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'The generation that will inherit Syria': education as citizen aid and political opportunity

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ABSTRACT

Grassroots initiatives to provide education were an integral part of efforts to stem the humanitarian disaster unleashed by the armed conflict in Syria. This article studies activists who organised informal schooling for children amid the devastating war. Building on life story interviews, we highlight the versatility of initiatives in the field of education for citizens who simultaneously engage in humanitarian action and mobilise for political change. There is a natural concern to detach humanitarian work from politics in order to gain and maintain a space for action. This has distanced the study of humanitarian aid from social movements research, which focuses on long-term struggles over power and political structures. We maintain, however, that the social movement literature generally, and studies on structural and cognitive political opportunity specifically, can help refine our understanding of the illusive nature of citizen aid. Our findings indicate that Syrians involved in humanitarian educational activities constructed their own structure of opportunities by monitoring shifting political and humanitarian conditions. Opening schools was a technical and pragmatic solution to the educational disaster caused by war. At the same time, it was motivated by a long-lasting desire to free Syria from its political plight and to offer an alternative.

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Introduction

Grassroots initiatives to provide education were an integral part of efforts to stem the humanitarian disaster unleashed by the Syrian war (Carnegie 2014; Pearlman 2019; Smartnews 2018). Children experienced tremendous hardship because of the war and the accompanying violations of their fundamental right to education. In 2021, the United Nations estimated that a total of 2.4 million Syrian children were not in school and that one in three Syrian schools had been damaged or destroyed. The classrooms that did remain were overcrowded, and schools often lacked proper sanitation, water and electricity (UNICEF 2021). From the beginning of the armed conflict, actors in civil society mobilised in support of education, creating substitutes for schools in areas where war had disrupted the education system and providing assistance to the internally displaced (Selvik 2021). In the areas that broke with

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the central government, communities self-organised education, both out of necessity and as a part of building an alternative to the Asad state. In the government-held territories, public schools continued to operate but found themselves lacking the necessary resources and space to accommodate rising needs for education (Longuenesse 2019).

Contemporary debates concerning humanitarian aid recognise the importance of responses by the affected population. Since the World Humanitarian Summit in 2016, the need to include local actors has risen higher on the development agenda (Barakat and Milton 2020). Yet although this issue has been part of humanitarian discourse for a long time, it has not been translated into practice. One obstacle may be the lack of adequate conceptualisation of the 'local' (Roepstorff 2020). Some research also describes a reluctance by local actors, in some cases, to integrate their work with that of larger humanitarian organisations (Rozakou 2017; Theodossopoulos 2016).

In this article, we aim to shed light on the emergence and dynamics of citizen aid in oppressive and violent settings. We present a qualitative case study of educational activities during the Syrian war, analysing it from a social movement perspective. Our research focuses on educational services that are provided by individuals and groups to compensate for the shortcomings of the formal education system. We shall thus look at informal educational initiatives created as supplements to public schooling.

There is a natural concern to detach humanitarian work from politics in order to gain and maintain a space for action. This has distanced the study of humanitarian aid from social movements research, which focuses on long-term struggles over power and political structures. We maintain, however, that the social movement literature generally, and studies on structural and cognitive political opportunity specifically, can help refine our understanding of the illusive nature of citizen aid. We take an agency-based approach to unfolding the complex relationship between social movements and structure (Jasper 2006), showing in detail how actors overcome structural barriers and create alternative social practices (Choe and Kim 2012; Kurzman 1996). Scrutinising the motivations of individual actors permits us to present a new perspective on citizen aid in times of war (Honari 2018; Jasper 2019).

Building on life story interviews with activists who initiated education projects in areas under government control, we seek to explain the origins of teaching initiatives as forms of citizen aid and the meanings volunteers assign to the practices in which they engage. We observe that providing education is framed as both a humanitarian act in the short term and a political act in the long term, making it a versatile tool in the hands of humanitarian activists looking for future regime transformation.

Citizen aid and perceived opportunities

Fechter and Schwittay (2019) use the term 'citizen aid' to mean projects initiated by individuals that are aimed at helping others in need and which are funded privately. They emphasise the importance of 'the agency of ordinary people making ethical decisions about providing assistance to others' (Fechter and Schwittay 2019, 1770). The term exposes a phenomenon which, while increasingly common in empirical terms, often remains hidden, as it is not addressed in established development and humanitarian research and practice. To illustrate both the growing interest in this phenomenon as well as its increasing presence, Fechter and Schwittay point to a wave of development and humanitarian literature on citizen aid initiatives (McLennan 2017; Schnable 2017; Taithe 2019). In relation to humanitarianism,

they mention concepts such as 'grassroots humanitarians' (Sandri 2018) and 'everyday humanitarianism' (Schwittay 2019) which seek to capture the nature of these citizen solidarity initiatives. Their mapping reflects a conscious effort within the academy to raise the visibility of citizen aid initiatives by supplying empirical data. Since, however, most of this research is quantitative, although it is able to show the scope of the initiatives, it cannot fully illuminate their nature. And since citizen aid activities can be considered small civil society initiatives that respond to local needs (McCabe, Phillimore, and Mayblin 2010), they also tend to be dynamic and temporal and thus difficult to study.

Recently, Vandevoordt and Fleischmann (2021) problematised the division made in the literature between humanitarian aid and social movements. They criticise the predominant view that because humanitarian help is provided in emergency situations, there is no time or space for reflection about structural causes and future plans. This 'imaginary of emergencies' has been considered radically different from the mobilisation for future objectives that characterises the social movement literature. Vandevoordt and Fleischmann stress, however, that no such clear-cut division between humanitarian aid and social movements actually exists. In the past, humanitarian work has been associated with such longstanding projects as ending slavery or providing universal medical help for wounded soldiers. Vandevoordt and Fleischmann also note a recent and growing tendency among humanitarian organisations to take on more long-term objectives. Further, they point out an opposite shift in social movement studies, from an emphasis on long-term programmes to a focus on dealing with the here and now. The growing body of literature on prefiguration applied to social movements analyses attempts by actors to enact future goals in the present (Yates 2015). Research on the 'European immigration crisis' of the last decade also highlights the tensions and fluidity between acts of grassroots solidarity and humanitarian activities (Rozakou 2017; Theodossopoulos 2016). This blurring and shifting of the boundaries between humanitarian work and social movements serves as a starting point to discuss the fluidity between citizen aid and social movement activism in extreme situations of war and oppression.

Here, we analyse this interlinkage with the help of cognitive and perceived political opportunity theories. For many years, social movement scholars explained the emergence of social movements and their dynamics on the basis of structural elements that were external to collective action. Newer theories, however, also integrate internal elements related to the culturally based agency of the movement itself. Political process theories explaining social movements have been criticised for assigning too much importance to structure and neglecting the role of the movement as an agent (Goodwin and Jasper 1999; Oliveira and Carvalhais 2017). One claim has been that in order for people to initiate and participate in collective actions, opportunities must be perceived as meaningful (Meyer and Minkoff 2004). Framing theories have emerged that can offer culturally based interpretations to social movement studies (Snow et al. 2014); they have also contributed to cognitive political opportunity theories, which focus on how opportunity is not only given to agents but also created by them (Choe and Kim 2012).

As a result, many recent attempts to explain the emergence and dynamics of social movements integrate political opportunity structure and the way it both restrains and encourages collective action with social movement cultural perceptions as expressed in discourse and praxis (Della Porta and Diani 2006; Oliveira and Carvalhais 2017). In addition, researchers have shown that individual actors react to various situations on the basis of both their resources and their perceptions of political opportunities (Choe and Kim 2012; Soehl 2013).

This strand of the literature is especially interesting, as the potential exists for a mismatch between the political structure of opportunities and the subjective perceptions of actors, that can shape the timing, form and content of collective action. After all, political opportunities may exist but will be irrelevant if they are not recognised by actors. Conversely, actors may perceive opportunities in situations that political structure theories would not consider as providing opportunities (Kurzman 1996). In addition, social actors can actively create their own political opportunities (Meyer 2004).

Our empirical analysis will show that individual actors are not passive with regard to the structure of political opportunity, but actively appropriate it, constantly seeking opportunities to act and shaping their activities accordingly. They do not observe the artificial division between humanitarian aid and social movement; rather, they look for viable initiatives which, even if described as humanitarian, may well have long-term consequences.

Method and sources: life story interviews

This article builds on life story interviews with three activists who devoted themselves to creating non-formal schools for internally displaced children in government-held parts of Syria during the Syrian war. A life story is 'the story a person chooses to tell about the life he or she has lived', and thus highlights aspects important to the teller (Atkinson 1998, 8). It casts light on how the teller experiences and understands life and draws connections between life's different stages (Gubrium and Holstein 2001, 126). Life story interviews show the meanings people attach to the activities they engage in Horst (2019). In parallel, they shed light on societal and political patterns (Chamberlayne, Bornat, and Wengraf 2000).

Because they are open-ended, life story interviews are a good way to shed light on understudied aspects of citizen aid. They offer thick descriptions that may help offset the research limitations that result from the difficulty in gaining access to education activists during wartime. It is important, however, to situate politically the cases that we have studied. Our research informants belong to a secular segment of society that opposes the Asad regime. An investigation of their practices is not an evaluation of the impact of informal education in Syria as a whole. During the course of the Syrian war, vastly disparate actors organised schooling for very different reasons. There were religion-based educational initiatives and projects carried out in collaboration with the government. We have dealt with actors who come from outside of religious circles (although they occasionally collaborate with them) and have maintained their independence vis-à-vis the regime. We refer to them as 'activists' because they expressed hope and determination to contribute to systemic change through their educational activities.

The research is part of a project on 'Societal Transformation in Conflict Contexts' funded by the Research Council of Norway (principal investigator: Cindy Horst). The methods for data collection, recruitment procedures, informed consent, and data storage were approved by the Norwegian Centre for Research Data (reference number 885760).[1] The interviews were performed by the first author, who is a Norwegian researcher fluent in Arabic. The first interview took place in a Western country where one of the activists had sought refuge because his life was at risk. He had founded a community kindergarten and two informal schools before leaving Syria. This informant introduced us to other actors who continued to live and run educational initiatives in regime-controlled areas in Syria. We arranged individual interviews with two of these activists in Lebanon, where they could speak (and the

interviewer could travel) safely. Because a life story interview begins with a potentially intimidating question – 'Can you tell me the story of your life?' – it is important to create a relationship of trust in order to obtain good research data. Therefore, we took time to get acquainted before beginning the recorded sessions. The interviews lasted two hours and 31 minutes on average and were carried out in Arabic, the speakers' mother tongue. They were recorded and later translated and transcribed. We raised follow-up questions about the reasons for, and organisation of, the educational initiatives. We subsequently carried out an inductive analysis of the data, identifying recurrent themes in the interviews and interpreting their meaning in the Syrian context. Below, we focus on three main observations that recurred in the three interviews. For the sake of reader friendliness, we discuss each finding in combination with the presentation of one interviewee. Pseudonyms are used to maintain confidentiality.

Monitoring political structure and constructing opportunity

Political opportunity in Syria is a scarce commodity. The Asad regime practices a rigid form of authoritarian rule based on surveillance and the repression of all open forms of political opposition. Actors who cross the red lines drawn by any of the powerful national security services risk torture and even death. One of our informants, Hamid, had joined a banned opposition party in the 1980s. He was jailed for 11 years, several of which he spent in the notorious Tadmor prison. After his release, he stayed out of politics and devoted himself to his studies until the Arab Spring kindled the hope that he might witness political change:

> In 2011, we felt that our old dreams were becoming reality. People were in the streets. I teamed up with the same people I had worked with earlier in the political party. We met, discussed, examined and tried to make sense of the events. We all believed that something similar would happen in Syria.

Hamid and his group were correct in their prediction. In March 2011, popular demonstrations broke out in the city of Daraa in south-west Syria. Members of his opposition circle issued a signed statement in support of the protests. This led to pressure and tighter surveillance from the security services, but the activists were not deterred. On the contrary, in the following month they announced the creation of a movement for 'a secular democratic state'.

As Hamid intimates above, he and his group of activists monitored the political situation closely. They took note of new conditions in the region and the mounting pressures on the regime and concluded that the time was ripe to take political action. Such monitoring is common for opposition groups, who typically are intimately familiar with the political system they aspire to change. Hamid himself grew up in a political family with a father who held a top government job. His life story interview is replete with indications that he possessed a clear strategic vision. The movement he helped to found was premised upon a need for peaceful resistance and a rejection of armed opposition. From an early stage, it engaged in civil society work, including providing food and shelter for internally displaced Syrians. Nor did Hamid's scrutiny of, and adaptation to, the changing political situation end with the detection of opportunities that made an uprising possible; rather, it continued as the war and state oppression made it increasingly difficult to act. As Syria descended into civil war, the regime cracked down harder on internal political opposition:

> In 2013, the space for political organisation grew smaller, all over Syria. We could not do politics beyond publishing certain statements on electronic websites. At the same time, the humanitarian needs were growing bigger. […] We saw that these kids needed schooling.

Just as Hamid observed that the space for political activities was shrinking, he also spotted a growing need for humanitarian action. Consequently, his group decided to concentrate its efforts in this field. Citizen aid became an alternative to politics, with education as the focal point. For actors known to be open opponents of the regime, however, there was no obvious opportunity to organise such work. Instead, Hamid and his team had to actively *create* their opportunities using different schemes. One of the solutions they found was to win the support of the clerics at a local church. The church agreed to host their non-formal school on its premises and protect it from intrusion by the regime. As Hamid explained:

> The initiative may come from a political activist who goes to the church and says: 'I want to launch this project, but I am on the regime's blacklist. Here is the project. I will leave politics aside. Are you willing to do it with me?' The cleric agreed. When the security services come to see him, he explains that he has accepted to do the project on the condition that politics be left aside. This is how you can make things happen in the challenging circumstances we have in Syria.

We asked Hamid whether the regime was not aware of what his group was doing. He replied:

> It knows for sure that there is a team working there, but thanks to the clerical establishment it does not interfere. The regime is not going to open a struggle with the Christians at this point. But of course, if it has problems with an activist, it will simply detain him or her. Moreover, there is professionalism in our work. The political dimension is no longer visible.

Hamid made the calculation that the Asad regime needed to keep the Christian community on its side. The state was at war and was promoting the narrative that the uprising was a Sunni Muslim fundamentalist assault against Syrian religious minorities. In this narrative, Asad was the protector of Christians. Hamid calculated that as long as the regime was faced with an existential threat, it would not close the school and provoke the irritation of the clerics: the more so because his team was contributing to solving a practical problem at a time when public school capacity was overstretched. With this calculus in mind, Hamid kept his eye on an opportunity and acted when space for political mobilisation became closed off.

Fluidity between social movement and humanitarian activities

Our interview with Jena, an independent woman from a well-off religious family, sheds light not only on the dynamics of monitoring political opportunities but also on the way that activists on the ground flexibly cross boundaries between politics and humanitarian work in order to keep their collective action going in face of war and oppression. Jena had a long personal history of rebellion. Against the will of her family, she had married a man from a different religious group, and later, while working for a government ministry, she found herself making choices that brought her into conflict with her superiors. Like Hamid, Jena made reference to changing circumstances and explained how she and her colleagues decided to leave politics behind, at least temporarily, in favour of humanitarian activities:

> After 2012, the scope for participating in demonstrations or engaging in politics was lost. We had decided that we would not leave the country. We were determined to stay, regardless of how the situation would evolve. So, we decided to calm down a bit and leave politics for humanitarian action, since it is easier to work in that domain. We worked in relief for approximately five years. In the beginning of 2017, they closed our kitchen and the housing centre. We changed to education.

Notable here is the fluidity with which protests and direct political engagement turned into humanitarian engagement as circumstances changed. The mutability of different kinds of collective actions also comes up: protests turn into relief work, which eventually transforms into education. The activists did not originally choose education as their field of action but arrived there as a consequence of the circumstances. Despite this, we also understand that education took on a special significance for Jena: 'People who work with education have a specific ideological background: often they are leftist. They have enlightened thinking. They feel the crisis we are in and feel they have to work to get the country out of it'.

It is interesting to see that the educational arena lends itself to battles of ideas in extreme circumstances, i.e. times of armed conflict and destruction. Despite the exceptional state of affairs, in educational work, politically oriented activists find a channel for keeping their political ideas alive. They also fight for their right to exist alongside government-supported educational initiatives. Jena explained that her group self-identified as, and was seen as, a political opposition group, and therefore did not seek to obtain an official operating licence. Still, she said, their school was tolerated by the authorities, due to the need for educational services:

> The problem in the educational sector is that centres like ours do not have a licence. We don't want to seek a licence and the regime would not issue a licence for us, because we are considered as the opposition. We operate as a local partner, without any paper to authorise our presence. We have proven our relevance in the area […] We work because the area and the children need such work a lot and there is nobody else to do it on a voluntary basis.

Jena's interview thus shows how the political struggle between the regime and its opponents has been displaced into humanitarian work: in this case, specifically into providing educational services, which the country desperately needs and which each side tries to supply according to its political agenda. Although neither Jena nor any of her colleagues had any official training as teachers, they were able to open a school by relying on previously established relationships:

> Having worked with relief for five years we had got to know a lot of people. We talked to them about our idea. We said, 'We want to do this, but we don't know how to start, we don't know how to teach them'. More qualified teachers offered their assistance. […] We teach for free and target children who have no other opportunities. There are many private institutes in our neighbourhood, but they are expensive. These people cannot pay for it. We only target poor internally displaced people.

There is no doubt that the opening of their school falls under the category of humanitarian work, as it provides for free a basic service for extremely needy people during wartime. Jena's educational initiative coincided with initiatives by many other national and international relief groups that became active in Syria after the outbreak of the war. Still, Jena found it important to stress the difference between the services and well-being her group provided and the activities of other relief groups. She offered the following description of the situation, in which her political background comes through:

> No one else in our neighbourhood works the way we do. Many organisations are in it for the publicity. They find a beautiful place and take pictures of laughing children and obtain a lot of money from abroad. […] Our work is very simple. We don't want international funding. We don't want cameras to film us. Nor do we seek to become a big name. We follow our convictions and try to help the children overcome their difficulties. Groups that work like that are nearly always part of the opposition.

Jena explained that as long as her group did not criticise the regime openly, they were allowed to exist and to act. At the time of our interview, hope still remained for a political transition, and Jena made it clear that in such a situation, the next step would be to legalise the school:

> For sure. The opposition's programme is a total programme, a new structure for the country. From the top of the pyramid to the bottom. But the opposition lacks the opportunity to express itself and describe its project in a proper way. If the situation improves and we get into a political transition in Syria, we hope that we'll be able to be open about our activities and get an official licence. At this stage, we cannot.

Beginning around 2018, when the intensity of the war diminished, the regime tightened the noose around civil society actors. Preparing itself for the post-war reconstruction phase, it wanted all development agents to work in partnership with government-endorsed non-governmental organisations such as the Syria Trust for Development. Our informants resisted this co-optation, considering education a way to accomplish long-term change. As we have argued elsewhere (Selvik 2021), education enables activists to overcome obstacles in the present by working with time. Its ultimate appeal is that the fruits of their endeavours will be reaped down the line.

The versatility of education

Each of the two activists we introduced above sought opportunities to engage in opposition politics and humanitarian action during the Syrian war, and each ended up organising grassroots educational activities. Our interview with a third activist, Samra, offers a deeper understanding of what leads activists to choose education as their domain of action. Samra is a middle-aged woman with broad experience in social, humanitarian and associative work. She explained that she had been brought up in an open environment and learned the value of civil society engagement from her father. Like Hamid, Samra belonged to an opposition party in her student days and was briefly jailed, but subsequently distanced herself from politics. When the popular uprising of 2011 broke out, she seized the opportunity to pursue her passion for citizen aid. Her first activities involved organising relief work in areas hit by fighting and organising training for vulnerable groups. She personally taught embroidery and knitting to women who had lost their husbands: 'to allow them to rely on themselves'. As the conflict deepened and humanitarian needs grew, Samra's engagement evolved:

> After a while, [when] the Red Cross and some of the churches became involved and the need for relief was less acute […] we started to think about the long-term perspectives. We did not have the capacity to go on nurturing these families. As we built our database, we noticed that the majority of children were not in school. There was a big group of dropouts. […] We realised that education was becoming the most important thing. A whole generation was cut off from school. We saw that it would create problems for a long time.

The quote suggests that Samra's decision to invest her time and energy in education rested on scrutiny of the situation and deliberation about what would be the appropriate response. Clearly a planner, she had created a database of internally displaced persons (IDPs) and their needs. Based both on that database and on her observations that other and bigger organisations were providing relief and that the conflict would have long-term consequences, she saw education as a strategic priority. Much like Jena, Samra had no teaching experience and did not see her role as that of a classroom educator. She did, however, organise an education centre for IDPs and recruited volunteers from her group to do the teaching. To make schooling accessible, the centre was placed in the area of the neighbourhood with the highest concentration of IDPs. Samra identified families in need using the database and reached out to them. At the time of our interview, the centre had 200 pupils and an additional 200 on its waiting list. It offered six-month courses aimed at helping dropouts return to school and at preparing illiterate children for public education by teaching them basic reading and writing skills.

Samra found this educational work meaningful and felt that she was able to make a difference. In a context where overall social and economic conditions for Syrians were deteriorating sharply, her satisfaction at building a workable institution from scratch was evident in her words. Samra explicitly said that she could not obtain similar satisfaction from engaging in political activism:

> For someone who has been interested in politics, it is difficult to leave the field completely. But I have found myself in another field, which is the civil society work. Even when I was active in politics, I focused on things like the environment and defending the rights of consumers. I like this; I feel it's easier to accomplish something. Politics always take you places you would not like to be. Especially in a context like ours.

This remark speaks volumes about the attraction of humanitarian work in countries experiencing repression and war: humanitarian work is more likely to yield positive results than political action, which can backfire in numerous ways. Samra was determined to make a difference for her people and country but knew from experience that politics in Syria is an unpredictable and dangerous game. When she concentrated on citizen aid, she could be certain that her efforts would be productive. This sentiment was particularly strong with regard to education, which has long-lasting effects on the lives of children. Samra summed up the meaning she found in educational work in the following statement:

> It is a drop in the ocean. Nevertheless, I think one drop is better than none. It can also have a positive effect in the future, in my opinion. If you teach one kid [which is good], then how about 200? You teach them how to read and write, to draw, to think. Music. Singing. It will affect the future of Syria. This is the generation that will inherit Syria.

Samra's reference to 'the generation that will inherit Syria' clearly communicates how her choice of education as a field of action provides her with a sense of accomplishment in the face of current chaos. For Samra, helping children to gain an education is not only a question of providing individual humanitarian help, but also a national social and political goal. By contributing to the education of children in the present, she is actually working towards the recovery of her country.

It is interesting to note that in addition to perceiving education as an opportunity for the acquisition of skills, Samra also mentions its role in shaping values, reinforcing that for

her, educational aid is inseparable from her political goals. For example, when discussing the ethnic situation in Syria, she emphasised the possibility for change inherent in her educational activities:

> Everyone came with this story: I'm Sunni, I'm Shia. Or even regional identities: I'm from Daraya, from Aleppo, from Raqqa. You find that some regions think they have priority over or are better than others. These sentiments grew during the events. Sometimes the feelings are muted, sometimes they emerge. No doubt they are there. The events made them worse.

The clashes of the war thus brought to the fore the fragile and complicated issue of minorities in Syria, and Samra explained how, within the framework of their educational activities, her group also reached out to parents. Education became a way to work with both children and adults to overcome this chronic division in Syrian society:

> We also have groups where we work with the kids and their parents on how to be with others. We don't restrict ourselves to reading and writing. We teach them how to socialise with others, how to accept the other, how to forgive. We have these thoughts in our centre. When you enter, you don't feel these kinds of tensions. In the beginning, it was there but we stress the spirit of the centre. You will not be able to accomplish something with someone unless you like him or her. To work with someone, you should like the person.

Education thus enabled Samra to strive for multiple goals at the same time. She could work for a more tolerant and open society while serving the immediate needs of disadvantaged children.

Arguably, Samra's educational activities had only been allowed to survive due to the instability of the situation and the problems experienced by the state in covering the basic needs of its population. Samra and her colleagues were aware that their activities, having not been officially sanctioned by the state, were at best a-legal. They had reached an agreement with a legal association that was prepared to assume responsibility and offer them some kind of legal coverage. But Samra remained concerned about the future. The following passage illustrates how she actively constructed her opportunity for action and envisioned scenarios in which her work in the present might even be institutionalised in future as part of the educational activities of the state:

> Otherwise, as I said, we wait and see what will happen in the future. You never know if all these initiatives will be forced to come under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education, for example. Anything can happen. We continue to say that whatever we have been able to accomplish for a limited period of time is an opportunity.

Discussion

In the final passage quoted above, Samra puts into words what we saw across all three interviews: the conscious and endless seeking out of opportunities to act, even in the most extreme situations of war and oppression. Actor-centred theories attempt to explain how, even in situations where no clear political structure of opportunity is discernible, people manage to organise collective action (Choe and Kim 2012; Jasper 2019; Kurzman 1996). In Syria, structural political opportunities changed in multiple phases. In an initial phase, due to the Arab Spring and the momentum for change it generated, a political opposition movement expressed itself openly and carried out massive collective actions in the streets.

Structural political opportunity changed again as the war escalated, and yet again when the Asad regime began to retake large parts of the country. Our empirical material illustrates how, despite shrinking room for collective action, activists interacted with the political structure, interpreted it and created their own political opportunities. Moreover, our interviews indicate that opportunity was considered as such even in the face of its inevitable termination: that is, opportunity was actively constructed by the people involved in the collective action. The choices of activists to move into humanitarian relief work generally, and later education specifically, were the result of monitoring external conditions and devising initiatives that served their long-term aspirations for a changing Syria. Our material thus clearly portrays the process behind the development of specific collective actions as the result of personal agency in the face of diminishing political opportunities. Research in radically different contexts, such as the UK, supports our observation that activists demonstrate an enormous capacity to readapt and overcome obstacles in order to carry out their projects. Community work and social movement activities may, thus, transform into humanitarian action in the context of extreme austerity (Jupp 2022).

The mutability between humanitarian work and long-term political action in the cases studied here is also relevant to the ongoing discussion of the constructed frontiers between humanitarian work and politics. The boundary line between humanitarian work and politics lies at the heart of a long-standing debate (Calhoun 2011; Rieff 2002). Research in the European context has shown that activists sometimes reject the humanitarian label due to its association with hierarchical and paternalistic structures of assistance, highlighting the egalitarian nature of their actions (Rozakou 2017; Theodossopoulos 2016; Witcher 2022). Indeed, the activists we interviewed upheld the division between political action and humanitarianism, as it protects their own work from interference. Nonetheless, our interviews also show that humanitarian work, specifically education, can be a way of maintaining political engagement in circumstances of war and oppression. Our informants were obviously interested in supplying relief to a suffering population, and thus their activities overlapped with the many other local and international humanitarian initiatives seeking to help Syrians survive a brutal war (Deane 2016; Hos 2016; Maadad and Matthews 2020; Shaban 2020; Sunata and Abdulla 2020). But our interviews also clearly show that these activists identify their work as different from the humanitarian work being carried out by others, and openly assign political meaning to their activities. Their attempts to supply immediate relief to the population are, in fact, part of their long-term struggle for the future of Syria (Ruiz de Elvira 2019). In this respect, our work helps further an understanding of the origins of citizen aid activities in general, and the importance of education as a specific field of action. In the case of our interviewees, we see that while their activities may be labelled humanitarian, their drive, networks and general ability to carry out these activities are a mixture of an immediate reaction to human needs and a long-standing commitment to political goals. These kinds of complex motivations and connections and their relation to successful attempts to meet educational needs are part of the humanitarian dynamics that unfolds when local and international actors face disaster. Cognisance of them will lead to a better understanding of humanitarian work in Syria and beyond.

Our findings also contribute to a better understanding of education during war and a recent rising interest in the relationship between education and resistance in contexts of war and oppression. Scholarship on education and war has highlighted the importance of grassroots initiatives, as opposed to international intervention, to serve the needs of the

population (Burde 2004; Rose and Greeley 2006). Nevertheless, the same work indicates that carrying out research on efforts by regular citizens to assume educational tasks is very complicated, due to the unstable and spontaneous nature of such initiatives. Our research sheds light on the origins of these citizen aid projects in the Syrian context and their relationship to prior political activities. The activists we interviewed explicitly connect their past political involvement with their present humanitarian work. They see their educational projects first and foremost as a way to strive towards the reconstruction of Syria. They talk about the lack of educational services and the fact that a generation of Syrians has been left with no basic schooling. At the same time, the process of constructing the future is intimately related to their world view and political ideas. Their work for better relations among ethnic groups is perhaps the best example of how their political agenda informs their educational projects. Their political agenda does not lie at the heart of their work, which is above all educational, addressing the need to provide young generations with basic skills to confront the challenges of the future. But their political ideas regarding religion, the desired political system and social issues hover in the background of their activities. We might say their drive is political, while the execution of their projects is more technical and professional.

In this sense, we can see how our research also connects to a rising interest in how education under oppression, even when not ideological in content, serves as a vehicle to empower groups and individuals and thus contributes to more democratic political systems. The basic premise found in the literature on war and education is that the mere provision of education can serve as a facilitator of social transformation towards political systems that would, eventually, serve the population (Davies 2005; Østby, Urdal, and Dupuy 2019; Smith Ellison 2014). Our research shows that even in extreme situations, educational projects lend themselves to significant social collective action. As activists take on everyday pragmatic acts such as recruiting a teacher or securing a classroom, they conceive them as meaningful steps towards the recuperation of Syria.

Conclusion

Finding themselves in extreme conditions of war and oppression, where the political structure of opportunities seemed unfavourable to any kind of long-term political activity, the activists studied here found unexpected ways to take action for the future of their country. By monitoring the shifting political and humanitarian conditions, Syrians involved in educational citizen aid initiatives constructed their own structure of opportunities. Although from the outside their situation may have appeared hopeless, by taking advantage of the fluidity between humanitarian activities and collective actions they created meaningful ways to keep their struggle for the future of Syria alive. Opening schools was one technical and pragmatic solution to the closure of political space and the educational disaster caused by war. The activists perceived that 'the generation that will inherit Syria' was doomed to ignorance because of a lack of basic education. On the one hand, solving this problem was a way to cover an urgent humanitarian need: a strategy they shared with many other local and international agencies. At the same time, their solution was also motivated by a long-term political goal: the desire to free Syria from its current political plight and offer an alternative. The case of citizen aid presented here thus illustrates how political clashes can find their way into humanitarian crises. Any full explanation of educational citizen aid therefore

needs to consider the fact that education is much more than a short-term technical solution. It is embedded in long-term political projects.

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Note

1. Prior to the interviews, the participants were informed about the aims, methods and implications of the research, as well as the voluntary nature of participation, and gave oral consent. Subsequently, their consent was confirmed in written form over WhatsApp.

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