



**It does not Need a Push-back to Push Back**  
The Perception of Political Violence Among  
Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

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## 1. Introduction

Ever since the outbreak of the Syrian ‘civil war’ in the aftermath of the Arab Uprising 2011, Lebanon has become the number one host country for Syrian refugees.<sup>1</sup> With a population of only six million people, Lebanon has been hosting around 1.5 million Syrians.<sup>2</sup> While in the first years there was still a limited sort of solidarity with fleeing people, this has been decreasing due to the longevity of the war in Lebanon’s neighbor country and the severe domestic economic crisis that Lebanon is going through since 2019 (see I3; see I6).

Besides, post-conflict sentiments influence the perception of Syrians in general. Up until 2005, when the last troops left the country, Syria was still an occupational force in Lebanon – the practice of forced disappearances was widely used which is present in the Lebanese memory until date (see Shaery-Yazdi 2021; Sriram 2013, 122ff.). The Cedar Revolution that pushed out Syria’s occupational forces was also the founding moment of the two opposing political blocks: the pro-Syrian March 8 and the anti-Syrian March 14 (Sriram 2013, 122ff.).

Against this background, the use of political violence against political opponents, journalists, and marginalized groups such as Syrians to distract the public’s eyes from broader (mal-) developments is nothing new but rather something well researched (see Knudsen/Yassin 2012). However, something that has not been dealt with enough is how various forms of political violence develop across time-space and how they are experienced. For the latter purpose, I put a special emphasis on emotional layers of political violence and the body level as these are often underrepresented and devalued as irrational or unimportant in research (cf. Fattah/Fierke 2009, 70).

Therefore, the following article undertakes a first approach to analyze in how far Syrian refugees experience political violence in Lebanon along and through multiple spatial scales. The leading research question is: *How and where is political violence executed against Syrian refugees in Lebanon?* To grasp the world of perception, expert interviews with eight NGOs were conducted that are active at the intersection of psychosocial support and advocacy. I

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=j70UBp>

<sup>2</sup> See: <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2022/03/UNHCR-Lebanon-Operational-Fact-Sheet-Jan.-2022.pdf>

start by outlining my methodology and ethical considerations, then come to my theoretical lenses (political violence and space), and then the description of my empirical material. The last chapter analyzes the collected data and connects it back to theory before I come to the conclusion.

## **2. Methodology**

As any research should start with ethical considerations, this is especially true for this one. First, I want to make visible that I have a working class background. Being a researcher, this is part of me and influences my perspectives on the social world. In particular, I am choosing an intersectional approach to analyze the various forms of discriminations that Syrian refugees have been facing as personal experiences with classist discrimination have been influencing this interest. However, this does not put me into a position in which I can relate to forms of *racial*, gender or sexuality based discrimination. Therefore, I want to prominently position myself as a *white*, male researcher. This puts me into an unequal power position in relation to Syrian refugees who live under systematic racism and displacement, and who cannot just leave Lebanon at any point as I can with my German passport.

This positioning is not an end in itself to me but rather determines my methodological considerations. My research is centered on the variety of political violence executed against and experienced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon. As such, a desk research would not have been sufficient because it cannot grasp how marginalized populations perceive this violence. Therefore, I decided to carry out expert interviews with organizations working at the intersection of psychosocial support and advocacy. In other words, I wanted to come as close as possible to the actual world of experience of Syrian refugees without actually talking to survivors of violence themselves to prevent (re-)traumatization. In the end, I conducted eight guideline-based expert interviews with NGOs active in the field – each interview lasted between 60 and 90 minutes.

The evaluation of the (fully anonymized) transcripts was followed according to three steps of the qualitative content analysis. During the first phase of extraction, I scanned and coded the text according to my theoretical layout and the categories that I have set before

(Gläser/Laudel 2008, 206): structural violence, epistemic violence, physical violence, and emotional/psychological violence (ibid., 208). This proceeding was followed for each sense section in five transcripts.<sup>3</sup> In the second phase, I scanned the transcripts for the characteristics of each code. Lastly, I summarized the arguments of each characteristic within one transcript and used this summary as the basis for my analysis.

### **3. What is (Political) Violence?**

As all research about the phenomenon of violence, this research starts with a definition. After all, violence can mean all or nothing depending on how narrow or wide one operationalizes the term. In my opinion, a purely physical understanding of violence as physical harm to people by people is not sufficient if we want to understand the various forms of political violence that are being executed vis-à-vis marginalized groups. In fact, I perceive this as a form of epistemic violence in itself, as it makes the everyday violence and micro-aggressions against structurally vulnerable groups invisible and as long as “it is not recognized, justice cannot be rendered” (Fassin 2013, 130). Therefore, I use the WHO definition to add psychological, verbal and structural forms of violence, a power dimension as well as self-harming behavior to grasp the execution of political violence(s) along multiple scales. Accordingly, violence is:

The intentional use of physical force or power, threatened or actual, against oneself, another person, or against a group or community, that either results in or has a high likelihood of resulting in injury, death, psychological harm, maldevelopment or deprivation. (WHO 2002, 5)

Consequently, my understanding of violence is broad and multi-faceted. The later analysis of the interviews was herein organized along the categories of structural, epistemic, physical, and emotional/psychological violence. Structural violence is a social environment in which the actual development of human beings is worse off than what it could potentially look like. Johan Galtung (1982) also uses the term social inequality to describe the core element of structural violence (ibid., 9ff.). Though epistemic violence is popularly used to criticize the knowledge production of colonial European science (cf. Brunner 2020), it offers an analytical instrument to understand how the usage of knowledge transforms into power. In specific, it

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<sup>3</sup> This article is the outcome of a six-week long internship at HBS Beirut. The amount of data exceeds the scope of this paper but will be discussed in my forthcoming Master’s thesis in depth. If interested in that or keen to give feedback, you may contact me at any time on [joschkadreher1\(at\)aol.de](mailto:joschkadreher1(at)aol.de).

will be applied to analyze the production of popular knowledge within the Lebanese media. Physical violence is the most graspable form of violence; it includes any form of direct harm. At last, psychological/emotional violence is the exposure of an individual to conditions that harm their psychological and/or emotional well-being by intimidations, humiliations, and the like (Dempsey 2020, 5).

So what are the constituent elements that make all these forms of violence a form of political violence? First, political conflicts can be solved by various means among which violence is just one. However, if violence is used to solve a political conflict as it is deemed opportune or no other means seem to achieve the goal, then we speak of political violence (Enzmann 2013, 44). Second, we can distinguish, and this indeed makes sense for the Lebanese case with its high presence of non-state rule, between (1) “violence from above” which indicates state institutions and (2) “violence from below” which operates outside of the state and/or is targeted against it (Ruggiero 2006, 1). Third, the stage and/or target of violence is the public (ibid., 21). The working definition of political violence for this paper is as follows: *Political Violence is the public use of physical force or power executed or announced by (non-)state individuals or groups against others to fulfill political goals and that may result in physical and/or psychological harm.*

### **3.1 Constitution of Political Violence: Why and when to choose Violence**

There is not one factor x that leads to violence y but we rather need to acknowledge the processual and structural dynamics behind it. Contributing factors to the execution of political violence include but are not limited to felt deprivation, availability and accessibility of resources, windows of opportunities, general (in-)acceptance of violence, and possibilities of legitimization (Enzmann 2013, 53ff.). In times of failing or overwhelmed social institutions triggered by major events like influx of migration, technological innovations or catastrophes, societies may become solely motivated by achieving a goal or overcoming the crisis as fast as possible, regardless of the method. Oftentimes agitators portray violence as this method to overcome the crisis. What used to be illegitimate means may no longer be (Ruggiero 2006, 71).

However, this disorganization of society cannot be confused with anarchy or the absence of morality. Rather it is about a reconfiguration of institutions and competition of norm systems that all claim to represent society in the best way (ibid., 71). In that sense, the own value system becomes the point of reference, as deviating or abnormal behavior – in short: anything that does not fit into the hegemonic perception – is perceived as endangering the moral order of a society that is already under pressure (ibid., 47f.).

Key to understand why political violence against political opponents is perceived as just and can be mobilized in such situations, is the process of excluding *them* from the own moral compass by strategies such as scapegoating, dehumanizing, othering<sup>4</sup> and/or declaring *them* enemies. By that, physical and political violence against opponents becomes legitimized as the eradication of the *other* becomes a just mean to reinstall or enforce a certain order (Enzmann 2013, 49ff.).

### **3.2 Actors and Perpetrators**

Unlike individuals, groups manage to organize and collectivize their members under the label of participating in something greater that gives meaning and enhances social cohesion. Even groups that do not aim at radical change or overthrowing a system, may still be actively executing political violence in order to institutionalize their own norms and preferences for the next generation (Ruggiero 2006, 84f.). Importantly, if an act of political violence is executed according to an outside impulse, this impulse will always be interpreted or cognitively processed first. So, there is always a subjective, very personal element of processing the received information and (re-)acting accordingly (ibid., 113f.).

#### *Violence from Above*

Though talking about the state comes with its own conceptual problems in Lebanon, the state is still in *de jure* control over its security apparatus and has the power to define what constitutes deviance (in distinction from normal behavior) and legitimate counter reactions to it. Indeed, the presence of some sort of criminality is deemed a question of survival for the state in order to (re-)perform its activity as security provider and (re-)produce cohesion among

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<sup>4</sup> A group-sociological process in which an inner-group (us) and an outer group (them/others) are constructed as antagonists. Individuals are essentialized according to certain features and difference turned into hierarchy.

what constitutes its *normal* population (Ruggiero 2006, 47ff.). Michel Foucault (1977) explains that the power to make life (biopolitics) instead of taking it also comes with the power to organize society along what is the wanted norm. Within that definition of power, everything that does not fit into this norm becomes a danger to the sovereign's power.

Direct forms of political violence from above can be seen in the misuse of legitimate power for example in police brutality during protests (Ruggiero 2006, 118f.). However, much more interesting for my undertaking are cases in which institutional actors make specific use of social disorganization and engage non-state groups to support their political goals (ibid., 74ff.). The institutional violence from above is thereby not detached from the violence operating outside the institutional apparatus. Rather, the former has an ability to control political violence from below (ibid., 73ff. ).

#### *Violence from Below*

For this research, I am not following the pure definition of "anti-institutional violence" (Ruggiero 2006, 1) as targeting the institutional configuration of the state. Rather, I perceive non-state actors a consecutive part of the post-Ta'if political system (Sriram 2013, 123ff.). Though this positioning of non-state actors within and outside institutional patterns at the same time may seem contradictory at first, I will not further analytically distinguish them. Thereby, I am not underestimating the role of non-state violence in the dismantlement of the state's monopoly of force but I rather do not perceive this as an aim in itself but more as a byproduct – most non-state actors to me seem to be interested in fulfilling their own interests rather than fighting the state.

## 4. Approaching Space

To come closer to an actual understanding of the spatial implications of my research question (*Where is political violence executed?*), this chapter outlines my analytical understanding of space(s). First and foremost, space is a rather complex word for something we all know and live in day by day. Importantly for the following analysis is my understanding of space as being embedded in society itself and thereby within power dynamics. Accordingly, if a local company goes global or a labour union decides to internationalize its struggle, both rescale the social world that used to be the status quo. Spaces are therefore produced by and through certain actions (cf. Belina 2017).

A body for example is a space just like a café because specific power relations and meanings are materialized within it and from there further order its surrounding space (ibid., 53f.). Observing men or women in any sort of public space for example tells a lot about this reciprocity: While men usually occupy more space by spreading their legs or using their voice to show their dominance this materializes the patriarchal organization of society within and through our bodies and by that in the public itself.

Having understood that, this turns any supposed distinction between internal and external upside down. We can now analyse the mutuality of externally lived and internally perceived spaces (see Lefebvre 1991, 91ff.). The later analysis will show on which places and along what scales political violence is executed against Syrian refugees. To sum it up, I am looking at the spaces (*Where?*) of political violence as this reveals social power relations.



## 5. Description of Empirical Data

As outlined before, I have focused on structural, epistemic, physical, and emotional/psychological (political) violence. Due to the limited space of the paper, of course, not all aspects can be comprehensively captured.

### 5.1 Structural Violence

The interviewees describe various forms of structural violence that Syrians have been facing in Lebanon. The following chapter presents an intersectional and systemic perspective on discrimination to understand the ground on which all other forms of political violence develop.

#### *Intersectional Discrimination: Race, Class, and Gender*

Interview 3 describes a perception of racial superiority which “essentializes it as if Lebanon is a race” (I3, l. 981) and from there turns into a “culture [...] to otherize every single person who is not Lebanese” (I3, ll. 1003f.). Difference is turned into fear of the Syrian and/or Palestinian and their expatriation is presented as a means to secure the people of Lebanon against the constructed danger “of being taken over” (I1, l. 748). This ideological thinking finds a structural expression in the sexist citizenship law that reserves the right to inherit citizenship to men, and the kafāla system that racially justifies economic exploitation of workers from Sub-Saharan Africa and South-East Asia. Especially the citizenship law has severe consequences for Syrian women, as marriage to a Lebanese husband is described as an exit strategy out of their precarious situation. Furthermore, it reflects a masculinist perception of the nation, which can be linked to a queer-hostility that is also used to scapegoat the Syrian community for the homegrown hate against queer people, according to the interviews.

#### *Lacking Reconciliation & Accountability*

Another factor that structures all interviews and especially elements of physical and epistemic violence is the lack of reconciliation after the Lebanese civil war and the Syrian occupation, and thereby the lack of accountability for perpetrators of war crimes. Consequently, Syrians are perceived to “symbolize” (I1, l. 116) a double security threat for “what [...] they believe in” (I1, l. 117) and what “entity [...] [they] represent” (I1, ll. 289f.), assuming a congruence between nationality-holder and state. First, post-conflict fears about the demographic and

political status quo are aggravated. Second, the Syrian refugees and the Syrian occupation are described as conflated perceptions in which any Syrian becomes the former war perpetrator. In a reconciliation free environment, this can easily provoke situational re-traumatization and escalation in personal encounters if former Lebanese war victims meet Syrian individuals who are conflated with the former oppressor. However, this is far from limited to the personal level but rather structures large parts of Lebanese society, discourse and politics “towards the refugees because it is as if you’re paying back what happened” (I1, ll. 251ff.). The lacking reconciliation is institutionalized in widespread impunity, which is described as a key factor in rights’ violations of marginalized groups. Also, the failing or failure of the Lebanese state contributes to “[dis]believe in accountability” (I5, ll. 447f.) and is described as increasingly leaving Syrian refugees vulnerable to vengeance.

#### *Lack of protection & deprivation*

The third structural violence dimension is targeted against Syrians as “a way of kind of indirectly forcing them out of the country” (I3, l. 501f.). Lebanon is a non-signatory state of the 1951 UN refugee convention, thereby Syrian refugees are considered (im-)migrants. By that, the Lebanese government avoids any obligations. Consequently, Syrian refugees live in legal and economic precariousness, vulnerable to mutual exploitations by landowners, employers or security forces. This structural exclusion from the Lebanese social and economic system is linked to the constructed fear of unraveling the fragile sectarian balance as most Syrians are Sunni Muslim but it also reflects the basis of a classist labor conflict. That is why curfews often come with structural violence like the setting of maximum wages, restrictions to work outside camps or in Lebanese companies at all.

While in the first years after the outbreak of the war, immigration was still possible and comparably easy, the Lebanese government increased restrictions against Syrians from 2015 onwards. As such, UNHCR stopped registering Syrian refugees following pressure by the General Security and the Foreign Ministry. In parallel, basic services were opened to Syrian refugees. This erratic governmental approach of being pro and contra Syrian refugees at the same time reflects a multi-level-game: appeasing the international community and the geopolitical allies Saudi-Arabia and Iran that both have their stance on Syria while at the same time increasing the uncertainty for Syrian refugees to motivate their return.

## 5.2 Epistemic Violence

The various elements of epistemic violence that come up in the interviews are politically used to distract the public's attention from governmental mistakes, new agendas, systematic corruption and structural problems.

### *Scapegoating*

Influenced by the Syrian occupation, the scapegoating of Syrians whenever a new crisis arises is described as something very habitual within Lebanese society. The most recent example is the bread crisis, in which the public anger was diverted towards Syrian refugees, by developing the popular demands (and actions) that Syrians need to be checked for documents and put into separate lines at the bakeries. This scapegoating is usually accompanied by the spread of fake news and the portrayal of an increasing criminality and danger.

### *Safe Country*

While in the first years of the Syrian uprising there were daily war reports in Lebanon, today a narrative of the war as being over and the country being safe prevail and are promoted by Assad as well as the Lebanese government that aims at a "normalization" (I3, II. 191ff.) of relations to organize returns. This shifting narrative cannot be detached from the international discourse. Whenever there is a political shift in Europe regarding the declaration of a safe country of origin, Lebanese politicians also use this to proclaim the safety of Syria and agitate for a return movement, says interviewee 4. This dynamic is reflected in the Brussels conference on international aid for Syria. While it used to be consensus up until the Brussels IV conference in 2020 that "conditions are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity"<sup>5</sup>, in the last two conferences this clear line was weakened by discussions about the right to return and its specific conditions.<sup>6</sup> For interviewee 4, this indicates a political shift in some European countries (most prominently Denmark) on the question of safe country and return.

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<sup>5</sup> See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2018/04/25/brussels-ii-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region-co-chairs-declaration/>

<sup>6</sup> See <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/06/30/brussels-iv-conference-on-supporting-the-future-of-syria-and-the-region-co-chairs-declaration/>; see <https://syacd.org/sacd-to-brussels-conference-for-discussions-on-return-to-have-meaning-there-must-be-safe-environment-in-syria/>

### *Hate Speech*

For the initial phase of the Syrian uprising, interviewee 3 describes a sectarianization of the conflict into 'Shia vs. Sunni' within Lebanon and among the two political blocks. For example, Hezbollah's engagement in Syria fueled these inner-Lebanese tensions to a level of physical clashes in Tripoli. These were then further used by politicians to spread hate against Syrians who were blamed for the tensions. However, only after the halt of registering Syrian refugees in 2015 an "anti-refugee rhetoric" (I4, l. 67) has become dominant across political distinctions. This is reflected in a media that ethnicizes individual crime into Syrian violence and thereby manipulates public opinion.

Increasing the amount of hate speech against Syrians is used to "benefit both economically and politically" (I5, ll. 61f.). First, the government thereby constructs emergency situations against vulnerable populations to attract aid without complying with reforms. Second, it is a populist tool to gain support in one's own electorate. It is organized from "general institutions until it reaches the community" (I5, ll. 133ff.) where it is mainly translated into micro aggressions (e.g. discriminating behavior/language) by individuals motivated by post-occupation experiences.

### **5.3 Physical Violence**

Interviewee 1 calls the overall direction of the repressive direct forms of violence "a display of power" (I1, l. 192) to show to the Syrian refugees in a very deliberate way they still "have the option to leave" (I1, l. 193). When it comes to institutional perpetrators of violence they are distinguished between the "individual level" (I3, l. 394) (security officers, soldiers, etc.) and "the institutional level" (I3, ll. 397f.) (legal procedures, organized raids, etc.).

### *Mobility Control*

Regarding the level of mobility control it is rather in and around smaller villages than in cities where restrictions occur. Even before the so framed refugee crisis there used to be curfews. Three motives are brought in for the municipal implementation of curfews: First as populist means to perform security strength, second to make Syrians feel unwelcome and third out of a perceived last resort to the state's failure in the organization of the refugees' influx. Despite

the rather localized decision-making, the municipalities are “backed by the security forces” (I1, ll. 226ff.) because the government wants to indirectly push out Syrian refugees.

The same motivation lays behind the raids. These are organized by national institutional actors and local (non-)state actors. In 2019 for example, individual Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) members locally raided Syrian work places, a practice that was later adopted by the Ministry of Labor, reports interviewee 3. Usually there is the municipal police, neighborhood watch groups that consist of youngsters affiliated with the old militias, local security committees<sup>7</sup>, and the ISF – which informally cooperates with all other actors and committee members.

The justification to further restrict the freedom of mobility is usually the occurrence of local clashes. During the Covid-19 pandemic however, refugees were put under stricter curfews than the overall population and surveilled by police and informally mandated Lebanese neighbors. Besides the violation of free movement, there are grave economic consequences following from shrinking time and space frames to work in and outside the municipality.

### *Forced Displacement*

The decision-making of the camp destructions is relatively detached from the national level because these actions are “very localized incidents of say, collective punishment” (I4, ll. 379f.) after single violent incidents. However, they cannot be detached from the nationally propagated hate speech that translates into individual and group action. Besides, national lawmakers are locally supporting the enforcement of arbitrarily updated legal requirements (e.g. on the usage of cement structures) whose non-compliance is then used as justification to demolish tents. So there are central decisions that equip local actors with a “carte blanche to just impose [...] [any] discriminatory measure” (I4, l. 539f.) in order “to test the patience of refugees further” (I4, l. 500).

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<sup>7</sup> These consist of local community members that are usually above the age of 40 and they can be affiliated to political parties or the municipal council.

### *Physical Clashes*

While physical clashes are often caused by very personal issues such as refusal of marriage or debt, they can be also ideologically motivated. Politically associated militias who feel empowered by the state of impunity play a key role in the execution of anti-Syrian attacks. After the Beirut blast for example, identified members of the Lebanese Forces beat up Syrians who participated in the popular protests. At the same time, the cracking-down of Syrian-led protests and the breaking of political agency of refugees is described as a common practice by institutional security forces ever since 2011.

### **5.4 Emotional and Psychological Violence**

Though it is hard to empirically prove the intentional use of emotional/psychological violence in all cases apart from psychological torture, overall it can be perceived as one strategy among many to “damage these people maybe enough so that they give up and just leave” (15, ll. 567ff.).

### *Stress and Uncertainty*

Out of the structural vulnerability, especially the checkpoints and interactions with security forces, emerges stress for Syrian refugees. As they are structurally disempowered, they are left in a state of constant uncertainty and hopelessness which contributes to distress; at any moment a new bureaucratic decision could impact their lives. Even though after more than one decade of displacement the “environment of insecurity and unpredictability” (14, ll. 603ff.) becomes somehow a state of normality, it still evokes constant distress because they “don't feel like they can settle down” (14, ll. 632ff.). Besides, daily scapegoats and micro-aggressions “put a lot of pressure on them” (16, l. 424).

### *Anxiety and Unsafety*

Interviewee 4 describes the environment that international institutions and the state in Lebanon provide to the Syrian refugees as a “restrictive sort of protection space” (14, ll. 575ff.) which is eroding. On a national scale, the increased bilateral cooperation with Syria and the safe country discourse make Syrians fear the grasp of Assad’s regime, either by deportations or repressions in Lebanon – fears that UNHCR fails to eradicate. Ever since 2021, when six

Syrian oppositional members were arrested and deported by Lebanese security officers in front of the Syrian embassy, this place has been feared and avoided. Consequently, Syrians increasingly control their own movement out of the feeling of insecurity.

Especially Syrian women do not feel safe because they cannot report sexual abuses out of fear to be abused once more or arrested (due to lacking legal documents). Consequently, Syrian women are made vulnerable on multiple scales as they are also increasingly subjugated to domestic violence by husbands whose anger and frustration is taken out on them.

### *Exclusion*

This final emotional perception describes the feeling of being excluded from moral perceptions, the human rights discourse, and “completely isolated and alienated from society” (I3, ll. 879ff.). It expresses itself in a feeling of not being welcome or cared about. One expert recalls how a Syrian mother explained to her this exclusion and *Othering* from the supposedly normal: ““They are afraid of us as if we eat people, but we don’t. We have children, how can we eat people?”” (I1, ll. 321ff.)

## **6. Political Violence against Syrian refugees in Lebanon**

This following chapter seeks to find out in what way the different forms of political violence are interrelated and develop across multiple spaces. Ever since the influx of Syrian refugees, the Lebanese government has reacted by planned inaction when it comes to protecting their rights and livelihoods (see Şahin Mencutek 2017). Instead it politicized a humanitarian crisis into a post-conflict sectarian question about the continuity of the demographic status quo and thereby the security of Lebanon itself.<sup>8</sup>

### *Spaces of Punishment*

The securitization of refugees has been a strategic means accompanied by scapegoating and articulating dehumanizing hate speeches. In the media, this fueling of hatred finds its expression in a narrative that constantly talks about the inherited danger of Syrians to the

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<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.un.org/en/development/desa/population/migration/events/ga/documents/2016/trusteeship/lebanon.pdf>; see: <https://apnews.com/article/fe52200a751e461c86fc1e9bf478144f>

economic<sup>9</sup> and security well-being of Lebanon.<sup>10</sup> By that, their *Otherness* is marked to exclude *Them* from the Lebanese norm, resulting also in their exclusion from any legal protection and moral compass. Just like militarized police solutions are generally perceived legitimate against criminality if they happen in socio-economic precarious areas (Christensen/Albrecht 2020, 391), so too, physical violence against Syrians by whoever feels empowered to execute it becomes a legitimate tool to overcome a crisis that Lebanon seems increasingly trapped in.

Meanwhile, the hate discourse against Syrians has become somehow repetitive. In this way, it enters the very bodies of people and “produces the effects that it names” (Butler 1993, 2). In other words, the anti-refugee rhetoric influences and steers the behavior of Lebanese and Syrian bodies alike. Years of hatred have been developing on a fertile ground in Lebanon as they were strategically linked to the Syrian occupation and the Palestinian camps, knowingly that both would (or at least could) mobilize “embodied knowledge from past conflicts” (Fregonese 2017, 7), and re-traumatize people in a country that has been lacking proper post-war reconciliation (see Ghosn/Khoury).

Consequently, an anti-Syrian atmosphere could be constructed that connects and affects shared experiences among Lebanese, form their subjectivities across time-space distinctions as it connects the body with the local with the nation with the past, and thereby coins and triggers collective emotions and feelings (Anderson 2009, 77f.). While emotional triggers are located within the individual body, it is through affects and atmospheres that they are formed into a cohesive yet not fully controllable network among bodies and objects that reciprocally influence each other (Anderson/Adey 2011, 1096; Closs Stephens 2016, 10f.; Fregonese 2017, 3). As of today in Lebanon, this translates into daily micro-aggressions and physical attacks that Syrians are facing if they are exposed as of such origin in public. These atmospheres may evolve their affective power in any moment and space – e.g. beatings at checkpoints by security officials, psychological torture in state detention centers, or violations during hybrid raids. The mere presence of the as other, deviant, and crises-responsible perceived body of the Syrian in public has become a justification for its punishment (cf. Belina 2018, 128).

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<sup>9</sup> In fact, the influx of Syrian refugees may have even been beneficial due to the increased amount of humanitarian aid which delayed the homemade collapse (Brun et al. 2021, 27).

<sup>10</sup> See: <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/09/26/Syrian-refugees-Lebanon-economics>



Besides these ad-hoc eruptions of violence in personal encounters, there are institutionally organized and hybrid forms of punishment like police brutality during Syrian-led protests, collective punishments through curfews<sup>11</sup> or raids that encourage or at least accept the inclusion of non- and para-state groups if it fits into their own agenda – which is rather the rule than the exception in Lebanon (see Carpi et al. 2016). During the Covid-19 pandemic, marginalized and racialized groups have been facing more repressions globally (Asquith/Bartkowiak-Théron 2021, 2016ff.). In Lebanon, this trend found its expression in discriminatory local curfews put on Syrian refugees exclusively.<sup>12</sup> These were enforced by institutional actors but also by mandated citizens to watch over the targeted neighborhoods. Besides the populist aim of the curfews to perform security activity against the fear of the *Other*, this reveals a racializing and biopolitical element (cf. Tazzioli 2021). On the one hand, the Syrians' presence in public is sanctioned by banning them from public space. On the other hand, this produces a somehow *abnormal, dangerous* Syrian body which goes hand in hand with the production of the *normal* Lebanese body in delimitation to it (see Foucault 2003). Sunčana Laketa (2016) shows how in the absence of phenotypical differences between antagonists, placing the *Other* in a distinct geographical location and deriving emotional meaning from that (weird smell, other taste, etc.) becomes a strategy to draw the line between 'us' and 'them'. Therefore, the deviation of the Syrian body is nothing true or real but rather a construct to foment a difference which may otherwise not be there.

What constitutes being Lebanese in that case may vary from each municipality according to the political affiliation of actors in charge. The motives and ideologies of the Maronite-Christian Free Patriotic Movement may vary greatly from those of Shia Hezbollah in some cases, while in other cases their overall anti-Syrian stance is more or less the same. Yet, both participate in illegal pushbacks, raids, and curfews. On a community level, these groups understand themselves as if they “protect their neighborhood” (I1, l. 468) from some sort of moral decay. Usually the patrols are executed by youngsters under the lead of old militia members. By performing these patrols, past emotional experiences and “feelings of nationality [...] can be recalled” (Closs Stephens 2016, 192) about who constitutes the enemy in order to reproduce social cohesion within the own reference group. In that process, the

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<sup>11</sup> See <https://www.refworld.org/docid/5433a8754.html>

<sup>12</sup> See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>

neighborhood is elevated to a higher scale as its protection becomes equivalent to the protection of the nation itself (UN-Habitat/UNICEF Lebanon 2018, 25).

Out of these vulnerabilizations from the outside follow severe consequences for an internalized vulnerability directed at the Self (Asquith/Bartkowiak-Théron 2021, 19f.). After years of multi-layered repression, Syrian refugees understand that they are not welcome anymore and at risk of arbitrary violations. Consequently, the smallest scale of the body is under psychological attack. Though class and gender determine the level of insecurity and immobility (see Monroe V. 2016, 12), the fear of being physically and verbally punished for being Syrian can be perceived as a universal experience. One that makes people want to hide, start by self-controlling and changing their habits and sometimes even their dialect in order to adapt to changing spatial conditions (cf. Löw 2001, 186). The hopelessness of the situation leads to psychologically caused illnesses like depression or physical consequences such as losing hair (see Karajerjian 2021) but also increasing suicide rates. Especially Syrian women are facing these intra-body experienced forms of violence: They are the ones that are exposed to daily micro-aggressions in the shops or sexualized abuses. However, this reproduces patriarchal ideas of masculinity and the nation (that are by definition heteronormative): On the one side, this establishes ideas of hypermasculine protectors of the Lebanese neighborhoods while on the other side, it constructs Syrian men “who cannot protect” (Fattah/Fierke 2009, 73) *their* women and who are by that humiliated, punished, and emasculated (see Elbert et al. 2013). Consequently, for Syrian women there is almost no safe space left as even in the most private space of the family they increasingly face punishment by their husbands because they seem to be an easy target for their frustration.<sup>13</sup>

Years of blaming Syrians for governmentally caused crises have resulted in an anti-Syrian atmosphere that connects human bodies through shared emotions and develops an affective power that can unleash politically motivated violence (or what I call punishment) at any moment on any scale. Politicians, the media, and (non-)state security actors have created an environment in which the punishment of Syrians becomes the means to overcome the current crisis, pay back the past, and even protect the nation by securing the neighborhood from the

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<sup>13</sup> This shall not be misinterpreted as sexualized violence resulting from a biologically predetermined male sexual drive (cf. Seifert 1993). Rather it is about reclaiming the supposedly lost masculinity by executing dominance over female bodies.

outsider. For the majority of Lebanese society and the Syrian refugees a situation in which Lebanese accept this scapegoat and experience fears from the *Other* has become the new normal, while Syrians experience fears and anxieties wherever they are. However, these spaces of punishment are structurally and emotionally strengthened by spaces of uncertainty.

### *Spaces of Uncertainty*

The insufficient legal protection of Syrians in Lebanon has always been a political and economic decision. First, it reflects a class conflict since the 1960s in which Syrians have been used by Lebanese entrepreneurs to dump wages while the Syrian regime could outsource high unemployment rates (El Daif 2022, 16). Second, both opposing blocks, the pro-Syrian March 8 and the anti-Syrian March 14 as well as each political faction, are tied to geopolitical backers. Consequently, the government constantly navigates its policies between the contrary political stances on Syria (between Iran and Saudi Arabia) while at the same time it appeases the international community (on which it financially depends). The Syrian body herein is lifted up to a national scale and becomes a site of geopolitical struggle over hegemony by politically reshaping what constitutes being Syrian in distinction from *us* (see Fregonese 2017, 3; Laketa 2016, 665) – reflected for example in debates about demographic fragility. On a policy level, this translates into erratic and unpredictable outcomes while for Syrian refugees it means a life in constant uncertainty.

While there is a “restrictive sort of protection space” (I4, ll. 575ff.) for Syrian refugees, Lebanon may still be safer than Syria, however these spaces are shrinking. Since 2014/15, the government has been quite active in drafting new policies on immigration and labor restrictions, deportations, illegalization of refugees and more (see Şahin Mencutek 2017; El Daif 2022, 19ff.). Of these, the decision by the General Directorate of the General Security in 2015 that requested UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees had the biggest impact – a decision that was accompanied by the dissolution of the Lebanese-Syrian labor agreement which further informalized Syrian workers and impacted their livelihoods (El Daif 2022, 19ff.). Though Syrians have even before not been treated as refugees but as displaced persons – due to the non-compliance with the 1951 refugee convention – this decision further challenged their legitimate stay in Lebanon. These policy changes went hand in hand with further job and

income restrictions, arbitrary rules on tent structures or even the closing of Syrian owned shops. All of these policies establish a network among different state agencies to organize the exclusion of Syrian refugees from public spaces and Lebanese society leading to cultural and economic segregation (Rommelspacher 08.01.2009, 30ff.).<sup>14</sup>

As the international discourse has been slightly changing into a direction where the partial safety of Syria is highlighted or single European countries like Denmark unilaterally declare Syria a safe country again,<sup>15</sup> the Lebanese government uses this opening window of opportunity to demand organized returns of Syrians which is broadly echoed in media reports.<sup>16</sup> At the same time, this effort is observable in the increasing cooperation with Assad's regime which goes as far as arresting Syrian oppositional members on their way to the embassy.<sup>17</sup> These changing international dynamics are also reflected in UNHCR's inaction when it comes for example to opposing governmental push-back announcements. Therefore the trust in humanitarian protection – even in times of crisis like the Beirut blast has shown<sup>18</sup> – erodes which is only further increasing the feeling of uncertainty and being left alone because “refugees do need reassurance” (I5, l. 474f.) from the international community.

These institutional changes, governing techniques, and the perception and behavior by the Lebanese public relationally produce effects of uncertainty on the Syrian refugees (cf. Anderson/Adey 2011, 1095). On the intra-body scale, they are left with a situation in which they cannot move forward nor backwards nor anywhere. They are demobilized (cf. Knudsen 2016, 453) while at the same time in “constant displacement” (I5, l. 634) because the next day or hour they might be forced to leave their tent or even back to Syria. After more than 10 years of displacement, their status is still not institutionalized which comes with its own implications of distress, anxiety, and not having any place in this world. Their *Otherness* is physically territorialized with keeping them in informal settlements (or large banners

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<sup>14</sup> In 2016, back then Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil stated that Syrians in FPM “municipalities will prevent the Syrian refugees from opening commercial shops” (see <https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/d/breaking-news/270446/minister-bassil-syrian-refugees-banned-from-openin/en>).

<sup>15</sup> See <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/apr/14/denmark-revokes-syrian-refugee-permits-under-new-policy>; see <https://www.spiegel.de/politik/seehofer-gruebelt-ueber-abschiebungen-nach-syrien-auswaertiges-amt-sagt-nein-a-e911c236-7ac9-41bc-89c8-1e518ae2cedd>

<sup>16</sup> See <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-aoun/lebanese-president-calls-for-safe-zones-in-syria-for-refugees-idUSKBN15I1WQ>

<sup>17</sup> See <https://www.achrighs.org/en/2021/09/06/12366/>; see <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2021/09/lebanon-general-security-must-halt-imminent-deportation-of-six-syrians/>

<sup>18</sup> See <https://www.achrighs.org/en/2020/09/29/11467/>

announcing the curfews in the streets) that are every now and then used to mobilize political resources through these places whose potential dangerousness is marked by historical experiences with the Palestinian camps – fears and feelings “that often accompany life in a post-conflict city” (Laketa 2016, 670). However, this exposes their precarious status to the public and can be read as an act of humiliation (Fattah/Fierke 2009, 72).

The geopolitical dependence of domestic politics in Lebanon rescales the Syrian body into a space that reflects a national struggle over dominance and power. In other words, anti-Syrian policies and rhetoric rather reflect the will to show to the public which politico-religious sects represent and dominate the country. As a result, there are arbitrary restrictions that increase the vulnerability of Syrian refugees as the legitimacy of their presence is questioned, work opportunities become less accessible, and they never know what may come next. At the same time, the changing international discourse on Syria as a safe country establishes a network between the international community, the Lebanese, and the Syrian government that excludes Syrian refugees from protective spaces. The consequences are experienced on an intra-body level as increasingly uncertain and unsafe because the shrinking protective spaces increase the possibility of physical violence.

## **7. Conclusion**

My analysis could show that the various forms of spatially executed and experienced forms of political violence cannot be detached from one another but rather build loose networks and follow one broader pattern: Make the Syrian leave while benefitting yourself! This political attitude is reflected in the erratic stances towards Syrian refugees because all policies are navigated according to what the geopolitical backers will say and what consequences on the flow of European aid will result from them. Indeed, there are protective spaces for Syrian refugees but these are under administrative attack by segregating them from public life and by remaining unpredictable to what changes may come next. This uncertainty is further fed by the nationally propagated hate, which increases the occurrence of physical political violence against Syrian refugees.

The perpetuation of an image of Syrians as deviant and dangerous has been excluding them from the moral compass of the Lebanese society and revoking memories from a traumatizing past. Under today's worsening economic conditions, physical harm against Syrians is perceived as a legitimate tool to overcome the crisis and reinstall what has been lost or what was supposedly taken away. Consequently, the mere exposure as Syrian in public spaces can be reason enough to be punished by physical attacks or discriminations. I have understood this overcoming of space-time as an atmosphere connecting the past with the Syrian body along various scales. Within Syrian bodies, public forms of violence are experienced by fears (of punishment) and anxieties. Herein, Syrian women become a multiple target: They are exposed to sexualized violence in public, experience the same emotional violence as men, and are increasingly facing domestic violence which is transformed from the public into the private out of lacking opportunities to revolt against structural discriminations.

Besides these rather affective elements of political violence, I have also shown a biopolitical element within the anti-Syrian measures. The locally enforced curfews against Syrians, especially during Covid-19, not only produce the *dangerous Other* but also the *normal* Lebanese body. For the municipalities, I have shown how militias reproduce post-war experiences of Syrian hostility and by that social cohesion within their own reference group. In that reading, the neighborhood becomes an arena over national hegemony and revenge for the past just like Syrians themselves become embodied sites of geopolitical struggles and dominance over the nation.

While there is still a protective environment in Lebanon that makes the country safer for refugees than its neighbor Syria, these spaces are shrinking due to repressive immigration or labor laws that legally and rhetorically challenge the legitimacy of Syrian refugees. These policy changes aim at and lead to structural forms of violence like job and income restrictions, arbitrary rules on tent structures or even the closing of Syrian shops. The shifting international discourse on returns to Syria offers a window of opportunity for the Lebanese government to do as they please. Consequently, Syrian refugees are increasingly banned from public spaces, segregated from Lebanese society, and they increasingly feel anxieties regarding push-backs and being pushed back to Syria.

Though outlooks are hard to formulate in Lebanon's current fragile context, one future risk mentioned by the interviewees should be taken seriously by policy makers and NGOs alike. Accordingly, Syrian refugees increasingly rely on self-protection groups as of their deprived status and the attacks they face. In other words, the political violence that Syrian refugees are experiencing lead to counter violence (as self-defense and vengeance) which bears the potential to further conflict escalations from local to national scale(s). The international donors especially the EU should not let the Lebanese government off the hook when it comes to human rights protection of Syrian refugees. Rather they should use their soft power to request reforms regarding the rule of law especially in these critical times.

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