



# My life in transit, Abu Nidal's Dwelling in Beirut

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# Refugees as City-Makers

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Social Justice and the City is a research program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs that aims to influence ongoing urban development (in Lebanon and beyond) for the purpose of actualizing more inclusive and just cities and regions. Over the past four years, the program has worked on questions of housing, urban renewal, public and shared spaces, forced population displacement, urban social movements, land policy, and more. Whenever possible, projects are developed in partnership with scholars, policymakers, and activists who share the same vision and concerns for equity, in order to broaden the program's scientific and practical basis and contribute to the making of an ecosystem of change.

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"My life in transit",  
Abu Nidal's Dwelling in Beirut

From occupiers to undesired migrants, Syrians have been on a long-term downward spiral in the collective memory of a significant number of Lebanese since 1975. Aside from the obvious challenge for any people to absorb in less than four years a population increase of over 25%, refugees' living conditions in Lebanon are complicated by the regulatory framework that organizes their arrival to the country. Indeed, the national government's failure to react to the massive population influx which brought over 1.5 million forcefully displaced individuals to Lebanon between 2011 and 2015 left the organization of refugee settlement and the management of their livelihoods to their individual means and those of a wide array of international organizations. In 2015, the national government opted to extend the oppressive *kafala*<sup>1</sup> framework that governs the presence and work of migrant workers in Lebanon to the Syrian population. This decision complicated their legal status and eventually criminalized their presence in the country given that the vast majority was unable to secure a "sponsor/guarantor".

These settlement conditions are further complicated by the historical context in which refugees have arrived, one that leads me to claim it is virtual-

ly impossible for Syrian refugees today to develop a healthy, comfortable situation in Lebanon. To begin with, Syrian refugees' presence is often cast within the history of the Palestinian refugee settlement that a section of the Lebanese population blames for the outbreak of the Lebanese civil war. In addition, many Lebanese individuals locate the presence of this large (Syrian) population in continuity with the history of Lebanese-Syrian relations, through which the current Syrian regime dominated for extended periods local and international politics in Lebanon and, consequently, the country's economic and social life.

In this ethnographic vignette, I share excerpts of a conversation with a young Syrian man recorded in July 2016. I offer readers a window to the daily struggles of a relatively well-off, active Syrian who has been in Lebanon for the past few years. Through his struggles in securing shelter, work, and a semblance of normalcy, one reads a narrative of resilience and resourcefulness but also incredible hardship amidst the continuous stresses of an uncertain future.

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Field notes, conversation with  
Abu Nidal  
Part 1: Settling in the city

It was a Sunday late afternoon in July when I sat with Abu Nidal in the area of Ashrafieh. We met at the inauguration of his friends' new restaurant (Syrian Armenians) where he had invited me to join him. He seemed relaxed, arrived late, apologized casually and smiled. The new restaurant owners welcomed him warmly. The music was loud: a background of Latin dance was perfect for the occasion since a Brazilian chef was cooking "live" for the opening night.

I learned that Abu Nidal had frequently travelled prior to the eruption of the Syrian revolution in 2011. By the time he returned to Damascus to be closer to his family, months before the outbreak of violence, he felt free. He hadn't expected the events that followed:

"It would never have crossed my mind that the country would be turned upside down or the world would break down at once, it was an impossible scenario. [...] When the "events" started [he laughs and adds], people now refer to it as a "civil war", [...] I never liked weapons or anything military or any appearances of violence so I came to the nearest possible place I could go to work... that was Lebanon."

Did you know anyone here? Did you have friends?

"No I didn't have any friends per se, but I had relatives."

At first, he moved around Beirut. Eventually, he settled in a house in the area of Manara with a Lebanese family of Syrian descent that he described as "*friends of the family*". Abu Nidal informally worked for the family for a while, helping run various errands in lieu of rent fees. About a year later, he moved to Ain el Mryseh and got a job with an international NGO. When I asked about the nature of his rental contract, he let out a smirk and said:

"I signed a 6 months contract, but it was not officially registered of course. [...] In this NGO, all employees were not registered with the National Social Security Fund, the NGO was recognized and registered solely by the Ministry of Social Affairs, [...] even my Lebanese colleagues had the same type of contract - the 6 months renewable - and none of us was insured in the beginning. They eventually provided us with private insurance".

A year later, in early 2015, Abu Nidal moved to the neighborhood of Hamra. Due to high rent rates and what he described as "roommate turnover", he relocated to the city's suburbs in the more affordable area of Ayn el Remmaneh where he found what he described as a "better" apartment and bought a car to compensate for the distances that now separated him from work and friends.

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Abu Nidal's name was made invisible in formal paperwork or registration - both his rent and salary were off the record. He fairly quickly learned to locate himself in the landscape of political divides in Lebanon and recognized that his presence in the country, like his Lebanese co-dwellers, is measured through sectarian lenses that perhaps in his case make him more "desirable" than others, and felt it in general.

I asked about his experiences at the General Security Offices (GSO).

“Honestly, the trip to the GSO is like a punishment for any Syrian. As a Christian, I have been treated better than others generally, but still the trip to the GSO is punishment...

I feel the difference in treatment, for sure. I'm not thrilled to tell you this but in Lebanon, being a Christian has helped me a lot, a lot..."

Abu Nidal's account does not differ at first glance from that of any other not-so-well-connected young Lebanese individual struggling to make it in his/ her country. Indeed, those who are not well placed or do not have access to a social (largely sectarian) network connecting them to the ruling class are forced to navigate a complex informal system to survive. He

works on any opportunity he can find, wholeheartedly. He is not wanted by the Lebanese community at large, and he knows it - and at the same time his presence is and has to be tolerated politically - and it is perhaps this combination that rendered his dwelling in the city suffocating.

## Part 2: Legal restrictions

Soon after the outbreak of the refugee crisis in Lebanon, hostility to the presence of forced migrants began to visibly materialize. With the government turning a blind eye, banners dotted both rural and urban landscapes carrying racist signs and threats, often with the implicit or explicit support of municipal authorities many of whom imposed curfews on this population. By restricting the mobility of Syrians, many municipalities effectively enforced a second class status on the refugees, empowering local youth to stop and harass those who dared move after sunset even if they were running to the pharmacy. Dire conditions were further exacerbated as of January 2015 after the Council of Ministries passed a decision to restrict Syrian refugees' entry into Lebanon and encourage those already present to leave by all

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many other Syrians are doing: start a business under the name of a Lebanese individual with no real assurance that s/he will honor our agreement and with no protection for my investment and work. Others are even doing import export activities, and live under *kafala*, they don't have a work permit! How could I accept that? I've applied for immigration; I hope that in the coming couple of months I will have moved out. You cannot live in a country where everybody is struggling, and where anyone can stop your advancement or put you out of work at any time. And let me tell you something, whatever money I made while I was here, I made from international organizations<sup>iv</sup>. I have not taken a Lebanese dollar since I came.”

I asked Abu Nidal whether he had ever tried to hide his Syrian accent.

"Oh yes, many times! But I can't do it... I can pass for a Jordanian, and I try to speak less in certain situations. I never felt the need to hide that I was a Syrian except during my years here. I love life, but to be honest, I am unhappy here."

Abu Nidal's struggle reflects well today's conditions of Syrians in Lebanon. Unable to leave, portrayed as the aggressors: competing for jobs and foreign aid while increasing the burden on an already fragile urban infrastructure, socially and administratively treated as second class dwellers.

Like every other Syrian I spoke with over the last 4 years, Abu Nidal has invested significant effort and resources into finding a legal way out of Lebanon. Those relative few who have succeeded are the ones with the better networks, higher education profiles and better prospects, in other words the “lucky” ones who score higher on foreign embassy checklists. Another section of the Syrian population have chosen the illegal way out, travelling by boat main-

ly from Tripoli - and those are the individuals with the physical and mental endurance to make it to the ever-so-coveted and developed world. The Lebanese government's decision to restrict and decrease the number of Syrians is as such succeeding - indeed, it is only the most disenfranchised who have to stay - the rest have either left or are in the process of leaving. In many ways, Abu Nidal's account is a best case scenario, his conditions are much better than most refugees'. And he cannot wait to leave.

<sup>i</sup> The *kafala* regulation is highly contested as per numerous studies, and labeled racist and against human rights

ii Minutes of meeting Lebanese Cabinet of Ministers, October 23, 2014 <http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=6118>

iii The author notes that *kafala* is widely translated as sponsorship, and has chosen to use guarantee / guarantor instead as this better reflects the legal responsibilities and implications of the regulation.

iv Abu Nidal insisted on the fact that all the work he has done in Lebanon has been with or for international NGOs or individuals, and he considers that his revenues have never been from a local Lebanese individual or company.

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More than five years into the “refugee crisis”, popular discourses and media debates in Lebanon still lack the vocabulary to describe the impressive competence of individuals and groups fleeing a war-torn country and the resilience they have demonstrated in facing difficult residency in nearby host countries. In this collection of essays, scholars, writers, designers and artists have set out to contest the stereotypical representation of Syrian refugees as destitute, powerless and passive aid recipients. Through original research, direct documentation, analytical representations, and visual investigations, they present a kaleidoscope of refugees as workers, entrepreneurs, dwellers, visitors, artists, artisans, students, drivers and –mostly– as active agents in the reconstruction of their livelihoods, as well as political subjects engaged in a reflection about the future of their country and the significance of their presence in today’s Lebanon. In doing so, the authors invite readers to reconsider the widespread conception of Syrian refugee presence as “a burden”, highlighting instead their important contributions in reimagining and enacting Lebanon’s cities and towns as places of refuge and diversity. Throughout these narratives, we read about coping mechanisms, ingenious schemes, but also abusive official policies and discriminatory legal frameworks that polarize social groups and undermine possibilities of collective reorganization and emerging solidarities.

המגוון הרחב של תרומות, מיומנויות ויכולות של הפליטים הסורים בלבנון, המאפשר להם להתמודד עם אתגרי החיים החדשים, נעלם לעיתים קרובות מתחת לשכבת הדימויים החד-ממדית של הפליטים כקבוצה אחידה וחסרת יכולות. המאמרים במסגרת אוסף זה מנסים להציג תמונה מורכבת ומגוונת של הפליטים הסורים, המדגימה את מגוון תפקידיהם, מקומות מגוריהם, ואת תרומתם למחזור החיים הכלכלי והחברתי בלבנון. דרך מחקר מקורי, תיעוד ישיר, מיומנויות אנליטיות, וחקר ויזואלי, המאמרים מציגים ספקטרום של פליטים כעובדים, עוסקים, מתגוררים, מבקרים, אמנים, מלאמים, סטודנטים, נהגים ובעיקר – כסוכנים פעילים במימוש חלומותיהם ובבניית חיי חסר פחדים. במהלך הסיפורים, אנחנו קוראים על מנגנוני התמודדות, על פתרונות יצירתיים, אך גם על מדיניות רשמית אכזרית ופיקוראניות משפטית המפרידה בין קבוצות חברתיות ומערערת את האפשרויות של ריגורגניזציה קולקטיבית ושל קידום סולידריות.