

The ever-present uncertainty for Syrians in Lebanon

Callum Sutherland · Sep 1, 2023



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Sitting on a balcony looking out on the town of Bqerzala in northern Lebanon, humanitarian volunteer Shinno Taguchi ponders on the question of returning to Syria one day.

“These days the conflict has gotten so complex, everyone has different ideas on the future of Syria. It is hard even for me to say what is going on,” he says.

Shinno grew up in Damascus with his Syrian mother and Japanese father, ultimately leaving Syria in 2010 for his parents' work. 13 years later, Mr Taguchi is volunteering as a teacher with NGO Relief and Reconciliation in Lebanon. This is the closest he has got to returning home.

Akkar, Lebanon's northernmost region, is home to roughly 200,000 Syrian refugees. Whilst Syrian hills and towns can be seen in the distance, most refugees remain unsure as to if, and when, they will return.

The journey to Lebanon

Going home is just one of the many aspects that, for Syrians in Lebanon, holds a lot of uncertainty. Over the last decade, this uncertainty has remained as a constant for those who have fled their homes as the Syrian Civil War erupted.

This question of returning to Syria is prominent amongst refugees. However, going back 10 years, the question was that of how to leave and where to go.

Hiyam Mkheber left her home in Al Qusayr, near Homs, in 2013 with her mother and siblings. Her father, who fought for the Free Syria Army against government forces, was killed during the fighting.



Hiyam and her mother in their home near Halba, the capital of the Akkar region. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

At the start of the conflict, Al Qusayr was a strategically important city for both the government and the rebels. Hiyam says that The Red Cross made an agreement with government forces, allowing some civilians to leave the city as intense fighting continued.

“We did not bring anything with us, just my mother’s identification card. After driving for a few hours, we arrived at a checkpoint and then we had to walk. There were a lot of children who had lost their arms and legs,” says Hiyam.

Hiyam, 10 years old at the time, was making her way to Lebanon, where her uncle knew friends that could help look after her family. This journey, full of uncertainty, shows the reality of the shared experience held by millions of Syrian refugees.

“If the army saw a man, they would take him away and we don’t know what they would do with them. Their family would cry because something bad would be done,” she recalls. Because of this fear, her brothers had to hide whenever they could during the journey.

After eventually arriving in Lebanon, Hiyam’s family moved shortly after to Akkar, where they have lived since. Six years later, the family was forced to relocate within Akkar after their Lebanese neighbour refused to live next to Syrians.

Trouble upon arrival

Another young Syrian refugee, Zaynab Al-Awad, has shared the experience of uncertainty since living in Lebanon. She fled Syria in 2012 with her family, settling in the village of Bqerzala where Relief and Reconciliation has its primary base of operations, the 'Peace Centre'.

Her father had previously worked in Lebanon before the civil war, and decided to return once again as the conflict began. Zaynab remembers: "My father got some money from friends for transport and we arrived in Bqerzala. We were the first family to build a tent here as we had no money to pay rent."

Financial issues would become a constant for the Al Awad family, as Zaynab's brother needed medical support for his diabetes. Their father began to work again, now alongside his 9-year-old son who left school in order to bring more money into the household.

"My brother worked with him for three years to help buy food. We continued to live in this tent for ten years and then we moved into a house in Qanayat," She explains. This move was made possible by the gradual wealth accumulated by Zaynab's father and brothers' work, but also made necessary due to societal issues.

Zaynab continues: "There were a lot of problems with the people in the village [Bqerzala] so we had to move."



The view of Bqerzala from Relief and Reconciliation's Peace Centre. The village is home to mostly Maronite Christians, as well as a Syrian refugee population. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

Again, disputes between different communities, whether it be Lebanese and Syrian or Sunni and Greek Orthodox, added to the uncertainty of where to live and how long for.

Mohammad Ghiye, treasurer at Relief and Reconciliation, encounters this dynamic regularly in his work. "Syrians are subject to bullying by some Lebanese, and it's the same within Lebanese communities based on

religious and political belonging,” he explains.

He continues: “If we combine kids from all these communities through summer camps, trips to the beach and mountains they will make memories and improve relationships. We have third parties that can confirm this success.”

What does the future look like?

Whilst this support begins to address uncertainty caused within Lebanon, there remains the important question of what the future holds for Syrians. For Hiyam, the possibility of returning to her home country is slim. Because of her father’s involvement in the war, her family cannot return as long as the Assad government is in power.

Concerning Zaynab, she aspires to return to Syria after completing her studies at university in Tripoli. “The most important thing for me is to get a grant to continue studying in another country after three years here.

“After this, my plan is to return to Syria and work as a doctor with my family.” she explains. However, many steps need to be taken before this can become a reality for the student. Without major financial support, this dream remains as a question mark.



Destruction in the Bab Dreeb area of Homs in 2012. Many Syrians living in Akkar come from Homs and the surrounding towns. Image Credit: Bo Yaser

The question of returning to Syria remains vague, due to circumstances both within Lebanon and Syria itself. However, with the support of R&R, some Syrians are at least equipped with the education and skills needed to make this a reality, whenever that may be.

Shinno Taguchi is hopeful yet cautious of returning home. "I had the privilege of growing up in Syria. I would love to go back if it is safe for me and my family," he concludes.