



# Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Winter Needs, Lack of Access to COVID-19 Assistance and Pressure to Return

Policy Brief February 2021<sup>1</sup>

**T**he situation in Lebanon has been steadily deteriorating, and is projected to get much worse. The financial crisis and COVID-19 lockdowns have crippled the economy, with inflation of the local currency leading to an ever-increasing price of goods and services for many. More than half of the Lebanese population has fallen below the poverty line in the last few months, and the Minister of Social Affairs has stated that 70% of the Lebanese population will soon be in need of aid. Tensions between disenfranchised communities and the Lebanese government are growing by the day due to the recent extension of the full lockdown imposed by the government, which has been extended until at least February 8. While the Lebanese population continues to suffer from the political neglect of its ruling class, Syrian refugees in Lebanon – a community that was already in a precarious situation before the economic crisis – are now more vulnerable than ever, facing increasing threats to their basic needs, as well as personal safety.

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As such, this briefing<sup>2</sup> outlines the main research findings and key protection and rights concerns that the RPW coalition has noted with regard to the enormous impact of the ongoing economic and COVID-19 crises in Lebanon. It documents the lack of access of Syrian refugees to COVID-19-related assistance, and an increased pressure on them to return home at a time when conditions for a safe, voluntary and dignified return are clearly not in place. It concludes with a number of recommendations for Lebanese and international policymakers, donors and NGOs.

To do so, this policy brief uses information observed and gathered through a digital conversation with 428 Syrian (n=264) and Lebanese (n=159) respondents residing in Lebanon, between 15 December 2020 and 15 January 2021.

## 1. Impact of the ongoing economic and COVID-19 crises

When comparing this most recent online conversation with previous conversations held in March and July/August 2020, it becomes clear that the situation for both Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees (including Palestinian Refugees from Syria) has greatly deteriorated, mainly due to the economic crisis that Lebanon is going through. **Lebanon is stuck in a vicious cycle of devaluation** of its local currency, which means that the prices of goods and services in Lebanese Pounds (LBP) are constantly increasing.<sup>3</sup> As a result of this inflation, compounded by COVID-19

lockdown measures, hundreds of thousands of jobs have been lost and approximately 50% of employees saw their salaries reduced.<sup>4</sup> In August 2020, ESCWA reported that 55% of Lebanon's population are now living in poverty, and 28% in extreme poverty.<sup>5</sup> The 2020 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, published by the United Nations in December 2020, even stated that **nine out of ten Syrian refugee families in Lebanon are now living in extreme poverty.**<sup>6</sup> This means that individuals who had already been in precarious situations in both refugee and host communities now find themselves unable to meet their basic needs.

Against this backdrop, our latest conversation held with Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees (including Palestinian Refugees from Syria) between 15 December 2020 and 15 January 2021, shows the **enormous impact of the ongoing economic and COVID-19 crises:**

- **Lack of income:** For 83.8% of the Lebanese community and 77% of the Syrian community, their income does not cover the cost of living. It is striking to see that, compared to the last RPW conversation, more Lebanese respondents reported that their income does not cover their cost of living (which is an expected outcome of the ongoing crisis in Lebanon), whereas the number among Syrian respondents largely remained at the same high level.<sup>7</sup> **This lack of income results in a dire need for support of the following necessities:** the need to cover home rents (76% of Lebanese host communities, 85.2% of Syrian respondents), followed by food (67.8% in general) and healthcare/medicine (44.9% of Lebanese respondents versus 36.5% of Syrians).
  - Almost two-thirds of Lebanese respondents (58.5%) reported having to borrow money in order to buy food. This percentage is even higher among Syrian refugees (67.5%). Moreover, 54.3% of all respondents reported having to rely on lower-quality food, while 48.3% of Syrian respondents have also had to reduce their number of meals, in comparison to 28.9% of Lebanese respondents.
  - Furthermore, it should be noted that with the winter season in full swing, **almost none of RPW's respondents (only 4.6%) reported being able to purchase winter essentials** (i.e. fuel and winter clothing). Also of grave concern is that 66.5% of respondents reported being unable to find suitable accommodation for winter.
  - **Lack of jobs:** almost a third of respondents (28.8% of Lebanese respondents and 29.8% of Syrian respondents) cannot find available jobs in their area.
- **Lack of work permits:** 43.8% of Syrian respondents still face issues with obtaining a work permit, which are issued haphazardly by the Lebanese General Security, and with no clear guidelines on how to obtain any kind of permit (work or non-work residency permit).
  - **Impact on housing rents:** despite Lebanese law, which prohibits anyone from refusing payment for a product, property or service in Lebanese pounds<sup>8</sup>, it is not unusual for rental agreements in Lebanon to be priced in dollars. Before the economic crisis, tenants could pay their rent in dollars or in Lira's at the pegged exchange rate of 1,500 LBP to the dollar.<sup>9</sup> However, the crisis complicated tenancy agreements significantly, as both landlords and tenants struggle to set rental values that are fair and sustainable.
  - Over one-fifth of RPW respondents (22.5%) reported that they had to pay their house rent in US dollars. More than 40% of the Lebanese respondents (43.4%) had to make other payments in USD as well. This is a major economic hurdle for both Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, as it is almost impossible to access hard currencies in US dollars, unless funds are being transferred directly to individuals from abroad. Even when landlords still accept payment in Lebanese Liras, many have had to raise the cost of rent as their expenses for generators and building maintenance have also risen. As such, a growing number of renters are finding themselves unable to afford the cost of shelter.

## 2. Lack of access to COVID-19 treatment, testing and vaccines

Against the background of ongoing discriminatory practices against Syrian refugees in the distribution of COVID-19 assistance<sup>10</sup>, **88.2% of all respondents reported not having access to proper COVID-19 treatment or healthcare** should they contract the virus. The most frequently cited reason for this is not having money for treatment (76.8% of respondents). A small group reported that there are no hospitals to go to for treatment (2.7%), and 2.2% reported discrimination as a reason for not having access to medical treatment.

Moreover, 70.9% of respondents reported not having **access to a PCR testing site**, this access is slightly lower among Syrian refugees (73.2%) than among Lebanese communities (67.7%). It is worth noting that at the moment of writing, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) has reported that all hospitals in Beirut and Mount Lebanon (the most populous areas in Lebanon) are not accepting new patients be-

cause they have reached peak capacity of hospital beds (including in Intensive Care Units).

On 17 January 2021, Lebanese government officials also announced that a bilateral deal with Pfizer-BioNTech to secure 2.1 million doses of its **COVID-19 vaccine** had been finalised, while on 15 January Lebanese President Aoun stated that Lebanon had reserved 2.73 million vaccine doses under the global COVAX Facility. Furthermore, on 27 January Lebanon's Health Minister stated that Lebanon is also negotiating the purchase of another 1.5 million doses of the Oxford-AstraZeneca vaccine. **While the Lebanese government has so far promised that these vaccines will be distributed on an equal basis, regardless of nationality, some Lebanese officials and politicians have called for excluding Syrian refugees from the vaccine rollout.**<sup>11</sup> The MoPH has stated that the vaccine will be distributed to everyone on an equal basis, but the most recent registration form put forward by the MoPH for the WHO-sponsored COVAX vaccination programme in Lebanon, for example, requires that any Syrian who wishes to register for the vaccine should have a form of valid documentation, for example a residency permit or passport<sup>12</sup> It remains to be seen what kind of priority refugees will be given within the COVAX campaign, and how accessible it will be in terms of location, as most Syrian refugees live in and around more sub-urban and rural areas. In addition, it is still unclear to what extent the MoPH plans for vaccination will include undocumented refugees, asylum seekers, and migrant workers.

### 3. Pressure to return

The challenges outlined above, coupled with the continued antagonism against Syrian refugees by Lebanese political actors and parts of the public opinion, have further exacerbated the “**push factors**” that Syrian refugees in Lebanon are faced with.

Indeed, in the most recent online RPW conversation with Syrian respondents, **74.4% of Syrian respondents reported feeling increased pressure to return to Syria.** In addition to the economic and living conditions contributing to these feelings, Syrians have also experienced a rise in hostility from the local host communities, and an inadequate government response. For example, Syrian residents of the Northern town of Bcharre experienced a disturbing act of collective retaliation after a Syrian man allegedly killed a Lebanese local from the town. Lebanese civilians attacked Syrian neighbors, damaging their properties and, in some cases, becoming physically violent. Rather than condemning the attack, the Mayor of Bcharre then called on all “illegal Syrians” to leave the town, or to stay and face the consequences. Syrian homes were searched arbitrarily and in violation of due process.<sup>13</sup>

Another attack by Lebanese locals against Syrian refugees took place only one month later, following a dispute between Lebanese employers and Syrian workers from the Minieh refugee camp in North Lebanon. This resulted in a confrontation between Syrians from the camp and Lebanese civilians, and the camp was set on fire, destroying all the tents and possessions of Syrian residents. However, the response to this attack has been markedly different, with many Lebanese neighbors opening their homes to the displaced, and Lebanese authorities condemning the attack. Both events led to the displacement of hundreds of Syrian refugees and increased feelings of insecurity.<sup>14</sup>

This increased pressure on Syrian refugees in Lebanon to return takes place against the backdrop of efforts by the Syrian government, the Russian Federation and the Government of Lebanon (GoL) to start organising large-scale returns – including the recent organisation of a “return conference” in Damascus in November 2020 and the development of a “return plan” by the GoL. However, **as documented in recent reports by RPW, the UN Commission of Inquiry and other actors, conditions are currently not in place for Syrian refugees to make return decisions on an informed and truly voluntary basis:** a sharp increase in “push factors” in host countries such as Lebanon, negative pull factors inside Syria, and most notably the lack of objective and reliable information about the conditions for safe and dignified return to Syria, undermine the voluntary character of the vast majority of returns.

# Recommendations

## Funding mechanisms

1. Donors should rapidly ensure full funding of relevant humanitarian response plans, including the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) and Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP).
2. Donors should ensure sufficient additional funding in response to COVID-19 and urgently commit resources to support emergency response plans for COVID-19 testing and treatment, food assistance, hygiene promotion, healthcare, rent support and emergency cash and/or in-kind assistance, as well as awareness-raising activities.
3. EU Member States should pledge a new financial contribution to the EU Regional Trust Fund in response to the Syrian crisis (Madad Fund), before the final meeting of the Fund's Operational Board in March 2021. They should also urgently identify the specific modalities on how work funded by the Trust Fund will continue after the expiration of the Trust Fund's mandate at the end of 2021.
4. Donors should accelerate and concretize aid localization efforts and commitments, by providing long term and flexible funding to local Civil Society Organisations (CSOs), including through the EU's Madad Fund.

## Access to healthcare, food and livelihoods

5. The Government of Lebanon, international agencies, donors and INGOs should ensure that access to PCR tests and COVID-19 vaccines includes Lebanese and non-Lebanese on an equal basis; and should ensure that the vaccine rollout also includes rural and semi-rural areas. COVAX, WHO, COVAX partners and other actors funding and coordinating vaccine rollout should ensure that a residency number is not required to access a vaccine, as many Syrians and others in Lebanon do not have legal residency.
6. UNHCR, UNRWA and other international agencies or INGOs that receive government funding to support refugee health programs must ensure that refugees are made aware of their COVID-19 treatment options; and could also provide transport to public hospitals for those who do not live near public hospitals.
7. Donors should rapidly develop and implement direct income support for all vulnerable Lebanese and non-Lebanese communities, in the form of expanded cash assistance. Donors and agencies implementing cash distribution interventions should ensure that the value of cash packages are not compromised due to the devaluation of the local currency and bank closures, for instance by paying beneficiaries in cash or providing in-kind support, and by ensuring that banks allow aid organisations to withdraw aid money at its real value rather than at the old exchange rate.
8. The Government of Lebanon should ensure needs-based humanitarian responses throughout all communities residing in Lebanon, and ensure that access to services (particularly health services) is provided in a non-discriminatory manner.
9. Donors and the Government of Lebanon should rapidly provide funding and support to farming systems through in-kind distributions and technical support. In the short term, farmers should have improved access to ecologically sustainable seeds and other agricultural inputs, and Cash for Work interventions. In the longer term, the focus should be on reducing dependency on imported inputs and increasing crop value by promoting new sustainable agricultural techniques, developing the local production of agricultural inputs and boosting local farmers' sales, as described in the agroecological principles of the FAO.

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# Upholding Refugee Rights

10. The Government of Lebanon should provide full clarity and transparency about the modalities of the so-called “return plan” issued by the Ministry of Social Affairs, and ensure that any such plan is based on humanitarian standards and takes into account the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return outlined in UNHCR’s “Protection Thresholds”. The Government of Lebanon should halt any further steps towards implementation of the plan before a clear dialogue with relevant stakeholders – including with UNHCR, humanitarian INGOs and local CSOs – is conducted.
11. The Government of Lebanon should commit to a moratorium on summary deportations of Syrian refugees. In the event of any deportations, they should ensure full, independent judicial oversight of deportation decisions and proceedings.

For a fuller list of policy recommendations related to the protection of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, please see the full Refugee Protection Watch report, published in October 2020.<sup>15</sup>

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**REFUGEE  
PROTECTION  
WATCH**

The Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) Coalition is an initiative between Basmeh and Zeitooneh, ALEF Act for Human Rights, PAX, 11.11.11 and Upinion.



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## Endnotes

- 1 The Refugee Protection Watch (RPW) Coalition – an initiative between Basmeh and Zeitooneh, ALEF Act for Human Rights, PAX, 11.11.11, and Upinion – was formed in 2019. The coalition undertakes research and advocacy on protection issues facing Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the conditions for safe, voluntary and dignified return inside Syria.
- 2 This briefing is a follow-up on two earlier briefings published by RPW in April and August 2020.
- 3 Due to the current black market rate of around 9.000LBP to every \$1 (where the official dollar rate is still pegged at 1,500 LBP for every \$1).
- 4 See <https://www.lecommercedulevant.com/article/29752-more-unemployment-and-instability-ahead>.
- 5 See [https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00268\\_pb15\\_beirut-explosion-rising-poverty-en.pdf](https://www.unescwa.org/sites/www.unescwa.org/files/20-00268_pb15_beirut-explosion-rising-poverty-en.pdf).
- 6 See <https://www.wfp.org/news/nine-out-ten-syrian-refugee-families-lebanon-are-now-living-extreme-poverty-un-study-says>.
- 7 See in this regard also a December 2020 World Bank report, which found that since the outbreak of the COVID-19 crisis poverty has increased 56% and 33% among Syrian refugees in Lebanon and Lebanese host communities, respectively: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/mena/publication/compounding-misfortunes-changes-in-poverty-since-the-onset-of-covid-19-on-syrian-refugees>.
- 8 Article 192 of the Currency and Credit law: [http://www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/LawView.aspx?opt=view&LawID=244905#Section\\_266682](http://www.legallaw.ul.edu.lb/LawView.aspx?opt=view&LawID=244905#Section_266682).
- 9 See <https://english.alarabiya.net/business/economy/2020/07/06/Lebanon-central-bank-sets-new-exchange-rate-for-essential-food-industries>.
- 10 See <https://www.achrights.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/COVID-19-Report-Translated-edited.pdf> and <https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/04/02/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>.
- 11 See <https://www.hrw.org/news/2021/01/28/lebanon-gaps-remain-vaccine-program-planning#>
- 12 See <https://covax.moph.gov.lb/impactmobile/vaccine>.
- 13 See <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1242727/driven-out-of-bsharri-syrians-seek-refuge-on-the-streets-of-tripoli.html>
- 14 See <https://syacd.org/treatment-of-syrian-refugees-is-lebanons-most-serious-human-rights-failure/> and <https://www.infomigrants.net/en/post/29329/eight-people-arrested-after-fire-at-lebanon-refugee-camp#:~:text=An%20arson%20attack%20at%20a%20refugee%20camp%20in%20Lebanon%20reportedly,by%20the%20Lebanese%20armed%20forces>.
- 15 See <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/trapped-between-lebanon-and-syria-absence-durable-solutions-syria-s-refugees>.