

# SYRIAN REFUGEES IN TRIPOLI, LEBANON

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**Image 1: A view of the neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen**

## THE REFUGEES IN TOWNS PROJECT

With the goal of understanding immigrant integration, the Refugees in Towns (RIT) project, based at the Feinstein International Center at Tufts University, seeks to explore the dual experience of refugees and the towns into which they move, from the perspective of both the refugees and the town. When refugees move into and settle in a town they change the fabric of social, political, cultural and economic relations, and this fabric of relations similarly influences the refugees' experience. The RIT project explores this co-evolving process of refugee integration and urban development by focusing on the 'ground-up' experience of hosting communities in towns or neighborhoods within large cities. Through a series of cases studies, the project documents urban changes (i.e. the impact on households and communities, on urban service and systems, and on urban governance), and the experience of the refugees themselves—whether and why they have thrived or struggled—with the goal of building a theory of integration based on the relationships between refugees and their host communities.

## INTRODUCTION

Lebanon has experienced an influx of 1.5 million Syrians since 2011, representing almost a quarter of its population. The challenges this influx creates have been particularly intense in Tripoli—Lebanon’s second largest city and the urban center of the northern governorate. Tripoli is a coastal city, just 30 km from the Syrian border, and its population has grown by 17% with the influx of Syrian refugees. Tripoli is poorer, more politically fragmented and more insecure than other parts of Lebanon, including Beirut, and the refugee influx has had deep repercussions.

This case study explores how the Syrian influx has affected Tripoli, with a focus on urban poverty. The case study will explore how relationships between Lebanese and Syrians have deteriorated as competition over jobs intensifies, security concerns increase, and decrepit public infrastructure has been further strained. It highlights the responses of Syrian refugees and the Lebanese population, ending with some ideas about ways to improve employment prospects and economic stability.

## OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

### TRIPOLI BEFORE 2011

The city of Tripoli has been marred by decades of armed conflict and instability, resulting in a fragile economy that is struggling to support the local population, let alone the recent influx of Syrian refugees.

As a result of the Lebanese Civil War, the city became massively de-industrialized, and most investments are directed towards Beirut.<sup>1</sup> Table 1 compares the illiteracy and school enrolment rates, and health insurance coverage between Tripoli and the national average.

**Table 1: Social Demographics in Tripoli Compared to National Averages**

Indicator		Tripoli	National Average
Illiteracy		11%	7%
School Enrolment	Public	70%	30%
	Private	30%	70%
Health Insurance Coverage		27%	52%

*Source: Adib Nehmeh*

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<sup>1</sup> Sader, Makram, “Tatawur al-Qita al-Masrifi 1990-2010,” Association of Banks in Lebanon, December 2010.

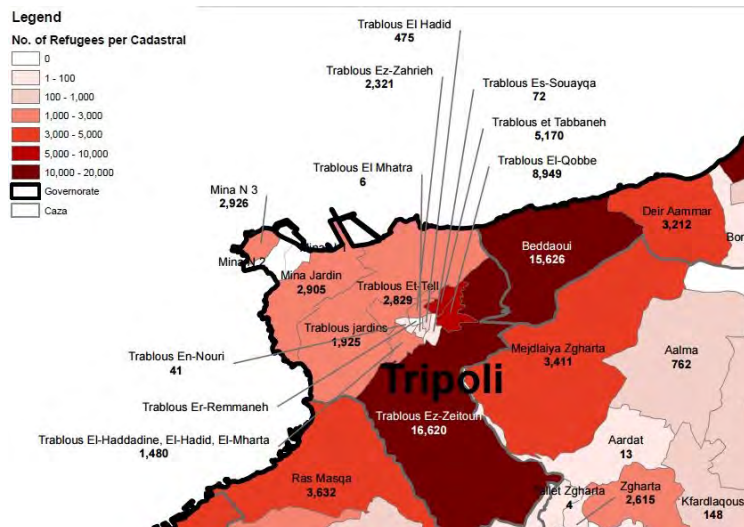
In addition to a history of conflict, the city currently hosts approximately 30,000<sup>2</sup> registered Palestinian refugees, and has been the home base for two UNRWA Palestinian refugee camps established after 1948. Palestinians have been established in Lebanon for multiple generations, and a new trend of informal settlements outside of camps, known as ‘gatherings,’ has emerged. There are now five Palestinian gatherings in the city of Tripoli in the municipalities of the Al Fayhaa Union, in Mina, Beddaoui, and Tripoli (Table 2).

**Table 2: Palestinian Gatherings and Official UNRWA Camps in Tripoli Metropolitan Area**

Municipality	Cadaster	Location Type	Name
Tripoli	El Qoubeh	Gathering	Bab El Tebaneh
	Jardins		Zahryeh
Mina	Al Mina Jardins No.3	Gathering	Al Mina
Beddaoui	-	Gathering	Mankoubin
	-		Mouhjarin - Beddaoui
	-	Camp	Beddaoui

Source: UNRWA, UNDP and UN-Habitat (2016)

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**Map 1: Tripoli and the distribution of the registered Syrian refugees at the cadastral level.** Source: UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response

<sup>2</sup> “Tripoli City Profile 2016,” UN Habitat, 2016, 3.

The war in Syria that began with the Syrian revolution in 2011 has caused the mass displacement of Syrians to Tripoli, mainly from nearby Syrian cities such as Homs, Al Qousayer, and Hama. As of January 2017, Tripoli hosts almost 70,000 Syrian refugees,<sup>3</sup> who live in 12 cadastrals in the Tripoli metropolitan area spread over 42 square kilometers, as shown in Map 1. According to our estimates, this represents a 17% increase in population since the beginning of the Syrian conflict with the city of Tripoli's population now officially 478,504.<sup>4</sup> However the real figure of Syrian refugees is undoubtedly larger as there are many more Syrians in the city who have not registered with UNHCR.

Syria and northern Lebanon have a long-shared history, with common cultural and religious characteristics. Tripoli is the largest Sunni city in Lebanon and many Syrians resided there prior to 2011, either because they had family ties or came for work, or because Syrians settled there during the Syrian government's occupation of Lebanon. Tripoli hosts a sizeable Alawite, pro-Assad community (estimated 50,000), concentrated in the neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen. However, the general disposition of the city is lingering animosity toward the Assad regime, because of its ruthless occupation of Tripoli during the Lebanese Civil War. Many Tripolitans therefore empathized with the refugees who fled the Assad regime, and at the onset of the war demonstrated their support by welcoming and protecting them in their neighborhoods.



Map 2: Tripoli, Lebanon



Image 2: View of the neighborhood of Jabal Mohsen

<sup>3</sup> "UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response," UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal, Accessed March 6, 2017.

<sup>4</sup> "Tripoli City Profile 2016," 3.

With the influx of Syrian refugees, Tripoli's hosting capacity was soon put under strain. In 2011, armed clashes were reignited between two bordering neighborhoods: the Sunni residents of Bab El-Tebaneh and the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen. The sectarian tensions between Sunnis and Alawites in Syria and Lebanon have a long history, intensified by the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990). The localized conflict in Tripoli ended in 2015, though the security problems continue to contribute to the city's chronic poverty. Half of Tripoli's residents are considered poor (the city's poverty rate is higher than the national average)<sup>5</sup> and the unemployment rate exceeds 35%.<sup>6</sup>

The influx of Syrians is the second wave of forced migration to hit Tripoli, with the influx of Palestinians being the first. Many Syrian households have relocated to the Palestinian 'gatherings' to take advantage of the low rents, the prospect of aid from Islamic charities, and the diminished Lebanese military presence that exist in these gatherings.

*"Tripoli has changed a lot in recent years, especially with the war in Syria. It is no longer the same city where I was born and raised. Many things have changed since then, my neighborhood is now more crowded, when I walk around I see new people every day. I see many kids spending their time out of the school, trying to help their parents make a living in this city. In the streets, I see a lot of unemployed youth and adults spending their days doing nothing, ready to do anything to earn a very small amount of money. I see long queues of poor people in front of ATM machines at the beginning of each month waiting their turn to withdraw the financial assistance from the international community. Tripoli has changed a lot but it remains the affectionate city that is always ready to host and help its neighbors." - Khaled Ismail*

## URBAN PROBLEMS AND THE IMPACT ON THE SYRIAN REFUGEES

The major form of poverty in Tripoli is income poverty. Today, 76% of Lebanese households have a monthly income of less than 750,000 LBP (500.00 USD),<sup>7</sup> while 74% of the Syrian refugees are living below the poverty line with less 180,000 LBP (120.00 USD) per month.<sup>8</sup> With few employment prospects, competition over jobs has been a key source of social tensions in Tripoli.

<sup>5</sup> "Peace Building in Lebanon: Tripoli Supplement." *United Nations Development Program (UNDP)*. March 2015, 12.

<sup>6</sup> "Challenges and Developmental Opportunities for Tripoli," *Invest in Lebanon (IDAL)*, February 27, 2016, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Leila Kaban, "Urban Inequalities and Poverty in Lebanon: What Can Be Learned From the Social Market Economy," *Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs*, January 2016, 10.

<sup>8</sup> The Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, December 16, 2016, 51.



**Image 3: A child playing in the street in Hay El Tanak, Tripoli**

Household income and daily wages across Lebanon decreased between 2012 and 2015.<sup>9</sup> The main driver behind this decline is widely considered to be Syrian workers' acceptance of lower daily wages. Lebanese business owners and employers take advantage of Syrian refugees who are often willing to work for lower wages and longer hours. Lebanese workers with similar skillsets and crafts have lost their jobs to Syrians, and everyone suffers from rising commodity prices and rents. This is due to an increased demand for housing which has placed pressure on the city's housing capacity particularly in heavily populated low-income neighborhoods, like Bab El-Tebaneh, Qoubeh and Zahryeh. The impact of the influx of refugees on the labor and real estate markets have contributed to deepening wealth inequality in the city.

**Table 3: Economic Vulnerability Indicators of the Syrian Refugees in Tripoli**

Key Indicator	Households < SMEB <sup>10</sup> (US\$ 87)	Households Below poverty line (< US\$ 3.84)	Households borrowed money	Households with debt > US\$ 600
Tripoli	53%	74%	88%	33%

Source: UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP

## GOVERNANCE AND REGULATIONS IMPOSED ON SYRIANS

Syrians face several government regulations that make life much more difficult for them, including: the need to renew residency permits, new employment regulations, and lack of coordination amongst public institutions.

### RESIDENCY PERMITS

In 2015, the Lebanese government attempted to limit the influx of migrants by requiring residency permits. The application for and renewal of residency permits has created significant barriers for refugees, preventing them from moving freely in search of livelihood opportunities or access to basic services, such as health and education. There is an even higher security presence in Tripoli, due to the enforcement of the 2014 Lebanese security plan, where 2,000 Lebanese Armed Forces deployed throughout the city in effort to stop the armed clashes. Syrians are at high risk of being targeted at

<sup>9</sup>“Lebanon Economic Monitor, Fall 2015: The Great Capture,” World Bank, November 18, 2015, 12.

<sup>10</sup> SMEB refers to the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket, which measures items deemed essential for household survival.

checkpoints and subsequently arrested and detained. Men are particularly targeted because they are perceived as being more of a security threat than women.

*“As a citizen of Tripoli, it was very obvious for me that there was a sort of plan to limit the freedom of movement of the refugees in the city applied by the government mainly starting from end of 2015 where the internal security forces (ISF) applied a very strict security plan to control the use of motorcycles which is known to be the most popular mean of transportation for the Syrians in Tripoli. This security plan led to the arrest of dozens of Syrians men and to a significant limitation in the freedom of movement especially in the downtown of Tripoli and during working hours.” – Khaled Ismail*

## EMPLOYMENT RESTRICTIONS

In addition to the residency permits, in mid-2015, the Ministry of Labor began a national campaign aimed at pressuring Lebanese business owners to employ only Lebanese nationals. The Ministry has since formalized a new legal framework that regulates Syrian labor in Lebanon. Syrians can only legally work in three sectors: construction, environment, and agriculture. The inauguration and rise to power of Mr. Mohammad Kabbara, the new Minister of Labor, has strongly influenced public opinion in Tripoli that Lebanese workers should have priority for jobs. The Ministry of Labor recently increased its presence in the city, especially in the downtown areas of Tripoli (Sahet El Nour and El Tal), which are central to commercial activities. The ministry conducts routine spot check visits to ensure that Syrians are not working outside of the three sanctioned sectors and without a work permit. These measures have directly contributed to the closure of dozens of commercial establishments because they were employing Syrians and not observing legal procedures.



**Image 4: Men spending their time outside a coffee shop in Al-Tel, Tripoli**

## LACK OF COORDINATION AMONGST PUBLIC INSTITUTIONS

There is widespread lack of coordination amongst public institutions in dealing with Syrian refugees, and the central government recently transferred responsibility to Tripoli municipality. However, the municipality has long been considered a paralyzed institution due to political affiliations and limited technical capacity. Poor governance in the city has encouraged the international aid system to fill local institutional voids. For example, basic services that should be provided by provided by the Tripoli municipality like health, housing, education, and food assistance to Syrians and vulnerable Lebanese are often provided by international aid agencies. The lack of coordination in the aid sector and the absence

of guidance from the municipality on donors' rules and procedures make the relationship between municipality and international agencies complicated and overwhelmed with bureaucratic processes. Despite the influx of aid money in to Tripoli recent years, the local governance dysfunction is barrier to positive growth.

### STRAIN ON COMMUNITY RESOURCES

Another impact of the Syrian influx has been increased pressure on municipal services like garbage collection, and on already precarious basic infrastructure assets, such as power grids, roads, and buildings. Electricity, in particular, is in short supply nationwide. Many Syrians (and even some Lebanese) obtain electricity by hooking up to independent sources without paying fees to the national utility company, EDL. There is increased demand on transportation services, causing crowding and road traffic, and many Tripolitans believe that the growing population has contributed to more traffic accidents.

### RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HOST COMMUNITY AND REFUGEES

Generally, Lebanese residents in Tripoli resent job creation activities that target Syrians, believing that Lebanese are entitled to available jobs and that Syrian refugees should not be prioritized for work and aid. Syrians in Tripoli are considered as second-class citizens who are taking over work opportunities and benefiting from international aid without any positive contribution to the city. This has led to social tensions that manifest in discrimination and personal disputes.

However, Syrians are still widely accepted in Tripoli due to the shared cultural and religious values. At Friday prayer, many imams give sermons emphasizing the importance of supporting Syrians as "Muslim brothers". By contrast, in other areas in Lebanon, like the city of Batroun (Christian village near Beirut), discrimination levels are so high that the municipality has enforced curfews for Syrians.

*"Every week, in every Friday Prayer I attended in the last 4 years, imams close their sermons by praying for the 'Syrian Brothers' who are suffering from forced migration and from the miserable living conditions along with all what is happening in their country. This type of weekly support through the mosques is preventing the acceptance level from declining in city and preventing a disastrous collapse in the city." - Khaled Ismail*





Image 5: As of the end of January 2017, the banner is hung in two different locations in Al Qoubeh-Tripoli. The sign says: "Dear Syrian refugee, I deserve to work in my country more than you do."

## HOW SYRIAN REFUGEES COPE WITH URBAN PRESSURES

Syrians in Tripoli struggle with the economic and security challenges of the city and the growing resentment of the Lebanese community, and many have adopted negative coping strategies. Three such strategies are specific to Tripoli's urban context: relocation to marginalized neighborhoods; accepting low wages and poor working conditions; and working in exchange for housing.

### RELOCATION TO MARGINALIZED NEIGHBORHOODS

In response to the new labor regulations, Syrian refugees previously living in the downtown areas are moving to marginalized and crowded neighborhoods on the outskirts of the city (Bab El-Tebaneh and Qoubeh) where there is less oversight from the Ministry of Labor. These areas are already occupied by poor and vulnerable Lebanese and the influx of Syrian is increasing population density and further deepening the social divide. Currently, there are no studies that examine the impacts of this relocation. Such research would certainly be worthwhile.

### ACCEPTING LOW WAGES AND POOR WORKING CONDITIONS

The lack of employment opportunities coupled with Ministry of Labor regulations have meant Syrians in Tripoli accept low wages and poor working conditions including lack of workplace safety. Tripoli has both the longest working hours and lowest average wage for Syrians in Lebanon.<sup>11</sup> Faced with barriers to formal labor markets, Syrians and some Lebanese residents have started micro-enterprises, i.e. small, craft-oriented businesses such as small wagons selling street food, sweets or coffee prepared in their

<sup>11</sup> "Tripoli City Profile 2016", 52.

homes. This large informal market can pose health and safety risks, and sometimes use child labor. However, it is a source of much-needed income for poor Syrian and Lebanese households.

## EMPLOYMENT IN EXCHANGE FOR HOUSING

Inflated rents across Tripoli mean Syrians sometimes work in exchange for housing. Alongside the sharp rise in population and income inequalities, Tripoli is witnessing a boom in the residential housing market for wealthy families, mainly in the southern area surrounding the Rachid Karamah International Exhibition Center. In these newly constructed neighborhoods in Al-Maarad, Dam and El-Farez, Syrian refugees work as service providers (janitors, domestic guards, etc.) in exchange for housing. One of the authors, a Lebanese resident of Tripoli, estimates that in these areas the wage does not exceed 150,000 LBP (\$100/per month). Furthermore, many Lebanese residents in these neighborhoods offer additional in-kind and cash assistance on an ad-hoc basis in exchange for other services, i.e. cleaning and protecting the building. Many buildings in the wealthy neighborhoods of Tripoli now have Syrian guards and janitors. These kinds of ad hoc arrangements offer some relief for Syrian households but also leave them exposed to abusive employers with little recourse. In the past, these positions were held by migrants from Egypt and Bangladesh, who carried out these tasks before the war in Syria. There is little information on the impact of this employment on migrants and the hosting community.

*“Many friends are living in neighborhoods like Al Dam and Farez, Al Maarad and Al Miten, where in every single building there is a Syrian family working as a janitor cleaning and monitoring the building. Usually, the Syrian wife is responsible for daily cleaning, the kids are responsible of lifting goods and stuff and the Syrian man is responsible of all maintenance (electrical and mechanical work) for the building.” – Khaled Ismail*

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Urban poverty and the influx of Syrian refugees together create a high risk of economic and social collapse in Tripoli. The fragility of Tripoli’s urban economy—weak infrastructure and public services, lack of employment opportunities, and paralyzed institutions—is further undermined by increasing community tensions. Some brief ideas follow for how to improve the situation all residents of Tripoli, including Syrian refugees.

## SUPPORT FOR THE SECTORS IN WHICH SYRIANS ARE ELIGIBLE TO LEGALLY WORK

Improved economic prospects are desperately required to improve Tripoli’s situation. In particular, improving the competitiveness of sectors in which Syrians are legally allowed to work—construction, agriculture, and environment (mainly waste management)—would provide a starting point to strengthen economic resilience for both Lebanese and Syrian Refugees. Tripoli has an industrial zone and is in the process of developing a special economic zone in the port. The city’s economy is highly dependent on commercial trading, industry and construction. However, these sectors exhibit sluggish

growth due to lack of infrastructure investments, low competitiveness in external markets, and, most importantly, and absence of a coordinated development plan.

The Tripoli Special Economic Zone project offers an intriguing potential to support vulnerable households. Indeed, with millions of dollars in planned investments, this project could create significant windfalls in Tripoli's wider economy through a multiplier effect.<sup>12</sup> By providing stable income and training opportunities in the construction sector, both Syrians and poor Lebanese citizens in Tripoli could benefit. Developmental programs of cash for work would be a good starting point.

*“Like most residents of the city, I suffer from the challenges created by population density, which is reflected on the public infrastructure in Tripoli. The pressure is clearly increasing on institutions such as hospitals and schools. Moreover, crowded roads and traffic jams are intensified by evening shifts for Syrian students, particularly in El-Tebaneh and Qoubeh. Despite the number of new programs in Tripoli created, the municipality needs to support the development of new infrastructure on a larger scale to accommodate them.” – Khaled Ismail*

## TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE FOR MUNICIPAL ACTORS

Municipal actors struggle to coordinate planning in Tripoli, but it is critical that the municipality design a rigorous strategic plan to deliver infrastructure and public services. Technical assistance projects targeting the Tripoli municipality and Al Fayhaa Union of Municipalities (Tripoli, El Mina and El Beddaoui) that aim to increase the municipality's capacity could be immensely beneficial and generate ripple effects through Tripolitan society. Specifically, technical assistance to the engineering unit responsible for infrastructure related activities could be an effective starting point.

The following three points illustrate high-level initiatives in that vein:

- Establish or support existing development offices to build the municipal capacity in terms of planning, fundraising, proposal writing and project management. In essence, the objective here would be to streamline administrative processes and lower the bureaucratic burden, which is stifling a number of initiatives.
- The municipality could receive on-the-job training from international organizations to increase in-house capacity. Such partnerships could be a cost-effective way of implementing effective institutional capacity building for the municipality and yield long-term benefits.
- Local decision makers must be empowered with decision-making abilities to promote urban development and coordination with international organizations and donors based on local knowledge and international best practices. The hierarchical and rigid processes in place make for slow changes when the urgency of the situation requires a nimble and agile municipal governance.

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<sup>12</sup> “The Tripoli Transformation,” *The Business Year*, Accessed March 18, 2017.

These capacity-building programs, offered to the Tripoli municipality staff, could lead to a more effective institutional response to the urgent needs in the city. Subsequently, this type of programming should contribute to lowering the social tension between refugee and host communities, which are mainly due to the pressures on public assets and services.

## RAPID EMPLOYMENT INITIATIVES

Rapid employment initiatives offered by international donor agencies offer a valuable alternative. Short-term employment projects that create temporary employment opportunities present “quick-fix” livelihood solutions for both Syrian and Lebanese communities. While these types of projects are a temporary remedy, they have the positive effect of injecting much-needed capital in the economy. Moreover, rapid employment initiatives have proved quite helpful at the household-level.

Some examples in Tripoli include:

- A rehabilitation project for al Zehryeh neighborhood implemented by Danish Refugee Council (DRC) to install solar streetlights and employing vulnerable Lebanese and Syrians workers in Tripoli.
- Business development projects targeting micro and small medium enterprises by UNDP, DRC, Care, Mercy Corps, BIAT (local NGO) and Al Majmouaa (local NGO). These projects are supporting small businesses established either by Lebanese and Syrians in Tripoli by providing them with either cash grants or business planning support, networking and linkage to markets.



**Image 6: Some popular rapid employment initiatives for Tripoli residents include "beautification projects", which include painting the exteriors of buildings, as a means to visually improve the city aesthetics from the destruction of the war.**

The implementation of large-scale rapid employment initiatives, which can include the rehabilitation of vulnerable crowded internal neighborhoods, installation of renewable energy alternatives, maintenance and construction of sewage infrastructure networks, as well as green spaces are recommended due to

their impact on first the livelihood of daily workers and the social cohesion between both communities in the city.



**Image 7: View from El Jesrin Souq in Beb El Hadid**

## CONCLUSION

The urban poverty aggravated by the Syrian refugee crisis offers a sobering perspective on the path ahead for Tripoli. The city is emerging from four decades of conflict and a myriad of challenges lie ahead. The economy's potential depends on external actors like the central government and international donor agencies, and on the ability of the municipality to step up to play a strong role. This report shows how income-generating prospects can ease tensions between host and refugee communities in urban settings. Quick fixes such as rapid employment initiatives and long-term strategic planning are both needed. Resources from international donor agencies can empower local decision-makers and make them effective. Integrated planning and focused investments could lead to a path of sustained livelihoods and dignity for Lebanese citizens and refugees in Tripoli.

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