Syrian refugee and mother of seven, from Idlib, Syria, inside her residence in Wadi Khaled, North Lebanon.
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BRIEFING

Building peace into refugee responses: Syrian refugees in Lebanon

With an estimated 1.5 million Syrian refugees,[1] Lebanon has the largest rate of refugees per capita in the world.

Lebanese communities have generally provided a positive welcome – solidarity that is based on significant family ties and shared history between the two peoples.

But the pressure created by refugee numbers adds to Lebanon's pre-existing governance and development challenges. The strain has created tension, insecurity, and a growing narrative that portrays refugees as a cause of wider challenges, a security threat and a problem to be pushed back into Syria. Western countries have responded by providing aid for refugees in Lebanon and maintaining security assistance to the Lebanese authorities, while largely limiting the number of Syrian refugees they host themselves. They can and should use their influence to reverse the negative portrayal and treatment of refugees – at home and in Lebanon – and to drive progress on long-term peace, governance and human security priorities.

This briefing draws on research by Saferworld and the Lebanese Centre for Policy Studies (LCPS) conducted during 2017. Interviewees included Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities in two locations in Lebanon, as well as representatives from international donors, international and local NGOs, and the Lebanese government.

■ **The danger of treating refugees as a security threat.** Although Lebanon faces genuine security challenges, denying refugees legal status and exposing them to harsh security measures could well prove counterproductive. Until there is a genuine peace to return to in Syria, the alternative is to recognise refugees' rights, including their legal status, and adopt a more inclusive approach to improving security for refugees and host communities. Donors' security strategies must avoid reinforcing counter-productive approaches, and instead promote and enhance

refugees' rights and help improve safety for both refugees and host communities while doubling down on efforts to find a lasting peace in Syria.

■ **The need to work on conflict and gender sensitivity.** Support to refugees and host communities has sometimes adopted a 'do no harm' approach, aiming to avoid exacerbating tensions, but it could do more to sustain peace and support social cohesion proactively. Donors and their partners can make progress by working through inclusive community structures to assess communities' priorities, make transparent and accountable decisions about what to do and who to support, and communicate in a way that helps dispel misperceptions. Aid must encourage positive interaction between refugees and host communities, help women and men overcome the vulnerabilities that underlie gender-related tensions and insecurity, and assist communities to push for progress on the governance and development challenges driving tensions and instability.

A more balanced approach to security

Impacts of securitised approaches

Lebanon's refugee crisis is increasingly being portrayed, seen and dealt with as a security challenge. Lebanon borders a highly militarised internationalised conflict. It has suffered attacks, including in Beirut, Tripoli and Arsal, carried out by militants affiliated with Syrian rebel groups. It has a porous border vulnerable to illicit smuggling of weapons and other goods. These threats are real, and differentiating between people fleeing for their lives and those who may pose a security risk is hard.

However, shutting down refugee registration, **arbitrarily associating Syrian refugees with violent groups, and striking the wrong balance between security, rights and development could well make the situation worse**. As protests calling for the removal of Syrians from the country have illustrated, the narrative that dubs Syrian refugees a security threat is trickling from national leaders and media into municipalities and communities, under-

mining trust and solidarity and legitimising counter-productive security measures.

"Lebanese [seeing] refugees as a security threat generates further segregation of communities and discrimination leading to weaker social cohesion."

Georges Ghali, executive director, ALEF Act for Human Rights

The government stopped registering Syrian refugees in May 2015. Though a complex issue, **the irregular legal status of an estimated 500,000 refugees[2] is a central problem underpinning a host of security and socio-economic problems**. The thousands of refugees without legal residence and work permits face **restrictions on movement, deportation threats, difficulty in accessing security, justice, health and education services, inability to register marriages and newborns, and exploitation when they work**.

In addition, **because of their vulnerable position, refugees feel unable to challenge unfairness or abuse**. Many Syrian men living in informal settlements do not leave for fear of being stopped by police, and are afraid to voice their opinion, especially on political matters.

Harsh security measures – evictions, the forcible return of hundreds of refugees to Syria, intimidation of Syrian refugees who lack legal status by security forces, curfews during which individuals are targeted based on their appearance, arbitrary arrest/detention and abuse, and raids on camps – are building fears and mistrust between the two communities and could undermine stability. **Syrian refugees consistently raised fears of raids, evictions, or having their houses or camps destroyed.**

"My [14-year-old] son told the officer that he was against the [Assad] regime. So he threw him in jail. My son has scars on his body until today because he got beaten in prison by Lebanese officers."

Syrian man

Although heavy-handed security provision is creating problems, people do face **pressing human security challenges**. People expressed fears about the increasingly fraught security situation, with crimes such as theft reportedly on the rise. Lebanese participants called for improved security and spoke about the stabilising role the Lebanese army has played. However, police feel unable fully to address security issues, and both communities are afraid to criticise security forces.

"We cannot talk about the Lebanese Army, or else we will be considered terrorists."

Lebanese man

A man arrives at a refugee registration office. In 2015, the Lebanese government decided to shut down all new registrations. Tripoli District, North Lebanon.
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> ## "If we talk about any security issue, we will be sent to interrogation. The security situation is scary."

Lebanese man

Women reported increased insecurity in both locations: both Lebanese and Syrian women are afraid of harassment and aren't comfortable walking alone. The tendency among Lebanese communities to put the blame for insecurity on Syrians makes women's insecurity a contentious issue.

Preoccupied by counter-terrorism and stemming the onward flow of Syrian refugees, some **donors are buying into the securitisation of Lebanon's refugee response**. And while certain actors have aspired towards a 'comprehensive' response to Syrian refugee flows in Lebanon, they have also prioritised the security dimension of their bilateral cooperation with Lebanon due to domestic security objectives. Lebanese NGOs and think tanks have warned that this "risks contributing to a deterioration of the security and human rights situation in Lebanon"[3] because it puts refugee management and national security ahead of human rights and legal protection.

Ironically, for all the emphasis on security, **inclusive and responsive efforts to tackle refugees' and host communities' security concerns haven't been well factored into the national and international response**.

A Syrian woman walks through the streets of Wadi Khaled, north Lebanon.
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Key recommendations

- **International partners should encourage and support Lebanon to maintain a proportionate security response** while taking more action to ensure both relief and **progress on addressing issues that are creating tension** and could prove destabilising.

- **Stability, social cohesion and prosperity can be advanced by offering all refugees legal status and abandoning security measures that are creating unnecessary fears** among refugees, such as arbitrary arrest/detention, evictions and forcible returns.

- Donors should encourage the establishment of **fair, clear and affordable procedures for Syrian refugees to register and remain legally in Lebanon** until there is a peace to return to in Syria. They should also urge Lebanon to ratify the UN Refugee Convention and support it to adopt fair national procedures to assess refugee claims.

- **Providing refugees with greater economic and legal security** would increase their spending power, boost the economy of host communities, create jobs, reduce the concentration of Syrian labour in low paid, informal jobs and lessen the 'race to the bottom' in wages and workers' rights.

- By **making it easier for Syrian males to move without fear of arbitrary arrest, detention and other abuses**, authorities can ease Syrian women and girls' exposure to harassment, exploitation and denigration.

- Supporting **empowerment of refugee and host communities, including through community security programming** – can help to ensure stronger accountability for how security is provided and foster trust between communities, informal actors and authorities to identify and solve security challenges together. Such approaches can prove highly effective even in contexts affected by hard security challenges.

- Beyond pressing for the protection of refugees' rights in Lebanon, **donor governments must themselves take greater responsibility for hosting Syrian refugees**. This would be a concrete way to support Lebanon and would also enhance their credibility when promoting refugee rights. They should also redouble efforts to work towards a just peace in Syria.

Conflict and gender sensitivity

What are the challenges?

Just two per cent of Lebanese respondents to a 2017 survey said there was 'no tension' between refugee and host communities in their area.[4] **Resentment from Lebanese host community members towards Syrian refugees** was apparent in both our research locations (Wadi Khaled and Bar Elias). Examples included tension between Syrian and Lebanese students over nationality issues and arguments over noisy children and unpaid bills.

> **"My son was standing on the road and young Lebanese men said some racist slurs to him because he is Syrian."**
>
> Male Syrian refugee in Wadi Khaled

Most refugees reside in host communities and their situation is hard enough, but others live in informal tented settlements **that are isolated, overpopulated, unsafe** and lack services.

> **"A Lebanese guy entered the camp with a gun and started shouting at us and insulting people. We couldn't do anything about it."**
>
> Syrian man living in an informal settlement, Bar Elias

Socio-economic issues underlie most tensions between refugees and host communities. In Bar Elias and Wadi Khaled, **jobs were the number one concern**, and elsewhere in Lebanon, there have even been some small-scale protests by Lebanese workers against the hiring of Syrians. The refugee influx has placed a heavy burden on infrastructure, including farmland used to house refugees, while a closed Syrian border has shut down trade routes that were essential for the local economy. In Wadi Khaled, we heard that financial reasons had pushed some young people to join ISIS.

Syrians also complained about **exploitation and poor working conditions**. In fact, our research depicts a 'race to the bottom', whereby employers exploit the vulnerability of Syrian labourers to offer poor wages and conditions, and this also worsens the working conditions and job security they offer to Lebanese workers.

Despite international efforts to balance assistance across communities, many Lebanese expressed resentment that Syrian refugees "receive more than us" and are "subsidised" by international aid.

> **"Syrians came and they get international aid and they get housing and help from different sources. So they are able to work for lower pay than the Lebanese."**
>
> Lebanese man, Wadi Khaled

> **"There are no NGOs that might help Lebanese people."**
>
> Lebanese woman, Bar Elias

There is a corresponding narrative among Syrian refugees suggesting that Lebanese are benefiting from the misfortune of Syrians. They (and, to a lesser degree, Lebanese host communities) also expressed **confusion and resentment about how aid is allocated**.

> **"How come one family can eat and the other can't?"**
>
> Syrian activist, Bar Elias

> **"We cannot understand the criteria for who gets aid and who doesn't."**
>
> Syrian man, Wadi Khaled

Despite attempts to strike the right balance, **aid allocation is not always conflict-sensitive**: NGOs often feel

pressure to select beneficiaries according to donors' preferred ratios rather than needs assessments. Palestinian refugees in Lebanon – over 460,000 of whom are registered with the UN[5] – can fall between inter-agency gaps.

> **"We don't make this distinction. We work in vulnerable places, marginalised areas. The most vulnerable right now are Syrian refugees; so sometimes we do have more Syrian than Lebanese [beneficiaries]."**
>
> NGO worker, Beirut

Further challenges highlighted by communities include the **strain on infrastructure and services** such as waste management, electricity, healthcare, education and road systems.

> **"The municipality does not have the means to provide all those services to the people."**
>
> Municipality representative, Bar Elias

Whereas Wadi Khaled has always struggled with access to water, electricity, jobs, education and healthcare, some interviewees in Bar Elias saw the strains on waste management, traffic systems and increasing rent and school costs as new. In particular, **poorer Lebanese have seen their conditions worsen**.

For their part, local authorities noted that management and service delivery challenges result from the strain created by lack of resources.

However, deeper analysis reveals that tensions revolve around long-standing **structural issues such as mismanagement, weak governance and corruption**, which was highlighted by participants in both towns.

"The Lebanese say that we have a better life… But how can they understand that our country is at war and we are living in a foreign country, with no foreseeable future for our children?"

Syrian woman living in an informal settlement near Bar Elias

Daily life inside a chicken farm in Akkar that was turned into a residential building by its owner. It hosts around 40 Syrian refugee families.
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"You need to know someone to be able to receive any help."

Lebanese woman, Wadi Khaled

Such governance problems are not just a local issue, but connect to national politics and the sectarian structure of the state. Progress will remain slow if political elites can succeed by blaming Lebanon's challenges on refugees and failing to provide a more coherent response strategy. With aid strongly focused on relief, there has been **insufficient emphasis on wider empowerment, governance and conflict prevention priorities such as livelihoods and human security**.

In both Wadi Khaled and Bar Elias, **gender roles consistently emerged as a source of tension** between refugee and host communities, often framed as part of discussions about worsening community morals.

"We are a conservative community. Girls here do not go out of the house, neither to coffee shops nor to neighbours. After the Syrian crisis, things have changed."

NGO worker, Wadi Khaled

Lebanese men and women shared critical perceptions about Syrian women's so called 'loose morals'. Stereotypes about Syrian women included that they took Lebanese husbands away from their wives and that they contributed to moral degradation as they were more open to divorcing. However, our research underlines that **Syrian women face a precarious economic and legal situation, exacerbated by the heightened insecurity facing male Syrian refugees**. Because of limitations to Syrian men's movements, gender norms are shifting and Syrian women are having to work to provide for the household, and move around unaccompanied.

Positives to build on

- Despite the evident tension, we also found solidarity between Lebanese and Syrian respondents in both locations, founded on the long history and inter-connectedness of the communities. When the first influx of refugees arrived in Wadi Khaled at the beginning of the Syrian crisis, they were warmly welcomed by the community, many of whom invited them to stay in their houses. **Solidarity still exists and can be built on.**

- In some ways **the refugee influx has previously boosted the economy** through the opening of restaurants and shops and increased consumers for goods. Fostering further mutual benefits could improve inter-community relations.

"My son was sick and I took him to the hospital… my Lebanese neighbour paid for my son's treatment."

Syrian refugee, Bar Elias

- Providing an opportunity and **space for communities to meet and come together** appears to mitigate tensions and can help build bridges.

- The **strong tribal system** in Wadi Khaled was a resource for solving problems, and the threat of being shunned kept conflicts to a minimum.

- The shift in international programmes from exclusive targeting of refugees towards more **balanced support that includes host communities and longer-term programming**, for example under the Lebanon Host Community Support Programme (LHSP), helps address the tensions over aid going exclusively to one community.[6]

- **Infrastructure and rehabilitation projects that benefit both communities** – such as projects that rehabilitate Lebanese people's houses, garages or other property to host Syrian families – were seen to be indirectly useful to reducing tensions.

A group of Syrian and Lebanese children play football against each other for the first time inside Al Wadi football field. Wadi Khaled, north Lebanon.
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A Lebanese mother of four inside her home in Bar Elias, Bekaa Valley. She hosts Syrian refugees and Lebanese activists to work together on community cohesion.
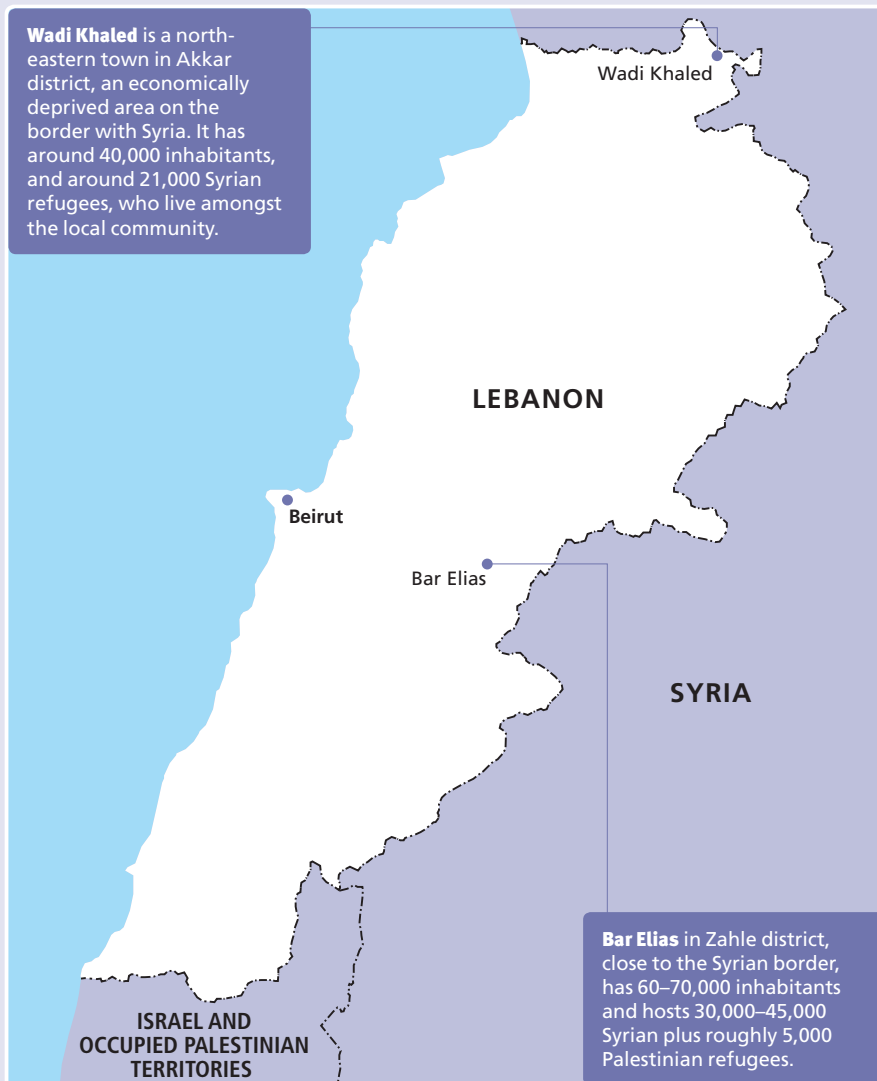© DIEGO IBARRA SÁNCHEZ/SAFERWORLD

Key recommendations

■ To help sustain peace and achieve lasting results, **assistance to Lebanon needs to take conflict and gender sensitivity further**. Building on conflict and gender analysis, programmes should explicitly seek to tackle issues that are causing tensions or risk provoking conflict, such as harmful gender norms, a lack of livelihoods, limited interaction and inter-dependence between communities and human security deficits.

■ While more resources are clearly needed, especially at municipal levels, conflict-sensitive approaches could **ease confusion and resentment over aid allocation**. Categorising beneficiaries as 'refugee' and 'host community' may not always be the best method to target the most vulnerable, and can entrench resent-ment. Working through inclusive community structures to assess priorities, agree criteria for allocating assistance, improve communication about decisions, ensuring effective feedback and follow up mechanisms could all be important in minimising tensions.

"Sometimes projects create a space for people from different backgrounds to meet and interact when they wouldn't have had the chance to do so otherwise. There is a prejudice but they realise their similarities."

NGO worker, Bar Elias

■ Programmes in all sectors should **support interaction and seek to build cohesion between communities at every opportunity** – in order to dispel misperceptions and restore trust.

■ **Aid must encourage and support progress on long-term, structural challenges** just as much as immediate relief. It must support the civil and political rights of refugees and host communities to participate in debates around decisions that affect them – whether taken by local or national authorities or aid agencies – and to hold these actors to account. Local NGOs raise this as a priority they cannot address due to donors' constraints. Such measures are vital for fostering better management of scarce resources, downward accountability and social cohesion and stability for the future.

■ **Promoting economic partnerships between refugees and host communities** can work to change the perception that refugees are a drain on, or are in competition with, host communities, as can investing to take the strain off infrastructure and services – addressing congestion, poor waste management, health and education services – in a way that benefits both communities.

■ Given the security constraints facing Syrian men, Syrian women have had to change their behaviour, bringing them into conflict with dominant social and gender norms and increasing their vulnerability. In response, **supporting efforts to discuss and challenge gender norms, building on positive shifts, and improve socio-economic opportunities for both Syrian and host women**, could bolster their security and well-being, while sustaining positive changes.

Wadi Khaled is a north-eastern town in Akkar district, an economically deprived area on the border with Syria. It has around 40,000 inhabitants, and around 21,000 Syrian refugees, who live amongst the local community.

Wadi Khaled

LEBANON

Beirut

Bar Elias

SYRIA

Bar Elias in Zahle district, close to the Syrian border, has 60–70,000 inhabitants and hosts 30,000–45,000 Syrian plus roughly 5,000 Palestinian refugees.

ISRAEL AND OCCUPIED PALESTINIAN TERRITORIES

About Saferworld

Saferworld is an independent international organisation working to prevent violent conflict and build safer lives. Saferworld looks at crises and threats from the perspectives of people in the worst-affected places. We promote action that is initiated by the communities themselves, and that effectively addresses the real causes of conflict-related crises and threats. We also aim to promote long-term peace through conducting analysis and setting up policy dialogue with governments, international organisations and civil society, on peace, terrorism and stability and responses to forced displacement.
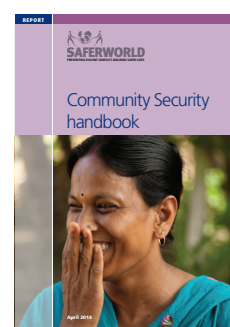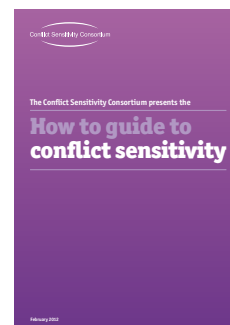
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About LCPS

The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies is an independently managed, non-partisan, non-profit, non-governmental think tank whose mission is to produce and advocate policies that improve governance in Lebanon and the Arab region.

Notes

1 The number '1.5 million' is from the 2017–2020 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP). However, official figures by the UNHCR place the number of registered refugees at 1,001,051 as of September 2017 (Mercy Corps (2017), *Quick Facts: What You Need to Know About the Syria Crisis*). The discrepancy is likely an estimation of the number of refugees who are unregistered with UNHCR, as the UNHCR stopped registering new arrivals in May 2015. Because of this, the number of registered Syrian refugees has actually, officially, dropped from 1.017 million in 2016 to 1.001 million in 2017 (2017 VASyR).

2 HRW, 2017, 'The Gaps in Lebanon's New Refugee Policy', March 14 2017, Available at: https://www.hrw.org/news/2017/03/14/gaps-lebanons-new-refugee-policy. Last accessed on 27 February 2018.

3 ALEF & PAX Policy Brief, 'Reinforce human rights as an essential element in cooperation between the EU and Lebanon,' July 2017. Available at: https://www.paxforpeace.nl/publications/all-publications/alef-pax-policy-brief-july-2017, p 1.

4 ARK, 'Narrative Report: Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon: Wave I', July 2017.

5 There are 463,664 UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. This number is notoriously unreliable, given uncertain numbers of Palestinian refugees still living in Lebanon, additional 'Non-ID' Palestinians, and more than 30,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria now living in Lebanon. UNRWA Statistics Bulletin 2016 in UNRWA Annual Operational Report 2016, pp 123 and 132–34, available at: https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/annual-operational-report-2016

6 LHSP is part of the UNDP response to the refugee crisis in Lebanon. It targets the poorest communities with a higher risk of tension and conflict. It is integrated into the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) 2017–2020.

Publications

For more on operationalising conflict-sensitive and community security approaches, see our *How to guide to conflict sensitivity* and *Community Security handbook*.

The Conflict Sensitivity Consortium presents the
How to guide to conflict sensitivity
February 2012

SAFERWORLD
REPORT
Community Security handbook
April 2016

For more on alternatives to securitised approaches, see our studies on constructive alternatives – *Syria: Playing into their hands*, *Blown back*, *Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding*.

Syria
Playing into their hands
Regime and international roles in fuelling violence and fundamentalism in the Syrian war
DAVID KEEN
SAFERWORLD

SAFERWORLD
REPORT
Blown back
Lessons from counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding in Yemen
Larry Attree
January 2016

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Dilemmas of counter-terror, stabilisation and statebuilding
A discussion paper