

# CASE STUDIES



The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship  
معهد الأصفري للمجتمع المدني والمواطنة  
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## ***Displaced Syrians in Lebanon: Beyond Categorization and Homogeneity of Experiences***

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***Displaced Syrians  
in Lebanon: Beyond  
Categorization  
and Homogeneity  
of Experiences***

*Edited by:*  
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## **ABOUT THE ASFARI INSTITUTE AT AUB**






The Asfari Institute for Civil Society and Citizenship is a regional hub of a dynamic community of academics, practitioners, policymakers, activists, and members of the general public interested in exploring traditional and innovative forms of collective actions, locally-grounded policy debates and in advancing realistic solutions to the obstacles to effective civil society and citizenship in the Arab world.

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.

**Manar Fleifel<sup>1</sup>**

Since the eruption of the Syrian crisis in 2011, an estimated 13 million Syrians continue to reside outside their places of origin. Such a substantial number denotes that more than half of the original population have been either internally or externally displaced by the war (Vignal 2018). Syria's neighboring countries, Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan, have been three chief refugee hosting countries worldwide. While Turkey has registered more than 3.5 million refugees, Lebanon registered around 1 million and Jordan more than 670 thousand (UNHCR, UN Situations: Syria 2019). Albeit such figures, in Lebanon, a country largely governed by informality (Ajluni and Kawar 2015)<sup>2</sup>, the number of Syrian refugees exceeds one million. According to Human Rights Watch, the Lebanese government estimates that the country hosted around 1.5 Syrian refugees in 2018 (Human Rights Watch 2018). Before the Lebanese State adopted restrictive policies that would limit the entry of Syrians in 2015, its policy has been widely labelled as "the policy of no-policy" (Mufti 2014) (Mourad 2017). The adoption of visa requirements and entry restrictions for Syrians by the Lebanese government has been attributed to the thirty years of Syrian military presence in Lebanon and the long-term Palestinian refugee presence in the country (Janmyr 2016). Since the Lebanese government does not refer to Syrians as refugees, and since it has not succeeded in governing the crisis in a paramount way to ensure access to basic services including livelihoods, shelter, health and education, many Syrians in Lebanon are left in a particularly precarious situation (Akesson and Badawi 2019) and (Dionigi 2016). According to Human Rights Watch, 74 percent of Syrians lack legal status in Lebanon (Human Rights Watch 2018). At the same time, thousands of children remain frayed of their rights to education, primarily due to the deteriorating economic situation of families who often send their children to work instead of school. It is estimated that there are 300,000 refugee children who remain out of school in 2018 (Human Rights Watch 2018). Moreover, on one hand, the economic situation in Lebanon makes it hard for displaced persons to find sustainable jobs, maintain a sufficient living, and access proper education and healthcare services,

thus leaving them in a financially unwarranted locus (Akesson and Badawi 2019). On the other hand, the social relations between Lebanese and Syrians are becoming increasingly overwrought, resulting in a state that further challenges the already-strained situation (Yahya, Kassir and El Hariri 2018). To add to all this, in the past couple of years, Lebanese municipalities and security agencies have been forcing Syrian refugees in several areas to take down their tents, typically without formal justification or due process (Stel and Van der Meijden 2018). Specifically, in 2019, and with the end of conflict in many areas in Syria, there has been a lot of pressure on Syrians to return, often very prematurely (Mhaissen and Hodges 2019). Recently, Lebanon has been facing an exceptionally borderline situation that has led to the eruption of October revolution, an incident which led to the partial overlooking of the Syrian refugee situation and the return of Syrians to Syria. As the priorities for Lebanon have shifted to the demands for the provision of basic services, the reparation of the deteriorating financial situation, and other calls for basic political and socio-economic rights, the focus has strayed away from Syrians in Lebanon. There does exist, however, at least one exception here, and that is the Lebanese people's concern towards the aid that they think Syrians are receiving in dollars. As a matter of fact, the majority of Syrians in Lebanon have been suffering equally from the inflation, the loss of jobs, and the overall deteriorating situation in Lebanon as well.

In 2019, the rhetoric about donor fatigue was louder than ever, especially with the rise in the gap in funding to 48 % by the end of 2018 (UNHCR 2018). Today, inevitably, Syrians in Lebanon remain in a particularly complex status since they are not only faced with the "typical" predicaments of displacement such as the loss of assets and other financial losses, the disintegration and separation of families, the loss of social and familial networks, and the loss of access to different services; they also continue to face several deterrents for a dignified life in Lebanon. In addition to the principally deteriorating political, social and economic situation

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<sup>2</sup> According to Ajluni, the percentage of informality was 44% before the crisis (Ajluni et al. 2015).

in Lebanon in the past months, the situation of Syrians in the country has been only getting worse since there have not been any honest efforts to reach political and economic settlements that would encourage Syrians to return to “safe areas”. For many Syrians, a safe, voluntary and dignified return remains a utopic imagination. Towards the future, many Syrians are likely to stay in host countries due to the loss of assets back home or their fear of prosecution or military service. Thus, as Fawaz put it, the Syrian displacement must be seen as a long-term protracted displacement, and it must not be limited to being treated as a humanitarian crisis, but also as a growing global reality (Fawaz 2017).

Very often, refugees are treated as objects of knowledge, populations to be managed or even contained, and most recently, as “Problems for Development” (See (Malkki 1995)). In the past years, international agencies, scholars, and the media have been recurrently grouping displaced Syrians residing in Lebanon under one category, portraying them as helpless and vulnerable victims, underprivileged populations, or security threats. Depending on their situation, most of these exposés present refugees as needy of protection, management, containment or care. Very rarely are Syrians described as agents or political actors, and most often, they are portrayed as passive recipients of aid or victims of war. Some scholars have termed this “refugee talk” and countered the discourse of the Lebanese government, most international agencies and the media when it comes to understanding and analyzing the lived experiences of Syrians in Lebanon (Fawaz, Gharbieh, et al. 2018). While is true that many displaced Syrian communities in Lebanon continue to face a lot of challenges, their experiences vary in relation to the spaces, professions, genders, communities, social and support networks they get involved in, among other factors. The diversity of the lived experiences of Syrians has been underrepresented in different platforms: media, scholarly work and in the development and humanitarian circles. Our research showed that there is a multitude of attitudes, perceptions, challenges and lifestyles adopted by Syrians residing in Lebanon. This research aims to build this counter-narrative and challenge the discourse that limits, categorizes and homogenizes the experiences of Syrians in displacement. It attempts to do this by unraveling the varied living conditions of displaced Syrians living across Lebanon, throughout their 8 years of displacement. Based on more than one hundred and thirty ethnographic interviews conducted with displaced Syrians living in more than seven different localities in Lebanon, this report presents the research that has been ongoing for

over two years as summarized in eight case studies that illustrate the different ways through which Syrians are accessing services and overcoming restrictive policies and procedures, like informal networks among other creative adjustment mechanisms they have adopted. The ethnographic study comprises life histories and semi-structured interviews, focusing on themes rather than sites. The first case study investigates the post-exit strategies adopted by the humanitarian actors and analyzes how displaced Syrians have continued accessing water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) services through ‘informal’ governing structures in the southern areas of Marjaayoun and Hasbaya. Based on thirty interviews, the second case study focuses on the impact of different working sectors on the lifestyles, challenges and aspirations of a diverse set of workers living and working in different areas inside Beirut, with a focus on the particularities of the differences between Syrian waiters and construction workers. The third case study explores the concept and practice of labor mobility as a strategy adopted by different Syrian workers residing in Beirut and its surroundings. This topic is explored as a method of skirting government restrictions and exploitative situations that are foisted on Syrian workers. The fourth case study explores the conditions, challenges and adaptive tools used by investors and restaurant workers in the distinctive areas of Akkar and Beirut. The fifth case study focuses on the importance of social networks and aims to depict the bridging capital in accessing livelihoods, labor and services such as healthcare amongst two tribes from al Manbej and their communities living in the outskirts of Beirut. The sixth case study highlights how a displaced Syrian community in Akkar, through its support networks and community leaders, managed to create an alternative governing body (with the absence of government services), and compares it with other communities where such bodies were lacking. The seventh case study focuses on interviews with women and explores the informal ways through which Syrian displaced communities support one another and create new friendships and networks in displacement. It also stresses the importance of understanding the lives of the interviewed persons before their displacement as an important milestone that helps in understanding their lives in Lebanon. The final case study, which also focuses on interviews with women, portrays the different types of Syrians’ housing arrangements in Akkar and its surrounding areas – the garage, the informal tented settlement, and the camp – and analyses the meaning of living in these spaces from the interlocutors’ point of view.

On a final note, while this report construes the resilience and agency as faced by a diverse group of Syrians residing in Lebanon, it does not underestimate the sublimation in the lives of Syrians before the Syrian war, a significant phenomenon that was reiterated throughout the fieldwork.

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# From Warzones to Border Zones: The Nature of an Informal WASH and Shelter Governing Structure

Lara Azzam<sup>1</sup> and Fadel Saleh<sup>2</sup>

## Summary

This article is based on twenty interviews with Syrian displaced families in the Lebanese southern areas of Marjaayoun and Hasbaya, post-exit of humanitarian actors, and analyzes how the WASH and shelter services have continued amidst the 'informal' governing structure. The study adopts a qualitative analytical approach with the objective of providing first-hand insights as told by Syrian displaced communities living in Lebanon in 2018 when aid was significantly reduced. Interviewees comprise members of the lower class of these communities, as the middle and upper-class Syrians in Lebanon are not in the scope of this case study. The article portrays the dynamics around the provision and reception of such services, from humanitarian services, governmental provision (or lack thereof) to informal methods of creating these necessary services. This case study ends by recommending to systematically deal with the pressing issue of creating a WASH and shelter governing structure for displaced Syrians in the surveyed areas.

## Introduction

Eight years into the Syrian crisis, Lebanon has been one of the main destinations for displaced Syrian families (Geha and Talhouk 2018). In 2017, several donors requested their implementing partners to conduct exit strategies and prepare the beneficiaries and host communities to continue the 'informal' governing mechanism in the districts of Marjaayoun and Hasbaya. This consisted of capacity building initiatives for local authorities, selected beneficiary committee members, and more broadly the residents of the entire Informal Tented Settlements (ITS). The exit strategy was conducted as the humanitarian and developmental funding decreased in Lebanon; hence, the International Organizations (IOs) shifted most of their humanitarian capacities to the 251 most vulnerable subjects and began linking relief, rehabilitation, and development by engaging local government mechanisms, providing the basic services and supporting the creation of a self-governing system amongst the refugees themselves. The implications of this strategy will be highlighted in the

following sections based on the beneficiaries' experience with it, potentially leading to an assessment of its success. It is noteworthy to mention that the relationship between the Lebanese host communities and the displaced Syrians could be described as strained, with numerous pressure points identified, ranging from access to services and basic infrastructure to job competition. While Lebanon has not witnessed any violence on the inter-communal level, tensions are continuously mounting (Knudsen, 2017). This can be attributed to the Lebanese approach to the refugee crisis, or lack thereof. According to Yahya et al (2014), this approach is a result of four factors: the huge refugee burden on a small country like Lebanon, fears in demographic imbalances, the Palestinian refugee experience, and the political dysfunction in the country that contributes to the lack of comprehensive strategy by the Lebanese state (Yahya, Kassir and Hariri 2018, 14). As such, one of the major causes of the strains between host and refugee communities is the Lebanese authorities' reaction to the humanitarian crisis which consists of a "no policy context" (El Mufti, 2014). This implies that the Lebanese rarely help displaced Syrians with service provision, particularly with regards to WASH and shelter governing structure. Moreover, some interviewees displayed frustration from what they regarded as exploitation by the Lebanese when it comes to the sponsorship system in place and low wages.

## Methodology

This case study adopted an ethnographic approach. The fieldwork consisted of semi-structured interviews with twenty displaced Syrians as well as field visits and observations in two southern villages (Marjaayoun and Hasbaya) during the fall of 2018. It is important to reveal the possible biases that could have stemmed from this case study stemming out of the positionality of the researcher who conducted the fieldwork. Firstly, it is important to note that the field researcher could "access" the communities residing in Marjaayoun and Hasbaya through his previous work as a field officer in an international non-governmental organization in 2017. Secondly, as a former NGO worker, the interviewees might

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have still perceived the field researcher as a powerful figure, revealing a lot to him due to the disappointments faced and suffering they had encountered in the post-exit phase. The interviewees might also have expected something from the field researcher due to his former and current position. Despite such biases, the field researcher was very clear with his interviewees as explained that he has left his job and that he is currently doing research and that he cannot offer any services.

### *Life in Syria and Lebanon*

The shift from an allegedly dignified life in Syria to a refugee life in Lebanon, whether in informal tented settlements (ITS) or a shelter, arguably, is one of the main sources of discomfort in the daily lives of the displaced Syrians. The current lives of many displaced Syrians in Lebanon are characterized by control, insufficient resources, and mistreatment. When interviewees were asked about their lifestyle back in Syria, the answers provided in all the interviews were predominantly positive. This triggered several points of inquiry on the reasons of unrest in Syria, where the interviewees highlighted that the problems they faced were mainly related to corruption and brutality, all the while stressing that their lives were not controlled through constraining laws. Additionally, the interviewees attributed dignity and respect to their lives in Syria as they believed that they have been deprived from these values in Lebanon. In some cases, they said that they were unsatisfied with their lives back then, but when they compare it to what they currently have, they consider their pre-war life ideal.

The interviewees came from different and diverse areas in Syria, namely Kobani, Rural Aleppo, Deir-Ez-Zor, Dara'a, and Raqqa. Generally, the interviews had a similar pattern in the answers with some case-specific differences. Most of the interviewees' houses were either directly targeted or affected by an airstrike or artillery shelling. Several interviewees stated that they fled Syria following the escalation of the military activities and the spread of the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS). In 2013, a report by Medecins Sans Frontieres affirmed that the fleeing Syrian refugees into Lebanon were seeking safety from bombings and other life-threatening conditions (Medecins Sans Frontieres 2013, 2). Similarly, in the 2017 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), the "UN characterizes the flight of civilians from Syria as a refugee movement, and considers that these Syrians are seeking international protection and are likely to meet the refugee definition" (Government of Lebanon and the United Nations 2018). Some interviewees also seemed to harbor resentment toward the Kurds and the Americans in the North and North-East of Syria who they said destroyed the area and caused the insecurity they are facing.

One man from Raqqa, a head of his household, provided a window into the state of affairs governing the lives of Syrians before the war and in Lebanon now. This same man told us that he is part of a tribe, and that lost everything he owned, moved to Lebanon, and resided in an informal settlement governed by various rules and binding conditions from the landlord and the host community. He expressed how his life changed in Lebanon:

*"In Syria, I used to live freely, with respect, in a house I own, making enough money for me and my family to live with everything we needed; sometimes I had even more money than I needed, and I used to save some money. In Raqqa, we are mostly tribes and the government used to be harsh with those that break the law only, [but] not with everyone. In Syria, things were cheap and even though there was not a large variety [of commodities], we didn't need those things. Here in Lebanon, you can find everything, but it is so expensive, so why would I want it if I can't afford it!"<sup>3</sup>*

<sup>3</sup> Haitham. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.



Another case of a family living in a shelter sheds light on different forms of refuge in the area. This family who is from Raqqa, lives in inexplicably horrendous conditions under an irregular/illegal status, with some members

suffering from severe depression and poverty. The head of the household summarized his grief telling us how he now lives in debt in Lebanon:

*“In Syria, I owned a big house and a land around it that I planted with different fruits and vegetables with enough water from the river to keep them alive. I made a good living out of it; we could buy food and clothes without being indebted to anyone. But here in Lebanon, life is the total opposite as I have no house because this is not a house; there is no work either, and debts are eating me up. I previously used to enter Lebanon to work in seasonal agriculture and then return with the money I made to add to our income. The Lebanese used to respect us as laborers and they used to ask us to come and help in the high seasons, but now we are refugees and a burden which has made them look at us differently. I am fleeing war and destruction, and in return I am treated with disrespect. Can you believe it that they used to hit me on my neck and kick me like an animal?”<sup>4</sup>*

The melancholy and nostalgia can be observed across thousands of Syrian refugees that have taken refuge in the areas of Marjaayoun and Hasbaya in South Lebanon, reflecting the realities they have been facing since the beginning of their displacement journeys. Many expressed hopelessness toward their situations since they believe that they will neither be able to go back to Syria, nor will they be granted resettlement in Lebanon. The looming informality in lifestyle, services, housing and virtually all aspects of their life also leaves them in desperation. Displaced Syrians have various views toward resettlement. According to Yahya et al (2018), their current lives in Lebanon are characterized by controlled informality. Since many of them inhabit informal settings, they have depended on informal networks of connections. Also, having been subject to restrictive laws involving legal documents, many have

refrained from interacting with governmental agencies for other matters (Yahya, Kassir and Hariri 2018).

### *When a Job Means Everything and Nothing*

Fieldwork has revealed that the desperate reality and circumstances faced by the displaced Syrians in Lebanon have led them to pursue jobs that mean everything and nothing at the same time. Their job is everything because they need it to make a living while they are in Lebanon, and it is nothing because of the very low wages, long working hours, and seasonal difficulties; it serves as a coping mechanism and a de facto element that is needed to create income and legalize their residency.

<sup>4</sup> Shahad. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

In December 2014, the Lebanese General Security (GS) introduced new regulations to restrict the entry of Syrians to Lebanon. Accordingly, “Syrians applying for, or renewing, residency permits were asked to pay an annual US \$200 fee, present a valid passport or identification card, and provide a document to the GS that is signed by a Lebanese national to affirm that he or she is sponsoring a Syrian citizen or household” (Amnesty International, 2015).

Displaced Syrians’ work life in Lebanon is thus governed by the Kafala system, or sponsorship system, whereby foreign nationals, including Syrians, must have a Lebanese employer acting as a sponsor in order to have legal residency. The Kafala system forces refugees living in ITSs to work only in agricultural fields, living in tents, and receiving low income. The agricultural work is a seasonal job that is not available all year round, therefore the refugees spend several months, particularly during winter, without income. They are not allowed to work outside the premises of their sponsor’s fields, otherwise,

they risk being expelled from the ITS and having their sponsorship withdrawn.

Furthermore, the security dimension has resulted in additional control and further documentation requirements upon displaced communities, which adds to their expenses. These externalities have additionally resulted in the mainstreaming and normalization of child labor among the displaced communities. Observations and information recorded during the fieldwork show that, on average, one of five children—all of which were above ten years of age—were expected to work. In 2018, United Nations and aid agencies warned that a “critical gap” in funding for Syrian refugees and host communities could lead to cuts in vital services (Kanso 2018). This reality and the severity of needs is summarized by Hafiza, a divorced woman from al-Hassakeh living in an ITS in Wazzani with her three children:

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*“Before the war started, my girls used to go to school whilst I worked two jobs: cleaning the school and running my grocery shop. I had the luxury of sending them to school whilst I ran around to make them live a good life. Now everything has changed; we live in a tent while we used to live in a house with a garden [...]. Living in a tent is very hard both in summer and winter, especially with the unstable structure and over-used mattresses. My daughters do not go to school anymore; now they have to work for us to survive hunger”.*<sup>5</sup>

A Kurdish family from Ain Arab, Kobani, believed they were treated better due to their ethnicity; still, they complained about the unfortunate working conditions:

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*“Here, some of the people are Arab Syrians and they sometimes blame the Kurds for the bad situation in Syria; however, since we are Kurds and the landlord is Christian, we can talk freely and he helps us because*

<sup>5</sup> Layla. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.



*others do not like us. My children and I work in return for staying here with our landlord. The treatment is unfair, and the wages are very low, which makes me unhappy with the situation due to the seasonal nature of our jobs and the [consequent] instability”.*<sup>6</sup>

One family from Rural Aleppo has faced much less issues than many others, because a member is married to a Lebanese man, which has served to improve the way they are treated by the Lebanese and displaced Syrians alike.

This ‘everything and nothing’ living dynamic has only further consolidated the informal dynamic of governance. While formality is demonstrated in the need for the official sponsorship system, this official need has resulted in an informal governance structure which benefits the (Lebanese) landlords and employers who give very low wages to the displaced Syrians’ and grants employers a degree of control over their employees in return for a tent/shelter which they are in desperate need of. Hence, this case study sees that the aid sector should be better aware of these circumstances to be able to fill these gaps and provide better work and living conditions for the displaced communities.

### **Aid Shortages**

Although the aid and development sector has the potential to serve as mediator or supporter to the system towards consolidating a formal scheme for the displaced Syrians, this is not the case. This sector’s intervention was confined to temporary relief programs, until they finally decided to implement their exit strategy from Marjaayoun and Hasbaya both in ITSs and shelter rehabilitation services. The design phase of the exit strategy began in the year 2017, through conducting surveys, negotiations, and capacity building with the local authorities to integrate the WASH needs of the Syrian refugees with those of the host community in the area, thus merging the services in return for service capacity upgrading from international organizations (IOs). The displaced Syrians were also expected to pay for the services on the long-term, namely for solid waste collection and sewage desludging services.

The post-exit strategy had different outcomes from those aspired by the IOs and the donors. In September 2018, the situation was marked by unsatisfied local authorities, unchanged service provision and capacity, and ITSs that were left with untreated sewage and uncollected garbage. At that time, the garbage was being burnt and the sewage de-sludged and then thrown in a nearby trench. The WASH situation is an acute health hazard that has resulted in a higher outbreak of diseases, especially water and airborne. Additionally, the organizations had provided shelter rehabilitation services that consisted of paying a landlord an amount of money and doing rehabilitation works in return for allowing Syrian families to live in the house with no rental fees for a specific period (usually 12 months). These contracts ended in December 2018, leaving hundreds of families with no choice but to either pay the rent or leave to an undetermined destiny.

In general, displaced Syrians hold a negative view towards the Lebanese governmental authorities, as they are accused of treating them unfairly, as compared to how they treat Lebanese people. Hence, these displaced communities avoid seeking help from the authorities in case they had any problems when reaching out for aid in the WASH sector. This raises many questions and concerns about the quality of water that displaced Syrians receive. For instance, when it comes to water, there is no guarantee that it will not be contaminated, or that tanks and water pipes will be in good condition for the use of refugees. Nonetheless, the quality of water is not the primary concern to displaced Syrians as their main target is receiving water, any water. Even in the cases where they have a good knowledge of the values of hygiene and its relation to health, this knowledge would not be put into practice due to a lack of infrastructure and resources. Based on their poor living conditions, it is also expected that they source their water from untreated nearby wells and do not buy drinkable bottled water. The way they dispose of their waste is also a source of concern as they do not receive any aid from the Lebanese government.

<sup>6</sup> Meriam. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

One family even asserted that the NGO that once installed toilets and drinking water tanks suddenly stopped coming and the sewage that they used to collect now floods the toilets, causing foul smells and illnesses such as diarrhea and vomiting. The same NGO also used to collect the garbage twice a week. After they stopped coming, garbage started piling up until the displaced Syrians decided to burn them, which caused lung problems among the displaced communities, as they claimed.

Nevertheless, it can be said that most displaced Syrians have benefitted from aid at a certain point, be it through the food vouchers, solid waste collection, toilet installations, or even shelter rehabilitation, amongst others. However, the number of aid recipients is allegedly increasingly

diminishing as INGOs that were responsible for WASH and shelter services in the districts of Marjaayoun and Hasbaya are continuously losing their operational funds. This explains why the overall perception of NGOs was negative and characterized by mistrust. Moreover, the initial plan of creating an informal governing structure has not proven effective as the interviewees claimed; they told us that they have returned to burning garbage and desludging sewage in buckets. This situation has led to a high rate of documented sicknesses.

One head of a household in the Sarada ITS (Marjaayoun district) gave an account of a situation prevalent among most of the interviewees:

*“Yes, I did receive aid from international organizations, but it has been minimal and only beneficial back when they were available. Now, there is a shortage leading to higher living expenses. For example, the organizations used to regularly distribute some cleaning products. They also installed toilet and water tanks, both for cleaning and drinking purposes. The situation was much better because they were used in desludging the sewage water, providing us with clean water. Now, all the ITSs in the area are like garbage storages and filled with sewage water that we have to remove with buckets and throw a bit further from the site of the ITSs but still close enough for us to smell it. This has caused the landlord to get very angry that our sewage and garbage are in the vicinity of his fields, and because burning them might affect the fruits and vegetables grown there”.<sup>7</sup>*

Most of the interlocutors accused the NGOs of being corrupt, unjust, and unresponsive to their calls. This is evident in the complaints of the aforementioned interviewee:

<sup>7</sup> Marwan. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

*“Most of the organizations help us for a short time and then they say their money has run out and leave suddenly. The camps always need them because without their help nobody would help us, and we do not have the money to provide everything for ourselves. I lost hope in calling the people I know who work at NGOs; they would either say they work in a different area now or give me a hotline number to call, who in turn would say they have registered my concerns with no follow up”.<sup>8</sup>*

Another man who lives in a shelter in the city of Marjaayoun that had received aid for some time, also expressed his dissatisfaction as follows:

*“I used to receive aid from the Umam (the UN). I used to have the food voucher, but it was stopped a year ago, which really had a negative effect on our living conditions. I still benefit from medical aid as I pay only 25% of the total hospital fees. Moreover, even though my house was renovated, it was not done in a sufficient manner as during the winter, the rain would leak into the house; it also gets very cold in the winter. Every time I tried to seek help from the IOs, they either did not respond or set a very long appointment until I no longer needed the aid, which is why I stopped approaching them for help. I just feel that they do not care about our problems or that they do not feel sympathetic with our troubles; they just treat us without mercy and care regardless of our problem”.<sup>9</sup>*

The mistrust and dissatisfaction that the displaced Syrians have expressed, and the gradual withdrawal of aid-providing agencies have resulted in a system that further

entrenches the informal nature of services and general lifestyle amongst Syrians in Lebanon. Practically, the exit strategy has meant that the humanitarian situation would

<sup>8</sup> Marwan. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Suleiman. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

continuously deteriorate with time. The implications are numerous, but most effects are taking their toll on the WASH situation that is essential for disease prevention; moreover, the issue is not eliciting help from locals. The services provided, though minimal from the perspective of the displaced Syrians, have resulted in improved hygiene and stable access to WASH services in ITSs. For the displaced Syrians in shelters, the provision of housing has improved their livelihoods in a number of ways, especially economically, as the burden of rent was removed.

Additionally, the role of INGOs and IOs have been crucial, particularly in terms of psychological support; for instance, their presence on the field has provided solutions for issues of exploitation. In one case, the support was evident when an INGO worker detected a case of exploitation and referred the case to the organization's legal protection unit, which eventually led to favorable outcomes. An interviewee briefly explained the case as follows:

*“The landlord manipulated and robbed me, so I filed a complaint and a lawsuit against him at the General Security with the help of a lady from the UN and the organization’s lawyer. The landlord/sponsor tried to threaten with deporting me to Syria, but the General Security and the lawyer pressured him and obliged him to pay me my money. Thereafter, the landlord felt I am protected and continued to be my sponsor even though I left his ITS”.<sup>10</sup>*

### **A Grim Outlook**

Although the Syrian conflict witnessed in the past two years a shift in its political and military dynamics with the military operations now confined to smaller areas, the return of displaced Syrians in Lebanon is not a necessary consequence (Keith and Shawaf, 2018). The increased calls for the return of Syrians by many Lebanese political actors and the Syrian government, and the exit strategy of humanitarian organizations, have caused a stir among the displaced Syrian communities across Lebanon and beyond its borders.

Given the fact that Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN convention relating to the status of refugees, this has given the Lebanese authorities a lot of ‘flexibilities’ in dealing with refugees. In 2014, officers of the General Security (GS) were given considerable leeway to deny

the entry of refugees, thus violating the principle of non-refoulement that prohibits countries from returning asylum seekers to their country where they might face the danger of prosecution (Lakkis 2014). In addition, it has been evident that Lebanese authorities have been denying the use of the term “refugees” since the beginning of the crisis, in order to release themselves of having to give Syrians their legal and political rights (Al-Saadi 2015). This situation has led to a system governed by informality amongst Syrian displaced populations in Lebanon, exacerbated by the restrictive policies and legal requirements, namely the sponsorship system, the lack of an official refugee status for Syrians, and diminishing international aid.

An old Syrian woman living in an ITS talked about her perception of Lebanese government officials and expressed her fear of them, which demonstrates the consolidation of the informal governing structure:

*“Whenever I see any governmental official, I feel very scared to the extent that I feel my heart pounding*

<sup>10</sup> Anwar. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

*out of my chest. Sometimes just hearing of them makes me scared. From time to time, these officials conduct search and arrest operations in the camp looking for people that are illegally settled or those with unregistered motorcycles. I also have no idea about the laws in Lebanon; I only know that there are some documents that must be renewed once every six months and others yearly. The Lebanese government has not helped us with anything; instead, it requires us to pay US \$200 in return for residency documents”.<sup>11</sup>*

The concerns that arise are numerous since the war has not completely ended yet, but many displaced Syrians feel that they are treated as if they are being requested to leave. The questions of return, safety and security, as well as the idea of going back to their previous lives after losing their loved ones make it hard for Syrian displaced populations to return. According to Yahya et al (2018), the threshold for safety and security conditions for return are much more severe among refugees than among internally displaced persons because the externally displaced have embarked on arduous journeys outside their countries (Yahya, Kassir and Hariri 2018).

The International Organization for Migration reported that “[...] between January and October 2017 more than 710,000 internally displaced persons returned to their areas of origin, while only 30,000 refugees returned” (International Organization for Migration 2017). Many have still not thought of returning as an option, as it raises many unanswered questions and fears: Who will reconstruct the homes? What will happen to their children who are required for conscription? Moreover, in some areas such as Raqqa, the question about who will control their territory remains unanswered. One man put it this way:

*“I have never thought of leaving Lebanon and returning to Syria as the situation is still very bad there. My house is completely destroyed, and my children are required for conscription; they will be detained as soon as we arrive. But if peace prevails upon Syria and we would receive help to rebuild our houses, I will indeed return”.<sup>12</sup>*

## Conclusion

The significant population increase in Lebanon with the presence of more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees has placed the country's infrastructure under strain, particularly with regards to water, sanitation, and hygiene.

It is of urgent importance that relevant stakeholders are engaged in exploring ways to enhance the WASH and shelter governing structures for displaced Syrian communities. Without the comprehensive response to WASH, underprivileged Syrians and Lebanese will remain at risk of serious diseases. This case study has shown the

<sup>11</sup> Nairouz. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Osama. Interviewed by Fadel Saleh, South Lebanon, July-August 2018.

urgency for collecting baseline information about WASH needs in all Lebanese governorates, particularly in areas with the highest number of displaced Syrians, post-exit of humanitarian interventions. Such types of studies should be presented and coordinated with the humanitarian community in Lebanon and most importantly shared with the concerned Lebanese stakeholders that are responsible for infrastructure. Such research should also be shared with local governments to be able to come up with a structured system for access to facilities and resources from an informed perspective. More qualitative studies should also be conducted on knowledge, attitudes, and practices of displaced Syrians when it comes to WASH services to ensure the provision of in-depth analysis of the situation and demands. All of the aforementioned recommendations will help inform the overall planning process of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) in a more conflict-sensitive manner, doing no harm to any of the vulnerable communities. Moreover, the Lebanese government should come up with a strategy to deal with the decreasing funds and retreating humanitarian interventions since this has the potential to jeopardize an already suffering waste management system, and the already strained Lebanese-Syrian relations.

Finally, while the displaced Syrians' questions and perceptions about returning to Syria are of vital importance, it is also worthy to explore how their perception about the Lebanese will be when they return and in the future. One of the field interviews' significant findings is that the Lebanese had respected Syrians more and treated them better prior to the war. Most of the interviewed displaced Syrians believe that the Lebanese have been exploiting and mistreating them. In the context of mainstream discussions centered around what role the Lebanese will play in the reconstruction of Syria, it is worth exploring in depth the Syrians' view on Lebanese working in Syria.

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# Labor Mobility of Syrians in Lebanon: Daily Lives and Future Aspirations

Jana Chammaa<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

This case study examines the labor mobility of displaced Syrians in Lebanon and the impact that this mobility has on their daily lives and aspirations for the future. It also unpacks the set of factors that influence the mobility of Syrian workers in Lebanon. As part of the field work, a total of 30 interviews were conducted with a diverse set of Syrian workers living and working in different areas of Beirut. The study portrays labor mobility as a coping mechanism that displaced Syrian workers employ to evade restrictions, exploitative situations and the precarious presence imposed on them by the Lebanese government. The study has found that the set of factors that influence the labor mobility of displaced Syrians are related to: the difficulty in complying with requirements for legal stay due to contradictory and arbitrary measures, the sponsorship system that creates a power discrepancy in employee-employer relations to the advantage of the sponsor/employer, the debilitating work conditions that Syrian workers endure on the job, and labor relations that determine performance and length of time at a job.

## Introduction

In 2011, Syrians started escaping the violent repression of protests by the Syrian regime, only to arrive in a country where the system and society had been already biased against them. To begin with, the Lebanese state is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, nor to the 1967 protocol (Janmyr 2016). This means that formal domestic refugee legislation is absent, and that the governance of refugee presence is ruled by ad hoc governmental policies. Moreover, the protracted presence of Palestinian refugees and Lebanon's historical experience of hosting refugees has created hostility towards another refugee movement. Additionally, the prolonged settlement of Syrians in Lebanon as migrant

workers since the 1950s and their military presence between 1976-2005 fueled animosities against harboring new categories of Syrians. On top of that, the severe economic downturn that ensued with the 2011 refugee influx further compounded resentment against Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

This bias was institutionalized when a series of migration controls were enforced three years after the start of the crisis, ending long years of open borders between Syria and Lebanon. In October 2014, the Lebanese government announced that it would limit entries of Syrians to "extreme humanitarian cases": single women fleeing with their children, those needing urgent medical care and children separated from their families (De Bel-Air 2017). Moreover, Syrian refugees are prohibited from re-entering the country if they go back for a visit to Syria. In January 2015, new criteria were introduced for new entries and for renewing residency permits, effectively dividing entries and renewals of Syrians into eleven categories<sup>2</sup>, each category requiring a submission of documentation not easily attainable in the absence of financial means, valid personal identification or a signed "pledge of responsibility" by a Lebanese sponsor, otherwise known as the kafeel. Also, the government has constrained the access of Syrians to the formal labor market by allowing them to work in three sectors only: construction, agriculture and "environment" (Lebanon Support 2016).<sup>3</sup> Therefore, an employer or a kafeel has to sponsor a Syrian worker within these permitted sectors. In May 2015, the Lebanese government asked UNHCR to suspend registration of Syrian refugees while fully aware of the porous nature of the Lebanese-Syrian border and its inability to control it. In addition, the government pressured the UNHCR to oblige registered Syrian refugees to sign a pledge not to work. This policy indirectly promotes informal employment and increases the vulnerability of refugees, pushing them to adopt options like sex work, child labor, and illegal migration to Europe (Lebanon Support 2016). Formally, these policies aimed at reducing the number of

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<sup>2</sup> The eleven categories are: Tourists, work visitors, property owners, shoppers, students, transit entries, entries for those who have been displaced, medical treatment visits, appointments with embassies and entries under a "pledge of responsibility" by a Lebanese citizen (Lebanon Support 2016).

<sup>3</sup> The environment sector includes domestic work, garbage collection, cleaning and maintenance.



Syrian refugees in Lebanon and had three goals: 1) limit the number of Syrian entries at the border, 2) encourage Syrians already in Lebanon to leave, and 3) formalize and control the presence of the Syrians who choose to stay (Lebanon Support 2016).

This case study portrays labor mobility as a coping mechanism that displaced Syrian workers have employed in order to evade restrictions, exploitative situations and the precarious presence imposed on them by government policies.

## Methodology

This case study adopts a qualitative approach whereby a total of 30 interviews comprising life histories and semi-structured interviews were conducted with a diverse set of Syrian workers (construction workers, concierges and waiters) living and working in different areas of Beirut (Hamra, Downtown, Salim Slam and Mazraa). The field research also encompassed participant observation that helped enrich the understanding of the interviewee's different experiences in the workplace, lifestyles and interactions with others. The field research was conducted over the period of 6 months in 2018.

## Labor Mobility in the Context of this Case Study

Radcliffe defines the term "labor mobility" as the movement of workers for the purpose of employment (Radcliffe 2019). The two primary types of labor mobility as defined by the Oxford Encyclopedia for Economic History are geographic and occupational. Geographic

mobility is the ease of movement across physical space such as short-distance and long-distance moves, as well as voluntary and coerced migration. Occupational mobility is the ability to change job types in a lateral (within a broad class of jobs similar in socioeconomic status) or vertical (from one job to a better or worse job) manner (Long and P.Ferrie 2005). Alonso suggests that labor mobility entails costs for both the country of origin (due to the loss of human capital, for example) and for the host country (reducing social cohesion, for example) (Alonso 2015). Furthermore, labor mobility can be restricted by a variety of legal, social and economic factors. In this case study, labor mobility is explored in the case of Syrian workers in Lebanon. Thus, the definition adopted in this paper takes labor mobility as the ability to navigate Lebanon's labor environment amidst a set of restrictive and detrimental policy measures imposed by the Lebanese state on Syrian communities.

## Unattainable Legality and Government-Sanctioned Abuse

Interviews with our interlocutors showed that their main concern is the increasing difficulty of attaining personal documents for the fulfillment of their legal presence. To attain legal status, displaced Syrians are required to submit a "pledge of responsibility" by a Lebanese sponsor or a valid rental lease contract or a work permit. The other option is to obtain a registration status with the UNHCR, which denotes signing a pledge not to work as decreed by the Lebanese government. The pledge not to work means that refugees could only legally sustain their livelihoods through humanitarian assistance (Care International Lebanon 2018).

*"Government policies seem to be getting more firm and unexpected, even illogical. The legal papers that are required from Syrians in Lebanon are hard to attain. Some of us came in an emergency and did not have time to bring all our personal documents that we are being asked for now".<sup>4</sup>*

One of the interviewees described how one time the General Security Office (GSO) asked him for a work permit to be able to guarantee his stay in the country.

<sup>4</sup> Abdellatif. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, May 2018.

*“The Ministry of Labor has currently stopped giving all kinds of work permits to Syrians. So how come the General Security Office is asking for something that another governmental entity is denying us?”<sup>5</sup>*

This shows that processes of residency renewal consist of unclear procedures and contradictory measures, marred by the arbitrary applications of the rules by the General Security Office. According to a Lebanon Support report, these measures have resulted in an increasing reliance by Syrian refugees on informal networks in the black market of fake sponsors, brokers, employers and employment contracts (Lebanon Support 2016). Thus, the policy of formalizing the process of residency renewal has paved the way for informal processes and brokering

mechanisms to flourish. It has made Syrian refugees prone to “government-sanctioned exploitation under the pretext of sponsorship” (Janmyr 2016).

One of the interviewees noted that things used to be much easier at the General Security Office, because nowadays, they are asking for more copies of identity cards, proof of residence, and sometimes even requesting that the Lebanese *kafeel* be physically present as well.

*“Before 2014, things were much easier as the General Security Office did not used to bug people around asking them to bring their legal papers. I had come before that year and I thank God for that. Nowadays, they ask you to bring three copies of your ID and one paper that shows where you live (paper for iskan) signed by the owner of the house. So, it has become stricter. Sometimes, if they want to make life harder on us, they would ask that the Lebanese kafeel come with us”.*

The kafeel or sponsor is usually the employer and is entitled, under the sponsorship system (*kafala*), to take control over the life of the Syrian employee. This system ties a worker’s residency to a kafeel, who has to be a Lebanese national, who then serves as a bail (Lebanon Support 2016). An employer could utilize this power discrepancy to his/her advantage and withdraw sponsorship at any time. This would result in Syrian workers losing their legal status at the discretion of their sponsor. The Lebanese kafeel can extort Syrians for exorbitant amounts of money in order to sign a pledge of responsibility. As such, these measures can be rightfully called policies of “manufacturing vulnerability”, which aim to strip groups of their rights, reject their presence and facilitate their exploitation (Saghieh 2015). Displaced

Syrians are put at the mercy of other people and are left with two solutions: they either leave the country or accept exploitation (Janmyr 2016).

One of the interviewees had received an ultimatum from the GSO asking him to present his legal papers and his work contract or bring in his kafeel with him to the Office. The interviewee ended up leaving Lebanon for Erbil, Iraq, for failing to produce the required papers. He paid the price for not fulfilling the General Security’s sudden requirements and arbitrary implementation of its policies. The interviewee explained:

<sup>5</sup> Louai. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, July 2018.

*“It seems I do not have any luck in Lebanon. Laws in Lebanon are randomly applied. Sometimes they ask you for your papers, other times they do not. So, I had to find a new venture outside. Life is hard. I would never risk going back to Syria to make sure that my papers are all legal for me to stay in Lebanon. If I return to Syria, I will have to join the army; my brother told me that and I do not want that to happen. So, I will leave for Iraq to work in the catering industry”.*<sup>6</sup>

A legal status is important for the displaced as it paves the way for them to access basic rights and fundamental services (Lebanon Support 2016). The absence of legality makes them vulnerable to arbitrary arrest and detention. One of the interviewed waiters described his interaction with a Lebanese police officer who arrested him near Manara in Beirut. The officer searched his wallet and found US \$300. After finding out that the waiter is from Deir al Zor, the police officer sarcastically asked whether the money was intended to be sent to Islamic State fighters in Syria. This encounter left the waiter in utter frustration and humiliation. He even felt an urge to leave the country.

A consequence of lacking a legal status is that Syrians cannot seek legal services and become subject to subsequent juridical correction upon experiencing any derogatory acts. This lack of legal protection puts them at risk of different types of abuse, as exemplified by our interviewee from Deir al Zour. Furthermore, displaced Syrians have also resorted to self-imposed limited movements to areas they are familiar with due to fears of arrest and detention at both regular and ad hoc checkpoints (Janmyr 2016;

Lebanon Support 2016). This affects their ability to go to their places of work or even gain access to work in the case of absence of legal status. In some areas, municipalities and political parties have resorted to imposing curfews on Syrian workers (Janmyr 2016).

#### Labor Relations and Debilitating Working Conditions

The sponsorship system produces increased dependency within labor relations because it makes a Syrian worker's legal and employment statuses highly dependent on the kafeel. Therefore, a work-based pledge of responsibility sanctions the kafeel's forced labor, exploitation and harassment of their workers (Lebanon Support 2016). This could take the form of low compensation, lack of formal contracts and long working hours. Labor mobility entails dealing with a work environment that is continuously mobile and full of unexpected “adventures”, as described by one of the interviewees. Some workers are in a constant state of change, consistently moving from one job to another due to difficult working conditions and inconsistent salary packages. Mutassim told us about his experience with this:

*“Since I came here to Lebanon, I have been working in various construction sites. I worked in Zahle, Chtaura for a short period of time then came to Salim Slam in Beirut. Right now, I am working on a construction site in Hamra. I was treated badly in Zahle; this is why I left and came to Beirut. The foreman who was from Zahle used to shout at us a lot and treat us badly”.*<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Fares. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, May 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Mutassim. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Salim Slam, Beirut, August 2018.

Another interviewee recounted his experience in mid-2014, while working at a restaurant in Bint Jbeil, in southern Lebanon. The worker's first issue of concern was his residency papers that would allow him to stay as a foreigner on Lebanese territories. His employer did not share his employee's concern and did not take the issue seriously, which caused a great deal of stress for

the worker. Another issue was that his employer was very demanding, and his low wage did not compensate for the work load and effort he was putting in at the job. What added insult to the injury was the "humiliating" living condition, as described by the interviewee, that he and his co-workers had to endure living together in a container that was provided by their employer.

***"We were living like sheep. We were forced to eat food remnants from the restaurant which were left behind by the customers. We chose to buy our own food because the leftovers were of such a low quality that our stomachs could not tolerate".<sup>8</sup>***

Mistreatment at the hand of employers was a common experience shared by many interviewees. This had compelled them to change their jobs as a way to enhance their status and escape exploitation, in the hopes of finding a better work environment. For many interviewed workers, their relationship with their employers had a great deal of influence on their performance and the

amount of time employed at a job and, consecutively, their mobility. For many, that meant moving from one exploitative work environment to another, until they could find a job where they are better treated by their employers. Raja described how his employer's behavior led him to leave work:

***"I felt exploited in my previous jobs but not here. I was shouted at a lot. Bad words were said to me, some of them racist and inhumane. But I just decided to leave, and I did. There is no need for me to create trouble and fight back".<sup>9</sup>***

Employers could also lay off Syrian workers at any time, without any legal or financial redress, due to the lack of formal contracts that could protect workers. Raja's case is a portrayal of this phenomenon:

***"I am currently working as a delivery boy at a restaurant in Hamra. I had worked at three other places before joining my latest job. I worked as a waiter at a coffee house in Ashrafieh but the treatment was bad. Then I went to work at a juice cocktail place in Mar Elias; it was***

<sup>8</sup> Mehdi. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Downtown, Beirut, June 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Raja. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Bliss, Beirut, May 2018.

*also unprofessional. Then I went to work in Hamra as a delivery boy at a restaurant. The owner told me to leave because he had an overload of workers”.*<sup>10</sup>

Few of those interviewed workers chose to leave their jobs and settle for self-employment. Self-employment is not an easy option for displaced Syrians due to the financial and bureaucratic/administrative challenges

of attaining legal requirements. However, when self-employed, some Syrians like Seif become independent and lose the feeling of being owned by their employer.

*“I am self-employed. I’ve been working as a plumber since 2014. I came in 2012 and I stayed jobless for around nine months after that. During that time, I was getting some money from my sister who was helping me out. Then I started working in a restaurant in Sin el Fil, but the salary was very low. After that, I worked as a delivery boy in Mar Elias before I started working as plumber. This is much better because it makes me feel independent. I am my own manager. When people treated me badly, I would just quit and leave. I don’t have to stay and hear them”.*<sup>11</sup>

Employee-employer relationships are a crucial aspect of labor mobility. Those who are mistreated, tend to stay for a shorter while and seek ways to escape their current employers. Meanwhile, those who had a positive relationship with their bosses enjoy stable jobs and stay at the same job for a longer period of time than those who were mistreated by their employers. Those who

are comfortable at their jobs also seem to be treated well by their employers, who sometimes even help them find housing or better-paying jobs or lend them money when needed. Below are some testimonies of different workers who experienced a fair treatment at work and whose employers have helped them in securing their jobs or livelihoods in a way or another.

*“I have been working as a construction worker since 2014 and I enjoy it. I have two wonderful bosses. I wouldn’t want to change my construction site. I have been working with them since the start”.*<sup>12</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Raja. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Bliss, Beirut, May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Seif. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Mazraa, Beirut, July 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Abu Youssef. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

*“I am treated fairly at my job. I feel very useful as my boss has handed me the responsibility of managing the waiters, which proves that I am useful”.<sup>13</sup>*

*“Our boss is a Lebanese engineer who studied in Canada. He came back in 2016. He conveys dignity, love and passion in his work. I trust him and he trusts me, and I thank him for that. Even though the salary is not great, I am happy more or less. I asked him for a financial loan of US \$200 once and he accepted”.<sup>14</sup>*

*“I am currently working as a waiter at a restaurant in Downtown Beirut. My ex-boss in Malla has a relative who owns the restaurant, so he asked him to employ me. I still see my boss in Malla as I live there. I changed my job because my salary is higher now”.<sup>15</sup>*

### *The impact of labor mobility on displaced Syrians*

The instability and mobility that characterizes the lives of displaced Syrians comes with emotional baggage. Stress, loneliness, hardship and uncertainty of the future are constant features of a displaced life.

This kind of life could be full of shocks, surprises and unexpectedness, which breeds psychological, social and economic instabilities for displaced people, and in return hugely influences their future aspirations and destinations Raja’s experience exemplifies these possible effects some Syrians might experience as a result of displacement:

*“I do not feel any kind of stability. I feel like surprises may occur at any time. This is the pure mode of mobility. The reason is that people here are moody and there are no fixed contracts. The Lebanese system is not clear and at any moment I might find myself returning to Syria”.<sup>16</sup>*

Many interviewed construction workers acknowledged the dependency of the Lebanese economy on Syrian

migrant workers. After all, the presence of low-wage Syrian workers serves the Lebanese market’s goals

<sup>13</sup> Adnan. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, May 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Abu Zayed. Interviewed by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Waleed. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Downtown, Beirut, June 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Raja. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Bliss, Beirut, May 2018.



and its aligned interests with the Lebanese elite construction workers such as Abu Youssef and Abu Zayed showed awareness towards this issue: (Turner 2015). In particular, many of the interviewed

*“They keep on telling us about the regulations imposed by the Lebanese government that they are indirectly asking us to leave the country, but they cannot; construction workers are always wanted here”.<sup>17</sup>*

*“I do enjoy a stable existence in Lebanon as our job (construction workers) is highly demanded. We always have to work on site and provide assistance to new construction site workers. I heard that the Lebanese government does not kick out construction workers because our profession is not practiced by the Lebanese”.<sup>18</sup>*

While construction workers spoke more of stability for the reasons outlined above, that does not mean they are willing to stay in Lebanon. Many of the interviewed Syrian workers from both the construction sector and the restaurant industry described the difficult lives that they are enduring in Lebanon due to imposed

restrictions and limited livelihood options. This pushes them to decide on a future that does not involve them staying in Lebanon for long. For others, the possibility of being forced to join the army upon return to Syria causes a great deal of concern, thus staying in Lebanon is their only option in the foreseeable future until it is safe for them to return to Syria.

One of the interviewees said that the end of his mobile life would be his return to Syria. He expressed that he could not bear to move around anymore or deal with any kind of informality or illegality. He expressed how

much he missed his parents and he does not see any reason why he should not consider moving back to Syria for he could not find stability in Lebanon:

*“My life in Lebanon is much harder than the one I led in Syria. I am alone here struggling to access my basic rights which were easily guaranteed in Syria, such as finding shelter, eating and going to the hospital when I need to”.<sup>19</sup>*

According to a survey conducted in 2016 on the perceptions of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, security and safety were the primary factors influencing

respondents' decisions to return to Syria, followed by housing, jobs, peace and justice, and efficient government (Yassin 2018).

<sup>17</sup> Abu Youssef. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Abu Zayed. Interviewed by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Salem. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Salim Slam, June 2018.

## Conclusion

The set of factors that influence the labor mobility of displaced Syrians in Lebanon are related to the difficulty in complying with requirements for legal stay due to contradictory and arbitrary measures, the sponsorship system that creates a power discrepancy in employee-employer relations to the advantage of the sponsor/ employer, and the debilitating work conditions that Syrian workers endure on the job and labor relations that determine performance and length of time at a job. Labor mobility and the ensuing instability at the emotional, economic and social level is a deliberate consequence of the series of government measures taken against the displaced Syrian community in Lebanon. Displaced Syrian workers can either accept exploitation or leave the country. Along with the government limitations on physical mobility in terms of curfews and checkpoints, and their limitations on the participation of Syrian workers beyond the three permitted sectors, these factors have severely restricted the occupational and geographic mobility of Syrian communities in Lebanon.

However, Syrians with a good financial standing and ability to import their capital are welcomed in Lebanon and are not exposed to kind of restrictions incapacitating less vulnerable and capable Syrians.

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# The Role of Social Networks and Capital in the Businesses and Daily Lives of Syrian Investors: A Comparative Look Across Greater Beirut, Tripoli and Akkar

Jana Chammaa<sup>1</sup> and Elie Khoury<sup>2</sup>

## Summary

This article aims to unravel the challenges faced by the displaced Syrian community working in the restaurant service sector in Lebanon. This study further reveals the roles of different types of capital in bridging these challenges. In specific, the focus of this work is to capture the in-depth personal experiences of the displaced Syrian community living and working in Lebanon by examining the social networks of members of this community, the performance of their businesses and their future plans. A comparative look into the functioning of these businesses and investor experiences across the three areas provides a comprehensive account into the challenges encountered by these investors and workers, in addition to the role of social networks and their ensuing capital in sustaining Syrian-run businesses. Among the findings of this case study is that the experiences of Syrian workers and the functioning of their businesses depended on how the restaurant industry is already developed in each area. In Beirut, the saturated and competitive market made it difficult for Syrian businesses to thrive, while in Tripoli and Akkar, the historical trading and social relations between Syrians and Lebanese in these two areas eased the experiences of Syrian investors. As for the challenges faced by the interviewees, they can be summarized into five main impediments: insecurity; harassment or discrimination; financial troubles; administrative/bureaucratic hurdles; and market-related challenges. To sum it up, the case study shows the importance of social networks and bridging capital in facilitating businesses run by the displaced Syrian community in Lebanon.

## Introduction

The onset of the Syrian crisis in 2011 added a population of almost 1.2 million (recent data show the registered Syrian refugee population at 916,113) to Lebanon's 4 million inhabitants (UNHCR, 2019).<sup>3</sup> The conflict has clearly affected Lebanon's GDP in a negative manner, as a result of disrupted trade routes, diminishing receipts

from tourism, greater political instability, worsening investor confidence and decreasing capital inflows (Errighi and Griesse 2016). As a result, Lebanon's GDP growth rate dropped from an average of 9.2% in 2007-2010 to a rate of 1.8% of GDP in 2011-2014 (Errighi and Griesse 2016).

The Lebanese economy is dominated by Micro, Small and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) and the informal sector (Fakhri, n.d.). Around 90% of enterprises have 5 employees or less and only 0.5% of enterprises employ more than 50 employees (Bou Khater 2017). The Lebanese labor market operates on an informal basis due to significant bureaucratic hurdles and excessive costs that are accrued as a result of formalizing businesses, in addition to the lax enforcement of the law and the low chances of being caught (Errighi and Griesse 2016). Informality means the absence of explicit and registered work contracts and/or the absence of social security coverage for workers on the job (Ajluni et al. 2015). Before the crisis, the informality ratio in Lebanon stood at 44%; however, the entry of displaced Syrians into the informal economy has led to a 10% increase in this percentage (Ajluni et al. 2015).

Displaced Syrians in Lebanon are often homogeneously portrayed as social threats, economic burdens and recipients of aid, and rarely depicted as consumers, investors and positive contributors to the local economy. In 2016, displaced Syrians spent US \$378 million in total for renting purposes. This is equivalent to US \$1.03 million a day (Yassin 2018). In the same year, the value of Syrian-owned real estate in Lebanon was estimated to be at US \$78,700,180 (Yassin 2018). Moreover, Syrian deposits in Lebanese banks are estimated to range between US \$15-18 billion (Middle East Monitor, 2018). Remittances to Lebanon increased from US \$7.86B in 2013 to US \$8.9B in 2014 (a 13.2% increase), which the World Bank attributed to remittances sent to Syrian refugees in Lebanon by their relatives abroad (Cuevas-Mohr, 2015).

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<sup>3</sup> Updated as of 30 November, 2019.

A prevailing perception in Lebanon is that Syrians are establishing businesses, competing with locals, causing unemployment and driving down wages, which in turn causes tension and spark high risk of violent reactions on the part of host communities. However, according to the World Bank, there is little evidence that new businesses established by Syrians have taken over Lebanese businesses. Between 2011 and 2014, Syrians created 66% of the stock of informal businesses, compared to 29% of Lebanese businesses started in this period (Errighi and Griesse 2016). However, during the same period, Lebanese nationals owned 84.1% of new businesses established near Syrian refugee settlements in Lebanon, while Syrians owned only 13.6% (Yassin 2018).

The case study aims to capture their personal experiences living and working in Lebanon through an examination of their social networks, the performance of their businesses and their future plans.

### *Methodology and Goal of the Case Study*

By adopting an ethnographic approach, this study uses the data from twenty interviews, conducted between May and August 2018, with Syrian workers and investors, to unravel the types of capital and the challenges faced by these interviewees in three different areas: Greater Beirut, Tripoli and Akkar. Moreover, this case study adopts a comparative approach, analyzing the differences between the three areas under examination. Further, adopting a comparative look allows us to look at the functioning of these businesses, investor and worker experiences and challenges and, the role of social networks and their ensuing capital in sustaining Syrian-run businesses.

### *A Comparative Look into the Restaurant Industry across Greater Beirut, Tripoli and Akkar*

Before beginning to draw out the differences and similarities between the restaurant industries in greater Beirut and Tripoli and Akkar, it is important to note that due to legal restrictions and other issues that are going to be explored later in this case study, opening a business is not an easy venture for Syrians in Lebanon. Syrians cannot own businesses; they need Lebanese partners, who will be the legal owners on paper, in order to venture into any business investment (CARE International Lebanon 2018). Aside from the issues that spring out of the formal and informal processes of opening a business under a Lebanese partner's name, Syrian investors have an additional number of challenges that they are faced with. One issue is that the performance of Syrian-run businesses and the experiences of Syrian investors in the restaurant industry depend on market-related factors, particularly the functioning and development levels of this service sector in each area. From this point, the case study focuses on the importance of distinguishing between different areas in trying to understand the push and pull factors pertaining to Syrians' investments in this service sector.

Considering that Greater Beirut (Beirut and its suburbs) is the center of the Lebanese service economy, the restaurant industry there was already developed prior to 2011. The already-saturated and highly competitive market demanded fewer investments entering the sector and more workers who would ask for lower wages in compensation for difficult working conditions (Blominvest Bank s.a.l., 2014).

The owner of a small restaurant in Gemmayzeh serving fast food sandwiches said:

*“My job is not stable; the market is tight and there is no money in the country. I am not profiting and trying hard to make ends meet. In Syria, it’s much easier; you would go to the market where you could find everything you need for your kitchen, all made in Syria. In Syria, there were the proper industrial material and it was easy to find the proper workforce; here it is chaotic... and above all expensive!”<sup>4</sup>*

<sup>4</sup> Khalil. Interview by Elie Khoury, Beirut, August 2018.

This person had to invest US \$15,000 with his business partner, a Syrian living in Australia, to start up the restaurant. Their restaurant was located on a street packed with fast food chains, which was putting a lot of pressure on his business:

***“Ever since I opened this restaurant, I have not gained any profit. This month my loss stands at US \$600. Some months it is a US \$1,000, others it is US \$1,200. Only when I start gaining profits that I will consider expanding my business”.***<sup>5</sup>

Eventually, the owner closed the restaurant one year after its opening as he could not keep up with the losses. A Syrian manager of a restaurant on Hamra Street tells the story of another place that also ended up being closed:

***“I tried to open my own restaurant with a Lebanese and two Syrians, but we failed. It is very hard to open a restaurant in Beirut. The market is harsh and demands a lot of energy and commitment. People think it easy to open a restaurant and start profiting immediately”.***<sup>6</sup>

In contrast, the investors in Tripoli had different experiences with the market. In this part of North Lebanon, small restaurants are densely populated in the Old City and mostly serve traditional food (Manakish, Foul and Hummus, Sweets, Shawarma, poultry, etc.) (Raad 2015). Previous restaurant owners, who mainly came from Homs, found the market very similar to the one back home. As a matter of fact, the proximity of Homs to Tripoli created historical trading and social relations between the inhabitants of the two cities.

The owner of a sweets shop located in the Tall Square, who used to previously work at a sweet shop chain owned by his family, shared his account on the importance of this geographical and social proximity, he said:

***“People from north Lebanon used to come to our shop in Homs, so when we opened here; locals were already familiar with our products”.***<sup>7</sup>

At the time of the interview, his shop in Tripoli seemed to be doing well as he has cultivated a regular customer base from Lebanon and Syria. After losing most of his assets in Syria, he managed to gather US \$25,000 from his relatives in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, in order to open the shop that enabled him to pay off the debt in three years. At his shop, he sells Syrian specialty sweets, which means that he is feeding the market with a product that is new, yet familiar to its customers.

Unlike the case of the Gemmayzeh sandwich shop owner, the sweet shop owner in Tripoli could generate profit and

<sup>5</sup> Khalil. Interview by Elie Khoury, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Hamed. Interview by Elie Khoury, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Bilal. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, July 2018.

repay his debts. Nevertheless, Tripoli still posed other challenges for small business owners:

*“There is no security here. I thought it would be different from what I saw on the television. My profit stands at one thousand. I pay five thousand for the mafias, the gangsters, and the State, for water and electricity bills. I also pay the wages of five Lebanese employees that are not even with me at the shop, and I have five Syrian employees assisting me. I pay the legal fees for three of my Syrian employees and the remaining two work free as stated by the Labor ministry. Every year I pay four to five thousand dollars for social security registration, another two thousand for work permits, and 900,000 LL for the General Security fees. This is too expensive. I am spending all my profits on these fees, which is turning the dreams of expanding my business obsolete”.<sup>8</sup>*

The case of Akkar tells a different story. After 2011, the population living in Akkar increased by a third. Akkar harbored Syrian investors that had fled the Homs district known for its established poultry and sweets businesses in Syria. The Syrian investors brought along financial and human capital. In addition, and due to the surge of refugees in the area, a high number of international NGOs set up new offices in the area and employed nationals, mainly from Akkar and North Lebanon (Carpi, 2014). One can say that the service economy in Akkar boomed after the Syrian crisis: consumption levels shot up, locals started receiving higher salaries, and new restaurants opened.

The Syrian business owners feel more at ease in Akkar compared to the ones in Beirut and Tripoli. The market in Akkar is relatively new with few competitors; moreover, the house rents are cheaper, the population is rapidly growing, and Lebanese and Syrian customers are familiar

with the products sold by Syrian vendors. According to a poultry restaurant owner, the restaurant industry boom is ever-increasing, with twenty-five new poultry shops opening since the start of the crisis, and this excludes all the cafes and other restaurants.

The partner at a poultry meat shop in Tal Abbas, a village next to Halba, who sells fresh raw chicken recounted how his business started. The interviewed owner of the shop is a Lebanese man who was leasing the Syrian man the apartment where he was living at the time of the interview. It was the Syrian partner who purchased the shop's equipment, and the partners have agreed to split the profits. The business was doing well back then, making the Syrian partner a monthly net profit of 500,000 L.L.; a sum that is considered as enough for living in relatively cheap village in Akkar. The shop owner expressed in confidence, his satisfaction and the satisfaction of his customers with his work:

<sup>8</sup> Rashad. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, July 2018.

*“I have customers who come to me especially. I do not cause trouble, and everyone likes me. I slaughter the chicken on the spot after weighing it in front of the customers. I work the Syrian way. You have other shops that slaughter all their chickens at five in the morning and then place the meat in the freezer”.<sup>9</sup>*

On Halba's main road, a man from Homs, who used to be a real estate investor, owns a small coffee shop. The business is registered under the name of the estate owner, who is his Lebanese relative. The two men share

a relationship built on trust and the owner would not intervene in the daily business operations. The Syrian man shared his account:

*“Six years ago, I started with a small amount of capital; around 1 million Liras. I agreed with the owner that I would pay him back his share after the business kicks off. He agreed as a way of helping me considering that we are far relatives. I started from scratch and now I am known in Halba. I have my customers because I take care of my coffee and my Arguileh”.<sup>10</sup>*

An investor in a Shawarma snack place from Homs, who came from Syria to Lebanon with US \$120,000, noted:

*“I didn't register in the United Nations because I do not want to be a burden on the state. I invested all my money here. Who turned out to be the beneficiary? The Lebanese state, the painter, the electrician, so on... I consider myself an investor, but the state is treating me as any other Syrian person who came to Lebanon; a nuisance. I do not pay any taxes, but I do pay electricity and water fees. I would not mind the state taking taxes from me, whether USD \$1,000 or USD \$2,000 each year as long as I am allowed to work freely and legitimately”.<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Adham. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, May 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Yassin. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, July 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Humam. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, August 2018.

Just like the previous interviewee who owned a poultry shop, this interviewee similarly takes pride in his shop's Shawarma:

*“We do not compete with the Lebanese shops because they do not know how to make shawarma the Syrian way. Each country/cuisine has its own method. The Turkish, the Lebanese and the Syrians each have their way”.*<sup>12</sup>

As such, it is important to note that one of the important aspects shared by the investors who invested in the service sector in Akkar and Tripoli is their confidence towards the service they are providing. This confidence is a result of two important factors. The first is the similarity between the markets back home and in their current hosting area. Regarding this factor, it is important to add that although both markets provide similar products, encouraging people to purchase familiar products, which were prepared differently; the Syrian way. The fact that these similarities did not encourage any competition between local host community products and Syrian products is in itself an achievement for

these investors. The second factor that encourages this sense of confidence is related to the already established networks that these investors had. This point will be further highlighted in the next section. Despite these positive findings in Akkar and Tripoli, as opposed to the negative ones entailing hurdles faced by Syrian investors in Greater Beirut, Syrian investors in these areas of North Lebanon still faced a myriad of issues. These issues are a direct result of the overall Lebanese policies and regulations towards Syrians in the country. For example, one investor told us how he was forced to shut down his shop for a while after a supposed health hazard:

*“The Health Ministry closed down my business for 5 months after they made up a story of food poisoning. It cost me USD \$20,000 to reopen the place. I was not the only one targeted but all the Syrian investors. I fixed my papers with the ministry and I opened again after fulfilling all the legal requests”.*<sup>13</sup>

### *The Role of Social Networks and Capital in Syrian-owned Businesses*

Social capital mobilized from social networks is a vital component that serves three main functions: 1) pooling of resources, 2) improving livelihoods, and 3) optimizing the use of limited resources (Uzelac et al 2016). It also enables access to information and opportunities. Social capital is defined as the ability to engage, get support from and influence other community members (CARE

International Lebanon 2018). This could happen in the form of support from fellow refugees as bonding capital that creates some form of a security net and provides emotional support. The other form of social capital is bridging capital. Bridging capital is the development of social relations with the host community in order to access housing, land, services and jobs. These relations can develop into meaningful friendships and lead to social integration and livelihood benefits (CARE International Lebanon 2018).

<sup>12</sup> Humam. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, August 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Taha. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, June 2018.



In general, the findings of this research showed that the role of social networks is key in the initiation, advancement, and maintenance of Syrian investor's businesses. A relevant finding that stems out is the fact that Syrian investors who express willingness to stay in Lebanon were the ones with the strongest social capital. Further, experiences with social capital differed between areas. For instance, what differentiates Halba's Syrian investors from those in other areas is the city's welcoming social space that has allowed them to develop their social networks. Social networks are thus as essential for the sustainability of businesses as they are for providing protection for investors in the face of government crackdowns or violence, and threats from local thugs.

## Social Networks and Protection

One shop owner in Tripoli told us that even though he was gaining profits out of his business and managing to repay his debts and heavy state fees, the pressure from local thugs urged him to consider leaving Lebanon even though his business was doing well. He felt as though he was living in constant terror, and he asserted that he would return to Syria at the nearest chance he gets.

His proclaimed failure is not related to how he managed his business, but in his inability to forge a bridging social capital with the local community that could have provided him with the protection he needed for his business.

*“I tried to gain friends, but it is impossible; no one likes us here”.<sup>14</sup>*

On the other hand, being in a generally welcome environment and having a strong social network around one seemed to be more of an important factor than years of experience in a certain business. This is the story of Nasser, a Syrian investor in Tal Abbas. Nasser did not have experience in the food industry, unlike the other interviewed investors who started their businesses

in Gemmayzeh and Tripoli with more than ten years of experience in this sector. Nasser used to be a government employee in Homs, holding a primary education degree. The only asset he had was his social and cultural capital which he attained as he was working in Lebanon as a construction worker in several construction sites. He described this experience:

*“My image of Lebanon has not changed; the same warm and kind people are still here. The people in this village and the villages nearby admire and respect me. They visit me and I visit them. I came to Tall Abbas and someone offered me to stay in Akkar Al Atika [Old Akkar] in a house that belongs to a migrant in Brazil... I hope I will go back to Syria, and one day we will. But in case I could not get my old job back, I will stay in Lebanon because I want to earn a living”.<sup>15</sup>*

A coffee shop owner in Tripoli told a different experience. Six years ago, before he came to Lebanon, he claimed that he had escaped a small prison and found refuge in a

bigger one. This time, the prison was the Lebanese state's regulations and the hostile environment around him:

<sup>14</sup> Rayyan. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, July, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Nasser. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, August, 2018.

*“When I came here, I saw almost the same obstacles as the ones in Syria, but instead of the militias there, here it is the exhausting Kafala paperwork and the same checkpoints”.*<sup>16</sup>

Referring to some young Lebanese men, he said:

*“Sometimes some come to the shop and they do not want to pay. I cannot do anything or else they would vandalize the shop. Then, I would have to go to their parents and complain, and they would in turn tell me that it will not happen again”.*<sup>17</sup>

This person expressed his intentions to go back to Syria to resume his business there once the war is completely over and law and order are restored.

Narrating a different experience, the Akkar Shawarma shop owner who came to Lebanon six years ago said:

*“My image of Lebanon as a democratic and civilized state that respects its citizens, unlike the Syrian state, has not changed. I once went to the General Security Office for the renewal of my papers and I was well treated there”.*<sup>18</sup>

The interviewee prided himself, noting that everyone in Akkar knows him, and that his sponsor looks out for him and did not even accept a payment for his *kafala*.

The same interviewee's sponsor is the same person who owns the restaurant, but he does not intervene in the business and only takes the rent. In addition, this investor has managed to develop good relationships with the local community, including influential members of society. The interviewee emphasized how much his sponsor and his neighbors helped him with his official papers, always looking out for his best interests, and even defending him when he was bullied by thugs.

Further, an investor who shared a positive experience told us that he would not return to Syria, even after things settle down. He said that he had invested all his money in Lebanon, where all his family members currently live, and he stated that he has no trust in the Syrian state.

One poultry shop owner also told a different story. While this person had benefited from his social network, particularly through his Lebanese mother, he still considered going back to Syria due to the growing hostility between Syrians and Lebanese in Akkar. He had registered his shop under the name of his mother who is Lebanese. His legal stay was eased, thanks to the

<sup>16</sup> Hamza. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, June, 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Hamza. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, June, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Humam. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, August, 2018.



*“Moujamala”*<sup>19</sup> residency. Despite having a Lebanese mother and despite having visited Lebanon as a child, he noted that Lebanon has changed a lot, especially after the civil war. He sees that people have grown more aggressive and wearier of each other. Sectarianism, chaos and lack of civility have become the norm. One thing he also highlighted was how the economic hardships in Akkar made the relationship between Lebanese and Syrians more complicated.

Despite this situation, this person still expressed his willingness to stay due to the other opportunities that had been provided for him through his social networks in Lebanon:

***“For me, my business is in my country; when things settle down, I will go back home. Nonetheless, I will keep the place open here and move between Halba and Homs. It is not going to be hard; the distance between the two cities is a 45-minute drive. Let us wait and see”.***<sup>20</sup>

In the case of the man who operates the sweet shop in Halba, he said he feels more like an employee rather than an investor. He described the trouble he faces with

his neighbors, and he narrated how he once made use of his brother’s contacts and connections with the Lebanese state and community to return the shop after he was afraid to leave his house:

***“We started to talk with some people in order to intervene, but many were afraid to do so. Then we talked to high-ranking officers, Sheikhs and Moukhtars. At the end, I was invited for dinner and coffee to their village in the mountain for a “Mousalaha”, which is a traditional manner for ending disputes”.***<sup>21</sup>

He said that the relationship between the Lebanese and Syrians had been very friendly but has been turning sour in recent years. According to him, the Lebanese people have become more aggressive. He used to visit Lebanon a lot to check the designs of Beirut’s shops and replicate them in Homs. However, his previous knowledge of Lebanon and his brother’s local contacts have not boosted his living conditions or provided him with any stability or security.

<sup>19</sup> The Moujamala residency is given to Lebanese citizens of dual citizenships, foreigners of Lebanese background (born to Lebanese fathers and unregistered in Lebanon), to spouses of Lebanese citizens, and to children of Lebanese mothers. Each category has its own set of documents, procedures and fees. The residency is renewed every year at the General Security Office.

<sup>20</sup> Taymour. Interview by Elie Khoury, Akkar, June, 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Bilal. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, July, 2018.

He said:

*“Lebanon and Syria are one land, but there would still be people whom you will not be able to deal with. They come to your shop, take a piece of a Fatira (a pie) and leave without paying. You cannot tell them a thing; even the Lebanese shop investor cannot say anything”.*<sup>22</sup>

At the time of the interview, he was considering going back to Syria at some point, but first he had to pay US \$2,500 for his residency renewal – a sum that he has not been able to save for the past 4 years. He explained:

*“I want to go to Homs when the borders open, but for now I am stuck here. Where can I get US \$2,500 so I can leave?”*<sup>23</sup>

These accounts sum up the challenges faced by the interviewees, which can be grouped into the following categories: insecurity due to harassment or discrimination, financial troubles; administrative/bureaucratic hurdles; and market-related challenges. These challenges are similar to those reported by Syrian entrepreneurs in Turkey (Alrawadieh, Karayilan, and Cetin 2018). It is important to reiterate the fact that administrative hurdles are related to the complex procedures and unclear laws that affect the legal presence of displaced Syrians, i.e. kafala system. Further, the lack of protection and government support for Syrian investors is another challenge pertaining to the feelings of insecurity. In addition, the market-related issues that were stated are related to limited revenues, high competition and saturated local economies. To add to that, the high cost of General Security fees required for the legal stay of employees, in addition to the high cost of electricity and water fees add more burdens on the backs of Syrian investors in the different areas explored in this case study.

This section showed how social networks and capital play a major role in facilitating businesses. This was reflected in the experiences of investors who started their businesses after securing loans from relatives living abroad, and the investors' use of Lebanese family members' contacts or partners to for protection and paperwork. As such, Syrian businesses tend to thrive in

places where social networks are available as safety nets such as in the cases of the investors in Akkar and Tripoli, as opposed to the case of the Syrian investor's sandwich shop in Gemmayzeh.

## Conclusion

Amidst the scant literature on experiences of Syrian entrepreneurs in Lebanon (Bizri 2017; Harb et al. 2019), this case study provides an overview of the diverse experiences of Syrian investors in Lebanon, including an account of the challenges they face. It shows the importance of social networks and ensuing social capital in facilitating lives of displaced Syrians, particularly investors and entrepreneurs. Through partnering up with Lebanese and building networks of friends and neighbors, Syrians become more interconnected with the host communities than one would assume.

The cases of Syrian investors explored here show a certain agency they enjoy, mostly coming from their economic and social capital, knowledge and experience. Thus, this case study's recommendations emanate from the calls of the Syrian investors themselves, which in turn ask for supporting and protecting Syrian businessmen at the legal and moral level. The future plans of Syrian investors and their businesses do not merely depend on their experiences of living and working in Lebanon, which have been particularly discouraging for some in the past couple

<sup>22</sup> Bilal. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, July, 2018.

<sup>23</sup> Bilal. Interview by Elie Khoury, Tripoli, July, 2018.

of months due to the current situation in Lebanon; these plans also depend on the situation in Syria and whether it is safe for them to return. For some, moving back is not possible because of their antagonistic stance against the regime. For others, it is a matter of choice, depending on their source of livelihood, whether in Lebanon or in Syria. For some, the hope is in expanding their businesses across the border, but for many, the sense of nostalgia is dominant as they dream about returning to their homes in the hopes of regaining their old lifestyle, social relations, and the sense of stability and order they lost when they left. Therefore, it is noteworthy mentioning

that whereas this case study has concluded major trends in the experiences of different investors in different areas, Syrian investors still showed a clear diversity of experiences in their ventures in the service sector in Lebanon.

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# Testimonies from Syrians Families in Lebanon: A Case Study on Family Relations and Social Capital of Displaced Syrian Workers

Jana Chammaa<sup>1</sup> and Mikhael Daher<sup>2</sup>

## Summary

This case study portrays the importance of social capital and family networks for the survival of displaced Syrian communities in Lebanon. By examining the importance of former and newly-established family relations and friendships, the case study lays out the experience of the interviewed communities who could secure jobs, housing and other services through such networks. Also, by emphasizing the active agency of displaced communities and the strengths of their networks, this work dismisses the prevalent discourses of Syrians as “passive recipients of aid” and “victims of displacement”. However, despite the importance of family and its strong capital, displacement has worsened the situation of Syrian workers and their families and communities due to the extraneous factors of displacement, specifically due to the Lebanese government’s policies and laws on labor, acquisition of legal documentation, and the lack of planning and subsidies on services such as housing and health.

## Introduction

The power of family in the Arab region has been extensively documented in academic literature (Joseph 1999, Singerman 2006). In Syria, the prevalence of proverbs such as “Blood doesn’t become water” (which means relations of blood cannot be abandoned) demonstrate the pervasive grip that the family has on individuals (Lokot 2018). While humanitarian narratives about Syrian families suggest a disruption of family configurations (Lokot 2018), this fieldwork showed that, on the contrary, family ties form the basis of survival during displacement.

This case study offers a portrait of survival that depicts the experiences of two families belonging to the Syrian displaced community in Lebanon, and their adaptive mechanisms in the country, amidst a restrictive and exploitative environment. It explores the central role that family plays in this survival mode in terms of providing employment, housing, and social and emotional support. In order to understand the experiences of Syrian communities in Lebanon, it is important to consider

the unique context of Syrian migration to Lebanon. The current forced migration flow is an ongoing historical phenomenon whose scale dramatically increased with the 2011 war. Chalcraft accurately described the migration flow between Lebanon and Syria as a “prolonged pattern of circular migration” (2009). Syrian migrants have always been a dominant feature in Lebanese economy and will continue to be in the future.

## Methodology

A total of 23 interviews were conducted with different members of two Syrian families and their friends residing in Lebanon between April and July 2019. The first interview was conducted with a natoon (watchman) of a residential complex in the area of Aramoun. The three other interviewees were the natoon’s brothers who were all living in Aramoun as well. This family then introduced the researcher to another family from Manbij whom they met in Lebanon. Members of both families led the researcher to some of their friends living in Beirut, some of whom work in Souk el Khodra (a vegetable market in the Cola area) and others who work in a construction site in Hamra, Beirut. The families interviewed for this study originate from al-Manbij in rural Aleppo. Two distinct features characterize these families: the tribal family structure and the unique migration patterns. These two features have proven to be vital in the migration of those families and their adaptation within Lebanon.

## Family as a Social Network: Bridging and Bonding Capital

The Arab family plays a crucial role in organizing social and political life, especially in distributing resources and facilitating coordinated actions to fulfill basic needs (Singerman 2006). Families have profound influence on the lives of their members, particularly in displacement. In this case study, it is evident that the family usually determines its members’ migration patterns and decision-making in terms of livelihood options, employment opportunities and places of destination/settlement.

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In this context, social capital is referred to the resources embedded in social networks. Two types of social capital are important in displacement contexts: 'bonding' capital, which refers to relationships among networks, and 'bridging' capital that refers to links a community forms with other groups such as host communities (Uzelac, Meester, and Goransson 2018). The type of capital (whether bonding or bridging) that one possesses has a major influence on the ensuing resources that one has access to. This case study shows how the family's bonding and bridging capital plays a crucial role in the displacement experience of the interviewed communities by highlighting the specific financial, functional and social roles the members play.

### *Tribal Structures, Family Ties and Roles in Displacement*

The tribal family consists of a closely-knit hierarchical structure. It extends beyond the boundaries of the

nuclear family to include married children, grandchildren and cousins. They are all led by the head of the family, usually the father, or the eldest brother if the father is dead. The mother is responsible for the household, while some of the children go to school but also have to work (before or after school hours), and others drop out of school and have to work, mainly in farming or caring for cattle. The father enjoys an additional role; he gives advice to his children and makes all decisions that affect the entire family, such as relocation or changing professions. This role remains until the father dies and then transfers to the eldest brother within the family. As the father grows older and cannot work anymore, he retires, and his children gradually start assuming responsibility of the house. As soon as the male children grow older and get married, they become responsibility bearers, and are encouraged to move into their own houses, which are usually in physical proximity to the main house.

*"I will tell you about our family; if we are to return to the life we had; we had a real life. We used to live on the same street, all seven brothers in Arabian built houses, not in buildings. The house is a 130-meter plot where you have two or three rooms with all facilities such as a salon, toilet and kitchen, and you can build on top of the roof as many stories as you can. It is yours, and you would be living next to your neighbors. It was legally planned. We lived next to each other - my father's house and next to him are my other brothers, sisters and me; we occupied the entire street".<sup>3</sup>*

### Immigration Patterns: Reasons for Leaving Manbij

As per our interviewees, farming was the most popular labor in Manbij, but the scarcity of water had urged the government to prevent the construction of water wells; thus, farmers relied on seasonal rain and yields, and had to spend 6 months outside of the labor force. Furthermore,

farmers could not make profit; nonetheless, this pattern sustained their lives as they had shelter, food, and their leisure was directly related to time spent with their families. Therefore, they were self-sustained but constrained to this particular living pattern. Those who wanted to start their own businesses or build a bigger house had to work outside of Syria, as even a regular worker outside the country would make an incredible amount of money compared to the average salary in Syria.

<sup>3</sup> Abu Khalil. Interview by Mikhael Daher. Suburbs of Beirut. April- May 2018.



Prior to the war in Syria, the interviewees from Manbij shared the same migration patterns. They all traveled to work outside of their villages; some traveled internally within Syria to Damascus, but the majority traveled to other Arab countries such as Jordan, Libya and Lebanon. Most of the members dropped out of school in the seventh grade to work with relatives, mainly brothers and cousins, who had already found work outside. When a person found work abroad, he would immediately inform his brothers, cousins and other people in the same village, and they would follow him. Most of them would work in the construction sector, and they would teach each other trades such as tiling, electricity and concrete works.

### Foremen: Financial and Human Capital

This trend created a new role for many Syrians; in addition to mastering a trade, they now had the ability to supply cheap labor, and hence the role of a 'foreman' was created. The role of a foreman is very similar to a contractor's but the former is more focused on providing cheap labor and doing construction work, rather than providing raw material. Foremen enjoy direct relations with Lebanese developers and engineers, which translates as having significant 'bridging' capital. Within both interviewed families there was a foreman, both of whom had been working in Lebanon prior to the crisis and continued to work after; moreover, both had strong relations with Lebanese developers. Their relationships were critical because they translated as economic relations through which the foremen provided the Lebanese developers with cheap labor and performed construction jobs at lower rates than their Lebanese counterparts, and the developers in return kept on providing them with work. This meant that the foreman had the ability to provide jobs for other refugees, and thus, refugees were able to meet ends through what they earned. Most importantly, foremen always prioritized family members and taught them the trade when needed, which shows a passing on of talent through generations.

### Foreman: Financial Management

The foreman is the one who receives all the salaries of his brothers; he manages work and is aware and in control of the economic situation of the entire family. This is a notion that is both borrowed from previous tribal structures in which the father/head of the family received and controlled the money that would enter the household. The function persisted in Lebanon, but the patriarchal head was replaced with the functional head, which is the foreman, and in many cases, the foreman

was the oldest brother.

Refugees have managed to replicate the financial hierarchy and fuse it with the functional one. For example, not only does the foreman receive all the cash, decide which jobs to take and distribute the profit among his brothers, he was also responsible in some cases for the housing of his brothers, and paid for the food that they get, their marriage expenses and other matters that may arise. It is as if wealth was shared among all of the brothers and the notion of private wealth did not exist among them. In the case of Abu Firas, head of the first family, his brothers do not carry money with them, except for what they need for transportation and basic expenses. Since they all work with him, he is responsible for handling all financial affairs.

In the case of the family of Abu Samer, he had eleven brothers and cousins working for him. However, he was not getting paid, so he managed to make an arrangement with another Syrian truck driver who turned his truck into a moving market and would circulate among Syrian workers and sell them goods. Abu Samer made a deal with this salesman that allowed all of his family members to borrow goods until he can repay him. The debt accumulated until it reached US \$5,000, but Abu Samer repaid the man once the family members had the money. What is distinct about this family is its diversity: there are two foremen, one brother is a driver, and another is a nator (watchman). Each member managed his own financial affairs; nonetheless, when one of the brothers needed money, they would all contribute to provide the necessary amount, and they would all regularly send money to their parents who live in the main family house in Syria.

Families with members that had been in Lebanon prior to the war enjoyed a safety net, which comprises trustworthy developers, and enables access to affordable housing, public services, and alternative compensations to work other than cash, such as housing or the ability to get loans. The tribal background of these families would emerge in a number of practices such as sharing money, housing and other resources. This allowed each member of the family to survive shocks thanks to the safety net that allowed the pouring of all the resources into a common pool that was accessible to all. Even though refugees brought along this tribal structure to Lebanon, its role has focused mainly on social solidarity that manifested itself in gatherings such as marriages, funerals and solving issues for others in need. Some accounts include the following:

*“We have around 1,500 persons from our tribe here in Lebanon. Good people are many. We managed to gather around US \$3,000 and sent the amount to his family in Syria. -what are the US \$3,000 for? The money is not for him, but for the children he left behind back in Syria. He had two sons and a daughter”.*<sup>4</sup>

*“Two years ago, when my family arrived here, I had a child whose treatment I was paying for back in Damascus. When the child died, I needed money, so they gathered for me US \$1,000 and they did not ask me to return the money”.*<sup>5</sup>

*“What if you needed money urgently, how would you get it? The social bonding that we have is perfect, my brother, cousins, relatives up until sixth or seventh grandparent, and our Syrian friends”.*<sup>6</sup>

The family also acts as the social environment where social activities take place. Its traditions shape what actions take place and its structure determines who gets to participate and how:

*“All of us used to gather daily at our father’s house. During the month of Ramadan, I would break my fast at my house, then go to my father’s house for tea and coffee. My father would prepare juice and my mother would make tea, then we would all gather until it is time for Tarawih Prayer. Afterwards, we would pray and then go to a madafah (guest room) that my brother had built - it is a big room. The entire neighborhood would gather there and every person would tell a story. That was intimacy and common living; we used to stay awake until 10.00 PM -12.00 AM, and those who*

<sup>4</sup> Abu Sami. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Tarek. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Jassim. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.



*had work would leave to sleep and those who did not could stay. There was no problem since the room's door faced the street. Some people would even stay awake until dawn. That was what we did during the month of Ramadan. On the day of Eid, we would all go perform the Eid prayer, then return back home and greet our family. Afterwards, we would gather at our parents' house to celebrate, then all of us would go to visit other people. We would be done at around mid-day, and on this day our mother would cook with her own hands. Usually, she does not cook or do any of the chores; only on this day she would cook, and by this time the Eid would be over, and it would be time for families to go far away to see distant people. We used to spend three days like this".<sup>7</sup>*

*"As soon as I laid the blanket, my neighbor would bring a chair and another would follow him and come over so that we sit together...the entire street was a single house."<sup>8</sup>*

This social structure emigrated with refugees. Abu Samer and his family still gather daily after work and sit together inside a garage in the residential complex he takes care of. Given that most of the interviewees did not feel welcomed in Lebanon, having family relations

was a compensation as they enjoyed an alternative social system in which each member is welcomed and cherished:

*"We eagerly wait to see each other; we are poor people that are gathered around each other".<sup>9</sup>*

Interviewees also expressed their unwillingness to integrate within the Lebanese social life because it differed greatly from their cultures and norms.

<sup>7</sup> Rabi. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Youssef. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Abu Khalil. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April -May 2018.

*“The social life in Syria is much more conservative than the one in Lebanon; We are the sons of a village (coming from a village) where we do not have people wearing seductive outfits in public, nor do we have public indecency. All residents of the village are related, and social life and ties there are much tighter and stronger”.<sup>10</sup>*

There is another reason behind their demotivation to blend in:

*“Even if you are a king here, you are still pointed out as a Syrian”.<sup>11</sup>*

### Daily Workers

Workers who traveled worked as daily workers; they preferred daily payments so that they could be free to leave whenever they wanted. The reason behind this is that they only traveled to gather money, leaving the rest of their lives behind in Syria, including their families, investments, and leisurely aspirations. They were able to devise a living pattern that allowed them to maximize profit, but at the same time manage their households and rest back in Syria. Hence, they would travel to work for around two months and then return to spend ten days with their families in Syria. Only men traveled to work and left their families behind in order to minimize expenses. They would look for the cheapest housing and, in most cases, lived together and shared food, house chores, transportation, expenses and rent. This living pattern had two important benefits that facilitated the relocation of Syrians after the crisis: they had access to and information about places with affordable housing and services, and they got used to harsh living conditions because of the hardships they had to deal with after the crisis. Nonetheless, even with these benefits, Syrians suffered the most when they had to bring their families along with them.

### *Aftereffects of the Syrian Crisis on Syrian Daily Workers*

#### Separation of Families

The crisis disrupted the migration patterns of Syrian workers, especially that they were no longer able to go back to Syria, and more specifically unable to reach their villages due to several safety-related reasons. This included being wanted for military conscription, or having illegal residency in Lebanon. Given that, they could neither afford spending any money on leisure in Lebanon, nor could they see their families and relatives. Their social lives grew severed, and this has had a negative effect on their mental wellbeing and general emotional comfort. Hence, many brought their families to Lebanon, even if this meant living in the most affordable substandard housing, which was still a financial burden since they had to rent a separate place instead of live with other workers. Thus, instead of paying their share of the rent cost that was divided among a huge number, they now had to pay the entire sum alone, which excluded additional life expenses. When asked about the difference he noticed after he brought his family with him to Lebanon, Abu Samer mentioned the following:

<sup>10</sup> Abu Khalil. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Maher. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

*“I now have rent to pay and medication bills; everything has changed and the burden is getting heavier...I cannot even arrange my own matters. How could I possibly do so if my family is with me? It is very difficult.”<sup>12</sup>*

That is why many men ended up sending their families back to Syria, even to places that were still not completely safe:

*“If I had received food aid and rental fees, I would have never thought of sending my family back to Syria, but I could not afford having them live here in Lebanon.”<sup>13</sup>*

Even though workers who used to live in Lebanon prior to the crisis had better access to affordable housing and were able to save a lot of expenses by, for example, sharing some of the expenses with different family members or living together, they were still facing the same issues. This grows more difficult when the entire family is affected by the same problem, resulting in the reduction of the entire ‘financial’ capital that is shared within, and thus the overall capacity to adapt. The situation has driven many to take hard decisions such as relocating nuclear families back to Syria, just like what happened with one of the interviewed brothers, even though the family had a foreman brother and an existing presence in Lebanon before the crisis. In this case, the extended families formed a social ring around the brother whose

family had left, preserving to some extent his social life and preventing social isolation.

### Losing Spaces to Blow Off Steam

Another negative consequence of the crisis on workers also stems from changing patterns. Before the crisis, Syrian workers in Lebanon used to compensate for their harsh living conditions and minimal control over their work conditions by having an alternative role back in Syria. However, after the crisis, they could no longer take on the complementary role that they lived in Syria, which left them stuck with the hard living conditions in Lebanon with no place to ‘blow off’ steam:

*“Here, I do not own myself. The construction project where I am working owns me...I am now governed by others. In Syria I was the governor of myself; I used to work freely on my own, in my land. I used to work the way I like - I was free. My land was mine and I worked the way I like. Now, however, you know that life here is different. Here, I am a worker and my daily wage is meagre - US \$16 that I use to eat, drink, move around and pay expenses for my house. All with only US \$16.”<sup>14</sup>*

<sup>12</sup> Abu Sami. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Marwan. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Abu Khalil. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April- May 2018.

Being part of a foreman's family offset this issue greatly because the foreman enjoys a certain level of control over those who work with him, since he plays the role of a contractor. After all, a foreman decides on issues such as pricing and dates of delivery. Besides, what is most important is that workers under the foreman supervision are mostly family members, and they do not have to deal with anyone else; thus, they still have a sense of control over their lives.

## Competition

One of the pressing issues that hinders the workers' ability to support their families is the oversupply of labor force after the crisis, which caused competition among Syrian workers. The competition has forced workers to substantially decrease their daily wage in order to stay active in the job market, which has in turn increased

exploitative actions by Lebanese employers. Syrian workers have to accept this exploitation in order to survive. In many cases, however, workers are left with no payments at all, even foremen struggled with the increased and uncontrollable competition. The increased economic burden has forced foremen to lower their service charges because the Lebanese developer would prefer to go for the lower price. And given that foremen still have to pay their workers, who are also members of their family, they have accepted the reduction of service charges. Naturally, they struggled greatly with this, to the point that their well-off financial situation has exacerbated and become similar to that of a daily worker. Some foremen even started to struggle with sustaining their daily lives. Many of them are now indebted to their workers and are providing them with housing rather than cash:

*“As for me, as a Syrian refugee, or a foreigner or displaced, call me whatever you want, the first thing is that I revived the market for house rentals, transportation, food products and bread, clothing, and electricity in Lebanon. I will tell you about myself; I once had to borrow money from Syria in order to pay people in Lebanon, but we had some delays here. Before, we used to work here in Lebanon and take the money and spend it in Syria, but today, I cannot even save US \$200 to send my mother”.*<sup>15</sup>

What escalated the severity of the situation is that Syrians have no legal power to fight back this exploitation.

*“Had this issue happened with an engineer in Syria, you could have stood up for him, but if you do this here, you lose your job, if you speak up here you might not have another job...In Syria, you can file a legal complaint about not getting paid, but here it would backfire because you are the weakest link”.*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>15</sup> Abu Youssef. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April–May 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Abdulla. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April–May 2018.

## Legal Vulnerabilities

Syrians have no legal power due to many reasons, the first is the kafala system that was introduced in 2015, which requires the payment of US \$200 per head for renewal of residencies. For individuals who are barely managing to survive, this amount is outrageous and cannot be spent on residency permits, especially considering that most of them are stuck in Lebanon and cannot travel. The

direct consequence of not obtaining a legal residency is that violators cannot cross the Lebanese border unless they fulfill the requirements of their legal stay, and since Syrians cannot travel to Syria anyway, their mobility is jeopardized within and outside the Lebanese border. Some of the interviewees revealed that they are waiting for the situation in Syria to get better so they could return, regardless of any incurred penalty:

*“I want to tell you something; as soon as the situation in Syria gets better, you are not going to see any more Syrians in Lebanon. Even Syrians that have lived here for 50 years are waiting for the first opportunity to leave for the same reasons, the same feeling that I have, which is that we are not welcomed!”<sup>17</sup>*

The indirect consequence of this illegality is affecting the lives of Syrian workers in Lebanon. Illegal residents cannot go to the police when they are not given their payments, robbed, threatened or violated because the first thing that they would be asked about is their residency permit. Thus, they refrain from resorting to law enforcement bodies for protection.

The second legal vulnerability lies in the failure of the Lebanese government to establish any rent control, and provide subsidized housing and public service, including water and electricity. This affects both Lebanese residents and Syrian refugees, but the latter are much more vulnerable to such issues.

*“When we first arrived, we used to pay US \$200 for rent, then the owner started to raise the rent gradually to US \$250, then US \$300, and later US \$350. We expected that he would feel with us and understand our suffering, considering that we were forced to leave our own country. We are not tourists... even in rural villages in Syria we used to have services equivalent to those of the cities of Lebanon, -What do you mean by services? -Public transportation and roads, water, electricity, waste management, and health services”.<sup>18</sup>*

Another reason for legal vulnerability is that an excessive number of refugees have settled in informal settlements in Lebanon such as Ouzai, Sabra, and Jnah, mainly because of the availability of affordable housing in these

areas. However, these areas suffer from extremely deteriorated conditions of housing, public services, and unreasonable rent rates charged for such conditions:

<sup>17</sup> Abu Youssef. Interview by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April –May 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Haitham. Interviewed by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April –May 2018.

*“We do feel exploited, if you come see our house you would know that it is not worth a US \$100 per person per month”.<sup>19</sup>*

Another problem in these vulnerable areas is the absence of the rule of law. Law enforcement is up to the local informal powers who control the area, many of whom are very hostile towards Syrian refugees due to their direct involvement in the Syrian war. This explains why people live there in isolation:

*“Not all people are good-mannered, and some of them say some harsh things. I comfort myself by going from work to home and vice versa without interacting with anyone so that no one harasses me”.<sup>20</sup>*

In such areas, harassment takes many forms, one of which is financial exploitation:

*“I have men working with me who are renting a house for US \$400 a month. The owner of their house owns a shop, and forces them to buy from him; they are not allowed to buy from anyone else. This man, for example, sells tea for 5,000 L.L., while other shops sell it for 2,500 L.L.”.<sup>21</sup>*

### *The Rise of Crippling Debt*

Another issue arises when several Syrian communities buy goods on credit and not in cash. This is because the majority of them are employed on a daily basis. Also, given the fact that the war in Syria has left many of them

with little or no savings, they would have no other choice but to buy goods on credit, which they repay once they work again and get cash. The issue of debt opens another door for exploitation as many refugees have claimed that shop owners intentionally manipulate the true amount of debt.

*“I live in Jnah (an area in the suburbs of Beirut) where I face this issue. At the end of the month, you are forced to pay amounts that you have no idea how they were accumulated. They (store keepers) don’t even like you to pay things in cash, they prefer credit, -why? -because when you buy something on credit that costs*

<sup>19</sup> Laith. Interviewed by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April –May 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Abu Khalil. Interviewed by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April –May 2018.

<sup>21</sup> Abu Youssef. Interviewed by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April –May 2018.



## *1,000L.L. it becomes 4,000L.L. at the end of the month just because you are not paying in cash.”<sup>22</sup>*

Falling in debt is inevitable for a daily worker, but it also affects families who have a foreman within them. This happens because in many cases the payment for the foreman gets delayed, which in turn delays the payment of his workers/other family members. In this regard, it is worth noting that the biggest advantages for foremen who have been in Lebanon since before the crisis, lie in their experience in navigating the Lebanese system and avoiding exploitative areas. They have established a reputation for themselves, which has encouraged many places to accept Syrians paying in credit even when those places did not do so for other refugees. The storekeepers would even delay the collection of payments and allow Syrians to continue buying on credit for a long period of time. This trust would cover the entire family of the foreman, and all members would get access to buying goods on credit, while payment would be done through the foreman.

### *Conclusion*

This case study shows the importance of the sense of belonging among Syrian families displaced by the war in their country. Families satisfy the need for social belonging and replace the need for social integration, by accepting and supporting each other, by providing financial and emotional support, and job opportunities. The major difference between familial networks and other types of social networks is that family bonds are stronger and more stable. However, the presence of the family does not mitigate the exploitation Syrians face in Lebanon or substitute the need for their interaction and integration with the Lebanese community. Social capital on its own cannot bring favorable outcomes; other factors such as government actions are also critical. The research highlights a number of areas where many Syrians still face difficulties, despite having their family networks. Those areas included housing, labor laws, acquisition of legal papers, and general services available for Syrian displaced populations in Lebanon.

By showing the resilience and strength of family networks and the roles of family members in overcoming the difficulties of displacement, the study intended to dismiss the discourse of refugees as victims and passive recipients of aid and services, and highlight the adaptive

capacity of refugees to survive the restrictive and debilitating environment in Lebanon. It depicts refugees as resources, as the “repositories of social capital made of social networks, reciprocity and trust”, and “as people with skills and connections” who are capable of collective action and adapting to the situation they are in (LSE 2016).

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<sup>22</sup> Abu Youssef. Interviewed by Mikhael Daher, Suburbs of Beirut, April –May 2018.



Jana Chammaa<sup>1</sup> and Sherif el Housseini<sup>2</sup>

## Summary

This case study looks at the diversity of living experiences among displaced Syrian workers residing and working in some of Beirut's commercial areas: Hamra, Malla-Zarif, Bliss, Downtown and Mar Elias. A total of 30 interviews and life histories were conducted with a diverse set of Syrian workers: 10 workers from the construction sector and 20 others working as waiters and concierges, in addition to a few others working in shops, printing centers and the NGO sector. Adopting a comparative approach, the study relies on these diverse experiences to draw out the commonalities and differences between the construction workers and the newly emerging professions that are being currently filled by Syrians (in restaurants, pubs, printing centers, shops, buildings, etc.).

## Introduction

Syrian construction workers have been a familiar feature of the Lebanese economy since the 1950s (Chalcraft 2009 & 2005). Prior to 2015, three bilateral agreements between Lebanon and Syria provided special rights and privileges for Syrian residents and workers<sup>3</sup>. Under these agreements, Syrians, only by showing their national identification cards, were entitled to a visa-free entry to Lebanon and granted a six-month residency permit at the border. The requirement of having a work permit was overlooked by Lebanese authorities, despite the large number of Syrian workers prior to the crisis that sparked off in 2011 (LEADERS 2019). Various sources estimate the number of Syrian migrant workers that were present in Lebanon prior to the crisis to be between 200,000-600,000 workers, but their numbers fluctuated according to major events in the country, such as the civil war, the reconstruction period that followed, the Hariri assassination, and the 2006 war.

The aforementioned special provisions to Syrian workers were ceased in 2015, four years after the start of the Syrian uprisings that developed into a full-fledged civil

war. After 2011, Lebanon became a home for 1.5 million Syrian refugees. Prior to that, it had already hosted a significant number of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees. In a matter of months after the crisis, Syrian refugees residing in areas inhabited by Lebanon's poorest, were entitled to services and support that were never provided by the Lebanese state to its own citizenry (Dionigi 2016). The situation has exasperated some Lebanese, who now had to endure aggravating gaps in public service delivery, unemployment, poverty, corruption, chronic governance issues and a lack of social protection mechanisms (LEADERS 2019). Moreover, the international response towards the Syrian refugees threatened the foundational base of Lebanese elites and their role in service delivery (Saghieh 2015). These developments provide some explanation as to why the response towards the Syrians went from an open-border policy to a policy of number reduction in a matter of years after the crisis began.

One policy that distinguished Lebanon's response to the influx of Syrian refugees from that of previous refugee flows to the country is opposition towards the establishment of formal refugee camps run by UNHCR. Thus, Syrian refugees had to capitalize on historical networks of migration and employment, relying on opportunities offered by Lebanon's cities (Fawaz 2016). Firstly, refugee camps in Lebanon are viewed as security threats because of the history of Palestinian camps. Secondly, the non-encampment policy has served the state's labor market goals, particularly the interests of the Lebanese owners of businesses and capital by expanding the labor supply, lowering wages and increasing workers' precarity (Turner 2015). This has allowed the restoration of previous levels of Syrian participation in the Lebanese economy.

Before the start of the crisis, the Syrian labor force was predominantly concentrated in the agricultural and construction sectors. After the refugee crisis started to turn into a protracted one, new profiles of Syrian workers who had fled the Syrian civil war with the intention of

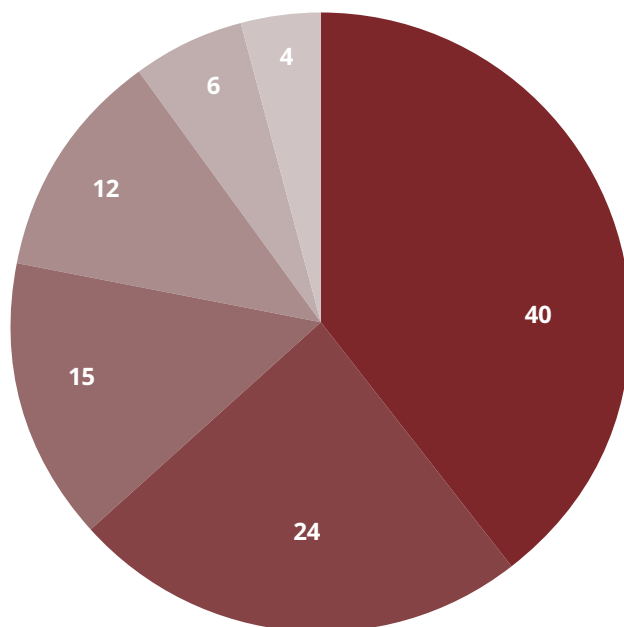
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<sup>3</sup> The three bilateral agreements are: the 1993 Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation and Coordination between Lebanon and Syria, the 1993 Agreement Regulating the Entry and Movement of Persons and Goods between Lebanon and Syria, and the 1994 Bilateral Agreement in the Field of Labor between the Government of the Syrian Arab Republic and the Government of the Lebanese Republic.

settling in Lebanon for the short-term, began entering the Lebanese labor market and started to access sectors which their predecessors had not traditionally occupied. The numbers of Syrians working in cafés, restaurants, shops, residential buildings and commercial ones, began to rise to numbers that Lebanon had never witnessed before. While Syrian workers in the past enjoyed freedom of mobility in Lebanon and could return to Syria whenever they wanted, nearly all Syrians in the present are refugees, 80% of whom lack valid residency permits, and for whom returning to Syria is not a safe option (LEADERS 2019).

■ Services  
■ Commerce  
■ Other  
■ Agriculture  
■ Construction  
■ Manufacturing



**Figure 1:** Estimated Distribution of Syrian Refugee Workers by Sector in Lebanon (Ajluni et al 2014)

## Methodology

This case study looks at the diversity of living experiences among displaced Syrian communities residing and working in several Beirut's commercial areas: Hamra, Malla-Zarif, Bliss, Downtown, and Mar Elias. A total of 30 interviews and life histories were conducted with a diverse set of Syrian workers from April to October 2018. We interviewed 10 construction workers and 20 workers occupying a range of professions in the service sector. Adopting a comparative approach, the study relies on these experiences to draw out the commonalities and differences between the construction workers and the newly emerging professions that are being currently filled by Syrians (in restaurants, pubs, printing centers, shops, and buildings).

## The perils of being a construction worker in Beirut

Syrian construction workers are involved in labor-intensive, low-wage, exhausting, and insecure work (Chalcraft 2005). Moreover, written contracts are absent, which means that the workers lack benefits and social protection. Most interviewed construction workers commonly reiterated complaints about their salaries and how they are not reflective of the risks they face or the amount of effort they exert on construction sites. One of the interviewees expressed his concerns by saying the following:

*“Imagine that I cannot save a penny and I have to enjoy sitting alone watching people hanging out while I have a bottle of water to drink for the whole day. My salary barely allows me to have a potato sandwich while others are eating juicy hamburgers. Life is hard.”<sup>4</sup>*

Fieldwork showed that the interviewed Syrian construction workers suffer a great deal from their inability to save money. A construction worker from Rif Dimashq expressed the following:

<sup>4</sup> Abed. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Downtown, Beirut, August 2018.

*“My life is centered around making money and saving. I ask myself sometimes, am I making money? The answer is maybe not enough to meet my expectations. I get paid on a monthly basis and the amount is better than what I would have made in Syria. I consider myself still serving in the army and I economize my spending as much as I can.”<sup>5</sup>*

Most of the interviewed construction workers lived in shared apartments or on construction sites, often in crowded and unsanitary conditions. Their rents were covered by their employers or project managers. In the case of married workers, the harsh living conditions

that they have to endure in terms of expensive costs of living and crowded housing, pushed them to make the difficult decision of leaving their families in Syria. A 31-year-old married construction worker from Dayr Hafir emphasized this issue as such:

*“I live in Cola-Salim Slam with other colleagues in a place owned by our boss. We do not pay rent. When I proposed to bring my family from Syria, my boss told me okay but that then I will have to pay my rent. He noted that my family cannot live with the other workers, which will force him to open new houses.”<sup>6</sup>*

In order to live with his family, the worker had to pay from his own expenses, which is something he could not afford. So, he ended up keeping his family in Syria. While construction workers do not have to pay their rent, they have to endure living in crowded housing conditions. They confine themselves to their construction sites and

barely have money left at the end of the month to spend on leisure activities. Intermingling with the locals is not an easy task for construction workers; they mainly interact with other fellow construction workers. The below quote reflects the inherent racism that characterizes the Lebanese relationship with Syrians:

*“In general, people barely talk to me. When I go to the market and buy food, people prefer to stay away from me physically. It is okay though; I have become accustomed to that. One of the guys in the neighborhood I live in is from Baalbek; he is dark skinned, so people avoid him thinking he is Syrian. That is funny (he laughs); man, life is harsh.”<sup>7</sup>*

<sup>5</sup> Abu Zayed. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Hassan. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Salim Salam, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Abu Zayed. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

Interviewed construction workers were also outspoken about the easy processing of their legal papers, citing their lack of competitiveness with Lebanese in the same domain as the main reason behind it. Seldom does one find Lebanese workers at construction sites where

they are prone to a number of dangers and risks that construction workers face. Usually, the Lebanese are the project managers or the foremen (noting that some foremen are Syrians). Moreover, Lebanese workers would never accept the low wages given to Syrian workers.

*“All my papers were processed while I was in Syria. I sent copies of my identity card and my army exemption permit by fax. My boss handles projects across the region and one time he came to see me while he was in Syria. On that day, he directly called the foreman in Lebanon to tell him about my experience, and right there he confirmed my availability to work. So I did not have to contact the Lebanese General Security or pass by their office. I only saw the Lebanese soldiers at the borders in Masnaa area and that was it.”<sup>8</sup>*

*“My friends had told me that construction workers are the only category of Syrians that the Lebanese government would not follow around to check on their legal papers because their jobs are in demand. So right now, things are going smoothly.”<sup>9</sup>*

### *Newly Emergent Professions occupied by Displaced Syrians*

Besides construction sites, Beirut's cafés, restaurants, shops, residential and commercial buildings, were employing Syrians as well. The workers at these places

seem to be in a better financial standing than construction workers, and they can also choose to live with their families. For example, the three concierges that were interviewed are living with their families or are waiting for them to come. Others live with flat mates. They pay rent from their own pockets. A young single male who works at a small cellphone shop in Hamra said:

*“I live in Hamra nowadays in a small flat I share with a Syrian guy. I used to live in Jnah but it was not a comfortable place. I pay around US \$300 per month for rent and my flat mate pays the same amount. I cannot*

<sup>8</sup> Abu Zayed. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Yahya. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, August 2018.

*live in a place shared with many people so I only stay with one roommate. If I have to live with a group of people, then I will simply leave.”<sup>10</sup>*

A Syrian woman who works in an NGO and lives in Mar Mikhael described the same experience. She expressed her desire to stay in a fairly good flat. Her salary, financial abilities and the help she was receiving from her mother allowed her to upgrade her housing condition.

A 48-year-old married employee, who works at a restaurant as its head waiter and head chef, came to Lebanon before the crisis erupted in 2011 and currently resides with his family in Hamra.

*“I pay for my flat from my own salary. I live with my mother, my sister, daughter and wife. My father is dead, and my other siblings are in Germany along with my son who is studying there.”<sup>11</sup>*

Having been living in Lebanon since before the crisis, this restaurant worker has been able to build several social networks across the country from Hamra to Mar Elias, Jounieh and the Beqaa.

Building networks with locals is a survival strategy that some of our interviewees have adopted in order to help them in finding jobs and proper housing, in addition to dealing with electricity cuts and water problems. The more open Syrians are with host communities, the greater is their ability to understand local problems and find innovative solutions to their situation. This is termed bonding social capital.

Despite some positive experiences of interacting and connecting with host communities, some interviewees described discrimination at the hands of police. A waiter who shares an apartment with three of his friends described how police officers used to wake them up at early hours of the morning asking them for their IDs, work permits and Iskan (Housing) papers. Another interviewee recounted how he was stopped by a police officer for suspicion of belonging to a terrorist group and was interrogated for holding a small amount of money. These encounters pushed some Syrian workers to limit their interactions with the locals. A coffee shop worker shared his experience:

*“I prefer not to intermingle a lot with the Lebanese people so I keep my distance. My experience so far has been good as I only interact with students, my colleagues and my boss. They are all nice, but I do not go any further than that.”<sup>12</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Laith. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, June 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Sami. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Hamra, Beirut, May 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Nader. Interview by Sherif El Housseini, Bliss, Beirut, April 2018.

## *Commonalities and Differences among Diverse Set of Syrian Workers*

### **Saving Money**

Construction workers were more vocal about the injustices they faced at their jobs, especially when it comes to saving money. In other professions, interviewees divulged that this task was easier for them. These employees were less frustrated and said that they could send money back to their families in Syria; nonetheless, some remained unable to afford bringing their families from Syria. Non-construction workers also get to hang out with their friends in their spare time, as emphasized by waiters, concierges, and employees of a printing center.

### **Attaining Legality**

There are two main pathways for Syrians to obtain or renew residency permits :1) applying based on UNHCR registration; or 2) obtaining a pledge of responsibility by a Lebanese citizen. Until mid-2016, a 'pledge not to work' was required to obtain residency based on UNHCR registration, pushing Syrians to go for residency obtained via sponsorship. According to the LEADERS Consortium report (2019), sponsorship is currently the only pathway for displaced Syrians who need to work. The report identified instances of when refugees were denied their residency application based on a UNHCR registration for suspicion of working.

Almost all interviewees spoke about the tighter controls that have grown stricter in the past two years, with the Lebanese General Security requiring residency permits and other legal papers. Waiters and shop workers were allocating part of their salary to pay for residency papers, while workers in the construction sector had it easier in this regard, as most of them were sponsored by the employers. The employers would visit the Lebanese General Security, presenting their employees' papers en masse. One of the workers remarked that the kafeel, or employer, is a key factor in determining the comfortability of a worker's life, especially if that person is well-connected, which means he can easily and immediately resolve any lingering issues with the General Security. If not, then the employer has to expect an on-site raid at any time of the day from security personnel asking for the legal papers of his workers.

### **Securing Housing**

Housing is an important element for establishing a sense of security for displaced communities. Most interviewed Syrians workers, whether they are in construction or in the other sectors, live in shared apartments with roommates who are often from the same nationality. Married couples are the only exception. Wages are deciding factors for the interviewees when it comes to their housing choices. For example, a single waiter who makes around US \$700 would normally secure better housing than a construction worker who is married and who earns US \$450 dollars. On the other hand, Syrians who work at shops are more sophisticated about their choices in housing to the extent that they would leave the country if living conditions are not up to their expectations.

It is usually the employers who provide housing for construction workers who are often housed in unsanitary and crowded conditions. Capacities of construction workers as buyers of essential goods are not vast and seem to be tighter than in other professions. For example, a shop worker in Hamra expressed his willingness to leave Lebanon in case he could not find a comfortable apartment to live in, and if he had to share it with more than one flat mate. His consumption decision rested on his financial capabilities outside and inside of Lebanon. Outside, his family were well-off, so in case he needed help to cover the expenses of his higher-priced desired good, which is the flat in this case, they would have provided him with the needed financial support.

### **Interacting with Host Communities**

Refugee and migrant communities often find it hard to assimilate or adapt to their new environments. In this case study, construction workers said they were less likely to interact with host communities and adapt to the Lebanese lifestyle. On the other hand, waiters, shop keepers, watchmen and other workers from outside the construction sector interact more frequently with locals.

### **Return to Syria**

Sometimes, returning to Syria is a choice but at other times it is simply not an option. When asked about their willingness to return, the majority of respondents, regardless of their profession, said that they wanted to return to Syria. Each interlocutor narrated a backstory that depicts the personal decision of whether to go back. For many, family was the main reason to return to Syria.



“My second half is still there so yes, I will surely return”, one of the interviewees said. Better halves could refer here to their wives, children and parents.

A widowed construction worker from Raqqa who lost his wife during the battles in the city, said:

*“I am planning to visit the embassies of foreign countries and ask about the procedures to leave. Going back to Syria is a nightmare because it means I am going back to a big cemetery. I am either going to stay Lebanon or leave for Europe.”<sup>13</sup>*

For this interviewee, going back to Syria is the equivalent to death. His life depended on his wife, but now that she is gone, he is no longer enthusiastic to see Syria again.

Another construction worker from Dayr Hafir foresaw his fate of returning to his homeland but expressed bitterness:

*“Syria is a strange place for me now. Returning there and seeing people I do not know is going to be kind of weird, but we cannot stay here forever.”<sup>14</sup>*

## Conclusion

This case study shows that displaced Syrians in Lebanon are not a homogeneous group. The various workers who live and work in Beirut experience and navigate the Lebanese system differently, according to their financial means and legal status, and whether they have contacts, family ties and connections with the host communities. It is apparent that Syrians who are financially better off were able to maintain a good living standard in Lebanon, with a greater ability to save money, secure housing and intermingle with the locals. Construction workers are more reserved about intermingling with the locals and experience difficulties saving money. Their experience in Lebanon determines their decisions to go back to Syria. Regardless of their profession, interviewed workers expressed their desire to return to their homes back in Syria; however, many of them feared persecution and military service.

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# From the Palace to the Tent Syrian Women's Housing Experiences in Akkar

Lara Azzam<sup>1</sup> and Rawad Ghattas<sup>2</sup>

## Summary

Nearly a decade into their journey to finding refuge, social and economic hurdles are still taking the toll on most Syrian refugees who continue to face myriad problems, especially when it comes to finding housing or shelter. Nonetheless, it is the status of women refugees that calls for a special focus, since women in Syrian refugee communities have assumed greater roles in being the main providers of livelihoods, in addition to their traditional domestic role. This case study considers the status of female refugees in Akkar, north of Lebanon. It bases its findings upon the testimonies of 20 Syrian women living in various housing types in Akkar. The study addresses the situation of these female refugees by taking into consideration the standard of housing, the social and economic burdens they endure, their participation in the workforce, and their visions for the future. Concluding, the study offers several recommendations for ensuring better conditions for displaced communities in Lebanon.



## Introduction

Akkar, a governorate in northern Lebanon is home to 110,000 refugees (Baylouny and Klingseis, 2018, 110). Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, refugees in Lebanon have undergone several changes, especially when it comes to housing and shelter, such as the increase in rental fees. There has also been a considerable construction boom, exceptionally the construction of warehouses and garages that have become atypically used for housing by Syrian refugees, which are, in many cases, equipped by donor organizations. Moreover, the construction and renovation of garages have become

an investment field for Lebanese contractors since it provides job opportunities for Syrian construction workers in the renovation, plumbing, and various roles for these places to become habitable. Accordingly, this case study examines the status of female refugees in Akkar, that is because many women in Syrian refugee communities have become the main providers of livelihoods, in addition to their traditional domestic role. According to the Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Report (VASyr) of 2018, the number of female-headed households constituted 25% in 2017 and 21% in 2018 (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 20, 2018). Syrian women and children, as most refugees worldwide, are often depicted as the most vulnerable to violence and trauma in the context of war (Asaf, 2017, 5). In this regard, UN reports have indicated that female refugees require special protection in Lebanon. The agency conducted a study in 2018 around the status of female refugees in Lebanon that shows that they constitute 53% of the total number of refugees in the country, 86% of whom are registered with UNHCR and 11% enjoy a work permit. According to the study, 79% of female refugees complain about economic challenges and deem them the heaviest, and 13% occupy jobs and they are the primary breadwinners in their houses, considering that the husband would be out of the picture (UNHCR, UNICEF and WFP 2018).

**Table 1.** Female-Headed Households by governorate (UNHCR, 2018, 20)

Governorate	2017	2018
<b>Total</b>	<b>19%</b>	<b>18%</b>
Akkar	25%	21%
Baalbeck-El Hermel	32%	27%
Beirut	7%	17%
Bekaa	22%	24%
El Nabatieh	10%	11%
Mount Lebanon	14%	14%
North	17%	13%
South	12%	12%

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<sup>2</sup> Consultant and former project coordinator

## Methodology

Twenty in-depth interviews were conducted with different women residing in various housing modules in the region of Akkar, between August and November 2018. Five interviews were conducted with women residing in warehouses/garages, another five were conducted with women residing in scattered informal tented settlements and ten were conducted with women residing in the Qusayr Camp. The researcher who conducted the interviews also carried out multiple field visits and informal interviews with the people in the area to understand the conditions behind the situation of these female refugees when it comes to the standard of housing, the social and economic burdens they endure, their participation in the workforce, and their vision for the future. It is noteworthy mentioning that the researcher has established these networks himself as he had been a long-term resident of Akkar, working in the humanitarian and development sector. The researcher has gained the trust of the interviewed communities prior to the research itself and claimed that this relationship has been helpful in obtaining facts and better understanding the situation of these women. The researcher did not face any problems while interviewing the women since he had gained the trust of their communities.



Exterior of a warehouse

Interior of a warehouse

Warehouse under renovation

## How do Syrian refugees deal with different housing options?

According to a study collected by UN-Habitat, informality is the dominant trend when it comes to rental arrangements in cities like Akkar. The research described the rental agreements as “typically oral, open-ended, and rarely specify the rights of tenants” (UNHCR, European Union, and UN Habitat, 2014, 42). The study also found that Syrians who had better situations and rental arrangements were the ones who had better knowledge of the market, social networks, and previous experience in the labor and rental markets in Lebanon (UNHCR, European Union, and UN Habitat 2014, 42).

To better comprehend the situation of the women who have been interviewed, it is necessary to describe the different housing options in some detail as these spaces harbor characteristics that constitute the day to day socio-economic dynamics of the lives of these women.

## The Warehouse

The warehouse has become a phenomenon that has accompanied the Syrian refugee movement. They are usually garages used to store goods or utilized and turned into mechanic workshops or commercial stores. In general, the warehouses under study were initially not habitable, but considering the need and demand, they underwent alterations and then turned into shelters.

Alterations include cutting out windows or any form of panes in order to allow in air and sunlight and replacing the traditional metallic roll-up garage doors with house panel doors. Usually, a garage (a type of warehouse) comprises one big room that gets divided using wooden barriers. The room is usually divided in two - the first one would be a living room and the second a bedroom. After that, a kitchen and a bathroom would be added. The fieldwork has found that the monthly rental fees for such a place range between US \$150 and US \$200, and alterations are made in coordination between the donor organizations and the landlord, on the condition that the latter adheres to the rental fees.

Warehouses and garages are not the usual housing options for Syrian refugees but the unfavorable conditions associated with displacement have forced such an option in areas such as Akkar. The interviewed women who were living in revamped garages were quite vocal about this matter. Many women expressed the fact that adapting to the new conditions has been a difficult task for them, especially that they had in their minds a different image of a beautiful Lebanon where all houses are fancy and neat, only to arrive in the country to find housing to be the first blow. Many women said they cried once they knew they were going to live in warehouses and felt very nostalgic for the house with the kitchen and the many rooms that they had left behind in Syria.

The residents of warehouses interviewed for this study were refugees either coming from Syria’s main cities or the countryside. In Akkar, most Syrian refugees have come from either Homs or al-Qusayr. They usually form civil communities after they had been working in Syria either as government employees or as business owners. Some also owned agricultural fields, and they had lived a fairly stable life and did not have to be constantly on the

go. Even though the rental fees of a garage are typically higher than that of other housing options (tents for example), as the former ranges between US \$150 and US \$200, sans services and internet fees, the interviewed Syrian refugee women told us they preferred garages and warehouses because they provide a degree of stability they linger for.

Considering that many refugees do not comply with the conditions for legal residency, they do not enjoy full mobility freedom or even the sense of security in their movements and during their work in areas away from their housing. Hence, they primarily depend on financial assistance provided by the UNHCR, and job opportunities available around their areas of residence, in order to provide the garage rental expenses.

The women who were residing in the garages or warehouses at the time of the interview originated from al-Qusayr, Aleppo, and Homs. Most of them were considered as middle class back in Syria, and they expressed that they had all enjoyed stable lives in their villages and cities back in Syria where they were housewives. These women have conveyed to us the suffering they had to go through in order to secure housing and to find relative stability in Lebanon. One of the interviewed women divulged that she had switched three warehouses before she finally settled in the warehouse where she was living during the time of the interview, in Tal Abbas. She described her current housing situation as substandard compared to her house back in Syria. Nonetheless, she said that it was their best option for the current time because they still had a kitchen sink and ceramic bathroom floor tiles. Another woman said that she was no longer able to do some activities she was used to in Syria, such as gardening around her home. She also addressed the struggle to access bathroom, and the lineups they had to endure when they were living in the informal tented settlements. Still, she also considered that the warehouse she was living in was the best available option in terms of stability and social security for her and her family. A third interviewee described her journey as a transition from the palace to the tent; nevertheless, she expressed content with her humble house that provides her and her family with a sense of security after the killing of her husband. The woman even talked about some unexpected positive aspects of the crisis, even though the family's lifestyle has been hit hard on social and economic levels. While many interviewed for this case study expressed an overall sense of resentment to their

current situations as compared to their lives in Syria, some of the interviewed female refugees talked about the advantages of displacement. One woman residing in a warehouse told us that she considered the crisis as an adventure or even an opportunity to run away from life's dull moments.

Another female refugee who identified herself as illiterate shared the same opinion. She had lost her newborn in Lebanon, and her husband was unable to work in the country because of legal restrictions. This woman was employed as an agricultural worker during the afternoons; however, she admitted she was happy because her children could pursue their education and because her (six-year-old) daughter was teaching her how to read and write. This woman had lived in a tent and had to work very hard to afford living outside this form of settlement. She claimed that female refugees living in warehouses lived a pretty comfortable life considering they did not have to sweat much to collect rental fees because of the multitude of aid they received that helped them pay their bills, unlike the residents of tents. Another interviewee shared the same perception and mentioned that as residents of warehouses, they enjoyed more privileges, in reference to the fact that they do not belong to the same social class as that of the inhabitants of tents. It is worth noting that class bias within the same refugee community was evident in our fieldwork.



A tent inhabited by refugees who work in agriculture

Supplying tents with WASH services

The next two sections will explore the two kinds of informal tented settlements (ITS): the tents that are scattered in different areas and the informal tented settlements in the Qusayr camp. It is important to mention that a UN habitat study found that in general, living conditions in the ITSs in Akkar tend to be poor due to several reasons; "structures are makeshift and unfinished, services are limited, and overcrowding is common" (UNHCR, European Union, and UN Habitat, 2014, 64). The study indicated that around 9 people share a tent that is around 20m<sup>2</sup>, a standard that is far from the typical SPHERE standards<sup>3</sup> (UNHCR, European Union, and UN Habitat, 2014, 64).

<sup>3</sup> Sphere is a global movement aiming to improve the quality of humanitarian assistance. The Sphere standards are the most commonly used set of humanitarian standards.

## The Tent

Another housing option for Syrians has been the tents that house a large number of refugees in various agricultural areas in Akkar. Tents are found as part of settlements mainly because of the presence of vast unused agricultural areas in Akkar, and the landowners have seen in refugees a labor force able to harvest these lands. For their turn, Syrians have relied on these lands to make a living and provide housing for themselves.

A tent is basically a piece of fabric supported by wooden pillars. Organizations operating in Akkar have been working on providing services for tented settlements, supplying them with bathrooms and water tanks to be used for drinking and washing. These organizations have also been providing services related to screening floors with cement and have been providing the fabric and pillars (UNHCR, European Union, and UN Habitat, 2014, 6). Tents, in general, are an inexpensive housing option. A tent's yearly rental fee ranges between US \$100 and US \$150, and some families do not even pay rent, in return for working in agriculture. Tents usually fit the lifestyle of their residents, because they are easy to disassemble and install; this eases the mobility of residents when they decide to move from one place to another in search of better work and living conditions. Interviewees who were residing in tents said that they had come from eastern Hama and Edlib, and their roots go back to Bedouin clans. They, unlike the residents of warehouses, have proven a greater ability to adapt and endure a life marked by constant traveling, instability, and continuous search for opportunities and better circumstances inside Syria and outside it.

A female refugee who had come from eastern Hama said in the interview that she had traveled from her village back in Syria to al-Raqqah where she stayed for five years because the Syrian city was home to large swathes of land. She explained that her husband used to own 200 heads of cattle before he managed to sell them there. She noted that back in Syria, all types of goods were available at cheaper prices. The woman added that ISIS had never supplied her, nor her family, with any type of food-based assistance when the militants were in control of al-Raqqah. At the time of the interview, the woman had been in Lebanon for eight years where she has joined one of the tented settlements. She explained that she came to Lebanon mainly because of the services that the UN was providing and job opportunities available in the country in the agriculture sector.

It is worth noting that most of the interviewed women from the settlements said they do not mind moving somewhere else in the future. One female refugee from a village in eastern Hama expressed her wish to collect money and afford leaving for Europe, even if it were through illegal migratory routes. Another interviewee, also from eastern Hama, said that she got married at an early age, but her husband had left her behind and travelled to Sweden; she currently can neither enjoy proper movement nor travel.

It is also worth noting that the fieldwork has shown that the main factors that determine the duration spent at settlements are the availability of work opportunities and the level of involvement of donor organizations that provide aid or services throughout the duration of stay.



Al Qusayr Camp

## Al Qusayr Camp

The al-Qusayr Camp started as a personal initiative during the influx of Syrian refugees towards Akkar. A number of individuals who had come from Al Qusayr in Homs, were behind this initiative that was referred to in its early days, using the slogan "We got no one but ourselves". The phrase echoes the dependence of Syrians only on themselves, and their avoidance of blending in with the Lebanese community, and thus their keenness on maintaining a collective identity. The phrase is also a culmination of their efforts in handling the crisis and dealing with its consequences. During the fieldwork, we learned that this group of individuals had leased a land plot located in al-Miniara plain in Akkar that used to be a landfill; at that time, it was unused and unfit to be utilized in agriculture. They told us that after leasing the land, they started cleaning it before setting up tents and asking al-Qusayr residents to come live in those tents. Afterwards, they dug a well in a very primitive way using their hands and shovels, and they could provide residents with water and other services. After a period of time, they said they built a wall around the camp and screened its floor with cement. Then, cement walls were erected, topped with zinc roofs. During the construction phase of the camp, a large room was designated in the middle of it in order to be used as a school. Female residents who were former



teachers, as well as holders of university degrees, took on the role of teaching in this volunteering project. The main aim behind this project was to sustain educational provision for children; to boost self-reliance among residents; and to cultivate their various life skills, in order to teach them how to manage crises, instead of giving up on them.

With time, the camp started gaining the interest of international and local organizations, which started providing educational, food and housing services. Considering that the camp enjoys organizational capabilities and social solidarity among its residents, it managed to regulate its relations with donor organizations for the sake of residents and their visions. The fruit of this partnership was the founding of al-Ihsan Center, which is a learning center that provides its services for both the Syrian and Lebanese communities. To sum it up, a group of Syrian refugees managed to organize initiatives to administer the crisis, and create a social and economic impact for the Syrian and Lebanese communities.



Al Ihsan Center

## *The Socio-economic Conditions of Women in Akkar*

The crisis has forced new responsibilities upon many Syrian women. Some scholars would argue that Syrian women's experiences in displacement has offered them freedom or empowerment (Asaf, 2017, 8). The new economic and legal conditions they have been forced into have driven them to take on new domains of responsibility that were once exclusive to men only back in Syria. As a consequence of their forced displacement, some of them had to start working for the first time in their lives. Many women had to do both, participate in running their households, and keep up with their children and needs. The women we interviewed told us that the major driver to work is dependent on the sufficiency of the aid provided by organizations. Once the household is not able to sustain itself from aid money, many women (and even children) have to work. The less the aid was, the more a woman had to work because the work conditions and the legal status of women provide them with more freedom, considering that the government turns a blind eye on women's labor, as opposed to the situation with

men. Many interviewed women said that the main reason that encourages women to take part in the labor market is that many communities depend on the role of women in work. For example, tribal and nomadic communities are known to be proficient in agriculture and harvesting, considering that these types of labor require a large workforce. However, this causes major distress for female refugees, as girls and women in Lebanon are highly vulnerable to abuse that takes many forms, from forced prostitution, to early marriage, and other types of gender-based violence (Dahi, 2014). A study conducted by Oxfam in 2013 showed that a high number of women had reported emotional and psychological stress because of the new tasks they were forced to do, and the harassment that they were suffering from, almost on a daily basis (El Masri, Harvey and Garwood, 2013).

Al-Ihsan Center managed to provide a safety net for Al Qusayr camp's residents, especially the women among them. The center has given women a place to resort to when they sought housing, education, and work opportunities. Female refugees were working in the fields of education, training, and cooking; one of them even had become the owner of a small market inside the camp.

Some female interviewees disclosed that they would not work away from their places of residence, even if for example, they had the opportunity to work in sewing with an international organization as one interviewee narrated; that is because their husbands do not allow them. Many of the interviewed women said they primarily depend on their husbands as the main breadwinners. It is worth noting that according to a report prepared by the UN on female Syrian refugees in Lebanon, it is the women who had lost a husband who suffer the most (UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP, 2018).

In conclusion, one cannot separately discuss the housing options and choices of Syrian refugees, by simply dismissing their previous and current socio-economic and cultural backgrounds. Such intertwining factors become linked together in displacement as they were pre-displacement. Fieldwork has shown that the type of housing and its uses are determined by social, economic, and cultural factors. For instance, communities with a production modes that necessitate stability, and others that necessitate continuous movement and traveling, would naturally mean that both communities will have different housing options - warehouse vs. tent. Moreover, the emergence of class differences between the residents of tent settlements and of warehouses could be traced back to differences in modes of production and the level of provisions by donor organizations.



## *The Future Visions of Syrian Women in Akkar*

The future visions of Syrian refugee women are linked with their visions for the Lebanese state and society, and the ongoing situation in Syria. Based on the testimonies of the interviewees, both, the Lebanese state and people have left a bad impression in the minds of the women who have been interviewed for this case study. In the best-case scenario, some women told us that whereas only a few Lebanese treated them kindly, the rest treated them as if they were inferior and either asked them to leave the country or manipulated them through playing with rental fees. The interviewed women did not complain about any form of physical harassment, but they did report several instances of verbal harassment, the effect of which they said would be more adverse. In this regard, it is worth noting that women find it difficult to report harassment or assault, fearing the shame and stigma that would haunt them, as per their common local culture in Syria.

In many cases, Syrian refugee women said that they lacked a sense of belonging considering the absence of social and economic security, governmental services, and the minimal hospitality they have observed. Policies that reinforce such behavior, or the lack of policies that regulate the status of Syrian refugees in the country, are all factors that incite a sense of not belonging among refugees around the world (Lems, 2018). Moreover, female refugees fear authorities because they, along with their husbands, do not have work or stay permits; they are also unable to return to Syria either out of fear, or because their houses were razed down. They are also unable to leave for Europe or any country that would provide them with a better life, just like in the case of the woman whose husband had traveled to Sweden some years ago. Another female interviewee said that although she received approval to travel, she did not leave because her son's application got refused. Hence, we reach the conclusion that although many opportunities exist for female refugees, whether to travel, work, or improve their living, they often do not grasp them either because of their familial commitments or their dependence on their husbands.

Some female interviewees also complained about donor organizations, whether local or international. Even though men were the ones mainly handling communication with these organizations, women saw that the conduct of these entities was problematic. They

also held a bad impression about Lebanese people, and believed that they were not only indifferent towards Syrians, but also tried to take advantage of them. Their impressions about the Lebanese state were not positive either. Most interviewees told us that they do not trust the state since they cannot resort to it neither in times of hardship nor in case their husbands were put in jail, as one of the interviewees narrated.

Light should also be shed on the differences in the ability of various Syrian communities in blending in with the host community. For example, in the case of the Tal Abbas camp, its relationship with its surrounding host community suffers to a point that reaches physical attacks and race-based violence. On the other hand, al-Qusayr camp runs its relations with its surrounding in a very successful and constructive manner, interacts with it, and benefits from it on social and economic levels.

As a result of the above-mentioned points, when Syrian women refugees envision the future, there is barely any sunshine, even if some interviewees may have expressed a certain sense of content with their current situation. Refugees still face various difficulties and challenges, and their outlook for the future, in terms of returning to Syria, is still vague. Furthermore, Syrian women told us their fears pertaining to the uncertainty behind their wait to get back home and, their concern about a generation that has been born and raised during the eight years of the crisis, and their fear of having to stay in a country away from their homes for a long time. These concerns exist considering that many refugees still lack legal papers, and their inability to pursue their education, all while they could sense their identities falling apart while they are in refuge.

Finally, it is highly important to delve deeper into the issue of the economic gap that could arise in the event of a mass return of refugees to Syria, and its consequences on the host community.

## *Conclusion*

Similar to the UN Habitat study conducted in 2014, this case study has shown that almost 9 years into the Syrian crisis, Syrian refugees in Lebanon still face difficult living conditions, particularly in informal settlements (UNHCR, European Union, and UN Habitat, 2014, 70).

The status of female refugees does not differ much from that of males in terms of deprivation, discrimination, negligence, and the various economic, social, and

political difficulties. Despite the overarching discourse on the vulnerability of refugee women, Syrian women interviewed for this case study have shown a lot of resilience. The support system around women has proven effective in their empowerment. Experiences of women in places such as al-Ihsan Center are proof that women do play a vital and effective role in Syrian refugee communities. At Al Ihsan, women were key to founding the center, and handling the responsibility of its sustainability through various activities, from teaching to cooking. Had it been without their effort, the center would not have succeeded in gaining the trust of both Syrians and Lebanese, and it would not have secured partnership opportunities with host organizations.

In all cases, this positive outlook should be handled carefully because it only applies to a small number of refugees. The majority continue to struggle on a daily basis, especially due to the current overall deteriorating socio-economic and political conditions in Lebanon.

Hence, the efforts of institutions working in the field of women's rights must be intensified and these efforts must be rooted in different societies to suit these diverse women target groups. This step entails taking into consideration the difference between the current and past cultural, social and economic backgrounds of female refugees and stirring away from stereotyping them and trying to fit them into ready-made molds sculpted by international development standards concerned with human and women's rights. It is true that some women complain about the dominance of men and their exercise of violence against them in this case study, but the majority of them is truly convinced with such lifestyle, and they possess the cultural and religious justifications on which they base their solid convictions. Therefore, the approach to women empowerment must be careful not to repulse women by paving the way for a dialectic dominated by western culture and its conspiracy theories about control. It is also important to note that the priority for women is to provide money and food for their families, which they place ahead of securing their rights, or being concerned with decision making, individual freedoms, and international agreements. Accordingly, women might start placing their expectations and hopes in the humanitarian and development sectors that they work with, which could help in figuring out how to gain the trust of refugees. After all, building trust should be the first building bloc towards working with Syrian refugees in general, and Syrian women refugees in particular.

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# The Role of Support Networks and Community Leaders in Displacement in Akkar

Lara Azzam<sup>1</sup>

## Summary

The year of 2018 was a very challenging one for Syrian displaced communities in Lebanon. That year, the funding for refugee aid organizations had been significantly reduced, United Nations (UN) agencies no longer provided the same level of services and support for refugee communities, and the Lebanese government had been in a political stalemate over the status of the displaced people and the dilemma of their return. Building on the above, this case study focuses on the aftermath of this situation regarding the role of support networks, community leaders and circle of networks in providing communities with services such as education, healthcare and shelter as well attending to their daily livelihood necessities. This case study shows that in the absence of state policy and an official coherent strategy, displaced Syrians had relied on their unofficial support networks from the beginning of their displacement journey until the present. The research focuses on a specific displaced community in Akkar, in North Lebanon, that managed to create an alternative governing body, and compares it with other communities where such bodies are absent.

## Introduction

Despite the neighboring Syrian crisis, and the huge influx of Syrians entering the country, Lebanon's borders were kept open with little regulation until late 2014. This period has largely been understood as one of state absence, referred to broadly as a "policy of no-policy" (Mourad 2017, 1). The lack of policy-making and planning strategies that characterized the Lebanese government's response to the crisis led to the emergence of alternative governing structures both, from "below" and "above". Such initiatives included local authorities, international agencies and local organizations, and led to, in some places, the creation of Syrian support groups and almost all service inclusive, self-sufficient camps. This is the case of al-Ihsan or al-Qusayr camp in Sahel Minyara in Akkar, where a governing committee had managed to provide

the camp residents with basic services such as water and electricity. Moreover, the services of the governing committee were also extended to resolving internal conflicts and coordinating with the Lebanese authorities. At times, these governing structures are thought to be serving as a post-displacement tribal structure in their mimicking of the tribal and family structures and roles, predominant in many villages of pre-war Syria.

## Methodology

The study was based on ten interviews with men and women from the camp, as well as several field visits and daily informal interviews and encounters, conducted in the spring and summer of 2018, which demonstrated the role of support networks and community leaders in providing for the residents of the camp in all aspects of life. The main points of entry for the researcher were two camp leaders that lead him to the other interviewees and gave him "access" to the camp. Some interviews were also conducted with displaced Syrians living outside the camp, showing, through a comparative lens, the extent to which community support and contacts are important for leading a dignified life in displacement.

## Life After Displacement: Sources of Living and Service Provision

Most of the interviewed displaced Syrians residing in al-Qusayr camp expressed a relative satisfaction with their status-quo. Although they received no help from the government, little help from the UN agencies in the form of food vouchers, and some help from local organizations such as Malaak NGO<sup>2</sup>, they managed to create their own support group.

The residents of this camp had formed a committee of men who manage the affairs of the residents and the camp in general. These committee members act as points of contact with the government to ensure that

<sup>1</sup> Project Officer – DCAF

<sup>2</sup> Malaak NGO is a Lebanese charity that supports al-Ihsan Academic Center in Sahel Minyara, Akkar.

basic services such as water and electricity reach the residents, and conflict mediators are ready to intervene when problems arise. The committee also fundraises for

the camp and collects money from the residents in case of emergencies. One interviewee who is a member of the governing committee gave an example of such a case:

*“In one case, one of the active volunteers [in the camp] was diagnosed with cancer. The UN does not cover these cases, so we lost hope from that. We collected money for him from the residents of the camp. People help each other because they feel that any one of them could get sick or need anything at any time.”<sup>3</sup>*

Upon realizing that they would not receive any substantial help from the government, the UN or local organizations, the residents of al-Qusayr camp joined efforts to manage

their own affairs and got creative with it, as the head of the six-member governing committee stated the following:

*“Let us say for example one resident wants to build an apartment. He would come to me and tell me [of his intentions], and here in the camp every person has been trained in one specific skill. We have a builder, a handyman, an electrician, and a plumber, so I gather them and they work together; in this way, we distribute jobs.”<sup>4</sup>*

An important factor that contributes to the social solidarity that is felt in this camp is the fact that most of the residents came together from nearby regions of al-Qusayr, a city in Western Syria, and one that is in proximity to Lebanon. These communities have expressed that they either knew each other from before, or became close throughout their journey and in displacement. In addition, given the proximity of al-Qusayr to the Lebanese border, some of the displaced men had come to Lebanon before the war, partaking in construction work or other handyman professions. This has granted them some familiarity with the area, and provided them with a few contacts, which they claim are crucial to their lives in displacement.

Another interviewee narrated how the community built the camp from scratch. He said that they had first rented

out the land that used to be a garbage dump, revamped it, and built tents on it, with the residents of the camp sharing the annual cost of the rent of the land. The camp now hosts al-Ihsan academic center, a school that teaches more than 500 Syrian students. When the center commenced its teaching activities, its aim was to ensure that Syrian children did not forget how to read and write. This strategy evolved as the students started going to public schools. The aim of the school during the time of the interviews was to help Syrian kids keep up with the Lebanese curriculum. In addition, Syrian parents who used to work as teachers in Syria, or who have some sort of education, volunteer as teachers, which makes them feel productive and beneficial. The establishment of informal education centers and initiatives are examples of the informal adaptive mechanisms employed by Syrian communities to access services like education in

<sup>3</sup> Abu Haitham. Interview by Rami Mehio, Akkar, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Sheikh Abdullah. Interview by Rami Mehio, al-Qusayr camp, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

the absence of a proper formal education system that is fit for Syrian students.

The interviewees who were part of the governing body expressed a positive outlook on their situation in general. One member said that the committee also provides psycho-social support for Syrians when needed and that all their services extend to reach many Lebanese as well. The most important note that these interviewees stressed is the fact that they were independent, one of them mentioned that they only worked with one NGO, and that they view their team as unique and helpful. He believes that they have made a positive impact on the surrounding community and society.

These reflections are not shared by all the residents of the camp as some had bleaker impressions of their life in the al-Qusayr camp, despite acknowledging that they are

doing much better than other Syrians elsewhere. Their main grievances were related to their relationship with the Lebanese government and people.

## *Perceptions of the Lebanese Government, People and International Organizations*

### **Government and People**

The perception of the Lebanese government and Lebanese citizens differed among the different respondents. Most of them noted that the Lebanese government was either passive and apathetic toward them, or that it was treating them with disrespect. For instance, one camp resident said the following:

*“If there are [displaced] persons who are Alawite, Christian, and Muslim, then the first [priority] would be for the Alawite, then the Christian, and finally the Muslim, that is if we even get a chance at something.”<sup>5</sup>*

Similarly, another distressed resident narrated:

*“Twice in the past they have come into our house to take us away while we were sleeping safely. In Syria, at least they used to knock first. [Here], they took 26 men among us for five days, the young and old alike. There was even one man among us who was intellectually disabled We were barefoot. After they took us out, they searched the houses. They stole a 100, 000 L.L. from me, and USD \$100 from our neighbor.”<sup>6</sup>*

It is noteworthy, herein, to mention that, according to the fieldwork, many displaced Syrians who came from al-Qusayr to Lebanon in 2013, seeking safety and security, allegedly suffered at the hands of Hezbollah members. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they

were uprooted from their houses by Hezbollah fighters against the backdrop of the al-Qusayr battle, and that they witnessed members from the party causing damage and committing murder (Nasseif 2014, 15). Hence, many displaced Syrians still harbor resentment against

<sup>5</sup> Abu Ziad. Interview by Rami Mehio, Akkar, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Abu Iyad. Interview by Rami Mehio, al-Qusayr camp, Lebanon, May-October 2018.



the group, and consequently towards the government, from a sectarian point of view. This is conveyed in one interviewee's statement:

*“When we first arrived, they [the government] had renewed our papers for 6 months. I think Saudi Arabia might have covered the expenses, but after those 6 months we became illegitimate. Wherever we go, they could detain us for [not having legitimate] papers. I just want my rights as a refugee. I did not come with papers, but I came with an ID. At least consider that I have come as a refugee. Look at how they have written “infiltrator” on the cards. Imagine how dirty that word is! Just write illegal entrant. We took you [the Lebanese] in during the 1982 war; we also took you in also in the 2006 war. I swear it was not Bashar al-Assad that spent [money] on you. I swear it was the Syrian people. In al-Qusayr, we emptied our houses out for the Lebanese.”<sup>7</sup>*

The interviewee, along with all the other interviewees, also mentioned that they have not been in contact with the Lebanese government, would not seek it in case of trouble, and are afraid to approach it because most of them have an illegal status. One of them, however, noted that he would approach the Lebanese General Security only because “[...]it is the only organization that can help you if you are in danger; so why not trust it? It is true they had come and raided us twice, but it has become routine.”<sup>8</sup>

Furthermore, the interviewees' perceptions toward the Lebanese people varied from one person to another, with many of them saying that some Lebanese are kind and generous and others are not. When asked if the Lebanese people are helpful, one of the interviewees said the following:

*“You know, they might help. I had a son that passed away. He was 25 years old. They (the Lebanese neighbors) did not leave me in need for anything. There are a few friends, some people in our community that I feel I could talk to. You could knock on their door. If they find out that you are in need they will come to your aid, especially in dire situations, situations of death.”<sup>9</sup>*

<sup>7</sup> Abu Iyad. Interview by Rami Mehio, al-Qusayr camp, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Abu Ziad. Interview by Rami Mehio, Akkar, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

<sup>9</sup> Abu Iyad. Interview by Rami Mehio, al-Qusayr camp, Lebanon, May-October 2018.



## International NGOs

When asked if he feels welcome in Lebanon and whether the international community has understood the Syrians' situation, one interviewee said the following:

*“Governmentally, we do not feel welcome; but as a community there are many people who are extremely inviting. Of course, there were people that were terrible, but in general the Lebanese people have been great. The international community understands our situation but does not help. Nobody is with us. We believe them sometimes when they say things in the media like they care. It is all lies. It is all agreements under the table. It has made us hate ourselves.”<sup>10</sup>*

The overarching sentiment toward the UN, international organizations, and the international community is generally negative. Only one interviewee expressed gratitude towards the Norwegian and Danish Refugee Councils as well as the Italian government that granted

him asylum. However, this remains an individual and separate case. Most interlocutors feel misunderstood and taken advantage of while some have mixed feelings about being displaced in Lebanon. One interviewee summarizes the latter in the following quote:

*“NGOs have failed in attending to the needs of Syrian refugees due to the large number of refugees and the complicated political situation in Lebanon. Therefore, the government's and NGOs' services are obviously insufficient. Still, Lebanon is the best host country among European and Gulf countries that took in refugees because others refused to take responsibility and left Lebanon alone. In Akkar, I feel welcome to the extent that if I run for elections I would be elected. But in Lebanon in general I do not feel welcome. The Lebanese have a terrible prejudice toward Syrians as a result of the stereotype they acquired from the Syrian regime's past occupation of Lebanon. But my experience in general has been excellent despite some difficult challenges to get my residency.”<sup>11</sup>*

<sup>10</sup> Abu Ziad. Interview by Rami Mehio, Akkar, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

<sup>11</sup> Sheikh Abdullah. Interview by Rami Mehio, al-Qusayr camp, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

**Securing Livelihoods: The Role of Community Networks**  
At al-Qusayr camp and al-Ihsan center, the interviewees pride themselves on the fact that they have created their own work opportunities. They claim that most of the men that came from al-Qusayr work in construction, carpentry and such handyman jobs, in addition to agriculture.

All interviewees agreed that Syrian and Lebanese contacts are key in the first phase of arrival since they help the newly arrived communities in settling. In the later phases these contacts become key actors in securing livelihoods and finding jobs for the displaced families. Many of the interviewed communities told us that they arrived in Lebanon with barely any money. For instance, one of the

interviewees received help from the owners of his sister's house; they helped him pay the first month's rent until he could settle with his family and find their own way. Despite that, the same person mentions that when such is provided, it sometimes comes at a cost. In his case, there was a lot of abuse where he, along with his sons, would work for ten days for less than USD \$100. *"People would cheat you. Not just Lebanese people, even Syrians were cheating us,"* he complained.<sup>12</sup>

Another interviewee, who now works for a Kuwaiti organization that had set up schools to teach Syrians, complained about how hard it is for Syrians to find jobs within the limited options they have in Lebanon:

*"I work there for USD \$300 a month—an amount that does not alleviate hunger. It is not even enough to pay rent. There are no real job opportunities. They are not giving me what is fair. Am I worth USD \$300? I have 30 years of experience. In the lowest of positions, I occupied in Syria I made USD \$650. Here in Lebanon, USD \$300 is not enough to buy bread and cigarettes."*<sup>13</sup>

The same interviewee also mentioned that the way he secured the job was through his acquaintances from his village who had arrived in Lebanon before he did. They helped him find a job at a construction site because

it is difficult for most Syrians to work in their field of specialty in Lebanon. Back in Syria, he used to work as a government employee.

*"You have to be from a certain professional background to look for jobs, or to have connections. You need to be a carpenter, or someone who works with concrete, polish, or paint, or any sort of labor work like that. Considering my job back home, I never thought about learning anything like that."*<sup>14</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Abu Ziad. Interview by Rami Mehio, Akkar, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Abu Ahmad. Interview by Rami Mehio, Akkar, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

<sup>14</sup> Abu Ahmad. Interview by Rami Mehio, Akkar, Lebanon, May-October 2018.

## *The Specificity of al-Qusayr Camp*

The general observation is that the residents of the camp that came from al-Qusayr have high morale, feel productive and efficient, and enjoy a network of family, relatives, friends, as well as Lebanese and Syrian neighbors. The people these interviewees were living with at the time of the interview were the same ones as those they came with from Syria. As such, they had replicated entire villages and configurations in displacement. This network was relatively large and had been receiving media attention in the past years due to its specific governance structure; a governance committee that ensures the basic needs of these individuals are met.

On the other side of the story, some interviewees who resided in Akkar during the time of the interview in camps such as al-Ihsan camp, such as two female interlocutors, had contrasting viewpoints than those residing in the Qusayr Camp. The interviewed women people came from rural Hama and Idlib and expressed much less satisfaction with their lives in Lebanon. The dissatisfaction and desperation of the other interviewees, three widows and one man, could be attributed to the several factors they mentioned during the fieldwork, namely having a small circle of people around them, family deaths and separation, and low incomes. One widow, for instance, described her life as 'extremely difficult' and 'unbearable'. She said that she lost her husband who was martyred in Syria, and that she was obliged to leave Idlib because of the escalation of the war and her worries about the lives of her eight children. This woman had left her parents behind and came with her brother-in-law, who later on left the family and went back to Syria. Her journey was difficult because prior to the war, she had never left her house, or worked –she hadn't even taken a walk on the street. However, after her displacement, she realized that she would not be able to feed her children if she did not work, so she secured a job in agriculture. She is only surrounded by her children, never having been in touch with or received help from any governmental or non-governmental organization, except for the UN food voucher, and occasional aid from a contact from al-Qusayr camp that helped in case of emergencies.

The support network of the latter interviewees has shown to be inconsistent and unreliable. Also, these interviewees must continually seek jobs to buy food, as there is no one to help them. They are also constantly burdened by rent issues. One widow said that she had trouble with the owner of the land where she had her tent and had to move out due to her inability to pay the accumulated rent fees.

These cases are remarkably different than those of the community of al-Qusayr camp. This shows the extent of the importance of support networks and community leaders in providing basic services, securing jobs and resolving conflicts. They also show how living in a community with family and friends whom they have known from before helps create a feeling of solidarity, positivity, and mitigation of the harsh conditions of the life of displacement.

## *Future Hopes and Fears*

All the interlocutors interviewed for this study expressed their desire to stay in Lebanon as opposed to leaving to a "Western" country; they would only want to go back to Syria when the opportunity arises and when it is safe. One man said that he stays in Akkar because it is close to al-Qusayr so he can leave easily and quickly when the return is deemed safe. Although some interviewees had been accepted for asylum in Western countries, they preferred to stay in Lebanon because they were either unable to take their family members with them or due to the stark differences in these cultures. One interviewee expresses this metaphorically, saying that he would "feel like a fish that has been taken out of the sea." Therefore, this shows how important family ties and support networks are for Syrians, particularly those who had come from al-Qusayr, Hama, and Idlib. Despite the instability and uncertainty faced by these interviewees, they all expressed unwavering faith of returning to Syria. One person expressed this by asserting that they would leave "in the blink of an eye if it [Syria] is safe."

During the time of the interviews, the Lebanese media coverage of the return of Syrian refugees had negative consequences on the displaced Syrian communities, making them feel even more insecure and unstable. When they heard that a decision was taken that Syrian refugees should leave, fear and panic spread among the communities. In 2018, the Lebanese government had set the issue of refugee return as a main priority on its political agenda, despite reports by human rights groups that those returning would face arbitrary detention and torture by the regime (Khodr 2019).

Yet, knowing that the culture of displaced communities relies on leadership, family ties and social solidarity, it is expected that the decision to return will be taken on a high level among them and that the return would happen collectively. Most of the interviewees said that they have not yet seriously thought about returning. However, they might have been too reserved to express concerns such

as whether or not their houses still stand, who occupied their houses and lands after Hezbollah and the regime took over, or whether they will face difficulties with the regime given that their areas were once rebel hotspots.

## Conclusion

The experience of al-Qusayr camp and its al-Ihsan center in Sahel Minyara is worth further exploration from social, economic, anthropological, and political angles, considering that it remains as one of the few camps in Lebanon that has managed to become self-reliant. This specific issue is what poses a challenge for the UNHCR that seeks to promote self-reliance among displaced communities (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018, 1459); only a few communities are able to do it successfully, and few individuals benefit from it, since it relies on factors such as the city or town of origin, contacts, networks and family ties. This is evident in the cases of the interviewees who did not enjoy living in a community such as al-Qusayr camp community and who struggled to meet basic services and to make ends meet. Amid the exit of international NGOs, inadequacy of UN assistance and political bickering over the status of displaced Syrians in Lebanon, there is a tendency to promote self-reliance strategies. In the case of al-Qusayr camp and other communities, displaced Syrians were forced into self-reliance. Even more, existing literature largely ignores the unsuccessful historical record of international assistance to foster refugees' self-reliance and fails to discuss its problematic linkages to neo-liberalism and the notion of 'dependency', where practices of self-reliance are largely shaped by the priorities of international donors that aim to create cost-effective exit strategies from long-term refugee populations (Easton-Calabria and Omata 2018, 1458). The promotion of self-reliance can result in unintended and undesirable consequences for refugees' well-being and protection.

As a matter of fact, some would argue that the current situation of refugee aid in Lebanon is a de facto self-reliant situation that is questionably intentional, so as not to make the displaced Syrians 'too comfortable' in Lebanon. This de facto situation has proven to be flawed, lacking and dangerous for the Syrians and Lebanese alike. It is thus essential that the issue of Syrians' return is resolved on the political level because it leaves a lot of displaced Syrians in a more desperate situation when it comes to their livelihood, and economic and mental states. The risk is evident in other ways, as many Syrians who are irregular residents become more frantic and aggrieved, potentially resorting to lawlessness as they feel like they

have nothing to lose. As such, it is equally important to promote a healthy relationship between the Lebanese and Syrian communities and the local governance structures of both of these communities, for the latter to have emergency contacts and reliable networks.

Many communities lack this type of support and are left in an inhumane situation that goes against all human rights. One interviewee told us that at the end of the day, he can only rely on God to help him.

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# Homes of the Past, Present, and Future: Tracing Routes of Syrian Displacement in Ghazze

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## Summary

This case study explores the housing situation of Syrian displaced communities and the conditions of formal and informal access to services. The article also explores the informal support received from Lebanese locals and other stakeholders, through a rooted, bottom-up methodology based on the input of the interviewees. The approach used assesses the elements that make up a home, including memories, trauma, basic services and household members. The case study captures the different aspects of living spaces and their effects on Syrian communities and their adaptivity (or lack thereof) to these spaces accordingly. Moreover, the article focuses on the issue of accessibility to spaces for different kinds of people. The study aims to show the informal ways through which displaced Syrian communities support themselves materially in terms of housing provisions, and the extent to which these communities' histories affect their housing situations as well. The article argues that in order to best comprehend the Syrian displaced communities' current housing reality, it is important to understand all the intertwined ways in which their realities are shaped by their past, present and future.

## Introduction

Research and analysis point to the many long-standing political, economic and environmental problems that pushed Syria towards war and instability. Between 2006 and 2010, Syria experienced the worst drought in the country's modern history (Gleick 2014, 334). Consequently, hundreds of thousands of farming families fell into poverty, causing a mass migration of rural people to urban shantytowns. It was in the impoverished drought-stricken rural province of Darīā, in southern Syria, that the first major protests occurred in March 2011. Millions of Syrian people were forced to leave the country to neighboring countries, as well as all over the world, as a result of the ensuing war. It is these families that face the harshest living and social conditions in urban Lebanon. In the best-case scenario, where many displaced Syrian communities

relocated to the rural areas of Lebanon, they still struggled to make a decent living. In this case study, the Syrians that sought refuge in Lebanon are referred to as Syrian displaced communities.

Within the term "Syrian displaced communities," there is so much to unpack. As these communities move from one area to another, they carry with them their memories, trauma, and histories. The new homes that they form on foreign lands are spaces that hold these histories. These homes are arguably the most crucial aspect of coping with their displacement, as a home would offer security from the harsh reality that they face. In this situation, histories are considered informal methods that these communities resort to in order to replicate their living experience in their home towns, hence giving them a connective safety net. Throughout this study, it was important to understand the individual histories of the people being interviewed, in addition to the qualitative information of their housing situations, in order to better understand both their conditions and the ways in which they need and receive support. Gloria Anzaldúa portrays space as neither a physical nor a constant location (Anzaldúa 2012); her definition contributes to this study in terms of tracing routes, basic methods of living and coping, and how routes for the future are created by temporary/permanent housing situations. Therefore, based on the assumption that Syrian displaced communities did not simply travel to a new place and receive shelter and aid, but, in fact, brought with them their histories across the border, the study explores how they recreate their concepts of home based on their pasts, how they adjust to their new homes, and the extent and quality of the basic services they receive, with a focus on the West Bekaa town of Ghazze.

Additionally, and in order to fully understand the extent to which these communities receive formal and informal aid –and how far that aid goes –it is crucial to collect their stories and observe their current ways of life. This includes the extent to which Syrian displaced communities receive aid or whether they fully rely on

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their own resources to create 'livable' housing conditions. The elements considered to make a housing situation 'livable' for the sake of this study are: availability of basic amenities that make up a functional household, affordability and safety. Based on these standards, the study explores the housing situation and to what extent it is 'livable,' taking into consideration the two dimensions of their displacement: mental displacement (memories, trauma, etc.) and physical displacement in relation to the material aspect for maintaining these homes.

## Methodology

The study investigates the different types of Syrians' housing arrangements, looking at tented settlements as well as apartment complexes in the town of Ghazze. Based on twelve field interviews conducted during the summer of 2018 in Ghazze, this study complements the literature and debates on displaced Syrians' housing by focusing on accessibility to housing complexes, the exploitation that occurs through high rent, and the adequacy of these spaces in terms of basic amenities. The twelve interviewees originated from Al-Zabadani, Homs, Ghouta and Rural Damascus. Their age range varied between two generations, and often parents (40-50 years old) and their children (16-30 years old) were interviewed together.

It is important to reveal the possible biases that might have stemmed out of this case study by pointing out that the field researcher interviewed some people who had rented their spaces from her uncle, and the interviewees were well-aware of that. This may have affected the dynamics of the conversations held and the content of responses received from the interviewees.

## Mental Displacement

The start of the journey begins upon leaving one's home, when the situation becomes too dangerous to stay. The journey continues as the individual travels and finds a new spot to build a life based on insecure foundations. Along with the few material belongings they manage to carry along, if any, they carry their notions of what home once was.

All the interviewees tended to romanticize their previous lives and homes in Syria. They complained about their current housing situation and overall displacement in terms of inadequate housing conditions, shortage of aid, governmental restrictions, lack of job opportunities, nostalgia, and at some instances from being mistreated by host communities and their employer or sponsor. Although a few of the interviewees said they did not have a problem with the Lebanese host communities, most of them stated that they were well aware that they are unwelcome and that the Lebanese have grievances and prejudices against them. Herein, it is important to explore the emotional and affective dimension of the displacement-emplacement continuum within transnational migration and hint to the need to consider perceptions of time and space in people's lived experience (Moghaddari 2018).

Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its 1967 Protocol. It also lacks any meaningful legislation on asylum issues (Janmyr and Mourad 2018, 19). Because of the uncertainty that is brought about by the Lebanese government's obscure and divided stance on displaced Syrians in Lebanon, the latter are neither encouraged nor expected to integrate in the Lebanese society. On the contrary, most of the interviewees complained about mistreatment and prejudice from the Lebanese people and government alike. Thus, the interviewees cannot even seek emplacement, what Bjarnesen and Vigh define as the striving to be "positively located in a relational landscape" (Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016, 10). The interviewed Syrians lack the social, financial and economic tools, and some of them even lack the legitimacy to be on Lebanese territory; some of the interviewees noted that they were in Lebanon illegally, crossing into the country with certain groups or via other illegal means. Others mentioned instances of being arrested by the police for having expired residencies.

A young man asserted that his dream is to continue his education, but he is discouraged by other Syrians' educational experience in Lebanon. He explained the experience of his sister who wanted to start attending a school in Lebanon but was rejected based on allegedly unjust premises. He said the following:

*"My sister is now wasting her life without any sort of education. They gave her a really hard time while registering for school; she kept repeating entrance exams for three years despite passing them. In the end,*



*we figured it would be best to just keep her at home. This school is in Hammara and the principal is very mean to her. Everyone else got into the school except for her. Even though she passed the third test, the principal suspended her and literally threw her out into the streets”.*<sup>3</sup>

Another woman said that her family has been in more than one situation where people would come up and say things like: *“You Syrians should go back to where you came from”*.<sup>4</sup> She added that, sometimes, when one of her kids crosses the street when a car comes up, the driver would shout things like that to their face.

If emplacement implies “a conceptual move away from place as location toward place as a process of socio-affective attachment,” (Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016, 13) or “a vast, intricate complexity of social processes and social interactions at all scales from the local to the global” (Massey 1994, 115), then most Syrians in Lebanon lack emplacement and even the means to reach emplacement. This leaves them in a state of confinement, as they can neither belong to the new land nor return to their homeland (The World Bank 2019, 11).

Most of the interviewees also fear conscription in Syria, political persecution or homelessness. The struggle for emplacement is indicative of the structural vulnerability that potentially enacts displacement (Bjarnesen and Vigh 2016, 13).

One might also add to the elements of ‘livable housing’ situation the element of separation from family members and loved ones. This has been excessively emphasized by the interviewees who talked about their separation from loved ones, as well as from their relatives who had sought refuge in other countries or remained in Syria. Others have not seen any of their family members since they came to Lebanon more than four years ago. For instance, one disclosed that most of her family members are still in Ghouta, but that the rest are scattered all over the world, such as in Jordan and Turkey. She stated the following:

*“We have not gone back to Syria for a visit since we came here. I haven’t seen my parents in three years because of the situation at the borders. I owe them USD 600, and if I were to cross the border, I would not be able to re-enter Lebanon. What would happen to my girls? I am here illegally, and with every passing year, I owe the government USD 200”.*<sup>5</sup>

Another female interviewee tried to replicate her garden house in Syria by growing a garden outside her house; yet, she said that their current house would not be considered as home because of her separation from her parents due to legal restrictions. Similarly, another

interviewee stated that *“[being in] Lebanon is in no way comparable with [being in] Syria,”* because, back there, she was *“living amongst her relatives which made it a much better life. When you are in your home country, you never want the days or nights to ever end”.*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>3</sup> Ahmad. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> Fatin. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>5</sup> Raneem. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Sumayya. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

The interviewees stressed that they did not receive any help from any local or international agencies to be reunited with their families. One home maker was hoping that the United Nations Higher Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) would arrange for a unification with her family. She said she would love to go to Germany to live with her daughter and husband, but she does

not know how to travel there. She also stated that she had never received any clear information from anyone regarding this matter.

A young man from Zabadani also complained from the harsh living conditions in Lebanon due to several factors, including family separation:

*“I came here illegally [...]. I was wounded from a missile that landed on our house. I came [to Lebanon] by myself, then two years later, some of my family members followed. At first, they could not come because of the siege of our area. I went to UNHCR and created a file to ask to travel and treat my leg, but I did not receive any kind of aid. I still have a sister in Syria who is married there so she stayed, but my father has been missing for 6 years now. One day, he just got up, left the house and never came back. We have no news about his whereabouts at all since then. He got into a car and, two years, later I saw that same car working for the government. I am not comfortable at all here”.*<sup>7</sup>

In addition to the emotional toll, there is also the financial toll that displaced Syrians suffer from as a result of separation from family members. A young Syrian from Homs said that he left school when he was in eighth grade upon the onset of the crisis. He said that coming to Lebanon prevented him from continuing his education because he needed to start working to sustain his family financially. His mother is still in Homs and his father had suffered from a brain clot, so he could not leave for

Lebanon with the rest of the family because treatment in Lebanon is much more expensive than in Syria. Although his grandmother and uncle are still in Syria, he had to work –along with his younger siblings –in gardening for other people to sustain their lives. His siblings also dropped out of school to help make a living for a family that is left without the head of the household. He, along with his uncle, also sends money to his parents living in Syria. He desolately explained his situation:

*“The hardest thing about coming here is that everyone I know is now [living] in different places. Some are in Europe, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon...everyone is away. We used to all live right next to each other. I’m in Lebanon illegally and they would force me to join the [Syrian] army if they catch me”.*<sup>8</sup>

<sup>7</sup> Saeed. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ahmad. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

Some of the interviewees stated that they are doing much better than other displaced Syrians in Ghazze and in Lebanon. One of them summed it up:

*“We are happy here, but whoever tells you that they are as happy here as they were in Syria is lying. You cannot be perfectly happy without your family and friends and [by being away from] the place you have grown in”.<sup>9</sup>*

### *Physical and Material Displacement*

The emotional and mental displacement that the displaced Syrians feel is further exacerbated by the material and physical displacement they encounter at their current inhabitation. Not only are they physically displaced from one country to the other, but they also encounter disconnection from their current living places, environments, hosting countries and communities due to several factors. Key in this disconnection is the poor housing situation combined with expensive housing rental rates. In the following section, the study delves into the housing and service provision situation, the challenge of rent costs and the little to no help that displaced Syrians receive from the government, UN agencies and host communities. These factors, in addition to the above-mentioned mental displacement, lead us to an assessment of whether the housing situation for displaced Syrians is considered ‘livable’ or not.

### Housing, Service Provision and Available Resources

The interviewees asserted that they were receiving little to no aid when it came to housing, neither from the Lebanese nor from UN agencies and other NGOs. Some said that, despite being registered with the UNHCR, they do not receive aid, or they had stopped receiving it, having been removed from the aid program without explanation. They asserted that in the past, some of them had received aid from the UNHCR in the form of diesel fuel in the winter for instance, but recently they have been depending only on the little financial and material resources at their disposal to create livable housing conditions. Many of them also had to move several houses in the past few years and recent months, moving between attics, garages and wedding parlors to be able to find suitable and affordable houses. One interviewee claimed that they received some help from people with their furniture, among other things. She described one of the houses she once lived in:

*“It was like a tomb with no windows or any sort of view. My husband kept looking for another place. We are still new to the house. In the previous house, we owned nothing but four mattresses on the ground. Some people helped us with the furniture for this house. When we managed to get a bit of extra money, we got a couch. But that was never our priority. One would go hungry just to provide school tuition money for their kids”.<sup>10</sup>*

<sup>9</sup> Mariam. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>10</sup> Raneem. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

Displaced Syrians also share housing spaces with their extended families because of their limited financial resources. One female interviewee lives in a house that comprises two rooms and one salon, along with her husband, son, mother and mother-in-law. Another woman stated that when they first moved into their rented house, there was no bathroom or plumbing system. Her husband applied to get electricity with the family's money. He even built the water pipes himself. The family said they did not receive any help from the house owner, even when it came to the most basic services. The woman added that upon arriving, the place was filled with rats and snow. For six months, while still trying to figure everything out, they had to ask the neighbors for water. The house, more accurately called a room, was originally built to house a generator.

One interviewee, who arrived in Lebanon in 2012, asserted that the house they rented *“was in an uninhabitable state; there was no door, windows, or electricity”*.<sup>11</sup> The interviewee and her husband fixed everything and bought furniture with their own money and with no assistance from anyone at all. Although she mentioned that they are in a much better housing and financial situation than other displaced Syrians, she exhibited some concerns on the isolated location of the house located in a meadow field. She said that she found it difficult to deal with the snakes and bugs around the house. The family also did not own a car, as they could barely come up with rent money. Their only means of

transportation was their son's small bike.

One female interviewee fervently decried her housing and general situation in Ghazze. When interviewed, she had been in Lebanon for five years after her house in Syria was bombed. She insisted that she had never received help from anyone although many people had come to speak with them before, but *“not even one piece of meat was ever offered to them when they went hungry”*.<sup>12</sup> The only kind of aid they had received from organizations was boxes of lentils, salt, and flour, which they received every four months. The interviewee stated that sometimes, their neighbors help them with food. This interviewee had lost her sight and both her children were sick, while the family lacked the financial means to treat them. In addition, she complained how expensive food, water, and medicine are in Lebanon, as her family could not afford to eat or buy medication. To add to all of this, nine other people were living in the house at the time of the interviews. She stressed that calling their place a “house” is an overstatement for what they lived in, because they basically lived in a kitchen where every member slept on its floor. In the winter, to stay warm, they had to burn shoes and plastic.

On the other hand, another male interviewee told us how he secures his family's livelihood and services differently. He said that a Lebanese person from Ghazze helped them by giving them a piece of land for free to build their tent. He also said that they got their water supply, logs, blankets and plumbing services from a local organization:

***“Every month, they come and clean out the hole. Every now and then we get things like oil and sugar. Our huge relief is that we save money on rent. For five years now, we have never paid rent. We do not really think of moving. We are safe, calm, comfortable, and doing okay”***.<sup>13</sup>

### Rent Costs as the Heaviest Burden

All the interviewees complained about the high cost of rent, and those who were offered a piece of land for free expressed the most satisfaction and comfort compared to all the other interviewees. One interviewee claimed:

<sup>11</sup> Fatin. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>12</sup> Sumayya. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmad. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

*“We live in an apartment complex. Rent is way too expensive; it is USD 250/month excluding electricity bills and such. The house was empty when we moved in; then, an organization from Denmark gave us some mattresses when we first came, and we still use them. We are not registered with the UNHCR anymore. We receive clothes from [one] organization”.*<sup>14</sup>

The monthly cost of rent among the interviewees ranged between 200,000 L.L and 500,000 L.L., depending on the size of the space and excluding utility bills such as electricity and water. This cost weighs heavily on them, as they stated that all of their income from work goes to rent.

For instance, one female interviewee said that her vegetable business barely generates enough money for her family to get by. At the time of the interview, they paid USD 100 per month for housing rent, and USD 300 per year for land lease where the business is. They also paid USD 1,400 per year for renting the water well. The only kind of aid that they received was through their UNHCR food card. Hence, the family developed a coping system: they would gather rent money first and then consider other expenses.

The main issue that the interviewees shared is that when they first came to Lebanon, they brought nothing with them. Some either did not know that they were going to be there for years, thinking it was a temporary situation, or fled hastily under severely dangerous circumstances.

One woman even complained that the work of her daughter cleaning other people’s houses was not enough to cover rent costs, and that the cleaning business is now taken over by women of other nationalities. She said that her daughter could not get health tests done because she always must choose between health and rent, *“and rent is always more important”*.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, one male interviewee complained:

*“I am not comfortable here at all. All my income goes to rent. I have no money left at the end of the month. With the best paying job that I could find, and I get paid exactly 500,000 L.L. which covers the rent. The apartment we are renting is just a normal place with two bedrooms, a kitchen, and a bathroom. Sometimes, in the winter when I used to go to Beirut for work, I would sleep at the warehouse under the rain and in the cold because I would have stayed at work too late in the night and could not come back to Ghazze because there would be no means of transportation anymore”.*<sup>16</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Fouad. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>15</sup> Sumayya. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>16</sup> Saeed. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

This situation is especially hard for the interviewees in comparison with their previous lives in Syria, which was not exceptionally extravagant, but was dignified and self-sufficient: *“In Syria, we would plant the food we needed to eat. Here, we cannot do that. The Lebanese people are cruel when it comes to money”*.<sup>17</sup>

### Life Then vs. Now

The displaced Syrians clearly demonstrate anguish because of mental displacement and trauma from physical displacement. They are also left disassociated from their current houses as they lack ownership and are

always made unwelcome either by the landlords or the Lebanese in their surroundings.

The interviewees spoke both woefully and with pride about their houses and lives in Syria, particularly due to their current situations. One interviewee described her *“big, beautiful, vintage-style with a rooftop and a garden”* house back home, which is now in ruins.<sup>18</sup> One coping mechanism adapted by interviewees was the use of past memory. By resorting to beautiful memories and attempts of replicating them in Lebanon as a form of consolation for their loss. Rania reminisced on her memories, saying:

*“On special occasions, I would buy the children gifts. I would throw parties on occasions such as Eid. In Ramadan, I would donate money to those in need. Once I moved to Lebanon, I was not able to completely quit those habits, though. I still throw a small party on Eid, but it is nothing like before. I am also unable to buy any sorts of gifts anymore”*.<sup>19</sup>

Another family used to own a butchery in Syria that made them a decent living, as they declared that their business was very good. After arriving to Lebanon,, they noted that

replicating or recreating their lives in Syria had come at a heavy cost:

*“It was a life a million percent different from our life here, and that is why we chose to live in an apartment rather than a garage or a tent despite the extra cost; we are just not used to living any other way”*.<sup>20</sup>

Their current situation triggers nostalgia and utopian longing to their lives and homes in Syria. In this regard, one interviewee said:

<sup>17</sup> Sumayya. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>18</sup> Nadia and Mariam. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>19</sup> Rania. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

<sup>20</sup> Saeed. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.



*“In Syria, we were so caught up in what seems now to be vain and silly trifles. We would want the best ceramic tiles and decorations for the house. We would get into silly competitions with neighbors on who can put the most money into their house. And then, a short while after, we all landed on the same [United Nations] UN mattresses”.<sup>21</sup>*

Nevertheless, many Syrian communities remain in a survival state of mind and try to create ‘livable housing conditions’ in displacement. One interviewee managed to build a door for their house to enhance their housing conditions, while another created a garden with lights to commemorate her previous home. Other interviewees, however, lacked the means to compensate the losses and create livable conditions because what was missing for them was beyond materialistic; their houses were missing family members that would have turned their housing places into actual homes.

## Conclusion

This case study has shown how housing is for the most part an intense struggle for many displaced Syrians, as well as an incomplete project that they must work on independently from the state or host communities. Pricing makes housing inaccessible to many, and even when housing is provided on free land, many issues arise. Yet, the most significant forms of aid that came up in interviews were those provided from locals in town. For all the interviewed persons, the informal aid that they received, whether it was food, clothes, or furniture, proved to be more helpful than any kind of formal aid such as the UNHCR food vouchers. Indeed, a systemic change is still needed, even now as the crisis enters its 9th year. With complaints written against them, abuse from the state, the feelings of being unwelcome, and with the current deteriorating economic, political and social situation in Lebanon, displaced Syrians continue to suffer from mental and material displacement and there are no emplacement measures on the horizon. At this point, even many Lebanese people might start to feel emplaced due to the conditions of the country. If officials do not reach a solution regarding the return of Syrians or the situation of Syrians in Lebanon, displaced communities will continue to face poverty, exploitation

and overall deteriorating conditions. It is expected that if the regional powers do not reach a solution, Syrians in Lebanon will continue to suffer from rent prices and low wages.

This case study has shown that informal housing services proved to be the “least worst” option guaranteeing the closest situation to a ‘livable’ housing condition. The results have shown that, in the most part, the housing conditions of the interviewed displaced communities proved to ‘unlivable,’ due to the different reasons that have been discussed; separation of family members, living in kitchens, living in a place where they are constantly reminded that they are unwelcome, and an imposed inferior status from landlords, host communities, and state officials.

Against this background, the housing dilemma of displaced Syrians should be addressed on three levels: i. the national governmental level where the status of displaced Syrians should be seriously and thoroughly discussed to be able to make informed policies about aid provision and their return status; ii. the local governmental level where municipalities and local governmental agencies should engage with displaced communities to be informed about the services they need; and iii. the rent and pricing situation – which also necessitates the creation of a standard renting scale for different areas. There also needs to be close communication with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) working in refugee aid in order to make informed decisions regarding policies pertaining to the housing situation, rent and seasonal requirements. Furthermore, at the community level, bridges should be built between host communities and displaced communities with the goal of building empathy and promoting knowledge-sharing on the economic and social needs of both peoples.

<sup>21</sup> Rania. Interview by Salwa Mansour, Ghazze, May-July, 2018.

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