

Fieldwork with refugees in Lebanon

The grain of sand praises the uncertainty of the desert wind

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The Lebanese Republic and refugees therein

Lebanon is a *confessional* parliamentary democracy, where each of the 18 recognized religious groups has a reserved high-ranking office in the government⁽¹⁾. Trying to fairly mirror the demographic distribution of the religious groups, such power sharing was introduced to deter sectarian conflict⁽²⁾ by the 1943 National Pact. Despite the bloody civil war that erupted in 1975 (and lasted until 1990), this political system is still in charge today.

The *largest per capita population of refugees in the world* is held by Lebanon: out of a total population of about 6,200,000 people, there are about 450,000 Palestinian⁽³⁾ and 1,000,000 Syrian⁽⁴⁾ registered refugees. This is arguably a major reason why Lebanese government is unwilling to give full citizenship to refugees living within the borders of the state: it would disrupt the delicate political equilibrium⁽⁵⁾.

Lebanon's refugee policy is ambivalent. On one side, it has maintained an "open doors" approach, but on the other it never signed the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, resulting in a limited legal status for refugees and asylum seekers in Lebanon⁽⁶⁾⁽⁷⁾.

Relevant to this work are the living conditions of both Palestinian and Syrian refugees. The former mainly entered the Lebanese borders in 1948 and 1967, after forced displacement due to repeated Israeli invasions of their homeland; since then, they are living in refugee camps scattered throughout the country, established by UNRWA in the 50's⁽⁸⁾. Life conditions in these camps are hard at best: they vary within a rather narrow range among the different camps, but common major issues are overpopulation, lack of facilities, lack of adequate sewage and water systems, unemployment. In addition, Palestinian refugees have no political, social or civil rights; they cannot access public education and health services, they cannot own property⁽⁹⁾.

The latter, Syrian refugees, have been entering the Lebanese state by the thousands as a result of the civil war in Syria since 2011. Their flow is somewhat different from the one followed by Palestinian refugees, as Syrians tend to return to their homeland as portions of Syria stabilize over time⁽¹⁰⁾ (this *return* is denied to Palestinians, for their lands are now occupied by someone else). These ebbs and flows are hardly the rule though: many Palestinians from Syria (and Syrians as well) settled in the Palestinian refugee camps, and many Syrians found shelter in other settlements variously



displaced over the territory (see below). By and large, Syrian refugees are treated with disrespect from both the Lebanese people and the country's government: there is abundant anecdotal evidence about this⁽¹¹⁾; and the same tale has been told many times regarding Palestinians⁽¹²⁾.

The socio-sanitary consequences of the situation introduced so far are of extreme relevance: for example, as of 2010 at least 15% of Palestinian households had at least one disability, 41% had at least one chronic depression case, 72% had at least one chronic illness⁽¹³⁾.

Despite being just a brief glimpse of the current situation, this surface-scratching introduction might be enough to frame a status of extreme marginal-

ization and hardship being faced by these refugee populations in today's Lebanon.

Scope and locations of work

As far as this work is concerned, my presence in Lebanon, within the *Music and Resilience* project⁽¹⁴⁾ (not discussed here), spanned over two separate trips: the first one in April and the second one in July, both of 2017. Even though my official MARS fieldwork was the one carried out during the April trip, I can't help but feel my further Lebanese coming three months later as just another step in the same shoes: I used the same MARSian approach, I worked with MARSians and other comrades along the same "wavelengths" as in April; the context was different though, and it proved to be a powerful further experience that really gave my MARSian experience a final boost before writing this conclusive report. I will therefore take that into full account for this report as well.

My activities joined the efforts of the M&R project in three separate locations:

1. Beddawi camp, Tripoli (April)
2. Saida (April)
3. Wavel camp, Baalbek (July).

I will hereafter give a brief introduction to each of the three locations.

Beddawi camp. Located just north of Tripoli, Beddawi holds more than 16,500 registered refugees over a 1 km² surface; in 2007 it saw its population doubled almost overnight as a consequence of the disorders in the nearby Nahr el-Bared camp, whose inhabitants were forced to flee⁽¹⁵⁾. Despite the camp problems (overpopulation, poverty, inadequate services), my experience pictures a peaceful camp where you can roam safely, welcomed by friendly inhabitants. Work there is done in cooperation with the National Institution of Social Care and Vocational training (NISCVT, known as Beit

Atfal Assumoud) that runs a Family Guidance Center (FGC) just outside of the camp, hosting many services and activities.

Saida. Work in the city of Saida was supposed to be carried out in two different contexts:

1. Ein El Hilweh Palestinian camp
2. Syrian shelters.

The first context was to be done in Assumoud's local FGC. Living conditions in Ein El Hilweh are very harsh: extreme overpopulation (in the last years, following the Syrian civil war, a large influx of Syrian Palestinians, the camp's population has swelled from 70,000 to as much as 120,000⁽¹⁶⁾), high poverty and school drop-out rates⁽¹⁷⁾, and occasional inner turmoil plague the camp's inhabitants. I have never been inside the camp for we are prohibited to enter it.

The second context was in cooperation with Blue Mission Organization, an NGO based in Saida supporting Syrian refugees across South Lebanon⁽¹⁸⁾. Blue Mission provides psychosocial services to refugees hosted in "shelters" (old buildings) scattered over the urban surface of Saida city.

Wavel camp. Baalbek is one of the most important archaeological sites in the Middle East, because of its wondrous Roman temples ruins. The local Palestinian camp, Wavel, is a "nice" and very friendly camp with almost 9,000 registered refugees. Its main issues, apart from structural matters (poor housing conditions, Mandate-era army barracks) and the very cold winter (it often snows) are the ones related to the resulting health problems, unemployment and many school drop-outs⁽¹⁹⁾. Wavel suffers from its location, cut out in the Beqaa Valley. Following the Syrian civil war, a very large percentage of its population is represented by Palestinian Syrian refugees. The local Assumoud center mainly deals with remedial classes for school drop-outs, providing also some other activity. No



vocational classes or musical activities present.

MARSworks

My MARS activities were supporting different projects all over the three locations, but overall these interventions can be framed within the M&R program, which in turn works in close connection with the greater picture of the Assumoud global activities for the whole Palestinian refugee population.

The Blue Mission activities were standalone projects along the ongoing M&R/BM cooperation.

In Beddawi, my aim was to support the community music program by M&R, which is bringing musical education to the children of the camp. The community music project goal is to give access to music playing to any child willing to play an instrument, and so it struggles to be as inclusive as possible. The aim of the April visit was to set the basis for the works that would ultimately lead to July 16th final public concert.

The children involved, all from the camp, proved to be slightly more than 30 in number, various ages represented (approx. 8/9 years old to 20ish). The work with this group, carried out during three hours in the morning, was split into three hour-long sections:

1. Group work
2. Section rehearsals
3. Ensemble rehearsal.

The first section showcased a wide array of musical activities, and proved to be a context where different ideas could be tried out, tested and refined in relation to the specific objectives of the sessions.



Wavel camp

Rhythmic and vocal games, modal African songs and other simple musical structures were employed to work on musical elements and convey musical notions in an inclusive, light-hearted way that could be enjoyable and useful at the same time. Section rehearsals focused on understanding and getting familiar with instrumental parts to be played in the final July concert (this time I took care of keyboards and percussions players).

The complete ensemble rehearsal musical needs were taken care by the M&R Musical Director and my (and fellow MARSians') role was mainly of support to the children where needed.

Additionally, a side musical program was developed during the afternoon with volunteers (mostly teenagers and young adults) who would take care of the musical works with the morning group during the absence of the Italian troop. Here I helped guitar players.

In Saida, the work with Assumoud was supposed to be in the same vein as the one done in Beddawi during the morning, i.e. working with the local music students group towards the final July concert. I just wrote that it was *supposed* because actually it was never meant to be. Internal disorders and clashes within the Ein El Hilweh camp prevented



Beddawi children

the children from getting safely out of their houses, and therefore the musical sessions were abandoned.

The work with Blue Mission, on the other hand, was successfully carried out. It consisted of three mornings of work directly in the Syrian shelters (the same two shelters every morning), along with BM's "activators". Me and Mr. Tony Almond, gentleman, troubadour and fellow MARSian, would join them in their sessions, sharing time with children living in the very shelter we were currently in. The activities were less directly rooted into developing actual musical competence, and more towards an engagement in peer group work in musical terms. A wide array of songs, games, call & response, voice & body activities was showcased to develop an inclusive and sharing, friendly atmosphere where the children (and operators and families alike) could feel safe.

After three days of this work in the shelters, a final workshop for Blue Mission operators was delivered in BM's headquarters: it was a morning's work to top up our mutual work and to share our different competences. Me and Tony involved the BM people in activities similar to the ones used in the shelters, challenging them to follow us to planet MARS by giving a different point of view on the whole concept of the role of music in such contexts as psychosocial work.

In Baalbek (Wavel camp), things were different altogether. The main difference was the context: it was the first time Assumoud allowed for a music project to be delivered in Wavel camp. This camp is notoriously less resourced than the coastal camps in general, and no musical activity had allegedly ever been done there (that is, before the MARSian invasion... even though we found some percussion instruments, forgotten in the FGC's



Syrian shelter, Saïda

closets). Therefore, our supposedly 10 days music workshop for local children was a *pilot project*, and a standalone one, waiting for the seed to hopefully bloom into possible future developments. *Inshallah*. Again, I just wrote *supposedly* because due to some organizational difficulty the first days were to be cut off, resulting in a week long project instead.

The group was made up of local children aged anything in between 10 and 16 years old (but with a couple of really young girls), and also included the Assumoud volunteers (3/4 people each time, adults anywhere between 20ish to 30ish; even the elder staff sometimes participated to the sessions).

Again, a *very* wide array of musical activities was showcased, this time aiming to both the creation of a peer group work and friendly exploration of musical elements, and the development of some musical competence of sorts. Therefore the activities varied anywhere through the more playful ones already listed for the other places, and some more



Wavel FGC

specifically focused ones, working deliberately on a single musical parameter at once (pitch, intensity, timbre, pulse), and even instruments building.

This last activity, instruments building, was actually another leg of the Wavel project, for it aimed to bring another form of musical experience to the locals. The M&R staff had designed and built out of scrap materials two xylophones (one octave apart from each other, to have a "bass" one and an "alto" one) to be brought as gifts to the children in the Assumoud center; at the same time a simple xylophone building workshop was to be held with local woodworkers. This was done with a local woodworker and aided by one of Assumoud's volunteers, on the penultimate day of our stay in Baalbek. This activity was conceived to work on several levels: to provide a sustainable way to create simple instruments in order to support basic music learning, to link Assumoud's activities with

the wider camp working reality, to convey some musical competence, to empower local craftsmen with new skills.

MARSthoughts

Well, these were, in short, the MARSworks. Now, for my MARSthoughts on the matter.

MARSthought1 is: it is amazing the connection you can reach with these people (especially children) after just a couple of days of musical activities. This is at once wonderful and scary. It is wonderful because... well, needless to say, our human hearts just resonate don't they? But it's also scary because this can actually *suck you in*. It seems that the marginalization these people live in renders them like sponges eager to adsorb any new sensation you can bring. But I might be wrong of course: it might just be a problem of mine, of the high sensitivity of my skin. The fighting among the kids to be the one next to me in the circle, to be holding my hands; the constant questioning, asking for something; the crescent physical engagement. But if I want to be with you in this musical experience of some days, I just can't be *in* you, I just can't merge. It just won't work. Or maybe it's me, unable to make it work under such circumstances. So we can be together as much and as close as we want, but me is me and you is you. On this basis the relationship is clear and at the end of the day we are both enriched, there is no confusion, and on the next morning we can proceed onwards side by side.

MARSthought2: it's the third time I face this Lebanese challenge, but I am still *not in control*. Even though now I can somewhat manage the matter as of MARSthought1, I still feel this confusion which makes me feel like I'm in a fog. Luckily, I have my principles, objectives, preparation and so on pretty clear, so I can just rely on them, like distant lights shining and showing the direction to go, but I feel

like my mind's gears are kind of clogged and find difficult to take decisions which usually would require not a big effort. But experience helps me even in this, perhaps in a twofold matter. First, now I am able to truly recognize this sensation when it comes forth (and this is priceless, of course); second *I learned to stop worrying and love the bomb*. Well, not quite so. But this is the path towards this sort of poor man's ataraxia; you know, I believe so much in what I'm doing – not because it's me (these feelings made me wonder more than once in April and July if I had chosen the right job, actually...) but because it's *music*, and because the MARSian approach can really *empower* all the individuals involved in the intervention. But things won't settle down nicely by themselves. On the contrary, this time in this situation I found myself involved in (both inside & outside) I just grabbed the importance of the aforementioned principles (*why*), objectives (*what*) and preparation (*how*) to be used as actual *tools*. Things will shape-shift again (as soon as I make some proper sense of this, maybe?), but for the moment I'm just enjoying this beautiful sensation: the one of not being in control and actually *enjoying it* (somewhat...).

MARSthought3: enough personal insight and aimless meandering in the realms of the unreal and utterly subjective. Self-questioning is important but shan't become an endless loop. It shall resolve into action before questioning again.

MARSthought4: in July I witnessed in Wavel some interesting culture clash. We had worked the first week towards some basic understanding of musical elements, playing with rhythms, learning modal African songs, and the like. In the second half of the workshop we decided to go more directly into musical competence, specifically trying to work on intonation with the basic C major triad. I was fully aware that intonation was imperfect at best for many of the children, but I wasn't expecting it to be so hard. It made us question our very approach, the basic assumption that that triad is an elementary musical entity, and that just like an atom made of three protons, it's understood as "Lithium" everywhere in the world. Well, maybe this is just a western preconception. That is *our* way to perceive the relationships between sounds.

MARSthought5: in Beddawi, it might appear that the role of the facilitator was very different in the three sections of the morning work: pure MARSian facilitator (whatever this means) in the first,



Wavel FGC

music teacher in the second and “friendly support figure” in the third. In reality it was all the same: being together through music. I believe this is what we mean by psychosocial musical intervention: being there, in music, to create or discover something together.

MARSthought6: since the very beginning in Wavel we incorporated some purely listening activity: we were playing something (very very simple, mostly improvised on the spot) while the people in the session were asked *nothing*. I was so surprised of how much this was meaningful: how much they were like spellbound while I was doing my best with four poor ukulele chords, how much this listening became something so precious that really unified all the group in a single entity, everybody beating spontaneously their hands *in time* to my playing, when it was so hard to reach that synch with the rhythmic games tried just 10 minutes earlier. This should be telling.

MARSthought7: lastly, for *uncertainty*. This is connected to MARSthought2 of course, but in a more practical way. The use of conditional sentences re-

garding this work in Lebanon is a common practice in many of the M&R internal communications. This is not because the M&R team is unsure about what to do, but because our work is “grounded on a changing basis”. This is due, for what I understood until now, to a number of factors. One is the different mindset between Europe and Middle East, where concepts like time, reliability, planning, etc. detain a more relative value... they are less cogent and more “fluid”. It’s something like we work with the rocks from the mountains, while they work with the sand of the desert. Sadly this sand sometimes slows down our gears, and prevents certain things from happening, in general. Another factor is the unstable living conditions of the people we work with: the Ein El Hilweh issue is a typical example. I will not discuss here the consequences that such a stress-ridden daily life has on the people living there, but I can say that for us it’s a great training for *our* resilience: be ready to let go of your expectations, be ready to frame a whole new program within hours, be ready to say goodbye and welcome at the same time.



Beddawi. I might be a radical improviser sometimes, improvising with my life sooner than with music, but in this context I learned to beware both of pretentiousness and of taking it too lightly. In my very first morning in Beddawi I was suddenly asked “can you do something *now?*” – and of course I readily jumped inside the sharks pool. When I emerged none of us had arguably gained anything (but most of the kids had fun, at least). The next day I deployed an activity that I had carved during the previous evening, with no better results. None of the two approaches (radical improvisation and meticulous preparation) had worked, mostly because of lack of experience, naive interpretation of circumstances, general pretentiousness.

Wavel. After some days of work in the FGC, we had a meeting with all the staff. A very pleased center coordinator said that the children were suddenly less hectic in their activities and could actually be together in a more quiet way. “They listen to us!”, she exulted. The ability (or availability) to *listen* is something I always try to foster, in myself and the others alike, but I seldom work on it directly: it is implicit in all my musical and psychosocial approach. But here the important bit for me is that this skill managed to sneak out of the sessions, leaving traces elsewhere and linking other individuals (and circumstances) not directly connected with music.

Saida. The very first session. Outdoors, seated in a closed rectangle between the outside wall and the shelter itself. As the session progresses, everybody gets more and more involved, and we reach a rhythmic apex with a multi-section clapping circle. The shared beat is steady and entralling. When it’s over, I realize that we are no longer “alone”: the parents and relatives of the children appeared outside their shelter, are clapping with us and smiling, either sitting next to us or looking out of the window. Again inclusiveness leaked out of the session, and *joined people with smiles.*

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“The contribution of refugees to their new homes worldwide has been overwhelmingly positive.”

Filippo Grandi, UNHCR