



Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Navigating Future Scenarios and Policy Recommendations

By

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Introduction

As Lebanon faces multiple crises, the ongoing presence of Syrian refugees remains a critical political issue. Political polarization, ad hoc management, and the international community's failure to find a political solution for the Syrian conflict further complicate the prospects for a safe return of Syrian refugees.

Since 2011, the local strategy for managing the refugee presence in Lebanon has been shaped by four key structural features that characterize all the public sector management. A closer examination of the political landscape reveals that these features: demagoguery, populism, politicism, and improvisation, have consistently shaped Lebanese political discourse.

a. Demagoguery

Certain political parties in Lebanon, suggest that the prolonged presence of Syrian refugees is part of a strategic plan by the international community and Arab states to resettle them in Lebanon and disrupt the country's demographic and religious balance. While the refugee situation does pose challenges to Lebanon's demographic structure, these claims tend to oversimplify the crisis and divert attention from addressing its underlying causes and exploring viable solutions for the safe return of the Syrian refugees.

b. Populism

In exchange for financial support and humanitarian aid, the international community compels the Lebanese state to sustain the presence of refugees on its territory. In response, the Lebanese government leverages this situation to negotiate with international donors, seek additional funding, and advocate for the return of Syrian refugees. However, it has become evident over the years that while humanitarian assistance provides short-term relief, it fails to address the root causes of the crisis and merely acts as a temporary fix.

c. Politicism

The Lebanese government opted to classify the displaced Syrians within its borders as "Displaced" rather than "Refugees." It also resisted the establishment of temporary border shelters, even those under Lebanese sovereignty and supported by the United Nations, due to concerns that these shelters could eventually become permanent camps. Despite the potential for temporary shelters to enhance the organization of the refugee situation and facilitate their return, the government's reluctance is rooted in fears of repeating historical patterns, particularly those observed in the Palestinian Refugee's context.

d. Improvisation

Contrary to many reports issued by humanitarian organizations, many Lebanese politicians assert that 80% of Syria is safe for refugees to return. Consequently, these politicians advocate for the Lebanese government to negotiate directly with the Syrian regime to expedite the return of Syrian Refugees from Lebanon, rather than waiting for a comprehensive political solution. Critics argue that these reports may not fully represent the situation, suggesting that there are safe areas in Syria where returning refugees could be resettled without facing arrest or prosecution by the regime.

While the discourse advocating for the return of Syrian Refugees have increased in recent years, such returns appear particularly dim in the short and medium term. This pessimism is rooted in the ongoing instability in their home country, coupled with the absence of a political will and a peace process, rendering the resolution of what has evolved into a 'Frozen Conflict' highly unlikely. Additionally, Lebanon's prolonged presidential vacancy and the current caretaker government's limited powers obstructs a dynamic collaboration and coordination with the international community to devise an action plan for the safe and dignified return of refugees residing within its territory.

Imminent Projections

Given the critical role of the refugee crisis in shaping Lebanon's political future, this paper aims to outline a strategic vision for managing the refugee presence and facilitating their eventual return. It outlines a comprehensive approach, addressing expected developments, potential scenarios, and necessary measures to safeguard Lebanon's sovereignty while ensuring a safe and dignified return for Syrian refugees. As Lebanon navigates its ongoing crises, tensions escalate at both local and international levels, bringing to the surface four major challenges that require immediate attention.

a. The Economic Crisis

On a local level, the economic crisis has added another layer of complexity to an already strained system characterized by weak infrastructure, ineffective social policies, and inefficient management of public goods. The socio-economic downturn has compelled more than half of the Lebanese population lives below the poverty line and 9 out of 10 Syrian refugees to live in extreme poverty and over half of the Lebanese population to live below the poverty line. Despite the World Bank attributing the economic crisis to be caused by years of corruption and mismanagement by the political stakeholders and a weak financial system, many politicians adopted the blame game and resorted to discriminatory rhetoric and hate speech blaming refugees for the crisis.

Without a unified, state-led approach and genuine political commitment, economic challenges and funding shortages allow politicians to exploit the refugee situation, either by populist pressure on the international community for their immediate return or by threatening to facilitate irregular migration to Europe. Safe return is essential, and pathways for it must be opened in cooperation with the United Nations.

b. Raids and Deportations

As the economic situation deteriorates alongside reduced funding, the Lebanese government has shifted its discourse on refugees from one that is donor-attractive to a controversial stance linking stability and economic recovery with the return of refugees to Syria. In April 2022, Lebanon's security services initiated the idea of deportations of illegal Syrian Refugees, notifying the international community of their intention to repatriate those lacking valid residency permits.

In an attempt to divert the public attention away from their own economic and political failures, the government engaged in a philosophy leading to a positive image that the return of refugees would be the initial step towards economic recovery. However, in the absence of UNHCR registration that distinguishes refugees from Syrian expatriates, economic migrants, workers or refugees, the line

between these classifications becomes ambiguous, and it requires scientific details along with specific operational procedures

C. The War in Gaza

The outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023 has led to increased military activity along Lebanon's southern borders, impacting numerous southern villages and towns. Any further escalation is likely to significantly affect Lebanon's key economic sectors, impeding the country's recovery and stability. The worsening situation and loss of resources could strain the already fragile social fabric, heightening tensions and potentially leading to civil unrest between refugees and local communities.

If the conflict persists or spreads beyond the border, Lebanon will face collateral damage on multiple sectors. Therefore, urgent international intervention is essential to avert a potential refugee crisis that could affect both Syrians and Lebanese, with the looming risk of increased secondary migration and illegal smuggling to Europe.

d. Secondary migration and illegal smuggling

Considering the deteriorating conditions, both Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees are increasingly resorting to irregular migration, often relying on smugglers for sea passage to Europe. While media and political focus has largely been on Syrian refugees, the number of Lebanese attempting to depart has also been rising. Lebanon has become a key hub for smugglers exploiting the desperation of those fleeing a government that has failed to address their basic needs and ensure a dignified life.

Given the severity of the crisis, it is essential for the European Union to take decisive action and support Lebanon. This includes not only providing financial aid but also establishing resettlement programs for refugees in a third country, and actively engaging in peace efforts to stabilize Syria, thereby facilitating a safe and dignified return for refugees.

The Foreseeable Scenarios

Following the murder of Pascal Suleiman (Lebanese Forces Party Member– April 2024) and in light of the ongoing investigation efforts to find the truth of this crime, calls for the return of Syrian refugees has gained renewed prominence and become a pivotal issue in Lebanese political discussions. Apart from being a priority for the Lebanese governments (**2014, 2016, 2018, 2022 where we followed multiple public policies approaches**), many Syrian refugees aspire to return to their country—a fundamental right recognized in international law under the principle of '*Voluntary Repatriation*.' Ideally, refugees would return to Syria to rebuilding their homes, while Lebanon takes the necessary time to reconstruct its infrastructure and recover from the economic crisis. However, in practice, the situation is far from ideal. Establishing the necessary conditions for voluntary repatriation, which ensure the safety and dignity of returning refugees, remains unachievable and ambiguous in the current Syrian context, especially considering the failure of the political peace process in Syria.

Therefore, the questions remain: who is responsible for securing the right to return? And how can we move from the current precarious situation to implementing effective measures that facilitate the safe return of Syrian refugees? Achieving this requires establishing secure conditions, legal

protections, and adequate economic and social conditions, ideally under the auspices of the United Nations.

Given the current dynamics, three potential scenarios are likely to unfold in the foreseeable future regarding the return of refugees to Syria:

a. Best Case Scenario: Quick and Immediate Return

The prompt and immediate return of Syrian refugees represents the best-case scenario, enabling displaced Syrians to return to their country, participate in the reconstruction process, and restore their identity, social cohesion, and prosperity. Undeniably, this rapid return should be accompanied by three guarantees for returnees: legal guarantees, security guarantees, and socio-economic guarantees.

- **Legal guarantees** involve protecting the right of refugees to return to their homelands and reclaim properties and homes lost or seized during the war.
- **Security guarantees** encompass protection from arrest, assassination, or disappearance, along with exemption from military conscription. This exemption reflects a genuine commitment to restructuring Syrian civil society, recognizing that lasting peace cannot be achieved through military mobilization.
- **Socio-economic guarantees** entail access to livelihoods and basic services like healthcare, education, and infrastructure upon return. Redirecting assistance from refugees in host countries to those determined to return, providing them with incentives to return back to Syria and participate in the reconstruction process could be a fundamental starting point for this return.

Regrettably, actualizing this scenario depends on achieving a political solution for the Syrian conflict, currently deemed unattainable given the prevailing circumstances. Though seemingly implausible, it could become achievable if officials in Syria and their allies demonstrate goodwill by respecting the political peace process, a reconstruction process and placing emphasis on the aforementioned incentives for attaining peace.

b. Worst Case Scenario: No-Return and a Catastrophic Disintegration

The prospect of Syrian refugees staying in Lebanon represents a challenging scenario that can be, with the potential for the disintegration of both the displaced community and the Lebanese host communities. This scenario could widen existing fractures in the Lebanese Syrian relation, evoking memories of the 30-year Syrian hegemony over Lebanon, marked by numerous casualties, kidnappings, imprisonments, and disappearances of Lebanese citizens in Syria but as a way to alter the demographic identity.

The extended stay of Syrian refugees in Lebanon raises concerns about preserving Lebanese national identity and poses a risk of further migration to Europe and other Arab countries. While international organisations focus on the need for refugees to return to Syria, Lebanon must address the possibility of their temporary resettlement by adopting effective strategies to manage this reality and pushing towards diplomacy for their return rather than relying on a policy of denial. This approach is crucial for preventing a crisis and avoiding a repetition of the violent history experienced with Palestinian refugees.

C. Most Probable and Pragmatic Scenario: Temporary Stay and Phased Return

The Syrian refugee crisis will persist as a significant long-term challenge for Lebanon. Contrary to popular misconceptions, the war in Syria is ongoing and is unlikely to conclude soon. Even when it eventually ends, the immediate return of refugees to a still-unstable country without adequate safety guarantees is implausible. Therefore, the most likely scenario involves a temporary stay of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, followed by a gradual return. This is supported by the fact that the movement of displaced individuals back to Syria has been ongoing since 2017.

To tackle this probable scenario, Lebanese authorities are required to develop a multi-dimensional mission statement roadmap that encompasses the following:

- a. Create a **classification system** categorizing refugees into distinct groups: **(a)** Economic migrants residing in Lebanon for work purposes, **(b)** Refugees displaced from Syria due to the conflict involving the Syrian regime and its allies, **(c)** Refugees seeking asylum in third countries and applying for resettlement, and **(d)** Syrians awaiting financial, economic, and social incentives for return. Implementing this classification would address Lebanon's concerns regarding the potential risks associated with the permanent settlement of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, it has the potential to mobilize international stakeholders to exert pressure on the Syrian regime and its allies to eliminate obstacles hindering the return process and collaborate with the Russians and Iranians for the gradual and safe return of Syrian refugees.
- b. **Coordinate with local and international stakeholders** to collect a threefold set of information: the refugees' places of origin, the ongoing obstacles hindering their return, and strategies to eliminate these obstacles at all levels. This approach aims to address root causes, facilitating the reconciliation process, providing reassurance, and ensuring a gradual and safe return.
- c. **Limit international and local aid** to individuals compelled to stay in Lebanon due to armed conflict and fear of facing prosecution upon returning home. This measure aims to diminish financial incentives that might otherwise encourage many Syrians refugees not falling within these categories to stay in Lebanon.
- d. **Apply the Lebanese Labor Law to Syrian workers**, while simultaneously safeguarding locals from job competition and ensuring decent working conditions for Syrian workers under the applicable laws. This approach includes **legal guarantees** to protect them from abuse and exploitation, contributing in return to the Lebanese economy and aiding in its economic recovery.
- e. **Continue providing education services and empowerment opportunities** for Syrian refugees, while simultaneously addressing the needs of host communities, to prevent clashes between host communities and the displaced.

This highly probable and pragmatic scenario demands well-informed crisis management, with a clear comprehensive national policy coupled with the ability to transform this challenge into an opportunity. In the context of this likely scenario, Lebanese authorities should remain realistic and consider temporary stay in Lebanon for a percentage of Syrian refugees for security reasons but under legal strict conditions. Therefore, it is vital to implement the above-explained classification system to ensure a gradual return and provide protection for those whose lives could be targeted, due to their political views upon returning to Syria.

Forward Outlook

In light of this complex reality, there is a tendency to overlook the root causes to this complex crisis, leading to short-term-oriented approaches that address the symptoms rather than the underlying issues. With this in mind, the following section aims to present a series of recommendations guided by the following framework:

- a. Any policy approach should foremost prioritize **Lebanon's national security** while also safeguarding and prioritizing the **right of return** for Syrian refugees.
- b. There is an urgent need to establish a **national consensus** and endorse a **policy framework** wherein both the government and local authorities, especially municipalities, distinctly outline their priorities, objectives, and prerogatives. This approach should rely on proactive and scientific tools to address the current situation, avoiding the use of populist rhetoric and misinformation.
- c. The Lebanese government should revive its **diplomatic efforts**, pursuing a wise diplomacy capable of understanding and reassessing both regional and international geopolitics. It should seek solutions to the refugee crisis within the framework of International Humanitarian Law while actively seeking support from the international community to ensure and promote the right of return.

Considering this, until the conditions for a dignified and safe return of Syrian refugees are established under the auspices of the United Nations, with the clear support of the UN Security Council and the League of Arab States, the following steps must be undertaken:

a. Integrating strategic reforms within public policy frameworks

Lebanon's recovery necessitates a shift from demagogic methods to effective public policies, addressing deeply rooted structural challenges. Rebuilding confidence in institutions through accountability, transparency, and proactive engagement is vital for its sustained prosperity.

b. Sustaining humanitarian aid and fostering community resilience for hosts and refugees until their return

To prevent potential social clashes, the international community should provide precise and impactful relief and development assistance to positively impact and prevent negative interactions between displaced communities and host communities. This can be achieved through enhanced cooperation with local actors and grassroots empowerment, ensuring a better response to the specific needs of communities.

c. Implementing gradual return and effective reconciliation models

Lebanon should diplomatically pressure the international community as well as Arab countries to resume peace efforts, ensuring safety and basic needs for returning individuals. Simultaneously, the Lebanese government should reform residency regulations, collaborate with the **UNHCR**, and coordinate with **European Union** for practical resettlement plans, facilitating refugees' gradual return and securing their right for self-determination.

d. Establishing a collaboration pact with the international community and the Syrian regime

The Lebanese government should proactively engage in diplomatic efforts, fostering collaboration with the international community to discuss viable options for the return of Syrian refugees. Simultaneously, efforts should be directed towards exerting pressure on the Syrian regime and its allies, with a focus on upholding the refugees' right to self-determination, safety, and their return to their home country, in accordance with the Geneva Process.

e. Recognizing the refugees' right for self-determination

The return of Syrian refugees must be a matter of their own choice; the international community and the host government should therefore respect and support the refugees' right to self-determination. The Lebanese government should engage in dialogue with UNHCR to ensure a secure return pathway. Simultaneously, refugees should have the choice to apply for asylum in European countries through coordinated resettlement schemes.

Implications and conclusions

Acknowledging that the challenges are unlikely to diminish in the near future, there is an urgent need to prioritize the advancement of policy implementation and the mediation pathway for external policy and diplomatic interventions on the political agenda. The longer we delay, the more complex the solution becomes. Lebanese decisionmakers must cultivate a sense of governmental ownership and responsibility. Therefore, it is imperative to move beyond ad-hoc policy responses and reliance on humanitarian assistance, and instead, intensify efforts to establish a comprehensive and enduring national refugee response framework.

Yielding to the current situation without actively seeking stable and safe return options risks depriving refugees of their freedom of choice and the right to return and hinders Lebanon from achieving economic recovery and improving its infrastructure. Accepting the status quo often overlooks the needs and aspirations of both refugees and hosts. Therefore, it is crucial to recognize that safeguarding refugees' identity and improving their situation depends on their safe and dignified return through a peace and reconciliation process. Acknowledging the return of refugees acts as a protective measure for Lebanon's national systems while preserving the social identity and freedom of both communities.

Lebanon has historically faced refugee influxes, and the governments' approach has repeatedly proven to be unsustainable, leaving both refugees and locals as victims. Hence, it is time for Lebanon to break from historical patterns, set aside the past, and focus on the future. Delving into the Palestinian case only adds fuel to the fire, as comparisons between Palestinian and Syrian refugees often do not align with reality and fail to address the root causes of the crisis.

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