

Lebanese are Tired of Hosting Syrian Refugees

by [Edward Gabriel \(/experts/edward-gabriel\)](/experts/edward-gabriel)

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

[Edward Gabriel \(/experts/edward-gabriel\)](/experts/edward-gabriel)

Edward Gabriel is a former US Ambassador to Morocco and currently President of the American Task Force for Lebanon.



Brief Analysis

A delegation of the [American Task Force for Lebanon \(https://www.atfl.org/\)](https://www.atfl.org/) (ATFL) just returned from a trip to Lebanon, where it met with over a hundred representatives of government, business, civil society, and academia while also visiting a Syrian refugee settlement in the Bekaa Valley. During the trip, I and other members of the delegation were struck not only by the deteriorating humanitarian crisis in Lebanon but also by how many [Lebanese blame the strains of their country \(https://madison.com/news/world/in-lebanon-syrian-refugees-face-new-pressure-to-go-home/article_78d6e3f1-c41e-538b-97f2-d3096e591182.html\)](https://madison.com/news/world/in-lebanon-syrian-refugees-face-new-pressure-to-go-home/article_78d6e3f1-c41e-538b-97f2-d3096e591182.html) on the significant number of Syrian refugees who remain in the country. Without the partnership of the United States, Lebanon, and the international community, we fear these suffering refugees and host communities will become even bigger losers in a larger regional conflict.

Among those with whom we discussed the issue, we found a prevalent belief in a number of factual errors regarding the refugee situation, which can lead to increasing tension in the country. One fact is indisputable: Lebanon's [Syrian refugees, displaced persons, and Palestinian refugees \(https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugees_of_the_Syrian_Civil_War\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Refugees_of_the_Syrian_Civil_War) from Syria—numbering more than 1.5 million in total—are the equivalent of the entire population of Canada and most of Mexico flowing into the United States within a short period of time. By comparison, [the United States resettled 62 Syrian refugees last year \(https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/\)](https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/01/30/key-facts-about-refugees-to-the-u-s/).

Some say the refugees are getting so much aid money that they want to stay in Lebanon. This is not true; [most Syrian refugees survive on less than 3 dollars a day \(https://madison.com/news/world/in-lebanon-syrian-refugees-face-new-pressure-to-go-home/article_78d6e3f1-c41e-538b-97f2-d3096e591182.html\)](https://madison.com/news/world/in-lebanon-syrian-refugees-face-new-pressure-to-go-home/article_78d6e3f1-c41e-538b-97f2-d3096e591182.html). UNHCR reported to us that the average refugee family pays more to lease land for their temporary shelters from local land owners than they receive from UNHCR. One refugee mother we visited said, “The Lebanese were welcoming at first, but now they don’t want us here anymore. I want to go back.” A [UNHCR survey \(https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63310\)](https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/63310) confirms this sentiment: 89 percent of the refugees polled want to go back home, about 5 percent want to go to third countries, and about 5 percent give other responses. For those who want to return, their principal hesitation about going back is security, both personal and economic. [Lebanese also feel as though Syrians are taking jobs away \(https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-refugees-tension/hostility-grows-towards-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-idUSKCN1B8128\)](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-lebanon-refugees-tension/hostility-grows-towards-syrian-refugees-in-lebanon-idUSKCN1B8128) from them since

Syrians will work for less pay. According to an NGO in Lebanon that we met with, Lebanon was creating about 3,800 new jobs per year before 2011. Since the refugee crisis, Lebanon has actually created about 10,000 jobs per year, including a net increase for Lebanese teachers and other skills.

On the other hand, the Central Bank Governor said that Syrian refugees impose a **direct cost of about \$1 billion a year and an indirect cost of \$3.5 billion on Lebanon (<https://fanack.com/lebanon/economy/lebanon-syrian-refugees-cost-the-economy-4-5-billion-every-year/>)**, which is much more than the \$1.1 billion received in 2018, although this does not include economic multiplier effects from donor aid.

Government security officials told us that the greatly inflated number of crimes attributed to the refugees has actually increased by less than 1 percent. Most Syrians are arrested not for petty or more serious crimes but are instead detained for not having proper paperwork. Since about 190,000 refugees who returned to Syria were not registered under UNHCR, their 'crime' was attempting to enter Lebanon or transit to Syria without proper documentation.

In informal discussions with UN officials, we were told the time may be ripe to create incentives in Syria to attract some refugees home. Although initially these efforts may only be marginally effective, UN officials believe Russia and European countries should discuss amnesty from military service for returning refugees with the Syrian regime, revising laws to make it easier for refugees to reclaim and rebuild their homes. It is also vital that the UNHCR have access to returned refugees inside of Syria to address their needs.

However, the UN and international donors also emphasized that significant refugee relocation from Lebanon will not occur without a political settlement that guarantees safe return and opens the door to reconstruction monies in Syria. Several American and UN diplomats added that **this would not happen with Assad in power (<https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2019/03/where-will-money-rebuild-syria-come/584935/>)**, at least for several years. In the meantime, one suggestion to handle reconstruction was to release frozen stabilization monies for projects in eastern Syria, where U.S. forces are already present to oversee reconstruction efforts.

The growing crisis in Lebanon appears unsustainable without significant intervention. It will require U.S. leadership to find solutions that not only provide aid and calls for the safe and voluntary return of the refugees, but also examine other proposals that hold the potential to ease the burden on all parties.

Among the efforts that should be on the table, the international community, including Russia and Europe—and eventually the United States—should press Syria to consider proposals that make it easier for refugees who want to voluntarily return. These refugees must have their safety guaranteed and access to international support. They must know also be assured they can return to their homes and those of military age will not face conscription.

The United States should release stabilization monies in areas of eastern Syria under its protection to rebuild there. Resettlement efforts should prioritize refugees from Lebanon who want to move to eastern Syria voluntarily.

While the international community must encourage the eventual return of refugees to Syria, international donors should also join with U.S. efforts in providing aid to Lebanon to support host communities and the refugees. Such aid should reflect the actual cost incurred by the Lebanese economy, which is strapped with burgeoning budget deficits.

At the same time, the Lebanese government should take responsibility to tamp down the increasing negative reactions by the Lebanese towards the refugees. Negative rhetoric by government leaders only fuel the anti-refugee sentiment. Government leaders instead should balance such comments with an understanding that they support the safe and voluntary return of refugees according to international standards, and in the meantime call on international donors to support programs that assist host communities and refugees in this plight.

Lebanon and the United States need to show each other there are win-win solutions that benefit all parties, and together they can work towards a fair, just, voluntary, safe, and timely resolution to this crisis. ❖

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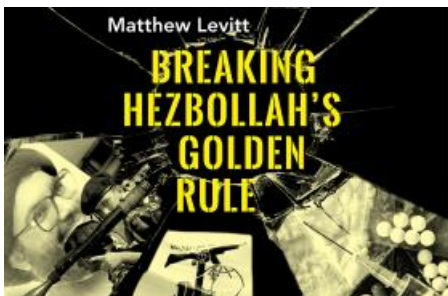
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