

# perspectives

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POLITICAL ANALYSES AND COMMENTARY

## Middle East & North Africa



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# Editorial

Arsaal, North Lebanon. Lots of Syrian refugees stay in this northern village close to the Syrian border



Sadly, the Middle East has witnessed some of the largest mass displacements of people worldwide over the past decade. As it currently stands, millions of Syrians are fleeing their homes, moving within the country and sometimes far outside of it. Not surprisingly, neighboring states have absorbed most of these people and have managed well under the circumstances. However, the question of how to deal with the waves of those who have lost everything and might not be able to go back in the near future is a huge challenge for the refugees and for host communities, especially since there is no settlement on the horizon.

Naela Mansour traces stories of displacement within Syria. While for most refugees, exile is a dire prospect, Dima Wannous elaborates on how, for some Syrian artists, their flight to Beirut gave them a space to breathe. We are also featuring a part of Marta Bogdanska's project "Exilium." The photographer asks refugees about one item in their possession and traces how a trivial lighter, a photo, a table cloth all of a sudden assumes a different meaning in their life.

There are stories of multiple displacements as well. After the Iraq War in 2003, more than one million Iraqi refugees came to Syria and are now stuck, as Kelsey Lundgren shows, with a home that has vanished long ago and an uncertain future in their refuge home. Palestinians, who were more privileged as refugees in Syria than in any other Arab country, face the problem of where to go from here. Mitwali Abu Nasser travelled to Palestinian camps in Lebanon to assess their situation directly.

Areej Abuqudairi looks at how the internal economics of the Za'atari refugee camp in Jordan has developed after it became infamous as a result of the tough weather

conditions, floods and three children who froze to death. Nejat Taştan explains how the *de jure* and *de facto* situation of refugees and their host communities works in Turkey. As for Lebanon, Rayan Majed traces the refugee experience in a country that has received the largest number of displaced persons and is the only country to still keep its borders open. Pierre Abi Saab reviews the film "Not Who We Are" by Lebanese documentary filmmaker Carol Mansour – a production made in cooperation with hbs.

In a reportage, Ryme Katkhouda looks into the impact of Syrian refugees on Lebanese society and its economy. Since the situation particularly affects children, Emma Gatten explores what exile means for Syrian children in terms of schooling and finding something akin to home.

Finally, Haid Haid explains how "protection" has become the legal and ethical cover for ignoring the personal and sexual rights of female Syrian refugees in neighboring countries. In her article on early and often not formally registered marriages of Syrian refugees in Jordan Areej Abuqudairi shares her insights on the legal vulnerability of women and families in the context of exile.

Of course, the many different facets of this topic make it nearly impossible to cover them all in only one issue of a magazine. Still, it is our hope that we can at least shed some light on several key aspects of the Syrian refugee crisis through voices that are on the ground, living the tragedy.

We will also continue the discussion online at our website, which you are encouraged to visit: [www.lb.boell.org](http://www.lb.boell.org)

Bente Scheller, René Wildangel & Joachim Paul

# Displacement

Naela Mansour

How might we speak of displacement? A dislocation? A yearning to be settled and the familiar landmarks nowhere to be found? Economic decline and the collapse of the infrastructure that supports family and individual? It is more than all these things. It is a lassitude, an impotence, but also a flaw in how time manifests itself: Having abandoned home one feels that time passes excruciatingly slowly; with the change of environment the slowness of time becomes infinite. The migrant is paralyzed; he loses his sense of initiative. Yet even this is not enough for us to talk of displacement. We bring you here vignettes, of people who have left their lands and emigrated; tales that shape a society called Nowhere, called Suspended, with all its gifts and pains. There is much pain and bitterness here, but sometimes, too, new seeds send green shoots through the ashes, and life goes on.

## Umm Ahmed: "Is the road to al-Dhiyabiya open?"

Umm Ahmed, or Amina, was born in Palestine, in a camp in Tabariya, to parents who had moved there from Safad. She lived there for seven years before she and her family were compelled to relocate once more in 1967. From that journey, Umm Ahmed remembers the voices of the Israeli soldiers as they gave them orders: "Damascus! Damascus!" she remembers, with her siblings and her family being forced to pick fruit from the trees. She also remembers arriving barefoot at the gates of Damascus.

When they reached Damascus they settled in one of the camps for Palestinian refugees that surrounded the capital. As though displacement was her destiny, an ever-present mark on her skin, the young Amina

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married a man from the Syrian Golan Heights, "the immigrants" as they are called in Syrian dialect. She had nine children by this man and was forced to help provide for them, washing down the entrance steps of buildings and cleaning apartments. She then moved with her family from their camp near Adra and after "a lifetime's hardship," arrived in al-Dhiyabiya, one of the neglected and chaotic locations in the South of rural Damascus. But she was delighted with what she had managed to achieve. She had put her nine children through school, with all of them taking their baccalaureate and some going on to university, and with her husband she had built their large (illegal) home: Big enough, as she puts it, for both girls and boys to have the privacy they require. With the

start of the Syrian revolution and the South joining Damascus in mounting demonstrations, and later, armed resistance, Umm Ahmed would voice her deep concern over what was happening where she lived. Many ordinary Syrians had a premonition of what the regime might do if its power and authority were challenged and were well aware that they were more exposed than anybody, more likely to pay the ultimate price, and had absolutely no way to offset this fate. This is why they did not join the revolution openly, but remained silent and scared. Umm Ahmed was protective of her family's modest assets and scared that it might all crumble away like some passing dream.

She remained where she was for a year and a half, beneath a hail of bombs and shells, until Ramadan 2012, when her house lost a wall, its windows and part of the roof. When the army stepped up its operations against al-Dhiyabiya, al-Hajira and Sayyida Zeinab, she was forced to leave for Damascus, with her daughters, where she was joined by her husband and her sons at the house owned by her husband's family. Umm Ahmed says that this early morning journey was even more bitter and more arduous than her trip from Tabariya to Damascus, and that she hoped to die before "the war that was coming," as though war and exile were a seasonal rite that every Levantine must pass through. But the true torment was to come: The quest for new accommodation. Umm Ahmed tried to convince her daughters that they should go to one of the refugee areas that were housed in the Damascus schools, but they refused outright. They had no intention of going through such a degrading experience, especially since they were educated women: "Well-off," with salaries. The search started in the housing developments of Barzeh, then on to Jaramana, then the neighborhood of Harna close to al-Tell, before leading them back to Barzeh. Umm Ahmed could not feel at home anywhere after leaving her house in the South. Every time she would give some plausible excuse in order to leave the place and attempt to go back to her house in al-Dhiyabiya: The water was cut off, the air was too cold and dry, there wasn't enough furniture, the rent was too high. And every time, she would force her nervous and unsettled family to continue searching. Between excuses she would come each morning to the Sayyida Zeinab bus depot and ask the drivers, "Is the road to al-Dhiyabiya open...?" Every day they would insist that there was no way through, and that most of al-Dhiyabiya had been destroyed or pillaged. But she kept trying. Since leaving her home she had not dyed her hair and she claimed that she



Driving to nowhere



had aged twenty years. Many of those who tell the story of their displacement say they have aged dozens of years, and many, too, talk of worry and instability.

### Withdrawal from public life

In terms of daily life, being a migrant, coupled with the soaring prices, means that no one has the time to properly engage in communal activities (or re-engage, assuming such things ever existed in the first place). Displacement involves a withdrawal from public life, a reassembling of the shattered fragments of

*Umm Ahmed, like thousands of others, dreams of nothing now save returning to what remains of her home.*

one's private existence, and one of the most important facets of this hardship is securing rent, a largely impossible exercise within Damascus proper, thereby forcing people out into other, undamaged, suburbs which are by definition some distance from where they live. This means more public transport, more hours spent at checkpoints on their way from A to B, and, by extension, more risk of being victimized on the basis of their identity documents which have been issued in revolutionary-controlled regions. Umm Ahmed gives the example of her son, detained at a checkpoint between Harna and al-Tell because his name resembled that of someone they wanted – this boy, who had never been openly involved in the smallest revolutionary act. She tells how he spent two months in the regime's prisons without her knowing what had

### Surviving

happened to him. She tells how she was forced to beg and borrow to get enough money to help out her imprisoned son and expedite his release. Blackmailing the families of detainees has now become systematic, a source of funding for the machinery of oppression.

Our picture of the situation in Syria would be very inaccurate if we were to imagine that every person who leaves their homes fleeing from war, destruction and death has great dreams and unbreakable hope. Umm Ahmed, like thousands of others, dreams of nothing now save returning to what remains of her home. A life beset by poverty, marginalization and tyranny does not hold a space open for involvement in public life; this only happens in cases of enraged, spontaneous revolt, of the kind we have witnessed in the revolutionary regions. The ongoing destruction has left many of those who have fled their familiar surroundings entirely occupied with quotidian concerns, and with keeping themselves and their loved ones alive without having to resort to vagrancy or suffering the breakdown of their family values.

### Dear Homs

April 2011: The morning of the Clocktower Square massacre in Homs, Nisma got up, tired, but determined to tidy and clean every last centimeter of her house. For months, obsessively, she had been doing the same thing, as if she sought to restore life to her city by setting her private corner of it in order. She felt the gaping void around her was hastening her own end. Nisma is a lady from Homs, a member of the city's bourgeoisie. The family history she has inherited, her memories, are indivisibly entwined with Homs, something she

expresses by saying that she cannot breathe outside the place. At first she would claim that there was no way she could desert Homs, no matter what happened. In late February 2012, after holding out for ten months, and following the siege of Baba Amr, she was forced to abandon her home and move to Damascus. Ever since she has been on a never-ending quest for the landmarks of a life that is now under threat, flipped head over heels. She feels, like other residents of Homs forced to leave their mother city, that she is suspended in mid-air, weightless, and is trying hard, fruitlessly, to understand this strange vegetative state.

Soon after she arrived in Damascus, Nisma was afflicted with a kind of schizophrenia. She could not comprehend how people could wander the streets without the slightest sense of compassion for Homs. How could they go off to restaurants and cafes while her city lay devastated? How could they help lend credibility to the line that, "It's all over and Syria is fine?" How? Nisma could not understand how a nation could become a collection of bubbles, each locked in its own temporal and geographical reality. After a while, she began to realize that people were units within a greater whole and that every unit was far more concerned with private concerns that might threaten one's own integrity, without denying the existence of sympathy and mutual understanding. This, in itself, eases the fear felt by the migrant and allows him or her to assimilate into the laws of his new "whole."

Today, circumstances have brought Nisma to Paris. When she talks about herself she says that her emigration was "super-deluxe." Not only did it not have any impact on her finances, it positively improved her situation. She was not compelled to register as a refugee because she had married a French citizen, a former acquaintance, and had gone to live in an upscale neighborhood in the city's 16th arrondissement. Upscale, perhaps, but nothing to compare to her old life in her "dear Homs."

### Combined and contradictory identities

As military operations in the Damascus hinterland intensified and people moved in their thousands into the city's schools, some emergency aid workers started to complain about the passivity of these newcomers and the fact they would not engage in any constructive, bonding group activities in the schools where they stayed. They also complained that the refugees were prone to

waste resources with no thought for others' needs. If asked, psychologists will tell you that the migrant unconsciously refuses to "join" the new environment, a refusal that combines both bitterness and a hope that he might return to his own home, and sometimes, too, some resentment towards the emergency aid workers, who are yet to lose their homes. A long history of violent injustice drives man to seek out absolute justice, even if it is the justice of devastation and ashes. Some of the activists who recently entered Ghouta Sharqiya to assist people in finding alternative ways to live, inform us that many revolutionaries, even those least directly involved in the war effort, do not care about Damascus or its iconic status in the slightest, nor do they show any interest in devising a military plan that will spare the city destruction, not even its historic treasures and architectural legacy. How can we ask a mother, who has lost her family in some random artillery bombardment, lost her house to a stray rocket, or seen her son tortured to death, to care about the mosaics of the Ummayed Mosque? How?

The schools and refuges offer us a concentrated sample of the social violence that once lurked behind the walls of private homes and burst out to engulf the country. First of all, the refuge is itself a kind of violence, since it reduces the individual's living space to the bare minimum required for privacy. Each person lives out their day-to-day lives under the watchful eyes of others, even though the horrors they have lived through have left them needing to be alone. It is a way of life almost indistinguishable from prison: The most powerful and violent are those who have the greatest access to freedom, privileges, food and so on. Women and children are mistreated by their relatives, as well as individuals from other families. We have heard numerous stories of harassment and assault in refuges. In one refuge, in Barzeh, a man physically assaulted the wife of a man he did not even know, purely because he considered her "insolent."

From another perspective, however, the phenomenon of immigration and refuge centers has forced the "other" Syrian community—the community that for so long looked away and refused to acknowledge what was taking place—to open its eyes and see. At certain points along the lengthy Barniya Street in Rukneddin, a neighborhood comprised of wealthy Damascene families and the upper-middle class, a number of migrants from the South have made their homes, refusing to go to the nearby refuge. Perhaps their plan is to beg along the street, which is thronged with cars all day long, but to passers-by they

seem to say: "Don't you want to look? I won't make it easy for you. I'm going to stay here to remind you and make your life hell with my trash and my kids and the shacks I build!"

One resident of Rukneddin tells us in great detail about something that took place in one of the neighborhood's parks. It is a well-told tale, not at all painful, but it suggests that a new Syrian identity will one day be born out of all this horror, a true identity: Not the dishonest, hypocritical one that generations of Syrians have embraced for decades without demur or honest examination. It runs as follows: A lady from the neighborhood, a regular at the park, is sitting on a bench. One of the migrants who have taken up residence in the park comes over with her daughter and sits down on the same bench. The lady shuffles down to the other end of the bench and hunches her shoulders. The migrant doesn't hesitate. Without any discomfort or sense that she is invading the woman's space, she shifts closer. It has become impossible for any Syrian not to intrude on another, that they might ask together: What is our identity, both old and new?

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From this perspective, displacement throws up large questions and, given the current circumstances, forces a break with certain social taboos. Ayman al-Doumani says that his mother finally left Douma on the Eid al-Adha holiday in 2012. She was forced to live where she could and the accommodation she found was in a mixed-denomination neighborhood, primarily Christian and Druze. At the end of her first week there, Umm Ayman began to go out to the house's garden without wearing the heavy head-coverings she usually wore. Many women have been compelled to provide for their families after losing the main breadwinner. Umm Rua is a woman from Zabadani whose family forced her to marry at a very young age and was unable to complete her studies despite being an excellent student. She got divorced then married again, this time to a man from Daraya, only to find herself on her own, after the August 2012 massacre in Daraya, with three children and not even knowing where her husband is. Her husband's family,

unable to take her and her children in, were cruel to her and her own family did the same. In those terrible days in the winter of 2012, in the most exposed shack in the slums of Rukneddin's Akrad district, without food, heating or income, when she considered killing herself to bring her suffering to an end, simple humanity provided a ray of sunshine in the darkness. Some of her neighbors managed to persuade her to consider other options: A low-level job, re-enrolling her daughters at school, resuming her studies. Today Umm Rua says she will never again make decisions about her life based on the wishes of her family or her husband. Today, she says: "There's no going back. Those days are over!"

Rana is a widow who took on the task of raising her four children following her husband's death. She tells how female migrants from different regions, sects and political backgrounds are working together on a weaving project, where the women make clothes for other migrants in exchange for a modest wage. The work forces the women to live side-by-side and get on with their lives. They are forced to accept one another. Being together in one, often cramped, place (such as a refuge or a family home that has taken in there), has started to generate new mechanisms for coexistence. Those involved might be burdened with bitterness, a sense of injustice and inarticulacy, but through the process, questions inevitably take shape, and from there, concrete formulations of citizenship.

In other cases, where people have been compelled to return to their families, psychological conflicts between different generations and against patriarchal authority have been revived, problems that had been deferred and left unresolved when the children married and moved out of their family homes. When Jamila left her home in Barzeh al-Balad she returned to her family home with her husband and two boys. For months, her father and her would take turns being in the house, in an attempt to avoid bickering over the petty details of daily life. One of the things about marriage, as Jamila explains, is that it severs your bonds with your family and frees you to make personal decisions unaffected by your parents' wishes. Her emigration returned her to that same shuttered environment and to "authority," in the patriarchal sense. The current war in Syria has prompted people to reevaluate their fears. All the traditional fears – of father, or husband, or of upsetting somebody important – have taken on a secondary importance in the face of death's unbridled assault on the living.



*A destroyed house in rural Idlib, 2013*

## Bridges

Between two places, emigration is nowhere. The gulf may be bridged and it may not be. It may be bridged with force of will, a determination to stay alive, a starting over, and it may be bridged with coffins. Months after Umm Ayman left Douma, her husband, who was in his eighties, passed away. He was unable to bear being parted from his home city for long. He had lived a whole, long life there without ever leaving. He died, as if he meant to bring his exile to an end, and asked that he be buried in Douma. His family was unable to accompany him to his final resting place, or hold a wake in his former home, but they did manage to hire a driver to take the body into Douma. On his final journey from Damascus to Douma, Abu Ayman's head was slumped against the car's window. He was a bridge, reconnecting his loved ones who had left Douma to his loved ones trapped within it. They gathered him up and buried him, just as he had wanted.

It remains a fact that the hardest and most painful task of all is building a bridge between home and the world outside. These days, I am still haunted by the memory of the art historian, whom I first met in Beirut and then again, a few years ago, in Damascus. She was giving a series of lectures on the subject of "the bridge: "Wooden bridges, steel bridges, concrete suspension bridges and the most problematic of all, porcelain bridges. This Frenchwoman of Cambodian extraction explained her interest in bridges thus: Her family had escaped the massacres perpetrated by the Khmer Rouge, and walked across the Cambodian border to save their children. The bridge that those children crossed towards another life and land was a bridge made out

of porcelain, fracturing beneath the weight of their feet yet indifferent to its fate: The sole purpose of its existence was to grant these children a future. Is the day in which I, too, will be forced to become a porcelain bridge, near at hand?

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1. Part of the testimony of Nisma, the lady from Homs, was published in Issue 3/4 (Winter 2013) of *Bidayyat* in an article entitled, "The Assassination of the Public Arena."

\*Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

# The Winding Road Between Damascus and Beirut

Dima Wannous



Dima Wannous studied French literature and translation at the University of Damascus in Syria and the Sorbonne in Paris. She worked as an editor and a presenter for the cultural program "City Lights" that was screened on the *Orient* satellite channel and writes cultural and political articles for a number of Lebanese and foreign newspapers. She has also written a book of short stories entitled, *Details*, published by Al-Mada printing house, and a novel entitled *Chair*, published by Dar al-Adaab. She currently oversees the cultural page of the electronic newspaper *Al-Modon*.

In just two hours, you can travel by car from Damascus to Beirut. In regular circumstances, Beirut is closer to Damascus than the Syrian city of Homs. But what about circumstances that require, if one is traveling from the Syrian capital to the Lebanese city center, passing through security checkpoints and being exposed to danger from aerial bombardment, military raids and clashes between the regime and opposition forces?

The road between Damascus and the Lebanese capital, cleaving upwards through the mountains, winding through and ultimately revealing Beirut – its sea, its dense growth of buildings and low sky – has been imprinted in my memory as the road to salvation. I don't think this is my memory alone. The "generation of the revolution" nowadays and the Baath Vanguard (a political organization set up by the totalitarian regime in Syria for children and youth) of yesteryear, carries this exact memory, just as I do.

Life in Beirut, only dozens of kilometers away, was a dream for a whole generation of young writers, painters, actors, directors, and musicians. There are many reasons why Beirut is a tantalizing city for this generation. It resembles them more than Damascus. It resembles their dreams. It understands their projects and respects them, lending the support necessary to realize them. It untangles their differences and beliefs. As opposed to Damascus, where they live on the sidelines, their plans consistently frustrated; where dissent is unacceptable; where one cultural doctrine dominates the land, and those with different beliefs are banished beneath it, to underground prisons.

Disagreement means marginalization, means social, humanitarian and political suffering. The only path to cultural enlightenment is, if possible, the one that

passes through the security checkpoints. Only that winding road to Beirut gives meaning to their existence. Gives them a temporary passport with which they can travel the world. Beirut: Syria's creative border.

After the beginning of the Syrian revolution two and a half years ago, Beirut transformed from a beautiful dream into an inescapable necessity. It is no longer just an option, but basically the only option open before the "generation of the revolution." Even if some don't choose to settle there permanently, using it only as a temporary substitute nation, or as a stepping-stone to Europe or Turkey, Egypt or the Gulf. This generation of dreamers is now forced to come to Beirut, not in leisure as they did before, or seeking deliverance with its culture, as in decades past.

Gemmayze Street, overtaken a few years ago when some of the residents fled the noise and revelry, Hamra street and the alleyways of Downtown (the city center), have all turned into artistic thoroughfares, crammed with showrooms and galleries. It is no coincidence that those galleries only really flourished a year after the Syrian revolution, with the influx of a number of young artists arriving to put on solo or group exhibitions. Most of those galleries were very careful not to delve into the Syrian revolution with any depth as a matter of survival. In the end, politics remains a "dirty" game, as one of the gallery owners puts it. "Interfering in politics is only a form temporary fuss that dissipates quickly," he said, "leaving nothing behind but a distant, useless memory."

The young artists in Beirut were given the opportunity to show their work and earn a living. In exchange, and in ways unknown to them, they also helped change the stereotypical image of the Syrian that many Lebanese have subscribed to over the last

few years; that superior, if not to say outright racist, look by which Syrians were regarded, no matter how cultured or creative they were. Ultimately, a Syrian, to most Lebanese, was nothing more than a construction worker, or a cheap mukhabarat (secret police) agent or a soldier in haggard military uniform.

Syrian artists – from painters to musicians, writers and actors – came and changed all of that. And their presence, despite the grumbling of some Lebanese, came as a shock to many. The Syrian revolution, in a very short time, helped leap over the old relationship with the Other. Those two and a half years returned Syrians to their rightful place as both citizens and human beings. It even helped shore up the Syrian worker. He was no longer just a worker, but a citizen now, in danger of persecution and oppression, murder and destruction. The Lebanese discovered that the Syrians were no better off than they. Just like the Lebanese, they too had lived under the shadow of the Syrian military jackboot. More importantly, they proved themselves to be a mighty and courageous people. The Lebanese had not for a second thought that the Syrians would ever break their silence, exposing themselves to death and inviting it into their lives. According to the stereotype, Syrians were subservient, cowardly, obedient and compliant, construction workers or security apparatus, superficial and single-minded. Brainwashed either in the doctrines of the regime or the opposition: The former inside Damascus, the latter outside Syria.

## Artists born out of the void

The idea is a bit harsh, perhaps. But many of the young Syrian artists were born out of the



What's next?

void. While their parents' generation was busy sinking into despair and counting their losses, this generation was raised alone, in Syrian schools that were more akin to packaging plants. Where, consciously and deliberately – far more insidious than unconsciously – the student's talents were sucked dry, the remaining droplets funneled into the service of one party, one leader (since the Baath party seized power in 1963), and any encouragement given the students related only to this one endeavor. The talented musician was the one who played nationalist songs praising the leader, the singer the one who sang for the leader, the painter the one who painted the leader and the actor the one who represented the state of the people after the "Corrective Revolution" (the one that brought Hafez al-Assad to power in 1970). The writer penned poems or articles about the greatness of Syria in the age of the "immortal" leader. For that generation knew no other leader but Him.

Taking all these circumstances into account, creativity, in its broader meaning, becomes something that requires mediation. For how was this canned, packaged generation able to produce artists whose importance spread far and wide? How did they manage to free themselves from that memory of violence and escape its repugnant legacy? The great surprise is how light the evidence of that memory is in some of their work, as if they had not lived it all. But they did live it. Only they didn't live it in silence. Instead they pushed against that accumulated despair and loneliness to create a parallel universe, a substitute homeland, a temporary passport, all perhaps in attendance of that single moment: The revolution.

In Beirut, it is no longer so easy to distinguish between the two experiences of

Lebanese and Syrian art in general. Syrian plays, showing at Al-Madina, Babel, or Dawwar al-Shams theaters are no longer visiting plays as they once were, but have become regular features of the theatrical landscape. Beirut now embraces the experiences of Syrians to perhaps the same extent as it does the Lebanese experiences. And the annoyances encountered by some Syrian artists are no worse than those encountered by some Lebanese. There is a competition. They share a citizenship, if not a nation, even if Lebanon is only considered a temporary homeland until the situation calms down in Syria.

Things are much the same in the world of music: Rap groups, for example, now have Syrians laying down rhymes side-by-side with Lebanese. The musicians' nationalities are no longer of any importance. They look like one another and carry the same concerns; they share the same dreams and the same despair of a generation divided between two countries at once. They speak the same musical language and are committed to the same humanitarian causes. Everyone sings about poverty and hunger, about a totalitarian military, about Sharia law, and about destruction, torture and murder. Nor is the idea as simple as the superficially offensive repetition of the fact that music brings musicians together under one roof. Not at all. We are talking here specifically about Syrians and Lebanese. Assad's fall is no longer a matter that concerns Syrians alone. The Lebanese as well—not just any Lebanese, to be sure—dream of the fall of the regime, defend the revolution, and chant its slogans loud and proud.

In addition to the artistic collaboration between musicians and actors, there's another kind of alliance taking place. It's a cooperation based on a knowledge of the political orientation of the owners of cultural venues, of theaters and exhibition spaces. Actually, I'm not sure "political orientation" is the right term anymore because the situation has transcended politics and become a humanitarian one, a matter of conscience. To stand by the Syrian regime is to stand shoulder to shoulder with murderers. Some gallery owners and managers, even if not directly concerned with politics, stand in solidarity with the Syrian people's revolution, with their "brothers," by offering them certain facilities such as providing them with a space where they can screen documentaries made by activists during the revolution, either inside or outside the country, or by offering an empty theater to rehearse, or even by giving workshops or organizing cultural activities for the Syrian refugees in

Lebanese camps.

On the other hand, there are theaters whose owners have refused, from the very beginning, to host any activity or show related to the revolution. Such behavior has now become deplorable, after two and a half years of continuous killing, a festival of death.

## Syrian art is liberated from its past

The Syrian artist Mohammad Omran once told me a story, one of many, about the relentless fear he lived under during his childhood, a childhood of the Baath Vanguard. It remains one of the most beautiful stories I've ever heard about the gigantic fear carried like a burden by my generation, a fear that has no doubt dug deep into our consciousness and wormed its way into our subconscious. He told me how all his memories of the 1980s are tinted entirely in a dusty yellow. He has only to hear about that era to see everything suddenly cast in that pale yellow. Omran was always terrified by the news report when the newscaster would peek out of that small screen to announce the opening of some facility or other. As the newscaster read the report, the screen pulsed with pictures of the opening. "Sponsored by the esteemed President... a governor... a member of the national leadership... the opening of the facility also...". On the screen, the image of people standing in line, ramrod straight. Looking exactly like one another, their features cloned from one another. And then they'd begin to clap silently. All the sound sucked away. The newscaster read while they clapped soundlessly on the screen. It was that, that silent scene that terrorized Mohammad Omran.

It's not an easy story. It can give one pause for a long time. I see that the fear the Syrians lived under has become a subject for the study and analysis of the kinds of diseases suffered by that generation. But it is hard to say that the generation of the revolution escaped without disease or complex. As they grew up, so too did their diseases. Only they are now allowed the compensation of a courage far stronger than that of their parents' generation, in my opinion. Circumstances helped, of course: The increased social openness, the easing of political isolation and the introduction of the Internet into work and life, all helped bolster this courage and shore up its undertaking. It is perhaps for that reason that the older creative generation has been cast aside. Cast aside not for lack of importance, not to lessen the impact of the riches they offered up in defense



Street graffiti, Kafranbel

of their ideals. But times have simply changed.

The times are always changing. Those who took to the streets were not of that seasoned, sacrosanct creative class. The absence of the important painters, the renowned musicians and writers was noticeable during the run-up to the confrontations, not just in Beirut but at home, within, as well. Here we can also talk about new artists, untrained in craft, who stunned the world with their creativity, like the youth of Kafr Nabel, like the amateur photographers and filmmakers who produced documentaries without any professional know-how or modern equipment save their smartphones or simple cameras. This is the cultural output after the revolution, liberated from the slogans that accompanied the work of most of the past generation. The ideas of the young generation are clear, renouncing prevarication, always ready for renewal. Their paintings blend technology with color, with current events, with the happening and the moment. They are documents that don't devalue over time. Their music is the same: Despite making use of the most current techniques, it does not come across as superior, disrespectful or elitist. Just the opposite in fact, in every way. Their films and books and theater pieces have all broken through a barrier of fear, bridging the gap between culture and street.

## Temporary presence

The first year of the revolution was characterized by the exodus of many Syrian artists from Damascus and their arrival in Beirut or their travel to other countries, all supposedly on a temporary basis. Many of those fleeing prison or compulsory service, or those simply seeking opportunities for work, were convinced that

the revolution would succeed within the span of a few months, and that they would be back in the country very shortly. I know people who left their winter clothes in Damascus when they fled in the summer, and vice-versa. Full of the sense of imminent return, some were motivated to document the revolution minute by minute, such as the young Syrian artist Tammam Azam, living in Dubai, or the photographer Jaber al-Athma. Others couldn't finish their projects, sure that they would be back any day. Things are different now, after two and a half years. For one, documenting the revolution minute by minute is no longer possible because of the complexities surrounding it and the numerous parties engaged in the conflict. On the other hand, there is a general frustration that disrupts the ability to create, to innovate. The current moment oppresses the capability to imagine and dream. And difficult living conditions only make everything worse.

It's hard to say whether Syrian artists and creators today should begin realizing their projects separate from the idea of a return, which might take far longer than first imagined. There is no longer the idea of the "temporary" dangling over their works. They are now more settled in the places they have found themselves. And their works are bigger, wider now than the revolution, than the moment. There is no longer room for the project of a moment. It is now the project of a lifetime.

\* Translated from the Arabic by Lina Mounzer



Khalil, Exilium project

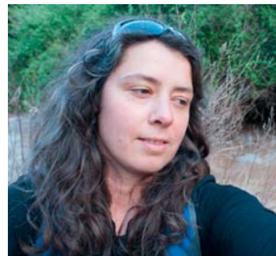
## Exilium

Marta Bogdanska

*"Show us the way to bitter exile"*  
- Euripedes, The Bacchae

Exilium is a project by Marta Bogdanska, a Polish photographer currently living in Beirut.

The project developed as a way to give space and document the experiences of a growing number of Syrian refugees, who had to leave their hometowns in the last two years. As I was fully aware that exposing their identities could put them in danger, I decided to work on this project without revealing anybody's identity. I spoke to around 11 people, who had fled Syria and came to Lebanon, and photographed one item that they took with them when they left. The item might be a piece of clothing, shoes or something personal and important that was "traveling" with the person. I then asked them to tell me a short story about this object and the route it took.



Marta Bogdanska is a Polish photographer and artist currently living in Beirut. She has worked on numerous artistic projects and has been published internationally. In 2012, together with Nisreen Kaj, she conceptualized and implemented the photo exhibition entitled, "Mixed Feelings" for hbs, portraying Lebanese young people with one parent from Asian or African origin. The portraits were on display along with quotes from the respective person, reflecting on their experience in Lebanese society.

### Khalil, 22

I have been in Lebanon for 17 months, but before I studied in Tripoli for four years. I came here 17 months ago around February 2012. I left because there was a good chance that the regime's army would destroy my village Tel Kelekh in Halaat and arrest me there.

Since I was a student in Lebanon before I didn't have difficulties arriving. I used my student identification and entered Lebanon legally. I took a road from Tel Kelekh to Halaat, then to Mashairfe, and through to Akkar to Tripoli.

The photograph that I brought with me from Syria is of my cousin who tried crossing into Lebanon a few days after me. He drowned in a river during the attempt. He was my friend since childhood. This photograph was taken 12 years ago when he obtained his first passport because he was going to Kuwait. It was a passport picture. He gave

it to me at the time and I kept it ever since. I used to keep it in my wallet with my ID and carte de visite wherever I went. I think he was in the 5th grade at the time, 11 or 12 years old.

My cousin had decided to come to Lebanon because of the bombing. There was no way he could have handled it anymore. Since he had a Lebanese nationality he was worried sick because it was so tense and he was afraid of being arrested as a Salafist terrorist fighting on the side of the Free Syrian Army and terrorists. He decided to take the smugglers' road through the river instead of the official crossing. It was raining heavily that night. When he was almost on the other side of the river he was surprised by a flood that swept him away. We tried to help him from the other side of the river but the difficult weather made it impossible for us to do that. Later we found his dead body on the side of the river. For me it was a tragic loss. He died just because he did not want to risk being arrested by the people of the regime.

I do not think I can go back to Syria before the regime is toppled. Then we could go back in dignity. I used to be humiliated at checkpoints by soldiers because my father was arrested. They were always saying that I was smuggling information in my laptop. They always searched my laptop and books and took them to the officer for a secondary search. That goes for all the checkpoints from my home to the borders. Sometimes, to get rid of them, I would go without carrying anything just to avoid this treatment. I left my mobile phone card with my cousin in the picture because he had the Lebanese nationality so they would not give him a hard time like me.

I think there's a risk if I go back now. All the men in my family are wanted by the regime. At least six of them have already been arrested, even before the revolution. My father too,

afterwards. I am wanted for military service, but of course I am not going to serve in that army.

My uncle is in prison. The regime thinks my village is hosting terrorists. My friends were killed at the hands of the regime. Their families have not received their bodies yet. It is risky for me to go back right now. Also, I am doing more things from here than what I can do inside. The situation there is really bad, and I would be living under siege, and therefore my hands would be tied security-wise.

### Noor, 21

I have been here for 13 months and a couple of weeks because things got really complicated in Syria, in Homs. I studied at Aleppo University



Noor, Exilium project

but life in the city was getting more difficult recently so I had to leave. My family decided to come to Lebanon and I came two weeks before them. We had to cross each one alone because they are not allowing families to cross unless they are paying a lot of money. Even if you have enough money to pay you might not be able to cross. My brother went first, then I went a week later, and after that my family came 13 days later. I came from Aleppo to Homs, and then to Tel Kelekh. From there I went to Dabussy and Abu Samra, and ended up in Tripoli.

I brought a lighter with me. It belongs to my fiancée in Aleppo. He forgot it on the table and I took it. Afterwards whenever he would say to me to give it back to him I would answer: "I will not give it back to you." It was just

a normal lighter. That was when I was planning to go to Lebanon but the roads were blocked to Homs so I took time to plan. My fiancée did not know that I was planning to go to Lebanon. I did not tell him because he was pro-Assad.

Despite how close we were at the beginning of the revolution we agreed not to talk about politics since I am for the revolution. Aleppo was calm then but I was always worried about my family in Homs. I was always talking to them to make sure they were safe and alright. Sometimes I talked to my fiancée about this. He was not exactly pro-Assad; he was just against any sabotage actions that could lead to the destruction of the country. He thinks that if Bashar had the time to reform he could do it. But I always argued that if he really wanted to reform the country he had a lot of time to do it,

11 years. He only kept talking about it without doing anything at all. During our last year, my fiancée and I had arguments. Finally we decided not to talk about it because we knew we would fight. When things got really complicated in Tel Kelekh, I rented a car for my family there to bring them to Homs and then to Aleppo. They did not manage to cross to Lebanon at that time. In the end though, we all managed to get here.

My fiancée is in Egypt now. We communicate through the Internet. During the last three months I have been here he at least managed to come to see me once. After I crossed to Lebanon he stayed two months in Aleppo. He did not leave immediately because he was stuck there when the conflict erupted. Fortunately they managed to get a flight from Aleppo to Egypt. He put his family on that plane

to Egypt and then he went to Damascus and from Damascus to Beirut, and then he came to Tripoli to see me. He stayed for a while with me and took a plane from Beirut to Egypt. I don't know how long I will stay here. We decided that if things get calmer in our town we would go back. Unfortunately we found out that our house was destroyed and we have no place to go back. All my uncles and relatives stayed at our house because theirs were destroyed, and now this one is destroyed too. I can't go back myself because I heard that they know now that we are working for NGOs here in Lebanon. We work with Syrian refugees. Our lives, my sister's and mine may be at risk if we go back. There was one time when we were sitting in the house with my friends and we counted

at a time and come back to Syria. Now I think we are here to stay until the regime is gone.

I crossed the borders legally by myself. My family (mother and sisters) crossed before me on the same day because we cannot cross all together. Although I was crossing alone they realized some of my family members with the same name had crossed before and they stopped me to check on it.

"Why are you going to Lebanon? Why did not all of you go together?" they kept asking. It appears they just wanted some money from us so we gave them a bribe. They said without paying any money they will not allow me to cross. They checked in my luggage. Another family was crossing at the same time as me but they were not allowed to cross. One



Joanna, Exilium project

59 bombs around us. Boom, boom, boom. When the Free Syrian Army took control of the countryside of Aleppo we held demonstrations at Aleppo University. I joined most of them. We finished our exams and went straight to the demonstration. I did not tell my fiancée that I was going to those demonstrations.

My fiancée has decided to come here in a few days and then we are going to get married.

## Joanna, 21

I came to Lebanon 13 months ago because of the continuous bombing in my hometown by the regime's army in Tel Kelekh. I used to come to Lebanon because I have relatives here. This time, however, is different because now we are refugees. We used to go for ten days

mohajaba (a fully veiled woman) was given a hard time by them, the Syrian border guards, and they did not allow her to cross. The trip took one hour from Tel Kelekh to Dabussy. On the Lebanese side I did not have any problems at all. I came from Aleppo to Homs and then to Tel Kelekh. From there I went to Dabussy and finally I managed to get to Tripoli. I spent ten days in Tell Kelekh to see what was going on. At that time Aleppo was still calm. Those ten days were unbearable. Yes, Tel Kelekh was bombed in the early days. Despite that we stayed on the second floor of the house because it was safe. After that bullets started going through every wall in our house. Our neighborhood was attacked because we had a field hospital in our street, across from our house. I had the thought that I was going to die in the next moment. There was no way I could have a life in this house. We heard



Juma, Exilium project

that the bombs the regime was using could go through four walls and we only had one roof above our heads. This was when my family took the decision that there was no way to stay.

I brought with me photographs of my friends and family members. I wanted to keep them with me. Despite the bombing, when I left, my house was still ok. However after I crossed the borders we saw on Youtube that our house was totally destroyed. It was a good thing that I brought these pictures with me because otherwise they would have been lost in all that destruction. I would have lost some of my memories. And I want to keep these photographs in case I cannot see them again.

I do not know how long I can stay here, even if the regime is gone, because we have no houses in Syria anymore. It would take a while before we could settle back in our country after losing all our clothes and furniture. All was lost, stolen or burnt. I used to study business management at Aleppo University.

## Juma, 31

I left from Damascus on the 15th of October 2011. I took a taxi and a main road from Damascus to Beirut. I had no problems at the border. I was worried that something would happen but it was ok. There was something funny that happened though. Before I left I had a strange feeling. There is this land between the borders: between the Syrian gate and Lebanese one. When I was crossing the border to Lebanon, I passed the Syrian gate and we entered a kind of "no man's land". When I got there I felt some kind of relaxation because I was worried before. Suddenly, in the middle of this "no man's land", I saw Syrian soldiers with guns, and it made me feel depressed again.

I had a lot of things in Damascus. I left them there. I just brought the most important thing, meaning clothes. You really need them. I brought with me a piece to cover a table, a tablecloth. Tantal it is called in Kurdish. I got it from my older sister. I really like it. It is very colorful, with a lot of brightness. She made it herself. It is traditional for the region I come from, which is the North, the Kurdish region. I wanted to keep it with me. In general I do not like colors but it is more like a memory. And you need it daily. My family is still there in Syria.

When I came here I told myself that I had left my memory and my archives. They will not get lost; I kept them with a friend. Many videotapes. They are important to me, although for sure they are not legal for the regime.

For me staying in Syria was "suicidal" – like committing suicide. It is not about danger. If you stay there you are put in a position where you would get killed or kill someone. I was working on documentary projects and in the middle of March, just when we started filming, they stopped. I stayed for seven months doing nothing, just sitting at home. Negative feelings.

I felt some euphoria but all my friends were in jail, people were getting killed, watching news. It was not easy. I couldn't feel anything in Damascus, the city I liked so much before.

We all know that the regime will change but I know it will not be easy, a lot of people will be killed, and a lot of blood will be spilled.

# Trapped in Disaster

## *Iraqi Refugees in Syria*

Kelsey Lundgren

The world is watching as Syrians flee en masse to neighboring countries to seek shelter and as the fighting continues in-country with a death toll of over 100,000, an estimated six million internally displaced and approximately two million Syrian refugees abroad.<sup>1</sup> There has been much debate over how to increase support for Syrian refugees in the neighboring countries and those trapped inside with limited access to clean water, electricity and other basic necessities. While the death and displacement of Syrians is extremely disheartening, a critical perspective from inside Syria is mostly forgotten: The perspective of those who once came to Syria as refugees. There has been some attention to Palestinian refugees, particularly after the shelling of the Yarmouk Camp in Damascus at the end of 2012. A widely neglected aspect is, however, the situation of the hundreds of thousands of Iraqis who were inside the country when the uprising began and who often find themselves in an even more difficult position now. With the continued violence in Iraq, they can hardly return but face even more difficulties than Syrian refugees in being accepted in third countries. What are the challenges Iraqi refugees in Syria face? How was their situation before the revolution and what options remain for protection and safety as the Syrian conflict – and their displacement – continues?

### Fleeing Iraq

Historically, the overwhelming majority of migrants residing in Syria are Iraqi by origin. Prior to the 2003 US-led invasion of Iraq and the fall of Saddam Hussein, most of the Iraqi nationals fleeing to Syria were political dissidents from all religious sects and ethnicities – Sunni, Shia, Christian, Arab, Turkoman and Kurd.

However, after the Falluja bombings in 2004 and the Samaraa al-Askeri Mosque bombing in 2006, Syria saw a huge influx of Iraqi nationals crossing the Iraq-Syria border, most of whom were fleeing sectarian violence that became commonplace in their country. The period immediately following these bombings is considered the height of the Iraqi refugee crisis, and the Syrian government estimates that 1.2 million Iraqis came to Syria at this time.<sup>2</sup> This estimate includes any Iraqi national that crossed the border into Syria – some may have been temporarily staying with family in order to wait out the Iraq war, but with full intentions to return. This article, however, focuses on the experience of those Iraqis who were given refugee status by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in Syria – the UN body charged with protecting and finding durable solutions for the displaced. Refugee status was given because it is determined that they meet the international, legal definition of being refugees, “a person, owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, who is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”<sup>3</sup>

Until the uprising began, Iraqi refugees living in Syria were considered “guests” and given a three-month tourist visa upon arrival but were eligible to renew the visa in order to legally reside in Syria. Despite having access to formal residency, some Iraqi refugees spoke of their fear of being illegally deported back to Iraq – where they would face significant danger, persecution and lack of basic services – if they came forward as a refugee. Due to this well-founded fear, some Iraqis did not attempt to renew their visas and instead lived without

legal status vis-à-vis the Syrian government, which for its part was mostly forgiving of those Iraqi refugees who overstayed and/or failed to renew their visas. Moreover, Iraqi refugees lived under a protective framework because the Syrian government deferred to UNHCR on considering Iraqi refugees *prima facie*<sup>4</sup> refugees, and thus their refoulement back to Iraq would be a violation of international law.<sup>5</sup>

Iraqi refugees who obtained a refugee status card from UNHCR ostensibly had access to the same basic health and public services as Syrians, and Iraqi refugee children were allowed to access education through local schools. However, due to a range of reasons – documentation issues, lack of money for school supplies and the need for children to work in order to support the family – only an estimated 10 percent of Iraqi refugee children residing in Syria in 2007 were registered to attend school. The Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) also reported deteriorating living conditions for Iraqi refugees, citing many of them living in overcrowded and unsanitary housing, with limited access to food and health care. These conditions, along with deteriorating funds and financial support from UNHCR, were leaving many Iraqi refugees in dire conditions.<sup>6</sup>

Iraqi refugees are not legally allowed to work in Syria and according to a 2006 UNHCR survey, 55 percent of male Iraqi refugees and 80 percent of female refugees were unemployed.<sup>7</sup> Without a proper channel to enter the formal labor sector, and meager assistance from local organizations, due to a lack of resources, many Iraqi refugees attempt to work in the informal labor sector, which leaves this already vulnerable population open to other forms of harm and exploitation: Working long hours for little or no wages; having no recourse for violations of labor law; fear over the risk of



Rural Aleppo, 2012

deportation; harassment and discrimination because of illegal and/or non-citizen status; and the risk of sexual and gender-based violence and discrimination, sometimes resulting in coerced sexual activities, sex trafficking or sex work.<sup>8</sup>

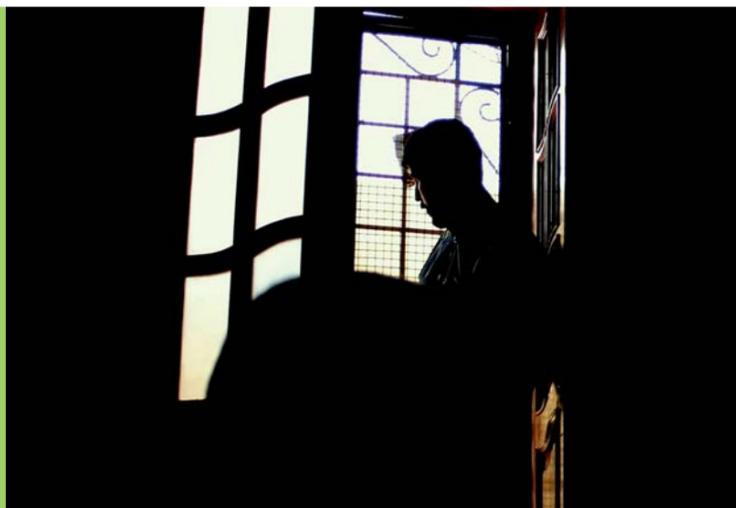
Given these hurdles, the only really durable solution, and the main goal for them, is to be resettled permanently in a third country, such as the US, Canada or Australia. Each of these countries has their own resettlement program that requires refugees to complete a series of interviews, and medical and security checks in order to assess their credibility and eligibility for resettlement. The largest resettlement program for refugees worldwide is the US Refugee Admissions Program (USRAP) which in 2008 welcomed 60,108 refugees worldwide, 23 percent of whom were Iraqi.<sup>9</sup>

### The Syrian uprisings and its unintended consequences

As of January 2013, the Syrian government estimates that 480,000 Iraqi refugees are still residing in Syria, of whom 51,300 are assisted by UNHCR. This is a marked difference from the 2008 figure of 1.2 million Iraqi refugees inside the country.<sup>10</sup> Given the decrease in security and increase in persecution that Iraqi refugees face in Syria, it is no surprise that many of them chose to leave the country. But for those who chose to remain, what protection concerns do they face?

Although the lives of Iraqi refugees in Syria were far from perfect before the uprisings began, after the uprisings, their lives took a dramatic turn for the worst. Iraqi refugees began to bear the brunt of the xenophobia caused by the paranoia that Syrian President Bashar al-Assad managed to stoke in selling the uprisings as the result of foreign influences

Kelsey Lundgren is a human rights and refugee advocate based in Istanbul, Turkey. She has worked for eight years on the protection and resettlement of vulnerable refugee groups who are displaced in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), as well as Turkey. Most recently she was the Overseas Project Manager for the Iraqi Refugee Assistance Project, a non-profit organization that provides legal assistance to refugee populations seeking resettlement to the West. Her area of specialization is increasing the protection sphere for lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) refugees in the MENA region. Her work has been published by Migration Policy Institute and used for policy recommendations targeting the US government and agencies of the United Nations.



Trapped in darkness

and not a response to his policies, brutality or his method of ruling the country. President Assad stated during a speech broadcast live on state TV that the uprisings were the result of regional, including Iraqi, and international “external conspiracies,” and that regional forms of “terrorism” needed to be handled with an “iron fist.”<sup>11</sup> On the other hand, Iraqis were also accused by opposition forces, like Jabhat al-Nusra, of supporting President Bashar al-Assad and his regime.<sup>12</sup>

Facing threats from both sides of the conflict, Iraqi refugees living in Syria report being under a kind of self-imposed “house arrest” because of the increase of xenophobia and violence against them; including being followed, beaten and harassed by Syrian state security officials. Additionally, as armed gangs, both pro and anti-Assad, increased their power and presence in and around Damascus, Iraqi refugees became trapped in the areas they populate, such as Sayyida Zeineb and Jaramana. In these neighborhoods, fearful refugee families pulled their children out of school, could not leave their homes for medical care and were subjected to targeted threats. One family cannot safely take their father to seek treatment for stage-four cancer because their neighborhood is under siege.<sup>13</sup> In another case, an Iraqi woman was beaten and dragged into a corner by a man attempting to rape her. Only a few days later, a Syrian armed group broke into her home and threatened her life if she did not return to Iraq.<sup>14</sup> In July 2012 alone, 23 Shiite Iraqi refugees were killed, some of whom were beheaded. The UN reported that in one particularly gruesome case, a family of seven was killed at gunpoint in their Damascus apartment.<sup>15</sup> Many refugees speak of suffering from severe trauma and depression due to living in the unsafe conditions generated by the uprising.

They also speak of a great fear over being “disappeared” due to the rise in kidnappings occurring in the areas they populate.

When refugees do leave it is only for necessary tasks such as renewing visas, but after the Syrian uprising began, refugees were being denied a visa renewal and given 24 hours or less to leave the country without any legal basis. One Iraqi refugee who was interviewed about his experience living in Syria, stated he was deported immediately after trying to renew such a residency permit. He was forced to return to Iraq – from where he originally fled due to political persecution – to live in hiding, and at the same time leave his elderly mother alone in a suburb of Damascus.<sup>16</sup>

Compounding these problems, most humanitarian organizations were either forced to shut down, or severely limit their services, due to the conflict, leaving Iraqi refugees without various forms of support. Those refugees that still obtain assistance in the form of food or goods, state that they are forced to sell their food rations or donated goods in order to pay rent, a cost that has skyrocketed due to the conflict, as well as more important needs such as medicine.

Eight hundred refugees who were able to find jobs, illegally or legally, in Syria were surveyed by UNHCR in February 2012. The survey shows that 40 percent have seen a decrease in monthly income and 13 percent lost their jobs altogether since the start of the Syrian conflict.<sup>17</sup> There are also complaints from refugees regarding corruption within international, regional and local organizations inside of Syria. Some workers at various organizations are being accused of taking advantage of a desperate situation and asking for money or other forms of bribes in exchange for goods, services or the promise of assistance in getting a refugee outside of Syria and

permanently resettled to another country.<sup>18</sup>

## Running out of options

With no foreseeable option of returning to Iraq, no chance at local integration in Syria, and now being directly targeted, Iraqi refugees are stuck “between a rock and no place.”<sup>19</sup> Currently, the three options available to Iraqi refugees in Syria are: 1) To wait inside Syria until the conflict subsides with the hope of being resettled to a third country; 2) to become doubly displaced and seek refuge in a neighboring country, such as Jordan or Turkey; or 3) to risk their lives and repatriate to Iraq.

Most Iraqi refugees when discussing their current options for protection argue that the conditions in Syria are dire and that legally obtaining entry into another neighboring country is difficult and almost impossible. One single mother, who also belongs to a religious minority inside of Iraq, was turned away at the Jordanian/Syrian border, after being held for over 24 hours, because she was a registered refugee in Syria. She was told that the Jordanian government could not accept any more Iraqi refugees and was forced back into Syria.<sup>20</sup> Those wanting to legally enter into Lebanon are required to show proof that they can financially support themselves while there, in the form of \$2000 USD, per person.<sup>21</sup> For a single refugee this would already be tough, but for a family of four, five or six, it is simply not an option.

Some Iraqis made the difficult decision to return to their home country, which can result in losing credibility regarding their refugee and resettlement claim. However, due to the fact that they cannot obtain legal entry into another country besides Iraq, and the refugee would rather face the devil they know than deal with the instability and uncertainty brought about by remaining in Syria, many did just this.

About his experience returning to Iraq, one refugee said, “I couldn’t get a visa to Jordan. The border was closed to Iraqi refugees. I had already spent six years in Syria waiting to go to another country. I couldn’t stand to risk my life in Syria after the war so I returned to Iraq because I had no other option.”<sup>22</sup> In addition to Iraqis having no options for gaining protection in Syria or Iraq, the United States, which receives the majority of refugees for resettlement worldwide, was forced to close its embassy in Syria in January 2012. Along with

this closure came a moratorium on refugee resettlement interviews by a US government official – a necessary and important step in the resettlement process. Without this interview, a refugee cannot be processed for a security clearance, issued a visa and is therefore, ineligible to resettle in the United States. Thousands of refugee resettlement files were frozen as a result. We get a clearer idea of what a devastating blow the effect of closing the US resettlement program from inside Syria had on Iraqi refugees by looking at the numbers. In 2008, the US government resettled 5,528 Iraqi refugees from Syria, while in 2011 and 2012, respectively, the US resettled 1,896 and 1,866.<sup>23</sup> There are currently an estimated 20,000 Iraqi refugees in Syria who are at some stage of the resettlement process to the US.<sup>24</sup> These people will continue to wait for the necessary clearance, which they will not receive in the near future, leaving them in a state of permanent displacement. One such family, hoping to leave any day, said they had their suitcases packed “for months.” There have been other reports of Iraqi refugees showing up at the airport in Damascus and demanding

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*“Why would we return to the place we fear the most and fled? I would rather die with my children than return to Iraq.”*

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to board planes bound for the United States. Not surprisingly then, some refugees described being trapped in Syria as a “slow death.”<sup>25</sup>

In an effort to solve the issue of not being able to complete a mandatory part of the resettlement process in the US, refugee advocates have been demanding a solution. One such solution is completing these interviews by video-conference. However, UNHCR representatives say this is not a feasible option for such a large group of people.<sup>26</sup> Another unprecedented effort came in the form of the US government allowing Iraqi refugees in Syria, who have been referred to the US for resettlement, to complete their case processing from inside of Iraq.<sup>27</sup> However, the onus is on the refugee to return to their country, find their own secure housing, make it to Baghdad for the necessary interviews and processing and still prove they are refugees under international law, despite being inside their country of

origin. Many refugees with whom this option was discussed directly refused to return to Iraq, even if it meant their cases would be completed since: "Why would we return to the place we fear the most and fled? I would rather die with my children than return to Iraq. I cannot even return there [to Iraq] for one hour."<sup>28</sup>

## A state of permanent displacement

Despite the international efforts involved in the conflict in Syria and its direct humanitarian consequences, namely the Syrian refugee crisis, the conflict, as well as the Iraqi refugee crisis, still burns. October 2013 was the deadliest month burns Iraq with over 1,000 casualties as a result of targeted bombings, kidnappings and killings.<sup>29</sup> Iraqi refugees clearly are trapped. They cannot return to their home country in the near future, and in Syria they face enormous protection and security issues caused by the conflict. Many of them have run out of options, and until the international community focuses some of its energy on this vulnerable group of people, they seem to be facing a dire fate: permanent displacement within the region.

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# Fleeing Towards Another Death *Syrian Palestinians in Lebanon*

Mitwali Abu Nasser

Unlike in almost all other Arab countries, Palestinians who settled in Syria with the first wave of 1948 refugees – and those that arrived later – were treated like Syrians in most areas of life, with the exception of rights related to elections and eligibility for membership of Parliament.

According to the United Nations Relief Works Agency's (UNRWA) statistics, there were 825,000 Palestinians in Syria as of January 1, 2013. While some live in the nine officially recognized refugee camps the majority live outside these camps, scattered throughout all of Syria's urban centers<sup>1</sup>. Palestinians did not start leaving Syria in large numbers until almost a year after the start of current events, due to the conflict's gathering ferocity and its growing proximity to their camps, especially those in Damascus and the surrounding countryside.

UNRWA estimates that the number of Palestinian refugees who have arrived in Lebanon from Syria will reach 80,000 individuals by the end of this year, with most going on to live in one of Lebanon's twelve main camps<sup>2</sup>

This article will look into the circumstances of those Palestinians who come from Syria to Lebanon, in an attempt to understand the challenges they face and thus contribute to finding solutions to their problems.

## Legal limbo

The issue of residency is one of the biggest problems facing Palestinians fleeing from Syria to Lebanon. It was formerly the case that the Lebanese Immigration Authority granted those who had a visa to travel on to another country for no more than one week, after which time the Syrian-Palestinian was obliged to make

his way to Lebanon's General Security agency to obtain a further one week for free. After this, the individual might renew the residency visa for another two weeks, after payment of 50,000 liras or about \$33 (USD) per person. However the dire financial circumstances in which most refugees find themselves, and the fact they cannot predict with any degree of accuracy when they will return to Syria, led many of them to forgo renewing their visas and to stay on in Lebanon illegally. UNRWA and various Palestinian organizations and authorities were placed under huge pressures to find a more sustainable solution to the problem of residency, and so it was that UNRWA concluded a deal with the Lebanese government whereby Palestinians were exempted from all costs connected with extending their visas and were granted free extensions for three months, up to a maximum of one year<sup>3</sup>.

The Lebanese government has yet to close its borders to those fleeing Syria. However, due to the large number of individuals streaming into the country and the government's concern that new permanent Palestinian camps might be established, it has recently begun to place hurdles in the way of Palestinians – and even Syrians – wishing to enter Lebanon, particularly now that it seems that the Syrian crisis is unlikely to end any time soon. About three months ago, the decision was taken – unofficially – to prevent the entry of Palestinians into the country by requiring the Immigration and Visa Authority on the Lebanese border to permit entry only to those Palestinians who could prove that they would leave Lebanese soil within a week, particularly those who had a visa to travel on to another country (the only viable point of departure being Beirut Airport), or those in need of medical treatment, with a few other permitted



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exceptions at the discretion of the Immigration and Visa Authority.

The next hurdle that refugees will face, and one which will give rise to major difficulties at the end of this calendar year, is the renewal of their annual visas. Lebanese law states that a sum of \$200 USD must be paid by, or on behalf of, every Palestinian from Syria after they have stayed in Lebanon for one year, with the further condition that they must exit the country then cross back in. This matter must be resolved as quickly as possible because by the start of the next year (i.e. 2014) the overwhelming majority of Syrian-Palestinians in Lebanon will be living there illegally. It is this issue that Abu Iyyad al-Shaalan spoke of when he said: "The group leaders met with [Lebanese] Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, and among the issues raised was that of residency and the urgent need to find a solution to this problem. Unfortunately, however, there is a law in place that neither Parliament nor the government can circumvent. The problem has to do with the Lebanese legal code. In any case, the Palestinian groups should form a delegation to meet with the government, and if a solution to the problem is not reached, then it is our job to secure the sums required for residency since immigrants from Syria do not have the means to pay them. UNRWA, too, should shoulder its share of the responsibility." And indeed, failure to reach a solution might result in the following:

1. Between 45,000 and 50,000 Syrian-Palestinians in Lebanon could be placed on wanted lists;
2. Processing such a vast number of people in one go could throw the relevant authorities and the Lebanese security services into a state of chaos, which could lead, of its own accord, to a state of emergency being declared;
3. Intensive waves of detentions and forcible expulsions could create tensions between supporters and opponents of the policy;
4. Those who have broken the residency laws could become criminals on the run, pushing them into the refugee camps and thus reviving the old problem of the Palestinian camps being viewed as "dens of crime" and havens for wanted criminals;
5. Those who fall outside the law will be unable to move around the country, thereby preventing them accessing the resources they need to face the hardships of exile;
6. Their financial and social problems will increase because they will be unable to obtain the aid assigned to them by the UNRWA.

Confronted by this developing reality, the relevant parties—such as the Palestinian-Lebanese Dialogue Committee, UNRWA, the

Palestinian groups and the various branches of the Lebanese security services—must come together to find a political solution, one adopted by the political leadership and put into practice by the organs of state bureaucracy, the judiciary and the security services.

## The housing crisis

The problem of finding so many refugees adequate housing was not readily apparent during the first wave of Syrian-Palestinian immigration into Lebanon, since many of the refugees were housed by relatives living in the camps. However the reception which camp residents extended to these refugees began to change due to a number of factors, the most important of which were the length of the conflict, the rising population density in the camps, the lack of space and the tough economic circumstances. Together these factors pushed the guest families to find somewhere else to live, resulting in a rise in prices and making it difficult to find places to rent or to secure money for rent, especially since the camps already suffer from overcrowding due to the fact that the cost of living is cheaper there than elsewhere. This has led to a number of problems, sometimes within a single family, or otherwise between the host family and their guests, prompting some families to take up residence in isolated encampments, garages or abandoned and uncompleted buildings. Still others have returned to Syria.

Engineer Nidal Ameiri from the Yarmouk Camp, explained: "I was forced to flee with my family to Lebanon because of the daily bombardment of my camp back in Syria. When I arrived, I went to live in the Ein al-Heleweh Camp and the people there welcomed us in with open arms. They gave us whatever we needed. I already knew that the Lebanese-Palestinians lived in wretched circumstances and that the majority of young men were unable to work due the restrictions placed on them by discriminatory Lebanese laws. The difficulty is that the camp itself suffers from major problems – first and foremost a lack of space and extreme overcrowding – and we have just added to their problems."

Furthermore, many Syrian-Palestinians still have difficulty paying their monthly rent and rely on aid and hand-outs to meet their obligations, while those living in areas unfit for accommodation have to endure the heat of the summer and the winter cold and all the diseases and health issues this brings in its wake.



Homeless Palestinian Syrian family, Shatila camp, Lebanon

Abu Jaber, a political relations officer for the Popular Front movement, said: "We are currently trying to locate shelters in cooperation with UNRWA. It is UNRWA's responsibility to underwrite the families' monthly rents until such time as the crisis is over, but even though we have tried to extract a promise from them they have refused to do so on the grounds that they are unable to bind themselves to such an obligation. The chief issue here is the size of the sums that need to be paid."

## Educational disadvantage

Most of the students who have come from Syria missed out on the second half of the 2012 academic year, due to their constantly moving from one area to another and the inability of the both UNRWA and Lebanese schools to take them in when they first arrive. At the start of the 2013 academic year, UNRWA took responsibility for guaranteeing places for all students up to the secondary school level and emphasized that it was vital that all children enroll in the educational system. A number of problems immediately became apparent, most significantly the problem of child labor, and the fact that many children were dropping out of school to work and help their families secure income, especially those in the 10-15 years-old category who accept employment for extremely low wages. This was confirmed by one refugee, Umm Nasser Helawa, who lamented: "I have three children. Two are still young, less than fifteen, and they left school to bring in food for the family. My eldest son, Nasser, was in his final year of a sociology degree, but now he works in a restaurant. It's true that he has someone covering the costs of his degree, but we're a large family, and the

boys have sisters. They are in school right now and their younger brothers cover their costs."

A second problem is the gap between the Lebanese and Syrian curricula, particularly when it comes to foreign languages (i.e. English and French), subjects in which the student from Syria often lags far behind. Many students in their third year of the secondary school science track are forced to switch to a Humanities track, since some scientific courses are taught in English. Many others drop out of secondary school altogether because they are unable to keep pace with the Lebanese curriculum, especially when it comes to foreign languages. One should point out here that some civil society organizations have tried resolving this issue by setting up academic booster courses during the summer holidays, but such programs are limited in their effect and largely unorganized.

Finally, there is the issue of university students, many of whom arrived in Lebanon with their degrees still uncompleted. These students face a number of obstacles, principally the fees, which, while not excessive (we are only discussing government universities here), are beyond the means of most families. Then there is the problem of the limited number of places at government universities and the prohibitive costs of private institutions. In addition, some of these students are also their families' only breadwinner, and so many are forced to go job hunting instead of enrolling at university. Then there are other problems to do with the curricula and courses on offer.

## A living wage

Lebanese law makes it illegal to work without a work permit, a document that is usually only dispensed to Lebanese citizens or those

with residency visas of longer than one year. Consequently, the majority of Palestinians who come to Lebanon from Syria are unable to obtain a work permit, since they hold “tourist” visas valid for only three months. The Syrian-Palestinian refugee’s job opportunities are thus limited to the black market, most of which operates within the Palestinian camps where the Lebanese government has no jurisdiction.

It is important to note that according to a joint study by UNRWA and the American University in Beirut published in August 2010,<sup>4</sup> the unemployment rate among Lebanese-Palestinians stood at 56 percent. The basic economic conditions within the camps are therefore dire and have been made worse by the arrival of Syrian-Palestinian refugees with all the resultant pressure on basic services, accommodation, daily provisions and competition over job opportunities that are largely manual labor, day-hires (i.e. painting, construction, pipe laying, etc.). Furthermore, the sole and essential source of income for many Syrian-Palestinian refugees is UNRWA, which even now distributes monetary payments (with only four pay-outs being made to date) at unpredictable intervals, thus confusing many beneficiaries, particularly in regards to the payment of monthly rent. It is this that Montaha al-Aswad from the Nahr al-Bared Camp talks about when she described her predicament:

“I fled the war in Syria out of a fear for my children and came to Lebanon. My husband looked for work but he couldn’t find any. In the last nine months he’s only worked a few days and the money that UNRWA hands out is not even enough to rent an apartment. The problem is that UNRWA doesn’t give us our money every month, as it should. We’re forced to ask friends for money to cover the rent and we rely on food that is handed out by some of the organizations, though of course, that only happens on high days and holidays. My little girl only drinks milk five times a month and my other kids have left school to help us get a bite to eat. That’s the thing that worries me most: I don’t know how their future will turn out. I want to educate them, but what little money they bring in is only enough to keep us alive.”

## A broken healthcare system

As far as UNRWA’s health services are concerned, Syrian-Palestinian refugees are treated much like their Lebanese counterparts: There are clinics that provide primary medical care to patients, fully-subsidized treatments for chronic conditions such as diabetes, and UNRWA pays

50 percent of the costs of any surgical procedure.

UNRWA’s main difficulty is its health budget, which has remained unchanged despite the growth in the number of its beneficiaries. The refugees from Syria are on the whole unable to pay medical costs, particularly the 50 percent required for surgical procedures. Mohammed Nasser, who emigrated to al-Rashidiya Camp from the Sabina Camp in South Damascus, explained: “My mother needed a heart operation, which cost around \$3000. UNRWA pays half and we have to pay the other half. Where am I going to get the money from, seeing as I don’t work? We haven’t been able to fund the operation so far, and nor will we.”

The refugees who are most active on this front belong to al-Badawi Camp in Northern Lebanon, where they mount a protest every week to pressure UNRWA into increasing the level of health coverage. Mohammed al-Aswad, a Syrian-Palestinian refugee who holds the health portfolio for the al-Badawi Camp’s popular committee, said: “Broadly speaking, most cases in al-Badawi and al-Bared are patients with chronic conditions. Two months back there were six cases of cancer where the patients had to leave the camp and return to Syria because of the high cost of treatment in Lebanon. Some other cases with nervous conditions also had to leave. When it comes to specialist doctors, patients here end up paying for treatment, because specialists, like surgeons for instance, are generally not working for UNRWA or at the other medical centers.”

Samar, an employee of UNRWA, added: “The agency’s clinics open in the morning and there are those who come in on a daily basis, children in particular. The real problem comes when you have, say, a child who gets ill in the evening, or a refugee kid who is injured in an accident.”

Another problem that these Palestinian immigrants find almost impossible to solve is the issue of dental treatment. No one provides free dental treatment and the costs involved are very high. As a result, the majority of the families we met have not visited a dentist in the last nine months.

## The Lebanese state and its “self-distancing policy”

The special conditions that pertain to the Palestinian presence in Lebanon have determined the nature of the Lebanese government’s treatment of Palestinian refugees from Syria.<sup>5</sup> These special conditions arose from the involvement of the Palestinians in

*Building full of Palestinian Syrian families, Bourj el-Barajneh camp, Lebanon*



the 1975-90 Lebanese Civil War and fear over Palestinians being naturalized as citizens, a move that would upset Lebanon’s fine-tuned, demographic and sectarian balance between Muslims and Christians on the one hand, and between Sunni and Shia on the other (the vast majority of Palestinians are Sunni Muslims).

For this reason, the Lebanese state has by and large failed to shoulder its responsibilities towards the new Syrian-Palestinian immigrants, instead shifting the burden onto the relevant international organization (UNRWA) and official Palestinian organizations represented by the Palestinian Authority and the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). The Syrian-Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have even been called by a variety of different names—displaced persons, immigrants, guests— but not refugees, for fear of the legal obligations and requirements regarding refugee rights. In this way the government can avoid providing refugees with the basic rights enshrined in international law.

## UNRWA, limited

In general terms, UNRWA is in the same position as many other international agencies and organizations: It is simply unable to absorb the vast number of Palestinian refugees arriving from Syria. This is due to a number of reasons, including the unexpected influx of large numbers when the front-line moved next to the Syrian camps, plus the agency’s inability to gather the sums it needed to execute its rapid response plan (which it launched in April 2012) that was to cover emergency relief operations for Palestinian refugees within Syria and those who had made their way to neighboring countries (i.e. Lebanon and Jordan). The sum required

was \$54 million, \$8 million of which was to be set aside for refugees in Lebanon. However, by October 2012, only \$250,000 had been collected.

Despite the fact that Syrian-Palestinian refugees benefitted from the same services as Lebanese-Palestinians, especially health and educational services (plus emergency supplies for refugee families, such as kitchen implements), and despite UNRWA setting up a rights office for Syrian-Palestinian refugees, the needs of the refugees far outstrip their limited resources. Ghaleb Nasser, an official at the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights, argued:

“There are real violations of Palestinians’ human rights taking place in Lebanon, especially those of the immigrants from Syria. Legally speaking, UNRWA is responsible for protecting the refugees, and by protecting, I mean that UNRWA is obliged to provide them with everything they need to live: To guarantee them food, clothing, education and accommodation. There are many days when these immigrant families don’t have anything to eat, and many of them are thrown out of rented accommodation because they cannot pay the rent. They spend many days wandering the streets or sheltering in civil society centers waiting for someone to take pity on them and give them enough cash to rent out another modest apartment. Isn’t this an example of UNRWA abdicating its responsibility?”

Although a joint committee has been formed with representatives from the PLO, UNRWA and the Palestinian Embassy in order to coordinate and communicate with the Lebanese security services, the issue of rapid response and direct coordination with the Lebanese and Palestinian authorities is still in urgent need of review and development.

Abu Amer, a political relations officer with the Popular Front, lamented the lack of



Palestinian Syrian girls from Yarmouk, Shatila camp, Lebanon

results that followed when his movement “had suggested to UNRWA that they form a crisis unit and grant greater powers to the PLO in Lebanon, especially the popular committees that are in direct contact with the immigrants circumstances, and furthermore to set aside a permanent budget for Syrian immigrants.”

### The popular committees: Organizations with no money

When the first Palestinians began arriving in Lebanon from Syria, the Palestine Liberation Organization and other Palestinian groups set up popular committees within the camps tasked with keeping an eye on the circumstances of the new immigrants, meeting their needs and requirements and resolving any difficulties they might have. However these committees have been powerless to fulfill their mandate because they have no budget from which to provide aid to the refugees. They rely solely on donations which they collect and then hand out to the refugees, restricting their role to that of an intermediary. As Abu Iyyad al-Shaalan, General Secretary of the Popular Committees in Lebanon, noted, “The issue of finances is very important, since most of the demands we face are connected with food, drink and housing. We do what we can, but our capabilities are very limited, especially since we never anticipated this huge flood of Syrian Palestinians who have arrived in Lebanon.”

Shaalan added that the Committee is still talking to official Palestinian organizations about improvements, “but the Syrian crisis has dragged on and we are worried that even more

[refugees] may come. Our first priority must be to put pressure on UNRWA to shoulder its responsibilities.”

### The role of Lebanese and international civil society organizations

Lebanese civil society organizations played a central role in providing emergency relief to Syrian-Palestinian refugees. The Sidon Emergency Committee, for example, grew out of a broad-spectrum meeting of Lebanese and Palestinian civil society organizations with the aim of providing emergency relief to Palestinian and Syrian families. An emergency committee in Tyre also saw Lebanese organizations such as the Amel Association working alongside Palestinian groups.

International organizations have also made a positive contribution to helping Syrian-Palestinians. The Norwegian Refugee Council has reequipped and repaired more than thirty homes, making them fit to accommodate refugee families, as well as providing rapid response aid in the form of clothes and blankets. Italian organizations and associations have also played an effective role. Principally active in camps in Southern Lebanon, they have distributed food aid and set up psychological support programs for children. Majed Keilani, head of the popular committee in the Ein al-Helweh Camp, emphasized the huge role played by international and Arab organizations in supporting local Lebanese and Palestinian organizations to make up for the severe shortfall in the provision of emergency relief to the refugees. While international, Arab and Lebanese organizations have put in sterling work, the lack of coordination between them and the absence of any clear and well-structured plan to manage the crisis have blunted their efforts and ensured they have not been as effective as is required.

### Social attitudes towards the newcomers

“Ahmed S,” a Lebanese-Palestinian from the Shatila camp in Beirut, explained, “I’m head of a family and I’m a painter by trade. I used to work one week out of every month, but it’s been a whole month now and I haven’t worked. Things are worse than they used to be. I realize our brothers in the Syrian camps have it bad, and in the end they’re our brothers

and we have to help them out, but we’ve got children, too, and we must feed them. This is the responsibility of our Palestinian leaders. Why don’t they work to secure the needs of the Palestinian refugees from Syria?”

Umm Mustafa, a Lebanese Palestinian from the Bourj al-Barajneh Camp, added: “For one month now, my boy has been looking for a place so he can get married and he can’t find one. It’s become impossible to find an empty house on the market, and when you do find them, the rents are prohibitive. Why have the rentals gone up like this? I’m telling you, it isn’t the refugees that are the reason, it’s the greed of people who make money off other people’s misery. You could get a place for \$150 and it would be fully furnished and equipped, but suddenly they’re all for \$300! It’s a crime, no?”

As for the ordinary citizen’s attitude to this influx of Palestinians into Lebanon, there is a wide divergence in views, split along political and religious lines. There are those that see it as a humanitarian issue, and believe that the Lebanese people should stand by the refugees regardless of where they come from or what religion they follow. Others say that the borders should be closed to all refugees, because Lebanon cannot take the numbers that are arriving. Lena Jorjis, a Lebanese woman from Tripoli, has this to say: “I love the Palestinians and I’m a supporter of the Palestinian cause. For me the problem isn’t the number of Palestinians; the real problem is the number of refugees. There’s more than half a million of them. Speaking personally, I’ve been unaffected, but my friends tell me how difficult it is for them to find work and that they’ve started to feel like strangers in their own country.”

Ashraf Darwish is a Lebanese citizen from Anjar on the Lebanese-Syrian border. She stressed that, “It’s a moral and religious duty. They are our brothers and we have to give them a helping hand.” However, “Ghriyan S,” a young man from al-Ashrafiyeh in Beirut, disagreed with them both, saying, “I come from a neighborhood where the majority of people are Christians and listening to people talk I know they don’t want any Palestinians coming in, not even Syrians. In my neighborhood the after-effects of the Civil War still linger on, especially when it comes to the Palestinian camps.”

### A way forward

Palestinian families that have emigrated to Syria are living through a real crisis due to the inability of UNRWA to meet even the very lowest level of their basic needs, the result of a lack of financial

resources, plus the inability of the Palestinian groups to take care of the refugees until the war in Syria comes to an end. Perhaps it is this that has prompted many writers and politicians—including Palestinian refugees themselves, whether those who have been trapped in the Syrian camps for the last ninety days without food or medicine, or those who have fled to Lebanon in fear of their lives—to demand that responsibility for the refugees be taken away from UNRWA and handed to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees.

Perhaps such a move would mean that international protection would be requested and delivered. If this demand cannot be met, however, the Lebanese state must review its decisions and policies in order to ensure the following:

1. The law that bars Palestinians from working in over seventy different professions, and keeps the Palestinian camps—where the majority of residents live below the poverty line—in their present dire economic circumstances, must be changed;
2. The state’s policy towards the camps, which treats them as “dens of crime” must be changed. Work must begin to create opportunities for development, improving circumstances in the camps and paving the way for economic development that guarantees an effective Palestinian role in realizing sustainable development;
3. The state must fulfill its legal obligations towards Palestinians arriving from Syria, including guaranteeing their safety and providing them with secure shelter.

Finally, civil society organizations, whether local, Arab or international must coordinate with one another and unite their efforts within the framework of a coordinating committee that follows a single, integrated agenda. Lebanon’s Ministry of Social Affairs could play an important role in creating this committee and coordinating between the various organizations involved.

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\* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

# Haves and Have-Nots in Jordan's Za'atari Camp

Areej Abuqudairi

Just over one year ago, thousands of white tents were erected near the Jordanian-Syrian border to "temporarily" host Syrian refugees who had fled violence in their country. Waves of refugees have since flooded the desert camp; Za'atari is now Jordan's fourth largest city and the world's fourth largest camp, home to 120,000 Syrian refugees.

To accommodate the population's needs, a market has sprung up along the main road at the entrance to the camp, extending over several kilometers, with grocery stores, clothing boutiques, restaurants, bakeries, cafés, electronic shops and barbers all available.

This frenzy of commerce has spawned winners and losers, buyers and sellers, haves and have-nots, honest traders and outright thieves.

Such divisions have fuelled resentment, particularly as those better off are viewed as taking advantage of the aid system at the expense of those living at the edge of survival, in an environment with very little security or regulations.

There are more than 2.1 million Syrian refugees across the Middle East, and the UN expects these numbers to continue rising steadily into next year.

## "It is a jungle"

At a small shop made of tin sheets laid on wooden sticks, Muhammad al-Hariri sells second-hand clothing for 1-2 dinars (\$1.40-\$2.80 USD) per piece. "It is for desperate people who need anything to cover their bodies, when [the clothes they came with] get worn out," he told IRIN.

Just a few meters away, Ashraf Khalil sits inside a "caravan", a pre-fabricated trailer, which he bought and converted into

a store for men's clothing ranging in price from 8-20 Jordanian dinars (\$11-28) per piece.

"Some people can afford to buy this. It is cheaper than any shop in Amman [the Jordanian capital]," he said, flipping through TV channels as a fan - a rare luxury in the camp - circulated air.

Refugees say those who arrived last year snatched up the market's best pitches and now rent out their shops or even sell "their" spaces to other merchants. Everyone receives the same assistance and medical care from aid agencies, but some refugees also make money, while many others do not.

People rent out their spaces for 50 dinars (\$70) per month, and sell them for 1,000 dinars (\$1,412), says Fadi Abu Dias, the owner of a currency exchange shop.

"You can say we are living in a jungle. The strong eats the weak," he told IRIN.

## Re-sale of aid

Tents, caravans, toilet seats, blankets, along with other donated items are openly on sale in Za'atari camp. Caravans donated by Gulf States were meant to replace UN tents, which are more vulnerable to the elements, but there were not enough for everyone.

If they move out of the camp to live in Jordan's towns and cities, refugees are supposed to return their tents or caravans to the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR). Instead, some caravans sell for as much as 200 dinars (\$282), Abu Dias said.

While some poor Syrian families cannot afford to buy them, others have more than one.

"Some refugees sell their [registration] cards (entitling them to assistance) before they return to Syria," said Kilian Kleinschmidt,

who manages the camp on behalf of UNHCR. "Others use them to get more assistance, including caravans, and then sell them."

Abu Lina Hourani, who used to be a trader in Saudi Arabia, furnished his three purchased caravans with rugs, a satellite television, a fridge, a washing machine and a cooker. He placed the caravans in a U-shape to create a "garden space" like the one at his house in Syria. He made a bathroom out of bricks, complete with a toilet seat.

"We are not here because we are hungry or poor. We just need a safe place. I want my daughters to sleep in dignity and have a private space to hang out," he said as he locked the metal gate to the three caravans. His son now runs a small business transporting things like yogurt in a refrigerated truck.

Abu Dias estimates there are at least 50 currency exchange places at Za'atari in addition to his own. He said many Syrians come to Jordan with "a lot of money", and some use it to start businesses in the camp. Many Syrians, especially those originally from the governorate of Dera'a in southern Syria, have relatives working in Gulf Arab countries who occasionally send them money. "This contributed to the class division," he noted.

According to the World Bank, Syria's gross national income per capita was \$5,200 in 2012. The World Food Program (WFP) distributes a package of dry rations to each refugee family every two weeks, consisting of bulgur wheat, rice, sugar, lentils, salt and vegetable oil.

In order to buy vegetables, dairy products and poultry, refugees sell food donated by WFP to shop owners in the camp, who sell it to Jordanians. This practice is legal and happens in many refugee camps around the world.

"Syrians come from a relatively



Syrian shop owner in Za'atari Camp. Prices at the camp remain unregulated

middle-income country, so they do not eat beans and rice every day," Jonathan Campbell, a WFP emergency coordinator, told IRIN.

"We are not exploiting our people. We are just helping them out," said Abu Fawzi, the owner of a shop selling aid, including food, kitchen sets and hygiene kits which he has purchased from Syrians. "They can use the money to buy things they can actually need." Jordanian merchants then come to the camp to buy from him wholesale.

Last month, WFP introduced a voucher system, which refugees can use to purchase things from two shops run by community-based organizations.

## High prices, no taxes

Shop owners do not pay taxes or electricity bills, but goods in Za'atari are sold at the same price as in other markets in Jordan, and sometimes even higher, refugees say, especially vegetables and fruits.

Many refugees feel they are being ripped off by the merchants, who don't pass on the savings accrued by not paying tax or electricity to their customers. Refugees cannot exit the camp unless they are "bailed out" by a Jordanian citizen (though security officials and aid workers say many of the well-connected refugees find ways to smuggle people and materials in and out of the camp). As such, their customers largely constitute a literal captive market.

"They [refugees who earn income] stand in the same line, just like us, when there is any kind of distribution: food, clothing, whatever - you name it," said Amina Zubi, who came to Jordan with only her children and what she was wearing. "They are using their brothers

and sisters instead of supporting them.

To be able to buy groceries from the Za'atari market, Zubi sends her 13-year-old son to work.

He stands with a wheelbarrow in the middle of the market, offering to wheel purchases or aid materials to residents' homes. Depending on the distance of the trip, Mohammad Kahir earns between 0.50 to 2 dinars (\$0.70-\$2.80) per trip.

"We have to live. We cannot eat bulgur and lentils every day," he said.

Hourani disputes Zubi's suggestion that refugees who are relatively well-off are taking advantage of the aid system when they benefit from the free services. "This assistance is ours. Why should we spend our money?"

### "Good money"

The market does, of course, have a benefit. It is the only place where refugees can buy items that are not provided by aid agencies, such as fruits and vegetables, meat, Syrian spices and desserts. And for many, the market is simply a reminder of the normal lives they were leading in their home country before the war. "Although it is located in the middle of the desert, it has the feel of the market in Dera'a," one refugee said, referring to the southern Syrian city from which many of the refugees originated.

There are also camp residents who acknowledge they benefit from more affluent refugees' enterprises. Some earn a decent wage, for example. One waiter said the restaurant that employs him earns about 200 dinars (\$282) per week, selling sandwiches and grilled chicken. Another Syrian, who also spoke on condition of anonymity, said he earns about 15 dinars (\$21) per day from working at a café owned by a "rich" Syrian refugee living outside the camp. "It is good money, especially when you do not have to pay for rent or anything else," he told IRIN.

### Promises of change

In addition to the different social classes in the camp, refugees say some residents have formed mafia-like groups involved in organized crime in the camp.

They say a small minority of the camp's residents create chaos in the camp - by rioting and attacking security officials, aid workers or other refugees - because they benefit from the insecurity by stealing and re-selling aid items, like caravans, tents, and equipment from public toilets.

"Some have surrounded themselves by Shabihias," said 20-year-old Issa Lafi, referring to militias supporting President Bashar al-Assad in the fight against rebels in Syria, "whom they hire to steal things from the camp at night and then sell them." In one night alone, 1,000 caravans were stolen, refugees and a security staff told IRIN, and police "do not dare do anything." Another senior security official, who spoke on condition of anonymity, told IRIN the camp can be very difficult to control. Refugees "refuse to cooperate... When we try to stop cars smuggling Syrians to work in Mafraq, they start stoning us, even children." On several occasions, refugees have stabbed Jordanian security forces or beaten them with sticks and stones.

Syrian refugees say those who cooperate with Jordanian police and security forces are "socially shunned" by residents of the camp. UNHCR has long been worried about a lack of law and order in the camp. "Of course, we have concern about how many people operate inside the camp with all these reports about mafias," UNHCR's Kleinschmidt said.

By improving the general management of the camp and introducing a governance structure, Kleinschmidt said that "hopefully" by the end of the year things will be "sorted out".

The plan is to divide the camp into districts, complete with street names and local representatives, with whom aid workers can liaise.

"Strengthening local governance will help us ensure better control of each district in the camp." At some point shop owners will also be expected to pay for shop licenses and electricity bills, he said.

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# The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Turkey

Nejat Taştan

Since the start of the conflict in Syria in early 2011, tens of thousands of lives have been lost, millions have been displaced and the disastrous humanitarian consequences have reverberated across the entire Middle East. The main objective of this paper is to assess the situation of the refugees from Syria in Turkey from a humanitarian point of view. Although the paper does not aim to make a political analysis of the conflict in Syria, one still has to keep in mind and emphasize that the conflict that initially began between government forces and the opposition, in time, also converted into a conflict between different ethnic and religious groups in Syria. This is a situation that has a direct impact on the refugees leaving their country, the humanitarian policies of the receiving countries and the consequences of these policies. It will also facilitate our understanding of the situation in Turkey.

With the start of the conflict in Syria, the governments of Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Turkey announced their plans to apply an "open gate" policy for humanitarian purposes. Open gates soon turned into open borders, which made it impossible to keep records of the refugees crossing the borders. In the meantime, with the rapid increase in the number of refugees, some countries started to take measures to make the border crossings difficult. The government of Turkey, confronted with the rapid increase in the number of people seeking refuge in Turkey, the spread of conflict into the north of Syria as well as the bombing that took place in Reyhanlı (March, 2013), partially abandoned its open gates policy, especially in the last six-month period, and tended to take the Syrian border under control again. Following this change in her policies, Turkey became a partner to the work of establishing campsites on the Syrian side of

the border and delivering humanitarian aid into Syria.

Turkey became party to the Geneva Convention related to the Status of the Refugees and the New York Protocol on the Status of the Refugees but with reservations. According to these reservations, Turkey only gives asylum to people arriving from Europe. For those who arrive from outside of Europe, Turkey grants refuge only until their departure to third countries.

Turkey, therefore, does not give refugee status to refugees from Syria, but does provide temporary protection which includes open gates, no forced refoulement, no limitations for their duration of stay in Turkey and humanitarian aid inside the camps.

The government of Turkey has assigned AFAD, the Prime Ministry's Disaster and Emergency Management Department, as the institution in charge of the coordination of the works related to the refugees from Syria. The Ministries of Interior, Foreign Affairs, Health, National Education, Agriculture and Rural Affairs, Transportation as well as Finance, the General Staff, the Presidency of Religious Affairs, the Undersecretary of Customs and the Red Crescent Organization all collaborate under AFAD's coordination. The Prime Ministry also assigned a governor, on September 21, 2012, to coordinate the activities in the region.

As such, AFAD established shelters for the refugees, especially in the provinces and districts along the border. As of September 2013, there were 21 shelters including 15 tent camps and six container camps in the provinces of Hatay, Gaziantep, Kilis, Şanlıurfa, Kahramanmaraş, Osmaniye, Adana, Adıyaman, Mardin and Malatya. It is known that better conditions are provided to the refugees in the camps in Turkey compared to other countries.



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Junction, Rural Aleppo  
2012

In the camps, health, education, food and communication-related needs of the refugees are fulfilled by the state.

The exact number of refugees in Turkey is not clearly known. According to an official declaration made by AFAD on September 26, 2013, more than 380,000<sup>1</sup> refugees have entered Turkey. Out of these, around 180,000 have returned to Syria and the remaining – approximately 200,000 – live in the aforementioned shelter camps. These official figures only represent the number of refugees who have registered at the camps, however. AFAD does not disclose data on refugees who live in Turkey without being registered at a camp. Moreover, the number of non-registered refugees is not clearly known. Various sources indicate the number of refugees in Turkey is actually 600,000 to 800,000<sup>2</sup> persons, a figure that is rising every day. Most optimistically, 400,000 non-registered refugees are trying to survive in large cities such as Istanbul, İzmir, Mersin, Ankara as well as in Kurdish cities such as Şanlıurfa, Mardin, Diyarbakır and Batman. We have knowledge of around 100,000 refugees that live in Istanbul alone. However, the lack of a registry mechanism for those who do not reside in camps makes it impossible to determine their number and needs. Unlike in Jordan, Iraq, Lebanon and North Africa, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Turkey does not make an effort to keep the records of the refugees.

The government of Turkey, for one and a half years following the beginning of the refugee movement, has not shown a willingness to co-operate with the international aid organizations and non-governmental organizations. For instance, the relationship with the World Food Program (WFP) was only established one year ago. There is still no

co-operation with the civil society organizations that want to conduct activities in the camps.

According to field studies, the refugees express the following reasons for not entering the camps:

**A desire to find a job and work:** Some of the refugees believe that they will be more free and better off if they work in big cities rather than live in camps.

**Physical conditions and security:** In some camps, more than one family must stay in the same tent or container due to a lack of financial means. Camps close to the border bear security risks and are located in regions close to the conflict areas.

**Isolation and restrictions on the freedom of movement:** The entrances to and exits from the camps are tracked; the communication between those who take shelter in the camps and the outside is also under supervision and the camps are closed to international civil society organizations or CSOs from Turkey.

**Risk of discrimination based on ethnic or religious identity:** Refugees with different ethnic or religious identities (Christians, Alawites, Kurds, Romans, Circassians etc.) do not enter the camps out of a fear of being discriminated against since the camps are under the control of the people with a Sunni Arab background.

**Sexual discrimination and violence:** The fact that the camps pose a risk for women and girls being sexually harassed, assaulted, exposed to violence and raped, deters women especially single women, and female refugees with children from living in the camps.

**Reservations related to the impartiality of the camps:** Many families are concerned that their children will be pressured and influenced by the political groups in the camps and will be forced to take a political side.

There are no policies developed by the government related to those refugees who do not enter the camps due to the reasons mentioned above. These refugees try to pursue a living with their limited opportunities as well as with irregular, individual humanitarian assistance. Since no state aid is extended to the refugees living outside the camps, no civil assistance organization is available either to work for these people. In fact, it is now almost impossible to determine the needs of the unrecorded refugees who are now spread over different cities of Turkey.

Additionally, the majority of the refugees cannot speak Turkish and do not know where to apply in case of an adverse situation. Although the challenges facing the refugees vary according to the provinces and districts

they live in, they also share common problems such as the lack of adequate housing, health and nutrition facilities, problems originating from cultural differences and children not being able to continue their education and facing social exclusion.<sup>3</sup>

In September 2013, the government extended the free health care in hospitals to the entire country. Before September, free healthcare in hospitals was only provided in the nine provinces where the camps are located. This is quite a recent and positive decision, but it is, as yet, unclear how this decision will be implemented.

Until this decision was announced, the refugees had been receiving healthcare services for a fee. Those who were unable to pay the fee were either left without any treatment or had to quit in the middle of their treatment, a particular problem for those patients with illnesses that require continuous treatment, pregnant women, disabled people, small children or elderly people among the refugees.<sup>4</sup>

Some of the refugees try to live in parks, shantytown tent settlements or share a room or an apartment with several other families. The apartments rented by the refugees generally do not meet hygiene and health conditions but still have high rental prices. Refugees are additionally exposed to social exclusion and, from time to time, discrimination in their neighborhoods. Local people exclude or reject refugees for several reasons, including the increase in rent prices after refugees arrive, children that stay on the streets asking for assistance and problems caused by cultural differences in general. In some cases, the apartments on the market for rent are not rented out to refugees.

Those who do not have any chance to rent an apartment try to survive in parks, bus stops and under bridges. In the last three months, news related to this issue in Istanbul started to appear in newspapers and on television. The situation is not any different in the other provinces and the approaching winter requires immediate measures to be taken for the refugees.

Indeed, winter conditions which have already arrived in Turkey will make the lives of the refugees, especially the homeless, much more difficult. Winter conditions will also call for new measures for rising needs in the tent camps. It is not hard to estimate that alongside basic needs such as heating and winter clothes, it will also be difficult to establish necessary hygiene conditions in crowded camps. It is expected that under such circumstances diseases, influenza in particular, will spread

easily.

Refugees looking for a job do not hold work permits to work in Turkey. Most of them do not even have the necessary papers to get the permit. The only available jobs for them are therefore low-paid ones with onerous conditions. Those who accept to work despite these conditions are made to work for at least 10 hours a day and are sometimes laid off without being paid.<sup>5</sup> They have no other option but to accept this situation, as they work informally and have no awareness of their rights.

Women are employed in daily cleaning jobs and make one fifth of what a woman from Turkey earns by doing the same job, or they work from their homes for contract manufacturing, again earning low wages.

In Istanbul, a high number of children from asylum seeking families are made to work under onerous conditions and for low wages.

Moreover, for those families that are not able to earn enough money for their living, women and children try to work or collect money on the streets to make a living for the family and to pay rent.<sup>6</sup> These women and children find themselves at a great risk on the streets since there is no protection mechanism for them.

The press in Turkey, on the one hand, covers these and other problems related to refugees that live outside the camps but, on the other hand, they deliver news that leads to their marginalization. Such news, generally about women and children asking for assistance on the streets, uses pejorative names like beggars to describe the refugees.

Finally, according to the results of a field survey of refugees living in Istanbul, the majority of these people state their desire to return to their country as soon as the war ends. There are, however, those who want to settle for good in Turkey or to set off for third countries.

The necessity to assess Turkey's refugee policies has become very clear when considering the current situation. The decision of Turkey to open its gates to the people fleeing Syria after the start of the conflict was necessary and correct. However, a series of mistakes have been made since the first refugees set foot in Turkey:

- Since the beginning, Turkey has perceived the refugees as a homogenous group and ignored the ethnic, cultural and religious diversity of Syria, as well as the relationship between these groups. The camps as well as the services provided there have been designed for the Sunni Arab group, which led many other ethnic and religious groups to avoid the camps. Turkey has ignored this.



Syria's entrance,  
Bab al-Hawa border  
crossing, 2012

- The relationship between the ethnic and religious groups in Syria with those in Turkey has not been analyzed.
- No registration system to track the refugees crossing the border has been created and the possible contribution from international organizations, particularly UNHCR, as well as related NGOs, is being ignored.
- The shelters have been established too close to the Syrian border and the conflict regions. They are completely isolated from the outside world. This situation also led to claims that the camps are used as logistics centers for the conflict.
- In the provinces where the shelters are established, the local population has not been informed in an open and sufficient manner. As in the case of Hatay, the social and cultural structure of the region has not been taken into consideration while choosing the locations for the camps.
- No sustainable humanitarian aid program has been created which takes into account the possibility of a prolonged conflict in Syria.
- The Turkish government often takes a side in the conflicts between ethnic and religious groups in Syria.
- The Turkish government disregards the principles of transparency in the organization and distribution of humanitarian aid and sends the humanitarian aid to Syria mainly to specific regions.
- The refugees outside the camps have been neglected for a long time and excluded from official statistics. Necessary regulations in the area of health and employment have come too late.
- There are no registry mechanisms or social support centers within the Provincial Governor Offices for the refugees who are unwilling to live in the camps. Local resources are not deployed in a timely fashion.

- Due to a rejection of co-operation possibilities with international and local civil organizations, the humanitarian aid policy that is in place seems to have caused a humanitarian tragedy risk for at least some of the refugees.
- In short, Turkey must, very rapidly, establish a long-term, sustainable humanitarian aid policy for refugees, one that is open to international and civil society co-operation.

1 The exact figures are 381,274 persons of which 181,240 have returned and 200,034 remain.

2 "There are 22 camps in ten provinces which officially accommodate 200,000 people. There are, however, 600,000, maybe even 800,000 asylum seekers in the camps." This is according to an interview with the coordinator governor, Veysel Dalmaz, IHD Border Report, September, 2013.

3 "We are not welcome here, they come and throw things inside from the window, they ask why we came here." A refugee named Eminönü, a 56 year-old woman, quoted in "Report on Syrian Refugees living in Istanbul," Report of the Working Group on Syrian Refugees, September, 2013. The working group is composed of ESHID (Association for the Monitoring of Equal Rights), Göç Der (Göç Edenler Sosyal Yardımlaşma ve Kültür Derneği – Association for the Social Support and Culture of Migrants), KADAV (Women's Solidarity Foundation), Hayata Destek (Support for Life), Migration Studies Center at Istanbul Bilgi University, Istanbul Medical Chamber, Human Rights Association, Istanbul Branch, Association of Social Workers.

4 "We are seven in total with four children; one girl, three boys. The girl is very ill, she has a severe cold. One of the boys has a brain tumor. We arrived in Turkey two months ago." A refugee quoted in "The Neglected Ones, Syrian Refugees in Istanbul," March, 2013.

5 "His two working sons first took a job somewhere else, but they were mistreated, laid off and not paid at all." A refugee quoted by Istanbul Research, September, 2013.

6 "The family came to Istanbul 15 days ago. They live in a construction site with too few belongings. The 11-months-old baby suffers from liver problems. The hospital they went to for treatment told them that the baby needs blood transfusions to survive. The family paid the examination fee of 36 Turkish Lira, but could not take the baby back to the hospital as the main treatment costs 4000 Turkish Lira." A refugee quoted by Istanbul Research, September, 2013.

## On the Circumstances Syrian Refugees are Facing in Lebanon

Rayan Majed

"Umm Ahmed" is a mother to two boys and a girl. She was forced to leave Muadamiyeh ash-Sham in the countryside outside Damascus when the planes started bombing the village. She and her children sheltered beneath the olive trees, waiting for the rain of rockets to stop, then made their way to al-Swairi in Lebanon's Bekaa Valley. This was in September 2012.

"At first we stayed in a room on the main road, until the owner asked us to move out. We looked for somewhere else but didn't find anywhere. The neighbors told us there was an abandoned prison in another town. We cleaned it out, fixed it up and settled there."

This prison was home to about twenty-nine families, all from Muadamiyeh, explained Umm Ahmed. The families were dispersed among the prison's dark and cramped cells. The cells were windowless, with steel doors, and reeked of rot and sickness and damp. More than eighty children spent their days and nights in the prison. They did not go to school. Some took religious studies lessons at the town mosque.

"To stop the children fighting they spent most of their time in the cells. There wasn't space for them to play in any case. Outside the prison there was barbed wire, not to mention cars, with people driving really fast." So said Umm Ahmed, who sent her eldest son, twelve year-old Ahmed, to work at the town's supermarket. He works there during the day and earns 50,000 Lebanese lira a month (the equivalent of \$33 USD).

This is just one example of the conditions facing the Syrian refugee population in the Bekaa Valley, whose numbers, according to the United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) stood at 220,000 registered refugees in September 2013, with 42,000 waiting to be registered and nearly 1,000 being

registered every day. The numbers include those living in prisons, those living in tents rented out to them by owners of agricultural land and those living in stables whose owners have cleared out their livestock and replaced them with Syrians in exchange for a rent that varies, according to one Syrian activist, between \$150 and \$200.

In all those areas which house Syrians from less well-off social backgrounds, many of the refugees exist in a state of homelessness and face great difficulties finding accommodation. When any of them comes across an uncompleted building they move in, despite its condition and the risks involved. Many spread out their possessions on the street and sleep there, roofless, with their children. In recent months, there have been ever more painful scenes in the nation's capital, with families living beneath bridges and at road junctions.

In the north of the country, in Akkar and Tripoli, activists and officials from international organizations working on the ground report that during the first wave of refugees the local residents opened their homes to them and invited them in. Many families from Wadi Khaled, whose own homes are scarcely big enough to house themselves, hosted Syrian families, sharing their food and taking turns to sleep. A very large number of Syrian refugees in the Wadi Khaled district still live as the guests of local residents, while the remainder stay in communal shelters, warehouses and rented apartments.

### The Palestinian camps

Despite their poverty and the conditions there, the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon



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have also taken in a large number of Syrian Palestinians who have had to endure a repeat of the tragedy of exile, plus other Syrians fleeing the killing.

Rima Malsi and her four daughters came to the Ain al-Hilweh refugee camp in South Lebanon at the end of 2012, the last station of many in her flight from Yalda, her hometown in the Damascus countryside. About a month later she was joined by her husband Mohammed, who arrived with news of the tragedies he had witnessed at home and started looking for work to support his family and cover the \$150 monthly rent they paid for their room (itself not fit for habitation) in the camp. A month after arriving in Lebanon, Mohammed committed suicide. He had not found work and could not stand the humiliation and the news that reached him from Syria about his home, which had been razed, and his mother, who was on the verge of death. Rima said that following the tragedy the camp's residents had embraced her and her daughters, taking care of all their expenses and the costs of burial:

"They didn't make us feel that we were strangers. The Palestinians here stood by us like family."

But even in those districts and camps that welcomed the Syrian refugees, resentment and ill feeling grew as time passed and the numbers of refugees climbed. According to the UNHCR, the overall number of refugees rose to 760,000 in 2013—with 77 percent of them women and children—while Lebanese government sources put the figure at over one million.

**They didn't make us feel that we were strangers. The Palestinians here stood by us like family**

The Palestinian camps exist in a state of neglect, poverty and overcrowding, and the districts that bear the greatest refugee burden in the north of the country and the Bekaa valley are also the poorest in Lebanon, and incapable of dealing with these numbers. These areas are also abandoned by the Lebanese government and have poor infrastructure and health services to begin with, so conditions there have only worsened with the rising tide of newcomers.

"In the beginning the Lebanese families thought it was only a temporary situation, so they welcomed them in and sympathized with them. But two years on, tensions started to surface," said Olivia Kalis, the Protection and Advocacy Advisor for the

Norwegian Refugee Council in Lebanon (NRC-L).

## Refugees and their Lebanese hosts face the same problems

Khaled al-Ikhtiyar, a Syrian activist, explained: "The things that Syrian refugees are lacking is exactly what the residents of Akkar, Tripoli and the rest of the neglected regions lack: Infrastructure and social and educational services. In other words, the existence of a strong, democratic state in Lebanon."

In fact, this is why a number of international organizations are working to support a welcoming environment for the refugees and to pressure the Lebanese state into requesting additional humanitarian aid to develop these regions, so that they are able to absorb the high numbers of refugees for an extended period of time.

One of the NRC-L's projects involves completing buildings where the Lebanese owners are unable to afford the cost of construction:

"In those Lebanese regions," said Kalis, "where refugees have come from Syria without shelter, we are working with homeowners who have not completed construction of their properties due a shortage of funds. We complete the building work for them, and in exchange they agree to house Syrian families for a one-year period. This project is important because it helps the host society and encourages it to carry on hosting."

However, the NRC's work only reaches a small proportion of refugees, with 44,990 shelters secured to date. And yet, Kalis added: "How can we secure enough accommodation to meet the basic requirements of a dignified existence for 750,000 refugees? In comparable situations the solution is usually to construct a large camp to hold these huge numbers of refugees, which costs less and makes it easier to guarantee basic services for the people living there. However, since the Lebanese government has rejected that option out of a fear of repeating the Palestinian camps' experiment, we are facing a very tricky situation. The refugees are spread out all over the country, and this makes it much harder both to guarantee service provision to them and from the point of view of costs as well, particularly since funding is limited."

This is why a comprehensive rescue plan must be followed, which includes aid for

*Tent settlement, Zahle, Lebanon*



refugees and the Lebanese communities which host them, plus support for the local authorities of these host regions.

## The problem of accommodation, rising rents, medical treatment and fear

Quite aside from the issue of emergency aid provision and bringing this aid to such a large number of widely dispersed refugees, the refugees are facing another fundamental problem: That of rising rents. This forces them to accept any work, for extremely low pay and renders them vulnerable to exploitation. It also inflames tensions and sensitivities between them and the Lebanese due to the effect cheaper labor has on the market.

These resentments, in the absence of any comprehensive plan that might offer ways of dealing with the issue, find their expression in xenophobic practices, even in those areas basically sympathetic to the Syrian refugees for humanitarian, sectarian, social and political reasons. In addition to the statements made by Lebanese politicians from time to time, and the hatred they bear towards Syrian refugees, it has become the norm to ascribe every problem in the country, all the thefts and crimes that take place here, to the Syrian refugee. There is also, of course, the shameful signs erected by a number of municipalities in Mount Lebanon and the South, which forbid "refugees" from walking freely at night – a practice that has met with approval in the North and the Bekaa valley as well. Furthermore, some refugees have been subjected to hostile acts and behavior, which are both unacceptable and constitute a clear breach of the law, as can be seen in the

video clip of a Lebanese security officer using his belt to beat Syrian refugees gathered at a checkpoint.

Refugees in Lebanon exist in a state of extreme fear. They have left their country, their homes, their land, their jobs, the entirety of their former existence, to which they long for nothing more than to return, and they have come here, to another country, burdened with the horrors of the violence and injustice they witnessed, to live out a present full of pain, never knowing what will deliver their future to them. Many of those arriving in Lebanon are also not registered with the UNHCR, have no official papers and know neither their rights nor how to obtain them. As Ikhtiyar explained, one group of Syrian activists is currently working to set up "The Syrian Refugee Guide" with the aim of helping newcomers from Syria get a grasp of the basic rules so as to avoid breaking Lebanese law on the one hand, and on the other hand, to lessen their fears, sense of disorientation and reduce the chances of them being exploited or mistreated:

"There's no one body that deals with refugees," he said. "Suddenly you might find that the Ministry of Social Affairs is on the line, another time it's the Interior Ministry, and then it's the army and intelligence services, or some specific political player, or some charity. The sheer number of players involved and the lack of a single mechanism confuses the refugee and prevents him understanding the basic rules, his rights and his obligations. Through the guide, we are trying to inform him of the procedures he must follow: Where must he renew his papers? Can he open a bank account, etc.? We are also attempting to provide legal support and protection by engaging lawyers to defend those in prison, because the UNHCR, given its limited powers and its inability to put

legal pressure on the Lebanese government, is less than effective in this area.”

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention that deals with the status of refugees, nor the related 1957 protocol, and so is able to sidestep any obligation to protect refugees.

Hani Tilfah, who works for the Basma wa Zeitouneh organization (A Smile and an Olive) which was founded five months ago and carries out projects to assist refugees, commented that in practice, the fundamental problem is that the Lebanese government does not recognize Syrians as refugees in the legal sense of the term and thus does not recognize any of the responsibilities that come with such an admission: “In such circumstances, the refugee is forced to renew his residency visa every year. Taking a family of five as an example, they must pay \$1000 per annum to renew their visas, which is a huge sum for them and they simply cannot manage it. So the family members have to live here without visas. They don’t send in job applications because of this, they stay put in the same place and their condition deteriorates further and further.”

Refugees also face great difficulties when it comes to medical treatment, since the cost of such treatment in Lebanon is very high, Hani added: “The UNHCR pays 75 percent of the cost of medical treatment for refugees that are registered with it. The remaining 25 percent is borne by the patient, who is mostly unable to supply the required sum. And of course unregistered refugees receive no aid at all.”

The owner of the building where Zeina (a twenty year-old Syrian refugee) is living asked her for sexual favors in exchange for foregoing rent for her and her family.

## Women and children as refugees

More than half of the registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon are children, around 350,000 in total. To these can be added the approximate figure of 150,000, which is the number of unregistered children, as Abir Abi Khalil, a child protection officer with The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), explained to Agence *France-Presse*. Moreover, the majority of these children have not been enrolled in schools. Basma wa Zeitouneh’s Tilfah explained:

“Only seven percent have enrolled in school. Lebanon has no basic infrastructure

capable of absorbing these numbers of Syrian children, since Lebanese schools are set up to absorb no more than 300,000 Lebanese children.”

The children that have not enrolled include those who participate in “alternative” activities set up by international organizations and other associations or work in grim and degrading conditions. They also include those who spend their days and nights out on the street, the group most vulnerable to exploitation and psychological, physical and sexual violence.

Mohammed is seven years old and sells gum at the Burj El Murr junction in Beirut. From morning to late at night he sits there on the dividing island between two streams of traffic, breathing in exhaust fumes. He does not speak and his unfocused gaze makes him seem older than he is. His eyes are drowsy. He’s usually to be found with his head cupped in his little hand, asleep, the gum and the few thousand lira he has earned forgotten at his side. Other children sell flowers on the streets of Beirut, in Hamra, Mar Mikhael and other neighborhoods, and their numbers are increasing.

Even the very few registered children who attend school face many problems and their grades are very low indeed. They have arrived in Lebanon after a grueling journey across the border and they come to school exhausted, only to be faced with a curriculum different to the one they studied back home. All this leaves many educational obstacles in their way, even for those students who were successful students back at home.

“An eight-year-old child drops back two years because of the difference in the curriculum,” Hani stated. This creates many problems for the student and makes him feel inferior. These problems are only increased by the beatings some of them receive at school from Lebanese children, as reported by Syrian activists.

It is worth pointing out here that many Syrian children have been born as refugees in Lebanon over the past two years, some of whom have been registered while others remain without any official document at all.

“Want to save Syrian lives? Increase humanitarian aid.” This is the title of an article written by Hillary Margolis and published on the Human Rights Watch website, in which she tells the stories of Syrian girls and women, living in Lebanon as refugees and enduring not only the difficulties of daily life but also their vulnerability to violence and sexual exploitation. The owner of the building where

Zeina (a twenty year-old Syrian refugee) is living asked her for sexual favors in exchange for foregoing rent for her and her family.

## Individual initiatives and civil society campaigns

On the other hand, and to compensate for the failings in education and numerous other fields, some international organizations and associations—such as NRC-L, UNICEF and Basma wa Zeitouneh—have staged activities for Syrian children that allow them to interact with Lebanese children, allow them to escape the circumstances in which they live for a while and encourage them to use play and art to express their repressed feelings, dreams and memories.

A number of individual initiatives and civil-society campaigns have also been launched and expanded since the start of 2013, using their modest and limited resources to confront the onset of winter storms and the xenophobic statements and actions directed at Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Social networking sites have seen the spread of videos and comments responding to the racist positions adopted by some Lebanese politicians, which have reached the point of calling for them to be sent back to their country, while signs have been erected in the streets of Beirut welcoming Syrians who have fled to Lebanon: “Welcome to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and sorry for what those racists among us are doing...”

Liyana Badr, who works at the Research Center, has been launching individual initiatives, along with a number of other activists and volunteers, since the refugees first started pouring in:

“The idea came to us at the start of the new year. We noticed that the number of children selling flowers on Hamra Street had been increasing in recent months, so we decided to collect a small sum of money and we organized a picnic for twenty boys and girls in the Senayah Gardens. The sight of them laughing and playing encouraged us to continue our activities. The next day we handed out toys to other children. When the weather got colder and stormier it occurred to us that there were families sleeping in tents in the Bekaa Valley without anything to cushion them from the ground or cover themselves with, and that they must be helped. Using Facebook requests we asked people to donate blankets to be handed out. A lot of people responded and in one week we’d assembled a huge pile of provisions. Our

Syrian friends worked with us and we were in communication with the Bekaa municipality, and we distributed the aid to a number of Syrian families.”

Rabaa, a volunteer for the “Together for Syria” campaign, pointed out that people are more accepting and willing to give when they know that initiatives are not political or sectarian in nature, but are instead individual initiatives with a purely humanitarian motive. A number of activists report that many associations and organizations working in the field of emergency aid lack transparency and are also more concerned with their media profiles and “political and sectarian” agendas than assisting the refugees.

“Together for Syria” is a group made up of activists and students from Lebanon and Syria belonging to a variety of different sectarian and political backgrounds.

“Our motive is humanitarian,” stressed Rabaa. “We meet people in a place of their choosing: it might be close to where they live or work. We collect donations and distribute them to Syrian families in Beirut, the North and the Bekaa Valley. We’ve been working in emergency aid since Syrian refugees started coming to Lebanon.”

It is this same organization that resumed its operations with the onset of winter, announcing that it was accepting donations on its Facebook page just recently. However, despite their importance, these individual initiatives have a limited impact when measured against the huge numbers involved and the sheer difficulty of the refugees’ circumstances.

## “They want to go back to their country”

“They want to go back to their villages, to their lives and jobs and daily existences, but they need peace,” said the Norwegian Refugee Council’s Kalis.

However, until they are able to return without risking death, the refugees are here to stay in Lebanon: A small, fragile, turbulent country. Its ability to shoulder this burden may be weak, but the state has no option other than to request international humanitarian aid, make a serious effort to absorb the massive crisis and pursue a comprehensive developmental policy which will strengthen the host communities, making them less fragile and better able to host those refugees fleeing the regime’s brutality, while granting those refugees their most basic human rights: That they may live with dignity while they wait to go home.

\* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger.

# Carole Mansour Wants Us to See / Wants to Show Us Something

Pierre Abi Saab

Its first showing in Beirut fell on the audience like a slap in the face. "Not Who We Are," tackles a thorny and sensitive issue: That of the displacement of Syrian (and Palestinian) refugees into Lebanon, from the point of view of the refugees themselves. Carole Mansour approaches the tragedy with courage and integrity, as well as a powerful ability to listen. She tells the story through the words of the witnesses, simple stories, true and painful, removed from any ideologies, party lines or narrow interests. There is an entire population (soon to equal a quarter of the population of the host country, as the film claims, probably even more), who have been torn from their land, their place, from their daily lives, from all that is familiar, who have escaped to Lebanon seeking shelter, looking for a temporary sense of security. What have they found in this brother land? How are they living? And how do they regain their memories, describe their actualities and narrate their estrangement?

Some Lebanese deal with the issue of the displaced dismissively and unconstructively, with fear-mongering tones, spreading ignorance and prejudice. Carole presents us – maybe for the first time – with the opportunity to listen. The film is about the plight of women, and the director is reflected back at us as she plunges into their intimate lives. "To be a woman in a time of armed conflict is more dangerous than being a soldier," she tells us. Five female refugees from different social and cultural backgrounds share stories that piece together a picture of the present moment and its difficulties. Afra'a, from Halab, is a middle-class woman living in a Beirut apartment with her sister and some friends; a graduate in English literature, she dreams of acting and singing, and spends her time searching for herself during this "time out" in Beirut, encountering numerous obstacles. Umm Omar and Umm Raed live under harsher conditions with their newborns on a piece of land overflowing with waste, next to a reeking warehouse, where there are five families to a single tent. Samar (not her real name, and we never see her face) was forced to marry off her two teenage daughters, though she had once dreamt of sending them off to university. And finally there is Siham, Palestinian, she of the inimitable personality, who buried her husband after watching him die at the Yarmouk refugee camp, then picked up her two twin daughters and fled to Lebanon, still safeguarding his bloodstained clothes and burying them in a flowerpot.

Carole Mansour's new film tells of these women's powerful modesty and dignified stubbornness. A smile often finds its way onto a face as it speaks of tragedy. Afra'a sings along with Fairuz and Ziad's (and Cosma's) "Autumn Leaves." Umm Omar laments the fact that she is unable to seduce her husband. Siham soldiers on for the sake of her daughters, Jana and Jodie, and works in the service of refugees. And Samar, nostalgic for the blackbird that used to wake her up every morning, sings along with Asmahan: "O Splendor of Roses, the Beauty of Roses." Carole takes us right into the intimate heart of the tragedy, introducing us to its real cost, its true victims. Do these people really live side by side with us? One is left, at the end of the film, with a sense of loss, of embarrassment, of failure and anger. One feels obliged to do something, if only to change one's attitude, to remember always to take these people and their circumstances into consideration in every discussion on the subject. It should be a requirement for every Lebanese to watch, "Not Who We Are," a film by Carol Mansour in cooperation with Heinrich Boell Foundation's Middle East office in Beirut.

\* This article is an updated version of Pierre Abi Saab's review of "Not Who We Are," first published on November 14, 2013 in *Al-Akhbar* Newspaper. It was translated from the Arabic by Lina Mounzer and is republished in this version with the consent of the author.



Pierre Abi Saab is a journalist and reviewer who has lived and worked between London, Beirut and Paris. Since the 1980s, he has specialized in Arabic cinema, visual arts and theater in North Africa and the Middle East. Abi Saab is an attentive observer of literary, artistic and cultural life in the Arab world. In 2001, he established the magazine *Zawaya*, for which he has the editor-in-chief until 2007. *Zawaya*, a magazine of emerging Arab expression – published in Beirut and dedicated to contemporary culture – targets a young audience in different Arab countries. He also was a co-founder of the pan-Arab daily *Al-Akhbar* in Beirut. Currently he is deputy editor-in-chief of *Al-Akhbar*, responsible for the arts, culture and media section.

## Not Who We Are

A Documentary About the Lives of Syrian Women Living as Refugees in Lebanon

Directed by Carol Mansour and Produced by Muna Khalidi  
In cooperation with the Heinrich Boell Foundation's Middle East office in Beirut.

At a time when more than 45 million people are displaced by war and conflict around the world, this documentary sheds light on the plight of women who have sought refuge in Lebanon after fleeing a war that has devastated their native Syria for almost three years. The effects of war on women are intensely traumatic, for not only are they forced to leave their homes, loved ones and social networks behind, they also face accelerated discrimination, disempowerment, and violence.

Through the stories of five courageous characters, we are led through the "refugee experience" as it impacts the lives of women. They open up and share their experiences of displacement and loss, and, in the process, we discover their strengths and resilience in the face of daily struggles to survive in an often harsh and unfriendly environment.

The women share reminiscences from their life in Syria, they talk about their hardships, they speak candidly about issues of intimacy and they disclose both their fears and their hopes for the future.

To view the trailer, please find it on the Facebook page: "Not Who We Are"

## We Love the Syrians, Yet...

### Ryme Katkhouda



Ryme Katkhouda was the news director of *Pacifica Radio Network* in Washington D.C. An international reporter, a senior radio/TV producer and a communication strategist, she specializes in Communication for Empowerment (C4E) & Youth Programs. As a Syrian woman who grew up in Lebanon, she makes sure the story is told first from the voices of people facing the barrel of a gun. Co-Founder of *Tlehna al-Daw* (We Came to Light), she provides this psycho-social support team with executive support, managing its community empowerment programs through communication and leadership development for Syrian refugees and their host communities.

"They are starting to cause serious social concerns," said Mustapha Akel, the mayor of El-Minieh, a middle/low-income city in North Lebanon. "Besides the volume of electrical and water consumption, sewage and garbage disposal problems, the cost of infrastructure repairs and the lack of solid waste setup in the tent settlements, housing costs in town are also sky-rocketing." He modestly added: "I want to marry my son off, but there are no more houses available. And the Syrian women who require much less financial security to be wedded are competing with our girls. Many are worried that their daughters will be a spinsters!"

Like many municipalities who seem to be those suffering the most from the Syrian refugees influx – with the Lebanese government not paying them much attention or taking financial responsibility for the issue – Mr. Akel explained how they welcomed their Syrian brothers and sisters at first and how they even supported them fully in the first four months out of a "humanitarian and religious courtesy." But now, as the Syrian crisis continues with no end in sight and the residents are impoverished as a result of the lack of external market access to the city's produce and products, the city won't be able to continue in these practices much longer. "The Norwegians are helping out, taking on the task of setting up a sewage and solid waste piping system that would feed into the city's existing network. But no one is helping us handle the doubling of the garbage for instance, which has reached 60 tons a day. We need more trucks, more money to pay the extra workers and the warehouses. We surely can use more international support here," he concluded.

In October 2013, during a conference held by the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, Caretaker Prime Minister Najib

Mikati also asked for more support, saying: "The only way possible for Lebanon to address these problems is through the support of the international community in speeding up reaching a political solution in Syria which will result in securing stability there and the return of the displaced back to their houses, homes, land and schools."

Broummana police chief, Maroun Habsheh, a Christian in a mostly Christian mountain town in the touristic area of Jabal Lubnan (Mount Lebanon), 30 minutes away from Beirut, kept reiterating how nice the Syrians who came to his town are, how carefully they park their cars and how politely they talk to everyone. Then he showed me how he registered every single Syrian in town,

with a passport photo attached to each family registration form and the person's civil status. "Culturally, they are no bother," he assured me. He just has, as he added, to go remind them many times day and night that their neighbors hear them when they sit on the balcony chatting away on their cellular phones. Or when they get up to eat in the morning during Ramadan, forgetting that though their religion is respected, people in town do not share it.

Syrian refugees are not much trouble for Arnoun's municipality deputy chief either. They registered their kids in school and supported the medical needs of the some 44 refugee households that came to this out-of-the-way rural area where "rent is high and there isn't much work for people."

"We wish for our Syrian brothers and sisters to be resettled in a protected zone in Syria," said Abu Selim, who just came from the Bekaa valley in East Lebanon, delivering water bottles to the small shop where I had stopped for breakfast. "They are unsupervised. They have no toilets, no sewers. They take our jobs and commerce," added the man who tells us that he is tired of the noise, the garbage, the cheap labor provided by many of the more than 1.3 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Initially, several levels of Syrian refugees settlements – all registered at The UN Refugee Agency or UNHCR – received money to rent garages, shops, empty buildings and collective dwelling buildings that NGOs helped to finish so that they could become livable areas. Poorer refugees settled near relatives working in rural areas and built next to those initial tents what is now known as Informal Tented Settlements (ITS), spread all over Lebanon.

Lebanese Civil Engineer Joumana Nasser, who worked managing many local development project with an engineering dimension, reports that the problem today is that these *ad hoc* settlements are in places where infrastructure was poor to start with but now municipalities must service almost double the volume of activity and population without much of an increase in funding or in human resources and with no infrastructure expansion. "The local improvement needs were huge, even though a lot of efforts were expended by international donors to fund infrastructure such as water or sewage networks. For solid waste collection, there aren't sufficient garbage trucks or bins." Ms. Nasser added: "With the influx of refugees, these systems have been overloaded and all the previous 30-year projections for improving the infrastructure via specific projects have been reached in less than two years."



Syrian father and daughter, Haret al-Nahmeh, Lebanon



Syrian refugees waiting for food vouchers, near Nabatieh, Southern Lebanon.

International donors and NGOs are trying to bridge this gap. "The local municipalities are not consulted much nor do they lead the effort," noted Ms. Nasser. "The lack of coordination occasionally results in garbage bins that the municipal trucks cannot handle!... International donors can make a real difference in Lebanon today," added Ms. Nasser. "If well coordinated, the response to the Syrian refugee influx could increase the investment in Lebanese water and solid waste infrastructure and a chance to implement all pending or planned projects for the benefit of both the refugee presence and the local hosting community." Ms. Nasser, who was a major force behind a formula successfully implemented between the Palestinian and Lebanese community in the reconstruction of Nahr al-Barid camp concluded: "It is for the implementing agencies and Lebanon's government to develop win-win projects to make both communities understand that their well-being is jointly tied, so both accept the other and cooperate to bring these projects to fruition. This would ease the tension that is building up to a critical threshold between these two communities."

Job loss complaints and fierce market competition are trends substantiated by the unemployment figures that have risen from ten percent to 25 percent affecting more than 250,000 males, figures derived from a government commissioned World Bank study cited most recently by caretaker Energy Minister Gebran Bassil. Moreover, wages are being driven down, as a Syrian worker demand only 35 percent of what the Lebanese charges for the same construction job.

"My friend, an accountant that made nearly \$600 USD in Kfar Rumman near Arnoun in South Lebanon lost her job to a Syrian who

does the job now for \$400," said Bahia, hanging out near her friend's shop in Kfar Rumman, a village in South Lebanon, with her seven-year-old daughter in her lap on a school day. "And they keep giving birth in Lebanon. So we don't know what is gonna happen next."

"We have three to four children to a family here, while they come here with ten kids. There is no planning there: How will they feed them, school them or groom them? The Syrians clearly do not care about education," said a mechanic who employs a ten-year-old Syrian child in the same village.

Nevertheless, school directors and English teachers that I had a chance to talk to in Haret al-Nahmeh between Beirut and Saida commended the Syrian students and their parents on their dedication to schooling and their seriousness when it comes to education. "They show much less in the way of attitudes that need to be disciplined and they are learning fast," said one English teacher who says that some of the refugees used to cry when she would enter the room initially.

In one town where Lebanese parents are not aware of which grade their children are in and some 200 report cards are waiting for the parents to bother to come pick them up, Syrians were banging at the door trying to register their kids. The diligent director of this impoverished school simply added more seats and tables.

According to the town's deputy mayor, Mr. Cherbel Matar: "Today, there are more than one thousand students in this public school made for 600." The official who said, "there is much more prostitution in town and theft since these refugees came," added that he "has no problem with Syrians who came a long time ago, have build large factories like the first Commodore Fridge factory and are spending money on both the neighborhood and the

Syrians alike."

Talking about the cultural difference that exists between his hospitable town and the Syrian refugees, Marwan Habsheh, Broummana's police chief told me: "They don't spend their money like we do. They live on very little." He continued: "One Syrian school teacher quantified this to me. She showed me how each Lebanese spends some 10,000 Lebanese *lira* a day on cleaning and self-grooming. So basically what we spend in a month would feed a Syrian family of five for a month."

"They rent hotel rooms and homes, and live a bit... Umm... crowded, not like us Lebanese," said the police chief of the very same town where I lived among 14 people in a 3 bedroom apartment as we fled the Israeli invasion in 1982. He concluded, "We Lebanese cannot live like that. They have a different way of living than us. They need help, cleaning products and assistance for their working family members who are very stressed from having to support them in a much more expensive country than their homeland."

"There is no more room for more refugees," said Mr. Nadim Chehayeb, an official from the Progressive Socialist Party who is responsible for the Aley relief committee and coordinating between the Aley region municipality and local NGOs.

Aley, located in the mountains above the capital Beirut, was the first locality to jump to help the Syrian refugees, providing them with some \$60,000 in areas that they settled in the Northern Akkar region. The area currently has some 2,000 households with five people living in each household on average. The municipality considers the impact of the Syrian refugees as positive since they believe it has created more opportunities for the Lebanese to have an income, especially those who have rented their houses. Last year in fact, it supported some 5,000 families' health care needs in full, assisting 1,700 mothers who gave birth safely, with 100 percent of the infants surviving.

Indeed, there are widespread reports of extraordinary acts of generosity and kindness by Lebanese towards Syrian refugees. "Many in town rushed to help individually and are supporting the 'respectful, well-mannered middle and lower income good people' who came from Syria," said Chehayeb. These Lebanese have established and funded a school for some 435 Syrian refugees, with Syrian teachers and a Syrian curriculum. They also threw a mixer party that brought in Lebanese youth for New Year's Eve that helped tremendously in opening up kids to one another. The relief agency also gets many calls a day from landlords asking them

to take good care of their tenants. The agency then stays in touch with the tenants, providing them with some feeling of security and an open channel to someone hearing their concerns. "Of course there are still a few (some ten percent) complaining about the current system. Some people are aggravated by their daughters losing their work to Syrian women workers, but mostly these are xenophobes," added Chehayeb. Still, I read in *The Daily Star* that the Aley caza (district) was the first town to impose a curfew on its Syrian "guests" for their safety, with 50-60 vigilantes riding in their cars at night to enforce it. Many other townships are following suit, despite the fact that caretaker Interior Minister Marwan Charbel previously told the media that local municipalities do not have the legal right to pass resolutions that infringe on the authority of the Lebanese Internal Security Forces. The southern town of Jezzine even went so far as to forbid Syrians from gathering in public places, something that makes many locals feel more comfortable.

"It keeps them safe. They are beating them sometimes, you know? What do you expect: There is a lot of them and people don't know them," commented one woman. Defending the curfew for Syrians, another Jezzine resident, Marie, said, "I am scared for my children in the school. We don't know how these kids live at home. They are not like us. They should keep them near the border where they can be watched."

For Garbeit Banboukian, Haouch Moussa's Armenian mayor in Anjar, a border oasis-like town on one of the biggest crossing roads from Syria, Armenians understand the experience of having to flee a country. Yet geo-politically speaking, he considers the act of fleeing a problem since the region today is under the threat of the same conspiracy of partition. They are trying to redraw the region's map, he exclaimed. "I took precautions to ensure there is still room for the Armenians who might have to flee Aleppo & Damascus in Syria as we have limited resources and limited space here in Anjar."

As such, he is critical when it comes to institutional aid for the refugees, some of whom who I saw selling Syrian groceries, novelties, underwear and Chinese plastic toys and knick-nacks off of carts. "If you support them economically, it is like you are sanctioning their immigration! You are legitimizing their presence and business competition," declared Hourch Moussa's mayor in Anjar. "Our shops are closing. Grocery shops and small businesses I am telling you, because the Syrians are on the street, noisy, selling everything out of a make-



*Syrian refugee children in Informal Tented Settlement by the Litani River Banks, Lebanon.*

shift unlicensed cart, meanwhile the Lebanese has to pay taxes. You do the math.”

Another concern of mayor Banboukian is that Syrian workers, who used to live with no health care, no education or housing support for years and who are working for less than the Lebanese – thereby depressing Lebanese wages – are now in the business of asking for more support. “They are registering in many townships and cheating the system.” Describing his own measures to deal with this, he added, “I took the fingerprints of all 1,500 persons, and a copy of their family ledger. I have increased the guards and the street cameras. I even forbade motorcycles in the streets past 6:30pm, and when people try to gather to smoke water pipes, lie down or hang out on the boulevard, the town security guards shoo them away. They can go in the public parks to socialize for free and not be an eye-sore. As a municipality, I have to ensure the safety of the town first. I know it is a sectarian way of managing things, but all of us work like this in Lebanon.”

“The power fuses are popping. More power cables need repairs, and the water consumption has tripled since refugees are breaking pipelines to get water and they leave the water running,” explained Saadeddeen Ibrahim Maita. The mayor of Bar Elias, a town on the refugees’ main passage-way through Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley added, “We have discussed these problems with other municipalities and we all need more resources fast, or our services will halt soon. We can barely serve our own people now.” The United Nations Development Programme has documented some 17,000 Syrian refugees in this particular town but Maita believes, “it is more like around 50,000 Syrian refugees now, give or take 5,000. They are as many as the initial residents.” Although, like most mayors, he relies on his own surveys and outreach, such figures are not

hard to believe, as Syrian and Palestinian-Syrian refugees can be seen everywhere. They seem at ease in a commercial corridor town where many Palestinian-Syrians settled and brought prosperity.

On the national government side, Ramzi Naaman, director of the national poverty program and Syrian refugees affairs at the Council of Ministers indicated that some Lebanese are actually benefiting from the Syrian refugees influx, and gain at least some profit since International financial aid is spent in Lebanon. He acknowledged, however, that poor Lebanese families are suffering the major brunt of this influx, especially those who have children and who are competing for meager financial aid and school subsidies. It is also a strain on 30-50 percent of the uneducated Lebanese, particularly women and youth competing in the job market with the new arrival of unskilled laborers. He concluded that what is really needed is for the Lebanese government and the humanitarian agencies to develop aid that benefits the poor in Lebanon, whether Syrian or Lebanese, given projections for 1.7 million poor Lebanese citizens by 2014. The concerns of the Lebanese working poor fighting for survival in a rough job market can seem “minor” though in comparison to some of what I usually hear in Beirut among the middle class.

“They are swallowing our country. Soon, there won’t be much room for us here,” said George while sipping a quick espresso in a nice coffee shop in Saifi, near the port of Beirut, as he rushes to make another delivery for his small business. “It is a conspiracy I tell you, to have us Lebanese leave town so they can settle the refugees.”

“Like in 1982, remember?” added an older man. “They tried settling the Palestinians then. But we aren’t going anywhere. This ship is

not sailing. Lebanon is our homeland.”

Jamal, who needs a quick bite before he goes back to his family so his son Tony, “can take the boat out one last time in this beautiful November weather,” chimed in: “You might not have much of a homeland soon. The ship is sinking, can’t you see? The president said so himself: Our very existence is at stake.”

Back in September, Lebanon’s president Michel Suleiman spoke of the crisis in his country, addressing the United Nations General Assembly in New York, and said it had an “existential dimension.”

This anxiety though is a real fear for many ethnic and Christian, middle-class minorities in a country where sectarian balance

is a highly sensitive issue. “Excuse me but we must say it; they are mostly Muslims, Sunni Muslims. The Christians are going to Europe and other well-to-do countries,” declared Marie, a modest home-maker picking up her kids from school in Jezzine.

Under a banner that read “Our Pride and Victory is in Karbala,” one elderly lady in the village of Kfar Rumman, dressed in black, signaling far too many losses in a place often bombed by Israel, declared, “What needs to happen is for everyone to sit at the same table soon. The Syrians, Iran, Russia, the US and China and work for Syria’s peace. Meanwhile, we have to bear the refugees. We are all Arabs, living in similar circumstances, having the same needs...”



## Shortage and Overflow

Close to Zahle in Lebanon, there is the only official refugee camp of the country that was licensed for Saudi Arabia. On the barren ground, about 40 tents have space. The inhabitants need to go to a facility about 200 meters from the camp to obtain water. On a clear, hot day in August, 2013, the fields right on the other side of the camp’s walls are being splendidly irrigated.

# Syria's Children Seek Another Childhood in Lebanon

Emma Gatten



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Eleven-year-old Solaf laughs when she is asked what she misses about Syria. The other children in her class, a remedial summer school in Beirut run by the charity, Jusoor, say they miss their neighborhoods, their schools and their friends. But to Solaf, the question seems a little absurd. Our homes are gone, she says. There is nothing to miss.

It is perhaps something of an achievement that Solaf can look to a future. For now she, like her fellow students, is focused on learning English, so she can attend a Lebanese public school. The school term starts soon, but not for the majority of the kids here today who have either been unable to find a place, or haven't passed the entrance exams, which include sections in French or English, languages not taught in Syrian schools.

Lebanon is now home to 748,000 registered Syrian refugees, in a country of just over four million. Of these are 400,000 school-age children, only around 100,000 of whom attend some kind of school, according to the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF).

We are facing an education crisis," said Hani Jesri, refugee education program director at Jusoor. He believes it is too soon to tell what the impact will be on a generation of Syrians with minimal education, given how long the crisis situation is likely to continue.

## The burden of trauma

Some of the more immediate impacts can be predicted though. All of the Syrian children arriving in Lebanon have faced upheaval. Many have witnessed violence firsthand, inflicted on family members or even themselves, and now face an uncertain future. In this context, school

provides a vital structure and stability in their lives.

"If these children are to have any hope, it is in education," said Ketty Sarufim, a child psychologist at the Lebanese American University. "Children under conditions of hardship generally become stronger. We actually do not give them enough credit. They don't crumble as we think they might." But cultivating this resilience requires returning normalcy to their day-to-day lives. In the uncertain situation Lebanon's Syrian refugees find themselves, education is the simplest way to do that. It provides a constant in their lives, as well as giving them a vital space to play. School, essentially, can help return their childhoods to them, and hopefully help break a cycle of violence they may otherwise find themselves in. Children with higher IQs have also been proven better able to deal with traumatic situations.

"Some of the students are aggressive, especially when they first come to us," said Jesri. "They have been out of school sometimes for one or two years and their only option is to go out on to the streets."

"We consider education vital, to prevent crime, terrorism, poverty and so on," said Soha Bou Chabke, a senior program assistant at Lebanon's Ministry of Education. The ministry has told all public schools they must accept Syrian students, and has opened afternoon classes in some areas with a high refugee population. But it is running out of resources. During the last school year there were 30,000 Syrian children enrolled in Lebanese public schools, at a cost of \$27 million USD for the government, according to Chabke. If enrollment goes up to even a quarter of the school-age refugee population, "we're not going to be able to cover the costs, because we just don't have the money."

A destroyed school in rural Aleppo, 2012



Lack of schooling locations and educational restrictions aren't the only thing keeping Syrian children from education, though. Many families don't consider sending their children to school to be economically viable.

"Two days ago I spoke to the father of one child, and told him his son had a place, he just had to pay registration fees of \$60, which would be paid back by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). He said he needed the money for rent. He didn't have \$60 to spend," said Jesri.

The dire economic situation for Lebanon's refugees is having a darker impact on the next Syrian generation, with child labor on the rise among the refugee community. Jesri says they'd like to open the school to pupils over the age of 14, but the reality is that "a lot of families rely on these kids for work." In Beirut, children as young as six or seven can now be seen on every main street, selling gum, roses or nuts, offering to shine shoes, sometimes just begging.

## A shelter for children

Home of Hope is Lebanon's only shelter for street children. Currently housing around 70 children, they have seen their numbers double over the past year, the vast majority coming from the influx of Syrian children. The kids arrive via a court order, after being picked up on the streets by police. Most are eventually collected by family members, but according to the home's directors the children are increasingly targeted by child traffickers, who try to forge IDs to claim the children, and put them back to work on the street. Child labor has long been a problem in Lebanon, and the current refugee situation is

adding fuel to the fire.

Located in a small town in the mountains just outside Beirut, Home of Hope isn't exactly as inviting as its name sounds. A locked front door leads to a rundown reception area, the walls covered in art and quotes from the bible – the shelter is run by the Lebanese Evangelical Society and teaches Christianity, although most of the children that pass through it are Muslim. Downstairs, behind another locked door, are the dorms, where the children are preparing for a camp trip. The dorms are sparse, but as home-like as can perhaps be expected. On a typical day, the kids take classes between 8am and 3pm. Most of them arrive at the center illiterate.

These are some of the most at-risk of Syria's child refugees, particularly while they are still on the street, vulnerable to abuse and with no guarantees of food and shelter. Some even deal with serious trauma. All of this can lead to aggression. Maher Tabarani, the director of Home of Hope, said he was forced to turn away the extremely violent children, who are normally older, because of the risks to others at the shelter.

"I can't keep extremely violent kids. If I see that, and I do every day, I can't keep them here," he said. "Children need a place they can call home. They need somewhere they can say 'this is my home, my territory,'" particularly after they have faced upheaval."

The Lebanese government has so far refused to create refugee camps for its ever-growing Syrian population, in large part because of its experiences with Palestinian camps during the Civil War, meaning makeshift accommodations have sprung up in and around villages and border towns. The temporary nature of this life is particularly difficult for children, compounded by the closeness of war



### "Junior Heroes" at Beirut's Monot Library

*Many Syrian children dropped out of school in Syria and not all can register in Lebanese schools. These two youngsters are the most loyal visitors of Beirut's Monot library, that is run by the Lebanese organization Assabil for public libraries. "They come here every day, and even when we occasionally open for an event on a Sunday, they show up," the librarian said. Whenever she has time, she dedicates herself to introducing them to the means of learning, be it print or electronic resources.*

and insecurity within Lebanon itself.

"Ultimately, nothing will be the same – that is traumatic in itself. They are losing their identity, what it means to be a Syrian," said Sarufim. "The best thing for them would be to find them homes, to make them live in a normal situation. But that doesn't exist in Lebanon."

### Abdallah: No memory of before the war

Abdallah doesn't know exactly how long he spent in Lebanon before he arrived at Home of Hope earlier this year. The nine-year-old fled the Syrian city of Idlib with his uncle, the last remaining member of his family, after shelling hit his home, killing his parents and younger brother. He remembers being left by his uncle with some distant relatives, somewhere outside of Beirut, and being taken by them to local charities to claim aid. Then, they told him he wasn't welcome and he was forced onto the streets.

He crept into a nearby restaurant to sleep and stayed there until one of the restaurant workers brought him to Home of Hope.

Now, he says, he is happy. Wearing a Home of Hope t-shirt so big it reaches down to his knees and a shy grin, he said he likes it at the home "because here nobody hurts me."

Illiterate when he arrived, Abdallah said he now loves learning to read. He wants to be a mechanic when he grows up, "because my dad was a mechanic and taught me how to fix cars before he died."

Abdallah's memories of Syria are a little hazy. He doesn't remember a time before the war, although he fondly remembers picking oranges and apples from the trees around his

house, and celebrating Eid at a neighborhood mosque. He has clearly worked hard to block out some of the more painful memories of what happened to him: He said his worst memory of Syria is when his father got into an argument over an unpaid bill.

With no family likely to claim him, Abdallah may well stay with Home of Hope until he reaches 18. He doesn't want to return to Syria, associating the country almost entirely with the war. In a strange way, he's actually lucky: His young age means it will be easier for him to move on from his past, especially now that he is in a stable environment.

### Ahmed: Growing up before his time

Thirteen-year-old Ahmed has had to grow up quickly since his family left the Khan Eshieh Palestinian camp in Syria early last year. In the days before they left, he and his three sisters had been sleeping under the stairs of their family home, out of a fear of shelling.

Back then, his main concerns were playing with his friends and his schoolwork. Now he talks of the rising rent prices in Lebanon, of the disadvantages he faces as a Palestinian here and of the effect the cramped conditions of south Beirut's Burj el-Barajneh camp are having on his state of mind.

"In Syria, I would play with my friends and I would clean my body of all my problems. Here, there's nowhere to play and I can't do that anymore," he said. Space is an issue for all residents of Burj al-Barajneh and Lebanon's other Palestinian camps, exacerbated by the influx of tens of thousands of refugees, but for the newcomers it's even worse, and stands in stark contrast to what they left behind.

"In Syria, the streets were wide, there were trees and gardens," Ahmed recalls.

For the first few months here, he was lonely, having left all of his friends behind, and more obviously troubled by the pain of leaving behind his home and family. Now he goes to a school run by UNRWA, and has friends his own age. Nonetheless, he sees a psychologist weekly, and his father, who in Syria was a history professor but now works as a day laborer, says the cramped home life is highly disruptive. While the family once lived in a seven-room apartment, they now share one room, a concrete construction on top of another apartment building. The lack of privacy is hard for a teenage boy, especially with so many sisters, his father said.

Ahmed is also very aware of the secondary treatment Palestinians in Lebanon receive. His dream is to be a dentist, like his uncle, but he knows that he can't achieve that if he stays in Lebanon, where Palestinians are barred from many professions.

"The situation here for Palestinians is definitely worse. There's no social mobility," he said. He knows this is the government's choice and thinks people should campaign against it. But Ahmed is positive, and looks to the future. He intends to go back to Syria one day, and lights up when he describes the regular calls he makes home to his remaining family there. In the meantime though, "I try to forget. I don't talk to my friends or family [about the war]. We're all trying to forget."

### Miriam: Even here we are not feeling safe

Even in Lebanon, 14-year-old Miriam doesn't feel safe. She worries about fighting around her home near the Chatila Palestinian refugee camp. She worries about the fact that every Friday the army closes the main roads as a precaution against violence. She worries about the car bombs that have happened in Lebanon recently.

"I only go to particular places," that she knows are safe, she said. "It's kind of the same as in Syria."

She arrived from Syria eight months ago, after leaving her home in Jowbar, in Damascus, with her parents and older brothers, and started coming to classes at Jusoor in the summer. She missed several months of school while in Syria and until she found Jusoor had been staying at home in Chatila while in Lebanon. "I was happy when I came and I saw the teachers and the students," she said. "I had

been looking for a school ever since I left my school in Syria."

Although she passed the entrance exams to enable her to go to public school, her parents have so far been unable to find a school that will accept her. But Miriam is determined. "If there was no school, I would be sad, but I must keep going. Maybe I can find a language center and learn English," she said.

Like Ahmed, Miriam said she is tired of remembering the past. "What was then and what has happened since, I don't want to remember." Ultimately she wants to return to Syria and to help rebuild her home and schools. She hopes to become a doctor, to help children and others.

She isn't fond of Lebanon. Her family live in a one-room apartment, in a building occupied by other Syrian families. They share three bathrooms between six families. "I'm not sure the Lebanese like Syrians," she said.

With the Syrian situation in crisis mode, there is little planning for the inevitable long-term scenario, including the future of the 400,000 children in Lebanon. The consequences are incalculable especially as the situation deteriorates even further: Indeed, a whole generation is at risk of being lost.

# Female Syrian Refugees

## Violating Rights in the Name of Protecting Women

Haid Haid



Haid Haid is a program manager at the Heinrich Böll Stiftung's office in Beirut. Prior to that, he worked as a senior community services-protection assistant at UNHCR – Damascus office. He holds a Masters degree in social development and a Bachelor degree in sociology.

The father sells his daughter's honor. It was beneath this dramatic headline, that on September 9th, 2013, the notoriously pro-Assad Syria News Channel broadcast the fabricated "confession" of a sixteen-year-old girl called Rawan<sup>1</sup>: That her father had pressurized her to engage in sexual relations with a number of militia members, as part of what the channel called "sex jihad." In November 2012, the girl had been abducted from an army checkpoint on her way home from school in city of Nawa in the Daraa Governorate, as a way of putting pressure on her father to turn himself in. The failure of Rawan's father to surrender nearly a year later did not convince the Assad regime that it was pointless to keep holding her, but rather encouraged it to look for other ways of making use of her. One of these was to force her to record a televised confession, which was used as part of its media war against its opponents. This incident is just one of many instances of the systematic use of sexual violence as a weapon in the Syrian conflict.

Sexuality is one of the most taboo and morally loaded topics not only in Syria but also in the Arab world. Apart from the actual physical humiliation and abuse many women (and men!) in conflict are suffering, there are many other ways to use sexuality as a weapon. One of them is to destroy the reputation of a woman and her family, the aim of the above propaganda – along, of course, with demonizing the adversaries of the regime.

Even though it is not known to what extent it is taking place inside Syria, the fear of it is – according to reports by international organizations – one of the main causes of Syrians fleeing the country.<sup>2</sup> However, taking refuge in neighbouring countries does not render these women immune to exploitation. When female Syrian refugees are mentioned

the subject of sexual exploitation is never far behind. Sexual exploitation always flourishes in times of war and crisis, but what sets Syria apart from similar situations elsewhere in the Arab world<sup>3</sup> is the legitimization of this exploitation and its transformation into a socially acceptable phenomenon, which has led to it becoming even more widespread. This article will attempt to shed light on this phenomenon and the reasons behind its legitimization and growing popularity, as well highlighting some specific cases.

### The pretext of protection

Many Syrian refugees tell of how, in the majority of the countries where they end up, they are constantly being asked the question, "Do you have any brides?" whether they are walking in the street, taking delivery of aid and assistance or even in their own homes. The usual justification for this is *soutra*, the concept of providing protection or social cover for women through marriage. Although it is well-known that women in the Arab world are stereotypically regarded as "deficient" or as having limited rights (in other words, that they require the protection of a male relative, whether father, brother or son and subsequently a husband) the unprecedented boom in marriages to female Syrian refugees on the pretext of *soutra* has no equivalent in otherwise comparable refugee movements in the Arab world. The region has witnessed a number of waves of mass emigration involving Arab women (e.g. Iraq, Lebanon, Sudan, Somalia and others), but the issue of "protecting" or "providing cover" for these women has never come up, despite the many stories of these women and children being subject to widespread sexual exploitation

and forced to turn to prostitution to secure a living. Rana, a Syrian female rights activist, said, questioning the sincerity of the interest in real protection: "Where were these guys when Iraqi women were being sold for a few dollars? Why didn't they marry the Sudanese and Somali women when they turned up in their countries as refugees, where many of them died of hunger?"<sup>4</sup> At this point we might address the most important factors that have led to the creation and legitimization of this phenomenon:

### The stereotypical view of the Syrian woman

The Syrian woman is seen, in the collective mind of the Arab community, as white-skinned and beautiful, capable of keeping her husband happy and never disobeying him, and working night and day to serve him. One of the most significant means that have helped to foster this image are the TV serials that are broadcast during the month of Ramadan and widely watched all over the Arab world. Where Egypt is considered to be the hotspot of Arab cinema and movies, Syria, in the last decade, built its reputation on its especially entertaining Ramadan serials. One of them conveying the above described image is presented by history-based Syrian television series such as *Bab Al Hara* (The Alley's Door), this stereotypical view of the Syrian woman is contributing to motivating young men to try and get hold of a Syrian girl and thereby fulfil the popular proverb: "*Atgawaz Shaamieh bitaash Isha Haniyeh*" (Take a Levantine wife and live the good life). Even though it is not only fiction, the plot is set in a totally different time: It caters to the wishes and dreams of an audience and reflects their desires, and thereby it shapes the image of Syrian women.



Syrian girl outside her family's pre-fab caravan in Zaatari, Jordan

### Poor economic circumstances

Although refugees in general suffer from reduced economic circumstances, the following points affect Syrian women more acutely than most:

- The majority of the Syrian population are from the middle-class, meaning they rely on a monthly salary without having large sums saved in the bank. Their savings are quickly exhausted as the cost of living in Syria is considerably cheaper than in neighbouring countries (i.e. Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon and Iraq), and the devaluation of the Syrian pound accelerates the process.
- In none of the neighbouring countries are Syrians eligible for work permits which forces them to moonlight and, as a consequence, makes them vulnerable. In some cases, women flee alone with their children, their husbands having perished, stayed back in Syria to win at least some income or out of a desire to guard the family possessions, going back and forth. In other cases, men are ashamed of seeing their family in poor circumstances and of not being able to fulfil their self or socially ascribed role as breadwinners and they leave their families.
- Finally, there is no sizeable, foreign-based Syrian community that can provide an alternative source of income.

### The economics of marriage

Many refugees are forced to marry off their daughters since they are unable to provide for their daily needs (food, water, clothing, medicine, accommodation, etc.). This is especially true of large families or those families whose members have special needs. They marry them in exchange for very small sums,



Arsaal, North Lebanon.  
Syrian women seek refuge in the  
house of one of the villagers.

sometimes as low as \$100 USD, and some do not receive any dowry at all.

Men who otherwise feel they cannot afford a marriage are now in that position – and might even be encouraged by their surroundings, claiming they were doing a good deed by becoming a “protector.” As in other spheres of life, however, they might not respect and appreciate what came cheaply for them.

### Religious exhortation

Preachers in a number of Arab countries have used their pulpits to promote marriage as a way to give *soutra* to female Syrian refugees. While some of these sheikhs confine themselves to promoting the concept of marriage and enumerating its benefits, others have drawn up marriage lists, and have visited the homes of refugees, advising them to marry off their daughters in order to preserve their honour. It’s important to highlight here that his phenomenon has not been created and promoted by a specific prominent preacher. Many preachers, in different countries, started using the *soutra* concept on the local level to justify and promote *soutra* marriage using different fatwas and Quranic verses.

### A lack of security

Widespread reports of the sexual violence to which female Syrian refugees are exposed (including, but not confined to, harassment, abduction and rape), particularly in the camps, has created a deep-rooted anxiety over preserving honour among refugees. The fear and despair that result from these families’ feelings of impotence and their losing hope in any immediate resolution of their crisis, have caused a number of refugees to marry off their

daughters as the only way to protect them. Hasana, a refugee and mother of two, said: “I swear we don’t want to marry off our girls, but at the same time we have to keep living here. Who knows what will become of us here, and I don’t think it’s an option to take them back to Syria because I’m worried what would happen to them.”<sup>5</sup>

Despite the absence of precise statistics for the spread of this phenomenon (a result of the fact that most wives are unregistered) the National Council for Women in Egypt announced that 12,000 marriages between Syrian refugees and Egyptian men took place in the space of a single year.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, the phenomenon has become a part of daily existence for people in those countries that host Syrian refugees, providing an indication of just how widespread it is. Indeed, it is not uncommon to hear some young man joking, “I had better slow down a little! If I carry on like this I’ll end up married to a Syrian!” Or men boasting that they could marry four Syrian women at once. Others use it as a threat to resolve marital disputes: “I’ll go and bring a Syrian woman home to live with us!” It should be noted, however, that people’s positions on the issue vary. Some regard marriages between Syrian women and Arab men as quite normal, something that has taken place both before and after the outbreak of the revolution, and that current concerns are just the media distorting the truth, while stories about poor Syrian families being exploited in order to get enough to eat are just rumours. Others believe that in these circumstances, and regardless of whether or not both parties have given their consent, marriages involving female refugees are invalid, especially since the families and girls are consenting out of need, not out of their desire to start a family. The solution, they say,

cannot be *soutra* marriage, since no problem can be solved by creating another problem; rather, these female refugees must be provided with a safe space in which to live, where all their material and other needs can be met.

### Marrying to survive

Majda is a Syrian woman who was forced to flee Syria around six months ago. She lives with her four daughters, whose ages range from eight to fourteen. Majda talks about the terror she has experienced in the camp, no less severe than that she lived through in Syria: “In the camp I lived in fear, especially at night. I couldn’t sleep a wink until I had made sure my children were all right.”<sup>7</sup> The reason for this was the widely disseminated stories about the abduction and rape of young girls in the camp. “A while back they abducted three girls from the camp,” she continued. “They raped them and dumped them here when they were done with them. No one could do anything because we had no idea who the kidnappers were.” Though incidents of sexual harassment in the camp do happen during the day, the majority of the terrible stories she tells take place at night. Majda is outraged that despite what is happening there is no guard posted by the women’s toilets at night, and that they are unlit and in a state of perpetual darkness: “I’m a big woman but I couldn’t go to the toilets on my own at night. I would always wait until the morning before going.” It took three months for Majda to reach a stage where she was able to live without her constant fear for her four children’s wellbeing at the camp. She needed to provide for them and find a secure place for them to live, but she was unable to leave them by themselves and go and look for work. One day, while Majda was collecting her aid packages with her daughters, a Syrian woman asked her if she wanted to marry off her daughters. After giving it much thought, Majda agreed to marry off her eldest daughter Sara, who was seventeen years old: “I didn’t know what to do. I mean, I told myself that by marrying off one of the girls I could take care of the whole family and we could escape this fear we were living in.” It did not take long until a groom was found: A man in his seventies who paid a dowry of \$3,500. Majda used the money to leave the camp and rent a place to live. Less than a month later, Sara came back to her family after her husband had divorced. “I know I did the girl wrong,” Majda said, “but it’s better to sacrifice one than sacrifice everybody.” Majda doesn’t hide the fact that she wants Sara to marry again: “It’s all a question of luck, but

God willing this time she will be more fortunate and she will get a nice boy who will look after her and stick with her.”

### A crust of bread dipped in blood

A number of aid-workers and refugees tell of the many men and marriage brokers who exploit the dire circumstances in order to find wives. Hasaan, a Syrian aid-worker, said that, “many men, most of them from the Gulf, distribute aid in the camps and other places where female refugees are to be found as a way of searching for a wife, or wives, though these marriages usually last a few weeks at most.”<sup>8</sup> Nour, a Syrian refugee living with her daughter in Lebanon, says that she was contacted by one man who described himself as a philanthropist, and who had obtained her number from a charity. He asked her about her circumstances and needs, then abruptly inquired if her face was as pretty as her voice, and did she want to marry: “The Saudi told me that he will set me and my daughter up like princesses if I marry him. I refused and told him I don’t want you or your aid and ended the call.”<sup>9</sup> Abu Abdullah, a Syrian refugee, said that many men come calling at the mosque where he works, looking for wives: “Do you have any girls looking for

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The issue of sexual relations following marriages involving underage girls is perhaps the greatest worry felt by refugee mothers...

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*soutra*?’ they ask. They think they can exploit us just because we don’t have any money. Once, this man turned up and asked me if I knew of any Syrian families that were all women. He told me he was prepared to pay all their expenses and house the lot of them. I mean, he must have thought I was an idiot. Someone like that, what do you think he wants with all those women?”<sup>10</sup> Although the camp managers are aware of these incidents of sexual exploitation they say they are unable to close their doors to anyone who is willing to provide aid, since demand far outstrips their resources and there is no way they can refuse any offer, no matter how small.

### Exploit or be exploited

The phenomenon of marriage brokers – or “matchmakers” or “guides” – is not new to Arab culture in the context of traditional marriages,



Arsaal, North Lebanon. Two young Syrian girls pose for the photo in front of the house they are staying in.

but the role these brokers play in the context of exploiting female refugees is very different to their former one and is tailored to meet the requirements of their customers. Formerly, the broker's job was to locate a bride to match the expectations of the groom's mother (who had the final say once she had seen the girl), whereas today the broker deals directly with the groom, who inspects (and sometimes does more than inspect) the bride before delivering his verdict. As for the "sweetener," the term for the matchmaker's fee, this never used to be agreed on beforehand, but today it has become an integral part of the marriage agreement. These brokers were once exclusively women, something that allowed them to see the bride and enter people's homes unimpeded, but now that the ultimate purpose of this profession has changed, this is no longer the case.

Umm Wafaa is a thirty-year-old Syrian refugee who lives in Jordan with her two daughters. Two years ago she was forced to flee Syria and has been providing for her children with the fees she makes as a marriage broker. The man who wants to "marry" will contact her and give a description of the kind of woman he wants, a description that is usually no more than that she be petite, pretty, and, if the man has enough money, a virgin, too. Umm Wafaa then tells him about the girls she has available and their prices. If the man wishes to view the girls he must pay a fee of around 50 dinars (the price can vary according to the customer, the broker and the bride) per visit. This buys him the right to see her and drink coffee with her. If he wants to see more he must pay more. Should the girl be to his satisfaction, he must settle all outstanding details with the broker, then draw up an unofficial (i.e. unregistered) marriage contract through a *sheikh* and pay the dowry to the bride or her father. This completed, he is

free to divorce her whenever he wishes. Umm Wafaa says that she is unhappy about her job: "I swear I don't want to be doing this. But there's no work. I can either be a broker or a bride, there's no third way! We are denied everything, you see, and the most important thing we're denied is our dignity. God damn these times for what they've turned us into."<sup>11</sup>

### What can I say?

The issue of sexual relations following marriages involving underage girls is perhaps the greatest worry felt by refugee mothers who find it very difficult to discuss the details of the sexual aspect of marriage with their young daughters. Samar, a mother of five who fled from her home in the Damascus countryside, said of the suffering she had endured over this issue: "It's made me lose ten kilos this month alone. I swear, I don't know what to do."<sup>12</sup> Samar has two girls, fourteen and seventeen and both engaged. Although they are about to get married, Samar is trying to put off discussing the details of conjugal intimacy: "It's incredibly difficult to sit a girl down and explain to her, 'This is what's going to happen.' I just tell myself it's down to chance what becomes of them. Just take his hand and go and live with him." But the problem of sexual ignorance is not the only problem facing these underage girls. Many of them are not registered by the courts, as in many countries the legal age for marriage is set at eighteen, and in some cases the husband refuses to allow it. As a result the families are forced to draw up unofficial marriage contracts for their girls, which means that none of their rights are protected. In cases where marriage to underage Syrians is contracted for the sole purpose of sex, the relationships tend not to

last. The girls are soon divorced and are then remarried to other men, with many of them living out an existence of perpetual rape by temporary husbands. Others are traded: Forced into prostitution. Some refugees say they hear of many cases where young Syrian girls are lured into cosmetic marriages, then forced to work as prostitutes by their husbands.

## Conclusion

Who knows what fate awaits Rawan, with whom this article started and who remains locked up in the prisons of the Syrian regime. Perhaps it is not so different compared to the fate of those Syrian women who were lucky enough to escape the cells only to be exposed to various forms of physical and psychological abuse in Syria and abroad. When it comes to sexual violence in conflict, often only the worst forms in the conflict zone itself are considered. After 2003, many female Iraqi refugees were turned into prostitutes and treated as such in the neighbouring countries. What is new and different about the Syrian situation is the amazingly high level of social acceptance child marriage and *soutra* now enjoy: Religious authorities have not only spoken out to create legitimacy for it, some also are actively involved in matchmaking or promoting the marrying off of Syrian women, always under the pretext of protection.

And there are parents who find themselves in moral dilemmas: They want the best for their children, they feel they cannot protect them or even earn enough to feed the family and then they decide to sacrifice the rights of their underage daughters.

The absence of any likely resolution to the Syrian crisis in the foreseeable future, something that would otherwise secure the rights of Syrians and facilitate their return, suggests that this phenomenon will

only become more widespread and that its damaging and destructive consequences will grow ever more complex and tangled. It confronts us all with the responsibility to create a safe space for Syrian refugees, where their rights can be protected and their needs met until they are able to return to their country, without their having to live with their greatest fears on a daily basis.

1. "Rawan Qaddah: The Girl Who Was Raped Twice," *Al Akhbar*, September 25, 2013 available via <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/191959>.
2. "Syria: A Regional Crisis," *IRC Report*, January, 2013. Available via <http://www.rescue.org/sites/default/files/resource-file/IRCReportMidEast20130114.pdf> See also the "Women Under Siege Project" available via <http://www.womenundersiegeproject.org/content/search?q=syria>
3. This phenomenon was witnessed in the 1990s, albeit on a smaller scale, with the arrival of female refugees from Bosnia-Herzegovina. There was rash of religious edicts at the time exhorting believers to marry such woman using *soutra* as a pretext. The majority of these wives were underage and many were coerced into illegal activities.
4. Author's interview with a Syrian female rights activist on August 16, 2013 in Lebanon.
5. Author's interview with a refugee on August 17, 2013 in Lebanon.
6. "Escalating debate in Egypt about the marriage of female Syrian refugees," *Az-Zaman*, March 31, 2013. available via <http://www.azzaman.com/?p=30237>.
7. Author's interview with a refugee on September 10, 2013 in Zaatari camp, Jordan.
8. Author's interview with a Syrian aid-worker on September 10, 2013 in Zaatari camp, Jordan.
9. Author's interview with a refugee on August 16, 2013 in Lebanon.
10. Author's interview with a refugee on September 11, 2013 in Jordan.
11. Author's interview with a refugee on September 11, 2013 in Jordan.
12. Samar's story is taken from the documentary, *Not who we are*, directed by Carol Mansour and funded by the Heinrich Boll Foundation.

\*The names of all refugees and activists mentioned in the article have been changed to protect their identities.

\*Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger

# Wed in Refuge

## Syrian Women and Girls in Jordan

Areej Abuqudairi

Located some 15 kilometers from the Syrian-Jordanian border at the edge of the northern Jordanian desert, Zaatari has emerged as the world's second largest refugee camp and a stirring symbol of a humanitarian crisis that has driven over 2.25 million Syrians from their homeland. Fires, riots, protests, child deaths, hunger, sandstorms, dust, heat and floods in the desert camp have all placed Zaatari in the headlines of media outlets across the region and around the world. But one issue that has particularly made the camp notorious is the alleged exploitation of Syrian women and girls. Weddings in the refugee camp have been used as polarizing symbols – media reports warn of “temporary marriages” arranged between Syrian girls and wealthy visitors from the Arab Gulf preying on vulnerable families in desperate need of money, while others have used videos of weddings and bridal showers to showcase the “resilience” of Syrian refugees.

A few minutes in Zaatari or one of the dozens of Syrian refugee neighborhoods popping up across Jordan and one quickly learns that the phenomenon is much more complex – with far-reaching consequences for both the Syrian community and host countries across the region.

Despite the media focus on so-called arranged marriages between Syrian brides and foreign visitors, the bulk of marriages in Jordan occur among Syrians themselves. Yet even within the most close-knit refugee communities, a troubling trend has begun to emerge that poses a challenge to Syrian women: Most marriages involve underage brides and remain undocumented. Relief officials, rights activists and even Syrians themselves warn that the trend may leave a generation of young women subject to exploitation, impoverished and without legal marital rights.

Fifteen-year-old Najat was one of dozens of young Syrian women preparing for her wedding day in the Zaatari refugee camp. Inside a pre-fabricated unit, or “caravan,” converted into a hair salon by an international NGO, Najat sat surrounded by her mother, sisters and mother-in-law to be. They were applying henna on her hands and arms while the hairstylist applied heavy make up to her childlike face. “We could not wait for another year to marry her off. This is the right age for a girl to get married and have children,” said Najat’s mother.

### Marriages in numbers

There are currently no accurate figures regarding the exact number of underage girls who have been wedded in Zaatari, with various Muslim clerics within the camp claiming to receive an average of 20 requests to wed girls under the age of 18 each week. Yusef Hilal, owner of one of the camp’s three bridal dress shops, tailors an average of 15 wedding gowns each week – some to girls as young as 13.

“Sometimes mothers come in and claim that their daughter is 17 or 18 years old,” Yusef said as he tended to his third bride-to-be in less than four hours. “But it is clear that many of the girls coming in are no older than 14 or 15.”

As for marriages happening outside the camp, the Islamic Chief of Justice Department in Jordan (CIJD) says there are more than 2,000 marriages of Syrian women to Syrian men that were registered in Sharia courts in Jordan as of November 2013 – more than 20 percent, some 500, involved women below the age of 18. “We know there are many more marriages, which are not registered both

inside and outside Zaatari,” said Judge Ashra Omari of (CIJD). In Jordan, the minimum age for marriage is 18 for both spouses, but in some circumstances exceptions for 15-year-olds are allowed.

### Traditions continued or a form of exploitation

Many Syrians defend the practice of early marriage, contending that the phenomenon is merely an extension of an integral part of Syrian culture and tradition rather than exploitation. “In our country, we get married very early. I was eighteen when I married my wife who was fourteen,” said Samir Hourrani, a 32-year-old Syrian resident of the camp.

A community assessment by UN Women in Jordan, indicates that 51.3 percent of females and 13 percent of males who participated in the study were married before the age of 18, and most prior to their arrival in Jordan. The report entitled, “Interagency Assessment on Gender-Based Violence and Child Protection Among Syrian Refugees in Jordan with a Focus on Early Marriage,” was based on interviews and questionnaires with Syrians inside Zaatari and in host communities.

In 2009, The United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) provided a Situation Analysis of Children in Syria (SITAN), which noted that 13 percent of women between the ages of 20 and 24 had married before the age of 18 in Syria. Syrian lawyer and women’s rights activist Daad Mousa reports that early marriages were “very common” among Syrians before the war. “In Syria, girls are married as young as 13 or 14, especially in agricultural societies,” said Mousa.

Tradition and socio-economic conditions were the major reasons behind early marriages inside Syria, argues Mousa, something that Syria’s Personal Status law allows. Indeed, it sets the minimum age of marriage at 17 for boys and 16 for girls, but allows an exception for religious authorities to approve informal marriages for girls as young as 13 and boys at 16.

Rather than tradition, Syrians in Jordan say they have seen a spike in marriages brought on by more modern financial concerns. Far from their home towns and villages, and associated social pressures, Syrian refugee families are much more willing to marry off their daughters without asking for a dowry or other financial securities in return – exempting prospective grooms from providing a home, furniture, gold and even wedding costs – all the responsibilities of young men back in Syria.

Faced with the opportunity to marry without the combined million Syrian liras – about \$7,000 USD – needed to cover the costs of a dowry and gold, many young, impoverished Syrian males who otherwise would remain bachelors are taking advantage of their new life in refuge. “There is no way I could have gotten married back home even before the crisis,” said Mohammed Naimi, a farmhand from the southern region of Khribet Ghazal. He added that he married his wife in a simple ceremony with his friends and father for a \$100 price tag. In Syria, there were rich people and poor people: “As refugees, we are all equal.”

“They say it only costs a ring nowadays. Why not get married?” said Zuhour, a Syrian “matchmaker” who arranges marriages between Syrian refugees from her temporary home in Duleil in northern Jordan.

Daraa-born cleric Younis Bargaandi (from Southwestern Syria) says although marriages are happening among Syrians, the trend has left the door open to exploitation with girls left with very little rights. “In this camp, girls are being bought and sold with a single word,” said the cleric who unlike many of his fellow Syrian clerics insists on documenting the marriages he performs in writing – a stipulation he said has led many families to turn away his services.

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In ceremonies in Zaatari and elsewhere in Syrian refugee communities, the standard dowry, about 100,000 liras or \$700 is no longer paid by the groom at the actual wedding ceremonies, but pledged in a verbal agreement between the bride and groom’s family to be paid upon their return to their homeland. With that amount – well below the standard 500,000 Syrian *liras* or \$3,500, for dowries back home and the marriage agreement not even written on paper, a debt is created that clerics say few families will be expected to repay. “Can you imagine marrying off your daughter and leaving her rights as a debt?” he added.

The cleric says many families approach him to approve marriages of girls as young as twelve in a bid to better their economic situation. “These are children. In an ideal situation, they should be attending school

instead of becoming wives and mothers.”

“Their insecurities about the future of their daughters make them want to see their daughters married at this age,” explained Naima Shoban, child protection advisor at the Save the Children organization.

## Early marriages: The conflicting views of clerics

Mohammed al-Saud, a 55-year-old cleric who fled his hometown of Daraa for Jordan one year ago, warned that although the marriage of girls as young as 15 remain permissible under shariah law – the absence of religious authorities in the camp and community oversight has left the door open for “widespread abuse” of young Syrian girls. “From a religious aspect, if both families consent and the groom is prepared and able to provide and respect his bride’s marital and civil rights, the union is not only acceptable – it is blessed,” said Saud, who performs an average of ten weddings a week in the camp. “But in Zaatari, families are marrying off their daughters without informing a cleric or even their relatives – God only knows what will happen to these girls in one or two years. Here there is no monitoring or penalties if a man abuses or abandons his bride.” While some clerics like Saud and Bargaandi remain concerned by the rise of unlicensed and underage marriages, others continue the practice in earnest in Zaatari and elsewhere across Jordan in a bid they claim “protects” the rights of Syrian women.

Mohammed Abu Tayyeb, a Tafas-born cleric (also from Southwestern Syria), claims he has sanctioned the unions of brides as young as 12 in Jordan as part of a “religious duty” to protect his community from “exploitation” and what he describes as the “vices of a refugee life.”

“Many of these girls are arriving in Jordan without their fathers, brothers or uncles,” Abu Tayyeb said from the northern city of Irbid, Jordan where he claims to perform some 50 marriages each month – over half to underage brides. “Until they are married they are left to exploitation by men – Jordanians and Syrians – who can sense that they are weak and without a voice. The only way to save them from a life of prostitution or abuse is to ensure they have a husband to defend them and take care of them. We are defending Syria’s next generation.”

One Zaatari cleric, who preferred to remain unanimous due to security concerns, said he does not even meet the bride in person to verify her age and the authenticity of the marriage. “My job is to bless the wedding, only.

She is under her parent’s guardianship. If they choose the wrong husband for a young bride, then they are cheating themselves.

We have done this [early marriages] for generations, and the prophet himself married a bride as young as nine,” he noted.

## Unregistered marriages: Lost rights

Activists, clerics and judges warn of the adverse consequences of these unregistered marriages which may leave women abandoned and prevent couples from claiming rightful legal custodianship of their children. The practice is illegal in Jordan, Judge Omari explains, as



Children in a tent settlement outside of Zahle, Lebanon

registered marriages in a sharia court remain the only written proof officials have of a child’s paternity and birth rights. “Marriage is not recognized unless it is registered in a sharia court. So, if a woman seeks divorce, she and the children will lose all of their rights as we cannot track their descent,” he said.

Although the practice of informal marriages is illegal in Jordan and widespread among Syrians, authorities have yet to report any arrests in connection with the practice. However, those who have already performed an informal marriage in Jordan, and who wish to legalize their union after the fact, face a price. Under Jordanian law, Syrians who wish to register their marriage post-ceremony face a fine of 200 Jordanian dinars or about \$280

for each party involved – the bride, groom, both parents and the cleric – or a 1000 dinars (\$1400) price tag Syrians say discourages many from coming forward and registering their informal marriages. Another factor behind the rise in informal marriages is a unique legal and cultural tradition stretching back decades before the current crisis.

According to clerics and Syrian legal experts, many couples – particularly those hailing from the rural countryside – were only required to register their marriages in court after they had their first child in order to receive a birth certificate under Syrian law. Gender experts warn that long-held traditions built around this legal loophole, along with pressure from Jordanian authorities are dissuading thousands of Syrian women and girls from documenting their marriages – robbing them of basic marital, parental and human rights at time when they are the most vulnerable.

“Girls are being married here while the situation inside Syria is worsening. Some men join fighters and leave their wives here, and some can simply abandon them,” Laila Naffa of the Arab Women Organization (AWO) warned.

Due to the undocumented nature of their unions, Syrian women remain at the mercy of their husbands, who legal experts and clerics warn can divorce and abandon their wives without facing any legal, social or religious consequences. One Syrian woman speaking on condition of anonymity said that after a few days in Jordan, she already began to face threats of divorce from her husband over mundane arguments. “He says if he could marry with a word, he can divorce me with another word.”

Syrian couples who were already married in Syria without registering their marriages are already faced with legal challenges regarding their children’s paternity, activists say. “We have met Syrian families who cannot prove they are a family. Of course, it is even tougher for female-headed households,” Jordanian lawyer Rana Abu-Sundus of the local women’s rights group, The Sisterhood Is Global Institute, said.

## Child mothers

Najat, who was wed seven months ago, is due to have her first baby sometime before the end of this year. She, like the rest of young Syrian brides, faces the pressures and expectations of becoming mothers shortly after their wedding ceremony. Inside Zaatari and in host



*Arsaal, North Lebanon. This group of refugee women decided to pose for photos after telling their heartbreaking stories.*

communities, The United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA) has clinics providing reproductive health services including counseling, family planning deliveries, as well as treatment for infections.

Underage girls constitute more than 10 percent of the recipients of the clinic's services in recent months, with the majority seeking help with deliveries and treating illnesses preventing pregnancies, UNFPA staff said. "Very few women and girls seek help with family planning. They are mainly interested in becoming pregnant," said gynecologist Reema Diab. On average there are 30 births every week in the Zaatari camp, half of which involve mothers under the age of 18.

"It has physical implications, especially premature pregnancy and childbirth, which entail increased risks of maternal mortality," warned midwife Munira Shabaan. Pregnancy-related deaths are the leading cause of mortality for 15-to-19-year-old girls worldwide, according to figures provided by UNICEF.

## Fighter brides

Fatima al-Saud is one of a growing number of young girls in Zaatari who marry only to find their husbands whisked away to the battlefield back in Syria days after their ceremony.

"We were married on a Friday, that next Sunday he was on a bus back to Syria," the 17-year-old said while clasping a photo of her 24-year-old husband Ahmed in the residential trailer they shared for their brief union, five months after his departure.

"I always knew he was with the Free Syrian Army and wanted to go back and fight, but I never imagined it would be so soon."

There are no official statistics on the

number of Syrian women and girls being wed to rebel fighters within Zaatari, although the camp's branches of the Syrian Tribal Council and the Higher Military Council estimate that some 150 current and recently recruited fighters are wed each month in the camp – more than half to brides who are under the age of 18.

Most of the young couples knew each other before their flight to Jordan or hail from the same village back in Syria, with the ceremonies receiving the blessing of both families – far from the exploitive image conjured up by the term "fighter bride."

Despite the conventional marriages, Saud says the lives of fighter brides are not nothing but longing for a reunion with totally consumed living in hope for their husbands returned. She spends her days like most of the growing number of rebel fighter housewives in the camp – preparing tea and coffee for her brothers-in-law and husband's parents, awaiting the occasional visit by relatives, following the latest developments in Syria on *Al-Jazeera* TV.

Still, amid the domestic duties, underage Syrian fighter brides such as Saud say they spend most of their days waiting – for news of their husbands' safety and eventual return.

Saud said she has not heard from her husband since he travelled from his home village of al-Shajareh to the Damascus area with a Free Syrian Army unit three months ago.

In the weeks since their last conversation, Saud was taken ill at a camp clinic where it was revealed that she was pregnant and due to deliver in a little over three months. With her due date a few short months away, Saud now finds herself facing a future she and few young fighter brides dreamed of when they tied the knot – raising a child as a single

mother, far away from her family or traditional social support networks in a foreign land.

If she was back in her homeland, Saud said she would share her child-rearing duties with her mother and grandmother – both of whom were killed during shelling of their home village of Nawa outside Daraa earlier this year. "My mother would have taught me how to raise a baby, how to put them to sleep, how to tell if they are hungry or ill," she said. "It would have been a lot easier."

With the fate of her husband unclear and her legal custodianship of their unborn child in question under Jordanian law, Saud, like an entire generation of young Syrian newlyweds, struggles to find resolve amid an ever uncertain future. "Back in Syria, we didn't know if we would live to see the next day," she said, her eyes fixated on her hands as she methodically knits a hat for her unborn child. "Here we have to learn how to go on and live."

## Syrian child brides: An uncertain future

As hundreds of Syrians continue to trickle over the 370-kilometer Syrian-Jordanian border each day, relief officials and Jordanian authorities expect the phenomenon of early marriages to grow as the conflict in their homeland continues. With over 400 Syrians crossing into Jordan each day, and the UN projecting the refugee population to pass the one million-mark before the end of 2013, authorities and aid agencies are working fast to prevent and save what some are calling Syria's "lost generation" of women and girls.

Jordanian authorities are in the process of opening an office of the country's sharia court in the Zaatari camp to register marriages, ensure they conform to Jordanian and Islamic law, as well as to provide basic counseling for newlyweds. "We are aware it is difficult for people to leave the camp and go to court, but they need access to court and advice," said judge Omari of the CIJD.

Meanwhile, aid agencies and activists on the ground in the camp and elsewhere are working with the local community by launching a series of awareness campaigns warning against the practice of early marriages. Through the assistance of community leaders such as religious clerics and tribesmen, Save the Children is one of many organizations reaching out to Zaatari residents to warn against the consequences and long-term costs of early marriage in exile.

"It took us quite a bit of time to get there. It is very challenging to prevent this practice as it is a tradition," said Naima Shoban of Save the Children. Yet despite the warnings and risks, marriage will continue to remain an attractive option for safety, stability and security for hundreds of young Syrian girls grasping for certainty while facing an increasingly uncertain future.

"The war has taken my family from me," 16-year-old Shireen Hariri, an orphaned refugee from Daraa, said as she browsed wedding gowns at Hilal's Zaatari store weeks ahead of her pending marriage to a Free Syria Army fighter in October. "Now I will have the chance to start a new one."

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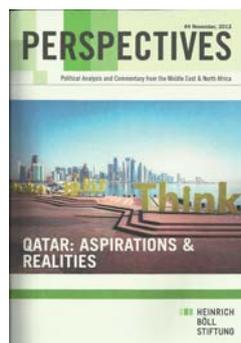
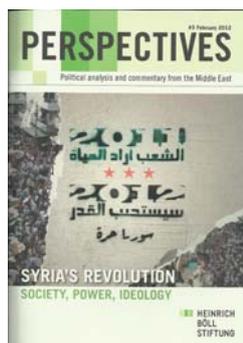
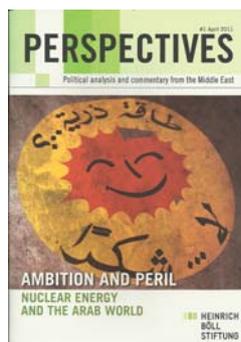
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