

Regional differences in the conditions of Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Sam van Vliet, Guita Hourani

Abstract

Lebanon has entered its third year as a country hosting the highest number of Syrian refugees in the region. All geographical areas with a high concentration of Syrian refugees in Lebanon share a similar protracted marginality, underdevelopment, and weak infrastructure. Syrian refugees experience different levels of legal and political conditions, security and protection, freedom of mobility, access to aid and relief services, access to labor, socio-economic conditions, and prices of goods and rent, all depending on their geographical settlements. These geographical differences are of eminent relevance that affects not only the Syrian refugees and their hosting communities, but also refugee policies and aid programs. This paper explores these variations by analyzing, first, differences among host communities and, second, by examining the dissimilarities among geographic settlements. The paper reveals that the conditions of Syrian refugees depend on the geographical areas of their settlement within Lebanon. Host-refugee relations also show a direct relationship to the variant geographical areas and their socio-demographic compositions. This paper concludes that geographical differences are of vital importance to be considered when studying the living conditions of refugees, developing policies, or designing aid programs.

Keywords: Syrian Refugees, Lebanon, host-refugee relations, regional differences, Governance, Aid

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Introduction

By the end of 2013, Lebanon is hosting around 1.3 million Syrian refugees scattered across more than 1,500 municipalities.¹ A recent World Bank study projects the Syrian presence in Lebanon to reach 1.6 to 2.4 million refugees in 2014. These population increases are a result of push factors (the situation in Syria) and pull factors (the level of assistance in Lebanon and the border policy of the Lebanese Government).² Various assessments, conducted in 2012 and 2013, show that these pull factors also relate to levels of security, livelihood, and socio-political structures within Lebanon. The more than one million Syrian refugees, including minority groups, Lebanese returnees, and Palestinian and Iraqi refugees from Syria are scattered around the country and within host communities. This makes it very difficult for humanitarian agencies, government planners, and researchers alike to have a full understanding of their numbers and needs. However, lessons learned – in two years of Syrian refugee humanitarian programming and preliminary assessments – point out to the existence of different categories of Syrian nationals and to the regional particularities of their conditions in Lebanon.³

Despite the lack of quantitative data on regional particularities of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, aid agencies have developed their programs in accordance to the realities of the area of implementation. National programs on health and education for Syrian refugees have shown different success rates per area of implementation. Exemplifying this reality, UNHCR has announced a decentralization policy starting in 2014, where field offices in Mount Lebanon, the North, Bekaa and the South will have full authorization to manage their respective areas. However, the many international agencies intervening in the Syrian refugee crisis show little compliance to the different reality of intervention between Tyre and Tripoli, for example.

How do Lebanon's regional differences affect the living conditions of Syrian refugees? And to what extent do humanitarian interventions take these realities into consideration? This study intends to: a) illustrate the legal and political environment of the regions in Lebanon where the Syrian refugees reside; b) identify differences in needs among Syrian refugee communities in these regions; c) highlight whether or not these differences are taken into consideration in aid interventions; and d) synthesize the possible risks and challenges to aid provision in light of these differences.

1. Realities on the ground

The security situation in some areas of Lebanon, specifically in the North and border regions, is volatile and security incidents regularly restrict access. Repercussions of the Syrian conflict on Lebanon's internal affairs and on the region has a direct impact on the living conditions of both Lebanese communities and Syrian refugees in the country. In addition, economic decline related to security deterioration and the Syrian conflict affects livelihood opportunities in the various hosting areas. It should be noted here that the Lebanese economy is traditionally characterized by long duration unemployment. Even in times of economic prosperity, Lebanon was not able to produce enough jobs to its own population.⁴

The political and socio-economic situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon varies significantly between geographic districts. As a result, a needs assessment in one area is not representative of the situation in another. First of all, governance structures are not harmonized in all parts of Lebanon. Apart from the fact that the Lebanese Government has been in deadlock since March 2013, the long-standing ineffectiveness of government structures on the central and governorate levels have led to the proliferation of local actors providing services to the population. As such, primary law and order in certain areas is undertaken by political groups or tribal networks, rather than the state apparatus.⁵ The uneven capacity of Social Development Centers (SDCs) run by the Ministry of Social Affairs throughout Lebanon and their widely varying financial and human resources are another example of inconsistent state capacity, especially in relation to social services delivery and poverty reduction.⁶ The various contradicting local governance structures in relation to each area in Lebanon influences the possibility of effective needs assessment and assistance delivery.

Furthermore, Lebanon shows significant regional inequalities in terms of access to public services, employment and infrastructure. North Lebanon and the Bekaa, the primary destinations for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, are characterized by poverty and underdevelopment. Many Syrian refugees have

settled in historically marginalized regions of Lebanon and are placed in direct competition for resources and jobs with struggling Lebanese families. The most vulnerable areas include the highly impoverished North, the Bekaa, the South and the Palestinian refugee camps across the country.⁷ The perception as to whether the impact of refugee presence was positive or negative differs between regions. Reports note that in some areas, such as Sidon and North Baalbek, municipal respondents considered the impact neutral, as Syrian refugees accepted jobs that Lebanese were not willing to perform.⁸ However, other reports stress the frustration among host communities about the decreasing wages and job competition following the influx of Syrian refugees.

Syrian refugees have settled in areas where they felt secure and their political views are shared with the hosting community. Since 2013, movements of Syrian refugees to other areas have pointed to a break in this trend.⁹ The latter is related to saturation of public services, shelter, and employment in the primary host area. Furthermore, Syrian refugees face very different reactions in the different localities of displacement and their encounters are in many cases subject to their political stance.¹⁰ Recent studies confirm that the sectarian background of the Lebanese hosting area affects the level of receptiveness towards Syrian refugees. The sectarian dimension also informed the choice of residence of certain families, with pro-regime Syrian families more prone to moving to the Hermel or Baalbek regions. The South appears to be somewhat different, with saturation in other Lebanese regions resulting in the movement of both regime loyalists and pro-rebels Syrians into that area. Studies also note that large cities and their surrounding suburbs, like Beirut or Sidon, are attracting Syrian refugees due to greater work opportunities especially in construction.¹¹

Other factors, such as proximity (in border areas) or presence of Syrian migrant workers (Lebanese being accustomed to Syrians) influence the level of hospitality per region.¹² Four locations in Lebanon have been selected as samples for a descriptive analysis. The rationale for this selection is based on the following criteria: a) the clustering of the refugees in these geographic locations; b) socio-economic status of the location; c) socio-economic status of the Syrian refugee community in the locations; and d) governmental structure characterizing the location. Available field data and secondary information from prior assessments and reports about these areas serve as background analysis for this paper in addition to extensive media review, as well as the authors' extensive personal contacts with the refugees.

2. The legal and political environment of Lebanese regions hosting Syrian refugees

South Lebanon

South Lebanon has only recently seen an increase in the presence of Syrian refugees, with 102,955 Syrian refugees officially registered by the UNHCR office in Tyre.¹³ The area is considered to be controlled by Hezbollah to a large extent, except for the Sidon area, which generally falls under the patronage of the Future Movement. Although refugees who are close to the Syrian regime have moved there, the traditional concentration of Syrian refugees in Sidon has been diversified by refugees moving from the Bekaa to the South, attracted by milder winter, cheaper rent, and job possibilities related to the size of construction taking place in the region, mainly by affluent Lebanese emigrants.¹⁴ South

Lebanon is also considered to be one of the safer areas of Lebanon, so far excluded from internal strife, kidnappings, and explosions.¹⁵ The small number of Syrian businesses opening up in Sidon and Tyre has been welcomed by local Chambers of Commerce, as they compete with Palestinian businesses more than with Lebanese enterprises.¹⁶ However, host communities are said to feel uncomfortable with the growing number of refugees due to the lack of governmental economic development plans, resulting in unlawful job competition and the increase of insecurity in the area.¹⁷

Although humanitarian programs responding to Syrian refugee needs in the South began only recently, compared to the Bekaa or North Lebanon, the experiences of NGOs working there already note great differences. The administrative structure, civil society capacity, and security situation are facilitating a more efficient and locally embedded humanitarian response than in other areas. Local and international NGOs have built presence in South Lebanon, owing to Israeli invasions and the presence of UNIFIL and its development projects. Additionally, education structures in the area allowed for a more successful integration for Syrian students than in Bekaa, for example.

Mount Lebanon and Beirut

The area encompassing Mount Lebanon and the capital Beirut has also seen a high increase of registered Syrian refugees, amounting to 219,532 in December 2013.¹⁸ The urban setting of this hosting area is characterized by a high degree of socio-political diversity, ranging from upper class Achrafiye to poor suburbs of Bourj Hammoud, Tariq al-Jadida, and Dahiye. With the strong impact of political affiliation on a street level, Syrian refugees have settled in urban areas where they feel protected by sectarian ties. In addition, the economic situation in Beirut attracts more wealthy Syrian refugees. This explains why this is the only area where Christian refugees appear more at ease registering with UNHCR in Beirut/Mount Lebanon, representing 4.5% of the registered refugee population.¹⁹

On the economic level, Syrians located in Beirut traditionally own capital. With the new influx of Syrian refugees, many have been able to enter the workforce with initial capital. Beirut and Mount Lebanon governorates report hosting a high number of informal Syrian businesses, amounting to 28.8 percent of the total established Syrian businesses in the country.²⁰

Syrian workers, traditionally working in Beirut construction sites, have been joined by newly arriving Syrian refugees of poorer categories, attracted by higher work opportunities in Beirut and surrounding areas. Urban areas with high low skilled economic activity, such as Dahiye and the eastern suburbs (Dora, Burj Hammoud, and Furnel-Chebbak) are the main hubs for Syrian refugees, offering suitable livelihood and shelter conditions.

The Mount Lebanon area is characterized by urban settlements; the fact that Syrian refugees have found shelter in collective shelters and apartments has made it challenging for humanitarian programs to target them and for Syrian refugees to find their way to the available services in the urban jungle.

North Lebanon

North Lebanon, ranging from Tripoli to Wadi Khaled, was the first area to host Syrian refugees, as early

as 2011. The North was one of the first locations where Syrians took refuge in 2011, while the area is currently hosting more than 257,000 refugees. The largest host areas are the city of Tripoli and the Akkar region, Wadi Khaled in particular.[21](#) Relations between Wadi Khaled residents and Syrians have always been strong, as many are connected by family and tribal ties. This relation has nonetheless come under pressure in the last year with the arrival of an additional 20,000 refugees. Most households now host large numbers of Syrians. Sources say that there is an average of nine refugees living with each local host family. Skirmishes between Lebanese residents and the Syrian army have impacted the security situation in North Lebanon. There are reports of Syrian refugees being exploited or humiliated due of their refugee status.[22](#)

Other reports note the specific burden Syrian refugees pose to the economic conditions of host communities in North Lebanon. Traditional UNDP development programs targeting the impoverished area (for example on agriculture, waste management, water systems, or infrastructure) have been diverted to emergency response to Syrian refugees. In addition, it is estimated that the influx of Syrian refugees caused an increase in Lebanese family expenditures in the area, while their income has decreased due to perceived competition of Syrian workers, deteriorating security conditions, and decreased smuggling activities.[23](#)

The establishment of Syrian businesses (about 8.9 percent the national percentage) has resulted in negative prejudices, because of the visibility of their presence and the frustration of Lebanese entrepreneurs from the economic decline in the region.[24](#)

The particular nature of the security situation in the North has hampered many agencies from developing their programs in response to the increasing needs of Syrian refugees, leaving many refugees strained of access to humanitarian programs. NGOs have also reported the high mixture of political and humanitarian motives of many local service providers, complicating the response and humanitarian transparency.

Bekaa Valley

The Bekaa Valley hosts the highest concentration in Lebanon; 275,040 Syrian refugees currently live in the Bekaa. The proximity of various sectarian communities with different political affiliations has resulted in tensions, which victimized some Syrian refugees. The close relationship between Lebanese and Syrians in this region dates back to the Ottoman era, when the Bekaa was governed by Ottoman Wali of Damascus. Relationships were strengthened during the 2006 Israeli War on Lebanon, when many Lebanese found refuge in Homs.[25](#) Recently, the north Bekaa town of Ersal received more than 20,000 Syrian refugees in less than two weeks, as a consequence of the Qalamoun fighting on the Syrian side of the border. The Syrian population of 40,000 in Ersal now outnumbers the Lebanese population of 35,000.[26](#) Ersal and other villages are considered to be of possible threat to Syrian refugees because of their proximity to the Syrian borders, as well as to the risk of sectarian conflicts between adjacent Shia and Sunni villages.[27](#)

Similar to North Lebanon, a 60% wage reduction has been reported in the Bekaa as a result of competition from Syrian labor and reduced border trade activities. In Baalbek for instance, daily wages for unskilled labor dropped from LL 20,000 to LL15000 or LL10000.[28](#) It should be noted, however, that

wage reduction is not implemented by Syrian nor Lebanese workers, but by Lebanese employers. But for the Lebanese workers affected by this wage reduction, it is Syrian refugees rather than Lebanese employers who are to blame for this.

Bekaa was the first region where the Lebanese government closed down Syrian businesses. According to the Economy and Trade Ministry's survey, 54 percent of the informal Syrian businesses are located in the Bekaa.²⁹ The region is characterized by poor developed infrastructure, remote areas, and a relatively weak local civil society structure, compared to South Lebanon or the urban coast areas of Mount Lebanon. The thousands of Syrian refugees streaming into this region since late 2011 have found shelter in the urban areas of Baalbek, Zahle, and Taanayel, because of the availability of shelter. However, since 2012, tented settlements have been erected in various areas, increasing the visibility of their growing presence. The Bekaa area has been hit hard with the reduced economic border trade with Syria, deteriorating security in many areas, and the enormous pressure of Syrian refugees on the host communities. This situation has tempted some local authorities and stakeholders to be less receptive of assistance for refugees or even evicting them from the area.

3. Needs particularities among Syrian refugees according to geographical areas

In addition to differences between the various hosting areas, assessments have also pointed to the high needs differences within the Syrian population. The financial characteristics of the Syrian refugee population are diverse. Where many Syrian refugees are obliged to occupy empty buildings or share apartments because they cannot afford renting, other Syrian middle class families rent and buy houses or stay in expensive hotels enjoying a tourist life in Lebanon.³⁰ Another group of the Syrian refugee population is composed of Syrian migrants working in Lebanon prior to the Syrian conflict who brought their families and adapted to the increasing living costs in Lebanon.³¹ Finally, many Syrians have relatives in Lebanon, either through kinship or marriage, especially in the border communities, enabling them to settle with their Lebanese relatives and benefit from their income generating connections within the Lebanese job market. However, most of the Syrian refugee population lacks the luxury of continuing business in Lebanon or local connections for housing or work and is obliged to seek a completely new livelihood in the country.

Studies show a major discrepancy between the different regions, with Syrian refugee incomes ranging from averages of \$86 in parts of Akkar to about \$547 in parts of Beirut. There are broad regional disparities in this regard, with some regions receiving substantially more aid per household than others, mainly as a result of an apparent pattern of larger households in those areas. The highest average spenders (Beirut) spend about \$580 a month while the lowest average spenders (Akkar) spend roughly \$359 per month.³² A majority of Syrian refugees (between 50 and 90 per cent) is believed to rely on aid, a percentage that also varies from one area to another. Syrian refugee income studies pointed to the 'non-existent' role of the state in all areas where the studies were conducted.³³

4. Analysis of risks and challenges to aid provision in light of regional differences

Analysis and Recommendations

Based on the analysis of regional differences between Lebanese hosting areas of Syrian refugees, several recommendations can be drawn for a proper intervention in the respective areas.

First of all, external interventions should take notice of the local particularities of the setting in which they intervene. Syrian refugees are not living in a political or socio-economic vacuum. Every area in which they reside is subject to international, national, and local dynamics, in which not only Lebanese but also Syrian refugees have started to play a role. Even the humanitarian intervention itself affects the socio-economic conditions of the area, as has been shown above.

Humanitarian organizations are called upon to be fully aware of the historical background of the specific area and the traditional relations between Syrian refugees and host communities to tailor each intervention accordingly. National harmonized emergency programs, targeting Syrian refugees in general without taking notice of their particular setting or the different categories of the Syrian population, risk doing more harm than good. As the above situation analysis also demonstrates, Syrian refugees choose to settle in a certain area for specific reasons, related to previous migration flows, family or kinship relations, shelter or employment conditions, or the political-sectarian characteristics of the area. Furthermore, the level of current assistance is herein important, be it from state, NGO, UN, or political entities. This is a dynamic refugee motive, which is subject to change according to the development of the setting. This multi-dynamic situation should be taken into consideration while intervening in any Lebanese area.

Second, a trend is showing that the hospitality of the Lebanese host community is rapidly changing, following the continued presence of Syrian refugees and increased concerns. Even in areas where Lebanese communities were traditionally closely linked to (the cause of) Syrian refugees, the receptive attitude is decreasing. The Lebanese population, especially in the poorer and undeveloped areas, is increasingly wary about the presence of high numbers of disadvantaged people. The sudden presence of refugees, relief resources, and aid workers in the concentrated areas of Syrian refugee settlement created both positive and negative opportunities for local hosts. Economic activities on the local level increased dramatically, as refugees represented both a large consumer market and a source of cheap labor. The refugee presence however, is increasingly associated with important problems, including labor competition, infectious diseases, environmental degradation, increase in crime and insecurity, and so on. These changes are not evenly distributed over Lebanon and vary across geographic areas and among social groups. The combined effects of socio-economic disadvantages that existed prior to the refugee crisis and the ramifications of the settlement of the refugees and their needs have only further widened the gap between the various geographical areas. Humanitarian agencies should be aware of this development and be flexible to shift their focus to both Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community, who are now showing similar vulnerability characteristics. International organizations could make more use of the local understanding of national organizations in this matter.

Finally, external NGOs intervening in the current Syrian refugee crisis should be aware of previous humanitarian programs running prior to the arrival of Syrian refugees. Lessons learned of support to Lebanese communities during the various emergencies (Civil War, Israeli invasions) and Palestinian

and Iraqi refugee migration waves are useful for humanitarian design and programming. In this regard, a shift from an emergency “Refugee-Centric Mandate”³⁴ to development Programs is advisable: the Lebanese government and international organizations could cooperate to create development programs in light of the national development goals, creating new jobs in the country’s labor market and invigorating the economic cycle in the country.³⁵

By including regional differences and the above-described local particularities in refugee policies, humanitarian programs will set the foundation for a more effective approach. The current dynamic security situation in Lebanon further confirms the need for a different intervention approach per area; Syrian refugees and their aid providers are not acting on an island but are both subject and object to their own local setting.

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