



KATE GERAGHTY/THE SYDNEY MORNING HERALD/FAIRFAX MEDIA

Women walk through the outskirts of Brital village, a Hezbollah stronghold in the Beqaa Valley, close to the border with Syria

The road from Damascus

Six million people live in Lebanon. Today, one in every four of them is now a Syrian refugee

By Xan Rice

Turn your back on the Mediterranean in Beirut, drive east along the highway, and you're soon in the foothills of Mount Lebanon, the range that runs along the country's spine. As the road gets steeper, the grey urban sprawl gives way to conifer forest and the summer apartments of wealthy city-dwellers seeking to escape the coastal heat. Higher still, the turns become sharper and old VW combis are parked by the roadside with the rear door open to show off Italian coffee machines. A hot drink is tempting; it is winter now, and soon the slopes will be covered with snow. Close to the summit, at 1,500 metres, is the first Lebanese army checkpoint, and a sign in Arabic and French confirming the way to the *frontière syrienne*. This is the road to Damascus.

The far side of the mountain is more barren and beyond it unfolds a wide, fertile plain known as the Beqaa Valley – the northeasternmost extension of the transcontinental Great Rift Valley. The Beqaa is famed for its archaeological ruins, vineyards, “Red Leb” cannabis and agricultural produce. In recent years it has become known for something else: Syrian refugees.

It was here in the central Beqaa, not far from the Beirut-to-Damascus highway, that Mona Chamali arrived one day in November

2013. She was with her husband, Abdurrahman, her four daughters, aged between eight and 18, and her two sons, in their early teens. It was their first time in Lebanon. They brought a few carpets and mattresses and savings in the form of gold jewellery – all that remained of their lives in Syria.

“When we got here the first feeling was just relief that we were safe, that the children were safe,” Mona told me recently.

Before the uprising started against President Bashar al-Assad in 2011, the Chamalis lived in the Baba Amr quarter of Homs, a large city in western Syria. They owned a three-bedroom house, with a living room, dining room and rooftop kitchen for making kebabs and sweets. On weekends they would pile into an uncle's car and go on picnics in the countryside.

Mona was proud of her family – “a good husband, good kids” – and of her achievements. She never went to school as a child but she later taught herself to read and write. She enrolled in sewing classes, took on clients and opened a shop. With her earnings, together with the money that Abdurrahman earned as a farm supervisor, they had enough to buy food, clothes and the occasional treat. Their eldest son was studying law at university; the other children were diligent students, too.

Early on in the Syrian Revolution, clashes broke out between anti-government protesters and national security forces in Homs. After nine months, with an insurgency raging, the Chamalis fled their home to stay with relatives outside the city. When Mona was able to return briefly to Baba Amr in 2012, she found it destroyed by army shelling. Her house had somehow withstood the bombardment, but soldiers burned it down as they swept through. There was nothing left to salvage, “not even a photograph”.

The Chamalis moved to Yabroud, a town close to the border with Lebanon, but the fighting followed them. One day in late 2013 a 15-year-old boy who lived next door was killed in a rocket attack. Mona and Abdurrahman decided that their only choice was to hire a van and cross the mountains into Lebanon, joining the 725,000 Syrians who had already sought sanctuary there.

When they reached the central Beqaa Valley, Mona's niece offered them space in her makeshift tent – along with 27 other Syrians. “It was so cramped that we could not even close the door,” Mona said.

Still, she and Abdurrahman were not too worried about the hardship. During the 2006 Lebanon War, fought between Hezbollah and Israel, relatives in Homs had taken in Lebanese refugees, who stayed ▶

► for several months until there was peace. The Syrian conflict was more serious, the Chamalis knew, but surely it would also have to end, and then they would go home.

In March, Syria's civil war will enter its sixth year. More than a quarter of a million people have been killed, the United Nations says (some estimates suggest the figure is much higher), and over 7.6 million are internally displaced. Nearly 4.3 million Syrians – a fifth of the population before the war – are registered as refugees in the region: they include 245,000 in Iraq, 633,000 in Jordan, 2.3 million in Turkey and 1.1 million in Lebanon.

A fireplace helped with the cold, but the snow was so heavy last winter that the roof kept sagging dangerously

(The Lebanese government believes the real number exceeds 1.5 million, because many refugees are not registered.)

Though Turkey has the biggest burden of refugees, it is a large country of 75 million people. Lebanon is a tiny state – half the size of Wales – with four million citizens. At least one in four people in Lebanon today is a Syrian. No other nation in the world has more refugees per capita. “We are a country hosting another country,” is how Hala El Helou, an adviser to Lebanon's minister of social affairs, puts it.

Given its fraught history with Syria, its sectarian politics and its experience with previous influxes of foreigners, Lebanon has had to deal with the refugee crisis in its own, often contradictory, way. It has been extraordinarily generous accepting so many of the displaced, and in the early days of the war many Lebanese opened their homes to fleeing Syrians, offering food and shelter.

Yet from the start, there has been an obvious wariness, too. The Lebanese government insisted on a “no camps” policy, so there are still none of the huge, aid-agency-run settlements that are typically associated with a humanitarian emergency. The authorities went so far as to prevent charities from providing sturdy shelters for the most vulnerable Syrians.

This approach was driven by Lebanon's deep-rooted fear of “permanence” when it comes to foreigners seeking sanctuary. In 1948, during the war that accompanied Israel's independence, hundreds of thousands of Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes. A hundred thousand of them

from a Lebanese. Known as a *shawish*, he sublets tiny plots to refugees, on which they put up their tents – shacks might be a more accurate description. A typical shelter has a timber or metal frame and walls made from wire, cardboard, plywood and blankets and other, found material. The outer shell is plastic sheeting, sometimes with UN branding, but more often in the form of discarded advertising banners weighted down with old car tyres: Plaza Palace nightclub, Orient Queen II Summer Cruise 2015, Mahmood Tea, Absolut Vodka.

The small settlement where Mona and Abdurrahman Chamali built their shack, in early 2014, was set in a field with a clear view across the valley to the Anti-Lebanon Mountains that run along the border. “I could go outside the tent, look at the mountains, and that's Syria,” Mona said.

The Chamalis agreed to pay the *shawish* a monthly rent for the land of \$133. At a cost of \$1,400, they then built a wood-frame shack with a cement floor, on which they laid their carpets and mattresses from Syria. A crooked piece of mirror adorned one wall of the bedroom. Another wall served as a clothes rack, with trousers, dresses and jackets hanging on nails. They bought a small Algi television and installed an iron fireplace in the middle of the room. That helped with the cold, but the snow was so heavy last winter – two feet deep at one point – that the roof kept sagging dangerously. On the worst nights, Mona's two sons had to scramble on top of the shack to scoop the snow off.

A much bigger worry was the children's education. It had proved impossible to enrol them in Lebanese schools, which were full, or too far away. This was a problem across the country. The number of school-age Syrian refugees is 400,000, more than the total number of Lebanese children in state schools. (Most Lebanese pupils attend private schools, which has left the public education system underfinanced.)



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Playing for time: 850 Syrian families lived in this half-finished school in Sidon in 2013

The result was that only a quarter of Syrian refugee children attended school in Lebanon in 2014. The rest stayed at home or, if money was tight – as it was for most families – were put to work, often under pressure from their *shawish*, who may have cut a deal with a local farmer to supply cheap labour. As you drive through the Beqaa Valley it is impossible to miss the small children toiling in the fields, hauling sacks of potatoes, picking lettuce or sorting garlic. Because refugees are not legally permitted to work, they are easily exploited.

“You have Syrians as young as seven working for ten to 14 hours a day,” said Maria Assi, CEO of Beyond Association, a Lebanese charity that runs centres for children in the Beqaa. “Mothers pick the fruit or vegetables and their children pack them into boxes and carry them to the trucks.”

With their savings dwindling, Mona and Abdurrahman faced a choice: they could send their children out to work, or find a way for them to live independently, leaving fewer mouths to feed. For the three oldest girls, aged 18, 19 and 20, this meant marriage to other refugees. One of them wed a cousin, another a neighbour’s son, and the third a young man from the same part of Syria.

“My heart bleeds for my children,” said Mona tearfully. “I could not afford to keep them there in the tent all day. In Syria, I would never have let them get married so young. I wanted them to get an education, a profession, and to be able to fend for themselves. But I had no choice.”

Her 15-year-old son found work on construction sites. By the beginning of 2015, only Hamed, 14, and nine-year-old Hajar

were still living like children – but without going to school.

As the refugees’ struggles have mounted, so has the sense of unease among Lebanese about the impact on their country. Even before the Syrian crisis, Lebanon’s infrastructure was creaking because of underinvestment, corruption and waste – its government is the fourth least efficient in the world, according to the World Economic Forum. With the population swelling by a third in just a few years, the pressure on roads, electricity, water and health-care systems has increased sharply.

The labour market is also under strain. Poorer Lebanese complain that the refugees are taking their jobs and driving down wages. Syrian migrants have long worked in agriculture and construction, but refugees have entered many other sectors, from the taxi business to restaurants and retail. On the streets of downtown Beirut, Syrian boys shine shoes and offer to “kiss your feet for a dollar”. Girls sell roses.

“We are a country that is used to dealing with displacement,” said Imad Salamey, an associate professor of political science at the Lebanese American University, when I met him at his office in Beirut one evening. “You had the Armenians coming in the Twenties and Thirties, the Palestinian crisis of 1948, and virtually the entire local population displaced during the civil war from 1975. So we always have a plan B or C, and also always have the expectation of other people coming in. But this influx is so large, and overwhelming for our resources.”

The third concern is demographic. If many of the Syrians were to settle in Lebanon, it would drastically alter the country’s delicate sectarian balance. Christians, Sunnis and Shias each make up between a quarter and a third of the Lebanese population, and since the end of the civil war in 1990 they have shared power nationally, trying to rule by consensus (one reason why the government is so ineffectual). Most of the Syrian refugees are Sunni.

Salamey continued: “All this comes at a time of deep division in Lebanese society, with different sides of the aisle opposing or supporting the Syrian regime.”

The predominantly Sunni-supported Future Movement has never forgiven successive Assad governments for meddling in Lebanon’s affairs. Bashar al-Assad’s father, Hafez, sent in troops during the Lebanese Civil War in 1976 and Damascus maintained up to 40,000 soldiers in Lebanon until 2005, when the outcry over the assassination of the former prime minister Rafiq Hariri – allegedly with Syrian involvement – forced them to withdraw.

On the other hand, Hezbollah, the Iranian-funded Shia political party and militant group that is the dominant force in Lebanon, is one of Assad’s strongest allies. Its fighters are helping his army across the border, in effect exacerbating the refugee problem by cleansing some Syrian border towns of their Sunni populations. Hezbollah’s activity in Syria is in part to secure its own existence: it has relied on the Assads, who are from the Alawite sect of Shia Islam, to facilitate the flow of weapons from its sponsors in Tehran.

“Hezbollah ties its fate to the Syrian regime,” Salamey said. “They say here: ‘If Assad stays, we’ll give you some power in Lebanon. But if Assad goes, then Lebanon goes to Hezbollah.’ That’s the threat, and they have the will and power to carry it out.”

Whatever their differences, all Lebanese political parties fear the threat posed by extremists in Syria, including Islamic State, which claimed responsibility for the suicide bombings that killed 43 people in Beirut in November, the deadliest attack on the city in 25 years. A recent Pew poll found that 99 per cent of Lebanese had a “very unfavourable” opinion of IS, the highest rate in any of the 11 countries surveyed. “This is the common ground that prevents further polarisation,” Salamey said.

Despite the sympathy for the refugees – especially among those who view Assad unfavourably – there is also a broad feeling in the government that Lebanon has ▶

▶ done as much as it can. In January, it implemented a new immigration policy for Syrians. For the first time since the two countries emerged as independent states from the French Mandate for Syria and the Lebanon from the 1930s onwards, Syrians now require visas to cross into Lebanon. For people fleeing war, the border is officially closed. In addition, Lebanon reinstated a requirement for Syrian refugees to pay \$200 to renew their annual residency permit. They must also sign an affidavit pledging not to work, bring a letter from a landlord and, in some cases, find a Lebanese “sponsor” to act as a guarantor. “We have reached a point where we simply cannot have any more people residing here,” said Hala El Helou, the ministerial adviser.

Most refugees cannot afford the \$200, let alone find a sponsor, and so risk harassment or arrest at security checkpoints whenever they move around. At the same time, their assistance from the World Food Programme has been slashed. The joint UN-Lebanese government appeal for aid in 2015 was for \$1.9bn, but by November less than half of that had been pledged. In July the WFP was forced to cut its monthly payment to refugees from \$30 to \$13.50 (it rose to \$21.60 in October after donations increased). It also reduced the number of beneficiaries: whereas 75 per cent of refugees used to get food vouchers, now only 55 per cent do. More than two-thirds of refugees now live below the poverty line.

“All the Syrians we speak to say the situation is worse than it was two or three years ago,” said Paul Yon, head of mission in Lebanon for the humanitarian group Médecins sans Frontières. “They’ve been getting more and more bad news this year.”

One morning I drove up the coast from Beirut to the Akkar province, one of the poorest parts of Lebanon, in the far north, to see how urban refugees were coping. On a quiet street in the town of Abdeh, a long shack had been erected beside a chicken coop on a patch of land between two apartment buildings. The shack belonged to the family of Amneh Aaraj, a 64-year-old grandmother from Idlib province in Syria, near the border with Turkey. It was divided into four rooms. Amneh shared hers with her daughter Mariam and three grandchildren. Mariam’s husband was detained by the Syrian army in the early days of the revolution when he left the house to buy nappies. When soldiers returned a few days later to demand a sheep from Mariam, she asked about her husband. “We are giving him bitter coffee,” she was told. He has not been seen since.

The other three rooms were occupied by two of Amneh’s other daughters and one son, and their respective families. They are hardy people who were accustomed to living off the land in Syria, and endured two years of repeated displacement because of the war. “We were doing this dance between several places,” Amneh said, “but we reached a breaking point.”

Now, they are reaching another one. A year ago Amneh stood on a nail outside the shack and the wound became infected. In Syria health care is free, but in Lebanon patients must pay, and treatment is expensive. The family scraped together their savings to fund several visits to hospital. By the time she arrived at a clinic run by Médecins sans Frontières a few months ago she had spent \$2,000 on treatment and it looked like she might lose her right leg to gangrene. Although it now seems that her leg may be saved, Amneh is filled with worry about her family’s future.

“Sometimes I think so much at night that dawn comes and I have still not slept. I feel

“It’s humiliating. People look at Syrians with disdain here”

guilty that we have spent so much on my hospital bills. I am a burden on my family.”

Amneh and her children have taken out loans, even writing IOUs to buy bread. This is a growing trend among Syrians in Lebanon; a recent UN survey found that 90 per cent of refugees are sinking into ever deeper debt. In 2013, only one in five households was purchasing food on credit; three in four are today.

Amneh said she dreams of “seeing the sky in Syria”, but younger family members are giving up hope. One of her daughters-in-law, whose husband leaves for work at a vegetable market every morning at 3am and does not return until 9pm, said she wanted to leave the Middle East and build a new life elsewhere. “I will go anywhere, for my children,” she said.

Others have already gone. A short drive away, on the second floor of a block of flats, Frangiyeh el-Thbi, who is 63, was catching her breath. She had just finished a seven-hour shift working in an olive grove. “At my age!” she said. In Syria, her family had prospered: she and her husband, Ghazzawi, owned a three-storey building in Homs, some farmland and a small fleet of petrol tankers and cars. Their building was destroyed in an air raid in the early days of the war, and most of their vehicles taken by the army. Before fleeing to Lebanon, Ghazzawi

managed to sell one of the tankers and two cars, giving him and Frangiyeh enough money to rent the five-bedroom flat in Abdeh for them and four of their children and their families. But they’d burned through their savings. Now, they were three months behind with the \$400-a-month rent. The landlord had threatened to evict them, and if that happened they faced the prospect of having to move into a shack.

“Here you cannot make a living as a Syrian,” Frangiyeh said, as a lunch of lentil soup, potatoes, tomatoes and cucumbers was served. “We have not eaten fish for two years, and meat for two months.” She continued, her voice rising: “It’s humiliating. People look at Syrians with disdain here. I want to leave. I want to go to Europe.”

With that, her daughter-in-law Hala took out her mobile phone and swiped through some pictures until she got to the right one. It showed a young boy posing for a photograph somewhere cold: he was wearing a thick jacket. In a second photo it was snowing. “Sweden,” Hala said, smiling.

The boy was her ten-year-old son, Mohamed, who had arrived in Sweden 20 days earlier. Hala explained that a number of Syrian families in Akkar had hatched a plan this year to get to Europe. Each family selected one person to travel in a group, first on a ferry to Turkey, and then on to Greece in a dinghy. Mohamed, who paid \$1,500 for the trip, updated his mother of his progress by sending WhatsApp messages.

“All the time I was crying,” Hala said, “but when he got to Sweden it was tears of joy.”

She said that once Mohamed’s residency papers went through, she and her five other children would be eligible to join him in Sweden. Frangiyeh wants to go, too. When one of her sons mentioned how cold it was, she replied: “I don’t care if it rains stones there – I will go.”

Even as some Syrians leave Lebanon, more refugees are arriving, despite the closed border. In the northern part of the Beqaa Valley is Baalbek, known in ancient times as Heliopolis: Sun City. It contains the country’s most spectacular archeological sites, including the Temple of Bacchus, one of the world’s grandest and best-preserved Roman temple ruins. It is also a Hezbollah stronghold, and many of the Lebanese militiamen fighting alongside Assad’s forces in Syria are from this area. On the road to Baalbek there are posters of the “martyrs” killed in action, as well as larger cutouts of Sheikh Hasan Nasrallah, the Hezbollah chief, and Iran’s spiritual leader Ayatollah Khamenei.

The atmosphere is not oppressive – shops sell tinsel and inflatable Father ▶

Lebanon's refugee burden

4.3m

Population before
the Syrian War

>1.5m

Syrian refugees in
Lebanon today

500k

Palestinian and
other refugees

\$21.60

Monthly stipend
for refugees



► Christmases. But a refugee fleeing the barrel bombs of the Syrian regime would be unlikely to feel comfortable on arrival; in the middle of town is a banner featuring Nasrallah and Assad, with the slogan “Together towards liberation”.

Next to a tumbledown farmhouse, a Syrian man named Khalid Lessem was constructing a tent. It had a gravel floor, chunks of stone around the base, canvas walls and a woolly beige carpet for a ceiling.

The tent was for his 20-year-old daughter-in-law, Samar, who had arrived from Syria in October with her infant son and daughter, Habib and Habiba. Khalid showed me into the farmhouse, where Samar and the children were sitting on a mattress in the main bedroom, on the first floor. Samar, who wore a pink-and-purple headscarf that covered her hair and mouth, explained that she and husband had lived in Eastern Ghouta, a suburb near Damascus. This is the opposition-held area where hundreds of civilians died in August 2013 after the Syrian army fired rockets containing a chemical agent, sarin. The suburb has been under siege ever since. (In August, Amnesty International said that the Syrian government’s “relentless bombardment and starvation tactics” in Eastern Ghouta had amounted to war crimes.)

“There was no electricity or clean water, and little food,” Samar said. “We used to

grind barley to make bread, but sometimes you would go hungry for two or three days. You would only go outside if you had to, but even in your home there was danger because of the air raids.”

A year ago, while Samar was pregnant with Habiba, her husband, Ahmed, was killed. Though she was desperate to leave with the children, it took months of pleading before she received permission from the army to pass through their lines. Her parents-in-law in Baalbek told her that Lebanon was closed to refugees. But Syrians can still get visas for temporary stays if they have the right documents, such as a flight ticket out of Beirut, an acceptance letter from a college, or, in some cases, a confirmed booking at a hotel.

When Samar arrived at the crossing to Lebanon with a printout of a hotel reservation, customs officials sent her away. She and her children slept on the street outside the border post for two days before some Lebanese guards took pity on her and allowed them through. When they arrived in Baalbek, Khalid understood just how bad conditions in Eastern Ghouta had been: Habib, who is nearly two, had never seen an apple or a banana.

The two habitable rooms in the farmhouse were already full because Khalid and his wife had six of their children with them, including one who was married. Samar

squeezed in, but felt uncomfortable taking off her headscarf in front of the teenage boys. Khalid tried to rent space on the ground floor, but the landlord, who keeps his pet songbirds there, did not want to move them. A tent was the only other option. “I hope the situation in Syria becomes better so I can go back instead of spending my life in a tent with nothing to do,” Samar said.

This was precisely how Mona and Abdurrahman Chamali felt when they arrived in the Beqaa Valley with their children more than two years ago. Now they are preparing for their third winter in Lebanon, hammering additional wooden planks across the roof of their shack before the snow comes. The chances of going home seem more remote than ever. In recent months they have been able to hear the sounds of war: the Syrian army and Hezbollah have been engaged in fierce battles with rebels in Zabadani, a hillside city in Syria close to the border.

Mona held out her bare hands. She has sold all her jewellery, “even my wedding ring”. The *shawish* comes by every evening to ask for the rent, which is in arrears.

The youngest son, Hamed, now 15, got a place at school but a few months ago, desperate for money, Mona and Abdurrahman withdrew him so he could work as a labourer. He typically earns between \$7 and \$10 on the two or three days a week he finds work.

There was one bit of good news. In October, Hajar, who is ten, was accepted by a primary school that runs a second shift of classes in the afternoon for refugee children. (With UN and donor-country funding, the Lebanese government scrapped school fees in September and greatly expanded access to education, doubling the number of Syrian children in school.) At lunchtime, the smiling girl bounded into the house, put her homework in a pink backpack and rushed out to catch her lift.

“I will do everything I can to keep her in school,” Mona said. “Even Hamed – if I can find a way to put him back in school, I will.”

She began to cry again. In Syria, if you needed to borrow money, family and friends were there for you, she said. Here, everyone had their own difficulties. “There’s nobody to ask about us.” Even the simple things that used to make her happy no longer do. After making a cushion the other day she realised how out of place it looked in such a ramshackle home. “You can’t even feel house-proud here,” Mona said.

Had she ever thought of leaving for another country, perhaps even for Europe? No, she replied, and put her face in her hands. “I’ve never thought of going anywhere else. No. I love Syria.” ●

Xan Rice is the features editor of the *New Statesman*