

## Unravelling future in displacement: Legality as an existential condition

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### ABSTRACT

In January 2015, Lebanon introduced a visa regime for Syrians, provoking havoc and panic among those already displaced in the country as a result of the war in Syria. This paper examines Syrians' affective reactions in order to retrace how displacement as an imposed legal-political category also becomes an existential condition. By drawing on my ethnographic fieldwork with Syrians in Lebanon, I capture the transformations in the transition from emergency to protracted displacement. The beginning of the "refugee crisis" saw Syrians struggling with socioeconomic hardships while their illegality was usually ignored. This configuration permitted the emergence of a presentist mode of being which nevertheless collapsed in the wake of the new visa regime. The elusiveness and illegibility of the new regulations made illegality and deportability real, tangible risks. This produced a sense of spatial-temporal entrapment in which the future colluded with the present and in which illegality became a status not only denying the entitlement to rights but also negating a claim to existence.

### KEYWORDS

Displacement; illegality; temporality; existence; Syria; Lebanon

Aisha had almost finished her shift at the travel agency where she worked in Tripoli, Lebanon. I was impatiently waiting for her, though distracted by her colleagues and their frantic hurrying up on tasks. They were busy completing a booking for plane tickets to Brussels and tickets for the ferry from Tripoli to Mersin for their Syrian clients, activities that were the main transactions of the agency, as Aisha once told me. However, that day – 3 January 2015 – the atmosphere was particularly tense. The phone kept ringing nonstop, more and more clients nervously entered the office. Everyone was puzzled and scared about the news announcing the imposition of a visa regime for Syrians entering Lebanon, the first of its kind since Lebanon left its border open to Syrians fleeing the war in Syria.

The news about this visa regime was announced on New Year's Eve. That day, my Facebook page was flooded with comments about the partial closure of the border for Syrians; in the late afternoon, I even received a picture of the criteria on WhatsApp, forwarded to

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me by Catherine, the foreign wife of a Syrian intellectual. Then nothing, even on the media. There was no follow-up news or details, nothing. “If there are any problems, we will let you know,” the staff kindly replied to insistent clients requesting explanations or clarifications about the new regulations. As it was, none of the clients received any explanations or clarifications. Nor did any other Syrians living in Lebanon at that time, who feared that the new visa regime would impact their already precarious predicament too, as indeed it eventually did.

Lebanon’s promulgation of the visa regime for Syrians was the latest (and most important) iteration of its policy on Syrian displacement which had been issued in October 2014.<sup>1</sup> The “October Policy” represented a radical change in Lebanon’s neutrality towards the events occurring in Syria, and consequently the influx of Syrians into the country, sealed by the “disassociation policy” issued in mid-2012 (Dionigi 2016; Janmyr 2016; Obeid 2023). Until then, Lebanon had engaged with the Syrian displacement as a humanitarian emergency, maintaining its borders open in spite of its refusal to recognize the 1951 Refugee Convention.<sup>2</sup> This meant that Lebanon officially defined Syrians as displaced persons [*naazihoun*] rather than refugees [*laaji’oun*]. Indeed, Syrians had to obtain a residence permit [*iqama*] to reside legally in the country, although the Lebanese authorities usually turned a blind eye to those who did not manage to obtain legal status and were, thus, illegal. Slowly but inevitably, however, the emergency started to engulf the country, becoming a protracted crisis. Lebanon responded to this transformation with the “October Policy”, a de facto rejection of the Syrian presence.<sup>3</sup> While the policy itself did not entail repressive measures, rejection was mainly achieved by treating Syrians’ illegality as a crime and stripping particular categories of Syrians of fundamental rights (Saghieh 2015).

These important implications, however, do not fully explain either the havoc the new regulations provoked, or the panic and disarray Syrians felt at the prospect of becoming illegal. For me, these reactions and their affective energy allude to a more visceral and existential aspect, embedded within legality and illegality in the context of displacement and its temporal inflation (see also Al-Khalili 2024; Holst and Hastrup 2024 in this volume), which I unpack in this article. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted in Lebanon between 2014 and 2019, I ask what the “visceral” relationship between displacement, legal regimes and future-making is.<sup>4</sup> How does this relationship mutate in a context where emergency becomes a protracted crisis?

My analysis resonates with the recent anthropological critique that has redefined the concept of displacement, not as a condition of uprootedness and forced mobility, but an existential condition in which the future plays a central role (Askland 2018; Obeid 2023; Ramsay 2020; Ramsay and Askland 2022). I situate this critique in dialogue with the Syrians’ legal-political condition in order to capture the unstable and contingent nature of their legal status. My aim is twofold: first, I dissect how legal regimes mould and influence, at times even radically, Syrians’ temporal orientations towards the future (Bryant and Knight 2019); second, I highlight how this relationship can only be unearthed by taking the future seriously, as a project-in-the-making, and by considering its relation with the historicity of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, against the backdrop of a time of war in Syria (see Bandak 2024, in this issue). I capture how displacement [*nuzuuh*] as a legal-political category imposed on Syrians also became an existential condition in specific moments of rupture. Specifically, I argue that Syrians’ legal status in Lebanon was not only about the entitlement to rights but also about a claim to existence. In

what follows, I examine how the entanglement between displacement as a legal-political category and displacement as an existential condition is produced and reconfigured. Central to this reconfiguration is the remaking of the relationship between past, present and future; as this relationship became unintelligible, Syrians were forced to find and experience new modes of inhabiting the present and future but also reckoning with a bygone past.

### Legal life as a claim to existence

Anthropological scholarship has challenged the conventional understanding of displacement as solely synonymous with crisis (Cabot 2019; Cabot and Ramsay 2021), forced mobility (Lubkemann 2008) and war migration (Askland 2018; Ramsay and Askland 2022; Sajadian 2023), by shifting the focus from displacement's spatial dimensions to its temporal ones. Building on this shift, Ramsay and Askland redefine displacement as an existential condition characterized by a rupture in the teleology of life, namely "a disruption of one's sense of existential continuity and stability" (Ramsay and Askland 2022, 601). Such disruptions may occur within the sense of self, but they also unfold within a social world and even within a collectivity (Ramsay and Askland 2022; see also Obeid 2023).

I employ this existentialist turn in the concept of displacement to investigate the meaning of legality and illegality in the context of the Syrian presence in Lebanon. My aim is to expand this notion of displacement in relation to the process through which legality and illegality become resignified, gaining new meanings as crises become protracted. Indeed, having a legally recognized and valuable life in the present and, more crucially, in the future, is a crucial aspect of existential mobility – understood in a loose sense of teleology of life, an aspect captured by Hannah Arendt in her reading of statelessness (Arendt 2009).

Arendt (2009) retraces the origin of the existential significance of this legal condition of non-belonging to a nation-state – and, consequently, humanity – to the loss of legal status and the loss of a home. While the loss of legal status positions the stateless person outside the law –and consequently, outside the realm of justice and freedom – Arendt argues that the loss of a home is a more fundamental deprivation because it manifests itself in the deprivation of a place in the world "that makes opinion significant and action effective" (Arendt 2009, 296).

Drawing on Arendt (2009), I expand the meaning of legal status beyond normative understandings of citizenship rights to having a "legal life", which becomes a precondition for enjoying specific rights by belonging to the sphere of legality. Legal life encompasses citizenship rights and the right to have a legal identity. It is a form of recognition and, simultaneously, a person's claim to existence. A legal life also entails a wide array of documents which allow us to have a meaningful legal and formal existence, such as certificates of education, marriage and birth. Indeed, these documents not only affect Syrians' mobility across international borders – even in the event of returning to Syria – but also represent forms of inclusion and exclusion from legality throughout time.

In 2015, Syrians' fear of entering a condition of illegality stemmed from recognition of the danger that this disjunction between physical and legal presence (Coutin 2003) would be reproduced ad infinitum. Indeed, as the crisis became protracted, the reverberations of inhabiting illegality might affect other aspects of Syrians' lives compromising their existential mobility. Yet, these questions were not so urgent in the first phase of the Syrian

displacement; at that time illegality was overlooked and the Syrians' focus was on making ends meet.

### Emergency and the repetition of an inhuman future past

In the first phase of the Syrian displacement, Lebanon engaged with the humanitarian emergency through a politics of inaction (Mourad 2017). It preserved its open border policy and granted all Syrians entering Lebanon a one-year residency permit [*iqama*] free of charge.<sup>5</sup> This approach to the "refugee crisis" allowed the formation of an informal, temporary asylum that offered Syrians different degrees of protection, including respect of the principle of non-refoulement, the main concept of refugee law (Akram et al. 2015; Janmyr 2016).<sup>6</sup> Generally speaking, Lebanon did not criminalize illegal movements of people by de facto suspending "all the laws that stipulate punishments for illegal entry and breaking the terms of residency visas" (Saghieh and Frangieh 2014), such as the 1962 law on the entry and stay of foreigners in Lebanon.<sup>7</sup> Police stations also substantially ignored Syrians either entering the country illegally or failing to renew their *iqama* (Frangieh 2014).

Yet, this protection was also conditional, precarious and susceptible to revocation by the Lebanese state, which could invoke Syrians' illegality at any time. As Amer, a Syrian activist and humanitarian worker in his early thirties, said regarding the predicament of the Syrian displacement,

In Lebanon there is pressure [*dhaught*], but not deportation [*tarhiy*]. ... Right now [December 2014] they closed the borders. Of course, it is difficult to cross illegally. For those Syrians who crossed the border illegally, this is another issue. Usually, they are arrested and then there is a self-deportation order (usually 24 hours or 7 days). They should leave the country but they [the Lebanese authorities] know they [Syrians] will stay in Lebanon. You know that Lebanon is not signatory of the Refugee Convention, but they still have to respect the non-refoulement principle.

Despite his emphasis on Lebanon's respect for the principle of non-refoulement, Amer also identified the pressure placed upon Syrians by the issuance of self-deportation orders in the event of arrest for other crimes, including certain forms of revolutionary activism (Ferreri 2023). Legal deportation compelled Syrians to leave Lebanon within a certain period of time, usually between one day and two weeks, and denied them the possibility of returning to Lebanon (Frangieh 2014). Syrians could rarely leave Lebanon – i.e. return to Syria or travel elsewhere – after having received such a deportation order. Instead, they continued to live in Lebanon, even though the illegality of the self-deportation order made physical deportation to Syria a real risk (Ferreri 2023, 126).

Other aspects of the Lebanese asylum regime produced pressure in the lives of Syrians, for instance, the high cost of renewing the *iqama* – amounting to 200 USD per person from the age of 15 – and arbitrary General Security practices including the request to obtain a work permit from the Ministry of Labour, which had stopped issuing permits to Syrians (Saghieh and Frangieh 2014).<sup>8</sup> Syrian families enacted several tactics to deal with these economic and bureaucratic hurdles, such as prioritizing the renewal of the family breadwinner's *iqama*, obtaining forged documents through a *simsar* [broker], or making short visits to Syria through legal routes, especially for women.

The pressure and this peculiar (precarious) legal condition were not given central importance in the way Syrians described their displacement in Lebanon, a displacement which they defined as *ghayr insaniyy* [inhumane]. Syrians did not pinpoint the inhuman aspect of their displacement within their peculiar (precarious) legal condition, since suspension of the law was a form of (temporary) protection, albeit with its limits. Instead, for them the inhumanity of displacement lay in the inability to sustain life in Lebanon due to socioeconomic difficulties.

The increasing cost of living in Lebanon and the “rise of the refugee crisis” was a topic discussed by ordinary Lebanese too. It was even given recurrent coverage in the Lebanese media. However, this discourse situated the rising cost of living in the emergency itself, as a direct consequence of the flight of thousands of Syrians followed by the arrival of humanitarian workers. Conversely, Syrians located the linkages between these hardships and the cost of living not in the crisis *per se*, but in the *longue durée* of the Syrian presence in Lebanon, specifically in Syrian circular labour migration in the shadow of the Pax Syriana.<sup>9</sup>

The inhumanity of displacement and the impossibility of sustaining life in Lebanon also reverberated into the future, which Syrians usually envisioned in Turkey and, more rarely, in Europe. The discourse of inhumanity was ingrained in a presentist mode of being that bound together an unliveable present in Lebanon with a future in Turkey, not far from Syria. Importantly, this discourse constructed a present through a future past (Koselleck 2004) shaped by the temporary experience of labour migration to Lebanon.

In autumn 2014, Aisha took a break from her busy schedule of work, university studies and revolutionary activism to celebrate the *'eid al-Kabir* with her friend Najwa, which she invited me to as well. In their early twenties and unmarried, these young women met in the protests in the heyday of the revolution in 2011, becoming close friends. Their friendship continued in exile. Aisha travelled from Tripoli to the Beirut suburbs to reach the flat where Najwa was living while recovering from surgery on her leg, severely wounded during an airstrike on her hometown. Aisha explained to me that Najwa was being hosted by a Syrian lawyer in her late thirties who had been involved in the revolution. She also added that the host was about to leave for Turkey and that, for this reason, she would be away for the entire day to bid farewell to her family, visiting Lebanon for a few days before returning to Syria the day after.

The imminent journey to Turkey of Najwa's host was not so surprising at that time because many Syrians living in Beirut and Tripoli shared a desire to move to Turkey – or at times even to Europe. Indeed, during a previous conversation with Aisha, she had told me that her main task at the travel agency was to book tickets for entire Syrian families, or young men, living either in Lebanon or Syria, to travel by sea from Tripoli to Mersin in Turkey. The decision of her clients in Lebanon to migrate to Turkey was rooted in the high cost of living, as an individual's salary and the humanitarian assistance provided could only cover the cost of accommodation and the most basic needs, she pointed out to me.

That day, the two young women also made a direct connection between the inhumane displacement and migration to Turkey and Europe. Najwa described her uncle's risky journey by sea to reach Holland where he requested asylum before voicing her own willingness to return to Turkey, where she had lived before staying in Egypt for a few months and returning to Lebanon for her surgery. In describing this desire, which would take her

to Turkey with Aisha a few months after our meeting, she looked me in the eyes, emphasizing that her decision was a “collective one”. Najwa argued that “[e]veryone wants to leave Lebanon because life is too expensive and the Lebanese are not nice [*latiyfiyyn*] with Syrians”, implying that there had always been numerous instances of Lebanese discrimination [*tamiyyz*] against Syrians: “That’s how it has always been”. This discrimination was rooted, she said, in the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon, adding that “nevertheless, it is not only our [the Syrians’] fault”. For Najwa, the inhumane aspects of the displacement unveiled a continuum between the past and the present, as she framed socioeconomic hardships and discrimination as instances of Lebanese resentment against the brutality of the Syrian military presence.

Najwa’s articulation of the inhumanity and the overlapping between past Syrian labour migration and the present displacement was not about conflating labour mobility and war migration (Lubkemann 2008). Instead, what I argue is that this overlapping reveals how Syrians constructed displacement in Lebanon as a repetition of the temporariness experienced by Syrian migrant workers in the past. Indeed, as the “muscles of the Lebanese economy”, Syrian men regularly used to migrate temporarily to Lebanon for work and then return to Syria where their families continued to live (Chalcraft 2009).

The inhumane nature of the displacement points to the extension of the temporal rhythms of the lives of Syrian men in Lebanon in the past which, in these times of humanitarian emergency, had become extended to displaced Syrians. The rhythm of this labour migration structured lives by way of a temporal–spatial split: the temporality of labour in Lebanon and the temporality of social reproduction in Syria – where life was cheaper and the regime’s socialist agenda granted access to medical and educational services (Chalcraft 2009), at least until the introduction of neoliberal measures (Proudfoot 2017).

Through the inhumanity of displacement as a conflation of the past into the present, Syrians lamented the impossibility of living a sustainable life in Lebanon. Economic hardship had a strong impact on Syrian families who had no financial tools to enrol children in school or to afford medical assistance for chronic diseases or other serious illnesses such as cancer, or surgery for the war-wounded. Access to medical assistance was a particularly crucial dimension of the Syrians’ precarious economic condition and tied to an ethics of living that was difficult, if not impossible, to sustain in displacement (El Dardiry 2017). These present concerns also reverberated into envisioning a future in Lebanon where not only social reproduction but also an ethics of living were perceived to be unsustainable.

Marriages and births amongst displaced Syrians did occur in Lebanon (Ferreri 2018; Proudfoot 2017) indicating that social reproduction was somehow taking place in displacement. However, articulating the displacement in terms of inhumanity was also a way for Syrians to reorient themselves in a present (and a future) through that past. Indeed, reliance on the “space of experience” shaped by this temporal–spatial split also offered a familiar framework within which to reorient themselves towards an unknown present and future, marked by deep uncertainties regarding not only the outcomes of the Syrian war and the feasibility of the revolution as a political project, but also a return to Syria.

Thus, Syrians managed the tempo of the emergency by replicating the idea of being in Lebanon temporarily, in a similar way to migrant workers in the past. The desire to return to Syria was never voiced, yet it was structurally embedded in this tempo. Indeed, for

many, the decision to migrate to Turkey rather than Europe was also instrumental in preserving a certain degree of geographical (and cultural) proximity to Syria (Bryant and Habash 2024). In the following phase, this model of temporal and spatial orientation towards the future collapsed, making the distinction between present and future, and Syria and Lebanon, blurred and ambiguous.

### The new visa regime: panic and not-yet-knowing

On 5 January 2015, the General Security applied a set of new requirements regulating Syrians' entry into Lebanon. For the first time, Lebanon implemented a visa regime for Syrians crossing the border, granting temporary residency to Syrian nationals who fulfilled strict criteria, such as having a Lebanese sponsor or an official appointment in a foreign embassy, studying at university, having a ticket to travel abroad, alongside categories devoted to tourism, business and medical treatment. The category of the displaced [refugee] was reserved for exceptional humanitarian cases. The procedures to enter under this category were only disclosed in April 2015. Syrians already in Lebanon also sensed that the new regulations were a first step towards rejecting the Syrian presence and, thus, deepening the displacement crisis.

A few days after the introduction of the new regulations, I was at the American University in Beirut to attend a talk organized on the "Syrian Refugee Crisis". By chance, I bumped into Catherine. We had had no contact since her text with the new regulations on New Year's Eve. Sitting in one of the chairs at the edge of the auditorium, her gaze was focused on her hands as she urgently knitted a scarf. Aside from her concentration, she was nervous about the new regulations. Her apprehension surprised me, since I did not think her family would be affected by this issue. To reassure her, I pointed out that the new requirements only applied to Syrians entering Lebanon, but she looked straight at me and replied:

We don't know yet. With the new rules, every Syrian is at risk. Everyone in my community is freaking out. None of us knows what to do; we cannot go back to Syria, especially men under 45 because they risk being conscripted again. At the same time, leaving the country is already a negative thing for the regime. And even if the regime does not act against people who went into exile ... let's say that they might be 'on the list'. And you know there are 'many lists'.

Terror kicked in at the prospect of having no other option but to be forced to return to Syria or being physically deported there. Day after day, the lack of knowledge about the visa regime instigated even more frustration and powerlessness. During the same week, my discussion with a Lebanese lawyer about the new regulations in an almost empty café in central Beirut was interrupted by the bartender, a Syrian man in his forties, who started to talk to the lawyer, a frequent customer. He nervously asked the lawyer about the possibility of renewing his *iqama* and, thus, being legal. She could only answer him, "We don't know", explaining that the General Security had not yet provided any information on the procedure. He listened to her carefully. Disillusioned, he murmured, "What do they want Syrians to do?" Throughout January, panic filled the air and inhabited every interaction I had with Syrians in Beirut and Tripoli.

The panic was a reaction to the certainty that the new regulations were only the first step towards a state crackdown on the Syrian presence in Lebanon. Yet, it was also



intrinsically tied to the uncertainty about the nature of this rejection. The mixture of knowing that things would get worse, but not (yet) knowing exactly how or when, was at the origin of the visceral panic and loss of control not only over their lives, but also time. Indeed, the introduction of the visa regime represented a “critical threshold”, what Rebecca Bryant defines as a moment of crisis that is decisive and liminal, outside ordinary times, when the present becomes uncanny as people anxiously perceive the present-ness of the present as the future cannot be anticipated (Bryant 2016, 20–21). The not-yet-knowing was an expression of the collapse of a specific temporal (and spatial) orientation towards the future past, based on repetition of the temporal structure of Syrian circular migration.

The precariousness of Syrians’ legal status prevented them from predicting what types of measures would follow the introduction of the new visa regime. The unpredictability was even more existential for Syrians as it was entangled with their inability to reorient themselves towards the future, not just the “far away future of stability”, but even what would or could happen tomorrow. The panic was paralysing. As Catherine said: “Everyone in my community is freaking out. None of us knows what to do ...”. The paralysis was a symptom of a lack of individual and collective agency at a moment when the displacement crisis was becoming prolonged and a forced return to Syria becoming a real possibility.

Indeed, this moment of not-yet-knowing was also saturated with the fear that Lebanon’s rejection of the Syrian presence would also transform legal deportation into *tarhiyl* [physical deportation – and handing over to the Syrian authority]. The indeterminacy of the new visa regime made deportability as the “protracted possibility of being deported” not only a legal, social (De Genova and Peutz 2010) and affective condition (Reeves 2015) but also an existential one. A (forced) return to al-Assad’s Syria, to a present from which they had escaped, became a tangible and fearful possibility due to the country’s geographical proximity to Lebanon. The anticipation of such an imminent future was a return to war, consisting of repression under the regime (Ismail 2018) and army conscription; this anticipation ruptured that connection with the past that had been sustained by the tempo of the emergency.

Confirming the fear of Catherine and many others, the new measures were extended to Syrians already residing in Lebanon. As a future of illegality and deportability collapsed into the present, it amplified the sense of temporal–spatial entrapment.

### **Protracted crisis: illegibility, entrapment and a future elsewhere**

Throughout January, February and even March 2015, the General Security continued to make revisions, amendments and implementations of the new regulations. The Lebanese state dealt with the protracted nature of the displacement through different forms of illegibility, making the state present in the lives of Syrians both as a bearer of rules and regulations and as a spectral presence materialized in documents (Das 2004, 250–251). As the new regulations continued to be revised, amended and implemented, this illegibility became more and more rooted in the elusiveness of the new regulations and, consequently, in the bureaucratic procedure for Syrians’ *iqama* renewal.

For instance, the General Security withheld information regarding the bureaucratic procedure for the renewal of the residency permit, which became a complicated



regime involving a series of documents that Syrians rarely managed to retrieve. The General Security initially shared the new procedure only with humanitarian agencies participating in the Protection Working Group. Only in mid-February 2015 did Syrians start to show me the long list of supporting documents needed to renew their *iqama* either stored in their phones or copied on paper. The new documentary regime required Syrians to provide a valid passport or ID card with an entry coupon and return card, as well as two photographs and a “housing pledge” with a property deed; these papers had to be signed or stamped by the *mukhtar* [state representative in a village or town].<sup>10</sup> These documents became a medium through which legality could be granted, at least for those Syrians who could still renew their *iqama*. Those who still had this chance either became anxious about their retrieval or started to go around with their papers “preserved” in plastic envelopes.

I met Barak, an activist and photographer in his early thirties, in Beirut on a sunny Sunday in February. He agreed to meet me to discuss his experience of siege in Syria and his photographic work from that period. But we never touched this topic as he started to talk about his *iqama* renewal. His voice betrayed his apprehension over whether he would manage to obtain some of the papers necessary for his legal status. He carefully took out all the documents he had. We went through all the requirements together, the papers he had collected and the ones he had not managed to obtain yet. He explained to me that he had to go to the municipality to register the contract, but so far his landlady had refused to legally register the contract because of the taxes she would have to pay. A few days later, my meeting in Tripoli with a journalist from Homs unintendedly concentrated on the new regulations too. Like Barak, he was uncertain about whether he would be able to renew his *iqama*. He took all the papers out of his briefcase to show me the documents he had collected, pointing to the stamp from the municipality he had obtained for the housing pledge while indicating which other documents he was still missing.

In those months, the affective relationship (Navaro-Yashin 2012) between Syrians and their legal papers was seeped in panic. The overwhelming presence of these papers in Syrians’ everyday lives shows how they became a medium through which to attempt to exert a certain agency vis-à-vis the spatial-temporal entrapment produced by the new regulations. The materiality of these documents was a powerful tool to rein in not only the elusiveness of the regulations but also the elusive nature of Syrians’ legality, which became tied to something more existential about inhabiting a time of protracted crisis and deportability. The possibility and ability to envision a future beyond displacement and the war became more elusive too because the crises were starting to no longer be an emergency but a structure defining their lives in the present and future.

The entrapment produced by the visa regime was different from the sense of alienation within the self and others that Michelle Obeid (2023) poignantly describes in her analysis of the aftermath of the Battle of Aarsal. Likewise, entrapment was not about international mobility (Jansen 2009) – though it included this element too – but primarily about building a future. With the new regulations, this possibility faded away. The innumerable scales of this spatial and temporal entrapment touched infinite aspects of Syrians’ everyday lives as well as their future, slowly transforming the panic of the first months of 2015 into a sense of an impending end.

The renewed application of the 1962 law on foreigners, which punished illegal residence in Lebanon, transformed a “refugee’s presence” into a crime (Frangieh and

Barjas 2016). The presence of regular and ad hoc military checkpoints in Tripoli and Beirut, and along the highway connecting the two cities, prevented many Syrian men with an illegal status from travelling. For those inhabiting legality, their journeys on service buses [*microbus*] were still filled with fear and suspicion (Kelly 2006) due to the unpredictability of the Lebanese soldiers, transforming a simple trip into a dangerous feat. The spatial contours of this entrapment became even more suffocating in Lebanon as Syrian men's illegality made it impossible for them to work; this increased the economic hardship already characterizing the displacement before 2015 even further.

At the same time, the temporal dimension of this entrapment became connected to the expiration of the *iqama*. The residency permit's six-month validity required Syrians to act with a certain speed and urgency to renew it, so as to decrease the fear of becoming illegal, a fear rooted in the consequences of illegality in the present. Illegality facilitated exploitation and undermined Syrians' access to basic services such as education, health-care and justice (Janmyr 2016). It also obliterated Syrians' existential mobility as, for instance, the lack of a legal status prevented Syrians from officially registering marriages or new-born children, expanding the temporal entrapment into the future. Indeed, the risk of becoming illegal collapsed the distinction between the present and near future, forcing Syrians to act in the *hinc et nunc*. This sense of urgency in which "everything hinges on the 'now'" (Bandak and Anderson 2022, 7) became a totalizing condition for many who wanted to escape the entrapment of illegality, or rather, the entrapment of a protracted displacement.

In the first six months of 2015, Syrians' visits to the General Security offices dotted around Lebanon became a powerful allegory of this "urgency" (Bandak and Anderson 2022) as the mobilizing force for them to escape the sense of entrapment they inhabited. The queuing for hours for their *iqama* renewal reflected the legal limbo they were experiencing. The initial panic generated by the uncertainty over retrieving documents was soon replaced by the fear of encountering the General Security street bureaucrats who had been explicitly instructed to make Syrians' *iqama* renewal more difficult. The fear intensified even more, as stories of individual experiences were shared and spread through word of mouth, and Syrians were forced to rely more substantially on a *wasta* [connection] working in the offices.

The sense of entrapment caused by the new regulations and the encroachment of the near future upon the present set in motion other dynamics too. By late springtime 2015, Syrians had become progressively more vocal in sharing their desire to reach Europe and new interminable queues started to form in front of the Syrian embassy in Beirut.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the entrapment of the protracted crisis had brought Europe closer to Lebanon, or rather had made Europe a reachable destination where life could start again, and a future could be envisioned. As Diana Allan evocatively described in the case of Palestinian refugees in Shatila, migration also offered Syrians "a teleological praxis that promise[d] the recovery of rights, privileges and potentials. It [was] about not merely financial security but also meaning and agency, and purpose, reconnecting actions in the present to the prospect of a future yield" (Allan 2014, 174).

Lamia, a hip photographer in her late twenties, decided to embark on a journey to Europe where she would request asylum. She shared this news with me shortly after Catherine introduced us during the social gathering in her family's home in May 2015. In our first and only encounter, she confessed to me her frustration at not being able

to build a “real” future after living in Lebanon for three years. Her initial plan was to move to Turkey, where many of her friends lived. However, her friends there suggested carrying on to Europe:

I never thought about going to Europe. It was even a surprise for me to think that I could actually do it. I decided to leave in July but a friend of mine told me another friend had decided to leave on Monday so we agreed to travel together.

Although at that point Lamia was still unclear on how to reach Europe, either with a false passport – as she later did – or with an organized package holiday, she felt compelled to follow her friend on this journey. Her urgency was motivated by the fear of being left behind, in the perpetual entrapment of a protracted displacement that was becoming the only context in which her almost illegal life was unfolding (Vigh 2008).

Throughout the summer, migration to Europe became an ever-present topic of discussion, not as a possibility but as an urgent plan of action. For some of my friends with children, the decision to risk their and their children’s lives on their journey *bi-tariq al-bahr* [by sea] was described as the ultimate attempt to retrieve the sense of a meaningful life and future. Other young Syrians, especially men, working intermittently in poorly paid menial jobs and pressured to find – and pay for – another fake Lebanese *kafyl* [sponsor], nurtured the desire to leave Lebanon too. Indeed, legality became a chimera for Syrians, even more so for those registered as refugees with the UNHCR – 61% of whom had come to lack a legal status by September 2015. This percentage was 70–75% higher than before the new regulations.<sup>12</sup>

By August 2015, the tragic images depicting the so-called “refugee crisis in Europe” reached Lebanon, sparking discussions about the risks of this perilous journey between Syrians convinced that Europe was the only way out of the crisis, and others who had decided or had no other choice but to stay. On my last meeting with Catherine, she updated me about some people I knew who had taken the Balkan route, and I told her about my friends who were about to leave as well. Catherine had always been against young Syrians migrating to Europe because, like many others, she believed that youth should play a role in the future of Syria. At the end of July, she confessed to me, she had changed her mind as she came to understand that there was no future there for them.

## Conclusion

The risk of illegality both as a non-legal status and an existential condition pushed Syrians to escape the spatial–temporal entrapment produced by the new regulations. This sense of entrapment was symptomatic of the metamorphoses undergone by the crisis. The displacement turned out to be not only protracted but even endemic, and at times almost a new discomfiting ordinary. A future of illegality and non-existence collapsed into the present, bringing Europe closer and the perilous journey to reach a future outside the crisis into the picture.

This future of further migration was radically different from the future past that had characterized the time of emergency. In that phase, Syrians had constructed the present and the future by relying on the repetition of the temporary split characterizing Syrian labour migration, in which the return to Syria – where social reproduction was

possible – was never voiced but remained implicit. However, with the new visa regime, this temporal orientation imploded. Deportability and a (forced) return to al-Assad's Syria in the present became so palpable and tangible that many lost control over their future-making; time and space became compressed and unintelligible. In this moment of rupture, or the uncanny present (Bryant 2016), Syria's future became geographically and temporally distant from Syrians' future-making.

By retracing the transition from emergency to protracted displacement, I have shown how Lebanon's shifting treatment of Syrians' legality and illegality deeply impacted their temporal orientation, especially towards the future. I also situated the dialectic between legal regimes and temporal orientations in relation to the historical Syrian presence in Lebanon. Dissecting the dynamism of how this future past unravels enables us to capture how the risk of illegality also brought with it the devastating fear of losing a sense of existing in the world.

From this perspective, migration to Europe and renewal of the residency permit were attempts to claim a (legally) meaningful existence. Building on the existential turn in the anthropological literature on displacement, I have shown how a legal life has an existential value that goes beyond normative understandings of refugeeness and citizenship rights. Ultimately, this article has questioned the taken-for-grantedness and normativity of the significance of the legality, illegality and legal-judicial categories found in studies of displacement. As the case of the Syrian displacement has demonstrated, the formation of these categories, their operationalization and how they are experienced and articulated, even existentially, can only be grasped by locating them within the historicity of the Syrian presence in Lebanon and unpacking how this presence was redefined in light of the war in Syria.

## Notes

1. Decision 38, Minutes of the Council of Ministers Meeting, 24 October 2014. Unpublished document provided anonymously to the author.
2. UNHCR registration gave Syrians access to humanitarian assistance and protection from refoulement; indeed, 'refugee' was not a legal category (Ferreri 2018). However, registration was crucial to obtain international protection, namely temporary and permanent resettlement (Akram et al. 2015, 38).
3. In 2014, the number of Syrians entering the country reached more than one million and the fear of a spillover of the Syrian conflict became concrete after Islamic State and Jabhat al-Nusra's fighters sieged the border town of Aarsal, before the Lebanese army intervened (Obeid 2023).
4. My research was mainly conducted among urban middle-class Syrians living in Beirut and Tripoli, a rural middle-class community living in an informal camp and surrounding communities in northern Lebanon. The fieldwork was mainly conducted in Arabic unless my interlocutors preferred to use English. All names are pseudonyms.
5. The Lebanese government outsourced the responsibility to assist displaced Syrians to the UNHCR, whereas it invested municipalities with political and security power to manage the Syrian presence (Fakhoury 2017).
6. Until 2015, the Lebanese state and UNHCR did not differentiate between different categories of Syrians: those who were victims of violence or persecution, people who were able to live safely in Syria, and migrant workers already residing in Lebanon (Saghieh and Frangieh 2014).
7. In 2011 and 2012 in a few cases, Lebanon enforced the physical deportation of Syrian deserting soldiers, handing them over to the Syrian authorities (Frangieh 2014).

8. The General Security is a key central authority in shaping the legal architecture of the asylum regime. It is responsible for monitoring borders and dealing with the admission and regularization of the status of foreigners (Akram et al. 2015). The General Security can enforce arbitrary detention without sentencing and is responsible for negotiating with foreign intelligence services.
9. The Syrian military presence in Lebanon started with the intervention of the Syrian Army in the Lebanese Civil War in 1976. With the end of the war, the Syrian military presence in Lebanon was consolidated by the Ta'if Accord, signed in 1991 and lasted until 2005 (Chalcraft 2009).
10. For Syrians living in informal settlements, the housing pledge certificate was substituted by a residency statement provided by the municipality.
11. To a certain extent, the aspiration to reach Europe was also facilitated by the Syrian regime's decree issued on 21 April 2015 which revoked the security checks on Syrians requesting a passport at any Syrian embassy. Prior to this decree, Syrian intelligence services vetted any request to obtain or renew a Syrian passport at the embassy, thereby denying this document to any Syrians deemed wanted due to certain political activities such as defecting from the army, political dissent or involvement in revolutionary activism (Ferreri 2018, 268).
12. Interview with UNHCR, Protection Unit 3 September 2015. Beirut.

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