

PASC WG Brief - Forced Evictions and Rising Social Tensions

This brief has been produced by the Persons Affected by the Syrian Crisis Working Group (PASC WG) ahead of the Brussels V Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region. The PASC WG is a network of 26 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, the PASC WG has been advocating and researching on a series of issues to shed a light on the most important and pressing protection challenges pertaining to child protection, forced evictions, the right to work, and deportations.

This year, due to the economic depression and change of country circumstances, the PASC WG expanded its research focus to include information on attempts at migration, restrictions on freedom of movement, the rise in social tensions, and sexual and gender-based violence. As such, the PASC WG's briefs for the Brussels V Conference are set out as follows: (1) Evictions and Social Tensions; (2) Documentation and Deportations; (3) Child Protection and SGBV; and (4) Migration and Freedom of Movement.

Current Context

Since the end of 2019, the Lebanese Lira experienced a 90% depreciation and is continuing in this downward trend, while the cost of consumer products has inflated at alarming rates.¹ Meanwhile, an estimated 25% of private sector jobs were lost and nearly 50% of salaries were reduced.² Half of the population of Lebanon is currently living in poverty and a quarter in extreme poverty, while the Ministry of Social Affairs has projected that 70% of the population will be in need of aid in the near future.³

Against this background, the already deplorable situation of refugees has worsened in several ways. In addition to the frightening statistics – 89% of Syrian refugees living in extreme poverty in 2020, as opposed to 55% in 2019 – refugees have also reported feeling increased pressure to return from both the government and host community.⁴ Much of this pressure is related to competition for jobs, in addition to the generally difficult economic and political situation in Lebanon.⁵

Rising Social Tensions

Refugees have been residing and living in Lebanon for over 7 decades now, and the influx of Syrian refugees began a decade ago with the start of the Syrian conflict, but the relationships between the

¹ Byblos Bank: "Lebanon this week 667", <https://www.byblosbank.com/common/economic-research-new/lebanon-this-week/lebanon-this-week-667/increase-in-food-prices-in-lebanon-is-highest-in-mena-region>.

² Financial Times: "Currency crisis leaves Lebanese cupboards bare", <https://www.ft.com/content/69e1e040-d8d7-494e-9a90-6f02f68f0bf7>.

³ Reliefweb: "VASyR Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (2020)", <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>.

⁴ Refugee Protection Watch: "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: winter needs, lack of access to COVID-19 assistance and pressure to return", <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2021-02/RPW%20Policy%20Brief%20February%202021.pdf>.

⁵ Reliefweb: "VASyR Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (2020)", <https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/VASyR%202020.pdf>.

government, refugees and host communities have rarely been symbiotic. Tensions have ebbed and flowed over the course of Lebanon's history, depending on the context in the country. With the decline of the Lebanese economy over the past few years, tensions towards Syrian refugees, which were already high, have risen even more, increasing their vulnerability and need for protection.

Over the course of 2020, incidences of discrimination or aggression against Syrian refugees rose, including attempts by politicians to scapegoat refugees for the spread of COVID-19, discriminatory application of the rule of law, including heavier fines and penalties faced by refugees for violating curfew restrictions, and increased inter-community aggression between refugees and host communities. A significant example is an incident that took place in April 2020, in the village of Ghazze, Bekaa, inhabited by 5,000 Lebanese and 25,000 Syrians (mostly refugees but also some workers with the required paperwork). A village official was attacked by Syrians living in one of Ghazze's informal camps after he prohibited the entry of relatives coming to visit one of the camp's residents, following the implementation of strict coronavirus measures in the region.⁶ This led the official to call for an evacuation of the 25,000 Syrians from the area, although, this decision was ultimately not applied, avoiding the dire consequences of forced evictions and collective punishment.

Situations like these are on the rise, often fueled by resentments caused by discriminatory policies and the ill-treatment of refugees. There have been widespread reports of municipalities applying restrictions discriminatorily based on nationality.⁷ Refugee camps were also portrayed as being hotbeds for the COVID-19 pandemic even before any refugees had been exposed to the virus, and later suffered exposure to a discriminatory campaign fueled by Lebanese politicians that called for Lebanese to be vaccinated before refugees.⁸

Forced Evictions

In light of the country context, it is unsurprising to find that there was a rise in evictions and threats of evictions of Syrian refugees,⁹ largely due to unpaid rent arrears. It is not unusual for rental contracts in Lebanon to be set in USD, though landlords are legally obligated to accept payment in Lebanese Pound. However, it was reported that some landlords attempted to continue demanding rents in USD or at the black-market rate, making the cost insurmountable for vulnerable families.¹⁰ Even those landlords who tried to be accommodating, in some cases allowing up to 14 months of unpaid rent, eventually had to issue evictions to defaulting tenants.¹¹

⁶ L'Orient-Le Jour: "Tension entre les habitants d'un village de la Bekaa et un campement syrien", <https://www.lorientlejour.com/article/1214668/tension-entre-les-habitants-dun-village-de-la-bekaa-et-un-campement-syrien.html>.

⁷ ALEF – Act for Human Rights: "Last Line of Hope report", December 2020.

⁸ Beirut Today: "FPM activists don't want to vaccinate Syrian refugees in Lebanon", <https://beirut-today.com/2021/01/20/fpm-activists-dont-want-to-vaccinate-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon/>.

⁹ Syria Direct: "The Beirut blast lays bare a shockwave of evictions hitting Syrians in Lebanon", <https://syriadirect.org/the-beirut-blast-lays-bare-a-shockwave-of-evictions-hitting-syrians-in-lebanon/#:~:text=The%20Beirut%20blast%20is%20laying,households%20in%20Lebanon%20this%20year.&text=Th is%20marks%20a%20drastic%20increase,collective%20evictions%2C%20per%20UN%20figures>.

¹⁰ Refugee Protection Watch: "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: winter needs, lack of access to COVID-19 assistance and pressure to return", <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2021-02/RPW%20Policy%20Brief%20February%202021.pdf>.

¹¹ Eviction Trends Update from LPC-IRC.

Forced evictions also took place on government land, where it was determined that the informal settlements were illegal or where it was decided that the land would be used for other purposes. SAWA for Development noted that roughly 40 tents near the Litani River had to be moved further away from the river due to them being on government land. They further stated that they have seen a rise in needs for cash assistance directed to shelter as Syrian refugees are increasingly unable to afford rents, even in those cases of persons living in tents and paying rent for the plot of land.¹²

In addition to individual evictions, several incidents of collective punishment took place. There were a few cases involving aggression from Lebanese civilians that forced the eviction of hundreds of Syrians from their homes. In November 2020, a Syrian man allegedly murdered a Lebanese local after a dispute between the two, in the town of Bcharre. This crime drew outrage from some of the locals of the town and resulted in a collective retaliation against Syrian residents, who faced attacks on their homes, vandalism, and in some cases, physical abuse. Several Syrians fled the town the night of the attack, and a total of 270 families were ultimately uprooted from Bcharre, as NGOs scrambled to find them other accommodations.¹³ Adding insult to injury, local authorities in Bcharre did not condemn the attack on Syrian residents, rather they called on all Syrian without legal residency documents to leave the town. They also instructed security forces to conduct arbitrary searches of Syrian homes for contraband, and such searches were reportedly carried out, in violation of local due process laws.¹⁴

Not one month later, another act of collective retaliation took place after an employment dispute between Syrian workers and Lebanese employers over unpaid wages in the region of Minieh. Teens from the employer's family reportedly went to the campsite of the workers and an altercation began that culminated in the entire camp being set on fire. Families scrambled to collect their belongings before their tents burned down. This incident led to the displacement of another 75 Syrian families and, again, pressure on local and international NGOs to find accommodations for them.¹⁵ While, this incident was condemned by local authorities and the host community - many of whom took in some of the displaced until other arrangements could be made – it resulted in the arrest of 6 Syrians and 2 Lebanese.¹⁶ The Lebanese army stated that the Lebanese men had entered the camp, fired shots in the air and then torched the camp, but did not give any explanation for the arrest of the Syrian men.¹⁷

What is alarming is not only the fact that local populations feel the need to take the matter in their own hands (showing the absence of the Lebanese authorities), but the fact that the Lebanese official

¹² Bilateral discussion between ALEF and SAWA, February 4, 2021.

¹³ Voa News: "Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon set ablaze after row", <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/syrian-refugee-camp-lebanon-set-ablaze-after-row>; <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2021-02/RPW%20Policy%20Brief%20February%202021.pdf>.

¹⁴ ABC News: "Locals want Syrians evicted from Lebanese town after killing", <https://abcnews.go.com/International/wireStory/locals-syrians-evicted-lebanese-town-killing-74375860>;

Refugee Protection Watch: "Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: winter needs, lack of access to COVID-19 assistance and pressure to return", <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2021-02/RPW%20Policy%20Brief%20February%202021.pdf>.

¹⁵ Voa News: "Syrian refugee camp in Lebanon set ablaze after row", <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/syrian-refugee-camp-lebanon-set-ablaze-after-row>; <https://11.be/sites/default/files/2021-02/RPW%20Policy%20Brief%20February%202021.pdf>.

¹⁶ Al Bawaba: "Lebanon: Eight People Arrested After Syrian Refugee Camp Was Set on Fire", <https://www.albawaba.com/news/lebanon-eight-people-arrested-after-syrian-refugee-camp-was-set-fire-1401602>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

institutions such as the security apparatus, the Ministry of Interior and the municipalities, are not able to ensure the protection of both the Lebanese host and Syrian refugees' communities. When people feel under threat, their only choice is either to fend for themselves, or rely on a legal official authority to protect them. The situation on the ground, during and after these incidents, have been extremely confused – the Lebanese authorities failing to share information in a transparent way. Further, the rule of law has not been respected with local authorities playing a role in the violence that occurred. Finally, accountability must be served equally, to the Syrian refugees who committed a crime, to the Lebanese individuals who retaliated, and to the Lebanese authorities who did not act as they should have to protect both the Lebanese and Syrians alike. Several other incidences like this have occurred over the course of the last year, although on much smaller scales and without drawing much attention.¹⁸

With the economic and social conditions rapidly deteriorating in Lebanon, it is likely that such tensions will continue to build, and more conflicts will take place. In the most recent Refugee Protection Watch (a coalition of international and local organizations monitoring returns to Syria, but also, other related protection issues) survey found that 63% of respondents feel that tensions in their community have risen. The main reasons given were the economic situation, competition for scarce jobs, and a rise in discrimination. Likely, it is the former two conditions that give way to the latter. Aid provided to refugees is also often a point of contention, as local communities find their situation deteriorating but perceive that more aid is given to refugees than to vulnerable host communities.¹⁹

Recommendations

To the Government of Lebanon

- The GoL must ensure that the law is followed in every eviction and due process is respected.
- The GoL should support inter-community dialogue to diffuse conflict/disputes that have the potential to lead to forced evictions.
- The GoL must ensure protection from violence of both the Lebanese host and the Syrian refugees' communities.
- The MoIM must ensure that municipalities coordinate fully with the Lebanese security forces in terms of information sharing and rule of law to avoid any attempt of collective punishment and abuses and violations that can emanate from it.

To Civil Society

- 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 to improve the process through which information sharing between organizations, at times of collective punishment and forced evictions, is facilitated to ensure that evicted families are taken care of (finding shelter, providing healthcare, food and water, in addition to information).

¹⁸ Syrian Observer: "In Less Than One Month, Four Cases of Eviction From Syrian Refugees' Homes in Lebanon", <https://syrianobserver.com/news/58017/in-less-than-one-month-four-cases-of-eviction-from-syrian-refugees-homes-in-lebanon.html>.

¹⁹ file:///C:/Users/User/Downloads/Qualitative%20Monitoring%20Social%20Tensions_Y1_RCA_Final_%20%20(1).pdf

- 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 advocate for legislation against evictions in the winter months and evictions that have a particularly devastating impact on vulnerable groups (elderly and young).

To UNHCR and UNDP

- Civil society and UNHCR and UNDP should scale-up existing mechanisms and their own capacities to 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 if human rights practices are not aligned with international treaties ratified by Lebanon especially to the Lebanese security apparatus and local authorities such as Municipalities when forced evictions or events of collective punishments are identified.



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