

# الجزيرة

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## Syrians in Tripoli: Anxiety and aspirations

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Kareem Chehayeb



Lebanon's Tripoli has been among the most welcoming cities to Syrian refugees, though tensions exist. In this special audiovisual report, Kareem Chehayeb profiles three members of Tripoli's Syrian community, now caught between a Lebanon in crisis and a homeland still at war.

“I’m not hiding anything from you,” said Salah, a middle-aged man, eyeing us warily.

“I have three children who work” selling flowers, gum, and other inexpensive goods, he continued. “Some days, they’ll come home from work and tell me, ‘Dad, someone came and stole our money from us’.” His children make the equivalent of US\$1 or \$2 per shift, he added, struggling to stay composed. “There are young men on the street. If they refuse [to give them money], they hit them a bit, verbally insult them [...] you know, that kind of stuff.”

“But to me personally? Thank God, nothing at all.”

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More than four months into Lebanon’s nationwide uprising, Syrian refugees in the country find themselves in a more precarious position than ever. What began as a mass protest against the political class has increasingly taken on economic tones, as Lebanon’s national currency nosedives and banks enforce [unprecedented limits](#) on depositors’ spending and access to funds. In response, prominent politicians have resorted to a well-practiced habit of pointing fingers at the country’s Syrian community, long used as a catch-all scapegoat for everything from unemployment to terror attacks. Addressing parliament earlier this month, Gebran Bassil—son-in-law of President Michel Aoun, and heir to his political party—[asserted](#) it would be “foolish” to deny Syrian refugees’ contribution to the economic crisis.

The protest squares themselves have not been entirely free of xenophobia, either. While most demonstrators encountered by this reporter focused their anger on

Lebanon's ruling parties and banks, some opined that Syrian refugees have exacerbated the situation. Many are opposed to Syrians and other non-Lebanese nationals [taking part](#) in the uprising, even if they have lived their whole lives in Lebanon.

If this demonization weren't enough, Syrian refugees have also had to bear the brunt of the economic crisis, along with their working class Lebanese counterparts. Rapid inflation has made paying for [basic monthly expenses](#) such as rent, fuel, and medicine even more difficult than it already was.

In short, refugees face a deeply unenviable dilemma, forced to choose between uncertainty in a simmering Lebanon, or a plunge into the unknown back home, where [war still rages](#).

Shortly before Lebanon's uprising broke out in October 2019, Al-Jumhuriya visited the northern city of Tripoli, which would go on to become the principal center of protest alongside the capital Beirut. What follows is not only a portrait of the city's Syrian community, but one of the city itself, and the fate shared by the two.



Lebanon's Tripoli, 2019 (Al-Jumhuriya)

## I. Salah: “Here’s the other cheek”

Salah was speaking to us in his modest home in Bab al-Tabbaneh, the poorest neighborhood in Tripoli, itself the poorest city in Lebanon. He and his wife welcomed us in on a scorching summer afternoon, hurrying to place some small mattresses on the floor and turn on the sole electric fan in the bare, unfurnished house. Outside, motorcycles whizzed to and fro in the narrow streets, surrounded by dilapidated buildings. Two Lebanese soldiers stood nonchalantly at a military post at the end of the street. In a city often associated with bustling markets and roads jam-packed with vehicles, this street was an odd exception.

Salah had expressed interest in meeting us when we reached out to him through an intermediary, though he seemed somewhat taken aback by the clip-on microphone. Like many Syrians in Tripoli, Salah told us he found it the

safest and most welcoming place for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, though he was also worried about the growing backlash against refugees across the country, including in Tripoli.

“I was last in Syria in 2011,” said an unsettled Salah, trying to maintain his composure. “I spent three or four days there.”

Hailing from the northwestern city of Ma’arrat al-Nu’mān in Idlib Province—which fell to Assad regime forces under a hail of Russian airstrikes last month—Salah fled with his wife and children during the early stages of the conflict to Tripoli’s Bab al-Tabbaneh, feeling he had no choice but to leave Syria as soon as the conflict intensified.

“One of my children passed away in Syria during the beginning of the uprising,” he said, adding that another died from high fever as a toddler in Lebanon. His remaining eight children can be heard running around and playing in the room next door.



Salah Rasheed and his children, Tripoli, 2019 (Al-Jumhuriya)

But his new home wasn't free of hostilities. Tripoli made international headlines in 2011 when armed clashes erupted between its Sunni and Alawite Muslim populations in the adjacent Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen neighborhoods, respectively. These skirmishes, which persisted until 2015, were often seen as a "[spillover](#)" from the uprising-turned-war next door in Syria. In a grim irony, the street bisecting the two areas was officially named Syria Street.

Salah, however, lives deeper within Tabbaneh, away from the former front line. His street was a far cry from the chaotic cacophony of the rest of the city, with only occasional cars and motorcycles passing by. Nonetheless, a certain paranoia evidently remained despite the calm—when we took photos of a fruit basket in a small shop, a Lebanese soldier and two plain-clothed men sped

towards us on a motorcycle.

Like many Syrians, Salah and his father worked seasonally in Lebanon prior to 2011. “I’ve been coming to Lebanon since 1996, after leaving school, with my father from time to time to help him with work,” he told Al-Jumhuriya.

Today, Salah’s parents, brother, and sister are now also in Lebanon, having fled Idlib. “I’m not in touch with anyone back in Idlib,” he said solemnly.

It’s commonly thought that the relative comfort Syrian refugees experience in Tripoli is due to the fact that both the host and refugee populations are majority-Sunni. Yet, beyond religion and sects, Tripoli and other areas further north, such as the agrarian Akkar region, have a history of strong economic ties with the Syrian labor force stretching back decades. As a result, their presence today does not feel as foreign as it otherwise might.

Though he spent over a decade working alongside his father in Syria and Lebanon, he does not frequently see him. “Why? The situation,” he said casually, shrugging his shoulders. “If I want to visit, I have to take a taxi, then I have to bring something—coffee or cigarettes or something—I can’t visit him empty-handed.”

It became clear in the course of the conversation that times were tougher for Salah and his family than he was willing to admit. Work opportunities were dwindling, and he was finding himself spending most of his time at home.

An example was a job he took on in Zgharta, a small city less than 10 kilometers southeast of Tripoli. “I worked a bit for their municipality when I first came here [...] it was

alright there,” he said. “We used to collect garbage and do other menial work.”

But many municipalities later increased restrictions on Syrian nationals, including those in and around Zgharta, which [expelled](#) its entire Syrian refugee population in 2017 after the brutal sexual assault and murder of a Lebanese woman, Rayya Chidiac.

Despite his limited access to sources of income, Salah continues to try and show resilience and poise. Every now and then, he would look at his cellphone, or someone would call him; a heavily auto-tuned mawwal ringtone would echo through the hollow room, and he would slowly check to see who was calling and mute his phone.

Though trying to remain stoic, it was evident he felt uncomfortable talking about his efforts to cope with the lack of job opportunities. He would also quick to dismiss the notion that he had suffered any form of the exploitation or hardship in Lebanon that other Syrians have faced systematically. With the exception of the anecdote about his children being beaten in the streets, he invariably claimed he heard such things about other people, but they miraculously never happened to him—“thank God,” as he said repeatedly.

His children are certainly not alone in working among Syrians in Lebanon. With Syrian adults legally [restricted](#) to a small handful of jobs, many families have resorted to using their own [children](#) as an extra source of income, whether through dumpster diving, working the fields, or selling



goods on the street like Salah's children.

While the Syrian conflict drags on, [donor fatigue](#) has caused a continuous decline in aid for refugees. Many Syrians are no longer eligible for all aid programs as a result. Salah and his family benefit from the World Food Programme (WFP) cards that allow them to purchase food from certified shops; usually small Lebanese family businesses.

"I've thankfully been able to keep benefitting from the [WFP] card, but some people lost theirs," he said, declining to speculate about donor fatigue. "I don't know the reason."

Many INGOs visit Salah and his family to assess their needs. When asked whether he receives aid and support from them, however, he looks down and stays quiet. His wife, who peeps into the room every few minutes or so, finally speaks. "No, they never help us," she says, before carrying on with the children in the other room.

But Salah remains adamant that Tripoli is the best place for him to be in Lebanon.

"As a whole, Tripoli is fine," Salah said. "There are just certain areas one shouldn't step foot in." He admits that he and many others no longer work in the old souk, after Syrian acquaintances faced harassment and theft there from what he described as thugs. Once again, though, he was quick to dismiss any possibility that the situation was problematic halfway through the explanation. "I believe our work should be indoors," he said. "It's better; nobody interacts with you."

It soon became clear there was an air of numbness to Salah's tone and overall projection.

“I keep to myself, I don’t interact with anyone,” he said. “If you come and slap me, I’ll tell you, ‘Here’s the other cheek’.”

At the time we were speaking to Salah, Ma’arrat al-Nu’man had not yet fallen to the pro-regime coalition, though it was under regular ground and air bombardment—an obvious impediment to Salah returning to his hometown.

“We’re hearing from many people that things are extremely unsafe [there],” he said, a hint of sadness breaking through his composure. “What’s happening in Syria is outrageous, with atrocities from many [sides], whether it’s the regime or armed [opposition] groups.”

“There is injustice and war everywhere [...] but then there is God, the final arbitrator of everything.”

“I only wish for safety and peace”

Syrian acquaintances of Salah’s have begun signing up to return to Syria through Lebanon’s General Security agency. Buses meet in numerous “collection zones” across the country—one of which is in Tripoli—before they are driven to one of several border crossings. Salah questions the allegedly voluntary nature of some of these returns.

“It’s voluntary, but why are they making the decision to return, despite the situation? It’s because people cannot [make ends meet to] eat anymore,” he said. “In Syria, perhaps they have a relative or someone who can look after them.”

But he's also heard horror stories about others upon returning to Syria.

"People have been able to go back to their hometowns, only for the regime to arrest them at their doorstep a month or two later." Those arrested are often never seen again.

Salah doesn't even dare to leave Tripoli to Akkar further north, or to Beirut, clicking his tongue and rolling his eyes.

"No. No way."

"I wish the situation there would be better so I could go back to Syria," he said, in another rare moment of emotional vulnerability. "Who doesn't want to live in their own country on their own land, in the house they built themselves?"

In the meantime, he insists he is happy in Lebanon despite his circumstances.

"I do feel luckier than them [i.e., those who had to return to Syria]," he said. "I only wish for safety and peace for Lebanon and its people."

## II. Rajaa: "He attacked my son"

Rajaa was dusting a cluttered and sweltering dollar store in Beddawi, a low-income neighborhood on Tripoli's northeastern fringe, while her adolescent son was repositioning the only fan in the establishment. Though the door was closed, the heat and intense sunlight, coupled

with the sound of blaring car horns, was unpleasant on all the senses.

This single mother from Eastern Aleppo appeared to be nostalgic about life in Tripoli in 2011.

“When they found out you were Syrian, they would immediately offer support,” Rajaa said, wiping her brow with a handkerchief. “But now we’re being told, ‘You took our jobs, our space [...] everything is expensive [because of you]’.”



Rajaa, Tripoli, 2019 (Al-Jumhuriya)

Nonetheless, Rajaa feels empathy for the Lebanese people. “They’re taking out their anger on us because they themselves have been exploited for so long,” she said. “They can’t take on the big guys, so they take on us instead.”

It didn't take long for Rajaa to shed her conversational reserve.

"If you don't bother people [...] people won't bother you," she said, adding that she keeps to herself while working her shifts, which exceed twelve hours daily. "But it's inevitable that [confrontations] will happen to you."

Say you're in a taxi, and you're talking with the driver. They ask if you're Syrian and if you're receiving aid. I just tell them, "Thank God," but then they [turn confrontational.] "We Lebanese are struggling to eat too. You have everything taken care of." I try to reason with them. I tell them no matter how much aid we get [as refugees] we'll never have stability or security. I don't want to be in confrontations, but the way some people speak to you, you just reach your boiling point and you end up letting it out.

She tells her son to settle down, as he walks around the small shop restlessly. "Yehya, that's enough, Yehya."

"What are they so bitter about?" she asked in bewilderment. "My husband died after moving around nonstop for the past five years." She was referring to the difficulty of leaving Aleppo, Syria's second largest city, which was subject to [intense battles and a brutal siege](#) in its eastern neighborhoods.

Rajaa added that there were misconceptions about the

extent of the aid Syrian refugees receive. She herself was told she was no longer eligible for medical aid for her heart disease and diabetes.

With her husband deceased, and the UN unwilling to provide her with the medicine or procedures required for her heart problems and diabetes, she was left with no choice but to work. Sighing, she recounted a recent incident at the doctor's clinic.

"The other day, the heart doctor found out I had a clogged artery." Rajaa reached out to the UN the following day to see if they could fund the required medical procedure. "They asked for my age, so I said I was 43 years old," she said. "Then they said, 'We can't help you until you're 60.' They said this in an email."

"They can't fund my operation unless I'm dead? Aid is declining; the UN isn't helping much with this anymore."

At this point, Yehya left and played outside on a shady side street by the store.

Throughout the conversation, Rajaa seemed more upset about her children than herself, despite her medical conditions and tiring work hours. She lamented how her children were out of school and deprived of their childhood.

Aren't children supposed to be happy on Eid?  
My son doesn't know when or if Eid will occur.  
My daughter is 16 years old, and you know they are very demanding at that age! It breaks your heart when you can't guarantee them

what they want, and they don't understand at this age [...] they just ask for things [...] clothes, new phones, or whatever.

In addition, she fears for her children's safety, claiming they are harassed more than ever before.

"[My son] was riding his bicycle, and accidentally bumped into another boy walking with his father," she recalled. "The father threw the bike and looked like he was going to attack him."

What initially seemed a trifling incident turned into a situation where she believed her son could have been killed, had it not been for her intervention.

Rajaa ran over to the scene, and was told by the man that he wanted to "kill" her son. "Then he said he would burn us. He was not ashamed to say he attacked my son", she said.

"I begged him to stop," she said, adding she was on the verge of tears. He eventually relented.

"He then said, 'If you weren't a woman, we would have said something else'. I told him, 'Thank God I'm a woman; tell me what you want to say. I didn't insult you. I just said you have no right to harm my son.'" They walked away.

Recalling the story appeared just as overwhelming and exhausting as the experience. Rajaa stopped talking and took some medicine from a drawer under her desk.

Despite the heightened tensions in Tripoli, Rajaa said returning home to Aleppo was impossible. “It’s a mess,” she said, citing what acquaintances in the city had told her. “Nothing has been rebuilt there.”

Like many Syrian refugees, she is also concerned about forced military conscription, and how the Assad regime has been sending more young men to battle. “Everyone is on the frontlines,” she said, including an older son of hers. “I have no idea where he is [now] or what his situation has been like over the past month [...] he was initially supposed to be gone for just 24 hours.”

All in all, though, it’s the rare moments of hope that Rajaa says keep her going. Ironically, one came recently while the Ministry of Labor was conducting nationwide [crackdowns](#) on irregular and informal foreign labor. When these crackdowns took place, she initially avoided coming to work.

One day she did, and the unthinkable happened.

“They [the inspectors] came and asked me, ‘How are you working if Syrians are not allowed to work?’” she recalled. “I said, ‘I know [...] but my husband is dead, I have heart problems and diabetes, and I’m working here to make ends meet’.” The inspectors turned their backs, and spoke quietly among themselves.

“‘You’re off the hook,’ they said. They showed mercy, and never came back.”

### III. Mohammad: “I have big goals”



Mohammad is a Syrian social worker in his mid-twenties. Though articulate and well-spoken, he is reluctant to talk.

Al-Jumhuriya agreed to not disclose the location of the interview, nor any specific details of his appearance or identity, due to his fear of reprisals. "I can't show my face, due to the political situation in both Lebanon and Syria," he said.

Unlike most other Syrians who have moved to Lebanon since 2011, Mohammad arrived less than three years ago. His comparatively late arrival was confusing to many Lebanese, who would say things like, "Why are you here?" and "The war is over."

"It was my first time out of Syria [...] and living by myself," he said, citing the above remarks as part of the difficulty of adjusting to life in Tripoli.

Back in Syria, he had studied business management, but the war and depression he went through inspired a career change. After reading more about mental health, Mohammad decided he wanted to study psychology.

"[It's] an important profession. I want to understand it better, so I can understand myself and those around me."

His only opportunity to study the subject in Syria would have been in Damascus, but this wasn't viable. "I couldn't study in Damascus because of the problems going on there, so the closest opportunity available was here in Tripoli," he explained.

In Lebanon, he would invariably be asked certain questions over and over again, whether in taxis on the way to campus, or in the classrooms—from both students and professors:

“Oh, you’re Syrian?”

“Yeah, I’m Syrian. So what?”

One question in particular would bother Mohammad more than any:

“What are you?”

“What do you mean, ‘What am I’?”

“Are you Sunni or Alawi?”

“This was something I personally found unpleasant,” he told Al-Jumhuriya. “I don’t like to ask people about their age, or where they’re from [...] I’d rather ask them what they’re studying, for example; that way I can actually learn more about them.” Lamenting that generalizations about Syrians are “often filled with inaccuracies,” he added, “I’m against the stereotyping of all people in general—not just Syrians.”

Beyond uncomfortable questions, Mohammad also faces legal challenges as a Syrian in Lebanon. Though Syrians can obtain the right to work in a small handful of professions, as a student he is not allowed to work in any. Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon have had to sign pledges in order to receive visas or legal residency, including pledges to not work or even to have [romantic relationships](#) with [Lebanese citizens](#).

Nevertheless, to make ends meet and sustain his professional passion, Mohammad works in social care in Tripoli, mostly with Syrian children, whom he helps overcome trauma and violent experiences through self-expression and other means of open communication.

For this, he runs the risk of deportation, he says. “I could have my residency canceled and be deported straight away.”

Lebanon has indeed seen a new wave of [deportations](#). Though the authorities say they only target Syrians who have entered the country illegally after April 2019, many Syrians receiving their marching orders have been present in Lebanon for years, including as UN-registered refugees.

## “They understood they were both victims”

Mohammad also volunteers in a local theater troupe that works toward ending internal conflicts in several Lebanese communities within Tripoli. “People think theater is a waste of time,” he says. “It might not end the problem, but it helps shed light on it and creates a path towards solutions.”

Syria Street, the aptly-named former frontline between Bab al-Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen, is far less busy and intense than most other streets in Tripoli, but efforts from various local collectives and NGOs have helped revitalize it after years of sporadic gun battles.

“As a Syrian, with my Lebanese counterparts, I was so pleased to see the impact we had by easing tensions between these communities,” Mohammad said with a smile

on his face. “They understood they were both victims, and weren’t each other’s oppressors.”

Despite integrating in his community and wanting to play a positive role in his new society, Mohammad is still affected by certain “ugly experiences” he recently faced.

“It took me eight months to get my residency,” he said, explaining that he had a card that was temporary but legitimate identification. “At the checkpoints they wouldn’t know it was legitimate, so they’d get me out of the vehicle and make me stand outside for 15-30 minutes.”

On several occasions, he only narrowly avoided detention and deportation.

“They wanted to take me to the [General Security] center. I was in their car until someone of a higher rank came over,” he recalled. “He asked me about why I smuggled myself into Lebanon.”

After explaining that he wasn’t smuggled in, he was let go but warned that he should give the officers the “right” papers. “He would say this even though I had done so [...] but anyway, this has happened more than once.”

“If I get detained, I might be prone to torture and other humiliation,” he said. “I have friends who were detained in similar situations, and we know what happened to them.”

He’s in touch with friends and relatives back home, and the situation, he says, is not conducive to returning. “Even in my city, there are no jobs and no economic activity,” he explained. “It’s true there are some areas that are not in a state of war, but the economic situation is horrific.”

“There are people who lost everyone they knew along with their families,” he said, describing the situation as traumatic. “Are they supposed to just live a life of memories? They would walk on a street and say, ‘This is where my brother died,’ or, ‘This is where our house used to be.’”

“The UN isn’t going to be able to accept everyone’s asylum requests, and not everyone is going to meet the requirements to relocate to a third country.”

For now, Mohammad says he’s looking ahead to develop himself and to help those around him, both in Tripoli and back home in Syria.

“I have big goals. I’m ambitious. I’m going to work step-by-step to achieve them.”

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