

# Addressing Key Issues Concerning Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

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# Acknowledgement

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# Disclaimer

While the team made all efforts possible to cross- check information and reproduce only accurate facts and events, this does not overrule the possibility of inaccuracies or oversights, for which the Working Group for Persons Affected by the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon expresses hereby its regrets.

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# Executive Summary

The Working Group for Persons Affected by the Syrian Crisis in Lebanon (WG PASC) is a voluntary, inter-organizational, non-binding, and informal network of 31 local CSOs, facilitated by ALEF - act for human rights. The Working Group is open to all local CSOs working with persons affected by the Syrian crisis. It works to enhance the capacity and space for CSOs in Lebanon to influence their government and international actors to adopt policies that more effectively meet the needs of vulnerable refugees and host communities and implement them effectively.

This brief has been produced by the WG PASC ahead of the Ministerial Event of the Brussels VIII Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region (BXL8). As part of the network's mandate to advocate for a future anchored in human rights, this brief is designed to shed light on the most important and pressing issues ahead of BXL8. It focuses on the perceptions of the WG towards the changes in the context in Lebanon, key issues concerning Syrian refugees, and the network's expectations of the conference, with recommendations for policy discussions surrounding BXL8. The brief is based on interviews that ALEF conducted with WG PASC members to gather their insights and perspectives.

The challenges Syrian refugees face in Lebanon are complex and multifaceted, deeply intertwined with the country's economic, political, and social dynamics. Indeed, there are many factors that have influenced this issue, including political divisions over how to deal with the Syrian crisis, the absence of a legal framework regulating the work of UNHCR and its relationship with the GoL, and the ambiguity of the national legal and regulatory frameworks related to managing the crisis. WG PASC has highlighted critical issues ranging from the impact of the economic crisis on marginalized populations – both Syrian and Lebanese – to the rise of hate speech against refugees and the securitization of the refugee file. The situation on the ground continues to evolve, with ongoing crackdown on refugees, increased vulnerabilities, and a growing sense of urgency for innovative durable solutions. BXL8 presents an opportunity for stakeholders to address these challenges comprehensively and collaboratively. The main expectations from the conference are for donor countries to prioritize economic and social factors, increase needs-based funding, ensure international supervision, transparent grant allocation, and adopt a comprehensive approach that addresses both immediate humanitarian needs and long-term solutions. There is an urgent need to address hate speech, prejudice, and the securitization of the refugee issue while acknowledging the interconnected difficulties faced by both Syrians and host communities. Thus, a human rights-based approach that upholds the dignity and rights of all individuals, regardless of their legal status, or even sexual orientation and gender identity, is needed today more than ever. On another hand, the Lebanese government must avoid excessively securitized measures and instead prioritize solutions that protect human rights and dignity. Moving forward, concerted efforts and collaborative initiatives will be essential in addressing the complex challenges Syrians and host communities face, ensuring a future anchored in human rights, dignity, and durable solutions.

# Recommendations

## To Donor States, including the EU

### On access to durable solutions:

- Acknowledge that Syria may still be considered as unsafe for certain individuals. Therefore, in discussions surrounding durable solutions, the option of repatriation should be considered as one of the potential solutions for Syrian refugees who are voluntarily and safely able to return.
- Support a refugee status determination mechanism (RSD) for Syrians in Lebanon, in line with international standards and in cooperation with the international community, particularly UNHCR, in order to differentiate between those in need of temporary protection and those who are staying in Lebanon as foreign migrants, in a way that safeguards the fundamental rights of all and ensures that they are not exposed to protection threats or returns to unsafe conditions. This could also contribute to alleviating tensions between host communities and refugees and mitigate negative perceptions and hate speech.
- Apply diplomatic pressure on all authorities in Syria, compelling them to establish robust guarantees for the safe and voluntary return of refugees, and create an international mechanism to provide such guarantees and follow up on them. Recognizing the pressing need for durable solutions to the protracted refugee crisis, it is imperative for the Syrian government to take concrete steps towards creating an enabling and inclusive environment that ensures the protection, rights, and dignity of returnees, including the needs of people with disabilities.
- Apply diplomatic pressure on the GoL to immediately cease forced deportations of Syrian refugees, particularly following a number of reports that allege that numerous deportees have already faced imprisonment, torture, or even death.
- Continue to monitor and advocate for the voluntariness of returns including by tackling protection and rule of law challenges in Lebanon that limit people's ability to make free and informed decisions, and which act as push factors, while encouraging improved information-sharing with operational actors on return movements.
- Push for an international monitoring mechanism, on the basis of the UNHCR Protection Thresholds issued in February 2018, that closely monitors the conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified return of Syrian refugees.
- Honor past resettlement pledges, the New York Declaration, and the Global Compact on Refugees.



- Recognize the protracted character of forced displacement and promote responsibility sharing among resettlement countries. More durable solutions are needed to prevent refugees from resorting to risky alternatives, including sea routes.
- Abide by the internationally recognized criteria for the selection of individuals for resettlement.
- Increase resettlement places, especially to individuals facing protection threats, in need of medical assistance, and refused entry to Syria by the Syrian government.
- Expand opportunities for safe and complementary pathways for asylum and opportunities for temporary visas and residencies.
- Take urgent measures to establish a more robust and comprehensive resettlement process that ensures the well-being and protection of marginalized individuals and people with additional risks including LGBTIQ+ individuals, political opposition, and victims of torture.

#### **On funding pledges:**

- Meet funding obligations and past financial pledges.
- Follow through on the Grand Bargain commitments to localization by providing increased support and flexible funding tools for local and national responders.
- Enforce the conditionality of aid to the GoL, making it contingent upon its strict adherence to international law, particularly the treaties ratified by Lebanon, and human rights principles. This includes ensuring the protection of Lebanese citizens' rights and public accountability of the GoL security and civilian institutions, especially in situations involving forced evictions, raids, arbitrary detentions, or any other occurrences of discriminatory measures.

#### **On preservation of a temporary protection space in Lebanon:**

- Prioritize humanitarian assistance for the protection of IDPs from South Lebanon, including for education and healthcare, in areas affected by the ongoing cross-border hostilities, based on needs and regardless of nationality.
- Work with UNHCR to remove obstacles for refugees in reaching their offices, in order to offer more efficient and more responsive protection channels.
- Increase allocated funds to mental health services for Syrian and Lebanese communities.
- Support and allocate funds to sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) programs and services, including funding specialized services for the LGBTQIA+ community.

### On addressing social tensions:

- Increase funding to conflict sensitive human rights initiatives that advocate for policies that more effectively meet the needs of both the Lebanese host and the Syrian and Palestinian refugee communities.
- Ensure multiannual, predictable, and flexible humanitarian and development support that also prioritizes peacebuilding, as per the triple nexus approach.
- Focus on funding and supporting peace-building programs and initiatives that address the tensions between Syrians and Lebanese, including through encouraging positive and violence-free dialogue between Syrian and Lebanese communities especially among school students.
- Make more concrete efforts to reduce the perception of aid bias in the aid disbursed to Syrian refugees and that for vulnerable Lebanese groups.
- Dedicate resources to decrease social tensions through public outreach and strategic communication countering the perception of lack of aid balance and emphasizing the leading role GoL is playing through clearly and publicly standing behind the policies and projects that the GoL is co-chairing and partnering on such as the LRP and the 3RF.

### To the GoL

### On access to durable solutions:

- Engage with UNHCR to establish a joint refugee status determination (RSD) mechanism to distinguish between refugees and foreign migrants, in compliance with international standards and in cooperation with the international community, particularly UNHCR.
- Halt the nationwide crackdown on refugees by security and municipal authorities and plan for a structured strategy instead of standalone discriminatory measures.
- Acknowledge that a significant percentage of refugees in Lebanon have been displaced from towns and cities in Syria that have undergone significant demographic changes, and this should be factored into the government's durable solution policy for refugees.
- Uphold the principle of non-refoulement that aligns with Article 3 of the Convention Against Torture, Article 14 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and Article 14 of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and refrain from taking any unilateral decision to deport without due process any individual, especially those with reasonable justification about the risks incurred if they are deported.
- Uphold rule of law and respect due process by giving anyone at risk of deportation to Syria the opportunity access to legal aid, meet with UNHCR, and present their argument against deportation. Any deportation that amounts to refoulement should be prohibited.

- Give the space to donors, civil society, and the Lebanese justice system, to monitor the conditions for safe, voluntary, and dignified returns and ensure the protection of the most vulnerable.
- Provide a regular, public, and transparent accounting of deportations, including reasons for removal, to international organizations and civil society in order to ensure accountability and the respect of rule of law.
- Revoke the decision made by the Higher Defense Council No. 50 of 15/4/2019 and the General Director of the General Security decision No. 48380 of 13/5/2019 ordering the expulsion or deportation of Syrian nationals who entered Lebanon through unofficial border crossings after 24 April 2019, without the application of the necessary legal procedural safeguards to prevent refoulement. The classification of Syrians who entered Lebanon after 2019 must adhere to an RSD mechanism that complies with international standards to ensure their protection from forcible return.
- Enhance diplomatic efforts to encourage resettlement spaces and other complementary pathways.
- Develop programs and policies that would increase the chances for complementary pathways.

#### **On preservation of a temporary protection space in Lebanon:**

- Commit to removing obstacles for refugees in reaching UNHCR offices.
- Ensure that revisions of policies and regulations in relation to residency permits for Syrian refugees are transparent and inclusive. These regulations should tend to expand the access to residency for those that could benefit and resolve the expansive gap in accessing legal residency.
- Ensure that the registration of important life events (birth, marriage, divorce, death) is accessible to all on a non-discriminatory basis, regardless of nationality and legal status.
- Extend the alleviation of the one-year limit for birth registration to ensure that refugee children born in Lebanon receive proper documentation and are not at heightened risk of statelessness. Statelessness among refugee populations would undermine their possibilities for resettlement and return and impose further pressure on the Lebanese state.
- Establish a clear, non-discriminatory policy for Syrian workers that specifies the sectors in which they are permitted to work, based on labor market demand and on ensuring adequate labor protections.
- Raise the minimum age required to be married to 18 years old to protect boys and girls of all nationalities from early marriage, through the endorsement of the draft law proposal that sets the minimum age of marriage in Lebanon, and pave the way for the general public, local authorities, and civil society to provide protection services to children victims of child marriage.

- Reinforce systems and policies related to the rights and protection of those vulnerable to violations of SGBV.
- Adopt a Do-No-Harm approach and equip security agencies with the necessary mechanisms, tools, and spaces, to collect testimonies, support, and protect survivors of SGBV, whether Lebanese, refugees, children, or members of the LGBTIQIA+ communities.
- Adopt a collaborative participatory approach to consult with various education stakeholders including UN agencies, civil society organizations, private sector, representatives from regional districts, municipalities, and parents, in developing the national education strategy to increase access to education to both Syrian and Lebanese vulnerable groups and coordinate efforts related to education service deliveries to make sure all children are educated, including access to digital infrastructure and the cost of transportation and school material.
- Monitor private schools' non-fee restrictions, such as discriminatory enrolment practices on the basis of nationality, on access to education for Syrian refugees.
- Ensure that alternate education systems and measures are set so that the ongoing cross-border hostilities does not interfere with children's right to access education.
- Guarantee protection from violence perpetrated by members of both the Lebanese host and the Syrian refugee communities.
- Ensure the full protection and inclusion of the LGBTIQ+ community. While existing provisions may offer some support, their effectiveness is limited if they coexist with penal codes that perpetuate discrimination against this community.

#### **On addressing social tensions:**

- Ensure that MoIM, municipalities, and security forces coordinate fully together in terms of information sharing and rule of law to avoid any attempt of collective punishment – such as evictions, raids, arbitrary detention, confiscation of documents, wage caps, and curfews – and the violations that can emanate from that, especially discrimination on the basis of nationality.
- Involve refugees in decision-making processes and seek input from refugees' representatives and community leaders.
- Ensure protection of human rights defenders, political activists, journalists, military defectors, and families of missing people, who face a higher risk of imprisonment and torture upon deportation.
- Support inter-community dialogue to diffuse conflict/disputes that have the potential to lead to safety and security risks.
- Coordinate with UNDP, UNHCR, and civil society to map the tools, approaches, and opportunities for building community relations, response, and prevention (roles in identification, referral, and awareness raising) regarding SGBV.

# The Situation of Syrian Refugees and the Changes in Context in Lebanon

Since the “Brussels VII Conference for Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region”, a confluence of factors has significantly impacted the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

The ongoing and worsening economic crisis continues to exacerbate the already existing myriad of problems in the country, leading to an increase in poverty, a rise in informal work, and deficiencies in the healthcare sector, as the majority of workers in Lebanon lack access to any form of social protection. As Syrians continue to fall deeper into vulnerability too, many families have been forcibly separated due to the economic crisis, as the breadwinner often has to move alone to more urban areas for work while the rest of the family remains in rural areas due to inflation and the rise of cost of living. However, Lebanese people as well, especially the most vulnerable among them, continue to increasingly suffer from the deteriorating economic conditions, making the host community no longer able to accommodate Syrians in the same manner as it did before. Although the government has failed at strategic planning since the beginning of the refugee crisis in Lebanon, the current ongoing political stagnation has further strained resources and deepened polarization within the Lebanese society, affecting its ability to accommodate Syrians and address their needs effectively. Indeed, political instability continues to be the main challenge in the country, with many WG PASC members believing that political polarization today is significantly deeper than it was in previous years.

Of particular concern over the past year has been the increase in reported raids against Syrians and their forced returns from Lebanon to Syria – a systematic practice by Lebanese security agencies which can in some instances be life-threatening. In fact, crackdown and the implementation of additional restrictive measures against Syrians have escalated, especially those that municipalities and local authorities impose against them. Calls for combatting irregular Syrian labor have become very vocal even though Syrians’ right to work in Lebanon is relatively restricted as they are only allowed to work in 13 professions. The Directorate General of General Security (DGGS) continues to arbitrarily increase work permit fees and has required Syrians to not have work permits in order to renew their residency, contributing to pushing many formerly legal workers into the shadows.

Fees for legal and civil documentation that Syrians need continue to increase too and in an arbitrary manner, especially those that the DGGS requires, further limiting their access to these life-saving documents amid the forced returns campaign. Even when it comes to education, some schools have made arbitrary decisions that have limited Syrian children’s access to education this year, in a context where children with unregistered births are already unable to enroll in schools.

At a community level, WG PASC members have observed a heightened vigilance towards Syrians, which has, in turn, fueled feelings of unsafety, a fear of the host community, and self-imposed mobility restrictions, all often leading to depression among Syrians. This comes amid an overall context of increased violence against marginalized groups in Lebanon, not just refugees,

but also individuals belonging to the LGBTIQ+ community for whom returning to Syria might be especially difficult due to the risk of discrimination against them from both authorities and relatives.

Nevertheless, many argue that violence against Syrians by the Lebanese has to be perceived from the experience of the older Lebanese generation with the Syrian regime and the two countries' history, including the role of the Government of Syria in the Lebanese Civil War, its consequent occupation of the country until 2005, the accompanying human rights violations, and the lack of knowledge on the fate of the 17,000 Lebanese forcibly disappeared. Thus, the feelings of the Lebanese population should also be addressed from an objective and scientific perspective, without justifying their translation into actions and hate speech. As such, network members are particularly concerned over the security situation in the country and the potential for deterioration in social stability. During this year, tensions have escalated into physical assaults and attacks among the two groups – sometimes life-threatening. This is happening as the presence of security forces in many regions in Lebanon continues to shrink due to the economic crisis, leaving agencies unable to fulfill their role in the face of such a critical security environment.

Backlash against Syrians in Lebanon continues to increase, accompanied with more vocal demands for the return of Syrians. The public debate over deeming Syria as safe for Syrians to return to has grown over the past year given Syria's status as a conflict zone. It is important to emphasize that one of the main factors preventing Syrian refugees from returning is the presence of numerous military points and sites controlled by various armed factions throughout Syria. These factions often engage in exploitation and violent behaviors, terrorizing and violating civilians, which severely inhibits the refugees' ability to safely return to their areas of origin. Additionally, ongoing concerns regarding security conditions and the lack of progress in the political process, as outlined in UNSC Resolution 2254, continue to pose significant obstacles to the return of refugees.

On 2 May 2024, the EU announced an aid package of 1 billion euros for Lebanon, primarily focused on strengthening border control to halt the flow of asylum seekers and migrants from Lebanon to Cyprus and the EU. This will be channeled through supporting the security sector, with salaries and assistance particularly for border protection, and increasing income-generating activities in the country. However, this package was announced within a broader EU-Lebanon deal, in which the Government of Lebanon (GoL) asked the EU to reduce funds that aid Syrians in Lebanon. More importantly, the EU agreed to look into a structured approach for the voluntary returns of Syrians to Syria in cooperation with UNHCR, calling on the latter to support those who want to return even if the agency does not deem Syria as safe. This comes after intensified diplomatic efforts by the Cypriot government to curb non-documented migration from Lebanon including through pushing the EU to re-examine areas that can be considered as safe inside Syria and to which Syrians can be returned. In fact, in May 2024, pursuant to public and official uproar that came as a consequence of the EU-Lebanon deal, the DGGS intensified its crackdown against Syrians, arbitrarily raiding informal tented settlements, shutting down unregistered businesses owned by Syrians, and arresting Syrians without a valid residency. The DGGS also announced the resumption of the agency's facilitation of return movements back to Syria and invited interested refugees to voluntarily sign up. On 4 May, a return convoy was organized with 330 individuals who crossed the border.

Additionally, many WG PASC members have witnessed restrictive measures against the work of NGOs supporting Syrians in different regions across the country, creating significant challenges.

Some network members have even indicated that local communities have expressed a negative perception of their work with Syrians due to religious differences between the two groups. Others have also indicated local backlash against women-rights organizations in addition to a regional backlash against human rights organizations. Indeed, the shrinking civic space, and hate speech and misinformation against organizations working on the refugee crisis, have created not just access constraints to providing assistance to those in need, but risks for staff members. The WG is especially concerned about methods to overcome these restrictive measures against the work of NGOs.

In August 2023, an agreement was reached between UNHCR and the GoL to share UNHCR's basic personal data on Syrians in Lebanon. While this agreement was framed in accordance with global data protection standards and the GoL committed to not using the data for purposes that violate international law, concerns continue to be raised regarding the data handover to the GoL and its potential influence on the ability of Syrians in Lebanon to obtain or renew legal residency.

Moreover, after the beginning of the war in Gaza in October 2023, the first funding crisis emerged related to the potential disruption of funds for UNRWA, threatening livelihood and future prospects for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. The WG PASC was gravely concerned about the impact on an already-suffering population in the country and its consequences on social tensions. By the end of that month, UNHCR and WFP also announced a reduction as of December 2023 in the overall percentage of Syrians receiving monthly cash assistance in the 2023/24 cycle from 90% to around 60% of the refugee population, due to a decrease in funding from donors for 2024 despite the ongoing high levels of vulnerability and needs.<sup>1</sup> These institutions have also so far failed to transparently provide the criteria they used to determine which beneficiaries will be affected by these cuts.

Coupled with other funding cuts and lack of access to services, these notable reductions in aid provided to Syrians raise significant concern over their repercussions, as they could not only heighten tensions due to competition for already scarce resources but could also contribute to an increase in crimes with people becoming further marginalized. These funding cuts are often attributed to donor prioritization of other crises in the world, such as the ongoing wars in Gaza and Ukraine.

These conflicts, however, have added layers of complexity, especially as, after the start of the Gaza war, hostilities began in the South of Lebanon as well, necessitating discussions on adequate protection measures for Syrians and Lebanese alike when Lebanese internally displaced persons (IDPs) are often being prioritized over Syrians in protection assistance. Prioritization of aid has not been the only factor complicating the crisis, as the ongoing armed conflict also continues to limit children's access to education due to school closures and contributes to exacerbating political tensions. This has also raised questions about the impact of the ongoing conflict on returns to Syria.

The escalating economic crisis in Lebanon has also had profound effects on vulnerable groups, especially women and children among Syrian refugees. In fact, these heightened vulnerabilities

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<sup>1</sup> Inter-agency Coordination Lebanon (2023, October 31). Message on behalf of UNHCR/WFP: Announcement of New Cash Cycle (UNHCR /WFP): notifications to refugees.

have contributed to a concerning uptick in child marriages, from 22% in 2022 to 25% in 2023,<sup>2</sup> as families struggle to cope with financial hardships and many children continue to be deprived of education making them at higher risk of child marriage. Overall, there has been a worrying increase in cases of SGBV, among both Syrian and Lebanese communities, including domestic violence and sexual exploitation. This includes physical violence, emotional abuse, and sexual assaults, creating an environment of fear and insecurity for many women and children. Sexual harassment has also been reported at schools with no law enforcement or punishment against perpetrators. Indeed, children bear the brunt of this rising violence, with a surge in all violent child disciplinary methods that adult members in the households use<sup>3</sup>, in an environment where hate speech and bullying among Lebanese and Syrian students is already rampant.

This overarching trend in the context of a complex interplay of economic, political, and social challenges, coupled with a growing apprehension against Syrians, raises particular concerns about ensuring protection; access to education, healthcare, well-being, social security, and housing; and meeting basic needs for Syrians in Lebanon under all of these circumstances.

This requires coordinated efforts and sustainable solutions to ensure the well-being and rights of vulnerable groups in Lebanon, including both Syrians and host communities.

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<sup>2</sup> Inter-agency Coordination Lebanon (2024). VASyR 2023 Preliminary Findings.

<sup>3</sup> Inter-agency Coordination Lebanon (2024). VASyR 2023 Preliminary Findings.



## Perceptions on Hate Speech

In examining the perceptions of the WG PASC on hate speech in Lebanon over the past year, a nuanced understanding emerges of the varied intensity of hate speech across regions and communities in the country. This difference across regions underscores the complex interplay of local dynamics, where economic strains, security concerns, and demographic comparisons contribute to the rhetoric's amplification. For example, network members operating in the field have observed that this discourse is less intense in Tripoli and Bekaa, especially among women, than it is in other areas. Simultaneously, a rise in hate speech and a high level of rejection of Syrians within the local community has been observed in Achrafieh and Batroun. Some members also reported a hostile refusal from the host community to engage in projects or activities with Syrians. Many often attribute this to the religious and political backgrounds of every area.

Root causes underlying hate speech complexities include economic pressures, resource competitions, governance and protection gaps, political stagnation, discrimination, and fears of identity and demographic changes. The economic crisis, in particular, stands out as a prominent trigger, fueling tensions and shaping negative narratives about Syrians. Indeed, resource scarcity exacerbates tensions, even among Lebanese themselves, particularly in areas dealing with limited resources and high needs. The political stagnation in the country and consequent lack of governance has thus intensified resource competition. Discrimination, including over religious differences, serves as an additional catalyst for hate speech, exacerbated by certain media outlets perpetuating systematic biases. This is particularly reflected in the concerns of the Lebanese about their security as a consequence of media reports on the alleged increases in crimes involving Syrians and in the birth rate of Syrian children in Lebanon in comparison to that of the Lebanese – often blamed on the international community's aid policy. However, overall, it is important to keep in perspective that the perception of the Lebanese towards Syrians also has historical roots and is controversial to many political parties and entities.

Government entities and political parties, in the intensity of their hate speech, play a significant role in shaping hate speech dynamics and in giving people the impression that harassment is a new norm that can go unpunished, indirectly legitimizing racism. Nevertheless, many CSOs view this intensity in the discourse as an indirect tool to pressure the international community for an increase in funding. The government and the media have also contributed to influencing shifts in public opinion. Indeed, previously moderate views have now shifted towards more aggressive stances, reflecting broader societal shifts and political narratives and contributing to polarization. The media is also able to make matters worse by not covering the Syrian perspective. This continues to happen while UNHCR has so far not played an effective role in combating that discourse. The latter's impact extends beyond rhetoric, heightening challenges marginalized groups already face and influencing societal attitudes and behaviors, evident in the prioritization of resources for Lebanese IDPs over Syrians residing in the South. It also affects collaborative efforts and community engagement, highlighted in the host communities' reluctance to participate in projects or activities with Syrians.

Marginalized groups, such as refugees from the LGBTQIA+ community, face an alarming surge in targeted hate speech and discriminatory rhetoric, exacerbating social fractures. Media coverage, or lack thereof, plays a pivotal role, with periods of silence and selective focus shaping public narratives and attitudes.

Women, in the midst of this discourse, also face heightened vulnerabilities, encountering barriers to accessing safe spaces freely and experiencing increased fear due to the hostile environment fostered by hate speech.

While many WG PASC members acknowledge the burden that Lebanon faces due to the refugee crisis and its impact on Lebanon's demography, society, and economy, the solution does not lie in hate speech and related actions, such as collective punishments, but rather in the GoL assuming its responsibilities. Addressing hate speech against Syrians in Lebanon thus necessitates a multifaceted approach by all stakeholders, encompassing inclusive dialogue, media literacy, and proactive measures to counter discriminatory narratives. Promoting tolerance, understanding, and empathy is pivotal in fostering a cohesive and resilient society that accepts diversity and de-escalates divisive rhetoric.

# Perceptions on the Securitization of the Refugee File

The perceptions of the network on the securitization of the refugee file in Lebanon over the past year reflects a complex interplay of governance issues, security concerns, and societal attitudes.

Many WG PASC members noted that, in general, securitization is a traditional characteristic of Lebanon's experience with crises and its approach to dealing with them. More specifically, the securitization of the refugee file has been a longstanding practice, adopted since the beginning of the crisis and influenced by past experiences with Palestinian refugees. This intense and exhaustive approach, rooted in a belief that the integration of refugees should be avoided, has been fueled by concerns about security, with the government taking an official position on the matter rather than individual practices or disagreements. In order to avoid integration, many believed that allowing Syrians to live in marginalization and poor conditions will encourage them to return to their country. This has instead made them particularly vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

However, there is a consensus among the network that the securitization approach is not without its challenges and may amount to an existential danger for Syrians in Lebanon. The government's lack of governance and failure to fulfill its duties have contributed significantly to the securitization of the refugee file. This lack of coordination among government agencies and the absence of a unified plan to respond to the issue have exacerbated tensions and led to an intensified security-focused approach. Incitement against Syrians by prominent figures continues to enable the targeting of an already marginalized group, exacerbating violence, including from within the Syrians themselves.

Moreover, dealing with the refugee file as a security and political issue has become more pronounced recently, in a context where any government or security entity is able to capitalize on this file for their own political gains. This has had repercussions on the assistance provided to Syrians, including a decrease in aid and increased restrictions on the activities of organizations working with them. Indeed, one of the main challenges facing civil space has become securitization in general, and that of the refugee file more specifically, further worsening the already fragile socioeconomic context.

The securitization approach is seen as a form of politicization and scapegoating, where refugees are often blamed for broader societal problems instead of the crisis being dealt with from a legal, political, and humanitarian perspective. This increasingly negative role of the government in handling the issue, coupled with the cross-border movements of some Syrians, including those benefiting from aid, has led to calls by civil society for an urgent resolution that encompasses the need for a valid and confirmed number of refugees in Lebanon (including the number of unregistered births), political solutions in Syria, and the legalization of the stay of Syrians in Lebanon.

The intersectionality between security, political, and demographic aspects of the refugee file emphasizes the need for a comprehensive approach that addresses governance issues alongside security concerns. Additionally, the role of social and traditional media in focusing on Syrians and on the alleged increase in crimes they commit has contributed to increased tensions and violence. However, in reality, the rate of Syrians in Lebanese prisons is at 29.25%, which has only increased by a mere 1% since 2023.<sup>4</sup> This highlights the disproportionate focus on Syrians in the public and media discourse, further fueling the narrative of securitization and often exacerbating the stigma and scapegoating of this already marginalized group.

In conclusion, while recognizing the security dimension of any refugee crisis, it is essential to acknowledge that the dire security situation in Lebanon is not solely due to the presence of refugees but is part of broader governance challenges including the absence of oversight and crisis management. This underscores the larger need for a stronger presence by the government to address societal challenges effectively. Collective punishment and scapegoating are by no means acceptable, highlighting the urgency of addressing the refugee issue within a framework that prioritizes human rights and effective governance.

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<sup>4</sup> Lebanese Ministry of Justice Directorate of Prisons (2024, April 22). Distribution of Current Prisoners by Nationality – Prisons.

## Expectations of BXL8

As the upcoming Ministerial Event of BXL8 approaches, expectations among network members vary, reflecting realistic assessments of the current situation, especially as many members felt that this year's Day of Dialogue, which was held on April 30, focused more on inside Syria, a political transition, and UNSC resolution 2254, than it did on neighboring countries including Lebanon.

As such, some respondents expressed a pragmatic stance with no specific expectations from BXL8, acknowledging the longstanding vulnerabilities and challenges faced over the years. This includes concerns about increasing vulnerabilities, particularly for refugees and marginalized populations, signaling a need for sustained support and attention from the international community. Indeed, as reflected in this brief, challenges this year continue to increase in comparison to last year.

However, there are voices calling for donors to prioritize economic and social factors in fulfilling their responsibilities in funding UNHCR's appeal needs. PASC continues to call for increased funding, particularly addressing housing and well-being issues for vulnerable populations and economic empowerment, especially for women. These funds need to be tied to international oversight and heightened transparency in grant allocation in order to ensure effective utilization of resources.

This reflects a desire for a more holistic approach that addresses not only immediate humanitarian needs but also long-term sustainable solutions. Donor countries are also expected to fulfill their responsibilities regarding resettlement. Anticipation thus surrounds the conference, with some hoping for a hint of a political solution on the horizon for the crisis. In fact, the issue lies in the linkage of returns to Syria with political transition in Syria, calling for the need to explore alternative solutions. This underscores the complexity of the situation, where humanitarian, political, and security dimensions intersect, necessitating comprehensive strategies.

Lastly, expectations also include urging the Lebanese government to refrain from adopting an excessively securitized approach and focusing on solutions that prioritize human rights and dignity. Indeed, there is an urgent need for a long-term solution that holds the Lebanon government into account.





