



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN
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MIGRATION POLICY GROUP: LEBANON ON THE EU MIGRATION ROADMAP

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INTRODUCTION

Within the framework of the FNF Madrid Migration Policy Group* a visit program to Lebanon was organized by the Friedrich Naumann Foundation (FNF) Madrid office, together with FNF Lebanon and Syria, in May 2023. This coincides with the growing international attention to the country due to its role as a center of emigration, a host country for refugees and a destination for migrant workers.

In a meeting during the visiting program, Michel Moawad, member of the Lebanese Parliament and former presidential candidate of the opposition, described the current situation as *"a time bomb about to explode at any moment"*.

The economic crisis affecting the country since 2019, the biggest in its modern history, exacerbated by the explosion in the port of Beirut in 2020, led to an increase in xenophobic sentiment towards Syrian refugees. The Syrians now find themselves helpless before a non-existent state that not only does not recognize their status or provide them with coverage, but also uses them as a scapegoat for the economic crisis, according to Amnesty International (AI), while pressuring them to return to Syria.

In fact, the Lebanese government, which refuses to recognize Syrians as refugees, considers Lebanon *"not a country of asylum, nor a final destination for refugees, let alone a country of resettlement,"* as stated in the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2015-2016, elaborated together with the United Nations. Faced with the Syrian refugee situation, the international community is "lost," says Mohamed Limam, a professor of political science in Tunisia, due to the institutional vacuum in which the country finds itself, unable to form a government since last year. With 5.5 million inhabitants, Lebanon hosts the largest number of refugees per capita in the world, led by 1.5 million Syrians, according to Lebanese government figures, who join some 400,000 Palestinian refugees, settled in the country since 1948, and some 14,000 from other countries, mainly Iraq. "We are a country of refugees, and this cannot work," Moawad points out.

In 2011, when thousands of Syrians began fleeing the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the Lebanese government allowed more than one million people to take refuge in Lebanon. However, in the absence of a clear administrative framework, and as the Lebanese government was politically neutral towards the Syrian conflict, the legal status of these people was left up in the air. The government refused to call them refugees and refers to them as "temporarily displaced individuals", while refusing to establish formal refugee camps, precisely to avoid the integration of Syrians.

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In addition to their situation of economic hardship, in recent months they have had to face a problem of coexistence with the Lebanese, fueled by xenophobic speeches and fake news. Refugees like Mohamed Khaled speak of *"attitudes of some Lebanese who ask us to return to our country because we are taking their jobs"*. Next to him, Shadia tells how *"in the grocery line a man criticized me for being here and for the money they give me. It was very hard for me"*.

In part of the Lebanese society - half of it lives below the poverty line - whose access to basic goods is decreasing every day due to the 90% depreciation of the Lebanese pound, an anti-refugee sentiment has increased, whom they blame for taking away their jobs, their land or for the increase in diseases. *"The country has experienced a depreciation caused by a very massive outflow of capital from Lebanon to abroad, which has driven a very fierce growth in prices,"* says Roger Albinyana, Managing Director of IEMed (European Institute of the Mediterranean). Moreover, *"precisely because the state has been diminishing its presence, the Lebanese economy has become a particularly informal economy, up to 70-75%, which is not sustainable"*.

The most that Syrian refugees receive from UNHCR is the equivalent of \$20 (per person per month) for food and \$25 per family for non-food expenses, which is below what a family requires to cover their basic needs. Only 1% of the refugee population has all their food guaranteed. According to UNHCR, 90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live in extreme poverty. On the other hand, the public thinks that all Syrian refugees receive cash assistance, but this is not the case. UNHCR and the World Food Programme (WFP) only cover 43% of the needs of Syrian refugees, Moawad points out.

Due to xenophobic episodes, Syrian refugees are now restricted in their movements. In the informal refugee settlement where Mohamed and Shadia live, in Tripoli, northern Lebanon, the municipality has imposed a curfew at 20:00. *"Refugees suffer a double hostility: where they are and the country they come from, they are probably rejected and used as a political asset,"* says Xavier Aragall, Head of the Migration Program at IEMed.

"The situation has worsened in recent months. We are concerned. In the past there were more actors supporting refugees than now. The fact that there is no president in the country has started to affect the refugees", remarks Ivo Freijsen, UNHCR representative in Lebanon. Anne Dolan, in charge of the UNHCR office in Tripoli corroborates this: *"I have never seen a situation like the one now."* In addition, *"we have problems when toxic messages come from political representatives regarding Syrian refugees. The pressure on us has increased and this does not help. It has been said that the UN is guilty of genocide, that we occupy settlements in third countries,"* says Freijsen. *"Of the fake news being spread, one of the most serious is that we are holding them here, when it is not true. We defend their right to return to the place where they were born, as long as it is in a safe way, or to the one they want."*

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The Lebanese government has launched a campaign for the return of Syrian refugees, which disregards the recommendations of UNHCR. Moreover, *"surely as happens in many EU countries, immigration and the refugee situation is a political instrument of the party in government, as in Italy, and is instrumentalized to obtain consensus or to create distraction from other problems,"* notes Anna Ferro, Senior Researcher at the Italian institute CESPI (Centro Studi di Politica Internazionale).

The Samir Kassir Foundation, which fights for freedom of the press, has detected an Internet campaign against Syrian refugees, *"used as a scapegoat to avoid talking about corruption or government blockade,"* explains its director Ayman Mhanna and not only is it hate speech against refugees, but also against the institutions that help them. In the informal refugee settlements, *"we provide them with a dignified life until they can return to Syria or are accepted in another country,"* says Dolan, who stresses that *"our priority is that the family unit remains"*. To combat fake news, *"we have decided to have refugees inform refugees. We have identified a hundred of them, influential in the community or religious leaders, to spread the correct information among them"*.

Most Syrian refugees are not in settlements, but scattered throughout Lebanon. In Mount Lebanon there are some 385,000 in the Bekaa Valley, and 200,000 in the north. Some 34% of them live in overcrowded conditions, according to UNHCR. *"Whenever there are clashes between the local population and the refugee population the situation is very worrying. Normally, these conflicts are localized, but in this case, it seems to be a cross cutting conflict in the whole country, higher where there is more density of Syrian population. Therefore, it cannot be tackled as a specific or local phenomenon, but rather as a general, structural phenomenon in the country,"* said Albinyana. The situation is even more complicated in the Palestinian refugee camps, the only official ones in the country, where Syrian refugees have arrived and the Lebanese government has left management in the hands of political factions and Palestinian armed groups.

Most of the refugee calls UNHCR receives from refugees in Lebanon are to ask how to obtain legal residency in the country. About 90% of Syrian refugees do not have legal residency in Lebanon, according to AI, which puts them at risk of arrest, deportation and limits their access to the world of work. The fact that they neither work regularly nor have residency *"does not facilitate their socio-economic inclusion and creates more problems,"* warns Alberto-Horst Neidhardt, Senior Policy Analyst and Head of the European Diversity and Migration program at the European Policy Center. In 2015, the Lebanese government suspended the registration of Syrian refugees, which claimed they were going to proceed with a new registration mechanism, which they never did. Since then, UNHCR has continued to count Syrian refugees who arrived before 2015, which amounted to 805,326 last March. Mohamed Khaled was a driver in Syria, a job he cannot do in Lebanon because of his refugee status, where he arrived in 2014, and does cleaning work at the port. *"The greatest job opportunities in Lebanon are in agriculture,"* he says.

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According to data from Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut, 32% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon were working in agriculture in 2022, higher than the 17% in the previous year. There are an estimated 500,000 to 800,000 seasonal workers in agriculture and construction who would need to be regularized, notes Joseph Bahout, director of the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. All figures are approximate; since the weakness of the State makes it impossible to know them accurately, (its last population census was in 1943). Syrian refugees who can work in Lebanon, thanks to the "sponsorship" of a Lebanese employer - a system introduced by the government in 2014 as one of the ways to renew residency - can only do so in the sectors of agriculture, construction and "environment" (garbage collection and cleaning service).

"Anywhere I wanted to go I would have to pay money, and I don't have any. And I'm afraid to go back to Syria" says Khaled. Another issue that complicates the eventual return of Syrian refugees to their country, in addition to not knowing whether they have a home, is compulsory military service, which, as in their case, they do not do, can result in prison sentences. Since 2016, 83,500 refugees in Lebanon returned to Syria, according to data verified by UNHCR, which notes that it could be a higher figure.

"Refugees are at the limit of not being able to recover after ten years without being able to develop in the role expected of them," Aragall points out. *"There is only one hope for them, which is the 4,000 people a year who can leave for another country that takes them in as refugees, but this is like the lottery."* Member of the European Parliament of the liberal group Renew Europe. FDP- Germany. MEP Jan-Christoph Oetjen urges the European Union (EU) to *"take responsibility for the consequences created by the tension in the country. There are European countries that argue that these people should go back to Syria, but this is not possible, just as it is not possible that they will have a better life in Lebanon. Being with them, one realizes that they have no hope of either returning to Syria or going to Europe,"* he mentions.

Oetjen argues, *"We Europeans have, as an international community, a responsibility to help, not only the Syrian refugees but the country in general."* As for the number of resettlements, he believes that the EU should increase it because *"9,000 people a year from Lebanon for the whole world is nothing. In Germany, it is true that we are taking in more refugees now than in 2015, but 5,000 people will not make a difference. People often say they don't want migrants to arrive, but they wouldn't even realize that there are 2,000 or 10,000 refugees."*

However, restrictive measures should never be in contradiction with EU values or principles. The refugee situation did not fully enter the EU's political agenda until 2021, notes Martin Lassen, head of the EU delegation in Lebanon, and it was in the wake of the 2021 economic crisis being triggered, a situation that is now complicated by the war in Ukraine. In 2022, 13 countries hosted 9,656 refugees, a 17% increase from 2021. Requests for Syrian refugee resettlement in Lebanon represent 40% of the total for the Middle East and North Africa.

LEBANON: FROM A HOST COUNTRY TO A DIASPORA NATION

Faced with the permanent risk of deportation, many Syrians decided to leave Lebanon by sea towards Europe: between 2021 and 2022, the number of departures almost tripled, from 1,570 to 4,629. Nevertheless, while the focus is on the attempts of Syrians undertaking these dangerous journeys, the number of Lebanese citizens who try irregular immigration by sea is only growing. As was revealed in the study "**Conflict, Crisis and Immigration. Irregular maritime migration from Lebanon since 2019**", by Jasmin Lilian Diab, Director of the Institute for Migration Studies at the Lebanese American University, and Ibrahim Jouhari, Researcher at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, American University of Beirut, published in collaboration with FNF Madrid office and launched during the Migration visiting program.

"The data show a significant increase in the number of Lebanese migrants both in absolute numbers and as a proportion of all migrants departing from Lebanese shores. In previous years, most of the migrants were Syrians and a limited number of Palestinians. But after Lebanon's economic crisis that started in 2019, the number and percentage of Lebanese migrants leaving the country increased," the analysis notes. According to UNHCR, in 2022, 62% of irregular migrants leaving Lebanon were Syrians, 11% Palestinians and 28% Lebanese. In 2021, Lebanese migrants were 11% and in 2020 18%.

Most attempts fail, as the Lebanese Armed Forces intercept them before they leave by sea, or just as they leave the coast. *"Every time we intercept a boat we cannot believe the amount of people that fit, up to 40 people in 8-meter boats,"* explains Colonel Haytham Dinnawi of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in a meeting at the Military Naval Base. On land, *"we confiscate boats when we have suspicions that something illegal is being done,"* he states.

The survey data, corroborated by the European Border and Coast Guard Agency (Frontex), reveal that since 2020 migrants are trying to reach further, specifically Italy. The main reason is that in 2020 Cyprus and Lebanon signed a migration agreement allowing Cyprus to return to Lebanon all migrants trying to reach its shores. Migrants also avoid going to Greece because, according to Legal Agenda, *"those who are intercepted are taken to precarious camps for 14 days and then returned to Beirut."* Instead, Italy provides suitable camps and then allows them to move to other European countries. Many migrants interviewed indicated that their final destination was Germany.

For more than a century, due to its weak governments, socio-economic instability and years of foreign interventions and occupations, Lebanon has not only pushed its citizens to seek a better future abroad, but has relied heavily on their remittances. In the post-war period, the diaspora was the primary source of income for the country's economy, just as it is today, the study points out.

CONCLUSIONS

Most Lebanese migrants are men, especially to the Persian Gulf area. While towards the West, most migrants are families. According to Moawad, between \$7 billion and \$8 billion entered the country each year from the diaspora, which plays a key role in the economy along with tourism, which brings in between \$5 billion and \$6 billion, 90% from diaspora families. Since the collapse of the banking system, the amount of money currently coming into the country from the diaspora cannot be quantified, as it no longer goes through financial channels, but is converted into cash or by other methods, Bahout points out.

While the situation in Syria is stagnant, as *"no other regime than that of the dictator is in sight,"* it would be a matter of *"improving the conditions of the Lebanese population, which in turn would most likely improve the inherent tension between the Lebanese and the refugee population,"* says Alibinyana. To do so, the country would have to set a series of reforms in motion. *"The economic measures to resolve this very complex picture are already identified, but there doesn't seem to be any will to push them forward,"* he argues. *"The fiscal system needs to be reformed so that the state has resources with which to make public policies, which is not the case at present, as for example, public health has a ridiculous budget. The entire informal economy does not contribute to sustaining the public coffers, so if the tax system is reformed, the State will have more resources to make more spending policies, which in turn help the most disadvantaged population".*

However, *"it is impossible to promote these structural reforms without the institutions working. In addition, now there is a power vacuum in the presidency of the country, the presidency of the government and the Central Bank, which have not been appointed. That is to say, we should start by appointing those responsible. As the starting system for the election of these leaders is a sectarian and patronage system, it is very easy to block it, because there has to be a consensus that they do not want to reach now".* Moawad throws out a question, *"How can you reform a state that does not exist?"*

Former MP Mustapha Allouch predicts, *"In five to 10 years there will be a new revolution, because there has been no place that has not had one unless the economy works."*

As for the return of refugees to Syria, *"the question, which is very difficult to resolve, is what can encourage Bashar al-Assad to open the doors and receive his refugees,"* Aragall points out. *"At the international level you could also link international reconstruction aid to the refugee issue, but it is very complicated. There would be no Western countries giving development aid to Syria. You saw with the earthquake (of February 2023), how international aid had to come indirectly."* In his opinion, the solution lies *"in regional geopolitics. The powers are redrawing their role. Saudi Arabia is running out of oil, has to position itself in the world, and is starting to engage in a diplomacy that breaks the mould. China, a bridge of dialogue between Iran and Saudi Arabia, is interesting to see how it can change things".*

CONCLUSIONS

Given the security situation in Syria, the most durable solution is the resettlement of Syrian refugees in a third country. In the meantime, to improve the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon *"it is necessary to think in the medium and long term, not in temporary and emergency solutions as is being talked about. We should talk about residence permits, access to education and work,"* says Neidhardt.

Moawad believes that the first thing to do is to know the real number of refugees and classify them into categories, since they are not all strictly refugees, there is an important component of economic emigration and it is estimated that about 30% are people entering and leaving the country. Then he considers necessary the construction of refugee camps organized by UNHCR following the model of Jordan or Turkey, and not that they reside informally throughout Lebanon.

Under the premise that *"solutions will have to come from within the refugee community,"* German Meike Ziervogel created the Alsama project in the Shatila refugee camp for Syrians and Palestinians in Beirut, which was set up in 1949 and is currently home to 40,000 people in one square kilometer. *"I don't have the solutions, but the results of what we are doing will be seen for generations to come and will contribute to improving their lives,"* she says. The project offers education through high school, provides empowerment work by preventing children from falling into crime, getting married or becoming underage mothers - 41% of Syrian refugee girls are married before they turn 18 - and uses cricket as a means to build their strength both physically and mentally. The institute, which opened in 2020, has 200 students "and we have a waiting list of 900," Ziervogel tells us with some of them, projecting a glimmer of hope. The project had started 11 months earlier as a small empowerment center for a dozen girls, who barely knew how to read and write. Now they learn Arabic, English and Mathematics, as well as empowerment classes. Ziervogel is studying how to get these students into college. *"I will put her in touch with someone who can help her in this matter from Germany,"* says MEP Oetjen, moved after hearing the children speak perfect English and convinced that *"changing a society happens through education."*

*Being aware of the multiple challenges posed by migration management in the Mediterranean region, the Mediterranean Dialogue project of the FNF project office in Madrid launched the Migration Policy Group in 2020. This initiative aims to bring together liberal policymakers and experts in order to harmonize proposals and political action addressing migration issues. FNF Madrid has developed a wide array of activities in order to strengthen the Migration Policy Group as well as to stimulate the exchange of ongoing and upcoming initiatives between the EU and its Mediterranean neighbors.



