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The Images of Syrian Refugees in the Mainstream Narrative: *A Case Study of Lebanon*

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Abstract

This paper re-examines the images that were associated with the Syrian refugee crisis between 2015-2018 through a case study investigating depictions in the mainstream narrative. The main contribution of the paper is to establish a link between the mainstream narrative and the negative images of Syrian refugees, and to draw parallels between the media and political discourse surrounding this subject. The main argument is that the mainstream narrative has significantly contributed to communicating a negative image of Syrian refugees in host societies through a stereotyped categorization. It aggravated the negative image of Syrian refugees through overreaction, panic, and by placing focus on the most controversial and sensitive problems in the host communities, such as demography, unemployment, and security.

Introduction

The tension and prolonged duration of the Syrian crisis aggravated the negative images of refugees regionally and internationally. The importance of this paper stems from the fact that it tackles a crisis unprecedented since the Second World War (1939-1945). 13 million have been displaced since the conflict erupted in 2011, accounting for about 60% of the population before the war, mainly distributed in neighbouring counties, North Africa, Europe and North America.[1] More than five million have sought refuge in neighbouring countries: Turkey (3.4 million), Lebanon (1 million), Jordan (660,000) and Iraq (250,000). More than 150,000 live in North African counties such as Egypt (130,000) and Libya. About one million refugees or asylum seekers live in Europe: Germany (530,000 representing the fifth largest refugee population in the world), Sweden (110,000) and Austria (50,000). There are approximately 100,000 refugees in North America, representing less than 1% of the total number of Syrian refugees worldwide.[2]

The aim of this paper is to analyse the negative images that were associated with Syrian refugees since the eruption of the civil war in 2011 through a case study of the mainstream narrative in Lebanon. The main argument is that the mainstream narrative has significantly contributed to communicating a negative image of Syrian refugees through overreaction and panic. The paper argues that the mainstream narrative constructed a stereotyped image of Syrian refugees as dangerous and undisciplined. They pose a risk to the safety of the host societies, its political and economic well-being, and are incompatible with its culture. It claimed that they are primarily male and highlighted the absence of women and children. It communicated an image of women as victims of domestic or community violence, victims of human trafficking or victims of a prevailing masculine mentality.

The methodology section discusses the social research method used in the paper to obtain and analyse data. The social and political context section provides a broad overview of the social and political context in Lebanon, the relations between Syria and Lebanon and the eruption of civil war in Syria in 2011. The literature review section analyses the secondary sources and academic authors' arguments concerning the research question. The theoretical framework section positions the theory within the broad framework of social constructivism. The section on the main-

stream narrative provides images of Syrian refugees in the Lebanese mainstream media, ranging from being pitiful victims to being ISIS affiliates. The subsequent section on parallels between the media discourse and the political discourse analyses the correlation between the media outlets on the one hand and the political powers and wealthy families on the other. The conclusion restates the main finding on the dominance of one mainstream narrative communicating a negative image of Syrian refugees, and the absence of a counter narrative.

Methodology

The main contribution of the paper is to establish a link between the mainstream narrative and the negative images of Syrian refugees. The main question concerns how the mainstream narrative contributed to communicating a negative image of Syrian refugees between 2015-2018. The paper uses case studies, which involves an up-close, in-depth, and detailed examination of the subject of study in relation to the contextual conditions.[3] The paper adopts social constructivism as a theoretical framework, which maintains that human development is socially situated and knowledge is constructed through interaction with others.[4] The research analyses mainstream narratives, which are defined as the majority cultural practices of a society. These can be used to describe the lens through which history is told from the perspective of the dominant culture. This term has been described as an invisible hand that guides reality and perceived reality. Since the narrative can be true or imaginary, these two terms together create the notion of 'dominant narrative', which refers to those who occupy the dominant group in different aspects of life, such as media and activism,[5] whose stories are told, and therefore heard.[6] The paper uses narrative analysis[7] to facilitate its examination of the news, media and interviews as the units of analysis to research and understand the way people create meaning in their lives. It centres on the organisation of human knowledge more than the collection and processing of data. This technique captures the minute portrayed, infused with the unrevealed meaning communicated by the teller.[8]

Twenty anonymous semi-structured interviews were conducted with Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Five more semi-structured quality interviews were conducted with Syrian officials

from the Foreign Office, and five more with officials from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) office in Damascus. Five additional semi-structured quality interviews were conducted with Lebanese nationals. The interviews focused on the personal experiences of the interviewees vis-à-vis the research question and the images of Syrian refugees in the mainstream narratives in Lebanon. The interviews were particularly important within the larger methodology in explaining, understanding and exploring the research question, while open-ended questions provided in-depth insightful information. Interviews were conducted via Skype in Arabic. Primary data were also obtained from the news, media and interviews by the Lebanese news agencies and television. My previous career in the Syrian Foreign Office, and the UNHCR office in Damascus facilitated access to the interviewees with a broader understanding of the narrative.

To avoid bias and to explore different narratives fairly, the major Lebanese media outlets between 2015-2018 were reviewed with no selectivity, exclusion or consideration as to political orientation or religion. These were: Noursat TV, Aljadeed TV, Almanar TV, MTV, Future TV, LBC TV, National News Agency, Tele Liban TV, Jabal Lebnan FM, Nostalgie FM, Radio Liban Libre, Radio Voix du Liban, Albinaa Newspaper, Cedar News, Arabweek Magazine, Femme Magazine, Ediori Magazine, Almughtareb Magazine, Almassira Magazine, Almarkazia News Agency, Daily Star Newspaper, Lorient Lejour Newspaper, Aldyar Newspaper, Almustaqbal Newspaper, Alhayat Newspaper, Alanwar Newspaper, Alsafir Newspaper, Alnaher Newspaper, Aljoumhouria Newspaper, Alakhbar Newspaper, Aliktissad Magazine.[9] These represent the major political actors in Lebanon, including: Gebran Bassil, Nabih Berri, Hassan Nasrallah, Saad Hariri, Samir Geagea and Walid Jumblatt.

The focus of the paper was news and entertainment programs. Data collected from interviews, notes, video and audio recordings, images, and text documents were gathered and examined as a whole. Notes were made on first impressions. The collected data were then revised again, one by one and read line by line. Sections relevant to the research question were labelled, then more precise relevant words, phrases, sentences, or sections about actions, activities, concepts, differences, opinions, or processes were labelled. The data were categorised and compared on a more

general, abstract, and conceptual level. The most relevant categories were labelled and their connections to each other examined.[10]

Social and political context

Lebanon is characterised as culturally Arab, permeated with Western influences, French in particular. For a long time, it was the only country with a Christian majority in the Arab world, but the Christian majority has declined in comparison to the Muslims population, which caused the country to undergo significant political change.[11] A civil war between 1975-1990 had its origin in the conflicts and political compromises of Lebanon's post-Ottoman period and was exacerbated by the nation's changing demographic trends, inter-religious strife, and proximity to Syria, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and Israel. It began as a conflict between Christians on the one hand, and the Palestinians and the national movement on the other. The conflict was complicated and changed the demography, which encouraged Muslims to demand greater participation in the government.[12]

On the 6th of June 1982, Israel invaded Lebanon and occupied Beirut in an attempt to stop Palestinian forces from attacking its territories. The invasion ended with the departure of the Palestinian and Syrian forces from Lebanon, and the signing of an agreement on the 17th of May 1983. Both allies and enemies resumed fighting, which justified the return of the Syrian forces in 1983 for the deterrence of further violence and the restoration of peace and stability. The war ended on the 30th of September 1989 with the Taif Agreement, which emphasised the special relations between Lebanon and Syria, and affirmed Lebanon's independence and Arab identity. It stipulated a set of political reforms, most importantly the distribution of seats in the House of Representatives equally between Muslims and Christians, and detracted the powers of the President of the Republic in favour of the Council of Ministers.[13]

In 2000, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak announced a full withdrawal from Lebanon. After the extension of the term of the President of the Republic Emile Lahoud, the UN issued resolution 1559/2004 which demanded the withdrawal of foreign forces and the disbanding and disarming of all Lebanese militia. On the 14th of February 2005, President Rafic Hariri was assassinated. Demonstrations demanded the withdrawal of Syrian forces and

the establishment of an international tribunal to investigate and punish the killers. Syria's allies rallied a huge demonstration on the 8th of March in Lebanon, saluting the Syrian army. Lebanese anti-Syrian presence groups held a huge counter demonstration on the 14th of March. Since then, the Lebanese split into two camps, the '8th of March' and the '14th of March'. In July 2006, Lebanon was the site of a 34-day military conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, which erupted in response to Hezbollah's capture of Israeli soldiers. It severely damaged the Lebanese civil infrastructure and displaced approximately one million Lebanese.[14]

In March 2011, a civil war erupted in Syria and caused a major refugee crisis and influx of millions of refugees. The war was fought by several factions such as the Syrian government's armed forces and its international allies, an alliance of majority Sunni opposition rebel groups, including the Free Syrian Army (FSA) and Salafi jihadist groups, Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). A number of counties in the region and beyond were involved either directly or indirectly and provided support to one faction or another. The fighting spilled over to Lebanon between 2011-2017 as opponents and supporters of the Syrian government travelled to Lebanon to fight and attack each other on Lebanese soil. According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, given the complexity of the Syrian conflict, bias in media reporting remains a fundamental challenge that misinforms researchers and misguides policy makers regarding the actual events.[15]

The social and political context aggravated the images of Syrian refugees in the mainstream narratives which were projected against a background of Lebanon's exposure to a series of serious socio-economic and political crises, which were a result of interaction among internal and external dynamics since the civil war in Lebanon, long before the Syrian refugee crisis. The increased expenditure failed to satisfy the public services and meet the rising demands amid a sharp decline in trade, tourism and investment. Lebanon suffered from a shortage of water supplies, which led to a decline in sanitation, electricity and employability. Standards of living declined, and many Lebanese have reached a level of poverty and struggle to meet their basic needs and expenses.[16]

Literature review

A study by the ABAAD Resource Centre for Gender Equality,[17] in partnership with the International Women's Association for Peace and Freedom, reviewed 504 articles published in three Lebanese newspapers: Alsafir, Alnahar and Alakhbar, over a period of 13 months between 2015-2016, in addition to 142 news reports by the Lebanese Broadcasting Corporation, MTV and Aljadeed TV. The qualitative analysis of the content showed that the overall press reports depicted Syrian refugee women as victims of domestic or community violence, victims of human trafficking or victims of a prevailing masculine mentality. The study referred to the perpetuation of the stereotyped image of Syrian women as guilty through images and videos that were published in the material. The material was associated with human trafficking and accompanied by images of sex trade or photos of women living in refugee camps, stereotyping and mainstreaming the Syrian refugee status in Lebanon.[18] The study concluded that the surveys showed a prevailing logic of generalisation and/or marginalisation in the Lebanese media dealing with Syrian refugees in line with the media system of the Lebanese political authorities. It communicated an image of Syrian refugee women as victims that have no political, social or economic role.[19]

A study by the Maharat Foundation[20], the Media Monitoring Unit in Lebanon and Jordan, and the Arabic Network for Human Rights Information concluded that the Lebanese media coverage had been politicised and weighed against the national interest of Lebanon and aid from donors.[21] The literature on Syrian refugees, however, did not establish a link between the mainstream narrative and the negative images of Syrian refugees, and parallel between the media discourse and the political discourse, a gap which this paper attempts to fill.

Theoretical framework

This section positions the theory within the broad framework of social constructivism in connection with the main argument to unpack the meanings of mainstream narratives of Syrian refugees. The influence and importance of the media in daily life continues to grow phenomenally. It has the ability to disseminate information and to encourage the citizens-customers to accept it without critical or conscious interpretations or informed

understanding. An important factor in the development of media is the technological advances that contributed to the rapid spread of media and gave more power to the presentation of reality and the state of society as it corresponds to the creators and constructors of that reality. Media has become part of everyday life by constantly issuing updated information, or constantly repeating other information so that it makes this information inevitable, creating an illusion in modern individuals that s/he is a member of the 'global society'. The highlight of this illusion is the created 'image of reality' in which the life of the modern human is unthinkable without the mass media. Media not only affects the individual, but also the entire society as a collective, as a space in which individuals meet their individual needs, achieves interests and realizes or loses their potential, talents or ideas.[22]

Ideally, media mediates between people, groups, communities, institutions and other social actors, to be the means of mass communication in society. However, media, through the explanation and interpretation of the information, 'constructs' the social reality in the sense that it adds to the information some elements that the original information did not have, that it forms information according to the requirements or the expectations of the centres of power, or some other interest groups. Mass media includes news and information, entertainment, powerful educational tools and more. It is the instrument of social control by special interest groups, individuals, institutions and countries. The entire set of social entities affects the creating of the illusion of the existence of a specific, autonomous, necessary and 'desirable' culture.[23]

With rapidly evolving media and technological tools, social constructivism holds that meaning-making is created through active engagement with knowledge and social interaction. In the age of cable TV, internet and cell phones, media shapes how people make meaning of and construct knowledge in the world. It creates new and larger communities reaching a broader spectrum.[24] The cognitive equilibration process of assimilation and accommodation of new experiences to one's knowing system, or the sociocultural appropriation of new skills, evolves through opportunities to interact in social networks online or mediated through computer or mobile technologies. Knowledge occurs through shared activity, through community engagement, dialogue, and communication in a community of shared activity.[25]

The Mainstream Narrative

The mainstream narrative has arguably communicated a negative image of Syrian refugees. Fake refugee images, photos and memes have been used to demonise them and distort public opinion. Many of these photos were edited or taken out of context in an effort to support a myth or argument, such as that ISIS jihadists are using Syrian refugees to infiltrate Europe, or that refugees are healthy, rich and do not need help. Several photos have surfaced online claiming to show Syrian refugees who came to Lebanon comparing them with more recent images of ISIS militants. However, even in cases where the photos appear to be of the same person, identification between photos has not been proven. Following an assertion by the Lebanese Minster of Education, Elias Bou Saab, to the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron, in 2015 that one in 50 Syrians entering Europe could be an ISIS member,[26] a spokesperson for the UNHCR noted that there is no legitimate way of proving such figures, and that this kind of statement is extremely unhelpful.[27]

In 2015, Aljadeed TV broadcast randomised interviews with Lebanese nationals expressing stereotyped views. It communicated an image of refugees as scared homeless beggars spreading in the streets all around Lebanon. They eat the food of the Lebanese and deprive them of job opportunities through providing cheap labour. Some interviewees identified Syrian refugees as suspicious or ISIS affiliates. Others were racist and expressed contempt towards them as uncivilised dark-skinned invaders. Others interestingly noted that Syrian refugees do not deserve any sympathy because they put themselves in this situation when they revolted, while at the same time they themselves re-elected president Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian embassy in Beirut in 2014.[28]

Demography is understandably a sensitive issue in Lebanon that shaped its attitude towards Arabism and broader pan-nationalistic causes.[29] The fact that Lebanon is comprised of different religious and ethnic groups and minorities explains the fear of a demographic imbalance resulting from the flow of large numbers of Muslim refugees. However, this has been arguably exaggerated and propagandised to panic. A journalist in Alnahar, Hussein Hazouri, claimed that Syrian refugees have changed the identity, culture and demography of Lebanon as they constituted two mil-

lion versus the Lebanese who were four million.[30] His claim however, conflicts with the statements by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Antonio Guterres, and UN statistics stating that there were 1,172,753 Syrian refugees in Lebanon in 2015[31] and a Lebanese population of 5.851 million.[32]

In a report in 2015, France 24 described the labour of Syrian refugee adolescents in farming, car repair or food delivery as a daily fact. Arguably however, it did not explain the phenomenon against the decision of Minister of Labour, Sajaan Qazzi, who confined the Syrian labour to cleaning, farming or building,[33] and who were consequently not expected to practice prestigious jobs. Its attitude towards the challenges facing Syrian children in Lebanese schools was arguably not on educational and pedagogic grounds. It depicted them as untalented and uncompetitive in comparison with their Lebanese peers, who are taught in either French or English. "During the class of French, the pupils repeat mechanically after the teacher, '*Jad mange du pain avec un verre de lait*'[34] two times, then the teacher asks them what Jad ate in the morning? Silent, the teacher finds himself obliged to re-explain in Arabic. When they pray, they do not understand a word, they do not even know the alphabet". France 24 claimed that in each of the schools they visited, there were children who never had never been to school before, and children in adolescence who did not know how to read or write.[35] Such a claim is, however, debatable because in 2015, the first wave of refugees had been only settled in Lebanon for four years. They arrived in May from Talkalakh in Homs, where education, reading and writing is free and strictly mandatory in accordance with law 35/1981, and law 32/2002.[36]

In an article published by Alnahar in October 2016, an academic professor Mona Fayyad warned that Syrian refugees have launched an armed conflict among themselves and against the Lebanese forces, and could consequently be viewed as a time-bomb that would eventually undermine security and stability. She condemned racism in general, but maintained that theorising was one thing, and practice was another. The repercussions of the Syrian refugee crisis was unprecedented and required a different description that goes beyond the racist cliché. The increase in the number of refugees, she claimed, led to an increase in the number and quality of crimes that were not previously known, such as slaughtering and beheading. Syrian refugees serve as a tool in the

hand of some parties that exploit their desperate conditions and destitution in return for aid.[37]

Fayyad explained the attitude of Syrian refugees from a physical perspective that also takes into account other factors such as genetics and biology, psychology and frustration. To support her argument, she explained that interactions in an empty container of air are different from those that occur in a full container. A vital space is required to allow a good and balanced life for living organisms. Losing this space resulting from extreme overcrowding disrupts these balances and produces a full extent of new, threatened, uncoordinated and aggressive behaviours. Ethology explains this phenomenon hypothesising that what regulates population waves in mammals is physiological mechanism as a response to density. The claim is proven in caged animals responding to density with stress and releasing lethal or fatal steroid secretions.[38]

A report published in 2016 by Alnahar entitled 'The deterioration of air quality after Syrian asylum', blamed air pollution on Syrian refugees, through linking increased fire accidents and the increasing number of Syrian refugees.[39] Another report published in 2017 by MTV, entitled 'The heads of Lebanese hairdressers are exposed to scourge by Syrian scissors', talks about a Syrian invasion of the profession, claiming that Syrian workers were taking over the jobs of the Lebanese.[40] Another report by Aldiyar published in May 2017 claimed that 300,000 Syrian refugee women were to give birth in 2017, while the birth rates between 2011-2017 were less than 100,000.[41]

On the 20th of April 2018, Aljadeed TV presented a sarcastic song of Syrian refugees, performed by Layal Daou in an entertainment programme. It handles the working class with scorn and contempt, mocks the Syrian dialect and expresses resentment of the frequent birth of children, which made the Lebanese a minority. In an interview with the editor and director, Charbel Khalil argued that the song is an expression of the social conditions in caricature, and denied charges of racism and calls against Syrian refugees. Another sketch by Charbel Khalil on LBC suggested that the Syrian women appealed to the Lebanese men because they are cheaper. A Lebanese lover abandoned his Lebanese beloved because their relationship is costly. He noted that he could engage with two Syrian women for the same cost.[42]

Fadi Dahouk, a journalist, claimed that the song was a form of provocative abuse and a threat to the lives of vulnerable refugees. It is consistent with the Lebanese mainstream narrative attitude presenting Syrian refugees as human mass desiring to occupy Lebanon and control its wealth.[43] Layal Haddad, head of the media department in Alaraby Aljadeed, noted that the song is not separated from a stereotypical portrayal of Syrian refugees in the Lebanese mainstream narrative; women work in human trafficking, and men steal, loot and rape. They have no talents, and they seek asylum to live on subsidies. They are primitive people, who have many children and work in popular professions, such as taxis drivers or wardens.[44] Hussein Berro, a dramatist from Istanbul, maintained that the influence of the song goes beyond its lyrics because of its targeting a sweeping majority of popular audiences. Entertainment episodes are the most watched and can convey messages which the target audience would accept subconsciously. The song has psychological and heritage connotations because of its techniques. Its beautiful tune carries history, culture and heritage of the Levant. Its folkloric melody is vivid and similar to love and wedding songs, which makes it easy to remember and echo.[45]

In September 2018, MTV published a special report that linked Syrian refugees to the increase of cancer rates in Lebanon, which the Lebanese Ministry of Health documented as 5.6 percent in 2018. In an interview, a medical specialist, Fadi Nasr, attributed the increase to two reasons: pollution and Syrian refugees. He explained that "the increasing infections caused by the spread of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are directly causing cancer. Because of the poor conditions they have suffered from, they come with dangerous bacteria that can create diseases in humans."[46] Mr. Nasr and MTV, however, did not refer to any evidence or studies that led to these findings.

In 2018 in an entertainment episode on LBCI, *Take Me Out*, the candidate responded to a question of whether he can speak Syrian dialect with "I am very racist! I prefer the devil to Syrians."[47] While this could arguably be seen as an individual attitude, the reaction and applause of the audience suggest that it might not be, and that the program has changed the Syrian catastrophe into material for an entertainment episode. It is also in line with a separate survey by Insider Monkey that Lebanon is number one in figures for racism regionally, and number two globally.[48] A Lebanese journalist, Rana Najar noted that the attitude towards Syrian

refugees is based on their social class. Rich businessmen are not exposed to racism or aggression because of their contribution to the economic welfare of Lebanon, the mainstream narrative avoids telling such stories that may conflict with the dominant stereotyped narrative, and suggests the existence of a counter narrative or images of Syrian refugees investing or hiring Lebanese labour.[49]

Parallel between media discourse and political discourse

This section provides paradigmatic examples of widespread narratives that have been consistent across different media and remained the same between 2015-2018. The dominance of one mainstream narrative and absence of a counter narrative in Lebanon introduces a parallel between the media discourse and the political discourse. Minister of Information Melhem Riachi acknowledged a deficiency in the mainstream narrative and media. In a joint workshop with the UNHCR on 3 August 2017, he noted: "We need to market positive media in Lebanon, and when we say positive media, we do not mean to hide facts or objectivity, but not to market a Syrian refugee who is a killer as if all refugees are killers. Such claim is racist, untrue and inhuman. The refugees are protected by law, which is above all. You are professional journalists and there is a great responsibility on all of you until Syrian refugees come back home safely. Your narrative should be positive, sensible, logical and courageous. It is only love that would eradicate tension between the guest and the host."[50] The statement, which could be seen by different standards as balanced, was however criticised by Lebanese journalists who viewed it as an attempt to silence and tame them.[51]

Arguably, a parallel can be observed between the media discourse and political discourse. There are two explanations for this pattern. The first is the fact that most of the local media is owned or directed by the political powers which determine the overall course of the media discourse.[52] Contrary to many other Arab countries, the Lebanese government does not control media outlets. However, political parties have the power to influence and direct the majority of Lebanese media institutions, which reflect the country's sectarian politics and serve as a mouthpiece for political propaganda. With the media being entangled in national

politics and international influence peddling, journalists are arguably required to act like political activists. Since media outlets do not rely on readership, but rather on investors and political or sectarian affiliations, there is little interest in producing quality media. Bribing journalists to publish a certain piece of information, or to avoid any further analysis on specific matters has become common practice.[53]

In her work 'The Lebanese media: Anatomy of a system in perpetual crisis',[54] Sarha El-Richani's adaptation of Hallin and Mancini's media typology to the Lebanese system functions as a scholarly springboard that moves the typology beyond the western world. As such, her critical assessment of the Lebanese system through Hallin and Mancini's four dimensions leads to an amended model that takes into consideration the unique elements that render the Lebanese system a variation of the Polarized Pluralist Model. Analysing the major tenets of Hallin and Mancini's framework, including a focus on the nation-state as a unit of analysis, as well as its goal of identifying patterns across various media systems, the key components of the Lebanese political system and the nature of governance, El-Richani labels Lebanon as a 'weak state', which comes as a result of the critical role of the Lebanese populist political patrons in deteriorating the country's political and media systems.[55]

Examination of ownership patterns of media, the high level of staff and audience partisanship, as well as patterns in guest appearances on broadcast shows characterise a high level of political parallelism. This is evident in the direct relationship between the media and political groupings,[56] which explains the bias in communicating the images of Syrian refugees. Key indicators, such as the poor organization of the profession, the use of journalists as instruments of the powerful, and low ethical standards, which are mainly a result of low salaries and bribery, suggest that the Lebanese media system has low levels of professionalism. El-Richani's assessment of the media market indicates that, given the political and sectarian frames of the Lebanese media, combined with the inability of the Lebanese press to generate sustainable income through advertising and a fragmented regional market that has so far only had room for entertainment programming at the expense of Lebanese political show, Lebanese media parallel with political grouping.[57]

A joint report by Reports Without Borders and the Centre for the Defence of Media and Cultural Freedoms in 2018, on the ownership of media institutions, based on the analysis of 37 major Lebanese media outlets, revealed that Lebanon's media is tightly aligned with domestic and foreign powers vying for control. Key political groups but also wealthy family clans benefit from a weak or dysfunctional legal framework that reflects an overall laissez-faire attitude. They have managed to maintain and extend their grip on pockets of public opinion throughout the dramatic events that have unfolded in and around the country in the last decades. Media in Lebanon is dominated by concentration, politicization and polarization. The Lebanese media record 79.3% dependency on the government, political parties or personnel. The report concluded that media legislations do not guarantee the transparency of media ownership, nor do they provide the necessary mechanisms to prevent conflict of interests.[58]

The study showed that there are 37 media outlets with the highest followings, concentrated in the hands of eight families and three political parties, which arguably explains the dominance of one mainstream narrative and absence of a counter narrative. The first four television companies are LBCI, Aljadeed, MTV and OTV. They are followed by 8 out of 10 viewers, which makes up 78.1% of viewership. They are respectively owned by the Khayat, Daher-Saad, Aoun, and Gabriel Murr families. A similar concentration is also evident in the first four newspapers, Aljumhuriya, Alnahar, Alakhbar and Aldyar, which makes up 77.9% of readership. Their respective main shareholders are the Michel Elias Murr, Hariri, and Tueni families, Ibrahim Al-Amine, and Charles Ayoub. Radio channels appear to be a little less focused. The first four companies are Modern Media Company, Lebanon Free Productions and Broadcasting Company, Almada Group and The New Audio and Visual Media Company, which accounts for 72% of listeners. The top four respective shareholders are the Khazen family, the Lebanese Forces, Elias Bou Saab, and the Phalange Party.[59] Media outlets are owned by the state, current or former MPs, ministers or political parties, which led to a media coverage of specific political orientations.

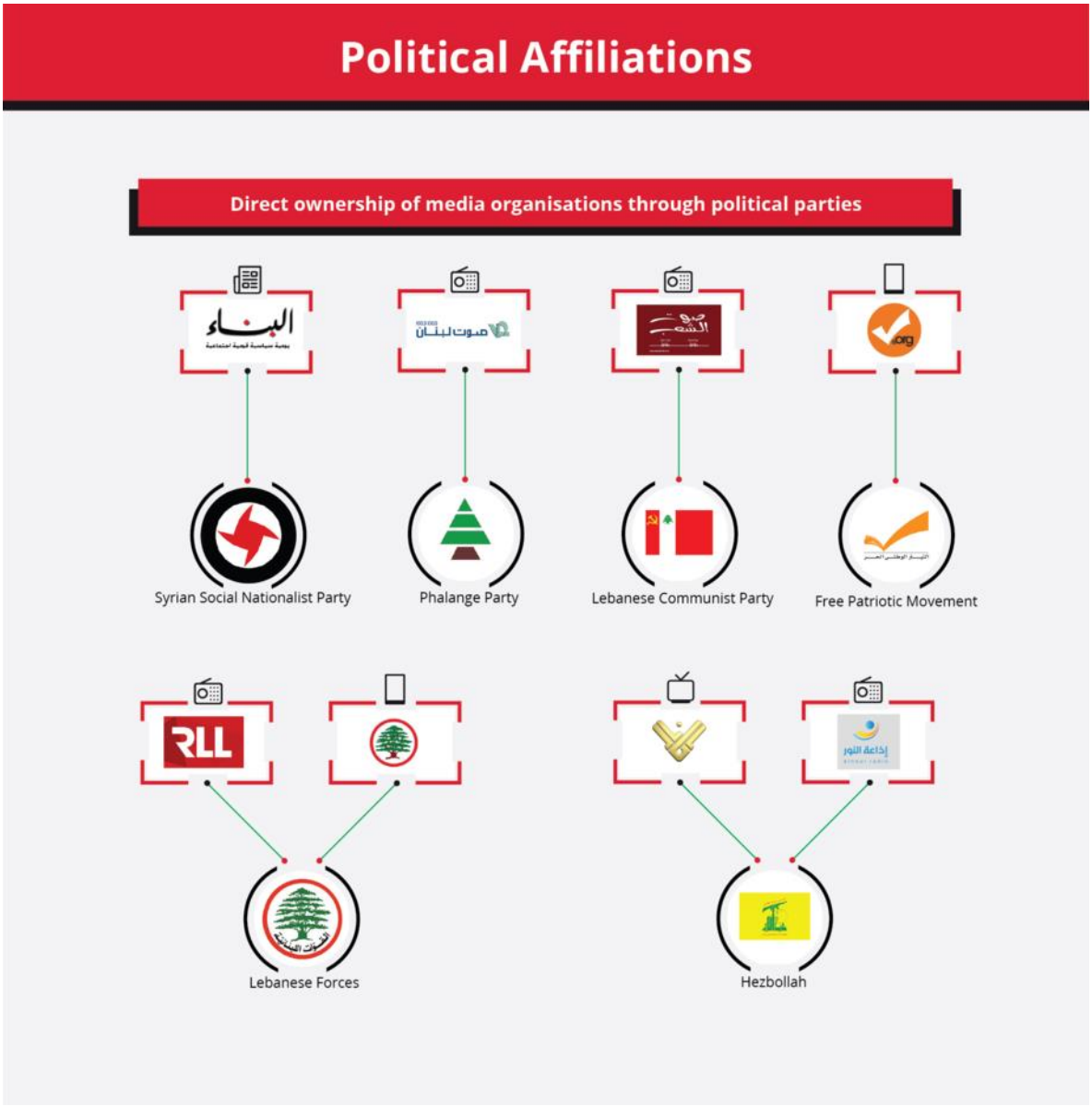

Figure 1: Direct ownership of media organizations through political parties.[60]

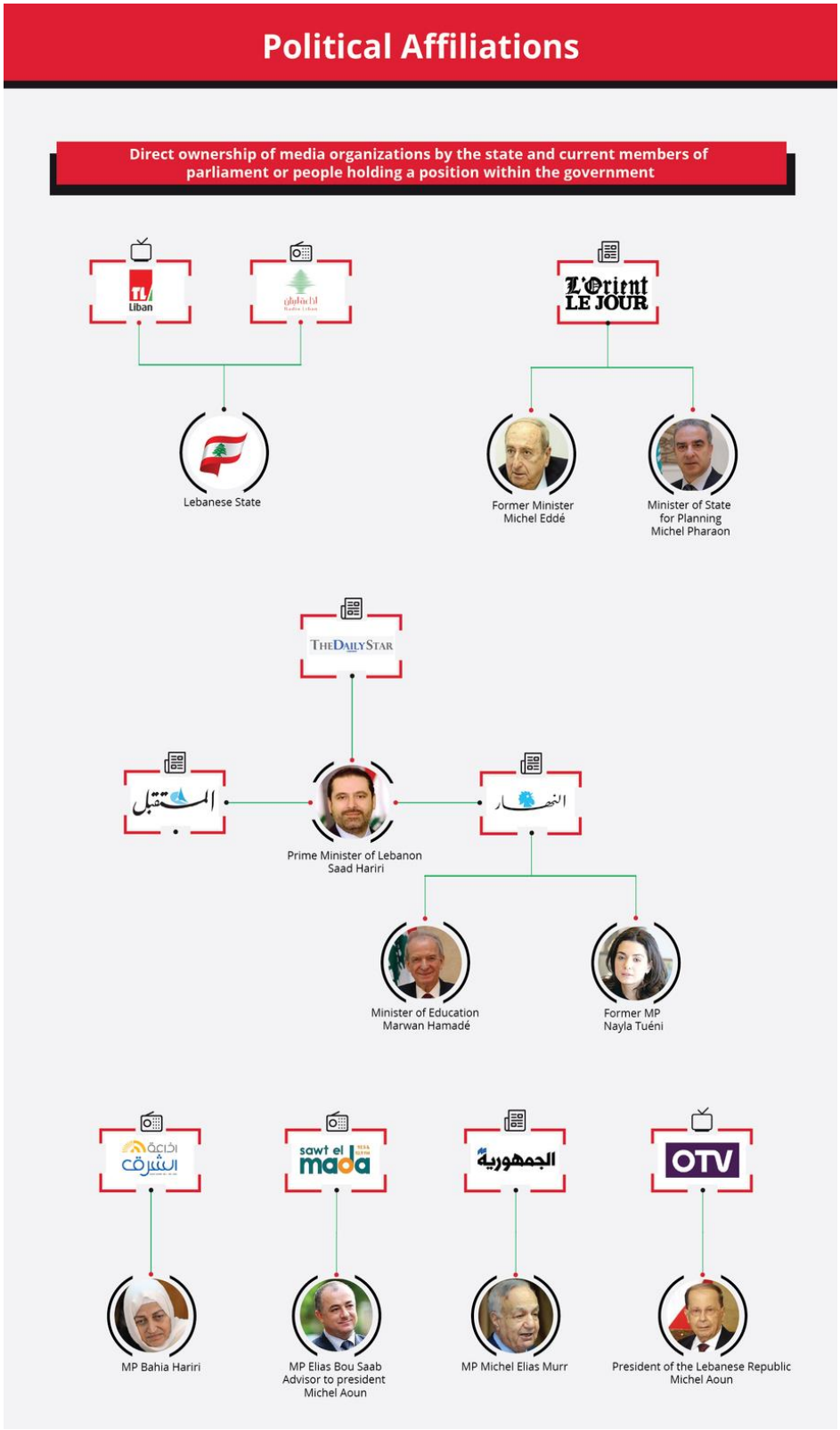

Figure 2: Direct ownership of media organizations by the state and current members of parliament or people holding positions within the government.[61]

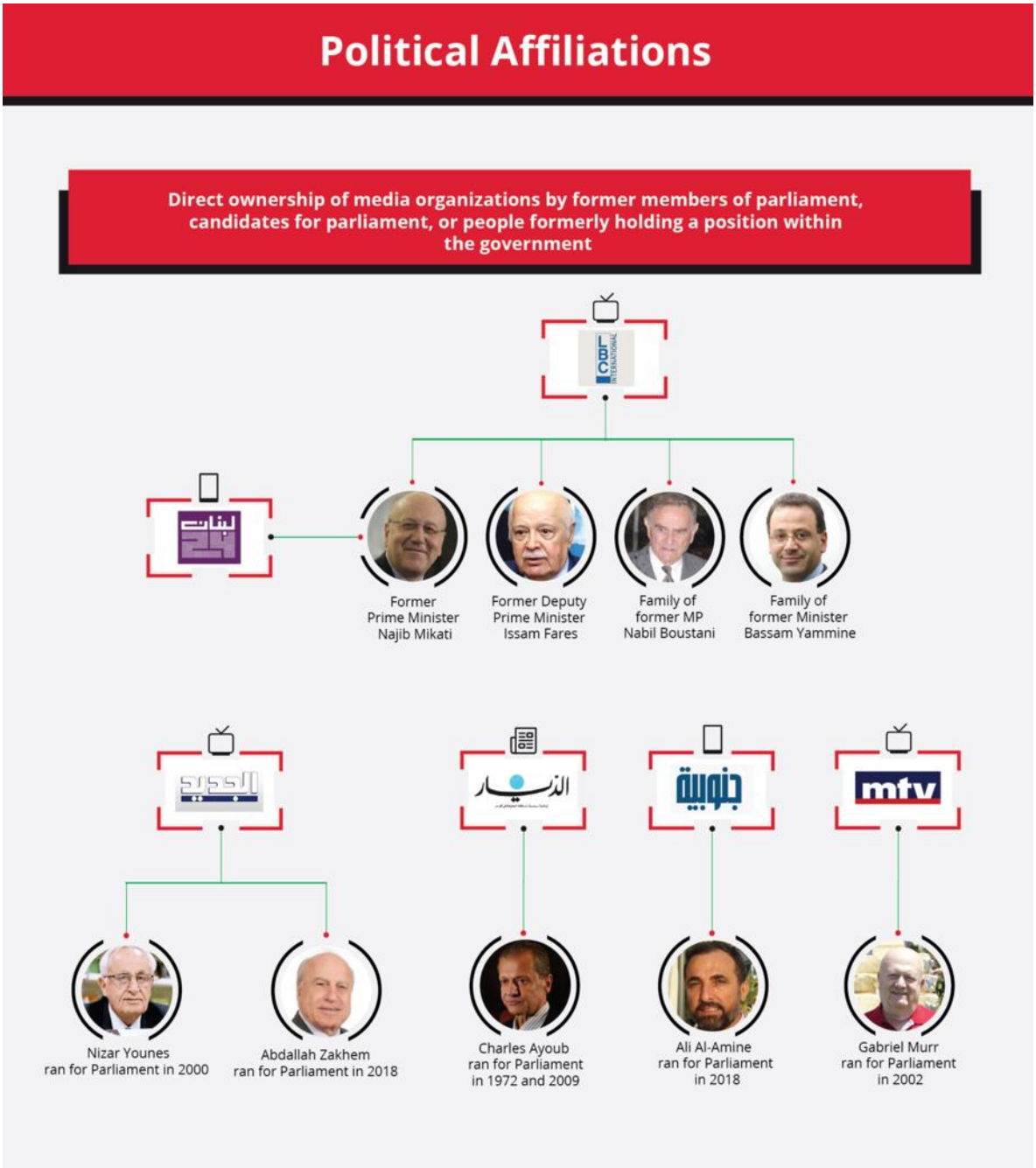

Figure 3: Direct ownership of media organizations by former members of parliament, candidates for parliament, or people formerly holding positions within the government.[62]

The second explanation is the complexity of the Syrian-Lebanese relations and tension since independence because of the conflicting attitudes towards the identification of Lebanese

nationalism and dis/union with Syria. The attitude of the Lebanese towards the Syrian military intervention in the civil war in Lebanon between 1975-1990 shaped the Lebanese attitude towards the Syrian population, whether they are refugees, students or employees, even after the withdrawal of the Syrian forces in 2005 in accordance with the UNSCR 1559. For example, Gebran Bassil in his tenure as a Minister of Energy and Water in 2013 noted, "We do not want Syrian refugees to take our place. Their very existence in Lebanon replaces the Lebanese. Lebanon is not a loose land!"[63] In October 2017, he tweeted "Every alien who is on our land without our will is an occupier."[64] Other ministers have linked Syrian refugees and the economic crisis and unemployment in Lebanon. Former Minister of Labour Sajaan Qazzi, who confined the Syrian labour to cleaning, farming or building in 2014,[65] told the International Labour Conference in Geneva in 2014 that unemployment rates among Lebanese have increased 21% since the Syrian crisis, and that statistics by the Prime Ministership show that 34% of crimes are committed by Syrian refugees.[66]

More recently, in his speech to the Arab-European ministerial meeting in Feb 2019, Gebran Bassil in his tenure as a Foreign Minister, claimed that 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon deprived Lebanon of 40% of its national output. He warned Europeans that he would not allow Syrian refugees to stay in Lebanon, and that the idea of integrating them was completely rejected because they pose a great threat to security and stability.[67] These figures however, are inconsistent with the official statistics of the UNHCR which state that the total number of registered Syrian refugees on 31 December 2018 was 948,849.[68] Bassil's notes are also inconsistent with the notes of the Executive Director of the World Food Programme (WFP). Speaking in front of the committee at the UK's parliament, David Beasley noted that Lebanon's economy could have imploded without cash-based assistance schemes from Syrian refugees. He argued that one third of cash spent by Syrians is used to buy products grown locally; one third is processed locally; and the other comes from the international market in the Lebanese economy. Beasley argued that Syrian refugees have the urge to return home. They do not want to be in London, Paris or Berlin. They will stay home if given any reason of hope.[69]

There are two explanations for the mainstream media tendency use the term "displaced" rather than "refugees". The first is that non-recognition as refugees is used as a technique to deny their merits and rights in accordance with international conventions, to which Lebanon is a signatory.[70] Arguably, however, while the UN definition of refugees as people who have fled war, violence, conflict or persecution and have crossed an international border to find safety in another country, applies to Syrian refugees, their status in Lebanon arguably conflicts with the 1951 convention. Article 3 of the convention provides that the contracting states shall apply provisions without discrimination as to race, religion, or country of origin. Article 17 provides that the contracting states shall accord to refugees the most favourable treatment accorded to nationals of a foreign country to engage in wage-earning employment. Article 21 states that the contracting states shall accord to refugees treatment as favourable as possible to access housing. Article 22 provides that the contracting states shall accord to refugees the same treatment as is accorded to nationals with respect to elementary education.[71] The second is that the political powers do not wish to allow their difficult experiences with the Palestinian refugees since 1948 to reoccur with the Syrians, fearing a repeat of the Arab-Israeli conflict during which the number of refugees and their descendants continued to increase as the war became more insoluble.[72] As of 1 January 2019, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) counted 475,075 Palestinian refugees in its twelve refugee camps in Lebanon.[73]

Conclusion

The mainstream narrative has significantly contributed to communicating a negative image of Syrian refugees in host societies following the 2011 civil war through a stereotyped categorization. One dominant mainstream narrative aggravated the negative image of Syrian refugees through overreaction, panic, and focus on the most controversial and sensitive problems in the host communities, such as demography, unemployment, and security. It communicated an image of Syrian refugees ranging between being pitiful and being ISIS affiliates, claiming they pose a risk to the safety, political and economic well-being, and are overall incompatible with the culture of the host societies. Therefore, the need to expand the image of Syrian refugees in media beyond the dominant stereotype may be increasingly necessary for understanding the evolving Syrian refugee crisis in host societies. Especially

amid the current resurgence of anti-refugee sentiments and rising nationalism,[74] it is important to recognise that no one chooses to be a refugee. Every minute, eight people leave everything behind to escape war, persecution, or terror.[75] For many refugees, the choice is between the horrific or something worse.

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