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## KAMIL AZIMOV. THE SITUATION OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS

*Keywords: Lebanon, Syria, refugees, economic crisis, loss of hope and confidence in the authorities.*

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*Citation:* Azimov K. The Situation of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: Challenges and Prospects // Russia and the Moslem World, 2022, № 1 (315), P. 73–86. DOI: 10.31249/rmw/2022.01.07

*Abstract. There are currently 1.5 million refugees from Syria in Lebanon. This is an immense burden for a country in permanent economic crisis. However, the Syrians do not want to return to their homeland. One of the consequences of this situation is the deterioration of relations between fraternal peoples.*

On December 26, 2020, a Syrian refugee camp was set on fire in the Minyan region of northern Lebanon. 75 families lived in the camp. According to witnesses, the fire arose as a result of a quarrel between Syrian refugee workers and Lebanese employers from the local Al-Mir clan. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported the hospitalization of several victims. This is not the first time that Lebanese aggression against Syrian refugees has occurred. A month before the events in the camp, 270 Syrian families left the city of Bsharre in northern Lebanon after a Syria born shot a Lebanese.

There are about 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon, most of whom live in camps in the Bekaa Valley and the Akkar region in the north of the country. UNICEF claims that more than

90 per cent of Syrian families live below the poverty line. The Lebanese authorities have repeatedly called on the international community to assist in the return of Syrians home. The Syrian authorities, with the support of the Russian Federation, held the first international conference on the return of refugees to the SAR in Damascus in November, but Western countries ignored this initiative.

The economic, political and health crisis that has severely affected the Lebanese population in recent years has also had many consequences for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This already vulnerable population is now in a critical state. The lack of an adequate legal status, the deterioration of already difficult living conditions and tensions with Lebanese society increase its vulnerability. At the same time, most refugees are not ready to return to their homeland.

Lebanon has not signed the Geneva Convention relating to the Status of Refugees (1951)<sup>1</sup> and the Additional Protocol (1967). The reason for this was the reluctance to have Palestinians on their territory, who, by the use of the proximity of Israeli territory, organized terrorist attacks against it for a long time. As a result of retortion measures, the civilian population of Lebanon suffered. In 1982 and 2006, the presence of Palestinians in Lebanon caused armed conflicts between these countries.

By 2017, the number of refugees in Lebanon (Palestinians, Syrians, Iraqis, Somalis, etc.) amounted to about 2 million people. There is an average of 232 refugees per thousand Lebanese.<sup>2</sup> Lebanon occupies the first place in the world by the number of refugees per thousand original residents.<sup>3</sup> It should also be noted that together with the Syrians, Palestinians who had previously lived in several refugee camps in Syria also moved to Lebanon.

The negative attitude of Lebanese towards those seeking asylum in that country can be explained by these reasons. After refugees rushed to Lebanon from Syria, where the civil war began, the Lebanese government refused to organize camps for the temporary residence of Syrian refugees, arguing its position

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by the negative experience of the Palestinians staying in the country. However, over time, the country's leadership has come to the conclusion that it is more reasonable to keep refugees under control. On September 11, 2014, Minister of Social Affairs Rashid Derbas announced the creation of the first camps in the Bekaa Valley and the North of the country.

Syrians were severely restricted in their rights and did not have refugee status in Lebanese territory, although they satisfy all the requirements of the international law. The Government of Lebanon classifies them as "temporarily displaced persons," as a result of which they cannot claim special protection. Such a position of the Lebanese government is explained by political considerations, as well as, as it was already noted, the experience of the long-term presence in the country of Palestinian refugees<sup>4</sup> who moved to Lebanon from 1948 to 1967.<sup>5</sup>

The Lebanese state allowed the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) to register Syrian refugees before 2015. As a result, refugee status was presented to Syrian citizens, which, although was not recognized by Lebanon, gave the right to a temporary residence permit. According to the agreement reached with the Lebanese Government, Syrian refugees were assisted, assuming that as soon as the conflict ended, the Syrians would return to their homeland or emigrate to a third country.

However, the situation in Syria continued to deteriorate, and then in the same 2015, the Lebanese authorities adopted a number of measures aimed at reducing the influx of refugees to Lebanon. Since then, Syrian citizens have been forced to receive visas to enter Lebanese territory.<sup>6</sup> In the visa application, they must indicate that the purpose of their arrival is a "short-term stay" in Lebanon.<sup>7</sup>

This toughening of living conditions has led to an increase in the number of Syrians living illegally in Lebanese territory. The fact is that the border between these two states has never been strictly controlled. That is why, it is impossible to name the

exact number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. According to Lebanese authorities, only 879,000 of the 1.5 million Syrian “displaced persons” currently living in Lebanon, are registered by UN services.<sup>8</sup>

As for Syrians who took refuge in Lebanese territory before 2015, their situation is regulated by the UNHCR protocol. Syrians who had been registered in Lebanon through UNHCR had the opportunity to renew their residency free of charge. For those who are not registered, it remains possible to find a sponsor and pay \$200 to obtain it.<sup>9</sup> This is difficult enough for people who are extremely disadvantaged. Thus, registration with the UN Refugee Agency is the key to legal defense.

According to NGOs estimates of refugee protection, three quarters of Syrian refugees living in Lebanon have no legal residence. Most of them live in tents in the Shuf or Bekaa region, where access to water or electricity is limited. They live in fear of being arrested by the security forces. UNHCR, UNICEF and the World Bank were able to provide schooling for only 100,000 Syrian children.<sup>10</sup>

With the influx of Syrians into Lebanese territory, criminality is growing. The authorities of dozens of municipalities have taken measures against those who are bashfully called “foreign workers,” that is, illegally working Syrians. In particular, only for them a curfew was introduced. In addition, unsuitable living conditions push refugees to crimes. This measure was introduced due to the fact that in an attempt to combat the unstable situation, some refugees become aggressive and steal what they are not able to buy. And their places of residence become a breeding ground for garbage (up to 7.5 tons of garbage daily), as well as a place for illegal fishing and the formation of criminal groups.

In May 2015, the Lebanese government suspended the registration of Syrian refugees by UNHCR, which led to a shrink of officially registered refugees. However, Syrians who apply to UNHCR offices are still considered “registered,” which retains

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their access to humanitarian assistance and support, as well as registered refugees, but they cannot count on the legal support provided to registered ones.

Some Syrian citizens who had no right to legal residence in Lebanon were arrested and deported to Syria.<sup>11</sup> Such a situation made Syrians vulnerable to fluctuations in political interests. The Lebanese authorities sometimes have contradictory intentions. On the one hand, the reception of such a large number of refugees is strategically important when contacting international donors, on the other, politicians fear the long-term presence of Syrians and their potential naturalization. Nevertheless, under international law, Lebanon was obliged to respect the principle of “non-refoulement,” which is applied against return to a country in which a person has reason to fear persecution.

The lack of legal residence and limited access to economic resources made the living conditions of Syrian refugees very complicated. Persons who do not have a residence permit cannot get a labour permit, and if they work, they do it illegally and for a small fee. Even those who live legally in the territory, the Lebanese government in December 2014 limited their ability to work in agriculture, construction and cleaning of premises and streets.

With the deteriorating economic situation, Syrian refugees faced not only job losses, but also prices increase for basic products. UNHCR, the World Food Programme and the United Nations Children's Fund reported an alarming fact in their latest report on the vulnerability assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon at the end of 2020. Almost 89 per cent of Syrian refugees currently live below the poverty line, compared with 55 per cent in 2019. The crisis has forced many families to reduce their food consumption. Some are no longer able to meet their basic needs and face hunger and lack of access to medical assistance.<sup>12</sup>

Even before the outbreak of coronavirus in Lebanon, half of Syrian refugee families were content with less than \$2.9 USA per

person per day, and 58 per cent of school-age children did not attend school.<sup>13</sup>

Regarding the situation of Lebanon's indigenous population, the report of the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA), published in September 2020, highlighted the serious impact of multiple crises for the living standards of the Lebanese population. Lebanon is currently seriously suffering from the economic and financial crisis, which has led to increased unemployment and impoverishment of Lebanese society. An increasing number of Lebanese are currently facing difficulties in meeting their basic needs, including food. In addition, the coronavirus pandemic increases the country's economic instability. According to May 2020 data, 55 per cent of the population lives in poverty compared to 28 per cent of the previous year. In Lebanon in 2020 there were 2.7 million poor people of the total population (estimated at 4.8 million people), which is 1.4 million more than in the previous year.<sup>14</sup> On January 14, 2021, new strict suppression measures were introduced in connection with the coronavirus epidemic. These measures include sufficiently severe restrictive measures, up to the closure of the vast majority of food stores, further aggravating the situation of both Syrian refugees and Lebanese in precarious situations.

Economically, especially after the explosion in the Beirut port (04.08.2020), the damage from which ranged from \$3 to \$5 billion, Lebanon needs international support. However, in the context of general problems (lack of resources, debt, unemployment, political instability alienating foreign investors), the presence of Syrian refugees exacerbates the situation. In spring 2020, Lebanon's public debt reached 170 per cent of GDP, one of the highest in the world.<sup>15</sup>

Under these tense economic conditions, the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon has increased tensions with the local population. In particular, Syrian refugees were accused of violating the current price policy in the labor market and,

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therefore, competition, which led to a decrease in wages of indigenous population. This position was reflected in 2019 in statements by Jebran Bassil, the former foreign minister at that time, who stated that “Lebanese have superiority over them (i.e. refugees – auth.) ... and naturally, we protect the Lebanese workforce... Lebanese, first of all!”<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Jebran Bassil’s remarks were negatively received by Lebanese society. Several hundred people gathered in the evening of June 12, 2019 at Samir Kassir Square in Beirut in support of Syrian and Palestinian refugees who were victims of racist statements by Foreign Minister J. Bassil.

In the face of unstable situation in the country and lack of work, skilled Lebanese or dynamic youth continue to leave the country. The weakness of the national economy has a serious impact on the employment sector. The unemployment rate among the Lebanese population is rising sharply, which the Government attributed to the presence of Syrian refugees, who agreed to work in much harder conditions and for much lower wages than Lebanese. In addition, they also offer child labor. In many families, children are sent to work to meet the vital needs of Syrian families.

The data of the Lebanese Ministry of Economy allow us to assess, apart from the problem of employment, the main factors of the economic crisis (in connection with the Syrian problem), in which the country is now, which provides refugees with its infrastructure and resources to the detriment of its population. The economic problems that had arisen with the influx of a great number of refugees had indeed affected various sectors, including the education of refugee children. This area should be taken under control by the Government of Lebanon, which, as we have already noted, does not have sufficient authority in the face of continuing institutional instability. Even before the start of the Syrian conflict, the lack of educational infrastructure was already problematic: public schools were overcrowded and there was lack of funds. With the arrival of thousands of refugees, the situation continues to deteriorate. The figures are alarming, and

protests are raised by Lebanese who are suffering from the consequences of the situation. Indeed, according to the Ministry, 50 per cent of the students attending school in Lebanon are now Syrian refugees.

With regard to resources, the results also concern. Prior to the Syrian crisis, access to water and electricity in a number of areas had already been hindered. Since the civil war, water services have operated only three days a week, and electricity has been cut off from three to twelve hours a day, depending on the region. The consumption of 87 million liters of water and 200 megawatts of electricity (that is, two hours of electricity) by refugees per day, costs the state, according to the ministry, quite expensive.<sup>17</sup> The same is happening in the sphere of supplies. Even basic food such as bread, the state has to subsidize. Refugees consume 5.4 million units of bread every day.

Currently, according to a study conducted by the World Bank, the Syrian crisis has already cost Lebanon \$7.5 billion between May 2011 and May 2014.<sup>18</sup> At the same time, the World Bank noted that “approximately 170,000 Lebanese are already below the poverty line due to a doubling of unemployment and an increase in government spending to \$1.1 billion.”<sup>19</sup>

Naturally, a part of the population is disliked by Syrian refugees, who receive relatively regular food aid from NGOs and financial assistance from UNHCR, while many Lebanese in need do not even have such an opportunity.<sup>20</sup> This tension has also been exacerbated by the health crisis. Many certified specialists, especially doctors, leave the country, receiving invitations to work from the Gulf countries.

The tragic events that followed showed a deterioration in relations between Syrian refugees and the Lebanese population. At the end of November 2020, a Syrian refugee killed a Lebanese citizen in the city of Bsharra in the north of the country. The mayor of the city, supported by many local residents, called for the expulsion of Syrian refugees living illegally in the area, some Syrian houses were burnt. There were demands for “collective

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punishment” among the population. The authorities were forced to introduce police force. The accused surrendered to the internal security forces, after which the investigation began. Conflicts also occurred in other parts of Lebanon.

The Syrian leadership hopes that the refugees will return when the government takes control of 70 per cent of the country. According to UNHCR, this is still too early to talk about, since it is still not safe in Syria. Many destroyed buildings, roads, some territories need demining. “Sleeping cells” of jihadists periodically wake up, which the army should pacify. The European Union conditions aid in restoring normalcy by political settlement of the conflict, thus implying the need for regime change.

On November 11–12, 2020, Damascus, with the support of Moscow, organized a conference on the return of refugees. Representatives of Lebanon, Iraq, Iran, Venezuela, China, the United Arab Emirates, Oman, Sudan were invited and participated. However, Damascus did not achieve the expected result: the European Union boycotted the conference, and Turkey, which received the largest number of Syrian refugees (3.6 million people – 2019 data),<sup>21</sup> was not invited, given its support for the opposition. Only Lebanon and Iraq were represented among the major host countries.<sup>22</sup>

Syrian President Bashar al-Assad called on Syrian refugees to return. In his opening remarks, he said that “millions of Syrians want to return home,” although this is not confirmed by the number of those who had the courage to return to the destroyed country.<sup>23</sup> Syrians in neighbouring countries – in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan – are not yet inclined to return, despite the fact that living conditions in host countries are significantly deteriorating. People are afraid to be forcibly called into the army or arrested by Syrian intelligence due to their possible involvement in the Syrian opposition, although several reconciliation events have already been held in the country and amnesties have been announced.

Sharbel Wehbe, Minister for Foreign Affairs of Lebanon, who spoke at the Damascus Conference, called on the international community to “intensify international efforts to ensure safe return of Syrian displaced persons,” believing that the current conditions are favorable for such a return.<sup>24</sup> However, Syrian citizens increasingly appeal to the consulates of member countries to the 1951 Convention for asylum.

It should be noted that the situation with Syrian refugees elsewhere is even less joyful. People live in the absence of information, feed on rumors and fear to return to their homeland. For example, in the southeast of the province of Homs, near the Syrian-Jordanian border, the Al-Rukban refugee camp is located. It is located in the zone of responsibility of the US base in At-Tanf and was organized after the Jordanian authorities stopped receiving refugees from Syria.

According to the Russian Defense Ministry, there are people in the camp who would like to leave it and return home. However, life in the camp is controlled by militants who demand ransom from the Syrians or leave relatives hostages in the camp.

In February 2019, the Syrian government, with the assistance of the Russian military, opened two humanitarian corridors for refugees from the Al-Rukban camp. Two checkpoints were specially created. At the same time, the authorities envisaged a whole range of measures aimed at providing returning compatriots with everything necessary: from the issue of documents to them in a simplified manner and the provision of basic necessities, to delivery to the place of residence.

However, the militants operating in the camp area intimidated the refugees, preventing them from taking advantage of this safe route. In turn, the American side did not allow buses intended for the export of refugees. Nevertheless, from March to the end of September 2019, 17,934 people left the camp (of which 5,125 were women and 8,994 were children).<sup>25</sup>

Such checkpoints were created on the initiative of the joint Russian-Syrian coordination headquarters. According to the

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Russian newspaper Izvestia, "with the support of Russia, thousands of educational and medical institutions have been restored for Syrian refugees and civilians in various parts of the country, more than 5 thousand houses have been rebuilt, six road bridges and more than a thousand kilometers of roads have been repaired, and power lines have been laid. Water supply facilities, bakeries, electric substations, gas stations began operating. And most importantly, more than 14 thousand industrial enterprises went into action."<sup>26</sup>

On the example of the Al-Rukban camp, where more than 3 thousand Syrians still remain, it is clear that there are forces inside the camps that do not want Syrian citizens to return to peaceful life. It is known that often young people are forced to serve in gangs, intimidate their relatives. Misinformation is a favorite means by which refugees are bullied, which makes them lose hope of return.

A survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon indicated a desire to return to their homeland, but not immediately. Most respondents believed that so far it is premature. A third of respondents doubted that they would ever be able to return to Syria. It seems that the socio-economic conditions in Lebanon do not play a significant role in the decision-making on return. People are mostly afraid of repression. Some did not have information about the state of their housing or, on the contrary, could not return, knowing that their housing was destroyed...

It is obvious that the process of returning Syrian refugees to their homeland will take several years. To force it, it is necessary to enlist the media, which will help create a true picture of modern Syria, where new houses are built, roads are cleared and children can go to school.

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VALENTINA SCHENSNOVICH. IRAN UNDER NEW US SANCTIONS. *Analytical Review*.

*Keywords: Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI); Hassan Rouhani; Ali Khamenei; IRGC; JCPOA; USA; Donald Trump; West; sanctions; EU; GDP; oil exports and imports; non-oil exports; foreign investment; budget; Fatah; economic recession; "economy of resistance"; social protests; forecasts.*

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*Citation:* Schensnovich V. Iran under New US Sanctions // *Russia and the Moslem World*, 2022, № 1 (315), P. 86–104. DOI: 10.31249/rmw/2022.01.08

*Abstract. The article contains the analysis of the changes that occurred in Iran in 2018-2020. During this period, the US administration again began to pursue a policy of sanctions pressure on Iran. The sanctions affected Iran's religious, political and military leaders. It should be emphasized that the sanctions are aimed primarily against the Islamic regime of Iran.*

## **Introduction**

The authors of the articles analyze the situation that occurred in 2018–2020 in Iran. After the conclusion of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, 2015), Iran began to