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Syrian refugee labour and food insecurity in Middle Eastern agriculture during the early COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

Drawing on ethnographic data from the 2019 *SyrianFoodFutures* and 2020 *From the FIELD* projects, this article provides insights into the early effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on refugee labour in agriculture in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria. In spring 2020, movement restrictions and supply chain disruptions caused displaced Syrian farmworkers to lose their jobs and experience increased food insecurity. We situate our findings in the context of host countries' use of legal ambiguity for governing refugees, Middle Eastern agriculture's reliance on migrant labour, and the region's longstanding food insecurity. We conclude that formalising refugee labour is not enough to address exploitation.

Key words: Refugee labour, agriculture, Middle East, legal ambiguity, food insecurity

1. Introduction

In December 2020, the situation of Syrian refugee workers in the Middle East briefly made international headlines. After Christmas, local youth set fire to an informal refugee settlement near the town of Bhanine in northern Lebanon, leaving 75 Syrian families homeless. The incident was reportedly sparked by a conflict between Lebanese residents and Syrian workers, who had demanded higher wages from their employers (Al Jazeera 2020). The incident highlights refugees' lack of bargaining power over the conditions of their employment, and the threat of losing already precarious livelihoods during the pandemic. Drawing on ethnographic data from the 2019 *SyrianFoodFutures* and 2020 *From the FIELD* projects, this article argues that for displaced Syrians working in agriculture in the Middle East, the novel coronavirus SARS-CoV-2 (COVID-19) began as an economic crisis, not as a health crisis. In spring 2020, our Syrian participants in *From the FIELD* had all heard about the new virus, but most felt

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healthy as normal, and no one had been tested for the virus. Instead, a more imminent threat was the loss of jobs and price hikes due to lockdowns and supply chain disruptions.

The pandemic has made visible commonalities between the socio-legal exclusion and exploitation of Syrian refugees, and of other migrant workers in agriculture around the world. In spring 2020, lockdowns sparked concerns about pressures on increasingly globalised food systems. In North America and the European Union, panic buying and changing consumption patterns put a strain on the demand side of food supply chains, amidst fears that labour shortages and lack of transport might disrupt distribution networks (Hobbs 2020). In North America, migrant workers were disproportionally affected by movement restrictions and a heightened risk of deportation, even though agricultural businesses continued to rely on mobile workforces (Beaumont 2020; Quandt et al. 2020). Migrants in the US were acknowledged as "critical infrastructure" or "essential workers", but there was a huge gap between rhetoric and reality: overcrowded and substandard living conditions facilitated the spread of the virus, and those without documentation did not have access to unemployment benefits or health insurance (NCFH 2020). Migrant organisations and academics were quick to point out that the pandemic had revealed more structural flaws in increasingly globalised agricultural production, including the widespread exploitation of migrant workers with insecure legal status: "we now confront the frailty of a food system which disposes of those who feed us" (IUF 2020; cf. Farmworker Justice 2020; Mares 2020). These critiques resulted in calls for system-wide approaches that would address labour hierarchies and workers' structural vulnerabilities, and tackle food insecurity at different levels of supply chains: amongst consumers, but also workers (Parks et al. 2020). However, such insights on the interconnected nature of food systems are remarkably absent from debates on mobile labour in humanitarian contexts.

In this article, we posit that the early effects of the pandemic on Syrian refugee labour in farming must be understood in the context of three interlocking systems: refugee-hosting countries' use of legal ambiguity for governing displaced populations, Middle Eastern agriculture's reliance on migrant labour, and the region's longstanding food insecurity. First, most of Syria's 5.6 million refugees have remained in neighbouring countries which are either not signatories to the 1951 Convention on Refugees (Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq) or do not recognize Syrians as "refugees" (Turkey). In Middle Eastern host countries, refugees are subjected to varying forms of registration that create new and complex experiences of illegality, restricting access to formal employment, public services, and mobility across borders and within host countries (Table 1). While not all countries require refugees to obtain permits to work in agriculture, in practice, farming is a hugely unregulated sector, where most Syrians work informally, without health insurance or labour rights. Forced Migration Studies scholars have argued that we should not accept refugees' legal limbo as a by-product of bad governance, but rather scrutinize refugee-hosting countries' strategic use of legal ambiguity to discourage and expel displaced people (Stel 2021; Zetter 2007). In Lebanon, for example, the proliferation of bureaucratic categories used by the UNHCR and the host state causes many Syrian refugees to be treated as economic migrants, rather than as vulnerable people in need of protection (Janmyr & Mourad 20218). In Turkey, the "temporary protection" status afforded to Syrians usually disqualifies them from international resettlement and puts them in a situation of "differential inclusion" (Baban, Ilcan & Rygiel 2018: 42), where they can access some social services, but are subjected to restricted freedom of movement and labour rights. Existing scholarship has focused on the political benefits of such politics for host countries: they can avoid contentious long-term solutions to mass displacement, especially the more permanent settlement of refugees. By contrast, in this

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article, we attend to the *economic* benefits of ambivalent refugee governance: the production of exploitable workers for increasingly globalised agricultural economies.

Second, we gain much by looking at Syrian refugee workers in the context of broader debates on precarious migrant labour. Seen through a labour lens, refugees' economic struggles are part of a global story of how capitalist economies shape mobility regimes, pushing marginalized people - refugees, migrants and citizens - to accept informal and exploitative labour (Besteman 2019; Bhagat 2020; Lewis et al. 2015; Rajaram 2018). Research with migrant workers can help us make the link between legal limbo and what happens in the workplace (Buckley, McPhee & Rogaly 2017): states around the globe use legal mechanisms to govern migrant populations that they consider desirable as *workers*, but not as potential *citizens* (De Genova 2002; Parrenas et al. 2021). Importantly, most migrants find themselves not in a situation of total irregularity, but in a grey zone of illegality that may change over time, and may differ in their interactions with different governmental authorities (Coutin 2000). Temporary status, coupled with the threat of deportation, reduces the bargaining power of migrant workers vis-à-vis employers, thus increasing their vulnerability to exploitative labour, debt relationships, and dependency on labour contractors (Cook-Martin 2018; Shamir 2017). It also produces experiences of discrimination and exclusion, partial forms of belonging, and transnational families (Menjívar 2006). In a similar vein, Syrian refugees in the Middle East have long lived in a situation of de facto settlement, while being framed as temporary "guests" by host states. In Jordan, refugees working without a permit also risk deportation to Syria (Mencutek & Nashwan 2020). Host countries like Jordan and Turkey frequently use the presence of large displaced populations to put pressure on international donors keen to stop refugee flows to the Global North (Kelberer 2017). Governments are quick to frame refugees as a burden on domestic economies and social welfare systems. During the pandemic, however, refugees' contribution to upholding food production has gone largely unacknowledged.

Third, this article contributes to a better understanding of the sectoral dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic. By late March 2020, Jordan had imposed one of the most severe lockdowns in the world. Other countries, like Syria, took a more fragmented approach (Hale et al. 2020). Online surveys with Syrian refugees in Turkey (DRC 2020), Lebanon (WFP 2020a), Jordan (ILO & Fafo 2020) and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq (World Bank-UNHCR Joint Data Center on Forced Displacement 2020) show that many refugees lost their jobs and became severely food insecure. However, existing studies fail to pay attention to sector-specific impacts on refugees working in agriculture (for an exception, see Zirh et al. 2020). This article presents findings in the context of the increasing export orientation of Middle Eastern food production, as well as the region's historical reliance on food imports. Increasingly globalised food supply chains have increased pressures on farmers, forcing them to cut labour costs (Corrado et al. 2016; Gertel & Sippel 2014). In Syria, the transition to a globalised market economy in the 1990s and 2000s produced a migrant workforce subject to low wages, poor working conditions, and few social protections (Abdelali-Martini & Dey de Pryck 2015). Seasonal agricultural labour is not new to many Syrians, who moved extensively within Syria and throughout the Middle East before 2011 (Chalcraft 2006; Rabo 2017; Wessels 2008; Zuntz 2021). As *refugees*, however, Syrians have been reinserted at the bottom of agricultural labour markets. Compounding the issue, the Middle East is considered the most food insecure region in the world (Zurayk & Gough 2013). In the 1970s, most Arab countries lost their ability to be food self-sufficient due to water scarcity, while an influx of oil revenue prompted a rapid transformation to a service and trade-based economy (Woertz 2014). Today, the region is the world's largest cereal importer, making it particularly vulnerable to global food price increases and pandemic-related supply chain disruptions (Woertz 2020). In Syria, the only country in the

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Levant that was food self-sufficient before 2011, conflict has exacerbated the effects of recurring droughts in the pre-war decade (Gleick 2014) and caused severe food shortages by destroying crop yields and agricultural infrastructure (Ababsa 2018). Two years *before* the pandemic, 5.5 million Syrians inside Syria were food-insecure (FAO & WFP 2018). Displacement in Syria has also put pressure on the food system of Lebanon, which imports 90% of its cereals (FAO 2020a). This article opens up a wider discussion about the interconnected nature of food systems, in which supply chain disruptions, refugee workers' insecure socio-legal status, and volatile labour markets make those at the front line of food production go hungry.

The article proceeds with a quick overview of the data collection methods and ethical considerations that underpin our research. In the third section, we draw on ethnographic data collected with Syrians in Turkey in December 2020 to show that chronic job insecurity put refugee workers in a vulnerable position even before the pandemic. In the fourth and fifth section, we present an analysis of remote ethnographic data collected with 100 Syrian families in five Middle Eastern countries between April and June 2020. The fourth section discusses pandemic-related transformations of refugee labour, and the fifth section turns to the interdependencies between refugee labour and livelihoods in a chronically food-insecure region. We conclude that formalising refugee labour is not enough to address exploitation.

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Country	Syrian refugee population	Percentage of Syrian refugees living in camps	Asylum policy	Right to work requirements	Restrictions on employment and freedom of movement
Turkey	3.6 million	4%	Since Turkey maintains the geographical limitation to the 1951 Refugee Convention, Syrians are not granted full rights as "refugees". In order to receive "temporary protection", Syrians must register with the government and obtain an identity card.	Refugees need a work permit, which they can apply for 6 months after registering for temporary protection. Syrians working in seasonal agriculture or livestock can be exempt from the work permit requirement. Work permits cost 347 TL (44 USD).	The Turkish government may impose geographical limitations or quotas on the number of foreigners under temporary protection working in seasonal agriculture. It may also require refugees under temporary protection to obtain authorization to travel outside the province where they are registered.
Jordan	660,000	19%	Jordan is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention. Syrian refugees who register with UNHCR receive an asylum seeker certificate, which must be renewed annually. Jordanian authorities also require Syrians to register with the Ministry of Interior (MoI) and be issued a biometric residency card (MoI card) to move outside camps and access public services. Since 2015, Jordan has closed its borders to Syria, prohibiting Syrians from seeking asylum in the country.	Refugees need a work permit; to be eligible, they must hold a valid MoI card. They are exempt from work permit fees, but must pay 10 JOD (14 USD) in administrative fees. Work permits for agricultural jobs can be transferred between employers.	Most skilled professions are closed to Syrian refugees. Syrian refugees without MoI cards and/or asylum seeker certificates face movement restrictions and may be deported or confined to camps.
Lebanon	1.5 million	The government's "no camp" policy prevents	Lebanon is not party to the 1951 Refugee Convention, but previously allowed UNHCR to register refugees and issue temporary residence permits. Since 2015,	Since 2019, the Ministry of Labour requires all foreigners to have work permits, although	The government limits Syrian workers to employment in three sectors: construction,

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		formal refugee settlements.	the government has ordered UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees and seeking asylum is no longer a valid reason for entering Lebanon. Syrians already in Lebanon must obtain legal residency through sponsorship as an economic migrant or possession of a UNHCR registration certificate.	enforcement mechanisms are not yet fully in place for seasonal workers. Work permits cost 120,000 LBP (80 USD). Syrians must also have sponsorship from a Lebanese employer. Obtaining a work permit grants Syrians legal status as a migrant, thereby precluding them from receiving UNHCR aid.	agriculture and environment.
Kurdistan Region of Iraq (KRI)	240,000	39%	Iraq is not party to the 1951 Convention. The Iraqi government provides refugees with identity cards and temporary residence permits, renewable annually. Syrians in camps receive an asylum seeker certificate from UNHCR. The residency permit entitles Syrians to freedom of movement, free healthcare and education, and the right to work.	Syrian refugees with a residency permit can work legally without needing a work permit.	There are legal barriers to Syrian refugees accessing some skilled professions. Syrian refugees cannot travel elsewhere in Iraq without a visa as their residency permit is only valid in KRI.

Table 1: Syrian refugee population demographics, asylum policies, and right to work in Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraqi Kurdistan (Bayram 2019; European Council on Refugees and Exiles 2019; Government of Lebanon and UN 2020; ILO 2018; Janmyr 2018; Leghtas 2018; Turkish Ministry of Labor and Social Security 2016; Norwegian Refugee Council 2016; Osseiran 2020; UNHCR 2018; UNHCR 2020a, 2020b, 2020c, 2020d, n.d. a, n.d. b; Yahya 2018; Yassen 2019a; Yassen 2019b; Yassin & Khodor 2019).

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2. Research methods

Data for this article were obtained as part of two multidisciplinary and collaborative projects, led by Principal Investigator Prof Lisa Boden at the University of Edinburgh: the AHRC-funded project *SyrianFoodFutures*, and the SFC-GCRF COVID-19 urgent research call project *From the FIELD*. Both projects received ethics approval from the Human Ethical Review Committee at the Royal (Dick) School of Veterinary Studies, University of Edinburgh. Our research team, more recently formalised into the One Health FIELD Network[1], brings together veterinary and agricultural scientists, social anthropologists, clinical psychologists, global health practitioners and economists. All research is conducted in collaboration with Syrian academics affiliated with the Council for At-Risk Academics, a British NGO that supports displaced scholars. Through our horizontal approach to partnership-building with academics in the Middle East, we aim to establish an alternative to extractive modes of research which have emerged during the Syrian refugee crisis, including the subcontracting of precarious labour from local researchers and refugees themselves (Sukarieh & Tannock 2020).

Through our Syrian partners' personal and professional networks, we were able to recruit Syrian participants from remote rural areas and from communities without ties to aid providers. For the *SyrianFoodFutures* project, Dr Ann-Christin Zuntz and Dr Shaher Abdullateef conducted ten days of in-person fieldwork with Syrian farmworkers and Syrian and Turkish agricultural entrepreneurs in Adana and Gaziantep provinces, Turkey, in December 2019. This research entailed interviews and participant observation in Syrians' homes, plant nurseries, greenhouses, and citrus orchards. For the *From the FIELD* project, we conducted remote interviews with 100 Syrian families working in agriculture in northern Syria, Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan and the Kurdistan Region of Iraq between April and June 2020. Given movement restrictions in the early days of the pandemic and some participants' limited literacy, interviews were conducted via WhatsApp, a cheap, easy and safe way to reach this specific demographic, as most displaced Syrians own smartphones and use the app to communicate with loved ones and NGOs. Because of the small sample size, the convenience sampling method, and respondents' diverse living and working conditions, our findings are not representative of all Syrian refugees in the Middle East during the pandemic, nor can we statistically compare results between study countries. We also lack baseline information about participants from before the pandemic. Still, our data provide a rare snapshot of the early effects of the pandemic on refugee labour and livelihoods in the Middle East, and indicate more long-term trends in the employment conditions of displaced people.

For *From the FIELD*, a subset of Syrian participants were invited to visually document their daily routines of food production, consumption and shopping (Ahlin & Li 2019). Through WhatsApp "food diaries", we gained insights into the embodied and affective aspects of refugee food insecurity at a time when several important processes intersected in our respondents' lives: the early economic shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic, the beginning of the agricultural season, and the Islamic holiday of Ramadan, traditionally associated with family gatherings and splendid meals. Ethnographic data helped us understand the cultural and social ramifications of COVID-19 mitigation measures. We found it easier to engage Syrian men in video ethnography, as some Syrian women from rural backgrounds did not participate for modesty reasons. To alleviate this gender bias, we also employed female academics to carry out interviews and collect "food diaries" from Syrian women. All participants received the

[1] See: https://www.onehealthfieldnetwork.org/

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equivalent of 13.5 USD by either bank transfer or phone top-up credit for their participation in the interviews, and an additional 13.5 USD for contributing ethnographic diaries.

Syrian farmworkers are doubly vulnerable: as residents in host countries with limited refugee-protection policies, and as labourers in under-regulated agricultural economies. They may experience legal or social discrimination, live in poverty, and suffer from psychological trauma. Participants inside Syria are also exposed to ongoing warfare. Hence, all names and case studies in this article have been anonymised. During in-person fieldwork in 2019, consent to take part in the study was negotiated verbally at the beginning of each interview. During remote research, all participants received a written participant information sheet and consent form in Arabic via WhatsApp. In addition, interviewers shared a WhatsApp voice message that laid out the terms of the study in plain language. Finally, we followed an oral consent protocol at the beginning of each interview to ensure that participants understood the purpose of the research. When necessary, interviewers also shared contact details of local NGOs that could provide support.

3. Before the pandemic: "We survive from one day to the next"

In this section, we discuss the chronic job insecurity and precarity that refugees experience in Middle Eastern agriculture. For want of space, we cannot aspire to do justice to the particularities of different agricultural economies in the region. Rather, we point out a number of features that put Syrian workers in a particularly vulnerable position at the beginning of the pandemic. To illustrate our argument, we begin with a short ethnographic vignette: in December 2019, Dr Ann-Christin Zuntz and Dr Shaher Abdullateef hitched a ride with a young Turkish businessman from Adana, an urban centre in western Turkey, to his citrus orchards an hour's drive away. Our host was keen to present himself as a global entrepreneur. While he usually resided in Istanbul, he had come to Adana for the weekend to check in on the orange and lemon harvest. Our host spent most of the drive talking about export opportunities for Turkish agriculture to the EU and impressing us with big numbers – his orchards produced 600 tons of oranges, 1,300 tons of tangerines, and 400 tons of lemon each season. However, he had little interest in agricultural production itself. While we saw dozens of workers in his orchard that day, he explained to us that he only had "four guys on [his] payroll". During the pruning and harvesting season, he ordered busloads of workers from a labour contractor from a local village. Some of these buses were parked on the gates of the orchard - each could seat 17 workers. During the harvest, women and men worked together. They arrived at 5am, took a breakfast break at 8am, and then continued their work until 3pm, when the buses picked them up again. The employer outsourced not only logistics, but also payment – all wages were paid to the labour contractor, who then distributed the money amongst the workers. For the labour contractor, the arrival of refugees had been an opportunity to take a greater cut. In 2012, at the beginning of the Syrian refugee crisis, internal Turkish migrants were paid 40 TRY (4 USD) a day, and the labour contractor received an additional 20 TRY per person. In 2019, newly arrived Syrian refugees accepted to work for 20 TRY, but now the labour contractor received an additional 40 TRY from the employer. For the latter, the biggest problem was to find adequate workers: "Will [the Syrians] be here tomorrow? They don't know!" He was most upset that Syrians rarely stayed long enough to learn the intricacies of pruning; unskilled labourers had caused damage to his citrus trees.

What the employer framed as workers' lack of commitment was perceived as extreme job insecurity by Syrian refugees. Close to the orchard, a Syrian family invited us into their tent inside an informal settlement. From their point of view, keeping an unpredictable schedule

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allowed the labour contractor to exercise power over them. We spoke with a young man who had only been told at lunchtime that there would be no job for him that day. The previous week, workers had been bused away at short notice to agricultural work sites in southern Turkey, hundreds of kilometres away, only to return the same evening. During the harvest, their life was a mixture of hectic activity and long periods of waiting. In the meantime, instead of making money, they kept getting poorer. Wages were only paid at the end of the harvest. In the meantime, the labour contractor charged them rent for the land that their tent was pitched on, and for tapping into the village's water supply. As the orchard was far away from the next supermarket, workers also bought food from the labour contractor. All these expenses were later deducted from their income through farming. Because of their remote living situation, Syrian children did not go to school; there were also no NGOs providing services this far in the countryside. However, refugee workers were not alone. Along the fences of the orchard, there were multiple tent settlements, some of them inhabited by Syrians, others by domestic migrants from Şanlıurfa in south-eastern Turkey. While their modest dwellings looked the same from the outside, licence plates gave away the Turkish workers' region of origin. As our Turkish host explained, the mass influx of Syrian refugees had led to intense competition between the workers living in these tents, an anecdote that confirms broader patterns: in the Middle East, refugees work alongside Egyptians in Jordan (Hartnett 2018) and Turkish-Kurdish migrants in Turkey (Pelek 2018), undercutting each other's wages. For seasonal workers like the ones we interviewed, Adana is just one stop on migrants' and refugees' annual migration circuit between different agricultural work sites in western and southern Turkey. Exact day rates and payment modes depend on agricultural products and tasks, but long, irregular working hours, unfit accommodation, irregular pay and child labour are a common experience for most seasonal workers (Development Workshop 2016). However, not all Syrian farmworkers live in informal tent settlements. During our fieldwork in western and southern Turkey, we met with Syrian workers residing in a variety of conditions. Young men, and sometimes families, lived in caravans next to plant nurseries and greenhouses. In the city of Gaziantep, refugees stayed in dilapidated buildings in the old town, while commuting to agricultural work sites in the countryside. In Islahiye, a small agricultural centre an hour's drive from Gaziantep, refugees who previously lived in official camps nearby have now moved into apartments. During the winter months, many migrated to Ankara or Istanbul for additional jobs. In one way or another, ongoing mobility in exile is a mainstay of many refugees' lives, and one of the reasons why pandemic-related lockdowns hit refugee workers in agriculture particularly hard.

After almost a decade of displacement, most Syrians working in agriculture live at subsistence levels. As one woman in Gaziantep explained to us, "Palestinians brought the key, but we didn't bring the key, nor the roof, or the floor. Until today, we didn't bring the key." This was a reference to Palestinian refugees' long-cherished dreams of return, and their practice of keeping the keys of houses from which they had been displaced. To Syrians, evoking the Palestinian experience captured their sense of lost livelihoods, and their inability to rebuild stable lives in exile even after decades. As Philips (2013) and others have described, many poor in the Global South find themselves in a situation of chronic poverty, with no prospects of upward social mobility. What is problematic about refugees' role in the Middle East is not their exclusion from local labour markets, but rather the contentious terms of their *inclusion*, notably their lack of access to full refugee protection and labour rights, and their struggles in a sector requiring huge and mobile workforces, albeit impermanent ones (Kavak 2016). As Syrian farmworkers in Turkey and Lebanon complained to us both before and during the early months of the pandemic: "One day there is work, and the next there isn't!" This is particularly true for the farmworkers that we encountered in Adana province, but the cycle of poverty can take

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different forms. For example, young men living very modestly inside plant nurseries were paid a regular monthly salary, but less than Turkish minimum wage, as their employers deducted their "living expenses" from their wages.

One reason for Syrians' lack of ties to agricultural employers is many Syrians' relationship of dependency with agricultural labour contractors (Development Workshop 2016; ILO 2018). In December 2019, we interviewed refugees who had taken part in NGO-led trainings, designed to secure more permanent employment in agriculture. These trainings rarely led to sustainable jobs because they seldom addressed refugees' reliance on intermediaries. Workshops rarely brought together agricultural employers and refugee workers in the same room, and failed to provide refugees with what they urgently needed to communicate directly with Turkish employers: Turkish language skills. While refugees use labour contractors to find jobs in seasonal agriculture with quickly changing needs, our pre-pandemic fieldwork shows that sometimes unequal power relationships go deeper: mobile workers, who live in tents and containers in agricultural work sites, also rely on labour contractors for access to land, water, electricity, and sometimes food. Taken together, the characteristics of refugee labour outlined above – chronic job insecurity, reliance on mobility and labour contractors - put refugees at risk when the pandemic hit.

4. In the early days of the pandemic: jobs lost in agriculture – but not everywhere

In this section, we paint a nuanced picture of job losses for refugee workers in spring 2020, at a time of sudden and wide-ranging lockdowns. The Syrians interviewed in spring 2020 lived in large cities like Irbid (Jordan), Gaziantep (Turkey) and Erbil (KRI), in villages and small towns along Syria's borders, and in internally displaced persons camps in northern Syria and refugee camps in KRI. What all have in common is that they originally came from rural areas, and most of them still worked in food production, even when they now reside in urban centres. In many cases, this income complements additional sources of revenue, including other work in the informal economy, and humanitarian assistance. In Ramtha, a border town in northern Jordan, for example, a family of nine survives on the labour of the oldest son who works in agriculture, the salary of the mother who teaches knitting classes at a local NGO centre, the father's monthly disability allowance from the UNHCR, and monthly WFP food vouchers, worth 15 JOD (21 USD) per person. Further north, in the Turkish city of Gaziantep, a 24-year-old woman harvests grapes, almonds and pepper, while her husband holds a job in a textile factory. In Lebanon and some parts of Turkey, where many refugees live in tents on agricultural land, work often involves the entire family, including women and teenage children. Figure 1 retraces our participants' movements from their places of origin to current sites of refuge in Syria's borderlands. These are among the most fertile and intensely cultivated regions in the Middle East – areas in which our respondents have found employment (again) in agriculture (cf. Buchorn et al., 2020).

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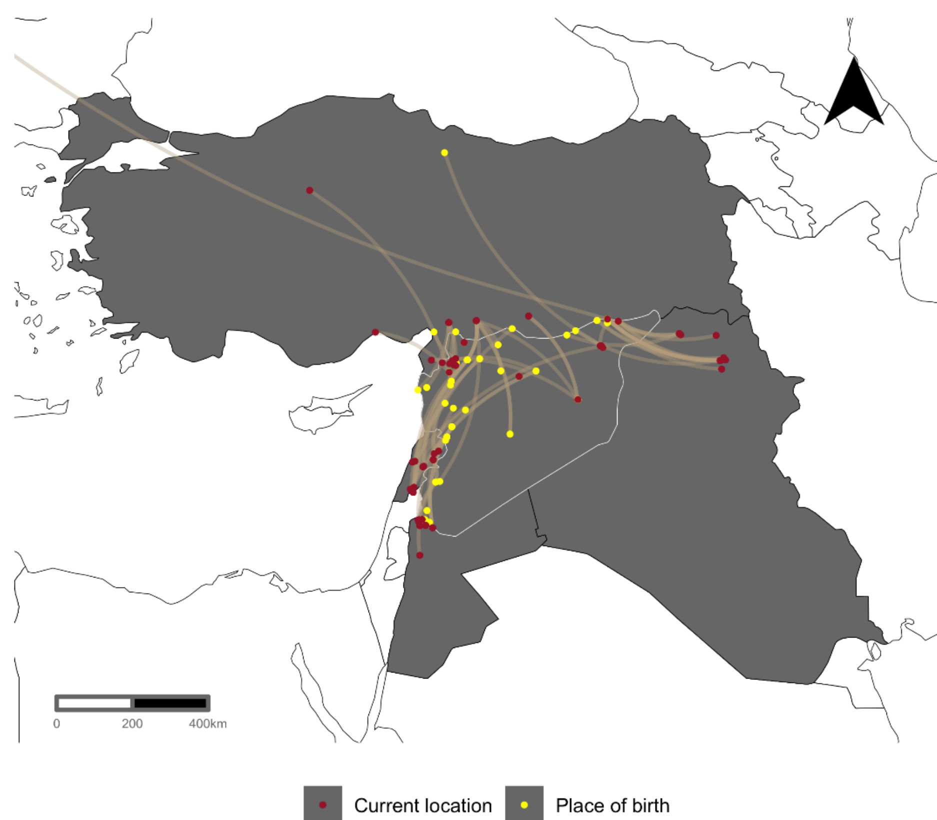

Figure 1: Displacement journeys, from birth locations in Syria to current sites of refuge in neighbouring host countries (approximate locations), for Syrian participants interviewed in *From the FIELD*. (The Map was created using the ggplot2 package from the R statistical software. Map data was sourced through Natural Earth project (the 1:50m resolution version) via the maps R package.)

In the *From the Field* study, 75% of respondents were male, with slightly higher numbers (85%) among participants inside Syria. The biased gender distribution is due to the fact that we deliberately asked to speak to the main breadwinners, to develop a better understanding of the economic impact of the pandemic on household economics. The age of respondents varied from 18 to 63; most were in their mid-thirties. The average household size was 5.7; 89% of respondents had children under the age of 18, with an average of 2.8 children per family. Only 8% had moved in the six months prior to the pandemic. Outside Syria, respondents' legal status and access to humanitarian assistance varied widely. In Lebanon and Jordan, between 90-100% were registered with the UNHCR, compared to only 35% in Turkey and 32% in KRI. Conversely, in Turkey, Jordan and KRI, 100% of refugees were registered with local authorities, compared to only 11% in Lebanon. As discussed in the introduction, the diversity of registration situations reflects country-specific refugee-reception systems, and complex experiences of illegality. In practice, most respondents worked in the informal economy.

A closer look at the early effects of the pandemic on refugee labour reveals a complex picture. In the month before the interview, 69% of all respondents saw their work hours decrease, particularly in Turkey (77%) and in northern Syria (77%) (Table 2). However, for a minority

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of workers (7%), work actually intensified. In addition, a considerable minority of respondents (10%) had been unemployed before the pandemic hit.

	Total	Turkey	Lebanon	Jordan	KRI	Northern Syria
Increased hours	7.1%	5.9%	10.0%	0.0%	20.0%	5.9%
Decreased hours	**69.0%**	**76.5%**	**65.0%**	**70.0%**	**50.0%**	**76.5%**
No change	14.3%	11.8%	20.0%	10.0%	10.0%	17.6%
I am unemployed	9.5%	5.9%	5.0%	20.0%	20.0%	0.0%

Table 2: Syrian participant responses from *From the Field,* by study country, in response to the question, “In the last month, have there been any changes to your work?”

Public transport was still available for 88% of our respondents, albeit with big differences across countries. (For example, 35% of respondents in Jordan had difficulties accessing transport.) However, generalized lockdowns were a common experience for 81% of our respondents during the early pandemic, and particularly affected those relying on public transport to access work sites. By contrast, many Syrian farmworkers living in tents or caravans on agricultural land reported that their work routines did not change in spring 2020.

Decreased working hours were not always the result of restricted access to agricultural work sites. Remote data collection for the *From the FIELD* study coincided with Ramadan: some respondents explained that shorter working days during Ramadan were typical, and thus unrelated to the pandemic. While some workers went from working full days to one or two hours a day, others worked two days a week instead of full weeks. For example, a Syrian family in Lebanon used to earn 2500LBP/hour (1.8 USD) per adult, and 2000LBP/hour (1.5 USD) for each of their teenage daughters. During the harvesting season, they usually worked ten to twelve hours a day. In the early days of the pandemic, this suddenly decreased to three hours of work. New stresses on refugee labour were compounded by other, unrelated events. In spring 2020, a storm destroyed the harvest of many farmers in Lebanon, further reducing work opportunities for refugees.

While many Syrians lost their jobs, farming continued for some, especially more highly qualified workers, as pandemic-related lockdowns coincided with the beginning of the agricultural season when there is a need for a substantial workforce. In a village in northern Jordan, we interviewed a 56-year-old man, responsible for a family of eight. In exile, he had acquired new skills in hydroponic farming, and found work in a greenhouse. While his working hours had decreased in spring 2020, he was still receiving his full salary. His WhatsApp diaries took us inside a giant greenhouse, where younger and older men, and sometimes children, were busy planting seedlings, checking the water quality, and packaging products. Rather than documenting the effects of the pandemic, our informant sought to demonstrate his expertise and leadership role in the work hierarchy.

For 70% of our respondents, monthly income decreased in spring 2020, with particularly devastating effects for respondents in Lebanon, Turkey, and KRI (Table 3). Almost half of our respondents did not have access to cash at the time of the interview. In Gaziantep, a Syrian father of three had a mere 100 TRY (10 USD) left in his wallet. Several people attributed this

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decrease in income to higher prices for agricultural inputs and, especially in Lebanon and Syria, to worsened currency exchange rates. Inside Syria, respondents complained that markets had been disrupted by border closures. Across study countries, farm workers complained about long waiting hours for public transport and fewer seats on buses. Some agricultural businesses stopped altogether; for example, one respondent worked on a farm where all the livestock were sold. For some refugees, wages did not change, but were withheld by the employer or labour contractor. One worker in Lebanon was told that he would only be paid at the end of the season, a common form of labour exploitation even before the pandemic. When he asked his employer about the money, the latter told him: "I don't have the money right now." Even when they lived rent-free, Syrian farmworkers in tents were especially destitute because of the multiple insecurities surrounding them. In Lebanon, a 32-year old man was staying in a tent with his wife and three children on his employer's land. When there was work in spring 2020, he and his spouse each earned 2000 LBP (1.5 USD) per hour. During a ten-hour day, the two of them thus earned the equivalent of 30 USD. But during the pandemic, they were employed even more irregularly than before. They complained: "We don't have a single lira in the home."

	Total	Turkey	Lebanon	Jordan	KRI	Northern Syria
Increased	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%	0.0%
Decreased	**69.9%**	**77.8%**	**80.0%**	**55.0%**	**87.5%**	**58.8%**
No change	30.1%	22.2%	20.0%	45.0%	12.5%	41.2%

Table 3: Syrian participant responses from *From the Field,* by study country, in response to the question, "In the last month, has the income of your household changed?"

The pandemic affected the labour of refugee women in distinct ways. In the Middle East, farming often involves the entire family. As feminist political economists have long argued, it is important to understand how gendered paid and unpaid work by different household members contributes to reproducing labour (Gore & LeBaron 2019). Many respondents live in traditional family structures, with a clear gendered division of labour. In almost 60% of families, women did not usually work before the pandemic, though a number would undertake occasional paid labour inside and outside the home. Among women who were working at the beginning of the pandemic, 24% did so outside the home – often in agriculture and factories – while 10% were engaged in domestic economic activities. Childless and younger women were particularly likely to work in agriculture, and often made an important contribution to household incomes, but even married women were often economically active: though in 70% of families, fathers were identified as the main breadwinners, mothers (15%) were also frequently named. An estimated 14% of women lost their jobs because of the pandemic; at the same time, unpaid labour at home increased for women in 76% of families. With more family members at home, women faced additional cleaning, cooking, and home-schooling. Finally, in 64% of families, children could no longer continue their education. Schools were closed and families could not afford devices for online home-schooling. In our own research, we experienced the difficulties of connecting remotely with our participants due to frequent power cuts, especially in Lebanon. Child labour was already a common reality for many Syrian families working in agriculture before the pandemic (Yılmaz, Karatepe & Tören 2019). Especially for older refugee children, this increases the risk that they will drop out of education more permanently – and join their parents in the fields during the next agricultural season.

5. Why do farmworkers go hungry during a pandemic?

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In the final section, we analyse a particular component of refugee labour in agriculture, i.e. refugees' own food insecurity. As discussed in the introduction, the latter must be contextualized within a longer history of food insecurity in the Middle East. To understand why Syrian farmworkers go hungry during the pandemic, one needs to know that they almost completely rely on markets for accessing food – and Middle Eastern agricultural markets are highly susceptible to global economic shocks. In spring 2020, 90% of respondents bought food from shops, while only a tiny fraction grew their own food (13%), or received food from employers (11%). As a consequence, initial price hikes in local markets exacerbated the pressures on refugee households which now found themselves with a reduced or no income at all. Food was widely available, with 93% of respondents reporting that markets were still open, but as one refugee worker poignantly remarked: "Food is in the markets, but not in Syrians' pockets." In addition, 89% of respondents reported major increases in prices of basic food commodities, e.g. wheat, flour, rice, oil and sugar, compared to the previous year. Over the last seven days before the interview was conducted, 94% of households had sometimes or always relied on less expensive food, and 27% had borrowed food from friends or relative, while 65% had purchased food on credit. A staggering 19% had spent between one and three days without eating.

The FAO defines food insecurity in terms of availability, access, utilization and stability (FAO 2009). Globally, in the early months of the pandemic, COVID-19 primarily impacted the access dimension of food security by causing loss of income and purchasing power, particularly among the poor (Béné 2020) – this is certainly what happened to our Syrian respondents in the *From the FIELD* study. However, the extreme rise in food prices, especially in Syria and Lebanon, was not widespread elsewhere. In fact, the FAO Food Price Index reached a seventeen-month low in May 2020, and only began to rise in June 2020. Although COVID-19 created market uncertainties, global food prices did not rise, except for in crisis-affected, low-income food-deficit countries like Lebanon and Syria, which are heavily reliant on foreign exchange reserves and whose food prices have thus been adversely affected by currency depreciation against the US dollar (FAO 2020b). In Lebanon, food prices started to inflate as early as autumn 2019, several months before the onset of the pandemic (WFP 2020a). In Hassakeh, inside Syria, a male participant of our study recorded a video of a late-night walk to a local shop: "See, this bag of crisp comes from behind the border. It used to cost 50 Syrian Pound, but with the increase of the dollar, it now costs 200 Syrian Pound. Because of Corona and the border closures. As you can see, the shop is half-empty, the borders are closed, nothing comes across anymore." While such price hikes might not have lasted for long, respondents in Jordan interviewed for our study at the end of June 2020 reported that prices for basic necessities had returned to normal by the beginning of the month. Still, even short-term price explosions were enough to deplete Syrians' meagre savings. Several respondents explained that they were only able to stockpile basic items for a short amount of time before they had run out of money.

In Lebanon, a Syrian family with several young children documented their sudden food insecurity on WhatsApp. The father summed up the combined effects of unemployment, illegality, and lack of humanitarian assistance: "I am the head of a household of five, including my father and my children. This dish is left-over food from yesterday. Before the Corona situation, I was able to provide food, but now I can't. I don't go out, there is no work, no NGOs, and I am not registered with the UNHCR." His wife further explained what this meant for the family's reduced food intake: "Before Corona, I used to cook a lot of dishes. Now, less so. Today, I prepared a meal of wheat and lentils. We made yoghurt. But we add water to it to

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make it thinner, because yoghurt is expensive. I depend on lentils and bulgur. What is this crisis, and when can we go back to work and provide for our children?" It is particularly alarming that the conditions documented in our study are a deterioration of already poor food utilisation. Syrians' diets were already suffering before COVID-19: since September 2019, many households within Syria reported eating only two meals per day, while consuming a basic diet of bread, rice, oil, pulses, vegetables, sugar, and very little meat (WFP 2020b). Food shortages, and scarcity are impacting on health outcomes. Child stunting in Syria was already rising since 2011 (World Bank 2020). A further decline in nutritional quality in the early months of the pandemic will have led to further health shocks with immediate, medium and long-term health consequences. It is likely that Syrian families' diets continued to worsen as their financial situations declined. Decreased dietary diversity leads to malnutrition (Hadley & Crooks, 2012), which in turn exposes Syrians to greater risk of reduced immunity, and makes them more susceptible to developing severe COVID-19 symptoms (Naja & Hamadeh 2020). This is of particular concern in northern Syria, which was deemed especially vulnerable to a serious outbreak already in spring 2020 (Abbara et al. 2020).

6. Conclusion

In this article, we provided an ethnographic snapshot of the early economic effects of pandemic-related lockdowns on refugee agricultural labour and food security in Jordan, Turkey, Lebanon, KRI and northern Syria. We made sense of our findings in the context of host countries' use of legal ambiguity as a tool of refugee governance, Middle Eastern agriculture's reliance on migrant labour, and the region's longstanding dependency on food imports. As the findings of our *From the FIELD* study show, many Syrians lost their jobs in spring 2020, due to pandemic-related lockdowns and disruptions to agricultural supply chains. Job insecurity is not a new phenomenon for displaced Syrians with limited refugee protection and labour rights, who have found employment at the bottom of segmented agricultural labour markets. Given agriculture's seasonal needs and the surplus of workers, refugees frequently lose and find new jobs. Drawing on pre-pandemic ethnographic data, we showed that this persistent job insecurity and over-reliance on movement and labour contractors put refugee workers in a particularly vulnerable spot at the beginning of the pandemic. We also argued that the early days of the pandemic coincided with the beginning of the agricultural season in our study countries, as well as reduced working hours during Ramadan. A greater awareness of how different sector-specific and cultural temporalities overlapped adds nuance to our understanding of how initial lockdowns affected particularly vulnerable workers in agriculture. We have shown however that the disproportionate effects of the pandemic on refugee livelihoods are compounded by the longstanding food insecurity in the region, especially in crisis-shaken countries like Lebanon and Syria. As refugee farmworkers rely on food markets susceptible to global economic shocks, they particularly suffered from increased food prices in the early days of the pandemic. In our follow-up study, *Refugee Labour under Lockdown,* in winter 2020/21, most respondents confirmed that job losses in spring 2020 had only been temporary. However, even the short-term loss of employment, combined with sudden price hikes for basic food staples, has further entrapped refugees in a vicious cycle of poverty. The erosion of refugees' limited financial safety nets, together with increased job insecurity in already volatile labour markets, has compelled them to return to exploitative and unsafe working conditions (Zuntz et al. 2021).

In closing, we spell out some recommendations for short-term development action and more long-term policy-making. In the short term, a more cyclical view of refugee labour market integration has important implications: in host countries where many displaced people can only

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find seasonal jobs, it is not realistic to expect refugees to become permanently "self-reliant". Middle Eastern host countries have turned into a laboratory for humanitarian programmes that seek to foster urban refugees' economic self-reliance, for example through encouraging micro-entrepreneurship. Sadly, these initiatives have rarely led to sustainable jobs because they are hampered by host countries' weak economies and ambivalent asylum policies, failing to grant refugees labour (and other) rights (Carpi 2020; Easton-Calabria & Omata 2018). Instead, it is important to acknowledge the need for intermittent but sustained and trustworthy welfare assistance to allow refugee workers to deal with extended periods of unemployment, beyond existing cash assistance for displaced families categorized as especially vulnerable. As our pre-pandemic fieldwork in Turkey shows, the relationship between agricultural employers, labour contractors and workers is also highly contentious. To prevent labour exploitation, e.g. through delayed payments, host countries should seek to formalise the role of labour contractors. Creating forums to bring together Syrian workers and employers more locally could allow refugees to bypass labour contractors, and negotiate more permanent terms of employment. In Turkey, specifically, Turkish language classes would allow Syrian refugees to communicate with employers directly.

In the longer term, our findings can inform a more nuanced critique of attempts at formalizing refugee labour (Betts & Collier 2017). For example, the 2016 Jordan Compact granted Syrian refugees in Jordan 200,000 work permits in exchange for advantageous loans and easier access to EU markets (Barbelet, Hagen-Zanker & Mansour-Ille 2018). Between 2016 and 2019, only 122,000 permits were issued to Syrian workers (3RP 2019). Bureaucratic red tape, domestic labour market dynamics, and Syrians' own survival strategies have all limited the success of the scheme (Lenner & Turner 2019). Can formalizing refugee labour put an end to exploitation? Our ethnographic data indicate that across the Middle East, refugees compete with irregular and regular migrants working under equally precarious conditions. As discussed in the introduction, the wider literature on temporary migrant labour also suggests that legal status alone cannot shield migrant workers, and even some marginalised groups of citizens, from exploitation (Chacron 2016). Without the political will and resources to enforce labour standards, existing labour legislation remains toothless. Looking at refugee workers through a labour lens shifts the focus from individual acts of exploitation to broader unequal power relations within labour markets and between worker-sending and receiving countries. As legal scholar Hila Shamir (2012) argues, it also opens up a discussion on new forms of political agency for workers. In the Syrian context, NGOs tend to frame refugees as passive recipients in need of upskilling. By contrast, Shamir envisions the possibility of worker-led collective action, for example through trade unions, using a language of "class struggle, solidarity, and social and economic concerns" (Shamir 2012: 95). Such a labour-centric perspective on displacement has much to offer when it comes to rethinking humanitarian targets and tools. However, a reconceptualization of displaced people as "migrant labourers" may also risk obscuring refugees' multiple protection needs, and what might be special about refugee – as opposed to migrant – workers.

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