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The Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon

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Abstract:

One of the most dramatic consequences of the Syrian civil war has been the massive displacement of civilians in and outside of Syria. Syrian refugees now constitute more than a quarter of the population in Lebanon. Although the government declared a policy of disassociation – a policy of professed neutrality regarding Syria – this has been undermined due to the presence of a plethora of actors with differing interests. Refugee flow has had severe impacts on national security and the economy, leading to further destabilization in Lebanon. The refugee flow has placed a serious burden on public services delivery including education, healthcare, housing, sanitation, water, and electricity, as well as on physical infrastructure which has lacked adequate capacity. Labor competition and the feeling that Syrians receive different financial treatment has generated ambivalent attitutes and resentments among locals. Both government and public concerns regarding the Syrian crisis and refugees may increase sectarian volatility and deepen pre-existing tensions due to the long and tortured history of Syria-Lebanon relations and increasing involvement of Hezbollah in Syria. One extreme risk might be the militarization of refugees. A strong government and regional/international support are vital for Lebanon to ensure stability in such a destabilizing situation.

Introduction

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have generated huge numbers of migrants and refugees due to persecution, generalized violence, human rights violations, poverty as well as inter-state and internal conflicts. A significant portion of about 45 million refugees and asylum seekers globally originate from the extensive MENA region.[1]

One of the most dramatic consequences of the Syrian civil war has been the massive displacement of civilians in and outside of Syria. The United Nations (UN) characterizes the flight of civilians from Syria as the refugee movement.[2] According to existing refugee studies, people fleeing persecution choose their immediate destination by considering geographical proximity, kinship relations, common culture (for example ethnic sectarian identity) visa/border regimes, and the cost of crossing the border.[3]

The United Nations High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), states that the number of registered Syrian refugees is 3,977,538 as of April 2015. This number includes 2.2 million Syrians registered by the UNHCR in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan and Lebanon, 1.7 million Syrians registered by the government of Turkey, as well as 24,055 Syrian refugees registered in North Africa.[4] Overall, the estimated number of unregistered Syrian refugees across the region stands at around five million. The number of internally displaced people inside Syria is around 6.5 million. Although many international and non-governmental organizations are concerned with the Syrian refugee issue, the main burden has been on the shoulders of hosting states like Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey since the outbreak of civil war in March 2011.[5]

Lebanon's Policy Response to Syrian Refugee Flow

Lebanon has been dramatically affected by the Syria civil war to a greater extent than any other country in the region. For Lebanon, it is a severe humanitarian crisis, a huge burden and a source of growing concern. The Lebanese Foreign Minister, Gebran Bassil, went so far as to state that "Lebanon's existence and identity are at risk as a result of the influx of refugees."[6]

As of May 2015, the numbers of Syrian refugee in Lebanon increased to 1,183,327, constituting 18-25 per cent of the population (four million).[7] Before the crisis

erupted, 500,000 Syrian migrants were working in the country.[8] Additionally, according to the UNHCR reports, there are around 315,000 Palestine refugees and the 50,000 Lebanese returnees who fled from Syria to Lebanon.[9] Nearly 51,000 Syrian children were born in Lebanon since the outbreak of the Syrian conflict and 36,000 of them are stateless as they do not have identification document.[10] Similar to other host governments, Lebanese government estimates that the total number of refugees as much higher, states that a further 230,000 Syrians are residing in the country.[11] For instance, the Head of the General Security Office (GSO) under the Interior Ministry, that is in charge for border management, registration and providing entry cards for Syrians, reported in January 2015 that the number of Syrians in Lebanon reached 1.6 million.[12] Although in the initial phase of the crisis, many refugees sought shelter in the northern Lebanon towns of Wadi Khaled and Tripoli,[13] now the refugees live dispersed throughout the country and are found across 1,500 localities.[14]

The Syrian refugees have joined a pre-existing Palestine refugee population, making Lebanon the country with the highest concentration of refugees per capita worldwide. However, Lebanon does not have concrete legal or administrative framework for refugee governance.[15] Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 Refugee Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and its additional Protocol in 1967 that both are main international legislation for refugee protection. Not being signatory of convention means that Lebanese law does not differentiate between illegal immigrants and asylum seekers. Lebanon is bound by the customary law principle of non-refoulement and by the obligations of the human rights treaties. These obligations requires, at a minimum, the adoption of temporary protection measures to ensure the safe admission of refugees, to protect them against refoulement and to respect their basic human rights.[16] Lebanon rarely grants the refugee status to individuals within its margin of discretion. UNHCR carries out refugee status determination on the legal basis of the Memorandum of Understanding signed in 2003. This memorandum forms the areas of agreement related to reception, status determination, temporary permits, durable solutions, regular information exchange, joint training and the strengthening of response capacities.[17]

Lebanese government refers to individuals who fled from Syria to Lebanon as “displaced” not as refugees although most of them seek protection and they are likely to meet refugee definition of the international refugee regime. Having such limited legal status of Syrians often has negative consequences on their ability to access their rights to protection and assistance during their displacement.[18] The Lebanese government allows refugees to enroll in public schools and universities as well as allows to access primary health care after registering with the UNHCR.[19]

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Lebanon largely adopted an open door policy for Syrian refugees until mid-2013. In the beginning, Syrians were able to crossing the border with their ID cards. Since Lebanese and Syrian independence in 1943 and 1946, respectively, their citizens had been able to travel without visa just by personal ID cards and were able to reside and work in Lebanon without restrictions or administrative or financial charges or fees.[20] Due to the easiness of access and the close family relationships between Syria and Lebanon, according to estimates, 15 percent of Syria’s workforce used to work in Lebanon.[21] An estimated 300-500,000 Syrians were working in the country at any given time. Often this migration was circular; men would work in Lebanon for a few months while their families remained at home.[22] Syrian migrant workers, prior to the crisis, typically accepted lower wages than Lebanese.[23] Nevertheless, both the Palestinian refugees and Syrian migrants faced the legal hurdles in finding employment. Lebanon did not allowed refugees, mainly Palestinians, to work and practice their professions. In February 2013, the Resolution No. 1/19 opened some professions, such as those involving construction, electricity, and sales, to refugees.[24] After the crisis erupted, these Syrian migrant workers tried to bring their families to Lebanon.[25] Syrians do not have refugee status, they do not have official right to work, however, they work illegally.

In early August 2013, Lebanese main authority for border management, GSO began asking Syrians to pro-

vide valid identification, either a passport or a personal Syrian ID card and explain their reason for arrival at the official posts. Syrians with damaged identity documents were not allowed to enter in Lebanon.[26] Syrian refugees are given an 'entry card' that works as a residency via for six months from the date of entry. Syrian refugees who did not enter through an official GSO post are able to legalise their stay. They have to renew their visa every six months up to three years at any GSO regional office. Authorities charge fee for regularization of stay and visa renewal per person aged 15' years old or above. The UNHCR registration document is not accepted at the valid documentation to provide proof of legal stay and proof of identity.[27] Particularly Palestinian refugees from Syria faced difficulties on border crossings and legalizing their status. There was no visa requirement until the beginning of 2015.

Local practices of hospitality toward the Syrian refugees are widespread among kin and non-kin Lebanese, contributing to absorb and support self-settled refugees.

Institutionally, in addition to the GSO, the ministerial committee responsible for Syrian refugees, the Ministry of Social Affairs of Lebanon and High Relief Commission (under the Prime Minister's Office), having policy mandate, work in collaboration with the UNHCR to coordinate the responses to the Syrian refugees.[28] UNHCR is the main responsible agency in the overall coordination of the Syrian refugee crisis; registration; protection monitoring and outreach activities; resettlement and humanitarian admission; provision of cash grants, shelter and access to health and education.[29] Lebaneese government has provided Syrian refugees access to most basic services like health and education through public institutions as well as clean water and sanitation.[30]

Besides the UNHCR many other actors provide humanitarian aid. Spontaneous assistance is provided by host Lebaneese communities (including Syrians – often middle class – who previously came to Lebanon as refugees) in various ways, ranging from offerring shelter to giving money, clothes, and/or accepting refugees into the informal economic life of the community.[31] The Lebanese stance is known as 'ambivalent hospitality'. Local practices of hospitality toward the Syrian refugees are widespread among kin and non-kin Lebanese, contributing to absorb and support self-settled refugees. Over time, however, labor competition and the feeling that Syrians receive different financial treatment has generated ambivalent attitutes and resentments.[32]

Unlike other host countries like Jordan and Turkey, The Lebanese government decided not to set up formal camps for Syrians to avoid giving the impression that refugees could stay permanently and also due to the country's previous experience with Palestinian camps. Palestinian groups in camps located in Lebanon were often accused for playing a starting role in the civil war between 1975 and 1990 that had deep roots in the internal political, sectarian and economic situation as well as the international politics such as relations with Syria and Israel. The government has chiefly been concerned that Syrian refugees might change the sensitive ethnic and sectarian dynamics in the country and might trigger a conflict between Syria and Lebanon. Various Lebaneese political actors try to impede the establishment of new resistance movements which they consider 'possibly threatful' for the stability of country and relations with the neighbor countries.

The flow of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has had an impact on the country in several respects, ranging from the economy and security, to politics and social dynamics. These will be reviewed briefly below.

Economic Impact

The refugee flow has placed a serious burden on public services delivery including education, healthcare, housing, sanitation, water, and electricity, as well as on physical infrastructure which has lacked adequate capacity. For instance, since the children comprise over half the refugee population,[33] the education provision is critically important. The Minister of Education and Higher Education takes full responsibility for the enrolment of refugee children in public schools working with the Reaching All Children through Education (RACE) programme. As of February 2015, 106,000 children in public schools attend in either the first or second shift. The total cost of Lebanon's public expenditures over 2012-2014 to accommodate the surge in demand for

public services due to influx of Syrian refugees was $1.1 billion.[34] Furthermore, rent inflation and high food prices turned out to be chronic problems in the country. The United Nations called for $1.89 billion to support Lebanon in dealing with the refugee crisis in 2014, but has only received $242 million so far.[35]

Given the fact that even before the crisis 25% of the Lebanese population lived below the upper poverty line of $4 per day, the influx of refugees worsened conditions considerably. The World Bank estimated that an additional 170,000 Lebanese would fall into poverty by 2014 and forecast a ten per cent increase in unemployment.[36] Lebanese workers and Syrian refugees are often in direct competition for scarce jobs.[37] As work permit required for all Syrians, most of them work illegally.[38] According to regional expert Lina Khatib, approximately one-third of Syrian refugee men are currently unemployed, while the average salary of those working accounts for only 40 percent of the minimum wage. The situation is even worse for women and open to abuses.[39] In contrast to Egypt, the Lebanese government has not allowed Syrians to open small businesses and make their own profession, in order to protect nationals.[40]

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In addition to the negative impact on public service provision and employment, the growth rate of Lebanon has been shrinking because the cumulative impact of the crisis has decreased government revenue while simultaneously increasing government expenditure. The World Bank has estimated that the impact of the crisis reduced Lebanon's economic growth rate (GDP) by 2.9% per annum from a predicted growth rate of 4.4% in 2012-14, whilst foreign direct investment and tourism income were projected to diminish by more than half compared to previous years.[41] As additional refugee flows influence the Lebanese economy further, the government is less likey to be able to address the economic impact.

As the needs and vulnerability levels of both refugees and the Lebanese population grow, social tensions are increasing. According to recent surveys conducted in the Bekaa and Akkar regions among refugees and host communities, over 90 per cent of Lebanese perceive refugees from Syria as an economic threat and underlined a rising threat of violence between the two populations.[42] Most Lebanese want to see restrictions on the entry of Syrians into the country, due to the economic burden and growing security concerns.[43]

Impact on Security and Stability

The Lebanese central state has been in a weak position, even dysfunctional, for a long time. Both government and public concerns regarding the Syrian crisis and refugees may increase sectarian volatility, deepen pre-existing tensions and destabilize the country. Such concerns about security and stability are not baseless, due to a number of reasons. First, Lebanon and Syria have been closely intertwined. Until 2006, there was Syrian military intervention and presence of Syrian military forces in the Lebanese soil which is characterized as the Lebanon's occupation by Syria. Following the assassination of Lebanon President Rafiq Hariri, the huge protests of Lebanese (one million out of a population of 4 million) and the concerted action of the United States and France urged Syria to withdraw its military forces from Lebanon. It is widely believed that Syrian's long-standing interference in Lebanon violated the sovereignty of Lebanon as well as exacerbated tensions between Shiites and Sunnis.

Second, there are many actors aside from the Lebanese government with much at stake in the Syrian crisis. Although the government has declared a policy of disassociation - a policy of professed neutrality with regard to Syria- due to the fragile (un)balances among Lebanese political actors as well as the increasing involvement of the Hezbollah in Syria, this has not succeeded in practice. Lebanese Shiite Hezbollah, which was primarily formed to offer resistance to the Israeli occupation, aims to prevent a full scale Israeli invasion into Lebanon and fought the regular Israel army in 2006. Having a military wing, Hezbollah is well rooted in Lebanese society, became a major political party and was part of the coalition government in Lebanon until March 2013. Hezbollah has been allied with Syria and Iran for a long time. It does not want to see a Sunni regime in Syria and see the crisis as an existential

struggle. It is believed that the loss of Syria would be catastrophic for Hezbollah.[44] It increasingly provides support to the Syrian regime, even sending members to fight alongside Bashar Assad's forces when the conflict broke out.[45] In May 2013, Hezbollah leader Hasan Nasrallah delivered two speeches in which he publicly admitted that Hezbollah fighters played an active role in support of the Assad regime.[46] Hezbollah has fought in several major Syrian cities, including Damascus, Homs, Aleppo, and Deraa, and its support has been decisive in some areas (as in Qusair, 2013). Both Sunni extremist and Syrian rebel groups like al-Nusra have retaliated against Hezbollah. On the other hand, the Lebanese Sunni community has been supporting the Syrian opposition and some Salafist groups are also sending fighters or harboring Syrian opposition fighters. Minorities, particularly Christian, are divided on the question of Syria. While some of them support Hezbollah, others who are part of the March 14th Alliance are anti-Syrian and do not want to interfere in Syrian affairs. The Future Movement is a secular movement in Lebanon led by Said Hariri. It is a part of the March 14th alliance and most of its base is made up by Sunnis. Despite the severe division between the Future Movement and Hezbollah regarding the latter's role in Syria, both parties have engaged in a dialogue over the vacant presidential post in Lebanon. After more than 330 days of deadlock between the various political blocs, this dialogue succeeded in resolving the presidential crisis in February 15, 2015 and a cabinet was formed with Tammam Salam as Prime Minister and Michel Sleiman as President.[47] A strong government is vital for Lebanon to ensure its own stability in such a destabilizing situation.

The Syrian conflict has also played out directly in some areas of Lebanon like Tripoli, Sidon and Beirut. In Tripoli, population has been polarized between those who support Assad among Shiite Alawite neighborhoods and those who oppose him among Sunni residents. Since the summner of 2014, the tense security situation in Lebanon has been particularly pronounced in border areas like Ersal, with heavy fighting between the Lebanese armed forces and extremist groups like The Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and al-Qaeda's al-Nusra Front. Authorities fear extremist Islamist groups are trying to expand land they control into Lebanon and to establish an emirate belonging to Islamic state in the northeastern Lebanon. ISIL has attacked border cities and by beheading a number of Lebanese soldiers.[48] Unfortunately Lebanese armed forces often fails to provide adequate defence in the areas that are most affected by the fighting.[49] Hezbollah did not support the Lebanese army there, although group's ability to fight a war substantially increased with its involvement in Syria.[50] According to regional analysts, Hezbollah chose to take a back seat to avoid enflaming Sunni anger and worsen sectarian tension in Lebanon. Also, it is believed that the presence of ISIL benefits Hezbollah because Hezbollah's ideology is often seen a counterweight to ISIL and able to present itself as an effective partner in the eyes of regional and international actors.[51]

The Lebanese government and communities in Lebanon are concerned that the influx of Syrian refugees might worsen the security situation, leading to a greatly increased risk of sectarian violence and civil war.[52] The Council of Ministers approved a paper on 23 October . 2014, stating that Lebanon must "halt the influx of refugees at the border, except for exceptional humanitarian cases, and to record the entrants at the border according to the reason for entering" and "strictly apply the Lebanese laws in this regard and revoke refugee status from everyone who enters Syria and violates the Lebanese laws and conditions for entry."[53] Since January 2015, the Lebanese government has taken new measures to regulate the entry and presence of refugees, including stricter border controls.[54] On 5 January 2015, GSO required that Syrians obtain an entry visa and provide supporting documentation such as proof of sufficient funding. Visas are valid between 24 hours and six months at most. New regulations have been criticized by Hezbollah and Amal movement.[55]

The Lebanese government/army has enacted periodic border closures in response to cross-border violence and threats and refugees have been denied entry, particularly if they are former or wounded Syrian soldiers.[56] The risks of being arrested, detained or even deported back to Syria are evident for Syrian refugees, and they are increasingly subject to monitoring and restriction of movement.

Two important questions for regional experts are, first, whether the Syrian crisis may spark a civil war in Lebanon,[57] and second, whether the Syrian refugee crisis has the potential to greatly destabilise the sensitive political balance in Lebanon by altering the relative populations of Lebanon's confessional groups. Although it is not easy to make a confident prediction, it seems that a civil war is unlikely. Hezbollah and Israel

do not want any escalation of conflict within Lebanon. The Lebanese state and the public are exhausted by long-standing civil conflict. As an answer to the second question, almost, three-quarters of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Sunnis, that makes the the Sunni community the largest sect. Their naturalization and employment may lead political and security repercussions. Nevertheless, any expected demographic shift in favor of Sunnis will not be reflected on ballot boxes soon. Moreover, it is concerned that many parties utilize such a population change to justify their calls for armament under the pretext of 'self-defense', particularly defense against the Sunni extremists.[58]

One extreme risk, can be the militarization of refugees given the fact that academic studies have found hat political violence involving refugees occurs in about 15 per cent of states hosting refugee populations of 2,000 or more.[59] Refugee militarization refers to the "involvement of groups of refugees in militaristic activities, including political violence, armed resistance, military training, explicit support for combatants, storage and diffusion of weapons, and/or military recruitment."[60] This may undermine the sovereignty and stability of the host state, perpetuate a transnational conflict and obstruct international efforts to resolve it, and present difficulties in the provision of humanitarian assistance to needy populations."[61] Instances of refugee militarization, despite demonstrating different characteristics, include Palestinians in Lebanon and Jordan, Rwandan Tutsis in Uganda, Rwandan Hutus in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (Zaire), Kosovars in Albania, Khmer and Karen refugees in Thailand, Sudanese in Ethiopia, Nicaraguans in Honduras, Eritreans in Sudan, Kurds in Iraq and Saharawis in Algeria. In his comprehensive theory of refugee militarization, Mike Lebson (2013) focuses on the importance of political and economic motivations in the context of broader structural factors as well as political opportunities and resource mobilization, mediated by the presence of militancy entrepreneurs. For refugees in Lebanon, as of mid-2015, there is not a sign of refugee militarization. In this sense, Lebanon's long-time decision for not setting camps seems a wise decision because housing large numbers of refugees in densely populated camps near the border without carefully supervising the security, demilitarization and the distribution of goods and aid into the camps, may often invite danger.[62]

The overall situation can be summarized as the substantial number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon survive in harsh living conditions, have lack of employment opportunities, experience social tensions and increasing insecurity that requires to develop compherensive policies.[63] For Lebanon, problems related to Syria refugees include high per capita ratio of refugees, their concentration in marginalized areas, overburden on Lebanon's infrastructure, limited financial support, violent spillover and increasing tensions between host communities and Syrian refugees.

Policy Recommendations

- The scale of the Syrian refugee crisis requires international solidarity and the provision of more effective support to countries hosting Syrian refugees. Support may succeed in being more effective if international governmental and non-governmental donors are able to harmonize their assistance and policies to develop an integrated aid framework in cooperation with the Lebanese authorities.

- Forced migration is a longstanding problem in the region and involves both security, human rights and identity issues. Regional organizations like the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference should develop institutional and legal mechanisms to tackle the refugee crisis in the MENA region.

- Existing asylum policies in developed countries should be revised to address the current needs of conflict-affected societies. EU member states and Gulf countries must also open their doors further to Syrian refugees to lessen the human strain on Syria's neighbours.

- Economic problems negatively affect refugee-community relations. While it is true that many refugees continue to benefit from Lebanese hospitality and generosity, it is also a fact that the cracks in social solidarity are deepening. To ameliorate social solidarity:

  - Community outreach and non-violent conflict management projects may be introduced;
  - Politicians, policy makers, and media may address the possible economic advantages of refugees to avoid aggravation of racism against refugees;
  - The government of Lebanon may ask that 20 percent of the aid to Syrian refugees is paid to the locally impacted communities and may publicize this, as Jordan has done.

- The risk of refugee militarization has to be taken seriously. Rather than discering simply the presence or absence of militarization, it is necessary to trace its evolution. It may be beneficial for host states to have awareness and vigilance regarding the likelihood of engagement in conflict for refugee groups when certain conditions are met. Either Lebanon should continue to its no camp policy, or ensure the security/demilitarization of planned camps. If the further militarization happen in the region, this may trigger refugee militarization, considering the issues of interests, identity, broader structural factors and particularly youth bulk. Furthermore, social, psychological and economic programmes addressing Syrian teenagers and out-of-school youth should be intensified. Additional funding should be allocated for supporting job placement and expanded vocational training programs to empower refugees and host communities alike.

Endnotes

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"We seek to promote democratic values and humane forms of governance that are sensitive to individual and collective human rights."

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