The Syrian crisis and its impact on Lebanon – A conflict analysis

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Almost 4 million people have fled Syria since the outbreak of the civil war, 1.2 million of whom are refugees in Lebanon -that is, about one in five people living in Lebanon is a refugee from the Syrian war. The present report analyses the impact of the Syrian conflict and refugee crisis on Lebanon and Lebanese host communities.

This brief analysis presents the main conflict issues and trends, and the network of interaction between local and national level conflict dynamics. It provides an overview of key actors relevant to addressing intercommunal conflict and draws some programming implications, for both conflict sensitivity of current programming and further opportunities for conflict transformation.

1. INTRODUCTION
1.1. Background

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, almost 1.2 million Syrians have sought refuge in Lebanon[1]. Norwegian Church Aid (NCA) with its partner International Orthodox Christian Charities (IOCC) has been providing assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and host communities since January 2014. This includes good in kind to refugees as well as the rehabilitation of water and sanitation infrastructure in schools and clinics, and hygiene promotion program in schools. Geographically, programmes are implemented in the North (Bebnine, Akkar, Tripoli, Khoura, Dinnieh), South (Zahle Caze, Bint Jbeil, Nabatiyyeh) and in the Bekaa Valley (Bar Elias, West Bekaa Caza).

In the light of the size of influx of refugees from Syria to Lebanon, the very difficult humanitarian context inside Syria and the volume of humanitarian assistance provided, NCA found it important to conduct a conflict analysis of the Syrian refugee crisis, the humanitarian interventions and the related transfer of resources, and its impact on the Lebanon and the Lebanese host communities – especially those being targeted by NCA programmes.

Along with being a conflict-sensitive programming tool, to ensure that programmes 'Do No Harm', this NCA conflict analysis also aims at serving as a necessary entry point for working on the conflict, facilitating suitable forms of peacebuilding interventions.

1.2. Methodology

The findings of this report were informed by a combination of secondary data review and primary data collection. It included a desk review (October- November 2014) of key studies[2], gathering of primary data in a refugee settlement in Bar Elias, Bekaa valley (Nov. – Dec. 2014)[3] and three validation workshops in Beirut, with Syrian refugees from Beirut and its suburbs, Lebanese representatives and local religious actors and faith-based organizations (February 2015)[4].

The focus of the analysis has been country-wide - disaggregated, where appropriate, by geographies relevant to NCA programming. While considering historical events of relevance to the analysis, it is mostly focused on developments witnessed over the past four years when the Syrian refugee influx into Lebanon first escalated.

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1   UNHCR, Syrian Refugees in Lebanon. Quarterly snapshot. January – March 2015.
2   In-depth review of 12 reports, conforming a cumulative reporting base of five surveys with a total of 4,245 respondents, approx. 180 focus group discussions and key informant interview or consultations with 555 participants. Relevant reports produced after the desk reviewed was concluded (e.g. Aktis, 2015; UNDP and Lebanon Support, 2015) have also informed this consolidated conflict analysis report.
3   43 households were surveyed (32 male and 11 female respondents; an average age of 43.6 years).
4   The authors wish to thank you IOCC Lebanon and especially Connie Maria Shealy for their support.

2. CONTEXT

2.1. Background to the conflict in Lebanon

With the largest proportion of Christians of any Middle Eastern country, Lebanon has a strongly divided ethno-religious base of Muslims and Christians. Consequently, Lebanon has a complex socio-political system, which must be historically contextualised in order to properly frame its current 'consociational' power balance, its multi-confessional state-society relations, its internal and regional-proxy conflicts, and the current social situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Historically, the first bouts of violent conflict in Lebanon were rural feudings over land, a form of conflict usually easy to manage. What conflict in Lebanon later became, however, was unconstrained violence along confessional lines, in which whole communities were sometimes destroyed in massacres. Whilst feuding between confessional groups did occur with some regularity in modern Lebanon, it occurred much like feuding within confessions—limited, and often settled through mediation. Confessional war differed from feuding, involving a far higher degree of ethnic identification and a demonization of the 'Other' that made it largely immune to mediation.

Confessional tensions and conflict in Lebanon began to escalate; the most serious being the short civil war in 1958, although that was more a secular factional conflict between political groups than a war between Christians and Muslims. However, conflict escalations in Lebanon were not solely due to communal fear and hatred, and the next phase of internecine conflict was the result of special conditions relating to the role of the Palestinians in Lebanon, and not an enduring hatred between Maronites and Muslims. Indeed, the current political system which re-stabilised Lebanon is based on a consensual power-sharing arrangement between Christian and Muslim communities created in the Lebanese National Pact; a corporate consociational form of government (Kerr 2012). It could be summarized that the civil wars in Lebanon of the latter half of 20th century were largely conditioned by broader range of factors beyond confessional consciousness, including the pressures of urbanisation, the Palestinian refugee influx, regional proxy wars and foreign intervention by Syria.

2.2. Overview of the current conflict

Almost 4 million people have fled Syria since the 2011 outbreak of the civil war, 1.2 million of whom are refugees in Lebanon[5] - that is, about one in five people living in Lebanon is a refugee from the Syrian war. Since the Lebanese government has not authorized the establishment of formal refugee camps, these refugees have taken up residence in over 1,700 host communities[6].

The current Syrian refugee influx appears similar to Lebanon's experience of Palestinian refugees some fifty years before, whose short-term resettlement developed into a massive, Sunni-dominant, long-lasting, and militarised presence. However, the refugee issue is only one (albeit an extremely large) challenge that Lebanon faces due to the conflict in Syria. The political demography of the two countries is entwining further, as support networks for groups on all sides of the conflict in Syria have also been mobilised in Lebanon. Although Lebanon has seemingly developed a policy of official dissociation from all sides of the conflict in Syria, the ground reality of this paints a different picture (ICG 2014). Indeed, many of the other regional axes of conflict run through Lebanon: the Sunni-Shiite divide; the Saudi-Iranian rivalry; the Arab-Israeli conflict; the status of minorities (particularly Christians, Alawites and Druze), and; the rise and empowerment of Sunni Islamists (ICG 2012). It is unsurprising then for the country to have suffered a number of intense, but localised, armed conflicts along sectarian or confessional divisions over the past five years—in two suburbs of Tripoli, in the Nahr el-Bared Palestinian refugee camp, in the northeastern border town Arsal—as well as a string of targeted terrorist incidents. Intercommunal tensions, some escalating to arson attacks on refugee camps or attacks on Syrians themselves, are therefore but one layer in a stack of ongoing violent conflicts in Lebanon—albeit, an interrelated one, and one which may structurally destabilise the country as it did following the influx of Palestinian refugees.

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5   UNHCR, Syria Regional Refugee Response Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal. Last updated 7 May 2015.
6   REACH Initiative, Lebanon. http://www.reach-initiative.org/where-we-work/ongoing-field-presence/lebanon Last access: 21 May 2015.

3. ANALYSIS OF THE CONFLICT

3.1. Main conflict issues

The main proximate conflictual issues relating to intercommunal tensions are primarily socio-economic, linked to the following:

- **Job shortages and housing, with increased rental prices.**

Over 90% of Lebanese nationals perceived Syrian refugees as a threat to their economic livelihood and to their value system, and over two thirds perceived them as 'existential threats' with notably higher rates in Sahel Akkar area (Save the Children 2014). Host Lebanese communities appeared aggrieved that refugees were 'stealing jobs', resentful that refugees could work for less money, particularly as their families also received humanitarian assistance (REACH 2014). In a survey by Fafo (2013), 98% (82% strongly so) believed that Syrian refugees were taking jobs from Lebanese. Other pressures on local economies had also become unfavourable for Lebanese residents, such as in a decrease in terms of minimum wages, as Syrian refugee labourers would often work for much lower rates. This has largely caused resentment from the Lebanese working classes (SFCG 2014).

Job shortages are also considered by Syrians as a main caused of division between Syrian refugees and Lebanese in the areas where they live in (NCA, 2014; SFCG 2014). Among employed Syrians there are complaints of low wages that barely covered rental prices and salary discrimination against Lebanese.

World Vision (2013) also noted that the significant swelling of certain communities—particularly in the Bekaa Valley and the North, in which settlement population sizes increased by up to 100% in two years, sometimes triggered rent increases of often 200% in a six month period, and up to 400% in some locations of Beirut. In this manner, many reports outlined and focus group discussions confirmed that the initial hospitality provided from Lebanese communities to Syrian refugees was quickly being eroded.

- **Strained public services, especially health and education**.

With health clinics reporting at least a 50% increase in caseloads over the preceding 12 months, significant increases in communicative diseases particularly during summertime and at schools, largely perceptibly caused by the refugee influx has not only strained public services, but also intercommunal relations. The education system was also strained by the Syrian refugee influx, including problems of language barriers; Lebanese students are taught in French or English, but Syrian children only know Arabic. Syrian children were also reported to have felt discriminated and excluded by peers and teachers, although there do not appear to have been any major clashes between refugee and host community children (World Vision 2013). This appears to have correlated with increased drop-out rates for students from poor Lebanese backgrounds, due to increased unemployment rates and living costs, and also concerns over transmissible medical conditions (Integrity 2014).

- **Feelings of exclusion and marginalization.**

Where Syrian refugees feel economically exploited by landlords and employers, and stigmatized by Lebanese society, Lebanese also feel excluded from humanitarian aid. Regarding the latter, conflict insensitive emergency programming has expounded these tensions, particularly:
- exclusion of the poorest within Lebanese host communities from humanitarian assistance;
- marginalisation of local formal and informal governance systems (in Lebanese communities) in decision-making;
- perceived corruption and wastefulness, particularly regarding beneficiary selection or targeting criteria

Whilst these conflictual issues are well-defined by both Syrian refugees and Lebanese and are pillars of a common narrative in different studies, there is need for a deeper, causal analysis. As the socio-economic disruption the mass influx of refugees has wrought on Lebanon's host communities, the conflictual issues are more pervasive than this—simply increasing resources or services which there is competition for (even if this were feasible) might neither defuse intercommunal tensions nor offer an efficient, long-lasting solution. An impact evaluation of projects to reduce service delivery pressures in communities under stress corroborates this point: *"Relieving resource pressures reduces the tendency to 'blame' the refugees; but this may displace refugee complaints [from host communities] onto the next-most-pressing problem. Satisfaction with service does not per se equal enhance social cohesion."* (Aktis, 2015:43)

A reading of the conflict situation cannot disregard identity politics, geopolitical interests (particularly through refugee and minority groups) or syncretic accounts of conflict, which appear to have more compellingly explained Lebanon's history of conflict and destabilisation. The proximate causes of intercommunal tensions however are intertwined with:

• **Lebanon's previous experience of hosting a large influx of Palestinian refugees**.
The influx of up to 400,000 Palestinian refugees in many ways structurally changed Lebanon and eventually imbalanced the multi-confessional political equilibrium which originally united Lebanon; in turn, this sparked the series of civil wars in 1975-1990, wreaking internal conflict in between. Whilst there are key differences between now and then, it is important that this factor is fully considered, and not omitted, when contemplating the stability of today's Lebanon.
• **Historical problems between Syrians and Lebanese** stemming back to Syria's involvement in Lebanon's civil wars, with deeply held prejudices against Syrians.
• **Relationships along confessional lines and perceptions of Syrian refugees as threat** to the current power balance.

3.2. Interaction of local and national level conflict dynamics

The local or intercommunal tensions are closely related to national level conflictive issues in a number of ways, including:
• Externally, the risk of spill over of the Syrian conflict into Lebanon (Hezbollah's military involvement, and refuge/sanctuary areas for Syrian armed opposition forces). All different future scenarios for the Syria's civil war would reasonably have an impact on conflict dynamics within Lebanon.
• Internal imbalancing—a significant increase in one confessional group, propelled from minority to majority status, in a system which was only stabilised through a consociational pact between the main confessional groups.

The polarisation in Lebanon over the war in Syria continues to affect the political atmosphere with regard to the refugee population, a group being seen with suspicion by many influential public figures. Given the fragile political balance in the country, it is unsurprising that many Lebanese wish it would be possible to separate internal politics from the Syrian refugee crisis – *"We need to keep distance from blending the Syrian refugees into our political kitchen"*, as one Lebanese research participant put it[7]. Undoubtedly, the experience of how Palestinian refugee-Lebanese host tensions transformed the country, leading to civil war and multiple sectarian massacres reminds alive in the Lebanese collective mindset.

The waves of Syrian refugees seeking a safe haven have further exacerbated the division among the Christian parties in Lebanon. Opposition to the Assad regime initially served as the main point of convergence for the different Christian parties in Lebanon—both during the civil war and during the post-war Syrian tutelage. Now, it remains one of the most divisive issues for these parties.

3.3. Intercommunal conflict trends

Intergroup conflicts are still relatively minor issues and mostly manifest in low levels incidents attack harassment and repression (e.g. curfew, or constricted political freedoms). Instances of violent confrontation are sporadic and localized, usually linked to crimes and offences for which Syrians are being blamed by Lebanese residents. However, there are clear signs that the tension is increasing and may lead to violence.

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7   NCA, validation workshop, Beirut. 26 February 2015.

This likelihood for violent conflict have been captured in different perception studies: The majority of respondents to a survey carried out by Fafo (2013) felt that it was likely that intercommunal or sectarian violence would flare—particularly in the northern areas, where almost 60% assessed it was very likely. According to Save the Children (2013), two thirds of Lebanese nationals in Bekaa and Sahel Akkar, and half of nationals in Wadi Khaled estimated intercommunal violence as likely. However, less than a fifth of Syrian refugees perceived this. Nevertheless Syrians are also pessimistic about security: As highlight both in NCA's focus group discussions and a household survey with Syrian refugees settled in and surrounding Beirut and in the Bekaa Valley, the security conditions are only expected to get worse.

The increasingly hostile environment and spike on underlying tensions goes hand in hand with an increased stereotyping of Syrians as terrorists – a process that often reaches back to the occupation of territory in the Bekaa Valley by armed Syrian groups and media reports of intensified clashes between those groups and Lebanese Armed Forces (e.g. Arsal).

There is a breeding ground for radicalisation among both young Syrians and Lebanese – with Syrian refugees perhaps more susceptible to radicalisation or recruitment into armed groups. Real or perceive excessive use of force by Lebanese security forces in their raids of informal settlements increases the feeling of indignation and helplessness among refugees (UNDP and Lebanon Support, 2015) and adds on to the list of stressors. In the surveyed informal settlement in Bar Elias there is an observable moderate positive correlation between age and safety perception (r =0.45), where younger groups feel more unsafe (NCA, 2014). Measures like stricter entry restrictions on Syrian refugees also send a signal of rejection to Syrians already in Lebanon[8], whom often feel there is a shortage of leaders within their communities.

4. KEY ACTORS IN ADDRESSING INTERCOMMUNAL CONFLICT

Syrian trust in conflict management capacities in Lebanon (e.g. municipality, police, political parties) are noticeably lower than Lebanese opinions—with a striking difference in their trust in political parties to help resolve conflicts (SFCG 2013). Similar trust patterns are observed in Syrian refugees settlements: Local political leaders, local government authorities and local police were regarded with the lower trust levels - interestingly, the army is more trusted than all those three groups. On the other side of the spectrum, family, friends and local religious leaders, in that order, are the three groups that women and men Syrian refugees relied upon the most to keep them safe. Although findings from NCA's survey in the Bekaa valley are by no means representative of the entire group of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, it is worth noting that when disaggregated, the data from that settlement shows significant differences regarding local religious leaders: they are most trusted by the youngest (15-30) and oldest (61-75) segments of the population, and women trust them more than men do. Similarly, Syrian refugees expect NGO and religious leaders to play a role in easing tensions between Lebanese and them, and changing negative attitudes. (NCA, 2014)

Traditional methods of conflict management appear reliant on local leaders. Through local efforts, leaders assumed that local conflicts could be contained and kept from escalating into sectarian strife. They focused on rapid response to any conflict by conceptualising them as family disputes only, most especially when tensions erupted between families associated with Salafists or the Shiite Alawites (Fafo 2013). However, Syrian refugees and Lebanese community members participating in focus group discussions consider that at the moment their leaders don't play a significant role in addressing local and national conflict dynamics – some consider that the reason why there are not in the forefront of peace might be because religious leaders are politically affiliated. Nonetheless, there is some consensus among both groups on that religious leaders do have a role to play.

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8   *"These measures are bad for us. They mean that Lebanon is telling us that Syrians should get out"* reportedly said a 39-years-old male Syrian refugee living in Tripoli about these entry measures. The Washington Post, 5 January 2015.

5. FACTORS FOR AND AGAINST PEACE – CONNECTORS AND DIVIDERS

Forces for peace can be characterized as key elements or forces that, if built upon, can lead to peace. In this regard, they can be portrayed as connectors between people. Conversely, factors driving conflict are forces working against peace or for a negative *status quo.* They are 'dividers' between people. (NCA-CDA, 2012). The following table summarizes some of these in the current Lebanese context[9].

Connectors (Factors for Peace)	Dividers (Factors against Peace)
1. Initial hospitality from Lebanese communities, signaling sympathy and understanding 2. Religious actors and leaders may play a more important role in addressing intergroup conflicts in Lebanon 3. Humanitarian assistance providing basic needs 4. Whilst mounting intercommunal tensions have been recognized by aid agencies, the potential for responses through 'social cohesion' initiatives still appear lackluster and criticized. 5. Some common cultural norms and value system	1. Housing and job shortages; 2. Health and educational services overstretched 3. Historical problems Syrians-Lebanese; 4. Real or perceived exclusion from humanitarian assistance and aid by Lebanese. 5. Low trust and prejudices (more so from Lebanese against Syrian refugees than opposite), reproduced in the media 6. Claims of exploitation and incidents of harassments on the Syrian side that go unpunished 7. Relationships along confessional lines and perceptions of Syrian refugees as threat to the current power balance in Lebanon 8. Lack of actors or mechanisms geared for conflict transformation 9. Many religious leaders also have their political exclusionary agendas

6. GENDER DIMENSION

There is insufficient information to begin to understand gendered roles and potentials for conflict transformation in intercommunal tensions. Although many studies had disaggregated samples of male and female respondents, little gendered analysis was afforded to discern a deeper, social understanding of peace, stability and conflict in Lebanon and the intercommunal tensions there. That said, one study (Oxfam, 2013) focused explicitly on the gender situation of Syrian refugees, but did not examine intercommunal tensions or other forms of conflict. It noted that male Syrian refugees often felt immasculated and that females were sometimes depressed, and sometimes empowered, in losing their 'femininity' in taking on new responsibilities and freedoms.

There is little quantitative data in respect to violence against women but many displaced Syrian and Lebanese women and girls report having experienced violence, in particular rape. Negative expressions of masculinity have increased, with anecdotal evidence of increases in domestic violence—men, often depressed, will release their anger towards their family and children. According to some estimates, at least one out of three Syrian women and girls are subjected to GBV including sexual violence, child marriage, intimate partner violence, survival sex, forced prostitution, exploitation and abuse (IRC, 2014; ABBAD 2015).

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9   One study (UNDP and Lebanon Support, 2015), of the conflict context in the Bekaa Region also resorts to classification of dividers and connectors. Understandably there is some overlapping between the two listings.

7. PROGRAMMATIC IMPLICATIONS

General programmatic adaptations may better sensitise implementation of emergency or relief projects to ease intercommunal tensions. These adaptations might include:

- **Ensure inclusion of vulnerable Lebanese host community members**. Adjusting the beneficiary targeting strategy to include assistance for Lebanese poor will improve overall humanitarian conditions, but also reduce tensions.
- **Strengthen communication and information-sharing with affected populations**, in compliance with the Core Humanitarian Standard on Quality and Accountability. A communication strategy should use different channels -considering that word of mouth appears to be the most effective one (NCA 2014)- and describe the targeting strategy, methods to prevent misuse, corruption and waste, and also a point of contact to handle grievances or complaints.
- **Consult/involve local community leaders** in programmatic design and decision-making. Project siting/implementation should be discussed and agreed with host communities.

When it comes to WASH programming, interventions may be enhanced to either avoid exacerbating intercommunal tensions, or alleviating such tensions in other sectors by, for example:

- Providing vocational training in plumbing and other technical skills related to sanitation;
- Developing community teams composed of both Lebanese and Syrians for water and sanitation infrastructure rehabilitation or development projects;
- Centring bilingual hygiene programming in schools with large number of refugee pupils.

As described above, resource competition is a key driver of intercommunal grievances and conflict, but that programmes which relieve the pressure of resource scarcities have not necessarily contributed to ameliorated intercommunal relations. There appears to be multiple opportunities to support positive transformation of intercommunal conflict, and also to develop resiliencies if the conflict escalates. At a local or community level, initiatives to transform intercommunal tensions over socio-economic issues from zero-sum to win-win scenarios through intercommunal collaboration, and also campaigns to combat Lebanese prejudices, are obvious entry points. At a national level, coalition or consensus building amongst cross-party political and confessional leaderships may limit escalation of conflict. Peacebuilding and conflict prevention/transformation initiatives targeting intergroup conflict dynamics are absent. Indeed, if the conflict escalates in the same manner which Palestinian refugee influx led to the destabilisation of Lebanon, focused programming on inter-group level conflict dynamics may be vital in both preventing a conflict and also improving the resiliency of Lebanon's communities. Focusing on this range of intergroup conflict dynamics, which—in part—pre-empt longer term changes in Lebanon's peace/conflict situation, possible peacebuilding opportunities might include:

- **Promote (inter-)community-led dialogue and conflict management** surrounding localised socio-economic competition—particularly housing, labour, and food. In particular this might mean establishing or empowering village level fora with representatives from both host and refugee communities. In the short term, this will: facilitate discussion and problem-solving (e.g. establishing housing associations); implement grass-roots relief (e.g. communal kitchens); and raise consciousness about the conflict issues, reframing them from perceived zero-sum conflicts to non-zero-sum ones. In the long term, this may promote empathy and foster intercommunal solidarity.

- **Empower credible, constructive, non-partisan representatives for Syrian Sunni Muslims**, if Syrian refugees do not subscribe to Lebanese Sunni organisations. Syrian refugees appear voiceless, and so have little political representation or social inclusion. A programme of participatory action research with refugee religious leaders and in-depth advocacy training and coaching for non-partisan representation may empower refugee representation. In the long term, increased political participation (even if not in mainstream politics) is broadly correlated with decreased conflict.

▪ **Train and coach a cohort of inter-confessional conflict mediators**. Development of a cohort of conflict mediators capable of credibly engaging with confessional constituencies (and, potentially, future militia) may enhance resiliency against conflict in the long term, and promote humanitarian protection of non-combatants. This will include training of key figures within their communities, underscoring positive values engrained in common cultural norms and religious beliefs and providing them with skills on mediation building on those very same values. In the short term, mediation teams may provide neutral lines of communication (or 'Track 1.5/2' diplomacy) between conflict groups, particularly Syrian opposition units within refugee communities, Salafist groups, and Hezbollah.

▪ **Identification and training of key figures within their communities, underscoring positive values engrained in common cultural norms** and religious beliefs and providing them with skills on how to disseminate those very same values. These respected individuals will be pivotal in shaping the contours of a peaceful coexistence formula, between Syrian-Lebanese, and among the Syrians – acknowledging that they are a plurality, not homogenous a group. Only by doing it we can alleviate the burden, and attempt at restoring the social fabric that the Syrians used to have before the crisis in Syria.

▪ **Encouraging and supporting religious actors** on the side of both host community and refugee community to engage, utilizing the formal and informal structures of their faith communities, in mediation and intergroup relationship building.

▪ **Facilitate avenues for fostering intergroup relations among refugee- host communities and the Lebanese government bodies.** These efforts will be instrumental in building awareness on issues related to radicalization, and prevention of impunity for violence. Religious actors should be active participants in these initiatives.

▪ **Parallel engagement inside Syria**, working and coordinating between different Lebanese and Syrian organizations in, for example, creating safe heavens to find shelter within Syria territories.

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