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# Tying the Cross-Cultural Knot Uncovering Perceptions on Lebanese- Syrian Intermarriages: The cases of Tleil (Akkar) & Qobbe (Tripoli)

*Conflict Analysis Report – March 2019*

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Supported by:

This report was written by an independent researcher as part of a conflict analysis consultancy for the UNDP “Peace Building in Lebanon” Project to inform and support UNDP Lebanon programming, as well as interventions from other partners in the framework of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). Through these reports, UNDP is aiming at providing quality analysis to LCRP Partners on the evolution of local dynamics, highlighting how local and structural issues have impacted and interacted with the consequences of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. This report has been produced with the support of the Department for International Development (UKDFID).

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## Acronyms

DFID	Department for International Development
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
HRW	Human Rights Watch
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISF	Lebanese Internal Security Forces
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

## I. Executive Summary

This report explores the perceptions of refugees, host communities and other stakeholders regarding mixed marriages between members of Lebanese and Syrian communities in Lebanon. More specifically, the study focuses on the village of Tleil in Akkar and the neighbourhood of Qobbe in Tripoli based on reports which cite intermarriage in these areas.

Our research seeks to provide insight into tensions which arise as a result of these intercommunity marriages, with evidence to suggest that there are regional variances in these perceptions. Thus, whilst some communities may think that intermarriage triggers dispute, others believe that it can enhance social stability and improve communication between groups. The report also highlights the vulnerabilities of women and girls who may be forced into intermarriage relationships, and also discusses growing instances of polygamy in some areas.

To mitigate tensions caused by intermarriage, the report recommends further study in order to obtain accurate data on the phenomenon and to facilitate meaningful sharing of information thereafter. Furthermore, to protect vulnerable women and girls affected by intermarriage, the report recommends to advocate for greater protection laws and to empower women to create positive change. Additionally, because intermarriage is heavily associated with religion, work with religious institutions is advised in order to prevent exploitation.

## II. Introduction

This Conflict Analysis Report forms part of a series of research studies, commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and funded by United Kingdom's Department for International Development (UKDFID). The research, exploring the prevalence of Lebanese-Syrian mixed marriage and its impact on

social stability, aims to uncover perceptions of stakeholders from Tleil in Akkar and in the Qobbe neighbourhood of Tripoli. The study also seeks to identify and understand a number of potential factors that may trigger such perceptions.

Despite significant differences between the rural border village of Tleil and the congested urban neighbourhood of Qobbe, both communities share one common reality: they host proportionally high numbers of Syrian refugees. According to the municipality, estimates place 1,400 Lebanese in Tleil and approximately 1,200 Syrian refugees, of which 843 are registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>1</sup> In Qobbe, it is more difficult to determine the number of Lebanese residents since many are not originally from Tripoli, but the UN Habitat Tripoli Profile approximated 80,000 residents to be of Lebanese origin, of which 7,200 were registered refugees.<sup>2</sup>

Further research is required to understand the conditions in which intercommunity marriage facilitates reduced tensions between refugee and host communities. These marriages have united people from Lebanon and Syria, creating bonds that have in turn encouraged many communities to welcome refugees. However, the economic and legal vulnerabilities of Syrian refugees, particularly young girls, places them at higher risk of abuse, exploitation and forced marriage. This report examines the perceived scale of Lebanese-Syrian mixed marriage, and the impact at both community and individual levels, particularly for women and girls.

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<sup>1</sup> UNHCR (2018). Syrian Refugee Response: LEBANON, Akkar Governroate. Distribution of the Registered Syrian Refugees at the Cadastral Level. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68129>

<sup>2</sup> UNHCR (2018). Syrian Refugee Response: LEBANON, North Lebanon Governroate. Distribution of the Registered Syrian Refugees at the Cadastral Level. Available at: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/68132>

### III. Objectives

The report attempts to answer the following questions:

- 1) To what extent do stakeholders (host communities, refugees and municipal representatives) believe that there are growing tensions as a result of Lebanese-Syrian intermarriage in their communities?
  - a. In what ways do they believe tensions are manifesting or will evolve in future?
  - b. Why do they think this is important (or not) in terms of impact on social stability?
- 2) Perception vs. Reality: How do stakeholders describe their knowledge about intermarriage?
  - a. How do they define it?
  - b. Do they personally know a Lebanese-Syrian couple or these general perceptions?
- 3) In their opinion, what are the biggest challenges facing women involved in intermarriages? Similarly, what are the biggest challenges faced by the couple, their families and the wider community?
- 4) Do respondents perceive any positive outcomes of intermarriages? If yes, what are they, and what is their impact on the relationship between refugees and the host community?

### Methodology

The research methodology of this report consists of the following:

- 1) Primary Data:
  - a. **Twenty Three key informant interviews** with the mayor of Tleil, civil affairs lawyer, mukhtar, two heads of local NGOs, INGO local field officer, UN agency local field staff member, a sheikh engaged in mixed Lebanese

- Syrian marriages, and stakeholders from the neighborhood of Qobbe and the village of Tleil including four local businessowners, six Syrian refugees, and five local NGO staff members.
    - b. **Two focus group discussions** with Lebanese and Syrian youth from in Qobbe.

- 2) Secondary Data: **Background research and analysis:** Review UNDP reports related to Tripoli and Akkar, with information derived from the Mechanism for Social Stability (MSS) processes as they pertain knowing that both communities were part of the Mechanisms. Other open-source documents, research papers, and background material were reviewed to better understand the context and dynamics related to the Lebanese-Syrian mixed marriages.

### General Context

#### Lebanese-Syrian Intermarriage: The Absence of Official Data

Tensions caused by Lebanese-Syrian intermarriage have been reported in Lebanon since 2014, when the Trend Analysis of Participatory Assessment (PA) Reports conducted by UNHCR found that women felt these relationships led to intercommunity tension.<sup>3</sup> More recently, in 2016 and 2017, Syrian women reported high levels of discrimination with many host communities expressing distrust and an unwillingness to engage with refugees, partly due to a sense of insecurity cultivated by the large influx of refugees. In 2016, young Lebanese people reported that tensions had increased and that they were “concerned of sexual/verbal harassment perpetrated against Lebanese women, Syrian-Lebanese intermarriages and child marriage among Syrian girls to Lebanese men.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR Lebanon (2018). Trend Analysis of Participatory Assessment (PA) Reports: A timeline of key events reported by persons of concern from 2012 to 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

This literature review gathers information on the perceptions about mixed marriages in Lebanon, finding that such relationships simultaneously increase and reduce tensions between refugees and host communities. This fluctuation is dependent on factors such as cultural parallels, geographical area, religious homogeneity and socioeconomic status. No study has yet focused specifically on intercommunity marriage between Syrian and Lebanese individuals, thus it is difficult to estimate the scale of the phenomenon. However, according to an ARK perception survey, the number of people who believe that intermarriage is a primary source of tension has increased by 10 per cent from WAVE I to WAVE IV.<sup>5</sup>

## Demography

One study conducted in Wadi Khaled, Akkar, found that factors enhancing social stability between refugees and host communities were often linked to shared histories between these neighbouring groups.<sup>6</sup> At the beginning of the crisis, these refugees were welcomed by many because of the shared history and culture between Wadi Khaled and Syria, family ties and empathy for those persecuted by the Syrian regime.<sup>7</sup> Whilst these social bonds have encouraged many Lebanese to welcome Syrian refugees to their communities, negative perceptions continue to rise as the situation is exacerbated by ongoing conflict in Syria.<sup>8</sup> Locals raised concerns that history may repeat itself, and that they would experience

the same negativity as in previous decades when Palestinian refugees resettled in Lebanon. These concerns are most notable in rhetoric which calls for refugees to return to Syria even before a political settlement takes place there.

The Akkar Governorate in the north of Lebanon has rarely observed such cultural tension, since many traditions are common to both predominantly Sunni populations.<sup>9</sup> However, in addition to settling in cities and villages according to their religious beliefs, many Syrian refugees make their decisions based on social class. For instance, refugees with middle or upper class status often choose to settle in Beirut or its suburbs, whilst refugees from more marginalized backgrounds have settled in cities or towns close to the Syria-Lebanon border<sup>10</sup> with many now residing in Tripoli's poorest neighbourhoods such as Bab al-Tabbaneh<sup>11</sup> Tensions are further compounded by additional socioeconomic dimensions since many wealthy Lebanese business or landowners have benefitted from the influx of refugees, whilst poorer host communities have suffered.

Intermarriage is also known to cause tensions in Syrian communities where there is a strong preference for intracommunity marriages, leading some Syrian women to accept or choose polygamous relationships with a Syrian husband.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ark & UNDP "Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon" WAVE I and IV

<sup>6</sup> The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (2018). Building peace into refugee responses. Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Accessed on 2.3.2019. Available at <https://www.kpsrl.org/sites/default/files/2018-08/Building%20peace%20into%20refugee%20responses%2028-8.pdf>

<sup>7</sup> Ismail, K., Wilson, C. & Cohen-Fournier, N. (2017). Syrian refugees in Tripoli, Lebanon. Feinstein International Center. Accessed on 4.3.2019. Available at <http://fic.tufts.edu/assets/Tripoli-FINAL-5-July.pdf>

<sup>8</sup> Sup7.

<sup>9</sup> CARE International (2018). Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Eight Years On: What works and why that matters for the future? Accessed on 1.3.2019. Available at [https://www.care-international.org/files/files/CAREInternationalLebanon\\_RefugeesinLebanon\\_What-worksandwhythatmattersforthefuture.pdf](https://www.care-international.org/files/files/CAREInternationalLebanon_RefugeesinLebanon_What-worksandwhythatmattersforthefuture.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> Thorleifsson, C. (2016). The limits of hospitality: coping strategies among displaced Syrians in Lebanon. *Third World Quarterly*, 37, 1071-1082.

<sup>11</sup> Lebanon Support (2016). The conflict context in Tripoli: Chronic neglect, increased poverty, & leadership crisis. *Conflict Analysis Report*. Accessed on 4.3.2019. Available at [https://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/ls-car-nov2016-tripoli\\_0.pdf](https://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/ls-car-nov2016-tripoli_0.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> House of Peace (2017). Customs & Traditions: Connectors or Dividers for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon? *Syrian Voices Paper*. Accessed on 1.3.2019. Available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/54481>



Increased polygamy is considered to be a cause of tension by both Syrian and Lebanese communities, in addition to early and/or forced marriages between Syrian girls and older Lebanese men.<sup>13</sup> In the case of the latter, Syrian girls are often married young due to their economic vulnerability<sup>14</sup> but, according to Dr. Imad, there is no data to verify these early marriages despite discussions of the phenomenon taking place. In general, early marriages amongst Syrians have become more prevalent as a negative coping mechanism which results from forced displacement.<sup>15</sup> In many families, early marriage is considered a protective measure against (Sexual) Gender-Based Violence, of which the risk is considered to be higher in Lebanon than in Syria. Financial pressures may also lead a family to marry off their young girls soon after they arrive in Lebanon, with some girls forced to marry young as a means to escape difficult living conditions or a lack of freedom at home.<sup>16</sup>

According to a Fafo survey conducted in 2013, 82 per cent of Lebanese respondents would feel uncomfortable marrying a Syrian,<sup>17</sup> with such relationships linked to moral concerns including men divorcing their wives for Syrian women<sup>18</sup> or marrying a second wife.<sup>19</sup> These

negative perceptions seem to arise from the idea that Syrian women are often identified as less demanding than their Lebanese counterparts,<sup>20</sup> or are more likely to work in brothels and/or seek a divorce.<sup>21</sup> Similar stereotypes were expressed in a study that explored coping strategies amongst Syrian refugees, in which a number of Lebanese informants suggested that Syrian women lack morals, often found throwing themselves at men or stealing husbands.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the media exacerbates such inaccurate perceptions, with one outlet underscoring misinformation about the percentage of unmarried women in Lebanon which has been reported as 85 per cent but is actually closer to 32 per cent<sup>23</sup> In reality, such prejudices are strongly linked to legal and economic vulnerabilities. As a result of the greater mobility restrictions placed on Syrian men, women are more likely to find work and are thus more publicly visible; adding to the perception that they are less conservative than Lebanese women.<sup>24</sup>

Many also believe that humanitarian agencies have unfairly provided support targeted solely at refugees, and although many organizations have since adapted their strategies to also support host communities, the negative perception persists. As a result, refugees are often verbally and physically harassed and often experience violence at the hands of host communities.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the ARK-UNDP perception survey indicated that almost 30 per cent of Syrians have experienced 'verbal harassment'.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, there is greater competition for employment and the crisis is

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<sup>13</sup> Sup7.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid

<sup>15</sup> Imad, A.G. (2017). The Problematics of Mixed Marriages between Persons of Different Religions, Denominations and Nationalities. *The Peacebuilding in Lebanon*. Accessed on 27.2.2019. Available at <http://www.lb.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/CrisisPreventionRecovery/SupplementArticles/17Supp/PEACE%20BUILDING%2017%20ENG%20p6.pdf>

<sup>16</sup> Bartels, S. A., Michael, S., Roupetz, S., Garbern, S., Kilzar, L., Bergquist, H., & Bunting, A. (2018). Making sense of child, early and forced marriage among Syrian refugee girls: a mixed methods study in Lebanon. *BMJ Global Health*, 3, e000509.

<sup>17</sup> Christophersen, M., Liu, J., Thorleifsson, C. M., & Tiltnes, A. A. (2013). Lebanese attitudes towards Syrian refugees and the Syrian crisis. Results from a National Opinion Poll. *FAFO Paper*, (13).

<sup>18</sup> Sup15.

<sup>19</sup> Sup7

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Sup11.

<sup>23</sup> Lebanon 24 (2019). ما حقيقة معدل "العنوسة" البالغ 85% في لبنان؟. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VmdAOJ>

<sup>24</sup> Sup7.

<sup>25</sup> Sup10.

<sup>26</sup> Ark & UNDP "Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon" WAVE IV, September 2015 <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67048>

placing additional strain on already limited public services, particularly in poorer host communities.

It seems, then, that intercommunity marriage is relatively rare, and that the phenomenon is in fact exaggerated in some communities. Accurate data could reduce tensions and challenge this misconception.<sup>27</sup> Interestingly, a collaborative assessment conducted by UNHCR and REACH in Akkar found that the relationship between refugees and host communities varied between villages: In some villages, refugees and host communities did not engage with one another, whilst in others relationships were characterized by a high level of interaction, often as a result of earlier positive contact between the populations. Indeed, one Lebanese FGD participant acknowledged stronger relationships between the two communities as a result of more intermarriages in the area.<sup>28</sup>

A study conducted by CARE International found that shared concerns between refugees and host communities, specifically for their children and negative coping strategies, could help to reduce tensions.<sup>29</sup> One activity that targeted the issue of intermarriage directly was held in Akroum, where a collaborative project between UNDP and KfW facilitated a series of workshops for Lebanese and Syrian women to address tensions related to both intermarriage and polygamy. The workshops taught sewing skills, encouraged cultural exchange and raised awareness of human rights.<sup>30</sup>

## Geographic Context

Tleil and Qobbe were chosen as the focus localities of this research because they were referenced in the Participatory Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon conducted by UNHCR in 2017, which cited perceptions of, or incidents related to, Lebanese-Syrian mixed marriages.

### Tleil in Akkar:

Tleil is located in the Akkar Governorate in North Lebanon. Nestled in Middle Dreib, the area experienced high tension at the start of the Syrian uprising, and as a result of indiscriminate attacks on villages such as Debbabiyeh and El Noura. Its proximity to the Syrian border gives it a strategic location, overlooking Syrian plains and connecting Sahel Akkar to Upper Dreib and Qobayyat.

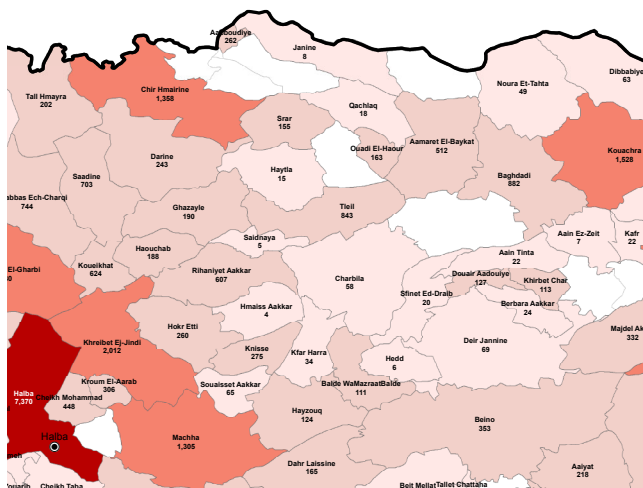


Figure 1. A map showing Tleil location as part of the Middle Dreib area of Akkar

## Economic Situation

Like most of Akkar, Tleil lacks investment in agriculture, but small pockets of productivity do materialize, and dairy and poultry farming are present but limited. As a result of hardships facing these small producers, many young people from the village seek employment in the public sector, often joining the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) or Internal Security Forces (ISF), and other private sector companies out-with the region.

<sup>27</sup> Sup15.

<sup>28</sup> UNHCR & REACH (2014). Lebanese Communities Hosting Syrian Refugees: Akkar Governorate - Lebanon. Assessment Report. Accessed on 1.3.2019. Available at <https://data2.unhcr.org/fr/documents/download/41553>

<sup>29</sup> Sup10.

<sup>30</sup> UNDP (2016). Lebanese and Syrian Women of Akroum Sewing New Friendships. *Peace Building in Lebanon*. Accessed on 4.3.2019. Available at <https://www.alnap.org/system/files/content/resource/files/main/undp-newsletter-web-en.pdf>

## Social Situation

Tleil was traditionally characterized by a class divide between farmers and landowners, but with increased access to education, better employment opportunities and resources, this divide is no longer a major influence on social relationships. Nevertheless, traditional thinking often permeates at critical milestones such as municipal elections.

Sectarianism is another highly divisive and sensitive matter in Tleil, where the village is comprised of around 1,450 individuals who mainly follow Christianity and who are divided across three sects: The majority are Greek Orthodox, and others are Catholic and Maronite. Each sect has various churches, institutions and gatherings but since most of them work outside Tleil or Akkar, fewer actually reside in the village. The outskirts of the village are home to around 1,450 Muslims, of which there are 843 Syrian refugees<sup>31</sup> and around 600 Lebanese nationals not originally from Tleil.<sup>32</sup> Most of these Lebanese families are from the surrounding villages who bought or rented lands on the main road and later used to host large numbers of Syrian refugees. This demographic shift has been a considerable source of tension for the Lebanese host community.

## Security Situation

According to the local authority, a lack of interaction between refugees and the host community complemented Tleil's long standing position as one of the safest villages in Akkar. This segregation was certainly considered as one means to reduce the risk of conflict or incidents, but not necessarily in resolving disputes over water or waste management. During the first few years of the Syrian uprising, some of the villages surrounding Tleil were targeted with indiscriminate shelling, affecting overall safety and security in the region, with one Syrian refugee

arrested for transporting arms.<sup>33</sup> However, since fighting stopped on the other side of the border four years ago, the security situation has improved markedly.

## Qobbe in Tripoli:

The Qobbe neighbourhood in Tripoli overlooks Bab El Tabbeneh, one of the poorest communities in Lebanon. Indeed, Qobbe shares many sociocultural and political characteristics with Bab El Tabbeneh, including a long and unsettled history of conflict from the Lebanese Civil War and the Syrian Army occupation. This ultimately lay the foundations for more than 20 sectarian clashes between Sunnis and Alawites living in Qobbe, Bab El Tabbeneh, Mankouben and Wadi el Nahle. Each neighbourhood was at the forefront of sectarian clashes from 2008 to 2014, ultimately impacting on socioeconomic conditions, and drastically affecting infrastructure and services. Qobbe is in fact home to the predominantly Alawite neighbourhood Jabal Mohsen, and so former fault lines stretched from the Riva frontline to Al Omari, passing by Bakkar, Amerkan and Qobbe Residential Housing Complex (Hariri Compound).

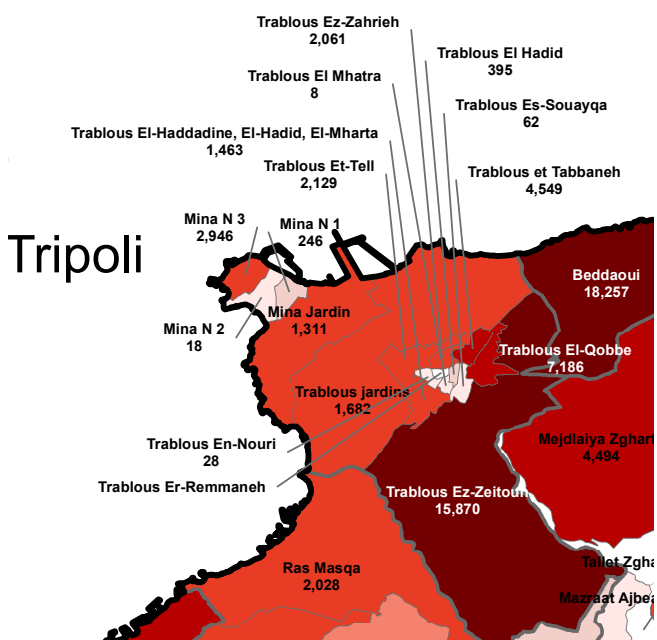


Figure 2. A map of Al Qobbe neighbourhood in Tripoli

<sup>31</sup> Sup1.

<sup>32</sup> According to the mayor of Tleil.

<sup>33</sup> Annahar (2015). توقيف سوري في عكار بجرم نقل أسلحة. Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VvkXbH>

## Economic Situation

Qobbe, namely the Amerkan and Bakkar localities, has historically been known as Tripoli's upper class where families build their villas and mansions overlooking the sea and in close proximity to many private schools. Indeed, the former Evangelical School for boys (Amerkan School) was later converted into a major intelligence hub for the Syrian Arab Army (SAA).<sup>34</sup> Some neighbourhoods in Qobbe were particularly vibrant prior to the onset of the 2008 sectarian conflicts; for instance, Amerkan, where many Alawites live, previously hosted more than 30 small textile factories/workshops with hundreds, if not thousands, of skilled workers. Today, less than five of these factories continue to operate, and are struggling to revive their business and productivity. In addition to thousands of both skilled and unskilled workers who lost their jobs due to closing businesses, there are also hundreds more who lost their livelihoods because they were injured by clashes and rendered disabled.

Many areas in Qobbe are owned by the national government where there are official premises for LAF and ISF, in addition to Qobbe prison and the Lebanese University, where the main campus in the north was located until recently when it moved to Haykaliyye in Koura district. These government institutions created livelihoods for tens of families in the region, as well as supported many shops and vendors located nearby. Despite the negative impact of the clashes, these institutions sustained a minimal level of operation until business as usual was restored following implementation of the Security Plan in 2014.

## Social Situation

Over the last few decades, the socioeconomic status and demographic makeup of Qobbe has

shifted drastically. Prior to the Lebanese Civil War in 1975, this neighbourhood was inhabited by wealthy and upper class families of Tripoli. During that time, Qobbe was characterized by its diversity in hosting Sunni and Alawite Muslims as well as Christians. The war segregated the neighbours and clear fault lines were drawn between the Sunnis and Alawites, whilst the Christian community travelled to safer zones in Tripoli or outside the city altogether. Checkpoints and walls dividing the neighbourhoods serve as a stark reminder of the unsettled history here, with bullet ridden buildings witness to the brutality of the clashes. In addition to government efforts to restore a number of these buildings in 2017, there remains a need for psychosocial intervention aimed at rebuilding trust between communities, and promoting forgiveness and reconciliation.

Since it is affordable and offers employment opportunities for both skilled and unskilled workers, the presence of Syrian refugees in the neighbourhood plays an additional role in the social dynamics of Qobbe.

## Security Situation

The neighbourhood of Qobbe survived as one of the conflict zones of Tripoli from 2008 to 2014: Hundreds of shops were forced to close, and tens of buildings were damaged. Today, security incidents are rare, and are usually a result of personal disputes, and gender-based/domestic violence. Individuals who participated in sectarian clashes are arrested occasionally but, in general, the situation remains relatively calm as it has done since the Security Plan was implemented in 2014. Despite reportedly high tensions between refugees and host communities, significant violence is rarely recorded, with triggers for tension usually related to national/local political issues.

<sup>34</sup> Chatawy, T (2015). بعدك على بالي . Available at: <https://bit.ly/2VIZo8s>

## Key Findings

### Perceptions on Lebanese-Syrian mixed marriages: The cases of Tleil and Qobbe

This research highlights underlying factors that may drive perceptions of refugee-host community relationships, including long-standing grievances or sectarian feuds.

In Tleil, the Mayor reported no intermarriages between Lebanese residents and displaced Syrians. However, in Qobbe, respondents and FGD participants seemed more acquainted with the subject, or at least believed that it existed in their community on some scale. Despite this, most respondents had an opinion about the subject: Some were opposed to the idea, whilst others showed little interest and instead highlighted more critical issues such as livelihoods or competition for employment. There was a notable lack of positivity towards the concept of intermarriage, with very few respondents identifying more benefits than challenges or noting that this type of marriage may enhance communication and interaction between the two families, and hence foster better relationships in the community.

Respondents shared their perceptions regarding a number of factors that may come to influence or be influenced by intermarriage. For instance, poor socioeconomic conditions and poverty were identified as the primary influencers in a decision to marry between communities. Similarly, weak legal frameworks, particularly from religious perspectives, can also facilitate the occurrence of and exploitation in intermarriage. The following sections of this report explore the dynamics and legalities of intermarriage, and its relationship with social stability.

### Perceptions about legal and religious frameworks

According to key informants with access to information regarding religious/legal frameworks,

there is a parallel structure that helps Syrians who do not want to register their marriage through official channels. This makes understanding the scale of intermarriage difficult to quantify.

“The whole marriage needs nothing more than a local self-declared sheikh with two male witnesses. Then the contract is written but never gets officially registered at the spiritual courts. If the man is the custodian of that contract, which in most cases he is, then the mere disappearance of the document annuls the whole process or as if it never happened. So, how can this be fair to women and who protects them?” –*lawyer*

In one key informant interview with a local lawyer who handles intermarriage cases, particularly those which entail divorce and/or disputes, he describes the situation as a “mess” and adds that it facilitates exploitation of vulnerable women and girls who are unaware of their human rights. Furthermore, if a marriage is not officially registered, legal rights cannot be guaranteed. According to the lawyer, “among the most critical issues is the fact that the sheikhs or religious figures that are handling the marriage are not registering it, mostly upon the demand of the couples, or mainly men.” In other words, a couple would call upon a local sheikh, mainly not under the jurisdiction of Dar el Fatwa, to conduct the marriage. The marriage certificate therefore is not necessarily registered, hence the divorce and anything else related to the legal rights of the couple, especially the women, cannot be guaranteed. This is creating issues not only related to the vulnerable women and girls, but also, if the wife gives birth, to the legality of this newborn and their right to registration and citizenship. The lack thereof risks the child becoming stateless and creating an even more complicated situation. A head of a local NGO working on protection related issues fully agreed with the lawyer’s perspective on how complex the situation is. “Unofficial or unregistered marriages put girls and women in a very vulnerable position. Many of them do

not even know that the contracts will not be registered, others are too young to comprehend or request that. While some others seem to know and agree for multiple reasons.”

According to the lawyer, one of the most important reasons behind this concurrence not to register the marriage is that “it is being used as a cover for prostitution or illegal relationships. So instead of doing something that is Haram (or prohibited religiously), they get the sheikh and witnesses to do the paper but then no one really cares about the entitlements of this contract. As if it never happened.”

The general perception is that most intermarriages are unofficial, hence, no one can extract any concrete data about it, including a definitive number nor the percentage of divorces, legal disputes or protection issues within these marriages. When asked about the scale, even key informants who work closely with these issues responded vaguely that there are simply “many” cases.

The sheikh interviewed in this study reported that around 5-10 per cent of the marriages he conducts in North Lebanon are mixed Lebanese-Syrian and that he registers them legally. However, he was unable to provide an overall estimate for how many similar marriages take place, primarily because there are no legal requirements or documentation. Another sheikh who facilitates such arrangements declined to take part in the interview when he became aware that the project was investigating intermarriage.

Many of the technical and legal hurdles explained by key informants were not mentioned by Lebanese host communities. Rather, they were more concerned about cultural differences, competition for jobs, and the complexities of stateless children or protection issues of vulnerable women and girls. In fact, not a single respondent mentioned any technical or legal problems, prompting the assumption that host communities do not

necessarily have in-depth knowledge that would allow them to understand the bigger picture, rather than rely on general public perceptions.

## Push and Pull Factors

An NGO leader used the term “push and pull factors” to describe the reasons that may influence men and women in pursuing intermarriage. Since many respondents did not support to the idea of intermarriage, it was important to understand why and so participants were invited to share and explicate their perceptions. The various push and pull factors listed by respondents do not necessarily highlight underlying triggers or diffusers of tension. In fact, there are perceptible differences in each region.

“Lebanese men in our communities are gradually becoming more convinced that marrying a Syrian lady will be more cost-effective and they wouldn’t need to do anything other than what they are obliged to do when marrying a Lebanese woman.” – female FGD participant

For men, push and pull factors may differ from those of women. For instance, Syrian women may be pushed into marrying a Lebanese man because of the hardships she faces at home; the Kafala system and the associated risks of exploitation; socioeconomic factors; religious and social pressures; and other cultural reasons. For Lebanese men, push factors may also be socioeconomic (namely, not being able to afford the standard required to marry a Lebanese woman). One young female FGD participant suggested that many Lebanese daughters are pressured into finding a home, leading men to find alternatives without subsidized housing loans.

Pull factors, on the other hand, appeal to more emotional reasoning, including love, respect and understanding. Analyses of responses indicated that many participants felt that intermarriage was somewhat materialistic and even opportunistic. For instance, one Syrian resident in Qobbe suggested

that many people assume Syrian women want to marry Lebanese men for citizenship, to secure protection, and access to basic services and social status.

As for Lebanese men, pull factors may include the availability of potential brides since, particularly in spite of socio-cultural differences, there are many commonalities. Additionally, the process is fairly easy, whereby sheikhs providing grooms with a list of potential matches to promote early marriage and prevent sins. According to these sheikhs, the earlier these young men and women get married, the less adultery-related sins they are likely to commit. This is not solely an issue in mixed marriages, but rather more generally the opposition to prevention of early marriage laws in Lebanon.<sup>35</sup>

## An Opportunity for Social Stability or a Trigger for Tension?

In Tleil, Lebanese residents appear to be adverse to any interaction with Syrian refugees, let alone the idea of intermarriage. Indeed, Syrian respondents did not even seem to be acquainted with the old town, with many living and working by the main road where they are not considered part of the village. Demographic shifts are indeed a trigger for tension here, where Muslims now dominate the surrounding villages and geographic segregation is evident. Indeed, the predominantly Christian Lebanese community live in the old town and have minimal interaction with the 'new' Muslim-majority village located by the main road where Syrian refugees tend to rent the shops that they live in.

Thus, the idea of mixed marriage is rarely discussed here but the Mayor of Tleil describes the phenomenon as a relationship that has always taken "place naturally between the Lebanese and Syrians who used to travel across borders or meet through familial occasions." For him, intermarriage

is normal and could still occur if Syria was as accessible as it once was. However, intermarriage with a refugee remains taboo, and is neither seen as an enhancer of social stability nor a trigger for tension as it is simply not acceptable. Indeed, a key local stakeholder suggested he had never heard of this and does not think it would ever happen either, with another reiterating the lack of interaction between the two communities. Thus, there was overall agreement between respondents that this was a topic of little relevance to them.

"The issue is mixed marriages in Tleil between host communities and refugees is not something I have heard of or expect in the village. I'm surprised to hear that it was cited before" – *Mayor of Tleil*

In Qobbe, responses varied widely between Lebanese residents and Syrian refugees. The Alawites in Qobbe held similar opinions to the Christian community in Tleil, but the rate of intermarriage between Alawite Lebanese and Syrians is much higher because of strong ties between the two communities. In fact, thousands of Lebanese Alawites are originally of Syrian descent, granted Lebanese nationality during the SAA occupation. Despite this unique relationship with the Syrian community, the Alawites of Jabal Mohsen have fairly limited interaction and tolerance to the idea of mixed marriage with predominantly Sunni refugees. This dynamic is not only driven by a sectarian difference but also a political discord. The Alawite community in Qobbe is mostly pro-Syrian regime and often see refugees as "traitors" or people "ungrateful" to an administration that presumably provided them with more than what they have now. The lack of empathy for these refugees is also compounded by the fact that many Alawites with dual nationality continue to visit Syria, namely the coastal province of Latakia, for healthcare and shopping in spite of security threats. Thus, as one Jabal Mohsen resident suggested, they are unable to understand why these Syrian communities forego this in favour

<sup>35</sup> HRW (2017). Lebanon must pass a law banning child marriage.

Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/ar/news/2017/04/12/302215>

of basic services provided by international aid. Indeed, there are many Alawites who “see living in a war-torn Syria easier and cheaper than being in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of Lebanon.”

Outside the Alawite Jabal Mohsen, Sunni communities are more welcoming of intermarriage, with some who consider it to be a “normal evolution of the relationship.” Others, particularly Lebanese Sunni women, were more conservative in their responses: “We cannot prevent people from marrying, it is Naseeb, or “God’s will”. Who are we to stand against it? But this does not mean that it is not creating a lot of issues”. For women in this community, it is difficult to generalize intermarriage as a trigger for tension or an enhancer of social stability. Rather, it should be analyzed on an individual basis. For example, mixed marriage is unlikely to support social stability if a Syrian refugee is the second or third wife of a Lebanese man. Instances like this may compound negative perceptions that Lebanese women hold of their Syrian counterparts, and one activist suggested the same for Lebanese men who marry young Syrian girls. One FGD participant clarified that Lebanese residents care more about employment pressures created by the influx of refugees than intermarriage, which seems irrelevant in comparison.

Regardless of geographic or religious background, most respondents were not very supportive of intermarriage. Even those with a more positive position discussed a number of caveats including cultural differences, lifestyles, risk of exploitation and many others.

## Recommendations

There are a number of key approaches and recommendations that may help to mitigate tensions that result from negative perceptions about intermarriage, including:

- Promotion of data collection, analysis and dissemination in response to the lack of, or

lack of access to, relevant information;

- Advocating for enforceable and regulated protection laws that can create safety nets, provide shelters for GBV victims, end child marriage etc.;
- Providing safe spaces whereby men and women, Syrian and Lebanese, can interact;
- Working with religious institutions to prevent exploitation and misrepresentation of sheikhs in sensitive tasks;
- Empowering women to become more financially independent and use their skills and motivation in skilled jobs including but not limited to the production of artisanal and handicrafts items that can support cooperatives; and,
- Sharing success stories about the approach.



## Annexes

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