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Aarsal and its Surrounding Villages A New Dawn

Conflict Analysis Report – March 2018



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This report was written by an independent researcher as part of a conflict analysis consultancy for the UNDP “Peace Building in Lebanon” Project to inform and support UNDP programming, as well as interventions from other partners in the frame of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). Through these reports, UNDP is aiming at providing quality analysis to LCRP Partners on the evolution of local dynamics, highlighting how local and structural issues have been impacted and interact with the consequences of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon. This report has been produced with the support of the Department for International Development (DFID).

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Acronyms

3RP	Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
CDR	Council for Development and Reconstruction
CIMIC	Civil Military Cooperation Unit
EDL	Electricite Du Liban
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GoL	Government of Lebanon
HCR	High Commission of Relief
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISF	Lebanese Internal Security Forces
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
ITS	Informal Tented Settlement
JAN	Jabhat Al Nusra
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
LHSP	Lebanon Host Communities Support Programme
MOIM	Ministry of Interior and Municipalities
MOSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
NGO	Non-Governmental Organizations
SDC	Social Development Centers
UKDFID	United Kingdom Department for International Development
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
UXO	Unexploded Ordnance
VBIED	Vehicle-Borne Improvised Explosive Device

Executive Summary

Context

Tensions between the people of Aarsal and its surrounding villages reached its peak in 2014 amid the increasing presence of extremist groups, namely the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and Jabhat al-Nusra (JAN), in Aarsal and its Jurds (Aarsal's mountainous outskirts). This presence, which was perceived by Aarsal's Shiite and Christian neighbors, as well as by some key officials in the country, to be an occupation of the village, is directly related to the war in Syria. For Sunni militants fighting against the Assad regime and Hizballah in Syria, the predominantly Sunni Aarsal constituted a safe haven for some of these fighters and a place where their families and support-base resided. However, their relationship with Aarsal worsened drastically in 2014 when both extremist groups reacted to an LAF arrest by "invading" the village and kidnapping both ISF and LAF personnel.¹ This has significantly altered the relationship between the Lebanese host community and Syrian refugees, especially those related to the militants. The incident shifted internal dynamics within the Aarsali community and led to higher discontent resulting from the performance of the former municipality which lost the municipal elections of May 2016.

Since 2016, Aarsal's newly elected municipal council made it a priority to restore relationships between the constituents. Some mayors described this phase as "opening a new page". In this research, we call it a "New Dawn" in the relationship, since it was also supported and consolidated through the recent 2017 LAF gains achieved through Operation Dawn of the Jurds. But until the moment when militants were expelled from the Jurds of Aarsal, the price the whole community has paid was very high on multiple levels including their livelihoods, municipal services provision, stability and security, as well as the overall relationship of Aarsal's citizens with the state.

The strain on services and the deterioration of social stability in Aarsal and its surrounding began even before the cordoning of Aarsal by the LAF that followed the 2014 incidents. A major influx of refugees brought tens of thousands of Syrians to Aarsal and its surrounding in the summer of 2013, as entire villages in Syria – especially Qusair and Yabroud in Qalamoun- fled into the Bekaa, where some resided in Aarsal. According to UNHCR's numbers of registered Syrian refugees, over 50,000 refugees resided in Aarsal and its surrounding villages. This is almost equal to the number of Lebanese living in these villages even though no official census represents accurately the number of residents. But all mayors, key informants, and focus group participants acknowledged that with the existing weak infrastructure facing twice the number of residents, the only way to keep the situation from collapsing would be through continuous international support and larger scale governmental interventions.

This report seeks to explain current intercommunal relations and grievances in Aarsal. It also aims at presenting the opportunities that both the community and the government have identified to support the area, and proposes a number of key considerations for the scale-up of international engagement to meet needs.

¹ Aarsal Conflict, Lebanon Support Civil Society Knowledge Centre:
<http://civilsociety-centre.org/timelines/27778>

Key Findings

Water and waste-water issues have been the most common across different localities and community groups. These include: Contamination of the Laboue spring as waste-water is dumped in its proximity, which led to a major conflict between the people of Aarsal and its neighboring villages; flooding streets from rainfall due to soil saturation; imposing changes in the terrain to accommodate ITSs in Aarsal. This soil saturation issue is placing an extra financial cost on the local host community, as households find themselves compelled to dislodge their seepage pits several times a year, while in the past, waste-water would be absorbed by the soil, and households needed to dislodge their seepage pits only every couple of years.

To reduce the tensions stemming from the increasing strain on both water and waste-water infrastructures, direct support should go to establishing networks, treatment plants, drainage canals, as well as to raising on best practices in water preservation and usage, among others. All interventions should be fully coordinated with local municipalities, relevant ministries, unions and, when needed, with the CDR.

Solid waste management constituted a second major issue due to health hazards resulting from waste being dumped and burnt in the open air. The longer waste is left on the streets before collection, the higher the health risks. It is important therefore to support the implementation of the sorting and recycling facilities along with the environmental redesigning of the dumpster. This should go in parallel with enhancing the capacities of municipalities in collecting and managing solid waste through the provision of additional bins, trucks, systems, and needless to say, raising the residents' awareness in terms of sorting at the source. For the latter, NGOs and the private sector could play a role in both in raising awareness and creating social enterprises concerning waste recycling and upcycling.

In terms of electricity, similar trends are recorded, as the deteriorating quality of service and higher needs have put a strain on the infrastructure maintenance. Therefore, supporting EDL by enhancing the infrastructure- including transformers and cables - and replacing weary equipment would help reduce the strain. Also, it is essential to support the municipality in its effort to organize the sector and manage the consumption in ITSs through alternative electricity sources or generators. Awareness raising can be achieved in partnership with INGOs and local NGOs to increase power conservation. Parallely, the private sector should be encouraged to invest in clean energy alternatives, especially solar power, to take some of the ITSs or neighborhoods off the grid and thereby decrease the pressure on the network. This would also constitute a sustainable intervention that would benefit the village in the long run.

The scarcity of sustainable and decent paying livelihoods was also identified as a major issue. In Aarsal, increasing competition over jobs and the direct impact of the conflict have negatively affected various sectors. For instance, all quarries in Aarsal had to stop their work during the clashes, resulting in a temporary lack of work opportunities. Taken in tandem with cases of equipment and heavy machinery sabotage, the clashes resulted in costly damages. In addition, the agricultural sector suffered. Most Aarsalis would previously make a living from growing fruit trees, especially cherries and apricots; a sector that has been hit hard due to the clashes between the militants and LAF, which also deprived farmers from a safe passage to their field. To be revived, this sector needs an immediate intervention or an action plan. Such intervention should focus on production as well as on increasing the yields

of local farmer. In addition, rehabilitation of orchards and agricultural infrastructure damaged by the conflict, including the rehabilitation of water harvesting infrastructure and irrigation canals is key. Other agricultural works including terracing, the replacement of dead trees, tree maintenance, rehabilitation of agricultural roads, reconstruction of agricultural rooms, and repair of water pumps should be pursued. This effort will need the provision of tools, equipment and technical support for land rehabilitation and stone fruit tree production. On a governance level, building the capacity of municipalities and local institutions to mobilize local communities for livelihood and economic recovery, as well as partners and resources, both national and international; supporting micro and small enterprises in agriculture, livestock, agro-food and handicraft production such as wool thread production, carpet weaving, and other byproducts of mining and quarrying such as ceramics, mosaics, and traditional tiles; enhancing market access and facilitating linkages with existing markets and value chains while building the capacity of local associations and cooperatives, through the provision of financial support and microfinance programs, among others.

When looking at **security**, it is essential to note the great improvements during the past year especially following Operation Dawn of the Jurds by the LAF that cleared Aarsal's surroundings from the presence of both ISIS and JAN. But that was not the only positive turn of events for Aarsal, since the municipal strategy adopted by the newly elected municipal council in 2016 also strengthened the overall feeling of security in the village. It also highlighted some local authorities' weaknesses in managing such a critical and sensitive portfolio. Therefore, it became very important to first support local security forces (municipal police) through training and capacity building to ensure their abiding by international human rights standards and help them adopt a social policing module that engages all residents and raises awareness and enhances preventative skills among families in protecting their children from violent extremism; secondly, support the municipality in preparing and equipping the police station expected to start operating as of Summer 2018; thirdly, support the demining action to make sure all Aarsal and surrounding villages have cleared their lands, while raising awareness among youth and all factions on how to deal with UXO if they ever encounter them. Currently, a mine risk education exercise on mines dangers commissioned by UNICEF and UNHCR is taking place in Aarsal that targets local authorities, public schools, civil society and farmers. A further effort is also needed to mediate between the LAF and land/property owners who wish to reclaim their estates, while supporting the LAF with needed barracks or prefabbed posts. Finally, increasing the engagement of LAF's Civil Military Cooperation Unit (CIMIC) in Aarsal to enhance the LAF's image and break the barriers between the latter and the population of Aarsal.

One last point addressed in this research relates to issues directly linked to social stability. Even though all the aforementioned topics can directly influence social stability, there are some other highly important points to consider. These include:

- Focusing on conflict sensitivity in all planned activities.
- Building on the current momentum to strengthen relationships between Aarsal and its surrounding. Although this relationship has been organically restored in few cases, especially at the municipal leadership level, for it to trickle down to the public, there needs to be a proper action plan with specific indicators and ongoing reinforcements.

- Promoting accountability and transparency is a contributing factor that reduces allegations of corruption, especially those where the municipality is at the epicenter of efforts.
- Encouraging civil society organizations from conflicting communities to engage in joint activities, which include supporting them in launching peace and reconciliation activities where they would be invited to innovate and use new methods in bridging the gaps between people.
- Education also constitutes one of the priorities; the strain and pressure on schools is one of the triggers of tension, resulting in thousands of Syrian refugee students on the streets, searching for jobs and competing aggressively with other Lebanese youth.

Introduction

This conflict analysis report is a part of a series of research studies commissioned by the “United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)” and funded by the United Kingdom Department for International Development (UKDFID) that aims at assessing the recent developments, atmospherics, and programming opportunities. Due to the importance given to Aarsal and its surroundings on the United Nations (UN) interagency agenda, it has been decided to dedicate the first report to this region.

Since the 2014 battles of Aarsal, when the militants from Jabhat Al Nusra (JAN) and the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS - also known as Daesh) entered the area, until August 2017, when the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) launched Operation Dawn of the Jurds², Aarsal has been somehow an isolated and certainly a red-zoned area for almost all international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and donors. Overall, few organizations from outside the town maintained certain types of activities there during these years. As a result, there has been a lack of information on the dynamics and changes that occurred in Aarsal, despite the major political, security, and socio-economic developments that this period has witnessed. Due to the absence of studies or research from the field, very little could be understood about the context there.

Since 2005, amid the vertical division of the Lebanese nation into two main political camps, 8th and 14th of March alliances, Aarsal, with a Sunni majority, has been positioned in confrontation with its mainly Shiite surrounding. Since then, the whole dynamics in the Baalbak – El Hermel governorate changed. The region witnessed an elevated sectarian and political strife, characterized by recurring security incidents and radicalization. It is believed that, with the various political and security milestones marked in Lebanon after 2005, the tension between Aarsal and its surrounding continued to escalate until reaching its peak with the turn of events in the Syria uprising, bringing with it a sectarian strife that fueled the Lebanese divisions and increased the animosity in the area to unprecedented levels.

After years of marginalization and neglect, the conflict in the border villages of Aarsal, Laboue, Al Qaa, Al Ayn, and Ras Baalbak among others, caused to put these villages under the spotlight, sparking the interest of Lebanese armed and security forces, the media, as well as international and local NGOs. Even before the refugee crisis brought hundreds of thousands of displaced into the Bekaa valley in 2013, the region has been already dealing with the repercussions of the Syrian uprising. Located a few kilometers away from the borders with Syria, this region has historically been affected by geopolitical changes and dynamics. The porous borders in the mountainous Anti-Lebanon have allowed smuggling activities in the past, with a shift of focus in recent years to arms and displaced families fleeing the raging war. This border crossing played a major role in influencing the events of the war in Syria by the direct engagement of Hizballah. Thousands of fighters crossed to Syria to fight alongside its regime, aiding it in reclaiming vast swathes of land, particularly those stretching alongside the borders with Lebanon. This mainly took place in the summer of 2013 and led to massive displacement from the areas of Al Qussayr and Al Qalamoun into Aarsal and other areas in Lebanon. In the meantime, the border crossing of Aarsal has been also used by the militants, both Lebanese and Syrian, supporting the Syrian opposition factions and anyone who fought against the Assaad regime, including extremist groups. This fact led, eventually, to the extremists controlling areas around Aarsal and clashing with the LAF, ISF and Hizballah, which resulted in a very tough security situation in the town for years.

² <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/order-day-conclusion-“dawn-jurds”-operation-and-army’s-victory-over-terrorism>

Recently, once security and stability started returning to the village and its surroundings, several donors showed interest in resuming operations in and supporting the region to help local communities' recovery efforts. An inter-agency 'Action Plan for Aarsal' was developed in 2017, extending over a period of eight months which, for the first time, was a combined approach towards both the humanitarian and developmental needs and gaps in each sector in Aarsal.

This research tries to shed light on the most recent developments in Aarsal and its neighboring villages, especially as regards the recent dynamics following the 2016 municipal elections and Operation Dawn of the Jurds by the LAF in 2017. These two milestones have seemingly altered the track of the relationship between Aarsal and its surrounding villages, particularly Laboue, but also Ras Baalbak, Fekhe – Jdeidet, Qaa, and Al Ayn. The municipal elections led to a major transition of the local leadership in Aarsal, resulting in a more open and moderate rhetoric. Also, the LAF operation put an end to the feeling of insecurity among Aarsalis, as well as to the perception of most Lebanese that the town has been somehow kidnapped or occupied³ by the extreme groups.

Objectives

This report aims to throw light on the area of Aarsal and its surrounding villages after several major milestones have been marked that influenced the situation, dynamics, relationships, and social stability. It provides a qualitative analysis based on the experiences of the key informants interviewed. Some of the main questions that this report tries to answer are:

- How did the situation in Aarsal and the surrounding villages change after the 2016 municipal elections?
- What are the triggers of tensions and how do they affect the daily lives of Aarsalis? What are potential entry points to programming for social stability?
- What are the priorities during the upcoming period from the perspective of local authorities, civil society and refugees?
- How did Operation Dawn of the Jurds strengthen the security apparatus and how did this affect the social stability and communal relationships?
- How do Syrians refugees in the region generally, and in Aarsal specifically, perceive the security and political changes? Do they fear from retaliatory behaviors after the "Dawn of Jurds"?
- How are the upcoming elections perceived in terms of their impact on social stability and relationships between host communities and refugees?

Methodology

The research methodology of this report consists of the following:

1. Primary Data:

- **Three** key informant interviews with mayors of Aarsal, Laboue, and Al Ayn: As a follow-up on previously conducted meetings (during previous conflict analysis visits), these one-on-one meetings allowed for a better understanding of developments, dynamics, and priorities in each village.

³ The Minister of Interior and Municipalities Mr. Nouhad Al Mashnouq stated in a press conference that he gave in December 2005, that he considers the town of Aarsal "occupied" by the extreme groups and rejected to be "drowning into the Syrian War".

- **Ten key informant interviews with stakeholders** from the village of Aarsal, including municipal members (both current and former), a retired Internal Security Forces member, agricultural cooperative members, NGOs coalition representative, local NGO founders, and former Mukhtar. These meetings served as a main resource for triangulating the data and capturing certain nuances in terms of relationships and dynamics, particularly with local authorities and how their actions are perceived by the residents.
- Participation in **three Mechanisms for Social Stability (MSS) committees meetings** in Qaa, Laboue, and Al Ayn, which engaged a total of around fifteen Lebanese residents from these villages, including local authorities, activists, educators, in addition to MOSA staff at the relevant Social Development Centers.
- **Two Focus Group Discussions** that brought together residents of Aarsal, both Lebanese and Syrian, including but not limited to women, youths, farmers and civil society activists. A total of seventeen (nine Lebanese in the first FGD and eight Syrians in the second one) attended and gave a detailed explanation of their day-to-day situation and provided their perspective on how the situation has evolved, but also recommendations for solutions.

2. Secondary Data:

- **Desk study and background analysis** consisted of reviewing UNDP reports related to the area, especially those uploaded on the 3RP United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) portal, or shared on Lebanon Support website, as well as the related maps or documents that can provide needed background information on the area and the previously identified themes or priorities.
- **Monitoring online data, mainly Geotagged Conflict Analysis map** (hosted by Lebanon Support) to keep track of what is being recorded in the media and elsewhere in terms of registered/tracked conflicts.

3. **Using both the primary and secondary data sets, a stakeholders' analysis** has been conducted to analyze key relations, conflict dynamics, triggers, dividers and possible connectors and role in contributing either positively or negatively to the situation. Also identifying existing programs that work on conflict mitigation/ prevention, or social stability in the region.

Governorate Context

Baalbak⁴ - ElHermel governorate is one of the three last governorates to be established in Lebanon, along with Akkar and Nabatieh, in 2003⁵. But it was not until 2014 that these governorates had their governors appointed and thusly administratively put into action. These governors came into office at the peak of a crisis in some of the most impoverished regions of the country, with almost nil funding or logistical support from the central government. The governorate is split into two districts, Baalbak and ElHermel, and consists of 84 municipalities and 7 unions of municipalities. It is bounded by Mount Lebanon and the governorate of North Lebanon to the west, the Akkar governorate to the northwest,

⁴ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/settlement.php?id=201&country=122®ion=90>

⁵ <http://www.localiban.org/rubrique900.html>

bricks used in the designing of Lebanese house comes from Aarsal. Furthermore, the town is known for its carpet making, using traditional methods such as “al nawl”. Carpet makers have been supported by several organizations to revamp this artisan work and to market it outside Aarsal. Today, women from the village are producing these carpets that are being sold in markets in the capital. One of the major sources of tension between Lebanese communities and Syrian refugees nowadays is the competition over jobs, especially those unskilled and low paying ones that the Lebanese were still willing to take, such as shop vendors, delivery persons, taxi drivers, waitresses and waiters, among others. In other fields, such as construction, agriculture and cleaning, Syrians can still work without much trouble because they have been working in these sectors since before the Syria crisis, add to this that the Lebanese are usually unwilling to perform these types of work. No doubt, both the security and political situations have impacted the economic situation in the town, although some would argue that the Syrian crisis has brought economic vibrancy to Aarsal, since many INGOs have begun to operate in the town, and that Syrians are opening shops to cater to the needs of both the Lebanese and Syrian communities.

Social Situation: Aarsal has five public and seven private schools, including a technical school. It has an infirmary that allows for quick health interventions before the patient is transferred to the nearest hospital in Baalbak. Several NGOs and INGOs started operating in Aarsal after the Syrian crisis, in addition to some being present long before the crisis, such as the local agriculture cooperation, the women association, and some youth groups.

Security Situation: Aarsal has suffered repercussions throughout the Syrian crisis because of the political affiliations, views and stands of its residents and those of the previous municipal council, and local groups. Moreover, due to its open space – the Jurds – ISIS and Jabhat Al Nusra fighters found refuge and base there, thereby not only isolating the town but also controlling parts of its internal affairs. This isolation caused Aarsal to witness a lot of mistrust from the surrounding villages, as well as from other parts of the country, where its people have been accused of protecting ISIS members and of being outlaws. This has had its implications on the relations with the surrounding villages, an issue that will be discussed further in the following parts of this report.

Syrian Refugees: Most refugees in Aarsal live in Informal Tented Settlements (ITSs) and rented apartments or shops. With the high number of refugees present in the village, ISIS and JAN fighters infiltrated these gatherings trying to recruit the hopeless, despaired, and angry youth. At the same time, the presence of refugees brought in support to the village through donor agencies, INGOs, and local NGOs. There is no doubt the high number of refugees has placed strain on the town’s local economic resources and infrastructure.

Aarsal's Surrounding

Aarsal is surrounded by eight municipalities as per the above map, three of which were considered in this research as a sample representative of the demographic and socio-political characteristics of the other five. The following section highlights some of the aspects of the villages surrounding Aarsal at the political, economic, and social levels, as well in terms of the presence of Syrian refugees within them:

Village/ Aspect	Laboue	Al Ayn	Qaa
Political	<p>Mainly dominated by Hizballah and Amal Movement</p> <p>Presence of other parties such as the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the Communist Party (CP)</p> <p>Municipal elections left the village divided and tensions rising between families</p> <p>Indifference of some residents towards the municipality resulting from mistrust</p> <p>The municipal council is composed of 15 members</p>	<p>Hizballah and Amal are have the strongest presence</p> <p>Presence of FPM, the SSNP, the CP</p> <p>There is some presence of the Future Movement (FM)</p> <p>Division over the last municipal elections between Amal & Hizballah created tension in the village</p> <p>The municipal council is composed of 15 members</p>	<p>The major political parties are the Lebanese Forces (LF) and the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM)</p> <p>SSNP, Baath, and CP maintain some sort of presence</p> <p>The village is divided between those who are pro and those who are against the municipality (LF).</p> <p>The village suffered from the war in Syria as it has been hit by suicide bombers; an act that increased political tensions and was considered the hardest incident, while the closure of the borders and the high refugee presence increased the strain on services and resources</p> <p>The municipal council is composed of 15 members</p>

Social	<p>13,000 inhabitants, mostly Shiite</p> <p>1 local infirmary that offers health services</p> <p>The nearest hospital is in Baalbak</p> <p>3 scouts groups: one linked to Hizballah, the other to Amal Movement and one is a national scouts group</p> <p>2 public playgrounds</p> <p>The village has inactive local NGOs and faces a huge need to engage youth in some type of activities</p> <p>Unemployment is high pushing the youth to join political parties, fight in Syria, or take drugs</p> <p>The situation in Aarsal highly impacted the political situation in Laboue as Hizballah pushed to have a bigger role in local political affairs.</p>	<p>8,000 inhabitants, mostly Sunni and Shiite, with few Christian and Alawite families</p> <p>2 public and 6 private schools</p> <p>2 clinics with the closest hospital in Baalbak</p> <p>A number of NGOs, scouts groups, and sports clubs</p> <p>Drug addiction is a rising problem in the village</p>	<p>4,000 actual residents, all Christians</p> <p>The village has some of the most active youth in the region</p> <p>Hosts a number of active NGOs and scouts groups</p> <p>Several INGOs operate in Qaa</p> <p>A cultural center, a public garden, and a playground</p> <p>A health center with the nearest hospital in Baalbak</p> <p>2 public schools, 1 elementary school, and 1 technical school</p>
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Economic	<p>The village, as most others, depends on employment in the public sector (LAF and ISF)</p> <p>Some commercial activities take place</p> <p>The battle in Aarsal interrupted all economic activities in Laboue</p> <p>The agriculture sector suffers from mismanagement and pollution of water resources</p>	<p>Relies on agriculture</p> <p>Support from certain commercial activities</p> <p>High youth unemployment</p> <p>Absence of a sewage network</p> <p>Faces the water shortages and water pollution problems</p>	<p>The village relied on cross border trade exchange before the Syrian crisis and was highly affected by it</p> <p>The agricultural sector suffers due to the lack of water</p> <p>High employment in the public sector</p>
Syrian Refugees	<p>Around 1,500 Syrian refugees</p> <p>Live mostly in apartments</p> <p>High competition on resources with the Lebanese</p> <p>Protests took place against them in the village</p>	<p>6,000 refugees, but only 1,600 are registered as living in Al Ayn</p> <p>Live mainly in apartments</p> <p>High competition over jobs and economic resources</p> <p>Strain on the infrastructure</p> <p>Protests were organized against Syrian refugees in the village</p>	<p>Qaa has around 50 ITs in the “Mashari’i Al Qaa” area that host above 9,990 refugees, while only few exist in the village itself</p> <p>Live in the village’s outskirts</p> <p>Few Christian Syrian families reside inside the village</p> <p>Refugees movement is highly controlled and monitored by the municipal police with a curfew set in place and ID cards distributed to those who work inside the village</p>

Registered Syrian Refugees in the examined villages:

Region	No of registered Syrians
Aarsal	38,821
Al Ayn	1,616
Laboue	1,419
Al-Qaa	9,221

Source: UNHCR (2018)⁷

Key Findings

The Lebanese population of Aarsal equates to that of all the surrounding villages together. Aarsal faces currently a huge strain on services and infrastructure, which in turn is causing multi-faceted environmental damage in the region. Therefore, the main sectors that needed to be examined as potential entry-points were the ones that could, if supported, limit the damage on the town and its surrounding. These include waste-water management, solid waste management, and water. These three entry-points were considered as main priorities, not only in Aarsal but also in Laboue, Al Ayn, Qaa, Ras Baalbak and Fekhe-Jdeidet. In other words, unless major interventions are made at these levels in Aarsal, the negative impact will continue to be felt in the town and in all of its surroundings to varying degrees. Some tensions generated between the villages while others generated within them, especially considering the significant ratio of refugees / host communities and the strained resources and competition over livelihoods. AS municipalities have been unable to fill the gap in services created by the refugees influx, they resorted to INGOs and donors who are now, in many cases, accused of not providing sufficient support to cope with the emerging needs. This hostility against INGOs and their implementing partner NGOs is based in most cases on discontent, because of past performance and accusations of corruption and mismanagement. Other issues that were taken into consideration while assessing the current situation and dynamics are matters of security, social stability and the potential impact of the upcoming elections on local dynamics.

Water and Waste-Water (Sewage)

Just like in most other Lebanese villages, issues related to water and waste-water management are always brought up when residents/people of these villages are asked about priorities and needs. But for Aarsal and its surroundings this was not the regular case. The massive numbers of Syrian refugees residing in the village, mainly in Informal Tented Settlements, brought this issue to unprecedented levels as the sewage of the entire village, dislodged by local and international NGOs, was being decanted in an area close to the Aarsal-Laboue border. According to a local activists, “there is a four-acre (40,000 m2) land that became a sewage dumpster; this contaminated our land and water.” The NGOs and contractors responsible for the dislodging justify their action mainly by explaining the extreme limitations in terms of options during the cordoning of Aarsal, but the surrounding villages have flagged raised this issue during the past couple of years, without any measures being taken. They were willing to even sue the municipality of Aarsal and the INGOs responsible because of the danger this issue puts on their

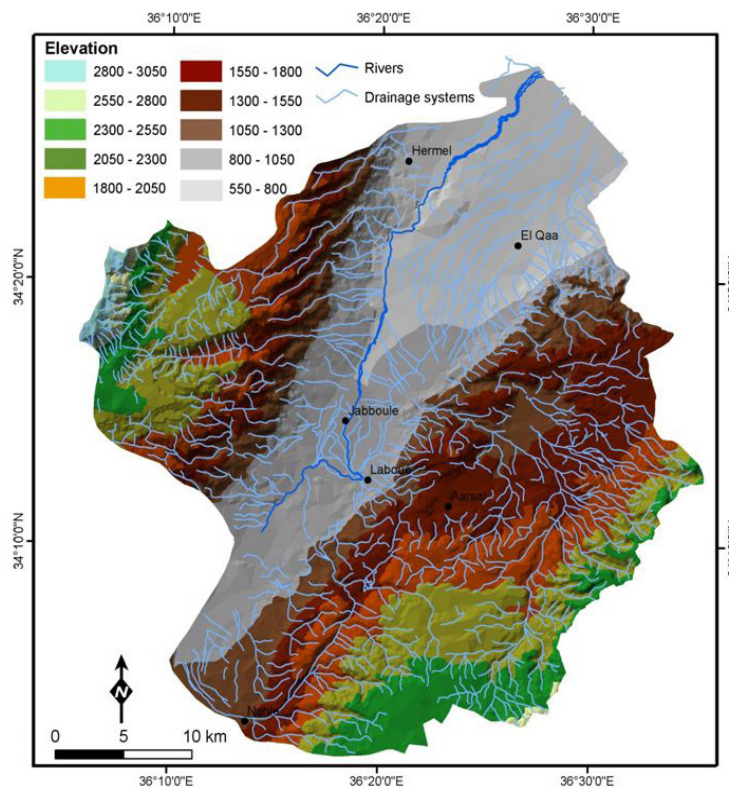
⁷ <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/region.php?id=90>

health and lives. One mayor described the situation saying “it was totally unbearable, and we had to speak up. We went to local MPs, the governor, and finally to the Ministry of Environment. We were promised that this whole case will be sorted out gradually, first by removing the dumpster from the area close to Laboue to a location closer to the borders with Syria, away from water sources, and later by working on installing a sewage network with proper treatment units.” This same sentiment has been echoed in Aarsal as well, not only by the Mayor, but also by local activists and residents. Almost everyone was criticizing the dislodging management and lack of proper planning handled by INGOs and subcontracted to Lebanese NGOs from outside Aarsal, unfamiliar thus with the nature of the area. “The contamination of around 30 water sources and springs in Laboue does not affect only that village but most of our surrounding neighbors who benefit from that water. This might be one of the reasons why we are witnessing so many cases of skin diseases and sickness”, said a member of Aarsal Cooperative.

The strain on infrastructure in Aarsal has overall doubtlessly risen to unprecedented levels with the massive influx of Syrian refugees. As one of the interviewees put it, “we’ve had a seepage pit for our house that we had used for more than 30 years without dislodging it once; the soil used to absorb it. But since the crisis, we dislodge it on annual basis, which is an additional cost on us as well as on all other families in the village.” A couple of Lebanese interviewees went further to suggest that “the issue of flooding in seepage pits that strains existing infrastructure would be solved, or at least reduced by half, if the INGOs and other actors delivering water for free to refugees would stop doing so, or get the refugees to pay for the water they spend since most of the issue is about misuse and carelessness.”

Figure 2: R. MASAAD, I. JOMAA, S. SKAFF, N. ARAJI “Orontes River Watershed” found at <http://slideplayer.com/slide/7043754/>

The topographical features of the Orontes River watershed



According to the mayor of Aarsal, “the Lebanese residents who live in proximity to the ITSs are suffering from this issue the most. Their lands are contaminated, and they cannot use their water. It is critical that we connect the ITSs to any sewage network that would be built in the future. Also, in Wadi el Hosn, scuffles would break out between the residents, we would even hear gunshots, all because of water and sewage related issues.” The two main conflict layers from the waste-water issue appear to be a Lebanese (Aarsalis) – Syrian refugees one and a Lebanese (Aarsalis) – Lebanese (Surrounding villages, primarily Laboue) one. This explains why in every single village visited and in literally all of the meetings organized, this topic has been raised as the main priority. An additional factor that, according to the mayor of Laboue, also led to placing an additional burden on the infrastructure and worsened the waste-water issue has been the “thousands of security forces - around five thousand soldiers - who participated in liberating the Jurds from terrorists”.

However, it seems that the local and national authorities, as well as international donors and NGOs are cognizant of the scale and sensitivity of this issue. Interviewees mentioned the follow-up from governmental officials as well as from local political leadership. But what is most important for them are the actions they expect to be taken by international donors and NGOs who seemed to have highlighted this issue among the top priorities of their intervention in the area. This was iterated during the meeting with the UNDP Bekaa area manager, who also mentioned an “action plan” being prepared for the region by major donors, including waste-water treatment interventions in Aarsal and its surrounding. This will probably include supporting the establishment of a waste-water network in Aarsal with a treatment unit in Chbeeb Valley, north of the village, overlooking Ras Baalbak, and taking into consideration the elevation of the village and its topography. It is also worth noting that recently the UNDP under the LHSP and in partnership with the Qatari Red Crescent, have constructed a storm water canal aiming to reduce the issue of flooding that occurs in the village with every rainfall, for which UNHCR and WFP have contributed.

Parallely, the mayors of Laboue and Al Ayn mentioned plans by the Council for Development and Reconstruction (CDR) to establish a main waste-water network and treatment unit targeting what is known as the “Laboue Basin”, including the villages of Laboue, Mekrak, Annabi Othman, Al Bezzaliyye, Al Ayn and Al Fekhe – Jdeidet. Harbata and Zabboud might be included as well. “The waste-water treatment unit will be in Al Fekhe – Jdeidet valley and would later support the irrigation of lands in northern Bekaa”, said the mayor of Laboue. Another mayor commented that “the overall project is estimated at \$48 million, while the amount of only \$15 million is committed in funding, so it is still at risk of delays.” Another risk that he voiced out was “the presence of certain individuals or groups who are pushing on CDR to change the path of the network (canals, underground pipes, etc.), claiming that they want to include other areas. But this would mean that the project would need more funding if changes are made to operate the facilities on pumps instead of through gravity.” During a conversation with an activist in Al Qaa, he made it clear that they are afraid this network project would negatively affect the supply and quality of water coming from Laboue to Al Qaa. This seems to be a very sensitive issue with a history of conflict since the Civil War period, when the Laboue water was cut off to the residents of Al Qaa. He said, “we are requesting a central path of this project, or else if it would affect our water supply, we will act against it and work to stop it.” These claims are “totally unreasonable and unrealistic” according to the mayor of Laboue who believes that “such a project will actually reduce the contamination of water and hence provide better water quality to the entire region.”

Possible Entry Points:

- Support the studies and implementation of waste-water networks and treatment units to reduce water and soil contamination and hence decrease the likelihood of tensions.
- Assess the damage and respond through water treatment projects, or through any other interventions that counter the effects of the previous water contamination from the waste-water dumping.
- Ensure all implemented activities in Aarsal and its surrounding are coordinated with the CDR, the union of municipalities, individual municipalities, and other implementing partners to avoid duplicating efforts.
- Try to balance between projects implemented in Aarsal and those in the surrounding villages, since the impact of the refugee and security crises in Aarsal highly affects that surrounding.
- INGOs working on WASH-related projects, especially dislodging, should also raise awareness on water usage, and introduce water preservation methods and techniques which should in turn decrease the damage on both water resources and soil.
- More awareness and support are needed to introduce more environmentally friendly irrigation methods, especially in parallel to the revival of the agricultural sector.
- Facilitate the processes of project procurement and implementation, since the current needs are quite pressing, and health hazards are high.

Solid Waste (Garbage)

The solid waste issue comes next after water and waste-water issues in terms of importance and impact. There is also correlation with the increase in residents because of the refugee crisis and the high number of armed forces operating in the region. It has been reported by the different mayors, as well as by activists, that waste has increased at least by double, in their villages, putting considerable strain on their resources in terms of vehicles, and financial and human resources. The mayor of Aarsal noted that “40 to 50 tons of garbage are dumped daily in a remote area in the village’s outskirts, where it is burned and landfilled. The smog it creates is one of the issues we keep receiving complaints about from LAF, the Fekhe – Jdeidet municipality as well as from Ras Baalbak municipality, since the wind blows in their direction.” This statement was echoed as well during the meetings with local activists and the cooperative.

The Qatari Red Crescent are carrying out interventions related to WASH in Aarsal, including a solid waste management unit to assist with sorting waste near the existing dumpster. According to the mayor, “this pilot is an expandable model whereby the capacity, efficiency, and functionality can be enhanced if international donors contribute to its expansion. For example, energy can be produced from this facility, which would help meet part of the increasing demand and reduce part of the strain on the village. Also, the dumpster itself needs treatment, or redesigning, for it to meet environmental standards.” Additionally, the UNDP under the LHSP, have provided several municipalities in the region with garbage bins, garbage collection trucks, and skid steer loaders with sweepers to enhance the capacity of the municipalities in responding to the growing strain over waste management resources.

Figure 3: Anonymous, Picture of the Smog from burning garbage in Aarsal



When asked whether Laboue can benefit from such a recycling facility in Aarsal, the mayor of Laboue mentioned that “the union of municipalities that Laboue is part of is currently studying a solid-waste management unit project that would be most probably implemented in Harbata with the aim of serving the surrounding villages. But Aarsal is not part of this union. In any case, the population of Aarsal alone, without the refugees, is equal to that of its entire surrounding villages, and so would be the waste produced in the village. So it would make sense that they have their own unit.” He had noted earlier that Laboue’s daily produce of waste is around 14 tons. And similarly to many villages in the area, international donors have provided bins, but the need for more is still present in almost all these villages.

Possible Entry Points:

- Support the implementation of the sorting and recycling facility along with an environmentally-driven redesign of the dumpster.
- Support decreasing the needs gap between surrounding municipalities on items such as bins and collection trucks.
- Build the technical capacity of the sorting facility workers, as well as that of the municipal council regarding efficient collection techniques and solid waste management.
- Support local NGOs to launch awareness campaigns on waste sorting, recycling, upcycling, and composting.
- Leverage resources between INGOs, local NGOs and the municipalities concerning waste collection and management. Also, encourage the private sector and social entrepreneurs to come up with creative solutions and support their initiatives to kick off.

Electricity

As in the rest of the country, the electricity supply in northern Bekaa, mainly in Aarsal and its surrounding villages, is inadequate. This is especially noted through the large number of Syrian refugees in Aarsal residing in ITSs, and has been particularly the case during the cordoning of the village for a number of years due to the security situation. The mayor describes the situation saying that “there are around 12.000 households in Aarsal and 5700 tents. All of them need electricity, but we simply do not have the structure to provide for all. The electricity situation is disastrous.” Aarsalis seem to fully agree on this description; one activist from a local NGO explains that “electricity is an issue whereby the village lacks enough poles and transformers. The ITSs are adding to the burden through illegal use of the network, so transformers burn or get damaged. But the Electricite Du Liban (EDL) would not accept to fix it, since they claim that it is not safe to come to Aarsal. In fact, the generator owners are the ones who fix any damages because they want their generators to operate less, so that they are not overused.” Another added that “a couple of years ago, EDL removed the power cable from one of the ITSs who would not pay the bill. But the landlord reconnected it claiming that this was inhumane”.

Syrian refugees, on the other hand, noted that they share the daily struggle for proper electrical supply with the Lebanese residents. One interviewee mentioned that “Lebanon has always been suffering from electricity shortages. The country is still buying electricity from Syria, even though the war is raging there. So, it is unfair to claim that Syrians are behind this problem. But in general, there can be certain measures taken to enhance the service and reduce risks and pressure on the network.” A Lebanese participant in the focus group discussion suggested that “if Syrians or the INGOs supporting them would pay EDL for the usage of electricity, or if they regulate the consumption through certain meters and so on, the intake will decrease. In parallel, they should invest in fixing the damaged infrastructure. Nowadays, my phone is not recharging when connected to the electricity due to the very low voltage; imagine the effect on our electrical appliances.” Another Syrian participant in the FGD clarified that “recently, the municipality has cut off the electricity from all the camps and now refugees residing in camps mainly pay for their electricity to Aarsalis who operate generators from 8:00 a.m. up until midnight. There are also thousands of refugees who do not live in camps, but rent shops or apartments, so this action is neither sustainable nor does it solve the whole problem.”

Total chaos characterizes the management of electricity services in Aarsal, since the whole structure is placed under considerable pressure with increased usage. The municipality is trying to organize the sector, but this requires greater efforts and further funding. The central government promised support, but until the time of writing this report, it was yet to be provided. Currently, no awareness campaigns are being organized by civil society regarding proper power usage and conservation, even though such campaigns might be needed in both host communities and refugees’ gatherings.

Possible Entry Points:

- Support EDL by enhancing the infrastructure, including transformers and cables; also replace weary equipment provided EDL maintains a presence in Aarsal.
- Support the municipality in its efforts to organize the sector and manage the consumption at the ITSs through alternative electricity sources or generators.
- INGOs can cover the bills of private generator subscriptions in case refugees cannot afford them.

- Local NGOs can be supported to launch power conservation awareness campaigns, including the distribution of power saving appliances.
- Invest in clean energy alternatives, especially solar power, to take some of the ITSs or neighborhoods off the grid, thereby decrease the pressure on the network. This will also constitute a sustainable intervention that would benefit the village in the long run.

Livelihoods

Livelihoods in Aarsal have been significantly affected during the past years, especially since the 2014 attack of militants against the village. In 2014, the village was cordoned by the LAF and Hizballah fighters from one end, while the east side of the borders was open only for the militants where the Jurds constituted their stronghold.

According to interviewees in Aarsal, “99% of Aarsalis are stone fruit tree producers and farmers who used to grow mainly cherries and apricots. Three quarters of them are also engaged in quarries, as they either own, work in, or have some sort of a business connected to that industry.” These sectors were severely hit due to the security situation and the siege. Consequently, Aarsalis completely lost four seasons. The damages inflicted on these sectors will need years to reverse, especially if no proper crisis management is put in place.

Aarsalis speak with profound sadness about their lands and dried orchards. After years of prohibited access, most of these orchards dried and trees died, especially in areas that require irrigation, such as Al Reayan and Chbeeb valleys, on the south and the northern sides of the village respectively. Many other agricultural lands located on the frontline between the militants and LAF have been razed, totally or partially, for security reasons. The following is a brief - based on the description of interviewees- of the way various agricultural fields have been consequently affected:

- Al Reayan and Chbeeb valleys: Almost all trees have died because the area depended on irrigation, and growers were unable to access and care for it. During the period of fighting, it has been reported that over 50 water pumps were stolen. Locals accuse the militants who had controlled the area, while, according to some sources, some machineries and equipment were confiscated or destroyed by Hizballah.

Figure 4: Anonymous, Dead Trees in lower Aarsal valleys due to the absence of irrigation during the village cordoning



- Central Jurd: This is where Daesh and Saraya Ahl El Sham (JAN affiliate) militants were based; they used to mainly cut trees for heating.

Figure 5: Anonymous, trees were cut by extremists for heating



- High Jurd: this area witnessed intensive shelling by LAF, destroying all the agricultural rooms that mount to around 350, and which growers would build in their fields to use whenever they visited their lands, especially during the harvest seasons, to avoid daily commute that would only increase their expenses. Also, militants used water collection wells as tunnels. As a result, the infrastructure of growers has been mostly damaged in this area.

Figure 6: Anonymous, showing the destruction of agricultural rooms in orchards in the Jurds



Through a LL10 billion grant (equivalent to \$6.7 millions) provided by the High Commission of Relief (HCR) and in coordination with the Municipality of Aarsal, the Government of Lebanon (GoL) only lately finished compensating cherry growers in the village. Farmers were compensated based on the number of trees they have in their orchards, regardless whether these trees perished or are still productive. The mayor expressed his pride to have advocated for this initiative in the past few years. This, however, does not come without a price; that is, the pressure of coordinating and ensuring distribution is being

fair and proper. This seemed debatable among Aarsalis, and more so by the current political opposition. According to certain Aarsalis, “this compensation is not equivalent to half of a cherry yield we used to produce before. So, what about the other three years? And how will [they] repay all the debts [they have] been accumulating during this period? Another big question is whether [they] will be compensated for [their] dead crops as well?” The whole matter of financial compensation created a lot of pressure on the municipality, as the mayor spent hours on the phone responding to allegations of favoritism, or receiving requests from beneficiaries claiming they have not been compensated. The local opposition focused mainly on these claims to criticize the municipality at large of mismanagement and underperformance.

Another main concern for Aarsalis is the replanting or reviving of their orchards. The replacement of the dead trees is a costly activity that does not reap benefits directly. According to a municipal member and head of the environmental committee, a newly planted tree needs around seven to eight years to start giving proper produce. Therefore, growers fear idleness in the meantime and during the coming seasons, which they cannot afford. A lead in the cooperative that includes around 28 members said that “in the meantime, alternative agriculture could be introduced in the fields between the newly planted trees. This could include peas, lentils, and other plants from the beans family.” This way, he proposes, the growers will be able to take care of their newly planted trees while also making a living from the alternative crops that can be produced starting the first season.

“For Aarsalis, the land is their mother. They will do anything and everything to see it live again. They would not wait to start working in it again.” Head of the local agricultural cooperative - Aarsal

Even though Aarsalis were highly affected by their damaged fields and businesses, they seemed to be determined to revive the sector and reinvest in it as much as they can. One interviewee stated that “[Aarsalis] were so eager to go back and check on their lands after years of prohibition, that even when they were told it might be dangerous because of the landmines, they did not care and still did it. Unfortunately, a couple farmers have lost their lives because of landmines.”

Livestock

Another topic that has been raised during the discussions with the Cooperative and the Lebanese FGD participants has been the absence of compensation to livestock owners, who either have lost a part of their herd because of theft (mainly around “Khirbet Daoud”) or because it has been sold in the market for very cheap prices due to feed reaching high costs during the siege. There seems to be no compensation plan neither in this sector, nor in the quarries sector, the latter being an even more important sector in the lives and livelihoods of Aarsalis.

Aarsalis are the most famous Lebanese producers of bricks used in the roofs of traditional Lebanese houses and villas. However, they are barely used at all in the Aarsali houses. This demonstrates, to a certain extent, the strained socio-economic conditions which are not necessarily new to the village, but that have certainly exacerbated recently. If they could afford it, Aarsalis, who are quite proud of their produce, would have used bricks to design not only their houses, but probably also streets and shops.

Certain interviewees accused neighboring communities engaged in the fighting of intentionally targeting their quarries. They believe that most of their quarries were “vandalized and intentionally targeted as a revenge for standing against the Syrian regime”. They shared photos that for them represent a proof that some of the heavy machinery, including diggers and other vehicles, were burnt deliberately with no signs of clashes or shelling taking place in their proximity.

Figure 7: Burnt bulldozer from one of the quarries in Aarsal



Figure 8: Anonymus, Burnt generator in one of the quarries



Figure 9: Burnt digger in one of the quarries in Aarsal



Commerce and Trade

In the last five years, Aarsal witnessed a commercial boom, reflected mainly in the increase of shops and markets. According to several interviewees, both Lebanese and Syrian, there are at least 500 new Syrian shops in the village, in comparison to 150 Lebanese shops. A Syrian interviewee said that “there is not a single shop around Aarsal that does not hire a Syrian worker.” Syrians interviewed seem proud of the economic cycle they claim to have brought with them to the village. “I think 90% of Aarsalis have benefitted from our presence, while 10% might be losing. [...] before we came, there was not a single apartment or shop rented for example. Now rented apartments alone account to more than

3,000 apartments” said one FGD participant. Another participant added that “even support cards from the UN can only be used in Lebanese shops, while the crisis response efforts provided more than 150 employment opportunities to Aarsalis.”

Concerning opportunities stemming from the refugee response, Syrian participants raised a “very important” issue, related to the way the schooling system in Aarsal works. They claim that less than 20% of refugee students are being accommodated in public schools, while the rest either drop out, or are enrolled in schools run by Syrians. In these schools, teachers volunteer are filling a huge gap in a critical domain affecting children. So “why do MEHE and INGOs not help us accredit these initiatives and cover their running costs if they really care about not losing a generation?”

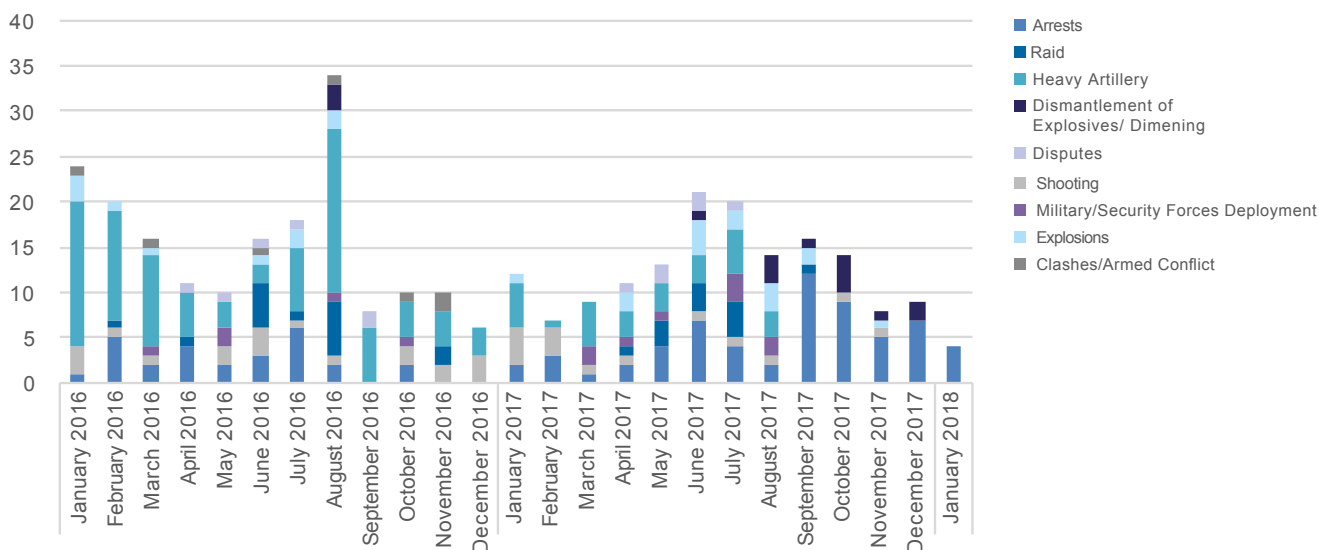
According to the Syrians and Lebanese participating in the discussions, the difficult labor situation is not caused by the refugees as much as it stems from a lack of policy and management by GoL of the whole issue from the beginning. On the other end, the mayor of Laboue shares a different perspective stating that “We are tired; it is definitely better that Syrians return to their homeland since they have become partners in everything and competitors in the livelihoods sector. We are tribes and we have our traditions. For us, guests must be served and taken care of, but when this situation is prolonged you can only wish for their safe return home. We hope 2018 would be the year of return for the Syrian refugees”.

Possible Entry Points:⁸

- Rehabilitate orchards and agricultural infrastructures damaged by the conflict, including the water harvesting infrastructure and irrigation canals and terraces; replace dead trees, maintain surviving trees; rehabilitate agricultural roads; reconstruct agricultural rooms; repair water pumps.
- Provide the necessary tools and equipment, as well as technical support for land rehabilitation and stone fruit tree production.
- Establish a nursery to help revive and boost reforestation and fruit tree production using adapted species and certified seedlings (cherry, apricot, pine, Greek juniper, etc.).
- Build the capacity of municipalities and local institutions to mobilize local communities in terms of livelihood and economic recovery, and mobilize as well partners and resources, both national and international.
- Support micro and small enterprises in agriculture, livestock, agro-food and handicraft production, such as wool thread production, carpet weaving, and other mining and quarrying byproducts, such as ceramics, mosaics, and traditional tiles.
- Enhance market access and facilitate linkages with existing markets and value chains
- Build the capacity of local associations and cooperatives. Also, raise their awareness on available financial support and microfinance programs.
- Draw from the recommendations of the Aarsal labour market assessment study commissioned by UNHCR and UNDP, released in February 2018.

⁸ Adopted from the Aarsal & Surrounding Livelihoods and Economic Recovery Concept Note, UNDP Livelihoods team, January 2018

Security⁹



The grip of security forces has eased since the period called a “siege” by the Aarsalis, which was described by one participant in the discussions as “living in a large prison called Aarsal”. Nevertheless, there still remains a LAF Intelligence checkpoint at the entrance as well as two other LAF checkpoints closer to Aarsal.

According to the mayor of Aarsal, the village was “kidnapped” in the past few years (mainly between 2014 and 2016). “It was not the Aarsal that we know. There was a Shari’aa court established by the militants and headed by a guy called Abo A’aisha, who used to decide who to execute and who to spare. They used to embody the law in a total absence of the state.” This dramatic picture of the situation has not been adopted during the FGDs and interviews with NGOs. In fact, interviewees mentioned that they did not see militants in the streets, since those were mainly based in the mountains and did not take over the streets. However, certain assassinations took place during that period. Regarding the Shari’aa court, interviewees did not negate its former presence but perceived its role to be “mainly for Syrians; for their marriages and other dispute management issues. But they had nothing to do with us.”

Interviewees agree that the security situation started to improve after the municipal elections. “When the new municipal council was elected in May 2016, we decided to end the abnormal security situation. Security was our utmost priority. We worked on reclaiming our village even before Operation Dawn of the Jurds took place. We imposed a 10 p.m. curfew for everyone and increased our police staff to 80, who were only Aarsalis, and this was very important in order to secure the streets and make sure no militants were taking over or setting up checkpoints. We paid around LL500 million (equivalent to \$330,000) over a period of fourteen months to get this apparatus running. I would say we bought our village back with this budget. We faced threats and attacks. I was personally threatened and under a lot of pressure. But it is over and now our village is safe; I believe it is safer than Baalbek” explains the mayor of Aarsal, who is proud that his coordination with LAF and other Lebanese security forces and authorities have “saved the village”. He adds, “the coordination with LAF and Chief Joseph Aoun, even

⁹ Data of security-related incidents is adopted from the Lebanon Support “Geo-located mapping of conflicts in Lebanon” accessed on Jan 20th, 2018 at <http://civilsociety-centre.org/cap/map>

before he became the Army Commander, has been continuous. And now we are planning to reopen the Aarsal police station during the summer of 2018, which was shut down since the attacks of August 2014.”

Not all residents share the same enthusiasm when other subjects related to LAF intervention are brought up. In Wadi Hmayd for instance, “security measures are still tight, and the army checkpoint would give each car a number, a process that takes around 15 to 20 minutes, before allowing it to pass to the quarries area. And while there, intelligence patrols pass every 5 to 10 minutes to monitor everyone. It is a bit humiliating to feel that grip even now when there are no more militants in the area” expressed one of the FGD participants. Another issue that was brought up seems to have been a taboo for around three years, after the clashes of 2014 took place, when “LAF took refuge in 35 houses which they used as posts or barracks. Until now, around 30 of these houses are still being used by LAF, abstaining from returning them back to their owners, and denying the latter any kind of compensation. For many, this is creating an unnecessary tension between citizens and LAF especially that the owners are wondering why the troops are not moving into prefabs, as is the case in many other posts in the area.”

Another cause of tension between LAF and Aarsalis, which is shared to an extent with a wider Sunni community across Lebanon, is the perception that “law is enforced only on them, while Hizballah and the Shiites can go around with their arms and full militant attires without even being stopped at a checkpoint.” This feeling of victimization and unfairness is exacerbated by the recent talks about a general amnesty that will free some of their youths from jail, “but at the expense of pardoning 40,000 Shiite criminals and drug dealers, while our kids (around 300) have in some cases not yet had a trial.”

A final security related matter mentioned during the meetings with the municipality and residents from Aarsal is the landmines issue, especially in areas that used to be separating Daesh from JAN. The problem is that these landmines have no proper maps, which makes it hard to know where exactly they are located, making any demining action harder and more time consuming.

Also, the presence of unexploded ordnances (UXO) can hinder the complete return of Aarsalis back into the fields and lands.

Figure 10: Anonymous, UXO from Aarsal Jurds (Left and right)



Possible Entry Points:

- Train and support local security forces (municipal police) to ensure their abidance by international human rights standards and help them adopt a social policing module that engages all residents one way or another, and raises awareness and improves preventative skills among families in protecting their children from violent extremism.
- Support the municipality in preparing and equipping the police station that is expected to start operating as of summer 2018.
- Support the demining activity to make sure all the lands of Aarsal and its surrounding villages are cleared. Meanwhile, raise awareness among youths and all factions on how to deal with UXOs if ever encountered. There is currently a mine risk education exercise commissioned by UNICEF and UNHCR taking place in Aarsal and targeting local authorities, public schools, the civil society and farmers on the danger of mines.
- Mediate between LAF and land/property owners who wish to reclaim their estates while supporting LAF with needed barracks or prefabbed posts.
- Increasing the engagement of LAF's Civil Military Cooperation Unit (CIMIC) in Aarsal to enhance LAF's image and break the barriers between the latter and the population of Aarsal. Usually, LAF would determine the priority interventions or activities that they wish to conduct in a certain area, but a facilitated dialogue session with the public to agree on those activities/interventions would create high buy-in and support from the people.

Social Stability

Almost all local authority figures who met during the research phase talked about a new era of relationships that they described as “Insihar” (literal translation, Fusion), to note that social stability between Aarsal and its surrounding is a top agenda item. However, they all failed to present any joint developmental or infrastructure project in its support. Other ideas discussed previously in Aarsal, such as waste-water or solid waste management, as well as other projects in the Laboue basin, might help, without necessarily implementing the same project in conflicting communities. Mayors mentioned monthly visits and meetings to strengthen dialogue and defuse any tensions. This led, according to the mayor of Laboue, to a “90% enhancement” in relationships with Aarsal.

It is always astonishing how far back in memory and history Lebanese can go to describe the reasons behind social tensions and intercommunal problems. If anything, this signals the failure of the “sweep under the rug” policies followed after almost every conflict, or whenever a deadlock in politics is faced that escalates into violence. The problem is that many Lebanese, especially politicians, keep insisting that “what has passed is past”. But reality proves that not only the past is still active in the mindset and decision-making activity of those who lived through it, but also it has passed on from one generation to the other, becoming a collective memory, which will, in turn, need decades to be erased from the people's consciousness. This is the case not only in Aarsal, but in many conflict-ridden localities around Lebanon. But in Aarsal, it was clear during the focus group discussions with the Lebanese residents that the past accumulations come into play in the troubled relationship of Aarsalis with their surroundings, as well as with the State.

To start from the latter, older participants in the FGD resorted to the widely used rhetoric among Sunni communities in Lebanon that “since the creation of Greater Lebanon these communities, such as Aarsal, Tripoli and Akkar, among others, who did not want to be annexed from Syria, were later punished for that demand by depriving them from basic services and development for decades- soon to be a century, while focusing mainly on Beirut and Mount Lebanon. This instigated hate and widened the socio-economic gaps between Lebanese, translating into different violent cycles during the fifties and sixties, and leading to fifteen years of civil war.” Aarsal was not as far from these incidents as the interviewees remembered during the FGD, but the most vivid were those starting in February 2005, after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafiq Hariri and the ensuing political divisions.

Some Aarsalis interviewed in this research still refer to the attack on their convoy, consisting of throwing rocks at it, after participating in the March 14 demonstrations in Beirut. Since then, a long list of incidents followed, ranging from scuffles to kidnapping and killing, and to a whole cycle of violence. But recently, it seems that Aarsal and its surrounding may be heading towards better relationships. According to both of the mayors of Aarsal and Laboue, it is the time to “revive the relationships and turn the page for a better future under the approach of ‘bon voisinage’ (Husn el Jiwar). “After the evacuation of terrorists and those supporting them from Aarsal, the town became open for everyone to visit. I visited the mayor of Aarsal whom I consider a friend. We now meet regularly, monthly or sometimes weekly. The divergence was with no more than 2% of Aarsalis, who were supporting the terrorists. Other than that, we do not have any issue with Aarsalis, they are our neighbors” stated the mayor of Laboue. The above-mentioned 2% has been used to a certain extent by Aarsalis as well during the discussion, regarding those who cooperated with extreme militants, using the camps or other locations as strongholds, abusing, thus, the trust and hospitality of Aarsalis in general. “Aarsalis and refugees were both victims in this battle. They did not have any sort of leverage or power on the sequence of incidents, even though they rejected it within closed circles.

Figure 11: Anonymous, one of the houses belonging to Aarsalis that were destroyed in Masharei’I Al Qaa by the Syrian Army



It is important to touch on the protracted land dispute between Aarsalis and Al Qaa residents over the area of Masharei'i Al Qaa. The dispute is multi-faceted; demographic/sectarian as well as economic. The most recent development in this conflict has been the intervention of Syrian Armed Forces in Masharei'i Al Qaa by "destroying the residences of Aarsalis", as some interviewees noted. They added that "since 2013, there have been around 200 Aarsali families displaced, primarily from Masharei'i Al Qaa, mainly because of threats from the Syrian army and Hizballah before the former destroyed their houses there. They used to inform the residents of the house that they were going to blow up and that hence, the head of the household needed to relocate his family to Aarsal. This created an extra burden for the Aarsali host community, especially since no INGOs have been interested or committed enough in helping this community of Aarsali displaced." One of these displaced who participated in the FGD explains in more details and distress that "on the 20th of June 2013, the Syrian Army started putting explosives underneath my house while LAF were watching from afar. I was standing 100 meters away, watching my house being blown up, without being able to do anything. And up until now, GoL has been heedless of our issue, even after opening the border crossing." It is important to note that GoL reopened the border crossing in Al Qaa to Joussieh in Homs a couple of months ago, with the presence of the General Security Director General as well as representatives from most municipalities, including Aarsal. The mayor of Laboue referred to the participation of Aarsal's mayor along with a delegation from the village in this event as an example of the better relationships between Aarsal and its surrounding.

The challenge will be to get these enhanced relationships on the local authorities' level to trickle down to all the community members living in the area- especially since the accumulation of hate speech and violent incidents during the past thirteen years left scars on those who lived through them. One of the Aarsali participants in the FGD who used to live in Laboue up until 2010 said "it became unbearable to live there. I had a picture of Rafik Hariri in my house and every time one of the neighbors would visit they would intentionally speak negatively about him in order to pick a quarrel. It all started in 2005 and they intended to escalate it to violence by beating our Aarsali youth whenever they visited or passed by Laboue. Whenever Aarsali cars pass through Laboue on their way to Aarsal, we would hear them saying "this car is going to Tel Aviv". I was able to protect my children by leaving Laboue and moving to Aarsal, but I could not protect my house which got vandalized, which has also been the case of rented shops in my building; just because we are from Aarsal. But since then nothing happened, and I would never go back to live with them." Similar cases of individuals and business owners who were directly affected and attacked by Shiite militants during the past period, will most probably need a long-term, well-planned, and seriously-led reconciliation process which would allow opening all the files and dealing with realities as they are. Even in Laboue, the perception can be that Aarsalis were behind many of their lost youth who died in fighting the terrorists "hosted in Aarsal".

Syrian Refugees

The Syrian uprising, especially with the 2013 resulting waves of Syrian refugees into Lebanon and specifically the Bekaa, added another layer to the complexity of tensions in the region. A Syrian refugee who participated in the FGD explains that "with the first battles of Al Qussayr in 2013, then those of West and Southern Qalamoun in 2014 and onwards, many families that had ties with Lebanese relatives fled and took refuge with them first. This facilitated being accepted and welcomed in the community. In the early years, activists supported us and were very generous and active even though the focus was mainly on food and non-food items. It was rather a humanitarian appeal for everyone, since no one thought it would be a prolonged conflict. So, between 2013 and 2014 most Syrians were

focused on basic services. Most were not even looking for jobs. But as the crisis continued, they began to think of their livelihoods and longer-term needs.” Syrian interviewees during this research do not perceive the impact of refugees on the economy as negative. On the contrary, they believe that they revived the economy, thanks to international INGOs and donors funding, as well as their own resources, injected into the community, especially in Aarsal. Some even mentioned that Syrians brought vocational skills with them that not only reduced some of the cost on Lebanese manufacturers, but also led to the transfer of those skills to Lebanese laborers who would benefit from that in the long term. They believe that the ease of doing business in marginalized communities has benefitted both the refugees and the hosting communities. One participant backed this statement by saying: “All those from whom we are renting shops and spaces would prefer that we stay in Lebanon for a longer period, if asked whether we should stay or go.” And when talking about Aarsal specifically, they agreed among each other that “nowadays the percentage of Aarsalis who still accept the refugees is around 70% or higher.” However, the interviewees referred to a tougher stance taken by the current municipality in dealing with refugees, compared with the previous one. Most of them mentioned the curfew that limited their mobility, while some said that “we were not against the curfew, because it also aimed to protect us and secure the village in which we are staying.” They all agreed that the curfew has changed to becoming less flexible towards mobility.

Figure 12: Picture showing the ITs in Aarsal by Corbett Hancey for the Toronto Star¹⁰



The generally positive perspective by Syrians of their host is not fully reflected in the point of view of Aarsali FGD participants. These are not less sympathetic toward refugees, but the past few years, especially the 2014 incidents and their aftermath, left most of them with questions about the mosaic of the Syrian community in terms of their true allegiances, intentions, and divisions. This can be sensed through the comment that “all Syrians are raised by intelligence agencies or mentalities. We feel they end up reporting everything. To whom? It varies. It depends on their benefit.” Another more prevalent perspective is that “there are mainly two opinions on who to blame for what happened in the village. Some blame the Syrian refugees while others, and they are a majority, put the blame on Hizballah. This

¹⁰ <https://www.thestar.com/news/world/2017/01/29/can-canada-help-a-besieged-town-in-lebanon-resist-daesh.html>

division is affecting whether empathy persists towards refugees or it has turned into feelings of anger or revenge. Still, many believe that most of what happened in the village has been orchestrated by the Syrian regime and its elements among the refugees to draw Aarsal into the conflict. We have not been dragged as they wanted us to be, but still, the cost we paid was high. Lives of Aarsalis were lost along with tens of millions of dollars in the economy, mainly in the quarries and agricultural sectors. Since the support eventually comes mainly to them, we go to a clinic set up for them if we need to.”

This last view has been supported through different statements from interviewees such as “the Aarsalis had nothing to do with this war, they didn’t even participate in it, but they were rather victims who would witness soldiers and residents die in the streets without knowing who killed them and why”. Another interviewee adds that “refugees in the camps were also victims; most of them; some died and others were displaced because of what happened. Some militants thought they could hide in these camps thinking that it is a supportive environment, which was not the case. They ended up taking them as hostages.”

Despite the wide array of issues that could be possible triggers of the conflict, especially those related to the previous clashes and to losses in livelihoods, the situation between the refugees and the host community remains contained and under the radar of the local authorities and key stakeholders. Syrians interviewed during this research neither signaled fear from any retaliatory actions, nor did they feel a rising sentiment against them in parallel to the elections. At the same time, Lebanese interviewees showed fatigue and dwindling interest in matters related to supporting or sympathizing with refugees.

“We used to be besieged during the fights of Aarsal. It was harder than the battles we faced in Syria.” Syrian refugee, Aarsal

Possible Entry Points:

- One of the approaches to make divided communities break barriers and interact positively is to identify common causes and issues between them, before encouraging them to work together on solving these issues. Therefore, it is worth exploring potential joint projects, building on what has been implemented previously by the United States Agency for International Development’s (USAID) Office of Transition Initiatives (OTI), in partnership with Aarsal Civil Society Coalition and Laboue Stakeholders Committee¹¹. This may include infrastructure projects, in which committees can play an oversight and outreach role, or organize livelihoods activities, especially if they engage women working in cooperatives and youths, who can also work together on many cultural and peacebuilding activities.
- Focus on soft components in ALL planned activities which are of strictly infrastructural nature. It is very important to build on the current momentum and strengthen relationships between Aarsal and its surrounding.
- Encourage INGOs to adopt implementation approaches by partnering with local NGOs, preferably from the targeted villages, in order to build local capacities and make sure local nuances are well understood and respected.

¹¹ The OTI/USAID Lebanon Civic Resilience Initiative supported both the Coalition and the Committee to implement a solar lighting project for the road connecting between Aarsal and Laboue. The program also supported a media team in both communities to work on challenging prejudices and promote a positive image of collaboration. The efforts culminated in the production of a theater play that tackles the social issues, as well as a photo exhibition and booklet promoting the region.

- Invest in services and basic needs, such as healthcare, by supporting the establishment of a public hospital or at least a multipurpose clinic. According to certain Aarsalis, “25% of the cases die on the way to the hospital in Baalbak (40km). The former Hariri clinic or medical center in the village is currently out of service but can operate as a mini-hospital.”
- Support initiatives that call for accountability and anti-corruption through capacity building in terms of awareness and advocacy, especially in light of claims of large amounts of money being lost through corruption.
- Encourage civil society organizations from the conflicting backgrounds to engage in joint activities, and support them in launching peace and reconciliation activities where they would be invited to innovate to bridge the gaps between people.
- Education is also one of the priorities. The strain and pressure on schools is one of the triggers of tension, and it also leads to thousands of Syrian refugee students on the streets, searching for jobs and competing aggressively with other Lebanese youth.

Authority and the relationship with the State

The social contract issue between citizens and the authorities, whether in Aarsal or its marginalized surrounding villages, is quite intriguing, as it has never been defined or static. The difference of this area resides in its population’s perception of and expectations from the state. For instance, during the Syrian crisis, under which impact this area fell, villages seemed to be leaning towards self-governance instead of a higher state presence, especially in terms of security matters. When residents of these villages witnessed – during the implementation of the “self-distancing policy” - how porous their borders were, whether in terms of rockets, suicide bombers or vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices (VGIED), trust in central authorities reached its lowest levels.

Local militias and political parties such as Hizballah, Amal Movement, and the Lebanese Forces¹², each in the localities that they control, were replacing the official security apparatus at various times during the past couple of years by erecting checkpoints¹³ or performing night patrol¹⁴ to protect the villages from any attacks. Even though this phenomenon did not last for long, it nevertheless brought back to the residents the distressing memories of the Lebanese civil war, namely how each sect and every party would control the lives and livelihoods of the areas under their control with a virtually absent state.¹⁵ This time, the state seemed to be less keen on letting go of the loose strings of authority in these battered areas. Therefore, LAF have been consequently deployed - a so-far relatively accepted institution by the different sectarian factions. The objective has been to take control of the internal security, but also to “liberate” Aarsal and its Jurds (Operation Dawn of the Jurds),¹⁶ from the remnants of extremist groups who took over partially between 2014 and 2017. This step has been coupled with promises of development and service delivery, in which the State seems to be aiming at a new “dawn” in its relationship with locals in these impoverished and underserved areas.

¹² <https://www.rt.com/news/199727-lebanon-christians-islamic-state/>

¹³ <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Security-Watch/Under-the-Radar/2014/0210/To-protect-Shiites-Hezbollah-imposes-its-own-checkpoints-in-Lebanon>

¹⁴ https://i2.wp.com/pow.photos/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/13568798_10154310221056018_719641739351781316_o.jpg?resize=1024%2C775

¹⁵ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-lebanon-syria/islamic-state-leaves-syria-lebanon-border-zone-idUSKCN1B80PR?il=0>

¹⁶ <https://www.lebarmy.gov.lb/en/content/dawn-jurds-0>

Figure 13: ISIS fighters waiting in buses before leaving the Jurds following the LAF Operation



During the interviews, several mayors mentioned potential projects and budgets expected to be spent in Aarsal and its surrounding during the coming period. Albeit a bit sensitive in their timing with anticipated parliamentary elections around the corner, these projects are nevertheless much needed to help those communities cope with the impact of the Syrian refugees' crisis. The mayor of Aarsal mentioned that they "were promised a \$15 million budget for Aarsal by GoL. These were agreed on by the Council of Ministers but the plan of how they will be spent is still not put into action. We expect them to build a hospital, a school, improve electricity, water, and roads. They will not cover sewage, solid waste management, or other livelihood projects. We also heard that the same amount, or even a bit higher (\$22 million), will be spent in Aarsal's surrounding villages." This approach, known in Lebanon as "6 w 6 mukarrar", aims at balancing between sects in all governance aspects, from employment to spending and other matters, even if it is not always deemed fair by all sides involved. But in this case, the mayor of Aarsal adds that "we do not want to create any tensions by being targeted alone with the support. It is important that it be balanced. Let it be similar to the approach that took place with the \$6.6 million budget that was distributed to the cherry growers as a compensation equivalent to a quarter of their losses during the past years, in a '6 w 6 mukarrar' fashion; this time, balancing aid between Aarsali cherry growers (all Muslim Sunnis) and the apple growers (mostly Christians and Shiites)."

The mayor of Aarsal added that "the municipality is currently moving forward to establish a "qalam nufoos", or civil registry office, in coordination with the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MOIM), as well as a Social Development Center (SDC) in the village, which the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) already approved, and which will be inaugurated soon." He added "we are moving away from the period when we had a Shari'aa court for extremists in our village, into a phase where the State is present and is the only authority."

Syrian refugees interviewed agreed that the current phase brought a new vibe towards the rule of law and handling authority in the village. They mentioned that even among leaders and activists in the Syrian refugees community, keenness has been sensed on supporting the municipality in securing the village. "We wanted to distance the ITSs from any damages during the Operation Dawn of the Jurds, and we made sure that the refugees are totally out of this equation. We have Lebanese flags raised on ITSs and no one have any problems with it. Preventing any clashes was a firm decision."

After a long period of absence, the enhanced security situation led to the return of main international actors and INGOs to Aarsal, including UNHCR, “who were back in the village for three months fixing their space and getting ready to go back to work” stated the mayor. He added that “Action Against Hunger, Danish Refugee Council as well as Mercy Corps are also back since mid-December.”

For the mayor of Aarsal “it all began with the elections in May 2016 of the new municipal council, which conveyed the true choice of Aarsalis who long for stability, peace, and openness. It was a turning point for the people that allowed them to voice their disagreement as to how the village was being run and the crisis ill-managed, also against the town’s ensuing isolation and the bad way the former municipality handled the relationships with the surrounding, especially that peoples’ livelihoods are at stake. We cannot be disconnected from all sides.” But the upcoming parliamentary elections that should take place in May 2018 are anxiously anticipated, knowing the high level of tension that usually surrounds the elections in Lebanon, including the rise in the sectarian hate speech. But these elections are different, because it the proportional voting system gives more power to the Sunni minority in the Baalbak – ElHermel governorate, mainly Aarsalis, and thusly more leverage over their choice of representatives. This power is currently being contested between PM Saad Al Hariri and former minister and head of ISF Ashraf Rifi. The latter is harder on the anti-Iran/Assad/Hizballah rhetoric that still resonates to a large extent in Aarsal. As for the Syrian refugees interviewed, one said “I do not think anything will change in terms of the relationship between Aarsalis and Syrian refugees during the upcoming elections. There is no hostility against us. Even after Fajr Al Jurood (Operation Dawn of the Jurds), nobody took any action against the Syrian presence in the village. Maybe there were very few individual cases of anger, but this does not reflect the overall situation.” Another added, “This has been the case not only recently, but we never felt there is any movement against refugees in Aarsal, not even when the crisis was at its peak during the siege. Some people were unhappy, but they never showed it publicly or acted upon it.”

Annex

Lebanese Focus Group Discussion:

- English Teacher and Former Municipal Council member, 60+ agricultural retiree
- INGO staff and local NGO volunteer
- Accountant, Agriculture
- Retired Internal Security Forces staff and first responder
- Local NGO staff
- Retired Internal Security Forces staff and activist
- Masharei'i el Qaa Agriculture and head of agriculture training committee, internally displaced
- Agriculture
- Former Hariri Foundation employee (clinic) and former Municipal Council member

Syrian Focus Group Discussions

- Civil engineer, Education coordinator, activist (Where from: Rif Dimashq, Arrival date: 2013)
- Teacher, Syrian education initiative (Yabroud, 2014)
- Former law student, photographer (Yabroud, 2014)
- Syrian NGO officer (Rif Dimashq, 2013)
- Teacher and Activist (Qussayr, 2013)
- Protection officer, local Syrian initiative (Rif Dimashq, 2013)
- Teacher, former business student, and part of a local initiative (Rif Dimashq, 2013)
- Civil Engineer, and activist (Rif Dimashq, 2013)

Interviews:

Aarsal Mayor and three municipal council members, including the head of the environmental committee

Mayor of Laboue

Mayor of Al Ayn

NGO Jusour, Founders

NGO Coalition in Aarsal, one participant

Cooperative for Mouneh and rural basket, two founders

Garabed Haroutunian, UNDP Bekaa Area Manager

Participated in the meetings of the MSS teams in: Al Qaa, Al Ayn, and Laboue

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