



Syrian Refugees from One Crisis to Another: The Question of Return

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The political, socio-economic and financial crisis that Lebanon is currently going through is the worst that the country has experienced in over 30 years. With an inflationary trajectory, a *de facto* devaluation of the Lebanese Pound (LBP) officially pegged to the American Dollar (USD) and banking restrictions imposed on foreign currency withdrawals, Lebanese citizens as well as foreign nationals residing in the country face great financial challenges. Moreover, the economic downturn has dramatically worsened since the lockdown was declared early March 2020 to contain the spread of the coronavirus. Lebanon's crisis management of the Covid-19 pandemic has been praised as efficient in terms of fatalities and spread of the virus, with 26 deaths and just over a thousand confirmed cases at the time of writing. Nevertheless, the shutdown of the economy has dramatically affected business-owners as well as their employees. Economic contraction, unemployment and poverty are expected to rise at a path that will overwhelm the already inefficient safety nets and public services available in the country. In this gloomy situation, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are not only confronted to deteriorating living conditions but also to additional challenges related to their status. Indeed, most have to deal with the consequences of not having legal residency in the country and of shrinking funding for UN agencies handling the refugee crisis.¹ Furthermore, they are often blamed for the dire economic situation in the country, which many observers describe as classical scapegoating, using a similar rhetoric to what is used elsewhere against foreigners in times of economic downturn. Therefore, the question of return is a timely and crucial one, as the financial and economic crisis, exacerbated by the Covid-19 crisis, might constitute a turning point for many refugees in relation to their intention and actual decision to return to Syria. Until recently, most studies concerned with the potential return of Syrian refugees to their home country stressed the utmost importance of safety and security elements inside Syria for refugees to consider return. Nonetheless, some observers have recently underlined

¹ Indeed, the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) saw its funding for the refugee crisis decrease and was thus obliged to compile a new list of vulnerable beneficiaries, the selection criteria of which are not well understood nor legitimized by the refugee population. See Anton Mukhamedov, "Liban. Une croisade haineuse contre les réfugiés syriens et palestiniens," *Orient XXI*, August 6, 2019, <https://orientxxi.info/magazine/liban-une-croisade-haineuse-contre-les-refugies-syriens-et-palestiniens,3228>, accessed February 2020.

the despair of many refugees in the midst of the crisis. In April 2020, dozens of Syrians were stuck for days at the Lebanese-Syrian border in an attempt to return to their home country, where the Syrian authorities denied them entrance under the guise of Covid-19 prevention measures.² It seems that conditions prevailing in Lebanon have become more significant and influential in refugees' intention to return as the crisis deepens in their host country. Hereafter, we analyze the determinants of return and the trade-off that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are facing through this decision-making process, while taking into account the latest economic developments in the country.

Return in Safety and Dignity

It is first crucial to understand the main determinants of the decision to return for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, as well as the risks that such a decision entails. What past and recent studies have consistently shown is that safety and security were so far the most important prerequisites for a return, despite the relative improvement of the security situation on the ground in Syria.³ Indeed, absence of conflict is a necessary but for most insufficient condition for refugees to return. Safety entails not only physical but also legal and material safety.⁴ Early 2019, the French and German Ambassadors to Lebanon recalled that "the main barrier [to return] is the climate of fear and injustice in Syria."⁵ Overall, the security risk is currently less related to direct fighting and war (although armed militias and gangs are still operating in some areas) but rather to potential human rights violations returnees could be victims of. They include arbitrary persecution, arrest or detention, acts of torture, forced disappearances and extra-judiciary executions.⁶ Often linked to safety and security issues, access to services, livelihood, and housing comes second as a main concern for Syrian refugees in considering a return to Syria.⁷ The economic situation in Syria is catastrophic, with very high poverty and unemployment rates, and a country to rebuild with little funding.⁸ Many inside Syria are thus relying on

² Lucy Parseghian, "لاجئون سوريون عالقون عند الحدود: النظام يمنع عودتهم بالقوة" *Al Modon Online*, April 21, 2020, <https://www.almodon.com/society/2020/4/21/>, accessed May 2020.

³ The World Bank, *The Mobility of Displaced Syrians. An Economic and Social Analysis*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/syria/publication/the-mobility-of-displaced-syrians-an-economic-and-social-analysis>, accessed May 2020.

⁴ UNHCR, "A Longing to Go Home, in Safety and Dignity: Intentions and Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon About Their Future," January 2018, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/63310>, accessed March 2020.

⁵ "Future of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Lies in Syria," *The Daily Star*, March 15, 2019, <http://ftp.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Mar-15/478876-future-of-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-lies-in-syria.ashx>, accessed May 2020.

⁶ "Syrie: La question du retour des réfugiés," *Amnesty International France*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.fr/conflits-armes-et-populations/actualites/syrie-la-question-du-retour-des-refugies>, accessed February 2020.

⁷ UNHCR, "Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria," March 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/68443>, accessed March 2020.

⁸ International Crisis Group, "Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon," Report N°211 Middle East and North Africa, February 13, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/211-easing-syrian-refugees-plight-lebanon>, accessed March 2020.

humanitarian aid distribution, which depends on the regime's authorizations and is often delayed or blocked. UN agencies and international organizations are further prevented from offering protection services to returnees, especially concerning housing and property rights.⁹ Since 2012, the Syrian regime conducts population transfers and demographic engineering and has legalized its policy through various new regulations, making it difficult to recover one's housing. In 2018, the regime passed the infamous Law No.10 to establish areas designated for reconstruction, which gives local authorities a week to obtain a list of property owners once an area is designated for reconstruction, then 45 days to submit it. In case some owners are not mentioned on the provided list, they have up to a year – the initial version of the law gave them 30 days only – to provide proof of ownership in person. Otherwise, the property is transferred to local authorities.¹⁰ Even when deeds are provided, authorities often reject ownership claims. It goes without saying that no compensation is offered for seized, damaged or destroyed housing.¹¹ The importance of left-behind assets and the ability to reclaim intact houses in Syria proved to be a key determinant in the decision to return.¹² In fact, most refugees would like to return to their place of origin, or to relatives if the former is not possible. Yet, they are not keen on returning to become Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in their own homeland, as this would not constitute an improvement from their situation as refugees.¹³ Another concern shared by many refugees, in particular young men, is the forced conscription that requires every man aged between 18 and 42 to complete his military service.¹⁴ Many fear that they will be sent to the frontline to kill or be killed by fellow citizens – fighting a war that is not theirs – especially since an amnesty for draft-dodgers expired in April 2019 and the regime is showing no intention to offer guarantees, let alone monitoring mechanisms to enforce these.¹⁵

⁹ "Syrie: La question du retour des réfugiés," *Amnesty International France*, 2019

¹⁰ For more information on the infamous Law No.10 (preceded by Decree No.66 in 2012) designating the areas prone for reconstruction in Syria, and its implications, see Ibrahim Abu Ahmad, "Assad's Law 10: Reshaping Syria's Demographics," *The Washington Institute – Fikra Forum*, September 17, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/fikraforum/view/assads-law-10-reshaping-syrias-demographics>, accessed May 2020; and for the other restrictive measures taken by the regime in relation to housing and reconstruction, see Sage Smiley, Noura Hourani, Reem Ahmad, "'A New Syria': Law 10 Reconstruction Projects to Commence in Damascus, Backed by Arsenal of Demolition, Expropriation Legislation," *Syria Direct*, November 19, 2018, <https://syriadirect.org/news/%E2%80%98a-new-syria%E2%80%99-law-10-reconstruction-projects-to-commence-in-damascus-backed-by-arsenal-of-demolition-expropriation-legislation/>, accessed May 2020.

¹¹ Amnesty International, "Q&A – Why Are Returns of Refugees from Lebanon to Syria Premature?," Amnesty International Public Statement, June 12, 2019, <https://www.amnesty.org/download/Documents/MDE1804812019ENGLISH.pdf>, accessed March 2020.

¹² The World Bank, *The Mobility of Displaced Syrians. An Economic and Social Analysis*, 2019.

¹³ International Crisis Group, "Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon," 2020.

¹⁴ Empatika, "Qualitative Research on Social Tensions in Lebanon – Round 2, Year 1," December 2019, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/72722>, accessed March 2020.

¹⁵ International Crisis Group, "Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon," 2020.

Despite all those risks, some refugees have returned to Syria in recent years. Some agreements were made outside the framework of the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), as part of localized deals with various actors.¹⁶ Usually though, it is the Lebanese General Security (GS), in relation with UNHCR, that organized returns for Syrian refugees either through applications at its offices or registration with political parties. Once voluntariness to return is checked for those who registered through political parties, the GS puts together lists of refugees willing to return and submits it to the Syrian security services for pre-approval. If security clearance is not given by the Syrian regime, the concerned refugees are not allowed to ride the buses transporting returnees to the border.¹⁷ It is essential for refugees to be able to access their security file before taking the decision to return, as it indicates if they are wanted by the Syrian regime and thus risk being arrested or prosecuted upon their return. However, this file is difficult to obtain without connections or outside the procedure of an organized return through the GS. Moreover, it is sometimes unreliable and it does not protect a returnee from arbitrary decisions.¹⁸ In November 2018, the Lebanese government confirmed that the regime forces had killed around 20 returnees, including at least two children.¹⁹ Rights organizations fear that these numbers are actually much higher and will keep growing if return is not conducted in a safe and dignified manner, implying that the human rights of returnees, such as the right to life, the liberty and freedom of movement, and the right to family unity, are respected all the time.²⁰ Although Syrian refugees keep themselves informed about the situation in their home country through social networks and word of mouth, the majority thinks that they have no access to reliable information in order to decide whether to return or not.²¹ Meanwhile, UNHCR insists that voluntary return of refugees should rely on free and informed consent. So far, the UN agency is not encouraging returns but is supporting any refugee engaged in the process of returning.

While it is true that most of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are longing to return to Syria, the question that remained open until recently was essentially when. Although the decision of return largely depends on prerequisite conditions prevailing in Syria, the current circumstances in Lebanon are gaining in importance and could now make a difference. Therefore, as rational and purposive individuals, Syrian refugees need to conduct an inextricable kind of cost-benefits analysis to determine whether to remain in Lebanon or return to Syria, putting their life and survival at stake.

Trade-off between Security Concerns and Economic Uncertainty

¹⁶ Human Rights Watch, World Report (2019): 353-355, https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/world_report_download/hrw_world_report_2019.pdf, accessed January 2020.

¹⁷ Amnesty International, "Q&A – Why Are Returns of Refugees from Lebanon to Syria Premature?," 2019.

¹⁸ International Crisis Group, "Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon," 2020.

¹⁹ Human Rights Watch, World Report 2019.

²⁰ UNHCR, "A Longing to Go Home, in Safety and Dignity: Intentions and Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon About Their Future," 2018.

²¹ UNHCR, "Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria," 2019.

Most refugees in Lebanon are torn between returning to Syria while fearing for their lives and freedom and the increasingly uncertain prospects of their current situation in Lebanon.²² It is worth noting that, until now, and despite the increasingly punitive push factors prevailing in Lebanon, the conditions there proved for most less critical in the decision to return than the prerequisite conditions in Syria.²³ Indeed, a World Bank study found that bad conditions of living do not imply a higher likelihood to return.²⁴ Furthermore, the growing hostility and administrative and legal hurdles imposed on Syrian refugees did not clearly affect the number of returnees in recent years.²⁵ However, many observers are now pointing to an increase in the weight attributed to push factors in Lebanon compared to conditions in the home country. The deteriorating situation in Lebanon seems to be a reason for many to reassess their priorities. Even before the current crisis, Syrian refugees in Lebanon were impoverished and struggling to make ends meet. This is even more so now that the socio-economic and financial crisis is deepening. Indeed, the purchasing power of Lebanese and Syrians alike is declining dramatically and Syrians are even more affected by the current crisis since they mostly work in the informal labor sector, and are thus offered no protection.²⁶ Among others, the construction and service sectors, where most Syrians are employed, are severely hit by the crisis, thus reducing job opportunities and dwindling wages for many refugees. While the job market is contracting, inflation is dramatically rising, leading to additional uncertainty to refugees' earning capacity and living conditions. To the point that the UNHCR representative in Lebanon, Mireille Girard, recently declared that the survival capacity of Syrian refugees is now at risk.²⁷ UNHCR reported that over 50% of refugees surveyed late April 2020 lost livelihoods, while 70% declared having reduced their food consumption as a result of the ongoing crisis, which has been exacerbated by the measures taken in the fight against the coronavirus.²⁸ Indeed, the lockdown implemented in the context of Covid-19 forced banks to close, making withdrawals impossible, what has affected cash assistance on which most

²² Ammar Hamou, Alice Al Maleh, "The Politics of Return: Refugees, NGOs Navigate Increasingly Fraught Climate in Host Countries," *Syria Direct*, April 10, 2019, <https://syriadirect.org/news/the-politics-of-return-refugees-ngos-navigate-increasingly-fraught-climate-in-host-countries/>, accessed February 2020.

²³ UNHCR, "Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria," 2019.

²⁴ The World Bank, *The Mobility of Displaced Syrians. An Economic and Social Analysis*, 2019.

²⁵ International Crisis Group, "Easing Syrian Refugees' Plight in Lebanon," 2020.

²⁶ Abby Sewell, "Lebanon's Financial Crisis Hits Syrian Refugees Hard," *The New Humanitarian*, January 9, 2020, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2020/1/9/Lebanon-financial-crisis-Syrian-refugees>, accessed February 2020.

²⁷ Anne-Marie El Hage and Caroline Hayek, "Quand la crise économique libanaise pousse des réfugiés syriens à rentrer chez eux," *L'Orient Le-Jour*, January 10, 2020, <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1201764/quand-la-crise-economique-libanaise-pousse-des-refugies-syriens-a-rentrer-chez-eux.html>, accessed in January 2020.

²⁸ UNHCR Staff, "Refugees across Arab World Feel Economic Pain of Coronavirus," *UNHCR*, May 1, 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/latest/2020/5/5eabcf704.html>, accessed May 2020. Other organizations reported that 80% of surveyed Syrians had lost their main source of income by mid-April 2020 following the COVID-19 measures, see Refugee Protection Watch, "Briefing on COVID-19 and Lebanon," April 21, 2020, <https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/covid-19-in-lebanon-impact-on-refugees-and-host-communities>, accessed May 2020.

refugees rely. Now that economic life is somehow resuming, Lebanon's Central Bank has forbidden depositors to withdraw foreign currencies, meaning that withdrawals are only possible in LBP. Whereas the Central Bank has issued some circulars to adjust the official rate of 1.507,50 LBP for 1 USD to 3.000 LBP for each USD in the bank, in order to reflect to some extent, the depreciation of the Lebanese Pound on the black market (around 4.200 LBP for 1 USD at the time of writing), the value of one dollar in a bank account is still less than that of a one dollar bill. Thus, the cash assistance provided to refugees and distributed through ATMs, i.e. in LBP, is worth less than what it used to, especially in the context of continuous inflation.²⁹ UNHCR and the United Nations World Food Programme (WFP) just increased the amount of cash assistance distributed in LBP to each beneficiary family and are planning to scale up their aid program soon.³⁰ Nevertheless, the extremely dire economic conditions in Lebanon seem to influence refugees' decision whether to return or stay more than ever before. Nowadays, it seems that some would rather go back to Syria despite retaliation risk and the lack of reconstruction and economic opportunities there, as the cost of living in Syria is much lower than in Lebanon at the moment. Even if some refugees would return now, it does not mean that they consider Syria a safe country, but rather that the costs of remaining in Lebanon now outweigh the risk of return. In their decision to return, refugees must account for the impossibility to re-enter Lebanon unless all the due fees and fines have been settled (related to illegal stay for instance). Additionally, they cannot register with UNHCR again. This policy actually re-categorizes them as irregular migrants if they were to re-enter the country, thus at risk of deportation and detention.³¹ This is a serious limitation for many families who would send a male member of the household to Syria to assess the situation with regards to safety, housing and assets, access to services and conditions of living before deciding to return.³²

Even if more refugees might be ready to return to Syria due to the worsening economic and financial situation in Lebanon, many are not able to go back to their home country or feel that the lack of prerequisite conditions in Syria is still outweighing the push factors prevailing in Lebanon. This highly depends on individual trajectories, often linked to the conditions of departure from Syria. Most of the refugees in Lebanon had been confronted to multiple displacements in Syria before reaching Lebanon and to threats to their lives and that of their families. This is why security issues are the first deterrent for the majority of refugees. Many left to avoid military conscription, while others were threatened due to their political affiliation. Those refugees would most certainly remain in Lebanon as long as the regime does not take steps to guarantee their security and safety, despite the worsening living conditions in their host country. Even if the government

²⁹ Abby Sewell, "Lebanon's Financial Crisis Hits Syrian Refugees Hard," 2020.

³⁰ UNHCR, "COVID-19 Update – Lebanon," May 4, 2020, <http://reporting.unhcr.org/node/27418>, accessed May 2020.

³¹ Vasja Badalič, "Rejected Syrians: Violations of the Principle of "Non-Refoulement" in Turkey, Jordan and Lebanon," *Dve Domovini Two Homelands* 49 (2019): 97-99, <http://twohomelands.zrc-sazu.si/en/articles/show/588/rejected-syrians-violations-of-the-principle-of-non-refoulement-in-turkey-jordan-and-lebanon>, accessed April 2020.

³² The World Bank, *The Mobility of Displaced Syrians. An Economic and Social Analysis*, 2019.

in Damascus would announce such measures, most would not trust the regime to actually implement or abide by them. This is why many would deem a political transition necessary before considering return as an option. The likeliness of return generally increases when a control takeover occurs in one's area of origin, although not when it is in favor of the Syrian regime.³³ Overall, a political transition at the national level should encompass transitional justice, a right for refugees to return to their areas of origin, and access to economic opportunities and shelter.³⁴ For many refugees, the above-mentioned concerns are deterrents that would surely continue to outweigh the worsening of living conditions in Lebanon. Other independent factors play a non-negligible role in the individual decision to return and could tip the balance in favor of a decision to remain in the host country, notwithstanding the dire conditions they face in Lebanon. One of those factors is the area of origin, as it shapes the security situation according to the level of destruction and the presence of armed groups and militias. This consequently impacts the access to services and livelihoods in the area, as the provinces that experienced the highest occurrence of conflict are now highly deprived on all dimensions of welfare.³⁵ Further, the ethno-sectarian predominance of one group over the other in the place of origin can play as a deterrent after all those years of conflict, but it can also shape the control that the regime might impose in the area in order to prevent the reoccurrence of an opposition. All those elements will largely determine the kind of life one can rebuild. Some practical issues could also interfere with the decision to return. Since most refugees are illegal in Lebanon, they would have to pay fines before they return, what they usually cannot afford. Many have contracted debt in Lebanon that they have to reimburse before leaving the country.³⁶ Finally, they might have lost official documentation that is required to return to Syria or to reclaim their property.

Prospects in Times of Overlapping Crises

The situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has deteriorated in recent years, due mostly to an uncontrollable financial and economic collapse, and, according to human rights and refugee experts, to restrictive policies imposed on them. Before the political, socio-economic and financial crisis bursted in the country, poverty was already widespread among Syrian refugees and most were living in dire conditions, heavily depending on humanitarian aid. The crisis that the country is currently experiencing, further exacerbated by the measures taken in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, has further worsened those living conditions as well as the future prospects for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Indeed, the measures put in place to contain the spread of the Covid-19 have aggravated the vulnerability of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This is reflected not only in a reduced access to healthcare, which was already limited and/or unaffordable before, but also and most importantly in the economic repercussions of the Covid-19. Over

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Maha Yahya, Jean Kassir, and Khalil El-Hariri, "Unheard Voices: What Syrian Refugees Need to Return Home," *Carnegie Middle East Center*, April 16, 2018, <https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/04/16/unheard-voices-what-syrian-refugees-need-to-return-home-pub-76050>, accessed March 2020.

³⁵ The World Bank, *The Mobility of Displaced Syrians. An Economic and Social Analysis*, 2019.

³⁶ Anne-Marie El Hage and Caroline Hayek, "Quand la crise économique libanaise pousse des réfugiés syriens à rentrer chez eux," 2020.

50% of Syrian refugees surveyed in April 2020 declared having lost their source of income and many more are resorting to negative coping mechanisms to survive in the midst of a growing inflation and LBP depreciation. Taking account of these new elements, the question of return seems timelier than ever, as living in Lebanon will soon become unsustainable if humanitarian funding is not increased quickly and significantly. Indeed, many refugees feel increasingly trapped between an impossible return to Syria, due to the persistent lack of security and safety prerequisites, and mounting difficulties in their host country, in terms of living conditions and legal issues. Although determinants in Syria would still outweigh the push factors in Lebanon for a majority of refugees – depending on their individual stories of flight and refuge as well as on their political affiliation – it is not excluded that, for an increasing number, the coefficients in the equation have recently changed. Before an upsurge in the number of returnees could be observed though, some obstacles would require being uplifted, such as the conscription obligation and the expropriation regulations. Yet, as emotional and rational individuals engaged in an optimization strategy, Syrian refugees in Lebanon could also think of the option of fleeing to a third country, instead of limiting their choice to staying in Lebanon or returning to Syria. However, their shrinking financial means to engage in an illegal journey and the restricted opportunities for resettlement make the third-country option less likely, especially when considering the fear of failed integration that many share. Nonetheless, it remains crucial to monitor intentions and decisions to return or resettle, as refugees need to be properly informed about the risks they are taking on their journey and the situation they should expect upon arrival.