Local and Regional Entanglements:

The Social Stability Context in Sahel Akkar

Conflict Analysis Report - August 2016

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Summary

This report introduces the conflict context in the Sahel Akkar area, the Lebanese most northern coastal area bordering Syria. Sahel Akkar is predominantly agricultural, with Muslim Sunni and Alawite residents and a small Christian minority, in addition to a Syrian refugee population equivalent in number to a third of the Lebanese population. The conflict issues experienced in the area today are rooted in structural causes, including a long history of control by feudal families and marginalization in national politics and developmental agenda. Present day conflicts largely revolve around long-standing politico-sectarian tensions between members of the Sunni and Alawite communities, which are vulnerable to regional and national level developments. These tensions alongside systems of economic exploitation and competition over resources impacts the relationships between the host community and Syrian refugees who are also negatively affected by national level policy on their legal stay in Lebanon and are vulnerable to gender-based exploitation and harassment.

In terms of actors, politically local Sunni inhabitants are largely loyal to the Future Movement with only a minority sympathizing with MP Khaled Daher and Islamic groups. Eid's Arab Democratic Party commends the sympathies of the Alawite minority, particularly given the inability of other political groups to create an attractive alternative. Municipalities and Mukhtars are important local actors, and encompass within them key community figures who derive their authority from family or political ties. There is also an important role of religious figures and economic players, including agricultural merchants and land owners. In terms of dynamics, rumours and incitement by the media, as well as religious and political actors, burden what field research indicate to be weak social infrastructure and local conflict mitigation mechanisms. Recent establishment of a municipal union and improved coordination between members of the local government, as well the mediation of key figures in the villages at times of crisis is supporting the nascent social infrastructure. The positive role played by Syrian refugees in the agricultural production cycle and relative abundance in water reduces tension linked to economic production. The report recommends the implementation of social stability and conflict sensitive development projects to safeguard the area from the impact of regional political changes, further strengthening local actors as well as revisiting national level policy on the residency of Syrian refugees.

I. Introduction

This report provides a quick description and analysis of the conflict and social stability context in the Sahel Akkar area of the Akkar governorate. The analysis is based on fieldwork conducted between 30 March and 8 May 2016, which included interviews with 22 key informants, including members of civil society organizations, local government representatives, representatives of local political parties, and local business people, in addition to members of the Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities[1]. As most key informants interviewed were adult men, given that men occupy many of the local government and political leadership position locally, we sought to complement the perspective they provided by implementing four focus groups comprised of Lebanese Alawite women, Alawite youth, Sunni Women and Sunni youth were conducted to explore community level perceptions and relationships of the social stability context in the area.

While the impact of historic, structural, and regional dynamics on the context has been noted, the focus of this report is on the social and socio-political conflicts and the local community level, and only provides a snapshot of the situation at the time of fieldwork.

II. Context

Sahel Akkar is a cluster of villages located in the northern coastal area of the Akkar governorate. The Sahel is not a set administrative area and the exact villages that fall within vary. Nevertheless, it can be roughly said to include the villages contained within the triangle starting from the coastal village of Qoubbet Chamra to the border town of Arida extending to the West, up to the border village of Aabboudiyé, including the villages of Tall Meaayan (Tall Kiri), Chir Hmairine, Al- Massaaoudiyé, and Mqaiteaa (Tal Hayat). This cluster is one of several similarly loosely defined clusters in the expansive governorate of Akkar, and is brought together because of geographic proximity, and usually delimited either by the highways that takes you to the two border crossings with Syria or by the geographic nature to exclude the bordering villages with a higher elevation (see figure 1).

A. Demography

The total population of Sahel Akkar is not easy to ascertain given the fluidity of the area's borders and limited availability of accessible accurate data which takes into consideration actual residence in the area[2]. As a rough estimate, the Lebanese population in the Sahel is between 23,000 and 30,000[3], out

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[1] Interviews were conducted in Arabic by two researchers, one Syrian and one Lebanese, and if interviewees accepted, were recorded. The report though does not provide a mere summary of the key issues reported by interviewees, but provides an analysis which does not always take statements by interviewees at face value and rather compares and contrasts various perspectives and opinions to provide this analytical summary. Names of all specific villages visited are not provided in this report to ensure protection of individuals who shared sensitive stories.

[2] For figures on the Lebanese and Syrian population, we have included the following villages: Aabboudiyé, Aamaret Aakkar, AAridet Cheikh Zennad (Arida), Cheikh Zennad, Chir Hmairine, Darine, Haouchab, Hayssa, Hokr Ed-Dahri, Hokr Jouret Srar, Kfar Melki Aakkar, Knissé, Marlaya Melhem, Massaaoudiyé, Mqaiteaa (Tal Hayat), Qaabrine, Qleiaat Aakkar, Qoubbet Chamra, Rmoul, Saadine, Sammaqiyé, Semmaqli, Srar, Tall Aabbas Ech-Charqi, Tall Aabbas El-Gharbi, Tall Biré, Tall Hmayra, Tall Meaayan (Tall Kiri). It is important to note though the many discrepancies between the name of the villages as used by the local inhabitants, the associated cadastres, and the name used for one or several villages at the Ministry of interior for electoral constituencies.

[3] The exact figure is 23,013 as per IPC - Lebanon extreme poverty distribution report (2008), as detailed in UNHCR's summary data of Lebanese and Syrian refugee population ranked vulnerability, dated January 2014 available on https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=4596 (accessed 21/12/2015) for the above villages. The area though includes some residents who are registered in other villages of Akkar or Minieh and might have been missed. In addition, the population since the estimation of 2008 might have increased, which explains the higher estimate. One mayor and some previous reports give a total approximate figure of around 40,000 - 50,000 residents but it appears unfounded.

of 253,623 in the whole of the Akkar governorate[4]. The number of Syrian refugees these communities host is approximately 13,533[5], making the proportion of Syrian to Lebanese residents more than 2:5, higher than the national ratio of 1:4. This number fluctuates due to the internal seasonal movement of Syrian refugees between the Bekaa and Akkar.

Many of the current residents of the area have only settled in the past 5 to 10 decades, and were in large part farmers or fellahin who did not own the land but rather worked it on behalf of the feudal landowners who had been in power since the period of the ottoman rule. The villages are thus generally small - the largest five villages host between 1,700 & 2000 residents each[6] - and in many cases the place of residence and work of the farmers is incongruous with the village in which they are registered and vote.

B. Socio-political composition

The population of Sahel Akkar is composed of Sunnis (predominantly) and Alawite, with a small Christian minority mainly in the village of Tall Aabbas El-Gharbi. Despite not being a majority in the Sahel, the Alawites in the area form 40% of the Alawite minority in Lebanon, with the other 60% residing in Tripoli, predominantly in the Jabal Mohsen area (though many of those originate from Akkar). They are represented in the Lebanese parliament since 1992 by two members in each of the areas where they are present.

Following the 2016 municipal elections, there will be eleven municipalities in the Sahel Akkar area, 2 of which are new. Most of the existing municipalities are also new and lack the accumulated experience in local governance. Existing municipalities have recently established a union for the Sahel, with the exception of the Tall Aabbas El-Gharbi municipality which has joined a different union.

Table 1: Municipalities and municipal unions in the Sahel Akkar region

	Villages under the municipality	# of Municipal border members	Membership in Municipal union (as of May 2016)
1	Hayssa	15	Sahel Akkar Municipal union
2	Cheikh Aayash	9	New municipality
3	Aabboudiyé	12	Was with Qleiaat
4	Qleiaat	15	Sahel Akkar Municipal union
5	Massaaoudiyé	12	Sahel Akkar Municipal union
6	Mqaiteaa, Qaabrine, Kfar Melki, Rmoul	12	Sahel Akkar Municipal union
7	Tall Biré	12	Sahel Akkar Municipal union
8	Tall Aabbas Ech-Charqi	9	Sahel Akkar Municipal union
9	Tall Aabbas El-Gharbi	12	Nahr el-Istwan Municipal union
10	Tall Meaayan Tall Kiri	15	Sahel Akkar Municipal union
11	Qoubbet Chamra	9	New municipality

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[4] According to the Central Administration of Statistic's 2002 data set, as cited in the Akkar Governorate Profile (June 2015) compiled by the Inter-Agency Coordination.

[5] According to UNHCR data, June 2016.

[6] Namely Mqaiteaa, Tall Aabbas El-Gharbi, Tall Meaayan, Chir Hmairine, and Qleiaat.

At the time of the 2009 parliamentary elections, nominees affiliated with Future Movement (FM) gained all of Akkar seats, one of whom has since become disassociated with the movement (see Table 1). Yet assessing the political loyalties of local residents based on results of the 2009 elections is slightly deceptive, given the particularity of political climate when the elections took place, the inclusion of the Sahel Area with the whole of the Akkar governorate, and the numerical dominance of the vote of the Sunni majority which marginalizes the popular Alawite leaders who are mostly pro-Syrian regime.

Table 2: Members of Parliament in the Akkar Qaza (elected in 2009)

Name of MP	Sect	Political affiliation
Khaled Daher	Sunni	Nominated as FM, but has since been disassociated from them.
Khaled Zahraman	Sunni	Future Movement
Moiin Muraabi	Sunni	Future Movement
Khodr Habib	Alawite	Future Movement
Riad Rahhal	Greek Orthodox	Future Movement
Nidal Tohme	Greek Orthodox	Future Movement
Hadi Hbeish	Maronite	Future Movement

C. Security

Two types of considerations are to be examined when discussing stability in the area. The first is the vulnerability of the region to national and regional conflicts and its use as a sight for mobilization and instigation. Accordingly, the security situation has fluctuated with political events, most notable the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005, and the 2008 clashes in different areas of Lebanon. More recent events relate directly to the situation in Syria and in Tripoli, where the relationship between the different sects reflects the relationship and fluctuations in power of the Syrian regime and the Future movement, among others. Given the current agreement among political actors in Lebanon since the Arsal events in 2014 to deflate tensions in Lebanon and the relative stability of the Syrian regime, the situation appears to go through a period of calm. Security incidents related to the proximity of the Syrian border appear unlikely given the relative stability on the Syrian side of the border that is under the Syrian regime's control.

Another consideration is the possible escalation into violent confrontations of disputes at the social level, namely conflicts between individuals and families – or even among the members of the same family – and the politicization of these conflicts.

D. Economy

Akkar is the poorest of the Lebanese governorates, and the Sahel is one of the poorest clusters within it with an estimated 63% of its residents living on less that 4 USD per day[7]. The main source of income is agriculture, most prominently potato, tobacco, citrus fruits, and vegetables. According to a 2010 World

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[7] as per IPC - Lebanon extreme poverty distribution report (2008), as detailed in UNHCR's summary data of Lebanese and Syrian refugee population ranked vulnerability, dated January 2014 available on https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download. php?id=4596 (accessed 21/12/2015).

Vision report, 46.5% of the local income is derived from agriculture (though key informants interviewed estimated higher percentages). This is followed by employment mostly in the public services and the army (15.42%), though contrary to the rest of Akkar, employment in the army is much less prevalent in the Sahel area. Other income is from diaspora remittances (8.56%), animal production (7.12%), in addition to various other sources including trade, construction, industry, transportation, and fishing (21.3%)[8]. The share of income from transportation and trade is likely to have dropped since the Syrian crisis, with repeated closure of the borders with Syria, and the politically motivated Syrian restriction on products from Lebanon. The Syrian crisis also had some further negative impact on the local population which often depended on the free health care and purchasing of key life necessities at a lower price from Syria.
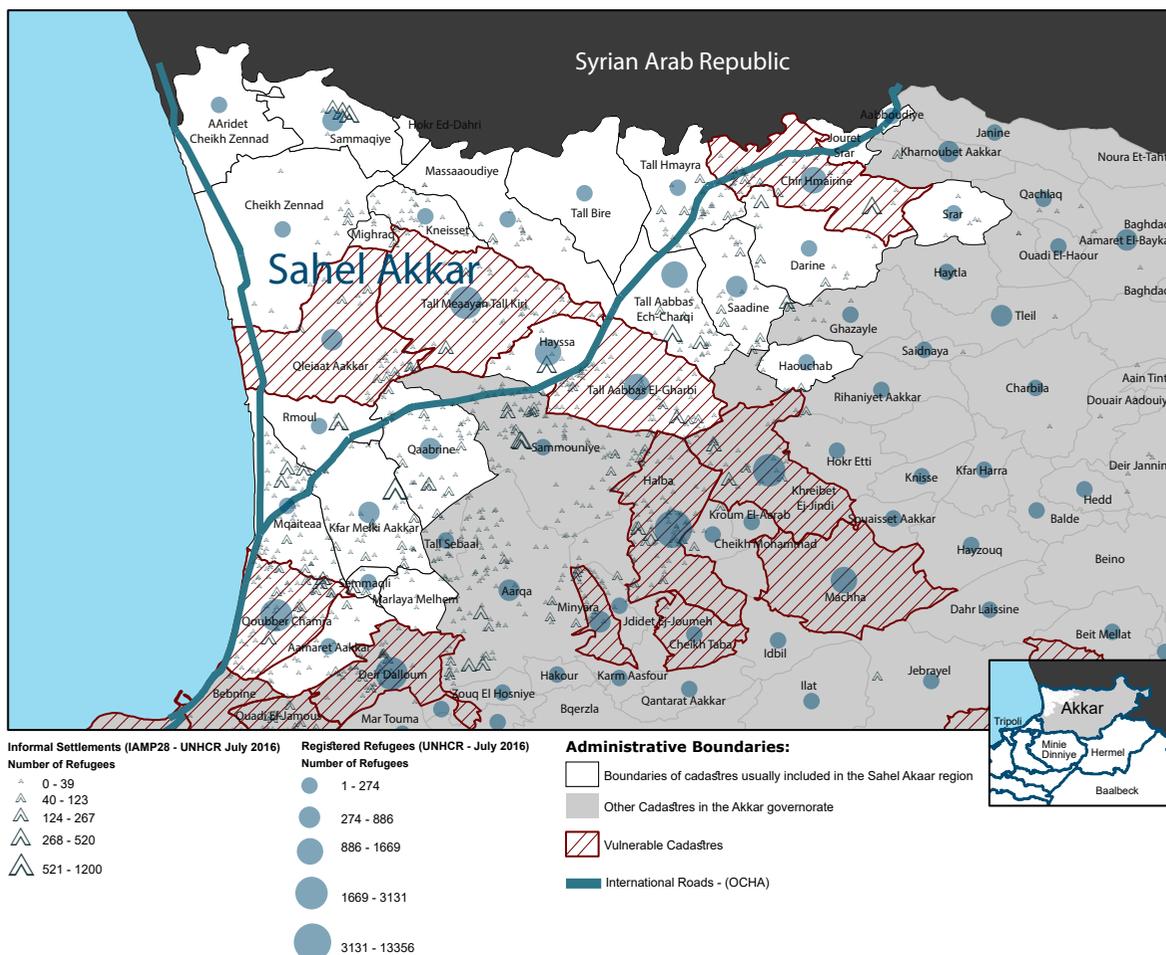
Figure 1: Map of Sahel Akkar

III. Conflict Issues

The conflict issues in Sahel Akkar today are strongly rooted in long existing structural causes. The local inhabitants have mostly been workers for feudal landowners since the Ottoman Period – most notably the Muraabi family. The control of these feudal families over the area, economically because of their ownership of the land and control of agricultural production or politically as quasi rulers on

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[8] World Vision Lebanon. Akkar IPM Assessment Report, 2010, as quoted in: World Vision, and UNDP. 2010. "Conflict Mapping Assessment – Akkar Area."

behalf of the Ottoman regime, was historically aided by religious authorities and endured even after the establishment of the state of Lebanon. For long, the marginalization of the Akkar region in the national level development agenda and the limited services afforded to it had been sustained by the interests of political representatives from the area; once feudal landlords turned into parliamentarians and politicians[9]. The late 1960's and 1970's brought in important changes, including the decline in the power of feudal lords within a changing economic environment which deprioritized agriculture and the rise in leftist political parties and movements to claim land ownership by farmers.

A 2010 UNDP/World Vision report analysing the conflict context in Akkar, suggests that there are three drivers for conflict in the Sahel area, namely: "Power relations between the beik and fellahin regarding ownership of land, sectarian divisions fuelled by confessional political system, and significance of socio-political ties of Alawites to Syria". The scene since then has changed significantly with the Syrian crisis, the fluctuation in power dynamics between the Syrian regime and Future Movement, as well as the influx of large numbers of Syrian refugees to the area. Nevertheless, any reading of the conflict context in the Sahel needs to be rooted in long standing dynamics that affect how the impact of the Syrian crisis is negotiated locally. Figure 2 provides a summary of these systemic conflict causes. The paragraphs below elaborate on the proximate conflict causes and issues observed during fieldwork.

A. Latent long standing politico-sectarian tension exacerbated by the Syrian crisis

According to World Vision's 2010 report, violent clashes occurred in 1975, at the beginning of the Lebanese civil war where the Christian village of Tal Abbas El-Gharbi was attacked by armed groups (Alawites and Sunnis, including Palestinian armed groups). While that Christian-Muslim divide does not define the conflict context in the Sahel today, its ramifications and the broader related tensions in Lebanon, continue to separate Tal Abbas from most other villages in the Sahel, most notably in its membership in the Nahr el-Istwan municipal union. Of more concern is the relationship between the Alawite and Sunni residents of the Sahel that has faced many ups and downs, often related to the broader regional political developments. Again in the early years of the civil war, political tension between the PLO and the Syrian regime caused tension and clashes between the mostly Alawite pro-Syrian residents of the Sahel and the mostly Sunni residents in support of the PLO[10]. More recent escalation took place after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and the withdrawal of the Syrian army from Lebanon in 2005, the start of the Syrian crisis in 2011, and the violent incidents that occurred in Tripoli (2008-2014) between the area of Jabal Mohsen and Bab el-Tabaneh which reflected negatively on the Sahel area. Notable are incidents of road blocking in various villages in Akkar, and violence and harassment that took place against the Alawites in Tripoli in 2013[11].

At the community level, and based on focus group discussions with Alawite and Sunni women and youth, there appears to exist mutual negative perceptions, mistrust, and very limited interaction. When relationships do exist, they are cordial and conflicts are promptly managed so they do not escalate and take on a sectarian tone. In addition, there were concerns of the sectarian tone in mobilization by

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[9] For an in-depth analysis of these dynamics from an academic perspective, see: Gilsenan, Michael. 1996. Lords of the Lebanese Marches : Violence and Narrative in Arab Society. London: I.B. Tauris.

[10] Again, according to the previously cited World Vision report (2010), which mentions that these clashes included an attack on the village of Tel Bibeh, resulting in the permanent displacement of its Alawite residents.

[11] For details of such attacks see: Human Rights Watch (Organization). 2013. "Lebanon: Sectarian Attacks in Tripoli - Threats to Alawites Increase as Tensions Mount." December 13. https://www.hrw.org/news/2013/12/19/lebanon-sectarian-attacks-tripoli.

political actors to woe local residents and strengthen their constituency, including for example public speeches with a sectarian tone, or accusations against some politicians of another sect of providing indirect support to extremist groups.

Many of the Lebanese Alawites in the Sahel have strong social and family ties in Syria, some even having Syrian nationalities. This, alongside a perception that they are historically discriminated against in Lebanon as a minority sect (and even more so since the withdrawal of the Syrian regime), further strengthens (including politically) their ties with Syria, described by one focus groups' participant "as the only place I feel safe". Alawite focus group participants gave examples of specific incidents of harassment on the streets or in educational institutions targeting them because of their sect. They also claimed that their Sunni neighbours accuse them of not being "proper Muslims" or being "kufar" because of the differences in religious practices and expressed concern over increased radicalization among the Sunnis in the area. That said, some commentators argue that it is in fact the strong ties that Alawites politicians have forged with the Syrian regime, particularly the Arab Democratic Party (ADP), have contributed to detaching the Alawite community from its mostly Sunni milieu and its later marginalization.

On the other side, women and youth focus groups' participants also voiced negative perceptions, mistrust, and claims of disrespect for the religious believers of the Sunnis. The reluctance to make friends and strengthen ties with members of the Alawite sect is best exemplified by the case of Sunni students who decided to leave a mixed public school when a new school opened in a relatively close Sunni village to minimize interaction with Alawite youth. Focus group participants from Sunni communities further expressed a perception that Alawites in the area have the support of the Syrian regime, which they described as hegemonic in the decades prior to the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri[12]. Even until the present moment, they claimed that armed Syrian forces could enter Lebanon and protect Alawite communities in case of conflict.

Nevertheless, this tension is rarely translated into violent clashes. In fact, specific incidents show a reluctance to further escalate existing conflicts and a status-quo that is sustained by a delicate balance of power. For example, the accidental killing of a Sunni youth from the village of Cheikh Ayyash by an Alawite driver end of 2011, which was resolved through mediation and financial compensation – reported by interviewees to be as high as 100 million Lebanese pounds – to ensure such an incident does not escalate. In another case, and around the same period, interviewees claimed that efforts to mobilize politically Sunni youth in support of the armed opposition in Syrian or against the Alawites in the area have been promptly blocked by Sunni key figures locally.

B. Weak local social and institutional control mechanisms to manage Syrian-Lebanese tensions

The relationship between the Syrian refugees and host communities and problems between them are intertwined with the above issues faced by the host communities. Socially, these relationships reflect, largely, the existing sectarian schisms among the Lebanese, and many Lebanese have projected tension with their compatriots on the refugees. In focus groups, members of both the Sunni and Alawite communities in the Sahel - as have done members of host communities in other areas of Lebanon -

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[12] When asked about the alignment, in the same period, of many Sunni politicians from Akkar with the same regime, youth focus group participants described this as being done out of necessity.

voiced some complaints about Syrian refugees competing with the Lebanese for livelihood and work opportunities and complained about the aid that refugees are receiving when many Lebanese are just as poor. That said, interviews with key informants and Syrian refugees themselves show that in fact the actual competition is only limited to some contrition related jobs, and Syrian labour in agriculture is appreciated. Nevertheless, and as one indication of the projection of Lebanese tensions on relationships with the Syrian refugees, members of the Alawite sect prioritized, in their description of the refugees, the refugees' religious identity, claiming that they pose a threat as many can be radicalized by religious groups and describing them as "providing support" politically to the Lebanese Sunni communities.

Economically, the Syrian refugees were again the weakest link in a hierarchical and exploitative cycle of production. In a national context where there is little state support for or organization in the agricultural sector, residents of the Sahel are mostly small farmers who are under the mercy of large land owners, vegetable merchants and brokers, and agro-chemical companies. The Syrian day-labourers, now in a legally and economically vulnerable position, are susceptible to exploitation by farmers and the shawish. Syrian workers are paid very low wages[13], a percentage of which is taken by the shawish, and are often subject to exploitation by the farmers who pay them less than agreed and sometimes nothing at all. Some key informants claimed that farmers do not pay because they are also financially strained. As brokers, landowners and companies have several means to force the farmer to pay if he owes them money, Syrian daily workers are commonly the ones not receiving their dues in such cases.

The physical, social, and economic infrastructure, already fragile in the area, is further strained by the influx of refugees. The physical infrastructure, be it waste water management, irrigation water, public schools, or electricity among others, has long been neglected by the Lebanese centralized development policies and is today a source of tension as pressure on it increases. Economically, land ownership is still concentrated in the hands of a few large farmers, either the traditional feudal families or new farmers of present day economic and political elite, forcing many local smaller farmers to rent the land they are farming. This system is a source of tension as these farmers sometimes refuse to pay, especially since land rent prices have increased because of the new demand from Syrians to rent land to live or work. Distributions of and employment within aid organizations is another resources that is contested. Some interviewees expressed dismay that offices of NGOs are mostly in Qobayyat or Halba, and voiced sectarian and political complaints that their staff are almost never from the Sahel. In addition, given the wide spread poverty of the area, minor tension on aid distribution between the refugees and host communities existed.

Finally, municipalities of the areas are not adequately equipped or experienced to manage this additional pressure. Most of the municipalities have limited administrative and financial resources and have only recently started working together in the newly established municipal union. Whereas in other areas in Lebanon some municipal members come with some social or civil activism background, in the Sahel area there are very few community based organizations. In addition, the experience of municipal members in collaborating with aid and civil society organizations as well as connections to

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[13] The average hourly wage for a female daily worker is between 1,100 and 1, 500 LBP and 1,500 – 2,500 for a male worker. The Shawish who is usually the link between the employer and the labourers and provides transportation takes a percentage, which could be up to 30% of the hourly fee. Usually agricultural workers are employed as a complete team (warshe), often from the same family or clan to minimize tension between workers. The majority of the workers in such a team, and men are given the duties that require physical strength. Some of the workers are at times paid in kind or allowed to cultivate the lesser quality agricultural products for their families' consumption.

central government is lacking. As a result, municipalities' intervention in local disputes is limited, which sometimes leads locals to call for higher-level intervention from political actors, and therefore expose them local issues to instrumentalization or escalation.

C. Increasing vulnerability of Syrian refugees to exploitation and harassment

The above conflict issues have gradually developed since the beginning of the Syria crisis. However, the 2015 national policy changes have further aggravated some of the local dynamics but increasing the vulnerability of refugees. Assessed from the perspective of the Syrian refugee population, the major concern is the difficulty and, at times, inability to legalize their stay in Lebanon under the new sponsorship system introduced in January 2015[14]. While the vulnerability that this system causes has been well documented by a number of rights and civil society organizations[15], there appears to be additional complaints and ramifications in the Sahel. For refugees living on agricultural lands and informal settlements in the Sahel, finding a sponsor has been very difficult and the bureaucratic process too time-consuming, obscure and expensive[16]. One Mukhtar from the area listed ten documents (and three photocopies of each) that need to be secured, some of which are to be brought from Tripoli, Halba, or even Syria (with additional costs), many of which expire within ten to fifteen days. Out of the 200-300 applications processed every month, he claimed that only one or two are successful. Lebanese and Syrians alike described the regulations of the General Security as fickle and ambiguous, and appeared trapped in a bureaucratic maze they do not know how to navigate.

The army has several checkpoints and according to interviewees regularly arrests Syrian men without legal papers, often imprisoning them for three days. This is making it almost impossible for Syrian men to work in agriculture, although they used to work in Lebanese farms seasonally, way before the Syrian crisis began. Such restrictions were also criticized by Lebanese farmers, who at the time of the interviews, needed workers to help during the potato harvest and were unable to transport them to work sites, or reported having trucks on their way to the field stopped by the army and all Syrian male workers on it arrested. Besides limiting livelihood opportunities for Syrians and negatively affecting Lebanese farmers, this restriction on men's movements has increased the burden of work and errands on women and children who are much less likely to be stopped by the army. While women and children have traditionally worked the land and have received a lower wage, with the restrictions on movement they are now obliged to work more hours to compensate for the loss of income from men. They are also obliged to run errands alone, including doctors' visits or grocery shopping, where in the past they probably would have not done them or have been accompanied by men.

Closely related according to key informants interviewed, Syrian refugees in tented settlements, particularly women are vulnerable to harassment due to their living conditions. In some settlements, they complained of repeated visits and sexual advances by male members of the host community,

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[14] As per the 'Syrian Refugee Policy Paper' approved by the Lebanese Cabinet in October 2014. See "Minutes of the Cabinet Meeting Convened on October 23, 2014". Accessed 22/7/ 2016. http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=6118.

[15] See for example: Amnesty International. 2015. "Pushed to the Edge: Syrian Refugees Face Increased Restrictions in Lebanon." Index: MDE 24/1785/2015. London, Bobseine, Haley, and Human Rights Watch (Organization). 2016. "I Just Wanted to Be Treated like a Person": How Lebanon's Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse of Syrian Refugees. https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon0116web.pdf, and NRC, and IRC. 2014. "Legal Status of Refugees from Syria: Challenges and Consequences of Maintaining Legal Stay in Beirut and Mount Lebanon."

[16] The types of sponsorship that the Syrians were applying for varied, including individual sponsorship as well ones attached to the land they were living on and/or the business of agricultural land that their employers owned. Information on the details of difficulties and impact of these different types go beyond the scope of this study.

which may be facilitated by the shawish for personal gain. Some spoke of threats or further harassment if these advances are rejected, including stone throwing or burning of tents of women who do not comply. We were told of three cases where families with young daughters have had to move out of certain settlements because of this (see Case Study). Females are made especially vulnerable when male members of their family are detained for lack of legal residence and they have to stay for several nights alone. In the summer of 2015, the informal tented settlements close to the main streets were evicted by the LAF and residents, which not only caused logistical difficulties for the refugees, but also further placed them under the control of the shawish that put them on alternative pieces of land.

2014

Repeated rounds of violence in Tripoli (2014-2008) between the area of Jabal Mohsen and Bab el-Tabaneh, contributing to Sunni-Alawite tension in Akkar

Regional and national level tension at the time of the start of the Syrian revolution

2011

Weakness of local level conflict mitigation mechanisms and of social infrastructure/control

Nation-wide tension after the assassination of Rafic Hariri

2005

Sectarian tension during the civil war

Almost exclusive economic dependence of the Sahel on agriculture and limited employment in state institutions

Late introduction of formal schools and relatively high illiteracy rates

Marginalization of the agricultural sector in the Lebanese economy and weakness of national level agricultural policy

Marginalization of Akkar generally in Lebanese state's development agenda

Strong connections to Syria as an economic base and second home for some

Marginalization of the Alawite sect in the sectarian based Lebanese parliamentary representation system

Inhabitation of the area is relatively recent, and many of the residents are of Syrian origin and moved to the area as farm workers

1943

Sectarian-based alliances and provocation used historically by competing national and regional powers

Ottoman Empire

Feudal land ownership system in the Sahel (and Akkar generally)
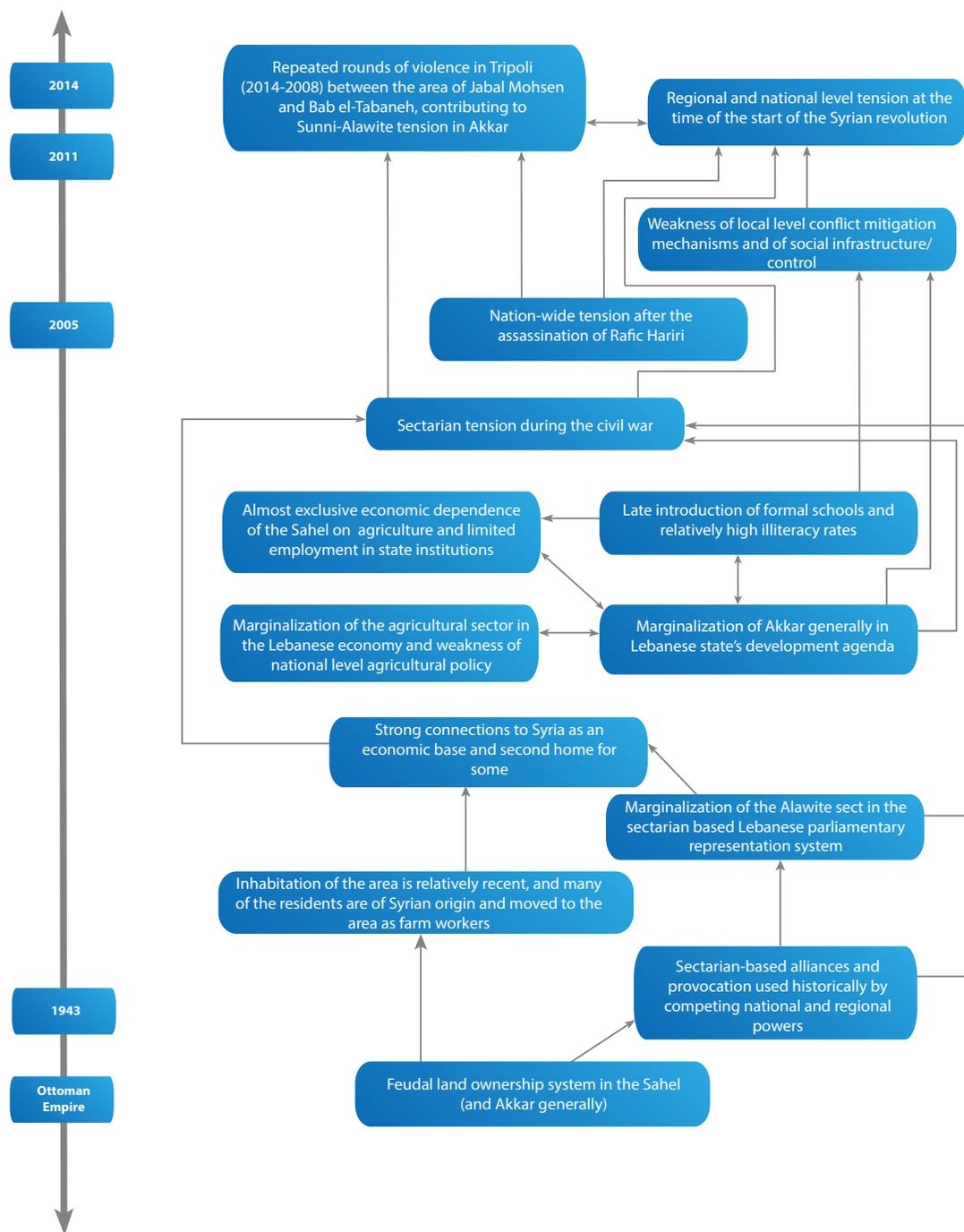
Figure 2: Systemic Conflict Causes in the Sahel Akkar region

IV. Actors

It is tempting to oversimplify the scene of political actors in the Sahel, and divide them into two clear political camps, one Alawite pro-Syrian regime camp and an opposing Sunni one. The Sahel's proximity to Syria and the connection of its Alawite minority to the Alawite communities in Syria does get it embroiled in regional conflicts and make it vulnerable to changes occurring in the neighbouring country. Today, there appears to be limited opportunities for those that are politically independent of their sectarian origin, which has a negative impact on the local dynamics as discussed below. Nevertheless, such a simplification obscures opportunities and actors who can support mitigation. Akkar governorate has a long history of dominance by feudal families, most notable of whom is the Muraabi family whose political loyalties varied and changed with the national conditions. In addition, particularly before 2005, many of the Sunni population had loyalties to pro-Syrian regime political groups including the Baath party. In addition, as one interviewer noted, the popular political culture is one that yields to the existing power structures, preferably those of the state, be it the security apparatus and the army or dominant political groups.

Actors can be broadly divided into two categories, which tie in with the key conflict issues described above. The first group encompasses national level political actors or those with national level significance, and who are closely linked to the politico-sectarian conflict. Another group is that of the social and economic actors locally and whose roles are closely tied to the region's weak and contested material and social infrastructure, systems of economic exploitation.

A. Political actors with national level significance

1. Arab Democratic Party, led by Rifaat Eid[17]: For around three decades, Ali Eid founder of the Arab Democratic Party and father of current Chair Rifaat was the most dominant Alawite political figure in both Akkar and Tripoli. His initial rise was as an advocate for the recognition in Lebanon of the rights of members of the Alawite sect. During the Lebanese civil war, his close relationship with members of the Syrian Al-Assad family and his military role as a proxy for the regime consolidated his power and he was elected as Member of Parliament in 1992. Due to internal politics within the Syrian regime, the party lost its privileged position and only regained it after Bashar Al-Assad took power in Syria and Ali Eid passed on the party's leadership to his son Rifaat, and most significantly after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri in 2005. The party stood in strong opposition to Future Movement in the North since 2005, and that political position was translated in recurrent armed battles in the city of Tripoli, the reverberations of which affected the sectarian relations in Akkar. A security plan, facilitated by a Future Movement – Hezbollah agreement, largely brought the fighting between the neighbourhoods of Jabal Mohsen and Bab el-Tabaneh in Tripoli to a standstill. The security plan and the sentencing – in absentia – of ADP leadership in the case of bombing Sunni mosques in Tripoli in the end of 2013 practically suspended, if not terminated, the party, particularly given the public absence of its leader Rifaat, now a fugitive after his indictment in 2014, and the death of the party's founder in December 2015. That said, on the popular level, loyalties to the party among members of the Alawite communities still exist and no other political groups has managed to fully replace its political role, now woe its supporters.

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[17] "For further details on the party and its development see Raphaël Lefèvre. 2014a. "Power Struggles Among the Alawites in Lebanon, Part I & II." Carnegie Middle East Center. http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=54058 and Raphaël Lefèvre. 2014b. "Lebanon's Alawites at a Crossroads." Carnegie Middle East Center. http://carnegieendowment.org/syriaincrisis/?fa=55663 (both accessed 17/6/2016)."

2. Baath Party: the villages of the Sahel not only have many supporters of the Baath party, but also registered members (a few of which are in leading positions). While some claim that historically they gained popularity because they defended farmers against feudal lords, today support from them is an extension of support for the Syrian regime as a strong actor in the area who could provide assistance to the marginalized sect. In the Sahel, there is little by way of independent politics for the party beyond support for the regime, and membership often coincides with other social status like being a Mukhtar or a member in the municipal council.

3. Lebanese Popular Movement (MP Mustapha Ali Hussein): Initially member of Future Movement and elected on its list in the 2005 parliamentary elections for the Alawite seat in Akkar. In a sudden turn of political position, he left the movement in 2007 and started the Lebanese Popular Movement which aligns itself with the Syrian regime. Today, he enjoys some popular support as the political voice of the Alawites in Sahel Akkar with the Eid family taking on a backstage role, though he still does not seem to have the financial and political resources or a broad constituency.

4. Future Movement is possibly the most popular political actor among members of the Sunni communities in the Sahel since the withdrawal of the Syrian regime from Lebanon in 2005. Their local presence is through local Movement coordinators in Akkar and affiliated elected municipalities and MPs (particularly Khodr Habib and Moiin Muraabi). Described by several interviewees as mere "employees", those local actors derive their political power from affiliation with the FM and generally do not have independent political leadership. In many cases, the movement's leadership centrally (including Nader and Ahmad Hariri) is called in to deal with political issues and even local disputes. The popularity of the movement in Sahel Akkar, which was quite high after the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and the later nationwide political tension between the March 8 and March 14 political camps, seems to have waned down in the past couple of years as financial resources dispensed by the movement to its constituency in the area decreased[18]. Nevertheless, the presentation of FM as a representative of the Sunni constituency in the area and personality politics sustain - to some extent – the movement's privileged position.

5. Khaled Daher: Elected in the 2009 round of elections on Future Movement's list, he has since suspended his membership in the Movement's political bloc[19]. Daher is from the village of Bebnine in Akkar (not in the Sahel) and has started his political career with Al-Jamaa al-Islamiya and was first elected to the parliament on their list in 1996 before running independently – and losing - in the elections of the year 2000 after a disagreement with the Islamic group[20]. The influence of his political background is still evident, and he is vocal in his opposition to the Syrian regime and support of many

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[18] For example, during field work some farmers we interviewed were organizing to see FM representatives hoping that they would get from them compensation for damages in the potato season due to weather conditions, but most farmers appeared dismayed by an expected lack for response from members of the Hariri establishment.

[19] Though Daher suspended his membership, it was reported that he was asked to do so by FM following his opposition to removing Islamic religious banners from certain areas in Tripoli, which seems to have disturbed several Christian players. For further details, see The Daily Star. 2015. "Controversial MP Suspends Future Bloc Membership," February 11, sec. Lebanon news. http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2015/Feb-11/287087-mp-khaled-daher-tells-the-daily-star-he-suspended-membership-from-the-future-parliamentary-bloc.ashx (accessed 17/6/2016).

[20] For details on Khaled Daher's political background, see his interview (in Arabic) in the northern weekly Al-Bayan: Al-Bayan Newspaper. "النائب خالد الضاهر يتحدث بكل جرأة وصراحة على صفحات 'البيان': أنا لستُ ذراعاً عسكرياً لتيار المستقبل... أنا مواطن لبناني أدافع عن كرامتي حتى الموت." Not dated. http://www.albayanlebanon.com/news.php?id=11802&idC=4 (accessed 17/6/2016).

of the Islamic/Salafist religious groups and champions, according to him, the rights of members of the Sunni sect. Although not as popular in the Sahel as in some other areas of north Lebanon, he is the public voice of these groups there, and is even accused by some key informants of sectarian incitement.

6. Religious figures and sheikhs (including Dar el-Fatwa and the Awqaf): The key figures in branches of national level religious institutions play an important socio-political role, representing the religious sentiment and giving political legitimacy to political actors and intervening, as well as providing or managing some of the aid to the Syrian refugee community. Most notable Dar Al-Fatwa and Sheikh Malek Jdeideh, Head of Akkar Endowment committee and head of the Muslim Scholars Committee (Hayat al-Ulama al-Muslimin also League of Muslim Scholars)[21] until 2014 when he resigned in what appears to be a dispute with the committee. Key informants also spoke of a possible negative role from some religious figures in inciting sectarianism or fundamentalist beliefs, though most noted that this in the Sahel is less prevalent than other areas of Akkar.

7. Lebanese Armed Forces and various state security apparatuses: The role of these apparatuses has a significant impact on the daily lives of Syrian refugees in the area, particularly with the moving check points and detainment of refugees – which refugees claimed was often as long as three days - that lack valid residence. In addition, the location of the area on the Lebanese –Syrian border and claims that political groups might mobilize or recruit young Lebanese or Syrian youth to join violent groups increases their visibility.

B. Local level social and economic actors

8. Municipalities and Mukhtars: Despite their limited administrative and governance capabilities, municipalities are possibly the most important local actors politically today. They encompass within them key community figures that derive their authority from family ties locally and from their role as brokers of regional and national level politicians. That said, they have limited bargaining power with politicians. The tension at times of municipal elections reflects family and political tensions, but this often ends soon after the elections. Due to the number of residents, many villages do not have municipalities and the locally elected Mukhtar thus plays an important role.

9. Traders of agricultural products: A central component of the agricultural economic cycle, the traders of agricultural products, or brokers as they are commonly called by farmers, have a lot of power over the livelihood of local farmers, as they control the sale price of agricultural production and access to loans from agro-chemical products. They also have a more direct relationship with political actors and landowners and with them manage most of the agricultural associations and cooperatives operating locally.

10. Feudal and historic landowners: Once key political and economic actors, landowners[22] today appear to have limited direct political influence resultant from their land ownership or tied in to local dynamics, despite some of them having political influence derived from their national political role. We have not been told for example of a direct role for landowners in municipal elections, or if their

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[21] For further information about the Muslim Scholars Committee, see Al-Masri, Muzna. 2015. "Between Local Patronage Relationships and Securitization: The Conflict Context in the Bekaa Region." Beirut: Lebanon Support / UNDP. Note though that the committee's role is reported to be in decline, particularly after the rise of Dar Al-Fatwa since the election of Mufti Derian in 2014.

[22] Of the older families, most notable is the Muraabi family, and recent owners we are told include the Hariri and Abou Jaoude families among others.

interference in local development plans. They do have latent power - often negotiated through agents administering the land - in that they can significantly alter the living conditions of the farmers, which rent and plant they land.

11. Shawishs, or the assigned superintendents over the settlements where refugees reside, play a central role in providing both shelter and livelihood opportunities for Syrian refugees and are still a key point of entry for some aid organizations. Some shawishs, as observed, are often complicit in the exploitation of Syrian day labourers and in allowing for the harassment or exploitation of Syrian refugee women[23].

12. National and international non-governmental organizations: Their visibility locally appears to be limited, though they play a much-needed role in providing aid for the refugees and the host community. That said, at time limited knowledge of the local political sensitivities appears to raise sensitivities among the local communities.

V. Dynamics

The below described dividers and connectors[24] need to be situated within a timeline of fluctuations in relationships within the Sahel between the different political and sectarian groups, with the assassination of Prime Minister Hariri and the start of the Syrian crisis as key junctures. The last two years saw increased calm after the Arsal crisis, the increased role of the LAF and diffusion of tension between Future Movement and the March 8 political camp, which paralleled a public consideration in the area that the Syrian regime is more resilient that anticipated at the beginning of the crisis. That said, a certain level of rupture in the sectarian relations has occurred and has not yet been mended evident for example, as interviewed claim, in the reduced visits from Sunni religious figures of Alawite villages. In addition, day-to-day economic and political changes do have a significant impact, particularly in issues related to the management of agricultural imports and exports and the regulations governing the work of Syrian refugees.

A. Dividers

- Weakness of social infrastructure and independent local conflict mitigation mechanisms[25]. Limited conflict mitigation mechanisms need to be seen in the light of these communities' relatively recent settlement in the area and history of deprivation. Relative to other areas in Lebanon the percentage of those educated is small, municipalities are inexperienced, and there are little – if any

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[23] For further information on the role of the Shawish, see Abou Kheir, Malek. 2016. "The Syrian camps Shawish: A man of power and the o ne controlling the conditions of refugees". UNDP Peace Building in Lebanon Supplement, Issue 12, June 2016. http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/peacebuilding-supplement-12/ and El-Helou, Maya. 2014. Refugee Camps in Lebanon: Syrian Women Bodies as a Site of Structural Violence. The Legal Agenda http://english.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=673&lang=en (both accessed 5/7/2016).

[24] The tool for analysing connectors and dividers was developed by the Collaborative for Development Action (CDA) as part of the Do No Harm/Local Capacities for Peace program. For a description, see http://local.conflictsensitivity.org/other_publication/do-no-harm-local-capacities-for-peace-project/ (accessed 7/3/2016).

[25] Conflict mitigation mechanisms are defined as: "Efforts to contain and reduce the amount of violence used by parties in violent conflict and engage them in a process to settle the dispute and terminate the violence" see page 18 in Payson Conflict Study Group. 2001. "A Glossary on Violent Conflict Terms and Concepts Used in Conflict Prevention, Mitigation, and Resolution in the Context of Disaster Relief and Sustainable Development." Payson Center for International Development and Technology Transfer - Tulane University. http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/6C8E6652532FE542C12575DD00444F2D-USAID_may01.pdf.

– community-based organizations. In practice, this has meant that for example when youth[26] harass Syrian refugees or get into fights with them, there is an increased risk of escalation, as there appears to be limited experience and power in local interventions. Northern regional and national politicians and figures are sometimes called upon to resolve local conflicts because they are expected, in order to defuse tension, to contribute financial resources or pay blood money that locals cannot cover.

• Religious and sectarian incitement by media, some religious figures and national level political actors and proliferation of rumours contribute negatively to an already fragile context, in particular on relations between members of the Sunni and Alawite communities. This includes for example the media claiming politico-sectarian dimensions to village level disputes that do not have such a dimension, or unfounded popular accusations and rumours of youth form certain villages supporting militant groups (be it pro or against the Syrian regime)[27].

• Competition over aid and perception of bias of international humanitarian institutions: this includes competition between the Syrian and Lebanese communities in this mostly poor area, as well as sectarian-based competition between one village and the other. At times, the number of the refugees might have been higher in Sunni villages, often attracting more aid money to both Syrian and Lebanese host community but creating discontent in Alawite villages. Efforts to rectify this by extending aid to Alawite communities raised, in return, objecting voices in Sunni villages calling for aid to target communities where need is greater.

• Lack of opportunities for political representation beyond the politico-sectarian divide of the pro-Syrian regime Alawite camp vs. the anti-Syrian regime Sunni camp. This often contributes to the stereotyping of members of other sects, with many Sunnis assuming all Alawites are pro-Syrian regime for example.

• Dissonance in some areas between the place of residence and actual area where residents vote within the Akkar region weakens some local municipalities and their representative value. In some villages, this also has a sectarian dimension, where members of one sect or the other live outside of the municipal authority of the village they vote in and attribute the limitations on services they receive to sectarian variables.

B. Connectors

• Recent establishment of municipal union and improved coordination between members of local government. Given the weakness of other political actors, the role of municipalities is very important. Local social stability mechanisms and programs that bring together actors from different villages, in partnerships with the municipal union, have further supported the union's role, emphasized the positive side of the relationships in the Sahel and expanded the social network of local actors for conflict mitigation if needed.

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[26] We have been told that behind the increasingly numerous acts of harassment or violent fights in the Sahel area are young men, some of whom are on drugs. We could not investigate these claims further.

[27] Of such unfounded rumours for example, we heard from both Syrians and Lebanese in the field that certain UN agencies are paying security apparatuses money to cover the cost (up to three days) of Syrian refugees when arrested which they claim is encouraging the practice. We do not know the source of such a rumour, but UN agencies concerned have refuted such claims and ensured that there is no policy that could be interpreted this way. Yet clearly, such rumours might have caused some negative implications on how the UN is perceives by refugees locally.

- Interventions in time of crisis by key figures in the villages, particularly if the conflict is limited, are well appreciated. Although they do not always suffice when there is a major conflict that requires financial compensation from the mediator, they have limited political ramifications compared to interventions by higher-level political figures.

- Development and social stability interventions can now benefit from recently available information compiled via the Local Development Office (LDO) at the level of the Akkar governorate and the Maps of Risks and Resources (MRR) process facilitated by the Ministry of Social Affairs and UNDP in the most vulnerable municipalities of the area. Information available in both allows for improved development programming which is better tailored to the realities of each village[28].

- Availability of livelihood opportunities for Syrian refugees that contribute positively to the local economy. This mutual interest reduces Lebanese-Syrian tensions, and encourages Lebanese actors to lend support to, or intervene on behalf of, Syrian workers in times of conflict.

- Abundance in some natural resources necessary for agricultural production, particularly water, reduces tension linked to economic production.

VI. Recommendations

Achieving social stability in the area requires the tackling of the structural causes of conflict in the area, through a strategic development plan that allows for local residents greater control and improved revenue from their agricultural activities and makes them less vulnerable to exploitation and mobilization. At an immediate level, social stability projects coupled with conflict sensitive development projects could safeguard the area from the impact of regional political changes.

A. The Lebanese government and aid organizations should support economic development projects, particularly agricultural local development programs that support the complete cycle of agricultural production -not only guidance and training programs - tie in with a national agenda and reduce dependence on brokers. This can include providing sustainable and alternative opportunities for farmers to sell their products in local and international markets. The possibility of establishing a local vegetable market, which parallels the one in Tripoli, is an option to be investigated as also a meeting point that helps improve cross-sectarian relationships.

B. Aid organizations need to strike a balance between prioritizing aid for the most vulnerable areas and targeting villages with varying sectarian backgrounds and ensuring transparent targeting criteria.

C. Organizations working on social stability and peace building should support Syrian-Lebanese informal justice and conflict mitigation mechanisms, and support for and empowerment of local institutions, including municipalities, parents committees in schools, moderate religious figures and SDCs.

D. Peacebuilding organizations need to support programs for rumour control and reduced media incitement and overall support for a role of the media in peacebuilding.

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[28] See http://4wslebanon.net:8080/lhsp/portal for the results of the MRRs.

E. Aid organizations should make available social cohesion and informal education activities, bringing together youth from different political and sectarian backgrounds, as well as Syrian and Lebanese youth. This could also be implemented through joint vocational training or capacity building programs for young farmers.

F. The Lebanese government should revisit its national level policy related to the legal residency of Syrian refugees, including waving the sponsorship requirement, the pledge not to work which would ease refugees' freedom of movement. Aid and Human Rights organizations need to advocate for that change of policy and bolster protection and access to justice mechanisms for Syrian refugees affected by it.

Case Study: "It is God who protects"

"It is like I was a slave, and was just granted my freedom"! It is with these words that Ahmad, a refugee from a North Syrian village, describes how finally finding a sponsor and legalizing his stay in Lebanon meant. The process, for which a local resident has generously supported by sponsoring him without asking for financial compensation in return, cost him 700,000 LBP ($466). This however was not as high a cost for Ahmad as the one of not having papers, included missing his brother's funeral in the south for fear of being arrested and not accompanying his sick daughter to the hospital. His wife and three daughters still do not have legal documents, not only because of the related cost, but also because his wife was not in a position to settle her legal status earlier as she needed further identification from Syria, which she could not obtain. Yet, legal residency was only one of several problems that Ahmad, as a father of three young girls, has also struggled with, including exploitation by the shawish and employers, and regular harassment of his daughters.

Ahmad came to Lebanon about three years ago and first lived with other Syrians in a settlement on a land adjacent to the main road until the LAF ordered the settlement's eviction in the summer of 2015. Frustrated by the very short notice he was given to move his tent, and his inability to dismantle the tent in time, he burnt what remained of it down so he was not punished for keeping it. The eviction though was an opportunity for him to move out the settlement managed by a Syrian shawish called Tamer. Ahmad, who did not have contacts in Lebanon when he first arrived, lived in that settlement for lack of other options, and complained that the shawish ended up taking almost half of what the family paid, either through rent and services, or through deducting a percentage from his and his family's daily wages.

Another problem he described was sexual harassment of the daughters, and he shared how in that settlement, there were too many men "coming and going, day and night" asking his daughters to "serve them tea and coffee" and making sexual advances. When the girls were not responsive, the whole family faced further harassment, and would be targeted by stone throwers at night. Ahmad described that he had no power to ask the young men to stop visiting, and told of stories of another family who also had to leave because of the repeated harassment of their young daughter.

In that settlement which I have also visited, the Syrian shawish who was reluctant to share much information with me had a large tent that served as a guesthouse for the many visitors. Local Lebanese contact described the cars of the many visitors parked outside and assume the shawish was directly benefiting from facilitating these visits.

Ahmad today lives on a tent adjacent to the house of a small farmer for which he, his wife, and daughters work sometimes. The harassment has not stopped completely, and he shows me pictures of the burning of part of his tent in the early spring. Him and other members of the family describe how young men from the village often hang out in a neighboring plot of land, and are often either drunk or on drugs, and that he has very limited power to stop them from harassing his daughters. In practice, he now does not allow his daughters to go anywhere on their own. Until he obtained his legal residency permit, their mother that had to accompany them to work, grocery shopping or doctor's visits. The girls are also outside of education, for the same security concerns given that the school is not close and registering in the afternoon shift means that they will only be back when it is nighttime. In addition, the cost of transportation is too high compared to the wages he receives.

Ahmad works a maximum of 4-5 days out of every ten days, and says that over the past years he is still owed wages amounting to over a 1,000,000 LBP (approximately 650 USD) which he has no way of claiming back. More often than not, at time of payment, employers and farmers claim that they made less profit than expected and pay a fraction of the agreed-on wages. While at times there might be opportunities for a local notable to intervene and pressure or embarrass the employer to pay, Syrians are usually obliged to forgo substantial unpaid wages because they have no means to claim them.

In such circumstances and in the cases of harassment I ask Ahmad about the means by which he seeks justice and what measures are available for him to secure his rights and protect his daughters. "It is god that protects" is his response, not because of his religiosity, but because of lack of other options. He says that he would prefer to avoid interventions from outsiders, because he believes that an intervention could do more harm than good and could expose him to the possible retaliations. This is confirmed a notable in the village, who describes the difficulty of dealing with the young thugs. While they and their families are known in the village, there is very little that can be done to control them, either from the side of security personnel or from that of social actors and the young men are often capable of violent retaliation.