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False Narratives, Fatal Consequences

Disinformation and Violence Against Syrians in Lebanon

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The recent killing of Pascal Sleiman has triggered a fresh wave of racist violence across Lebanon. Since the abduction and murder of the Lebanese Forces politician near Byblos on April 9, 2024, the country has witnessed a horrifying escalation in hate speech and incitements to violence against Syrian refugees.

Alongside a marked increase in the number of checkpoints, the last two and half weeks have seen a spike in arrests, municipal curfews, thefts and hate attacks on Syrians by civilians; many Syrians have been forced to flee their

homes in fear of ultimatums by vigilante gangs. At least one Syrian refugee, Ali Abdulbaqi, died after being kidnapped and tortured while returning from work in Bint Jbeil, and two other young men from Al-Raqqa were subjected to assault and brutal torture. Many Syrians have become too scared to leave their homes.

The undercurrent of racism, incitement and scapegoating towards Syrians has become an all-too-familiar fact of life in Lebanon, where the Syrian community has been enduring recurring episodes of violence and oppression for the last decade.

It is important not to treat the murder of Pascal Sleiman, albeit a significant and tragic demise, as the sole cause of the violence which has followed. His death was indeed the catalyst for a wave of racial hatred, but this hatred did not spring from a vacuum. It would not have been possible to reach the current level of lawless racist violence - to the point where civilian gangs can threaten, kidnap and murder Syrians in the street with impunity - without the prolonged complicity of the Lebanese state and media in the incitement against Syrian refugees and the long-term campaign of disinformation which accompanied it. Theories abound as to who killed Sleiman and why, but for the purposes of the current attacks on Syrians, only one detail is relevant: that the perpetrators were Syrian, and therefore guilty by virtue of nationality.

Fake News and Fictional Families

The chaotic security situation has provided the perfect environment for disinformation to spread on social media, and there have been reports of **fake images and video**

tapes circulating in order to incite against Syrian refugees. The most egregious examples of disinformation, however, have come not from the general public, but from Lebanese media outlets and politicians.

No visitor to Lebanon in the last two months could have failed to notice the proliferation of a provocative advertising campaign on huge billboards across the country. “Undo the Damage - Before It’s Too Late”, the boards proclaim, while a subtitle explains, “The Syrian Displaced Issues Needs Immediate Actions” [sic].

The organisation behind the campaign appears to be the Lebanese NGO World House of Lebanon, with funding from MTV Lebanon, the Lebanese Chambers of Commerce, Industry and Agriculture, and the Lebanese Economic Organizations (a collective of Lebanese employers). It was developed by the company Phenomena - described on their [Facebook page](#) as a “creative ad boutique” - who have been using their social media pages to post video clips and publications to accompany the billboard campaign. The name, “Undo the Damage”, makes two puns: the first is a reference to the UN (which has taken a central role in Lebanese conspiracy theories about the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon). The second is a play on the Arabic word damj (integration), playing on the fears of many Lebanese that the continued presence of Syrians will change the demographic makeup of Lebanon, or even bring about the end of the Lebanese identity or the Lebanese nation.

The campaign relied heavily on disinformation and in particular on photos and videos purloined from different contexts or platforms. Many of the [videos](#), for example,

make the claim that Syrian refugees “constitute over 40% of the Lebanese population”. In the face of this “alarming fact”, it implores the Lebanese to “unite and act responsibly to rectify the situation.” In reality however, the official UNHCR estimate for the number of Syrian refugees as of December 2023 (including those not registered with UNHCR) stands at 1.5 million, equivalent to roughly 25% of the population (this is still an estimate, since no reliable statistics exist for the population of Lebanon.) This number is undoubtedly still large, and it does no good to pretend that the presence of a large refugee population does not cause strain on the infrastructure of a country; but the deliberate inflation of figures by the media and the governmentThe claim of 40% is based on figures published by the Lebanese General Security in 2023, stating that there are 2,080,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It has never disclosed how it arrived at this figure, or whether it includes all Syrian refugees or merely those registered with UNHCR. and the transparent attempt to place full responsibility for the collapse of Lebanon’s infrastructure on Syrian refugees is as dangerous as it is disingenuous.

One [video](#) in particular, posted on Phenomena’s Facebook page, stretches the bounds of credulity. A man speaking in voiceover narration in a Syrian accent explains that his name is Ibrahim, a Syrian refugee in Lebanon, and that he and his wife Afaf have seven children, with an eighth on the way – followed by the poignant slogan “Undo the Damage – before it is too late.” Upon closer inspection, however, every single photograph in the photo, including “Ibrahim”, his wife and children, is appropriated from another site or platform. The photographs of Ibrahim and six of the children are taken from the website Shutterstock, each taken in different years and in different locations, while the

photo of the seventh child is taken from a World Health Organization report from 2020, and the photograph of Afaf is taken from a publication by the local American newspaper The Milwaukee Independent. Not one single image was taken in Lebanon. Even the image of the refugee camp shown at the start of the video is a Shutterstock image of a refugee camp in Jordan.

In other words, “Ibrahim” and his family do not exist: they were deliberately fabricated for the purpose of preying on Lebanese fears of widespread demographic change in the country. It is no coincidence that this series of videos, in style and in substance, are strongly reminiscent of the **social media campaign** by the “National Campaign to Liberate Lebanon from the Syrian Demographic Occupation” Apparently since rebranded as the “National Campaign for the Return of Syrian Refugees”. led by Maroun al-Khawly, which also falsely used Shutterstock images to incite against Syrian refugees. Both are products of the same campaign of disinformation, and both had the desired effect of sowing fear, suspicion and hatred towards the Syrian refugee population.

By the time of Pascal Sleiman’s murder, there was minimal need to incite against Syrians: the groundwork had already been laid.



The infamous billboard poster, featuring a photograph of a Syrian refugee girl in the countryside of Idlib, taken by Syrian photographer Muhammad Bash and [posted on Shutterstock](#) on February 7 2023.

Scapegoating and Incitement

Lebanese politicians from across the spectrum have been united for quite some time in their calls to deport Syrian refugees, who present a useful scapegoat to hold responsible for the country's economic crisis. The narrative that Syria is now safe for return has aided their direct incitement against Syrian refugees. For example, Free Patriotic Movement leader Gebran Bassil recently warned of "the dangers of the presence of Syrian refugees and the disintegration of the state", while Samir Geagea threatened that "we [Lebanese] will become refugees in our homeland." Such fearmongering provides a useful distraction from the ruling class's own failures in managing the country. Incitement by Lebanese politicians is, to some extent, to be expected.

However, many Lebanese media outlets such as MTV and Aljadeed TV have recently shown themselves willing to partake in the demonization of Syrians by disproportionately reporting crimes committed by Syrians and mentioning the Syrian nationality of suspects in lieu of an accusation. By way of addressing the issue of disproportionate focus and the presentation of crimes committed by Syrians as a “series” rather than isolated incidents, the Mayor of Ashrafieh on MTV on April 1st stated that “We’re focusing on Syrians because crimes are only being committed by our Syrian brothers, with all due respect to the good people in Syria.”

The involvement of MTV in the “Undo the Damage” campaign points to a much closer alignment between the Lebanese state and Lebanese media, both of whom are complicit in the ongoing violence against Syrians in Lebanon. The murder of Sleiman may have sparked the latest attacks, but the longstanding campaign of disinformation and incitement provided fertile ground for racism long before.