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# Syrian Refugees in Palestinian Refugee Camps and Informal Settlements in Beirut, Lebanon

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## Abstract

Informal spaces often develop on the periphery of cities as a result of the arrival of rural migrants, national and international workers, refugees and others. In Lebanon during the 1950s, Palestinian refugees arrived and settled in tent camps, which were originally created in 1948 for temporary use. 69 years later, they are still considered refugees and still in these “temporary camps”, which have transformed into informal concrete slums. The number of Palestinians exceeds 500,000 in a Lebanese population of less than 4.5 million. The Syrian conflict has added a further one million Syrian refugees who, for security, as well as political and economic reasons, found themselves searching for shelter; they had no choice but to go to the existing overcrowded Palestinian camps or other dense poor neighborhoods, mostly in Beirut City, the capital city of Lebanon.

This paper analyzes the transitional settlement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, examining two distinct elements in the Beirut urban fabric: the Burj El-Barajne Palestinian refugee camp and Naba Neighborhood, one of the informal urban areas. The cross comparison highlights the typology of housing, the use of space, the health situation and the challenges faced by new arrivals. It also evaluates the population transformation, the integration of refugees in the wider social structure of the host community and their incorporation in the labor market and local economy.

Based on existing studies and first-hand materials gathered through interviewing residents while visiting both case-studies, this paper highlights current living conditions and provides recommendations for healthier and more sustainable urban environments. We also consider urban integration strategies to ensure refugee social and economic participation. The paper contributes towards improving outcomes for refugees and providing practical knowledge for humanitarian organizations, in Beirut or in similar urban refugee contexts.

## Introduction

In recent decades, many countries around the world, developed and developing ones alike, have been facing a major challenge. The issue of mass migration is a key feature of contemporary global society; the various movements of rural migrants, national and international workers and of course, refugees, presents a fundamental political challenge for many countries.

Lebanon is a developing country with a long history of immigration. It is one of the countries facing the issue of internal and international migration and mass influxes of refugees. Even though its geographical area is small (10,452 km<sup>2</sup>), Lebanon has attracted temporary workers and refugees of different nationalities for almost a century (MPC, 2013). The influx of economic migrants and refugees caused the creation of many of the ‘informal settlements’ found within the suburbs of Lebanese cities.



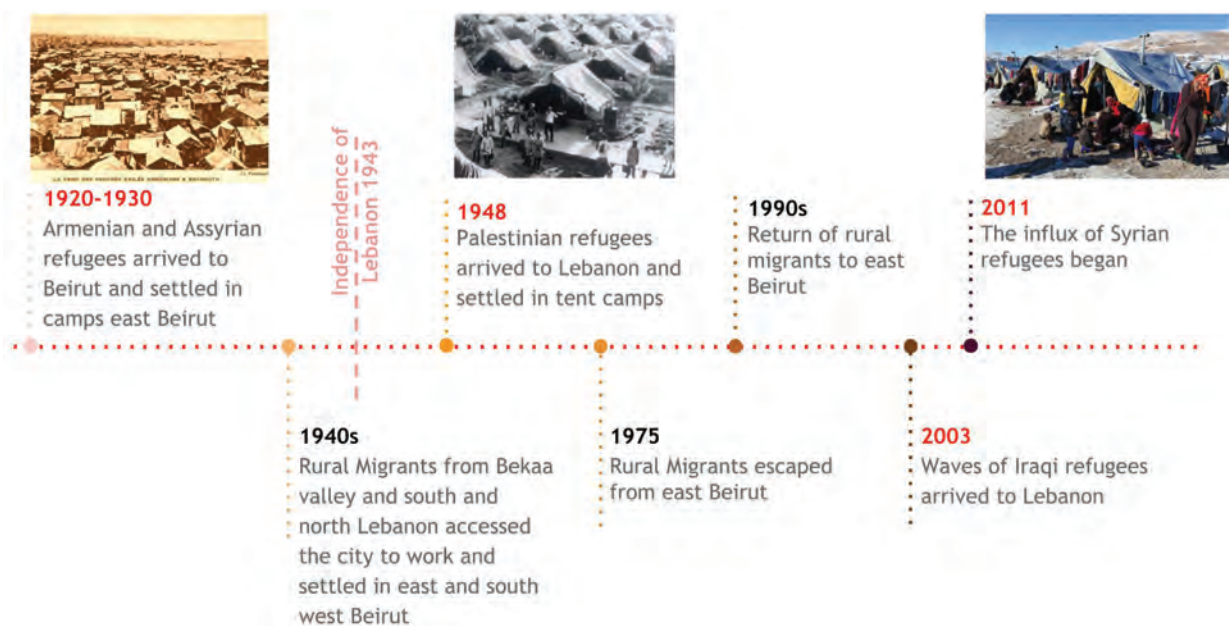


Fig. 1)  
History of migration to and within Lebanon. Developed by authors

Lebanon hosts large numbers of refugees and asylum seekers, especially Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi people, who today form a big part of the Lebanese population. Lebanon is one of three countries, together with Turkey and Jordan, which has been heavily affected by the arrival of forced migrants fleeing Syria (MPC, 2013). It is the second biggest refugee-hosting country of Syrians after Turkey (UNHCR, 2017).

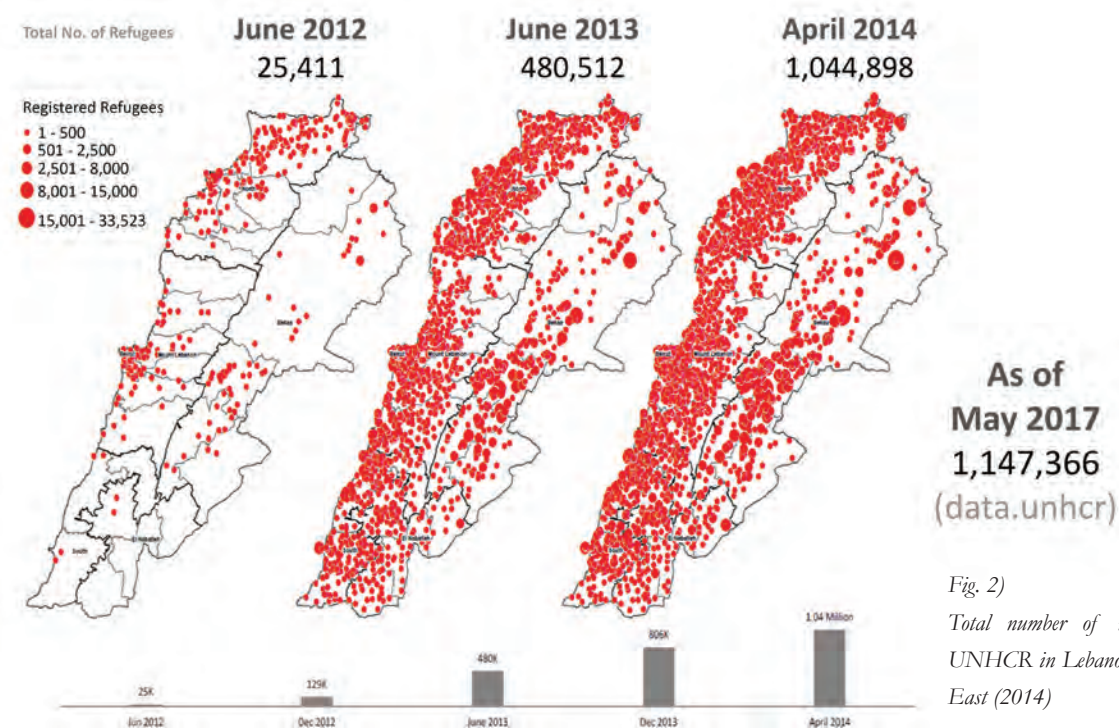


Fig. 2)  
Total number of registered Syrian Refugees with UNHCR in Lebanon since 2012. Source: Eye on the East (2014)

Within the total Lebanese population of 6 million, there are over 1 million Syrians, around half a million Palestinians and over 0.1 million other Arabs and Asians (UNRWA; MPC, 2013). Today, one in four people in Lebanon is a refugee and/or international migrant, with the majority of them located in the suburbs of the main cities of Lebanon: Tripoli, Saida and the capital Beirut, the most populated of all.

The modern urban history of Beirut was marked by high population density in informal areas, totalling about 53% of the city (World Bank, 2015). During the 1940s and 1950s, the growth of informal settlements in Beirut spread into the

eastern and southwestern parts to form new suburbs such as Nabaa, Rouweyssat, Az-Zaaytriyeh, Hay Sellom, Raml, and Ouzai (Fawaz & Peillen, 2003). These informal settlements were also accompanied by the creation of four refugee camps for Palestinians post-1948, Mar Elias, Shatila, Sabra and Burj El-Barajneh. These camps all started as tent camps before being gradually transformed into the informal concrete slums found today (MPC, 2013).

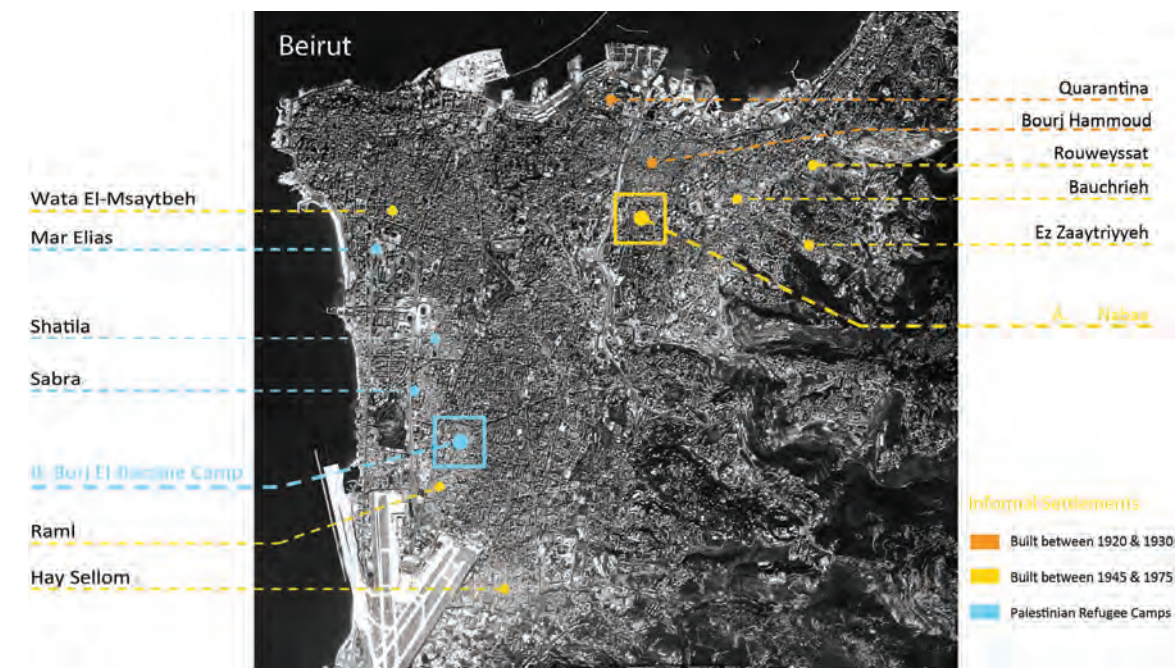


Fig. 3)  
Informal settlements and refugee camps in Greater Beirut. Based on report by Fawaz & Peillen, 2003

Today, Beirut hosts around 280,000 Syrian refugees (UNHCR, 2017) who are mostly living in poor areas where rent prices are affordable; they found refuge in informal settlements and already existing Palestinian refugee camps. This paper analyzes the transformation phases of two neighborhoods in the Beirut urban fabric: the Nabaa neighborhood, one of the oldest informal urban areas; and the Burj El-Barajneh Palestinian refugee camp. The choice of case studies is based on the concentration of Syrian refugees, which is high in contrast with other similar neighborhoods. The paper compares the current situation of each case following the transitional settlement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Moreover, the cross comparison highlights the typology of housing, the use of space, the health situation and the challenges faced by new arrivals. It also evaluates the population transformation, the urban integration of refugees in the wider social structure of the host community and their incorporation in the labor market and local economy. Based on existing studies and first-hand materials, this paper highlights the living conditions in each of the two cases and provides recommendations for integration and healthier, more sustainable urban environments. At the same time, it explains how the 'bad' political decisions of the Lebanese government have resulted in the creation of the informal settlements and camps as well as resulting in worsening the living conditions within them.

According to Al-Husban and Adams in their 2016 article 'Sustainable Refugee Migration: A Rethink towards a Positive Capability Approach', the refugee migrant "issue" is often heavily political, while the mass migration by refugee migrants is invariably seen as a short-term "problem" that will consume resources and generally have a negative impact on the hosting communities. In the case of Lebanon, the continuous ignorance about the migrant/refugee "issue" is a core problem which, even still, impacts Lebanese infrastructure, society and economy, particularly in Beirut. Instead of viewing the refugee population as a burden, perhaps, the government could think of the large numbers of refugees as a valuable, productive part of the population, who could be a benefit to the country and economy.



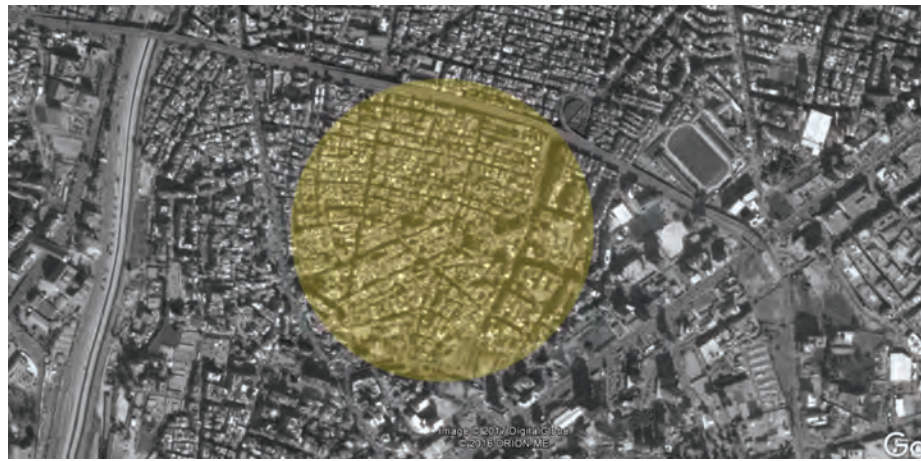


Fig. 4)  
The area of Nabaa neighborhood

### Nabaa Neighborhood

Nabaa is a small neighborhood with an approximate surface of 0.19 km<sup>2</sup> (UN-Habitat, 2017). It is located east of Beirut, in the region of Bourj Hammoud, which has been the shelter for Armenian refugees since 1920. In the 1940s, the city observed rapid economic development due to industrialization. Impoverished rural migrants from the Bekaa valley and southern and northern Lebanon chose the eastern suburbs of Beirut due to the many employment opportunities in factories and workshops there (Fawaz, 2009). In addition, since the beginning of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Nabaa has become one of the most accessible refuges for the Syrian refugees that arrived in waves to Beirut. During the Lebanese civil war phase (1975-1990), after an increase in religious discrimination in Beirut, most of the residents were evicted to other parts of the country. They were then replaced by displaced people who escaped from other Lebanese cities due to conflict; after the end of the war, original residents were able to recover and move back into their properties in Nabaa (Fawaz & Peillen, 2003). The proximity to main neighborhoods, the easy access to Beirut, and the affordability of rentals made the neighborhood a focal point for Lebanese citizens, and foreigners, who came to the city to work in construction and infrastructure projects implemented after the war. The congestion of the neighborhood and the needs of the residents have resulted in the transformation of the majority of ground floor apartments to small sized shops and workshops.

Fig. 5)  
One of the streets in Nabaa



Since 1993, the neighborhood has presented a unique diversity of demographic mixture. Until the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011, the population was distributed between low-income Lebanese families (including Armenian people who today are Lebanese citizens), and migrant workers from Syria, Iraq, and Africa (UN-Habitat, 2017).

The average population before 2011 can be estimated at 11,000 and the density at 58,000 people/km<sup>2</sup>, and recently the population increased to 14,760 persons living at a very high density of 78,000 people/km<sup>2</sup> (UN-Habitat, 2017). Today, the number of Syrian refugees is 9374 persons living in 1624 apartments in Nabaa at a residential count of 5.3 people/residential unit. Otherwise, Lebanese people are living at an average density of 3.5 people/residential unit (UN-Habitat, 2017). If we look deeper into these numbers, it appears that a minimum of 5684 people, mainly Lebanese, left the neighborhood during the last 6 years. Those people were replaced by 9374 new arrivals (3690 more people).

### Social Issues

The different nationalities and religions in the neighborhood have enriched the population diversity and added new churches and mosques (Mar Doumit Church, Farhat Mosque, etc.) Otherwise, the available social services in the district are not able to fulfill the needs of the residents. Only 5 health-care centers are present but are under pressure due to the high population density; people basically rely on private hospitals out of the neighborhood as well as Beirut Governmental Hospital in Jnah due to their affordability (ACTED, 2015).

During fieldwork undertaken in Nabaa, we observed high levels of educational absenteeism. The majority of Syrian children are not registered in schools (Assaad, 2016). This high rate is because of the difficulty in finding a vacancy in public schools (there are only 3 in Bourj Hammoud), the unaffordable prices at private schools (5 in Bourj Hammoud), and the involvement of children in work in order to help support their families (UN-Habitat, 2017). The need for education encouraged some social development centers to give free lessons and courses for illiterate children. The programs also include resettlement courses for students coming from Syrian schools in order to integrate them into the Lebanese education program.

Fig. 6)  
In Nabaa, children play in streets due to the lack of public space and formal playgrounds.





## Physical-Spatial Issues

With reference to UN-Habitat's report which was published in 2017, Nabaa contains 765 multi-level buildings that have 3 to 4 floors each. It is composed of nearly 3,000 residential units.

The year 1961 was the first time when building permits became mandatory (Verdeil, 2002). Until the civil war in 1975, in various locations the building code

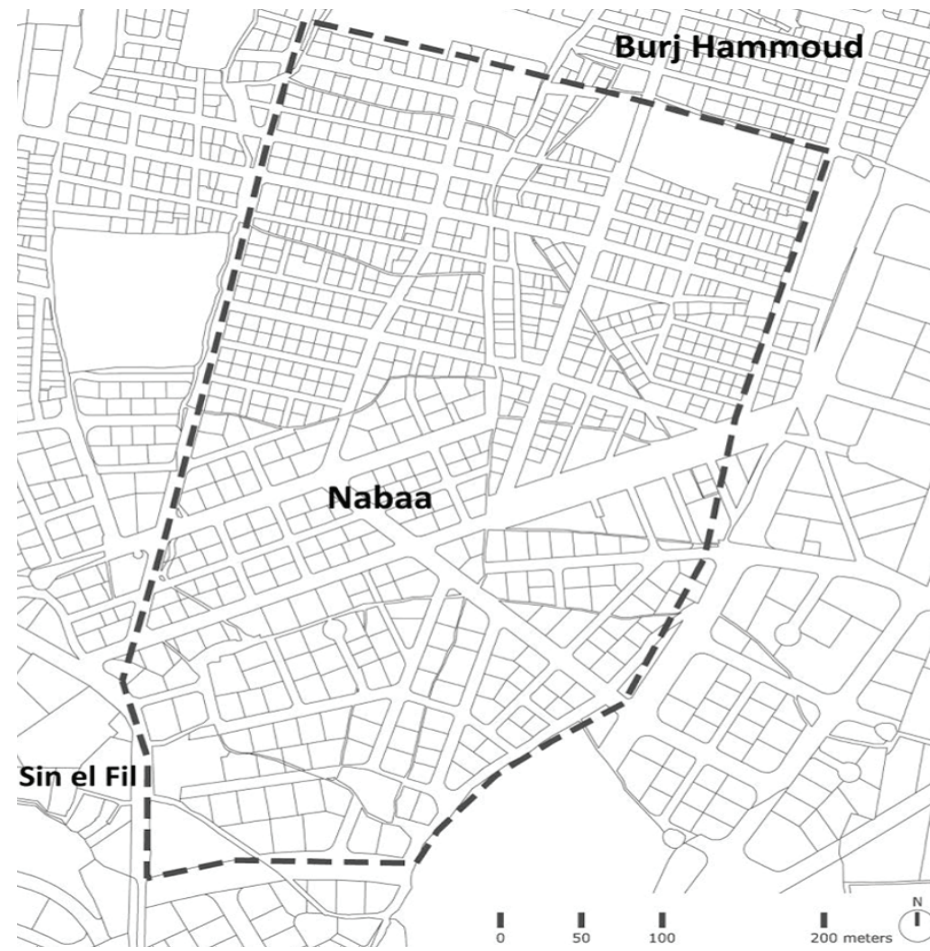


Fig. 7)  
The outline of Nabaa neighborhood.  
Map developed by authors

and urban regulations were bypassed to provide dwellings for newly arriving migrants. The footprints of buildings reveal the chaotic planning and disregard for the building code and urban regulations. Buildings generally follow the shape of the lot, sometimes with a small inner patio for lighting, usually with no setback between buildings, or are away from roads, which is affecting the natural lighting and ventilation inside buildings. Also, because of the building density, there is a huge lack of open public space, gardens and playgrounds.

## Apartment typology

Nabaa today mostly contains one to two bedroom apartments, with some exceptions of three-bedroom apartments. After the return of rural migrants to Nabaa in the early 1990s, the high demand on housing encouraged landlords to add floors and subdivide the majority of the 2 and 3 room apartments to multiple single-room units and to add kitchens and bathrooms (UNHCR; UN-Habitat, 2014). The most common prototypes are:

- The one-room apartment which contains, other than the multifunctional room, a small bathroom and a kitchen. It's usually occupied by 4-5 persons and its average area is 20 m<sup>2</sup>.
- The two-room apartment which contains 2 rooms and the service area. The first room is a bedroom, usually connected to a kitchen and serviced by a bathroom and the second is a family room. This type is mostly occupied by a family with 4 to 6 kids.

## Basic urban services

After the end of the Lebanese civil war in 1990, the general situation of Nabaa neighborhood has deteriorated due to its marginalization by the municipality of Bourj Hammoud and the Lebanese government, with no attempt made to improve infrastructure or provide basic services. The situation has been exacerbated by the additional Syrian refugees who have arrived to the neighborhood since 2011, whose numbers continue to grow.



Figure 8: The current conditions of streets, sidewalks and buildings in Nabaa.

The existing wastewater network has become overloaded by the population growth. Potable water and electricity (which are provided by the government) experience extended shortages, residents must therefore rely on private suppliers, who provide water and electricity at unreasonable prices. Moreover, a stormwater network is not available in Nabaa. Bins are not provided for the city's garbage collection, thus garbage is placed at street corners and in vacant plots (UN-Habitat, 2017). Additionally, almost all the narrow streets are in a bad condition, with lots of potholes and permanent accumulation of water. In addition, most sidewalks are inaccessible as they are often blocked by cars due to the lack of formal parking spaces.

## Conclusion

Syrian refugees are living in poor conditions due to the high rental prices in the neighborhood and the unavailability of job vacancies. Most large families are living in one-bedroom apartments, single men are sharing small apartments (in groups of up to ten people), and often two small families (usually relatives) live together in the same apartment. As for the physical situation of the neighborhood, currently 35% of the buildings (where 38% of the population live) need urgent intervention to fix serious structural problems and severe wall and balcony leaks, in order to protect the homes and lives of dwellers (UN-Habitat, 2017). Since 2011, the waves of Syrian refugees arriving to Beirut in general and Nabaa specifically have added huge pressure on existing infrastructure, public services and facilities, as well as on available employment opportunities. This has caused many Lebanese families to leave Nabaa in the last 6 years while the government has provided nothing but inaction and neglect. In the following case of Burj El-Barajne Refugee Camp, we will see a similar situation of transformation caused by the thousands of Syrian refugees who resettled in the camp and created additional pressure on the basic public services and infrastructure, residential units and job opportunities.



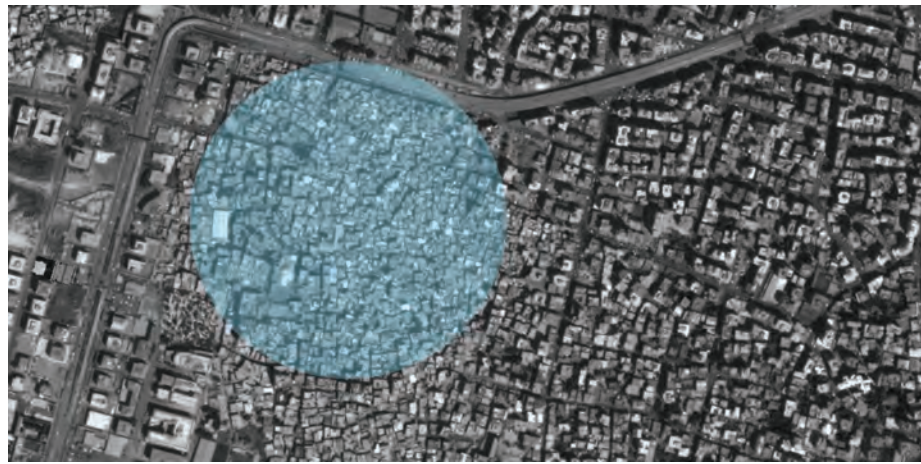


Fig. 9)  
The area of Burj El-Barajne Refugee Camp.

### Burj El-Barajne Refugee Camp

As with Nabaa, Burj El-Barajne was another main point of attraction for Syrian refugees due to the low living costs within the camp. As it is still considered a ‘temporary’ refugee camp for the Lebanese government, the inhabitants do not pay tax, nor for water or electricity and rental prices are affordable. These conditions attracted thousands of Syrian refugees to settle there, says Mohamad Daher, General Coordinator of Al-Nakab Center for Youth Activities at the camp (2016).

Burj El-Barajne refugee camp was established in 1948 to accommodate the large influx of Palestinian refugees who arrived to Lebanon after the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. The majority of these refugees and their families still reside there today. The camp was constructed on 0.23km<sup>2</sup> of land in the southern suburbs of Beirut. As mentioned earlier, Burj El-Barajne was initially envisaged as a temporary part of the city; however, decades of neglect of the area and inaction by the Lebanese authorities led to the informal permanent settlement that is chaotic and problematic, as it exists today. Burj El-Barajne has grown organically with time, without structural planning, producing a maze-like web of dense alleys and informal buildings.

Following analysis completed with visits to the settlement (April, 2016), interviews with humanitarian workers, meetings with inhabitants, and site assessments of buildings, Burj El-Barajne’s main issues can be summarized in the following three categories.

### Social and Political Issues

Even though the camp has no surrounding wall or fence, since its establishment, it has been isolated from the Beirut society and neighborhoods, and the situation has deteriorated following the arrival of the Syrian refugees. The camp exists effectively as an island shut off from the social and administrative life of the city. Inhabitants are treated as second-class citizens, without the right to vote or to work in many professions (Woodrow, 2016).

According to Daher, until 2011 the settlement housed around 28,000 Palestinian inhabitants, including around 3,000 Syrian workers who brought their families to the camp once the Syrian conflict started. Today the camp’s population has rapidly increased to around 40,000, due to the influx of Syrian families (Daher; Abu-Diwan, 2016).

Despite many families having lived there and being on personal terms with one another, the social fabric of the camp is torn. Its growth and flourishing are negatively affected by the physical limitations and informality of the settlement: mainly the low quality of individual buildings, the population density (particularly after the Syrian refugees arrived), the compressed and chaotic layout of the buildings and the lack of public spaces as explained in detail in the following section.

### Physical-Spatial Issues

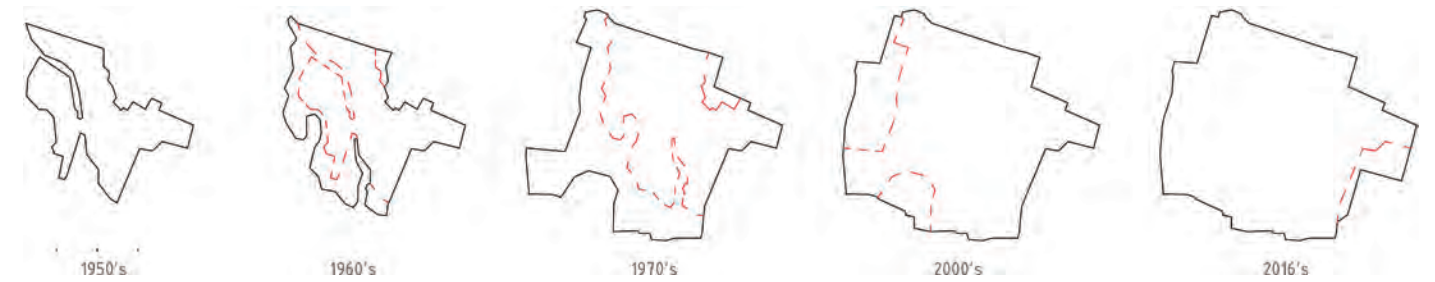


Fig.10)  
The growth of the Burj El-Barajne camp since 1960’s until today.  
Figure was adapted from Woodrow, 2016

In 1948, the camp started with tents which were gradually replaced by mud huts. Zinc roofs were installed on the huts, later to be replaced by concrete houses. This transitional process was developed by Palestinian refugees themselves. When the possibilities for horizontal expansion of the settlement were exhausted, the inhabitants began to build vertically in order to cater for the growing needs of the population. This process led to the dense informal settlement that exists today with no clear identity, formal infrastructure or housing typology.



Fig.11)  
Transformation of Palestinian Refugee Camps since 1948 until now, from tents to permanent concrete houses.  
Source: Ismail and Ciravoglu 2016.

The organic and internal demographic population increase, coupled with the continued influx of new Palestinian refugees and the neglect of the settlement by Lebanese authorities, has led to Burj El-Barajne becoming an underdeveloped sprawling urban slum.

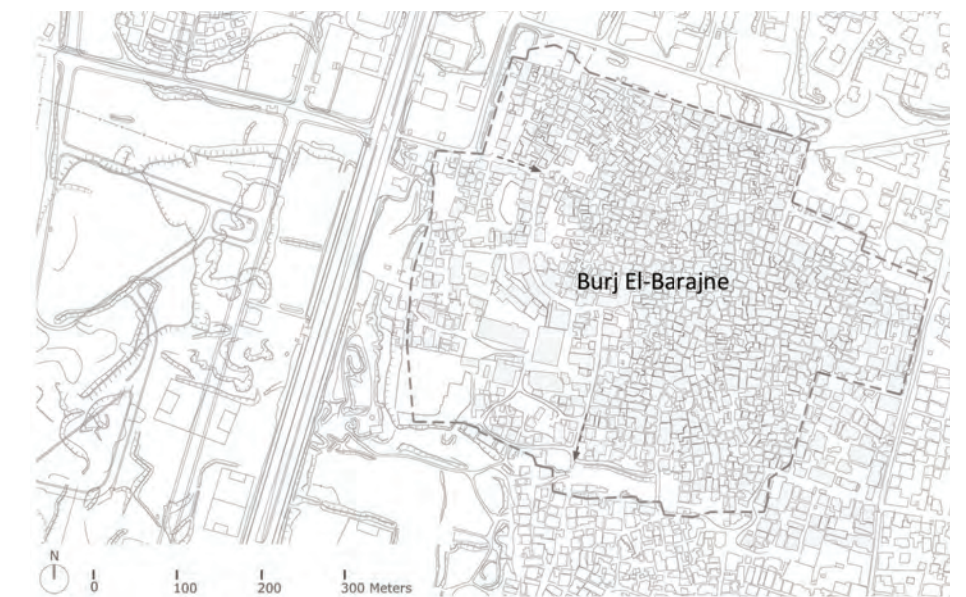


Fig.11)  
The outline of Burj El-Barajne refugee camp.  
Map developed by authors.

Today, the area is a dense urban fabric composed of around 1,000 concrete buildings, constructed on foundations capable of supporting two stories, despite most buildings having four or more stories and lacking formal structure and architectural efficiency (Daher, 2016).



Through the site visits, the interviews conducted on site and the spatial assessments, the major spatial issues which both Palestinians and Syrians are facing can be demonstrated as follows:

- Similarly to Nabaa, the residents of Burj El-Barajneh camp do not follow any building code or urban regulations. The setback between buildings does not exist in the camp.



Fig. 13)  
The building typology. Buildings grow vertically in order to cater for the needs of inhabitants.

- Most newly constructed buildings lack formal foundation and the architectural efficiency as they start from above ground. It is not possible to dig and implement structural foundations due to the small size of available lots in between existing buildings and the financial challenges which the residents face today. Moreover, there's an average of 1 floor being built every 5 years, which is creating a higher pressure on existing structure and a further risk for the inhabitants.



Fig.14)  
The chaotic structural systems (left). Foundation of new buildings start from above ground (right).

Referring to the Bhanes Center for Seismic and Scientific Research, in 1956, an earthquake measuring 6 degrees on the Richter scale struck Lebanon, killing 136 people and destroying 6,000 houses (Naharnet, 2013).

Around this time, the camp still consisted of tents and shack structures so the damage was negligible. It is predicted an earthquake of similar scale will hit in the next 50 years (Abdo et al, 1998), and if it does, it will cause a mass death and destruction to all these un-engineered concrete structures of the camp.

- Due to the high density of buildings, the streets are narrow, damp and dark, giving the feeling of being underground. Only a slight amount of natural light reaches street level and even less reaches the ground floor apartments/rooms.

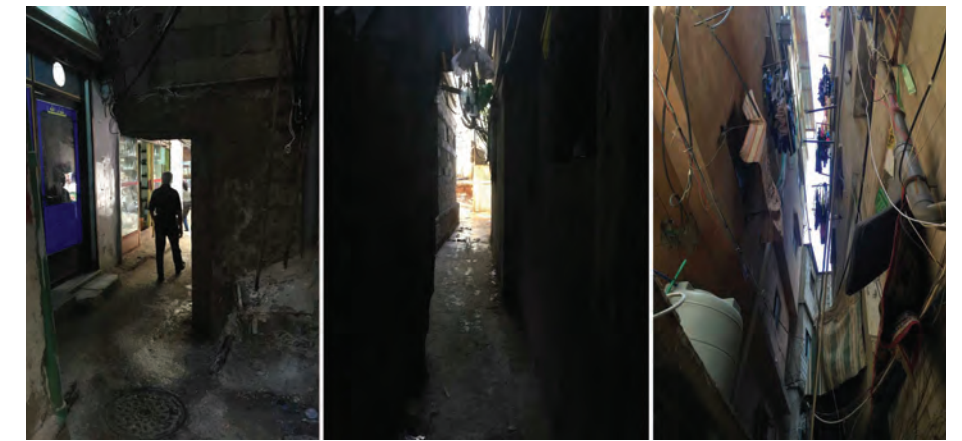


Fig. 15)  
The inner alleyways in the camp.

- Residential units are extremely small. Regarding space in individual structures, rooms are shared by 3 people or more. Most apartments have privacy issues due to the small distances between buildings.
- There is an extreme lack of public space within the camp. The only spaces in which people can gather are the residual spaces, around shops and between buildings. The camp also lacks trees, green spaces, playgrounds, open squares and recreational facilities.



Fig. 16)  
The existing infrastructure systems (from left to right: electrical, sewage and water networks)

- There is a complete lack of formal public infrastructure in the area (sewage and drainage). Moreover, many die annually from electrocution whenever it rains, caused by the tangled overhead wires and electrical cable connections which inhabitants created. That is creating a continuous threats to the lives of inhabitants.

- As the camp only has one main road, cars/vehicles cannot access it, except in a small part of the camp. In case of emergency, it is almost impossible to reach inner areas. Thus, motorcycles and bicycles are the common transportation systems as the average width of alleys is 1.5m.



## Economic Issues and Challenges

Palestinians and Syrians have to adapt to these physical limitations to find the most beneficial and profitable use of space. Ground floor spaces are constantly reconfigured to maximize profitability either for personal commercial use or for leasing to newcomers. The main source of income for many inhabitants is these small shops, found in every street and alley.



Fig. 17)

*The commercial activity within the camp.*

As our analysis shows, the Burj El-Barajne is no longer a refugee camp and must be considered as a permanent settlement and an integral part of Beirut. Over the span of 69 years, the settlement (since 1948) has undergone a long transitional process, with many difficulties along the way. There is a need for urgent change and as a first step the acceptance of the Palestinian and Syrian inhabitants, who deserve no less than a decent quality, as long as they are seeking refuge in Lebanon.

## Recommended Strategies for Nabaa and Burj El-Barajne

It is necessary to recognize and accept Palestinian and Syrian refugees, who deserve better living conditions, and an increased social interaction from wider Lebanese society. In the long run, the quality of life inside both settlements can be improved by a general urban strategy from the Lebanese government and the UN agencies (UNRWA, UNHCR and UNICEF). This strategy should be based on a multi-sectoral approach combining social, cultural, physical, and economic plans, and specify short-term and long-term action plans to solve the problems detailed above. In addition, some immediate interventions should be undertaken especially with regards to the safety of buildings, health improvements, and relocation of vulnerable people who reside in unsafe settlements. It is important to consider that the lifespan of Nabaa and Burj El-Barajne and other informal settlements in Beirut, including camps, extends beyond the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Furthermore, other important improvements should be made for both neighborhoods as soon as possible, including: upgrading of apartments through architectural interventions in order to provide the necessary ventilation and natural lighting, provision of social services especially for women and children by involving them in social activities, upgrading the quality and capacity of existing schools or building new ones, integrating children through resettlement courses, provision of healthcare services for all residents, creating recreational facilities, provision of basic urban services (potable water, electricity, etc.), and finally upgrading of existing waste management system as well as the stormwater and drainage networks.

## Conclusion and Discussion

Despite some economic and political issues in Lebanon, no refugee should be abandoned, whether in a slum or elsewhere. Now is the time to safeguard the rights of the inhabitants of Nabaa and Burj El-Barajne and to provide a brighter future for them.

After 69 years of inaction and ignorance towards Palestinian refugees and refugee camps, today the Lebanese government is repeating the same mistake with Syrian refugees who currently form a large part of the Lebanese society.

As a substantial part of the population (1 out of 4 people is a refugee in Lebanon), refugees must definitely be a 'part of the solution'. The Lebanese government could consider refugees a skilled workforce and benefit from their presence, to provide employment in support of weak sectors in Lebanon, e.g. agriculture which used to be an important productive sector in the 1990s. This way refugees can be more involved, generate income, have autonomy in their lives, feel they belong to the society and have a higher quality of life, until repatriation one day.

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