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One million Syrians in Lebanon: A milestone quickly passed

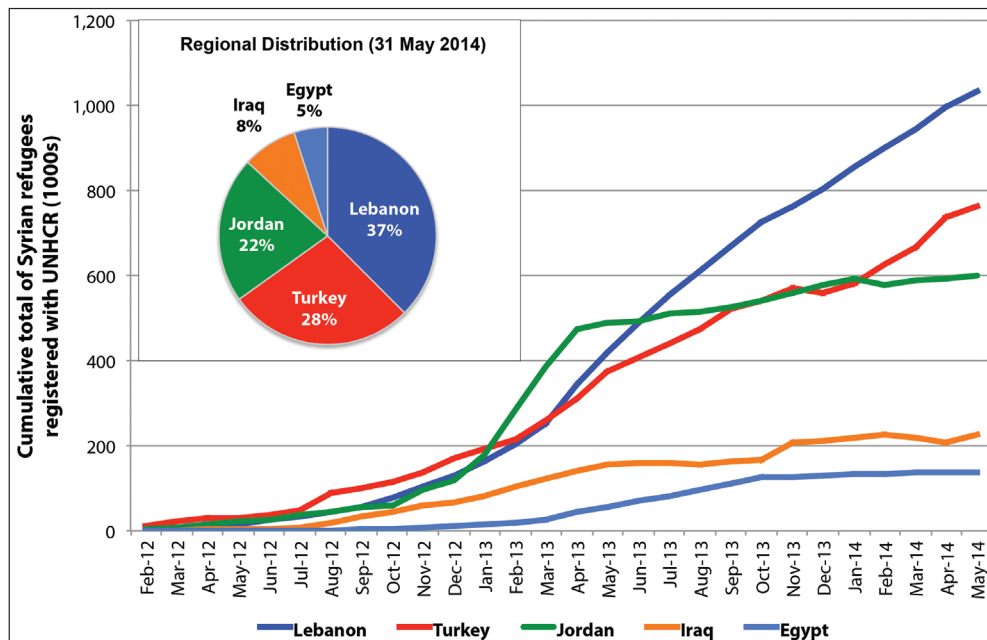
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Introduction

Lebanon received its one-millionth refugee from Syria on April 3rd, an event that the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the UN's refugee agency, called a "devastating milestone."¹ Unfortunately, markers such as these only show the distance travelled but not how far is left to go. This one was quickly passed and there is still no end in sight. In the eight weeks following that announcement another 90,538 Syrians made their way to Lebanon in order to escape the fighting that rages on in Syria.² With 1,090,538 Syrian refugees now on its territory, undoubtedly even more given the time it took for this article to come to print, Lebanon is home to nearly 40% of the 2.84 million Syrians now living in neighbouring countries (see figure 1a). It has accepted an average of 53,000 people each month for the past 12 months (see figure 1b), resulting in an incredible 25% population increase since fighting began three years ago. Without greater sharing of the human as well as the financial burden by rich world countries, Lebanon is at risk of paying the price for its hospitality with severe political and economic destabilisation.

Several factors have facilitated the flow of Syrians into Lebanon, the first and most obvious being that Lebanon has maintained largely open borders throughout the crisis while Syria's other neighbours have increasingly restricted crossings since the beginning of 2013. This has made the route to Lebanon the path of least resistance for many of those fleeing the violence. Another important factor is that many Syrians lived in Lebanon before the conflict began. This pre-crisis population, which has existed since the 1950s and were estimated to number around 500,000 in 2011, are part of the many family, political, and business networks that span the Lebanese-Syrian

Figure 1a: Syrian refugees registered to UNHCR in Neighbouring countries (January 2012-May 2014)



Source: UNHCR

border and that facilitate refugees' access to Lebanese soil. Many of these long-established Syrians are, at least initially, able to offer some semblance of shelter, local knowledge, and logistical help to new arrivals. As one report from Swiss Peace argues, "Current migration patterns of refugees from Syria are not random but based on confessional [religious/sectarian] and social ties that coincide with political sympathies and result in (perceived) social and physical safety provided by affiliated clans and communities."³ As discussed later on in this brief, this channelling of refugees to certain places based on their socio-religious profiles has consequences for the Lebanese political system and greatly increases the destabilising potential of the current refugee flow.

Many of these same areas also rank as some of the poorest parts of Lebanon. More than a quarter (28.5%) of Lebanon's population lived under the national poverty line of €2.89 per day (US\$4/day) in 2007 (the most recent data available).⁵ As can be clearly seen from the table below, the areas most afflicted by poverty – i.e. the North, Bekaa and

Mount Lebanon, and to a lesser extent the south — are also the areas with the highest numbers of refugees. Together, the North, the Bekaa, and Mount Lebanon accounted for both 78% of Lebanese living below the poverty line prior to the crisis (around 987,000 people), and 85% of registered Syrian refugees currently in Lebanon (800,000+ people). In short, the population most vulnerable to any shock is being asked to give the most.

The Strain on Local Communities

One remarkable characteristic of the present crisis is that, across the region, only a small portion of refugees live in camps. Lebanon is unique however, in that the government has so far refused to establish any formal refugee camps. Although the number of informal tented settlements is on the rise – UNHCR reported in March that some 15% of refugees, around 155,000 people, are now living in close to 1000 such settlements – the vast majority of refugees in Lebanon are dispersed across some 1600 communities.⁴ These localities are unevenly distributed



Figure 1b: New refugees registrations with UNHCR per month – Lebanon (January 2012-May 2014)



Source: UNHCR

geographically, with refugees primarily concentrated in the North; the Bekaa in the centre-east; the centre band of Mount Lebanon between Beirut and Zahle; and the south-west area stretching from Beirut down to Sour, near the Israeli border (see map).

The strain on these communities is obvious regardless of the metric used. Employment, education, healthcare, housing, sanitation, physical infrastructure, or living costs: all have experienced spikes that have severely reduced already insufficient capacity. The World Bank estimated last September that by the start of 2014, Lebanon's national average electricity delivery would be cut from 18.3 hours per day to 16.5 hours per day (a 10% reduction), and in rural areas power might only be delivered 50% of the time.⁶ To give another example, Syrian refugees were already accounting for 40% of primary health-care visits in December 2012, when there were only around 130,000 refugees in country (around 12% of the current total).⁷ Shortages are endemic, raising costs of medicines and supplies, and patients – both Syrian and Lebanese – must often wait a long time to

Map 1: Lebanon with areas of refugee concentration shaded in blue



Source: UNHCR



be seen. The World Bank and others have reported that one consequence of this has been that local residents are often travelling further and incurring additional costs to reach less-used healthcare facilities.⁸

Costs for rent and provisions have risen substantially in areas of high refugee density. As rents have risen, evictions have become increasingly common.⁹ This is, in part, because rent inflation has priced many of the poorest out of the market. It is also due to the fact that refugee families are often more willing than local Lebanese to pool resources and live together under one roof. In such cases a group of refugees is often able pay more rent in absolute terms than a single Lebanese or Syrian family.¹⁰

At the same time, refugees looking for work have severely depressed wages for daily labour.¹¹ Refugees and the residents of many rural communities both tend to work in the agricultural and construction sectors, and thus are often in direct competition for scarce jobs. The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the UN reported last year that some areas of Lebanon had seen up to a 60% decrease in the wage rate for day labour.¹² The World Bank estimated that, “by end-2014, some 170,000 additional Lebanese will be pushed into poverty. ... An additional

220,000–324,000 Lebanese are expected to become unemployed ... most of them unskilled youth which would about double the unemployment rate, to over 20 percent.”¹³ Furthermore, local municipalities, which are responsible for many aspects of service delivery, are not able to keep up with the increased demand for such basics as water and sanitation.

These dynamics have led to an increase in tensions between refugees and the inhabitants of host communities in some areas. A report released in March 2014 from the Norwegian Refugee Council corroborates claims made elsewhere that some refugees, especially those with irregular legal status, have been the target of harassment and violence.¹⁴ Such instances of animosity are often attributed to the perception of some local residents, many of whom face some of the same structural constraints as refugees, that Syrian refugees unfairly benefit from humanitarian aid while dragging down the living conditions and employment prospects of local residents. It is important to stress that to an extent this is only perception. The International Labour Organisation reported that Lebanese workers in the Bekaa still earn around double their Syrian counterparts, albeit still below the official minimum wage,¹⁵ and

Table 1: Poverty and Refugee Distribution Across Lebanon’s Governorates

Governorate	Percentage of Lebanon’s Poor in Governorate (2007 data)	Percentage of Governorate’s Population that is Poor (2007 data)	No. of registered S. Refugees in Governorate (as of May 2014)	Percentage of total registered S. Refugee Population in Governorate (as of May 2014)
Bekaa	13.0%	12.7%	339,539	35.9%
North	38.0%	20.7%	266,865	28.2%
Mount Lebanon	27.3%	39.9%	236,593	25.0%
South	15.6%	10.5%	77,831	8.2%
Nabatieh	4.0%	5.9%	45,818	4.8%
Beirut	2.1%	10.4%	28,575	3.0%

Source: Columns 1 & 2: International Poverty Centre. 2008; Column 3: UNHCR; Column 4: calculated, based on a total of 995,221 registered refugees.



no reports have claimed that *Lebanese* are starting to live in construction sites and informal camps. Nevertheless, such perceptions are widely reported to have negatively impacted refugee-community relations. Thus, as much as it is true that many refugees continue to benefit from Lebanese hospitality and generosity, it is also a fact that the cracks in social solidarity are deepening. In Lebanon, such cracks do not run across the surface of a solid foundation but threaten to seriously undermine its already weak political system.

A Fractured Political Context

Lebanon's central state is weak and dysfunctional. As a case in point, it only acknowledged that a refugee problem existed and required a government response in December 2012, more than 1.5 years after the start of the conflict. Its initial response was stillborn however, as several months later Prime Minister Najib Mikati resigned and the government collapsed with the nascent plan still unfunded.¹⁶ A new government returned to work in April 2014 after a year's absence. Amidst these events the State administration managed to request an impact assessment from the World Bank, which was delivered in September 2013, and finally published a 24-page roadmap of stabilisation measures in mid-November 2013. Drawing heavily on the recommendations of the World Bank's impact assessment, it reportedly provides a multi-tier programme for returning the levels of public service delivery, employment and private investment to pre-crisis status, as well as several projects for 'strengthening social cohesion.'¹⁷ By all accounts the Lebanese state has done little to implement this plan to date.

The Lebanese government operates in parallel with myriad private, quasi-state and extra-state actors. The most notable of these is Hezbollah, the Iranian- and Syrian regime-backed, Shi'ite resistance move-

ment-cum-political party, cum-state-within-a-state that simultaneously stands in parliament and rivals the government and military in terms of power and ability. The country's politics is further fractured by its deeply sectarian system, with power distributed in state institutions on a confessional [religious affiliation] basis and most non-state political actors organised along confessional lines. Religious, political and kinship/community identities thus overlap to a great extent in Lebanon, and while it is incorrect to reduce Lebanese politics to religious affiliation it is equally impossible to understand it without including the religious and sectarian dimensions.

In this context, the entrance of the Syrian refugees has the potential to greatly destabilise Lebanon's politics because it alters the relative populations of Lebanon's confessional groups. The vast majority of refugees are Sunni and they have migrated to communities that share that religious/community identity. This increases the demographic weight of Sunnis, unofficially the 3rd largest confessional group in Lebanon today, both at the national level and in certain regions. As previously noted, political power in Lebanon is distributed on a confessional basis. This demographic shift thus directly threatens the clout wielded by the political actors of other confessional groups, most notably in this case Hezbollah.

Lebanon's history is also deeply entwined with Syria's, not least because the latter occupied the former for nearly three decades, starting in 1976. Lebanon's current leaders, many of whom were active in the Lebanese civil war, thus grew up in relation to Syria and maintain either a cooperative or antagonistic stance toward their more powerful neighbour. When Syrian tanks finally withdrew in 2005, Lebanon's political factions fell into two camps: the pro-Syrian 'March 8th' coalition headed by Hezbollah on one side of the fence, and the anti-Syrian 'March 14th' coalition headed by Saad Hariri's Future Move-



ment on the other. Their conflicting stances over Syria have paralysed much of the government's decision-making capability, and its internal divisions have only become more stark as the war in Syria has spread and the refugee crisis worsened. Factions that not only oppose each other over Syria, but often fight each other within Syria, have now opened Lebanon up as a second theatre of war.

The violence destabilising Lebanon today has escalated in parallel with Hezbollah's increasingly open support for the Syrian regime. The group was initially coy about its involvement across the border, however that changed in April 2013 when Hezbollah announced its direct cooperation with the Syrian military in an assault on a rebel stronghold at al-Qusayr, Syria.¹⁸ Since then both Sunni extremist and Syrian rebel groups have promised reprisals against Hezbollah, its patrons, and Shi'ite civilians, its assumed supporters.¹⁹ Lebanon has suffered 13 car and suicide bombings since the battle of al-Qusayr, 11 of which targeted Hezbollah or Shi'ite neighbourhoods and were claimed by Sunni extremist groups (see box). This retribution has not, however, slowed the pace with which Hezbollah has deepened its involvement in the fighting. Over the past year it has fought in several major Syrian cities, including Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Deraa.²⁰ It is spurred on by the rise of a particular type of Sunni extremism in the region, specifically *takfiri* groups that see Shi'ites as infidels, and the challenge to Bashar Al-Asad, Hezbollah's patron in Damascus. The Hezbollah leadership, according to a report by the International Crisis Group, sees both of these factors as existential threats to its organisation.²¹

Thus, Syrian refugees are also able to destabilise the situation by joining the fight against Hezbollah on Lebanese soil. Not only are most refugees Sunni, but many have links with the Syrian opposition forces. At times militants who have faced off against Hez-

bollah in the field are directly mixed in with refugee flows, such as when Hezbollah forces helped storm Yabroud, Syria last March and fighters as well as civilians fled to the Lebanese city of Aarsal.²² There have also been reports of militant groups recruiting from among Lebanon's refugee populations. Thus it is possible that some of those who fled have seen an opportunity to strike back at Hezbollah on its home turf. Today the northern border regions remain extremely unstable, with occurrences of cross-border shelling of Lebanese villages by the Syrian regime, inter-factional fighting, and a near complete lack of Lebanese state presence.

Dealing with Danger on Europe's Doorstep

European and other rich world countries must do more to help Lebanon cope with the on-going crisis or they risk watching the situation there spiral further out of control. Sectarian tensions easily run high in Lebanon, and its political stability is, for the moment, still predicated on maintaining the delicate balance of power that exists between different confessional groups. With (Shi'ite) Hezbollah openly fighting alongside the Syrian regime, Sunni extremists retaliating against Hezbollah's actions on Lebanese territory, and a refugee population reaching 1.1 million, the pressure on the country is reaching new heights. If it reached the boiling point not only would Lebanon burn, reason enough to ease the strain, but the ensuing conflict would produce and galvanise militants and extremists on all sides. This would further destabilise the region and constitute a new threat to the security of the European neighbourhood.

The European Union and other countries can help try to prevent such a tragedy in many ways. It must increase its already laudable financial support for humanitarian relief efforts. As of May 16th, EU



Blood in the streets

Lebanon has experienced a rash of car and suicide bombings since July 2013. These attacks, 11 of which targeted Hezbollah, Iran, or Shi'ite neighbourhoods and were claimed by some of the many Sunni militant groups operating on Lebanese soil today, were likely prompted by Hezbollah's increasingly open cooperation with the Syrian regime against Syrian opposition forces.

9 July 2013 – *Beirut*

0 dead, 50 injured in Beirut's Shi'ite Dahiyeh suburbs
Unclaimed

15 August 2013 – *Beirut*

21 dead, 250 injured in Beirut's Shi'ite Dahiyeh suburbs
Claimed by Brigade of Aisha, the Mother of the Faithful

23 August 2013 – *Tripoli*

35 dead, 500+ injured outside two Sunni mosques
Unclaimed, Hezbollah suspected

19 November 2013 – *Beirut*

23 dead, 146 injured outside the Iranian Embassy
Claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades

27 December 2013 – *Beirut*

6 dead, including Lebanon's anti-Syrian former finance minister Mohamed Chatah, and 71 injured
Unclaimed, Hezbollah and Syrian Regime suspected

2 January 2014 – *Beirut*

4 dead, 77 injured in Beirut's Shi'ite Dahiyeh suburbs
Claimed by Islamic State of Iraq and Syria

16 January 2014 – *Hermel*

5 dead, 42 injured near Hermel's government building
Claimed by Nusra Front of Lebanon

21 January 2014 – *Beirut*

4 killed, 50 injured in Beirut's Shi'ite Dahiyeh suburbs
Claimed by Nusra Front of Lebanon

1 February 2014 – *Hermel*

4 dead, 23 injured at a petrol station
Claimed by Nusra Front of Lebanon

19 February 2014 – *Beirut*

6 dead, 129 injured near the Iranian Cultural Centre
Claimed by the Abdullah Azzam Brigades

22 February 2014 – *Hermel*

3 dead, 17 injured at a military checkpoint
Claimed by Nusra Front of Lebanon

16 March 2014 – *Nabi Othman (Bekaa Valley)*

2–4 dead, including a local Hezbollah leader, and 14 injured
Contesting claims by the Free Sunnis of Baalbek Brigade and Nusra Front of Lebanon

29 March 2014 – *Arsal*

3 dead, 4 injured at a military checkpoint
Claimed by the Free Sunnis of Baalbek Brigade

— *Compiled from news reports*

member states had contributed over €1.24 billion to the region since 2011 and another €1.3 billion had been donated from EU communal funds.²³ Unfortunately, the scale of the crisis demands even more than that. Last year's UNHCR funding appeal was only partially met, with donations totalling €1.53 of €2.15 billion (71% of the amount requested) by

the end of 2013.²⁴ This year's much bigger appeal for €3.13 billion has so far been 27% funded. Some €1.26 billion of this has been earmarked for programmes in Lebanon, but to date UNHCR has only received €276 million (22%) for Lebanon-specific works.²⁵ More must be given.



When drafting the cheques, however, donor countries should not only send their euros to international organisations. The Lebanese central state, as weak as it is, has not inspired confidence in international donors and has been effectively sidelined in the world's response to the crisis.²⁶ However, as the report from Swiss Peace argued, "sustaining the availability of local community capacities will be a key resource to cope with future refugee needs."²⁷ Municipalities, which are the front-line governmental service providers, are in desperate need of funds to maintain basic functions. Direct infusions to local governments as well as Lebanese NGOs have the potential to relieve some of the rising tensions between refugees and host communities, as well as dispel resentment among those who feel refugees receive preferential treatment from the international community.

European Member States must also open their doors further to Syrian refugees to lessen the human strain on Syria's neighbours. While Lebanon has received more than one million refugees, the EU's 28 member states have accepted 41,695 of 69,740 asylum requests from Syrian refugees since the start of the crisis in March 2011 to December 2013 (the remaining cases are pending). There are unfortunately few signs of hope that such attitudes will soon change. As of December 2013, EU countries had pledged a mere 12,340 resettlement spots to last

year's UNHCR initiative, only 40% of the requested 30,000, itself a very small number.²⁸ The rich world cannot dodge its responsibility to the people of Syria by pointing to the size of its humanitarian contributions. It is the human pressure on Lebanon's labour markets and infrastructure, as much as it is the poverty of refugees and host communities, that is threatening to tip the scales.

Finally, and most importantly, both international actors and the Lebanese government must fully understand that this will be a protracted refugee crisis. It is fantasy to assume that over a million people will leave Lebanon and return to Syria in the near future. Thus, while funding is still needed for immediate relief, planning must turn from a humanitarian to a developmental mind set. How can jobs be created, housing and infrastructure systems improved, and political systems adapted to successfully and durably absorb a large portion of the Syrian refugees currently in Lebanon without harming the Lebanese? These questions must be answered, or Lebanon risks layering a second refugee population on top of its resident Palestinians. This latter group has now been in the country for 65 years, yet still faces many problems with residency, employment, and access to government services. It is in no one's interest to see what has happened to the Palestinians of Lebanon happen again.

ENDNOTES

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Migration Policy Centre

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