

# An Unregulated Security Threat

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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## The Syrian refugee crisis may force Lebanon, Hezbollah, and Iran to reevaluate their approach to Bashar al-Assad's war.

As more and more Syrians flee to neighboring Lebanon, the situation there is a growing national security concern not only for Lebanon, but the entire region. While Hezbollah and Iran are supporting the Assad regime in Syria, their increased vulnerability in Lebanon should give them pause, as the recent bombing of the Iranian embassy and the assassination of Hezbollah operative Hassan al-Laquis show. Instead of continuing their *carte blanche* support for Assad, the Party of God and Iran have increased reason to constrain him, not only through the international effort to destroy Syria's chemical weapons, but also via a future political settlement in which the Assad family cabal "steps aside" in favor of a viable transitional government that can truly end the conflict.

## ECHOES OF ANOTHER REFUGEE CRISIS

According to official figures, Lebanon has absorbed around 800,000 Syrians fleeing the conflict. The Lebanese government estimates that the true number is closer to 1.2 million, as many Syrians entering Lebanon stay with family and in informal housing. That accounts for roughly a quarter of Lebanon's 4.4 million population.

In a confessional system like Lebanon, the arrival of refugees with little prospect of returning home anytime soon creates significant political problems. The UNHCR estimates that 96% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Sunni Muslim, much like their Palestinian counterparts from 1948 and 1967. Around half are in poorer areas of the country such as north Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley, where Sunni-Shia tensions remain high; the rest are scattered throughout Mount Lebanon and the south, the demographic base of the country's Shia population.

Given the role of Palestinian refugees in setting off the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990) and the continued status of Palestinian camps in Lebanon as legal and military twilight zones where the Lebanese authorities are not permitted to enter, it's not surprising that requests to establish formal Syrian refugee camps are being resisted by Lebanese and their leaders. Instead, Syrians are living with a variety of hosts, renting apartments, or squatting in the country's

plethora of half-constructed buildings, shelters, or the informal tent camps growing throughout the country. And because an estimated one third of Syrian housing has been destroyed, which by some estimates would take up to a decade to rebuild, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are a long-term problem that all Lebanese actors will need to manage. And just to make matters worse, a recent report by the World Bank on the economic impact of the Syria crisis on Lebanon shows that overall economic growth in Lebanon has been so constrained as a result of dealing with the crisis that providing jobs for Lebanese, let alone Syrians, will make keeping up with the crisis that much more difficult.

## EMERGING SECURITY THREATS

**W**ith no end in sight to the Syria conflict and diplomacy just getting started, the security threats arising from these camps are growing by the day. There is a mounting danger of disease spreading into Lebanon and beyond, as the emergence of polio in eastern Syria reveals. And while this can be contained through a concerted humanitarian response, refugee camps are also breeding ground for terrorist recruitment, and can serve as a planning base for terrorists to launch internal attacks against Lebanese civilians.

Lebanese politicians are increasingly upfront with the threat. On the sidelines of the recent UN General Assembly meeting, Lebanese President Michel Suleiman said that Lebanon is facing a "crisis of survival" due to the influx of Syrian refugees, saying that "social tension will increase with the fierce competition for jobs and services."

Lebanon's Interior Minister Marwan Charbel recently asserted that many refugees are in fact rebel fighters and therefore are a threat to Lebanon's security. Hezbollah MP Walid Sukariya also remarked that refugees are carrying out "killing operations" targeting factions in Lebanon that support the Assad regime, while some are in the country to carry out "acts of sabotage." Lebanese MP Sleiman Frangieh, another figure historically close to Syria, said that up to 50,000 Syrians have fled to Lebanon carrying arms.

The Lebanese authorities reportedly are reacting to terrorist recruitment as well. Recently a Lebanese magistrate issued an arrest warrant for a defected Syrian Army colonel who entered Lebanon as a refugee, Ahmed Amer, accusing him of forming an armed gang to carry out terrorist activities in Lebanon. Earlier, another Lebanese judge charged 12 individuals, including a Lebanese and two Syrians in state custody, for plotting terrorist acts and assassinations in Lebanon. Even in Europe, where money is collected to help Syrian refugees, monitoring agencies are increasingly worried about contributions making it into the hands of extremists and their recruiters.

Both Hezbollah and their brethren in the IRGC Quds Force are active on the ground in Syria, making those forces vulnerable to the regime's continued attempt to shoot the opposition into submission, and even possible chemical or Scud missile use in the future. It is also clear from Assad's recent posturing on the upcoming presidential "election" in late spring that the Syrian president has no intention of stepping aside or implementing anything other than a fake attempt at a settlement. Assad has only been able to reassert his control through the intervention of Hezbollah and Iranian proxies, combined with his use of chemical weapons, other strategic weapons such as Scuds, and continued use of artillery and aircraft. Unlike the last Syrian uprising in 1979-1982, there has been a considerable demographic shift in favor of the majority Sunni population in Syria, meaning while Assad is "holding on," his ability to shoot his way out of the current crisis without a viable political solution is unlikely to work.

The best way forward for Hezbollah and Iran in the long run is to support a genuine political solution that leads to a transitional government in Syria that reflects the wishes and aspirations of Syrians throughout the country.

Immediate progress seems unlikely, as both the opposition and the regime see the battle as a zero-sum game where they believe they can achieve absolute military victory. This view is already running into the rocks of reality: the Syrian opposition is not going to return to the pre-uprising status quo where they accept Assad's rule, and their sponsors in the Gulf and beyond are not about to stop supporting them anytime soon -- before or after any "deal" on

Tehran's nuclear program. In fact, proxy conflicts often increase after adversaries reach either nuclear capability or deals to contain them, as a return to conventional wars is a safer way to pursue their interests. At the same time, the regime's forces, even with Hezbollah, cannot retake all Syrian territory and hold it without substantial forces they do not have. Facing these grim realities now can help avert more bloodshed in Syria and in Lebanon in the long term.

*Andrew J. Tabler is a senior fellow at The Washington Institute and author of [In the Lion's Den: An Eyewitness Account of Washington's Battle with Syria](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/in-the-lions-den-an-eyewitness-account-of-washingtons-battle-with-syria>). ❖*

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