

Protecting Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

Given the breakdown of the Lebanese state, Arab countries' normalization with Assad, and the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition, it seems that the United States can step in to play a pivotal role in protecting Syrian refugees facing persecution.

Immediately after the April announcement of the assassination of Pascal Sleiman—the Lebanese Forces coordinator in the [Jbeil area](#) (<https://aawsat.com/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525B1%2525D8%2525A8%2525D9%25258A/%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D8%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B9%2525D8%2525AA%2525D8%2525AF%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A1%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA-%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252587%2525D8%2525AF%2525D9%25258A%2525D8%2525AF%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525AA-%2525D8%2525AA%2525D9%252582%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252591%2525D8%2525AF-%2525D8%2525AD%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%252583%2525D8%2525A9-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525B2%2525D8%2525AD%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A8%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525B9%2525D9%252582%2525D8%2525A8>)—a wave of threats towards Lebanon’s Syrian refugee population swept through the country’s Christian communities. These threats came from Lebanese officials, politicians, and civilians described as "uncontrolled party elements." Moreover, there have been instances of Syrian refugees being beaten, evicted from homes and businesses, and even being kidnapped, as happened when unknown individuals intercepted a taxi carrying two Syrians on a road in North Bekaa and kidnapped them to an unknown location.

Persecution of Lebanon’s Syrian population is not merely local vigilantism. National leaders have adopted their rhetoric and proliferated anti-Syrian sentiments. The ethnically Armenian Minister of Industry in the caretaker Lebanese government, George Bouchikian [stated](#) (

unable to effectively quell the violence.

Inflating the Crisis

Observers of the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon know that the Lebanese authorities have never established a system for absorbing refugees. Syrian refugees—fleeing violence, dispossession, and destruction at the hands of the Assad regime and its allies in Hezbollah—have faced exploitation and marginalization since the first wave of refugees arrived in 2011.

The Lebanese government's "intentional chaos" contrasts with the approaches taken by Turkey and Jordan, which coordinated aid distribution and data gathering with the United Nations and other countries in a systematic manner.

Lebanese officials have taken advantage of the chaos and have deliberately inflated the Syrian population in an attempt to stoke fear; while the United Nations and civil society groups estimate there are less than 900,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the government claims there are between two and three million. Various Lebanese media outlets also play a role in sowing chaos, as they are quick to highlight the discrepancy between the different population estimates. Certain elements of the media shine a light on the lack of transparency in aid distribution as well, further eroding public trust in international aid organizations.

In order to actually address the challenges of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, officials would need to provide honest and good-faith demographic data about the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and their locations to better facilitate support to them.

Political forces have also tried to exploit Syrian refugees to expand their popular base or to blackmail Europe and the international community for more money, which often goes to purposes other than those for which it was allocated. [Gebzan Bassil \(https://twitter.com/Gebzan_Bassil/status/178668199738701501\)](https://twitter.com/Gebzan_Bassil/status/178668199738701501), the leader of the Free Patriotic Movement subject to American sanctions and an ally of Hezbollah, exemplified this via a post on the X platform, where he called for the expulsion of thousands of Syrians from Lebanon with the aim of intimidating and financially blackmailing Europe.

Misleading Generalizations

The official Lebanese discourse, along with political elites, often resorts to misleading generalizations when categorizing Syrian refugees. Specifically, they fail to distinguish between refugees fleeing the regime's oppression and those seeking work without complying with Lebanese labor laws. These individuals—in contrast to refugees—move between Syria and Lebanon with ease, and their movement is facilitated by Hezbollah and other forces aligned with the Syrian regime which use those elements for their own interests. In addition, the Syrian regime facilitates the movements of these elements to access international programs for Syrian refugees. These groups are often implicated in inciting riots and security incidents, with some even armed.

The most dangerous aspect of lack of differentiation is that between criminal prisoners and political prisoners detained by Lebanese authorities based on Syrian arrest warrants. Recently, the General Directorate of Lebanese General Security issued a decision to [deport \(https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/press-release/2021/09/lebanon-general-security-must-halt-imminent-deportation-of-six-syrians/\)](https://www.amnesty.org/ar/latest/press-release/2021/09/lebanon-general-security-must-halt-imminent-deportation-of-six-syrians/) six Syrian refugees despite the serious risks awaiting them in Syria, leading some of them to attempt [suicide \(https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/3/7/%2525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525AC%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A1-%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A8%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252581%2525D8%2525B6%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525AA-%2525D8%2525B9%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252589%252589\)](https://www.aljazeera.net/politics/2024/3/7/%2525D8%2525B3%2525D8%2525AC%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D8%2525A1-%2525D8%2525B3%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525B1%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%252581%2525D9%25258A-%2525D9%252584%2525D8%2525A8%2525D9%252586%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252586-%2525D9%25258A%2525D9%252581%2525D8%2525B6%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252588%2525D9%252586-%2525D8%2525A7%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252585%2525D9%252588%2525D8%2525AA-%2525D8%2525B9%2525D9%252584%2525D9%252589%252589) out of fear of the torture awaiting them if handed over to Syrian authorities. A similar incident happened when four Syrian prisoners—including two brothers—attempted suicide by hanging themselves with blankets inside the central "Roumieh" prison in Lebanon in protest against the deportation of a prisoner (the brothers' sibling) to Syria by Lebanese General Security.

However, Syrian refugees throughout Lebanon are struggling. Some media outlets have even broadcast a television advertisement inciting against Syrian refugees, claiming that Syrian refugees will name their children "Bashar" or "Asma," after the head of the Syrian regime and his wife, insinuating that all Syrian refugees in Lebanon are loyal to the regime.

Syrian [Abu Mohammed \(https://www.imlebanon.org/2024/04/12/refugees-lebanon-16/\)](https://www.imlebanon.org/2024/04/12/refugees-lebanon-16/) (50 years old), a father of four children, says that he and his family dare not leave their home—located in one of the villages of Mount Lebanon,—for fear that they would be beaten or deported from the town. Nor does his family have anywhere else to go to. He wonders, "How can thousands of innocents bear the responsibility for what some villains do just because they carry the same nationality?"

Reem, another Syrian refugee residing in Lebanon, echoed these sentiments in a conversation with *Al Hurra*, asking, "Where are human rights from what is happening? Why were families scattered? Why were my children deprived of seeing their father? They want to pin the crime on all Syrians and treat them with inferiority and racism and beat them brutally, unfortunately, there is no justice on this earth! We were deprived of the homeland and shelter, I wish everyone knew that power does not last for anyone."

In the same context, Lebanese journalist Diana Moukalled remarked in [tweet \(https://twitter.com/dianamoukalled/status/1778372739042017454\)](https://twitter.com/dianamoukalled/status/1778372739042017454) on the X platform "that there is a deafening silence towards the intimidation and hatred campaign happening in the Lebanese street against Syrian refugees, through the shameful tolerance of the Lebanese political authority towards violent practices, and calls for collective punishment." She pointed out that "no one trusts the security narrative that followed the murder of Pascal Sliman." Moukalled questioned the absence of the state during these attacks, calling out Interior Minister Bassam Mawlawi's speech in particular and emphasizing that the discrimination against Syrians will only lead to "more tension, suffering, and blood" in Lebanon.

Hezbollah's Trap

There is also the suspicion that these tensions are tacitly encouraged by Hezbollah. Lebanese opposed to Hezbollah see that the Gaza war has revealed the fragility and vulnerability of this organization, which is classified as terrorist by the United States and some Arab and European countries. Mohammed Ibrahim Surur, an important moneychanger for Hezbollah, was killed in the Beit Meri area of Beirut. It is widely believed that Israel is responsible for strike, and Israel's ability to assassinate a top financier in the heart of Hezbollah territory is taken as proof of the Hezbollah's weakness.

Conflict with Israel, Lebanon's crippling financial crisis, and a host of domestic pressures have pushed the party to create problems to deflect public anger, and Syrian refugees appear to be a useful scapegoat. Indeed, some observers and political analysts argue that the party has managed to provide logistical services to Syrian and Lebanese [gangs \(https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1432737-%25D9%2585%25D9%258A%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D8%25B4%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7-%25D8%25AD%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A8-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2584%25D9%2587-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A8%25D9%2582-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B2%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2595%25D8%25BA%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2582-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D9%2586%25D8%25B7%25D9%2582%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25AE%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA\)](https://www.skynewsarabia.com/middle-east/1432737-%25D9%2585%25D9%258A%25D9%2584%25D9%258A%25D8%25B4%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7-%25D8%25AD%25D8%25B2%25D8%25A8-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2584%25D9%2587-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D8%25A8%25D9%2582-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D8%25B2%25D9%2585%25D9%2586-%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%2595%25D8%25BA%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D9%2582-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D9%2586%25D8%25B7%25D9%2582%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25A8%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25AE%25D8%25AF%25D8%25B1%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA), which enabled them to trade in drugs and carry out targeted killings, the latest of which was the assassination of Pascal Sliman. Supporters of this theory point to the fact that after his killing, Sliman's body was transferred to Syria through party-controlled territory. Simultaneously, Hezbollah has stood aside in the matter of refugees and covertly supported the protest movements against refugees in the Christian areas, taking advantage of dysfunctional Christian parties and the silence of the Arab and international community to feed anti-Syrian sentiments and divert attention from the party's own failures.

Given the breakdown of the Lebanese state, Arab countries' normalization with Assad, and the fragmentation of the Syrian opposition, it seems that the United States can step in to play a pivotal role in protecting Syrian refugees facing persecution. The United States has a number of levers it can pull to help facilitate change, as it is the largest supporter of aid for Syrian refugees, as financial and material advances [exceeded fifteen billion US dollars \(https://www.state.gov/translations/arabic/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2588%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D9%2586-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2586-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA\)](https://www.state.gov/translations/arabic/%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2588%25D9%2584%25D8%25A7%25D9%258A%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA-%25D8%25A7%25D9%2584%25D9%2585%25D8%25AA%25D8%25AD%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A9-%25D8%25AA%25D8%25B9%25D9%2584%25D9%2586-%25D8%25B9%25D9%2586-%25D9%2585%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7%25D8%25B9%25D8%25AF%25D8%25A7%25D8%25AA).

[%25D8%25A5%25D9%2586%25D8%25B3%25D8%25A7-14/](#)). Thus, the U.S. government can exert its right to monitor how aid spent and ensure that it reaches its beneficiaries.

There are ways in which the United States could help; specifically, the United States currently provides significant support to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which has [forced Syrians](#) (<https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/07/05/lebanon-armed-forces-summarily-deporting-syrians>) to return to Syria under the false label of a "voluntary return." The Lebanese authorities have also previously handed over some Syrian civil activists, who entered Lebanon legally to meet their relatives and relatives to the Syrian authorities; some of those transferred were executed, and some are still detained.

But ensuring there is pressure on the LAF against coordination with the Syrian regime and pursuing Assad's critics on Lebanese soil may make a significant difference in the lives of Syrians. U.S. grant agencies should also establish or strengthen mechanisms to ensure that Lebanese NGOs and other bodies have policies against incitement of Syrian refugees. And inflammatory rhetoric against Syrians should be considered in determinations towards granting travel visas to the United States.

The United States can also reaffirm its policy that the entirety of Syria is unsafe for refugees to return. Such a statement, while simple, helps challenge the notion peddled by the Lebanese government and political forces that Syrians can simply return to "safe areas" in the country to justify forced returns.

No one denies the Lebanese state's right to control its security and seek solutions for the presence of refugees on its territory. However, Syrian refugees should not be used as a political tool to distract from the country's dire economic problems nor as a cover to hide the great corruption in their executive and political administrations. Lebanon's failure to sign international agreements related to refugees a "transit country" and not a "country of asylum" is a short-sighted attempt to avoid long-term solutions to the country's Syrian refugee crisis. ❖

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