



Arab Reform Initiative

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The Syrian Diaspora in Lebanon: Between a Lack of Policy and a Policy of Alienation

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The Syrian demographic presence in Lebanon is not new. Syrian workers have historically worked in seasonal agriculture, industry, and construction in Lebanon. Many families from Syria's middle and upper classes were present in Lebanon in different stages. Some left for Lebanon amidst a nationalization stage during the unification of Egypt and Syria (1958-1961). Some of those that stayed received Lebanese citizenship.¹

Syrians own many buildings in the areas of Raouche, Verdun, and Bliss Street in Beirut, for example.² For Damascenes in particular, Beirut was their second city. It is closer to them than most Syrian cities. They visited Beirut on holidays for shopping and business, but Beirut was also a transit station in their travels. Border procedures were not as complicated, and the highway from Chtaura in Bekaa to the Syrian border was packed with stores owned by Syrians from Idleb and Damascus in particular.³

The intensive movement of Syrians into Lebanon, however, took place after the end of the Lebanese war during the reconstruction era, i.e. in the early 1990s. Syrians abandoned their villages, which were below the poverty line, in search of job opportunities in Beirut that their government had failed to ensure for them.⁴ Most of these laborers worked in construction, under harsh conditions, and Lebanese laws did not apply to them visa-a-vis wages, social guarantees, or housing, and neither did the Lebanese labor law in the event of an accident.⁵

Their arrival coincided with growing military and intelligence domination by the Syrian regime in Lebanon, and its control of political life there. The Syrian regime even used some Syrian workers at times for intelligence purposes, causing some Lebanese to generalize about them as tools of the regime in Damascus.

In 2005, following the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from Lebanon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the massive demonstrations that ensued, there were attacks on Syrian workers depicted as informants for the "protectorate regime." The regime was "happy with these attacks, since they fueled Syrian racism against the Lebanese."⁶

Since the outbreak of the revolution in Syria in 2011, about one million Syrians have entered Lebanon, according to the statistics of the United Nations High



Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). However, this figure may be inaccurate. It is in any case lower than the figure that some politicians and media outlets in Lebanon adopt for the purpose of political exploitation and to frighten Lebanese about Syrian “creeping” and “infiltration,” as they call it, in order to aggravate the sectarian situation and increase “international aid” on the pretext of the refugees: the higher the number, the greater the aid.⁷ According to a report by Human Rights Watch, not to mention public disagreements between the Lebanese authorities, it seems that there is corruption in dealing with international aid, which does not reach all refugees.⁸

Since the beginning of the Syrian movements for asylum in 2011, the Lebanese authorities’ discourse has been focused on Syrian rural classes that had sought refuge in Lebanon, which tend to be less educationally and financially privileged. The aim of this discourse was to stereotype Syrian refugees and raise fear of the burden that they would impose on Lebanese society. Still, it has purposely ignored the responsibility of one of the pillars of power structure in Lebanon, Hezbollah, in forcing a large portion of these groups out of their villages after occupying them. Lebanese authorities overlooked the middle and upper classes that had fled to Lebanon as well, with their bank deposits and their financial and knowledge resources, from which both Lebanon and the refugees could have benefited. Syrian refugees were stigmatized as culturally inferior, designated as *other*,⁹ and considered responsible for the devastation of the country, and were thus made into scapegoats attributed the worst characteristics.

In this paper, we will examine the situation of the most vulnerable Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and then address the situation of the middle and upper classes and the educated elite that sought asylum in Lebanon.

1. The Most Vulnerable: Fueling Further Precarity

When Syrians began fleeing to Lebanon in late 2011, families of Syrian workers who had been there before the Syrian revolution and who could no longer return to their villages were the first to arrive. They were followed with others from the Syrian countryside (primarily Qusair, the Homs countryside, and the Damascus



countryside, as well as Aleppo, Idlib and elsewhere) who fled to Lebanese border regions in the Bekaa Valley and the north. Syrians did not need an entry visa to the country at that time, and the border was open. There was sympathy for them among the residents who received them in the Bekaa and the country's north. Some refugees lived in the homes of Lebanese families, and others lived in tents set up by owners of agricultural lands. Some stayed in stables that were cleared of cattle by their owners and set up for refugees. Others also stayed in unfinished and dangerous buildings or in abandoned prisons, collective shelters, warehouses or apartments¹⁰.

a. The Impact of Internal Lebanese Political Divisions

Given Lebanon's political division around the Syrian revolution, divided between supporters of the revolutionary movement and loyalists to the Syrian regime, state institutions first dealt with the refugee issue with denial. Officials believed that the situation would not last and there was no need for organizational measures.¹¹ The administration left the matter up to local communities, associations and international institutions. However, even in areas which had embraced Syrian refugees, frustrations and tensions began to rise as time passed and as the state remained absent as the first year of the displacement came to a conclusion.

The areas which received the largest number of refugees in the north, the Bekaa, and the Palestinian camps were the poorest in Lebanon. They were also neglected by the Lebanese state and had already lacked acceptable infrastructure and sanitation. "What the Syrian refugees lacked was what the residents of the north and the Bekaa lacked: infrastructure, and social and educational services."¹²

As the security situation deteriorated in Syria and Hezbollah became openly involved in the fighting alongside the regime, in late 2012, the number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon began to rise and the role of international organizations grew. The Lebanese state remained absent, intent on adopting a policy of non-policy – that is, not taking a clear policy with regards to the situation of the Syrians and refusing to set up camps for them. At the same time, this state did not propose alternative solutions and instead dealt with the refugee issue lightly and in terms



of material interests, just as it deals with internal Lebanese issues such as waste, electricity, education and elections. It left the administration of labor-related matters up to “local dynamics.”¹³

As the absence of a clear policy from the state was established, the fate of refugees was left to the municipalities to take measures in accordance with their sympathy with the issue, without any central plan to support these municipalities. Starting from 2013, we began to see discriminatory measures taken against Syrians, such as restricting their movements,¹⁴ as well as attacks against them. The Aarsal events and, before this, the presidential elections in Syria in June 2014, in which a large number of Syrians in Lebanon participated, were a “shock to some Lebanese” preceded by the rise of the Nusra Front and ISIS in Syria. This had a major impact in the ever-greater deterioration of the situation with regards to the refugees. There was an increase in populist and inflammatory rhetoric inciting fears and hatred toward them and legitimizing aggression against them.¹⁵ This occurred many times, specifically after each bombing or crime which occurred in Lebanon. Investigations were not conducted into these assaults, while the perpetrators remained immune from judicial prosecution.

This inflammatory rhetoric can be read as a form of “Lebanon’s involvement in the war being led by Hezbollah in Syria against the Syrian people and the mobilization of many segments of Lebanese society and the exploitation of high levels of sectarian sensitivity against the Syrian refugees.¹⁶” Syrian refugees and laborers in Lebanon were labeled “ISIS sympathizers” in order to justify the aggression against them, combining “the effects of ‘ignorant racism’ and the policies of Hezbollah and their allies to justify continuing to send thousands of Hezbollah fighters to Syria to support the regime.”¹⁷

b. Agreement on the Problematic Nature of the Syrian Issue

Lebanese divisions around Syria gradually faded, and the parties who had previously taken severe positions toward the Syrian regime began to retreat in favor of finding common ground with other parties. The first victims of this process were the Syrian refugees. Everyone agreed on linking Syrian asylum to the fear of



terrorism.¹⁸

One of the consequences of this agreement was that Lebanese factions united around the decision issued by General Security in the first month of 2015 which aimed to curb refugee arrivals by imposing entry visas on those fleeing the war in Syria and restricting residency visas for Syrians in Lebanon with the aim of forcing them to return to their country.

This decision comprised a violation of the international charters and legal systems which stipulated you could not “forcibly deport people to areas undergoing wars.” It also failed to achieve its aim, as it was not able to force Syrians to their country, while it was able to regulate their residencies inside Lebanon.

c. Residency Visas as a Source of Marginalization

Most Syrians in Lebanon now lacked residency visas. It was difficult to secure the 200-dollar price of renewal, while they were also unable to obtain the necessary documents or find a Lebanese sponsor, who often exploited the weakness and vulnerability of Syrian refugees when they could.

The difficulty of obtaining residency increased the marginalization of refugees and led to new problems. This situation restricted men’s movement out of fear of arrest, and children began working to support the family, thereby increasing school dropout rates. The numbers indicate that of the 500,000 Syrian children registered in Lebanon who are between three and 17 years old, about half of them—that is, more than 250,000—are out of school. The highest dropout rate is in the Bekaa area, where about 78 percent of children are not in school.¹⁹

The legal, social and economic vulnerability of refugees translated into an increase in the rate of violence against women and children, early marriage, the exploitation of children in the worst forms of labor, and even trafficking. Domestic violence increased as people were imprisoned in their homes, and those subjected to harassment or exploitation were unable to register complaints, in addition to the fact that they could not register new births.²⁰



This came against the backdrop of the increasing levels of poverty and indebtedness in the country. The latest extensive statistics by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees²¹ indicated that 70 percent of Syrians and 90 percent of Syrian Palestinians (a term referring to Palestinian refugees who had taken refuge in Lebanon coming from Syria) were below the Lebanese poverty line – which is four and a half dollars per person per day.

d. Forced Return and the Impasse

The Lebanese state had prior experience in dealing with refugees and in depriving them of their basic rights. It dealt previously – and still deals – in the same way with the Palestinian issue, under the pretext of the fear of settling them. It today pursues a policy of legal, social, humanitarian and political restriction against Syrians on the same pretext of pushing them to return.

The aforementioned restriction is accompanied by raids carried out by the Lebanese army inside informal Syrian camps, during which they carry out arrests. In 2017, these led to the deaths of at least nine Syrians who were in custody. The army's account of the deaths referred to “chronic health problems worsened by weather conditions,” while images sent to Human Rights Watch showed the effects of injuries “consistent with inflicted trauma in the setting of physical torture.”²² The army did not carry out investigations into the death as it had promised and did not punish those responsible for these crimes.

e. Social and Sectarian Composition

Most Syrian refugees are Sunnis from the countryside and are from areas classified as hostile to the regime, sparking distinctive fears. There was a fear that this group would begin to pursue political, or at in the least social, rights. In addition, there was a fear that they could be used within the framework of the country's political and sectarian balance of power. As such, it was seen as better to push them to marginal locations. Because of Hezbollah's control, they have been strongly monitored and disciplined and severely restricted. They therefore have no solutions available except to leave Lebanon and/or return to Syria, as Fouad Fouad, a professor at the American University in Beirut, put it.



Despite the internal Lebanese pressure aiming to return Syrians to Syria, however, this return remains impossible. This impossibility is manifested in the fact that those in Lebanon are mostly from the poorest class, and it would therefore be difficult to transfer them or for them to return given that they have lost a segment of their homes inside Syria. It is also worth noting that Hezbollah has prevented their return on a practical level, and that the Syrian regime does not want this either: “There is a huge pool of Qusair residents in the Bekaa who are only a few kilometers away from their villages. Qusair has been nominally “liberated” from extremists, but in practice, it has been captured and its residents have been prevented from returning. Refugees are now in a real crisis. There is no opportunity inside Syria allowing them to return and work, and spaces outside Syria have been closed to them. The Syrian regime and Hezbollah alongside it have not allowed them to try to return and search to find out what they can do. Therefore, their presence has turned into problem feeding on itself, a problem that some fear may explode at any moment or create a change in the region to lighten the pressure on them.”²³

f. The Positive Economic Impact of Refugee Influx

In an article titled, “Syrian refugees: Unexpected wealth for the Lebanese economy, beyond demagogic speeches,”²⁴ Rosalie Berthier counted the positive effects that Syrian refugees have created in Lebanon, and which politicians have attempted to disguise by focusing exclusively on negative aspects. The author explains how this refugee influx has not created new problems that have caused Lebanese economic recession, and that it is not responsible for the deterioration of public infrastructure, but rather has exacerbated old problems caused by decades of mismanagement and irregular economic policies. She also shows that the blow to the Lebanese economy (in terms of a decline in exports, tourism and investment) was caused primarily by the Syrian war and not the arrival of Syrian refugees to Lebanon. She concludes her article by saying that expelling Syrians from Lebanon could produce an even worse economic crisis than the one that their presence is supposed to have created, as the departure of the Syrians would deprive Lebanon of an important portion of foreign support and from many



internal services which the country needs. It would also contribute to a decline in bank deposits, which would create additional pressure on the Lebanese financial sector. Their sudden deportation would also create a shock for the real estate market and would threaten this sector's financial stability.

In a study published by Nasser Yassin, director of research at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, entitled "Fact of the Day," he also counted the positive effects that the arrival of Syrian refugees to Lebanon has created. These included the number of small stores which benefit from the food cards given by international organizations to refugees, the number of jobs which have been introduced for Lebanese civil servants to strengthen the capacity of the ministries to respond to the crisis, as well as the rents paid by refugees which in 2016 were close to 378 million dollars.

Jihad Yazigi, a journalist and researcher specialized in the Syrian economy, pointed out that the volume of Syrian investment in the real estate sector was estimated at about 600 million dollars between 2012 and 2014, according to the World Bank. He said that in 2017 Syrian investments in the real estate sector were the second largest after Saudi Arabia, according to the Lebanese property registry.²⁵

The members of the Syrian upper and middle classes who came to Lebanon after the revolution broke out would have been able to offer knowledge and financial investments if they had not had exclusions and restrictions imposed upon them. In an interview, university professor Fouad Fouad²⁶ said that these segments were neutralized because they did not serve the adopted policies of division and *mazloumiyah*, the feeling of injustice. International organizations also did not have a model for dealing with upper and middle classes as they did a model for humanitarian aid to cover basic needs. The opposing model – the integrative model – does not consider refugees to be a burden, but a positive factor.

2. The Upper and Middle Classes: Wasted Opportunities

The first wave of Syrian asylum seekers witnessed great migration by the urban



upper and middle classes. Many have come to Lebanon, which "Syrians have fancied as a country of openness, where it makes sense to invest oneself socially, and where a middle-class person can invest the funds or cognitive efforts that they have."

a. Businessmen and Industrialists: Mismanaged Investment

According to Fouad Fouad, there were no policies to allow investment by businesspersons or industrialists. "Large numbers businessmen and industrialists moved from Aleppo to Lebanon. They registered their children in schools, lived in luxurious homes, and their monthly expenses exceeded ten thousand dollars. Some stayed in hotels: there are stories about Syrians who lived for two or three years at the Venice Hotel, one of the most expensive hotels in Beirut. They deposited their money in banks, and then they realized they could not invest it. Many tried to start businesses, but the laws restricted them." As he recounts, the Lebanese Economic Association held an annual conference in early 2014, in which economists estimated Syrian cash liquidity in Lebanon at seven billion dollars, a remarkable figure that should be invested rather than being kept in banks. However, this has not been done, and Lebanese laws have not responded to the flow of funds that need to be invested.

Syrian industrialists and businesspeople were the first to leave Lebanon: "Their investments left, but many of them left their families and children there, because they are socially more comfortable than Erbil (Kurdistan) or Egypt, where they opened companies.²⁷" Others moved to Dubai.

b. Professionals: Capital Erosion

The professional groups – such as schoolteachers, university professors, lawyers, doctors, and engineers – were restricted in late 2014, when a decree was issued defining occupations prohibited to non-Lebanese. Accordingly, Syrians were restricted from jobs in agriculture, construction, and the health sector. This decision has had a significant impact on a group of Syrians who became unable to



work. This was followed in the beginning of 2015 with the above-mentioned decision by General Security Directorate, which imposed very high bars for residency and treated its applicants unequally. Professionals and specialists were required to obtain a residence permit, provide a lease contract, place a deposit in a bank, or enter into a contract of employment. “Since they were banned from work, many put the equivalent of 100 million lira (65,000 dollars) as a deposit in addition to the lease to obtain residence. With time, however, this capital began to erode. Some left for Europe when it opened its doors in 2015, and a small portion began to think of returning to Syria. In 2017, this group began to return hesitantly to Syria.²⁸”

c. Youth: Misdirected Energy

The most serious loss was the “bleeding of youth cadres²⁹” into Europe. A large number of young university graduates who have the energy and desire to work, and the ambition and the ability to integrate and benefit, came to Lebanon in the beginning of the Syrian migration. Some worked in relief aid and, given the opportunity, they could have played a central role as intermediaries between Syrians and international organizations as well as the Lebanese community and institutions, not only in relief but also in educational, health, and other institutions.³⁰ However, the lack of opportunity for these young people to stay in Lebanon augmented the control of certain clerics and Islamic associations on Syrian communities.³¹

Young Syrians opened some restaurants, cafes, and shops, as permitted by Lebanese law. Moreover, in the first stage of migration, Beirut witnessed cultural and artistic activity that was fostered by the arrival of many young Syrian artists. Various Syrian or Syrian-Lebanese bands were formed, plays were staged, and exhibitions were held.

However, over time, staying in Lebanon became difficult for this group of youth. The difficulty of obtaining a residence permit, the cost of living, and their sense of threat made them seek out places that provide them with a space to work and psychological stability.³² “The worst thing that has happened in the past three years, which makes it more difficult to return to Syria, is that most young people of



working age moved to Turkey and then to Europe, before Turkey closed its doors to Syrians.³³”

The departure of young people who drove Syrian civil organizations in Lebanon reflected negatively on the activity of these institutions.³⁴ This adds to the restrictions imposed since 2017, after their activities were overlooked in the early years. At present, Syrian organizations cannot carry out their activities openly and publicly, but only through a “Lebanese façade.”³⁵

Still, the workspace remains open available despite the difficulties. Many Syrian organizations continue to operate in Lebanon in the field of women's rights, relief, alternative education, music, culture, citizenship, capacity building, and transitional justice.³⁶ They also seek networking and cooperation among themselves.³⁷

d. A United Front

There are no deep political divisions at the level of the Syrian civil society organizations in Lebanon. According to Fouad Fouad, there are “Syrians who support the Syrian regime and consider what is happening a conspiracy. There is a silent category of Syrians who are concerned with the developments inside Syria. There is also a third group of Syrians whose positions changed when the power balance changed and they began to consider returning to Syria. The regime, for its part, used its well-known policy, i.e. confiscating the assets of any public opposition voice abroad to impose silence. The category that is shrinking in size (most of whom migrated to other countries) has some different views in analyzing events in Syria, but are inclined to hold the regime responsible for the Syrian tragedy.”

Conclusion

After pushing qualified groups that can provide help and reducing the burden of the refugees to leave Lebanon, it is today only the poorest and the least educated Syrians who remain in Lebanon. Given this, no Syrian political activity has taken shape in Lebanon, as restriction on associations and current Lebanese political



persuasions prevent any Syrian political formation.³⁸ As Ali Atassi, a Syrian writer and director states, “There is no political entity that can defend the rights of Syrian refugees in Lebanon aside from the Syrian embassy, which does not do so at all.³⁹”



Endnotes

1. Interview with Fouad Fouad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
2. Interview with Mamoun Ganama, a Syrian businessman, held in Beirut on 11 March 2018.
3. Interview with Mamoun Ganama, a Syrian businessman, held in Beirut on 11 March 2018.
4. There are no accurate statistics on the actual number, but the number of Syrian workers in 2000 was estimated at half a million, according to an Amnesty International report.
5. Ryan Majed, "The Story of the Syrian Worker the Roaster of Beirut," NOW, 10 March 2018.
6. Omar Kaddour, "On the Lebanese intimidation on us," Al-Mustaqbal newspaper, 14 September 2014.
7. Interview with Ali Atassi, Syrian writer and director, held in Beirut on 6 March 2018.
8. Human Rights Watch, Syrian Refugee Children's Uncertain School Aid, 14 September 2017.
9. Interview with Fouad Fouad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
10. Ryan Majed, "On Some Conditions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," published in Perspectives, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Review, on 29 November 2013.
11. Ryan Majed, "A new wave of hatred against the Syrian refugees after the bombings of the Lebanese town of Al-Qaa", Al-Hayat 7 July 2016
12. Ryan Majed, "On Some Conditions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," published in Perspectives, the Heinrich-Böll-Stiftung Review, on 29 November 2013.
13. Ryan Majed, "A new wave of hatred against the Syrian refugees after the bombings of the town of Al-Qaa al-Bananiya", Al-Hayat 7 July 2016.
14. In 2013, Burj Hammoud municipality took the first discriminatory measures against the Syrians. It demanded the residents of the area not rent their homes to Syrians, and expelled some of their homes. In 2014, 45 municipalities tightened the movement of Syrian refugees when they were subjected to a night curfew, feeding a climate hostile to them. The curfew appeared "in retaliation for the clashes that took place in Aرسال in August 2014 between the Lebanese army and extremist groups emanating from Syria," Human Rights Watch said in a report.
15. When Lebanese visitors were kidnapped in Syria in 2013, the Syrians were attacked in Lebanon. They were also subject to attacks after the ISIS kidnapped a Lebanese soldier, Abbas Medlaj, during the events of Aرسال in 2014.
16. Ryan Majed, "Organized Gangs Assault the Syrians in Lebanon", NOW 9 September 2014.
17. Ziad Majed, "Racism of the Idiot", NOW. 9 September 2014.
18. Interview with Fouad Fouad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
19. Lebanon crisis response plan 2017-2020, p.11
20. Lebanon crisis response plan 2017-2020,
21. Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Lebanon, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon to further poverty", Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, 15 December 2017.
22. Human Rights Watch report, " Lebanon: Deaths, Alleged Torture of Syrians in Army Custody", 20 July 2017.



23. Interview with Fouad Fouad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
24. Rosalie Berthier, «Les refugies syriens, une richesse inespérée pour l'économie libanaise: Au-Delà des discours démagogiques», 9 Janvier 2018, magazine orientxxi.info.
25. An interview with Jihad Yazji, a journalist and Syrian economist, held in Beirut on 18 February 2018.
26. Interview with Fuad Fuad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
27. Interview with Fouad Fouad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
28. Interview with Fouad Fouad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
29. Interview with Sabah Al-Hallaq, specialist in women's issues at the Syrian Association for Citizenship, held in Beirut on 5 March 2018.
30. Interview with Ali Al-Atassi, Syrian writer and director, interviewed in Beirut on 6 March 2018.
31. Interview with Ali Al-Atassi, Syrian writer and director, interviewed in Beirut on 6 March 2018.
32. Interview with Maurice Aayek, a Syrian journalist specializing in media development, held in Beirut on 26 February 2018.
33. Interview with Fuad Fuad, Syrian university professor, interviewed in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
34. Interview with Maurice Aayek, a Syrian journalist specializing in media development, held in Beirut on 26 February 2018.
35. Interview with Sabah Al-Hallaq, specialized in women's issues in the Syrian Association of Citizenship, held in Beirut on 5 March 2018.
36. Women Now, Syrian Eyes, Gharssah Team, Sawa for Development and Aid, Najdah Association Najdah Now, Alphabet, Kiyani, Bassmah w Zaitounah, Bassamat, Jussour, Molham Volunteering Team, Multi Aid Programs, Dammah, Noun, Lamsat Ward, the Syrian Center for education, The Syrian League for Citizenship, Bidayat, Ittijahat.
37. Interview with Maurice Aayek, a Syrian journalist specializing in media development, held in Beirut on 28 February 2018.
38. An interview with Fuad Fuad, a Syrian university professor, held in Beirut on 4 March 2018.
39. Interview with Ali Atassi, Syrian writer and director, held in Beirut on 6 March 2018.



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