



**Syria Transition Challenges Project**

Research Project Report (6)

***Supporting Syrian Refugees amidst Lebanon's Crises***

Will Todman, CSIS

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## **Syria Transition Challenges Project**

A multilateral dialogue and research project that aims to build bridges between the EU, Russia, Turkey, and the US on the three issues of Reform, Refugees Return, and Reconstruction. The project is run by the GCSP in collaboration with European University Institute (EUI), Syrian Centre for Policy Research (SCPR), and swisspeace.

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## **Executive summary**

Lebanon is in freefall amid numerous crises. The currency has collapsed, food prices have quadrupled in a year, and Covid-19 cases continue to rise after one of the strictest lockdowns in the world. More than half of Lebanese households now live below the poverty line and the government will soon be forced to end subsidies on basic goods. The country is approaching a national humanitarian emergency and widespread food insecurity.

Syrian refugees are especially vulnerable because the Lebanese government has curtailed their rights and restricted international support for them. More than 90 percent of Syrians in Lebanon now live in extreme poverty. However, the prospect of any imminent, voluntary return of large numbers of refugees to Syria remains distant. Numerous surveys with refugees confirm that they do not feel able to return to Syria, despite worsening conditions in Lebanon.

Lebanese are increasingly in need of economic support and feel ignored by the government and aid organisations. In this context, Lebanese leaders' attempts to scapegoat refugees are gaining traction. Scapegoating refugees not only allows the political class to delay critical reforms but has also resulted in increasing inter-communal violence. As Lebanon's freefall continues, the risk of more widespread violence increases.

Donors face a dilemma in how best to respond to the crises. The Lebanese political elite have steadfastly refused to implement necessary economic reforms to avoid collapse and have proved to be unsuitable partners for aid operations. To circumvent the government, donors have increased their support to local leaders in the hope that it can help create a more permissive environment for refugees with channelled support through local NGOs.

Humanitarians are now trying to meet the needs of vulnerable Lebanese, Syrian refugees, Palestinian refugees, and migrant workers in different humanitarian responses. Aid coordination is becoming a gargantuan task. Shifting to a country-wide or "Whole of Lebanon" response would better streamline the humanitarian response and ensure refugees and vulnerable Lebanese are treated equitably. Donors have little appetite for such an approach, but it could soon be the only viable option.

Interviews with international donors revealed a viewpoint that the United States is not capitalising on its potential influence on the refugee file in Lebanon. To maximise the United States' potential to improve conditions for vulnerable Lebanese and Syrians, it must increase its participation in donor discussions in Beirut and devote more political capital to the issue.

The United States and other donors should use this political capital to take advantage of new openings to build the foundations of sustainable development for all. The changing context has created a few, though limited, opportunities to push for programs that are primarily framed as aiding Lebanese yet include refugees.

## Introduction

When a young Syrian boy in Mount Lebanon bought pain relief tablets for his father, he could not have imagined the consequences his family would face. A group of Lebanese followed him back to his tent and demanded to know if someone in his family had Covid-19. Despite his father's insistence that it was just a headache, the group began to attack him. The Lebanese then urged their municipality to evict the refugee family for violating its curfew on Syrians. It complied. The boy's family and their relatives were kicked out of their homes of seven years, taking only what they could carry on their backs.<sup>1</sup>

Anti-Syrian discrimination is rising as conditions rapidly deteriorate in Lebanon. Lebanon's financial crisis has caused the Lebanese lira to lose more than 90 percent of its value on the black market since 2019 and has drained foreign reserves.<sup>2</sup> Food prices rose by 423 percent between October 2019 and November 2020 and as the government runs out of money for subsidies on basic goods, the risk of a country-wide food security crisis is growing.<sup>3</sup> The Beirut port explosion of August 2020 caused \$4 billion of damages and left tens of thousands homeless. On top of that, Covid-19 overwhelmed medical facilities in late 2020 and even after one of the strictest lockdowns in the world, cases continued to increase as a third wave hit in March 2021. "Lebanon is now Venezuela in the making," warned one Western official based in Beirut.<sup>4</sup> More than 50 percent of Lebanese now live under the poverty line.<sup>5</sup>

The crises have hit Syrian refugees even harder. Their lack of legal protections undermines their ability to provide for themselves and exposes them to discriminatory practices. The number of Syrians living in extreme poverty increased from 55 percent in mid-2019 to 89 percent in late 2020.<sup>6</sup> More than 60 percent of Syrian households lost their income because of Covid-19 and refugee evictions have increased.<sup>7</sup>

Despite conditions in Lebanon, the prospect of a voluntary mass refugee return to Syria remains distant. The security concerns that prompted Syrians to flee their homes in the first place are unresolved. Bashar al-Assad remains in power and his regime continues to forcibly conscript men and conduct arbitrary detentions. Economic factors in Syria also deter refugee returns. Over the last year, the Syrian lira collapsed, bread shortages have worsened, and Covid-19 has spread

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<sup>1</sup> Saadi Alouh, "Buying a box of Panadol causes a municipal investigation and a family's eviction: Syrian refugees are stuck between the coronavirus and destitution," *Legal Agenda*, April 8, 2020, <https://bit.ly/3qG6tBw>.

<sup>2</sup> "Freefalling Lebanon currency hits new low," *France 24*, March 16, 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210316-freefalling-lebanon-currency-hits-new-low>

<sup>3</sup> "Lebanon: VAM update on food price and market trends (December 2020)," *World Food Programme*, January 19, 2021, <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/lebanon-vam-update-food-price-and-market-trends-december-2020>

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Western donor based in Beirut, November 25, 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Karolina Lindholm Biling, "Why investing in refugees benefits host communities and the refugees' country of origin," *Executive Magazine*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.executive-magazine.com/poverty/why-investing-in-refugees-benefits-host-communities-and-the-refugees-country-of-origin>

<sup>6</sup> Abby Sewell, "Almost 90 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon now live below the extreme poverty line, a UN assessment reveals," *L'Orient Today*, December 22, 2020, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1245698/almost-90-percent-of-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-now-live-below-the-extreme-poverty-line-a-un-assessment-reveals.html>

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Yasmin Kayali Sabra, co-founder of Basmeh & Zeitooneh, November 11, 2020.

rampantly across Syria. At a recent conference on refugee return in Damascus, a hot mic picked up an attendee saying that “all Syrians would leave Syria tomorrow if they could.”<sup>8</sup> The majority of Syrian refugees, who constitute as much as a quarter of Lebanon’s population, will therefore remain in Lebanon as it spirals towards collapse.

Lebanon’s security situation is also disintegrating. In March 2021, the acting interior minister said that security forces are no longer able to perform 90 percent of their duties because of the crises, warning that the security situation “has broken down” and “all possibilities are open.”<sup>9</sup> Two days earlier, the army chief warned that soldiers were going hungry.

Lebanese leaders are increasingly fuelling anti-Syrian discrimination and scapegoating refugees as a strategy to delay critical reforms. Growing tensions between Syrians and Lebanese are leading to violence. In November 2020, Lebanese residents of the northern town of Bsharre demanded the eviction of Syrian refugees and set fire to their homes after a Syrian allegedly murdered a Lebanese man.<sup>10</sup> A month later, Lebanese men burned a camp to the ground that hosted 300 Syrians in al-Miniyeh in northern Lebanon.<sup>11</sup>

The risk of instability is not limited to Lebanon. Desperate Lebanese and other refugees are increasingly attempting the treacherous sea crossing to Cyprus. Thus, another wave of refugees could arrive on Europe’s shores just as it grapples with the domestic economic fallout of the Covid-19 pandemic.<sup>12</sup>

Lebanon’s free fall warrants urgent interventions from the United States and other donors to cushion civilians from the crises. The explosive political climate and the changing humanitarian landscape raise the danger that interventions focused on refugees could stoke further unrest. Instead, donors and their implementing partners should reinforce their commitment to aiding Lebanese and Syrians in tandem and seek new opportunities to build the foundations of sustainable development for all.<sup>13</sup> That approach must integrate increased humanitarian support for Lebanese

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<sup>8</sup> “Opening of the International Conference on Refugee Return in Damascus,” *RT*, November 11, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k\\_NSXvZ1Q74&feature=youtu.be&t=32865](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=k_NSXvZ1Q74&feature=youtu.be&t=32865).

<sup>9</sup> <https://money.yahoo.com/lebanons-interior-minister-says-security-200938653.html>

<sup>10</sup> Human Rights Watch, “Lebanon: Dire Conditions for Syrian Refugees in Border Town,” January 19, 2021, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/19/lebanon-dire-conditions-syrian-refugees-border-town>.

<sup>11</sup> Syrian Association for Citizens’ Dignity, “Treatment of Syrian refugees is Lebanon’s most serious human rights failure,” January 13, 2021, <https://syacd.org/treatment-of-syrian-refugees-is-lebanons-most-serious-human-rights-failure/>.

<sup>12</sup> Hundreds of desperate migrants have attempted the risky sea journey to Cyprus, with at least 21 attempted crossings between July and September 2020, in comparison with 17 for the whole of 2019. “UNHCR and UNICEF: Urgent need to address the root causes of life-risking journeys from Lebanon and ensure swift rescue of people distressed at sea,” UNHCR, September 18, 2020, [https://www.unhcr.org/lb/13585-unhcr-and-unicef-urgent-need-to-address-the-root-causes-of-life-risking-journeys-from-lebanon-and-ensure-swift-rescue-of-people-distressed-at-sea.html#\\_ga=2.8127482.958519951.1602179382-207894769.1589918770](https://www.unhcr.org/lb/13585-unhcr-and-unicef-urgent-need-to-address-the-root-causes-of-life-risking-journeys-from-lebanon-and-ensure-swift-rescue-of-people-distressed-at-sea.html#_ga=2.8127482.958519951.1602179382-207894769.1589918770).

<sup>13</sup> Lebanon endorsed the United Nations’ 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015. The Lebanese Ministry of Environment collaborated with ESCWA to identify six sustainable development priorities for Lebanon in 2015: achieving employment generating economic growth; building institutional and administrative capacity and improving governance; improving social protection systems for all groups and addressing inequalities; achieving energy security; developing infrastructure and sustainable cities; and protecting natural habitats and

with longer-term strategies to support Syrian refugees, finding ways to build their self-reliance along with pathways toward durable solutions.

This paper is primarily based on information gathered through 21 remote interviews with key stakeholders in Lebanon, including representatives from donor governments, UN agencies, international development institutions, international non-governmental organisations (INGOs), Lebanese and Syrians working for NGOs, and local experts between November 2020 and January 2021. It also draws from a private roundtable discussion between 29 experts hosted virtually by CSIS in November 2020.

## **Syrian refugees in Lebanon**

The Lebanese government initially adopted a permissive approach to civilians fleeing Syria. Lebanon had a historic policy of allowing Syrians visa-free entry to Lebanon, and Lebanon continued this policy in the early years of the Syrian conflict as arrivals accelerated.<sup>14</sup> By 2014, the UNHCR had registered more than 1 million Syrians in Lebanon which had become host to the largest number of refugees (Syrians and otherwise) per capita in the world.

But as numbers of refugees grew, the government clamped down. In October 2014, the cabinet called for a reduction in the number of Syrians residing in Lebanon and the removal of those who “fail to abide by Lebanese law and conditions of entry to Lebanon.”<sup>15</sup> The government ordered UNHCR to stop registering Syrian refugees and closed the border to the majority of new arrivals in January 2015. As a result, we do not know how many Syrians live in Lebanon today, but UNHCR estimates the number to be 1.5 million.<sup>16</sup>

The Lebanese government severely restricts Syrians’ ability to maintain legal residency, work, and move around in Lebanon. Syrians must renew their residency permits every six months for a fee of \$200. Many do not have the required documents to complete this process, including formal lease documentation, a valid identity card or passport, and an entry slip and return card.<sup>17</sup> As a result, nearly 80 percent of Syrians in Lebanon surveyed in 2019 reported not holding residency.<sup>18</sup> Lacking legal status, many Syrians avoid leaving their homes or immediate surroundings for fear

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biodiversity. Jana El-Baba, “The sustainable development framework in Lebanon: A national assessment,” *ESCWA*, February 2015, <http://www.databank.com.lb/docs/Sustainable%20Development-ESCWA-2015.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Maja Janmyr, “Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” *Oxford Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35:4, December 2016.

<sup>15</sup> Minutes of the meeting of Lebanon’s Cabinet of Ministers on October 23, 2014, Presidency of the Council of Ministers, <http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=6118>.

<sup>16</sup> UNHCR, “2021 Planning summary: Operation Lebanon,” Global Focus, December 29, 2020, <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/pdfsummaries/GA2021-Lebanon-eng.pdf>.

<sup>17</sup> Maja Janmyr, “Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon,” *Oxford Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35:4, December 2016.

<sup>18</sup> United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF), and World Food Program (WFP), VASyR 2019: Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (Lebanon: UNHCR, UNICEF, and WFP, 2019).

of being detained at checkpoints.<sup>19</sup> In March 2021, Amnesty International released a report documenting 25 instances of Lebanese officials torturing Syrian refugees, many of whom were arbitrarily arrested.<sup>20</sup>

Lebanon has also restricted refugees' labour rights. Refugees who are registered with UNHCR are required to pledge not to work in the presence of a notary. Those who are not registered with UNHCR can only work in the agriculture, construction, or cleaning sectors, and they must secure a Lebanese sponsor.<sup>21</sup> The sponsorship system effectively renders Syrians as economic migrants which causes them to lose international protections afforded to refugees.<sup>22</sup> Additionally, because sponsors know Syrians cannot receive refugee assistance again if they leave them, the system often creates abusive relationships. As a result, the potential for Syrian contributions to the economy in both skilled and unskilled labour is wasted.

### **Lebanon's refugee response**

Lebanon's politics have shaped and restricted its response to the refugee emergency and have kept Syrians in limbo. On one hand, Lebanon continues to demonstrate remarkable generosity in hosting record numbers of refugees. While forced deportations have increased since 2015, they have not been widespread.<sup>23</sup> But on the other hand, the government's refusal to integrate refugees into society has stymied refugees' ability to develop self-sufficiency. Syrians in Lebanon live in a state of "constant uncertainty," as a result.<sup>24</sup> They know their status in Lebanon is not guaranteed and are at the mercy of the changing policies of Lebanese politicians.

Numerous political sensitivities shaped the government's response. The legacy of the large Palestinian refugee population, many of whom have lived in Lebanon for 70 years and have no prospect of returning, raised the spectre of a protracted displacement of Syrians and led the government to categorise Syrians as "displaced" rather than "refugees." The influx of refugees, most of whom opposed the Syrian regime, also exacerbated political fault lines between Lebanese factions that support different parties in the Syrian conflict. The arrival of Syrians threatened to alter Lebanon's demographic balance as the majority of Syrian refugees are Sunnis. However, anti-Syrian sentiment does not exclusively manifest along sectarian lines. The Syrian occupation

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<sup>19</sup> Refugee Protection Watch, "Trapped in Between Lebanon and Syria. The Absence of Durable Solutions for Syria's Refugees," October 2020, <https://www.basmeh-zeitooneh.org/trapped-in-between-lebanon-and-syria-the-absence-of-durable-solutions-for-syrias-refugees>.

<sup>20</sup> "Lebanon: "I wish I would die" – Syrian refugees arbitrarily detained on terrorism-related charges and tortured in Lebanon," *Amnesty International*, March 23, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde18/3671/2021/en/>.

<sup>21</sup> Durable Solutions Platform and Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, "Addressing Protracted Displacement in Lebanon: A Medium-Term Outlook for Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Host Communities," January 2020, 11, <https://www.dsp-syria.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/DSP-LCPS%20report.pdf>.

<sup>22</sup> Maja Janmyr and Lama Mourad, "Modes of Ordering: Labelling, Classification and Categorization in Lebanon's Refugee Response," *Journal of Refugee Studies* 31:4 (December 2018).

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch, "Syrians deported by Lebanon arrested at home," September 2, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/09/02/syrians-deported-lebanon-arrested-home>.

<sup>24</sup> Interview with Rabie Nasser, director of the Syrian Center for Policy Research, November 24, 2020.



of Lebanon left a legacy of hostility towards Syrians among many Lebanese, including Sunnis, who also resent the flood of cheap Syrian labour.<sup>25</sup>

These sensitivities prevented the emergence of a coherent Lebanese policy on refugees, which was further undermined by Lebanon's political gridlock. While international organisations commended Lebanon for its open border and non-encampment policies at the start of the Syrian crisis, those strategies were the result of political stalemate rather than progressive thinking.<sup>26</sup> Political resistance prevented the government from setting up official refugee camps, and so informal settlements emerged and spread across northern Lebanon and the Bekaa valley which were not permitted to be connected to infrastructure and harder to manage.<sup>27</sup>

Paralysis at the state level in Lebanon also delegated decision making on Syrian refugees to local authorities. The absence of state policies regulating the presence of refugees allowed municipalities to exert power over various issues, including settlement. Entrepreneurial municipalities leveraged the refugee presence to increase their revenues. For example, early in the crisis, some municipalities allowed international actors to implement refugee housing unit projects on their land in exchange for financial incentives, irrespective of the government stance on such projects.<sup>28</sup>

### **The international refugee response**

International actors have struggled to navigate Lebanon's political environment to provide assistance to Syrian refugees. At the start of the Syrian conflict, the Lebanese government took responsibility for security affairs relating to refugees, but delegated responsibility for providing for refugees to international organisations. In 2015, recognising the toll that the influx of refugees was taking on host countries, the international community adopted a new, comprehensive approach which combined humanitarian and development responses in Lebanon, Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. This response is the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan in response to the Syria Crisis (3RP), and the Lebanon chapter is the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP).<sup>29</sup>

The LCRP was intended to be a vehicle to support host communities in Lebanon alongside refugees. It aims to strengthen the capacity of national and local service delivery systems and to

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<sup>25</sup> Faysal Itani, "Occupational Hazards," *Newlines Magazine*, February 2, 2021, <https://newlinesmag.com/first-person/occupational-hazards/>.

<sup>26</sup> Maja Janmyr, "Precarity in Exile: The Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon," *Oxford Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 35:4, December 2016.

<sup>27</sup> Nasser Yassin, T. Osseiran, R. Rassi & M. Boustani, "No Place to Stay? Reflections on the Syrian Refugee Shelter Policy in Lebanon," *Issam Fares Institute (AUB) & UN-Habitat*, 2015, 15, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20150907-noplacetostay.pdf>.

<sup>28</sup> Nasser Yassin, T. Osseiran, R. Rassi & M. Boustani, "No Place to Stay? Reflections on the Syrian Refugee Shelter Policy in Lebanon," *Issam Fares Institute (AUB) & UN-Habitat*, 2015, 54, <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/20150907-noplacetostay.pdf>.

<sup>29</sup> UNDP, "An Introduction to the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)," June 20, 2020, <https://www.arabstates.undp.org/content/rbas/en/home/library/crisis-response0/an-introduction-to-the-regional-refugee-and-resilience-plan--3rp.html>



reinforce Lebanon's economic, social, environmental, and institutional stability.<sup>30</sup> Although UNDP states that "most" vulnerable communities in Lebanon have been assisted under the program, a European donor estimated that "70 to 80 percent of assistance went to refugees."<sup>31</sup> This estimate indicates that international interventions have not always benefited Lebanese in tandem with refugees. One of the issues was the social stigma in Lebanon associated with accepting services provided by international donors.<sup>32</sup>

The endemic mismanagement and corruption of the Lebanese government has restricted and distorted the international refugee response. While humanitarian aid remains unconditional, donors have refused to deliver development assistance until the government implements large-scale reforms. Because it has not yet done so, donors have preferred to work outside of government structures. After the 2019 revolution that toppled the government of Saad Hariri, the need to bypass government institutions grew more acute. The U.S. ambassador to Lebanon said the United States now "generally avoids" providing assistance to the government of Lebanon.<sup>33</sup>

Lebanese politicians have used the deteriorating economic situation in Lebanon as justification for restricting international aid interventions targeting refugees. Former foreign minister Gebran Bassil has been one of the most prominent politicians to deploy anti-refugee rhetoric. In a sign of the power of the anti-Syrian faction in the government, Lebanon managed to ensure that there was no mention of refugees in the final communique of the 2018 CEDRE pledging conference, even though bolstering Lebanon's ability to host refugees was the primary impetus for the conference.<sup>34</sup>

## **Lebanon's crises and the new humanitarian context**

The crises of the past year have transformed the context for humanitarian operations in Lebanon. Syrians' material conditions have taken an especially hard hit.<sup>35</sup> The number of refugees living in extreme poverty increased from 55 percent in mid-2019 to 89 percent in late 2020.<sup>36</sup> More than 60 percent of Syrian households lost their income because of Covid-19.<sup>37</sup> Syrians have also become victims of increased discrimination. Both the Covid-19 pandemic and the Beirut explosion

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<sup>30</sup> "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) Overview," United Nations, [https://www.un.org.lb/library/assets/LCRP\\_QA-124515.pdf](https://www.un.org.lb/library/assets/LCRP_QA-124515.pdf).

<sup>31</sup> UNDP, "An Introduction to the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP)"; European donor in Beirut, November 27, 2020.

<sup>32</sup> European donor in Beirut, November 27, 2020.

<sup>33</sup> "Lebanon's Challenges: A Conversation with U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea, Event Transcript," CSIS, November 13, 2020, 8, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201113\\_Morrison\\_Dorothy\\_Shea.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201113_Morrison_Dorothy_Shea.pdf).

<sup>34</sup> "CEDRE: Economic Conference for Development through Reforms with the Private Sector: Joint Statement," April 6, 2018, [https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/cedre\\_statement-en-final\\_ang\\_cle8179fb.pdf](https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/cedre_statement-en-final_ang_cle8179fb.pdf)

<sup>35</sup> Natasha Hall, "The Importance of Marginalized Communities in Lebanon," CSIS, December 14, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/importance-marginalized-communities-lebanon>.

<sup>36</sup> Abby Sewell, "Almost 90 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon now live below the extreme poverty line, a UN assessment reveals," *L'Orient Today*, December 22, 2020, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1245698/almost-90-percent-of-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-now-live-below-the-extreme-poverty-line-a-un-assessment-reveals.html>

<sup>37</sup> Interview with Yasmin Kayali Sabra, co-founder of Basmeh & Zeitooneh, November 11, 2020.

motivated spikes in evictions of Syrian refugees.<sup>38</sup> NGO officials have also reported several instances of Syrians being assaulted when trying to buy paracetamol from a pharmacy, apparently due to fears that they could spread Covid-19.<sup>39</sup> An anguished Syrian father who could not afford medical treatment for his daughter set himself on fire outside the UNHCR office in November 2020.<sup>40</sup>

But while the crises have made life particularly difficult for Syrians, the number of Lebanese in need has skyrocketed. Around 50 percent of Lebanese now live under the poverty line.<sup>41</sup> Those who are able to leave the country are increasingly doing so.<sup>42</sup> The risk of a food insecurity crisis in Lebanon has also increased, given Lebanon's reliance on imported food, the government's increasing inability to pay for subsidies, and its diminishing ability to import fuel, agricultural equipment, and fertilizer. One member of the security forces said that he used to buy his children whatever they wanted, but now he can barely afford groceries.<sup>43</sup> Meanwhile, grocery workers have complained that they cannot finish marking increases in food prices before they are told to raise them again.<sup>44</sup> As one Western donor said, "it would take a miracle for Lebanon not to face a total humanitarian crisis for their own people."<sup>45</sup> Another said the middle class has "almost totally disappeared" and that she has seen Lebanese eating from rubbish bins for the first time.<sup>46</sup>

More Lebanese now rely on public institutions, placing greater strain on public services. Private hospitals accounted for 82 percent of Lebanon's healthcare capacity before the crises, but many Lebanese can no longer afford private healthcare and are resorting to public facilities.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, while 70 percent of Lebanese students previously attended private schools, at least 50,000 Lebanese children have been transferred to public schools as a result of increasing costs, and schools are prioritising Lebanese over Syrians.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Alicia Medina, "The Beirut blast lays bare a shockwave of evictions hitting Syrians in Lebanon", *Syria Direct*, September 20, 2020, [https://syriadirect.org/news/the-beirut-blast-lays-bare-a-shockwave-of-evictions-hitting-syrians-in-](https://syriadirect.org/news/the-beirut-blast-lays-bare-a-shockwave-of-evictions-hitting-syrians-in-lebanon/#:~:text=The%20Beirut%20blast%20is%20laying,and%204%2C613%20individuals%20were%20evicted.)

[lebanon/#:~:text=The%20Beirut%20blast%20is%20laying,and%204%2C613%20individuals%20were%20evicted.](https://syriadirect.org/news/the-beirut-blast-lays-bare-a-shockwave-of-evictions-hitting-syrians-in-lebanon/#:~:text=The%20Beirut%20blast%20is%20laying,and%204%2C613%20individuals%20were%20evicted.)

<sup>39</sup> Interview with Yasmin Kayali Sabra, co-founder of Basmeh & Zeitooneh, November 11, 2020.

<sup>40</sup> Najia Houssari, "Impoverished Syrian refugee sets himself on fire outside UN center in Lebanon," *Arab News*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1758911/middle-east>.

<sup>41</sup> Karolina Lindholm Biling, "Why investing in refugees benefits host communities and the refugees' country of origin," *Executive Magazine*, November 2, 2020, <https://www.executive-magazine.com/poverty/why-investing-in-refugees-benefits-host-communities-and-the-refugees-country-of-origin>

<sup>42</sup> Interview with European donor based in Beirut, November 25, 2020.

<sup>43</sup> Ellen Francis, "Lebanon's collapse piles strain on army, security forces," *Reuters*, March 9, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/lebanon-crisis-security-crime-int/lebanons-collapse-piles-strain-on-army-security-forces-idUSKBN2B11D3>

<sup>44</sup> Ben Hubbard and Hwaida Saad, "Lebanon's financial collapse hits where it hurts: The grocery store," *New York Times*, March 22, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/03/22/world/middleeast/lebanon-currency-groceries.html>

<sup>45</sup> Interview with European donor based in Beirut, November 25, 2020.

<sup>46</sup> Interview with European donor based in Beirut, November 27, 2020.

<sup>47</sup> "Lebanon: Hospital Crisis Endangering Health", Human Rights Watch, December 10, 2019, <https://www.hrw.org/news/2019/12/10/lebanon-hospital-crisis-endangering-health>.

<sup>48</sup> Remarks provided by the deputy prime minister of Lebanon, Zeina Akar, to the Brussels Conference, "Lebanon," *European External Action Service* March 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VdWiY6Y4ThU>.

## **A shifting international response**

The LCRP is no longer an adequate response to meet humanitarian needs in Lebanon. Although it is relatively well-funded, the plummeting exchange rate hampers its effectiveness, and a refugee-centred response is insufficient. Donors are formulating multiple other responses to paper over the gaps and the coordination of the international response is becoming increasingly complicated. One INGO worker in Beirut described humanitarian coordination as “the worst I’ve seen in my life,” describing multiple working groups with no clear authority and key sectors being omitted from flash appeals.<sup>49</sup>

The changing context for Lebanese has exacerbated local sensitivities about international support for refugees in Lebanon. The U.S. ambassador to Lebanon described “bending over backwards” to show that the United States does not provide refugees benefits that local populations do not receive.<sup>50</sup> Yet, perceptions among Lebanese persist that international assistance favours refugees.<sup>51</sup> If the situation deteriorates further and no new support systems are put in place to support vulnerable Lebanese, those perceptions could become reality.

After several attacks on refugee settlements, fears of inter-communal violence have affected the humanitarian response. One European official based in Beirut acknowledged that rising tensions undermine international donors’ ability to maintain the principle of “do no harm.”<sup>52</sup> The Lebanese government cited the risk of social tensions in its decision to enforce a cap on the amount of assistance donors can provide to refugees to ensure it does not exceed assistance for Lebanese in need. This restriction has prompted donors to expand their assistance horizontally so that more refugees overall receive assistance, but the level of assistance that those refugees receive is inadequate.<sup>53</sup>

The crises have pushed humanitarians toward short-termism. One NGO worker said that “donors no longer want to hear about education or livelihoods programs” and a UN official said that donors have increasingly favoured six-month and one-year projects over longer-term interventions. INGO officials have increased their emergency cash assistance, which is seen as a vital means of ensuring that people can buy bread. But the increase in cash assistance raises the danger of creating an internationally financed social safety net with no accountability from the state, which could prompt longer-term dependency on international aid.

International donors continue to state that they will only provide large-scale relief when the government implements reforms. U.S. ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea said the United

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<sup>49</sup> Interview with INGO Lebanon country director, November 11, 2020.

<sup>50</sup> “Lebanon’s Challenges: A Conversation with U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea, Event Transcript,” CSIS, November 13, 2020, 9, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201113\\_Morrison\\_Dorothy\\_Shea.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201113_Morrison_Dorothy_Shea.pdf).

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Lebanon country director of INGO, November 11, 2020.

<sup>52</sup> Interview with European donor based in Beirut, November 27, 2020.

<sup>53</sup> Interview with European donor based in Beirut, November 25, 2020.

States “got smart” about politicians’ refusal to implement promised reforms in exchange for international support and would no longer tolerate it.<sup>54</sup> But a Western official noted that Lebanese politicians always follow the same pattern. They wait for an eleventh-hour bailout, fail to implement the reforms they promised, and the underlying issues worsen.<sup>55</sup>

In spite of the unprecedented crises roiling Lebanon today, the political elite has expressed no sign of moving forward with reforms and cannot even agree to form a cabinet. An official at an international organisation stated she has not detected any shift in the government’s calculus on Syrian refugees over the past year either, saying “dialogue with the government [on the refugee file] is not any easier.”<sup>56</sup> When the World Bank announced the \$246 million Emergency Crisis and Covid-19 Response Social Safety Net Project (ESSN) in January 2021, it did not mention refugees and was not accompanied by any publicly-announced reforms to improve conditions for Syrian refugees.<sup>57</sup>

The intransigence of the Lebanese political elite poses a dilemma for the United States and international actors pushing for reforms to ease refugees’ hardships: if a near nuclear-sized explosion in the heart of the capital failed to bring down the political system or motivate serious reforms, would anything? Equally, withholding development aid has proven an ineffective strategy to force reforms. If the Lebanese government is unwilling to implement reforms that would improve conditions for their own people, can they be expected to do anything to improve conditions for Syrian refugees?

### **Circumventing the government**

Given donors’ failure to leverage funding to achieve positive change for Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese from the government, they have attempted different ways to circumvent the government entirely. Two potential solutions include adopting a more localised approach or shifting to a “Whole of Lebanon” humanitarian response.

#### *A. Going local and its limitations*

The ineffectiveness of the central state has led some donors to support decentralisation more vigorously by funding projects in coordination with municipalities and directing more aid to local

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<sup>54</sup> “Lebanon’s Challenges: A Conversation with U.S. Ambassador to Lebanon Dorothy Shea, Event Transcript,” CSIS, November 13, 2020, [https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201113\\_Morrison\\_Dorothy\\_Shea.pdf](https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/event/201113_Morrison_Dorothy_Shea.pdf).

<sup>55</sup> Interview with European donor based in Beirut, November 25, 2020.

<sup>56</sup> Interview with international development organization official, November 12, 2020.

<sup>57</sup> World Bank, “US\$246 million to Support Poor and Vulnerable Lebanese Households and Build-Up the Social Safety Net Delivery System,” January 12, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/01/12/us246-million-to-support-poor-and-vulnerable-lebanese-households-and-build-up-the-social-safety-net-delivery-system>.

NGOs.<sup>58</sup> While many Lebanese have lost faith in the central government, the public has higher levels of trust in local government.<sup>59</sup> Municipalities are on the front line in the refugee response and wield important influence over refugees' work and movement. Because maintaining hospitality at the local level is critical to refugees' wellbeing, some donors have found that circumventing the central government by engaging directly with municipal officials is more fruitful.

International donors have avoided directly funding municipalities' payroll, but they have financed local projects by engaging with municipalities which benefit host communities and local leaders. A UN official argued that providing local leaders with "wins" has proven helpful with the optics of the refugee response and has led them to encourage their constituents to have a positive attitude toward refugees.<sup>60</sup> Municipalities' receptiveness to creating a more permissive environment in exchange for foreign funding varies from region to region. While some may see such projects as helpful for attracting new revenue or winning elections, others are genuinely interested in establishing programs that benefit the whole community.<sup>61</sup>

However, Lebanon's crises have created new problems with a municipality-focussed refugee response. Municipalities now receive no money from the central state and are at risk of bankruptcy. As a result of worsening economic conditions, municipalities have prioritised their limited resources on their constituents rather than refugees and it has become harder for them to ensure the hospitality of their constituents.<sup>62</sup> As one INGO country director said, "just as armed actors will never starve during a conflict, neither will municipalities during a crisis. They will find a way to line their own pockets."<sup>63</sup> Municipalities' abuses against refugees were particularly bad at the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic. Syrian refugees were exposed to increasing evictions and dozens of municipalities implemented curfews for Syrians.<sup>64</sup> Donors also struggle to enforce municipalities' compliance with the terms of projects that are intended to benefit both Lebanese and refugees. One NGO worker said that foreign funding was used to renovate Lebanese homes hosting Syrians, but the landlords evicted the refugees after the renovations were complete.<sup>65</sup>

There are also practical problems with adopting a decentralised approach at scale. Identifying the key stakeholders and which local figures hold veto power over a municipality's policies on refugees varies by municipality and is time intensive. Local NGOs are not well-placed to take on this role as they lack negotiating power over municipalities. Therefore, engagement must be conducted directly by donors or INGOs, which is time consuming.

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<sup>58</sup> Interview with INGO Lebanon country director, November 11, 2020.

<sup>59</sup> Interview with Lebanese NGO worker, December 23, 2020.

<sup>60</sup> Interview with UN official, November 13, 2020.

<sup>61</sup> Interview with NGO worker in Lebanon, November 11, 2020.

<sup>62</sup> Interview with Lebanese NGO worker, December 23, 2020.

<sup>63</sup> Interview with INGO Lebanon country director, November 11, 2020.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with INGO worker in Lebanon, December 3, 2020.

<sup>65</sup> Interview with NGO worker in Lebanon, November 11, 2020.

Lebanon's crises have undercut the potential of a municipality-centred approach. The transactional costs are high and donors lack compliance enforcement mechanisms. However, some municipalities remain more open-minded about international interventions that can benefit the whole community and may be more open to efforts to build decentralised infrastructure that benefits Lebanese and refugee communities – including renewable energy generation, wastewater treatment, and waste disposal. Donors and their implementing partners should publicise successful local models to encourage others to follow suit.

Donors have also directed more money to local NGOs to circumvent the government. Local NGOs often enjoy closer relationships with beneficiaries and are well integrated in local communities, often hiring directly from them.<sup>66</sup> These relationships allow a greater understanding of beneficiaries' issues and more tailored programming. Funding local NGOs also cuts out middlemen, leading to a more cost-effective approach. Supporting local groups also builds their capacity, providing longer-term benefits.

However, local NGOs have some disadvantages. Because NGOs lack the status of large INGOs or UN agencies, municipalities can wield more influence over their activities. NGOs' lack of clout can undermine their ability to negotiate aid access. Supporting a large number of local NGOs also makes coordination more complicated and may make it harder to identify gaps or duplicities in the humanitarian response.

### *B. Shifting toward a "Whole of Lebanon" approach*

The level of humanitarian need in Lebanon may soon warrant a shift to a Whole of Lebanon approach. A Whole of Lebanon approach would be a single strategic framework for humanitarian operations in Lebanon which would supersede and consolidate the existing humanitarian mechanisms, including the 3RP response for refugees, the Covid-19 response, the early recovery mechanism following the Beirut port explosion, and more recent support to vulnerable Lebanese. The Whole of Lebanon approach would aim to improve the effectiveness of the humanitarian response by better identifying the needs of all vulnerable groups in Lebanon, harmonising different response activities, and reducing overlap and duplication. This approach would likely lessen perceptions of one group benefitting over another and so could reduce the risk of inter-communal violence.

A Whole of Lebanon approach would represent a fundamental shift in how aid organisations have operated and would face significant bureaucratic hurdles. The current approach enjoys the inherent power that comes with the status quo. The costs for international donors of shifting approach and funding a new appeal may also be significant, reducing its appeal to donors who are looking to reduce their overseas spending due to the Covid-19 pandemic. A Whole of Lebanon approach could also raise issues of accountability and aid dependence. New influxes of

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<sup>66</sup> Interview with Yasmin Kayali Sabra, co-founder of Basmeh & Zeitooneh, November 11, 2020.

international funds could further cushion the political elite from public pressure and reduce the impetus for them to implement reforms.

The Lebanese government has sought increased international funding to serve vulnerable Lebanese. The World Bank's ESSN program will serve as a social safety net for 780,000 vulnerable Lebanese over a three-year period.<sup>67</sup> The program indicates that the international community is willing to increase its support for vulnerable Lebanese, but it does not represent a shift to a Whole of Lebanon approach. The program is solely aimed at Lebanese families and has not replaced the 3RP mechanism for refugees. It is also a stopgap measure which may not prove sustainable in the long-term if it is not accompanied by complementary programs to rebuild trust in the state and break down networks of sectarian clientelism.

As conditions continue to deteriorate in Lebanon, humanitarians will issue more appeals and the overall coordination will become increasingly complicated. Although donors have little appetite for a Whole of Lebanon approach, the dangers of Lebanon's state completely disintegrating are growing more acute. Donors must now begin more serious discussions about a Whole of Lebanon approach, ensuring that refugees are fully integrated.

### *C. Pursuing win-win solutions in the new environment*

Donors are likely to resist shifting to a Whole of Lebanon approach until Lebanon completely collapses and it is too late. Therefore, donors should capitalise on any opportunities that arise to push for more minor reforms. Space, albeit limited, is emerging for donors to pursue solutions that benefit all vulnerable communities in Lebanon while building the foundations of more sustainable development. If donors highlight the benefits new programs can bring to Lebanese, the government is more likely to accept initiatives that are inclusive of refugees. Although donors experience challenges in working directly with ministers and convincing them to implement reforms that benefit refugees, more limited success can be achieved when donors work with their Lebanese counterparts on a technical level.<sup>68</sup>

Donors have managed to expand some of the services originally targeted at the neediest refugees to benefit vulnerable Lebanese and greater numbers of Syrians, while simultaneously prompting reforms to set Lebanon on a more sustainable trajectory. One example is the EU's "Flat Fee Model" program, which aimed to increase vulnerable groups' access to healthcare in Lebanon. The subsidised fee of 3,000 Lebanese lira covers the costs of medical consultation, diagnostic and

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<sup>67</sup> "Lebanon emergency crisis and Covid-19 response social safety net project (ESSN)" *World Bank*, January 12, 2021, <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/lebanon/brief/lebanon-emergency-crisis-and-covid-19-response-social-safety-net-project-essn>

<sup>68</sup> Interviews with Western officials based in Lebanon, November 2020.



laboratory tests, and medication.<sup>69</sup> Donors previously faced resistance from the government when trying to expand the program to a national level. However, after the Beirut explosion, the number of Lebanese in need of medical support increased and the government approved a working group to expand the program nationwide. If implemented, Lebanese citizens' changing circumstances would have motivated a system benefiting both refugees and Lebanese across the country.

An opportunity could also be emerging to resume refugee registration. As more Lebanese fall into poverty, the imperative of a comprehensive country-wide needs assessment is growing. Donors can therefore incorporate the registration of refugees into a push for a country-wide assessment. Having an accurate idea of who is in the country is in the interests of all Lebanese as it would allow donors to optimise public services accordingly. The optics of such an approach would be sensitive, but resuming refugee registration has country-wide benefits, including better data on the skills refugees have which could be utilised in Lebanon.

Lebanon's crises have created new needs in the labour market, which create new incentives for Syrians to work in a way that benefits all in Lebanon.<sup>70</sup> The devaluation of the Lebanese lira has made some sectors more competitive, including exports. Syrian refugees are well placed to work in manufacturing and other sectors to boost Lebanon's exports, but they are not currently permitted to do so.

The economic crisis has highlighted the need to bolster Lebanon's agricultural production. Agriculture is one of the few sectors in which Syrians can legally work in Lebanon, and there is little competition between Lebanese and Syrians as the wages are very low. Many Syrian refugees have agricultural backgrounds and are well-placed to help Lebanon as it approaches a food security crisis. The EU and FAO delivered a package aimed to spur job creation in the agricultural sector in October 2020. International officials' clear articulation of the benefits the package would bring to Lebanese farmers and the wider Lebanese population was key to its passing.<sup>71</sup> Donors could build on this program to further encourage Syrians to work in agriculture and food production to bolster Lebanon's food security.

Showing Syrians contributing to solutions to Lebanon's crises may help ease inter-communal tensions. After the Beirut port explosion, many Syrians worked to rebuild the city, demonstrating their ability and willingness to help Lebanon recover.<sup>72</sup> A similar opportunity is emerging in the medical sector. Mobilising Syrian healthcare workers to aid in Lebanon's Covid-19 response—and publicising their contributions—could help combat anti-Syrian sentiment.

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<sup>69</sup> Interview with European official based in Lebanon, November 11, 2020. For more information, see: Durable Solutions Platform and Migration Policy Institute, *A Bridge To Firmer Ground: Learning from International Experiences to Support Pathways to Solutions in the Syrian Refugee Context*. Research report, March 2021, 106-109.

<sup>70</sup> Will Todman and Erol Yayboke, "Refugees could help solve Lebanon's economic crisis," *CSIS*, July 10, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/refugees-could-help-solve-lebanons-economic-crisis>.

<sup>71</sup> Interview with European official based in Lebanon, December 3, 2020.

<sup>72</sup> Hannah McCarthy, "Syrian refugees excluded from Lebanese labor market," *Counter Punch*, January 11, 2021, <https://www.counterpunch.org/2021/01/11/syrian-refugees-excluded-from-lebanese-labor-market/>

Lebanon will only overcome its crises with major reforms. However, the political elite has proven unwilling to consider these reforms and remarkably resilient in the face of sustained public protest. International donors' chances of achieving major reforms are extremely limited until something fundamentally changes the calculation of those in power. Until that happens, the solutions outlined above do not require major reforms from the government but would represent win-win solutions that are of clear benefit to both Lebanese and Syrians.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The increasing needs of Lebanese risk overshadowing the needs of Syrian refugees amid Lebanon's cascading crises. However, international donors must continue to advocate for refugees as they are uniquely vulnerable and constitute almost a quarter of Lebanon's population. Half of Syrians in Lebanon are food insecure and 90 percent live in extreme poverty.<sup>73</sup> Failing to integrate them into the international response will reduce the effectiveness of any humanitarian response in Lebanon.

The intransigence of the Lebanese political elite, their corruption, and their steadfast rejection of reforms poses serious challenges for the international response to Lebanon's crises. Interviewees expressed a sense of helplessness that something as dramatic as the Beirut port explosion did not trigger broader changes or force the government to commit to needed reforms. Circumventing the government by dealing directly with municipalities and local NGOs cannot be a comprehensive solution and there is little appetite in the international community to shift to a Whole of Lebanon approach.

However, the stakes are too high to write Lebanon off as a lost cause. Donors can and must do more to advocate for the needs of Syrians while aiding Lebanese.

### *1. International donors*

Lebanon's accelerating collapse could cause splits in the international community's stance on aid. While it is critical that humanitarian aid remain unconditional, donors must not abandon their opposition to providing development aid before the government implements serious reforms. Doing so would be counterproductive and would only prolong Lebanon's woes. Signs have recently emerged that Lebanese politicians are attempting to approach alternative donors, like Qatar, in hope of receiving a bailout.<sup>74</sup> International donors must remain in close contact and ensure that their strategy of incentivising reforms is not undermined by alternative donors.

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<sup>73</sup> Abby Sewell, "Almost 90 percent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon now live below the extreme poverty line, a UN assessment reveals," *L'Orient Today*, December 22, 2020, <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1245698/almost-90-percent-of-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-now-live-below-the-extreme-poverty-line-a-un-assessment-reveals.html>

<sup>74</sup> "Hariri holds talks in Qatari capital," *Nahar Net*, February 17, 2021, <http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/279511-hariri-holds-talks-in-qatari-capital>.

International donors should:

- Fully fund all past pledges made to provide humanitarian aid to Lebanon, including pledges made towards the refugee response, as well as the Covid-19 response.
  - Reflect the reality that Syrian refugees will remain in Lebanon beyond the short-term by supporting longer-term programming whenever possible.
- Reiterate that conditions in Syria are not conducive to the safe return of refugees.
  - Articulate clear opposition to Lebanese authorities' pressure on refugees to return to Syria.
  - Insist that returns remain voluntary, informed, and dignified.
- Retain a united stance on the Lebanese government's need to implement the reforms stipulated at the CEDRE conference.
  - Provide limited conditional funding for the Lebanese government which is contingent on easing restrictions on Syrian refugees and has strict compliance mechanisms.
- Increase monitoring of Lebanese actors to vet for the corruption and mismanagement of donor funds.
  - Incrementally reward Lebanese actors and institutions that demonstrate greater transparency and accountability.
- Pursue initiatives that support Lebanese and Syrians in tandem, placing particular emphasis on the benefits to Lebanese with Lebanese interlocutors.
  - Insist that refugees be integrated into all new internationally funded aid programs in Lebanon.
  - Push the government to fulfil its pledge to resume refugee registration by linking it to a nation-wide needs assessment to gather data to optimise interventions.
- Accelerate aid localisation to municipalities and local NGOs.
  - Increase funding to municipalities that operate openly and effectively and demonstrate respect for refugees' rights.
  - Provide local NGOs with longer-term and more flexible funding.
  - Incorporate local NGOs into the design and planning phases of programming more routinely to ensure interventions are sensitive to local tensions.
- Continue to fund livelihoods interventions during the crises to reduce reliance on emergency cash assistance and deter negative coping mechanisms.

- Prepare Syrian and Lebanese workers to enter sectors that would benefit the Lebanese economy.
- Target labour intensive sectors to maximise job creation and increase self-reliance.
- Place more emphasis on fostering social cohesion between refugees and host communities.
  - Devote more resources to countering disinformation about refugees on social media and other manifestations of xenophobia.
  - Publicise prominent examples of Syrians contributing to the good of all in Lebanon.
- Hold more serious discussions about a shift towards a Whole of Lebanon approach in anticipation of a nation-wide humanitarian crisis.

## 2. *The role of the United States*

At the beginning of the Biden administration, the United States has an opportunity to redouble its commitment to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and demonstrate that the Hezbollah issue does not dominate its strategy in Lebanon. President Biden’s pledge to resettle 125,000 refugees to the United States in the first year of his administration is a positive commitment and sends a strong signal that more needs to be done to help countries hosting refugees.

However, more must be done on the ground in Lebanon. Interviews with international donors revealed a sense that the United States is not capitalising on its potential influence on the refugee file in Lebanon. Because much of the United States’ funding is channelled through the UN, its visibility is limited.<sup>75</sup> An additional problem is the limited human resources dedicated to the refugee file. Although the two members of staff in the embassy from the Bureau of Population, Migration, and Refugees dedicated to Syrian refugees are reported to be excellent, they are outnumbered five to one by their counterparts in the EU delegation.<sup>76</sup> As such, they are unable to follow the issue as closely or wield the United States’ political influence as effectively.

The United States should:

- Capitalise on its potential to influence issues relating to refugees in Lebanon.
  - Increase the number of staff committed to the refugee file at the U.S. embassy in Beirut, even by one or two, to allow for greater participation and influence in donor discussions with the Lebanese government about Syrian refugees.

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<sup>75</sup> According the USAID’s “Lebanon – Complex Emergency” Fact Sheet #1 Fiscal year (FY) 2021, 85.6 percent of PRM’s spending in Lebanon went to UNHCR and UNICEF, with just 14.4 percent going through “implementing partners.” [https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/12.30.2020\\_-\\_USAID-BHA\\_Lebanon\\_Explosions\\_Fact\\_Sheet\\_1.pdf](https://www.usaid.gov/sites/default/files/documents/12.30.2020_-_USAID-BHA_Lebanon_Explosions_Fact_Sheet_1.pdf).

<sup>76</sup> Interview with European official based in Lebanon, December 3, 2020. A State Department spokesperson declined to confirm the number of officials dedicated to the refugee file in written communication with the author, stating that PRM has refugee coordinators in each of the countries bordering Syria and that USAID Bureau for Humanitarian Assistance staff across the region oversee USAID-funded programming, some of which supports Syrian refugees.

- Increase coordination with like-minded donors on refugee issues.
- Encourage the World Bank and International Monetary Fund to integrate refugees more fully into the support they provide to Lebanon.
- Demonstrate appreciation for the global good Lebanon has provided by hosting such large numbers of refugees by taking on more of the burden.
  - Ensure that a significant proportion of refugees resettled to the United States during the first year of the Biden administration are Syrians from Lebanon.
- Leverage its strong relationship with the Lebanese Armed Forces to improve conditions for Syrian refugees in the protection space.
  - Advocate for a moratorium on the detention of refugees who lack legal paperwork.
  - Maintain opposition to any refoulement.

The United States and other international donors play a vital role in supporting vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees amidst Lebanon's multiple and increasing crises. Failing to establish sustainable and inclusive aid efforts while advocating for state reforms will ensure the continuation of Lebanon's national humanitarian emergency and exacerbate negative regional implications.