

# Urban Refugees in Lebanon: Housing, Residency, and Wellbeing

Lebanon hosts over a million Syrian refugees in addition to other displaced groups. These refugees have gravitated to urban centres, putting significant pressure on local infrastructure and services. Living in close proximity to one another, hosts and refugees face significant challenges to their wellbeing. While some of these challenges are distinct, such as legal residency, others, such as housing are shared. Addressing these challenges should be a priority for national and municipal governments, and humanitarian and development agencies. Urban informal settlements, official Palestinian camps, and unofficial ‘gatherings’ are key localities for intervention.

As the Syrian civil war enters its eighth year, Lebanon hosts the highest concentration of refugees per capita worldwide. Estimates indicate that Syrian refugees make up 22.8 per cent of Lebanon’s population. Although Lebanon has maintained a remarkably welcoming position, the chronic burden on towns and cities, combined with weak governance and widespread concerns about security have put a strain on nationals and refugees alike. A review of existing studies shows that women and men face distinct but related challenges towards enjoying safe, dignified, and worthwhile lives.

## Staying legal: an uphill battle

Up to 70 per cent of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lack valid residency status. Regular policy change, complex bureaucracy, and prohibitive paperwork requirements and fees, combined with inconsistent application of rules have hindered Syrians from renewing their residency status. The Lebanese government levied annual fees for renewing legal residency on all household members aged 15 years or over. But as time progresses, impoverished Syrians are increasingly unable to afford legal status. In response to international dialogue, in 2017, the Lebanese government introduced a waiver of the residency renewal fee for significant numbers of Syrians (though not all). Monitoring the expected positive outcomes of the reforms will be critical going forward to inform further policy change.

Invalid residency status has affected men and women in quite different ways. Shifts in gender roles within the family are apparent. Security forces and police monitor documentation at checkpoints across cities. These checks largely target men and have reduced their mobility and

ability to work, access health care, or register child births due to fear of arrest, detention, and deportation if they do not have valid documentation. Not being able to register births is one key reason why half of the nearly 500,000 Syrian school-age children registered with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) are not getting a formal education.

Women find themselves looking for employment while still burdened by childcare and unpaid domestic work. Meanwhile, men are unable to provide for their families, often leading to depression, frustration, and cases of domestic violence. Refugees without valid residency status also face heightened risks of exploitation in work and other places, particularly as they are reluctant to seek recourse from the police and the law courts for fear of arrest and deportation.

## Urban housing: a race to the bottom?

The Lebanese government has held a firm ‘no-camp’ policy since the onset of the Syrian crisis, seeking to avoid the negative historic experiences it has had with the now urbanised Palestinian refugee ‘camps’. The ‘no-camp’ policy has enabled Syrians greater autonomy to determine where to live, which can improve their wellbeing as relatively structured and secure environments such as camps often stifle aspiration and agency over their lives.

Syrians have pursued their own housing solutions, rapidly shifting over the last years from rural border areas to the cities. This has exacerbated existing shortages of affordable housing caused by failed urban planning and a dysfunctional Lebanese housing market. As rents have quickly risen, relatively low-cost housing in urban informal settlements increasingly attracts the poorest

refugee, migrant, and host groups. Yet, public policy considers these areas illegal. The quest for urban housing often leads to substandard, unsafe, and severely overcrowded living conditions with few shared public spaces, such as parks and street markets, that could foster everyday social interactions with Lebanese hosts. Cramped living conditions are associated with poor psychological health, and the occurrence of family conflict, domestic violence, and badly behaved children. Overcrowded housing limits privacy and dignity, and affects people's peace of mind.

Moreover, as low-income housing is scarce, property rents have rapidly increased, eating up large shares of people's uncertain and fluctuating income, often earned through informal work. Rents cause major worries and anxieties for both host and refugee communities, not least as forced evictions occur regularly. Additionally, frequent moves in search of affordable housing mean that it is hard to maintain social networks that could contribute to improved social cohesion and that are important to feelings of inclusion and wellbeing.

## Policy recommendations

- **Valid residency status is critical to displaced groups.** To date, this has been viewed chiefly as the mandate of humanitarian actors focusing on legal protection. Given that residency status affects many aspects of refugees' lives, including birth registration, access to jobs and education, there is a clear need and opportunity for humanitarian and development programming to foster refugee awareness on the pathways to obtaining legal documentation. Moreover, aid agencies should take the wellbeing impacts of limited legal documentation into account in programme design and advocacy across sectors, e.g. education; shelter; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); and employment.
- **Aid could deliver enduring results in informal settlements and urban Palestinian 'camps'.** Informal settlements and official and unofficial Palestinian camps host significant numbers of Syrians but also poor Lebanese and other groups. As their populations become more and more mixed, there is an opportunity to direct aid towards improving these areas, which have suffered historic neglect. Improving access to basic services (water, sanitation, waste collection, electricity) is critical. This should be accompanied with creating a greater stock of affordable and decent quality low-cost housing, otherwise investments may drive up rents and force the poorest to relocate. These investments should benefit vulnerable host, refugee, and other poor groups in the short run, and benefit Lebanon long after the Syrians have returned to their country.
- **Advocacy must accompany aid investments** to generate enhanced political appetite for legal and policy reforms that enable municipalities, utilities, and other organisations to provide better services to informal settlements.
- Levels of service and aid provisioning differ for specific groups within and across the different types of urban informal settlements. However, in all these settings there are underserved populations. The aid community's emphasis on vulnerable households, rather than on serving the needs of a particular nationality, should **enable more equitable access to services for all groups.**
- **Shared urban public spaces can foster peaceful social relations** when used by host communities and temporary residents on an everyday basis. Improvements in the availability, quality, security and accessibility of public spaces, such as parks and street markets, may thus support vibrant and harmonious cities.
- Effort should be made to **analyse positive factors** in relationship building and maintaining peaceful dynamics in densely built-up urban contexts. Analysis to date has focused on 'drivers of tension'.

## Further reading

- Chatty, D. (2017) 'The Syrian Humanitarian Disaster: Understanding Perceptions and Aspirations in Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey', *Global Policy* 8 (supplement 1): 25–32
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## Credits

This *IDS Policy Briefing* was written by **Hart Ford** (ACTED Lebanon) and **Dolf te Lintelo** (IDS) and edited by **Vivienne Benson**. It is an outcome of research funded by the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research-Foundation for the Advancement of Tropical Research (NWO-WOTRO) programme on 'Security & Rule of Law in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Settings'.

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ISSN 1479-974X



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