




LEBANON
SYRIANS
IN LIMBO
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Beirut. During a fashion show at the Four Seasons Hotel, Syrian designer Noor Azhari speaks on the phone. Born in Aleppo, she grew up between Syria and Saudi Arabia. Noor fled Syria in 2011 to Beirut where she created her own brand, "Caramel". Today she has three children and is divorced.



Ariz. The road that connects the Qadisha valley (visible on the right) to the Beqaa valley, the latter area has a Muslim majority and an intense presence of Syrian refugees (over 120 thousand).

They have fled the war in Syria. There are more than a million.
But Beirut does not consider them refugees

In the past, as workers, they helped rebuild Lebanon from the rubble of war. Today they seek refuge there from their own war, the bloodiest in recent decades. The Syrian refugees – one million according to the UNHCR, but in reality many more – who since 2011 have been crossing the border to take refuge in a safe country.

“Lebanon is welcoming and has a generous heart,” Pope Francis has said, referring to an unequivocal fact: Lebanon (a little larger than Cyprus with 4.5 million inhabitants, excluding Syrian refugees and 250,000 Palestinians) receives more refugees per capita than any other country in the world, following a centuries-old tradition that has always seen its rugged mountains as a shelter for persecuted minorities.

Some parties have made a “sovereign” flag of the phenomenon in the wake of the slogan “Lebanese First” and “Send the Syrians Home”.



Beirut. At the Zico House, which just held a performance of *Beit Bayout*, directed by Farah Wardani, a play inspired by the life of 18 Syrian refugees (here relaxing after the show ends) and sponsored by the Intisar Foundation.



Jbeil. At the port of the ancient city of Byblos, Syrian Ghiath Rumaneh officially asks for the hand of his Syrian girlfriend, Eveen Sukkar. Both of them are from Damascus and are in Jbeil on holiday; he is studying in Turkey, she lives in Syria.



Tripoli. Syrian Nour Al Melli (sitting in the centre), 28, is originally from Hama but since 2011 has been in Lebanon, where he studied communication at the university, graduating in July 2019. Today, together with a few friends, he manages a media platform on Facebook ("Shada", here in the office during the recording of a video) dedicated to the city of Tripoli.

But there is another problem: terms such as “refugee” or “displaced person” in Lebanon make no sense as the country has never signed the 1951 Geneva Convention on Refugees. The result is a legislative vacuum: there are no official refugee camps and many Syrians in Lebanon (one in four) have been living for years in a legal limbo that often prevents them from obtaining a residence permit and thus from finding work.

“It’s paradoxical, there are wealthy Syrians who come to Lebanon on holiday and go to the seaside,” says Ahmad, from Tripoli, “while I, who can’t go back to Syria, live here but have a tough time supporting myself respectably.” Some do volunteer work and some study, while others get by as artists, musicians, online teachers of Arabic, or work as waiters, off the books.

And then there’s the other side of the coin, that of the most fortunate. Those who have money. “My work permit? I took care of it in a day,” designer Noor Azhari says with a smile. “I’m from Aleppo but left in 2011. You’ve just got to pay. It’s easy, right?”



The rugged mountains that separate the coast of Tripoli from the valley of the Beqaa in the District of Minieh, an area with a Muslim majority and a large presence of Syrian refugees (there are almost 60 thousand).



Beirut. Syrian Farah Azrak on the terrace of her house in the Geitawi district. Born in Damascus, Farah left Syria after the war, traveling to Europe and Canada and then settling in Beirut where, among other things, she deals with body and voice art.



Beirut. Khaldoun Albatal, 33, poses at the Riwaq Beirut bar (opened by three Syrian friends) in front of a painting by Syrian artist Milad Amin depicting the bodies (and souls) of many dead Syrians. Khaldoun was born in Damascus but fled Syria in 2014. Today, with his NGO, Al Caravan Project, he is helping Syrian children in Lebanon.



Beirut. Syrians Fatima (centre) and her husband Mohamad (right), a professional cook, along with sister Noor (left) and other friends, relax on Sunday mornings near the Raouche Rocks (also known as Pigeon Rocks). The couple are from Damascus but fled to Beirut in 2016 and live off casual jobs.



Beirut, Monroe Hotel. At an art fair the Syrian painter Leena Deeb, born and resident in Homs, checks her phone, while surrounded by friends and colleagues.



Tripoli. Syrian sisters Dalia and Sally Kalaleeb (centre and right), together with their cousin Joudy Al Sibai, rest on the beach on the island of Bakar, connected to the mainland by a bridge. The Syrians came to Tripoli on holiday for a week.



Tripoli. An amusement park along the coast. Tripoli, 30 kilometres from the Syrian border, mostly Muslim, is a city with a high concentration of Syrian refugees (in the city are about 55 thousand).



Beirut. At gallery 392RMEIL393 the Syrian artist Sami Al Kour, 28, welcomes friends to his exhibition's vernissage. Born in Damascus, Sami has been living in Beirut since 2018, where he is continuing his work as an artist.



Beirut, Shatila refugee camp. Syrian Reem Ail, 18, embroiders with other Syrian women at Shatila Studio, a social enterprise founded in 2019 that employs over 100 Syrian and Palestinian women living in Shatila. Reem was born in Deir el-Zor but in 2014 she fled with her family to Lebanon: she is the oldest of 12 brothers and works because her family needs money.



Jbeil. Walking through the ancient city of Byblos.



Beirut. Syrian Farah Azrak on the terrace of her house in the Geitawi district. Born in Damascus, Farah left Syria after the war, traveling to Europe and Canada and then settling in Beirut where, among other things, she deals with body and voice art.



Beirut, Monroe Hotel. Monroe Hotel, at an art fair, Syrian artist Sana Atassi talks to some friends. Sana was born and lives in Damascus where she works as an artist but often comes to Lebanon for work: in her paintings she depicts "the pain of Syrian women, without rights and afflicted by war".



Beirut. Syrian Enas Safadi, 29, attending a concert on Jeanne D'Arc Street, during the Global Week for Syria festival. Enas is originally from the city of As-Suwayda, is a member of the Druze community, and has been living here for three years. "Finding work for us Syrians is not easy," she explains, "and so far I have been a volunteer for NGOs and take courses in acting".



Jbeil. Bahsa Beach, just north of the ancient city of Byblos, often frequented by both Lebanese and Syrian refugees.



Beirut. Syrian guitarist Tarek Khuluki playing a concert on Jeanne D'Arc Street during the Global Week for Syria festival.



Beirut. Syrians Fatima and her husband Mohamad, a professional cook, together with sister Noor and other friends, relax on Sunday mornings near the Raouche Rocks (also known as Pigeon Rocks). The couple are from Damascus but fled to Beirut in 2016 and live off casual jobs.



Beirut. During a fashion show at the Four Seasons Hotel, the new Syrian designer Ola Nassour poses next to a mirror: in the fashion field for three months, Ola - who created her own brand, "O Fashion" - was born in Damascus and married her husband Ali in 2009: with him she lived in Zimbabwe for work and now both live in Beirut with their three children.



Tripoli. Syrian Nour Al Melli (second from left), 28, is originally from Hama but since 2011 is in Lebanon, where he studied communication at the university, graduating in July 2019. Today, together with some friends, he manages a media platform on Facebook ("Shada", here at the office) dedicated to the city of Tripoli.



Tripoli. Syrian Asem Nayrab, 27, on the beach on the island of Bakar. Assem is originally from Idlib but since 2011 he has been in Lebanon, where he studied communication at university and volunteered for Save The Children.



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