

# briefing

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international

## An uncertain future for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: The challenges of life in exile and the barriers to return





Syrian refugee Kifaa, 29, sits in between her children Sofaa, 8, and Ammar, 4, at their home in a collective shelter in Wadi el Zeyni, Lebanon. The family is from Idlib and decided to leave Syria because the situation became very serious and houses were being destroyed, including their own.

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# An uncertain future for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: The challenges of life in exile and the barriers to return

## Introduction

The impact of the eight-year long Syrian conflict has been felt by millions of civilians forced into exile from their country. The Syrian crisis has produced the largest number of refugees in the world today. Its effects on other countries in the region have also been profound, particularly in Lebanon, Syria's smallest neighbour, now hosting the highest per capita number of refugees. For the 1.5 million Syrians in Lebanon, life has largely continued in a state of limbo, with some longing to return home while others wishing to remain out of fear of persecution back in Syria. In either case, the majority are still caught in a precarious existence and in desperate need of stability, security and basic services.

While Lebanon has so far avoided large-scale conflict spilling over onto its territory, despite its history of civil war, the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on the country has been considerable - not only in terms of its demographic and economic impact, but also in its implications for the country's fragile sectarian balance. However, notwithstanding various tensions and clashes, especially in the north of the country, the peace has so far held. Lebanon's political elite, while fragmented into competing factions, has nevertheless worked together to maintain the status quo against the threat of increasing identity-based violence.

While the outbreak of Syrian conflict in 2011 was primarily rooted in social, political and economic grievances against the regime of President Bashar Hafez al-Assad, it has taken on increasingly sectarian dimensions in the years since. This is due in no small part to Assad's presentation of the conflict in stark terms of terrorism and extremism, with his government purporting to stand as a bulwark between the violence of the militant Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) and Syria's embattled religious minorities. This has profound implications for the future of a country that was, for centuries, well known for its history of religious diversity.

While religious minorities within Syria have themselves been caught up in the violence, Assad's opportunistic exploitation of communal fears and the deep demographic shifts wrought by the conflict has seen the share of Alawites, Christians and other minorities rise significantly within government-held territory.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in addition to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of the Sunni majority to the north, millions have been forced out of the country. Their prospects of return to a country controlled by a regime that has disproportionately targeted Sunni civilians during the conflict are far from certain.

While not pretending to address the complexities of each of Syria's minorities and their specific contexts, this short briefing examines the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon through another lens: that of minority rights. It attempts to understand the situation of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon today and the difficult choices that lie ahead of them, as well as the complex effects of their presence on Lebanese politics and the country's delicate communal framework.

## Lebanon: host in an unstable region

There are historical precedents for significant numbers of refugees receiving sanctuary (and subsequently citizenship) in Lebanon, the earliest and largest being Armenians fleeing Ottoman persecution after World War I. Armenians now form roughly five per cent of the Lebanese population and have integrated well into Lebanese society. Smaller groups of Christian denominations that came to Lebanon around the same time, such as Assyrians and Syriacs, were also welcomed and naturalized.

The creation of Israel in 1948 forced almost 100,000 Palestinian refugees into Lebanon, a number now approaching half a million.<sup>3</sup> Still denied a right of return, only a small percentage of Lebanon's Palestinian refugees - predominantly Christians - were naturalized in Lebanon. The majority have remained in camps, with multiple generations exposed to a range of social and economic deprivations. Grievances and disputes around the issue of the Palestinian population in Lebanon, and their militarization at the time, was a major catalyst in the outbreak of the 1975 - 1990 civil war. The permanent presence of the Palestinian population has, since 1948, been at the centre of much of the country's political disputes. In particular, the fact that the Palestinian population in Lebanon is predominantly Sunni has led to concerns among other religious denominations that Lebanon's fragile demographic balance could be destabilized were they naturalized - a situation that has contributed to their continued marginalization and exclusion to this day.<sup>4</sup> Their predicament illustrates the difficulties now facing the country's Syrian population and their uncertain future.

The war in Syria has now lasted almost eight years. After Turkey, Lebanon has played the largest role internationally as a host to those fleeing the violence. Estimates suggest that up to 1.5 million Syrians have resettled in Lebanon since the beginning of the conflict,<sup>5</sup>

## Brothers and foes: A brief history of Lebanon and Syria's complex relationship

The arrival of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees into Lebanon since 2011 is only the latest milestone in a turbulent shared history between the two countries - a history with significant religious dimensions, given the diversity of ancient faiths and religious communities in the region.

Collectively 'Greater Syria', the two countries were ruled together under the Ottoman Empire alongside modern-day Jordan and Palestine. While the Ottoman decrees of 1839 and 1856 established equality for all religions, sectarian violence nevertheless persisted, most notably between the Christian and Druze communities of Greater Syria at the time. Following the end of World War One, France gained control of the area. Recognizing that unity in the region would threaten its military and political rule, colonial administrators sought to exploit divisions among the population. With the creation of Lebanon, the French partition brought into existence a territory dominated by Maronite Christians, with the colonial authorities acting as a supposed 'protector' of Christians in the region. Syria, on the other hand, retained a large Sunni Muslim majority with Christians forming a significant minority. Both mandates shared largely the same religious minorities, encompassing Druze, Jews, various Christian sects (including Assyrian, Chaldean, Coptic, Greek Orthodox and Syriac) as well as a number of branches of Islam (Alawite, Alevi and Shi'a).

Lebanon ultimately came to favour independence from greater Syria, under the National Pact, which introduced a

confessional system of governance and granted a degree of representational power to all recognized religions at the time. This was calculated in line with the ratio determined under the French mandate by the 1932 census, until the collapse of the National Pact following the outbreak of Lebanon's civil conflict. It was eventually replaced in 1989 by the Taif Accord, which promised a secular future for Lebanon but effectively perpetuated its system of confessionalism. The latter not only continues to sideline many minorities, particularly unrecognized religious groups, but also threatens the stability of the country as a whole.<sup>2</sup>

Lebanon endured its own civil war between 1975 and 1990. The conflict was multifaceted: the product of local sectarian issues as well as geopolitical dynamics. In 1976, Syria sent troops to Lebanon with the supposed aim of protecting the Christian community, resulting in a protracted military occupation and a number of conflicts involving the Syrian army. It was not until 2005 that Syrian forces fully exited Lebanon, following a popular uprising that came to be known as the Cedar Revolution.

This history, with its series of tumultuous episodes between the two neighbouring countries, continues to shape relations between the two states and their peoples. While Lebanon and Syria share close demographic and historical ties, their relationship has also been heavily tested over the last few decades.

meaning that some 20 – 25 per cent of those now residing in the country are Syrian. Though the large majority are Sunni Muslim, the Syrian refugee population is not homogeneous and includes Syrian Alawites, Christians, Shi'a, Druze, Isma'ilis and Yezidis, all of whom have sought refuge in Lebanon.

Lebanon's long history as host to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees, as well as its complex relations with history and the active support that armed actors such as Hezbollah have given the Assad regime during the current conflict, have shaped its treatment of the Syrian refugee population. While the significant burden that this small country has shouldered as a sanctuary for a large share of Syria's displaced population must be recognized and celebrated – Lebanon has, by some margin, the largest per capita refugee population in the world - its policies towards them have become increasingly restrictive in recent years. At the same time, the ongoing refugee crisis has exacerbated a number of internal tensions within Lebanese society.

## Human rights violations against Syrian refugees

Lebanon, as party to various international treaties, including the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and having integrated into its own Constitution (amended in 1990) its commitment, without exception, to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, has therefore national and international obligations to ensure equality amongst all within the remits of its territory, 'without distinction of any kind'. These obligations have been unmet in many ways, both towards Lebanon's own population and its refugee communities.

Until 2015 Lebanon maintained an open-border policy with Syria, allowing Syrian citizens to enter the country. In January 2015, however, the government introduced new restrictions for those seeking entry as well as those who had already crossed, including a \$200 annual residency fee – since waived for long-term registered refugees<sup>10</sup> - that was prohibitively expensive for many Syrians. At the time it made the situation of thousands of families in Lebanon

## The sectarianization of political conflict in Lebanon: The case of the Alawite minority in Lebanon

The number of Lebanese Alawites is estimated to be somewhere between 100,000 and 120,000,<sup>6</sup> excluding the thousands of Syrian Alawite refugees who now reside within the country. The problems facing the Alawite community in Lebanon today cannot be disassociated from modern politics, including the community's link to Syria's Alawi-led Baathist regime. During Lebanon's long war, some Lebanese Alawites provided military and political support to the Syrian forces occupying Lebanon. The perceived support of Alawites for the Assad regime has deepened the already existing tensions between them and other local communities, particularly Sunnis. In Tripoli, home to more than half of the country's Alawite population, these tensions have at times resulted in violent clashes between sections of the Lebanese Sunni and Alawite communities, bringing the city almost to the brink of conflict.

Two trends evidence a growing apprehension among the Alawite community in Lebanon. Firstly, notwithstanding their recognition as an official Lebanese sect, Alawites have historically been persecuted for their beliefs, displaced from Lebanese urban centres to its surrounding mountains. Today the majority of Lebanese Alawites appear to be consolidating in their historical urban mountain enclave of Jabal Mohsen, on the outskirts of Tripoli. This is despite the fact that the historic neighbourhood itself has become notoriously impoverished, deprived of public services and subject to sporadic bouts of violence with neighbouring Sunni militants and more recently extremist Islamic groups. Past years have seen Alawite shops burned, Alawite workers shot at and buses carrying Alawite residents targeted.<sup>7</sup> In January 2015

nine residents were killed and 37 wounded in a double suicide attack in Jabal Mohsen, an attack claimed by the anti-Assad Islamist group Jabhat al-Nusra.<sup>8</sup>

Given that the arrival of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has included members of the rebel Free Syrian Army, as well as anti-Assad Salafi networks, the Alawite community in Tripoli has not been spared from what some observers have been quick to designate as sectarian 'spill-over' from the war in Syria. While it is generally acknowledged that Lebanese Alawites are not active in providing resources to support the Assad regime's war effort, the perceived association has proven deadly for Alawite civilians, both old and new, now living in Lebanon. Among various drivers of communal tensions between Lebanese and Syrians, the political situation within Lebanon and the region is increasingly significant alongside economic competition and other factors.

This may be partly to gain better access to services and representation - given the inherent systemic bias toward larger faiths and sects - but also to better facilitate social integration. This could too be evidence of taqiyya, the historic practice of religious dissimulation in a climate of latent persecution. Aside from the continuous threat of violent attacks, these indicators speak to a more persistent everyday issue facing Alawites in Lebanon: that of economic and social discrimination. Alawite residents of Jabal Mohsen in particular have expressed the view that they have been abandoned by the Lebanese state as punishment for their perceived disloyalties.<sup>9</sup> Despite being grouped as a religious minority, Alawites in Lebanon today suffer from discrimination that is, essentially, political in nature.

even more uncertain: indeed, the proportion of households legally residing in the country fell from 58 per cent in 2014 to just 29 per cent in 2015, whilst the number of households in debt and in poverty increased dramatically.<sup>11</sup>

This development had profound implications on the status of hundreds of thousands of Syrians and their experiences as refugees in the country. An illegal status puts Syrian refugees at serious risk of detention, violence and even deportation: Lebanon has not ratified the 1951 UN Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees and has on a number of occasions violated the internationally recognized principle of non-refoulement by pressuring Syrian refugees to leave through various restrictive measures, such as prolonged arbitrary detention or refusal of residency permits.<sup>12</sup> For periods of time, Lebanon prevented the UN refugee agency UNHCR from registering new Syrian arrivals, which also had an impact on how many amongst them had access to the services they are entitled to, including the most basic: protection.

The Government of Lebanon opposed the creation of camps and from the beginning favoured the setup of

'community settlements' for Syrian refugees across Lebanon. Most Syrian refugees have been renting anything from houses, rooms, garages or plots of land from Lebanese property owners and despite the policy of 'community settlement', around 18 per cent are currently unable to afford any form of rental accommodation and reside instead in non-formal camps,<sup>13</sup> mostly along the borderland areas of the eastern Bekaa valley. Here, Lebanese officials enforced a policy of not allowing more than a basic timber-and-plastic structure, with more robust buildings by refugees being prohibited and demolished. Such camps are also routinely raided by the Lebanese armed forces in anti-terrorism raids. There are regular reports of violence and mistreatment of Syrian refugees during these operations, some fatal, with clear evidence of torture and in some cases death.<sup>14</sup>

In the absence of an effective government-led response to the crisis and amidst increased tensions following a number of violent incidents, including the outbreak of fighting in August 2014 in the border town of Aarsal between Lebanese forces and members of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra that resulted in the deaths of dozens of soldiers and civilians,

Lebanese municipalities took on the role of ‘policing’ the presence of Syrian refugees within their territory. This led to excessive use of force, limitations on freedom of movement and various other forms of discrimination, ranging from curfews to evictions. The practice was widespread, sometimes with banners clearly dictating that Syrians were not allowed to circulate after certain hours.

While derogations on freedom of movement might be acceptable temporarily in extraordinary situations, such as in officially declared states of emergency, these curfews were individual measures taken by municipalities, in clear violation of Lebanon’s obligations under international human rights law. The curfews, implemented across more than 45 municipalities, exclusively targeted Syrians by prohibiting their presence outside of their dwellings in the evenings. Syrians would face fines, short-term imprisonment or police harassment if they were caught breaching the curfews. Besides being legally dubious and discriminatory,<sup>15</sup> these curfews have frequently been imposed not only by police but also local vigilantes, who have used them as a pretext to violently target Syrians.

## The role of religious discrimination

Religious discrimination against Syrian refugees in Lebanon, if not systematic, can add a further layer of complication to the dynamics between the two populations, and contributes to making the Lebanese environment all the less hospitable for Syrians. Research on the ways that religious identity may shape the experiences of Syrian refugees in Lebanon remains underdeveloped. Indeed, for the vast majority of Syrians, the discrimination they face in Lebanon stems from their nationality and status before it relates to any direct religious affiliation.

One area highlighted by some commentators is the apparently low representation of Christians among UNHCR-registered refugees. Despite the fact that Lebanon has been the main recipient of Syrian Christian refugees, as opposed to Turkey and Jordan,<sup>16</sup> the proportion of registered refugees identifying as Christian appears to be significantly less than their estimated share (10 per cent) of the pre-war Syrian population. This has been seen by some sources to suggest that Syrians from religious minorities are reluctant to identify publicly as refugees in Lebanon. Yet other factors, from the existence of supportive kinship networks in Lebanon to a fear of reprisals by Syrian authorities should they register as refugees, may also encourage some Christians to not engage with the UN’s refugee agency. Many Syrian Christians, as well as members of other communities such as Druze, have access to well-developed kinship networks that offer an alternative system of support to the refugee system. Furthermore, while many members of the Christian community and other minorities in Syria sympathized with the opposition,

the increasing influence of extremist groups among rebel forces may also have encouraged some to remain in Assad-controlled areas once the conflict progressed.

Evictions have been practiced widely, particularly targeting Syrians in overcrowded or informal housing. While authorities have typically presented these as routine crackdowns on housing violations, rather than aimed at Syrian refugees specifically, in practice the evidence suggests that many of these evictions have been conducted with the objective of removing Syrian residents from the area. An April 2018 report by Human Rights Watch (HRW) found that from 2016 to early 2018, at least 3,664 Syrians had been forcibly evicted by local authorities, while another 42,000 were at risk of eviction. Interviews with affected Syrians suggested that not only had they been specifically targeted on account of their nationality, but also at times on account of their faith. Almost all of the municipalities involved in the evictions were Christian-led, for instance, while the great majority of those evicted were Muslim. Some respondents claimed that other refugees who were Christian appeared to have been left alone.<sup>17</sup>

Similarly, some sources have suggested that communal rivalries have led to varying local responses to Syrian refugees, with the most welcoming being Sunni-dominated municipalities and the least being those controlled by Shi’a, while Christian municipalities generally fell between the two. This was interpreted as being driven partly by local fears that a large Sunni presence would alter the existing demographic balance, but also in terms of politics and security: as many Lebanese Shi’a power-brokers supported the Assad regime and viewed the (Sunni majority) Syrian opposition with suspicion, Sunni Syrians were therefore seen as a potential threat.<sup>18</sup>

It should be noted that this ‘confessional’ narrative is questioned by other research<sup>19</sup> and the actions of specific municipalities, while potentially driven by discrimination, does not reflect a concerted, nationally defined strategy against Syrians in general or Sunni Syrians more specifically. These examples do, however, point to the importance of enforcing a consistent, equitable and rights-based response to the Syrian refugee population to ensure that local municipal policies do not become increasingly sectarian in character.

At a community level, in general research suggests that despite widespread tensions between the Lebanese host population and Syrian refugees, these animosities have so far not been defined in strongly sectarian terms. One Syrian Alawite interviewed for this briefing stated that, while he experienced discrimination, this was on the basis of nationality rather than faith: ‘It’s because I’m Syrian. Here in Lebanon they discriminate against Syrians because they are Syrians, not because of their religion; they discriminate against each other based on religion.’<sup>20</sup> This is echoed in surveys that have highlighted the primary importance of economic concerns such as employment and access to assistance in determining relations between the Lebanese and Syrian communities.<sup>21</sup>

Anti-Syrian sentiment has been inflamed by specific incidents, such as the killing in September 2017 of a young Lebanese woman by a Syrian national in the northern town of Mizyara. Following her death, local residents demonstrated against the presence of Syrians in the area and called for Syrian refugees across Lebanon to be expelled from the country. Though relations between the communities had until then been cordial, many

Syrians were subsequently targeted by vigilantes, with the alleged collusion of security forces, and forced to leave their homes.<sup>22</sup> Though large-scale targeted attacks of this sort have been relatively rare, it does illustrate the real danger of communal tensions turning violent and the importance of addressing the underlying drivers of conflict, such as limited livelihood opportunities, before they flare up.

## The situation of smaller religious minorities in Lebanon

While communal discussions of Lebanon's Syrian refugee population often focus on the larger and more visible religious groups, such as Christians, Druze and Shi'a or Sunni Muslims, other smaller minorities may be driven to adopt a sort of 'religious camouflage' to protect themselves, as some did in their homeland. Lebanon's own minorities behave in a similar fashion, with many unregistered minorities either assimilating under larger religious communities or taking steps to avoid revealing their religious identity.<sup>23</sup>

The threats facing these communities, rather than direct discrimination, may be more indirect and yet impact nevertheless on their ability to participate fully in public life. Interviews with Syrian Isma'ilis, a community that faced significant discrimination within their home country, illustrate these issues. In Lebanon, the Isma'ili community now numbers a few hundred members and is the only sect of Islam not represented in the country's political system. As a result, there is little popular recognition of their community. 'Most of the people I meet here in Lebanon don't know what an Isma'ili is', said one Isma'ili respondent. 'Sunnis say, "Ah you are Shi'a!". Shi'a say, "Ah you are Sunni!"'<sup>24</sup>

On the one hand, this lack of awareness means that they are able to avoid potential communal rivalries. 'People who get discriminated because of their religion are the people from big and known sects like Sunni Syrians,' the respondent continued. 'If one of them lived in a Christian Lebanese community, for example, they might suffer from discrimination. As an Isma'ili, our community is not known even in Syria, and there is not that much recognition.'<sup>25</sup>

On the other hand, members of smaller religious minorities may simply not be comfortable or even used to talking about their faith in public. Another respondent, when asked whether he would answer a question relating to his religion, stated: "What is your sect? I don't know if I faced this question, what would be the reaction. Would it be positive because I'm from a minority sect, or it's going to be negative because anyway I'm Syrian. Even in Syria I wasn't talking or telling about my sect or religion... Here I follow the same strategy because you can't guess what the result is going to be. I'm not hiding it, but I don't talk about sectarianism."<sup>26</sup>

## The difficulty of return

After decades of repressive rule, the conflict in Syria has unleashed a range of destructive forces, from intercommunal rivalries to religious extremism, that have profound implications not only for the country's minorities but also the large Sunni refugee population now contemplating the possibility of return to their homeland. The widespread destruction in many parts of the country, deep-seated social trauma and the government's hold over the majority of Syrian territory, with extremist organizations still active in the areas outside Assad's control, mean that for many refugees in Lebanon repatriation is not currently an option. A representative sample survey by UNHCR of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Egypt, Iraq and Jordan published in July 2018 found that, while more than three quarters of respondents (76 per cent) wished to return one day to Syria, in terms of the next 12 months, just 4 per cent intended to return while another 11 per cent were

undecided: the overwhelming majority (85 per cent) did not intend to do so.<sup>27</sup>

Nevertheless, despite this inhospitable environment, it is likely that in the near future the number of returns to Syria may rise, with UNHCR suggesting that some 250,000 refugees could return in 2019.<sup>28</sup> While the conflict continues to take a heavy toll on civilians in many parts of the country, the 'stabilization' of areas by the government has been paralleled with a growing discourse internationally, including in neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, of the situation being conducive to returns, with governments encouraging and even pressuring some Syrian refugees to return to Syria. The Lebanese government and Hezbollah established a number of centres during 2018 to register Syrians wishing to return,<sup>29</sup> and some refugees have even reported receiving messages informing them that their areas are now safe to return to.<sup>30</sup> While UNHCR has so far maintained its position that conditions in Syria are not conducive for repatriation,

stating in 2018 that ‘present conditions in Syria are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity’,<sup>31</sup> there is growing pressure in Lebanon for repatriation and return. In January 2019, for example, at the Arab Economic and Social Development summit meeting in Beirut, Lebanese President Michel Aoun publicly called for the return of refugees to Syria. On the other side of the border, the Centre for Refugee Reception, Distribution and Settlement, a Russian entity under the Ministry of Defense based in Damascus, is now coordinating and monitoring the return of refugees and IDPs within Syria.

These developments point to the urgent need to consider, alongside the pressing humanitarian needs of the millions of Syrians displaced internally or living as refugees in Lebanon and elsewhere, the future of the country and the challenges of creating a sustainable post-conflict settlement for the diverse population. In particular, Assad’s cynical mobilization of communal anxieties amid the growing influence of extremist elements within the Syrian opposition forces has resulted in an increasingly sectarian landscape – accelerated, too, by the displacement of minorities by militant groups in areas under their control. As a result, the country’s demographics have been redrawn, with its religious minorities concentrated in the government-held areas of central and southern Syria, while in the north the population is now largely Sunni.<sup>32</sup>

There has been little evidence from the Assad regime of a willingness to accommodate former opponents or foster an inclusive environment for the safe return of the millions of mainly Sunni Syrian refugees to their homeland. Legislation such as Law 31 of 2018, passed in October 2018, granting the Ministry of Awqaf (religious endowments) with additional powers to determine what religious discourse is ‘appropriate’ and to penalize ‘deviant’ groups, appears to be primarily designed to control Sunni and other opposition groups.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the passage earlier in the year of Law No 10 stipulated that owners of land and property in destroyed areas slated for reconstruction should register ownership within 30 days or risk forfeiting their property. Though the timeframe was later extended to a year and in principle relatives of the owners can file claims on their behalf, the barriers for Syrians living abroad or in opposition-held areas to register their ownership are overwhelming. Many Syrians consider that the law has been passed with the specific aim of removing large sections of the Sunni population from government-held centres such as Damascus and establishing minority populations perceived to be sympathetic to the regime in their place.<sup>34</sup>

While the Syrian uprising was driven largely by political and social grievances, the regime has sought to reframe the conflict in terms of order and instability, with Assad presenting himself as a protector of the country’s minorities. The government appears to be continuing this damaging and divisive narrative through policies that will

further entrench communal divisions in Syria for years to come. How these issues are handled in the future will play a central element in whether some of Syria’s former diversity can be restored. While presenting itself in largely secular terms, the Assad’s regime has in practice promoted sectarianism and identity-based politics in its bid to re-establish control. Any return of refugees from Lebanon and other host countries will require that these and other discriminatory provisions are addressed: otherwise, like hundreds of thousands of Palestinians still living in limbo, many Syrian refugees will have no choice but to remain in their present situation in Lebanon, regardless of the difficulties they face.

## Conclusion

While the Syrian refugee crisis has created significant strains in Lebanon, in the process bringing some of the country’s internal divisions to the surface, the country has so far managed to avoid an outbreak of large-scale sectarian conflict. Furthermore, though there is evidence of growing tensions between Lebanese and Syrian communities, rooted particularly in economic concerns such as employment, this is by no means the whole picture. Indeed, local civil society organizations have played an important role in bridging barriers between Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees, offering both solidarity and humanitarian support.<sup>35</sup> More broadly, too, various associations and citizen movements have attempted to challenge the wider backdrop of the country’s sectarian politics by offering an alternative vision of a secular, rights-based citizenship for all, regardless of religion.<sup>36</sup>

It should be noted, too, that the broad agreement among the different factions within Lebanon’s political system to prevent the development of sectarian divisions within Lebanese society has contributed positively to the country’s security, notwithstanding the ongoing economic and governance challenges. However, given the intersection of the more punitive regulations being applied to the Syrian population in general and the apparent targeting of specific religious groups with eviction described earlier in this briefing, the most effective step to ensure the current crisis in Lebanon does not create further sectarian violence is to promote an inclusive strategy towards the refugee population firmly founded on international human rights standards.

The international community has an important role to play in ensuring Lebanon can continue to provide its large refugee population with security, basic services and more broadly a place within Lebanese society to allow them to live with dignity and meaning until such a time as safe, voluntary return to Syria is possible. Lebanon, with the largest per capita refugee population in the world, faces considerable social, economic and political burdens as a result of the crisis and it is only fair that these should be shared with other countries. However, the Lebanese Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), established to support Lebanon



through the creation of humanitarian and development programmes to support both Syrian refugees and vulnerable members of the Lebanese population, is at present underfunded: at the end of 2018, for example, it had received just \$1.4 billion of the \$2.68 billion it had requested at the start of the year – a funding gap of almost half (48 per cent) its requirements.<sup>37</sup>

In Syria, meanwhile, given the regime's tight control of public expression and opposition, the likelihood of either a vibrant civil society movement or a progressive government approach towards the reintegration of returning refugees

seems slim. Yet the long-term future of the country could depend to a considerable extent on the extent to which, in the next few years, any process of return is undertaken freely and safely, with all possible measures in place to enable those displaced since the beginning of the conflict to return to their homes. Without sustained and meaningful pressure from the international community, including Lebanon and other major host countries, the alternative is what has been described by various sources as a 'frozen conflict' – a future scenario characterized by instability and sectarianism.

## Recommendations

### To the government of Lebanon:

- **Bring an immediate end to curfews, evictions and other punitive policies towards Syrian refugees.** As a signatory to the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, the International Convention for the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination and other human rights treaties, the government should ensure that the Syrian population in Lebanon is able to live freely without fear of discrimination.
- **Develop a comprehensive, rights-based strategy to facilitate a comprehensive, coordinated response to the current Syrian refugee crisis.** This should prioritize both the immediate humanitarian needs of the Syrian refugee population while also providing a longer-term vision for the community to live safely and sustainably in Lebanon until conditions permit their safe and voluntary return.
- **Ensure that the treatment of Syrian refugees is equitable and consistent, without discrimination towards a particular group.** For example, benefits and support should also be extended to the hundreds of thousands of Syrians living in Lebanon not formally registered with UNHCR as refugees. Furthermore, authorities should avoid any measures specifically targeting Syrian refugees, particularly those that could appear to be aimed at specific religious groups within the refugee population.
- **Take steps to prevent arbitrary or abusive treatment of Syrian refugees by municipalities, security forces and Lebanese civilians.** Given the scale of the current crisis and the lack of an adequately resourced nationwide response, the government of Lebanon should take steps to promote a clear, consistent policy towards Syrian refugees across the country and ensure firm protections are in place to ensure this is respected.
- **Promote positive communal relations between the Lebanese and Syrian populations, drawing on the involvement of civil society and the communities themselves.** Among other measures, authorities should

develop targeted programmes in some of the poorest areas in the country, where many Syrian refugees currently reside, to support inclusive and mutually beneficial development programmes to reduce tensions over unemployment and other issues.

- **Guarantee the right of Syrian refugees to remain in Lebanon, with concrete procedures in place to prevent forcible returns and other human rights violations.** As some groups within Lebanon call for the return of the refugee population to Syria, authorities must affirm in unequivocal terms their right to remain for as long as conditions within Syria remain unsafe, and the continued support of Lebanon as a host to this community.

### To the international community:

- **Provide adequate support to Lebanon to alleviate the economic and social pressures of the refugee crisis.** Given the disproportionate number of Syrians hosted by Lebanon and the significant challenges it faces, other countries have a clear responsibility to contribute to the ongoing development and humanitarian shortfalls this has created through financial support to the LCRP and other mechanisms. By targeting both Syrians and marginalized Lebanese citizens, these efforts could ensure the protection of highly vulnerable individuals while also strengthening stability within Lebanon.
- **Uphold the rights of Syrian refugees to non-refoulement and prevent further involuntary returns to Syria.** As pressure within Lebanon grows for Syrians to leave the country and other regional actors reengage with the Assad regime, the international community should take steps to guarantee the long term security of the refugee population. This include ensuring, particularly as the Syrian government continues to perpetrate gross human rights abuses against many of its civilians, that Syrians are not coerced or indirectly pressured through hostile policies towards them to return to Syria while conditions remain unsafe.

## Notes

- 1 The Economist, 'How a victorious Bashar al-Assad is changing Syria', 28 June 2018; MRG, 'Syria', World Directory of Minorities and Indigenous Peoples, updated May 2018.
- 2 Minority Rights Group, *The Leaves of One Tree: Religious Minorities in Lebanon*, December 2014.
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## **An uncertain future for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: The challenges of life in exile and the barriers to return**

The impact of the eight-year long Syrian conflict has been felt by millions of civilians forced into exile from their country. For the estimated 1.5 million Syrians in Lebanon, life has largely continued in a state of limbo, with some longing to return home while others wishing to remain out of fear of persecution back in Syria. In either case, the majority are still caught in a precarious existence and in desperate need of stability, security and basic services. *An uncertain future for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: The challenges of life in exile and the barriers to return* explores the situation of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon today and the difficult choices that lie ahead of them, as well as the complex effects of their presence on Lebanese politics and the country's delicate communal framework.

While Lebanon, with the highest per capita refugee population in the world, has played a vital role as a sanctuary for displaced Syrians, many refugees have also suffered excessive use of force, limitations on freedom of movement and various other forms of discrimination, ranging from curfews to evictions. Though it has so far managed to avoid an outbreak of large-scale sectarian conflict, the most effective step to ensure the current crisis in Lebanon does not create further violence is to promote an inclusive and rights-based strategy towards the refugee population. The international community has an important role to play in ensuring Lebanon can continue to provide its large refugee population with security, humanitarian assistance and more broadly a place within Lebanese society to allow them to live with dignity and meaning until such a time as safe, voluntary return to Syria is possible.

In Syria, meanwhile, given the regime's tight control of public expression and opposition, the likelihood of either a vibrant civil society movement or a progressive government approach towards the reintegration of returning refugees remains slim. Yet the long-term future of the country could depend to a considerable extent on the extent to which, in the coming years, any process of return is undertaken freely and safely, with all possible measures in place to enable those displaced since the beginning of the conflict to return to their homes.

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The text does not necessarily represent in every detail the collective view of MRG or its partners. Copies of this study are available online at [www.minorityrights.org](http://www.minorityrights.org)

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