

A black and white photograph of a person's hands, with fingers slightly curled, resting on a dark, textured surface. In the foreground, a large, rounded metal teapot sits on a flat, dark surface, likely a stove. The teapot has a spout on the right and a handle on the left. The background is dark and out of focus, showing more of the person's hands and possibly other objects.

HPG Working Paper

# Dignity and displaced Syrians in Lebanon

‘There is no *karama* here’

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# Acronyms

<b>3RP</b>	Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
<b>CwC</b>	Communication with Communities
<b>FGD</b>	focus group discussion
<b>GSO</b>	General Security Office
<b>ICRC</b>	International Committee of the Red Cross
<b>IFRC</b>	International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies
<b>INGO</b>	international NGO
<b>ISF</b>	Internal Security Forces
<b>LCRP</b>	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
<b>Levit</b>	Levantine Institute of Tripoli
<b>NGO</b>	non-governmental organisation
<b>NRC</b>	Norwegian Refugee Council
<b>OCHA</b>	UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs
<b>SRP</b>	Syria Response Plan
<b>RRP</b>	Regional Response Plan
<b>UNDP</b>	UN Development Programme
<b>UNHCR</b>	UN High Commissioner for Refugees
<b>UNICEF</b>	UN Children's Fund
<b>UNRWA</b>	UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
<b>UNSC</b>	UN Security Council
<b>WASH</b>	water, sanitation and hygiene
<b>WFP</b>	World Food Programme



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# 1 Introduction

Since the popular uprising and subsequent war in Syria in 2011, more than a quarter of its population have fled – mainly to Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt – and another 25% have been internally displaced. The end of 2017 saw 12.6 million Syrians forcibly displaced – 6.3 million refugees, 6.2 million internally displaced (IDPs) and 146,700 asylum-seekers (UNHCR, 2018a). In the words of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi: ‘A quarter of all Syrians are refugees. A quarter of the world’s refugees are Syrians’ (OCHA, 2018b).

In Lebanon, 976,065 Syrians were registered as refugees with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) as of 31 June 2018, out of an estimated 1.5 million Syrians residing there<sup>1</sup> – most of whom (87%) live in Lebanon’s 251 most vulnerable and deprived municipalities (OCHA, 2018a; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 12). Lebanon hosts the largest proportion of refugees compared to its population worldwide, with one in six under the UNHCR mandate<sup>2</sup> – virtually all of whom are Syrian (UNHCR, 2018a). In 2017, more than three-quarters of Syrian refugee households in Lebanon lived below the poverty line (\$3.84/person/day), making humanitarian aid essential for many (UNHCR et al., 2017). Yet, as the needs of Syrians rise, international funding continues to fall. In 2017, the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP)<sup>3</sup> was only 45% funded, and only 17% of the displaced Syrian population received multi-purpose cash assistance from UNHCR, though nearly 70% of those registered are eligible (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 39).

This case study is part of a two-year project by the Humanitarian Policy Group (HPG) at the Overseas Development Institute (ODI) seeking to better understand dignity in displacement. Like *Dignity and*

*the displaced Rohingya in Bangladesh* (Holloway and Fan, 2018), the present case study on Syrian refugees in Lebanon is grounded in a literature review surveying how dignity is conceptualised in humanitarian action (Holloway and Grandi, 2018). Central to humanitarian principles and foundational human rights documents, dignity is often invoked in modern humanitarian action, yet aid programmes and policies rarely identify exactly what it is, or how they are trying to support it. More importantly, they seldom gather or report affected communities’ views on dignity. This research seeks to fill this gap.

The fieldwork in Lebanon focused on gathering the views of displaced Syrians and humanitarian workers to position dignity more centrally in the humanitarian response. Like the overall research framework for the dignity in displacement project, the study centres on three main questions:

- What do refugees mean by dignity?
- What do humanitarians understand by dignity?
- Has the humanitarian response upheld dignity for displaced Syrians in Lebanon? Are there any differences between local and international organisations?

While the study does not claim to be exhaustive, it aims to contribute towards a more coherent and inclusive understanding of what Syrians mean by their own dignity and how they understand it in the context of the response to their displacement. The research shows there is little difference between how displaced Syrians and humanitarian actors in Lebanon see dignity, but this similarity does not result in what either views as a dignified response. This is due to different interpretations of key concepts, such as accountability, transparency and fairness, and external constraints, such as the national legal framework and funding limitations.

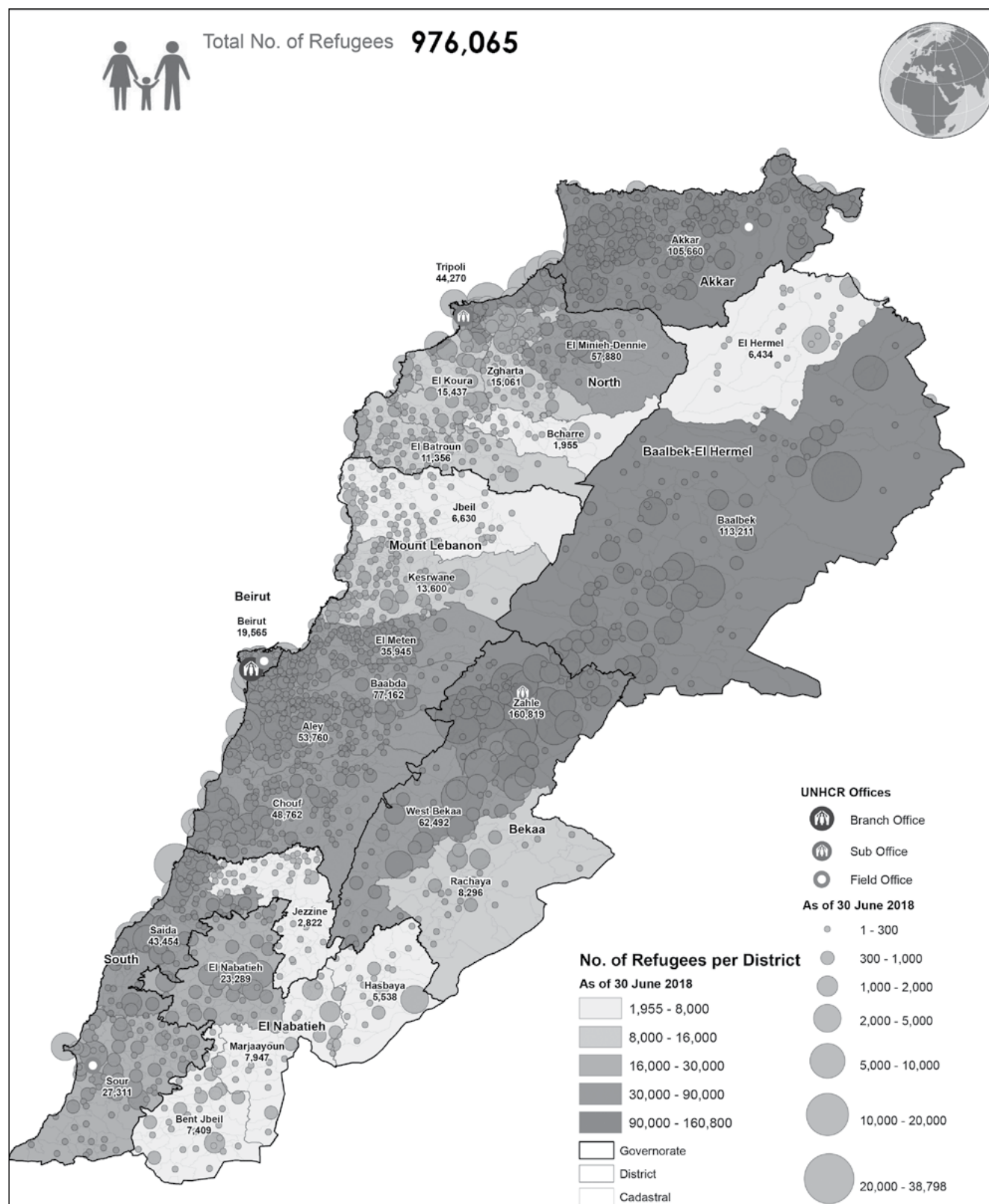
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1 The actual number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is unknown after UNHCR suspended new registrations on 6 May 2015 at the request of the Lebanese government (Howe, 2016; Rabil, 2016; UNHCR, 2017). In 2015, Amnesty International reported that 72% of Syrian children born in Lebanon do not have an official birth certificate.

2 This does not include Palestinian refugees under the responsibility of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). When included, the figure rises to one in four (UNHCR, 2018a).

3 The LCRP is a multi-year plan of the Lebanese government with international and national partners to provide protection and humanitarian assistance to displaced Syrians, Palestinian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese, and support public service delivery.

**Map 1: Number and distribution of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon**



Source: UNHCR Lebanon, 2018



## Box 1: Why choose Lebanon as a case study?

The sheer magnitude of the displaced Syrian population in Lebanon was one reason for selecting it as a case study, but by no means the only one. Lebanon faces many of the challenges that the changing nature of displacement presents to humanitarian organisations across the world. The refugee population in Lebanon is highly scattered, with a variety of living arrangements – private accommodation, informal settlements, pre-existing Palestinian refugee camps – concentrated in urban settings. Despite 75% of Syrians in Lebanon living below the poverty line,

their socio-economic backgrounds vary widely, from extremely poor households relying on aid for survival to better-off families who do not need aid; from people with no education to highly educated elites; and from both rural and urban areas. Arriving in multiple waves since 2011, Syrians have been exposed to different iterations of international responses, aid programmes and funding initiatives. Now a protracted displacement, the development needs of the affected community coexist with still-unresolved humanitarian challenges.

The chapters that follow present the results of the Lebanon fieldwork. Chapter 2 provides a brief overview of the recent Syrian displacement and response. Chapter 3 outlines what dignity means to Syrians in Lebanon. Chapter 4 summarises what humanitarian actors in Lebanon mean by dignity and describes the inherent tension between aid and dignity. Chapter 5 analyses the disconnects between refugees' and humanitarians' views on aid and dignity, and Chapter 6 discusses the implications of the research and offers policy recommendations.

### 1.1 Methodology

This study used a qualitative approach based on in-depth interviews with Syrians and humanitarian actors in Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> Partnerships with local organisations were a core feature of the research approach. The research team in Lebanon comprised two international and one Syrian researcher from HPG and one Lebanese, two Syrian and an international researcher based in Lebanon, working with two Lebanese organisations: Sawa for Development and Aid and the Levantine Institute of Tripoli (Levit).<sup>5</sup> The Communication with Communities (CwC) unit of UNHCR Lebanon

organised three interviews with groups of refugee men and women in Beirut, Tyr and Zahle.

Between June and August 2018, the research team interviewed 126 refugees in 59 individual interviews, five focus group discussions (FGDs) and five group interviews, including the three already mentioned.<sup>6</sup> We also interviewed 39 humanitarian workers, mostly individually.<sup>7</sup> Among displaced Syrians, interviewees were selected randomly through canvassing and snowballing techniques. By interviewing Syrians in governorates where most refugees reside, the geographical distribution of the interviewees was closely related to the distribution of the Syrian population in Lebanon: North (Akkar, Aarsal, Baalbek and Tripoli), Central Bekaa (Bar Elias, Chtaura and Zahle), Mount Lebanon (Beirut) and South (Tyr) (see Table 1 and Map 2).

Four in five Syrian interviewees had received some humanitarian assistance, though most only sporadically; one in five had yet to receive any, though all were in close contact with people who received or believed they should receive aid. Participants were also chosen according to age, gender and diversity considerations, to ensure that the sample reflected broader demographics within the Syrian refugee population. The sample included 59 women (47%) and 67 men (53%) as well as 24 people

4 For a list of the interview questions, see Annex 1.

5 Sawa is a Lebanese grassroots organisation working with Syrian refugees in the Bekaa Valley to improve living conditions and provide job opportunities by involving beneficiaries in the design and implementation of projects. Levit runs an Arabic language school in the morning and a school for Syrian refugee children in the afternoon, and offers volunteering opportunities with local NGOs in North Lebanon.

6 FGDs were conducted with Syrians sharing common characteristics, such as gender or age, whereas group interviews were conducted with Syrians, but with no other commonality.

7 Since the research focused primarily on Syrians' and humanitarians' ideas of dignity in displacement, only six key informants (i.e. academics or other experts) and no national authorities were interviewed.

**Table 1: Number of refugees interviewed, by geographic region**

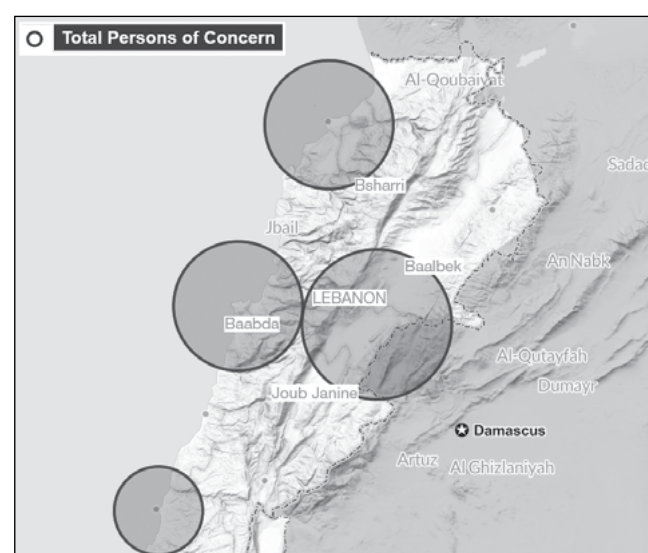
Location	Refugee population	Refugees interviewed
Bekaa	351,972 (36.1%)	59 (46.8% of total interviewees)
Mount Lebanon (including Beirut)	254,993 (26.1%)	28 (22.2%)
North (including Baalbek and Akkar)	251,537 (25.8%)	31 (24.6%)
South	117,500 (12.0%)	8 (6.3%)
Total	976,002	126

Source: UNHCR, 2018b.

between 18 and 25 years old (19%), 90 between 26 and 49 (71%) and 12 between 50 and 75 (10%).<sup>8</sup>

The sample also varied in accommodation type and length of displacement. According to official statistics, 17% of Syrians displaced in Lebanon are living in ad hoc informal settlements, largely in governorates bordering Syria (Akkar, Baalbek and Bekaa). The remaining 73% are in residential buildings, and 9% live in non-residential structures, such as unfinished buildings and garages (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 150). Among the Syrians interviewed, 73 (58%) lived in private housing (rented rooms and apartments), and 53 (42%) in informal settlements. No Syrians living in non-residential buildings were interviewed. Finally, the length of displacement varied, with an average of four and a half years and a range from six months to seven years.

## Map 2: Geographical distribution of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and sites of HPG research



Humanitarian actors were identified through snowballing. Thirty-nine humanitarian staff were interviewed, of various nationalities (including Lebanese, Syrian and other), working in 27 organisations – 18 international, five Lebanese and four Syrian non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as well as UN agencies and the Red Cross/Red Crescent Movement.

Finally, four validation group interviews were held in which refugees who had been part of individual interviews were invited to listen to the initial findings and analysis and provide additional input.<sup>9</sup> This exercise not only enriched the research but also allowed respondents to participate in the preliminary analysis. At the invitation of OCHA Lebanon, HPG led a similar validation discussion with members of the humanitarian community, presenting the preliminary findings to a group of 12 staff from UN agencies and international NGOs. The feedback and input into the analysis from the roundtable has further informed this study.

## 1.2 Language and terminology

All but two members of the research team spoke Arabic, and all interviews were conducted with Syrians in their native language.<sup>10</sup> The word for dignity in Arabic is *karama* (كرامة). It has various connotations, such as honour and pride, and is used in a wide range of societal, cultural, religious, philosophical and literary contexts. Since the 2011 uprising, it has become central to Syrian slogans, narratives, literature and artwork, and political and social discourse (Mansour, 2018). As such, the idea of dignity is pervasive and engrained in the daily lives of displaced Syrians in Lebanon.

<sup>8</sup> Children account for the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (54% (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 12)), but were excluded from the sample for ethical reasons

<sup>9</sup> Sawa conducted two validation groups in the Bekaa Valley, and Levit conducted two validation groups in Akkar. Each validation group had an average of five participants, resulting in a total of 20 participants.

<sup>10</sup> Two English-speaking HPG researchers led one FGD in Beirut and one group interview in the Bekaa Valley using translators.

## Box 2: Reception of the research

Most people approached for interviews welcomed the project and its objectives. Almost all humanitarian interviewees were receptive to the need to reflect on dignity and its meaning(s) in the humanitarian sector, and they were keen to incorporate refugee perspectives into their programming. The reaction of Syrian interviewees was more mixed. Many welcomed the chance to express their views openly on a topic they described as timely, crucial, sensitive, the 'core suffering of all Syrians' and one that 'touched their wounds and triggered their sorrows'. About

a dozen declined due to a variety of reasons, including privacy, fear and a reluctance to talk about a sensitive topic, lack of confidence that anything would change, interview fatigue and lack of time. Many Syrian men depend on day wages, which they could not afford to forgo, and therefore declined. Others declined because they felt 'we have no dignity left to speak about'. In general, however, displaced Syrians deemed the research important and were eager to share their views on dignity in the context of displacement and the humanitarian response.

The Syrians interviewed for this project demonstrated a clear and immediate understanding of the word from their perspective. The research team is confident in the translation of the word dignity as *karama* as they did not encounter difficulties in communicating either the sense or import of the concept, and were able to do so without additional explanations or reframing. Despite differences in the conditions and situations of interviewees, they used remarkably similar terms to interpret, explain and contextualise what dignity means, and why it is important to them. Various Arabic words were used to describe *karama*, including *al-e'hteram* (الاحترام), *al-hokouk* (الحقوق), *al-sharaf* (الشرف), *al-onfwan* (العنفوان), *al-isteklaliyya* (الاستقلالية), *al-fakhr* (الفخر), *al-e'temad* 'ala al-nafs (الاعتماد على النفس), *tahqeeq al-dhat* (تحقيق الذات) and *qeemet al-dhat* (قيمة الذات), which translate as respect, rights, honour, pride with strength, independence, pride, self-reliance, self-realisation and self-worth, respectively.

Finally, this report avoids terms such as 'refugee' and 'beneficiary' unless necessary for clarification, as the first is a term that many Syrians in Lebanon feel uncomfortable with (though a few wish it was used more) and the second connotes passivity. As Janmyr and Mourad (2018) note, for Syrians, the refugee label suggests suffering, poverty and a lack of dignity. Many Syrian interviewees were aware of the sensitivities and tensions inherent in the refugee label, with one young Syrian man in Beirut stating:

*We need to speak about the Syrian human being before we use the word refugee ... When we say refugee, we exclude the agency of the Syrian person ... On the other hand, I am afraid that we might deprive the refugees [of] their rights if we do not use the term refugee.*



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# 2 The current context of Syrians in Lebanon

The influx of Syrians into Lebanon in 2011 did not come as a surprise. The two countries share a long and tangled history, separated by a border arbitrarily drawn in 1920 under the French Mandate and still debated today (UNSC, 2006). The two countries' common political and socio-economic history, geographical proximity and close relations through trade and family ties led many Syrians to seek refuge in Lebanon (Rabil, 2016). As they started arriving in greater numbers after 2012, alternatives beyond the homes of relatives, friends and business partners were needed to accommodate the growing refugee population. The government's strict no-camp policy means that this is a highly scattered population, the vast majority of whom are living in urban settings (Sanyal, 2017; Ford and Lintelo, 2018; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018).

## 2.1 The displacement context in Lebanon

Since the start of the conflict in Syria in 2011, the Lebanese government has maintained a 'no-camp' policy. Although refugee camps are often viewed as, and built to be, temporary, Lebanon's experience with Palestinian refugees, who have been living in camps since 1948, gives context to this decision (Arab et al., 2015; Sanyal, 2017). Although in line with UNHCR's *Policy on alternatives to camps* (2014), when combined with a pre-existing housing shortage, the outcome has been a large proportion of urban refugees, pushing up rents and leading to severe overcrowding (Ford and Lintelo, 2018). Informal settlements of wood-framed dwellings covered by plastic and collective shelters in warehouses and unfinished buildings have proliferated, and one in three displaced Syrians lives in inadequate or overcrowded conditions (Arab et al., 2015; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018).

After allowing Syrians into the country for more than three years, in January 2015 the government of Lebanon, through the General Security Office (GSO), the branch of the Interior Ministry regulating entry

and residency in the country, tightened restrictions on freedom of movement, access to work and legal status (Amnesty International, 2015; Janmyr, 2016; Mansour, 2017; Harb et al., 2018; Lintelo et al., 2018). Refugee rights are not recognised as Lebanon is not signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention (see Box 3). Three-quarters of Syrians lacked valid residency status in 2017, either because they were unable to obtain it initially or because they could not renew it due to complex bureaucracy, prohibitive paperwork and high fees or inconsistent application of policies (Amnesty International, 2015; UNHCR et al., 2017; Ford and Lintelo, 2018; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018). In 2016, Human Rights Watch reported that 90% of Syrians living in informal settlements and collective shelters in Akkar, Tripoli and the Bekaa lack valid legal status.

The arrival of so many refugees, which continued even after the restrictions imposed in 2015, has exposed and exacerbated Lebanon's challenges, such as high unemployment and limited basic service provision (Rabil, 2016; Saavedra, 2016; Harb et al., 2018). In the past year, Lebanese leaders and politicians have become more vocal in pressing for Syrians to return home. There are curfews against refugees in 400 of the country's 1,100 municipalities, and Syrians have been evicted in attempts to drive them away, even if landlords lose money as apartments remain empty (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 166; Human Rights Watch, 2018b).

## 2.2 The humanitarian response in Lebanon

The humanitarian response to the influx of Syrians into Lebanon has undergone several iterations since 2011. Initially much of the response was ad hoc and based on the spontaneous solidarity of local communities, a handful of international and national NGOs already operating in the country, UNHCR and municipal governments. What coordination there was was via the government's High Relief Committee,



### Box 3: Lebanon and refugee rights

Lebanon was a member of the committees that laid the basis for both the International Refugee Organization and its successor, UNHCR. However, it has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention, which it partly helped draft, or the 1967 Protocol relating to the Status of Refugees. Lebanon's position stems from its objection to the permanent settlement of refugees on its territory, particularly as the 1951 Convention does not provide a solution to the Palestinian situation, as well as its belief that ratification is unnecessary since many provisions are applied

voluntarily (Janmyr, 2017; Sanyal, 2017). The preamble of the Lebanese Constitution prohibits the permanent settlement of foreigners on its territory. According to the 2015–2016 LCRP, 'The Government of Lebanon stresses on all occasions its longstanding position reaffirming that Lebanon is neither a country of asylum, nor a final destination for refugees, let alone a country of resettlement' (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2014). This statement does not appear in subsequent LCRPs (see Government of Lebanon and UN, 2015; 2018).

with the assistance of UNHCR. In 2012, the UN consolidated humanitarian efforts with the Regional Response Plan (RRP). The RRP evolved into the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) in 2015, overseen at the regional level by UNHCR and the UN Development Programme (UNDP) and coordinated at the country level by national governments (Rabil, 2016). Country plans within the 3RP, including the LCRP, sit alongside the 'Whole of Syria' approach, implemented in 2014, which includes operations within Syria and cross-border operations from Turkey and Jordan, but not Iraq or Lebanon. This approach has had mixed success in bringing together multiple operational centres and improving coordination between the UN and INGOs (Howe, 2016).

Dignity is frequently evoked in the LCRP. The plan's overall strategy is 'centred on needs which recognizes the interrelatedness and beneficial impact of the activities undertaken in different sectors on the individual's protection and dignity'. It is employed by multiple sectors, including cash assistance (described as 'affording greater choice and dignity to beneficiaries while providing substantial benefits to the Lebanese economy'); protection, which is 'aimed at obtaining full respect for the rights, well-being and dignity of the individuals concerned in accordance

with national and international law, regardless of age, gender, social, ethnic, national, religious or other background'; shelter, where the objective is 'ensuring the dignity and privacy of the displaced population'; and safe access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities for women and adolescent girls, seen as necessary for 'maintaining dignity' (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 5, 8, 135, 151, 187). Yet, this study suggests, dignity for Syrians in Lebanon is found in rights, respect and independence – all of which exist independently from, but can still be enhanced or undermined by, the humanitarian response. Thus, while the interviewees, both the displaced and humanitarian workers alike, recognised the efforts of the humanitarian partners in Lebanon, the overall response may not be able to fully uphold the dignity of Syrians in Lebanon. However, the predominantly urban nature of displacement in Lebanon has made it difficult for organisations to identify, locate and assist refugees, particularly as many lack experience in urban settings (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018). Meanwhile, the government's refusal to countenance interventions that appear to make the refugees' tenure permanent means that aid organisations are struggling to implement sustainable interventions, including infrastructure and basic services.

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# 3 Dignity: the views of displaced Syrians in Lebanon

When asked what dignity meant to them, many Syrians interviewed in this study answered, ‘dignity is everything’. As one young woman from an urban area in Syria put it: ‘Dignity is synonymous with human value and an inherent part of it. It is the equal treatment of people under the title of humanity, the appreciation of all human beings and respect and consideration of opinions regardless of status, work, class, culture or oppression’. Yet, interviewees continuously expressed their idea of dignity through references to its absence in their current situation, stressing the lack of rights and justice, constant humiliation, exploitation and discrimination that define their life in Lebanon and taint their relationship with the host community (see also Mansour, 2018). Other key aspects of dignity include guaranteeing a future for their children through education, providing for themselves and their families and having adequate work and living conditions. When asked about returning to Syria, many spoke of their desire to go home and live ‘in dignity’, but only if the appropriate conditions – security in particular – were in place.<sup>11</sup>

Syrians interviewed for this study articulated the idea of dignity around three main themes: rights, respect and independence through self-reliance. These themes emerged consistently in the interviewees’ stories and were repeatedly interlinked: achieving economic empowerment was conditional on the right to work; feeling disrespected followed both from not being entitled to basic rights and not being able to realise one’s personal aspirations; and lacking recourse against abuse were violations of human rights. These conceptualisations also mapped onto key daily interactions – with the government, host communities and families and neighbours. Interviewees consistently illustrated their idea of indignity in displacement in terms of their encounters with the GSO and Internal Security Forces (ISF), the negative stereotyping they perceived from Lebanese society and the acts of disrespect and verbal and physical abuse they suffered from the authorities, the local community, neighbours, employers and local shopkeepers. Only a quarter of the Syrians interviewed individually mentioned aid

agencies – positively or negatively – in response to general questions about dignity.

The word cloud (see Figure 1) shows the most common words interviewees used in answer to the three questions ‘What does dignity mean to you?’, ‘What are the requirements for a dignified life?’ and ‘When did you feel most dignified or undignified?’.

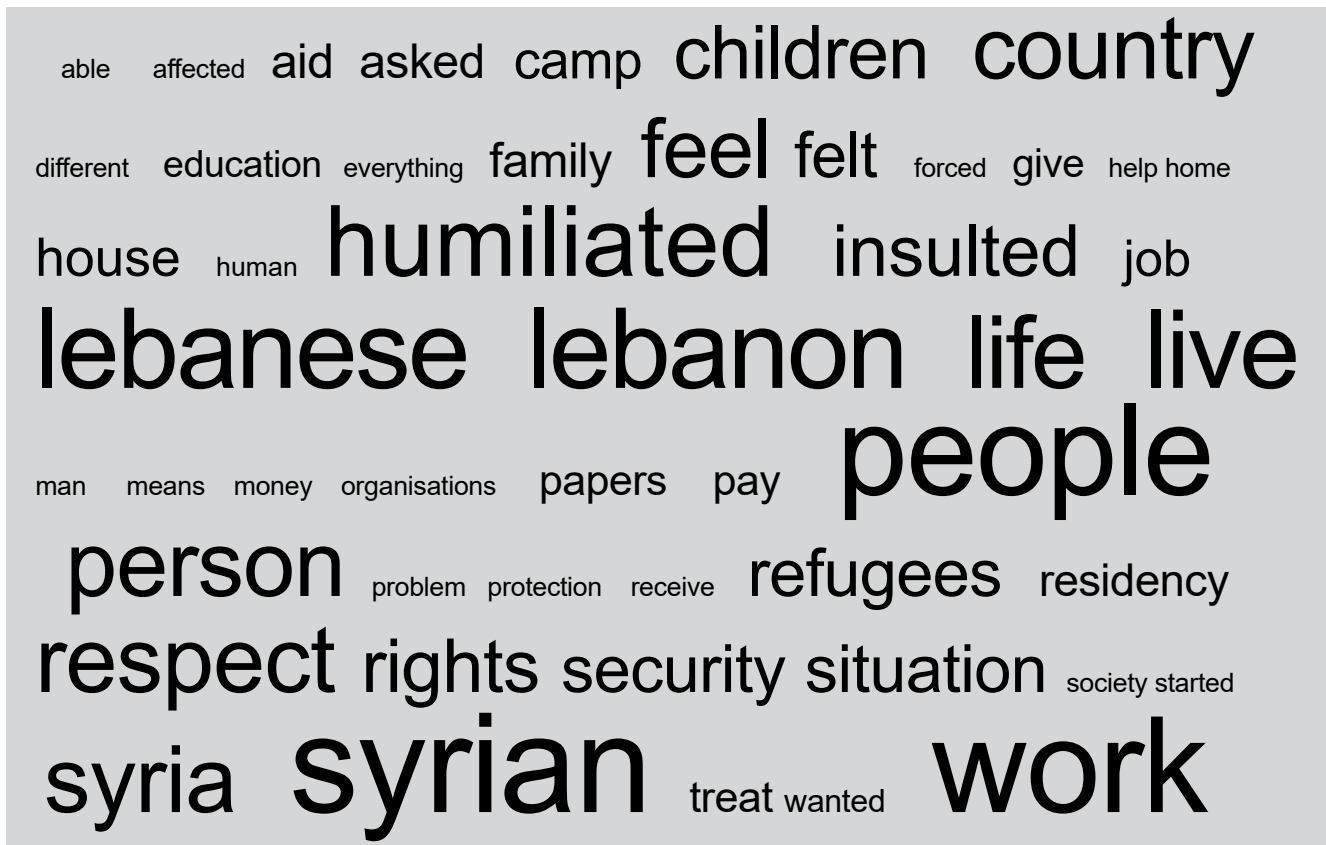
In general, dignity was an idea separate from religion and centred on the individual. Virtually no interviewee mentioned religion when describing dignity or a dignified life, though several stressed the importance of respect for culture and traditions, which are of course shaped, but by no means determined, by religion, among other factors. Some referred to the dignity of the larger Syrian community and a collective sense of dignity when describing their feelings of humiliation, as did a young woman describing her displacement in the Bekaa Valley: ‘I felt that not only was my own dignity humiliated, but that of all Syrians’. Similarly, a young male medical graduate in Mount Lebanon referred to collective dignity as ‘one individual in a bigger group. I would not be dignified when anything happens to one of the group members ... I feel undignified when any person who lives in a different town or city is being humiliated’. Others spoke of collective dignity by referencing stereotypes. As a female humanitarian worker in her fifties said: ‘When any taxi driver tells me that I do not look like a Syrian, I feel humiliated by that. Why do they stereotype Syrians? ... It is an insult to have stereotypes about Syrians that we are all backward and have the same dress code’.

The majority of interviewees, however, conceived of dignity in an individual manner, stressing the centrality of respect for the person and their fundamental rights, while also conscious of the social value of one’s self-esteem. Residing in a country that has progressively revoked their right to residence and limited their ability to work, Syrians in Lebanon feel they lack protection and recourse, yet they still linked dignity to the ability to shape their own lives

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11 A forthcoming HPG policy brief will address the issue of return, drawing on HPG field research in Bangladesh and Lebanon.

Figure 1: Word cloud



and futures, and many interviewees talked eagerly about the potential contribution they could make to their host communities and country, as well as to the humanitarian response.

### 3.1 Dignity as rights

Across age and gender, interviewees consistently linked dignity with rights. A 26-year-old woman in the Bekaa Valley stated: ‘When it comes to dignity, it is all about rights’. Many described how lacking legal status in Lebanon was the primary reason why they could not live a dignified life in displacement. One result of the government’s increasingly stringent policies, and their arbitrary enforcement, is that most Syrians now have no other choice than to live in the country irregularly. A dignified life was impossible, they claimed, if their most fundamental rights were dependent on having ‘papers’, and thus denied because they were not citizens, or even recognised refugees. A 38-year-old construction worker in Bar Elias claimed equal rights were ‘essential for a dignified life’; many claimed that they were ‘de facto second-class citizens’ and felt gravely undignified because of it. Indeed, many interviewees stated that their dignity would only be protected when they were considered equal with local citizens.

A host of profoundly negative implications arise from Syrians’ lack of legal status: exposure to mistreatment by the GSO and ISF, exploitation by employers and harassment by Lebanese citizens. Stories of abuse filled many interviews, emphasising that the lack of recourse or a state apparatus to support them affected their dignity. A young man in Tripoli stated: ‘If you want to sue someone for a crime, the police will ask you as first question, “do you have papers?”’. Although one interviewee, a 41-year-old man in Bar Elias, claimed that ‘dignity is being able to reply and speak out when there is abuse’, many have resorted to remaining silent because of their lack of rights. A man with a university degree in geophysics, who now works as a cashier in Beirut, said: ‘We do not respond to insults not because we do not have dignity, but because we do not have the power or authority to respond’.

Syrians frequently interact with, and are often abused by, Lebanese security forces (Human Rights Watch, 2018b). They are required to go to the GSO to renew their legal residency and must constantly pass through checkpoints dotting Lebanon, manned by the ISF or the Lebanese army. A 37-year-old man said: ‘I went another time to try to get my papers in order, to renew my residency papers at the General Security. When the soldier looked at my expired identity card, he just hit me. This violated my dignity’. A 54-year-old man in the North claimed that Syrians without

legal residency permits were at risk of being detained at security checkpoints, verbally humiliated and told not to arrive at the checkpoint again without papers. This harassment, combined with the curfews imposed in dozens of municipalities, severely restricts Syrians' freedom of movement. One woman in Tripoli told the researchers that: 'My family and I never really go out of the house. We leave just to get the basics, food and supplies. We speak to no one and never go to visit people'. Lack of freedom of movement and fear of checkpoints has been well documented (Andres-Vinas et al., 2015; Howe, 2016; NRC, 2016; UNHCR et al., 2017; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018).

This abusive treatment at the hands of the state in turn encourages abusive behaviour by others. One young man said that 'people were nice at the beginning, but the government was not, and the police have changed how people deal with Syrians in this country'. Syrians are vulnerable to landlords and camp managers (*shawish*), who often exercise their power improperly and exploitatively. A 55-year-old man living in an informal settlement shared this story:

*Another dispute that humiliated us was when our electricity was cut off by the landowner of the camp, who also works as a security guard, and who collects fees from us for the electricity for every kilowatt that exceeds his normal price. This man profits from our tears and threatens to throw us out, and we have to put up with it in order to stay on his land.*

While some Syrians deal with their landlords directly, such as this man, most go through a representative, the *shawish*, who is typically male, often the first to arrive or someone who has worked in Lebanon previously and who may have ties to the landowner (UN-Habitat and UNHCR, 2014; Sanyal, 2017).

Finally, the importance of the right to education and healthcare featured prominently in interviewees' answers. Most framed education both as a right for their children and as a means for building a better future. Despite some improvements and efforts by the government to enrol more children in school, in 2017 enrolment rates for children aged 6–14 ranged between 59% (Bekaa) to 78% (Akkar), and the highest primary completion rate was 14% (Mount Lebanon) (UNHCR et al., 2017: 33). Most Syrian children who attend school go only during the second shift in the afternoon, when teachers are often tired and classrooms overcrowded (Carrier, 2018). A 28-year-old woman in the Bekaa Valley tied this loss of the right to education to a violation of Syrian children's dignity and 'the destruction of an entire generation educationally'.

Syrians interviewed for this study, particularly older people and parents, felt poor access to adequate health services acutely impinged upon their dignity and fundamental rights. This 56-year-old man captured the concerns of many:

*One time there was someone in the camp who was sick and who ended up passing away. We took him to the hospital, but he did not have valid papers or anything, and he did not have money. They did not want to admit him, to treat him. They discriminated against him for being Syrian. Even if I am Syrian, I want to claim my rights, just like anyone else.*

According to a recent vulnerability assessment, 89% of refugee households requiring primary health care could access it in 2017 (UNHCR et al., 2017: 36). However, many Syrian interviewees felt the cost of healthcare was prohibitive. In their opinion, healthcare, like education, is a right that should be free and available to all, as it was in Syria, regardless of nationality or circumstance, even though in Lebanon these services are highly privatised and are not free even for Lebanese nationals.

## 3.2 Dignity as respect

Respect is the second crucial aspect of dignity for Syrian interviewees. One woman in an FGD in Bar Elias stated: 'My dignity is respect ... For a dignified life, I want respect only, in exchange for any luxuries in life'. Similarly, a man in Bar Elias said: 'My dignity comes from others' respect and estimation of me. I used to have offices and was capable in the people's eyes in Syria, and even during the war I still had my dignity there. I didn't see any loss of my dignity until I left Syria'. The idea of dignity as respect, therefore, is related to another key interaction in Syrians' daily life in Lebanon: that with host communities. This relationship has deteriorated: initially one of welcome and solidarity, it has become one of mistrust, resentment and even outright racism as fatigue with the protracted displacement of Syrians deepens. Many Syrians mentioned the normalisation of perceptions and stereotypes of Syrians as backward, dirty, vulgar, inferior or animals.

Examples of humiliation, discrimination and alienation from the Lebanese community appeared in more than half of the interviews. As the participants of an FGD in Tripoli claimed: 'There is no dignity in displacement ... Here is always humiliation'. One young woman in the Bekaa Valley told several stories of humiliation, including

being shouted at by a landlord for picking jasmine flowers:

*The landlord came out and started yelling at me, telling me ‘you Syrians are vulgar.’ I was shocked and tried to apologize but he kept yelling, so I started crying and left. There is a general perspective in the Lebanese society that all Syrians are the same. I am not saying that all Syrians are good, of course there are those who misbehave but this is like any another society where you find both good and bad people.*

As mentioned, the Syrians interviewed for this study explained how they had learned to accept these humiliations without protest for fear of being bullied further or reported to government officials.

Although the issue of harassment is sensitive and often not disclosed, many women spoke of the humiliation they felt at being perceived or stereotyped as ‘cheap’. In an FGD of six refugee women in Beirut, four said that they had been attacked in public places ‘because we are Syrians’. One of them described the following situation:

*The driver of a public van told me ‘you Syrians are very cheap, how much money do you want?’ and started touching me. I was so scared, but I managed to hit him with my shoe and jump off. What hurt me the most was what he said about Syrian women. These stereotypes hurt me so much. People judge me badly just for being Syrian.*

Likewise, a woman in the Bekaa Valley said: ‘Things we hear a lot as Syrians and are very demeaning to us. “When are you going back to Syria? Why did you come to Lebanon? You are cheap. You will get married for 100 USD. You took our husbands”’. Many women said that they did not leave their homes to avoid incidents such as this. One woman even spoke of taking her daughter out of school to escape humiliation and harassment on the street.

For several respondents, their treatment in Lebanon came closer to that of animals (dogs, cows, sheep) than fellow human beings. In an FGD, one man gave this example: ‘A little while ago, there was an animal rights protest in Beirut. But for Syrians who have been violated for years, no one does anything, and they’re humans! Where is the dignity in that?’.

A 39-year-old man in an informal settlement in the Bekaa Valley told us:

*My friend works for a Lebanese man who bought a dog. What made my friend take notice was when he realised that the dog has a passport, and she has a metal piece in her collar in case she gets lost. The dog's dignity is preserved. They care about dogs here, but they don't care about Syrians.*

### 3.3 Dignity as independence

Finally, many interviewees articulated dignity as independence or personal and economic empowerment: the ability to choose and shape the course of their lives, the possibility of self-realisation and the opportunity to provide for themselves and their families. Interviewees often associated their dignity with the ability to realise the potential of their educational backgrounds, skills and experience, yet the legal framework in Lebanon creates an untenable employment situation for most Syrians. Almost three-quarters of Syrians aged 15 and older lack legal residency;<sup>12</sup> in 2013, more than 90% worked without employment contracts and more than half worked on a seasonal, weekly or even daily basis (Masri and Srour, 2014; UNHCR et al., 2017). Less than 1% of the working-age Syrian population have work permits (Yassin, 2018). The GSO has passed a regulation allowing Syrian children who turned between 15 and 18 years old after entering Lebanon and who lack identification documents to get temporary residency permits, which will allow them more freedom of movement, to attend school and to access healthcare (Human Rights Watch, 2018a).

Interviewees were keen, not only to improve their situation, but also to contribute to their host communities. They are unable to do so because Syrians are restricted to working in agriculture, construction and cleaning services – all sectors that do not attract Lebanese workers, and thus are considered an exception by the Ministry of Labour to the general restrictions on foreigners’ right to work in Lebanon and, in the case of the first two, in which Syrians were largely employed in Lebanon prior to 2011. Moreover, the *kafala* system requires Syrians to have a Lebanese sponsor, usually their employer, whom they must pay to obtain a residency permit. In work, Syrians are exposed to harassment, exploitation and abuse, from long hours and low (or no) wages to more abusive treatment (Errighi and Griesse, 2016; Human

12 Children under 15 are covered by their parents’ residency status.



Rights Watch, 2016; UNHCR et al., 2017; Harb et al., 2018). As an elderly man in Bar Elias stated: ‘At work there are many situations in which they take advantage, where the agreement is initially a specific amount and at the end we only get half’. One woman in Beirut claimed:

*All the jobs I had were very exploitative. All the employers were either womanizers, deceitful, or wanted to give me much less money, even though they made me work double that of any Lebanese. Sometimes they would force me to do things that I was not supposed to. They exploit you because you are Syrian, and they know you need to work.*

Educated, working-age refugees found being unable to work in jobs that matched their qualifications particularly undignified. When UN Secretary-General António Guterres, then acting as High Commissioner, briefed the UN Security Council (UNSC) in 2015, he stressed that ‘Syria is experiencing a massive brain drain; 86 per cent [of 1,200 survey respondents] have a secondary education. Almost half have gone to university’ (UNSC, 2015). Indeed, of the 59 Syrians interviewed individually for this project, 39% had completed secondary education and 27% had at least one university degree.

A 25-year-old woman, a graduate in pharmaceutical science, described the humiliation of having to register as an agricultural worker: ‘When I go to the GSO to renew my residency, I have to lie about my original profession for fear of being expelled. Once an officer repeated the question, “Tell me the truth, what is your real job?” I was torn between feelings of fear and insult to my dignity’. Barred from working as lawyers, engineers, teachers or doctors, many interviewees lamented seeing their skills go to waste, particularly in a country with major challenges in delivering basic services such as healthcare and education, often for lack of qualified personnel (Andres-Vinas et al., 2015; Le Borgne and Jacobs, 2016; Mansour, 2017; Carlier, 2018). A woman working for an aid organisation in the Bekaa expressed this frustration: ‘The refugee is not only a person carrying a few belongings; we carry many more things like skills, knowledge and history’. For Syrians, working for aid and development organisations is one way to use their skills and agency. Many insisted that ‘Syrians must be employed by UN agencies and NGOs working on the Syrian response’. As a man in Aarsal put it when asked what aid organisations should do to

respect his dignity: ‘Employ at least 50% Syrians and 50% Lebanese. The Syrians will have the same background, and they are more able to understand the refugees and their needs because they have gone through the same conditions’.

Although some are frustrated at having to accept jobs that do not match their qualifications, others are willing to do any work they can get if it means being more self-reliant, and hence dignified. A man in Tripoli said: ‘The economic situation is also extremely important for dignity. I hate asking my friends and family for support. It has a negative impact on my dignity. I always privilege work above anything else to protect my dignity’. Others spoke of keeping jobs in which they were verbally abused, spat upon or cheated out of wages because they needed the work.

### 3.4 Dignity as the intersection of rights, respect and independence

While dignity is conceptualised as rights, respect and independence, these three ideas constantly intersect. Displaced Syrians in Lebanon do not feel respected because they do not have rights, such as the right to work, and cannot be economically independent. With no rights and no recourse to justice, many feel that ‘there is no dignity here’. The following account, related by a 28-year-old woman living in Beirut whose husband and nine-year-old daughter already had valid residency permits, links the three conceptualisations of dignity as rights, respect and independence:

*The simplest thing for having a dignified life is that you can renew your legal documents without having to wait for ages and without having employees obstruct the process and prevent you from getting your documents ... I had appalling experiences renewing my residency here. I spent two years going back and forth between the General Security and the UN trying to renew my legal permit, but they did not have a solution for me ... I was exposed to abusive treatment from officers who had terrible requests for me. There was one officer in the GSO who told me he would issue my residence permit if I agreed to sleep with him for one night. And why? What does he think we are? ... The Lebanese go back and forth to Syria without needing any document, and their economy has revived because of the*

*Syrians here. So, why have they reached this low level of negotiation? It would have been much easier for me if he asked for more money, for a bribe. How cheap he thinks we are and how much he thinks he can exploit us to ask for such a thing rudely and bluntly!*

*The second time I was very lucky when I got to know somebody by coincidence who helped me renew my residence permit, after two years and without asking me for anything. I explained to him what happened and what I had been*

*requested to give for my permit, and I told him that I do not want to do anything like that. He told me he doesn't want anything from me ... He asked me to send him all my papers, and he sent me the legal residence permit to my home in two days ... It was actually very easy and a matter of two days only. So, why were they exploitive and ugly to me? I will never forget the words of that employee who was negotiating with me: 'Why do you care so much? It only takes two hours in the hotel'. I keep remembering those words all the time.*

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# 4 Dignity: the views of humanitarian actors in Lebanon

Most humanitarian workers interviewed for this project had thought long and hard about what dignity meant and how their work could best promote it among displaced Syrians in Lebanon. When asked whether they knew what Syrians meant by dignity, many had a clear idea of how displaced Syrians conceived of it. Although the type of aid their organisation provided and their role within the organisation characterised some of their views on dignity, their answers to the question ‘What does dignity mean to you?’ centred on the same three main ideas raised by the Syrian interviewees: rights, respect and independence. Any differences were more of perspective, framing and terminology than of substance. For example, humanitarian actors tended to speak of protection and safety when discussing rights, and of choice where Syrian interviewees stressed independence. ‘Dignity is the ability to exercise freedom of choice, access rights and live in safety’, said a Lebanese worker for an INGO.

The principle of ‘do no harm’ also featured prominently in the interviews with humanitarian workers in Lebanon. To promote dignity, they sought to do no harm ‘psychologically, financially, physically and spiritually’, which to most meant ‘identifying the non-negotiables’ and ‘enabling the beneficiaries to make decisions and feel empowered’. These ideas inform how humanitarian workers think dignity ought to be promoted in practical ways, even when they recognised the challenges in doing so and the mixed track record of their organisations or of the humanitarian response generally in Lebanon.

## 4.1 Rights and protection

Humanitarian workers spoke of the ‘basic link between dignity and living standards’ and saw their work and its link to dignity as meeting Syrians’ basic needs, in line with the first core principle of the Sphere Charter: ‘those affected by disaster or conflict have

a right to life with dignity and, therefore, a right to assistance’ (Sphere Project, 2011). Humanitarian workers believed strongly that dignity ‘is a human right’. Many noted that ‘equating service provision to dignity is not enough’. Across organisations and roles, dignity meant ‘giving people the possibility of enjoying their rights’, and interviewees saw their role as ‘facilitating the beneficiaries’ access to [those] rights’. Many associated dignity with ‘promoting access to services and rights’, where the ability to meet basic needs was an integral part of a rights-based approach to the humanitarian response. If dignity is respecting fundamental rights, it includes all rights – ‘physical needs, food, shelter, life, work, education and healthcare’. A senior humanitarian worker emphasised: ‘The starting point for dignity is a realisation of rights. That means the entire spectrum, from basic needs like food and water to freedom of speech’.

Some humanitarian workers believed dignity in displacement is only possible if Syrians have the opportunity to ‘live life as before the displacement’. A senior worker at a UN agency stressed that ‘the opposite of dignity is misery’ and that the humanitarian response ought to ‘avoid people living in poverty and degradation’. Since ‘we are dealing with a population that is psychologically distressed due to an on-going negative situation’, he remarked, ‘self-respect decreases as a result of that’.

A few interviewees mentioned explicitly that legal status in the host country was ‘central to maintain dignity’ and demonstrated the awareness within the sector of the limitations that the national legal framework posed to the ability of Syrians to live a dignified life in displacement. Several interviewees closely echoed interviewed Syrians: ‘There is no dignity without equal rights’. The founder of an NGO told us: ‘For many displaced Syrians, the biggest challenge, especially after 2015, is not having papers or legal status in Lebanon. When you do not have a legal status, you become vulnerable, you can be detained,

stopped or deported at any time. Displaced Syrians live in constant fear for the future'. UNHCR, in particular, considers legal residency a top priority, through both participatory approaches with displaced Syrians and advocacy with the GSO.

In speaking about rights, some humanitarian workers saw advocacy with the host government and the donor community as either complementary to or inherent in their role. Most focused their answers, however, on how their work could remain as relevant as possible to the protection needs of Syrians, and stressed a 'people-centred and rights-based approach' as the centrepiece of a dignified humanitarian response. According to a humanitarian worker in Beirut, 'the idea of dignity permeates all levels of our programming through the ideas of giving back to the refugees the entitlement lost by not being citizens and of compensating for the protection of human rights that citizenship would otherwise give them'. Thus, in practice, many humanitarian workers in Lebanon agreed that upholding Syrians' dignity meant 'a community-based approach centred on protection' in which dignity means participation, or 'an active role by the beneficiaries in shaping programming and the projects implemented in their communities'.

## 4.2 Respect

The views of humanitarian workers in Lebanon also aligned with those of Syrian interviewees in recognising respectful treatment as necessary to upholding dignity in displacement. Most interviewees talked about dignity as respect and equivalent to the fundamental principle of humanity. As an INGO worker explained: 'We prioritise not hurting or disrespecting them'. Many interviewees defined dignity as 'recognising the humanity in each individual' and 'respecting their needs in a respectful way'. Some used analogies similar to those used by Syrian interviewees: 'They want to feel human, not be treated like animals'. In the words of another INGO worker: 'We ought to treat refugees like adult, responsible humans and stop seeing them as refugees only – treat them like anyone else both in positive and negative aspects'.

The ability to 'recognise the individual and treat them as such' as well as 'understanding the social and cultural context and respecting their specificities' were how humanitarian workers sought to promote dignity in practice. Many interviewees emphasised respectful practices as well as building and enforcing a 'culture of respect' for the Syrians within their organisations, which included 'not tolerating any type of disrespectful

behaviour' and 'constantly giving an impeccable example'. Although they did not always mention the issue up front, some were aware of examples of 'undignified practices and actions' taking place. A Syrian NGO worker spoke specifically of examples where other humanitarian workers take 'pictures and videos of beneficiaries with food baskets, or receiving money, or thanking the donors', which were 'all very insulting practices for people in need'. Some interviewees ascribed these failures to the fact that 'there are many inexperienced employees in relief work', noting that 'there is not enough monitoring, if at all, of them'. Disrespect was a result of 'lack of awareness by the local staff', who did not know how to interact with or listen to people in need and would 'respond to refugees in inappropriate ways'. Some mentioned the adherence of their organisation to the *Code of Conduct for the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and NGOs in Disaster Relief* (1994), but they still stressed the need for humanitarian organisations to have 'more trainings and procedures'. Only a handful mentioned that their organisations conducted specific 'protection-based training' for its employees.

## 4.3 Independence and choice

Many humanitarian workers in Lebanon thought that respect for Syrians depended on their ability to make choices. In the words of a former INGO worker, dignity is 'recognising the individual and treating them as such and with respect and taking into account their ability and rights to make decisions'. A Lebanese worker agreed: 'Dignity is to have choice, power, respect, voice, and the ability to maintain all that'. If upholding refugees' dignity meant 'giving them a normal life', then freedom of choice is essential in doing so: 'Dignity is basically the opposite of having to take it as it comes to you'; it is 'the ability to choose, to be free from undergoing others' choices, free from want and dependency'. Thus, humanitarian workers saw their responsibility as ensuring that 'refugees have the ability to choose their own actions' and helping them pursue 'the future they want'.

This idea coincides with Syrian interviewees' framing of dignity as independence and the ability to shape their lives. Many humanitarian interviewees believed that cash assistance guaranteed that ability to choose. As one programme specialist put it: 'The question for donors now is really why *not* do cash programming?' – a question that has been asked since at least 2011 (DFID, 2011). Most staff of INGOs and UN agencies stated that 'cash is dignity', though with some caveats. According to a UN worker: 'Cash is a modality of intervention, a tool rather than an end. It promotes

dignity because it offers the possibility of choice. Cash is a tool for empowering our beneficiaries, to help them make decisions freely, a link to their survival needs and thus to upholding their human rights'. Although humanitarian workers often said that 'cash is the future', many still claimed a uniqueness in the Lebanon response. The Syrian population in Lebanon is concentrated in urban areas, where there is good access to ATMs, and Lebanon's middle-income status ensures ATM access even in rural areas such as the Bekaa Valley. Overall, interviewees saw cash transfers as an optimal solution 'to overcome economic barriers to access services' in Lebanon. A UN worker described the logic behind this idea:

*Cash programming upholds dignity because it puts the decision back at the level of the beneficiary and puts the beneficiary at the centre of the decision-making process in regards to their livelihood. At least at the beginning of displacement, refugees cannot work, this takes away from them control over their own lives and makes them mere recipients of aid. With cash transfers, refugees have choices: they become consumers. They gain status and have the opportunity to participate in the life of the community. Buying in the shops close to where they live, they have a positive impact on the local economy and thereby are more accepted. By receiving cash, a Syrian father displaced in Lebanon can provide for his family because he can make choices on what to buy, how to allocate money between debt, investment, repairing a tent and addressing other adverse conditions. He can in turn maintain the role of the breadwinner in the family and thus uphold the family structure.*

Syrians confirmed this strongly held belief, and many stated that 'cash is always better'. A 39-year-old woman in the Bekaa Valley told us: 'Going to the bank to redeem the card gives me independence, and it means I do not have to wait during the distributions or be exposed to any dispute during the gatherings. I also have the discretion to buy what I need and where I want'. A senior worker at a local NGO added that cash respected people's privacy since 'Syrians generally do not want to take anything in front of others'. Other humanitarian workers acknowledge problems with the cash-based system. As one UN worker claimed: '91% of people receiving cash assistance come from rural areas in Syria, so they are not able to use an ATM card' and require training.

Several humanitarian interviewees made the connection between dignity as agency and the right

to work. As a senior employee in a local NGO emphasised: 'The first thing to do is to help [them] find a job'. Others expressed concern that Syrians 'might find the jobs available to them undignified'. These considerations were at once in tune with the frustrations of Syrians who wanted access to opportunities matching their qualifications, as well as dismissive of the willingness of many to work regardless of the nature of the job. As an experienced NGO worker told us: 'Solid waste management is a problematic line of job, for many reasons, including gender dynamics. But when we asked the refugees "do you have issues in the community by doing this job? Is it considered undignified?" they replied no; they were happy to have a job'.

## 4.4 Tensions between dignity and aid

If most humanitarian interviewees thought dignity was fundamentally 'the freedom to make choices', when asked whether the humanitarian response had promoted the dignity of Syrians, some recognised the crucial tension between dignity and humanitarian aid. A senior humanitarian worker in Beirut reflected that 'this idea of free choice is a paradox because the nature of our relationship with beneficiaries is that we provide, and they receive, aid. If it were otherwise, they would not get any of the life-saving assistance we provide. In such a situation it is difficult to improve their dignity'. Another added: 'This is tragic, but being a refugee automatically means that you live in an emergency situation, so you do not have much choice'.

Some humanitarian workers knew that, for Syrians in Lebanon, accepting humanitarian aid has been difficult and profoundly challenging. Indeed, many Syrians stressed that they either did not want to be seen as 'beggars' or did not need assistance: 'I can provide for my family *alhamdu-lillah* [praise be to Allah]'. Their relationship with aid was therefore paradoxical. On the one hand, they felt aid was their right, given that the situation they found themselves in had not been their choice but rather caused by forced displacement. On the other, they were keen to say they did not want or need to beg. As a young man in Tripoli stated: 'Asking people for help really affects your dignity. It makes you feel small and powerless'. Thus, for Syrians, *how* aid is distributed is more important, whereas for humanitarian workers the focus has been on *what* aid is delivered. Many humanitarian actors saw their direct interactions with beneficiaries as important, but recognised that this



had been given less attention in the response due to prioritisation and funding constraints.

Finally, some humanitarian workers remarked upon their relative unimportance in the lives of many Syrians (this is reflected in the word cloud (see Figure 1)). Two interviewees from different organisations noted: ‘We are such a small part of their lives and their dignity’ and ‘our beneficiaries have a much bigger life outside the response’. Syrians confirmed the higher importance they placed on relations with Lebanon and its host communities. When expressing aspirations for a dignified life in displacement, they often mentioned the humanitarian response last, if at all. A 39-year-

old Syrian woman living in an informal settlement in the Bekaa Valley stated: ‘Humanitarian aid does not preserve or respect dignity and there cannot be a link between aid and dignity. Our dignity comes from the people around us and from our interactions with them all the time, while the organisations are not always present’. Indeed, less than one in ten Syrian interviewees agreed that humanitarian organisations played a key role in addressing their needs and recognised the link between aid and dignity. One who did – an 18-year-old man in Bar Elias – claimed: ‘Instead of resorting to the mistake of stealing or other acts to cover our needs, aid plays the biggest role in helping support and preserve our dignity’.

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# 5 Dignity in the humanitarian response

As seen in the two previous chapters, Syrians and humanitarian workers interviewed for this project had similar views of dignity, centred on rights, respect and independence. These overlaps alone do not guarantee a dignified response, however. This chapter analyses how a shared notion of dignity can still result in the perception that the dignity of displaced Syrians is being undermined in the humanitarian response in Lebanon through a lack of accountability and transparency and different ideas of equality and fairness, as well as instances of degrading treatment and poor communication. Finally, a perceived lack of coordination – ‘an ill-defined and loosely used term that means different things to different actors and in the end means little’ – leads to further complaints from both humanitarian actors and displaced Syrians (Mansour, 2017: 10). Although external constraints such as limited funding and political decisions by host governments challenge the humanitarian system in Lebanon specifically and the Syrian response more broadly, much could still be done to make the response more dignified in the eyes of both the affected population and the humanitarian community.

## 5.1 Lack of accountability and transparency

Interviewed Syrians linked dignity with rights, and when asked questions about whether the humanitarian response upheld or undermined their dignity, they also linked rights and the humanitarian response. One in six stated that ‘aid is my right’. A woman in Beirut claimed: ‘Once the organisation takes my name and my number and they give this to the donors, that means they received aid, and it is my right’. Others linked their right to assistance with the life they led in Syria prior to the conflict. As a young man in the Bekaa Valley said in an FGD: ‘We paid the price of our rights in advance. My country used to collect taxes from us to send to the UN and people in need’. Having recourse to a system to which they once contributed amplifies many Syrians’ desire to understand how relief organisations spend the money raised on their

behalf and what criteria are used to redistribute it – the main way Syrian interviewees stated humanitarian agencies could better uphold their dignity.

For some humanitarian workers and many Syrians, a dignified response involves accountability to the affected population and transparency around targeting criteria. Yet, in practice, most Syrian interviewees believe that the humanitarian response in Lebanon has not communicated openly and clearly about how aid money is being spent. Many noted how the humanitarian sector closely resembles a big business and highlighted how little money they believed reached refugees. They see expanding offices, recruiting international and Lebanese staff and covering security, transport and other administrative costs as being at the expense of Syrians who need assistance. As two young men in Tripoli stated: ‘They say there are no funds, but who knows what they are doing with the money?’ and ‘To be honest, I feel that most of the assistance given for Syrian refugees is stolen by NGOs. What comes to us is a very limited percentage. God knows what they are doing with all that cash’. For one Syrian woman living in Shatila, ‘another condition for dignity in displacement is that there is more awareness of where the money that humanitarian organisations are given goes, and that there is more transparency in aid allocations’.

This perceived lack of transparency was also mentioned when discussing the selection criteria for aid – both cash and in-kind, though, when asked, almost all interviewees preferred to receive cash. Many Syrian interviewees felt that the humanitarian response was undignified because receiving assistance was ‘just based on luck’, rather than systematic, or that ‘the UN has randomly chosen the names’. A man in Tripoli said: ‘Some people get assistance, others don’t. It is very degrading for your dignity. You feel like a beggar’. A 2017 perception survey also cited lack of transparency as an issue, with 46% of respondents saying that cash transfers were not fair or transparent (Ground Truth Solutions, 2017).

Several interviewees for this study stated that they wanted organisations to conduct ‘a thorough study or

research regarding people who are most in need'. These studies, such as the annual Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR), have been conducted repeatedly and systematically, but the metrics and results have not been shared with the affected community, though they are available online, leading many displaced Syrians to feel that they must not have been done. Vulnerability assessments are not used to identify families in need of aid, and articulating criteria to measure and map needs at scale requires translating human suffering into quantitative indicators – an exercise naturally fraught with inaccuracies.

The decision to inform Syrians of the eligibility criteria used to allocate aid is widely debated within the humanitarian community. 'We always question whether to release the selection criteria', stated one UN worker. 'The issue is that they are not at all easy to explain. So, the problem begs the question, how do you communicate in a meaningful way, especially the cut off between families that might look very similar but are just above or below the threshold?'. Similarly, the founder of a Syrian NGO recounted:

*Resources are very limited and much less than the needs. No matter how we try to explain the criteria we take into consideration when delivering assistance, beneficiaries would not believe us, and they would not understand the nature of our work. They think we are 'liars', and this is very exhausting ... We have been accused of stealing the relief fund.*

Many in favour of transparent targeting, however, are concerned that sharing criteria may change behaviour and lead to fraud. One INGO worker stated they should justify why people are or are not included in the vulnerability target, but were also aware that refugees do not always tell the truth. 'Once you have been asked the same questions in vulnerability assessments – "what did you eat in the last 24 hours?" – people have learned what to answer. Can you blame them?'. UNHCR has introduced a communications module to explain targeting, but continued efforts will be needed to ensure it obtains a wide outreach.

## 5.2 Different ideas of fairness and equality

Syrian interviewees also called for transparency around criteria based on their ideas of fairness and equality – ideas often evoked by people not receiving aid, when comparing their situation to

others who do. A woman in Bar Elias stated: 'There are families who were better off than we are, but they were receiving aid. This saddened us and made us feel like we were being discriminated against. I am a refugee here, and I have rights just like any other refugee'. Another woman in Shatila also linked dignity with fairness: 'Dignity is the way of being treated ... The way help is distributed is not fair. I have a young child and do not receive anything, while others receive it even though they have a husband who can work. We should receive aid'. Similarly, a man in Bar Elias answered the question about what humanitarian organisations should be doing differently to respect dignity by saying: 'I want the distribution to be fair'. In most cases, Syrians equated aid with cash assistance. Yet, due to lack of resources, only 17% of displaced Syrians in Lebanon receive cash assistance, even though nearly 70% of refugees registered with UNHCR meet the eligibility requirements, i.e. they currently live below a survival minimum of \$435/month for a household of five – the amount 'needed per month to survive in Lebanon with dignity' (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 36, 39).

Others may have initially felt that they did not need aid but registered anyway. As a man living in Tripoli stated:

*When I first arrived in Lebanon I did not want to register at UNHCR for assistance as I was thinking that people who really need it should go. My friends told me that many people way more comfortable than me are benefiting from it, so I thought why not register. Humanitarian agencies should be more careful to whom they distribute assistance.*

Many Syrian interviewees believed that targeting was based on what humanitarian workers observe during home visits, resulting in confusion when people are included in or removed from the allocation without being spoken to in person. Beyond believing what they see when they do visit Syrians' homes, one woman in Beirut suggested that 'they should ask the landlord or the neighbours for double checking and validation' to ensure fairness in distributions.

When prompted as to what a dignified aid distribution would look like, 14 out of 20 participants in the final validation groups suggested that aid should be given equally, regardless of a person's situation, and believed that giving more aid to those in greater need based on subjective criteria created tensions. Others who had been interviewed throughout the project agreed,

with several saying that everyone should be given cash assistance and to ‘distribute to everyone or to no one’ since ‘everyone needs assistance, and everyone has the same agony’.

Yet, for some humanitarian workers, targeting upholds dignity because it ‘provides assistance to the highest number of people in need ... as fairly as possible’ when there are not the resources to provide universal assistance. ‘Operating at scale means prioritising meeting basic needs and allowing the highest number of people to live a dignified life’, said one UN worker, before asking: ‘Is it more important to reach a larger number of people or to do it in a dignified way?’. For many Syrians, these two are not mutually exclusive. Giving aid, particularly cash, to all who are in need, without differentiating between levels of need, is in their opinion the dignified option. Many humanitarian workers are aware of this preference. As one UN worker remarked:

*If you ask the refugees, they would tell you they prefer that less money is given but to more people, that the aid is made community-based. We instead created targeting based on a formula that creates social tensions within the community, and differences between people who live together and share funds.*

The affected community’s view of dignity, then, may require trade-offs that conflict with some humanitarian workers’ own ideas of fairness. With unlimited resources, many would likely give adequate aid to all displaced Syrians. Funding, however, is a major constraint on the number of Syrians receiving aid and the amount distributed. In 2017, the LCRP was only 45% funded, though Mansour argues that it is not only ‘the limited size of the funds; it is also due to how the funds are spent and how that spending is coordinated, if at all’ (Mansour, 2017: 7; Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018). Similarly, in interviews many Syrians said that they did not feel limited funding was an acceptable rationale for restricting aid, with one describing how his mother and sister had been cut off from aid: ‘We do not know the reason for the mistake, despite the evaluation and needs assessment. The justification they gave is that there is no funding. But this is not our fault.’ Humanitarian workers cited short-term and insecure funding as one of the major challenges to upholding Syrians’ dignity. As one INGO worker stated: ‘We never know what is going to happen. Now we lost funding for water projects ... How is a decent life possible without water?’.

## 5.3 Degrading treatment and poor communication

Although many Syrian interviewees were upset about the amount of aid they were, or were not, receiving, this study confirmed that dignity is seen as less about *what* aid is given and more about *how* it is given (Oxley, 2018). A woman in the Bekaa Valley stated: ‘I feel aid organisations never have the notion of dignity in their programmes when they deliver humanitarian assistance ... They only care about the number of food baskets they are delivering regardless of the approach or attitude towards the refugees in the process’. Similarly, a young woman in Bar Elias stated: ‘My accepting aid is not shameful. It is my right, and the aid is in my name. But the way I receive aid and what happens when I receive it may humiliate my dignity’.

Many mentioned waiting in long queues with large groups of people outside of distribution centres. A young man in Tripoli claimed: ‘The process of queuing for assistance is humiliating. That is why we never registered with other organisations’. Another young man in Tripoli concurred, and preferred the e-card because ‘at least you don’t have to go through the humiliation of waiting in line for a small box of rice. I would never do such a thing, on account of my dignity’. In the view of many, if aid in-kind is given, it should be delivered to them. As a woman in Aarsal stated: ‘If you want to give me aid and preserve my dignity, you should give it to me regularly, and it should be delivered to my tent. They know where I live. We do not have to go to receive aid and wait for hours in the sun, rain or snow’.

How humanitarian agencies communicate with displaced Syrians was also cited as an issue of respect and dignity, particularly as several UN agencies rely on text messaging systems to inform people of their eligibility for aid, rather than face to face. The implementation of a proxy means test, developed through vulnerability profiles collected between 2014 and 2016, reduced ‘the need for large scale household visits’, which were time-consuming, costly and discriminatory towards those whom organisations could not visit, while at the same time reducing human contact (Government of Lebanon and UN, 2018: 40). One woman in an FGD in Beirut felt that ‘the messages sent by the UN and other organisations were not reaching everyone ... [and] there should be a better way to communicate with people’. Several humanitarian workers also decried the state of communication and the tension between human contact and operating at scale. An

INGO worker highlighted the importance of the CwC working groups, but admitted that ‘official channels of communication are incredibly limited’. One UN worker noted the limitations of current communication systems, particularly around aid eligibility, and stressed the need for new technology, such as text messages, when operating at scale. Others, like this highly experienced humanitarian worker, disagreed: ‘Rather than focusing on new technology, every programme should have direct contact with refugees. This is a basic protection principle. We should infuse human contact into interventions at scale’. Similarly, another NGO worker lamented text messages as ‘one-directional’ and argued that, ‘when vulnerability assessments are centralised, you remove the human aspect and, thus, dignity’.

Communication and respectful treatment were areas where some interviewees distinguished between local and international organisations. One of the hypotheses that this project aimed to test was that a more locally led response will result in a more dignified response, based on the assumption that local humanitarian actors are inherently better at knowing what local communities need and want and thus are better equipped to provide a more dignified response than international actors. Based on the fieldwork for this research, it was not possible to prove or disprove this point, for two reasons. First, with few notable exceptions, most Lebanese organisations working with Syrians today did not exist before 2012, and most organisations involved in the response are still international. As a result, there are few local organisations in Lebanon with prior knowledge and exposure to, and thus greater awareness of, the displaced population. Second, INGOs in Lebanon must employ a high percentage of Lebanese nationals (90%) (Mansour, 2017; OCHA, 2018a). INGOs operating in Lebanon, therefore, have the necessary resources to understand the local context. Some Syrian organisations operate at a small scale in Lebanon, and other Syrians are involved in both local and international NGOs and civil society organisations as volunteers, further increasing the cultural awareness of both local and international NGOs. (The 10% quota for foreign workers includes internationals and Syrians alike, thereby reducing opportunities for Syrians to participate in the response to their own displacement.)

Many Syrian interviewees praised and criticised local, national and international organisations almost equally. Regarding the appropriateness of the treatment received, they were more likely to distinguish between individuals than between

organisations: ‘Some employees were nice. Some were rude to us’. Regarding the modalities of distribution, UNHCR seemed to fare better than smaller organisations. Although there were complaints, many Syrians deemed the organisation ‘respectful and organised’, while ‘other organisations were very chaotic when distributing assistance. Staff would be screaming at us, and it was very messy’. Local organisations were more likely to be perceived as corrupt and based on favouritism. According to a man in Bar Elias:

*International organisations are better. There is less verbal abuse and the amount of aid is more, while with local organisations there are many thefts in addition to insults and waiting long hours ... International organisations are more fair, making sure people get what they're due, while the aid in local organisations is in the hands of the workers and doesn't reach very far.*

Experiences were similar in Tripoli: ‘With local NGOs, it's all about *wasta* [nepotism]. Only if you know someone inside will you get anything’. Other interviewees spoke of waiting in the distribution queues of local organisations and observing local Lebanese in the queue and receiving aid. A middle-aged man in an informal settlement in Bar Elias recounted:

*Another time, there was a distribution by one of the organisations. The worker was Lebanese – I recognised him from the neighbourhood. His sister came, disguised, wearing a hijab and dress similar to the residents of the camp, and received assistance right in front of our eyes. Not only that, then she went and changed her clothes to another colour and returned again!*

When local organisations were praised in interviews, it was connected to respect for religious practice, such as giving special Iftar (fast-breaking) meals during Ramadan or providing culturally appropriate gifts at Christmas or Eid.

Many Syrian interviewees wanted to see more accountability for humanitarian organisations’ staff and volunteers. As a man in Aarsal explained: ‘There is no code of conduct for the staff in the Lebanese or international organisations ... There should be a code of conduct that everyone has to abide by, and they should be dismissed if they misbehave or violate it’. Although almost all organisations have their own code or follow a standardised code, such as the 1994 *Code of Conduct* and the UNHCR Code of Conduct (2004), their contents are often not made easily



available or sufficiently visible, leading many in the affected community to feel they must not exist. One local NGO worker also called for an update to the 1994 *Code of Conduct*, saying: ‘Preserving the dignity of displaced people should be mentioned and explained well ... Donations, charity and aid should be provided discreetly without anyone knowing to maintain the dignity of the people receiving aid’.

## 5.4 Lack of coordination

Finally, both humanitarian workers and displaced Syrians interviewed for this project mentioned improved coordination between organisations as one way of solving many of the issues mentioned in this chapter. Yet, the two groups approached the problem from different angles. For humanitarian workers, coordination was largely about a more integrated and complementary system to prevent fraud, avoid duplication of services and prioritise referrals. One INGO worker claimed that politicisation had weakened coordination in Lebanon, while another cited competition between agencies over scarce resources. A recent report argued that ‘international actors are implementing the same projects in the same areas and municipalities and at times are even targeting the same beneficiaries’ (Mansour, 2017: 16). As one interviewee working directly on improving coordination stated: ‘Right now, the response is too fragmented. We need to work together, and with community-based organisations, so people aren’t incentivised to play humanitarian actors off

[against] one another’. Many humanitarian interviewees supported a streamlined system so that organisations could see who is registered and from whom they are receiving help, as a way to validate their criteria and make sure the most vulnerable receive aid.

For displaced Syrians, coordination was also a way to streamline the response and make it more encompassing, and this was often mentioned when answering the question: ‘What should humanitarian organisations have done differently to respect your dignity?’. In their view, coordination should primarily aim to cover gaps left by different organisations’ targeting criteria, or ‘to provide more comprehensive coverage of our needs’. Rather than assume an individual who is not receiving aid from one organisation will not meet the criteria of the next, several Syrians suggested that streamlined databases would allow organisations to know who is not yet receiving assistance and take that into account, as those who receive some aid are now less vulnerable than those who receive none. Others mentioned that coordination would ensure that informal settlements are covered equally and with a variety of items. An older man in Bar Elias stated: ‘There should be better coordination between organisations. If an organisation distributes sugar, for example, we don’t want all the other organisations to come and give us more sugar ... If an organisation brings clothes one day, then the next time they should bring food, and the next time something else’. Coordination, then, like many other aspects of the aid response, is deemed important by both the humanitarian sector and the affected population.



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# 6 Conclusions and recommendations

Dignity is a pervasive concept in humanitarian discourse, though it is almost always undefined. This study sought to examine dignity in displacement, starting with the affected community – displaced Syrians in Lebanon – by asking, ‘What is dignity to you?’. Only by understanding Syrians’ own definition of dignity can the humanitarian response be judged to either uphold or undermine their dignity. For displaced Syrians interviewed for this study, dignity was consistently evoked in their conceptualisation of rights, respect and independence – concepts that were interconnected and closely tied to the lack of legal or refugee status. Not all Syrian interviewees conceptualised dignity the same way, with most speaking of individual dignity while some mentioned its collective aspects, particularly when discussing stereotypes. Almost all, however, linked their lack of dignity to their current displacement and lack of legal status, rather than the humanitarian response.

The two-year HPG project ‘Dignity in displacement’ hypothesised that the more similar conceptions of dignity were between the humanitarian community and the affected population, the more dignified the response would be. This case study, however, shows that this hypothesis may need to be reconsidered. Like Syrians, interviewed humanitarian actors saw dignity as rights (protection), respect and independence (choice). Yet, the response was considered undignified by most Syrians as well as by many humanitarian actors. The causes of this disconnect were not conceptual differences, but rather the loss of rights, respect and independence Syrians had prior to the current conflict, which the humanitarian response had been unable to restore; unfulfilled expectations in the level of aid provided; how each group defined key principles in humanitarianism, such as accountability and equality; and how these principles were put into practice. Each group used terms such as transparency, fairness, communication and coordination, but defined them in different ways.

Much of what Syrians feel is undignified about the response stems from their perceptions of how aid decisions are made. Although many humanitarian

actors felt they had valid reasons for maintaining the confidentiality of their eligibility criteria, sharing the criteria with the affected community would go a long way towards increasing accountability and promoting transparency in the response. Humanitarian actors often justified withholding the criteria by saying that the affected community might use this knowledge to take advantage of the system. They recognised, however, that more genuine inter-organisational coordination would help identify needs and increase complementarity in the response. Syrians also acknowledged that some aid recipients take advantage of the system, but stressed that better coordination among aid providers would address what they saw as the bigger problem: too many people in need being overlooked.

Dignity often has more to do with the intangibles of aid delivery than the tangible aid itself. Many Syrians spoke of their desire for aid workers to be held accountable to a code of conduct. Almost all organisations have had codes of conduct in place since the early 2000s, but there is still much to be done if the affected community feels so disrespected that they assume these codes do not exist. Similarly, more – and better – communication between the affected community and the humanitarian sector would be more respectful and would prevent many misunderstandings. Rather than receive a text message that informs them if they will or will no longer be getting aid, almost all Syrian interviewees wanted face-to-face contact with the people who make these decisions. Yet, the humanitarian community may not have the resources for such methods at scale, depending on the design and priorities of the response.

Beyond different interpretations of humanitarian concepts, external constraints such as limited funding and government policies prevent humanitarian workers from acting on their conceptualisations of dignity. Almost all humanitarian workers said that they knew that Syrians were frustrated that they were not receiving enough aid, but that there was little they could do to give some people more aid beyond taking it away from others. Similarly, many spoke of

their desire to employ Syrians in their organisations, but added the caveat that it is difficult to do so when the Lebanese government limits the number of foreign workers they can employ. Whether upholding dignity is an obtainable goal for the humanitarian sector also depends on external circumstances that humanitarian workers may not be able to influence. Rather than speak of upholding or preserving dignity as an end in itself, perhaps the aim should be to make displacement more dignified in relative terms, and in Lebanon there is still more than can be done.

Rather than use external constraints as a justification for not improving the response, organisations could do more to involve Syrians in programme design,

implementation, monitoring and evaluation, including at the policy and decision-making levels. They could also provide livelihoods activities that are more in tune with their beneficiaries' views of what dignity means and how it can be best promoted, particularly in terms of work, respect and independence.

Humanitarian organisations should continue to work together to encourage the government of Lebanon to ease restrictions on residency permits, employment, education and healthcare, so that Syrians have a choice in how they prepare for their future. Communication and accurate information about the situation in Syria will be crucial to Syrians debating return, and humanitarian agencies will have a major advocacy role to play for those who may wish to remain in Lebanon.

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# Annex 1: Interview questions

## Questions asked in individual interviews with refugees:

1. What is dignity to you?
2. What are the requirements for a dignified life to you?
3. Since you have been displaced outside Syria, when have you felt most and least dignified? Why? Can you give us any examples?
4. Have you received any assistance from humanitarian organisations?
  - a. What type of assistance (Cash, food, non-food items, etc.)?
  - b. What type of organisations (Syrian, Lebanese, or international)?
5. How have these organisations treated you? Can you give us examples?
6. Do you think that humanitarian organisations respected your dignity?
  - a. If yes, what aspects of what they do/did make you think so?
  - b. If no, why not?
7. Do you feel more dignified when receiving an e-card or other assistance? Can you give us examples?
8. Do you think that humanitarian organisations treat everyone equally?
9. What should humanitarian organisations have done differently to respect your dignity? Can you give us examples?
10. What are in your opinion the conditions for a dignified life back in Syria?

## Questions asked in FGDs with refugees:

1. What is dignity to you?
  - a. What are the requirements for a dignified life to you?
  - b. Since you have been displaced outside Syria, when have you felt most and least dignified? Why? Can you give us any examples?
2. Can you tell us about the assistance you are receiving?
3. How have these organisations treated you? Can you give us examples?
4. Do you think that humanitarian organisations respected your dignity?
5. What kind of aid makes you feel more dignified?

6. What should humanitarian organisations have done differently to respect your dignity? Can you give us examples?

## Questions asked in individual interviews with humanitarian actors:

1. How does your organisation go about upholding the dignity of Syrian refugees in Lebanon?
  - a. How does the idea of dignity affect the design and implementation of your programmes/projects?
2. How do you promote dignity in your work/tasks?
3. Do you believe it has/you have been successful in doing so? Why/why not?
  - a. Do you monitor that regularly? How?
  - b. Do you have any systematic ways of evaluating it?
4. What is dignity to you?
  - a. What ideas do you most directly link to the notion of dignity?
  - b. Is this understanding captured in the humanitarian principles guiding your work?
5. Is this the same idea that your beneficiaries have of their dignity?
  - a. Have you asked them? (Why not?)
  - b. Have you incorporated their answers into your programming? (How?)
6. What are the biggest challenges for your organisation, and for your specific role, in promoting your beneficiaries' dignity when providing humanitarian assistance in Lebanon?
7. Are there organisations that are doing a particularly good job in promoting the dignity on the Syrian displaced population in Lebanon?
  - a. Is there any difference between local and international organisations?
8. What lessons have you learned so far regarding promoting dignity in displacement?
  - a. Do you know of any specific examples of good practices (programmes/projects)?
9. What would need to happen for a dignified return to be possible? What would a dignified return look like?

# HPG

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Cover photo: Syrian refugees  
Nazih, his wife Fatima and their  
children warm their hands next to  
a stove inside their shelter at an  
informal settlement near Terbol in  
the Bekaa Valley, Lebanon.

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