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The Syrian refugee crisis: Religious identity as a stronger predictor than national identity of helping in global emergencies

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When major crises emerge, cross-national helping on the part of ordinary citizens can go a long way towards alleviating suffering – both at the level of supporting government aid policies and through offering individual charitable assistance. But can we predict who is more likely to help? **Nihan Albayrak** *has focused on the Syrian refugee crisis and found that religious identity is a stronger predictor of offering help than national identity. She goes on to suggest that the charity sector should keep this in mind to maximise the success of their campaigns.*

The world is bombarded with the news of global emergencies almost every day. Most of the countries where these emergencies take place do not have enough resources to offer solutions. For this reason, the assistance of other countries that have the capability to alleviate suffering caused by such emergencies appears to be vital. This situation requires people to help others from countries far away. However past research shows that, in general, people are not inclined to help those who are from other countries.

Understanding what motivates cross-national helping is essential for promoting it. My research focuses on identity, specifically investigating whether identifying with a nation or a religious group enhances the motivation to help victims of a global emergency. I focus in particular on the Syrian refugee crisis. My findings suggest that identifying with a religious group is a stronger predictor of helping in the context of a global emergency than identifying with a nation, and religious identification plays a different role depending on whether or not the potential helper and the victims hold the same religion. Similarly, the results also show that helping is less likely to occur when the helper and the victims have different religious identities (e.g. British non-Muslims and Syrian refugees perceived as Muslims).

The role of social identities on influencing help

Individuals may feel different levels of identification with their social groups (e.g. their nation, family, teammates), and the strength of those identifications affects their behaviour. For example, a woman who strongly identifies with being a female might be very supportive of gender equality movements and help other women to get equal rights, for example in the workplace. A woman who strongly identifies with being a doctor, meanwhile, might not necessarily care about women's rights and might instead be more supportive of movements that improve the working conditions of doctors, taking action accordingly.

That is, the extent to which people identify themselves with different social groups varies and this can result in differences in helping behaviours. Some people may be more inclined to

perform the act of helping because of their identification with the nation (e.g. British) and others might do so due to their identification with the religious group (e.g. Christian).

The literature on cross-national helping usually involves research on different kinds of identities, based on how inclusive or exclusive they are. For instance, because it is more inclusive, the European identity (that includes Poles, Germans, Greeks, and so on) might trigger more help for the victims when compared to the British identity (that includes British people only). Hence, when the European identity is activated, people begin seeing Portuguese, Italian, or French people as 'people like me' or 'one of us', and become more willing to help them, whereas in the case of the British identity being salient, Portuguese, Italian, or French people would be perceived as 'others' or 'not one of us', which makes people less likely to help those groups. In that sense, more inclusive social identities, such as a religious identity, may play an effective role in endorsing cross-national helping because of religion's potential to enhance the perception of individuals from different countries as 'one of us'.

However, individuals can have multiple simultaneous social identities (e.g. British and Christian) and can strategically withdraw from identifying with a certain group if being a member of that group does not bring much benefit (e.g. just British or just Christian). In this respect, individuals may also shift their identification from one social identity to another depending on various contexts. Therefore, it seems crucial to explore what role national and religious identification plays on helping in the context of a global emergency.

To this end, I scrutinised this question with survey data collected from Muslim and non-Muslim British samples as ingroup and outgroup potential helpers for Syrian refugees, respectively. In these groups, I specifically examined both support for national policies that aim to help Syrian refugees and individual intentions to help Syrian refugees.

National v. religious identification

When the motivations for helping are considered, identifying oneself with the nation had no effect for British Muslims. On the contrary, among British non-Muslims, identifying with the nation decreased support for national helping policies. Identifying with a religious group, on the other hand, was a key factor on helping for both groups. Among British Muslims, the more people identified with their religious group, the more they perceived Syrian refugees as 'people like me', and this in turn improved their support for national helping as well as individual helping intentions.

An opposite effect was detected for British non-Muslims, where identifying with their religious group made people less inclined to see Syrian refugees as 'people like me'. Despite this negative effect, however, results demonstrated that when British non-Muslims do see Syrian refugees as 'people like me', this increased their support for national helping policies as well as their individual intentions to help Syrian refugees.

Basically, although perceiving Syrian refugees as 'people like me' enhanced the proclivity to help for British non-Muslims, it did not do so with the support of religious identification. Therefore, British non-Muslims' motivation to help might be more connected to how they think the members of their religion should help 'others' or how practising their religion is vital for them, rather than identifying with the members of their religion.

In addition, when helping scores were compared between two groups, there was an intriguing pattern that signifies a clear distinction between Muslim and non-Muslim people. According to this, British non-Muslims identified with their nation more than British Muslims while British Muslims identified with their religious group more than British non-Muslims.

Moreover, British Muslims outscored British non-Muslims on perceiving Syrian refugees as 'people like me', national helping attitudes, and individual helping intentions. These differences indicate that being an ingroup (i.e. British Muslims) and outgroup (i.e. British non-Muslims) helper to victims (i.e. Syrian refugees) not only affects the motivation to help but also the likelihood of helping.

Overall, since government aid is unstable and often dependent on political interests, increasing the help provided by individuals may have consequential outcomes in terms of the number of lives saved in disaster zones. In this manner, the findings of this study give important insight on how religion could be an important factor that either promotes or diminishes humanitarian response in global emergencies. The findings point out that British non-Muslims (i.e. outgroup helpers) saw Syrian refugees as part of an 'outgroup' on the basis of religious and national affiliations whereas for British Muslims (i.e. ingroup helpers), religious affiliation was a positive factor but national affiliation was not a significant factor in their attitudes or intentions of helping.

For this reason, to maximise the help and support for the victims of the global disasters all over the world, it seems essential for the charity sector, when designing campaigns and charity appeals, to keep in mind the religious identification of the potential ingroup helpers and the religious ingroup norms and religiosity of the potential outgroup helpers.

About the author

Nihan Albayrak is a PhD candidate in the Department of Psychological and Behavioural Science at the LSE, researching helping in the context of global disasters with a special focus on social identities, cultural proximity, and geographical distance. Her work on help and global emergencies earned her the Popular Prize at this year's LSE Festival. Twitter: @nihanalbay