

In search of safety: Syrian refugees' challenging access to legal stay in Lebanon

More than three years after fleeing the war in Syria and seeking refuge in Lebanon, Mahmoud's quest to find safety has not yet concluded. "Without valid residencies, no one can feel safe", said Mahmoud, 32.

"Sometimes, when we do not have any money or the most basic things we need as a family, returning to Syria seems like the only option to survive. My wife thinks about it all the time, but she knows it is not safe to return yet".

Mahmoud worries that his wife's thoughts of returning to Syria means he will have to be separated from his two daughters, as return is not an option for him at the moment.

"It is sad that we are pushed to choose between returning to a war torn country

and enduring the never ending challenges of being a refugee", said Mahmoud who cannot bear the thought of being separated from his family.

Mahmoud remembers how their life changed back in Syria after the war erupted: "We had to move homes three times. Life was very difficult and I was being called to join the army, and things did not get much better for us here in Lebanon.

Since arriving in Lebanon in late 2015, Mahmoud was not able to obtain legal residency and finding a sponsor continues to be a

major challenge for him, which is also the case for many other Syrian refugees in the country. "The process is not only very expensive but also very complicated. I am not able to find someone who would take on such a responsibility and go through all the hassle", said Mahmoud.

Every day and with every missed opportunity, Mahmoud feels the implications of lacking valid residency. "I have learned new skills and have good experience from my past jobs back in Syria; however, without legal stay I cannot manage to get a decent and stable job. I was released from my last job because the employer was no longer comfortable employing someone with no residency", he explained.

Without a stable income, Mahmoud and his family struggle to provide their basic needs. Having to pay 250 US Dollars every month for rent meant that the lit lamps and stoves for heating during winter became luxuries the family could not afford.

"My wife tried to find a job, but not having legal residency exposed her to all sorts of exploitation at work. After one grave incident, we both decided it was best for her to stay at home and take care of our babies."

"Opportunities to improve our living conditions might be available for us elsewhere in different parts of the country; however, we will never be able to find out because we cannot travel outside the village where we reside here in the Bekaa. As a father, sometimes I feel I let my wife and daughters down. But there's very little I could do to improve their situation".

Almost three quarters of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lack legal stay, which poses immense restrictions on refugees' mobility and access to services, and exposes them to heightened risks of arrest as well as exploitation.



Credit: Danish Refugee Council

“ Not having a valid residency not only leaves us in a difficult financial situation, but also makes us feel like criminals or fugitives who have to always be on the run ”