

The New Reality in Syria Constitutes an Existential Threat to Lebanon

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Brief Analysis

What would be the effect on the United States—politically, economically, socially—if the country accommodated 100 million refugees in the span of a few years? This is the situation that Lebanon now faces. At 4,000 square miles, tiny Lebanon has welcomed more Syrian refugees in absolute numbers than the entire European Union since 2011—certainly exceeding one million, and by some counts neighboring two million. Even conservative estimates put Lebanon, with a population of four million, at a historical record of refugees per capita. Now that a new reality is descending upon Syria, Lebanon’s act of necessity in allowing refugees across its borders may metastasize into an existential threat.

More than seven years after the start of the Syrian uprising, the Damascus regime has effectively prevailed. While sympathies within Lebanon were divided, the Lebanese government officially adopted a neutral stance towards the escalating conflict next door. The resulting unprecedented influx of Syrian citizens caught Lebanon’s historically dysfunctional government by surprise, and it failed to articulate a meaningful plan for framing or managing the issue. Turkey and Jordan, recipients of comparable numbers of Syrian refugees, put in action both diplomatic and assistance plans. Yet the refugee question in Lebanon seemed to be an afterthought, both in international forums and in Lebanon itself, with the government’s only apparent policy a de facto open border.

This negligence reflects the reality that Lebanon’s neutral stance towards Syria only existed in rhetoric. Some Lebanese did provide sporadic support and marginal arms shipment facilitation to factions of the Syrian opposition, yet both political configurations within Lebanon and Hezbollah’s influential armed presence have provided valuable services for the Syrian regime. Hezbollah—ostensibly a resistance movement dedicated to countering Israel’s designs—has been instrumental in aiding Iran’s attempts to prop up the Damascus regime, exacerbating the flow of refugees into Lebanon.

Not all Syrians displaced to Lebanon, however, are war refugees. Over the past decades, Lebanon has reportedly hosted hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers who now dominate certain sectors of the Lebanese economy, such as construction and agriculture. Lebanon has also been host to a large number of Syrian bourgeoisie, either connected to the regime or seeking to preserve wealth outside of Syria. This economic migration to Lebanon intensified with the growing conflict, but was in essence indistinguishable from previous periods. Moreover, much of

the Syrian rural population migrating to Lebanon sought refuge with family connections in provincial Lebanese towns and villages.

These factors created a sense of familiarity with Syrian migration in Lebanon, and may have allowed Lebanese society to believe that Syrian refugees represented the normal cycle of economic inter-dependency between the two countries. Moreover, sympathy for the Syrian plight was genuine and widespread.

But numbers matter. Soon, the limited municipal, police, and welfare resources of many of these welcoming towns became overwhelmed by the needs of a new population in distress. The cost of rent and commodities surged, employment—already at unsatisfactory levels—was further strained, and both international and local support was often redirected from local challenges to the more urgent needs of refugees. Most importantly, both incidental and organized crime exploited the strains on law enforcement and increased in activity.

Amidst the lack of a national policy, some localities reacted to the emerging situation with absurd and often bigoted measures. Municipalities imposed “curfews for Syrians” along with improvised, legally questionable local registries and even bans on Syrian youth riding motorcycles. Attacks on Syrian refugees may have not exceeded normal crime levels, but the charged atmosphere of animosity between Syrians and Lebanese made every incident newsworthy, both in Lebanon and amongst the Syrian diaspora, which now often views Lebanese society as racist against Syrians—while offering its own dose of anti-Lebanese rhetoric.

And while international aid has diverted some of the more calamitous impacts—despite the habitual diversion of funds associated with support—this short-term treatment may have exacerbated the fundamental problem. Much of the population has been in Lebanon for years, and many young Syrians have only notional exposure to Syria, viewing Lebanon as an accidental home. In a normal political situation, the Syrian population may have integrated into the country’s economic and political life. Lebanon is no normal situation, and its swelled refugee population now reflects a new challenge to Lebanon’s already intractable political tensions.

Demographic Imbalance

The state operates on the fiction of a two-community polity, with “Christians” and “Muslims” equally represented at all levels of government. A single “Christian” community has actually become something of a political reality, with politically distinct Christian communities (*tawa’if*) shifting to denominations of an increasingly unified Christian society. On the other hand, there is no “Muslim” community. “Muslim” Lebanese identity is sharply segmented into Sunni, Shi’i, and Druze components, with Sunni and Shi’i leaderships representing the major political rift while Christian and Druze parties align with either side. This polarization remains acute at the popular level despite the Iranian-dominated Shi’i block’s promotion of Sunni political figures, intended to negate the Sunni-Shi’i divide.

Syrian migration to Lebanon is overwhelmingly Sunni, and any long-term presence suggests a dual political imbalance in the precarious host nation. If the Syrian residents of Lebanon are included within political demographics, the Christian share of the population falls below the dangerous threshold of 20 percent. This renders the currently equal division of political representation between Christians and Muslims untenable and increases the temptation among Christian circles to emigrate if they fear that the future of Lebanon would exclude them. More dramatically, the demographic balance between Sunnis and Shi’is—now nearly equal, with Shi’is enjoying the political upper-hand given the military might of Hezbollah—would be dramatically altered, especially as the new (Syrian) “Sunnis” may hold a justifiable grievance against the para-military force that contributed to their tragedy. The potential risk of radical exploitation would thus be considerable, and the risk of conflict in Lebanon severely enhanced.

While the possibility of a formal resettlement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon may have been entertained by international parties, all such considerations are loudly rejected by all groups in Lebanon itself—Syrian and

Lebanese, Muslim and Christian, Sunni and Shi'i. However, the categorical refusal of naturalizing Syrian refugees and the vocal demands that they return to their homeland do not amount to a resolution of the existential threat to Lebanon.

Damascus in Lebanon

In fact, the existential threat facing Lebanon is actually the putative Damascus regime's potential to manipulate Syrian refugees rather than the refugees themselves. The regime has no interest in most refugees returning, having often "cleansed" strategic areas of their presence and resettled more loyal residents in their place. Deemed hostile, or at least friendly to hostile forces, their return would necessitate the allocation of considerable policing resources. In contrast, their continuing stay in Lebanon would be an asset for the regime in its interest to return to Lebanon.

Damascus is in a "reconquista" mode, looking to restore its gravitas by reinstalling the full status quo ante of pre-2005. The regime suffered its first humiliating defeat not in 2011, but six years earlier when a popular uprising in Lebanon forced the Syrian army to retreat after nearly three decades of its brute force presence. However, the regime has never abandoned Lebanon.

While the current priorities of the Syrian regime are to extend its authority to areas that elude its control in Syria proper, a more muted but equally important item on its agenda is to re-impose its control onto its western neighbor. Syrian intelligence and security apparatuses have maintained connections and cultivated new sources in Lebanon since the regime's retreat. The recent parliamentary elections in Lebanon demonstrated that Damascus is still a factor in Lebanese politics, as the pro-Syrian camp netted many new seats. Regaining its previous position of strength in Beirut and punishing enemies while rewarding allies would be satisfying for the obstinately oppressive government; it will also confirm and seal the regime's internal claims of omnipotence.

Thus, the destabilizing effect of Syrian refugees in Lebanon can function as an element of the regime's strategy. Given the regime's past manipulation of radical Islamist and other terrorists, it is foreseeable that it would play on both willing and unwilling groups within the refugee population for its own purposes. If the regime encourages staged or facilitated attacks on its close proxies or key targets, these actions may even create the call for a direct Syrian military presence in Lebanon once more.

Some have argued that attempts to renew Syrian influence in Lebanon may have an upside—the efforts will pit Damascus and its allies against Tehran and its tools. In fact, a Syrian presence in Lebanon would be a welcome development for Iran, as Syria itself is trapped in an Iranian stranglehold. Iran has no interest in having Lebanon viewed as a direct Iranian proxy; the country is already home to Iran's most successful revolutionary franchise, and direct control would sap away a good portion of the benefits of its influence there. Were Lebanese politicians to court Damascus, Tehran could avoid this perspective—with the added advantage of Western and other powers' cyclical hope that Damascus could be separated from Tehran, delaying more serious actions against the latter power.

It is hard to identify reasons that the Damascus regime would refrain from an attempt to return Lebanon to its sphere of influence. Indeed, the cumulative effects of such an attempt—exacerbated by the continued political pressures of Syrian refugees in Lebanon—may amount to the existential threat that the "precarious republic" has so far succeeded in avoiding. ❖

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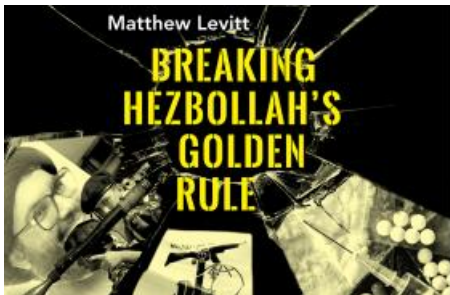
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