

# From Inactivity to Reactivity and Gut Proactivity: Review of Lebanon’s State Policies Towards Syrian Refugees (2011–2022)

Elias DAHROUGE<sup>1</sup> 

*With an estimated 1.5 million, Lebanon is one of the most affected countries by the Syrian refugee crisis, making it the country with the highest rate of refugees per capita in the world. While praised in the early years for its hospitality, Lebanon’s policy response towards refugees became gradually more restrictive and repulsive. The following article gives a comprehensive review of Lebanon’s policies regarding Syrian refugees between 2011 and 2022. It argues that during this period, the state’s policy response can be divided into three major phases defined by the concepts of inactivity, reactivity and gut proactivity. Each of these phases comprise a multitude of different policies on the local, national and international levels, which are thoroughly examined and categorised. In addition, the article gives interpretations for the probable motives behind the various policies by linking them to the peculiarity of the Lebanese political system itself.*

**Keywords:** *Syrian refugee crisis, Lebanon, policy response, policy of return, refugee studies, Middle East*

## Introduction

The Syrian civil war that started in 2011 triggered one of the greatest humanitarian tragedies of the 21<sup>st</sup> century by displacing millions of Syrians both internally and internationally.<sup>2</sup> Neighbouring Lebanon is one of the most impacted countries by this refugee crisis. The country witnessed the influx of around 1.5 million of Syrian refugees, making it the second biggest recipient for Syrian refugees.<sup>3</sup> In this respect, with a population of roughly 4.5 million, Lebanon became the country with the highest rate of refugees per capita in the world, making up around 30% of its total population according to the United Nations

---

<sup>1</sup> PhD candidate and Lecturer at the Corvinus University of Budapest; works as a research consultant in public policy in Beirut, Lebanon, e-mail: [eliasdahrouge@hotmail.com](mailto:eliasdahrouge@hotmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Amnesty International 2015; United Nations 2018.

<sup>3</sup> UNHCR 2019a.

High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) itself.<sup>4</sup> While praised in the early years for its generous hospitality, Lebanon saw a shift of its policy towards the Syrian refugee population. In this regard, authorities switched gradually from no-policy to policies of exclusion and policies of return. The aim of this analysis is to present a comprehensive review of Lebanon's policies regarding Syrian refugees from 2011 up until 2022. For that purpose, it reviews the three phases that it conceptualises as phases of *inactivity*, *reactivity* and *gut proactivity*. Afterwise, it examines the three phases' different policies that were undertaken on the local, national and international levels, and tries to interpret the various motives behind each of these measures. Nonetheless, the first step below is dedicated to the detailed presentation of the context in which these policies were adopted.

## The context

Lebanese state policies towards Syrian refugees have to be understood in their proper context. Despite its complexity, this context has three main relevant dimensions that have to be taken into consideration for the following analysis. The first dimension can be qualified as structural, as it is related to the Lebanese political system's nature itself, its institutions, as well as to the different binding international regulations to which the country adheres. Understanding this structure is key for the interpretation of motives behind the different policies. The second dimension is temporal. It is related to the timeline of the Syrian refugees' influx in numbers and their evolution through years. They help us to establish correlations between fluctuations in refugee numbers and implemented public policies. The third dimension is conjunctural, as the Syrian refugee crisis coincides with the multileveled financial, socioeconomic and political crisis that Lebanon witnessed starting from 2019.

1. Regarding the structural background, Lebanon is known for its peculiar *consociational* political system based on consensual power-sharing between its various religious components guaranteed through mutual veto.<sup>5</sup> Implications of this system are twofold: on the one hand, power is divided among sectarian political parties. But since each has its own interests and priorities, consensual power-sharing often results in a multi-cephalous executive which prevents unified decision-making.<sup>6</sup> As a consequence, the Lebanese state policies are characterised by a high level of institutional ambiguity.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, the system's structural dysfunctions reflect on a generalised systemic weakness that relativises any policy analysis. On the other hand, since the system grants each sect a proportional representation through quotas, the fragile sectarian status quo engages sects in a mutual "confidence game"<sup>8</sup> in which each aims constantly at maintaining the sectarian demographic balance in order to avoid any questioning of the quotas'

---

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that in addition to Syrians, Lebanon hosts around half a million of Palestinian refugees who came after 1948 (UNHCR 2018).

<sup>5</sup> MESSARRA 2003; MAALOUF MONNEAU 2015; SALLOUKH et al. 2015; CORM 2003.

<sup>6</sup> SALLOUKH et al. 2015; FAKHOURY 2014.

<sup>7</sup> NASSAR-STEL 2019.

<sup>8</sup> SALIBI 1998: 38–56.

repartition.<sup>9</sup> Thus, fear from demographic change is a key driver of actors' decisions and policy initiatives. The influx of Syrian refugees must be understood then as a perceived threat by many decision-makers. This context might also explain other structural elements like, for example, that Lebanon is not signatory of the 1951 UN Refugee Convention.<sup>10</sup> Yet, the government abides by the principle of non-refoulement.<sup>11</sup> This is also an important framing element for policy analysis.<sup>12</sup>

2. Regarding the second contextual dimension, Lebanon is one of the most impacted countries by the Syrian refugee crisis. Any attempt of understanding its state policy towards refugees must be put in the context of the evolution of the refugees' influx itself. With the absence of any reliable official census, the UNHCR's data provide a valid indicator of numbers and their trends. In this respect, after a consequent increase during the first years, the number of UNHCR-registered refugees reached a peak in spring 2015 with around 1.2 million.<sup>13</sup> Later, the number dropped back below the one million, with around 919,000 registered for autumn 2019.<sup>14</sup> Afterwise, numbers continued to decrease further slightly by reaching 814,715 by the end of 2022.<sup>15</sup> This can be explained by a multitude of factors such as resettlement, return to Syria, and illegal migration towards Turkey and Europe induced by the worsening economic conditions as presented later. For instance, 100,000 refugees were resettled to third countries by June 2019.<sup>16</sup> In the meantime, the Lebanese state continues to give the number of 1.5 million Syrian refugees as its official estimation.<sup>17</sup> In consequence, the analysis of Lebanon's refugee-related policies has to be understood in the wake of these fluctuations through time.

3. Finally, regarding the conjectural context, since 2019 Lebanon has been facing a multitude of parallel and intertwined crises that are both affecting public opinion and the state's policy response in relation to Syrian refugees. In this respect, the worsening economic situation of the past years triggered a wave of mass protests starting of October 2019.<sup>18</sup> The multileveled crisis had some dramatic consequences on the Lebanese population. In fact, annual inflation rates surpassed 150% for 2021 and 170% for 2022,<sup>19</sup> while the Lebanese Pound's devaluation reached 95% by the end of 2022,<sup>20</sup> and the – once thriving – banking sector prevented access of depositors to their own savings.<sup>21</sup> But the ruling class failed at providing adequate solutions, leading the World Bank (2022) of qualifying the crisis as deliberately-orchestrated by its elites and as one of the world's

---

<sup>9</sup> FAOUR 2007.

<sup>10</sup> JANMYR 2017; BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>11</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>12</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>13</sup> UNHCR 2019b.

<sup>14</sup> UNHCR 2019b.

<sup>15</sup> UNHCR 2023.

<sup>16</sup> IOM 2019.

<sup>17</sup> This estimation is often shared by many other sources since many Syrians failed to register as refugees, especially after Lebanese authorities asked UNHCR to freeze registrations in 2015 as presented later in this analysis (UNHCR 2022; UNHCR 2023; UNHCR 2019a).

<sup>18</sup> DAHROUGE et al. 2020.

<sup>19</sup> DERHALLY 2023.

<sup>20</sup> BASSAM et al. 2022.

<sup>21</sup> World Bank 2022: 67.

worst economic collapses since 1850.<sup>22</sup> As a result, 80% of Lebanese were pushed into poverty by the end of 2022,<sup>23</sup> and thousands lost their jobs or were forced to emigrate to seek better opportunities.<sup>24</sup> Many politicians of the ruling elite were tempted at blaming refugees,<sup>25</sup> fuelling by that the overall resentment against them.<sup>26</sup>

## The different phases of Lebanon's refugee response

The Lebanese state's policy response towards the Syrian refugee crisis was already comprehensively and continuously analysed during the past years. Generally speaking, the state's undertaken policies can be categorised under three separate phases that evolved chronologically on the timeline. In fact, between 2011 and 2020, they shifted gradually from what we call here *inactivity* (2011–2014), to *reactivity* (2014–2016) and *gut proactivity* (2016–2022). The following few paragraphs give a summary of these main phases.

This first phase of *inactivity* was often described as a phase characterised by a “policy of no policy” or “ostrich policy”.<sup>27</sup> During this phase, borders remained open for Syrians, but they were denied any specific legal status.<sup>28</sup> Most of the time, the government was unable to explicitly formulate any refugee-related policy, and when it did, it failed in its implementation.<sup>29</sup> However, the only exception to the rule of no-policy was the strict and declared ban of camps.<sup>30</sup> Indeed, in contrast with Jordan for instance, Lebanon did not regulate or establish refugee camps. As a consequence, the uncontrolled flood of refugees had directly impacted municipalities. Soon, local authorities were left without any form of guidance from the government,<sup>31</sup> leading to a multitude of ad-hoc decisions taken on the local level.<sup>32</sup> In parallel, assistance was “outsourced” to various local or international governmental and non-governmental organisations.<sup>33</sup>

The second phase of *reactivity* saw between 2015 and 2016 a shift towards the so-called “policies of exclusion”<sup>34</sup> through which the government tried to regulate the transborder movement of Syrians.<sup>35</sup> The turning point happened in late 2014 when the cabinet officially addressed the Syrian refugee crisis for the first time after three years of its beginning.<sup>36</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> World Bank 2022: 65.

<sup>23</sup> Human Rights Watch 2023.

<sup>24</sup> LÓPEZ-TOMÁS 2023.

<sup>25</sup> BRUN-FAKIH 2022.

<sup>26</sup> ROSE 2019.

<sup>27</sup> “Policy of no policy” was first conceptualised by Karim El Mufti (2014), while “ostrich policy” by Saghieh and Frangieh (2014), as cited in KIKANO et al. 2021: 429. They both refer to the first years of the Syrian refugee crisis during which Lebanese authorities failed at taking any active measure.

<sup>28</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017, 17.

<sup>29</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>30</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>31</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>32</sup> HOCHBERG 2019.

<sup>33</sup> BRUN et al. 2021; KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>34</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>35</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>36</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

The declared rationale was articulated around the need to contain the influx through recording all entries at the borders.<sup>37</sup> This development is definitely linked to the context: as mentioned earlier, numbers of UNHCR-registered Syrian refugees reached 1.2 million in 2015. As a result, during the following few months, the General Security<sup>38</sup> (GS) applied restrictive visa and residency measures on Syrians<sup>39</sup> and the Lebanese authorities asked the UNHCR to stop new registrations, depriving by that many Syrians from both financial and in-kind aid provided for registered refugees.<sup>40</sup> It also pushed most of them into a status of illegal residency that put them at risk of vulnerability and exploitation.<sup>41</sup>

The third phase of *gut proactivity*<sup>42</sup> comes in the light of Michel Aoun's election as President in late 2016. It is characterised by the rising advocacy and the gradual implementation of a soft plan for the return of Syrian refugees.<sup>43</sup> This move came in the context of a general consensus among Lebanese influential political actors on the necessity of the return of Syrian refugees after years of conflicting positions. But the multiplicity of initiatives coupled with fragmented decision-making processes make its tracing quite difficult.<sup>44</sup> These go from the creation of official bureaus at the General Security for receiving applications of voluntary returnees,<sup>45</sup> to the formation of other committees managed by non-state actors such as political parties who coordinate return directly with the General Security.<sup>46</sup> But as usual in the Lebanese *consociational* political system, there was no consensus among political parties on the return's modalities.<sup>47</sup> Details around these policies are tackled in the next parts.

## Three levels of policy response

After the chronological approach that led us to identify the three main phases of Lebanon's policy response to the Syrian refugee crisis, the analysis needs to be completed by a detailed typology of the various policies implemented. For that, policies must be examined separately on their local, national and international levels.

---

<sup>37</sup> GHANEM 2015.

<sup>38</sup> The General Security is one of the Lebanese state's four security agencies. Its main tasks are border control, regulation and management of foreigners' residencies and counterterrorism.

<sup>39</sup> GHANEM 2015.

<sup>40</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>41</sup> UNICEF–UNHCR–WFP 2018.

<sup>42</sup> The usage of "gut" for describing "proactivity" is for underlining the emotional and instinctive character of the state's actions as interpreted here. In other words, the state's proactive measures are coming from the "stomachs" of the decision-makers rather than from rational thinking.

<sup>43</sup> FAVIER 2016: 1–6.

<sup>44</sup> FAKHOURY 2021.

<sup>45</sup> VOHRA 2019.

<sup>46</sup> FAKHOURY 2021.

<sup>47</sup> FAKHOURY 2021.

## ***The local level***

As mentioned earlier, on the local level, the state's inaction transferred the management of refugees to local authorities such as municipalities.<sup>48</sup> In other words, municipalities were kind of indirectly "sub-contracted" by the state. As a result, state *inactivity* turned soon into municipal *reactivity*. It gave local authorities complete freedom in adopting all kinds of ad hoc – and sometimes illegal – measures and regulations that ranged from restrictive to inclusive.<sup>49</sup> Their actions were inconsistent.<sup>50</sup> For example, many municipalities limited residing refugees to receive guests after specific hours, or forbade them to access public spaces.<sup>51</sup> In some towns, Syrians were simply asked to leave, or were prohibited to access the area. In this regard, refugees faced eviction notices and mass expulsions in many regions.<sup>52</sup> Other municipalities like Hadath for instance – a Christian town in the vicinity of Beirut's southern suburbs – simply banned Syrians from working within their territory.<sup>53</sup> Elsewhere, municipalities limited Syrians' movement after certain hours through curfews. For instance, within one year between 2014 and 2015, more than 45 municipalities were identified to have imposed curfews for unjustified motives, despite being forbidden in doing so.<sup>54</sup> The United Nations documented that, up until 2018, 14% of refugee households experienced imposed curfews in their areas of residency, varying from 1% in Beirut or Akkar in the North, up to 45% in some of South Lebanon's regions.<sup>55</sup> Curfews were issued by municipalities in 97% of the cases.<sup>56</sup> With the worsening economic and financial crisis that Lebanon started to experience in recent years, many municipalities began to tighten even more their restrictive measures against Syrian refugees.<sup>57</sup> Indeed, crises need scapegoats. It progressively pushed some municipalities to undertake populist measures against Syrians, such as setting daily wages caps for Syrian workers,<sup>58</sup> in order to ease Lebanese – and their resentment – who often perceive Syrians as stealing their jobs.<sup>59</sup>

## ***The national level***

The national level is the core focus of this analysis. For a better understanding of the full picture, the analysis requires a thematic dissection of the various policies. In this respect, the meticulous review enables us to distinguish between 1. economy and labour policies;

---

<sup>48</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>49</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>50</sup> HOCHBERG 2019.

<sup>51</sup> HOCHBERG 2019.

<sup>52</sup> PRESTON 2017.

<sup>53</sup> Naharnet 2019.

<sup>54</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>55</sup> UNICEF–UNHCR–WFP 2018.

<sup>56</sup> UNICEF–UNHCR–WFP 2018.

<sup>57</sup> HAYEK 2022.

<sup>58</sup> RAMADAN 2021.

<sup>59</sup> ROSE 2019.

2. identity-protecting policies; and finally, 3. an escalating policy of return. The first two categories are mainly *reactive* measures, while the third is *proactive*.

1. Economy and labour policies were one of the first *reactive* actions to be declared by the Lebanese Government. It started in 2013, when the Ministry of Labour intended at regulating the work of Syrians by confining them into specific restricted domains.<sup>60</sup> But the Council of the Ministers revoked this measure, in parallel with its decision to link United Nations aid and assistance's eligibility to unemployment status, according to which "displaced" would no-longer be considered as such if practicing a job.<sup>61</sup> These first measures correlate with the rise of incoming Syrian refugees in 2013 and onwards as presented earlier. Later, the Ministry of Labour succeeded in limiting work permissions for low-skilled positions such as agriculture, cleaning and construction.<sup>62</sup> If the regulation seemed to be relatively progressive, the practice revealed the policy's real intentions. In fact, the paperwork and regularisation demarches proved to be quasi-impossible to meet, since it required employers of proving that no Lebanese could fill the position of Syrian postulants, and that they would abide by a 9-to-1 quota of Lebanese versus Syrian employees.<sup>63</sup> Then, in 2015, Lebanese authorities imposed work permits on Syrian employees, and asked in parallel the UNHCR to remove employed Syrians from their list of aid beneficiaries.<sup>64</sup>

2. The second category of policies include those *reactive* measures intended at protecting Lebanon from various threats to its national security. It includes policies and actions that prohibited the institutionalisation of organised camps, as well as those that tried to limit any form of long-term implantation of Syrians in the country. The formers are also referred to as the no-camp policy.<sup>65</sup> As previously explained, Lebanon prevented the elaboration of a camp policy for Syrian refugees.<sup>66</sup> This decision was most probably linked to the country's past experience with Palestinian refugees who settled in camps that are regulated by various Palestinian factions and remain out of direct state control.<sup>67</sup> Hezbollah – one of the most influential political actors on the Lebanese scene – expressed its fear of having potential security "pocket zones" that would soon fall out of control.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, many thought that these zones could witness the proliferation of Sunni extremist groups and eventually become a threat for state security.<sup>69</sup> The latter policies, those that intend at limiting long-term Syrian settlement, concretised through initiatives that prohibited Syrian refugees from building shelters out of hard or long-lasting construction material. In this regard, the Lebanese Supreme Defence Council ordered the demolition of all informal shelters identified as built of such material, which technically turned around

---

<sup>60</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>61</sup> BOU KHATER 2017.

<sup>62</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>63</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>64</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>65</sup> SANYAL 2017.

<sup>66</sup> TSOURAPAS 2019: 464–481.

<sup>67</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>68</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017: 19.

<sup>69</sup> FAKHOURY 2021.

3,500 Syrian families into homeless people in Aarsal alone.<sup>70</sup> In parallel, the Ministry of Social Affairs dispatched some watchdogs across the country to monitor and keep an eye on all Syrian refugee-related humanitarian activities, preventing any form of perennial improvements on refugee accommodations and constructions.<sup>71</sup> In this respect, any other construction material than wood or plastic was destined to be demolished.<sup>72</sup> On another note, these decisions had some dramatic consequences on refugees' safety. The sole use of light construction material put many settlements at high risk of fire hazards, like in 2020 in Minieh, North Lebanon,<sup>73</sup> or in Aarsal in the Beqaa,<sup>74</sup> leading often to many casualties.

3. The third category of policies regroup the state's instigation and progressive escalation of return initiatives that characterise the third phase that we named *gut proactivity*. As indicated by the appellation, this phase is defined by a switch from mere *reactive* measures to *proactive* procedures, albeit emotionally-driven as if coming from the *gut*. In this respect, the policy of return had to be first accepted, then planned and finally implemented. When it comes to the first step, political struggles between the pro-Western and anti-Syrian regime 14<sup>th</sup> of March coalition on the one hand, and the pro-Syrian regime 8<sup>th</sup> of March coalition on the other, – both included in consensual governments of national unity – made it difficult to agree on a unified vision about return. For example, parties could not agree over the question of safe zones within Syria.<sup>75</sup> But calls for the immediate return of refugees were gradually growing. The Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) of Michel Aoun went as far as proposing its implementation by force.<sup>76</sup> Hezbollah – the former's ally – was also holding similar positions.<sup>77</sup> In fact, when the Syrian conflict started to lose in intensity, the 8<sup>th</sup> of March coalition – namely Hezbollah and its allies (Amal and FPM) – adopted the Assad regime's narrative and claimed that Syrians were safe to return home, unlike the 14<sup>th</sup> of March coalition which declared the contrary.<sup>78</sup> This takes us to the next steps in which intentions were to be translated into concrete actions. One of these actions was implemented by the GS who started to relocate thousands of refugees based on their “voluntary” will to return to “safe zones” in Syria.<sup>79</sup> By the end of August 2019, the GS declared to have supervised the repatriation of around 2,700 Syrians in just three months, a step considered by Human Rights Watch as “placing them at risk of arbitrary detention and torture”.<sup>80</sup> Since then, the so-called voluntary return organised by the GS continued on a regular pace.<sup>81</sup> But obviously, these initiatives were still perceived as shy by the government. In the decision-makers' perspective, return policies needed an upscale at the size of the crisis itself. Intentions for a comprehensive plan were translated

---

<sup>70</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>71</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>72</sup> HOCHBERG 2019.

<sup>73</sup> HOUSSARI 2020.

<sup>74</sup> L'Orient Today 2022b.

<sup>75</sup> GEHA 2019.

<sup>76</sup> GEHA 2019.

<sup>77</sup> FAKHOURY 2021.

<sup>78</sup> GEHA 2019.

<sup>79</sup> Human Rights Watch 2020.

<sup>80</sup> Human Rights Watch 2020.

<sup>81</sup> Human Rights Watch 2021; Human Rights Watch 2020.



into the elaboration of a clear roadmap by the 2020 Hassan Diab Government for the safe return of Syrian refugees, and was based on the cooperation with the Syrian regime.<sup>82</sup> Nevertheless, the cabinet's resignation following the deadly Beirut port blast of August 2020<sup>83</sup> diverted the focus of the caretaker government towards other priorities. The plan was to be reactivated under the Mikati Government of 2021, which upon its formation, issued a decision over the return question, followed by the appointment of a ministerial committee to deal with this folder.<sup>84</sup> This came along with a rising discourse that stressed on the inability of the country to cope with the crisis anymore.<sup>85</sup> It also led to some suspicious cases of what some organisations denounced as being arbitrary deportations.<sup>86</sup> The organisation of so-called mass voluntary returns was undertaken by the Minister of Displaced Issam Charafeddine. In July 2022, Charafeddine announced his plan to organise the safe return of 15,000 Syrians per month in collaboration with Damascus,<sup>87</sup> considering Syria a safe place,<sup>88</sup> and suggesting the deportation of dissident refugees to third countries.<sup>89</sup> Soon, and despite the objections of the UNHCR, President Aoun announced the launch of the minister's plan in October 2022.<sup>90</sup> By the end of October, the results remained far from the target, as only 751 persons were successfully repatriated,<sup>91</sup> showing the limits of mass voluntary return policies. All in all, although being difficult to measure with exactitude, an estimated 76,000 Syrian refugees returned back home from Lebanon during the 2016–2022 period.<sup>92</sup>

### ***The international level***

Lebanon's policy on the international level was previously conceptualised as a type of "refugee rentier state".<sup>93</sup> This appellation refers to states that use refugees as a mean to excerpt "refugee revenues" from donors in return for keeping them on their soil.<sup>94</sup> There are two types of refugee rentier state strategies: one uses blackmailing by threatening donor states with refugees like Turkey, while another uses softer back-scratching methods for its chantage, such as promising donors to keep refugees contained within their borders in return of cash assistance and aid.<sup>95</sup> In this respect, Lebanon's political elites are profiting from international aid allocated for hosting Syrians. In the past years, the state's

---

<sup>82</sup> ASTIH 2020.

<sup>83</sup> BASSAM–CHMAYTELLI 2021.

<sup>84</sup> National News Agency 2022.

<sup>85</sup> The international dimension of this discursive "chantage" are addressed in the next paragraph (National News Agency 2022).

<sup>86</sup> SEWELL 2022.

<sup>87</sup> L'Orient Today 2022a.

<sup>88</sup> L'Orient Today 2022a.

<sup>89</sup> FAKIH 2022.

<sup>90</sup> HAMADI 2022.

<sup>91</sup> LANGLOIS 2022.

<sup>92</sup> Asharq Al-Awsat 2022.

<sup>93</sup> TSOURAPAS 2019: 464–481.

<sup>94</sup> TSOURAPAS 2019: 464–481.

<sup>95</sup> TSOURAPAS 2019: 464–481.

representatives used international donor conferences as platforms for their back-scratching discourses.<sup>96</sup> These strategies were also complemented by other behaviours in which the government tried to bargain donations in counterpart of incentives, such as for example the delivery of work permits to Syrian refugees, who happened to be already employed on the black market.<sup>97</sup>

## The different motives behind the policies

The policy analysis of the previous sections provides tangible evidence and hints about the probable underlying motives that drive the many actions and initiatives of the Lebanese state towards Syrian refugees. Regarding the phase of *inactivity*, it is undeniable that decision-makers and key actors have had some kind of humanitarian considerations. Hezbollah for instance had a previous debt towards Syrians when they welcomed Lebanese Shia from South Lebanon during the 2006 war with Israel.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, this explanation must be balanced with the structural realities of the Lebanese political system that cause deadlock and paralysis in decision-making:<sup>99</sup> a more logical explanation for the state's initial *inactivity*. Also, the inability to control the fluid Syrian–Lebanese borders discredits any argument that tries to claim that the open door policy was intentional.<sup>100</sup> When it comes to the phase of *reactivity*, the prior concerns of authorities were most probably of economic nature for the sake of protecting the domestic jobs market,<sup>101</sup> while the no-camp policy was driven by security concerns linked to the Palestinian precedent.<sup>102</sup> In addition, this phase can also be interpreted as a message from the government to the international community stressing on its refusal of becoming a country of asylum for millions.<sup>103</sup> Finally, the phase of *gut proactivity* – marked by the initiation of an upscaled return policy – engages the analysis in a multitude of subtle interpretations. While some might see it as a mere variant of state securitisation,<sup>104</sup> others interpret it as linked to the perception of fear from Syrian refugees as a threat to the country's sectarian demographic balance.<sup>105</sup> This is especially relevant for the non-Muslim Sunni religious groups, mainly Shia, Druze and Christians.

## Conclusion

All in all, from an initial *inactive* phase marked by a policy of no-policy, the Lebanese state started to adopt more *reactive* policies of restriction and exclusion, before shifting

---

<sup>96</sup> TSOURAPAS 2019: 464–481.

<sup>97</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>98</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>99</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

<sup>100</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>101</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>102</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>103</sup> KIKANO et al. 2021.

<sup>104</sup> BRUN et al. 2021.

<sup>105</sup> ŞAHİN MENCUTEK 2017.

towards implementing a *proactive* policy of return. The first phase was defined by a context of general hospitality, while the second was triggered by the exponential growth of incoming refugees. Finally, the third phase was generated by the indefinite prolongation of the refugee crisis, coupled with the worsening economic crisis in Lebanon. Throughout the three phases, different policies were adopted on the local, national and international levels. On the local level, the state did not adopt any policy. Hence, municipalities and local communities had to deal with the crisis by their own. On the national level, the state implemented restrictive policies in many different sectors. Some of these were economy-related – such as the regulation of the Syrian labour force – while some others were security-related such as the no-camp policy. Later, the state started to push more aggressively towards organising mass voluntary return. On the international level, the Lebanese state acted as a rentier state by using chantage in order to attract international aid. While these policies were determined by a multitude of different security and economic motives, it is important to underline that their main driver might be linked to the fear that Syrian refugees generate a perceived threat to the country's fragile sectarian demographic balance. But this claim needs to be corroborated by further investigations.

## References

- Amnesty International (2015): Syria: The Worst Humanitarian Crisis of Our Time. *Amnesty International*, 07 April 2015. Online: [www.amnesty.org.nz/syria-worst-humanitarian-crisis-our-time](http://www.amnesty.org.nz/syria-worst-humanitarian-crisis-our-time)
- Asharq Al-Awsat (2022): Scores of Syrian Refugees Head Home from Lebanon. *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 05 November 2022. Online: <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/3971016/scores-syrian-refugees-head-home-lebanon>
- ASTIH, Paula (2020): Khottat al-hukuma al-lubnaniyya li-iaadat al-nazihin al-suriyyin taqum aala al-tansiq maa dimashq. *Al Sharq Al Awsat*, 17 July 2020. Online: <https://aawsat.com/home/article/2394451/>
- BASSAM, Laila – AZHARI, TIMOUR – PERRY, Tom (2022): Lebanon to Slash Official Exchange Rate from Nov. 1, Finance Min Says. *Reuters*, 28 September 2022. Online: [www.reuters.com/markets/asia/exclusive-lebanon-apply-weaker-official-exchange-rate-finance-minister-says-2022-09-28/](http://www.reuters.com/markets/asia/exclusive-lebanon-apply-weaker-official-exchange-rate-finance-minister-says-2022-09-28/)
- BASSAM, Leila – CHMAYTELLI, Maher (2021): Lebanon's Mikati Hopes to Form Government Soon. *Reuters*, 28 July 2021. Online: [www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-mikati-says-he-hopes-form-government-near-future-2021-07-28/](http://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/lebanons-mikati-says-he-hopes-form-government-near-future-2021-07-28/)
- BOU KHATER, Lea (2017): *Labour Policy and Practice*. Beirut: UNDP. Online: [www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/CrisisPreventionRecovery/SupplementArticles/16Supp/PEACE%20BUILDING2%2016%20july%202017%20p4.pdf](http://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/CrisisPreventionRecovery/SupplementArticles/16Supp/PEACE%20BUILDING2%2016%20july%202017%20p4.pdf)
- BRUN, Cathrine – FAKIH, Ali (2022): Debunking the Dangerous Myth that Refugees Are an Economic Burden in Lebanon. *The New Humanitarian*, 26 September 2022. Online: [www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/09/26/Syrian-refugees-Lebanon-economics](http://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/09/26/Syrian-refugees-Lebanon-economics)

- BRUN, Cathrine – FAKIH, Ali – SHUAYB, Maha – HAMMOUD, Mohammad (2021): *The Economic Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon. What It Means for Current Policies*. Ottawa: Centre for Lebanese Studies for the World Refugee & Migration Council. Online: <https://wrmcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Lebanon-Syrian-Refugees-WRMC.pdf>
- CORM, Georges (2003): *Le Liban Contemporain. Histoire et Société*. Nouv. La Découverte. Online : <https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.2886>
- DAHROUGE, Elias – NAMMOUR, Jihad – LOTF, Ahmad Sami et al. (2020): The 17 October 2019 Protests in Lebanon: Perceptions of Lebanese and non-Lebanese Residents of Tripoli and Surroundings. *Global Campus Human Rights Journal*, 4(2), 488–516. Online: <https://doi.org/10.25330/932>
- DERHALLY, Massoud (2023): Lebanon Inflation Soared 124% in January as Economic Crisis Continued. *The National News*, 22 February 2023. Online: [www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/02/22/lebanon-inflation-soared-124-in-january-as-economic-crisis-continued/](http://www.thenationalnews.com/business/economy/2023/02/22/lebanon-inflation-soared-124-in-january-as-economic-crisis-continued/)
- FAKHOURY, Tamirace (2014): Debating Lebanon's Power Sharing Model: An Opportunity or an Impasse for Democratization Studies in the Middle East? *The Arab Studies Journal*, 22(1), 230–255. Online: [www.jstor.org/stable/24877905](http://www.jstor.org/stable/24877905)
- FAKHOURY, Tamirace (2021): Refugee Return and Fragmented Governance in the Host State: Displaced Syrians in the Face of Lebanon's Divided Politics. *Third World Quarterly*, 42(1), 162–180. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2020.1762485>
- FAKIH, Lama (2022): Forced Return of Syrians by Lebanon Unsafe and Unlawful. *Human Right Watch*, 06 July 2022. Online: [www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/06/forced-return-syrians-lebanon-unsafe-and-unlawful](http://www.hrw.org/news/2022/07/06/forced-return-syrians-lebanon-unsafe-and-unlawful)
- FAOUR, Mohamad (2007): Religion, demography, and politics in Lebanon. *Middle Eastern Studies*, 43(6), 909–921. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200701568279>
- FAVIER, Agnès (2016): Increasing Vulnerability for the Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: What's Next? *Middle East Directions (MED), Policy Briefs*, (3), 1–6. Online: <http://doi.org/10.2870/388671>
- GEHA, Carmen (2019): Political Complexities of Return: Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. *Middle East Institute*, 14 May 2019. Online: [www.mei.edu/publications/political-complexities-return-syrian-refugees-lebanon](http://www.mei.edu/publications/political-complexities-return-syrian-refugees-lebanon)
- GHANEM, Esperance (2015): Lebanese Visa Regulations Cause More Distress for Syrians. *Al-Monitor*, 21 January 2015. Online: [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/01/lebanon-security-regulations-syrian-refugees-visas.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2015/01/lebanon-security-regulations-syrian-refugees-visas.html)
- HAMADI, Ghadir (2022): Aoun: Return of Syrian Refugees Will Begin Next Week. *L'Orient Today*, 12 October 2022. Online: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1314355/aoun-return-of-syrian-refugees-will-begin-next-week.html>
- HAYEK, Caroline (2022): Several Municipalities Tighten Restrictions on Syrian Refugees. NGOs Denounce Discriminatory Measures Taken by Some Municipalities. *L'Orient Today*, 14 August 2022. Online: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1308497/several-municipalities-tighten-their-restrictions-on-syrian-refugees.html>

- HOCHBERG, Leo (2019): *No Longer Just a Humanitarian Crisis: The Politicization of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon*. Beirut: Heinrich Böll Stiftung.
- HOUSSARI, Najia (2020): Hundreds of Syrians Flee as Refugee Camp Torched in Lebanon. *Arab News*, 27 December 2020. Online: [www.arabnews.com/node/1783491/middle-east](http://www.arabnews.com/node/1783491/middle-east)
- Human Rights Watch (2020): *Lebanon: Events of 2019*. Online: [www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/lebanon](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/lebanon)
- Human Rights Watch (2021): “Our Lives Are Like Death”: Syrian Refugee Returns from Lebanon and Jordan. Online: [www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/20/our-lives-are-death/syrian-refugee-returns-lebanon-and-jordan](http://www.hrw.org/report/2021/10/20/our-lives-are-death/syrian-refugee-returns-lebanon-and-jordan)
- Human Rights Watch (2023): *Lebanon. Events of 2022*. Online: [www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/lebanon#:~:text=Keynote,-A%20New%20Model&text=Lebanon%20entered%20the%20fourth%20year,of%20the%20population%20into%20poverty](http://www.hrw.org/world-report/2023/country-chapters/lebanon#:~:text=Keynote,-A%20New%20Model&text=Lebanon%20entered%20the%20fourth%20year,of%20the%20population%20into%20poverty)
- IOM (2019): Marking a Milestone: 100,000 Refugees Resettled from Lebanon Since Eruption of Syrian Crisis. *International Organization for Migration*, 28 June 2019. Online: [www.iom.int/news/marking-milestone-100000-refugees-resettled-lebanon-eruption-syrian-crisis](http://www.iom.int/news/marking-milestone-100000-refugees-resettled-lebanon-eruption-syrian-crisis)
- JANMYR, Maja (2017): No Country of Asylum: ‘Legitimizing’ Lebanon’s Rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention. *International Journal of Refugee Law*, 29(3), 438–465. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eex026>
- KIKANO, Faten – FAUVEAUD, Gabriel – LIZARRALDE, Gonzalo (2021): Policies of Exclusion: The Case of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 34(1), 422–452. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/feaa058>
- LANGLOIS, Alexander (2022): Lebanon Falls Short on Refugee Returns. *Manara Magazine*, 09 December 2022. Online: <https://manaramagazine.org/2022/12/lebanon-falls-short-on-refugee-returns/>
- LÓPEZ-TOMÁS, Andrea (2023): Stricken Lebanon Endures 3<sup>rd</sup> Exodus as Its People Flee Disaster. *The Media Line*, 13 January 2023. Online: <https://themedialine.org/top-stories/stricken-lebanon-endures-3rd-exodus-as-its-people-flee-disaster/>
- L’Orient Today (2022a): Caretaker Minister Aims to Return ‘15,000 Displaced [Syrians] Per Month’, with Syrian Govt Support. *L’Orient Today*, 04 July 2022. Online: <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1304696/caretaker-minister-aims-to-return-15000-displaced-syrians-per-month-with-syrian-govt-support.html>
- L’Orient Today (2022b): Fire erupts in Syrian refugee camp in Aarsal. *L’Orient Today*, 18 August 2022. Online: <https://today.lorientjour.com/article/1308835/fire-erupts-in-syrian-refugee-camp-in-aarsal.html>
- MAALOUF MONNEAU, May (2015): *De l’Etat inachevé à l’invention d’une nation*. Paris: L’Harmattan. Online: <https://doi.org/10.4000/remmm.9542>
- MESSARRA, Antoine (2003): *La gouvernance d’un système consensuel: le Liban après les amendements constitutionnels de 1990*. Beirut: Librairie Orientale.
- Naharnet (2019): Hadat Controversy: A Small Example of Lebanon’s Deeply-Rooted Divisions. *Naharnet*, 26 June 2019. Online: [www.naharnet.com/stories/en/261910](http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/261910)
- NASSAR, Jessy – STEL, Nora (2019): Lebanon’s response to the Syrian Refugee crisis – Institutional ambiguity as a governance strategy. *Political Geography*, 70, 44–54. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2019.01.005>

- National News Agency (2022): Al-akhbar: al-gharb yadghat: mamnu' i'adat al-nazihin. *NNA*, 07 July 2022. Online: [www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/552272/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%8A%D8%B6%D8%BA%D8%B7-%D9%85%D9%85%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D](http://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/%D8%B3%D9%8A%D8%A7%D8%B3%D8%A9/552272/%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%A3%D8%AE%D8%A8%D8%A7%D8%B1-%D8%A7%D9%84%D8%BA%D8%B1%D8%A8-%D9%8A%D8%B6%D8%BA%D8%B7-%D9%85%D9%85%D9%86%D9%88%D8%B9-%D8%A5%D8%B9%D8%A7%D8%AF%D8%A9-%D8%A7%D9%84%D9%86%D8%A7%D)
- PRESTON, Scott (2017): Syrian Refugees in Lebanon Face Eviction. *Al-Monitor*, 10 November 2017. Online: [www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/11/lebanon-refugees-evictions-syrians-notice-municipalities.html](http://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2017/11/lebanon-refugees-evictions-syrians-notice-municipalities.html)
- RAMADAN, Tala (2021): Ras Baalbeck Municipality Sets Curfew and Daily Wage Cap for Syrian Workers. *L'Orient Today*, 11 November 2021. Online: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1281195/ras-baalbeck-municipality-sets-curfew-and-daily-wage-cap-for-syrian-workers.html>
- ROSE, Sunniva (2019): Lebanon Cracks Down on Hiring Syrian Refugees. *The National*, 30 June 2019. Online: [www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/lebanon-cracks-down-on-hiring-syrian-refugees-1.879868](http://www.thenationalnews.com/world/mena/lebanon-cracks-down-on-hiring-syrian-refugees-1.879868)
- ŞAHİN MENCUTEK, Zeynep (2017): *From Inaction to Restrictions: Changes in Lebanon's Policy Responses to Syrian Mass Refugee Movement*. Hamburg: Käte Hamburger Kolleg / Centre for Global Cooperation Research (KHK/GCR21). Online: <https://doi.org/10.14282/2198-0411-GCRP-19>
- SALIBI, Kamal (1998): *A House of Many Mensions. The History of Lebanon Reconsidered*. London: I. B. Tauris.
- SALLOUKH, Bassel F. – BARAKAT, Rabie – AL-HABBAL, Jinan S. – KHATTAB, Lara W. – MIKAELIAN, Shoghig (2015): A Political History of Sectarian Institutions. In SALLOUKH, Bassel F. – BARAKAT, Rabie – AL-HABBAL, Jinan S. – KHATTAB, Lara W. – MIKAELIAN, Shoghig (eds.): *The Politics of Sectarianism in Postwar Lebanon*. 12–31. London: Pluto Press. Online: <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt183p3d5>
- SANYAL, Romola (2017): A No-Camp Policy: Interrogating Informal Settlements in Lebanon. *Geoforum*, 84, 117–125. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2017.06.011>
- SEWELL, Abby (2022): Hajjar announces intention to launch plan for return of Syrian refugees. *L'Orient Today*, 20 June 2022. Online: <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1303214/hajjar-announces-intention-to-launch-plan-for-return-of-syrian-refugees.html>
- TSOURAPAS, Gerasimos (2019): The Syrian Refugee Crisis and Foreign Policy Decision-Making in Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey. *Journal of Global Security Studies*, 4(4), 464–481. Online: <https://doi.org/10.1093/jogss/ogz016>
- UNHCR (2018): *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2018*. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Online: [www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/](http://www.unhcr.org/globaltrends2018/)
- UNHCR (2019a): *Lebanon Operational Fact Sheet February 2019*. The UN Refugee Agency. Online: [www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/03/UNHCR-Lebanon-Operational-Fact-sheet-February-2019.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2019/03/UNHCR-Lebanon-Operational-Fact-sheet-February-2019.pdf)
- UNHCR (2019b): *Syria Regional Refugee Response*. December 2019. Online: <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>

- UNHCR (2022): OCHA–UNHCR Lebanon: Fact Sheet, April 2022. *Reliefweb*, 03 June 2022. Online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/unhcr-lebanon-fact-sheet-april-2022>
- UNHCR (2023): *Operational Data Portal. Refugee Situations. Syria Regional Refugee Response. Lebanon*. Online: <https://data.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71>
- UNICEF–UNHCR–WFP (2018): *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon (VASyR 2018)*. Online: [www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/12/VASyR-2018.pdf](http://www.unhcr.org/lb/wp-content/uploads/sites/16/2018/12/VASyR-2018.pdf)
- United Nations (2018): Worst ‘Humanitarian Tragedy’ of the Century Looms in Idlib, UN Aid Agencies Warn. *Reliefweb*, 11 September 2018. Online: <https://reliefweb.int/report/syrian-arab-republic/worst-humanitarian-tragedy-century-looms-idlib-un-aid-agencies-warn>
- VOHRA, Anchal (2019): Lebanon Is Sick and Tired of Syrian Refugees. *Foreign Policy*, 31 July 2019. Online: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/07/31/lebanon-is-sick-and-tired-of-syrian-refugees/>
- World Bank (2022): *Lebanon Public Finance Review*. Washington: World Bank. Online: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/bitstream/handle/10986/37824/P1733451f74154311fb4a149871a9041d2b545b62921.pdf?sequence=11&isAllowed=y>