

THE EU-LEBANON'S MULTILATERAL REFUGEE GOVERNANCE

BUSINESS AS USUAL OR POLITICAL SOLUTIONS?

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In the past seven years, the massive influx of Syrian refugees into Lebanon has placed the country and its people under significant political, socio-economic, and humanitarian stress, where now one in five people is a refugee—the highest population of refugee per capita in the world. Up until January 2018, Lebanon still hosted close to one million registered Syrian refugees, and because the Lebanese government stopped the registration of new refugees, given the ‘existential’ risk of rising numbers back in 2015, this figure does not include individuals waiting to be registered or who entered the country illegally. Still, up until 2014, this pressing social catastrophe did not fully draw the world’s attention, but once the refugee crisis hit Europe, it became a widespread concern for migration policy in western countries.

Syrian Refugees: Lebanon’s Contextual Complexity

Most refugees in Lebanon are scattered throughout the country but mostly concentrated in urban areas, with 80 percent living outside camps as settlement services tend to be no better than outside conditions, with the highest urban concentration located in the Beirut area at around 266,000 registered individuals. However, the highest population of refugees is still located in the Bekaa eastern province of Lebanon,

with a population of around 357,000. Approximately half of all the refugees from Syria in Lebanon are children and teenagers, whose decent livelihoods are constantly in danger.

Moreover, the population in Lebanon was anticipated to surpass the 5.3 million mark in 2030. However, considering the Syrian refugee crisis, the estimated number of people currently living in Lebanon is about 5.9 million, a rapid population increase 12 years ahead of the projected date. This increase places an enormous pressure on Lebanon’s economy, infrastructure, security concerns, and its already frail ability to provide services, consequently increasing tensions between Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees. A report by the International Crisis Group in 2015 put it thus:

Lebanon, today as in the past, is vulnerable to the regional tug of war. Rebel infiltration and an influx of refugees from Syria echo the pre-civil war context, when conflicting Lebanese stances toward Palestinian refugees and fighters paralyzed the political machinery and fueled grievances and polarization. Against this backdrop, it is unclear how and for how long the country can resist the stresses emanating from its neighbor’s conflict.

The complexity of the Syrian refugee

population is increasingly contextual and problematic as this crisis mirrors the Palestinian refugee crisis that is often held responsible for bringing about the Lebanese Civil War. The security concerns, integration disputes and anxieties, change in demographics, unrest, and extremism are seen by many Lebanese people as a potential threat to the stable social fabric of the country, posing a risk of fueling another major conflict. In short, the historical experiences of the Lebanese people—and the government apparatus—with refugees influence heavily today’s response, along with present socioeconomic motivations and future uncertainties of another civilian and sectarian strife.

Main Challenges Among Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

In addition to Lebanon’s experience with refugees, there are several protracted socioeconomic challenges among refugees and Lebanese communities that further instability and add another layer of pressure to the state, placing Lebanon and refugees into a dire humanitarian situation. Nowadays poverty levels are high, with 1.5 million Lebanese living below the poverty line, and over 76 percent of Syrian refugees in the same condition. These protracted challenges among Syrian refugees and Lebanese continue to outpace the available re-

sources for this crisis, and place a heavier strain on the coping abilities of all affected communities to tolerate harsher conditions. Until now, the crisis in Syr-

ia has worsened existing development needs among vulnerable Lebanese and has cost the Lebanese economy about US \$18 billion.

Regularly, constraints on obtaining legal documentation place many Syrian refugees under a legal limbo that makes legal protection harder, impacting mo-



An eight-year-old Syrian refugee sells fruit in a refugee camp in Lebanon.
Photo Credit: AP Images.

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bility and limiting their access to many services, leading to exploitation and harassment by authorities, and a tendency to engage in illegal labor, thus forcing many families to engage in child marriage, child labor, and negative coping strategies to meet basic necessities. In terms of education, 250,000 Syrian refugees of school age remain out of any kind of educational system. Moreover, the rapid and increased demand for social services and infrastructure continues to fuel grievances between both communities and has dramatically affected their capacity to attain decent livelihoods. In particular, the Lebanese healthcare system is overburdened, and the rapid growth of about 50 percent in demand has decreased its capacity to cope with a growing population. In these conditions, and given Lebanon's lack of operational capacity and financial resources to respond to the needs of the Syrian refugee population, the European Union has had a major role in assisting the small country deal with a growing migrant population. As Lebanon is hardly able to respond to the needs of its own citizens, the EU has made the decision to help the country deal with what is now considered the international community's responsibility of helping Syrians fleeing from war and conflict. The EU has taken particular steps that have made the EU-Lebanon's bilateral cooperation become vital in supporting refugees and host communities.

The European Union: Neighborhood Policy and Lebanon

At large, in recent years, global migration due to war, climate change and sluggish socioeconomic conditions in the Middle East and North Africa are defining policy across the world. Predominantly, the European Union has had to adapt to the fast-changing political and socioeconomic realities that surround the porous continent, and respond to the massive influx of asylum seekers and refugees in search of protection. Despite progress made in the past decade towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the current course of action of systematic responses of cooperation to the refugee crisis threatens to delay further progress if the wellbeing of all beneficiaries—refugees and host communities—continues being disregarded as a priority. To date, the European Union has provided Lebanon with about €440 million in the form of humanitarian assistance to cope with the Syrian refugee crisis. Most of the aid provided from the EU is used to provide cash assistance and help people cover basic necessities, health care, shelter, water, and sanitation. This funding also serves to help refugees with legal matters of concern. In total, the EU has provided Lebanon with more than €1.2 billion since the start of the crisis across different areas, including bilateral development assistance that benefits both refugees and host communities.

In addition to the partnership's priorities of working towards a sustainable Lebanon, the most significant deal has been the EU-Lebanon's Compact, adopted for the 2016 to 2020 period. The deal supports the stabilization of the country by providing humanitarian assistance to refugees and Lebanese communities, and by increasing the resilience of Lebanon in different areas such as infrastructure and the national economy, that would, in the long term, also benefit the Lebanese. The compact focuses mainly on enhancing growth opportunities, countering terrorism, supporting governance, and facilitating migration and mobility. Nowadays, the EU has become the greatest partner of Lebanon's refugee governance scheme, especially in terms of providing refu-

gee children with quality education. The agreement of a minimum of €400 million in foreign aid is in aggregate to the already on-going projects that are worth up to €80 million implemented in 2016 and 2017, which indeed show the EU's commitment to ease Lebanon's struggles in hosting up to a million Syrian refugees. In addition, for 2018, the EU approved an additional €44 million assistance package that would promote Lebanon's stability and economic development. EU High Representative Federica Mogherini stated during a visit to Lebanon in December of 2017:

During my visit to Lebanon today, I will confirm the European Union's full support to stability, security, and unity of the country. Lebanon can count on EU commitment from the humanitarian aid to development cooperation, but also on economic and security levels. We will also continue to accompany Lebanon in its solidarity towards Syrian people fleeing the crisis.

Despite the EU's focus on promoting the well-being of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Lebanese institutions' responses are, on the other hand, at worrying odds with the international community's approach in supporting the future of refugees, Lebanon, and the region.

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Syrian refugees in Jordan. Photo Credit: AP Images.



Lebanon's Policy?

Lebanon's refugee governance, or the policy of the 'non-policy' has been considered as one of the main obstacles in dealing effectively with the crisis. Issues of corruption and lack of accountability, good governance, and compliance from institutions, in addition to a consuming bureaucracy, have exacerbated the impediments of many Syrian refugees and Lebanese communities alike. Notably, institutions have been negligent by failing to implement official governmental guidelines that are meant to ease the impediments of the crisis. Several Lebanese bureaucrats seem to be more interested in using Lebanon's position of leverage in the international community, and have rather decided to pursue an unwelcoming policy. The EU's agreement with Lebanon includes the underlying intention of limiting Syrian refugee migration to the EU, which is, in essence, one of the main concerns of the EU's Neighborhood and Security Policy. Lebanon's political system is often blamed for the stagnant condition

and legal limbo that many refugees face today. Its inability to provide for its own citizens offers a clear picture of their lack of will to provide for others. The Lebanese state could simply not be interested in satisfying the needs of its citizens, but rather is interested in satisfying those of the ruling elite.

This long-standing crisis has put many Lebanese through tests while strengthening their already outstanding pliability. Thus far, the Lebanese government's lack of leadership and its well-thought political economy machine on refugees certainly portray several weaknesses among elite members to 'respond' to critical circumstances on the ground. The government continues to use refugees as scapegoats and leverage in the international arena to justify their inability to tackle protracted socio-economic issues.

The standard in today's Lebanese state of affairs, especially in its refugee 'policy,' is the disturbing contrasting statements among institutions and stakeholders that create a cycle of never-ending impediments for Syrian refugees,

especially in regard to residency policies and education policies, consequently bringing along an overwhelming confusion where lack of compliance triumphs over policy standards. Realistically, the absence of a robust agreement for refugee policy might be added to another chapter of Lebanese confessionalism (the division of political power among sectarian lines), and how it can occasionally become fruitless. There's the impression that confessionalism is also distributing Lebanese among sectarian lines to respond to the refugee crisis, failing to propose unified solutions, but remaining keen on maintaining Lebanon 'stability', and in some way with the highest HDI among Arab states in the Levant.

Several NGOs and INGOs are only able to do much as long as the elite consents. Powerful figures in the economical and political arena such as the current president Michel Aoun (Christian), Saad Hariri (Sunni), Walid Jumblatt (Druze), Nabih Berri (Shia), Hassan Nasrallah (Shia) and Samy Gemayel (Christian) have in place a stable sectarian gover-

nance, but fully comprised of their own interests, in particular, an unlimited source of cheap labor, and a patronage system of aid that might be emboldening these leaders to hold on tighter to their positions, compromising the future of Lebanese institutions and governance system.

Thus, the political class discourse in front of Syrian refugees appears to have very little desire to do anything that would make life better for Lebanese communities, and propose durable solutions for refugees. Significantly, the elite remains dependent on a large low-skilled labor class, and the current presence of refugees provides a further supply to continue this practice of low wages and exploitation. However, at large, it is essential to clarify that despite that these claims are factual, Lebanese workers have also been exploited for many years by the elite.

But most importantly, regarding the crisis' political links with Syria, refugees today remain an embarrassment to forces friendly to Bashar Al-Assad, such as Berri and Nasrallah, as the massive influx was caused by an ally in the region which now threatens to drastically change the demographics in the country. Similarly, President Aoun and his allies continue to be concerned about the increasing number of Sunnis, who form part of the majority of Syrian refugees, and the threats to dilute the Christian constituency. And lastly, Prime Minister Hariri remains committed to Syrian refugees, as most are Sunni, and their opposition to his adversary Al-Assad in Syria. For many, any intention to disrupt the balance and favor one religious group over the other is usually a 'deal breaker' that creates fears among Lebanese.

Besides the complex circumstances of the Lebanese domestic political spectrum, the current politics of aid donation from partners to Lebanon might be undermining state authority, as most assistance is usually provided to non-state actors given known cases of corruption, lack of accountability, and good governance. But the state in Lebanon remains keen on using refugees as influence to attract more aid and 'keep refugees away' from the West, now becoming the EU's

strategic partner for the simple act of 'containing' refugees and hence following the same unclear patterns of previous agreements and 'business as usual' transactions of bilateral cooperation.

Silence and postponement on this matter cannot be the most sustainable choice, and henceforth, the time to renegotiate the status quo shall come. Dangerous levels of instability are always haunting Lebanese politics, and a possible relapse into conflict could threaten the principle of non-refoulement at the doorstep of the EU, and in one of the EU's main partners for refugee governance. The current 'no policy' approach

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in Lebanon is certainly not bearing in mind the long-term impact of another refugee population that could remain in the shadows of a legal limbo for many years to come.

Policy Recommendations

The current EU-Lebanon multilateral agreement must align with the nature and root causes of displacement to prevent future conflict, build much needed capacity, and avoid fueling a deal that helps 'keep migrants away' from the West to prioritize the needs of the displaced and host communities. The agreement should, of course, yield

benefit to all partners, but it must regard refugees and host communities as the essential focal point.

Additionally, the agreement must avoid falling into a regime of tolerance and aid patronage between the funder and the aid receiving country (the EU and Lebanon), that would only benefit elite members and well-connected figures. For these purposes, the parties should enforce a stronger regime of aid conditionality that promotes compliance and good governance among Lebanese institutions. In this regard, partners must emphasize accountability to guarantee that aid is not further contaminating and undermining Lebanese institutions.

Finally, donors and partners must understand and treat foreign assistance as a highly-political move that carries several consequences and far-reaching implications for Lebanon. In that sense, it is important to place greater emphasis on political solutions that adapt to the grievances of Syrian refugees and assists Lebanon with greater incentives to apply needed reforms. It would be convenient to discard conventional models of assistance, and move towards models that emphasize sustainability and most importantly, on the EU's established commitment with Lebanon to find political solutions to solve regional crises.

The EU has made several pledges to help Lebanon host up to a million Syrian refugees; however, the political, sectarian and structural dynamics of the Levantine country are proving to be a complex contextuality that keep defying international standards of aid and assistance. It would be up to the EU's role as a financial patron to tackle notorious concerns of its assistance towards Lebanon, especially in regard to political commitments and patronage commonalities of aid that threaten to keep disregarding beneficiaries as the focal priority in this EU-Lebanon refugee governance deal.

Despite any shortcomings, a focus on stronger international cooperation mechanisms should remain the ideal approach, particularly considering rising nationalist views of isolation to this global and regional crisis. **HJR**