

Lebanon Brief – Forced Evictions

This brief has been produced by the Persons Affected by the Syrian Crisis Network (PASC) ahead of the Brussels IV Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region. PASC is a network of 27 local Non-Governmental Organizations supporting vulnerable Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians. It aims to amplify the capacity and influence of its members, increasing their ability to monitor, advocate, and discuss research findings on key national and international trends and issues pertaining to human rights and protection in Lebanon. As part of its mandate to advocate for a future anchored in human rights, this brief is part of a series of briefs designed to shed a light on the most important and pressing issues pertaining to child protection, forced evictions, the right to work, and deportations.

These briefs have been prepared using a questionnaire that PASC conducted from 12 February to 4 March 2020. The PASC questionnaire consisted of 82 questions that collected data at the individual level and the community level. Questions included those on demographics and the four themes studied: child protection, the right to work, forced evictions, and deportations. The questionnaires differed from one another dependent on the interviewee's nationality. In total, PASC was able to conduct 409 interviews (99 Lebanese, 205 Syrians, and 105 Palestinians (from Lebanon and Syria)) during this data collection exercise. The main challenge faced by PASC was the COVID-19 pandemic that abruptly ended field visits. This obviously means that the questionnaire did not take into account the impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable communities, however, it can be said with confidence that the concerning trends identified on these four topics in March 2020 have deteriorated sharply since the advent of COVID-19.

Progress Since Brussels III

The international community has a shared responsibility to support host states neighboring Syria that have been disproportionately impacted by the presence of large numbers of refugees. Short to long-term stability and cohesiveness in Lebanon within this context requires a thorough consideration of the repercussions of measures, including forced evictions, that heighten tensions among communities in the country. These tensions stem from the failure to address Lebanon's socioeconomic challenges even before the refugee crisis and are only exacerbated by refugee presence. The attainment of sustainable solutions, therefore, depends on the inclusivity and comprehensiveness of forthcoming socioeconomic policies.

Forced evictions are a root cause of need and must be ended to ensure a protective environment. The protection implications, especially on women and children who experienced evictions, are particularly worrying. According to studies by UN-Habitat, following an eviction, women are often more vulnerable to abuse, particularly if they become homeless or forced to move to inadequate housing. The lack of shelter and privacy can lead to increased exposure to sexual and other forms of violence. Children are also more likely to experience trauma and require psycho-social support as a result of forced evictions. Even as the number of forced evictions decreased in 2019, based on PASC's data collection, 80% of Lebanese, 70% of Palestinians, and 73% of Syrians share the belief that incidents of eviction will increase in the upcoming months,¹ which will render them almost twice as likely to resort to adopting emergency coping strategies such as involving school children in income generating activities: begging, accepting high-risk jobs, and in the cases of Lebanese families, selling their house or land. The latter will invariably lead to a shelter crisis

¹ PASC Survey Results (February to March 2020).

for low income Lebanese families, exacerbating tensions between vulnerable communities competing for shelter.

Main Causes of Forced Evictions

Reasons behind forced evictions are the accumulation and/or late payment of house or camp rental fees; higher cost of essential services and goods in light of COVID-19 and the economic crisis in Lebanon; and/or the suspension of UNHCR's assistance to refugees on the basis of unclear criteria for receiving assistance.² Moreover, there are security reasons behind forced evictions, such as the eviction of refugees from lands abridging property owned by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), for example the collective eviction of refugees next to the Riyak air base in 2017.³ Lastly, some evictions take place under the auspices of clearing pollution, such as the 2019 collective eviction of refugees from their camp by the Litani River Authority because it was increasing pollution into the river.⁴ While cases of forced evictions are increasing, a significant amount of vulnerable families that have not otherwise been evicted – yet – are at serious risk of being evicted soon due to the crisis, and therefore the level of vulnerability is increasing.⁵ Another leading cause prompting forced evictions includes social hostility and host community tension, including arbitrary evictions resulting from conflicts.⁶

The main reason for evictions, which is a result of the socio-economic and financial crises, is that refugees, and generally persons living in poverty, are unable to meet rental payments. In some cases, landowners want to reuse their properties for personal or business purposes. In addition, refugees' livelihoods, including work, have decreased due to the economic crisis and enforcement of the limiting labor law, which was reactivated in summer 2019. With the impossibility to pay rent, and sometimes, the need to pay rent in US Dollars at the request of landlords, thousands of refugees, as well as Lebanese, are having more and more difficulties to honor such payments.

COVID-19

Currently, the COVID-19 pandemic has put vulnerable communities at heightened risk of eviction. Due to the pandemic, the lack of access to information and the spread of fear within vulnerable communities, scapegoating refugees, or taking measures to cast away refugees have increased. Certain municipalities in the country have tried to evict thousands of refugees living within their areas. The case of the Ghazze village in the Bekaa is the perfect example. Following an incident between Syrian workers and the mayor, who refused visits from the workers' families due to the curfew and social distancing measures, local authorities were about to evict the 25,000 Syrian refugees from the area. Thanks to the intervention of local organizations and the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs this did not come to fruition.

² Field Interviews with Refugees that were conducted by SAWA for Development and Aid in May 2020.

³ News Deeply: "Nowhere left to run", <https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2017/09/28/nowhere-left-to-run-refugee-evictions-in-lebanon-in-shadow-of-return>

⁴ The Daily Star: "Litani Authority evicts 300 Syrian refugees in South", <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2019/Apr-02/480210-litani-authority-evicts-300-syrian-refugees-in-south.ashx>

⁵ SAWA for Development and Aid's questionnaires with refugees subject to forced evictions and PASC Working Group's Survey Results.

⁶ International Crisis Group: "Easing refugees plight in Lebanon", <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/lebanon/211-easing-syrian-refugees-plight-lebanon>

Forced Evictions and Returns

As Human Rights Watch asserts, the principle of non-refoulement does not only concern direct forced returns, but also situations where refugees voluntarily return since they feel that they've been left with no other choice.⁷ Intentions toward returning to Syria are expected to increase after facing forced evictions or being under continuous threat of forcible eviction. Further, the repercussions of COVID-19 and the financial and economic crisis in Lebanon are also influencing refugees' position with respect to their return to Syria even if the Lebanese economic crisis is having an impact on the Syrian economy itself. Under all these conditions together, preliminary analysis reveals that Syrian refugees are left with no option but to return to Syria, even if that entails life-threatening endeavors and no safety guarantees. Although this situation should be closely monitored as the deteriorating economic crisis in Syria has made, according to local organizations, many refugees hesitant to return.

Access to Assistance

Based on the PASC survey, 60% of Lebanese, 84% of Palestinians, and 71% of Syrian respondents have no contingency plan in case they are evicted from their house due to financial limitations or because they do not think any plan would help. These individuals also have no one to contact in case of eviction, which leaves them all alone, without any legal advice or technical assistance in case it happens. This situation shows an evident lack of visibility and no efficient support such as hotlines, legal counseling, and support platforms to connect the people in need with the people that could provide help. The few who know whom to contact will usually contact humanitarian organizations.

Recommendations

To Civil Society

- Civil society should support the creation and improvement of informal governance frameworks in camps by establishing representative, gender-inclusive, sub-committees to develop plans that reflects needs on the one hand, and response plans in the event of evictions on the other.
- Civil society should improve existing structures and enhance coordination such as the Evictions Task Force and Protection Working Group, especially in terms of monitoring forced evictions.
- Civil society should begin establishing a working group responsible for eviction response plans that link camp committees and local and international organizations on the one hand, and UNHCR and the Ministry of Social Affairs on the other.
- Civil society should establish a long-term programming and advocacy link with municipalities. This link seeks to negotiate and coordinate with municipalities in cases of eviction.
- Civil society should include residents, mainly of community leaders, in the negotiations toward finding solutions to potential social problems and tensions between host and refugee communities.
- Civil society should advocate for legislation against evictions in the winter months and evictions that have a particularly devastating impact on vulnerable groups (elderly and young).

To the Government of Lebanon

- The GoL must ensure that the law is followed in every eviction and due process is respected.

⁷ Human Rights Watch, September 20th, 2018, "*Lebanon: Refugees in Border Zone at Risk*", retrieved from: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/09/20/lebanon-refugees-border-zone-risk> (accessed March 21st, 2018)

- The GoL should support inter-community dialogue to diffuse conflict/disputes that have the potential to lead to forced evictions.

To UNHCR and UNDP

- UNHCR and UNDP should increase monitoring to ensure that forced evictions are not used as an instrument to increase pressure to return.
- UNHCR and UNDP should increase their coordination and information sharing with local and international organizations to ensure more effectiveness in programming.
- UNHCR should clarify the criteria of selection regarding service provision and cash assistance to support refugees facing eviction.
- Civil society and UNHCR and UNDP should scale-up existing mechanisms and improve their hotline support through the engagement of legal actors to provide advice on the legality of evictions, and rights of tenants, migrants, and refugees, including to facilitate the reporting of any abuses related to evictions.

To Donors

- Donors must condition aid on the LAF's and Municipalities' engagement in legal evictions to prohibit unlawful eviction.



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