LEBANON

Mixed Messages as Media Cope with Internal Stress and External Pressure

» Magda Abu-Fadil

With Lebanese media mired in dysfunctional domestic politics, facing regional security threats and international upheavals, and troubled by their own shaky existence, it is no surprise that there has been a hodgepodge of migration coverage since 2015.
ABOUT EUROMED MIGRATION IV AND THE STUDY

“How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on Migration?”

This is a Chapter of the Study “How does the media on both sides of the Mediterranean report on migration?” carried out and prepared by the Ethical Journalism Network and commissioned in the framework of EUROMED Migration IV (EMM4, 2016-2019). The objective of this project, financed by the European Union and implemented by ICMPD, is to support EU Member States and ENI Southern Partner Countries in establishing a comprehensive, constructive and operational dialogue and co-operation framework, with a particular focus on reinforcing instruments and capacities to develop and implement evidence-based and coherent migration and international protection policies. In order to achieve this objective, EMM 4 builds upon the results of the first three phases of the project (2004-2015) and tailors its activities around two pillars: the first pillar facilitates effective North-South and South-South regional dialogues and co-operation in the four main fields of migration and international protection-related matters (legal migration; irregular migration; migration and development; international protection and asylum). The second pillar focuses on capacity-building by applying a new outcome-oriented approach that includes sub-regional activities, tailor-made national training programmes and targeted technical assistance packages for committed partners. Both pillars are supported by a horizontal and cross-cutting thread aimed at accumulating evidence-based knowledge and establishing effective communication in order to contribute to a more balanced narrative on migration.

Find the entire study at www.icmpd.org/EMM4migration_narrative

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Lebanon has a turbulent history, including a civil war from 1975 to 1990 during which print and broadcast media were created to service warring factions, mostly along sectarian and politically ideological lines. Radio stations and TV channels continue presenting their founders’ views, if not in full militia fashion as during the war, but their bias is inescapable.

Although glossaries of migrant-related terminology - provided by international organisations and NGOs -- exist, journalists covering the story still use terms like “migrant,” “refugee” and “settler” incorrectly and interchangeably.

Glossaries are not always updated fast enough to keep up with the media’s needs, and not necessarily available in the three main languages used in Lebanese news outlets: Arabic, French and English.

Statistics are a tricky topic. The government’s figures on the number of Syrian refugees and migrants may vary from those of international organisations and United Nations agencies tasked with registering asylum seekers.

A sticking point is the number of undocumented residents who slip undetected across borders, evade aid agency safety nets, and disappear through the cracks of bureaucracy.

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN convention on “non-refoulement,” or not sending refugees away once they arrive.

Sociologist Mona Fayad wrote an analysis piece in Annahar daily 4 October 2016 http://www.annahar.com/article/480019 on Media’s Role in Dealing With Syrian Migration. She said Syrian refugees, exceeding a third of the population, threatened Lebanon’s social equilibrium and that the impact had begun to manifest itself in the rising rate of violence and security incidents involving Syrians who accept aid in exchange for services rendered to partisan groups.

Her article also touched on the causes of youth radicalisation in migrant and refugee groups and neighbouring disadvantaged local communities, and the friction caused by their interaction.

“We shouldn’t overlook the fact that the Syrian migration comes against a backdrop of Lebanon undergoing a dangerous political, economic, and social crisis tied to domestic problems and the conflict in Syria,” she said, noting that all these factors could undermine security and become a time bomb in the medium and long term.

Lebanon, whose population is about four million, hosts upwards of 1.5 million Syrian refugees, and some half a million Palestinians in camps established after the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, to which were added thousands of Iraqis fleeing the violence in their country after the US invasion in 2003.

Naharnet http://bit.ly/2gCx9lw, quoting the United Nations, reports that more than half the Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not have valid residence permits, leading to a rising number of unregistered new-borns.

Additionally, many Syrian refugees are hamstrung by measures making it almost impossible for them to obtain or renew their residence permits. As a result children are dropping out of school – if they even attend – and replacing adult men to become their families’ main breadwinners.

Lebanon has a turbulent history, including a civil war from 1975 to 1990 during which print and broadcast media were created to service warring factions, mostly along sectarian and politically ideological lines. They competed with state-run outlets and have morphed into commercial, albeit partisan, ventures.

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While examples of fair and balanced coverage of migrant-related issues exist, they seem to have been overshadowed by a proliferation of hate-mongering journalism. Those listed in this report focus on the negative coverage and its ramifications.

Shifting political alliances since the Syrian conflict began in 2011 have also meant a certain degree of recurrent escalation or de-escalation in the tone used by some media outlets.

There was no reporting in these examples on the diaspora in general, remittances, diaspora investments, and little on migrants’ repatriation, save for Lebanese politicians’ statements about setting up safe havens within Syria for those escaping the violence.

Most of the emphasis was on the politics, economics, development / aid and security angles of the story. As with donor fatigue, there is refugee fatigue, so stories involving Syrians reflect the mood.

Emotional, human interest and fact-based issues dominate the news agenda when security and terrorism matters are at stake or when crimes are committed; when Lebanon receives or requests more foreign assistance to handle the flood of Syrians; and when international dignitaries and celebrities visit refugee camps.

Major challenges in telling the migration story from inside the newsroom include:

- Access to reliable data and statistics. Data comes from conflicting sources with an interest at stake, so verification can be problematic;
• Political and economic interests that influence media coverage and combine with sectarian, religious, and social considerations;
• The presence of hate speech in public discourse, which has become increasingly common. Politicians take to different media platforms to blame their rivals for policy mistakes and social media used by all sides adds fuel to the fire by repeating offences that lead to hate crimes;
• The lack of voices for migrants; some media fail to be inclusive because of other priorities, interests, budgets and deadlines.

In all of this social media play an increasingly visible and influential role in coverage of migrants. In some cases it’s positive, like rallying support for needy refugees, but it can also be negative, blaming them for rising crime figures, or for adding to demand for basic services and putting pressure on crumbling infrastructure. This often inflames politicians’ negative statements.

A tendency to sensationalise and to use stereotypes has always been present in Lebanese media but this ebbs and flows with the magnitude of crises. In television, it’s common for newscasts to begin with the headlines followed by an editorial-cum-opinion introduction passing off as news. That segment is used to lash out at adversaries, criticise policies and practices, defend positions, and draw attention to certain causes, before delving into actual news reports.

Online media provide a wider spectrum, given the possibility of posting content 24/7 but social media and comments – where available – are fertile ground for exacerbating matters.

Editorial bias is inevitable in a country where media answer to political, economic, religious and sectarian patrons and where neighbouring Syria, whose government is both villain and hero to different groups of Lebanese citizens, is an inextricable part of Lebanon’s history.

During the Lebanese civil war Damascus sent troops under Arab League auspices to help quell the violence. This led to 30 years of heavy-handed tutelage.

The troops were chased out following a civil revolt in 2005 after former prime minister Rafic Hariri was assassinated, but Syrian influence over internal Lebanese affairs remains strong.

Meanwhile, the levels of competence and skills of journalists covering the migration story range from good to mediocre. In general, underpaid journalists don’t have fixed beats so reporters may cover different topics on a given day leaving little time to worry about the political correctness of choosing the right terms.

Moreover, drastic budget cuts in most media mean journalists have to multitask on fieldwork and may also spend more time covering from their desks to meet increasingly shorter deadlines.

Pressure of time and limited sources of information hinder Lebanese journalists. Advertising revenue has been falling for many years and newspapers have laid off editorial staff, or cut the number of pages, and turned their attention to digital publishing. An enormous burden falls upon the remaining journalists.

The grave economic problems have seen several news organisations unable to pay their employees in months, so there is little incentive to go out on a limb in reporting assignments. Some leading papers have announced their intention to close down.

Where there’s engagement with the audience it varies from cursory to non-existent. Staffers may respond to comments and social media posts, but more often individual journalists active on social media do the engaging.

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CASE STUDIES

The following are a selection of media controversies in 2016 arising from migration-related coverage:

CASE ONE: “A refugee’s shoe is worth more than Lebanon and the leaders…Bassel Al Amin to jail” was a Lebanon Files headline 6 December 2016. The online news site said media student and former intern at Al Jadeed TV Bassel Al Amin had posted on his Facebook page: “The shoe of a Syrian refugee, worker and citizen is worth more than your republic, cedars, Lebanon, right wing, independence, government, revolution and leaders.” http://www.lebanonfiles.com/news/1119419.

The Lebanese penal code dates back to 1943 and bars “targeting national unity or disturbing the serenity of the nation’s elements,” a catch-all phrase for stifling dissent. Lebanon Files said the Anti-Cyber Crime Bureau had summoned Al Amin for questioning and he had been jailed for a week.

Former interior minister and lawyer Ziad Baroud said http://bit.ly/2heNYmE the Facebook rant did not justify incarceration, that it could have been handled with a fine, and that the code needed updating.

“All journalists reject being summoned to any investigation, be it by the anti-cyber crime bureau or any other authority, but in the case of Al Amin, all journalists in Lebanon wash their hands of him because he insulted his people, land, cedars and country’s leaders for the sake of a Syrian refugee’s, laborer’s, and citizen’s shoe,” Lebanon Files said. “Wouldn’t he be better off going to live in Syria and participate in the so-called revolution his way by dealing with the shoes?”

MTV News said it was honoured to protect Lebanon against marauders and launched into a tirade against all media that defended Al Amin’s right to speak up under the guise of freedom of expression, including Al Akhbar daily which it labelled “base, mercenary, racist, and sectarian to the bone.” MTV is anti-Syrian regime, Al Jadeed has seesawed in allegiances and Al Akhbar is pro-Syria and supportive of Hezbollah, a close ally of the Syrian regime.

An MTV News reporter asked whether Al Akhbar’s journalist who strongly supported Al Amin should be addressed in like fashion and aired a mock Facebook post stating: “MTV’s shoe is worth your paper, slogans, racism, sectarianism, pens, dependence (on patrons), history, and anyone supporting your support…”

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Following his arrest, several journalists and activists defended Al Amin on social media and called for his release using the hashtag “A (Facebook) status is not a crime” while MTV News launched its own campaign across platforms and in emails to opinion leaders slamming Al Akhbar and Al Jadeed.

CASE TWO: MTV Lebanon Prime Time News – December 7, 2016 – YouTube https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YBdjZjLCs4&feature=youtu.be. This report on Syrians in refugee camps in Lebanon raised alarms about their ballooning birth rates, but refugees considered them a blessing, according to those interviewed. Tents barely large enough for a family of five had seen an average increase of one person a year, the reporter said. Refugees interviewed for the report averaged 7-10 children per family, saying it was normal and good. One refugee said he stopped at eight children because camp conditions were difficult.
CASE THREE: Students from arts school Académie Libanaise des Beaux Arts (ALBA), at the University of Balamand, posted a YouTube video https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Hw7rOd3pzT8 called “I wouldn’t date a Syrian” that went viral on traditional and social media. It showed French-speaking female students dismissive of Syrian young men in racial tones. The video purported to survey women students by asking if they would date Syrian men. All the women’s replies were negative citing cultural and educational differences. The video was subtitled in Arabic. http://www.lebanondebate.com/news/292125

An ALBA professor published a Facebook clarification saying the video was a student assignment to highlight the issue of “veiled racism in Lebanese society and the impact of a sensitive topic on social media.” But it went awry when the video elicited angry reactions, with comments suggesting these Lebanese women were trying to dissociate themselves from their Arab identity and appear Westernised by speaking French, and blasted ALBA for its students’ insensitivity. An email from ALBA’s administration later reiterated an earlier statement saying the video was part of an academic project, issued an apology, and condemned all offensive racist, political or religious content.

CASE FOUR: Al Joumhouriya newspaper published a report on 10 November 2016 headlined: “Dima Sadek Attacks OTV and Calls for Action” http://www.aljoumhouria.com/news/index/336670. The article said LBCI TV anchor/presenter Dima Sadek had joined other critics of OTV, her former employer and an arm of the Free Patriotic Movement of Lebanese President Michel Aoun, to disparage an episode of the candid camera-type program “Still Your Heart” in which actors insulted and demeaned a Syrian. The channel had aired an episode in which a refugee was terrorised when the station crew insulted and humiliated him by forcing him to get down on his knees and stomach and take off his clothes, before admitting it was a stunt. Activists attacked the station on social media.

Sadek expressed revulsion at the episode, noting it proved society was sick, and called for action before disaster strikes. On November 18 Al Joumhouriya quoted Sadek as saying: “Stop That Program.” http://www.aljoumhouria.com/news/index/336477. She posted online messages saying: “From the day I left OTV, I took a firm decision not to criticize this station, no matter what... After I saw the video, I considered that faced with such sadistic hallucination and nausea it would be unethical not to attack OTV, or at least this program...What madness, what hatred, what blasphemy made you reach that point? Are those who wrote the script and produced the terrifying and revolting segment we saw, humans like us? What, pray tell, is this? What is this? Where did you get all this hatred and racism and haughtiness? Since when were you like this?”

CASE FIVE: Annahar daily caused a social media stir when it published a story November 9, 2016, “Further Deterioration of Air Quality Following Syrian Asylum Costing $151 Million Since 2011.” The unsigned news item referred to Environment Minister Mohamed Machnouk chairing a meeting to discuss a proposed national strategy for air quality management. Machnouk said a 2011 World Bank study had estimated the deteriorating air quality cost Lebanon $151 million annually based on a garbage crisis in the country and the presence of some 1.8 million Syrian refugees. Pro-Syrian advocates took to social media to criticize Annahar on charges of stereotyping and dehumanising Syrian migrants.
CASE SIX: The NOW Lebanon news website headlined an article November 22, 2016: “Hezbollah MP: Regulate movement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon” https://now.mmedia.me/lb/en/NewsReports/567141-hezbollah-mp-regulate-movement-of-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon The article said a member of Hezbollah’s parliamentary bloc had called for regulating the movement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, hours after a north-eastern town was rocked by a wave of deadly terror attacks. It said the legislator proposed gathering the refugees in “one camp,” with no details on how the plan may be implemented, adding that their movement should be regulated through special passes granted by security forces after their relocation.

CASE SEVEN: Al Akhbar daily reported August 17, 2016 http://www.al-akhbar.com/print/263857 “MTV is Worried About Journalism By Strangers.” It said a news item on MTV pointed to problems threatening Lebanese journalists’ livelihoods caused by Syrian asylum seekers edging them out of jobs. The Journalists Union had expressed alarm about competition from foreigners in media organisations undermining Lebanese journalists’ employment. Al Akhbar criticised the union for mobilising to protect Lebanese journalists from “strangers” but systematically denying them rights and depriving them of union membership. “While waiting for the union president to take a stand, Labour Minister Sajaan Qazzi was firm and used terminology akin to war and exclusion, saying the media world must be cleansed of foreigners,” Al Akhbar said. Qazzi had referred to print media, where he said foreigners were replacing Lebanese, and insisted on “Lebanizing the Lebanese press” - a throwback Civil War and sectarian cantons parlance, it added.


CASE NINE: The French-language monthly Magazine November 2016 issue headlined an article “Syrian Refugees: Rabiyeh Residents’ Daily Calvary.” http://magazine.com.lb/index.php/fr/component/k2/item/17290-refugies-syriens-quotidien-des-habitants-de-rabie. The feature focused on “rudeness, filth, and insecurity” in the Beirut suburb of Rabiyeh where residents were furious at the endless parade of Syrian refugees heading to the German embassy nearby and turning residents’ daily lives into a nightmare. The reporter mentioned refuse, discarded food, outdoor and in-building bathroom use, and aggressive behaviour towards residents. Magazine said residents had petitioned local MPs and written to the German ambassador to relocate the refugee reception centre, to no avail.

CASE TEN: Lebanon Files wrote on September 9, 2016: “Basil is a Racist...But Granting Citizenship Isn’t Handled with Epics” http://www.lebanonfiles.com/print.php?id=1089438. It said Foreign Minister Gebran Basil – son-in-law of President Michel Aoun – had offered netizens and social media users the chance to lambast his “racism” following his remarks at a Lebanese expat conference in New York during which he announced he’d support a law granting citizenship to the children of Lebanese women married to foreigners, provided they’re not Syrians or Palestinians, “to safeguard our land.”

CASE ELEVEN: An Al Modon article October 1, 2016 titled “Eye on Syrians in Lebanon”...Racism’s Tragedy http://www.almodon.com/print/20a1d991-f6a1-40e9-bf2c-9e0607049129/6910c86-f4a0-4721-b6d6-b86ef9f7f2c said propaganda against Syrians was “documented” and that racism was no longer limited to political statements but had become institutionalised.

Given the range of views, bias and prejudice that infects Lebanese media recommending a course of action for journalists to rectify negative coverage may seem straightforward, but to be effective it must reach all levels of the media. The steps outlined in the introduction to this report, all of which apply to Lebanon, will certainly help.