

Interview with His Excellency the Minister of Social Affairs in Lebanon

Mr. Hector Hajjar

MoSA, Beirut, Lebanon - March 5, 2024

By Grace Bou Nafeh (Doctoral Student at UGR and Conference Interpreter AR/EN/FR)

Context

Between 2022 and 2024, during the financial, economic, and political crises in Lebanon, relevant United Nations agencies regularly met with the Ministry of Social Affairs of Lebanon to discuss assistance work paths and progress achieved, with simultaneous interpretation (Arabic-English) being provided. In one of those meetings, based on the Minister of Social Affairs' request, the interpreters were instructed to interpret the term "Refugee" in English, used by UN agency representatives, into "Displaced" in Arabic, when speaking of Syrian nationals on Lebanese territory.

Interview

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| Question 1 | What are your expectations from the use of specific terminology in the diplomatic field? |
| a | Do you think it is essential in the process of communication? |
| b | And if so, in which sense? |

Answer

Minister: Yes, we need to use specific terminology, because there are terms that have a legal dimension, and there are terms that have a political dimension, etc.

Moreover, there are terms that are rigid, and there are terms that change with time. Therefore, we certainly have to choose, in translation, and especially in simultaneous interpretation, the terms appropriate to what the speaker is saying. I will give you an example. What do you understand with the word "Lebanonization"? (used in French – "Libanisation", a neologism that means "fragmentation") How do you translate this word?

Interviewer: *Adding the Lebanese character or cachet*

Minister: Which cachet? Is it the social cachet? The political one? What is "Balkanization"? (used in French – "La Balkanisation") The term "Lebanonization" is a term that we have created. Are we talking about Lebanonization as of Dividing Lebanon?

Interviewer: *Well, depending on the context.*

Minister: Depending on the context. I am saying that there are international terms that are universally recognized, and you, interpreters, have to be well informed about the context you are working in, to be able to relay the discussion, or to relay what a person is saying in his language to the people who are listening to him. However, one also has to accompany the evolution of some terms, which acquire a local notion and reflect a political or social situation, or those small words that reflect a reality. Sometimes, it might be difficult to find a literal translation, in which case, one should use a longer explanation to be able to transmit the message we want to transmit.

Interviewer: Well, first, you have already answered me on several points. At the beginning, I was asking you this question from your perspective, meaning the terms that you yourself use, before addressing the translation aspect.

Minister: I choose my terms. As a political man, I choose my terms very clearly, and I use them taking into consideration their different dimensions, depending on whom I am talking to. When I address the international community, I choose terms that the international community understands, and when I give a public speech, I choose terms that do not exclude the international dimension, but that the people understand; I use a simpler language. The politician adapts his terms to his audience, the one whom he is addressing, and to the framework within which he is speaking. Are we speaking in an academic setting? An international conference? On television? Are we addressing an audience of people sitting in the morning over coffee and listening to us? Are we addressing the intelligentsia? I certainly choose my terms, and you might have attended some of my events, you would then know how accurately I choose them.

Interviewer: Your speeches are indeed clear, organized, and translation-friendly. We can follow the logical sequence in them.

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| Question 2 | Usually, we translate the word “refugee” with the term “لاجئ” (Lāji’) in Arabic. But you proposed its translation with that of “نازح” (Nāziḥ - meaning “displaced”) when talking about Syrians on Lebanese territory. In this context, could you please explain why you prefer the use of نازح (Nāziḥ - displaced) instead of لاجئ (Lāji’ - refugee) as a translation of refugee? |
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Answer

Minister: Allow me to tell you something, there is a huge difference between the words “displaced” and “refugee”. The issue of the “displaced”, for us, and according to the way we think, is an issue of “temporary displacement”. And they (the displaced Syrians) have to return (to their country). We hosted them in conditions of war, they moved from one place to another, and now they have to return to it. They do not enjoy a status that allows them to stay here permanently. (On the other hand), the “refugee” is a person who has gone through a very big crisis in his country, and maybe his country has disappeared from the map or gone through a situation where things have changed there completely, and he has become a refugee, and will remain a refugee until a political, international, or UN solution has been found. As for “displacement”, it means that one has moved quickly due to a specific situation of commotion and chaos,

and this movement is not meant for the displaced to deeply establish camps, tents, installations, sewage and water systems, infrastructure, and schools.

In the Palestinian refugee camps, there are schools, hospitals, and social centers. As for the displacement centers, we are working in a way so that there would not be any schools in them, nor hospitals, and not even meeting centers. By that, we are trying to say that if they want to do something, let them get out of their camps for it. We are not in a situation where there are closed camps, this situation is not similar to that of the Palestinians. This is a temporary presence because some events have occurred, and now they have to go back quickly to their country. Quickly to their country. This is the difference with “refuge seeking”. There (in Palestine), we have the case of the occupation of a country. When we speak of Israel, Israel came and changed the Palestinian system, it uprooted a population from its land and took the country from that population. At least, this is what we believe. As for those who believe something different, it is another story. The return of those Palestinians depends on an international settlement. And they are staying in legal camps, with their structures, hospitals, etc. Is the situation of the Syrians similar? Are there people who came and uprooted the Syrians? There is an internal political dispute (in Syria), between internal parties. Now, there is foreign intervention, yes. But they (the displaced) fled the cannons... they fled the cannons.... Now, things have returned to how they previously were.

Today, the displacement of the Lebanese in the South of Lebanon is a displacement because of the bombing. Are we, today, building camps and telling them that they have become refugees inside Lebanon? They are displaced inside Lebanon, they have moved from one neighborhood to another, from one region to another. And their return will happen when the shelling of the cannons stops, because, if Israel announces a ceasefire tomorrow, they will go back to their villages, and the reconstruction plan would start.

Today, in Lebanon, do we have to accept the story that there is a country that has occupied Syria, and with its occupation of Syria, has moved Syrians to Lebanon, and consequently, that we have to find an alternative country for the Syrians in Lebanon? Should we build camps for them because they are staying in Lebanon? We believe that Syria has been through a political setback related to governance, to the ruling of the country, it is about something internal, and Syrians have to go back naturally to their country.

The issue that we have realized is that our perspective is different from the international one. What we have considered as an internal political dispute, has become much more than “internal politics”. There is a demographic change in Syria, a change to viewing Syria as one single country, but this is directly impacting Lebanon, rather than indirectly. How so, directly? What was supposed to end in 2015 did not end. Moreover, its life is being prolonged. Between 2011 and 2015, there was a war in Syria. Now, there is no war there. Nine years have passed between 2015 and 2024. Why are they still here? Some of them are at risk (political risk if they go back to Syria), but what about the rest?

Interviewer: They are economically displaced persons.

Minister: Indeed. This is why we focus on the idea of “displacement”, “temporary displacement” governed by laws devoid of the “permanent” dimension.

Interviewer: If I understood you well, you are giving the concept/dimension of time to the term “displacement”, whereas if we look at the official definition, the displaced person is still in his country, and the refugee is outside his country (geographic dimension).

Minister: Indeed, and we consider that it is a temporary displacement to a neighboring country, and they will return (to their country). In 2006 (war between Lebanese Hezbollah and Israel), some Lebanese were temporarily displaced from South Lebanon to Syria, and they came back. When I visited Bachar Al Assad after the earthquake in Aleppo, I told him at that time: “Lebanon has gone (through war) in 2006, people got displaced to Syria and have returned to it when stability was restored, and Lebanon was waiting for them. Now regarding the Syrian displacement to Lebanon, the war is over (in Syria), let us open the way (for return), why are we putting conditions (on their return)?”

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| Question 3 | What do you think their understanding or intention are when they use the term “Refugee” in English? |
| Question 4 | In Arabic, you always use “نازح” (Nāziḥ - displaced), and never “refugee” when speaking of Syrians on the Lebanese territory. Do you think there will be any difference in the understanding of the term Refugee vs Displaced when translating to them back into English? |
| Question 5 | Do you think they understand that you consider Syrians in Lebanon as displaced? Knowing that there is an important difference in meaning between the two terms. Or maybe in this context, they think the terms “refugee” and “displaced” can be used interchangeably? |

Answer

Minister: The international community chooses its words clearly, in a covert, political way.

Interviewer: Fair enough. This means that when they hear us using in interpretation the word “displaced”, they understand your message, as I understand from you, or could we use them interchangeably?

Minister: They understand my message but do not accept it. They also impose on me a message that I do not accept. They are trying to get me used to a message they want me to accept with time, and I want to convince them that, every day, there will be something that shall not make them feel comfortable.

Interviewer: Therefore, in this sense, there is a political message that is being sent.

Minister: There is nothing but a political message being sent, and the consequence of the political message is a humanitarian, social, educational, health, and international commitment. It is a commitment as well towards the country that has hosted the people who sought refuge in it. Today, that also means that the rhetoric that is circulating, is about making the country that has hosted (the Syrians) bear the responsibility of protecting those people, and when we say “to protect them”, we mean protecting them on all levels.

Currently, we are moving towards the unification of tracks, this big movie, the unification of tracks for the response (for the Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians), which means that after a while, they will tell us: “There are no (more) funds, you bear their responsibility.”

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| Question 6 | Do you think the intention of the English-speakers is being conveyed when using نازح (Nāziḥ - displaced) instead of لاجئ (Lāji' - refugee) in Arabic? |
| Question 7 | Do you think there will be any difference in the understanding of the term نازح (Nāziḥ - displaced) versus لاجئ (Lāji' - refugee) in Arabic by the listeners from the different possible Arabic-speaking target audiences, when speaking about Syrians on Lebanese territory? |
| Question 8 | If such audience answers based on the “نازح” (Nāziḥ - displaced) principle, what is the probability of it creating a misalignment between them and the English-speaking audience, leading to further misunderstanding? |

Answer

***Interviewer:** There might be a misunderstanding at the beginning maybe?*

Minister: Those who listen in Arabic - with the explanations that we are providing over time - will certainly understand that (the difference between the terms). Especially if, in the same political file, we use the same terms, because there are politicians who mix everything; they use “refuge” and “displacement” in the same speech. There are Lebanese politicians who know what they are saying, they use the same term from the beginning till the end of their speech, and they explain it. But there are people about whom we can say that this is not their specialization nor their perspective, and they do not know what they are saying, versus the people who know what they are saying.

***Interviewer:** Thus, for the audience that is uneducated regarding the difference between “displaced” and “refugee”, it will not get the message.*

Minister: Of course, such audience will not get the message, this is why, in my speeches, as a politician, and regarding this topic - you told me that I am clear and I have a (logical) sequence in my ideas - what I am trying to do is raise awareness. My speech is equivalent to an awareness-raising process. Awakening the subconscious mind that is dormant among the Lebanese, and I always do that to tell them that there is something that is being pushed through according to the frog tale (Boiling Frog Syndrome), that is, temperature is being raised slowly until it (the frog) dies. Beware, your subconscious should wake up and say “I say no”. Consequently, I use this strategy in my communication. As a matter of fact, take September 2021 (as a reference date) - date at which he took office - compare how things were before that date with how they were one year after it; you will then know where this rhetoric has led.

Do this exercise. Before 2021, there was barely any talk about the Syrian issue. There was the covid pandemic, and things were a mess. Starting 2021, I started with this “relentless repetition of this information” (“matraquage” used, in French), and now, look at the extent of its impact in 2022. This is why they (By “they”, I think he means the UN agencies working for the Syrians in Lebanon) caused such a commotion and rose up against me, because my message reached them. For this reason, today, there are moves, and everybody wants to “claim they know the best interest of the Syrians” (the expression used in Arabic is “everybody wants to be the father of the child”); at least, let us sensitize people on these risks. That is, there is someone who raised the awareness of people about those risks, there is someone who

visited the (Syrian) camps - talking about himself; he is known to be close to people and to reality on the ground. However, there are people - other politicians - who spoke about the camps without having visited them. I visited them, I spoke from the camps, I filmed videos inside the camps, and I explained to people about the economic risks, the social risks, the risks of child bearing, all this was an awareness raising process, in addition to the dollarization issue - giving Syrians assistance in USD at a time the Lebanese were going through a financial crisis and could not withdraw their savings in USD from banks. We have reached the peak, and people are aware from now on. What is important is that I have reached my goal, and now is the time for decision-making, now we are at the stage of making the decision. Now, we have reached the serious phase of deciding about who will make the decision to get them out. Now, the strategy is about continuing with the pressure, without reaching a state of bloodshed. Continuing with the pressure, because now things have started to reach the state of bloodshed, in Bourj Hammoud (town in Lebanon), there were confrontations between Syrians and Lebanese, and we are walking a thin line.

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| Question 9 | In the case the Ministry will honor me again with the task of an interpretation mission, should I consider additional terms related to the topic of (displaced) Syrians, or maybe Palestinian or other refugees or migrants across the Lebanese territories in order to perform better my work when translating between English and Arabic? |
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Answer

Minister: Of course, there are many terms other than “displacement” and “refuge”. There is “temporary presence”, and we should understand what temporary presence is, because today, there is temporary presence of people who are waiting to be repatriated, there is temporary presence of those waiting to go to a third country; after disasters occur in some countries, whether political or other, there are terms in the relevant language that we have to understand and put in their framework, because that allows people and decision-makers to know what to say, as until today, there are decision-makers who do not know the difference between “finding a third country” and “temporary residence”. For example, during the war in Iraq, when Lebanon hosted Iraqis here, that was temporary. That was “temporary hosting” until they would go to their final host country; they came to Lebanon in order to go to Canada, they came to Lebanon then went to a third country, they were resettled in a third country; that happened when the Iraqis were here, and if you go back in time and look at the lexicon used by then, those terms were used a lot. For that reason, for example, there was no need for the Iraqis to stay in Lebanon, no camps were built for them despite the fact that their numbers were large. We always used to speak about the Iraqis, saying that their presence was temporary, they will come (to Lebanon) and then leave. And all those countries were open to them, like Sweden, Canada, the USA, Australia, they were all receiving them. Why are things different with the Syrians? Are there other reasons?

You are welcome, and see you hopefully again. If you want to hold another meeting, I am available for that.

Notes:

- The Original interview was held in Lebanese Arabic by interpreter Grace Bou Nafeh.
- The interpreter added some background information within the interview answers (marked by brackets or dashes) for clarification.

Biographies

Hector Hajjar

Mr. Hector Hajjar holds a degree in social activism, and has worked in the field of social service. He assumed office as Minister of Social Affairs of Lebanon in September 2021, and held this position until January 2025. Before his political career, he worked as a dentist and founded several organizations to help the disadvantaged communities and people with special needs.

Grace Bou Nafeh

Grace Bou Nafeh is a sworn translator and conference interpreter, and holds a B.A. in Translation and an M.A. in Interpretation from the Lebanese University in Beirut, Lebanon. She is currently pursuing doctoral studies at the University of Granada, Spain.