

The Tripoli Project:

A Case Study of Middle Eastern
Urban Revival

**THE
FARES
CENTER**

The Fletcher School
Tufts University



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1. About the Project

Cities across the Middle East are under enormous stress in the face of conflict. Major urban centers like Aleppo, Mosul, Homs, and Raqqa have undergone destruction and changes in demographic composition and character. They will for generations suffer from the aftermath of war. When the dust settles there will be many such cities across the region that will need to rebuild and learn to live in peace once again. One such city is Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, which is emerging from 40 years of intermittent conflict. The metropolis' path to economic recovery and peace has been marred by extreme poverty, marginalization by the state, and political sectarianism. Additionally, Tripoli has been influenced by regional factors such as the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the Syrian refugee crisis. It is also burdened by the image of being home to networks of radical extremist groups. Yet, all is not bleak. There is also tremendous energy, hope, and potential driven by Tripolitans committed to hastening economic development, strengthening inter-community relations, and pursuing social justice.

Initiated by the Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies, the Tripoli Project aims to mobilize the various specializations of the Fletcher School as well as the wider academic community in the Greater Boston Area to support and understand the revival of the city as it is led by its own people. Thus, the project's broad strategic objectives are:

- To serve as a multi- and inter-disciplinary forum to understand the various social, political, economic, and cultural aspects of Tripoli's revival.
- To facilitate graduate and post-graduate research and professional opportunities to engage with the city of Tripoli.
- To develop a network of local, regional, and international stakeholders interested in contributing to Tripoli's revival.

Yet ultimately, the Tripoli Project is not just a study of Tripoli. Through our approach, we hope to identify how post-conflict communities can sustainably promote economic prosperity and social harmony and how their success can be replicated elsewhere in the region. The lessons we learn from Tripoli will both nuance often pessimistic conversations about the future of war-torn cities and provide a guide to the reconstruction of other Middle Eastern urban centers.

For further information about the project, please visit our website or contact us at fares-center@tufts.edu.

<https://sites.tufts.edu/tripoliproject/>

2. About the Fletcher School at Tufts University

Established in 1933, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy is the oldest exclusively graduate school of international affairs in the United States. The primary aim of the Fletcher School is to offer a broad program of professional education in international relations to a select group of graduate students committed to maintaining the stability and prosperity of a complex, challenging and increasingly global society.¹

The Fares Center

The Fares Center for Eastern Mediterranean Studies seeks to create an academic environment for the promotion of greater understanding of the rich heritage of the Eastern Mediterranean and of the significant challenges that this region faces in the twenty-first century. The Center acts as a major focus for cross-regional and cross-cultural analysis, providing a forum for the articulation of a rich diversity of viewpoints and encouraging the consideration of policy issues from an international perspective. Lying at the interface between the academic, policy, and business communities, the Center is in a unique position to sponsor academic symposia, conferences, and seminars to promote accurate analysis and interdisciplinary discussions.



Tripoli's residential skyline from the Al-Mina district

¹ Mission and Impact, The Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, Tufts University, <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/About/Mission-and-Impact>

3. The Multidisciplinary Approach: The Fletcher School and Tripoli

The numerous opportunities and challenges facing Tripoli constitute a web of legal, economic, social, historical, and political issues wherein local, regional, and international actors have a stake. The Fletcher School houses 19 research centers, chairs, and programs specializing in fields central to the city of Tripoli including: human security, economic development, technology, international business and finance, environment and resource policy, maritime studies and peace building.² Over the past decades, the school's faculty, with the support of graduate students, have produced cutting edge research and have lead innovation in their respective fields. The intersection of the Fletcher School's diverse disciplines in international affairs with Tripoli's post-conflict landscape thus provides a dynamic foreground for a mutually beneficial partnership.

In the summer of 2017, eight Fletcher students worked on Tripoli-related issues in collaboration with the Lebanese government, international NGOs and IGOs, local non-profits, and private foundations

The Fares Center seeks to be a nexus point of the emerging partnership between Tripoli's stakeholders and the Fletcher School. The center is uniquely positioned to address the question of post-conflict revival in Tripoli and beyond. Complementing its geographic expertise, it currently collaborates with different components of the school to develop a comprehensive approach that includes insights from multiple disciplines. The project is already actively engaged with local actors in the Tripolitan community. In the summer of 2017, eight Fletcher students worked on Tripoli-related issues in collaboration with the Lebanese government, international NGOs and IGOs, local non-profits, and private foundations. Moreover, a wide network of actors in Tripoli have expressed keen interest in and supported engagement with the Fletcher School. These include civil society activists, government officials, politicians, entrepreneurs, local and international NGOs, UN agencies, as well as universities and research institutes.



Off the coast of Tripoli, on the way to Rabbit Island

² A complete list of research institutions at Fletcher is available at: <http://fletcher.tufts.edu/Research/Centers-Chairs-and-Programs> "Peacebuliding In Lebanon: Tripoli Supplement," United Nations Development Program, March 2015, p 1, http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/archive/tripoli-supplement.html.

4. Why Tripoli?

The abatement of Tripoli's internal conflict in 2014 has given way to new optimism as the state, international aid system, and the private sector accelerate their efforts towards positive change. At the local level, there has been: an upsurge in civil society actors, a burgeoning social entrepreneurship scene, a wave of arts-based peacebuilding initiatives, and the swelling of an enthusiastic youth base determined to revitalize the city. At the same time, the war in Syria has attracted an increased level of international attention to Tripoli, as the city—located just 30 km from the Syrian border-- is a likely hub for many of the reconstruction efforts in a post-conflict Syria. As of 2015, of the city's 478,00 residents, nearly a fifth are Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Tripoli hosts 70,000 of Lebanon's 1.5 million Syrian refugees, making expansion and diversification of the city's economy evermore essential. At the same time, the conflict in Tripoli, marked with sectarian elements, has facets parallel to the politics of the Syrian war and has been discussed as a critical tipping point for potential destabilization in Lebanon.

As of 2015, of the city's 478,00 residents, nearly a fifth are Syrian and Palestinian refugees. Tripoli hosts 70,000 of Lebanon's 1.5 million Syrian refugees.

This section of the report provides a quick glimpse of the city, offering abbreviated narratives of the historical context, conflict, security landscape, displacement trends, and economic situation. It is informed, in part, by interviews conducted during a two-week trip to Lebanon in January 2017 and by extensive secondary research over the course of the following months. As part of the field research, the Tripoli Project team met with numerous stakeholders and experts working in the city to assess the interest of local actors and establish initial opportunities for future projects. We met representatives from:

- American University of Beirut
- Al-Azm University
- Beyond Reform and Development
- Carnegie Middle East Center
- Conflict in Cities and the Contested State
- Danish Refugee Council
- Intelligile
- International Medical Corps
- International Rescue Committee
- March Lebanon
- Perla
- Former Prime Minister Najib Mikati
- Ruwwad
- Road Map to Reconciliation
- Safadi Foundation
- Sirens Associates
- Synaps
- Tripoli Special Economic Zone
- Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club
- Tyour Amal School for Syrians
- Université Saint Joseph
- University of Balamand
- UNESCWA
- UNDP
- Utopia
- We Love Tripoli

4.1 Historical Perspective: What are the roots of Tripoli's current situation?

Although Tripoli today is often cited as Lebanon's "deprived city" or even "Mother of the Poor,"³ it has a long and storied history. Inhabited from as early as the 14th century BC, Tripoli contains architectural remnants that tell of its layered past. Founded by the Phoenicians, Tripoli was historically the center of a confederation consisting of Sidon, Tyre, and Arados Island. This earned the city its name: "Tripolis," meaning "triple city."⁴ Tripoli gradually developed into a commercial and trading hub due to the strategic location of its port on the Eastern Mediterranean, particularly during the Mamluk dynasty. Under the Ottoman Empire (1520 to 1918), the city was a major administrative district.

However, Tripoli's privileged status in the Eastern Mediterranean came to an abrupt end in the 20th century. Under the French Mandate (1918 to 1943), the colonial power carved Tripoli into the state of Lebanon, despite the fact that many of its residents would rather have been included in Syria. Tripoli continues to share extensive socio-cultural, religious, and economic ties with towns that ended up in Syria, particularly Homs and Hama, for whom Tripoli was the main port. The origin of the modern Lebanese state was thus also the start of a fracture between Tripoli and Beirut, a divide which remains alive today.⁵



Taynal Mosque in Tripoli

The city progressively de-industrialized during the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) as major infrastructure services ceased to operate. The Iraq Petroleum Company pipeline and refinery stopped operations in 1976, as did the railway connection to the city. Agricultural production in the surrounding areas also declined. The city never fully recovered economically. During the 1980s, in part due to economic decline, Tripoli became the stronghold of the Harakat Al-Tawhid, a fundamentalist armed movement linked to Islamist opposition movements in Syria.

Nonetheless, the popular framing of Tripoli as a Sunni stronghold overshadows the image that most Tripolitans are proud of: that of a uniquely diverse city where people of different ethnic and religious backgrounds coexisted and flourished - like many other centuries-old cities in the region. The fact that many minority and elite groups have migrated away from Tripoli in recent decades due to perceived social discrimination, armed

3 "Peacebuliding In Lebanon: Tripoli Supplement," United Nations Development Program, March 2015, p 1, http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/archive/tripoli-supplement.html.

4 "Tripoli City Profile," UN Habitat, 2016, p 5, <https://unhabitat.org/tripoli-city-profile-2016/>.

5 Hilal Khashan, "Lebanon's Islamist Stronghold," Middle East Quarterly, Spring, 2011. <http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/2948.pdf>

conflict, and economic collapse is also lamented. While respecting its character as a predominantly Islamic city, there is a marked aspiration to recover its more cosmopolitan character.

4.2 Resolving Conflict: How does violence begin and end?

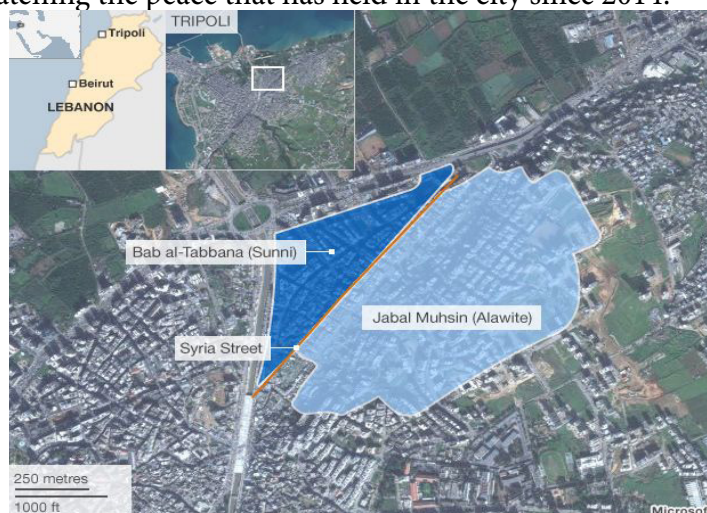
The case of Tripoli presents an interesting example of a protracted urban conflict in a post-conflict state. It poses a series of fascinating questions that are not easily answered, including identifying the true drivers of the conflict, and how and why it ended. Many are quick to characterize Tripoli's conflict as a sectarian struggle between the minority Alawites and majority Sunni Muslims in Lebanon, exacerbated by the political strife in Syria. Though sectarian elements are present, the complex political, historical, geopolitical, and economic influences at play illustrate why the "Alawite vs. Sunni" depiction is vastly insufficient.

The popular framing of Tripoli as a Sunni stronghold overshadows the image that most Tripolitans are proud of: that of a uniquely diverse city

Many point to the Lebanese Civil War as the root cause of escalating communal tensions in Tripoli. From 1976 to 2005, the city was largely controlled by Syrian troops. The Assad regime asserted its military and political dominance by targeting its opponents within the Tripolitan population, many of whom were sympathetic to the Islamist opposition in Syria--especially given the historic ties with cities like Hama. Residents allege that torture, assassinations, kidnappings, disappearances, and arbitrary detentions were used. Yasser Arafat too used the city as a base for the PLO when the latter was in conflict with Syria. The Syrian regime also had allies within the population, especially among the mainly Alawite Arab Democratic Party. Division; and tensions with sectarian overtones remain to this day within the population, exacerbated by each side's sympathies in the conflict. A key incident is the 1987 Bab Al Tabbaneh massacre which remains at the forefront of the collective memory of many Sunni residents in Tripoli; many cite this event as part of the challenges of reconciling the neighboring Sunni and Alawite neighborhoods.

Although the 1989 Taif Agreement brought an end to the Lebanese Civil War, divisions between Alawite and Sunni groups in Tripoli remained prevalent and personal. The events of 2005 exacerbated tensions in the city, maturing into violent clashes in 2008. Triggers included the assassination of Prime Minister Rafik Hariri and the subsequent Cedar Revolution, which led to the resignation of Prime Minister Omar Karami and the withdrawal of Syrian troops from Lebanon. Tripolitans have become resilient in the face of fragmented peace and unresolved grievances as isolated violent attacks ebb and flow.

The Syrian Government's crackdown against the 2011 Syrian revolution further rekindled divisions among those in Tripoli who support or condemn the regime of Bashar Al Assad. Due to significant historical ties to the cities of Homs and Hama, residents of Tripoli have been outspoken in support for both sides of the Syrian civil war. Lebanese citizens and newly arrived Syrian refugees protested hand-in-hand against Assad in the streets of Tripoli, while other Tripolitans supported his regime. The dynamics of the war mirror those of the conflict in Tripoli, potentially threatening the peace that has held in the city since 2014.



Areas affected by the latest Tripoli conflict

Source: <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-21336372>

Some people in Tripoli refer to the most recent round of violence (2011 to 2014) as a “war (harb)” while others name it “clashes (ishtabakat);” there is no clear classification of this period of violence. The differential phrasing used may in part be a reflection of Tripolitans’ proximity to the conflict. The majority of the violence was concentrated on the frontlines of Syria Street, a metaphorically named road that divides the marginalized neighborhoods of Bab Al-Tabbeneh (majority Sunni) and Jabal Al-Mohsen (majority Alawite)⁶, while the rest of the city remained largely undisturbed.

Hundreds of people from these two areas have been killed, wounded, and imprisoned. Despite the violence, the central government remained largely uninvolved in the conflict due to political considerations of a national unity coalition paralyzed by the need to balance multiple, conflicting interests. However, twin mosque bombings in 2013 were the first attack to hit the affluent Al-Mina district, drawing the rest of Tripolitan citizenry into the conflict. The bombings were the deadliest in Tripoli since the civil war, killing 47 and injuring 500.⁷ The government and various civil society groups quickly mobilized in response, taking a harsher stance to end the fighting.

**The majority of the violence was concentrated on the frontlines of Syria Street,
a metaphorically named road that divides the marginalized neighborhoods of
Bab Al-Tabbeneh (majority Sunni) and Jabal Al-Mohsen (majority Alawite)**

One of the many burning questions in relation to the recent conflict in Tripoli is about how the violence ended. While the last prominent attacks occurred in 2015, many credit the 2014 Lebanese Security Plan--under which the government deployed security forces to the area and issued thousands of arrest warrants to calm hostilities--for this halt in the violence. Others allude to a back door deal negotiated between the leaders of both sides, with the participation of their regional backers and other forces in the country. Some conspiracy theories allege that the conflict was a distraction to allow militia groups to control the arms flow from Tripoli into Syria, and that it stopped when no more money was to be made. Others see the conflict as a constant pressure against some of the city’s politicians, or an effort to keep the country on edge. There has been no public peace agreement or formal reconciliation process in Tripoli, especially because the violence occurred at the city and not the state level. The mystery surrounding the localized peace process begs the question of whether stability will persist, and if so, for how long?

4.3 Community-Led Security: How does a city maintain stability under both internal and external threats?

The securitization of a city is a complex and interconnected process. Tripoli provides an example to study and examine best practices in how an interdisciplinary security landscape can foster coexistence in post-conflict, divided societies.

In March 2014, the Lebanese Government issued a Security Plan in hopes of stabilizing the situation, concentrated on the feuding neighborhoods.⁸ The Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) deployed 2,000 troops into the city and the judiciary issued thousands of arrest warrants.⁹ At the time of writing, the armed Lebanese troops are still highly visible and established at checkpoints throughout the city, with the aim of enhancing safety. The factors that brought about the security plan and the way in which it was negotiated allegedly involved cooperation between the city’s politicians and armed groups, together with their regional and international backers. But the details of the plan remain largely unknown to the public. Even so, the doctrine of mediation and “Se-

6 Bernard Rougier, *The Sunni Tragedy in the Middle East: Northern Lebanon from al-Qaeda to ISIS*, Princeton University Press, 2015, p 13, <http://www.meforum.org/meq/pdfs/2948.pdf>.

7 “Scores Dead in North Lebanon Twin Blasts,” *Al Jazeera English*, August 24, 2013, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2013/08/201382311249855388.html>.

8 “Tripoli, the uncertain stability of Lebanon,” *Mediterranean Affairs*, May 30, 2016, http://mediterraneanaffairs.com/tripoli-the-uncertain-stability-of-lebanon/#_ftn10.

9 “The Conflict Context in Tripoli: Chronic Neglect, Increased Poverty, & Leadership Crisis,” *Lebanon Support*, September 2016, p 16, http://civilsociety-centre.org/sites/default/files/resources/ls-car-nov2016-tripoli_0.pdf.

curity by Consent” pursued by the Lebanese security establishment is certainly worth further investigation and may contain many lessons that would benefit other cities in the region. One significant element is that a large percentage of security force personnel are originally from the city or its surrounding areas and are familiar with the population. They are thus not considered an external force. This factor can be studied as a variant of ‘community policing’ where the people do not consider the security establishment as alien.

However, the operationalization of human security needs is also fortified by various NGOs and civil society actors who are supported by international donors. Local and international NGOs active in Tripoli are engaged in efforts to prevent and counter violent extremism. International donors are also involved with Security Sector Reform and the training of both the LAF and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) in activities such as community policing. There are still various threats to city’s stability, including the operations of radical Islamist groups, Hezbollah and the Arab Democratic Party all of which are perceived to have regional backers. Economic insecurity, unemployment and the lingering aftermath of the conflict (including widespread substance abuse by ex-fighters) are also factors. Additionally, the shadow of the war in Syria looms large and continues to fuel tensions, with people from the city joining the fighting on both sides.



A view from Bab al-Tabeneh in Tripoli

The surge in arrests and search operations has caused a climate of intense fear amongst the young men of the city, particularly for Syrians and Palestinians who continue to be profiled as a security threat and can be interrogated, detained, arrested, and even deported with minimal transparency. Therefore, while there has been a decrease in city-wide violence since the implementation of the Security Plan, it may have come at the expense of vulnerable communities’ rights and needs.

Sunni Radicalization

The resurgence of Islamic fundamentalism in Tripoli has perhaps been over-emphasized in popular narratives of the city as a stronghold of conservative Sunnism and the birthplace of Lebanon’s Salafist movement, although it does remain a security concern. The radicalization of Sunni groups in Tripoli has peaked in recent years, where many young men are being recruited and trained to support fundamentalist groups in Syria. The foreground of sentiments against Hezbollah as well as opposition to the Syrian regime, combined with extreme poverty in North Lebanon and militant groups’ provision of financial incentives, creates an environment conducive for the recruitment of young men into extremist Sunni groups.¹⁰ Some believe that ISIS has its eyes on Tripoli to serve as a critical city in the caliphate, as it would be the group’s only coastal city in the Levant. Public displays of ISIS and Salafist flags have not been uncommon in Bab Al-Tabbaneh.

Civil Society Peacebuilding Initiatives:

Civil society has undertaken various peace and reconciliation initiatives to achieve both short and long-term security goals. Many NGOs have launched programs that teach non-violent communication, mediation, and

10 Raphael Lefevre, “The Roots of Crisis in Northern Lebanon,” Carnegie Middle East Center, April 2014, http://carnegieendowment.org/files/crisis_northern_lebanon.pdf

reconciliation practices. Creative community-based peace building strategies using theatre, music, poetry and other art forms are becoming more popular in the city.¹¹ March Lebanon is pioneering such approaches in the community and is one of several NGOs symbolically locating themselves on Syria Street to reclaim peace and help reconcile dissenting groups. The café Qahwetna has doors on either side of the dividing line in order to provide safe entrances to youth coming from their respective neighborhoods; a functional stepping-stone until the security barriers diminish. Ruwwad, a non-profit community development organization, similarly operates a community center on Syria Street with entrances to both neighborhoods. Ruwwad's work is also linked to the business community both in Tripoli and in the wider region with similar initiatives in Jordan and Egypt.



The Qahwetna Café on Syria Street

These and other NGOs in Tripoli conduct development work and cultural activities aimed at preserving peace and restoring coexistence. Private foundations, such as those established by former Finance Minister Mohamed Safadi and former Prime Minister Najib Mikati also conduct numerous development activities in the city in collaboration with international donors such as the EU, UNICEF and USAID. A small community of expats who work primarily with international NGOs typically reside in the city's Al-Mina district.

The Legacy of Nahr el-Bared

In May 2007, the LAF and the Islamic fundamentalist group Fateh-al-Islam engaged in a battle over the group's power and violence in and around the Palestinian refugee camp Nahr el-Bared, less than 20 km outside of Tripoli. By September 2007, Fateh-al-Islam had taken over the camp. The fighting caused severe destruction to the camp's infrastructure. The government of Lebanon responded by providing emergency assistance for resident Palestinians, who found themselves displaced from conflict yet again, and by engaging Palestinians to increase internal resistance to the group. The battle of Nahr el-Bared may be cited as a precedent to the creation of an imara of an Islamic caliphate in Northern Lebanon. There are many lessons to be learned from the manner in which the government of Lebanon engaged the local community to dispel the threat posed by a fundamentalist group. Furthermore, the reconstruction of the camp, which is yet to be completed, is also worthy of further study especially for its impact on community relations and the provision of human security as a form of PVE. It is also linked to complex internal politics in Lebanon.¹²

11 "Café Tripoli," March Lebanon, March 25, 2016, <https://www.marchlebanon.org/en/about/in-the-press/614/en>.

12 "Tripoli City Profile," UN Habitat, 2016, p 18, <https://unhabitat.org/tripoli-city-profile-2016/>.

4.4 Migration, Displacement, & Humanitarian Response: How do people foster coexistence?

Local tensions have been compounded by an influx of Palestinian and Syrian refugee populations, transforming social stability in Tripoli, especially given the city's dynamics of urban poverty. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocols, and has struggled to provide basic livelihoods and protections to these groups.

Palestinian Refugees

Tripoli's historic Sunni identity appealed to many Palestinian refugees during their displacement from Palestine in 1948. Palestinians are mostly segregated in UNRWA's nearby camps, Nahr El-Bared and Beddawi. Others reside in new informal Palestinian settlements referred to as "gatherings."¹² The situation for four generations of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is a chronic humanitarian crisis.



Tyour Al-Amal, A school for Syrian refugees

Syrian Refugees

Tripoli's population has swelled by at least 17 percent since 2011 as a result of the Syrian refugee crisis.¹³ Fleeing the violent conflict, many Syrians have settled in Tripoli due to historical family connections, prospects of employment opportunities, geographical proximity to Syria, and shared cultural and religious traditions. In an attempt to limit the influx of Syrians, the Lebanese Government has adopted restrictive policies for obtaining legal status in the country. The lack of legal protection for Syrian refugees significantly exacerbates their vulnerability as they confront challenges in securing livelihoods and thus, access to basic services, food, shelter, and health care.

Other Migration Trends

Tripoli's port has made the city a transit hub for Syrians and other migrants seeking smuggling routes towards Turkey and Europe. Like other parts of Lebanon, Tripoli hosts migrant and domestic workers, predominantly from Southern Asia and Eastern Africa, under the employer sponsorship system, Kafala. Such migration contributes to the economic and social fabric of the city, and its role in supporting or hindering urban revival should be considered.¹⁴

¹³ This estimated calculation is derived by UNHCR records, which indicate that 70,000 Syrians refugees live in Tripoli, see: Syria Regional Refugee Response, UNHCR, March 6, 2017, <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/documents>.

¹⁴ <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon-2016>.

A Humanitarian Hub for Syria

Though the Syrian refugee crisis has exacerbated the precarious socio-economic situation in Tripoli, the city is now the hub of humanitarian action in Lebanon, triggering unprecedented international aid flows to the city. Competition over jobs and access to international donor funds are major sources of tension between vulnerable Lebanese residents and refugees. Wage levels have been driven down by the massive labor supply shock while rent prices have sky-rocketed.¹⁵ Discrimination and exploitation have become daily experiences for many Syrians in Tripoli. In part to mitigate these concerns, humanitarian programs are required to target and provide relief to both refugees and the vulnerable Lebanese in the host community.

Tripoli presents an urban case study for the intersection of the humanitarian and development sectors in the context of a protracted refugee response

As programing expands in this direction, Tripoli presents an urban case study for the intersection of the humanitarian and development sectors in the context of a protracted refugee response. The migration patterns present a unique context to explore urban displacement trends, the operationalization of social cohesion, and the political agency and rights of refugees. The question remains, however: for the city to emerge and re-establish itself as an economic and cultural hub, how can social diversity be a source of wealth, rather than a source of conflict?

4.5 Economic Development: What supports inclusive and sustainable economic revival?

The city may also serve as a hub for coordinating the humanitarian and post-conflict response for Syria. Economic opportunities are sparse in the capital of North Lebanon. Although it has the second largest port in the country, 90 percent of Lebanon's shipping goes through the port of Beirut. With 51 percent¹⁶ of residents living in extreme poverty and the unemployment rate hovering at 35 percent¹⁷, economic recovery is a key priority. The civil war played a major role in stagnating Tripoli's economy, but the underdeveloped nature of the economy can also be attributed to its historical marginalization by the central government.

At the national level, the Lebanese Government is focused on industrial development and is working towards the establishment of a Special Economic Zone. Other grassroots initiatives are blooming in the city, with a growing number of entrepreneurs and small & medium enterprises (SMEs). Most businesses are 'micro-enterprises' and operate informally on the roadsides, and now are largely run by Syrians throughout the city. Some speculate that given the absence of significant business investments and large-scale industries, few businesses in the city employ over a hundred workers.¹⁸

The Tripoli Special Economic Zone (TSEZ)

An ambitious project is currently underway to develop a Special Economic Zone in northern Lebanon. The objective is not only to diversify trade and economy but also to bring prosperity to the most economically stressed part of the country. In collaboration with international agencies (World Bank, USAID), the Government of Lebanon has created a committee chaired by ex- Finance Minister, Raya El Hassan. The TSEZ was initiated in 2008 and ratified by Parliament in 2009. It will be located at the Port of Tripoli. The new management team, established in 2015, is cautiously optimistic. They are focused on developing the regulatory, legal, and operational

15 "The Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," UNICEF, UNHCR, WFP, 2016, <http://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon-2016>.

16 "Peacebuliding In Lebanon: Tripoli Supplement," United Nations Development Program, March 2015, p 12, http://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/crisis_prevention_and_recovery/archive/tripoli-supplement.html.

17 Invest Development Authority in Lebanon, "Challenges and Developmental Opportunities for Tripoli," February 27, 2016, p 8, <http://investinlebanon.gov.lb/Content/uploads/Publication/160302024035341~Invest%20in%20Tripoli.pdf>.

18 Based on repeated assertions by several Tripolitan business owners and residents.

frameworks within which the TSEZ will function while keeping in mind international best practices. Current plans include providing a blanket tax exemption to the companies in the zone with up to 50 percent of foreign labor allowed. Key challenges the TSEZ has encountered include inadequate or obsolete infrastructure, the limited labor-market competitiveness of the local population, and low investor confidence, in addition to civil society concerns surrounding labor rights and environmental impact.

Entrepreneurship

At the other side of the spectrum, grassroots actors are driving economic change. Entrepreneurs, artisans, and local activists are taking matters into their own hands and striving to create a more prosperous future for Tripolitans. There are few prospects for the youth in the city, but organizations such as the Tripoli Entrepreneurs Club (TEC) and Ruwwad Lebanon are slowly fostering change by strengthening local networks and building capacity. One of the goals of TEC is to limit the ‘brain-drain’ of talent by providing opportunities for youth in creative and technological sectors.



Common micro-enterprises in Tripoli, a fruit-seller's stand and biking on the corniche

The Rachid Karame fairground, named after former Lebanese Prime Minister and son of Tripoli, was intended as the city's international fairground and is an emblem of Tripoli's unrealized economic prestige. Designed by Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer for the 1962 World Fair, when the city was on the path for a prosperous economic boom, the fairground's one million square meters are now an abandoned park. However, the flocks of tourists it was intended to inspire are gradually increasing. Localized initiatives, such as Mira's Guided Tours¹⁹, have helped to revitalize local and international tourism to the city. Additionally, the TSEZ is exploring the feasibility of converting the fairground into a Knowledge and Innovation Hub that would attract local and perhaps even international ICT firms to set up shop in Tripoli.

19 "Mira's Guided Tours." <https://www.facebook.com/mirasguidedtours/>



The Rachid Karamah International Fairground

The economic activity brought by reconstruction efforts in a post-war Syria could indeed be the market boom that the city needs. Until then, it is uncertain what economic and business initiatives will be most successful amidst the urban poverty trap, absence of major diversified industries, a growing refugee population, falling wages, and an expanding informal economy. How can the current influx of funding into the city be used to support sustainable growth that will continue even after international attention moves elsewhere? Economic recovery is vital to Tripoli's re-emergence on the national scene. Without it, tensions are likely to remain high amongst established and new Tripolitan residents

————— **Entrepreneurs, artisans, and local activists are taking matters
into their own hands and striving to create a more prosperous
future for Tripolitans** —————

What the preceding discussion highlights is that the challenges currently posed by Tripoli in its post-conflict state demand a multidisciplinary approach. Leveraging a range of diverse academic disciplines to study Tripoli will help reframe and contextualize complex problems beyond their current scope, supporting the generation of innovative solutions.

5. Looking Ahead

As the Tripoli Project expands to achieve its strategic objectives, our projects and activities will center around the following dimensions:

A Multi-Disciplinary Ideas Forum: Through lectures, seminars, workshops and panels the project will foster a vibrant exchange of ideas between scholars and policymakers about the challenges and opportunities in Tripoli as well as in other reviving urban centers.

Research: Leveraging a network that includes the academic community at Tufts University and in the Greater Boston area as well as Tripoli's key stakeholders, we will enable in-depth, policy-oriented, and multi-disciplinary research on the city in the form of blog posts, journal articles, and op-eds.

Student Engagement: The project will seek to provide graduate students at the Fletcher School the opportunity to implement mutually beneficial research, internship and consultancy projects with public, private and civic sector organizations working in Tripoli.



The corniche in Al-Mina overlooking the port

An aerial photograph of a densely packed urban area, likely in the Middle East, viewed from a high vantage point. The foreground is dominated by a large, light-colored, rocky outcrop. The city below is a dense cluster of buildings, many with flat roofs and some with red-tiled roofs. A prominent blue dome is visible in the middle ground. The sky is a clear, deep blue. In the center of the image, there is a blue square containing white text.

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