

Sudanese refugees in Lebanon - the overlooked community and its struggle with the UNHCR and Lebanese society
by Anja Pilchowski, July 2024



Nicolas Ibrahim Surssock street (see caption below)

The arrival of people from Sudan began in the 1950s and 1960s. During this period, the labour market in Lebanon, which was experiencing economic growth, was in need of workforce. This need coincided with the availability of labour from Sudan, particularly from North Sudan. Without the issue of obtaining a work visa, the boys and men from North Sudan were summoned to work in the homes of wealthy Lebanese politicians and businesspeople as domestic workers (L'Orient Today, 2023). Another phase of migration began in the late 1990s, at intervals that coincided with periods of instability and war in central and west Sudan, with the arriving people working in the hospitality and construction sectors (The Public Source, 2021; L'Orient Today, 2023). Since the people arriving at the end of the 1990s must be regarded as refugees or at least as forced migrants, registration with the UNHCR is an obvious step. In December 2011, 400 people from Sudan were registered with the UNHCR (UNHCR, 2011) and in August 2023 there were 2,296 (UNHCR, 2023). However, there are indications that all the while the number of Sudanese living in Lebanon is higher than the number registered. Between May and July 2022, the IOM counted 11,539 Sudanese residing in Lebanon as part of its Migrant Presence Monitoring programme (IOM, 2022). The people encountered live predominantly in Beirut, Baabda, El Meten, Aley, Sour, and Saida districts.

The low UNHCR figure is either due to the UNHCR's unwillingness to register people as refugees (Janmyr & Al-Saadi, 2023) or to the refusal of affected persons to be (furthermore) registered with the UNHCR, as they consider the UNHCR's support as

insufficient and insincere. Between 2014 and 2015 there was an attempt to establish an UNHCR supported Sudanese refugee committee to include refugee voices. However, Janmyr (2022b) found that the refugee committee rather served the UNHCR than the Sudanese refugees. It can be stated that the UNHCR has used the Sudanese refugee committee to showcase that it gives space to the voices of refugees - in reality, this attempt only served the maintenance of unequal structural power relations.

Registration with the UNHCR usually allows Sudanese people to enroll themselves and potential children in schools, receive modest financial support, and the possibility to be reallocated to other countries. The two organisations who can eventually resettle refugees from Lebanon to another country published no indications about how people can obtain access to resettlement. The UNHCR indicates that they determine who is eligible to be considered for resettlement. "UNHCR identifies refugees based on their protection needs and continuously reviews the situation of highly vulnerable families to assess whether they meet resettlement criteria. The assessment of protection needs is based on credible information received from refugees during their interactions with UNHCR and/or partners" (UNHCR, n.d.). The IOM "can provide logistical support to the resettlement states' authorities, thereby facilitating their selection missions as well as the visa processing and travel document procedures in the countries from where refugees are resettled" (IOM, n.d.). With the criteria remaining vague and no application for resettlement can be made, a lot of power remains in the hands of UNHCR and not with the people in need.

If life was already difficult before, it has become unbearable since 2019 for both the majority of Lebanese and the majority of refugees with a paralysed Lebanese economy and the outbreak of COVID-19. In December 2019, there were massive confrontations and protests in front of the UNHCR building in Beirut (Al-Saadi, 2020). The criticism towards the UNHCR Lebanon is similar to what was issued from refugees towards the UNHCR in Libya. After having been severely abandoned by the UNHCR Libya, refugees started a 100 days sit-in in October 2021 in front of the headquarters i.a. mainly demanding evacuations to lands of safety, justice and equality in terms of support among refugees and asylum seekers who are registered with the UNHCR, to call on Libya to sign and ratify the constitution of the 1951 Refugee Convention (Refugees in Libya, n.d.).

Janmyr & Al-Saadi (2023) published a graphic novel about people from Sudan and their realities in Sudan, during migration, and in Lebanon and especially about their experiences with the UNHCR Lebanon. The characters are fictional, however the output is based on a profound ethnographic research carried out in Beirut between 2015 and 2021 with protection seekers from Sudan. Janmyr & Al-Saadi (2023) illustrated several recurring UNHCR-related themes like: too small a quota of people being relocated, files have been closed without disclosing the reasons (and subsequently support has been revoked), the files and their contents are inaccessible even though they contain the

refugees' personal data, high-threshold accessibility as some are unable to travel to the UNHCR in the Jnah neighbourhood of Beirut or are denied entrance without an open file, the lack of legal remedies against UNHCR decisions.



UNHCR Lebanon building in Nicholas Ibrahim Surssock Street

Caption: On 15 July 2024, I went to the UNHCR building on Nicolas Ibrahim Surssock Street in the Jneih neighbourhood in Beirut. My aim was to take a photo of the UNHCR building. I politely approached the security staff and asked for permission. At first it was denied, but when I continued to insist, several people who were in a hierarchical relationship had to be approached to give their consent. Meanwhile I was asked the reason for wishing to photograph the building, what my profession is and where I am from. And while I was talking to a member of security staff, I was photographed without my consent or knowledge. I only realised that I was photographed because of the unique sound a certain phone makes while taking pictures. This prompted me to openly ask why I was being photographed just because I wanted to take a picture of the UNHCR building. The answer was "for security reasons".

In order to exist independent from the UNHCR and to work in Lebanon, people have to register with the Lebanese authorities. However, as most Sudanese have entered the country illegalised or became illegalised due to the non-renewal of visas, most of them do not have a residence permit. And Lebanon has not signed the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, which leaves Sudanese refugees in a precarious legal position. Without formal recognition, they are categorised as 'illegal migrants' and lack access to basic rights, like a work permit. The Lebanese General Security Directorate, responsible for residency permits, has stringent and often discriminatory policies that disproportionately affect Black African migrants. And Sudanese children born in Lebanon to parents without legal residency face significant challenges. Without proper identification documents, these children lack access to basic rights and services. Children without IDs cannot enroll in public schools, access healthcare, or obtain legal employment when they grow older. This lack of documentation perpetuates a cycle of poverty and marginalisation, severely impacting their future prospects and integration into society. These children are also at risk of arbitrary detention and deportation, as their undocumented status makes them highly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Due to racism and/or their illegalised statuses, people from Sudan never really mingled with the Lebanese majority society or other non-Black refugee communities and are facing exclusion and hostility on a regular basis (The Public Source, 2021; Janmyr, 2022a; L'Orient Today, 2023). In addition, most Sudanese are at risk of arbitrary arrest, detention and unlawful deportation as every other member of illegalised refugee/migrant communities in Lebanon. And most (i)NGOs focus on the support of Syrians, Palestinians, or migrants arriving within the Kafala system. Sudanese refugees might be few in numbers, but they still need the same support as every other marginalised community. “[Refugee] communities in Lebanon (...) face a universal problem (...): the systems established to help are neither representative of their needs nor do they actively develop refugees' social, political, and economic self-agency” (The Public Source, 2021). The systems also fail to address the root causes that led to these communities being vulnerable in the first place. Hence, Sudanese refugees navigate these structures by forming networks of care and interdependency (Reumert, 2020). However, due to limited resources, most Sudanese people exist from month to month making it impossible to generate savings or move further to other countries. Most also have/feel the obligation to send remittances to Sudan and support members of the Sudanese community in the diaspora in Lebanon as mentioned before. This became crucial once again after the outbreak of another war in Sudan in April 2023.

In order to enrich the article with several personal life stories, it was planned that at least three people from the Sudanese community in Beirut were interviewed, but only Tariq¹ was available².

Tariq arrived in Lebanon in 2010. He took a flight from Sudan to Syria and from there entered Lebanon illegalised on foot like many people from Sudan have done before him. Tariq chose Lebanon as his destination because other Sudanese people told him about the job opportunities here. However, Tariq was never able to legalise his residence in Lebanon. When life was already hard in Sudan, it has turned into yet another struggle for survival after his arrival in Lebanon. Tariq mentioned that he was checked several times by the Lebanese authorities for his papers but managed to navigate out of potential arrests and probably also from subsequent deportations. Tariq also never registered with the UNHCR because they refused to register him, as they considered the area, he came from to be safe³.



*Tariq

Instead, he tried to find work immediately within the shadow economy. Since his arrival, he has mainly worked in the cleaning sector, away from the public gaze and without any health insurance. Tariq explains that these jobs are predominantly held by Black migrants. He shares his 2-bedroom flat with three other men from Sudan. Over the past months Tariq and his flatmates were threatened with eviction multiple times, because the landlord was repeatedly asking for more rent. Which the tenants are unable to provide due to their precarious and poorly paid jobs. An eviction would not only mean that they would lose the roof over their heads, but also that they would not be able to transport the furniture

¹ The name has been changed to ensure data protection.

² For further readings on the realities of the Sudanese community in Lebanon, I recommend "Cardboard Camp. Stories of Sudanese Refugees in Lebanon" by Janmyr, M. & Al-Saadi, Y. (2023).

³ And later, after April 2023, he no longer saw any benefit in a registration.

they have painstakingly collected. Tariq explained that he has many other monetary obligations besides rent, such as sending money to his family who live in war torn Sudan and supporting members of the Sudanese diaspora in Lebanon. He has basically lived from month to month since his arrival.

Official medical treatments are not accessible due to his illegalised status. In case he is physically sick, he seeks support from doctors operating with (i)NGOs. Offers for maintaining mental health are not accessible at all. In order to calm his busy mind, Tariq usually goes on long bike rides through Beirut. Tariq explained that he has never truly approached an (i)NGO in Lebanon for long-term support. He said he does not trust them. He made the experience several times that (i)NGO employees have taken his personal data and promised support, but then never contacted him again.

For social gatherings, he used to go to the only Sudanese club in the Hamra neighbourhood of Beirut. However, he stopped going there for various reasons and now prefers to hold social gatherings in his shared flat. Former Lebanese co-workers never turned into friends and discontinued contact after he left the workplace. This means that the only social bubble he has been in since his arrival is the Sudanese diaspora in Lebanon.

Tariq says he is very tired of life in Lebanon. But since he cannot return to Sudan, he would like to move/relocate to a European country. Until now he has not yet found a suitable option.

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