Before their sweat dries: labour and family in the Syrian refugee camps of the Bqa’a valley, Lebanon

Jacob Cassani
UCL
Submitted for the requirements of Research Degree: Institute for Global Prosperity (PhD) on the 1st of September 2022
Declaration Page

I, Jacob Cassani, confirm that the work presented in my thesis is my own. Where information has been derived from other sources, I confirm that this has been indicated in the thesis.

Signature:
Abstract

This thesis is concerned with the social life of the Syrian refugee camps of the Biqa’a valley, Lebanon. It argues that the organisation and reproduction of cheap wage-labourers is central to understanding both life in the camps and their relationship with neighbouring towns and villages. Syrian refugee labour is shown to be essential to capitalist agrarian production in the Biqa’a valley. Furthermore, the thesis demonstrates how the social structures which have emerged in this context are based on an accommodation between pre- and non-capitalist family and gender norms and a capitalist regime of production. Rather than challenging one another, a mutually reinforcing accommodation has been found between patriarchal structures of power and the exploitation of cheap labour. The control and organisation of wage labour is outsourced to family structures and founded on extensive unwaged female domestic labour. Based on 17 months of participant observation in one camp and village, this thesis uses ethnographic methods to demonstrate the centrality of labour to Syrian encampments in the Biqa’a valley. It gives a historical overview of pre-Syrian Civil War circular migration, and then addresses specific aspects of camp life and labour organisation. Through thick qualitative analysis, it shows the centrality of labour to camp-village communication, family organisation, Lebanese landownership and usage patterns, non-governmental organisations, and regional mobility. It further argues that wage labour is discursively devalued and comes into tension with other normative hierarchies and shows how this tension is expressed through irony and humour. The thesis concludes by arguing that this accommodation between pre- and non-capitalist socio-cultural norms and capitalist modes of production is normal, rather than exceptional. It constitutes an organic manifestation of capitalist development which is contingent on local context and does not follow the traditional Marxist European trajectory.
Impact statement

This thesis offers important insight into participant observation methodology. It explains the centrality of the researcher being cast into ‘roles’ while conducting fieldwork, and the ways that these are often a function of local ideological considerations. It also explains how fieldwork often entails unavoidable participation in hierarchical power structures. It explores new ethical considerations in light of these methodological findings, but also how they can be original and important sources of data. The methodological reflections on the role of identity offer a previously articulated reflection on the fluid nature of the researcher’s identity, which will be important for research training both at UCL and elsewhere. Findings will be disseminated through the researcher’s teaching at UCL and through an academic publication based on Chapter II (currently underway).

This thesis makes several important empirical contributions which will have wide-ranging impacts. The Syrian refugee crisis is the defining regional event for a generation in the Levant region, and this thesis is one of the first long-term ethnographic accounts of refugee camp life. As such it will be an invaluable resource for future academic, journalistic and policy-based work in the future. Humanitarian organisations’ interventions will be guided by the findings of this thesis, and also through collaboration with the researcher as a consultant and advisor. Furthermore, it is the first academic account of hashish production in the Levant region, and so represents a ground-breaking new turn to studies of drug production in the region. It is a key resource for journalists and documentary film-makers wishing to document the area, as well as policy-makers looking for pathways to future legalisation and regularisation of the narcotics trade. More generally, this thesis is at the forefront of movement to recentre labour in studies of the Middle East. It demonstrates labours’ centrality to the economics of the refugee crisis and so guides future humanitarian and development interventions.

This thesis will have the important impact of reconciling classical Marxist-inspired studies of class with the fundamentally important insights of gender studies. It coherently articulates the granular processes by which labour-market regimes are premised on familial and domestic gendered practices, and the cultural contingency of these structures. This research puts these findings into discourse with other contexts of rural capitalist exploitation, and so contributes to the de-exceptionalising of the Middle East in studies of contemporary capitalism and also to countering eurocentricity from our understandings of capitalist development.

Impact will occur through article dissemination – this thesis is already the basis for two publications in their final stages. Several other publications are underway for key disciplinary journals and edited volumes, in collaboration with several other scholars working in related fields. This will ensure that the findings of this thesis are incorporated into the essential reading lists and teaching materials for the region and topic. Furthermore, the research findings have formed the basis for presentations at three workshops and conferences, with several more planned in the academic year 2022/23. Findings will also be disseminated via author interviews on discipline-related podcasts.
‘Pay the worker his due before his sweat dries’

- Imam Ali Ibn Talib
# Table of Contents

*Declaration Page* .......................................................................................................................... 2  
*Abstract* ......................................................................................................................................... 3  
*Impact statement* .......................................................................................................................... 4  
*List of figures* .................................................................................................................................. 7  
*Acknowledgements* ......................................................................................................................... 8  
*Note on transliterations* .................................................................................................................. 10  
I - *Introduction* ................................................................................................................................ 11  
II – ‘What are you doing here?’: suspicion, identity, and participant observation ..................... 37  
III – ‘They came before’: histories of circular labour migration between Syria and the Biqa’a valley ................................................................................................................................. 67  
IV - Bread and salt: labour, partnerships and trust ........................................................................ 109  
V – Family business: Syrian work teams ............................................................................................ 129  
VI – ‘We used to work’: Lebanese peasant capitalists and Biqa’a masculinity .................... 157  
VII - Organisations that don’t work: NGOs, the League of Syrian Arab Workers, and community support boxes ............................................................................................................. 196  
VIII - On the move: Syrian lived geography between the camps of the Biqa’a .................... 225  
IX - ‘They laughed at us’: humour and ideological critique in the case of Syrian labour . 254  
X - Conclusion .................................................................................................................................... 285  
XI - Glossary of Arabic terms ........................................................................................................... 298  
XII – Bibliography .............................................................................................................................. 304
List of figures

Figure 1 - Syrian camp dwellers attend a funeral in the village 20
Figure 2 - A typical, medium-sized Syrian refugee camp in the Biqa’a valley 34
Figure 3 - Stamps used by the hashish farmers to mark their product dating back to the 1970s 47
Figure 4 - The plains and mountains of the Biqa’a Valley 53
Figure 5 - A view of the Ba’albeck, one of the major cities of the valley 72
Figure 6 - An old metal-framed tent used when migration was seasonal 82
Figure 7 - One of the older Syrian men of the camp, who had been coming to Lebanon for decades 90
Figure 8 - A young Syrian man and his daughter in their tent 102
Figure 9 - A Syrian labourer waters a field of hashish 111
Figure 10 - A Syrian sharecropper stands with his fields of potatoes 117
Figure 11 - A Syrian shaweesh buys grain for his sheep 121
Figure 12 - A mid-sized work-team gathers the cut and dried hashish from the 124
Figure 13 - Two Syrian cousins dig irrigation channels in an orchard 133
Figure 14 - A Syrian man records the hours of his work team, which mostly consists of his extended family 141
Figure 16 – A Syrian father and son process the hashish in a karaj 144
Figure 17 - Two younger village men 173
Figure 18 - Machinery used to process hashish 178
Figure 19 - A family of Lebanese landowners and a family of Syrian wage-labourers harvest the potato crop together 190
Figure 20 - A truck arrives to distribute tent materials from the UN and an INGO 206
Figure 21 - The men of the camp discuss the distribution of good NGO work between the households and negotiate with the Lebanese project coordinator 212
Figure 22 - A Syrian man sits on his motorcycle 230
Figure 23 - A Syrian man cuts wood that he has just transported on his motorbike 237
Figure 24 - A Syrian couple pose for photos at their wedding 245
Figure 25 - Two Syrian sheep traders discuss their flocks 248
Figure 26 - Freshly made preserves dry out in the sun, made by the women of the camp 276
Figure 27 - Piles of hashish dry in the sun on the plains of the valley 292
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank several people for helping me to complete this thesis. Firstly, I am grateful to Marie Odgaard, who first introduced me to anthropology and made me realise that ethnography was what I had been doing all along. I would like to thank Nora Stel for her guidance and discussions throughout my doctorate – our regular conversations have been a real breath of fresh air over the past few years. I must also thank China Sajadian for our countless discussions about the Syrian camps of the Biqa’a, where we compared our field sites and findings. It was her work that inspired me to participate in manual labour with my interlocutors, which was key to the success of this thesis. Thanks also go to Mark Ball for the countless coffee morning chats that we had during my write-up period and for reading my thesis. His comments on my writing and our discussions were really useful in clarifying my argument on the page and in my head.

I would like to thank the organisers and participants of the Beirut Workshop on Labour in the Middle East which I participated in in 2022, but especially Rima Majed and John Chalcraft. It was an inspirational experience to work with so many other researchers and academics with shared interests. I am thankful to the University of Gothenburg Program on Governance and Local Development (GLD) for their funding support for my fieldwork, and for their help in editing and publishing the working paper which was to become the foundation for my thesis.

Thanks go to my two supervisors, Christopher Harker and Lucia Michelutti, for their guidance over the course of this project. I am also grateful to those administrators and staff members at UCL that helped me to navigate the opaque bureaucracy of UK higher education and to stretch truths and bend rules in order to complete my research.

My main interlocutors remain anonymous in this thesis, but needless to say a special thanks is due to those Syrian and Lebanese men and women who took it upon themselves to guide me through their worlds and opened their homes to me. I am especially grateful to Boutros Kattoura and Hassan Shreif for the many evenings spent discussing and correcting my understandings of Lebanese culture, economics, politics, and family relations, and to their families for their generous hospitality.
Last but not least, thanks to my family for supporting me throughout my doctorate. A special thank you goes my mum, for reading and correcting so many early drafts of my work.
Note on transliterations

My interlocutors spoke almost entirely in Lebanese and Syrian Arabic dialects, and I have followed Deeb and Harb (2013) in using an extremely simplified system for transliterating Arabic. I have omitted indications of long and short vowels and distinctions between hard and soft letters. An apostrophe (’) is used to indicate the letters ‘ayn and hamza. I trust that specialist readers will be able to use the context to follow my transliterations. Proper names and place names are written in their commonly accepted English spellings (eg. Hizbollah, Beirut, Ali) and untranslated Arabic words are indicated in italics. All translations (and mistakes) are my own unless otherwise noted.
I - Introduction

‘The Imam Ali Ibn Talib said, “Pay the worker his due before his sweat dries,” But here, they steal your blood, and you still don’t get your due.’ – Abu Taymour, a Syrian refugee-labourer

This thesis studies the social life of the Syrian refugee camps of the Biqa’a valley. I argue that wage labour is the central organising feature of both life inside the camps and their relationship with neighbouring Lebanese towns and villages. The necessities of wage labour and the reproduction of the labourer, both materially and culturally, were the central organising and bounding structures of life in the camps. Other social structures and logics were also present, such as the family and the tribe, and their normative and practical requirements appeared to diverge from the requirements of capitalist wage labour. However, my fieldwork showed that these two social structures were deeply intertwined with labour reproduction and organisation, and their relationship tended to be one of mutual reinforcement. The ease and flexibility by which traditional Syrian family practices and capitalist wage labour cohabitated, and the similarities with numerous other cases of rural capitalism indicates that this coexistence should be considered the norm.

The labour system of this region of the Biqa’a was one characterised by constant, systematic labour insecurity on the part of both the employers and the workers. Almost all wage labourers were Syrian, to the extent that ‘Syrian’ was synonymous with ‘wage labourer’. Already a marginalised and exploited group in Lebanon prior to the Syrian Civil War, migrant labourers stuck in the ‘invisible cage’ (Chalcraft, 2009) became refugees in an even more insecure position. Their loss of a home to return to, punitive legal and extra-legal measures, and the huge influx of refugees following the war has further weakened the already precarious position of (Syrian) labour in Lebanon. Refugees have some supplementary income and subsidies from international organisations, the Syrian state, and other family sources, but these have steadily declined and at the time of my fieldwork, camp inhabitants were largely reliant on wages for their subsistence. The weak position of labour in the Biqa’a meant that late and non-payment of wages was very common, and this was underpinned by a general latent threat of violence, arrest, and eviction. This created an environment of opposition between Syrian labour and Lebanese employers and capital owners. The gendered division of
labour and the seasonal nature of agricultural work meant that the year was characterised by alternating bouts of unemployment and labour shortages. Gender norms and patriarchal structures were strongly implicated in what kind of labour was available, who it was available to, and where. Women and children constituted the majority of the labour force, and undertook a majority of the tasks associated with agricultural production. Men were predominantly employed in construction, specific agricultural work, and as labour organisers.

The cumulative result of these factors was a system of deep intertwining between family networks and labour organisation and reproduction. Family units and relationships were harnessed as the basis for labour organisation and motivation. Household patriarchal norms were transferred to the fields, and conditioned the ways that wages were earned, distributed, and understood. Extended family networks were central to the continued reproduction of the labour force, sharing wages and non-wage benefits, cushioning against periods of unemployment and taking advantage of periods of high demand for labour, and reducing the costs of food and childcare. These considerations clearly deeply influenced decisions concerning marriage, settlement, children and education. The refugee-labourers of the Biqa’a were highly mobile and invested considerable time and money into maintaining a parallel Syrian geography of the valley. Continued and renewed attachment to home-villages in Syria was important to maintaining these family networks and so the social reproduction of the labour force.

This research project thus makes the empirical contribution of providing one of the first long-term, ethnographic accounts of life in Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon. This mass forced migration has been the defining social and political event in the Levant for a generation, but the social structures of these camps and their relationships with neighbouring Lebanese communities has yet to be comprehensively documented on a granular level.

This thesis makes its theoretical contribution by engaging with three separate but related debates. These are discussed in detail in the ‘Key Debates’ section (later in this chapter), but I will here give a brief overview of these pillars of my theoretical analysis. The first theoretical discussion which grounds my ethnographic work is that of labour, class and power. My thesis
contributes to the broader project of articulating a history and theory of capitalism which is not premised on a Eurocentric, linear view of material development (Chalcraft, 2005). Specifically, it addresses how these economic relations are manifest in rural households and communities which are more or less fully integrated into global capitalist relations of production (Bernstein, 2006). It builds on previous work which does this in the Middle East, such as classic historical accounts of labour (Beinin, 2001; Beinin & Lockman, 1998; Chalcraft, 2004; Lockman, 1994) and more recent, varied approaches to economic transformation (Beinin et al., 2020; Chalcraft, 2009, 2011; Hanieh, 2013; Proudfoot, 2022; Seikaly, 2015). It thus constitutes a reframing and a partial answer to the ‘Agrarian Question’ of rural capitalism (Ajl, 2021; Bernstein, 2006), explaining the commercial agriculture of the Biqa’a valley as a piece of the global history of capitalism with connections and similarities to other contexts, rather than an exceptional system.

The second framing concerns the fundamentally important role played by families, kinship and gender. This thesis responds to Joseph’s (2018) call for a critical account of the Arab family, and follows her in unpicking the granular details of power relationships between individual family members. It takes seriously her claim that the family is the primary unit of political and economic security, identity, and labour forces in the Middle East, and analyses how these identities and practices are manifest in a context of wage labour organisation. It further builds on Hammam’s argument that the gendered division of labour is central to shaping modes of production which emerged in the Middle East (Hammam, 1986) and how the expansion of wage labour to women can facilitate their oppression and reinforce patriarchal hierarchies. I also deploy the recent analytic innovations made by Social Reproduction Theory (SRT), which argues that a coherent account of capitalist modes of production also requires a holistic explanation of the social reproduction of the labourer (Bhattacharya, 2017). Socially reproductive labour, as opposed to labour geared towards the production of commodities, often takes place within the home and is unwaged and highly gendered. By employing SRT, this thesis thus offers a framework to understand the familial, gendered, and community work which goes into reproducing the labour force and put it into discourse with traditional Marxist analysis of capitalism.
The third theoretical contribution deals with the social marginality of refugees and camps. In contrast to the previously dominant framing of the refugee camp as a ‘space of exception’ (Agamben, 2005), this thesis sees the Syrian refugee population as having active political agency and explains the dense network of social relations that constitutes the camp. It understands the Syrian forced migration and encampment as part of a broader socio-historical trajectory which is inextricable from the capitalist development of the region. In doing so, it demonstrates that gendered and class identities may be more appropriate approaches through which to understand practices of encampment than ‘refugee-ness’.

This thesis combines these theoretical debates with long-term ethnographic description to give much-needed account of the social structure of rural society in the Middle East (Obeid, 2019), and gives ‘noncapitalist practices historical agency in political-economic transformation’ (Chalcraft, 2005, p.25). In so doing, it coherently articulates the practices of capitalists and labourers in rural Lebanon in the context of globalised markets and local cultural practices.

**The research project**

My primary field site and the main source of most of the data in this thesis is a small refugee camp and neighbouring village in hidden in the mountains of the Biqa’a to the northwest of Ba’albeck. This network of villages constitutes the main hashish farming region of the valley, and has a high level of autonomy from the formal state apparatus. My research took this camp and village as a starting point and followed the lives of the villagers and camp inhabitants for more than a year, following their family networks throughout the Biqa’a. There are thousands of similar pairings of rural villages and neighbouring camps which provide the wage-labour for Lebanese owned capitalist enterprise, each with its own regional specificity and history, and this thesis is an in-depth, qualitative case study of one of these couplings. While the specificities which emerge through my ethnography may vary from case to case across Lebanon, my research indicates that the broad structural mechanisms outlined above constitute a clear starting point for understanding life in the camps and intercommunal relations.
The villages of Biqa’a valley are not in a state of transition from some pre-capitalist to agricultural capitalist system. The region has been subject to large scale capitalist enterprises for decades, and peasant subsistence farming all but disappeared at least two generations ago. Likewise, wage-labour migration has been a central component of rural Syrian life for generations, and it is culturally normalised and a central pillar in the social reproduction of village life in Syria. The refugee crisis, then, represents on the one hand a dramatic and traumatic event for these communities, but on the other hand fits into pre-existing labour-migratory networks and practices (Al-Khoder, 2017; Sajadian, 2020). Rather than identifying a seismic cultural shift, my fieldwork shines a light on, despite apparent conflict, the coexistence and indeed mutual reinforcement of the exploitation of migrant wage labour and the patriarchal family structure.

When I initially conceived of this research project, I envisaged fieldwork focussed on the figure of the *shaweesh*, a sort of labour organiser and refugee camp manager. As my participant observation progressed, I found that while the *shaweesh* did indeed play an important role in the camps of the Biqa’a, this role varied greatly and was symptomatic of the social structure which arose from the more fundamental mechanisms of labour-capital relations. Rural capital’s demand for a pliable labour force reverberated far beyond the flourishing of *shaweesh*-like middlemen, and this research project traces these forces as they interact, conflict, and find accommodation with other foundational social structures – namely, the family.

Put very simply, then, the questions this thesis asks are: how is life organised in the marginalised communities of Syrian encampments of the Biqa’a valley? What structures their relationship with neighbouring Lebanese communities? What implications does this have for our understanding of rural communities like these more generally? The answer that I have found through my fieldwork was: the organisation of these social relations was conditioned by an interaction between labour organisation and exploitation, and context-specific patriarchal family norms and networks. The accommodation between these two distinct social structures, of course, requires some unpacking – and this is the job of this thesis.

**The main arguments**
This thesis makes three interrelated arguments simultaneously. I present them here in ascending order of theoretical abstraction:

1. Syrian refugees constitute a rural wage labour force, whose manageability is essential to the functioning of the capitalist economy of the valley. Labour organisation and the social reproduction of this workforce are centrally important to the organisation of life in the camps and in their relationship to neighbouring Lebanese villages.

2. The necessities of organising and reproducing this labour force interacts with distinct context-specific social practices surrounding the patriarchal family and nationality. The logics of wage-labour do not exist in a vacuum, but must find accommodation with these other social structures. Despite superficial instances of conflict, an accommodation has been found, whereby exploitation of wage-labour and patriarchal family structures and gender norms constitute a mutually reinforcing set of social practices.

3. This intertwinement between capitalist wage-labour exploitation and context-specific social practices reflects a more general characteristic of rural capitalist development. Instead of the wholesale upheaval of social structures, adaption and accommodation are found where these structures can be made to facilitate wage labour exploitation. Extensive and striking parallels with other cases of marginalised workers in rural capitalism in very different contexts supports this assertion.

The first and second of these arguments are made very explicitly throughout this ethnography. As each chapter deals with a distinct aspect of social life in the camps and villages of the Biqa’a, arguments one and two are made with regards to that specific area of interest. In this sense, these chapters can be seen as standalone arguments, showing the centrality of labour organisation and reproduction and the accommodation with patriarchal family structures in relation to the specific area that is dealt with in that chapter. These distinct strands constitute a broader ethnography of life in the camps, which are brought together in the conclusion. The third argument, being more general, is implicit throughout these individual ethnographic chapters, and is returned to in the conclusion.
The structure of this thesis is as follows: the remainder of this chapter situates my research in the broader academic literature. It puts my research into discourse with three broad strands of academic debate. First and foremost, I explore work on labour and rural economic development from a range of disciplines. I consider the debate surrounding the ‘Agrarian Question’ and focus on works which have addressed the accommodation between capitalist modes of production and distinct social practices. The Middle East has been relatively absent from this debate, and I consider the reasons for this, and note the centrality of marginalised populations to this theorisation. I then consider the state of research into the family in the region, and how this interacts with practices and norms of gender. Work on family practices in the Middle East has demonstrated its fundamental and distinctive importance as an organising political institution in the region, but the relationship between the family and economic production is understudied. Finally, I consider refugee governance, I give an overview of work on refugee camp governance and the relationship between these populations and the labour market.

Chapter II concerns the methodology of this research project and is divided into two parts. The first part concerns my participant observation and data collection. I give an account of the steps taken to undertake my fieldwork in what can be understood as a ‘hostile environment’ and a place of high intercommunal tensions, where reputation management is essential to safe data collection. I consider the ethical concerns and obstacles to fieldwork, and the steps taken to mitigate these. This chapter highlights the importance of joining my interlocutors in the fields as a labourer and considers how these factors may have influenced the knowledge produced by this thesis. The second half of this chapter is an in-depth consideration of the impact of a researcher’s positionality and the ‘roles’ which I was cast in by my interlocutors. I consider how this affected my fieldwork and the implications for Middle Eastern fieldwork more generally.

Chapter III is the first ethnographic chapter, which situates my field site within a longer historical narrative of labour and migration. It gives a brief political, social, and economic history of the Biqa’a valley and Lebanon more broadly, and a countrywide overview of the impact of the Syrian Civil War and subsequent refugee crisis. It demonstrates the centrality of migrant labour to the profitability of agricultural enterprises and its relationship with
nationalism and a pliant labour force. It shows how many of the Syrian encampments are based on pre-existing networks of circular labour migration which came into existence at least a generation before the Syrian Civil War. The refugee crisis has both disrupted these practices, but also built upon them.

Chapter IV addresses work agreements between Syrian refugee-labourers and Lebanese landowners. It shows how these agreements take place in a highly insecure labour environment which increases the importance of developing trusting, long-term partnerships and clientelist linkages between individuals (usually male heads of household). It also explores the importance of Lebanese farmers maintaining a reputation as haqqani (trustworthy), and how these relationships spill over into other aspects of camp and village life. I argue that this valorisation of these partnerships builds on the mirrored characteristics of the two communities: Lebanese villagers as property owners able to use their social position to grant protection, and Syrian refugees as labourers able to navigate the social landscape of the camp to organise labour teams.

Chapter V offers an in-depth analysis of the warsheh (work team) as a social unit. I show how the Syrian work teams which undertake most the agricultural and construction labour in the Biqa’a are reliant on family networks and normative practices, and this directly affects wages, labour force pliability, and profitability. I argue that this confluence between Syrian family practices and wage labour has the effect of reinforcing, rather than challenging patriarchal norms, and increasing the potential for labour exploitation.

Chapter VI addresses the other side of the labour-capital relationship in the Biqa’a, focussing on the specific requirements of Lebanese landed property owners. It considers the socio-economic structures conditioning Lebanese farmer’s reliance on Syrian refugee labour, and shows how deeply Biqa’a ideals of the good life are associated with property ownership. I then explore how this conditions the identity and choices made by villagers, particularly in the context of a specific rural Biqa’a masculinity.

Chapter VII analyses the few formal institutions that were present in my field site and shows how their scope of action is conditioned by the need to maintain and reproduce a rural labour
force. It considers the relative impotence of organisations such as non-governmental organisations (NGOs), municipalities, and the security apparatus in the governance of refugee camps and explores the ways that they do not fulfil or often even seem to be trying to achieve their stated goals. Rather, they respond to and reinforce social relations based on the demands of rural labour and capital.

Chapter VIII is an ethnographic account of an often unremarked upon aspect of Syrian refugee life, that of intercamp mobility, and its central role in labour organisation and reproduction. This chapter shows how in the absence of formal institutions, extended tribal-family networks spread through the camps and towns of the Biqa’a valley and beyond serve to facilitate the social reproduction of labour. I demonstrate how the mobility practices of Syrian refugees between the camps enables the reproduction of a wage labour force in conditions of instability by spreading costs and benefits across family networks and creating a responsive pool of unemployed workers to be drawn upon in times of shortage.

Chapter IX turns to how these capitalist labour practices are understood, performed, and critiqued discursively by my Syrian and Lebanese interlocutors. I analyse how my interlocutors discussed wages, work and debt, and focus on the role of humour as Syrians and Lebanese showed their understanding of the tensions between capitalist labour practices and other norms of hospitality and family. They expressed this through ironical joking, which is simultaneously subversive, but also reinforces the ideological structures which enable their exploitation.

Chapter X concludes, drawing these previous seven strands together. It reiterates my central thesis in the context of the ethnographic data that I have collected and reflects on the underlying mechanisms at work. It further considers the implications of these findings for broader anthropological and social science theory and research and draws linkages and parallels with other similar cases of agricultural capitalism throughout the world.
Key debates

This section situates my thesis in the context of the three major theoretical discussions introduced above and shows how my work builds on previous scholarship on the region and elsewhere.

1. Labour, class, and power

This thesis is first and foremost a study of labour relations in agrarian capitalism, and as such draws from and builds on an extensive body of scholarship on rural political economies and peasant communities. It seeks to describe in granular detail the actually existing social relations that constitute rural capitalism in the Biqa’a valley, with a special focus on labour. In doing so, it builds on an extensive body of similar work, which generally frames this issue in the context of transition from a pre-capitalist mode of production to one of fully fledged
capitalist agriculture. While this thesis is more concerned with a thick qualitative account of the present, rather than mapping and categorising historical pathways, it is important to understand the theoretical genealogy upon which it is building.

Agrarian capitalist development has been a distinct theme since the origins of Marxist scholarship. In sketching out his historical model of the development of English agrarian capitalism, Marx articulated what has been termed an ‘enclosure’ model (Bernstein, 2006), whereby ‘emergent capitalist landed property and landed capital displace predatory landed property and dispossess the peasantry’ (p.450). This stylized model was quickly subject to refinement and debate in early Marxist scholarship, and discussion of the way that this transformation takes place has come to be known as ‘the Agrarian Question’. This question, in its early Marxist form, can roughly be understood as trying to understand the role of the rural in the transition to capitalism, and can be seen as dealing with rural class relations, social shifts in peasant society, agrarian capital accumulation, and its relationship to industrialisation (Bernstein, 2016). It was in part through answering these questions that researchers recognised that ‘paths to capitalism are diverse, non-linear, and historically contingent’ (Bair et al., 2019, p.394) and that these could in turn condition the social relations that emerged in a fully capitalist economy.

The Agrarian question has been reformulated in the wake of the experience of newly independent colonial countries and the global south from the 1970s onwards. In his framing of the Agrarian Questions in the context of the Arab region, Ajl (2021) points out the continued political salience of rural populations to national politics, conflict and struggle to reproduce the rural social structure, and industrial development. More generally, granular ethnographies of labour are lacking in the Levant, both in urban and rural areas. In his comprehensive review of the state the academic study of labour and the working classes in the Middle East, Jones (2015) shows a notable absence of working class history when compared with other global contexts. He blames this primarily on the growing institutional interest in political Islam. Most earlier canonical work such as that of Beinin and Lockman (1998) predominantly deals with urban, industrial and craft contexts. Anderson (2016) repeats this picture, but instead lays the blame at the feet of the ‘politics of notables’ paradigm, and this critique is echoed by Ajl (2021) who focuses on questions of imperialism.
The absence of accounts of the Levantine rural working class in recent decades is striking when seen in comparison to regions such as Latin America and South East Asia, and further still when Syrian regime’s self-conscious cultivation of a ‘peasant’ identity is taken into account (Batatu, 2012).

This is reflected in more general anthropological overviews of the state of research in the Arab world: Deeb and Winegar (2012, p.540) called for a corrective to the general trend to focus on the urban and upper/middle classes at the expense of the rural and working class. This call is echoed by Obeid (2019, p.18) whose work focuses on the continued central political and economic of the family in rural, marginal regions of Lebanon. In many ways these recent calls are a restatement of Abu-Lughoud’s calls for economic anthropology and the study of peasant communities in the Middle East a generation earlier (1989, p.299).

Parallel to these regional debates, there has been a growing realisation of the possibility of the coexistence of non-capitalist modes of production with wage labour, and oftentimes a deep intertwinement between the two, which required explanation. Early Marxist anthropologists such as Meillassoux (1981), Godelier (1977) and Rey (1979) recognised this and attempted to use their ethnographic data to resolve this blind spot in Marxist theory. The interaction between the pre-capitalist family structure and changing relations of production was made central to these studies, and indeed many other accounts of rural political economy and capitalist development. In-depth studies of social formations that actually existed at different historical moments complicated the idea of one ‘mode of production’, and indicated that rural economies often elided straightforward categorisation as ‘agrarian capitalism’ or ‘pre-capitalist’ (Akram-Lodhi & Kay, 2016). This was clear in studies of labour, where the coexistence of peasant producers and capitalist wage-labour, often in the same household, emerged as a very common and durable phenomenon (Roseberry, 1978; Worby, 1995). The organisation and social reproduction of labour emerges as an important lacuna in building a general theory of rural capitalism which corresponds to ethnographic case studies.

Bernstein (2006) notes that since at least the 1970s, global capitalism has permeated former colonized territories with capitalist social relations of production – rural communities have internalised capitalist social relations in the organization of (rural) economic and these
economies are deeply embedded in international divisions of labour, markets, and circuits of capital and commodities (p.454). He points out that this has led to a situation where classes of labour ‘pursue their reproduction... through insecure and oppressive - and in many places increasingly scarce - wage employment, often combined with a range of likewise precarious small-scale farming and insecure "informal sector" ("survival") activity, subject to its own forms of differentiation and oppression along intersecting lines of class, gender, generation, caste, and ethnicity’ (p. 455). He proposes that the new ‘Agrarian Question’ of the twenty-first century concerns a crisis of social reproduction of labour, brought about by increasing fragmentation and collapse of livelihoods of the rural poor, and the failure of wage labour and corresponding social structures to adequately replace previous systems of social reproduction (Bernstein, 2006, 2010). In short, it asks ‘what happens to rural households when they are not incorporated en masse into circuits of rural wage-labour or commodity production sufficient to reproduce their own livelihoods?’ (Bair et al., 2019, p.392).

These accounts of agrarian labour are in keeping with broader trends in scholarship on labour globally. Most notably, Chalcraft (2005) further problematises the application of linear accounts of capitalist development to non-Western contexts. He argues that Marxist narratives of economic development assume a Eurocentric model which denies historical agency to pre- and noncapitalist cultural and social formations – rational behaviour of capital and labour alike is obliged to confirm with expectations generated by a very specific and contingent period of European history. Where non-Western contexts inevitably fail to conform to these expectations, they must be explained as ‘backwards’ exceptions rather than variations and different trajectories. To resolve this, he proposes that scholarship follows Mitchell (2002) in granting ‘a range of apparently noncapitalist practices historical agency in political-economic transformation’ (Chalcraft, 2005, p.25) and so ‘pluralising capitalism’. He suggests defining capital and labour ‘generously’ to account for the social structures which arise in contexts which are clearly penetrated by capitalist relations of production, but do not conform to a Eurocentric trajectory.

A parallel intellectual endeavour has sought to develop Marxist thought in conversation with the critiques and findings of feminist scholarship and investigations into other forms of oppression. This has recently coalesced into a school of thought called Social Reproduction
Theory (SRT). This approach constitutes a recalibration of Marxist accounts of the social reproduction of labour, building on feminist scholarship such as the work of Federici (1975) and Vogel (2013). Much of Marxist analysis of capitalism focuses on the production of commodities through the combination of labour and capital, but it largely takes the existence and availability of the labourer for granted. As Bhattarcharya (2017) puts it, Marx and Marxist theory largely fails to account for the vast array of processes are needed to ensure that the worker arrives at their workplace ready to produce - these range from the preparation of food, to mending and cleaning clothes, ensuring there is water to bathe, to healthcare, childbirth and childcare. Transportation is needed for the worker arrive at the workplace, as is education so that the worker can read instructions and make calculations. These processes and the extensive human labour which they entail underpin capitalist production, but are largely absent from holistic accounts of ‘the economy.’

SRT aims to correct this by ‘building from Marx’ and give a full account of the huge amount of familial and communitarian work that sustains and reproduces the worker. This is work is often highly gendered and takes place within or orbiting a kin-based family unit, but the labour force may also be replaced in other ways such as slavery and immigration (Bhattacharya, 2017, p.13). These processes may not merely reproduce labour, but also serve to reproduce a specific kind of compliant and disciplined labour. SRT thus invites us to address the role of systemic oppressive structures implicated in this reproduction (such as gender and race) as central to capitalist exploitation of labour in the workplace and in sites of social reproduction such as the home, and how these may relate to one another.

As an analytic lens SRT further offers a framework to break free from the constraints and assumptions imposed by Marx’s usage of conceptual categories such as ‘the working class’, which are drawn from a very specific historical period and geographic place. It provides a solid theoretical rationale to address the cultural practices and social relations which socially reproductive processes entail as an essential constituent part in a holistic account of capitalist economic development. SRT thus functions as a theoretical tool which guides empirical data collection and analysis. It instructs researchers to look beyond the productive and waged economy, and to analyse reproductive and unwaged spheres of human existence in order to produce a coherent, integrative account of capitalist social relations. In this thesis, then, I use
the term ‘social reproduction’ in the broad sense to refer to those processes which enable
the work force to reproduce and be available to sell their labour for production in the fields
and construction sites each morning. As an analytical framing, it enables us to see the
connections between family and community practices in camps of the Biqa’a valley and
capitalist production for the market.

It is here that this thesis takes its starting point – it seeks to articulate the relationship
between labour used in commodity production and socially reproductive labour in a context
of agrarian capitalism. I take the refugee camps and hashish farms of the Biqa’a valley as a
granular qualitative case study which visibly manifests several important aspects and tensions
in the relationship (migration, gender, social marginality). The dependent and complex
relationship between agricultural production and domestic and community reproduction that
this ethnography analyses is a vindication of the integrative approach that SRT prescribes.

As a starting point for investigation into agrarian labour forms, Worby (1995) suggests a
number of key questions about the organisation of the production process. He says that a
comprehensive study should answer:

What are the forms of labour that characterise peasant households recruiting agrarian
wage workers and those that do not? Do they have distinctive histories of family
development, labour surplus or shortage, or accumulation of money capital? How is
labour - both wage and non-wage - actually recruited, by whom, and from where?
How is it deployed, supervised and rewarded? What are the crops and tasks for which
certain forms of wage labour are most often engaged, and which are those that seem
to 'resist' the intrusion of wage relations? Are there differing forms or degrees of
accumulation that are made possible by the deployment of one labour form or
another? If so, what makes it possible for some people to engage workers in labour
arrangements of their own choice and design, and others, through effective force or
consent, to participate in these? In short, what are the key sites and means of
contention over which forms are put into practice? (Worby, 1995, p.5)

It is this level of granular detail that my ethnography strives for, and which is essential to a
coherent articulation of the complex social forms that emerge from real agrarian
development. While this thesis draws on a plethora of social science research into agrarian development, three major works in this tradition can be seen as directly underpinning my approach.

The first is Arrighi and Piselli’s (1987) investigation into agrarian capitalist development in southern Italy. They sought to explain why certain social relations of production led to varying degrees of capitalist transition, accounting for context specific material and social variation. They were able to show the ways that ‘paths to capitalism are diverse, non-linear, and historically contingent’ (Bair et al., 2019, p. 394), and document these processes in Calabria over the course of the twentieth century.

This thesis borrows from what Bair et al. have termed the three methodological tenets of Arrighian political economy (2019, p. 395) which constitute a development on previous Marxist scholarship on the issue. Firstly, it studies ‘labour supplies and the wage-labour relation in historical and comparative perspective, without presuming or privileging a particular form as the sine qua non of capitalist transition.’ This allows for the recognition and study of different property regimes and labour structures across agrarian communities, in the same region. This is clearly manifest in this thesis’ incorporation of different labour and agrarian production regimes across the Biqa’a valley. Secondly and relatedly, research must look beyond the scale of the local — I have incorporated the circular migratory regimes between Lebanon and Syria, and further the impact of the global and national economy on wage-labour and social reproduction in the camp and the village. Thirdly, analysis must address ‘institutional bases for transformations in the welfare and livelihoods of rural communities,’ understood expansively to include social conflict and bargaining power, but also state policy, the characteristics of migratory flows, and institutions of social exchange. Such institutions have been made central to my account of the agrarian economy of the Biqa’a.

The second approach this thesis draws from is that of Taussig’s study of the political economy of the Cauca valley in Colombia, where he addressed ‘the proletarianization of peasants as they became landless manual labourers on sugar plantations and large commercial farms’ (Taussig, 1974). Like Arrighi, this is a study of transition to capitalism, but it is more deeply
grounded in a rich ethnographic account of material and social relations of agrarian capitalism, and also the way that this was experienced and understood by the labourers themselves. The thesis draws particular inspiration from his taking seriously the relationship between changing economic context and family and household structure. He draws attention to the role of kinship in mitigating exploitative labour relations and debt, and the importance of understanding the mechanisms of inter- and intra-household wage sharing and spreading the labour of social reproduction (p.226). The social relationships of the workers that he studies have a deep reciprocal relationship with labour, and this is manifest in his granular account of both household structure and the organisation of labour on commercial farms. Also, implicitly throughout this text, and explicitly in Chapter IX, this thesis keeps in mind the role of ideology in the labourers’ navigation of capitalist wage-labour and other normative structures (Taussig, 1977).

Recognition of the import of the ideological component to everyday labour relations leads me to the third and final theoretical approach which underpins this study. Rather than addressing the politics of exploitation and social relations in terms of capitalist transition, Scott (2008) focusses on the everyday operations of power in a peasant community. He shows how the performance of social hierarchies and symbolic practices both discipline the labour force, and condition the possibilities and openings for everyday resistance. He further questions the explanatory coherence of some kind of ‘false consciousness’ in explaining the quiescence of rural labourers in the face of exploitation. He advocates a close account of individuals’ subjective experiences of class relations, arguing that oppression and exploitation are always embedded in a concrete social and cultural setting. Data the researcher collects concerning the operation of power must always be understood in the ideological terms that the labourer experiences it, since this rootedness in a particular socio-historical context is central to its functioning (p.43).

This thesis, then, combines these approaches. It responds to an established Marxist tradition in answering the Agrarian Question, accounting for the continued and heightened importance of agriculture in the Arab world. It does so with a view to constructing an account of the labour of commodity production and the corresponding social reproduction which underpins this, and the social structures which have arisen as a result.
2. *Families, kinship and gender*

The second conceptual pillar of this research project is family. The importance of and need for further theorisation of the role of families in labour and a holistic account of capitalist political economy has already been articulated by Social Reproduction Theory and similar feminist critical scholarship. The study of family and kinship has been central to anthropological and sociological work since the origins of the discipline, but as Stone (2002) recounts, much of this early work was premised on European cultural axioms which ‘produced an ethnocentric distortion of other people’s cultural realities’ (p.5, on this, see also Schneider, 2014). This earlier strand of structural anthropological analysis of kinship is clear in earlier work on the Levant (Holy & Holý, 1989; Khuri, 1970). More recent approaches in anthropology have away from studying ‘the family’ in terms of broad structural relations, instead addressing the ways that family is practised and conceptualised, and the corresponding subjectivities which emerge. Amongst anthropologists, Sahlin’s describes this broad framing as seeing kinship as ‘mutuality of being: people who are intrinsic to one another’s existence’ (Sahlins, 2013, p.2) and something which is realised through cultural kinship practices. A similar process has occurred in sociology, with the discipline moving away from studies of a preconceived notion of ‘the Family’ as a heterosexual couple with children founded on a sexual division of labour, and instead turning to studying the more fluid area of social relations which individuals refer to as ‘family life’ (Bernardes, 1999, p.38). This thesis takes this fluid, practice-based approach to the family as a starting point and builds on work in this tradition in the Middle East.

This thesis follows the extensive work of Joseph in its basic framing of family, which in turn builds on Donzelot (1997). Donzelot gives a historical account of the French family as a site for the proliferation of biopolitical technologies and so the operations of power and the creation of certain subjectivities, and makes clear that the French family was a site where state and class operated to transform, contest, and mould its constituent social relations. In Arab families, Joseph (2011; see also Stack, 2003) applies a similar theoretical framing, but argues that, while family and state remain integral, and indeed mutually constitutive to modern political regimes in the Middle East, they follow a very different trajectory to
Donzelot’s context. This is because in the Middle East, ‘the absence of state consolidation, familial moralities, idioms, obligations, and entitlements have carried the burden of the work of the state’ (Joseph, 2011, p.162). She has explored the specific mechanisms by which this has occurred in the Middle East, for example showing the ways that patrilineal descent has become associated with citizenship and so broader ability to make political claims, and how deeply this is embroiled with related gender identities (Joseph, 1999, 2000, 2005; Khatib, 2008).

Joseph argues that we should not study families only as social institutions, but also simultaneously ideological constructs, relationships, and practices (2011, p.152). These are the outcome of constantly operating processes of political power, and are thus subject to changes. Her accounts of Lebanese families combine a Foucauldian approach to power relations and the construction of subjectivities with a granular reading of divisions of labour, wealth, and legal structures. Gendered and family practices deeply condition practices of wealth and inheritance in the Arab world (Joseph, 1994, 2021), which in turn effects subjectivity and desires.

Linguistically, using the term ‘family’ itself presents a range of complications - as Joseph (2018, p.3) notes, there are numerous words which are translated as ‘family’ from Arabic, each with their own distinct meanings and connotations, but also with extensive overlap. She correctly warns against uncritically applying theoretical constructs associated with the western ‘family’ to the Middle Eastern context. My interlocutors generally used the word ‘a‘a’ileh to refer to the ‘nuclear family’, and also the more extended kin relations including grandparents, uncles, aunties and cousins, but this term could also be deployed in political conversations to refer to what might better be understood as larger clan units. They also used terms such as ahl and usra occasionally. My research is concerned with articulating an account of familial relations in the Biqa’a, and so I used the term without offering a conclusive definition from the outset – rather, its full, complex meaning should emerge from the ethnography.

In the context of Lebanon, Joseph’s account of Arab family practices as a confluence of patriarchy and connectivity in many ways can be seen as pre-empting Sahlins’ definition of kinship. This thesis follows Joseph in using patriarchy to ‘mean the dominance of males over
females and elders over juniors (males and females) and the mobilization of kinship structures, morality, and idioms to institutionalize and legitimate these forms of power’ (1993, p.459). She understands ‘connective’ relationships in Arab families as those in which a person’s boundaries are relatively fluid so that persons feel a part of significant others. Persons... did not experience themselves as bounded, separate, or autonomous. They answered for each other, anticipated each other’s needs, expected their needs to be anticipated by significant others... they saw others as extensions of themselves and themselves as extensions of others. Maturity was signalled in part by the successful enactment of a myriad of connective relationships. In a culture in which the family was valued over and above the person, identity was defined in familiar terms, and kin idioms and relationships pervaded public and private spheres, connective relationships were not only functional but necessary for successful social existence.’ (Joseph, 1993, p.452)

For Joseph, these family practices interact with broads social, economic and political structures to reinforce a specific kind of family solidarity entailing the ‘production of selves willing and capable of entering into hierarchal gendered and ages relations in which persons subordinated their needs and desires to those of male kin and elders’ (p.479).

However, despite Arab families being the primary unit of political and economic security, identity, and labour forces and ‘the most powerful social idiom throughout the Arab region’ (Joseph, 2018, p.1), the role played by family practices in labour organisation has been understudied when compared to other contexts. Wick (2015) addresses the relationship between women and labour in the Middle East - now that feminist anthropology has ‘debunked the separation between domestic work and work on the job’ (p.177), she argues, we must study labour as an essential part of ‘gendered individual and familial identities but never simply a means of self-fulfilment for an autonomous individual...work is at the centre of rights, duties, and needs that bind people to each other.’ Joseph’s work accounts for economic calculations in her analysis of connective family relationships, but it is generally treated as being of secondary importance to culturally normative relationships. This thesis turns Joseph’s account of familial power relations to the labour force, and articulates the intertwinement between the two.
Research into the intersection between family, gender, and wage labour in the region is scattered. Important early work by Hammam (1977, 1986) has argued that the interaction between the gendered division of labour and the transforming labour market is central to understanding modes of production that emerged in the Arab world. As her and other studies of rural Egypt (Toth, 2005) demonstrate, this in turn shapes the gendered division of labour within the household. Other more recent research by Fernández (2019, 2020) has shown how the replacement of familial labour practices with wage labour in rural Syrian has, through the disembedding of labour from moral economies has led to an increase worse working conditions and pay for women. The Syrian refugee crisis has sharply revealed the ways in which Syrian women are structurally disenfranchised in the labour market, and how this has been dramatically accentuated by forced displacement and economic collapse (Traboulsi, n.d.), especially in rural contexts (Dedeoğlu & Sefa Bayraktar, 2020). Apart from a notable intervention by Sajadian (2020), exploration of the intersection of the family and the agrarian economy in the modern Middle East has been scarce. This is all the more surprising given the centre stage that it takes in Khater’s account of the silk economy of nineteenth century Lebanon (Khater, 1993).

This thesis draws upon the more extensive body of work on gender in the Levant and Middle East more broadly (Abu-Lughod, 2002). I take inspiration from critical feminist scholarship such as (Deeb, 2011; Deeb & Harb, 2013a, 2013b), which seek to situate gendered practices with the nexus of both traditional cultural practices and changing economic practices. Similarly, this thesis heeds Joseph’s (2018) recent call for researchers to recognise that families and gender are not synonymous with women and children – I give equal weight to local practices of masculinity and its role in conditioning family and economic production. There is a growing appreciation of the importance of masculine subjectivities in family practices in the Middle East. Several classic works of anthropology in the region delved into the centrality of masculinity in social relations (Gilsenan, 1996; Johnson, 2001), but there is now a renewed attempt to coherently articulate the role of masculinity in shaping social relations in the region (Inhorn, 2012; and critique by Paul, 2011; Proudfoot, 2022). This has been, to an extent, noted with regards to the Syrian refugee crisis (Suerbaum, 2018, 2020), and the specific vulnerability of men to conscription (Monroe, 2020; Turner, 2017).
Other kinship concepts, namely the tribe and clan, feature in this ethnography. Unlike the family, these units have been subject to more extensive political and anthropological analysis, especially in the context of Middle Eastern state formation (see, for example, Al-Mohammad, 2011; Dukhan, 2014; Khoury & Kostiner, 1990). Studies of tribes and clans are able to draw from an established body of anthropological work on kinship and segmentary lineage structures. As with families, tribal terminology and my usage of it requires some clarification.

Amongst all of my interlocutors, Lebanese and Syrian alike, clan and tribal relations passed through males. Most of my Arab Syrian interlocutors were members of tribal confederations, which they referred to as qabileh and have distinctive names. These were generally very large, consisting of tens of thousands of members, and had a fairly clear leadership with political affiliations. They also used the term ‘ashira to refer to segmentary lineages within these tribal confederations. Each qabileh was constituted by several ‘ashira, which have their own, distinctive names. Confusingly, in everyday conversation Syrians might use the term qabileh to refer to what was, strictly speaking, their ‘ashira. On an everyday basis, the broader tribal confederation of the qabileh featured little in interpersonal interactions. In contrast, the ‘ashira was a salient social unit – my interlocutors knew, or knew of, most members of their ‘ashira in the Biqa’a valley and actively reinforced social relations between them. Familial traits, enmities, and geography were discussed in terms of ‘ashira, and it was predominantly on this level that significant social interactions and conflicts such as tha’ir (feuds), diyyeh (blood money payments), and musaliha (reconciliations) took place. Within these ‘ashira were sub-lineages, and my interlocutors traced their genealogy back through the male line to a handful of ancestors some five to seven generations back. For an in-depth treatment of the complexities of Syrian tribal structures, see Batatu (2012). Some of the Lebanese Sunni community in the Western Biqa’a also fit into this discursive framing. Where the term ‘tribe’ is used, then, it refers to these Syrian ‘ashira unless otherwise specified.

Amongst the Lebanese, a similar framework exists. Persons with shared kin relations generally have the same family name and are often referred to as a beyt (literally house, but here translated as clan). While this terminology is spread throughout Lebanon, it is much more common in the Biqa’a valley. Christian, Shi’a and Sunni families in the Ba’albeck – Hermel region of the Biqa’a are all generally referred to as beyt al [insert family name] in everyday
conversation. The Shi’a beyt of the Biqa’a usually belong to one of two ‘ashira, but it is on the level of the beyt that feuds and interactions generally take place. These Lebanese beyt can be very large, with tens of thousands of members, and as with the Syrian ‘ashira, within this larger beyt there were subdivisions between lineages, which had their own internal rivalries and alliances (on the history and dynamics of the clan/tribe system of the Biqa’a, see Hamzeh, 1994; Khalil, 1990). Where the term ‘clan’ is used, I am referring to these Lebanese Biqa’a based kinship units. My research focuses on granular, familial relations, and analysis takes place mostly on an individual and household basis. However, these practices occur within a context where some understanding of tribes and clans is necessary to understand certain patterns of interaction.

This thesis, then, builds on the extant body of family studies work in the Levant and the broader Middle East. Joseph argues that the concept of the ‘Arab family’ has not been subject to the same level of extensive critique as the ‘Western family’ (Joseph, 2008), and this thesis can thus be seen as responding to Joseph’s call to rigorously theorise and problematise families in the Arab world by addressing family and gendered power structures in the context of labour organisation and reproduction. This theory approaches Arab families from her broad framing and puts this into discourse with the previously posed questions of labour and capitalist development.
3. Refugees and camps

This thesis is concerned with the exploitation of rural labour, its organisation and reproduction, but it is also concerned with a very specific group of marginalised labourers: refugees. All of my Syrian interlocutors were simultaneously refugees and wage-labourers, or directly involved in the social reproduction of cheap Syrian labour in the Biqa’a valley. This thesis works against the abstraction and reification of the category of refugee implicit in both public discourse and academic scholarship and emphasises the integration of refugees as a distinct social group into the political economy of Lebanon. While I am not advancing a universal lens of labour through which to view refugee camps, I argue that in the case of Lebanon, refugees’ social position and encampment is deeply intertwined with the demands of labour and capital. This finding is instructive to refugee studies in that it indicates that taking ‘refugee’ as a category through which to begin understanding an encampment may not be the most appropriate starting point.
For too long, scholarship was trapped in a cycle of building up and then breaking down the Agambenian theoretical structure of camps as ‘spaces of exception’ and refugees as *homo sacer* (Agamben, 1998, 2005). With this debate resolved more or less decisively in the favour of the anti-Agambenian camp (Abourahme, 2020; Owens, 2009; Ramadan, 2013; Ramadan & Fregonese, 2017), the onus is now on articulating the next steps in the debate. Now that we know that camps are not just spaces of limbo, and refugees do in fact have political agency, how should they be incorporated into our understanding society? In many ways, Lebanon has a head start in this debate: political agency of refugee populations and encampments has long been recognised, given the centrality of Palestinian refugees to political life in the Levant and the broader Middle East. So too has the relationship between refugee camps and the city, thanks to the permanence and urbanisation of these Palestinian neighbourhoods.

‘The camp’ has been framed in relation to ‘the city’ or ‘the urban’, and scholars have applied the theoretical tools of marginal urban development to understanding the social relations and subjectivity of refugees (Agier, 2002). This thesis acts as something of a corrective to this move to see refugee camps as an urban phenomenon, firstly by showing how common and normalised encampment is in a rural context. Indeed, most Palestinian camps in the Levant were originally rural in the sense that they were established on agricultural land on the peripheries of cities and towns, and subsequent rapid urbanisation has transformed them into urban spaces. Secondly, by taking these camps as embedded in a historical, economic, and geographic environment rather than studying them in isolation, this thesis indicates that temporary encampment and disenfranchised migrant labour can constitute a broader structural practice than the framing of ‘forced migration’ and ‘refugee crisis’ might indicate.

Studying ‘camps’ runs the risk of becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy – taking the camp as a distinct socio-political unit risks neglecting the ways in which members of this refugee group are integrated into Lebanese society in other, more fundamental ways. On an individual and community level, this thesis shows how the ‘refugee’ category was rarely the main subjective identity of refugee populations, and contestation over the categorisation and associated political discussions took a back seat when seen next to discussions of poverty, nationality, kinship and class. In this way, this thesis builds on recent scholarship which centres analysis
of forced migration at its intersection with other foundationally important social relations such as kinship and labour (Bjarnesen, 2016; Bloch & McKay, 2016).

This research situates forced migration in a broader context of rural political economy and historical circulatory migration. It shows how deeply embedded refugee economies are in agrarian production in the Biqa’a valley, and situates ‘refugee-ness’ as one symbolic and material factor in the social reproduction of labour in Lebanon.

This thesis is grounded in theorisation of agrarian capitalism and granular approaches to studying wage labour and social reproduction in rural contexts. It is particularly focussed on the relationship between production and the work involved in reproducing labour, and the way this structural relationship is conditioned by local contextual factors. It does so by studying a marginal labour group of Syrian refugees, and so simultaneously contributes to debates on how to theorise these populations and spaces. Likewise, by conducting this research with a focus on family and gendered practices, this thesis brings questions of the workings of Arab families into much needed discourse with the underlying mechanisms of property, labour, and production.
II – ‘What are you doing here?’: suspicion, identity, and participant observation

Introduction

My fieldwork methodology generally adhered to classical anthropological practices. The data I collected was almost entirely qualitative fieldnotes, based on an extended period of participant observation. I adapted my initial research plan to the activities whose importance became clear only after an extended period of fieldwork and well-developed relationships. My field site could be characterised as a hostile social context but there were some straightforward steps that I took to manage this hostility and the ethical quandaries that went with it. Similarly, my position between two very distinct communities gave rise to some delicate social diplomacy, but this yielded more, fruitful data. It was only through long-term intimacy with these two communities that I was able to identify the practices that are central to this thesis, and adopting new, unexpected methods in the field. Suspicion was a constant issue during my fieldwork, as the following two vignettes illustrate:

1.

The turn-off to the camp was located just as the freshly tarmacked road gave way to more and more potholes, and then eventually just a dirt and gravel track leading up to the village. A handful of young men and I walked up the track, past the stinking sewage treatment plant and the overflowing skips. The camp was hidden about half a kilometre down the track, out of sight, save for the tell-tale coming and going of men with distinctive Syrian haircuts on cheap Chinese motorcycles and children marching back and forth from the corner shop back in the village. We emerged onto the main road and waited around, cracking jokes, until eventually a grizzled Lebanese farmer trundled up, sat astride his small red Massey-Ferguson tractor, pulling behind it a clattering trailer. We piled into the back, and began the slow climb up the tracks to the local quarry.

Jalal was eighteen years old and had recently married. He was currently staying in the camp, but had recently struck a deal with local Lebanese hashish farmer – he would set up his tent
on the farmer’s land and act as a natur (guard), responsible for the regular watering of his land (see figure 9). This deal did not come with a salary, but guaranteed hours of work, and the probability of further opportunities in the future. It also came with perks, the first of which was this trip to the quarry, which was owned by the cousin of the farmer. Jalal needed gravel to make a solid foundation for his new tent, and this could be expensive – the farmer had asked his cousin, and so Jalal was getting a trailerful for free. All he had to do was rent the tractor and its Lebanese driver for 50,000 Lebanese lira (LL).

We pulled up to the quarry to find the heavy machinery hard at work, gouging away at the mountain side. I recognised the driver of the excavator as one of the Kurdish men living in the village, who held a salaried position in the organisations of one of the larger hashish farmers, and he greeted me. The local policeman, Tariq, was also there. He continued discussing something with another quarry employee before finally turning to us, and Jalal explained why he was there. After some back and forth, and a few barbed remarks, he gave permission for the trailer to be filled. While the excavator thundered away, Tariq turned his attention to me.

‘Come here... what are you doing here?’ he asked, already clearly not interested in my answer. ‘Morning Abu Ali!’ I said, feigning friendliness ‘I’m helping the lads get the gravel for Jalal’s tent’. He ignored my answer and stared at me hard in the face ‘What are you doing here, with the Syrians?’ We had done this conversation dozens of times before – I had been hanging around in the camp for over a year by this point, and he had been present as I had got permission from and interviewed numerous members of the municipality. ‘I am writing a book about the Syrians in the camps for my doctorate at the university, don’t you remember?’ He ignored me again and carried on his inquisition, as much to perform his authority in front of the onlookers as exercise it over me. The lads and the Lebanese farmer looked on, quietly, clearly interested in how the hierarchy of our interaction played out.

There were a few reasons for his suspicion about my presence here. These quarries were often of dubious legality, and in this part of the Biqa’a were usually owned by people in some way connected to the drug trade. On top of that, the quarries and the surrounding mountains were regularly used as shooting ranges, by the lads of the village, the army, some of the more serious drug traffickers, and Hizbollah. However, none of these dodgy activities were
particularly secret, and informed rather the general background insecurity and suspicion of
the valley. Rather, what Tariq was particularly perturbed about was what I was doing there
with a gang of Syrian men. What could this British man possibly be doing engaging in manual
labour with a Syrian?

‘Who told you that you could come here?’ he demanded. This was something of a strange
question, a half-hearted intimidation attempt. We were not more than a mile from the village,
and these hills were not really ‘owned’ by anyone, and generally were treated as the
playground of the young men of the village – I had been tearing around these mountains with
my Lebanese village friends in 4x4s for years. This issue was that this time, I was there with
Syrians, for work. I affected mild bemusement at his inquisition, following the time-honoured
script of the power of Lebanese security officials. ‘I didn’t think there would be a problem,
but if you want, we could go talk to the mayor or to Hussein?’ These were the two authority
figures who knew me well, and to whom Tariq was beholden. He grunted and got out his
phone, half-considering and half-pretending to call them, while I looked on with an innocent,
good-natured smile. Then he looked up and asked me, ‘What is your rank?’ ‘What do you
mean, Tariq?’ I replied. ‘You know, in the army, what is your rank?’

2.

The mother of one of my closest friends in the village had tripped over outside of her house
and broken her leg. It was nothing too serious, and she was a tough woman, but she would
be hospitalised for a few days and I joined to visit her with a few of her adult children and
their cousins. We sat in the hospital room cracking jokes and drinking coffee while their
children caused a comforting level of chaos around us.

‘You know, Jacques, that in 2006 the Israelis attacked this hospital?’ said Ali, my closest friend
from the villagers, a committed Hizbollah supporter. ‘Oh yeah?’ I said, ‘Why?’ ‘They thought
that Hizbollah was using it, and there were weapons here. But look around, do you see any
weapons?’ He kept a straight face, but his eyes twinkled. There was added irony to this since
I knew full well that Ali, like many village men, had a pistol tucked down the back of his
waistband. ‘Be sure to tell your bosses that there is nothing here, yes?’ His cousins chuckled
as I promised to relay the message directly to Mossad, and we that would delay our attack until his mother was safely back home.

***

These two conversations are illustrative of the different kinds of suspicion that pervaded my fieldwork, and the ways that the Lebanese villagers and Syrian refugees were acutely aware of my role as a researcher and an outsider. Reactions ranged from the straightforward hostility and harassment of Tariq the policeman to the complex, reflexive jokes made by Ali. My interlocutors were well-aware of the different audiences that their narratives were performed in front of, and I in many ways constituted just another, less important stage. They gave an explicit, running commentary on my research, methods, and findings, and regularly and cleverly incorporated my positionality into their conversations, jokes, and reflections.

This chapter serves two, related purposes. Firstly, it gives an overview of my research methodology, and explains my approach to collecting data. I explain how my field site could be understood as a hostile social context, the steps I took to manage this hostility, and reflect on how this may have affected the ethnographic data that I have collected. Secondly, I reflect on the role of conspiracy and suspicion in Middle Eastern fieldwork, and its deep intertwining with the positionality of the researcher. I consider the implications of simultaneously ‘studying up’ and studying marginalised groups. I show how the repeated crises affecting Lebanon spilled over into everyday interaction with my interlocutors, and situate my fieldwork experience more generally in the deteriorating research environment of the Middle East. I address the tension between wanting to avoid orientalist tropes and imperial proclamations and my interlocutors’ efforts to actively cast me in the role as the representative of ‘the West’.

**Participant observation in a violent social context**

My field site centred around Ba’albeck and a small hashish farming village and neighbouring refugee camp to the northwest of the city. While only a two-hour drive from the capital, the area of the Biqa’a valley between Ba’albeck and Hermel is marginalised and undeveloped.
There are high levels of poverty, and clan allegiances remain dominant social and political factors. Drug production and smuggling are common activities and conducted with impunity, often in plain view of military bases. The population is heavily armed, and shootouts and murders between clans are a common occurrence, and a vast number of the men are living as fugitives in the area. It was not at all unusual to be woken up by RPG explosions throughout my fieldwork – and stray bullets from clashes between warring clan groups hit my house on several occasions. While the violence of Ba’albeck and its surrounding areas rarely even makes the national news, the hashish industry is a regular, photogenic feature for international documentary film crews (Katerji & Roussinos, 2014; Lister, 2017; Stahl, 1988). Furthermore, the violence from the drug trade and clan feuds rarely affects visitors to the valley – the picturesque rural villages and impressive Roman ruins creates a steady domestic tourism industry.

This violence trickled down into everyday interactions – guns were commonplace, and it was not at all unusual to meet Biqa’a men who had killed people and/or been shot. Locals often prided themselves on their familiarity with gunfire – gunshots regularly echoed across the valley while I sat with my friends enjoying the summer evenings. They would pause and listen to the shooting for patterns which could tell you if it was celebratory, a ‘flexing of muscles’ between different clans, or a proper battle. They would then judge whether we could stay sitting on the balcony, or if it would be safer to go inside to avoid falling stray bullets (on this, see Al-Masri, 2017; Moghnieh, 2017). One battle had dragged on all evening, until all of a sudden, a volley particularly loud gunshots rang out: one of my friends smiled grimly ‘finally, the army has brought the M50!’

This area is also the heartlands of the Islamist political party and militant group Hizbollah, which was founded in Ba’albeck and has an extensive security presence in the region. Hizbollah is in a state of low-level conflict with Israel, which it sees as part of a broader conflict with Western and Gulf states, and has been very active in militarily supporting the neighbouring Assad regime in the Syrian Civil War. While Hizbollah certainly holds ideological hegemony in the region, it is by no means totalitarian. While there are clear and dangerous ‘red lines’, criticism of the party (within certain limits) is normalised, as is some degree of political competition, though this space has been steadily shrinking in recent years.
International and local NGOs operate relatively freely, though are less numerous than other regions. This context of violence, drug trafficking, protracted conflict, and suspicion deeply conditioned my approach to data collection and my experience in the field.

**Getting started: introductions, gatekeepers and permissions**

Access to this community, and indeed the idea for this research project, arose from my prior experience in Lebanon. I had worked for an international NGO delivering emergency and development funding to refugee communities in Lebanon (predominantly education) for several years prior to my doctorate. It was through this work that I had fairly extensive experience of the humanitarian sector, Lebanese institutions, and the politics of refugee camps. My work had been mostly in Palestinian refugee camps, but I had been sufficiently exposed to Syrian camps and communities to begin to formulate questions about how these communities were governed, and how they were simultaneously integrated and segregated from the broader Lebanese economy. Parallel to this, having lived in Lebanon for several years, I spoke Arabic and I had made several friends who came from the hashish farming areas surrounding Ba’albeck. As I began my Research Master’s in Anthropology at UCL, I proposed a rough outline of my project to these friends, who agreed to help facilitate my work in their village and make the relevant introductions. Given the environment of heightened suspicion towards Westerners, it is very unlikely I would have been able to undertake this project had I not already made long-term friends and an established relationship before starting this research. My Master’s fieldwork essentially consisted of a two-month pilot-project in the summer of 2018. With this project a success and with a greatly expanded network of friends and interlocutors in the area, I returned to Ba’albeck for my doctoral fieldwork in the autumn of 2019.

Because of the previously highlighted lack of formal state sovereignty in the region, it was important to get approval from local gatekeepers. Given the size of the community, there was no one individual who could grant this approval. Instead, I explained my research project to numerous and varied members of the Lebanese community, almost all of whom actively offered advice about how to conduct my work. My friends introduced me to figures as various as the mayor and deputy mayor, several major drug farmers, the owners of the local
restaurants, various Hizbollah members, and of course a never-ending stream of cousins and local lads, many of whom became close friends. Lebanese norms of hospitality were indeed very conducive in this initial period of getting to know local Lebanese villagers. The larger hashish farmers like Hussein, who is a recurring character in this thesis, were very comfortable with my presence and regularly reassured me that there was no problem with my research.

Almost all of my Lebanese interlocutors were supporters of Hizbollah in some way, and tacit consent from the party was certainly required for my presence there. Like Carpi (2020, p.148) many of the people I met assumed that I had been given ‘political protection’ to conduct my research, but this was never formally granted. I was well aware that some of my friends would be reporting back to the party on my activities, and I made clear to them that I was always happy to discuss my research. If the Hizbollah security apparatus had any questions to ask me or were unhappy with my work, I would be happy to oblige. I did not want to be seen to enquire too closely to Hizbollah’s structure or work, since this was not my research project and would undoubtedly raise suspicions. I had several friends who were close with the party and so I could be fairly certain that if I needed to or they wanted to, I could easily be contacted. Indeed, in one of the few transparent moments, early in the project I asked one of these men – ‘look, if you think that Hizbollah has a problem with my research, please tell me now, because my project will take at least a year.’ He looked at me and said, ‘I have spoken to them and it is fine, don’t worry.’ This was the closest I got to formal consent from Hizbollah. I had few explicit encounters with the Hizbollah security apparatus, but I got the impression of a diligent, efficient mukhabarat organisation, and I have no doubt that at some point members will be reading and commenting on this thesis.

Sluka says that researcher should aim to be in a position where they are warned before they are punished (1990, p.120). I successfully managed this, and was indeed warned off topics explicitly twice. On two occasions, I had asked about local, politically sensitive issues not directly related to my research project; the first concerned long running land disputes between the Shi’a villagers and a neighbouring Christian village that ran the risk of flaring up, and the second concerned my views on Syrian military conscription. In both cases, some weeks after the initial conversation, I was gently but clearly told by friends I knew to be Hizbollah employees that these were not appropriate conversations to have. These
encounters both confirmed my paranoia – what I said was indeed being recorded and reported. However, they also allayed my fears about the broader permissibility of my project: these were obviously risqué topics, so the warning had the inverse effect of confirming that everything else I was doing was permitted. Sometimes an encounter with the mukhabarat can be reassuring.

Given the political divisions between the various ministries and state security apparatus, there is no one ‘permission’ that can be granted for work in the Biqa’a. Instead, I followed a similar procedure to the drug smugglers and different clan lineages – I had friends who were officers in most relevant branches of state security, and I made myself available and chatted openly about my research. I have no doubt that several of them were reporting to their superiors on my activities, but by making myself open and accessible, I feel that I circumvented any need for formal investigation.

This delicate balancing of permissions to conduct research and activating and maintaining friendships in different fiefdoms was key to my research process because it was a practical case of ‘doing wasṭa’. Wasta is a very broad and commonly used term in Arabic to refer to activating connections to navigate social and bureaucratic obstacles and access resources (for an in-depth discussion of the practice, see Egan & Tabar, 2016; Leenders, 2012). Wasta can refer to anything from using connections to speed up the processing of paperwork, to bribing judges, to literally get away with murder. This activity is central to daily life in the Levant, and thus the social and economic structures that I was studying. Gaining access, maintaining relationships, and circumventing suspicion, then, offered excellent and transferrable insight to the ‘politics of the everyday’ in the valley, the practice of doing wasṭa, and the subjectivities that it creates. This was also the case in navigating tensions with local young men – by activating my social references to navigate potentially hostile confrontations like the first vignette with Tariq, I was participating in and reproducing local power structures and the economy of wasṭa.

A large part of my research can be seen as ‘studying up’ (Nader, 1972). In Ba’albeck and the surrounding villages, the Lebanese clansmen were sovereign powerful men with extensive local and national connections – I was there as their guest, and the success of my research
was contingent on their goodwill. Many of these Lebanese men were powerful even within their local communities, as large landowners, wealthy smugglers, officers in the security services or integrated into political parties; they had established reputations and deep roots. I, on the other hand, was disposable – a man of no consequence, present only briefly, and probably a spy. This did not mean I had no social value – as a well-educated outsider, I was the perfect recipient of Arab hospitality and a sounding board for ideas and arguments. Osburg (2013) complicates the assumed asymmetry of power between anthropologist and interlocutor, and argues that this is accentuated in the particular power dynamics associated with the case of studying ‘illegal’ actors and the complicated relationship between marginality and power in criminal domains. Even amongst the impoverished and marginalised Syrians, an asymmetric power dynamic was clearly visible. I needed access to the camp for my research project to work, and they needed nothing from me, and my interlocutors were well aware of this.

In the initial process of establishing myself in my field site, I tried to eschew non-governmental organisations (NGOs) for several reasons. First, I was certain that NGOs alone could not provide the social references that I needed for the kind of participant observation that I hoped to conduct. NGOs can only operate with the conditional permission of local gatekeepers, and it was this permission that I needed. Second, I was wary of being too closely associated with certain NGOs. Local NGOs are often deeply implicated in local power structures and networks of wasta, which are never neutral. Similarly international NGOs are often affiliated (or perceived to be) with outside or foreign powers. In both cases, I ran the risk of unintentionally becoming strongly associated with one side of local and international power structures. Third, I was aware of the institutional bias in much of the research conducted amongst refugee communities, where initial introductions are undertaken via a formal organisation, which then frames the subsequent research. Throughout my previous work in International NGOs, I strongly suspected that the role of the ‘humanitarian regime’ in refugee lives was overstated. Throughout my time working in the emergency and development sector in Lebanon the vast majority of humanitarian work struck me as reactive, constantly struggling to keep up with changing events on the ground and unable to penetrate the opaque local politics of the camps and villages. Projects took years to implement, and then had to be dramatically warped to meet changing requirements and unforeseen obstacles, and permission to operate from local
stakeholders could be rescinded at a moment’s notice. Locals and refugees often seemed equally bemused by the internal bureaucracy and requirements of these organisations. As such, I wanted to approach the topic from the perspective of the camp dwellers first and foremost, and incorporate NGOs only insofar as they actually featured in the everyday life of a camp.

This work of finding community guides and permissions was complicated by my decision to study two communities simultaneously. My older friends in my chosen field site introduced me to a local NGO worker who had been instrumental in the establishment of the local camp. While there were dozens of camps a short distance from my house in Ba’albeck, the process was self-selecting as this village was the only place that I had sufficient prior long-term relationships to conduct my research. The NGO worker took me to the camp, and very briefly introduced me to a young Syrian man called Anwar. He promptly seemed to forget about my research and began reprimanding the refugees for failing to maintain the water infrastructure of the camp. Luckily, despite this cursory introduction Anwar and I hit it off, and very quickly became good friends. Over the course of the pilot project he, and then his extended family, guided me through the community of the camp and he, like Hussein, is a recurring character in this thesis.

In many ways, this very half-hearted introduction benefited me, and I was able to develop my relationship with the camp-dwellers alone. I was not overly associated with local NGOs or the Lebanese villagers, which would have acted as barriers to my integration into camp life. I thus balanced my research between the two communities, and tried not to become too affiliated with either one in the eyes of the other. Given the obvious hierarchical relationship between the camp and the village, being too closely associated with one would limit my interactions with the other. In both cases, I was certainly the recipient of the community’s hospitality, but I was also engaged in a careful balancing act to ensure that being a ‘good’ guest in one community did not make me a ‘bad’ guest in the others (Shryock, 2012). On both sides I was encouraged to discuss, and often mock, the other group, and avoiding this faux pas was a daily diplomatic task.
Figure 3 - Stamps used by the hashish farmers to mark their product dating back to the 1970s

Data collection and ‘hanging out’
My initial research project had focussed on camp government, and envisaged studying the formal and informal structures operating in the camp. I had initially framed the work as focussing on the figure of the shawesh, a sort of camp chief and labour organiser discussed in later sections. I had also hoped to conduct participant observation with the local municipality, local political parties, religious institutions, and later local NGOs. Quickly, as I began my participant observation with the camp inhabitants, it became clear that these formal institutions featured little in everyday life. I began ‘hanging out’ with whatever men extended their hospitality to me in the camp and the village. My data consisted primarily of fieldnotes, which I took in a small black notebook. Once my interlocutors got used to the idea of me taking notes, they quickly began to instruct me on what to write, often reeling off Syrian shawi dialect vocabulary. This is a distinctive dialect spoken by Syrian Arabs living in certain areas of the Eastern regions which constitute part of the jazirah. This refers to the geographic region which encompasses part of southeastern Turkey, northwestern Iraq, and northeastern Syria – in Syria this is roughly the three governorates of Raqqa, Deir Ez Zour, and Hassakeh (shawi identity is explained further in Chapter III). They also used my fieldnotes as joke amongst themselves, instructing me to write down increasingly ridiculous and insulting stories about their friends. Given that I always had a pen and paper to hand, men regularly called upon me borrow some paper to make a note, or even just asked me to jot down and calculate hours worked.

Like Dresch, I found it impossible to undertake or record what would elsewhere be categorised as interviews – ‘to do so... would violate a local sense of context of what could be said to whom’ (2000, p.117). I did not record any conversations, and even concerning the most innocuous of topics my interlocutors were uncomfortable with being recorded. Photographs were usually acceptable, but limited to men. Once they had got used to my way of conducting research, often my interlocutors would do the explaining of my project to strangers for me – I was introduced as ‘writing a book about the Syrians in the camp,’ and they would invite the new acquaintance to tell me about their lives and work in the Biqa’a.

The ethnography that follows, then, draws from the well-established tradition of anthropological participant observation (Bernard, 2017). Prior to my fieldwork, a documentary film-maker had made a film which adopted very similar research methods to
mine in a shawi Syrian refugee camp (Helmrich, 2017), and I spoke extensively with the researchers and camerawomen who worked on this film (see also Kalthoum, 2018). This period of ‘hanging out’ and slowly extending my social circle continued for the next 10 months or so. After roughly 6 months, the centrality of labour as an organising feature of Syrian refugee life had become apparent through my field work, and I began to explicitly pursue questions of labour relations between the two communities and amongst the camp dwellers. As the summer progressed, my interlocutors became busier with work, and by this point it naturally followed that I joined them at their work in the fields, construction sites, and karaj (garage is the literal translation, but the term refers to both mechanic’s garages and those used for the processing of hashish). The obvious labour shortages in the harvest season provided the perfect opportunity for me to slot into the different work-teams, and I worked as a Syrian labourer throughout the 2020 harvest season. It was only when I showed an already intimate knowledge of the workings of the hashish industry and labour practices that my interlocutors began to give more than cursory, superficial answers.

Throughout my participant observation, I was subject to extensive hospitality and this was very difficult to repay – I agree with Lammers (2007) and de Regt (2019) that giving, and learning how to give appropriately, is central to good fieldwork and should not be neglected in the name of scientific neutrality. In the Biqa’a, the opportunities for a Westerner to extend hospitality are few and far between – one of the few ways I was able to ‘give’ without violating norms of hospitality was through offering lifts in my legally registered car. This did not infringe on domestic space, and further made use of my foreign-ness and the freedom of movement it entailed. The conversations from these journeys, private, the world whizzing by us, were some of the most ethnographically rich ‘interviews’ that I managed to conduct throughout my fieldwork. Furthermore, as is shown in Chapter VIII my offers of taxi services revealed the extensive and vitally important networks between the different camps of the valley.

While I was able to collect rich and detailed qualitative data, this thesis contains very little quantitative data. This is in part because such data is not widely available in Lebanon, and especially not in the Biqa’a. Where it is available, it is often very unreliable. Statistics and accurate numbers of mass migrations are elusive things under the best of conditions. These problems are amplified in Lebanon, where demographics have a special political weight, and
no census of the population has been conducted since 1932. Dramatic over- and under-
exaggerations are common, even in official documents, and attempts to identify accurate
numbers of even small migrant populations, such as that of my main field site, are inherently
difficult. This problem is noted historically by Adelman (1982) and in the more recent crisis by
authors such as Clark and Cavatorta (2018) and Jagarnathsingh (2018) and I experienced it
first hand in my previous work with an INGO in Lebanon. This was further borne out by my
fieldwork, where any attempt to systematically collect quantitative data on my interlocutors
would have been treated with suspicion. Throughout my work, I was envious of those
ethnographies that I had read that were able to list households, size, income, and occupation.
Even family trees were a potential source of conflict and suspicion for my interlocutors. I
would have liked to have been able to supplement my ethnography with more precise
analysis of the changing demographics of the camp and village, broader clan and tribal family
ties, and numerical flows of wealth. It would have helped in both comparing between
households and camps and in identifying different social classes and patterns of behaviours
amongst my interlocutors, and also in comparing my findings to other field sites. However,
given the composite and fluctuating nature of many of the households that I was dealing with,
even if I had been able to collect such quantitative data, it would have likely presented an
inaccurate picture and probably presented more problems in analysis.

Given the context of paranoia and the knowledge that I was being closely watched by security
services, data security was a very real consideration, and I took steps to consider the different
threats to my data and set up systems to ensure that my data remained secure (Grimm et al.,
2020). I anonymised my field notes as I wrote them, and wrote in an abbreviated shorthand.
I stored my digitised notes on an encrypted hard drive, and transferred them out of the field
monthly. I avoided writing down some of the more sensitive stories that I was told in the field,
was very careful about what I photographed, and did not map my field site. I was already well
aware of these rules of data management in Lebanon as a result of my previous work in the
country, but the paranoia and conspiracy theories of Lebanese political discourse were
imprinted on my everyday work practices and physical movements (for a similar, in-depth
account of this see King, 2020).
There is a fairly extensive body of practical advice on managing danger in hostile environments and conflict zones (Rodgers, 2001; Sluka, 1990, 2012; Sluka et al., 2012), and I drew from this and my own professional experience in my fieldwork. Unlike other field sites described as dangerous (Goldstein, 2014), petty crime in Ba’albeck was remarkably low - you could leave your mobile phone on a coffee shop table, and still be sure it was there when you got back from the toilet, and men could generally wander the unlit streets in the middle of the night without fear of being accosted.

I have left the villages and camps unnamed in this thesis, but this would unlikely stop a keen reader. Lebanon is a small country, and it would not be hard to find out who was friends with the red-headed Englishman who lived in Ba’albeck. For this reason, using pseudonyms and omitting details would not be enough – readers familiar with my fieldsite would quickly be able to identify the characters from the camp and village. Instead, I have combined several persons into one, and mixed up dates and aspects of their stories.

This ethnography is representative of the villages and camps of the central and northern Biqa’a. However, the region’s autonomy from the formal state apparatus could mean that the practices observed are unique to this small geographic context. The illegal nature of most of the crops in question was coupled with villagers’ more general hostility towards any attempts by the formal state apparatus to assert sovereignty over the region. As such, non-state governance practices were naturally more pronounced than elsewhere in Lebanon, and the importance of individual landowners was increased. However, given the Lebanese state’s well-documented disinterest in governing Syrian populations (Nassar and Stel, 2019) it would be unfair to characterise the practices of the Biqa’a as exceptional. Rather, the observed practices are more likely to represent an exaggeration of country-wide practices and tendencies.

Furthermore, while the main crop was hashish, I observed little distinction between illicit drug production and legal harvests of apples or potatoes. On an everyday basis, my interlocutors treated the crops as interchangeable, and legality had a negligible effect on labour practices. Aside from some vague comments by a few Syrians that hashish was *haram* (forbidden on religious grounds), the distinction between crops was made on the basis of labour, capital,
and profit considerations. Certainly, the general context of illicit trade meant that state employees and agencies were less able to utilise whatever formal capacities they may have had. However, given my experience elsewhere in the country, this difference does not seem to represent a decisive break in labour organisation practices.

More generally, a huge proportion of economic activity in Lebanon is informal – as Jagarnathsingh (2016) notes ‘informality rates were quite high in Lebanon, with around 50% of the Lebanese population working in informal settings. The informality rate is significantly higher in sectors such as agriculture and construction’ (p.11) prior to the Syrian Civil War. In 2009, the ILO estimated these sectors’ informality rates as 92.47% and 80.74% respectively (p.10). While work in the illicit hashish economy was thus ‘more’ illegal than other jobs, it should be kept in mind that the formal state was largely absent from regulating the agricultural and construction sectors of the Lebanese labour market. Where it did intervene, it did so to constrain opportunities to legalise and formalise labour relationships, and these conditions of dubious legality constitute the backdrop for Syrian wage-labour in Lebanon. Sajadian (2020) is useful for comparison with a somewhat more licit context.
Work as fieldwork

The most fruitful period of my fieldwork was the final five months – it was in this period that I was able to participate in the everyday work process, and further had the background knowledge to make sense of the relationships and practices that I was witnessing. I would have liked to spend more time undertaking this kind of participant observation, and looking back, perhaps I could have pushed for inclusion into this aspect of life sooner than I did. However, due to the levels of suspicion levelled at me as a potential spy and the illicit nature of the industry, at the time I felt it prudent to wait for a long time before making this step. The seasonal nature of agricultural work also has a role to play here – the late winter and spring are periods of unemployment for many of my interlocutors, and it was only in the summer that the centrality of labour to life in the camp and village became clear.
It also revealed the class-based nature of social hierarchy. While I am clearly white, Western, with ginger hair, it was not uncommon for me to be mistaken for a Syrian when dressed in work clothes and in the fields. This would lead to all sorts of mistakes, where visiting Lebanese would order me around gruffly, and my friends would giggle at the Lebanese faux pas. It was also useful in understanding the emotional relationship to work. This was most apparent in the pure, unadulterated fury I felt burning in my chest when dealing with one Lebanese apple trader. I and a team of Syrian workers had been carrying crates of apples through the orchard in the heat with no breakfast, lunch, or cigarettes for an entire day, while he sat in the shade and checked for blemishes. At the end of the day, he repeatedly and rudely doubted my accounting of how many tonnes of crates we had loaded. That he had sat under a tree while we sweated all day, and then had the gall to doubt our work! I was furious, and this turmoil of emotions and angry indignity based on class and national divisions could not be explained through interviews.

While I have tried my hardest to account for this, my own cultural predilections concerning ‘real work’ were clearly present in my fieldwork. I certainly embodied and enacted certain British cultural valorisations of work and manual labour, and these attitudes became apparent to me as I found myself expressing them to my interlocutors. On numerous occasions, I caught myself translating old-fashioned maxims that I would never normally use into Arabic: ‘a good day’s work is its own reward,’ ‘if it is worth doing, it is worth doing right,’ and ‘never leave a job half done’. My interlocutors were clearly aware of my moralised attitude to work, and indeed played on it in our conversations. There is, then, the possibility that some of my data has been skewed by my position. But of course, the researcher cannot be an empty vessel. Indeed, I think that my valorisation of ‘the labourer’, inflected as it is by clear British socialist tradition, was useful in establishing something for my interlocutors to argue with and compare their experiences to.

\section*{Conspiracies, suspicion, and the researcher}

It is difficult to overstate the central role of conspiracies to Levantine political discourse. Conversation turns to the political regularly, and this in turn leads to discussion of foreign involvements of plots (whether real or imagined). As Elias Muhanna put it:
‘If amateur political analysis and debate is the Lebanese national sport, conspiracy theorizing must be its major leagues. The appeal of the conspiracy theory in Lebanon is entirely understandable. It injects reason into the bewildering arena of shifting alliances, chronic instability, and random acts of violence, which animate the political stage… the Lebanese feel at ease when they know that several predatory nations are dancing around their tiny country, rubbing their hands together and cackling menacingly as they cook up ways to exploit and subjugate them. Being reminded of this on a regular basis makes them feel safe, for indeed, the alternatives are far more disturbing.’ (Muhanna, 2008)

The way that these narratives trickle into everyday conversations and relationships in Lebanon is described by Fisk (2001) as ‘the Plot’. There has been surprisingly little written, at least in English language academia, about the central role of mua’amarat (conspiracies) in everyday political discourse in the Middle East (the issue is dealt with by Proudfoot, 2014, 2022, but note the absence of any mention of conspiracies in Altorki, 2015). I suspect this is in large part due to a desire by scholars not to reinforce harmful orientalist stereotypes about the irrational and plotting Arab (Reedy, 2010). However, this culture of suspicion was the central obstacle to my fieldwork, and visibly increased as the crises of 2019 – 2020 unfolded.

The collapse of the Lebanese banking system and the steady impoverishment of most of the Lebanese population was the economic background to my fieldwork, and this was mirrored in already war-torn Syria. This was met by large protests beginning on the 17th of October 2019, which eventually fell prey to the Lebanese sectarian system for containing any meaningful challenge to the political status quo. This was then followed by the US assassination of IRGC leader Qassem Soleimani in Iraq in January 2020. He was deeply linked to Hizbollah operations throughout the Middle East, and so this was felt as a direct attack on many of my Lebanese Hizbollah-supporting interlocutors in Lebanon. The Covid-19 pandemic then began later that year, followed by the Beirut port explosion in August, a series of assassinations, and the abortive return of an infamous collaborator with Israel and torturer, to name but a few of the more dramatic political events of my fieldwork. My research took place amongst loyalists – my Lebanese interlocutors were supporters of establishment parties
Hizbollah and Amal, and my Syrian interlocutors were supporters of the Syrian regime of Bashar al Assad. They grappled with their continued loyalty and steadily declining standard of living (Alamine, 2020), and as a British researcher I was implicated in the foreign conspiracy narratives they used to do this.

Life in Lebanon is deeply conditioned by the Lebanese Civil War and other violent conflicts and invasions, and the constant anticipation of violence is a central feature to everyday life (Hermez, 2012, 2017). Over the course of my fieldwork, as the political deadlock and economic and social collapse worsened, so too did concerns about war. Along with the violent repression in response to the protests, a series of shootouts and assassinations further heightened the sense of fear in the country. This fraught environment has important implications for conducting research, and the newly arising obstacles to ethnographic fieldwork in the Middle East has been the subject of renewed discussion (Cantini et al., 2019). The danger of being seen as a spy is heightened in these contexts of surging political turmoil, repression and violence. While in a very different context and country, the murder of Giulio Regeni has brought the limitations of the protection that European citizenship brings a researcher into sharp relief (Clark & Cavatorta, 2018). This murder was unknown in my field site, but its ripples have been felt in academia. In my field site to mention but a few recent incidents, a British man died in extremely murky circumstances (Patience & Rowell, 2018) and a group of Czech men were kidnapped in 2016 (AFP, 2016). More generally, the Lebanese state and establishment political parties have been using increasingly more repressive legal and extra-legal measures to silence researchers and activists.

My participant observation invites a reflection on the role of researcher positionality in Middle Eastern fieldwork. The issues in ethnographic fieldwork in the Middle East that I want to address here are far less extreme than the risk of death or physical harm – they rather stem from the heightened salience of ‘the outsider’ as a disruptive threat to the status quo. This position of the researcher occurs to differing degrees in most ethnographic contexts, but I posit that it is heightened in the Middle East where foreign conspiracies are central to everyday discourse, my interlocutors’ identities, and particularly in explaining steadily declining standards of living. Kanafani and Sawaf argue for the continued need to deploy ‘the ethnographic self as a central research tool while continuing to push the boundaries of critical...
inquiry’ in Middle Eastern ethnography, and in my case my interlocutors did not let me omit the ‘who’ of fieldwork (Kanafani & Sawaf, 2017, p.6). Similarly, Saleh has shown the importance of kizb (lies) and construction of narratives in her fieldwork, as she is drawn into ‘a tangled web of lies’ based on shared local and tacit understanding of how to present oneself in public arenas in Lebanon (Saleh, 2017, p.57). In this next section, I consider three ‘roles’ which I was cast in by my interlocutors, their methodological implications, and the way they affected the relationships which developed over my fieldwork.

**Role 1: an imperial spy**

It is in this context of conspiracy and suspicion that I was conducting my research – as a white British, middle-class university-educated man, my role as a spy and representative of the old colonial enemy was preordained. Many of my interlocutors and acquaintances were certain that I was a spy, for MI6, the CIA, or Mossad, and it was rare that a day went by in Ba’albeck without this characterisation featuring in a conversation. What exactly I was spying on was also vague, and varied from person to person. Some accusations were explicit and aggressive (‘What is your rank?’ or addressing me in Hebrew). Others were more subtle (‘So who directed you to do this research? Where does your funding come from?’). For some of my closer friends, this suspicion was expressed through jokes (‘Be sure to tell your bosses that!’). Indeed, for some of my interlocutors this certainty that I was or would someday convey my knowledge to a powerful Western government or had some connections to the UN was an incentive to share their stories with me (on this see Driscoll & Schuster, 2018, p.419). Others still were more clear-sighted – I was not yet a spy, but longer-term they knew that there was a good chance that I would be employed by or advise the British government in some way or another, and they weighed the costs and benefits of this likelihood in their interactions with me and regularly cracked jokes about my future work prospects. This position has been the subject of anthropological reflection since the origins of the discipline (see Dresch, 2000, p.116 on Pitt-Rivers).

My interlocutors (including a number of the security branch officials and Hizbollah members that I encountered) still certainly believed that my British citizenship extended me a significant degree of protection. People assumed that I had extensive wassta and could
summon the power of British embassy at a moment’s notice (I tested this once - I called the number that was listed on the British Embassy website to see what would happen: it was disconnected). Comparisons to Lawrence of Arabia or James Bond were common, and not necessarily hostile. As I became more comfortable and closer friends I found myself leaning into their suspicions with humour (not dissimilar to the cases discussed by Borneman & Masco, 2015). I would promise to relay my friends’ concerns to the Queen, for example, or as we watched the news about the latest disaster to befall Lebanon, comment that our evil plan was coming to fruition. In his work on the Russia-Ukraine conflict, Morris does an excellent job of describing the way this ‘origin-culture geopolitical baggage’ can follow a researcher in their field site. He shows how ‘researchers are inevitably representatives of the conception of culture’s soft power, however critical we might want to be’ (Morris, 2016, p.122). The constant probing and testing was tiring, but it was also boring and simply distracted from my research (see Borneman in Ghassem-Fachandi, 2009).

There is, of course, clear foreign interference in Lebanese and Syrian politics, and famously cases of anthropologists actively participating in Western military and political endeavours in the region and elsewhere (Forte, 2011; Postill, 2008; Price, 2002; Robben, 2009). I have tried to frame my project in such a way that it is not a work to inform imperial policy and does not recreate orientalist tropes and narratives. But none of my interlocutors were aware of such internal disciplinary controversies, and their narratives of espionage drew from distinct historical narratives to those discussed by academics. My interlocutors were far more likely to talk about, for example, the conspiracy theories that ISIS was created and controlled by the CIA or a supposed trade blockade that Western countries had established to cripple Lebanon’s economy, than any actual cases of foreign interference in the region.

For the most part, Syrians found this Lebanese paranoia concerning me to be humorous, and being the object of Lebanese villagers’ conspiracy theories created a sense of complicity between us (a more lighthearted version of the dynamic described by Nassif, 2017). This is not to say that conspiracy theories were not rife in the Syrian community, and I did have numerous very uncomfortable conversations with informants and persons strongly affiliated with the Ba’ath party. Rather, politics and so conspiracies were simply not the main topic of conversation, and my Syrian interlocutors were much more interested in questions work and
everyday finance in Britain than my country’s supposed role in creating ISIS or the Lebanese financial crisis. It also created farcical conversations amongst my Lebanese friends, where new acquaintances were unsure what they were supposed to be keeping secret from me, and older friends would use this paranoia to wind up the newcomer. The village lads would drop increasing hints that I was a Mossad agent, and giggle as the new acquaintance became more and more uneasy.

I adopted a policy of frankness in my political opinions. Firstly, this is simply because it is impossible to pretend to be someone that you are not for more than a year. It is much more suspicious to be caught out lying about what you think of Bashar al Assad than to just be clear that you don’t like him. Secondly, it undercuts the espionage narrative – what kind of spy would just say outright, in company, that they don’t like Assad? I was regularly quizzed, probed, and tested by people that I met. This was done with varying degrees of politeness and was nothing new, but it gave all new interactions a slight edge. Even after almost five years living in Lebanon, I was still subject to questioning and suspicion on a daily basis – as Dresch notes, when you speak 30 words of Arabic it’s ‘you speak Arabic well’ but when you speak 200 it’s ‘what exactly are you doing here?’ (2000, p.114). This general context of hostility was tiring, and took its toll by the end of my fieldwork.

I was subject to what Bajoghli (2019) describes as ‘interrogative surveillance’, where ‘subjects are fully aware that they are being surveilled, because the surveillance takes place through informal interrogation practices, which are often intimidating. Surveillance creates a set of norms and accept- able responses. If a subject knows she is being surveilled, she is supposed to act within a set of norms in order to prove that she has nothing to hide and is not involved in any activity that would be a threat to the state.’ (p.451). She goes on to point out how this can be used strategically, performed by interlocutors or used as a test to see if it is safe for them to trust the researcher and circumvent the very power structures that interrogative surveillance is meant to protect. In private moments, and after months of interrogative surveillance, interlocutors would test out transgressive ideas on me – of course, in such an environment, these discussions were never wholly trusting. How could I be sure that this wasn’t some kind of test set by the various security agencies that were watching me? Of course, it is important to keep in mind that I was not the only one under surveillance – in a
paranoid security state, my interlocutors were in a similar position. This game of strategic probing was heightened due to my position as a foreigner, but it was also just a specific case of a common part of everyday interaction between inhabitants of my field site.

Role 2: a man without honour

My masculinity has certainly determined the data available to me, and so the argument of this thesis. Foreign-ness is very gendered, and I was noticeable precisely because I was a foreign man. It was normal for Biqa’a men to marry foreign women and move back to Ba’albeck, and there were plenty of Ba’albeck children with foreign mothers. However, the few Biqa’a women I knew who had relationships with foreign men lived in Beirut, and the only foreign men that I know of living in the region for long periods of time were fugitives. Given the patriarchal norms and rules concerning the interaction between the genders in both Lebanese and Syrian rural society, much of my interactions were restricted to men. My primary interlocutors were almost all men, with a couple of older women. This gender segregation was far more pronounced amongst my shawi Syrian interlocutors. This segregation is not purely physical – women are often present in the room with non-familial men, but men dominated conversation and it would be inappropriate to speak too directly and at length with female members of the household.

In part because of these restrictions, it took me quite a long time to realise just how central female wage labour was to the economy and social life of the camp and village. Female absence went unremarked, and it was only after an extended period of participant observation that I was able to notice how often women were absent from the domestic sphere, and so necessarily at work. This is not to say that I was unable to talk with women – as I became a regular visitor to several households, my interlocutors wives, sisters, and mothers slowly began to join our conversations. As Wagner notes ‘the most striking indicator of gradual inclusion into family life… was the suspension of gender segregation’ (2016), and this was certainly the case in my fieldwork. However, this suspension was not without its limits. In the camp there remained a clear limit to these interactions, which were always inevitably interrupted and dominated by the men of the house. It is significant that the only extended period of time that I spent ‘alone’ with a Syrian woman was in the fields when we
worked together in the harvest season. Likewise, the two distinctive female Syrian characters in Chapter V are explicitly characterised as transgressive. These and many other women would have been great additions to this ethnography, but I decided that further association with me, a young male researcher, given their already precarious position would have been too potentially risky, and several times I chose not to pursue what could have been fruitful areas of research.

Inflected in this data and my fieldwork is, as with my moralised view of work, a moralised view of masculinity. To paraphrase MacDougall, we do not go into the field as blank slates—we bring our ways of inhabiting maleness with us (2015, p.25). Repeated good-humoured and not so good-humoured mockery and questioning about ‘European’ gender roles and sexual practices led me to be positioned as an archetypal ‘European Man’. I found myself making absurdly general and positive claims about gender roles in Britain, as with work. Casting aside moral relativism, in the face of constant claims of the superiority of Levantine patriarchal society, I found myself discursively constructing an abstracted European masculinity that I did not know I had. In response to repeated demands that I recognise the importance of female subservience, I argued for a northern European manly self-reliance. In the face of jibes about European sexual degeneracy, I mocked my interlocutors as inexperienced prudes. This was, in itself, a manifestation of a kind of British masculinity; firstly, I found myself being pushed into the position of defending ‘our women,’ and eventually embracing this role. Secondly, this less-than-cautious engagement in verbal sparring with my interlocutors was an instinctively British cultural practice of ‘taking the piss’. Perhaps in a different context, this could have caused no end of problems, but fortuitously in my field site it meshed well with Lebanese and Syrian masculine ideas of humour and argument (Gilsenan, 1996; Hage, 2009, p.63).

Women play a considerable role in this ethnography, but their voices are relatively absent. Female ethnographers can, in part, overcome this barrier but this is further constrained by other aspects of the researcher’s identity (Schwedler, 2006). Researcher positionality should not be understood in purely limiting terms. My role as an outsider man often made me the sounding board for more transgressive ideas. I had made clear that I had a girlfriend back home, and this did at least partially establish me as having some kind of position in the gendered hierarchy/trajectory. In fact, it provoked extensive and frank conversations (mostly
with men, but some women) about gender roles and sexual politics. It also meant that I was encouraged to perform stereotypical ‘European’ roles to act as a foil for my interlocutors to knowingly perform exaggerated versions of an idealised Arab masculinity (for more on this, see Chapter IX), but also for women to mock other men in the camp and village.

As before with questions of work, splitting my research between two communities meant that it was difficult to adjust to the different gender rules. Several times I offended Lebanese women by not paying them enough attention, as a result of just coming from the camp where to do so would be awkward and inappropriate. Juggling these national hierarchies were equally difficult, where I would feel obliged to ignore some of my best male Syrian friends from the camps when in the presence of female Lebanese villagers who I barely knew.

The gender of the researcher has deeply conditioned the ethnographic data available to me, but this is not a fundamental limitation. Female researchers would face mirrored obstacles in the field, as has been extensively documented (see Altorki & El-Solh, 1988). In this way, I have made use of my gendered positionality to engage in questions of gender with my interlocutors in order to not only document women’s role in labour and labour reproduction, but also ‘capture a fuller range of constructions and experiences of masculinity’ (Deeb & Winegar, 2012, p.544) and how they are implicated in this.

**Role 3: atheist, communist, heathen**

Another very important but often unremarked upon aspect of researcher identity is their religious and political views, which in Lebanon are often seen as deeply intertwined. Indeed, my left-wing political views are clearly manifest in this thesis – it concerns capitalism and labour relations and draws extensively from a Marxist tradition. Similarly, atheism is largely not understood as a social category in my field site, and indeed much of the Middle East. I was caught between not wanting to mislead my interlocutors, whilst simultaneously avoiding the social ostracism that atheism can provoke. As a Westerner, it is almost universally assumed amongst people that I met that I was a Christian and that I at least in some way supported the British state. However, in long-term ethnographic fieldwork in a context of deep suspicion, there is not so much room to maintain the ‘fine balance between diplomatic exposure of my opinions and an overtly inquisitive attitude’ (Ramailo in Cavorta, p.130) – one
cannot hide one’s true beliefs from close friends over a period of years (Bernard, 2017). As with these other questions of identity and positionality, I opted for a policy of honesty, earnest discussion, and humour. Amongst my Lebanese interlocutors, many of whom I had known before I began my research, it was well-known that I was an atheist, and this was the source of much enjoyment for many of my friends, and confusion for other villagers. Another one of my closer friends’ common jokes was to use my religious beliefs as a way to wind up their relatives. They would direct conversation with an unknowing uncle towards religious themes, all the while exchanging glances. They would encourage him to question me on technicalities of Christianity, sniggering as he became more bewildered at my answers, before finally collapsing into laughter at look on their uncle’s face as it dawned on him that he was speaking to someone who did not believe in the immaculate conception.

Amongst the Lebanese community, this did not generally present significant social barriers. In fact, by being categorised as a ‘communist’ or a ‘leftist’ in Lebanon, I was also understood to be in automatic disagreement with Western mainstream policy, which in most cases was the salient political question (Leftist movements have their own extensive history in Lebanon, but as a Westerner the more complex aspects of, for example, the relationship between the Communist party and Hizbollah are glossed over). Indeed, in Lebanon where local identity is rife with sectarian-political meaning, being Lebanese (and so inherently a member of a political heritage and sect) can be a serious impediment to social relationships and research. Political positions are often assumed, as is knowledge of social norms. As a complete outsider who very obviously did not fit into oppositional categories, I was granted more benefit of the doubt in discussions, explanation of histories, and access to domestic life (Hermez, 2017, p.26).

It did, however, lead to countless tedious discussions with more hardline or religious people, who could not leave the topic alone. I have lost track of the number of conversations that were ruined because one member of the group just would not accept that I did not agree with the ontological argument for God’s existence. I considered identifying as a Christian, as many Westerners do in the Middle East. However, in my experience this has led to being immediately quizzed on the intricacies of the Holy Trinity and transubstantiation. Several
times, on a visit to a next-door Maronite Christian town, I was treated to surprise epic monologues about the evils of Protestantism. The problem is not so easily resolved.

In the Syrian refugee camp, I was not as comfortable expressing such views, and likewise my interlocutors were just less interested in theological or political theory discussions. My close friends knew my beliefs and chose not to pursue the topics, and actively directed conversation away from religion or high politics with other members of the community. I deferred to them, and again fell back on jokes or historical explanations of the difference between Catholic and Protestant to dodge the issue.

The possibility for religion to become a problem was brought into sharp relief with the murder of Samuel Paty in October 2020, a French schoolteacher who was decapitated by an angry Islamist teenager for showing a cartoon of the Prophet Muhammad in a lesson about freedom of speech. Due to the vagaries of the internet, the story reached the Arabic language news sphere of my interlocutors a month or so after the killing. All of a sudden, I found my normally very relaxed interlocutors in the camp fuming at ‘attacks on the dignity of the prophet’ and celebrating the decapitation. Their social media statuses and conversation was replete with threats to invade Europe and overt, violent holy war imagery. The French President Macron was also singled out for furious verbal abuse. As usual, I was pushed into the position of representative of the West, but this time, it was not a topic to crack jokes about. None of my interlocutors really seemed to know the details of what had happened in France, but when they eventually asked me to explain how such mockery and discussion could happen in Europe, the conversation was extremely delicate. Even attempting to explain that mockery of religion was socially accepted, and that the murder was not justified by European standards put me in a very uncomfortable position, and I was constantly quizzed and angrily interrupted by a group of all suddenly very devout men.

**Conclusion**

My fieldwork took place in a context of violence, suspicion, and intercommunal hostility. My status as an obvious outsider marked me out for suspicion, but it also offered advantages in terms of access to certain community members and more generous and extensive
explanations of social relations, history, and cultural practices. My methodological considerations indicate the need for ethnographers to complicate the distinction between ‘studying up’ and ‘studying down’ - the power relations between myself and my interlocutors were dynamic and never a straightforward hierarchy. Furthermore, this chapter shows that the researcher is not passive in these interactions but must actively engage in the power relations which determine their own position in the hierarchy of their field site. This was an explicit part of my work, as I balanced my time between the two communities and juggled different competing gatekeepers. I was obliged to activate *wasta* in order to overcome obstacles like the local policeman in the opening vignette, and inserted myself into different positions in the village hierarchy through work and socialising. I actively played a role in carving out a position for myself and this participation in shaping the social order of my field site was an essential part of my research.

As I have shown, my position as foreign researcher was never far from the minds of my interlocutors. This conditioned the topics that I discussed with them, and the ways that we discussed them. It has certainly affected the data that I have collected, in both positive and negative ways. In this heightened context of suspicion and narratives of civilisational conflict, the importance of these parameters was made more obvious to me. Tacit comparison is central to ethnographic writing practice (Gay y Blasco & Wardle, 2019), and here I have reflected on how this was manifest in fieldwork. Awareness of the roles that one is cast in by others is a central part of social interaction, and in this fieldwork, playing on these roles discursively was an essential skill both for my interlocutors and the researcher. The argument of this thesis is infused with this play on roles, which deeply affected my interaction with labour, social class, and gender. Much of the more original data that I have managed to collect was precisely because of this engagement in the social game of arguing and playing on my position as a very specific kind of foreigner.

My methodological considerations have notable similarities with those of ethnographers in very different contexts such as Goffman (2015), Bourgeois (2003) and Osburg (2013). Taken together, our work indicates that rather than striving for neutrality, practitioners of participant observation should recognise their active role in the social relations of the community that they choose to study. Participating in these processes is both an unavoidable...
and data-rich part of ethnographic research, especially when studying questions of identity and power relations.
III – ‘They came before’: histories of circular labour migration between Syria and the Biqa’a valley

Introduction

This first ethnographic chapter shows how pre-war seasonal labour migration from Syria to Lebanon played a central role in both the structural conditions of Syrian flight to Lebanon and individual decision-making. This precarious Syrian workforce was essential for the economic development of Lebanon more broadly, and the economy of the rural Biqa’a in particular during the two decades prior to the Syrian Civil War. These patterns of migration and the continued participation by labourers in communities and institutions back in Syria were key to the social reproduction of this workforce, and so underpinned commercial agriculture in the valley. Rural Syrian household and community reproduction was deeply intertwined with Lebanese demand for labour, and the war and subsequent forced migration caused an upheaval of these structures. However, rather than a collapse, the Biqa’a has seen a massive expansion of this workforce. Households have transplanted a large body of people, social relationships, and practices from their hometowns in Syria to the Biqa’a valley. The organisation of this workforce was based on gender and nationality prior to the war, and the weakness and exploitation that this entailed has been accentuated by this mass forced migration.

Syrian refugees’ decisions to migrate to the Biqa’a were not made at random. Nor was it, for the most part, an unexpected departure in the middle of the night. Rather, most of the camp dwellers that I encountered in rural areas of the Biqa’a valley had fled Syria following well-established migratory routes which they or their families had been travelling since long before the 2011 beginning of the Syrian Civil War. Syrians who had previously worked the harvest season in Lebanon and returned to their hometown for the winter began to extend their stays in Lebanon as the war ground on. Family members steadily joined them as life under the rebels, ISIS, and the regime became more unstable and violent, and economic opportunities in Syria withered away. This pattern was replicated for rural-dwelling Syrians, but amongst my interlocutors it was most pronounced for those originating in the area of Syria that is part of the jazirah. The Syrian part of the jazirah region roughly corresponds to the three
governorates east of the Euphrates river: Raqqa, Deir ez Zour, and Hassakeh. This area not only provided the bulk of migrant agricultural labourers that I encountered, but also has a distinct cultural identity and practices within Syria, which have been imported to the camps of the Biqa’a.

This chapter’s primary function is to establish context in which the mass forced migration of the Syrian Civil War took place and to show how individual labourers are embedded in this environment – an understanding of this background is essential to broader argument of this thesis. To do so, I first give a historical overview of the relationship between the Biqa’a and Syria, demonstrating their deep economic intertwinement and the growing importance of wage-labour migration over the latter part of the twentieth and first decade of the twenty-first century. I then describe my primary field site, a small village and camp located in the network of villages that spreads out through the hashish farming region to the west of the regional capital Ba’albeck. I locate this community in the broader historical context of the region and give an overview of the specific socio-economic structures which conditioned Syrian migration to the Biqa’a.

In the second half of this chapter, I then analyse the pathways by which Syrians came to be in this peripheral, rural part of Lebanon by giving the life-stories of four Syrian men, who are broadly representative of the different trajectories that rural families from Syria have followed in their flight to Lebanon. These individual histories illustrate the different patterns of migration and the common theme of labour in conditioning these stories. Lebanese need for labour and Syrian ability to organise and provide it created the pre-war networks which facilitated migration to the Biqa’a and determined how and where Syrians settled after moving to the Biqa’a. Comparison between these life-histories reveals important generational and regional differences between their experiences.

The Biqa’a: a contested bread-basket

The Biqa’a valley is a fertile strip of land approximately 100 miles long, located between the Lebanon and Anti-Lebanon Mountains bordering Syria to the East and the North. The French mandate completed its incorporation into the modern state of Lebanon in 1920, but the
eastern border between Lebanon and Syria is poorly demarcated and porous, and movement between the two countries has historically been common. Before the refugee crisis, the valley had a population of roughly half a million, the majority of whom were Shi’a Muslim, with a significant number of Maronites and Catholics, and a few Sunni areas. There is one major North-South highway, with networks of small villages spreading up the mountains to the east and west (the flat plains and imposing mountains typical of the valley are shown in figure 4).

The Lebanese government was historically dominated by Maronite Christians from the jebel lubnan region and tended to ignore Shi’a majority regions such as the Northern Biqa’a (Mouawad, 2018). Contributing to this marginalisation are the valley’s porous border and close economic ties with Syria, encouraging further exclusion based on conflicting loyalties (Obeid, 2010). Correspondingly low levels of popular legitimacy have mirrored the lack of central state activity and investment. Here, clans remain central to local politics, heavily armed, and fiercely autonomous from central state authority. Smuggling and hashish farming have been key to the local economy since the 1950s (this is attested to by the old hashish branding and logos that the villagers showed me, dating back to at least the 1970s as shown in figure 3), with fugitives protected by political patronage and parallel military forces (Marshall, 2012). With the outbreak of the Civil War, what little state control there was collapsed, and kidnapping and drug farming flourished. The Syrian regime of Hafez al Assad took control of the Biqa’a in 1977, though its forces acted more as arbiters between rival factions and clans than a sovereign power. Palestinian military forces crumbled in 1982, but the Iranian Revolutionary Guard established a headquarters in the regional capital of Ba’albeck (the urban centre of the valley for Shi’a muslims, shown in figure 5) and began recruiting for what was to become Hizbollah. By the early 1990s, Hizbollah had replaced Syria as the arbiter between the Biqa’a clans (Hamzeh, 1994).

Under the Ottoman empire, the Biqa’a valley was for the most part ruled from Damascus. With the redrawing of national boundaries that followed World War I, large parts of previously distinct regions were grafted on to historical Ottoman mutasarafiyeh (autonomous region) of jebel lubnan (Mount Lebanon). This process in the Levant was largely as a result of bargaining between colonial powers and is broadly referred to as the Sykes-Picot agreement, but it also responded to certain local political and economic considerations and interests. This
expansion of borders was in part a response to the Great Famine of 1915–1918 which afflicted Mount Lebanon and killed perhaps as much as half of its population. In seeking to guard against future famines and mass, local leaders campaigned to incorporate fertile agricultural land from neighbouring regions in the nascent state, and this coincided with French mandatory policy of creating a Maronite Christian dominated, French-friendly state in the region. However, the inhabitants of these regions were largely Muslim, as opposed to the predominantly Christian and Druze populations of Mount Lebanon.

Despite this redrawing of the political map, from its creation by the French in 1920 the border between Lebanon and Syria has been largely open, and mobility between the two countries has been common for all social classes. These practices have been addressed by authors such as (Picard, 2006), who describes the post-Sykes-Picot mobility as a continued ‘ottomanism’, which she defines as ‘a constant flow of human, material and symbolic exchanges between the Near Eastern provinces was inspired by a nomadic habitus that contradicted territorialisation and the stabilisation of identities and belongings.’ However, mobility has often been the product of traumatic political ruptures - mass displacements towards the end of the Ottoman Empire, followed by the Great Famine, and later the Armenian genocide and the Palestinian Nakba have deeply conditioned the development of Lebanon’s political system (see Fawaz, 1994; Makdisi, 2000; Salibi, 2003; Traboulsi, 2012).

Connections between the Biqa’a and Syria prior to the war were particularly strong. In several towns along the border, inhabitants hold citizenship from the neighbouring country, and throughout the valley it was normal for Lebanese and Syrians to travel to Syria regularly for shopping, where prices were cheaper. ‘We used to go to the market in Syria every month,’ Hiba, one of my closest female Lebanese interlocutors, recalled. The border has been very weakly policed - even at the height of the most recent conflict, when hundreds of millions of dollars have been spent by foreign donors on militarising the relatively short border, passage to and from Syria could be organised by smugglers in a couple of days, and only cost around US$100.

Syrian labour migration to Lebanon has been a common practice since the state’s establishment, and Syrian workers have long been spread throughout the entire country. As Chalcraft (2009, p.54) notes, Lebanon steadily became a regional mercantile and financial
hub, and while labour migration was an established phenomena there was a steady upwards trend from the 1940s onwards. While there was a large, established body of wealthy Syrians living and working in Lebanon, for the most part these Syrian migrants came from the countryside and provided a huge pool of cheap, informal labour. Cross-border movement increased exponentially over the 1960s and 1970s, making the economies of the two countries largely interdependent by the beginning of Lebanese Civil War.

During the Lebanese Civil War which began in 1975, Syrian regime forces occupied large parts of Lebanon, including the Biqa’a valley. While officially a peacekeeping force, the Syrian regime established a permanent security apparatus and further facilitated the movement of Syrian workers and goods to Lebanese markets, and the centre of their control was the Biqa’a valley. This situation was to continue for three decades, and the Biqa’a was deeply intertwined with the Syrian economy. This informal domination was consolidated with the end of the Lebanese Civil War in 1990 - the forces of Hafez al Assad acted as an extractive parallel state arbiter between the no-longer warring Lebanese political factions. The regime allowed for foreign capital to flow through the rebuilding and redevelopment of Lebanon and for the ‘spoils of truce’ to be divided between the Lebanese political parties and ex-warlords, on the condition that it was able to extract its share and its political prerogatives were not challenges (on this, see Leenders, 2012).

Different regions and industries had their own distinct patterns of Syria-Lebanon migration. The Biqa’a valley is Lebanon’s agricultural heartland, and so was historically subject to more intense fluctuations in the number of pre-Syrian Civil War migrants. Labourers would arrive in early summer, as the demand for labour increased, and work through to the end of the harvest season in November. They would then return to Syria and enter a period of partial unemployment and tending to family farms and flocks for the winter and spring. Some labourers remained in Lebanon, where they may have had longer-term employment as a steward or guard for an absentee or large landowner. Cross-border flows were not unidirectional, however. As labour flowed from Syria to Lebanon, luxury items which were unavailable in Syria were smuggled from Lebanese ports over the mountains, as were increasing quantities of hashish and other drugs over the course of the Civil War.
The heavy-handed rule during the Syrian occupation was greatly resented by Lebanese inhabitants of the Biqa’a. Syrian army checkpoints were everywhere, and any dispute ran the risk of the involvement of the Syrian mukhabarat. The region was highly securitised, and even small villages like my field site had their own dedicated contingent of the Syrian army, the mukhabarat, and sometimes a wing of Syrian regime affiliated Palestinian militias. ‘When you wanted to pass a checkpoint, they Syrian would wave you through with his leg, like you were a dog’ said one indignant villager (this is a common trope, repeated by Al-Khoder 2017), ‘you couldn’t move a tin of tuna from Ba’albeck to the village without paying some Syrian officer’. Given that Hizbollah was now deeply involved in propping up the Syrian regime, this uncomfortable history was often conveniently ignored in the name of the muqawameh alliance (literally ‘resistance’, this is the term used by supporters to refer to Hizbollah and its broader national and regional allies). However, even the most fervent Lebanese supporters of the Syrian regime would, when pushed, grudgingly admit that the Syrian occupation was largely responsible for the resentment it inspired.
Syrians were not the only labourers in the twentieth century. In my field site, much of the land was still worked by peasant smallholders until the 1990s, and the wholesale replacement of Lebanese household labour with Syrian migrant wage labour only occurred in the past two decades. Within the Biqa’a valley, poorer Lebanese smallholders would often work their own and others’ land and seasonal migration within the Biqa’a was not uncommon even a generation ago. Palestinian labour was also used throughout the Civil War period and other, unexpected migrant groups. For example, through a quirk of history, a few dozen Pakistani refugees found themselves in the Biqa’a in the 1990s and temporarily settled as agricultural workers in my field site. These men had left in the early 2000s, but were fondly remembered by my Lebanese interlocutors as hard-working, honest labourers – a comparison they frequently invoked as a way to criticise the Syrian camp dwellers.

_Pax Syriana_

Syrian domination and economic intertwinement increased dramatically with the end of the Lebanese Civil War, and the economic boom that followed the rebuilding process through the 1990s. As the reconstruction began, the Lebanese economy was booming. Syrian migration steadily increased, most visibly in construction, but spread throughout the economy. The Lebanese lira was pegged to the dollar in the mid-1990s, and so even the lowest Lebanese wages were high by comparison to Syria.

This process was further accelerated by the death of Hafez al Assad and the accession of his son Bashar to the Syrian presidency in 2000. This new guard set about dismantling components of the protectionist economy, privatising and liberalising huge parts of the state infrastructure and, most notably, agricultural support structures. The corresponding unemployment and fall in profitability of agricultural land was offset in large part by the possibility of seasonal labour migration to Lebanon. The two economies were deeply intertwined – Lebanon required Syrian labourers for essentially every sector of the economy, and Syria desperately needed Lebanon to absorb more and more young workers with few prospects in their hometowns. This process was so irresistible that not even the violence of 2005 surrounding the assassination of Rafiq Hariri could do anything but temporarily stem
migrant flows. The Syrian army withdrawal in the face of mass protests was largely accompanied by the pre-emptive flight of huge numbers of labourers. However, slowly but surely, they trickled back as the situation calmed (Chalcraft, 2009, p.204).

This situation continued throughout the *pax Syriana* period, beginning in 1990, with Hizbollah becoming increasingly integrated into the Shi’a community clans. In the aftermath of the Civil War, the Syrian regime continued to deploy large numbers of troops to ensure its dominance throughout Lebanon. Their presence bred deep dislike for Syrians amongst the Lebanese population, subject to their arbitrary rule. In the face of mass protests, Syrian troops withdrew in 2005, and a formal Lebanese state presence slowly returned to the region, primarily through military checkpoints and bases, but also through some infrastructure investment and services. In general, however, its authority was limited: drug farming continued in plain sight of army bases, and inhabitants retained their weaponry. With the outbreak of the Syrian Civil War, Hizbollah became steadily more involved in fighting for the Assad regime, and many Shi’a men from the Biqa’a fought in Syria. Likewise, the Civil War spilt over into the Biqa’a valley, with Syrian Islamist militants seizing and holding the Lebanese town of Aarsal from 2014 until a joint Hizbollah-Lebanese Armed Forces operation dislodged them in 2017.

As the Syrian Civil War ground on, millions of Syrian refugees entered Lebanon, and more than half a million of them settled in informal refugee camps in the Biqa’a valley. Anti-refugee sentiment has increased, both in the population and the Lebanese government actions and rhetoric (Human Rights Watch, 2018). However, rather than direct action, the refugee policies have generally been characterised by ambiguity and confusion, maintaining a delicate balance of political parties in national unity governments. The experiences of Palestinian refugees (Knudsen and Kerr, 2013) and the Syrian occupation loom large in informing attitudes towards the new Syrian refugees.

As noted previously, mass displacement and its demographic impact play a central role in Lebanese sectarian politics. In Lebanon’s consociational sectarian state, state resources and jobs are divided according to sect. However, since no census has been taken since 1932, this, in turn, is highly contested, and displaced populations are understood in terms of upsetting this sectarian balance. This sentiment was evident in the previous mass displacement of
Palestinians, which set a broad tone for the current Syrian crisis. Sayigh gives the authoritative account of Palestinian refugees’ ascendance and defeat in Lebanon (2015), which was framed as an existential threat to large swathes of the Lebanese population (Knudsen and Hanafi, 2010). As majority Sunni Muslims, Palestinians and Syrians are seen as threats who may be potentially naturalised to boost Sunni numbers. This fear looms large in both high politics and everyday interactions, especially amongst Christian and Shi’a communities. The Lebanese state’s ‘no-camp’ policy of refusing to recognise Syrian refugees or allowing the establishment of formal camps is based on fears of loss of sovereignty (Knudsen, 2016; Sanyal, 2017). Any policy or practise that could be interpreted as ‘normalising’ the presence of these groups is treated with the utmost hostility. Like the Palestinians before them, Syrian refugees in Lebanon exist in legal limbo – Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Convention on Refugees and does not legally recognise displaced Syrians as refugees (Janmyr, 2016). Lebanese government administration is systematically opaque, increasing precariousness and repeatedly framing the presence of Syrians as a threat to the political and demographic balance of the country (Nassar and Stel, 2019). The impact of these legal constraints on work and livelihoods is clearly documented by Jagarnathsingh (2016), and this manifests itself in systematic discrimination and segregation in all aspects of life (Human Rights Watch, 2018; Sewell and Alfred, 2017; Nassar and Stel, 2019; Stel, 2020).

Field site

My field site was a small, isolated village in the mountains to the northwest of the regional capital of Ba’albeck. In mid-winter, the village population was as low as a few hundred, while it would swell to several thousand in the summer. Likewise, the number of Syrian inhabitants varied seasonally, with labourers moving between family members in different camps in the valley. The villagers were almost entirely Shi’a Muslims from the same clan; hashish farming, production, and smuggling have been the central economic pillars of the area since at least the middle of the twentieth century. While there are also many émigrés, city dwellers, and state employees amongst the villagers, almost all households in the village have some income originating in the hashish industry. Due to the illicit nature of the local economy, despite high numbers of military and state security recruits from amongst the villagers, law enforcement and the military are not welcome in the village and surrounding areas.
Hashish farming and production are among the primary economic drivers of the Northern Biqa’a villages, and there is a well-established, export-based economy. This industry has undergone dramatic changes in recent years. Production was curtailed at the end of the Civil War, and it was only with the collapse of Syrian dominion over the valley in 2005 that the market began to reopen. Supply shortages meant that hashish reached astronomically high prices – US$1,200 per kilogram in 2012 (Khoder, 2019). Over the past decade, these high prices have gone hand in hand with the opening of new markets and smuggling routes, greatly increasing the reliability of the hashish trade for small-scale farmers whilst reducing the production risks. This, naturally, led to an increase in demand for seasonal agricultural labour, almost entirely provided by Syrian migrants. The price of hashish plummeted to around US$125 per kilogram in 2020, in part due to a steady increase in supply, but intensive production continued along with the labour demands that go with it.

My primary field site was a far cry from the seas of tents often associated with Syrian refugee camps. Situated about half a kilometre down the road from the village, the camp consisted of some 60 tents clustered together in rows on a hillside, surrounded by trash and a sewage treatment plant (see figure 2). The 400 or so inhabitants come and go on foot, motorbike, or are collected before a shift by Lebanese villagers driving 4x4s. The refugees had slowly arrived as the Syrian Civil War ground on and ISIS seized their home village near Raqqa in 2014. At first, they made deals with private landlords or squatted unused land, but in 2016 the municipality and a local NGO gathered the various tents to a more manageable location on the outskirts of town, providing water and utilities. Some families rented rooms in the village, and around 20 tents remained on private land, despite the best efforts of the municipality.

Camp dwellers were all from the Raqqa’a governorate of Syria. While Lebanese villagers often referred to them as nawar (gypsy) or badu (Bedouin), camp-dwellers rejected these labels. They were members of two settled tribes and proudly referred to themselves as shawi, a loose term associated with the Sunni towns and tribes of Hassakeh, Raqqa, and Deir Ez Zour. Previous scholarship has presented shawi as a generally pejorative term (Colin et al., 2012; Lange, 2005, 2015) with various different origins, but both I and Sajadian (Sajadian, 2020, 2022) found that our interlocutors proudly referred to themselves as shawi. Most Syrians
living in the village instead originated from more northwestern, majority Kurdish, regions. Both communities had relations to the village that long predated the Syrian Civil War. While many owned and had farmed small parcels of land in their home villages in Syria, this was generally considered a supplementary income, and not a particularly profitable one. Income from small-scale agriculture in Syria paled in comparison to income from seasonal wage labour in Lebanon’s booming post-Civil War economy. As young men, they came to the Biqa’a in the mid-1990s in search of work and established seasonal labour relations with local Lebanese farmers. As the Lebanese economy and the hashish industry grew, these men brought more and more family members with them for the harvest season, returning to their villages in Syria for the period of unemployment during the winter months. With the onset of the Syrian Civil War, these groups expanded and began staying year-round. Despite being, for the most part, Assad supporters, as Sunni Muslims, they were suspected of being rebel or ISIS supporters by local Christian and Shi’a Lebanese communities.

It is worth reiterating for non-specialist readers at this early stage that this ethnography straddles two culturally distinct groups of people, which existed in a very clear hierarchical relationship. While there are extensive shared cultural, historical, and economic practices between the Lebanon and Syria, amongst my interlocutors there was no question that Syrians and Lebanese distinct social classes, and that in my field site Lebanese villagers occupied a socially superior and dominant position relative to Syrians at all times. The hierarchical social order of these two communities in many ways resembled a similar system described by Gilsenan (1996) between the agha class of small landowners and the fellah class of labourers and sharecroppers in northern Lebanon. This division was most clear with the Syrian shawi community, a distinct marginalised sub-group even within Syria, who constituted the majority of wage-labourers and all the camp inhabitants. The extent of this segregation will become apparent throughout the ethnography, but this social identity was present in all interaction between these two groups, and it was almost always immediately apparent from signifiers such as dress, haircut, and accent. While there were occasional intermarriages between non-shawi Syrians and Lebanese and occasionally other shared social engagements, these were almost non-existent when it came to shawi-Lebanese relations.
Social cleavages in Syria were replicated amongst the settlement patterns of the newly-arrived Syrian diaspora in Lebanon. Many of the city dwelling, university educated, English-speaking Syrians quickly found relatively well-paid jobs for which they were overqualified, in Beirut. On the central street of Hamra ‘man, everyone was Syrian! It was like being back in Damascus, always seeing friends in the street’ said one of my middle-class, urban Syrian friends. The Syrian Civil War ground on and it became clear that there would be no resolution, and it became increasingly clear that the situation for Syrians living in Lebanon could only get worse. Many of those Syrians who could, continued on, finding refuge in Europe and Canada. Some negotiated the labyrinth of UN bureaucracies to get asylum, others took advantage of family reunifications, and still others used universities and scholarships as a means to resettle.

In contrast, while many rural Syrians who had previously worked in agricultural labour followed very different pathways. These working-class Syrians had made up the bulk of the pre-war migration to Lebanon, and so used and followed these distinct networks to facilitate their flight and settlement. Lebanon is not a large country, and there were no significant physical barriers to moving around. They instead followed the pre-war circular migration networks – previously temporary, small, tented settlements that functioned as summer work camps transformed into larger, year-round settlements, and those men whose role had previously facilitated regular movement and work began to coordinate much larger, more permanent, static communities. New camps sprung up as offshoots of older agreements, and newcomers found themselves as intermediaries between these communities, working within the framework first established by the pre-war labour migrants.

In previous years, the seasonal work had been a relatively lucrative business – the going rate for unskilled labour was LL3,000 an hour, but more skilled workers could command 4,000 – 5,000 an hour. Maqtou’a (piecework, paid by the completion of a task, regardless of time taken) was also common, and distinct bartering frameworks and references existed for different tasks in hashish production, construction, and orchard work. An able-bodied, competent young man or woman could make at least LL40,000, and up to LL80,000 per day during the harvest season. Before the economic crisis of 2019, this was US$30 – US$50 a day, a huge amount of money in rural Syria. Many of the older generations of Syrians had bought land and built houses in their home villages with these wages before the Civil War. Since the
beginning of the refugee crisis, entire families, including non-workers, have fled to Lebanon, abandoning their land and houses or leaving them with relatives. There is little incentive to return to Syria – job prospects are bleak, houses and property were lost in the War, and the Syrian lira was hit by hyperinflation, rendering wages worthless. Furthermore, almost all of the men are wanted for mandatory military service with both the regime and anti-regime forces, and returning would risk arbitrary detention by the authorities on other unknown charges.

Despite this, many of my Lebanese interlocutors repeated the refrain that the Syrians were ‘not real refugees, they came before to work and then go back to Syria,’ and now that ‘the war is finished and Syria is safe, they must return.’ The view that Syrians were staying in Lebanon to collect aid money was widespread amongst my Lebanese interlocutors. This was largely coupled with a belief in conspiracy theories about foreign plans to use Syrians to engineer demographic change. This fear of migrants upsetting the delicate balance of power in Lebanon is central to Lebanese political discourse and foundational to the current regime. Aid from the UN and other organisations certainly factored in Syrian refugees’ decision to stay in Lebanon, but it was hardly decisive. Before the 2019 Economic Crisis, Syrian refugees with up-to-date paperwork were usually eligible for US$27 per person monthly, and some poorer families qualified for an additional monthly US$180 in cash assistance. However, for many, due to Lebanese bureaucratic obstacles, registration was impossible – much of the required paperwork was unavailable or too expensive, and the Lebanese state intermittently compelled the UN to stop registrations of new refugees. This income represents only a few days additional days’ wages each month but was the source of extreme resentment by many Lebanese villagers. Syrians were constantly rumoured to have huge stacks of cash buried underneath their tents, and those who were not completely destitute were often seen as ‘liars.’

While it is deeply conditioned by local political history and identity, this Lebanese hostility towards Syrians echoes a broader global trend of attempts to distinguish between the categories of ‘refugee’ and ‘economic migrant.’ As has been noted elsewhere, concerns with this distinction tend to be, at their core, ideologically motivated (Goodman et al., 2017; Long, 2013). All of my Syrian interlocutors were self-described refugees and, as with all Syrians,
would face serious danger should they return home. They were both refugees and migrant labourers; there is no reason to treat the two as mutually exclusive.

The beginning of my fieldwork coincided with the Lebanese economic collapse. This had been looming for some time, as it had become apparent in recent years that Lebanon would be unable to service its massive debt, most of which was held by domestic banks (for background on this, see Berthier, 2017; Safieddine, 2020). In 2019, banks found themselves in a liquidity crisis and closed their doors, and the inflated value of the Lebanese lira began to collapse. As the scale of the crisis became apparent, the central bank was unable to maintain the peg of the lira to the dollar, and the exchange rate shot up. As imports are paid in dollars, but wages are paid in lira, this meant a huge drop in the population’s purchasing power. Similarly, aid money for the Syrians dwindled to negligible amounts in 2020.

The exchange rate steadily rose – US$1 was equivalent to LL1,500 pre-crisis in 2019, and this rose to around LL8,000 towards the end of 2020. The collapse continued and by mid-2022 US$1 was worth around LL30,000. For farm labourers, this was critical: hourly wages amongst my interlocutors dropped from US$2 to 30 cents in a matter of months in 2019/2020. Likewise, unpaid back-wages, sometimes running into the thousands of dollars, became worthless. The same occurred for Lebanese state employees – a low-ranking private soldier’s pre-crisis wage had been equal to around US$700 a month, which shrunk to less than US$100 over the first year of the crisis. Wages in lira were unchanged, while prices of imports and domestically produced goods alike shot up.

Subsidies delayed the effect of this inflation on many staple goods, but as the economic collapse continued prices skyrocketed. As a point of reference, prior to the crisis in 2019, a kilogram of bread was LL1,500, equal to US$1 at the time. By 2022 the price of the same bread had reached almost LL30,000, which was still US$1 at mid-2022 exchange rates. Other staples underwent a similar shock. For example, in Ba’albeck the price of a kilogram of domestically produced tomatoes rose from roughly LL1,000 to LL8,000 and potatoes rose from LL3,000 to LL12,000. The cost of imports rose with the dollar exchange rate.
Being one of Lebanon’s few exports, the hashish market was partially protected from the crisis – hashish was sold on the international market so the price was not so dramatically shocked by the unmooring of the Lebanese lira from the dollar peg. But even in this sector, the price of fertiliser, farm machinery, and repairs rose astronomically. For smaller farmers who sold their product domestically to larger smugglers, prices did not drop as severely as other products such as potatoes, but smugglers with access to international markets offered payment only in increasingly worthless and unstable Lebanese lira.

**The original shaweesh**

In the case of rural-rural migration, this pattern of labour migration was largely facilitated and directed by labour organisers. As Anwar, one of my primary interlocutors introduced in this chapter, put it ‘people follow people, man’. In many cases, Syrian men who had travelled to Lebanon in the Civil War or in the early 1990s saw the need for large labour groups. Many began organising seasonal workers from amongst their relatives, transporting them to Lebanon for the summer and harvest months. These groups could grow, the demand for cheap labour was so strong. These organisers are known as *shaweesh*.

The figure of the *shaweesh* is central to this social order, acting as an informal means to outsource refugee camp governance without recognising or regularising them. A *shaweesh* is an individual who acts as an intermediary between Syrian camps, Lebanese farmers, the government, and non-governmental organisations. *Shaweesh* have been in existence since at least the 1980s in Lebanon, organising seasonal agricultural labour groups from Syria. A *shaweesh* will often organise camps for the workers and transport them to and from different jobs. Migrant labourers are employees of the *shaweesh*, who is responsible for paying them for their labour. The *shaweesh* is paid by the Lebanese farmer, often taking a commission for each worker provided. As camps have become permanent, the role of the *shaweesh* has expanded to include leasing land and renting plots to Syrian labourers, coordinating utility provision, and setting up small shops and mosques. The *shaweesh* is often responsible for keeping order within the camp and managing local municipality relations and security services. The term *shaweesh*, however, should be used with some trepidation. Many camps do not have *shaweesh* or have one in name only. Aid organisations and Lebanese often use
the term to refer simply to ‘the leader of the camp,’ and Syrians do the same to simplify their dealings with outsiders. The reality on the ground is often more nuanced – some people may work as a shaweesh for a brief period, some camps may expel their shaweesh, and some shaweesh are appointed by local security forces but have no real authority over their fellow camp-dwellers. In one of the few pre-War ethnographies of rural Syrian encampments, Bochi argues that they constitute an ‘autonomous sphere of sociality’ (2011, p.63) which lets them overcome the alienation and estrangement that so features in Chalcraft’s (2009) account.

Figure 6 - An old metal-framed tent used when migration was seasonal

The first generation

It is in this broad context that people moved from the jazirah in northeastern Syria to settle in tented encampments, construction sites, and apartments in the Biqa’a. The search for work and income, and considerations of labour organisation and social reproduction drove these migration and settlement decisions both prior to and after the outbreak of the war. Social
class and region of origin met with quick thinking and a hefty dose of luck to determine the fortunes of these men and their families. The stories of Abu Ibrahim and Hammad, two of my close interlocutors now in their late-forties and fifties are illustrative of these different trajectories. Like many young men from the Syrian countryside, they had first come to Lebanon in the early nineties seeking work and opportunities, not intending to stay and never foreseeing that they would be settled in a rural Biqa’a village some three decades later. These next sections give in-depth accounts of their life histories and analyse the ways that capitalist wage labour and familial social relations interacted to shape their choices, opportunities, and living arrangements.

Abu Ibrahim

Abu Ibrahim’s story is that of the archetypal shaweesh. A skinny, grey man in his 50s with few remaining teeth, Abu Ibrahim holds himself with a special kind of authority. Perhaps it is the distinctive way that he wears his black jalabiyeh and always clean keffiyeh headdress, balanced precariously on his bald head (this is traditional clothing for Syrian men, illustrated in figure 7). Perhaps it is the way that the children of the camp know not to wind him up, the way they do other adults. It took me almost a year to be properly introduced to Abu Ibrahim by my main interlocutors in the camp – he lives down in the village, in an old two roomed building behind one of the gaudy mansions of the most prominent wealthy Lebanese villager, nominally the clan leader. He did not complete more than a few years of school and cannot read, and when he needed to make a phone call, his son had to open the phone and select the number. Despite this, he was one of the central nodes around which local Syrian-Lebanese relations revolved, and one of the few Syrians known by name to pretty much every villager. I pieced together his life-story from several conversations in his family home and at social events in the tents of relatives in various camps, where he was one of the more prominent and authoritative members of his tribe and community. He sat and argued and joked with the rest of his male cousins and relatives, but there was always a slight tinge of deference to him in his rough-voiced storytelling, especially by the younger men.

Abu Ibrahim first came to Lebanon in 1994 as a young man in his early twenties looking for work. He was part of the broader wave of Syrians who came to Lebanon looking for work in
the post-Lebanese Civil War boom, facilitated by open door policies and agreements implemented by the Lebanese and Syrian governments (Chalcraft, 2009, p.140). For these *shawi* Syrians, the story of circular labour migration to Lebanon seemed to begin with the 1990s, and have a distinct trajectory to that of Syrians whom lived closer to the border. Abu Ibrahim had never been to Lebanon before, but several of his relatives had completed their military service and been deployed in the country.

‘We didn’t know anything,’ he said, ‘we were looking for work.’ He described his initial visits in sparse detail and seemed to consider them preliminary trips before a more meaningful, significant stage in his life. My field site, the village that he now resided in and had done for the better part of two decades, was not his first port of call. Rather, he first sought work in the more intensively farmed Western Biqa’a, where much of the valley’s vegetables are grown. This, too, was a common pattern amongst many of the older Syrian men who were now settled in the area between Ba’albeck and Hermel – they cut their teeth in the more established, legal agricultural enterprises of the Western Biqa’a, before branching out to more lucrative work in the hashish fields to the North. Abu Ibrahim worked several seasons as a labourer in the Western Biqa’a, in various jobs in farming and construction and moving between different towns and encampments, but this period held little nostalgia for him.

The crux of his story came in 1998, when he was brought by another Syrian from the Western Biqa’a to work the village. The Syrian, a Kurd who had been working in the village for a few years previously, was organising work teams in hashish production and construction. Abu Ibrahim told me this story several times, in front of several different audiences, always using the same rehearsed lines. Abu Ibrahim and a cousin of his had been brought by the Kurd to work in the hashish fields for a few weeks, and they saw how lucrative this work could be. As he put it ‘we worked for him for 10 days, and then we took over – it was a coup!’ The men who had gathered around must have heard this climax dozens of times, but they never failed to laugh at Abu Ibrahim’s triumph. This kind framing of his ascent reflected a more general way that labour and fortunes were discussed – he did not focus on the years of undoubtably hard labour that he had undertaken before, or the relationships that he had built over this time. Rather, work was something to be seized and controlled, not hours to be tallied. The political implications of the joke and the use of the word coup (*inqilab*) was intentional and
natural: work was inherently associated with questions of local political power, and these
were bound up in questions of familial and regional identity.
To what extent there actually was a ‘coup’ is unclear, and from the much more gradual way
his work team seems to have grown it seems more likely that over a number of years he was
able to use his family network to undercut other, competing labour contractors. He began by
bringing some members of his extended family with him – he named only men, but as time
went on, he was certainly referring to entire households. They were members of his
immediate family, ‘first one, then two, then three people’ he said, ‘then twenty.’ They
brought collapsible, metal-framed tents (shown in figure 6) from Syria which they set up on
unfarmed land on the outskirts of the village and they would work the summer and harvest
season. Unlike other shaweesh that I had met, Abu Ibrahim was almost egalitarian in his
attitude to the warsheh (workshop, work team). He always referred to it collectively, and
rarely to himself as a leader – it was always ‘we worked…’ or ‘we travelled…’. Likewise, he
took little role in helping others set themselves up, and the responsibilities and power that
came with this. Other shaweesh would rent tents to their workers, but Abu Ibrahim took an
entirely hands off approach.
As the years went on, his team of workers grew, and so too did the pool of Lebanese for whom
they worked. He knew all the Lebanese farmers of the beyt (clan) that populated the village
by name, and their sons and family trees intimately – he and his warsheh had worked for all
of them at one point or another. As he put it, there was no set pattern of work, and each year
would involve a new negotiation for different jobs with the larger hashish farmers and
perhaps an agreement to camp on their land. While Abu Ibrahim set up his camp exclusively
in the village, in the pre-hashish boom years of the early 2000s his team used to branch out
and work for farmers from neighbouring clans and villagers. ‘Even in 2012 we worked from
someone from the next village, but now we just stay here – it isn’t worth it,’ he said.
Over this period he and his relatives became experts in the hashish growing and production
process, but they showed little interest in it. While the Lebanese villagers that I spoke with
expressed a pride in the crop and the land, men like Abu Ibrahim were generally indifferent.
While money was to be found in hashish in Lebanon, home was undoubtably some 200 miles
85


northeast on the banks of the Euphrates. Of all of the shawi men in my main fieldsite, only one had attempted to make anything that resembled a permanent migration to the Biqa’a valley. Similarly, some men of his generation engaged in a few more speculative ventures as sharecroppers, but Abu Ibrahim was content to leverage his position as a shaweesh, organising the transport of a growing number of cheap Syrian labourers from the outskirts of Raqqa to the expanding and increasingly profitable hashish fields.

As my fieldwork progressed, I met several other men from Abu Ibrahim’s tribe and the other tribes that shared their villages surrounding Raqqa. Their stories had a similar trajectory in different villages in the Biqa’a — the initial period as a young man of scouting the area and the varied, non-expert work, followed by establishing a niche of both relationships and expertise. He had also tried different models of labour organising. He had at various points taken a commission for each worker that he provided, but this too varied with the jobs that his warsheh took on. Now that they were employed almost exclusively by one of the larger Lebanese farmers, Hussein, he instead acted more as an intermediary between the other members of his tribe and the Lebanese landowner and smuggler. The teams were paid hourly rather than by the shift, and this had been the case in the village since as long as anyone could remember. He received a daily wage for his presence in the fields, though he left most of the actual organising to his deputies, only intervening when there was a serious problem. His family were automatically included in the work teams, but he did not receive a percentage per worker provided whilst I was conducting my fieldwork (Chapters IV and V go into detail of the organisation and economics of these warsheh).

The composition of Abu Ibrahim’s team had changed over the years and was very flexible. For members of his tribe back on the Euphrates, they had a choice of different work teams and arrangements, either with Abu Ibrahim or another shaweesh in another camp and village. It was not at all unusual for people to have worked one year in the Western Biqa’a for vegetables, and another year for Abu Ibrahim in hashish. Some families would move or split mid-season if there was the possibility of more lucrative work. In the hashish farming villages in harvest season, the demand for labour in the harvest season was such that Abu Ibrahim’s warsheh could easily absorb anyone looking for work.
By the standards of rural Syria, his household was earning very good money. He was married twice and had 10 children when I met him, ranging from a new-born baby to a young man. They had few overheads besides food while they stayed in Lebanon, and he could have at least five members of his household working most days. While exact figures of any household income were a closely guarded secret amongst my interlocutors, with a minimum of five members working 8 – 10 hour days at LL2,500 per hour for at least four months of the year, this came to an income of at the very least US$10,000 annually (and likely several times that figure). The costs of social reproduction were offset by his continued base in Raqqa – he never paid rent in Lebanon, always living in a tent, housing for free in some kind of agreement with a Lebanese farmer, or returning to Syria. His family bought everything they could, from household essentials to food, back in Syria where it was cheaper and brought it with them. Large meals were prepared daily by several assigned women and girls in the family, and they were also responsible for the organisation and upkeep of the small encampment and whatever livestock the family had. They took advantage of Syrian healthcare and schools which further defrayed the costs of social reproduction and used this extended family network to ensure childcare and maximise workforce participation. As noted in the introduction, SRT directs us to attend to the unwaged familial and communitarian work that enables the worker to arrive ready to sell their labour in the fields each morning - in this case, Syrian state institutions and gendered norms of domesticity worked together to reproduce this cheap and mobile workforce.

Furthermore, his lack of interest and personal investment in the hashish industry was in part explained by his continued attachment to and investment in his hometown. While his seasons were longer than others, and he was more likely to have work through the autumn and winter, he still maintained a strong link with his home village and extended family network - even in the summer he returned regularly to visit Raqqa, and would stay for months through the winter. With his earnings, he bought a few dozen dunam of land (the common measurement of land in the region, usually 1,000 metres squared, or a quarter of an acre) in his hometown and built first a family home and then later a house for his adult son. He farmed some of this land growing staple, not particularly profitable crops like wheat and corn. He had a herd of sheep of which he was particularly proud, and amongst the shawi men this was the most popular and respectable investment that one made after establishing a home. Even
after a quarter of a century spent working in Lebanon, he was decidedly a *shawi* Syrian in his
dress and his accent and had made no noticeable concessions to Lebanese culture – any
television or music they watched was Syrian and his family’s social circle entirely consisted of
fellow *shawi* from Raqqa.

Abu Ibrahim’s ascent to relative prosperity as a *shaweesh* coincided with broader political and
economic transformations. As was noted, his initial decision to look for work coincided with
the end of the Lebanese Civil War and subsequent rebuilding boom, and the series of
cooperation treaties between Lebanon and Syria which came into effect. The increasing size
of his work teams also corresponded to later developments. The size and scale of the hashish
industry began to pick up with the end of the Syrian occupation in 2005, and so too did the
Lebanese farmers thirst for cheap Syrian labour. Then, from around 2009 to 2012, as a new
generation of smugglers opened new routes to new markets both price and demand shot up,
and the hashish boom got underway. Profits and production in the Biqa’a shot up, and so too
did demand for Abu Ibrahim’s *warsheh*. Furthermore, work in the Lebanese village had
become so intensive that they did not have time to work for other clans, and they tied
themselves more explicitly to a couple of major members of the Lebanese clan.

This coincided with the beginning of the Syrian Civil War and collapse of regime control in the
*jazirah* region. Violence and economic collapse pushed more and more people from the
*jazirah* to leave the region, and many of Abu Ibrahim’s relatives who had previously stayed
put in Raqqa decided to join him in the Biqa’a. These numbers increased when ISIS seized
much of the north-eastern rebel held territory over 2013 – 14, and then again as ISIS began
to lose ground and turned to increasingly repressive tactics in 2015 – 16.

As an older man who has completed his military service in Syria and has a *kafeel* (sponsor) for
legal paperwork in Lebanon, Abu Ibrahim had remained relatively free to come and go
between Raqqa and the Biqa’a throughout the war. After the war started, his main household
moved year-round to Lebanon and his sons could no longer return for fear of being called up
for military service, but he continued to come and go. He sold his herd of sheep, but close
relatives continued to farm his land back in Raqqa – he took a percentage of the profits of the
sales of wheat and rapeseed that they grew but inflation and economic collapse has rendered
these profits negligible. In Lebanon, despite increasing restrictions on Syrians, Abu Ibrahim was at least partially insulated from hostilities by dint of his association with men like Hussein, and he was afforded a degree of respect or at least tolerance by most Lebanese that he encountered.
Figure 7 - One of the older Syrian men of the camp, who had been coming to Lebanon for decades

Hammad
Hammad is a memorable man – the men of his family all share the same distinctive build: short, broad shouldered and rotund, with solid, formidable bellies. They are so distinctive that the other Syrians say that you can recognise a brother or cousin of Hammad immediately. He is a jovial, familiar figure to be seen driving around the village in his beat-up white van. Now in his late forties with seven children, he too has spent the past quarter of a century in Lebanon and is now settled in the Biqa’a more or less permanently. He and his family lived in a large, comfortable house in the village, and were keen to extent their hospitality to me simply as a visitor, but upon learning of my research Hammad was especially happy to recount the story of how he ended up settling here. His life story is, like Abu Ibrahim’s, exemplary of the trajectory of Syrians who came to Lebanon in the early 1990s, deeply shaped by labour market considerations. He told me his story in his family home over his wife’s special pumpkin *kibbeh* cooking, constantly interrupted by his teenage sons asking for money or his little daughter coquettishly vying for his attention.

Hammad was not *shawi*, but from a very distinct part of Syrian society to Abu Ibrahim. He was born to a large Sunni Arab family in the Kurdish majority region of Afrin, where they lived in a small, ethnically mixed village. He grew up speaking Kurdish and Arabic, and his family initially farmed their fields around his village. Like Abu Ibrahim, he came first to the Western Biqa’a in search of work as a very young man in 1994. He travelled to Lebanon aged 14, with his 18 year-old uncle in search of work. ‘We were directed to a *shaweesh*, and he gave us a tent and bought us everything. Anything we needed, he provided for free. We would just work, and pay him back from our wages afterwards.’ He was positive about this experience and looked back on his youth fondly, rummaging around in a cupboard to dig out a suitcase full of old photographs of him and his brothers and cousins in their youth. He worked for a season, and then returned to Syria. ‘And do you know what I did when I got back? I bought a stereo system, oh-ho, I felt like a man,’ he said, laughing at the memory of his teenage self.

Like Abu Ibrahim, he began working seasonally, but quickly found more regular work with the municipality in Zahleh. The men of his extended family followed suit, and all of his brothers and most of his cousins had worked at least a few years in Lebanon. He returned to Syria to
complete his military service, and as with Abu Ibrahim found himself offered a few day’s work in the hashish farming jurd (rugged mountainous region). He quickly established himself as a reliable and hard worker, and had no trouble finding employment in the orchards and hashish farms. As the hashish market picked up, and the previously impoverished small farmers began to make greater and greater profits, they began to build, and construction work also exploded. He had, for the most part, been settled in the Biqa’a ever since - his brothers and cousins had joined him, and they were all capable men who had quickly found work. For the most part, men from his extended network Afrin were employed in more highly skilled labour than the shawi – they were generally employed in overseeing the more complex hashish refinement process, or as drivers of heavy construction machinery, and thus commanded higher wages (often double) than the shawi field labour teams of Abu Ibrahim.

Hammad married a woman from his hometown, and she joined him in the Biqa’a. They lived in a rented house in the village, which unlike Abu Ibrahim’s two bare rooms, was very much Lebanese in style and decoration, with two stories and a reception room. They had children in Lebanon, but when his eldest son reached school age in 2007 he tried to move his family back to his home village in Afrin. They lived in his family home, but after a year of struggling to make ends meet, they moved back to Lebanon. The local Lebanese government school was short on students and needed to increase numbers in order to justify remaining open, so he and some of the villagers agreed that his children could attend in order to bolster the class size.

In that same year, he had struck a deal with a Lebanese man who owned a small corner shop in the village. Hammad had laboured intermittently for him for the better part of a decade, and the villager was old and ill and wanted to wind down his business. He knew Hammad well, and they agreed that he would take over the day-to-day running of the shop, and they would split the profits in half. This older Lebanese farmer acted as Hammad’s kafeel for official paperwork and facilitated bureaucratic processes like legally registering his vehicle. He steadily grew the business as the village’s wealth also increased, and it became the main hub of trade. He was a smart businessman and a hard worker, regularly driving through the night to get the best deals on fruit and vegetables for his shop. As the local shopkeeper, by the time I met him in 2018 Hammad was well known by most of the Lebanese villagers since their
childhood, and treated very much as ‘part of the furniture of the village’. In many ways this partnership was successful precisely because of the explicit national hierarchy, where roles and deference were clearly defined.

Like Abu Ibrahim, he had retained his links to his home village. He had a close relationship with his six brothers, and they had invested a significant proportion of their savings back in their home village. Together, they held roughly 200 dunam of land, and had several houses. Like Abu Ibrahim, it was farmed through the war by relatives, in this case two brothers who had stayed in Syria. However, unlike Abu Ibrahim, Hammad’s holdings were somewhat less secure – at the beginning of the uprising, his village was in the hands of Kurdish forces, who generally did not interfere with existing property structures. Things changed with the Turkish-backed anti-Kurdish offensive Operation Euphrates shield in 2017, and their hometown fell into the hands of FSA and Islamist militias. People affiliated with these Turkish proxies began to make claims on their land and question the ownership rights of Syrians residing abroad.

In contrast to Abu Ibrahim, Hammad’s position in Lebanon was visibly more of a permanent migration. His children barely knew their hometown, spoke Arabic with Lebanese accents, and had done the entirety of their schooling here. Hammad’s children had ‘returned’ to Syria every now and then, and he was keen to show me that he had all the paperwork ready and up to date in Syria. However, they were raised in this Lebanese village and their social circles existed almost entirely in the Biqa’a, and included both the children of fellow families from northwestern Syria and local Lebanese children. Hammad’s children had little to do with the shawi Syrian community, which did not seem to mix. As the Syrian refugee crisis continued, the local schools began to operate in shifts, teaching Lebanese children in the mornings and refugee Syrians in the afternoons. The afternoon classes were of far worse quality, and better integrated men like Hammad managed to ensure their children attended the morning classes. Even amongst the older teenage boys who began to take on skilled labour jobs in the village, there was a divide – one shawi interlocutor, after having been slighted by one of Hammad’s sons, said that ‘they think they are Lebanese. They think that they are better than a Syrian.’

Hammad was comfortable with the Lebanese farmers, big and small, and it would take an extremely prejudiced villager to speak badly of him. He had known many of the men of the
younger generation since they were born and even taught them valuable lessons about farming in their own village. He could sit at the *sahra* (late night sessions of tea-drinking, smoking, chatting, and playing cards) at one of the outhouses and reminisce comfortably with the farmers over prices of crops and feats of strength in years gone by. Regularly, when my Lebanese interlocutors were bemoaning the Syrian presence in Lebanon, I would point out Hammad’s centrality to the village’s economy. Almost without fail, they would reply that ‘he is the exception’. Hammad was then referred to as the exemplary, hard-working ‘good Syrian.’

His family were renowned for their work ethic and skill, which is a stereotype associated generally with Kurds. Some of the older Lebanese men would use his example as a means to bemoan their countrymen – ‘look at us!’ they said, ‘even in this village, there are 300 people, but it is a Syrian who opens the shop!’ If he had any kind of problem, or required intercessionary wasta, he had a plethora of respected clan members who would be prepared to throw their weight behind him.

Hammad spoke with an obvious Syrian accent, but being from the west of Syria it was very easy to understand to Lebanese ears when compared to the *shawi* dialect spoken by Abu Ibrahim. He did not engage in strong code-switching or use words in the Syrian dialect which made it difficult for Lebanese villagers to understand. He and his brother’s expertise in hashish production, and the respectful and generous way that they dispensed this to the Lebanese with whom they worked, was well received. The layout of his house, too, was amenable to Lebanese tastes, as was the social role played by his wife and children. Like Hammad, she was a gregarious and welcoming hostess, and the gender norms of their community gave her much broader scope to socialise independently than the wives of Abu Ibrahim. She could be seen giving and receiving visits with other women out and about in the village, and was quick to join in conversation but also always ready to extend hospitality in the form of food and drink in their reception room. She and his children thus served as further points of integration between his family and the village. This stands in contrast to Abu Ibrahim, whose more strictly controlled family was far more isolated from village social life.

Hammad was adept at local politics, as well as business. Living in a Shi’a village, as he did, he was visibly a supporter of Hizbollah and the broader *muqawameh*. In Syria, he was a member of a smaller Nasserite party (but not the Ba’ath party) which supported the Assad regime and
Hammad's level of integration to the village community was most strikingly revealed when his brother Yousif died of a long-term illness, and the whole village turned out for the ‘aza’a (literally, consolation, condolence, or ceremony of mourning, but it is the rough equivalent to a wake). Even some of the most anti-Syrian villagers put aside their prejudices and attended to pay their respects in the three days of mourning that followed. The shawi men of the refugee camp also attended in delegation to comfort him (as is shown in figure 1). Like
Hammad, his brother Yousif had also worked and lived in the village for the past two decades. This level of care was not the case for shawi and other post-war arrivals whose social circles were largely restricted to their original communities which had been transplanted from Syria.

For Hammad’s family, little had changed materially since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War. He and his family had signed up to the UN as refugees and so received cash assistance each month, some additional US$200. He hoped to qualify for resettlement to Europe or Canada, and would seize the opportunity if it arose, but he was not counting on it. Meanwhile, the influx in cash to the village, both in the form of the hashish and the arrival of the new Syrians, meant that his shop had greatly increased trade and business was booming when I first got to know him, before the onset of the crisis. The war refugee crisis had certainly increased anti-Syrian prejudice in the community and the Biqa’a more generally, and his (older, male) children had had several run-ins with more xenophobic villagers. However, these problems were generally smoothed over by Hammad’s deep and long-standing relationships with important men from every lineage of the local clan. Hammad and his family, then, occupied a strange in-between space as almost ‘honorary Lebanese’. Nominally temporary, they were so deeply intertwined in the everyday life of the village, it was difficult to conceive of them, and the rest of the extended clan, ever really having somewhere else they called home. They were the ‘exceptions’ which occurred with regularity in villages throughout the Biqa’a. Hammad had secured his position by making himself indispensable to the economics of the village, and by carving out an impeccable reputation as a hardworking, trustworthy labourer and honest trader.

For these two men, then, their partial settlement had been decided long before the outbreak of the Civil War. They were now refugees, unable to return as they had before, but their material and socio-political status in the community had changed little with the outbreak of the war across the border. For both of them, their positions were deeply conditioned by pre-war labour migration and the social relations both in the Biqa’a and in Syria that arose from this. The differences in their positions too, in how they spent their money and their level of integration, corresponded to their backgrounds and Syria and how this positioned them in the Lebanese labour market. Both had progressed from hourly-wage labourers to men with
some level of financial and social capital which they could leverage into income, but their position in the village remained very much a function of their labour-providing role.

The new arrivals

Other men had taken pathways which were clearly in response to the war, and their lives had been upturned by the Syrian Civil War. Their decisions to settle in the village and camp was in direct response to violence in their hometowns in Syria, yet they followed the paths forged by this previous generation. Many of my camp-dwelling shawi interlocutors had remained in their hometown when the Civil War started, and remained there even when ISIS seized their village. As conservative Sunni Muslims who had endured chaos of the different factions of the FSA for the previous few years, for some this takeover was not particularly problematic on an everyday basis. It represented a new stage in the war, but initially a far more stable period than the years that had preceded it. Many of these Syrians temporarily left their village, to return only when open conflict had died down and ISIS had established full control. While their tribe was strongly affiliated with the Syrian regime as a result of policies to co-opt the smaller tribes to the regime apparatus (Dukhan, 2014; Synaps, 2020). Only the more overt regime supporters felt the need to flee immediately, and the other villagers adapted to their new situation. However, as ISIS began to lose ground in 2015 - 2016, they turned to more repressive tactics and also began attempting to press local young men into their ranks. Inevitably, these outsiders, both foreign and Syrians, clashed with the locals. For several of my interlocutors, some offenses became too much, and fights broke out. Faced with almost certain death if they remained, many of these men and their extended families would chose to slip away in the middle of the night.

Anwar

Anwar was one of my main interlocutors in the camp, and one of the more prominent young men in the shawi community. He was easy and straightforward to talk to and could code switch between shawi dialect and Arabic that was more amenable to Lebanese ears, which made him useful as a go-between for NGOs and the municipality and the rest of the camp. He was the same age as me, and was 17 years old when the war broke out. He was from the
same tribe and village as Abu Ibrahim, but had never been to Lebanon as a child - his father ‘Ahad was steadily employed as a driver for the Euphrates Dam Company, and Anwar was set to follow in his footsteps. A good student, he had graduated high school and begun studying at an educational institute a few towns over. Thanks to his father’s stable employment he and his siblings had spent their childhood in their hometown and had not travelled to Lebanon for any seasonal agricultural labour. Even so, agricultural labour was not alien to Anwar, and he and his siblings had experience working in their family’s fields of their hometown, and many of their cousins, uncles, and aunts made the seasonal trips to the Biqa’a.

His education was stalled by the war as the educational institute that he was attending closed, and then the possibility of work in his hometown steadily dried up. He got married, and then came to Lebanon for the harvest season in 2014, staying with relatives for the summer before returning to Syria for the winter. This was in part a work trip, but also a visit to look at the possibilities of relocating to Lebanon. ISIS had seized his hometown, but things were relatively stable, so he and his family decided to stay put. However, as the campaign against ISIS got underway, opportunities to make money in Raqqa disappeared and there was an increasing risk that he would be forced into military service by either the regime or the rebels. As they lost ground in 2015 – 2016 ISIS rule became more and more tyrannical and clashed with locals, many of whom were his relatives.

Just after the birth of his first child, things came to a head. In 2016, Several ISIS men came to his house, as a result of a dispute with a cousin of his. An argument over land ownership got heated, and one of the ISIS men pistol-whipped his cousin. ‘He was a Tunisian, I hate Tunisians’ said Anwar. A fist-fight broke out between Anwar’s cousins and some of ISIS men, and although no one was seriously injured, many of the men of his tribe decided it would be better to leave than to stay and face reprisals. This additional problem was the tipping point for Anwar, and he, his wife, their baby daughter and his brother packed their things into an uncle’s pick up and drove through the night to Damascus. More and more of their relatives were following a similar route during this period. They stayed in Damascus for a night, before continuing on to stay with relatives who were already set up in camps in the Western Biqa’a.
Permanent camps had already been established at the beginning of the war, and grew rapidly as ISIS-related campaigns continued. They had plenty of relatives to stay with, and there was no shortage of work. However, rather than stay in one of the shaweesh-run camps of the Western Biqa’a, Anwar opted to move his family to the village, where more of his close relatives were located. Abu Ibrahim’s workers had been increasingly staying here throughout the year, and they had been joined by more and more relatives who used this as a base to build their own tents and establish their own working relationships with smaller farmers. The hashish boom was in full swing, and Abu Ibrahim’s warsheh was very busy, but there was plenty of work for these newcomers to find with small to medium sized farmers who had started growing intensively to take advantage of these high prices.

A friendly and reliable man, Anwar quickly established himself as a labourer in the village and found no shortage of work in this initial period. Here, he first built his own tent using what materials he could find, buying and borrowing wood and concrete and building with the help of more experienced relatives. Later, he managed to get some materials such as plastic sheets (shadr) and wooden boards from NGO distributions. As refugee numbers in the area swelled, dozens of new encampments sprung up around the village, either squatting on disused land or in agreement with local farmers. With refugees outnumbering villagers, the municipality decided to act to create a more manageable refugee population. In coordination with an NGO, they cleared some land on the outskirts of the village, put in place some basic infrastructure, and provided the materials for more solid, durable, concrete foundation tents. A local ordinance was passed mandating the refugees to move to the official camp, and after some persuasion and intimidation, most of them gathered there, Anwar included.

‘Ahad

Anwar’s father followed a different trajectory. He was a jovial patriarch, and as an older man in his sixties, he was not at risk of military service from either the regime or ISIS. He was not involved in disputes, and so was able to stay in their village for the entirety of the war. He remained there for as long as possible with his wife and five daughters, while his older sons Anwar and Habib made their way in the Biqa’a. As young men, Anwar and Habib were at risk of conscription by all sides in the war, but his daughters were relatively safe. When I first met
‘Ahad in 2019, he was visiting his son in the Biqa’a and weighing up the possibility of moving to Lebanon. Sat in the sun outside of Anwar’s tent on the main track through the camp, he was greeting relatives from his village back home that he hadn’t seen for years.

He had managed to stay in Raqqa throughout the conflict, under the FSA, ISIS and now the Kurdish-backed SDF. The only violence he encountered was the brief period when ‘the Kurds’ and the SDF retook his village from ISIS in 2017, as part of the final push of the anti-ISIS offensive. Even then, ‘we left the village for 10 days, and then we came back – a few houses were damaged but everything was there. The Kurds didn’t steal anything.’ However, the continuation of the war had increasingly worsened the economic situation in the jazirah, and there was no work in their Raqqa village, little food, and intermittent electricity. Prices for crops were low, inflation had reduced his state pension to nothing and the land that he had would not be enough to support the family.

He had visited Lebanon once before, when he was serving in the Syrian army in the 1980s. He was part of the Syrian occupation forces posted just south of Beirut as the Israelis invaded in 1982, but he had not returned to Lebanon since the Syrian retreat. His visit in 2018 was open ended, and he had brought his wife and daughters with him. They visited several camps in the Biqa’a, and ‘Ahad was clearly exploring options and trying to understand the social and economic implications of the potential move to Lebanon. He would be leaving the security of his home and take on the much higher expenses incurred by life the Biqa’a, which could include rent, municipality taxes, utilities bills, much higher food costs, and the initial set up costs of buying a tent and the necessary furniture. However, he would likely be able to claim UN cash assistance, which would offset these new overheads, and if he chose his location correctly, he could ensure a steady and regular income through his daughters working in agricultural labour teams. His five daughters were all of working age, ranging from their early teens to late twenties, and their combined labour in a team run by a shaweesh like his relative and old friend Abu Ibrahim would be considerable.

Early on in the crisis, it had been possible to sign up for cash assistance programmes in Lebanon and then simply return to Syria. As the money was accessed via an ATM, these Syrians would then simply come to Lebanon every month, collect the allowance, and return.
This practice was nowhere near as common as many Lebanese believed, but it was certainly not unusual at the beginning of the war. However, as the war worsened, conscription became more of a serious risk for those men who remained in Syria and checks in Lebanon were tightened to stop this kind of exploitation. Furthermore, crossing the border became more difficult and Syrians had to pay increasingly expensive professional smugglers. These prices, reaching US$100 per person, more than negated the benefits of going back and forth, and by the time my research started, most Syrians had decided to stay put in the Biqa’a.

Ultimately, ‘Ahad decided to make the move in 2019 and I met him in his new tent a few months after he was smuggled across the border. It was not a particularly profitable decision in the end, but he decided that some work for the family in the Biqa’a was better than none in Raqqa. Rather than joining his son in the hashish farming region, he chose a larger, tribally-mixed shaweesh run camp in the Western Biqa’a about an hour and a half’s drive from his sons. The camp was mixed, with a handful of different tribes, but the inhabitants were all members of the shawi tribes of Raqqa, and many of his relatives - there were plenty of relatives and friends from his home village. The shaweesh had a large team, and camp inhabitants had to pay ground rent of LL1,000,000, which was discounted by 50% for every household that provided workers for more than 100 shifts in the shaweesh work team. One five our shift paid LL6,000 and there was a fairly constant demand for young female labour. With his five daughters, they had discounted ground rent and their frequent work was the basis of his household income. This was further supplemented by with their successful registration to the UNHCR and so access to World Food Programme (WFP) cash assistance of $27 per person each month.
Gender, migration and violence

It is important to note, as this will be a recurring theme throughout this thesis, the absence of female agency in these migratory stories. Both prior to and after the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, women were a key part of the labour force and moved back and forth between Syria and the camps of the Biqa’a, but they had little agency in the matter. Decisions and histories of migration tended to be pioneered by men, but women following was an essential component of a successful migration. Most of the historical narratives that I collected in my fieldwork replicated the lone-male-pioneer account that was recorded by Chalcraft in the pre-Civil War period. However, given the strong associations between banat (girls) and field work and women’s clearly fundamental role in agricultural labour that pre-dates the Civil War, my male interlocutors have significantly understated the extent of pre-crisis female circular migration in rural Lebanon.
When I asked my interlocutors what they did in the winter, the normal reply was qa’ad (sit), a common way to refer to periods of employment in rural areas which is referenced by Gilsenan (1996). Social reproduction remained deeply tied to this period of unemployment in the winter – for the Syrians, ‘we do weddings in winter.’ During this period of respite from productive wage labour, Syrians engaged more in the work of reproducing the foundation of their labour power, the family. This was both through biological reproduction (marriage, childbirth, and the related social processes), but also the reproduction of the familial and communal relations that domestic life was based on - Winter was a period of socialising and re-affirming family and tribal relations in their natal villages in Raqqa. While women were responsible for much of the physical labour that these periods of unemployment involved, men were also expected to engage in intensive patterns of socialising in their extended family network to maintain these relationships.

Gender also features in a contemporary, significantly underappreciated reason for settlement in Lebanon: that of male military conscription. For many of these men, and so their young families, while avowed regime supporters, the prospect of being taken by the Syrian military for an undetermined period of time to a man a checkpoint far from home, for negligible wages, was one of the most significant obstacles to return to Syria. This is not to say they could not do it – if one could return to their hometown, there was a good possibility you could stay there and rely on ‘the Kurds’ to avoid military service. But in the broader calculations of how best to provide for one’s family for younger men like Anwar, staying put in Lebanon and waiting seemed by far the most sensible approach. While in theory, Syrians could pay badeel (literally translated as substitution, but used to refer to the price paid to get an exemption from military service), the price of US$8,000 put it far beyond the reach of men like Anwar. Even those who did have the money ran significant risks - the money might be captured before the paperwork can be finalised, the agreement could be reneged upon at a future date, or the man might be conscripted into some other kind of militia. This was the case for Abu Ibrahim, who had paid his son’s badeel in order to give him free movement between the Biqa’a and Syria, only to find that his son was still at risk of being called up. ‘They laughed at us,’ he said (literally translated, but colloquially this translates as ‘they ripped us off’).
Several older men were also caught up in problems of regime bureaucracy. One camp dweller was arrested in Raqqa by the regime, under suspicion of being an ISIS supporter. He was tortured in prison, and kept there for almost a year, before finally being released, his name cleared. Needless to say, he was not inclined to stick around in case further accusations were levelled against him, and he fled to the Biqa’a. He is now fearful to return, and there is no likely resolution in sight. Similarly, one of my interlocutors knew that he was wanted for an investigation in Hassakeh, the neighbouring province. He had it on good authority that his name was not on the border, but rather he was expected to go to the mukhabarat headquarters in Hassakeh. He had no idea what the case entailed – for all he knew, it could be a technical issue, or concern someone else. However, as he put it to me ‘right now, the book is closed. If I go back, they will open the book.’ These uncertainties meant that older men who had done their military service and were vocal regime supporters were still afraid to return. Issues like this had piled up over the past ten years, and sifting through them had become harder and harder. With it, the number of these older men, who in theory can move freely between Lebanon and Syria, has dwindled.

This is not to say that all older men and women were unable to move back and forth. For certain key issues, most notably health, camp dwellers would bear these newfound costs and risks in order to make the journey. Several prominent members of the camp spent several months in Damascus for treatment of long-term illnesses that the UN would not cover, and several women I knew made the trip back for fertility treatment. Marriage also regularly involved movement and linkages between the Biqa’a and Raqqa. In many cases older relatives may still be in Syria, and so the formal visits may have to be adapted accordingly. Payment of the bride price might take place in Syria, and brides might sometimes be brought with a male escort from Syria to Lebanon for the wedding. The bodies of those who had died in Lebanon also required an escort to their natal village. If a family member died here, as happened several times over the course of my fieldwork, the body would be sent back to Raqqa for burial, ideally within a day, in-keeping with Islamic law. In order to ensure its passage, the body would need to be accompanied by an older man, usually someone with some connections to the regime in order to ensure safe and swift passage. Continued circular migration, then, was closely linked to social reproduction, and defraying the associated costs of certain key activities.
The financial costs associated with going back and forth between the village and Lebanon have also risen. Prior to the Civil War, the cost of movement back and forth for the border was negligible. As the Lebanese border was tightened, many Syrians like ‘Ahad opted to be professionally smuggled - prices are stable, pegged at US$100 per person, but this has made regular movement for Syrians unfeasible. This was made even more difficult in mid-2020, when the cash strapped Syrian regime put in place perhaps its most nakedly extractive policy yet – a US$100 charge for all Syrians returning from Lebanon, to be paid in US dollars, and exchanged at the official Syrian government rate. The corona virus crisis only added a further layer of obstacles to cross. Negative PCR tests were required, to move both ways on the border, for a period in 2020. The result was, of course, both a market in real tests, and a market in guaranteed negative tests.

Economic considerations set the framework for migration decisions and questions of work and prices were clearly central to Syrian refugee’s calculations. However, as Anwar and Hammad’s stories show, there was a looming threat of violence and expropriation which loomed large in these considerations and could trigger the actual decision to leave. Men’s accounts of flight from their Raqqa village always took place in the shadow of violent confrontation with ISIS, but with vague reference to skyrocketing prices and absence of work. This violence provoking decision also applied the few cases where men returned to Syria. One possible reason for younger men such as Anwar to return to Syria, was the threat of feuds and violence. This could occur because of being wanted by the Lebanese, but in the cases that I encountered it, return was prompted by a violent dispute within the Syrian community.

One of my interlocutors, Anwar’s cousin Omar casually mentioned in conversation how he had been stabbed in a camp further down the valley the previous year. I thought I had misheard him, but he whipped up his shirt to show a nasty knife scar in his ribcage, straight into his lungs. He told the story with a jovial resignation and not a hint of bravado – a jealous man, a shami (from Damascus) had come to his tent to talk with him, suspecting that he had spoken with the man’s current love interest. Harsh words had been exchanged and the visitor ‘took the teacup and smashed it on the floor’ – Omar’s implications was clear, this man had deliberately violated the norms of hospitality in his home and insulted him. Furthermore, he
referred to him only as the *shami*, implying that this regional difference was implicated in his disrespect. Omar then struck him and they began to wrestle – his mother broke up the fight and the *shami* fled, and Omar sat up to find that he had been stabbed through the ribs. He was rushed to a nearby hospital as his lungs filled with blood, and luckily was saved. The *shami* disappeared – he could no longer reasonably stay in the Biqa’a – Omar’s tribe were too many and too widespread to avoid them, and it would eventually erupt into further violence. Instead, he fled to Syria, preferring to take his chances with conscription with the regime or with rebels (Omar didn’t know which, and didn’t seem to care – it was all the same to him). The *shami*’s relatives paid *diyya* (blood money) and covered the cost of Omar’s hospital bills, and made clear that they were not supporting this man. ‘I even hang out with his brother sometimes,’ laughed Omar.

Over the course of my fieldwork, a similar series of events repeated with Anwar. A fight broke out between him and another set of brothers over the right to lucrative *maqtou’a* work, and I watched his brother Habib beat one of the others unconscious and give him a serious concussion. In the aftermath of the fight, both sets of brothers made themselves scarce in neighbouring refugee camps, and traded insults and threats. While passions were high and before any tribal mediation could take place the camp was not a safe place for Anwar. Indeed, with their family networks deeply intertwined and spread out across the Biqa’a it was clear they would not be able to avoid each other forever. With no resolution in sight, and not wishing for a second confrontation in which someone could be even more seriously hurt, Anwar considered returning to Syria. He was wanted for conscription, and this would essentially remove him from any further feuding – but at what cost? He could perhaps make it to his home village, but should he be picked up by regime forces or the Kurds, he would be sent to who knows where, for who knows how long, far away from his wife and children, and with no wage would condemn them to dependence on his other relatives. His consideration reached the stage of asking me to change some Lebanese lira for US$100 to allow him to return. It was difficult to tell how much this was a serious consideration, and how much it was intended to demonstrate the other option should the feud not be resolved and so spur his relatives (and myself included) to work to find a mediated solution to the feud. After two weeks of tension, a truce was established and talk of returning to Syria stopped. In both cases, returning to Syria, and inevitably joining one of the militias or the army, was an option of last
resort. It had very serious financial implications for young men with families, and reflected the proximity of violence to everyday household economics.

**Conclusion**

Historical labour migration was central to understanding patterns of Syrian migration to the Biqa’a before and after the war. In my field site, the Syrian communities and the camp had their origins in labour migration by pioneers like Abu Ibrahim and Hammad in the early 1990s, and this process is replicated throughout the region. The crumbling Syrian economy and violence was mirrored by the hashish boom in the Biqa’a valley, and these factors pushed and pulled men like Anwar and ‘Ahad to make the journey. Their ability to labour or their control over female labour was central to this decision and further conditioned their choice of camps to settle in, and they followed the pathways and networks created by their predecessors. Camps and village dwellings are divided and based on geographical and tribal relationships in Syria, and family networks have largely been imported from Syrian rural villages. Thus, the picture of migration is one of both disruption and continuity.

In terms of the broader arguments of this thesis, this chapter’s historical and geographic context reiterates the basic point that Syrian refugees should be understood as a rural wage-labour force. It further highlights the centrality of social reproduction of this labour force and how deeply it is intertwined in continued linkages and mobility decisions. The Syrian men were drawn to the Biqa’a by their need for income and the demand for labour in Lebanese agriculture, but their ability to fully participate in this productive economy was contingent on both family practices and state institutions back in Syria. They made use of familial and tribal relationships to find work and fill gaps in the labour force, and to organise cheap living arrangements. The Syrian state played an important role in providing cheap food, education and healthcare, but the costs of living in Lebanon were also defrayed by continued participation in the social life of their villages back in Syria. Unable and unwilling to integrate into Lebanese society, it was back in Syria that my interlocutors were able securely invest their savings in the land, housing, and livestock essential for maintaining their livelihoods. It was also where important processes of social reproduction such as weddings, funerals and childbirth took place. The availability of cheap Syrian labour was contingent on the continuity
of these communal practices which reproduced families and tribal linkages. After the beginning of the Syrian Civil War, many of these linkages were subsequently transplanted to the Biqa’a (for more on this, see Chapter VIII).

While these narratives are clearly male-centred, the recurring considerations of household reproduction and the use and movement of female waged and unwaged labour are an implicit factor. Abu Ibrahim and ‘Ahad’s migratory pathways were especially dependent on their social positions in Syria and the control over female labour that it entailed. This not only allowed them to ensure regular household income through waged labour, but also to maintain the mobile and sometimes cross-border households that their work demanded. This chapter thus shows how labour market considerations in the Biqa’a were premised on distinctive norms of gender and family social relations, and indicates that this should be a central consideration in analysis of other labour markets.

Finally, by situating the mass forced migration of the Syrian Civil War in a broader historical context, the chapter indicates how normalised and central to capitalist production the creating of a disenfranchised labour force was to agrarian production in the region. In Bernstein’s terms, these Syrian populations constitute part of the ‘fragmented classes of labour’ that are reliant on wage employment combined with precarious informal activities, both of which are subject to differentiation and oppression along lines of class, gender, and ethnicity (Bernstein, 2006). The continuities traced out in these life-histories show how the Syrian Civil War created new layers of disenfranchisement for an already impoverished social class, but did little to alter the underlying exploitative mechanisms that had long-since been in operation.
Introduction

This chapter analyses the main channels of interaction between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities, focusing on partnerships between Lebanese landowners and Syrian workers. I show how this capital-labour relationship structured interactions between the two, and more specifically how labour market considerations (namely labour scarcity and reliability) were the determining factors in interactions between these two communities. In a context of legal ambiguity, segregation, and vulnerability, the importance of trust and reliability was heightened. This empowers individuals with more access to capital and reliable labour while incentivising the cultivation of long-term, trusting, patron-client relationships. While other patterns of interaction are also visible – such as those based on security considerations, clans and tribes, and friendship – in almost all cases, labour market considerations remained a conditioning factor.

I present four vignettes of different kinds work relationships between men from the Lebanese and Syrian communities, underlining the centrality of labour market considerations to Syrian integration in the valley. I analyse a shaweesh-organised labour team, an individual partnership, a sharecropping arrangement, and a case of forced labour. Each case of labour-based intercommunal interaction and corresponding practices of organisation and reproduction is shown to structure the social relations within and outside of the camp. I demonstrate how different interlocutors leveraged their social positions through labour to their economic and social benefit, and how these individual practices have had the cumulative effect of reinforcing social segregation and hierarchy. I further show how these relationships were underpinned by patriarchal norms of the Syrian camp household, and how these partnerships spilled over from purely labour-contracting arrangements to affecting the social reproduction of the camp and Syrian community more broadly. Social reproduction returns here as a key analytic to show the intertwinment between wage-labour in the fields and unwaged familial and community practices. Syrian men were able to engage in these labour relationships because their social position in the camp allowed them to organise and control their extended families predominantly female labour. My interlocutors were reflexive about
these conditions and understood themselves to be both creating and navigating the social structures governing the Biqa’a labour market.

As will be a recurring refrain throughout this thesis, a clear understanding of life in the camps of the Biqa’a requires an understanding of Syrian refugees as social class of wage-labourers and corresponding unwaged labour to facilitate the reproduction of this labour force. This class-based foundation to my approach, however, does not preclude the use of the clientelist framing for understanding everyday interactions. Asad’s (1972) critique of Barth warns against anthropology implicitly assuming stable clientelist frameworks of political action at the expense of social class, and reconciling social class and clientelism has continued to be a central debate in anthropology of the region (Gellner & Waterbury, 1977). Syrian-Lebanese relations are an interesting manifestation of patron-client patterns of interaction because they are simultaneously so explicitly tied to Lebanese capital’s demand for Syrian wage-labour, but also a striking performance of social hierarchy and exchange (on the model of Eisenstadt & Roniger, 1980).

Recent work has reiterated the importance of the patron-client framing in understanding social structure and economic distribution in Lebanon and the broader Middle East. The insights offered by Cammet and Issar (2010), Ghaddar (2016), and Scala (2015) on the granular distributive practices of Lebanese political clientelism makes a compelling case not to disregard the framing entirely. Hamzeh (2001) makes the convincing case that as a structure for Lebanese social relations, the regionally specific practice of clientelism has adapted to very different economic and political contexts over the history of the country. Even in the past decade, the cultural specifics of the clientelist bargain of ‘dignity for loyalty’ have played a central role in the political movements of the Arab Spring (Hermez, 2011) and later the 17th of October 2019 uprising.

Patron-client relationships emerged as a distinctive socio-economic practice in my field site, and this chapter seeks to situate them in the broader economic context of the camps of the Biqa’a. I draw from de Elvira et al. (2018), and look beyond the dyadic asymmetrical power relationship of Lebanese patrons and Syrian clients, and pay special attention to the socio-economic context that facilitates them and the way that they spill over into other kinds of
relationships and interactions. Pre-existing social practices of Lebanese and Syrian communities had specific implications for the organisation and reproduction of labour, and these were reconciled through patron-client channels.

Figure 9 - A Syrian labourer waters a field of hashish

Patrons and clients, capital and labour

‘Bread and salt - do you know what that means? It means trust, friendship. Between us and the Lebanese, there is no bread or salt,’ said Abu Taymour. He was an older man who had been one of the first Syrian migrant workers to this region of Lebanon, first coming from his village in the Hama countryside at the very start of the Syrian occupation in the 1970s. He was now in his seventies and working as a natur (guard) at the summer house of a wealthy villager who spent most of his time in Beirut. We were drinking coffee on the sofa of his one-room, cinderblock dwelling which had been built onto the back of the house’s garage. The room was simultaneously homely and sad: there were all sorts of useful odds and ends kicking around
and old photographs and decorations, but at the same time, the grim damp patches on the ceiling and the broken window spoke to serious impoverishment and neglect. An oversized poster of Hafez al Assad gazed down on us benevolently, and the television blared propaganda from the pro-Syrian regime news station al Mayadeen while he poured me a fourth cup of coffee and tried to force yet another cigarette on me.

Abu Taymour was paid LL200,000 per month to guard the under-construction house for the wealthy villager who he had known since his childhood. It was an easy job, and mostly involved being present on site to give access to the various workmen who called by intermittently. Despite this long relationship and farcically low wages, his employer was now several months behind on payment. ‘I don’t know why,’ he said, ‘I call him, and he tells me ba’den (later).’ He sighed resignedly and took a deep drag on his king-sized Cedar cigarette, ‘what can we do?’

He had known most of the men of the village since they were children, and had a taciturn, fatherly way about him. He had been settled in his home village in Syria after decades working in Lebanon, but his house had been destroyed by rebels in the war, and his wife had died. His children were adults working in Lebanon and Syria, and he had chosen to return to the Biqa’a and take on easy work to sustain himself. After half a century of working in the fields and in construction in Ba’albeck and the surrounding villages he had an almost encyclopaedic knowledge of the history and gossip of the local clans and lineages. Despite having known most of the men of the village since before they were born, such was the hierarchy of the Biqa’a that late and missed payments for his work remained a central concern. The atmosphere of working in the region is best described as one of deep-seated insecurity and mistrust, and this was magnified over the course of 2019 – 2021 as the Lebanese economy collapsed.

Abu Taymour’s problem of lack of trust and recourse in labour disputes was replicated amongst my interlocutors. In an environment of economic precariousness and social disruption, trust that wages would be forthcoming at the end of the month was a valuable thing. The Syrian refugees constituted a rural wage-labour force, and so their relationship with the Lebanese community hinged upon these social relationships. These questions of
trust between Syrian heads of household and Lebanese property owners were premised on and reinforced patriarchal control of extended household labour, and this is replicated in the following four very different kinds of relationships.

1. **Anwar and Abu Ali: friendship and partnership**

‘So, how much does Abu Ali owe you?’ I asked. ‘Hmmm... let me see,’ said Anwar as he tinkered with the fuel injection of his motorcycle, muttering under his breath as he counted up the hours he and his family had worked watering Abu Ali’s hashish fields and other odd jobs over the past few weeks. ‘I think 500 thousand, something like that,’ he said before blowing down a small tube from his motorcycle to clean it. ‘Oh, and will he pay? Or will he cheat you?’ I asked. After almost a year of participant observation in the Syrian camp, I had grown used to stories of farmers reneging on agreements and brushing off Syrian labourers who ask for money owed. Anwar told me that this had happened to him several times, so I was surprised that he had continued to work for so long without being paid. ‘Abu Ali will pay me, for sure,’ he replied, with a tone of certainty, ‘He is haqqani.’ This word is used to describe people who are honest and treat others justly – amongst the Syrians, it is used to refer to those Lebanese who pay the wages they owe their workers.

Anwar is one of my main interlocutors in the camp. He has a quick smile, showing a chipped front tooth, and moves with the sharp, abrupt steps of a man used to heaving bricks and bales all day. Anwar has a slightly ginger beard and creases in his forehead that make him look far older than 26. He and Abu Ali were examples of the mutually beneficial relationship that Syrian labourers and Lebanese landowners often cultivated: it was the main channel of interpersonal interaction between the two communities. The trust that Abu Ali was haqqani was central to this relationship and reverberated far beyond the certainty that Anwar would be paid for his labour.

Abu Ali was Anwar’s main employer – a gruff, straight-talking Biqa’a villager in his fifties who worked as both a medium-sized hashish farmer and in construction. He organised all-male warsheh, which mostly consisted of small groups of labourers to build the concrete and cinderblock walls, floors and ceilings for the ever-booming housing market. For the past two
years, they had worked together intermittently – through him, Anwar had learnt how to pour and set concrete and the finer details of hashish production. Their relationship was obviously hierarchical but was also one of friendship – they quite liked one another, joked and drank tea together, and communicated regularly, even when there was no work to be discussed. Anwar was a key member of Abu Ali’s team and would be automatically included in any work Abu Ali had. Similarly, it was assumed that if Abu Ali needed a labourer at short notice, Anwar would prioritise him. As time went on and Anwar became more experienced, he organised his own warsheh and jobs independently, employing other Syrians that he knew from neighbouring camps. Despite this, he continued to make himself available whenever Abu Ali needed him. Several times, I found him juggling various jobs to meet one of Abu Ali’s last-minute demands, at no apparent financial benefit to himself. He referred to Abu Ali as mu’alemi (literally meaning ‘my teacher,’ but often used as a term of respect for a master of a trade or a boss) and trusted that his wages, often several hundred dollars, would be paid. Abu Ali always paid Anwar, never taking more than a few weeks, and never disputed Anwar’s account of his hours, which he kept a record of in a small, well-worn notebook. Anwar did not extend this trust to other Lebanese employers and was much more reticent to work for them, often asking for his wages in small chunks as the work progressed.

The benefits of this relationship for Abu Ali became clear as the harvest season began and labour shortages for the hashish harvest started to show. Despite a swelling of the Syrian population in the summer months, with Syrian labourers coming from other camps down the valley to stay with family members, supply just could not meet demand. Many Lebanese farmers who did not have established long-term relationships with Syrian labourers struggled to find workers for their crops. Dozens of farmers would pull up to the camp to find labourers, only to be met with silence as all the workers were already in the fields or too tired to take on another job. Furthermore, if a Lebanese farmer had failed to pay labourers in previous years or had had disputes over the final bill (very common occurrences), it would be well-known in the camp, and even the most hard-up Syrian would claim they were too busy to work. Abu Ali, on the other hand, faced none of these problems. He could rely on Anwar to organise a small warsheh to weed, water, and cut his fields. These workers, usually drawn from Anwar’s extended family, trusted that his relationship with Abu Ali would ensure they would be paid. His team generally consisted of himself, his brother Habib, his brother’s wife
Aisha, and his sister Nour, and then a handful of other cousins in need of work. This trust even extended to Abu Ali’s relatives, for whom the warsheh laboured during the harvest season, under Abu Ali’s guarantee. This relationship was the basis for what would be an otherwise very unstable labour relationship.

The converse also applied. When Anwar had a problem with other villagers, he could turn to Abu Ali, an older, respected member of the local Lebanese clan, for support. This happened several times over the course of my fieldwork. In the midst of the harvest season, a villager called Abu Jamal (discussed in the fourth vignette) arrived at the camp with his sons to coerce labourers into working his fields for free, waving guns and rounding up Syrians like indentured servants. Watching the operation of intimidation, I noticed that Anwar’s tent, with his wife, brother-in-law, and children, went unmolested. Abu Jamal had a list of the camp inhabitants, and Anwar was hardly an unknown character, so I was confused as to how he had managed to avoid the round-up. When I asked, Anwar smiled mischievously, ‘Mu’alemi Abu Ali spoke to Abu Jamal. He told him, “Anwar is my worker, and you don’t come near my workers.”’ As neighbouring villagers from the same clan, for Abu Jamal to ignore this claim on Anwar’s labour would be a grave insult to Abu Ali and cause no end of problems within the Lebanese community. By binding himself to Abu Ali, Anwar had not only saved himself from three or four days of forced labour at the height of the season, but also the indignity of being intimidated in his own home in front of his wife and children.

Their relationship also played a role in moderating internal camp disputes. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Anwar and his brother began feuding with another set of brothers in the camp, who accused him of ‘stealing’ some lucrative welding work down in the village. Harsh words were exchanged, which erupted into violence twice. The second time, one of the other brothers was seriously injured and had to go to hospital. This ran the risk of serious violence and had the potential for someone to be evicted from the camp or worse. As blood was high and dark words were muttered, Anwar turned to his Lebanese patron, visiting Abu Ali one evening for coffee and explaining the situation to him. The opposing set of brothers did likewise, visiting their own regular employer from the Lebanese community, another older clan member of similar stature and connections. After some discussion amongst themselves, the patrons came to their own decision – they would not take sides, but any further violence
would lead to both aggressors being ejected from the area. With this heavy-handed, but effective, ultimatum, they handed responsibility to the Syrian internal tribal mediation process. However, the Lebanese patrons’ intervention was enough for both sides to calm down and for the feud to be brought under control, with neither side losing face.

The two also considered other business ventures. Like the rest of the village, the refugee camp siphoned electricity from the national power grid and did not pay for *dawleh* (state) electricity. However, this supply was intermittent and, while the village had private generators, the camp was left without electricity for long periods. Muhammad, the enterprising sharecropper discussed in the next vignette, had at one point bought a generator he used to supply his camp neighbours for a monthly subscription fee. However, since his customers were all relatives, he struggled to collect back payments. His cousins would claim they didn’t have anything, and he would be unable to push the issue further. Eventually, tired of losing money on diesel, he cut the supply to the whole camp.

Anwar and Abu Ali schemed to take Muhammad’s place. A Lebanese villager would never be able to keep track of the changing status of the 400 or so camp inhabitants or visit frequently enough to maintain a generator or chase up bills. Similarly, a Syrian would struggle to collect fees from his neighbours and relatives or have enough savings or security to buy and maintain a generator. However, combined with a Syrian undertaking the collection visits and follow-ups, and the Lebanese capital and latent threat to those who do not pay, the business venture showed signs of being profitable. They had more plans for providing internet to the camp, should this venture work out. This plan was more of an explicit partnership, built upon previous patron/client practices and the associated trust.

This relationship between Anwar and Abu Ali exemplifies the beginnings of a fragile partnership and friendship between Lebanese villagers and Syrians replicated throughout my fieldwork. Unlike the older men of the camp who provided their families’ labour to the local *shaweesh* (discussed in a later section), younger, savvy younger men like Anwar seemed to prefer the independence of these individual, private agreements. While deeply hierarchical and following a patron/client pattern, there were clear elements of reciprocity that emerged. As trust developed between these two men, it was clear they realised that working together
was easier and more profitable than separate, casual agreements. This trust built upon the material requirements of labour but spilled over into other areas of life, such as feuds and camp infrastructure provision. These relationships are inherently precarious and require constant maintenance but, if successful, offer far more security than alternative arrangements.

As the financial crisis continued, a new strain on their relationship emerged: over the course of my fieldwork, hyperinflation had decreased the purchasing power of Anwar’s wages by around 80%. While Abu Ali still paid on time, Anwar began to push (respectfully, of course) for a higher hourly rate. For example, he made jokes about the value of his Lebanese lira wages in US dollars and dropped hints about how he hadn’t eaten meat for months. On the other hand, Abu Ali was wary of any deviation from the ‘fixed wages’ that had been in place for years and would respond by deflecting, perhaps by jokingly repeating the stereotype that Syrians all kept stacks of cash beneath their tents. So began a guarded, uncertain renegotiation of their delicate agreement, which is still ongoing at the time of writing.

Figure 10 - A Syrian sharecropper stands with his fields of potatoes
2. Muhammad the sharecropper

‘This year, I think I have 30 dunam,’ said Muhammad, as he sipped his tea. ‘Hmm, no, wait, more like 40.’ he corrected. As the potatoes sizzled in the embers, we warmed ourselves by the fire against the November frost creeping in over the fields. Muhammad is a greying, taciturn Syrian man in his early 40s who works as a sharecropper with Lebanese villagers. He plants potatoes and hashish, and his teenage son was working behind us in the small outhouse, weighing bags of potatoes from this year’s harvest. ‘The prices are rubbish this year, and I spent a lot, but it is better than 3,000 [LL] an hour…. before the crisis, there was money,’ he said wistfully.

Sharecropping is a common, established practice in the villages of the Biqa’a. In my field site, small landowners would often give their land to a more experienced farmer for what they colloquially referred to as daman. No money would change hands, but the farmer would work the land, and at the end of the year, give the landowner a portion of the final crop. Within most of the smaller Biqa’a villages, a framework exists to guide the percentages and responsibilities of anyone wishing to do so. To the north of the village, where the land was richer and the water plentiful, the landowner would provide the winter ploughing and water, and the sharecropper was responsible for everything else. They would then split the crop in half upon harvest. To the south, the land was more capital intensive, requiring substantial quantities of fertiliser and complex, large-scale irrigation systems. Here, the landowner would take at most 25% of the final crop, but the sharecropper would be responsible for organising the water supply. Larger scale, capital-rich Lebanese tended to engage in the latter, while poorer Syrians would engage in the former. As with Muhammad, the Syrian involved was almost always an older man who had been working seasonally in the village for a long time, often before the war, and had an established reputation.

Some Syrians, such as Muhammad, had made tens of thousands of dollars from this practice during the hashish boom of previous years, much more money than they ever could have through wage labour. One dunam of land could produce roughly 2 – 8 kilograms of hashish, which, even in the worst pre-crisis years, sold for US$300 each. A canny sharecropper who
knew how to leverage his family’s labour could be looking at easily US$1,000 profit per
\textit{dunam}, after expenses and splitting the crop with the landowner. Men like Muhammad
reinvested this money in land and capital machinery, both in Lebanon and back home in their
Syrian villages. Muhammad had invested his profits carefully, buying cars, generators, and
land back in his hometown near Raqqa. As my fieldwork got underway, however, Muhammad
was pessimistic about his profits in the coming year. With the price of hashish hovering at
US$125 per kilogram and the soil \textit{ta’aban} (tired) from years of intensive farming during the
boom, profits were being squeezed, and he was lucky to make even US$5,000 in 2020.

Muhammad was juggling several of these sharecropping agreements. He and his family had
worked seasonally in the village before the Syrian Civil War as wage labourers. When ISIS took
over his hometown near Raqqa in 2014, they settled in the Biqa’a, and Muhammad began to
work year-round as a sharecropper. This year, he had about 40 \textit{dunam} of land in the village
and refugee camp area, pieced together from four different Lebanese villagers. He further
leveraged these agreements to access disused hashish production facilities (including
machinery for processing and storage space) owned by one of the Lebanese landowners. He
planted hashish, potatoes, and a large kitchen garden of which he was particularly proud. The
Lebanese villagers tended not to pay much attention to his work schedule or what else he
gleaned from the land, as long as they received a reasonable portion of the crop at the end
of the year. Even with the plummet in prices, Muhammad was insulated from the worst
effects of devaluing wages and had his plentiful kitchen garden to offset the rise in food prices.

Furthermore, as an established name, he and his family had a higher degree of protection
from harassment by the local police and Lebanese \textit{shebab} (young men, lads). Not merely a
wage labourer, several Lebanese villagers had a vested interest in Muhammad being able to
come and go freely to tend to the crops, and for him to stay to work the fields for the full year.
In cases of Syrian sharecroppers, deeper guarantees seemed to bind the Syrian to the
Lebanese. While no formal contract was drawn up for the land, the Lebanese villager might
act as a \textit{kafeel} (sponsor) to regularise the Syrian’s legal paperwork, supporting them with their
connections through the opaque Lebanese bureaucracy. They might also become a \textit{wakeel}
(guarantor), so the Syrian could legally register and drive a vehicle without fear of being
stopped by the police or other villagers. Muhammad had both of these agreements with men whose land he was farming.

The Lebanese villagers who engaged in sharecropping were often absentee landlords who wished to profit from land they owned while keeping the illicit production at arms-length, usually because they were employed by the state. This gave them the relevant ‘on paper’ authority to support the Syrian through bureaucratic processes, but also the incentive not to be fully committed to hashish farming and the legal problems that go with it. While most sharecropping arrangements concerned hashish, it was not unusual for Lebanese landowners to engage in similar agreements to manage their orchards. In addition, giving the land to a Syrian was also a way of avoiding conflict between Lebanese villagers. It established a ‘buffer’ for disputes over water rights or inheritance. Several times, I observed that the misrouting of water, resulting from a failure to coordinate between the Lebanese farmers responsible for the water, was blamed on a ‘stupid Syrian.’ Sharecroppers like Muhammad would humbly and politely apologise, treating their scapegoating as the cost of doing business. Similarly, if several Lebanese brothers shared a piece of land, it was often easier to hand it over to a sharecropper and collect and divide the crop at the end of the year than to coordinate and divide responsibilities between the various claimants.

Those Syrian sharecroppers that were successful, like Muhammad, often had access to a large pool of household labour, with capable wives and older children. Younger Syrian men without the same level of knowledge and family resources and relationships tried and failed. At the end of the year, adding up all their labour costs and the unforeseen overheads, combined with plummeting prices and low yields, they saw their profits squeezed down to nothing. Older, more experienced men such as Muhammad cleverly leveraged their relationships to avoid these costs. For example, Muhammad could borrow a tractor for ploughing from one Lebanese landowner, hashish production machinery from another, and free leftover fertiliser from a third. The practices of sharecroppers like Muhammad represent another, perhaps more explicitly economically motivated type of Lebanese-Syrian relationship, founded upon Muhammad’s ability to source and organise Syrian refugee labour to work Lebanese land. Once again, it is clear how this partnership spills over into other aspects of life, regularising
Muhammad’s legal status and his position as a growing landowner back in his home village in Syria.

Figure 11 - A Syrian shaweesh buys grain for his sheep

3. Hussein the smuggler, Abu Ibrahim the shaweesh and his warsheh

From early September, the normally sleepy villages of the northern Biqa’a are alive with activity. At sunrise, tractors arrive at the refugee camp, collecting raucous trailers full of Syrian workers – mostly young teenagers with colourful scarves wrapped around their heads and dangerously brandishing sharp-toothed sickles. The main attraction for Syrian settlement in the region is the abundance of work from the end of summer through to the winter months, and Syrians from camps in other parts of the valley often travel to the area to stay and work with family members for the harvest season. In most villages in the area, there are large-scale farmers with hundreds of dunam of hashish for harvest. This must be done entirely by hand.
throughout September, requiring teams of almost 100 labourers working from 7AM until 4PM every day, for at least a month. Production work requires smaller teams but is still labour intensive and continues through the winter. The harvest work is deeply gendered – labourers are referred to as *banat* (girls) though almost half are actually teenage boys. Work by *banat* is usually seen as less valuable and so paid at a slightly lower rate. Men generally have roles as overseers or work in smaller teams involved in the ‘male’ tasks of loading and unloading the large bales of hashish. There was less of this work, and so the result was that while male work paid more, Men were far more often unemployed. In contrast, female work was plentiful – weeding and cutting and gathering the hashish were considered female tasks, and there was far more of a demand for labour in these areas.

Syrian refugees comprise these teams, run in a delicate, complex business partnership between several Syrian men from Raqqa and the larger hashish farmers. During my time in the Biqa’a, one tribe member, Abu Ibrahim, an older man and one of the first to arrive in the Biqa’a from Syria in the early 1990s, acted as a *shaweesh*. He organised the work teams from the refugee camp and other Syrian families in the village. His ability to do so was based on his established reputation among his extended tribal network from Raqqa. In many ways, Abu Ibrahim owed his position to being of the correct social stature to be allowed to chastise his cousins’ children whilst in the fields. He then coordinated the organisation of the work teams with another member of his tribe and a Kurdish Syrian, who were employed by a larger Lebanese farmer called Hussein on a monthly salary. These two men would keep a written record of the workers and wages owed, but they deferred to Abu Ibrahim in coordinating with a given Syrian family about how many of them would work and how much they were owed.

As noted in the previous chapter, Abu Ibrahim was largely a figurehead around which coordination centred; he did not have much of the coercive or exploitative powers that I have seen *shaweesh* exercise elsewhere. However, while his position was symbolic, it also had practical implications. He did not take a commission (a cut of each labourer’s wages) as other *shaweesh* do further down the valley – for some of my interlocutors, this meant that Abu Ibrahim was not a ‘real’ *shaweesh*. However, he and his family did get priority in smaller work teams at other times of the year and this translated into a sizable household income.
This system of labour was only possible for larger farmers like Hussein with high levels of liquidity. Hussein was both a large farmer and was directly involved in smuggling the hashish abroad, so sold his crop for a much higher price and was paid for it regularly in US dollars, unlike other, smaller farmers who exchanged their crop locally for Lebanese lira. Larger farmers’ ability to muster such work teams was partly due to their fiercely protected reputation as *haqqani* men, who pay wages exactly and immediately. Any labourer on these teams that wished to be paid their wages could do so at any time, at a moment’s notice, and they were keen to demonstrate this to me. This is a huge liability borne by Hussein, who would owe tens of thousands of dollars by the end of the harvest season. Given the size of his operation, maintaining a team of this size was essential to harvesting before the crop went bad in the fields. Even the hundred labourer teams were not enough – several times over the course of the harvest season, Hussein was forced to engage *shaweesh* from outside the local Syrian community to harvest the crop in time.

This need for large labour teams was the main reason for the Syrian encampment at my village fieldsite. The larger farmers like Hussein trod a delicate line, balancing their specific requirements with their neighbours’ need for labour and the hostility towards the Syrians’ presence. During the harvest season, other Lebanese farmers faced acute labour shortages – without the liquidity or reputation to organise large teams, or long-term relationships like that of Abu Ali and Anwar, many of these farmers risked losing their crop before they could harvest it. This could turn dangerous – these farmers would frequently threaten the camp with violence, and it could be a source of conflict between the larger farmers and their neighbours. The larger farmers responded as best they could, regularly trying to placate irate villagers who couldn’t find workers. Hussein, the main source of income for Abu Ibrahim’s work team, intermittently directed the team to harvest his neighbours’ land under his guarantee of payment. In this way, Hussein strove to avoid accusations from his neighbours that he was hoarding the desperately needed Syrian labour. Once more, Lebanese agricultural capital’s labour requirements were central to issues of Syrian encampment, as well as Lebanese farmers’ maintenance of their *haqqani* reputation.

In many ways, the financial crisis magnified the advantages of farmers like Hussein with access to large US dollar capital. He could afford to placate his large work team with a nominal raise
of per hour, which did not come close to offsetting the loss in purchasing power caused by hyperinflation. His access to dollars allowed him to further improve his reputation as *haqqani*, whilst simultaneously insulating him from the collapse of the local currency.

![Figure 12 - A mid-sized work-team gathers the cut and dried hashish from the fields](image)

4. **Abu Jamal and forced labour**

Some Lebanese farmers took a completely different approach to solving the labour shortage, as I learnt one hot September morning in the camp. I was drinking tea and chatting with Wa’el, one of my interlocutors, in his tent when we heard some shouting outside and the rumble of an engine. We poked our heads to see what was going on and saw an older Lebanese farmer I knew as Abu Jamal, who had driven his tractor down the central track of the camp. He was shouting at a group of women who were pleading with him, while his adult son marched up and down the camp, waving an automatic rifle and shouting into various tents, ‘Come on, get to work!’
Abu Jamal was a mid-sized farmer and known for never paying his workers. As such, he couldn’t gather any labour to work his fields – whenever he or his sons came to the camp, Syrian labourers made themselves scarce, or made clear that they were on their way to another job. Instead, Abu Jamal claimed that he owned the land upon which the camp was built, something he repeated to anyone who would listen. Since the Syrians were staying on his land and not paying rent, he reasoned they ought to at least work his fields for the harvest season. On this basis, Abu Jamal decided that each household had to provide him with one labourer for the time it took to harvest his fields. He explained this all to me from his tractor, certain that I would agree with the rationality of his argument.

However, Abu Jamal’s claim was not quite as clear cut as he seemed to think. When it was first established, the camp was deliberately positioned on some of the least desirable land in the area. The municipality and NGOs had instructed the refugees to set up their tents on what had previously been steep, unfarmable scrubland. All of the villagers I spoke to were certain that the land was either owned by the state or divided between so many villagers that no one could ever make a coherent claim. The other villagers roundly dismissed Abu Jamal’s claim to the land, but he continued to fiercely assert it.

While the other Lebanese villagers did not share his claim, his attitude of entitlement towards Syrian labour certainly was. They disapproved of his explicit exploitation of the camp, but their opposition to Abu Jamal’s practices never reached confrontation; it mostly consisted of muttering, ‘What, are the Syrians his slaves now?’ Many Lebanese farmers expressed hostility to the idea that Syrians had any ‘right’ to wages, but rather thought that, as guests in Lebanon, the Syrian refugees should be grateful for anything they received. While not universal, the general attitude amongst the smaller farmers was that an idle Syrian during the harvest period was obliged to work for any Lebanese who demanded his labour, and should be happy with any payment they deigned to give him. Of course, in specific cases, patrons like Abu Ali would protect their clients, but those Syrian refugees without a patron powerful enough to stand up to Abu Jamal were subject to his press-ganging.
Abu Jamal’s approach was simple – come harvest period, he would decide when he wanted to harvest. He had a list of the families and tents in the camp he had acquired from a patron-client relationship with another Syrian, eschewing any need for a shaweesh, and demanded one adult worker from each household. If anyone refused, he would drive his tractor into their tent and crush it, along with their belongings. This was no idle threat – he had partially destroyed the tents of two of my interlocutors who tried to resist him in previous years. His sons would come to the camp with him, toting automatic weapons they would occasionally shoot in the air for added effect. Syrians would try to avoid his claims on their labour, pleading prior engagements, infirmity, or simply by hiding or appealing to patrons amongst the Lebanese villagers. However, for most, this kind of exploitation was simply the cost of living and working here. As Abu Jamal veered his tractor dangerously close to the tent of a woman trying to plead her case, I asked Wa’el, ‘Why isn’t he harassing you?’ Wa’el smiled grimly before leading me back inside, ‘My sister has been down working in his fields since yesterday morning,’ he said.

While this is an extreme approach, forced labour was surprisingly common. A more frequently deployed tactic used by many villagers was to simply delay payment to Syrian labourers repeatedly, for months on end. When the Syrian labourer asked one too many times, the farmer would take offence at what they characterised as a lack of trust. This would provoke a more general argument in which they would threaten the Syrian, who would take the hint and forget about the wages. Every single one of my Syrian interlocutors had experienced this on multiple occasions, and this created an environment where engaging in wage labour was fraught with risk. These fraudulent, exploitative practices reinforced the importance of Syrians seeking patrons and guarantors amongst the Lebanese population or working for a shaweesh.

Conclusion

In these four vignettes, we can see the fundamentally important role of labour in conditioning the governance of Syrian refugees. Other factors played a role in the actions of my interlocutors, but wage labour remained a key determinant of the pattern of conflict and resolution. Disputes between Lebanese farmers (as in the case of the large work team) were
based on and resolved through access to Syrian labour. Similarly, conflicts between camp dwellers (as in the case of Anwar) were based on the distribution of work and resolved through patronage relationships based on labour. Friendships and partnerships between the two communities in the first three cases, where it could be said that there was ‘bread and salt,’ were again built on the foundation of reliable labour provision over long periods and pre-Civil War migratory labour patterns.

At its base, this relationship grew from two general, mirrored characteristics in each community. Firstly, there is the Lebanese access to capital, most often in the form of land ownership, and the Syrian’s corresponding ability to gather the labour needed to make this capital profitable. Secondly, the Lebanese can navigate the Lebanese clan and state networks to protect Syrians from predatory practices and bureaucratic dangers. This is mirrored by the Syrian’s respective abilities to navigate and demystify the internal workings of the camp and Syrian community. Throughout the four vignettes, we can see these common features replicated in each kind of relationships.

Furthermore, this chapter indicates that, to a large extent, the governance practices in which Syrian refugees and Lebanese hashish farmers engage are in a state of continuity rather than disruption. The practices and relationships described above all predate the refugee crisis. The Syrian Civil War heightened the vulnerability of the Syrians and increased the supply of cheap, unskilled labour, but all of this has occurred within the parameters of a pre-existing socio-economic framework. This fieldwork also indicates a high level of variability in shaweesh systems and responsibilities. As the above ethnography demonstrates, however, the shaweesh is often a shorthand for far more complex and variable relationships and practices. Key actors in the camp’s governance and the organisation of labour, such as Anwar and Muhammad, were not shaweesh. Even the credentials of Abu Ibrahim, the nominal shaweesh, were disputed.

The clientelism described above is unlikely to be exceptional – in places with private property regimes, wage labour, and no recourse to formal legal structures, trusting relationships based on mutual gain are the foundation of these interactions. Throughout 2019 - 2020, the Lebanese economic crisis has raised serious obstacles to the continuity of this system. As
prices have risen and wages have remained at their nominal value, the longer it takes for trusted employers to pay back wages, the less value the wages have. Smaller farmers have been less able or willing to pay, while Syrians have been more urgently in need of their wages. Many Syrians kept their savings in Syrian or Lebanese lira and were wiped out by the collapse in both currencies. This has gone hand in hand with the results of capital-intensive hashish production – prices have dropped, the soil has become less fertile, and water sources less reliable. More and more land is only profitable for large-scale, capital intensive farmers. As their share in the market increases, smaller farmers feel the squeeze, straining the relationships described in the first and second vignettes. This further demonstrates the extent to which local, clientelist relationships are intertwined with the movements of international capital.

The crisis has also sharpened pre-existing social cleavages. For the Lebanese, it has dramatically increased the importance of access to international dollar markets and high liquidity. This manifests in the growing importance of large-scale, capital-intensive production, and the end to the division between hashish producers and smugglers. Illicit production has thus replicated broader trends in Lebanese agriculture. Amongst the Syrians, it has sharpened the difference between pure wage labourers entirely reliant on the sale of their labour at market price, and those like Muhammad and Anwar who are able to supplement these arrangements with small-scale investments and long-term bonds of trust. Likewise, the collapse of the lira has enhanced the reputations of large farmers like Hussein as haqqani whilst simultaneously protecting their profit margins. In many ways, this pressure on pre-existing patron/client relationships whilst simultaneously increasing their importance is a microcosm for the Lebanese social contract as a whole. As the economy has collapsed over 2019-2020, previous patronage arrangements have increasingly been unable to meet the demands of the population; this can be seen in the increasingly frequent civil unrest and protests.
V – Family business: Syrian work teams

Introduction

As was shown in Chapters III and IV, Lebanese agriculture and indeed much of the Lebanese economy in general is reliant on cheap, pliable migrant labour. This need for labour is central to understanding the settlement and governance of Syrian refugee camps in the Biqa’a valley, where the camps are the main source of labour for farmers. While the previous chapter has analysed intercommunal partnerships as the main channel for interaction between the two communities, this chapter now analyses the foundation upon which this is built: the organisation and provision of labour through the warsheh (workshop, work team). The term warsheh is used broadly to refer to a wide range of labour teams, and can consists of anywhere upwards from three to several hundred workers. A warsheh generally consists entirely of Syrians, and is informally contracted by Lebanese landowners or businessmen to work in agriculture, construction, and other sectors requiring manual labour. These can range from unskilled, very casual work to highly skilled long-term undertakings which require extensive planning and logistical organisation. Alongside the partnerships in the previous chapter, the warsheh is the focal point for Syrian and Lebanese social relations. The warsheh and the household constitute the two main sites of Syrian social relations, and indeed there is a complex overlapping relationship between the work team and the household (and the family more broadly). Wage labour practices and the requirements of agricultural capital interact with patriarchal norms to create a manageable workforce, lower costs, and ideologically construct certain kinds of work as less valuable.

The agricultural workforce is largely made up of women and children, and the division of labour is deeply gendered. A standard hourly wage is the discursive norm against which labour is quantified. However, many of the labourers never see their wages, or even know how much they are being paid. Different social dynamics and pay systems establish varying incentive structures, which are key to understanding the exploitation and precarious position of the Syrian refugee-labourers. While money is certainly central to motivating the workforce, other non-financial aspects are also key. Payment in kind is an important part of the
labour/capital calculation, but this in turn responds to different calculations based on norms of hospitality and patriarchal authority. Furthermore, the family-based nature of work teams facilitates a circulation of unquantified labour and hospitality between Syrian families. The economy of agrarian production in the region is underpinned by these cheap labour teams, and organisation and reproduction of these workers is premised upon patriarchal norms controlling child and female waged and unwaged labour.

This chapter seeks to understand what kind of wage labour is present in the refugee camps of rural Lebanon, how this has interacted with migration from rural Syria, and put these findings into discourse with studies of rural family work practices globally. I give an ethnographic account of different types of work teams, the way they are organised, incentivised, and distribute labour and income. I argue that the organisation and extraction of labour is based on pre-refugee crisis practices, an understanding of which requires a deep account of patriarchal structures of rural Syrian families. Gender ideologies and related ideas about the suitability and value of certain kinds of work are central to maintaining this system, and are harnessed to organise, reproduce, and exploit this workforce.

More broadly, this chapter can be seen as questioning how we define and understand wage labour – as noted in Chapter I, my ethnography follows Chalcraft (2005) in defining labour expansively to challenge Eurocentric notions of linear capitalist development and grant historical agency to apparently noncapitalist practices in political economic transformation (pp. 25 – 26). This chapter seeks to make sense of the labour practices found amongst the refugee-labourers of the Biqa’a, a disenfranchised population that has been partially incorporated into agricultural wage-labour production processes. Despite this dramatic and rapid transformation of livelihoods, these communities have maintained a sense of cultural cohesion and a labour system has developed which marries the requirements of Lebanese agricultural capital with the socio-cultural practices of rural Syria. I show the dependence of globalised agrarian hashish industry on the control of Syrian women and children’s labour, and the central role of patriarchal authority in the household to this production process. It is this confluence of social relations that underpins the economic structure of the Biqa’a valley, and is a common and organic means by which labour is exploited by capital owners.
While this ethnography supports the idea that ‘paths to capitalism are diverse, non-linear, and historically contingent’ (Bair et al., 2019), it challenges the characterisation of certain rural labour practices as ‘failed’ or ‘partial’ transitions to capitalism. Studies of rural capitalism are replete with these apparently ‘partial’ transitions, and these are most notable in the emergence of agricultural wage-labour, which when subject to scrutiny is often found to be underpinned by numerous, not necessarily capitalist, exploitative practices. The recurrence of these political-economic structures in very different contexts calls for a more nuanced account of what they represent, beyond just a chronological step in the development of capitalist agriculture. The foundational importance of gender and family relations to the exploitation of labour in the Biqa’a shows that rather than exceptions, the hidden wage labour structures which emerge are a core component of capitalism outside of the narrow European historiography. Scott (2008) argues that ‘transformations of the material base and their economic and social consequences for class relations have worked themselves out within the context of a given, normative environment.’ Forms of self-interested appropriation and economic control must be ‘euphemised’ through pre-existing normative structures, which can only be understood through close analysis of the micro-dynamics of everyday work and conflict.

This point is further reinforced when my ethnography is considered in conjunction with works in very different social contexts. The absence of research into gender and intrafamilial relations in agrarian commercial production is noted by Sanchez (2013). Her ethnography highlights the continued centrality of waged and unwaged family (often female teenage) labour in agriculture advanced capitalist economies. She shows how in the Californian strawberry industry, a combination of family sharecropping and wage labour outsourced labour organisation and discipline to the Mexican patriarchal family. This system, she notes, undermined the development of rural trade unions, and allowed for harsher physical discipline and ideological conditioning than direct wage labour arrangements. She argues that this system ‘was successful because it provided social power and prestige mainly to patriarchs, while it disempowered, exploited, and subordinated child, teenage, and young woman nonwage labor on the farm’ (p.24). My ethnography in this chapter shows a very similar process underpinning capitalist enterprise in the Biqa’a. In Bernstein’s terms, the ‘fragmentation’ of classes of labour is achieved through the harnessing of patriarchal family
practices to agrarian capitalist production. Rather than an exceptional process, this is central to labour organisation and so the extraction of surplus value.

This explicit framing, that noncapitalist family practices fragment the agrarian labour force and are central to capitalist exploitation, is central to understanding the practices of rural refugee camps in the Levant. It has been amply demonstrated that the social practices that determine the micro-dynamics of individual work arrangements can be central to capitalist exploitation of labour. This has been shown in rural contexts as varied as post-Civil War Southern USA (Angelo, 1995), sugar cane cutters in Peru (Scott, 1976), farmer labourers in the Dominican Republic (Baud, 1992), and rural debtors in India (Rao, 1999). In urban contexts, a similar process has occurred with informal day-labour and mediated employment (Purser, 2019). Formally free, wage labouring or sharecropping workforce is constrained by a combination of social, economic, and legal structures to constitute ‘unfree’ labour, and the Biqa’a work teams documented here are a variation on this theme.

However, other research has shown this interaction occurring through the related framing of gender in cases of capitalist production. For example, Caraway (2005) argues in her case study of Indonesia that ‘feminization is one method that employers deploy to enhance productivity and labor control. Since gender is a key organizing principle in the factory, managers see productivity and labor control through a gendered lens.’ She argues that increased female participation in these workforces is not just an issue of wages, but also has a reciprocal relationship with ‘gendered discourses of work’, where capacities and problems are associated with a naturalised assumptions about work and the worker. Similar process are shown to be at work in ethnographies such as Chatterjee’s (2001) account of the way female labour is disciplined and contested on Indian tea plantations, and Wyer’s (1986) analysis of the gendered division of labour and use of child labour in Brazilian agricultural production. The intertwinment of masculinity, political oppression, and labour is also explored by Ross (2021) in neighbouring Palestine. Sargent notes how workers may assert control over their productive activity by refusing or contesting certain tasks (Sargent, 2020) and expressing hostility towards certain identities (Kantor, 2020). This can serve the interests of capital and maintain other social hierarchies - certain groups may assert control over others by engaging in similar behaviour, and this can be seen in male resistance to engaging in labour
characterised as ‘female’. In Scott’s sense, exploitative rural wage labour is ‘euphemised’ through gender and patriarchal ideologies, and this may facilitate a capitalist mode of production.

This process – the interaction between power-hierarchies and identities and capitalist production – is only just beginning to be studied in the Levant. In urban settings Saleh (2016) describes Syrian scrap metal collectors and Lebanese property owners, explaining how marginal workers made labour calculations based on not only the material costs of scrap metal, but also on accounting for the cost of ‘social production of particular hierarchies reproduced through citizenship, religion and labour’ (p.104). Traboulsi’s (n.d.) ethnography articulates the intersection between gender norms and class identity amongst Syrian women refugees who have settled in different parts of Lebanon. In rural areas, Fernández (2019, 2020) has given detailed accounts of Syrian household modes of production within Syria, and Sajadian’s (2020) work shows how the practices have been transposed to refugee communities in the Biqa’a.
Labour teams, families, and power

Given the nature of Lebanese hashish production, and agricultural production in general, much of the process is labour-intensive. In my field site, small to medium operations with less that 100 dunam of land are usually owned by individual Lebanese villagers or close family units, and they require teams of 5 – 30 labourers for short, intensive bouts of work. No individual smallholding requires labour for more than a couple of weeks at most, so these labour teams, often referred to as warsheh (literally, workshop), circulate amongst these operations in a given handful of villages. Movement between the different warsheh is common, as is intermittent periods of unemployment. Demand for labour ebbs and flows with the seasons, with periods of low demand in the late winter to a frantic hunger for labourers in the harvest season. The seasonal nature of the tasks meant that certain specialised workers were more or less in demand at different times of year. The larger farming operations, due to their size, operate on a much tighter timescale, and require constantly maintained large labour teams for the harvest season.

Here, organising these work teams was a constant activity, in constant discussion amongst my interlocutors, both Lebanese and Syrian. Most tasks in the fields and production of hashish were very time sensitive, and required a group of cooperating workers. The oversight and motivation of these teams therefore constituted perhaps the main framework through which power was exercised, both by Lebanese farmers over the refugee communities, and internally between refugees. As was shown in Chapters III and IV, work was often scarce, and reliable payment even scarcer. UN aid payments, where Syrians were lucky enough to be eligible, were not enough to protect against poverty, and this is explored in more detail in Chapter VII. Daily life amongst my Syrian interlocutors was thus a constant monitoring of opportunities for work for themselves and their extended families. Work could be paid hourly, usually at the standard rate of three thousand Lebanese lira in the central Biqa’a, or it could be maqtou’a (piecework). This meant that a price would be agreed for a task, and the Syrian labourer was paid this amount for the completion of the task. The Syrian was then free to recruit as many co-workers and take as long as he wanted to complete the task, within certain
bounds, of course. Thanks to the Lebanese lira being pegged to the dollar, prior to the economic crisis beginning in 2019, wages and prices were also very predictable.

Figure 14 - A family team cuts a field of hashish

1. Anwar’s family team

‘Come on lads, come on! Work! You are not here to play, you here to work!’ shouted Anwar as the sun began to rise over the valley. We had been cutting a field at full speed for a solid hour and a half without a break, and the sun was beginning to creep over the mountains. We wanted to get as much done as possible before the full force of the late September heat hit us. Anwar and his sister set a relentless pace, and I could see that the other three younger cousins who were working with us were struggling to keep up. I finished my section a little behind Anwar, and stretched my stiff back. ‘So, Ya’aqoub, are you tired?’ asked Anwar, laughing, ‘you look like an old woman!’ The field spread out before us, and even at this rate it seemed impossible that we would finish before lunch as Anwar had planned. He had already
made a deal with another farmer on the other side of town and wanted to finish this quickly and move on (the team in figure 14 is exemplary of these kinds of warsheh).

The most common work team found at my field site roughly corresponded to an extended household unit. Smallholding farmers rarely had tasks that would take more than a few days, or even a week. These teams would be led by a male head of household, who would agree a price for the task at hand with the Lebanese farmer, either maqtou’a or hourly and a set number of labourers. He would then recruit the labourers, firstly from his household, and then from his extended family, rarely more than 10 workers. Often, then, the payment for work, while nominally paid to each labourer, would be calculated, agreed, and collected by the male head of household from the Lebanese farmer, and other household members would have little input into these negotiations.

Anwar’s warsheh consisted of eight other family members: Anwar and his brother Habib were the team leaders, and I played the role of an honorary brother. His unmarried sister Nour was visiting for the harvest season from their parent’s tent in the Western Biqa’a, because she could make more money here at this time of the year. The other members were Habib’s wife, and three younger cousins. Anwar’s immediate family had fled Raqqa ISIS and military conscription for the Assad regime in 2016, settling in two tents in a small camp on the outskirts of a central Biqa’a town where many relatives had been engaging in seasonal labour for decades.

In this team, everyone worked equally, and Anwar and his brother jokingly mocked each of us to speed up. ‘Don’t worry, we do it to everyone,’ he confided with me after having mocked me in front of the group, ‘that is just how we work.’ It was a self-disciplining unit – the team was small enough that it would become apparent if someone wasn’t pulling their weight, but the deal with the landowner Majid was big enough that Anwar would make sure that we did a good job, to preserve his relationship and future opportunities. With a fixed amount and a tight deadline to meet to be earning above the standard the hourly wage of 3,000, it is important that everyone is working at full capacity. When cutting fields for the harvest, each member of the team was assigned a shurha (line of crops). The team then cuts the line as quickly as possible, and of course any member who is working slower than the others
immediately becomes visible and it subject to the mocking of the others. Anwar would quickly notice if a team-member had missed any stalks, or stacked the cut stalks badly, and a relentless torrent of mockery would quickly follow. Most of the time, this was good natured camaraderie, but where some non-immediate household war sheh members were visibly not pulling their weight, this could result in serious arguments and even being kicked off the team. Such was the pace of work and the group pressure to keep up that on several occasions my team members sliced open their fingers with their sickles as they tried to cut too quickly. They did not stop to bandage the sometimes-gaping wounds and continued working until they had finished their shurha, drops of blood splattering on the soil behind them and drying rapidly in the sun.

In other teams, the organising male would take the role of a supervisor, not actually cutting the field himself. The money would be divided between the team members, but since the majority came from his own immediate household, most of it would remain with him. Anwar, however, knew that by setting the pace he could ensure we finished a lot quicker and were able to cut more fields in a day. Since Anwar was working at a price per dunam rather than hour, this would mean more money. ‘We prefer maqtou’a,’ he said, ‘if we could, all our work would be maqtou’a’. They explained that there is more incentive to work hard, if you have set a price, and they would hope to complete the task faster than the time. Numerous times my interlocutors would berate one another for not working fast enough to be making more than the standard hourly wage. When my interlocutor ‘Amer returned home from a second day of piecework, the task unfinished, his older sister scolded him. She calculated that at his current pace of work, he would have earnt only about LL1,5000 an hour, well below the standard hourly rate of LL3,000. ‘You have to profit from maqtou’a, not lose!’ she chided.

Most of the older men and those who were illiterate relied on their memories to keep track of hours, while the younger, literate men like Anwar tended to keep an account of their hours in a little doftar (notebook) like the one shown in figure 15. He was responsible for collecting to often very delayed payment from the Lebanese farmer and dividing it up fairly. This in turn often entailed a negotiation with the Lebanese farmer, who would dispute Anwar’s accounting of the hours and offer a much lower amount. Anwar would then have to balance this with the expectations of the non-household members that worked in his team and his
reputation and ability to muster work teams in the future. This arrangement further reinforced the head of household’s position, since payment and work were entirely contingent on his trusting relationships with various Lebanese farmers, as shown in Chapter IV. While Anwar might ask other household members to confirm his figures, his recollection was the final word on the matter, and he had no qualms about defending his accounting of his and his warsheh’s hours to Lebanese employers and team members alike.

Where members of Anwar’s family worked in other teams or vice versa, payment was often left for long periods of time. This was in part because Lebanese farmers took a long time to pay for wages owed and often underpaid the leader of the warsheh. However, there was never a ‘fixed’ time period within which wages had to be paid and pressing explicitly for wages was not generally socially acceptable. The payment of wages often took place between the male heads of household through a social call, rather than payment to the individual worker. Where wages were given to the individual worker, they generally handed them over to the head of household immediately. Since most of the men in the camp were related, wage payment resembled the squaring of debts between cousins rather than a worker receiving his due. At various stages through my fieldwork, cousins and uncles of Anwar would call around to collect a few hundred thousand Lebanese lira. While a few of these men had worked on teams with Anwar, the majority of this money was based on hours worked by younger and female members of their households in Anwar’s warsheh.

Anwar would sometimes work with men of his own generation, but the tasks they undertook were specifically male labour like digging irrigation channels, watering orchards, and diq (beating) the hashish. In these cases, the warsheh was always very small and the relationship egalitarian. In other tasks where a clearer hierarchy emerged, male heads of household of a similar age would rarely work together and one man would be in charge. In this way, the patriarchal family structure was preserved and reinforced through these work teams, and so too was the socially egalitarian relationships between the men of the camp. The apparent exception to this was construction, where more obvious work hierarchies emerged between larger numbers of men. However, this was often moderated by the presence of a Lebanese or a non-shawi Syrian who took a more active role in managing the team, or sometimes teams being made of a composite of men from different camps.
His family balanced highly fluctuating employment by pooling the resources of three households across two camps. His parents lived with his four unmarried sisters in another camp about an hour away in the Western Biqa’a – here, there was much more regular, worse-paid work for young women on large, shaweesh-organised work teams. These large teams worked mostly in fruit and vegetables, and engaged in exclusively ‘women’s work’. As such, there was little prospect of respectable employment for two young men here, so Anwar and Habib had set up their tents in a more remote, hashish farming part of the Biqa’a. Here, due to the small size of the farmer’s plots they were able to organise their small warsheh. He, his brother, and father continued to pool the family’s savings between the two camps. Both Anwar and his brother were married and had their own tents and households, and their father has a fairly steady income from his younger daughters’ work in the warsheh of the Western Biqa’a. However, the boundaries between the finances of these households was fluid: Anwar exercised fairly extensive discretion over savings, keeping some money in his own household, but regularly contributed any excess income to his father’s household.

Labour also circulated in the Biqa’a according to these gendered, family structures - the women of Anwar’s family moved between the two camps depending on where there was more profitable work. In the hashish harvest season, several of Anwar’s sisters would stay and work with him, while in the winter and spring, they were based at his father’s. This also occurred when there was the chance of more lucrative work or benefits from NGO projects – households could expand or shrink according to the need, and other pools of savings could be drawn upon when required. These flexible boundaries between households and the way that family ties were maintained and used is examined more explicitly in Chapter VIII.

This flexibility also extended to more serious risks – if more serious problems were to arise for any branch of the family, they would not find themselves destitute having to flee but would hide at the other camp. While often framed in terms of insults and dignity, a common source of these problems was control over maqtou’a work. This happened when a violent feud flared between Habib and Anwar and another set of brothers in their camp – as described in Chapter IV, they argued over which warsheh had the right to some lucrative
building work in the Lebanese village. Insults were traded and escalated to blows, and the opposing parties sought temporary refuge in their fathers’ camps.

These household-based teams effectively meant hourly wage labour, but with no need for the small to medium Lebanese farmer to step into the role of ‘labour contractor’. Where the agreement was *maqtou’a*, the landowner devolved all labour organising responsibilities to Anwar, making him effectively the labour contractor of his own family members. Anwar was then incentivised to exploit their labour as efficiently as possible and manage family disputes in order to increase any income the household as a whole might make. He might split the team between different jobs, or send the less efficient member’s onto other *warsheh* if he thought that it could be more profitable. It also meant that he was acting in a dual capacity as an employer, paying wages hourly, and as a patriarch. He combines these two kinds of authorities in his work in the field.
Figure 15 - A Syrian man records the hours of his work team, which mostly consists of his extended family
This combination of roles was not without its dangers – when a non-immediate family member was working in a different team, there was the risk that the norms governing these two roles could conflict and provoke conflict in the camp. For example, Anwar’s relative Muhammad, who was introduced in Chapter IV, lived in the camp just a few tents down. As explained in Chapter IV, rather than working as a wage labourer or leading a warsheh like Anwar, Muhammad had several sharecropping agreements with Lebanese landowners. He grew crops on their land, and they provided the necessary irrigated water while Muhammad was responsible for the labour related tasks of planting, weeding, and harvesting. At the end of the year, they would divide the crop between them, and he was free to sell his share to whichever trader offered him the best price. This was not without its risks, but could be far more lucrative than Anwar’s warsheh, with profits reaching the tens of thousands of dollars annually.

Muhammad tried to minimize the amount of money that he had to spend on labour, so for the most part tended to mobilise his family’s labour for his fields – his wife and children did most of the work. They were not paid, since they were in effect working to ensure his profits from the sale of the crop at the end of the year. However, every so often he had to reach beyond his immediate family and form a more composite group of workers, especially for bigger jobs like weeding and cutting. This would mean paying extra wage labourers from his extended family in the camp. His was a delicate case, since he had to manage his roles as both a profit seeking sharecropper, and his position as a family member. Since Muhammad did not own the land, his main role in this sharecropping agreement was to leverage his family and tribal relationships to organise cheap labour to work the fields, and he naturally tried to reduce these expenditures to increase his yearly profits.

During the harvest season of 2020, Muhammad organised a group of five women labourers to join him, his wife, and his two sons to cut his fields. Among them was Anwar’s sister, Nour. He had offered the whole group LL700,000 to cut 20 dunam. This seemed like potentially lucrative maqtou’a work – cutting the fields would take just less than 3 days if the women all worked hard and pulled their weight, and so divided between five it would come to roughly LL140,000 each, a decent wage if they finished quickly. However, on the second day, it transpired that Muhammad was including his wife and eldest son as having a share in the
maqtou’a price, meaning that the LL700,000 was to be divided by seven. This reduced the shares of the other, non-family team members. Anwar and his sister Nour fumed over lunch once she had figured out her pay. ‘He is trying to cheat us,’ they grumbled ‘He is paying his son and wife? How?’ Since Muhammad’s family members would never actually receive any cash, he was effectively paying himself. He used the idea of them working as wage labourers for him as a sleight of hand to reduce the wages of the other team members - conflicts like this were common and frequently discussed in the camp.

The practices described above for Anwar’s team were generally representative of the labour practices of the younger families of my field site. The family structure, then, was deeply intertwined with the agricultural wage labour that is the norm for Syrian refugees in the Biqa’a. While wages were nominally calculated by individual, and this was used as a yardstick against which to measure a jobs viability, in practice they were collectively pooled by household. The younger and female members of the household had little agency in these jobs and rarely if ever knew the full value of the labour they contributed. Some of the more confident women, like Nour, might participate in these discussions, calculations, and strategizing, and attempt to maximise household income. They could even sometimes exercise control over younger members of the warsheh, but ultimate control over labour and wages rested with the male head of household and were almost exclusively discussed in these terms. Organisation and motivation of the workforce thus drew extensively from family patriarchal hierarchy. The collective income that the warsheh produced was enough for the family to get by, and even to save a little in good years, but this was quickly eaten up by any period of illness or unemployment.
2. Abu Ibrahim the shaweesh and his team

I spent some time working with the shaweesh Abu Ibrahim in the harvest season of 2020, and observed parallel structures to those found in Anwar’s warsheh. When I joined them, Abu Ibrahim’s work-team was a chaotic mass of more than one hundred labourers. The group was mostly young teenagers, and some older women and mothers were in the team, who kept control over the children to an extent. Older teenage girls and younger women were generally far more profitable if sent to work on maqtou’a. The young men, on the other hand, often saw themselves above this feminised work. They were not paid any more than the women for their labour in the fields, which was also a source of resentment and indignity. The result was that many of the men who worked in the fields visibly avoided labouring as much as possible, and made light of the whole endeavour. In contrast, when I joined an all-male team engaging in the appropriate ‘masculine’ tasks I found a very different environment. When working with eight other men loading and unloading trucks with the crop under the
supervision of an older Kurdish man, for example, the workers were far more diligent about the task at hand.

At half past six in the morning, the tired old Massey Ferguson tractor sped up to the camp carrying a large, clanking trailer, and dozens of children, wide awake and shouting already, piled in. Some were woken up by their mothers and relatives, but others left the house under their own steam, before their parents even woke up. The trailer creaked and clanked as they began the day’s arguments and fiddled around with their headdresses for fieldwork. The atmosphere of this big, very young, work group was far removed from Anwar’s serious, money-oriented team that was described in the first section. Most of the workers were in their early teens, and the environment was more like a chaotic school, full of children half-working, half-playing, as they fanned out in a jumbled line along the sides of the field. This seasonal work was, for most of the children, simply what they and all of their friends and relatives did at this time of year.

The shaweesh and his assistants directed the harvesting. These assistants were paid monthly by one of the larger Lebanese farmers called Hussein, for whom the team worked for most of the year. Repeating the practice described by Sajadian (2022), they too wore all black and affected a kind of mafiosi image. They patrolled the line shouting at gaggles of teenagers who were slowly clustering together, and slowing their work as they chatted, but it was a never-ending task. Teenage jokes sometimes turned into arguments which could stop whole sections of the work team and even become physical fights. The foremen and the handful of older women were often trying to keep the peace between one hundred hungry teenagers wielding sharp sickles. The work group, being so large, was mostly anonymous. Furthermore, with such low hourly wages, there was a clear incentive to work slowly. There were no other teams of this size in the area, so the larger Lebanese farmer Hussein could not replace the workers. I had begun working at the same pace that I worked with Anwar, but my friend Ali quickly told me ‘slow down man, no need to kill ourselves for three thousand an hour’. On this team, if you finished your shurha, you simply turned to help the worker next to you. More and more of the team would fall upon increasingly small and chaotic patches of hashish, like an organism eating away at the crop until there was nothing left. The correct thing to do was
work just hard enough that the foreman didn’t shout at you, but no harder – as Ali said, there was no need to expend extra energy.

As recounted in Chapter III, the hundred or so workers were drawn entirely from Abu Ibrahim’s extended tribe, and the cluster of villages on the northern bank of the Euphrates, just outside of Raqqa. Most of the adults were close relatives of his, and they had been part of a close-knit community which had decamped to the Biqa’a and divided between various camps and villagers. Abu Ibrahim was one of the original pioneers, and this Syrian encampment was founded on his decades-old practice of transporting and organising his extended family to labour in the booming Lebanese hashish industry. While many of the Lebanese villagers constantly complained about the camp and regularly threatened to burn it down, the refugee camp provided the hundreds of workers that could be seen toiling in the fields throughout the harvest season. Of the fifty or so households that made up the camp, a solid majority contributed at least one labourer to Abu Ibrahim’s team. None of these workers had directly chosen this work – rather, in each household, the male head had made an agreement with Abu Ibrahim, who in all cases was a direct relative. This man, usually an older father, would then send the younger and female members of his household to work for the team.

As in Anwar’s much smaller warsheh, the names of labourers were recorded by one of the Kurdish shahri (on a fixed monthly wage) organisers. He recorded the number and family names of the workers diligently in voice notes on his phone, which he then copied meticulously into a large notebook each day. At the end of the working day, children and women gathered into household groups and they left the fields, and the foreman would record the number of workers for each man’s household. ‘Abu Abbas: five, Abu ‘Amar: two, Abu Mahmoud: three’, he spoke into the phone as the groups of children and their mothers and older sisters filed by towards the trailer for a ride back to the camp.

This system outsources much of the questions of labour discipline to the family unit. Each head of household is reliant on their children and the younger female members of their family for a large portion of their income. Problems with the workers could be quickly referred to their father. The children who were undertaking much of this labour were not motivated by
the wages they were to receive, but rather hopped onto Abu Ibrahim’s trailer because their father had told them to, and their friends were all their anyway. Likewise, the work team did not quite violate patriarchal norms of dignity by having the young women of these households under the eyes of strangers – rather, they were being managed and disciplined by a close male relative.

The money was left to accumulate in the doftar, and Hussein was liable for paying families at any given time. Unlike small to medium farmers, who often disputed the accounting of hours, Hussein would pay promptly and exactly. His hashish farming operation was so large that he needed to be able to muster large, reliable workforces very close to his fields. In this way, the households of the camp were assured payment by Abu Ibrahim’s two-decade old relationship and Hussein’s thirst for reliable workers. Older male heads of household would collect the wages through a social call to Abu Ibrahim towards the end of the season. They rarely kept a close accounting of the wages owed for their children’s work. While the amount in question was the result of a precise calculation of hours and individuals, the payment instead resembled a friendly squaring of debts between closely related patriarchs. Like Anwar, these general practices were broadly representative of the way other shaweesh that I encountered operated.

However, there were some important differences between Abu Ibrahim and the other shaweesh that I encountered elsewhere (for example, in the camp of Anwar’s father). Importantly Abu Ibrahim did not take a cut of each worker’s wages. In other larger warsheh elsewhere, the shaweesh would negotiate a payment per worker with the Lebanese famer, and then take a percentage for each worker provided (Sajadian, 2020). Abu Ibrahim’s role was more of an intermediary than a pure labour contractor – he did not take a percentage for the wages provided, but rather acted as an intermediary or buffer between Hussein, who was ultimately responsible for the payment of the workers and the Syrian heads of household. In exchange, rather than a fixed sum per worker, he received a guaranteed daily wage for himself as labour organiser, and priority with Hussein for work for his family during outside of the harvest season. In the winter, the hashish production process required far fewer workers and more expertise, so Abu Ibrahim was able to guarantee this work for his family.
Furthermore, he played a fairly insignificant role in the provision of goods, services, and infrastructure to the camp. In other locations, wages would be reduced by money owed to the *shaweesh* for fuel, electricity, water, ground rent, accounts in the camp shop, and even furniture. The refugee-workers could often find themselves owing money at the end of the month. In this camp, however, such practices were largely absent – the municipality extracted what it could for various services, but monopolistic exploitation through debt was not practiced. This was perhaps because this camp, unlike others, was tribally homogeneous – all the households were from the same two tribes, and indeed were very closely related within those lineages. While disputes and debts certainly arose, they were between close family members of equal standing, rather than any systemic camp hierarchy. Likewise, by occupying the position of primary labour organiser, but declining or being unable to take a governing position over his brothers, cousins, and nephews, Abu Ibrahim further stymied the possibility of such an individual arising. Instead, it seemed that the logic of family-based, rural production, had been adapted to these conditions of wage labour in a foreign environment. As with Anwar’s team then, but on a much larger scale, the integration of family and labour organisation allowed for the preservation of patriarchal hierarchy but also relatively egalitarian social interactions between adult males of the same tribe and extended family.

In short, like Anwar, Abu Ibrahim was able to ensure a fairly decent income for his household, but the costs of social reproduction meant that he could not be seen as accumulating capital. Once again, an integrative perspective is needed to understand Abu Ibrahim’s living arrangements – his household’s engagement in and availability for productive wage labour was contingent on and demanded by context specific norms of social reproduction in rural Syria. These social relations and domestic labour furnished him with a pool of workers to supply to Lebanese landowners, but simultaneously conditioned what he could do with this income and determined the unwaged work that he and his family engaged in. His annual income was higher than most of his relatives, and he had bought land, animals, and vehicles back in Raqqa. But the costs of living between Lebanon and Syria and maintaining relations with his relatives and tribesmen meant that this money would not go far. His sons married the daughters of close relatives, and paying for their *mahr* (bride price) and weddings and building housing for them back in Raqqa consumed much of his income.
3. *Female labour inside the home*

The family unit’s reliance on female labour underpinned these two work arrangements. Often, brothers lived in tents next door to one another, and formed composite households with shared expenses, as we have seen with Anwar. This would often mean that meals, motorbikes, and other key expenses were shared between two or three households. A key component of this shared household was the woman at home. Since one woman could usually cook and look after the children for two or even three small households, it was more financially effective to combine households when they were younger and smaller. Working to such tight deadlines during harvest season meant that hours were unpredictable, and the family-team would arrive home from work exhausted, with filthy clothes. She would ensure that there was food available and ready whenever the ravenous workforce returned to the camp.

This closeness of the camp to the village and fields dramatically reduced labour costs. For smaller teams, most Lebanese farmers provided hospitality to their labourers in the form of a bread, tomatoes, tuna, sardines, mortadella, onions, salt, roast potatoes, some kind of fizzy drink and sugary tea. While most farmers would explain this as simply part of the norms of hospitality, it clearly factored in economic calculations as well. Hiring a full work team for entire days on hourly labour generally required the provision of lunch. For larger work teams, this could be prohibitively expensive – a basic lunch for ten people would come to perhaps LL40,000, around US$27 prior to the 2019/20 financial collapse. Some of my more candid Lebanese interlocutors explicitly included this in their calculations of the cost of work teams, which would add roughly 30% to the hourly wages of each team. For a team the size of Abu Ibrahim’s, this would be logistically very difficult and drive up labour costs. Instead, labour exploitation was maximised by harnessing the domestic labour of women and the normative assumptions that she was responsible for having food available in the house for family and guests at any time. Large, warm, tasty meals were constantly being prepared by these women and girls and these unwaged, gendered practices were essential to the availability of a well-fed workforce ready to sell their labour to the Lebanese landowners.
Female labour was central to other aspects of the social reproduction of the labour force far above the provision of cheap, filling food and childcare. Workers’ clothes were usually filthy after a day’s work, and so there was a constant stream of washing and mending to be undertaken in each household. The labourers themselves needed to wash, and in the camp outside of the summer this meant using the *sooba* (wood/diesel-burning stove) to heat water for several hours. The tents themselves, being exposed to the elements, needed constant cleaning, including the rugs, bedding, and stove. These women prepared *mooneh* (preserves, shown in figure 26) in the autumn, and some maintained small gardens and tended to chickens, as well as being available to buy from the local grocers and vegetable sellers who visited the camp. There were no appropriate restaurants, laundrettes or boarding houses in the area to supplement this female labour, and the men were generally unable to complete these tasks themselves - in short, female unwaged domestic labour was essential to the social reproduction of the workforce, kept the costs of wages low, and increased the profitability of the crop.

Alongside this day-to-day work of social reproduction, there was the more obvious importance of biological reproduction. Household livelihoods, as has been shown, were generally predicated on multiple children who were in some way engaged in either the wage-labour force or domestic labour from a relatively young age. Abu Ibrahim’s team was founded on these small bands of brothers and sisters being sent to him by his relatives, and those children that stayed at home were expected to help with domestic unwaged labour. This community was similar to the Bedouin’s described by Joseph (2013) in the high value placed on bearing and raising children for women’s identity and role in these communities, and their preference for high numbers of children. The importance of having children for female and male life-progress cannot be understated and was indeed constantly reiterated by my interlocutors. Having large numbers of children was culturally vaunted, and this long predated the capitalist wage labour arrangements that I am describing.

The system for organising wage labour teams was thus premised on these social practices, and this was commented on by both my Syrian and Lebanese interlocutors. Amongst the Syrian camp dwellers, having a large number of children in a family was both valuable in its own right, and also explicitly discussed as a source of household income. While many of my
interlocutors would joke about how having many children meant more money, in more serious discussions most of the younger men my age were more sober about the financial costs of having many children and did not consider increasing family numbers as necessarily economically sensible. Rather than one practice fuelling the other, they should be seen as mutually reinforcing: families had high numbers of children, and labour organisation practices accommodated and took this into account. The agro-capitalist mode of production in the Biqa’a was premised on Syrian women’s continued high levels of fertility in the camp, and their undertaking of the corresponding labour.

4. Female labour outside the home

Most of the workers in the previous sections are women, but organisation was mediated by men. The significance of these gender dynamics was brought into sharp relief with the few female-led teams operating in the area. Jana’s *warsheh* (workshop) was named after their formidable female *shaweesh*. Her team of 10 – 20 teenagers worked exclusively *maqtou’a*, usually in short bursts, for quick payment. For example, in harvest season the *warsheh* leader would negotiate cutting various fields for a fixed price, and then subdivide this payment amongst the workers. For example, each worker would be given LL20,000 for a *shurha*, which they would then race to finish. The quicker they finished, the more they could rest. Likewise, the quicker the team finished, the more jobs they could complete, and the more money they could make. Jana was from the same *shawi* tribe as my other interlocutors, but had married a man from a different tribe. They had separated many years ago, and she had returned to her natal family but she was now effectively a head of household. These kinds of partial divorces, though rarely discussed were not that uncommon amongst my interlocutors.

The workers of her *warsheh* were drawn from her tribe, but they were often somewhat more distantly related to her than those on teams such as Anwar’s. Similarly, her agreement seemed to be more with the individual worker than the worker’s father. While the wages of all of the workers in her team were still ultimately given to the worker’s male head of household, the individual labourer’s themselves expressed more of an ownership of the money. They knew exactly how much they were being paid, and often took the cash themselves at the end of the day. In the case of some of the teenage boys, they saw this
money as contributing directly towards their father saving for their marriage in the future. In this way, her teams resembled something closer to a straightforward wage-labour agreement, not so mediated by patriarchal family structures.

Jana was a striking character – she had a bronzed, weather-beaten face and a gravelly voice. While still dressing in a feminine manner, as a shaweesh she had a number of more masculine attributes which helped her maintain her distinctive role and authority. She chain-smoked cigarettes, publicly and obnoxiously, something frowned upon for a woman amongst the Syrians of the camp. She made sex jokes and swore loudly at workers, and was known to hit them with plastic pipes if they were slacking. She did not defer to men in conversation, and she even engaged in physical fights with men, often very publicly. I once saw her repeatedly punching another man in the face after he insulted her at a wedding party, which led to a mass brawl, with her in the midst of it. Further still, she was constantly rumoured to be rich, and to rip people off in the deals she struck for her work teams. For a man, these attributes would almost be expected, even vaunted. Indeed, they were a key part of her performance of her role of authority.

Despite working in the same way as other shaweesh, there was a degree of stigma attached to her team. While she was by no means shunned by the camp dwellers or other member of the tribe, Jana and her team were generally treated as a byword for all that was bad about the shaweesh system of organising labour in the fields. As far as I could tell, they were no less efficient than other composite teams, nor were team members cheated out of their wages any more than was usual. Despite this, the explicit profit motive of her team, without the trappings of family labour, seemed to give it an almost transgressive nature. ‘Ah Jana? That ‘arsah, smoking her cigarette and waving her pipe, I would not pay her one lira!’ spat the non-shawi Syrian natur (guard, watchman) Abu Taymour, who had been compelled by his Lebanese employer to coordinate with Jana as her team weeded the fields. ‘Arsah is a common insult, but it directly translates as pimp. When used in this context, the implication that Jana and her team was transgressing gender norms and behaving ‘dishonourably’ was clear.
The problematic intersection of gender and wage labour was even clearer with other teams. As the harvest season picked up, the larger farmers were hard-pressed to harvest their crops before the autumn rains came and began sourcing labour from further and further afield. I was working as part of a small sub-team of Abu Ibrahim’s one morning, when all of a sudden, we were met by another work team, who was to harvest the fields with us. The dozen young women were from a separate camp, and led by a short, confident woman in her early twenties called Batoul. They were all from the same extended composite-household, and originally came from a medium-sized village in Idlib. None of them had any experience of migrant labour in Lebanon before they fled ISIS in 2016. The women were all in some way related, either through blood relationship or marriage, but these relationships were not as standardised and straightforward as with Anwar and Abu Ibrahim. Like Jana’s warsheh, the foundation of this team was not an individual family-household but more closely resembled a gathering of vaguely related women who needed work, first and foremost.

Unlike young shawi women, they had no qualms about speaking directly and at length to me about her life, work, and home. The leader, Batoul, was explicitly critical of their work conditions. ‘We live by ourselves, we have our own camp, just three tents. There are two men, my uncle and her husband, and they do nothing. We all have to sleep in the same tent – is that not shameful? The men must work, no?’ She was explicit in her complaints that the women of her team worked in the day and did all the cooking and cleaning when they returned home, and as an entirely female team with no male relative present, they also faced even more harassment from other men in the fields. These women organised their own labour arrangements and were directly involved in the financial calculations of their work, with no intermediary. Their attitude towards work was likewise visibly not seen through the lens of gendered roles and paternal authority, but rather far closer to a pure wage-labour relationship than Anwar and Ibu Ibrahim’s teams. Indeed, Batoul explicitly used her position as a wage labourer as a means to criticise the assumed patriarchal authority of her male relatives.

Criticism of Batoul and Jana concerned both the quality and the morality of their work. They were maligned by other warsheh as being lower quality labourers, but also as being in some way suspicious or cheats. This was expressed through complaints such as that of the natur,
but also through constant casual sniffs and scornful looks by the other *warsheh* from the camps. More generally, this demonstrates how masculine control was communally enforced. Patriarchs were able to exercise power over their household because of this broader environment of hostility towards women who strayed beyond the clearly established confines of the family-household-*warsheh* nexus that constituted the foundation of wage labour in the valley. The community would keep track of any individual woman working outside of these confines, and suggestions and rumours would doubtless follow.

**Conclusion**

In each of these very different kinds of Syrian work teams, the family structure plays a central organising role. In the cases of Anwar and Abu Ibrahim, the correlation between the family, the household, and the *warsheh* was striking. However, even in the cases of more composite, female-led teams of Jana and Batoul, some kind of family relationship was a background condition for their organisation. The ethnography covers a wide range of pay-structures, tasks, and efficiency, but all took family norms and practices for granted to some degree. The most effective way for Lebanese farmers to recruit from the segregated Syrian refugee-workforce was through existing family structures. In the case of Anwar, this was through a small, self-disciplining, income-maximising family team. Likewise, Abu Ibrahim relied on his tribal position to recruit and discipline workers from his male relatives’ families. Similarly, payment and spending were collectivised and based on composite family households, despite individual wage calculations. Agrarian production relied on a large number of young labourers, which assumed high levels of biological reproduction, and the corresponding labour that went with it. The structure of the workday, also, assumed the presence of a female household member to prepare the day’s meals and other essential, unwaged tasks. The social reproduction of the work force was contingent on a strict and culturally contingent division of labour.

Initially, this system could be understood as hourly wage labour, in the sense that payment for labour was calculated hourly for each individual. The hourly payment was regularly discussed, and the standard wage of LL3,000 an hour was taken for granted in my field site. Regional comparisons were often made between camps, and this was used as a yardstick
against which to measure the profitability of *maqtou’a* work. From this perspective, the Syrian labourers appear to be a fully proletarianized workforce. Despite undertaking a labour contracting role, organisers like Anwar and Abu Ibrahim were not generally able to save beyond the costs of social reproduction. Capital accumulation occurred further up the chain of production, as hashish entered the transnational market via large smugglers like Hussein.

However, on closer inspection this ethnography indicates that the discursive gloss of the ‘hourly wage’ hides a more complex picture. The reliance of labour organisation on pre-existing family structures means that much of the ‘work’ of disciplining Syrian labour is outsourced from the landowners to the family structure. The foreman draws his authority from his position as a patriarch, rather than a distinct organisational position. This was perhaps most visible in the overt gender discourses which I observed in the two female-led teams of Jana and Batoul – their engagement in wage-labour was notable precisely because it was not fully mediated by familial social relations and did not reproduce male authority. Likewise, in the absence of legal structures to support labour agreements, much of the necessary trust, debt, and dispute resolution are channelled through Syrian tribal and family relations.

This outsourcing of labour governance has allowed for the creation of a workforce with little resembling the ‘class identity’ described by early Marxists. Wage-labour has been extended to women and children without a corresponding loss of authority for patriarchal figures, nor has there been any risk of collective action on the part of labourers. Cultural practices concerning gender and age work within family structures to distance labourers from control over the sale of their labour power, and simultaneously increases the scope for exploitation in the fields and patriarchal control at home. These findings strongly support the Arrighian thesis of rural development, demonstrating how the dynamics of local social relations can shape the economic geography and condition the (non)formation of certain social classes. In his Italian fieldwork, Arrighi found that local social relations can hinder the development of rural capitalism. This ethnography further finds that such structures can also create a more easily disciplined class of wage-labourers. In Chalcraft’s (2005) terms, this mode of agrarian production constitutes a distinct regime of capitalist exploitation, where the organisation of the labour force was based upon contextually specific historical and cultural factors.
organically constituted dynamic capitalist exploitation. This is an important finding because it is exemplifies how an account of capitalist modes of production is incomplete without a clear understanding of the social relations that exist in the home and the community. Patriarchal norms of the Syrian household have kept wages low and the workforce pliable, but this chapter also indicates that they are more deeply intertwined with the way that labour is practiced and experienced. The labour regime described above functioned and indeed was premised on labourers engaging in work, at least in part, for reasons related to ‘noncapitalist’ social relations.
VI – ‘We used to work’: Lebanese peasant capitalists and Biqa’a masculinity

Introduction

This chapter addresses the other side of the socio-economic interaction, that of Lebanese rural capital owners. It articulates the demands of rural land ownership, and explains the normative structures of the village, the concepts that underpin them, and the incentives and practices that this creates. I argue that Lebanese landed capital is deeply intertwined with cultural norms, and specifically ideals of masculinity. I show how the logic of capital is context specific, and these cultural norms constrain and condition interaction with the Syrian refugee-labourers. In mirror image to the previous chapter, Lebanese land-owner practices often rely on gender norms and family structure for their reproduction.

In this chapter, then, I can be seen as building on Bernstein’s (2006) call for new approaches to the Agrarian Question, insofar as I give an account of what may have once been describes as a ‘peasant’ rural community which has ‘internalised capitalist social relations in the organisation of economic activity’ (p.454). Furthermore, I heed Chalcraft’s critique of earlier Marxist analysis, which sees non-European capitalists who ‘fail to behave as economically rational capitalists surely should’ (2005, p.19) according to a narrow Eurocentric account as an exception to be explained. I follow his prescription to ‘define capital generously’ (p.26), and take this development of a land-owning Biqa’a class of farmers as a manifestation of capitalist agrarian development in its own right, rather than addressing it in relation to a generalised, European origin account. This approach allows for clearly locating the role of masculine cultural practices in the development of this rural economy.

This chapter is a companion to the previous chapter, in that it is the second half of the labour-capital relationship. This chapter argues that the Lebanese villagers of the central and northern Biqa’a, who were previously a predominantly peasant farming community have shifted to becoming a propertied class over the past two generations. I show how land and property ownership was a key component to identity as a villager and membership of the community more generally, but how this had become decoupled from labouring on the land.
This identity and social position required constant work (but not wage-labour) by the villagers to maintain, and was underpinned by the organisation and reproduction of Syrian labour in the camp neighbouring the village. Norms of village masculinity and patriarchy conditioned this social position, and these conditioned these villager’s conceptualisation of the appropriate ways to use their property and live their lives more generally, and the viable strategies for them to pursue this.

An important symptom of these mechanisms which is discussed in this chapter is the villager’s hostility towards hourly wage-labour. Many of the men (and indeed, women) of the village worked in salaried jobs, often employed by the state and this had to a large extent facilitated this transition of agriculture from peasant farming to commercial property. However, these jobs were often seen as ‘lifestyles’, which came with a broad set of benefits and duties, one of which was a monthly wage. My attempts to quantify these wages in terms of hourly work was met with either incomprehension or hostility. As well as lifestyles, jobs could also be seen as ‘property’, in the sense that state employment was something acquired through relations and exchanges not actually entailed by the formal remit of the job (for example, bribes, political loyalty, family relations). This account of Lebanese work practices mirrors the way that in previous chapters ‘Syrian’ was synonymous with ‘wage labourer’, and as a result was socially stigmatised. Furthermore, it more generally shows how an understanding of Syrian settlement is incomplete without a full account of Lebanese property ownership, and vice versa: the two cannot be studied in isolation.

In keeping with Chalcraft’s (2005) approach to ‘plural capitalisms’, patterns of private capitalist land ownership in the Biqa’a should not be seen through the lens of a Eurocentric enclosure model, but as the organic development of a specific capitalism nested in a cultural context. Furthermore, my interlocutors were explicitly conscious of the changing social and economic relations that their community had undergone and how they were living in ‘changing times’ (Obeid, 2019). The importance of land ownership patterns has been central to studies of the development of agrarian production and peasant communities, and Arrighi (Arrighi & Piselli, 1987) and Bernstein (1998, 2004, 2006) have convincingly argued for their inclusion in any answer to the agrarian question. Scott (1976) has amply demonstrated the need to articulate the moral economies governing exploitation and access to political favour.
The persistence and transformation of peasant communities through capitalist relations of production is clear in a wide range of contexts such as banana plantations in the Caribbean (Grossman, 1998), tea plantations in India (Besky, 2014), tobacco growers in Costa Rica (Barlett, 1982), coffee in the Andes (Roseberry, 1983), Nigerian farming under British colonial rule (Shenton & Lennihan, 1981), and frontier expansion in Bolivia (Gill, 2019). Generally, it has been recognised that peasant communities persist under capitalism and non-capitalist social practices interact with capitalist modes of production. This theoretical finding is necessarily contingent, given that the actual implications rests upon the local cultural context.

The mechanisms by which this process occurs in the Biqa’a and the broader Levant has not been fully articulated. The transformation of the Syrian peasantry and changing land ownership patterns has received some attention both from the Ottoman Empire (Buheiry & Khalidi, 1984; Owen et al., 2000; Sluglett & Farouk-Sluglett, 1984), the Colonial Period (R appas, 2021; Whitaker, 1996), and post-independence (Khalaf, 1991; Sato, 1997) and under the Ba’ath (Forni, 2001; Hinnebusch et al., 2011; Hinnebusch, 1989; Khalaf, 2020). The integration of sub-groups of the Syrian peasantry into the state apparatus has been a cornerstone of much fruitful political analysis of the Assad regime (Batatu, 1981, 2012). In Lebanon, work has addressed the interaction between capitalist land-ownership practices and peasant cultures and communities (Antoun & Harik, 1972; Farsoun & Farsoun, 1974; Gellner & Waterbury, 1977; Gilsenan, 1996; Starr, 1977). Cash crop production has transformed peasant communities – most notably in Lebanon, the late 1800s silk industry transformed gender, family, and land tenure relations in the Mount Lebanon region (Khater & Khater, 1993; Khater, 1993, 1996). Abisaab (2009; 2001) has documented similar social transformations wrought by the tobacco industry in Southern Lebanon.

As an important cash crop, the impact of hashish production on rural Lebanon has been neglected. While there is a well-developed study of into the political economy of drug production in rural and urban north and south America (Dávila et al., 2021; Jensen & Rodgers, 2021; Pine, 2019; Rodgers, 2018), the booming drug markets of the Middle East and their production are under researched (Robins, 2011). Aside from some work on qat production (Cassanelli, 1988; Kennedy, 1987; Milich & Al-Sabbry, 1995; Wedeen, 2007; Weir, 1985a, 1985b) this gap is only just beginning to be filled (Marshall, 2012; Ram, 2020; Robins, 2016).
This chapter marries these two bodies of work, showing how the profitable cash crop of hashish has interacted with peasant social structures and rural masculinity to create land ownership patterns which are reliant on Syrian labour and local Lebanese political sovereignty.

While much of Lebanese agrarian production is in a state of stagnation and considered unprofitable by small to medium farmers (Allam, 2011; Hamade et al., 2015), the hashish industry has been booming for the past decade. North of Zahleh, hashish fields spread up the mountains to the west of the main highway, in plain view of the state security forces, and crop yields and product quality is argued about loudly in coffee shops. The majority of the product is exported, where it is sold on international markets and paid for in dollars. While one of Lebanon’s few exports, even hashish is not free from the global supply chain: inputs are such as fertiliser, fuel, and machinery must be imported and are subsidised. As we have seen, the labour requirements are met from abroad, and even this is to an extent subsidised by international aid and Syrian regime services.

In my field site, one of the larger of the few dozen hashish farming villages of the Ba’albeck-Hermel region, there was roughly ten thousand dunam of prime hashish growing land available (though crops were not planted on all of it each year). Each dunam could produce 1 – 4 qantar (a measure of weight equivalent to 90 kilograms, used locally to measure bales of dried crop) of dried unprocessed hashish, and each qantar could produce a further 1 – 3 huqa (a smaller measure of weight roughly equal to 1,200 grams, used to measure the processed hashish). A dunam of land, then, could produce between 1 – 12 huqa. At the height of the hashish boom in 2012, a huqa could be sold locally for prices as high US$1,200 and even in the worst years for US$300. Overheads were also low – one could grow and process a dunam of crop for roughly US$400, accounting for ploughing, seeds, field and refinement labour, and fertilizer. A small farmer, then could easily make a profit of tens of thousands of dollars annually from this market.

Profits shot up once the product was exported – farmers and smugglers regularly quoted prices of several thousand dollars for good quality Lebanese hashish that had been smuggled to Europe, the Gulf, and Egypt. This increased overheads and risks, of course, and many
smaller farmers sold locally to larger traders instead. These traders then made even higher profits from selling the finished product abroad. With hundreds of thousands of dunam of hashish planted in the Biqa’a and most destined for export, this comes to an annual sector revenue of several hundred million dollars. While prices and yields varied from year to year, the low and stable costs of inputs and guaranteed market made this an extremely profitable and reliable agricultural enterprise.

While hashish generally functioned as a cash crop locally, it was not entirely distinct from other illicit flows – many of the larger hashish smugglers were involved in the production and movement of other kinds of illegal narcotics. Alongside globally popular drugs like cocaine, the Syrian Civil War has been notable for the dramatic increase in captagon production (Herbert, 2014; Kravitz & Nichols, 2016; Nichols & Kravitz, 2015). Captagon is a stimulant and, strictly speaking, the term refers to a psychoactive drug called fenetylline. However, ‘captagon’ is colloquially used to refer to a wide range of synthetic stimulants available in pill form throughout the Middle East (EMCDDA, 2018). Many of the larger Biqa’a smugglers were commonly known to be involved in these markets, but unlike hashish, it was a deeply secretive industry. Throughout the entirety of my fieldwork, I heard and saw almost nothing other than rumours concerning its production and trade. I mention it, then, so that the reader is aware of a potential blind spot of this work.

Another important aspect of village social relations that this chapter does not fully deal with it that of village diasporas. Biqa’a villages had sizeable diasporas in Beirut and abroad who regularly returned for the summer months. As noted earlier, in my field site only a few hundred Lebanese people lived in the village year-round but in the summer the number of inhabitants swelled to the thousands. Villagers often moved away in search of jobs or higher education and these moves regularly became permanent. These clan members generally maintained their linkages to their natal village even several generations after leaving and while not all were financially successful or stable, there were a solid proportion of villagers who found stable and sometimes very lucrative employment in the Lebanese state apparatus or in business in Beirut and abroad. This diaspora’s land purchases and sales, building projects, remittances and expenditure were also important parts of the village economy. These city-dwelling clan members were often also the means through which villagers interacted with the
Lebanese state apparatus. However, an in-depth treatment of these familial linkages and economies would require participant observation in Beirut and abroad, which was beyond the scope of my Biqa’a based project.

Figure 15 - A Biqa’a villager

**Biqa’a villagers and the Lebanese state**

The relative transparency of the hashish economy in the Biqa’a valley should not be confused with a diminished role of the state. The Lebanese state has been key to the distribution of wealth in this region, and is visible through its role in infrastructure projects and the corruption that goes with them, and also when state security forces act as a balance between the feuding clans or curtail some smugglers expanding operations. The state is also present on a far more everyday basis, through employment in the military, security services, and other state apparatus. While it was unable to control the hashish industry, it played a central role in the changing peasant identity and social relations of the region.
The main Biqa’a clan that I worked with throughout my field work had numerous representatives in the state apparatus prior to and during the Civil War, but most of my interlocutors noted a significant increase in the ease with which Shi’a men were able to join the military after the end of the Civil War. This is supported by broader academic work on the changing sectarian nature of the Lebanese Armed Forces (Barak, 2006, 2009; Yassin & El Solh, 2017), but the process by which sectarian quotas are divided up and filled remains murky. Regardless, this change was discursively considered an important moment by my interlocutors, and in most of the village families that I worked with at least one son entered the military or security apparatus under the auspices of a more high-ranking clan member.

This coincided with a shift away from purely agrarian livelihoods in the region, and was nowadays one of the key ways that families attained a secure income, access to state services like healthcare and pensions, and also social status. Prospects for employment in the state apparatus and most often the security services were regularly discussed amongst the men of the village. One evening while sat on the porch of my friend Ali’s house drinking tea with a few of the men in his family, we watched as his wealthy neighbour Abu Tamer drove past in an expensive-looking black BMW. Ali sipped his tea and remarked, ‘Oh, Abu Tamer, he is clever. He entered one son into the mukhabarat, and another is a trader [ie. a drug smuggler].’ ‘And he entered another one into Hizbollah’ added his cousin. ‘And their children as well,’ said a third villager. The men nodded approvingly. It was almost taken for granted that any sensible father would ensure that his sons and grandsons were similarly distributed between these apparatuses of power. Appropriately diversified family livelihoods were not restricted the military, however - another friend’s family had similarly achieved an ideal division, with four sons: one worked in the religious establishment, another in the mukhabarat, while the other two were a practicing engineer and a lawyer – all four moved back and forth between the Biqa’a village and the capital Beirut on a regular basis and continued to grow small amounts of hashish on their father’s land. While a marginal, nominally peasant community, the region was well-integrated into modern and state capitalist structures and far removed from historical subsistence farming – supporting Bernstein (2006), this community was far removed from the peasant societies considered by early Marxists (Engels, 2021; Kautsky, 2021; Murthy, 2021).
The role of the military was visible in everyday life, and most of my Lebanese interlocutors wore some form of quasi-military attire ad any given time. Jackets, boots, combat trousers, a certain style of sunglasses, and of course firearms and mud-splattered pick-up trucks: these were the appropriate accoutrements of a Biqa’a village man. Firstly, these clothes are worn because they are cheap and practical for life in the mountains. Secondly, most of the village men that I spent time with had done some form of military service, and they picked up the habit from this – they wore clothes left-over from service, but army surplus shops were also some of the best-value, most straightforward clothes shops in the area. Wearing indications of one’s status could also command a degree of respect in non-official social interactions in the valley. More generally, however, this clothing represented the kind of work that these men are engaged in: military garb is appropriate for masculine labour which was bound up with local sovereignty, the state apparatus and criminal enterprises. The quasi-military fatigues these men wore was a visual representation of the blurred boundaries between these different social institutions (on this, see Jusionyte, 2015).

The rural qabaday (tough guy or outlaw) features as a central character in Gilsenan’s (Gilsenan, 1996) account of rural Lebanon, and ideas of qabaday masculinity were common amongst my interlocutors. However, rather than the spectacular stories recounted by Gilsenan, in the Biqa’a so many of the villagers were matloubeen (wanted by the security services) and involved in drug smuggling that it was not particularly worthy of note. Shootouts and arrests tended not to be treated as special narratives, but rather part of the rhythm of life. Fear of informants meant that most men preferred to keep their stories secret, only to be recounted at a safe distance. Older men recounted lost fortunes, while younger men tried to keep their legal troubles and feuds quiet.

Outlaw-ness was often treated as synonymous with being a Shi’a from the Biqa’a. Several of my interlocutors found their lives radically curtailed by summons for questioning by the security services for involvement in suspicious activities. If followed by criminal charges, attending these summons often risk imprisonment until trial, and in Lebanon’s crumbling judicial system this often means years behind bars. Safe in the village, and able to move back and forth to Ba’albeck every now and then, these men live a circumscribed life, and usually
throw themselves wholeheartedly into the hashish trade. Larger hashish farmers may be wanted, but were generally known to make regular payoffs to political contacts to keep the security apparatus at bay.

The number of matloubeen in the Biqa’a valley has significant socio-political implications. There are tens of thousands of wanted men in the valley, a huge proportion of the adult male population. These men cannot vote, and there are enormous and varied difficulties concerning property registration and inheritance. Given that they are such a significant sector of Biqa’a society, this disenfranchisement by the Lebanese state serves to reinforce parallel, clan-based governance structures. In local elections, since the votes of the matloubeen cannot legally be counted, there is a strong incentive for consensus-based negotiations for municipal councils rather than democratic elections. Similarly, it meant that legal registrations of land transfers are not always possible, so ownership often does not correspond to legal registration. Attempts at general pardons have generally been opposed on a national level, and these discussions often take a sectarian turn.

State employment, access and enforcement of the law was mostly distinct from state support for farmers. During the period of my fieldwork, there were no notable state interventions into the legal agricultural markets (namely the apple orchards), which were entirely conducted through informal middlemen on a cash basis. Aside from a few small grants in beekeeping, the odd water tanker, and some access to apple storage, the state played a very small role in the agricultural sector. Despite various attempts at legalisation, the hashish sector remains illegal and therefore removed from the scope of already very limited state intervention. The security services have engaged in several futile attempts to curb hashish production: in 2012 state security forces had tried to destroy hashish crops in the Biqa’a and were met with village-wide protests and were eventually chased off by local farmers shooting at them. No one was seriously injured, but since this period there have been no serious attempts to curb production. The few security operations which did occur were very small, and mostly served to drive prices up – attempts to arrest specific individuals (which almost always ended in a gunfight and the fugitive escaping) often seemed to be a function of internal mafia-like competition rather than a wholehearted attempt to stop production.
The role of the Lebanese state in peasant communities in the Biqa’a thus contrasts with those of neighbouring Syria. Land redistribution and state support for crops had been real and meaningful for my Syrian interlocutors, and many of them had benefited from Syrian land reforms and state subsidies of strategic crops – as has been noted, the shrinking of the state from rural areas in Syria played a large role in setting the stage for the Civil War. In contrast, the Lebanese state was unable to even identify or enforce existing property holdings, let alone redistribute them. Rather, the state registry and maps and nature reserves existed as secondary to a local clan-based mediation and oral record of who owns what. These claims in turn were the product of historical seizures and grievances and responded to clan and lineage disputes and inheritances. Instead, the main role of the state amongst the Lebanese villagers was to offer certain forms of employment and to disenfranchise the many matloubeen. The formal state apparatus, with its employment and property records was generally permeated by parallel, more important structures. The state set the rules and arena for contestation, but this could easily be disregarded – the state apparatus was more a measure of one’s power, rather than the extent of it.

**A man of capital**

Amongst the village men, patriarchal norms constrained what work was appropriate for them to undertake and the costs of social reproduction. In Lebanon and elsewhere in the Levant, the centrality of patriarchal norms to the social structure have been fairly comprehensively documented (Haugbolle, 2012; Johnson, 2001; Joseph, 1994). In my field site, ‘appropriate’ work for a village man was deeply constrained by a regionally specific ideal of patriarchal masculinity which was constantly reinforced through daily discourse. As within the Syrian community, work was conditioned by age and gender, and also according to nationality and place. Likewise, the costs of social reproduction were to a large extent determined by these norms of village masculinity and corresponding family structures and ideals. Wage labour fell outside of this spectrum of appropriate male behaviour, and the scope of ‘appropriate’ work that a man could undertake was delimited by the intersection of several related aspects of masculinity.
The first concerned militaristic ideas of manliness and their relationship with the state. The importance of control over the means of violence to rural male identity was one of the main focuses of Gilsenan’s (1996) work, and my fieldwork largely supported this finding almost half a century later. For my Lebanese interlocutors, some form of military employment was generally held in high esteem and considered ‘the’ appropriate job for a village. Similar to the process described by Bourgois (Bourgois, 2003) in his ethnography of Puerto Rican drug dealers in New York, in post-Civil War Lebanese capitalist society certain jobs met the requirements of village masculinity (this has been considered in depth by Haugbolle, 2012; Knudsen & Gade, 2017). For my interlocutors, military employment came with honour and prestige, a male environment, carrying arms and operating vehicles, and the latent threat of and ability to use violence. I also noted that it came with many opportunities to be outdoors, something which was important for village lads used to roaming the mountains and fields. State employment involved negligible manual labour, which was strongly related to Syrians and so lower social status. Furthermore, employment in security services promised steady advancement, and thus fulfilled the expectation that a man’s status would improve with age.

Related to this was state employment’s increasingly important role in enabling the social reproduction of Lebanese households – it came with the promise of pensions, family healthcare, cheap loans to help buy housing, and educational benefits for children. The work schedule generally meshed well with ideals Lebanese family life, and the work schedule was organised in such a way that soldiers serve a few days in a certain base, and a few days at home. Not only was this well suited to commuting from the village, but it also allowed men to have full, relaxed days to dedicate to other ventures economic ventures and social engagements in the village. While the employment in the security services was perhaps best suited to village masculine ideals, other appropriate professions adhered to a similar pattern. Work in state administration met many of the requirements, as too did employment in Hizbollah or with an NGO.

The second way that village masculinity conditioned the capitalist relations that were present in the village was through the parallel idea of the *tajir* (trader). To be *shatir* (smart) and a *ra’ismali* (capitalist, investor) were laudable traits which helped a man to provide and ensure security for his family as well as increase his social status. Almost every single one of my
Lebanese interlocutors collected a parallel income from rent or capital ownership in some way, and many strived to increase and diversify this income stream. Even for those with state employment or heavily involved in the hashish industry, a sensible man was generally also seen to ensure other income from property. This diversification of incomes is common throughout rural Lebanon (Allam, 2011; Amhez, 2019; El-Jundi, 2019), and these processes often involved the extraction of rent or labour surplus from Syrians. For the village men, then, improving security and livelihoods was tied to capitalist investment practices but also reinforced the division between Syrians and Lebanese, and the labourers and propertied villagers.

The rules of appropriate masculine work were also deeply tied to place and the corresponding social relations. For example, one of my interlocutors was a professional chef in Beirut and lived between the village and the capital. He was fairly well-paid and worked in a fancy downtown restaurant, far from the local and regional politics of the Biqa’a. Back in his village, however, working as a chef and serving his relatives and other Biqa’a men for a wage would be unthinkable - it would contravene any number of norms of hospitality, social hierarchies, and domestic gender relations. In the village, cooking was a job for a woman or a Syrian. Likewise, another of my Lebanese interlocutors, Ramzi, had worked in construction in the Gulf for a few years, but would never dream of doing so in Lebanon. Abroad, he had been working on a well-paid, fixed contract and appropriately placed in the social hierarchy and life-trajectory of a young Lebanese man. In the village, he would be working with Syrians, for an hourly wage, for his fellow clansmen – even one of these possibilities was unthinkable for him. The Lebanese villagers were well aware of this tension - as my friend Ali put it more bluntly, ‘They will go to Europe and wash dishes, but then they return to Lebanon and say this is a job for Syrians!’

The importance of meeting these Bourgeois-esque ‘respectable masculine’ working conditions was such that villagers felt a need to ensure income streams from capital ownership, rather than wage-labour. This was most common through ownership of arable land: most village men inherited or owned some portion of land on which they could grow hashish, and perhaps a portion of an orchard. Those with significant landholdings might farm it themselves, while the smaller landowners would give over their land to full-time farmers in exchange for a
portion of the crop at the end of the year (a sharecropping practice known as *daman*). These full-time farmers, however, hired Syrians like Anwar and his *warsheh* for almost all of the labour.

The second process that villagers generated non-labour income from property was through ownership of housing - alongside land, many villagers had inherited old houses, garages, and outhouses which were in various states of disrepair, and commonly subdivided between several children. Men were generally expected to save and build a new family home before they could marry, and many of these older buildings did not meet the requirements of modern family life. Furthermore, rental between members of the same clan (in the village) was generally frowned upon, as this would create hierarchical relations between family members which could turn into conflict. In Ba‘albeck and Beirut rental was acceptable, and since Lebanese men did not move natal villages upon marriage, they were constrained to either build a new house in the village, rent in the city, or live in awkward limbo with their parents. The result was that the rental market in the villages surrounding Ba‘albeck almost entirely consisted of Lebanese villagers renting inherited property to Syrians, with whom the hierarchical relationship of landlord was acceptable. On top of this, there was a wealthy diaspora of villagers who had left and made their fortunes in Beirut or abroad – they would often buy land and build houses which they stayed in during the summers, further pushing up land prices.

Similarly, otherwise unprofitable, unproductive land had become an increasingly important source of income because of the influx of Syrian refugees. One *dunam* of rocky, infertile, unirrigated land could fit as many as ten Syrian tents, and rents varied from a LL100,000 – LL1,000,000 annually (roughly US$200 - US$700) per household. Basic infrastructure would often be provided for free by NGOs, water provided by a private company, and electricity could easily be diverted for free from state power lines. This practice was less common in my main field site because of the municipality organised camp, but it was normalised throughout the Biqa‘a valley. For larger camps, land was often leased by a Syrian middleman, who also often worked as a *shaweesh*. Village men could thus leverage their property-owning status to ensure income whilst maintaining a hierarchical relations with the Syrian community.
Finally, many of the younger men used their social status in their autonomous villages to exploit arbitrage opportunities in the domestic drug and arms market. As Biqa’a village men, they were able to safely buy and store hashish and drugs in Ba’albeck and the village without fear of the state security apparatus, and sell them on or transport them to sellers in Beirut and the richer coastal towns. Cheap arms were flowing from Syria and these men were perfectly placed as a conduit to the Lebanese market, and the absence of enforcement meant that illegal narcotics were cheap and easy to find. Most of the younger men that I knew at least dabbled in these illicit trades, but risks were high for anything above small profits. There were various other ways to make income, but this sketch illustrates the way that local norms of masculinity, violence, and social status combined to create a very specific set of capitalist property-ownership practices and diminish the value of labour.

This masculine Biqa’a capitalism was also tied to cultural practices of family. Firstly, masculinity did not only condition the appropriate incomes, but also expenditure. As has been noted, marriage required the accumulation of capital and income, and an understanding of the structure and life cycles of Lebanese households is important here. In my field site, children lived with their parents until they were married, upon which time they would establish their own household. Marriages are not arranged, but usually involve a lesser or greater degree of parental consent and assessment of the prospective bride or groom. While there was generally far greater pressure on women to marry earlier and have children quickly, this comes with a corresponding pressure on the man to have prepared the means to a comfortable life, usually in the form of building and owning a house, and having a stable income. There was a strong pressure against women working, and there were even fewer respectable job opportunities for women in the region. This meant that men in the village were obliged to invest tens of thousands of dollars in buying land, building, and furnishing homes before they could marry.

On top of this, in trying to achieve an ‘ideal family life’ my male Lebanese interlocutors felt a strong pressure to maintain a certain standard of living which required high expenditure and consumption. They regularly bemoaned these expectations as a new development, and expressed this in gendered and national terms. As Ali put it, ‘I need to build two houses for my wife, one in the village and one in Ba’albeck. Then I need to pay for the maid. I pay school
fees, buy two cars, a motorcycle, mobile phone, petrol, internet, clothes, meat.’ These new costs associated with a modern, respectable life between the village and Ba’albeck were expressed as a requirement of marriage, expenditure to meet women’s newfound needs, and men like Ali would regularly declare that if it wasn’t for their family, they would be happy with ‘just one room.’ The cost of maintaining a respectable household was discursively juxtaposed with Syrian labour and family practices. ‘The Syrians, they buy bread and tomatoes and send their children to work!’ concluded Ali irately. To reduce his expenditure would be to live ‘like the Syrians’ and damage his sense of self-worth and his social status with the other villagers, as would engaging in wage labour. Once again, village gender norms and family life created specific patterns of consumption, property usage, and labour practices.

This was further evidenced by the role of Lebanese women’s labour. Domestic labour was extensive, especially in poorer households that did not have foreign domestic workers, and significantly contributed to household income. Women engaged in similar unwaged labour to that of Syrian women described in the previous chapter, which dramatically reduced costs of food compared to other households in Ba’albeck or Beirut. Many Lebanese women also worked and significantly contributed to household income, but this was often discursively ignored and discouraged. The respectable jobs for women were similarly gender constrained in the Biqa’a. The most common opportunities were employment in a relative’s shop in Ba’albeck, working as a teacher in a school or kindergarten, certain kinds of state employment, or working for an NGO. Ali’s adult sister Zeinab, for example, was unmarried and so still lived with his parents – she had been in regular employment in a supermarket in Ba’albeck for the better part of a decade, earning around US$500 a month which she contributed to the household. While for Zeinab, her steady employment and the trust that was put in her by her employer was a source of quite pride, in every discussion with Ali about money, property, and work, his sister’s employment was ignored. When it did come up, it was at best treated as inconsequential and at worst a minor nuisance for the travel it required.

These gender and family norms, while constraining, were not fully binding - they were strongly tied to inhabiting the villages of the Biqa’a. Gendered and family constraints on income and expenditure changed in Ba’albeck and in Beirut. As noted previously, for example, renting was acceptable in Ba’albeck, and completely normalised in Beirut. Similarly, other
kinds of employment which did not necessarily fit patterns of village masculinity were acceptable in the city. City life came with its own constraints, and many villagers had at some point in their life tried living in Beirut and Ba’albeck and often abroad. In neither case was a villager able to escape from capitalist social relations or the demands that gender and family expectations put upon their income, property, and expenditure, but they were able to choose between the social relations of the village or of the city. The village was not cut off from this urban world, and these city-dwellers returned regularly and remained friends with their rural relatives.

While the villagers may have once been peasants in the classical Marxist sense, they have long since internalised capitalist social relations in the organisation of their economic activity. In many ways they were exemplary of social groups described by Bernstein (Bernstein, 2006, 2010) – they had long done away with subsistence production and shifted to the production of commodities for a global market. In doing so, they had transitioned to a new, propertied rural social class. This internalisation of capitalist relations, however, has not been the adoption of an externally imposed, alien capitalism. Rather, the capitalist social relations observed are closely tied to local normative ideals of masculinity, family life, and national hierarchy. A village man owned property and received rents, and supported his social status through certain kinds of employment which often involved violence and the state. This further emphasised the distinction between villagers and Syrians, and the negative mirrored association between Syrians and wage labour.

Older men in their forties and above were acutely aware of how the concept of work had changed over the past two generations. While they would not engage in hourly-wage labour themselves, they could remember village life before the arrival of cheap Syrian labour, the expansion of state employment to the Shi’a communities of the region, and the post-Civil War economic boom. Those who had grown up during the Civil War, while nowadays relying on Syrian labour, were often very capable in a trade. Amongst my older farmer interlocutors, there were electricians, car mechanics, plumbers, expert tree pruners, and builders. Rather than valorising wage-labour, however, they tended to idealise communal family labour and use this as a means to criticise the younger generations. Ali, who had worked as a soldier, a mechanic, and a farmer and smuggler summarised this attitude: ‘this new generation, throw
them all away’ said Ali. ‘We used to work,’ he told me, ‘Before, the mosque would announce
that so-and-so was fixing his roof, and the next day all the men of the village would be there.
I helped to build the irrigation channels myself as a child. Now, it is all Syrians.’

Figure 17 - Two younger village men

**Land, clans, and disputes**

The Ba’albeck – Hermel area of the Biqa’a is to a large extent politically organised by a clan
system. Each beyt (clan, house) is associated with a small number of villages, though the
families are often now spread out through Ba’albeck and Beirut as well. These clans and the
corresponding system is predominantly Shi’a Muslim, but in this region Christian and Sunni
extended families are often spoken about in the same way. Clan membership and natal village
is the main way that initial introductions are made and non-family relations framed. Despite
my very un-Lebanese red hair, even I was regularly asked ‘min aya beyt?’ (from which clan?)
when I was introduced to new villagers. Clans closely guard land ownership in their villages, and for this reason men generally do not and cannot buy property in the lands surrounding other clans’ villages.

While in everyday conversation there was a preference for marrying a woman from your own clan, it was not at all unusual to marry outside of the extended family. Biqa’a women might marry and move between clans and villages, but it was normal for them to retain strong links with natal hometowns and retain their father’s family name. Children too, often had very strong links with their maternal family and visited their mother’s family regularly. However, land ownership and living arrangements rarely, if ever, breached these village/clan boundaries. Sale of the land was generally only socially accepted when it was to another resident of that same village, and there was a strong proscription against sale to people from families from outside of the village. Trade in land on the sahel (the plains, flat land at the bottom of the valley) and the larger expanses between the villages was less constrained, but still a highly politicised process.

This had a visible impact on female inheritance. As has been noted by Joseph, it is common for Lebanese women not to claim their inheritance instead leaving it to their brothers (1994, p.63), as in part a strategic insurance against husbands abandoning their wives, and also as a manifestation of patriarchal norms about male brotherly provision for sisters. In my field site, women generally did not receive land as inheritance if they married outside of their clan, instead receiving cash. Even if they married inside the clan, women claiming their share of their inheritance was often seen as a contentious act - this is not to say that it did not happen, and it was very much a case of conflict and accommodation between rights as guaranteed by Islamic law and the necessities of maintaining patriarchal clan structures. When I asked a female friend, married to a fellow clan member, why she had never claimed the land due to her, she replied ‘What, and take from my brothers? No, that would be shameful.’ Other women were not so passive, and as the economic crisis began more married women began to claim their inheritance of land back from their brothers in attempts to expand income for their immediate families.
This clan system (and the corresponding property practices) was underpinned by constant feuding between clans, and between lineages and families within clans. The first, and most serious kind of feud, which lingered in the background of most political discussions, was sectarian-clan disputes. These generally stretched back to land ownership disputes stemming from mandate-period Lebanon. Villages were more mixed during this period, and as property ownership was being formalised under the French mandate disputes broke out between Christian and Shi’a groups which led to violence and several killings. This pattern, for different disputes, was replicated in villages throughout the central and northern Biqa’a and broke out into serious violence in the post-independence period in the 1950s and 60s (see for example Bennafia, 2009; Amhez, 2019, p.15). These tensions formed the backdrop of the Civil War, and led to increased segregation and Christian and Shi’a villages. Land claims persist: Christian families claim land in villages that they left in this period, which is now farmed by Shi’a villagers. Shi’a villagers dispute municipal boundaries and budgets, which favour the Christian populations.

The second kind of dispute concerns clans - arguments escalated into killings, which in turn led to blood feuds between the different clans. These could often begin as simple disputes and were commonplace, but their intensity was heightened by the drug trade and the easy availability of weaponry. Men of a given beyt were generally seen as responsible avenging the death of a fellow clansman, and were often treated as sharing in responsibility for the actions of other members of their beyt. Throughout my fieldwork, gunfights would erupt regularly and echo over Ba’albeck and its surrounding areas, and inhabitants treated them as part of the background of daily life. RPG explosions which would make the national news if they occurred anywhere else in the country were normalised and ignored in the central and Northern Biqa’a.

The third kind dispute concerned members of the same clan, and was generally more relevant to land tenure patterns. There were many reasons for internal clan feuds, but it was very common for villagers to dispute each other’s ownership to certain areas of land. When I asked my interlocutors about land acquisition, many of them said that they *hotet iydi ‘al ‘ard* (literally, put my hand on the land). This referred to taking possession of land simply by using it, and it was not necessarily a hostile act. Many of the farmers I knew farmed land that was
formally owned by Christians who had left the village, and that they had ‘put their hand on’. Similarly, if brothers and cousins left for Beirut or abroad, a villager might ‘put his hand on’ their share of their inheritance, and farm it until or if they ever came back to claim it. Given the lack of formalised inheritance, inheritance rights were generally only discernible through a combination of historical records and deciphering several generations of inheritance and trades which was often only orally recorded. This naturally lends itself to differences in interpretation, and thus rather than relying on legal structures, effective ownership of land depended on one’s integration and maintenance of a clan-based social network. Disputing another villager’s right to land required that you could mobilise both legal and oral records in support of your claim, and much of the evening discussion amongst the older farmers consisted of public digestion and dissection of who owned what. Members of the clan who had left the Biqa’a might sell their land, or simply lose it through subdivisions and trades and other farmers ‘putting their hand on it’. While they could and did occasionally activate historical claims, physical and familial distance generally led to waning claims to property ownership.

In many ways this reflected a capitalist permutation of the historical common land practices described by Schaebl (2000). She shows how under the Ottoman Empire and French mandate, access to musha’ (common lands) under the Ottoman Empire and the French mandate served a ‘disciplinary function’ – this status was central to political subjectivity since ‘to be entitled to a share of common lands, however tiny this share may be, validated a person as a real member of the community’ (p.289), but further required a constant engagement in social relations and politics of that village (on the linkage between landownership and broader socio-political rights in Lebanese villagers, see El Nour et al., 2015; Mundy, 1996, and on the historical anti-musha’ reforms, see Nadan, 2018). Similar rules now applied to a fully entrenched system of private property, where private ownership of profitable agricultural land had a similarly reciprocal relationship with one’s status as a clan member and villager.

The importance of land ownership has been further reinforced by the booming hashish market which has increased the value of agricultural land. The increasingly wealthy and rapidly growing Shi’a community has also pushed up demand for land for housing development and so also increased the value of land suitable for housing. Many of my
interlocutors engaged in land speculation, buying land prime for housing development on the outskirts of Ba’albeck. While plenty of villagers had bank accounts and were fully integrated into the Lebanese banking system, many of my interlocutors did not trust banks and depositing one’s savings in land was a safe investment. This was especially the case for the *matloubeen* who were cut out of the formal economy. On top of this, many of those villagers who left and became wealthy in Beirut or abroad would often build houses on their family’s land. This simultaneously consolidated their claim to the land and ties to their natal village even if they were absent for long periods of time, and gave them a summer house and fall-back in case things went wrong abroad. More and more of these houses were sprouting on the outskirts of the Biqa’a villages, further pushing up the price of land, each one built with Syrian labour and guarded by a Syrian *natur*. These peasant communities were deeply enmeshed in capitalist speculative land prices, which arose from and were conditioned by village cultural norms surrounding wealth and local community membership.

The Lebanese economic crisis, which gained momentum as I began my fieldwork, brought these employment and rent capturing structures into sharp relief. State employment wages, previously considered valuable and stable, were reduced through inflation by around 80% in less than a year, while most prices remained pegged to the dollar. Over the course of 2021, the remaining perks of the job, such as healthcare, began to crumble as essentials such as subsidised medicine disappeared. The hashish price contracted, but this was part of a pre-crisis downward trend and it retained value as a cash crop compared to other crops like potatoes and apples in 2020. As the crisis spiralled, a household’s level of diversification and the extent to which it had invested previous years’ rent and employment income into certain forms of capital became visible and extremely important. Likewise, the benefits of stable employment and labour disappeared.
Sons of the village

1. The small farmers

Ali’s brother, Ammar, was about 50 years old – he didn’t know exactly, because back when he was born, the villagers used to delay registering the birth of their children and often gave the date as the first of January. He grew up in the midst of the Civil War, when movement around the country was circumscribed and the Shi’a villages were in a permanent state of semi-conflict with their neighbouring qowet villages (members of the Lebanese forces, a Maronite supremacist militia and political party). He is the typical *ibn al daya’a* (son of the village) – easy to find either at his house surrounded by his four lively children, at his outhouse by the fields smoking *nargila* (water pipe, shisha) with his friends or running errands in his battered old red pick-up truck. He has never considered living anywhere else and dropped out of school like many of the men of his generation in his early teens. He can read and write,
however, and his stern face and quiet demeanour are deceiving – when he does chip in to conversation, it is often to make a deadpan, ironic joke. Since the 1990s, Rabi’a has made a relatively stable living for his immediate and extended family from his hashish farming work. His is from one of the larger lineages within the beyt, and as the eldest of nine children, he had taken on the mantle of head of the family. He married a woman from the neighbouring lineage, and they live in small a house that they constructed just above his parents’ home. Built into the hillside and with a connecting staircase running outside, it is part-additional floor, and part separate dwelling. His children and nieces and nephews run back and forth between his and his parents’ house, and in the centre of the village it is around these cosy dwellings that his extended family orbits.

Sat outside his outhouse surrounded by growing hashish and watching his two little sons discussing how best to build a den from left-over bricks, rocks and sticks, I asked Ammar how much land he had. Land ownership, as has been noted previously, is a slippery concept, and Ammar’s property was no exception. The amount of land an individual owns at any given moment is always up for debate - undivided lands from grandfathers may be counted or discounted depending on the context, and claims to unfarmable scrubland may be included, as may land that he has ‘put his hand on’. Ammar was silent, and at first I thought he hadn’t heard me until I saw that he was carefully adding up. ‘I have 50 dunam,’ he said, finally ‘...roughly.’ This was by no means all registered to him, he explained – the number included land that he had bought and transferred legally, but also land that he had bought where the legal paperwork had not been completed. Other portions had been bought in partnership with his brother. It also included land inherited from his father and grandfather, some of which was undivided and so shared with cousins and brothers, and other portions which were divided. These divisions and inheritances, too, were sometimes legally recorded, sometimes not. Then, there was land which was legally owned by Christians who had left the village – some of this he had ‘put his hand on’ and was simply farming as his own, other portions he had agreements with the absentee Christian claimants to use. Then, there was land he was farming through sharecropping agreement (daman) with other villagers. This figure did not include the few dunam of prime building land that he also owned down in Ba’albeck. These forms of ownership could overlap – one could informally inherit land that one’s father had ‘put his hand on’, and this would then be farmed in common by brothers or further
subdivided. Ownership might also become confused if certain brothers disputed the divisions of their inheritance. To further complicate this land-ownership picture, Ammar had sharecropping agreements with several Syrians like Muhammad (Chapter IV), who farmed his land and gave him a portion of the crop at the end of the year.

This convoluted picture of land ownership was not fixed and could vary from year to year. The boundary between land-ownership and communal social relations was non-existent: Ammar owned this land precisely because he was able to continually socially activate his ownership claims. These shared ownership and _daman_ practices also bound brothers together and created a network of shared interests amongst the village men, as well as creating a constant source of disputes. On top of this, as his sons grew up, he would divide his land between them, adding another layer of social relations to determine their landholdings. It was by no means clear what land holdings his sons would receive, and this was contingent on their ability to exert their claims. However, as charismatic teenagers who were similarly _ibn al diya’a_ it seemed to me that they were more than sufficiently integrated into the local social relations to maintain their claims.

Ammar was an outlaw, one of the _matloubeen_ and had been for over two decades. He had been named in a smuggling case in his youth and summoned for investigation in Beirut. Faced with the probability of a long prison sentence, he chose to ignore the summons and remain in his mountain village. Here, the security services could not reach him, and he could travel back and forth to Ba’albeck every now and then. Cut off from the legal economy and his movements circumscribed, he had become a full-time hashish farmer and this had been his profession for the past two decades. He was generally conservative, and usually sold his crop locally to Hussein for a lower price but much less risk on his part.

Much of his land was very good, well-irrigated, and would have annual yields at the top end of the spectrum. At a rough estimate, his land could produce roughly 3 _qantar_ per _dunam_, and a further 2 or 3 _huqa_ per _qantar_. If he planted 30 _dunam_ that year and the crop was good, he could produce 270 _huqa_. During even the worst of the boom years, the local price was US$300 per _huqa_ giving him an annual revenue of over US$80,000. At its height, this could reach well above US$200,000. Of course, there were expenses, and these figures would be
reduced by percentages claimed by others through *daman* agreements, and the overheads of fertilizer, diesel, and hiring Syrian labour. However, they give a rough picture of the income to be made from hashish as a cash crop. One hundred *dunam* was generally the upper limit that a smallholding farmer could farm and process on his own using only simple irrigation systems, cottage industry machinery, and a few casually hired Syrians. The processing machinery and *karaj* (garages used for processing hashish shown in figure 16 and 18) were usually communally owned and shared between brothers, and this was the case with Ammar. For those more ambitious villagers, there was a small village-wide rental market.

Slightly different were the practices of Fouad, one of Ammar’s relatives and childhood friends. He, too, was *ibn al daya’a* and could often be found of an evening sat at the *sahra* at Ammar’s outhouse joking with the older men of his generation. Slightly better educated than Ammar, he had graduated from school and spoke a little French – he owned slightly less hashish fields, perhaps twenty *dunam*, but a further twenty *dunam* or so of fruitful, better-established orchards. While apples were not hugely profitable, prior to the crisis he could make as much as $20,000 from his orchards annually. He gave some of his hashish land to Syrian sharecroppers in exchange for half of their crop at the end of the year. He would further supplement this income by buying raw and half-processed hashish - he would refine it further and sell it on to one of the larger traders for a tidy profit, often making tens of thousands of dollars over a short period of time. While he had certainly made money, Fouad had foregone much of the profits of the boom years of the past decade in order to keep a low profile and ensure his freedom of movement and integration into broader Lebanese society and formal institutions.

Like most of the men of their generation, they had done their military service, and had brothers and cousins in the security services and in Hizbollah. While this extended medical cover to at least some immediate relatives, for both Fouad and Ammar, health problems of uninsured relatives had been extremely expensive and damaged their savings. Less dramatically, but more importantly, they were both friends with various important figures such as Hussein (discussed in the next section) who acted as channels for mediation. It was Ammar’s outhouse, down the road by the fields, that the men gathered daily. The bottleneck of the village meant that any movement through the Northern side of the village would pass
by his little hut, and so he kept abreast with the comings and goings of the Syrians and Lebanese alike.

Both Fouad and Ammar were married to women from their clan, who were assertive and funny characters. Fouad’s wife Fatima was especially friendly and could often be seen marching around the village, various family children in tow on some kind of errand, shouting greetings to neighbours and relatives across the street. While both had finished school and had brief bouts of employment as younger women, they had engaged only in domestic labour since their marriage. Their days were generally filled with more work tasks than their husbands, with extensive and lengthy food preparation and childcare, all of which was essential for the maintenance of these village households. However, this was not locally considered ‘work’ and generally went unremarked – it was simply taken for granted that this was how women spent their days.

Men like Ammar and Fouad did not squander the income of the hashish boom years. They had grown up in poverty during the violence and uncertainty of the Lebanese Civil War, and many of their investments seemed to be in part motivated by securing the positions of their families in the region. They built houses and garages in the village and Ba’albeck, and bought more land both for farming in the village and as property speculation in Ba’albeck. Fouad had built a house in Ba’albeck, where his wife and children would spend the harsher winter months. They would perhaps live there more permanently when the children reached high school age, as there were better quality schools in the regional capital. They invested it in capital machinery, and each had bought several generators to power their houses and their farming apparatus out in the fields, and dug wells and installed pumps to irrigate their crops should the rivers dry up that year. These, too, could be rented out to neighbouring farmers without access to water. They were smart investments to guarantee profitability and ease in the long run and would pay back over the years. They had both also bought a couple of durable vehicles, gold, and some more expensive power-tools and firearms. They saw this as investment of their profits, but their investments were guided by a deep mistrust of the formal state apparatus and strong value placed on self-sufficiency. As village men, they were responsible for ensuring continued income for their family and their investment practices
were deeply conditioned by their experience of Civil War and their embeddedness in local clan culture.

Farmers like Ammar and Fouad had an ambiguous relationship with the camp of Syrians. For a long time into my field work, they both proclaimed complete ignorance when it came to anything to do with the Syrian camp dwellers. They both knew Hammad, the Syrian shopkeeper, well, but they both actively and discursively ignored the refugee camp, discussing it only in negative, pejorative terms. They both regularly blamed the camp for petty local problems like damaged crops or electricity cuts, and complained about the UN assistance that the Syrians received. For the first nine months that I was conducting my participant observation, Ammar claimed not to know the names of Syrians - ‘why do I need to know their names? They are all the same!’ he exclaimed. For them, ‘Syrian’ was synonymous with ‘wage labourer’. It is difficult to adequately convey how deeply Syrians are associated with cheap labour by men such as Ammar and Fouad, and how frequently this relationship is reinforced daily. Throughout my fieldwork, it would be a surprise if I spent a day with them that did not in some way involve Syrian wage-labour. It was very common for them to simply assume that any Syrian man who was not currently working was available to sell their labour power at any given moment, and for them to hail Syrians passing in the street and order them to complete some menial task. However, as the year progressed and the summer began, both began to need labourers and the attention that they paid to the Syrians (though not their attitudes) began to change.

In the summer, Ammar and Fouad both began searching for Syrian warsheh to weed their fields, and then to harvest their hashish crops and their orchards. By September, the shortages were apparent and they were scrabbling for labourers – neither had developed the kinds of patron-client relationships that Anwar had with Abu Ali, nor were their crops sufficiently large to engage the team of someone like Abu Ibrahim (described in Chapter V). Instead, they seemed to reach out half-heartedly, randomly and sometimes aggressively to any Syrian they encountered. They even turned to me, knowing that I was friendly with much of the camp, and asked me to organise some warsheh to cut their fields maqtou’a. I proposed this to Anwar, but he turned it down – the prices they were offering were too low, and he had worked for Ammar before and found him too domineering and demanding.
Ammar’s brothers bemoaned his inability to organise labour and failure to cultivate a patron-client relationship which would facilitate Syrian labour organisation. Eventually, he found a more expensive warsheh in a camp in a neighbouring village but this meant that he had to transport the labourers in his pick-up truck to and from the fields each day, which took almost two hours. His brothers bemoaned his inability to organise labour, but Ammar’s failure in this regard was fairly common amongst the small to medium sized farmers. It was a function of two kinds of social relations: firstly, in an effort to maintain strict distinctions between the two communities, many farmers’ cultural prejudices and the enforcement of hierarchy stymied any possibility of partnerships like those described in Chapter IV. I repeatedly suggested to Ammar that it would be a good idea to develop relationships with Syrians in the future in order to ensure workers in the harvest season, but he stubbornly refused, saying ‘they are all the same they are all lazy! They don’t want to work!’ Secondly, it was a function of straightforward economic calculations – Syrians were often unsure of Ammar’s ability or willingness to pay, and his tight negotiation of maqtou’a prices did little to assuage these worries. When faced with this failure, many of the farmers resorted to a discourse of almost feudal sovereignty over the village. On one particularly fraught day during the harvest, Ammar began darkly threatening to burn the camp down if no Syrian would sell their labour to him. This attitude of entitlement to the labour of the Syrian refugees pervaded these labour relations, and found its most extreme manifestation of the force labour practices of Abu Jamal (see Chapter IV).

There were cracks in this studied ignorance of the Syrian community amongst the smaller farmers, and this often corresponded to gender. Insulting and belittling Syrian men and the quality of their labour was almost expected, but exceptions were made when it came some of the Syrian women. This was most notable just after the harvest season, as the hashish was being refined in the karaj, and Fouad began to seek out a few specific Syrian women from the camp. They were considered the best at the final sieving phase of the hashish production, using a filter called a saqaleh. In a rare moment of engagement with Syrian society, Fouad said ‘Oh, Muhanad’s wife, she is the best at jal (the process of sieving the hashish by gently circulating it on a sieve) – she is worth five [Syrian] men.’ This was one of the few ways that Lebanese farmers could discuss labour positively whilst reinforcing their superior status over
Syrians in the social hierarchy - they praised only Syrian women, whose labour was already considered worth less in the Syrian community, and simultaneously insulted Syrian men as being ‘worth less than women’.

2. The big farmers

On first impressions, Hussein was no different to the other two farmers. I first met him at a sahra in Ammar’s little field outhouse one spring evening with the rest of their childhood gang of friends, now all grizzled and greying men in their forties. Hussein wore the same tired army surplus fatigues as the rest of the farmers, down to the zulfikar necklace denoting him as a Shi’a. Like them, he spent his days driving around the village visiting his fields, orchards and karaj in a beat-up pick-up truck, a pistol tucked down the back of his waistband. He spent his evenings in Ammar’s little outhouse drinking tea, smoking, and discussing village gossip and international relations. Like the rest of the village men, he had the same easy hospitality and casual generosity that was the positive stereotype of a Biqa’a man. However, unlike his childhood friends, his business made millions of dollars a year.

Hussein had started out as a poor farmer like the rest of his friends. Indeed, much poorer, many villagers remembered – back in the 2000s, he did not even have the money to buy a generator to power his water pump, Ali told me. However, a little over a decade ago, through some more daring and effective smuggling, he ‘opened a new route’ to smuggle hashish to the Gulf and Egypt. The actual details of this process are shrouded in mystery, but Hussein made a lot of money from this smuggling very quickly. He was certainly working in partnership with other powerful political figures in the country and the broader region, but he had very quickly leveraged this network to become a major direct exporter with buyers outside of Lebanon. By cutting out the middleman, the value of each huqa of hashish that he produced increased exponentially. This route was very reliable, and he was able to calculate his production in advance, with a far better understanding of demand from abroad. His brothers also participated in this operation, and they went from poverty to being some of the richest men in the village over the course of a few years.
Hussein was still *ibn al diyi’a*, and he reinvested much of his profits in the village. He increased the size of his operation, buying land, machinery, and vehicles like Ammar and Fouad, but on a much larger scale. He bought up more and more land, and made *daman* agreements with other landowners, Christian absentee landlords and Shi’a farmers alike. This spread some of his profits around and gave many in the village a vested interest in his success. He not only increased the size of his own operation, but also began to buy up most of the finished product of the village, and by 2012 he was the ‘go-to’ buyer for most of the hashish farmers in the area. Rather than deal with traders from outside of the community, more and more of the farmers began producing a crop simply to sell to him. Demand on this ‘new route’ was high, and provided a minimum standard of quality, he would almost always offer to buy his fellow villagers crops – annually, his turnover reached the tens of thousands of kilograms. Sold abroad, his operation had an annual revenue of tens of millions of dollars. Since he was also engaged in the smuggling, he could store or sell this hashish depending on demand in destination countries. Likewise, since they had a guaranteed buyer and at a moderate price, the smaller and medium farmers were more secure in investing and expanding their operations.

‘Before, there were farmers and there were traders. Now, they are the same person,’ Ammar told me. As Hussein and his associates increased their market share, they were able to drive harder and harder bargains. Their crop made up well over half of the village’s total hashish output by the time of my fieldwork and so his actions had a direct and visible impact on the hashish price. Since he bought from most of the village, he bore much of the resentment as the hashish price began to fall. ‘To be honest, they don’t need us anymore,’ Fouad confided in me. ‘Before, we could have asked for a higher price, but now, he can just tell us how much he will pay for it, and if you like it, good! If not, God be with you!’

For most farmers, this was seen as simply a function of his dominance in the local hashish market. However, it could also be a function of the opaquer side of the business, that of the globalised hashish market. While in casual conversation, the larger farmers were often accused by smaller farmers of operating some kind of oligopoly, and indeed, there was certainly coordination between the larger smugglers in each village, it was difficult to see how the numerous, often competing, large farmers across the Biqa’a would be able to coordinate
their smuggling and hashish stocks in response to both changing local conditions and external markets annually to fix prices. At the time of my fieldwork, the price still seemed to be very much set by the valley-wide market, with various negotiations over crop and finished product prices underway in September, until a rough guide of the annual qantar and huqa price emerged in October and November.

Despite his newfound wealth, Hussein’s life did not diverge very much from the other farmers. He spent most of his evenings at sahra in the outhouses of his relatives, discussing who had bought which small patch of land or a new tractor in the village. He hunted in the mountains, and put on the occasional music night for the young men of the village. There were several warrants out for his arrest, but he made regular payments to certain members of the security apparatus to keep them at bay. If a member of the mukhabarat went beyond their remit and began poking their nose into his business in the village, he and a few of the other village men had no qualms about holding them at gunpoint and beating them up, as they had done on several occasions. As a wanted man, despite his wealth and fearsome reputation, he would rarely leave the village, and even less often venture beyond Ba’albeck.

Despite this, he maintained a family home in Beirut for his wife and children, where they went to school, and he sometimes made the trip to the capital. His house in the village was a gaudy and luxurious palace, though he did not seem to care – he spent most of his time outside. He had several Ethiopian and Bangladeshi servants and a few fancy cars, but he was rarely seen driving them. While his children and wife lived a more visibly luxurious lifestyle of consumption between the village and Beirut, the daily pace of his life seemed to differ little from Fouad and Ammar.

Unlike the other, smaller farmers, Hussein’s operation involved balancing much more significant overheads and capital investment. It required multiple, better built and larger karaj to store and process the hashish, and in the self-reliant economy of the Bqa’a, this often meant buying much of the required construction machinery himself. He had to clear the routes to and from these half-hidden buildings, and buy larger machinery to process the vast quantities of hashish – a couple of old machines borrowed from a cousin would not be enough on production of this scale. Alongside storage space, there was also the need for significant
capital outlay on tractors and transport trucks, and much larger and more important irrigation infrastructure. For land that was not directly fed by a river or spring, Hussein needed access to a well and diesel-powered water pump to ensure irrigation. Much of the new land that he had acquired was not naturally irrigated – this was why he had been able to buy or take it on *daman*, since without significant investment in water infrastructure, it was worthless. Over the past couple of decades, the annual snowfall that replenished the mountain springs and wells had decreased, and along with it the annual water flow. More and more land required this as the springs dried up towards the end of the summer. For smaller farmers, for a water pump to break was not a huge problem – they could usually borrow from a neighbour, and the crops would survive a few extra days. However, on an operation of this size, there was no fallback for Hussein, and in midsummer water pumps had to be working night and day.

These overheads redistributed a solid proportion of his profits. The land that he took *daman* meant that he gave a portion of his profits to other clan members. His constant construction also paid the owners of the quarry, machinery, and mechanics, electricians, and plumbers. He bought petrol from the local stations to run his small fleet of vehicles, and he would rent out his tractors and construction equipment to the clan and municipality for discounted rates or even for free when he was not using them. He owned properties and businesses in Ba’albeck and Beirut, which might turn a profit but which also could be a means to offer a family member employment. On top of this, even more significant redistribution took the form of payoffs to connected politicians and members of the security services. Hussein also made regular donations to the political parties Hizbollah and Amal, and distributed food regularly to some of the poorer members of the clan.

There were also more obvious cases of explicit use of wealth to maintain the status quo – when disputes flared up between members of his and neighbouring clans, Hussein and his brothers might use their wealth to smooth over any problems, paying off other clan members’ debts and then resolving the issue internally. Similarly, in cases of internal clan disputes concerning land and money, Hussein’s status meant that he could act as a mediator and where possible use his wealth to smooth things over. Violence erupting between or within clans was not good for business, and could lead to all sorts of problems with movement around the valley.
Importantly, this entire capitalist venture was based on Syrian refugee labour – it is men like Hussein who are the main beneficiaries of the refugee camps in this part of the Biqa’a. The rapid expansion of their business over the past decade or so has coincided with the Syrian refugee crisis, and thus, rather than there being an increasing demand for labour and upwards pressure on wages, supply has increased with demand, and wages remained stable, while production and profits increased. As was explained in the previous chapters, a large proportion of the encampment was based on Abu Ibrahim’s long-term relationship with Hussein, and his importance to Syrian encampment extended beyond directly employing this warsheh. As I have noted, many of the smaller farmers grew and produced their crop to sell to Hussein, and they employed the other independent warsheh organised by Syrians like Anwar and Jana. While some of the wages that Hussein and the other farmers paid to their Syrian labourers left the village, and was sent to Syria as remittances or spent in Ba’albeck or in other refugee camps much of it further circulated in the village. Hussein’s hashish smuggling money was further redistributed through the village network as Syrians spend it in the supermarket, the butchers, and the dollar store.
Figure 19 - A family of Lebanese landowners and a family of Syrian wage-labourers harvest the potato crop together

3. The young men

‘Oooh! If this crop doesn’t make at least four huqa per qantar, I don’t know anything,’ said Abbas as he rubbed the black oil from his fingers to make a waxy ball of hashish. We had just cut a tiny, well-tended little field, more of a large garden, measuring perhaps a third of a dunam. We had started work late in the day, and cut at a leisurely pace. Me, Abbas and his cousin Hassan had cut the hashish – there was one Syrian man, a cousin of Anwar’s called Abu Hadi, who Abbas often brought with him in a nascent patron-client relationships that I described in Chapter IV. However, this was the height of the harvest season, and Abu Hadi could make a lot more money elsewhere, and Abbas would not begrudge him that. Besides, Abbas had nowhere to be today, and enjoyed working outside. ‘There is no better hashish than this’ he said, breaking up the little ball into little crumbs or junood (soldiers), as they are locally known. He mixed the fresh hashish with tobacco and wrapped it in a waraq ash sham
rolling paper. We sat in the shade of a tree, looking out on the bundles of fresh cut hashish that we had left on the ground to dry out in the sun. His cousin fetched us some fresh walnuts from a tree up the hill, and we smashed them and drank tea as the sun began to set.

Abbas was a young man in his early twenties, born and raised in the village. Like many more men of his generation who grew up after the end of the Civil War, he had completed his schooling, and had explored other options beyond farming and state employment. He was fairly academic, and rather than enter the army or security services straight out of school, he was studying agricultural engineering at the Lebanese University. He knew he could make a decent living from hashish farming and that he would enjoy it, but as a young man who had been more exposed than previous generations to the world outside of the village he was interested in broadening his horizons. Abbas had helped on his grandfather’s fields for as long as he could remember, and as his grandfather grew older, he had begun taking a more and more active role in the family business. His father was a Hizbollah man who took little interest in farming, and he was very close with his grandparents.

Like many young men in the village, he had been given a couple of fields of his inheritance early - while not a formal transfer, many fathers would give their sons a couple of parcels of lands to farm themselves before they were married. This was a way for the young man learn the business, to earn money for himself, and potentially to save up for marriage and building a house of his own. As his uncles and aunts had mostly left the village and he had only one sister, Abbas and his cousin were the only young men left to farm their grandfather’s fields. The fields his grandfather had explicitly given to him would be unequivocally his, but the rest of the land was essentially open for contestation. He would claim his father’s share and make sure that he got the best agricultural land, but there was a good chance that his city dwelling cousins would never claim their inheritance or even know what it was. Abbas was already farming it on behalf of his grandfather, and would likely continue to do so in the event of his death. ‘I put my hand on all of my grandfather’s land’ he said, ‘and if someone wants to come and claim his share, they are welcome,’ he smiled benignly. Until then, he would carry on farming and treating it as if it was his, and keep the profits of the crops to himself. Besides, his city-dwelling cousins could most likely be placated with a portion of the crop and have no idea how to drive a hard bargain when it came to the hashish industry.
Like many young men, he had basic military training from Hizbollah and as a capable Biqa’a clansman and his father’s son he would no doubt be welcomed with open arms if he chose to make a career of it. Likewise, he had considered joining the army, but knew that he would not be able to face the discipline and the prohibition on hashish smoking. His cousins Hassan and Ramzi, on the other hand, had both joined the army but their Biqa’a masculinity and wheeling and dealing meant that they were both discharged after a few years. Ramzi had been kicked out of the army for smoking hashish, and had gone abroad to try his luck working in the Gulf and Africa. Hassan had got into more serious trouble – he had been naïve and unable to resist the chance to make some quick money when offered by a few officers, and was caught smuggling fuel across the border to Syria whilst on duty. He too was discharged, and subject to an investigation and legal case which dragged on for years. Not quite one of the matloubeen, he was wary of encounters with the security forces and drawing attention to himself. For six years he lived an existence circumscribed by court dates and the looming threat of imprisonment, until the case was finally dropped during my fieldwork. By this point, however, many opportunities had passed him by and he had thrown himself whole heartedly into the hashish farming business.

Like most younger village men, Abbas and Hassan farmed their early inheritance, and with the guarantee of their father’s land in the future they had some long-term security. Some younger men had dozens of dunam, but for these two, their own personal crop was not more than 5 dunam each. This was good quality land and could make as much as forty-five huqa. With few overheads and no one to split the crop with, at the height of the boom, they could have sold this to Hussein for a tidy sum (maybe as much as US$40,000 some years). Abbas was unusual in that he worked the fields himself – most of the men would pay a couple of Syrians like Anwar to undertake most of the labour. At LL3,000 (pre-crisis this was equivalent to US$2), the cost of casual Syrian labour barely put a dent in their profits. The vestiges of this boom were visible in the trucks and firearms of the young men of the village.

However, the 2019 price was roughly US$200 per huqa and fell to as little as US$125 in 2020 - their crop alone was not enough to meet the spending requirements of a young man about town, let alone save to build a house and get married. Young men like Abbas and Hassan
increased their income by buying unprocessed and partially processed hashish from neighbours and family members, finishing the production and then selling it on. However, rather than sell for a lower price to local traders like Hussein, these younger men would often try to sell for a higher price to the domestic market. Dealers on the other side of the mountains, on the Lebanese coast where tourism was booming, were always in need of Biqa’a hashish and would pay more than double the local price. They would also make use of their knowledge of the mountain routes to make a quick profit, buying hashish in the village and selling it for twice the price on the other side of the mountains. This domestic smuggling was a risky business, but also a way that these young men could make use of their autonomous Biqa’a base to compensate for the drop in prices. These same coastal drug dealers might ask for some stronger drugs, like cocaine, which men like Abbas and Hassan could easily acquire in Ba’albeck. This, too, could be sold for a much higher price on the other side of the mountain, and more and more young men of the villages were becoming involved in this kind of arbitrage.

Neither Abbas nor Hassan had ever considered any form of hourly-waged employment. They had grown up in a village where almost all of the labour in the fields and construction was undertaken by Syrians, and this association meant that such work was completely out of the question for them. However, more generally they seemed set against the possibility that their time and sweat could be given an numerical quantity. Where they worked for the state security apparatus, they were mwazaf (employed) and this came with a monthly wage, certainly. However, for them it was more of a lifestyle, of which the income was only one part of a bundle of benefits to stable employment. They never calculated how much they earnt in terms of hours worked, both in employment or in hashish: this was something that Syrians did.

**Conclusion**

Lebanese villagers in the Biqa’a are deeply integrated into the global capitalist economy, and while my field site may once have been described as a peasant rural community, it has long since internalised capitalist social relations in the organisation of economic activity. Land functioned as private property for the production of commodities, and the farmers’ main
source of income was from rents and profit extracted from Syrian labour. They constituted a new property-owning rural class as described by Bernstein (Bernstein, 2006), who had managed their transition to commodity production, made money from globalised international markets, and engaged in speculative practices and capital investments.

Despite these obviously capitalist traits, their practices diverged from what a classical Marxist account would describe as ‘rational capitalist accumulation’. The used of their wealth was not purely motivated by the pursuit of profit - much of it is directed by Lebanese ideas of the good life, the search for privately owned family and clan security, and an ideal of rural masculinity. In this way, they are exemplary of the need to ‘pluralise capital’ called for by Chalcraft (2005). The type of capitalism practiced in the village was the organic product of local cultural practices which conditioned what was economically rational in this context. For these men, as I have shown, private property was both a commercial object to be traded and speculated on in a clearly capitalist manner, but it was not treated as distinct from social relations. They were well aware that property had to be maintained through engagement in village social life, and underpinned by the requirements of village masculinity and patriarchal norms. Without this, they would struggle to maintain their landholdings and turn a profit. This was the case for smaller and medium farmers who used their wealth to ensure family security and maintain their position and claim to village society, but also for larger farmers whose capital maintenance was tied to balancing clan obligations, land rights, and larger networks of transnational drug smuggling.

This affects the labour market – the locally specific norms of masculinity, family life, and capital ownership meant that village men rejected waged labour, but equally sought employment to diversify and insure against unforeseen circumstances. In maintaining social hierarchies, Lebanese villagers actively created a weak and unorganised, dependent labour force, as this was one of the only ways to maximise the profitability of their crop. It was certainly true that the collective hostility of these farmers to the Syrian presence reduced the possibility of wage bargaining. Farmers were also aware of the power they had over Syrians, and keen to maintain it. However, there was little to no sense of collective organisation on the part of the already divided Lebanese villagers. Rather, it was the structural result of their landholding practices that led to short-term employment and a weak and exploited
workforce. The Syrian refugee crisis presented an opportunity for more intensive exploitation of land and labour, and this continued to shape the class formation of the rural Biqa’a (exemplary of the processes described by Bernstein, 2010, p.110).

This chapter has demonstrated how culturally specific Inheritance practices further played an important role in the capitalist economy of the village. As property is unclear and divided through inheritance and disputes, landholdings are small and unstable. This is instability works against a fully ‘employed’ proletariat, since it is only farmers with landholdings the size of Hussein that can employ work teams for significant periods of time. Land ownership was deeply contingent on norms of family ownership and inheritance and the continued maintenance of these claims, which required a constant engagement in Lebanese family practices and the broader community along the lines of the general framework that Joseph (1994) described. This in turn supports Arrighi’s (Arrighi & Piselli, 1987, p.657) more general claim capitalist development is contingent on customary norms that regulate marriage and inheritance. This ethnography takes this finding one step further, demonstrating that these social practices not only affect capitalist development, but also determine what constitutes rationality in the emergent capitalist society.

This account of the Lebanese peasant community supports Bernstein’s general claim that, despite what could be considered historical roots in a form of classical peasant economy, even these peripheral communities were deeply integrated into the global capitalist economy and had internalised capitalist relations of production. This chapter further indicates that rather than an Arrighian ‘partial’ or ‘failed’ agrarian transition to capitalism, these Biqa’a villages are a case of a distinct, organic, and culturally specific set of capitalist practices.
VII - Organisations that don’t work: NGOs, the League of Syrian Arab Workers, and community support boxes

Introduction

The previous chapters have argued that Syrian refugees constitute a rural wage-labour force working for Lebanese landed-property, and that the organisation and reproduction of Syrian labour structures intercommunal relations and those internal to the Syrian community. While patriarchal cultural practices and national hierarchies have been shown to be central to this process of organisation and reproduction, formal organisations are largely absent. The family has been shown to be one of the most critical social institutions and to be engaged in a mutually constitutive relationship with the state in the Middle East (Joseph, 2018), and this thesis has thus far shown how the family has interacted with foundational mechanisms of labour and capital. In doing so, this thesis has supported Joseph’s assertion that the family is the ‘primary unit’ of political and economic action.

This chapter now turns to address the ‘secondary units’ of social organisation which can be found in the Biqa’a. These are a wide range of institutions in my field site which are constituted, at least in theory, as distinct from the family structure. They were mostly formal organisations with administrative capacity, much of which was nominally focussed on the governance of the refugee communities. These ‘secondary units’ were largely absent from the everyday life of the Syrians of the camp. While formally present in my fields site, these organisations largely abdicated their official organising and governing capacities, which were instead fulfilled by parallel kinship structures. Where they did feature, it was generally reactive, and in response to pre-existing patterns of social interaction based on more pertinent questions of Lebanese capital’s requirement for cheap Syrian labour. This chapter explains how non-family-based organisations such as the state apparatus, the UN, and NGOs were largely unable to influence life in the Syrian camps in the face of the social relations that arise from the labour-capital relationship described in the previous chapters. Furthermore, I argue that in the cases where these organisations did appear to affect labour relations and social reproduction, it was because the capacities of the institution were harnessed by distinct activity of property owners or labourers rather than any coherent agency possessed by the
institution itself. In this chapter I initially discuss these organisations as distinct from families and commercial enterprises, but I do so in order to ultimately demonstrate how deeply intertwined they in fact are.

When I originally conceived of this research project, non-family-based organisations such as the UN, the municipality, and the appointed shawesh were assumed to be far more central to everyday lives and social reproduction of the refugee population. For many reasons, both methodological and theoretical, research projects often take these organisations as a starting point (this is discussed in Chapter II). It was fortuitous that in my field site, the impotence of these organisations was so clear that quite early on in my research I was able to shift my focus. The initial phases of fieldwork were largely a process of realising just how little effect these organisations had on daily life in the camp, and the subsequent centrality of labour relations. Formally constituted organisations generally adapted their practices to meet the labour requirements of the Lebanese villagers, regardless of their official obligations. Where an organisation could be seen to be acting decisively, it was generally because this project or practice contributed towards the maintenance the exploitative social and economic relations between and within the two communities. Likewise, where an organisation presented a challenge or obstacle to these interests, it was ineffective and often simply ignored.

In the first section, I situate my ethnography in juxtaposition to contemporary discourse which focuses on the ‘humanitarian regime’ as a dominant political actor. In Lebanon, a sophisticated system of control exists to deny international humanitarian actors of agency at the ‘street level’, despite extensive and pronounced formal interaction at the higher levels of the state. There is a well-developed body of international donors and emergency and development organisations, whose activities are constrained, directed, and harnessed by local Lebanese political and economic concerns. I then explain the workings of the main formal institutional actors encountered daily in the camps of the central and northern Biqa’a. I first address the UN and internationally funded local NGOs. I then analyse the local municipality and its interaction with the League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon, and its role as a tacitly accepted channel for the Ba’athist regime amongst Syrian communities in Lebanon. I finally look at the local Syrian community’s abortive attempts to establish their own community organisation. For each of these cases of non-family-based organisation, I
show how their activities were motivated, constrained, and influenced by the foundational demands of labour organisation and reproduction.

A humanitarian regime?

The study of humanitarian organisations and interventions is an important subfield of refugee studies, and this lens has been used fruitfully in the study of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Scholarship has turned a critical eye on the activities of humanitarian and non-state organisations in the governance of refugee populations and their relationship to the formal state apparatus. The ubiquity of UN agencies in certain contexts of mass displacement has led to some researchers framing the UNHCR as a ‘surrogate state’ to some populations (Kagan, 2011; Miller, 2017). This turn can be seen as a manifestation of a more general appreciation of the operations of power and latent violence in apparently mundane bureaucratic structures (Eldridge & Reinke, 2018) and the way this affects migrants and refugees (Horton & Heyman, 2020).

Unlike questions of labour, this issue is well addressed in Middle Eastern scholarship. Work draws on an extended body of literature on protracted refugee crises in the Levant and further afield, and the case of UNRWA. The study of NGOs is a distinct subset of social science research in the Middle East, and has provoked extensive reflection on the structural tensions created between the purported goals of positive social change, and the orientalist and imperialist tendencies of international NGOs (Abdo, 2010). In the Levant, this body of literature is perhaps most developed with regards to UNRWA (Khour, 2010; Rosenfeld, 2010; Takkenberg, 2009). In the case of the Syrian refugee crisis, Turner (2020) has shown how humanitarian organisations’ discourse and practice imposes racial and neoliberal categorisations and values on Syrians in Za’atari refugee camp in Jordan.

This has been documented in Lebanon extensively. Marron (2016) has shown how humanitarian organisations’ interventions into Palestinian refugee camps has deeply affected the economic and social relations of these communities, and resulted in a ‘cartelisation’ of camp space. In my aid and development work prior, I had extensive experience negotiating this space. Other recent work has shown how NGOs problematise other normative cultural
practices of hospitality and concepts of home (Wagner, 2018). Wagner (2017) has further explained how depoliticised NGO interventions actively ignored the importance of labour market considerations for Syrian refugees. The role of NGOs and other non-state organisations in responding to the Syrian refugee crisis has been studied in Turkey. Even prior to the Syrian Civil War, NGOs and humanitarian organisations were deeply implicated in Lebanon’s political economy (Cammett, 2015; Cammett & Issar, 2010).

In Lebanon new organisational constellations have emerged with the Syrian refugee crisis. In the face of government inaction, humanitarian organisations from the UN and INGOs appear to have been thrust to the forefront of refugee governance. Schmelter (2016) has gone so far as to characterise this as a ‘humanitarian regime’, whereby these organisations have been left to reactively negotiate and create a piecemeal policy response to the mass forced migration.

The UNHCR sits uncomfortably at the centre of this structure, which is in theory organised by the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). After several years of inaction and ad hoc policymaking and intervention, international donor and NGO intervention in Lebanon was finally given a formal framework in the form of the LCRP in 2015. Local authorities and municipalities and other aid organisations have been at the forefront of the huge influx of Syrian refugees, and there has been poor communication between these organisations and between them and the central government, and they have been noted to lack the capacity to respond adequately to the crisis (Boustani et al., 2016). The LCRP proposed to focus donor aid on improving the capacity of already existing Lebanese public institutions as a means to increase the country’s capacity to host Syrian refugees (Government of Lebanon & United Nations, 2019).

Fakhoury (2017, 2021) has situated the Lebanese state’s ‘institutional vacuum’ and subsequent ‘outsourcing’ of response to non-state actors in the context of Lebanese sectarian and corrupt political system. Works such as Mourad and Piron (2016) and Christophersen et. al. (2013) have explored how these interventions have struggled with already overstretched and ineffective municipal service delivery and social cleavages. Fawaz and Harb (2020) analysed the multifaceted constellation of non-state organisations that emerged in the
aftermath of the economic crisis and Beirut port explosion in 2020, drawing attention to the military’s dominant role in coordinating these responses. Jagarnathsingh (2018) gives a similar picture in her account of the confused multiplicity of non-governmental actors and the dominance of the security apparatus in the governance of Syrian refugees.

Institutional practice at ‘street-level’ diverges greatly from the LCRP, and this was clear in my field site. Recent years work has seen a turn to deconstructing and analysing the nature of interventions in the Levant and problematizing their social and economic impact (Fakhoury, 2020). Stel (Nassar & Stel, 2019; Stel, 2020) has shown how the ambiguities of humanitarian interventions in refugee governance should be seen in the context of a broader ‘hybrid sovereign state’. The ambivalent socio-economic impact of humanitarian interventions in Lebanon has been extensively documented by scholars such as Carpi (Boustani et al., 2016; Carpi, 2014, 2015, 2020b). This has been explored by other journalistic accounts of the granular workings of the ‘humanitarian regime’ and its interaction with the Lebanese state apparatus, which have shone a light on the economic underpinnings of these encounters (see for example Parker, 2016; Sewell & Alfred, 2017).

**NGO projects and the UN**

The UN looms large in refugee life in Lebanon. With the Syrian embassy opaque and distant, and the Lebanese state apparatus hostile or indifferent at best, the UN represents by far the best funded, most powerful bureaucratic apparatus that Syrian refugees might encounter. My interlocutors used the term *al umam* expansively – directly translated, the word means literally ‘the nations’, and this is an abbreviation for the Arabic the United Nations, *al umam al mutahida*. They used the term to refer to to several distinct bodies with widely varying mandates and remits of work, and *al umam* was: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations International Children’s Emergency Fund (UNICEF), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the World Food Programme (WFP) and any other UN affiliated organisations. It was also used to refer to international NGOs, who were partially funded by these organisations, such as the Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC),
Caritas, Medicins Sans Frontiers (MSF) and many others. These organisations in turn worked with local Lebanese NGOs, who could also sometimes be referred to as *al umam*.

This conflation sometimes represented confusion on the part of my interlocutors, and sometimes was simply a shorthand for similar organisations operating basically identically in the same region. As a general rule in Lebanon, most fieldwork and projects are actually delivered by international NGOs in partnership with local NGOs and municipalities. There was one dominant NGO in the central and Northern Biqa’a called FOUND, and my interlocutors were far more familiar with the structure of this organisation, often referring to individual projects and employees.

In the absence of any intelligible Lebanese system to regularise their stay, refugees often turned to *al umam*. Considerations of work and wealth arose for Syrian refugees even prior to interaction with *al umam*. As discussed in Chapter IV, securing a work permit via a Lebanese kafeel was generally considered the most secure type of status for a Syrian in Lebanon, as it gave some legal standing to their work and created a clientelist relationship with a Lebanese villager. However, the majority of Syrians in the camp were not wealthy enough to pay for a kafeel and were unable to develop a long-term relationship with any Lebanese villagers which could result in some kind of work-for-sponsorship exchange. For these Syrians, registration with the UNHCR was the best option. While they meant very different things legally, they were discursively treated as being at least roughly commensurable - both provided a modicum of protection against harassment by the Lebanese security services and the risk of arbitrary arrest. As Anwar put it, ‘*al umam* is my kafeel - with a Lebanese, you don’t know. Maybe you will pay and then you don’t get your papers. Maybe he comes to me and tells me I have to work for him.’

Once again, work was central to these interactions – those Syrians registering with a kafeel were allowed to work in the three sectors of agriculture, construction, and cleaning (Jagarnathsingh, 2016), and even this had very shaky legal standing and could be subject to reversal at any moment. Those Syrians registering with the UN were often (but not always) obliged to sign a pledge not to work, which they then promptly ignored. The labyrinthine and tortured developments of Syrian registration and legal status in Lebanon is discussed in detail
by Janmyr (2016, 2017, 2018), Jagarnathsingh (2018) and Stel (2020), but the result was that it was almost impossible to fully regularise one’s residency and work in Lebanon. For my interlocutors, as for most Syrians, the question was deciding which labour and residency laws was it most sensible to break. They would carefully weigh up the advantages and disadvantages of different registrations, which varied depending on where they were living and working. Broadly speaking, the calculation was a question of economics and security: having a Lebanese kafeel offered more security, especially if a Syrian was visibly working and ran the risk of being picked up by security services. On the other hand, it was an expense and usually disbarred the Syrian from certain UN based distributions. Of course, actual success in registration was often a matter of chance – many Syrians were deregistered as refugees with the UNHCR as a result of Lebanese state interventions, and a kafeel could similarly arbitrarily revoke their sponsorship from a Syrian at a moment’s notice.

The main potential benefit of UNHCR registration was access to cash assistance programmes, and a number of other health services and some distributions. Income from cash assistance programmes could have a significant impact on a family’s livelihood – prior to the financial crisis, roughly half the families in my field site were receiving the baseline payments of US$27 in monthly aid for each family member from the WFP. This was delivered via the bitaqa hamra, which literally translates as ‘red card’ - this refers to the debit card given to Syrian households to access the centralised cash-based assistance schemes implemented by the UNHCR, WFP and other partners. Other families received an additional US$180 for being even more hard up, so a large family could have a monthly guaranteed income of several hundred dollars, if they were lucky enough to have all their paperwork in order and qualify for these schemes. Having one’s name on these lists could also translate into distributions of other goods like the one shown in figure 20, usually winterization items such as extra tent tarpaulin (shadr) and diesel fuel (mazot).

Confusingly, however, some aid and distributions were undertaken by other NGOs using different lists to those of the UN, which were compiled independently. One major local NGO had its own list of camp households and inhabitants, which while still outdated was far more up to date than the lists used by al umam. Many of my interlocutors were unclear about how these lists were formed or the differences between them, or the process by which they could
get their names on them. Often, attitudes were simply ones of resignation: maybe they would get lucky, maybe not - who knows what systems were used to decide who qualifies for extra shadr this year? Who knows why their name was removed from the UNHCR or WFP aid lists? While these distributions and assistance often helped with household maintenance, healthcare, and daily domestic needs, they were generally too small and unreliable to feature greatly in my interlocutors calculations.

Knowledge of the inner workings of al umam often came via an opaque text message, informing the families of a payment made into their account, summoning them to Zahleh for an interview, or informing them that they no longer qualified for certain benefits. This was then supplemented by word of mouth and announcements on social media, which was rife with rumours and suppositions. Refugees might be summoned to the UN headquarters in Zahleh to wait in long queues in order to confirm details of their paperwork, or to a Ba'albeck subsidiary to undergo an iris scan to confirm that they were still in the country. These control measures were both oppressive and chaotic, and served to reinforce the opacity of the vast, quasi-state apparatus. From the refugees’ perspectives many of the decisions al umam took regarding their own personal cases seemed random and unintelligible, and indeed, oftentimes they were.

While due to the Lebanese state’s ‘no-camp policy’ discussed in Chapter III, most camps in the Biqa’a were private enterprises. While a few were established and administered by local NGOs, for the most part they were the product of agreements between the inhabitants and local Lebanese landowners and the municipality. After being established in this way, the camp could then be assigned a UNHCR location number, against which data could be collected and aid distributed. This number did not offer the camp any form of legality or protection, but simply identified it as a location that was visible and legible to al umam. With thousands of these locations spread out through the valley, the UNHCR was visibly struggling to keep their data up to date, let alone deliver emergency aid on this basis.

Alongside UNHCR – WFP cash transfers, INGOs (such as NRC, DRC, Caritas) tended to deliver aid projects in collaboration with local Lebanese partner organisations. Many of these local partner organisations had very low capacity and little long-term, embedded presence in
either the Syrian or the Lebanese communities. Every couple of months throughout the
course of my fieldwork, a 4x4 with a NGO logo would pull up unannounced to the camp, with
an unfriendly driver and a new nervous looking NGO worker from far away down the valley.
They would ask to speak to the shaweesh, and then ask Abu Mahmoud the same questions
he had answered a dozen times before. ‘What do you need? How many tents are there? What
is the camp number?’ The lads would gather round the car, making jokes and generally not
taking it seriously. While some of the NGO workers accepted offers of Syrian hospitality in the
camp, others were visibly terrified or disgusted. Several times, I saw the NGO worker refuse
to leave the car and conduct the entire interaction through a rolled down window, making no
effort to hide their contempt for the camp and its inhabitants.

As we have seen, Syrians’ decisions to register as a refugee with al umam were conditioned
by balancing work, income, and risk considerations. Those NGO activities which affected the
camp were similarly inflected by labour considerations. In my field site of Ba’albeck and the
surrounding network of villages, there was one local NGO called FOUND which had by far the
most visible on-the-ground footprint, and dominated the delivery of projects in the region. It
had long-term relationships with many of the camps and communities of the area, and it was
run three local Lebanese men who had studied in Europe, but were also neatly drawn from
three of the largest clans in the area. They would implement, again in partnership with several
other NGOs, local and international, projects ranging from infrastructure building, to
education, to aid distribution, to providing bins to municipalities. Likewise, their employees
were drawn mostly from their clans, and were usually part of the communities that they were
working with. FOUND owed their effective functioning and capacities to their integration into
the Lebanese clan system, and their ability to provide appropriate and well-paid work to
villagers.

Lebanese communities were very hostile to direct distributions by NGOs to Syrians, and would
often demand that they too received part or all of the goods or money in question. Projects
instead took advantage of the social status of Syrians as wage labourers, and the most
significant interventions in my field site involved FOUND temporarily employing large
numbers of Syrian refugees in activities which would benefit the Lebanese villagers. This
reflected a broad compromise replicated in NGO interventions throughout Lebanon – the
Lebanese community would allow Syrians to be temporarily employed in well-paid jobs with good working conditions by the NGO, provided that the Lebanese community was the direct beneficiary of the work they were undertaking. In many ways this was a local manifestation of the principles articulated in the LCRP. In the case of FOUND, for example, a standard project might perhaps employ a Syrian construction labourer for one month in a project to improve Lebanese village irrigation system. The Lebanese village would benefit from the improved infrastructure, while the Syrian would be paid LL30,000 per day, (US$20 at the pre-crisis exchange rate, roughly double the standard wage from casual employment) and have guaranteed and far more comfortable working conditions.

As far as the Syrian camp was concerned then, NGOs were mostly seen as sources of intermittent well-paid employment, with the possibility of the occasional distribution of household goods and perhaps some support for medical costs. I was friendly with several FOUND project coordinators and observed as they undertook numerous projects over the course of my field work, balancing the demands of their donors, local villagers, and the Syrian refugees, and even managing to serve their own interests every now and then. NGO interventions were beholden to this countrywide tacit agreement that Syrians could receive aid through employment, provided the benefits were funnelled to the local Lebanese community. Deciding who would receive this work depended on Syrian family and tribal structures within the camp, and also the Lebanese community’s requirements for labour. As in the previous chapters, questions of labour organisation the family were central in determining social relations in the community, in this case being the important question of what aid was delivered, and who benefitted.

I will now give a case study of a FOUND project implemented with funding from a large international donor which illustrates the extent to which labour market considerations and tribal family structures determined the viability and content of NGO interventions in my field site.
Figure 20 - A truck arrives to distribute tent materials from the UN and an INGO

Picking apples, picking labourers: a case study of NGO intervention into the Syrian labour market

With each project that FOUND implemented, one of the main issues was choosing a fair distribution of workers from each family in the camp. It was generally taken for granted that projects would be implemented on a household basis, and that FOUND would not be able to identify the most in-need households. The general principle adopted was that each family would be assigned one work place on a given project. However, projects rarely employed the entire camp, so in order to avoid allegations of favouritism and disputes amongst the camp inhabitants, FOUND had to keep track of who had been employed in previous projects and ensure a steady rotation of (well-paid) work amongst the households of the camp.

However, there was no effective shaweesh in the camp or official list of camp households and inhabitants, and these were constantly changing as families left or joined the camp or stayed...
temporarily for a brief period of work. To further complicate matters, some men had two wives in the camp, so there was a constant argument about whether this constituted two separate households and thus merited two workplaces on a given project. Similarly, very small households such as new husband and wife were sometimes discounted and treated as part of the husband’s father’s household, but this too was subject to fierce debate amongst the Syrian refugees.

One of the largest projects that FOUND implemented during my fieldwork attempted to organise and pay Syrian labourers and distribute them amongst the Lebanese farmers in the harvest season of 2020. The humanitarian logic of this project, like many others, was convoluted – it essentially amounted to international donors subsidising the Lebanese apple harvest in exchange for being allowed by the local community to pay Syrian refugee families a few hundred dollars above the monthly wage. After a year of the Lebanese economic crisis and corresponding collapse in real wages, the value of this better paid work was heightened amongst the Syrian community. However, from the outset the project was beset by difficulties and arguments. The FOUND coordinators struggled for months to firstly collect a reliable list of Syrian refugees living in the camp and village, and then to assign one worker from each household a place on their work scheme. With a limited number of places, each suggested distribution resulted in protest from those households who were left out of the project (figure 21 shows one of the many group discussions had by the camp dwellers about these work placements).

Alongside this, the project also proposed to employ Lebanese villagers and (mostly non-shawi) Syrians who lived in village, and it split the allotment of workplaces between these groups – forty workplaces for each of the three groups. This was based on a rough population estimate by the NGO coordinator, and also what he thought would be acceptable to the Lebanese villagers. Of the village-dwelling Syrians, several notable families were omitted from the list, the most striking being the family of Hammad, the shopkeeper introduced in Chapter III. With his visibly secure financial position and plenty of work for his family, the coordinator decided that he could be justifiably and safely left out of the project. Missing out on projects like this was one of the costs of Hammad’s more secure and integrated position in Lebanon.
Similarly, a third of the workplaces were reserved for Lebanese villagers, but it was generally understood that they would not actually show up for work, but collect the wages anyway. For the Syrians and the Lebanese NGO coordinators, this was treated as simply the cost of doing business. I was with my Syrian interlocutor Jalal waiting outside the village hall to sign up for the project in a chaotic line of Syrians, while a series of grim looking Lebanese men pulled up in 4x4s and barged past us, ignoring the queue. They signed up for the project and hopped back in their car, not once even acknowledging the presence of the Syrians. I expressed doubt to Jalal that these men would work alongside him in the orchards, and he laughed at my naivety. ‘The Lebanese never work – if they come, they sit and smoke and drink tea’, he said, light-heartedly.

The coordinators managed to expand the scope of the project several times to incorporate more workers in order to balance demands and avoid disputes. In early September, a finalised list of workers was circulated and those named were invited to come to the village hall to sign up for the project. However, when the Syrians from the camp arrived to the village hall, they found that the list had been changed. It transpired that, after the initial circulation of the list, a couple of the more influential camp inhabitants had felt it was unfair and contacted the NGO once again – some households had been left out, while others had been assigned two workplaces. The NGO responded to their advice and changed the list, but in doing so inadvertently empowered these men as gatekeepers to this more lucrative and easy work. It was no coincidence, perhaps, that these camp inhabitants were actively working with the village municipality and also with the regime-affiliated League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon (see later section in this chapter).

However, this was not the end of the story. Over the next two days, the village hall was filled with Syrians trying to re-add their names or members of their households to the list, or correct what they thought had been an initial oversight. Others appealed to Lebanese patrons in the village to intervene on their behalf and ensure that they had work by ‘doing wasta’. For example, one of my interlocutors called Abdelaziz had been named in the originally published list but was subsequently removed from the new list. This was because, he was told, he currently lived with his brothers and so despite being married and having children who were currently in Raqqa, his current tent constituted one household. As such only one workplace
would be assigned to this household. He objected to this, arguing that he had a family and household like everyone else, they just weren’t here right now. For the camp dwellers, highly mobile households were the norm and geographical distance was not necessarily a marker of absence from the community, and his argument was generally received favourably (Chapter VIII explains Syrian mobility and geography in more detail). He was especially annoyed with handful of men from the camp who had inserted themselves into a position of power. However, he was a regular employee of one of the more prominent villagers who was on the municipal council and they had developed a patron-client relationship (as in Chapter IV). Abdelaziz explained the situation to this Lebanese villager, who in turn spoke with one of the NGO coordinators, a fellow clansman and a close relative. The coordinator relented, and reassigned Abdelaziz his workplace. This pattern was replicated dozens of times to varying degrees of success, and the NGO coordinators struggled to juggle these competing claims to well-paid work. Several times these Lebanese patrons arrived at the village hall personally, with their Syrian clients in tow, to press their claims to places on the project.

Once the distribution of workplaces was (more or less) finalised, a new obstacle was encountered: distributing them between the Lebanese farmers and orchards. In theory, the Syrian workers were to be distributed amongst the poorer, more unstable Lebanese farmers, but actually conducting any kind of meaningful assessment here was out of the questions. Instead, the project numbers were expanded so that at least a couple of Syrian labourers could be assigned to each Lebanese farmer, regardless of his wealth and landholdings. The local coordinator once again struggled to write a list of orchard owners that roughly corresponded to the different village households and clan lineages, and the size of their orchards. On top of this, the complex shared ownership and early/delayed inheritance practices described in Chapter VI added another layer of confusion to achieving a socially acceptable distribution of the Syrian workers.

More layers of confusion were to follow. The timing of the apple picking season was not fixed, of course, but varied from orchard to orchard. Farmers would often decide to pick their crops with just a few days’ notice, and this meant that rather than being able to stagger the distribution of Syrian labourers evenly across the harvest season, the demand for workers looked to be very intense for just one brief period, with many farmers wanting to pick their
crop at the same time. Worse still, because the hashish harvest began late that year, there was more overlap between the two crops than usual, adding an extra logistical dimension to the problems. Normally, the hashish harvest began in early September and was mostly completed by October, just in time for the apple-picking to begin. However, this year the hashish was not ready until late September, creating worker shortages. To further add to all this confusion and the logistical difficulties faced by FOUND coordinators, the Syrians of the camp substituted members of the same household for one another, and began to trade shifts between households. For example, if one household had an opportunity for more lucrative hashish processing work, they might let a neighbour or cousin take their assigned shift and take a cut of the daily wage.

The delays and disorganisation of this intervention into the local agrarian economy was such that eventually many of the farmers harvested the apples by hiring their own casual labourers – for the most part, these were exactly the same Syrian men and women whose names were on the NGOs lists in the first place. The finalisation and confirmation of the lists was so encumbered with difficulties navigating the family structures and politics of the camp and village that most of the crops had already been harvested. Since the project was already well underway, an allowance was made for the Syrians to undertake other tasks that the Lebanese farmers needed doing. This resulted in huge discrepancies in the types of work – some Syrians were constantly ordered by the farmers to do menial tasks, while others were given a fairly simple task like clearing the grounds of the orchard and left to it. The calculation of hours once again emerged as an issue, with some Syrians being sent home early and others being expected to complete tasks that took much longer than the hours they had been assigned by the NGO.

Fouad, one of the Lebanese farmers from the Chapter VI, told me that the national dynamics between Syrians and Lebanese meant that a mixed team would never work – Lebanese villagers would not collaborate with Syrians, and gender norms meant no end of issues for mixed-gender-nationality teams. For the most part, the project simply ignored the Lebanese villagers who had been assigned as workers. However, Fouad had opted instead to ask FOUND for a whole team of Lebanese workers. This was unusual and under normal circumstances this would violate norms of clan hierarchy. However, Fouad was able to circumvent this: he
ensured that he was assigned mostly workers who were much younger men and women and in some way related to him, so his work team reproduced the patriarchal clan structure of the village – he would be unable to exercise authority over men who were closer to his age and less related to him. Since the Lebanese workers were in far less demand, he was able to engineer a much larger team than usual. He was a charismatic man, and was able to cajole these young Lebanese workers into a friendly, though not particularly efficient, work environment.

Despite all this confusion, the FOUND coordinators and their families were all assigned the more sought after, reliable Syrian workers. While everyone else, Syrian and Lebanese alike, experienced interminable delays, for these landowners, their paperwork was completed in a timely fashion and their Syrian workers were ready to pick their orchards in time for the harvest. It also meant a degree of accommodation when it came to the work groups – leaving early, arriving late, or swapping shifts with a relative would be overlooked. Several of these coordinators had long-term patron-client relationships that extended well beyond this one individual project, and working well for a Lebanese coordinator would lead to being offered more work by the family at a later date. This expedited process was yet another one of the mutual benefits of the kinds of partnerships described in Chapter IV.

This project case study illustrates the extent to which NGO interventions were conditioned by questions of Syrian labour organisation. NGO projects proceeded on the basis that they reinforced the association between Syrians and strictly controlled wage labour and respected the social hierarchy between the two communities. Furthermore, as this account shows, NGO interventions were premised upon family labour practices, and further were dramatically constrained and shaped by Syrian community perceptions of the appropriate distribution of labour by household. Similar processes were replicated across all of the projects that I observed over the course of my fieldwork. Fouad’s case of an entirely Lebanese work team further reinforces this conclusion – he understood precisely these social relations and used this to take advantage of the intervention.
The men of the camp discuss the distribution of good NGO work between the households and negotiate with the Lebanese project coordinator.

**The League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon**

The League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon was the most active formal institution within the Syrian community. While the name might suggest certain trade union-like functions, the League was membership organisation that roughly resembled a cross between a political party and a rotary club. It was a network that spread through the Syrian community in Lebanon, and while not officially part of the Ba’ath party, it was very much an Assad loyalist organisation. The League functioned as a grassroots line of communication between regime loyalists and the broader Syrian refugee-labourer community in Lebanon. Members could be found in Syrian communities throughout Lebanon, and while it was not present in every single camp, a member of the League was rarely far away.
Upon its inception in 1974 and official foundation in 1977, the League seems to have been at least initially involved in labour organisation and securing social protection for Syrian workers in Lebanon. From the outset, however, it was deeply linked to the Assad regime (Chalcraft, 2009, p.120) and its activities were tied to the Syrian occupation. After an abortive attempt at collective action, the League shifted to serve a role as a mouthpiece and arm of cultural propaganda for the Assad regime. The league’s slogan is ‘Rights, Education, Health’, but in my field site, I saw members of the organisation undertake just one distributive activity, spraying disinfectant at the beginning of the COVID pandemic.

Nominally a league for workers, membership did not seem to be necessarily contingent on actually engaging in wage-labour. Amongst my Syrian interlocutors, many of the older men had been members of the Ba’ath party and other regime supporting parties before the Civil War in Syria and had received a degree of political education through these structures. The younger men had generally fled Syria before they could take an active role in this party structure, and only a few of the more committed camp dwellers had maintained their party memberships. For both generations, the League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon was one of the main formal channels for interaction with the Syrian regime from the Biqa’a.

The most visible activity of the League was organising demonstrations of loyalty to Assad in the Syrian communities of Lebanon. Intermittently, members organised meetings consisting entirely of older men (many of whom did not work, despite what the name of the organisation would imply), who would publicly declare their allegiance to Assad. This often took the form of posing for photographs with the Syrian regime flag, the logo of the League, and perhaps a picture of Assad himself. They occasionally distributed caps, t-shirts, jackets and pictures of Assad to the other camp dwellers, and held small rallies which had the uneasy blessing of the pro-Syrian regime Lebanese communities and were an opportunity for Syrians to publicly renew their allegiance to Assad. The League was one of the primary actors involved in organising and transporting Syrian regime loyalist to vote in the 2021 Syrian presidential election (Rantisi, 2021; Sewell, 2021), and the current head of the League, Mustafa Mansour, regularly makes statements which parrot the regime’s party line concerning specific refugee-related issues in Lebanon.
Alongside these public functions, the League network played an important role as a channel for interaction with the Syrian state apparatus. As a network of regime loyalist in Lebanon, it not only worked to facilitate returns, but also offered a route for informal communication for those with legal or document issues. While not official, members could get in contact with other members who could advice on specific issues such as cross border mobility, registering property, or registering to vote. After a decade of Civil War, a vast number of complex bureaucratic problems had arisen, and the League served as a channel to the related interactions between the mass of Syrians in Lebanon and the overwhelmed and crumbling Syrian state apparatus.

The League used these networks to facilitate the control and surveillance of the Syrian community in Lebanon, in coordination with other pro-regime Lebanese organisations. In the following account, I show how the League of Syrian Workers in Lebanon used its intermediary role in coordinating NGO distributions to collect information on the Syrian community. It shared this information with the local municipality, which tried to use it to manage the Syrian workforce and increase local informal taxation. This episode is illustrative of the costs of visibility as a Syrian, and the way that once again this was a function of labour and tax income considerations.

An encounter with the League: a case study of collaboration

I drove carefully over the potholed, crumbling road, past the stinking leaking sewage on the western side of the village, to meet one of my interlocutors, Abed. He was a fervent regime loyalist from the camp and normally we would sit on a carpet in front of his tent while he regaled me with conspiracies, but today I picked him up from a corner shop where he had just bought three packs of cigarettes. Without explaining why, he directed me to a small house set back a little off the road on the outskirts of the village. I drove past it regularly, and the tell-tale Chinese motorcycle parked outside indicated that it was inhabited by a Syrian, but after a year with the labourers of the villager, I was still unclear who he was.

We entered the house to find two Syrian men who I vaguely recognised – they were neither from the shawi community, nor from Hammad’s extended clan. I had never seen them
labouring with my interlocutors, but rather had encountered them on the peripheries of a few social gatherings in both the camp and the village. Abu Hassan was a tough looking Kurdish man from Aleppo, who had been living in the village for almost two decades, but did not have the same social prominence as Hammad or the figurehead status of Abu Ibrahim. Haj Ahmed was also from Aleppo, and a member of the same broader tribal federation that the *shawi* Syrians belonged to, though he was not *shawi* himself. He had an authoritative, superior air, and it was his house that we were in. These three Syrians were ardent Ba’athists, and after I was served tea and underwent a brief interrogation, the conversation turned to stories of regime intrigue and political connections here and back home.

As we were chatting, Abu Hassan was copying notes from one rough book into a clearer list, double-checking names and family sizes every so often with Abed. He was compiling an up-to-date list of the Syrian inhabitants of the village and surrounding areas, and Abed was his reference for the ever-changing social landscape of the camp. He was very diligent in his recording of the granular details of the household, far more so that I had ever seen in similar administrative exercises with FOUND or the municipality. Meanwhile, Haj Ahmed alternated between quizzing me on my research project and giving authoritative and authoritarian statements on how the Syrian working classes should be governed. ‘Everyone has his specialism’ he explained to me, unprompted. ‘Shepherds know about sheep, what do they know about governing? Syria needs a soldier to control it!’ he said as Abed nodded along. Despite, or perhaps because of his suspicions of me, Haj Ahmed was keen to show me photographs of him in military garb, serving in some kind of paramilitary capacity for the regime back in Syria in the early days of the Civil War. He was a lawyer by profession who had left Syria after an internal regime power struggle had left him politically exposed. In the Biqa’a, he was still working as a lawyer, making use of his networks to act as a transnational intermediary for Syrians in Lebanon.

These men were far more guarded when they spoke with me and made no secret of their suspicions that I was an American or Mossad spy. Amongst the Syrian community, it was also only these more avowed Ba’athists and League men who tried to adopt more interrogative, *muhkhabarat* roles with me, quizzing me in detail and with obvious suspicion, sometimes
crossing over into outright hostility. However, for the most part, they preferred to steer the conversation towards the sexual predilections of European women.

Amongst his various and vague jobs, Abu Hassan was a municipal employee of some kind, and the list he was writing was essentially a census on the Syrians of the region, updating the last list which the municipality had compiled in 2016. He was following up on which families had registered their names with the municipality and paid LL10,000 for the newly issued municipality ID cards. The municipality had decided that all workers over the age of 14 had to register for these cards, and these lists that Abu Hassan was writing neatly in his copy book were to form the basis for the future administration of the Syrians in the village and surrounding areas. Once again, the municipality reinforced the association between Syrians and wage labourers, making it the key component of their institutional legibility.

The compilation of this list neatly illustrates the intertwinement between humanitarian aid, municipal governance and taxation, Syrian labour, and the Syrian regime. In the summer of 2020, the economic crisis was well underway and essentials such as cooking oil had become prohibitively expensive. Mirroring practices throughout the country, a larger international NGO was undertaking a distribution of food in partnership with the municipality. Boxes of staples such as rice and oil worth perhaps LL200,000 (roughly US$30 at the time) were to be distributed to both the Lebanese and Syrian communities. The distribution was paid for by the international NGO, but the goods were stored and distributed by the municipality. They were stored in the municipal building, and first distributed amongst the Lebanese population. The municipality made clear that the household-worker lists compiled by Abu Hassan would form the basis for those households eligible for the distribution, and so this NGO inadvertently provided the incentive needed for Syrians to register. Syrian intermediaries, all of whom were members of the League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon, coordinated this process. There was no formalised, explicit institutional collaboration, but members of the League were all actively helping the municipality and similarly seemed to have some knowledge of the internal workings of the international NGO’s broader regional distribution plans.

Once the distribution was complete the implications of this new census became clear. Syrians had benefitted in the short term, but now the municipality had a far more coherent, reliable
list of working Syrians which they could use for future camp administration. The following month, municipal employees and their intermediaries began using this list to enforce far stricter collection of monthly waste disposal taxes (LL10,000 per household) and water payments (LL20,000 per household). Rather than relying on the haphazard word of the appointed camp shawesh Abu Mahmoud, they now had their own registry which they began to follow up with threatening phone calls to those who hadn’t paid. The following month prices, which had been fixed throughout the crisis, began to rise.

The list was not limited to the camp and included Syrians living in tents on private land and in rented accommodation. With an accurate list here, Lebanese municipal employees began a campaign to systematically coerce these Syrians to move off the private land and into the camp. This would increase the water and tax revenues, and weaken the patron-client relationships which had developed as a result of these private arrangements. It was thus a way to both increase taxation and also weaken the position Syrian labour in the valley. However, despite serious and repeated threats of violence many Syrians outside of the camp stayed put, trusting in their Lebanese patrons to protect them against municipal predation. Their gamble proved correct, and the municipality’s attempts to further corral the Syrian population was met with resistance from individual Lebanese landowners. While by no means friendly to the Syrian population, men like Ammar and Fouad (see Chapter VI) would not allow fellow clansmen in the municipality to dictate what they could and couldn’t do on their own land. After a few months of harassment, it became clear that the local farmers were keen to maintain these private rental arrangements and would not enforce the municipal ordinance, and the issue was quietly shelved.

Further attempts at extraction quickly followed. A few months later, the municipality declared that all the tents of the camp were, in fact, the property of the municipality. This was news to the camp inhabitants – while the camp land had been prepared by the municipality, the tents themselves and much of the camp infrastructure had been built with a combination of FOUND humanitarian aid money and private Syrian funds in 2016. There was a considerable market in tents amongst the Syrian community (see Chapter VIII), but the municipality had little interest in this. Rather, the intended effect of this ordinance was to further disenfranchise the Syrians by forbidding them from dismantling their tents and moving to private land or a
different camp. While it may not have been wholly enforceable, it made camp dwellers think twice before trying to sell their tents or move. It further weakened the position of Syrian labour by raising the costs of mobility and household access to wealth through the sale of tents and trapped the inhabitants into paying the steadily rising waste collection tax and water bills.

Members of the League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon thus actively worked with the municipality to weaken the position of Syrian labour in the village and surrounding areas. They did so by using their intermediary roles to facilitate distributions by international NGOs which were intended to help with household reproduction. For Abu Hassan and Haj Ahmed, this activity was a key part of their nebulous employment as intermediaries in the municipality and as a lawyer, respectively. Abed clearly hoped to similarly leverage his intermediary role into some kind of long-term personal benefit. It is important to note that given all three of these men’s affiliation with the Syrian regime, the census of Syrians in the area was not only in the hands of the municipality, but effectively in the hands of the Syrian regime as well, should it be required. The census was premised on the Syrians as labourers, and further facilitated predatory rent extraction practices.

The community support box

Amongst the Kurdish and other non-shawi Syrian inhabitants of the village, there were several attempts to formalise community solidarity and redistribution on the basis of non-family networks. As noted in Chapter III, this community was made up of a patchwork of different families often related through marriage, rather than as members of the same tribe and clan. While social relations were less clear and certainly less diligently maintained than the shawi community, there was still a clear sense of community of the ‘Syrians of the village’ and Hammad’s family was the central node around which they orbited.

These families sometimes helped each other out financially, lending each other money, paying each other’s bills, or using wasta to reduce hospital bills and other costs. However, as the war continued and more newcomers arrived in increasingly worse financial circumstances, some members of the community like Hammad felt that individual largesse
was not enough to overcome these regular and often expensive problems. Collectively, and after much discussion, in early 2019 these various families agreed to established a mutual aid fund which they called a *sunduq ijtima‘i* (social box), referred to colloquially simply as ‘the box’.

The premise of the box was very simple: each participating family (so almost always a male head of household) would contribute a small sum of LL10,000 (about US$7 at the pre-crisis exchange rate) each month. This would then give them the right, with the consent of all of the other participants, to draw on the total sum in the event of an emergency. With a few dozen families participating, it only took a few months for this some to reach quite large figures, all diligently kept and recorded in a *daftar* by a trusted man. In my field site this box was a noticeably male-led endeavour, but these community savings practices, where social visits are structured around economic goals, have a distinctive and often female history in the region (Hamalian, 1974).

Early on in my research, I had heard of this box and asked interlocutors like Hammad about it. Despite being participants, they were all surprisingly vague on the rules and its organisation and this lack of clarity was eventually the box’s undoing. I first became aware of the tensions surrounding the box while visiting my interlocutor Abu Rayan, a local taxi driver. His father had died back in Syria and I and a handful of other men were attending the ‘aza’a – we were drinking tea and keeping him company around a fire outside in the late autumn cold. It was a small affair – Abu Rayan was a Kurd who was relatively new in the area and did not have particularly strong relations with many of the other local families, but a steady stream of village dwelling Syrians and even the odd camp-dwelling *shawi* Syrian and Lebanese popped by to give their condolences.

We had been sat chatting for a few hours and the topic of the community support box had come up. Abu Rayan had expressed discontent that recently funds from the box had been drawn upon by another family to help to pay for a funeral, but he had not been offered anything to help with his father. He thought that this was unfair, since although his father was in Syria, he had borne the costs of the hospital bills, the funeral and now the ‘aza’a and was based here in the village. The other Syrians who had drawn on the box were in the same
financial position as him, but the deceased member of their family had been physically present in the village.

A week later I was back hanging out with Abu Rayan, trying to set up his new television for him, when two serious looking Kurdish men called around for a chat, one of whom I knew, called Samih. They were other participants in the community box, and his complaints had reached them. They told him that they understood his problems, but that by voicing these complaints out loud, he was undermining the project. The box seemed to be a fragile thing which these men were concerned about protecting, ‘and there are those who want it to fail,’ said of Samih, ominously. Abu Rayan restated his complaints along with his support for the box, but it seemed clear that more issues would arise unless the rules of what constituted an appropriate emergency were clarified.

Predictably, more and more disputes arose over who could draw on the box and when. It was not clear if the box was limited to medical emergencies, or other forms of emergency. Was it for paying hospital bills alone, or also funeral expenses? Some of my interlocutors advocated a conservative notion of an ‘emergency’ while others wanted the box to even extend to helping with the costs of marriage. Participants struggled to agree on a distinction between ‘difficulties’ faced by community members and the more general demands and costs of communal activities of reproduction. Alongside this, as the economic situation worsened in the final months of 2019 and into 2020, more and more members were missing monthly payments. Despite the best efforts of community-minded men like Samih and Hammad, they were unable to maintain a steady monthly flow of cash or to standardise the rules of when funds could be drawn upon. In early 2020, the participants agreed to disband the community box, and return the money to each of the contributors.

Despite this failed attempt by the Syrians of the village, the camp dwellers regularly discussed the possibility of setting up their own social box. They appreciated that unforeseen expenses were a regular occurrence, and money circulated in this community in the form of gifts and contributions at marriages and ‘aza’a but this was done on an individual basis. The Syrians of the camp were keen to standardise these figures, and further speculated on how the box could be used as a collective investment vehicle. Prior to the 2019 - 2020 financial crisis, the
Lebanese lira had been pegged to the dollar and so been a very stable container of value. With its steady and rapid decline, camp members argued for creating a community box where the money was invested in sheep or gold to preserve and increase its value. However, these discussions quickly became bogged down in technical questions about what would constitute an allowable expense, and how they would enforce collections. The consensus amongst the Syrians of the camp was that they would be unable to pressure participants to contribute if they claimed to be hard-up that month, and would be unable to exclude other camp dwellers who wanted to claim on the community box in cases of serious emergency.

These two failures to establish a community box demonstrates the continued centrality of family relations in organising non-labour financial flows between members of the Syrian communities of the region. The impersonal administration and enforcement that was necessary for such organic projects to function clashed with more dominant cultural practices. In the case of Abu Rayan, the village-dwelling Syrian community was unable to establish a disinterested hierarchy of social expenditures, where weddings, funerals, and health emergencies were neatly categorised and ranked. The distance of Abu Rayan’s father also illustrates how the administration of the community box struggled to articulate the boundaries of the community and different approaches to geographical distance. Likewise, the problems identified by the Syrians of the camp show how any impersonal rules would clash with pre-existing family-based norms of mutual support. The box was premised on macroeconomic factors creating a stable currency, and this linkage of local practices to global capitalist markets was further reflected in their consideration of financial speculation in other non-monetary stores of value.

This point was further illustrated by a case of very effective administration of mutual community support that I observed in the camp. The practice of Syrian tribes paying diyya (blood money) in the case of feuds with other tribes was unquestionably adhered to by my interlocutors in the camp. In 2020, one teenage member of Anwar, Abu Mahmoud, and Abu Ibrahim’s tribe got into a fight with a Lebanese teenager in the Western Biqa’a, near the camp of Anwar’s father. He damaged the local Lebanese boy’s eye and an operation was required. After extensive tribal mediation with the injured boy’s Lebanese Sunni tribe, a payment was settled upon and musaliha (reconciliation) was declared. The amount to be paid to the family
of the injured boy was set at roughly LL10,000,000, which each male member of the tribe would be contribute towards equally, regardless of ages. The men of the camp engaged in a detailed and enthusiastic self-census, led by the wajih ash sheikh Abu Khalid (literally translated this means ‘face of the shiekh’ - the tribe’s sheikh was based in Syria and this was the title of his representative in Lebanon) documenting the number of males in each household and persons responsible for paying in a large blue hardback doftar – over a thousand males were registered and contributed to this payment. In this case, impersonal mutual aid practices were effective precisely because they were underpinned by family and tribal normative structures.

Conclusion

Non-family based, formalised social organisations were present and active in my field site. However, their activities were deeply constrained by the labour market and family practices and focussed on work and income. Organisational practices which reinforced the subordinated position of Syrian labour and the existing social hierarchy were accepted, and activities were moulded to suit these social constraints. Similarly, familial relations permeated the workings of these nominally distinct organisational structures, conditioning the logics by which they acted and the options available to them.

In the three case studies analysed above, the logic of family practices and labour relations dominated other institutional aims and objectives. On a national level, UN and donor practices beholden to the constraints of Lebanese oppressive policies towards Syrian refugees and had little impact on the day-to-day lives of my interlocutors. As the case study of FOUND showed, local NGO activities were deeply conditioned by the intersecting demands of the local labour market context and familial relations within the camp. Interventions such as the apple harvest project took for granted that interaction with the two communities must be on the basis of Lebanese as landowners and Syrians as wage labourers and reinforced these associations. The project carefully maintained national hierarchies through its unequal distribution of foreign funds between the different communities, and it was also premised on a specific gendered and hierarchical structure of the household distribution of labour. Interestingly, while on the one hand it supported these exploitative familial relations within
households, on the other hand the project strove to preserve in-camp egalitarian distributive principles *between* Syrian households.

Likewise, the activities of the municipality and the League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon took Syrian labour as the starting point for their administration and census taking. Like FOUND’s intervention, their activities assumed and reinforced the patriarchal household as the basis for social organisation, and further emphasised Syrian wage-labour and the foundational mechanism of interaction between the communities. The compilation of the census clearly illustrates the double-edged sword of social legibility. My interlocutors were struggling to meet the basic requirements of social reproduction and provide daily meals, and the NGO distribution helped them to defray some of these costs. This helped the Syrians in the short term but also served to remove upwards pressure on wages, and ultimately facilitated the predatory extractive practices of the municipality in the longer term.

The abortive attempts to establish community support boxes were also constrained by the growing crisis of social reproduction amongst Syrian refugees and the family-based norms of egalitarian social interaction. Participation and access to the boxes was organised in terms of familial-household units, but labour was not a precondition. These communal projects reflected a genuine communitarian effort to spread the rising costs of social reproduction across the Syrian community. However, participants’ struggled to implement impartial distributive principles in the face of both the rising costs social reproduction such as healthcare, funerals and marriages and expansive notions of family relations. Ultimately, however, the Lebanese financial crisis was central in undermining the institutional logic of the community support box, and this highlighting the extent to which these activities were premised on specific macroeconomic conditions of stability.

In the context of the broader argument of this thesis, this chapter underlines the primacy of labour relations and family practices in structuring relations within and between communities. Other ‘secondary institutions’ were ineffective and responded to the demands of the labour market and family. Municipal ordinances and NGO projects were roundly ignored or drastically altered to suit these competing and far more dominant normative structures. These case studies clearly indicate the need to analyse ‘humanitarian regimes’
with a critical lens – once again an integrative approach has shown the intertwinement between the demands of labour and capital and the demands of social reproduction.
On the move: Syrian lived geography between the camps of the Biqa’a

Introduction

This chapter is concerned with situating the Syrian refugee-labourers within the broader context of the refugee camps of the Biqa’a. Rather than a static population, I argue that the Syrian refugees of the valley were highly mobile and had access to a distinct network of camps and other locations. I explain the workings of this network and show how it was deeply implicated in maintaining the socio-economic relations within the Syrian community that were necessary for its reproduction. Constantly traversing sprawling world of camps and businesses of the Biqa’a, the Syrians reproduced and benefitted from the social capital contained therein. While my ethnography focused on a single site (my main village-camp field site northwest of Ba’albeck), participant observation required me to follow my interlocutors along this lived geography of the Biqa’a, and this revealed the strength and importance and continuity of social relations imported from Syria to the social reproduction of households and labour.

I show how my Syrian interlocutors moved between camps frequently and regularly and explain the variety reasons for this movement, ranging from social visits to labour recruitment to internal markets for certain goods. This movement constitutes a distinct network, and archipelago of meeting places and routes that represents and adapted version of Syrian family and tribal networks, transplanted to the Biqa’a valley. This network represents a distinct lived geography of the valley which is unique to the Syrian communities, and diverges greatly from that of my Lebanese interlocutors. This distinctive geography is crucial to the sustainability of Syrian livelihoods in the valley, and so the maintenance of a cheap, malleable labour force which Lebanese property owners require. It spreads risk across extended family networks, increases choices and anonymity in the face of Lebanese society, and facilitates biological reproduction and a distinctive Syrian identity. It also represents a constrictive social sphere through which family and tribal power relations operate.
The chapter begins by examining the limited literature on internal refugee mobility, and situates my work in the context of scholarship on mobility and segregated space in the Levant more generally. It then explores the lived geography of Syrian society in the Biqa’a, the social and economic capital latent these extended family networks that underpin this. In this chapter, I explain the different means of transportation and socio-economic rationales that govern them, and analyse the main causes and practices of intercamp mobility: work, funerals, weddings, market and bureaucracy, and social visits. I explain the use of this mobility in cases of feuds and evasion and show its role in constituting an idea of freedom for my interlocutors. I show how each of these practices of intercamp mobility can be seen to reproduce a malleable and easily exploitable labour force, through the adaption of pre-existing community and kinship structures.

**Mobility in Lebanon: boundaries and linkages**

As was shown in Chapter III, there is an extensive body of literature which deals with cross-border labour mobility and forced migration in the Levant and globally. However, internal Syrian mobility within Lebanon is, despite its prevalence, an understudied phenomena. Some research has been conducted into Syrian refugee mobility in other parts of the Levant, and this work has shown a strong relationship with questions of labour. In Jordan, encampment and control of Syrian movement has been from the outset explicitly linked to the labour market. Fearful that an influx of cheap Syrian labour would weaken the potential for employment for Jordanians, the Jordanian state has implemented draconian border control policies, strictly enforced labour restrictions, and controlled movement in and out of the major camps. It has further situated these mega-camps such as Za’atari in remote areas, far from urban centres (Turner, 2015). Clandestine movement for Syrians from the camps to other cities still occurs, and legal mobility has been based on attempts to harness and control this massive labour force in what is known as ‘the compact’. Short term work-permits were issued in attempts to create a trade zone, but this has largely been viewed as a failure (Fakhoury, 2020; Howden et al., 2017; Lenner & Turner, 2018). In many ways, Lebanon represents the opposite end of this spectrum, where thirst for weak, cheap Syrian labour has led to an absence of restrictions on mobility.
Studies of Syrian intercamp mobility may be sparse, but there is an extensive body of literature on Lebanese mobilities which deals with spatial bordering practices and territorialisation in the region. Much of this work finds its origins in the Lebanese Civil War, where with the collapse of the Lebanese state the country was carved up into sectarian militia territory. Lived geographies and borders, checkpoints and routes became inextricable from one’s sectarian-political identity. This was perhaps most strikingly manifest in the ‘archipelago of sovereignty’ described by Hanafi (2012), where the PLO established itself as the sovereign power and military force in the dozens of Palestinian camps and gatherings scattered throughout Lebanon in the 1970s, and in collaboration with the LNM controlling large swathes of the country. With the Civil War, this space has shrunk to an archipelago of camps and gatherings. Mobility between these Palestinian territories is common and political and social and kinship connections are strongly maintained between these communities, which are sometimes hundreds of kilometres apart. There are shared accents, urban design features, political structures, food, and social conflicts. For example, violence between armed groups in Ein El Helwe camp may be segregated from the daily life of the surrounding city of Saida, but have important implications for other Palestinian camps on the other side of the country. Political isolation from the state is reinforced – ‘the concrete walls, barbed wire, and army checkpoints which surround each camp mark both the physical and juridical limits of the Lebanese state’s concerns regarding the prosperity and happiness—indeed, the very lives—of the Palestinians’ (Hanafi & Long, 2010 p.17; see also Hanafi et al., 2012, p.46).

Lebanon’s spatial segregation has continued throughout the post-war rebuilding period. Which has been determined by an intersection between political-sectarian cleavages and wealth stratification. Deeb and Harb (2013b, 2013a) have shown how the combination of sectarian space, gender, and modernity have manifest in unexpected new practices of leisure and consumption. The constraints of these emergent geographies are explored by Bou Akar (2018), who argues that time and space in the Lebanese capital are constantly framed in terms of ‘the war yet to come’. Spatial practices reinforce sectarianism and turn peripheral areas into frontier zones between different communities (on this, see also Hafeda, 2019; Khechen, 2018). For Bou Akar, war, violence, and demographic threat are latent in the spatial configurations that she describes, and this securitisation is certainly clear in the Syrian camps. However, the distinct spatial practices and mobilities found in the Syrian camps also
constitute a means to maintain social structures imported from Syria which underpin this marginalised labour force’s social reproduction.

Labour is more central in Monroe’s (2014) account of Syrian urban mobility. She, too, concurs with Bou Akar with regards to the territorialisation of Lebanese urban space in the anticipation of violence (Monroe, 2016). However, she shows how Syrian mobility is conditioned by a related but different set of constraints. Through her ethnography of Syrian delivery workers, she shows how class, national, and regional power relations and hierarchies affected how these labourers approached navigating the city – movement became a geographical calculation of risk and possibility which these Syrians embodied in their movement.

As with the Lebanese population, Syrian spatial practices have generally been understood in terms of hierarchical restrictions. Without wishing to diminish the importance of these oppressive practices, this chapter aims to articulate a more holistic account of Syrian mobile geographies, and approaches mobility from the perspective of sustaining livelihoods and social reproduction. In this sense, this chapter follows Stevens (2016) in seeing Syrian social networks as protective shelters and sources of capital in times of crisis. Zbeidy (2020) echoes this in her study of Syrian refugee marriages and the social network that surrounds them to challenge the idea that displacement represents a liminal state - marriage as a way of ‘home-making’ (p.71). For Syrians displaced to Jordan, the ‘collective effort to get someone married leads to the expansion of family networks and the (re) building of social support systems and connections’ (p.72). My ethnography draws from both of these accounts, arguing that by following the Syrian lived geographies of the Biqa’a, we can see the social networks which underpin refugee livelihoods. In-keeping with the broader argument of this thesis, this lived geography revolves around an intersection of labour considerations and family practices.

The following account of inter-camp mobility emphasises the need to understand the camps and other Syrian refugee spaces and mobilities as a set of social relations which creates a distinctive, often invisible geography of the ‘Syrian’ Biqa’a. Syrian camps of the Biqa’a do not make explicit claims to sovereignty in the way that territory is divided and denoted the works previously discussed - this idea of invisible boundaries is repeated in work on Lebanese
political urban development. Here I am suggesting a distinct geography of invisible linkages which exists for marginalised Syrians. Rather than reinforcing sectarianism or national hierarchies, these linkages maintain distinctive Syrian identities. In this case the shawi tribal Syrian network I describe here is for the most part a pre-existing social network transplanted from Raqqa and scattered throughout the Biqa’a valley. This Syrian network runs parallel to Lebanese Biqa’a geographies - it shares some routes and meeting points, but often diverges, with different roads, shops, times of day, dangers, and rules. Aside from the static camps, this Syrian geography was often invisible, contained within a closed network of Syrian sociality. It was through this constant movement through this social network that the social reproduction of Syrian labour was possible, and this relied on pre-existing cultural practices of family and tribe - this lived geography underpinned the economy of the Biqa’a valley.
Figure 22 - A Syrian man sits on his motorcycle

The Syrian Biq’a
In this section I explain the reasons for and practices surrounding inter-camp mobility, but I must first give a brief outline of how this mobility was achieved. Most Syrian households in my field site had access to a motorcycle. These Chinese produced bikes were not just cheap (at the time of my fieldwork they traded for roughly US$400 – US$500), but hard wearing and could be used on tarmacked roads and dirt tracks. Petrol was cheap and they were fuel efficient, and my interlocutors used them for anything from popping to the shop to riding for hundreds of kilometres down the valley. This style of bike was only ridden by Syrians, with Lebanese motorcyclists riding larger motocross bikes. These personalised and decorated motorcycles were a constant feature of life in the Biqa’a, and young men could often be found tinkering with them outside of their tents or admiring new decorations on social media (see figure 22 and 23 for a typical example of the motorcycle and its positioning in front of the tent).

Syrian motorcycles were rarely legally licensed, as this was prohibitively expensive and required huge amounts of paperwork that these refugees could not access. This meant that owners were always at risk of being stopped by the Lebanese police and having their bikes confiscated, especially if they strayed beyond the confines of their local area. Despite this shaky legal footing, bike theft was uncommon, and even the local Lebanese villagers seemed to draw the line of exploitation of the Syrians here. Several times during my fieldwork, unscrupulous Lebanese men were stopped by more fair-minded local farmers and smugglers from stealing or requisitioning the motorbikes of my Syrian interlocutors.

While young men would often transport their wives, children and other family members precariously perched on their motorbikes, for larger groups and older people taxis were the main form of transport. There were intermittent, cheap bus services running between cities and larger towns, but Syrian camps were often situated at least a drive away from these transportation routes. Syrian taxis operated separately to Lebanese taxis, and outside of the cities and larger towns the two markets were distinct. Lebanese drivers tended to be based in the larger towns and cities of Ba’albeck and Zahleh and could be called out to smaller villages. However, my Syrian interlocutors rarely did this - licensed Lebanese taxi drivers charged more, and the Syrian community in each village would often have one or two men with cars legally registered to their kafeel and wakeel papers giving them the ability to drive
the car (relatively) unmolested by the security services. These men worked as taxi drivers to the Syrian community, and this overcame a whole range of cross-cultural problems. For example, Lebanese taxi drivers would usually charge per trip, and hope to complete as many fares as possible in a day. In contrast, unofficial Syrian taxis were often relatives and so took part in the social engagements that they were transporting their passengers to and from. These drivers would take a fee for the trip, but not be in any hurry to complete it and collect another fare. Also, Lebanese drivers often did not know the names and locations of the different camps and Syrian communities, whereas Syrian taxis were far more adept at navigating this hidden geography. Over the course of my fieldwork, I steadily fulfilled the role of one of these relative-taxi drivers for my interlocutors in the camp. I became one of the handful of taxi drivers for my interlocutors’ cross-Biqa’a journeys – I rarely accepted payment, but even when my passengers were complete strangers Syrian hospitality dictated that I was treated to food and coffee when we arrived at our destination. It was through this participant observation that the central role played by inter-camp mobility in social reproduction of the Syrian labour force was revealed to me.

Checkpoints, ubiquitous on Lebanese roads and frequently used to harass Syrians, did little to stop or even curtail this mobility. ‘Turn right down here,’ said Anwar, ‘I know your car is nizami (literally ‘in order’, but colloquially used to refer to having fully legal status) but she doesn’t have any papers, so it is better’ he said, gesturing to his wife. We were driving down the main Ba’albeck-Hermel road, and I swerved off down a dirt track. The army checkpoint was a couple of hundred meters up ahead, and the well-used dirt track went just around it before rejoining the main road 50 meters after the checkpoint. ‘They know that we take this route. In Syria, there would be a checkpoint on this road as well... but in Lebanon there is no state,’ he shrugged. Knowledge of this geography was a key part of the membership of this marginalised community. When giving interlocutors lifts between the camps, they would constantly crack jokes about my car being nizami and so not subject to searches or checking papers. If I swerved off the main road to avoid checkpoints, this would be met with approval and shouts of surt mina w feena! (‘you have become one of us!’).

Mobile Syrian labour
Mobility throughout the Biqa’a for work reasons was normalised and it was very common for refugees to move between camps permanently and temporarily, in search of work. Some of my interlocutors even commuted between towns and camps on a daily basis. As was demonstrated in previous chapters, decisions regarding encampment were deeply influenced by work considerations, and I have previously discussed the role of seasonal migration several times. Prior to the crisis, Syrian migration to the Biqa’a was largely seasonal, but after the establishment of these more permanent camps internal labour migration has continued. With a glut of workers and depressed wages, mobility within the valley is essential to maintaining employment for an extended family. Wages can then be pooled between several households across multiple camps, which would hedge against periods of unemployment in one or the other (as with Anwar and his father ‘Ahad in Chapter III).

These practices were most visible in September and October, where the population of my main field site swelled. As Lebanese villagers living in Beirut and abroad returned to the village for the summer and early autumn months, so too did Syrians. Almost every household in the camp seemed to have an extra relative staying for the season. During these few months, work was lucrative and easy to find – the more densely populated camps with fixed wages and shaweesh down in the sahel had more than enough workers. Family members slowly appeared in the camp – a teenage brother-in-law, a sister, a mother, and joined the now highly in-demand warsheh of men like Anwar (see Chapter V), ferried by taxi drivers and on the back of male family members’ motorcycles. Gender norms generally required that women had a family member escort them on these journeys between camps, but this posed no real obstacle to mobility - rather it was often used as an excuse for older male relatives to visit one another. The practice of splitting the extended family between multiple camps spread across the Biqa’a meant that there travelling up the valley for work could be combined easily with visiting a sibling or cousins who could provide a bed and food for extended periods of time.

Seasonal migration could also occur for larger jobs. For example, early on in the summer, the shaweesh Abu Mahmoud’s son Brahim managed to secure a temporary job as a natur (guard) down on the sahel, responsible for the daily watering of a crop of courgettes. The job came with a small one-room concrete hut, free vegetables, and peaceful, undisturbed views of the
flat, empty plains of the valley. Back in the village, he and his wife were still living with his father - this job offered a few months respite for the newlyweds and gave them an opportunity to save money for buying a new tent of their own. In the winter, the hut and their flimsy summer tent would have made for grim living arrangements, but with the summer sun beating down they were spending a relaxing few months in the outdoors, far away from the hustle and bustle of the camp.

Another interlocutor, Abu Amer, had constantly encountered problems and threats when ranging his sheep on the outskirts of the village land. While his daughters found work in the warsheh of his relatives in the camp, sheep trading was his family’s main source of income (Lebanese stores like the one shown in figure 11 catered to men like Abu Amer throughout the valley). In late 2019, through family contacts in another camp down on the sahel, he found a Lebanese farmer with a large amount of land left fallow that year, and struck a deal for lodging and ranging his sheep – the farmer was not planting on the land so was happy with the low price of LL200,000 for the full year. This move opened other work opportunities – Abu Amer’s family became the farmer’s go-to warsheh for weeding and harvesting his other crops. There was also a shaweesh run camp on a neighbouring plot of land, and he sent his children to join this larger, worse paid warsheh when there was no work available. In mid-2020 he moved again, this time selling off much of his herd, and taking on a job as a live-in natur of a chicken farm. With six children of working age still living with him, his family was easily able to manage the coops, and with his eldest son Amer now a young man, he could split his household. He left his elder sons and daughters at the chicken farm, and returned to the original camp with his wife and younger children. He set up his tent in my field site once again, and split his time between the two households.

Work-related mobility was not always seasonal – plenty of the warsheh of the camp catered to smaller neighbouring villages which did not have their own Syrian camps. On the main arterial road of the valley, there were several spots where Syrians could stand and wait for work – Lebanese in search of day labourers would pull up and announce how many labourers they needed for one-off jobs, usually loading and unloading goods. These Syrians could then end up travelling for hours up and down the valley in the back of a Lebanese van or pick-up truck, lifting stones, salt, cement, or whatever else might be circulating through this network.
of villages. This work was unpredictable – you might be paid LL10,000 for hours of backbreaking work one day, and then get LL50,000 for an hour’s easy work the next. If a man was lucky, he would find more stable employment through these shorter piecework gigs. Naturally, these parts of the valley and the nearby refugee camps attracted more young men hoping for work, and some of the younger men from my main field site would visit relatives in these roadside camps and pick up a few shifts of work while they were there.

My interlocutors, having come to the Bîqa’a valley via long-established family networks, expressed a clear-sighted view of these options and decisions. Often their best friends, siblings, cousins and parents lived in different camps, and they circulated between these different encampments and discussed and compared them. The type of social life in each location, the relationship with the local community, and the associated costs of living were all considered, but work opportunities was by far the most important factor and influenced all these other factors. In my field site, there were many opportunities for sporadic, well-paid jobs for small warsheh, making it appealing to young families like Anwar’s. With no ground rent to pay there was no need to guarantee a steady regular income, so they could risk the long periods of unemployment and delays in payment in order to access the far more lucrative hashish work.

In contrast, larger families with older children might move around like Abu Amer, or settle in a shaweesh run camp like ‘Ahad. Here, they families would pay rent but be guaranteed a minimum income from the children’s work. Young unmarried men often instead gravitated towards camps on the arterial roads where there was plentiful day-labour. My interlocutors constantly circulated these camps, gathering information from their extended family network and evaluating these opportunities. Mobility between camps was thus central to the livelihoods of my Syrian interlocutors, as they took advantage of short-term work opportunities and also sought the best location to maximise income depending on their household situation.

The importance of mobility for work and incomes was further illustrated by the coronavirus lockdowns. Unable to really police the Lebanese population of the Bîqa’a, the lockdown requirements were most stringently applied to the Syrian populations, whose movement to
and from the camps was severely restricted. For the first month, Syrians adhered to this but by the second lockdown they began to chafe against the restraints and their inability to leave to find work. This resulted in several serious fights between camps inhabitants in and neighbouring Lebanese populations, though mostly in the Western Biqa’a where the Syrian population was far larger and less vulnerable to wholesale evictions.

**A social network: family linkages and visits across the camps of the Biqa’a**

As has been noted, families would often be spread between different camps and exchange visits which could last days, weeks or even months. These could be caused by weddings, funerals, illness, the birth of a child, religious celebration or for no particular reason at all. In many ways it seemed that my interlocutors were continuing the intensive visiting patterns that they engaged in back in Raqqa, spread out across the Biqa’a valley. It was a regular occurrence for me to call round at a friend’s tent only to find out from a neighbour that they had gone ‘as sahel (to the plains).

New mothers who were not working often spent considerable time with their maternal family, especially if that family was from the same tribe or lineage. In winter, women and children were also more likely to spend time down ‘as sahel, away from the harsh cold of the mountain villages (and the associated expenses of heating the tent all day while the children were there). If a woman was ill, or a man was called away, another member of the family would usually come to fill in for their role in the household. In this way, inter-camp mobility facilitated domestic labour and the work that underpinned Syrian wage-labour.

These gendered family practices could, however, cause a loss of income. For example, when Anwar and Habib’s parents returned to Syria for a visit and to check on their fields and house in Raqqa, they left their daughters in their camp in the Western Biqa’a to continue working. Patriarchal norms required that there was a parent or at least an adult male family member present in their household, so Habib moved temporarily to their camp in the Western Biqa’a to live with his younger sisters. Here, while there was plenty of work for banat in the shaweesh’s warsheh, there was no appropriate work for a young man in his twenties. As a result, Habib lounged at his parents’ camp unemployed for a few months until his mother and
father returned from Syria – while this was a significant loss of income, this was treated by the family as simply unavoidable.

The celebrations of Eid al Adha and Eid al Fitr were also causes for inter-camp visits, and I visited four different camps on Eid al Fitr, following my interlocutors through their network of family in the Western Bq’aa. However, by far the most common reasons for family visit were deaths and weddings.

Figure 23 - A Syrian man cuts wood that he has just transported on his motorbike

1. A death in the family

‘Where is everyone?’ I asked Um Jad, Anwar’s friendly old, widowed neighbour. I had arrived at the camp on a mid-harvest season morning, and had seen the women and children out cutting away in the steadily shrinking hashish fields. I knew Anwar was busy with his washeh over in Abu Ali’s fields, But when I arrived at the camp, none of the older men were anywhere
to be found. She beamed me a toothy smile from her spot on the doorstep of her tent - ‘they have all gone to the ‘aza’a, in the Western Biqa’a,’ said Um Jad, ‘there is not a single man in the camp. Will you have some tea?’

Over the course of my fieldwork, I became used to these abruptly organised wakes. Alongside weddings, they constituted one of the main organised social gatherings of the Syrian refugee community. According to Islamic tradition that the body of the deceased should be buried the same day and this was generally strictly adhered to. Since it was generally difficult for Syrians to be buried in Lebanon, and few wanted to, the body would have to quickly undergo the long journey back to Raqqa. This was just one more of the solid anchors which tied the refugee community back to their hometown. The body must also be accompanied by a family member – this needed to be an older man who had the appropriate Lebanese paperwork and was sufficiently friendly with the Syrian regime to come and go across the border and facilitate the journey, organise the paperwork, and navigate the various check points along the way. These steps not only reinforced the spread of the family ties, but also highlighted the continued sovereignty of the Assad regime, even in death.

These networks were stretched across borders and between camps - death in Lebanon or Syria would be met with an ‘aza’a in the tent of the nearest family member here in the Biqa’a, and relatives would gather from camps scattered across the valley. With their relatives in different camps, my interlocutors regularly organised groups to travel down to the camps of as sahel and the Western Biqa’a to pay their respects upon the death of a relative. All of the older men of the camp attended at least some of these ‘aza’a, and they were one to the major organised moments of inter-familial and inter-tribal solidarity – this was where physically distant family relationships were renewed, and absences and lack of condolences were noted by those in attendance.

The ‘aza’a was simultaneously an enactment of the patriarchal hierarchy of camp society and a moment to reinforce these family bonds. The event itself was gender divided, with older men more likely to attend - they were less likely to have prior work engagements, and even where they did it was easier for them to decide to take the day off and organise the transport themselves. Where the death was closer to home, such as a camp dweller, however, women
were equally involved in the entire process. At the event itself physical gender segregation was strictly adhered to, unlike everyday life in the camp, with one tent reserved for men and next door for women.

Men would drop by, with numbers slowly increasing over the morning and afternoon. Bitter coffee would be served, usually by one of the younger male teenagers of the household, and each guest was offered a sip. The fatiha, the opening verse of the Quran, would be intermittently recited by a man entering or leaving the ‘aza’a, and the men would pause their conversations to recite and hold their hands up to the heavens. The men prayed together, lined up and lead by one of the more religious older men. Similarly, a feast would be provided, often communally, of thureed (a dish of stewed chicken or lamb, served on top of Arab bread). The politics of providing the food were not as important and intensely discussed as at weddings, but the burden of providing the food would be borne by neighbouring households, and naturally relied on female labour. In cases where the ‘aza’a lasted the traditional 3 days, the job of cooking would alternate between them.

The atmosphere, at least in the men’s side of these wakes, was jovial. Jokes abounded, and relatives who had not seen each other for months on end caught up on old gossip and news. The family members of the dead may have been saddened and silent, but the rest of the men would joke and chat. Aside from the occasional loud comedic exchange by a few of the larger personalities, the room was broken up into several smaller conversations. Work, of course, was the main topic. It was discussed in detail - who was working, where, how they found the job, how much they were getting, how secure the employment was. These conversations went on for hours over infinite cups of tea while the food was being prepared. Stories of disputes and conflict were recounted and chewed over, as was the situation back home in Raqqa and the prices of smuggling and safest routes over the border. Unlike Lebanese conversations, which often strayed into high politics and broader narratives, these conversations were focussed on the practical and the financial. This was the forum through which men were able to discuss who was wanted or imprisoned, and the technicalities of paperwork and prices of movement. Members of the Syrian community in the village might occasionally show up to pay their respects and give his outside opinion on questions of hashish prices and cross-border movement.
The ‘aza’a was also a place to gauge a Syrian family’s integration into the Lebanese community - no Lebanese villagers ever visited the camp to pay their respects, and only one or two members of the shawi community living in the village, such as Abu Ibrahim, ever received Lebanese visitors. In contrast, was noted in Chapter VI, several Lebanese men visited Abu Rayan, a Kurdish Syrian, at the ‘aza’a for his father - his landlord and kafeel and a regular employer showed up to pay their respects (and also discreetly recruit some workers for a job he needed doing out in the fields). As I noted in Chapter III, when the Syrian shopkeeper Hammad’s brother died attendance at the ‘aza’a was very high – almost all of the men of the village showed up to pay their respects, even those who were highly hostile to Syrian presence. This ‘aza’a was a testament to the extent to which his family was integrated into the local community, and an enactment of the partial exception to established national hierarchies that Hammad’s family represented.

2. ‘We work in the summer, we do weddings in winter’

Weddings celebrations represent the other major formalised event in Syrian camp social life, and have become similarly adapted to the archipelago network of camps in the valley. Prior to the refugee crisis, the Syrian social calendar had corresponded to seasonal migration to and from Raqqa - ‘we work in the summer, and marry in the winter,’ Abed told me. Weddings and the feasts and parties that go with them would take place back in their home village, and the young men were eager to show me the videos and pictures of the feasts, with hundreds of men gathered around a long parade of dishes of thureed. However, since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War and their flight to the camps of the Biqa’a, these practices had been adapted to allow the continued social reproduction of the community, as more and more couples were married and started families in the camps.

Like funerals, weddings occupied an important space as a traditional event which was adapted to the new social conditions of encampment, which gathered the scattered Syrian community from across the Biqa’a to reaffirm their social relations and enable the continued reproduction of this distinct community. Furthermore, while the Lebanese villagers tended to be quite hostile to any mass gathering or movement of Syrians, and exception was made for
weddings. Syrian children marching onto private fields, blaring music, dancing, and large groups of men marching about wielding sticks was blithely ignored by the Lebanese villagers in the case of weddings. I attended several weddings over the course of my fieldwork, even acting as a chauffeur in a couple of last-minute affair, ferrying a young bride and groom between the various essential pre-party engagements across multiple camps in the spread out across the valley before the wedding.

The wedding was the main joyous party in the refugee camp. In my field site, the wedding between Abu Anas and the daughter of Abu Omar had been in the works for most of 2020. The marriage had been a long time coming, and there had been a number of details to work out before the engagement could be officially announced. These were predominantly financial – while Abu Anas had the savings to set up a tent and organise the wedding party, the Lebanese economic crisis had thrown up all sorts of obstacles regarding the *mahr* (bride price, paid by the family of the groom to the family of the bride). For at least the decade leading up to the economic crisis in 2019, the standard *mahr* in this *shawi* community was stable, at LL3,000,000 (US$2,000). As hyperinflation began, many previously stable figures were disrupted – this ranged from the price of bread to utilities bills, to bride prices. Reported mahr began to creep up – midway through 2020, we were hearing reports of first LL4,000,000 being paid at one wedding down on as sahel, then LL5,000,000 in another camp.

When Abu Anas finally announced his wedding in October, it was met with great excitement – no one had really doubted that he would manage to marry Abu Omar’s daughter, but the *mahr* was LL8,000,000, and unheard-of amount! This number was repeated in every conversation the following week, and even some of the more knowledgeable Lebanese employers like Hussein felt the need to inform their friends during regular *sahra* late-night tea drinking sessions at Ammar’s outhouse. With the value of the lira plummeting, this new nominally much higher rate actually represented a sharp drop in the *mahr* in dollar terms – LL8,000,000 was worth around US$1,000 at the time. Wages and prices in the Syrian community were slow to respond to the macroeconomic tumult, and prices had been so stable for so long that many of my interlocutors did not fully understand that such dramatic nominal price rises actually represented huge cuts in income and expenditure. Delays to Abu Anas’ wedding due to the collapse of the Lebanese banking sector shows how intimate social
life of the Syrian camps and the most fundamental practices of social reproduction were inextricably linked to macroeconomic financial structures.

Lebanese Shi’a villagers often undertake the kutub al kitab Islamic ritual which officiates an engagement, but then wait years before having the official marriage party. In contrast, Syrians would throw the marriage party quickly after the official engagement. The rough structure of events was as follows. First, after much backroom negotiation, there would be an official visit to the household of the bride – an older male, ideally the father of the groom, would request the marriage and stipulate the mahr and other terms in front of the gathered relatives. When the father of the bride accepted, a relative with some religious knowledge, perhaps even a sheikh, would join the hands of the two men and recite the relevant Quranic verses, and the bride price would change hands. Where the family is split between Raqqa and the Biqa’a, this visit and exchange between parents can take place back in Syria, or responsibility might be delegated to other older family member in the Biqa’a.

In the ceremonies that I attended in the less remote Western Biqa’a, the religious life of the camp was notably more integrated into the formal religious establishment. A bad tempered, Lebanese Sunni sheikh would administer the marriage in these camps, with formal documentation which could then be transferred and used as proof of marriage in Damascus. For inhabitants of the more remote Northern camps, weddings were often conducted by an older man, to be registered formally at a later date. However, this later date was often unclear and many of these unions and the children which were born had little legal status in the eyes of the Lebanese or Syrian states.

The following week, the groom would ideally have set up his own tent and furnishings. Prior to the Civil War Syrians often strove to have built their own house in their Raqqa village by this point, and indeed those families with the means continued to do so as, well as setting up a tented household in the Biqa’a. The groom would then pay for the wife’s dress, coiffure, and make-up, and rent a car to collect her on the wedding day. This would be accompanied by a bridal gift - gold earrings, a necklace, and a ring. The prices of all of these expenses would be diligently discussed by the men of the camp, and in many cases hard-up young men would
have to borrow money from their brothers, cousins, and uncles to cover these ballooning costs.

The wedding day itself had little by way of formal ceremony. The bride would be ferried by the groom to and from her various appointments, and then taken back to her parent’s tent, where possible, to bid them farewell. This often involved a lot of movement back and forth between the different smaller camps of the area, tracing the family and economic linkages between the different camps and tribes. Meanwhile, the extended family and guests of the groom would be treated to a feast of thureed, often catering to hundreds of guests at considerable expense. While food digested, gossip similar to that of the ‘aza’a was shared between the family members who lived in different camps scattered across the Bqa’a – the men of the tribe reconnected and discussed work, prices, and movement back and forth to Syria.

There was one wedding singer and affiliated band and sound system who were hired for most of the shawi weddings that I attended up and down the valley, and they set up their chaotic mass of speakers and wires while the guests digested their food and gossip. The music slowly turned up and the crowds of more distant relatives and inhabitants of neighbouring camps began to gravitate towards whatever scruffy open field would serve as a dance floor. The space was cleared, and the fanan (artist, singer) began to play at deafening volume. The car carrying the bride pulled up and was immediately swarmed by dozens of gleeful children, who were almost ritualistically warded off by younger men brandishing sticks.

I was enlisted to play the part of chauffeur at one of the more last-minute weddings that I attended. The bride descended from my car in her finery, and a path was cleared to a seat outside of a tent, where she and her new husband were on display to the camp. The whole process would be intensely filmed by a Syrian cameraman (another expense), but also by hundreds of smart phone cameras for hours on end (the couple can be seen on display in figure 24 – I was one of hundreds of onlookers crowding around to take photographs and to report back to our friends). The dancing then began in earnest, with the dabke beat striking up, and the young and old of the tribe and camp lining up in a huge circle, reaching upwards of a hundred participants in the stamping line dance.

243
This wedding was also a good moment for a fight – this was one of the few times when large groups of young men from more distant branches of the family and sometimes different tribes were gathered together. As the sun set and people were giddily dancing and sticks were waved, fights broke out quite regularly. Rarely did anyone really know the cause, but shouting ensued and punches were thrown, and one man perceived a slight from which he would fume for the rest of the evening. At this specific wedding, the first two scraps were broken up and the music continued. However, the third such conflict devolved into a serious brawl between dozens of men and the music was finally turned off. Me, Anwar, and Habib decided it would be best to make ourselves scarce, and they quickly rounded up their wives, sisters, and children, and headed for my car. ‘You see how the Arabs are, Ya’aqoub?’ said Anwar, looking slightly relieved that we could finally head home.

These marriages and the inter-camp mobility that goes with them represent two interrelated socio-economic facets of Syrian refugee life. Firstly, as with funerals, they are an adaption and continuation of pre-Civil War social practices and reaffirm Raqqa-based social and family networks more than a decade after the beginning of this mass migration. The family and tribal network of camps in the valley was traversed by the relevant parties, and trans-border family links were re-iterated. Secondly, they remain a key moment through which family economic resources are collected, displayed, and distributed within the shawi community. This was generally a circular movement of wealth, between members of the same community – this account of marriage reveals the Syrian lived geography of the Biqa’a and flows of family sociality and wealth which underpinned this labouring community’s social reproduction.
Figure 24 - A Syrian couple pose for photos at their wedding

Mundane movements: markets, hospitals and bureaucracy
Alongside labour and these signification life-events, there were many more mundane causes for everyday Syrian mobility in the valley. They generally involved other key socio-economic interactions which underpinned Syrian livelihoods. Firstly, mobility was necessary for purchasing cheap goods in commercial centres – there were large weekly markets in Ba’albeck and other regional centres, where fruit and vegetables were considerably cheap than village shops, and other essentials like oil, salt, rice and household goods could be bought in bulk. Those Syrian men who traded in sheep were highly mobile, moving up and down the valley to buy and sell from flocks like the one shown in figure 25. Those few men in the area like Muhammad, Abu Rayan and myself, with (relatively) legally registered vehicles, were in demand for these kinds of trips. These shopping trips also revealed distinct inter-camp markets for certain items: music speakers, computers, tents, internet routers, mobile phones and other expensive electronic goods tended to be traded between Syrians within camps, rather than through Lebanese shops. In part this was because the mobility to view and purchase the items could often be coupled with a social visit, but also because Syrians expressed a fear at being ripped off by Lebanese shop owners and having no redress. By keeping their transactions as embedded in the shawi economy as possibly, they retained a degree of accountability.

Secondly, mobility was key in defraying the costs of healthcare. Syrians in remote villages were rarely catered to by mobile clinics, and my interlocutors had a network of doctors who were known to be cheap and treat Syrians without prejudice. This information was clearly disseminated amongst the Syrian community, who would regularly check on a doctor’s credentials by asking relatives. There were also folk doctors of varying expertise scattered throughout the camps. This ranged from older women who stitched up wounds to men who gave massage therapy, and again these medical trips were always coupled with a social visit. While a large portion of the costs of most emergency medical procedures would be covered by al umam, Syrians faced tough decisions when it came to long term health issues and childbirth. Older people could return to Syrian to try to access free healthcare, but the speed and quality of the medical sector had taken a significant downturn since the beginning of the war by all accounts. This was, of course, not an option for those men wanted for military services or with other legal difficulties (see Chapter III). There was a handful of charitable foundations in the Biqa’a, often Gulf funded, which would financially contribute to treating
these more long-term issues (for example, corrective surgery). They operated via an opaque and nigh-impossible to navigate system, and the clinics were often located far from the Shi’a-majority northern Biqa’a where my main field site was located. The ability to use family networks and visit relatives in camps in the Western Biqa’a, where the clinics were mostly located, was thus key to accessing cheap healthcare.

Thirdly, simple bureaucratic procedures often required regional mobility on the part of the Syrian refugees. My interlocutors were regularly summoned to visit the UN headquarters down the valley Zahleh to regularise and update their residency and registration paperwork and access regular aid payments. As the economic crisis continued, only certain bank branches reliably disbursed money from the *bitaqa hamra* cash assistance programmes. This number dwindled as the Lebanese banking crisis dragged on, making mobility between the different towns of the valley all the more important for Syrian livelihoods. The birth of a child provoked a rapid series of visits to negotiate the web of UN, Lebanese, and Syrian bureaucracy – my interlocutors need to visit the hospital, doctor, and mukhtar (the local notary responsible for registering births, deaths, and marriages) several times, ferrying pieces of paper with different stamps on them to regularise the birth and access UN money to pay the hospital bills.

This mobility was extremely gendered – strong gender disparity is a recurring feature of this ethnography, but it is a point worth making explicit here. In my field site, women generally had very little agency in organising both these more mundane socio-economic tasks or the weddings and funerals. They were left at home wherever possible, and whenever they left the camp they required a male chaperone at all times. Despite this, the events which required inter-camp mobility were generally based on female unwaged labour. Amongst other Syrian communities it was more normal for women and children to travel alone without a male companion, but my *shawi* interlocutors adhered to gendered and familial restrictions on mobility quite strictly, especially with younger women.

Furthermore, unlike male Syrians, women were generally free from nationality-based harassment by the Lebanese authorities. While sexual harassment was rife, there seemed to exist a tacit understanding that the Lebanese police and army would not stop, check the
papers for, or arrest Syrian women. This led to paradoxical situations where women were able to navigate checkpoints and journeys without difficulty but struggled to do so because their male chaperone lacked the appropriate paperwork. Lebanese constraints on mobility reinforced the role of men as agents of inter-camp mobility.

![Two Syrian sheep traders discuss their flocks](image)

**Figure 25 - Two Syrian sheep traders discuss their flocks**

**Fight and flight: strategic diffusion and feuds in the Syrian camps**

This chapter has drawn a picture of a Syrian community diffused between multiple camps across the Biqa’a, who retain a network of familial ties between these scattered locations to facilitate the social reproduction of their community. This diffusion has obvious practical benefits - throughout the Biqa’a valley, individuals were rarely more than half an hour from the household of a member of their extended tribe. With clusters of the tribe dotted throughout the valley, there was an extensive network of tents and homes offering hospitality and guidance in different areas and communities. While this seemed to be an organic
occurrence rather than a conscious strategy, it was something that my interlocutors were well-aware of and took advantage of frequently. This dense network was largely impenetrable even by the most diligent of the Lebanese security forces, and a young man in trouble could easily disappear into the camps.

This was most obviously demonstrated by the few army raids that occurred on the camp in my field site. Raids by the Lebanese security forces had been common in the earlier years of the Syrian Civil War, when there was a concerted effort to arrest and harass Syrians throughout the country, but by the time of my fieldwork this campaign had wound down. However, my primary field site had been raided several times by the army, and the army adhered to the tacit rules of harassment and only tried to arrest the male inhabitants. ‘Man you should have seen me run!’ laughed Anwar, ‘I was so fast, down through that field. The Lebanese soldier tried to chase me but he was very slow... it’s not a big thing, they would just put you in prison for a few days, and then they let you out.’ Having relatives scattered around the area meant that, once he had put some distance between him and the army, he slipped through the village and called at a cousin’s house on the other side of town. This secluded tent was on private land, and not subject to an army raid, and Anwar was able to get a good night’s sleep.

The strategic advantage of this diffusion was clear when I began my fieldwork - the size and confusion of the camps and the constant movement between them meant that inhabitants could quite easily deny that people were there, and outsiders would be none the wiser. Women were expected to be home during the day and she could quite easily meet any enquiries as to the whereabouts of her husband, father, or son with ‘he is out... no, I don’t know where... no, I don’t know when he will be back.’ The patriarchal structure of households meant that debts, work, and taxes generally could not be demanded from women, who could plausibly deny any knowledge of their husband’s finances or access to any money. An outsider could not enter the tent of an unaccompanied woman alone without causing serious offence and rapidly escalating the conflict. When I first began to visit the camp, it was very common for women who did not know me to tell me that their husbands were not in, or they did not know where they were, when I knew perfectly well they were in the camp as I had organised
to meet them on the phone. Over the course of the year, as people became more comfortable with me and realised that I was not some kind of security agent, these instances stopped.

Alongside army raids, there was the ever-present danger of evictions and fires, and this diffuse family network further reduced the risk to each camp. If a camp was evicted, became embroiled in a large-scale dispute, or was burnt down (intentionally or accidentally — both were common) inhabitants would not be left fully destitute. They were guaranteed a warm bed and meal if they could just make it to their relatives’ tent in the next village half an hour down the road.

Anwar made more dramatic use of this network in one of the more serious episodes of my fieldwork, and I was directly implicated in this. As I mentioned in Chapter III, a feud broke out between him and another set of brothers over some contested welding work. After insults turned to blows one hot afternoon in the camp, his brother Habib knocked one of the other men unconscious with a rock, seriously injuring him. The camp was simmering, and it was clear that things could turn very violent very quickly, so Habib and Anwar hopped on their motorcycle and disappeared. The other brothers were furious and if they encountered each other before any reconciliation, violence would certainly ensue again.

The next day, I received a phone call from a strange number, it was Anwar asking me to come and see him. He directed me to a nearby town, and then from that town down a long dirt backroad to a very secluded tent. This was the summer house of his cousin Brahim, mentioned earlier in this chapter. Anwar was lying low here until the dust settled, and Habib had taken their shared motorcycle and gone to a different tent in another camp. Anwar needed me to give him a further ride to his father’s tent, where he could hole up until the tribal mediation process began to resolve the dispute with musaliha (reconciliation). The Syrian lived geographical networks were both a safety net and a threat. They enabled Anwar to disappear quickly and anonymously. However, he was so deeply bound to this social network that he shared with these feuding brothers, it would be impossible for him to avoid them even in camps hundreds of kilometres away in the valley.
This network was deeply implicated in kinship and tribal and regional geographies carried over from Syrian, and this was starkly illustrated in episodes of danger and violence. For example, the Maronite Christian town down the road from my field site hosted several Syrian camps, and relationship between these camps and their host community was very poor. When the villagers eventually burnt the camp down, I thought this news would shock or worry my interlocutors. However, the evicted camp was made up of people from Idlib, the other side of Syria, who had no tribal or family links to my interlocutors. Likewise, the village was Maronite Christian and affiliated with the Lebanese Forces party, so had negligible social interactions with my Shi’a Muslim Hizbollah supporting village friends. This disjuncture meant that my interlocutors saw little relationship between what was happening down the road, and what might happen in their own camp – their physical proximity to these evictions did not seem to give my interlocutors pause for thought. In contrast, a fire in the camp of some fellow tribe members in the Western Biqa’a some two hours away by car was immediately important news.

**Conclusion**

Syrian refugees are highly mobile within Lebanon. Unlike Jordan, the Lebanese state has neither the capacity nor the will to impose serious restrictions on the mobility of refugees. Refugee mobility between camps and other locations in the Biqa’a was a central component of everyday life, and essential to the socio-economic structure of the camps. This mobility operated according to a distinctive networked geography which varied between different groups of Syrians. It roughly corresponded to regional and tribal pre-war linkages, but these were also conditioned by economic rationale. Mobility was vital to the sustained livelihoods of Syrian families and the social reproduction of the labour force, and so in turn underpinned the capitalist agrarian economy of the Biqa’a.

This network and mobility had several important implications. Firstly, it meant that Syrian refugees were able to access institutions and services far beyond their immediate locality such as healthcare, aid from NGOs, religious institutions, and registration of births marriages and deaths. These institutions were crucial for the survival of Syrian households, camps, and the community as a whole. They facilitated essential processes of everyday reproduction and
also offset costs that wages could not cover. In this way, these networks were an essential support for agrarian capitalist labour exploitation, circumventing upwards pressure on wages.

Secondly, this Syrian lived geography was also the basis for recreating pre-war social networks. These networks largely tracked village and tribal relationships which had been transplanted to the Biqa’a valley, and my interlocutors expended significant time and resources in maintaining these networks. They sustained a sense of tribal and village community despite the displacement, which translated into communal solidarity and redistribution. Once again, this network helped Syrians to weather the storms of the unstable economy of the valley and also navigate violent conflicts and other dangers. Importantly, the distinctive *shawi* identity and traditions were maintained through this mobility, and this was essential to the continued existence of a distinct Syrian community.

This chapter has also shown how there was an important parallel market for trade in certain items which tracked the Syrian lived geography of the valley. These markets usually concerned more expensive items, required greater trust, or were distinctly ‘Syrian’ items – intercommunal Syrian networks were used to sidestep dangers of Lebanese predation. As this chapter has shown these interactions were often bundled up together, and mobility would entail a whole range of socio-economic engagements. A trip to the next town could mean finding work, visiting family, selling a phone, buying banned electrical items, receiving updates and news from back home, checking prices and finding cheaper food. It was also fraught with risk – it could mean being stopped at a checkpoint or run off the road with impunity by a Lebanese driver. For Syrians, however, the importance of maintaining these networks far outweighed the potential costs of Lebanese oppressive and disciplinary practices.

This was little understood by Lebanese villagers, and most of the smallholding farmers had little to no concept of Syrian mobility and geographies. As the coronavirus showed, Syrian networks throughout the Biqa’a were generally understood by the Lebanese villagers in threatening terms. Those Lebanese that did take an interest in these geographies did so for the recurring theme of this thesis – labour. Larger farmers like Hussein were the only Lebanese villagers I encountered who actively understood these Syrian networked
geographies, and indeed exploited them come harvest season to muster a workforce at short notice.

While the camps themselves are temporary, the socio-economic practices which underpin them are not. They are not transitory, exceptional spaces, but nodes in a less visible but very real territorial network of the Syrian diaspora in Lebanon. This chapter has emphasised the need for an integrative approach to studies of agrarian production by demonstrating the extent to which the labour for and so profitability of the hashish industry hinged on the continued existence of Syrian familial and tribal networks spread out through the valley.
IX - ‘They laughed at us’: humour and ideological critique in the case of Syrian labour

Introduction

The previous chapters of this thesis have focused on the granular details of the organisation and reproduction of labour, its relationship to Lebanese property, and the patriarchal and other hierarchical social relations which facilitate this. This chapter shifts focus to the concepts underpinning these practices and examines how they both facilitate this exploitative system and reveal a tension between capitalist wage labour practices and other cultural practices. Labour and debt commodification were difficult to reconcile with gendered and national hierarchies, and norms of kinship and nationality. Here, I address these tensions as they arise concerning debt, wages, and concepts of work. I further show how humour and irony are used to both critique this dissonance and further reinforce the devaluation of Syrian labour.

I begin this chapter with an overview of (largely Marxist) anthropology investigating the process of labour commodification in newly capitalist rural environments and draw heavily from Taussig (1977, 2010). He highlights the co-existence of precapitalist and capitalist concepts, and their usage in criticising newly emergent capitalist relations of production. In his study of the Cauca Valley, this ideological process is expressed through beliefs involving the combination of super-natural religious forces and capitalist practices. In contrast, my interlocutors navigated these ideological quandaries through use of humour and irony. The central role of humour and irony in Levantine culture in expressing social critique is well-articulated in anthropological literature on the region, and I draw on this body of work, noting recent insights generated by interest in displaced Syrian livelihoods. In this chapter, I combine these two approaches: like Taussig’s South American interlocutors, the Syrian labourers and Lebanese villagers combined capitalist and pre-capitalist concepts as a means to critique their current social relations. However, rather than referring to religious forces, they used humour and irony to express the tensions between wage labour and other social practices. I consider the extent to which these ideological manoeuvres in fact reinforce social hierarchies, and argue that this reflects a tension between the cultural practices which underpin the wage
labour system of the valley and material relations of production. The economic system of the rural Biqa’a is premised on this uneasy coexistence.

**Ideology, capitalism and social critique**

This chapter draws from these two distinct bodies of literature. Firstly, it builds upon extensive, predominantly Marxist, anthropological scholarship addressing the conceptual role of wages, the process of commodification of labour, and the way that this interacts with other cultural norms in pre-or semi-capitalist societies. Secondly, it draws from a small but insightful body of literature on humour, irony, and lies in Levantine society. This work has given a rough account of the centrality of these practices in Levantine sociality and specifically senses of political agency and critique. This chapter articulates the relationship between these two conceptual frames: amongst my interlocutors, humour and irony were the primary medium through which tensions surrounding capitalist relations and wage labour were discursively expressed and processed.

Marx’s account of the commodification of labour in the transition to capitalist modes of production has been simultaneously a source of insight and tension for anthropological work, especially in nascent rural capitalist communities. As Taussig notes, Marx observed that transition to the capitalist mode of production means that ‘an entirely new set of traditions and habits have to be developed by the working class, to the point where common sense regards the new conditions as natural’ (Taussig, 1977, p.133), or in Marx’s terms ‘as self-evident laws of Nature’ (Marx, 2010, p.726). As capitalist relations of production spread through rural peasant communities, aversion to wage labour is widespread in historical and contemporary sources – this hostility is often manifest in attitudes and beliefs which regard capitalist relations as unnatural and bad. ‘Societies on the threshold of capitalist development necessarily interpret that development in terms of precapitalist beliefs and practices’ (Taussig, 2010, p.11) - these attitudes may seem irrational to Western capitalist eyes, says Taussig, but they constitute a potential critique of capitalist social relations.

Taussig placed this ideological process at the centre of his early work. Through his fieldwork in rural Colombia, he argued that when subject to rapid rural proletarianization, peasant
communities expressed their antagonism towards these new modes of production through apparently mystical practices and beliefs. For example, he recounts his interlocutors’ belief in the ‘devil labour contracts.’ According to this practice, male wage-labourers were widely believed to sell their souls to the devil to increase labour productivity. The money they earned from this extra productivity could then be used to buy luxury items, but not as investment capital. If the labourer used money resulting from these ‘devil labour contracts’ to buy land, it would be infertile, and if he bought livestock, it was believed to sicken and die. This belief may seem strange, argues Taussig, but it is no stranger than the commodity fetishism which occurs in Western capitalist society where capital is seen as having a ‘natural’ propensity to expand and increase. An important aspect of belief in ‘devil labour contracts’ is that they constitute a moral judgement of capitalist practices – to increase productivity through wage labour is seen as causing the destruction of land and livestock and is a decidedly ‘unnatural’ thing to do. For Taussig, beliefs in practices such as the devil contract ‘arises from a living context of coexisting ways of life: a peasant mode of production, in which the direct producers control means of production and organize work themselves, side by side with a capitalist mode of production, in which they control neither the material of labor nor its organization. Lived out daily, this actual and nonabstract comparison creates the raw material for critical evaluation.’

Taussig’s account of commodity fetishism and the arising nascent critical beliefs based on folk practices echoes Scott’s (2008) emphasis on understanding exploitation and the operations of power as always being embedded in a concrete cultural setting. The ideological terms that a labourer experiences (and critiques) their exploitation and oppression are central to the functioning of the system in question, he says, and these should be central to a critical account of capitalism as it is practiced in the world. This chapter follows Taussig and Scott in articulating the ideological manifestation of these criticisms as expressed by my interlocutors.

However, there are some important differences between Taussig’s and my accounts – my field site is certainly not ‘on the threshold of capitalist development’ – it is far beyond the doorway. This thesis does not subscribe to the implicit chronology of capitalist development present in Taussig and many other Marxist inspired accounts, but regardless, the economy of the region should be understood as one of fully-fledged capitalism and deeply integrated into
global markets. Furthermore, in the camps of the Biqa’a, there was no talk of mystical contracts with the devil. Religious sects did feature in conversations concerning economic relations, but their usage was largely concerned with communitarian identity and associated class status rather than a specifically religious explanation for wealth distributions.

However, striking similarities abound – the Cauca and the Biqa’a were both fertile valleys filled with peasant cultivators who had rapidly become landless, disenfranchised wage labourers, government employees, and capital owners. The Syrian refugee-labourers and Lebanese villagers needed to ideologically reconcile their current positions with their self-perception, and further to express a critique of these relations of production within the accepted norms of sociality. These practices in turn conditioned the structure of the economy of the valley. Rather than expressing their discomfort with this ‘unnatural’ state of affairs through mystical-religious practices, my interlocutors used another established cultural pattern: that of jokes and irony.

Joking, or rather a specific style and pattern of humour, is one of the main ways that social critiques are expressed and processed in the Levant. The role of humour in addressing structural inequalities, oppression, and political economy in the Levant was a central theme in Gilsenan’s (1996) work. In his ethnography of a small Lebanese mountain village in the early 1970s, public narration was central to constituting hierarchy and masculine identity, and Gilsenan explores the role of irony and humour in both critiquing and reproducing these social structures. In this and more recent work (Gilsenan, 2016) he situates kizb (lies) as central this social system, arguing that Lebanese villagers mask and simultaneously critique transformations in the socio-economic structure of the village - ‘Kizb bridges the gap between form and substance, ethos and the actualities of the political economy, but at the same time men directly experience and know that it is a false “solution” to the problem’ (p.552).

In Gilsenan’s work, jokes and work constituted distinct spheres of social norms. He makes clear that in his fieldwork, established traditional social hierarchies were fair game for mockery. However, increasingly important things like work relations, money, and work-time were considered outside of the scope of this elaborate form of social performance (Gilsenan, 1996, p.222). My research findings differed from Gilsenan’s – rather than narratives and jokes
concerning ‘great men and spectacular deeds’, work was very much a topic for mockery and irony. However, the form and purpose of these jokes remained the same – public joking and mockery formed a critique of the speaker’s position in the social hierarchy whilst simultaneously enacting and reproducing this social structure.

This mechanism has been analysed elsewhere in the Levant (Obeid, 2015, p.442). In Wedeen’s (2015) account of ideological performance of deference in Syria, she argues that the regime compelling citizens to behave ‘as if’ they believed in regime narratives and propaganda was central to the regimes social power – people could joke, mock, and transgress privately but this dramatically performed the widespread obedience commanded by the regime and did not challenge the existing social order. In her more recent work on ideology and humour in Syrian, Wedeen analyses the famous Syrian television series Daya’a daay’a (‘A lost village’) (2013, 2019), which was watched by almost all of my interlocutors. She shows how the characters ‘are often good-hearted citizens who know some aspects of right from wrong, but they no longer have that narrative capacity to reflect on the broader conditions or microdynamics of their oppression… the villagers here even devise creative ways to reestablish existing power relationships when those become unsettled and their absence too anxiety inducing’ (Wedeen, 2013, p.867). In her nuanced account of rich and varied Syrian comedy at the beginning of the uprising, she argues that this form of political humour is both a critique of the dominant power structure and also highlights ‘citizens’ attachment to and recognition of their own subjection’ (p.873).

Anderson (2013) develops and critiques Wedeen’s account, arguing that ironic, scornful, self-deprecating narratives of his Syrian interlocutors were a safe way of critiquing one’s social environment – where the narrator was deeply implicated in the negative social environment, to scorn oneself was to scorn the broader social structure (p.474). He finds agency and authentic political voice in narratives which take ‘cognizance of oneself as implicated and involved in a system of absurdity or incongruity, and bringing that fact into the open, to be publicly witnessed. That is done not simply or even mainly by mocking or castigating the other, by drawing attention to his or her failings, or by cursing an unjust system. It is done by drawing attention to one’s own involvement in it: announcing oneself as an object of lament and scorn’ (p.478). Despite their differences, Gilsenan, Wedeen and Anderson all direct us to
look at jokes and narratives to understand the ideological tensions which may be present in the oppressive capitalist relations of production which I found in the Biqa’a.

Saleh and Zakar (2018) have already explored the interaction between jokes, play and work in mediating the experience of Syrians in Lebanon. In their account of young scrap collectors in Beirut, they show how a blurring of the lines between work and play are used to navigate the restrictive conditions put upon them by local Lebanese communities. Their interlocutors use jokes and irony to navigate the informal economy and social exclusion, happily reiterating Lebanese prejudices that ‘Syrian bodies can sustain work under all conditions, including filth and extreme temperatures’ (p.6). They show how child-labourer’s playful irony ‘transforms social prejudices and misfortunes into heroic virtues and novel possibilities... cultivating a playfully oblivious attitude which triumphs over both the fluctuations of the market and the contingencies of life’ (p.6).

Saleh (2017) has further explored the linkages between jokes, lies, gender and livelihoods in Syrian refugee culture in Lebanon. In her ethnographic account of female roadside workers in Beirut, she shows how women engaged in teasing relations and sexual innuendos, and how this reciprocity created a sense of community and navigate moral transgressions. Similarly, in her account of the ‘Master Cockroach’ scrap metal trader (2016) Saleh shows how lies and self-deprecation further form an important strategy in Syrians representing poverty and deference to Lebanese landlords and politically powerful actors, and controlling the flow of information that their labour affords them. This often took the form of delaying payment of debts, even though the ‘Master Cockroach’ secretly had more than enough to pay. His name itself reflects a sort of ironic embracing of the subordinate position of Syrian workers, which both critiques and reinforces dominant labour ideologies (p.94).

Tensions surrounding changing relations of production were not always expressed through jokes, however. In her account of memory in the construction of identity amongst shawi groups from the jazirah in the 1990s, Sato observes that her interlocutors saw the ‘shifting relationship between themselves and their tribal sheikhs from the perspective of this historical change in production relations’ (Sato, 1997, p.202) Their collective narrative was one of domination by sheikh’s through mid-twentieth century land cultivation, as state they
characterised as ‘abid (slave, servant). With the early Ba’ath land reforms, they had become fallahun (peasants). This historical memory conditioned contemporary practices conditions contemporary economic practices – while land ownership and subsistence farming remained out of reach for most of her interlocutors, men’s identity as independent peasants did not allow them to work for local landowners. A similar dynamic occurred amongst my shawi interlocutors, who identified as fallahun in opposition to muqta’ajiyeen (feudal lords) and ra’asmaliyeen (wealthy capitalists). Sato observed that these identities had a concrete effect on the structure of the labour market and specifically labour migration – it meant that ‘big landowners and entrepreneurs have to hire local or temporary workers from other regions to look after these plants throughout an agricultural year. They also hire a large number of local female labourers for the cotton harvest’ (p.203). Discursive accounts of rural livelihoods vary, however - Sarkis-Fernandez (2019, 2020) has shown that amongst rural labourers in Idlib, recent damaging agrarian reforms have been framed as ‘going backwards’ to a time of feudal Ottoman dispossession.

There is, then, a clear body of literature which analyses the discursive frames through which changing relations of production in the Levant are understood and critiqued. Following Taussig and Scott, the ideological terms that a labourer experiences their exploitation is central to our understanding of the functioning of the socio-economic system. In this case, rather than the ‘mystical’ approaches to wage-labour such as the ‘devil work contract’, interlocutors used irony, jokes, and memories to understand their social positions. My interlocutors were not as explicitly comedic as the cases discussed by Wedeen and Saleh, nor were they as full of masculine bravado as the narrators found in Gilsenan’s work. However, constant irony and jokes were used to navigate and critique the tensions that arose between subordinate positions as refugee wage labourers and other established practices and (often gendered) identities. The chapter uses these approaches to analyse the distinctive ideological apparatus surrounding work that has developed in the camps and villages of the Biqa’a.

Hard work: nationality and Syrian jokes about labour

‘So why is it that the Lebanese don’t just make the hashish themselves?’ I asked, part-naively, part-mockingly, to a group of Syrian friends in the camp. We were sat outside of Abu
Mahmoud’s tent in the middle of the camp, enjoying a balmy evening and chatting about *shughul* (work). The sewage pipe on the main street of the camp had backed up last week, and some of the younger women of his family were carrying buckets of gravel to re-cover the newly repaired pipe. Abu Mahmoud had not been helping, and I had been making fun of him for dodging responsibilities. A good-natured, stocky man in his late forties, he took my mocking well, and first affected being an infirm old man, incapable of hard work. I pointed out the *kizb*, saying that I had seen him working in the fields that very morning. His teenage daughter joined in, laughing, as she heaved another bucket of gravel past us, pointing out that she too had been working in the hashish fields all day. He chuckled, and changed his approach, saying the job was beneath his dignity as the elder father of the household.

‘A Lebanese *can’t* work like us,’ said Brahim, Abu Mahmoud’s son, enthusiastically. There was an added irony that he too had been sitting drinking tea while his wife and sisters, all part of Abu Mahmoud’s extended household, had been carting filthy piss-soaked gravel through the camp. ‘What do you mean, *can’t*?’ I asked. While hashish production work was by no means easy on the body, it was not *that* physically strenuous, a point attested to by the fact that most of the workers were little more than children.

‘Man, standing in the *karaj* for 10 hours, lifting hashish, with all the powder, they *can’t* do it!’ said Brahim, ‘they start to cough and after ten minutes, they have to go out.’ The ice had now been broken, and the rest of the extended family joined in - ‘They *can’t* carry a bucket of concrete!’ said his brother Muhammad. ‘They *can’t* pick potatoes!’ enjoined his sister. ‘They *can’t* lift up stones!’ said a younger cousin. ‘Or throw out the rubbish!’ giggled Bahim’s wife. ‘Or clean a toilet!’ This list of straightforward tasks went on and on, to much hilarity. The comedy was further heightened by me and my notebook – the group listed more and more ridiculous jobs and laughed as I diligently wrote them down with performed earnestness. I asked Abu Mahmoud how to spell a word in Arabic, forgetting that he was semi-literate. This provoked yet another bout of hilarity, with the rest of his family cracking up as he pretended to know how to write, very obviously and exaggeratedly stumbling through spelling out words to me.
This form of joking was very common amongst my interlocutors in the camp. There are four main components of this encounter which were replicated throughout much of the joking discussions surrounding work. Firstly, there was the obvious insinuation that Lebanese were weak and incompetent – they were incapable of working and so were forced to rely on others. Secondly, they were highlighting the opposite – that Syrians were tough and hardworking. The dynamic here is identical to that explained by Saleh and Zakar (Saleh, 2016; Saleh & Zakar, 2018): Syrian labourers, through jokes and irony, harness negative stereotypes of Syrians as bodies of unthinking muscle, somehow physiologically attuned to dirt and hardship. They remould themselves a superior to their exploiters. Abu Mahmoud’s inability to read and write further highlighted this position as the humble countryside labourer. Thirdly, while this joking offered relief from their subordinate positions, it also reinforced their position in the social hierarchy. Abu Mahmoud’s family’s collective list of jobs that Lebanese ‘cannot do’ was revealing – they were mundane and repetitive jobs, which my interlocutors were both valorising as things that they could do, but also devaluing as simplistic and straightforward work. The tasks were both productive and reproductive, and were those associated with wage labour but also straightforward household chores. These were not tasks to base one’s identity on as a worker, it was implied, but rather should be taken lightly. This joking drew attention to the Syrian’s exploited position, but also devalued and belittled precisely this kind of labour, circumventing the formation of any class or worker identity on this basis. While it undermined class or labour-based identity, the performative nature of these jokes reinforced a sense of national, communal identity. Finally, these jokes actively ignored the role of gender – while much of the labour that was discussed, both waged and unwaged, was in fact undertaken by Syrian women this was omitted from the scope of the jokes. While national hierarchies and Lebanese prejudices against Syrians were topics open to mockery and critique, the feminisation of wage-labour was not.

These jokes, then, functioned as both a critique of social relations as they currently existed, but also reinforced other oppressive systems upon which local relations of production were founded. They criticised Lebanese capital ownership and Syrian poverty and exploitation, whilst simultaneously reinforcing patriarchal control of female labour and its devaluation.
The Syrian jokes had a solid foundation in our everyday experience. As I have emphasised throughout this thesis, almost all wage-labour was undertaken by Syrians, and the Lebanese farmers seemed to actively avoid any physical involvement in the production process. This is not to say that they did not do it – many of the farmers I knew showed themselves more than physically capable of heaving and unloading bales of hashish – but this was always a last resort. Even the smallest tasks, which may have taken only quarter of an hour, would only be undertaken after having mused ‘shall we get a Syrian to do it tomorrow?’

There were, of course, widely remarked exceptions to these stereotypes which only served to highlight the general rule. While working for the major farmer and smuggler Hussein on one of his larger fields, I noticed that despite being one of the wealthiest farmers in the village (and indeed, the valley), he was not standing aloof from the work. In contrast to other farmers, Hussein was hopping in and out of pick-up trucks to carry hashish, helping workers when they almost dropped the heavy bales of hashish, and generally making himself a physical presence in the harvest process. While by no means sweating with the labourers, his willingness to get his hands dirty was clear and had a visible positive effect on the morale and efficiency of his work teams. I mentioned this to my Syrian interlocutors back at the camp, and the answer was uniform: ‘yeah, the children of Ali Fadel (ie. Hussein and his brothers) are not afraid of work.’ Aside from further bolstering the brothers’ image as laudable men (and supporting their claim to being haqqani, discussed in Chapter IV), marking them out as exceptional in this respect served to reinforce the more general view of Lebanese as the opposite, afraid of work.

A man’s job: gender and Lebanese villagers’ perceptions of Syrian labour

It is difficult to adequately convey how deeply Syrians are associated with cheap labour amongst my Lebanese interlocutors, and how frequently this relationship is reinforced daily. As I have emphasised, days spent with Lebanese villagers almost always in some way involved Syrian labour. Any offers to help around the house, in the fields, to fix or move things, were almost entirely met with ‘no, no, leave it – we’ll get a Syrian to do it later.’ In the midst of the coronavirus lockdown of 2020, I planted a small garden of vegetables behind my house. As my Lebanese interlocutors called by, to a man, they told me that ‘you don’t have to dig that,
I can get a Syrian to do it for you.’ Lebanese villagers often assumed that any Syrian man who was not currently working was available to sell their labour power at any given moment, and it was common for my conversations with Syrian labourers outside of the camp to be interrupted by passing villagers ordering them to complete some kind of task.

Lebanese jokes about Syrians constituted a similar social critique to that of the previous section. They were also rooted in an analysis of the existing relations of production that the speakers themselves were implicated in and had negative feelings towards. This, too, was expressed through pointed mockery, but coming from the position of a landowner and employer, these jokes more explicitly reinforced rather than questioned the social hierarchies of the valley. Self-deprecation often used, but unlike the situations described by Anderson (2013), in the Lebanese context of relative freedom of speech it generally had the effect of reinforcing rather than undermining social hierarchies. Lebanese jokes about Syrians were predominantly concerned with their intelligence, rather than their physical capabilities. Syrians were almost universally described by Lebanese farmers as mahbul (dumb), ghashim (thick), or himar (a donkey). Every farmer had an anecdote about some kind of (expensive) problem a Syrian had caused on their farm, and throughout my fieldwork conversations were regularly concluded with the decisive claim that ‘ma fi ahmaq min as suri’ (there is no one stupider than a Syrian).

In stories where Syrians were not stupid, they were considered untrustworthy – villagers’ narratives were replete with accounts of Syrian labourers stealing things as minor as teacups, sickles, or handfuls of hashish from the karaj. If anything was damaged or lost, it had to be caused by a Syrian, and then the imagined Syrian’s miserly, mooching attitude became the source of comic relief. Interjections here were striking in their incoherence, and their ability to guard against the possibility of dispute between Lebanese villagers. As was noted in previous chapters, this joking scapegoated Syrians when there was potential for disputes to arise between Lebanese villagers. When a fire partially burnt a Lebanese villager’s small orchard, it was universally agreed that the fire must have been set by a ‘stupid Syrian.’ A barrage of mockery of Syrian ignorance of fire followed, despite the fact that the dry orchard was situated opposite a coffee hut frequented exclusively by Lebanese men who chain-smoked and flicked their cigarettes carelessly on the ground, a few metres away from the
orchard. Of course, this irony was not lost on Syrians, and simply provided more material for their comedic routines back in the camp.

It was difficult to read a deeper layer of social critique into this barrage of xenophobic and class-based humour. The one common format of joke made by Lebanese that is at least partially critical, mirrors the omission of gender noted in the previous section. Female Syrian labour was a key part of Lebanese mockery of Syrians. For example, while questioning Fouad (see Chapter VI) about his treatment of his workforce, I asked why, if Syrians were so incompetent, he did not just hire Lebanese? He replied that ‘One Syrian man is worth three Lebanese men, but one Syrian woman is worth five Syrian men.’ This was a recurring theme in my interviews and discussions with villagers – when faced with the indispensability of the Syrian workforce, they would admit that Syrian women were strong and reliable workers, but it was really men that were the subject of their criticism. Often, my Lebanese interlocutors would go so far as to name a woman they knew from the camp as their favourite worker, temporarily letting down their refusal to discuss the camp inhabitants on an individual basis.

Fouad went on to say, ‘Look, Jacques, those Syrian men, they do nothing. Last year in the winter there was a metre of snow in the village. I was driving and I saw that Syrian Abu Khalid, the one who has made himself sheikh, he was walking with his wives. You know he is married twice? And they sleep in the same bed? Yes, anyway, they were walking from the shop and the women were each carrying two bags. You know what the sheikh was carrying? A box of tissues! I swear to God.’ At this point, Fouad stopped to do a comic impression of the sheikh strolling through the snow while his wives struggled with their shopping bags. ‘So I stopped next to them and said “get in, I will take you” and you know what he did? He got in the car alone, and left his wives to carry on walking in the snow!’ Now that he had picked up pace, Fouad continued on – ‘Do you know how many children he has? And all of them working! He sits at home and drinks tea, and sends them all out to work – his wives can’t come home until they have at least 30,000 [Lebanese lira]!’

This rant was exemplary of the genre - in this story, Fouad focused on the Syrian man Abu Khalid breaching the patriarchal bargain, and his failure to participate in both reproductive and productive labour. Fouad (grudgingly) admitted that while the Syrian women were indeed
strong, in this case trudging through the snow carrying a heavy load, this hardiness reflected negatively on their husband. This upending of gender norms was then reinforced by his reference to Abu Khalid’s supposed sexually transgressive behaviour. Repeating a common negative trope about Syrians, Fouad saw Abu Khalid as sex obsessed, and this was linked to his exploitation of his family’s labour.

Work, service, employment: Lebanese villagers’ conceptions of labour

On the Lebanese side, the word *shughul* (work) was used in a much looser sense. Lebanese farmers would describe themselves as ‘working in hashish’. To be ‘at work’ meant for many of the village farmers to be physically in their place of work, be it the fields or their *karaj*. This time spent did not necessarily include labour, however – it could be overseeing a couple of Syrians, or often simply being interrupted by passing fellow villagers and adhering to the norms of hospitality that went with these encounters. A cup of tea and a chat with a passer-by could go on for hours but was never considered an ‘interruption’ or an annoyance. Similarly, often people would describe themselves as ‘working alone’, and it was only with further probing that they had actually been accompanied by a couple of Syrian labourers.

It is pertinent to note the discursive difference between *shughul* and other forms of work, and their importance to the (masculine) identity of many of my Lebanese interlocutors (see also Chapter VI). *Shughul* was a vague term for a wide range of activities, but these were distinct from two other kinds of labour. The first was *khidmeh* (directly translated as ‘service’), which referred to a whole range of government employment, though most often used for work with the military and security services. State employees would rarely use *shughul* to refer to their employment, and the use of the term *khidmeh* identified them as state employees even in casual conversation. It is important to note that branches of the security services such as *aman al ‘am* have a scope of responsibility far broader than what is generally considered ‘security’, but tend to perform many of the administrative/bureaucratic roles of the state. The third term used is *wazifeh*, which directly translates as employment. This refers to a salaried position either in the state or private sector, so there was some overlap with *khidmeh*, and in colloquial usage - it has strong implications of permanence, stability, and identity. These two terms referred to more than just labour – they implied a general lifestyle,
trajectory and social status. An individual *fat bil dawleh* (entered into state service) or *sar mwazaf* (became employed), and these were states of being rather than wage-labour relationships. Amongst my Lebanese interlocutors, there was a strong hostility towards quantification of labour-time (as discussed in Chapter VI). I did not encounter a single instance of interlocutors describing work by wage-per-hour and met with resistance and incredulity every time I tried to calculate this with them. While property ownership was the ideal source of income, there was a hierarchy of employment, with wage-labour at decidedly at the bottom. This was reiterated through these discursive distinctions.

Lebanese labour in the fields was rare. A culture of family labour and ownership has been integral to Lebanese rural life, and it has been most extensively documented in pastoral communities, where collective labour and cross-family exchange remain common, especially between women (Obeid, 2020, p.28). For many of my interlocutors this was in living memory, and they showed me pictures of their grandparents labouring in their fields in the 1980s. However, the changes wrought by the post-Civil War economic boom and influx of cheap Syrian labour on these unwaged labour practices has yet to be properly addressed. Around the harvest season, I only encountered two groups of villagers working their fields. The first was a couple of unmarried middle-aged women. They had grown, weeded, and cut their own field, which was a part of their inheritance from their (elderly, but still alive) father. Their working the field was in part a function of their position as older unmarried women, asserting their rights to their inheritance in the face of any possible challenge from their brothers (this was an almost exact case of the inheritance protection mechanism described by Joseph, 1994). The other similar case was that of younger men who had been granted some land as a form of early inheritance from their fathers or grandfathers, and were working the land for some spending money (see Chapter VI). For the most part, these men tended to hire Syrians like the rest of the smallholding farmers, but a few of my friends showed a genuine enthusiasm for the work. They would round up a few cousins, and perhaps a Syrian or two, and spend an afternoon cutting, getting stoned, and having a picnic. *Karaj* work was a little more common, and married Lebanese women might participate if their husband was processing a small quantity and the *karaj* was close to their house. In this way, a few hours of hashish processing could be incorporated into their domestic labour.
Lebanese generational self-identity was also a mirror image of these national stereotypes and gendered practices. Older farmers were, when questioned, acutely aware of absence of any Lebanese rural labour force. ‘Oh, Jacques, this new generation, throw them in the bin. They don’t know what work means,’ Ali told me, ‘every one of them wants to be a boss or I don’t know what!’ Older farmers such as Ali made frequent nostalgic references to collective labour practices of their youth - ‘We used to work,’ he said. ‘Before, there were no Syrians. Someone would make an announcement from the mosque that so-and-so was fixing his roof tomorrow, and the whole village would be there.’ The same went for the irrigation systems: as the channels carrying river water to the fields were being fixed and renewed by teams of Syrians, paid by international donors, men like Ali recalled having worked to set the concrete moulds a quarter of a century ago. Like Sato (1997), I am not so much concerned with the veracity of these recollections, but rather the extent to which this use of historical memory is used to express a critique of contemporary relations of production – reification of collective rural labour was an implicit criticism of the vast array of tasks are now outsourced. The wage-labour market is entirely Syrian, and infrastructure work is undertaken by foreign-funded NGOs, nominally the responsibility of corrupt municipalities or other government bodies. In reminiscing about a communal past, Ali and his friends were bemoaning the absence of social labour relations in the present.

One place that this Lebanese collective labour was still visible was the family potato harvests (see figure 19). Many families still planted a couple of dunam of potatoes, often as part of crop rotation to ensure higher hashish yields. Larger fields would, of course, be harvested by Syrians, but some village families still made an event out of the process. Several times I joined a harvest with the older women of the family picking potatoes, helped by their children and a few Syrian wage-labourers. The Lebanese men would usually oversee the tractor, and shoot some birds for sport and a snack. One woman would be sorting the tea, and another would be making everyone sandwiches and roasting potatoes on the open fire. In the meantime, the Syrian labourers and one or two of the more diligent family members would gather up the crop into piles and the tractor churned up the earth into waves. It was a joyous and fairly anarchic proceeding, and it was easy to see how this further reinforced the nostalgic vision of village life in some time lost, a life which was undermined by an influx of cheap labourers and the need for consumption and profits.
'I want 100,000 lira from him': debts, communities and labour

Another aspect key to the functioning of capitalist agriculture and indeed the socio-economic system of my field site was debt. As with wages and work, this concept had specific local characteristics regarding how it was understood and practiced locally. Debt was central to both wage-labour and the labour of social reproduction in the camp and village, but the short-term economic demands of debt had to be balanced against the stability of the broader economic system and the cultural norms which underpinned it. Debt had to be negotiated and understood in an ideological context of family practices and enforced social hierarchies.

The word deyn (debt) was rarely used by any of my interlocutors, who had a variety of euphemisms and allusions to refer to the practices. Most commonly, they would say something along the lines of badi masari mino (literally, ‘I want money from him’ – this phrasing is vague in Arabic as well as in English). The kinds of debt that existed in the camp and village can be grouped into different types, and the social norms which applied to different debts varied drastically. As with work, debt was the source of friction between capitalist market relations and other ideological structures, and this gave rise to jokes which expressed and critiqued this tension.

Internal camp debt was very common between members of the shawi refugee community. This generally took the form of men, often cousins or other close relations, borrowing from or lending to one another. This could be in the form of literal loaning of cash or buying of goods to incur debt, or instead the debt was incurred by labouring for each others’ warsheh (or more often, women from one man’s household labouring for that warsheh). These debts were very common – pretty much everyone in the camp simultaneously owed and was owed some usually quite small amount at any given time, and much of this arose from the warsheh wage-labour described in Chapter V.

All debts were in Lebanese lira, even a year into the financial crisis and hyperinflation, and it was rare for anyone to demand payment or for there to be any fixed timescale for repayment. For example, one recently married young man Bilal had racked up a series of debts to various
members of the camp in the build-up to his wedding (myself included). He had been delaying for months in paying several of his cousins, and owed Anwar about LL100,000 - the value of this sum had plummeted since the initial loan. A few months later, Anwar had organised a work team which included Bassam, and he was due to be paid some LL200,000 via Anwar at the end of the week. Subtracting Bassam’s debt from his wages was unthinkable for Anwar - this would have amounted to a forcible extraction of the debt from his cousin and done serious damage to his social standing. My interlocutors were unable to really explain why they could not press for these debts, but it seemed to be an intersection between norms of fraternal relations between members of the same clan, a sense of charity, and a proscription against questioning people’s claims to being hard-up. To press for the money would be to essentially do away with all three of these norms in the name of money: Anwar would be prioritising cash over his relationship with Bilal, refusing to be charitable when Bilal was short on money, and so by extension calling him a kizab (liar) when it came to his pleas of poverty.

Another example further illustrates this point. Anwar needed to pay for his daughter’s hospital bills, so was in the process of chasing up as many debts as possible – a reason was needed to pursue a debt, and in this way the repayment was often framed as a friendly or charitable act rather than an obligation. He was chasing money from his brother-in-law, for whom his unmarried sister Nour had worked. This debt had been left for over a year, and it was unclear if the Lebanese employer had ever actually paid for the work. Anwar’s mother pressured him to apply social pressure – ‘ask Muhanad, do we have a hisab (account, debt) with him or not?’ To demand the money they thought they were owed was not socially acceptable, but if Muhanad were to recognise the existence of the debt, as a family member he would be socially obliged to pay it as a charitable act in Anwar’s moment of need.

Several of these camp members had small debts from incurred by labour even as long ago as the previous year. Often, the Lebanese late payment practices were the source of this. If a camp dweller had laboured on a family member’s team, they could not push for payment until it had been first received from the Lebanese – their cousin could not be held accountable if the Lebanese farmer was not haqqani. If and when money was finally received, a delicate and complex calculation had to take place - as we have seen, Lebanese regularly underpaid the team leaders, who were then left to figure out how best to divide the money amongst the
workers. This created tensions between the *warseh* of the camp - rumours abounded of less trustworthy Syrians who had received money from Lebanese but not paid or short-changed the other members of their team. Debt from wages was never a certain figure, nor were the vast majority of the labourers able to assert their claim to money from anyone. This was a direct function of national hierarchies and family-tribal norms interacting with the labour market.

The one occasion in my field site that ‘debts’ were treated with a serious, numerical precision was the payment of *diyya* (blood money). As mentioned in Chapter VII, as a discursive signifier, the organisation of blood money and reconciliation was often the self-defining characteristic of my *shawi* interlocutors, and was paid after the fight between the two teenagers. Each household was to pay a fairly negligible amount per male, but this payment was obligatory and not to be delayed. The significance of this *diyya* payment was similarly expressed through jokes – the men of the camp laughed that I had been hanging around in the camp so much that I should count as an extra man in Anwar’s household and so should be included in the payment. This joke expressed an interesting tension between material financial preference and tribal and familial ideologies. My interlocutors were on the one hand expressing how they would like more people to contribute, since this would reduce the amount that they would have to pay. On the other hand, it was understood to everyone involved that I would not actually have to pay, because I was not really a member of their tribe. These jokes, then, articulated annoyance at the monetary burden that *diyya* put on them, but also reiterated the primacy of tribal solidarity considerations over financial concerns.

However, by far the most frequently mentioned debts amongst my interlocutors were intercommunal debts. These were mostly incurred by Lebanese owing Syrians for work done on the promise of payment. These debts were very fluid and they vagueness of their payment or non-payment made it very difficult to map people’s incomes. As Brahim put it ‘you work for a Lebanese and want 4,000,000 [LL], and he says he doesn’t have it. Then he forgets, and after 6 months, he gives you 2,000,000 [LL], and you should thank him!’ While this is to an extent an exaggeration, it is difficult to overstate how normalised not being paid agreed wages in any fixed timeframe was.
Of course, intercommunal debts also flowed the other way. Most of the Syrians in the camp, and indeed many of the villagers, ran up tabs at the local shops. General cash shortages meant that paying for each item was unworkable, and many families would run up tabs of well over LL100,000 to the local shops. The local businessmen like Hammad who ran the shops had a deep knowledge of the different families of the camp and the village, and kept detailed records of their custom. These debts were, of course, in the name of the male head of household further reinforcing the linkage between adult males and integration into the local credit system.

Likewise, the municipality and local water company that provided to the camp also billed them monthly, and this in turn constituted a non-negligible income. Syrians very regularly failed to pay these two utility bills. Since the services of water and rubbish collection were billed to the whole camp collectively, if one or two people failed to pay, the municipality and water company would withhold the water to the entire camp. This happened fairly regularly, and this created a sense of anonymised, collective identity in terms of shared responsibility for debt. It also reflected a more general attitude to payments – the camp inhabitants never paid early or on time, because why should they? There was nothing to be gained from paying on time, so the inhabitants exercised what little power they had by not paying, and maintained a plausible claim to destitution should the need arise in the future (as was the case with the Master Cockroach in Saleh (2016)). There was an unspoken rule within the camp that if the water was cut, it was not the fault of the individual who had not paid, but rather ‘just one of those things’ that would eventually sort itself out. These negotiations were chaotic, and no one from the camp took charge – rather, the owner of the water company usually relented after a few weeks and accepted slightly lower payment, or settled with the individual in question separately if they went to ask him personally. There was also a mirror image here – the Lebanese villagers were always late on the payment of wages, so in turn the camp was always late in its payment for utilities.

Together, these debts bound the Syrians and the Lebanese together. For the camp to disappear, even slowly, would be a huge drop in revenue and loss for the local shops and utilities provider. To fail to pay at least a minimum number of work debts would also lead to
the disappearance of the work force and a loss of profits come harvest season. Debts were, however, much more fluid numbers, very rarely well-organised or publicly documented (in contrast to Sajadian, 2020). Repayment of debts was subject to a range of other cultural norms which often clashed with an entirely commodified concept of labour. As the next section shows, this tension was often expressed through jokes and mockery.

A serious debt: humour, norms, and social critique

‘Ya’aqoub, Ya’aqoub, Abu Mahmoud owes me money from some work, what should I do?’ We were sat around in the Anwar’s tent one evening with some visitors from another camp. He had a slight grin, and the rest of the men went silent. I put on my most serious face and asked ‘How much? And for how long?’ ‘Oh 50,000 [LL], for 2 months now,’ came the reply. ‘Oof, man! Abu Mahmoud this is a serious debt, why haven’t you paid?’ I enquired. ‘I don’t want to,’ Abu Mahmoud said, feigning disdain for the question. ‘He says he doesn’t have it, what is your advice?’ Anwar said, looking at me, and then at his visitors. I thought hard for a moment and then replied ‘well, what you should do, for 50,000 [LL], is wait until Abu Mahmoud’s wife washes his clothes. A jalabiyeh like that, you could sell for at least 70,000 [LL]. You wait until his wife puts it on the washing line to dry, and then you take it, go down to Ba’albeck, and sell it at the market. It you take the 50,000 [LL] and your travel expenses, and you give him back anything else that he has earned.’ This absurd scenario was met with raucous laughter from the men of the camp.

It became a running joke, and whenever a newcomer was in the camp, Abu Mahmoud, Anwar and a couple of the other older men would push me to come up with ideas for collecting debts from one another. I would produce more and more ridiculous, crude, and petty suggestions, and they would cackle at the idea of annoying each other to get their money back. In many ways, I found myself performing a caricatured version of an impersonal Western debt collector, and they performed their roles as open-handed, generous Arab tribesmen. At the same time, they were drawing attention to the problems that arose from the clash between these attitudes and the everyday importance of debt repayments to their income. This comedy routine, then, was a manifestation of exactly the ideological mechanism that Gilsenan (2016) described – kizb, playful lying, was used to articulate the gap between
normative structures and the actualities of the political economy, and highlight the participants experience of the problem and inability to find a solution.

This pattern of humour also emerged amongst my Lebanese friends. From the outset, my participant observation in the refugee camp was regarded with a degree of comedy, but it was my beginning to work with the Syrian labourers that was considered hilarious. Many of the younger farmers, understandably, thought the idea of a British university-educated man working in the hashish fields and orchards of the Biqa’a was completely absurd – it was ridiculous that I had not yet fat bil dawleh or sar mwozaf, the only appropriate courses of action for a man in my position. However, my insistence on being paid the same as the other Syrians and the fact that I actually collected my usually tiny wages was the most recurring source of humour. One of the running jokes concerned a small outstanding debt that I was owed by one villager called Abdallah. He had hired Anwar and some of his cousins from the camp to hand plough his orchards. Unbeknownst to him, I had been at Anwar’s that morning, so had joined the team to complete the job, and I was owed for a day’s work. Anwar had been in charge of the agreement, and had asked Abdallah for the hours worked by the team, and of course Abdallah had disputed these hours and avoided paying Anwar for weeks, and then months on end.

When my Lebanese interlocutors realised that I had worked with Anwar and had not been paid because Abdallah was dodging payment, they rejoiced at this opportunity to wind up Abdallah. He effectively owed me, via Anwar, some tiny amount of money – about LL10,000. Without fail, every time they saw him, they then proceeded to relentlessly tease Abdallah as a cheapskate for ripping me off, telling him that he was embarrassing their beyt in front of the foreign researcher and reminding him that I had written all of this down in my notebook. Abdallah would then comedically roar with anger that I had shamed him in front of everyone for talking about his debt to me in qadem al ‘alem (in front of people, in public). He would then offer to pay me, which I would politely refuse, saying that my agreement was with Anwar and I would be paid whenever Abdallah got round to paying Anwar in full. By this point, our audience of village lads would be laughing their heads off.
In this case, we both played our stereotypical roles and this routine hinged on the tension between the basic principles of wage-labour and Lebanese power over their Syrian labourers. Once again, the joke was both critical, in the sense that the humour relied on the groups’ awareness of this dissonance, but also conservative. We were all implicated in going along with Abdallah ripping Anwar off, and the joke reminded us that Abdallah would not face any real censure for his actions – the social hierarchy upon which the local economy was based was reinforced. About six months later, Abdallah finally paid Anwar a little over half the amount that Anwar claimed he was owed.

In both cases, my interlocutors used teasing humour to highlight the tension between debts incurred from labour and other social norms. In the former, the Syrians were both showing how constant unpaid debts were a fact of life, and performing their inability to collect in this debt. By incorporating me as the outsider, they showed that they were well-aware of another possible approach, where debts were serious and must be paid, but they instead valorised their kinship links by publicly mocking any attempt to enforce debt collection between brothers and cousins. In the latter case, the Lebanese villagers showed that they too were aware of the problems that the non-payment of workers gave rise to, and how it was morally objectionable. However, the jokes did not bring any serious moral censure to bear, reminding everyone that there was no real need to justify non-payment of a Syrian labourer (and implicating me in this judgement). In both cases, the jokes required everyone involved to play along. They hinged on an implicit assumption that all participants know that enforcement of debt clashed with other normative structures, and that these practices should ultimately be treated with preponderance.
Wage uncertainty and monetary stability

‘We pay three thousand an hour’, the Lebanese farmer told me. ‘Some might pay the girls less, but I pay them all the same.’ And what about the shaweesh? I asked. ‘There are no shaweesh here, I only pay workers. Once, some guy wanted to get paid for bringing the workers. I told him you work, or you don’t get paid’.

‘Here, we get paid three thousand an hour. I can’t feed my family on three thousand an hour, but what can you do? God is generous’ – Ahmed, a Syrian Labourer

Looking back over my early field notes, they are replete with statements and claims like this, which take the hourly wage as fixed and immutable, set by an invisible hand and implicitly understood by all involved in the economy of the Biqa’a farms. As previous chapters have shown, the actual rigidity of wages is decidedly less fixed, and income and outgoings diverge
greatly from what these initial calculations imply. Here, however, I am concerned with the way that this circulation is understood by the Lebanese and Syrians involved. Both groups resisted any idea of a fixed labour-power-for-money bargain for very different reasons. Primarily, Lebanese resisted it because it is in direct contravention with their ideological sense of local sovereignty and national hierarchy. While many Lebanese villagers only loosely conceived of this as influencing the labour market, the cumulative structural impact of this hostility to wage labour is one which dramatically weakens Syrian workers. Syrian ideological rejection wage labour is less visible, given that so many of the camp inhabitants are in fact involved in some form of nominal wage labour, and its cumulative effect less easy to decipher. It largely takes the form of continued life trajectories which position wage labour as a temporary, unvalued, or feminine state. Both of these conceptualisations marry noncapitalist cultural practices (patriarchy, hospitality) with the logic of capital ownership.

When Lebanese called Syrians for work, and indeed whenever a Syrian set about working, especially on smaller, fixed tasks, the hourly wage was rarely discussed. The Syrian would make their calculation of income based on hours worked multiplied by LL3,000, and the Lebanese would do likewise. While arguments often arose over the final amount, this was almost always based on discrepancies over hours worked, the quality of the work, or claims to not have cash at that moment, but never a claim for a higher or lower hourly wage. Many of the farm labour tasks required extensive skill, aside from the piecework tasks, and a couple of specific roles in hashish production, but discussion usually skirted around the money-for-labour-time ratio. These numbers had been fixed, my interlocutors guessed, for almost ten years. There was some mention of a rise in wages back in 2012, but the idea of ‘increasing wages’ was vague at best. Over the course of the 2020 harvest season, hourly wages on the larger teams of women and children were raised from LL2,500 to LL3,000. This was clearly due to inflationary pressure and in fact represented a pay cut on last year’s wages of about 60%. However, even this nominal raise was not explained in terms of the value of labour – instead, both the farmers, the Abu Ibrahim the shaweesh, and the workers themselves explained it as a form of compensation for them having to work further from their homes and so delaying lunch. Workers arguing that their hourly labour was worth more was not discursively available to these teams.
This everyday complacency was a direct result of financialised capitalism and the macroeconomic policies of the Lebanese state and banking sector. The Lebanese Central bank pegged the Lebanese lira to the dollar two decades previously, bringing stability to the country’s economy in the aftermath of the Civil War. This practice artificially inflated the lira’s value, and effectively subsidised imports, and was underpinned by commercial banks using customers’ dollar deposits to buy unsustainable quantities of government debt. Expectations of stability and purchasing power were internalised by an entire generation of Syrian labourers, whose everyday financial transactions assumed a stable Lebanese lira. When the government was no longer able to service its debt, commercial banks closed their doors and customers were no longer able to access their deposits. The value of the Lebanese lira plummeted, and it lost roughly 80% of its value over the course of my fieldwork. It is testament to the extent that this stability had been internalised by my interlocutors that even after a year of economic freefall, many friends were still sure that the Lebanese lira would somehow return to its original value. Labourer’s wages remain almost unchanged after the end of the 2020 harvest season, when my interlocutors began to explicitly vocalise and act on the possibility of lira wages not having the same value next week. Larger farmers and smugglers like Hussein were partially insulated from the crisis as they exported their product and received payments in dollars. However, smaller farmers like Ammar and Fouad sold locally and were paid in lira – as an export the hashish price was more stable than other industries, but they too experienced monetary instability that they slowly began to act on over the course of 2020.

Expectations of monetary stability were internalised, but reliability of hourly wages was not. Primary resistance to wage labour by Lebanese villages came in the form of reneging on precisely this fixed wage of LL3,000 per hour. This most commonly took the form of paying workers differently to what their hourly calculations implied - most often this would be less, but it could occasionally be more. Regularly, Syrians would come away from a job looking slightly irritated and tell me that they had received ‘just ten thousand [LL]’ though their exact calculation would often come to several thousand lira more. Sometimes they cursed the name of the Lebanese farmer who underpaid them, sometimes they accepted it with resignation, and sometimes they praised them as generous for overpaying them or for paying them for their full hours ‘even though I didn’t do very much’. The overall implication was clear,
however – wages are not guaranteed, not a right, but contingent on the relationship between the employer and the worker.

Another common practice was for Lebanese to simply claim they did not have any money on them and tell the Syrian to come get it *ba’den* (later). While many Lebanese did eventually pay, this again controlled the terms of employment. Finishing a shift with some Anwar, he would ask ‘is there money?’ and the response was almost inevitably ‘no, *ba’den*’. With some of the more regular partnerships described Chapter IV, this was an almost theatrical performance and the Syrian labourer trusted that money would be forthcoming. It was a common occurrence for Syrians to wait weeks for payment and eventually give up, saying that the Lebanese villager *dahek ‘aleyna* (literally translated as ‘laughed at us’, an expression meaning to be ripped off or screwed over).

For the most part these sums were not that large – at most a couple of hundred dollars, but there were several cases of labourers who were owed several thousand dollars before they realised that they weren’t going to be paid. Oftentimes, Syrians were caught in a bind – they completed a task and were asked to do something else. They had not yet been paid for the first task, and the Lebanese farmer would tell them they would be paid after completing the second task. Hours and days of labour would begin to add up, and the larger the number, the more a Syrian would worry that the Lebanese would renege on the payment. To quit at this point, however, would be to provoke an argument with the employer and so potentially forfeit the wage for all hours previously worked. Collective payment further complicated these matters. Lebanese might pay some members of a team whilst ignoring others, or pay the whole team too little but the difference per person would be small enough that it was not worth disputing. Collective payment anonymised the Syrian workers and weakened any individual claim to a specific agreement. There were, of course, Lebanese villagers who would pay *ba’den* – indeed being more trustworthy individuals, they were the majority of my Lebanese interlocutors and friends. However, this generalised instability increased the personalised nature of these men’s trustworthiness. For my Syrian interlocutors, these practices of delaying, reducing and disputing hourly wages and accounting were an inherent part of being a wage labourer. National social hierarchies appeared to clash with the logic of capitalist wage labour, but actually maintained a cheap and weak labour force.
Abu Mahmoud, one of the older Syrians who arrived soon after Abu Ibrahim said that this practice of not paying the workers was relatively new. He had been coming to the village for over two decades but said that the late/diminished/non-payments began with the onset of the refugee crisis, between 2012 - 2014. There is a clear correlation between the shift from a seasonal workforce usually based on more longer-term relationships, to a general oversupply of often anonymous labour, and heightened Shi’a-Sunni and Lebanese-Syrian tensions. Some older Syrians reminisced about the period of the Syrian occupation. Before the Syrian withdrawal in 2005, if a Syrian worker felt that he was underpaid or cheated, he could speak with a Syrian officer, who would put the Lebanese farmer’s name on a list at the checkpoint. The farmer’s movement in the Biqa’á would then be restricted until they resolved their dispute with the worker.

Waged labour was further rejected by those with apparently stable employment. Those Syrians on shahri wages regularly professed to have no fixed hours. This was sometimes a source of pride, with a couple of Hussein’s employees saying that they were working ‘24 hours, 7 days a week’, clearly pleased at their indispensability to some of the larger hashish farming operations. In many ways this valorisation of work as a lifestyle rather than a labour-time-for-money exchange emulated the Lebanese distinction of khidmeh and wazifeh. Other men were hired shahri by smaller farmers, but this rarely lasted – usually, the farmer’s demands of work ‘24’ annoyed the Syrian, who had hoped to work elsewhere at the same time. For their part, Lebanese smallholders were almost never happy with the work of their Syrian employee and complained that they were himar and ghashim.

Regularly, young Syrian men like Anwar would receive phone calls from Lebanese villagers imperiously demanding that they come work for them right away, and money was almost never mentioned. While to an extent it was standard business practice to eschew questions of payment and money until a later time, often the Lebanese villagers would try to begin the work without even agreeing a payment. While in theory they could perhaps claim that this was because there was a set price, more often than not the price of the work was very much contingent on their goodwill.
When I asked my Lebanese interlocutors about these practices, responses took a number of forms. Firstly, many of the villagers used this as a jump of point to complain about the untrustworthy, criminal elements of the village. Secondly, they would defend the practice, and regale me with stories of cheating and lazy Syrians who stole things or broke valuable farm equipment. More generally though, my interlocutors’ attitudes seemed to touch on the nebulous political position of the Syrians. The argument went roughly as follows: if the Syrians were refugees, as they claimed to be, then they were not labourers. They were guests, being begrudging extended the hospitality of the Lebanese people. This meant that they did not have any ‘right’ to demand payment, but rather should be grateful for anything the Lebanese gave them. Similarly, the villagers did not want the camp there, and so were completely justified in demanding all the labour they wanted from the Syrians – if they didn’t like it, the Syrians could always go somewhere else, or back to Syria. For the most part, however, they simply shifted the conversation to a general political discussion about Syrian national character.

Syrian resistance to the Lebanese practices of wage labour also manifested in constant joking and mockery. Regularly, if a Lebanese asked a Syrian about their work or wages, the Syrian would make up some absurd number, sometimes claiming they were paid double their actual wage, with a deadly straight face. When I asked my interlocutors why they did this, answers were very rarely forthcoming. On the one hand, it was in part because in the case of future work, they were hoping to claim higher hourly wages, but more often than not, it seemed to be a way of poking fun at the Lebanese villagers. They were engaging in daring *kizb*, mocking villagers who knew nothing about the value of labour and highlighting the variability of their wages.

This joking could also be self-deprecating. For example, I was hanging around with Jalal (the young man introduced in Chapter II) and a few other Syrian lads from the camp at the pond in the centre of the village. They were supposedly looking for work, but it seemed like there were mostly just hanging out with their friends and smoking cigarettes. As usual, we were talking about work, and Jalal turned to me and said ‘me, I don’t start work for less than 20,000 [LL]. If a guy comes, I get in the car and I say “put 20,000 [LL] in my pocket now, or I am getting out!”’. He steadily escalated his claims, struggling to keep a straight face and positioning
himself as more and more of a powerful labourer, able to dictate the terms of his employment. By the end of his spiel, as he told it, the Lebanese villagers were queueing up and begging him to work for them. While the lads collapsed into laughter at Jalal’s speech, the one older woman there smiled and said to me ‘he is an idiot. He doesn’t even get 20,000 [LL] for a whole day’s work.’ Once again, these ironic jokes performed the same ideological functions. Firstly, Jalal drew attention to the men’s subaltern position as impotent wage labourers, constantly commenting on their exploited position. Secondly, he reinforced the devaluation of labour, treating it lightly. Thirdly, we were all implicated in this performance – it was made funny precisely because we all knew that his story was completely ridiculous. While some of the young men of the camp were certainly more serious about their value as workers, this reflects a generalised attitude towards the conditions of employment, and the negative, self-deprecatory discourse that was available to these workers.

Syrian workers often also used their hourly rates to avoid discussion about their actual income, with me and with Lebanese and fellow Syrians. ‘3,000 lira’ was a standard response when asked how much a certain job paid, though often the work in question might in fact pay far more as piecework. The worker would be loathe to bring a potentially lucrative deal to the scrutiny of any nosey inquirers, and maintaining a plausible claim to poverty could also be used to avoid paying internal debts in the camp – other camp dwellers would be far more keen to get their money if they knew their neighbours were earning LL50,000 a day instead of LL20,000. Similarly, payments to the camp water provider and municipality could occasionally be avoided if you could reasonably claim you hadn’t had enough work that month, and this was certainly helped by claiming the lowest possible wages for every job.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have shown how wage-labour and related concepts interact with other social practices and hierarchies. Each community’s conceptualisation of capitalist production and the social interaction that goes with it was inextricable from national and gendered hierarchies. Wages, debt, and work were constantly framed in such a way as to reiterate Lebanese domination of the Syrian population and deny the validity of any rights-based discourse concerning wage labour. Gender roles were similarly implicated in these discourses.
Female labour was characterised as transgressive by Lebanese as a means to criticism Syrian men, and it was notably omitted from Syrian male conversation. Norms of masculinity clearly conditioned understandings of what constituted acceptable labour relations, and practices of familial, tribal and clan solidarity were essential to understand the way debt functioned in both communities.

Wages, debt, and work are thus central to the capitalist order of the valley, but labour was not treated as a commodity in the sense that Marx described. The sale of labour and corresponding practices were explicitly understood to be contingent on and constrained by other social relations. My interlocutors regularly highlighted the contingency of these economic practices on other social structures, and resisted the naturalisation of purely capitalist wage-labour. Lebanese villagers and Syrian refugees were reflective on these conditions, and used these apparently opposing ideological structures reflexively and strategically. This is most obviously evidenced in Lebanese hostility to any form of Syrian labour rights on the basis of national hierarchy, which dramatically weakened labour power. However, it is also clear in Syrian appeals to fixed wages cloud Lebanese understandings of their income.

The dissonance between the logic of capitalist wage labour and other practices of national and gendered hierarchy was present throughout discussion. There was visible clash between norms of wage labour and local hierarchies, female labour and patriarchal gender roles, and debt and bonds of kinship. Following Taussig (1977, 2010), popular discourse employed non-capitalist ideological structures to criticise these conflicting social relations – rather than mysticism, criticism was clearly expressed through ironic jokes and humour. The Levantine practice of self-deprecating humour, mockery and kizb as a form of social and political critique has been well documented, and as was the case with Gilsenan (1996) and Saleh and Zakar (2018), as a researcher I was included in these collective exercises. However, previous discussions have tended to neglect the role of work in this humour, and with it the linkages to a broader understanding of the ideological mechanisms of economic subjectivity. This chapter showed how this cultural form was used by my interlocutors to express an understanding of the dissonance between competing sets of social rules.
It also showed how the resultant mockery tended to simultaneously reinforce rather than undermine the status quo. Many of the examples discussed above were ambivalent – they were critical of existing relations of production and reproduction, but simultaneously conservative in their impact. They performed hierarchical relationships and implicated all of the participants in their continuation. My interlocutors demonstrated that they were aware that things could be otherwise, but publicly accepted and even valorised the norms that gave rise to their current situation.
X - Conclusion

‘So Jacques, you have been here doing research for more than a year now. Tell us, what did you find? What are you going to write when you go back to Britain?’ Hussein asked me. The harvest season had come to an end, and the nights were drawing in. The hashish was all harvested from the fields and stored in various karaj dotted around the valley. Now was a period of brief respite in the production cycle – the stems were left to dry out and the farmers waited for the temperature to drop before they began processing the plants into the finished product. We were sat outside of an outhouse, looking out over the empty fields. Hussein poured me a tea, remembering that I did not take sugar, while I cracked open the shells of fresh walnuts gathered by his teenage son.

I had not been prepared for such a straightforward question about my research, and indeed was still a long way from properly formulating my argument. However, the pieces were there, and Hussein was an intelligent, powerful man asking me a serious question about my work. I stopped my nutcracking, thought for a moment, and answered. ‘Well, what I have found is that the relationship between the Syrians in the camp and the Lebanese in the village is, essentially, economic. They are here because you need labourers, and they can work. The UN, tribes, political parties, they aren’t important – you guys are landowners, and you need workers.’ Hussein nodded approvingly, and took a drag from his shisha pipe, smoking the harsher, dried tobacco that many of the older farmers smoked, instead of the sweet, flavoured stuff favoured by the younger generation. ‘Ah, so this is what you will tell them when you return to Britain? Yes, good, you are very clever. And will they listen to you?’

In this brief exchange, powerful men like Hussein both renewed the permission they had granted me to write about the Syrian camp, the village, and the hashish trade, but also checked up on what exactly it was that I was doing and how it would be presented when I returned to Britain.

This thesis in some ways echoes the way my interlocutors saw their society, and in other ways diverges greatly. Both Lebanese and Syrians saw the intercommunal relationship as one of hierarchy and exploitation, and indeed took this for granted. They, too, would tend to explain
Syrian settlement in economic terms and would in large part concur with the broad strokes of the labour-capital relationship that I have painted. They would, however, disagree with me about the reasons behind these developments and the ethical implications of these practices. On the question of the female role in the workforce, however, we would differ. There is a commonly held prejudice amongst my Lebanese interlocutors, as noted, that Syrian men do not work, and instead force the women of their household to work in their stead. In contrast, my Syrian interlocutors would generally ignore the central role of female labour to their household, and instead articulate a patriarchal version of their society where female work was at best can unimportant exception. This thesis toes the line between these two versions, acknowledging the social practices on which they are founded but also the cultural roots of the prejudices that inform them.

Concluding remarks

It is worth restating the argument of this thesis in full here. Firstly, this research has shown how Syrian refugees constitute a rural wage labour force which underpins the agrarian economy of the Biqa’a valley. Lebanese capital’s demand for wage labour permeates all aspects of Syrian refugee life and structures both life in the camp and its relationship with the neighbouring Lebanese community. Secondly, this ethnography has argued that the specific social relations found in the camp and village are a product of the interaction between the demands of wage labour and context-specific cultural practices. There is a reciprocal relationship, whereby patriarchal family practices and national hierarchies accommodate the exploitation of wage-labour, and vice versa. The agrarian capitalism practiced in my field site was premised on this mutual reinforcement, and the social reproduction of labour relied extensively on distinctive cultural practices. Namely, it required extensive unwaged domestic female labour and close-knit extended family and tribal networks spread out through the valley, and the specific shawi Syrian norms and practices of hospitality and sociality that went with this. Thirdly, this intertwining is not unusual – labour organisation and reproduction does not exist in a cultural vacuum, and nor does capital accumulation. The power and social relations which underpin agrarian production in any context must both have meaning to the individuals involved and emerge organically from pre-existing social structures. This thesis has
shown reconciling family practices and national hierarchies with the demands of wage-labour is vital for agrarian capitalist production.

This argument and the corresponding ethnographic data have several theoretical implications. It supports Bernstein’s (2006) assertion that there is no ‘agrarian question’ in the classical Marxist sense. While this study took place in a remote rural context, capitalist relations of production had long since been established on a local level and fully internalised by my interlocutors and the community more broadly. Approaching this case of agrarian development searching for peasant cultivators transitioning to capitalist relations would thus be mistaken. Similarly, while apparently remote and cut-off from the formal financialised economy as a largely illicit economy, this rural context was deeply integrated and affected by international capitalist markets. This was most starkly demonstrated by the impact of the financial crisis, but also the importance of hashish as a product for export onto global markets.

This thesis has also made a case for a pluralistic understanding of capitalism. It has taken Arrighi’s (1987) claim that paths to capitalism can be diverse and multilinear a step further, showing how the resultant mode of production can also vary greatly from the specific relations that emerge as prescribed by classical Marxist theory. In this sense, the articulation of agrarian capitalism contained in this thesis offers not only a challenge but a development of previous Eurocentric accounts. Following Chalcraft (2005) and Mitchell (2002), this thesis has given agency to locally specific non-capitalist practices in the development of capitalist relations of production, and shown what another kind of organically developing, fully fledged capitalist transition can look like. Rather than characterise this as a stalled transition or an exceptional situation in need of explanation, this thesis has shown how capitalism can be founded upon very different subjectivities and corresponding rationalities.

Specifically, it has shown how family practices, ideologies, and power relations can determine how individuals engage with labour and condition the broader productive economy of the region. I have demonstrated how the wage-labour organisation of the Biqa’a is deeply intertwined with Syrian family hierarchies, and this system is underpinned by an essential, precapitalist community network and unwaged labour practices. Additionally, national hierarchies and fiercely defended Lebanese local sovereignty, along with specific rules of
inheritance and community membership, determines how capital is accumulated and the constitution and rationality of the property-owning class.

On a conceptual level, this supports the insights of SRT in incorporating the social reproduction of labour into any account of capitalist production. As this thesis has shown, the hashish economy of the Biqa’a cannot be understood without a deep understanding of the foundational Syrian and Lebanese social practices which facilitate the maintenance of a weak and flexible workforce. My adoption of an integrative approach to production and reproduction has highlighted structurally significant linkages between non-market process and unwaged labour both in the home and the community and capitalist commodity production in the fields and karaj of the Biqa’a. Be it the extension of patriarchal authority from the home to the field, the usage of multi-camp tribal networks to offset unstable employment, or female unwaged domestic labour underpinning the mustering of work-teams in the harvest season, capitalist production was deeply influenced by these processes.

More generally, though, this thesis makes a case for broadening and reflecting on our conceptualisations of labour and capital. Many of the practices described in this thesis may seem in contravention of economic rationality if examined alone and without thick qualitative contextual analysis. This thesis allows us to understand apparent deviations from Marxist prescribed capitalist rationality by drawing out the Eurocentric assumptions of the hitherto linear narrative. My integrative approach takes culturally distinctive social relations as a prerequisite to social reproduction, which in turn conditions the specifics of labour exploitation (and usage of capital) for production. This, in turn, affects the social relations of the household and the community. This circular approach grants agency to important social practices like the family in its account of capitalism in the Biqa’a, and in doing so lets us see this society as a coherent whole rather than an exception to be explained.

The centrality of labour to Syrian camp life, its intertwinement with family and national hierarchies, and the resultant specific manifestation of capitalism has been shown independently in each chapter. In Chapter II I showed how participating in the work force was key to my successful data collection. It was through this engagement that I was able to trace the relationship between the domestic practices I had witnessed in my interlocutors houses
and tents and the economic production of the fields and construction sites. This experience in the family work teams also gave me the tools to interpret the stories and discourses which I had collected from conversations with the villagers and Syrian refugees.

Chapter III showed how pre-crisis labour migration and corresponding family networks laid the groundwork for patterns of Syrian displacement after the outbreak of the Civil War. It showed how this migrant labour force and subsequently refugee population was instrumental in the agrarian development of the Biqa’a, and how this labour force was underpinned by social reproduction back in rural Syria. Post-war migrants like Anwar followed in the footsteps of men like Abu Ibrahim, and their choices and relationships were shaped by the rural Lebanese labour market and their family relations.

Chapter IV gave a granular account of the way that the demands of labour and capital structure the relationship between the camp and the villagers. It showed how Lebanese interacted with the refugee camp as property owners, and Syrians as wage labourers and those with the capacity to muster family labour. These relationships were thus premised on a national hierarchy and also on a Syrian family practices whereby adult males could organise (predominantly female) labour. These interactions were further shown to be a permutation of established yet adaptive cultural practices of clientelism. These partnerships were not only the basis for intercommunal trusting relationships and friendships, but also spilt over into many other aspects of camp life, ranging from the provision of utilities to the resolving of violent feuds. The need for these patron-client pairings was based on an environment of extreme labour insecurity, which in turn was a direct consequence of national hierarchies and exercise of Lebanese sovereignty which diverges from other contexts of rural capitalism.

The internal structure of Syrian work-teams and their dependence on family practices was explored in Chapter V. This chapter argued once again that Syrian camp life was inextricable from the demands of labour, this time by showing how family life was manifest in work in the fields and orchards. The recruitment and organisation of Syrian wage labour in the Biqa’a was shown to be entirely based on Syrian family relationships, and this was further underpinned by female unwaged labour at home. This intertwine was shown to have several important implications. It meant a form of mutual support between capitalist exploitation
and family power structures and hierarchies. Through outsourcing labour organisation to male heads of household and creating self-disciplining family labour units, property owners defrayed the costs of labour force organisation. At the same time, wage-labour was extended to women and children without a corresponding loss of authority by male heads of households. The family and the gendered division of labour also serves as a barrier to the consolidation of any labour identity or solidarity. Similarly, women’s unwaged domestic labour continues unchallenged, but this serves to essentially subsidise the maintenance of a cheap labour force. Wage labour was thus present in these teams and extended to a large proportion of the camp, but in a culturally specific formation which had distinctive implications for the actual material process of agrarian production.

Shifting from labour to capital, Chapter VI showed how Lebanese villagers could be understood as a propertied class whose behaviour must be interpreted in terms of gendered and family practices and the maintenance of national hierarchy. Rather than seeing the agrarian capitalism of the Biqa’a as ‘in transition’ or ‘partial’, this chapter makes the case for a localised capitalism where Lebanese property ownership comes with its own demands and desires. I showed how community membership and status was tied to property ownership, and how this association mirrored that of Syrians and wage labour. This chapter explained the complex local land-ownership and inheritance practices, which again were in part a product of international global capitalism and the post-Lebanese Civil War economic boom, and part a manifestation of a very local conceptualisation of private property where ownership must be constantly activated and defended through social interaction. The social life of the village and ideals of masculinity and family thus required the maintenance of a disenfranchised, external labour force. In Chalcraft’s terms, these practices represent not an exceptional, or partial capitalism, but an organic and local one which corresponds to the rationality of the cultural environment of a Biqa’a village.

Chapter VII then looked away from the family to other institutions which purport to structure life in the camps. I considered three different kinds of nominally non-family based organisations: NGOs, the League of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon, and a local community support group. In each case, I showed how these institutions were permeated by family practices and national hierarchies, and their scope of action was constrained and in some
cases determined by considerations of labour and capital. The chapter shows how organisations’ actions were premised on reinforcing national hierarchies and patriarchal authority, and took Syrian labour as a central component of their approach to the camp community. More generally, this chapter indicates that activities undertaken by these organisations were only feasible where they supported the currently existing balance between national hierarchy, wage labour, and family structure. I suggest that this is not unusual and should inform our understanding of NGO and other interventions in the region.

Chapter VIII then broadened the scope of my ethnography beyond the confines of the village-camp pairing, and showed how Syrian camp life is part of a large network which spreads out through the Biqa’a valley. The Syrian community has its own vast lived geography which spreads out across the different camps and towns of the valley – in large part many of the historical practices which used to stretch between Syria and Lebanon prior to the Civil War have been transplanted to the Biqa’a valley. Families and tribes are divided between different camps based on labour and social reproduction considerations, and the Syrian population is highly mobile. The division of families between camps helps them to find work, take advantage of other means to defray the costs of social reproduction, and provides security in a potentially dangerous environment. This network is rigorously maintained through extensive visiting, and of course this mobility is highly gendered and serves to reinforce rather than challenge patriarchal hierarchies.

The final chapter considered how Syrian and Lebanese people conceived of and discursively navigated this marriage between wage-labour agrarian capitalism and family and national hierarchies. I argued that my interlocutors, both Lebanese and Syrian were acutely aware of the tensions arising from the exploitative capitalist economic practices which I have described. I considered conceptualisations of work, debt, and wages. I showed how the villagers and camp dwellers were keenly aware of how these capitalist practices were contingent on national and gendered hierarchies, and further how they clashed with other non-capitalist ideological value structures. They navigated this through the use of a Levantine form of joking, which constitutes a reflective social critique. It allowed Syrians and Lebanese alike to acknowledge and complain about the gap between form and substance, but it was often a conservative practice. However, in many cases this public performative practice
facilitated exploitation by devaluing labour and collectively reasserting acceptance of the status quo.

These aspects of life come together to paint a picture of a Syrian community of wage labourers, where capitalist practices are deeply intertwined with a specific national hierarchy and model of patriarchal family.

Figure 27 - Piles of hashish dry in the sun on the plains of the valley

Reflections

As a study of exploitative capitalist labour relations, one aspect of life is notable by its absence: that of resistance. Throughout my fieldwork, as should be clear from this thesis, I encountered no notable cases of explicit resistance to labour exploitation or oppression. My male interlocutors were well aware of the concepts of a trade union and strikes but at no point did I encounter anything approaching labour organisation. Even in the much looser
sense that Scott uses the term ‘resistance’, my ethnography turned up very little. Certainly, there was plenty of foot-dragging, inflating hours, gleaning extra fruit and vegetables, avoiding paying utility bills, and ignoring the municipality and state’s more oppressive laws and ordinances. However, labour exploitation and oppression were such that these activities barely offset the costs of the social reproduction of the labour force. Structurally, these activities did not resist exploitation but rather enabled its continuity. Aside from a few cases of very minor theft, the only examples of wage-labour resistance that I found were perhaps some of the young men casually breaking Lebanese owned irrigation gates when they would not open, in order to save time and effort.

I have been wary of looking where the light shines, and as a result I am conscious of the pessimistic picture that this thesis paints for any kind of radical politics. The work of Scott (2008) and more recently Pye (2021) suggest that by refining and complicating our understand of what constitutes the labourer and social class, researchers can more readily identify cases of resistance and class conflict that more orthodox Marxist categories have caused us to overlook. I think it is likely that this hypothesis bears fruit in other contexts, but my research did not find fertile ground for a radical politics. My sentiment is echoed on a regional level by Chalcraft (2021), in his analysis of the ‘revolutionary weakness’ of the post-Arab Spring Middle East.

Pessimism aside, I posit that this ethnography constitutes a case study of extremely successful capitalist exploitation of labour, and in this sense it can be instructive. The absence of resistance to exploitation can be traced back to the central finding of this thesis – the marriage between a specific form of wage labour and family and national hierarchies. The case of the Syrian refugee-labourers of the rural Biqa’a is a case of the extension of wage labour practices to a very large portion of the population without many of the logistical and ideological difficulties that might be otherwise foreseen as inevitable. Labour organisation and the exercise of power that goes with it has almost entirely been outsourced to pre-existing family structures, and any discourse of rights or value of labour that might become available to these workers is neutered by both the material and ideological distance of workers from ownership of their wages.
The important cases of transgressive behaviour in the form of female-led work teams in Chapter V are illustrative of this phenomenon. These women violated gender norms through their activities as labour organisers and their proximity to wages and were distinguished from other labourers in their articulation of a more explicit ‘wage-labour’ discourse. While this may have constituted resistance to some form of family-based patriarchal labour exploitation, it also represented a different kind of capitalist wage-labour ideology. Batoul and Jana’s transgression was to engage in exploitative wage labour without the full discursive and organisational gloss of the family – we should not overlook the fact that the result was a similar kind of exploitation.

This thesis de-exceptionalises the Middle East and situates it within the narrative of the global development of capitalism. The practices described here and the more general framework where pre-existing social relations have become intertwined with labour organisations to create new mutually reinforcing conglomerations are clear in other contexts. For example, the parallels between my account of familial entanglement with globalised agrarian commodity production and that of Sanchez’s (2013) ethnography of young female labour in Mexican immigrant families working on strawberry farms in California is striking. In both cases productive labour arrangements and reproductive practices created a system of discipline which reinforced patriarchal power in the home and simultaneously maximised exploitation in the fields. Similarly, Melossi’s (2021) ethnography of the oppressive labour contracting system used to exploit African migrants working on tomato farms is analogous to the shawish system I have described. Migrant vulnerabilities are exacerbated to create a weak and pliable ‘reserve army of labour’, which is managed through the adaption of pre-existing hierarchical social relations. Chatterjee (2001) shows how the norms of masculinity and femininity shaped the cultivation regime and disciplining of labour on an Indian tea plantation and responded to the unwaged, gendered labour of social reproduction.

My research makes the case that socio-economic practices in the Levant can be subject to the same scrutiny and explanation as other regions, using the same theoretical apparatus. This thesis further does so by giving cultural practices agency in our understanding of a capitalist mode of production, and steering clear of imposing a Eurocentric narrative on top of local history and concepts. My ethnography thus demonstrates that fighting against orientalism
can yield fruitful insights into the different ways that capitalist agrarian development can be manifest

Further research

This thesis indicates clear avenues for future research. It has demonstrated that the study of labour is a fertile ground for social science research in Lebanon and essential to our understanding of Syrian and Lebanese communities. It has given an in-depth account of one community working in one sector, but alongside a few works by Saleh and Zakar (Saleh, 2016; Saleh & Zakar, 2018), Chalcraft (2009), Monroe (2014) and Sajadian (2020, 2022) this represents just a fragment of the picture. This project is thus at the forefront of labour studies in the Middle East and a strong vindication of this approach. Future works should address different communities and social classes of Syrian and Lebanese waged and unwaged workers. They should explore the social relations and subjectivities associated with other work practices such as khidmeh and wazifeh, and the impact of these migrant labour camps on communities on the other side of the border back in Syria. They should also explore the clearly defined unwaged domestic labour tasks (such as Obeid, 2019), and also those which are increasingly being undertaken by migrant domestic workers (Frantz, 2013; Mark Johnson & Wilcke, 2015; Jureidini & Moukarbel, 2004; Kassamali, 2017)

Comparison with related contexts could also be fruitful. My Biqa’a valley-based findings would benefit from comparison with other rural contexts of Syrian displacement, such as Turkey and Jordan (see the work of Dedeoğlu & Sefa Bayraktar, 2020; Pelek, 2019), but also other sites of rural capitalist exploitation of disenfranchised populations (Kaminer, 2019; King et al., 2021; Melossi, 2021). These comparisons will help to identify and analyse generalisable findings and frameworks for our understanding of the Agrarian Question in its modern formulation. This work also indicates the need for a close comparative examination of Syrian and other forms of migrant labour in Lebanon and the region (namely, but not exclusively, the growing body of literature on unfree migrant domestic labour).

This research has also clearly shown the ways that work spills over into other areas of social and political relations, and the need for further exploration of these linkages. Similar work in
this vein is exemplified by Martínez and Eng (2016, 2017), who have explored the social relations and symbolic values associated with bread production in the Syrian Civil War. Their work has made use of the dramatic transformations of the Civil War to explore the entanglement between Levantine conceptualisations of sovereignty and the provision of food aid, and in so doing has shone a light an essential and often overlooked manifestation of the politics of the everyday. This thesis has shown the need to analyse ‘everyday’ practices and extract the foundational political mechanisms from otherwise routinised social interactions.

In large part due to my masculinity, this thesis has been decidedly male oriented. Future research could attempt to redress this balance, as has already been done by Traboulsi (n.d.), Sajadian (2022) and Saleh (2017), by accessing those areas of domestic and female life which were closed off to me as a male researcher. On a related note, this thesis has demonstrated the centrality of masculine concepts and discourses to labour organisation and reproduction in the Levant, and thus indicates a need for further exploration from a male perspective. Research is only just beginning to fully appreciate and explicitly deal with the complexity and importance of masculinity to social life in the Middle East (Haugbolle, 2012; Inhorn, 2012; Kristin V Monroe, 2020; Norbakk, 2018; Suerbaum, 2020; Wick, 2015), and this thesis stands at the forefront of this turn in social sciences research in the region.

My research has also indicated a need to study the activities of NGOs and state apparatus in the context of the local economy and political hierarchy, as my study has indicated that a clear understanding of projects and interventions requires a deep qualitative account of the labour market and land ownership practices. It thus joins recent work such as that of Turner (2019, 2020) and Wagner (2017, 2018) in refining and ‘re-politicising’ our understanding of humanitarian interventions in the region.

This thesis has indicated the need for a return to classical themes of class, capital, and labour in our understandings of rural Syrian labour camps, and the importance of putting them into discourse with equally fundamentally important questions of gender. It shows that studies of social systems and structures are likely incomplete without an in-depth account of capital and labour flows, which may diverge from discursive accounts of governance. A deep
understanding of Syrian and Lebanese behaviours is impossible without a clear mapping of the material and ideological factors that condition them.
XI - Glossary of Arabic terms

‘aaleh: family, usually used to refer to the ‘nuclear family’, but can also be used to refer to more extended kin relations including grandparents, uncles, aunts, and cousins

‘abid: slave, servant

‘arsah: literally ‘pimp’, a fairly a common insult

‘aza’a: literally ‘consolation’ or ‘condolence’, but used to refer to the ceremony of mourning and comforting the bereaved

agha: an old Ottoman rank, used in parts northern Lebanon to refer to a class of small landowners

ahl: family, can refer to immediate family or broader family including parents, aunts, and uncles

al umam: literally ‘the nations’, used colloquially to refer to UN affiliated bodies such as UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF

aman al ‘am: General Security, the main security body in Lebanon which also performs many of the administrative functions of the state

ba’den: later on

beyt: house or clan

badu: Bedouin

badeel: literally ‘substitution’, but used to refer to the price paid to get an exemption from military service in Syria

banat: girls, used to refer to young women in general

bitaqa hamra: literally ‘red card’, this refers to the debit card given to Syrian households to access the centralised cash-based assistance scheme implemented by the UNHCR, WFP and other partners

dabke: traditional Levantine dance

daman: broad term used to refer to land rental, purchase, and sharecropping arrangements

dawleh: state

daya’a: village
dahek ‘aleyna: literally ‘laughed at us’, an expression meaning to be ripped off or screwed over

deyn: debt

diq: to beat, in this context it refers to beating dried hashish with a pitchfork to separate the buds from the stalk

diyyeh: blood money payments

doftar: notebook

dunam: common measurement of land in the Levant, usually around 1,000 metres squared or a quarter of an acre

fanan: artist, singer

fatiha: opening verse of the Quran

fallah/fallahun: class of peasant farmers, sharecroppers and rural labourers

fat bil dawleh: to enter into state service/employment

ghashim: thick, a common insult

haqqani: trustworthy, one who is honest and treats others justly

haram: forbidden on religious grounds

himar: donkey, a very common insult

hisab: account, debt

hotet iydi ‘al ‘ard: literally ‘I put my hand on the land’, this expression refers to taking possession of land simply by using it

ibn al daya’a: son of the village

inqilab: coup

jal: the process of producing hash by gently circulating it on a sieve

jalabiyeh: loose robe-like garment, traditional dress for men still worn by many Syrians from the jazirah region.
jazirah: literally ‘island’, this refers to the geographical region encompassing the plateau to the east of the Euphrates including northeastern Syria, northwestern Iraq, and southeastern Turkey

jebel lubnan: Mount Lebanon, the distinct geographical region

junood: literally ‘soldiers’, but used by locals to refer to the little crumbs of hash which go into a joint

jurd: rugged mountainous region

kafeel: sponsor, required for foreigners in Lebanon seeking residency and work permits

karaj: literally ‘garage’, but the term refers to both mechanics’ garages and those used for the processing of hashish

keffiyeh: headdress

kizab: liar

kizb: lies

khidmeh: literally ‘service’, but refers to a whole range of government employment, most often used for work with the military and security services.

kutub al kitab: Islamic ritual which officiates an engagement and involves signing a marriage contract

mahr: bride price, paid by the family of the groom to the family of the bride

mahbul: dumb, a common insult

maqtou’a: piecework, paid by the completion of a task, regardless of time taken

matloub/matloubeen: wanted by the security services

mooneh: preserves, staples, food supplies

mu’alemi: literally ‘my teacher,’ this is often used as a term of respect for a master of a trade or a boss

mua’amarat: conspiracies

mukhabarat: secret police, intelligence agency

mukhtar: the local notary responsible for registering births, deaths, and marriages (amongst other things)
muqawameh: literally ‘resistance’, this is the term used by supporters to refer to Hizbollah and its broader national and regional allies

muqta’ajiy/muqta’ajiyeen: feudal lord

musaliha: reconciliation

musha’: common lands under the Ottoman Empire

mutasarafiyeh: autonomous region under the Ottoman Empire

mwazaf: employed, with implications of long-term security and stability

nargila: shisha, water pipe

natur: guard

nawar: gypsy

nizami: literally ‘in order’, but colloquially used to refer to having full legal status

qabaday: tough guy, outlaw

qabileh: tribal confederation

qantar: a measure of weight roughly equivalent to 90 kilograms, used in the Biqa’a to measure bales of dried crop

huqa: a measure of weight roughly equal to 1,200 grams, used to measure processed hashish

qadem al ‘alem: in front of people, in public

qowet: the Lebanese forces, a Maronite supremacist militia and political party

‘ashira: segmentary lineages within tribal confederations

ra’ismali/ra’asmaliyeen: wealthy capitalist, investor

sar mwazaf: to become employed

sahel: plains, flat land at the bottom of the valley

sahra: late night sessions of tea-drinking, smoking, chatting, and playing cards

sooba: wood/diesel-burning stove
saqaleh: filter/sieve contraption for the final stages of hashish production

shadr: plastic sheets used as tent tarpaulin

mazot: diesel fuel

shahri: monthly, on a fixed monthly wage

shami: someone from Damascus

shatir: smart, clever

shaweesh: labour organiser and camp manager

shawi: an identity associated with certain Sunni towns and tribes of Hassakeh, Raqqa, and Deir Ez Zour.

shebab: young men, lads

ta’aban: tired, exhausted – can be said of a person and the land

shurha: line of crops

shughul: work

sunduq ijtima’i: social box, a mutual aid fund

tajir: trader

tha’ir: feud

thureed: dish of stewed chicken or lamb, served on top of Arab bread

wajih ash sheikh: literally ‘the face of the sheikh’ - the title of a tribal sheikh’s representative in Lebanon

surt mina w feena: you have become one of us

usra: family, close relatives

wakeel: guarantor, o the Syrian could legally register and drive a vehicle without fear of being stopped by the police or other villagers.

warsheh: workshop, work team
wasta: very broad and commonly used term in Arabic to refer to activating connections to navigate social and bureaucratic obstacles and access resources

wazifeh: employment, a salaried position either in the state or private sector with strong implications of permanence, stability, and identity

zulfikar: the name of the Imam Ali ibn Talib’s distinctive two-tongued sword, a symbol of Shi’ā identity often worn by men on a necklace


Al-Mohammad, H. (2011). "'You have car insurance, we have tribes": Negotiating everyday life in Basra and the re-emergence of tribalism', *Anthropology of the Middle East*, 6(1), pp. 18–34.


Anderson, K. J. (2016) 'Lost and found, then lost again? The social history of workers and peasants in the modern Middle East', *History Compass*, 14(12), pp. 582–593.


Chalcraft, J. (2011) 'Migration and Popular Protest in the Arabian Peninsula and the Gulf in...
the 1950s and 1960s', *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 79(1), pp. 28–47.


Fawaz, M., & Harb, M. (2020) 'Is Lebanon Becoming Another “Republic of the NGOs”?' *Arab Center Washington DC.*


Helmrich, L. R. (2017). The Long Season. Pieter van Huystee Film & TV.


experiment [Accessed 31 August 2022]


Katerji, O., & Roussinos, A. (2014). *Lebanon’s Hash Farms*. Vice News. Available online at:


Long, K. (2013) 'When refugees stopped being migrants: Movement, labour and humanitarian


Obeid, M., (2015) 'States of Aspiration: New Questions for Middle East Anthropology' in


Takkenberg, L. (2009) 'UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees after sixty years: some


