UNDER THE RADAR?

HOW SYRIAN REFUGEE ENTREPRENEURS ADAPT AND OPERATE IN LEBANON’S INFORMAL ECONOMY

Ramzi Fathallah
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The project was coordinated by Nasser Yassin (Principal Investigator), Maysa Baroud (Project Coordinator), and Yara Mourad (Program Manager) of the Refugee Research and Policy Program at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs.

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“While every refugee’s story is different and their anguish personal, they all share a common thread of uncommon courage - the courage not only to survive, but to persevere and rebuild their shattered lives.”

Antonio Guterres – Former UN High Commissioner for Refugees

ABSTRACT

With many Syrians forced to flee war and violence since 2011, Lebanon has hosted a large number of Syrian refugees who also have sought employment and earning an income to survive. Establishing businesses has been a gateway for many Syrian refugees who could leverage certain skills, business acumen, or specific circumstances. However, Lebanon provides an institutional environment characterized by a high level of ambiguity and uncertainty due to its current local economic challenges as well as the politicized nature of the Syrian refugee crisis. This has created both an enabling and constraining environment for Syrian refugee entrepreneurs who are operating their businesses in informal settings. Adopting an exploratory case study approach, this report examines the entrepreneurial experiences of 37 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. In particular, I shed light on the ways Syrian refugee entrepreneurs adapt and operate their ventures in informal institutional arrangements. The study highlights the different forms of informality that entrepreneurs operate within and the different adaptive mechanisms that they employ. I also underline the social normative institutions that provided a compassionate bedrock to Syrian refugees since 2011 but have been shifting recently towards questioning the legitimacy of these business actors in some areas of Lebanon. The report also suggests some practical and policy recommendations to engage multiple actors in supporting Syrian entrepreneurs who could leverage better conditions to improve their situations not only temporarily in Lebanon, but also in Syria when they return.
ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

AUB American University of Beirut
EU European Union
ICLS International Conference of Labour Statisticians
IDP Internally displaced persons
IFI Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs
ILO International Labor Organization
INGO International non-governmental organization
IRB Institutional Review Board
MFO Microfinance organization
NGO Non-governmental organization
SRE Syrian refugee entrepreneurs
UN United Nations
UNDP United Nations Development Program
UNHCR United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
WFP World Food Programme
Eight years into the Syrian civil war that generated more than 6.8 million recorded refugees and 6.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs), Lebanon ranks as the top country in hosting the highest number of refugees per capita. Today, 1 in 4 individuals in Lebanon is a refugee. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Lebanon has 938,531 registered Syrian refugees as of April 2019, mostly concentrated in the Bekaa area. In addition, there are 20,000 refugees with Sudanese, Ethiopian and Iraqi roots. Also, Lebanon is currently hosting an estimated 304,599 Palestinian refugees that live under the mandate of United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (UNHCR Data on IDPs, 2017).

The Lebanese government has not abided by any international or legal framework for the proper organization of refugees. Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees nor its accompanying 1967 protocol. When the Syrian crisis first struck, the Lebanese government refused to create refugee camps and adopted a more ambiguous approach instead (Yahya, 2018). Lebanon followed a typical stance of denial, so that the influx of refugees – which reached its peak in 2013 – was not met with any structural planning or assimilation policy. Veered between fear and compassion in response to the refugee crisis, Lebanon adopted an unclear and ambiguous policy towards refugees and their economic integration. While appearing to encourage humanitarian integration of refugees into their host community by not placing them all in a single formal camp, the Lebanese government has made a conscious decision of non-encampment that came as a result of the country’s political impasse (Yahya, 2018).

Lebanon has had a difficult experience hosting Palestinian refugees following the 1948 Nakba. With over 70 years of the existence of Palestinian refugee camps in the country, the inhabitants of those camps are still denied the basic political, social and economic essentials to live. Moreover, the fact that Palestinian armed factions control the camps while the Lebanese authorities’ control is limited, the government has avoided creating new spaces where militarization and radicalization could form. Instead of being an interim solution, the refugee camps could evolve to be a long-term threat.

As a result of the absence of formal camps in the country and the protraction of war crimes and collateral damage at home, Syrian refugees have grown more dependent on the assistance provided by international humanitarian agencies and more reliant on the resources of the underprivileged host communities in Lebanon. The European Union (EU) and its member states have spearheaded a budget that could help Lebanon cope with the influx of refugees into its already frail socio-economic and urban infrastructure. The EU assistance has reached 1.8 billion Euros to support Syrian refugees and host communities in multiple areas (EEAS, 2019), such as:

- Protection of individuals based on their vulnerability by attempting to meet their most urgent needs
- Assisting Syrian refugees in Lebanon through advocacy on their legal status in the country
- Development of Lebanon’s socio-economic structure by encouraging job creation for both Lebanese locals and Syrian refugees to help push the country’s economic growth forward
- Building new healthcare centres and improving access to basic health services for both Lebanese and Syrians in need
- Improving the infrastructure and the quality of education provided by Lebanese public schools

In addition, the London Conference for Supporting Syria and the Region, held in February 2016 planned to create 1.1 million jobs for Syrian refugees and host communities by 2018 (Harb et al., 2018). In 2019, multiple donors pledged $7 billion in aid for Syria and refugees who fled the conflict-ravaged country.
THE INFORMAL ECONOMY IN LEBANON

While more than 65,000 refugees have left Lebanon to resettle in other countries through the auspices of the United Nations (UN), refugees who chose to, or were obliged to, stay in Lebanon were reported to indirectly contribute to an increase of unemployment and childbirh; and to rising tensions between refugees and their respective host communities, in addition to municipal restrictions, etc. (UNHCR Resettlement Data Finder, 2017). Refugees in Lebanon have resorted to mechanisms that have kept them going for more than eight years now; the most notable would be: working for someone else, opening a business – be it home-based or small-sized businesses, making way through financial hardship, or going into debt. Syrian refugees are allowed to work in very specific sectors such as construction, agriculture, and the environment sector. However, in attempts to adapt and make a living, most refugees have taken part in what is known as the informal economy. The informal economy usually encompasses all sets of economic activities, enterprises, jobs, and workers that are not regulated or protected by the state (WIEGO, 2018). In most developing nations, the informal economy represents the vast majority of the country’s labor market: accounting sometimes for 90% of employment (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2018). Some observers consider activities taking place outside the rule of law, such as dealing in illicit goods or services, as part of the informal economy.

A large portion of Lebanon’s labor market includes non-Lebanese who engage in low-skilled domestic work, construction, and agriculture to make ends meet. Remaining highly vulnerable, refugees have resorted to informal routes to make a living in the country, rendering some notable macro-economic impacts on the country’s informal economy. In 2015, the ILO indicated that Palestinian employment in Lebanon is mostly informal, as “less than one-fifth of employed Palestinians have a written contract” (Ajluni & Kawar, 2015). Palestinian refugees have resorted to informal, unregistered businesses in their so-called “no-zone” camps where the Lebanese authorities are not allowed to step in.

With the high influx of Syrian refugees, the informal economy in Lebanon had to welcome and absorb a new group of people willing to work long hours with minimal or no social protection and an extremely low wage. Most Syrian refugees have settled in the Bekaa governorate, where 63 out of 100 persons is a refugee (UNHCR, 2017) while a lesser amount reside in Beirut, where every 7 out of 100 persons is a refugee (UNHCR, 2017). The ILO has estimated that one-third (33%) of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are unemployed and that 92% of the refugees who have jobs have no formal contract and endure irregular monthly incomes (Ajluni & Kawar, 2015). In an assessment of the aggregate impact of Syrian refugees on the Lebanese labor market, the World Bank has predicted that informal employment in Lebanon would increase by 10% every year (2015). As there are multiple governmental agencies with different interests, governmental actors have different views on what might constitute informality (Webb et al., 2013); in reality, there are various degrees of informality along a continuum between formality and informality.

There are also multiple schools of thought on informal economies in developing countries. However, two schools might be most relevant in the context of this study. According to the legalist school (De Soto, 1989), a hostile legal system leads a group of entrepreneurs to operate informally to avoid burdensome issues like legal procedures and the fees of business registration (WIEGO, 2018). The voluntarist school of thought similarly looked at the informal economy as the legalist school but did not blame the hostile legal system. It rather explains that entrepreneurs deliberately choose to operate informally to avoid taxation, regulations, fees, and other costs (Maloney, 2004). However, the informal economy as a whole is not only limited to what these or other schools state. An informal economy expands mostly during crises, therefore suggesting that informal activity reflects a survival strategy (WIEGO, 2018).

Syrian refugees have used their remaining resources to develop small-scale businesses that often depend on informal sources of income. Syrian refugees are not necessarily confined to camps or settlements nor exclusively dependent on regional and global aid. Driven either by the need to find any sustainable income to survive or by previous business experience back home in Syria, many are spotting opportunities and creating new businesses in various parts of Lebanon. Refugee entrepreneurship has become an interesting notion worth examining globally in different host nations; and a widespread phenomenon in Lebanon (e.g., Bizri, 2017; Harb, 2017; Shepherd, Saade, and Wincent, 2019).
SYRIAN INFORMAL ENTREPRENEURSHIP

Scholarly work has attempted to gather some sort of consensus over the reasons why entrepreneurs, refugees or not, do not conduct their jobs as legitimate and legal entities under the formal regulatory environment. A somehow popular definition of informal entrepreneurs has surfaced that relies on institutional theory. By distinguishing between formal institutions with codified regulations and registered personnel, and institutions with informal norms that do not follow the legal status quo, the institutional theory proposes that informal entrepreneurs operate outside the “boundaries” of formal rules/institutions and inside the boundaries of informal ones (De Castro et al. 2014; Webb et al., 2009). According to this theoretical framework, the existence of informal entrepreneurs stems from the societal asymmetry set between informal and formal institutions. In other words, informal entrepreneurship is directly proportional to the lack of congruity between formal and informal institutions. Bruton et al. (2012: 1) define informal firms as those that are unregistered but derive income from producing legal goods and services. In parallel, according to the international statistical standards adopted by the 15th International Conference of Labour Statisticians (ICLS) in 1993, the “informal sector” consisted of enterprises that are unincorporated (i.e., not constituted as separate legal entities independent of their owners) and/or are not registered with a national government authority (ILO, 2003).

Facing so many legal, economic, and social challenges, the majority of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs end up operating in informal markets. The context of Syrian refugees establishing or trying to start businesses in Lebanon is not well-understood due to unclear laws, and weak and fragmented policy enforcement, though recent studies such as Bizri (2017) and Harb et al. (2018) highlight cases of some successful businesses in Lebanon run by Syrian refugees.

According to a number of non-governmental organization (NGO) country directors interviewed for this study and who work with displaced Syrians, Syrian people are by nature traders and business-oriented, more educated, and more entrepreneurial than other refugee populations. Making use of the entrepreneurial potential of Syrian refugees could be an investment in the host country’s microenterprise future (Koller & Kunze, 2017). Many international organizations are providing support (e.g., scholarships, vocational training, entrepreneurship opportunities) to refugees to stop their dependency cycle on aid and avoid illicit and dangerous ways to make a living.
REFUGEE ENTREPRENEURSHIP LITERATURE

There has recently been an active research stream in management that investigates migrant entrepreneurship (Kloosterman, 2010). This body of literature relies heavily on the mixed embeddedness theory (Kloosterman, Van der Leun, and Rath, 1999) that provides the background for the interaction between migrant entrepreneurs and the pool of opportunities in the business environment available to them. This framework, adapted to explore the business opportunities of migrant entrepreneurs, categorizes three levels of influence: the individual entrepreneur’s set of personal resources and capital, including ethnic/social networks, the structure of market opportunities in the host market for migrant entrepreneurs, and the macro-institutional environment of the host country. The market is presented as hostile for immigrant entrepreneurs who are unfamiliar with the conditions. Despite these challenges, migrant entrepreneurs rely on personal resources and social networks to leverage opportunities in the market. The mixed embeddedness approach is silent on the dynamics of informal practices that entrepreneurs create and does not account for the relationship between entrepreneurs and other relevant stakeholders that might help in producing these informal practices (Ram et al., 2017).

Although this theoretical approach might be relevant for studies in refugee entrepreneurship, we should be cognizant of two issues. First, the migrant entrepreneurship research has so far focused on the contexts of developed economies (i.e., the Global North), receiving migrants from developing countries (i.e., the Global South) and much less on contexts of developing countries receiving refugees. The institutional environment tends to be quite different between countries in the Global North and South and would impact the entrepreneurship dynamics of migrants and refugees. Second, there should be a major distinction between migrant entrepreneurs and refugee entrepreneurs. Migrants move voluntarily, usually for economic reasons, while refugees are forced to escape their countries due to violence and/or political conflict. Heilbrunn and colleagues (2018) note that refugees and asylum seekers are considered one of the most marginalized groups of migrants, exposed to discrimination and very challenging conditions. Refugees also have to adapt to the laws, norms, and values of their country of destination, while trying to recover what they lost during traumatizing experiences (Heilbrunn et al., 2018; Wauters and Lambrecht, 2008).
METHODS OF INQUIRY AND ANALYSIS

Since our knowledge of refugee entrepreneurship is still at an emerging stage, I chose the case study method to study this rather unexplored phenomenon in management research (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019). The case study methodology is also appropriate here because my aim is to understand the everyday experiences of the entrepreneurs who are portrayed in this report. I have been able to approach each entrepreneur’s experience to explore the unique and common themes across all my participants as well as get as close as possible to their “real-life context” (Yin 1994). I started conducting exploratory interviews with SREs in three different field sites. Although this report examines SREs in a single country context, the institutional, legal, economic, and social environments may vary from one geographic area to another; these are factors that could foster or hinder this type of entrepreneurship. This multifaceted composition of our selected study sites made them ideal spaces to explore the interactions between refugees and host communities.

These preliminary interviews helped me to understand more the context of operating small businesses in Lebanon by Syrian refugees. Next, with the help of a research assistant, I started conducting extensive individual interviews with SREs in four areas of Lebanon. To respect the privacy of the participants and the confidentiality of their narratives, I disguised the name of the entrepreneurs and the geographic areas where they work. In total, my data includes 37 cases of entrepreneurs operating in Lebanon’s informal economy. Table 1 describes the entrepreneurs and their businesses.

I adopted the simplest, broadest possible definition of an entrepreneur as an individual who is self-employed (Caliendo et al. 2014), organizes and manages a business and undertakes the risk for the sake of profit. I examined only the experiences of SREs who relocated to Lebanon after the war in Syria in 2011. There were two cases of Syrian entrepreneurs who had lived in Lebanon for a period of time beforehand (for work as an employee or for studies), but they had already relocated to Syria by 2011. They fled back to Lebanon during the war.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The main aim of this study is to understand the adaptive mechanisms and coping strategies of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs (SREs) in operating a small business in Lebanon in the informal economy, despite all the hardship and challenges they face. To evade the restrictions from or the ambiguity of formal institutions, actors resort to multiple informal coping (Tsai, 2006) or ‘creative’ strategies to be able to access what they need (Yassin, Stel, & Rassi, 2016). I adopt the notion of informal coping strategies or adaptive mechanisms (Tsai, 2006; Yassin & Chammaa, 2016; Yassin, Stel, & Rassi, 2016) in an entrepreneurship setting where Syrian refugees start running their micro-enterprises in different communities in Lebanon. I place emphasis on Syrian refugees as agents with the capacity to reach beyond their formal and informal boundaries to advance their entrepreneurial interests.

As such, this study sets out to:

- Explore the different motivations and experiences of SREs in starting businesses in Lebanon;
- Shed light on the legal and social challenges encountered by SREs, in particular, the legality and legitimacy of their ventures in different host communities;
- Identify and describe the different forms of informal mechanisms adopted by SREs to adapt to and operate in the challenging institutional environment of Lebanon;
- Portray the relationship dynamics between SREs and Lebanese stakeholders;
- Highlight some practical and policy recommendations.
### TABLE 1. DESCRIPTION AND DEMOGRAPHIC CHARACTERISTICS OF CASE STUDIES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Case #</th>
<th>Area of origin - Syria</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age group</th>
<th>Family status</th>
<th>Year started business</th>
<th>Business type</th>
<th>Business location in Lebanon</th>
<th>Number of employees</th>
<th>Future plans</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A1</td>
<td>Idlib</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Houseware shop</td>
<td>Area 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A2</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>1 dollar shop</td>
<td>Area 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A3</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>Clothing shop</td>
<td>Area 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to expand his business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A4</td>
<td>Al Raqqa</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>Clothing shop</td>
<td>Area 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to go back to Syria and complete his education</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A5</td>
<td>Al Raqqa</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Area 1</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Wants to go back to Syria when the war ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A6</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>May 2018</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Area 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to go back to Aleppo when the war ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A7</td>
<td>Daraa</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Divorced</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Clothing shop</td>
<td>Area 1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to buy more products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B1</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Barber shop</td>
<td>Area 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Does not think of going back to Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B2</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Perfume shop</td>
<td>Area 2</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Wants to expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B3</td>
<td>Al Raqqa</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2011</td>
<td>Clothing store</td>
<td>Area 2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to finish his studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B4</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Water services</td>
<td>Area 2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wants to expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C1</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C2</td>
<td>Al Harika</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Clothing shop</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wants to go back to Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C3</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>1 dollar shop</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1 dollar shop</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C4</td>
<td>Idlib</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to buy new machines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C5</td>
<td>Qalamoun</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to go back to Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C6</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to buy new machines</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C7</td>
<td>Hama</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Grocery store</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C8</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Clothing store</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Wants to go back to Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C9</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Clothing store</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to get more products</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C10</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>2-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>1 dollar shop</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Case #</td>
<td>Area of origin - Syria</td>
<td>Gender</td>
<td>Age group</td>
<td>Family status</td>
<td>Year started business</td>
<td>Business type</td>
<td>Business location in Lebanon</td>
<td>Number of employees</td>
<td>Future plans</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>--------</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>C11</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1 dollar shop</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to travel to complete his studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C12</td>
<td>Aleppo</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C13</td>
<td>Zabadani</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2017</td>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Wants to keep running the salon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C14</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2011-2012</td>
<td>Hairdresser</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>Wants to take a loan and expand</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C15</td>
<td>Daraa</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2012</td>
<td>Minimarket</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Goes back and forth between Lebanon and Syria</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D1</td>
<td>Damascus</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Tailor</td>
<td>Area 3</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Wants to see if she can re-open her shop</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E1</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Dairy products</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to open on his own without a partner</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E2</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Cheese workshop</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Stated that he is leaving end of 2018</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E3</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Small coffee shop</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E4</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>30+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Small bakery</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Not specified</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E5</td>
<td>Qusayr</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Supermarket</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Wants to finish studying and expand his supermarket</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F1</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2016</td>
<td>Pastry shop</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Does not wish to go back</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F2</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2014</td>
<td>Restaurant</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to go back to Syria when the war ends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F3</td>
<td>Hama</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>25-30</td>
<td>Single</td>
<td>2013</td>
<td>Arguileh shop</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Looking for scholarships to continue his studies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F4</td>
<td>Homs</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>50+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2015</td>
<td>Bakery</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Wants to open another bakery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F5</td>
<td>Bab Ammar</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>40+</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>Late 2015</td>
<td>Bakery</td>
<td>Area 4</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Wants to seek resettlement in Australia</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The priority was to focus on cases of entrepreneurs who operate their ventures outside of the informal tented settlements or camps because most of the Syrian refugees live outside these arrangements and interact much more with host communities if they run these businesses outside. However, I conducted some interviews in camps and/or informal tented settlements to obtain some insights into how SREs operate in these environments.

To identify participants that fit our purposeful sampling, I contacted organizations that work with Syrian refugees through different programs to support them in Lebanon and asked these organizations to help us in recruiting participants. I had mixed responses. Some organizations were helpful and assigned some of their team members to identity SREs who are willing to talk with us. Other organizations were not able to help due to “limited resources” or “the sensitivity of the topic and the challenging context.” All recruitment and consent procedures were followed as per Institutional Review Board (IRB) guidelines. For example, agents or employees of organizations discussed my request with some of the refugees’ entrepreneurs to solicit their initial consent to meet with me for the research. Participation in the study was completely voluntary. At the meeting, I explained the study and interview to the participants and then asked them again if they were willing to participate, emphasizing the fact that they have the right to refuse participation. Participants were ensured that their privacy and confidentiality would be maintained.

We approached the Syrian entrepreneurs by informing them that this is an academic research project and we want to study their challenges as well as how they adapt, stressing that ‘we want to get their voice heard’ (Harb et al., 2018). We conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with the 37 entrepreneurs included in this report. When asked, my research assistant and I tried to give information about organizations that might support Syrian refugees through training, workshops, grants for small business ideas, educational scholarships, equipment, or loans. I also conducted interviews and met with seven community facilitators and organizations in Lebanon that shared with us many insights on the context of SREs and how they operate their businesses in this challenging institutional context.

Regarding data analysis, my inductive approach closely followed established procedures for inductive research (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), including guidelines for constant comparison techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and working recursively between the data and emerging insights. A cross-case analysis has helped me to draw out meaningful insights without over-generalizing from single case occurrences (Heilbrunn & Iannone, 2019). I identified both commonalities and variation in the experiences of SREs. I coded and kept a record of every type of challenges and strategies participants mentioned, and then used constant comparative analysis to aggregate similar challenges and strategies into broader themes.

We should be wary that due to the exploratory nature of the study, findings should not be generalized to a wider population of SREs. In other words, they are not representative of all SREs in Lebanon. This research could serve as a starting point for further investigations into the different types of SREs at different scales of their businesses, different degrees of formality, and with various success rates.
SREs have shown a high degree of agency in starting business ideas to support themselves and their families. In some instances, they were able to expand their entrepreneurial ventures and aspire to further growth and success. A Lebanese NGO manager shared: “If you allow Syrians to operate their businesses and to consume more, they will benefit themselves and us. People rely less on aid when they have businesses.” However, the unclear and uncertain nature of laws and regulations pertaining to Syrian refugees opening and operating businesses in Lebanon hindered their entrepreneurial ambitions. Many times this led to band-aid solutions adopted by both the SREs and some enforcing formal entities. These solutions would have been satisfactory if most, if not all, of the Syrian refugees are planning to leave Lebanon for another destination or going back to Syria. However, through our conversations with SREs who participated in the study, many presume that they cannot go back to Syria due to many restrictions, such as safety, military service avoidance, and loss of property and assets. Also, many have established and invested a relatively good amount of money in their ventures, so they are not willing to easily let go of what they have been working on and investing in during the last six years or so in Lebanon.

The informality of businesses has always been the norm within underprivileged communities in Lebanon and many other parts of the world. A manager of an international non-governmental organizations (INGO) that supports SREs commented: “Even if they have enough money to open their businesses, Syrian refugees are adopting informal methods to sustain their businesses because of the difficult steps they should follow to make their business formally recognized.” However, a policy of denial has reigned over the existence of many Syrian refugee-run businesses. This approach has encouraged random or weak enforcement of the laws against them and encouraged SREs to resort to many informal adaptive strategies to be able to fly under the radar, continue their business operations, and avoid penalties.

**Motives**

As a consequence of displacement and limited livelihood opportunities, most SREs pursued entrepreneurship as a self-reliance strategy by taking advantage of a common language, familiarity with the culture, and relative peace and stability in neighboring Lebanon. Many had experienced significant losses in Syria and had little choice other than to try their best in Lebanon to rebuild their lives and create small businesses to sustain themselves and their families. However, some young Syrian men are also in Lebanon to avoid being drafted for their military service and/or to pursue university-level studies. These young men, while temporarily living in Lebanon, opted to become entrepreneurs, first to sustain themselves and second to save some money and send it back to Syria.

SREs portrayed in this report differed in their resources and had experienced different market conditions, which led to different opportunity structures and subsequent choices of entrepreneurial activities. Previous experience and tacit knowledge prevailed as important factors in the SREs’ choices of business ventures. Most SREs had some form of financial support from family members residing in Lebanon, Syria, or elsewhere to start their ventures.

The literature on micro-entrepreneurs defines necessity-driven entrepreneurs as those who resort to the informal economy as the only available source of income because there are no other alternatives, while opportunity-based entrepreneurs use the informal economy to generate a higher income and enjoy greater autonomy and flexibility (Williams, 2008). Although earning a livelihood is the most important objective for most SREs, we came across nine cases of entrepreneurs who started out of necessity but are currently expanding their businesses and capturing opportunities along the way. Specifically, Syrian refugees who were already small business owners in Syria were very much opportunity and growth-driven in Lebanon. In addition, SREs who had borrowed from microfinance organizations (MFOs) or won a sum of money from NGOs and/or participated in small-business training programs tended to be more entrepreneurial and growth-oriented in their approach in handling their businesses relatively to entrepreneurs who did not receive any support.

This report echoes the new conversation in entrepreneurship that we should not label micro-entrepreneurs as either necessity-based or opportunity-based (e.g., Welter et al., 2018) because many SREs start as necessity-based entrepreneurs but eventually become more opportunity-driven after establishing their businesses and experiencing some
success. Most entrepreneurs perceive a combination of necessity and opportunity in their informal activities (Webb et al., 2013; Welter et al., 2018). For example, B4 was working in construction but found a better opportunity in water tank services, while C5 leveraged his experience in running his own car wash in Syria to open a new one in Lebanon.

Hence, we need to rethink and challenge our assumptions that refugee entrepreneurs are exclusively necessity-based and have limited opportunities to survive or grow in host communities. We should also not underestimate the economic impact of these small businesses as they could provide a decent living for entrepreneurs, and in many instances offer job opportunities for other Syrian refugees as we have witnessed in many of our cases. Many Syrian-run small businesses have established a local footprint in their neighborhoods and host communities, while others have already started exploring some international opportunities (e.g., C1).

Regulatory challenges

Many Syrians do not have the proper documentation of formal residency in Lebanon as renewing or securing residency permits entails so many complicated and expensive procedures (Janmyr, 2016). Moreover, Syrians registered with UNHCR must provide a pledge that they will not work in Lebanon; while refugees not registered with UNHCR must arrange for an individual or organizational sponsorship to be able to work in three sectors: agriculture, construction, and environment (formerly referred to as “cleaning services”) (Janmyr, 2016). In contrast, working in other sectors requires more bureaucratic and financial conditions to be completed. The sponsorship system requires that employers take full responsibility for the individual (Janmyr, 2016). In addition to the aforementioned challenges, SREs have to deal with two other challenges: 1) very limited financial resources, and 2) threats of having their businesses shut down. A3 was very worried about the second one:

“The main problem we are facing is the decision that’s been made which states that Syrians are not allowed to have their own businesses or stores. The problem lies in this decision that’s destroying many businesses but not all businesses. Such decision must be executed on all Syrians and not on some...It would be better if we get a notice before we have to close...Where can I go?”

As with previous studies that examined SREs in Lebanon such as Harb et al. (2018), most SREs are worried about the legality of their residence in Lebanon, the legality of their ventures and all related documentation issues. The legality issue was not raised by participants in camps in Beirut as these areas, we were told, are under the power of certain political parties, and SREs have not experienced any types of harassment regarding the legality of their businesses. Also, SREs operating very small businesses at home or inside settlements were not very concerned about this issue, due to the size and limited nature of their business.

Most participants (except for a few who were based in camps or settlements) expressed their interest in formalizing their personal and business status because they want to avoid living in fear that their business would be shut down and/or to prevent being detained. They did express their intentions to formalize their businesses, but we cannot presume that they would do so if regulations would indeed be eased. We need to keep in mind that operating informally is a major cost-saving measure for SREs, but also equally puts them at risk and creates other forms of costs as well as restrictions. Moreover, many SREs have expired legal and residency papers that require renewal before being able to formalize a business. Many complained that they cannot afford renewing these papers; hence, they will not be able to pay for registering their businesses. There was a vicious cycle that kept these SREs stuck in informality and operating under the radar.

Clearly, there are certain procedures that foreigners could follow in Lebanon to establish a business or buy a house/store. However, Syrian refugees, with limited capital, would face many hurdles to operate a formal business. The procedural process on how a displaced Syrian can open a business in Lebanon is complicated, especially if one cannot open a bank account; a procedure made much more difficult at the peak of the refugee crisis in Lebanon. As clearly explained by one of the cases, there are many bottlenecks that restrict SREs from completing the process of formally registering the business. While in the field, we heard that some municipalities are allowing certain SREs to register their businesses at the municipality level with no need for ministerial or government level permit (such as not getting an izo3a tijariya). This process is not transparent and does not make the venture formal, as some lawyers explained to us later.
"I had a shop for three years and now the municipality of [X] shut it down. That shop was for a Lebanese owner and I only rented it. I was a tailor, minding my own business... It seems someone had filed a complaint against my shop and demanded to close it. That is what I was told."

There was a perception that SREs are locked into this vicious cycle of informality, and that the only way to operate a business when you do not have a big capital or wasta (meaning connections) is to resort to an informal type of entrepreneurship. Moreover, the informal status of SREs might hinder the profitability, efficiency and expansion potential of their businesses, beginning with the immobility of SREs. This theme was salient in the narratives of growth-oriented SREs. For example, C5 told us: “I have some unfinished papers at the General Security, so if I ever needed to buy some supplies, I can’t go to [this town] or any other place.”

SREs operate on a continuum of informality; with some more informal than others and based on the informality degree of the adaptive mechanisms they adopt. These mechanisms reflected the different shades of grey in which SREs operate in Lebanon. Moreover, many SREs adopted different strategies simultaneously in different circumstances, and the cases reflected a much more complicated reality that tends to resemble a continuum with different types of overlaps. As such, SREs can be compliant with certain formal requirements (e.g., residency or Lebanese shop registration) while in conflict with others (e.g., not holding work or business permit).

Adaptive mechanisms in the informal economy – Informal coping strategies

After analyzing the case studies, different adaptive mechanisms were identified that SREs adopted to respond to conflicting institutional demands with their needs to operate their businesses and earn a livelihood. There is a gap between the original intentions of formal institutions and the perceived needs and interests of SREs. Informal adaptive mechanisms refer to informal coping (Tsai, 2006) or to multiple ‘creative’ strategies to be able to access what actors need (Yassin, Stel, & Rassi, 2016) and manage their desired activities while evading the restrictions and/or ambiguity of formal institutions (Tsai, 2006). Consistent with Oliver (1991), many responses to institutional pressures could be arranged on a continuum from
Hiding

Our data also showed that some SREs resort to using certain hiding techniques. Hiding refers to avoiding the need to conform to formal institutional pressures by actively choosing to be out of sight of the formal law enforcers. SREs intentionally operated businesses in places that were harder to discover by the authorities. SREs also operated a business from their homes, so they can be less visible and keep a low profile. C6, a tailor, decided to move her business out of the shop on the street to her home. She told us:

“I'm using this room in my house, even if I have lost a room, I still saved another rent. A shop requires money here and there, you get into trouble with others for being Syrian and they might even close your business.”

Even when they had to operate in a regular shop, some SREs opted for a small street or alley where few people pass by. They kept the door shut most of the time and only interacted with people they trust, rather than visibly opening and promoting their business.

Other SREs had to alter their business model in a way that decreased exposure to legal actors and authorities. For example, some SREs focused only on the delivery of their products or services and had their small stores closed most of the time. They developed an efficient delivery system between their clients and themselves through which orders were taken by phone and then delivered to clients' homes. This response might have entailed some opportunity costs for the SREs; however, it also reduced the risks and actual costs of dealing with authorities that might want to fine them or shut down their business.

We also heard that a Syrian refugee tailor has been moving from one location to the other; every time the municipality asks him to close his store.

In addition, SREs shared with each other information on municipality or Internal Security Forces raids, so SREs can close their businesses and hide for some time. However, closing a store has negative repercussions on the SREs financial earnings. A5 explained:

“When a municipality team comes for inspection, I close my shop... We tell each other. The people here tell each other. But if you close two days in a row, you will get seriously broke and can no longer pay rent.”

most to least resistance to institutional pressures. Inspired by the work of Oliver (1991), informal adaptive mechanisms are presented here as the SREs’ attempts to preclude the necessity of conformity; due to their inability to formalize their business operations or their lack of desire to do so. They achieve this through four types of adaptive responses: dismissing, hiding, camouflaging, and informal partnering.

Dismissing

Dismissing here refers to putting away or not taking into consideration the issue of business formality. At times, SREs simply ignore explicit laws regarding Syrian refugees doing business in Lebanon. Some SREs dismiss these issues, especially when they are operating in Palestinian camps or neighborhoods controlled by certain political parties because “the government will not be able to enforce laws in this area, without the consent of the political parties.” In fact, these SREs cared more about abiding by the norms and regulations of the camp, the political party which dominates a certain neighborhood, or the ‘forgiving’ municipality in some areas. B3 commented:

“No, I never faced a problem with a municipality or the Internal Forces. They never threatened to close the store but the municipality comes after you if you have fees to pay... My store is not registered but I pay the store owner the fees...municipality inspectors don’t enter the shops usually. They don’t bother us. ... But it depends on the municipalities, for example in [that area] I heard they banned Syrians from opening a shop.”

In addition, SREs operating their businesses in informal tented settlements did not feel the need to abide by any laws since their businesses were quite restricted to customers within the settlements, and Lebanese law enforcers were not even interested in regulating these businesses.

Within these confined spaces of camps and settlements, SREs have the largest degree of freedom to ignore or bend the rules pertaining to Syrian employment and businesses. Dismissing was not intended to directly challenge the formal and legal institutional pressures. Instead, SREs did not feel an urge to comply with these laws. B1 told us: “Harassments from legal actors to formalize our businesses do not happen here because mainly this area is not registered in any government books.”
Camouflaging

Most SREs engage in some form of camouflage to be able to continue operating their businesses under the radar. Camouflage was the most common adaptive mechanism due to its ability to provide an appearance of compliance or semi-compliance with the regulations, while still operating the business informally. In such cases, SREs appear to conform rather than actually conforming. Camouflaging the true ownership structure of a business rendered the distinction between a formal and informal business of SREs virtually meaningless. SREs made their business look more Lebanese and/or more compliant with Lebanese laws pertaining to Syrian-led businesses (i.e., claiming that the SRE is a partner with a Lebanese operator).

Some SREs concealed their identity as owners of the business and pretended to be the employees. In fact, we experienced two incidents, when SREs started the interview by telling us they are ‘just an employee,’ and that the owner of the business is Lebanese. However, after they felt more comfortable in the interview they shared that they rent the shop from a Lebanese, but they own the products in the shop and reap all the sales revenues. A large number of SREs told us that they always stress that the owner is the Lebanese landlord and that this strategy has been effective in many cases.

Sometimes, SREs needed to lie not only to get away from those who want to enforce the law, but also to protect themselves from abusive clients. For example, C5 said: “Many people have come, washed their cars and took off. Eventually, I started telling them that this place is not mine, it belongs to my Lebanese boss. So then, they pay.” Some SREs worked as cleaners for a Lebanese sponsoring organization during the day, and operated their own businesses in the afternoon, showing their ‘seemingly’ valid work permit to inspectors who came to check their stores.

Moreover, SREs attempt to reduce the extent to which their business is inspected, scrutinized, or evaluated by partially protecting themselves either by asking a Lebanese to sign the lease of their business shop on their behalf, or hiding behind a legitimate Lebanese figure. Some SREs, who are operating in environments where there is scrutiny against them, found a Lebanese friend or relative who is willing to sign the lease contract of the shop in his or her name with the landlord. SREs felt comfortable as – legally – the tenant is Lebanese, and they should not be at any risk. Others were renting their stores directly from a powerful local Lebanese actor who wanted SREs to keep working and paying their rents. In this case, the local Lebanese actor argued that these tenants are his employees and at times, he issued valid documents for them. In some cases, the local Lebanese actor even pretended to be the partner. We called this phenomenon the “Abu Abed effect,” a term that mirrors this typical powerful Lebanese man who has his own connections and can help SREs to bend or avoid certain rules. These Lebanese charged SREs daily, weekly or monthly rents and they provided protection and support for SRE businesses in return. The “Abu Abed” was usually a man, but not necessarily always. In fact, we came across a case in Area 1 where the shop owner was a Lebanese woman who was known and respected in the area and provided protection as well as support to the SRE tenant. Also, these Lebanese actors tended to be compassionate in general with the SREs’ status quo and daily challenges.

Informal partnering

Finally, some SREs engaged in partnering with some of their Lebanese friends or family members to run business ventures. This partnership was informal and based on a verbal agreement between the SRE and Lebanese partner. While camouflage relied on appearance rather than the real nature of the business, informal business partnerships tend to be more real partnerships. This arrangement provides a boundary-blurring situation for SREs because they are combining formal and informal techniques simultaneously. The business and the lease of the store are usually registered in the name of the Lebanese partner and both partners share costs and profits. The decision to informally partner with a Lebanese national was much more focused on the positive consequences of having a local supporter. F3 shared: “My partner is Lebanese. I made a deal with him...He disliked my situation, but wasn’t able to help me...We decided to open a business together, to make a profit, and upgrade our financial status.” When prompted about the challenges for SREs, he replied: “As for me, because I have a Lebanese partner, it was easier. My partner saved me 50% of the troubles... Even if people from the Ministry of Labor come for inspection, our shop is legal because the rent contract is under the name of a Lebanese person.”
Shades of grey and power imbalance

The adaptive mechanisms adopted by SREs and presented beforehand reflect the different shades of grey within which SREs operate in Lebanon’s informal market. Moreover, these coping strategies could also result in different power dynamics between Syrians and the local Lebanese. Although many SREs resorted to family or friends to register a store lease in their name or to form an informal partnership, the Lebanese individuals indirectly gained a certain power over SREs. The Lebanese friends and family members expressed compassion towards Syrian refugees and wanted to support and offer a favor, but they (in)directly get to hold invisible power over SREs. For instance, Lebanese individuals might decide not to renew the lease for an SRE, take an exaggerated cut of the profits, or take over the entire business, especially since all ‘official’ documents of the business are held in the name of the Lebanese partner—although this was not reported by any of the SREs we interviewed. A Lebanese landlord told us:

“I would say that all these are my partners [three SREs who had three shops located side to side] because they are not allowed to rent a shop legally. But I’m almost a partner, I take half what they make [as rent expense] which makes me practically a partner. They pay me daily and not monthly, and I earn almost half what they make...Of course. I’m benefiting myself and others.”

While camouflaging and informal partnering could be thought of as low-risk adaptive responses in terms of the potential for harm from actors who scrutinize SRE businesses for legal compliance, they also entailed dealing with the risk of losing trust between the partners.

Categorizing SREs

One of the main areas of interest highlighted by this study is the lack of homogeneity between SREs themselves. The cases exemplify the difficulties of discerning a pattern or fixed categories in the type of entrepreneurship refugees engage in. SREs vary in many dimensions. While I believe that our findings stand on their own and reflect the diversity of SREs and their adaptive strategies in operating their ventures in Lebanon, I attempt below to provide some observations to represent the different types of SREs. The idea is not to create a typology of SREs, but to present certain characteristics in which they may vary. The tentative labels are not mutually exclusive, as an SRE could be a combination of two, three or various categories. Moreover, one problem with the categorization of SREs is that we might exaggerate the differences between people from different categories while at the same time perceive members of groups as more similar to each other than they actually are. For example, despite all women refugees in our cases being the breadwinners of their families (or being the heads of their household), some aspire to grow, while others are rather satisfied with the status quo. In categorizing, we should be cautious of overgeneralization.

Women and men entrepreneurs

War, conflict and being refugees have changed the role of Syrian women. They have taken on a self-supporting role due to – in most cases – the absence of the head of the household because of military service, death, divorce, separation or resettlement. Syrian women tended to take on jobs like hairdressing and cosmetics, tailoring, or any other home-based business. Because of norms of social modesty and of being sole breadwinners, who also have to take care of children and the household, most of the women worked privately from home. They are more likely than men to adopt the strategy of hiding by actively choosing to operate their businesses out of sight at home and/or in concealed shops. For most, these ventures were their first entrepreneurial experience. All shared with us that they felt more empowered, as a result of leading and managing a business. On the other hand, some women SREs used their status as the sole supporter of their family and as a vulnerable refugee as an excuse to bend the rules of the municipalities when their shops were threatened to be shut. Two female SREs urged law enforcers to be more empathetic with their situation and were given special treatment or a pardon to continue working.

Most male SREs reported having suffered relatively more due to local authorities’ efforts of punishment and discipline. In most cases, male SREs resorted to adapting through camouflage and informal partnering as they were working more in public places and triggering more scrutiny from law enforcers. When it comes to marketing, women SREs have made use of social media, such as Instagram or Facebook, as an outlet to display their work while men have usually preferred to rely more on traditional means such as relationships or word of mouth.
SREs in different regions

The environment in which SREs operate their ventures informally in Area 3 and Area 4 varied between being relatively permissive to challenging, according to the respective neighborhoods. In some areas, SREs told us that in this neighborhood they feel as if they are in Syria due to the ‘humanitarian and friendly’ approach of the local community. In other areas, SREs – mostly ones that do not have a residency permit or a work permit – were more cautious and had to go in hiding by working and moving around out of sight and opening their shops in areas that are not very visible or visited by regulators. Some SREs in Area 3 were forced to close down and were evacuated to different areas because of local pressure and reactions that were unfavorable to refugees. Nevertheless, in general, Area 3 and Area 4 were considered more welcoming zones for Syrians as there are many mixed families from Syrian and Lebanese origins living in these villages, and there is a long history of movement of people and trade. In fact, there were more cases of informal partnering in Area 4 than in other regions. In Area 1, SREs were no strangers to pressure from their surroundings. Many have stated that they have been threatened multiple times to close their shops. To deal with that, SREs usually worked in disguise by changing the appearance of their business/shop and putting a Lebanese person at the front.

Who are the SREs?

Figure 1 below represents some of the common types of SREs we came across during our fieldwork, based on some factors such as motivations, gender and types of business.

Female heads of households
single female breadwinners represent the category of female entrepreneurs in our study, as discussed previously.

There were two different types of SREs operating in Lebanon that differed in terms of their entrepreneurial motivations. Non-aspiring SREs were satisfied with the business they were operating and could see themselves continuing the same thing in the next few years, as long as they are not forced to shut down the business and/or move to Syria. On the other hand, aspiring SREs were already thinking about how to expand their ventures and improve their conditions. It did not matter whether they wanted to expand the business in the current geographic area or somewhere else, but they already had plans what to do next and how they could succeed.

College-going SREs were male refugees who have accomplished a certain university degree and are still pursuing graduate education in Lebanon or aspire to enroll in graduate school somewhere. They operated business ventures to earn their livelihood, but the future of their entrepreneurship journey depends on when and where they would be completing their graduate degrees.

Economic SREs were also male refugees who were forced to come to Lebanon due to the conflict. They started their business to earn their livelihood, but today they base their decision on whether to stay in Lebanon or go back to Syria on the economic incentives that either context can offer them. That is, these SREs compare the two contexts based on how much they can earn from having a venture in Lebanon versus working in Syria and how they can spend the money to live (i.e., cost-benefit approach). Many shared with us that economically it makes more sense to stay in Lebanon for now, as they will not be able to maintain the same lifestyle in Syria if they go back to their old jobs or open similar ventures there.

Normative challenges and societal perceptions

The degree of compliance with formal institutions defines the businesses or activities of SREs as formal or informal. In other words, the informality of these businesses or activities is evaluated based on whether they comply with formal laws and regulations. However, some groups may judge these activities to be socially acceptable/legitimate when they are consistent with informal social norms, values and beliefs (Webb et al., 2009: 493). In fact, informal activities prevail and sustain in many parts of the world due to the acceptance of these activities based on the informal normative institutions of the society.

The informal normative institutions include the norms, values, and beliefs of large groups in society that shape notions of social acceptability (Aldrich & Baker, 2001). Previous research also suggests that entrepreneurial activities in the informal economy may motivate the integration of people in communities and offer employment to community members (Webb et al., 2009). In our context, the normative institution of the host country is a pertinent dimension that must be explored to understand whether the practices of SREs...
in Lebanon are considered legitimate. The values and norms of the host society reflect whether communities in Lebanon (still) tolerate and accept SREs. The research indicates that formal rules/norms in Lebanon make operating a purely Syrian refugee-run enterprise quite difficult but that some communities and cities have informal rules/norms that are more welcoming and tolerant, making the SREs legitimate. However, these dynamics might be changing. Although displaced Syrians are welcomed in some communities in Lebanon, xenophobia reigns and is on the rise, in particular when Syrian entrepreneurs open new shops, start new ventures, or initiate any business transaction. This is because they are perceived by the business host community to be ‘stealing’ away customers and opportunities from local businesses and entrepreneurs, who are already struggling in their own unstable home economy.

The initial informal economic activities that are informal yet legitimate (Webb et al., 2009), provided Syrian refugees with opportunities to overcome economic disadvantages they face in their daily routines. Nevertheless, the rising anti-refugee narrative in some areas of Lebanon has started challenging the legitimacy of these entrepreneurs. Losing legitimacy of SRE operations might jeopardize the safety and economic sustenance of these refugees, many of whom depend on very limited aid and donations. In fact, as the situation is relatively improving in Syria, some Lebanese municipalities and Lebanese citizens have begun questioning whether the presence of Syrian refugees is still legitimate, starting to perceive the presence of the Syrian refugees-run businesses as informal and illegitimate. As a consequence, more direct and indirect harassment targeting SREs has increased in many areas in Lebanon.

In the case studies we examined, there were multiple levels of acceptability of Syrian refugees conducting businesses and the legitimacy of these business ventures. In fact, some areas were more permissible than others due to the long history of cooperation between Lebanese and Syrian communities from trade activities to inter-marriages. This, in turn, has affected how the meso-level institutions such as municipalities and political parties fostered this type of entrepreneurship or, at least, accepted this type of activity and tried to regulate them as if they were
Lebanese informal entrepreneurs. Areas like Bar Elias have been known for their hospitality towards Syrian refugees and have provided certain support including not interfering directly with the formality of their businesses as long as some local rules are respected, for example avoiding using public spaces (pavement) to display merchandise. On the other hand, some municipalities have been reported to be evicting Syrian refugees and shutting down their businesses (Human Rights Watch, 2018). In this sense, the municipalities become virtual creators of the informal space through their stable or changing redefinition of what is permissible and what is not in the market place for both Syrian and Lebanese businesses.

During data collection, we heard about incidents of Lebanese shop owners verbally abusing SREs, intentionally creating troubles next to SREs shops to scare customers out of SRE businesses, reporting the unregistered status of SRE businesses to the police, or even not paying for a service or product bought from SREs. Of course, these were self-reported instances that we need to handle with caution, also not all our cases experienced similar harassments. On the other hand, many SREs spoke very highly of their Lebanese neighbors, customers and suppliers who have provided a helping hand in bad times and have built strong personal relationships with them.

There were no specific coping strategies to adapt to the informal normative institutional challenges pertaining to the legitimacy and acceptability of SREs; however, the geographical area’s social and cultural mesh played a major role in easing or hindering the integration and acceptability of SREs. Efforts by Syrian refugee communities to work, trade, and serve the Lebanese population could facilitate their integration in host neighborhoods and their legitimacy in these areas.

**Positive impacts of Syrian refugee entrepreneurs**

We heard a lot from our interviewees about the benefits that Syrian refugees, in general, and SREs, in particular, are contributing to local economies since they are renting houses, shops, and procuring supplies from Lebanese shop owners. Also, SREs are regularly selling to Lebanese customers at relatively low prices. Moreover, we noted that most of the SREs recruited one or two employees in their ventures, hence providing job opportunities for vulnerable people, in particular other Syrian refugees but also underprivileged Lebanese. Clearly, these workers were employed “off the books.” Also, family members were employed in some ventures, which provided some livelihood support for other Syrian refugees.

In sum:

- SREs are an integral source of demand for merchandise, food, business supplies, shops and housing, which would help stimulate local economic growth.

- SREs provide products and services at competitive prices that benefit all consumers in the market.

- The presence of SREs in some areas has increased the flow of money and spending in rural areas and in relatively impoverished neighborhoods in Lebanon. A micro-local economy has been created through SRE activities and aid-sector support, leading to an increased demand for goods.

- Some local and international organizations are creating programs that give refugees the chance to develop their entrepreneurial ideas and turn them into businesses. This has helped refugees become less dependent on aid and other support.

- Some Syrian refugee-led businesses have expanded and created job opportunities for some local Lebanese people and other Syrian refugees looking for jobs.

**Outcomes of entrepreneurship: Sustenance or resilience?**

Although our qualitative-based approach does not aim nor can it assess the impact of running business ventures on the quality of livelihood and improvement in the income of SREs, the report highlights some insights that could be further explored in future research. First, what determines the performance and success of SREs is very subjective, as it depends on one’s initial endowments and objectives, and could encompass so many elements including financial rewards, psychological rewards, family stability, social rewards, etc. For example, some SREs defined the success of the venture by being able to feed their family. Others wanted to make a profit and start saving money, while another group was thinking of growing the business and being recognized among peers.
Second, performance should be assessed in reference to clear benchmarks. In particular, the literature and published reports on Syrian refugees discuss the resilience of this group despite hardship. However, we need to be wary of the definition of resilience and distinguish between sustenance and resilience (Williams & Shepherd, 2016). Many SREs are able to provide a livelihood to sustain themselves and their direct families. Sustenance tends to provide for most basic needs of SREs and helps the owners to focus more on short-term goals to get by another day. On the other hand, some SREs were able to improve their lives since they were displaced to Lebanon and have a more long-term oriented focus. They might progress from bad to good conditions. This resilience outcome in turn should be divided into different forms based on 1) the level of how much SREs are recovering from hardship, and 2) the relative reference level of the initial condition. Is it a recovery from hardship to a level of success and financial stability, equal to that which they had experienced in Syria before the crisis? Or is it progress in comparison to the level of stability they had during the war in Syria? Or is it perhaps in comparison to the level they had when they started living in Lebanon? Resilience has generally been used to describe individuals that are able to react to and recover from duress or disturbances with minimal effects on stability and functioning (Linnenluecke, 2015; Sutcliffe & Vogus, 2003) with a focus on recovery and rebound to their pre-adversity operational and performance status. It is understood as an act of recovery, to go back to a certain level. But these SREs had experienced different levels of financial well-being and psychological (in)stability in the last six years. Distinguishing among these levels is pertinent to understanding the wellbeing and satisfaction of Syrian refugees operating businesses in Lebanon or in any other host countries.

Most of our participants expressed sustenance, or survivorship (Fathallah et al., 2015) and had the ability to just continue new daily business functioning, despite all the challenges. But this functioning was new and different from the level they had before the disruption. In fact, the uncertainty regarding the legality of their presence adds a huge toll on the resilience of SREs who know that sorting out the individual and family legal documentations would cost them a lot of money, and maybe expanding or growing the business might put them at a higher risk and expose them as targets to official legal enforcement.

A full recovery may not happen, but compared to the options they would face if they returned to Syria, most SREs felt that their conditions in Lebanon are better.

**Future plans and prospects**

All the SREs we interviewed were not planning to leave Lebanon soon. We identified three groups of SREs in terms of plans and prospects. First, some SREs are eager to go back to their families and businesses in Syria, but they are still waiting for more security assurance in their hometowns or reassurance that they will not be drafted into the army upon return. Second, a group of SREs perceived the current economic, family, and social opportunities in Lebanon as much more conducive than what would await them in Syria. Third, a group of SREs did not know where they would be in the next year or so. It was hard for them to perceive future goals because there were multiple uncertain factors guiding them.
CONTRIBUTION TO ACADEMIC LITERATURE

This exploratory study contributes to the emerging literature on refugee entrepreneurship. The report emphasizes the creativity, challenges, struggles, and vulnerabilities that exist among a group of 37 Syrian refugee entrepreneurs (SRE) and how they adapt despite adverse conditions. Mainly, I highlight the experiences and entrepreneurial practices of this special group of entrepreneurs who live in marginal and challenging places and contexts (Imas, Wilson, & Weston, 2012). I also show that refugee entrepreneurs are very heterogeneous and that understanding their motivations, characteristics, adaptive mechanisms, and objectives can enrich our understanding of everyday entrepreneurship in a challenging context (Welter et al., 2017). Most literature on migrant entrepreneurship tends to focus on the opportunity and growth potential of migrant entrepreneurs. However, this study and other studies on refugee entrepreneurs can help us to better understand the experiences of refugees, who as a population differ from migrants, by engaging with their past trauma and struggles and current challenges in the process of establishing and maybe even growing their businesses.

In addition, this study contributes to the mixed embeddedness literature (Kloostermann et al., 1999) by giving voice to the entrepreneurs to understand how the different aspects of embeddedness such as social, economic, cultural, and network factors shape their actions. For example, the role of law enforcers and municipalities is very salient in determining the permissibility of SRE businesses. The report shows the multilevel institutional influences that could impact these entrepreneurs, sometime positively while other times negatively. Although the wider national institutional/regulatory and socio-cultural contexts affect the operations of SREs as per the mixed embeddedness perspective, the findings highlight the multiplicity of institutions and the heterogeneity in law enforcement among different areas. This study also suggests that we should understand the different types of social capital and networks of refugee entrepreneurs. For example, refugees or migrants moving to a neighboring country might leverage old friendships or family ties with local people who could facilitate their work. As discussed, many SREs were able to create informal partnership agreements with local Lebanese friends or family members they knew before they were displaced to Lebanon.

This study also adds to the literature on entrepreneurship in informal economies (Bruton et al., 2012; Webb et al., 2013) by zooming in on a special form of informal entrepreneurship. We build on the work inspired by Oliver (1991) in understanding responses to institutional pressures by discerning much more nuanced informal adaptive mechanisms in the context of refugee entrepreneurs. These informal coping strategies challenge many notions regarding the power dynamics between refugee entrepreneurs and local stakeholders. The report shows how relationships between refugee entrepreneurs and landlords, partners, or sponsors can ease the process for SREs, but also might expose refugees to new risks. This study also highlights that although most informal entrepreneurs are considered legitimate actors in the current literature on informal economies in developing countries, over time, they might lose legitimacy and face new forms of informal institutional void (Webb et al., 2019) that might escalate the already existing challenges they face from the formal institutional void.
Under the Radar? How Syrian Refugee Entrepreneurs Adapt and Operate in Lebanon’s Informal Economy

CONCLUSION

The main contribution of this report is highlighting the experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon in operating their business ventures despite the very challenging institutional environment. Entrepreneurship is one way Syrian refugees adapt to secure their livelihood. Due to the complexity of laws and regulations as well as their very limited access to financial capital, SREs operate in informal markets across different regions in Lebanon. The study sheds light on different tactics and dynamics by which entrepreneurs avoid certain formal institutional pressures. The four adaptive mechanisms, namely dismissing, hiding, camouflaging, and informal partnering, help SREs to create ventures and secure their livelihoods. Clearly, not all SREs are performing well. While some business ventures are providing Syrian refugees with sustenance, these entrepreneurs are hoping the future will present their business with much improved legal and social conditions. Also, there is a group of SREs who are struggling because their businesses have not succeeded or are being closed down for various reasons. A few SREs felt more resilient through their ventures as they appreciate how much their lives have improved since they started their ventures, and they are aspiring to grow and improve their financial conditions.

Entrepreneuring in the informal economy does not correlate with protection, by default and when considering the definition of informal markets. However, it might provide accessible, affordable and socially inclusive opportunities for many to earn their livelihoods and integrate with the local community. If host communities keep on accepting SREs in their markets due to social values and norms, SREs might be able to sustain their livelihoods as they currently are. By delegitimizing these ventures, SREs might feel motivated (or forced) to transfer into formalizing their businesses in these communities. However, if the requirements are impossible to achieve for most SREs, refugees will end up closing their shops and returning to even worse financial and livelihood conditions.

In terms of agency, the report showcases 37 Syrian refugees who chose to take control of their livelihood and open business ventures. Yet, they differ on some characteristics, as discussed in the report. Notably, the highest degree of agency is reflected in those SREs who want to grow their businesses, and have resorted to camouflaging or informal partnering. On the other hand, SREs that chose to hide or dismiss the institutional challenges they faced tended to be more content with the status quo and did not mind staying confined in certain areas or neighborhoods, thereby securing another day, another dollar. In general, all SREs exercised agency within the confined spaces of the areas they are living in and running their businesses. However, outside these contexts, they were powerless because they still do not know when and what new legal and social enforcements will take place, and how these changes will affect their businesses and their individual legal status. Although most of the camouflage and partnership mechanisms relied on SREs’ personal networks and relationships, we do not know whether power will shift towards Lebanese partners and sponsors, and whether trust will be put to test between the two parties. In fact, some SREs who adopted hiding practices chose not to disguise their ventures behind Lebanese partners because they were afraid to be exploited at a later stage.
RECOMMENDATIONS

We should be careful not to glamorize Syrian refugee entrepreneurship, as some are still struggling and facing daily economic and psychological hardships. Instead of focusing on just the heroism and success of SREs, we should focus on the real-life experiences of various SREs and what we can do to foster their entrepreneurship in Lebanon (at least temporarily), and also if and when they return to Syria. In fact, some participants expressed how they plan to continue within the same line of business venture when they go back to Syria. By emphasizing the existence of and challenges associated with informal entrepreneurship of Syrian refugees, as well as their adaptive mechanisms, we hope to inform policymakers engaged in refugee entrepreneurship and institution-building.

Syrian refugee entrepreneurs are here to stay for now. What is fundamentally needed, is a new paradigm through which we can understand and embrace the semi-formality of SREs, a hybrid approach to embrace the local and the foreigner, the formal and informal, the small and the large, the host and the guest. I present herein some recommendations that are based on the study findings. Due to the case study methodology and exploratory approach of this research, these are ideas I believe worth discussing with stakeholders from various levels and vantage points, namely SREs, Lebanese entrepreneurs, Lebanese citizens of the host community, Lebanese neighbors, NGOs, INGOs, civil society actors, municipalities representatives, legal consultants, etc. Without macro-level support of institutional bodies and policy-makers, the discretion of the meso-level bodies, such as municipalities, in enforcing or forgoing some laws will result in unfair treatment of SREs. Effective coordination among stakeholders, and education of various stakeholders about SREs are the first two important steps.

There is a rising and recurrent confirmation in the political discourse today that Syrian refugees are ‘guests’ in Lebanon and would be better off going back to a nowadays safer Syria. Even with this current stance towards SREs, we can posit some recommendations that would help SREs to stay self-reliant and acquire some business and entrepreneurial experience that could be transferred back to Syria when they return. In fact, some NGOs are already exploring opportunities to provide entrepreneurial and financial assistance in Syria. However, regardless of the changes in laws and regulations concerning the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon and the status of their business ventures, we all have an ethical duty to protect Syrian refugees and provide a decent and fair process in all circumstances:

- Engaging in a multi-sectoral dialogue among all stakeholders including SREs and the host community within each municipality that hosts several Syrian refugees, while focusing on the positive impact of SREs on their communities. Informal discussions and interactions between actors could provide an impetus for a new conversation to legitimize the SRE work, before moving to new reforms to facilitate the regulatory environment and specifying short-term and long-term action plans. The dialogue should also focus on how to preserve the legitimacy of SREs and how they need to structure in particular ways, so they can achieve semblance to other legitimate entrepreneurial ventures in their contexts. It is worth noting that legitimate ventures do not have to be fully formal ventures, as many Lebanese businesses are operating informally in many regions of the country.

- Initiating large-scale studies to examine the number, scale and economic spillover of the SREs in different areas in Lebanon.

- Educating the stakeholders on other countries’ experiences of hosting SREs:

  - For example, since 2011, the capital that has been invested by SREs operating formally in Egypt amounts to approximately $800 million (ILO, United Nations Development Program [UNDP], & World Food Programme [WFP], 2016). Even informal SREs in Egypt have been reported to be creating job opportunities by hiring both Syrian and Egyptian workers, and in some cases Egyptian workers only. This has fostered an exchange of expertise between the local Egyptian force and the Syrian workers and has effectively increased Egypt’s exports. SREs have invested in sectors such as perfume production, textile, food and restaurants. Many Egyptians wear a brand of clothing with a tag that says, “Made in Egypt, with Syrian hands” (ILO, UNDP, & WFP, 2016).
In addition, Egyptian authorities are creating a framework that would make Syrians’ educational and professional documents recognizable under the country’s law.

- Studying the positive and negative impact of SREs on the business activities of Lebanese business owners.

- Proposing new guidelines to facilitate the legal residence documentation of SREs, then introducing a realistic gradual plan to facilitate the registration of SRE businesses for those who wish. The government needs to work with the informal sector – not against it. In general, SREs who want to register their businesses are more growth-oriented, which can have a positive economic impact on the host community. The new framework should also tackle the formalization of Lebanese informal entrepreneurs paralleling the two different procedures for Lebanese entrepreneurs and Syrian entrepreneurs.

- Drafting realistic requirements that could also encourage some SREs who wish to grow their business in Lebanon to formalize the business, while protecting those who do not or cannot transition to other alternatives to secure livelihoods.

- Encouraging municipalities and other governmental actors to treat SREs who are forced to close their business with decency and justice.

- Delineating certain requirements for SRE businesses that are able to register for a certain limited commercial registry, as to formalize its establishment but also restrict its activities. Several degrees could be introduced for Syrian businesses based on the size and contribution to Lebanese employment and public revenues.

- Encouraging formal, fair, and voluntary Lebanese-Syrian business partnerships. Policy-makers could provide incentives and lower restrictions to Lebanese-Syrian businesses over Syrian-only businesses, as long as both parties have equal and fair rights in the Lebanese judicial system in case of conflict.

- Fostering training and assistance to SREs. We applaud the efforts of many NGOs and INGOs that are providing business training, financial grants, and microloans to train and support SRE businesses. SPARK and Jusoor have also focused on Syrian refugee startups and young business ideas that have the potential to be scaled up. We should encourage more entrepreneurial training programs, including coupling grants and microloans with some business training and workshops.

- Encouraging NGOs and local organizations to create entrepreneurship education and to facilitate opportunities through training that are specifically tailored to relatively more mature or older people (above 30-years old) who have a good amount of knowledge and experience, and need the vocational and financial support to implement their ideas.
REFERENCES


ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Refugee Research and Policy Program

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

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

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- Enhancing and broadening public policy-related debate and knowledge production in the Arab world and beyond;

- Better understanding the Arab world within shifting international and global contexts;

- Providing a space to enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in and about the Arab world;

- Disseminating knowledge that is accessible to policy-makers, media, research communities and the general public.