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► **To cite this version:**

Norig Neveu. The Palestinian refugees, Christian humanitarianism, and the remaking of the Melkite church in Jordan. *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies*, 2023, 10.1080/13530194.2023.2233220 . halshs-04381110

**HAL Id: halshs-04381110**

**<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-04381110>**

Submitted on 9 Jan 2024

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# The Palestinian Refugees, Christian Humanitarianism, and the Remaking of the Melkite Church

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## Abstract

The arrival of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Jordan after 1948 and 1967 represented a major challenge for young states, international institutions and humanitarian organisations, both faith-based or secular. In this context, the Melkite Church developed its assistance activities, particularly health and vocational education, to respond to this humanitarian crisis and the needs of the refugees. By questioning the humanitarian strategy implemented by the Church through its representative Mgr Assaf, this article will revisit the modalities of deployment of a Melkite humanitarianism in Jordan. The latter was based on the redefinition of the Church's modes of action and its expansion into new cities on a national scale. In order to do so, the Church began major structural changes, especially in its personnel: feminisation, laicisation and internationalisation. How does the case of Melkite humanitarianism allow us to understand a large-scale response to the humanitarian crisis in Jordan, especially in urban space outside the camps? How does the case of Melkite humanitarianism contribute to a deeper understanding of the structural changes in the in the recent history of the churches in the Middle East?

**Keywords:** Palestinian refugees, Melkite humanitarianism, humanitarian diplomacy, Jordan

## Introduction

In 1948, with the Arab-Israeli war and the *Nakba*, the exile of thousands of Palestinian refugees to neighbouring countries created an unprecedented humanitarian emergency situation in the Middle East to which states, international institutions and religious organisations had to respond.<sup>1</sup> In 1950, the West Bank was formally annexed to the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan. Jordan was the main host territory for an estimated 280,000 Palestinian refugees.<sup>2</sup> In 1967, the arrival of a second wave of refugees or displaced persons swelled this number. These migrations constitute a structuring, yet little documented, turning point in the history of humanitarianism and Christian assistance policies in the region. Most of the humanitarian institutions or international NGOs developed their activities in Jordan with the arrival of Palestinian refugees,

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<sup>1</sup> G. Karmi, and E. Cottran (eds), *The Palestinian Exodus, 1948–1998* (London: Ithaca Press, 1999); S. M. Akram, “UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees”, in *The Oxford Handbook of Refugee and Forced Migration Studies*, ed. E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, G. Loescher, K. Long, and N. Sigona (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 227–40.

<sup>2</sup> J. Al Hussein, “UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 9, no. 2 (2000): 51–64.; K. Berg, “From Chaos to Order and Back: The Construction of UNRWA Shelters and Camps, 1950–1970”, in *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development*, eds S. Hanafi, L. Hilal and L. Takkenberg (London, Routledge, 2014), 109–28.

after 1948 in the case of the Near East Christian Committee for Refugee Work,<sup>3</sup> after 1967 for Caritas for example.

From 1948 onwards, together with the young governments of the region, religious institutions strove to respond to the humanitarian crisis. In addition to Muslim assistance,<sup>4</sup> churches developed their activities. This article looks back at the structuring of Melkite humanitarianism in Jordan from 1948 onwards. It will show that the newly appointed Archbishop Michel Assaf played a crucial role to promote the Melkite Church as a key actor of Christian humanitarianism in Jordan, by implementing new forms of humanitarian action. How was Melkite humanitarianism defined and characterised? How has Melkite humanitarian diplomacy been used to serve competitive humanitarianism in the field, predominantly towards other Catholic institutions but also to counter the development of Muslim social action? In order to do so, the present article will review two structural characteristics of post-1948 Melkite humanitarianism: the feminisation of the Church personnel involved in social action, and its laicisation. How does the case of Melkite humanitarianism allow us to better understand the large-scale response to the humanitarian crisis in the country's urban spaces? How does it contribute to a deeper understanding of the structural changes in the in the recent history of the churches in the Middle East?

Research articulating humanitarianism and the Palestinian refugee issue initially focused on the work of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The latter was established in 1949 by the UN General Assembly with the prerogative of improving the living conditions of refugees and reintegrating them into the economies of their host countries, with a primary focus on education and vocational training.<sup>5</sup> UNRWA's humanitarian policy<sup>6</sup> was thus thoroughly documented, including the institution's representations of its humanitarian action, through the medium of photography.<sup>7</sup> Next, research focused on UNRWA's activities as far as legal, economic and nation-building policies.<sup>8</sup> The attention paid to UNRWA and the importance of the Palestinian migration phenomenon in the region led to the development of research on assistance to Palestinian refugees, largely focused on the camp space from 1952 onwards,<sup>9</sup> and the encampment policies encouraged by the states of the region and international institutions.<sup>10</sup> However, while studies on the articulation

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<sup>3</sup> L. Robson, "Refugee and the Case for International Authority in the Middle East: The League of Nations and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East Compared", *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 49, no. 4 (2017): 625–44.

<sup>4</sup> M. Boulby, *The Muslim Brotherhood and the Kings of Jordan* (Atlanta: Scholar Press, 1999).

<sup>5</sup> E. Buehrig, *The United Nations and the Palestinian Refugees* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1971); M. Viorst, *Reaching for the Olive Branch: UNRWA and Peace in the Middle East* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989a); M. Viorst, "Palestinian Refugees and non-Refugees in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip", special issue of *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2, no. 1, 1989b; B. N. Schiff, *Refugees into the Third Generation. UN Aid to the Palestinians* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 1995).

<sup>6</sup> S. Latte Abdallah, "UNRWA Photographs 1950–1978: A View on History or Shaped by History?" in *I Would Have Smiled. Photographing the Palestinian Refugee Experience (a Tribute to Myrtle Winter-Chaumeny)*, eds I. Nassar and R. Salti (Washington D.C.: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 2009), 43–65.

<sup>7</sup> I. Nassar and R. Salti, *I Would Have Smiled. Photographing the Palestinian Refugee Experience (a Tribute to Myrtle Winter-Chaumeny)* (Washington D.C.: The Institute for Palestine Studies, 2009); J. Paulmann (ed.), *Humanitarianism & Media 1900 to the Present* (New York/Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2019).

<sup>8</sup> For a synthesis, see S. Hanafi, L. Hilal, and L. Takkenberg (eds), *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development* (London: Routledge, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> M. Agier, *Gérer les indésirables. Des camps de réfugiés au gouvernement humanitaire* (Paris: Flammarion, 2008).

<sup>10</sup> Taking Jordan as an example, see for instance L. Oesch, "L'amélioration des conditions de vie dans les camps de réfugiés palestiniens à Amman ou la dé-théâtralisation de l'urbanisme jordanien", *Journal of Urban Research*, special issue 7, 2015; L. Achilli, *Palestinian Refugees and Identity: Nationalism, Politics and the Everyday*

between faith-based humanitarianism and assistance to refugees have flourished since 2011 and the war in Syria,<sup>11</sup> the response of religious institutions and faith-based NGOs to the 1948 and the 1967 humanitarian crises remains under-researched.<sup>12</sup>

This article builds on the recent literature on faith-based humanitarianism. It discusses the notion of secularisation and the dichotomy between faith-based and secular humanitarianism.<sup>13</sup> The confessional dimension of charity, including refugee assistance, is increasingly scrutinised in order to highlight the links between religion and charity, humanitarianism and confessionalism.<sup>14</sup> The genealogy of Christian humanitarianism in the region can be traced back to the end of the 19th century, when the Middle East was established as a "laboratory of modern humanitarianism".<sup>15</sup> Management of the migratory phenomenon has been central to this genealogy since the Ottoman period and has conditioned the development of a "humanitarian diplomacy".<sup>16</sup> This humanitarian diplomacy is linked to the implementation of strategies and/or cooperation aimed at influencing the deployment of policies implemented by the public authorities towards the populations targeted by the relief work. It is based on multi-scale networks of solidarity and influence. After WWI it was reshaped asymmetrically by the churches within the new national borders.

Missionary organisations and then Christian associations flourished in the Middle East from the end of the 19th century and they provided assistance to the "poor" or "deprived

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(I.B.Tauris, London: 2015); S. Latte Abdallah, "Palestinian Women in the Camps of Jordan: Interviews", *Journal of Palestine Studies* 34, no.4 (Summer 1995): 62–72; B. Destremau, "Deux camps de réfugiés à Amman", *Revue d'études Palestiniennes*, 52, (1994): 21–68; R. Farah, "Crossing Boundaries: Reconstruction of Palestinian Identities in al-Baqa'a Refugee Camp, Jordan", in *Palestine, Palestiniens: territoire national, espaces communautaires, Les Cahiers du CERMOC*, eds R. Bocco, D. Destremau and J. Hannover, no. 17, (Lebanon: CERMOC, 1997), 259–97.

<sup>11</sup> See for instance: T. Zaman, *Islamic Traditions of Refuge in the Crises of Iraq and Syria* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); A.-C. Wagner (now Zuntz), "Remapping the Holy Land from the Margins: How a Jordanian Evangelical Church Juggles the 'Local' and the 'Global' in the Syrian Refugee Response", *Contemporary Levant* 3, no. 2 (2018): 95–109.

<sup>12</sup> The following is a major contribution to the history of Catholic humanitarianism towards Palestinian refugees: M.-C. Rioli, *A Liminal Church: Refugees, Conversions and the Latin Diocese of Jerusalem, 1946–1956* (Leiden: Brill, 2021).

<sup>13</sup> J. Saunders, E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh and S. Snyder, S. (eds), *Intersections of Religion and Migration: Issues at Global Crossroads* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016); M. Barnett, J. Gross Stein (eds.), *Sacred Aid. Faith and humanitarianism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>14</sup> E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "Faith-Based Humanitarianism in Contexts of Forced Displacement", *Journal of Refugee Studies* 24, no. 3 (2011): 429–39.

<sup>15</sup> K. D. Watenpaugh, *Bread from Stones: The Middle East and the Making of Modern Humanitarianism* (Davis: University of California Press, 2015); D. Rodogno, *Against Massacre: Humanitarian Interventions in the Ottoman Empire, 1815–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011); D. Rodogno, *Night on Earth: A History of International Humanitarianism in the Near East, 1918–1930* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); I. M. Okkenhaug and K. Sanchez Summerer, *Christian Missions and Humanitarianism in the Middle East, 1850–1950* (Leiden: Brill, 2020), J. Paulmann (ed.), *Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016).

<sup>16</sup> B. Duriez, F. Mabile and K. Roussel (eds), *Les ONG confessionnelles. Religions et action internationale* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007); C. Prud'homme, "De la mission aux ONG de solidarité internationale. Quelle continuité ? ", in *Les ONG confessionnelles. Religions et action internationale*, eds B. Duriez, F. Mabile and K. Roussel (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2007), 55–70; J. Furniss and D. Meier (eds), "Le laïc et le religieux dans l'action humanitaire, une introduction", *A contrario*, 18, no. 2 (2012): 7–36; L. De Elvira Ruiz and S. A. Saaidnia (eds), *Les mondes de la bienfaisance. Une approche comparative des pratiques du bien* (Paris: Éditions de l'EHESS, 2021).

population”, particularly in Palestine,<sup>17</sup> Egypt<sup>18</sup> and Lebanon.<sup>19</sup> It is mainly within the Protestant world that the connection between charity and the Christian religion has been studied.<sup>20</sup> The humanitarian networks linked to the Catholic Churches remain little studied even though they shed light on blind spots in the competitive fabric of humanitarianism in the Middle East. In Jordan, after the initial development of Protestant and Catholic health and educational assistance at the end of the Ottoman period, the creation of the Emirate of Transjordan under the British mandate made Amman a new front for missionary competition, with the opening of hospitals, such as the Italian hospital in Amman in 1926 or another one in Karak in 1932 by the ASMI. The Church Missionary Society, a British Protestant missionary society, also opened several dispensaries at the end of the 19th century and opened a hospital in Amman in 1926 in the al-Ashrafiyya district. These churches laid the foundations for the humanitarian institutions which went on to develop a response to the reception of Palestinian refugees after 1948 and then again after 1967.

The Melkite or Greek Catholic Church, a Middle Eastern or local church, attached to Rome since the 18th century, is an Eastern Rite Church. Widely established in Palestine, Syria and Lebanon, it developed in Jordan from the inter-war period as a result of missionary activity and then with the arrival of Palestinian refugees. From the early 20<sup>th</sup> century it was referred to as the bridging church (*Église-pont*) by certain members of the catholic episcopal hierarchy. During the inter-war period it was considered as a missionary church *par excellence* through its development of schools, chapels and churches throughout the country.<sup>21</sup> Since the refoundation of the Patriarchate of Jerusalem in 1847 and its latinisation policy, conflicts had been recurrent between the representatives of the Latin and Eastern rites within the Catholic Church, often in competition on the field. This led to several attempts at reconciliation with the setting up of inter-ritual schools or even projects for a single patriarchate.<sup>22</sup>

From the 1920s onwards, the rapid development of the Melkite Church in the Emirate of Transjordan led to the creation of the Archeparchy (archdiocese) of Petra and Philadelphia in 1932, whose prerogatives extended to the national borders. It was first entrusted to Paul Salman, a Syrian and former seminarian of Saint Anne of Jerusalem.<sup>23</sup> After his death in 1948, his

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<sup>17</sup> I. Okkenhaug and K. Sanchez Summerer, “The Role of Protestant Missionaries During the Great Arab Revolt in Jerusalem and South Palestine (1936–1939) – Towards Humanity?”, *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies BJMES*, special issue edited by J. Paulmann and E. Möller, ‘Crisis in the Middle East. Humanitarianism, Religion, Diplomacy- 1860–1950’ (forthcoming).

<sup>18</sup> E. Möller, “The Suez Crisis 1956 as a Moment of Transnational Humanitarian Engagement”, *European Review of History*, 23, nos 1–2 (2016): 136–53; A. Turiano, “Une mission catholique en mutation (1954–1970) : les salésiens dans l’Égypte nassérienne”, in *Missions, Powers and Arabization*, special issue of *Social Sciences and Missions*, P. Bourmaud and K. Sanchez Summerer, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> C. Verdeil, “Mission, Charity and Humanitarianism in the Levant”, in *Christian Missions and Humanitarianism*, I. M. Okkenhaug and K. Summerer-Sanchez, 21–37.

<sup>20</sup> B. Baron, *The Orphan’s Scandal: Christian Missionaries and the Rise of the Muslim Brotherhood* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2014); N. Maksudyán, *Orphans and Destitute Children in the Late Ottoman Empire* (Syracuse : Syracuse University Press, 2014).

<sup>21</sup> N. Neveu, “Polysemic Borders: Melkite and Orthodox Clerics and Laymen in the Emirate of Transjordan, 1920s–1940s”, in *Regimes of Mobility: Borders and State Formation in the Middle East, 1918–1946*, J. Tejel and R. Hakki Öztan (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2022), 141–69.

<sup>22</sup> Maggiolini, P. “The Influence of Latin-Melkite Relations in the Land of Transjordan, From the Rebirth of the Latin Patriarchate to the Foundation of the Archdiocese of Petra and Philadelphia (1866-1932)”, *Living Stones Yearbook, The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust, The Living Stones of the Holy Land Trust (Melisende: Essex 2012), 165-199*; N. Neveu, “Between Uniatism and Arabism”.

<sup>23</sup> P. Maggiolini, “The Archdiocese of Petra and Philadelphia and the Hashemite Emirate of Transjordan. Modern History and Ecclesial Identity”, *Journal of Eastern Christian Studies* 65, nos 3–4 (2013a): 201–29; N. Neveu, “Between Uniatism and Arabism: Missionary Policies and Diplomatic Interest of the Melkites in Jordan during

successor, Michel Assaf, a Syrian also trained at Saint Anne continued his policy of expansion on a national scale, notably through the development of social action and assistance to Palestinian refugees. The Melkite Church, which was very active in the education sector, had not developed a charitable health activity in Jordan until the arrival of Palestinian refugees. This article then questions the model of Melkite humanitarianism developed after 1948. What were the modalities of its implementation? This article argues that the crafting of Melkite humanitarianism cannot be understood without taking into account humanitarian diplomacy in Jordan: field activities were deployed thanks to the development of international philanthropic funding networks and above all through collaboration with international institutions, including the UN. The notion of humanitarian diplomacy will shed light on the networks of actors (religious, lay, philanthropists) linked to the assistance of Palestinian refugees and the strategies developed in order to constitute a Melkite humanitarian space in Jordan through the support of Jordanian authorities, international institutions and the Catholic hierarchy. This humanitarian diplomacy brought in new actors: women and laity, key actors in the recent history of the church and the redefining of its activities in the field.

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