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Increasing Vulnerability for the Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: what's next?

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General Michel Aoun's election to the presidency of the Republic of Lebanon at the end of October has fuelled fears among Syrian refugees in Lebanon that their situation may deteriorate further. Some of them even predict the implementation of a forced-return policy to their homeland. In fact, in very recent months, representatives of Aoun's party (the Free Patriotic Movement) were at the forefront of an anti-refugee discourse. In his inaugural speech to parliament, Aoun reiterated that "there will be no solution in Syria without the return of the Syrian refugees to their country".

However, Lebanon's new president will probably only have limited room for manoeuvre on this issue. In fact, the Lebanese government adopted a new policy in October 2014, whose primary aim is to preserve stability and security by maintaining Syrian refugees in illegality. This strategy reflects a broad consensus of the Lebanese political class and is therefore unlikely to change in the near future. The question is whether – and for how long – managing a quasi-status quo can guarantee Lebanon's stability in the medium and long term.



1) The tightening of State policies towards Syrian refugees

Lebanon has the highest per-capita concentration of refugees worldwide. Based on Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs' figures, on 31 October 2016, of around 5.9 million residents in Lebanon, the total number of refugees in the country was estimated at around 1,500,000. The number of Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR in Lebanon, who are officially considered to be 'displaced people' by the Lebanese authorities, reached 1,017,433. This figure has remained relatively stable since early 2015, when the Lebanese government began implementing a more restrictive policy towards Syrian refugees. Since then, the situation of the latter has continued to deteriorate significantly.

In October 2014, the Lebanese government approved a Policy Paper on Syrian Refugee Displacement, which aimed to reduce the numbers of Syrian refugees in the country, to ensure security by increasing the regulation of the Syrian population, and to ease burdens on the infrastructure. This policy became effective in January 2015, when the General Security closed the borders and introduced a new Entry and Renewal of Residency Permit. Two months later, the Lebanese government requested that the UNHCR suspends new registrations of Syrian refugees. The new regulations have led to around 70-80% of Syrian refugees being left without legal residency permits.

As pointed out by several well-documented reports published in 2016 by Lebanese and international NGOs,¹ the lack of legal status for the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees has significantly increased their socio-economic vulnerability and put their safety at risk.

Indeed, the 2015 regulations have created de facto at least three main categories of refugees: a minority of wealthy Syrians who can obtain a three-year residency permit; Syrians who were previously registered with the UNHCR, who have been requested to sign a pledge not to work and some receive very little compensation; and

unregistered Syrians who wish to work within the three sectors legally opened to them (agriculture, construction and environmental sectors), who have to obtain a pledge of responsibility by a Lebanese sponsor.

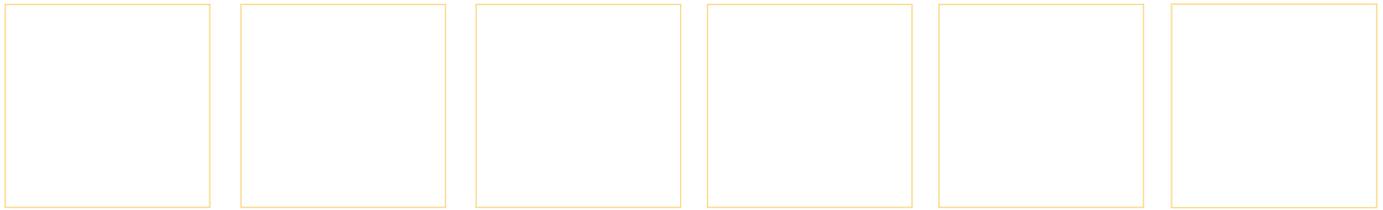
This policy has opened the door to practises such as temporary arrests at checkpoints, arbitrary detentions, and the imposition of curfews for Syrian refugees in certain municipalities. There has also been a rise in labour and sexual exploitation among the most vulnerable refugees (especially women and children who represent three-quarters of the Syrian refugees) by Lebanese sponsors, employers and landlords. These practises particularly affect those refugees living in approximately 1,900 informal settlements across Lebanon, most of which are located in the most deprived areas of the country (the North and the Bekaa Valley). In contrast, the refugee families whose breadwinners had worked in Lebanon before 2011 seem to benefit from more protection from the Lebanese host communities.

More broadly, the 2015 regulations have trapped Syrian refugees in a vicious circle. Their lack of legal status has limited their freedom of movement, notably for males. It has also caused limited access to livelihoods, education and health services, as well as more informal work.² In 2015, 70% of Syrian refugees lived below the extreme poverty line for Lebanon (versus 49% in 2014) and nearly 90% of them were in debt.

Such deterioration in their living environment has led thousands of Syrians, who had sought refuge in Lebanon, to move onward to third countries (most of them to Turkey, then illegally to Europe) in 2015. However, in January 2016, as part of its agreement with the European Union, Turkey also adopted new regulations. Syrians coming from Lebanon are now required to hold a visa to enter Turkey by air or by sea. Since then, Syrians have felt trapped in Lebanon. They cannot escape their precarious conditions, unless they return to Syria (which is not an option for the majority under the current circumstances) or travel to the few countries that do not require them to possess an entry visa (Sudan and Malaysia).

1. Human Rights Watch, "I just wanted to be treated like a person": How Lebanon's Residency Rules Facilitate Abuse of Syrian Refugees? January 2016; Lebanon Support, *Formal Informality, Brokering Mechanisms, and Illegality*, June 2016; Lebanese Center for Human Rights, *Legal Challenges Faced by Refugees from Syria in Lebanon*, October 2016; The Legal Agenda, *Regulating the Residence of Syrians in Lebanon, A Legal Petition to Prevent Vulnerability*, Seminar organised on 10 November 2016.

2. Ibid. See also Lebanon Support, *Syrian Refugees' Livelihoods. The Impact of Progressively Constrained Legislations and Increased Informality on Syrians' Daily Lives*, September 2016; Lebanon Support, *Access to Healthcare for Syrian Refugees. The Impact of Fragmented Service Provision on Syrians' Daily Lives*, November 2016.



In this context, negative discourse against refugees, hailed by both Lebanon's political class and its population, has grown in echo to the increasing pressure on Lebanese infrastructure caused by a population growth of more than 30% in less than 5 years. This discourse is partly rooted in the complex history of the relationship between the two neighbouring countries.³ It is also fuelled by ideological and political motivations, especially among Christian (historically) and Shia (currently) parties, which perceive the 'implantation' of a mostly Sunni refugee population as a challenge to the confessional balance of the Lebanese political system.

Lebanese politicians, regardless of their political affiliation, have increasingly called for the 'safe return' of refugees to Syria. At the UN General Assembly Summit in September, Foreign Minister Bassil stressed the necessity to identify and send refugees to safe zones in Syria, and Prime Minister Salam called for "a detailed roadmap for the safe and honourable return of the Syrian refugees who are present in Lebanon"⁴. These ideas (some of which had already been discussed in the past, such as the creation of safe areas by imposing no-fly zones in Syria) are judged as unrealistic by most representatives of UN and human rights organisations. So far, it has not been possible to concretely translate these ideas into the situation on the ground, not only because they violate the international *non-refoulement* regulations, but above all because they could contradict the strategic interests of some of the main Lebanese actors. Indeed, Hezbollah, whose military intervention in Syria has led to an influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon, is unlikely to favor the Syrian refugees' return in the areas that he has sanctuarised. A potential return of Syrian refugees to their country would thus have to take place within the framework of the demographic-transfer policy set up by the Syrian regime in Damascus.

Finally, these discourses might reflect a strategy of the Lebanese political class in order to put more pressure on international donors to obtain increased financial support. Yet, they also reflect the real difficulties faced by the Lebanese government in finding sustainable solutions to the long-running crisis of the Lebanese institutions that has been exacerbated by the Syrian refugee crisis.

3. Elisabeth Picard, *Liban-Syrie Intimes Etrangers*, Actes Sud, Paris, 2016.

4. Kareem Chehayeb, *Lebanon's New Presidency May Enact Anti-Refugee Agenda*, 10 November 2016, Refugees Deeply.

2) Low effectiveness of the international support provided to Lebanon

While more restrictive measures were taken by the Lebanese authorities, the international community has provided the latter with increased financial and technical support. The main objective was to enable Lebanon to contain the refugee population within its borders without undermining the country's social, economic and security stability. International organisations and UN agencies have worked in close cooperation with some ministries (Social Affairs, Interior and Foreign Affairs), as well as with international and Lebanese NGOs, and more recently with municipalities, to address the prolonged socio-economic and security impact of the refugee crisis. Despite growing involvement from international actors over the last two years, Syrians in Lebanon remain in a vulnerable and precarious situation.

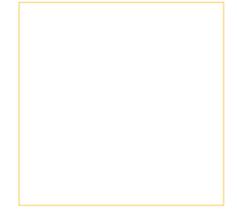
Since 2012, with a special focus on security, international donors, mostly European, have begun to provide support to better secure and control the Lebanese borders.⁵ In 2014, the Lebanese government then agreed to cooperate with the UN on the development of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP)⁶. This 'integrated humanitarian and stabilisation strategy', implemented in 2015, aimed to ensure humanitarian assistance and protection for the most vulnerable displaced people from Syria and the poorest Lebanese people;⁷ and to strengthen the capacity and quality of the national and local service-delivery systems.

Only half of the funding that was initially required to implement the LCRP was provided in 2015. In February 2016, the London conference aimed to raise new funding to meet the needs of those most affected in Syria and its neighbouring countries. In its own attempt to secure increased funding, the Lebanese government pledged to promote two programmes that focused on education and economic opportunities for Syrian refugees and the Lebanese alike. In September 2016, \$857 million from the

5. 'Integrated Border Management in Lebanon', funded by the European Union, started in October 2012 and ends in December 2018. Many other programmes have been designed, such as the 'UK Train and equip partnership with the Lebanese Army Forces' or the 'Danish Project to support Land border security in Lebanon 2015-2018'.

6. *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016*.

7. There are an estimated 3.3 million people in need, of whom 1.5 million are vulnerable Lebanese, 1.5 million are displaced Syrians and 300,000 are Palestinian refugees.



London pledges were disbursed in Lebanon (and \$572.4 million have been planned/committed for 2017).⁸ In addition, on 15 November the EU announced that new funds were available for Lebanon, to be used with the aim of addressing the impact of the Syrian crisis.⁹ Finally, the 2017-2020 LRCP, to be adopted by the end of 2016, is likely to follow the same framework as previous plans, including the ‘social stability sector’, which focuses on direct support to municipalities.

While it is too early to present a comprehensive assessment of the impact of the recent financial commitments (and other bilateral funding) on the Syrian refugees’ condition, Lebanon appears to have done little compared to Jordan and Turkey.¹⁰ Despite lengthy negotiations between the UNHCR and the Lebanese government, there has been no significant improvement on the issue of residency permits, which remains the top priority for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.¹¹ Moreover, a Syrian refugee without a valid legal residency permit can try to obtain a new one, but he has to leave the country (in general to Sudan) before finding a new sponsorship in Lebanon to renew his residency permit papers.

With regard to education, Lebanon has taken some positive steps to enrol around 200,000 Syrian children in formal schools in 2015-2016. Yet, an estimated 250,000 primary and secondary-level Syrian children did not attend school in July 2016.¹² This lack of attendance is mainly due to safety and economic reasons, but also due to the governmental policy’s inadequate responses

to meeting the needs of Syrian children (such as the schools’ location, which is often far from the refugees’ accommodation; the lack of a free transportation system; the content of the Lebanese curricula; and harassment towards Syrian children in some public schools).

Finally, the programme, which aims to promote the creation of “300,000 to 350,000 jobs, 60% of which could be for Syrians”¹³ as ‘temporary jobs’, has not taken any concrete shape yet. It is improbable that the programme can offer a sustainable solution to the employment crisis that pre-existed the refugee crisis. The labour market, which has been characterised by the ubiquity of the informal sector and the lack of public-policy planning for years, needs in-depth reform.

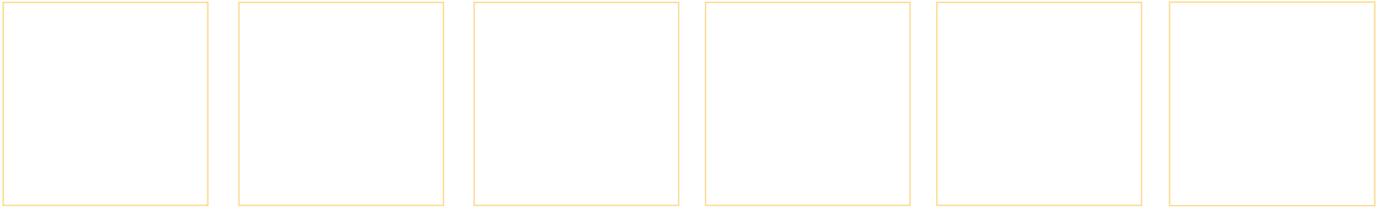
Conclusions and recommendations

Despite the Syrian refugee crisis’s profound impact on Lebanon, social tensions have so far rarely escalated into widespread violence. This relative stability has been firstly the product of the massive, albeit imperfect and objectionable, intervention of international actors. It can also be explained by the self-restraint posture of both Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, who share great concern that the generalised violence from Syria will spill over into Lebanon. Finally, the fragile stability of Lebanon is paradoxically also due to entrenched political divisions in the Lebanese scene. These divisions have indeed prevented the adoption of new measures that would have likely had even worse consequences for Syrian refugees than those that were already approved in October 2014.

The presidential election and the expected formation of a new government are unlikely to cause a dramatic change in the Syrian refugees’ situation, as the Lebanese political scene will remain divided and focused on preparing the parliamentary elections that are scheduled for May 2017. However, the spread of populist and racist discourse against refugees, as well as the continued deterioration of the most vulnerable population’s daily lives are likely to aggravate social tensions and to considerably weaken the already feeble ties between Syrian refugees and Lebanese public institutions.

8. *Supporting Syria and the region*; and *Post-London Conference Financial Tracking Report: Co-hosts’ statement*, 3 November 2016. At the London Conference in February 2016, \$6 billion of pledges were made for 2016, and a further \$6.1 for 2017-2020. In September 2016, \$4.7 billion of the pledges for 2016 have been disbursed.
9. The agreement foresees a minimum EU allocation of \$400 million in 2016-2017. “In turn, Lebanon commits to ease the temporary stay of Syrian refugees, in particular regarding their residency status”. “[EU and Lebanon adopt partnership priorities and compact](#)”, 15 November 2016.
10. For example, the Jordanian government has issued more than 26,000 work permits to Syrians in recent months.
11. Since last June, the ‘pledge to not work’ has been substituted by a ‘pledge of responsibility to comply with the Lebanese law’, and alternative, people living in informal camps now require alternative documents to renew their residency permit. These changes have not yet been implemented everywhere.
12. Human Right Watch, ‘*Growing up Without an Education*’, *Barriers to Education for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon*, 19 July 2016. Hana A. El-Ghali, Nadine Ghalayini, and Ghida Ismail, *Responding to Crisis: Syrian refugee Education in Lebanon*, Policy Brief, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, March 2016.

13. [London Conference – Lebanon Statement of Intent, February 2016](#).



In this sensitive and complex context, international actors have limited scope for action, especially since most European countries have adopted a very restrictive asylum policy towards Syrian refugees. Nevertheless, the European States involved in crisis management should try to alter some negative trends by acting immediately to:

1. Provide support to the Lebanese authorities to set up a long-term development strategy that respects both the international human rights conventions and the need for Lebanon to preserve its social and economic stability. International donors should continue to negotiate with the Lebanese authorities to improve the legal, educational, housing and economic situation of Syrian refugees in the short term, in return for increased funds to Lebanon ('conditional funding'). A more human-rights-based approach for Syrian refugees would include, at least, the adoption of clear, simplified and uniform rules and procedures that enable all Syrian refugees to obtain legal status; as well as regulation and control of the sponsorship system – if it is not abolished – and all forms of exploitation and abuse against refugees.

2. Improve their funding and aid mechanisms to reach the most vulnerable population in Lebanon. Insufficient funding is only one part of the problem and must be treated. But many other dysfunctions, such as widespread corruption, have prevented Lebanon from successfully meeting the needs of the most affected populations. Transparency mechanisms should be set up at all levels of the humanitarian response (from donors to UN agencies, ministries and the non-governmental sector).

3. Strengthen constructive collaboration between international actors and the Lebanese authorities on the one hand, and between the Lebanese government and the non-governmental sector on the other hand, to reduce the deep trust crisis between Syrian refugees, the UN and the Lebanese authorities. It should be a priority to include Syrian civil society organisations, which are most likely to outreach refugee communities, in the Lebanese response plan. This requires easing restrictive policies around residency and work, especially for Syrians who are active within CSOs.

4. Maintain extreme vigilance in the face of official Lebanese calls for the 'safe return' of Syrian refugees to

their country, and at the same time work to create the minimum conditions for a 'voluntary return', namely the imposition of a lasting ceasefire, an acceptable political transition, and the beginning of infrastructures and public services' reconstruction in Syria. In the medium term, international donors should integrate an approach that is based on a needs assessment to rebuild post-conflict Syria into their current assistance programmes for Syrian refugees in Lebanon (notably in education, vocational training and employment).

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