



UNREGISTERED: Asheqa holds her unregistered seven-month-old daughter Nour inside their tent in a refugee camp in Lebanon's Bekaa valley. REUTERS/Mohamed Azakir

Redrawing the Middle East

A generation of Syrian children who don't count

By [John Davison](#) | Filed May 3, 2016, 11 a.m. GMT

The war in Syria is not just reshaping Middle Eastern borders. It is creating thousands of stateless children.

BAALBEK, Lebanon – Seven-month-old Nour lives in a tarpaulin tent pitched on a muddy patch of earth in Lebanon's Bekaa valley. The tent, one of a dozen in a small refugee camp, contains a metal stove, a prayer mat and worn rugs on the floor. A leather jacket and a plastic mirror hang from nails hammered into its wooden beams.

Swaddled in a faded pink blanket against the cold, Nour is the first of her Syrian parents' three children to be born as a refugee. Her family fled their native Homs at the start of Syria's civil war. Crammed two to a seat in a bus, her parents and two older siblings travelled 70 miles (112 km) into Lebanon, where Nour was born.

Now her mother and father, Asheqa and Trad, face a new challenge. They need to register Nour with a local government office in Lebanon by her first birthday in early September. A birth certificate is the crucial first step to securing Syrian citizenship. Without it, Nour could join a fast-growing generation of children who are stateless – lacking legal recognition as a citizen of any country.

But as Nour's parents are learning, even something as simple as registering a baby's birth is fraught with hurdles for a refugee in Lebanon.

The country has more refugees per head of the population than any country in the world, but it is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention and has not allowed the U.N. to set up formal camps for Syrians. Some politicians fret about the impact of mainly Sunni refugees from Syria on the country's sectarian balance. Power in Lebanon is carefully divided between Christians, Shi'ite Muslims, Sunnis and other groups. Registering Syrian births could create a precedent for Syrians to settle in the country, they worry.

Surveys by the United Nations refugee agency and the Norwegian Refugee Council suggest the number of children whose births remain unregistered in Lebanon could be as high as 50,000. Aid agencies see similar difficulties registering children in Jordan, Iraq and Turkey, which host millions of Syrian refugees between them. That means the number of Syrian children facing statelessness is likely to be much higher.

Those thousands of potentially stateless children are one way the wars in Syria and Iraq are reshaping the Middle East and its people for good.

"If you look at the number of births that have happened ... I think we can be talking about hundreds of thousands who are potentially not registered in the region as a whole," said Daryl Grisgraber, senior advocate for the Middle East at Refugees International, a humanitarian group that works for displaced and stateless people.

The U.N. says stateless children risk missing out on basic rights such as education and healthcare, can face difficulties getting a job and are exposed to abuse and even trafficking.

To have Nour fully recognised as Syrian will involve a Kafkaesque process that requires trips to different government offices, negotiating checkpoints to get to Beirut, and approaching the Syrian embassy – something many refugees fleeing civil war are afraid to do.

Lebanon's social affairs ministry, which handles the refugee issue, said the steps required were "clear and proportionate."

Nour's parents – they asked not to reveal their full names for fear of being targeted by Syria's warring factions or arrested by Lebanese authorities – are afraid of embarking on the process. They have not even tried to get her birth registered, despite understanding what that might mean down the line.

"We're scared for her future," Asheqa, her mother, said. "We're afraid that if we want to return to Syria, we won't be able to take her in because she has no documents. Where's the proof that it's your child?"

TAKING FLIGHT

Asheqa and Trad abandoned their house about three months after the Syrian uprising against President Bashar al-Assad began in 2011. Like many buildings in Homs – a centre of the uprising – their home was later flattened to rubble in bombardments.



DEVASTATION: A street in Homs in March 2014. Asheqa and Trad say their house has been destroyed and they have nothing to go back to.

REUTERS/Thaer Al Khalidiya

“We found out the school next door was shelled and collapsed onto our house,” said 25-year-old Asheqa. “We stayed with relatives nearby for a while, but there were 16 people under one roof, there was no work and the fighting intensified.”

The couple and their two children – daughter Rahaf, now 7, and son Marhaf, now 5 – fled for Lebanon, where they have squatted on farmland near the town of Baalbek ever since. When they left Syria, they took all their identity papers, marriage certificate and family booklet, and papers relating to their children.

“When the war ends, we’re keen to go back. We’re not exactly looking forward to it with nothing left, but we want to go back and rebuild,” Asheqa said.

Until Nour’s birth is registered, however, they are stuck in exile. Children without a registered birth certificate face separation from their families if they try to cross international borders, including into Syria. Without the certificate, Nour has no legal proof of parentage or place of birth.

But her parents face a complex and often unclear registration process. And they fear arrest if they try to move around too much in Lebanon.

REGISTERING A BIRTH

The United Nations and the Norwegian Refugee Council, a humanitarian aid group, advise refugees to carry out three crucial steps to register a newborn in Lebanon. The steps still leave parents several bureaucratic procedures away from obtaining full Syrian citizenship for their child, but are the most important and time-sensitive.

First, parents should obtain a birth notification from the hospital where the child is born, or from a midwife.

Next, they should take the birth notification, their own identity papers and marriage certificate to a local notary closest to the place of birth. Notaries will then produce a birth certificate, for which they normally charge a fee of up to \$20.

“We’re afraid that if we want to return to Syria, we won’t be able to take her in, because she has no documents.”

Asheqa, Nour’s mother

Finally, the parents should register the certificate with a local government registry office in Lebanon.

All this needs to be completed before a child turns one or the process becomes much more expensive and complicated, involving courts, lawyers and DNA tests.

Asheqa and Trad completed the first two steps within 10 days of Nour's birth last Sept. 12.

Now, though, they are stuck.

Restrictions on Syrian refugees, including a requirement they carry certain documents or risk arrest, have made it harder to move around. The rules force Syrians registered as refugees to pay \$200 a year for the right to stay in Lebanon but ban them from formal employment. Trad and Asheqa's papers expired in January last year, right at the time the new regulations took effect.

When Lebanese security forces raided the family's camp last December, Trad and several other men were detained because they could not produce valid papers.

Trad said he and the other men were held for a day and then released with a warning to renew their residency papers or face arrest again. Since then, he and Asheqa have been afraid to leave the camp.

"We don't dare approach any authorities, not even to register Nour's birth, without renewing our residency first – we're scared they'll lock us up," Trad said.

But \$200 is a huge sum for refugees, 70 percent of whom the U.N. says live in extreme poverty. And refugees not only have to pay the annual charge, they often need the help of a Lebanese sponsor, who usually charges another \$200.

"So that's \$400 for me, \$400 for my husband, before we can go to register our daughter," Asheqa said.



CAMP: Refugee children in the Bekaa valley. Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon live not in huge camps but in small settlements alongside villages. REUTERS/Mohamed Azakir

“The lack of identity documents just makes everything in life much more difficult.”

Bill Van Esveld, Human Rights Watch

In Syria, Trad, 32, drove taxis. In Lebanon he does casual labour and seasonal farm work. But none of that makes much money.

“I get maybe one day of work in 10 and make 10,000-20,000 Lebanese pounds (\$7-13),” he said. The family collects U.N. aid worth around \$100 per month – barely enough for bread, they say. They also owe hundreds of dollars to a local grocer who has repeatedly extended them credit.

The grocer's wife, Amira Msheik, showed a reporter a handwritten list of Syrian families in the area that owe money to her husband, Ismail: Umm Ahmed, 1,250,000 pounds, Abu Saadoun 700,000 pounds, Samah, 1 million pounds.

Asheqa and Trad are now trying to save or borrow enough to renew their residency. But their debt keeps mounting. Trad found work in March. On his first day he crushed his finger in a tractor accident and had to borrow \$1,000 to cover the hospital fees.

MISINFORMATION AND BUREAUCRACY

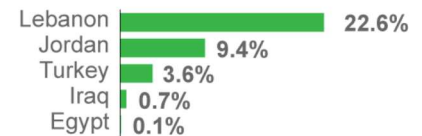
Technically, even though their own residency documents have expired, Trad and Asheqa can complete step three and register Nour with the local government office. But aid agencies say lack of reliable information and rules that are applied inconsistently mean that in practice, this rarely happens.

The Norwegian Refugee Council says many refugees give up because they lack information, fear the authorities or simply cannot afford to register. The U.N. reports similar difficulties. Aid agencies try to inform families, but are stretched due to the numbers of refugees, who often live in hard-to-reach areas.

Syrian refugee crisis

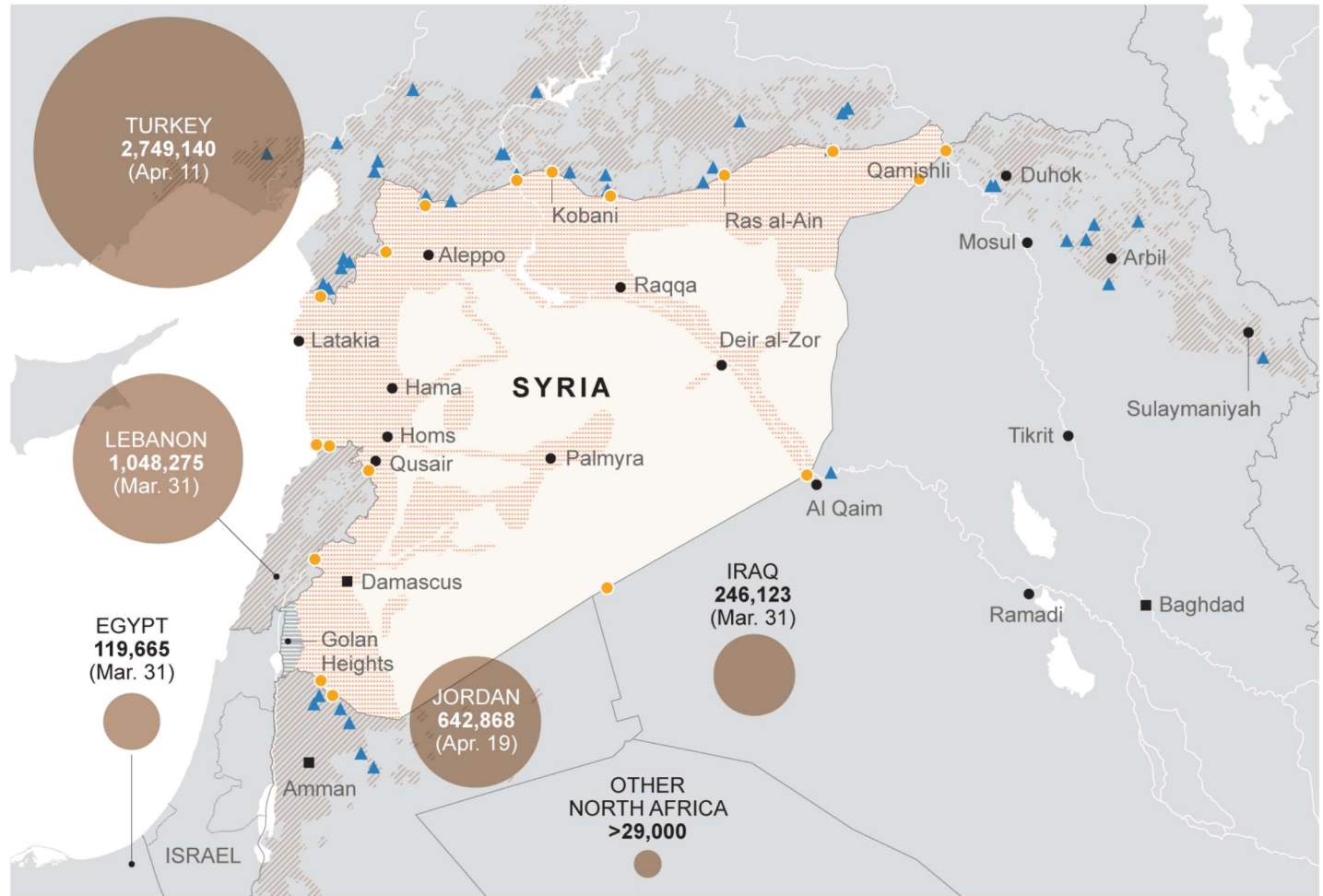
Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey are hosting more than 4.8 million Syrian refugees, according to the latest data from the United Nation's refugee agency.

As percent of host country's estimated 2015 population



■ Area of refugee concentration* ▲ Refugee camps* ● Border crossing □ Conflict and displacement areas

SYRIAN REFUGEES IN NEIGHBOURING COUNTRIES (From end 2015 to indicated date)



Sources: UNHCR; World Bank; U.S. Department of State's Humanitarian Information Unit; Institute for the Study of War. *As of end August 2015.

“It is confusing,” Asheqa said. “We’re not sure even which local government office we’d need to go to. But what’s the point anyway? We still need to renew our residency.”

Nour is one of 10 unregistered babies in her small camp. In the early months of 2016, a new baby was born almost every two weeks. The settlement is just one of hundreds in the Bekaa Valley alone.

In all, almost 70,000 children have been born to Syrian refugees in Lebanon since 2011, the United Nations says. This number excludes families not registered with the U.N., for which the refugee agency UNHCR has no estimate.

A UNHCR survey of 2,500 families at the end of 2015 said 68 percent did not complete the third step, leaving their babies unregistered. Norwegian Refugee Council figures from January last year showed that more than 80 percent of nearly 800 refugees interviewed failed to register.

The implications of having so many potentially stateless Syrians are worrisome.

“It pushes you underground,” Human Rights Watch researcher Bill Van Esveld said. “The lack of identity documents just makes everything in life much more difficult. The door to crucial rights like education and healthcare may be closed if you don’t officially exist. You’re forced to live in a grey zone, or even treated like a criminal.”

Khalifa al-Matar, another father in the camp, fled northern Syria’s Raqqa with his wife three years ago. He has missed the cut-off point to register his son Hakam, who is now 18 months old. Khalifa now needs to get a lawyer, renew his own residency and possibly take a DNA test to prove Hakam is his.

“I tried to register Hakam,” he said, breaking a piece of firewood with one hand and holding his son in the other. “There seemed to be 50 ways to do it, and no one told me how. I even tried at the Syrian embassy. They told me to go to the notary, the notary told me I had to go back to Syria, so I eventually gave up.

“Tomorrow there could be worse problems than now, and maybe we’d even need to flee Lebanon. With Hakam unregistered, we can’t go anywhere,” he said.



SPECTATORS: Children climb a fence to watch a football training workshop in Azraq refugee camp in Jordan last November. REUTERS/Muhammad Hamed

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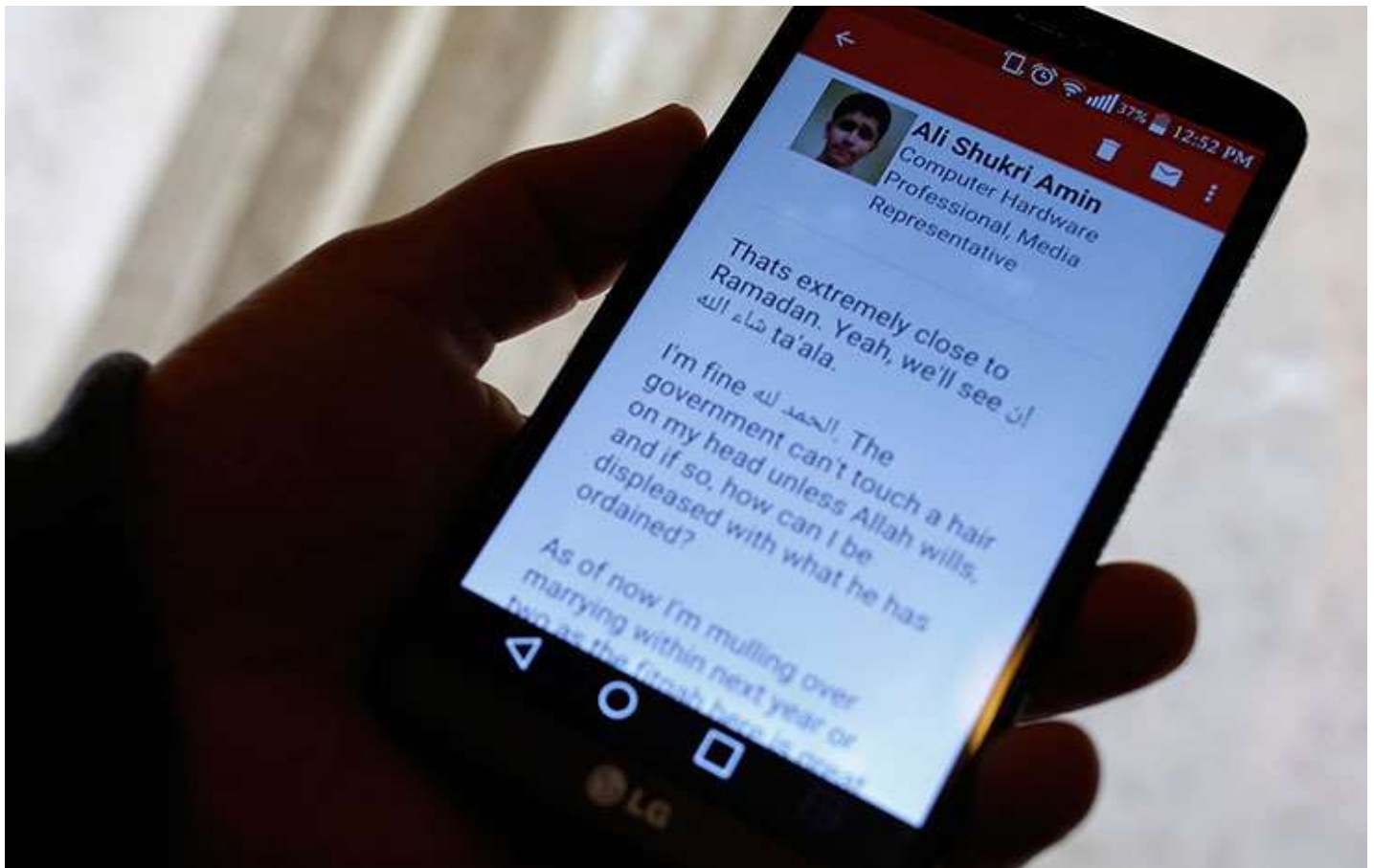


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