

# AGORA ASSOCIATION



## THE SITUATION OF THE SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON

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## Political Structure and Treatment of the Refugee Question:

The refugee question in Lebanon (officially independent since 1943), is an issue ongoing from the foundation of the country. Along with the declaration of Israel's foundation in 1948, nearly 100 thousand people had to migrate to Lebanon at the first stance. Today approximately 500 thousand Palestinians are living in Lebanon with a "temporary refugee" status and they can gain visibility only through UN registration processes. The Palestinians born in Lebanon are not considered Lebanese citizens, hence having insurmountable difficulties in handling issues such as health, education and social services. According to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) data, nearly half of the Palestinians in Lebanon are living in 12 camps consisting of tents and shanty houses. Palestinians were forbidden to work in 70 sectors until 2007, when this restriction was reduced to 20 sectors through pressure from international institutions. While many Syrian refugees seek asylum in Lebanon, there are considerable cuts in the number and the budget of aid programs to Palestinian refugees.



The question of migration and refugees in Lebanon is considered a highly politicized topic from the very beginning and has been one of the important factors which highlight the fragility of the political framework that operates through ethnic and sect-based political blocs. In Lebanon, all official posts beginning with the presidency to public employees are distributed on religious membership. In the country, it is customary that the president be elected among Christians, the prime minister among Sunnis

and the chairperson of the parliament among Shiites. The membership to Lebanese Parliament is distributed equally (since the year 1989) among Muslim and Christians. The same principle applies to cabinet membership. The organization of the political life has directly affected the treatment of the refugee question.

From 1990s on, refugees from Africa and the other Arabic countries, especially LGBTI and female refugees started to seek asylum. In Lebanon, besides the population of approximately 6 million, there are already half a million Palestinian refugees and nearly 250 thousand migrant workers -mostly women- from Asian countries. The fact that over one million Syrian refugees have sought asylum in Lebanon after the Syrian crisis, the refugee question started to acutely affect the political life of the country. Since the 'political balance', based on the assumed proportions in population of religious and ethnic groups, is reflected also on the parliament and the central and local sections of political hierarchy, an inflow of over 1 million asylum-seekers (almost 20-25 percent of total population) is seen as a threat to an already-fragile political equilibrium.

## **Access to Public Services and Registration:**

Lebanon is not a party to the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the Syrian refugees are officially defined as “displaced persons”. Lebanon insists on not establishing official camps for Syrian refugees and denying permanent settlement to them is the focal point of its refugee policy. In international platforms concerning the “refugee problem”, Lebanese representatives are continually calling for arrangements to send Syrian refugees back “home” as soon as possible. Lebanon has sent nearly 50 thousand Syrian refugees to USA, Sweden and France by including them to UN’s resettlement program and thousands of Syrians have migrated to other countries on their own means since 2011.

As of September 2018, 952.652 Syrians were registered as “displaced persons” in Lebanon. To be able to stay in the country legally, Syrian refugees have to be registered officially by appealing to Lebanese General Security Office. For registration, every person should possess an ID, an address and a document that specifies the date of entrance to the country and 200 dollars per capita for all those over 15 years old. 200 dollars fee is demanded for each renewal, which is required annually. From May 6, 2015 on, UNHCR has stopped registrations on the demand of Lebanese government. This situation prevents access of more than 500 thousand Syrian refugees to services provided by UN organizations. In February 2017, Lebanese government has declared that it will not demand the annual registration renewal fee from Syrian refugees who have registered before January 1, 2015 and who have received residence permit by the year 2016. However, because this office does not have enough personnel and there are regional differences in practice, the renewal transactions cannot be realized efficiently. Most of the Syrian refugees continue their lives unregistered to avoid renewal expenses. By the year of 2017, only 27% of Syrian refugees over 15 years old held residency permits. 79% of the births in the year of 2018 of Syrian parents living in Lebanon unregistered<sup>1</sup>. Only 20% of the babies born in Lebanon hold valid birth certificates. In September 2017, the provision that refugee parents should be registered to be able to register their babies is repealed. Also, it was stated that it will suffice for only one of the parties to hold a legal residence permit to legalize a marriage transaction made in Lebanon. While the absence of a legal residence permit is depriving the refugees from access to public services and international support, it is also increasing the risk of facing custody and maltreatment and is restricting the movement within the country.

## **Public Services and General Situation:**

13 million Syrians had to leave their home because of Syrian crisis. While nearly 6 million Syrians were relocated in Syria, while 7 million have taken refuge in the countries such as Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan and Iraq. It is known that more than 1 million Syrians have taken refuge in Lebanon which has a population of nearly 6 million. In Lebanon, there are also many refugees from Iraq, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Sudan. When this number is compared with the native

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www1.wfp.org/publications/vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon-vasyr-2018>

population, it was not possible for Lebanon to produce healthy solutions to meet the needs of refugees in such a great influx.

In Lebanon, the number of doctors per 1000 person is 3,13; of delivery nurses is 3,64 and of pharmacists is 18,9<sup>2</sup>. More than half of the population lacks health insurance and most of the public health expenses are financed on personal terms. The National Social Security Fund generated through premiums collected in income-based rates covers 10% of treatment expenses and 20% of medical examination fees while only very serious health problems are covered totally<sup>3</sup>. According to the data of Lebanon Ministry of Health, the proportion of health expenses in GDP is 7.5%. One third of the health expenses is covered from taxes, one third is covered by private insurance and National Social Security Fund and one third is covered by patients themselves.

The quality of public health services is quite inadequate because of the deficiency of infrastructure and planning mechanisms, sectional administration, sect -and ethnicity- based discrimination in service delivery, non-transparent public administration mentality and corruptions. UNHCR was providing free health service during the period of intense refugee influx, but when the number of refugees increased greatly, a 2-dollar care fee started to be demanded from patients. 75% of the expenses for patients who need emergency treatment is covered, although many medicines cannot be found in pharmacies<sup>4</sup>.

In Lebanon where the public service network is not structured properly and public services are handed over to private sector and local ensembles to a large extent since 1990s, the access of the poorest sectors of population is quite limited; and the situation is worse for the refugees. Nearly 1 million Lebanese citizens are trying to survive with an income below the poverty line. According to 2018 data, the GDP of the country is 56.710 million dollars and the public debt is about 80 billion dollars. While the unemployment rate was 20% in 2014, it has risen to 46% by the end of 2017. Female unemployment rate is around 60%. The civil war that has started in 1970s and continued for years has practically terminated the existence of trade unions.

There is no qualified public service network in the areas of health, social services and education accessible to refugees. For this reason, from the beginning of the refugee influx from Syria, support of non-state actors especially in these three areas has become a vital need. According to 2017-2020 Lebanon Crisis Plan, half of Syrians who have taken refuge in Lebanon are children and young people. Many children and women are still in need of protection.

To meet the basic demands for service, which exceeds the capacity of existing institutions, it should be underlined that there is a need for well-structured macro plans with clearly identified priority fields and the public administration has to be reformed urgently. 2017-2020 Lebanon Crises Response Plan<sup>5</sup> / LCRP is a multi-year plan which was prepared for this purpose and to

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<sup>2</sup> [http://applications.emro.who.int/docs/EMROPUB\\_2018\\_EN\\_20620.pdf?ua=1](http://applications.emro.who.int/docs/EMROPUB_2018_EN_20620.pdf?ua=1)

<sup>3</sup> <https://borgenproject.org/healthcare-in-lebanon/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.pri.org/stories/2013-12-29/why-getting-medical-care-lebanon-harder-escaping-syria-video>

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.un.org.lb/library/assets/LCRP%20Short%20version-015625.pdf>

which the Lebanon government and its international/national partners are parties. The UN is also carrying on works which focus on bonds between humanitarian aid and developmental support to Lebanese society to create means of livelihood and employment opportunities as part of Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP).

According to the data of LCRP, 500.000 Syrian children registered in Lebanon are in school age (between 3-17 years old) but half of them are out of school. At the beginning of 2016, 238 schools started to give dual education and the state schools are overcrowded because of this policy. According to the report prepared by United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR), United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF) and United Nations World Food Program (WFP)<sup>6</sup>, 88% of the Syrian refugee families are indebted. While the average debts of the refugee families were 800 dollars in 2016, this figure increased to 900 dollars in 2017 and a thousand dollars in 2018. 70% of the Syrian families are trying to survive with incomes below poverty line. The marriage rate among Syrian girls has increased to 29%. Most of Syrian refugees are living in tents they established by their own means in Beqaa Valley and 34% of them are homeless or are trying to shelter in miserable conditions. The camps of Syrians lack legal status whatsoever and the authorities are continually pressing to remove them. For this reason, a large part of Syrian refugees have taken refuge on their own means in cities and rural areas. The monthly average rent expense of the refugees is about 180 dollars. In Lebanon, the minimum wage is 450 dollars since the year 2012.

A large part of Syrian refugees can be classified as unqualified workforce. Especially the refugee workers who work in construction and agricultural sectors and the natives are trying to make a living with incomes decreased by 60% because of imposed competition. The number of people who need social aid and services is increasing because of growing unemployment and of number of refugees.

### **Situation of Key Refugee Groups in Lebanon:**

Poor living conditions have a more negative effect on female refugees. Woman-led families are the worst-off within the body of refugees. A large number of women and children is exposed to sexual exploitation and the number of child marriages are increasing if only to be able to survive in difficult conditions. There isn't any legal regulation which protects the children in terms of marriage age in Lebanon. Even though there are many attempts and protests about this issue, the lives of refugee girls are worsening because of the lack of regulations prohibiting the child marriages. In Lebanon, all of 18 official sects/ethnic groups have their own regulations vis-à-vis marriage and the legal marriage age is identified by religious authorities according to religion, sect, ethnicity and regional belonging. Even though the Lebanese people do not approve marriage under 18 generally, child marriages are common in all sectors of the society<sup>7</sup>. It should be realized that there is an urgent need for a regulation prohibiting marriage under 18 years of

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<sup>6</sup> <https://www1.wfp.org/publications/vulnerability-assessment-syrian-refugees-lebanon-vasyr-2018>

<sup>7</sup> <https://aawsat.com/english/home/article/1616216/hundreds-protest-against-child-marriage-lebanon>



age, which is binding for all sectors of society to protect Syrian minor girls. One of the most important areas of concern for the refugee organizations operating in Lebanon is the prohibition of child marriages. For this purpose, numerous actions targeting both refugees and citizens are undertaken.

The non-governmental organizations in the field are providing active support as to access to health services. Informative workshops targeting women and girls on violence, sexual and gender violence, reproductive health, sexual issues and on questions concerning women's rights are organized. Mobile clinics are conducting health and psychosocial support in the field. These organizations are also providing educational support through fixed and mobile educational means.

Many refugee families are led by women and the women are forced to be decision makers now in many fields from which they were excluded in Syria<sup>8</sup>. This situation is welcomed as a positive change especially by most of the young women. NGO's are also trying to provide supportive mechanisms concerning changing social roles and increasing responsibilities of women in public and private spheres. However, as in Turkey, the Syrian refugee women are defenseless against intense labor exploitation, discriminative sheltering practices, exclusion, violence, sexual harassment and abuse in Lebanon. The specialized studies on supportive mechanisms concerning sexual abuse and sexual harassment are not adequate. Because the public support is limited in studies on trauma, the non-governmental organizations are the most important service providers in this field.

Along with these, limited access to public services and justice mechanisms is turning the women into prominent victims of human trafficking. Forced prostitution and temporary marriages are the most frequent ways in human trafficking. The fact that legal work is denied to most of the refugees is one of the important reasons of the proliferation of human trafficking. In Lebanon, most of the institutions and organizations carrying work on refugees are also working on human trafficking. Lebanese experience is quite important for conducting studies on human trafficking also widespread in Turkey. The subject of human trafficking is an inseparable part of the refugee problem and studies on this issue should be supported and generalized as soon as possible in Turkey as well.

LGBTI refugees are faced with the risk of violence directed to them as well as their families and their immediate circles. Law No. 534 prohibits all forms of homosexual relations in Lebanon. This law deepens the risks of LGBTIs, escalates maltreatment in custody, physical, psychological and economical violence, and poses an important obstacle for the participation of LGBTIs to social life. LGBTI organizations are making great efforts for the abolition of this law

and on human rights abuses (such as forced HIV test and anal control, seizing computers, dismissal etc.) legitimated by this law.

LGBTI organizations are providing educational support for the personnel of humanitarian aid institutions who work



[s of syrian refugee women in lebanon.pdf](#)

in the field, in view of accelerating the process by working actively with UNHCR about resettlement of vulnerable groups in third-party countries. The 7/24 phone line is an important service to many people. They have also been providing psychosocial support for adult males exposed to sexual harassment.

### **Regional Experience Sharing:**

Generally, it should be underlined that the field experiences of refugee organizations and humanitarian aid institutions conducting work in Lebanon are also important for similar organizations operating in Turkey. Unfortunately, almost no cooperation, nor mechanisms of solidarity exist between organizations doing similar work in these two countries. It is quite important in terms of the protection of refugees' rights, to implement adequate means of communication and experience sharing between organizations working especially with most disadvantaged sectors such as women, children and LGBTI. LGBTI organizations are conducting valuable studies to struggle against discrimination based on sexual orientation and sexual identity in Lebanon and in many Arabic speaking countries. The solutions developed to prevent the children of seasonal agricultural workers from dropping out of education and the organization of mobile services towards women doing agricultural work are quite inspiring for the organizations in Turkey. One of the important points of an information network throughout the Gulf countries and Middle East on human trafficking is Lebanon. Establishing regional networks and using these networks effectively is a critical method to prevent human trafficking. For this reason, it is of vital importance that information on the works of Lebanon refugee organizations on this issue is shared and understood in our country.