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Syrian Refugees in Lebanon:  
a dead-end scenario

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## Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: a dead-end scenario

### Abstract:

*After nine years of war in Syria, there are more than 900,000 registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The harshness of exile itself has been hampered by a series of barriers that refugees have found to develop their lives in that country, which, together with political pressure on their return, act as push factors. Since the end of 2019, Lebanon has been suffering a dire political and economic crisis, unprecedented since the Civil War. Amid these circumstances, the COVID-19 pandemic has erupted. Meanwhile, the situation in Syria remains unsafe. Hostilities continue while the regime offers no guarantees in a country destroyed and devastated by nine years of civil war. In this context, the return of Syrian refugees cannot be considered voluntary or safe, according to the parameters established by UNHCR.*

### Key Words:

*Syrian Refugees, Voluntary Return, Safe Return, Lebanese Crisis, Lebanon, Syria.*

*\*NOTE: The ideas contained in the Opinion Papers shall be responsibility of their authors, without necessarily reflecting the thinking of the IEEE or the Ministry of Defense.*

## *Refugiados sirios en Líbano: un escenario sin salidas*

### *Resumen:*

*Después de nueve años de Guerra en Siria, hay alrededor de 900.000 refugiados sirios registrados en Líbano. La dureza del exilio se ha visto incrementada por una serie de barreras que estos refugiados han encontrado para desarrollar su vida en el país y que, junto a presiones políticas por propiciar su retorno lo antes posible, actúan como factores de expulsión. Desde finales de 2019, Líbano se está viendo azotado por una crisis política, económica y social sin precedentes desde la Guerra Civil, en medio de la cual ha irrumpido la pandemia del COVID-19 y sucesos traumáticos como la explosión del 4 de agosto de 2020 en Beirut. Mientras tanto, la situación en Siria sigue sin ser segura. Las hostilidades continúan en algunas zonas del país y no hay garantías, todo ello en un país destruido y devastado por nueve años de guerra. En este contexto, no se puede considerar que el retorno de los refugiados sea voluntario y seguro, conforme a los parámetros establecidos por ACNUR.*

### *Palabras clave:*

*Refugiados sirios, Retorno Voluntario, Retorno Seguro, Crisis Libanesa, Líbano, Siria.*

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## Syrian conflict and migration crisis

In 2011, a popular uprising against Bashar al-Assad was brutally suppressed, leading to the militarization of the revolt and a complex conflict that lasts until today<sup>1</sup>. The intervention of different powers<sup>2</sup> intensified the conflict's intensity and duration, which has already caused 586,100 direct victims<sup>3</sup>. Although the war is still far from over, it is heading towards a victory for al-Assad and his allies: Russia, Iran and Hezbollah<sup>4</sup>, who hold control over most Syrian territory<sup>5</sup>.

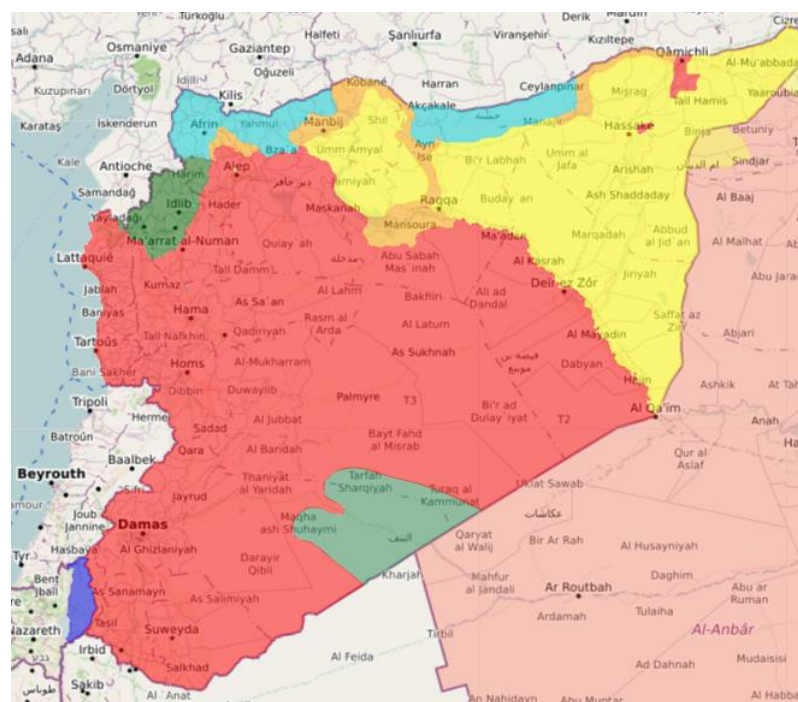


Figure 1: The situation in Syria in 2020. Source: *Syrian Civil War Map*<sup>6</sup>

<sup>1</sup> ÁLVAREZ OSSORIO, I. "Siria, siete años de oscuridad". Fundación Alternativas, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> ORTEGA, A. "Siria: una guerra mundial concentrada". Real Instituto el Cano, 2016.

<sup>3</sup> Observatorio Sirio de Derechos Humanos. "Syrian Revolution nine years on: 586,100 persons killed and millions of Syrians displaced and injured", 14 March 2020.

<sup>4</sup> NÚÑEZ VILLAVERDE J.A. "Principio del fin en Siria". Real Instituto el Cano, 2017.

<sup>5</sup> European Institute of Peace. "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity", July 2019.

<sup>6</sup> Syrian Arab Army -al-Assad Government- (in red), Turkish Army and Syrian Interim Government (light blue), Hayat Tahrir el Sham and National Salvation Government (dark green), Kurdish forces of the Syrian Democratic Army (yellow), Syrian Democratic Army and Syrian Arab Army (orange), rebels supported by the United States of America (light green) y Israeli Occupation of the Golan Heights (dark blue).

Security Council resolution nº2254 proposed a roadmap for an inclusive peace process that would end the conflict. It comprised a political process led by the Syrians themselves as the only sustainable solution, which would lead to a peaceful transition and a constituent process. As recommended by the United Nations, a constituent committee has met in Geneva several times, but no substantial agreement has been reached<sup>7</sup>. While diplomatic efforts to find an inclusive solution are unsuccessful, Russia and Iran struggle to normalize al-Assad as the only possible way out for Syria.

Meanwhile, the conflict has caused what is already the largest migratory crisis in the contemporary world. Almost half of the Syrian population has left their homes. At the beginning of 2020, 6.6 million Syrians were internally displaced, and 5.6 million were refugees, mainly in Turkey, Lebanon and Jordan.

### ***Syrian Refugees in Lebanon***

As of May 2020, there were 892,310 registered Syrian refugees<sup>8</sup> in Lebanon. The refugee population lives mainly in urban areas or informal camps in the north and east. By political decision, no formal refugee camps have been established.

The main vulnerabilities this population faces include difficulties in obtaining and renewing legal documentation; the increase in restrictive policies by the Lebanese State and the worsening of relations with host communities; rising inflation; limited access to healthcare; poor housing conditions; economic vulnerability, unemployment and job insecurity; child labor and marriage; as well as the increasing difficulties for the schooling of minors<sup>9</sup>.

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<sup>7</sup> ONU. "Syria: Lack of consensus following face-to-face talks, underscores need for broader process", 20 November 2019.

<sup>8</sup> ACNUR. "Lebanon January -March 2020". Operational Update, July 2020.

<sup>9</sup> ACNUR. "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", 2019.



**SYRIA REFUGEE RESPONSE**  
**LEBANON** Syrian Refugees Registered  
 31 May 2020

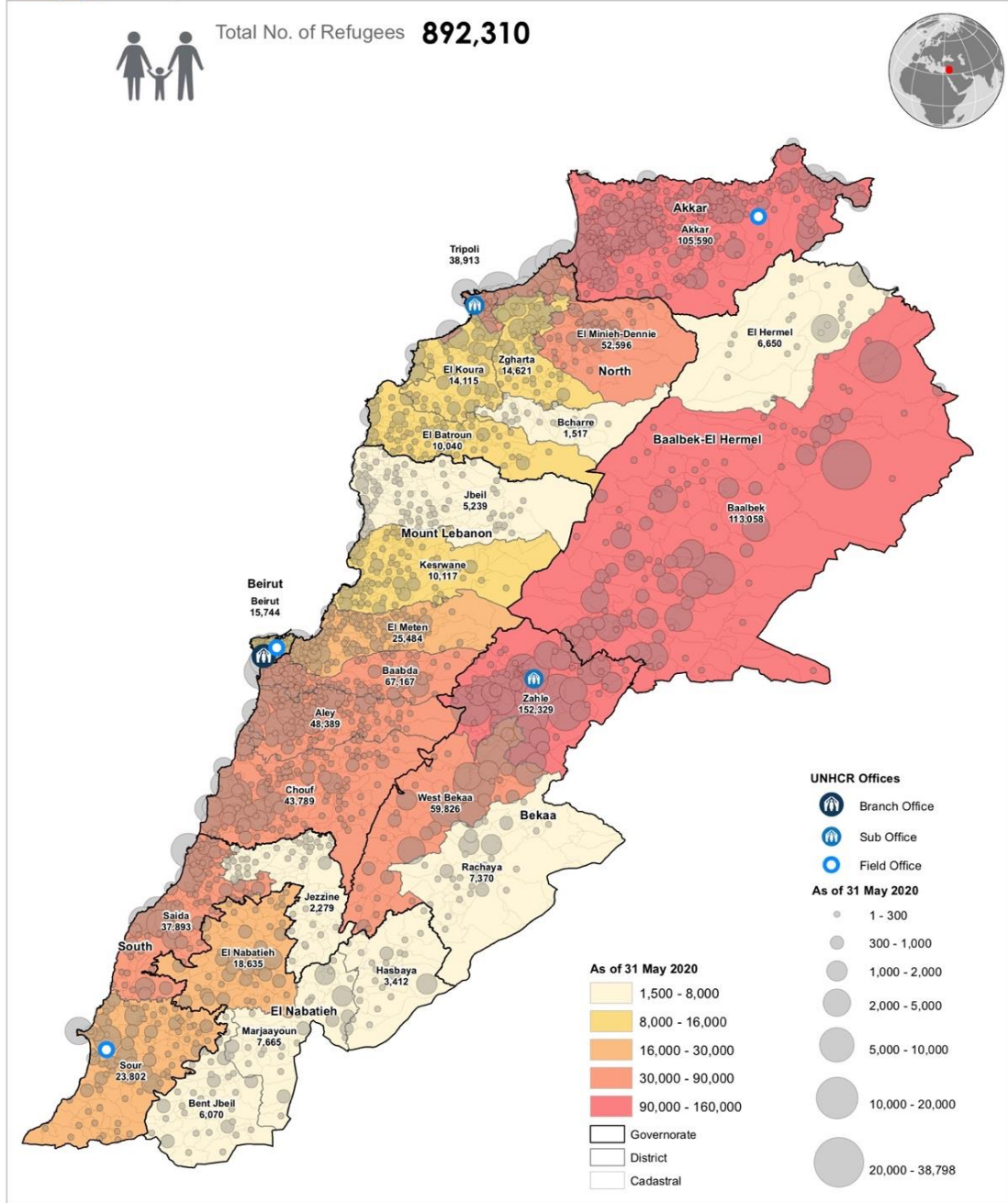


Figure 2: Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Source: UNHCR, 2020

Furthermore, since 2019, Lebanon is experiencing a dire economic, political, social and health crisis, posing a disturbing outlook for the refugee population<sup>10</sup>. Many Syrian refugees find themselves at stake, between two almost impossible options: stay in an increasingly hostile Lebanon or return to Syria.

### **Political and strategic debate on the return to Syria**

As UNHCR states, there are three solutions for refugees: return to the country of origin, integration in the host country, or resettlement in a third country. Between 2011 and 2020, only around 100,000 resettlements have been carried out from Lebanon<sup>11</sup>. Integration seems complicated, given the lack of political and social will, geographical and infrastructure constraints, and the historical memory of the role of Palestinian refugees in the Lebanese Civil War (1975-1990).

According to International Law, the return must be voluntary, safe and dignified. Voluntary return comes from the principle of *non-refoulement*; that is to say: involuntary return would be equivalent to forced transfer. Additionally, it must take place in safety and dignity conditions, as recognized in different United Nations resolutions, the most recent being that of December 19, 2017. The operational framework for returning to Syria<sup>12</sup> proposes several indicators of physical, legal and material security<sup>13</sup> that would guarantee return as by international standards. These would be the significant reduction of hostilities; the presence of guarantees of no-discrimination, arbitrary detention, disappearance, or any retaliation for returnees; amnesty for those who deserted from military service; establishment of effective and accessible mechanisms that facilitate the restitution of property and the corresponding compensation in accordance with international law; as well as the guarantee that UNHCR can monitor the process and the conditions of return.

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<sup>10</sup> SEWELL, A. "Lebanon's financial crisis hits Syrian refugees hard". The New Humanitarian, 9 January 2020.

<sup>11</sup> OIM. "Resettlement Offers a Vital Lifeline to Syrian Refugees", 12 May 2020.

<sup>12</sup> ACNUR. "Regional Operational Framework for Refugee Return to Syria", March 2019.

<sup>13</sup> ACNUR. "Manual de Repatriación Voluntaria: Protección Internacional", 1996.

The *International Conference to Support the Future of Syria and the Region* organized by the European Union and the United Nations in 2019 concluded that Syria did not meet the conditions for a safe and dignified return. Besides, the United Nations and the European Union support voluntariness as a *sine qua non*-condition for return. Other stakeholders, however, promote a "safe" return. Russia presented in 2019 an initiative to promote the return of refugees to Syria as a tool to normalize the al-Assad regime before the international community<sup>14</sup>.

This confrontation also takes place in Lebanese politics<sup>15</sup>. President Michel Aoun and Gebran Bassil, foreign minister between 2014 and January 2020, both from the Free Patriotic Movement, strongly promote the "safe" return of Syrian refugees<sup>16</sup>. Lebanese factions opposed to Iranian and Syrian influence, such as Mustaqbal and the Lebanese Forces, insist that return must be "safe" and "voluntary." Qatar and Saudi Arabia<sup>17</sup> have also rejected the "safe return" notion promoted by Russia since it would normalize and legitimize Al-Assad<sup>18</sup>.

UNHCR (2019) revealed that 75.2% of refugees wanted to return to Syria one day. However, 88% of those in Lebanon did not express interest in returning in the near future. This is mainly due to the lack of security; the lack of opportunities; the lack of a place to live; the impossibility of avoiding military service; limited access to essential goods and services; the fear of being arrested; limited access to education, as well as the absence of a political solution to the conflict<sup>19</sup>. Despite this, more than 200,000 refugees have returned to Syria since 2017<sup>20</sup>.

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<sup>14</sup> CHOUCAIR, M. "Moscow's Initiative on Return of Syrian Refugees at Standstill". Asharq al-Awsat, 24 June 2019.

<sup>15</sup> ASSI, A. "International Politics of Syrian Refugee Return: The Case of Lebanon". Middle East Institute, 20 August 2019.

<sup>16</sup> The New Arab. "Lebanon's President renews calls for return of Syrian refugees". 22 September 2020.

<sup>17</sup> Sawa for Development and Aid. "Unpacking Return: Syrian Refugees' Conditions and Concerns", 6 February 2019.

<sup>18</sup> ASSI, A. "International Politics of Syrian Refugee Return: The Case of Lebanon". Middle East Institute, 20 August 2019, quoted.p.7.

<sup>19</sup> ACNUR. "Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria. Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan", 2019.

<sup>20</sup> Amnistía Internacional. "Why are returns of refugees from Lebanon to Syria premature?" 12 June 2019.

## Is the return to Syria voluntary and safe?

The principle of voluntariness must be understood in relation to two variables: the conditions in the country of origin and the situation in the host country<sup>21</sup>. For a return decision to be voluntary, the positive pull factors in Syria must be the fundamental element motivating this decision, at the expense of Lebanon's negative push factors. Likewise, a voluntary decision must rely on information about the conditions in the areas of return, the guarantees regarding their safety and well-being, as well as access to protection mechanisms<sup>22</sup>. Last but not least, there must be informed knowledge about the policies that affect property ownership<sup>23</sup>.

UNHCR has recently raised concerns about the growing challenges that Syrian refugees face in Lebanon, mainly due to the country's economic crisis and the dire situation<sup>24</sup>. In 2018, different international NGOs expressed their concern about push factors that are promoting premature and unsustainable returns<sup>25</sup>.

### **Push Factors**

Despite the initial opening, the Lebanese government has opted to regulate Syrian refugees' presence in a more restrictive way<sup>26</sup>. In 2014, the government approved a road map to reduce the number of Syrians in the country. The main lines of action consisted of stopping refugees at the border, encouraging them to return, and protecting Lebanese employment<sup>27</sup>. In 2015, the Lebanese General Security stopped renewing

<sup>21</sup> ACNUR. "Manual de Repatriación Voluntaria: Protección Internacional", 1996, quoted.p.6.

<sup>22</sup> KEITH, A y SHAWAF, N. "When is return voluntary? Conditions of Assylum in Lebanon." Forced Migration Review n °57, 2018, pp. 62-63.

<sup>23</sup> LHIF. "Briefing paper on return of refugees to Syria". Obtained in a LHIF meeting at the NRC headquarters in Beirut, November 2018.

<sup>24</sup> ACNUR. "UNHCR concerned at growing anxiety and challenges of refugees in Lebanon", 31 January de 2020.

<sup>25</sup> LHIF. "Lebanon Humanitarian INGO Forum. Briefing paper on return of refugees to Syria", 2018, Quoted p.8

<sup>26</sup> LENNER, K. y SCHMELTER, S. "Syrian Refugees in Jordan and Lebanon: between Refuge and Ongoing Deprivation?" En IEMED, Mediterranean Yearbook 2016: Mobility and Refugee Crisis in the Mediterranean Dossier.

<sup>27</sup> ALSHARABATI, C. Y NAMMOUR, J. "Survey on Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon". Institut des Sciences Politiques USJ. Beirut, 2015.



residence permits for Syrians and since then, this procedure has become a real nightmare. In 2017, the percentage of Syrian refugees in an irregular situation raised to 74%<sup>28</sup>. Additionally, Lebanon did not sign the Geneva Convention, despite lacking an Asylum and Refugee law.

Irregularity excludes Syrian refugees from access to guarantees and essential services and makes employment extremely difficult. The implementation of these policies by General Security has normalized practices such as temporary arrests, arbitrary detentions, deportations, and the organization of "voluntary returns," widely condemned by the international community<sup>29</sup>.

One of the direct consequences of this restrictive regulation is job insecurity<sup>30</sup>. The majority of Syrian refugees must work illegally in order to survive<sup>31</sup>. In 2019, the government carried out a campaign against foreigners' "illegal work,"<sup>32</sup> leaving thousands of Syrians unemployed. Also, between June and December 2019, the government closed more than 1,160 shops exploited by Syrians<sup>33</sup>, which had already been done before<sup>34</sup>. In addition, Lebanon has been experiencing a terrible economic and financial crisis since the end of 2019, which has led to many companies' closure and the rise of unemployment<sup>35</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> ACNUR. "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", 2019, Quoted .p.4.

<sup>29</sup> RAHME, K. "Refugee Protection. Lebanon Country Report", Global Migration: Consequences and Responses, Paper 2020/34, January 2020.

<sup>30</sup> TURNER, L. "Explaining the (Non-)Encampment of Syrian Refugees: Security, Class and the Labour Market in Lebanon and Jordan". Mediterranean Politics, nº 20 vol. 3, 2015, pp. 386-404.

<sup>31</sup> FAO. "Agricultural Livelihoods and Food Security Impact Assessment and Response Plan for the Syria Crisis in the Neighbouring Countries of Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey", 2013.

<sup>32</sup> KHODR, Z. "Syrian refugees: Lebanon crackdown on undocumented foreign labour". Al Jazeera, 11 July 2019.

<sup>33</sup> ACNUR. "Measures impacting refugees in Lebanon: Shop closures", June-December 2019, April de 2020.

<sup>34</sup> BBC Arabic. "لبنان يغلق محلات تجارية للاجئين سوريين". [Lebanon closes shops of Syrian Refugees], 28 March 2017.

<sup>35</sup> ABDULSATTAR IBRAHIM, M. Y HAMOU, A. "As the nation defaults, Lebanon turns its back on Syrian refugees". Syria Direct, 10 March 2020.

On the other hand, 79% of Syrian refugees feel unsafe in Lebanon<sup>36</sup>. Most of them attribute the insecurity to tensions with the authorities and host communities, arrests and police raids, and the lack of documentation. Some organizations have also denounced dozens of arbitrary detentions, tortures and abuses, which in some cases led to deportation to Syria<sup>37</sup>.

Before the outbreak of the revolution in October 2019, most Lebanese pointed Syrians as the cause of many problems in Lebanon, blaming them for taking away their jobs and increasing the crime rate<sup>38</sup>. Some ministers significantly promoted this discourse in the government<sup>39</sup>. Since then, there have been numerous violent demonstrations in front of companies that employ foreigners<sup>40</sup>, mainly Syrians<sup>41</sup>. In this context, many Syrian refugees' daily life is marked by fear, intimidation, despair, and the lack of protection from the Lebanese state. This climate of insecurity forces many families to consider returning<sup>42</sup>.

Housing is another main push factor. 43% of Syrian families borrow money to pay rent, or they do not pay it and go into debt. Besides, UNHCR has reported the eviction of 4,409 Syrian refugees in 2019, 51% of which were justified for "environmental" reasons<sup>43</sup>, in a country where public management of waste goes through incineration or landfilling. On the other hand, housing conditions are poor. According to UN-Habitat,

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<sup>36</sup> SHAWAF, N. y EL ASMAR, F. "We're not there yet. Voices of refugees from Syria in Lebanon". Oxfam International, 2017.

<sup>37</sup> Violations Documentation Center in Syria. "Syrians in Lebanon : Between Arbitrary Arrest and Unjust Jurisdiction", 2020.

<sup>38</sup> GABRIEL, E. "Lebanese are Tired of Hosting Syrian Refugees. The Washington Institute for Near East Policy", 2019.

<sup>39</sup> Euro-Mediterranean Human Rights Monitor. "Growing racism towards refugees in Lebanon alarms of wide scale violence", 13 June 2019.

<sup>40</sup> Info Migrants. "لبنان: حملة لمكافحة العمالة الأجنبية غير الشرعية" توجع مظاهرات وتوترات بمختلف المناطق. [Lebanon: campaign of fight against the work of ilegal foreign crowned with demonstrations and tensions in different regions], 17 June 2019.

<sup>41</sup> Al Jazeera. "مظاهرة ضد السوريين بلبنان.. وباسيل: لن نسمح ببقائهم". [Demonstration against Syrians in Lebanon.. and Bassil: we will not allow them to stay], 15 de Junio 2019.

<sup>42</sup> Amnistía Internacional. "Lebanon: Wave of hostility exposes hollowness of claims that Syrian refugee returns are voluntary", 12 June 2019.

<sup>43</sup> ACNUR. "Collective evictions and eviction notices. Report covering January-December 2019", 2020.

73% of refugees live in residential buildings. Of these, 57% are overcrowded, and 40% are below humanitarian standards<sup>44</sup>.

The rest of Syrian refugees live in informal settlements, mainly in the Bekaa Valley and in Akkar, where 40% of tents are dangerous or do not meet the minimum humanitarian conditions<sup>45</sup>. The extreme vulnerability of these settlements is especially evident in winter. In 2019, the storm "Norma" affected 151 camps in Akkar and Bekaa<sup>46</sup>, leaving 11,000 refugees homeless and putting more than 70,000 at risk<sup>47</sup>. Another problem in winter is the limited access to fuel. In many cases, refugees burn garbage or other toxic substances to keep warm<sup>48</sup>. The last push factor on Syrian families is access to education. Since 2018-2019, the Lebanese Ministry of Education has limited the schooling of Syrian children, justifying it by a budget mismatch of 30 million dollars due to donors' non-payment<sup>49</sup>.

All these circumstances put high pressure on Syrian refugees. In this context, many feel that return is the only alternative. As of October 2019, before the outbreak of the protests and the economic, financial, political, and health crises plunging Lebanon into the abyss.

### ***The 2019-2020 Lebanese crisis***

On October 17, 2019, massive protests broke out throughout Lebanon. Participants demonstrated against the corruption of the political class, causing Saad al-Hariri's government's resignation and unleashing a social and political crisis unprecedented since the Civil War. Many of these protesters sympathized with Syrian refugees<sup>50</sup>.

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<sup>44</sup> ACNUR. "Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", 2019, quoted p.4.

<sup>45</sup> NRC. "70,000 refugees at risk after heavy snow and floods", 10 January 2019.

<sup>46</sup> Acción Contra el Hambre. "Winter weather worsens conditions for Syrian Refugees", 15 January 2019.

<sup>47</sup> ACNUR. "Norma Storm: Situation Report", 9 January 2019.

<sup>48</sup> Al Jazeera. "Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Jordan try to stay warm", 12 January 2019.

<sup>49</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Lebanon: Stalled Effort to Get Syrian Children in School", 2018.

<sup>50</sup> SURPRENANT, A. « Les réfugiés syriens au Liban partagés face au mouvement social ». Orient XXI, November 2019.

The economic crisis, which many saw coming, showed up in November 2019 when the Lebanese pound broke its historical parity with the US dollar (1 USD = 1,508 LL). However, the authorities have maintained the official exchange rate. Consequently, a black currency market has emerged, while real prices have risen, and the real value of money has plummeted. Banks reacted by introducing harsh capital control measures. Since then, many businesses have been closed, and thousands of jobs have been destroyed<sup>51</sup>. In this context, one of the most vulnerable populations are Syrian refugees, but not only. The World Bank has warned that about half of the Lebanese households now live below the poverty line<sup>52</sup>.

Amid this crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic broke out. The refugee population is one of the most vulnerable groups<sup>53</sup>, given the overcrowded conditions and limited access to healthcare<sup>54</sup>. Furthermore, many of the measures taken at the local level are discriminatory against Syrians<sup>55</sup>. On the other hand, the pandemic crisis is causing a reduction in cooperation programs worldwide, which in the medium term can have disastrous consequences for the permanence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon<sup>56</sup>. In Beirut, the Syrian embassy announced at the end of April 2020 that it would help refugee families return to Syria<sup>57</sup>.

Meanwhile, the economic situation continues to deteriorate. The Lebanese pound's real value has plummeted to 1USD = 10,000LL in July 2020, which means that the prices of essential goods, rent, or medicine have increased eight times<sup>58</sup>. Inflation and the loss of thousands of jobs have been painting a terrifying picture of hunger and despair, not only

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<sup>51</sup> CHAKER, J. "The Lebanese Economic Crisis 101". Jadaliyya, 23 March 2020

<sup>52</sup> Al Jazeera. "COVID-19: Almost half of Lebanon now lives below poverty line", 1 April 2020.

<sup>53</sup> SANCHA, N. "Coronavirus en Líbano y Siria". Conference in Casa Árabe, Madrid, 22 April 2020. Retrieved from: t.ly/BgoA (Consulted online on 20/10/2020).

<sup>54</sup> Action on Armed Violence. "Syrian refugee access to healthcare in Lebanon", 12 March 2020.

<sup>55</sup> Human Rights Watch. "Lebanon: Refugees at Risk in COVID-19 Response", 2 April 2020.

<sup>56</sup> SOUCHAIR, J. "Coronavirus en Líbano y Siria", Conference in Casa Árabe, Madrid, 22 April 2020. Retrieved from: t.ly/thh0 (Consulted online on 20/10/2020).

<sup>57</sup> Syria News. "السفارة السورية في بيروت تفتح باب عودة السوريين بشروط في ظل أزمة كورونا". [The Syrian Embassy in Beirut opens the door to the return of Syrians under conditions], 23 April 2020.

<sup>58</sup> WFP. "Minimum expenditure basket for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", March 2020.

for refugees but also for most Lebanese population. Since May, thousands of people have taken the streets despite the curfew, to which the army has responded forcefully<sup>59</sup>.

When nothing could get worse, 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate stored in Beirut's port detonated on August 4, causing a vast and violent explosion in the heart of the city. The blast killed more than 190 people, injured thousands, and left more than 300,000 in homelessness. The explosion devastated a large part of the surrounding neighborhoods, formerly important commercial and leisure areas of the capital. This event has been a severe blow to the country's already delicate economic, political, humanitarian and emotional situation. The causes of the explosion and the reason why such explosive material was there are still under investigation.

After the explosion, thousands of Lebanese took to the streets, demanding accountability and causing Hassan Diab's government's resignation. After unsuccessful attempts to form an independent government to tackle the crisis and unblock international aid's arrival, the Lebanese parliament has tasked Saad al-Hariri with forming a new government, a year after his resignation<sup>60</sup>. It is still too early to determine the full extent of this crisis, but what is clear is that Lebanon has long since ceased to be a safe shelter for Syrian refugees.

As the entire world faces the pandemic, Lebanon is also facing one of the worst crises in its history. These circumstances are bringing about premature returns of Syrian refugees<sup>61</sup>, forced by the worsening conditions and government policies, all of that clouded by the lack of information on actual conditions in Syria.

### ***Physical Security***

Physical security is the first concern of Syrians when deciding to return<sup>62</sup>. At the beginning of 2020, clashes in several parts of the country have left 2,500 victims and

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<sup>59</sup> HRW. "Lebanon's Protests are Far from Over", 27 April 2020.

<sup>60</sup> MENESES, R. "Saad Hariri, designado primer ministro del Líbano un año después de dimitir. El Mundo, 22 October 2020.

<sup>61</sup> MARKS, J. "Why Syrian refugees are at risk of a forced return to Syria". The Washington Post, 13 February 2019.

<sup>62</sup> ACNUR. "Fifth Regional Survey on Syrian Refugees' Perceptions and Intentions on Return to Syria. Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Jordan", 2019, quoted .p.8

displaced half a million<sup>63</sup>. The UN warned in March of forced displacement and violations against civilians<sup>64</sup>. Nevertheless, what makes a safe return more difficult is the absence of security guarantees for returnees.

UNHCR and the Independent International Commission of Inquiry have accused the forces involved in the conflict of perpetrating war crimes, indiscriminate attacks against civilians, medical facilities and medical personnel<sup>65</sup>. The al-Assad government has not guaranteed that it will not act against its own population and the few ones offered in local reconciliation agreements are not being fulfilled<sup>66</sup>. However, the lack of guarantees is not limited exclusively to government forces. Independent investigations also point to human rights violations by armed opposition groups, some of which continue to control territories, such as Hayat Tahrir As-Sham, and the Free Syrian Army<sup>67</sup>. Equally important are the many barriers that UN agencies face to access areas of Syria and monitor the field, which is an essential condition of safe return.

Furthermore, since the 1970s, the Syrian regime has used enforced disappearance as an intimidating practice to silence any opposition. Around 117,000 people have been arrested or disappeared between 2011 and 2016, most of them at the regime's hands<sup>68</sup>. In 2018, after Bashar al-Assad invited Syrians to return, the Air Force Intelligence Chief said publicly that *"a Syria with 10 million trustworthy people (...) was better than a Syria with 30 million of vandals. (...) Syria will not accept the presence of cancer cells, and they will be destroyed immediately."* At the same meeting, he said that he would filter the returnees to keep *"the good ones"* and *"use"* them<sup>69</sup>.

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<sup>63</sup> OCHA Syria. "Recent Developments in Northwest Syria Situation Report N° 10", 12 March 2020.

<sup>64</sup> OHCHR. "UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria : Unprecedented levels of displacement and dire conditions for civilians in the Syrian Arab Republic", 2 March 2020.

<sup>65</sup> ACNUR. "International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic, Update V", November 2017.

<sup>66</sup> European Institute of Peace. "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity", July 2019. Quoted.p.3

<sup>67</sup> ACNUR. "International Protection Considerations with Regard to People Fleeing the Syrian Arab Republic. Update V", November 2017, quoted p.14

<sup>68</sup> Dawlaty y WND, Women Now for Development, "Shadows of the Disappeared", 13 de November 2018.

<sup>69</sup> EL-SADANY, M. "When Assad asks Syrians to come home, here's what he really means". The Hill, 16 August 2018.

The returnees are forced to interact with the security forces, and arrests are taking place<sup>70</sup>. Being detained in Syria carries a very high risk of disappearing or being tortured<sup>71</sup>. Also, the security forces are using many returnees to obtain information and recruit new "local informants" to contribute to the regime's system of social control. These arrests affect more young men in age for military service; people who practice professions considered "risky"; those who sought asylum; or those who have relatives in areas like Idlib or Rif Halab<sup>72</sup>.

There are independent studies carried out with the returned population in government-controlled areas, in which 60% of the interviewed are looking for ways to leave again, mainly due to insecurity and fear of being arrested<sup>73</sup>. To sum up, the perception of the risks of being arrested or disappeared, the ongoing conflict, the lack of guarantees, and the lack of access to information, instill a fear that dissuades many families from returning to Syria.<sup>74</sup>

### ***Legal Security***

The Syrian government has issued no guarantees that it will not discriminate against returnees. In fact, in matters such as property recovery, the government approved Law No. 10 of 2018. According to this law, authorities can modify urban development areas' designation, establishing a limited time to claim property. This law is discriminatory towards those out of the country, and its application is arbitrary. Half of the property records were destroyed during the war; before the conflict, only 50% of the lands were registered. Besides, 70% of the refugees lack legal documentation, making it even more difficult for them to prove their ownership<sup>75</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> European Institute of Peace. "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity", July 2019. Quoted p.3

<sup>71</sup> OHCHR. "UN Commission of Inquiry on Syria : Unprecedented levels of displacement and dire conditions for civilians in the Syrian Arab Republic", 2 March 2020, quoted p.14

<sup>72</sup> European Institute of Peace. "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity", July 2019. Quoted p.3.

<sup>73</sup> SADC. "Vegeance, Repression and Fear: Reality behind Assad's Promises to Displaced Syrians", 13 October 2019.

<sup>74</sup> CORNISH, C. Y KHATTAB, A. "Climate of fear deters Syrian refugees from returning home". Financial Times, 14 July 2019.

<sup>75</sup> NRC. "Syrian refugee's documentation crisis", 26 January 2017.

The government declared a general amnesty for desertion cases and evasion from military service by Decree No. 18/2018, giving a period of six months to report to the military detachment in their constituency. However, this amnesty does not mean that those who take advantage of it are not called up to do military service later. Also, the military authorities are still carrying out arrests at the border as well as imposing sanctions, prison sentences and even disappearances<sup>76</sup>.

### ***Material Security***

Syria is going through a massive crisis, devastated and ravaged by nine years of civil war. The World Bank estimates that losses between 2011 and 2016 are \$ 226 billion<sup>77</sup>, four times its GDP. In March 2019, the United Nations estimated that 83% of the population lived below the poverty line, a context that has recently worsened due to sanctions and the crisis in Lebanon, the "economic lung of Syria"<sup>78</sup>. A 2018 study found that many of the recently returned refugees acknowledged that the situation in their communities of origin was worse than they expected<sup>79</sup>.

On the other hand, the COVID-19 pandemic has aggravated the crisis<sup>80</sup>, considering that both the government and the groups that control the territory lack the means to deal with the pandemic<sup>81</sup>. Just before it exploded, 53 health facilities suspended their services due to the clashes<sup>82</sup>.

In a nutshell, Syria's situation does not seem to offer an environment of material security that would favor return. This scenario, together with the lack of guarantees, poses a rather complicated panorama that makes it impossible to consider the return of refugees to Syria according to the parameters established by UNHCR.

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<sup>76</sup> European Institute of Peace. "Refugee Return in Syria: Dangers, Security Risks and Information Scarcity", July 2019. Quoted p.3.

<sup>77</sup> World Bank. "Growth after War in Syria", August 2019.

<sup>78</sup> BARNES-DACEY, J. "Society max: How Europe can help Syrians survive Assad and coronavirus". European Council on Foreign Relations, 21 April 2020.

<sup>79</sup> Impact Initiatives. "Picking up the Pieces: realities of return and reintegration in North-East Syria", 2018.

<sup>80</sup> SANCHA, N. "La pandemia agrava la crisis en la devastada Siria". El País, 12 May 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Violations Documentation Center in Syria. "In World Health Day, Syria is unable to respond to COVID-19 with the current health situation", 7 April 2020.

<sup>82</sup> WHO. "Northwest Syria: WHO raises alarm as more than 50 health facilities are forced to cease operations amid mass displacement and hostilities", 3 February 2020.



## Conclusions and recommendations

Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in a very delicate situation, facing increasing challenges in a context of enormous uncertainty and insecurity. Lebanon is trapped in a difficult and deep structural crisis, drawing an environment that expels and is no longer safe, and where the only option is to return to Syria. Meanwhile, Syria is still in conflict, is still unsafe, repressive and discriminatory towards returnees. Consequently, the return to Syria does not comply with the conditions of voluntariness, security and dignity established by International Law. Furthermore, this return cannot be sustainable until a real and inclusive national reconciliation process takes place.

While this does not seem to happen in the near future, it is urgent to think of practical and realistic solutions that alleviate the humanitarian situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and ease the region's migratory pressure. The international community must urge the Bashar al-Assad regime to offer real guarantees, allowing those who want to return to recover their properties without the fear of disappearing or suffering retaliation. Simultaneously, resettlement must be accelerated and increased so that third countries in better conditions share with Lebanon the burden that this tiny and weak republic has been carrying for years. Finally, donors must not cut back their support to Lebanon and the Syrian refugee population, despite challenging global circumstances.

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