

From Burden to Backbone

Rethinking Syrian Refugee Integration in Lebanon's Economy, A Policy Report

Dr. Carlos Naffah, Ms. Nour Alwan

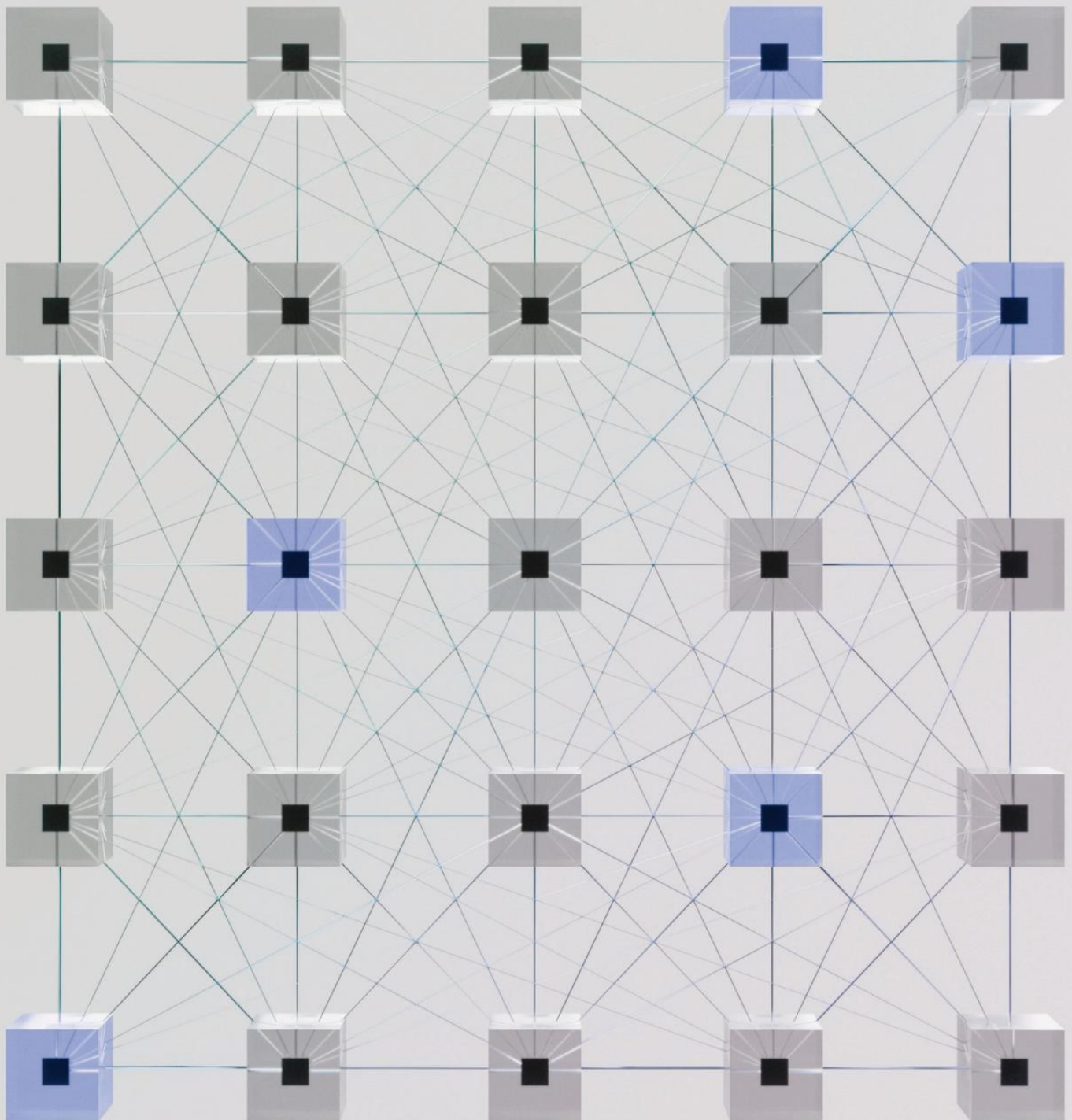


Table of Contents

Executive Summary	4
Introduction: Reframing the Refugee Debate	5
Historical and Policy Context	6
Demographics and Labor Dynamics	7
Economic Contributions of Syrian Refugees	8
Barriers to Integration	10
Legal and Administrative Barriers	10
Labor Market Segmentation	10
Credential Recognition and Skills Mismatch	10
Gender-Based Constraints	11
Social Discrimination and Hostility	11
Limited Access to Public Services	11
Perceptions of Competition and Blame	11
Media and Political Narratives	12
Tensions vs. Everyday Coexistence	12
The Role of Municipalities and Civil Society	12
Resentment Over Uneven Aid Distribution	12
Toward Social Integration	13
Social Tensions and Perceptions	13
Perceptions of Competition and Resource Scarcity	13
Social Cohesion and Informal Integration	13
Pressure on Public Infrastructure	14
Role of Media and Political Rhetoric	14
Navigating the Way Forward	14
Recommendations for Lebanon: A Policy Blueprint	15
Conclusion: A Pragmatic Path Forward	16
A Call for Pragmatism, Not Idealism	16
Inclusive Development Is the Only Sustainable Option	16
Final Reflection	17
Annex: Methodology and Graphs	18

A. Methodology Overview	18
References.....	20
About the Authors	24

Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung e. V. 2025

Lebanon Office

Tabaris Square, Charles Malek Avenue, Tabaris Center 1063, 10th Floor,

Achrafieh - Beirut

Email: info.beirut@kas.de

Website: www.kas.de/libanon

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this publication are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung or its Lebanon Office.



The text of this publication is published under a Creative Commons license: "Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 international" (CC BY-SA 4.0), <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/legalcode>

Executive Summary

Over a decade after the Syrian conflict triggered one of the largest displacement crises in modern history, Lebanon retains the world's highest per capita refugee population, even amid the fall of the Assad regime and the effort of the new Syrian government's consolidation of power and nascent reconciliation initiatives. Despite these political shifts, persistent security instability and unresolved conditions in Syria have rendered large-scale refugee return improbable in the near term. Consequently, Syrian refugees remain deeply embedded in Lebanon's socioeconomic fabric, not as passive aid recipients but as active contributors to its informal economy. Yet Lebanon's national policy framework persists in a reactive and fragmented manner, failing to adapt to this protracted reality or to leverage refugees' economic potential for national recovery.

This report, based on field research in Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh in North Maten district, challenges prevailing narratives that portray refugees as an economic drain. It reveals how Syrian refugees are already filling labor gaps in key sectors such as construction and services, often under exploitative conditions and without legal protections. Interviews with business owners and local officials confirm that refugee labor is indispensable, despite the lack of formal recognition.

Legal ambiguity, restricted employment sectors, and a lack of credential recognition continue to confine refugees to the economic margins. Women face added barriers due to cultural norms, caregiving responsibilities, and safety concerns. At the same time, social tensions are fueled by competition over jobs, strained services, and a lack of transparency in aid distribution. Still, many Lebanese employers view refugees as reliable workers, and some municipalities have taken informal steps to foster coexistence. Rather than persist in short-term crisis management, Lebanon must adopt a forward-looking strategy of structured economic inclusion.

While there are undeniably burdens and challenges associated with the massive presence of refugees in Lebanon, there also exists untapped potential in the form of human capital, particularly if managed through sound legal and institutional mechanisms. This report emphasizes a pragmatic policy direction: one that recognizes the strategic interest of turning displacement into development. With appropriate labor reforms, governance structures, and international support, Lebanon can shift from a containment paradigm to one of economic recovery, anchored in inclusive development. Refugees are not merely a humanitarian concern; they represent a labor force already embedded in the economy and a resource that can contribute to rebuilding national resilience if formalized and supported effectively.

Introduction: Reframing the Refugee Debate

The presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is one of the most politicized, misunderstood, and economically consequential issues facing the country today. Since 2011, Lebanon has hosted more than one million Syrians displaced by civil war. While the international community often commends Lebanon for this role, domestic discourse has increasingly cast refugees as an unsustainable burden on the country's fraying social contract and economic stability.

This report challenges that narrative. Drawing on empirical evidence and firsthand accounts from two municipalities with high concentrations of Syrian refugees, it argues for a strategic pivot: from reactive containment to proactive integration. In doing so, it joins a growing international body of work recognizing refugees as recipients of aid and as contributors to host economies.

In Lebanon, the refugee issue intersects with a broader context of systemic crisis. Since 2019, the country has experienced a severe financial meltdown, institutional paralysis, and a decline in public services. These compounded pressures have amplified anti-refugee rhetoric, even as Lebanese citizens themselves face job insecurity, income loss, and service shortages. However, blaming refugees for these structural failures misses the point: the real challenge is not the presence of refugees, but the absence of inclusive, forward-thinking policies.

The current policy vacuum leaves Syrian refugees in legal limbo. Most cannot work legally outside of three restricted sectors (agriculture, construction, and cleaning), forcing them into informal employment. This not only undermines their livelihoods but deprives the Lebanese state of potential tax revenue and the benefits of a regulated labor market. Meanwhile, many refugees bring valuable skills, entrepreneurial drive, and a willingness to work in sectors where domestic labor is in short supply.

Despite the tensions, coexistence is already happening on the ground. In places like Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh, Syrian and Lebanese residents live and work side by side. Syrian refugees are employed in construction sites, workshops, service shops, and small businesses. Some have started informal enterprises, from tailoring and food delivery to phone repair and mobile vending. These grassroots dynamics reveal a truth rarely acknowledged in national discourse: integration, in practice, is already underway.

What remains is for policy to catch up. This report aims to provide an evidence-based roadmap for economic inclusion. This plan not only acknowledges the reality of Syrian refugee participation but also seeks to enhance and formalize it in a manner that benefits both communities. The report is structured around key themes: labor market participation, economic contributions, social tensions, and comparative global models. It draws heavily from field data, focus groups, and interviews to illuminate the lived experiences behind the numbers.

Reframing the refugee debate is not an exercise in idealism. It is a pragmatic response to Lebanon's most urgent policy gaps. Rather than treating refugees as a temporary crisis to be managed, Lebanon can design policies that turn displacement into development. While a

voluntary, dignified return to Syria remains a long-term objective, the current reality demands immediate and structured integration. These two goals are not mutually exclusive. Integration is a necessity for stability today, and it can coexist with the aspiration for return when conditions allow. This report argues that, with the right legal, institutional, and financial frameworks in place, Syrian refugees can become a cornerstone of Lebanon's recovery, not a burden to be endured, but a backbone to be supported. The findings presented here are based on mixed-methods research conducted in Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh, involving 300 survey respondents, 20 key informant interviews, and 6 focus group discussions. For full methodological details, see Annex A.

Historical and Policy Context

Lebanon's role as a host country for refugees is not a new phenomenon. From the Armenian genocide to the Palestinian Nakba, the country has repeatedly absorbed large populations fleeing regional conflicts. Yet the scale and duration of the Syrian displacement since 2011 have created unprecedented challenges. With over one million Syrian refugees entering a country of just five million residents, Lebanon now holds the highest number of refugees per capita globally.

When the Syrian crisis erupted, Lebanon adopted a policy of non-encampment, distinguishing it from countries like Jordan and Turkey. This approach enabled Syrian refugees to settle in towns and cities across the nation. While this strategy was praised for upholding the freedom of movement, it also led to informal and unregulated patterns of settlement that placed enormous pressure on host communities, particularly in underserved municipalities.

For the first few years, the Lebanese government coordinated with international agencies under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). However, the absence of a comprehensive national refugee policy, combined with increasing political pressure, eventually led to stricter regulations. In 2015, Lebanon requested the UNHCR to halt new refugee registrations. At the same time, new rules were introduced requiring refugees to pay exorbitant residency renewal fees and obtain a Lebanese sponsor to work legally, requirements most could not meet.

Today, Syrian refugees in Lebanon face a state of legal ambiguity. Those without valid residency permits risk arrest, harassment, and deportation. Employment is technically restricted to three sectors: agriculture, construction, and cleaning. Yet, in practice, many refugees work informally across various sectors, including manufacturing, services, retail, and logistics. This informality makes them vulnerable to exploitation and excludes them from labor protections and social insurance.

The legal vacuum has also had wider implications for Lebanon's economy. With over half a million workers excluded from formal structures, the state loses out on taxes, social security contributions, and regulatory oversight. Furthermore, employers who hire refugees informally often do so out of necessity or pragmatism, citing their willingness to accept lower wages and

precarious working conditions — a point frequently emphasized in the interviews conducted for this report.

The political discourse around refugees has also hardened over time. As Lebanon descended into economic and financial crisis after 2019, refugees became easy scapegoats. Politicians from various sects and parties have blamed them for unemployment, crime, and infrastructure collapse, often ignoring the underlying governance failures and corruption that predate the refugee crisis.

Nevertheless, local-level governance and civil society actors have sometimes filled the policy gap. Municipalities like Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh have developed informal systems to manage the presence of refugees, often collaborating with NGOs and international donors to provide basic services. These experiences suggest that when empowered and resourced, local governance can play a key role in managing integration and reducing tensions.

In sum, Lebanon's policy approach to the Syrian refugee crisis has been marked by ad hoc decisions, restrictive labor policies, and a lack of long-term vision. As this report argues, the current situation is not sustainable. Suppose Lebanon is to protect its own social fabric and economic viability. In that case, it must transition from reactive restrictions to proactive inclusion, starting with coherent legal frameworks, labor reforms, and investment in host communities.

Demographics and Labor Dynamics

The socio-demographic profile of Syrian refugees in Lebanon reveals a predominantly youthful and economically active population. In the surveyed areas of Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh, most Syrian respondents fell within the 18–34 age range, with significant representation in the 25–34 bracket. This age composition aligns with the high labor force participation rates observed among Syrian refugees, highlighting their economic potential and vulnerability. Among Lebanese respondents, the age profile was more evenly distributed, but a notable portion also fell within the younger working-age group.

Gender disparities were pronounced. Male Syrian refugees had an employment rate four times higher than female Syrian refugees, reflecting both structural and cultural barriers. Women cited a lack of childcare, social stigma, and safety concerns as primary reasons for non-participation in the labor market. Among Lebanese respondents, gender disparities were present but less severe, and women had comparatively better access to formal employment channels.

Marital status also showed marked differences between the groups. A significantly higher proportion of Syrian respondents were married, consistent with cultural norms that encourage earlier marriage. In contrast, Lebanese respondents displayed more diversity in marital status, including a higher percentage of single, divorced, or widowed individuals. This may reflect broader socio-economic factors, including delayed marriage trends due to economic precarity.

The distribution of respondents across the two municipalities was nearly even, allowing for a comparative look at urban refugee dynamics. Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh both host a high concentration of refugee populations, but differ in economic character. While Sad el Boushrieh leans more toward industrial and commercial sectors, Dekweneh encompasses residential and informal employment sectors. This geographic diversity provided a rich dataset to explore the local labor ecosystems in which Syrians and Lebanese operate.

Labor market participation further illustrates systemic inequalities. While 68% of Syrian respondents reported being employed, most were engaged in informal, low-wage jobs. In contrast, only 32% of Lebanese respondents reported employment—a figure that may seem surprisingly low and could challenge the widespread perception that Syrian refugees are “taking Lebanese jobs.” However, this figure must be viewed in context: many Lebanese have exited the labor force due to emigration, frustration with poor job prospects, or dependence on remittances and informal family support networks. It is also important to note that the 32% refers only to the proportion of Lebanese respondents who reported employment; it does not reflect the entire sample or the combined Syrian-Lebanese group. Therefore, the Syrian and Lebanese employment rates should not be interpreted as adding up to 100%. Finally, the difference in sample size (201 Syrians vs. 100 Lebanese) may also affect proportional comparisons. Income data support this disparity. Only 6.5% of Syrian respondents earned less than \$100 monthly, but just 58% earned more than \$300. Among Lebanese respondents, 6% also earned below \$100, but a significantly higher 81% earned over \$300 per month. This contrast reflects the segmented nature of Lebanon's labor market, where nationality, legal status, and informality intersect to shape vastly different economic realities.

Legal documentation remains a major barrier to equitable labor participation. Just 46.3% of Syrian respondents held a valid work permit, while the remainder relied on informal arrangements. This lack of legal status not only exposes refugees to exploitation but also limits their mobility, bargaining power, and access to services. Lebanese workers, by contrast, benefit from legal protections and employer obligations, despite being affected by the broader economic downturn.

These demographic and labor insights are critical to understanding the underlying dynamics of refugee integration. They show that while Syrian refugees are economically active and demographically primed for workforce contribution, systemic barriers keep them trapped in precarious labor segments. Recognizing these patterns is the first step toward designing policies that facilitate meaningful inclusion, not just subsistence.

Economic Contributions of Syrian Refugees

Despite being largely excluded from the formal economy, Syrian refugees in Lebanon have emerged as vital contributors to economic activity in several key sectors. Their labor underpins much of the country's informal economy, particularly in construction, agriculture, manufacturing, retail, and services. This section explores how refugees sustain the economy from the margins

and identifies opportunities for scaling up their contributions through better regulation and integration.

Syrian refugees have become the backbone of Lebanon's informal labor market. Employers in Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh reported that Syrian workers are often more reliable, affordable, and willing to accept difficult working conditions than their Lebanese counterparts, not due to preference but out of necessity. With limited legal avenues for employment, many Syrians take jobs others avoid, often with long hours, poor safety conditions, and little job security.

These contributions are particularly evident in construction and manual trades, where Syrians comprise a substantial portion of the labor force. In manufacturing and repair services, they play key roles in small workshops and production lines. Many have also created informal micro-enterprises, from barbershops and food stalls to delivery services and tailoring businesses. While often unlicensed, these enterprises stimulate local commerce and employ within refugee communities.

Refugee entrepreneurship is another critical yet underrecognized dimension of economic contribution. Though operating in legal grey zones, Syrian entrepreneurs demonstrate high ingenuity and resilience. Their businesses meet real community needs and contribute to local economic circulation. Many of these businesses could be formalized and scaled with supportive policies, creating jobs for both Syrians and Lebanese.

The impact of these contributions is not merely anecdotal. Survey data indicate that 66% of Syrian respondents who hold a work permit earn more than \$300 per month, compared to only 51% of those without a work permit. This challenges common assumptions that refugees are a net drain on the economy. Rather, many are actively generating income and supporting families locally and across borders through remittances. However, the informal nature of this work comes at a cost. Without legal status or contracts, Syrian workers are vulnerable to wage theft, abuse, and sudden job loss. They are excluded from Lebanon's National Social Security Fund, cannot access employment benefits, and often face unsafe conditions. Moreover, the Lebanese state misses out on revenue from taxes, permits, and social security contributions that a more inclusive policy would generate.

Lebanese business owners interviewed for this study frequently expressed a desire to regularize hiring Syrian workers. Many would be willing to pay taxes and accept formal employment if the regulatory environment were simplified and sanctions were reduced. This reveals an opportunity for labor market reform that balances the inclusion of refugees with economic incentives for employers.

In short, Syrian refugees are already deeply integrated into Lebanon's economic fabric. Their labor sustains key industries, their businesses fill market gaps, and their spending supports local commerce. What remains is for policy to recognize and support this contribution by moving refugees from the margins into the mainstream. Doing so would improve refugee livelihoods and boost Lebanon's productivity, fiscal health, and long-term economic recovery.

Barriers to Integration

Despite their economic potential and active participation in the informal labor market, Syrian refugees in Lebanon face numerous barriers to full integration. These obstacles are legal, institutional, social, and economic, and they reinforce a cycle of vulnerability and exclusion that undermines both refugee resilience and national recovery.

Legal and Administrative Barriers

The most immediate and persistent barrier is the lack of legal status. According to the study, only 46.3% of the surveyed Syrian refugees held valid work permits. Obtaining or renewing legal residency and work authorization is a bureaucratically complex and prohibitively expensive process, subject to frequent policy changes. Many refugees are unable to meet the requirements, which often include securing a Lebanese sponsor or employer willing to assume legal responsibility. This lack of legal recognition forces refugees into informal employment, limiting their access to fair wages, legal recourse, and social protections. Without legal residency, refugees are also at risk of arrest, detention, and deportation, further deterring them from asserting their rights in the workplace.

Labor Market Segmentation

Lebanon's policy restricts refugee labor to only three sectors: agriculture, construction, and cleaning. These sectors are often low-paid, physically demanding, and lacking labor protections. However, the study revealed that many refugees are working outside these sectors informally, in retail, manufacturing, and services, highlighting both the need for broader legal access and the inefficacy of the current system.

The segmentation creates a dual labor market where Syrian refugees occupy the most precarious positions. It also creates inefficiencies in the economy by preventing skilled refugees from contributing in their areas of expertise. Several participants in the study had university degrees or technical skills that were not being utilized.

Credential Recognition and Skills Mismatch

Refugees who possess higher education degrees or vocational training from Syria often face difficulties in having their qualifications recognized in Lebanon. There is no formal mechanism to assess or validate foreign credentials. This has led to significant underemployment and frustration among youth and professionals. This skills mismatch means that Lebanon's labor market is not benefiting from the full potential of the refugee workforce. Simultaneously, sectors such as healthcare, education, and engineering, which face domestic shortages, remain underserved. To address this gap, Lebanon could pilot a credential assessment and recognition initiative in collaboration with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), with technical support from the ILO, UNHCR, and selected academic institutions. Such a program could initially target high-need sectors like healthcare and education, using standardized assessment tools, language bridging courses, and partial certification pathways. Over time, this

would help formalize refugee skillsets, reduce underemployment, and connect qualified individuals to areas of labor market demand.

Gender-Based Constraints

Women face an additional set of barriers. The employment rate for female Syrian refugees is significantly lower than for males, due to a combination of cultural norms, lack of childcare options, limited mobility, and safety concerns. Few employment programs are tailored to women's needs, and vocational training often overlooks sectors suitable for female workers.

Empowering women economically is crucial for the development of individual families and communities. Expanding access to flexible work, home-based employment, and gender-sensitive training programs could help close this gap.

Social Discrimination and Hostility

Refugees frequently report experiencing discrimination in the labor market and everyday interactions. This includes being paid less than Lebanese workers for the same job, verbal abuse, and social exclusion. These dynamics are exacerbated during economic stress, when competition for jobs intensifies. The media and political discourse have further fueled negative perceptions. Refugees are often scapegoated for Lebanon's economic decline, even though structural corruption and governance failures are the primary culprits. This environment increases social fragmentation and makes integration more difficult.

Limited Access to Public Services

Syrian refugees often live in overcrowded, substandard housing and struggle to access healthcare and education. While international agencies provide some support, public infrastructure remains overwhelmed. The inability to access affordable services affects refugees' physical and mental health, school attendance, and productivity in the workplace.

In conclusion, the barriers to integration are deep and multifaceted. They are not only the result of policy choices but of a broader failure to design a coherent national strategy for inclusion. Addressing these barriers requires reforms in legal status, labor rights, education, gender inclusion, and anti-discrimination policies—not as charity, but as strategic investments in Lebanon's stability and economic recovery.

Perceptions of Competition and Blame

Across both municipalities surveyed, Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh, many Lebanese respondents expressed concern over perceived competition for jobs, services, and housing. These perceptions were most acute in low-income areas where both Lebanese and Syrians compete for informal employment. In such contexts, Syrians are often seen as undercutting wages or accepting poorer working conditions, creating downward pressure on labor standards.

Lebanon's broader economic collapse has exacerbated this. As public services deteriorate and living costs rise, some Lebanese citizens perceive humanitarian aid for refugees as unfairly generous. This perception persists even though many of the same international programs also

support host communities. The result is a zero-sum mindset that hinders the development of cooperative solutions.

Media and Political Narratives

Public discourse, amplified by political figures and media outlets, has frequently portrayed refugees as a destabilizing force. Politicians from various factions have blamed refugees for everything from environmental degradation to crime, often using such rhetoric to deflect attention from governance failures and to rally support among their base. The result has been a toxic narrative environment that complicates efforts to promote inclusive policy.

Tensions vs. Everyday Coexistence

Yet, the social reality on the ground is more nuanced than dominant narratives suggest. Despite tensions, many communities have developed informal systems of coexistence. In both Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh, Syrian and Lebanese residents interact regularly at work, in schools, and neighborhoods. Some local employers even rely on mixed teams, and neighbors often assist each other in times of need. Several focus group participants shared stories of cooperation, Lebanese families helping Syrian neighbors access healthcare, or Syrian workers assisting Lebanese employers with informal repairs and logistics. These accounts reveal a base of mutual dependency that, while fragile, offers a foundation for more structured community-building efforts.

The Role of Municipalities and Civil Society

Local actors have played a key role in managing tensions. In some cases, municipalities have implemented inclusive services or organized town-hall style dialogues to foster mutual understanding. Civil society organizations have facilitated joint Lebanese-Syrian youth programs, sports initiatives, and vocational workshops for women, all of which help reduce stereotypes and build trust. However, these efforts often lack sustained funding and institutional support. Their impact is localized and temporary unless backed by broader policy frameworks that institutionalize social cohesion as a national priority.

Resentment Over Uneven Aid Distribution

A recurring theme in interviews was the perception that refugees receive disproportionate aid while Lebanese citizens are left unsupported. Although international donors have committed to a "No Lost Host" approach, implementation gaps remain. Inconsistent communication, unequal access to programs, and limited transparency in aid delivery have deepened these grievances.

This imbalance fuels resentment and hinders the inclusion of refugees. More equitable and visibly shared development investments, in schools, clinics, and housing, would benefit both populations and reduce intergroup tension.

Toward Social Integration

True social cohesion requires more than tolerance; it demands structures that enable equal access, shared spaces, and collaborative problem-solving. Integration should not be forced or top-down, but community-led and context-sensitive.

Encouraging joint community projects, empowering local councils to manage inclusive initiatives, and ensuring open communication channels between refugee and host groups can help shift perceptions from competition to collaboration. The success of refugee economic integration policies will ultimately depend not only on legal and economic reforms, but also on social willingness to support them. Rebuilding public trust, countering misinformation, and investing in shared community development are essential steps in that direction.

Social Tensions and Perceptions

Perceptions of Competition and Resource Scarcity

In municipalities like Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh, where both Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens coexist in dense urban settings, tensions have emerged around access to jobs, services, and aid. Many Lebanese respondents cited perceptions of unfair competition in the labor market, particularly in construction, agriculture, and manual services, where refugees often accept lower wages, longer hours, and more precarious conditions. These realities, though shaped by legal exclusion and necessity rather than preference, have stoked resentment.

The issue of aid distribution further exacerbates tensions. Several Lebanese interviewees expressed frustration at what they perceive as disproportionate support given to Syrian refugees by international organizations. At the same time, host communities continue to suffer from the same systemic challenges, unemployment, inflation, and lack of public services, without equivalent support. This perception is compounded by a sense that donor priorities have sidelined Lebanese needs, thereby deepening mistrust between communities.

Social Cohesion and Informal Integration

Despite these grievances, field interviews and focus group discussions suggest that narratives of absolute hostility are overly simplistic. In many instances, Syrian and Lebanese residents have built relationships of mutual reliance, particularly where economic interdependence and everyday interactions are common. Lebanese small business owners often employ Syrian workers, and Syrian-run microenterprises provide affordable services that are used by Lebanese customers. Such functional integration is most visible in low-income neighborhoods, where economic hardship transcends national identity.

Joint participation in municipal activities, such as religious celebrations, school attendance, and community clean-up efforts, has also fostered some degree of social cohesion. However, these positive experiences are highly localized and often dependent on proactive civil society or NGO facilitation.

Pressure on Public Infrastructure

The rapid and largely unplanned influx of refugees has placed unprecedented strain on Lebanon's already fragile infrastructure. Public schools, clinics, waste management systems, and housing markets are all under stress. Overcrowded classrooms, long waits in healthcare centers, and rising rental costs are common complaints from both Lebanese and Syrian residents.

Lebanese citizens often attribute the decline in public service quality to the refugee presence, though many of these problems predate the Syrian crisis. Years of underinvestment, corruption, and mismanagement have undermined public institutions. Nevertheless, the perception that refugees are "overusing" services remains widespread, and it influences both public opinion and policy.

Role of Media and Political Rhetoric

Local media and political elites have played a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions. Political leaders frequently invoke the refugee issue to deflect attention from governance failures. Blaming refugees for economic stagnation or the collapse of public services has become a recurring theme across party lines. Similarly, sensationalist media coverage often portrays refugees in association with crime, disorder, or terrorism, reinforcing stereotypes and justifying restrictive policies.

This narrative cycle has consequences. It undermines efforts to promote inclusion and hinders refugees' ability to navigate daily life safely. Interviewees described increased instances of verbal harassment, eviction threats, and labor exploitation, especially following inflammatory political statements or security incidents.

Navigating the Way Forward

Addressing social tensions requires more than legal reform. It demands a shift in narrative, driven by evidence-based media reporting, inclusive municipal governance, and grassroots intercultural engagement. Municipalities must be empowered, not only to mediate tensions but also to design services that benefit both communities. Only through shared development, rather than parallel aid structures, can durable social cohesion be achieved.

Recommendations for Lebanon: A Policy Blueprint

Facing a critical juncture, Lebanon must transcend temporary containment strategies and instead harness the potential of refugees as contributors to economic restructuring and resilience. Grounded in field evidence both from Lebanon and from other countries affected by the Syrian refugee crisis, and comparative pragmatism, the following pillars blueprint proposes actionable pathways:

- › Legal and labor market reforms necessitate sectoral expansion beyond saturated agriculture and construction to manufacturing, retail, and delivery services via revised ministerial circulars, reducing informality while enhancing fiscal revenue. Permit formalization requires streamlined, subsidized processes through mobile units and group applications, coupled with inter-ministerial task forces harmonizing residency and employment policies to prevent arbitrary deportation.
- › Investment should prioritize short-cycle Technical and Vocational Education and Training (TVET) programs in high-demand trades such as IT, caregiving, and mechanics. These should be complemented by ILO- and UNHCR-supported skills assessment toolkits to validate informal competencies. Rather than enforcing gender quotas—which may not align with prevailing social norms—programs should include tailored components designed to support women's integration into the labor market. This includes developing sector-specific pathways that reflect women's preferences and constraints, alongside supportive measures such as access to childcare and safe transportation.
- › Donor Alignment must condition international assistance on measurable benchmarks, such as refugee labor access, gender parity, and shared infrastructure, while harmonizing fragmented interventions under the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) with unified livelihood targets.
- › Narrative Transformation hinges on evidence-based media campaigns spotlighting refugee economic contributions, amplified by training trusted local voices (employers, municipal leaders, educators) to reframe discourse toward solidarity.

Collectively, these interdependent measures form conceptual scaffolding for sustainable reform, reducing informality, boosting local economies, enhancing self-reliance, and ultimately repositioning refugees as catalysts for national recovery.

Conclusion: A Pragmatic Path Forward

Lebanon is navigating one of the most complex intersections of humanitarian crisis, economic collapse, and political fragmentation in its modern history. Within this vortex, the presence of over one million Syrian refugees has been framed as a central tension, one that stretches public services, tests social cohesion, and generates political friction. Yet the findings of this report challenge the dominant narrative that refugees are an unsustainable burden. Instead, it reveals a more grounded truth: Syrian refugees are already part of Lebanon's labor market, service economy, and social fabric. The issue is not their presence, but the absence of policies to manage and leverage that presence productively.

This report has demonstrated that Syrian refugees contribute significantly to sectors such as construction, agriculture, manufacturing, and local services, despite being systematically excluded from formal employment and denied pathways to economic security. Informality, legal ambiguity, and lack of protection not only undermine refugees' rights but also weaken the Lebanese economy through lost tax revenues, depressed wages, and unregulated labor practices. Integration, if well-managed, can help reverse these trends.

A Call for Pragmatism, Not Idealism

The recommendations offered are not based on ideal conditions, nor do they require large fiscal outlays. They are pragmatic, stepwise actions that can be locally implemented, donor-supported, and designed to serve both Lebanese and Syrians. Legalizing sectors where refugees already work, simplifying permits, supporting informal entrepreneurs, expanding vocational training, and investing in municipal infrastructure are feasible, incremental reforms.

What is required is not an overhaul of state architecture, but a shift in mindset from containment to inclusion, from crisis response to development planning. Political actors must stop using refugees as scapegoats for decades of mismanagement and instead focus on evidence-based solutions. Municipalities, NGOs, and private sector leaders already recognize this and are ready to act if they are given the necessary resources and policy space.

Inclusive Development Is the Only Sustainable Option

Lebanon's economic recovery depends on rebuilding its productive sectors, creating jobs, and restoring investor confidence. None of these goals is possible if more than a million economically active people remain in legal limbo. Formalizing refugee labor is not about generosity; it's about national interest. It means better data, stronger institutions, higher tax revenue, and more stable markets.

Additionally, inclusive development is the only sustainable path to social cohesion. As long as refugees and hosts compete for limited services and support, tensions will escalate. However, when aid supports shared infrastructure and employment policies are coordinated, cooperation becomes not only feasible but also rational.

Final Reflection

This report does not argue for indefinite settlement. , A voluntary, dignified return remains a goal, once conditions in Syria permit. However, promoting refugee integration and supporting voluntary return are not mutually exclusive. Integration is a pragmatic necessity in the current context, refugees are already embedded in Lebanon's economy and society. Enabling them to contribute more fully benefits both host and refugee communities, while keeping the door open for return when it becomes viable. Lebanon must manage the present. Refugees are here. They are working. They are educating their children. They are part of daily life. The question is whether the state will continue to ignore this reality or embrace it as a foundation for recovery.

From burden to backbone is not a slogan. It is a policy direction, rooted in evidence, informed by global practice, and designed with Lebanon's unique constraints in mind. If pursued seriously, it can turn a protracted crisis into a new model for inclusive resilience.



Annex: Methodology and Graphs

A. Methodology Overview

This report is grounded in a mixed-methods research approach, combining quantitative survey data with qualitative interviews and focus group discussions. The research was conducted in two urban municipalities—Sad el Boushrieh and Dekweneh—both host high concentrations of Syrian refugees and have experienced substantial labor market shifts.

Quantitative Component

Sample size: 301 respondents • 201 Syrian refugees • 100 Lebanese nationals

Sampling technique: Quota-based stratified sampling to ensure gender, age, and employment sector representation

Survey method: Face-to-face questionnaires conducted by trained enumerators in Arabic

Qualitative Component

Key Informant Interviews (KIIs):

10 business owners

5 municipal officials

5 representatives from NGOs and international agencies

Focus Group Discussions (FGDs):

2 with Syrian male workers

2 with Syrian female residents

2 with Lebanese community members

The qualitative component was used to triangulate quantitative findings and provide narrative depth, particularly around sensitive topics like social tensions, informal work arrangements, and inter-community dynamics.

Sampling Limitations

Urban Bias: The sample focuses on urban and peri-urban areas, which may not reflect the experiences of refugees in rural Lebanon or those in smaller informal settlements.

Self-Reporting Bias: Income levels, legal status, and work conditions were self-reported and may have been affected by underreporting or social desirability bias.

Selection Bias: The use of quota sampling aimed for demographic balance but is not a substitute for randomized selection; findings are illustrative, not statistically generalizable.

Security and Political Sensitivity: Due to the politically charged context, some respondents may have withheld sensitive information, particularly regarding legal documentation or experiences with authorities.

Ethical Protocols

All research was conducted according to ethical research guidelines. Enumerators received training on informed consent, confidentiality, and cultural sensitivity. Respondents were informed of their right to withdraw at any time, and no identifying information was recorded. Focus groups and interviews were conducted in safe, neutral locations, and special care was taken when interviewing vulnerable groups, including women and undocumented individuals.



References

- Ahsan Ullah, A. K. M. . (2018). Conflicts and displacements in Syria: Exploring life trajectories of separated refugee minors. *Asian Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 12(2), 207-224.
- Barakat, S. (2023). Retrieved from <https://core.ac.uk/download/568109742.pdf>
- Benton, M., & Glennie, A. (2016). Digital Humanitarianism: Howtech entrepreneurs are supporting refugee integration.
- Betts, A., & Collier, P. . (2017). *Refuge: Transforming a broken refugee system*. . Penguin UK.
- Borjas, G. J. (2017). The labor supply of undocumented immigrants. . *Labour Economics*, 46, 1-13.
- Brell, C. D. (2020). The labor market integration of refugee migrants in high-income countries. . *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 34(1), 94-121.
- Brell, C., Dustmann, C., & Preston, I. (2020). The labor market integration of refugee migrants in high-income countries. *Journal of Economic Perspectives*, 34(1), 94-121.
- Bustamante, L. H., Cerqueira, R. O., Leclerc, E., & Brietzke, E. . (2017). Stress, trauma, and posttraumatic stress disorder in migrants: a comprehensive review. . *Revista brasileira de psiquiatria*, , 40(2), 220-225.
- Castles, S. (2010). Understanding global migration: A social transformation perspective. *Journal of ethnic and migration studies*, 36(10), 1565-1586.
- Chappuis, S. O. (2018). *Victim, Terrorist, or Other?: A Qualitative Content Analysis of Alternative News Media Depictions of the Syrian Humanitarian Crisis*. (Doctoral dissertation, Bowling Green State University).
- Cherri, Z., Arcos Gonzalez, P., & Castro Delgado, R. (n.d.). The Lebanese–Syrian crisis: Impact of influx of Syrian refugees to an already weak state. Risk management and healthcare policy,. 2016, 165-172.
- Clemens, M., Huang, C., & Graham, J. . (2018). The economic and fiscal effects of granting refugees formal labor market access. Center for Global Development Working Paper. 496, 1-69.
- Daley, C. (2009). Exploring community connections: community cohesion and refugee integration at a local level. . *Community Development Journal*, , 44(2), 158-171.
- David, A., Marouani, M. A., Nahas, C., & Nilsson, B. (2020). The economics of the Syrian refugee crisis in neighbouring countries: The case of Lebanon. *Economics of Transition and Institutional Change*, . 28(1), 89-109.
- Dempster, H., Ginn, T., Graham, J., Ble, M. G., Jayasinghe, D., & Shorey, B. . (2020). Locked down and left behind: The impact of COVID-19 on refugees' economic inclusion. . *Center for Global Development, Refugees International, and International Rescue Commi*. Retrieved from Dempster, H., Ginn, T., Graham, J., Ble, M. G., Jayasinghe, D., & Shorey, B. (2020).
- Desiderio, M. V. (2016). *Integrating refugees into host country labor markets: Challenges and policy options*. Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute.
- Desiderio, M. V. (2016). *Integrating refugees into host country labor markets: Challenges and policy options*. Washington DC: Migration Policy Institute.

- d'Haenens, L., Joris, W., & Heinderyckx, F. (Eds.). . (2019). *Images of Immigrants and Refugees in Western Europe: Media Representations, Public Opinion and Refugees' Experiences* (p. 7). Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Easton-Calabria, E., & Wood, J. . (Journal of Ethnic and Migration Studies,). Bridging, bonding, and linking? Syrian refugee-led organisations and integration in Berlin. . 47(19), 4308-4326.
- Erdoğan, M. (2019). *Syrian refugees in Turkey*. Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung Report.
- Esses, V. M., Hamilton, L. K., & Gaucher, D. (2017). The global refugee crisis: Empirical evidence and policy implications for improving public attitudes and facilitating refugee resettlement. . *Social issues and policy review*, 11(1), 78-123.
- Faraday, F. (2021). The empowerment of migrant workers in a precarious situation: An overview. . *Global Knowledge Partnership on Migration and Development (KNOMAD)*, Paper, 39.
- FASANI, F. (2024). *New approaches to labour*. EU.
- Fawaz, M. (2017). Planning and the refugee crisis: Informality as a framework of analysis and reflection. . *Planning Theory*, 16(1), 99-115.
- Fong, R., Busch, N. B., Armour, M., Heffron, L. C., & Chanmugam, A. . (2007). Pathways to self-sufficiency: Successful entrepreneurship for refugees. . *Journal of Ethnic & Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, 16(1-2), 127-159. Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/legacy-pdf/5bd31fd67.pdf>
- Freedman, D. P. (2007). *Statistics (international student edition)*. Pisani, R. Purves, 4th Edn. New York.: WW Norton & Company, .
- Georgiou, M., & Zaborowski, R. . (2017). *Media coverage of the "refugee crisis": A cross-European perspective*. . Council of Europe.
- Ghadian, N. (2021). The Syrian refugee crisis and the international community. Middle East Policy. 28(1), 51-69.
- Gonzalez Benson, O. &. (2021). Grassroots refugee community organizations: In search of participatory urban governance. *Journal of urban affairs*, 43(6), 890-908.
- Hamadeh. (2022). Retrieved from https://laur.lau.edu.lb:8443/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10725/14206/Hawraa_Hamadeh_ThesisGW_Redacted.pdf?sequence=1
- Hatton, T. J. (2017). Refugees and asylum seekers, the crisis in Europe and the future of policy. *Economic Policy*, 32(91), 447-496.
- Hilado, A., Reznicek, E., & Allweiss, S. . (2021). Primer on understanding the refugee experience. *Refugee mental health*, 19-43.
- Hirani, K., Payne, D., Mutch, R., & Cherian, S. (2016). Health of adolescent refugees resettling in high-income countries. . *Archives of disease in childhood*, 101(7), 670-676.
- IOM. (2015). Retrieved from <https://www.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd12616/files/2018-07/WMR-2015-Background-Paper-CTacoli-GMcGranahan-DSatterthwaite.pdf>
- IOM. (2020). Retrieved from <https://lac.iom.int/en/blogs/seeking-social-cohesion-between-host-communities-and-migrants>
- Itani, F. (2013). Stability through Change: Toward a New Political Economy in Jordan. . *Universitäts- und Landesbibliothek Sachsen-Anhalt*.
- Kallick, D. D., Roldan, C., & Mathema, S. . (2016). Syrian immigrants in the United States. . *Center for American Progress*.

- Kallick, D. D., Roldan, C., & Mathema, S. . (2026). Syrian immigrants in the United States. . *Center for American Progress*.
- Kir Elitaş, S. (Ed.). . (2024). *Media Representation of Migrants and Refugees*. . IGI Global.
- Kirmayer LJ, Narasiah L, Munoz M, Rashid M, Ryder AG, Guzder J, Hassan G, Rousseau C, Pottie K; (2011). Retrieved from <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3168672/>
- Kumar Agrawal, S. (2019). Canadian refugee sponsorship programs: Experience of Syrian refugees in Alberta, Canada. . *Journal of International Migration and Integration*,, 20(4), 941-962.
- Lee, E. S., Szkudlarek, B., Nguyen, D. C., & Nardon, L. . (2020). Unveiling the canvas ceiling: A multidisciplinary literature review of refugee employment and workforce integration. *International Journal of Management Reviews*, , 22(2), 193-216.
- Lenner, K., & Turner, L. . (2019). Making refugees work? The politics of integrating Syrian refugees into the labor market in Jordan. *Middle East Critique*, . 28(1), 65-95.
- Majalla, A. (2023). Retrieved from <https://en.majalla.com/node/294296/documents-memoirs/jordanian-initiative-ends-iran-and-hezbollahs-exit-syria>
- Massey, D. (2005). Backfire at the Border. Why Enforcement without Legalization Cannot Stop Illegal Immigration. . *Trade Policy Analysis, The CATO Institute*, 29.
- Matlin, S. A., Depoux, A., Schütte, S., Flahault, A., & Saso, L. . (2018). Migrants' and refugees' health: towards an agenda of solutions. . *Public Health Reviews*, , 39, 1-55.
- Matlin, S. A., Depoux, A., Schütte, S., Flahault, A., & Saso, L. . (2018). Migrants' and refugees' health: towards an agenda of solutions. . *Public Health Reviews*, 39, 1-55.
- Nambuya, S. S., Okumu, J., & Pagnucco, R. . (2018). Refugee socio-cultural integration and peaceful co-existence in Uganda. . *The Journal of Social Encounters*, 2(1), 81-92.
- News, U. (2023). Retrieved from <https://news.un.org/en/focus/syria>
- O'Keeffe, P. (2023). Higher Education in Refugee Camps via Collaborative Blended Learning: The Impact and Benefits for Refugees and Their Student Tutors. In *Teaching Refugees and Displaced Students: What Every Educator Should Know* . Cham: Springer International Publishing., 109-125.
- OECD. (2019). *FINANCING FOR*.
https://www.oecd.org/content/dam/oecd/en/publications/reports/2019/12/financing-for-refugee-situations_baddbd7d/02d6b022-en.pdf.
- Platzer, M. (2018). Refugee access to tertiary education. Refugees and migrants in law and policy: Challenges and opportunities for global civic education.
- Plummer, R. C. (2019). *Labour market segmentation and the demand for EU migrant workers: A comparative study of Sweden and the United Kingdom*. Keele University.
- Rea, A., Martiniello, M., Mazzola, A., & Meuleman, B. . (2019). *The refugee reception crisis in Europe. Polarized opinions and mobilizations*. European Studies.
- Rea, A., Martiniello, M., Mazzola, A., & Meuleman, B. . (2019). *The refugee reception crisis in Europe. Polarized opinions and mobilizations*. . European Studies.
- reliefweb. (2023). Retrieved from <https://reliefweb.int/disaster/eq-2023-000015-tur>
- Runde, D. F. (2011). Retrieved from <https://danielrunde.com/2022/12/14/competition-or-coordination-coronavirus-in-the-developing-world/>
- Salameh, M. T. (2024). *Beyond Borders: Impacts of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on Jordan*.

- Schneiderheinze, C., & Lücke, M. . (2020). Socio-economic impacts of refugees on host communities in developing countries. *PEGNet, Poverty Reduction, Equity and Growth Network*.
- Schuettler, K., & Caron, L. . (2020). *Jobs interventions for refugees and internally displaced persons*. World Bank Group.
- Shepherd, D. A., Saade, F. P., & Wincent, J. . (2020). How to circumvent adversity? Refugee-entrepreneurs' resilience in the face of substantial and persistent adversity. . *Journal of Business Venturing*, 35(4), 105940.
- Tabur, C. E. (2012). Retrieved from The decision-making process in EU policy towards the Eastern neighbourhood: The case of immigration policy. : <https://core.ac.uk/download/8768469.pdf>
- Teitelbaum, M. S. (n.d.). Immigration, refugees, and foreign policy. . *International organization*, 38(3), 429-450.
- Tsourapas, G. (2019). The Syrian refugee crisis and foreign policy decision-making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. . *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4(4), 464-481.
- Türk, V. &. (2016). From burdens and responsibilities to opportunities: the comprehensive refugee response framework and a global compact on refugees. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, , 28(4), 656-678.
- UNHCR. (2022). Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/lb/what-we-do/education>
- UNHCR. (2023). Retrieved from <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/>
- UNHCR. (2023). Retrieved from <https://www.unrefugees.org/news/syria-refugee-crisis-explained/#:~:text=Since%202011%2C%20more%20than%2014,live%20below%20the%20poverty%20line.>
- UNHCR. (2024). Retrieved from <https://www.unhcr.org/innovation/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Emerging-practices-to-improve-access-to-and-working-conditions-on-digital-labour-platforms-for-refugees-and-host-communities-%E2%80%93-Joint-Report.pdf>
- UNHCR. (2025). Retrieved from <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>
- Vickers, M., McCarthy, F., & Zammit, K. . (2017). Peer mentoring and intercultural understanding: Support for refugee-background and immigrant students beginning university study. . *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, , 60, 198-209.
- Waldinger, R. (1982). The occupational and economic integration of the new immigrants. . *Law and Contemporary Problems*, , 45(2), 197-222.
- Wamimbi, D. (2016). The contribution of urban refugees to the economic development of host nations: A case study of Uganda. *Uganda Martyrs University*.
- Wolfe, G. (2021). Retrieved from <https://cmsny.org/publications/venezuelan-migrants-legal-contexts-wolfe-010421>.
- Yacoubian, M. (2021). Retrieved from <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>
- Zapata, G. P., & Tapia Wenderoth, V. . (2022). Progressive legislation but lukewarm policies: The Brazilian response to Venezuelan displacement. *International Migration*, 60(1), 132-151. Retrieved from <https://cmsny.org/publications/venezuelan-migrants-legal-contexts-wolfe-010421>.

Zreik, M. (2024). *The Influx Unveiled: Demographics, Impact, and Initial Responses to the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon*. In *The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Lebanon's Economic Landscape: The Impact of Forced Migration on GDP, Unemployment, Inflation and Trade* (pp. 9-29). Cham: Springer Nature Switzerland.

About the Authors

Lead Researcher

Dr. Carlos Naffah is a distinguished university professor and consultant specializing in public policy and refugee crisis management. His work is situated at the intersection of academia, policy reform, and international cooperation, with a particular focus on fostering Arab-German relations.

A **Ford Global Fellow (2020)** and recipient of the **German Foreign Ministry's "German Unity through Arab Eyes" Award (2015)**. Dr. Naffah has directed major regional projects with organizations like the **Adyan Foundation, GIZ, and the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD)**. He holds a PhD in Education Policy and master's degrees in International Education Management and Political Sciences. His expertise lies in building frameworks for cross-cultural collaboration and sustainable policy.

Researcher

Nour Alwan is a researcher and project manager with over seven years of experience in international development, humanitarian work, and policy advocacy. She specializes in designing evidence-based solutions for displaced communities and vulnerable populations, having led over 30 international projects with organizations including the **Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung, Dream Driven, and Friedrich-Naumann-Stiftung**. Her expertise includes stakeholder engagement, monitoring and evaluation, and youth empowerment in conflict-affected contexts. Nour is currently pursuing a Master's in Public Policy at the **Willy Brandt School of Public Policy, University of Erfurt**, specializing in Conflict Studies and Non-Profit Management.

