

Robert G. Rabil, *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Double Tragedy of Refugees and Impacted Host Communities*. Lanham, MD: Lexington Books, 2016. 125 pp. Hardcover: \$79.16. ISBN 978-1-4985-3512-0.

The world is in the midst of one of the worst refugee crises in recent history,¹ and the Syrian Civil War is one of the largest contributors to this crisis—forcibly displacing over twelve million Syrian people.² Newsflashes about the treacherous journeys of Syrian refugees fleetingly grip the attention of spectators abroad. Lost in the sporadic public outcry about the refugee crisis, however, is the account of refugee life after arrival. How do refugees settle into host communities? What are the dynamics between refugees and their host communities? In his book, Robert G. Rabil attempts to fill in this narrative gap by addressing these questions. Specifically, he addresses the Syrian refugee crisis in the host country of Lebanon, beginning with an overview of Lebanon’s history and sociopolitical background. By explaining Lebanon’s seamless emergence out of the Ottoman Empire and into a prolonged period of colonization by Great Britain and France, Rabil provides his reader with an understanding of Lebanon’s desire for a redefined national identity—setting the stage for its current geopolitical situation.

After Lebanon gained its independence in 1943, and after the Arab defeat in the 1948 War, two political camps formed in the country: the first involved a leftist, pan-Arabist ideology, which supported “Arab” causes like the Arab-Israeli conflict; the second camp involved a separatist ideology, which sought to dissociate Lebanon from “Arab” causes—thus “maintaining the status quo of the political system” (2). During this time, many Palestinian refugees began to flee to Lebanon. As military involvement between Palestine and Israel increased, tensions between the two Lebanese political camps also heightened and, eventually, Israel infiltrated southern Lebanon. After some Syrian-backed involvement, Israel was successfully forced out of Lebanon. Lebanese individuals nonetheless harbor mixed feelings about Syrians, partly because Syria also occupied Lebanon for thirty years. Moreover, Syria aided in making Hezbollah a “preeminent military and political force” in Lebanon—thus contradicting the goals of the second political camp (3).

Rabil’s concise summary of Lebanon’s history and sociopolitical background effectively provides enough context to introduce the Syrian refugee crisis. As a part of his chronology, he explains the eruption of the Syrian Civil War in 2011, which led to a massive influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon. Careful not to downplay the plight of refugees, he is able to sensitively explain the dramatic impact the Syrian refugee crisis has had on Lebanese culture, economy, politics, and spatial particularities. Namely, he emphasizes how Lebanon—a country with an area of only 4,036 square miles—is “the only country in the world with the highest concentration of refugees per capita” (4). He explains how this has caused Lebanese citizens to resent refugees, but he fails to provide empirical evidence or other persuasive sources to support this statement. Instead, in the conclusion of the book, he provides anecdotal support from his own experiences and observations while in Lebanon during the years of 2012 and 2015. Considering the heightened level of crime reported by Statistics Lebanon LTD, as well as the increased competition for cheap labor, this statement is not outlandish; however, it is important to question whether he overly simplifies the views of Lebanese people.

After setting up Lebanon’s sociopolitical landscape, Chapter 2 breaks down the

¹ *World Refugee Day: What You Should Know*, CNN (June 20, 2017, 10:27 AM), <https://www.cnn.com/2017/06/20/world/world-refugee-day-worst-crisis-in-history/index.html>.

² *Refugee Statistics*, UNHCR, <https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/statistics/> (last visited Oct. 22, 2018).

geographical concentrations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and describes the living conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon as “poorly accessed and serviced areas in insecure shelters” (13). He contrasts this information with the living conditions of Palestinian refugees from Syria, who tend to settle in and around established Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, about which he provides few details. He concludes this chapter by highlighting an important nuance of refugee life: these particular refugees are illegal, unregistered, and stateless refugees. Not recognized by the government, this sub-society of refugees is “more exposed and helpless than the formal vulnerable society of refugees” (14).

Chapter 3 delves deeper into human rights, refugee legal status, and society. By explaining Lebanon’s stance on the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the 1967 Protocol—Rabil illustrates that refugee legal status in Lebanon is mostly governed by national laws concerning foreign nations. Namely, Lebanon considers Syrian refugees as “displaced,” and does not have formal refugee Syrian camps. This could be a product of the “deep scars” that Lebanon has after sixty years of experience with Palestinian refugee camps (18). As far as Syrian refugee integration in Lebanese society goes, Lebanese authorities provide Syrian refugees with “entry coupons” upon arrival at any five official border crossing ports—automatically granting holders residency for six months, after which time they must pay \$200 for renewal of their status. The Lebanese Ministry of Interior waived this fee for a few months. This section turns out to be one of the rare occasions when Rabil mentions the Arab gulf countries’ embarrassingly negligible support of refugees. In fact, he provides less than one paragraph of balanced critique of Saudi Arabia’s rejection of refugees, and the abysmal financial support it provides. In addition to housing obstacles, refugees also face employment issues. Lebanon’s Ministry of Labor Issues Resolution No. 1/9 opened up more professions to Syrian workers, but Rabil is quick to point out that work permits are required for all Syrians, which come at a cost.

Next, the book lays out Lebanon’s evolving responses to the refugee crisis, describing yearly “Regional Response Plans.” Before these plans were drafted, many Islamic charitable organizations and international organizations took the lead in assisting refugees, especially in the period around the start of the Syrian Civil War. Lebanon has since developed formal plans to consolidate humanitarian requirements and activities—providing access to asylum and protection from refoulment, ensuring basic needs are met, and undertaking contingency measures for mass influx. As the Syrian crisis intensified, Lebanese officials sought to address similar objectives on a large scale, and invested heavily in short, medium, and long-term tracks to accomplish goals—like restoring and expanding the economic and livelihood opportunities of refugees, building resiliency and equitable access to public services, and strengthening social cohesion.

Appropriately, the next chapter reviews the achievements and failures of the 2015–2016 response plan—the most recent one available to the author at the time of the writing of this book. Predictably, funding shortfalls were the cause of many of the plan’s shortcomings in the housing and financial assistance, education, health, and livelihood sectors. Housing assistance per family per month was \$100, and monthly food assistance per person was only \$27. Second, although schools supported 106,735 refugee children, this represented only half of the children who sought enrollment. Third, Lebanon renovated fifty-four primary healthcare centers and provided new medical equipment to 180 centers. However, 20 percent of Syrian refugees—which then amounted to 20,000 persons—were unable to access care. Finally, the livelihood sector is failing, as Syrian workers must be sponsored by Lebanese citizens who arrange work permits for them.

Unlike the aforementioned chapters of the book, which methodically provide context for

material in forthcoming chapters, Chapter 6 comes as a surprise. Rabil takes an interesting turn by entitling this chapter with a question: “Refugees and Terrorism: Culprits or Guilty by Association?” He starts by providing a background of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), describing it as a neutral actor in domestic and foreign affairs—but conceding that it has also been perceived as being a “Christian army” (74). Despite the strong sense of nationalism imparted by the LAF, Lebanon’s still-divided sense of national identity allows for the country to serve as a battle ground for many other countries—including Saudi Arabia, Iran, Syria, and Palestine and Israel.

Since Rabil does not provide much context in the earlier parts of the book, the questions of (1) how severe terrorism is among refugees and (2) how necessary such a chapter is for the central argument, are unclear. In the subsection of Chapter 6 entitled “Refugees and the Campaign of Terror,” Rabil goes so far as to assert that “most of the perpetrators [of recent car denotations across Lebanon] hailed from refugee camps or had deep contacts with the large Palestinian and Syrian refugee population in Lebanon” (100), suggesting that refugees are *not* guilty by association, but rather *culprits* of terrorism. For the first time, Rabil tips the scale of sympathy in the favor of Lebanon as a host country, rather than refugees. Although he supports the assertion that some refugees can be more susceptible to terrorist propaganda, he does not provide caution about this link. Indeed, his hasty approach to, and generalization of, such a sensitive topic risks undermining the entirety of his book—as some sources suggest that terrorist groups do not have a direct link to refugee indoctrination.³

In sum, the first five chapters of *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Double Tragedy of Refugees and Impacted Host Communities* provide an important introduction for all readers, especially those who are not familiar with the plight of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the struggles of host communities. In these chapters, Rabil is able to focus on the host community, while still paying respect to the hardships of refugees. However, Chapter 6 assumes a different tone, suggesting that refugees are culprits of terrorism in Lebanon. Rabil concludes by asserting that “[r]efugees have become rightly or wrongly a focus of disdain” among host communities in Lebanon (110). This book potentially polarizes both sides of this intense debate.

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³ Lizzie Dearden, *Parsons Green Attack: No Evidence Isis is Systematically Using Refugees for Terror Plots, Research Finds*, INDEPENDENT (Sept. 19, 2017, 11:17 PM), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/parsons-green-attack-isis-evidence-refugees-terror-plots-jihadis-terrorist-islamic-state-paris-a7955026.html>.