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Coping strategies among self-settled Syrians in Lebanon

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Refugees in Lebanon prefer living outside camps, where they can influence their situation.

Three years into the conflict, displaced Syrians in Lebanon are affected by both governmental and ordinary people's ambivalence towards their presence. From the point of view of the international humanitarian community, the absence of official camps in Lebanon makes it far harder to ensure refugee protection and coordinate aid relief. The refugees themselves, however, say that they prefer living outside camps where they have better opportunities to influence their situation.

Lebanon's experience with Palestine refugees since 1948 affects its practices and policies toward the displaced Syrians. The Lebanese authorities have refused the establishment of camps as they fear that history will repeat itself. The establishment of armed Palestinian groups in camps was one of the reasons for the civil war between 1975 and 1990, and Lebanese authorities fear that the establishment of new camps would increase the likelihood that Syrians will stay and form spaces of resistance for Syrians in exile.

More than 400 informal tented encampments are registered around Lebanon to accommodate Syrian refugees. In Bebnine, a village of around 40,000 residents in the poor northern Akkar region, informal encampments – groupings of simple plastic tents constructed directly on the ground without water, electricity or sanitation – have popped up in several places. The Syrians, both urban and rural poor from the Homs region, typically arrive empty-handed and traumatised and end up moving into makeshift shelters in shops, garages, store-rooms, hallways and even a slaughterhouse.

Back in Syria many of the refugees lived close to their relatives' houses. After the flight to Lebanon, families were scattered, which has contributed to the loss or

weakening of social support. Some Syrians have formed social relationships with non-kin individuals such as host families or other refugees and go on to apply kinship categories like mother, father, sister and brother to them to emphasise their obligations and roles associated with close family.

While local practices of hospitality toward the Syrian refugees are widespread, the Syrians have been used as scapegoats for economic as well as political insecurity. The coping strategy used by Syrian refugees that has the most severe impact is employment in the unskilled labour market in agriculture, construction or in small businesses. Prior to the crisis, Syrian migrant workers typically accepted lower wages than the Lebanese due to the comparatively lower cost of living in Syria. Now the refugees compete with Lebanese for even lower wages, since they also receive aid, a livelihood strategy closed to poor Lebanese. An overwhelming majority of Lebanese¹ believe that Syrians are taking jobs from the Lebanese and pushing down wages.²

Refugees report incidents of physical violence. Some Syrians have tried to change their accent or other characteristics so as not to be subjected to harassment. Salma who fled from Idlib with her husband and five children says: "We fled here but I do not feel safe. Hopefully we will go back home soon."

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1. Data from a national survey with a representative sample of 900 respondents

2. Christophersen M, Thorleifsson C and Tiltnes Å (2013) *Ambivalent Hospitality. Coping Strategies and Local Responses to Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. Fafo AIS www.faf.no/pub/rapp/20338/20338.pdf