

9 YEARS ON:

Struggles and hopes
of Syrian refugees in
Lebanon





ABOUT THE LPC

The Lebanon Protection Consortium (LPC) brings together Action Against Hunger, Gruppo di Volontariato Civile (GVC) and the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC), with financial support from the European Union Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid (ECHO). The three organisations aim to address protection concerns through the following actions:

- Analysing vulnerabilities of targeted communities;
- Responding to shocks, persistent humanitarian needs and legal protection concerns through the existing coordination mechanisms;
- Advocating for an improvement of the protection environment.



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Except mentioned otherwise, the source of all the figures in this publication is the 2019 *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR)*.

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INTRODUCTION

REFUGEES' PERSISTENT PROTECTION CONCERNS IN CRISIS-HIT LEBANON

Nine years into the Syria crisis, Lebanon remains the country with the largest concentration of refugees per capita, hosting an estimated 1.5 million Syrians. Together with around 29,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria who have been accommodated in addition to approximately 175,000 Palestinians already present or born in Lebanon since 1948, this relatively small country has been under considerable economic and social pressure.

Since mid-October 2019, Lebanon has been experiencing political and social unrest. The current crisis is widely considered the most serious financial and economic crisis in decades. These latest developments have also had an impact on the refugee communities. Many have had decreased access to livelihoods and the cost of basic goods has increased. The wide-spread fear of political repercussions has led refugees to reduce their movements to a minimum. This has further exacerbated vulnerabilities that predated the crisis, including challenges in obtaining legal residency, substandard shelter conditions, limited access to water and sanitation and livelihood opportunities.

The people that the Lebanon Protection Consortium features in this booklet shed light on challenges that refugees and Lebanese are facing every day.

LACK OF LEGAL RESIDENCY

The number of Syrian refugees without legal residency has continually increased and in 2019 reached over 78% of the refugee population. A **lack of legal residency has far-reaching consequences on all aspects of their life in Lebanon**, including in terms of securing housing, accessing livelihoods and facing risk of arrest, detention and deportation.

In late May 2019, the Government of Lebanon started deporting Syrians back to Syria, with more than 2,700 persons deported by late August 2019 (last available General Security figure). This represents a significant policy shift from Lebanon's repeated commitment to the principle of *non-refoulement*.

LIVING IN SUBSTANDARD SHELTERS...

The Lebanese government opposes creating formal camps, so refugees must find and pay for their own accommodation including in informal tented settlements (ITS). **Over half of Syrian refugee families are living in overcrowded shelters, shelters below humanitarian standards and/or shelters in danger of collapse.** Thirty percent of Syrian refugee households live in substandard structures; some live in tents made of plywood and plastic sheets providing minimal protection from extreme weather. Furthermore, a decision to demolish tents was taken in early May 2019 that affected refugees in Bekaa, Aarsal and the North of Lebanon. In Aarsal alone, 2,700 households had to dismantle their tents and then rebuild them with less resistant materials to comply with a new regulation. Many refugees thus rely on emergency humanitarian assistance after each storm and face impossible dilemmas – such as spending their meagre resources on heating or on food.

In addition, as a result of rising rents and loss of livelihoods, refugees but also Lebanese are increasingly 'downgrading' their living conditions, including by moving into ITs. This has resulted in intensified competition over shelters and resources in already precarious neighbourhoods.

...WITH INADEQUATE ACCESS TO BASIC SERVICES

As many refugees live in precarious shelter conditions, they have inadequate access to Water, Sanitation and Hygiene (WaSH) facilities. Central government building codes and policies restrict 'durable' interventions which could allow ITs to meet the basic standards required for safety and dignity. More than 42% of Syrian refugees still rely on bottled water as a main source of water, placing a heavy economic burden on refugees.

Access to education for Syrian refugees also remains challenging. In addition to the lack of school capacity to absorb more children in areas with a high concentration of refugees, cost-related reasons are the most common barriers to education. As a result of the current economic crisis, there may be an increase in numbers of Lebanese students who were previously in private schools, integrating into public schools.



A group of tented settlements flooded as a result of heavy rain storms in Aarsal in January 2020

© Joe Hammoud for Action Against Hunger

This might negatively impact refugees' future ability to enrol or maintain their current place in schools. Access to health is impacted similarly.

RESORTING TO NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS AS A WAY OF SURVIVAL

In the current political and economic context, increasing numbers of Syrian refugee households are resorting to crisis livelihood-related coping strategies, especially by reducing expenditure on food, health, education and selling productive assets. The increased use of crisis food-related coping strategies means that refugees are more likely to reduce portions, skip meals and/or restrict consumption by adults so children could eat. Only 8% of the refugees are food secure.

During 2019, the overall advocacy space was further restricted with the Lebanese Government's clear focus on returns and the implementation of a variety of measures that further restrict refugees' movement and livelihoods, such as evictions, curfews, arrests/detention, raids and a crackdown on 'foreign' businesses and workers.

While there is a clear association in public perception between Syrian presence and Lebanon's economic challenges, there is no specific targeting of refugees at this point in time. However, social tensions continue and an anti-refugee sentiment could intensify in the coming months as the economic crisis in Lebanon continues to unfold.



NEEDS UNADDRESSED

Around 107,806 severely vulnerable Syrian refugee families receive food assistance from WFP in the form of \$27 per person per month. In addition, the most severely vulnerable families receive multi-purpose cash assistance (\$175 per household per month) from UNHCR and WFP to meet their basic needs. Due to limited humanitarian funding available, some severely vulnerable families remain without cash assistance.



TWO GENERATIONS

The lives of Mahmoud* (70 years old) and his grandchildren Amir* (14) and Sami* (12) took a dramatic turn as the war unfolded. The young boys were left without parents during the conflict in Syria. Eventually, Mahmoud became the sole caretaker of his grandchildren in an ITS in Arsal.

MAHMOUD

'With my wife, we had five sons and one daughter. We had worked hard to invest in our children's education. I used to work with the Syrian Ministry of Agriculture as a gardener. Most of my job consisted of grafting trees and landscaping'. When the war started in 2011, Mahmoud and his family first sought refuge in Yabroud, where they come from. As the situation began to escalate and as cities became politically divided, he and his wife felt increasingly unsafe. 'In our village, if you have left during the war, you are considered a traitor'.

In the end, the family had to split. Mahmoud moved to Arsal in Lebanon, while the rest of his family stayed in Syria. Mahmoud described the situation with a lot of sorrow: *'My wife then died in Qalamoun, and so did two of my sons. The conditions of the death of my eldest are unknown. I have never seen his remains'. He paused for a second. 'My second son was a medical officer who left the army shortly before having a stroke - caused by the stressful living conditions'. His two surviving children, Amir and Sami, were left on their own. The war had indeed already triggered severe schizophrenia episodes in their mother, making her incapable*



Mahmoud standing outside his tent in Arsal in January 2020
© Joelle Assaf for Action Against Hunger

of taking care of the children. She is cared for by other family members in Syria. The psychological stress endured by Mahmood has started to manifest physically as he developed high blood pressure and pain in his arms and nerves. He was also injured while working and is thus unable to continue working.

AMIR AND SAMI

Mahmoud's daughter is a young divorced mother who still lives in Syria. *'She is taking care of her children as well as three of her nieces. Caring for two more boys would have been an additional burden, so we decided that Amir and Sami would be sent to Arsal to live with me here'*, said Mahmood. *'I am now 70 years old, unable to work and the sole care-taker of my two grand-children'*.

To add to his sorrow, Mahmood had to dismantle part of his tent with the support of his grandchildren, following the demolition order. Their shelter previously had higher walls that protected them from the cold — this was particularly needed as they occupy the last tent in the camp, which makes them more exposed to wind and the family cannot afford heating the tent most of the time. They also had to demolish an entire room in their shelter, which they were using to store their belongings. They now live, sleep and store their belongings in the same small room with little to no privacy. The Army allowed them to keep their concrete-built toilet. The family is now exposed to Arsal's harsh weather, particularly in the winter.

Mahmoud added with regret: *'Amir, 14 years old — the eldest — has to support me and his younger brother'*. Amir looked at him and continues shyly: *'My grandfather first found me a job in a mechanic's shop in Arsal. However, the owner of the shop was abusive and disrespectful. He often refused to pay my salary [of 5,000LBP (US\$3.32) per week]'*. Amir later found a new job at a carpentry workshop as an apprentice, with the same salary, 10 hours per day. The owner has been kinder so far.

The family of three had been receiving and surviving on US\$27 of assistance per month for some time, but the assistance has been discontinued. They now rely on Amir's limited income and the generosity of neighbours and distant family members to buy food, fuel for the heaters and to pay the rent. Mahmoud finds it difficult to accept. *'I send Amir and Sami to eat at neighbours' homes, as I cannot provide enough food for them'.*

In November 2019, over 15,000 refugee households were affected by updates in the calculation used to prioritise assistance recipients. Some stopped receiving Multi-Purpose Cash Assistance and/or Food Cash Assistance — like Mahmoud — even though their situation had not changed. Refugees impacted by the discontinuation express frustrations, particularly linked to what they perceive as insufficient information about how their vulnerability is assessed.

When asked about the future, Amir's only response is: *'I want to become a professional carpenter'.* Amir's work currently allows his brother to continue attending school. And maybe become a health professional, like his late father.

*Names changed for confidentiality.



Amir and Sami standing outside his tent in Arsal in January 2020
© Joe Hammoud for Action Against Hunger





ALONE IN THE CRISIS

Amina, a woman from Al-Qusair in Syria, opens the door to her tent and slowly guides Action Against Hunger's staff around. The 70-year-old is almost blind, has a string of health issues and her movement around the tent is with great difficulty. No light goes through her tent. Contours of pots and dishes sprayed across the floor in Amina's makeshift kitchen. In the middle of it there is a bowl of unfinished meal, a simple dish of bulgur and rice. She has no way to refrigerate food, and whatever little food she has is cooled by the freezing weather outside. Her main room is equally modest: two thin mattresses, a pillow and a blanket neatly curled around a small stove that's emitting feeble heat: *'I hardly have any fuel to run the heater, and whatever I manage to scrap up leaks out; the thing is broken'*, said Amina. With walls built of thin wooden panels constructed on low layers of concrete bricks and loosely covered with thin plastic sheets, it is impossible not to feel the light breeze of cold air coming from outside.

Amina came to Lebanon in 2011, shortly after the war started in Syria, and settled in Aarsal. She has one daughter who is married and has her own family but having no income and very little to survive on. Her daughter rarely comes to visit and even rarer has the means to bring her mother over. Apart from sporadic visits of neighbours, Amina is all alone, with only a small television to keep her company. Her life was difficult even before the war; her husband passed away 30 years ago, and she raised her daughter alone. They lived very modestly, but they managed to survive. Now, without an income of her own, Amina has very little, and even the little she has is thanks to the generosity of her refugee neighbours: *'I don't have my UN [UNHCR] aid card anymore, and I can't buy food from the minimarket on credit because they know I have no way of paying them back. I only have god to turn to, he is my only saviour. I only go out to visit my neighbour in the tent next door to get some warmth'*, said Amina, softly sobbing.

Through the years of displacement and living in poor conditions, Amina's overall health deteriorated, and now she suffers from many illnesses, such as high blood pressure and heart disease. Her vision has been limited to only one eye, and when she last had the opportunity to visit a doctor, she was informed that

she would need surgery if she would want to keep her vision altogether. She needs medication to sustain the minimum of her health and to remain pain-free, however medicine is expensive and visiting a doctor for check-ups even more: *'If I want to go to the hospital, I'd have to borrow money from someone, and if I can't then I don't go. I ask my neighbours to lend me the money, I need minimum 6,000LBP (US\$3.99), but they don't have that kind of money either. When I need medication, I go to the pharmacy and ask to get medicines for free. They sometimes give them to me on credit and sometimes they say that they can't help me. I already owe them a lot of money'*, said Amina. Amina got up to go to the bathroom, every move with visible difficulty. When asked if she needs help, she said she supports herself leaning on the wooden panels of the tent.

When she re-enters, it is as if she had momentarily forgotten that we were there, with a bright smile she said: *'Welcome, welcome! I'm so happy you are here!'*. What is striking the most is Amina's loneliness. Throughout the conversation, it becomes clear that, apart from an occasional visit of Action Against Hunger protection team, hardly anybody else comes to check on her.



Amina discussing with Action Against Hunger team how the demolitions in Aarsal affected her living conditions

© Aida Burnett-Cargill for Action Against Hunger

Earlier in 2019 she was forced to demolish a part of her tent. It was particularly hard on her, because she had relocated to where she currently lives in order to be closer to her daughter's family, and it took a lot of time for her to settle in the already poorly constructed structure: *'When they came, they looked at me and told me: "you need to bring that wall down". I told them: I can't do that; can't you see my situation? They responded: "You will have to figure it out". A young man from the camp came and helped me, god bless him. He brought down the wall and rebuilt it the way they asked'.*

When asked about what is most difficult for her, Amina said it is being unable to afford basic food and medicine: *'I have to pay for rent of the tent, and pay for electricity, where would I get that money from? The doctor told me that I will become blind. I don't care about my sight, I don't have the money for it, and if I did, I would rather use it for food',* said Amina.

PERSISTENT OBSTACLES TO ACCESSING EDUCATION

Despite the substantial progress made through government and donors' commitments, major barriers to education continue to keep Syrian children from enrolling in learning. The participation in organised learning, which is the percentage of children between 3 and 5 years of age who were attending an early education programme, slightly decreased from 16% in 2018 to 13% in 2019. As for children between 6 and 14 years of age, enrolment remains stable at 69%. The percentage of children between 15 and 17 year of age in school remained at 22%.



ADMINISTRATIVE BARRIERS TO SCHOOL ENROLLMENT

Seven-year-old Layan* was born in the midst of the war in Syria in 2013. A few days after her birth, fighting intensified in the area they were living in and her family was forced to flee to Lebanon. Layan's parents had not registered their marriage at the time she was born and therefore were not able to register her birth before leaving Syria.

'I constantly feared that my children would be taken away from me; that the authorities would think I was not their mother because I did not have any proof that they were mine. Therefore, I could never move freely from one area to another with them', said Kholoud, Layan's mother.

When the school year started, Layan enrolled in school along with her friends, but had to drop out after a month because she didn't have any ID. This devastated Layan. *'Layan loved the school and did not understand why she could not go there like the other children',* Kholoud explained.

Seventy percent of Syrian children born in Lebanon are not registered. Similar to Layan, many of these children without legal documentation may not be able to access healthcare or education.

Kholoud reached out to one of NRC's education centres seeking any learning opportunity available for her daughter. As she was explaining her situation to NRC's staff, she was referred to the legal counselling and assistance programme to meet with a lawyer. She received legal support to obtain a proof of marriage and was then able to register the birth of Layan and her siblings, enabling Layan to enrol in school once more.

NRC, also through LPC interventions with support from ECHO, continues to advocate for an easing of documentary requirements for school enrolment, which remains an education barrier for Syrian children in Lebanon.

*Names changed for confidentiality.



WATER, SANITATION, AND HYGIENE (WaSH)

While 88% of households have access to drinking water – a number that has decreased compared to 91% in 2018 - water-trucking is the source of water of nearly half of the Syrian refugees living in non-permanent structures. Nearly 75% also rely on improved pit latrines. Both solutions, if not paid for by NGOs or the UN, are an additional cost for the refugees.

A woman wearing a brown winter coat and a yellow headscarf is gesturing with her right hand while talking to another person. The second person is wearing a tan vest over a dark jacket, with a green arrow pointing up and a blue circle logo on the back. They are standing in front of a white tarp. A teal banner is at the bottom left.

ANYONE CAN BECOME A REFUGEE

Khatoun, a 30 year old from Raqqa, stood her ground against the extremists of ISIS, but this brought her to the refugee camps of Lebanon. A law graduate who wrote her thesis on sexual harassment, she worked in a public notary office in Raqqa. Yet the war interrupted her plans and drew her life in a direction she never expected.

Khatoun's first experience of displacement started when the clashes between the regime and rebels began in Raqqa. The massive bombing and armed conflict pushed her and her family out of the city. *'It was chaos. A massacre. Bullets were flying around us as we were escaping.'* She added: *'I remember we ran into the wilderness, sleeping in the open air without shelter and exposed to the weather for around one month'*. After 30 days, a truce was announced in her hometown, so they returned home.

At the time, ISIS had not established its full power yet. She was still stopped by ISIS followers repetitively, asking her to *'cleanse herself from wrongful teachings [her law practice], and learn religion instead'*, but she always replied back and argued against them. *'I could no longer see women in the streets. Men who did not conform to their ideology or look felt in danger. Young people, early teenagers, were being recruited'*. During that period, she met her husband and got married. When Khatoun's brother was kidnapped for ransom, and her husband was beaten while driving a motorcycle, her father insisted that the whole family leaves to Lebanon. Hence, in 2013, they boarded a bus heading to Ghazze, in the Bekaa.

'I had heard about refugee camps, but it was the first time that I went to one, and that I had to live in it. I remember the first day it was raining a lot, and it was damp everywhere. I was shocked'. Refugees living in ITs are exposed to having their camp, tent and belongings flooded frequently. Accessing adequate and dignified water and sanitation infrastructures remains problematic for refugees. In non-permanent structures, the most common source of water are water tanks, filled through water-trucking and organised by NGOs, UN agencies or private contractors. Nearly 75% of the sanitation facilities in non-permanent structures are

improved pit latrines, necessitating costly desludging interventions. Finally, only 8% of the wastewater is treated in Lebanon, a health, environment and dignity issue.

Khatoun continued: *'It was tough to adjust to it the first year. I had a job before, I was independent...'* Her sister was of great support in helping her see the positive side of the situation. She tried to find jobs in Lebanon in her domain to better provide for herself and her family. In addition to her lack of a Lebanese degree or contacts, the Lebanese legislation prevents Syrians from working in most sectors.

Khatoun and her family resorted to working in agriculture when their financial resources were entirely exhausted. They had a deal with the landlord: they work the fields in exchange for 6,000LBP (US\$3.99) per day per person for one year, and he deducts the cost of their rent and utilities annually from their salaries. *'After working for a year, and after the deductions for rent and utilities, we were left with 200,000LBP (US\$132.87) only. Barely enough for food or medicine! So we stopped and tried to find other opportunities'*, she added.

One of Action Against Hunger's staff was visiting the camp for WaSH inspections and looking for volunteers to support in maintaining the camp. Khatoun presented her CV and was selected as a community mobiliser and focal point for her camp. She now identifies the needs of the camp and its residents. She also provides awareness sessions on hygiene promotion and water sanitation practices to the camp. *'The sessions have been received with great positivity by the people here. Even refugees from nearby camps have come to learn more and participate'*, she said.

Khatoun hopes to return to her hometown one day. In the meantime, she dedicates her energy to supporting her fellow refugees with her new knowledge.

SHELTER DEMOLITIONS

57% of Syrian refugee households are living in shelters that are either overcrowded, have conditions below humanitarian standards and/or in danger of collapse. More than half of these shelters either have leaking roofs, or leakage/rot on the walls.

31% of the shelters have unsealed windows or doors, an issue during the winter in areas like Arsal where temperatures can stay below zero for several weeks.



SURVIVING WINTER IN A TENTED SETTLEMENT

Moayed had to demolish his concrete shelter last summer by order of the Lebanese authorities. Now he and his family, who fled to Lebanon from Syria in 2013, are living in a makeshift tent in the hills. As winter sets in, they are struggling to cope with the freezing temperatures and biting winds.

Moayed fled to Lebanon together with his wife, mother and six children when the fighting intensified in their home town of Qusayr, western Syria. Leaving both his home and business behind was a difficult decision but he knew it was the only way to keep his family safe from the shelling.

NEW STRUGGLES IN A NEW LAND

In Lebanon, the family moved to an ITS in the town of Aarsal in the Bekaa Valley, an area known to be prone to harsh winter conditions. Hoping life would be better in their new home, Moayed soon realised every day would be a struggle.

'I worry so much about my family during the winter because we do not have proper walls to keep the cold out', said Moayed.

'During the summer of 2019, we had to demolish the concrete walls in our home because of the regulations of the Lebanese authorities. We went from living in a protected shelter with walls to living in a tent covered with plastic sheets. This is not enough to protect us when it snows and rains'

REFUGEE HOMES DEMOLISHED

Lebanon has the highest number of refugees per capita in the world, amounting to over a quarter of the country's total population. This has created a huge strain on its infrastructure and public services.

'We can see and feel a big difference between this and last winter,' said Moayed. 'It is freezing inside the tent during the strong winds even when we have the heater on. We are worried it will collapse on us'.

'When it rains, water leaks into the tent from everywhere: the sides, the ceiling and even from underneath the ground, leaving all our belongings wet'.

HELPING FAMILIES PREPARE FOR WINTER

Every ITS in Lebanon has a 'Shawish' who acts as the main contact for aid organisations.

Through the local 'Shawish', the NRC was made aware of Moayad's particularly challenging situation. Through LPC interventions, and with the support by ECHO, the NRC team provided Moayad with a shelter kit including timber and plastic sheeting to prepare his family's tent and protect them from winter.

AN UNCERTAIN FUTURE

Moayed has a disability affecting his mobility, which makes it impossible for him to work and provide for his family in Lebanon. He relies on assistance from aid organisations working in the area, and sometimes resorts to incurring debt to cover the needs of his family.

'It is difficult not being able to provide for your family. In Syria, my disability didn't prevent me from working as I owned my own clothes shop and my mother was employed in the agriculture sector. We had a good life and never relied on anyone's assistance to make a living', he explained.

'I want to go back to Syria but it needs to be safe and stable so that we can work and rebuild our home. When safety can be guaranteed and conditions allow for it, I will take my family and return home.'



Moayed receiving a shelter kit from NRC
© Racha El Daoui for Norwegian Refugee Council



FLOODED OUT OF THEIR TENT

A recent winter storm forced Intisar, 36, and her family to evacuate their tent in Aarsal. Now her husband is trying to repair the shelter with the help of their two young sons, aged just 8 and 10.

THE WHOLE TENT FLOODED

Intisar and her family, who fled to Lebanon in 2013, live in one of those settlements. Without proper walls to protect them from the stormy winter weather, their tent flooded. The family was forced to evacuate.

'My family and I are sleeping in a relative's tent until the floor dries', Intisar explained. 'All our mattresses, blankets and pillows are soaking wet. We are trying to dry them outside but there is barely any sun'.

'I'm constantly worried about the rain and wind. The other day the wind was so strong that the tent almost collapsed on our heads. The rain was pouring in from the ceiling and window, leaving the whole tent flooded'.

CHILDREN HELP WITH THE REPAIRS

The family is struggling to repair the damage, and is having to rely on the help of their children in the hopes of moving back in.

'My husband is trying to repair our shelter with the help of our 10 and 8-year-old sons, Mahmoud and Adnan*. They are removing nails, replacing the timber and covering the roof so the tent doesn't flood anymore. They work as if they were adults', said Intisar, regretfully.*

STRUGGLING TO MAKE ENDS MEET

Refugees represent over a quarter of Lebanon's total population. This has created a huge strain on the country's infrastructure and public services. Refugees cannot legally work, and frequently struggle to meet their essential needs. Seventy-three percent of Syrian refugee households live below the national poverty line.

Since fleeing Syria, Intisar's family have had to rely on their eldest son, Majd, to make ends meet. Majd is now 18 and has been working since he was just 14. He is often separated from his family for long periods of time to avoid transport costs.

'Majd breaks my heart', says Intisar, tearfully. 'His childhood was taken from him and he had to quit school to provide for us. No child should have to take responsibility for their family'.

HEALTH CONCERNS

Living in ITSs, especially in wintry conditions, can have a significant impact on refugees' health. Intisar's family is unfortunately no exception.

'It is very distressing to live like this. I'm constantly worried about my family and the health of my children. The most challenging part of life here is when your child becomes sick and you can't take him or her to a doctor to get treatment. My son and daughter both need medication that we can't afford', said Intisar.

NRC's emergency response team through the LPC and with support by ECHO, has been on the ground assessing the damage to provide emergency kits consisting of items such as timber, plastic sheets, mattresses, blankets and hygiene products to families in need.

'My only wish for the future is that Syria will be safe again so that my family and I can return', Intisar concluded.

*Names changed for confidentiality.



Adnan, one of the younger children, is helping in repairing his family's tent. | © Racha El Daoi for Norwegian Refugee Council



**FROM THE CITY TO THE ITS, WHERE
TO FIND THE BEST SHELTER?**

'We have been in Lebanon since 2013 and the situation has been moving from bad to worst', said Hussein. Following the deterioration of the conflict in Syria, he left to Lebanon seven years ago. Like many other refugees, he arrived at the border area near Baalbeck, in North Bekaa. He was living in a commercial premise along with his wife, his brother and his son. 'The living conditions were so bad that we had to move out. The place was flooded and not prepared to withstand the whole winter', Hussein explained.*

Hussein and his family decided to move to an ITS since the shelter in the city was not liveable. First, they moved in with his cousin, his wife and their four children, hoping it will also improve their financial situation, but it did not. *'We decided to come here because we thought we could find more job opportunities. But even here the job opportunities are minimal'* explained Hussein. *'We even lost the UN [UNHCR] cash assistance because we were not able to go to renew our registration',* he added.

He explained that in terms of services, they have electricity for twelve hours a day and water is available, yet in exchange of fees, of course. He continued: *'we have a latrine for us (ten individuals) but the septic pit is not well made and it smells horrible... and the tent we are sharing with my cousin and his family was in very bad conditions and not properly insulated for winter, which was clear when it flooded during the latest storms. Water was coming from all directions, from the floor and the ceiling and windows. It's like every time we solve a problem, another ones pops out of out of nowhere'.*

Hussein became aware that GVC is offering support. He called the organisation's hotline, and with GVC assistance through the LPC, with support by ECHO, Hussein and his family received a complete kit to build an adequate shelter unit consisting of tarpaulin, plastic sheets, different sizes of timber to build the structure of the tent, a toolbox, hinges for the door, locks and a synthetic plastic mattress. Along with this kit, they received basic household items such as sleeping mattresses, blankets, plates, forks, knives, cups or jerry can, a water tank and a latrine. *'If we had not received the tent from GVC we would be staying with another*

family, in someone's home,, or I don't know what we would have done! Hopefully when winter is over our situation will be better', said Hussein hopefully.



Hussein's tent (on the right) and the latrine they have near their shelter
© Marta Castillo for Gruppo di Volontariato Civile



NO WORK, NO SHELTER

Fifty-three kilometres. That distance separates Ahmad from Homs (Syria), his hometown. He arrived to Lebanon eight years ago following the conflict. Since then, he has been living with his family in Qaa, a border area in North Bekaa with a high population of refugees -13,877 individuals according to the latest data from UNHCR. Most of them live in ITSs, similar to Ahmad, his wife and their three kids. *'We moved several times from one [ITS] to another but always in the Qaa area'*, said Ahmad.

They were evicted from the last settlement they were living in because he was not able to work anymore. *'I broke both my hands while working in the field and the landlord evicted us because we were living in his land in exchange for work'*, explained Ahmad. *'We became homeless and unemployed suddenly and we had to start all over again'*.

They moved in one tent with two other families- eleven persons in total- that agreed to share their tent while they all waited to find other adequate shelter. Naturally, tight space created a lot of tension. *'When we moved in, we didn't have an outhouse. We used to go in the open air'*, explained Ahmad. *'Now, they built an outhouse but it is not very sturdy. Every time a storm hits, it is destroyed'*. He adds: *'we have only one water tank for all of us but we cannot use it at its full capacity'*. Close to the tent, there is a well that never fills enough to provide their daily needs. The owner of the well is a farmer that pumps water to irrigate his land. *'While the pump is turned on, we have access to it but we can only pump water to the tank for 15 minutes until the electricity cuts off'*, said Ahmad. However, in winter the farmer does not pump as much water as in other seasons since he doesn't need it, which decreases their water supply even further. Regarding the electricity, Ahmad explained that it is available for twelve hours a day. *'It is especially difficult for us when it is dark outside since we do not own rechargeable batteries to be used in the off-hours'*, said Ahmad.

They wanted to move to a new tent next to the one they were sharing but they were not able to start all over again by themselves. *'We have a lot of debt, because moving is costly, so we end up having to buy everything all*

over again', said Ahmad. In this situation, they called GVC's helpline to ask for assistance. After an assessment, GVC, through the LPC with support by ECHO, provided a New Arrival Kit to Ahmad and his family as emergency assistance. This kit contains all the material to build a new shelter. 'We hope to have a proper latrine as well soon', explained Ahmad. 'It is really good to have our own shelter again but we are tired to go from one place to another. We have been here for eight years now and things are not getting better... We want to have a house again, a real one, not a tent anymore. That's all we want', concludes his wife.

*Names changed for confidentiality.



Interview of the inhabitants of the household with GVC staff
© Silvia Mazzocchin for Gruppo di Volontariato Civile

NEGATIVE COPING MECHANISMS

Refugees need to make difficult choices to overcome daily problems such as the lack of food and of income: 12% withdrew their children from school for this reason in 2019, 54% reduced health expenditures and nearly 60% reduced their number of meals per day. Officially, only 2.6% of the children between 5 and 17 were working – a figure which is likely to be under-estimated. In other cases, harsh living conditions can lead to a premature return.



UNREALISED DREAMS

Arsal falls in the Lebanon mountains, which makes the weather there highly unpredictable — a source of anxiety for communities living in inadequate shelters. Amid a particularly foggy and snowy day there, Najib* (15 years old) was playing outside with his brother Salim* (5). It was an unusual day for him because he had a day off from his job at a small local Tannour (bakery). Unfortunately, Najib, like many other Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, has to work.

Najib, his parents, and two siblings lived in Rif Dimashq in Syria. Khalil*, Najib's father, explained: *'I was running the family business, a tailor workshop in Syria that I inherited from my forefathers. In 2011, the conflict was escalating, and it was no longer safe for my family to stay in the city; the business took a severe knockdown since the majority of our clients were from the town of Ghouta, which was undergoing an economic embargo and military skirmishes'*. Following the events, they left the city and went back to their village in the same governorate. Khalil started working in any job he could find to support the family, be it in construction or agriculture, until 2014, when their village underwent heavy bombardment. A ricochet penetrated Khalil's spinal cord and paralysed his legs and weakened one of his arms. He slipped in a coma for a few months and was transferred to a hospital in Lebanon for treatment. After he regained consciousness, he decided to bring his family to Lebanon.

The new family situation required Najib, the eldest child, to go to work to cover their basic needs, even though the economic situation in Arsal is rather sluggish and employment or business opportunities are slim. Khalil commented: *'The current economic crisis in Lebanon has also affected refugees and the Lebanese communities in Arsal alike. The situation is difficult for everyone with limited income. Everything is more expensive now, and the amount of assistance remains the same'*.

The deterioration of the economic situation meant one thing for Najib, that he needs to continue working in the bakery nearby for twelve hours a day, making around 25,000LBP (US\$16.61) per week.

Najib described his days: *'I wake up and go to work at 6:00 am, and I stay there till 6:00 pm. Over there, I do whatever the owner asks me, be it cleaning or helping in carrying the flour bags [approximately 50kg each]. I'm so tired when I come back home, I eat and sleep. Sometimes I go see my cousins to play with them'*. But Najib has different ambitions. When we asked if he wanted to go back to school, he paused then said *'yes, but I have to work. I have to do something'*.

Following the decision by Lebanese authorities ordering the demolition of concrete-built shelter in the summer of 2019, they had to dismantle concrete components of its tent and decrease the height of the walls. The situation was difficult for the family, with the disabled Khalil not being able to support his sons in the dismantlement. *'In response, Action Against Hunger through the LPC, with support by ECHO, have provided material to insulate the house from the cold and from the flooding, which is very helpful'*. The situation remains particularly difficult during the winter when temperatures drop below zero for several weeks.

Najib wants to go back to Syria, to study, and continue his family business as a tailor. Yet there are a lot of uncertainties about the future of Syrian refugees. Khalil expressed similar interests of returning: *'There should be international intervention to assure the safe and voluntary return of refugees to Syria. For us to make sure that we do not become political targets, and that there is something to go back for [in reference to their houses and businesses]'*.

*Names changed for confidentiality.



**I LOST MY WHOLE WORLD WHEN MY
FAMILY RETURNED TO SYRIA**

'No one can imagine what I'm going through, I sent my wife and daughter back to the war. They are on a bus on their way to Idlib', said 37-year-old Ahmad, with tears in his eyes.*

Ahmad and his wife, Fatima*, fled the war in Syria in 2014 when the situation deteriorated in the outskirts of Damascus where they lived and after losing several family members. They arrived to Zahle (Bekaa, Lebanon). As a result of the economic and political crisis that unfolded at the end of 2019, life in Lebanon became extremely difficult for them.

'The living conditions in Lebanon became unbearable over the past six months and I haven't been able to find a job. Without work, I couldn't provide for my family anymore. I haven't paid my monthly rent of US\$150 for the past three months and the landlord needs her money', Ahmad said. 'She told us to leave. I didn't want my family to end up on the street, so I sent them back to Syria'.

RETURN TO SYRIA

'I didn't have any other choice than to send my family back to Syria. I thought it would be better for them there. In Syria your neighbours will knock on your door and help you if you need support but here, we are alone'.

The return of Ahmad's wife and daughter hasn't gone as planned: *'My family was supposed to go to my mother and siblings in Ghouta, not to Idlib',* said a devastated Ahmad. On the 28th of January, Fatima and four-year-old Maya* returned to Syria. They travelled to Ghouta as foreseen but were not allowed to enter because they could not demonstrate any formal link with the town and were asked for additional documents. With nowhere to go his wife and child spent the night at a distant relative's place but the next day they had to leave.

'Fatima has an uncle who lives in Idlib who agreed to host them. She had no other choice than to go to Idlib. Knowing that it's very dangerous there now it was the hardest decision we had to make', Ahmad explained. 'Imagine people are fleeing the violence in Idlib and my family is going towards what they are running from'. Ahmad himself couldn't return with them to Syria because of security reasons and the current political situation in Syria.

EXTREMELY DIRE LIVING CONDITIONS

'Since the start of the protests life became particularly difficult. The first month, my salary was reduced to half and a month later I got fired together with other Syrian and Lebanese workers. My employer was good to me, but he simply couldn't afford to pay our salaries anymore due to the situation', Ahmad explained.

Seventy-three percent of Syrian refugees live below the national poverty line of US\$3.80 per day. Given the unfolding crisis over the last few months, this percentage is likely to be even higher now. Ahmad and Fatima are among the 55 percent of Syrian refugees who live below the severe poverty line of spending less than US\$2.90 per day, meaning that they are unable to meet their survival needs for food, health and shelter.

'The past few weeks were hell on earth for me and Fatima. We didn't have enough money to buy food. We couldn't afford spending more than US\$1 per day and we split a piece of bread between us over two days so we could give our daughter, Maya, a whole piece', he explained.

'Fatima lost a lot of weight, but our priority was Maya. We reached rock bottom but we didn't want our daughter to know what we were going through. I didn't want her to see me humiliated as a father unable to take care of them', said Ahmad. 'I sent my soul to the danger in Syria because I couldn't afford to feed her'.

LIVING WITHOUT HIS FAMILY

'Maya, is my light and soul. My wife and I were married for eight years before we were blessed with a child', said Ahmad. 'She is the joy of my life. I don't know what I will do with myself if something happens to them. My life wouldn't be worth living without them', he said. NRC through the LPC and with support by ECHO helped Mohammed obtain a birth registration for his daughter before she returned to Syria.

'I haven't eaten for several days. I can't afford it. I bought a pack of noodles but I can't boil it because I don't have gas for the stove. Maya used to eat noodles', he said remembering his daughter. 'She left me her teddy bear and a few pieces of Lego and told me to remember her when she is not around', Ahmad said whilst bursting into tears. 'I have lost my whole world'.

In Syria, Ahmad says he lived a good life. He worked as a blacksmith and was pursuing his law studies at the university. He dreamt of becoming a judge.

'I miss home, but Syria and Damascus are a distant dream for me today. Returning is just a dream', Ahmad concluded. 'All I want now is for my wife and daughter to come back to my arms. I want to hug my daughter again'.

*Names changed for confidentiality.



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