

Tragedy Tears Through Lebanon. Syrians Are Marginalized More Than Ever.

As told by Syrian refugees whose lives remain in British Columbia, but compassion flies back home.



Syrian refugee family's youngest daughters, Nour Khalaf (nine years old) standing behind her little sister, Sarah Khalaf (three years old).

PRINCE GEORGE, Canada - An eager ray of Saturday sunshine trickles in through Syrian refugee Aliyah Kora's window. The week has finally presented its gift. She instinctively goes downstairs, decamping to her living room. With her husband selling food at the local market and her five children fast asleep, this is the time she has for herself, her one respite, to help quiet the onslaught of worries that plague her thoughts.

"Mama?" Her voice makes the turbulent journey to Turkey via WhatsApp, before reaching the ear of her mother. Though she dearly wishes to be in Syria with the rest of her children, Aliyah's mother seeks medical attention, a practically impossible phenomenon in her hometown, Aleppo, stemming from the sheer enormity of the cost.

Aliyah's mother is in dire need of heart surgery, having been turned away from Lebanon she remains on the outskirts of Turkey. Aliyah spends the rest of the morning connecting with her brothers and sisters, who have been scattered helplessly throughout Syria, with some edging towards the borders, where food is scarce and death prevailing.

The usual tranquility this morning brings her, is however, clouded. Burdened by a fresh layer of misery, afflicting displaced Syrians today, that she so narrowly escaped.

This haze of sorrow came about on 4th August 2020 when an explosion fuelled by a large amount of ammonium nitrate stored at the port of Lebanon's capital city, Beirut, ripped through the city. Killing an estimated 181 people, inflicting injuries upon 6,000, deeming 300,000 homeless and leaving behind it a hefty US \$10–15 billion in property damage. The 1.5 million Syrian refugees residing in Lebanon have already had a hard time illustrating Lebanon to be a place where they may set their worries at ease. The Beirut blast has not made this task easier, seizing the lives of many, sending catastrophic vibrations out to Aliyah's family and Syrians across the globe. Aliyah explains that stressful circumstances increase urgency. This urgency can be seen as the lack of patience Lebanese authorities have for Syrian refugees. With numbered supplies and resources, the Syrians have dropped off their priority list altogether.

This results in complications, taking the form of increased discrimination towards Syrians, in Lebanon and a shortage of supplies and finances, to those displaced within Syria. In this British Columbian town, all seven Syrian refugee families are working, with the children having a strong hold of academics and the English language. Though these families are safe, their families are caught in a new kind of hardship. With all fingers pointing to the raging politics monopolizing Syria and Lebanon, Prince George residing Syrian refugees feel for those met with the fate they scarcely escaped.

"They need security, they need stability," said Khalid Kitch, a Syrian refugee father, recalling his family trapped in Syria and Lebanon. With Syria and Lebanon sharing a border and being connected through intricate political and economic relations, each is also home to natives of the other, causing them both to be dragged down a toilsome path by the explosion.

The politics surrounding the Syrian regime and the Lebanese political parties have always been connected by a tense thread. The war afflicting Syria and the civil war that raged on in Lebanon for almost two decades have collaboratively worsened the situation. From 2011, Syrians that have crossed the border to Lebanon, in hopes of safety and protection, are greeted with a harsh reality.

The Beirut blast could have prompted a time for unity. To ease the unanimous pain and suffering that these people are afflicted with, but politics has paved a way for separation. It appears that Lebanese authorities are not eager to rebel against their seemingly preordained path.

"Who pays the price of politics? It's always the people," said Dr. Maissaa Almustafa, a teacher of Politics of the Middle East at the Wilfrid Laurier University Department of Political Science. She continues to explain that in this case, the Syrian refugees, in Lebanon, are left to carry the weight of a war they did not ask for and a history they were not in a position to mismanage. The tragedy of Beirut has ignited the overlooked truth, that Syrian and Lebanese politics has manufactured one of the worst humanitarian crises of all time, before turning on their heels and leaving Syrian refugees in their dust.

Racism Is Given a Sharper Knife

The blast in Beirut did not stop at physical damage, it inflicted discriminatory hardship to the same extent. Aliyah's teenage daughter, Razan is immensely grateful for her life in Prince George. She recounts her childhood in Lebanon with a shudder. Though Lebanon is home to the largest proportion of Syrian refugees in the world, over one million, compiling to thirty percent of Lebanon's total population, it is hard to paint Lebanon as a haven to the refugees who try to live there. The hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, testify to this statement, as they are yet to receive full rights from Lebanese authorities, though they began seeking safety in Lebanon around eighty years ago. Lebanon remains confident in this deposition, with regards to their Syrian refugees as well.

"They always separate us," said Razan. Her statement is certainly justified. From restricting access to certain public parks, jobs and a highly restrictive schooling system, the atmosphere in Lebanon is anything but welcoming. "It is so much worse now," Razan said, thinking back to the explosion. People are fighting now more than ever, with limited

hospital space, Lebanese people have lost any remaining tolerance for Syrian refugees. Razan sighs, echoing the empathy the Prince George Syrian community feels towards the Lebanese and Syrian people.

"They don't go to school," Aliyah said, recounting the young children of her siblings, bringing about the next notable impact of increased animosity. The blast, in igniting racism, encouraged the deterioration of the education of Syrian youth. A 2018 statistic states that forty-four percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are out of school and forced to enter the labor market, this percentage is likely to soar with tensions rising and many schools having been destroyed in the blast.

Similar prejudice can also be found in cemeteries, through the refusal to bury Syrian bodies. What they will do with the minimum of forty-three Syrians that died in the Beirut explosion, one cannot be sure. Those who escaped immediate death in the blast, can hardly be perceived as lucky. Banin Charity Association, in Lebanon, abiding by their policy, has pointedly refused Syrian people in need after the explosion. Many landlords also reject Syrians coming in the hopes of a place to shelter their family, after the explosion left them with nowhere to call home. The pre-existing resentment projected onto Syrians in Lebanon, has only been magnified, with hatred dominating the streets that are brimming with destruction.

"The Lebanese people will just hit Syrian people and say go back to your country and you're not welcome here," said Razan. Razan explained that she has never experienced any such prejudices in Prince George and that we may turn to the Lebanese government to be the uncommon dictating factor, creating the reality displaced Syrian families face. Indeed, it has been reported that Lebanese have killed and beaten Syrian refugees, as well as evicting and deporting Syrians right and left.

"They said that if they can't come to Canada, they will go back to Syria, because in Lebanon everything is very hard and bad now," Batool, a seventeen year old Syrian refugee said, referring to her uncle and his family, who are currently living in Lebanon. These Syrians find themselves fleeing from one war to another. Though some may be bewildered at the prospect of returning to a country still under war status, Batool and her family believe that though Syria is bad, Lebanon is worse.

The Lebanese government readily enables this notion. "They have been pushing Syrians to leave from day one," said Dr. Almustafa. Although international laws postpone the banishment of all Syrian refugees, this does not lessen the hostility and, as Dr. Almustafa explained, the Lebanese government is doing all they can to prevent more Syrian refugees from crossing the border. In order to apply for a visa, Syrians must declare a reason for immigration and demonstrate sufficient finances, all to be admitted to Lebanon for six months at most. Syrian refugees are also not classified as such in Lebanon. Therefore, many families that lost breadwinners in the explosion, do not receive support as refugees and struggle to support themselves as though they had never left Syria.

The Road Back Home Is Rubble

Batool continues to explain that though her relatives consider the move back home, from Lebanon, the trip is not at all easy. In the off chance that the house of her family is still standing, the Syrian government demands documents to prove ownership of their property. With Syrian refugees losing everything, paperwork is a far off concept. With their life savings deteriorating in value, Syrians are trapped in a country where the government wants them gone now, more than ever, Batool explains.

In addition to these unlikely requirements for their return home, the journey itself is reason enough to be greatly discouraged. Sahar Kalaf, a Syrian refugee mother, who fled from Homs to Prince George, recalls a conversation with her mother. During their discussion, her mother reflected the torment in her heart, burdened by Sahar's missing brother. One and a half years ago, venturing from the war ridden city of Idlib back to Homs, with no option of seeking safety in Lebanon, he was snatched out of a bus by government officials, as his accompanying wife conveyed back to Sahar. This bus warranted its enormous price as guaranteed protection, so after paying a month's pitiful salary, Sahar thirty-three year old brother and his wife expected a safe journey back home.

"People in power take and go," as said by Khalid Kitch.

Mental Health Takes a Blow

The Beirut explosion managed to come at its victims from all angles, taking a deafening hit to the physiological well-being of the Syrian refugees, worsening buried pre-existing trauma.

With alarming indifference, Khalid Kitch said, "You just stay in your house if it's not destroyed, if people come with guns, you leave." Though he presents this reality his family in Syria and Lebanon face, to be nothing of question, there are surely underlying issues that are too hastily brushed aside. Dr. Palinkas, a professor at the University of Southern California, with expertise in mental health and experience with refugee and immigrant communities, comments on the gravity of the explosion and the post traumatic symptoms the Syrians displaced in Lebanon are confronted with. "People who go through very traumatic events, such as civil conflict, will oftentimes experience three different kinds of mental health problems," Dr. Palinkas continues to explain that post traumatic symptoms will often be accompanied by anxiety and depressive symptoms. With Lebanon buckling under pressure from its fleeing resources, Syrian refugees will be further impaired by these internal wars, as they grapple to adjust to this fresh tragedy.

Sahar's family is reasonably well adjusted in Prince George, but they dream of moving to the nearby city, Kelowna. "There are many Syrian families in Kelowna, from Homs," Sahar said, beaming with whist at the thought of being surrounded by people native to her home city. Sahar also said that she yearns to visit Syria, when she receives her Canadian citizenship. Though the source of extensive hardship lies in Syria, it is still home to her.

"One of the things about a traumatic event, if that it rips apart the social fabric of the victim," Dr. Palinkas explained, in regards to the draw of returning to Syria many feel. "The experience itself can isolate one who experienced the trauma from those who did not." He further explained, as many crave social connections, it is only in one's nature to return to a place where that once was present, if it is lacking where they currently reside. However, these Syrian families in Prince George do not intend on moving back to Syria completely. Dr. Palinkas relies part of the decision to return to Syria on the reception of the host countries, "Canada has maintained a very open attitude, welcoming attitude, towards Syrian refugees," he said.

Dr. Palinkas continues to explain that not all countries have made this effort. Many countries in central Europe, such as Hungary, Serbia and the Czech Republic may even drive away their Syrian refugees. "A large part of it will also depend on the political and social climate of the country of origin, for example if Assad remains in power," Dr. Palinkas said, further illustrating the complications surrounding a dilemma between the mental and political battle Syrian refugees face. This dilemma is turned on its side by the explosion, leaving no space for mental clarity for Syrians in Lebanon.

Has The Explosion Deemed All Hope Lost?

As the turmoil displaced Syrians in Lebanon are facing become clear, so should the priority. "If we start thinking about the people, if we put the people in the centre of our policies, we can help," said Dr. Almustafa. Dr. Almustafa explained that the process of supporting one party against another is fueling a merciless cycle of war. We can see this in the lives of the people in Syria, struggling to find safety. As their wellbeing is being cast aside by those in power, the society is falling into disrepair, especially in the trying time of the blast.

When asked how she thinks the corrupt governments at play are justifying their decisions, Sahar's daughter, Hajar said, "their mind is like that," she comments on how they act, "without knowing anything about the people." Hajar's mother gives a weak smile. Her children peek around the door, when greeted with several sets of eyes, they collapse into a fit of giggles. The youngest, Sarah, bravely showcases her best composure. She's young, maybe three? Her mother's face radiates joy as she replies, "she's Canadian."

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