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Securing Shelter While Facing Eviction: The Case of Syrian Migrants in Lebanon

Dima El Khouri

Dima El Khouri documents the politics of securing housing for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. She shows the complex web of negotiations that take place between refugees, local Lebanese city dwellers, local authorities, and international NGOs.

Between the beginning of the conflict in Syria in 2011 and 2014, the Lebanese government failed to react to the arrival of Syrians fleeing conflict in their country. By 2015, approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees resided in Lebanon, in addition to almost half a million Palestinian refugees, and at least 200,000 unskilled migrants from other nationalities, in a country of 5 million (Dahdah 2015). Local authorities and international NGOs manage the residency of these refugees. The relations between migrants and host-dwellers are central to the understanding of the migration cycle. In Lebanon, these relations are marked by a cycle of negotiations around the appropriation and control of space. For refugees, whose status is solidified as second-class dwellers, their primary concern and struggle is securing a place to reside, resorting to negative coping mechanisms.[1] On the local Lebanese side, the concern lies in control over space and socioreligious stability.

Drawing on 32 in-depth interviews conducted in Tripoli between 2015 and 2019, I explore the complicated affair of securing housing in an urban context marked by political fluctuation and informality around the question of the public management of the refugee. It is a context in which the "policy of no policy" (Kikano, Fauveaud and Lizarralde 2021) of the government induces a continuous cycle of unequal negotiations for space between dwellers.

Frustrations of Lebanese landlords and the appeal of Syrian refugees

In 2018, I hailed a collective taxi in the heart of Tebbeneh. The driver's chatter during the 30-minute drive in traffic served as a barometer for the generic "refugee talk" on the street. "We have been invaded by a wave of refugees… I know them very well—I rent them apartments," he said. While Lebanese dwellers do not accept refugees in cities in Lebanon, and specifically in public spaces, they prefer the latter as tenants and workers. My driver explained that he was renting out four apartments and a shop to Syrians, and one apartment to a Lebanese woman. He had no complaints from his Syrian tenants because "they would borrow to pay on time or leave with no hassle." His Lebanese tenant was his only tenant who was late to pay.

Lebanese dwellers have contradictory feelings towards the presence of Syrian refugees. On one hand, the latter's informal nature and residency status presents an opportunity for labor exploitation (e.g. work below minimum wage, rent with no contract). On the other hand, they are looked down upon and undesired in social contexts. For example, my driver was disgusted with the eating habits of his tenants: "They eat herbs I can't stand to smell."

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[1]   Some refugees use assimilation techniques, such as "faking" an accent, changing the way they dress or how they wear a specific article of clothing, in order to hide their origins.

Substandard conditions, increasing rents, and insecurity of available housing

Most housing that is available to migrants in Lebanon is substandard and needs major repairs, ranging from plumbing to serious structural problems.

Figure 1. A Syrian family in Tebbeneh, Tripoli, rents an apartment in a fragile building structure

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A vulnerability assessment of 4,966 households carried out by the World Food Programme in 2017 found that "4% of shelters are in dangerous conditions … while 28% have other urgent repair needs" (Saiid, Elzuhairi and Papavero 2017). One Syrian refugee family in Tebbeneh told me that upgrades to their apartment had just been finalized by "the UN" but were not sure by which organization exactly. Their apartment was substandard, and the most serious issue I witnessed was the damp and degraded walls. The process that led to the upgrades was random and informal: people from the *omam*[2] had been visiting the area, offering upgrades for apartments where Syrian refugees resided. The "organization" made no formal agreement nor signed a contract with the landlord: they surveyed the apartment and sent three workers within a week to fix it up. The situation was a win-win for the Syrian tenants who now lived in a slightly better maintained apartment and for the Lebanese landlord who received upgrades free of charge.

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[2]   The common Arabic street reference to individuals from the United Nations.

Figure 2. Upgrades in a Tebbeneh apartment

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Before this intervention, the apartment owner had made no upgrades and the Syrian family had made no such request, and because his tenants were Syrian, the landlord received upgrades at no cost. Despite the family's long-term presence in the apartment, they feel no security of tenure. With no rental contract and no legal residency documents, they are exposed to eviction at any time with no legal recourse possible. While this family told me that they "give their landlord no trouble and always pay on time," evicting refugees with no formal rent contract is common.

A continuously present threat of eviction

Refugees tend to take the initiative to leave their shelter when they cannot pay. This is a preventive measure to avoid eviction that is enforced by varying degrees of violence, from a request to move out, to a threat of police intervention; and varying degrees of authority, ranging from the landlord to the neighbors to the local authorities. Figure 3 shows three types of evictions observed during fieldwork.

Figure 3. Types of eviction to which Syrian refugees are subjected (El Khouri 2019)

Type of eviction	Reason	Enforcement
Evictions at the tenant-landlord level	Mainly inability to pay rent	Dialogue, ranging from friendly to violent
Evictions by authorities	Non adherence to municipality rules, no residency permits	Public demand, army or police raids
Socially enforced evictions	Different and numerous acts of daily rejection	Social pressure

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The first type is at the landlord-tenant level. It occurs when the refugees are unable to make rent on time. This eviction type is enforced through dialogue ranging from civil conversation to violent verbal aggression. While in most cases a conversation happens before the eviction, refugees expect the decision, to the extent that they will sometimes leave an apartment or shelter before being asked. This was the case of Maysaa's family, who in 2017 had been residing in Tebbeneh for around six months. Her family of five had been living near the center of Tripoli, but had been struggling for a year before moving. After selling most of her jewelry and borrowing all the money they could, they decided to leave "before [they were] kicked out" and moved to the cheaper area of Tebbeneh.

The second type are group evictions carried out by institutions, specifically the municipal police executing orders from municipal authorities.

Figure 4. Screenshot of a news clip in which a group of Syrian refugees describe their eviction, July 2018

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In one incident reported in local media outlet Al Jadeed in 2018 (Figure 4), police rounded up around 100 Syrian refugees after midnight and forced them to leave under police surveillance, in public view (Chamseddine 2018). In another example, local authorities displayed banners around the municipality (Figure 3) requesting all Syrian workers within the boundaries of the municipality to leave the area before a specific date. While it was unclear whether only the workers were being asked to leave or their entire families, and equally unclear whether the banners were meant to evict the workers from their residences or only from their work activity.

Figure 5. Public banner in Ehden requesting all Syrian workers to leave the municipal boundaries

Source: Campagne en faveur des syriens face au racisme / الحملة-الداعمة-للسوريين-بوجه-العنصريّة [n.d.].

The third type is eviction by social pressure. One refugee residing in Tripoli told me his family was "thrown out" from Abu Samra, a central neighborhood in Tripoli, reluctantly explaining:

> "Nobody asked us to leave, but I just knew I had to get my family out of there. How can I say it… For example, our upstairs neighbors threw water at our balcony every day. Whenever we passed any Lebanese neighbors they would whisper profanities, just loud enough so we could hear. My wife would not let my children play outside; she was afraid all the time… we were the only Syrians in the building. There was this one man, from a couple of floors up… his look made me feel dirty… We just couldn't stay…" (Syrian refugee in Tebbeneh, 2017).

The price of escaping conflict

Syrian refugees, like other poor migrants, struggle to secure housing and work (Dahdah 2015). They tend to accept precarious living conditions to survive. Lebanese landlords prefer them as tenants because refugees are forced accept precarity within an informal socio-urban context. They are tolerated if they pay on time and don't ask for much—and they face eviction at two scales: at

the socio-urban local level (e.g. by the landlord, or from local neighborhood pressure), and at the local authority level, consisting mainly of group evictions ordered by local authorities and carried out by police.

This kind of dialectic can be observed in other areas such as access to work opportunities, to public space, and to local or international aid. The presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is used at the international level as a bargaining chip to solicit aid. At the national level, they are blamed by politicians—sometimes exclusively—for an ever degrading social and urban infrastructure. The management of the dwelling of Syrian refugees—who are exploited and undesired at the same time —is a clear reflection of a dysfunctional political system in Lebanon. It is within these contradictory contexts that Syrians can sneak into the interstices of the city, negotiating the best place they can: commonly an inferior one in a difficult setting—the hefty price to pay to escape the Syrian conflict.

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