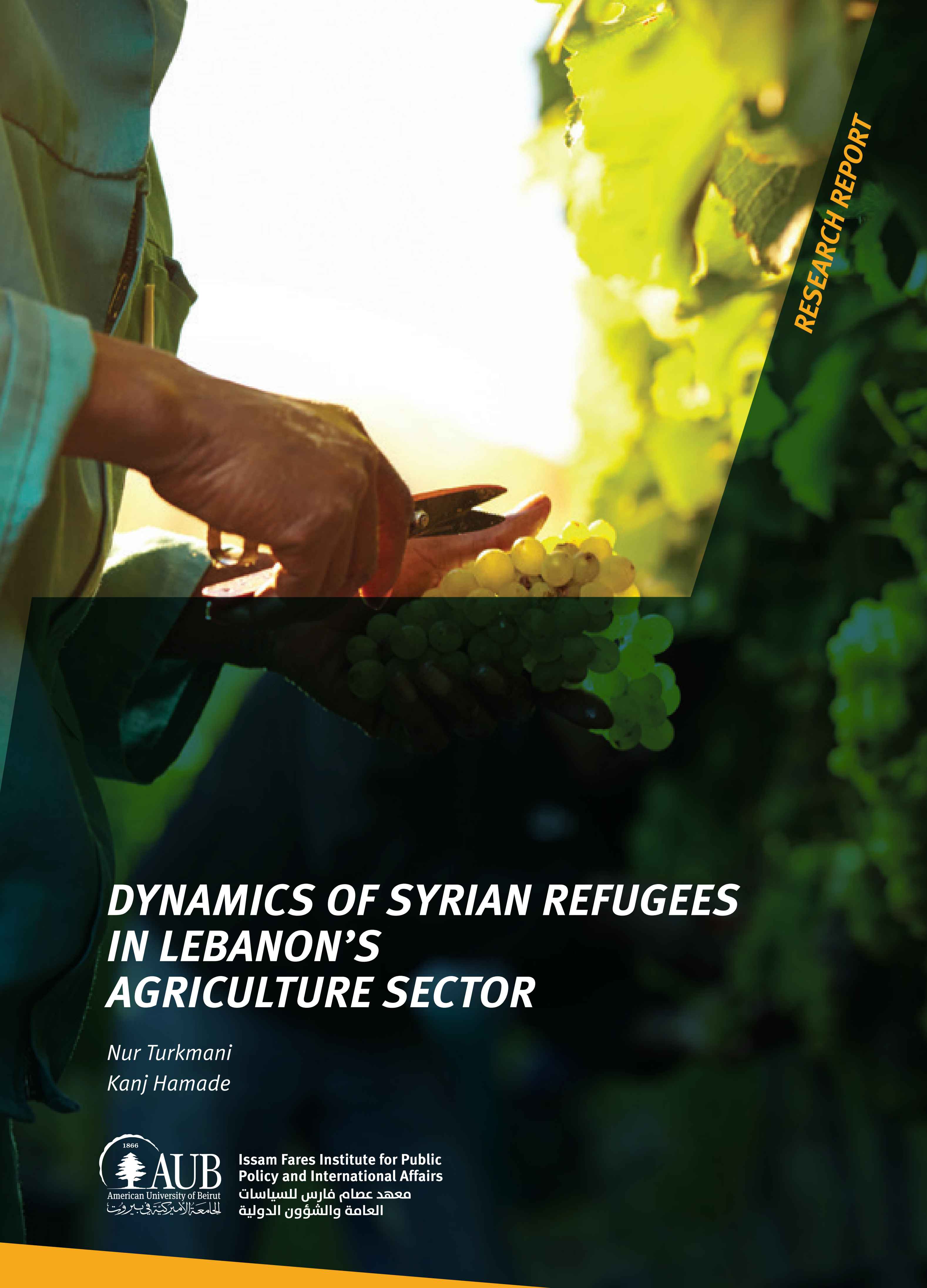

RESEARCH REPORT

DYNAMICS OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON'S AGRICULTURE SECTOR

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to critically examine the dynamic of Syrian refugees in Lebanon's agriculture sector, while studying the capacity of the sector to absorb refugees. It focuses on the informal strategies and processes Syrian refugees use to access employment within the agriculture sector and the labor dynamics and structural challenges that govern Syrian refugees' work. The research method is ethnographic, relying on various empirical tools such as focus group discussions, key informant interviews, field observations, and memos in Akkar, Baalbeck-Hermel, and the Beqaa region. The study finds that the agriculture sector is capable of absorbing refugees because of multiple reasons: the sector's informality, the long history and connection of Syrian workers to Lebanon's agriculture, the dependence of the sector on cheap labor and the lack of competition with Lebanese agriculture workers, the "legality" of refugee work in agriculture, and the investment of international organizations in the sector. At the core of refugees' strategies to access agricultural work is their reliance on social capital and communal networks, the *shaweesh* (community manager), and in rare cases, non-governmental organizations and international organizations. These strategies are key for women, as many did not have previous working experience. The emergence of female-headed households among the refugee community has pushed many women to reluctantly take on jobs in the agriculture sector. While findings show that women do not necessarily enjoy agriculture work, there is an emphasis on the relative feeling of safety on the field, as women are able to work with one another during daytime. Refugee agricultural workers in Lebanon, however, describe feeling trapped in jobs with no security or contract, minimal wages, long working hours, lack of protection, exposure to multiple health hazards, bad working conditions, and cyclical poverty. Despite these shared challenges, the study finds that there are no organized collective networks. In fact, refugees actively distance themselves from any form of mobilization in cases of exploitation, whether from the Syrian *shaweesh* or Lebanese landowners and employers. Yet, there are cases of solidarity, whereby refugees, particularly women, look after and protect one another. This study is important as it depicts how the informality of the agriculture sector, and the ease with which refugees can access it, has led to the "agriculturization" of Syrian refugees.

ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ANERA	American Near East Refugee Aid
AUB	American University of Beirut
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
FGD	Focus group discussion
FHH	Female-headed households
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
ILO	International Labour Organization
IO	International organization
IRC	International Rescue Committee
ISF	Internal Security Forces
LCRP	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
LRI	Lebanese Reforestation Initiative
NGO	Non-governmental organization
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNICEF	United Nations Children’s Fund
VASyR	Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme

INTRODUCTION

A walk through the corners of the capital city delineates the omnipresence of informal economic activities: Vegetable sellers looking for a spot to set up their carts, refugee construction workers scaffolding one of Beirut's high-rise buildings, old Lebanese shop-owners with unregistered *dikkenehs*, taxi drivers rightfully complaining about their limited social security, and female salespersons with no work contracts and long working hours.

The evolution and expansion of Lebanon's informal economy is increasingly being documented (see Fakhri, 2016; Turkmani & Hamade, 2019, forthcoming; Fawaz, 2017; Errighi & Griesse, 2016; Ismail et al., 2018), with multiple reasons as to why it is so entrenched: An uneasy state formation, bureaucracy, disrupted government functions, regional conflict and consequential waves of migration, and several domestic conflicts. Today, with the influx of over a million Syrian refugees into the country, and the ensuing increase of employment-related informality (Ajlouni & Kawar, 2015), there is a dire need to further contextualize 'informality' and understand its many layers.

The agriculture sector in Lebanon is paramount to the discussion of informal employment and will be the main focus of this paper. Upon the arrival of Syrian refugees, a significant number sought work in the fields as agricultural wageworkers. Indeed, in 2012, an assessment conducted by the International Rescue Committee (IRC) and Save the Children in Akkar reported that 20% of Syrian refugee families are employed by the agriculture sector (IRC et al., 2013) and the number has likely increased significantly.

In Lebanon, this oft-ignored sector is considered "legally informal", with no agriculture-related policies enacted since the Fouad Chehab era (1958-1964). Until today, the status of Lebanese farmers has not been legalized and agricultural workers do not fall under the labor law — or any other law, for that matter. This is unsurprising, given the historical trajectory of Lebanon's political economy and its core-periphery dichotomy (see Traboulsi, 1994; Gates, 1989). Yet, it is a critical sector, employing between 5.5 to 6% of the population (UNESCWA, 2016), with over 170,000 part-time and full-time Lebanese farmers and/or landowners and 85,000 agricultural workers (MoA & FAO, 2010) and a significant number of Syrian refugee workers, presumably, around 200,000 Syrian agricultural workers in Lebanon (Hamade, 2017). The agriculture sector, moreover, is one of the most refugee-absorbing sectors (Ajlouni & Kawar, 2015). The International Labour Organization (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2014) suggests that 24% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon work in the agricultural sector, with 70% of them distributed between Akkar, accounting for 34%, and Beqaa, accounting for 36%.

This research is primarily interested in exploring the dynamic of Syrian refugees in agriculture, illustrating the capacity of the sector to absorb refugees. Particularly, we are interested in answering the questions below:

- What informal strategies do Syrian refugees tap into to access employment and initiate livelihoods? What is the hiring process? And why is the agriculture sector refugee-absorbing?

- What are the labor dynamics governing Syrian refugees' work, specifically in relation to women?

Using an ethnographic approach, we intend to focus on the agency of Syrian refugees in the agriculture sector. Specifically, we look at the strategies and processes they undergo to access work in the agriculture sector, in addition to their methods (or lack thereof) of bargaining with the structural challenges they face. In doing so, we are not setting up a hypothetical framework to evidence a phenomenon but rather addressing the 'hows' and 'whys' of refugees' informal employment.

We contribute to a well-established literature on the exploitative dynamics of the agriculture sector and its relation to poverty and migrant labor, in addition to the forms of everyday resistance (Bayat, 1997). However, our added input is the focus on Lebanon's particular context with the surplus of Syrian refugee labor, and the anthropological lens we use to explore and acknowledge refugees' agency, adaption, and coping strategies.

CONTEXT

Syrian refugees in Lebanon face numerous obstacles including the lack of legal documentation, political fear-mongering targeted toward them, inadequate access to healthcare and shelter, and extremely vulnerable economic conditions. The Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees (VASyR) (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], United Nations Children's Fund [UNICEF], & World Food Programme [WFP], 2018) reports that 69% of Syrian refugees are below the poverty line and almost 9 out of 10 of them are indebted. Yet, their access to livelihoods and sustainable income is extremely limited, due to multiple legal limbos (Fawaz et al., 2018; Saghieh, 2015), social and political pressures (Geha & Talhouk, 2018), and a structurally challenged labor market (Jaoude, 2015). At the onset of the Syrian crisis, many refugees were almost entirely dependent on different non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and international organizations, particularly the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), for assistance and registration.

However, with the rapid decrease of funding from these organizations (UNHCR & United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2017) and the protracted nature of the conflict, there has been an urgent need for Syrian refugees to secure their livelihoods on their own. Most Syrian refugees have no alternative but to engage in informal employment, seeking jobs in agriculture, construction, petty trade, and cleaning, with no promises of fair and timely payment, social security, and compensation. In fact, 92% of Syrian refugees work in different sectors of the informal economy without employment contracts and 72% are paid seasonally (Stave & Hillesund, 2015; Fakhri, 2016).

Informality, however, is not new to Lebanon; the World Bank reports that before the crisis erupted, there were already high levels of unemployment and informal labor (World Bank, 2017). The lack of formal, efficient, and legal regulation has pushed Syrian refugees to navigate and adapt to already informal contexts through employing a series of informal strategies in their host communities (Yassin & Chamaa, 2016). The relation between informal labor and refugee or migrant status is crucial to explore here, as many refugees flee from war or other socioeconomic hardships only to be met with obstacles to find economically viable opportunities in their host countries (Dustmann et al., 2017; Banerjee, 1983).

Before the 2011 crisis, Syrian migrant workers also operated informally. Starting from as early as the 1940s, large numbers of Syrian migrants began arriving to Lebanon, mainly to work in agriculture and construction (Chalcraft, 2009). Lebanon's labor market, as such, is intricately embedded with cheap and low-skilled labor. Yet, although Lebanon relies on migrant workers (and refugees), it excludes them from the benefits of the Lebanese labor law (Longuenesse & Tabar, 2014). Syrian migrants and refugees end up with significantly lower wages compared to locals working the same job, in addition to longer working hours, minimal protection and security, and poor working conditions (Turkmani & Hamade, 2019, forthcoming).

Indeed, although to flagrantly different scales, Syrian migrants prior to 2011 also suffered from poor working conditions despite their work being sanctioned by bilateral agreements of economic and social cooperation. A survey conducted before the massive influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon noted that "Syrian migrant farmworkers are among the most marginalized populations in Lebanon, living in poverty, lacking basic legal protections and frequent targets of discrimination" (Habib et al., 2016).

Yet, since 2011, political tensions and fear-mongering have made things much worse for refugees. In 2015, the government enacted policies to freeze the entry of refugees, while limiting the work refugees could access. While previously, the 1993 Agreement for Economic and Social Cooperation between Syria and Lebanon enabled freedom of movement, employment, and residence, today, it is extremely difficult for Syrian refugees to obtain a work permit. Renewing the residency permit is required for a work permit. Yet, renewing the UNHCR registration previously required refugees to sign a pledge not to work[1] and renewing residency under a Lebanese sponsor, who

1 *In 2016, this pledge was changed to a pledge to abide by Lebanese laws. However, Human Rights Watch released a report noting that Lebanon's General Security Office does not always follow through with this change. See more: Human Rights Watch. (2017). Lebanon: New Refugee Policy a Step Forward". Retrieved from: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/02/14/lebanon-new-refugee-policy-step-forward*

would pledge responsibility, requires an annual fee of $200 USD. There is also an option of receiving a housing attestation from the UNHCR for renewing residency, yet this can be difficult to attain. Even if refugees do meet the above requirements, there might be resistance from the government due to fears of economic competition (Yahya et al., 2018). This, coupled with political fear of refugees' integration, has pushed the government to actively disassociate from matters related to refugees' livelihoods[2].

LITERATURE REVIEW

Cheap labor and the agriculture sector

The agricultural sector and its labor force have long been posited as critical to understanding a country's center-periphery relationships and its interactions with local and global economies, in addition to international migrations (Gerbeau & Avallone, 2016). Historically, and on a global scale, the agricultural labor force suffers from exploitative trends (Bonanno & Cavalcanti, 2014; Cánovas, 2014)[3]; in many countries, the sector continues to profit from cheap, temporary, and migrant labor. Across the world, we see a similar story: Mexican laborers in California; Moroccans and Romanians in Mediterranean Europe; Palestinians in Israel; Bangladeshis in Greece; South Americans in New Zealand; and particularly, post-2011, Syrians in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey.

The influx of refugees to a country and the mass migrations of the workforce further complicate our understanding of the labor market and the interactions between state and refugees. The presence of a high number of migrant laborers, who are readily available and flexible, leads to a restructuring in the agriculture sector, as demonstrated in the book Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area. Farmers need seasonal laborers for cheap agricultural labor, but the laborers are also dependent and controlled by rigid legal and economic mechanisms that keep them excluded and continuously rotating, from one informal job to the other. Boeckler and Berndt (2014) argue that the system set in place wants to keep things under its control, while remaining flexible. This allows the informal economy to keep running, with low costs and minimal regulation or intervention by the government necessary.

2 "A National Dialogue Table called for by President Michel Suleiman in 2012 resulted in the Baabda Declaration, which established the Policy of Disassociation from the conflict in Syria" (Geha & Talhouk, 2018). Additionally, a coordinator of the LCRP noted that one of the most contentious points for the government was livelihoods particularly because of fears of economic competition.

3 The quicker pace at which non-farm sectors expand puts the agricultural sector at a disadvantage, consequently leading to increased inequality and income gaps between those two sectors (Otsuka, 2012). This phenomenon, explained by Marxist theorists, is rooted in the industrialization of agriculture and the perpetuation of neoliberal politics leading to urbanization and a rift between rural-urban areas (Clark & Foster, 2009).

The growth of temporary workers is highly linked to migrant – and, in the case of Lebanon recently, refugee – labor. Casual labor, however, "often indicates extreme poverty of smallholder agriculture particularly for women who are overwhelmingly clustered in low-entry, unskilled, and low-return activities" (World Bank Group, 2017). The presence of temporary labor, specifically female workers, makes it easier to avoid market regulations (Katz & Chamorro, 2003). Relevantly, the changing socioeconomic dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa, particularly with the large influx of refugees, has also led to changing gender dynamics.

Livelihood strategies

Livelihoods are the means through which people, put simply, get by. They consist of a household's capabilities, assets, and activities, deployed in order for household members to support themselves (Chambers & Conway, 1992). One useful definition of livelihoods, in relation to refugees in particular, refers to "how people access and mobilize resources enabling them to increase their economic security, thereby reducing the vulnerability created and exacerbated by conflict, and how they pursue goals necessary for survival and possible return" (Jacobsen, 2002; Amirthalingam & Laksham, 2009). Not all livelihood strategies are sustainable; there is a distinction between livelihood strategies and negative coping strategies (which does not concern this specific study). Hence, sustainable livelihood refers to the ability of a person to adapt, cope, and recover from external shocks, while also contributing to other livelihoods locally and globally. Today, sustainable livelihood is a framework used in rural development projects, poverty reduction, and sustainability studies to better understand how internally displaced persons and refugees support themselves economically and socially.

While several studies – most of which are commissioned by humanitarian organizations, NGOs, and donors – look at the agricultural sector in Lebanon and examine the exploitation faced by Syrian refugees, there is a huge gap in the literature when it comes to analyzing or exploring refugees' actual strategies within the sector itself, and the changes occurring within the sector. Certainly, a lot of attention has been put into understanding transnational mobility in the Mediterranean countries, as detailed by the book, "Migration and Agriculture: Mobility and Change in the Mediterranean Area" (see, for instance, Cole & Booth, 2007; Michalon & Morice, 2008; Crenn & Tersigni, 2013; Colloca & Corrado, 2013), but there has been less attention focused on the agency and processes refugees engage in. Thus, this study focuses on Lebanon's particular context of agriculture and Syrian refugees, while acknowledging the wide body of literature – situating agriculture and its labor force within market forces, the tense relationship between refugees and states, and shifting gender dynamics in agriculture.

METHODOLOGY

The research method relies on a qualitative approach with engaged observation, balancing between various empirical tools such as focus group discussions, field observations, key informant interviews, and memos to interpret and understand the research topic at hand. At the heart of the approach was the commitment to ethnographically record and report the perspectives and experiences of the subjects themselves (i.e., Syrian agricultural workers and Lebanese farmers). In line with this commitment, the experiences of people understudy were prioritized over analytical frameworks (see Emerson et al., 1995).

Specifically, nine focus group discussions (FGDs) were carried out from October to December 2018 in Akkar (Minieh and rural Akkar), Baalbeck-Hermel (Baalbeck), and the Beqaa (Saadnayel and Qaa). The locations were selected because of their agricultural significance, historical marginalization and impoverishment, and refugee-dense populations (ILO, 2014; UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2018)[4]. All three areas account for the highest distribution of farms (25% in Baalbeck-Hermel, 18% in Beqaa, and 16% in Akkar). FGDs were disaggregated by gender and, to the best of the researchers' ability, included different 'types' of agricultural workers, i.e., some worked with a *shaweesh*, some were single females and headed a home on their own, some had other informal jobs like construction, etc. Focus groups attempted to include a combination of Syrian agricultural workers who arrived as refugees but had worked in farms before, agricultural workers with previous work experience in Lebanon, and refugees who were plunged into the agriculture sector as a means of attaining income. In addition, fourteen in-depth interviews were held: Eight with Lebanese farmers, two with Lebanese agricultural workers, and four with Syrian *shaweesh*. Finally, seven key informant interviews were conducted with experts, including urban specialists, a Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) coordinator, a civil servant working at the Ministry of Agriculture, an informality specialist, an NGO worker specialized in education, and a gender expert.

4 *ILO. (2014). Assessment of the impact of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their employment profile. Beirut, LB: International Labour Organization Regional Office for the Arab States.*

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Agriculture as an informal, refugee-absorbing sector

A combination of various factors, rooted in informal dynamics, has enabled the Lebanese agriculture sector to readily absorb Syrian refugees: their long history of agricultural work in Lebanon, the alleged lack of competition with Lebanese agricultural workers in comparison to other sectors, a strong need for cheap labor, the "legality" of Syrian refugees working in agriculture, and the related prevalence of NGOs and international organizations (IOs) investing in the sector.

Informally formal

As is the case in most developing and emerging countries, Lebanon's agriculture sector is extremely informal. The country's agriculture sector has long depended on cheap labor, employing a large number of Syrian workers both prior to and during the crisis. The state's historical lack of rural investment, coupled with Lebanon's imbalanced geographical and economic development and the overall pervasiveness of the informal economy, has resulted in a de-facto informal dynamic in the agriculture sector. This informality has also been hampered by inadequate infrastructure, limited access to finance, political corruption, and a continuous cycle of social and political conflict. More importantly, as an agricultural expert put it, it is an informality that is approved and, to a certain extent, regulated by the government itself. This is in large part due to the competitiveness of the agriculture sector due to the low wages and its relative self-autonomy.

Indeed, there have been no agricultural policies since 1959, and the status of agricultural farmers has not yet been legalized. Agricultural farmers in Lebanon do not fall under the labor law. Lebanese farmers reiterated the pervasive informality they operate in, from the production to the lack of legally recognized businesses. On the one hand, it is perceived as a huge cause of poverty in rural areas but on the other hand, both farmers and experts note that the informality of the agriculture sector creates a flexibility that enables inclusivity. One expert put it as such, "The informality

of the agriculture sector is one of the main reasons explaining its resilience and [its] ability to be more inclusive of Syrian refugees, including women."

A long history of Syrian agricultural work in Lebanon

Since the mid-20th century, Syrian men have sought work in Lebanon. Predominantly, they worked in the fields of agriculture and industry, settling for long months in mostly rural areas before returning to Syria for a break. In his timely book, 'The Invisible Cage', Chalcraft (2009) explores the factors that resulted in Syrians' migration to Lebanon: The short traveling distance, a neoliberal Lebanese market with higher wages, and limited legal restrictions on Syrians migrating and working. Significantly, farms in Syria were largely family-run and self-subsistent; as such, there was minimal income generated from farms in Syria and rural Syrians with agricultural know-how sought agricultural work in Lebanon. Although the migration process has had different sets of challenges, given the continuously changing political climate (i.e., the Lebanese civil war, the Syrian military occupation, the assassination of former prime minister, Rafiq Hariri), Syrian migrant workers have always been a critical component of the Lebanese agriculture sector. The post-civil war reconstruction period during the 90s pooled in between 400,000 and 1.4 million Syrian migrants working in agriculture and construction (Gambill, 2001). In fact, prior to 2011, 54% of the agricultural workforce in the Beqaa was comprised of Syrian migrants, while in Akkar, 90% were migrants (most of whom were likely to be Syrians) (IRC et al., 2013).

Certainly, a significant number of Syrian agricultural workers interviewed had a history of agricultural work in Lebanon. Asem[5], a 40-year-old *shaweesh* in the Beqaa Valley, recalled how over twenty years ago, he would accompany his father during work visits to Lebanon. Sleeping in a rented house with several other Syrians from Eastern Ghouta, Asem's father would negotiate with Lebanese farmers what to grow and how best to do it. Even after his father passed, Asem continued coming to Lebanon for several months a year to work in different areas around the Beqaa. After the breakout of the war, the landowner he had worked with sponsored Asem[6]. Mohamad from Hama has a similar story, although unlike Asem, he is not sponsored. In the winter, he and his brother would move to Lebanon to work in green houses in Akkar. Syria's winter months, according to Mohamad, were too dry for the green houses that his family specifically worked on. For Mohamad, Asem, and several others, Lebanon's arable lands, farming seasons, and weather temperaments were all too familiar. This has meant that Syrian agricultural workers with previous experience in Lebanon know the best farming practices and understand how best to deal with landowners. This makes the presence of Syrian agricultural workers much more desirable than that of Syrians working in other sectors.

There was also a palpable sense of safety in rural areas, emphasized during the discussions. One man put it best by saying, "We are far from trouble. We are by our people here in settlements and the mountains and land are close to us." A woman in Akkar, when asked whether she prefers urban areas to rural ones said, "The mountains make me feel closer to home. In the city, no one cares who you are." Particularly in Akkar, there was discussion on how culturally similar Syrians and Lebanese were. Although this is possibly linked to political and religious synchronicity, it holds true that many Syrians feel relatively at ease in Akkar.

"Syrian workers do the jobs Lebanese don't want to do"

FGDs elicited the widespread aphorism that "Syrian workers tend to do jobs that Lebanese workers don't want to do." As aforementioned, Syrian migrants have historically occupied the majority of working positions in the agriculture sector, particularly that of low-skilled labor. Relative to other sectors, such as services, this decreases the level of competition or perception of competition between Lebanese and Syrians in the field of agriculture. Specifically, discussions with Lebanese farmers illustrated how unappealing semi-skilled or low-skilled agricultural work was for Lebanese. The reasons cited were the low wages, long working hours, lack of social security,

5 All participants' names have been changed to protect their anonymity.

6 Under the Lebanese sponsorship system, the Lebanese sponsor holds a large amount of control and is responsible for the legal status, health care, accommodation, and work permission of the Syrian refugee they are sponsoring. Syrian refugees under sponsors report high levels of exploitation (see Danish Refugee Council et. al, 2019).

and the propensity to find employment in better positions. Lebanese, therefore, were more likely to own the land and do part-time work in beekeeping or apple picking and hire Syrians to do the hard labor. Moreover, Lebanese workers were more likely to engage in different aspects of the agricultural value chain (i.e., packaging, distribution, and sales).

A critical reason why the agriculture sector can absorb a large number of refugees is because agricultural work is not perceived as a threat to Lebanese workers and the local economy by the government. Since the arrival of Syrian refugees to Lebanon, the Lebanese government has erected multiple walls to prevent them from accessing a variety of jobs in Lebanon. In December 2014, the Ministry of Labor released a circular that limited Syrians from working in sectors other than construction, cleaning, and agriculture (Yahya et al., 2018). For this reason, many Syrian agricultural workers pointed out that they felt "safer" than Syrians working in services, or those owning shops. In an FGD in the Minieh area, two participants discussed how they did not carry the burden that other Syrians did in their workplace. They recounted the multiple stories they had heard of Syrian shops closing down or Syrians being fired from their jobs on the spot. While they faced their own set of hazards and were exploited by landowners or *shaweesh*, they did not face the looming fear of being thrown into jail because of their occupation per se.

Investment in the sector

Due to these intersecting legal and social factors, NGOs and IOs tend to actively invest in the agriculture sector, particularly on projects related to livelihood opportunities, social cohesion, and community building. International organizations, from Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), American Near East Refugee Aid (ANERA) and Mercy Corps to the ILO and AVSI, and local organizations, such as MADA, engage in different projects ranging from technical agricultural classes, linking Syrian refugees to Lebanese landowners, and investing in agricultural projects by Syrian refugees. A key informant interviewee, a representative of a vocational training school in the Beqaa area, noted that agricultural training is the only one that potentially leads to stable employment, particularly for women. "All these sewing and cooking classes… […]. For what? Most of the time they cannot work in this. If you teach a woman or a man how to work on the land, they can start something. They can work directly […]. This actually provides them with income." Indeed, in fields other than agriculture, construction, and cleaning, it is extremely difficult to hire Syrians, even those with residence permits. A key requirement is that employers prove that a Lebanese candidate is unable to fill the position (Yahya et al., 2018). As such, the prescribed legality of agricultural work enables organizations to invest in sustainable livelihoods as opposed to null trainings. One Lebanese farmer, for instance, noted that when he started his small organic farming venture, he contacted several vocational training schools to ask for agricultural workers who have received training on organic methods.

Mapping access to employment

At the crack of dawn, Syrians come out of their tents or homes to wait for the *shaweesh* to arrive with his truck. Other times, they walk towards their *shaweesh* or the plot of land they will be working in, hands enveloped in their spouse's or child's. Depending on the season, their gender, and location, Syrian workers irrigate, prepare the land, pick olives and grow eggplants, harvest potatoes, and spray pesticides. How do Syrians in rural areas access employment in the agriculture sector? Certainly, at the heart of this answer is social networks, personal relations, and the infamous *shaweesh*.

Lebanon's tense legal and political situation makes Syrian refugees' livelihood strategies very limited. For instance, one research (Correa-Velez et al., 2013) looks at refugees in Australia in an attempt to understand predictors of employment. They find that the region of birth, the amount of time spent in the country, informal networks and job service providers, and owning a car were key to finding a job. In Lebanon, Syrian refugees are all *kasreen* (i.e., they have not paid their sponsorship fees) and are met with discrimination and, at times, are arrested when they cross checkpoints from one area in Lebanon to the other. Their mobility is highly limited, and owning a car is rare. Moreover, financial assistance has been significantly decreasing. In such a context, where there are multiple barriers, what do they depend on for finding jobs?

The first section details how the informal structure of Lebanon's agriculture sector, which has long depended on Syrian workers, readily absorbs refugees. Today, there is a dependence on cheap labor

that is usually supplied by Syrian refugees. However, now that we have covered the structural element, this paper will investigate the strategies themselves.

Social capital

Fieldwork and observation illustrate that refugees' pursuit of livelihoods is highly reliant on their social capital, considered in livelihood research as a key asset (Jacobson, 2006). This capital refers to connections, financial support, material and emotional support, and broader employment networks.

Firstly, there is a tendency for Syrian refugees to move to areas where the predominant sect is similar to theirs. For instance, in Baalbeck, refugees reiterated that they preferred to live in Sunni areas as there was less likelihood for there to be negative interactions or tensions with the host community. Hopkins (2006), in his research, shows that refugees take into account the presence of like-minded communities when making a choice about where to settle. In Lebanon, refugees prefer areas where there is already an existing Syrian community, specifically in areas where there is easier access to informal jobs. Syrians from rural areas are also likely to move to rural areas in Lebanon, such as the Beqaa and Akkar, because in addition to feeling more accustomed to the "rural way", they can try their luck with agricultural work. There is also a sense of safety and connection in rural areas, distanced from the busy and more politically tense urbanized areas.

In the areas under study, we also found there is active effort amongst refugees to create a sense of community even amongst one another, especially in informal tented settlements where interaction with host communities is extremely limited. Syrians from different geographic areas and, in some cases, with different political opinions, form strong family-like bonds between one another. In this sense, when one person finds an agricultural project to work on, they try to involve other neighbors or family members from within the settlement they live in. In one FGD, we were told that settlements had become a hodgepodge of Syrians from Aleppo, Homs, Idlib, Raqqa, etc., and they all had found ways to live collectively in the settlements with as much harmony as possible. "That doesn't mean fights do not happen," one man in Saadnayel said, "but we know that outside here [the settlement] we are easily targeted; so we try to maintain calm. We do not want trouble." This social cohesion amongst refugees is a key capital for emotional, social, and, at times, financial support.

Moreover, the refugees have adopted inter-household economic and social networks in the camp. They exchange products of daily use with their neighboring households and lend and borrow money from them. Those who are already settled in the camps help newly settled refugees to find employment in the labor market. These networks provide a safety net built on mutual aid and help in coping with limited income generating opportunities and social insecurity. All this contributes to economic survival and secure livelihoods. The camp refugees also borrow from moneylenders, mortgage their jewelry in local shops, and sell livestock in the local market. We can say that the availability of such loans and trade activities are strongly dependent on social relations between both sides.

Shaweesh

Generally, in rural areas, Syrian refugees seeking agricultural work have a straightforward, albeit informal, process. Many live in informal tented settlements supervised by a *shaweesh*. The *shaweesh* structure is a relic of pre-2011, when Syrians would arrive to Lebanon for seasonal labor and one person would usually recruit and overlook a group of Syrian workers. Today, the *shaweesh* is the informal supervisor or representative of a settlement with previous connections to local authorities or landowners. Usually, the *shaweesh* rents a plot of land from a Lebanese and looks over the setting up of tents, collects rents, and liaises with aid distributors, the municipality, or even governmental authorities such as the internal security forces (ISF). In some cases, the *shaweesh* has no previous connections but is informally selected because of his or her strong personality and negotiation skills. Many *shaweesh* organize agricultural work, given the demand in rural areas for cheap labor. As such, they liaise with a Lebanese landowner, a Lebanese coordinator (called a *wakeel*) or a group of Lebanese farmers. The hierarchy of agricultural work is usually as followed: a Lebanese landowner owns a plot of land and recruits a Lebanese *wakeel*, who then informally contracts or works with a Syrian *shaweesh*, who then organizes Syrian agricultural workers.

There are cases, however, whereby Syrian refugees are supervised by a *shaweesh* who does not oversee

agricultural work. For instance, in one of Saadnayel's settlements, a group of female agricultural workers mentioned that their *shaweesh*, who was a woman, simply dealt with rent and aid distribution matters. Similarly, there are also many cases of Syrian refugees living in residential buildings. In 2012, Rayana, a widow, arrived to Akkar with her family from rural Homs. In Syria, she never really worked but would sometimes help her late husband with livestock. After moving into a shared accommodation close to Halba, she asked around how she could get a job. Her neighbors all suggested that it was best to liaise with the *shaweesh* from a nearby settlement, as finding an agricultural job without his help would be challenging. Since then, she has been working for that *shaweesh* on different agricultural projects. Generally, it was agreed that working through a *shaweesh*, while with its own set of challenges, could be more stable.

Some agricultural workers, even without previous work experience, might work directly with the landowner but this appeared as quite uncommon in the Beqaa. Women, particularly, prefer that the *shaweesh* acts as a middleman because "he is Syrian, just like us." Additionally, many workers have heard of other Syrians who have been heavily exploited under the hands of a Lebanese employer. One agricultural worker in Akkar put it best, "I'd rather be exploited by someone from my country, right?" In Akkar, however, given that agricultural work is more dispersed and less structured, it was more common to find agricultural workers taking on random projects with Lebanese farmers. For instance, Ahmad and his wife Amina, who have no background in agriculture, asked their neighbor – who was a farmer – if they could help him on his plot of land. For three weeks, they picked olives not too far from the house.

The importance of social networks is depicted as the most efficient way of finding jobs given the informality of agriculture. Those closer to the *shaweesh*, for example, are told about a new, better agricultural project. As such, one FGD participant, Amara, noted that many agricultural households try to get closer to the *shaweesh* so he "keeps them at the top of the list in case a new job opportunity comes up." Additionally, people from the same family tell each other of job opportunities, as do neighbors and friends. In one case, a Syrian refugee, Bassam, worked on an organic farming project funded by an NGO. Once his job was more stable, he brought in his cousin to work alongside him.

Non-governmental organizations, international organizations, and municipalities

In the absence of state assistance to refugees, NGOs and IOs have been playing a significant role in refugee-dense areas. The government's policy of disassociation, in addition to some ruling political parties' inflammatory discourse on refugees, creates a huge gap that is filled by the UNHCR and a myriad of other NGOs. However, livelihoods are still the biggest point of tension amongst NGOs, as was noted by a livelihoods coordinator at an international organization. The reason is that organizations have to abide by the government's policies about the jobs limited to refugees, and have to ensure a certain level of social cohesion between refugees and host community members. Many Lebanese perceive the financial assistance that refugees receive as a threat to them, and, following bouts of unsettlement in many villages and regions, NGOs and IOs have had to be more careful about their intervention. Yet, despite that, there are many refugees who rely almost entirely on NGOs and IOs financial assistance, such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and UNHCR's multi-purpose cash assistance and/or the International Committee of the Red Cross' (ICRC) winter cash assistance. Other organizations also contribute in cash and/or in-kind assistance for refugees' livelihoods. Several NGOs – whether grassroots or more institutional – play a significant role in connecting refugees to job owners, conducting relevant agricultural (and life skills) training, and even offering training in budget-keeping and financial management. However, there are always limits to the training as for many refugees, they cannot easily work in the private sector or start their own businesses.

Lebanese-Syrian solidarity

Although this was rare, in cases whereby it did exist, Lebanese-Syrian solidarity was a key strategy for refugees. To start with, Syrian migrant workers with previous work experience in Lebanon are those most likely to find jobs upon arrival to Lebanon. As was the case with Asem and Mohamad, previous agricultural migrant workers (who worked in Lebanon) might become *shaweesh*, or contact landowners with whom they have worked with, or return to an area familiar to them. In a focus group in Baalbeck, a group of relatives fled from Al Qusair to Baalbeck in 2013. Before the outbreak of war, some of the men had worked in the village of Deir el Ahmar, 12 km northeast of Baalbeck. After settling in, they

continued some of their work directly with the Lebanese landowner rather than taking the common route of connecting with a *shaweesh*. Generally, they noted that Lebanese farmers prior to 2011 preferred to hire a family of farmers and pay them directly as opposed to having to pay *shaweesh* wages. Some of their wives, sisters, and children are also harvesting crops in Deir el Ahmar. They also noted that when they first arrived, they worked on their pre-2011 contract; but after the 2015 restrictions, many of them registered as refugees because that made it easier to access financial aid, healthcare services, and other benefits like food donations. Indeed, not all previous Syrian migrants are as lucky. Several interviewed said there were stark changes in Lebanon over the last couple of years, making it difficult for them to have any form of stable employment.

There were also cases, like Saadnayel, for example, where Syrians relied on Lebanese landowners to connect them to other landowners in need of work. We predict Lebanese-Syrian solidarity is more likely in urban areas, where there is more daily interaction. While social relationships are rare, work-based relationships between Lebanese and Syrians are not.

Labor dynamics

This section explores the labor dynamics of Syrian refugees within the agriculture sector, looking particularly at the wage distribution, gender division of work and family structures, patterns and layers of exploitation, and expressions of solidarity and collective organizing.

Wages

For Syrian agricultural workers, salaries have always been abysmally low, with differences depending on gender, age, and location. More often than not, if the *shaweesh* manages the work, he deducts a fixed amount from the salary – usually around 2,000 LBP per person, per day. Generally speaking, in the Beqaa and Akkar, daily wages for male agricultural workers are 10,000 LBP if they work directly with a landowner and 8,000 LBP if they work with a *shaweesh*. For female agricultural workers, it is around 6,000 LBP whether they work with a landowner or *shaweesh*. Children, who tend to work only through a *shaweesh*, earn between 4,000 LBP to 6,000 LBP a day, with girls usually earning 4,000 LBP and boys earning 6,000 LBP. Based on the interviews and FGDs, wages are slightly higher in the Beqaa than Akkar, and have been this way even before 2011. For instance, male and female agricultural workers in Akkar might earn as little as 7,000 LBP and 5,000 LBP a day respectively, regardless of whether they work with a *shaweesh* or landlord. Certainly, in Akkar, wages are less standardized and there is more room for salary differences between agricultural workers. A number of women interviewed in Akkar, who work with different landowners depending on what projects are available, are paid between 1,500 LBP to 2,000 LBP an hour.

Prior to the refugee crisis, when Syrian migrants arrived for work in Lebanon, their salaries were usually fixed on a one-month or 15-day basis. In the Beqaa, previous Syrian agricultural workers reported earning more prior to 2011, approximately 3,500 LBP per hour. Others noted that there has not been much of a wage change as even then, they [male workers] earned around 10,000 LBP a day. "What has changed," Samih said, "is the number of days we can work. Before, we were usually guaranteed to work for an uninterrupted month or two. [...] Now, it is once a week if we're lucky." Agricultural workers in Akkar shared a similar observation, although they noted wages pre- and post-2011 have mostly been unchanged. The high number of refugees looking to work in agriculture has, indeed, led to a decrease of working hours and days, particularly in the Beqaa.

However, in both Akkar and the Beqaa, previous agricultural workers noted that the *shaweesh* is taking a higher margin of profit than he used to. One woman in Akkar noted that before 2011, she used to make 2,000 LBP an hour and the *shaweesh* would take 500 liras but today the *shaweesh* takes 750 liras an hour. Some *shaweesh* denied this, but others noted they have indeed increased their profit, citing the maintenance work in settlements, increased competition, and higher cost of living as reasons. One Lebanese farmer, Jaber, said, "Believe me, the *shaweesh* are mafias. I know of a *shaweesh* that makes $300,000 USD a year. They take from each worker every day and they take from us as well."

Lebanese agricultural workers, although relatively rare in comparison to Syrian agricultural workers, earn more and are usually given higher-skilled work. Prior to 2011, they earned between 20,000 to 40,000 LBP a day (with wages in Akkar being on the lower end of the spectrum). Today, Lebanese agricultural workers interviewed note they are paid less (although they are in the same 20,000 to 40,000

LBP range). One Lebanese worker in the Beqaa, Khaled, said before 2011, he earned 35,000 LBP a day – today, he earns 25,000 LBP. He, along with other Lebanese agricultural workers, blamed this on the pervasiveness of cheap labor, which has driven down wages.

Gender division and family structures

There is no one specific way of working; it is usually organized based on verbal discussions with the *shaweesh* or landowner. Generally, if a family lives in an informal tented settlement with a *shaweesh* who has a deal with a landowner, refugees work to cover rent. They might split work between family members, or the man might work all the months. In a similar vein to bonded labor, the *shaweesh* takes a portion of refugees' salary and the rest goes to rent; if workers do overtime, the *shaweesh* pays them or covers their debts at a supermarket. Sometimes the *shaweesh* himself owns the shop. In cases where refugees work with landowners or *shaweesh*, they might choose to work less or agree on a schedule.

As for the division of work between males, females, and children, it is largely based on pre-2011 arrangements. Women and children tend to cultivate, harvest, grow, and maintain crops, with women usually engaging with more detail-oriented work, such as weeding and sowing. On the other hand, older boys (15 or 16+) and men are responsible for spraying pesticides, netting, constructing greenhouses, and other "hard-work" labor such as using heavy machines and moving crops from one location to the other. Work shifts largely depended on the project and season at hand but were usually between 7 in the morning to 2 in the afternoon. Sometimes, they would take a one-hour break and work until 5:00 pm.

Family structures differed largely from one household to the other, depending on which village or city in Syria they came from, whether they had a background in agriculture, and the contextual gender ideologies. In some families, both husbands and wives worked. In cases where both are working together, the landowner pays the man or the *shaweesh* deals with him directly. Yet, the large number of female-headed households (FHH) has also pushed women to leading roles in agriculture. One family in Akkar, who had hailed from Idlib, said they (both spouses) worked together on their land. Yet, both noted that the woman worked because "it was fun, not a responsibility." They added that agricultural work for them is tough and tiring, and they are sometimes forced to do tasks they never had to do back in Syria. In other families, for instance those from Homs and rural Homs, it is considered "shameful" for women to work. Having to confront these assumptions, upon arrival to Lebanon, was difficult for many women and men and one male agricultural worker in Akkar said, "Even though we need the extra money, I still wouldn't let my wife work. This goes against my belief."

One of the biggest changes within Syrian family structures was the emergence of FHHs due to the many men who died, were displaced, or were unable to take on the role of breadwinner and public decision-maker in the household. VASyR (UNHCR, UNICEF, & WFP, 2018) reports that females head 18% of refugee households in Lebanon, with 55% of FHH not having any member working. In female-run households, with no able-bodied males in their family and no financial assistance, women and girls may be forced into agricultural work, many times against their desires. They end up having to juggle between household work, childcare, and agricultural work. When asked whether the income they make empowers them in anyway, the majority said it does not because they usually do not have cash in their hands – most of the money goes into the rent of the tent and paying debts to supermarkets and/or pharmacies.

Yet, some of the female agricultural workers reported finding joy in their work. Although they returned home exhausted and many times sunburnt, they created strong friendships and enjoyed laughing together on the field. Many women prefer not to leave the settlement area, as they perceive Lebanon as a foreign place where they are easily judged and held accountable for their actions. As such, the field is a 'safe' space for them, where they can spend time together and share their challenges and hopes with one another. This was especially the case for those who were unmarried with fewer responsibilities. A group of female neighbors in Minieh sometimes work together and laugh at the *shaweesh* behind their back. Fieldwork also showed that there were sprouts of female *shaweesh*, some of whom are also liaising agricultural work. Although female *shaweesh* remains a rare phenomenon, it indicates the growing 'independence' and leadership roles that women have taken on within their communities.

There were also a few cases of Syrian-led family farms, one in Qaa and the other in the Minieh-Akkar area. In Minieh-Akkar, a small plot of land was leased

by Jaafar. Jaafar, who used to work previously in both the Beqaa and Akkar, settled permanently in Lebanon in 2013 with his wife. In 2014, he married his cousin because "she had beautiful eyes, but I also needed an extra pair of hands in the land." Today, Jaafar, along with Bari'a and Ranya, work on the plot of land. Usually, one of them stays at home with the children while the other works on the field, with Jaafar directing them. However, the two women laugh during the interview and note that they both work more than Jaafar does. A similar case was witnessed in Qaa, whereby Samih, Amani, and their two children work and look over a farm. Although most of their work is a form of subsistence farming, they sell some of their produce to Lebanese traders.

Because most agricultural workers are daily laborers with unstable income, the majority of them have no capital or savings to invest in livestock, open a shop, or distribute final products. This is made even more difficult due to residency restrictions. Additionally, there are legal limitations regarding opening a shop, coupled with restricted movement due to the lack of legal documents. However, one agricultural worker in Akkar, who arrived with some savings from Syria and established a good relationship with a Lebanese landowner went on to rent land from him. Overall, Ahmad said he had a good relationship with the landowner who, as long as Ahmad was paying monthly rent, gave him the freedom to grow and sell vegetables without asking for profit.

Patterns of exploitation

Agricultural workers face multiple layers of exploitation, with no job security or insurance, sick day leaves, compensation, or protection from agricultural hazards.

Health-related issues

The sheer presence of such a high number of refugees in settlements means that if a worker is sick, he or she could easily be replaced. Certainly, a huge worry for many of them is the physically exhausting work they engage in and the consequent health hazards. This was particularly elaborated on by women, many of whom must work during pregnancy and menstruation. Some of the general health issues reported were sunburns, back pains, and infections due to exposure to pesticides. Additionally, the long hours of uncomfortable bending, kneeling, and carrying goods resulted in musculoskeletal diseases. Because medicine is usually expensive and the UNHCR does not cover all healthcare needs, there is also fear that they will not be able to treat any illnesses or diseases. This is worsened by the household living conditions within settlements, unfinished buildings, hidden garages, and squat apartments, which are highly susceptible to flooding and have poor ventilation, indoor dampness, and bad electricity. Indeed, a study by a team of researchers at AUB (Habib et al., 2016) collected data on 290 Syrian migrant agricultural workers, which indicated a strong relation between household living conditions and multi-morbidity. They found that the poorly constructed dwellings correlate with both direct and indirect consequences on health, spurring from headaches, fever, vomiting, to infectious diseases, such as tuberculosis and hepatitis, and asthma.

Unchecked power of the *shaweesh*

Another pervasive phenomenon was that many times, workers were not paid. There were multiple stories shared about being verbally contracted by Lebanese landowners who did not pay the promised amount. Workers also said it was common to be cheated by a *shaweesh*. Sometimes, a *shaweesh* paid them for less days than what they worked. Several women also discussed how "cheap" a *shaweesh* can be. "If I leave one hour early because my stomach hurts, he immediately deducts [...] Imagine!" Tanya exclaimed in an FGD in Qaa, after which Tamara added, "The problem with the *shaweesh* is he counts every hour, so if we go home early, he would put it down in his mental memory!" Indeed, several other women, particularly those in the Beqaa, described their *shaweesh* as a bully who was always waiting for them to err. Sometimes the *shaweesh* differentiated between residents, depending on his relationship with them. One woman in Saadnayel told a story of how her friend in the settlement was nearly evicted by the *shaweesh* because she stopped working (due to back pains) and was no longer receiving financial assistance from the UNHCR. The *shaweesh* gave her one week to return to work or leave the camp. Yet, her neighbor, who was married to the *shaweesh*'s friend, had not paid rent for two months and the *shaweesh* had not threatened to evict her.

A gender expert, with extensive work on refugee-related matters, noted that by default, the unchecked power the *shaweesh* has over a settlement's refugees could be detrimental for women's safety. She added that women working with the *shaweesh* might fear

speaking up against him, as he is sometimes their sole link to a job or aid distribution. Other women, however, spoke highly of their *shaweesh* noting how without him or her, they would not find work. One woman in Qaa noted, “Some people like to complain about their *shaweesh*, but no one is forcing you to work. A *shaweesh* of course has their interests. We all do. At least the *shaweesh* can protect us if something goes wrong.” Most female agricultural workers interviewed prefer to work with a *shaweesh* as opposed to with a landowner directly. The reason is that a *shaweesh* is usually Syrian and understands their plight, whereas a Lebanese landowner might not only exploit them but also look down on them as Syrian women. Some said, “The best thing about a *shaweesh* is he provides a job and you’re less worried about having to look for one.”

Gender-based harassment

Despite its reported existence, sexual harassment was a delicate topic to discuss in FGDs and was avoided by participants. Yet, experts indicate that many women face harassment on their way to and from work, in the transportation buses, and sometimes from the *shaweesh*. One mother, Fatina, noted that she never lets her daughters go to work alone without their brothers because she did not want them to be kidnapped or harassed. Women also complained of the low wages and long working hours and said that many times gender-related challenges were not taken into consideration. Some of the examples they gave were pregnancy, having to cook for their children, or having to return home before it was dark. Interestingly, several women interviewed justified the fact that they were paid less, noting that it was because they undertook less physically demanding labor than men. However, those were exceptions; most interviewed women argued that they are unsurprised that they are paid less or that their gender-related challenges are not prioritized. They blamed this on the general lack of consideration given to women. One woman said, “Women have it worse in everything – you think there will be equality in the agricultural sector?”

Child labor

Additionally, a dangerously growing phenomenon within agriculture is the pervasiveness of child labor, observed in Baalbeck, the Beqaa and Akkar (but mostly in the Beqaa). During the potato seasons, hundreds of children were seen returning to their settlements at sunset, with bent backs and in rubbery slippers. Some of these children were as young as eight or seven. An NGO worker reported that during specific seasons – most notably the potato one – many children do not attend school. “It’s a huge challenge,” he said, “to convince families to send their children to school. And who do you blame? The parents? Or the overall situation? Of course, the overall situation.” He added that half of Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are out of school and the Beqaa region has witnessed extremely high rates of drop out, with children working in agriculture. Indeed, several studies report that child labor is becoming more and more common (Save the Children & UNICEF, 2015; FAO & REACH, 2015). A few employers employ children because of the cheaper labor, the easier management and longer working hours, and the minimal level of experience needed to complete some agricultural tasks (FAO & ILO, 2017). Although the minimum employment age in the Lebanese Labor Code is fourteen, many children below that age are working. Additionally, the Code sets various protection measures for children above the age of fourteen, yet there is minimal enforcement of this (World Vision, 2018).

Resistance or survival?

Notably, both male and female Syrian workers all articulated the various legal barriers they faced and the immense lack of protection from their employers or *shaweesh*. However, many reported not being able to protest the unfairness. One worker in Akkar put it poignantly, “When you’re hungry, you do not care about insurance.” Most refugees noted having no option but “accepting” this fate. There were no organized collective networks that we came across. Many Syrian refugees shy away from the word ‘organizing’ as such; however, there were clearly forms of solidarity or survival strategies, whereby women take care of each other or women work together to protect themselves from sexual exploitation. There were a couple of cases that also delineated solidarity – for instance, one woman was bullied by a *shaweesh*, and the next day her friend stayed home with her as an act of solidarity. However, they both laughed because the week after they both returned to work after the *shaweesh* had given them a warning. Another man in Akkar noted that if you pick out extra oranges on the day at a field, you share a basket with your neighbor, knowing that your neighbor will share olives with you the week after. There is little collective bargaining power because of how high the stakes are for refugees

(refoulement, jail, eviction, etc.), in addition to a history of dictatorship that limited Syrians' capacity to develop a culture of unionizing or bargaining. Even within the settlements themselves, refugees rarely stand up to the *shaweesh* because, at the end of the day, the *shaweesh* has the final word and can prevent aid from reaching them or not employ them for agricultural work. One agricultural worker in Akkar, Wadih, summarized it, "We left because we are revolutionaries. But now we are here as refugees, not revolutionaries [...] Here, there is no room to resist any system."

As such, collective resistance is near impossible given all the legal and political barriers. Abdelmalek Sayad, who extensively discussed the immigration of North Africans to Europe, refers to migrants (and refugees, by extension) as an invisible, alien workforce, who are external to the state and the state's citizens. That is, they are "absent", so to speak, in their host country, and are perceived simply as workers or members of the labor force (Sayad, 2004). Sayad argues that thinking about migration also requires thinking about the state, whereby migrants, who live a life of high uncertainty, are controlled through a framework of illegality and continuous fears of expulsion.

In Lebanon, as the context section depicts, refugees are highly vulnerable and direly seek different informal and temporary jobs (Hamade & Turkmani, 2019, forthcoming). The state – or, rather, the sector – benefits from the presence of seasonal laborers, who are simultaneously desired and undesired (Gertel & Sippel, 2014). There are elements of racism and spatial separation amongst migrant workers, particularly those in agriculture, which lead to a protocol of discipline and control (Berlan, 2001).

At the end of the day, Syrian men and women had common interests and needed to protect them. They are able to 'protect' and 'take care' of themselves in several ways: forming WhatsApp groups to warn each other of checkpoints or tell each other of jobs; selling food assistance they receive to make income; sharing food with one another; extending electricity cables and running water; opening 'illegal' shops in refugee settlements with goods imported across the borders, etc. There were also cases of Syrian-run schools. In other words, refugee settlements have become semi-autonomous communities, with kin and friends depending on each other and creating their own system, or what Bayat (1997) calls the "politics of everyday lives".

However, these activities are not carried out "as conscious political acts; rather they are driven by the force of necessity – the necessity to survive and live a dignified life" (Bayat, 1997). Refugees made it a point when asked about collective organization to reiterate that they did not want in any way to be political or organized, and that they wanted to be as far away as possible from the light. Again, there is a need to create their communities without intervention from authorities (Bayat, 1997).

Agricultural restructuring

Prior to fieldwork, agricultural changes were identified in Qaa and Akkar. In Qaa, satellite images illustrate an increase in irrigated areas between 2011 and 2013, indicating an increase in farming. Similarly, in Akkar there has been an observable switch in farming systems, with the replacement of citrus orchards by intensive greenhouse vegetable production. Yet, with the onset of fieldwork, the aim was not to probe farmers and agricultural workers on these specific changes but rather to ask open-ended questions and see whether there have been cases of agricultural restructuring observed. Interestingly, a significant number of interviewed Syrian agricultural workers highlighted a number of positive changes on the ground, specifically those based in Akkar and Qaa. Lebanese farmers, on the other hand, were less likely to discuss positive changes and instead illustrated the multiple long-term challenges faced by the agriculture sector in Lebanon.

In Akkar, Syrian agricultural workers noted that since the influx of refugees to the area, there has been an increase of greenhouses, in addition to an introduction of new methods of farming. During FGDs, men and women (with a history of agricultural work) said they are familiar with Lebanon's agriculture sector and they have also brought in some of the skills from Syria. Mohamad noted, "We know [Lebanese people's] land much more than they do themselves [...]". This is true even with regards to Syrian rural workers with no previous experience in Lebanon, given the similarities between Lebanon and Syria's climate, crop production, and ecological stresses. Moreover, prior to 2011, Syria was arguably the only self-sufficient country in food production in the region. When probed, Mohamad and many others pointed out that they also brought in and taught Lebanese many farming skills from the Syrian rural areas. Hailing from the various agricultural areas in Syria – from AlHassakeh to Raqqa, Suwayda and Deir-ez Zir – Syrian men and women both have

the technical know-how to engage with the agriculture sector in Lebanon. Some of these skills include planting lemons in plastic houses, growing vegetables such as eggplants (particularly for preparing *makdous*), strawberries, and different *hashayesh* (parsley, spinach, mint). Jaafar, an agricultural farmer in Akkar, noted, “If you walk around Akkar and have an eye for agriculture, you’ll be shocked by the increase of farming.” His wife, Karama, who works with strawberry farming, agreed. She added that a long time ago, strawberries were imported into Lebanon – “but today, Lebanese can say they have delicious strawberries growing on their fields.” In one FGD in Minieh, the male and female agricultural workers agreed that because of the high number of Syrian cheap labor, there are now more plastic houses across the Minieh-Akkar area. They also added that years ago, there was not as much “agricultural action” in the Akkar area.

On the other hand, most Lebanese farmers interviewed said the agriculture sector has regressed over the last couple of years. They cited several reasons: lack of governmental support, the illegal import of cheaper products from Syria, the closure of several critical export routes due to the war in Syria, and the growing costs of production. Other long-term challenges were cited, such as the small sizes of farmland plots in Lebanon, resulting in land fragmentation, hiked rent prices, the country’s centralized economic approach, which has long prioritized services over agriculture, and the weak cooperative structures in the country. Many farmers noted that the Syrian crisis brought in a lot of political turmoil, which has pushed away trade and tourism, two sectors farmers benefit from both directly and indirectly. One farmer, Ali, in the Beqaa noted that before 2011, they had started to benefit from international highways with trade centers on the way to Syria. Ali also added that Syria had been a key partner and after the eruption of war, there has been a significant decrease in export. Amir, another Lebanese farmer in the Beqaa, pointed out that trade has been affected heavily specifically because of border closures, the Nasib border point being the most critical. Yet, Amir also said, “It wouldn’t be fair to dismiss some of the positive effects of Syrian refugees [being here]. There is an increase in demand for Lebanese products because we suddenly have a very high number of newcomers that eat potatoes and tomatoes.” Sadim, a Lebanese farmer in Akkar, also added that because of the decrease of Syrian exports, some countries, particularly in the Gulf, rely on Lebanon to export more. Indeed, the World Bank reports that there has been a 5.1% increase in export (World Bank, 2014). Another farmer in the Beqaa, Hamad, also added that there is more of demand particularly due to the decrease of Syrian exports. Syrian female agricultural workers in the Beqaa area (both Qaa and Taalabaya) also noted that, despite the series of aggressions some of them have faced as workers, there is a relatively strong demand for their work. Samara, for instance, said during an FGD in Saadnayel, “It’s funny, because we need them and they need us. That has always been the relationship between the Lebanese [landowner] and the Syrian worker.”

Moreover, as aforementioned, because donors, NGOs, and IOs can engage with agricultural livelihoods, there is more investment in rural areas. These investments both help Lebanese farmers and enable Syrian agricultural workers to be hired. Most of these programs, from the FAO to the Lebanese Reforestation Initiative (LRI), usually have conditions that push Lebanese farmers to hire Syrian agricultural workers.

Agriculturization amongst Syrian refugees?

Indeed, what became obvious during the fieldwork is that there is a massive “agriculturization” of Syrians in the Beqaa and Akkar. The instability of jobs and minimal access to employment have pushed Syrians into the field of agriculture as a means to make income. During FGDs and informal discussions, it appeared that a large number of agricultural workers came from non-agricultural backgrounds. Some had worked as shop-owners and taxi drivers. On one of the field observation days, a group of agricultural workers introduced us to Hakim, who was a history graduate from the University of Aleppo. Living in Saadnayel, he now works in agriculture because it is a way to make some extra income – “there are no positions for educated Syrians. It’s either agriculture or construction and I’m less likely to be injured in agriculture[7].” This was also the case for several women, most of whom have no previous working experience in Syria. The high costs of electricity, water, and rent pushed them to seek out jobs. For many of them, cleaning was disgraceful and therefore, agriculture was one of the only options they had available to them (Hamade & Turkmani, 2019, forthcoming).

7 *In December of 2014, the Ministry of Labor issued a circular limiting Syrian refugees’ work to construction, agriculture, and cleaning (which includes waste collection). For more, see: Francesca Battistin and Virginia Leape, Towards the Right to Work: A Guidebook for Designing Innovative Public Employment Programmes—Background and Experiences from the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon (Beirut: International Labour Organization, 2017): 17–18.*

CONCLUSION

Unpacking the relation between the agriculture sector and the Syrian refugee crisis is critical: on the one hand, the agriculture sector in Lebanon has long suffered from lack of regulation, poor economic conditions, and weak cooperatives. The war in Syria has pushed some Lebanese farmers to desperation, with the closure of borders and the decrease of trade with its once giant partner Syria. Similarly, Syrian agricultural workers are trapped in jobs with no security or contract, minimal wages, long working hours, lack of protection, exposure to multiple health hazards, bad working conditions, and cyclical poverty. While it is true that Syrian agricultural workers in Lebanon also worked in Lebanon informally, without social benefits, there was always an option of return to Syria, a reliance on a free healthcare system and benefits in Syria, and stronger relations with Lebanese landowners, who were less affected by political pressures that erupted post-2011. There has been a huge entry into the agricultural labor market in all three locations understudy, which has arguably impacted previous agricultural workers and slightly driven down wages. Indeed, for Syrian workers, there is a suspended struggle with wanting to create a livable reality in Lebanon and wanting to return to Syria, what Chalcraft (2009) aptly describes as "exilic rotation".

Yet, on the other hand, our fieldwork has shown that the informality of the agriculture sector has indeed enabled the absorption of several Syrian refugees seeking jobs, particularly women with no previous work experience in need of income. In some cases, agricultural workers have been innovative and have been able to create safe spaces and build a strong network of solidarity. Syrian refugees reported strong social networks among one another, in addition to relying on the *shaweesh* as an adaptive strategy.

The sector was thus able to engage in restructuring mechanisms to answer increased local demand and the reduction of export. Moreover, this research follows through with the notion that the informality of the agricultural sector has given more room for Syrian refugees to act upon their agency, individually learn new skills, and become more flexible to work within different areas in the field. They have had to learn different farming skills, according to the location and the season. This includes working with cereals, fruits and vegetables, olive oils, grapes, and tobacco. Women agricultural workers and children have also had to pick up skills to help with pruning, harvesting, and working in plastic houses. In Akkar, there has been a transformation in the traditional agricultural system to cater to the rising population, and Syrian refugees were part and parcel of that change. Similarly, in the Beqaa and Baalbeck, with the help of international organizations, Syrian farmers have had to pick up skills in organic farming. This, therefore, indicates that despite the many quandaries of the agriculture sector, it has been a source of livelihood and integration for many Syrian refugees.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Improving the agriculture sector

The agriculture sector in Lebanon is heavily neglected by the state, resulting in haphazard working conditions, weak farmer's cooperatives, high rates of import and low rates of export, and minimal technological improvements.

- National-level advocacy is necessary to address the barriers in Lebanon's agriculture sector. Key political and policy-related changes include:

    1. Advocating for an increase in the Ministry of Agriculture's budget and improvement of human resources within the ministry, in addition to reforming public institutions to ensure better efficiency, effectiveness, and impact.

    2. Advocate for reorganizing and improving subsidy schemes to support small-scale farmers.

- Supporting and facilitating access to finance and grants that lead to investments in improved agricultural technology and infrastructure.

- Supporting and training Syrian and Lebanese agricultural workers and farmers on improved technology and better agricultural practices.

- Working with vocational schools and universities on joint training programs that will provide agricultural workers and farmers with better agricultural practices.

Valorizing the role of Syrian agricultural workers in Lebanon's agriculture sector

- Creating linkages between rural workers, existing cooperatives (especially women cooperatives), civil society, and urban-based initiatives. One such example is Buzuruna Juzuruna, which is a project that trains Syrian agricultural workers on organic farming and links their produce to farmer's markets in Beirut.

- Cooperating and, when possible, funding Syrian refugee women-led projects in rural areas. There are high rates of unemployment among Syrian refugee women and many of those living in rural areas would rather stay at home than work on the field. Support should be given where possible to provide them with home-based jobs, such as agro-food processing (for instance, making mouneh).

Prioritizing the protection of Syrian agricultural workers

This study illustrates the multiple protection-related challenges Syrian agricultural workers face. It is thus necessary to work on:

- Drafting laws to ensure better working conditions in the agriculture sector and social protection (in the form of insurance) for agriculture workers.

    - Working specifically on an agricultural labor law that ensures protection of agricultural workers and fairer wages.

    - Reforming the cooperative law, which is currently weak and unclear, and ensuring cooperatives have incentives and support to grow and expand.

- Enabling and strengthening referral systems for women in rural areas to report on abuse, gender violence, and harassment faced both in and out of the field. It is important that agricultural workers are aware of what referral systems do currently exist and have access to relevant contacts. Moreover, advocating for equal pay for equal work between men and women is key.

- Campaigning against child labor, through improved access to education and awareness-raising. It is key to advocate for cash for education programs that would encourage and enable Syrian refugee children to attend schools. Additionally, it is important to monitor child labor and report it to the relevant organizations when and where possible. National surveys on child labor in agriculture could provide a comprehensive and statistically accurate assessment of the number of children working, the hours, and the contextual recommendations for mitigating it. One such

example is the study conducted on child labor in the Bekaa region (Habib, 2019).

- Providing assistance to refugees in order for them to have an improved economic standing. This can take form through cash for work projects in agriculture, small grants for agricultural projects, and direct cash assistance.

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ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Refugee Research and Policy Program

Lebanon and the Arab region are facing one of the largest refugee crises spawning serious public policy challenges. Given this context, the Refugee Research and Policy program generates refugee related/policy-oriented research that addresses an existing knowledge gap in the field of refugee studies. Moreover, the program seeks to enrich the quality of debate among scholars, officials, international organizations, and civil society actors, with the aim to inform policymaking relating to refugees in the Middle East and beyond.

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The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) is an independent, research-based, policy oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy-relevant research in and about the Arab region.

The Institute is committed to expanding and deepening knowledge production and to creating a space for the interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, civil society actors, and policy makers.

IFI goals:

- *Enhancing and broadening public policy-related debate and knowledge production in the Arab world and beyond;*
- *Better understanding the Arab world within shifting international and global contexts;*
- *Providing a space to enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in and about the Arab world;*
- *Disseminating knowledge that is accessible to policy-makers, media, research communities and the general public.*