

GHARSAH: BATTLING ANTI-SYRIAN DISCRIMINATORY RELIEF IN LEBANON

This text is based on interviews with Ola al-Joundeh, a Syrian feminist activist and founder of Gharsah, and Khaled Khansa, a Syrian architect and activist who joined Gharsah as a volunteer in 2014 and became a program manager in 2021.

The Bekaa governorate in eastern Lebanon is home to a large community of Syrian refugees. Most live in rented housing, while others reside in informal tented settlements. In 2014, Ola al-Joundeh founded Gharsah to provide educational support for Syrian refugee children living in camps. “Activists built the school in the camp with their own hands, using iron and wood,” Khaled says. It started as a kindergarten and expanded. Gharsah worked to empower refugee women and girls through various gender justice programs, like political awareness and sexual and reproductive health and rights.

“Gharsah initially had no funding, and we relied on in-kind donations,” Khaled says. The team is cautious and selective when applying for funding. “We don’t accept funds with requirements that oppose our politics and ethics, like donors who want us to take photos of people while receiving aid parcels or make them sign receipts.”

During the full-scale Israeli aggression that started in September 2024, Gharsah halted routine activities and hosted internally displaced Syrian refugees who were excluded from formal shelters. “Displaced Syrian refugees endured horrible conditions. We often had to rent spaces in unfinished buildings for 500\$ a month!”

The discrimination in the national emergency response plan also meant that displaced Syrian refugees were not allowed to secure their collective shelters without government approval. “We saw our people stranded in the street, sleeping in parks and under bridges. It was extremely heartbreaking,” Ola says. “We had to exert so much pressure on local authorities to use five schools as shelters for Syrian refugees in West Bekaa,” Khaled says. Lebanese security forces continued to pressure Gharsah to evict Syrian refugees “illegally” sheltering in schools. The team managed to stall until their partner, Frontlines for Change, secured another shelter.

Ola highlights the importance of the trust between Gharsah and the Lebanese community, which has been built over the years. It allowed Gharsah some freedom to operate before securing official approval from Lebanese government authorities. “While we struggled with government officials, local community members were supportive, which allowed us to bypass the ban on sheltering Syrian refugees without prior approval.” It seems that years of mutual support were successful in challenging the government’s anti-Syrian discriminatory practices in the Bekaa.



The Israeli war was a trigger for many displaced Syrian refugees who were already traumatised by war and displacement in Syria. “People fled their homes again, leaving everything behind. We had to provide for them while we struggled with a lack of funding and support,” Khaled says. “Our core funds covered all relief expenses. We only received small additional grants from our regular feminist donors.”

Khaled's residency permit in Lebanon expired at the end of August 2024, so he returned to Syria after the Lebanese government made it very expensive to renew residency permits for Syrian nationals. He felt a sense of frustration and anxiety about not being able to help people on the ground as the Israeli war escalated. “I took on some documentation, management, and fundraising tasks while in Syria, but I wanted to be in Lebanon helping people,” he says. By the end of October, Khaled managed to return to the Bekaa and immediately got to work, organising logistics and distributing aid. “Solidarity for me is about empathy and understanding. It is about being inclusive, feeling everyone's pain, and organising for practical solutions,” he says. Both Khaled and Ola assert Gharsah's strong belief in working with the community with modesty and empathy.



The lack of funds during the war presented a serious challenge for Gharsah and many other community organisations working with Syrian refugees. “We noticed that all groups working with Syrian refugees faced difficulty securing funds. It seemed like a political decision,” Khaled says. At some point, Gharsah received a grant of 20,000\$, but the paperwork was complicated and time-consuming. “We had no time to get multiple quotations or document every expense. Some donor conditions were extremely unrealistic to meet during a war.”

Gharsah is most at home working with feminist donors. “Some organisations provide sub-grants and are struggling with donors after October 7th,” Khaled explains. Meanwhile, he praises the flexibility and participatory approach of feminist donors. “They are supportive, understanding, and truly participatory. They make bureaucratic procedures easy and simple. We don't feel a hierarchy with them, and it truly feels like a partnership.” Khaled appreciates the genuine interest and support that feminist donors show, mentioning that some of them conduct field visits to witness impact or take up specific tasks like narrative reporting to ease the workload of grantee organisations.

“Donors must understand that the money they give us is ours, not theirs. It belongs to the people,” Khaled says. Both Ola and Khaled are frustrated with the implicit political agendas of donors. “Money should go where the real need is.” In a genuine commitment to their values, Gharsah chose to end a political awareness program for young Syrian refugee women due to the explicit pro-Israeli politics of the German donor entity. “If you, as a donor, don't support victimised people everywhere, regardless of politics, how can I trust and work with you?”, Khaled exclaims.