

Politics and the Plight of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Political Brief on the Return of Syrian Refugees

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Introduction: The Centrality of Politics

This political brief aims at presenting the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon by highlighting the centrality of politics to the plight of refugees. Having been forced to flee Syria, we argue that Syrian refugees are stuck in Lebanon without a coherent policy framework and may be forced to return home without any guarantees of safety or stability. The situation of Syrian refugees cannot be analyzed without an understanding of the Lebanese political scene between 2011 and 2018.

This political brief is addressed to Lebanese policy-makers in their capacity as responsible for navigating every-day politics and for developing a strategy for the protection and return of refugees. The Lebanese government is constantly negotiating its position with the international community, as well as with national counterparts, regarding refugees. Politics continues to be central in this negotiation process and in shaping the response to the crisis. By focusing on the relational aspect of politics and refugee response, this brief highlights the plight of Syrian refugees and offers potential recommendations.

This political brief is based on a one-year research project funded by the American University of Beirut focused on examining the Lebanese political context and its impact on the government's response to the Syrian refugee crisis. Using qualitative data and insights from politicians, public officials, NGOs, and donor representatives, this project seeks to highlight the complex political realities Syrian refugees face in Lebanon.

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The Plight of Syrian Refugees

Forced to Flee

- The uprising that began in 2011 against the Syrian regime was met by violence and escalated into a full-fledged war forcing more than 5 million persons to flee the country.
- Inside Syria, the UN estimates that more than 13.5 million persons require humanitarian assistance and 6 million are internally displaced. Massive shelling, chemical weapons, detentions, torture, and starvation have been the main drivers forcing Syrians to leave their country.
- Syrians who fled to Turkey were granted temporary protection and hosted in one of the 14 camps managed by the Turkish authorities in collaboration with the Turkish Red Crescent.
- Syrians who fled to Jordan settled mainly with host communities and a small number resided in formally organized camps with access to basic services.
- Lebanon adopted an open-border policy between 2011 and 2014 which allowed more than 1.5 million Syrians to enter the country. But Syrians who fled to Lebanon were left without a clearly defined and consistent policy, legal or, administrative framework. This void of law and policy is attributed to Lebanon's precarious political positioning towards the conflict in Syria which left its institutions in political deadlock in the early stages of the crisis.

Stuck in Lebanon

- By the end of 2014, the Lebanese government began to introduce aggressive policies starting with closing the borders and requiring Syrians to pledge not to work or to secure a Lebanese sponsor and pay for a residency permit every 6 months. In May 2015, the government officially requested that UNHCR stop registering refugees.
- Inside Lebanon, the rights of Syrians were not protected by international law and as such their access to mobility, education, employment, and healthcare was completely left to the whim of political parties and local municipal councils.
- Syrians fled to informal settlements mainly in the Bekaa, North and South of Lebanon and faced haphazard unregulated local practices, such as work without pay and gender-based violence.
- While Lebanon was hailed as an international model of resilience for hosting the highest number of refugees per capita worldwide, the absence of a rights-based refugee policy made their stay turbulent at best and dangerous at worst.
- 76% of Syrian refugee families live below the poverty line, 53% of Syrian refugee families live in substandard shelter conditions, and 74% Syrian refugees aged 15 and above do not have legal residency (VASyR 2017).
- Overlapping national, regional, and international events prevented Syrian refugees in Lebanon from being able either to return home or to seek refuge and protection elsewhere.



A Syrian refugee child in an informal settlement in Bekaa Valley, Lebanon. Source: UNICEF/Alessio Romenzi.

Forced to Return

- The discourse of Lebanese politicians towards Syrian refugees changed drastically in 2016 and in the lead up to the 2018 parliamentary elections, fueling rising tensions between refugees and some host communities, framing refugees as the cause of unemployment, instability, and diseases. Emboldened by World Bank estimates that the economy had incurred losses up to \$13 billion, Lebanese politicians, foremost Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, began calling for the immediate return of refugees to Syria.
- In April 2018, Prime Minister Saad Hariri represented Lebanon at international donor conferences, CEDRE and Brussels II, reiterating Lebanon's commitment to the international community continue to accommodate Syrian refugees. This was coupled with a call for additional international funding and donor commitment to support for both refugee and host community needs.
- In June 2018, this governmental stance was undercut by Foreign Minister Bassil who ordered a freeze on residency permits for UNHCR staff, and threatened to take further measures against UNHCR, accusing the agency of impeding the refugees' return to Syria.
- At present, the return of refugees is being pushed forward through three tracks: General Security has begun facilitating the return of hundreds of Syrians in coordination with UNHCR; Hezbollah has opened centers to organize refugee return in coordination with the Syrian regime; plans for a US-Russia would facilitate the return of a sizable number of refugees without direct negotiation between the Lebanese government and the Assad regime.

Politics and the Syrian Refugee Crisis

- Given Syria's role in the Lebanese civil war, its tutelage over Lebanon from 1990 to 2005, and accusations of involvement in the assassination of prominent Lebanese politicians, the issue of relations with Syria is polarizing among Lebanese political actors. March 8 alliance considers Syria an ally while March 14 alliance do not.
- Given the sectarian nature of Lebanon's political power-sharing system, the presence of majority-Sunni Syrian refugees is highly politicized. Syrian refugees are perceived as an existential threat for Christians, a security threat for Shiites, and an economic threat for underprivileged Sunnis living in areas where Syrians have settled in masses.
- Foreign patronage has played a major role in the formation of the Lebanese nation state and continues to be a core pillar of sustaining the Lebanese polity, even in times of crisis. Historically Christian politicians have leveraged their ties with France and the US, Sunni politicians with Saudi Arabia, and increasingly since the 1980s the Shi'a with Iran. These actors have competing interests within Syria and therefore add to the difficulty of reaching consensus among Lebanese politicians.
- After the influx of over 1 million refugees and migrants to Europe in 2015, international donors developed a growing vested interest in keeping Syrian refugees in Lebanon and other neighboring



Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil during a press conference. Source: Reuters.

countries. International donors have pledged billions of dollars to supporting Lebanon and the region in hosting Syrian refugees, as well as other donations and loans aimed at boosting the country's economy and fostering its resilience (including from Gulf countries).

- Lebanese politicians have benefitted from the crisis in repositioning Lebanon's government in the international scene, making use of the threat of Syrian resettlement to Europe as leverage for receiving international funding on one hand. On the other hand, Lebanese politicians are simultaneously advocating the return of refugees to Syria, as a means of appeasing rising tensions from some host communities and as a pretext for defending the sectarian demographic balance.

Current Situation in Lebanon

- The start of the Syrian uprisings signaled potential conflict within Lebanon, given the polarized stances towards the Syrian regime. The complexity of Lebanon's relations with Syria increased, with March 14 alliance expressing solidarity with the uprising and March 8 supporting the Assad regime.
- A National Dialogue Table called for by President Michel Suleiman in 2012 resulted in the Baabda Declaration, which established the Policy of Disassociation from the conflict in Syria. Shortly thereafter, Hezbollah joined the conflict in Syria in support of the regime, and parliament postponed elections, plunging Lebanon into a political deadlock that jeopardized any chances of consensus over a coherent policy towards refugees.
- The election of Michel Aoun as President marked the end of a two-year presidential vacuum and the

absence of consensus. Since his election, a national budget was passed for the first time in over a decade, and parliamentary elections were held after a 9-year wait.

- The results of the elections more or less maintained the status quo in terms of the make-up of parliament, with the noteworthy election of several figures close to the Syrian regime who were involved in the Syrian-Lebanese security apparatus at the time of Syrian guardianship over Lebanon. Saad Hariri has been named Prime Minister of the government-to-be by President Aoun and is currently in the process of forming a new cabinet while presiding over the incumbent caretaker government.
- Despite relative political and security stability, Lebanon's economy is dwindling. A recent World

Bank report gives a bleak economic outlook, citing increasing trade deficit, slow GDP growth rate, and growing public debt. To mitigate these factors, the Lebanese government has participated in several international donor conferences to secure soft loans and grants for rebuilding infrastructure and boosting the economy, strengthening the Lebanese

- Army, and supporting Lebanon in hosting Syrian refugees.
- Worsening economic conditions have been conducive to a rise in political discourse against Syrian refugees with claims that their presence is the main cause for unemployment, weakened infrastructure, and alleged increase in crime.

Contested Politics and Contested Issues

Contested issues affecting the status of Syrian refugees are the result of contested politics and divergence among politicians over the situation in Syria and its implications on Lebanon. The right of refugees to return safely and voluntarily to their home is now predicated upon four main contested issues:

Relations with Syrian regime

The question of formal diplomatic ties with Syria is more acceptable to the Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah (who regard the Assad regime as an ally) than to the Future Movement and the Progressive Socialist Party (who oppose Assad). As such, who negotiates with the regime and on what terms affects the timing and conditions of the return of refugees.

Existence of safe zones in Syria

UNHCR's official position is that there are no safe zones yet in Syria and the Syrian regime has still not delineated a clear plan to manage potential safe zones. However, the Lebanese Foreign Minister has repeatedly stated that Syria is safe enough for the return of its refugees, while other parties negate this as an option at present.

Safety and security within Lebanon

Life for Syrian refugees in Lebanon is increasingly difficult given the discriminatory societal, legal, and infrastructural conditions pertaining to their presence in the country and their right to health, employment, education, safety, and mobility. The politics of what is considered voluntary return continues to hinge on the individual freedoms and rights of refugees within Lebanon.

Legal conditions within Syria

The continued war in Syria, in addition to regime policies such as the conscription law for all adult males under 42 and massive property seizures mostly in formerly rebel-held areas through Decree No. 66 (2012) and Law No. 10 (2018), severely impedes and discourages the return of Syrians to their homes.



Syrian refugees preparing to leave to Syria, near Aرسال, Lebanon. Source: LBCI.

Complexities of Return

- Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not a monolithic group but have fled from different backgrounds and for different reasons. At present, existing proposals for their return do not consider differentiating factors that can put thousands of lives at risk.
- In addition to differences in age groups, gender, sect, and socio-economic status, the situation of the regions inside Syria from which refugees had to flee differ greatly. Various areas in Syria are still unstable as foreign armies and militias are spread across the country and several areas are still occupied by ISIS and other armed groups.
- The Syrian regime has adopted policies that discourage and obstruct the return of Syrians, most notably the conscription law mandating all males aged 18-42 to join the Syrian army, in addition to massive property seizures mainly targeting formerly rebel-held areas through Decree No. 66 (2012) and Law No. 10 (2018).
- Right of return is further complicated by the fact that Lebanon is home to Syrian activists who took part in the uprisings as well as Syrians close to the Assad regime. Activists who are challenge the legitimacy of the regime face probable threats of being detained as they cross the border and tortured in Syrian prisons (as has occurred frequently since the uprising).
- The existence of at least three different proposals on how refugees return to Syria makes the government's policy towards return obscure. It is not clear what prerogatives each of the Lebanese government and General Security, UNHCR, Hezbollah, or Russia would be responsible for when it comes to facilitating the safe return of refugees. Policy-makers themselves appear divergent on some issues, and it is a probable result that refugees would not know which path to pursue to secure their return or asylum status.



*Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad in an interview with AFP.
Source: AFP.*

Political and Institutional Recommendations

Any viable recommendations must take into consideration the centrality of politics in addressing the crisis. Policies and policy directives in the next phase should be based on UNHCR's framework for safe, dignified, and sustainable return. This framework should also serve as the basis for any negotiations with the Syrian regime on the right and process of refugees' return. We recommend a three-fold approach in the upcoming phase:

-1- Strategy Development

Developing a National Strategy for the Protection of Refugees and the Support of Host Communities

The National Strategy would be aimed at ensuring the safety of refugees and supporting host communities in the protection of refugees. The National Strategy would highlight the role of central government institutions in supporting local communities and municipalities where refugees are settled. Support, not only in terms of funding, should aim at creating local bodies to monitor and report on the situation between refugees and host communities with the aim of combatting any acts of discrimination and violence.

Developing a strategy focused on the status of Syrians in Lebanon who were active in the uprising against Assad regime

This strategy ascertains that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not a monolithic entity and that some may need more measures for protection than others. This strategy would aim at developing clear and binding recommendations for refugees' protection and sustainable resettlement inside or outside Syria. It would also consider that a percentage of refugees may have to stay in Lebanon and outline a strategy to enable them to live with freedom and dignity. The strategy must prevent the return of Syrians whose lives would be targeted specifically for their political views. Clear policies on asylum and resettlement would be included here.

-2- Institution Building

Fostering Institutional Coordination for the Return of Refugees

The existence of multiple policy initiatives, programs, and proposals for addressing the issue of refugee repatriation calls for immediate institutionalized coordination among Lebanese ministries. This coordination is especially needed to ensure consistency and coherence in the government's approach towards the process of facilitating Syrians' return. The coordination should be based on a National Strategy and should ensure the proper allocation of resources towards fulfilling the strategy and safeguarding refugees' rights.

Creating a Monitoring and Reporting Unit in the Office of the Prime Minister

The Unit would have the primary function of ensuring that the roadmap and National Strategy comply with international law. Its members are a UN representative, a human rights lawyer, and a senior researcher. The main purpose of this Unit is to document and publish reports on the implementation of the National Plan and the roadmap for return or resettlement of refugees.

-3- Political Discourse

Formalizing the position of the Lebanese government towards Syrian refugees

It is an immediate necessity for the upcoming government to take a clear and coherent position on the situation of refugees. The position must be consistent with the right of protection of refugees and should outline the resources Lebanon requires to secure this right. The absence of a clear position, or the conflicting positions by different politicians, needs to be replaced by an accessible formal position by the Lebanese government vis-a-vis the international community and the Syrian regime.

Initiating a campaign to raise public awareness against acts of racism and discrimination

There is an imminent need to circumvent actions that could trigger violence between refugees and host communities. A campaign led by politicians and opinion leaders is needed to raise awareness of host communities and stakeholders for the need to protect refugees in order to maintain Lebanon's stability. The campaign would focus on key messages about the situation of refugees, local stories of cooperation between Lebanese and Syrians, as well as economic models of success.