

## How Syrian refugees left home, but managed to rebuild it elsewhere

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After fleeing your home, where do you go next to try and rebuild the life you had before? Syrian refugees who have settled in neighbouring Lebanon have asked themselves this question, arriving in a country with no formal refugee camps.

1.5 million Syrians have come face-to-face with this reality, relying on their own initiative and memories to construct new homes across Lebanon.

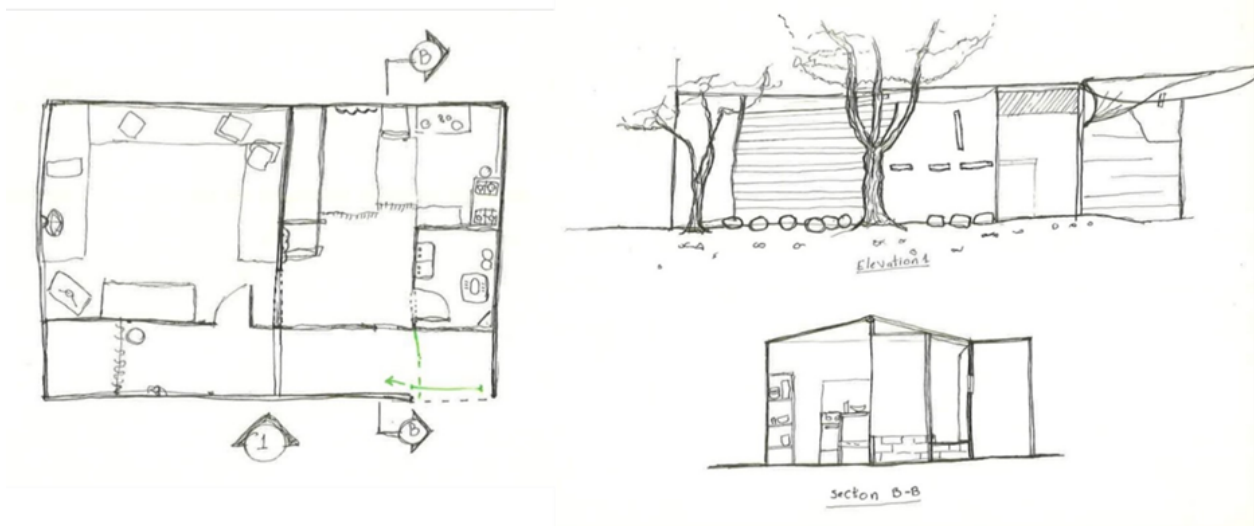
The Al Awad family arrived in Akkar, northern Lebanon, in 2012. They became the first family to set up a tent in the village of Bqerzala, with others following soon after. The Mkheber family also fled Syria a year later, sharing a room with other families before finding their own space, an old garage which they then converted.

In countries such as Iraq and Jordan, many Syrians have settled in organised camps, with some infrastructure provided by the government and other external sources. In Lebanon however, there is a unique dynamic at play, something which Egyptian architect Menna Essam is eager to explore.

### **'Trying to find home somewhere else'**

Miss Essam visited several refugee camps in Akkar whilst volunteering with an international NGO, Relief and Reconciliation for Syria (R&R). She remembers: "When I visited the camps, it was really interesting how the tents were constructed entirely by the people living in them. Each tent looked completely different."

She continues to explain that in Lebanon, most camps began with just one family setting up a tent, with others soon following in their path and building their own tents around those already there. Because of this independent growth and structure, these camps have their own unique look.



“It is like they [Syrians] are trying to find home somewhere else, in a temporary structure built by themselves. Some people built their own courtyards, some have shared social and communal areas.” explains Menna.

Because of its individuality, Miss Essam decided that she wanted to begin researching this specific type of camp, designed entirely by refugees and their memories of home back in Syria.

For the Egyptian, this research is important for two reasons. As these camps are defined as temporary, it is likely that they will not stand the test of time.

“You don’t have anything to tell others that people lived in these places. There won’t be evidence, so this needs to be documented for future research or for people to understand this displacement.”

Menna also has a personal connection to this crisis, as she grew up in Syria’s capital Damascus. “I have seen pictures of places I knew that have been totally destroyed. I feel like I lost something that is related to who I am, I cannot go and revisit these places.”

### **Elevating the plight of the Syrian refugee**

Not only is research into Syrian refugee structures important to inform others about what they consist of and to provide a record, it also helps tell the stories of the people at the heart of them.

Dr Ayham Dalal is a Palestinian-Jordanian architect who has written extensively on Syrian migration and refugee camps, particularly in Jordan. He was born and raised in Syria, giving him further insight into understanding these refugees and the structures that they settle in.

Whilst camps in Jordan were initially set up as a temporary response to the refugee crisis, they soon became urbanised, permanent communities. This development occurred rapidly, transforming make-shift camps into ones that resembled cities. The same has occurred in Lebanon, as informal camps have become a regular, more permanent feature within the Akkar region.

Some Syrian refugees have found accommodation in the form of converted garages, such as this structure on the outskirts of Bqerzala, Akkar. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

Despite finding a long-term footing in such countries, disregard for the refugees living in these communities is still an issue. This is something that Dr Dalal looks to address through his research.

He explains: “We need to be more grateful as these refugees contribute to economies and daily life in these countries [Lebanon and Jordan]. I want to make sure that light is shed on their struggles and their ability to resist the ugly conditions that have been created for them.”

This commonly found ignorance towards Syrian refugees and their contribution somewhat finds its origin within historical context. During the Lebanese Civil War, the Syrian military occupied much of the north and east of Lebanon.

Ayham Dalal explains: “Some Lebanese communities feel that they were occupied by Syrians, creating a lot of friction between the two. Some Lebanese feel uncomfortable with Syrians living there [in Lebanon].”

Syrians are also often used as an excuse for Lebanon’s political and economic crises. “In Lebanon the failure of the state is a big problem. There is the idea that this failure is because of Syrians and only them.” says Ayham.

### **Deciding where home is**

Amongst this tension between some Lebanese and Syrians, do refugees see a future here? Is this something that can even be considered given the ongoing turmoil in Syria? Menna Essam gained insight into these questions during her initial research.

Whilst Syrian refugees have used their homes for inspiration when constructing a new dwelling in Lebanon, the personal connection to home has been lost for some.

Essam explains: “Some people don’t want to go back home, they feel more loyal to Lebanon than Syria, especially those who moved at the start of the war. They are losing their connection to their origins.”



Syrian and Lebanese children taking part in Relief and Reconciliation’s annual summer camp in the Akkar countryside. Image credit: Relief and Reconciliation

Dr Dalal has also found some interesting perspectives through his work. The architect says: “Living in the cities is extremely expensive, so some families are happy to stay in the camp. They don’t have to pay for services and accommodation and they are surrounded by other Syrians.”

Syrians have brought their idea of what home looks like with them to Lebanon, and this is where many of them intend to stay. Whether they choose not to return or simply cannot because their house no longer exists, a new sentiment is growing amongst this somewhat stranded demographic. Lebanon is now home, at least for the near future.