

Executive

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SPECIAL REPORT

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Sojourning for migrant truth

■ BY THOMAS SCHELLEN



WHAT ONE REFUGEE CENTER SAYS ABOUT THE LONG HISTORY AND CURRENT CHALLENGES OF HUMAN MIGRATION

The Pournara Emergency Reception Center has a bureaucratically correct name, a politically correct security fence, a totemic gate arch, a well managed access and information procedure for visiting delegations, and daily fluctuations of migrants. Located in a Cypriot plain near the capital Nicosia, the camp is where a diversity of refugees and asylum seekers take their first official whiff of European air.

Prominent among them have recently been migrants coming by boat directly from Syria or via Lebanon. With arrivals of 1,100 refugees and migrants in Cyprus in April, (a minor monthly de-

crease but a year-on-year tripling of Syrian refugee arrivals on the island according to data by refugee agency UNHCR), increasing numbers of Syrians have been widely reported as having decided to leave Lebanon after sheltering there for up to 13 years.

They have been further portrayed in frequent media reports as a growing group that have embarked on the Eastern Mediterranean clandestine migration route to Europe because they are faced with new reprisals and hostility in Lebanon. When compared with the up to two million displaced persons that are assumed to hang on anywhere between Akkar and Marjaouni in the far north and

south of the small country, the count of boat people is moderate.

According to the UNHCR data sheet on the Mediterranean situation, by a June 9 update time, Cyprus saw 4,363 arrivals of refugees and migrants, out of 66,369 sea arrivals to EU shores by the same groups. The bulk of almost 70,000 sea and land arrivals of refugees and migrants to Europe for the year to date were recorded in Spain, Italy, and Greece (see map for refugee clusters in MENA countries and migration routes in the Eastern Mediterranean).

Migrants have nonetheless featured heavily in Cypriot concerns – just ahead of EU parliamentary elections in which one of Cyprus' six seats in the assembly was won by an anti-migration party. In recent months, concerns have focused specifically on Syrians arriving by sea because of the high proportions of Cyprus' asylum applicants to citizens and because of an assumed high escalation risk of Syrian inflows. From the perspective of witnessing the management of arrivals at the Pournara intake center, Syrian refugees are a group whose asylum applications are not accepted on account of their nationality, in this way standing out among other Middle Eastern, Asian and Africans who make their way to the gates of the camp, are medically checked, processed in accordance with their statuses, and in regular cases stay for a short period.

From inquiries with senior camp administrators, Executive learned that unaccompanied minors are the longest stayers in the facility. Expectations of migrants vary when they come into the camp, with many arrivals from sub-Saharan countries falsely believing themselves to be “in Europe” and taken onward, whereas Syrians and other Middle Easterners have a far better comprehension of Cyprus. Some who arrive here already have social networks in the Greek part of the divided island and will move quickly into private environments after a 5-day mandatory stay in Pournara.

The dusty and often smelly camp (sewage systems are being upgraded in the context of an overall €25 million camp expansion and improvement effort) is the busiest and only migrant entry processing facility on the premier European landing point in the Eastern Mediterranean, and steppingstone to dreams. But to evoke associations of the arid Pournara setting with another island-based immigration center is an incredible stretch, even if that other center also had a gate function – a century ago – to a realm of perceived great opportunities for mainly European emigrants: the United States. Of course this particular old immigration center, which also

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saw war refugees and persecuted individuals enter its halls, today hosts a museum and constitutes, together with neighboring Liberty Island, a US National Monument that draws in history buffs and tourists (3 – 4 million annual visitors, a multiple of the immigrants that were processed there at the start of 20th century).

Looking into the container and tent accommodations at Pournara in 2024, it feels unfathomable that this, and/or other refugee processing centers and asylum seeker camps in the Mediterranean region will ever be converted into museums where well-heeled family members and descendants re-imagine the hardships and sacrifices that their forebears underwent on their journeys into a socioeconomically advanced life.

Yet two other impressions assert themselves immediately: compared to the tent camps in Lebanon where displaced Syrians are informally kept and residing chaotically on the strength of their hosts' kindness, the according to media “dilapidated” Pournara facility represents organized, regulated, justiciable and never anarchic Europe (in good and also in less adorable ways).

It is equally clear that Cyprus is a natural way point in one or more of the three migration corridors leading into Europe on this side of the Middle East – and that no barrier and revision of regulations will solve the problems of migration and refugee pressures rolling against and sometimes over choke points on the illicit routes from the Middle

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East to Europe. As long as the disparity in human liberties and opportunities between the two geographic and cultural regions is high, migrants' hopes will be directed at comfort zones as unlikely as the Pournara Emergency Reception Center.

TIMELESS MOTIVES

Away from political consideration and fears over surging refugee numbers, migration is an eternal phenomenon of our human species. As such, in the long run it might be a natural (and over centuries growing) threat to a global civilization that defines itself as a community of competing market societies. Migration is the democratic movement that votes with its feet for rebalancing global economic justice.

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Migration stands for a complex cycle of social, economic, and political changes. The concepts of this cycle have been birthed by the European invention of the nation state and this particular construct's territorial sovereignty – and whose wandering actors have, through their very existence, challenged artificial claims of authority by the nation state's progenitors. In a nutshell, migration, as perceived in our 21st century societies, is a strange and economically productive story but self-defeating narrative.

For all the value that migration had for human survival and territorial expansion, it has been blanketed in myths and faulty assumptions. Today, migration is quantifiable both in terms of numbers of people on the move and in terms of some of its eco-

nomical importance, as well as measurable in qualitative terms and cultural value.

This measurability is quite opposite to historic assumptions on alleged mass migrations such as the European *Die Völkerwanderung/ Les invasions barbares* in the fourth to seventh centuries. Those pivotal migrations around and into European territories probably, and contrary to earlier assumptions, witnessed no tribes or ethnicities on the move but saw culturally and biologically heterogeneous groups limited in size by military logistics, undertake military-economic migrations.

Estimates of these barbarian change agents' numbers are both varying and uncertain, but minuscule – some assessments spoke of headcounts representing cumulatively 3 to 4 percent over a 100-year period – in comparison to the late Roman Empire's estimated 20 plus million population in its West Rome part in the middle of the fourth century. Yet popular and scientific European perceptions from the 17th to the mid-20th century imagined that entire ethnicities of chieftain-led barbarian males and their entourages moved in on West-Rome from the north, east, and south, including Huns, Bulgars, Slavs, and various Germanic tribes, such as Goths and Vandals, who to this day are associated in vernacular with external threats and destruction.

Contrasting to those speculations of migratory peaks and troughs, we read in the 2024 World Migration Report (WMR) by the International Office of Migration (IOM, another concerned UN agency) that the percentages of humans on the big move are amazingly constant in the long run. "The current United Nations estimate is that there are about 281 million international migrants in the world, which equates to 3.6 per cent of the global population," the biennial WMR says.

A 50 plus-year table in the WMR shows percentages of migration to the world population in the 2 to 2.5 percent range between 1970 and 85, just under 3 percent in the 15-year period after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the associated globalized outbreak of optimism, and 3.2 to 3.6 percent in the 2010s, the same level as seen after the slowing of global life due to the Covid19 pandemic. It seems that 3.6 percent of the world population being on the move in the 2020s is not a terrifying crisis but consistent with gradual and small percentage-wise upticks over more than half a century.

THE LENS OF GEOECONOMIC DISPARITY

The image of surprisingly slow increases in migration sharpens further when viewed together with technological innovations and headline demographic developments. The accelerations in the speed and physical ease of travel do not need to be elaborated on. Let it just be remembered that the aviation industry broke through the barrier of 50 million annual passengers in the early 1950s and this year expects to break the barrier of 5 billion annual passengers. Compared to the increases in tourism, leisure and business travel that according to some estimates is the domain of a global minority of 2 billion people, it seems almost surprisingly low that in absolute numbers, the number of global migrants has swelled by a factor of about 3.5 between 81 million people in 1995 and today.

When correlated with population growth, the number of people on the move lets one recall that change makers do not at all need to be majorities. Instead of more than tripling as it did in absolute numbers, the share of migrants in the world has increased by about 57 percent, from 2.3 percent of the global population to the percentage seen today. As the IOM notes, growth trends have not been uniform, but strongly favored some “migration corridors linked to geographic proximity as much as geoeconomic disparity”. Migration flows oriented themselves in south-north directions from the Car-

ibbean into North America, from Africa into Europe, and from Western Asia into Europe.

The long-term secular migration trend is consistent with economic observations on the value of migrant work. Thus, some growth in positive international awareness of overall migration benefits in business communities in developed and advanced developing countries derives from successful quantification and financialization of the real economy contributions of migrants.

According to a migration brief research paper by McKinsey Global Institute from a few years ago, migrants (just before the corona epidemic and its dampening effect on free move of people) contributed \$6.7 trillion or about 9.4 percent to global GDP. McKinsey emphasized that those migrants would have contributed only 55 percent, or about \$3.7 trillion, if they had stayed put where they were under the status quo ante.

Migrants – seen in context of the geoeconomic disparity alluded to by the WMR – were especially good for their favorite developed destination countries as they accounted for 40 to 60 percent labor force growth in those countries and did not harm long-term employment or wages for the native workforce. Economically, migrants helped high-

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labor-cost destination countries’ (or, presumably, all countries with local pay scales that are better for workers than their countries of origin) competitiveness by accepting wage gaps of 20 to 30 percent when compared with native workers. Better integration of migrants into their new economic environments could improve the contribution to the global economy by up to one cool trillion dollars, the McKinsey migration brief proposed.

NEITHER ILLICIT NOR CRIMINAL

It is further to be recognized that migration is to vast proportions neither illicit nor criminal, and most migrants are both legal and voluntary economic actors in the societies that they immerse in. Migrants who move into economies with higher productivity than their source countries contribute more to destination countries competitiveness and to global GDP. They dramatically contribute to the balancing of global inequality scales, although the measurements of these unintended or partly unintended public goods that migrants deliver, are only proxy indicators.

Remittances as indicator for the migrant economy’s importance have grown from nominally \$128 billion in 2000 to \$831 billion in 2022 and “now

far outstrip official development assistance to developing countries and foreign direct investment” says the IOM. According to its latest data, total remittance flows amount to \$831 billion in 2022, of which 78 percent are attributed as inflows to low and middle-income countries.

Of the top ten countries receiving remittance inflows when quantified in absolute numbers, eight are low and middle income economies. Their share of remittance flows is reported as \$361 billion, or 43.5 percent of global remittance flows. In those ten countries, shares of remittances in GDP range widely – because of their very great differences in population and GDP which is also the reason why Lebanon is not one of the top countries by this metric despite of the exorbitant importance of remittances for national GDP. It is a share which according to IOM amounts to less than 0.5 percent in China, between 3 and 5 percent in India, Mexico, and Nigeria, 6 percent in Egypt, almost 8 percent in Pakistan, and 9.4 percent in the Philippines. In order to achieve higher economic potentials of migration and avoid shortfalls in global equity, it is necessary to normalize the global migration narrative away from negative and hostile perceptions.

EVERYTHING AND ITS FLIPSIDE

The flipside of this rosy calculation rises into sight when one starts to consider transaction costs of migration and where to price them into profit calculations and corporate governance requirements. The capitalist, one-sidedly benign impression of migration is sharply set off against the fact that cost burdens of migration, let alone cost burdens of hosting and aiding refugees and forcibly displaced persons, are among the main bones of contention in politics of developed nations. Cost of social expenditures within societies and their territorial bounds do not compare at all to costs that are willingly shouldered, or reluctantly accepted, in integrating migrants, providing official development assistance (ODA), or caring for refugees, asylum seekers, and people in need of protection.

For example, to correlate the EU’s external action commitment to the Eastern Mediterranean with the bloc’s overall finances, it can be noted that the EU’s current multi-annual financial framework (MFF) for 2021 to 2027 has set a ceiling of €11.57 billion for “civil protection and humanitarian aid op-



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erations”, with the precise annual allocations in the neighborhood of €1.65 billion being each year determined through the bloc’s budgetary process. Out of the total €189.4 billion EU budget set last November for 2024, this assistance budget for humanitarian aid outside of the EU is €1.8 billion (0.95 percent), of which €470 million are destined to reach the Middle East and North Africa region.

Notably, the bloc’s 2024 budget for managing migration and controlling its borders is more than twice as hefty, at €3.89 billion (2.05 percent).

Cutting through the jungle of numbers and commitments is, for example, Concord, a European NGO Association. It notes that substantial chunks of official development assistance have been channeled in the past two years from ODA budgets into refugee care within donor countries. The organization cites the concerned OECD member countries’ 2023 ODA of 0.37 percent in gross national income to document that donor countries are yet again failing to meet the objectives of ODA.

On a side note illustrating the accumulation of conflict-induced burdens to the EU – as well as the bloc’s enduring priorities – in recent years, a media report by Turkey’s Anadolu Agency at the end of March detailed that the EU and its member states have allocated \$88.3 billion to humanitarian aid for the Ukraine and \$18.5 billion to care for refugees who were displaced from Ukraine since the conflict began in February 2022.

THE WEAK FUNDAMENTALS IN THE STORY OF EXTERNAL CARE

The gigantic fly in this ointment is the probable instability not of migration itself but of forced displacements as sub-sector of migration. This is where in the WMR’s description, “increasing numbers of people are being displaced, within and out of their country of origin, because of conflict, violence, political or economic instability as well as climate change and other disasters”.

According to accounts of IOM and UNHCR, the global count of displaced persons reached 117 million at the end of 2022, inclusive of 71.2 million internally displaced people, 35.3 million refugees, 5.4 million asylum seekers and 5.2 million otherwise displaced (not refugees or IDPs) who are in need of protection. Over just the two-year period from 2020 to 2022, the number of asylum-seekers has risen by approximately one third from 4.1 million to 5.4 million, the WMR highlights.

The picture gets only worse if rates of increase are calculated. In the pages of specifically refugee-



themed data sheets, this century’s alarming rise in totals and subtotals of displaced groups sums up as near-110 percent per-decade increase from 22.17 million individuals in 2004 to 46.12 million persons in 2013, followed by another decade of increase by 153 percent to the above cited 117 million reported across seven categories for the end of 2023 (IDPs being consistently the largest, followed by displaced persons classified as refugees).

In this context, the popular climate risk and climate change adaptation angle that has in recent years been added to the catalog of conflicts and disasters, is in the view of some scholars a less verifiable and less prevalent direct migration driver than disasters such as droughts and floods that are ingrained in cultural memories.

Regardless of any intellectual interpretations, however, simply seeking to comprehend the growing tides of human conflicts and abject misery, including the aggregate impacts of disasters, sting the mind extra painfully and mentally affect any information consumer. Which does not mean that they unleash strategy-making capacities.

THE PERILS OF SYMPATHY

We as human beings are prone to imagine the impacts of wars and the pains of individuals and families as stories – they appear daily and almost formulaically in advocacy and information media contexts. That we easily “derive sorrow from the sorrow of others”, as Adam Smith phrased it in his opening chapter of the *Theory of Moral Sentiments*

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(1759), seems indeed to be something that “even the greatest ruffian, the most hardened violator of the rules of society”, and possibly even the most populist of modern political demagogues, is not altogether without.

But that sympathy, walking in the other’s slippers for a minute, does not make for an “impartial spectator”, as Smith named that inner voice on individual level, nor does it capacitate us to orchestrate an economically just and effective strategy for addressing and hopefully preventing forced displacements around the world. In conclusion of observation in the first half of 2024, as reported from debates over migration and refugees in diverse cultures and political, there is over-rich evidence that “a better world doesn’t start with more empathy” (to use a formulation in the book *Humankind* by Dutch writer Rutger Bregman).

That does not mean that economic man wins but rather suggests that efforts by economically literate “social maternalists” (development economist Paul Collier) are more needed than ever. Devising and actually implementing such strategies for addressing the forced displacements challenge is morally and economically imperative. Conflict, violence and disasters incur societal and economic

cost burdens that can no longer be externalized and forgotten. In this fatedness, the imperative for addressing the outcomes of forced displacements scales many degrees up from the economic need for holistic management of migration. The latter can be engineered when the political and business mindsets of decision makers switch from serving “shareholders” to meeting “stakeholder” interests, or any concept of similar orientation, such as the conscientious capitalism approach.

16:1

It is not only the rise in refugee numbers but also the horrifying “stickiness” (using a term of management consultants and other economic men) of forced displacement that makes a case for an urgent rethinking of disaster assistance, humanitarian interventions, and targeted ODA actions.

The argument resides in hard-core stats. Out of the total refugee count of 38 million in 2022, some 340,000 persons enter the statistics as returnees to their country of origin. An even much smaller number is reported as naturalized in the countries where they were residing: 51,000 persons. The latter number befuddles the imagination – if you meet a naturalized refugee in the country they have fled

to, you meet not a billionaire one-percenter but a member of a 0.00064 percent global royalty.

Moreover, this astonishingly small number of first-country naturalized refugees has been decreasing in 2023. Likewise, third-country resettlements of refugees – which local politicians and opinion makers have been increasingly fond of touting as their favored answer the presence of displaced Syrians in Lebanon – is globally as unimpressive as can be.

According to the IOM, more than 114,000 refugees were resettled in third countries in 2022, but this slightly larger number also is nothing to cheer about. Citing resettlement numbers of 81,000 in 2005 versus merely 57,000 in 2021, the WMR declares that “The number of resettled refugees has fluctuated over the years... Overall, resettlement has not kept up with the significant increase in need”.

Against fluctuating, single-digit third-country resettlement ratios, the WMR further elaborates that resettlement needs are on the rise due to “various refugee crises and new displacement situations”. The race seems to be on a no-win trajectory for returns and third-country resettlements the report declares: “There were 16 new refugees for each refugee that was returned or resettled in 2022”. The IOM is projecting a 20 percent year-on-year increase in resettlement needs to 2.4 million refugees in 2024.

AN ALTERNATIVE VIEWING ANGLE ON THE DISPLACEMENT CHALLENGE

For a secondary viewpoint on the controversial need to address not only the humanitarian needs

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of refugees and internally displaced persons but also commit much more – more funding and more than funding – to burden sharing and innovative thinking on conflict reduction, the newly published 18th edition of the Global Peace Index (GPI) by an Australian think tank, the Institute of Economy and Peace (IEP), says a number of things on the economic cost of violence, numbers and ratios with intuitive relevance for migrantonomics.

The GPI 2024 baseline is an increase in the number of conflicts. “There are currently 56 active conflicts, the most since the end of Second World War, and with fewer conflicts being resolved, either militarily or through peace agreements.” Moreover, the index points out that the involvement of at least 100 countries in at least partial involvement of external conflict has almost doubled when compared with 2008. The GPI adds that the number of 92 countries involved in active conflicts beyond their borders, the number of engaged participants is the highest in its 16-year existence.

AND TO ASK MORE QUESTIONS

Is this reason to assume a straight line of causality from the increasing number of conflicts in the past decade to this century’s explosive increases in reported refugee counts? As IEP observes that its measured categories of “conflict deaths, GDP losses, refugees and IDPs, and terrorism have increased by at least 100 per cent in the last 15 years”, it certainly is not an impossible question to ask.

What does all that worrying news mean for the bottom line of migrantonomics? “The global economic impact of violence was \$19.1 trillion in 2023, equivalent to 13.5 per cent of global GDP, or \$2,380 per person”, with a year-on-year 0.8 percent increase from 2022, the key findings list in the GPI says. At another place, the report reiterates in slightly different wording that \$19.1 trillion in purchasing power parity (PPP) terms are “equivalent to 13.5 per cent of the world’s economic activity (gross world product) or \$2,380 per person”.

It is to note here that the PPP methodology can distort economic perceptions. In this sense, the difference between the implied size of gross world product in PPP terms (north of \$138 trillion) versus the nominal global GDP estimate of around \$101 trillion by the World Bank is already requiring a tenuous leap of the mind. Within the MENA region, which by the index’s data is world’s “least peaceful” and location of four in the world’s ten least peaceful countries, the GPI attributes a low worsening of peacefulness to Lebanon, showing it

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in 135th place out of 163 countries with a peacefulness score of 2.693 (lower scores indicate more peacefulness), slightly worse than its 2.581 score in the previous year.

For the economic cost of violence, Lebanon is noted as having suffered an economic impact (inclusive a multiplier) from violence at \$8.36 billion in 2023, and corresponding economic cost of \$4.55 billion. The latter, according to the GPI methodology, is \$1,561 per capita cost and representing of 6.55 percent of GDP. However, and very counter-intuitively, in the – less violent for Lebanon – year of 2022, the economic impact of violence on the country is given as \$11.16 billion and the cost as \$5.92 billion, which the index describes as \$2033 per capita cost of violence in PPP terms and representing 8 percent of GDP.

The estimates are calculated in purchase power parity terms and serious further questions need to be asked on these numbers, especially when noting that cost of conflict deaths and other direct and

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indirect costs in 2023 were escalating and that the 2024 GPI publication at least in its text portion is cognizant of the regional repercussions of the Gaza conflict, saying that it has thrown the entire Middle East region, including Lebanon, into crisis, and that “the risk of open warfare remains high.”

In its general observations of the GPI, military expenditures and internal security expenditures are the two top items that sustain the economic impact of violence and together account for almost \$14 trillion dollars, or 74 percent of the overall economic impact of violence. The message that can be taken from such data mining and index building exercises seems to be one of dubitable details.

On the side of long trends and risks, however, observations of the GPI and the observations of UNHCR and IOM on refugee waves and the risks of conflicts behind them, strengthen each other. The local message that correlates with the need for new global inquiries into solutions for peace, refugees, migrants, and external risks is that the

Lebanese experiment of the 2000s and 2010s has tested the hypothesis of an economy’s survivability.

Its research question was if a country can survive in economic peace when competing economic minority interests are only controlled by the polity’s de-facto stockholding chieftains and by fiefdom-type, corrupted sub-contracts with only the faintest commitments to common purpose, shared belonging, and mutual obligations. The hypothesis that this country can, has crashed spectacularly. There is no peace and globalization story of sustainable market economies without improved migration management and there is no economic peace without addressing the problem of refugees.

■ There are no sustainable market economies without improved migration management and there is no economic peace without addressing the problem of refugees



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TIMELINE

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Displaced in history

■ BY MARIE MURRAY AND ALINE NASSAR

A SELECTIVE PICTURE OF A CENTURY OF DISPLACEMENTS

If a timeline were to present a full picture of displacement and migration trigger events in the Arab world, it would necessarily fill many pages and span many centuries. Understanding the role of the refugee in the region's diverse cultures actually has to start with taking note of the refugee narratives – and mandates to respect the displaced and sojourners – that are foundational elements in the religions of Islam (with the exile of its founder in Medina), Christianity (with the first family's flight to Egypt) and Judaism (with the pivotal role of the exodus in the creation of a people).

As Executive cannot but illustrate only a small slice of this millennia-lasting narrative, what we present in above infographics is a selective snapshot. The aim of a timeline of 21 major events in five countries over the course of—roughly—a century is not to give a comprehensive picture, but to illustrate the upheavals caused primarily by the conflicting push and pull of efforts to shape the region according to internal and external interests.

THE DOMINO EFFECT

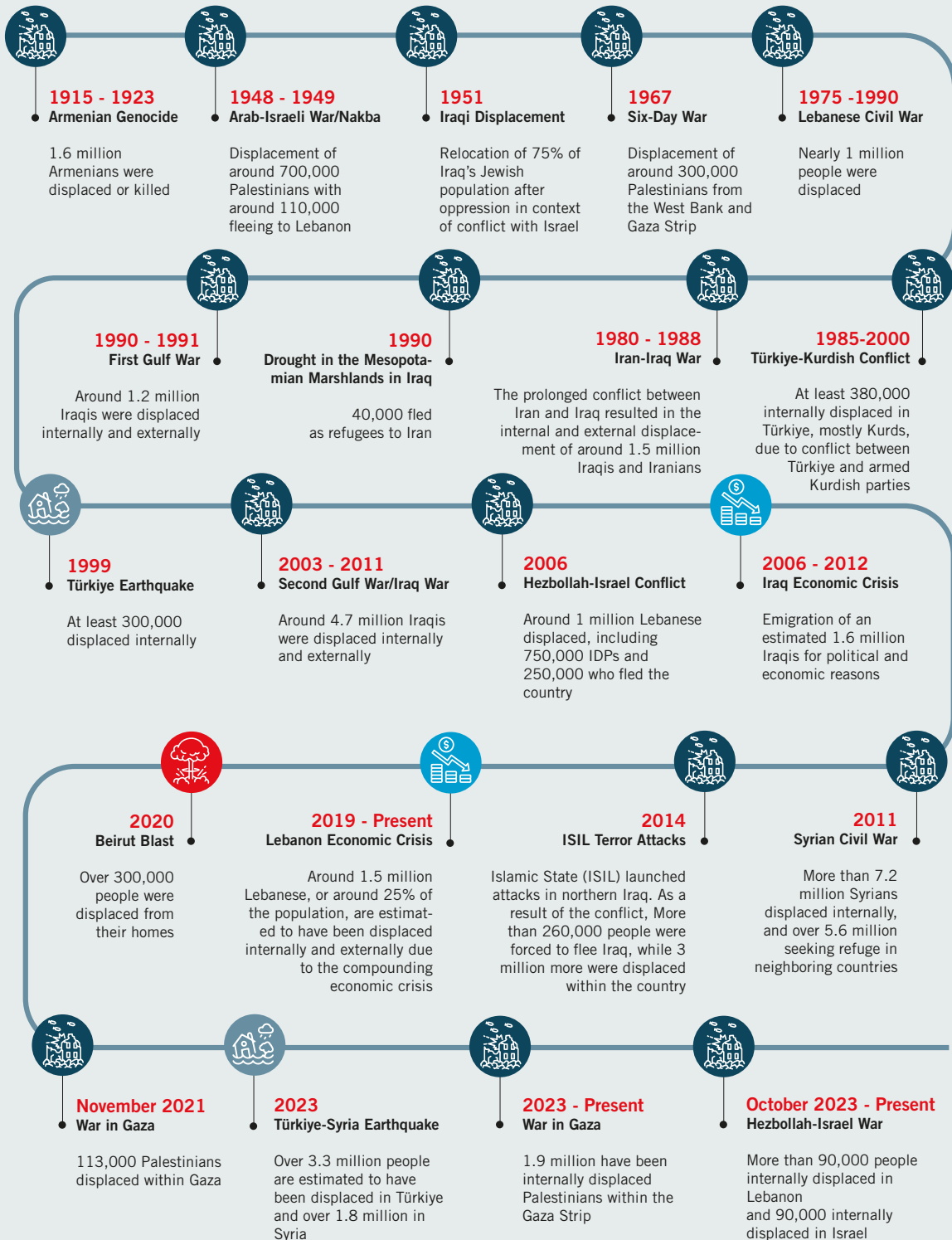
At the start of this timeline, these five countries—none yet declared as such according to our modern understanding of nation-states—were mapping out their sovereignty, or, in most cases, having it mapped out for them. The brief, post-WWI mandate period after the dismantling of the Ottoman Empire coincided with the establishment of the Turkish republic in 1923 and was followed by declarations of independence of the Hashemite Kingdom of Iraq from the British in 1932, and Lebanon and Syria from the French in 1943 and 1946 respectively. But the most noteworthy chain of events impacting migration and displacement during this time was the movement of Jewish refugees from Europe (facilitated by the British) and Arab countries, and the establishment of the state of Israel on the territory of Palestine. The repercussions of these developments across the region and globally have had a ripple effect of conflict and exile.

The forced displacements of the subsequent Arab-Israeli conflicts would require a different examination. It can only be noted in passing here, as must be conflicts between autocratic regimes and disasters that drive forced displacement from African and Western Asian countries into the MENA region. Also not captured, though certainly contributing to some of the events specified on the timeline is the Arab Spring, a period of revolutionary uprisings and protests across the region that began in 2010 in Tunisia and spread outward assisted in large part by social media. It led not only to the toppling of governments in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Yemen, but also spurred the anti-authoritarian protests in Syria at onset of the civil war in 2011.

In Lebanon, a similar revolutionary, pro-democratic movement occurred later in 2019—against a corrupt rather than an authoritarian regime. It unified much of the country and brought about a newly prescient alertness to the precarious status quo caused largely by the corruption of Lebanon's political leaders. The *thawra* became a national wake-up call directly preceding Lebanon's major economic crisis years.

It is of note that while some of these timeline events caused serious, mostly internal displacement, such as the Hezbollah-Israeli July war of 2006 and the Beirut Blast of August 2020, the displacement was short-lived and did not trigger any significant international migration. In contrast, it is disingenuous to describe the ongoing Syrian conflict as one displacement trigger event, since during its course, there were numerous occurrences causing major migratory waves out of Syria as well as multiple internal displacements. The current genocide in Gaza, while not yet triggering substantial out-migration, has caused such grave and destructive incidents of repeated internal displacement, that it is certain to have weighty and long-lasting consequences as one of the most critical refugee challenges of the era.

21 major displacement events in 5 countries over a century



War and Conflict



Economic Crisis



Natural Disaster



Manmade Disaster



The Case of Lebanon

■ BY HANEEN SAYED



CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS FOR A REFUGEE-HOSTING COUNTRY

The brutal war in Syria has had a devastating effect on the country and significant spill-over into Lebanon and other neighboring countries, most intensely between 2012 and 15. Entering the 2000s with a new president and hopeful new laws on investment, banking, and business ownership, Syria had been fast-growing country whose population increased from about 16 million at the turn of the century to more than 21 million ten years later. Then, however, brutal oppression of protests and minor unrest unleashed an internal war.

Compared to similar situations across the world of internal conflict impacting neighboring countries, the economic impact of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon has been disproportionately high. This is attributed to three major reasons: (a) the sheer scale and duration of the Syrian conflict, and the size of displacement into Lebanon; (b) the high exposure of Lebanon to the fallout of the Syrian conflict, spe-

cifically its dependence on transit trade through Syria, and sensitivity to regional instability; and (c) the low institutional resilience and capacity in the country.

To date, the Syrian conflict ranks second in duration in recent history, with only the Afghan civil wars lasting longer. More than 400,000 battle-related deaths are directly attributed to the conflict and more than half of the country's pre-conflict population have been displaced internally and externally into Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, Egypt and Europe – considered the largest displacement since World War II. Entering its 13th year, the scale of economic collapse in Syria has been much larger than the average of other conflicts. By 2021, Syria's GDP had shrunk by 54 percent from 2010. Over two-thirds of households today report being insufficiently or completely unable to meet basic needs.

Lebanon has felt the fallout of the Syrian con-

flict through multiple channels. First and foremost, Lebanon received between 1.5 and 2 million Syrians fleeing fighting and seeking better economic opportunities – making Lebanon the country with the largest number of refugees per capita in the world (between 25-30 percent of its population).

Second, in terms of economic losses, Lebanon has suffered relatively larger losses than its neighbors. From 2011-2019, the Syrian conflict reduced GDP growth rates in Lebanon by two to three percentage points each year, with a cumulative cost estimated at approximately \$90 billion from the period 2011 to 2021 (World Bank 2024 unpublished report). Trade disruptions had a significant dampening effect on GDP. Excluding the impact of the Lebanese financial crisis, the World Bank estimates that between 2011 and 2021, Lebanese exports declined by 46 percent and imports by 33 percent on average.

PUBLIC DEFICIENCY REPLACES PUBLIC SERVICES

With most of the country's GDP comprising financial, trade, and tourism services, the Syrian conflict-led trade disruptions, reductions in Foreign Direct Investments (FDI), and slowdown in service sectors in Lebanon have overshadowed what little GDP impact was generated by the increased demand and labor supply involving displaced Syrians (estimated to have boosted GDP by 0.9 percentage points between 2011 and 2017).

All these impacts have been larger in Lebanon than in other Syria conflict-affected countries, including Jordan and Iraq. Without the conflict's negative impacts, neither would the country's public debt ratio have built up to the level of more than 172.3 percent of nominal GDP in 2019 nor would Lebanon's gross public debt have approached \$102.5 billion in 2023 – although the debt and debt ratio would under even the best economic development scenario have been wholly unsustainable, given its high levels for more than two decades.

From the economic perspective on refugee scenarios, it is expected that a hosting country's GDP and household incomes will grow as aid comes in and consumption increases due to the arrival of the refugee population. This is a statistical outcome resulting from the fact that inflows of more people (refugees and aid workers) and more money (international aid and government spending) into a particular geographical area will lead to increases of incomes and consumption.

Conventional economic wisdom suggests fur-

■ The economic impact of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon has been disproportionately high

thermore that, over time, the increased consumption could lead to a boost in local production and sales of goods and services. As refugees enter the local labor market, this could possibly reduce labor costs for employers which ultimately would benefit households as prices decrease.

On the other hand, refugees exert pressure on public services which strains resources and increases environmental degradation. Water and electricity shortages, overcrowding of services such as health and education, increased traffic and pollution, and competition for jobs and housing are common problems. Unemployment may increase especially among the most vulnerable including women, youth, low-skilled and informal workers as competition typically involves these communities.

On the social level, the Syrian conflict itself increased poverty in Lebanon by 7 percentage points, at least as estimated from 2012 to 2019. Survey data from 2022 indicate that more than 87 percent of Syrian refugees live in poverty – a trend that worsened over time. According to the refugee agency UNHCR, 90 percent of this group need humanitarian assistance in early 2024. By 2022, however, and largely as a result of the economic/financial crisis that erupted in 2019, the number of Lebanese living under the poverty line in absolute terms exceeded that of non-Lebanese: of the 3.9 million people in need in the country, 2.1 million – 54 percent – are Lebanese. As the World Bank says in a new 2024 poverty and equity assessment for Lebanon, poverty has more than tripled from over a decade ago from 12 percent in 2012 to 44 percent in 2022, with the share of poor Lebanese increasing.

Labor market conditions for Lebanese, especially women, have deteriorated since the onset of the conflict in 2011 although mostly this is due to the overall economic slowdown. The official unemployment rates in 2019 stood at almost 30 percent for Lebanese and increased for both Lebanese and Syrians.

Recent reports show that between 2019 and 2023, the occupations which had rising shares in the economy were mostly low-skilled occupations, and increasingly Lebanese are taking up these jobs, creating tensions between the two communities. In

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COMMENT

■ Between 2019 and 2023, the occupations which had rising shares in the economy were mostly low-skilled occupations and increasingly Lebanese are taking up these jobs, creating tensions between the two communities

agricultural labor, for example, the share of Lebanese employed doubled (albeit from a low baseline) between 2012 and 2019 and in 2023. Similarly, the

proportion of Lebanese in elementary occupations has almost doubled from 5 percent in 2019 to about 9 percent in 2023.

Public services are not typically designed to suddenly absorb a 25 to 30 percent increase in demand. The demand will either be met through increased supply of services or a sharing of existing levels of services which means a decrease in the host community access. In Lebanon, the influx of displaced Syrians has put significant pressure on public services, in particular, education, health care, water and sanitation, energy and transport.

Already, prior to the influx, public services were stretched both in terms of supply and quality due to lack of long-standing investments and reforms. Do-

nor funding, which is estimated at \$1.5 billion per year over the past six years, has been mostly committed to poverty alleviation in the form of food and cash assistance (43 percent), followed by education and healthcare with 20 and 13 percent, respectively. Allocations of 10 percent each went to livelihood and water, leaving a small percentage to energy.

This distribution indicates that the funding for public services has not been sufficient to compensate for the increased level of usage and need for maintenance and expansion. According to most recent World Bank estimates, the total recurring cost of providing for needs of 1.5 million Syrian refugees in the education, healthcare, water, energy and transport sectors was \$1.7 billion in 2022/23, much higher than the level of donor funding for these sectors.

In addition, while aid has helped expand healthcare and education services to accommodate the refugee needs, quality of services has been severely impacted. Earlier studies by the World Bank estimated a \$2.5 billion funding requirement for stabilize access and quality of public services to pre-conflict levels. In an environment where international assistance is stretched across competing needs (Gaza, Sudan, Ukraine, etc), the declining percentage of funding of Lebanon's refugee needs from 54 percent in 2015 and



again 2020 to 35 percent (the highest level of funding percentage-wise) in 2022 is alarming (source: 2023 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan).

Besides the cost impacts on public services that I outlined above and which have been significantly under-compensated for in the case of Lebanon, the state's capacity to mitigate such shocks greatly affects the size of the impacts. State capacity can be described in broad terms as: its capacity to collect taxes for the delivery of public services; the ability to conduct budgeting and public investment management within a medium-term vision; the ability to effectively perform budget execution and deliver public services while complying with audit standards and demonstrating public accountability.

On all these fronts, Lebanon performed far below MENA averages prior to 2011 and its performance worsened after the 2019 economic/financial crisis. We are today still witnessing the deep deficiency of state capacity after an almost total collapse of the public sector under the weight of the economic crisis. In analytical reflection of the years before the acute crisis, it has to be admitted that the Lebanese state and its institutions were first not ready to respond to the refugee influx in 2011 and in the following years to 2019 missed opportunities to strengthen their systems and build resilience.

WHERE TO GO FROM HERE?

Looking ahead, with the lack of resolution of the Syrian conflict on the horizon, and absent an economic recovery in Syria in the medium-term, the conflict-driven spillovers into Lebanon have become protracted and will continue. Voluntary return of the refugees to Syria in significant numbers is highly dependent upon provision of security and protection in Syria, availability of basic infrastructure and services, and creation of economic opportunities. But while these challenges appear open-ended and far exceed Lebanon's ability to manage alone, the question posed is: how can Lebanon most effectively manage and mitigate the impact of the Syrian conflict and refugee presence?


Hosting refugees contributes to a global public good in that countries hosting refugees are bearing a responsibility on behalf of the international community. The challenge for the international community is to ensure adequate responsibility-sharing (referred to as burden sharing in other contributions to this report. Ed.) because refugee protection is a global responsibility. Hence, all countries should help absorb the costs of hosting refugees.

Globally, three donors provide almost two-thirds of bilateral financing for assistance to refu-

gees, and four countries account for almost three-quarters of all resettlements. Many more countries should provide financial support to refugee-hosting countries and Lebanon should continue to receive sustained higher levels of support. More donors should provide multi-year commitments as this would allow the government to plan its response. In addition, after 13 years of programming and implementation of the international community's support for Syria refugees in Lebanon, there is need for a critical evaluation of aid strategy and its mechanisms. Fragmentation, lack of effective coordination and high overheads of aid need to be reviewed.

At the same time, Lebanon must address the basic reforms needed in the country specifically reforming its state institutions and building capacity. Investing in state institutions – including in automation and digitization of services - which will bring better service delivery and reduce state capture is a critical pillar of building resilience and enabling a better response to the impact of the Syrian conflict and refugee presence. The presence of international organizations and active civil society groups provides an opportunity for a more effective outcome.

The Lebanese state on its part should build an updated database, allowing it to better understand and distinguish between the different statuses of Syrians residing in Lebanon, and tailor responses, including return strategies, accordingly. Registration should be initiated at three levels: residency, marriages and births including for Syrians with no identity papers. This helps avoid a generation of 'stateless' Syrians, especially since registration rates of refugee births did not exceed 36 percent in 2022.

Lastly, Lebanon can also learn from what other countries are doing to mitigate impact of the refugee influx on the labor market such as the Jordan Compact – a program adopted by Jordan in 2016 whereby it provided work permits to Syrian refugees in specified sectors in exchange for support by the international community with multi-year financing and easing of Jordanian exports to Europe. Such innovative schemes can be adapted to the Lebanese reality. Regulating the labor market – through identifying labor market needs and issuing work permits to Syrian refugees where needed – would help increase the share of formal jobs in the country, as well as state revenue. Regulatory reforms, better labor market information and enforcement of labor standards are necessary in Lebanon not just to help reduce the impact of refugees, but also for the labor market as a whole. 

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Q&A

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Making do and mustering support

■ BY THOMAS SCHELLEN AND RUBA BOU KHZAM



INTERVIEW WITH THE MINISTER OF SOCIAL AFFAIRS
DR. HECTOR HAJJAR

Social emergencies, safety nets, and refugee issues have taken center stage in Lebanese public debates since the country's rapid descent into economic misery more than four years ago. Along with towering social needs, the country's centrally concerned public institution – the Ministry of Social Affairs, or MOSA – logically has increasingly been thrust into the local and international limelight. Notably however, while the Lebanese Republic maintains a large number of ministries by international comparison, MOSA's importance has historically often been overshadowed by ministries that were widely seen as politically more strategic or important in terms of their fiscal and economic contributions. Thus, MOSA's role, heightened further in recent months due to the country's first external conflict-forced internal displacements with resulting new social emergencies in decades, not only deserves support and understanding because of today's overwhelming humanitarian needs but demands even more attention as a strategic building block of a more social Lebanon. Executive's questions were answered by the Minister of Social Affairs, Hector Hajjar.

E *Over 90,000 people have been forced by armed conflict from Lebanon's southern border area as of the*

beginning of spring. There are widespread fears, caused by the Gaza crisis and Israeli threats, of escalation and new attacks which would result in more internal refugee movements. How has the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) been able to support these internally displaced persons, or IDPs, and what will it be able to do if numbers of internal refugees were driven upwards by increased violence?

I am not the only one in charge of dealing with the situation. I am responsible at the level of the Ministry of Social Affairs. The Lebanese government has set up a ministerial committee, of which I am part, that deals with the southern file. It represents all relevant ministries, such as education and health, working under a coordinator, who is the Minister of Environment, with the highest official being the Prime Minister.

As for us at the ministry, we visited the affected sites from the first day and participated in the crisis response plan. We followed the displaced and those residing in the border areas who did not want to leave. At the same time, we modified the plan so that we had a response to the people who wanted to remain in their homes, as well as to the people who took refuge in the shelter centers and the people who went and rented accommodations or moved in with other families.

The Ministry of Social Affairs, within its capabilities, has to date launched several initiatives. Firstly, we initiated a project called "Khotwa" in partnership with Expertise France and Shield Foundation to psychologically support the displaced men and women. Secondly, we placed a mobile unit for reproductive health in Tyre to follow up on displaced women. Providing health support, the mobile unit travels to shelter centers and to families staying with their relatives. Thirdly, we have provided the entire south with aid materials to equip the centers, such as equipment for people with special needs to facilitate their lives and mobility. And fourthly, we have provided food supplies, especially flour, to support the people displaced within the south and those residing in the border strip.

Jointly with other ministries, we provided medical equipment to Jezzine and Marjayoun hos-

pitals and supported Bint Jbeil and Tyre hospitals with diesel fuel. [In addition to food and material supplies provided in several governorates], we also transferred additional cash support to people with special needs between the ages of 15 and 30 in the southern region, reaching the families benefiting from the poorest families program and the “Aman” program of \$2.5 million. We have received a new Chinese donation of \$1 million that we are preparing to use, either by transferring it in cash or through food supplies.

We are also meeting with most international institutions and with all embassies to encourage additional funding. During my recent visits to the south, I proposed and will continue to propose two ways of assisting the displaced: either through direct support, which is through motivating follow-up institutions to provide medicine, aids, etc., or through indirect support where we allocate entitlements to the southern regions for covering payments such as phone bills, Internet bills (DSL), electricity and water bills, and municipal bills. It is my message that we must take a decision to support the citizens determined to remain in the south, relieve them of the burden, and stop this pressure on them. We must help them indirectly and remove taxes and dues from them.

E *Can you quantify for us both the needs and the value of the assistance that MOSA has been able to provide to the IDP in the past 6 months?*

The subject of statistics is supposed to be in the hands of OCHA [the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs] and the coordinator of the response process to the displaced. He is the one who can tell us how to proportionate the response to all needs. I cannot tell you a number so as not to be mistaken.

E *One cannot predict when the conflict in Gaza will end. But by historic experience we know that no war lasts forever, so at some point fighting in Gaza will stop and there will be people whose lives have been devastated and who will seek to leave. Do you expect that there will be any influx of new Palestinian refugees from Gaza on Lebanon?*

Everything is possible and everything is not possible. Lebanon's position on this issue is clear. We do not want to receive anyone in Lebanon from the Palestinian issue in Gaza. I think this is also Egypt's and Jordan's position. A presence of displaced Palestinians or of people who could flee from Gaza to Lebanon would be very difficult to accommodate now and is rejected.

E *What portion of the 2024 Lebanese budget is allocated to MOSA and how large is the ministry's human capacity when you compare the capacity of 2024 with 10 years ago?*

Over the past ten years, we have lost more than 80 percent of our financial capacity, that is to say, our budget today has been cut by 80 percent. Regarding the human capacity we have two problems. Firstly, a shortage in our qualified staff; we do not have the ability to replace whoever has left MOSA. Next, we have a problem with wages, which have not yet recovered from the crisis since 2019. This means that we have a problem with the number of employees, a problem with their motivation because of low wages, and a problem with budget. The way we compensate for the budget problem is through borrowing and aid.

E *Developed countries with welfare states have high levels of social transfer payments. Compared to social expenses that average at 21.5 percent of GDP in OECD [Organization for Economic Coordination and Development] countries, how large is the role of the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon and of social assistance in the overall Lebanese system and how well do people regard the ministry and its services?*

From approximately two and a half years ago, the number of beneficiaries of social assistance has reached 15 to 20 percent of the Lebanese population.

During these two and a half years, we have provided and are providing complementary health, psychological, social, and employment services to the extent of 15 to 20 percent in order to reduce the burden and create a

multi-dimensional approach for people who are going through crises. Whether there is appreciation by the Lebanese or not is because these programs do not have regularity. There are those who are satisfied when we pay for them, and there are those who are dissatisfied when we stop paying due to lack of order and administrative capacity. An example of what is happening with us is that we had to pay up to 100,000 families this month, but we were not able to do so due to administrative matters. This has to be considered a debt because the government system does not provide funding for cash assistance.

E *Based on the question that was asked before, how do you see the Lebanese comparing themselves to the Syrians who receive aid?*

There is a great comparison because over the

■ “A presence of displaced Palestinians who could flee from Gaza to Lebanon would be very difficult to accommodate and is rejected”

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past 11-12 years there have been a health program, an educational program and food supplies in addition to cash and some secondary school aid such as transportation and the internet that were provided to Syrians [who sheltered in Lebanon]. For the poorest Lebanese families there was some cash support, but support of school needs has been irregular, health support does not exist, and the rest of these services are also non-existent. Here I name as example two women, one Lebanese and the other Syrian, who want to go [to the hospital] to give birth. Because of the [payment requirements] in the healthcare system, the Lebanese woman faces a problem with how she will go to give birth. As for the Syrian woman, she can access a system covering her needs. Satisfaction for the Syrian woman will be high, while for the Lebanese woman there is no satisfaction at all.

E *Do you agree with the general numbers that are being circulated that there are about 1.5 million Syrian displaced people in Lebanon today? What number does the ministry work with?*

Firstly, in Lebanon there are no accurate statistics. Secondly, do you want me to give you a number that would have been correct before you asked the question, or a number that reflects how it has changed since you asked? [There are many fluctuations], because there are Syrians crossing the border as we speak. Also some are fleeing because of what just happened in Jbeil [the murder

of politician Pascale Sleiman], and there are babies who have just been born. We rely on numbers according to General Security [data], because we do not have statistics and there is no government decision to collect them.

According to the General Security file, there are 2.1 or 2.2 million Syrians in Lebanon. It is possible that there are 1.9 million, but the number is certainly higher than 800,000, and not all of these Syrians are displaced.

In this matter, the role of the UNCHR has become greater than its size. Displacement is the result of war and persecution; there was a military

war that took place in Syria in the year 2011 and ended in 2015 in general. From today's perspective, there was no war in Syria in 2023 and the Syrian who came to Lebanon in 2023 came because of economic reasons. He left due to the economic blockade and the international sanctions, or due to the earthquake [of February 2023], or to flee to Europe. Therefore, calling all Syrians in Lebanon "displaced" is a crime.

Clearly, I say that any country in the world, whether European or Arab, or any international or human rights organization that calls all the Syrians in Lebanon displaced or refugees, [commits] a crime in the field of Lebanon and must be punished at the Hague Court. Why? Because if someone comes to steal a car in Lebanon, or to rob a house in Lebanon, or to work as a mafia or a group of smugglers to Europe, I will be a criminal if I give him the status of a displaced person. How many [people working in] international institutions and international organizations are criminals because they make these wrong judgements?

For many decades, Lebanon has had 200,000 to 250,000 Syrians working in agriculture, industry and commerce. These people are now called displaced people. Any person calling them displaced people is firstly a criminal against the Syrian because he made the Syrian think of [betraying] his country, and a criminal against the Lebanese because he allows Lebanese to live with instability at time they cannot tolerate that.

We used to say that there are 30 to 40 percent of those in Lebanese prisons who are Syrians. Some did not believe us, but this is the reality today. Whoever [stays as Syrian in Lebanon but] is not in school, does not live a normal life, is not monitored by their municipality, and who is not in a home but lives on village sidewalks, does so as a result of prostitution addiction, theft, smuggling, forgery, and money laundering. Once we gave this individual the status of a displaced person, we protected him from persecution. So, if a Lebanese wanted to steal, he would bring a group of Syrians to steal for him, because the displaced person does not stand trial and the UN appoint a lawyer to defend him. It is an internationally prescribed crime to call all the Syrians in Lebanon displaced.

E *If we look at the situation of the Lebanese people in light of the waning social and economic crisis of the*

■ "We rely on numbers according to General Security data, because we do not have statistics and there is no government decision to collect them"

past few years, how is the government and especially MOSA able to maintain the overall social contract in Lebanon and give the people security?

Four or five months ago, we finished, signed, and launched the National Strategy for Social Protection, which is the first such strategy to operate in Lebanon in 75 years. At MOSA, we did not wait for the launch of the strategy in order to begin work. We, in line with the strategy, had begun to launch the programs of the [Emergency Social Safety Network] program and the [National Poverty Targeting Program], and today we are integrating between them. [This integration process] will end at the end of June.

Secondly, we launched the unified social registry, which is the basis of the national social protection strategy. If we have a unified record, we can know how to work. If we do not have data for all of Lebanon, we cannot work. We also established, and will launch in May, the GRM—a complaints call center with 30 employees. We further launched the Cash Assistance Program for Disability, which is accessible to people aged 15 to 30 years, and we will work to expand it.

Overall, 600 billion Lebanese lira from the

Lebanese government have been released in support of people who have disabilities. They are adults, children and the poorest. Also, today there is an Inter-Ministerial Committee headed by the Prime Minister, and I practically lead it in the absence of the relevant ministers. The committee was formed and we met last week and now we are forming the National Technical Committee.

For the first time in Lebanon's history, with the support of UNICEF and ILO and a clear Lebanese ministerial will, especially from the Ministry of Social Affairs, we want to reach the topic which is related to ensuring the rights of the Lebanese citizen to live a decent life so that he/she does not become a refugee or displaced person in other countries.

E *The 2023 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan of the UN and stakeholders indeed said that MOSA has taken the lead in developing a national social protection strategy. How far advanced is the development of this strategy, perhaps expressed as percentage in terms of reaching full implementation?*

No percentages. A part [of the strategy] is what we are implementing together with other

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ministries, another part is in the design phase to be implemented in the future, and we are working with the Ministry of Finance to secure its funds.

Elements of the strategy presently under design are, for example, care of the elderly and their protection, including coverage of medicine, and the subject of the social security system and its improvement. But things are moving. We are also working on an automation process for development of services at the level of the Ministry of Social Affairs and at the level of the 150 MOSA branches, so that they can provide the services of a referral system and a linking system with the rest of the ministries.

E *Once all elements are in place, will it be a Lebanese strategy or an imported strategy?*

The National Strategy for Social Protection has passed through many stages. The basic stage that it passed through is a strategy for everyone residing in Lebanon. It was stopped and modified to become Lebanese only because we do not have the capacity to bear refugees or displaced persons. It is a Lebanese production with international standards, and there is an attempt to be 100 percent Lebanese, but it is not 100 percent Lebanese.

E *Did the recent economic crisis, with all its disadvantages, contribute to accelerating the process of building social systems in Lebanon?*

It is possible, but the main point is that in Lebanon not all are convinced of a social system based on a protection strategy. From the Ministry of Social Affairs, we have complete conviction of this, but this approach needs wider support, ideally through an international resolution. Public trust and a culture shift are necessary for the citizen seek protection from the state.

E *How can one change the prevailing distrust in the population where it is often alleged that everything done by this or that ministry or by any minister, are acts of corruption?*


Through developing a culture of non-cor-

ruption at the level of ministers and government and at the level of the people. Throughout history, the lack of real examples of projects that are far from corruption makes people disbelieve that there is anything that is not corrupt. But I say that the work to build the government really begins with the minister actually acting in the interest of building a nation, with transparency and with projects that are linked effectively and in keeping with a media plan. The people on their part must take steps to understand reality and progress. It is a matter of the culture of building a nation. We Easterners are more emotional than we think. Was the incident [the abduction and murder of Pascal Sleiman] that happened on Sunday taken from an emotional perspective or from an actual perspective? From this incident we can see how things are being viewed.

E *Is solving the problem of trust and also the problems of Syrian refugees and displaced people in Lebanon, primarily a political challenge, a technical challenge, or what?*

There is a political governmental decision, there is an executive technical decision because there is a technical problem with the government agencies and their movement, and there is an external media, legal, diplomatic decision to convince the capitals of the decision that this is in Lebanon's highest interest and this is in the highest interest of the displaced. What we lack today is not knowing how to explain to the Western and Arab countries that we are not against the displaced. We are with the real displaced people, but against exploiting the displacement issue for goals greater than displacement, which are political goals.

E *By my understanding you have a personal background as humanitarian actor. Is being the Minister of Social Affairs a dream job for you?*

I had and still have a dream to build Lebanon, a homeland for humanity, and this dream is realistic. By what means I will build it, that is not what is important to me. Whether I am a minister, a deputy, or a social activist, the form is not important. What I seek is beyond the form. I seek the content. 

■ “The work to build the government begins with the minister actually acting in the interest of building a nation”

The interview was conducted in person with the minister. Arabic interview responses have been translated and edited.

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The Sisyphean task of the UNHCR

■ BY THOMAS SCHELLEN



INTERVIEW WITH UNHCR REPRESENTATIVE IN
LEBANON IVO FREIJSEN

What social and economic science often calls a shock event is something that heavily impacts the moment but transpires into much more consequential long-term changes of the previous status quo. These changes can be and usually are both boons and challenges. From early in 2011, a series of popular Arab outcries against calcified and corrupt political realities disrupted the power constellations in numerous MENA countries, with results that gradually changed from initial, immense optimism and passion to a new political and social status quo with widely varying up and downsides in the very same countries. The strongest and most lasting impact of those decade-old developments on Lebanon was the country's necessary intake of Syrian refugees. In parallel, and causally tied to the overpowering need, Lebanon saw substantive increases in the presence of international NGOs and especially a massive boost of its presence by the United Nations' refugee agency, UNHCR. Inquiring about the agency's role and relations with local public stakeholders, Executive sat down with Ivo Freijsen, the UNHCR representative in Lebanon.

E *Altercations in south Lebanon have caused the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to climb above*

90,000 in February of 2024 as tracked by the International Office of Migration (IOM). The number has hovered between 90 and 100,000 since then, in addition to which there are uncounted thousands of people who have sheltered with relatives, friends, and communities. Is UNHCR involved in providing for the needs of people that have been forced out of their homes in southern Lebanon because of the military confrontations across the southern borders?

IF The answer is yes, as part of a large effort that is government-led. [Acting] in support of national efforts [by the Lebanese] government and national organizations who work closely together with UN agencies and iNGOs, we provide, or help provide, a list of services such as collective centers or psycho-social counseling. We are also involved in provision of materials – we call these 'critical relief items' – that people need to better cope with displacement and we have supported local authorities' disaster response mechanism through [provision of] laptops and other kind of infrastructure. We should also mention that we should not only be concerned about people who are forced to move but also of people in the area who were already in need and may have more needs now; people who could not move or for other reasons took the decision not to move. They are also in a heightened state of vulnerability where we are worried that more money is needed. More money for the whole response community.

E *an you give us a number for the value of how much has been provided in the first six months of the situation and how much more would be needed under a scenario of the cross-border conflict's continuation without further escalation?*

IF There are many practical projects in progress that need funding. This is the Lebanon Response Plan [LRP] put together by UN agencies, national and international NGOs for humanitarian assistance to all population groups in Lebanon, including in the south. This document has a very large price tag and funding this endeavor and the agencies that are part of it, is what is needed. Should [the situation] further escalate, then the ability to quickly respond at scale in all the sectors where response is needed, is for us and other agencies completely linked to the amount of resources that [are made available].

In talking resources, financial power is the first layer of needed resources but the second layer is probably human capital, meaning experts and aid workers. Would UNHCR have enough human capacity to immediately step up your emergency response if an escalation of conflicts were to happen?

IF Always to a degree. As humanitarians, our DNA is flexibility, agility and [the ability] to re-prioritize. You can always do a bit but then there are limitations and then you need more staff, personnel that we don't have. We would only have that if a very generous donor says, "I am going to give you lots of staff. They are not going to be super busy but then you are ready." That hardly ever happens.

E *The Lebanese population's trust in their government is, politely said, not high and after the first eruption of conflicts in October, many Lebanese have been questioning the government's emergency preparedness, often doubting if their government will be able to help in any emergency. Next, they have been asking if the international agencies will help them. How do you evaluate and answer to this attitude and mindset of the people?*

IF The normal arrangement is that a country facing a crisis has a degree of own resources to address a humanitarian crisis or fallout of a situation [such as] a natural disaster, conflict, and internal displacement. But it is also very normal for affected countries' governments to say "we are struggling here, can the international community come in?" And that is of course the case in Lebanon.

We have been here for many years and always hope that there is a degree of government ability to engage, [knowing that you as international actor] simply need the government for some things, because they are taking the decisions at municipal and governorate levels, and so forth. It should be an important actor in terms of coordination and then there are other actors. Those can be charitable organizations within the confessional community and national NGOs; then there are international NGOs and the UN. We can already safely say that they are all needed in this case. I am worried that this is getting up to a situation where we are not getting a lot of new [funding] amounts to do the work.

E *In the spring of 2024 regional and European concerns include a surge in refugee arrivals in Cyprus, as well as streams of forcibly displaced persons from Sudan to Egypt. While these have been high on the EU political agenda for months, it seems that little is being done to prepare for a new outpouring of refugees from Palestine, where many residents of Gaza but also the West Bank must be regarded as displaced persons in the*

fourth or fifth generation. How does this situation look from your perspective? Is there a risk of new Palestinian refugees, a large proportion of which would have to be expected to seek shelter in adjacent countries, perhaps including Lebanon?

IF If you look at the map it is of course not an easy scenario how Palestinian refugees from Gaza could reach Lebanon. Discussing scenarios of that sort, like coming by sea, would divert attention from much more pressing issues that we all must be concerned with in Gaza. In the Lebanon situation, we already have a lot on our plate and a lot of vulnerable people who need assistance.

■ "The international community has responsibility that countries bearing the brunt of displacement, which 80 to 90 percent are neighboring countries, are adequately supported"

In global context, it is clear that people will move if conflict and other issues are not controlled. Then the international community has responsibility that countries bearing the brunt of displacement, which to 80 and 90 percent are neighboring countries, are adequately supported.

E *Any influx of refugees to Lebanon indeed usually originates in violent internal conflicts just outside of Lebanon's borders. When the Syria crisis in the early 2010s led to the drafting of the 2014 Syria Regional Response Plan (RRP), then UN high commissioner for refugees Antonio Guterres stated his concerns over refugees' access to asylum in and outside of the region and a needed "comprehensive regional strategy", something like a paradigm of shift in concerted humanitarian and development actions. Has this shift come to pass?*

IF It is a document from ten years ago and I would rather look at the situation as it unfolded in the past ten years since then, which is first of all that Syria remains such that people have fled and some continue to flee. If this were different, people would have less need to flee and people would be able to go back. In the meantime, large numbers of people have been able to reside in Lebanon, essentially since 2011, with what we consider to be refugee status – others call it differently – and we continue to call on Lebanon to try and stay the course in a humane and hospitable country where people can not only seek but also benefit from protection. We think it is a large task for the international community to support this effort and to also find durable so-

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lutions elsewhere for refugees, which is resettlement, and is always to third countries.

E *Countries such as Rwanda?*

IF You are referring to the UK Rwanda deal. That is a very different arrangement and falls under the domain of externalization. UNHCR issued a statement on what our position is on that deal. In terms of resettlement, we hope that other [UN] member states with such capacity will continue to display what we call international burden sharing or responsibility sharing by making clear to the countries that do all the heavy lifting – and Lebanon falls in that category – that refugees can have other places where they can go and find a new home.

E *Would it be correct for me to think that from your position any deal to support Lebanon financially in managing the refugee situation in the country would preferably also include an improvement of the resettlement outlook?*

IF I all the time meet donors to thank them for everything they have done and continue to do, and to also make a plea to continue financial assistance to UNHCR and other actors, and show support through resettlement.

E *When some people say that resettlement until now has been very small, what do you tell them?*

IF Yes, we sometimes get criticized [about the level of resettlement]. I wish it will be more but we



■ “An increasingly small number of Syrians are getting a level of compensation on very serious ‘life or limb threatening’ conditions”

as UNHCR are not in a position to put people on a plane and send them to a country that agrees to receive refugees. It all depends on UN member states’ governments, parliaments, and the general public. We have a number of [resettlement] opportunities kindly offered by member states but there is a huge gap between what should happen and what is happening. We have numbers of how much in resettlement is needed versus how much is available and we can only be as convincing as possible, based on meticulous humanitarian arguments and see if member states are willing to change [their resettlement offers].

E *At past and probably future conferences seeking other funding pledges for the crisis in this country, the funding gap has not been diminishing. The gaps are growing.*

IF That is true.

E *Is then, from the funding perspective, the work of UNHCR in Lebanon a bottomless hole that cannot be filled? That will require to go and beg, ad infinitum, with the international community?*

IF We need to, and I think we managed to do, our level best in making sure that what we communicate to the international community is a realistic picture of what the needs are and what [funding] is needed, what we plan to do, and that we do it in the most cost-efficient and prioritized manner. As humanitarians, we should not make the mistake to say, “there is not enough money, so let’s stop calling for money or reduce our requirements”. We have an obligation to be needs-driven and then it is up to the international community to see how much willingness and capacity exists to support this.

E *Irrespective of the exact size of the funding gap that you almost certainly will have to cope with for this year, do you expect UNHCR Lebanon to never go broke?*

IF It depends how you describe broke. We are approaching the middle of the year, and we are 15 percent funded [at time of this conversation at the end of April]. That is not a percentage that I like. We are at a point in a year where you have actually most of the work that you want to do, [on the way] and would like to be at least 50 percent funded, and we are not. FAO [the UN’s food and agriculture organization] and UNICEF [the UN’s children’s fund] had to reduce their aid disbursements earlier in 2024 in Lebanon, cut down on packages, and all that. However, I don’t think we’ll go broke in the sense that

there is no funding anymore and we have to pack up and go home. That would send out such a bad signal to Lebanon that an agency that is here to support the government in the difficult challenge is no longer able to support but we are not at that point yet.

E *Public debates in Lebanon often argue with numbers that are unsecured or even contradictory as to the relative percentages between citizens and refugees in the country, which sometimes seems to detract from the fact that the numbers of needy and vulnerable people of either Lebanese or Syrian identity are far too large. What numbers does UNHCR work with?*

IF We have 1.5 million Syrians known to us that we consider as refugees. That corresponds actually with the figure that the government is also using often within the framework of our planning documents like the LCRP and the LRP [Lebanon Crisis Response Plan and Lebanon Response Plan]. There are also other numbers but I do not take responsibility for other numbers, because we do not have them. That should really be put to the government.

E *And when I ask persons in the Lebanese government, they tell me I should ask OCHA and UNHCR for the numbers.*

We can explain the numbers that we can explain. Other numbers need to be explained by others. What we also should say is that we are concerned with Syrians who are considered refugees or potential refugees. If there are also other Syrians here not known to us, that should be clarified by others.

E *Key numbers, such as the number of economically active people in the country or of non-Lebanese labor with or without work permit, lack levels of accuracy that would allow exact planning of economic stimulus measures or social expenditures. However, there is one often cited number that I want to check with you, namely that 90 percent of cost of healthcare or hospitalization by Syrian refugees has been and is covered by UNHCR or other UN agencies, and that Lebanese individuals would be unable to have such support. Is the 90 percent a number that applies when the cost of an individual Syrian mother's medical bill for a treatment is concerned, whether a child delivery or another procedure in a hospital?*

I want to clarify and confirm that this is not an accurate description. What I can say is that an increasingly small group of Syrian refugees are getting a level of compensation on very serious conditions that we call 'life or limb threatening'. We struggle with [having] less and less money also in this area, so we are prioritizing. Less and less people get support for an increasingly small number of conditions. What we pay [as share of such treatment costs] is



increasingly less and what the refugees themselves need to pay is increasingly large. The generous [90 percent coverage] description that we often hear has never been correct, has not been valid often, and is definitely no longer valid now.

As we feel for how difficult it is for the Lebanese, it is important to know that a lot of our assistance that we pay to hospitals goes

to hospitals that are at the disposal of the whole Lebanese society. We have spent an enormous amount of money on the healthcare system which has frankly been a lifeline for Lebanon in a situation where healthcare has become very problematic. Let's not make the mistake to start criticizing refugees [for benefiting from international support for their medical needs], because assistance in this and other domains has actually been beneficial for Lebanon in a situation where systems have started to collapse.

E *From an economic perspective, I would ask here if you ever paid 90 percent of healthcare treatment costs for refugees in some cases at some point in time, did you pay this to hospitals in Lebanon or for treatments outside, and if you paid it for local treatments, would this not translate into a large amount that benefited Lebanese employees working in the hospitals and healthcare system?*

Let anyone who has an assumption or a degree of frustration [about the alleged coverage of refugees' medical bills percent] just contact us. It is often based on old information. I want to say two more things; first, we don't think the solution is to say stop [allocation of funds to healthcare costs], because that would actually be counterproductive for the Lebanese and Lebanese institutions.

[Second], we also will not hesitate to point out that refugees sometimes have specific vulnerabilities. Many surveys show us that refugees are often in a much more vulnerable state or are for example not easily able to get any [medical] insurance. If you are

■ “A lot of our assistance that we pay to hospitals goes to hospitals that are at the disposal of the whole Lebanese society”

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Q&A



Lebanese and have money, you can pay for [medical] insurance. This is much more difficult for a refugee.

Let us try and continue to have a factual discussion on this. One other point is primary healthcare. The humanitarian community of UN, national partners and iNGOs, which is primarily here because of the hosting of refugees, is supporting a huge network of clinics and primary healthcare facilities. More than 50 percent of the people who knock on the doors of these facilities are Lebanese.

E *The 2023 LCRP not only promised holistic and inclusive action with multi-year priorities of balanced protection of “displaced Syrians, vulnerable Lebanese, and Palestinian refugees” but also proposed to hopefully “reinforce Lebanon’s economic, social, and environmental stability”. Is supporting the stability of the Lebanese economy something that you, UNHCR and other UN agencies, are doing?*

IF What we do will have positive input for Lebanon either directly or on a secondary level. Things in Lebanon would look different if the humanitarian actors would not come to the fore with the same amount of money. It is not an insignificant amount of money and people [who are given cash assistance] spend it here. The objective of humanitarian assistance and LCRP or LRP is not to overhaul the Lebanese economy. We want to play a supportive role but we have humanitarian objectives, which is primarily to ensure that people suffer less and have larger stability in terms of wellbeing and protection status. But longer-term institutional and economic reform is beyond the humanitarian sphere. It involves the development community and international financial institutions and [UN] member states.

Lebanon has actually been a very good example of what we call integrated programming, where we do not look only at refugees, or only Lebanese, or only victims of the port blast. Especially now through this


LRP, this new document. There are not many countries who are proposing such an integrated proposal and funding appeal. That is exactly what donors want from us: [to have] no longer siloed approaches but to still work within the humanitarian-plus sphere. You always try to contribute to longer-term approaches for more to happen durably in the longer term. And this is often where you need measures that go beyond the sphere of influence of the humanitarian community. [However,] I agree that it does not make sense for us to overpromise [on contributing to economic stability of the country] because this is not our mandate, not our expertise, and often depends on factors that are within political, security, and macroeconomic domains. We can only advocate but do not pull the strings there.

E *Is being a refugee a crime?*

IF Never

E *Is it a crime if someone calls himself a refugee but is in reality an economic migrant?*

IF Our position there is let’s listen to people. Lets not judge from a distance. Only by taking this extremely seriously, by listening to people, will we be able to understand who they are and why they are on the move. You hear us often say that people don’t move because it is easy or fun or because they have a choice, irrespective of what the reasons are. The reasons why people move can be economic or due to more hardcore protection [needs], or combinations. A human-centered, honest, effective approach is what we call for. Let’s not make the mistake that it is only others and people in African countries or the Middle East [who can be forcibly displaced by conflict]. Ukraine reminded all of us [in Europe] how close this can become. In my country, the Netherlands, my own mother was an IDP during the second World War. She could not stay where she was staying and had to move somewhere else in the Netherlands. So this is not so far away or so long ago.

We are worried if we see restrictive measures that are discriminatory and leading just to more vulnerability. This leads to more need, as people are still here. There is more need and more desperation and it is difficult for humanitarian assistance to attend to these needs in a context where we get less and less money. If one sees these measures, one question could be: what are these measures going to lead to and is [such an outcome] actually in Lebanon’s interest? 

BEHIND THE FEAR

■ BY ROUBA BOU KHZAM

THE VOICES OF REFUGEES IN LEBANON

Shortly after Executive committed to conducting interviews with 10 foreigners of Arab origin, a state of anger prevailed in the Lebanese streets that was directed towards Syrian refugees specifically, but also resulted in a buildup of larger frustrations around perceived mishandling of a refugee crisis within the country.

On April 7th, 2024, Lebanon was shaken by the murder of Pascal Sleiman, a member of the Lebanese Forces Party. The Lebanese military authorities issued a statement on April 8th that read, “The Intelligence Directorate of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) arrested most of the people involved in the kidnapping in Jbeil. Their investigation revealed that the kidnappers were trying to steal the car when things went tragically wrong, resulting in the death of the abducted person. The kidnappers then transported the body to Syria.” Attacks on Syrians and the damaging of their dwellings and motorbikes erupted in Jbeil and Beirut, while angry protesters—seemingly affiliated to or supportive of the Lebanese Forces—blocked major highways.

Accordingly, I, as head interviewer, faced a significant challenge. All the interviewees were increasingly afraid of being interviewed and having their names or faces scrutinized by readers. They absolutely refused to be photographed. For this reason, Executive decided to conduct the interviews without pictures and offered the option of anonymity. Most of the names have been changed except for Kawthar, Mousa and Majida, who consented to the use of their real names. My constant

reassurance was, “I’m here to convey your stories and voices and not to hurt you.” The interviews were conducted both online and in person—in coffee shops, universities where some are students, and in the building where one interviewee works as a concierge. I tried to gather stories from people living in different areas of Lebanon (Beirut, Nabatiyeh, Akkar, and Mount Lebanon) and even reached out to an individual online who is currently in Spain.

The stories I heard were heavy with hardship. They spoke of discrimination, bullying, and violence. Some considered themselves to be refugees, though a few rejected this label. I sensed the weight of hopelessness in their voices and a desperate yearning for a haven. The common thread? All except one voiced a fervent prayer for a chance to reach Europe, a place they see as offering dignity, human rights, and a secure future, away from the harsh realities they face in both in Lebanon and the places from which they fled.

The majority of the interviewees insisted that, as Kawthar expressed, “we are neither happy nor comfortable here as Lebanese people might think. We face daily hardships and bear the blame for the actions of others only because we are refugees and can’t return home.”

Through these interviews, I delved into the complex lives of refugees in Lebanon and heard stories that challenged my perceptions, unveiled hidden struggles, and ultimately, reminded me of our shared humanity.

KHALIL, A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE

“We came to Lebanon, and all I know is that we are landless and there is no land to which we can return,” says Khalil, a Palestinian refugee currently living in Ain al-Helweh camp. Born in 1996 in the village of Hamama, Majdala District, Palestine, Khalil came to Lebanon just two years later in 1998.

In 1948, a devastating event for Palestinians called the Nakba or “catastrophe” took place during which, according to the United Nations, 700,000 Palestinians fled conflict or were expelled from their homes in what is now the state of Israel and were not permitted to return. Many sought escape in neighboring countries, including Lebanon.

Among those who fled to Lebanon in 1948 was Khalil’s father. Years later, in 1995, he went back to Palestine to reunite with his family and Khalil was born the following year. The family moved to Gaza and after three years returned to Lebanon and took up residence in the Ain al-Helweh camp in Sidon.

Khalil’s early years were characterized by both hardship and a sense of community. He acknowledges the role of UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, in providing basic necessities and education. However, navigating life as a Palestinian in Lebanon presented challenges that continue to this day.

Security limitations are a daily obstacle, Khalil explains. “There are four entrances [to the Ain al-Helweh camp], and there is a check point at each entrance marked by the Lebanese army. We have to show ID and we are subjected to inspection.” These delays, he says, “caused me to miss the first class of many classes” during his university studies.

Finding employment presents an even greater difficulty. Despite holding a Bachelor’s degree in radio and television and a Master’s degree in business administration from the Lebanese International University (LIU), Khalil’s Palestinian nationality has repeatedly disqualified him from jobs in his field of media and communications.

“Rejection from multiple jobs in my area of expertise occurred,” Khalil explains. He recounted an experience with an international organization in Sidon, where he excelled as a volunteer, transitioning to a paid volunteer role. When a media office position opened, he applied. “After the interview, they told me that because you are Palestinian, you cannot be employed,” he said. “They apologized, stating they weren’t aware of my nationality. While I held high hopes for the position, disqualification solely due to my nationality was disheartening.”



Khalil further highlights a paradoxical situation regarding his contradictory status as both Palestinian refugee and foreigner. “They tell me I cannot register the house [I live in] because I’m a refugee, yet when I apply for a job, they say I’m a foreigner and can’t be hired because of quotas. So how can I be a foreigner for work but a refugee when it comes to housing? There’s no clear definition of ‘refugee’ in this country, and that’s very frustrating for me.”

Despite the difficulties, Khalil has secured a stable job with a pension, but he is still worried about long term security. “If I were to start a family, I would not want them to reside in Lebanon,” he says. His aspiration is to find a country offering stability and a true sense of belonging, a right that continues to be elusive for him in Lebanon.

■ “How can I be a foreigner for work and a refugee when it comes to housing? There’s no clear definition of ‘refugee’ in this country and that’s very frustrating.”

KAWTHAR, A SYRIAN REFUGEE IN LEBANON WHO WAS GRANTED ASYLUM IN SPAIN

“I’m like all the Syrian refugees in Lebanon who needed an opportunity to leave, and I finally had it,” says Kawthar over a Zoom interview with Executive. Kawthar is a 24-year-old Syrian woman who had the opportunity to go to Spain with her family for asylum.

In 2013, the Syrian conflict forced Kawthar’s family of five to flee their hometown of Levant, Syria. The experience left her with lasting memories of the conflict, including the sounds of army aircrafts,

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missile strikes, and widespread destruction. “Our house was completely destroyed,” she recounts, “and I lost many relatives during that time.”

At the age of 14, Kawthar arrived in Lebanon with her family. They settled in Khiam, southern Lebanon, where her father, a tailor, found work for a low wage, but education was still out of reach for Kawthar. “My father’s income, which could only cover rent, electricity, and basic food, was insufficient to afford my school and transportation fees,” she says.

After five years in Khiam, the family relocated to Nabatiyeh. Here, Kawthar enrolled in free workshops wherever she could find them. She took

sessions that taught hair-dressing, and others that offered drama therapy and psychological support. During this time, her father has a medical condition requiring two major surgeries and rendering him unable to work. The responsibility of supporting the family

shifted to Kawthar and her 18-year-old brother.

Kawthar encountered discrimination while working in Nabatiyeh at a gift and toy shop. “Being new to the job,” Kawthar explains, “I made a mistake. I placed merchandise on the shelf before the owner arrived. When he saw it, he shouted at me and threatened physical violence in front of the entire store. The next day, because I needed the income, I returned to work only to be told I was no longer needed and to go home immediately. I left the store crying in the rain.”

Further hardship struck when Kawthar’s brother was injured. “My brother was the victim of a hit-and-run accident,” Kawthar recounts. “The perpetrator fled the scene, and we were unable to identify them. My brother sustained broken legs and was unable to work for a significant period.”

Following the accident, for a four-year period, the family submitted medical reports to the United Nations. Their intention was to secure assistance with food supplies or medicine for her brother and father. “However, in an unexpected turn of events, the UN resettlement program contacted us, offering asylum in Spain,” she says.

On March 11th, 2024, Kawthar and her family arrived in Spain. They currently reside with a host

family and will transition to their own housing within six months. The Spanish government funds her language courses, facilitating her future education. Kawthar aims to pursue a career in accounting in the future.

“In Spain,” she concludes, “everyone is treated equally. Nationality is not a factor. Here, we feel we are treated with dignity and respect. For the first time, I feel valued as a human being.” Kawthar concludes that, “with this newfound security, I don’t consider returning to Syria, Lebanon, or any Arab country.”

KAREEM, A SYRIAN REFUGEE LIVING IN TRIPOLI, LEBANON

Kareem, a 21-year-old Syrian refugee who requested anonymity, sits down to talk with Executive over a Zoom call. He recalls a childhood shaped by the Syrian conflict. Though his village, Jeb Alis in the Aleppo countryside, remained relatively peaceful, his family fled to Lebanon in 2013 fearing the escalating violence.

“We came when I was ten,” Kareem says. Their family of six grew to seven with the birth of his sister in Lebanon.

Education, however, posed new challenges upon arrival in Tripoli. Kareem transitioned between three public schools, initially attending afternoon classes designed primarily for Syrian students. “The frequent changes were due to me adjusting to the Lebanese education system and curriculum,” Kareem explains. These afternoon classes offered a sense of familiarity with classmates who shared his experiences. “Having other Syrian students around made things a little easier at first,” he says. However, there were downsides. “The quality wasn’t high,” he says. “Teachers were often recent graduates with limited experience. Plus I missed out on core subjects like English and important electives like art, sports, and religion.”

One specific incident stands out in Kareem’s memory. “There was this class about citizenship rights,” Kareem recalls. “The teacher was explaining what rights people have, but then she said something strange. She said Lebanese people have all these rights in their country, while Syrians don’t because it’s not our home. I was upset – rights are for all regardless of nationality.”

In high school, Kareem secured a spot in the regular morning classes alongside Lebanese stu-

■ “Every day I had to work in the mornings in a mini market, attend class for four hours in the afternoon, then return to work at night”



dents. This transition marked a positive step. “The Lebanese students were welcoming, and I felt comfortable learning with them,” he says.

Kareem’s experience of balancing work and studies is a common reality for Syrian students whose families typically face significant economic pressures. A study on child labor among Syrian refugees in Lebanon conducted by researchers from the Faculty of Health Sciences (FHS) at AUB in 2019 found that 58 percent of Syrian refugee households live in extreme poverty, unable to access basic survival needs. This forces children like Kareem to contribute to the family income, often at the expense of their education.

“Every day, I had to work in the mornings in a mini market, attend classes for four hours in the afternoon, then return to work at night,” Kareem explains. “All my earnings went to my family to get food and live.”

Despite these challenges, Kareem persevered. He actively improved his language skills through extra efforts at home reading and studying English. After finishing high school, Kareem secured a place at the Southern New Hampshire University in Tripoli, where he is currently enrolled in his first year of business studies.

Kareem’s future hope lies in Europe. “The situation in Lebanon is worsening,” he observes. “Recent events in Jbeil [the murder of Pascal Sleiman] led to shop closures for many Syrians in Tripoli. While we haven’t faced personal issues yet, the fear is constant.” With relatives in France and America, Kareem hopes that joining them one day will open up better economic opportunities.

LAMIA, A SYRIAN REFUGEE IN AKKAR, LEBANON

“We were baking bread at home,” says Lamia, a 21-year-old Syrian refugee recalling memories of her life in Syria. “There was a huge shortage of flour,

sugar, and other essential food items that limited our options. Shops were closed, making daily life difficult.” In 2014, the conflict escalated in her neighborhood due to the siege on her hometown of Homs, and Lamia fled with her family at the age of 11.

Their arrival in Akkar, Lebanon, marked a new chapter for Lamia and her family. Initially, they shared a single home with relatives, effectively creating a three-family household with each occupying a single room. Lamia described these initial living conditions as “very difficult.” After two months, her father secured a separate residence, allowing them to establish a more permanent home for their family of seven.

“We registered with the United Nations,” Lamia recounts, “but there was no assistance for us as a family because they considered that my siblings being adults could work and spend.” Left without UN support, the family was forced to rely on their insufficient savings during this initial period.

Education also presented hurdles for Lamia. Upon arrival in Lebanon in 2014, she was enrolled in a Kuwaiti charitable school in Akkar specifically designed for Syrian students. She spent a full year there completing grade six, but the school’s certificates were not recognized by the Lebanese education system. Transitioning to a public school in Akkar for seventh grade, Lamia encountered bullying from classmates due to her accent. “The seventh grade was one of the most difficult grades for me,” Lamia recalls. “There were many days when I would come home crying and say that I would give up and not continue school because I didn’t understand the subjects and the language was very difficult for me, especially the French language. If it were not for my family’s support, I would have stopped studying.”

Following high school graduation, Lamia secured a full scholarship through the Lebanese Association for Scientific Research (LASeR) Spotlight Scholarship Program. This scholarship allowed her to enroll in online business administration studies at an American university.

Lack of Wi-Fi access at home meant that Lamia had to find creative ways to study online with the laptop provided by the association. “I went four days a week from Akkar to Tripoli [two hours of daily commuting] to access LASeR’s center for internet connectivity,” Lamia says. In her second year at the center, a teacher recognized her potential and offered her an online teaching opportunity as a pri-

■ “I am happy that I am studying and working but there is fear that we experience daily”

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vate instructor in mental accounting for a company based in the Emirates.

“I am happy that I am studying and working but there is fear we experience daily,” Lamia says. She described an unsettling experience that forced them to relocate within Akkar. “One year ago, we were living in a building with several floors,” Lamia recounts. “Our Lebanese neighbor on the first floor was getting annoyed by the sounds and the garbage [from the building’s residents]. He threatened us with weapons, and told us, ‘You want me to hurt one of you lightly until you learn?’” Lamia maintains her family wasn’t responsible for the disturbances.

According to Lamia, the tensions between Lebanese and Syrians that accelerated after the murder of Pascal Sleiman in Jbeil led to the closure of many Syrian-operated shops in Akkar. These tensions, along with struggles to file and update paperwork, cause concern for Lamia’s future. “My passport is not renewed and we don’t have residency,” she says. “These situations create anxieties as we look toward the future, with the possibility of my father or brother being detained or even all of us being deported.”

MOUSA, AN IRAQI LAW STUDENT SEEKING MEDICAL TREATMENT FOR HIS DAUGHTER

Mousa, an Iraqi national and father of two daughters, has been coming to Lebanon since 2012 for medical treatment for his eldest daughter, who has cerebral palsy. He initially made periodic visits but settled in Lebanon in 2018. This decision aimed to facilitate his daughter’s regular physical examinations and pursue a degree at the Islamic University of Lebanon, where he is currently a law student.

Mousa emphasizes his legal status in Lebanon. “I am not considered a refugee,” he clarifies. “I have a student residency permit and maintain a private business in trade back in Iraq. My primary reason for being in Lebanon is my daughter’s health. I re-

turn to Iraq every month or two for work and family vacations.”

Treatment costs in Lebanon are a significant concern for Mousa. While acknowledging the lack of specialized physical therapy centers in Iraq, he notes the higher expenses associated with treatment in Lebanon. “The situation was better when a dollar was equal to only 1,500 Lebanese pounds,” he says, referring to the Lebanese currency depreciation following the country’s economic crisis. The dramatic weakening of the Lebanese pound has significantly inflated the cost of treatment in Lebanon, creating a double challenge for Mousa where he is responsible to afford his daughter’s care while also paying for his studies at the Islamic University of Lebanon.

Mousa’s younger daughter attends school in Lebanon and is currently in the third grade. “While she’s definitely improved in her language skills,” Mousa says, “the annual tuition fee of \$3,500 creates financial strain for the family. This burden is particularly heavy considering the overall rise in living costs in Lebanon.” Mousa worries about his ability to continue affording his daughter’s education, especially with the potential for further tuition increases.

Despite not experiencing the continuous personal discrimination that many refugees speak of experiencing in Lebanon, Mousa perceives a difference in treatment based on his nationality. “While I haven’t faced issues in day-to-day interactions,” he says, “there are situations where my Iraqi background seems to affect how I’m treated.” He cites examples in healthcare, where he says costs can increase after he reveals his nationality; and in public security, due to the lengthy and often frustrating residency renewal processes.

“Last year,” Mousa recounts, “I submitted our residency papers for renewal in January. Despite expecting a one-month turnaround, I wasn’t able to receive the passports until August. This eight-month delay significantly hindered my travel to Iraq for work, creating disruptions to my business and impacting my ability to support my family.” The stressfulness of these bureaucratic hurdles make it difficult for Mousa to manage his life in Lebanon.

Mousa’s future plans remain uncertain. The availability of improved medical care for his daughter in Iraq is a compelling factor for return. Technological advancements and the establishment of

■ “I am not considered a refugee. I have a student residency permit and maintain a private business trade back in Iraq. My primary reason for being in Lebanon is my daughter’s health.”

specialized centers there offer hope for his daughter's continued progress. However, his educational pursuits in Lebanon complicate the decision for Mousa, who has invested time and effort into his law studies. Leaving before completion would, for him, represent a significant loss.

ALI, A PALESTINIAN REFUGEE UNIVERSITY STUDENT

"My grandfather came with a dream of returning to our land. But after all this time, even that dream feels out of reach." These are the words of Ali, a Palestinian refugee who has called a tent in Burj al-Barajneh camp his home since 1948, when his grandfather fled Palestine during its occupation.

Born in 2004, Ali benefitted from UNRWA schools and completed 12 years of education. With the help of the Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP) Bridge Program's SAT prep course, he secured a scholarship to AUB, LAU, and universities in Canada and Turkey.

While exciting, the scholarships still left a financial gap, like the Canadian one which covered only 70 percent of the expenses. Ali chose to pursue a nursing degree at AUB with additional assistance from the Palestinian Student Fund (PSF). In January 2024, after four semesters, Ali reluctantly transferred to Beirut Arab University (BAU) where the financial burden would be less strenuous.

Echoing the frustrations of many Palestinians in Lebanon, Ali pointed to the lack of basic rights for refugees. "We cannot find good job opportunities," he said. "There is no opportunity to open a private business. If we want to buy a house, we have to register it in the name of a Lebanese person we trust. It cannot be registered in our name."

Ali's decision to study nursing—a field facing a shortage in Lebanon—was strategic; he hopes the need for nurses will outweigh his refugee status. Ali currently earns income as an online private tutor to help cover his university fees. Alongside his work and studies, he also founded the FEKRA project, aiming to provide vital academic guidance and deliver online classes and SAT sessions to students in need and raise awareness around issues facing vulnerable communities.

Ali shared the emotional toll of the ongoing war in Palestine; "Palestinians like us are destined to endure oppression and injustice indefinitely." Ali explains that this sentiment arises from personal losses, including deaths of relatives and others with whom he's lost contact.



■ Ali painted a grim picture of his current camp - dangerous electrical wiring that often runs through accumulated rain-water and claims lives through electrocution

In order to travel outside of Lebanon or apply for a visa to a foreign country, Ali must first secure a Palestinian travel document from Lebanon. Refugees who are not registered with UNRWA can only be granted a document valid for one year, while those registered with both the General Directorate of Political Affairs and Refugees as well as with UNRWA can apply for a five-year travel document. Despite repeated visits to General Security and long waits of over 12 hours, Ali found himself caught in a bureaucratic maze, his paperwork repeatedly rejected without clear explanations. "Every time, officials questioned my education at AUB, mockingly asking 'Who pays for you? Do you speak English? Describe a situation in English,' and they laughed."

"Building a life here isn't possible," he says. His hope lies in a program offered by the PSF every two years, a chance for Palestinian nursing students to work in England. This opportunity is driven by a desperate need for safety. Ali painted a grim picture of his current camp - dangerous electrical wiring that often runs through accumulated rain-water and claims lives through electrocution, and a constant threat from loose weapons and thefts, often attributed to the influx of Syrian refugees. He concludes with a statistic highlighting the demographic shift: "Out of 50,000 residents, 35,000 are Syrians, leaving just 15,000 Palestinians. This situation needs control."

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ABU AHMED, A SYRIAN CONCIERGE IN VERDUN, BEIRUT

In the heart of Beirut's bustling Verdun district, sunlight streams through the entrance of a modern apartment building, illuminating the kind face of concierge Abu Ahmed. He greets each resident with a friendly word, a helping hand with groceries, or a quick fix for a squeaky door.

By 2010, life in Abu Ahmed's hometown of Al-Hasakah, Syria, had become a relentless struggle for Abu Ahmed. Juggling his duties in the Syrian army with long hours at a local sweets shop and private transport work, Abu Ahmed struggled to make ends meet. But it wasn't just the workload; simmering political tensions and frequent panic-inducing situations related to the impending conflict created a climate of fear and instability. Newly married with a young son, Abu Ahmed made the difficult decision to leave his family in Syria and build a more secure future for them in Lebanon.

The construction industry was booming in Lebanon, and Abu Ahmed found steady work in various Baabda workshops until finally landing a job as a concierge in Verdun in 2011. Despite the stability, Abu Ahmed still hoped to be reunited with his family.

In 2014, he embarked on a perilous 1200-kilometer journey back to Syria. Passing through Raqqa, then under ISIS control, he encountered hostile faces and a newly unfamiliar landscape. Recalling one encounter at the border, Abu Ahmed says, "When the foreign official was looking for my civil ID I gave it to him and asked him if I could

smoke a cigarette." What Abu Ahmed saw as a simple request was met with aggression. "He started screaming at me hysterically and threatened to cut off my head," Abu Ahmed says. "He kept repeating, 'You are a corrupt generation. You are a corrupt generation.'" In addition to the threats, the sounds of shelling nearby added to the raw fear. Witnessing this violence firsthand left no doubt - he had to get his family out of Syria.

"On the bus back to Lebanon," Abu Ahmed remembers, "strict rules were enforced." He says that women were segregated at the back, completely covered, adding, "My son didn't even recognize his mother because of the full blanket."

Since then, the dream of returning home has remained unfulfilled. In 2021, Abu Ahmed and his wife took their four children back to Syria, "to return to my country... forever." However, the reality on the ground was far from welcoming.

Kurdish control in his area presented a new set of challenges. "There was a fierce battle," he recounts. Schools, now under Kurdish control, offered a curriculum incompatible with his values. Overcrowding, constant clashes, and a sense of volatility made the situation untenable.

"I stayed there for only 28 days," he says. Lebanon, once viewed as a potential refuge, now felt like the only option.

The thought of escaping to Europe has crossed his mind, but the fear of losing his family at sea is a powerful deterrent. "All I can do now is focus on my children's education." He diligently teaches them foreign languages at an afternoon institute in hopes that these skills will one day pave the way for life in a European country where Abu Ahmed imagines a brighter future for them. "For me," he continues, "the dream remains - a return to a peaceful Syria, not as a transient visitor, but as a man rejoining his family, finally whole again. Lebanon has provided shelter, but here I'll always be an outsider," Abu Ahmed concludes. "The danger of being Syrian, it never truly leaves us."

HANAN, A PALESTINIAN MOTHER BORN IN SYRIA AND NOW A REFUGEE IN LEBANON

Hanan, her voice hushed, talks about the events that led her to Lebanon. Born in Syria's Yarmouk



camp, a Palestinian refugee by origin, she is no stranger to displacement and hardship. Yet, she says nothing prepared her for the horrors that unfolded in 2011-2012. "Every time [we heard a bombing] my little daughter asked me, 'Should we go to the shelter now?'" Hanan recalls.

Eventually, one fateful strike destroyed their entire home, leaving them with nothing but the clothes on their backs. Hanan, her husband, and their daughter, and some extended family members fled Syria in 2013, seeking refuge in Hanan's grandmother's house in Nabatiyeh, Lebanon. It was a desperate scramble for safety, and they were forced to share the cramped space with eight other families. Here, basic necessities were a luxury. Without electricity, the two light bulbs of the residence were powered by a single UPS. During the winter, the only source of heat came from a coal furnace that offered a small measure of comfort. Pregnant at the time, Hanan describes the anxiety that accompanied the physical discomfort, "I even slept with my hijab on because there were many men with us in one house," she whispers.

Hanan explains that with the help of Hezbollah, her family was able to secure a small apartment for \$350 a month. "Hezbollah gave us the rent for 3 months and they helped us with blankets to sleep on," Hanan says. Her husband and brother, determined to provide for their family, took on work as plumbers. "They worked day and night and were very tired for a very, very small amount of money that only brought basic foods," she says.

Lebanon's economic strain and social tensions fostered an environment of prejudice towards Syrians. Hanan says she faces constant verbal abuse, fearing to even walk the streets. This atmosphere of hostility extended to her daughter, whom Hanan says is ostracized by classmates at school.

The uncertainty surrounding her husband's fate adds another layer of anguish. In 2022, in a desperate attempt to build a better life for his family, Hanan's husband hired a smuggler to help him reach Germany. His first step was to reach Turkey, a common transit point for refugees seeking to reach Europe. From there, he connected with a smuggler, striking a deal for passage to Germany. When the smuggler demanded double the amount that was initially agreed upon at the Turkish border, Hanan's brothers—already in Germany—appealed to friends for help and managed to transfer the additional funds.

Upon reaching Greece, a key entry point for many refugees into Europe, Hanan's husband was apprehended by authorities. Detained and eventually returned to Turkey, he found himself trapped in

a cycle of repeated attempts and failures. His communication with Hanan during this time was sporadic. He tried various routes, but was ultimately captured again and transferred back to Idlib, Syria. "The last message I received from him was at the first of Ramadan [March 10th, 2024], that he is now in Idlib and do not call him on this number," she says. The lack of communication since then has left Hanan fearful and uncertain.

The toll of war and exile has been immense. "We are fighting death to get out of here," Hanan concludes.

NORMA, A SYRIAN STUDENT AT A PUBLIC SCHOOL IN VERDUN, BEIRUT

In the heart of Beirut lives Norma, a 17-year-old Syrian student with a determined spirit. Unlike most teenagers, her memories of Syria are gleaned from photographs and stories, not lived experiences. Born in Lebanon in 2007, just 20 days after her family arrived, Norma considers herself Lebanese in all but nationality. "We don't consider ourselves refugees," she clarifies, "We have residency, a sponsor, and legal papers. We visit Syria regularly, and no one bothers us."

Norma has fond recollections of her early school days at Shakib Arslan public school in Verdun, Beirut. She excelled academically, developed strong friendships, and was well regarded by teachers, and school

officials. For Norma, her Syrian background wasn't a barrier, but rather a facet of her identity. However, the 2019-2020 school year coincided with a period marked by a confluence of crises in Lebanon. The country was teetering on the brink of economic collapse, with widespread protests erupting in October 2019. Then, the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in early 2020 both exacerbated the spiraling economic situation and forced schools to transition to online learning. "It wasn't the same," Norma says.

Her dream of becoming a doctor, fueled by a desire to help others, faced a new obstacle – instability. Adding to the chaos, teacher strikes demanding better pay began in earnest in 2020. These strikes resulted in frequent school closures and a fractured curriculum, significantly impacting the learning experience for students like Norma. "These disruptions affected my grades," Norma explains, "as did my father's financial situation. A private medical

■ "For me, the dream remains - a return to a peaceful Syria, not as a transient visitor, but as a man rejoining his family, finally whole again."

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university is simply out of reach.”

Despite the setbacks, Norma remains undeterred. She’s set her sights on a new goal – pharmacy. “It’s less expensive,” she explains pragmatically, “and there’s a need for pharmacists in my hometown in Syria.” A flicker of hope lights up her eyes as she talks about the possibility of returning and contributing to her community.

Norma’s father, a symbol of resilience, embodies

the complex relationship between Syrian refugees and Lebanon. Despite the hardships, he resisted calls to register with the UN for potential resettlement in Europe. “He sees Lebanon as a second home,” Norma explains, “a place with shared Arab customs

and traditions.” He worries about raising his children in an unfamiliar cultural landscape.

Recent events in Jbeil, where tensions against Syrians flared up, have troubled Norma. “It upsets me,” she says with quiet conviction, “that one mistake by a Syrian makes people think all Syrians are bad. It’s wrong. Lebanon is home, and just like there are good Lebanese people, there are good Syrians too. We just want to live in peace and dignity.”

MAJIDA AL SHAHAB, A 22-YEAR-OLD SYRIAN REFUGEE UNIVERSITY STUDENT

“Lebanon, this multicultural country that allowed me to learn, gain experience, and network with others, is also the country that I’m planning to leave from because of difficult financial and societal reasons.” These are the conflicted words of Majida, a Syrian refugee whose story reflects the tightrope walk many refugees face in Lebanon.

Majida, originally from Deir al-Zuhur, Syria, once lived a normal life. Her father, burdened by a chronic back problem, managed to support their family of nine through agriculture. But the war tore their world apart. Their home was destroyed, and on top of the constant dangers, they faced additional threats due to her father’s past. In the 1990s,


he had spent time in Lebanon, and certain groups in their Syrian region now considered him an outsider. Fearing persecution, they fled to Lebanon in late 2012, leaving their homeland behind with no chance of return.

“When we first came to Lebanon,” Majida explains, “we were registered with the United Nations due to our need for income and protection. Initially, they provided us with a monthly stipend of around \$45 per family member. But this assistance has dwindled to the point where we no longer receive any support.”

Despite the hardships, Majida sought normalcy for herself and her family. She enrolled in public schools in Aainab, Mount Lebanon, where they lived, as these schools were practically free. However, her experience there was far from ideal. Majida faced racism from her classmates. They ostracized her, refusing to talk to her. This culminated in a disturbing incident during an exam. “When my classmates were cheating,” Majida recounted, “they threw their cheat sheets to me when they thought the teacher wasn’t looking. The teacher assumed I was the one cheating and punished me. My family had to intervene. This experience made me feel like a target, like they saw me as an easy mark.”

Majida says she responded by pouring herself into her studies, where she felt she could excel. She also actively participated in volunteer activities, telling Executive that her hope was that her accomplishments and dedication would bridge the gap with her classmates.

Majida’s high grades secured her an 80 percent scholarship to study medical lab sciences at the University of Balamand. Financial aid covered an additional ten percent, and to bridge the remaining gap, Majida works part-time at the university lab.

Despite her academic success, her future in Lebanon feels precarious. Unannounced raids on their home and recent events in Jbeil have heightened anxieties within the Syrian refugee community. Majida dreams of a stable future abroad, a job with a pension that allows her to support her family and eventually bring them to safety. “We condemn crime,” she says, “but not all Syrians should be punished.” Her story exemplifies the ongoing challenges faced by refugees in Lebanon, where even academic success can’t guarantee a sense of security. 

The interviews were originally conducted in Arabic.

■ “One mistake by a Syrian makes people think all Syrians are bad. It’s wrong. Lebanon is home, and just like there are good Lebanese people, there are good Syrians too.”

REFUGEES
PHOTO ESSAY

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WITH MUNZA IN THE BEKAA

■ BY JENNY GUSTAFSSON

DAILY LIFE BETWEEN A DISPLACED AND HOST COMMUNITY IN A BEKAA VILLAGE

Muzna Al Zohouri, a journalist and social activist from Al Qusayr in Syria, near the border with Hermel, came to Lebanon in June 2013, after losing many of her family members in the war.



The agricultural lands of the Bekaa, where work in the fields is done mostly by Syrians, often women and children.



It's a sunny day in the Bekaa, early enough in spring for the snow to remain on the highest mountains. The road cutting through the valley is busy with trucks, vans, and cars. Near Chtoura, a man next to a parked car calls out, "Sham, Sham." A small tuk tuk stops on the side of the road. Muzna Al Zohouri, a woman in her thirties, steps out.

Al Zohouri, a journalist and community expert on women and refugee issues from Al Qusayr in Syria, dedicates much of her time to social and volunteering activities, like supporting families and young people in the Bekaa.

"I always have a lot of things to do. But I like it, I like to be busy," Al Zohouri says.

This morning, she heads to an area in nearby Saadnayel where families from Syria live in tents and simple dwellings. The small road that leads there is lined with fields on both sides.

As soon as Al Zohouri arrives, she sees a woman she met in project during the pandemic.

"It's been such a long time, how are you?" she asks as they embrace.

There's also a woman who came from Syria with her daughter only a few days ago, to quickly see her husband who works in Cyprus. This is the only

■ They go to a field nearby, where a group of Lebanese and Syrians grow vegetables together. Each family has their own plot and decisions are taken together.

Jawahir and Safieh Al Assaf, both living near Saadnayel in the Bekaa, with the daughter of a family friend, on a plot of land planted collectively by a number of Lebanese and Syrian families.



chance for them to meet.

The women take out a saj and start preparing bread with homemade cheese and muhammara brought with the woman from Syria. Al Zohouri takes a seat next to the saj in order to catch the

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PHOTO ESSAY

Muzna Al Zohouri gets her photograph taken at the entrance of a home near Saadnayel.



A small boy on a bicycle on the road leading past the house where Muzna Al Zohouri lives in Manara in West Bekaa. Her neighbors are families from both Lebanon and Syria. "I like the calm here but when I want to socialize, I go to one of the camps."



bread before they burn. The women smile, saying that she would make a good baker.

Then, they go to a field nearby, where a group of Lebanese and Syrians grow vegetables together. Each family has their own plot and decisions are taken together.

"We are 14 families, some have left and new ones have joined," Safieh Al Assaf, one of the members, says.

She has been in Lebanon since the war in Syria started. But like many other Syrians, she first came to do seasonal work when she was a child.

"I remember walking into the field and the beetroot plants were taller than us," she says.

Syrians have long been a key component in Lebanon's agricultural economy, according to a 2019 BMJ Global Health study on Syrian displacement and labor in Lebanon, and in particular here in the Bekaa, where some 42 percent of the country's cultivated land is. A 2020 study published by the American University of Beirut and the Issam Fares Institute found that even before 2011, more than half of the agricultural workers here were Syrian.

Other fields, like construction, also depend on the

Syrian workforce. This began in earnest in the 1950s, when Lebanon grew as a regional financial hub and the Syrian countryside saw big population growth. Despite conflicts and periods of unrest in both countries, cross-border work migration continued.

When all members have arrived to the field, a small meeting starts. Money is collected to buy fuel for the water pump. Al Zohouri, when learning that one of the men is from Al Qusayr, sits down next to him to ask about common acquaintances.

After a cup of bitter coffee, she calls for a tuk tuk. The driver, also from Syria, soon arrives.

The small, three-wheeled vehicles have grown in number since the pandemic and the onset of the economic crisis. Many drivers are Syrian.

“Drivers either own their own tuk tuk or rent one, and pay a share to the owner,” Al Zohouri says.

Oftentimes, owners are Lebanese. Buying a new tuk tuk requires an investment of 2500-3000 dollars. Instead, drivers pay between 100 and 150 dollars per month in rent, depending on the condition of the tuk tuk. Compared to a car, the small vehicle can go much farther on a full tank – but at a slower speed, maximum 70 km/hr.

Al Zohouri spends a lot of money each month on transportation, she says. She lives in Manara, a small town half an hour’s drive from the main highway.

“Because of the work and activism I do, I must always go from place to place,” she says.

The driver takes her to Bar Elias, where the central market street is busy with shops. Relations between Lebanese and Syrians, as well as Palestinians, are good here according to Al Zohouri.

“Perhaps it’s the proximity to the border and a history of many intermarriages. We cannot generalize, but I always feel welcome in this area and I know many residents of different nationalities,” Al Zohouri says, speaking of the relatively harmonious relations she observes in many towns in the Bekaa.

She knocks on the door of a damp basement apartment, where a family she knows lives. Three of their children, now teenagers, have a rare disease that makes their health, including the ability to walk, deteriorate constantly.

Through different community-funded campaigns, Al Zohouri tries to help families like this.

■ Buying a new tuk tuk requires an investment of 2500-3000 dollars. Instead, drivers pay between 100-150 dollars in rent.



Children in a family Muzna Al Zohouri visits in Saadnayel holding up Syrian bills. Just like the Lebanese lira, the Syrian currency has collapsed in recent years.



On the way to a family in Bar Elias, Muzna Al Zohouri meets a woman she knows. They share a tuk tuk, the small taxi that has become increasingly popular in the Bekaa in recent years. Drivers either pick up passengers along the way or operate as private taxis.



Muzna Al Zohouri makes saj bread in the home of Safieh Al Assaf, a woman living near Saadnayel. They use a rural version of muhammara, which has aged goat cheese and zaatar mixed in with the tomato paste.

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PHOTO ESSAY



Vine leaves for sale in Bar Elias near the Masnaa border crossing between Lebanon and Syria. The centre of town has many small shops and street vendors and is a popular place to shop for Syrians and Lebanese in the area.

She relies on people's donations.

"I always say that a tiny bit goes far if many contribute," she says.

Sometimes, it's shop owners that give low prices or donate products. Like campaigns she did during Ramadan, where children got to pick out new outfits in different stores. Or it's a person – often a Syrian individual who managed to leave and build a life elsewhere – contacting her to donate a sum of money.

"I have spent a lot of time doing these things, so I have a network and people know me," Al Zohouri says.

She goes back to the tuk tuk driver, who is waiting for her. On the way back home to Manara, she takes out her phone and adds a person to a What-



■ "Perhaps its the close proximity to the border and a history of mixed marriages. We cannot generalize, but I always feel welcome in this area and I know many residents of different nationalities"

One of Muzna Al Zohouri's aunts, Siham Motawa, who lives in a small tent in the Bekaa, looks out of her window. There's a tree with janarek, sour green plums, growing outside.

Muzna Al Zohouri visiting one of her aunts, Siham Motawa, in the small but carefully decorated tent where she lives with her daughters.



■ Through different community-funded campaigns, Al Zohouri tries to help families like this. She relies on people's donations. Sometimes, it's shop owners that give low prices or donate products.

Khodr Al Harfouche, a man from Al Qusayr, the same town as Muzna Al Zohouri. He now lives in Saadnayel where he grows vegetables on a plot of land collectively managed by Lebanese and Syrian farmers. The group only uses organic methods and local seeds.



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PHOTO ESSAY




A boy biking past a house and a group of tents in the Bekaa, just off the main road near by Bar Elias. More than a decade after their arrival from Syria, many Syrian families continue to live in tents near Lebanese towns and villages.



A wall painting in Qabb Elias in the Bekaa. Syrians have been a key workforce in the valley for decades, above all in agriculture and construction. Following the end of the civil war in 1990, some 20-40 percent of the total labour force in Lebanon was Syrian, according to a 2020 Lebanese American University study.

sApp group. It's the grandchild of the man from Al Qusayr, who asked her about study opportunities.

"I don't know anything right now, but I will add her to a group where we share grants and scholarships. Hopefully something will come up," Al Zohouri says. 

Jenny Gustafsson is a freelance writer and journalist, and the co-founder of Mashallah News and Switch Perspective

Refugee Economics 101

■ BY THOMAS SCHELLEN



LIES ABOUT REFUGEES AND THE MISPERCEPTIONS OF MIGRANT ECONOMICS

It is another summer of conflict and despair in the Eastern Mediterranean region, which is to say that a sad saga of displacements, deprivation, and humanitarian aid dependency of an estimated 12 to 14 million people, in overwhelming majority of Syrian origin, now meanders through its 13th annual chapter.

Having started in Arab Spring days of 2011-12, the saga has two intertwined plot lines, the first being one of international humanitarian aid, insufficient burden sharing, and political self-interest dressed up as – or in the friendliest interpretation mixed with – high-brow moral imperialism. The second plot line in the 13-year running serial tragedy is one of political cronyism and obstructionism, ever-decreasing structural reform prospects, and existential uncertainty of millions across the region, regardless of their national belonging or statuses under international law.

The first plot line dominates in international conferences and the second rules regional public squares in the Middle East. Both parts of the narrative share a deficit in real economic perspectives. Common to both plot lines is also the increasing realization that a combination of a cataclysmic institutional cleansing and unprogrammable upside reform shocks in the region's economies is the only option for bringing the entire saga to a not-too-unhappy close.

THE INTERNATIONAL PLOY

The search for funding is a crucial element of the Syrian drama's international plot line that is mainly written in Europe. At the end of May, EU administrators of foreign affairs and crisis management once again gather together ministerial representatives and civil society members from a handful of Mashreq countries to an annual crisis ritual of political futility and catastrophic numbers.

The 8th Brussels Conference in Support of Syria and the region results in reiterative statements (live-streamed and recorded), promises of undying dedication, partial fact sheets, and a €7.5 billion commitment by the donor community to support populations in Syria and neighboring countries.

After the conference, international donors' new commitment to the embattled region amounts to €5 billion in grants and €2.5 billion in concessional loans for 2024 and beyond, according to European Commissioner for Crisis Management Janez Lenarčič. The pledged grants include €2.12 billion in EU support for 2024 and 2025.

As Lenarčič elaborates in his concluding remarks to conference participants, three fourths of the grant pledges came from the EU and its member countries: €3.9 billion for this year and €1.2 billion for 2025 and beyond. A press release adds, in a standard expression of political EU correctness, that this assistance would support Syrians inside Syria and in neighboring countries, as well as their host communities in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq.

While one can analyze and dissect the numbers of humanitarian aid to countries in the Middle East under a large number of ideological and political approaches, one thing that cannot be derived from such scrutiny – or from remarks uttered at the Brussels conference or smaller-scale crisis meets – is that the efforts are closing the inequality gaps within regional countries or are narrowing these gaps between crisis-hit MENA countries and OECD countries even by a single percentage point.

To the contrary, numerous delegate remarks in Brussels this year corroborate that pledges a) have been trending downwards and b) neither are nor have ever been matching the needs. The data cited in press releases of the Brussels conference out-

comes since 2017 tell the same story.

From the perspective of economy and sustainability, the financing story's main characteristics – and chiefly disheartening aspects – thus are decreases in funding but even more so the dearth of progress towards any economically viable outcome. EU official Lenarčič admits to “immense frustration” because, as he says in his keynote, over the past 13 years of the Syrian refugee and internal displacement crisis, “every year the situation worsens and little progress is made towards finding solutions.”

THE REGIONAL ANGLE: UNIVERSAL INSUFFICIENCY

Read from the, albeit greatly varying, local perspectives in the affected five East Med countries, the saga is today a drama of threefold insufficiency of international support, solidarity and respect. Insufficiency first in provision of viable support to an estimated 7.2 million internally displaced persons (IDPs) in Syria and secondly, insufficiency in provision of humanitarian aid to approximately 6.5 million externally displaced persons (DPs) in four other sovereign states directly neighboring Syria. Thirdly, and very severely, regional opinion makers bemoan the insufficiency of international “burden sharing” with those four states.

Burden sharing is a concept that is today often referred to in climate risk discussions but is historically associated with the defense strategies of the transatlantic alliance. In humanitarian context it is the catch phrase for equitably distributing the cost of hosting forcibly displaced persons in the areas where people flee to: up to 90 percent of people forced from their villages and towns by whatever catastrophe flee to places where they have relatives or similar support networks, and thus become IDPs in their own country or refugees in countries nearest to their homes. This phenomenon is one of universal human behavior and requires burden sharing by the affluent countries that benefit greatly when refugees shelter comfortably far from their borders.

WIDER RAMIFICATIONS

In this sense of analyzing the reach of catastrophes, one might compare the social and economic shock waves of a war, internal conflict, or huge disaster to the blast wave from an explosion (which the denizens of the Beirut conurbation in Lebanon have become involuntary experts on). Such a blast wave rapidly and near instantaneously travels outwards from its “ground zero” at first and subsequently causes, albeit gradually weakening, disruptions in a wide radius.


Taking this lesson to heart, at stake in the violent drama of Syria are not only the survival and minimal

wellbeing of internally and externally displaced human populations in and around Syria. At stake are also the economic fates of directly – as host communities – and indirectly impacted populations in the aforementioned nearby countries, and ultimately also in countries far beyond.

The indirect regional impact of the unmitigated Syrian disaster is today such that citizens in surrounding states are experiencing cumulative economic and social pressures from minor to massive degrees. This exacerbates the urgency of shoring up political reforms and economic resilience in countries with an approximate total inhabitant count of 172 million persons (by population from largest to smallest: Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon), which is roughly equal to the combined populations of Germany, France, Belgium, Denmark, and Luxembourg in Europe.

Lastly, there is a critical but neigh unanswerable question: what is at stake for the world if one sees global uncertainties beyond the sensationalized role of scapegoats that refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers have been playing in physical beer garden debates and televised political rhetoric in Europe since the days of the European Economic Community (to which, in the debates on Syrian refugees, the marvels of internet communication technology have added troll-infested online forums)?

The economic and social peace of the European Union has been shored up and defended throughout the bloc's short history by shielding its common market and high living standard with political and economic means. Could this status quo at some point be materially disrupted to the point of being fundamentally disrupted by a unprepared-for refugee scenario?

It somehow stands to reason that in a globalized world with a population that has doubled from 4 to 8 billion in the past 50 years and that is today experiencing unprecedented mobility of information and knowledge, of financial and human capital, of services, relationships, and cultures – with equally unprecedented, interconnected risks from pandemics to financial contagions and systemic breakdowns – new and different coping strategies and contingency plans for human catastrophes are needed. 

■ The indirect regional impact of the unmitigated Syrian disaster is today such that citizens in surrounding states are experiencing cumulative economic and social pressures

REFUGEES
ANALYSIS

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Refugee Economics 201

■ BY THOMAS SCHELLEN



LEBANON'S INTERCONNECTED LOT

Mental planning exercises for a more difficult world may be appropriate for G7 countries or risk summits at the World Economic Forum.

Countries in the Middle East crisis region are already experiencing what it means to be exposed to active existential threats. For Lebanon, the recent Brussels gathering of European bureaucrats, representatives of the concerned Arab governments, and Middle Eastern civil society stakeholders means many nice wishes, reiteration of the call for political solution in Lebanon as well as Syria, plus some underwhelming financial support numbers.

A Lebanon fact sheet published on the European External Action Service (EEAS) website in conjunction with press material after the Brussels meet says that pledges from the EU and member states to displaced Syrians and host communities in Lebanon have risen to a cumulative tally of €3.14 billion for the past 13 years. As fact sheets also re-

veal that out of €33 billion provided by the EU and its member states in response to the many-tiered, multi-country Syria crisis since 2011, this means around 9 percent of the cited EU crisis responses have been dedicated to Lebanon.

Related EEAS fact sheets for Syria, Jordan, and Turkey disclose amounts of €2.3 billion EU assistance inside Syria, €4 billion in Jordan, and €10 billion in Turkey. From Lebanese citizens' perspective, these numbers almost must be interpreted as both underwhelming and unfair when the stated EU support amounts are considered against the humanitarian needs in the four countries.

For example, the Turkey fact sheet cites 2.7 and ca. 2 million refugees in the country as benefiting respectively from protection services and cash transfers for basic needs, presumably as part of EU humanitarian assistance at €3.6 billion value since 2011. Contrastingly, the fact sheet on humanitar-

ian assistance delivered to Lebanon's people in need – “vulnerable Lebanese and refugees from Syria” – mentions ca. 1 million beneficiaries from protection and social cohesion related services and 1.1 million that received livelihood support. Yet, the overall value of EU humanitarian assistance to Lebanon is cited as €867 million, seemingly indicating that just over 24 percent of the humanitarian assistance given to those sheltering in Turkey was allocated to Lebanon's targeted people in need.

THE STRICTLY LOCAL ANGLE: MISSING ELEMENTS AND CONTRADICTIONS

The numbers leave room for further questions from noting that the amounts in four EEAS fact sheets on Syria, Jordan, Turkey, and Lebanon are not summing up to the cited €33 billion value of the EU's and member countries' aggregate support from 2011 to date. This discrepancy can certainly be explained in more careful accounting of delivered EU assistance than is offered in flashy one-page infographics. However, it draws attention to a larger dichotomy: Numbers on the international assistance to the country are simultaneously convoluted and underwhelming.

In addition to being underwhelming under the aforementioned mandate of burden sharing, donor contributions to Lebanon, as to Syria and Iraq, are over all of the last 13 years decidedly lacking in relation to the humanitarian and development needs that exist. Yet at the same time, messages sent in response to regional aid appeals have been contradictory as both donor determination and humanitarian needs have been habitually overemphasized in strategic and crisis response plans by whatever international agency/agencies under whatever name.

The futility of this communication strategy is glaringly reflected in the growing gaps between initial asks and provided funding for humanitarian and development purposes. Initial asks for funding of needs in Lebanon under the Regional Refugee & Resilience (3RP) and Lebanon Crisis Response (LCRP) plans rose from \$1.7 billion in 2013 to \$3.4 billion in 2022 (and \$3.6 billion in 2023) but the coverage ratio which had vacillated above 45 percent and peaked at 54 percent in 2015 and 2020, dropped below 40 percent in 2021 and 22.

Data for the first quarter in 2024, under the new label of a consolidated Lebanon Response Plan (LRP) in place of the previous LCRP and locally focused, “strictly humanitarian” Emergency Response Plan (ERP) show that a total ask of \$2.7 billion received 10 percent new funding between Jan 1 and March 31 of this year.

The absence of reforms and macroeconomic success in the regional crisis and its constituent countries raises doubts if lower aid commitments are merely expressions of donor fatigue and tighter budgets in more challenging times. But irrespective of reasons and the absence of new and compelling donor-funded regional and national development strategies that would explain the changes of crisis response plans, the fact to note most is how the lack of regional initiatives and governmental reforms matches or rather exceeds any issue that one can have with the international donor community.

BAD ARGUMENTS, MORE MISSING ELEMENTS, AND MORE CONTRADICTIONS

International burden sharing is essential for Lebanon's recovery from its economic crisis. Accounting for costs of sheltering refugees on the Lebanese side of the equation, which would help in constructing a clearer path of economic recovery, however, has been a missing element of the equation on the Lebanese side.

Moreover, instead of making genuine societal efforts at drawing up a balance sheet of the complex profit and loss with nuanced accounting of divergent factors in the economy of the crisis-embattled country, national stakeholders on all sides of the debate on displacement and Syrian refugee impacts have only instrumentalized unverified headline cost numbers of hosting refugees. This rhetoric, while present since the start of the refugee influx and spiking several times at different times in the intervening years, has in 2024 escalated into what many foreign observers have judged to be attempts of refugee scapegoating and demonization. It is juxtaposed with unmet economic opportunities.

Lebanon's two arguably most critical areas of socioeconomic development since the start of post-conflict reconstruction and development in the 1990s under the stewardship of Rafiq Hariri were healthcare and education. Both have seen attempts of public-private sector collaboration as well as several decades of growth of private sector educational and medical services industries with significant regional expansion potentials.

■ Instead of making genuine societal efforts at drawing up a balance sheet of the complex profit and loss, national stakeholders on all sides of the debate on displacement and Syrian refugee impacts have only instrumentalized unverified headline cost numbers

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■ It is not something that is caused by hosting Syrian refugees or can be remedied by international agencies but only by the structural and legal reforms that are the duty of the Lebanese state



In the context of politicized debates over provision of medical and educational services to displaced Syrians, however, angles of economic performance and opportunity were left unexplored and replaced with counterproductive and contradictory approaches.

90 PERCENT FOR THEM, ZERO FOR US?

An example for an often-heard but factually incorrect and economically and socially deeply coun-

terproductive non-argument in the healthcare file of the Syrian presence is has been in the time of the Lebanese economic crisis that UN agencies cover “90 percent” of hospital treatment costs of Syrian mothers in delivery rooms. It is a claim that is not infrequently laced with sentiments of fear over high birthrates among displaced the displaced Syrian population in the country. Reports say 350,000 children have been born to Syrian mothers in Lebanon since 2011, with some seeming to think that having babies while living as a refugee was a purpose of moving to Lebanon.

The widespread popular assumption of 90 percent medical cost coverage for a delivery by a refugee woman is factually incorrect, UNHCR resident Ivo Freijssen tells Executive with view to the increasingly severe financial limitations faced by UN agencies that also curtail medical coverage. He explains that “an increasingly small group of Syrian refugees are getting a level of compensation on very serious conditions” but that regular 90 percent coverage of costs associated with a child delivery “has never been correct, has not been valid often, and is definitely no longer valid now”. (see interview)

Emotive criticism of the alleged comfortable medical coverage of Syrian women in childbirth is a meme of comparison whose second half argues that Lebanese mothers cannot benefit from such fundamental assistance. This, however, makes the meme politically and socially explosive but at the same time socially and economically counterproductive.

While lack of coverage for prenatal, natal, and postnatal medical needs of Lebanese women is a glaring failure, it is a failure of the Lebanese healthcare system. This failure’s origin can be traced to legislative decision and design flaws in social safety provisions that have perilous healthcare impacts combined with the financial exhaustion of the National Social Security Fund NSSF by the depreciation of the national currency.

It is not something that is caused by the hosting of Syrian refugees or can be remedied by the international agencies but only by the, decades overdue, structural and legal reforms that are the duty of the Lebanese state.

From economic and social analysis of this problem, it needs to be added here that some of the most noteworthy impulses of reform in the healthcare system are attributable to the improvements in primary healthcare. And these improvements, which

began with a wave of capacity building and expansion of primary healthcare centers (PHC) in the early 2010s are causally and operationally linked to the work of charities that initially responded to the needs of Syrian refugees. Consulted to high degrees by displaced Syrians until the late 2010s, today the PHC network is the go-to provider to Lebanese citizens of all backgrounds, serving their needs on daily basis and thereby paving a viable way towards better and more efficient healthcare.

Finally, in financial terms, it has to be acknowledged that the payments of refugee medical bills and general subsidies to hospitals – from fuel for generators to donations of medical drugs and vaccines – by international agencies have added value to the Lebanese healthcare economy. In the economic crisis, agencies' emergency financial support to hospitals "was a lifeline", as Freijisen mentions.

Moreover, if even a very simple mental accounting of the economic impacts of payments for any medical procedures and care for refugees by UNHCR and other agencies is undertaken, it will be clear that this money behaved mostly agnostically (as money is wont to do). It entered the pockets of Lebanese health workers, maintenance and administration staff, suppliers, and providers of external services from taxi drivers to PR consultants. Not leveraging the role and capacities of Lebanese hospitals in refugee medical care is, in economic sense, a missed opportunity.

EDUCATION FOR RETURN OR STAGE SETTING FOR NEW TROUBLES?

In education, controversies over schooling of Syrian children have erupted as far back as 2012 and 13. According to Carlos Naffah, education expert and author of a new book on the refugee crisis, the schooling dilemma developed over four phases. In the buildup of refugee numbers up until 2014, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education neglected preparing for an increase in student numbers and the need to teach them the curricula and knowledge that would enable their life in Syria after an eventual return.

Then, however, as decisions on teaching the Lebanese curriculum were taken against international advice, Naffah sees the system as moving from unpreparedness in the first phase to inefficiency in the second between 2014 and 19. This was followed by pandemic-related non-performance in the third from 2020 to 23. As an example of the system's weakness, he tells Executive that only 1 percent of the Syrian student generation entering the Lebanese school system in 2013 were able to meet



■ It has to be acknowledged that the payments of refugee medical bills and general subsidies to hospitals by international agencies have added value to the Lebanese healthcare economy

10th grade attendance requirements after 2019, in the third phase of the schooling drama.

According to Naffah, UNICEF and international agencies paid \$1.1 billion for education of refugee students but the funds were not deployed intelligently and were unable to build sustainable education pathways or instigate overdue systemic reforms. More importantly, however, the opportunity was missed for the Lebanese and for the Syrian stakeholders.

Firstly, the imposition of the Lebanese curriculum was a contradiction to the declared intent of seeing young Syrians return to their country as quickly as possible. "If you are really respecting the right of return of refugees, you will do whatever you can to help them keep their identity. What we did was use the policy of integration [while] we are talking on television against integration," he says.

It was also an operational misjudgment that contributed to high seasonal dropout rates, extremely low educational attainment, and juvenile delinquency, he adds: "The result is that we have more frustrated Syrians who are not anymore Syrian by culture but were unable to become Lebanese by identity and political rights. I name them as lost generation and in my opinion are the ingredients of future crises." ■

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Refugee Migrantonomics 301

■ BY THOMAS SCHELLEN



THE MACROECONOMIC VECTORS

These examples from Migrantonomics 201 are just seeking to illustrate the pointlessness of uneconomic rants where combative but uncertain data, meaning data referenced without clear identification of their sources and research methodologies, have been put forth heavily in recent argumentation against the continued presence of displaced Syrians in Lebanon.

Whether one considers these combative data to be politicized or not, the main problem is not that such data are used as tools in debates without the fact checking that should be undertaken by media and decision makers that quote them. The bigger problem is the existence of multiple barriers preventing the compilation of timely and verifiable data that needed to both develop economic solutions and create trust so that the insights the data provide are actually translated into actionable concepts and projects of adequate scale.

It is self-explanatory that the actual costs of sheltering displaced people in Lebanon has to be assessed accurately not only for the purpose of requesting more and better-targeted burden sharing from the international partners but also for developing salient and actionable economic projects out of local initiative.

For being useful in economic planning in Lebanese attempts of rebuilding the nation, however, the problem of even approximately assessing the costs of the refugee crisis is made extra difficult by at least five barriers, the first three of which informed or created the other two:

1. The lack of data
2. Long-standing distortive impact of Lebanese policies and politics
3. Changes in the economy and hosting cost equation over the past 13 years
4. Contradictions of refugee policies and rhetoric

THE COMPLEX DOMESTIC RISK MATRIX BENEATH LEBANON'S REFUGEE CRISIS

1) Deficient data

The lack of data is endemic to Lebanon and extends from basic population and census data to data on migrant labor and displaced Syrians. As far as state capacity, the lack of data is broadly reflected in tax compliance gaps and economic informality (all informal employment in Lebanon has recently been estimated by the World Bank at 65 percent in 2022/23, up from 52 percent for 2018/19). Furthermore, it sabotages macroeconomic planning. In the specificity of the displacement crisis, economic modeling of refugee impacts on the economy is unreliable in absence of basic data.

2) Ill-advised policies

State interventions into markets and untargeted provision of subsidies have not been able to improve social equity and social mobility. Economic effects of subsidies on fuel and electricity ranged from support of wasteful behaviors to non-adoption of advanced technologies. Data on migrant labor and interconnections of Syrian and Lebanese economies was not

researched to the required depth if initial survey numbers were politically undesirable. As inflows of refugees surged, their tapping into subsidies was heavily criticized but the real culprits were the underlying policies.

3) Disruptions of the economy

Numerous disruptive events impacted the Lebanese economy. In the buildup phase of the crisis period of the 2010s, internal Syrian warfare was a cause of reduced Lebanese GDP growth and underperformance versus economic potential. This detrimental impact was in public perceptions soon overshadowed by the Syrian refugee inflows. But as economist Khalil Gebara maintains, Syria's internal warfare and involvement of Hezbollah therein continued to have negative impacts on Lebanon GDP beyond the abatement of fighting in Syria. Homegrown political crises – parliamentary and presidential vacuums – eroded governmental maneuverability and popular trust in the state. The state's ability to respond to economic challenges with reforms and policy innovation was further weakened. Geopolitical and regional

turbulences and international financial shifts in mid 2010s affected Lebanon and piled further risks on the already risky unconventional finance measures that Banque du Liban undertook in 2016.

From autumn of 2019, as the liquidity crisis triggered destruction of financial trust and currency values, the systemic meltdown of the economy impacted the country in ways that are incomparably more severe than the Syrian displacement crisis. It seems unclear how the depreciation of the Lebanese currency changed the cost of hosting refugees in hard-currency terms or how much the international donor funding of Syrian refugee needs contributed to the sustenance of Lebanon between 2020 and 2022. How to quantify the role of the displacement crisis in its positive and negative impacts on the Lebanese economy when comparing the four years of 2020 to 2023 with 2015 to 2018? "That is a great question. All I can tell you is that the cost of the financial crisis is much higher than the cost of the whole displacement," says Gebara.

versus de-facto reliance on cheap Syrian labor

5. The need to account for the refugee economy holistically, which requires tabulation of positive and negative economic impacts, not just assumed headline cost factors.

LOOK: A STRATEGIC ECONOMIC SOLUTION

Separating fake and useless numbers from those that can be leveraged into salient economic planning is a mission that this dip into the material cannot attempt. Against the missing strategic approach to improving the economics of the Lebanese crisis situation, one remedial action is to accept that the numbers on international support deserve to be examined from multiple sectoral angles and under

consideration of aggregate demand. Even – or especially – if they are not in support of the hitherto practiced refugee economics and established narrative.

Instructively for the Syrian displacement and refugee debate, a new World Bank poverty survey notes that growing involvement of Lebanese workers with low-skilled jobs in the economic meltdown was "partly due to a shrinking pool of better-paying skilled jobs" but notably did not reflect the demographic surge due to arrivals of Syrian refugees. "Segmented labor markets for the most part, mitigated the impact of this demographic surge on labor market outcomes for the Lebanese," the survey report and press statement mentions in passing.

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■ For an economic solution, Lebanon's inflows of international aid deserve examination in relation to the national financial commitments and development of productivity in the refugee economy that have been undertaken by public and private stakeholders in Lebanon

Corresponding to the survey findings that labor market participation rates by Lebanese citizens weren't impacted negatively by the influx of Syrian refugees in the 2010s but only by the Lebanese economic meltdown after 2019, a research report by three Lebanese and one Oxford-based academic did not detect a direct impact of refugees on GDP.

The report, issued in September 2021 by London-based NGO World Refugee & Migration Council (WRMC), concludes that "the arrival of refugees has placed pressure on infrastructure, housing prices (in some areas) and livelihoods. However, at the macro level, the economy's downturn is not caused by the arrival of the refugees."

Using a vector auto-regressive (VAR) statistical analysis model, the WRMC researchers gauged impacts of Syrian refugee numbers on key economic indicators, namely growth, labor markets, imports, exports, inflation, received funding, and electricity generation. Detecting no causal relations between refugee numbers and examined economic variables (testing for what is known as Granger causality), the results of their scientific research "affirm that no relationship exists between the number of refugees and the growth of the Lebanese economy," the academics say. They add that this finding, while the

exact opposite of widely held perceptions, is reinforced by the fact that the country's economic performance was problem-ridden and generally performing below potential already in the two decades before the arrival of Syrian refugees.

Earlier research by UNDP explains that during the refugee crisis' first phase, aid inflow generated benefits at a multiplier of 1.6 for every dollar provided, with 14 percent of aid being expended on salaries and the like to local agency staff and other funding contributing to sectors such as retail, housing, and pharmaceuticals. Notably, the UNDP report, published in 2015, was never followed up with a second part announced at the time.

All this material supports the idea that for an economic solution, Lebanon's inflows of international aid deserve examination in relation to the national financial commitments and development of productivity in the refugee economy that have been undertaken by the country's public and private stakeholders.

While the burdens to the country, such as direct costs to stressed infrastructures and environmental damages, are undeniable, the total amount of aid that entered Lebanon – and consequently its economy, irrespective of the status and identity of



aid recipients – between 2011 and 2022 is cited as \$12.39 billion in the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) of 2023. The timeline of aid grants shows that, after initially low funding asks and inflows in 2011 and 12, annual flows of donor funds for the next ten years of 2013 to 22 ranged between \$1 and 1.45 billion annually.

Given such funding levels since 2011, actual coverage of the cost of hosting DPs in Lebanon can be broadly estimated at 80 percent “over the past years,” Khalil Gebara, professor of economics at the Lebanese American University, writes in a recent position paper.

He calculated this ratio on basis of numbers published in the LCRP. “You see [in the LCRP] what donors are spending their money on. You see that they are covering all of the human issues of Syrian refugees like food and shelter and protection. What you do not see covered are expenses related to infrastructure, which leaves things such as electricity and water. That is how I reached the conclusion,” Gebara tells Executive.

Both Gebara and education expert Carlos Naffah, who likewise recently authored a position paper on the Syrian displaced persons crisis in Lebanon, refer to media reports that put the annual cost of hosting the displaced at between almost \$1.5 and \$1.7 billion.

The primary sources of the cited annual cost range are said to be within a yet to be released World Bank paper and several media reports quoted Ferid Belhaj, World Bank Vice President for Middle East and North Africa, for the \$1.5 billion cost assessment. The number may be deserving further investigation (let’s not talk about the IMF’s 2016 Article IV staff report here) but appears as a much more

plausible one when compared with alleged refugee hosting costs to Lebanon that amounted to more than \$50 billion over 13 years.

As a working hypothesis, it seems reasonable to insist on increased burden sharing after having compiled macroeconomic insights into the local refugee and migrant economies into a actionable plan that combines international financial inflows – which Lebanon has unrivaled expertise on – with programs of expense rationalization and better cost efficiencies, in addition to fostering the activation of new economic opportunities created by the demands of safely more than one million people, including 350,000 children under 12. Call it advanced migrantonomics.

To repeat: correlating the need for a macroeconomic solution for Lebanon’s economic challenges that includes a sustainable answer to the displaced persons problem with the need for a regional refugee solution and a economic answer to the nexus of politico-humanitarian economics, self-interested and exploitative migrant economics, and minimal-sustenance refugee economics, that is challenging decision makers and economic strategies in all parts of the world, suggests that solutions for this global challenge can be studied in in Lebanon. ■

■ The timeline of aid grants shows that, after initially low funding asks and inflows in 2011 and 12, annual flows of donor funds for the next ten years of 2013 to 22 ranged between \$1 and 1.45 billion annually

Lost cause or redeemable opportunity?

■ BY CARLOS NAFFAH



LEBANON AT A CROSSROAD

Lebanon has been profoundly impacted by the influx of Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war in 2011. With about 2 million Syrian refugees according to government estimates, Lebanon is home to one of the largest refugee populations globally. This massive influx has strained Lebanon's already fragile economy and infrastructure, creating significant challenges in integrating these refugees into the country's economic fabric. However, it's crucial to recognize that Syrian refugees also present potential economic opportunities, particularly through their labor, which, if harnessed effectively, could contribute significantly to the Lebanese economy.

The sudden and substantial increase in popu-

lation, mostly since 2013, has placed an enormous strain on Lebanon's public services and infrastructure with the healthcare and education systems bearing the brunt of this pressure. The surge in students between the ages of 6 and 15 has, from 2014 until now, led to overcrowded classrooms, schools operating on double shifts, a decrease in the quality of education, and a strain on the student-teacher ratio. Similarly, the healthcare system has been overwhelmed, resulting in longer waiting times, a decline in the quality of care, and a strain on medical resources. The World Bank estimates that between 2012 and 2014, Lebanon incurred between \$308 million and \$340 million in costs for healthcare, education and social safety nets, and \$589 million

for infrastructure, underscoring the urgent need for support and investment. The increased pressure on public services has also exacerbated infrastructure challenges, such as inadequate power and water supplies and waste management systems, further deteriorating living conditions for refugees and host communities.

EXPANSION OF THE INFORMAL ECONOMY

The informal economy refers to economic activities that are not regulated by the government and do not contribute to the official GDP. Many Syrian refugees lack legal work permits, especially because the Ministry of Labor only allows Syrian nationals to work in three sectors that are unappealing for most locals: agriculture, construction, and cleaning. This pushes them to work in the informal economy, which is characterized by low wages, poor working conditions, and no social protection. The informal sector, at estimates of 30 to 40 percent of all economic activity and already an obstacle to sustainable economic growth, has by some unconfirmed estimates doubled and become more crowded to the disadvantage of all who compete for jobs in this segment.

Duly registered enterprises, who have to contend with increasing tax burdens and other competitive disadvantages, say that growth of the informal economy hinders the performance of formal businesses by creating unfair competition. This can lead to a decline in formal business activity and a loss of tax revenue. The lack of oversight in the informal sector also makes it difficult to protect workers' rights, leading to exploitation and abuse.

The integration of Syrian refugees in the informal economy has increased social tensions and economic disparities. Lebanese citizens, especially those living in poorer communities, often view refugees as competitors for limited resources and employment opportunities. This perception has fueled social tensions and resentment towards refugees, complicating efforts to integrate them economically and socially, especially since around 1.5 million refugees receive humanitarian assistance from international agencies. Although an almost equal number of needy Lebanese also benefit from various forms of donor support, displaced Syrian recipients who simultaneously work in the informal economy are seen as having a competitive edge over poor Lebanese.

The social explosivity of the situation has been underlined by a recent World Bank survey, which found "a significant increase in monetary pover-

ty from 12 percent in 2012 to 44 percent in 2022 across surveyed areas", namely five Lebanese governorates. The fact that one third of Lebanese are living below a revised poverty line and have frequently been forced by the economic crisis to take on lower paying, low-skilled work, exacerbates the competition for the same informal jobs with Syrian workers whose families live up to 90 percent under the 2022 poverty line.

This has resulted in incidents of discrimination and hatred against refugees, especially in the poorest areas, creating an atmosphere of hostility that hinders the ability of refugees to integrate economically and socially. Efforts to address these social tensions have been inadequate due to a lack of human and financial resources, and these initiatives have often been limited to pilot programs with limited experimental impact.

THE LEBANESE ECONOMIC AND LABOR MARKET SITUATION BEFORE THE SYRIAN WAR

Before the Syrian conflict, Lebanon's economy was characterized by significant fluctuations in Gross Domestic Product (GDP), as economic growth was overly concentrated in areas such as service banking, tourism, and real estate. Lebanon's GDP, which according to Banque du Liban, Lebanon's central bank, reverted from an average annual rate of 8 percent between 2008 and 2010 to an aver-



■ Although an almost equal number of Lebanese also benefit from donor support, displaced Syrians who work in the informal economy are seen as having a competitive edge over poor Lebanese

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COMMENT

age of 2 percent between 2010 and 12, underwent significant fluctuations in the first two decades of the century but was supported by a relatively stable political environment and strong monetary inflows from the Lebanese diaspora and Gulf countries. Downside risks were extensive, however, including stubbornly high public-debt-to-GDP ratios and massive fiscal deficits as well as lack of infrastructure investments, political cronyism, and corruption that hindered sustainable economic development.

IMPACT OF THE SYRIAN WAR ON LEBANON'S ECONOMY

The Syrian war profoundly impacted the Lebanese economy from the early 2010s, leading to a significant contraction in economic activity and increasing fiscal pressures. The economic challenges that were reflected in the aforementioned sharp drop in GDP growth for 2011-12, were in the next few years exacerbated by the influx of refugees that peaked between 2013 and 2015.

The increased demand for public services and infrastructure and the loss of revenue due to disrupted trade and tourism strained government finances. The fiscal deficit widened, and the public debt-to-GDP ratio rose to more than 150 percent. The economic slowdown has also led to higher unemployment and poverty rates, exacerbating socio-economic challenges.

For instance, a study by the World Bank found that the Syrian refugee crisis has cost Lebanon an estimated \$18 billion in lost GDP, demonstrating the scale of the economic impact.

The expansion of the informal economy has posed significant challenges for the Lebanese government. It has hindered efforts to regulate the labor market, enforce labor standards, and collect taxes. The prevalence of informal employment has also reduced social security contributions, limiting the resources available for public services and social protection. Addressing these challenges requires comprehensive policy reforms to integrate refugees into the formal labor market and support decent working conditions.

SYRIAN LABOR'S POTENTIAL FOR THE LEBANESE ECONOMY

Despite the significant challenges, the influx of Syrian refugees also represents potential economic benefits. A study by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies highlighted that refugees have increased their available skill set and significantly boosted domestic consumption by injecting humanitarian aid into the economy. This aid, worth more than \$1 billion annually, has an estimated multiplier effect of \$1.6 for every dollar spent, stimulating local markets and benefiting Lebanese businesses, especially in the food and housing sectors.

Many Lebanese investors have benefited from the abundant Syrian labor force willing to work for low wages, reducing costs, increasing profit margins, and enhancing market competitiveness. This has also contributed to the establishment of small and medium-sized factories, especially in the food industry. Refugees also contribute directly to the economy as consumers, as increased demand for goods and services positively impacts production and sales.

Humanitarian aid has played a crucial role in mitigating the economic impact of the refugee crisis, stimulating local markets and creating jobs. International donors have provided significant financial support to Lebanon from the beginning of the crisis to today, helping to meet immediate needs and support public services. For example, the European Union has provided nearly \$3 billion to Lebanon from 2011 to today. Aid programs have supported infrastructure projects, such as the rehabilitation of schools, healthcare facilities, water networks, municipal empowerment, and support for small and medium-sized enterprises, creating jobs for Lebanese citizens and refugees alike.

The presence of a large number of Syrian refugees has offered an opportunity to leverage Syrian labor for Lebanon's economic growth and to fill gaps in the labor market. For example, Syrian refugees with expertise in construction, agriculture, and various trades can contribute to these sectors, which are vital to the Lebanese economy.

Successive Lebanese governments from 2011 to today, in minimal coordination with international organizations and NGOs, have implemented programs to facilitate the integration of Syrian refugees into the formal labor market within the permitted professions with the knowledge of the relevant Lebanese ministries. The Lebanese Ministry of

■ Despite Lebanese officials largely ignoring Syrian entrepreneurs' potential, many have shown their entrepreneurial spirit and resilience by setting up businesses in Lebanon



■ Lebanese policymakers are encouraged to abandon traditional guardianship policies and political gridlock and turn this crisis into an opportunity

Education and Higher Education has facilitated the implementation of vocational training and education programs for Syrians, even if they do not have identification papers.

Despite Lebanese officials largely ignoring Syrian entrepreneurs' potential, many have shown their entrepreneurial spirit and resilience by setting up businesses in Lebanon. These range from small retail shops to more substantial construction, agriculture, tourism services, and more ventures. Registering and legalizing these businesses can lead to an influx of Syrian diaspora funds into Lebanon to finance and develop investments, stimulating economic activity and creating jobs for both Lebanese and Syrians.

POTENTIAL ROLES AND ACTIONS FOR LEBANON IN SYRIA'S EARLY RECOVERY PHASE

Lebanon has an excellent opportunity to contribute to the early recovery phase in Syria, given its geographical proximity and the presence of a large number of Syrian refugees, primarily since the eighth conference to support the future of Syria and the neighborhood, which concluded in Brussels on May 27 of this year, raised the value of the early recovery fund in Syria to 560 million euros. Furthermore, international agencies will implement projects that contribute to reducing the burden on Syrian citizens who are still in Syria, so long as implementing companies are not government or opposition-affiliated, which could be a distinct opportunity for Lebanese companies.

Lebanon can also play a crucial role in building the skills and capabilities of the Syrian workforce through a program that empowers refugee students with skills relevant to Syria's future. This includes providing vocational training and education programs for Syrian refugees and returning refugees and supporting initiatives to rebuild and strengthen Syria's education and training systems.

Lebanese policymakers are encouraged to abandon traditional guardianship policies and deadly political gridlock and turn the crisis into an opportunity. Lebanon can work with other regional countries to promote regional cooperation and stability. This includes active participation in regional forums and initiatives to support a comprehensive political solution in Syria and address broader regional challenges.

Pressure on public services and infrastructure, the expansion of the informal economy, and social tensions are substantial obstacles that must be addressed. However, by tapping into the Syrian labor force and supporting the safe and voluntary return of refugees, Lebanon can not only mitigate the economic impact of the refugee crisis, but also indirectly support Syria's recovery. Through strategic actions and regional cooperation, Lebanon can turn this difficult situation into an opportunity for economic growth and development, benefiting both countries and contributing to regional stability. ■

Dr. Calos Naffah is a university professor and consultant with expertise in refugee management and public policy

REFUGEES
MAP

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TALLYING TRAUMA

■ BY MARIE MURRAY AND ALINE NASSAR

A PARADOX OF POROUS BORDERS AND TIGHTLY BOUND TERRITORIES

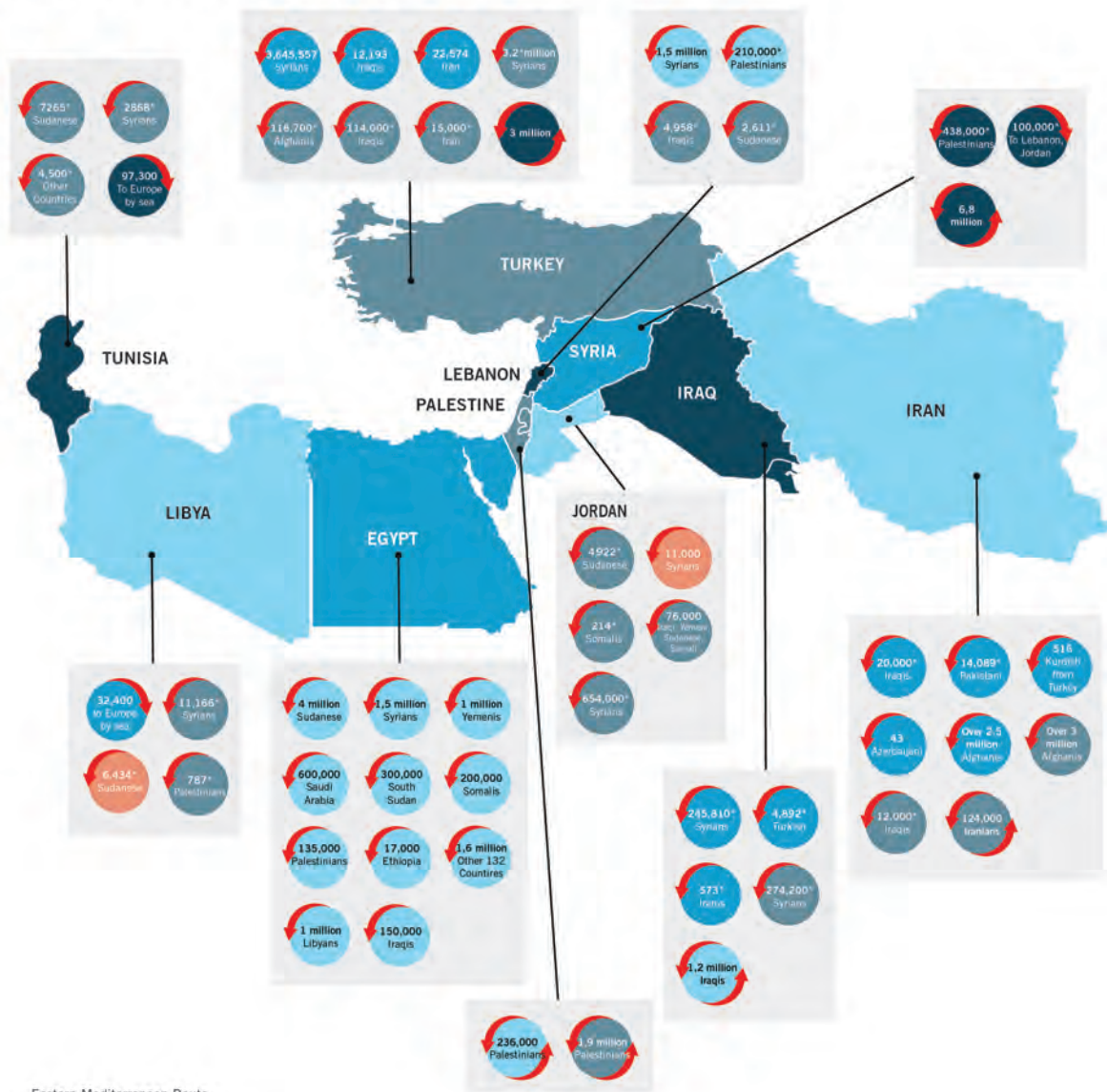
The MENA region has seen a massive flows of migration due to both internal and external displacement over the past century, the last four years of which are depicted here. In the selection of countries on the map, the numbers show refugee or asylum-seeking populations including those that have been displaced well before 2021 as well as the more recently displaced. The UNHCR reports that the global percentage of refugees who flee to neighboring countries is around 70 percent, but can be far higher, as in the case of Syria where over 85 percent of displaced Syrians have sought shelter in nearby countries. What we have, by one interpretation, is a map of arbitrarily drawn and often highly politicized nation-state borders that seemingly by design entail the migrations or forced movements of their populations.

Although the Oxford dictionary defines a refugee as someone who is forced to flee to another region or country to seek shelter, the term also has its own legal, political, and technical meanings that make data collection on refugees a slippery project.

In one example of this, the numbers marked with an asterisk on the map refer only to refugees who are officially accounted for by either the UNHCR, UN-WRA, or a government body that has its own refugee registration process. Not only do the criterion for determining who is a refugee differ by organization or government body, but in some cases these entities have limited scope or do not exist at all.

By any quantification, loose or precise, it is clear that migratory trends and forced displacements are only increasing. The most well laid out care and management strategies (which are few and far between) cannot possibly amend the harms caused by forced displacement events. Looking at a map of a region with exceptionally high populations of displaced peoples begs the question not only of how to properly address the problem, but, more importantly, how to prevent it in the first place. There are many state powers far and wide with little proximity to the region who can decisively be factored among those accountable for aiding and abetting this crisis.

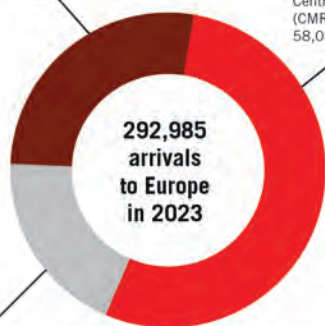
Refugee nations or people on the move?



Eastern Mediterranean Route (EMR - Bulgaria, Cyprus, Greece) 78,101 arrivals

Central Mediterranean Route (CMR - Italy, Malta) 58,032 arrivals

Western Mediterranean Route (WMR) and Western African Atlantic Route (WAAR) to Spain 56,852 arrivals



* Registered with the UNHCR, UNRWA or through a government body

