

Lebanon – Resilient, For Now.

EU Action Needed as Refugee Crisis Stokes Tensions

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While the destructive effects of the Syrian civil war have been felt across the Middle East – and beyond – the impact on Lebanon has been exceptionally severe. The scale of the refugee influx raises serious humanitarian concerns but also has the potential to undermine the long-term stability of Lebanon itself. The number of Syrians registered with UNHCR in the country has stabilised at around 1.1 million in recent months, amounting to nearly a quarter of the native population of Lebanon (4.8 million) although NGOs estimate that the actual number could be hundreds of thousands higher. Lebanon has coped remarkably well with the refugee population up to now, but in the longer-term, external assistance is needed. This creates an opportunity for the EU to act in the humanitarian interests of the refugees, the stability of the region and, in so doing, to re-boot the southern dimension of its troubled Neighbourhood Policy (ENP).

Analysis: Potential Radicalisation Amidst Scarce Resources

UNHCR [currently states](#) that it can secure less than half of the funding required for the appropriate response to the refugee crisis in Lebanon, which leaves many Syrian refugee communities vulnerable to a number of threats related to the coming winter. Amongst other pressing humanitarian concerns, insufficient housing, lack of access to health care and drinking water are particular problems. However, after the escalation of fighting between Lebanese armed forces and sunni-jihadist militants in northern Lebanon in late August, Syrians have also [become victims of abuse and mob attacks](#). In some cases, these attacks – perpetrated by private citizens – happened in the full view of security forces, who failed to intervene.

While these incidents have so far been limited in their scope, they signal the potential for wider conflict if the refugee crisis is not dealt with, especially in light of jihadist groups' efforts to exploit the hopelessness of refugee communities. Rather than trying to address some of the underlying issues, Lebanese politicians have implemented [policies designed to limit the number of refugees](#), which effectively strip some of them of refugee status. Inflammatory statements on refugee issues made by politicians from across the Lebanese political spectrum have further exacerbated the situation, helping to deepen the divisions between Syrian refugees and Lebanese communities.

Insufficient governmental resources and lack of capacity to provide public services are particularly pronounced in the underdeveloped regions on the Lebanese-Syrian border that host the majority of the refugees but have limited public infrastructure and economic opportunities. The influx of refugees thus provides a potential source of conflict as scarce resources, such as water and electricity, which were insufficient even for the Lebanese population now have to be shared among a much larger number of people. The refugees have also had an impact on local labour markets and have been blamed for rising unemployment and for driving down wages in low-skilled jobs.

Despite the potential for further conflict that these issues raise, there is no long-term Lebanese political strategy to deal with the refugee population and its effects, as well as a lack of resources to implement any such policy.

Outlook: A Problem That's Not Going Anywhere Soon

Despite the declarations of some Lebanese politicians, Syrian refugees will most probably not be able to leave the country in the near future. This situation invokes the memories of how the country's civil war began in the 1970s, which is seen to have been fueled by the arrival of large numbers of Palestinian refugees and armed factions. For the time being, Syrians in Lebanon lack the unifying ideology, weapons, and infrastructure (such as large refugee camps) that were available to the Palestinians and so the situation is not yet of comparable severity in this regard.

However, if the rumours about the jihadist proselytising activities among the refugees are true, it could pave the way for radicalization and future conflict with host communities. These fears, along with the perceived need to preserve the carefully balanced, but fragile Lebanese political system (which is based on religious proportionality), mean that the refugees will also be unlikely to remain in Lebanon in the long-term. The need for a medium-term strategy, which addresses the issues raised above, but also supports longer-term and wider goals is therefore clear.

The objective of EU activities in the country should be to prevent both deterioration of the refugees' situation and any escalation of tensions between the refugees and Lebanese communities. Decisive EU action could help to strengthen its standing in the region and to shape the image of the southern dimension of its Neighbourhood Policy.

Recommendations: Alleviating the Symptoms While Addressing the Causes

- ◆ The new **European Commission DG Neighbourhood and Enlargement** should provide humanitarian assistance to ease the immediate plight of refugee communities, but should also focus on the longer-term stabilization of Lebanon, in line with the goals of ENP. Development assistance to improve infrastructure, support economic development, and increase community resilience at the local level should also be intensified.
- ◆ The **EEAS**, through its delegation to Lebanon, should work to find common ground between different stakeholder groups on the refugee situation as a basis for creating a longer-term strategy. As one of the biggest donors in the country, the EU should also use its leverage to support conflict-prevention and conflict-resolution processes between Lebanese actors and Syrian refugees, at the political level and, practically, at the local level.
- ◆ The **V4 countries** should continue to engage in bilateral development projects in Lebanon but should also show their commitment to the stability of the region by helping to resettle Syrian refugees, thus demonstrating their commitment to reviving ENP's Southern dimension.

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