

## SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON: ECONOMIC, POLITICAL AND SECTARIAN CHALLENGES IN THE ABSENCE OF A GOVERNMENTAL STRATEGY

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As the war in Syria does not show any concrete sign of ending in near future, it continues to effect neighboring countries deeply from different aspects. Among other issues, the refugee crisis is one of the foremost repercussions of the Syrian civil war at both regional and international level. Due to its geographic proximity and its intensive socio-historical relations with Syria, Lebanon takes one of the biggest burdens in terms of the Syrian refugees crisis as it has become the highest concentration of refugees per capita worldwide. Therefore, this policy brief analyzes the current situation of Syrian refugee in Lebanon, Lebanon's response to this crisis, and the social and political consequences of the presence of Syrians in the country within the context of the peculiar confessional system of Lebanon. Within this framework, it argues that although the wider effects of the Syrian civil war together with Lebanese internal impasses have accumulated several tensions in the current Lebanese politics and economy, the high number of refugees from Syria with its sectarian dimension has emerged as another major problem to be faced with by Lebanese leaders. To conclude, since a swift return of Syrians is not a realistic option at present, there is a need for a clear and national strategy in light of internal political divisions for sustainable solutions.

As the war in Syria does not show any concrete sign of ending in near future, it continues to effect neighboring countries deeply from different aspects. Among other issues, the refugee crisis is one of the foremost repercussions of the Syrian civil war at both regional and international level because the deterioration of the humanitarian situation in Syria forced millions to seek refuge in neighboring countries.

Given the fact that the Syrian population was reported to be at around 23 million at the beginning of the crisis in 2011; the volume of the humanitarian tragedy due to the civil war in Syria becomes much more clearer when one considers that 14 million Syrians are currently in dire need of humanitarian assistance. Among them, more than 5 million people are registered as refugees in different countries; more than 6,5 million people are internally displaced by violence and around 4,7 million people are in hard-to reach and besieged areas.<sup>1</sup> Due to their geographic proximity, neighboring states,

namely Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, are the largest host countries for the Syrian refugees.

Lebanon takes one of the biggest burdens in terms of the Syrian refugees crisis because of the social and historical relations between two countries, the easy entrance conditions at the early years, and the overlap in language in addition to its geographic proximity. The burden for Lebanon, indeed, becomes more explicit especially when the Lebanese confessional system and the demographic aspect of these refugees are concerned. Therefore, this policy brief intends to analyze the current refugee situation in Lebanon, Lebanon's response to this crisis, and the social and political consequences of the presence of Syrians in Lebanon respectively. Within this framework, it argues that although the wider effects of the Syrian civil war together with Lebanese internal impasses have accumulated several tensions in the current political and economic situation in Lebanon, the high number of refugees

from Syria with its sectarian dimension has presented another major problem to be faced with by Lebanese leaders.

### **Brief Overview of the Presence of Syrians in Lebanon**

The presence of Syrians in Lebanon is not a recent phenomenon due to the migration for economic reasons in the past. The first wave of migrations started in 1950s and 1960s when hundreds of thousands of Syrians searched economic opportunities in the ‘Switzerland of the Middle East’, which was a cultural, intellectual and most importantly economic center at the time. While ordinary Syrians from lower and lower-middle class were searching for job opportunities, the rapid economic growth with a liberal economy also attracted wealthy entrepreneurs to move their business and families to Beirut.<sup>2</sup> The presence of Syrians in Lebanon in terms of both labor and investment also increased during the post-Taif Accord after 1990 due to the facilities

provided to Syrians under the auspices of Damascus.

Due to this historical background, Lebanon has a long history of existence of Syrians in Lebanon; however, the enormous influx of refugees since 2011 has had a significant impact on the country. By March 2017 since the beginning of the Syrian uprising in March 2011, the number of Syrians officially registered by the UNHCR exceeds 1 million and the number of Palestine refugees from Syria reached to 30.675. There are also nearly 280.000 Palestinian refugees and 6.000 Iraqi refugees in Lebanon. Additionally, there are also unregistered refugees given the fact that UNHCR has stopped registering new refugees in May 2015 due to a request from the Lebanese government.

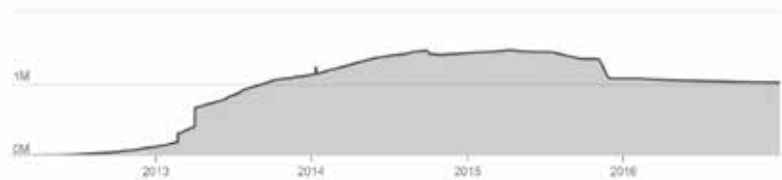
Together with the number of non-registered Syrians, which is unknown but absolutely substantial, the unofficial numbers by many international organizations estimates that there are around 1,5 million refugees in Lebanon, a country of around 6 million inhabitants.<sup>4</sup> This

Together with the number of non-registered Syrians, the unofficial records estimate that there are around 1,5 million refugees in Lebanon, a country of around 6 million inhabitants. This number, in reality, amounts to a quarter of its local population.

<b>Figure 1: Refugees in Lebanon<sup>3</sup></b>	<b>Registered Syrians</b>	<b>Palestine Refugees from Syria</b>
	1.011 million	30.675
	<b>Palestine Refugees</b>	<b>Iraqi Refugees</b>
	277.985	6.000

number, in reality, amounts to a quarter of its local population. In other words, given the fact that almost one in four persons in the country is coming from Syria, Lebanon’s capacity to

deal with the crisis has already been overstretched while it has become the highest concentration of refugees per capita worldwide.<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 2: The Number of Registered Syrian Refugees in Lebanon<sup>6</sup>**

### Livelihood Conditions of Syrian Refugees

Although the government of Lebanon and its people were appraised for their generosity and cooperative efforts especially in the initial phase of the refugee crisis, the prolonging of the crisis deteriorated the conditions of refugees and increased the burden on the host community. While most of the refugees currently experience

very hard living conditions with very limited resources, returning to Syria is basically not an option for them as the conflicts continue and the regime in Damascus remains in power.

More than a third of Syrian refugees live in poor regions of Lebanon like Beqaa, Akkar and Baalbek-Hermel governorates, where they created a major economic burden for local communities. Indeed, in these

governorates not only Syrians but also the local communities need humanitarian assistance. Apart from these regions, Beirut and Mount Lebanon governorates also host around 26 % of Syrians.

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, many refugees tended to settle with their families and friends; nevertheless, as the uprising turned into a country-wide civil war, displaced Syrians began to search for more permanent accommodation options. Unable to cover the renting expenditures, many refugees erected tented settlements in the Beqaa and South Lebanon due to the ‘no camp policy’ of Lebanon.<sup>8</sup>

Another major problem of the refugee community is the lack of education services for their children given the fact that majority of them are youth and children and those under 18 constitutes more than half of the whole community.<sup>10</sup> According to UNHCR, less than half of school-aged Syrian children have access to schools in Lebanon and those who have access do not necessarily

attend classes regularly for several reasons.<sup>11</sup> The lack of regular education for refugees’ children constitutes one of the main problems for longer terms.

### **Lebanese Policy towards the Syrian Refugees**

Lebanon had to face with the Syrian refugee crisis together with its internal impasses. A country with an already fragile political system and having ambiguous relations with Damascus, it has applied mutable approach to Syrians seeking protection in Lebanon.

Lebanon is neither a party to the 1951 UN Convention on the Status of Refugees nor has a legal framework related to the issue. In the absence of a law related with refugees, the policy of the government of Lebanon was just to do nothing, but to continue with the existing regulations and bilateral treaties for the entrance of Syrians into Lebanon. Indeed, the strategy towards refugees was in line with the first official overall stance of the Lebanese

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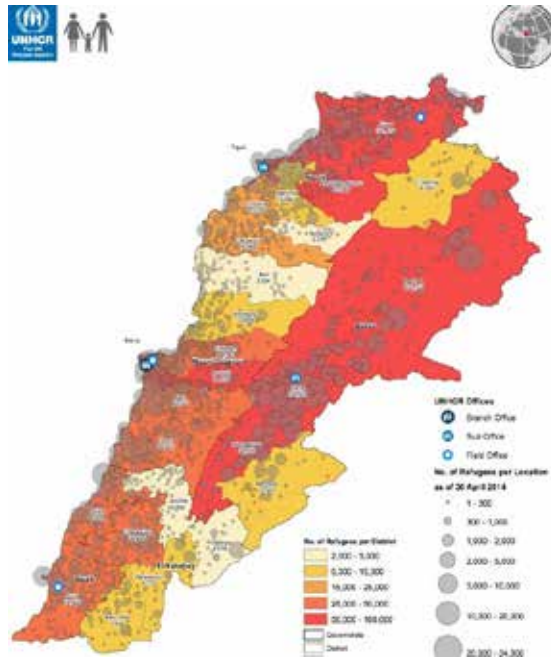


Figure 3: Regional Distribution of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon<sup>7</sup>

government, namely a general dissociation policy as declared with the Baabda Declaration in mid-2012. It is also important to note that the crisis, at the time, was perceived as short term and contained as it appeared to be in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen. Therefore the official reaction was relatively calm and limited.

Although the Baabda Declaration advocated ‘eschewing Lebanon from regional and international conflicts and as well as the negative repercussions of regional tensions’, the

no-strategy policy towards the entrance of Syrians in practice was interpreted as an open-border policy for refugees and the number of refugees began to increase sharply. In the absence of a law with a great expectation that Syrian crisis would not last very much, the government accepted the entrance of Syrians into Lebanon, but rejected to use the term ‘refugees’ (*lajoun*) in order to prevent the long term settlement of Syrians in the country. Having a very controversial experience of Palestinian refugees

in its history, the Lebanese government prefers to use the term ‘displaced persons’ (*nazihoun*), a less permanent status as well as a less demanding term in terms of international law.<sup>12</sup> Based on the same experience, it also rejected the establishment of refugee camps.

Since the Lebanese society has been radically divided on the issue of the ongoing war in the lack of a national policy to handle Syrian refugees, Lebanese bureaucratic agencies and municipalities started to demonstrate contradictory responses towards both the entrance and the presence of Syrians. Indeed, Lebanese municipalities have a long history of autonomy. Therefore, they tried to deal with the problem with their own methods which are imposed by municipality police and, in some cases, local vigilante groups.<sup>13</sup> The different interpretation of the Syrian crisis by various Lebanese actors, in time, made the presence of the Syrian refugees a sensitive issue between pro-Syrian groups and anti-Syrian groups as well as

Michel Aoun, who had aligned his party with Hezbollah.<sup>14</sup>

In February 2014, a new government was formed and its policy towards the refugees was less tolerant. By spring 2014, the local concerns started to be heard more clearly and the new government began by closing unofficial border crossing points which had been tolerated before. In October 2014, the government approved a policy paper on Syrian refugees. The policy paper acknowledged three main goals regarding the displaced Syrians: (1) reducing the number of Syrians by limiting their access to Lebanon and by encouraging them to return to Syria, (2) increasing security regulations of the Syrians, (3) easing the burdens of both local and national authorities.<sup>15</sup> With this policy paper, in other words, the Lebanese government tried to reassert its authority by replacing its open-border policy with more strict visa and residence regulations.

In the implementation of this new approach, the General Directorate of General Security (GS) has been in charge. It is a

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**Figure 4: Syrian Refugee Tented Settlement in Aarsal<sup>9</sup>**

security and intelligence agency which is responsible for border control, too. Widely viewed as being close to Hezbollah, GS has enforced necessary precautions to reduce the entrance of Syrians, who are overwhelmingly Sunni, into Lebanon and to encourage those who have already entered to return to their home country. Obviously, these restrictions slowed the refugee flows and made staying in Lebanon more difficult and costly. Official records, at least, confirm so. However, as Dionigi points out, these policies did not positively affect Lebanon's security and stability<sup>16</sup> because, as Janmyr states, these new troublesome requirements for

the entrance and the renewing of residency caused considerable number of Syrians in Lebanon to fall into illegal status, which in the end increased their exploitation or alienation.<sup>17</sup> Norwegian Refugee Council reports that approximately 53-70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and around 86% of Palestinian refugees from Syria are currently without legal stay permit.<sup>18</sup>

In conclusion, the policy of Lebanon towards Syrian refugees has shifted from the open-border policy regulated within the framework of special relations between the two countries to the implementation of more challenging regulations,



which made both the entrance and the stay increasingly difficult. However, neither of these approaches aims to address the underlying causes of the problem.

### **Lebanese Perceptions towards the Syrian Refugees**

Since the beginning of the 2000s, but especially with the Hariri assassination in 2005, different sects within Lebanon have developed divergent ideas regarding the role of Syria in Lebanon. Indeed, the debates on the role of Syria in Lebanese politics have been the major dividing line and the main reason for the formation of two competing camps in the domestic politics; namely the March 8<sup>th</sup> and the March 14<sup>th</sup> Alliances. Therefore, the uprising in Syria caused different sects within Lebanon to position themselves as either for or against the Assad regime. The issue of Lebanese attitudes towards Syrian refugees, hence, should be evaluated within this wider context and their attitudes are being shaped by the economic and

social effects of refugee inflow on their daily lives.

Based on the no camp policy, Syrian refugees are scattered across the country, which are some of the poorest and most vulnerable neighborhoods in Lebanon. Consequently, the presence of refugees is exacerbating already difficult living conditions of the local communities. Since Syrian refugees are accepting lower incomes and longer work hours without any social benefit, it presents direct challenge to the job opportunities for Lebanese.<sup>19</sup> It is also reported that even Sunni communities who are comparatively tolerant to the influx of Syrian refugees complain about the unsustainable costs in social and economic terms.<sup>20</sup> Although the Lebanese economy has a history of relying on the presence of Syrian labor, as mentioned before; it is not able to absorb such an influx of new workers. Therefore, in 2015, Lebanese Ministry of Labor almost banned the refugees from working by establishing a pre-condition for the employers that they have to make sure that

Although the negative appearance of the Lebanese economy cannot be explained only through the existence of refugees, they are being blamed by local communities as the most tangible consequence of the crisis, which in turn further crystallized tensions between Lebanese and Syrians.

the job cannot be carried out by a Lebanese citizen.<sup>21</sup>

Other than employment opportunities, Lebanese economic growth has slowed and the influx of refugees has caused significant challenges to the barely functioning Lebanese economy due to the intense relations between Syria and Lebanon. Given the security situation in Syria and the closure of borders, the only overland trade route of Lebanon has been stalled and the exportation has decreased. Additionally, the domestic prices of goods also increased due to the alteration of the supply and demand in the market because Syria is also the main channel and source for imports. The increase in prices of basic goods and services constitutes a major problem for hosting communities. The real estate and the tourism, the two major sectors in Lebanon, have also been affected negatively. The lack of stability and the security concerns pushed investors and tourists to reconsider their investment plans or travels.<sup>22</sup>

In sum, although the negative appearance of the Lebanese

economy cannot be explained only through the existence of refugees, they are being blamed in the eyes of local communities as the most tangible consequence of the Syrian crisis, which in turn crystallized social tensions between Lebanese and Syrian refugees.

### **Sectarian Concerns about the Syrians**

The heavy burden of Syrian refugees from economic and social aspects is, indeed, similar to the experiences of other neighboring countries. Having considered the fact that Lebanon is the highest concentration of refugees per capita together with its weak state structure; this burden comparatively puts more pressure on Lebanon's capacity. However, of the three main refugee host countries, namely Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan, Lebanon presents another peculiarity due to its confessional political system where the identities of refugees become highly problematic issue between various groups in the country.

For Lebanon, the influx of Syrian refugees is not only a matter of numbers, but it represents a threat to the sectarian equilibrium upon which the state is founded on. At the moment, there is a kind of equilibrium among the major sectarian groups with around 30% Shia, 30% Sunni and 35% Christian. However, since Syrian refugees are overwhelmingly Sunni and if the significant part of that population is going to permanently settle in Lebanon with or without a legal permit, this would make the Sunni community the largest single entity in Lebanon. Therefore the influx of them into Lebanon led to the emergence of serious concerns among Maronites and Shias. On the other hand, some field reports state that Syrian refugees also afraid of possible attacks by pro-Syrian regime groups, mainly Hezbollah.<sup>23</sup>

Despite Hezbollah's heavy involvement in the civil war in Syria independent from the domestic concerns, it carefully refrains from delivering public hate speeches against refugees except measured calls for

cooperation between the authorities of the two countries for the return of Syrians. In this regard, it can be argued that Hezbollah carefully, at least on the level of discourse, highlights the humanitarian character of the crisis, but also continuously underlines the possible effects of a long term stay of these refugees. Therefore, Shia community led by Hezbollah would never accept an option for the permanent settlement of these refugees in Lebanon.

Similarly, another main political group voicing concerns about the presence of Syrians in Lebanon is the Christian constituency. Their main concern has been centered on the emerging sectarian structure for decades, where Christians have been becoming minority. In line with this, former President Michel Suleiman defined the existence of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon as an existential crisis for the country.<sup>24</sup> Similarly, the new President Michel Aoun insistently calls for the repatriation of Syrians and for creating safe zones in Syria.<sup>25</sup>

The influx of Syrian refugees for Lebanon is not only a matter of numbers, but it also represents a threat to the sectarian equilibrium upon which the state is founded on.

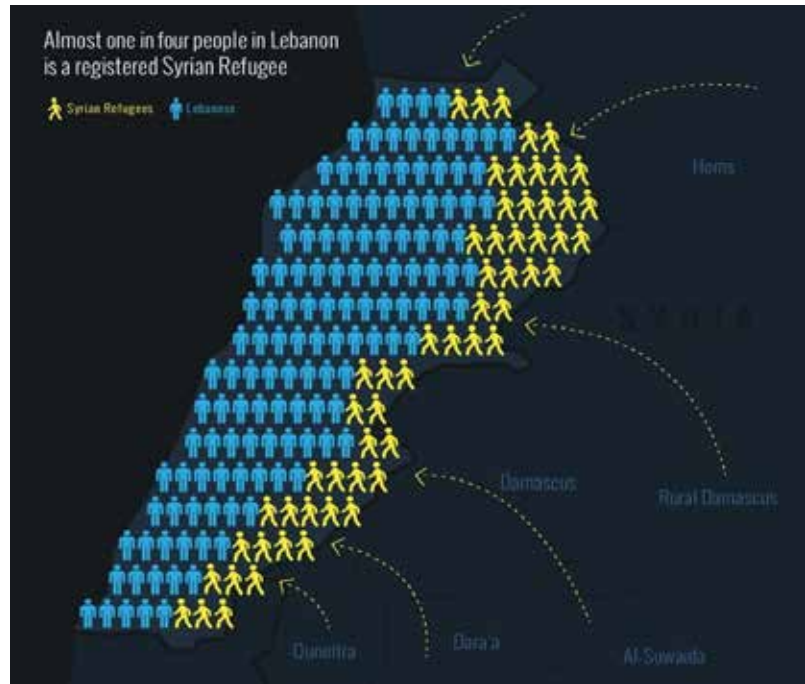


Figure 5: Lebanon as the Highest Concentration of Refugees Per Capita

In brief, the sectarian concerns of various Lebanese groups about the Syrian refugees present a unique dimension related to the profound consequences of the Syrian refugee crises. It has a great potential in importing the sectarian rifts the current conflict in Syria generated, especially among Sunnis and Shia without excluding Maronites.

### Conclusion

One of the main conclusions of this policy brief would be that

Syrian refugees' conditions in Lebanon are in dire needs of humanitarian assistance. Therefore, according to several reports, most of the Syrian refugees' choice is to go back to their home country due to several reasons like living expenses, security concerns and Lebanese attitudes. However, since the war in Syria is ongoing with an indefinite future, a swift return of these displaced people is not an option at least for the near term.

Syrian refugees have surely affected already delicate

Lebanese economy and political balances detrimentally. However, in order to fully understand the underlying reasons of the impact of the refugee crisis on Lebanon, one also needs to give attention to the lack of clear vision and national strategy with regularly updated figures and data on the side of Lebanon to deal with the problem. Although Lebanon had done more than what was to be expected; it is also a fact that,

without being aware of the seriousness of these challenges to Lebanon in both short and long terms, the fluctuation of the official response from open-border policy to very strict regulations based on the political interests and sectarian concerns of leading Lebanese political groups disabled the entire system of governance, preventing any viable action plan for sustainable solutions.

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