

Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Between Repatriation and Discrimination

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Discussions about the repatriation of Syrian refugees continue in the corridors of the Lebanese government as well as between politicians. The government's approach has become clear with statements by the Lebanese President Michel Aoun to the ambassadors of the countries of the International Support Group for Lebanon in June 2018: "The repatriation of Syrian refugees cannot be postponed till a political solution is reached to the Syrian crisis. Lebanon's capacity no longer allows refugees to stay for an unspecified period." President Aoun also pointed out that the repatriation process is possible, as refugees have been able to return gradually to areas that are now safe in Syria.

These statements have been accompanied by a wider debate between UNHCR and the Lebanese Foreign Ministry, with the Ministry accusing the UN agency of blocking the return of Syrian refugees to their country. This debate has escalated, resulting in the suspension of UNHCR staff applications for residency by the Lebanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

UNHCR has highlighted the danger of indiscriminate repatriation of refugees to areas in Syria that are still unsafe, calling on the Lebanese government to cooperate in "providing care for those fleeing the violence." UNHCR spokesperson in Geneva, William Spindler, denied that the organization was "impeding the return of refugees, unless they have chosen to do so." Spindler continued, "From our point of view, the conditions in Syria are not yet favorable to help refugees return to their home regions, although the situation is changing."



Figure 1 Poster calling for Syrian refugees to leave

However, at the level of the Lebanese municipalities, it is not unusual to see signs in the streets calling for the repatriation of refugees. These signs are accompanied by a growing rhetoric of racism, threats and restrictions on refugees in Lebanon by municipalities. There have been many recorded incidents such as in the municipalities of Burj Hammoud and Nabaa where shops owned by Syrians have been forcibly closed as a restriction on their work. In addition, Syrians face restrictions related to obtaining legal residency as well as those related to accessing basic services such as health and education.

Results of the Lebanese Government's approach

Lebanon has witnessed several incidents of mass repatriation of Syrian refugees to Syria. The most recent of these took place on October 1, 2018, with some refugees leaving Tripoli to Aleppo while the rest went to the Qalamoun area northeast of Damascus as well as to Damascus countryside. The number of returnees varies in each repatriation, ranging from 200 to 3,000 people. These repatriation groups are mainly organized by the Lebanese General Security and Hezbollah offices. The latest news of repatriations to Syria raises many concerns among Syrian refugees.

The following include some testimonies about refugees who had returned to Syria

"We are from Aleppo and live in Damascus countryside. My brother Abu Mahmud fled with his family to Lebanon five years ago and worked there as a tailor. He does not engage in politics or any other things that might harm his family. However, after the death of our brother, Abu Mahmud decided to take the risk and return to Syria by applying through reconciliation committees in Lebanon to attend the funeral and to bring his family back. On his return to Syria, however, he was arrested on the border and after 20 days the news of his death came to us." A.S. said.

N.A. said that her husband applied to the reconciliation committees in Lebanon to return to the Qalamoun area. N.A. has five children, the youngest of whom is only 48 days-old. Three days after they had arrived to their home area, three men came at night. They knocked on the door calling her husband's name. When he came out, they shot him. It was difficult to get to the hospital and he died of bleeding. After his murder, the murderers claimed that the reason was an outstanding debt and also vengeance. But this is not true, and neither the police nor security forces came to investigate the killing. This is not the only case documented in the Qalamoun area.

W.B., who stayed in Lebanon more than five years, registered to return to Qalamoun. Through coordination between the local Lebanese municipality and Lebanese General Security, he returned with his wife and children in a round of repatriation on July 7, 2018. As soon as he arrived in his village of Fleita, pro-Assad militias burned his car. On the second day in the city of Yabroud, he was hit by a vehicle belonging to a pro-Assad militia. His health condition is critical, and he is in the hospital. Again, neither the security authorities nor the police have intervened to investigate and hold the perpetrators accountable.

In conclusion, despite new laws and procedures Syrian refugees remain stuck between an unknown fate if they return to Syria and daily discriminatory measures by Lebanese government institutions if they remain in Lebanon. It is necessary to stress that Syrian refugees are living in Lebanon because of the ongoing war, fear of arrest and indiscriminate killing.

Accordingly, the Syrian Civic Platform hopes that the Lebanese government will improve the conditions faced by Syrian refugees; stop hate speech, hold violators accountable, and provide access to legal facilities and basic services, especially health and education.

We call on the international community to protect the refugees and ease the pressures on them, whether economic, educational or security-related.

We emphasize the safe and dignified return of refugees after the end of the war, under the guarantee of the United Nations.

We also reiterate our belief that the return of refugees must be accompanied by a comprehensive political solution that ensures the safety of refugees and provides the basic conditions for their return.