

Refugees face wave of racism in Lebanon, Egypt
By Rana El Moussaoul
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BEIRUT: A wave of xenophobia is blighting the lives of thousands of Syrian refugees in countries such as Egypt and Lebanon, where they are often blamed for anything that goes wrong. In Egypt, Syrians are accused of taking sides and interfering in the country's political crisis, while in Lebanon they are accused of taking the jobs of Lebanese.

Egyptian media have played an instrumental role in spreading anti-Syrian sentiment, accusing them of joining protests in support of deposed Islamist president Mohammad Morsi.

Morsi, removed by the army on July 3 after huge protests, rose through the ranks of the Muslim Brotherhood – a key component of the opposition in Syria.

“We must boycott Syrian shops because they use our money to terrorize us,” reads one text message distributed via social networks.



File - A Syrian refugee woman holds her child as they doze off on the sidewalk of a street in the southern Lebanese city of Sidon on July 18, 2013. (AFP PHOTO/MAHMOUD ZAYYAT)

“Several unemployed Syrians have been paid 300 Egyptian pounds [43 dollars] by the Muslim Brotherhood’s Guidance Bureau to take part in [pro-Morsi] protests,” the message adds.

The message also accuses Syrians of using weapons supplied to the rebels fighting President Bashar Assad’s regime in clashes in Egypt between pro- and anti-Morsi protesters.

The tone can be just as harsh on Egyptian television.

“If you continue to stand by the Brotherhood, the people will destroy your homes,” controversial presenter Tawfik Okasha said on the privately owned Al-Faraeen channel.

“The people are not ready to accept agents or spies undermining their victory” against Morsi, Okasha added.

The massively popular ONTV channel, also privately owned, has aired anti-Syrian rants.

“Syrians, if you meddle in our affairs, our boots will kick you in the streets,” journalist Youssef al-Husseini said.

Both Husseini and ONTV later apologized for the remarks.

The anti-Assad Syrian Journalists’ Association has called on Egyptians not to “generalize and stigmatize hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees.”

But “right now, the Egyptians believe that being Syrian equals being Muslim Brotherhood,” said Abu Yasser, a young Syrian living in Egypt.

Known best for his stinging criticism of the Brotherhood, Egypt's famous satirist Bassem Youssef has also hit out against the growing anti-Syrian sentiment, blaming "certain liberals, who hate the Muslim Brotherhood, of reproducing the same fascism and the same racism."

Cairo has now imposed new visa regulations requiring Syrians to apply for a visa.

The United Nations has meanwhile expressed concerns over reports of Syrians being deported back to their war-torn country.

In crisis situations "there is always a search for a scapegoat," said Sari Hanafi, who teaches sociology at the American University of Beirut.

"In Egypt, you have a mixture of confusion and basic chauvinism. To help explain the [pro-Morsi] movement, people are blaming the foreigners," Hanafi told AFP.

In Lebanon, which hosts some 600,000 Syrian refugees, rising resentment is linked to socioeconomic problems. A recent survey showed that 82 percent of Lebanese accuse Syrians of stealing their jobs.

More than 54 percent of Lebanese believe their country should close its borders to Syrians altogether.

Caretaker Finance Minister Nicolas Nahhas told AFP that Syrians in Lebanon have the right to work "except in business and commerce." He argued that they were causing "unfair competition" after 377 illegal businesses in eastern Lebanon were shut down.

While the conflict in Syria has caused significant damage to Lebanon's economy, partly by putting off tourists, many Syrians have rented homes and invested in the country.

All too often comments that "these Syrians" "rape our daughters" and "spread diseases" can be overheard.

But such racist remarks also contrast sharply with the welcome granted by many Lebanese to refugees, particularly in the border areas.

"The Lebanese have known war in all its forms," according to the Lebanese Observatory for the Rights of Workers and Employees.

"We know only too well what it means to be a refugee. The Syrian people have welcomed us in the past – we must do the same."

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