

# The Peace Building in Lebanon

news supplement



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## Special Edition

This supplement is produced by the UNDP «Peace Building in Lebanon» project, funded by Germany. The Arabic version is distributed with An-Nahar while the English version is distributed with The Daily Star and the French version with L'Orient-Le Jour. The supplement contains articles by writers, journalists, media professionals, researchers and artists residing in Lebanon. They cover issues related to civil peace in addition to the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon and the relations between Lebanese and Syrians, employing objective approaches that are free of hatred and misconceptions.

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When “Strangers” Are Displaced to Keserwan: Wholesale Hatred and Selective Content





## The Power of Words and Figures

The Syrian refugee crisis has touched everyone in Lebanon. No one can ignore neither the struggle for survival of many of the refugees in this country nor the impact of the crisis on host communities. At the same time, people in Lebanon have done their best to help Syrian refugees to live in dignity until they are able to return to their home country. Yet, six years after the start of the crisis, and with no political solutions in sight for the conflict in Syria, patience is wearing thin and frustrations are mounting. We all know that our opinions and understanding are not shaped solely by facts and evidence. This also applies to the current crisis, with tensions between communities driven both by reality and perceptions.

We all have a responsibility to act and address refugees' issues in a way that is objective and constructive. Media, in this regard, have an important role to play, especially in view of the coming Parliamentary elections. The media should strive to inform rather than influence or fuel negative stereotypes and incitement. In this light, it is important to offer neutral spaces in the media for a fact-based discussion about problems and achievements of Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities. This news supplement is a small step towards promoting this discussion, which will hopefully enhance mutual understanding and respect.

**Celine Moyroud**  
UNDP Country Director

## Open Your Heart

"Open your heart for those who are much worse off than you", said German Chancellor Angela Merkel in defense of her refugee policy. Both Germany and Lebanon continue to live up to this vow. Therefore, with the cold and rainy winter just around the corner, we should once more turn our attention to those who need our support the most: refugees and citizens burdened by the Syrian crisis and its implications for Lebanon.

As Christmas approaches, I would like to quote Father Georges Massouh from his article in this supplement, "The true lord is the one who chooses to be a servant to the poor, the needy, the displaced, the refugees, the homeless and all the afflicted." So, why don't we start donating more, sharing more and judging less? Because no one knows how it feels for refugees to be at the constant mercy of prejudice, and no one knows to what extent our perception is influenced by biases.

Once again, I am pleased to present to you the 17th issue of the "Peace Building" news supplement. This four-year-old initiative engages the media by bringing together journalists, writers and artists from diverse backgrounds to work on promoting peace and rejecting prejudice - an experience befitting a country that has long boasted.

**His Excellency Mr. Martin Huth,**  
**Ambassador**  
Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany in Beirut

## A Basket of Crises

The Lebanese surely feel the urge to curse these times and the onslaught of crises that make them forget what really matters: developing and modernizing their country. Today, they have every reason to fear that the latest of these crises, namely the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran, will consign to oblivion the issue of Syrian refugees, who according to the latest data account for one quarter of Lebanon's inhabitants. It must be said that the Lebanese have gotten their fingers burnt many times before. Present in their country since 1948, Palestinian refugees are clearly no longer a priority for the international community. Not even for the Lebanese State, which has become accustomed to suffering the repercussions of the many crises rocking the Middle East since that time: the endemic Arab-Israeli wars, the Camp David peace accords, the Lebanese war set off by armed Palestinians, the two Gulf Wars, the Israeli attacks on Lebanon, the break-up of Iraq first followed by Syria, the jolts of the Arab Spring... not to mention the multiple terrorist attacks that have shaken the

country of the cedars. All of that happening to the backdrop of economic crisis, unemployment and political immobilism. The new Iranian-Saudi crisis that has hit at the heart of Lebanese official institutions risks pushing the thorny issue of displaced Syrians to the background: more than a million mostly destitute people to manage on a daily basis, with the infrastructure of an already overstretched country hardly keeping up. International aid may well pour in, but it will not be able to meet all their needs while a growing number of Lebanese are living in precarious conditions. Accommodating more than a million people in an already overburdened country is unthinkable, and planning their return at this stage would be an impossible feat. In short, this is the squaring of the circle with not enough people to round off the angles.

**Gaby Nasr**  
Managing Editor - L'Orient-Le Jour supplements

## The Price of Being a Brother in Times of Conflict

The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee has issued the second part of its study "Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon", addressing concrete issues in the lives of refugees that relate to living conditions, poverty and unemployment, and other aspects of concern to Palestinians and Lebanese alike. The former is in a constant state of anxiety, lack of stability and fear of an unknown, or at least uncertain, future. The latter is constantly worried about the presence of foreign brothers on his land, with no hope of their return to their country. Despair, oppression, duress and destitution have pushed many of them to embrace terrorism or to revolt against the host country. This deteriorating situation is further reinforced by the fact that the Lebanese are competing with them in breaking the laws. The changes taking place in the world do not bode well for existing crises, including the refugees and displaced issue. Most countries are plunged in an abyss of their own political and security problems as well as economic ones, according to the study. The problem is exacerbated as a result of the lack of international commitment to find effective solutions to resolving the conflict. Instead, refugees are only provided

for at the subsistence level and with a bare minimum of health, education and social services. Today Lebanon has again been plunged into its own internal problem, although the issue of Syrian refugees was at the top of its agenda until recently. It had referred the issue to the UN in order to avoid turning it into another Palestinian cause and to ensure that Syrian displacement does not last for years on end, as the conditions for their return are quite different. The issue has now taken the backseat to other problems, but this does not mean that it has become of lesser importance or that it has been forgotten. It is an existential issue for Lebanon, which cannot withstand any more pressure, especially if pressures mount. However, the problem is not unilateral, but rather it is multilateral. The problem is first and foremost a Syrian one, as well as being an Arab and international one, and no party should forsake its mission to ensure that refugees do not end up paying once again the price for conflicts between brothers.

**Ghassan Hajjar**  
Editor in Chief - An-Nahar newspaper

# How long will Syrian Refugees Remain Victims of Political Interests?

Elie Ferzli\*

Earlier this year, a Lebanese MP demanded in Parliament that a fee of USD 100 be imposed on all foreign nationals crossing by land into Lebanon. Obviously, he was not in two minds about stating that his goal was to tackle Syrian displacement to Lebanon. The legislator saw his proposal as the perfect answer to the Syrian displacement issue, based on an item in the tax law that imposes LBP 5,000 on persons crossing land borders.

When the Minister of Finance tried to explain during that legislative session held to debate the tax law that there are treaties and agreements governing the relationship between the two countries, making it impossible to impose arbitrary taxes, that same MP said: What agreement are you talking about, now that the number of refugees has reached two million?

It was easy for the MP to say that the Syrian displacement was illegal, but there were persons who told him that his statement was inaccurate. The objecting minister refused to let that statement pass, saying: By the way, the presence of Syrian refugees does not conflict with the law.

This debate sums up the Lebanese authorities' handling of the refugee dossier, an issue dominated by arbitrariness and triviality, adding to the exploitation of the refugee issue to political ends here and there.

Two million refugees is the easy figure tossed around by politicians. It is naturally larger than the figures put forward by the UN, down to almost half according to the UNHCR. As a result of the lack of seriousness in dealing with the issue, all the efforts made by the authorities have not led to this day to any changes in these numbers. As long as the war in Syria rages on with no end in sight, the international community is cautious about returning refugees to their country, in fear of putting them at risk again. The official authorities in Lebanon are working hard to keep permanent settlement at bay, which many countries consider to be one of the solutions to the refugee issue. The US president had announced this from the UN rostrum.

The branches of power's lack of a unified vision of the issue of refugees is closely linked to the bitter political dispute over the Syrian crisis since its breakout. This disagreement resurfaces on every occasion and on every item, whether it has to do with the right timing for their return or the areas to which they should return, and, most importantly, what channel to use? The dispute is most severe between those seeking to return the refugees in coordination with the Syrian government, led by the President of the Republic, and those who reject any contact with that government and who prefer the United Nations to be the mediator, led by the Prime Minister, with the UN considering that "the conditions are not suitable for their return" at this time.

Disagreements within the Government are no less severe than those outside it. Obviously, there is no unified authority on the issue of refugees, nor is there political consensus about it. Each party is addressing the issue independently. As soon as a party tries to

impose its views on the others, it is confronted with fierce opposition. The Ministry of Displaced Affairs had submitted a vision to the Ministerial Committee tasked with the affairs of refugees, but all parties swiftly asked for striking it off the agenda. The Foreign Ministry's paper still faces barriers to getting to the Council of Ministers due to disagreements over it. On trips abroad, the Prime Minister's discourse is strikingly different from that of the President of the Republic on the matter. Recently he made a personal initiative, delivering to the ambassadors of the five major countries, and the representatives of the European Union, the United Nations and the Arab League messages to the stable and low-tension regions where he expressed his rejection to linking return to a political solution, considering that there is no interest in an explosion in Lebanon as a result of the refugee crisis.

This difference confirms that there is no unified policy to deal with the refugees, particularly in terms of the part on their return to Syria. On the other hand, everyone is still committed to the 2015 ministerial agreement, which states: "the rejection of resettlement, ending the refugee movement permanently (except in humanitarian cases), the loss of the refugee status by any Syrian who returns to Syria for any reason." Contrary to what is being promoted and the fear-mongering of the consequences for the large number of unregistered Syrian births, who may become persons with the *maktoum el-qayd* (no official records in Lebanon), the previous government had considered that the registration of births at the embassy or with

the UNHCR immediately removes the status of *maktoum el-qayd* for the newly born. These points were reiterated by the Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil in his paper to the Government, in which he proposed the basis for a comprehensive plan to pave the way for the safe return of refugees. In the paper, Basil proposes that the Government gradually takes steps to encourage the Syrians to return to their country and prepare for such a return in a manner consistent with international obligations.

Besides the dispute over the method of return, "political violence" towards refugees has been on the increase lately. Many link this rise to the approaching parliamentary elections. The presumptive candidates believe that focusing on the issue of refugees reinforces their electoral presence. They, therefore, do not address it officially, in a way seeking to find logical and scientific solutions to the refugee crisis, but rather as part of political one-upmanship that neither benefits refugees nor the host communities, contributing to increasing tensions between the two groups. Some politicians, who are presumptive candidates for the parliamentary elections, believe that having refugees in the crosshairs earns them points in the elections, believing that voters are now rejecting Syrian refugees who they see competing with them for livelihoods.

The return of the Syrians to their country is the most popular slogan, as well as talk of the need to besiege their movements in different towns and cities. This one-upmanship is consistent with racism refugees are facing in many areas, whether through night curfews or collective expulsions from villages. It is also consistent with manifestations of violence against them just for being Syrians. The result is more racism, which leads some refugees to not leaving their homes, fearing for themselves and their families of unprovoked violence, generalizations and prejudices, and sometimes the terrorist or criminal stigma. The statistics of the Ministry of Interior show that the level of crime among Syrians does not exceed that among the Lebanese, despite the vast difference in living standards and conditions. The solution is not necessarily instilling fear in refugees. But this is just what happened after a series of attacks against them that terrorized them. "We are living in safety because the Syrians are 'good,'" says the former Minister of Social Affairs Rashid Derbas. "If they wanted to organize themselves socially, economically or politically, they would have changed the face of Lebanon; we have to get out of the nest of vipers and see reality for what it is, without hyperbole."

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# Role of Customs and Traditions in the Relations Between Displaced Syrians and Host Communities

Elias Sadkni\*

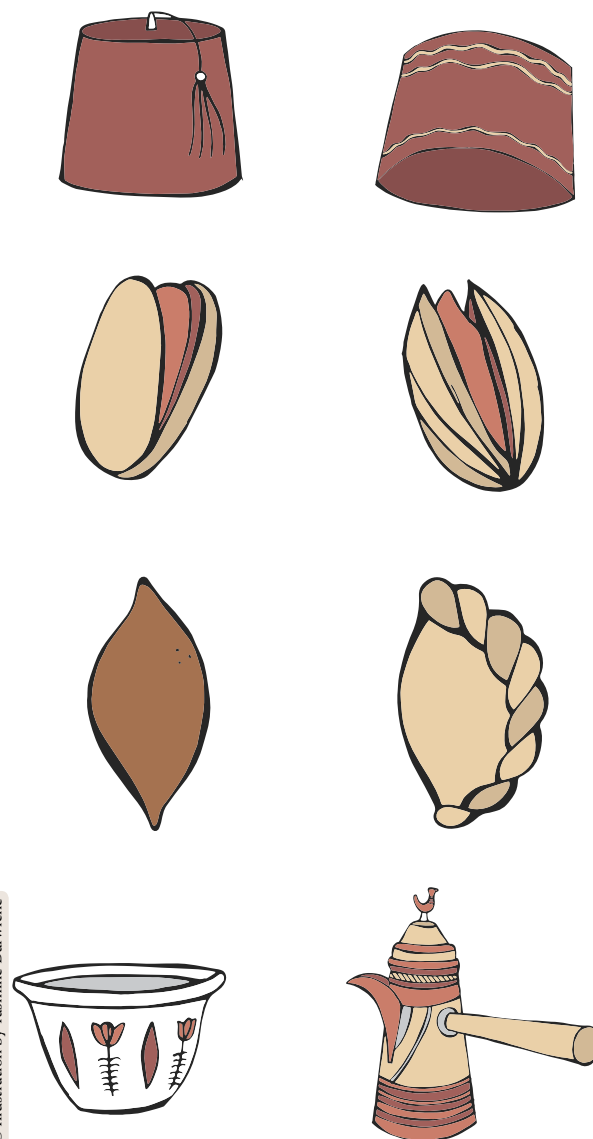
**Mixed or separate wedding celebrations, the role of women, staying out late, picnic in public parks, leaving shoes outside the front door, dress codes and other issues to do with our customs and traditions have been rich fodder of discussion on the factors that set apart different Syrian communities, on the one hand, and that set Syrians apart from their host communities, on the other.**

These discussions took place during the workshops held by the team of the House of Peace (HOPE) project<sup>(1)</sup> that included refugees, hosts and humanitarian workers from local communities. Those varied stories and their content were of interest to many working in relief and development. This led HOPE to thinking about how to include these outputs and turn them into recommendations that can contribute in some way to promoting social peace in Lebanon and Syria. This was the birth of "Syrian Voices".

The first paper published by HOPE as part of the Syrian Voices series was titled "Customs and Traditions". It is a research paper that doesn't seek to give final answers about the role of customs and traditions as factors of peace or conflict for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It is an attempt, as the series title Syrian Voices suggests, to raise problematic issues relating to social peace from a purely local perspective to reflect the views of those concerned and contribute to making their voices and stories as told by them heard. Moreover, the title of the series in this format does not aim to offer the voice of one community, that of the refugee community, but rather to offer a platform for people who rarely, if ever, get one, regardless of their nationality. The focus on the identity of refugees has two reasons: the first is moral as they are the most marginalized group in Lebanon, and the second is technical, that they represent the majority of workshop participants. Nevertheless, all the stories, ideas, discussions and recommendations presented reflect a variety of perspectives shared by the Lebanese, Syrians, Palestinians and all those who we were able to reach in our workshops and round-table discussions.

Two points should be noted here. Firstly, we did not conduct a theoretical study to define customs and traditions or to provide a conceptual framework for them. Instead we collected stories deemed by their narrators during the analysis as having to do with these factors in one way or another. Hence the stories included to discuss society's customs and traditions address of various problematic issues. Many of them relate to employment, early marriages, child labor or the role of social figures in conflict resolution. However, customs and traditions had their share during the analysis of these stories by participants.

The second point has to do with classification and generalizations. When we talk in broad terms about a refugee community and a host community, we are not talking about two internally homogeneous communities that are different from each other, especially in terms of customs and traditions. In many of the stories we heard, participants agreed that in many regions the points of convergence between Syrians and the Lebanese outnumber



© Illustration by Yasmine Darwiche

tensions between the two communities, especially as a result of the interpretations that accompany it (the cheap dowry of Syrian women, their cooking skills, their tolerance of polygamy, etc.).

One female participant recounted a story she witnessed in a *servis* or shared taxi that happened between two Syrian women and a Lebanese woman. The two Syrians were talking about their husbands coming home after work, when the Lebanese woman intervened, accusing their husbands of "stealing" jobs from the Lebanese. So, one of the Syrians replied by saying, "We're not just going to steal your jobs, we'll steal your husbands too." The dispute developed into a fist fight between them, forcing the driver to pull over and ask them to get out of the car. The general impression is that this tradition has been growing recently and that it has clearly become a sore point, especially between women.

However, according to one female social researcher who took part in a round-table discussion, there are no accurate figures about the reality of the increase in mixed marriages between Syrians (women in particular) and the Lebanese following the refugee crisis. In addition, we do not know whether all the talk about it is purely social and media fear mongering or whether it reflects a unique and new social phenomenon.

The changing roles inside families also had a big share of the discussions during workshops and round-tables. The majority of participants agreed that Syrian women have found an opportunity in the refugee community to enter the labor market and contribute financially to supporting their families, while it is more difficult for men to find jobs and to move freely on the Lebanese territory. Given that women working flouts the customs of certain communities, it has led to many tensions in families despite being their only choice.

In this context, many Syrian women expressed that they have gained more confidence as a result of the programs they took part in with some humanitarian organizations and associations, and began to feel a measure of that independence and power that they sensed in Lebanese women. In addition, some went as far as to say that many women who wished for divorce but were unable to go through with it have more freedom now to go down that road and rid themselves of their oppression. In a related context, some told stories of men who forced their wives to withdraw from certain workshops and demanded that the organizations active in their regions stop their awareness campaigns, as women had become "more disobedient".

On the other hand, some female participants said that work adds new burdens to women and stripped them of what they formerly considered to be privilege or "indulgence", when men would provide for their living and women were only responsible for bringing up the children – their main task – and caring for the home.

As for early marriages, which has been talked of much

(1) The House of Peace HOPE is a social peace-building project established with the support of the Jesuit Order in Lebanon. It cooperates with local communities and humanitarian organizations working in relief and development.

lately, most participants agreed that it is one of the most problematic issues due to its negative effects, both psychological and physical, on minors, and because it is a "negative" coping mechanism to deal with a refugee situation by getting rid of financial burdens or finding a local guarantor to provide for the family. At the same time,

participants stressed that this phenomenon has been at the heart of the customs and traditions of our societies, even before the refugee crisis, i.e. it is not an emerging phenomenon. Therefore, there was no decisive position on the issue of early marriages. Despite recognizing its harmful effects, there was at times a form of acceptance under the cover of displacement.

Although it is also widespread in Lebanon, this phenomenon has become an object of ridicule and derision regarding refugee communities, accusing them of being backward societies by some members of the host communities.

In a related context, child labor also got its share of stories and discussions. Despite the negative perception of it, child labor is often seen as the only available solution to provide income for households, especially in cases where male breadwinners are absent or are unable to move freely. This phenomenon too is not new, as the work of youngsters has long been seen in many local communities as a means of education and character building. Although this kind of work meets some of the needs of families and relieves some of their burdens, child labor leads to the most tension and problems between those families and employers as a result of the exploitation children are subjected to and their harsh working conditions.

Another prominent subject had to do with the differences in expressing social solidarity and celebrating social events. Although generally such customs bring together all communities, this was not always the case in reality.

One of the traditions Syrians brought along from some of their regions – or that they developed in Lebanon as a result of difficult financial situations – is celebrating their social events and weddings at home. Often these kinds of celebrations involve a large number of people and continue late into the night. We heard many stories about problems arising as a result of these celebrations and families forced to leave their homes and move to other regions. In contrast, many positive experiences recounted by participants centered on the contribution made by public or private events to bringing individuals and families of different nationalities closer, especially with the factor of preparing food in these events and the possibility of sharing recipes between women.

On the other hand, several stories dealt with the great services Lebanese persons made to Syrians by helping them resolve some of their problems. An example of such a story is defending a Syrian family whose landlord had decided to throw them out despite the family agreeing to renovate the house instead of rent. The issue was only resolved with the intervention of a Sheikh and his mediation to end the dispute.

In contrast, some female participants in their analysis of a different story considered that the intervention of a Lebanese man to resolve a dispute in a Syrian family, between a husband and wife, was inappropriate because it was private matter. Although they acknowledged that domestic violence was wrong, they believed that the result of the intervention was worse, as it led to expelling the husband from the building, and hence the entire family.

In conclusion, it should be said that the subject of customs and traditions is complex and cannot be condensed in one research paper. It requires more research to paint a clearer picture of the situation as the different effects of our customs and traditions cannot be disregarded on our relations as individuals or diverse communities, especially in cases of displacement and asylum. Therefore, the aforementioned is a simple contribution and a call for a broader debate of a recurring topic of discussion that is rarely handled critically and analytically. This call is particularly addressed to humanitarian organizations and media outlets that should take this issue seriously and consider the impact of their activities on people's relationships through their handling of the prevailing values, customs and traditions in our communities.

*\* Humanitarian Activist, Development and Peacebuilding Specialist, Director of the House of Peace Project*





# The Problematics of Mixed Marriages Between Persons of Different Religions, Denominations and Nationalities

Dr. Abdul Ghani Imad\*

**The distance between rightness and reality widens or narrows depending on the inherited and prevailing cultures, customs and concepts, as well as the laws governing marriage and the relationships ensuing from it.**

In principle and based on rights, the principle of equality among people is recognized and consecrated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Discrimination on the basis of religion, race or nationality is no longer acceptable. Yet the notion of mixed marriage from the legal viewpoint is founded on precisely the recognition of the existence of these differences.

This difference, played out socially through inherited concepts and claims, finds justification in diverse and pluralistic societies under the pretext of preserving culture, specificity and homogeneity, a claim often concealing – even mixed with – sectarian, religious and ethnic biases.

In practice, we are faced with a challenge from the onset. How can we differentiate between the "objective problems" arising or expected to arise from mixed marriages and the similar objective problems arising from homogeneous marriages if we adopt non-sectarian, non-religious and non-ethnic variables such as differences and discrepancies in cultural, social and family levels, employment, housing, and the social environment and customs?

No fair and honest researcher would deny that problems and disputes happen and will continue to happen in all types of marriages. All one has to do is visit one of the religious courts specializing in the affairs of religious groups to see the extent of the problem, which is linked to variables that go beyond religion, denomination and nationality. Therefore, we will always find both successful and failed cases in any form of marriage, with each case having its own causes and determinants, without any of these forms, such as mixed marriages, being necessarily doomed to failure. The marriage institution is a world filled with private matters, disputes and secrets. However, can any broad concepts and factors be identified as determinants of success or failure?

The leading argument against mixed marriages is conflicting reference values between the different religions and various nationalities, and that their cultures would inevitably lead to conflicts and disputes between the parties to the marriage. The love relationship uniting the couple and shielding it from reality at the beginning of the marriage soon fades when faced with the facts of life and the demands and requirements of the environment in terms of family, customs and traditions. And problems rear their ugly head inside the marital home.

Some of these problems and disputes are objective, such as all the disputes that usually arise inside the marital home. Some of them are related to the nature of mixed marriages, are linked with other elements and entail certain responsibilities.

## Mixed marriages between people of different nationalities:

There are several problems that occur in this type of marriages. On the one hand, there is the legal aspect of obtaining a nationality (how difficult or easy it is, children's nationality, denying the Lebanese woman the right of conferring her nationality on her children, a topic covered by many media campaigns and at the heart of political tensions involving fear-mongering about refugee resettlement). These are all issues widely debated in the civil and political communities. The legal aspect also includes the problem of inheritance that is applied on the principle of reciprocity between States.

Some speak of conflicting values that soon arise between spouses of different nationalities, an issue that is open to debate in light of cultural globalization. If the system of reference values was as conflicting as is claimed, the couple would have not tied the knot in the first place and would have not united under a shared roof. However, the idea is that this cultural difference is likely to find catalysts in the social environment of the spouses, as the notions of personal freedom, commitment to family and social rituals, the values of family relations, the relationship with children and their upbringing, and sacrifice differ in eastern societies from those in the Western culture of individualism.

Recently, with the increasing number of Syrian refugees, there has been ever more talk of the phenomenon of Lebanese men marrying Syrian women. It is an old and historical phenomenon between the two countries that takes on today a different character, as it is accompanied by talk of marriage with minor girls. There are no accurate statistics, but UNICEF figures show that 32% of marriages registered with it between Syrian refugees is with girls under the age of 18. This figure reflects the number of marriages among Syrians and has nothing to do with non-Syrians. It is a figure related to the early marriages prevalent in rural Syria, and has only risen with the displacement as a result of poverty and the need for security and stability. Syrian displacement and the ensuing misfortunes of exploiting minor girls in marriage with Lebanese or non-Lebanese men poses an additional challenge today.

## Mixed marriages between people of different religions:

Coexistence between people of different denominations and sects in diverse societies can undoubtedly bridge the gaps between their basic reference values. But this is not the natural result. On the contrary, it can also lead to hatred, competition and intolerance. The issue is primarily related to the ability of the public system to promote a culture of tolerance, justice and equality among its citizens. Only then can coexistence generate shared reference values based on the culture of citizenship rather than that of sect or denomination.

However, the reality is different, as mixed marriages exac-

erbate differences legally and socially in light of the sectarian system in Lebanon, which is governed by established laws and customs. From the legislative point of view, the personal status laws allow polygamy and unilateral divorce for Muslims. This further reinforces male values, especially that marriage is viewed as any other contract that can be terminated at the will of one of the parties, an issue that greatly differs from the legislation on Christian marriages. The differences are even starker when it comes to inheritance laws where Christians are subject to the civil law of 1959 that guarantees equality between men and women. On the other hand, Islamic law enshrines different laws for inheritance with a bias for men. Legal loopholes are quite popular nowadays to circumvent these rules, such as changing one's religion or denomination for Christians to be able to obtain a divorce, or gifts and joint bank accounts for girls to ensure they get an equal share of the inheritance as the boys. Therefore, the legal rule is not as important as its intellectual, cultural and values-related impact.

One of the most important problems that may face this type of mixed marriages is "religious education" for children, which most parents resolve by adopting a "secular culture" to bring up their children. Even if they are successful in this effort, they soon run against a sectarian culture protected by law and armed with longstanding institutions besieging them and their children everywhere they turn.

## Mixed marriages between people of different denominations and sects:

These marriages no longer provoke the same reactions as before in the Christian or Muslim communities, despite some cultural dregs that still play a role among a few who adhere to dated concepts. It is noteworthy, however, that they have regained a footing recently among Muslim Sects (the Sunnis, Shia, Druze and Alawites) as tensions and disputes escalate.

To overcome the problematics of traditional marriages, some are resorting to civil marriage, a contract that has no legal effect if concluded on Lebanese territory but recognized by civil courts in light of article 25 of decree LR60 if concluded outside of Lebanon in compliance with the foreign country's laws. Therefore, there has been a growing number of couples travelling to Cyprus, Turkey and Greece among other countries to enter such marriage contracts and there are specialized agencies facilitating these arrangements.

Despite all the difficulties and problems, some sociological and statistical studies show a significant increase in the number of mixed marriages in general, yet they remain very low between Christians and Muslims. A recent study conducted by International Information found that there are 173,883 mixed marriages in Lebanon, representing 15% of all officially registered marriages. They are distributed as follows: 32,231 contracts between different Muslim branches, 118,250 between different Christian denominations and 10,797 between Christians and Muslims. It is thus clear that marriages between different Christian denominations are three times higher than those between Muslim sects (68% compared to 18.5%), while the rate of marriages between Muslims and Christians remains very low, at only 6.2% of all marriage contracts.

**Despite all the difficulties and problems, some sociological and statistical studies show a significant increase in the number of mixed marriages in general, yet they remain very low between Christians and Muslims**

\* Professor of Social Sciences at the Lebanese University

## Testimony

# Mixed Marriages: Love Breaking Down Barriers

Nada Merhi\*

Mixed couples often face opposition, whether as a result of their different nationalities or different religion. Firstly, they have to convince their families of their choice. Next, they have to get their milieu to accept them as a couple. Three couples offer their personal experiences.

## A Social Barrier

When Riwa and Walid decided to tie the knot twelve years ago, the issue of religious community did not come up. At least for the husband-to-be. "I was brought up with nationalist ideas, with no place for religion and religious communities," he says. "I've always wanted a civil marriage, especially that I wasn't practicing my religion." The issue arose on the part of the young woman who belongs to the Druze community. "Although there have been several mixed marriages in my family, I had a hard time convincing my parents of my choice," recalls Riwa. "It was a social barrier. In our community, you're born Druze, you don't become Druze. So, by marrying a man from a different sect, my children won't be Druze. Our elders fear losing a member of the community, especially that we're a minority. Religion in itself has never been a problem. Besides, my family is open to others. My parents have always had friends from other religious groups. We share their holidays. I was also schooled and did my university studies in institutions where I met people of different faiths. I've never had the fear of the other." Yet, meeting Walid's friends was a blow to Riwa. "I had always thought that Christians were open," she says. "I was very surprised to see the reaction of his friends who were surprised that we had a civil marriage and who were asking

us all kinds of questions. They wanted to know if our marriage was 'legal', if we were living 'in sin', what would the religion of our children be... For them, I came from an environment that was completely strange to them. But, over time, they came to see that I was not trying to take Walid from his family or his environment despite being from a different religion. On the contrary, I blended into their environment."

"Our relationship is enriching on multiple levels," adds Walid. "Personally, I don't judge a person by their beliefs, which could change over the years. Besides, that's my case. When we got married I wasn't a practicing Christian. Today, I am, in my own way. Riwa has never objected. She has no problem with me praying in front of her. If she wasn't this open to others, I think this would have caused a problem for our couple."

For Riwa, "children are the criterion of the degree of openness to others". "If I had had children, I would have been able to convey a message to that religious society and show it that it was possible, even in a mixed marriage, to bring up children as highly spiritual persons who know God in all His splendour, away from the reductive denominational perceptions," adds Riwa. "I would have taught them to take the best from Christianity and the Druze doctrine."

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## "I'm Appalled by Discrimination"

They are newly weds, but their idyll began four years ago. Nivine met Abdo through her best friend who was taking dance classes with him. "She was convinced that we were going to get along very well because we are similar in many ways," says Nivine.

When the young woman decided to introduce her partner to her parents, the answer was a resounding no. "When they learned that Abdo was Syrian, they didn't want to hear any of it," she recalls. "I confronted them for the first time in my life. The idea that their refusal was due to the fact that Abdo was Syrian was unbearable. I told them that I was willing to leave him on the condition that they met him first."

They finally gave in, but Nivine's father tried to persuade her against carrying on with this relationship, which "wouldn't bring anything but trouble": the Lebanese perception of Syrians, her inability to transfer her Lebanese nationality to her children, etc.

"I was willing to take on these challenges because for the first time in my life, I was ready to commit," says the young woman. The meeting went well. "They calmed down after meeting Abdo's family. They saw that we shared the same values, even though we belong to two different social environments. Today, my parents even take Abdo's side when-

ever we have an argument," she adds.

On Abdo's side, the issue of nationality did not arise "because my paternal grandmother was Lebanese". "My father and uncle were born in Lebanon," he adds, "I like the Lebanese accent because it reminds me of my grandmother." When he moved to Lebanon 10 years ago, Abdo was surprised "at the hostility of the Lebanese towards Syrians". "I wasn't really aware of the tensions between the people of the two countries," he adds. "In the beginning, I tried not to go into politics and not speak with a Syrian accent." Everything changed when he met Nivine. "For the first time in 10 years, I was finally able to talk about topics that mattered to me," says Abdo. "Our relationship helped me change in our respective environments the vision that our friends had of both peoples. My friends learned that not all Lebanese are arrogant or condescending."

On Nivine's side, her friends "discovered that there were 'good' Syrians after all". "A friend of mine keeps telling me that Abdo is the only Syrian he likes," says Nivine. "Some continue nevertheless to ask me if I don't have problems with the fact that he's Syrian. People around me have understood that you can't tar everyone with the same brush. As far as I'm concerned, I've never judged a human being by their nationality, I judge them by their humanity. I've always been appalled by discrimination, since I was a child."

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## Breaking Taboos

Their marriage is everything but conventional, at least for a society like the Lebanese. Zeid is Lebanese and Mekdes is Ethiopian. At the very beginning, this union caused many administrative problems: first, to register their civil marriage entered into in Ethiopia, "a procedure that required nearly a year"; then to register their child who was born around three months after their union, "the authorities considered him to be illegitimate"; and finally to renew Mekdes' residence permit a year after the marriage, "because they were trying to deport her". "We lived in anxiety for several months," says Zeid. "I was without a residence permit and without my passport for almost a year," says the young woman. Eventually, following a scathing article in the media and some "string pulling", the child was registered and the young woman obtained the Lebanese nationality.

Socially, the couples say that they "have not had any serious issues". "I find people's shocked reaction amusing," says Mekdes. "What's wrong with me marrying a Lebanese guy?"

"In our neighbourhood [the couple lives in Achrafieh], everybody loves her," says Zeid. "People are not too racist. Things would probably have been different if we were living in a different region." He goes on to say, "I take a lot of shared taxis, *servis*. When people see my

son, they guess that my wife is Ethiopian. And the confiding starts. Suddenly, everybody's fallen in love with this Ethiopian woman. The affairs were nevertheless short-lived as a result of family pressure."

In their union, Zeid and Mekdes have been able to break taboos in their environment. "All my friends now eat Ethiopian cuisine," says Zeid playfully. "At the beginning, we had many Ethiopian parties and Mekdes cooked for everyone. With time, barriers began to break down. Many Lebanese live in a bubble. Everything outside their bubble is foreign to them. In our environment, people no longer look down on Ethiopian women, instead they started treating them as equals. Moreover, many of our friends also married Ethiopian women. =In marrying Mekdes, Zeid thought that he would integrate more into the Ethiopian culture and that his son would have two homelands. The opposite has happened. "My wife has integrated into the Lebanese society," he says. "As for my son, he speaks French and Arabic." That won't be the case with their next child, says Mekdes jokingly: "I'll teach him Ethiopian so he can then teach it to his brother."

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## Report

# When “Strangers” Are Displaced to Keserwan: Wholesale Hatred and Selective Content

Madonna Semaan\*

**For their most part, the inhabitants of Keserwan are relentless in expressing their indignation at the "infiltration" of displaced Syrians into their towns and villages. And while the term "racism" involves an inferior view of a group of people, some push its meaning to its absolute limits. Others feel no shame in talking with "hatred" about "an enemy" who was and remains "the cause of economic and political problems in the country".**

A long time ago, the region resisted Syrian presence, keeping it outside its walls. It had raised the opposition banner for a long time, just like neighboring Jbeil and Metn. Today, its inhabitants are expressing their indignation at the general Lebanese and the local Keserwan policies that have led to the infiltration of "Syrians" into villages and neighborhoods, constituting a *de facto* "presence".

Thus, the people of Keserwan did not wait for the latest official statements demanding the return of the displaced to their safe villages and towns in Syria to express their resentment or opposition, though these statements did contribute to increasing the intensity of the discourse.

However, there is selective content amidst this wholesale hatred as a result of "interests" at times and "special relations" at others. This involves the defense of some business owners of hiring Syrians and that of some inhabitants of Syrian neighbors or tenants. Every story of "amicability" is met with another story of "amicability", and all talk expressing "hatred" is met with "hatred".

## The Syrians of Keserwan

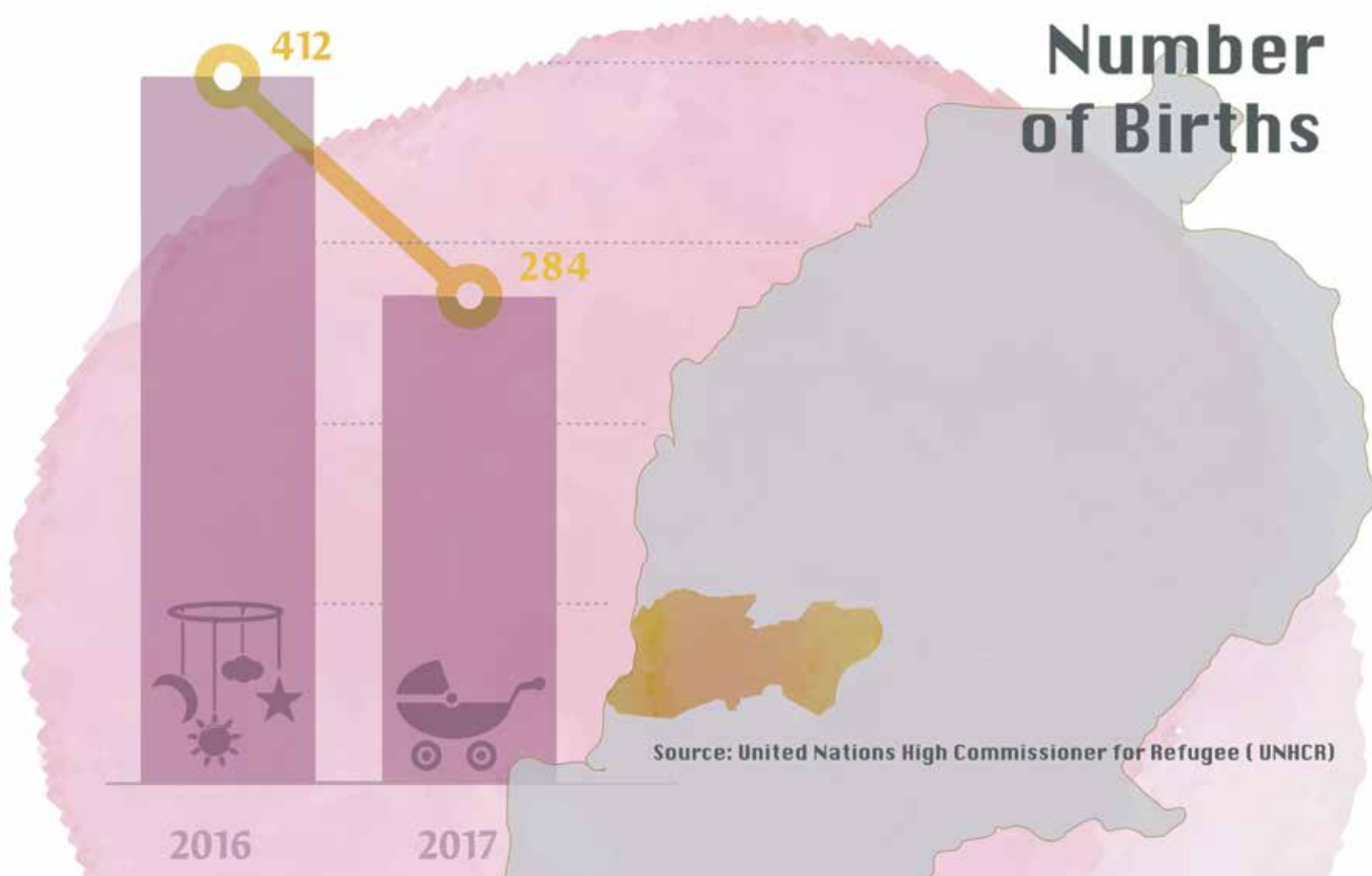
Syrians only came to Keserwan for work, as they have probably heard of the famous "strangers" saying among the inhabitants of Keserwan. Before the war in Syria, they came to this district to work on construction sites. Following the outbreak of the war, these same Syrians became displaced workers, helping other Syrians settle in the mountains of Keserwan. This is true for the Muslim Syrians. As for the Christian Syrians, they chose the region for religious reasons.

According to Raghida, who was displaced there with her family in 2013, her husband did not wish to go to other regions with a Muslim majority. Although the family shared the region's religion, specifically in Jounieh, "life was not easy at first, we remained until very recently those Syrians who will deplete the goods of this country." The situation did not change until the couple made some positive steps towards neighbors and their employers. This was why the

owner of the shop where Raghida works made an effort to enroll her daughter in a school after the principal of a public school refused to take her, saying that the school was already full.

Like many other Syrians, Raghida did not wait too long before getting a job. "Employers snatch us up quickly, as employee benefits and pay are minimal," says Raghida. She knows many Syrians who replaced Lebanese workers in the labor market. "This is what makes the Lebanese hate us more, although we didn't force employers to hire us," she adds.

Although the areas of work are different in the mountains of Keserwan, where men of different religions and denominations work in agriculture and construction, the view the Lebanese have of these Syrians is no different. The Lebanese regard them with utmost circumspection and caution. In Hrajel, Faraya, Jeita, Yahchouch, Safra and other villages and towns, "every Syrian is guilty of stealing





and harassment until proven innocent". As a result, some have received their share of beatings just for lifting their heads. "It is not wrong to respond any suspicious move with beatings as a preventive measure against disobedience that we definitely can do without," says Toni from Hrajel.

### An Economic and Social Burden

From the coastal towns of Keserwan to the highest peaks of Mount Sannine, and from Nahr Ibrahim to the north to Nahr al-Kalb to the south, no Lebanese citizen who resorts to Syrian workers seems to be willing to give them up. In construction, agriculture, trade, bakeries and sewing, Syrian labor remains the cheapest given its abundance and the absence of social and health benefits. Thus, the Lebanese benefit from Syrian displacement at a purely personal level.

On the other hand, there is a clear Syrian burden weighing on villages and towns that are not covered by the programs and aid offered by states and international organizations. Keserwan District is different from other districts, such as Baalbek, Hermel and Akkar among others, with displaced camps and gatherings. Hence, some mayors of towns in Keserwan talk of overstraining economic burdens and social changes that have transformed the familiar look of neighborhoods and streets. "When have we ever seen women in hijab in Jounieh?" deplores Leen. "And what about the houses and buildings overcrowded with families sharing a single apartment?" Such complaints frequently reach the Municipal Council of Zouk Mikael, in addition to many other complaints about "vandalizing roadside

shrines, the displaced walking around with daggers and gathering on streets and in squares in groups to smoke the hookah," according to the deputy mayor Pierre Ashkar.

Ashkar seems to be in agreement with the Mayor of Jounieh Juan Hobeish and the Mayor of Faraya Michel Salameh to reveal that the municipalities are not able to determine the number of Syrians living in them. Ashkar notes that Zouk Mikael is home to around 4,500 registered Syrians, an increase of 500 Syrians since the summer. These figures do not include the Syrians not registered with the municipality and those registered with the UNHCR and not with the municipality. Jounieh too does not have accurate figures about the number of Syrians there, "although they're probably in constant movement", says Hobeish.

While Hobeish and Ashkar reaffirm that there are no curfews imposed on Syrians in their municipalities, Salameh says he has imposed a curfew on "young displaced men" effective after 7 pm, except for those carrying a night work shift card signed by the municipality.

Curfews seem to be a minor detail for municipalities as opposed to the opening of competing businesses run by Syrians and Syrians getting electricity illegally from municipality power lines. Hobeish has vowed to close 72 businesses in Jounieh run by Syrians, "as they don't pay municipality dues", while Salameh tries to ensure that no Syrian opens a store or owns a taxi car in Faraya.

The Mayor of Faraya talks of several municipalities collecting a lump sum for every room or apartment occupied by Syrians to recover "even if only a small

amount" of the expenses incurred by municipalities as a result of the displaced for electricity, sanitation and other matters. He stresses that he has not taken these moves, but asks the Government to put them into law as the burden borne by villages and towns is growing.

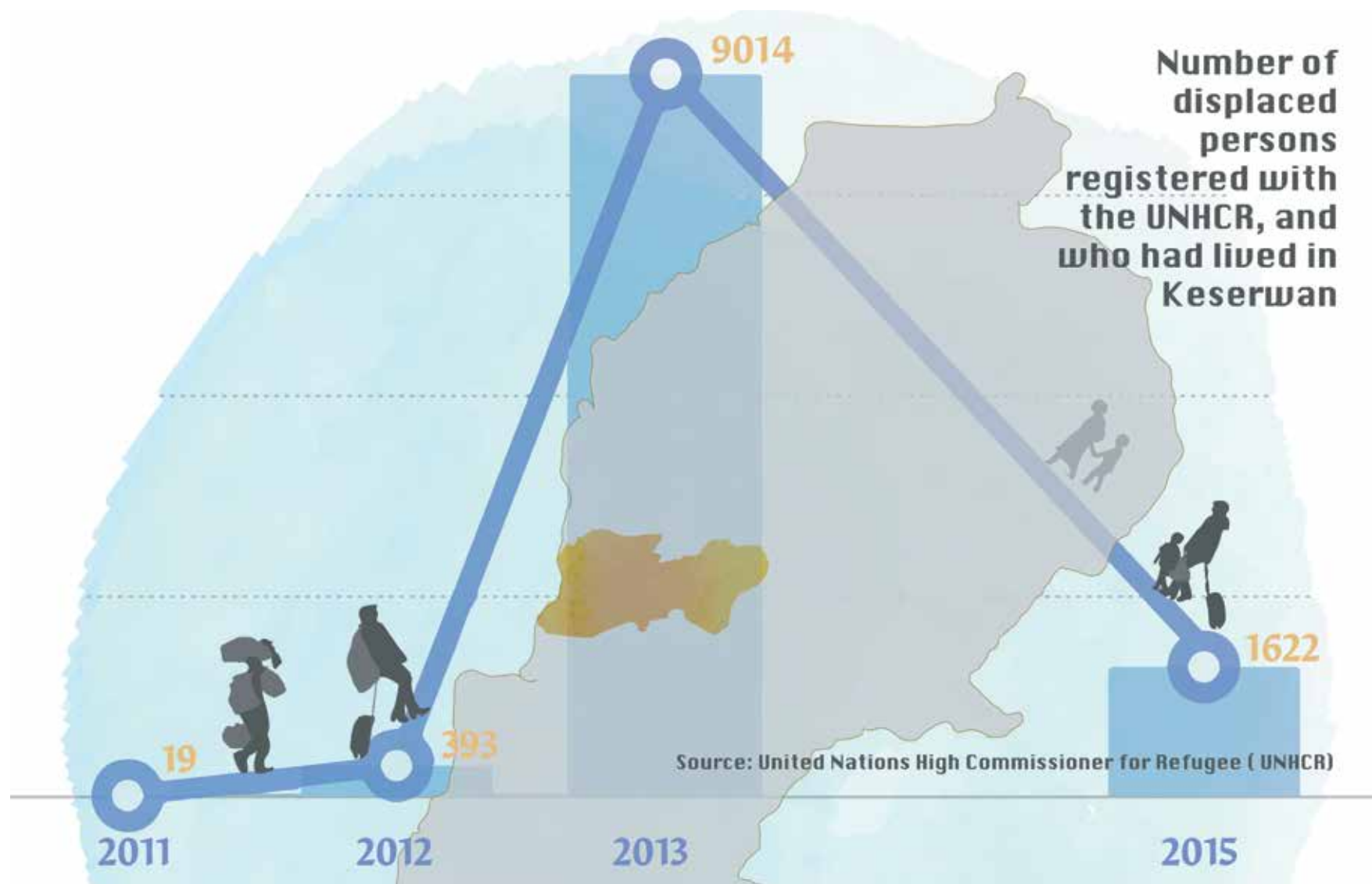
Officials in the three municipalities receive a large number of complaints against the displaced, yet most Lebanese come to the defense of Syrians working for them when a complaint is lodged against them.

With the exception of personal interests that may link a displaced Syrian to a Lebanese citizen, the prevailing view of Syrian displacement is bleak, holding the Syrians' directly responsible for the economic deterioration.

"Charity medical organizations and institutions in the district do not receive any assistance from international organizations to help the displaced, or at least do not receive sufficient assistance," says the head of a clinic in Keserwan, who asked to remain anonymous. "It's similar to how Keserwan is being neglected in development projects implemented in other regions for hosting large numbers of displaced Syrians."

In light of this "shortage" of contributions, the head of the clinic says that "some are refusing to help the displaced in terms of health and medicine on the grounds that what we receive is barely enough to help the region's poor". She went on to amend her statement by saying that this does not apply to the children of the displaced.

\*Journalist



# If You Want to be Great, be a Servant

Father Georges Massouh \*

**The Apostle Paul exhorted the people of Rome – the greatest of cities of days of yore – not to neglect to show "hospitality to strangers". He was referring to being hospitable to the poor who find themselves on the streets of a city that looks down on them and rejects them with its haughtiness that is as cold as its marble-clad structures.**

In his epistle to the people of great Rome, Paul reaffirms the essence of the law that can be summed up in the fulfillment of the commandment "love thy neighbor". He reminds them that "any other commandment, are summed up in this word, "Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor; therefore, love is the fulfilling of the law" (Paul 13:8-10).

But who is this neighbor who should be loved? In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Luke 10:25-37), Jesus Christ affirms that brotherly affection is not founded on blood, national or sectarian ties, or any other form of tribalism for that matter, but rather it is kinship that is created under certain circumstances, when a person chances upon another person in need of help. Kinship is, therefore, not "kinship of flesh and blood". Kinship is a *becoming*, governed by "mercy". Every traveler, displaced, migrant, stranger or oppressed person on earth becomes the neighbor. Remarkably, the Samaritan, who is despised by the Jewish community, does not continue on his way upon seeing the Jew stripped of his belongings by thieves and left by the side of the road. He stopped and put off his plans upon seeing someone in distress, a Jew whom he considered to be a heretic and an enemy and who was left for dead. The Samaritan did his duty without regard to the identity of the one in need.

We are "not to please ourselves", says Paul to the people of great Rome. "Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor. "Seeking to please God is meaningless and futile if we do not please our neighbor, especially the one who has "fallen victim to robbers", and even more so victim to tyrants, assassins and murderers. Prayer, fasting and all forms of worship are therefore invalid if they do not strive to serve man and to embrace him in times of hardship and adversity.

Jesus himself identified with outsiders, linking salvation to the commandment of charity to be observed by the faithful. When he spoke of weighing deeds on Judgment Day, he identified love for one's fellow man to be the main measure used, explaining that he who loves Christ is not sincere if he does not love the person who has Christ inside of him, i.e. the sick, the hungry, the poor, strangers and prisoners: "For I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you welcomed me, I was naked and you gave me clothing, I was sick and you took care of me, I was in prison and you visited me" (Matthew 25:35-36). We can also refer to the opening to the Sermon on the Mount, in which Christ blesses the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers and those who are persecuted because of righteousness (Matthew 5:1-12), to affirm that in both texts, Christ spoke of the importance of free service, charity and mercy among men to attain salvation.

Jesus identified with the oppressed of all nations, clearly saying that when you do works of mercy to those, it is like you are doing works of mercy the Lord himself. The present text does not refer to faith as a condition for salvation, although there are texts affirming faith as a doorway to eternal life. Therefore, the text does not mention faith, religious or doctrinal identity of those practicing mercy. "When the Son of Man comes in his glory... he will sit on the throne of his glory. All the nations will be gathered before him...", with "all the nations" referring to the Jews and all the other religions existing in the world. At the time, "nation" referred to the religious nation, with the Jews rejecting any relations between them and the Gentile nations. Jesus came and lifted the barriers between nations and called upon them all to accept salvation. He also told the Jews, the people of his own nation, that there are good people among other nations, and that the Lord will look on them with compassion.

We can also say that man is the place where God prefers to be worshipped. For the person who is inhabited by God is more splendid than all the temples, churches and mosques. To serve God is to serve man into whom God breathed his spirit, "since the Spirit of God dwells in you". Therefore, man is the *qibla* and the *mihrab*. Pilgrimage to him is akin to pilgrimage to holy places, to the tomb of Jesus. God does not dwell in erected stones nor is He sheltered by a roof. He prefers dwelling in warm hearts. "Give me your heart".

The Christian tradition considers the Good Samaritan to be Christ himself, for Christ is the perfect neighbor sent by God to heal our wounds and to save us from the grip of evil and the darkness of death. Accordingly, we can see Christ himself in each person who feeds the hungry, gives something to drink to the thirsty, clothes those in need of clothing, invites a stranger in, looks after the sick and visits a prisoner. Based on what Saint Paul the Apostle said: "Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ." (1 Corinthians 11:1), Origen of Alexandria (235+) calls upon us to follow

the example of the Samaritan who is in the image of Christ. He says: "We can follow the example of Christ and have mercy on those who have fallen victim to robbers. We can go to them, bind their wounds and pour oil and wine on them, and set them on our own animals, and lift their burdens."

There are many mentions in the Bible that following the example of Christ requires Christians to act as servants to their fellow men, not as lords, even if they are the lords of their people by today's standards. For Christ, the Almighty, after washing the feet of his disciples on the night when he was betrayed to be crucified, addressed them: "You call me Teacher and Lord—and right, for that is what I am. So if I, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. I have set you an example, that you should do as I have done to you" (John 13:13-15).

Being a lord in Christianity is neither power nor force nor wealth. Becoming a lord is only attained through charity, humility and obedience to the word of God. The true lord is the one who chooses to be a servant to the poor, the needy, the displaced, the refugees, the homeless and all the afflicted. And Christ himself says: "But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all" (Mark 10:43-44).

Christ is the stranger and at the same time he who does works of mercy for the stranger. When we do works of mercy for the oppressed it is the same as doing works of mercy for Christ himself, and at the same time we can say that whoever does works of mercy is following the example of Christ himself, he is becoming in the image of Christ and following his example. On this topic, St. Epiphanius of Salamis (403+) explains: "Does our Lord get thirsty or hungry? Does he need clothing, he the unchanging in his nature, having created what is in heaven and on earth, he who nurtures the angels in heaven, and every nation and species on earth? It is inconceivable. The Lord does not get hungry in essence, but in his saints; he does not get thirsty in nature, but in the poor."

We are, therefore, called upon to take upon ourselves the burdens of contemporary man with his many troubles, wounds and problems, and to see his destitution and oppression, especially the troubles of people in times of war and displacement, and commit to caring and helping them until the times of evil come to an end. To love God is to strive always to fulfill the only commandment He commanded we should be guided by: "that you love one another as I loved you" (John 12, 15). To love God requires that we love man first, every man.

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**Seeking to please God is meaningless and futile if we do not please our neighbor, especially the one who has "fallen victim to robbers", and even more so victim to tyrants, assassins and murderers**



# Islam and the Other

Omar Kayed\*

**The trust crisis is undoubtedly deepening between Muslims and the "other". This is confirmed by the clear rise of the extreme right in some Western countries, the growing wave of anti-Muslim sentiment or Islamophobia, and increasing demands for curbing illegal immigration (most immigrants are Muslims). The developments of the past two decades have shown that fundamentalist groups, with their medieval values and violent practices, have extended their influence and are now threatening Western countries, especially after carrying out attacks in France, Belgium, Germany and the United States and after hundreds of young men from various European countries have joined the ranks of ISIS. In some Arab countries, particularly in Syria, Iraq and Libya, minorities are afraid of co-existence with Muslims, following the gross abuses carried out against the Yazidis in Sinjar, the displacement of Christians in Mosul and the murder of Copts on the shores of the Mediterranean in Libya.**

The most important challenge for Muslims today is restoring trust, reassuring the other and making amends with the world. This can only be done by liberating religion from the grip of fundamentalist groups and restoring peace to it. The best way to achieve this end may well begin with reforming the national state, ending the interference of political authorities in well-known religious institutions and initiating a systematic review and comprehensive rectification of all the concepts distorted by the extremists, including the relationship of Islam to the other.

According to Quranic texts and the prophetic experience, Islam honors man as a human being, regardless of his beliefs, gender, language, civilization or color. Diversity, plurality and difference is a *Sunnah* or a way of the ways of God. God Almighty says: "And if your Lord had willed, He could have made mankind one community, but they will not cease to differ." (Hud, 118). He ordered Muslims to coexist with the "other" in peace, cooperation and familiarity, and to have dialogue and debate with them in friendliness. God Almighty says: "Allah does not forbid you from those who do not fight you because of religion and do not expel you from your homes – from being righteous toward them and acting justly toward them. Indeed, loves those who act justly." (Al Mumtahanah, 8). God is asking for the highest degree of righteousness and charity and the highest degree of justice. He also says: "And do not argue with the People of the Scripture except in a way that is best" (Al 'Ankabut, 46). He says: "O People of the Scripture, come to a word that is equitable between us and you" (Ali 'Imran, 63). In his Sahih (1312), al-Bukhari recounts that the Prophet SAWS came across a funeral, and he was told that it was the funeral of a Jew. He responded by saying, "Isn't it a soul?" Moreover, the Prophet SAWS died and his shield on loan from a Jew (Sahih Muslim, 1603). He could have borrowed from his companions, and they would not have begrudged him anything, but he wanted to teach his *ummah*.

In the prophetic experience with the People of the Scriptures, we should mention two important charters. The first is the Charter of Medina recognizing the pluralistic social reality and the equal rights of all groups. The document names twenty groups, nine of which are Muslim and eleven non-Muslim. It does not cross out or banish any group, not even the polytheists mentioned in article 20. Moreover, the charter considers the Jews an *ummah* of Muslims, to each its own religion, as stated in article 24. Despite that, Hebrew Jews (Banu Qurayza, Banu Qaynuqa and Banu Nadir) – and not all Jews – turned against the Muslims at very critical times and cooperated with the polytheists.

The second constitutional document was written by Prophet SAWS in the year of the covenants, 10 AH, to the Christians of Najran who had come in delegations to the Prophet SAWS after his defeat to Quraysh and Khaibar. The first paragraph in the document says:

"I commit myself to support them, to place their persons under my protection, as well as their churches, chapels, oratories, the monasteries of their monks, the residences of their anchorites... I will protect their religion and their Church wherever they are found... with utmost vigilance on my part, the People of my House, and the Muslims as a whole." He also mentioned another important aspect: "If the Christians approach you seeking the help and assistance of the Muslims in order to repair their churches and their convents or to arrange matters pertaining to their affairs and religion, these must help and support them. However, they must not do so with the aim of receiving any reward. On the contrary, they should do so to restore that religion, out of faithfulness to the pact of the Messenger of Allah, by pure donation, and as a meritorious act before Allah and His Messenger." This means that if Christians want to build their churches, Muslims should assist them without considering this help a debt. When Easter came and the Christians of Najran were still in Medina, the Prophet SAWS opened the doors of the mosque to them, and they prayed their own prayers. When a delegation of Abyssinian Christians came, the Prophet let them stay at the mosque and personally showed them hospitality and served them, saying, "They have honored our companions (those who migrated to Abyssinia with Ja'far ibn Abi Taleb), I would like to honor them myself."

Since the Umayyad period, Christians have held their public celebrations in the streets, led by crosses and clergy, and these celebrations were not held in isolation from the Muslims. It was also customary during the reign of Harun al-Rashid to decorate the streets and for

the Christians go out on Easter in a large procession. According to Will Durant, the early Abbasid period was one of the flourishing eras for the tolerance showed to Christians in practicing their religious rites, building churches and monasteries, and equality with Muslims in jobs. The official jobs included hundreds of Christians, and there were so many Christians rising to high offices as to rouse Muslim suspicions. (Will Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, Chapter 13, p. 132). It is also striking that the Mongols kidnapped a group of citizens that included Muslims, Christians and Jews. During the negotiations, the Emir of the Mongols, Kutlushah, wanted to release the Muslim prisoners only. The Caliph refused, and insisted on releasing everyone. And they were all released.

The rights of polytheists, atheists, pagans, Magi, Buddhists, Hindus and others were also viewed as equal to those of Muslims, without discrimination, and they were citizens just like the others. Last judgment is by God. Their rules are like those of the People of the Scriptures, they have their religions and Muslims have their own, and the relationship between them is one of dialogue, charity and cooperation. When the Muslims conquered Persia and these religions appeared, they consulted among themselves. 'Abd al-Rahman ibn 'Awf said that he heard the Prophet SAWS say that they should be treated as the People of the Scriptures. Yet, it should also be said that there were abuses carried out by some of the caliphs against non-Muslims. However, most of the time, these abuses were not limited to them, as such injustice was also inflicted on Muslims and on anyone who opposed the political authority, like Ahmad ibn Hanbal.

In conclusion, the verse "There shall be no compulsion in [acceptance of] the religion" (Al Baqarah, 256) remains one of the most important objectives that religion instilled in societies. Muslims should not initiate any religious fighting or war as claimed by extremist organizations. The only reason that legitimizes fighting is self-defense when anyone, even if a Muslim, initiates an attack against you. The Almighty says: "Permission [to fight] has been given to those who are being fought, because they were wronged." (Al Hajj, 39). He also says: "So whoever has assaulted you, then assault him in the same way that he assaulted you." (Al Baqarah, 194). If the Quraysh pluralists had not caused harm to the Prophet, insulting him and expelling him from his land, he would not have touched them, saying only: "so whoever wills – let him believe; and whoever wills – let him disbelieve, for you is your religion, and for me is my religion." Had Persia and Byzantine not started fighting him and killing his messengers, he would not have attacked them.

**The rights of polytheists, atheists, pagans, Magi, Buddhists, Hindus and others were also viewed as equal to those of Muslims, without discrimination, and they were citizens just like the others. Last judgment is by God. Their rules are like those of the People of the Scriptures, they have their religions and Muslims have their own, and the relationship between them is one of dialogue, charity and cooperation**

# Protection and Language Preventing Refugees from Falling Through the Cracks

Georges Ghali\*

**Discussions on the refugee file in Lebanon have always been fuelled by dissociation, misconceptions, violence and often misinformation. Such gaps and challenges have mostly taken the form of lengthy Byzantine discussions on words, terminologies and language. Since the 1960s, at least, the debate on language in Lebanon has been designed to evade responsibility, in the hope that word choices will make the situation better.**

The discussion broadly starts with the obvious debate on the identification of these individuals. The latter has led to a pathetic epic journey of wording and expectations. Since the beginning of the influx of the Syrians into Lebanon, as a result of the armed conflict, the Government of Lebanon dissociated itself from the crisis. More dangerously, the Lebanese government shifted the responsibility onto the myriad of international organizations working in Lebanon and on donor countries alike. This was accompanied by a series of internal communication and political messaging at the national level.

The Lebanese government has since 2012 utilized the word "displaced Syrians" in order to refer to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The position is strongly built on an assumption that referring to refugees as displaced would relieve the State of Lebanon of its responsibilities. This approach raises two main concerns. The first is the shifting of the discussion to a linguistic exercise of brainstorming a semantic field of movement and mobility. The early years of the crisis focused largely on ensuring that communication with regard to the humanitarian crisis excluded the word refugees. The second concern, which is more dangerous in nature, lies in motivations and intentions. By adopting such terminologies, the Government of Lebanon aims at escaping from obligations and responsibilities falling on any duty bearer within the human rights framework.

The question remains of whether people have fewer rights if they are called displaced. Is the Lebanese society more resilient by perceiving refugees with different wording? Although not a party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Lebanon nevertheless has obligations towards Syrian refugees and cannot allow them to fall into a legal black hole, even in the context of mass influx. A series of existing international norms are indeed applicable regarding the *non-refoulement* of persons fleeing a conflict, but also their protection and reception conditions in the host country. Such norms should be interpreted in a mutually reinforcing manner for the protection of refugees and asylum seekers. It is paramount to stress that the situation of mass influx cannot be invoked by Lebanon to violate the principle of *non-refoulement* and core international human rights obligations.

On the other hand, several terminologies, despite their correctness legally, could also fuel further tension among host and refugee communities. An understanding that many Syrian nationals are "irregular" in Lebanon or a number of Syrians are detained for "illegal entry" or "illegal stay" spreads a perception of insecurity among communities. Lebanon has a valid interest in ensuring the stability and security of the country, however the category-



The idea shows the difference between *nuzuh* or displacement in Arabic and *luzhu'* or asylum-seeking in Arabic through the way the two words are written. *Nuzuh* was a single block with the letter *h* distancing itself away from it but at the same time hanging at the end of it, indicating displacement and seizing the opportunity to return. Small letters and diacritics squeezing together overlapped, as if emitted from within it, indicating a longing to return and forming a single block again, i.e. "the return of the letter *h* to the letters *n*, *u* and *z*".

As for *luzhu'*, the letters appear closely knit, twisting on themselves, indicating assembly in a small space twisting on itself. The two words appear homologous because they hold a meaning and its antonym.

based restriction of movement, including arrests and detentions, and the persistent mistreatment and stigmatization of refugees should be addressed within the rights-based context. The rigid policies implemented on Syrian nationals in Lebanon, in addition to curfews, raids, arrests, and violations to the presumption of innocence, have generated a strong perception among Lebanese coining refugees as a security threat. The latter perception generates further segregation of communities and discrimination leading to weaker social cohesion and further challenges to stabilization interventions.

While the media and social dynamics play a significant role in framing attitudes by placing blame or targeting specific communities, the authorities, in conjunction with other relevant organizations, including civil society and humanitarian actors, should examine ways in which social cohesion can be built and maintained. Changing perceptions and attitudes towards refugees so that they are viewed within the context of their unembellished reality,

rather than perceived as an inherent socio-economic and security threat, is fundamental to addressing misperceptions, which have fostered jealousy and resentment in Lebanese public opinion.

In conclusion, the constant shifting of responsibility and creation of an environment of dependence and lack of protection could be counter-productive for the concerns of the Lebanese government and the interest of its society. It is of ultimate need that debates currently taking place with regard to a comprehensive policy document for the Lebanese government address these challenges. It is important that even when discussing solutions to the crisis, Lebanon's decision makers focus on the return to Syria, blindsiding protection and rights-based elements for Syrian refugees, who in any case, will have to spend several years in Lebanon.

\* Executive Director ALEF act for human rights



# Leaving with Two Memories

Mohammad el Hajj Hussein\*

The street at 6 am is a sign of the stillness of life in those neighborhoods that are used to taking notice of the details of the roads, balconies and windows. From the balcony of the house, the neighborhood looks like adjoining matchstick boxes, tied by electricity cables to form one big spider's web known as the popular neighborhoods. The streets are full of pedestrians, beaten and tired faces going back and forth in a single file, scribbles on house walls left by lovers tired of walking to school or to girls' fountain at a water spring.

Next to the nostalgia for everything, Abu Hassan's face looks like an old vessel with inscriptions of a story too long to recount. The man who has aged as if life had eaten the sides of his body, worn down as he arranges flower pots on the metallic balcony balustrade, where he likes to snatch quietude and plunge into it as an ally of silence, over a cup of coffee and the soft sound coming from his radio broadcasting the songs of Fairouz, Wadiah el-Safi and Nasri Shamseddine, watching the steps of Umm Hassan, who aged alongside him, and three "flowers" inside the house who are a lifetime's harvest.

The members of that family in the neighborhood had nothing to do with any of the things that made it into the Guinness Book, or the summits of the Arab nation for that matter. They are people who call things as they are – shelter, wall, work. From the windows of his one-story house, life looks like a relay race. The father leaves at dawn with his fava bean cart, looking over the smell of cumin, sliced onions, gas burning on low, and the spices leaving you with a taste that ties you to the place. You don't forget a corner where Abu Hassan stands. At noon, his daughters come out of school; at night, thousands of stories he inherited from grandmothers and mothers and the earth, which only passed down to him a cart for toil and a family for happiness.

Every day, his three daughters leave for school, accompanied by their mother's prayers, as if these hundred meters were a path in a wild forest, inhospitable to everything but the mercy of God. At school, all days seem alike – girl secrets, dreams arranged on shelves and in drawers being erected and tumbling down. Some of them dream of universities away from the neighborhood that comes to a standstill in the morning and comes back to life late into the evening. Others dream of a knight of flesh and blood, astride a happy life. Reading, languages and sports. They were three roses on the stage of life summed up in two weary faces bearing the name of Hassan, a boy they never had.

The mother spreads the aromas of her cooking around the neighborhood, the aromas of spices seasoning traditional dishes, of the mujaddara [brown lentil porridge] laid out in the center and surrounded by yoghurt, onions and bread... winter soups during a season that goes by like a familiar foe whose movements they know well, making them desert the balcony, but taking care of the pots that grew with every prayer, every detail of the life of a family that build its home with love and warmth. The floor was spacious enough to accommodate their meals, sitting on sponge mattresses with



Shadow Box, an artwork by one of the children taking part in the "Forsa" (Opportunity) project organized by Search for Common Ground as part of drawing workshops aiming to integrate host and nurturing environments through the arts

their legs crossed, in an oriental position that traces a circle around the fire place, brought together around it like a choir in unison before coming out on stage, putting down charters of support and all for one. The rain washes the neighborhood all at once. The smell of dirt paints a line of life in silence and in the hustle and bustle. The cold leaves a red flush on faces like that of shyness. The cart positioned at the corner becomes a haven of warmth for those escaping the hellish biting cold. Abu Hassan sits next to it, placing firewood in a can, worn-out like his lifetime, like all journeys he had lived through – as a boy, young man and old man – and the owner of a cart that provides for a family, pushing it towards the top of comfort, with devotion and steadfastness.

He blows out smoke on another balcony, looking out at a new path, a path in a new country, different to the one in which he had piled joy and memories in. The war years ground on past. Sadness gnawed at him about what he had left behind and all those that passed away. Bombs, rockets and car bombs have levelled everything. Corners now hide murderers of all forms, all the details of the love that ties them to their place of origin, their place of birth, and what the wind of the last days there bore, has been lost in the jostle of track

vehicles and bullets.

The picture passed as cruel as death, before this arrival, and before the attempts they had set their eyes on in the new place. The last thing they remember of their land is that the bus was swaying, like a toy car in the hands of a child, with marks of wear and tear after hours of playing with it, now living its final seconds. Everybody turned around to their land, as if bidding farewell to a dead person just before laying in the ground, with the whistling of shells, the ringing of bombs landing in the hearts, as if the earth has been given out to dark-skinned people who cannot count to ten before love, cannot leave God alone, and cannot flee but together.

The road to Lebanon was long. They had to come across all the faces that forced them to leave, with all their different flags. It was enough for someone to say, "What would have happened if this kid hadn't done that," and the salvo of voices would ring in unison, "Allah had decreed it and what He willed has happened." And in the silence of each the condemnation of all by all, that they are the victims of all the mistakes – the mistake of the parents, the mistake of the land, and the mistake of the leaders and the young man who stabbed the heart, and left them another appearance in a bus swaying on the road to Lebanon.

This night is heavy with a stony silence. There is another farewell to go through, and another memory they have to live with. Two journeys.

Here, the houses have become closer to them. They have become the children of the place, new neighbors to people who know who the newcomers were, what sadness they bear, and what windows they open to restore something from an old neighborhood they had lived in.

Abu Hassan put his life in order on a cart of corn, fava beans, and lupin beans. He began pushing joy on mountain roads, near schools to house them, next to people looking into each other's hearts so that grief for what they had lost there would not be extinguished. But the place became their identity that did not force them as before to tremble.

His daughters became more beautiful from all what they had suffered. The schools were easing his grief, the roads that everyone walked on, to everyone, life became windows opening up to hope. They set up in the place everything that resembled them: the meals of their women, the clothes of their little ones, their dialect, shyness, and their eyes that were beginning to forget the grief reserved for them.

The city with all its fear grew accustomed to them. It reconciled with the new faces, with their cries for livelihoods. Painters, electricians and cart vendors. It reconciled with all that had passed as if it were other people. Life became shared, or at least for Abu Hassan, shared without sadness, fear or confusion about an identity that is still in their hands.

The heart of the matter is that he was tired of paying the price of a sin he did not commit, nor that those sharing the bus with him the first time and probably the second committed. Everybody gathered their things. Abu Hassan placed the things from his second home on the cart that was swaying on the road to a new dwelling. Their curse was repeated. Every time someone stabs their hearts, they leave without a land. The journey of fear and the fleeting moments of respite in between forces them to run towards any salvation. The pose of those leaving mourns the girl whose image was the sadness of the whole earth. She was their daughter, their sister, their neighbor and of an identity that did not confuse them. She was the daughter of their kinpeople. Abu Hassan turned and his weeping was louder than the voice of everyone else. No moan coming out, as a man with two hearts, one beating in an old corner and the other awaiting his new dwelling.



# Displaced Syrians as Labor Force Taking Part in the Production of Tobacco in the South

Mohammad Berri\*

The participation of the displaced Syrian families has provided the tobacco farmers in the Bint Jbeil region in South Lebanon with a helping hand to improve production in light of hardships and limited financial means.

The sexagenarian farmer Abu Hussein from the village of Aaitaroun tells the National News Agency reporter: "I currently supervise a farm of 12 Dunams (around 3 Acres) and resort to the aid of a number of displaced Syrian families living in the neighborhood".

He explains: "Tobacco cultivation is exhausting and its working days are simply a loop in which the seasons interlap".

He continues, busy with pricking tobacco leaves with the help of his family members and some female Syrian workers: "I helped them with the process of cultivation because if labor and expenses are spent properly, the production profits would amount to the expenses".

He points out that "Syrian labor is temporary, especially during planting. It is a leveraging factor for production".

Tobacco cultivation in Bint Jbeil serves as a breadwinner for several families. It is considered one of the main agricultural crops next to olives and has accompanied the farmer for better or worse, before, during and after the Israeli invasion, in the absence of alternative crops.

Tobacco cultivation requires sixteen months of continuous work, starting with putting seeds in intensive care beds, then planting them in the right soil, then growing, picking, pricking, spreading out, sorting and equipping, up to the final phase when deliv-

ering the yield to the Régie Libanaise des Tabacs et Tombacs.

In her house in the village of Kounine, Hanan pricks the tobacco leaves that are laid down on a plastic table before her. This is the yield she reaped from growing an area of four Dunams (one acre) of land.

She explains: "Labor costs are very expensive compared to the production, but two years ago (...) we started resorting to displaced Syrian workers. We pay them half of what we used to pay the Lebanese per day, i.e. twenty thousand Lebanese pounds".

She adds: "During the phases of picking and pricking, we pay two thousand Lebanese pounds per string. And with the assistance of the displaced Syrians when needed, the result is at least better than that of before; especially in the implanting season".

Two years ago, Bahia migrated from Syria to Bint Jbeil. She knew nothing about tobacco cultivation. In this regard, she says: "In just a few days I learnt how to 'plant' the land with the neighbors, then we began working with them as partners in production".

Bahia and members of her family now master all details of this cultivation, including planting, picking, pricking, drying and collecting, except for seed-planting in the nursery and growing the first implant.

She explains: "This phase is hard and needs accuracy and knowledge of the diseases that attack the nursery. Each disease has a name and a cure".

Tobacco cultivation, according to an agricultural guide at the Régie Libanaise des Tabacs et Tombacs, requires "a lot of expertise, evolution and follow-up, due to the diseases that attack implants and seedlings".

He says: "The farmer must be informed of this and he should know the minimum necessary requirements in terms of treatment expertise and daily surveillance, as well as caring for sterilizing the soil and spraying pesticides, plowing the land, sowing seeds taken from plants that are not affected by disease and avoiding intensive farming". The participation of the displaced Syrians is limited to certain phases.

As for the vice president of the General Trade Union, head of the Union of Tobacco Growers in Lebanon, Mr. Hassan Fakih, he emphasizes that "tobacco cultivation is an inherited family cultivation practice and enjoys mechanisms related to expertise and accuracy in order to avoid the production of an unhealthy crop".

Accordingly, he explains that "the Syrian labor is often limited to the planting season."

\* National News Agency Reporter in Tebnin, South Lebanon





# Discrimination against Women in the Nationality Law: Its Impact on Lebanese Families and Issues of National Integration

**Dr. Fahmiyya Sharafeddine\***

**Nationality is one of the complex issues of human rights granting a person the legal status that confers on him or her the rights and obligations to obtain full citizenship. That is why all international declarations and conventions recognize that "everyone has the right to a nationality" and states that "no one shall be arbitrarily deprived of his nationality nor denied the right to change his nationality".**

The nationality of married women in Lebanon is governed by decree N° 15 of 19 January 1925, amended by the law of 11 January 1960.

Women are discriminated against in the current nationality law in three aspects:

1. Lebanese mothers cannot pass on their nationalities to their children. In other words, the nationality law confines kinship to fathers. Mothers are thus deprived of their basic rights as citizens. The nationality law also ties nationality to the soil, stating that "shall be considered Lebanese every person born on the territory of great Lebanon".
2. Lebanese wives cannot pass on their nationalities to foreign husbands.
3. Discrimination between mothers of Lebanese origin and mothers who acquire the Lebanese nationality, i.e. foreign women married to Lebanese men are entitled to acquiring the Lebanese nationality and to pass on their nationality to their children if they outlive their husbands while this right is denied to Lebanese women.

Although Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women in 1996, the State made reservations to article 9 (2) that states that "States Parties shall grant women equal rights with men with respect to the nationality of their children," in addition to other articles which together constitute flagrant discrimination against women in Lebanon.

The arguments made against those demanding the amendment of the nationality law are not based on any factual or objective knowledge of what is happening inside society. Neither governments nor NGOs have any data or figures on the general trends relating to the marriage of Lebanese women to foreign nationals and on whether there is a deliberate focus on one nationality in particular.

One of the aspects of this lack of knowledge appears in the reactions of politicians to correct judgments delivered in cases relating to the nationality law and discrimination against women in this law.

How does this bias in the nationality law affect women?

**Back to figures:**

There were roughly 18,000 marriages between Lebanese women and foreign nationals in the 14 years between 1995 and 2010.<sup>(1)</sup>

This figure was reckoned based on the fertility rate in Lebanon that stands at 2.3%. It was then possible to show that those concerned between 1994 and 2008 were:

Parents:  $18,000 \times 2 = 36,000$

Children:  $18,000 \times 2.3 = 41,400$

Total: 77,400 affected persons (mother, father and child)

According to statistical figures then, the problem affects 77,400 individuals. This figure is significant when we recall that the population of Lebanon is 4 million persons, according to the most generous estimates.

These individuals live in Lebanon and they belong to

18,000 families according to the figures of the short time period between 1995 and 2008, i.e. 14 years.

Those 77,400 individuals belong to families prejudiced by the current nationality law, 41,400 of them are descendants of Lebanese mothers, who are Lebanese citizens whose obligations are clearly set out in the Constitution, in peace and in war. These women have the right to choose and elect their representatives, they are eligible to defend their country, pulling their weight when duty calls, and they pay taxes just like other citizens, if not more. Yet, these women live in their homeland like strangers, forced to stand in long lines to obtain residence permits for their children, and forced to beseech the "powerful" to obtain work permits for spouses, to make sure that their husbands remain at their side and with their children.

**The problems women face as a result of discrimination against them in the nationality law:**

- The required residence permit for husbands and children;
- Difficulty obtaining residence permits;
- Husbands being forced to have fictive employment in the case of Palestinians as they are prohibited from owning property.

The problem of obtaining a residence permit is a nightmare not only for those with limited incomes but even for women who are of an above average class, who express their frustration over the time they have to spend on this issue and their anxiety over deadlines.

There are limited areas for work. The current situation keeps foreign men out of a large number of jobs, especially the liberal professions such as medicine, law, engineering and pharmacy.

While they can only practice other jobs in the private sector:

**Education**

Children are prohibited from choosing courses that lead to liberal professions such as medicine, engineering, pharmacy, etc. They end up travelling as they are not able to choose fields of education and work.

**Healthcare**

Whereas the problems of families enjoying good economic status are confined to residence permits and work, the suffering of other families due to financial issues go beyond those. Since women cannot confer their Lebanese nationality on their husbands and children, the latter are deprived of the social benefits that all Lebanese are entitled to, especially if the mother is not working and is not covered by social security provisions. This problem may be resolved with regard to children, but how can it be resolved with regard to spouses if the social security measures are not applicable to them?

**Inheritance**

Most women expressed their concerns about the issue of inheritance. "I'll be forced in the future to sell all my property and transfer the funds abroad, as foreigners can only own a limited percentage of property," said one

woman, "In the case of my death, my children won't be able to inherit it as they need a decree."

In this context, the woman was very emotional as she is as Lebanese as men and she should have the same citizenship rights, and not be "a second-class citizen" as she put it.

**Psychological Problems**

One woman said, "I feel that my husband is going through an internal conflict because of an identity crisis, he has no other national affiliation, neither to Lebanon nor to any other country. And he has lost hope on the issue of nationality," adding, "I am worried about the future and fate of my children, in case they don't get the nationality, their father would take them to his country and they will feel strangers there."

**How Does This Affect National Integration?**

The modern state is a state of rights, laws and citizenship. Moreover, in practice, it is a contractual relation between individuals and the state, whereby the state grants individuals all their rights and imposes on them obligations.

Nationality is what differentiates citizens from foreigners, and it is through nationality that individuals become citizens united by the state of rights and laws.

Nationality therefore becomes synonymous with citizenship – nationality being a symbolic confirmation of belonging to a homeland, making it a key element in the affirmation of citizenship.

We are seeing the negative impact of the discriminatory nationality law on national integration by depriving a significant number of children of the nationality of the State that they have grown emotionally and practically connected to through their mothers, leading to numerous financial and psychological problems despite them being citizens who were born and who live on its soil. This may lead to a real divide that would affect social integration, the substantive basis for the building of a modern state.

Equality before the law is not an end in itself; it is a means to social integration. Discrimination between the citizens of a state on the basis of sex or religion leads to a disruption in the relations between citizens and the state, and among the citizens themselves.

The nationality system that has accompanied the establishment and rise of the modern state is a safety valve for the existence of the political body. As a consequence, depriving children of their nationalities exposes this society to precarity and instability.

The political caveats against a fair and equal nationality law have an impact on a large number of Lebanese women and their families. Why should the Lebanese women pay the political price? Are not non-Lebanese women who marry Lebanese nationals a weighting element in political equations?

Is it not time to extricate the concept of equality from politics?

Amending the current nationality law should no longer be put off. Women are looking forward to it not as a favor they wish to obtain but as a right to be restored.

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(1) This paragraph was chosen as it begins with the Nationality Law that was endorsed by the Government in 1995 until the launching of the Lebanese women's rights project. The said project was implemented by the National Committee for the Follow-Up on Women's Issues (CFUWI) along with several civil societies with the support of UNDP.





Comics by Taghrid Abdel Al, Palestinian Writer and Artist Residing in Lebanon



The UNDP «Peace Building in Lebanon» project works since 2007 on enhancing mutual understanding and promoting social cohesion by addressing root causes of conflict in Lebanon. The project has been also lately working on addressing the impact of the Syrian crisis on social stability in Lebanon. The project supports different groups from local leaders and local actors, to educators, journalists, youth and civil society activists, in developing medium and long-term strategies for peace building, crisis management and conflict prevention.

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