

Refugees returning to Syria in the context of the crisis in Lebanon

Kamel Dorai

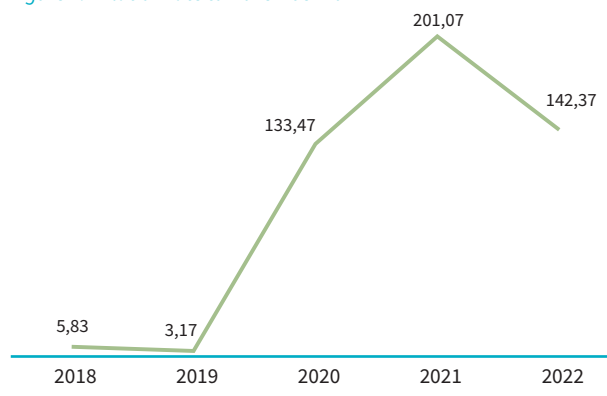
Syrian refugees in Lebanon are currently under intense pressure to return to Syria. The pressure to return has gradually grown over the last 10 years, but has increased in intensity since 2019, and has been reactivated or applied more systematically since the summer of 2022, at least in the Lebanese political discourse. In this policy brief, we look at the conditions for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the return policies they are faced with, the actual return migration that takes place, and other migration outcomes.

The multiple crises in Lebanon

Since October 2019, Lebanon has been going through one of the most devastating and prolonged economic and financial crises in its modern history¹. The crisis was quickly compounded first by the outbreak of COVID-19 and then by the Port of Beirut explosion in August 2020. It was then further exacerbated by the global economic crisis and rising food prices related to the dramatic depreciation of the Lebanese pound, which has lost more than 95% of its value in three years. The Russian invasion of Ukraine has exacerbated the situation further. The plummeting of the Lebanese economy in this period has been of a brutality that is normally only associated with conflicts or wars. Nominal GDP was cut in half and GDP per capita dropped by 36.5% between 2019 and 2021 (World Bank, 2021). As shown on the graph, the country has faced a three-digit yearly inflation rate since 2020, peaking in 2021 at 201.7%².

The economic crisis has led to the impoverishment of whole parts of the Lebanese society and it is estimated that more than half of the country's 6 million people are living in poverty (World Bank, 2022). Families are increasingly getting into debts in order to meet daily expenses and are forced to avoid spending on health or education. In general, wages are not keeping up with inflation. The minimum wage for unskilled informal labour was around 600,000 Lebanese pounds per month (400 USD in

Figure 1. Inflation rate to November 2022



2019) before the crisis, and is now ranging between 2,500,000 LBP and 4,000,000 LBP (between 50 and 100 USD) for those who manage to work full time, according to the interviews conducted as part of the research being presented.

Impact of the crisis on Syrian refugees

The Syrian refugees in Lebanon were already marginalized before the crisis, and their situation has deteriorated further – 90% of Syrians in Lebanon were in need of humanitarian assistance at the end of 2022³, due to difficulty covering basic needs (food, accommodation, health). With constantly changing exchange rates, and rapidly changing economic conditions, poverty rates vary depending on the timing of surveys and poverty definitions. The average monthly income of Syrian households including cash assistance is around 4,180,000 LBP (approximately 100 USD), representing only half of the Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB). Close to all (97%) of Syrian households say they reduce their food expenditure and rely on borrowing money to meet their basic needs. In recent months, due to the economic crisis, the renewal of residence permits has also become increasingly difficult because Syrians cannot find a Lebanese sponsor or pay the costs related to the procedure⁴.

¹ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/overview>

² <https://blog.blominvestbank.com/45915/lebanons-inflation-remains-high-but-at-a-softer-rate-at-142-37/>

³ UNHCR, Lebanon - Needs at a glance, 2023.

⁴ UNHCR, *Protection Monitoring Findings Lebanon* – 3rd Quarter 2022.

This policy brief presents the main conclusions of a study conducted among Syrian refugees in Lebanon in November 2022. It is also based on a series of research on Syrian refugees in Lebanon begun in 2013 and fieldwork carried out in November 2022, as well as on other reports and studies on the Syrian population in Lebanon.

Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Lebanon is not party to the 1951 Geneva convention on refugees and does not have a system that grants asylum to refugees. Consequently, Syrians are not granted refugee status in Lebanon, but only temporary protection.

No other country has as many refugees relative to its population size as Lebanon. Refugees are estimated to make up 19.8 percent of the population living in Lebanon – at an estimated 1-1.5 million, Syrians represent the largest group¹.

Beginning in 1991, Syrians benefited from a special entry and residence regime in Lebanon, which exempted them from holding passports and visas, while giving access to certain sectors of the labour market. With the outbreak of civil war in 2011, large numbers of refugees fled to Lebanon, adding to the labour migrants who were already there.

It is difficult to estimate the real number of Syrians currently present in Lebanon. Lebanese authorities regularly cite the figure as 1,500,000, which would include all categories (those registered with UNHCR, migrant workers etc.). After peaking in 2015 at 1,180,000, the number of Syrians registered with UNHCR had fallen to around 825,000 by the end of 2022. The number of Syrians most likely lies between these two figures.

The exception for holding passports and visas for Syrians was revoked in 2015, when the government decided to change the status of Syrians on its territory. Since then, faced with the massive influx of Syrians, the Lebanese authorities have asked UNHCR to suspend the registration of refugees, meaning that Syrians are now required to obtain a visa to enter the country and a residence permit to stay in Lebanon legally (Janmyr, 2016). To do so, it is necessary to have a Lebanese sponsor, the approval of the authorities, and to pay an annual 200 USD renewal fee. A work permit is required to access the labour market – and applying for a permit also costs money. It is estimated that around 85% of Syrians over the age of 15 do not have legal residence in Lebanon, and some of them are not registered with UNHCR either².

¹ According to UNRWA, in 2022 some 210,000 Palestine refugees (180,000 Palestine refugees from Lebanon and 30,000 Palestine refugees from Syria) were living in Lebanon (<https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/hitting-rock-bottom-palestine-refugees-lebanon-risk-their-lives-search>), along with 8,145 Iraqis, 2,386 Sudanese and 3,120 refugees from other nationalities registered as refugees by UNHCR (UNHCR *Fact Sheet Lebanon*, September 2022).

² UNHCR, *Protection Monitoring Findings Lebanon – 3rd Quarter 2022*.

Pressures for Syrian refugees to return

Several actors have expressed concerns that the refugees have become a convenient scapegoat for Lebanon's current economic problems. The UNHCR⁵ notes that an “an uptick in anti-refugee rhetoric by state officials has corresponded to more frequent restrictive measures and discriminatory practices, such as local curfews, raids and other restrictions”.

Najib Mikati, Lebanon's caretaker prime minister, stated at a ceremony in June 2022 that Lebanon no longer has the capacity to bear the burden of the Syrian refugee presence under the current circumstances – asking the international community for help to repatriate them. In July 2022, the Lebanese government announced that it wanted to resume its policy of “voluntary returns” of Syrian refugees, and to repatriate 15,000 Syrians per month. The first returns, which were highly publicized, began in October 2022. According to the Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs, approximately 1,000 refugees have been repatriated⁶. In a recent interview with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, Lebanese Prime Minister Najib Mikati said priority should be given to the repatriation of refugees. This pressure for voluntary return was accompanied by a hardening of the official discourse with regard to refugees.

Since the summer of 2022, key informants have been increasingly talking about restrictions being put in place by the Lebanese authorities in certain regions (such as the Beqaa) to limit the access of refugees to the labour market. These restrictions are, however, rarely documented. At the same time, the assistance distributed by UNHCR and the various humanitarian organisations has also decreased because it is paid in Lebanese pounds. Several exchange rates have coexisted in Lebanon since the beginning of the crisis. In 2021, international humanitarian agencies were sold Lebanese pounds at an exchange rate that was 40% lower than the market rate⁷. The increase of cash assistance cannot keep up with the (very high) inflation rate and depreciation of the Lebanese pound.

Some of the restrictive policies for refugees were put in place several years ago but have been reactivated or applied more systematically since the summer of 2022. For instance, the decision to demolish illegal camps where many Syrians live in rural or

⁵ UNHCR, *Protection Monitoring Findings Lebanon – 2nd Quarter 2022*.

⁶ Hajjar accuse le HCR de bloquer le retour des réfugiés en Syrie, *L'Orient-Lejour*, 28/11/2022.

⁷ Lebanese banks swallow at least \$250m in U.N. aid, REUTERS, 17 June 2021.

peri-urban areas, pressure exerted by certain municipalities for the eviction of Syrians from the territory of their municipality, and the deportation of Syrians who entered illegally by the Lebanese General Security.

Since 2015 and the introduction of restrictions on entry, residence and access to the labour market for Syrian refugees, the Lebanese authorities have repeatedly shown their willingness to proceed with the return of Syrian refugees to their home country, in coordination with the Syrian authorities. However, in practice, returns have not been observed on a large scale. Several Lebanese political parties have taken up this issue. In 2017, Hezbollah, the main Shiite party which supports Bashar al-Assad's regime, developed a return programme in coordination with the Lebanese General Security, leading to the return of several thousand refugees. The Free Patriotic Movement (a political party created by the former president Michel Aoun) also promoted the safe (rather than voluntary) return of refugees by opening telephone hotlines in several municipalities to promote repatriation. UNHCR, like most international human rights organizations, opposes this policy, arguing that the situation in Syria does not guarantee the safety of refugees once they cross the border and refugees should therefore not be forcibly returned.

In October 2022, another return programme was set up by the Lebanese authorities, but thus far, it has not had much impact in terms of increasing returns. The programme has been heavily publicized for internal political reasons and also to put pressure on international organizations to do more to stimulate returns. The Minister of Social Affairs regularly denounces the role of UNHCR in Lebanon. Several Lebanese political figures, many of whom are rather close to the Syrian regime, have argued since the autumn of 2022 that the security situation in Syria has improved – from their point of view – and that it is necessary to proceed with the repatriation of Syrians due to the economic crisis. Similar programmes, promoting the repatriation of Syrians, have been developed in recent years, but have only concerned a few thousand refugees. According to the Lebanese General Security, these returns are taking place in coordination with the Syrian authorities. The list of candidates for return is subject to Syria's prior approval. Several sources indicate a high refusal rate on the part of the Syrian authorities, related to internal political concerns.

More recently, certain Lebanese political actors⁸ have been spreading the idea that refugees are one of the causes of the Lebanese crisis (citing, for example, the pressure on infrastructure), leading to the rise of an increasingly racist discourse. This is something several of the Syrians we interviewed in Lebanon worry about. Many talk about an event that had just taken place when we visited in November 2022. A young Lebanese had been assassinated by a Syrian national in a village in southern Lebanon – resulting in the expulsion of all Syrians from the village.

On the Lebanese side, while the repatriation of refugees is regularly mentioned by political leaders, no large-scale plan on forced returns has been implemented in practice. It is believed that this is largely due to a lack of internal political consensus and international pressures.

Returns in numbers

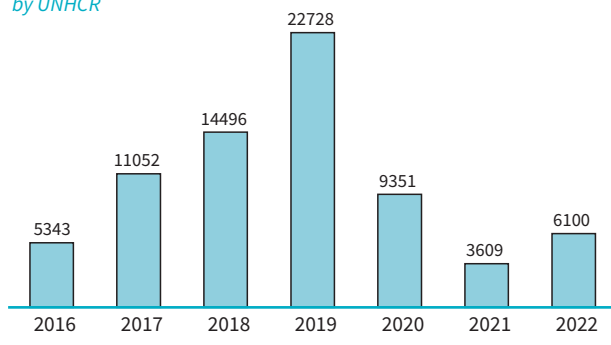
Has the increasingly difficult economic and political situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon resulted in increased numbers of returns to Syria? Some key respondents argue that the deteriorated economic context, with no real prospects for improvement in the medium term, is pushing Syrians to leave. Refugees interviewed in November 2022 mentioned that an increasing number of Syrian families have decided to return to Syria because they cannot pay their rent. This is not, however, reflected in the available figures.

The number of Syrians who returned to Syria from Lebanon is almost more difficult to establish than the number of Syrians in Lebanon. The number of Syrians registered with UNHCR has decreased by over 300,000 since 2015. However, we do not know if these Syrians are still in Lebanon (but for various reasons are no longer registered with UNHCR), if they have moved on to other host countries, or if they have returned.

Even if the UNHCR does not support the repatriation policy developed by the Lebanese authorities, the UN agency registers the voluntary returns of Syrians who declare themselves to the agency. These returns are still limited in number. In total, since 2016, UNHCR has verified the return of approximately 80,000 Syrian refugees to Syria out of a total of more than 800,000 registered refugees. In 2022, UNHCR verified the return of 9,711 Syrian refugees to Syria.

⁸ UN humanitarian coordinator issues statement amid increasing 'negative sentiments and hatred' towards Syrian refugees, L'Orient Today, 22 July 2022.

Figure 2 Voluntary Return of Syrians from Lebanon monitored by UNHCR



The Lebanese authorities have put forward a figure of between 400,000 and 500,000 voluntary returns since the start of the Syrian conflict. There can be several different explanations for the discrepancy in numbers between UNHCR and Lebanese authorities figures. Far from all Syrians who return to Syria intend to remain there – some may go for short visits to see family, to inspect property or to get healthcare, and go back to Lebanon, entering the country illegally, after a few weeks in Syria. This can result in a high number of border crossings into Syria that do not reflect actual returns. Many refugees who wish to reach Turkey or Europe also choose to travel through Syria to do so and consequently some of the border crossings that are interpreted as returns are actually emigration towards a third country. At the same time, it is reasonable to believe that the UNHCR's figures underreport the number of returns, as far from all Syrians return report their return to the UN agency. As UNHCR registrations can give access to food coupons, families where some members have returned to Syria may have incentives to keep their returned family members registered with UNHCR in Lebanon, in order to continue receiving their rations.

Few returns – in spite of pressures

The combination of economic crisis, lack of recognition of refugee status and residency permits, and increasing tendencies to blame the Syrian refugees for Lebanon's problems, creates strong pressures for the Syrians in Lebanon to return to Syria. But there are numerous reasons why most of the refugees choose to remain in the crisis-ridden country. The

most important reason is the security situation in Syria. The country is still involved in several armed conflicts and there is ongoing infighting between non-state armed groups. Many refugees also express a lack of confidence in the current regime, and the fear of being arbitrarily detained, as reasons for not wanting to return. Stories of arbitrary detainment of returnees are well known among Syrian refugees, and the practice was documented in a report by Human Rights Watch in 2021⁹. Many young men of military age – and their families – fear returning to Syria and having to join the army.

The refugees often say they intend to return to Syria¹⁰ but the conditions for return are still not met today. This can also be linked to economic conditions. Nearly 7 million Syrians are now internally displaced, resulting in a profound socio-economic reconfiguration of the country. Many refugees worry about the potential difficulties of integration upon their eventual return to their country. Many Syrians in Lebanon have no home to return to, as their houses were destroyed during the conflict. The scale of exile since 2011 has dispersed entire families across several countries, and this makes a possible return to Syria more complicated, because it will not mean a return to the social configuration lived prior to the conflict.

For all of these reasons, the Syrians in Lebanon are reluctant to return to Syria. However, as the situation in Lebanon becomes increasingly harsh, greater numbers are attempting to leave Lebanon for other countries. The crisis in Lebanon has led to an increase in people leaving Lebanon by sea – often for Cyprus. The number of emigrants by sea more than tripled between 2021 and 2022. According to IOM¹¹, more than 4,200 migrants tried to leave the country by sea in 2022. In September 2022, 94 Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians died when their boat sank¹².

⁹ Human Rights Watch, "Our Lives Are Like Death" Syria Refugee Returns from Jordan and Lebanon, October 2021.

¹⁰ UNHCR, *Sixth Regional Survey on Syrian refugees' perceptions & intentions on return to Syria. Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan*, March 2021.

¹¹ IOM, *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan*, 2023, https://crisisresponse.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd1481/files/appeal/pdf/2023_Lebanon_Crisis_Response_Plan_2023.pdf

¹² En Syrie, le bilan du naufrage d'un petit bateau de migrants s'élève à 94 morts, *Le Monde*, 24 September 2022.

The project (MARE)

MARE (Research on European Management of Migration and Refugees) is a research project funded by the Norwegian Research Council. The project aim is to produce better knowledge on how European policies for refugee protection and migration management shape the rights and opportunities of migrants and refugees, on the one hand, and how this is linked to political stability in host countries, on the other.

The researcher

Dr. Kamel Dorai is a geographer and research fellow at the CNRS based at Migrant, University of Poitiers, France. His main research interest is the study of forced migration in the Middle East and more specifically the urbanization of refugee camps and refugees' trajectories.

Fafo

Fafo is an independent social science research foundation (established in 1982) based in Oslo, Norway. Fafo consists of three subsidiary companies: The Fafo Institute for Labour and Social Research, Fafo Technology Consulting (Beijing) Co. Ltd, and Economics Norway. Fafo produces policy relevant research on social welfare and trade policy, labour and living conditions, migration and integration.