

Summary of Master's thesis

**To be or not to be political: Questions to international development discourse through an investigation of active youth citizenship among young, educated Syrians in Beirut**

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**1. Problem statement and relevance**

This thesis investigates how and why young, educated Syrians in Beirut engage in the aid sector for refugees from Syria in Lebanon. By juxtaposing their subjective interpretations of the engagement with assumptions in international development discourse, the thesis highlights how substantive practices of active youth citizenship intertwine with abstract discursive structures. The international development sector places hopes on active young citizens around the globe to advance their respective societies and the international community. Mainstream international development discourse therefore tends to transport an affirmative vision of active youth citizenship as individual obligation among educated youth, in coherence with the idea of global citizenship. In the context of displacement, however, the realms of citizenship and citizen identity become contested.

Regarding the social relevance of this thesis, it can be stated that it addresses one of today's biggest challenges with respect to displacement, which revolves around the Syrian conflict. Lebanon hosts the highest number of displaced Syrians per capita. The socioeconomic backgrounds among Syrians in Lebanon are highly diverse, which is rarely perceived from outside the region. To study the engagements of young, educated Syrians for their fellow Syrian citizen in Lebanon reflects this diversity. The phenomenon is of particular interest, given that civic (youth) engagement has been scarce for decades under the authoritarian rule of the Assad family. The topic hence ties in with the timely debates on the newly emerging Syrian civil society. Young, educated Syrians have indeed great potential to shape the process towards a peaceful Syria. Their views on active citizenship and international development discourse provide valuable input and critique for the international community to learn from.

The prevalence of conventional conceptions of citizenship in international governance structures renders citizenship theory a highly suitable angle to bridge matters of displacement and development. Viewing that the boundaries between humanitarian and development aid blur in the case of this increasingly protracted displacement, and given that the funding for both approaches stem from at least partly identical, globally acting donors, it can contribute to untangling this situation. From a theoretical perspective, the concept of citizenship needs to be

expanded and substantiated along with our ever changing life worlds. With numbers of refugees and stateless people on the rise, the rights of 'others' and the boundaries of political community increasingly attract interest in contemporary political theory. What the academic community lacks most are empirical studies of the performative dimension of citizenship. On a final note, it should also be kept in mind that this thesis contributes to removing the general paucity in research on young Syrians, especially profound in terms of anthropological approaches.

## **2. Research design and methodology**

The following research question underlies the thesis:

*How and why do young, educated Syrians in Beirut actively engage in the aid sector for refugees from Syria in Lebanon, and how do their interpretations question international development discourse of promoting active youth citizenship?*

To answer this question, the thesis draws on empirical data in the form of in-depth interviews and participant observations, collected during a fieldwork period of eleven weeks in Beirut. This qualitative research strategy was chosen to gain in-depth knowledge of the subjective perceptions of young, educated Syrians in Beirut, who are active and important to the international aid sector for refugees in Lebanon, but rarely noticed. By privileging my interviewees' interpretations, I question some of the assumptions that are promoted in international development discourse on active youth citizenship.

Non-probabilistic, purposeful sampling was applied, which resulted in a total of eleven interviews that were included as primary sources. The data analysis followed an inductive approach towards theory, and advanced successively from open to axial coding to selective coding. This accommodates the interpretive epistemology of the research.

## **3. Findings and conclusion**

The thesis shows that the engagements under investigation constitute not necessarily conscious instances of active youth citizenship, which are grounded in self-interested motives and two forms of citizen identification. The respondents considered themselves Syrian as well as global citizens, and understood their engagements as stemming from both civil commitment towards fellow Syrians and the idea of universal human rights. What was striking was that the engagements were framed as apolitical, because 'being political' was assessed as either undesirable or impossible within the local context and the internationalised aid sector. These depoliticising circumstances contradict what international development discourse purports

regarding active youth citizenship, and jeopardise the peacebuilding efforts of young Syrians. This thesis therefore concludes that the interdependent international interventions in the Syrian crisis disregard the potential of the legitimate gatekeeping role of young, educated Syrians for processes of reconciliation and inclusive development. Such long-term issues are largely overlooked in the climate of constant emergency surrounding current research on Syria.