

Refugee Research and Policy in the Arab World

Social Cohesion and Intergroup Relations: Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Nationals in the Bekaa and Akkar

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Charles Harb is a social and political psychologist interested in research on identities and group dynamics, with a special focus on the Arab world. Dr. Harb received his PhD from the University of Sussex in Brighton. His research includes investigating sectarianism, social identities, identity motives and preferences, self-concept across cultures, values, and life satisfaction. He is currently an Associate Professor of Social Psychology at AUB.

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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.

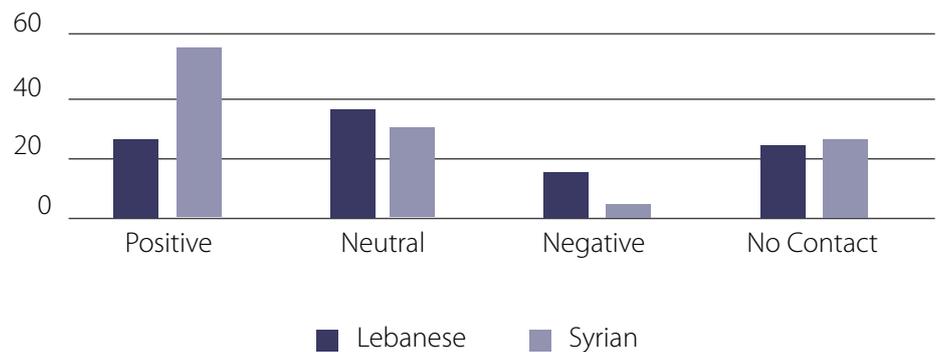
The growing influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon has strained its socio-economic fabric, piling pressure on employment opportunities, housing, trade, and infrastructure capacities (basic services). Tensions between Syrian refugees and their Lebanese host communities have led to intercommunity clashes, and it thus becomes imperative to identify the indicators of social instability and ways to reduce them.

A research project initiated by Save the Children (SC) and in association with faculty at AUB assessed the social psychological dimensions of Syrians and Lebanese relations in the Bekaa, Sahel Akkar and Wadi Khaled.

Study Design and Sample

The study used a multi-stage, multi-method research design, and included 17 focus group discussions and a quantitative survey administered to a representative sample of 1200 participants (600 Lebanese and 600 Syrians) from Akkar and the Bekaa. The survey included measures of contact quantity and quality, various perceptions of threat measures, perceptions of corruption, support for discriminatory policies, as well as measures of support for violence and intercommunity conflict.

% Contact Quality



The Refugee Research and Policy in the Arab World Program aims to collect, support and initiate research relevant to refugees – whether Syrian, Palestinian, Iraqi, or others. It seeks to harness the refugee-related, policy-oriented research in order to achieve several goals: to enhance the Arab world's input into regional and global refugee issues, to raise the quality of refugee-related debate and decision-making in the region, and to enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials, international organizations and civil society actors.

Dr. Nasser Yassin Faculty Research Director
Rima Rassi Senior Program Coordinator
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Some Main Findings

The research study found that perceptions of threat between both communities varied in type (whether existential, economic, symbolic or status-honor) and across regions (Bekaa, Sahel Akkar, Wadi Khaled). Among Lebanese nationals, perceptions of Syrian refugees as symbolic and economic threats were particularly high (>90%) in all three regions, with respondents asserting that Syrian refugees are a threat to their value system, way of life, and to their economic livelihood. A majority of Lebanese nationals also perceived refugees as an existential and status/honor threat. On the other hand, over 70% of Syrian refugees perceived Lebanese nationals as symbolic and economic (but not existential) threats – especially in Wadi Khaled.

Perceptions of corruption did vary between the two communities: more than a third of Syrian refugees perceived INGOs, local businesspersons, property owners and healthcare institutions as corrupt, while the Internal Security Forces (ISF) family leaders and municipality officials were not perceived as such. Lebanese nationals reported lower corruption rates, and only a fifth rated INGOs as corrupt.

The study also found that violence indicators toward Syrian refugees were relatively high among Lebanese nationals, particularly in Akkar. Furthermore, the study found a relatively high potential for violence towards INGOs among Syrian refugees residing outside Informal Tented Settlement (ITS).

Recommendations and Policy Implications

To reduce negative attitudes between the Lebanese and Syrian communities this study recommends parties to:

- Reduce Syrian refugees' perceptions of INGO bias and corruption by reforming aid delivery and address concerns about exclusion and corruption in healthcare delivery
- Devise better strategies to prevent intermediate providers of basic products and services (e.g. health care organizations, food stores and property owners) from taking advantage of Syrian refugees' vulnerable situations
- Redirect aid distribution to focus more on Syrian refugees residing outside ITS
- Implement developmental projects targeting host communities that might improve municipality infrastructure, basic services and economic prospects, and create employment opportunities for the youth
- Increase the presence of ISF personnel in sensitive areas, and increase the Lebanese government's involvement in addressing Syrian refugee issues as well as host community problems.
- Highlight common value systems and worldviews that are shared between Syrian refugees and Lebanese nationals through normative interventions and actions (e.g. festivities, common projects).



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