

2024

The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

Managing the Crisis and
Ensuring the Right of Return



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Overview

Lebanon hosts the largest ratio of refugees per capita worldwide.

Syrian refugees constitute today more than 25% percent of the country's total population¹, with the vast majority living in difficult humanitarian conditions.

Lebanon is clearly no longer able to bear the heavy burden of refugee presence,

particularly given the country's weak institutional structures. This situation has been exacerbated, in recent years, by the country's economic crisis, increased competition in the labor market, additional pressure on the already dilapidated infrastructure and weak services sector, all of which have led to growing tensions within host communities amidst a deteriorating security situation and an increasingly hostile political discourse towards Syrian presence.

In the absence of any political solution in Syria in the near future, and the regime's adamantness on maintaining significant barriers to return, Lebanon finds itself facing a social ticking time bomb. It is no longer possible to ignore the economic and financial impact of refugee presence in the short term and its social and demographic implications on Lebanese society in the medium and long term.

The debate around an approach to the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon has been characterized by polarizing approaches:

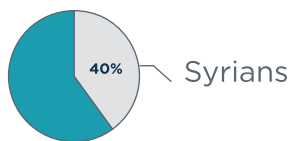
there are those who dismiss the crisis' negative impact on the current situation, and those who have turned Syrian refugees into scapegoats, holding them responsible for the collapse in Lebanon and instrumentalizing the refugee crisis to fuel internal political disputes.

Thus, there is an urgent national need to address this crisis in a way that balances respect for international law and the obligations of the Lebanese state on the one hand, and the Lebanese national interest on the other.

1- This ratio is based on UNHCR figures, which estimates a total of 1,500,000 refugees. UNHCR has 786,000 total registered refugees. In addition to an undisclosed number of recorded refugees, UNHCR discloses that a total 1,500,000 Syrian refugees are present in Lebanon. The Lebanese General Security estimates that a total of 2,080,000 Syrian nationals are in Lebanon, setting the ratio at 33%, of a total population of 6 Million.

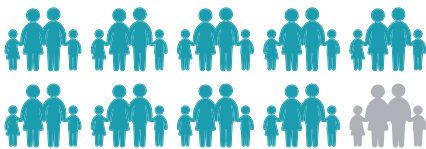
The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Numbers:

The Syrian refugee population in Lebanon is estimated at **1.5 million – 2 million.**



Syrian births already make up **40%** of total births in **Lebanon.**

51.9% of Syrians are **below the age of 20**, compared to **29.6%** of Lebanese.



Around 90% of Syrian households in Lebanon live below the extreme poverty line.



Around 17% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in camps.



10130 refugees returned to Syria in 2023; compared to 23000 returnees in 2019.

The share of Syrian nationals to the total population in Lebanon is expected to surpass **40%** in **15 years.**

Up until 2023, **33%** of Syrian refugees received financial aid from the United Nations.



The maximum threshold of direct cash assistance from UNHCR and/or WFP combined is \$115 per household.



83% of Syrians in Lebanon do not possess a residency permit.



On average, only **1%** of refugees benefit from resettlement.

In 2023, only **8,625 Syrians** were resettled.

Developments in 2023-2024

- **The International Community's position remains unchanged amidst diverging intra-EU approaches**

Through its position, the international community continues to link the return of refugees in Syria to a political solution, in light of the continued severance of diplomatic relations with the Syrian regime, an unlikely implementation of Resolution 2254 in the near future, and limited progress under the 'step for step' approach adopted by the UN Special envoy to Syria.

However, recent years have witnessed an increased willingness to consider interim solutions, particularly within the context of early recovery. Specific European countries have also recently called for the reassessment of the security situation in Syria and for more nuanced approaches to dealing with the crisis.

- **Lebanese authorities' efforts to issue a plan remain insufficient despite wide political alignment on the need to address the crisis**

A wide, and rare, cross-partisan political alignment on the need to address the refugee crisis has driven the government to accelerate efforts to issue a relevant policy approach. While an 11-point plan was laid out by the Minister of Foreign Affairs at the 2024 Brussels conference on Syria, it still falls short of being a coherent policy and does not present a pragmatic roadmap to address the issues at hand.

In parallel, in March 2024, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities launched a roadmap to organize the legal status of Syrians and manage their return. The details of the plan have not been published. Acting Director General of Security, Major General Elias Al-Baysari, described it as a national strategy that "adheres to the principle of voluntary repatriation, diffuses possible animosity between the Lebanese and Syrian populations, and manages the repercussions of the Syrian refugee crisis until safe and voluntary return is established, or resettlement becomes possible".

- **UNHCR shares refugee data with the Lebanese state, though data remains incomplete**

In late 2023, an agreement was reached between UNHCR and the General Security Office (GSO), whereby UNHCR data on Syrian refugees was shared with the Lebanese authorities, after a long and politically charged back and forth between the two. The GSO confirmed that while the database includes the names of 1,486,000 displaced persons, it omits their area of origin, date of registration and date of entry into Lebanon, which complicates the task of Lebanese General Security in determining their status.

- **Funding to the Syria Response continues to decline**

Assistance to Syrian Refugees in Lebanon continues to decrease, particularly amidst changes in political priorities in light of the Russian war on Ukraine and the Israeli war on Gaza. UN funding cuts have already caused a 32% decrease in the number of beneficiaries, with assistance permanently discontinued for 88,000 households (~400,000 individuals). Assistance continues for around 190,000 households (~900,000 individuals).

The Government of Lebanon's “no-policy” policy

- **The Lebanese authorities have failed to adopt and implement a clear policy with regards to Syrian refugees.**

- In 2014, the authorities rejected the “integration of displaced Syrians and the establishment of camps” in an official paper, while failing to propose alternative policy responses.
- In the year 2020, a statement by the Council of Ministers stressed the need for safe return. Little was done subsequently.
- In 2022, the Minister of the Displaced proposed a plan to repatriate Syrian citizens to Syria at a rate of 15,000 Syrians per month. The plan, dependent upon the cooperation of Syrian authorities, failed.
- In March 2024, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities launched a road map to “organize the legal status of displaced Syrians and their return”. Details of the plan have not been published.

- **The Lebanese government retracted from its responsibility in organizing Syrian refugee presence, invoking the specter of naturalization.**

In 2011, the government stopped registration efforts and commissioned this task to UNHCR. This weakened its ability to understand and respond to the crisis at various levels, including labor market regulation. In 2015, the Lebanese government requested that UNHCR

- **The relationship of successive governments with the international community was been marked by short-term approaches**

These approaches sought to maximize foreign aid levels while failing to use aid sustainability to the benefit of both Lebanese and Syrians.

- **Successive governments also had to face conflicting postures vis a vis the Syrian regime.**

Several Lebanese parties, particularly throughout the early years of the Syrian war, refused normalization with the Syrian regime, highlighting the Caesar Act and the risk of exposure to sanctions as an additional reason to reject such normalization. Nonetheless, coordination between the two countries at the security and political levels persisted, and the Lebanese state acknowledged in the 2020 'General Policy Paper for the Return of the Displaced' that one of the most important prerequisites to the safe return of the displaced is cooperation and coordination with the Syrian state as the only party capable of securing the necessary guarantees.

Obstacles to the Return of Syrian Refugees

At the Level of the Syrian Regime

The Syrian regime uses the return of refugees as a political bargaining chip. It refuses to discuss repatriation options without significant concessions on behalf of the international community.

The regime has engaged in the systematic expulsion of Sunnis, and considers the return of Sunni-majority refugees as a reversal of the military gains it has achieved.

A large number of Syrians fear return because they have evaded compulsory military service or because of their anti-regime positions.

The socio-economic reality in Syria is a key hindrance to the voluntary return of refugees, especially since most of the areas from which they fled were either completely destroyed or taken over by other internally displaced persons, or their properties and lands were confiscated by the Syrian regime under its expropriation laws.

At the Level of the International Community

The international community insists on a political solution to the conflict in Syria as a pre-condition for normalizing relations with The Assad regime, lifting sanctions, and launching the reconstruction process. To date, aid has been limited to early recovery efforts which include rehabilitation projects in populated areas of Syria only. This has greatly limited the effectiveness and margin for any interim solutions.

The international community maintains that Syria remains unsafe for return, and has refused to reassess the situation despite the end of intensive fighting.

No support has been provided for voluntary sustainable return and re-integration so far.

In the face of this reality, the international community is unable to provide sustainable solutions for refugees apart from limited, unscalable resettlement options, and mostly providing them with assistance in Lebanon, thereby adopting a policy of fait accompli.

Policies for Lebanon: Organizing Syrian Presence and Guaranteeing Return

1. Organizational measures in Lebanon: upholding national interest by regulating the legal and social status of refugees

If Lebanon's main interest lies in working towards the return of refugees to Syria or their resettlement in other countries, so must be organizing their presence in Lebanon. Their legal and social status should be regularized for more effective crisis management through practical steps on several fronts:

- **Re-examine the status of Syrians present in Lebanon, allowing a distinction between asylum seekers and economic migrants.** This will require further updates to the current database available to the Lebanese authorities, including additional data from UNHCR. This recategorization exercise will allow for more refined approaches in addressing the crisis and organizing returns.
- **Monitor the movement of legal border crossings with the aim of revoking refugee status** for Syrian citizens who move between Syria and Lebanon frequently.
- **Expand registration operations for residency, marriages, and births.** This includes the facilitation of registration of marriages and births despite the absence of identification papers in most cases, to avoid large numbers of unregistered individuals. Syrian birth registration rates did not exceed 36% in late 2022. It should be noted that registration operations can be completed in a period of 12 to 18 months, in the event that the necessary financial and human resources are secured.
- **Control illegal borders and crossings** and provide the required political, logistical and technical support to the security services to achieve that goal
- **Regulate the labor market and ensure the application of enforced laws.**
 - Adopt the same measures for Syrian nationals as all other foreign workers, with obligations to pay taxes and obtain work permits.
 - Allow Syrian employers working illegally in Lebanon a grace period to legalize their status, otherwise authorities should resort to shutting down these businesses.
 - Bolster the Ministry of Labor monitoring team so that it can effectively cover the entirety of the Lebanese territory (at least 50 additional employees are required).
- Intensify efforts to maintain security at home and avoid tensions between Syrians and Lebanese, **prevent all repressive or inhumane measures**, and address all forms of collective punishment against Syrian citizens.

- **Adopt a clear structure at the level of the government** to manage the refugee file, with well delineated responsibilities across ministries and security and administrative agencies.
- **Establish a parliamentary subcommittee** to follow up on the refugee file, monitor the government's performance, and make suggestions and recommendations.

2. Dealing with the Syrian regime: a systematic approach that calls on the regime and its allies to uphold their responsibilities

Given the prevailing political circumstances, any effective plan to resolve the refugee crisis and organize returns objectively requires dealing with the Syrian authorities in a structured manner, unlike the current approach.

This includes the formation of a joint committee composed of high-level officials from the two countries to agree on specific items related to the return of refugees, the most important of which is reaching a mechanism for the recognition of school and birth certificates, discussing the possibility of completing sentences in Syria for Syrians sentenced in Lebanon, and extracting a solution to the problem of military service to facilitate the return of refugees who consider it their primary impediment.

In this context, the political forces allied to the Syrian regime, led by Hezbollah, must use their political influence to secure the appropriate conditions for return. This will also require ending their military presence in large areas inside Syria, especially those bordering Lebanon, from which hundreds of thousands of Syrians have left for Lebanese territory.

3. Diplomacy with Arab countries: guaranteeing the return of refugees and securing Arab financial and political support

Diplomatic action towards Arab countries must be intensified in order to take advantage of their openness to the Syrian regime and in order to obtain commitments that guarantee the return of Syrian refugees as a Syrian, Lebanese and Arab strategic interest, and to restore social and demographic balance in Syria.

- **Integrate Lebanon within the Arab frameworks** emanating from the Amman consultative meeting on Syria.
- **Work towards the formation of a joint committee** at the Arab level composed of high-level political figures to support return efforts, including obtaining a commitment from Arab countries to contribute to reconstruction efforts and support sustainable return and reintegration.
- **Develop and institutionalize political and technical cooperation with Jordan** as a key partner given the common interest between both countries in addressing the refugee crisis.

4. Diplomacy with the international community: the need for nuanced positions and more effective interventions

The inclination of donor countries to reduce aid levels on the one hand, and to link the return of refugees to a comprehensive political solution in Syria on the other, objectively contradicts Lebanese national interest. Lebanese authorities should therefore engage in diplomatic action at the highest level to:

- **Push towards solutions that allow the start of dignified and sustainable return,** in parallel with the ongoing political track.
 - Urge the international community to reassess the security situation in Syria, allowing for a more nuanced assessment.
 - Elicit a commitment from donor countries to link early recovery programs to the return of refugees, and channel more support to areas that have experienced large waves of displacement.
- **Maintain financial support to Lebanon** for both refugees and host communities, and increase support for administrative and security agencies allowing them to better manage the refugee crisis. Support should be provided against clear programmatic frameworks and linked to a transparent monitoring and follow-up mechanism.
- Urge the international community to **increase resettlement rates**, as part of its commitment to burden sharing.

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