

LOST

While the world has focused much attention and millions of dollars on providing food and physical supplies to millions of refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria, award-winning foreign correspondent Janine di Giovanni travelled to Lebanon where she found that one of the most urgent needs of refugees is

information

“ People are being misled that they will find paradise when they leave — then they see that they have nowhere to go, and no one wants them. They must be informed before they go about what life will be like, as a refugee. ”

— SYRIAN REFUGEE



A woman walks outside a stretch of tents in Arssal, Northern Lebanon, in a camp set up for refugees who have fled Syria.

Syrian refugees, particularly those from the Damascus area, have fled to camps and unofficial settlements in Northern Lebanon.



When we arrived at the UN's Beirut refugee registration centre on a hot autumn day, hundreds of people had been waiting under an unrelenting sun for hours – there were mothers with newborn babies, children, and elderly. The NGO War Child has installed a small playground nearby, but it was gated shut, and there were no children inside playing. The men stood patiently in line waiting to be registered. If I could define one emotion that seemed universal amongst the people we met that day, it seemed to be: baffled.

One man waiting in line was a 21-year-old Syrian from Damascus, a university graduate who once worked at one of Damascus' best hotels as a customer service representative before he fled the war. He had been waiting for hours, clutching his dossier of papers, before being told he was not eligible for refugee aid.

Speaking broken English – pleasant and mannerly despite his palpable frustration – he declined to give his name for fear of reprisals, but agreed to be interviewed. He told us he had travelled all the way from Tripoli, northern Lebanon (a three hour journey by car) because he was told in Tripoli to report to Beirut. Here in Beirut, he had just been told to go back to Tripoli to register, because his parents were Palestinian – even though he was born in Syria – he would not be eligible for benefits from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

He had come here with three other friends – all Palestinians who had been born in Syria to Palestinian parents. "I think

of myself as Syrian," he said. "I went to Syrian university and my friends are Syrian. Yet I am not considered a Syrian refugee." They had been told to go to UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees). But UNRWA, he complained, had told him to go to Beirut and UNHCR in the first place. He tried to argue his case: it was senseless. He left the line, defeated. The journey had been expensive. Worse, he was going back to a tent in Tripoli with no more knowledge than when he set out at dawn that morning.

"There is a complete lack of information," he said. "I wasted days trying to register, now it looks like I cannot. This kind of experience makes you want to give up."

Others waiting in line were not sure what they would be offered once they had registered. The less well off – from rural areas – were simply confused about what they were doing there at all. They said they came because neighbors advised them to. Most of them said they had come to the registration center because they thought UNHCR could help them get to another country. One man actually said he left Syria expecting to "go straight to the German Embassy, and they would put me in a hotel. I was very misled ... neighbours told me I could go to Germany if I got to Lebanon." These were stories we were to hear repeated many times during the week spent interviewing refugees across the country.

The more educated amongst those we spoke to complained they needed a clear website to give them instructions about what to do once they arrived in a host country. "We need to know where we should go, how we get our kids in school, how to apply for citizenship, and if there is a chance to get out of this country, to Europe," one man explained. One young man from Homs said, "Before I left Syria, there was virtually NO information about what I could expect when I arrived." From word of mouth he had heard to go to UNHCR, but even waiting at the center, he said, "The Lebanese authorities seem to make it harder – they give no information at all. People have high expectations that they can leave the country and go to Europe. Then they get here and [only then] they see reality."

The main source of information for the more educated people at the centers seemed to be Facebook and Al Arabiya TV. Checking websites of various embassies did not give them a clear picture of whether or not they would be able to go to another country. "Embassy web pages are not the most user-friendly. There should be a general site to advise people of their rights, where we can

ARSSAL, NORTHERN LEBANON



A view of the tent camp set up outside of Arssal in northern Lebanon, which borders Syria. These tents were set up by a main mosque on a hillside to accommodate the increasing number of Syrian refugees fleeing across the border.



Children play and take care of one another outside their tent homes.



Women prepare tea in a communal kitchen built near the tents. There is often no electricity or running water where these families have taken refuge.

go, what countries really will take us, or if we have to stay in Lebanon. We need the most useful information – with clarity."

Once the refugees are registered at the UNHCR center, counselors tell them that they are eligible for food vouchers or food packages – the latter usually reserved for the most vulnerable and newly arrived. According to a Senior Program Assistant at WFP, the food program is using SMS with some success to alert beneficiaries when they are handing out vouchers. "Occasionally we do it by word of mouth, through local agencies and community leaders," she says. "Friday prayers seem to be the best way to reach people."

The unregistered, however, have to rely on either the community leaders to communicate when food will be distributed; or through leaflets or posters, if they can read. "Unless they are newcomers, [the unregistered] are not our target audience." The next steps will be to introduce a system of card vouchers similar to debit cards, with which beneficiaries can go to shops and buy food. This, however, also poses a challenge "It's difficult to teach them to use them. Some of them have never seen a card," said the Program Assistant.

There are 13 distribution centers around Beirut alone – in the entire country there are nearly 90. The Beirut registration centre, with its tangible air of needy confusion, and the endless snaking line of hot, weary and frustrated refugees is just one of many where millions of Syrians find themselves struggling to make sense of their new lives in exile. It also sums up one of the most challenging and frequently underestimated aspects of humanitarian response: meeting the refugees need for information.

There are no official refugee camps for Syrians in Lebanon. "This is because there are still reminders of the Palestinian refugee crisis," said one Syrian analyst. "And the effect that had on the society." Knowing they are not wanted, the Syrians go to either host families, fields, migrant camps, unofficial settlements, or even parking garages. There are an estimated 1,300 unofficial refugee settlements throughout Lebanon.

Ironically, the site where we started our first day of research has a dark history in the annals of international refugee lore. Thirty one years ago, in September 1982, an estimated 800 mainly Palestinian refugees were slaughtered, raped and maimed in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Southern Beirut by Lebanese Christian militias, an episode that has left a bloody stain on Lebanese

1,300

The estimated number of unofficial Syrian refugee settlements throughout Lebanon.

13

Number of distribution centers around Beirut alone. There are nearly 90 in Lebanon.

19,000

Estimated number of refugees housed in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps in Southern Beirut before the Syrian crisis.

4K-5K

Estimated number of people to whom Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF) in Lebanon has attempted to distribute non-food items such as blankets and cooking sets (nearly 1,000 families) in Shatila camp alone.

history. The camps, located in a suburb of Southern Beirut, are extremely high density. Before the Syrian crisis, they already housed an estimated total of 19,000 refugees. Syrians have come here out of desperation, perhaps because they heard there was a Syrian community being established here. There are no official figures of how many Syrian refugees are here as so many – most that we talked to – remain unregistered.

The camps are still miserable places: muddy streets and barefoot children. Women are covered with traditional hijab and Arabic is the lingua franca. Vegetable sellers hawk onions, potatoes, tomatoes – the fresh food is available, and it is cheaper than downtown Beirut prices – but these refugees don't have money to buy it. The camps are a maze of dark alleys. People live in old concrete buildings where extra floors have been added to house new arrivals; the half-finished buildings, especially the exposed stairways leading to the apartments are hazardous for children, the elderly and the disabled. Most apartments are without electricity and some do not have running water. Bare electrical wires are strung cross the narrow alleys, stealing electricity from main sockets. There are many stories of people accidentally electrocuting themselves.

Reaching Sabra and Shatila early in the morning, we met our contact. A local Syrian, who had fled the fighting the year before, he had persuaded people it would be safe to answer our questions about their information needs and sources. We visited several families, one family leading us to another, and so on, so that we managed to cover a lot of ground in both camps. Most of the homes were scantily furnished – a mattress on the floor, a few plastic jugs of water to tide over the family for the day. There was a general sense of desolation and desperation. As we entered the room, the refugees mistook us for NGO workers and began to excitedly question us about where they could go to get help. The men spoke to us while the women sheltered in separate rooms or brought us coffee. Thanks to our guide, who was a local, people were trusting: friendly, and no matter how poor, they always insisted on offering coffee or soda, as is the Syrian style of warmth and hospitality. Even so, the conversations were shadowed by the paranoia of life inside Syria under four decades of dictatorship. In villages inside Syria, there are some older residents who are afraid to even whisper the Assad name for fear or repercussion. The refugees bring with them a legacy of fear that makes them distrustful of any information from outside sources be-

yond family and friends. This same legacy is also a major obstacle to their access to humanitarian aid.

Most of those we interviewed are not registered with UNHCR. They fear that by handing over their personal data, they will expose themselves, and potentially their family back in Syria, to unwanted dangers from Assad's Ba'athist regime. "I was afraid there, why would I not be afraid here?" one man told me. "Hezbollah monitors everything." The sad truth is that this is not an altogether unrealistic assumption: it's no secret that Hezbollah operatives are active inside Syria on the side of the Assad government regime



A UN official later confirmed that while they did not give beneficiaries' private information to the Lebanese authorities, if they were asked to – she would have to comply.

The reluctance of many refugees to register with the UN system has immediate and potentially life-threatening repercussions. Not only are they on their own in sourcing basic provisions for survival, but they complain of a crippling lack of information in general. Nearly all the interviewees in both camps showed a surprising lack of interest in political news, saying: "We don't really care about news – we just need to find out how to live here." Their most immedi-

ate need is for information on everyday life: shelter, food, water, doctors for their children and information about schooling.

Khalid, 37, is the head of a household in the Sabra camp. We sat inside his home on the fourth floor of a concrete building – on a mattress, surrounded by his children. He was from the countryside near Homs, and he had fled the war, like all the rest because it was no longer viable to raise a family there. He had not registered and he was not going to. To make telephone calls, he had to borrow my phone – so high is the Lebanese tariff. His fears about being so cut off from any kind of assistance – for example, what

A view of a street in the camp of Shatila in Beirut. In recent months, spillover from the Syrian war has caused Shatila to absorb thousands of people fleeing the violence. Many of the arrivals are Palestinians from Yarmouk camp, located near Damascus in Syria.



Fatima Kharwutli, seated next to her father, displays damaged family documents that were saved from a fire that broke out in their apartment last week in the Shatila camp. The Kharwutli family are Syrians from Idlib province but fled the violence to Lebanon. Working as a painter, Mr. Kharwutli is barely able to sustain his family of eight people.

happens when his children get sick? – were amplified by his isolation.

Khaled, like so many others we spoke to, appealed to us foreigners to help them get out of this situation and “to go to Sweden.” As news sources inside the country are notoriously polarized and political, families trying to make the painful decision to leave their homes and flee across the border have no reliable sources of information to guide them. Rumour and half-truths abound. It appears that a recent news program (tellingly, no can say for sure which one) was aired inside Syria, reporting that 17 countries were open to welcoming Syrian refugees. The news was seized upon and spread rapidly on the street, sparking a wildfire of unrealistic hopes along the grapevine just as fast as it spiraled into inaccuracy. We learned that many refugees had crossed the border expecting that their first port of call when arriving in Lebanon would be the Swedish Embassy to request their visa. Others said they had though the Swedish or Germans would give them plane tickets to relocate their families.

Virtually none of the families we spoke to had radios. Unlike large-scale refugee situa-

tions in many other parts of the world, radios are conspicuous by their absence. Television has always been the preferred source of information in Syrian life – although it appears that mainly the women use TVs (where they can be found) and then only to watch soap operas or comedy programs. Some men told us that if they were home they watched TV in the evenings, tuning in mainly to Al Jazeera and Al-Arabiya. No one watched the Syrian TV stations; nor did they want to learn news of Syrian political updates – they cared more about the everyday lives of their relatives inside: “Are the crops growing?” “Who is taking care of the animals?”

To feed their hunger for local information about their situation in Lebanon and also in their home places, the vast majority of refugees rely on mobile phones and SMS. While cell phones are reliable and easily accessed however, call charges in inside Lebanon are prohibitive for the Syrians. Most rely heavily on SMS. Whatsapp is a godsend; the ubiquitous app of choice for cheap talk about the many small precious things that keep families connected, hoping, surviving.

UN agencies and NGOs alike know that the efficiency and effectiveness of their aid



programs rely to a large extent on their ability to communicate with refugees. “Mass information is one of our biggest challenges,” said Joelle Eid from UNHCR, admitting that reaching the mass of unregistered refugees in Lebanon is a priority. With Syrians dispersed in 1,300 locations throughout Lebanon, getting vital information to them about food distribution, health care and schooling is a monumental task. Yet most aid providers have apparently not yet invested significantly in accessible and cheap mobile or SMS systems that would enable them not only to reach, but also actively exchange information with the millions of displaced on the familiar and preferred mobile phone platforms that refugees already use regularly on a daily basis.

UNHCR and UNICEF have old-school “hotlines” that can connect refugees to information call centres. Refugees are given the hotline number when they register, and the lines do receive up to several thousand calls a day. Many people we spoke to, as they are not registered, are unaware of the existence of the lines. Besides, they are not free. With charges by the minute, many refugees worried they would be put “on hold” once they reached the hotline. Most people

questioned echoed 37-year-old Khaïd who says: “I would not use one. Too expensive.”

UNHCR and other NGOs also offer “counseling desks” at distribution centers. Here, staff are available to answer questions from newcomers; however, those who do not register would not approach a counseling center, or a distribution point. In general, UN and other aid agencies still rely heavily on old-school “local focal points” and partners on the ground. Leaflets are also distributed – but as many of the refugees interviewed cannot read or write, this is of questionable value. An informal survey by UNHCR earlier this year confirmed the best way – and certainly the most trusted way – to reach refugees was “word of mouth.”

As Joelle Eid rightly points out: “Not all refugees have radios or the luxury of sitting in front of their TVs.” This observation resonated during our travels, during which we saw so few radios and so many dead televisions. “We need to convey messages, because some refugees arrive and don’t even know what UNHCR is. Some have been in Lebanon for months before they even hear about registering with us. They eventually settle down in areas, and then they ask

A boy walks past the ubiquitous calls for Palestinian statehood in the Shatila camp. Thousands of Palestinians from Syria and Syrians have fled the fighting in recent months, most notably around Damascus. Many have sought refuge in the Shatila Palestinian camp in particular because of its low rental costs. However, most eke out a living scraping by with a small fee given by UNRWA and other odd jobs the men are able to find in the camp. Often, several families must share rooms that are cold and damp during the winter.



Children play near a damaged building in Bab Tabane, a neighborhood in Tripoli, Lebanon. Bab Tabane is intersected by Syria Street, an area that has seen pitched gun battles over the past several months between Sunnis and Alawis. Snipers sometimes fire randomly from the Alawi side, which is located on slopes in front of this building.

around – usually relatives, or locals will tell them where to go.”

In some ways, Tanak Camp (Tripoli, northern Lebanon) might be the most “luxurious” site of all the places we visited – on the other hand, it is also a place of grave desperation. Tripoli is a politically sensitive area where fighting between Sunni and local Shias frequently breaks out. People don’t feel safe. They worry about the war spilling over the border. They worry that they will be attacked by Shias, or by Hezbollah. There have also been car-bombing incidents in the past few weeks. There is an edgy, nervous feel to the area, with currently 215,000 registered refugees in the Tripoli and Qubayat region, and an additional 13,000 waiting for their registration papers.

Mud tracks lead off the main road near the sea in Tripoli to what looks like a waste dump. But suddenly, out of brush and trash, a settlement appears. The houses are one or two rooms, corrugated roofs, apparently pre-fabricated. Some of the houses have running water. Toilets are holes in ground. Some have electricity, but not all. Many of the Syrian families have oddly brought their television sets, but they did not have power in their huts. So the sets sat idle, looking out of place.

The winter is going to be painful. Most of the people we spoke to here fled from rural areas – near Homs or nearby villages, some from Hama area, nearly all were unable to read or write. Some people came from the towns of Bayda and Baniyas – scenes of horrific killing earlier in 2013 by Syrian government forces. Most of them were women. Their men – though they did not want to say this – were back in Syria, still fighting, or dead.

In the case of one woman, who became our guide, a 34-year-old feisty yet illiterate woman whose name we’ll withhold: her husband was killed in the fighting, leaving her widowed with six children. It became clear to us that she was a major source of information exchange between the refugees and the aid agencies: the chosen person that the other refugees trusted to take their problems to the “authorities.” She appeared to have been handed this role on account of being more aggressive and less reserved than the other women, more street smart. And yet, as one family pointed out, this creates a system of imbalance – if our guide did not choose to pass on the problems of one family or another, when she sought out UNICEF or local NGOS, she did not have to. Families in the camp were entirely in her power

when it came to expressing their needs.

We left to visit a UNHCR registration center a few miles away from the informal settlement. This was a more congenial atmosphere than the Beirut registration center. Refugees appeared to be better dressed, more educated, with an innate sense of resilience, or resourcefulness amongst them. Some came from cities such as Damascus or Kalamoun, and others from villages and countryside. They waited patiently and said the wait was not long – less than two hours at the maximum.

“Most of them do know the name of a relative or a place where they can go once they cross the border,” said Daniela Raiman, Senior Field Coordinator for UNHCR in Tripoli. Most of that information, Raiman says, is gleaned by word of mouth while they are still inside Syria. These were clearly the fortunate: those in possession of slightly better information than millions of others.

Most of the Syrian refugees are settled in the Bekaa valley – an estimated registered 223,000 plus 41,000 waiting to be registered. Near the Chtaura crossing point, where nearly 1,000 people cross a day – people have even set up tents not far from the border posts. Passing the green, green fields of Bekaa, you see blotches of color. “You think they are flowers,” says Soha Boustani for UNICEF. “Then you realize they are children.” Indeed, Syrian refugee children are being used for cheap manual labor – up to 16 hours a day, working double shifts, for about eight US dollars a day. When I later interviewed some of these children, they said they all wanted to go to school, but were unable to as they needed to earn money to keep the family going. Again, there was a notable absence of men. “Where is your father?” (shrug). Then someone would whisper: “He is back in Damascus/Homs/Hama fighting, but please don’t say that. They are scared.”

Near the border, several people stopped us, mistaking us for UN officials: “Is it true that 17 European countries are taking Syrian refugees?” they asked. It had become almost comical how this sliver of wrong information had been so widely misinterpreted – and how dramatically sad the reality is. Again I was struck by the absence of radio: it’s clear that the news that comes here is filtered down in an unreliable skein of rumour. When I asked about radios, I got blank stares. The youngsters seemed more tech savvy, shrugging off my question, saying they prefer Facebook and YouTube. Yet there were no computers in sight. At Layan camp,

the latest “word of mouth gossip” news is that the worst winter on record is coming. This information is passed from a local newspaper, which someone got their hands on, and has been circulating through the camp, causing deep concern. People are living in tents here, with one dirty lavatory for men, one for women, in a tin hut. Children urinate on the floor – women waited patiently for their turn to wash, to use the facilities. Compared to some camps, they are lucky – at least they have a toilet, but when winter comes, these settlements will be harsh.

Here, too most people have cell phones, and communicate regularly with relatives inside Syria about their situations, although they never speak about politics – too risky. Again, WhatsApp appears to be the main form of cell phone use. Most people have Lebanese SIM cards, but in the Western Bekaa, some people are still able to use their Syrian networks, which are cheaper.

I sat with a former labourer, who had lived in New Jersey and spoke broken English. His home was a tent, dark and furnished with mattresses, low chairs and some objects brought from Syria. He proudly pulled out the address of his relative in the USA, and asked if I could get him papers to return there. He was teaching his young wife and his small children English. He had no plans for the coming months; he said he was “Waiting for someone to come and help us.”

A local political party, FUTURE, affiliated with the Sunni leader Saad Hariri (son of assassinated leader Rafic Hariri) is working to distribute warm clothing, bedding and food to the refugees. Their staff say the best way to communicate with the people is “face-to-face interviews,” but they admit they have a political agenda. With surprising frankness, Khalid Saleh from FUTURE told us “Assad is responsible for killing our last President. We have common interests with the Syrian revolution.”

One educated refugee put it this way: “I think people should be told WHILE they are STILL inside Syria that they should stay. They might be in a war zone, but they will be better off than coming to Lebanon, where their chances of getting to another country are pretty non-existent. And the life as a refugee here is hard.

“Social services inside Syria, for the poor, are actually working better than they are here. People are being misled that they will find paradise when they leave – then they see that they have nowhere to go, and no one wants them. They must be informed before they go about what life will be like, as a refugee.”

223K

Estimated number of Syrian refugees registered in the Bekaa valley, which doesn’t include the 41,000 waiting to be registered.

\$8

The pay (in USD) Syrian refugee children earn for up to 16 hours of manual labor per day.

17

The number of European countries many Syrian refugees mistakenly believe are accepting Syrian refugees.

1/3

Proportion of Syrian refugees who are in official refugee camps, according to Khalid Saleh of FUTURE.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR



The research contained in this report was led and coordinated by award-winning foreign correspondent Janine di Giovanni. Janine is a contributing editor to *Vanity Fair*, a contributing writer to the *New York Times*, *Granta*, *Newsweek* and many others, and a weekly columnist on international affairs for *Newsweek*. A member of the Council on Foreign Relations, she frequently lectures on human rights abuse around the world. A version of this article appears on *Syria Deeply*: <http://beta.syriadeeply.org/op-eds/lost>. Janine's research team included Marianne Nari Fisher, Ali Shajrawi, Kinan Madi, Abodi Nova, and Aleksii Tzatzev.

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ABOUT INTERNEWS

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