

other sides.

In a deeply religious society like Lebanon, rumours with a spiritual connotation could be particularly powerful. 'The statue at Harissa turned twice during the civil war,' says Chaftari, laughing. Christian leaders would spread the rumour that this statue made out of pure concrete had turned towards a certain direction 'to protect Jounieh, or to protect the Christians in general' remembers Chaftari.

"Miracles" of this kind were often spread among the population when we were passing through a difficult military situation', the ex-combatant explains, in order to raise the morals of the population and to tell them, 'that God will help us'. The social scientist Frayha has a similar opinion, 'You need miracles in situations of weakness, you need hope, and this comes from superstitious beliefs.' Those beliefs weren't limited to the Christian sect only, and were equally used by Muslims. The Shiites, for example, used Zeinab (a grandchild of the prophet Mohamad). 'Important Shiite figures would say that "Sitt" Zeinab had appeared in their dreams, saying that "the road ahead is long and difficult, but at the end, you will be rewarded"', recalls Amashi. This would strengthen the moral of combatants and civilians alike to endure difficult times, and keep on fighting.

The preconceptions that had existed in people's minds, and the traumas experienced during fifteen years of civil war couldn't be immediately lifted when the civil war officially came to an end in 1990.

A Christian couple got married after the end of the civil war and decided to celebrate their honeymoon in Amir Amine palace, a beautiful hotel located in a mountain area which is inhabited by Druze and Christians. A relative to the couple told them, 'The Druze will come at night and cut your throats!' The couple left the hotel in panic; their war traumas were so strong that their honeymoon was ruined.

Also, in the mid-1990s, the Ministry of Displaced People organized a summer camp in the Lebanese mountains, with the aim of contributing to reconciliation efforts among Lebanese youth from all the different religious sects. The trainers used specific activities to deconstruct the preconceptions that had existed between the different religious groups during the war. At the end of the camp, a girl came up, crying, and told one of the camp's organizers, that she couldn't go home now and face her parents. When the trainers asked for the reason, she said, 'My parents taught me that the people from the other side were bad, that they even looked differently from us. I found

out that this was a lie. How can I believe my parents ever again?'

What to believe and whom to believe, that's the central question. By the way, the article on the new armed group to fight IS wasn't published in the well-known Lebanese newspaper at all. This was just another rumour. Apparently it appeared in an online magazine. I guess I should have sat down and do some proper research in order to confirm my information, too!

Note

As I am finishing this article, someone translated a paragraph that appeared in the online magazine, Lebanon Files, for me. The article was talking about an article that in turn appeared in the Al Akhbar newspaper entitled 'A training of the Socialist Party under the cover of a scout camp': 'On 20/09/2014, Al Akhbar mentioned that under the cover of a scout camp, the Socialist Party, together with the fundamentalist Druze group "Sheikh Ammar", organized a training camp for more than 60 people in the hills of Shwaifat city. There were some sheikhs from Deir Qoubel village as well. It wasn't the first time that such training camps including military performances, as well as the firing of weapons had been seen in these hills. This time, however, the training for the participants of the camp were theoretical lessons only; about using heavy automatic weapons, especially those that you can carry on 4x4 vehicles, and they were told how to use these heavy guns.'

Often, rumours carry a little grain of truth. It is true that in the past, parties from different affiliations abused scout camps for military training. It is true that currently, Lebanese civilians are pulling out their hidden guns again, and some are even forming civilian protection forces in their communities.

I happen to work for an NGO called 'Permanent Peace Movement'. The director of this NGO, Fadi Abi Allam, gave training sessions during this particular scout camp – about conflict resolution and peace building, and definitely not about heavy guns. A war starts in the minds of the people, and such articles poison the civil peace in Lebanon. Peace also starts in the minds of people. Let us not be deceived by political or military leaders and their media outlets, let us not let them manipulate our minds for war. Let us take up responsibility and create a space in our minds, free of rumours and misinformation, for peace.

The Syrian President is being Made in Lebanon? Rumours and the Syrian Presidential Election in Lebanon

Haid Haid

The Syrian presidential elections were an event of special significance for Syrians and Lebanese alike, since holding these elections entailed prolonging the humanitarian and political crisis suffered by Syrians and the societies and states that play host to them. It was the first time that Syrian elections had allowed for out-of-country voting, and the Syrian embassy in Lebanon prided itself on having had more than 80,000 voters on the first day alone.¹ Given the time and space available for voting, it is more realistic to suggest that between 20 and 30,000 cast their vote. However, the images of crowded streets and the whole event being perceived as more of a happening than an election, led to controversial discussions, 'How could citizens who had to flee their country participate in this dog-and-pony show?' And even more so, 'How could they vote for the President who in the worst case had them persecuted, in the best case did not protect them?' In fact, some of those participating in the elections were motivated by genuine desire. Others, however, feared the consequences if they did not take part, with a number of rumours circulating, urging people to get involved, and threatening them with dire consequences if they did not. This was the result of a number of factors that this article will attempt to address by shedding light on the circumstances in which such rumours gain currency and how people respond to them.

The fear of having one's nationality revoked

As the armed conflict in Syria grew fiercer (itself the product of the regime's excessive use of force against citizens who peacefully demonstrated for political change), reports began to circulate that Bashar al-Assad and

his supporters were involved in a plan to partition Syria into a number of different states. Though these claims were never verified, they caused a large number of Syrian refugees to feel that the regime was secretly plotting to revoke their Syrian nationality – for their lack of loyalty – by creating the state it desired, having accepted that it was unable to take control of all Syrian territory. Such concerns on the part of many refugees created a fertile soil for the unquestioning acceptance and circulation of any rumour which confirmed their fears that they would be unable to return to their homes. Against this backdrop, claims concerning various draft laws gave added impetus to rumours urging participation in the presidential election. The most important of these draft law rumours were:

i) 'I'm not Syrian'

In late 2013 there were widely disseminated rumours of a draft law that would revoke the nationality of all Syrians who had participated in activities against the Assad regime within Syria or abroad, by bearing arms, funding, incitement, organisation or facilitation.² This particular claim spread because some refugees believed that the law governing the entry of non-Syrians into Syria and their residence there also covered Syrian citizens abroad. In other words, they would be treated like foreigners in their own country. Despite being untrue, some Syrians abroad still believe in and circulate this rumour, convinced that the regime will use this draft law as a way of disposing of its political enemies and applying pressure to those states hosting them (since stripping Syrian refugees of their nationality would mean they would have to stay in their host nations). The fear of losing one's nationality is also not entirely abstract as an increasing number of Syrians are stranded



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abroad because the Syrian regime will no longer issue extensions for their passports.

ii) New IDs, for whom?

During a parliamentary session in March 2014 the Syrian Interior Minister announced that his ministry was in the process of creating new identity cards and that the project would begin to roll out in the second half of that year, as soon as the necessary funds had been collected.³ Even though officials pointed out that the idea of the project was first mooted before the start of the crisis, and that it had nothing to do with current events, many still harboured suspicions over the true purpose of making this announcement, particularly given the project's high cost (estimated at 28 million Euros) in a country that is going through a debilitating economic crisis. A lack of clarity around the mechanism for implementing the project and its timeframe had led some to link it to the then upcoming presidential elections, since the only people eligible for new ID cards would be regime loyalists in regime controlled areas. Others point out that the project will hinder the return of Syrian refugees and émigrés to their home towns, while enabling those who have abstained from military service to be tracked down and arrested. In this context, many believe that the process will effectively revoke nationality from half the Syrian population, the majority of whom will be those who oppose the regime.

iii) Seizing property and renting it out... Why?

In May 2014, the Ministry of Justice discussed a proposal to rent out houses and real estate abandoned when their owners left the country. The justification for this proposal was a stated desire to provide secure shelter and thus to reduce the sufferings of the many Syrians who had recently been made homeless. Although the regime had previously been willing to offer support to displaced persons in the area, including providing shelter and humanitarian assistance to Lebanese refugees in 2006, this was the first such gesture during this conflict. So far its officials had not even made the effort to visit internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria, let alone refugees abroad, and yet now pondered how to use refugee's property to host IDPs. The likely effect of this would be to help one group of displaced persons at the expense of another.

Rents were to be set by the committee and the monies collected placed in a special funding account and returned to the properties' owners on their return via a payment system also run by the committee.⁴ However, the lack of detail in

the proposal and the fact it coincided with the presidential elections helped raise suspicions that there was some plot afoot against the opponents of the Assad regime. For instance, the proposal made no mention of whether the consent of the property owners would be obtained, whether their relatives or agents within Syria or abroad would be contacted, the percentage of rent monies that the state agencies would keep, how the leases would be organised, nor anything of the fate of the contents of these homes and buildings used in this way. This provoked fears that the seizure of private property belonging to the tens of thousands of Syrians who have fled the country as a result of unrest was being enshrined in law, particularly given the favouritism the authorities have typically shown to supporters of the regime.

Events that have contributed to the spread of rumours

i) 'Even here in Lebanon, they come after us...'

Citing accounts from Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Reuters reported that men were wandering around refugee camps in the Bekaa Valley asking who intended to vote in the presidential elections and taking down names. According to Reuters the men identified themselves as members of a Lebanese party allied to Bashar al-Assad, and their presence in the camp was a reminder to more than one million Syrian refugees that they were still within the reach of the regime.

Some refugees whispered that heavily built men driving cars with blacked out windows had suddenly appeared, demanded to see their identity documents and taken down their details. They claimed that vehicles would come on election-day to take them to the Syrian embassy and that anyone who failed to vote would be prevented from re-entering Syria. Reuters added that though during the course of more than twelve interviews it did not encounter any proof that refugees were being intimidated, the mere presence of men carrying papers with the Syrian embassy seal on it would be enough to frighten many people, particularly given the regime's long history of brutality in Lebanon and the existence of powerful regime allies within the country.⁵ All Syrians also carry memories of the omnipresent *Mukhabarat* (intelligence service) in Syria — of the plain-clothed men trying to look like normal citizens but who could be 'smelt for miles against the wind.'

The *Mustaqbal* newspaper, close to the



Activists from the Syrian village of Kafranbel commenting on the elections

Lebanese March-14 coalition, reported that Syrian refugees and residents were going to the Syrian embassy as a result of intimidation being carried out in their homes and places of work by Hezbollah and other allies of the Syrian regime. A Syrian who works as a security guard in Beirut told the paper that members of the March-8 movement had come to his building and ordered him to come with his family the following day, to one of the assembly points from where Syrians would be bussed to the embassy. He indicated that most of the Syrians he knew had submitted to the same intimidatory tactics, fearful of revenge or being expelled from their homes and jobs. Sources on the ground spoke to *Mustaqbal* about the confiscation of identity documents belonging to a number of Syrian refugees to ensure their attendance and participation in the elections, while others were blackmailed in various ways, such as being told that those who did not vote for Al Assad would not have their travel permits renewed and would not be allowed back into Syria.⁶

Other refugees told the *NOW News* website that Lebanese men had come to their homes and forced them to take part in pro-Assad marches. They reported that, 'We took to the streets and carried portraits of Bashar al-Assad for fear of public humiliation. They also forced us to vote for him. We had no choice but to do what they wanted because there is no government to protect us.'⁷ In an interview with *al-Nahar*, a representative of UNHCR in Lebanon, Ninette Kelly, revealed that her organization had received reports, 'that there were refugees who were feeling vulnerable as the date for elections in Syria approached; that they had been pressured to vote and that they felt unsafe.'⁸

ii) 'Don't shove!'

The arrival of large numbers of Syrians at the gates of the Syrian embassy in Yarzeh — transported in buses and trucks hired for the occasion — created gridlock, preventing many from reaching their destinations. The standstill affected a number of important centres in the city, prompting some voters to complete the journey on foot while waving Syrian flags, portraits of Assad and Hezbollah banners, and chanting slogans in support of the president and Hezbollah. This angered many of those who were caught up in the traffic jam, particularly opponents of Assad, leading to fights between the gridlocked drivers and the marchers.

The extensive media coverage of this 'electoral gridlock' only increased the pressure felt by those Syrians who were in two minds about going to vote. Some media outlets exaggerated the numbers of those who went to vote, thus increasing the speed with which this rumour spread and its impact. While some blamed the Lebanese government, which should have anticipated and prevented what happened, others believed that the gridlock was deliberate, that the vehicles transporting Syrians to Yarzeh had all been dispatched simultaneously with the intention of creating a traffic jam that would focus media attention on the scale of voter participation, thereby intimidating those who had been unwilling to vote and putting pressure on them to attend.

Reactions against Syrian refugees

i) 'Go home'

'These people don't have any dignity. I swear I don't feel sorry for any of them, because they all should be wiped out.'

'Go back to your country, you morons.'

The above are just two examples of the comments made by Lebanese citizens on social media sites, protesting at the impact of the Syrian presidential elections in Lebanon. But the anger felt towards Syrians in general, and especially those who had chanted for Bashar al-Assad, and paraded around with his portrait, was not just confined to the man on the street but also found echoes in official statements by Lebanese political parties, particularly those opposed to the Assad regime. The position of the March-14 movement came through clearly in a statement made by senior alliance member and former MP Mustafa Allouch to Al Nahar, 'March-14 believes that these people support and love Bashar al-Assad so they should not be designated refugees and the Lebanese state must take the decision to send them back to their homes.'⁹ Minister of Labour, Sejaan Kazzi, told the same paper that, 'the crowds that Lebanon witnessed outside the Syrian embassy show that these refugees are not refugees at all but rather an army, just like the Syrian Deterrent Force used to be.' He added, 'If you have thousands of people loyal to the Syrian regime trying to vote it in, that means they can go straight back to areas controlled by the regime, which has extended its reach within Syria. I shall ask the cabinet to adopt a firm position with regards to sending them back to Syria as soon as possible.'¹⁰ Many media figures and artists close to the March-14 Movement have also called for Syrians to be deported. On *DNA*, a satirical news analysis show, presenter Nadim Koteich called for Syrian refugees to be 'resisted,' and even 'expelled from the country.'¹¹ It is interesting to note that the reactions of opponents of Assad mostly failed to take into account the above rumours about intimidations and threats issued – and the resulting fear of many Syrians that they would be denied permission to enter or leave Syria, and of not being granted visas by the Syrian authorities.

'Feelings of fear or insecurity do not always submit to rational considerations, but can be excessive and paranoiac.'

The anger many Lebanese felt may be partially explained by the heavy traffic caused by the flood of Syrians coming to participate in the elections, but is also a sign of disgust many Lebanese feel at Syrians seeking to re-elect Assad, after all the crimes he has committed — and continues to commit — in Syria and Lebanon. However, the Lebanese response

is not confined to disgust and resentment, with the regime's allies celebrating this 'moral victory', others have attempted to come up with rational explanations, so as not to end up blaming the victims and shifting ultimate responsibility away from the true criminal. Yet, even so, a substantial proportion of Lebanese citizens, and also those Syrians opposed to the regime, continue to feel active hatred towards pro-Assad voters. Their responses have not been limited to incendiary statements, with Lebanon seeing security incidents and revenge attacks, most notably the burning of a camp in the Jdita municipality in the Bekaa Valley, two days after the elections, which was home to around two hundred Syrian refugees.¹²

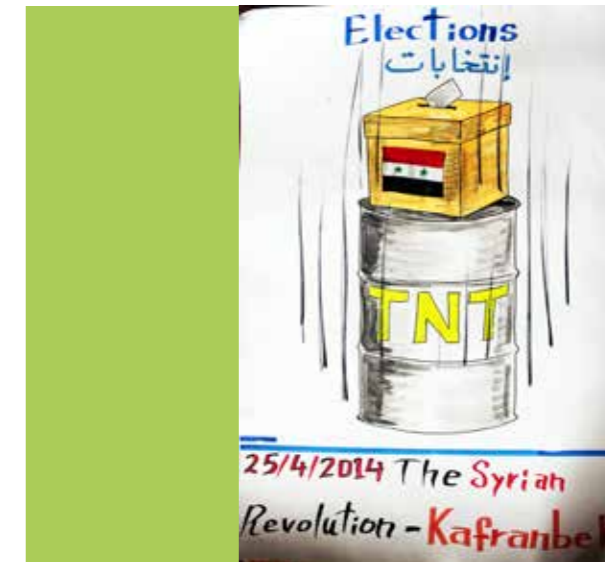
ii) Revoking refugee status

In early June 2014, Lebanese Minister of the Interior, Nihad Machnouk, declared that he would be revoking the refugee status of Syrians in Lebanon who had re-entered Syrian territory. This was announced shortly after the uproar provoked by the participation of Syrians in the Syrian presidential elections. A statement from the ministry read, 'As part of the ongoing process of regulating the entry and exit of Syrian subjects into and out of Lebanon, all Syrian refugees and those registered with UNHCR are requested not to enter Syrian territory after June 1, 2014, on pain of having their status as refugees in Lebanon revoked. This measure has been taken to safeguard Lebanon's security and relations between Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens in host areas, and to prevent any friction or mutual antagonism.'¹³

This decision prompted widespread concern among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, some of whom were in the habit of regularly travelling to Syria for a variety of reasons. The most common of these were; renewing residency, checking their property (i.e. homes, shops, land etc.), obtaining official documents, visiting family members, buying medicine for chronic illnesses at cheaper Syrian prices, and finally checking to see if conditions in their home areas would allow them to return or not. The minister's plan did not differentiate between those refugees who had to go to Syria on urgent business and those who were in fact living in Syria, while remaining registered in Lebanon.

It is worth noting here that the requirements for entering Lebanon as a refugee are the same as those for non-refugee Syrians, which are governed by Syrian-Lebanese treaties. What worries Syrian refugees is that revoking their status would cut off their access to aid and assistance, most of which is provided by UNHCR.

Another take on the elections by the activists of Kafranbel



The online rumour war

Some tried to fight the rumours that were being circulated by regime supporters to encourage participation in the presidential election by creating 'counter-rumours', to the effect that UNHCR would revoke the refugee status of anyone voting. This claim when sent via social media, such as 'WhatsApp' was accompanied by the UNHCR logo. The following announcement was also passed around via facebook, 'To all those Syrians who went to participate in the presidential elections out of fear that they would not be allowed to return to their homeland Syria: Syrian embassies abroad intend to send the names of all voters to the United Nations in order to demonstrate the extent of support for Bashar al-Assad's regime among the Syrian people. The names of voters will be compared to those names on UNHCR's aid lists and all those who participated in the elections will be struck off, since aid is intended for those who are unable to return to their homes, and who have left their country in flight from the regime's injustice, in accordance with the 'No home' humanitarian principle.'

Both these rumours, however, were not widely circulated among Syrian refugees and so had a limited impact. There were a number of reasons for this, including that the majority of refugees not having access to social media and chat apps, which were the principle mediums used to circulate these rumours; Syrian refugees fearing the regime more than the prospect of losing the support of UNHCR, and UNHCR denying that it had written the text attributed to it in a letter sent to all registered Syrian refugees.

Conclusion

Despite the fact that it is impossible to be certain of the impact that the rumours discussed above had on encouraging Syrian refugees in Lebanon to participate in the Syrian presidential elections, direct observation of Syrians during the elections show that at least a number of them were affected. This has been reinforced by reports and articles written about the elections. However, the most important impact of these rumours was not on the results of the presidential elections itself, but rather on the relations between Syrian refugees and their host communities. This in turn led to the spread of other rumours which incited public feeling against Syrians in Lebanon. This was reflected in the calls of many Lebanese politicians, public figures and celebrities for Syrians in Lebanon to be sent home.

1. <http://www.al-akhbar.com/node/207400>
2. Facebook post: <https://www.facebook.com/syriaheissyira/posts/249373365216192>
3. New identities in Syria, March 12, 2014, at <http://www.damaspost.com/>
4. <http://ncro.sy/baathonline/?p=6300>
5. For more information, see the following article by the author: <http://lb.boell.org/ar/2013/05/03/nhw-trmym-llqt-llbny-lswry>
6. Hezbollah secures quorum for Al Assad, May 29, 2014, at <http://www.almustaqbal.com.lb/v4/article.aspx?type=np&articleid=618937>
7. Nadine Elali, A free election?, May 24, 2014, at <https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en>
8. Syrian regime show of strength lays siege to Beirut, May 29, 2014, at <http://newspaper.annahar.com/>
9. Mohammed Nimr, Why don't Al Assad's supporters return to Syria? May 28, 2014, at <http://newspaper.annahar.com/>
10. Syrian regime show of strength lays siege to Beirut, May 29, 2014, at <http://newspaper.annahar.com/>
11. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eUxQCaMenxc&feature=youtu.be>
12. <http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/721151>
13. <http://www.alquds.co.uk/?p=175089>

* Translated from the Arabic by Robin Moger