

Established in 1955, northern Lebanon's [Baddawi refugee camp](#) is home to between 25,000 and 40,000 "established" Palestinian refugees. Like other Palestinian camps across Lebanon, it has long been violent and lawless. This summer, I conducted fieldwork there.

Such camps are outside Lebanese jurisdiction, and have commonly been referred to as "[islands of insecurity](#)". Nonetheless, the established residents of Baddawi camp have offered protection and assistance to tens of thousands of new arrivals from Syria since 2011.

These recent arrivals include Syrian nationals who have fled violence and persecution in their country, but also displaced Syrian-Palestinians and Iraqis. While they are new to Lebanon and Jordan when compared with "established" refugee communities, refugees from Syria are now officially categorised as "protracted" refugees. And for many hundreds of thousands of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, this is the [second, third or fourth time](#) that they have been displaced by conflict.

Baddawi is a stark reminder of the urgent reality of this crisis. We've been saturated with stories and images about the [refugee crisis](#) (really a [protection crisis](#)) in Europe – and yet the vast majority of refugees from Syria are still hosted by Syria's neighbouring countries. At the end of [August 2015](#), there were 1,114,000 in Lebanon, 630,000 in Jordan and 1,939,000 in Turkey.

European states and political parties are still debating how to respond to this crisis and where, with the UK [threatening](#) to redirect foreign aid to provide resources for local councils to house refugees in Britain. Meanwhile, since the very outbreak of the Syrian conflict, vital support has been given in [Lebanon](#), [Jordan](#) and [Turkey](#) by local communities and civil society groups.

Their diverse initiatives are clear examples of the importance of what has been called “[south-south humanitarianism](#)” – the assistance and protection offered by states, civil society groups and organisations from across the global south to people in need. This assistance both complements and at times directly challenges humanitarian efforts from wealthier countries and NGOs in the global north.

These local communities include Lebanese, [Jordanian](#) and Turkish citizens, but also [protracted refugees](#) who sought sanctuary in Lebanon and Jordan long before the outbreak of the Syrian conflict or the violence that has engulfed the region since 2010.

These refugees have been offering key forms of support and protection to “new refugees” from Syria through what I call “refugee-refugee humanitarianism”. By helping each other, refugees are defying the widely held assumption that refugees are passive victims who need outsiders to care for them. But these responses shouldn’t be idealised. However much they help each other, these refugees are still contending with terrible power imbalances, exclusion, and outright hostility. With established refugees already living precarious lives, we must ask how sustainable refugee-to-refugee assistance can really be.

## Arriving in the camp

Many refugees I spoke to explicitly named Baddawi as their destination from the outset of their journeys. Its residents have provided shelter, food and clothing, and in many ways the camp supersedes Lebanon at large as a place of safety. Indeed, in spite of the extreme poverty and armed conflict between the Palestinian factions that compete to control different parts of Lebanon’s camps, Baddawi is still seen as safer than many of the other spaces available outside it.

Figure: Safe and sound? Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Author provided

Part of that reputation stems from the solidarity among its residents. Established refugees in Baddawi camp and “new” refugees often have a great deal in common, providing strong foundations for this form of refugee-refugee support: they share the legal status of being refugees and an embodied understanding of the nature and impacts of violence, dispossession and displacement.

Sharing this space gives refugees an opportunity to form part of a broader refugee nation, to be with other refugees rather than arriving as strangers in a Lebanese city. But this does not mean that all refugees in Baddawi are positioned equally, have been equally welcomed, or have had equal access to the services and resources available.

In effect, a hierarchy of refugee-ness has emerged. Established residents consistently describe newer arrivals as “refugees”, clearly differentiating between the camps’ natives (the original, authentic ones) and the newcomers (somehow inauthentic and challenging the rights of “established” refugees). This parallels the increasing competition between established and new refugees, not only for limited space but also over increasingly scarce resources and jobs.

## The UN steps in

Both UN refugee agencies are working in Baddawi. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) provides assistance and protection to all refugees from Syria apart from Palestinians, while the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has a mandate to provide support only to Palestinian refugees.

Ever since UNHCR’s arrival in the camps, camp residents have transformed “UNHCR” into a verb, and talk about the camps having been “UNHCR-ised”. Through this process, Palestinians who had originally worked for UNRWA – the main employer in the camps – have moved, where possible, to UNHCR positions,

which are more highly paid than UNRWA roles. That means established Palestinian refugees who used to provide help to other Palestinians in the camp through UNRWA are now helping Syrian refugees by working for UNHCR.

But both institutions are struggling to provide meaningful support to the expanding population, and all the camp's residents are suffering as a result.

Figure: Making it work. Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Author provided

Many refugees from Syria arrived in the camp with some savings and basic items to sell and barter, but these can only be stretched so far. Indeed, sources of local assistance for Palestinians from Syria have become even more urgent after UNRWA was forced, in May 2015, to [suspend its cash assistance](#) to help accommodate the more than 43,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria who are currently seeking sanctuary in Lebanon.

So the need for local support has only become more acute, but with Baddawi's already limited services and infrastructure so under-resourced, established camp residents and local organisations are increasingly running out of resources to support both new refugees and their own immediate families.

On the one hand, this is leading to tension and insecurity among and between [new and established groups of refugees](#) in Baddawi, as has often happened in refugee situations [around the world](#). Many of my "new" and "established" interviewees told me that recent arrivals are often abused and exploited by local service providers.

Sadly, different forms of abuse are common across refugee situations around the world, where men, women and children are subjected to human rights violations by other refugees, [international aid providers](#), and [international peacekeepers](#) alike.

## Solidarity and insecurity

Refugee-refugee humanitarianism is filling a glaring gap, offering material, emotional and spiritual support to people who've been displaced by the Syrian conflict, often for the second or third time. But it's also becoming increasingly unsustainable.

The initial sense of solidarity that greeted "new" Palestinian arrivals at Baddawi camp has started to ebb. Established refugees are questioning the implications of hosting newer refugees, and are wary of the UNHCR-isation of the camps. As established residents begin to focus on their own situations again, welcome is giving way to detachment. This has shifted to a response that has embodied, at best, the "unwelcoming" of "new refugees", and at worst, overt hostility and violence.

Without meaningful international support for both "new" and "established" refugees, the fast-approaching winter will reveal the unsustainability of life and living, livelihoods and local responses in such a context of widespread, and overlapping, precariousness.