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Syrian war refugees in Lebanon (2011-16): Unwelcome urban residents and access to the city

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Translated by Cadenza Academic Translations

Abstract

The massive flow of refugees into Lebanon since the beginning of the conflict in Syria has required Lebanese society and its government to deal with a transformation that is unparalleled in the country's recent history. The situation has been exacerbated by the fact that the refugees are concentrated in urban areas.

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1. <http://eso.cnrs.fr/fr/index.html>

In this respect, Syrian migration into Lebanon differs from typical images of refugee populations, which associate them with temporary facilities or tented settlements. The rapid increase in urban populations (roughly 25 percent in four years) has put infrastructure under severe strain and aggravated tensions between Lebanese people and the new Syrian arrivals. The Lebanese authorities have nevertheless reacted slowly. Since 2011, the government has, for example, refused to grant Syrians refugee status and has imposed increasingly harsh restrictions on them. Since January 2015, Syrian migrant workers have been placed under the authority of an individual Lebanese ‘sponsor’ (the *kafala* sponsorship system), which compels them to try to make themselves invisible in the city and often puts them in illegal situations. This article analyzes the changes in the migration policies of the Lebanese government between 2011 and 2015, their negative impact on the ability of Syrians to gain access to the city, and the effect on urban life as a whole, for both Syrian and Lebanese residents.

Keywords: refugees, Lebanon, migration policies, access to the city, *kafala*

Since 2011, the conflict in Syria has resulted in a massive influx of refugees (at least 1.5 million people) into Lebanon. In 2017, there were still nearly a million registered Syrians in the country, representing 25 percent of the total population.¹ The image of refugees living in makeshift camps dominates in the media, and even in some research (Agier *et al.* 2014), however, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates that over half of all refugees around the world live in urban areas. This observation has been confirmed by multiple field studies (such as Vivet 2015).² In gravitating toward urban areas, refugees hope to benefit from a wider range of resources, and easier access to services and economic activities. This pattern can be seen in Lebanon, where the influx of Syrians is an almost exclusively urban issue. UNHCR data show that, like Lebanese citizens themselves, over 90 percent of the Syrian refugees registered since 2011 live in urban areas (Verdeil *et al.* 2007). The majority have opted to settle in the largest agglomerations, where jobs and housing are easiest to find. Beirut, and the cities in the Bekaa region (Zahle) and northern Lebanon (Tripoli) thus appear to be preferred destinations, and Syrians now form the majority in some neighborhoods in these cities.³

1. Throughout this article, the term “Syrians” refers exclusively to nationality, independent of all other characteristics, such as religion. The same applies to our use of the adjective “Lebanese.”

2. “Urban Refugees,” UNHCR, 2016, last consulted May 7, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/urban-refugees.html>.

3. Statistical definition of Lebanese cities is a difficult task, as average occupation densities mean that 90 percent of the total population can be considered to be urban based on the international

Syrian migration into Lebanon results from the violence of the war, but is also determined by other, sometimes older factors. The places where Syrians settle are for example influenced by social and family networks rooted in certain neighborhoods, or by their proximity to Lebanese communities with a shared religion or history (in the case of Syrian-Palestinians). Areas of geographic concentration are also explained by a long history of labor migration, supported from the 1960s by policies in both countries (Chalcraft 2006) that led to borders being opened up, except during the period of Syrian military occupation (1990-2005).⁴ As such, the Syrians who have recently settled in Lebanon cannot be exclusively considered *war refugees* in the sense of international law. The forced migration of Syrians into Lebanon may be inextricably linked to the war, but it is driven by complex forces that result from different layers of the two countries' histories.

Indeed, since 2011, Lebanese society has cohabited with Syrians whose presence reawakens a painful past. Whether they support or oppose the regime, Syrian citizens are associated with a non-democratic state whose single party was responsible for the subjugation of Lebanese sovereignty until 2005. As a result, the entry and residence regulations that were favorable to Syrians at the start of the conflict have gradually hardened as the waves of migration have increased. Since 2015, the borders have been almost entirely closed, and all Syrians without refugee status are subjected to a legal system that turns them into second-class citizens: the *kafala* system. This requires them to find a Lebanese sponsor—someone who will act as a guarantor for the authorities in exchange for a fee—before they can apply for a residence permit.

Despite these restrictions, Syrians are continuing to settle in Lebanese cities: subjected to these strict regulations, they deploy tactics and strategies to make themselves invisible and anonymous, the only protections that might prolong their stay in the country. Fleeing the internal conflict, and forced to seek refuge in a neighboring state that was until recently under military occupation by the Syrian regime, they must consent to restrictions on their basic rights, tolerate economic exploitation, and accept their status as unwelcome

threshold of 1,000 inhabitants per conurbation, which is however very low. Lebanon is divided into six governorates (Muhafazat) that are subdivided into twenty-five districts, and these divisions do not necessarily follow relevant urban boundaries.

4. The Lebanese Civil War began in 1975 and came to an end in 1989, when a tripartite committee consisting of Algeria, Morocco, and Saudi Arabia oversaw signature of the Taif Agreement (on October 22, 1989), which was brokered by the Arab League. The protagonists involved in the civil war met in Taif, Saudi Arabia, to agree on a seven-point document. In addition to members of the Lebanese parliament representing certain factions that had taken part in the civil war, the agreement also involved neighboring country Syria, which had been involved at an early stage. This agreement entrenched an interfaith consensus that paralyzed the entirety of Lebanese political society, allowing the Syrian Baath regime to establish an effective protectorate over Lebanon, combined with a military occupation that lasted until 2005 (Chalcraft 2006).

urban residents. Meanwhile, as it takes in this massive influx of Syrian migrants, Lebanese society—with the exception of a minority of activists—is tolerating this situation of discrimination. The injustices are political, but tend to have specific spatial dimension. They materialize in urban geography and in the everyday practices of different groups of urban residents.

Restrictive measures that go as far as prohibitions on the use of public spaces through curfews, imposed or communicated by urban authorities, have increased mistrust between Lebanese and Syrian people, resulting in practices of avoidance, reactions of intolerance, and even acts of violence. These tensions vary across different locations, social situations, political positions, and religious communities, but a general rise in animosity can be seen as refugees settle permanently and mechanisms of control are strengthened. Lebanese cities have thus become sites for permanent negotiation between two groups of urban residents; a negotiation in which the Syrians are grossly dominated. Living in precarious circumstances, they are trying to adapt to the successive regulations introduced by the state or local authorities. Their position is particularly uncertain because the Lebanese state is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (commonly known as the “Geneva Convention”).⁵

This article considers the practical conditions of access to Lebanese cities faced by Syrians who have fled the war in their country. Our study is based on around fifty interviews, twenty of them comprehensive, and thirty conducted during field observation studies, along with two focus groups held in two neighborhoods in Tripoli and Beirut between November 2014 and November 2015.⁶ The first section provides a geography of displaced Syrians in Lebanese urban areas, and an overview of the successive policies implemented by the authorities. These descriptions will not be approached through the sole prism of the “marginal man”, described by Robert E. Park and Everett V. Stonequist as vulnerable and related to “the suffering of discovering the world in the urban maze” (Missaoui and Tarrus 2006).⁷ Instead, given the long-standing nature of relations with Lebanon, we argue that, although dominated, Syrians

5. UNHCR, original 1951 text supplemented by the 1967 protocol. For more detail, see “The 1951 Refugee Convention,” UNHCR, last consulted May 7, 2019, <https://www.unhcr.org/uk/1951-refugee-convention.html>.

6. These studies were carried out as part of Dima El Khouri-Tannous’s doctoral research. All interviews were conducted in Arabic, without an interpreter. Digital recording was used during the observation phases that were accompanied by verbal exchanges, and during the two interviews with Syrian refugees, who also acted as guides in their neighborhoods of residence. Each observation phase included interviews with Lebanese and Syrian people of different ages, sexes, and religious beliefs, accompanied by contact with representatives from local authorities and employees of national and international humanitarian organizations.

7. *The Marginal Man*, Robert E. Park and Everett V. Stonequist (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1928), cited in and back-translated from Missaoui and Tarrus 2006.

are actors in their own right, “required to negotiate the diversity and limits of their desires and choices, and to situate them at the intersection between rich and poor areas, between day and night, between work and idleness” (Missaoui and Tarrus 2006). The second section of the article describes the impact of the political measures taken against Syrian war refugees. Between 2011 and the end of 2014, the state merely took a *laissez-faire* approach, leaving local authorities to manage their own situations, but a sudden change took place in January 2015, when measures designed to limit the movement of Syrians in urban areas were introduced. In the final section of the article, we will look at recent measures introduced to control Syrian migration, with a particular focus on the *kafala* system, which has had profound repercussions on the urban practices of Syrians and their access to the city.

SYRIANS IN LEBANON: URBAN MIGRANTS

Syrians in Lebanese towns and cities

In May 2015, there were nearly 1.03 million UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and this number is likely to have further increased since then.⁸ Syrians can be found in all regions of the country, but are concentrated in the main cities and their surrounding areas (figure 1). Within urban areas, high concentrations are frequently linked to a high proportion of low-income or poor communities. In Tripoli, the Fayhaa Union of Municipalities (UoM) reported 71,145 officially registered Syrian refugees in October 2014, but they are in fact estimated to number nearly 259,000, with 148,000 living below the poverty line (officially set at €3 per day).⁹ The same can be seen in Bourj Hammoud, in the eastern suburbs of Beirut, where 17,591 refugees were registered in October 2014, a figure that is likely underestimated. According to data gathered during field research by UN-Habitat in 2015, the neighborhood had a total population of 75,866 inhabitants, with 8,500 of them living below the poverty line.¹⁰

8. It is difficult to provide a precise number of Syrian refugees and displaced persons in Lebanon, as registration was abolished in May 2015. Before this date, registration was possible but not compulsory. Many Syrians therefore refused to register, not wanting to receive the aid offered by the United Nations because they had entered the country illegally. They also feared the Syrian authorities, who were in a position to carry out reprisals on members of their family or relations who remained in the country. Furthermore, as Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention, Syrians registering as refugees could not automatically obtain a residence permit.

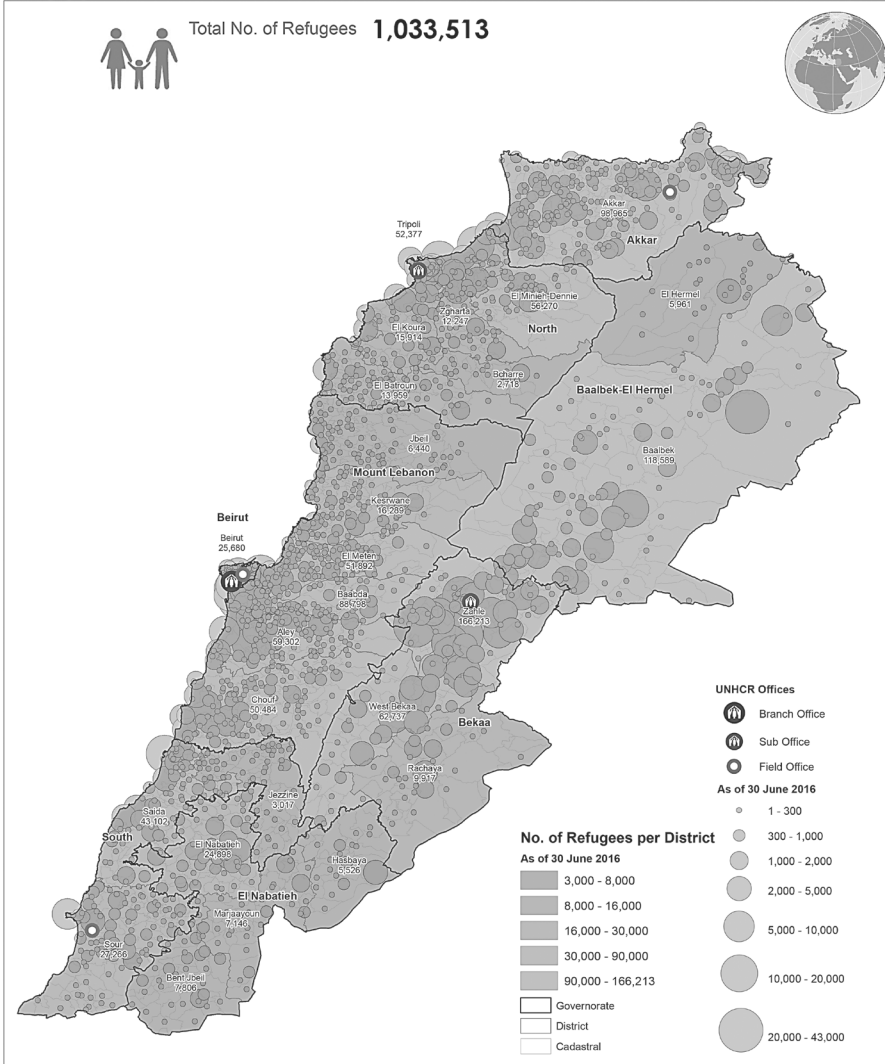
9. Working paper: UN-Habitat, Union of Municipalities, Overview and Statistics, January 27, 2015.

10. UN-Habitat, 2015, Data sheet provided to the author.



SYRIA REFUGEE RESPONSE
LEBANON Syrian Refugees Registered
 30 June 2016

UNHCR Lebanon - Beirut
 Country Office



This map has been produced by the Inter-Agency Information Management Unit of UNHCR based on maps and material provided by the Government of Lebanon for operational purposes. It does not constitute an official United Nations map. The designations employed and the presentation of material on this map do not imply the expression of any opinion whatsoever on the part of the Secretariat of the United Nations concerning the legal status of any country, territory, city or area or of its authorities, or concerning the delimitation of its frontiers or boundaries.

Data Sources:
 - Refugee population and location data by UNHCR as of 30 June 2016. For more information on refugee data, contact Diana El Habr at elhabr@unhcr.org
 GIS and Mapping by UNHCR Lebanon. For further information on map, contact Jas Ghosn at ghosn@unhcr.org or Maroun Sader at sader@unhcr.org

Figure 1. The location of refugees in Lebanon (Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, June 30, 2016)
 (Source: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php>)

There are several reasons for this pattern of distribution. First, UNHCR was prevented by the Lebanese authorities from setting up refugee camps in the country (Buccianti-Barakat 2016, 263). Second, many Syrian migrants lived and worked in Lebanon after the end of the civil war in 1990, coming and going between the two countries depending on the economic cycle. When war broke out in 2011, it is estimated that several hundred thousand such Syrians already working in Lebanon were unable to return to Syria and thus “automatically” became displaced persons (Buccianti-Barakat 2016, 263). This meant that many Syrian families already had a relative or friend on the ground when the violence led to them fleeing their country, and until January 2015 they were able to enter Lebanon without specific formalities. During the first three years of the conflict, there were thus no barriers to Syrians entering Lebanon, as there were no measures in place to limit their entry or movements.

In such a context, individuals decide where to settle based on their support networks, potential access to housing, jobs, or economic activity, proximity to a shared community (religious, political, linked to a profession or social group), and the ability of international organizations to support them (Fawaz 2014). This phenomenon, which can be seen in many different contexts, has specific features in the case of Lebanon that are worthy of closer examination.

Beyond the specific case of Syrians, several studies have demonstrated the arrangements negotiated between migrants and Lebanese people for access to housing or trade (Deboulet 2008; Hily 2009). These studies offer a new understanding of the sociospatial determinants of access to urban infrastructure, revealing “forms of interaction, but also of avoidance” (Doraï 2007).¹¹ This observation can be easily applied to Syrians, with growing validity as the migration flows have increased. These arrangements mean that middle-class Christians from Damascus are likely to live in the Mount Lebanon area, while Alawites tend to settle in Shiite areas or those under Hezbollah control.¹² These spatial rules are not without their exceptions, including Beirut and its suburbs, whose favorable economic conditions are attractive to Syrians who do not have a support network to provide them with access to housing or employment. Beirut is the natural choice for these refugees as it offers more economic opportunities, which supersede the factor of socioreligious identity.¹³

11. Translator’s note: Unless otherwise stated, all translations of cited foreign language material in this article are our own.

12. Our use of these terms is not intended to conflate individual beliefs and social positions linked to religious identity (the only ones that concern us here) under a single term.

13. This explains the social, religious, and economic diversity in the distribution of Syrian migrants in Beirut. Such diversity can also be seen across the city’s population as a whole.

***Policies toward Syrian migrants:
Four phases between 2011 and 2015***

Between March 2011, when significant migration began, and December 2016, various political, social, and economic constraints were imposed on Syrian refugees. Their legal status and living conditions in Lebanon have been downgraded, affecting their access to the city (figure 2).

In the first few months, refugees were able to enter the country without a visa, and other than a few isolated incidents (private disputes), the primary constraint was financial. In this initial period, Syrians were not therefore in a significantly different position from other economic migrants. Their geographic distribution closely corresponded to that of their relatives or friends, with this key factor guided by the opportunities for identification and social recognition they might find in certain cities, such as Tripoli. Until February 2013, the 190,000 Syrians who had arrived in Lebanon only had a marginal impact on the social, political, and regional equilibria. They were not considered to be refugees by the Lebanese authorities, and their entry to the country was subject to common law regulations.

In February 2013, the Syrian conflict took a turn for the worse as the opposition movement was heavily repressed, and the war became increasingly violent. The flow of migrants increased, with thousands a day crossing the Lebanese border.¹⁴ During the month of February alone, 160,000 additional migrants were registered. Until April 2014, when the threshold of a million Syrians was reached, entries grew to over 60,000 a month. The symbolic figure of a million was a shock to Lebanese public opinion, leading to another change to the situation.

The intensification of the Syrian conflict also increased tensions within Lebanon. The substantial humanitarian aid made available to Syrians was resented by the poorest Lebanese citizens, including those living in Beirut, whose already precarious situation became even more difficult when the rent control system came to an end on April 1 (Marot 2014–2015). Syrians had almost entirely settled in urban areas, putting further pressure on the already inadequate capacity of infrastructure and utilities. Another symbolic threshold was reached in spring 2014, when Syrian migrants outnumbered the Lebanese citizens in some communities, such as Zeitoun in Tripoli (UN-Habitat 2015). From then on, due to the urgency of the situation, the government definitively took charge of dealing with refugees, taking over from humanitarian organizations (Boustani *et al.* 2016).

14. "Lebanon total persons of concern," UNHCR Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal, last consulted May 9, 2019, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>.

	Conditions of entry	Conditions of residence	Approximate number of refugees (at end of period) Source: UNHCR	Sociopolitical context
Phase 1: March 2011 - February 2013	Free entry with passport. Checks at the border. Form granting a 6-month stay.	Six months renewable upon visit in person to the offices of the General Security Directorate.	188,000	Low level of support from the Lebanese people. Syrians considered to be refugees with their movements restricted by some local authorities.
Phase 2: March 2013 - April 2014			1,045,000	200,000 Syrian refugees between February and March 2013. The threshold of one million refugees triggers international awareness.
Phase 3: May 2014 - December 2014		Symbolic financial contribution.	1,170,000	Tensions rise following the Syrian presidential elections, in which Syrian refugees in Lebanon participate. The number of entries slows down. The government limits the movements of Syrians with passes required across the country.
Phase 4: January 2015 - December 2016	Entry restricted. Some categories of refugees are still however accepted (young graduates, artists, high-income individuals). Christian Syrians are preferred in some districts).	One year, renewable under very restrictive conditions. The entry visa cost reaches 200 USD, on top of varying additional fees.	1,033,000	Restrictions are put placed on the conditions of stay, and the <i>kafala</i> system is extended to Syrians. Syrians are placed under the personal authority of a Lebanese sponsor. Decrease in the number of registered refugees.

Figure 2. Table outlining the Syrian presence in Lebanon, broken down into four phases.

Designed and produced by Dima Elkhouri.

In June 2014, Syrians in Lebanon were invited to vote in the Syrian presidential elections. Votes had to be cast in the embassy, located in a suburb of Beirut, and Syrians travelled there in loud convoys, with some chanting their support for Bashar al-Assad.¹⁵ These events definitively impressed upon Lebanese public opinion the burden of Syrian migration. Beyond their quantitative numbers, Syrians were now politically visible, reminding Lebanese people of the dark days of the occupation. The episode was extensively reported in the media, and directed the way in which the various sectors of Lebanese public opinion subsequently saw Syrians.¹⁶ Under pressure from public opinion, the government abandoned its *laissez-faire* strategy and attempted to stop the flow of refugees, and to reduce the visibility of Syrians who had already settled in the country.

SYRIAN AND LEBANESE URBAN RESIDENTS: A DAILY STRUGGLE FOR COHABITATION

Tensions and concealment

In a country whose national cohesion rests on a fragile balance between many different socioreligious groups, a 25 percent increase in the resident population has naturally had an impact. Conscious of the fact that their presence is likely to trigger sociopolitical instability, Syrians have tried to make themselves invisible, blending in as much as possible with Lebanese urban residents. Many of them have therefore developed the ability to change their accent, and alter their posture or clothing. More significantly still, they are quick to “play both sides”, sometimes agreeing with criticism of Syrian refugees by Lebanese citizens, as the following story illustrates:

A Lebanese woman entered the clothing store where my daughter works as a sales assistant, clearly annoyed about something. When my daughter asked her what was wrong, the woman asked whether she was Lebanese or Syrian. My daughter did not tell her the truth and said she was Lebanese. The angry woman then revealed why she was annoyed: “All the sales assistants are Syrian! I’ve had enough, they’ve taken our jobs and our children’s jobs.” My daughter replied: “I hope we’ll be rid of them as soon as possible.” Just like that, I swear!

(Rana, a Syrian war refugee in her forties, Tabbaneh (Tripoli), November 2015¹⁷)

15. Syrians travelling to cast their votes were reluctant to declare their support for a candidate competing with Bashar al-Assad. However, they were not all opponents of the regime. Independently of their opinion on the regime, they had primarily fled from the violence and danger of the war (Dot-Pouillard and Pesquet 2014).

16. “This is what the Syrian election looks like in Lebanon,” Adam Taylor, *The Washington Post*, May 28, 2014.

17. Interviewee names have been changed.

Syrians have quickly grown used to this kind of attitude: concealing their nationality in order to be able to live in the city, hiding among the local people as best as they can. Conscious of these practices, many Lebanese people like to play a game of “spot the difference,” and claim they can identify Syrians in the public space: “For example, someone who’s well-dressed but wearing sandals is a Syrian!”, confided a 24-year-old Lebanese man in a focus group (Tabbaneh, November 2015). This example illustrates the way in which Syrians are generally perceived by the Lebanese. With the exception of the educated elite or a few activist groups, the Lebanese people we met in the context of our research openly claimed that “the Syrians are everywhere.”

My wife likes the beach. A lot. But is there any chance of getting a foot on the beach at the weekend? None at all! The Syrians are everywhere. They’re very conservative and my wife doesn’t wear a veil. Syrian men look at Lebanese women in a very provocative way. It’s impossible to walk down the street, impossible to go for a stroll outside without the Syrians being there. I’ve stopped going to the Corniche because it’s full of Syrians.¹⁸

Q: So if you go to the Corniche at the weekend, you won’t find any Lebanese people?

Not a single one! It’s like being in Homs, Hama or some other city like that.¹⁹

(Ibrahim, a Lebanese man in his thirties, Tabbaneh, November 2015)

The rate of unemployment in Lebanon is high, and has been exacerbated by the reduced opportunities in the Gulf countries following the global financial crisis in 2008. Until then, the Gulf countries constituted a source of income for many families, regardless of their social position. The labor market, which was already under strain, has been made even more challenging by the arrival of the Syrians, who compete with native jobseekers, particularly in the retail and restaurant sectors (Longuenesse 2014-2015). Historically, Syrian migrants worked in the construction or agriculture sectors, in subordinate jobs that the Lebanese were reluctant to take on.²⁰

Q: And what about work?

Well, you see, Syrians can do anything. They could move a mountain if they were asked to do it.

Q: And the Lebanese can’t?

18. In both Tripoli and Beirut, the “Corniche” refers to a seaside promenade area.

19. Homs and Hama are Syrian cities.

20. In October 2012, an article in the weekly *Executive Magazine* noted that “Unemployment in Lebanon is in excess of 10 percent, with youth unemployment close to 25 percent.” The article also explains that educated Lebanese people have long emigrated to find jobs, given the few opportunities available in Lebanon. See “Unemployment in Lebanon: Lack of skills or lack of skilled jobs?,” Zafiriz Tzannatos, *Executive Magazine*, October 2, 2012.

The Lebanese have more pride, they want more than that. Syrians will take anything, under any conditions. A Lebanese man won't accept [a daily wage of] 10,000 Lebanese pounds (€6). A Syrian would accept 5,000 [Lebanese pounds] (€3).

(Ahmad, a Lebanese man around twenty-five years of age, Tabbaneh, Nov. 2015).

The sources of tension are not limited to the area of employment. Lebanese urban infrastructure (roads and utilities) was significantly impacted by the civil war between 1975 and 1990, and the influx of Syrians has exacerbated what was therefore an already critical situation. Growth in urban populations has affected electricity and water distribution, and saturated road traffic and household waste collection capacity. This latter sector stirred strong emotions in July 2015, when images of roads drowning in uncollected waste circulated in the media and social networks. The difficulties are primarily due to collection measures becoming inadequate in the late 1990s, but the situation has grown worse following the sudden increase in urban populations.

Managing the crisis at the local level: Hostility gradually takes hold

When the waves of migration first began, many Lebanese people showed solidarity with the suffering of the Syrian people, but this trend has been overturned by the increase in migrant numbers. Demonstrations of solidarity have become rare, and limited to certain groups: young activists or the educated elite, who are over-represented in Beirut (figure 3). Despite their persistence, these defenders of the refugee cause have been unable to hold back the tide of hostile reactions, which are sometimes accompanied by racist insinuations: “[. . .] protracted refugee situations also have indirect security implications. Tensions between refugees and the local population often arise as refugees are perceived to receive preferential access to social services such as health and education. Over time, competition between refugees and the host population over scarce resources can also become a source of insecurity” (Fiddian-Qasmiyeh *et al.* 2014, 155).

By way of example, in July 2016, a group of 200 people gathered outside the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, in the Achrafiyeh neighborhood of Beirut, to protest against the hosting and living conditions for refugees.²¹ This group called for the prohibition of curfews affecting Syrians and condemned a “racism [that] threatens civil security.” The demonstration consisted of young urban residents, remained small, and was easily contained by the military forces.

A photograph taken in 2012 by an activist collective, “Against the racism faced by Syrian refugees,” shows another form of protest against the curfews imposed on Syrians by certain urban authorities (figure 4). These protests were too small to have a significant impact, and were unable to prevent such

21. “Lebanese against racism,” Sandy Alhayek, *Assafir*, July 19, 2016, back-translated from the French translation by Dima El Khouri-Tannous (DK).



Figure 3. Welcome message: “Syrian refugees and workers, welcome to Lebanon. We apologize for the actions of our racist compatriots” (back-translated from the French translation by DK).

(Source: The campaign in support of Syrians against racism),
Facebook page, URL: <https://www.facebook.com/275589542617185>
الحملة الداعمة للسوريين بوجه العنصرية.



Figure 4. Information on the curfew in Sin el Fil, Beirut: “All foreign workers living in Sin el Fil are asked to go to a police station before June 10, 2013 to obtain badges. They are also asked to obey the curfew between 9 in the evening and 6 in the morning” (back-translated from the French by DK).

(Source: The campaign in support of Syrians against racism.)

measures from being implemented: in May 2014, they were implemented by the majority of urban authorities in the country, preventing Syrians from being out in public spaces after sunset.

Another photograph (figure 5) shows how official limitations on the use of public spaces may be accompanied by more informal restrictions. In Bhamdoun, a town situated on the route between Beirut and Damascus, a sign displayed at the side of the road prohibits Syrians from leaving their homes between 8 p.m. and 6 a.m. It is handwritten and has no official stamp. Since 2013, Syrians have been subjected to many restrictions on their movements, issued by local authorities or instigated by individuals assuming powers that they have no legitimate right to exercise. Circumventing the national and local authorities, these abuses have provoked protest at the leniency of the public authorities, who have done nothing to reduce tensions between Lebanese and Syrian residents in urban spaces. With many of them implementing such restrictive measures, local authorities have closed their eyes to the actions of some of their citizens attempting to dissuade refugees from settling (Bobseine 2016).

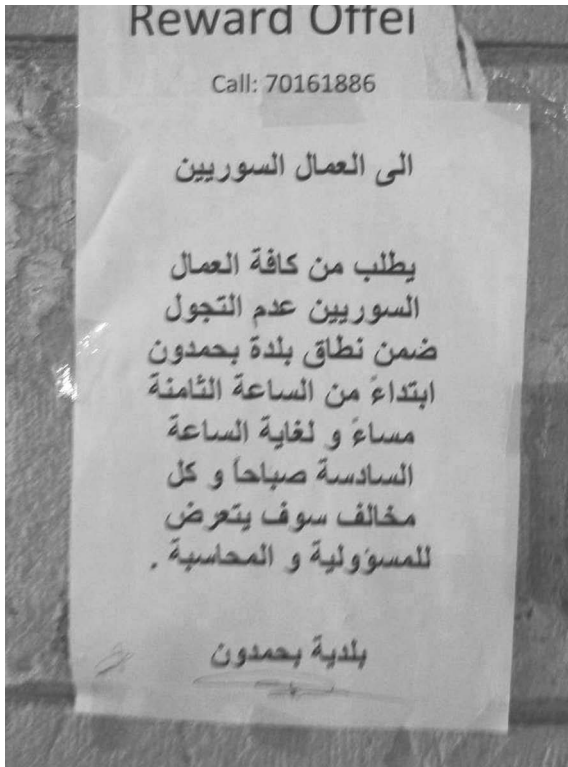


Figure 5. Curfew information for Syrian workers: “All Syrian workers are asked to observe a curfew in the town of Bhamdoun between 8.30 in the evening and 6 in the morning. Anyone not observing the curfew will be held responsible. Signed: Bhamdoun Urban Authority” (back-translated from the French by DK).
(Source: The campaign in support of Syrians against racism.)

THE *KAFALA* SYSTEM AND THE CITY: A NEW TOOL FOR URBAN MANAGEMENT
The kafala system: a tool for controlling Syrian migration

In October 2014, the Lebanese government adopted a directive making the conditions of entry for Syrians tougher. This law, which came into force on January 5, 2015 (Council of Ministers of Lebanon, 2014, see Table 1), has made visas compulsory. All Syrians wanting to cross the border also have to have a residence permit. The directive states that, to obtain this permit, migrants must find a sponsor to whom they will be linked under the so called *kafala* system. This measure not only restricts those entering the country but also affects Syrians already present in Lebanon, and has had a direct impact on their living conditions.

The *kafala* system, which is also used in the Gulf states and Saudi Arabia, previously affected foreign workers with a low level of education (such as female cleaning staff: Dahdah 2010). With the agreement of a Lebanese natural or legal person, or more rarely UNHCR, under the *kafala* system refugees are under the authority of a sponsor called the *kafeel*. This latter can end the contract unilaterally, with no legal requirement to provide a reason for doing so. Termination of the contract automatically ends residency approval, putting migrants at risk of expulsion. For Syrians living in Lebanon prior to the date of the directive, the *kafala* system has also become compulsory for every application to renew their residence permit.

The *kafala* system has therefore become the main tool for controlling the flow of migration from Syria. Unlike the way in which it is used in the Gulf countries, the government directive specifies that it must be accompanied by a declaration certifying that the person under the *kafala* system will not undertake any paid work. Unable to take up formal employment, Syrians thus find themselves forced to accept illegal, and often poorly paid jobs. This directive has therefore weakened a population that was already struggling, imposing conditions that sometimes resemble those of forced labor.

Furthermore, the procedure for entering the *kafala* system is not clearly set out in the official documents. Several Syrians we spoke to explained that, when they called the telephone information line set up by the Lebanese security forces, they often had to wait for several hours or call back several times before they received satisfactory answers. To fulfil the conditions of immigration, Syrians also have to endure extremely long waiting times in the offices of the General Security Directorate, which is responsible for dealing with migrants. These offices have specific queues for Syrians, and humiliating treatment is par for the course. Then there is the cost of the procedure which, according to the Norwegian Refugee Council, can be up to €60 for preparation of documents, on top of the €150 in fees to government officials. Once they have given their approval, it is not unusual for a *kafeel* to demand that refugees work for them illegally, or to force them to pay an additional sum of

money in exchange for their support. Subjected to both red tape and demands from their *kafeel*, Syrians are therefore in a legally insecure position, both “outside the law and outside the protection of the law” (Frangieh 2014).

The impact of the kafala system on urban practices

By altering residency status and making it difficult to obtain, the *kafala* system forces Syrians to restrict their use of urban spaces, in order to avoid causing problems for the *kafeel* who has put his trust in them. As his/her legal representative, the *kafeel* must be present at all public acts involving the Syrian that he “sponsors,” including police questioning or arrests, and is held responsible for any violations, such as working illegally, or even more serious matters such as theft or homicide. Many Syrians are unable to find a *kafeel* and fall into illegality, which forces them to lower their profile even further.

Syrians are therefore caught between the insecurity of their legal position and enforced dependency on other individuals, but become accustomed to this untenable situation because they have nowhere else to go. As we were told on many occasions, the Syrian Embassy puts up multiple barriers to avoid granting passport applications from Syrian citizens. The information provided is opaque, the documents required for the application are difficult to obtain, and the administrative fees are high (€300 to €400). Under such circumstances, it is unsurprising that one of the main concerns of a significant proportion of the Syrians we spoke to was the renewal of their Lebanese residence permit. When it expires, their status becomes illegal and they risk imprisonment, or at the very least humiliation, at the hands of the security forces.

Q: What is your current residency status?

Well, I’ve just found out that it’s not really a residence permit. I’m not officially a resident, I only have sponsorship (by a *kafeel*). I found this out because I couldn’t get a visa for Cyprus. I wanted to go there for three days to attend a friend’s wedding, but the embassy rejected my application. My documents are not legally recognized. I don’t have the right to work but when I say I’m not working, none of the officials believe me. I do however have legal status to remain in Lebanon. It costs 300,000 Lebanese pounds a year (nearly €180). The first time I paid that amount, it was for a year, renewable in six months. But then I was asked for the same amount again because I hadn’t paid for 2014. So I paid retroactively even though the law didn’t come in until 2015. I didn’t receive a receipt, but I don’t think [the official] stole the money. There’s a system and everyone you know pays. The procedure is designed to restrict the number of Syrians.

(Jad, Syrian resident in Zokak el-Blat, Beirut suburb, July 2016)

During our interview, Jad also recounted an incident similar to those experienced by several of his fellow Syrians. He was sitting on a cafe terrace when a police car pulled up next to him and an officer in the car told him that smoking was prohibited in public places—including a cafe terrace—and

asked to see his identity papers. When he realized that Jad was Syrian, the official turned away to make some telephone calls. After waiting for a short while, Jad approached to ask what was going on. The police officer assaulted him verbally and physically before taking him to the station. He then asked him to bring in his *kafeel*. Fortunately, Jad has a good relationship with his *kafeel*, who has connections, including in the police force. After a few calls he was set free, though not without being threatened with overnight detention. Before leaving the station, he was forced to sign a declaration stating that he had not been assaulted and had been detained for refusing to answer questions from a public safety officer. Having admitted to defying an officer, Jad then had to endure legal proceedings and was sentenced to ten days' imprisonment or payment of a fine equivalent to €180. However, Jad still felt he was in a better position than the majority of Syrians living in Lebanon, as he has a good relationship with his *kafeel*. He is able to work for himself, though of course illegally, and this work enables him to meet his needs.²² His status is not internationally recognized, even though it is considered to be legal in Lebanon.

Since the beginning of 2015, the Lebanese authorities have increased checks and carried out operations in several informal settlements in which Syrians are living. These have been accompanied by numerous curfews and other measures taken by urban authorities with a view to limiting the movements of Syrians, who have become unwelcome users of the urban public space, particularly at night. The effectiveness of these checks is strengthened by unprompted action by many Lebanese people, who monitor the arrival of Syrians.

These difficulties have pushed Syrians to adopt two kinds of attitude: either making themselves invisible so that they are not identified as Syrian, or giving up on going out and remaining confined at home (Bobseine 2016). This second strategy is used in particular by those who are unable to renew their residence permit, either because they have not found a *kafeel*, or because they are unable to pay the money required to enter into a contract with one. Syrians still living in Lebanon are therefore under a doubly untenable bind: they have become unwelcome, but the majority of them do not have the resources required to leave the country.

CONCLUSION

The Lebanese government's failure to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis initially led it to pass on responsibility to local authorities. Without providing any guidance, the state implicitly conferred upon urban authorities the duty to

22. To renew his residence permit, in addition to his own identity documents and those of his *kafeel*, he was asked for a certificate of residence, a certified declaration that he would not work in Lebanon, a rental contract or document proving that his *kafeel* owned his main residence, and a sponsorship certificate from his *kafeel* stating that he took full responsibility for Jad.

intervene in managing relations between Lebanese and Syrian urban residents. Taking a *laissez-faire* approach, the government left municipalities to make their own decisions on measures to meet local needs for security and social stability, with most Lebanese people objecting to the presence of Syrians in their living spaces. Curfews and prohibition notices were thus developed as tools designed to limit the mobility of Syrian war refugees and their access to the city.

In January 2015, in an attempt to regain control of the situation, the government made the *kafala* system compulsory for all individuals requesting a residence permit. Applied to Syrians, a system ordinarily used to control labor migration has served to limit entry to and residency in Lebanese territory. Beyond its administrative difficulties, this system has had many negative effects. Placing one individual (the Syrian) under the direct authority of another (the Lebanese *kafeel*), it has institutionalized what was an already oppressive hierarchy, subjecting the former to economic exploitation by the latter along with arbitrary treatment by the police forces. Between 2011 and 2015, the restrictions required by some *kafeel* were compounded by local measures restricting movement, and this rise in arbitrary treatment increased tensions. Yet, at an international, national, and local level, the *kafala* system appears to be the sole response from the Lebanese central authorities, as the country is not a signatory to the 1951 Geneva Convention.

The position of Syrians living in Lebanese urban areas has radically changed since the *kafala* system came into force. Arriving as refugees (even though this term didn't always have any international status), they have gradually become economic migrants, but at the same time have had to give up legal employment. Under this paradoxical bind, many Syrians have chosen to make themselves less visible in public urban spaces, as waves of migration have increased and restrictive measures have been strengthened. Simultaneously, they have had to accept illegal work, supplying a "black market" that benefits employers inclined to favor the *kafala* system. Finally, the *kafala* system has led to a shift in international aid, from humanitarian assistance aimed primarily at Syrians to overall social action aimed at all deprived households, whether they are Syrian, Lebanese, or of another nationality.

While refusing to build camps for the Syrians, the Lebanese government has proceeded by trial and error with a new way of managing displaced persons. The scattered public policies in place do not form a coherent body but have created a complex system of domination between Lebanese and Syrian citizens, which primarily takes shape in urban areas. Restrictions on movement and access to the city are interwoven with institutionalized forms of economic exploitation, sociospatial injustice, and police surveillance that are making Syrians unwelcome, in both urban and political spaces.

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