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# Policy Brief

## Lebanese Contradictory Responses to Syrian Refugees Include Stress, Hospitality, Resentment

**Research by Fafo highlights disruptive consequence of long-term refugee presence in the country**

### Summary

This policy brief examines both impact of and responses to Syrian forced displacement in Lebanon and is based on fieldwork in the Sunni-village of Bebnine and a national opinion poll with a representative sample of 900.<sup>1</sup> The mass influx of refugees is causing increased competition for scarce jobs in the informal sector. The Syrian refugees can combine aid assistance with below-average wages. As an unintended consequence, particularly poorer Lebanese are losing their jobs to cheaper Syrian labour or left with an unsustainable income.

Attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Lebanon are characterized by contradiction. The Lebanese hosts have been remarkably hospitable and continue to absorb and support the self-settled refugees. On the other hand, intensified labour competition over time combined with a sense of differential financial treatment produce ambivalent attitudes and resentment towards the Syrian refugees. More than half of the Lebanese population surveyed believe that no more Syrians should be allowed to enter Lebanon and prefer UN refugee camps for those already in the country.

The brief suggests that in the context of self-settled refugees, communal tensions caused by labour competition can be reduced by introducing cash for work assistance.

### Introduction

More than two years into the conflict in Syria, Lebanon is the country in the region that has received the largest number of Syrian refugees. By the end of June 2013, more than 570,000 refugees were registered or awaiting registration with the UNHCR.<sup>2</sup> Estimates by the Lebanese government, which include work migrants, claim that more than one million Syrians are now in Lebanon, a country of only four million people.

**The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB)** was inaugurated in 2006 to harness the policy-related research of AUB's internationally respected faculty and other scholars, in order to contribute positively to Arab policy-making and international relations. IFI is a neutral, dynamic, civil, and open space that brings together people representing all viewpoints in society. It aims to: raise the quality of public policy-related debate and decision-making in the Arab World and abroad; enhance the Arab World's input into international affairs; and, enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in the Middle East and abroad.

**Fafo** is an independent and multidisciplinary research foundation focusing on social welfare and trade policy, labor and living conditions, public health, migration and integration, and transnational security and development issues. Fafo works within both a domestic Norwegian and larger international context.

<sup>1</sup> Poll results are available at <http://www.Fafo.no/ais/middeast/lebanon/91369-syrian-refugees.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

Fafo Institute for Applied International Studies (Fafo AIS) has studied the dynamics and impact of Syrian displacement in Lebanon.<sup>3</sup> Bebnine, the village we selected for a case-study, is among the poorest in North Lebanon with a population of about 35,000 and an estimated 6,000 Syrian refugees. The lack of camps and a centralized infrastructure for assistance to the Syrian refugees makes aid distribution unpredictable and difficult to access for refugees. The refugees' settlement into local communities is also a constraint in the aid operations, solved elsewhere by concentrating refugees in camps.

Lebanese citizens increasingly fear that the country's strategy of dissociation from taking sides in the Syrian conflict is crumbling by sectarian strife inside Lebanon, but not least because of increased Hezbollah and Sunni insurgent activity on each side of the conflict in Syria. Many Lebanese fear war is becoming more likely inside their own country. They have stopped asking if and now only ask when there will be war.

## Aid: too late and too little, unpredictable and difficult to access

There are no camps or reception centres for Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the refugees are trickling into villages and towns all over Lebanon on a daily basis. They frequently arrive empty handed. Often confused and traumatized by war, they need some time to orient themselves as refugees before they are able to search for assistance. They will ask Syrian or Lebanese friends and relatives for support, or just wait along the road for someone to help them. Local NGOs try their best to register and assist the new arrivals with food parcels and mattresses, but have limited resources. There is limited coordination between the small NGOs, resulting in excessive assistance to some refugees and nothing to others. One frustrated refugee woman complained quietly when a NGO coordinator offered her extra mattresses: *'I don't need another mattress; I need food, we are hungry.'*

While local NGOs encourage the refugees to register with the UNHCR, some are too scared to register out of fear that their names will travel back to the Syrian government. When the refugees eventually search for help, sometimes after weeks, a majority register with the UNHCR, a requirement to be eligible for UN assistance. It typically takes one month to get an appointment with the UNHCR and another month will pass by before aid is made accessible. The refugees are thus vulnerable the first few months after arrival. They are totally dependent on support from the local communities and organizations. This situation requires a search for employment, particularly in the unskilled job market, which in turn can out-manoeuvre local workers.

Refugees complained that it was difficult to access the UNHCR for registration. An educated male refugee (28) said that reaching the donors was an on-going challenge:

*There is only one telephone line to the donors so it is really difficult to talk to them, because everyone is calling. When we finally come through on the line, they only give us an appointment after a month. They should have better phone lines in order to help these people.*

The UNHCR offices are far away from the villages where the refugees live; for northern Lebanon they have to go to one office to register (Tripoli) and visit another place to obtain assistance (Qubayat). The travel expenses to reach these destinations are an extra burden for the refugees.

When assistance from the UNHCR and others is finally secured, refugees find that it does not cover all their needs. Most importantly, it does not cover expenses for rent and accommodation. Further, food coupons could not be used to purchase all items deemed a necessity, such as shaving equipment. Medicines are not included, although refugees often receive free consultations at nearby clinics. Under-funding is a chronic problem for UNHCR and getting worse because the number of refugees is growing faster than previous predictions. As a leader of a NGO network put it: *'The needs are growing, but the resources are not.'*

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**"I don't need another mattress; I need food, we are hungry."**  
- Syrian refugee

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**"The needs are growing, but the resources are not."**  
- NGO worker

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<sup>3</sup> We will take this opportunity to thank the Norwegian Ministry of Foreign Affairs for funding this study. Our thanks also go to Information International in Lebanon for survey implementation and our field assistants Mary Rose and Diana for excellent support in Bebnine. Fafo colleagues played a crucial role in processing data and preparing the tabulation reports, as well as giving comments and valuable support to the analysis. Not least will we thank Syrian refugees and local people in Bebnine that willingly shared their experience with the Fafo team.

Fieldwork findings strongly suggest that the registration process must be strengthened and coordinated. This could be done by empowering local authorities to obtain an overview of categories of registered refugees and the aid they are receiving and strengthen coordination between local NGOs and aid networks already implementing programs and providing services.

## 'They are stealing our jobs'

The initial Lebanese hospitality towards Syrian refugees has become strained due to increased competition for scarce employment, particularly in the unskilled sector. According to Fafo's poll most Lebanese believe that the Syrians are taking their jobs and causing wages to decline. Aid to Syrian refugees allows them to combine aid and work as a livelihood strategy, an opportunity closed to most poor Lebanese, thus marginalizing the host population. In the past, Syrian labour migrants have accepted lower salaries than the Lebanese. The introduction of aid enables the Syrian refugees to accept even lower wages since it is the combined income from aid and low paid work that allows the household to survive.

For the Lebanese, particularly those lacking formal education and depending on the unskilled labour market, the resulting competition is devastating. Many lose their jobs altogether or alternatively are forced to accept lower salaries than before. A possible remedy might be the introduction of 'cash for work' programs to the Syrian refugees to ease the pressure on the local labour market. Such a program would have to be coordinated with other aid, and designed to avoid crowding out Lebanese from jobs.

Lebanese youth from lower socio-economic backgrounds were particularly vulnerable to increased job competition. Traditionally many of Bebnine's young men drop out of school early to enter the unskilled labour market. Several young men we interviewed had recently lost their job to cheaper Syrian labour. To succeed in life they were expected to save up money for a house and a wedding. With reduced income-generating opportunities they had little hope to accomplish these goals. '*They are stealing our jobs*' complained Ahmed (21) who had lost his job as a car mechanic. He is depressed about his future; '*There is no future, sometimes I regret that I was born*'.

## Ambivalent Lebanese attitudes towards Syrian refugees

A majority of Lebanese think that the Syrian refugees are supported financially to an unfair degree, while their needs are neglected. High unemployment coupled with a sense of differential economic treatment creates disillusionment, particularly amongst poorly educated youth.

The job competition which has decreased salaries in the unskilled sector for both Lebanese and Syrians is fuelling ambiguous feelings amongst Lebanese citizens towards the Syrian refugees. While Lebanese hospitality was evident in daily practice, Fafo's opinion poll shows that many Lebanese prefer some distance to Syrians. Three in five Lebanese are uncomfortable having Syrians as close neighbours and only half claim they would be comfortable working with Syrians. This scepticism is greater among the youth. Nevertheless, 8 percent of the polled Lebanese households comprise one or more Syrian refugees, and 20 percent provide or have provided accommodation to Syrian refugees for pay.

The Syrian refugee crisis is fuelling old and new stereotypes. In local and public discourse the refugees were labelled as 'criminals', 'immoral' and 'infected'. A local politician claimed that these attitudes were integral to everyday racism in Lebanon: 'The Lebanese always think they are better and look down on others.' Increased labour competition triggers stereotyping of the refugees and people use them as scapegoats for Lebanon's troubling economy.

The potentially long-term presence of displaced Syrians - only 49 percent of the Lebanese think they will return within a year - seems to worsen the attitudes towards the refugees. Moreover, seven in ten believe that the UN should establish refugee camps, thus protecting the Lebanese from the economic burden of hosting the Syrian refugees.

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- Lebanese youth

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Besides improving job opportunities for the hosting population, one way to reduce tensions could be to target both Lebanese and Syrian households in aid operations to make sure Lebanese are not marginalized by competition with Syrian refugees. Creating new aid dependencies must however be avoided. Furthermore, we suggest programs and activities targeting prejudice and intolerance. Such programs are planned but still lack funding and most donors prioritize food and basic needs over improved social relations.

## Fear of Syrian War spill-over

Three in four Lebanese think that Syrian refugees are posing a threat to national security and stability. Lebanon's fragile confessional political system has come under additional strain because of the increasingly sectarian character of the Syrian civil war. Already since the Syrian withdrawal after former Prime Minister Rafik Hariri's assassination in 2005, Lebanese politics polarized into a pro-Syria camp (8th March) and an anti-Syria camp (14<sup>th</sup> March). However the Lebanese government, at least until it was dissolved in March 2013, has adopted a policy of dissociation by not taking sides in the current conflict in Syria. In contrast the Shiite Hezbollah has supported the Syrian regime more or less openly since the conflict broke out. The spring of 2013 saw increased Hezbollah engagement in Syria, as well as public confirmation of this activity. Lebanese Sunni insurgents have been trained and equipped to participate in the war inside Syria on the opposition's side.

Except for some cross-border incidents, mainly rocket attacks and kidnappings, as well as sporadic fighting in Tripoli and Sidon, the conflict between Lebanese Shiite and Sunni fighters has mainly been fought inside Syria alongside the Syrian Army and the Syrian opposition. This activity is increasingly starting to resemble a proxy war for Lebanese groups.

These developments have made the Lebanese fear that war will spread to Lebanon; according to the poll, two in three think so. This is corroborated by qualitative fieldwork suggesting that people believe that war is becoming unavoidable inside Lebanon.

## Conclusion

Lebanese fear that the mass influx of Syrian refugees will upset the sensitive sectarian balance holding Lebanon together and lead to armed conflict, perhaps throwing the country into a new war. Poverty and a deteriorating Lebanese economy and unpredictable distribution of aid to Syrian refugees lead to amplified competition for scarce resources. The population increase is more than the economy can absorb. Many Syrian refugees combine work and humanitarian aid, which causes Lebanese to lose their jobs. The economic disparities created by unequal livelihood possibilities generate Lebanese resentment and ambivalence towards Syrian refugees. Already vulnerable youth from the poorer segments of Lebanese society are particularly affected by these negative developments. Economic exclusion and lost hope for the future can increase the recruitment of young men to militant groups, thus increasing the potential for armed conflict in Lebanon.

## Recommendations

- Introduce cash for work programs for refugees to alleviate social tensions created by labour competition caused by Syrian refugees' opportunity to combine aid with low paid jobs.
- Target both poor Lebanese and Syrian households in aid operations, but in a careful way to avoid creating new aid dependencies.
- Strengthen a coordinated registration process when refugees arrive locally, preferably by empowering local authorities to have an overview of categories of registered refugees, the aid they are receiving, and coordination between local NGOs and aid networks operating in the field.
- Provide additional support to vulnerable refugees who are unable to navigate in a disorganized aid landscape, particularly during the two first months.



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