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Geopolitical Shifts in the Levant: Impacts on IDPs and Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

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Executive Summary

Lebanon's prolonged economic collapse, political paralysis, and war with Israel have aggravated an already precarious situation, giving rise to waves of mass internal displacement. Bearing the brunt of the conflict are Lebanon's public services, including healthcare, education, and electricity, which have significantly deteriorated, leaving the state ill-equipped to handle the new crisis that resulted from Israel's war on Hezbollah. A lack of political consensus has further compounded these challenges: indeed, Lebanon has struggled to elect a president and form a functional government capable of getting the country back on track for recovery by addressing necessary reforms to secure international aid. This political instability has additionally weakened Lebanon's ability to respond effectively to the ongoing humanitarian crisis. The war with Israel has displaced thousands, destroyed infrastructure, and left many unemployed. Since a fragile ceasefire was established, efforts have shifted toward rebuilding and supporting the most affected communities.

An additional layer of complexity emerged when, only a day after Lebanon's ceasefire, unprecedented political shifts in Syria led to the collapse of the Assad regime, which had ruled for over 54 years. During the war with Israel, some Syrian refugees in Lebanon began returning to Syria, with over 300,000 having left since the beginning of Israel's escalations in September 2024. However, this return is neither systematic nor supported by robust international frameworks. Recently, another wave of Syrian refugees has returned home. However, military, political, and socioeconomic uncertainties in Syria raise doubts about whether conditions for a safe and sustainable return exist. In parallel, considering all these disruptions, it has become abundantly clear that Lebanon can no longer handle the refugee burden on its own, especially given its current economic and political fragility.

The changing situation in Syria presents both challenges and opportunities for Lebanon and its regional and international partners, including the European Union. However, the outcome of the post-Assad transformation process in Syria is far from certain. As the realities in Syria evolve, Lebanon will have to ensure its interests are considered. Hence, Lebanon must engage pragmatically with the new Syrian regime, especially given recent shifts in diplomatic relations, as regional and international actors flock to Syria. The return of Syrian refugees is a priority for Lebanon, yet, a cautious and strategic approach is necessary to ensure that returning refugees have adequate security and economic opportunities, as well as to safeguard Lebanon's economic interests and prevent a vacuum, given that Syrians occupy a large portion of manual labor jobs in Lebanon. Moreover, given the destruction and humanitarian crisis inside Lebanon caused by the war between Hezbollah and Israel, Lebanon will also have to engage with the international community and the Lebanese diaspora to garner political and economic support for the rebuilding of the country. A key condition for Lebanon's ability to address its domestic crises and facilitate the return of internally displaced persons (IDPs) is the full implementation of the ceasefire agreement

Introduction

On November 26th, 2024, a ceasefire was announced, halting the mutual aggression between Israel and Hezbollah. Lebanon had been bearing the brunt of Israeli attacks as a result of recent escalations in the Israel-Hezbollah conflict, which originally began in October 2023. On September 17, 2024, a series of pagers equipped with explosives, held by Hezbollah members, went off across Lebanon. The next day, another set of explosions took place, this time originating from walkie-talkies. Cumulatively, the attacks resulted in 39 deaths and nearly 3,000 injured. On November 10, 2024, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, acknowledged Israel's role in the attacks for the first time by stating he green-lit the operations. The pager attacks marked the beginning of increased escalations between Israel and Hezbollah, an Iranian backed militia group in Lebanon, after nearly a year of cross border attacks that had been previously mainly confined to the South of Lebanon. Tension remained high, with several targeted attacks on Beirut's suburbs, until they reached a critical point with the assassination of Hezbollah Chief Secretary, Hassan Nasrallah, on September 27, 2024.

The Displacement Crisis in Lebanon

According to the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health, more than 3,670 individuals, including 200 children, have been killed, and over 15,000 injured, by Israeli airstrikes since October 2023.[1] Massive internal migration followed, as areas across Lebanon, from the South to the Beqaa became more frequent, and new, previously safe, areas in those regions began being targeted. On October 7, 2024, UNOCHA estimated that more than 600,000 people were displaced, while the Lebanese government estimated that the number was more likely to exceed 1 million.[2] Schools became the main destination for those seeking shelter, and they quickly became overcrowded, as many took refuge in places like the Manara street and Martyr's Square in Beirut. Further disruption and displacement were recorded after Israel called for the evacuation of the entire city of Baalbek on October 30, 2024, with most people seeking refuge in neighbouring towns such as Deir El Ahmar.

A mid-October report[3] stated that Northern Lebanon, particularly Akkar, remained the primary destination for internally displaced persons (IDPs), hosting 61% of the displaced population. However, over 85% of shelters in the region quickly became at full capacity, raising concerns about shelter availability. In Beirut and Mount Lebanon (BML), 24% of IDPs relocated, mainly from southern Lebanon, though internal displacement within BML reflected varying safety conditions, particularly around southern Beirut. On 31 October, Israeli forces launched a series of heavy airstrikes in Baalbek, while concurrently issuing evacuation orders targeting the entire Baalbek region and Tyre city. Tens of thousands of people, including many who had sought shelter in Baalbek from other areas, were forced to flee. In southern Lebanon, more than 40,000 housing units have been destroyed across 37 villages,

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[1] Wassim Seifeddine, "Lebanon Death Toll Soars to 3,670 as Israeli Attacks Kill 25 More People," *Anadolu Ajansı*, November 23, 2024, sec. Middle East, https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/lebanon-death-toll-soars-to-3-670-as-israeli-attacks-kill-25-more-people/3402498.

[2] Wassim Ben Romdhane, Jennifer Vallentine, and Bram Frouws, "Lebanon's Escalating Conflict: What Are the Displacement and Migration Consequences?," *Mixed Migration Centre* (blog), October 10, 2024, https://mixedmigration.org/lebanon-conflict-displacement-migration-consequences/.

[3] International Rescue Committee, "Lebanon Crisis: Rapid Needs Assessment - Key Findings #4," Assessment Report (Lebanon, October 18, 2024), https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-rapid-needs-assessment-key-findings-4-18-october-2024.

leaving thousands of families without homes. The Ministry of Public Health has reported that 15 hospitals are either out of service or partially operating and more than 180 health workers and rescuers have been killed. Over 1.2 million people have now been displaced, including those internally displaced within Lebanon and those who have been forcibly displaced into Syria. One third of those internally displaced are children under 15.[4]

Shelter conditions for IDPs were critical, with 61% living outside official shelters.[5] Many were in overcrowded, informal shelters, such as abandoned buildings or garages, while 9% were living in precarious conditions, including on the streets. Shelter quality is declining, with 65% of households rating conditions as moderate.[6] Overcrowding, lack of privacy, and exposure to gender-based violence (GBV) are major issues, particularly in the North. Despite these challenges, only 10% of IDPs were willing to relocate, with many expressing concerns over the poor conditions and safety of their current shelters.

On the other hand, Lebanon had already been dealing with the Syrian refugee crisis, and recent escalations exacerbated the situation. Some Syrian families returned to Syria, while the remaining refugees were proceeding with caution, limiting their movements. Syrian refugees in Lebanon can be divided into three groups. The first group includes those who can return to Syria—around 300,000 have returned after the military escalation between Hezbollah and Israel mid-September 2024. Their return has become easier since the Syrian then still ruling Syrian regime temporarily stopped charging a $100 fee at the border, though several returnees have been arrested.[7] The second group consists of those who have sought shelter in facilities specifically designated for Syrians, but access to these shelters was severely limited due to the lack of available space.[8] The third group is made up of those who are homeless, sleeping on the streets or in public parks—conditions that are among the most difficult.

There was a severe shortage of support for Syrian refugees, as shelters struggled to raise funds for basic needs such as medicine, diapers, and infant formula for the Lebanese, let alone the Syrians. Moreover, the support for Syrian refugees in Lebanon was uneven across the country, with areas like Western Bekaa and some areas in the North, such as Tripoli, offering more support, namely due to the large presence of Syrians in these areas since the start of the Syrian civil war in 2011. In Beirut, the high number of displaced and injured Lebanese citizens further limited the resources available for Syrians.[9] According to a UNHCR assistance representative, shelters in Lebanon were almost exclusively Lebanese-owned, and the available capacity was insufficient to accommodate the influx of IDPs. Various humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR, were distributing essential aid such as food, water,

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[4] "Emergency Situation Report: Lebanon Crisis," Situation Report (Beirut: International Rescue Committee, November 8, 2024), https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/international-rescue-committee-emergency-situation-report-lebanon-crisis-8-november-2024.

[5] "Lebanon Crisis: Rapid Needs Assessment - Key Findings #4," Assessment Report (Lebanon: International Rescue Committee, October 18, 2024), 2, https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-crisis-rapid-needs-assessment-key-findings-4-18-october-2024.

[6] "Lebanon Crisis: Rapid Needs Assessment," 3.

[7] TIMEP, "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Face a Crisis Within a Crisis," *The Tahrir Institute for Middle East Policy* - (blog), October 10, 2024, https://timep.org/2024/10/10/syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-face-a-crisis-within-a-crisis/.

[8] Some schools that once served as refugee centers were repurposed for displaced families, but these facilities proved inadequate to meet the needs of the large number of displaced Syrians.

[9] TIMEP, "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon".

blankets, mattresses, pillows, and kitchen sets. However, there was clear discrimination in access to emergency assistance, with policy makers providing aid based on nationality rather than need.

The level of international aid was insufficient to meet the needs of both the Lebanese population and the Syrian refugees. The burden on the country became overwhelming. Given Lebanon's current crisis, it seems unlikely the Lebanese government can intervene effectively in the reconstruction. With so many challenges, authorities are stretched thin. While the priority of the Lebanese authorities is to fulfill their side of the ceasefire deal, initiate political renewal and economic reforms, and engage in reconstruction, this also raises questions about facilitating the safe return of refugees. It may be safer for them to return to secure areas in Syria rather than remain in precarious conditions in Lebanon.

1. A New Disruptive Element: The Increase in IDPs in Lebanon and its Spillovers

a. The Impact of Regional Instability on Lebanon

The ramifications of the IDP crisis were significant across multiple dimensions, including in terms of housing demand, economic pressure, and inter-group tensions. The strain of around one million displaced individuals has exerted tremendous pressure on Lebanon's already vulnerable infrastructure, overwhelming essential public services such as healthcare, education, and sanitation. The surge in demand for housing has resulted in overcrowding in both refugee camps and urban settings, consequently driving up rental costs and forcing many displaced families into substandard living conditions. The economic strain is equally daunting, as the Lebanese economy, which has been grappling with a prolonged financial crisis, is now faced with the challenge of supporting an increasing population in need of food, shelter, medical care, and necessities. Furthermore, social tensions have escalated between the Lebanese displaced Syrians and local communities, where resources are limited and competition for employment, housing, and assistance is intense. The psychological impact on both Lebanese citizens and displaced individuals is also significant, compounded by the trauma of displacement and the persistent fear of violence and persecution. Collectively, these factors have intensified Lebanon's difficulties, jeopardizing not only the country's stability but also the welfare of its inhabitants.

› Economic Impact of IDPs

The cumulative cost of physical damage and economic losses from the conflict in Lebanon is estimated at US$8.5 billion, according to a World Bank report.[10] This report published on November 17, 2024, identifies US$3.4 billion in damages to physical infrastructure, with Lebanese Prime Minister, Najib Mikati, highlighting that other critical sector, including education, health, agriculture, and the environment, also suffered damage, with losses totaling approximately US$5.1 billion. This leaves these sectors vulnerable to a substantial decrease in their capacity to deliver essential services to the public, while

[10] World Bank, "Lebanon Interim Damage and Loss Assessment (DaLa) - November 2024," Assessment Report (Washington, D.C.: The World Bank, November 2024), https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/099111224112085259/pdf/P5063801c62fbe0c21beff1d0a436d07e02.pdf.

simultaneously increasing the strain on the state, which is already facing limited resources and financial constraints. The conflict is projected to reduce Lebanon's real GDP growth by at least 6.6% in 2024, adding to a significant economic downturn over the past five years, which has already seen a contraction of more than 34% of real GDP.

In addition to the nearly 1 million people displaced within the country, around 166,000 people lost their jobs, resulting in a US$168 million loss in income, also according to the World Bank. The same report explains how the Lebanese housing sector suffered the most, with nearly 100,000 units damaged, leading to US$3.2 billion in losses.[11] Disruptions to trade are approaching US$2 billion, partly due to the displacement of workers and business owners. Additionally, agricultural damages and losses, caused by destroyed crops, livestock, and the displacement of farmers, have amounted to about US$1.2 billion. This is especially concerning in the current situation, as many displaced people since October 2023 have come from rural farming communities. Some reportedly travelled between their new locations and their farms to tend to their land and livestock, thereby securing their livelihoods, exposing themselves to greater risks.[12] Displaced individuals seeking new sources of income face competition with local communities for limited job opportunities. The increased demand for goods and services in host areas led to higher prices, further widening the gap between income and expenses. Moreover, social networks that could help mitigate the effects of income loss were disrupted.[13]

Over 1.26 million people, or 23% of the population, were suffering from acute hunger as food insecurity spread and deepened throughout Lebanon, according to the World Food Programme (WFP). Lebanon was already experiencing record-high currency devaluation and food inflation prior to the recent developments. A World Bank Study from May 2024 claims that poverty has more than quadrupled in the last decade, reaching unprecedented levels.[14] Currently, nearly all refugees and half of Lebanese households struggle to put food on the table. To support one million displaced individuals for three months, approximately $131 million is needed. However, only $74 million has been allocated to relief organizations, leaving displaced people in shelter centers reliant on community efforts and NGOs for assistance.[15] According to Environment Minister Nasser Yassin, Lebanon required $250 million per month to assist the people displaced by Israeli airstrikes.

The Lebanese economy is estimated to shrink an additional 2.3% in 2025 and 2.4% in 2026, even after a ceasefire was announced on November 26, 2024, two months after the escalations started. This decline is due to a slowdown in expected economic activity, the slow recovery and reconstruction process, and significant losses in capital across various sectors such as infrastructure, buildings, factories, equipment, and utilities. The economic downturn could lead to a 3.2 percent decrease in public revenues in 2025 and 3.1 percent in

[11] World Bank, "Lebanon Interim Damage and Loss," 11.
[12] REACH, "Socio-Economic Vulnerability in Lebanon: Impact and Outlook of Conflict Escalation," Assessment Report, October 4, 2024, https://repository.impact-initiatives.org/document/impact/4f2e0635/REACH-LBN_Socio-Economic-Vulnerability_04102024.pdf.
[13] REACH, "Socio-Economic Vulnerability in Lebanon," 5.
[14] World Bank, "Lebanon Poverty and Equity Assessment 2024 : Weathering a Protracted Crisis," Poverty Assessment (Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, May 23, 2024), http://documents.worldbank.org/curated/en/099052224104516741/P1766511325da10a71ab6b1ae97816dd20c.
[15] "Lebanon," World Food Programme, September 24, 2024, https://www.wfp.org/countries/lebanon.

2026, worsening the government's fiscal challenges and its capacity to sustain essential public services.[16]

› Social Tensions and Hostility

The new rent inflation rate increased by 37% per year in September 2024, according to data from the Central Administration of Statistics (CAS). This rise took place prior to the housing situation becoming worse due to mass displacement. Moreover, the Washington Post reported that at least 5,868 buildings have been either damaged or destroyed across the borderlands between Lebanon and Israel, with the vast majority of the devastation happening after October 2, 2024, the day after the launch of the Israeli ground invasion.[17] In light of the pressing need to accommodate for an increasingly large number of displaced individuals, many landlords have taken extra cautionary measures while leasing out their apartments. While some have turned to renting solely on referrals, others have depended on the crisis management of their local governments. There are fewer housing options available because many landlords are still reluctant to rent to IDPs because of safety worries and possible military targeting. Therefore, anecdotal data suggests that rental costs have roughly doubled from their prior levels, especially in safer parts of Lebanon.[18] The situation is being exploited by landlords, who are requesting increased fees and several months' rent upfront.

As a result, social tensions escalated due to the heavy flux of IDPs into different towns and areas, with many Lebanese began demanding an end to displaced people illegally squatting in private property in various Lebanese regions, particularly in Beirut, heightening tensions. Lebanon, which went through a violent Civil War (1975-1990), is still internally divided and therefore very prone to sectarian tensions, especially in politically fragile situations. The Washington Post, for example, claimed that the widespread displacement brought on by Israeli strikes has constituted a "test of the fragile sectarian balance" in Lebanon, because Israeli bombing has destroyed entire buildings occupied by displaced people in Christian areas, allegedly targeting "Hezbollah," raising fears and distrust amongst locals.[19] Several cases have been reported whereby tensions between the displaced and the locals have risen due to a fear from the locals that the displaced would garner unwanted attention from Israel.[20] Indeed, an influx of individuals from predominantly Shia

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[16] "UN Development Programme Warns of Socio-Economic Crisis in Lebanon amidst Escalation of Hostilities," UNDP, October 23, 2024, https://www.undp.org/arab-states/press-releases/un-development-programme-warns-socio-economic-crisis-lebanon-amidst-escalation-hostilities.

[17] The Post claims to have obtained an examination of Sentinel-1 satellite radar data, verified films, and examined satellite imagery from southern Lebanon to arrive at its conclusions. The recordings depict more than a dozen controlled demolitions conducted by the Israeli military, which damaged or destroyed at least nine religious sites, in addition to the obvious devastation caused by Israeli bombings and escalating ground combat. See Meg Kelly et al., "Israel Has Damaged or Destroyed Nearly a Quarter of Buildings in Lebanon's South," *Washington Post*, October 31, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/10/31/israel-war-lebanon-south-destruction/.

[18] Mira Said, "Humanitarian, Economic, and Social Effects of War on Lebanon," Report (Blominvest Bank, October 29, 2024), 8, https://blog.blominvestbank.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/10/Humanitarian-Economic-and-Social-Effects-of-War-on-Lebanon-1.pdf.

[19] Faiza Diab, "Will Lebanon avoid a New Civil War?," *Al Majalla*, November 3, 2024, sec. Politics, https://www.majalla.com/node/322897/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D9%87%D9%84-%D9%8A%D9%86%D8%AC%D9%88-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D9%85%D9%86-%D8%AD%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D8%A3%D9%87%D9%84%D9%8A%D8%A9-%D8%AC%D8%AF%D9%8A%D8%AF%D8%A9%D8%9F#.

[20] For example, according to a Reuters article, Israel's military campaign across Shi'ite-majority areas of Lebanon, which has forced over a million people into Sunni and Christian areas, has escalated sectarian tensions and threatened the stability of Lebanon, according to more than a dozen lawmakers,

Muslim regions, where the Iran-backed Hezbollah maintains a significant presence—Dahieh, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa Valley in the east—into areas that are majority Christian and Sunni Muslim, has exacerbated tensions.[21] Some building managers have resorted to asking new arrivals to identify themselves to ensure that they have no affiliation with Hezbollah, out of fear that specific buildings and other tenants would be targeted by association. This, in some places, increased the level of internal tension and suspicion among neighbors and residents, and re-awakened memories of the civil war for many.[22] Significantly, in early October, French Minister of the Armed Forces Sébastien Lecornu warned that "an imminent civil war" was brewing in Lebanon. He stated: "achieving a ceasefire in Lebanon is a necessity for our collective security," highlighting the "strong interfaith tensions" reported across the country. "But you can see that Lebanon could completely collapse even further than it already has," he added, clarifying to the LCI television channel that "Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing model, originally designed to maintain stability, has instead amplified divisions. Hezbollah and its allies insist on a presidential candidate that is aligned with their position, while opposition factions advocate for a neutral candidate, creating a political deadlock with no clear resolution in sight. Our position, at the present time, is based in particular on the fear of an imminent civil war in Lebanon," as reported by Agence France-Presse.[23]

› Political Polarization

Even prior to the war, Lebanon was facing deep rooted political polarization that has heightened over the last 5 years of the crisis. Lebanon's sectarian power-sharing model, originally designed to maintain stability, has instead amplified divisions. Hezbollah and its allies have used their strong political and military position in Lebanon to control outcomes and at times block processes that they considered unfavorable. They insist on a presidential candidate that is aligned with their position, while opposition factions advocate for a neutral candidate, creating a political deadlock with no clear resolution in sight. It remains to be seen whether an upcoming election round set for January 9, 2025 will be able to overcome the stalemate.[24] In any case, ending the political vacuum at the country's presidency is a

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politicians, residents, and analysts contacted by Reuters. See Timour Azhari, "Mass Displacement in Lebanon War Revives Spectre of Sectarian Strife," *Reuters*, October 15, 2024, sec. Middle East, https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/mass-displacement-lebanon-war-revives-spectre-sectarian-strife-2024-10-15/.

[21] The IDP crisis in Lebanon has also exacerbated social tensions between landlords and displaced families who have resorted to squatting in vacant properties. In one case, the BBC interviewed a designer in Hamra, who reported that families broke into her building, initially housing 20 individuals but later sheltering over 100. While she sympathizes with their plight and refrains from evicting them until a governmental solution is found, she acknowledges the situation's unsustainability and expresses concern over its broader social impact. See Lina Sinjab, "Lebanon: Communal Tensions Grow in Beirut as War Forces Relocations," *BBC News*, October 30, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/c99rx89znmlo.

[22] Diab, "Will Lebanon avoid a New Civil War?".

[23] Agence France-Presse, "French Minister of the Armed Forces Expressed Concerns about a Potential Civil War in Lebanon.," *L'Orient Today*, October 22, 2024, sec. Politics, France, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1432331/french-minister-of-the-armed-forces-expressed-concerns-about-a-potential-civil-war-in-lebanon.html.

[24] "Berri Sets Jan. 9 as Date for Parliamentary Session to Elect President," *L'Orient Today*, November 28, 2024, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1437340/berri-sets-jan-9-as-date-for-parliamentary-session-to-elect-president.html.

precondition for not only implementing the ceasefire agreement, but also to launch the lang-overdue reform process.

With the ceasefire now in force, efforts to disarm Hezbollah, a central demand of many opposition leaders, remain a challenging goal. The 13-point agreement is based on the contours of UN security council resolution 1701, which previously ended the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah but failed to be fully implemented on both sides. According to the agreement, Hezbollah must remove its heavy weaponry north of the Litani River, around 25 km north of the southern border, and Israel's forces must leave southern Lebanon. During a 60-day transition period, the Lebanese army is supposed to take control over the south. The agreement states that only "official military and security forces" in Lebanon will be permitted to carry guns, according to a circulating copy of the ceasefire agreement.[25]

The US and France will become part of the Tripartite Mechanism, which was established to help resolve controversial situations and involves the Israeli military and Lebanese army, and UNIFIL. The "reformulated and enhanced" structure, which will "monitor, verify, and assist in ensuring enforcement" of both parties' promises, will be chaired by the United States, according to the ceasefire deal. Any suspected infractions will be expected to be reported to the system by Israel and Lebanon.[26] The most polarising issue at this phase is the disarmament of Hezbollah. Hezbollah's disarmament is still essential to the complete execution of Security Council decisions pertaining to Lebanon. Several opponents of Hezbollah have asked the group to give up its weapons and continue to be only a political organization.[27] On the other hand, attempts to address this issue are viewed by Hezbollah's Shiite base as a betrayal.

2. A Rapidly Changing Situation and a Window of Opportunity

With the fall of the Assad regime, the main responsible for forced migration and displacement of Syrians inside the country and within the region has disappeared. . In a matter of days, past arguments emphasizing the difficulties of Syrian refugees who couldn't return to Syria out of fear of political repression, persecution, torture, and mandatory conscription, have been tossed aside However, the country still faces, and uncertain future and it remains to be seen whether the stakeholders and decision makers in Syria will manage a transition that results in a peaceful and inclusive new political system.

In response to the uncertainty, several European countries, including Germany, Austria, Croatia, Greence, France, and Hungary, are reviewing their policies toward Syrian refugees.[28] Some nations have suspended visa issuance for Syrians altogether, while

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[25] Adam Geller, "What to Know about the Ceasefire Deal between Israel and Lebanon's Hezbollah," *AP News*, November 26, 2024, sec. World News, https://apnews.com/article/israel-palestinians-hamas-lebanon-hezbollah-ceasefire-3ed296f8317ecaa89c4e3548c75c9602.

[26] "Lebanon Ceasefire: What We Know about Israel-Hezbollah Deal," *BBC News*, November 27, 2024, https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cx2d3gj9ewxo.

[27] Kevork Yacoubian, "The Post-Nasrallah Era: A Seismic Shift in Lebanon's Politics," *Geopolitical Monitor* (blog), November 5, 2024, https://www.geopoliticalmonitor.com/the-post-nasrallah-era-a-seismic-shift-in-lebanons-politics/.

[28] Amanda Castro, Hannah Parry, and Michael D. Carroll, "Refugee Claims Halted amid Islamic State Fears," *Newsweek* (blog), December 9, 2024, https://www.newsweek.com/syria-war-live-updates-bashar-al-assad-1997531.

others have imposed stricter asylum regulations. Germany, which hosts the largest number of Syrian refugees in Europe, froze over 47,000 applications and expressed cautious optimism while warning of the risks of premature returns. Some countries, like Austria, are developing repatriation plans, while others suggest incentivized returns.[29] This reflects a broader European shift toward limiting migration and focusing on the repatriation of Syrians currently residing within their borders. Already during Assad's reign, some member states had pushed for the European Union to reevaluate its strategy on Syria, suggesting a greater focus on facilitating returns.[30] Despite the fact that irregular migration into the European Union decreased in the first nine months of 2024 uncontrolled migration flows continue to be a challenge.

In light of the fast-changing events, top diplomats from various countries, both Arab and Western, are reaching out to the new regime to try and find a footing in the changing landscape. Two prominent players have already seized the opportunity to form ties with the new forces of power in Syria. High-ranking officials from Turkey and Qatar traveled to Damascus for talks with leaders of the militant coalition that ousted former Syrian President Bashar al-Assad, according to a statement released by Syria's interim information ministry.[31] Similarly, EU foreign policy chief Kaja Kallas and EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen stated on December 17th, 2024 that the EU will resume its delegation in Syria and start contact with the country's new government.[32] However, the EU maintains that conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified returns are not met yet.

Moreover, these new policy adjustments come at a time when Lebanon remains overwhelmed by the economic and social challenges posed by hosting over one million Syrian refugees—amounting to nearly a quarter of its population. As European nations take steps to normalize relations with post-Assad Syria and promote refugee returns, it is essential that they assist Lebanon in this endeavor. Lebanon's strained resources, political instability, and housing crises have made it ill-equipped to handle the prolonged displacement of such a large population.

European countries could support Lebanon by providing financial aid to strengthen infrastructure and services for returning refugees, collaborating on frameworks to ensure safe and voluntary repatriation, and addressing potential risks such as property disputes and reintegration challenges in Syria. This assistance would not only alleviate Lebanon's burden but also reinforce international commitments to shared responsibility in managing refugee crises. A coordinated approach, integrating Lebanon's needs with Europe's

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[29] Anthony Faiola et al., "After Assad's Fall, Some Say It's Time for Syrian Refugees to Go Home," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2024, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/2024/12/09/syrian-refugees-return-assad-europe/.

[30] "Austria Calls for a Reorientation of EU Policy Towards Syria," *Vindobona*, July 23, 2024, sec. People, https://www.vindobona.org/article/austria-calls-for-a-reorientation-of-eu-policy-towards-syria.

[31] IANS, "Senior Turkish, Qatari Officials in Damascus for Talks with Militant Leaders: Syrian Interim Govt," *National Herald*, December 13, 2024, sec. World, https://www.nationalheraldindia.com/international/senior-turkish-qatari-officials-in-damascus-for-talks-with-militant-leaders-syrian-interim-govt.

[32] Reuters. "EU to engage with Syrian leaders and reopen delegation," December 17, 2024. https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/eu-delegation-damascus-become-fully-operational-again-kallas-sayas-2024-12-17/.

migration policies, could serve as a model for balancing humanitarian obligations with practical realities.

a. How the Shift in Syria can Impact Lebanon

Almost immediately after the fall of the regime, Syrians began going back to Syria from Lebanon in scores, with more than 1,500 people expected to have gone back.[33] At the same time, Masnaa, the only official border crossing between Lebanon and Syria, has been overwhelmed by an influx of travelers, mainly Syrians, along with some Iraqis and Iranians trying to leave Syria. The situation was exacerbated by the absence of Syrian security forces, leading Lebanese authorities to tighten border controls, which delayed entry processing and left thousands stranded. Entry permits are now being granted on a case-by-case basis, primarily for humanitarian reasons, and typically for short durations of two to four weeks. Meanwhile, Syrians leaving Lebanon faced fewer restrictions and received assistance. As many Syrians have already left, more continue to attempt entry, especially from areas around Damascus. Lebanese Interior Minister Bassem Mawlawi visited Masnaa to oversee tighter security measures, including increased personnel and checkpoints. Tensions have also risen among Lebanese citizens near the border, and tensions are expected to rise as Lebanon has just come out of a devastating war.[34]

Reports stated that some displaced Syrians feel that the reasons for their stay in Lebanon have diminished, as they no longer face the arbitrary arrests or repression they once did under the regime.[35] For some, the conditions in Syria appear to have improved enough to consider returning- although the numbers are still low. At the same time, many who have lost everything in Syria do not see an incentive in returning before the economic and security situation improves. Moreover, the situation is not one-sided, as a new wave of displacement might be taking place, with regime supporters and their allies fleeing to Lebanon to escape potential persecution and revenge from opposition groups in Syria.[36]

Lebanese politicians have already started calling for the departure of Syrians, saying there is no longer any justification for displaced Syrians to remain in Lebanon.[37] A prominent Christian leader emphasized that the international community, particularly the UNHCR, has no excuse for delaying this return process and called for the cessation of aid to

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[33] "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Begin to Return after Regime's Ouster," *The New Arab* (blog) (The New Arab, December 8, 2024), https://www.newarab.com/news/syrian-refugees-lebanon-begin-return-after-regimes-ouster.

[34] "UN 'Mulls Setting up Syria-Lebanon Border Camp for Displaced,'" *The New Arab* (blog) (The New Arab, December 10, 2024), https://www.newarab.com/news/un-mulls-setting-syria-lebanon-border-camp-displaced.

[35] Fida Makdashi, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon: The hour of return has struck," *Independent Arabia* (blog), December 9, 2024, https://www.independentarabia.com/node/613535/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/%D8%AA%D9%82%D8%A7%D8%B1%D9%8A%D8%B1/%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D8%B2%D8%AD%D9%88%D9%86-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B3%D9%88%D8%B1%D9%8A%D9%88%D9%86-%D9%81%D9%8A-%D9%84%D8%A8%D9%86%D8%A7%D9%86-%D8%AF%D9%82%D8%AA-%D8%B3%D8%A7%D8%B9%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%B9%D9%88%D8%AF%D8%A9.

[36] Makdashi, "Syrian refugees in Lebanon".

[37] "Bassil: The reason for the Syrian displacement to Lebanon has completely disappeared, and therefore there is no need or justification for any displaced Syrian to remain.," Elnashra News, December 10, 2024, https://www.elnashra.com/news/show/1701241/باسيل-سبب-النزوح-السوري-الى-لبنان-انتفى-بالكامل-وب.

Syrian refugees in Lebanon, except for assistance related to their repatriation. He also suggested that the fall of the regime could pave the way for a new government in Syria, one that is more democratic and open to the international community, which could lead to improved relations with Lebanon. This, he believed, would not only benefit Syria but also create opportunities for Lebanon in terms of investment and reconstruction, particularly if international sanctions on Syria are lifted.

The situation was already dire before the war with Israel broke out, and tensions were at their peak after the killing of a Christian politician in April, which prompted calls for deportations and restrictions on Syrians.[38] Caretaker Prime Minister Najib Mikati stated in the aftermath that most Syrians will soon be deported. The situation caused a new wave of internal displacement within Lebanon[39], with many displaced Syrians moving from Christian-majority areas to Sunni-majority regions in the north like Tripoli, Akkar, Al-Minya, and Al-Dinniyeh, where the Sunni population is predominant.[40]

Similarly, in September of 2024, the Lebanese Ministry of Education and Higher Education's decision to allow Syrian refugees without legal residency or UNHCR registration to enroll in schools sparked a lot of controversy. The new policy offered a one-year grace period for undocumented Syrian students to enroll and delayed residency and UNHCR registration requirements until the 2025-2026 academic year. Critics were concerned this would attract more Syrian refugees to Lebanon. The Ministry of Education saw this policy as an opportunity to regularize the status of undocumented Syrians, on the other hand. The Ministry said that it intended to share details of Syrian students taking official exams with General Security, aiding efforts to monitor illegal refugees. The decision, nonetheless, reignited concerns about the large number of undocumented Syrian students in Lebanon. In 2024, over 24,000 Syrian students passed official exams but could not receive diplomas due to lack of legal documentation. Despite the policy's controversial nature, the Education Ministry clarified that issuing certificates does not imply residency facilitation, which remains the responsibility of General Security. While the Ministry defends the policy as a necessary service, General Security insists that residency permits cannot be issued to individuals who entered Lebanon illegally. The issue of educating Syrian refugees continues to be a pressing concern, with Syrian students comprising about 7% of vocational education and 45% of primary education.[41]

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[38] Paula Astih, "New Syrian displacement movement inside Lebanon after the strict measures in the Christian areas," *Asharq Al-Awsat* (blog), May 18, 2024, https://aawsat.com/node/5022008.

[39] Madeline Edwards, "The New Humanitarian | Syrians in Lebanon Stay Indoors as Fears of Xenophobic Violence Grow," *The New Humanitarian* (blog), April 22, 2024, https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/news-feature/2024/04/22/syria-lebanon-fear-xenophobia-violence.

[40] Ahmad al-Khair, a representative from the northern district of Tripoli-Al-Minieh-Al-Dinniyeh, highlighted two main factors driving this new wave of displacement: the Israeli attacks on southern Lebanon and the racist practices and violence against Syrians in other regions. He noted that the burden of this internal displacement is heavily felt in the Bekaa and northern regions, which are struggling economically, socially, and security-wise. Al-Khair stressed the need for the Lebanese state to create a clear plan to address the Syrian displacement crisis, particularly in the northern and Bekaa regions, while also emphasizing a national consensus to tackle the issue across Lebanon. See Astih, "New Syrian displacement movement".

[41] Lara El Hachem, "New Education Policy Sparks Controversy: Lebanon's Approach to Illegal Syrian Students," trans. Yasmine Jaroudi, *LBC International*, September 14, 2024, https://www.lbcgroup.tv/news/news-bulletin-reports/795880/lbci-lebanon-articles/en.

b. Opportunities and Challenges for Lebanon in a Shifting Geopolitical Landscape

Between September 24 and October 22, the Syrian Arab Red Crescent (SARC) reported[42] that approximately 440,000 individuals, including 71% Syrians and 29% Lebanese, crossed from Lebanon into Syria using official border points. It is also believed that many others used informal routes to leave the country. Additionally, the UN estimates that 60% of the displaced are children and adolescents, many of whom arrived in urgent need of medical care, shelter, food, and water. Currently, around 16.7 million people in Syria require assistance, representing over 72% of the population, the highest number since the crisis began in 2011. Of those in need, an estimated 45% are children.

So far, in a somewhat astonishing turn of events, the transition of power in Syria has not witnessed previous scenes of bloodshed. A transitional government has been put in place, with Syria's new interim prime minister saying that he aimed to bring back millions of Syrian refugees, protect all citizens and provide basic services, while acknowledging it would be difficult because the country lacked foreign currency. Syria has been put under strenuous sanctions since the Caesar Act was issued in 2020. The Caesar Act significantly tightened U.S. sanctions on the Syrian regime and targeted individuals, businesses, and governments that think of aiding Damascus or contributing to Syria's reconstruction. This bipartisan law applies globally, affecting entities in sectors such as energy, aviation, construction, and engineering. Its aim was to deter normalization efforts with Syria by countries like Lebanon, China, and the UAE, emphasizing the regime's role in displacing millions and committing human rights abuses. It remains to see what the future of these sanctions under the new regime will be.[43]

For Lebanon, as one of the most important host countries for Syrian refugees, the prospect of a stable, peaceful Syria is a great opportunity. However, Lebanon must also be aware that an intensification of international support for Syria might come at the expense of the neighboring countries that have been the main recipients of international financial support. A complete halt to support for Lebanon would deliver a significant shock to the country's already fragile economy, which has been heavily reliant on international aid amidst its ongoing financial crisis. Such a shock could worsen economic conditions for both Lebanese citizens and refugees. Because Lebanon has been embroiled in one of the most severe economic crises in modern history since 2019, this implies that in order to support all of the refugees living here, Lebanon has had to rely even more on outside assistance than before. In May 2024, the European Commission announced a one-billion-euro aid package for Lebanon. With 25% of the funds going to the Lebanese army and security

[42] "UNHCR Syria Flash Update #18 Response to Displacement from Lebanon to Syria," UNHCR SYRIA FLASH UPDATE (UNHCR, October 25, 2024), https://www.unhcr.org/sy/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2024/10/UNHCR-FLASH-UPDATE-18_Displacement-from-Lebanon_25-October-2024.pdf.
[43] Acil Tabbara, "Caesar Act: What Are the Repercussions on Lebanon?," *L'Orient Today*, May 31, 2020, sec. Politics, https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1220002/caesar-act-what-are-the-repercussions-on-lebanon.html.

services, most of that assistance was intended to meet the fundamental needs of Syrian refugees and other vulnerable populations in the nation.[44]

Moreover, the haphazard or abrupt departure of Syrians could create a severe economic vacuum, particularly in sectors such as agriculture, construction, and services, where Syrian labor has become essential. To avoid such consequences, there is an urgent need for a rational and carefully managed approach to this issue. A strategy that is gradual, progressive, and collaborative would allow for the phased return of refugees in a way that mitigates economic shocks and security risks. This requires coordinated efforts between the EU, Lebanon, and international organizations to establish clear frameworks for return, strengthen local infrastructure, and ensure that repatriation is both safe and sustainable. Only through such a comprehensive approach can Lebanon's stability be preserved while addressing the challenges posed by the ongoing refugee crisis.

The geopolitical shifts and new realities being shaped in the Middle East in such a short period of time pose both fears and opportunities. In the aftermath of the war, Lebanon seeks to re-establish the role of the state and revitalize its institutions. The urgency of electing a new president and forming an effective government is critical to addressing the country's deepening economic and social crises, restoring confidence in governance, and strengthening its capacity to manage challenges, including the Syrian refugee issue. The European Union (EU) can play a pivotal role in this process by supporting reforms and backing initiatives to improve public sector efficiency. Strengthened governance will not only stabilize Lebanon internally but also position it as a more effective partner in addressing regional challenges.

[44] Sara Stachelhaus, "EU-Lebanon Deal: Turning a Blind Eye to Reality," *Heinrich Böll Stiftung* (blog), July 16, 2024, https://eu.boell.org/en/2024/07/16/eu-lebanon-deal-turning-blind-eye-reality.

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About LISA

The **Levant Institute for Strategic Affairs (LISA)** is a Beirut-based think tank dedicated to addressing Lebanon's fundamental economic, political, and societal challenges. Through research and policy recommendations, LISA collaborates with civil society organizations and decision-makers to promote and advocate for practical solutions to these issues, fostering informed dialogue and policy-driven change.
This paper was drafted by **LISA**, reinforcing its commitment to fostering informed dialogue and actionable policies for Lebanon's future.

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