The Importance of Marginalized Communities in Lebanon

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THE ISSUE

- As a series of compounding crises propel hundreds of thousands of Lebanese into poverty, refugees and migrant workers in the country—more than a fourth of Lebanon’s population of nearly seven million—confront even starker challenges. In addition to discrimination and a lack of legal protections, they face harsh competition over limited jobs and resources.

- Advancing the well-being of marginalized communities is vital not only as a humanitarian measure but also because the effects of their immiseration will ripple through the rest of Lebanese society and deepen the challenges of corruption, criminality, and organized and random violence.

- Donors must ensure that humanitarian and development efforts in Lebanon—including cash assistance, healthcare, education, and protection programs—are expanded and continue to reach marginalized communities. Integrating local non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and local leaders in design and planning will advance programs’ effectiveness and beneficiary buy-in and also ease social tensions.

INTRODUCTION

On November 5, a 58-year-old Syrian man set himself on fire outside the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) offices in Beirut reportedly because he could not afford to pay for his sick daughter’s medical treatment. It was not the first such incident this year. Millions of people in Lebanon are becoming increasingly desperate, and rising numbers of them have attempted the risky journey by sea to Cyprus. At least 21 boats attempted sea crossings between July and September 2020—compared to 17 throughout the whole of 2019. Many have died attempting the escape.

Decades of mismanagement and corruption have led to a series of cascading crises in Lebanon. A political movement took down the government last fall. On March 9, 2020, Lebanon defaulted on its Eurobond debt. The value of the Lebanese pound has plummeted nearly 80 percent in less than a year, evaporating savings and slashing purchasing power. Amidst stalled International Monetary Fund (IMF) discussions on reforms and assistance, an explosion at Beirut’s port on August 4 killed over 200 people. The explosion rendered tens of thousands homeless, and caused over $4 billion in damages. The United Nations estimates that more than 55 percent of Lebanese are now in poverty. On top of that, there are now 1,607 new Covid-19 infections reported on average each day, and intensive care units are at a dangerous 88 percent capacity. By early October 2020, Lebanon imposed lockdowns on 111 towns and villages—further straining businesses and their employees.
As protests and calls for reform gather steam, many politicians have turned to blaming outside actors for the economic collapse. This scapegoating has not only led to human rights violations like refoulement—the forced return of refugees to their countries of origin—but also forced evictions and sexual and physical abuse of refugees and migrant workers.

The international community appears unified, insisting that financial assistance to Lebanon will require genuine economic and political reforms. It must also insist on the protection of marginalized non-Lebanese citizens in the country. Comprising more than a fourth of Lebanon’s population of just under seven million, these refugees and migrant workers are an integral part of Lebanese society and play a vital role in the economy. In addition, most have nowhere else to go for the foreseeable future.

They face an uphill battle. Lebanese authorities and religious leaders continue to call for refugee return despite numerous studies highlighting the economic and security barriers to most Syrians returning. Palestinians have been living in Lebanon for decades and will continue to stay, beholden to the results of a heretofore unsuccessful peace process. Domestic workers from Africa and elsewhere often cannot afford early tickets home, and exit visas have been difficult to obtain. And in Lebanon’s system, which relies on communal leaders to provide what the central government often cannot, these communities are especially vulnerable. As Dr. Fadi al Halabi from Multi Aid Programs told CSIS, “Most Syrian refugees would say there is no one to represent me and my interests. We [Syrians] don’t have an embassy to protect us, and UNHCR can’t.”

Lebanon’s long-term future depends on creating a resilient system that protects all people, advances transparency and rule of law, and creates a predictable environment for investment. A large and vulnerable refugee and migrant worker community that struggles in the shadows undermines that future by distorting labor markets and deepening sectarian divisions. If the chaos is unchecked, Lebanon may well slide into the status of a failed state or even back into civil war. Including marginalized communities in Lebanon’s recovery and expanding humanitarian assistance now is not just good for those communities, it is good for Lebanon and good for those who would be hurt by Lebanon’s collapse. Failing to do so makes that collapse more likely.

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-Dr. Fadi al Halabi, Multi Aid Programs

**CONTEXT**

Lebanon, a tiny heterogeneous country, has historically hosted hundreds of thousands of refugees and migrant workers. For the most part, these refugees have remained outside of Lebanon’s precarious political system, which carefully manages power between the country’s 18 recognized sects. However, the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, much like their Palestinian counterparts, are Sunni, and non-Sunni groups in Lebanon see them as a threat to the country’s delicate demographic balance.

The outsized role that Syria played in Lebanese politics for decades also complicates matters for Syrian refugees. Now, as Syria continues to struggle through a decade-long civil war, Lebanon shares a 365-kilometer border with a war zone. Many of the antagonists in the Syrian
Civil war are connected to sectarian and political groups in Lebanon. Most Syrian refugees fled the Assad government, which has positive relations with many of Lebanon’s politicians and with its military ally, Hezbollah.

While this tension has led to limited outbreaks of violence—such as the five-day battle in Arsal in August 2014 between Syrian armed group members and the Lebanese army—the war in Syria has not spilled into Lebanese streets. In a country flooded with millions of weapons, a long porous border with a conflict zone, and a history of sectarian conflict, this relative peace is admirable. As the country descends further into an economic crisis on top of the pressures of a Covid-19 response, however, Lebanon’s balancing act may be falling apart.

In the last week of November 2020, 270 Syrian refugees fled Bsharri, Lebanon after Lebanese men attacked them in their homes wielding sticks, knives, and guns, and, in some cases, burning the houses down. At least one victim was forced to travel to Tripoli when a local hospital refused to treat his wounds. Allegedly, the men were motivated by the murder of a Lebanese man by a Syrian man for unknown reasons. However, the terrorized Syrian refugees were completely unrelated to the murder suspect. This is not the first case of collective punishment of Syrians in Lebanon, but the severity of the case points to potentially troubling trend.

If the Lebanese order breaks down, the likelihood that refugees and foreigners will be dragged into a conflict over resources is high. Indeed, Palestinian residents of Lebanon were both victims and antagonists in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990), and the war helped cement Syrian influence over Lebanon. The recent round of public protests in Lebanon has not had a heavy sectarian flavor up to now, but sectarianism appears poised for a resurgence. Politicians are testing messages that scapegoat others for Lebanon’s troubles, and as the crises deepen, there is a growing political and social pressure to prioritize Lebanese needs. Some politicians are arguing that social safety net packages explicitly exclude refugees. Some also argue for forced refugee return. In Lebanon’s evolving competition for scarce resources, Syrians, Palestinians, and domestic migrant workers have no patrons and no protectors.
**THE EFFECT OF LEBANON’S CRISIS ON VULNERABLE COMMUNITIES**

Lebanon’s overlapping crises over the past year have been catastrophic for vulnerable communities. Some 90 percent of the over one million Syrian refugees living in Lebanon lost their income in the last year or had their salaries reduced, and roughly 80 percent were unable to pay rent. Now, 88 percent of Syrian refugees live below the extreme poverty line. That represents an increase from 50 percent in mid-2019.

Lebanon’s population of over 200,000 Palestinians and 20,000 refugees of other nationalities are facing similar economic hardships. On November 9, Philippe Lazzarini, the commissioner-general of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), announced that the UN agency, upon which many Palestinians rely for everything from education to medical care, had run out of money. Claudio Cordone, UNRWA’s Lebanon country director, told CSIS that they had to suspend salaries to their staff and may have to suspend some services. Those affected have already gathered to protest outside UNRWA offices. Meanwhile, Covid-19 cases in the Palestinian refugee community surged from 200 in July to more than 10,000 the first week of October 2020.

Lebanon’s estimated 250,000–400,000 domestic migrant workers are also suffering. In a shattered economy, Lebanese employers stopped paying or let go thousands of domestic migrant workers. A survey conducted in mid-April by the Anti-Racism Movement (ARM), a local nongovernmental organization (NGO), found that 40 percent of migrant workers had lost their jobs after the coronavirus outbreak, while another 18 percent were laid off since the start of the financial crisis in 2019. With little in savings and nowhere to turn, hundreds of domestic migrant workers were forced to sleep in the streets, oftentimes outside of their embassies, asking for help to return home.

**MEETING IMMEDIATE NEEDS**

Meeting the needs of refugees and vulnerable communities in Lebanon was already difficult prior to the economic crisis. With the Lebanese government essentially bankrupt, the humanitarian community is taking principal responsibility, providing relief for food, rent, healthcare, education, and other types of basic assistance for millions in the country. Even local NGOs like Egna Legna Besidet and the ARM, which had focused on advocacy and solidarity especially for domestic migrant workers, became aid workers overnight to respond to unprecedented numbers of foreign workers abandoned by employers. They went out to the streets themselves and delivered aid boxes, masks, and sanitizer.

However, in such a fragile environment, “doing no harm” can be difficult. The government’s insistence on an artificially low exchange rate makes cash assistance problematic. NGOs debated providing beneficiaries with dollars but worried that carrying the coveted but scarce currency would make beneficiaries vulnerable to robbery, amongst other economic concerns. Replacing cash assistance with in-kind assistance solves currency problems but can distort local markets. Even emergency assistance can have unintended consequences: After the Beirut port blast, NGOs and the government worked to provide small business and homeowners with assistance to rebuild. Some landlords rebuilt apartments and then evicted refugee tenants. What is clear is that cash assistance will need to be expanded and soon to get marginalized communities through the winter without losing their homes and going hungry.

Even with financial support from the UNHCR, the cost of medical treatment and supplies for many Syrian refugees is still prohibitive. Human Rights Watch told CSIS that they spoke to one Syrian woman with three disabled children who had to sell their wheelchairs to pay the rent. And while Syrians can enter public school, many families are struggling to prioritize education over another income. By March 2020, 23 percent of Syrian refugee families had already withdrawn their children from school, and a rising number were entering the workforce. NGOs argue that expanded cash assistance could mitigate some of these negative coping strategies.

**RISING COMPETITION FOR MORE LIMITED RESOURCES**

Despite this dismal reality for many refugees, politicians, such as Gebran Bassil, the leader of the Lebanese Free Patriotic Movement, the largest political party in the parliament, continues to make false assertions that Syrians live for free in Lebanon, stoking inter-communal tensions. “They are receiving aid for every aspect of their lives. They are receiving
They are better covered on health than the Lebanese,” he said when speaking about Syrian refugees last year.23

As more Lebanese share the same fragile institutions as refugees and migrant workers and the job market shrinks, these tensions will grow. Until the recent economic crisis, most Lebanese relied on private healthcare and schools. Over 80 percent of Lebanon’s hospitals and 70 percent of its schools are private. However, more citizens, unable to afford the fees, will switch to public healthcare and schools, dramatically increasing the pressure on these institutions. To prevent any backlash from citizens, the Ministry of Education has already assured the public that priority will be given to Lebanese.24

Ensuring that people are not prioritized for medical treatment by nationality, as medicine disappears from shelves and intensive care units fill up, is another serious concern. To respond to the pressure on healthcare, some NGOs are advocating to shore up the public healthcare system for all people in Lebanon in the face of rising demand and a collapsing national insurance plan. The approach of subsidizing nationality-blind healthcare seeks to meet dire public health needs and to prevent competition or tensions between foreigners and Lebanese seeking low-cost care.25 It remains to be seen how far international support of these institutions can go without politicians firmly committing to a governmental reform process.

Gaining access to a limited job market could also be a source of tension. While Syrians, Palestinians, and domestic migrant workers are restricted to working in certain sectors, competition for these scarce jobs will dramatically increase as many Lebanese fall below the poverty line. Expanding cash assistance is vital to meeting basic needs in lieu of lost salaries, but it is unsustainable and inadequate. This is why, even in the face of an emergency, many NGOs still believe livelihoods programming is essential.

While additional interim support can be provided to shore up education and healthcare, the challenge for Lebanon is how to invigorate the economy with a large and growing percentage of poorly paid and poorly educated residents whose life chances are undermined by current conditions in the country. In addition to providing refugees with the right to healthcare and education, many economists agree that economic reforms should be tied to basic rights to work and to movement for refugees and migrant workers. Doing so will make development programs more effective, but it is a longer-term process.26 As Yasmin Kayali, co-founder of Basmeh & Zeitooneh NGO, pointed out, “Change is not going to happen in four months and not in six months. It takes years. You’re changing mentalities, you’re changing livelihoods, and you’re trying to better people’s quality of life . . . this is the kind of commitment that we need.”

GROWING PROTECTION CONCERNS

While ordinary Lebanese strain at the increasing difficulties of daily life, many of Lebanon’s politicians seem to put the blame squarely on the back of marginalized communities. Corruption and weak infrastructure have wracked Lebanon since the end of the civil war in 1990, yet Energy Minister Cesar Abi Khalil said, in February 2017, “If it weren’t for the refugee crisis, Lebanon would have electricity 24/7.” While this rhetoric and more overtly racist speech is not new, the political and economic crises have provided the spark needed to turn talk into action.

Between late May and late August of 2019, General Security reported that they had deported 2,731 Syrians. On June 3, 2019, Minister Abu Suleiman launched a campaign called “Only Your Countrymen Can Help You Stimulate Your Business.” Under the plan, businesses had one month to register any undocumented foreign employees.27 However, the title makes the goals of the campaign quite clear. Establishments employing refugees were fined or closed, preventing others from employing refugees as well. In the same month, Lebanese authorities ordered the demolition of refugees’ simple breeze block homes in Arsal, leaving 5,000 families and as many as 15,000 children homeless.28 Forced to live in inadequate overcrowded tents, a foot of snow built up on tarp roofs, and the flu swept through the tented settlement last winter. With a surge in coronavirus infections, this winter could be even worse. The discrimination has also affected the Covid-19 response. Stories of refugees and migrant workers being
mistreated, isolated, beaten, or detained for having Covid-19 abound, inhibiting both testing and treatment. Early in the pandemic, at least 21 municipalities enforced more stringent curfews and other Covid-19 restrictions on Syrians than Lebanese residents.²⁹ There are at least two cases of Syrians being beaten or evicted after buying acetaminophen, as their purchase suggested that they might have Covid-19.³⁰

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Civil society organizations and NGOs are also calling for a moratorium on deportations and suspension of prohibitive residency fee requirements. At least 88 percent of Syrian refugees lack legal residency, meaning they are at constant risk of detention. Even those with residency through work sponsorship are vulnerable to sexual and labor exploitation—much like domestic migrant workers—by employers who take advantage of their lack of legal or de facto protections.³⁴

The caretaker government initiated reforms to the foreign worker sponsorship, or “kafala” system,³⁵ but on October 14, Lebanon’s highest administrative court suspended its implementation due to a lawsuit by the lobby for domestic worker recruitment offices.³⁶ For now, the priority for many migrant workers is to find new accommodations or just go home.

Advocates continue to push the government to incorporate refugees and migrant workers into Lebanese labor law and hold abusive employers accountable. Without an enforcement mechanism or a patron in the Lebanese government, these communities will be exposed to more wide-scale abuses as Lebanese politicians and people become more desperate.

CONCLUSION

As more Lebanese cannot afford basic necessities and more pressure is placed on the system, bitterness towards assistance to non-Lebanese will grow without additional conflict-sensitive support. While reforms and accountability needed to make the Lebanese government meet the needs of its people will be slow, meeting urgent humanitarian needs for marginalized
Communities will save lives, ease social tensions, and prevent conflict. They rely on the international community to press for their protection. Incorporating these protections in future negotiations for state-wide reforms will also be essential for a viable Lebanese state.

Donor governments have a stake beyond a humanitarian imperative. Ironically, Lebanon’s own recent history is a case study in the global implications for sectarian and socio-economic tensions leading to inter-communal violence. Lebanon itself houses only a minority of its own citizens; many fled during the country’s 15-year civil war. Were sectarian tensions to break out in Lebanon again, non-Lebanese with no option of returning home would likely become participants, seeking protection from antagonists. Inter-communal violence would incubate extremism on all sides.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

By the end of September, there was still a 55 percent gap in funding for the 2020 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan. Filling the funding gaps for the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP), the LCRP, and UNRWA will be vital to getting Lebanon through the winter and another Covid-19 surge. Expanding livelihoods and education assistance in a way that promotes social cohesion will be more important than ever before. With this funding comes further engagement with local and national authorities and the possibility of making change within Lebanon and improving the prospects for stability and peace. Specifically, donor governments and aid workers should:

- Increase nationality-blind assistance. Subsidizing nationality-blind healthcare and providing indirect assistance to municipalities for service provision can inhibit tensions between host communities and refugees. However, engagement should consistently monitor abuses and anti-refugee rhetoric and make clear that such discrimination is unacceptable to a lasting partnership.

- Exercise flexibility working in areas in the South and East with Hezbollah influence. Serving and protecting refugee communities in these areas, where they are under threat, is essential. An adequate humanitarian response there can also diminish the local communities’ reliance on Hezbollah-affiliated actors.

- Incorporate local NGOs and civil society organizations (CSOs), which have the trust of their communities and double as watchdogs for abuses, in the design and planning phases of programming. Organizations, led by the communities they serve, are better placed for understanding their needs and being privy to an escalation in abuses.

- Engage with religious leaders, municipalities, and the central government with an aim to reduce xenophobic rhetoric and promote the rights of non-citizens.

- Sufficiently fund monitoring mechanisms to ensure that aid reaches people in need and is not diverted. Humanitarian aid will not be immune to corruption in this climate.

- Fast-track third country resettlement options, prioritizing those who would be persecuted in Syria and under immediate threat in Lebanon.

Donor governments and international financial institutions should continue to press for much needed reforms in Lebanon following from the Reform, Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) and the CEDRE conference in Paris in 2018. However, such negotiations should:

- Carefully consider how to mitigate the negative impacts of lifting or even threatening to lift certain subsidies, such as those on medication.

  - If non-citizens are left out of cash-assistance safety nets provided when subsidies are lifted, they will be made even more vulnerable.

  - Transparency with regard to any reform package is essential to prevent behaviors such as hoarding, which could make vital medical supplies unavailable to the public or clinics.

- Ensure basic rights to work and movement for refugees and domestic migrant workers, as granted in international conventions.

  - Incorporating these rights into the labor code and establishing an independent regulatory and enforcement mechanism for such protections for Lebanese and non-Lebanese alike will be essential.

  - Monitoring evidence of abuse and forced deportation of refugees must remain an integral part of U.S. security assistance and diplomatic efforts.

- Establish a coordination mechanism for development and humanitarian actors to ensure that any future infrastructure or agricultural projects maximize benefits by providing work opportunities for the most vulnerable rather than the cronies of a particular politician.
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“ESCWA warns: more than half of Lebanon’s population trapped in poverty,” The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, August 19, 2020, https://www.unescwa.org/news/Lebanon-poverty-2020-%text=Estimates%20reveal%20that%20more%20than%2019%25%20of%20the%20population%20was%20poor%20in%202020.


“Syria in Focus: Rise in evictions due to increased economic vulnerability,” Inter-agency Coordination Lebanon, July 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/77872.pdf


UNRWA provides education to 37,000 students, supports 27 PHCCs, and infrastructure and service to Lebanon’s 12 Palestinian camps. CSIS interview with UNRWA director via Zoom, November 16, 2020.


Medina, “The Beirut blast lays bare a shockwave of evictions hitting Syrians in Lebanon.”

87 percent of Syrian refugees highlighted assistance to cover rent as a priority need. “In Focus: Rise in evictions due to increased economic vulnerability,” Inter-agency Coordination Lebanon, July 2020, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/77872.pdf

CSIS interviews with experts in Lebanon’s health sector, November 11–16, 2020.


35 The system used to monitor migrant labor in the country.


38 Since municipalities cannot open bank accounts, paying them directly in USD also risks feeding corruption since they can just exchange the money on the black market and use a portion for their own purposes. CSIS interview with INGO director in Lebanon, via Zoom, November 10, 2020.

39 The 3RF is part of a wider dialogue between the international community and the government on macroeconomic stabilization, including discussions at the 2018 Conference for Economic Development and Reform through Enterprises (CEDRE). The 3RF covers an 18-month period and is part of a comprehensive response by the international community, bridging from emergency relief and humanitarian action toward medium-term reconstruction.