



TAREQ AL-SHAM (THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS): SYRIAN REFUGEES, LEBANESE SOCIETY, AND UNSETTLED PROBLEMS

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Abstract

This essay departs from standard academic style to address the implications of the Syrian refugee crisis for Lebanon's civil society, particularly with regard for solidarity across difference and the always-troubled Syria/Lebanon relationship. I adopt this style because the consequences and unfolding changes to Lebanese civil society and political practice driven by the Syrian crisis are still in progress, have uncertain outcomes, and are in a state of constant flux. The same must be said of my own knowledge and understanding of this situation, as I continue to engage in fieldwork and dialogue with actors on the ground. This essay is the product of my particular place as an ethnographer at the beginning of what is likely to be years of study, as an outsider entering into a new country and city, as a policy actor with a higher education initiative for Syrian refugees and host community members in Beirut, and as an American-Canadian binational uninterested in sharpening distinctions between 'there' and 'here', neither in my own understanding nor in my scholarship.

Because of the unsettled nature of the analysis in this piece, I have chosen not to arrange it as an argument supporting a single thesis. Instead, I have interwoven sections from my fieldnotes, particularly those from my trip to Beirut in May 2015, with sections that lay out, in a less personal format, the context and elements that collectively helped shape the situation as it stands. My goal is to both document the dynamics of anxiety and rejection that surround the refugee crisis in Lebanon—where refugees are demonized in the press, targeted through bylaws aimed at 'foreigners,' and by denying access to basic services. My aim is to understand how the intertwined elements of Lebanese and Syrian history and politics have are creating this moment. At a time when societies around the world are gripped with fear and panic, how can the microcosm of the crisis in Lebanon give us insight into the development of xenophobic anxieties in our own societies? How does Lebanon's proximity to the Syrian crisis make its experience reflective of global responses to uncivil times?

Keywords

refugees, Syrian civil war, Lebanon, host/refugee relations, civil society

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It is February 2015. I have just been recruited into a project to design a distance-learning program for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. They need someone to travel to Beirut with a research assistant, meet with potential partners and gather preliminary data to help set up the program. I've never been to Beirut, and I've been itching to get back to the Middle East for a while. I jump at the opportunity.

As I'm negotiating with my mother for her to provide backup childcare for my partner while I'm traveling, she says, "Isn't Beirut really dangerous?"

I smile (more than a little condescendingly), thinking of her civil-war-era memories of the city, formed by American media. "No, not really," I say. "It's about as dangerous as visiting Paris."

I find that more than a little ironic, these days.

One in five people in Lebanon right now is a Syrian national; Lebanon has the highest population of refugees per capita on the planet, and is third in size of refugee population after the much larger Turkey and Pakistan (UNHCR, 2015). But Lebanon isn't a signatory to either the 1951 Convention or the 1967 Protocol relating to the State of Refugees. That means it has no international obligation to refugees, either the 450,000 Palestinians who have been stuck in Lebanon since 1948, or the over 1.1 million Syrians who have fled the civil war over the past five years. There is no obligation of non-refoulement, not returning people to a place where they are in danger; no obligation of social support.

That doesn't mean there's nothing for refugees in Lebanon. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) operates throughout the country, as does the United Nations Refugee Works Agency (UNRWA), which has taken on Syrian Palestinians along with its existing responsibility for Lebanese Palestinians. They issue formal registration numbers to refugees, and refer them to the massive network of non-governmental organizations that do the actual work of helping people find housing, food, and schools. They facilitate resettlement elsewhere. That's the important bit: resettlement elsewhere.

In the early days of the Syrian civil war, it was easy to get to Lebanon if you needed to leave Syria. The border has historically been open to passage both ways; my Lebanese students tell me people used to drive to Syria to go shopping sometimes, because the prices were lower. And so, since getting to Lebanon was easy, Syrians are everywhere in Lebanon now. Many have settled throughout the Bekaa valley and other rural areas—the Lebanese government has forbidden UNHCR to establish formal refugee camps, so they and the NGO community refer to “informal tented settlements” instead. In Beirut, Syrians have spread throughout its suburbs, renting apartments in working and middle class neighbourhoods wherever they can find them.

On the streets of Beirut, I lose count of how many cars have Damascus plates. I look it up on a map. It's just a hundred-some kilometres on the highway between Damascus and Beirut. Two hours drive, if there's traffic (and in Beirut, there's always traffic).

They've closed the border now. No more Damascus plates coming through.

We climb into our taxi at the airport, tired after sixteen hours flying from Toronto to Frankfurt to Beirut. For my research assistant, a Canadian citizen whose extended family are Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, this is an awkward return: she was one of the thousands of Canadians evacuated in the summer of 2006 during the brief war between Israel and Hezbollah, leaving her aunts and cousins in their home in the south. The taxi driver speaks English, so she leaves her Palestinian-accented Arabic for later. "What hotel?" he asks, as he lifts our suitcases into the back of his minivan.

She tells him the name; he doesn't know it. "It's on Damascus Road," she says, recounting what it said in English on the Travelocity website.

"Where?" he says, puzzled.

She pulls out the reservation printout and confirms that's what it says. "Damascus Road? Shari'a Dimashq?"

"I don't know it," he says. We hand him the printout with its small map, and he figures out where to take us.

Later, I look at the hotel-provided paper map, which tries to organize the chaos that is Beirut's geography. Damascus Road, the major thoroughfare outside our window, isn't called Shari'a Dimashq, but Tariq al-Sham. Al-Sham is an old name, one that came before modern boundaries; it sometimes means the whole of the Levant, sometimes the modern country of Syria, sometimes just Damascus. Back home, news commentators are struggling over whether al-Sham is best translated as "Syria" or "the Levant," and therefore whether it's ISIS or ISIL that we should be scared of today.

When I look up Sham in my dictionary later, the word beneath it is shu'um, bad luck or ill omen. It's a quirk of spelling; there's no etymological relationship between the two. But there's a poetry in that these days.

Lebanon and Syria's relationship has been tense since the line between them was drawn in 1922, under the French. Before then they were the Vilayet¹ of Beirut and the Vilayet of Damascus under the Ottomans. But everything got tenser after the Syrian army entered Lebanon, on the invitation of Christian political leaders in 1976. They helped wage the civil war, maintained order, fought a proxy war with Israel on Lebanese territory. A peace agreement in 1989 and another treaty in 1991 were supposed to get the Syrians to withdraw, but they kept troops in Lebanon, and a guiding hand in Lebanese politics, until 2005.

1 Vilayet. (Turkish) A first order administrative division, or province, in the Ottoman Empire

The metaphor people use to refer to the Syrian-Lebanese relationship is familial. For instance, the 1991 accord is called the Treaty of Brotherhood, Cooperation, and Coordination. There was a common saying that *suriya shaqiqat lubnan* - Syria is Lebanon's sister (Riskedahl 2011, p. 248) and the metaphor shows up in writings both scholarly (Norton 2000, pp. 36, 46) and popular ("Goodbye to Beirut," 2001, p. 43). The Maronite Patriarch issued a statement that kickstarted a new conversation about Syrian withdrawal in 2000 by calling for "an atmosphere of truthfulness and frankness, and real brotherhood, and mutual respect" (Riskedahl 2011, p. 242).

It's not a happy family, though. Riskedahl reports that anti-Syria graffiti artists in the early 2000s added *wa lubnan akbu sharmuta* - Lebanon is the brother of a whore - to the earlier trope. The Economist wrote that "the sisterly Arab republic also retains its tentacles in Lebanon's politics, economy and internal security apparatus" ("Goodbye to Beirut," 2001, p. 43). Hardly a friendly model of siblingship. The same article reports that Christians in particular "have long chafed under the tutelage of what they see as a grubby, grasping neighbour [and] resent the slovenly Syrian checkpoints that still dot the country" ("The Curse of Strong Friends," 2001, p. 40). Adeed Dawisha argued there existed "a conviction of the indivisibility of Syria and Lebanon" (Dawisha 1984, p. 229) in the minds of the Syrian government, its political elites, and, at least sometimes, the masses, but most Lebanese don't seem to share this conviction. What is called the Cedar Rebellion outside of Lebanon is called the Independence Intifada inside it (Riskedahl 2011, p. 233), the shaking off Syrian rule and restoring Lebanon to its rightful place as an independent state in 2005.

Syrian migrants took the brunt of such sentiments long before the current crisis. Norton (2000) described supporters of former Lebanese president Michel Aoun, who organised Lebanese greengrocers to compete with Syrian migrant vegetable sellers, as holding banners reading "The seller is Lebanese, the produce is Lebanese, the money is for Lebanon" (p 47). Habib C. Malik, a conservative Christian philosophy professor, went further in a 1997 essay for Middle East Quarterly:

One particularly disturbing feature of Syrianization is the presence inside Lebanon of over one million Syrian workers engaged in construction jobs, vegetable vending, selling peacock and ostrich feathers to motorists stranded in Beirut traffic, and other menial employments. This huge Syrian work force (roughly equivalent to one-third of the Lebanese population) sends some \$10-12 million in hard currency out of the country every day. More alarming is the prospect that many Syrians will remain in the country, legally or not, marry Lebanese, settle in, and perhaps invite other members of their families in Syria to cross the porous border to join them. These workers strain Lebanon's already precarious demographic balance, they introduce a neo-colonial dimension to Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, and may contribute to the Syrian grip through intelligence efforts. (n.p.)

Things calmed down after 2005, it seems. Almost a normal, relationship. Maybe all it took was 'them' moving out of the same house; plenty of siblings get along better when they don't have to share a space.

And then, in 2011, it went to hell again.

As we drive around Beirut, the taxi drivers tell us about its geography. One, when we say the name of the NGO we're visiting, asks us, "*lil lubnani au lil ajanib* [for Lebanese or foreigners]?" and then apparently doesn't need any further directions. Another driver points out the entrance to Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp destroyed by Israeli-allied forces during the civil war; it looks like any poor neighborhood in the city.

One of my students used to work in Beirut, in the refugee services sector. She used every connection she had, and set us up meetings for us with NGOs, universities, small activist groups of Lebanese, Syrians, and others trying to make a difference. Now we go around with folders in our hands. In each place, we pitch our project, get a sense of how the partners here feel about it, take feedback and make decisions about where to go and who might be good to work with.

We tour community centers in the outlying areas of Beirut, all of them decorated with signs marking the support of the international community. In one community center, a whole floor of classrooms lie empty, because the Lebanese government made UNHCR cease support for vocational training for youth, wanting to re-centralize those programs through the relevant ministry. That was six months ago. Nothing's happened since. The only reason the NGO still has the space is that they own the building, and rent the ground floor to a grocery store. "So you see," they say calmly, "we would have plenty of space for your program to use".

In another centre, there's a large empty room for projects, and another floor with a warren of offices and waiting rooms. There are three people working in the small office where we are meeting. We ask about setting up a computer lab for classes. "We'd need locks", is the first thing the director says. "The materials for the recycling program keep getting stolen. I don't know what would happen to computers". Behind us, a mother with a weeks-old infant in her arms and two older children argues energetically with a social worker about getting her kids registered for school. I don't think about how far she came with that infant in her arms. I don't think about how far she came with that infant in her belly. If I cry, I can't take notes.

Everyone we talk to says our program would meet a need, that there isn't another program like it, not that they've seen.

Every Lebanese NGO worker and professor we talk to perks up when we say that we're going to be taking some Lebanese students as well.

Every Syrian we talk to asks about whether we'll be able to get our students to Canada.

My student sits across from me in my office, eating his way through my leftover Halloween candy. He came in to talk about his doctoral research in classical philosophy; he stayed to talk about his relatives. His mother's Syrian family is now living with his father's Lebanese family in the suburbs of Beirut.

He tells me, "There are signs everywhere saying that foreigners can't be out after curfew. My cousins sent me pictures. In all the newspapers, there are articles about how the Syrians are criminals. My uncle told me that when they crossed the border, the soldier asked him to open his

trunk. So he did, and the soldier walked around to the back of the car, looked in, and walked back around to the front to tell my uncle he could pass. He had to get out and go close his trunk himself. I mean, it's not a big thing. But it's just disrespectful, like they're doing everything they can to show you're not welcome".

When my student first learned I was working on a project for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, he'd told me he was half-Syrian, half-Lebanese. Now, if he's asked, he says he's Lebanese with Syrian relatives. *Min 'asl suri*, someone says to him--from Syrian background. He replies, *'asl ummi suri*--my mother's background is Syrian. We laugh, because it's funny, and because it isn't.

I'm an American who lives in Canada now, and spends a lot of time trying to understand the relationship between my two countries. The border between us was built by colonialism, and solidified by the different attitudes taken towards the colonial power over time. One large in population, one small, sharing a language, an economy, a culture—the large one looking down on its smaller neighbor and convinced it knows the answer, the small one fiercely independent and maybe feeling a little superior. The little sibling trying to stake out its independence, but still tied to the other, still wanting to keep the flows between them going. Shared language, economy and culture, but not the same. I think I understand how Lebanon feels; I think I understand why Syria doesn't understand it.

It is the American presidential season, and everyone I know is joking about going to Canada if Donald Trump wins the election. As an American who already got out (and the daughter of a Vietnam War protester, who knows this has a history), I offer my guest room, in jest, to refugees from the United States.

For there to be as many Americans in Canada as there are Syrians in Lebanon would mean about nine million Americans. Slightly more than the population of New York City. What would Canadians do if nine million Americans ran for the border? What would Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal look like if every tenth license plate on the street was from Washington, New York, Vermont?

How long would it take for them to want us gone? Not long, I think.

These are the rules, if you are a Syrian in Lebanon right now.

You used to be able to get a work permit. There was a cost, but it was straightforward: you paid the fee, you got the permit. Now, no more permits are being issued to Syrians. Not even NGOs working in refugee communities, who want to hire Syrians to be able to help in Syrian communities, can get around it. (We ask, could you hire our graduates? They say, we would love to, but...). So you work in the black market, if you can.

You were guaranteed access to public schools for your children when you crossed the border. But public schooling is poor quality in Lebanon; the middle and upper classes send their children

to private schools, particularly in Beirut. And the Lebanese educational system is entirely in French or English; Syrian children come from an Arabic-only curriculum, with English or French taught as second languages, and cannot catch up in the Lebanese system. Due to overcrowding in areas with high refugee populations, schools are now running a 'second shift', where the refugee children come after the Lebanese children have been sent home and the exhausted teachers have to go through a whole second day's worth of instruction. (Nobody got a raise for that). And even if you make it through the system to get your baccalaureate (high school diploma), or if you were in university in Syria, which had some of the best public universities in the Arab world, you cannot go to the public university, which is Lebanese-only. Private university tuition will run you between US\$100 per credit at the least expensive universities, to over US\$600 per credit at elite schools. That's thousands of dollars per year. And you can't work legally, remember? How are you going to pay tuition?

If you need healthcare, you either need to pay for it privately, or use charitable clinics. You're doing that alongside most of the Lebanese population, so at least there's comfort in numbers. But the burdens on the system are pressing down.

At the beginning, you could cross freely, stay as long as you like. Now, every Syrian in Lebanon needs a six-month residence permit, costing US\$200. If it expires, and you're caught, you could be sent back to Syria. No non-refoulement, remember? If you want to enter briefly, say, to get a visa from an embassy in Beirut or to fly to your family in Europe or North America or the Gulf, you have to have three nights of hotel reservations even if you're only staying one night, plus US\$1500 or more in cash to prove you're going 'shopping' and proof of a reason to go to Lebanon--like a plane ticket from the Beirut airport, or an invitation letter from an embassy for an interview. Even with all of that, they might not let you in.

If you live in an 'informal tented settlement', then you don't have access to resources. You only have a school if you're close to a previously existing one, or if an NGO has set one up. You only have health care if UNHCR or an NGO brings you a doctor. You only have food if you can find somewhere to buy it, and if you have money, or if the World Food Programme or an NGO brings you some.

If you live in an urban neighbourhood, there are checkpoints asking to see your papers to get into or out of it. There are signs announcing a curfew for foreigners. Your neighbours won't talk to you, even though you live in the same shabby/sha'abi [lower class/popular] apartment building.

If you want to get resettled in a Western country legally, you need to have a UNHCR number. If you weren't registered by May 2015, you can't get a number. If you are a Palestinian Syrian and your identity documents say that, you can't get a UNHCR number and are sent to UNRWA. That's good, because UNRWA has a system set up for connecting you to services; that's bad, because you can't be resettled, and because UNRWA's resources were stretched to the breaking point before the wave of Syrians arrived.

There is nothing you can do about any of this.

My student tells me in the first week of classes that her family is walking across Europe from Syria and that she's going to need to take a week off at some point to go help them. I say, whatever you need.

She tells me more in bits and pieces. Her family, Palestinians who had been living in Syria since the Nakba², had previously tried to live in Beirut, but the situation was so bad they went back to Damascus. Her mother couldn't find work--as a French teacher, a desperately needed skill in Lebanon.

After that, her mother tried to take her teenaged sister to Beirut, just for one day. Her sister had an interview at the American Embassy to get into a scholarship program in the States. They take a taxi; there are eight checkpoints between Damascus and the border, and you need to pay the soldiers at each one. All their papers are right; she has the hotel reservation, the letter of invitation from the embassy, the money to make clear she is just passing through. All the same, they leave them standing there for hours. People cry. In the end, they say that the teenager can pass, but her mother can't--she doesn't have security clearance. They both turn back, get in the car, go home.

Her sister turns to her mother. "How can they treat us like this? Like we aren't even people? I can't live here any more".

When they get back to Damascus, they start getting together the money to pay a smuggler. They can't stay here any more.

Under Ottoman rule, the Vilayet of Beirut extended as far south as Nablus, in the now occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank; with Sykes-Picot, Mandatory Palestine and Mandatory Lebanon were split, half-French, half-British. During the 1948 Nakba, refugees from Mandatory Palestine fled what was becoming Israel, and sought safety in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Egypt, and the parts of Palestine that were staying under Arab control. And there they've stayed in these countries for 70 years, without any real chance to go home.

It's common knowledge in the Arab world that the worst place to be a Palestinian refugee is in Lebanon. In Jordan you have citizenship, in Syria you have basic rights, but in Lebanon you can't go to public schools, can't own a business or property, can't hold a government or professional job or join the law, engineering, or medical syndicates (Abdulrahim and Khawaja, 2011, p. 152). You live in a state of permanent precariousness. The Lebanese blame you for the civil war, calling it "the war of others on our land," even though plenty of them fought too. You also fall into a hole in international law: you don't have the rights of an international refugee, because it's UNRWA, not UNHCR, that takes care of you (Abu-Zahra, 2006, p. 112).

Every Palestinian refugee in Lebanon lives with the fervent desire to get out, to get to another country, to get somewhere that will give you citizenship, will give you papers, will give you rights. And yet, you can't leave. You can't amass the resources; you lack the documentation

² Literally, "catastrophe"; used by Palestinians to describe the foundation of the state of Israel and the mass expulsion and migration of Palestinians from Israeli territory in 1948.

to get out; nobody will take you. And even if you could leave, maybe you don't want to. At least three-quarters of the Palestinians in Lebanon were born there, and many have never lived anywhere else. Returning to Palestine is a fantasy for them. Staying where they are would be enough. But making a life under these conditions is next to impossible. So what to do? Stay in limbo. Stay and wait. Get out if you can.

The Lebanese look at the 450,000 Palestinians living among them. They look at the million new Syrians arriving to live alongside them. They can do the math. They don't want these newcomers any more than they want the ones they've always had.

My research assistant and I make a good team: I speak English and French fluently, and she speaks English and Arabic fluently, therefore we are capable of carrying out any conversation we need to have. But it does mean that, when our interlocutors are only comfortable in French and Arabic, as is not uncommon among Lebanese elites, we end up having to update each other afterward about what was said in the other language--we both speak enough to get something, but not enough to catch the subtleties.

After one meeting with a large group, where I spoke with half the people and she handled the other half, we play catch up in the living room of our hotel suite. Mostly it's what we expected--good feedback, some clarity about how to refine our idea, and the definite sense that these aren't our potential partners. They're already too overburdened, their resources stretched to almost nothing. They can barely do what they want for the Lebanese they serve. We get it, we do.

She sighs. "You know what one of them said to me about the refugees? She said, 'What's most important is that they leave'. She knew I was Palestinian, she knew I have family here. She said that to me".

In both the US and Canada, this is what I hear: Why are we taking all these refugees when we have so many people here who need our support? What are we doing for homeless veterans? (It's always homeless veterans). Aren't these people dangerous? How do we know they aren't terrorists? Maybe just women and children. Maybe no young men. Maybe just this one refugee, the one with the Humans in New York photo, the one whose baby drowned, that one I can see and understand. Otherwise, how do I know I share something with these people? How can I possibly open up my community to include these people who I can't understand?

Or sometimes I hear, they have suffered so much, they have endured such struggle, we must help them. We hear about families fleeing on foot for thousands of miles, risking their lives on the sea, and our hearts are moved. And so we sponsor one refugee, one family, one life saved. We knit them hats. We donate our used furniture. We write a check.

Canada has committed to 35,000 refugees. The United States, 10,000. They'll be settled in cities and towns across the country, supported by church groups and nonprofits and groups of concerned and generous neighbors. One family at a time, they'll become just like any of the first

and second generation refugees I meet as students in my classroom or across the cash register at Tim Hortons³.

I think of over a million Syrians in Lebanon, waiting. I think of four million sitting around the borders of Syria, waiting. I think of seven million internally displaced, waiting. I think of the whole population of Syria, deciding when it's time to go. Waiting for summer, waiting to save the money, waiting for something to happen too close to home to deny anymore. When they can't stay here any more.

How can we understand those millions as a part of our community? How can we understand the ones who are a 'security risk', who don't have a story to tell, who are just ordinary? Can we?

It is February 2016. After a full year of bureaucracy and chaos, that nascent project has bloomed into a three-country, four-institution initiative with the start of a curriculum, and I'm the co-director. There have been bombs in Burj al-Barajneh and gunmen in Paris; no one is safe. Canadians have realized they should feel guilty about Syrian children drowning on the shores of Europe; Americans have decided to be scared of them instead.

I buy another round-trip ticket to Beirut. We'll see what I find when I land.

³ Tim Hortons is a Canadian quick service restaurant chain, best known for its coffee and donuts, and considered by most Canadians to be a key part of Canadian popular culture. (No really, ask any Canadian about it. Literally, any Canadian.)

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