

## Society

## Interview

## Lebanon's youth bearing the brunt of unemployment, regional instability

Samar Kadi

Beirut

Lebanon is plagued by one of its worst unemployment crises in history, compounded by domestic and regional political instability and a massive influx of refugees fleeing war in neighbouring Syria. As in most parts of the world, Lebanon's youth bear the brunt of the country's economic woes.

The overall unemployment rate in Lebanon stands at 25%, with unemployment among those under 25 at 37%, Lebanese Labour Minister Mohammad Kabbara said.

"We have approximately 30,000-35,000 young people who graduate from university every year and only 5,000 jobs are offered annually, which leaves some 30,000 without jobs," he said.

"The majority of young graduates used to find work in the Gulf countries but we all know what the situation is like at present. In fact, many Lebanese expatriates are returning home because of shrinking opportunities."

With the drop in oil prices and rising security concerns, employment opportunities in the traditional external markets – in the Gulf, in African countries and in the West – have considerably decreased for Lebanon's labour

force. Some counties have sought to apply tougher entry regulations that further limit employment possibilities, increasingly blocking the outlets that traditionally helped ease Lebanese unemployment.

"This is seriously impacting the national economy, which relies largely on the remittances of expatriates," Kabbara said. "The situation in Lebanon is extremely difficult now, and this is due to regional crises, especially in the Gulf region, and because of the war in Syria."

Considering such a dramatic situation, there is an urgent need to create jobs within Lebanon's borders by adapting the educational curricula to future labour market needs, the minister stressed.

"There should be a comprehensive national labour study of the market. We have a saturation of engineers, medical doctors and business and finance professionals, whereas there are other professions which Lebanon needs and is in short of," Kabbara said.

"Vocational and technical education is very important but still untapped. We need to guide the youth towards fields that offer job opportunities, such as vocational training, which produces specialised skilled workers."

The "massive and unorganised" influx of Syrian refugees, he said, aggravated Lebanon's unemployment problem. Tensions increased in recent years as refugees competed with Leba-



Lebanese Labour Minister Mohammad Kabbara.

(Provided by Samar Kadi)

**The unemployment rate in Lebanon stands at 25% with unemployment among those under 25 at 37%.**

nese for jobs and strained the country's basic services and infrastructure, especially in the poorest areas, where refugees are mostly highly concentrated.

"The competition by cheap Syrian labour is real and very true," Kabbara said. "There are many illegal non-Lebanese (Syrian) businesses. They do not abide by the labour laws, evade taxes and lack mandatory requirements, constituting the biggest danger to our national economy."

"Moreover, you have big local institutions in Beirut employing Syrians because they pay them lower wages. I am not only talking about unskilled labour but also computer technicians, IT engineers and other jobs that should be for the Lebanese."

Kabbara said the ministry was reinforcing inspections to crack down on illegal Syrian employment and businesses.

"The problem is that we have a small number of inspectors who cannot properly cover all areas. We are mainly focusing on areas where you have high refugee concentration, namely in the north and the Bekaa Valley, and we have already closed down tens of illegal trades and fined Lebanese firms hiring non-Lebanese illegally."

Also, child labour, which was an issue in Lebanon before the Syrian crisis, has multiplied since the arrival of refugees in 2011. Some Lebanese employers prefer to hire children, finding them cheaper and more compliant than adults. The Labour Ministry

estimates their number is no less than 250,000, with the overwhelming majority Syrians. Some NGOs say that 60-70% of refugee children work.

Almost all refugee children in Lebanon's eastern Bekaa Valley work in fields, many exposed to dangerous pesticides and fertilizers. In towns and cities, they work on the streets, begging, selling flowers or shining shoes. They also work in markets, factories, shops and construction sites and run deliveries.

Lebanon hosts 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees, one-quarter of its population but officials said the number was at least 1.5 million.

Kabbara said Lebanon was expected to benefit tremendously from Syria's eventual reconstruction. "For instance, the Chinese are very interested in Lebanon (as a base) for Syria reconstruction. This will definitely create thousands of job opportunities for the Lebanese," he said.

In the longer term, the oil and gas sector is bound to create considerable and sustainable employment opportunities at all levels.

However, the economic situation in Lebanon remains tightly linked to other regional issues, including the war in Syria and the Gulf crisis. "All this is impacting us and we are paying a high price, especially our youth," Kabbara said.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society sections editor.

## Setting up a model school in al-Qaeda-run Syrian enclave

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Istanbul

Running a school in the enclave controlled by Syria's al-Qaeda affiliate, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham, Syrian-American Rania Kisar has become skilled in getting her way, either by negotiating with militants or by pushing back against them.

When she was preparing for the students' graduation, a militant group sent an inspector who told her not to play music at the ceremony. She argued back. Then on graduation day, she invited the group.

The ceremony started with a nod to tradition with a Quranic recital in line with the inspector's wishes but then, as the students filed out in front of an audience of relatives and local officials, as well as representatives from the militant group, Kisar played "Pomp and Circumstance" – the anthem used at graduations in the United States.

**Syrian-American Rania Kisar believes that the international community's fear of radical Islamists taking over Syria is exaggerated.**

It was a calculated gamble: She was betting the militants would not make a scene.

"It was matter-of-fact. They did nothing," she said.

She knew why they had intervened in the first place. "If they don't interfere, they won't be considered powerful," she said.

Idlib province in north-western Syria is the last major stronghold of the rebellion that erupted in 2011 against Syrian President Bashar Assad. Al-Qaeda's branch is the strongest force in the territory: It leads an alliance of factions known as Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) and domi-

nates the administration set up by the opposition to run the province.

The group must tread carefully, balancing between its aim to control and its wariness of triggering a backlash from residents and other factions. So far, it has stayed relatively pragmatic: It takes every opportunity to show it is in charge but has shown no interest in a wide-scale imposition of an extremist vision of Islamic law.

They halted public killings of criminals; there are no religious police patrolling streets, arresting or beating people and they haven't forced women to wear the niqab face veil.

That is a sharp contrast to the Islamic State (ISIS) in the stretches of Syria and Iraq where the rival militant group has ruled for three years.

Instead, al-Qaeda administrators and fighters try to enforce rules on a smaller scale and avoid heavy-handed confrontation and presenting themselves as the champions of Syria's "revolution" against President Bashar Assad.

Idlib stands in a tenuous position among the international and regional powers that are effectively carving up Syria.

Assad's military had threatened an offensive on Idlib but is focused elsewhere, against ISIS militants to the east. Turkish troops and their Syrian allies who control parts of neighbouring Aleppo province were reportedly mobilising to move into Idlib – prompting sharp warnings from HTS against any attempt to do so. The United States is focused on its own campaign against ISIS with the assault on Raqqa and it is unclear how it and Assad's ally Russia want to deal with Idlib.

Idlib, swelling with more than 900,000 Syrians displaced from other parts of the country, is the refuge of an opposition movement that hoped to create a new Syria and only a few years earlier appeared to have the momentum in the conflict.

Now Kisar and others like her are trying to keep al-Qaeda's influence at bay.

"Everyone sold us out," she said in an interview in her office in Istanbul, where she regularly travels.

Kisar said the international community's fear of radical Islamists taking over Syria is exaggerated and reflects a lack of understanding of the Syrian opposition. She and others argue that the militants are needed, they provide services and infrastructure as well as skilled fighters for now but will not have support later.

From the start, Kisar has been a true believer in the uprising. After the revolt began in 2011, she left her administrative job at a Dallas university and joined the opposition.

She travelled with fighters on the front lines, helping displaced people. She organised services in opposition territories. Along the way, she survived an air strike and lost a colleague who was kidnapped by ISIS militants and was believed killed.

Finally, she settled in Maaret al-Nu'man, Idlib's second largest city. It was one of the few strongholds of the moderate Free Syrian Army (FSA), the umbrella group for the internationally backed opposition factions. Radical factions such as al-Qaeda have grown in influence and gained a foothold but Maaret al-Nu'man's residents largely continued to support the FSA. They repeatedly staged protests whenever al-Qaeda fighters went too far, arresting journalists or cracking down on opponents.

In 2015, Kisar launched the Syrian Humanitarian Institute for National Empowerment (SHINE).

It provides classes for adults in computers, programming and web design. Registered in Dallas and funded by donations from Turkey and private citizens in the United States and elsewhere, the foundation has graduated 237 students.

Kisar takes great pride in the result: A "geek squad" of tech-savvy men and women who can fix smart phones and computers. That is vital in opposition-held areas, where there are no telephone lines and the

population relies on satellite internet for communication.

"There are no private institutes, no universities, there are no hospitals," she said. "It is us, a bunch of locals, volunteers, stepping forward and saying, OK, I am going to clean the street, I am going to go volunteer in a hospital and I am going to build a school. ... This is my part. This is my honour."

**■ The Syrian Humanitarian Institute for National Empowerment (SHINE) provides classes for adults in computers, programming and web design.**

Her first brush with the militants came when she had to explain her work to gain accreditation from the bureaucracy they control.

She bickered with one official, arguing that armed groups should not control civilian affairs. He wouldn't look her in the eye because she's a woman but "when he heard I am from America, he said: 'We have every honour that an American Muslim is here and wants to be here,'" she recalled.

Even in heated debates with the militants, she said, she has kept a respectful tone, something that has helped keep her operating.

It also helps that she is a woman. "I can get away with a lot of things," she said with her characteristic giggle. "There is a lot more leniency towards me because I am a woman."

The ultraconservative militants were concerned that SHINE provides classes for men and women. So she negotiated to keep it going by segregating the space – men on the bottom floor, women on the top. When air strikes hit the top floor, she set up separate areas on the ground floor.

The militants sent inspectors to ensure classes observed their in-

terpretation of Islamic laws. The strictly computer-focused programme had nothing that would offend them, she said. "They want to interfere in everything," she added.

HTS is increasingly intervening in day-to-day affairs in Idlib and in civil society groups, confiscating goods and taking control of exchange bureaus, said Sam Heller, a Syria fellow at the Century Foundation, a US think-tank. Its attempts to seize a role in provision of relief aid have alarmed the aid community, he said.

At the same time, it is struggling between its identity as a hard-line jihadist movement and its ambition to lead the rebellion with its variety of factions, wrote another Syria watcher, Mona Alami, in a recent Atlantic Council article.

When that balancing act breaks down, violence can explode.

In June, Maaret al-Nu'man was shaken when pitched street battles erupted between al-Qaeda militants and the FSA, bringing gruesome revenge killings and leaving at least six civilians dead. HTS fighters fired on residents protesting against the militants' presence in the streets.

For a moment, the chaos seemed to shatter Kisar's spirit. "It is going to break loose," she said over the phone at the time. "Everybody is fighting everybody."

She left the town for several days to "breathe."

Eventually, calm was restored with a shaky reconciliation, though one that increased the militants' influence: The FSA faction running the town had to leave their offices, replaced by an agency linked to al-Qaeda.

Kisar resumed her work – and her own balancing act. This time, she was preparing festivities for local children to celebrate a major Muslim holiday.

"You must check out the videos," she said, giggling. "It is like Disneyland. It is SHINEland. It is majestic."

(The Associated Press)