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‘There is no safety.’



A mattress, an ashtray, and an Islamic calendar. A row of dirt-smeared clothes hanging neatly from wall hooks in a row, and a broken tile inscribed with the word “Allah”.

That’s all that adorns Mohammed’s* one-room apartment in eastern Beirut’s Mar Mikhael neighbourhood. And it’s all that surrounded him on 8-13 April, when he spent several days cloistered indoors after seeing reports of rising violence against Syrians like him in Lebanon, sparked by the [killing of a Christian politician](#).

Steps away from his front door, over the narrow alleyway where Mohammed lives alongside a handful of other Syrians and their families, a giant English-language billboard reads: “UNDO THE DAMAGE. THE SYRIAN DISPLACED ISSUE NEEDS IMMEDIATE ACTIONS. BEFORE IT IS TOO LATE.”



João Sousa/TNH

Billboards in Beirut, part of a new campaign that appears to call on Syrians to leave Lebanon.

Twenty-five-year-old Mohammed and his friend Marwan*, who is also Syrian, spoke with The New Humanitarian while sitting on a ledge under the billboard, sharing cigarettes and bottles of Pepsi. Because they don't speak English, neither had noticed the billboard – part of a campaign that began dotting Lebanese highways in March.

Many have interpreted the [campaign](#) – sponsored by a group called World House of Lebanon, the Lebanese TV channel MTV, and several other organisations – as a call for Syrian refugees to leave Lebanon.

But given rising anti-Syrian fervour in Lebanon, which has boiled over in recent weeks into public attacks and at least one [one alleged murder](#), Mohammed and Marwan don't need to understand the ad to fear for their safety.

Pascal Sleiman, an official from the right-wing Christian Lebanese Forces (LF) party went missing on 7 April. His dead body was later found across the border in Syria. LF supporters placed the blame on Syrians, while an array of Lebanese politicians called for deportations and other restrictive measures – ostensibly to target criminals.

Most Syrians “will be deported” in the near future, caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati [said on 13 April](#), adding that the country was “in the process of putting in place a solution”. That same day, the governor of north Lebanon [called for](#) a “ban on all gatherings of displaced Syrians”, and restrictions on their movement. On 18 April, Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi said Syrians without what he called “security reasons” for remaining in Lebanon [would have to leave](#), adding that authorities do “not accept attacks on Syrians”.

Between [1.5 million](#) and about [2 million](#) Syrians live in Lebanon. Around [815,000 are](#) registered with the UN as refugees, but the Lebanese government halted the registration of new refugees in 2015 as [part of moves](#) to restrict the numbers of new arrivals.

Syrian refugees have long faced abuse and violence in Lebanon. The Syrian research and activist group [ETANA found that up to 500](#) Syrian refugees had been sent back across the border during a wave of deportations in 2023, which also saw “a spike in arbitrary arrests, destruction of housing and camps, beatings, and other forms of intimidation”.

But many worry that this uptick in violence is different.

In one [unverified video](#) shared by a local radio station the week after Sleiman's killing, men clad in black allegedly beat a Syrian man on a street north of Beirut. Later, on 15 April, other unknown attackers allegedly tortured and killed a Syrian man elsewhere in Lebanon, [according to local activist group Eye on Syria](#). The New Humanitarian could not immediately confirm the details of either incident.

Ramzi Kaiss, Middle East researcher with Human Rights Watch (HRW), told The New Humanitarian he has “received reports of people being beaten or threatened in the wake of [the] killing of Pascal Sleiman or being forced to leave their homes in certain areas” due to intimidation.

Growing fear on the streets

The violence has forced many Syrians to hide indoors or steer clear of certain areas to avoid a similar fate, several Syrians told The New Humanitarian. One delivery driver, Yasser from rural Aleppo, said he has limited his work radius solely to Beirut's multicultural Hamra area and the mainly-Muslim part of Beirut's southern suburbs where he lives, in order to avoid the risk of being attacked or abused on the streets. He asked that his surname not be published, to protect his safety.

Much of the violence is alleged to have taken place in Christian-majority areas, where many residents support political parties that have long called for Syrians to return to Syria.

For Mohammed, who came to Lebanon 10 years ago from Deir Ezzor, being holed up indoors amid the rising violence has meant missing out on construction work and other odd jobs. Noting that the next block over is known for a local right-wing Christian militia accused of vigilante violence against Syrians, he said he fears arrest or beatings should he wander too far from home.

He and others said that men who work in menial jobs like construction or delivery are often assumed to be Syrian, and singled out for abuse.

Dara*, a Beirut-based Syrian-Swiss activist who tracks such abuses using a pseudonym for security reasons, described how the militia drove through her own neighbourhood, several minutes away from Mohammed's home, last week, honking and shouting anti-Syrian slogans on megaphones.

Some Syrian families have left Beirut's Christian-majority neighbourhoods for their safety as a result, "including two of my friends" who had been living in the nearby Burj Hammoud area, Dara added. They are now staying with colleagues.



João Sousa/TNH

A banner in Beit al-Chaar, a village in Lebanon's Metn district, pictured 14 January 2024, reads: "Foreigners are forbidden to move around within the Beit al-Chaar and al-Hdeira municipalities from 8 pm until 6 am, at risk of being held accountable."

In other areas, residents, and even municipalities, have hung banners either imposing curfews or outright "bans" on Syrians entering – though such bans are not backed up by actual laws, according to HRW's Kaiss.

"Any restrictions put in place cannot be imposed on a discriminatory basis, including on nationality," he said.

Banding together

Syrians in Lebanon count many professions among their ranks, but it isn't always easy to get work, because of discrimination or restrictions on obtaining residency papers and work permits.

In Beirut, many Syrian men work as delivery drivers, because it is a job that pays cash and doesn't ask too many questions. Hassan, a clean-cut man in his 20s from rural Aleppo, has become something of an informal labour leader for other drivers.

A year ago, he helped start a WhatsApp group of fellow Syrian motor scooter drivers who work for the Lebanese food delivery company Toters. Hassan, who has since stopped working in delivery for a better-paying job at an auto-repair workshop, asked that his surname not be published, as he lives in Lebanon without residency papers.

He's also in a slew of other WhatsApp groups, which the men use to inform each other about the rolling Lebanese security checkpoints they encounter while out doing deliveries.

To keep themselves safe in the groups, the administrators request full names and other information from new members, Hassan explained.

He showed The New Humanitarian one of the recent chats: voice note after voice note of men warning their colleagues of the new checkpoints that have popped up along their routes.

"Good morning guys, there's a checkpoint in Verdun [neighbourhood in west Beirut], watch out!" said the most recent one.



João Sousa/TNH

Hassan, a Syrian who used to work as a delivery driver, tries to help his former colleagues keep away from checkpoints, as well as potential abuse and violence.

Hassan said he always checks the groups before riding his scooter, and adjusts his route accordingly.

The stakes are high for those who make their living driving. At the official checkpoints dotting the city, officials often impound unregistered scooters – or those belonging to drivers without licences – until the workers pay a fine. Syrians without proper work and residency papers pay exorbitantly higher fees to get their scooters back than those who do have them.

In recent weeks, the men said, there appear to be more checkpoints.

Yasser, who works as a delivery driver for a bakery, said this happened to him three months ago. He coughed up \$20 – a painful chunk of his roughly \$300-per-month income – to get the motor scooter back.

"You can't work without your scooter," Yasser said.

Hassan's twin brother Hussein, who also works delivery and did not want his last name published, has in recent days restricted the routes he is willing to take to those within Beirut's Muslim-majority southern suburbs and Hamra, away from predominantly Christian areas.

‘We all look out for one another’

While unease spreads, there has been some camaraderie too. Next to the bakery where Yasser works, a muscular, bearded Lebanese man who goes by the name of Abu Bakr sat on a plastic chair, smoking nargileh. He owns a car rental business, and is buddies with the other business owners and workers on the street, including the Syrians.

Abu Bakr, who asked that his full name be withheld to protect his privacy, said he collects money from friends on the street, or dips into his own earnings, to help his Syrian friends get their scooters back from the pound.

He usually pays about \$50 per incident, he said, and has intervened “too many times to count”. One Syrian colleague, who asked not to be named because he works as a delivery driver and feared reprisals, sat next to him on a chair. He confirmed that Abu Bakr had helped him get his scooter back.

Abu Bakr said he helped the Syrians, “because we all look out for one another”.

But for those outside Abu Bakr's social circle, the WhatsApp groups will have to do, and there are no guarantees of safety.

Ali, a Syrian artist and activist who also asked that his surname not be published to protect his safety, came to Lebanon in 2013 to escape the war at home. Several months ago, he woke up early in the morning to the sound of men screaming below his balcony in Beirut. When he went outside to investigate, he saw a group of men beating several Syrian delivery workers who were carrying a cake.

“I was like, what can I do? Should I go down? Should I scream?” He decided to film the incident, and it was [published](#), anonymously. “I saw the smashed cake [on the ground] later that morning,” Ali added.

Months later, a friend of his was detained and deported to Syria. He has been unable to return to Lebanon.

“In general, in Lebanon this is not a new thing,” Ali said. But something does feel different now. In the aftermath of Sleiman's murder, Ali stayed in Beirut. Worried about harassment, he avoided other parts of Lebanon. “Just for a couple days when things were crazy,” he explained.

Since Ali works a white-collar job, he said people tend to leave him alone in public, assuming he's Lebanese. His neighbours, however, know he is Syrian. They are usually friendly, but he still fears that knowledge could put him at risk someday. “There is no safety,” he said.

**Names changed out of concern for the safety of the interviewees.*

Edited by Annie Slemrod.