



SACD Analysis

May 2020

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Impact of Covid-19 on Syrian Refugees: Lebanon

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic has severely affected numerous countries across the world. The loss of life, paralysis of the healthcare systems, severe restrictions on the movement of people and goods due to social distancing and other restrictive measures employed to stop the spread of the virus, have become the norm for societies on all continents. The impact of the pandemic on the economic and social spheres is yet to materialize in full force.

Amidst the crisis, there is one population that is particularly vulnerable: refugees. Exposed to the rampant spread of the virus in overcrowded camps, where social distancing measures are near impossible to implement, already living in poverty and with almost non-existent economic opportunities, and subject to discrimination and hostility, refugees are extremely exposed to the brutal impact of the pandemic.

This is why we at the Syrian Association for Citizens' Dignity decided to produce a series of analysis of this impact on Syrian refugees in countries which host the largest numbers of Syrians. The first such analysis will focus on Lebanon, where the situation facing Syrian refugees was dire even before the pandemic struck, due to the economic crisis rocking the country.

The Syrians who fled to Lebanon from the death and destruction in their homeland, were already facing the repercussions of the Lebanon's economic crisis, which severely affected their ability to earn a basic income even at the subsistence level. The collapse of Lebanese pound led to a rise in the prices of basic goods and services, on top of the increases in rent that refugees are paying for accommodation and the lands leased to set up their camps.

This hardship added to a precarious situation refugees faced as the pandemic struck, which manifested in an increased threat of the spread of the virus in crowded camps or draconian and discriminatory implementation of measures by municipal authorities in charge of areas where refugees live. Very often, Syrian refugees were forbidden from leaving their places of residence even after the authorities lifted the restriction of movement on the Lebanese.

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In this briefing, the researchers of the Syrian Association for Citizen Dignity conducted interviews with Syrian refugees in different regions of Lebanon to capture the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Syrian refugees there, how its consequences were reflected in their lives, and tried to present a possible scenario of what the future impact could be if the current situation continued and/or got worse. Derived from this analysis are some recommendations to the international community on alleviating what are potentially dire outcomes of this crisis.

Backdrop of the crisis

Since October 2019, the economic situation in Lebanon has taken several drastic turns for the worse. The cabinet initially reacted by approving a new tax package, which has sparked demonstrations and strikes in various regions of the country. It was followed by the suspension of operations in most of the Lebanese banks, which in turn fuelled strikes and new protests leading to confrontations with the security forces¹, in which one of the demonstrators was killed. The Prime Minister resigned² days later, but his resignation did not quell the protests throughout Lebanon.

During this period a large segment of the country's business was disrupted, and huge amounts of capital exited Lebanon. In early March, the new government announced it was unable to pay the portion of the public debt accumulated for years³. The crisis coincided with the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic.

As the virus spread across the country and the societal crisis deepened, the pandemic and issues arising from its spread were weaponised by political parties in their continuous struggle for political power⁴. The resulting instability only made economic matters worse. The Lebanese pound collapsed, causing a sharp rise in the prices of basic goods and services. The Lebanese currency plummeted by more than 150%, which raised the consumer price index by more than 20% at the beginning of April 2020⁵. In the following weeks, Lebanon, as other countries around the world, imposed a number of restrictive measures aiming to contain the virus and the resulting closures of economic activity. As the virus spread, the pressure increased both on Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees. Some 1000 cases

¹ Lebanon protests explained, 17 January 2020:

<https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/201911/lebanon-protests-explained/>

² Lebanon PM Saad Hariri resigns as crisis takes violent turn, 29 October 2019:

<https://www.dw.com/en/lebanon-pm-saad-hariri-resigns-as-crisis-takes-violent-turn/a-51037753>

³ President Diab announces the suspension of the March 9 entitlement to Eurobond and the reconstruction of the debt, 07 March 2020:

<http://www.pcm.gov.lb/arabic/subpg.aspx?pageid=17328>

⁴ Corona virus: infections in Lebanon, Italy and Israel for the first time and an increase in the number of infected people in Iran and South Korea [in Arabic], BBC Arabic, 21 February 2020:

<https://www.bbc.com/arabic/world-51588830>

⁵ Consumer Price Index Chart, Consultation and Research Institute: <https://crilebanon.com/>

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were confirmed so far across Lebanon.⁶ There were no reported deaths among the Syrian refugees⁷, although several positive cases were recorded in the Palestinian refugee camps.

The repercussions on the Syrian refugees

When such complex economic, political and health crises strikes, the effects will be most visible on the most vulnerable groups within society.⁸ Syrian refugees in Lebanon are such a group. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the number of Syrians in Lebanon exceeds 900,000⁹, 80% of them are women and children, and they account for 16% of the total number of Syrian refugees in the world.

The continuing crisis in Lebanon, in all its complexity, has affected Syrian refugees in the following ways:

I. Livelihoods

More than two thirds of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the poverty line¹⁰. With the beginning of the strike and the lockdown, their situation got much worse. Most of the refugees living in camps make a subsistence living; they pay for their basic needs like food or accommodation with what they can earn that day. Their dire situation was personified in the death of a man who burned himself alive because he was unable to pay for food and basic needs of his family, after losing his job in one of the workshops.¹¹ As the economic crisis deepened, the whole country suffered from a sharp rise in prices, especially for food commodities, which made the situation catastrophic for the most of Syrian refugees. No solution to the economic downturn is on the horizon, and the prices are likely to increase even more during the coming period.

6 Republic of Lebanon Ministry of Public Health: <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en/Media/view/317211//%D8%A7%D984%D983%D988%D981%D98A%D8%AF-19->

7 Resources of SACD and civil society organizations in Lebanon

8 101 Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis Volume II Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, pp25: <https://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi/Pages/publications/books/20182019-/20190701101--facts-and-figures-on-the-syrian-refugee-crisis-volume-2.aspx>

9 UNHCR database: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria>

10 A study conducted by the UNHCR showed that 71% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below poverty line: <https://bit.ly/2AEHucr>

11 Refugees of Lebanon at the time of Corona [in Arabic], The New Arab, 17 April 2020: <https://bit.ly/3dj2eog>

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According to a study done by a Dutch NGO Pax for Peace¹², 85% of Syrian and Syrian-Palestinian respondents (200 out of 234 respondents) answered that they had lost their main source of income, due to the lockdown measures making it impossible to work: their income has been severely reduced or disappeared. All areas of Lebanon seemed to be equally affected by job income loss.

Ibrahim, 40, displaced from the southern countryside of Homs to the Lebanese region of Aarsal, says: "We are suffering a great crisis that put us under the poverty line with the scarcity of humanitarian aid. I have five children and our living conditions are very difficult. The United Nations assistance has decreased, because it is given to us in Lebanese pounds and with high prices, this is no longer enough."

Jumana, from Homs, who is displaced in the Lebanese villages of the Bekaa Valley: "I have to pay the rent for a house for three months in advance and I cannot afford it. The rent has increased, it is obscene now, and we do not know what the coming days will bring."¹³

Zaid, displaced from the countryside of Aleppo: "The crisis in Lebanon started before the pandemic, and it has affected all of the people, Syrians and Lebanese. The biggest problem is that the Syrians are no longer able to pay home rents due to the cessation of work. There are many homeowners who have been patient with tenants for months, but the situation has prolonged on both sides, so they now have to kick the Syrians out of the houses."¹⁴

II. Legal implications

Most Syrians in Lebanon do not have a legal residency document (74% at the end of 2018)¹⁵ and less than 1%¹⁶ have a work permit, as most Syrian refugees cannot obtain residency due to the high cost of the permit. With the spread of the pandemic and the increased tension in the security situation in Lebanon as a result of the recent events, the legal status has become more important than ever for the refugees. Visiting hospitals, following up with aid organizations, and the need to move around from one place to another makes the need for such documents even higher than before. However, the crisis has made the possibility of attaining the legal status in the country much more difficult. Most refugees fear to report to official institutions, including

¹² COVID-19 in Lebanon: Impact on Refugees and Host Communities, Pax for Peace, 22 April 2020: <https://bit.ly/3g6SVKg>

¹³ From the interviews conducted by SACD with Syrian refugees in Lebanon

¹⁴ From the interviews conducted by SACD with Syrian refugees in Lebanon

¹⁵ Facts & Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis Volume II Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs, pp.52: <https://bit.ly/3cCOR2h>

¹⁶ *ibid*

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hospitals, for fear of detention or deportation. This is despite the fact that the Lebanese government issued a decision to stop the deportations of people with health conditions, but the decree was not practically implemented on the ground, as several Syrian families were expelled as a result of going to pharmacies to buy simple medicines such as pain relievers.¹⁷

According to a study by Access Center for Human Rights, at least nine camps in different towns in the Bekaa region have been raided by various security agencies on an almost daily basis without any legal justification, as their registration papers are searched with UNHCR and legal residence papers¹⁸.

Siham, a displaced person from Damascus countryside: "We are being severely restricted by some of the locals who are close to our camp. They have prevented us from leaving the camp to purchase even the basic stuff. If things continue like this, we have no choice but to return to Syria despite what we know about Syria."¹⁹

Samia, from the Daraa countryside, now in Aarsal: "We are afraid to move or visit hospitals, we don't know what will happen. I fear for my children and there is nothing I can do, I feel helpless."

"Because of the heightened security, leaving the house has become an unbearable risk. The families have no choice but to have one of their family members to risk going out and secure the necessities of the house, and sometimes supplies for several families," says Leila from Hama countryside, now in Aarsal²⁰.

Added hardship with Covid-19

Syrian refugees are particularly vulnerable to the crisis caused by the collapse of the economy and the Covid-19 pandemic due to the fact that women and children make up the large majority of the refugee population. The situation makes it more difficult for them to move freely and makes them more vulnerable to harassment when they do get out.

The measures enacted to contain the spread of the virus are in many cases used to target the refugees directly, as 21 municipalities imposed

17 Buying Panadol causes a municipal investigation and expulsion of a family: Syrian refugees are trapped between Corona and destitution [in Arabic], The Legal Agenda, 8 April 2020 <https://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=6663>

18 Lebanon: Investigating the situation of Syrian refugees under COVID-19 pandemic, Access Center for Human Rights, April 2020: <https://bit.ly/2zVd4T7>

19 From the interviews conducted by SACD with Syrian refugees in Lebanon

20 From the interviews conducted by SACD with Syrian refugees in Lebanon

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discriminatory restrictions against the Syrian refugees.²¹ Bans on movement and gathering were in some areas imposed on Syrians before they were extended to the Lebanese, and most municipalities designated only one person to go out to buy goods to supply the needs of all camp residents.

Non-governmental organizations working in the medical field announced that the number of beneficiaries decreased by 80% due to restrictions and barriers imposed on them.²² In practical terms, the main local powerful figures asserted full control over Syrian lives and their affairs. Clans, political party officials and other power groups took place of the official institutions tasked with combating the virus, which increased discrimination of the refugees based on sectarianism and political positions.²³

The key priorities of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are currently related to managing the basic living conditions, as they are struggling to secure a daily living, which has pushed the protection and prevention measures against COVID-19 to the background. The struggle to secure the basic needs has become especially difficult with the decline in support from some of the organisations that worked with the Syrian refugees, due to limited access due to the government restrictions, or to poor financing, or lack of funds related to the current economic crisis, especially that the banks imposed restrictions on withdrawing funds in addition to obliging institutions and individuals to withdraw in Lebanese pounds, which is hampering the access to funds for many aid organisations.

By the end of April, no cases of COVID-19 were recorded among the Syrian refugees in the camps, and a few cases were recorded of Syrians living in cities and outside the camps. Although UNHCR pledged to conduct free tests for Syrian refugees and expand its awareness and relief activities targeting cleaning materials and sterilization, it still lacked the capacity to cover the increasing needs in the camps and only covered a small portion.²⁴

According to the ACHR report, UNHCR faces many challenges, from a lack of financial resources that is a major challenge - UNHCR is calling on donors to increase funding to meet the growing demands of refugees beyond UNHCR's financial capacity - to the difficulty of continuing other medical assistance programs after the reallocation of financial resources to be serve in the COVID-19 prevention plan.²⁵

21 Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in COVID-19 Response, Human Rights Watch:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/04/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>

22 Lebanon: Investigating the situation of Syrian refugees under COVID-19 pandemic, Access Center for Human Rights, April 2020: <https://bit.ly/2zVd4T7>

23 Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in COVID-19 Response, Human Rights Watch:

<https://www.hrw.org/news/2020/02/04/lebanon-refugees-risk-covid-19-response>

24 UNHCR Syria Refugee Regional Response:

https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71#_ga=2.117667465.1417388621.15899294121446928877.1589929412-

25 Lebanon: Investigating the situation of Syrian refugees under COVID-19 pandemic, Access Center

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Khadr, a displaced person from Homs, is in a camp on the Syrian-Lebanese border: "Yesterday, one of the benefactors donated supplies to 70 out of 300 families. What are the rest supposed to do? The number of people who do not receive help from United Nations and aid charities is increasing every day."²⁶

What next?

Considering the current conditions in Lebanon and the reality of life of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the likely scenario in the near future involves the continuation of the economic crisis in Lebanon, coupled with the likely increase in cases of Covid-19 infection. The indebtedness of Syrian families will rise in light of the deteriorating economic situation and the weak humanitarian aid that reaches them. The weak government response to the pandemic and absence of any coherent strategy to tackle the economic crisis is likely to lead to further deterioration of the economic dynamics, which is bound to impact the security situation.

In light of this scenario, the Syrian refugees will continue to be one of the most prominent pressure points used in the political, sectarian and economic discourse as part of the problem. The president of Lebanon has compared the presence of refugees to the pandemic and this comparison is bound to deepen the already rampant dehumanisation of Syrian refugees.²⁸⁻²⁷ In his interview with the Russian outlet Sputnik in early May, the Lebanese President Michel Aoun stressed that "his country needs international medical and financial support because of the catastrophic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic"²⁹ on the country's economy, made worse, according to Aoun, by the fact that Lebanon incurred nearly 30 billion US dollars in costs as a result of the "presence of 1.5 million displaced Syrians in the country." Aoun repeated this in his meeting with the International Support Group for Lebanon and asserted that his country is facing the worst crises it has known in the last 75 years, created by the triumvirate of factors: the Syrian refugees, the economic downturn and Covid-19. In the eyes of Lebanon's highest office, the Syrian refugees constituted the same threat a deadly virus.³⁰

²⁶ From the interviews conducted by SACD with Syrian refugees in Lebanon

²⁷ The Lebanese President stresses that his country needs international support because of the implications of Corona [in Arabic], Al-Sharq, 4 May 2020: <https://bit.ly/3e2nhf5>

²⁸ A meeting in Baabda Palace for the International Support Group for Lebanon. The President of the Republic: The comprehensive economic and financial plan for the state is nearing completion [in Arabic], 6 April 2020: <https://bit.ly/2zeJfgd>

²⁹ Statement by the Presidency of the Lebanese Republic, 4 April 2020: <https://bit.ly/2LHQakv>

³⁰ Aoun calls on international community to support Lebanon to avoid economic collapse 8 April 2020: <https://bit.ly/2XilyKI>

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Although the Lebanese authorities have pledged not to deport Syrian refugees for lack of valid residency if they have to take the COVID-19 test, it is not at all clear how this may change once the pandemic is declared as over. There is a founded fear among the Syrians that they will be arrested or deported after this crisis, as authorities are aware of their information and locations.

While the government security forces are bound to be focusing on the deteriorating security situation as a result of the increasing protests, the pressure on the Syrians is bound to increase. As a result, we will likely witness more incidents and violations against the Syrians in Lebanon, beyond the current trend of expulsions, harassment and sectarianist abuse directed at them, possibly leading to direct attacks against the Syrian refugee camps and more widespread violence, which could threaten thousands of lives.

Such grim prospects in Lebanon are bound to lead to waves of forced return, with estimates of people who would chose to go back to an unsafe, dangerous Syria in the thousands. This would put their lives in direct danger of the ongoing killings, arbitrary arrest or enforced disappearance by the Syrian security forces in government-held areas.

This process has already started. At the beginning of this month, dozens of Syrian families gathered for long days at the Syrian-Lebanese border, desiring to return to Syria because of the bad conditions they are suffering in Lebanon. Some of them bribed their way into the uncertainty of Syria, but most were forced to turn back.³¹

According to a last year's report by the SACD, which interviewed more than 100 Syrians who were forced to return to Syria under similar circumstances, more than two thirds were planning to leave again and this time permanently, due to the security threats they faced from the regime and the lack of basic living conditions. Their goal was to try to reach Europe this time. If the numbers of those forced to leave Lebanon were to increase, the most probable direct consequence would be that the attempts to reach Europe are bound to increase, even if the payments to smugglers are exorbitant and the risks are high. The smuggling routes are already being re-activated. Increasingly, the Syrian refugees prefer to engage in such an adventure than to stay in Lebanon in the current circumstances.

31 Syrians are stuck on the Lebanese-Syrian border, the Assad regime prevents their entry and [Lebanon does not allow their return! [in Arabic
Orient News, 22 April 2020: <https://bit.ly/2zQAWqS>

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To avoid this dangerous scenario, which is bound to impact Syrian refugees most severely, but is very probably going to reverberate beyond Lebanon, Syria and the region, the international community must take notice and act promptly. The main donors to the UNHCR and international NGOs who are providing aid to Syrians in Lebanon must be aware of the implications of such developments as they face their own economic challenges resulting from the pandemic. International aid is often the first and, politically, the easiest item to reduce when facing the pressures the Covid-19 exerted on all economies, but the consequences of cutting the aid to Syrian refugees in Lebanon would be far reaching, as described above.

The response should go in the opposite direction, with the direct aid to the refugees in fact being increased to alleviate the additional hardship they are facing as a result of restrictions and the resulting loss of employment opportunities. It is crucial that such support through the currently available channels is maintained and strengthened to help them secure accommodation, rent for the homes and lands on which the camps were built, in addition to covering their basic needs for goods and services. If this does not happen, the likely direct impact would amount to a de facto forced return into unsafe conditions of regime-held areas in Syria.

The economic aid to the Lebanese government to alleviate the raging economic crisis is of paramount importance to alleviate the economic hardship on the local population, which will in turn reduce the political manipulation of the refugee issue and dehumanisation of Syrians as one of the main problems facing the Lebanese society. Donors should also look at three ways of working with the Lebanese government to overcome the practical difficulties of aid provision resulting from financial restrictions placed on the aid organisations receiving support from donors for re-distribution in various forms to the refugees.

In addition, the international community needs to work with the Lebanese government to improve the security situation of the refugees, to facilitate the release of Syrian detainees in Lebanese prisons who were arrested on the grounds that they violated the residency condition during Covid-19; to ease the movement restrictions on the Syrians in Lebanon, to allow them to benefit from medical services and early examinations, and to interact positively with official recommendations and prevention programs on Covid-19; and to increase health awareness and health support for Syrian refugees in their current locations, especially for the most vulnerable groups, such as the elderly and the chronically ill.

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Lastly, the international community must act to support the Lebanese government in facing the burdens of hosting Syrian refugees, while at the same time making firm demands for discrimination against Syrian refugees to be curtailed through legal means, and for the government to decisively intervene to prevent discriminatory treatment. This includes requesting the Lebanese government to allow the registration of refugees who are not registered in Lebanon with international organizations, allowing them to obtain the necessary services and support from international bodies.



Syrian Association for
CITIZENS' DIGNITY

SACD is a civil rights popular movement established by Syrians for Syrians. It works to promote, protect and secure the rights of displaced Syrians.

✉ info@syacd.org
📷 [SYrianACD](#)