

Guita Hourani Discusses Migration and her work at the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC)

■ Interviewed by Myriam Sfeir

Managing Editor

Interviewing Ms. Guita Hourani, Associate Director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) at Notre Dame University (NDU), Lebanon, was indispensable for this issue of *Al-Raida*, considering that she is a woman who heads one of the few centers that addresses the issue of migration in the Arab world. Being herself a forced migrant, her testimony is very poignant given that she experienced the alienation that migrants face when they flee their country of origin and settle in a foreign land.

1. Can you expound on your background, family, education and work?

I am from Taalabaya in the Bekaa valley, where I was raised in a closely-knit and very conservative family, along with two brothers and a sister. My studies began in Lebanon and then in the United States, leaving for the latter in 1983. In the US, after graduating with a Masters in Urban Planning, I was a consultant for several years to the World Bank and the International Institute for Development in Washington, D.C. Also in the US, I pioneered and taught a course at several universities and institutions on the role of women in war, peace and conflict resolution, founded the Maronite Research Institute (MARI) and its electronic publication, *The Journal of Maronite Studies*, and was a Fellow at the Institute of

Christian Oriental Research Center at the Catholic University of America. I had intended to return to Lebanon on a permanent basis in 1997, when I started teaching at the Holy Spirit University and was the advisor for International Academic Affairs; however I left again in 1999 to finally return permanently in 2002.

I returned to Lebanon mainly because of my parents. My parents did not like living in Europe because of the weather and decided to return to Lebanon; therefore, being the only single child in the family, I returned to be with them. Both my parents are in their early seventies and need to be cared for, not so much physically as emotionally and morally. My parents could not, and still cannot, adjust to the fact that most of their children and grandchildren are not around them.

The first two years were very miserable — I was very unhappy and disliked living in polluted, noisy, and chaotic Beirut. Yet, with time, I got used to life here in Lebanon, especially after managing to persuade my parents to move to the mountains.

I am currently the Associate Director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC) at Notre Dame



A festival celebrating the Lebanese Independence in front of the Lebanese Embassy, Mexico, 1950. Courtesy of LERC.



Mercedes Mafud de Rage carrying her daughter Ivonne. Accompanied by Juan Erales, José and Sara Cuaik and Latife Abdel Nur de Mafud, with Hilda Rage. Mexico, (n.d.). Courtesy of LERC.

University and a member of the University's Research Board. At LERC I wear three hats; I am the head manager, the head of research, and a researcher. I am responsible for setting up the research policy of the Center; I lead research projects, represent the Center locally, regionally and internationally, and provide consultation in my capacity as an expert on Lebanese migration issues for governmental and non-governmental institutions. I also served as an expert on migration for the Maronite Patriarchal Synod from 2003 to 2006.

2. You spent many years yourself as an emigrant, how did this personal experience affect your understanding of the migration issue and your work as a researcher?

In 1983, I was forced to leave my country of birth, Lebanon. My parents sent me to the USA to my maternal uncle to recover from an injury I sustained during the war. I was supposed to stay in the US for a couple of months, but my parents decided that I should benefit from being there to further my studies, especially that I always wanted to continue my education. The months turned into years, too many years, actually. While living permanently in the US, I also tried settling in different countries, France, Japan, and then Canada, but the US was the place where I was destined to be a migrant. My migration

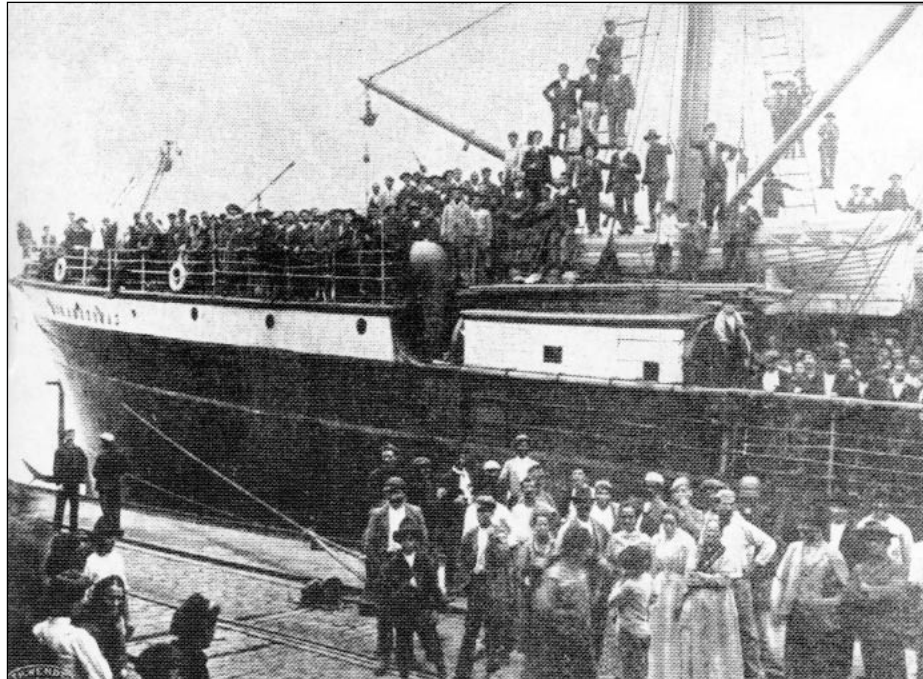
was from 1983 to 2001 with an interval of two years spent in Lebanon between 1997 and 1999. My life has been marked by the experience of migration given that almost half of my life was spent away from my loved ones and from my country, Lebanon.

Had it not been for the Lebanese civil war that made of us forced migrants, I think I could easily have become another person. I shall never know who that person could have been, a pilot, or a medical doctor, or maybe a married person living incognito in my village. The only me that I know, however, is the one that is marked by the consequences of displacement and migration.

My siblings and I are forced migrants. None of us chose to leave and stay away for that long, we truly didn't have a say in this decision. I was supposed to leave to study medicine in France upon completing high school. However, all my plans were sabotaged by the war of 1975. Following our displacement and all the bloodshed I witnessed, I couldn't tolerate the sight of death and bodies and so my interest in medicine faded. My second choice was to become a pilot but my injury during the war prevented me from becoming a pilot and so I ended up being a historian and an urban planner, which is not so bad. At least I am alive, unlike my cousins and best friend.



Antoine Farah and Vilma Pergeli Farah with their children coming back to Lebanon, Brazil, 1964. Courtesy of LERC



The disembarkation of emigrants in the port of Santos, Brazil, 1907. Courtesy of LERC.

Even though my life has been very rich with travel, education, and very positive experiences, there are things that I was deprived of, things that I cannot recover or recreate. Things such as growing up with my siblings, knowing what my brother's favorite music was, how he lived his adolescent life, how much my other brother suffered when he was kidnapped, how my parents survived, things such as sharing the family burden with my sister, enjoying Christmas as a family, attending the wedding of my brother, the birth of my nephew, etc. Being a migrant is a very painful experience. Migration is separation; it is an agonizing experience especially when you are forced to migrate against your will, when you leave behind your loved ones under bombardment never knowing when you will see them next.

When I look back, I realize how polarized I became. I lived with one part of my heart and mind in Lebanon and the other part in the States. I left the US after fourteen years without even obtaining a green card. Had I been less idealistic, I could have secured the American citizenship that would have facilitated my life and the life of my family. I didn't even think of US citizenship as an opportunity for my family. I blame myself for being idealistic, for not being pragmatic, and sometimes when it hits me hard that we are spread all over the world, I feel guilty for not having put my family first rather than my principles. It was out of selfishness and stubbornness that I failed to bring my family together to the US when I had the opportunity of doing

so. Now my sister is married in France, my brother lives with his family in Belgium, my other brother and his family are on the island of Guadeloupe, and my parents and I are in Lebanon. I will always regret not thinking of them first and not doing my duty to my family.

Migration is both an opportunity and a misfortune. It polarizes people, it makes them face their demons, and it challenges their identities, beliefs, fears, and strengths. Migration has made me a better person than the one I knew before leaving. Well, let me rephrase this, it exploded my talents, it widened my lens, it realized my dream to travel and to learn, it broke me and remolded me time after time with every failure and every success. Migration is a god that remolds its creation constantly.

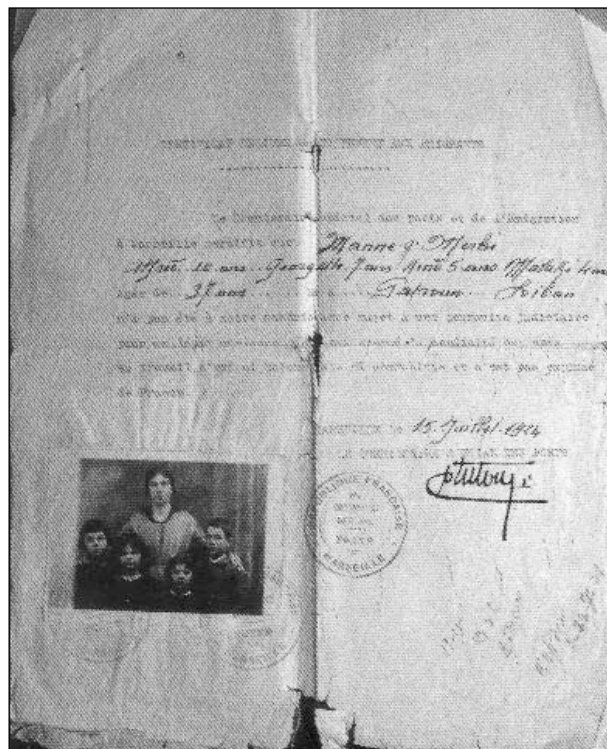
As for what it did to my understanding of migration issues and its impact on my work? I wouldn't have been so effective in my work if I hadn't experienced migration myself. My own experience has given me a special entry into this complex and contradictory world of mobility and separation. I can deeply understand migration and migrants. Migrants face adjustment and integration issues that are probably the hardest to deal with because they demand a change of mindset, behavior, and misconceptions.

One of the issues that I had to deal with at different intervals in my life as a migrant in the US was the issue of race. During my first semester at the university I was

asked to fill out a census. One of the questions was "are you White, Hispanic, Black, Native-American or Other" and my answer was Hispanic because I was in South Carolina and I saw that I looked like my Hispanic classmates more than anybody else. I was never faced with a question of race before. In Lebanon you are identified by your religion. Then a couple of years later I realized that being Hispanic is an identity as well as a race, and then when I learned what the definition of white is, I started referring to myself as white. After a couple more years had passed, and with better knowledge of race and ethnicity in the States, I reasserted my identity and my ethnicity by placing 'Syriac' next to 'Other' in the census. I wanted to reclaim who I was. So you see, in one decade I changed my perception three times vis-à-vis my racial belonging. This is not the least of the issues that people face in their journey as migrants.

3. You are currently the Associate Director of the Lebanese Emigration Research Center (LERC); can you tell me more about the Center and its activities?

We established LERC in April 2003, as an initiative of the Lebanese Notre Dame University, known locally as NDU. We created the center basically to promote the academic study of contemporary and historical migration to, from, and through Lebanon. We work with local and international scholars and we use both traditional-academic and alternative-grassroots methodologies. We also have introduced the use and study of information and communication technology (ICT) as a research tool and object of our studies here of late. Another of our aims at LERC is to support original research and to promote an intellectual exchange among experts, students, and others who hold an interest in international migration and national development. The focus of our work at LERC involves the relationships within the network of Lebanese diasporic communities spread throughout the world; and the role of Lebanese migrants and their



Travel certificate of Manné Merhi, her son and three daughters from Batroun, Lebanon July 15, 1924. Courtesy of LERC.

remittances back home, which have come to play a continuing role in the development of their home country. In saying so, our ultimate aim at LERC is to become the world's principal center of research as well as being the chief repository for archival and other material related to Lebanese migration. The Center, we hope, will also serve as a forum where scholars and advanced students of migration, with all its related disciplines, can meet with actual migrants, as well as those interested in the field. We are trying to create a place where the university's faculty and students can discuss migration

issues with local officials, businesspersons, and other professionals, and where a wide variety of human experience and knowledge can be accessed and explored.

LERC is also heavily involved in community activities. In addition to public forums on the economic and political effects of Lebanese migration I mentioned before, the Center organizes regional workshops on issues of particular concern to local communities, as well as occasional exhibitions of photographs and documents from its own archives. From October to May of each academic year, and as part of the Center's monthly lecture series, Lebanese audiences are introduced to a wide range



"Meu hotel", em 1918, na fronteira do Brasil com o Paraguai.

A postcard of Meu hotel in 1918 Brazil-Paraguay Borders. Courtesy of LERC.



Grand receptions offered by Don Antonio Letayf in his ranch. Present in this reunion were President Carranza, diplomatic members and a group of Lebanese merchants, Mexico (n.d.). Courtesy of LERC.

of topics presented by local and foreign specialists. Our lecture topics till now have dealt mainly with the Lebanese migrant communities in France, Mexico, and Australia, the structure of the transnational Lebanese family, absentee voting and election reform, the effects of migration on the village of Bishmizzine, and migrant patriotism in times of crisis.

Apart from its activities here in Lebanon, we encourage the staff at the Center to regularly participate in a wide variety of international conferences and forums, again focusing in particular on migration and cultural exchange between the lands bordering the Mediterranean.

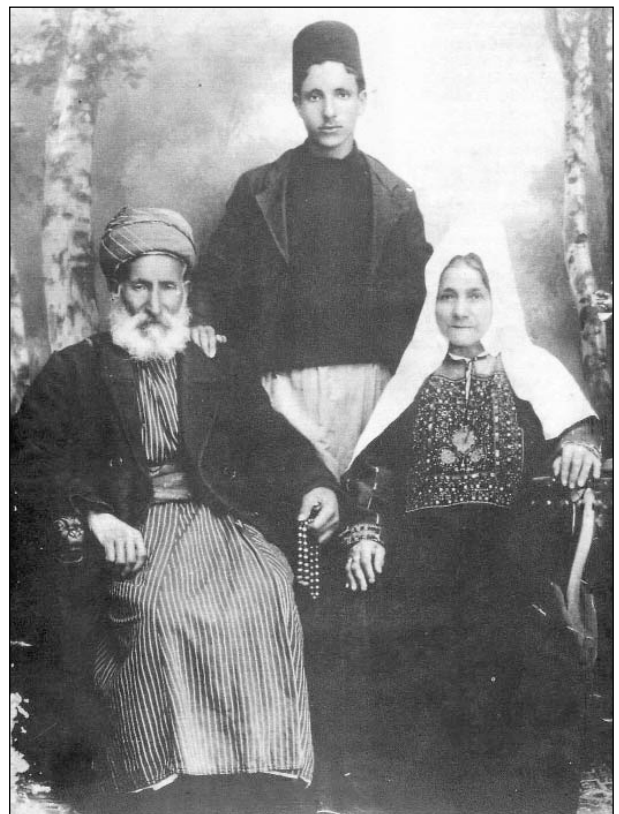
4. At LERC do you strive to include a gender dimension in the research you undertake? Do you collect gender-disaggregated data?

Migration studies, as a whole, are neglected in Lebanon, let alone a focus on women's migration experiences. However, many Lebanese and non-Lebanese scholars outside the country have published a wide variety of research on the subject of Lebanese women migrants: such as Dr. Akram Khater (*Inventing home: Emigration, gender and the middle class in Lebanon 1870-1920*), Dr. Evelyn Shakir (*Bint Arab*), Joanna Kadi (*Food for our grandmothers*), Anja Peleikis (*Lebanese in Motion: Gender and the making of translocal village*). Several PhD dissertations address the subject, such as Lebanese migration to Sierra Leone: *Issues of Transnationalism, Gender, Citizenship, and the Construction of a Globalized Identity* by Lina Beydoun. Most of these books and dissertations have been collected by LERC and are available at our Center for consultation.

At LERC we also highlight the gender dimension in our

applied social science research projects. For instance, in our in-house survey on the evacuation that took place during the Summer 2006 War, we purposely included a set of gender specific questions. In doing so, we hoped to be able to map out the profile of the female sample from among the interviewees; that is, we not only wanted to know how many had already migrated or were planning to leave, but also to learn more about their evacuation experience as women.

We are currently in the process of aggregating the data collected from a later survey, commissioned by the EU's Consortium of Applied Research on International Migration (CARIM), on the impact of the Summer 2006 War and its aftermath on insecurity, migration, and return. We received well over 600 responses from our residents' questionnaire. Out of the 444 residents who filled out our residents' survey properly, 195 were women; we also canvassed the Lebanese expatriates with a separate questionnaire, receiving over 100 responses, and out of the 71



Issa David Assaf and Anastacia Salvador de Assaf and their son Elias in Belén, Mexico in 1899. Courtesy of LERC.

valid migrant responses 22 were from women. This information will be a large part of the initial basis for a database that will monitor the feminization of the migration from Lebanon. Simultaneously the statistics on women are being jointly aggregated with the data from the male participants in the final report, which will give us an overall picture of the status of migration in Lebanon for the survey period. The final report is available on the EuroMed website (www.carim.org), or directly at (http://www.iue.it/RSCAS/e-texts/CARIM-RR2007_01_Hourani&Sensenig.pdf).

We understand that migration impacts gender roles, personal behavior, employment, education, and economic life. We also understand how migration challenges the meaning of being a woman, especially when migration is forced in many cases, as it is in Lebanon. Therefore, we are also planning several follow up studies, one of which is on the increasing phenomenon of young, educated, female Lebanese migrants; another is to collect Lebanese women's life narratives, not so much on a historical basis, as was done in the past, concentrating on former female migrants, but more on those who are migrants today and we would like to cooperate with your center on this subject.

Of course the term "gender" means both women and men. We are also looking at the other side of the coin, at migration as a specifically male experience. We now have enough raw data from our two studies carried out from July to December of 2006 in order to contribute to the study of male migration for the first time. Some of our staff members are preparing our first study of male migration, integrating our recent data with gender studies theory on male identities.

5. At the international level, migration flows are becoming increasingly feminized; is LERC undertaking any research along these lines?

LERC has been in existence for three and-a-half-years only. The founding years were dedicated to collecting material (books, studies, and archival material), establishing contacts, signing agreements, and setting up our

objectives and goals. We were also keen on thinking and working outside the box, using oral history, visual history and physical culture studies in local village settings in the north of Lebanon. We haven't really got around to carrying out any project dedicated specifically to the feminization of migration in Lebanon. However, in all our ongoing and future research projects, LERC is paying special attention to the feminization of emigration from Lebanon. We know from observation and anecdotal information that there is an increase in the migration of young, single, and educated Lebanese women. This is the result of several factors. First, it is due to the disproportionate number of males who have emigrated previously, and it is also due to the large number of males who have died during the past decades of conflict. More women are being educated and are entering non-traditional sectors of the economy, and because of the insecurities,



The Elegant Jorge Trad Tueini in her twenties, Mexico (n.d.). Courtesy of LERC.



Juanita Majluf and her friend in Orizaba, Veracruz, 1916. Courtesy of LERC.

both political and economic, in the country, they are opting for migration, mainly to the Gulf, but more and more to other parts of the world including, but not only, Western Europe and Canada. In addition to the political and economic reasons, there is a specific social reason as well; it is said that there is one marriageable male to every five single females in Lebanon who are looking for a husband. The search for better marriage opportunities might also be a reason for some women to leave.

Currently, we are in the process of preparing a research project that will deal with this topic exclusively and we would love for it to be a joint venture between our Center and the Institute for Women's Studies in the Arab



Teresa and Raquel Nader with their fiancés, Mexico. (n.d.). Courtesy of LERC.



Young first generation Lebanese women disguised as wives of sheiks, Mexico, 1935. Courtesy of LERC.

World, in cooperation with scholars from other international and regional organizations.

6. What are some of the challenges you are facing at LERC in terms of gender and migration research and how are you dealing with them?

We are facing challenges in terms of conducting migration research in general and gendered research in particular. The challenges are basically the lack of data and the near absence of data collection by the different ministries, agencies, and departments of the government. It is the government's duty to collect the needed data. In general, international organizations, UN bodies and non-governmental organizations usually make use of the data provided by governments. In Lebanon, the situation is complicated, given that the past thirty years have been very chaotic with the civil war taking its toll on all government sectors. It is important to note that we have not had a national census since 1932. Hence, we do not know the actual composition of our population. There are projections, but without a national census and the proper programs needed to collect the different variables at the ports of entry and departure no factual data will be available.

Mind you, there are two studies that were done in the last 30 years, one by the government's Central Administration of Statistics and one by the Université Saint Joseph (USJ). Moreover, Dr. Anis Abi Farah of the Lebanese University started a database, a personal initiative, and published a small study on the subject. Two of



Jorge and Minerva Zacarías, Alfredo, Amira, Alicia and Guillermo Asali in traditional clothes, Mexico, 1942. Courtesy of LERC.

the studies put migration between 1975 and 2001 at around 900,000. This information does not include those who have returned and re-migrated or returned and stayed. So the data is not very detailed. Thanks to the studies mentioned, we are now able to form an idea about the number and makeup of the population that is left in the country. However, these studies are sporadic. In order to really understand migration, interim studies and interim aggregation of information, statistics, and data are required.

Since 2001, no studies have been published on migration. There might be some studies that are prepared for

private purposes or by commercial enterprises, but these studies are not made available to the public.

Another obstacle we are facing is that universities are not properly maintaining contact with their graduates, in order to know their whereabouts; that also deprives us of an alternative source of information. The respective alumni associations could become a major partner in improving migration studies in Lebanon.

It is unfortunate that there is very little we can do to deal with the lack of data other than conducting quantitative research. Quantitative research requires large amounts of funding that is simply not obtainable at this time for the social sciences. Given that the University is our main funding resource, we should look for alternative funding sources as well. Moreover, one needs relative peace in the country to be able to conduct research projects. One must be able to send researchers to conduct fieldwork without being worried that they might come in harm's way. We certainly will do our best to secure funds. This does not mean that we are not already trying different avenues to carry out such research. Here again, we might profit in this matter if our two institutions would work together more closely.

7. What changes do you think would benefit the situation of Arab migrant women in the diaspora?

The changes could occur on four levels. The first changes



Juanita Serio de Asali, Mexico, 1930. Courtesy of LERC.

should occur on the level of the individual women themselves. Women should benefit from their migration experience in order to further their knowledge base, education and experience, to reinforce their identity, and to partake in social and national life, including politics. The second change should occur on the national level, to get women recognized as equal members of society and to enact laws that protect them as human beings and as women. Laws that will allow them full participation in social and national life along with the establishment of monitoring bodies that oversee the implementation of these laws. The third level is that of the host countries, whose laws should protect women against abuse and harassment, low pay, unequal pay and job insecurity, and allow them to realize their full potential. The fourth level is the international one, where we have seen serious efforts to set up laws that protect women, that encourage them to take action to emancipate themselves, and ensure their access to education, housing, employment, health treatment, food, credit, and the like.

The above mentioned items are applicable to all women. As for Arab migrant women, I believe that they have to do more for



The Funeral of Pedro Kahwagi Kuri, Mexico. Courtesy of LERC.

themselves in order to benefit from their migration experience, especially in developed countries. They should gain education and knowledge, participate in civil society, in political movements, in parties and in international organizations, exploit their talents, discover themselves, and realize their potential.

I agree with the anthropologist Emmanuel Todd when he said that the defining factor in the adjustment of immigrants — the factor that determines the ultimate success of the migration process for a specific group, that is in our case the situation of Arabs, is the social status of women in both the country of origin and the country of immigration. I believe that Arab women migrants have impacted the lives of women in the Arab world in the past and will continue to do so, especially with the development of technology and transportation, which facilitates networking and interaction. I believe that it is important to set up a networking channel between migrant women and resident women in Lebanon and the Middle East to exchange ideas and benefit from experiences and maybe have a mentoring program for young women.

8. What are the specifically Lebanese aspects of your work on migration?

All the work we do at LERC is on Lebanese emigration. We are very interested in doing comparative studies. Examining the migration experience of Lebanese women and comparing it to that of Egyptian, Jordanian, or Palestinian women is one of our dreams.

At LERC we are not concentrating much on the migration that happened in the past because research on that subject is well developed and enjoys a lot of support today. We want to catch up with what is happening today, to be able to benefit our society with suggestions for policies. There is so much work to be done; especially studying, for instance, the role of women as identity carriers and protectors, as well as their role in the integration process in the host societies.



A group of Lebanese leaving the French embassy in Mexico, 1930. Courtesy of LERC.



Dimitri Dib Family, Brazil, 1920. Courtesy of LERC.

9. Can you tell me more about the latest research project LERC has undertaken on the effects of the Summer 2006 War and migration?

All our projects that were planned for last summer were aborted as a result of the war. However, during the war — while we were literally sitting around wondering what to do next — we decided to use this unwanted "opportunity" to work on a study about immigration, remigration and evacuation under fire, so to speak. The study dealt with the assisted departure of return migrants who had actually returned to reside in Lebanon or migrants who were just

visiting Lebanon for their summer vacation. We knew that the war affected remigration or return to Lebanon and migration from Lebanon. With the data as a basis, we found that 12% of our sample comprised people who had returned this summer to check out life in Lebanon and eventually bring back their entire families. Eighteen percent had actually already decided to return permanently, but were forced to leave, so you can imagine the impact. Even though the sample in our study was small, what was revealed was significant. The loss of hope was one of the major casualties of the war. Many of the Lebanese living abroad lost all hope of returning to Lebanon.

Over and above the aforementioned study, LERC has published two handbooks. The first book is a bibliography of Lebanese migration in Australia and New Zealand and the second is a handbook entitled *The Lebanese*

Migrants in Brazil: An Annotated Bibliography. We also developed an alternative toolkit, using Sven Lindqvist's "dig where you stand" approach to local migration studies, which will come out as a book in the fall of 2007. Moreover, LERC prepared a white paper that was sent to the Boutros Commission on electoral reform in the fall of 2005, on the right of Lebanese migrants to vote out-of-country. Last but not least, we are planning a special study on Lebanese women migrants to be carried out in late 2007.

We are currently finalizing two studies, the results of which will be published in the spring of 2007. One is in the form of a book on absentee voting in the case of the Lebanese migration and the second is about Human Insecurity and Forced Migration in Lebanon following the Summer 2006 War.

 Recent Publications on Lebanese Migration  	
<p><i>Insecurity, Migration and Return: The Case of Lebanon Following the Summer 2006 War</i>, Guita G. Hourani and Eugene Sensenig-Dabbous, Euro-Mediterranean Consortium for Applied Research on International Migration (CARIM), Research Reports [CARIM-RR 2007/01] Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, San Domenico di Fiesole (FI): European University Institute, 2007. The study is available for download on CARIM's internet website at www.carim.org</p>	
Funded by	
 	
<p><i>The Impact of the Summer 2006 War on Migration in Lebanon: Emigration, Re-Migration, Evacuation and Return</i>, Guita G. Hourani, NDU Press 2006. ISBN: 9953-457-55-7.</p>	
http://www.ndu.edu.lb/lerc/	
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