



Artist: Houmam AlSayed

## **Syrian (In)formal Displacement in Lebanon**

*Displacement as Urbanism,  
Informality as Architecture*

*Dr. Ahmad Sukkar, Hani Fakhani,  
and Sawsan Abou Zainedin*



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In doing so, the Institute provides training workshops and programs beside regular teaching at AUB, encourages and provides evidence-based research in areas related to political participation, accountability and good governance, produces policy/practice recommendations to improve citizens' engagement and civil society roles in mediation, deliberation and self-organization.

It also promotes public awareness of civil society and civic engagement best practices in the region through its monthly meetings and seminars and stimulates fruitful dialogue among the region's varied publics through its programmatic activities of workshops, conferences, blog and publications.

The Asfari Institute is a research center based at AUB since 2012 and is a solid partner in consolidating AUB commitment to serve, educate and engage the Lebanese society. The Institute is mobilized to develop a new minor program on civil society and collective action with relevant AUB faculties. Among its new activities is the consolidation of three new lines of work: Civil Society Law and Governance, Culture as Resistance, and Civil Society in Conflict and Post Conflict Setting.

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## ***Bridging Academia and Activism***

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# ***About the Project***

## **THE LAY OF THE LAND:**

### ***A Social Mapping of Daily Practices in Informality amongst Syrian Displaced Communities in Lebanon***

#### **Funded by the Ford Foundation**

This research project examines how, in the face of conflict and crisis, Syrian displaced individuals and communities in Lebanon are attempting to (re)organize themselves within the informal sector to secure access to essential services. We understand informality as a sector of goods and services that is outside of, but not necessarily disconnected from the formal purview of the state. In Lebanon, most citizens are already accessing resources such as water and electricity from within the informal sector. Whereas access to such services might ideally be seen as indissolubly linked to the rights of citizens, the distribution of such goods in Lebanon is hardly equal in practice. The access to goods and services by displaced populations is consequently further compounded in such a context where, by the nature of the country's political economy, must also acquire and secure their rights through informal networks.



By addressing this question of informalization and displacement, we reflect on practices of exclusion as experienced amongst Syrian displaced communities from different socio-economic backgrounds who are otherwise perceived as non-citizens in Lebanon. We aim to document through qualitative methods and life history approaches some of the ways Syrian communities have attempted to harness basic livelihood necessities. In so doing, we examine how the Syrian crisis is contributing to the reassembling of these networks, their hierarchies, and ultimately reshaping modes of governance and state borders between Syria, Lebanon and among Syrians themselves.

***Dr. Ahmad Sukkar<sup>1</sup>, Hani Fakhani<sup>2</sup>, and Sawsan Abou Zainedin<sup>3</sup>***

When fleeing from warzones in Syria to inner and border zones of Lebanon during the Syrian war, some displaced Syrians have lived in residential apartments while most others have had to live in warehouses, tents, and other forms of makeshift shelter, constantly moving in search of better places and opportunities. While their past homes from which they moved are memories and their future homes to which they desire to move to are hopes, their present shelters where they have lived without truly dwelling reflect the realities of displacement and informality. This research paper examines the tangible and intangible patterns of these forms of shelter and their urban agglomerations, raising several critical questions. What are the main points of critique towards Lebanese housing policies before the Syrian crisis? How did these policies contribute to shaping the transition to an escalating crisis of Syrian displacement in Lebanon? What are the effects of Syrian displacement on Lebanese neighborhoods after the sudden influx of Syrians to Lebanon and the restricted development of official policies and the building of camps? What are the key social, political, economic, and cultural factors that shape these effects, internal or external, between Syrians and Lebanese, especially when some Lebanese public and state actors have seen the Syrian displacement in Lebanon as a national and sectarian problem to be contained, stopped, and

reversed? What are the different formal and informal processes of architectural and urban adaptation of Syrian displaced communities in housing and the making of urban places? Analyzing the humanistic, socioeconomic, administrative, and governing aspects of the architectural and urban features of the Syrian displacement across Lebanon, this paper argues that Syrian displacement patterns in Lebanon have rendered displacement a compound and complex system of urbanism, and informality an integral form of architecture. The paper shifts discussions on the formal and informal settlement to a perceived integrated formal and informal displacement of the Syrian communities in Lebanon. By using an approach that integrates cross-disciplinary architectural humanities and social sciences, this “diversity research” adopts a qualitative methodology based on a literature review of academic research and technical reports. It highlights a number of significant theoretical concepts of formal and informal displacement and reflects on the case studies and interviews conducted by researchers as part of the project *The Lay of the Land: A Social Mapping of Daily Practices in Informality amongst Syrian Displaced Communities in Lebanon*, implemented by the Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship at the American University of Beirut, and funded by the Ford Foundation.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This research paper was submitted as part of the publications under the project entitled *The Lay of the Land: A Social Mapping of Daily Practices in Informality amongst Syrian Displaced Communities in Lebanon*. The main research and dissemination activities of the project were conducted between 2018 and 2020. The rethinking of the cases in the third section of this research builds on case studies and interviews conducted by researchers as part of *The Lay of the Land* project and cited in this research.

The historical, political, social, and cultural aspects of the Syrians' presence in Lebanon, and in particular Refugees of the Syrian Civil War in Lebanon, are popular topics that appear as the titles of two articles in the loosely edited, widely accessed, multilingual, free encyclopedia of Wikipedia. Although Wikipedia is not a reliable source, nevertheless, these entries show that their topics are discussed at large. However, academic scholarly literature on displacement and the informal settlement of Syrians in Lebanon is limited. Academic scholarly literature and official reports on this topic have mainly been in the form of periodic assessments of humanitarian needs, as is the case of most publications of the specialized agencies of the United Nations and the organizations and research centers that work closely with them. These publications provide comprehensive data, including sophisticated maps (UNHCR 2019a), infographics, charts, and diagrams in credible fact sheets (UNHCR 2019b; IFL 2018), statistical dashboards (UNHCR 2019c; 2019d), updated operational response plans with shelter sector logframe (UNHCR 2019e, 169–185) and meta-analysis of tens of reports and assessments (Zetter et al. 2014). They also include volumes of facts and figures on the Syrian refugee crisis (Yassin 2008, 2019) that inform the discussion, and counter falsehoods and half-truths. However, these publications offer little critical interdisciplinary analysis. Policy research institutes such as the Carnegie Middle East Centre and the American University of Beirut Policy Institute have published reports that critically tackle the political, economic, and social aspects of displacement mostly to inform policymaking on issues including return and reconstruction (Yahya, Kassir, and El-Hariri 2018; Yassin et al. 2015; Refugees=Partners 2019). Think tanks such as the Arab Reform Initiative have published the outcome of research related to displacement, such as *Leveraging the Syrian Diaspora* (Arab Reform Initiative nd) in the dossier *Mapping the Syrian Diaspora as A*

*Global Player in the Reconstruction of Syria* (Kodmani and Jaber 2018), in order to inform policymakers. This dossier includes a research paper on “the Syrian diaspora in Lebanon between a lack of policy and a policy of alienation” (Majed 2018). Media articles, blogs, and collaborative initiatives have either portrayed displacement as a crisis or revealed the potential contribution of displacement in shaping forms of life in stories of both individuals and communities (Refugees=Partners n.d.); few of these publications have addressed the urban or architectural perspective of displacement and informality in a comprehensive and scholarly way. Even fewer have attempted to expand their investigation to include theorizing about the concepts of displacement and informality in the light of present operating policies.

The literature on the urban aspects of the topic of Syrians in Lebanon, as a subtopic of Syrians out of Syria, addresses two sides of the same coin: people in place and people out of place. However, Lebanon and Syria paired are a special case as “two places” Syrian people move from one to the other and hope to return. The description of the connection between Lebanon and Syria as “one nation in two countries” has been either harshly criticized as myth or highly praised as a reality by different political and intellectual groups in both Syria and Lebanon, especially during the presence of the Syrian Army in Lebanon between 1976 and 2005. The long-standing presence of Syrian workers in Lebanon has been perceived differently from the army, yet also with either hostility or welcome. Whether through the military hegemony of an army, the economic service of workers, or the humanitarian asylum of ordinary people, Syrian displacement and Lebanese informality need to be examined differently through the double lens of people and place.

## Speaking to Key Publications on Displacement and formality in Syria-Lebanon, the Middle East, the Global South and Beyond

The University of Oxford's Refugee Studies Centre, a global leader in multidisciplinary research on forced migration, published several critical studies about the Syrian crisis, refugees, and displacement in the *Forced Migration Review*, which claims on its website to be "the most widely read publication on forced migration." The outstanding examples include a complete issue entitled *The Syria Crisis, Displacement and Protection* (Couldrey and Herson 2014). It examines the social, economic, and legal aspects of vulnerability, gender, and activism of Syrian refugees and Palestinian refugees from Syria in countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and the Kurdish region of Iraq. Until the time the author wrote his article on "mobility as a solution" (Oesch 2014), Lebanon adopted "a relatively open-door policy" that allowed mobility. By contrast, the contribution of countries such as Japan to the Syrian refugee crisis was described as "open wallet, closed doors" (Omata 2015). When the open-door policy was negated, and the mobility of Syrian refugees across the borders became impossible, as will be discussed later, informality in housing and the built environment compensated to some extent for the flexibility that was lost as one of the "coping strategies among self-settled Syrians in Lebanon" (Thorleifsson 2014). In this article, the author explains the effect of the absence of official camps for Syrian refugees in Lebanon from two points of view: the international humanitarian community, which considers that this absence makes it harder to coordinate aid and ensure protection, and the refugees themselves, who prefer to seek opportunities outside camps (Thorleifsson 2014). While this article refers to important aspects of urban and architectural settings in places like Akkar, it is a short review of this highly complicated topic. With the implementation of the closed-door policy after 2014, new studies that take into account not only the socio-economic and legal relationships that shape the experience of the displaced communities but also the diverse aspects of their urban setting, became essential.

Entitled *Syrians in Displacement*, another issue of the *Forced Migration Review* marks the seventh anniversary of the Syrian conflict in 2018 and discusses the changes in the Syrian case. Focusing on displacement, it provides insights into the continuing challenges

of protection, humanitarianism, stability, and social cohesion within cities and refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Europe (Couldrey and Peebles 2018). However, like the first issue on Syria, this one contains insights into the architectural and urban setting of displacement and informality that are scattered across articles with no one article focusing on them in particular. Nevertheless, the shift of titles from "Syrians in Lebanon" (Jordan, Turkey, Europe, or any other countries or regions) to "Syrians in Displacement" is significant to our theoretical study of urbanism. It marks "displacement" not only as a state of being for people but also, as it were, a "place" where they live without truly dwelling. With the "fears of integration," Syrians in Lebanon and other countries are often described as "temporary guests," welcomed by some political and social groups and unwelcomed by others (Dahi 2014). It is as if displacement is a house with an open or closed door of policies. Informality, whether in the material making of the place or the immaterial socio-economic relationships between people, is like guests making themselves at home.

The interrelated parameters of war in Syria and displacement in Lebanon remain hot topics and are the subject of a doctoral thesis based on ethnographic fieldwork that won the British Society for Middle Eastern Studies' Leigh Douglas Memorial Prize in 2019. The thesis examines the state of permanent loss and ambiguity between illegality in Lebanon and statelessness in Syria by following the trajectory of displacement of the Syrian community from the Syrian city of al-Qusayr to the Akkar district in Lebanon. It does not focus on urban setting either but rather on the legal and social aspects of the concept of *tasharrud* (a state of permanent loss), "a term used by the community to define its own displacement and war" (Ferreri 2018; BRISMES 2019). The expression refers to the extremely bad conditions of displacement and vagrancy.

This use of the term *tasharrud* encourages a fresh examination of the concept of displacement in the context of Middle Eastern urbanism and Arabic terminology. The English word "displacement" is often translated into Arabic as *nuzuh*. The Arabic noun *nuzuh* derives from the Arabic verb *nazaha* (to move from a place). This is unlike the case of the first intrinsic meaning of the English verb "displace," which means "to take the place of somebody" (Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary). By extension, the second meaning is "to force people to move away from their home to another place" (Oxford Advanced Learner's

Dictionary). The Arabic noun *tasharrud* implies the mobility of displacement. It derives from the verb *sharada* (to move away). The transitive verb *sharrada* means to keep someone without a home. From this perspective of Arabic terminology, “displacement” refers to “homelessness,” for it originally means having no place. In the context of Syrian displacement in Lebanon, some aspects of “displacement” refer to “statelessness,” as most of the displaced people have vague legal status, are not recognized as refugees, and have lost Syrian official papers that prove their status. Homelessness and statelessness are, therefore, synonyms in this context within the intersections of private and national circles. In other words, there are three distinct yet interrelated meanings of displacement in the Arabic culture: *nuzuh* (to move from a place), *tasharrud* (to have no place, to go astray, moving between places), and *luju’* (to go to a place, to take refuge, and to find a safe place and dwell in it). To understand displacement as a form of urbanism in the context of this article is to understand it as stages of movement and a circle of development in the informal situation. Displacement is therefore connected with people at the theoretical level of “place-making,” that is, at the family level of the home, at the community level of urbanism, and at the national level of the state.

The edited book *Refugees as City-Makers* (Fawaz et al. 2018) covers a significant gap in the research fields of Syrian displacement and Lebanese informality as connected to urban planning, governance and activism, and spatial practices and justice. In their introduction, the editors argue for a “different kind of refugee talk,” as opposed to the polarized representation of refugees by international organizations as powerless and passive recipients of aid, and the representation of refugees by political leaders and the mainstream media as a wave of invading forces that threaten the cohesion and sovereignty of the host community (4). The written and visual analysis of this publication looks at refugees as active and impressive home-makers, city navigators, urban producers, and political subjects who have settled, started up new businesses, introduced new forms of inhabiting and navigating urban quarters, and negotiated access to shelter, work, education, and other ingredients of everyday livelihood (4–5). The editors argue that Beirut “is being reshaped through specific urban practices initiated by individual and collective refugee experiences” (5). They claim that most of their interlocutors who recognize the stigma associated with the “refugee” terminology “were typically reluctant to accept this

label;” however, the editors prefer to use the term “refugee” throughout their publication to counteract “the ongoing criminalization of refugee presence in Lebanon and elsewhere, asserting the responsibility to offer safe shelter and livelihoods” (5–6).

“Refugeehood” (*luju’*) in their argument is a state yet to be entirely achieved, but it is almost already there. Negated and approved by various official and academic agencies and local actors, including the “refugees” themselves for contrasting reasons, refugeehood is like a segment in the circle of *nuzuh*, *tasharrud*, and *luju’*, that defines a space for activities and development. The difference between individuals and communities describing their experiences of displacement as *tasharrud* (vagrancy) and others describing it as “non-refugeehood” raises new questions about social and spatial justice. This research attempts to address them by deconstructing the concept of displacement using an urban lens. It stimulates a rethinking of displacement as a continuum between the formal and the informal. Between the extreme case of vagrancy and misery, and the other extreme of development and prosperity, displacement reveals the degrees of this continuum (Kabbanji and Kabbanji 2018), given the spectrum of meanings of the formal and informal between *rasmi* (official, planned, legal and licensed) and *nizami* (official, regular and uniformed), on the one hand, and *’afawi* (spontaneous), *’ashwa’i* (unofficial, random irregular and uniformed), and *mukhalif* (built without permission or without following the licensed plan or the common standardization), on the other.

In sum, this article focuses on “Syrian (in)formal displacement in Lebanon” by explaining the boundaries and challenging the division between the formal and informal housing processes and the social inclusion of “Syrians” in Lebanon. It attempts to go beyond the cases in Syria (Al Asali, Wagemann, and Ramage 2019) and Lebanon (Mintchev et al. 2019; Knowles 2019). It contributes, through the Lebanese case of the Syrian displacement, to the global debate about urban informalities as a “framework of analysis and reflection” (Fawaz 2017) and a “site of critical analysis” (Banks, Lombard, and Mitlin 2019). It further adds to the literature on urban informality in the Middle East (World Bank 2017), the Global South (Banks, Lombard, and Mitlin 2019) and beyond (Waibel 2012; Jones 2014). Whether through top-down governmental policies, bottom-up community initiatives, or international involvement, approaches that are humanitarian people-based and/or developmental place-centered

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need to be restructured in both theory and practice. The more comprehensive the analyses of these policies and initiatives are at the theoretical level, the more appropriate their applications become at both the local level of the neighborhoods and villages, and the state level of municipalities, districts, and governorates. This article, which aims to be holistic without claiming to achieve that ambition, attempts to discuss how to integrate them functionally—when necessary—according to the micro and macro contexts. Given the growing globalization of the Syrian case, the “Syrian” as a collective adjective rather than “Syrians” as individual stories in Lebanon and elsewhere is ultimately at stake.

# Syrian (In)Formal Displacement In Lebanon

Approximately 6.8 million refugees have left Syria, mostly to the neighboring countries, Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan. Syrians who fled to Turkey have been granted temporary protection, with some people residing in government-managed camps and others in host communities in cities across the country. Those who fled to Jordan settled mainly in host communities and a small number in formal camps with access to services. The 1.5 million refugees who fled to Lebanon were largely left with no clear policy or framework for housing them at first. The policy gradually became one of resisting any further increase in refugee numbers.

## *The Shock of a Stumbling Urban Landscape*

The urban landscape in Lebanon is distinctly characterized by a lagging public sector and a dominant private sector. The public sector lacks the competence and political will to set and enforce inclusive and socially just urban legislative frameworks. The private sector operates through a manipulative and highly inflated real estate market that dictates the terms of urban development in the vacuum brought by a lack of urban governance and policymaking. This urban landscape is manifested in increased socioeconomic urban

## Where have all the Syrian refugees gone?

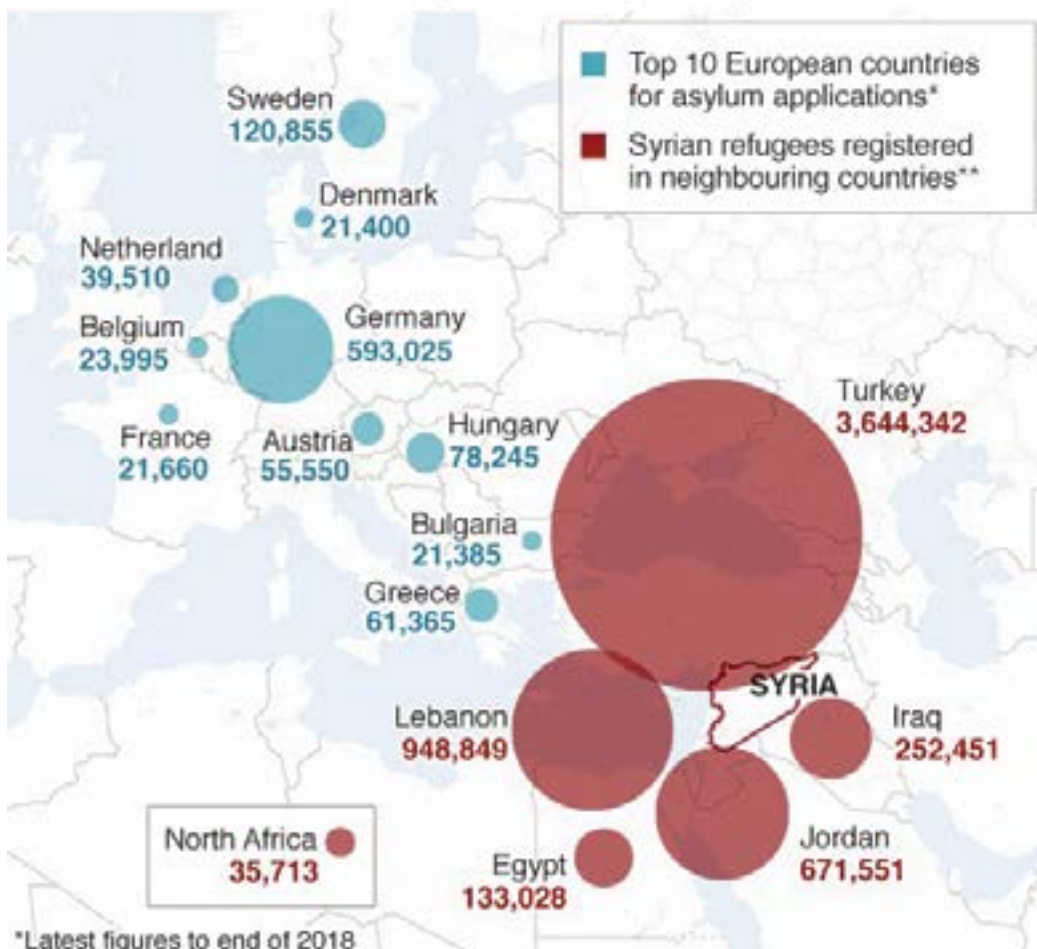


Figure 1: Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries (BBC 2019)

inequality as low- and middle-income populations are further excluded from the cities that are gradually becoming exclusively accessible to the powerful elite (Fawaz, Salamé, and Serhan 2017).

Restricted access to affordable housing is one of the critical manifestations of urban inequality. Since 1997, government interventions in the housing sector have been limited to demand-side policies in the form of subsidized mortgage loans through the Public Corporation for Housing, which was established under the Ministry of Social Affairs to replace the abolished Ministry of Housing. Arguably, these interventions are contributing to the rising cost of housing as a result of excessive demand, especially in desirable areas, while other neighborhoods have become more neglected. Housing provision, as such, has been abandoned by the Lebanese authorities and turned out to be manipulative and increasingly inflated real-estate market. The limited intervention of the government in the housing sector, along with a series of unjust legal provisions concerning rent, including lifting rent control (8.5.2014 and its amendments 28.02.2017), has increased the vulnerability of tenants in favor of landlords and strained the market with an increased demand for affordable housing (Fawaz, Salamé, and Serhan 2017, 1). This unbalanced situation has led to the displacement of thousands of vulnerable households from their home cities towards the peripheries in search of better affordable options, and puts an extra burden on the inefficient infrastructure, including transport. As a result, large segments of the population have been living in inadequate housing, including informal settlements, suffering from severely deteriorated infrastructure and public services, and lacking security of tenure. Constant threats of eviction are triggering socio-economic and political turmoil. The rental market is hugely disproportionate to the levels of income, feeding into a vicious cycle of poverty and vulnerability. The already existing class and sectarian segregation and spatial fragmentation are being exacerbated by new layers of urban grievances, jeopardizing the already exhausted post-conflict reality of Lebanon (Public Works Studio, the Order of Engineers and Architects in Beirut, and UN-Habitat 2018).

In this complicated situation, the team working on the Social Justice and the City program at the American University of Beirut said: "It is safe to speak of an ongoing housing crisis" (Fawaz, Salamé, and Serhan 2017). The crisis exhibits a number of characteristics. Housing in Beirut, for example, proves to be more

expensive than in cities like Paris or Dubai (Public Works Studio, the Order of Engineers and Architects in Beirut, and UN-Habitat 2018, 6). Public policies are primarily geared towards landowners despite the fact that nearly half of the population in Beirut are tenants, as rent is their only accessible means to the housing market (UNDP survey conducted in 2008). The average rate of evictions is very high, reaching 200 cases in a block of 300 buildings. These evictions mostly happen to vulnerable groups with no housing alternatives. Some religious and civil institutions are providing housing in some neighborhoods, although this runs along sectarian lines. Transfer of ownership from landlords to private developers is increasingly becoming common practice in the market, especially amongst landlords wishing to liquidate their property when in need of ready cash. This practice has also been widely adopted for most buildings in old neighborhoods that are usually owned by a large number of heirs or shareholders who, given the high fees incurred, cannot afford to subdivide their property. Thus, they are left with no option but to sell to investors. Perhaps the most significant feature of this housing crisis is the extremely high percentage of empty apartments in old and new buildings. This reaches 20% in some neighborhoods compared to the average 3–5% in a balanced housing market. This feature, however, reveals the potential of the city to address the issue of affordability if proper frameworks are put in place (5).

The team of the Social Justice and the City program concluded that the housing crisis in Lebanon has multiple drivers. Chief among these is the lack of political will to intervene in a context where the economic interests of the powerful elite dictate policymaking in the built environment. The unrest and economic uncertainty are also playing a major role in discouraging long-term investments that usually account for the provision of affordable housing. Additionally, the lack of a national urban housing strategy to guide decision making, and the multiple deficiencies in the broader agenda of social policymaking in which shelter is inscribed are further intensifying the crisis (Fawaz, Salamé, and Serhan 2017, 1).

To these already unstable diverse realities, factors and actors in the urban landscape in a country with a long-contested history of hosting Palestinian refugees and Syrian economic migrants, 1.5 million displaced Syrians have arrived, according to the Lebanese government estimate. In 2019, close to 950,000 of them were registered with UNHCR (UNHCR 2019b). In 2017 and 2018, 1 in 6 people were refugees under the responsibility of UNHCR (UNHCR 2018a, 2; 2019f, 3).



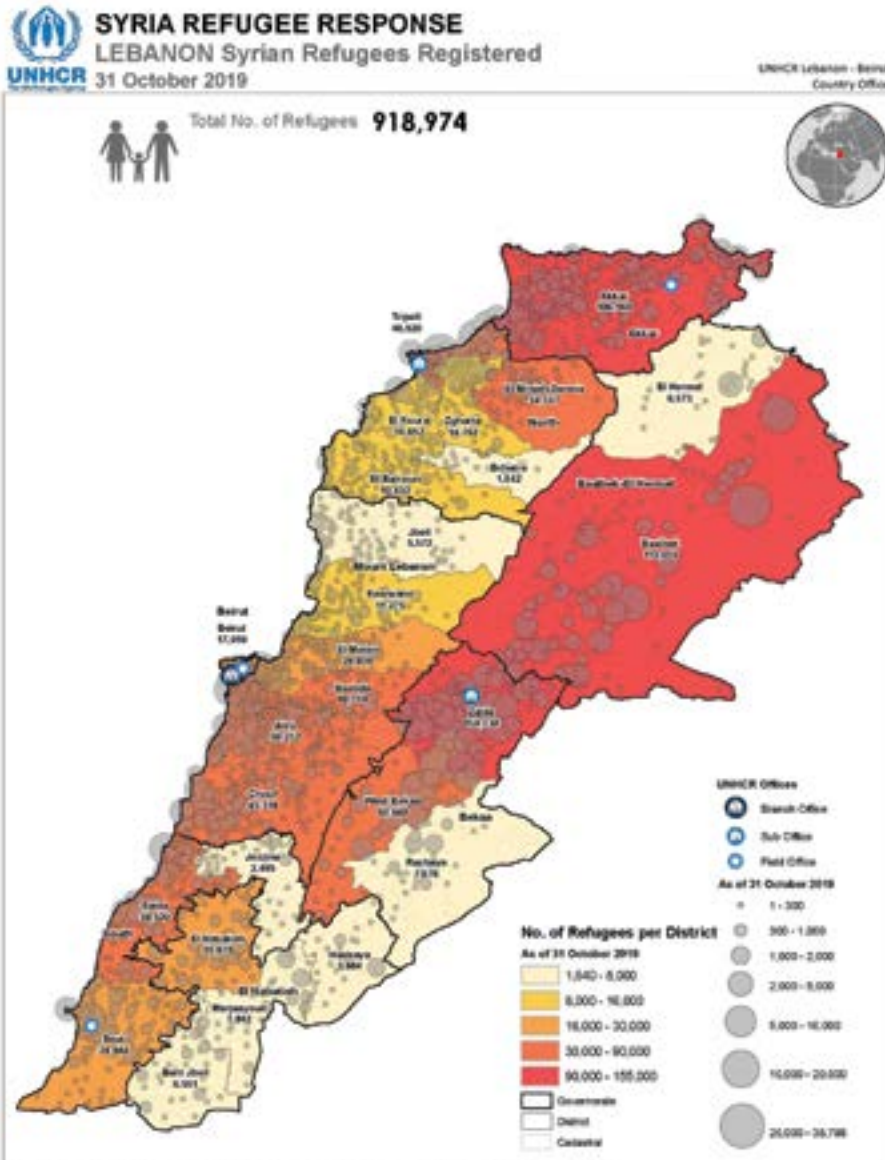


Figure 2: Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon, October 2019 (UNHCR 2019b)

In the beginning, Lebanon adopted an open-border policy towards Syrian refugees between 2011 and 2014. However, the highly praised resilience of Lebanon as an international model for being “the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita” diminished after 2014 (UNHCR 2019b). By the end of 2014, the open-door policy was negated, and a new set of legislation controlling the access of Syrian refugees was enforced. The Lebanese government closed the borders and requested Syrians to pay for residency permits every six months. By 2015, the government officially asked the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to stop registering refugees. With the increasing demands to return refugees to Syria, the government’s former Foreign Minister, Gebran Bassil ordered a freeze on residency permits for UNHCR’s staff. He threatened

to take further measures as he accused the agency of obstructing the refugees’ return (Geha and Talhouk 2018, 2).

Several contested matters in the political landscape of Lebanon concerning Syria and its conflict have driven this drastically changing political stance towards Syrian refugees in Lebanon. These issues include the question of formal diplomatic ties with the Syrian authorities. There are also the issues of safety and security within Lebanon, as well as the contested claims on the existence of safe zones and the legal conditions within Syria (Geha and Talhouk 2018, 4). The changing policy, however, has been catalyzed by the lack of an institutional framework to respond to the dramatic influx of refugees (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014), and the biased assessments of

the toll of the Syrian influx on Lebanese institutions and infrastructure. An early impact assessment of refugees in Lebanon conducted by the International Labour Organization in 2013 reported that poverty incidence has risen to 53% in the North, 42% in the South, and 30% in Beqaa, governorates with a concentrated presence of Syrian refugees, compared to the national rate of 28% (ILO 2014, 53). Rent for accommodation has risen sometimes by more than 200% in 6 months in some areas, and by 400% in some of Beirut's districts (38–39). Public services were strained by a doubled demand on healthcare centers in some areas (39) and a reported increase of solid waste by 30% to 40% as well as extra pressures on education, water, and other services (41). The World Bank estimated the fiscal cost of the Syrian conflict on Lebanese infrastructure at 589 million USD between 2012 and 2014 (World Bank 2013, 4). These facts highlight the big challenge the country's infrastructure and public services were already facing. The absence of institutional frameworks exacerbated the toll of the influx of refugees and was manifested in highly charged societal tension and institutional discrimination, rendering refugees confined within their miserable realities. This condition has romanticized the question of return and deprived it of its urgent politicized certainty.

### *The Urban and Architectural Reality of Refugees in Lebanon*

On the institutional level, the Lebanese constitution recognizes the right of everyone to an adequate standard of living, including adequate housing. However, it sets limits to the enjoyment of basic rights—including housing rights—by non-Lebanese persons (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014). Additionally, Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention (Janmyr 2018; 2017), and thus, it did not recognize Syrians in Lebanon as refugees, including those registered with UNHCR as refugees. Hence, no comprehensive national strategy was put in place, and no defined or consistent legal and administrative frameworks were developed to accommodate the influx of Syrian refugees (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014). The central government of Lebanon, which was already struggling with a housing crisis predating the refugee influx, had not only declined to take a leading role in providing housing solutions to ease the already strained situation, but also banned UNHCR from establishing formal refugee camps (HRW 2018). The Lebanese government, despite the relentless pressure from aid organizations to set up formal refugee

camp, maintained its position, citing what it saw as the failed experience of the Palestinian camps. In those camps, this failed experience of Palestinian refugees manifested itself in that they were a marginalized community (Suleiman 2006). As in Jordan, security, class, and the labor market explain the non-encampment of Syrian refugees (Turner 2015). However, unlike the case in Jordan where there is a more organized and controlling central authority, the whole burden in Lebanon was completely left to the over-stretched local authorities who were compelled to absorb and respond, although unevenly, to the sudden increase in their populations, which sometimes rose up to four times the original number within their jurisdiction (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014). The failure of an institutional response to this refugee influx and the limited ability of the international community to respond paved the way for two dominant sectors to take the lead, sometimes in interrelated manners: the private and the informal.

In the private sector, the relationship between Syrian pre-war economic migration and conflict displacement with Lebanon's real estate market has been perceived in contradictory ways. Many Lebanese developers claim that the Syrian crisis was the primary cause of the real estate market deterioration in Lebanon. However, signs predating 2011 suggested that the real estate market was already stagnating. This reality resulted and manifested itself in thousands of apartments lying vacant, housing prices becoming extremely inflated, and affordable housing being in very short supply (Ashkar 2015, 92). On the other hand, some scholars contradict these claims by arguing that the Syrian crisis, specifically the flight of capital and the bourgeoisie from Syria, have increased demand for housing and thus reshaped the market. The first wave of Syrian refugees, which was mostly of the upper economic class, sought accommodation in Beirut, increasing the rental market by 40% during 2012. This sudden increase in demand for housing allowed leading developers to switch their frozen housing stock to the rental market to alleviate the losses caused by slow sales (95–96). By 2014, 57% of the refugees in Lebanon were living in rented apartments, yet informally in many cases, contributing 73.7 million USD per month to the Lebanese economy (NRC 2014, 6). Many Syrian businessmen decided to buy apartments when they realized the crisis back home seemed to be lasting longer than initially expected (Ashkar 2015, 96).

In fact, the relationship between the construction market in Lebanon and the Syrian displacement and migration stretches back decades, given the long-

standing reliance of Lebanon on Syrian workers. The flight of Syrian workers from Lebanon—during the 2008 Lebanese conflict, for example—was claimed by some real estate developers to have had negative results for the construction market given the high costs of replacing Syrian workers with Lebanese ones (Ashkar 2015, 93). This situation continues up to the present, with the construction sector being one of the few markets Syrians are allowed to access for job opportunities as per Decree 197 of the Ministry of Labor (Errighi and Griesse 2016, 11).

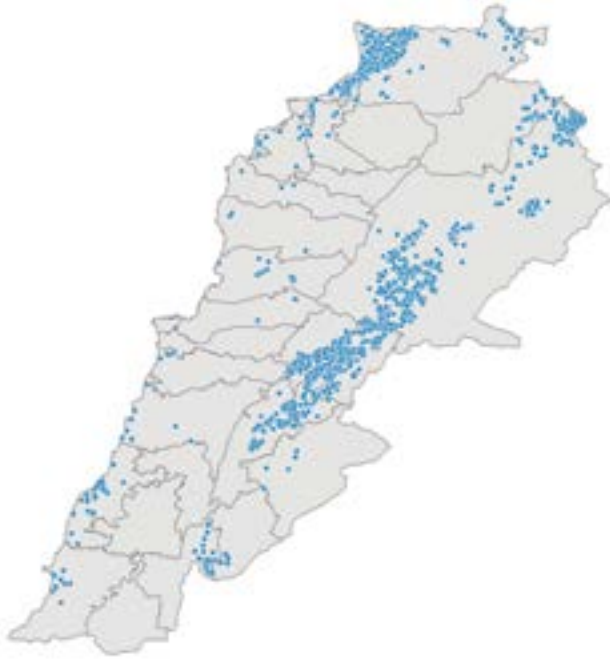
The highly inflated real estate market, however, deprived a large number of Syrian displaced people access to its housing stock, as was the case for many of the Lebanese middle- and lower-income classes. For a long time, the market operated exclusively to serve the rich developers, expatriates, and wealthy foreign individuals, and it detached itself from local demand and supply dynamics. As a result, thousands of vacant apartments in Lebanon were unavailable for most Syrians and Lebanese, who were struggling during a peak in the housing crisis. The competition over what was already a minimally affordable housing stock drained out the market, creating further pressure on the host Lebanese communities (Ashkar 2015).

With the real estate market being inaccessible to the most vulnerable displaced people, the extremely high demand for housing was channeled to the informal market, giving Lebanon's already strong and vital informal sector more momentum. Since the 1960s, urban centers in Lebanon had attracted an influx of rural migrants seeking better quality services. Some of these migrants managed to reside in the centers of cities, while many settled on the peripheries, creating the core of what became known as the informal settlements, or poverty belts, of Lebanon. These, in turn, constantly attracted displaced people, including Lebanese fleeing the war in the south, Iraqis, Palestinians, as well as foreign workers (Fawaz and Peillen 2002), and most recently, the influx of Syrian refugees.

Given the relative affordability, responsiveness, and flexibility of the informal market, most refugees accessed shelter through informal channels. According to the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon in 2018, the informal market exploited every opportunity, including vacant land and non-residential properties, producing various new forms of shelter to host refugees.

The diverse typologies of these forms reflect the flexibility, responsiveness, and affordability of the informal market. According to UNHCR, these typologies include residential structures (designed for human residence), non-residential structures (not designed for human habitation), and non-permanent structures (structures erected in an ad-hoc manner that could be quickly dismantled and moved). Residential structures include apartments and houses, and concierge's rooms in residential buildings that usually consist of a single room with likely very basic toilet/kitchen facilities. Non-residential structures include factories, workshops, farms, active construction sites, garages, shops, agricultural/engine/pump rooms, warehouses, hotel rooms, and schools. The non-permanent structures include tents and prefab units. UNHCR experts also define shelter according to collectivity (how many households living in the same structure), communality (how many households sharing facilities), management (by an agency, charity, or committee), adequacy (in terms of the need for a technical intervention), and sealing (with walls, doors, and windows). Other ways to define a shelter include legality and rural/urban location. Inclusion in some categories means automatic inclusion in others, for instance, "if a shelter is unsealed, it is also by definition inadequate. If the shelter type is non-residential, it is highly likely that the shelter is inadequate, though it is possible to rehabilitate a non-residential structure to meet minimum standards" (UNHCR, 2018b).

One major form of informality was the hundreds of informal tented settlements which emerged across the country, mainly in agricultural areas, hosting nearly 19% of refugees in Lebanon. The majority of those (90%) lived below the poverty line, with agricultural work as their primary source of income. For many, tented settlements were the most affordable available option as, on average, they cost 58 USD a month. However, many viewed those settlements as temporary solutions and awaited better shelter opportunities (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018).



**Figure 3:** *Informal settlements in Lebanon, June 2017 (UNHCR 2017).*

Another pattern in the informal market has been the non-residential spaces transformed into shelters, which hosted 15% of refugees in 2018, the majority of whom were below the poverty line (71%) and mostly worked in construction (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018, 41). A common form of these shelter typologies has become known as *makhzan sakani* (storehouse-turned-home). Although non-residential spaces that are transformed into shelters are slightly more expensive than temporary tents in tented settlements, with an average rent of 149 USD a month, many consider the former as a much better option (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018).

Residential apartments have hosted over half of the Syrian refugees (66% as of 2018) (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018), although the majority were located in informal settlements, as in Beirut, for example (Fawaz 2017). However, economic hardships and legal insecurity have pushed more refugees towards non-residential and non-permanent informal forms of shelter. The percentage of refugees occupying residential apartments dropped from 73% to 66% between 2017 and 2018 (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018). This drop has been mainly driven by the extremely high rental costs in residential apartments with which refugees could not keep up, so they were forced to evacuate and move to other types of shelter. The fact that the majority of refugees lacked secure tenure has exacerbated this situation (NRC 2014; UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018). Multiple moves or displacements have been widely recorded with 10% of refugees reported to have changed accommodation in six months in 2018, and 12% in 2017 (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018).

As in the wider housing market in Lebanon, the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon 2018 also cited rent as the main access of refugees to all forms of shelter. This was the case for 81% of refugees in 2018. Rent, however, was extremely high and increasing. Although rent in non-permanent and non-residential shelters was slightly cheaper than rent in residential properties (estimated at 221 USD per month), it has steadily increased by 66% in tented settlements and 10% in non-residential shelters, in comparison with the relatively stable rent of residential properties. Additionally, the vast majority of refugees (89%) had only verbal agreements with their landlords, most commonly outlining monthly rent payments, which may or may not have included electricity, water supply, and other services (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018).

In addition to rent, 8% of refugees are estimated to be hosted for free, and 6% are hosted in exchange for work (UNHCR 2018b). Third-party hosting, involving cash-support to host families by an external organization, is also documented (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014). In some cases, Lebanese landlords have offered land for free for Syrians to set up tents. In others, such as in the case of al-Qusair camp, the settlement was initiated as a self-help settlement by a community of displaced people from al-Qusair city in Homs. They initiated and built the camp with some basic infrastructure on a landfill site. Later they received support from NGOs working in the area and set up an educational center which helped both Syrian and Lebanese people.

The distribution, density, and location of refugees' shelters and settlements have been the product of a set of political, cultural, economic, and social factors. Displaced Syrians were highly concentrated in peripheral and poor areas, mainly in southern Lebanon, northern Lebanon, and Beqaa. Some cities, towns, and neighborhoods attracted refugees more than others, converting areas, such as some Beirut neighborhoods, into de facto Syrian settlements with the number of Syrians exceeding that of Lebanese. By September 2013, Syrian refugees were present in numerous municipalities (World Bank 2013, 28). In over 133 locations, Syrian refugees accounted for more than 30% of the overall population (28–29). Akkar has been called “the capital of displacement.” Many of the pre-crisis existing Palestinian refugee camps attracted a large number of displaced people (Fawaz 2017), and many settlements have been built by or for Syrians who are their major residents.

Economic factors are amongst the main drivers of these patterns. The economic status of refugees has guided the distribution and forms of their shelters, dividing them between and within the formal and informal markets, and contributing to the production of new socioeconomic divisions among refugees themselves and the exclusion from the wider host communities (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014). The patterns have also been strongly driven by the sectarian divisions of Lebanon's urban demographics, which have tended to attract refugees to certain areas based on their sects and subjected them to different levels of discrimination accordingly. For example, many of the municipality-led evictions of Syrian refugees targeted Sunni families and spared Christian ones (HRW 2018, 2–3). This resulted in new layers of division amongst refugees themselves. Sectarian discrimination has gone hand in hand with the political polarization in Lebanon towards the Syrian authorities and its manifestation on a spatial level (Geha and Talhouk 2018, 3).

In addition to these drivers, Syrians have often followed existing routes of other displaced communities who assisted them with information about the informal shelter market in relation to access and prices, as well as access to job opportunities. Newly displaced people have naturally followed previously displaced family members or existing social networks seeking a sense of solidarity and social security. The long-existing pre-crisis networks of migrant workers, who have lived in specific areas for years as construction or service workers, have also played a key role (Fawaz 2017). Additionally, the presence of humanitarian organizations in some areas, mainly informal settlements hosting refugees, has been a vital attracting factor.

With informality being the most responsive to the needs of refugees, the international humanitarian actors—who were lagging behind and struggling as they were over-occupied with negotiating with the government to allow the building of camps—have tapped into the informal sector. Informality provided them with a dynamic framework for their humanitarian and developmental response. International organizations claimed that they operated through local authorities, despite constant assertions by most municipalities that international organizations had bypassed them when providing services to refugees within their jurisdiction (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014; Carpi and Boano 2018). International organizations mostly work on demand-side, providing cash for rent, which in a way has contributed to inflating the rental market. However,

other approaches have tackled the supply side, as they contributed to the creation of additional housing units. Such organizations have engaged in developing tented settlements by providing some infrastructure (toilets and water facilities) in addition to providing construction materials. They have also participated in the process of developing the non-residential shelters, including “storehouses-turned-homes,” in return for guarantees that landlords would honor their agreements and respect a rent cap that protects refugees (NRC 2014). They have even attempted to organize a form of informal governance with respect to the prominent role of the Shaweesh (the community representative in informal settlements) and the committees of refugee and host communities (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014).

### *An In-between Space: The Struggle of Informality and Displacement*

While the informal sector played a vital role in securing shelters for thousands of refugees, it nevertheless created many challenges for both the refugees and host communities. Despite its high adaptability and responsiveness vis-à-vis the formal private market and public housing provision, the informal market remained characterized by poor performance, leaving a big gap between supply and demand and raising competition for the limited available shelters. Additionally, the low-quality shelters kept many refugees on the move, looking for better housing opportunities. In fact, the poor quality of shelter is often one of the primary cited reasons for refugees to move from one shelter to another. According to UNHCR in 2018, 6% of refugees lived in shelters in dangerous conditions, one-third of refugee families lived in overcrowded shelters, and 35.5% lived in substandard shelters (UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP 2018). The disparity in shelter quality has created division among the refugees themselves with residents of the tented settlements, for example, viewing residents of the transformed non-residential spaces as being more privileged, with better access to the support of organizations.

The mechanisms of informality kept both host and refugee communities vulnerable to inequality and abuse. The social networks on which refugees rely to access information about the price and availability of shelters are, by their nature, not accessible to all refugees. Landlords in such unregulated markets have great power and leverage over refugees, which many have exploited by asking for unrealistically high and

constantly rising rent fees and evicting tenants who fail to meet their unregulated requests. The insecurity of tenure in all housing forms of the informal market, including the rented apartments, non-residential, and non-permanent shelters, has left tenants vulnerable to eviction. On the other hand, some landlords have been victims of tenants who left without paying rent (UNHCR and UN-Habitat 2014).

The increasingly unfavorable attitude of the government towards refugees has exacerbated the situation. The sponsoring system introduced in 2014 by the Lebanese General Security created an unhelpful power dynamic between the refugee and host communities. The system aimed at restricting the entry of Syrian refugees and forcing foreign nationals, including displaced Syrians, to have an employer who acts as a sponsor (*kafil*). The sponsor would usually impose several conditions in return for legal protection within the sponsorship (*kafala*) system. This system gave power to individual Lebanese over Syrian refugees, who in some cases were exploited. Because of the sponsorship system, refugees residing in informal tented settlements were forced to work in agriculture with little income, and they were not allowed to work outside the premises of their sponsor's land even in winter when there is no work on the land; otherwise, they were at risk of being expelled from the settlements. Furthermore, article 49 of the 2018 state budget law introduced an exit, but only in theory, by granting permanent residency to non-Lebanese able to purchase a property worth of at least \$300,000. However, the Constitutional Council suspended this article soon after launching it amid appeals of Lebanese parties against it in connection with the presence of Syrian refugees. Needless to say, the vast majority of Syrians in Lebanon have never been able to meet such a requirement (Azar 2018; Inas 2018; Kni'u 2018).

The political dysfunctionality of Lebanon, in addition to other demographic and ethnic fears, has made the relationship between the Lebanese and Syrian communities go from challenging to worse (Yahya, Kassir, and El-Hariri 2018). In this regard, the Lebanese government began to complain about the enormous burden of hosting a large number of Syrians in such a small country. Discussions leading up to the 2018

Lebanese general elections fueled the already rising tension between Syrians and their host communities, blaming the former for the failure of public services, shortage of housing, instability, and unemployment, among other things. The sectarian nature of the Lebanese power-sharing system polarized the public response to the presence of Syrian refugees. The fact that most Syrian refugees were Muslim Sunnis was perceived by many in Lebanon as a threat to the Christian and Shiite communities. This situation was especially problematic, given the growing visibility and size of the Syrian settlements (Geha and Talhouk 2018).

The tension gave rise to public and official discrimination against Syrian refugees. This discrimination was evident in incidents such as the fire set at the Dier Al-Ahmar camp, which displaced hundreds of refugees in 2019 (Vohra 2019), and the increased number of municipalities forcibly evicting Syrian refugees during 2017 and 2018 as reported by Human Rights Watch (HRW) (HRW 2018). At least 3,664 Syrian nationals were evicted from at least 13 municipalities from the beginning of 2016 through the first quarter of 2018 and almost 42,000 Syrian refugees remained at risk of eviction in 2017 (17). The Lebanese army evicted another 7,524 in the vicinity of the Rayak Airbase in the Bekaa Valley in 2017. A total of 15,126 Syrians near the airbase had eviction orders pending, according to Lebanon's Ministry of Social Affairs (28–29). Additionally, HRW reported incidents where the Lebanese army forced refugees living in semi-permanent shelters on agricultural land to dismantle their own shelters' concrete walls and roofs and replace them with less protective materials (HRW 2019). The Lebanese authorities claimed that evictions took place based on breaches of housing regulations by refugees, such as not registering their lease. The evictions, however, targeted only Syrian nationals, although the same breaches were widespread among Lebanese nationals (HRW 2018, 34). This escalation of discrimination against Syrian refugees exposed a high level of tension between refugees and host communities, which in turn intensified fear and pushed refugees even further to isolation within their own Syrian communities.

This paper highlights aspects of informal displacement in case studies based on interviews with Syrian displaced communities in some of the most vulnerable localities in northern, east-central and southern Lebanon (UNHCR 2015) conducted as part of The Lay of the Land project. The cases focus on rural areas far from Beirut and close to the disadvantaged areas near the borders.

We selected these particular cases out of several other case studies conducted as part of The Lay of the Land project because of their richness in urban components, despite the fact that the authors who conducted them did not intend to situate them directly within the urban field. The discussion below builds on the selected cases in an attempt to rethink their contribution to the urban discussion in this paper.

**The first case study, “From the Palace to the Tent: Syrian Women’s Housing Experiences in Akkar”** by Lara Azzam and Rawad Ghattas, examines the socioeconomic aspects of the differences between living in a warehouse and a tent in Akkar District in Akkar Governorate, northern Lebanon. Based on twenty testimonies of Syrian women, it addresses the situation and struggles of female refugees.

“Warehouses” are non-residential spaces transformed into basic shelters. Residents of those “houses” consider them the better option when compared to tents in terms of the level of stability and social security, yet as substandard compared to their houses back home. Many residents had been either employees in the public sector or private small-business owners in Syria. With the lack of freedom of mobility, they rely on jobs nearby and financial aid assistance to pay for rent. For some of these residents, the warehouse is also a reflection of social status. Informal tented settlements, on the other hand, host a large number of refugees. They are usually set up in agricultural areas, where landlords benefit from their workforce in return for providing work and land. Many of their residents come from Bedouin or agricultural backgrounds. In general, tents are the least expensive shelter option. They receive different levels of support from organizations that build bathrooms

and provide water. The Al-Qusayr Camp shows an example of a “self-help” camp that was built by refugees who organized themselves and attracted support from various organizations. The experience of living in Lebanon for most women interviewed has been socially and economically difficult, with a common sense of being deprived, discriminated against and neglected. However, some women interviewed showed a high degree of resilience and of being empowered by their own social support system.

The inaccessibility of the formal rent market has led many refugees to settle in various informal shelters, forming, in many cases, social solidarity networks among themselves. While one type might provide a better level of social and economic stability than the other, informality remains a mainstream channel of shelter provision. Positive aspects of informality, in this case, include proximity to flexible job opportunities. However, most refugees perceived their experience as being characterized by deprivation, discrimination, negligence, and gloomy uncertainty.

**The second case study, “Homes of the Past, Present, and Future: Tracing Routes of Syrian Displacement in Ghazze”** by Lara Azzam and Salwa Mansour, focuses on the humanistic aspects of trauma and memories of displacement and what makes a “home.” Based on twelve interviews with displaced families, it traces the routes of Syrian displacement in Ghazze District, Western Beqaa Governorate, east-central Lebanon.

The displaced families interviewed tended to romanticize their past and to hold negative views about their present situation, feeling unwelcomed, mistreated, and, therefore, socially alienated. They struggle amidst a shortage of aid for shelter, the constant need to move between houses, challenges to access the expensive rental market, lack of basic services, and, sometimes, having to live in uninhabitable places. Many of them support each other informally in searching for the best available housing options. The newly developed socioeconomic networks are based on existing Syrian workers’ networks from before the Syrian crisis, such

as the network of construction workers who used to work in Lebanon and had deep connections with the Lebanese community.

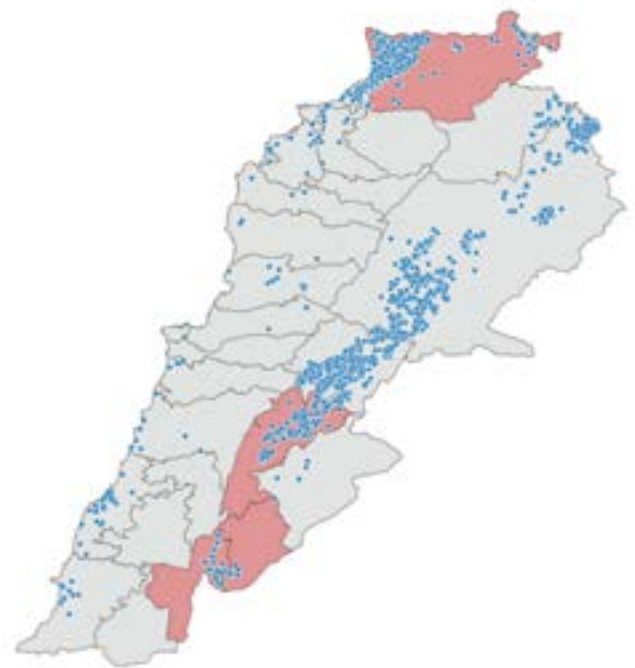
The past, present, and future of the displaced families shape their formal and informal housing realities. They have inherited their present informal socioeconomic networks from those formalized within their previous Syrian urban settings, whether in Syria or Lebanon. Their informal, unsettled conditions within the fluid Lebanese urbanism has strengthened this supportive network and rendered the skills to develop it transferable to Syria upon a possible return. The rigid formality in the Lebanese urbanism has shaped flexible virtual Syrian urban networks that are more important than the physical urbanism. It is as if there are two strata of urbanism: Syrian informal, non-physical urbanism lying above and intertwined with a formal and informal, physical Lebanese urbanism. While their networks have not gone through any comprehensive stages of formal urban development, informality has prevented this displacement from becoming vagrancy (*tasharrud*) through informal assistance to housing provision to fill the gap resulting from the absence of formal official assistance from the government.

**The third case study, “From Warzones to Border Zones: The Nature of an Informal WASH and Shelter Governing Structure”** by Lara Azzam and Fadel Saleh, demonstrates the humanitarian and administrative nature of the informal governing structure of WASH (water, sanitation, and hygiene) and shelter in Marjaayoun District and Hasbaya District, Nabatieh Governorate, southern Lebanon. It is based on twenty interviews with members of the displaced Syrian communities living in informal settlements.

The displaced families have benefited at some point from the WASH and shelter aid programs. However, aid was significantly reduced in 2018, and the providing organizations attempted to implement strategies for withdrawal. These exit strategies included a shift from humanitarian methods of delivering services towards supporting a self-governance structure of the informal settlements, in particular building the capacity of the local authorities to integrate the WASH needs of the displaced Syrian people into those of the host country. The strategies have not proved effective, and the displaced communities were not satisfied. Systematic development of a sustainable WASH and Shelter governing structure for displaced families remains a priority. Expressing collective melancholy for this

present and nostalgia for the past, the displaced families share a feeling of dissatisfaction with being stuck in an in-between space, neither able to establish decent lives in shelters in Lebanon nor able to return home to Syria.

Regardless of the degree of success of integrating the WASH governing and administrative system within the semi-architectural system of the shelters and the semi-urban infrastructure of the informal settlement, the attempt demonstrates degrees of a shift from informality to formality in the Syrian displacement in this case. The transition from Syrian informality to Lebanese formality is direct, less spontaneous, and more formal.



**Figure 4:** Informal settlements in Akkar, Western Beqaa, Marjaayoun, and Hasbaya districts, June 2017 (UNHCR 2017). Author highlighted studied districts.



## *Displacement as Urbanism, Informality as Architecture*

The facts and incidents presented in the case studies and the analyses reflected on these cases illustrate that the struggle of Syrian communities in Lebanon in search of “home” have rendered their displacement a form of urbanism that revolves around “place-making” in a constant state of mobility. Displacement, in this sense, not only implies the spatial manifestation of *nuzuh* (to move from one place to another), but also reproduces it as an endlessly repeated experience: displaced families in Lebanon have been forced to relocate over and over again. Additionally, displacement embraces the state of *tasharud* (to have no place) from an urban perspective. The ability to secure shelter in Lebanon has negated neither the state of homelessness nor the state of statelessness. Shelters have failed to provide adequacy and safety, let alone contribute to securing legal security. Finally, displacement as a form of urbanism redefines the state of *luju* (to take refuge in a place) as an unachieved experience driven by the politics of displacement. The Lebanese authorities have deployed urban arrangements and legal frameworks that have negated the state of stability that displaced communities seek in their refugeehood.

Often forced to exist on the margins of the law and institutional frameworks, the efforts of displaced people in their processes of place-making become acts of informality. In the contexts of displacement in Lebanon, informality has given rise to new forms and patterns of space production that—despite their shortcomings—have surpassed the potential of formal mechanisms, and their elitist and discriminatory modes of production. Syrian informality has somehow created agglomerations parallel to the already existing Lebanese ones. It has presented itself as a viable, innovative, and more socially and spatially just alternative for the marginalized to move forward. From this point of view, informality has ceased to be an illegal status of architectural production. Instead, it has reclaimed itself through the attitude and actions of Syrians in Lebanon as an integral form of architecture, a legal necessity, and an inclusive mode of social and spatial production. In this sense, (In)formality becomes (Il)legal.

From this perspective, the bewilderment of displaced communities as they try to understand their experience of displacement between *nuzuh*, *tasharud*, and *luju* has acquired extra meaning. Between the conditions of homelessness, statelessness, and a state of non-refugeehood, displaced people in Lebanon are caught in a state of ambiguity and vagueness. Mourning their past homes as memories, and longing for future homes as hopes, they tend to romanticize the question of return and deprive it of its political urgency, especially in the light of the international efforts to block resettlement in a third place other than Syria and Lebanon, such as in Europe. However, confronted by the immense security challenge of return, displaced people find themselves captive in the reality of their present situation, living on the margins in their parallel agglomerations. With deadlock in any definitive progress in improving their lives despite their tireless efforts to achieve better housing and job conditions, their constant struggle to make a real place and feel at home in Lebanon has reached a dynamic stalemate in an urban, economic, and social sense. With the intensive regional and national struggle and the restrictive local policies, neither externally supplied relief nor internally generated development have been enough to make a breakthrough in their urban reality. Nevertheless, their successful efforts at “sustainable living,” on their own way of the lay of the land in Lebanon, can be described as a partial victory.

The sudden influx of displaced Syrians to Lebanon, which coincided with a sharp deterioration in living conditions, among other factors, provoked negative reactions and practices by the Lebanese, both the public and the state. The Syrian displacement has come to be seen, especially by the Lebanese authorities, as a temporary crisis. The strains of this crisis are believed, as claimed by the former Lebanese Prime Minister, Saad al-Hariri, to have led the country to a “breaking point” and “civil unrest” (Reuters 2017). The Syrian displacement, as such, was treated as a problem to be immediately contained, stopped, and reversed at all costs. This treatment translated into heavy-handed government policies of forbidding formal camps, attempting to isolate refugees, denying them their rights, and in some cases forcing them to return to Syria. Should the Lebanese authorities had seen the Syrian displacement as part of the longstanding and continuing processes of urbanization, including those processes that contributed to previous wars in Lebanon, they might have sought other approaches to respond, including reforming the public housing sector. Portraying the crisis as temporary allows the government to justify its approach to reverse the crisis and bring the condition back to how it was before it, pushing Syrians out of Lebanon.

All of these reactions and practices blocked the contemporary massive Syrian displacement from being perceived as a continuation of the long historical challenge of displacement in Lebanon, a lesson which the Lebanese cities in general, and Beirut in particular, invite us to learn. Beirut itself was built by refugees from Mount Lebanon and Damascus in the 1890s who brought with them their capital, workforce, and skills. It remained for decades a destination for thousands who fled from Armenia, Palestine, Iraq, Syria, and many other places, and whose displacements shaped and reshaped the city over and over again (Fawaz 2017). The contemporary Syrian displacement in Lebanon was perceived differently in the context of the postcolonial national division and even tension between Syrian and Lebanese states and the lack of comprehensive and meaningful governmental collaboration and conflicting regional and international influences on both countries.

The policymakers in Lebanon wavered in “short-termism” between either “no policy,” as a result of a weak state and undeveloped government, and “security-focused policies,” as a result of a fearful small state that lacks a long-standing and holistic governmental vision. In either case, the only result was a worse situation. Those measures also left organizations concerned with refugees, especially in the first few years, paralyzed by the unsuitability of their conventional short-term humanitarian response frameworks due to unique political dynamics on the one hand, and the size of the “crisis” on the other.

However, our research has criticized the inadequate understanding of displacement and the deficient or unsustainable interventions. Contrary to understanding displacement as a temporary challenge, the research has shed light on the aspect of displacement in Lebanon, in its different forms of *nuzuh*, *tasharud*, and *luju'* as an integral part, or a new phase of, the long history of urbanism in Lebanon whose shaping and reshaping was heavily influenced by migration and displacement. Refugees in this context, as many scholars have previously argued, can be seen as “city-makers.” Furthermore, displacement can be understood as urbanism. This understanding invites policymakers to assess the Syrian displacement as part of a wider long-term urban challenge that requires solidarity, a long-term “displacement policy,” and a strategic urban response, rather than escaping to short-termism or a defensive mood.

The insufficiency of state and international community-led responses to the need for shelter and essential services has led some refugees to seek housing in the highly inflated private market, exhausting their savings. The majority of low-income people, who could not afford the private market, were left with no other solution than informality. New forms of shelter and housing provision flourished, including the conversion of non-residential spaces into houses, the “self-help” or “work for shelter” types of informal tented settlements, and informal collective shelters. These forms, while satisfying some basic needs of refugees, constituted

a business opportunity for the host communities, but have largely left both the refugees and host communities vulnerable to abuses. In reaction to this reality, driven by the prospect of informality and disappointed by the insufficiency of mainstream humanitarian response, some INGOs and local authorities eventually shifted their response strategy toward a developmental approach. They have tapped into informality and strategized its integration into the cities, pouring more efforts into the development of national systems to provide services and reinforcing Lebanon's socio-economic stability as envisioned by the UN response strategy. Interventions in this direction have taken many forms, including providing basic services to informal settlements, attempting to regulate the rent of the "non-residential-turned-residential spaces," attempting to integrate the informal settlements' infrastructure into the wider cities' infrastructure, building the public services institutions' capacities, or supporting the beneficiaries' capacity for self-management of their settlements. This shift represents an emerging new understanding of informality as a legitimate mode of architecture and space production, and an entry point for solutions—an area worthy of further exploration by policymakers and planners in their endeavors to end the dilemmas faced by the officials seeking to resolve the long-standing housing provision struggle in Lebanon. In this respect, informality has emerged not only as a form of housing architecture, but rather a coping mechanism to compensate for the failure of the architectural systems in providing for those most in need, and as an integral form of architecture in its wider meaning of addressing socioeconomic and cultural diversity. Furthermore, informality in this Lebanese context is not an odd and limited form in comparison with a supposedly dominating formal form, as is the case in many countries around the world, especially the Global North, but a subtly integrated substratum that has become integral to architecture by the practical necessity of the modern tradition of displacement in Lebanon. Against this background, informality became architecture itself.

Displacement and informality, as illustrated in this research, heavily rely on social, solidarity, and economic networks. They can either serve as bridges to build on the mutual interest of both the host and displaced communities, or become dividing factors. This brings to the foreground the importance of basing the design of any response strategy on understanding the dynamics between, and interconnectedness of, both the host and displaced communities. This also reminds planners of the importance of participation and the building of a collective aspiration to achieve shared prosperity for both host and displaced communities. But beyond the social implication, the experience of displacement and informality is also very personal; few can be said to have found home, security, or certainty. Without access to dignified shelter and basic services, and with the social and economic inequalities that shape refugees' experience, the sense of insecurity and temporariness will continue putting heavy pressure on Syrians to consider leaving Lebanon. In turn, this may discourage them from positively engaging with their host communities, contributing to the local economy, or investing in building sustainable lives. This condition deprives refugees of the minimum level of certainty and predictability. Moreover, the condition highlights the danger of response policies solely centered around security goals rather than approaching displacement and informality holistically as a set of social and economic processes.

The more exclusive and exclusionary the Lebanese urban settings become; the more Syrians in Lebanon are seen to be displaced; the more rigid the Lebanese formal architectural system becomes, the more the refugee architecture develops informally and the more it becomes resilient. However, the interrelatedness of Syrian displacement and Lebanese settlement through the formal and the informal implies avoiding seeing the physical state of settlement as an unachievable dream and the immaterial state of displacement as an undesirable status quo. In other words, this interrelatedness implies avoiding seeing settlement positively when it is formal and unfavorably when it is informal and, instead, advocates looking realistically at

displacement itself as being an integration of the formal and the informal within settlement. In this integrated formal/informal displacement—or the (in)formal displacement—displacement attempts to function positively in both the formal and informal the settlement. Furthermore, informal displacement can be seen as a different form of formal settlement, and placement can be seen in displacement. The (in)formal, from this standpoint, has both the meaning of “the formal” and its opposite “the informal” separately, on the one hand; and “the formal” and its innermost meaning of being in it informally and without separation, on the other.

“The lay of the land” of the Syrian displacement in Lebanon entails gradual degrees of such informality between the condition of separation between the informal and the formal, as the rare cases of encampment of Syrians in rural areas, and the opposite extreme condition of non-separation between the informal and the formal as in the Syrian informal network in Lebanese major cities, especially Beirut. While informality in the city refers to displacement, in that an individual or a community remains somewhat detached from the city, formality in a camp refers to a tendency towards urbanizing where informality itself, as if it were a collective organic human and urban being, becomes displaced. It is not the house in a city nor the tent in a camp, but a “house nowhere” in a warehouse, in a factory or in an agricultural pump room that are but examples of these hybrid forms of (in)formal displacement. Therefore, “a social mapping of daily practices in informality amongst Syrian displaced communities in Lebanon” offers an architectural and urban mapping of their (in)formal displacement. From this perspective, architecture and urbanism, in both their morphological form and social structure, have become synonyms for informality and displacement. Ultimately seeking to become while not becoming, the Syrian experience of displacement in formal informality in Lebanon, beyond any postcolonial division and neoliberal policies, is ontologically social and existentially humane, humanitarian, and even humanistic *par excellence*.

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