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Syrian Migrant Workers in Lebanon:  
The Limits of Transnational Integration,  
Communitarian Solidarity, and Popular Agency

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## **Abstract**

New patterns of regional migration in the Middle East since 1991 have been interpreted as involving new forms of transnational integration, activating new transnational communitarian solidarities, and as emanating distinctively from below. This paper interrogates these ideas with regard to Lebanon/Syria by examining the Lebanese public discourse on Syrian migrants from 1945-present with particular reference to the 1990s, on the assumption that public discourse plays a partly constitutive role in shaping migration. The paper traces how positive constructions of Syrian migrant labour before the civil war gave way to negativity and controversy in a context of economic crisis and Syrian control. In pre-war Lebanon, cheap and unskilled Syrian labour was seen favourably as a much needed and relatively trouble-free resource in an economy perceived to be booming. During and after the war, because of economic problems and the Syrian 'occupation', Syrian workers started to be seen as a threat to Lebanese sovereignty, polity, economy and society. I argue that growing labour flows have accompanied intensified nationalism and isolationism, currents which have overwhelmed potential cross-border communitarian solidarity and done little to engender popular agency or transform the terms of a regional political economy exploiting cheap and manipulable labour.

## **Keywords**

Migration, Syria, Lebanon, discourse, transnationalism, exploitation



## Introduction

New patterns of regional migration in the Middle East since 1991 have been interpreted as involving new forms of transnational integration, activating new transnational communitarian solidarities, and as emanating distinctively from below. This paper interrogates these ideas with regard to Lebanon/Syria by examining the Lebanese public discourse on Syrian migrants from 1945-present with particular reference to the 1990s, on the assumption that public discourse is not neutral regarding the distribution of power and resources,<sup>1</sup> and that it plays a partly constitutive, not just a reflective role in shaping migration. The paper traces how positive constructions of Syrian migrant labour before the civil war gave way to negativity and controversy in a context of economic crisis and Syrian control. In pre-war Lebanon, cheap and unskilled Syrian labour was seen favourably as a much needed and relatively trouble-free resource in an economy perceived to be booming. During and after the war, because of economic problems and the Syrian 'occupation', Syrian workers started to be seen as a threat to Lebanese sovereignty, polity, economy and society. I argue that growing labour flows have accompanied intensified nationalism and isolationism, currents which have overwhelmed potential cross-border communitarian solidarity and done little to engender popular agency or transform the terms of a regional political economy exploiting cheap and manipulable labour.

## Syrian Labour as a Useful Resource

'Lebanon was built with Syrian muscles', declared a wealthy, Lebanese Greek Catholic to his grandson in the early 1990s.<sup>2</sup> The old man's point was to lodge a mild objection to the clamour that arose in the Lebanese press in the 1990s over what was seen as the threat posed by Syrian workers to Lebanon's polity, economy, society and culture. He was saying that Syrian workers have always been in Lebanon, and that their 'muscles' have been useful to wealthy Christians, and that therefore there was little real warrant for the newfangled controversy. What has been useful to the Lebanese, the old man was saying, are precisely the *muscles* of a disciplined migrant labour, which can be bought or sold as a commodity without 'problems', which works hard for low wages, but which does not seek political or social rights, press cultural claims, or make a visible home in Lebanon and which, at the end of the day, 'melts away like sugar in tea', as a newspaper headline from the early 1970s described the apparent invisibility of Syrian labour in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> The old man's words gave a tantalizing glimpse of a pre-war discourse, which became an anachronism in Lebanon in the 1990s.

Following the division of Lebanon and Syria into two separate national states, and in keeping with the laissez-faire orientation of the 'merchant republic', Beirut tended to seek the free movement of goods and persons in its relations with Damascus, a goal which included the free movement of cheap Syrian labour into Lebanon.<sup>4</sup> In June 1947, Gabriel Murr, the Lebanese Minister of Public Works, explained that Syrian work in Lebanon is not put under any restriction, and that '25 per cent of the

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1 See Robert Wuthnow, *Communities of Discourse: Ideology and Social structure in the Reformation, the Enlightenment, and European Socialism* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 1989), 547-8.

2 Reported by the grandson in question, film-maker George Nasr, during conversations in Beirut, 5 August 2004, 20 August 2004.

3 Newspaper headline from *al-Sayyad* 27 April 1972 'quarter of a million Syrian workers melt away every evening like sugar in tea'. The idea of Syrian 'muscles' can be seen as a metonym for the kind of labour-as-disciplined-commodity long seen as useful for Lebanese employers.

4 During bi-lateral negotiations with Syria in the summer of 1950 'Beirut still demands the free movement of persons, goods and capital. Damascus refuses and obliges Lebanon to pay in rare hard currency imports from Syria (above all wheat) and is forbidden from re-exporting these imports' 10 July 1950, reported in Joseph G. Chami, *Le Mémorial du Liban: Vol 2, le mandat Béchara el Khoury, 1943-1952* (Beirut: Chemaly and Chemaly, 2002): 350.



workers on the building sites of the Ministry of Public Works are Syrian'.<sup>5</sup> Both countries understood well each others' mutual interests in allowing cheap Syrian workers into Lebanon, and hence occasionally admissions were offered and restrictions threatened as a bargaining chip in bi-lateral relations. Hence, when Gabriel Murr sought to persuade the Syrians to authorize the passage through Syrian territory and into Lebanon of an important oil pipeline, he promised both an equal division of the profits and said that 'we are going to accept Syrian labour power on the building sites and installations of the company on the same conditions as the Lebanese employees and workers'.<sup>6</sup> Labour admission on good terms was therefore offered as an incentive to the Syrians to sign up to the accord, which they duly did. To pick another example, in September 1959, Syria retaliated against a Lebanese refusal to allow Syrians to travel by Beirut airport without a Syrian exit visa by raising the exit tax and imposing security validation for Syrians coming to Lebanon, which forced 700 Syrians to turn back at the border.<sup>7</sup> The Syrians correctly understood this restriction to be harmful to Lebanese interests.

These occasional wrangles over the labour supply were an elite affair, of limited import, and not in any significant way a response to controversy or public opposition to the presence of Syrians in Lebanon. Such wrangling merely confirmed the accepted place of Syrian labour in the regional political economy. In spite of the fact that there was as much as one Syrian worker for every two Lebanese workers in the early 1970s,<sup>8</sup> their presence was not particularly controversial. Likewise, the fact that the population of Beirut was 45 per cent foreign in 1975 was not seen as a cause for alarm.<sup>9</sup> Instead this foreign presence was generally understood as a positive sign of Lebanon's strength and international prominence. It was thought natural that the 'Switzerland of the East' should attract professionals from Europe as well as labour from less well-off neighboring countries, and the Lebanese economic miracle required cheap, unskilled labour in any case, which could not, it was held, be supplied from within Lebanon. As Edouard Saab wrote in *Le Jour* in 1952, the Lebanese refused through pride to take just any work,<sup>10</sup> and therefore labour from abroad was necessary. A long article in *Al-Sayyad* newspaper in 1972 explained some of this thinking, which was usually held as a matter of conventional wisdom which did not need articulation. The journalist repeated the widespread notion that a Lebanese economy dominated by services could not supply sufficient unskilled labour, and thus manual labour was required on a permanent basis from the outside, and that many Lebanese despised manual labour in any case and would not undertake it. Cheap external labour was required because in an unplanned economy like Lebanon's the prices of basic commodities would always exceed wages. In construction a skilled Lebanese electrician or tiler always required a number of unskilled Syrians to assist. The indispensability of Syrian labour was only underlined by the fact that their absence during the summer of 1969—when Syria closed the border in the wrangling preceding the Cairo Accords—caused a delay in the construction of the Fu'ad Shihab bridge. During that summer wages for manual labour doubled because of the Syrian scarcity, which meant that contractors had to stop work. The author went on to detail Syrians' invisibility and lack of basic rights in Lebanon, in spite of their productive contribution, saying that the only attention they received was from periodic security

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5 Cited in Chami, *Mémorial*, Vol 2, 9 June 1947, p. 207.

6 Cited in Chami, *Mémorial*, Vol 2, 9 June 1947, p. 207. The pipeline was to terminate between Sur and Saida in Lebanon. Syria's agreement was announced by Prime Minister Riad al-Solh (the Tapline agreement) on 1 September 1947. See Chami, *Mémorial*, p. 213.

7 Cited in Chami, *Vol 4, Le Mandat Fouad Chéhab, 1958-1964*, p. 61.

8 General security released figures in 1970 listing 279,541 Syrians in Lebanon. André Bourgey and J. Pharès, 'Les bidonvilles de l'agglomération de Beyrouth'. *Revue de géographie de Lyon*, Vol 48, No. 2 (1973): 107-139, p. 121. The resident working population of Lebanon in 1970 was 572,000 Lebanese. Albert Dagher, 'Al-Quwa al-'Amila wa-l-Namu fi Lubnan' in *Linking Economic Growth and Social Development in Lebanon*, (Beirut: UNDP, 2000): 85-99, p. 86. Thus (discounting other foreign labour) Syrians made up about a third of the working population of Lebanon.

9 André Bourgey, 'La guerre et ses conséquences géographiques au Liban'. *Annales de Géographie*, n° 521, 94<sup>th</sup> year (1985): 1-37, p. 3.

10 Cited in Chami, *Mémorial*, Vol 2, 24 May 1952, p. 433.

searches roughly handled by police searching for militants.<sup>11</sup> In other words, this was a highly sympathetic comment on Syrian workers' plight in Lebanon, which does not appear to have been particularly controversial. Fighting among workers which attracted lurid coverage in the 1990s and 2000s was reported on neutrally and briefly in the 1960s.<sup>12</sup> More important controversies in the relationship with Syria concerned not Syrian labour, but the price of Syrian grain, the currency, smuggling, and Syrian troop incursions across the border.<sup>13</sup>

The Lebanese labour movement did demand protection from the cheap competition of foreign labour, although without attracting widespread public support or publicity. In June 1950, workers syndicates requested an end to the engagement of foreign labour in industry.<sup>14</sup> In the same year the taxi drivers' syndicate denounced competition from foreigners working in public vehicles.<sup>15</sup> The Ministry of Social Affairs, shortly after its foundation in 1951, was persuaded to state publicly that it was desirable to regulate the presence of Syrian labour through a system of work permits: 'Because of the competition of Syrian labour which has taken on a serious character, Social Affairs call on the government to prevent the clandestine entry of Syrians, to search for Syrians without permits in the markets and factories, and to impose on them a renewable two-week residence permit, and to send back all Syrians without a residence or work permit'.<sup>16</sup> This goal—rather than the politically and economically impractical idea of exclusion—was to emerge as the main regulatory demand of the labour movement, and in the absence of larger public support or awareness, was only half-heartedly pursued by the government until the civil war. Various measures came on the books, although they were rarely enforced, and seem to have depended largely on whether the employer sought to obtain a work permit and contract for his employee. As this was an administrative inconvenience for the employer, and implied some rights and protections for the worker, employers rarely went down this road, and work permits were rarely taken up.<sup>17</sup> As those I interviewed who had worked in Lebanon before the war insisted, there were no restrictions, no fees, no visas, no work permits: 'In regards to this country,' said Adib Mahrus, who worked in construction in Lebanon from the late 1960s to the 1990s, 'from Homs to Golan, there are no borders between us [. . .] the borders are always open [. . .] in the time of Camille Chamoun, the time of Chehab, and in the time of Frangieh [. . .] the borders have always been open, you go straight through, there are no checkpoints, there is no entry security, there are open borders!'<sup>18</sup>

Far more controversial than Syrian workers was the presence of Palestinian labour in Lebanon. Initial Lebanese open-handedness towards Palestinian refugees appears to have been short-lived. In a stormy debate in parliament in December 1951, for example, Emile Lahoud asserted that the Labour Code forbade work to foreigners in Lebanon, that the Lebanese have the right to work 'and their interests must come before those of the Palestinians'. Emile Bustany's attempts to reply were drowned out by clamour and hammering on the tables.<sup>19</sup> Edouard Saab's article in *Le Jour* in 1952 mentioned that Lebanese did suffer to some degree from the competition of Syrian labour, but claimed that 'we have more to fear from the competition of Palestinian refugees. Escaping the law imposing a work permit on foreigners, they have overrun companies, public enterprises, and construction sites. It is henceforth rare to find a Lebanese stone dresser, a mason, or a whitewasher'. Saab affirmed that as

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11 Kamal Matar, *Al-Sayyad*, 27 March 1972.

12 See a succinct report in *Al-Nahar*, 9 May 1964, p. 4.

13 Chami, *passim*.

14 Cited in Chami, *Mémorial*, Vol 2, 8 June 1950, p. 345.

15 *Ibid.*, 349.

16 Cited in Chami, *Mémorial*, Vol 2, 28 October 1951, p. 407.

17 *Muharrar* Lebanese daily 7 January 1975.

18 Adib Mahrus, Interview, 9 March 2004. I heard the same story from dozens of other workers.

19 Cited in Chami, *Mémorial*, Vol 2, 27 December 1951, p. 415.

much as 10,000 Palestinian families were maintained by Palestinians working in Lebanon, and deplored Lebanon's disproportionate generosity.<sup>20</sup> Political hostility to the Palestinians at this stage overlooked the fact that Syrian workers also tended to escape the 'law imposing a work permit on foreigners'. The idea that Lebanon was being 'overrun' by foreign workers seems to have been applied only to Palestinians (and not to Syrians or others) until the 1980s.

With the Lebanese economy bearing up remarkably well in the early years of the civil war, the widespread view of Syrian workers as a much-needed and largely trouble-free resource persisted into the early 1980s. Syrian workers' attempts to organize and acquire rights during the late 1970s encountered the opposition of employers and their supporters, but did not appear to significantly irritate public opinion at large, and even attracted support from some quarters. Following the failure to implement certain limited social protections for Syrian workers agreed on at the highest levels in 1973 and legislated for in 1975, and subsequent to the Syrian military intervention in Lebanon in 1976, a Union of Syrian Arab Workers in Lebanon was established in Ra's al-Nab'a in 1977 espousing Ba'athist and pan-Arabist rhetoric and under the control of the Hafez al-Asad regime.<sup>21</sup> The most prominent action was a union-backed sit-in by several thousand Syrian porters and drivers demanding end of service compensation at the haulage company of Ibrahim Yassin al-Qayssi during the penultimate week of August 1979. Violence broke out between the Lebanese security forces protecting the employers on the one side and Syrians and some armed Palestinian elements on the other. The major francophone daily, *L'Orient-Le-Jour*, took the employers' side,<sup>22</sup> while the other major dailies remained fairly neutral.<sup>23</sup> Those taking the employers side were not opposed to Syrian labour, it should be noted, only to the demands being lodged by troublesome workers. *Al-Rayya* published a sympathetic article mentioning the 'oppression' practiced by al-Qayssi against the strikers.<sup>24</sup> The strike precipitated discussion and meetings between the Syrian workers' union and the General Confederation of Lebanese Unions as well as the International Labour Organization, with a view to joint organization.<sup>25</sup> A sympathetic article published in *Al-Sharq* in 1981 entitled 'Four Years of Union Struggle', spoke of, and probably exaggerated, Lebanese support for the Syrian workers' union. The article defended Syrian workers by maintaining that 'Syrian workers do not compete with Lebanese workers because most Lebanese do not work in most of these sectors [building, agriculture, baking etc] [. . .] because the demand for this kind of worker is much greater than the supply. Although this does not stop the artificial creation of circumstances by employers to dominate Lebanese and Syrian workers in order to exploit them—a fact which results from the lack of union institutions and the absence of organization especially among the Syrians'.<sup>26</sup> Lebanese response to Syrian organization and strike action was therefore by no means uniformly hostile, some of the response was sympathetic, and opposition by employers appears to have been to workers *qua* workers, not *qua* Syrians.

### Starting to Fear Foreign Labour

The beginnings of a real change in public discourse about foreign workers in general appears to be rooted in the economic crisis which set in after 1983. The currency began a long and precipitous descent,<sup>27</sup> budget and trade deficits, debt, unemployment, and inflation intensified.<sup>28</sup> The arrival during

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20 Cited in Chami, *Mémorial*, Vol 2, 24 May 1952, p. 433.

21 For a propagandist historical sketch of the union, see *Al-Ba'ath*, 31 December 1981.

22 *L'Orient Le Jour*, Sunday 19 August, 1979, p. 10.

23 *Al-Nahar*, 19 August 1979, 23 August 1979; *Al-'Amal*, 19 August 1979, p. 4 and 28 August 1979, p. 5.

24 *Al-Rayya*, 25 August 1979.

25 See *L'Orient Le Jour*, 23 August 1979 & *Al-Nahar*, 23 August 1979.

26 *Al-Sharq*, 30 October 1981.

27 In 1982, \$1 still equalled only 3.7 Lebanese Lira. Bourgey, 1985, p. 33

the 1970s and early 1980s of numerous South Asian workers—in domestic and other services especially—was grist to those starting to see the presence of foreign workers in a negative light.<sup>29</sup> The tone of public discourse started to change dramatically. An article of February 1985 in *Al-Anwar* can serve as a good illustration. The headline: ‘50 thousand workers remit about a billion Lira per year’; the subtitle: ‘Lebanon faces an invasion—foreign workers’. The article began: ‘If this number [50,000] of foreign workers is considered by many countries to be normal, then in Lebanon this is absolutely not the case, at least in relation to the size of the national workforce.’ ‘It is well known’, journalist Ibrahim ‘Awwadi continued, ‘that since 1983 Lebanon has been living through a crippling economic and social crisis, represented on the economic front by the complete freeze on the activity of businesses without exception, and finally the financial sector. . . . This striking and dangerous inability in the balance of payments evident since 1983 and which attained about \$1,400 million by 1984, and likewise an increase in the domestic public debt which reached by the end of last year more than LL31 billion, have meant a continuation in the budget deficit estimated to reach by the end of this year more than LL6 billion.’ All of these factors have contributed to an ongoing currency crisis which began at the end of 1984. On the social front the crisis was even clearer, ‘Awwadi reported: hyper-inflation, the collapse of wages’ purchasing power, immiseration, and ‘armies of unemployed’. Amidst all this, the totally contradictory fact that ‘we see foreign labour attacking this country in a remarkable way’. Hence the ‘recent demands by the General Confederation of Labour that the government issue a decision putting a stop to the import of foreign labour after its continuing illegitimate competition against Lebanese labour’ and because it ‘negatively pressures the price of the Lebanese pound’. ‘Awwadi affirmed that business establishments were taking advantage of the precarious security situation, firing Lebanese and replacing them with cheaper foreign labour, a ‘dreadful army’ which was contributing to the collapse of the currency, as foreign workers often require payment in dollars, which are then sent abroad to the tune of \$60 million per year.<sup>30</sup>

‘Awwadi’s article, written at a time where elite opinion felt that Lebanon was undergoing an economic crisis, eloquently represented a new line of thinking, which connected economic problems to the presence of foreign labour. Conventional wisdom prior to the economic crisis of 1984 was that cheap foreign labour was good for the Lebanese economy, even if political or cultural concerns, as well as sectarian and/or chauvinist sentiment may have sometimes blocked out the importance of this idea. Typically, it was conceded that Lebanese labour needed some protection, but it was held that Lebanese workers had to compromise in the light of the larger requirements of the Lebanese economy. The new thinking was to take the issue of foreign labour out of the narrow confines of the labour movement, away from the heated controversy over Palestinians, or from the atrocities of the militias (who had been killing Syrian workers since 1976), and into the mainstream of Lebanese public discourse. Even while making allowance for the fact that Lebanese were seeing South Asian workers in numbers for the first time in their country, the figures that ‘Awwadi mentions with such trepidation are tiny in comparison with both previous and later experiences of foreign labour in Lebanon. The statistic that 50,000 workers were remitting \$60 million per annum abroad is hardly impressive; Lebanon housed more than 500,000 foreign workers in the early 1970s, for example—ten times more than the numbers that were now so suddenly worrying to the Lebanese public. Just as striking, the number of work permits being issued by the Labour Ministry was actually diminishing from 1982 with the economic downturn. In short, a new and unprecedented invasion of foreign labour, in numerical terms, had simply not taken place. The use of the word ‘invasion’, especially in the wake of the

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28 The purchasing power of the minimum wage fell drastically between 1984 and 1987. In 1984 the purchasing power of the minimum wage had lost 13.6 per cent of its 1974 value, but by 1987 had lost 65.2 per cent of this value. Kamal Hamdan, ‘Les Libanais face à la crise économique et sociale: étendue et limites des processus d’adaptation’ in *Maghreb-Machrek*, 125 (July-September 1989): 19-39, p. 27.

29 As *The Daily Star* reported on 4 April, 1984: ‘Foreign labor has replaced Lebanese as the back-bone of Lebanon’s unskilled and semi-skilled work force’.

30 *Al-Anwar*, 26 February, 1985.

devastating Israeli invasion of 1982, the depiction of foreign workers as a ‘dreadful army’, and the emphasis placed on Lebanese popular immiseration and unemployment (topics which had often left middle-class opinion cold in the past) were all striking signs of the urgent feelings the economic crisis stirred up and the powerful interests it affected. The emphasis on the currency collapse, when the Lebanese pound had long been seen as the backbone of the Lebanese economy, not to say the international standing of the merchant republic itself, is a telling indicator of what moved elite opinion to start finding persons to blame for their growing predicament. At a more everyday level, of course, wealthy groups would certainly have felt the impact of having to pay domestic servants in dollars at a time when the Lebanese pound was plunging.

In this atmosphere there were renewed calls for restriction on foreign labour. PM Rashid Karami convened a committee to study the issue in February 1985.<sup>31</sup> In August, the Lebanese Forces announced that foreigners were only permitted to undertake certain menial jobs in Lebanon, namely domestic service, construction, street cleaning, cooking, car-washing, and portage. Even for these jobs it had to be established that no Lebanese wanted them prior to a foreign hiring.<sup>32</sup> Salim Hoss, the Minister of Labour finally issued law no. 261 in August 1986 preventing the employment of foreign labour in a variety of professions except those involving skills scarce in Lebanon. His adviser told a national daily that the measure was intended to protect Lebanese labour and to support the national economy at a time of economic and social crisis and in the wake of protests, demonstrations and sit-ins by those who believe that the state should ensure their subsistence and solve the crisis.<sup>33</sup> The authorities had been moved to act, although it seems unlikely that these difficult-to-enforce measures made much difference in hiring practices regarding Syrian workers on the ground. Nonetheless, the new economic thinking was hardly hegemonic. A report submitted to *Al-Safir*, for example, made the older argument that the number of foreign workers in Lebanon corresponded to Lebanon’s economic strength, and that since 1983, according to the figures for work permits released by the Labour Ministry, numbers of foreign workers had been diminishing.<sup>34</sup> Nor did commentators single out or even mention Syrian workers in the context of these debates. In some cases, Syrian workers continued to remain invisible. One analyst, for example, asserted that the largest contingent of Arab labour in Lebanon was Egyptian, a clear blunder, derived from the official figures on work permits.<sup>35</sup> By the late 1990s, in spite of the fact that the official figures on work permits remained broadly similar, such a blunder would be inconceivable. Certainly, the Syrian workers’ union, far from feeling obliged to defend the presence of Syrian workers in Lebanon, merely issued a statement blaming speculative mafias for the outrageous rises in the dollar price and calling on the authorities to tackle pervasive popular hunger.<sup>36</sup>

Fears over the Lebanese economy, and Lebanese economic problems continued through the 1990s and into the twenty-first century. Notwithstanding some optimism during the early years of reconstruction, and the relative stabilization of the currency, there were growing budget and trade deficits, and sharp increases in the external debt which started to look insupportable by the early 2000s. Lebanon’s pre-war role as a haven for capital at a time of statism and redistribution elsewhere

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31 *Al-Anwar*, 26 February, 1985.

32 *Al-Nahar*, 3 August 1985.

33 *Al-Safir*, 28 August 1986. Look at Augustus Richard Norton’s book on Amal to see if these labour protests were organized by Amal.

34 Report submitted to *Al-Safir* with no author and no date, but probably from 1986 (judging from its content and file placement in the archives), p. 1. The report argued that there was still demand for foreign labour in spite of the war and economic problems because of Lebanese emigration, the absorption of a section of the workforce into the militias, the fact that Lebanese refused to take certain jobs, the revival of some areas requiring unskilled labour, and the fact that some employers were taking advantage of the absence of the state to worsen work conditions, fire Lebanese, and employ foreigners (p. 8).

35 Report submitted to *Al-Safir*, p. 2.

36 *Al-Nahar*, 5 July 1987.

in the Arab world was now sharply attenuated, and more importantly, its role as the financial centre of the Middle East had been overtaken by the Gulf. Lebanon continued to lack an industrial base and significantly improved agricultural productivity. Many worried that the Lebanese economy simply could not provide the necessary jobs, creating unemployment and spurring emigration.

These fears inspired a ramifying discourse through the 1990s linking these structural problems to the presence of foreign labour, although Syrian labour was not directly mentioned until 1994. Faltering efforts at reconstruction, and a renewed currency crisis in 1991-92, for example, re-focused attention on the supposedly negative impact of foreign labour on the Lebanese economy because of remittances abroad. One study—hailed in the newspaper *Al-Siyasa Al-Kuwaitiyya* as ‘profound and exhaustive’—reported that foreign labour in Lebanon was the most important factor in the deterioration in the Lebanese pound. It was reported that countries with strong economies imposed strict conditions and regulations on foreign labour, ensuring that there was no question of foreign labour taking work that could be done by nationals. The Scandinavian countries, it was stated, restricted foreign entrants to six per cent of the local population and to a sojourn of two years only. If one compared this with the situation in Lebanon, where Sri Lankans, Philipinos and other non-Middle Easterners were employed in numbers, one could see the truly deleterious effect on the Lebanese pound, particularly vis-à-vis the US dollar, in which their wages were guaranteed. The hard currency drain of such workers, whose numbers were estimated at about 10,000, was calculated on the basis of wages at about \$50 million per year. But if one took into account all foreign workers in Lebanon, then the drain would equal about \$100 million per month, meaning about \$1.2 billion per year needed just for this by Lebanon after the wartime destruction of its economic infrastructure. The answer according to the report was the restriction of foreign labour to two years sojourn and the regulation of foreign labour on the basis of a full study of what Lebanon’s real foreign labour needs were.<sup>37</sup> The figures for remittances, whether or not they were based on an exaggerated yearly wage bill—\$5,000, were far higher than those of the 1980s, and were alarming to many, especially when all thoughts were turning to economic reconstruction. The report quietly included Syrian workers without naming them or directing attention towards them. They were unnamed for political reasons, but as everybody knew, they made up the largest contingent by far of any foreign labour in Lebanon.

### **Syrian Control and Social Crisis**

In the early 1990s, the discourse on foreign labour acquired a new urgency for reasons which went beyond the narrowly economic. First and foremost among these was Syrian control. The Syrians, who had deployed in Lebanon since 1976, were given the green light to use air-power there by the US in return for Syrian support against Iraq in the 1991 Gulf War. General Michel ‘Aun, the Maronite Christian isolationist, was defeated, making Syria the guardian of the Ta’if Accords of 1989, which gave the blueprint for a post-war settlement, which retained a sectarian structure, but handed more political power to the Sunni and Shi’a Muslim political leadership. The new power structure meant it was now possible as never before to link the presence of hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers in Lebanon to the project of Syrian domination of Lebanon, and to Christian losses under the new settlement. Once this link was made, all and any opposition to Syrian control could and did attack the presence of these workers. Syrian workers had become a political football as never before. Suddenly, such workers were signified (although before 1994 not directly) by the phrase ‘foreign labour’. Previously, ‘foreign labour’ had signified South Asians or Palestinians with Syrians left largely out of account in view of the widespread idea that they were in Lebanon largely unofficially, as a temporary or seasonal presence, and with their roots basically across the border. However, because of the extreme political sensitivity of this issue, and the real need for security in Lebanon (which was guaranteed by Syria), there was hardly a direct mention of Syrian workers themselves in public

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<sup>37</sup> *Al-Siyasa Al-Kuwaitiyya*, 16 December 1992.

criticisms of foreign labour until 1994, let alone anything specific on how Syrian control was furthered by or linked to their presence.

A further factor, however, was the strongly felt sense of social crisis and the need for Lebanese national unity and reconstruction in the wake of fifteen years of division and civil war. It was felt that Lebanon had to recover its viability and social cohesion if it was to survive and prosper. In this context the presence of foreign labour was now linked, not just to the weakness of the once proud Lebanese economy, or to infringements on Lebanese sovereignty, but to a social crisis threatening the overall coherence and vitality of the national fabric itself. Journalist Ali Safa, in a long article in *Al-Liwa* on 6 January 1990, spoke of the double danger faced by Lebanon. On the one side, a ‘great emigration of the national potential’—made up of professionals, workers, entrepreneurs, specialists and others—‘sleeping at the doors of foreign embassies’ in order to escape war, unemployment, high prices, instability and closure; an emigration which Ali Safa maintained was sapping the very basis of national, social, and economic strength, and even of individual fulfilment within the country. And on the other side ‘a frightening spectre, quietly on the march in the darkness, exploiting the war to take the place of national economic strength which has left and emigrated abroad. Little by little, we shall see the ripening and strengthening of this new economic power which is represented in foreign labour and skills in all fields [including] agriculture, industry, trade and services’.<sup>38</sup> A grim prospectus indeed, notable for its ascription of a kind of insidious agency and telos to foreign labour, the in-migration of which threatened not just the economy, but the very basis of Lebanese social development and the coherence of Lebanon as a national entity; fears stirred, most likely, by fifteen years of still unresolved civil war. Ali Safa went on to enquire as to the laws and regulations surrounding in-migration, and the ways in which Lebanese workers were protected or not from foreign competition. The need for such protection was therefore linked to any potential national reconstruction, which would have to overcome an ongoing social crisis, reduce emigration, and protect the national workforce.<sup>39</sup> Complaints over inadequate regulation, in-migration, unemployment and emigration were occasionally greased with xenophobic remarks about ‘white, black and yellow faces’ staring out at the Lebanese passer-by, talking a multitude of languages, and asking for directions from the queues outside the office for granting work permits.<sup>40</sup> Lebanon entered the 1990s, then, stalked by a newly conjured ‘frightening spectre’, which had been absent from public discourse prior to the civil war.

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38 *Al-Liwa*, 6 January 1990.

39 Ali Safa’s article went on to interview Elias Habr, the President of the Confederation of Labour, who laid out the demands of the labour movement for more protection and regulation, and then Professor Mustafa Isma’il, a representative from the Ministry of Social Affairs, who explained the existing protections for Lebanese labour and downplayed their weaknesses.

40 This indication came in January 1993 in a long article in *Al-Anwar* headlined ‘Foreign labour competes with Lebanese labour in the absence of official protection’. ‘15,474 foreign workers entered Lebanon in 1991’ the article began, and detailed the work permit statistics. ‘And in the midst of this’, journalist Carol Samaha continued, ‘the Lebanese worker fumbles about, and finds himself facing serious competition. The state does not pay attention to his plight. The Employment Authority doesn’t discharge its functions, contenting itself by giving work permits to emigrants, while the office for supervising foreigners works away, with queues at its doors, from which white, black and yellow faces look at you. Each talking some language and all asking for directions. They wait for work permits and the government does not begrudge them. Just when it is begrudging the Lebanese worker proper organization of the labour market inside the country’. The article went on to link the chaos in the labour market with unemployment and the subsistence crisis among the Lebanese, arguing that the state was failing in its duty to protect Lebanese labour. The article included the defence put up by the government, to the effect that the war had disorganized the labour market, that there were key areas where Lebanon lacked labour power and thus needed foreign labour, and that a forthcoming protocol with Syria would solve the problem. But these points were not incorporated into the dire picture presented in the first few paragraphs. The discourse—greased by xenophobia about strangers with coloured faces, whose offensive acts included ‘looking at you’ and ‘asking directions’—is also undeterred by the relatively tiny number of work permits—about 15,000—that caused such concern. In short, the article linked—with the assistance of xenophobic sentiment—an ongoing social and economic crisis to the presence of foreign labour in the country. *Al-Anwar*, 14 January 1993.

## Opening Salvoes against Syrians

Direct references in the public discourse to the negative role of *Syrian* labour in Lebanon are sparse indeed until 1994. Publicly, at least, until this point, Syrian labour was the elephant in the room. In the context of Syrian control in Lebanon it was considered a taboo topic by the press and remained firmly in a Lebanese ‘hidden transcript’. However, starting in 1994 articles began to appear which tackled the issue head on.

In June 1994, *L’Orient Le Jour* published an article, which linked Syrians negatively to political, economic and social issues, under a bold headline ‘Who’s afraid of Syrian labour in Lebanon?’ ‘Officially they are only 50,000.’ the article began, ‘But the Lebanese have the impression of seeing them everywhere: at crossroads, on the bridges, at factory exits, in the fields, in the destroyed buildings downtown and even in the tiny alleys of the capital where they get lost playing at taxi-driving. So much so that they feel somewhat ‘overwhelmed’ by Syrian labour, to which the post-Ta’if accords seem to have opened wide the doors of Lebanon’. ‘Beyond the sensitivities that this massive presence could inflame’, the article continued, in a bare hint at unspeakable concerns about Syrian occupation, and the place of the Christians in a Lebanon ever more ‘Arab’ and ‘Islamic’, ‘does it not pose an economic problem to the country, particularly to Lebanese workers’ who must struggle against this competition. ‘The response to this question varies . . . . If the Lebanese workers appear devastated, the employers are satisfied and the Labour Ministry is serene. According to the latter this presence is necessary and all irregularities will be regulated in the cooperation accord soon to be signed between the Lebanese and Syrian Ministers of Labour.’<sup>41</sup> The article moved to the question of labour competition, and for the first time, everyday disputes between Syrians and Lebanese workers were aired in the press. The article mentioned arguments threatening to become physical between Lebanese and Syrian vendors of electrical items next to the Hazmieh junction. The Lebanese shouting: ‘How come you sell the same material at cheaper prices in this region which is under our control?’ In Barbir ‘almost the same discussion’, where Lebanese removal men complain about their Syrian competitors who charge half the fee for the same work and are thus preferentially employed by lorry owners. ‘Why, in this case, don’t the Lebanese reduce their rates? ‘It’s impossible’, exclaims Abu Ayman, ‘working all day I’m struggling to earn 20,000 LL per day. With a family to feed, this scarcely covers the cost of bread. The Syrians themselves don’t have rent to pay, nor family to maintain. They can therefore lower their prices.’ In this way, and with other avenues of criticism of Syria closed, elite opinion hatched a new sympathy for the social plight of the Lebanese workforce in order to push ‘pro-Lebanese’ concerns.

The article went on to flag issues of middle-class social concern—the illegal Syrian squats in semi-destroyed buildings both downtown and in areas like Aley and Bhamdoun, and the ‘new, but very quickly soiled pavements’ adjacent to Syrian habitations. The threat of more permanent Syrian settlement is also given an indirect allusion where it is mentioned that Syrians would return and advise their families to come and join them in Lebanon, because for them, it was claimed, in spite of tough conditions, ‘Beirut still represents paradise’ compared to conditions back home.<sup>42</sup> An even more sensitive concern over the threat to Lebanese sovereignty is touched on where the issue of Syrian military backing for Syrian workers in Lebanon is mentioned indirectly: ‘In fact’, it was reported, ‘they seem entirely at ease and don’t seem to fear at all that one day they will be sent back. “Who would dare do it?” exclaimed Omar, “We are covered [by Syria] and nothing can be taken from us.”’ Even in the context of new accords between Syria and Lebanon, ‘Nothing will change for us’ Omar affirms with assurance . . . ‘We won’t leave [because of reconstruction] without indemnities’. This was a show of bravado, and the squatters were indeed to be evicted without compensation, but for many Lebanese, Omar’s words were a frightening demonstration of how the Syrian army backed

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41 *L’Orient Le Jour*, 13 June 1994.

42 In fact, a fairer generalization would be that Beirut represented for Syrian migrants not paradise, but increased earning capacity.



Syrian workers in Lebanon to the detriment of Lebanese sovereignty and identity at a particularly fragile time of reconstruction.

Just as worrying, according to the author, was the unwillingness or inability of the government to address the issue: 'The Minister of Labour, Abdallah al-Amin, doesn't give the impression that there's much to be done. For him, all this will be resolved in the framework of the accords which will soon be signed between Lebanon and Syria to regulation the situation of workers in the two countries.' As the Minister is quoted as claiming: 'The Lebanese state is sovereign and Syria entirely respects that. . . . Believe me, once the new accords are applied, the situation will be well-controlled'. Few of *L'Orient Le Jour's* readership would have believed these claims.<sup>43</sup>

The Arabic press remained skittish about direct or extensive criticism of Syrian workers however. The principle relevant debates of 1994 were without strong rhetoric, and revolved around the less controversial question of increased regulation of foreign labour in general, which usually meant regulation for those holding work permits, which most Syrians did not hold. *Al-Liwa*, for example, in discussing an increase in foreign labour in Lebanon in 1993 wrote that 'before the war the foreign labour force [. . .] was mainly restricted to Syrians and Palestinians, but the war threw open the doors of the country to anyone demanding entry, which created a fundamental change in market, which remained open to foreign workers of a variety of geographical and racial backgrounds [. . .] competing with Lebanese labour'.<sup>44</sup> The idea here, then, was that the real problem of foreign labour in Lebanon was not about Syrians, but with respect to the relatively small numbers of those from South Asia. It was relatively uncontroversial for the government to move on this issue, because Syrian workers were largely not included. Hence, in July 1994, fines were increased for those employing foreigners without a permit.<sup>45</sup> In theory this would have applied as a matter of law to those employing Syrian workers, but everyone involved must have known that in practice this was irrelevant. In September 1994, *Al-Nahar* reported that 'Syrian workers will benefit from insurance [against work accidents] after the issue of legislation on work accidents'. The background to this was regulatory law 136 requiring employers to insure Syrian workers against accidents on site. This law had gone to cabinet in 1983 and been quietly dropped. It appears that regulation 4905 of 22 April 1994 now attempted to put certain aspects of the law into force. Employers were threatening not to pay and in practice it seems that their opposition and a lack of political will meant the law was rarely enforced in practice.<sup>46</sup> In October 1994, the long-promised regulation of the labour market appeared with the signing of a 'Joint Labour Agreement between Lebanon and Syria'. The agreement stipulated that Syrian workers would benefit from Lebanese labour law, but not from social insurance, and end of service compensation would remain at the behest of the employer.<sup>47</sup> *Al-Diyar* did publish a question posed to the General Secretary of the Labour Ministry by a news agency that was critical of the agreement: 'The statistics show that there are a large number of Syrian workers working in Lebanon, while there are very few Lebanese working in Syria. Does this mean that the Agreement benefits Syria alone?' The answer: 'The Agreements are not normally tied to numbers and figures, but to the public interest of the contracting parties. And the spirit animating this agreement is not one assessing profit and loss [[. . .]] but is intended to organize solid and beneficial labour relations between two brotherly countries tied together

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43 The Minister went on 'There is no problem of unemployment in Lebanon as regards the working class . . . . Unemployment is based among graduates who cannot find positions . . . . These are those who pose a problem'. According to the Minister, wrote Scarlet Haddad, 'the number of Syrian workers in Lebanon does not exceed 50,000'.

44 *Al-Liwa*, 30 June 1994.

45 *Al-Safir*, 21 July 1994.

46 *Al-Nahar*, 24 September 1994. In October an agreement was signed with the UN to undertake a survey of the Lebanese labour market over two years at a cost of \$500,000. It was said to be aimed at discovering the needs of the labour market with a view to protecting Lebanese labour. *Al-Nahar*, 7 October 1994.

47 *Al-Safir*, 27 October 1994.

unshakeably by history, geography and excellent relations'.<sup>48</sup> The more pro-Syrian *Al-Safir* did not report this critical question, although it did report the answer.

After several years of allusion and evasion, open criticism of Syrian workers finally appeared in the Arabic press in the summer of 1995. Michel Murqus dropped a bombshell in *Al-Nahar* in July. The headline began: '1,435,991 Syrians remain in Lebanon since 1993, and Lebanese emigration is at 150,284'. No-one had previously seen authoritative reports of figures for Syrian workers this high. Only in June 1994 the official figure had been 50,000. Murqus derived his new statistic, not from the more or less irrelevant statistics on work permits, but by subtracting the number of monthly border exits by Syrians from the number of their monthly entries recorded by Lebanese General Security, a source not easily dismissed. This method gave a monthly balance of Syrians remaining in the country, which when added up, gave an overall tally, supposedly, of numbers of Syrians who stayed. Murqus showed that the General Security figures showed increasing numbers of Syrians entering each month—as many as 156,511 per month in 1995, for example, and increasing numbers staying each month—as many as 71,074 per month in 1995. His figures showed that more and more Syrians were staying each month during 1993-95. If the Lebanese population was about 3 million, wrote Murqus, then 'One Syrian lives in Lebanon for every two Lebanese'. For political reasons, most likely, Murqus' article was terse and without emotive language, but the figures, in a sense, spoke for themselves to the readership. Meanwhile, Murqus emphasised, Lebanese emigration, a perennial fear, especially among Christian Lebanese, was increasing, and had already reached a total of 150,684 non-returnees since January 1993. This total could be added to the 900,000 Lebanese who had emigrated during the civil war. This all made up an exchange of 'Lebanese labour power for foreign labour power'. Murqus here linked in-migration to out-migration, in the manner of the 1990 article in *Al-Liwa* considered above, but here his claims were shorn of rhetoric, and firmly connected to Syrian workers. He also brought an argument elaborated about foreign labour since the mid-1980s directly to bear on the Syrians—that their remittances, which he claimed exceeded even the level of remittances sent to Lebanon by Lebanese working abroad, damaged the balance of payments. Murqus did not make much of the question of currency, or even of labour competition, arguing that there were areas in which Lebanese labour power was weak, and thus Syrian workers participated legitimately in the economy. But, under cover of such judicious balance, perhaps, he publicized two hitherto little heard economic arguments. First, that the presence of all this untaxed labour was a loss to the Treasury, and more importantly, that because Syrians did not consume as much as Lebanese, and that they sent the very substantial sum of \$1 billion per annum back to Syria, this had a major dampening effect on commerce in Lebanon.<sup>49</sup>

Murqus' economic arguments were developed and publicized in the press over the following two years, as those worrying over the Syrian presence made their views known in the public sphere. Take an important article by Muhammad Zabib, for example, published in *Al-Usbu'a al-'Arabi* in August 1996. The headline was 'Invasion of foreign labour in Lebanon'; the subtitles are 'Dark danger

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48 *Al-Diyar*, 3 November 1994.

49 *Al-Nahar*, 24 July 1995. Articles which did not specifically name Syrian workers, but signified their presence under the rubric 'foreign labour', used far more emotive language. For example, a headline in *Al-Usbu'a al-'Arabi* ran: 'Lebanon is drowning in foreign workers and regulatory measures await implementation'. While job opportunities for Lebanese were restricted, the article claimed, 'these opportunities are offered to thousands of foreign subjects' numbers of which have undergone 'a remarkable increase in the last four years'. Such an 'invasion' meant a pressing need for regulation to protect nationals. Beyond the question of competition, foreign labour also meant a drain on hard currency, was negative for consumption, and because it was untaxed meant both unfairness to Lebanese who were taxed, as well as a loss to the treasury. The article sought investigation, regulation and protection by the Ministry of Labour. *Al-Usbu'a al-'Arabi*, 14 August, 1995. Michel Murqus continued to press his case in other articles, affirming that 'The Lebanese treat the issue of non-Lebanese labour with great fear and timidity, even while this issue plays a major role in the Lebanese economic problem, because of the linkage to the question of Syrian labour'. He maintained that by early 1998 the General Security figures showed that 2.3 million Syrian citizens remain in Lebanon, and given that there was probably a margin of error on exit of about 40 per cent, this meant that the true number was probably about 1.4 million. *Al-Nahar*, 3 January 1998.

threatens political and social explosion' and 'Number of foreign workers reaches about half the Lebanese population'. Foreign labour, Zabib argued, impacts negatively on economic development because of remittances, losses to the Treasury, and weak Syrian consumption patterns. First, \$1.2 billion per annum was being sent abroad in remittances. This was a significant 14 per cent of total Lebanese domestic production, valued at \$8.5 billion. There was also a loss to the Treasury, of possibly \$180 million per annum, on the basis that 15 per cent of remittances would have become revenue in taxes on fees for permits and taxes if workers were all legal and properly regulated. This \$180 million would cover 14 per cent of the Lebanese external debt, estimated at about \$1.3 billion, and amounted to about 22 per cent of customs duties (at \$815 million per annum). Further, Syrian workers' spending barely increased consumer demand in the way necessary to reverse spreading economic inactivity. Workers do not benefit the all-important real estate market because they sleep under bridges, on building sites and in overcrowded rooms. Most, Zabib went on, do not buy clothes or food in Lebanon, but bring their own provisions from Syria on the weekend, a trip taken on Syrian transport. Hence, in return for wages paid, Lebanon benefits little from Syrian consumption. Further, activity in the key construction sector has only given jobs to foreigners. Hence the social benefit to Lebanon of an important part of reconstruction is lost. The 'decision-makers' who try to justify the situation are wrong, he argues, to insist that the Lebanese are lazy or culturally or socially incapable of doing strenuous work. Their idea that the presence of foreign labour is a sign that Lebanon is more prosperous than its neighbours should also be questioned. Instead the emergence of an economy strong in finance but with no industrial base and a heavy reliance on foreign labour meant a regression 'towards the level of backward countries'.<sup>50</sup>

Zabib's article also serves as a good example of how foreign labour in general and Syrian workers in particular were linked to an intensifying social crisis, especially in regards to unemployment and depressed wages. The competition of around 700,000 Syrian incomers on the Lebanese workforce of 1.2 million puts significant downward pressure on wages and increases unemployment and emigration, it was said. Workers come from countries with relatively low living costs whereas in Lebanon the absolute poverty line is over \$600 per month for a family of five to cover basic needs. Yet, even the best paid of most foreign workers are only paid around 35 per cent of this sum, and enjoy no social benefits, the lack of which for Lebanese is decisive in making even the lowest paid unable to compete. Contrary to the common idea, not all Lebanese job-seekers are college graduates or skilled workers: there are Lebanese cleaners in municipalities forbidding foreign labour, and whereas Beirut cleaning is done mostly by Syrians, Lebanese cleaners exist in Saida, Sur, Nabatieh, Junieh, Tarabulus, Ba'albek and other towns. Without unemployment compensation, job loss is a serious problem. When several family members are forced to work because of poverty, or take several jobs, this increases the demand for work, which is not provided because jobs are taken by foreigners. The spread of poverty increases participation in the informal economy or hidden unemployment, especially in the public sector. Under these conditions, there was 'a continuing rise in emigration', which had now reached 1,050,000 since the war's beginning.<sup>51</sup>

In addition to economic and social problems, foreign and Syrian workers started to be linked to security and legal difficulties. In August 1995, for example, an article in *Al-Nahar* drew attention to pressing security and legal problems attendant on the massive presence of foreign labour. The first part of the headline used the now familiar imagery of a country drowning in foreigners: 'Lebanon nearly drowning under waves of infiltrators'. But the use of the word 'infiltrators' was new, and was intended

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50 *Al-Usbu'a Al-'Arabi*, 14 August 1995. The article, which is more nuanced than the headline might suggest, repeats the possibility that there were about 1.2 million Syrian workers in Lebanon (out of a total of about 1.5 million foreign workers in the country), which meant that Syrians alone comprised about a third of the population. Further on, however, the author, Muhammad Zabib, suggests that a more realistic figure for Syrian workers is about 700,000, although the basis for this number is not explained.

51 In 1990, the line of causation was felt to run the other way. Out-migration during the war, it was said, had created gaps filled by in-migration. Now it was being asserted that in-migration was driving Lebanese to emigrate.

to indicate that this ‘wave of humanity pouring into Lebanese territory across the borders’ is ‘one of the greatest security and judicial threats currently faced by Lebanon’. But security measures have been inadequate, and ‘the entire government apparatus is incapable of describing the disease or finding a cure’. Tens of thousands have been arrested according to the relevant laws for illegal entry and the use of forged passports, permits and identities, all over the country: in the north, the south, the Biqa‘a, in houses, workshops, hotels, gardens, restaurants, hospitals, night clubs, petrol stations and drug-dens. But General Security is operating beyond capacity, the prisons are desperately overcrowded, and the funds for expelling those who have served their sentences and paid their fines are simply not there. Further, those expelled to Syria soon return. Negotiations with Syria on this point have not yet born fruit. Tens of thousands of mafia-organized Egyptians, investigation has revealed, enter illegally through the border with Syria. A conference with Lebanon’s neighbours is required to put a stop to this problem, whereby about 2 million foreigners live in Lebanon at a yearly cost of around \$2 billion. Overall, the article attempted to demonstrate that a flood of foreign labour was threatening the rule of law in Lebanon. That Syrian workers were very much a part of this is never directly specified in the article, which takes pains to mention South Asian countries, but these were the omissions of the politically astute. It was commonly assumed that a very significant proportion of those 2 million foreigners were Syrians.<sup>52</sup>

Finally, commentators became bolder in linking these ramifying problems to policy-making and Syrian control on the one hand, and in making policy recommendations on the other. Zabib dared to write that the whole issue was outside the proper ‘frame of discussion and research in view of its multiple connections with the unbalanced relationship between the ruling political class and Syria’, a relationship which was not considered in regard to this issue ‘suited to the national interest’, in that Lebanon received things that it did not demand. The implication being that Syria was imposing its labour power on Lebanon. Indeed, while most countries are tightening up on in-migration, Zabib argued, Lebanon continues to open her doors to foreign labour ‘without organization or studies’. Reform should involve clearer regulations; fines for illegal entry; compulsory work permits; serious fines properly enforced for employers of illegal workers; enforcement of laws preventing foreign employment in various professions and specialities; social insurance for foreign workers covered by employers (a measure not just ‘humanitarian’, but aimed at increasing foreign workers’ price to make them less competitive); and, finally, taxation on foreign workers’ income.<sup>53</sup>

## The Battle Joined

Opening salvoes such as these broke the silence on Syrian labour, popularized exaggerated figures, started to build up authoritative discursive links between such labour and political, economic and social problems, and challenged, more or less directly, the Syrian-based settlement. These early raids

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52 *Al-Nahar*, 19 August, 1995. Zabib makes brief reference to predominantly Christian fears over possible changes in the sectarian balance, especially in the light of the Naturalization Law which had included ‘a large number’ of foreign workers, who as Lebanese citizens might now vote in elections. *Al-Ushbu‘a Al-‘Arabi*, 14 August 1995.

53 *Al-Ushbu‘a Al-‘Arabi*, 14 August 1995. Much of this important article was reprinted in *Al-Watan Al-‘Arabi*, 3 January 1997, under the headline ‘Foreign labour in Lebanon one and a half million in the absence of regulation’. The subtitle: ‘More than a million Lebanese have emigrated since the start of the war.’ The authorities issued various statements in defence of the situation. ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam, for example, a representative of Syrian President Hafez al-Asad, claimed in an interview in November 1995, for example, that ‘Labour going to Lebanon is damaging to the Syrian economy, and creates shortages and problems. Naturally it is not we who push this labour to go to Lebanon. Our Lebanese friends are the ones who open the way, because Lebanon was built on the basis of Syrian labour. Before the war, agriculture, and industry, and construction in Lebanon were all established on the basis of Syrian labour. And we’ve talked much with different parties in Lebanon: Why do the Lebanese not work when non-Lebanese do? And why doesn’t the Lebanese worker work in construction and road-building and agriculture? Of course many say that Lebanese do not work in these areas’. Khaddam also denied that Syrian workers were cheaper than Lebanese workers. Various official statements such as these characterized the response of the authorities during the early stages of the public controversy. Khaddam cited in *Al-Nahar*, 3 January 1998. Michel Murqus, ‘Foreign Workers Remit \$4.2 Billion yearly abroad’.

into the 'redoubts and trenches' of civil society, paved the way for, and were backed up by a number of panels, studies and lectures on Syrian labour which took place in the latter half of 1996 and into 1997, by which time the issue was very far from being discussed only in coded language, in hushed tones or behind closed doors.<sup>54</sup> The authority and recognition of the oppositional discourse was given a further boost in August 1997 when the Maronite Patriarch Cardinal Mar Nasrallah Butros Sfeir stepped into the fray, speaking of the abnormal situation in Lebanon, and endorsing the figure of 1.2 million Syrian workers, citing their competition with Lebanese workers as one of the 'basic problems' facing the country.<sup>55</sup> Until 1997, however, there was little systematic defense of Syrian labour in the press, only scattered statements by the Labour Minister, representatives of Hafez al-Asad and other officials.<sup>56</sup> From about 1997, however, those who did not believe that Syrian labour was such a threat, those who supported or were willing to live with the Syrian presence, or those hostile to the Christian isolationists entered the debate, and a major controversy over numbers, society, and above all the economy developed. Debates were only intensified in 2000 following the Israeli withdrawal from the occupied South in May, which reduced the rationale for the Syrian security presence in Lebanon, and the death of Syrian president Hafez al-Asad in June. Both dramatic events were grasped as political opportunities by those opposed to Syrian control. After 2000, words became actions as demonstrations were organized, 'Aunists engaged in various high-profile campaigns, such as selling 'Lebanese' produce on the streets, the youth of certain city quarters prevented Syrians from entering in the wake of crimes allegedly carried out by Syrian workers, and shadowy groups carried out attacks on Syrians. Syrians themselves joined protests and occasionally fought back.

### *Debating Numbers*

The first major attempt to rebutt Michel Murqus' figures for the numbers of Syrians in Lebanon came in the shape of a study published in January 1998 undertaken by demographer Roger Sawaya on behalf of the Syrian-Lebanese High Council.<sup>57</sup> Sawaya claimed that there were no more than 253,000

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54 For example 'Abdallah Rizq of Saint Joseph University gave a lecture on Syrian workers at a panel on the issue in December 1996. *Al-Siyasa*, which reported on the lecture, ran the headline: 'Syrian labour in Lebanon has a negative effect on wages and unemployment'. *Al-Siyasa*, 17 December 1996. In fact, the lecture was academic, hedged, and non-polemical. 'Abdallah Rizq did build on the idea that much of the Lebanese labour force was in fact in competition with semi- and unskilled Syrian labour by arguing that 46.1 per cent of Lebanese workers had either no education or only a primary education, and thus were in competition with Syrians. Oweijane Khoury began a PhD on the topic under Bassam Hashim at the Lebanese University around this time.

55 *Al-Nahar*, 4 August 1997. Of the other four key problems cited by Sfeir—the Israeli occupation, the Palestinian presence, the existence of 40,000 Syrian troops crushing democracy, and emigration—the latter two were also bound up with the issue of Syrian labour, ratcheting up the political sensitivity of the issue.

56 In July 1997, for example, Nasri Khoury, the General Secretary of the Syrian-Lebanese High Council responsible for cooperation and coordination with Syria, shot back in defense of existing policies. First, he claimed, the media had seriously inflated the figures on Syrian workers: 'we have studies showing that the number of Syrian workers in Lebanon varies according to the season and does not exceed an absolute maximum of 300,000'. Moreover, 'the number of other Asian and Arab workers is greater in number than that of the Syrian workers present in Lebanon, and we don't hear any word about these workers'. Perhaps behind these exaggerations, he suggested, are 'political goals and intentions'. Second, it was known, he argued, that the 'Lebanese labour market requires this labour power'. Third, there is a joint Lebanese and Syrian interest in putting this labour power in an organized framework, a task being discharged by the Joint Committee established in the Labour Agreement of October 1994, and due to result in an agreement to regulate work and workers as soon as possible. To this end, studies have already been undertaken. Fourth, popular movement between the two countries is desirable in view of history and shared identity, while market integration between Syria and Lebanon aims to build up an Arab economic bloc which can face up to the hegemonic economic and political projects led by the Turkish-Israeli alliance. *Al-Sharq*, 1 July 1997. Interestingly, official responses played a role in authorizing and drawing out explicit references to Syrian, as opposed to just foreign labour, as when 'pro-Lebanese' mentioned fears associated with foreign labour, officials replied that an agreement with Syria would solve the problem, implicitly acknowledging that 'foreign labour' actually meant 'Syrian labour'.

57 Appeared on 3 January 1998 according to Michel Murqus in *Al-Nahar*, 2 July 1998 '*al-ihitimam bi-al-'ummala al-suriyya*'

Syrian workers in Lebanon. He argued that Murqus' General Security figures only counted the number of entries and exits, but not the number of people. However, the same individual could enter and exit 12 times a year, with an obviously inflationary effect on the gross figures. Further, exits were undercounted as many Syrians did not hand in their temporary entry cards on departure. This enabled them to escape re-paying the exit fee from Syria—recently raised, supposedly, from 50 cents to \$4—when they next returned to Lebanon, because they could maintain the previous exit stamp from Syria and entry card to Lebanon with corresponding dates. This practice dated back to 1970, it was said, when new legislation required a work permit on re-entry to Lebanon, leading Syrian workers not to register their exit in order to avoid having to get a new permit on each entry. Hence the statistical anomaly of apparently rising numbers of migrants between 1969 and 1970 just when construction activity was slowing down. Moreover, Sawaya argued that not all Syrian entrants were workers. Cross-border movement of tourists, residents, visitors and students had increased because of the special relations between the two countries. A Lebanese tourist ministry report noted 254,000 Syrian tourists in 1996, when 32,436 Syrians were permanently resident in Lebanon according to the Ministry of Social Affairs. All these persons would have inflated the figures for entry and exit.<sup>58</sup>

Mikhail 'Awwad, who began with an attack on the the journalism of *Al-Nahar* itself,<sup>59</sup> pressed home similar points in direct debate with Murqus. He argued that the statistics based on recorded entries and exits were deceptive in the extreme. Their imprecision is admitted by Murqus himself when he points out they change year-on-year depending on visa regulations. And even after recent regulation, they do not catch 100 per cent of cross-border movement, let alone 60 per cent as transport workers and General Security personnel well know. Many departure cards are undoubtedly lost, and departure by sea or air can also confound the exit statistics. Neither science nor logic can allow the astonishing use of figures by an expert in journalism, economy and society, which are inaccurate by about 40 per cent and hundreds of thousands of persons, to draw dangerous conclusions. On Murqus' sectoral figures, 'Awwad continued, the notion that there are 300,000 Syrians in construction is an unreasonable exaggeration, as construction is in sharp recession, down by 70 per cent, and contracted sharply between 1994-95. Nor is there an objective basis for the figure of 250,000 seasonal Syrian workers working in agriculture, a sector which only employed 120,000 at its height, and in recession since the war, and currently employing fewer than 60,000, most on family farms. And where are the public projects which Murqus claims are employing 150,000 Syrians? The bridges, the motorways, and the infrastructure are practically finished, and are not particularly labour intensive in any case. As for the 35,000 Syrians supposedly working in assorted services—as concierges, and in tourism and petrol stations—this is a gross exaggeration: there are only 25,000 buildings in greater Beirut, only 40 per cent of which require concierges. The tourist sector is in crisis, and Syrian workers do not compete in this field with Lebanese expertise, which in fact has been rebuilding Syria's tourist sector. As for the municipalities, Beirut municipality, by far the largest, only has 8,000 employees in total.<sup>60</sup> 'Awwad later argued that Syrian workers probably numbered between 200-400,000, according to economist Kamal Hamdan's study.<sup>61</sup>

In response, Murqus claimed that commentators were focusing too much on the numbers rather than the problem itself. Nonetheless, he took on Roger Sawaya's study, pointing out that in spite of Sawaya's stress on demography and science, he did not seem to grasp that if there were 12 entries into

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58 A report on the study appeared in *Al-Hayat*, 26 June 1998. Sawaya maintained that Syrians did not take Lebanese jobs, and that the Syrian presence had numerous positive features, such as an increase in construction because of the cheapness of Syrian labour.

59 'There is no doubt that *Al-Nahar*, on the basis of its position, journalistic philosophy and goals, has taken an oppositional stance to the presence of Syria in Lebanon in all its forms: the political and military guarantees, the special relations, and the agreements. And for some time has persisted in inciting the idea of incompatibility, making a mountain out of a molehill.' *Al-Diyar*, 26 January 1998.

60 *Al-Diyar*, 26 January 1998.

61 *Al-Diyar*, 2 February, 1998.

Lebanon without any mention of an exit, then this certainly indicated that 12 persons had entered Lebanon, just as if there were 12 entries and 12 exits, then this would indicate that none was left in Lebanon. If there were 12 entries and 11 exits, then one Syrian would remain in Lebanon. It was not possible for one individual to enter Lebanon 12 times and leave 10 times. In other words, it was not relevant whether exits and entries referred to one individual going backwards and forwards, or to many individuals.<sup>62</sup> Bassam al-Hashim, a professor at the Lebanese University, and his doctoral student, Nada Oweijane Khoury, continued the charge on the basis of the General Security figures in 2000 and later.<sup>63</sup> These interventions attracted another round of rebuttals, notably Ali Atassi's articles in *Al-Hayat*.<sup>64</sup> The debate on numbers showed little sign of resolution or diminution as the 2000s wore on, with public opinion at large just as divided as the press.

### ***Economy***

At the heart of the debate, however, were economic questions.<sup>65</sup> One of the most important exchanges illustrating many of the arguments on either side took place during 1997 and 1998 between Michel Murqus and Mikhail 'Awwad.

'Awwad began with the argument that the movement of labour power in the region was part and parcel of a positive process of globalization. 'While it is said', he wrote, 'that there are tens of thousands of Syrians in Lebanon [. . .] there are more than 600 thousand Egyptian workers in Syria [. . .] and 1.5 million Sudanese in Egypt'. Lebanon, too, has long exported and received labour power and benefited from forms of regional integration: 'from ancient times, Lebanon is considered the greatest country in the world for emigration and the export of labour power in proportion to the number of its population'. In the 1950s, the Lebanese economy was built on the shoulders of the Arabs: Syrian capitalists fleeing nationalisation, oil money searching for financial services, and summer tourists. Further, as many as 400,000 Syrians worked in Lebanon under proper regulations until 1975.<sup>66</sup> The idea was to emphasize long-established Lebanese interdependencies and ties to the region, and linked the enlarged Syrian presence to modern forms of globalization.

A second key idea was that Syrian labour appeared in Lebanon not for political reasons but because of the division of labour, and performed a much-needed function in the Lebanese economy. 'Awwad argued that Lebanese war-time emigration left a gap in the labour force which Syrians filled. He

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62 Al-Nahar, 2 July 1998 'al-ihitam bi-al-'ummala al-suriyya'.

63 Nada Oweijane Khoury, 'L'Immigration au Liban: Aspects socio-economiques et incidences identitaires'. Doctoral Thesis, Rabieh-Lebanon / Paris-France, 2001, Université Libanaise: Institut des Sciences Sociales, Section II & Université René Descartes, Paris V. Bassam al-Hashim, *Al-Itifaqat al-Ijtima'iyya* etc in *Al-'Alaqat al-Lubaniyya al-Suriyya* (Antalya: *Al-Haraka Al-Thaqafiyya*, 2000) pp. 110-148.

64 Muhammad Ali al-Atassi, 'Adad al-'Ummal al-Suriyyin fi Luban' in *Al-Hayat*, 18 April, 2001.

65 Geostrategic questions and issues of Arabism and brotherhood made their appearance in the debate. For example, in July 1997, Nasri Khoury, the General Secretary of the High Council responsible for cooperation and coordination with Syria, argued that popular movement between the two countries is desirable in view of history and shared identity, while market integration between Syria and Lebanon aims to build up an Arab economic bloc which can face up to the hegemonic economic and political projects led by the Turkish-Israeli alliance. *Al-Sharq*, 1 July 1997. However, commentators rarely went into questions of Arabism and brotherhood in any detail, and geostrategic issues appeared in an even less substantive fashion in the discourse. The reason, arguably, for the relative absence of such issues is that the idea of an Arab bloc opposed to Israel and the United States could never be hegemonic in a Lebanon including a significant Western-oriented, wealthy Christian population. Economic categories were far more likely to articulate the interests of diverse groups.

66 *Al-Diyar*, 26 January 1998. 'Awwad wrote elsewhere in the same vein that eight million persons of Lebanese origin are scattered in the four corners of the globe—their remittances 'make up one of the most important elements in the stability of the Lira and the balance of trade. Other Arab countries send huge numbers abroad. 'Globalization is the easy and speedy movement of capital, goods, and labour between countries, and we are in the age of globalization'. *Al-Diyar*, 2 February, 1998.

maintained that the war and militia culture had caused Lebanese workers to lose their work ethic and become lazy, expensive, and ineffective. The war had exacerbated individualism, ‘boss mentality’, intolerance and neglectfulness, and in any case the Lebanese refused to take exhausting or shameful work, preferring consumption over production. The major growth sectors after the war, contracting and construction, had always been done with foreign labour in Lebanon. The political establishment, moreover, does not consider itself responsible for allocating investment or protecting labour power, but is committed to market-based organization based on profit. This encouraged employers, already suffering from wartime crisis, to abandon any social obligation to protect or train its labour force. In fact, Syrian labour has been a golden opportunity for Lebanese employers and postwar reconstruction. Legal and other costs are minimal, and it is distinguished by high productivity, as well as professional and academic skills. A great number of specialists have graduated from Syrian schools and institutes, and exist in a public sector experienced in high-quality infrastructural projects. These skilled masters and workers have been just what the Lebanese market seeks.<sup>67</sup>

Third, not only did the division of labour and economic need explain the Syrian presence in Lebanon, but the truth was, according to ‘Awwad, that Syrian labour drove the Lebanese economy, and was in no sense a drain on hard currency or economic activity: first, unlike Egyptian or Asian labour, Syrian labour was not costly in terms of insurance, correspondence, communications and transport. Moreover, unlike other foreign labour, Syrians are not contracted immediately, and so do not start sending hard currency home straightaway, but spend what they have or acquire debt which is later paid off. And, many Syrians do not simply send the hard currency home, but buy consumer and other goods in Lebanon which stimulates the economy. Finally, Syrian savings are ultimately re-invested in significant quantities in Lebanese banks.<sup>68</sup>

Finally, the way forward, according to Mikhail Awwad, was to liberate Syrian labour in Lebanon from ‘reasons for suspicion’ and to ensure its development as a positive factor in the Lebanese economy. This required cooperation between Syria and Lebanon, organization and training of foreign labour to ensure commensurability with Lebanese interests and priorities; a complete national plan to enumerating Lebanese labour and solving its problems and answering to issues of competition at all levels; and, finally, a cooperative framework between the Syrian and Lebanese labour unions based on the existing fraternity agreement.<sup>69</sup>

Michel Murqus’ counter-arguments on taxation, consumption, labour competition, and above all remittances aimed to rebut the idea that Syrians in Lebanon benefited the economy by filling a much-needed position in the division of labour. First, he argued that Syrians were a fiscal burden: the Treasury still subsidized services like electricity, which foreign labour consumed, but did not pay for; the Social Fund lost out because foreigners were not registered therein; and foreigners who took the place of Lebanese who could otherwise have obtained social insurance placed a burden on the Health Ministry, which now had to pick up the tab for sick Lebanese. Second, Murqus added a new twist to the consumption argument: it was not just that foreigners spent less in Lebanon, but that foreign competition reduced Lebanese wages which accounted for a large proportion of the recent weakening

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67 *Al-Diyar*, 26 January 1998. In another article, ‘Awwad emphasized a long-standing structural dependence of the Lebanese economy on cheap foreign labour. ‘And the condition in which the labour-commodity lives in Lebanon is as a result of this economy and its nature, and the issue of the intense presence of unskilled foreign labour is not a result of the ‘special relations’ between Syria and Lebanon, but is a characteristic accompanying the modern economic history of Lebanon. Before the war there were tens of thousands of Syrian workers in Lebanon, and during the war, when the Syrians left, its place was taken by Syrians, Indians, Kurds and Asians, and Lebanon was unable to secure the needs of the labour market with national labour.’ *Al-Diyar*, 2 February, 1998.

68 *Al-Diyar*, 26 January 1998. He added in a second article that Syrian labour was less costly than Asian labour, more productive, and possesses appropriate skills for construction, which is at the heart of reconstruction. Syrian labour is cheap to hire and fire, unlike other foreign labour, which requires end of service compensation (in accordance with the work contract) and the costs of a ticket home. *Al-Diyar*, 2 February, 1998.

69 *Al-Diyar*, 17 September 1997.



of consumer demand. Third, he emphasized that labour competition was very real, citing a study showing that since 1991 Syrians (who already work in construction and agriculture), had entered further sectors, such as industry, transport, and ambulant selling, and were now inevitably spreading into hotels, restaurants, hospitals, fuel distribution, retail, the public sector, bus stations etc..<sup>70</sup> Syrians were penetrating multiple fields, especially competing with young skilled Lebanese, as Lebanese employers sought to increase profits, and as the market suffered from inadequate regulation.

Finally, and most importantly, Murqus publicized an even higher figure for remittances abroad, citing a study arguing that about 600,000 foreign workers were remitting at least \$3.2 billion abroad. In fact, wrote Murqus, there were more Syrians, and earning more than this study assumed, to give a figure of \$4.2 billion for remittances, an enormous sum which Lebanon could not bear and which adversely affected the balance of payments. The remittances drain on Lebanon was the key problem for the Lebanese economy, because unlike, say, Lebanese labour in the Gulf in the 1950s and 1960s, which was paid for by an oil surplus, foreign labour in Lebanon was paid for by debts which the Lebanese would be left to pay off.

As for policy, Murqus maintained that, however unlikely, something had to be done, citing, ingeniously enough, the fact that Syrian migration was damaging not only to the Lebanese, but also to the Syrian economy, as Khaddam had affirmed. Foreign labour, he argued, should be retained in unskilled areas of agriculture and construction, but reduced overall by a half, empty places being filled by unemployed and sacked public sector workers. Employers aiming to escape income tax, social insurance, end of service compensation, and social contributions (transport, schooling etc.) by employing foreign labour should be taxed at \$1000 per worker, and the revenue transferred to the Housing Bank.<sup>71</sup>

‘Awwad’s response was to charge Murqus with inconsistency and ideology, and to attempt to rebut his points on consumption, labour competition and remittances. First, he charged Murqus and his supporters in *Al-Nahar* with not living up to their own economic philosophy. ‘The Lebanese economy is based on the free-market, and *Al-Nahar* is the first and greatest defender of this. The free-market means freedom to exchange goods and work, and freedom to remit and to leave the market to decide prices and values of commodities, and labour power is a commodity which submits entirely to the laws of the market, just as any other commodity.’ Why, ‘Awwad was asking, did Murqus make an exception to his philosophy on this point only?

Second, on the question of consumption, he argued that Syrian workers spend more than 50 per cent of their earnings in the Lebanese market—in entertainment and travel. Syrian workers also enhance market relations between Syria and Lebanon, especially through stimulating the Syrian economy, partly by transferring Lebanese consumption habits to Syria. They transfer money from Syria to Lebanon, opening bank accounts, unlike Asian labour. Finally, their presence extends tourism and shopping trips to Lebanon, as a visit to the border on a Thursday or Friday attests.

Third, on the issue of labour competition, ‘Awwad revives a point tacitly accepted before the civil war, which was that there were economic benefits to labour competition which outweighed the claims of labour. He cites labour market analyst Najib ‘Isa’s point that although foreign labour exerts a downward pressure on Lebanese wages, this negative development had to be balanced against the stimulating effect on the economy of having cheap labour, which creates jobs downstream. If foreign labour was not present at all, and if one had to find 500-700,000 jobs, not from foreign labourers, but from Lebanese, this would exert a major upward pressure on wages, and costs of production, completely paralysing some productive sectors. The real issue, then, was merely the question of how

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70 He herein directly took on the arguments of a representative of Syrian president Hafez al-Asad, ‘Abd al-Halim Khaddam, who claimed that the Lebanese did not want the jobs Syrians took.

71 *Al-Nahar*, 3 January 1998.

much foreign labour the Lebanese economy actually required, although it was certain that the Lebanese economy needed about 300,000 such workers.

Finally, as for the remittance figures, who would believe that Murqus' unexplained \$4.3 billion per annum is sent abroad, when the most optimistic estimates of Lebanese national production do not exceed \$10 billion? 'Who would believe that half the national income was going to Syrian workers?' Murqus overestimates wages paid to Syrians, the proportion that they send home, as well as days worked, which are more like 265 per annum than 365. Assuming Murqus' figures, then 150,000 workers in public projects would remit \$848,625 per annum ( $\$15.50 \times 365 \times 150,000$ ), which over 5 years would equal about \$4.24 billion for Syrian workers in this sector alone. Yet, the total spent on these projects over five years has not exceeded \$1.5 billion, so the workers could not possibly have made off with over \$4 billion. 'Awwad maintains that the only explanation for a professor making such basic errors in method and logic, and producing wildly unlikely exaggerations, was ideological distortion based on a political agenda: the intent to turn the issue of Syrian workers into one of the most important reasons for Lebanon's economic crisis in order to oppose Syria.'<sup>72</sup>

As for policy, the state should not only reduce the amount of foreign labour and put obstacles in its path, but also regulate it through informed study of the labour market, and state policy in education and elsewhere. A little more objectivity, and a good deal of work and pressure on the government to organize the labour market, 'Awwad concludes, will bring more positive results 'than trying to inflate perforated water-skins'.<sup>73</sup>

### **Transnationalism, Communitarianism, and Popular Agency**

As we have seen, before the civil war the presence of Syrian workers in Lebanon was barely debated. They were seen by many power-holders as a relatively trouble-free source of much needed cheap labour with roots across the border in Syria. Since the economic downturn of the 1980s and the Syrian-based post-war settlement, however, and as criticism became more and more politically possible over time, an acute controversy ranging over political, economic and social issues developed in Lebanon over the presence of Syrian migrant labour. At a time of an intensifying flow of capital, goods and persons across the Syrian-Lebanese border, then, and while political, legal and administrative coordination increased, the public discourse traveled in the opposite direction. Public opinion became polarized on nationalist lines. Instead of the development of a transnational discourse, which in various ways might have transcended the importance of the national, whether through ties of sectarian community, religion, Arab brotherhood, class, or human rights, and bound two nations together in some innovative way, it would appear that the category and terrain of the national was the leading figure in the debate. Appeals to historical ties, religion—Islam—and Arab brotherhood certainly existed. But these were far from new, and had a decidedly muted presence in the overall controversy, which was fought out on specific issues related to numbers, economy, society, and polity. Appeals to Arabism in this context were less about transnationalism, in any case, and more about regionalism: the consolidation of a regional economic and geopolitical bloc consisting of Syria and Lebanon in the face of Israel, Turkey and the United States.

Appeals to transnational sectarian solidarity in the public discourse were almost non-existent. The most important ascription was to Syrian nationals—not to Greek Orthodox, Roman Catholic, Kurd, Druze, or Sunni. Christian Lebanese did not look to their Christian Syrian counterparts, as far as I have seen. Of course some Christian commentators primarily harbored little-expressed fears about Muslim Syrians, because of the issue of potential naturalization and the sectarian balance, and coded 'Syrian' to mean 'Muslim Syrian'. But this did not hold across the board by any means. Largely behind closed

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72 *Al-Diyar*, 26 January 1998.

73 *Al-Diyar*, 2 February, 1998.

doors, other Christians feared Syrians as those who had imposed a post-war settlement in which Christians had lost, or as representatives of an authoritarian culture that would poison Lebanese freedoms, as criminals, or as backward and rural elements that would drag civilized Lebanon back into the Third World. The unifying thread of the isolationist discourse was opposition to Syrian control, and concerns over the Lebanese economy. These worries did not turn on the sectarian or religious affiliation of the Syrian worker, but on the fact that they were Syrian in the first place.

Superficially, one might think that the sympathy among the Lebanese middle-classes for the plight of their workforce exposed to cheap competition might have opened the door to genuine support for Lebanese workers and popular mobilization, and therefore had some positive impact on popular agency. Or, one might be led to believe that the Syrian military presence in Lebanon worked to support Syrian workers' rights in some significant or new way: certainly the Lebanese articulated the latter point as a fear over and over again. In fact, the regional political economy, the Syrian and Lebanese establishments, and the open borders, whose workings were only tangentially illuminated by the controversy over Syrian labour, worked to break up, isolate and weaken both Syrian and Lebanese workers' activism, organization, income, and rights. Lebanese concern over worker competition in Lebanon must be seen, not as genuine support for workers, but as a way to criticize Syria or to express other economic, social and cultural worries. Such concerns had not existed prior to the civil war, when it was felt that Lebanese workers should moderate their demands for sound macroeconomic reasons, and that a cheap and manipulable Syrian workforce was a good thing. Few organizational links were built to the Lebanese labour movement, which was, in any case, largely under Syrian control. There was no organized Lebanese attempt to employ Lebanese labour over Syrian, given that it would have hit profits. There was little time for the consideration of measures really helpful to Lebanese labour, such as Zabib's unusual suggestion that Syrian workers be given social insurance, which would make them far less competitive against their Lebanese counterparts. The reason Lebanese opinion found this notion obnoxious is because it sounded like giving Syrians rights, just when it was felt that it was the Lebanese to whom rights should be given. But this reflex response betrayed the superficiality of the thinking on the question of the conditions making Lebanese workers suffer. Conditions for Syrian workers, of course, were undermined by the Lebanese discourse, the hostility of which hobbled Syrians in their search for allies in the host society, access to social goods and social claims, or escape from their sweated status. Syrian political power, on the other hand, helped secure for Syrian workers access to the Lebanese labour market and physical security, but did nothing to advance their rights or organization, and in fact actively worked to maintain their disposable status in Lebanon.

Furthermore, the controversy was heavily structured by the underlying more or less tacit assumption that market forces should take precedence and that the poor majority should have little protection against market forces or those controlling capital. First, the status of the market and exchange as a ruling institution was so entrenched and authoritative that few questioned its legitimacy in distributing Syrians in the direction of Lebanon. Analysts debated what market forces should dictate, not the legitimacy of the market forces in social organization in the first place. Second, few directed their public complaints against Lebanese employers who, arguably, were as responsible as anyone for the presence of Syrians in Lebanon. Even less criticism was directed at the monopolies controlled by major Lebanese families in agriculture, for example, which kept costs of production high and therefore led farmers to seek cheap labour from abroad.<sup>74</sup> It was easier to criticize economically poor Syrian workers than to take on wealthy Lebanese. And where class and power issues were intertwined, it was easier to find weak scapegoats than to tackle the major decisions in the macroeconomic structuring of the Lebanese economy during reconstruction, decisions which contributed heavily to the ongoing economic and social crisis. These assumptions constituted more an attack on popular agency than any structure within which it could be supported.

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74 From conversations with Fawaz Trabulsi in 2004 and 2005.

Indeed, those engaged in the controversy did not differ as greatly as one might think on the actual terms of the labour regime. The ‘pro-Lebanese discourse’ did not seek to send the Syrians home *en masse*, as it recognized a need for cheap labour, and the pro-Syrian discourse also claimed to seek proper regulation of the workforce. If the pro-Lebanese discourse represented a kind of isolationist nationalism and the pro-Syrian discourse a kind of regionalism, both discourses still sought ‘trouble-free’ and exploitable labour. This point comes out most vividly in Mikhail Awwad’s ‘pro-Syrian’ argument that the regional economy requires Lebanon’s labour-power, whether Syrian, Lebanese or otherwise, to remain cheap, and Syrian competition performs this service. Once the idea that neither party to the controversy genuinely sought workers’ rights is understood, the supposed ‘transnationalism’ of the ‘pro-Syrian’ position is exposed as one based on the exploitation of regional labour. In this regard, it is the continuity of the discourse with the pre-civil war years, rather than any innovation, that should be emphasized.<sup>75</sup> If this was a transnational practice, then it was one based on the grinding exploitation of cheap labour supplies.

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that in the case of Lebanon/Syria, the public discourse about intensifying labour flows during the 1990s does not support the idea that new forms of transnational communitarian solidarity or popular agency were emerging alongside new migration patterns in the Levant. In place of communitarian solidarity, we have an isolationist, nationalist Lebanese discourse on the one side, and a ‘pro-Syrian’ defense of the economic benefits to the region’s economy of Syrian migration to Lebanon on the other. Neither position turned on, or asserted transnational communitarian solidarity, which was not at stake in any significant way in the public controversies I have reviewed. Most writers and readers of these discourses thought in terms of nationalist categories. Workers were seen primarily as Lebanese or Syrian, and their confessional affiliation was only of secondary or tertiary importance. A number of academics and journalists did assert anti-xenophobic and rights-based visions of transnational integration, but these remained marginal to the mainstream version of ‘transnationalism’, which was based on assumptions reaching back to the 1940s about the economic need for the trouble-free exploitation of cheap and manipulable labour.

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75 The thin skein of an alternative discourse did exist, though, among human rights advocates, leftists, and others, which emphasised labour protection and rights, and sought to downplay the importance of either regionalism or nationalism. In 1997, Ziyad Majed argued that ‘work conditions and relations violate [. . .] [foreign labour’s] human rights’ a fact which ‘often reflects the racism against coloured or poor foreigners which continues to characterize our society’. He noted that various groups in Lebanon were demanding that the Labour Code should cover foreign maids, and derided the excuse that such coverage would mean that ‘no coffee would be made before 8 am and no juice after 5 pm’. *Al-Nahar*, 2 December 1997.