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Relatives of Lebanese held in Syria block workers



The families of nine Lebanese Shiite pilgrims kidnapped nearly a year ago in Syria are stopping Syrian workers in Beirut from going to work in a bid to put pressure on those holding their relatives. On Wednesday, an AFP reporter saw around a dozen relatives, men and women, stop cars at an intersection in an industrial area on the outskirts of the southern suburbs of Beirut, a stronghold of Shiite Syrian regime ally Hezbollah. Unarmed men posted on the route sent back drivers and Syrian workers aboard minibuses after verifying their identities, explaining that their gesture was a bid to draw attention to the plight of their relatives. They also ejected a group of Lebanese schoolchildren from a bus driven by a Syrian, ordering him to turn back. "We know what we're doing isn't great, but we are so desperate," said Inaya Zogheib, the daughter of one of the Lebanese hostages being held in Syria. "We have nothing personal against the Syrians, they've have lived among us for 30 years," adds Mona Termos, whose husband Ali is another of the hostages. "But while our relatives are being held in Syria, we won't allow them to have their livelihoods," she says. "My husband managed a supermarket, and now my two daughters have left university to keep the family afloat." A group of Lebanese Shiite pilgrims were kidnapped in May 2012 in northern Syria's Aleppo province as they returned from a pilgrimage in Iran. The women in the group and two men have been released. The kidnapping was claimed by a man who identified himself as Abu Ibrahim and says he is a member of the rebel Free Syrian Army, but the opposition group denies any involvement in the abductions. Thousands of Syrians have flocked to Lebanon for decades to find employment in jobs that pay better than those available in their country, which has been ravaged for the past two years by a brutal civil war. Since the conflict began, more than 400,000 Syrians have also sought refuge in neighboring Lebanon, putting pressure on the small country's resources and creating tensions with local residents in parts of the country.