

Changing Attitudes Towards Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

Hei Yi Robyn Ma explores the protection of indigenous land rights, and not only how they are affected by climate change, but may prove a key part of the fight against global warming..

The Syrian Civil War began in 2011 as one of a series of pro-democracy movements and protests that were sweeping across the Middle East at the time, a period of mass unrest known today as the Arab Spring (Aljazeera, 2018). The initial protests against repression and police brutality escalated into a full civil war, and as of November 2019, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) registered 5.7 million refugees from Syria (UNHCR Refugees Operational Portal, 2019). With a growing population of Syrian refugees in their country, the attitudes of many Lebanese have shifted from compassion and sympathy to frustration and discontent. An examination of Lebanon's current situation reveals this shift through an economic, political, and social perspective.

Lebanon currently hosts more refugees per capita than any country in the world (Eldawy, 2019). Refugees constitute approximately one quarter of Lebanon's total population, with one million Syrians joining an estimated 300,000 Palestinian refugees and 10,000 others who sought protection prior to the beginning of the civil war (Eldawy, 2019). A further 400,000 Syrians were working in Lebanon before the war, many of whom have become de facto migrants as the conflict has prevented their repatriation (Dorai, 2018).

Initially, Lebanon maintained an open immigration system facilitated by bilateral agreements; Syrian seasonal workers would migrate across the border to work in minimally regulated sectors like agriculture, services, and construction (Dorai, 2018: 113-126). However, economic difficulties in 2011, shrunk the labour market and stoked political, religious and social tensions across the country (Dorai, 2018). This has prevented Syrian refugees from fully integrating into Lebanese social and economic life ever since, limiting their contribution to the economy and encouraging the belief that refugees are economic burdens (Arrar, Hintz and Norman, 2016). Aside from this, their capacity to contribute to economic growth is even more severely constrained by bureaucratic obstacles. Following the outbreak of civil war and the subsequent mass influx of displaced Syrians in 2014, the immigration agreements were suspended due to the fear that Syrian refugees would settle permanently (Arrar, Hintz and Norman, 2016). Refugees now face additional legal and civil barriers which restrict their employment opportunities and freedom of movement. The Lebanese government requires Syrians to pay an USD\$200 annual residency fee or apply for a waiver. Consequently, just 18 percent of Syrian households have a legal residency, and applications for a fee waiver are demanding, with less than 50 percent of Syrians qualifying for such a benefit (Eldawy, 2019). The absence of a legal status makes refugees vulnerable to economic exploitation, fines, and deportation.

Historical Context:

Distrust towards refugees can be explained through the historical context of the Lebanese Civil War. Since independence in 1945, Lebanon has experienced ethnic tensions between its four majority religious groups; Maronite Christians, Sunni and Shia Muslims, and Druze (Jaulin, 2014: 250-271). These tensions erupted in 1975 when gunmen, suspected to be associated with the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), a Palestinian nationalist militia, killed four Phalangists and a Christian paramilitary group, sparking a civil war between the religious factions (Tristram, 2019). In a failed attempt to swiftly end the conflict, Syria involved itself militarily, siding with Maronite Christians and provoking outrage across the Arab world. Subsequently, the

Syrians helped end the war officially at the Riyadh Conference. The Syrian army continued to occupy Lebanon until 2005, further entrenching tensions between the two peoples.

The divide on the issue of refugees is evident within Lebanese politics in the split between the March 8 Alliance and the March 14 Opposition. The former support the Assad regime, with Hezbollah providing paramilitary assistance in the Syrian Civil War, whilst the latter support the Syrian opposition. Evidently, the crisis in Syria has been projected onto Lebanese politics with both groups involved in Lebanon as rivals. Syrian refugees have been blamed for the rise of crime in Lebanon; Rifaat Eid, the head of the pro-Assad Arab Democratic Party, has labelled Syrian refugees in Tripoli as terrorists (Wood, 2012). This has politicised the refugee crisis in domestic politics and radicalised resentment against Syrians.

Legal Barriers:

The effects of such hostility are only exacerbated by the Lebanese Government's official labelling of refugees as "displaced persons", emphasising their lack of special status (Eldawy, 2019). This is manifested as a refusal to establish refugee camps and provide refugee assistance. A 2014 policy paper aimed at reducing refugee numbers further highlights the Lebanese government's apathy, and even antipathy, towards the refugee crisis (Cherri, Gonzalez and Delgado, 2016: 165-172) as current policies contravene the 'Geneva Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees' of 1951 (Aljazeera, 2018). Such policies (or lack thereof) include efforts to repatriate more than 25,000 Syrian refugees despite no guarantees of their safety being given by the Assad regime, municipal curfews to restrict the movements of refugees, and a "policy of no policy" on the issue of Syrian refugees (Eldawy, 2019). These policies exclude Syrian refugees from desperately needed aid, adding further structural barriers to their integration.

Politics:

Frustrations and discontent stemming from the deteriorating political and economic situation in Lebanon are often misdirected by the Lebanese towards Syrian newcomers as long-standing sectarian divisions are further exacerbated. As most Syrians arriving are Sunni Muslims, this threatens the already tense demographic divisions in Lebanon; the country has been unable to hold a census since 1932, fearing that it would disrupt the power-sharing dynamic between religious groups (Jaulin, 2014: 250-271). The head of the Maronite Church, Patriarch Bechara al-Rahi, has stated that the presence of a Sunni majority of 1.5 million Syrian refugees significantly alters the sectarian balance in Lebanon (Raad, 2018). Lebanon's modern history shows a timeline rift with sectarian violence, as today's system of government rests on a fragile democratic balance. Tensions that have seeped into the governance structure of Lebanon are evidenced by their confessional system whereby the highest offices are reserved for representatives of certain religious communities (Eldawy, 2019). This change in demographics has upset the delicate power structure in Lebanon, exposing the vulnerabilities of the archaic system.

Social Tensions:

Boiling social tensions are pushed into the spotlight by media and popular culture, which highlight social anxieties and perceived stereotypes of Syrians. The Lebanese channel 'al-Jadid' played a song depicting Syrians as Lebanon's majority and drew on stereotypes like Syrians' poor living conditions and high birth rates to cast them in a negative light, provoking, Dubai-based Syrian news channel 'Orient News' to produce a musical calling employees of 'al-Jadid' Nazis (Soz, 2018).

Economic Factors:

Another contributing factor is the weak Lebanese economy. As mentioned, Lebanon entered an economic crisis in 2011 with an entrenched informal economy, high inflation, overwhelming national debt, and a low GDP which nearly pushed the economy into a recession (Eldawy, 2019). The fragile Lebanese economy has

struggled to cope with the influx of Syrian refugees. Furthermore, Lebanese businesses are unable to export products, as the war has virtually closed off the land route. Key industries such as tourism, housing and transportation have also been affected by the crisis. Foreign direct investment has dropped, and it appears unlikely that investor confidence will recover soon (Mudallai, 2013). With unemployment and inflation on the rise, there is increasingly fierce competition for employment between the Lebanese and refugees in a shrinking job market. The '2018 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon' (VASyR, 2018) report found competition for jobs and resources as some of the top factors for tension with the host community (UNHCR, 2018). In an already fragile economy, the influx of Syrian refugees has led to an oversupply of labour (Eldawy, 2019). Competition over scarce jobs has driven Lebanese workers out of the labour market, propelling a further negative shift in attitudes towards Syrian refugees as low-skilled Syrians will work for one third less than the minimum wage (Eldawy, 2019). The lack of employment protections for the Syrian refugees tilts the balance of competition for jobs in their favour, engendering resentment towards them in their host society (Eldawy, 2019). The economic conditions in Lebanon have therefore only inflamed anti-refugee attitudes amongst the Lebanese people.

External Aid:

It would be expected that funding from the international community and aid agencies for refugees in Lebanon should help alleviate this burden. However, Lebanese religious and non-profit organisations that once provided humanitarian aid exclusively for Syrian refugees are now seeing a surge of Lebanese locals seeking help. The Catholic organisation, Caritas Lebanon, has now set aside 30 percent of each project budget for the local Lebanese community, whereas in the first three years of the Syrian refugee crisis, 100 percent of the project beneficiaries were Syrian (Raad, 2018). This again highlights the struggle for resources in an overcrowded space against the backdrop of a weak economy and cash-strapped government, driving further frustration towards the refugee population in Lebanon.

Consequences:

The consequence of the changes in policy and attitudes towards Syrian refugees is an exacerbation of their plight. The Human Rights Watch estimates that less than half of the 631,000 school-age refugee children in Lebanon are receiving formal education, and 180,000 Syrian children are in the labour market (Human Rights Watch, 2018). According to VASyR (2018), more than half of the Syrian arrivals are "unable to meet the survival needs of food, health and shelter", with 60 percent living below the poverty line (UNHCR, 2018). As refugees face housing insecurity, students are increasingly dropping out of schools and joining internal militias (Eldawy, 2019).

The shift in attitudes towards Syrian refugees in Lebanon has evidently been facilitated by the political, economic and social situations in the country. Poor economic conditions and long-existing sectarian divides have only been worsened by politicians who, in light of the refugee crisis, capitalize on the deepening fears and fissures in society. The Syrian war is not contained within Syria alone, but rather has seeped into the politics of neighbouring countries.

However, this change in attitudes may progress into a more compassionate mindset. A thaw in political tensions and removal of economic and legal barriers against Syrian refugees would allow them to positively contribute to Lebanon's economy. In a society filled with increasingly anti-refugee sentiments, perhaps Lebanon can be the bearer of light and move towards a more supportive, constructive and empathetic framework of governance.

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