

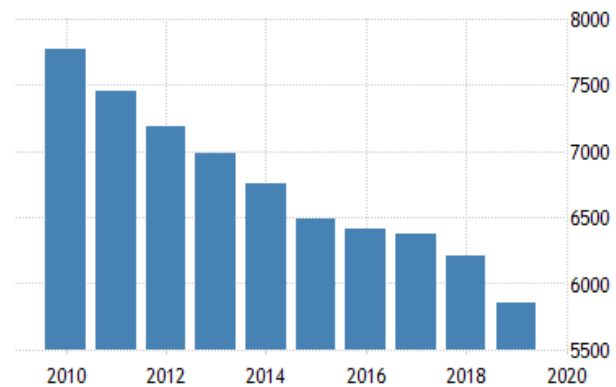
## Striking a Balance in the Refugee Concern in Lebanon

**Forum:** Advisory Panel

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### Introduction

Lebanon has the highest number of refugees in the world, with more than 1.2 million Syrian and 300,000 Palestinian refugees. Lebanon already suffers from a drastic social and economic crisis, which not only is making the asylum-seekers' lives harder but also is placing greater strains on the local citizens. After the massive influx of refugees, Lebanon's GDP dropped by 2.85%, and competition for low-skilled jobs between the Lebanese



*Lebanon GDP dropping in post-2011*

and the refugees rose. In response to this, xenophobic incidents have become more frequent. For instance, the government started to destroy houses, charge Syrians for illegally entering the border, and threaten employees to fire their Syrian workers. As a result, nearly 45% of the refugees are living in poor housing conditions and three-fourths are living with approximately \$4 per day.

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### Background

Prior to the refugee crisis, the UNHCR considered Lebanon's territory as the optimal solution to the displacement of thousands of refugees. Hence, with aid from the UNHCR in 2011, Lebanon accepted refugees without a visa and protected them with housing and jobs. Consequently, a large number of Syrians that were suffering from their devastating civil war fled to Lebanon for peace and security. However, even with the help of the UNHCR, the Lebanese government failed to find a balance in handling the large wave of incoming refugees, not having created any policies in advance to cope with the emerging refugee crisis. The government later created restrictions in accepting refugees by requiring a hotel reservation and a 2,000-dollar visa. Moreover, the refugees' legal status went down, and their lack of citizenship strictly limited them in jobs, education and basic resources.

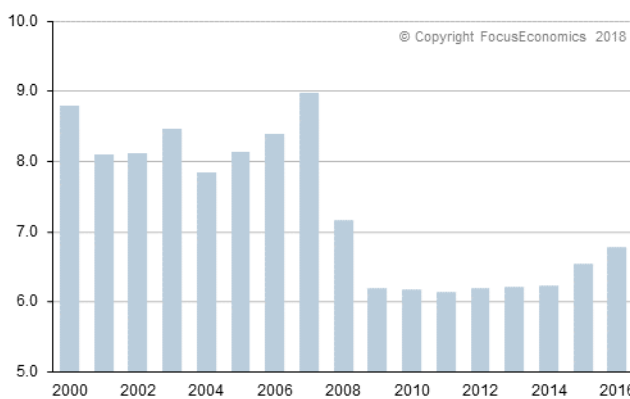
The COVID-19 pandemic and the large explosion of ammonium nitrate in the major port in Beirut is making the situation worse. The Syrian refugees who already lacked access to health care became vulnerable to the pandemic, and many locals lost their jobs due to the explosion, pulling the unemployment rate even lower and preventing migrant workers from finding jobs to support their families. The Syrians are now left with two unwanted choices: stay in Lebanon with poor conditions or return to their dangerous hometown.

## Problem Raised

### *Job Shortages*

Before the refugee crisis, Lebanon's labor market was already in bad shape. The Lebanese were suffering from high unemployment rates and were having hard times finding a stable well-paid job. When 1.2 million Syrian refugees settled in Lebanon, this problem exacerbated greatly.

One in five people in Lebanon is a refugee, which means the Syrian refugees take up a huge portion of Lebanon's population. To sustain their life in Lebanon, these migrant workers started to fight for jobs, willing to work with low salaries compared to that of the local citizens. This inclined the labor market towards the Syrians, and according to the Bolminvest Bank, Lebanon's unemployment rate doubled after the large influx of Syrians. When the Lebanese government became aware of this, they started to go against "undocumented foreign labor,"



*Decreasing unemployment rate in Lebanon*

allowing only the Syrians that were officially documented to work. However, most Syrians in Lebanon are undocumented because residency permission documents are hard to afford. In addition, after the implementation of this new "rule," the Lebanese government threatened employees to pay fines if they have undocumented Syrian workers. Consequently, the Syrians were driven to the bleak of getting fired and losing their source of sustainability.

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### *Segregation*

Even though Syria and Lebanon have similar cultures and traditions, the fissure between the Lebanese and the Syrian refugees are clear. The Lebanese have inevitable prejudices against the Syrians who participated in the Lebanese civil war, and this historical incident has frustrated many Lebanese having Syrians enter their territory.

In 1976, Syrians had invaded Lebanon during the Lebanese Civil war, siding with Israel, which had already started to supply arm forces in Lebanon. The Syrians were interested in Lebanon's territory and strongly supported the Maronite militias side against the Palestinian Liberation Organization in the Lebanon civil war, exacerbating the situation.

As a result, segregation is increasing in Lebanon. The Lebanese viewed the Syrians and the other refugees as a burden to their country and defined them as unwanted guests. Moreover, the Lebanese government started to define the refugees as an obstacle for Lebanon's development and turned all the social and economic issues as if it were the refugee's fault. As a result, thousands of Lebanese started to campaign against the Syrians, making propaganda and shouting "Syria, you must leave," in front of Syrian shops.

### *Unclear Refugee Policies*

Lebanon's refugee crisis was neglected by the Lebanese government for a long time. They did not set clear policies on how to prevent a refugee crisis when millions of refugees were

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coming into their territory. A reporter even pointed out that the government did not even have a proper name for the Syrian refugees, and instead of officially calling them “refugees,” they called them “displaced people.”

In effect, due to the Lebanese government not taking action to solve this crisis, the Lebanese communities started to find their own means to deal with the influx of refugees. For instance, they implemented night curfews on the Syrian refugees and limited their freedom of movement, which is a right written in international human rights law. Thus, due to unclear refugee policies, many Syrians became victims of unauthorized rule and were left with no official humanitarian aid from Lebanon. Specifically, many Syrians did not have a proper place to reside in and due to the government’s strict rule against Syrian employees, they were cut off from food, medicine, hygiene products, electricity, et cetera.

### *Poor Housing Systems*

The “No refugee camp policy” was one of the few policies that were implemented in 2011 when Lebanon started to accept refugees that were registered in the UNHCR. Such a policy was established in Lebanon after their experience of having Palestinian refugees settle in their territory in 1948. They learned that refugee camps were expensive, take up a lot of their territory, and made the refugee stay become prolonged. Thus, they didn’t want this to happen again and restricted the creation of many refugee camps. However, this policy made the situation worse.



*The bathroom of a common refugee house*

Many Syrian refugees had to find their own places to live, and many ended up in small apartments or tents that were pitched on unused land. Some refugees even ended living in garages, streets, and unfinished buildings with a lack of electricity, water, and sanitation necessary to sustain healthy lives.

## **The P5 Nations’ Stances**

### *China*

China, being one of the major countries in the world, is still far from accepting refugees into their territory. A journalist even reported that if China decided to host the same number of refugees that enter Lebanon, the issue could have been alleviated greatly. However, Chinese authorities are strongly against the acceptance of foreigners due to their complicated policies and argue that the Western countries should be the ones responsible for this crisis since they were the ones who historically caused the war in Syria. On the other hand, according to The Diplomat, China did donate 14 million dollars to support the refugee crisis and has made contributions to help.

### *United States of America*

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Compared to other countries such as Lebanon, Turkey, or Jordan, the US only hosted a small number of refugees. A document written in Seton Hall University emphasizes that the US has only accepted 11 Syrian refugees in 2018 while Lebanon was accepting 1.2 million refugees to alleviate the growing crisis. People claim that the US did less than they should have to help the refugee crisis. They assert that this was mainly due to the US refugee policies that necessitate a time of at least one year for a refugee to officially settle in the territory with asylum protection.

### *United Kingdom*

The United Kingdom is currently the second-largest donor to the ongoing refugee crisis in Lebanon. Since 2011, the UK has accepted and protected approximately 5,000 Syrian asylum-seekers in their territory and has partnered with the UN by joining programs that help refugees who fled their hometowns.

### *France*

In response to the refugee crisis in Lebanon, the French government has shown their solidarity by donating €40 million to the Lebanese who are suffering from the refugee crisis. In addition, the French government has hosted 30,000 refugees to help alleviate the ongoing refugee crisis and to solidify their commitment and connection with the Lebanese.

### *Russian Federation*

The Russian government has recently claimed that Lebanon should no longer be the site of support for Syrian refugees. Thus, they are now helping the refugees who have decided to leave Lebanon to safely go back to their hometown. For instance, they ensure that the refugees have the correct documents and are safe when headed back to their country, specifically by setting up refugee centers in Syria that provide returnees with safe access to infrastructure, needs, and transportation.

## **Possible Solutions**

### *Establishment of Refugee Camps*

Even though the Lebanese government has implemented the “no refugee camp policy,” the solution to establish more refugee camps is inevitable in terms of the Lebanon-Syria refugee crisis. Millions of refugees who came to settle in Lebanon are currently displaced and have vital problems with the lack of basic resources such as food, water, electricity, and sanitation. According to the UNHCR, about 73 percent of the refugees rent a residential building that lacks a toilet, roof, kitchen, and windows. Thus, with the creation of more refugee camps, the asylum-seekers would find stable places to live in.



*Exterior view of the refugees' residential building*

On the other hand, refugee camps in the long term may bring negative consequences. Due to the paternalistic actions of refugee camps, asylum-seekers and refugees may become too

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dependent on their aid and lose their capacities to sustain their own lives. The creation of these camps also can diminish local economies and pollute neighboring areas.

### *Hosting Syrian Refugees with Jobs*

After the COVID-19 outbreak, many companies globally have faced an economic meltdown. In the midst of this pandemic, cheap labor has become one of the major solutions to the market industry that wants to alleviate their economic downturn.

In effect, instead of limiting the Syrian workers from getting employed, if the Lebanese government allows the Syrian refugees to work with a low wage, in the long run, this can possibly benefit both the Lebanese economy and the decreasing unemployment rate in Lebanon. This is because the Syrian workers would help grow the private enterprises that are settled in Lebanon and boost the economy, attracting many foreign investments and creating more jobs for the Lebanese labor market.

Nevertheless, this solution cannot perfectly clear up the situation. Refugees who have not obtained adequate education and job experience may fail to support the private firms in Lebanon. This would make the economic recession even worse as enterprises may be pressed to “waste” money by paying laborers that did not contribute sufficiently to the business.

### *Third Country Resettlement*

Refugees make up a quarter of the population in Lebanon, and Lebanon has reached their maximum capacity in protecting and sustaining their lives. Thus, resettling the refugees to a third country can alleviate the crisis. The refugees would be allocated to a better place to start their new living, and the reduced numbers of refugees would support the Lebanon government from the diminishing unemployment rate and economic depression.

However, it is solely the third country’s choice whether or not they want to accept refugees for resettlement. This means that there is a limited number of refugee resettlement programs that agree to accept the refugees, and thus only about 10% of the refugees worldwide are accepted for resettlement in a year. Moreover, only refugees that are identified as the most vulnerable are selected for resettlement, which means other refugees who are not identified as the “most vulnerable” status are eliminated from third-country resettlement.

## **Glossary**

*Paternalism*: supporting and aiding individuals, businesses, or nations externally, usually by controlling them without their will.

*Refugee*: people who flee their country due to war or corruption and settle in a different country to live.

*UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees)*: an UNO established in the UN with the goal of protecting refugees all around the world.

*Xenophobia*: fear and/or hostility toward foreigners or strangers.

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### **Timeline**

*1975* – Lebanon initiates a civil war with Syrian participation.

*March 2011* – Syria starts a multi-sided civil war.

*December 2011* – Lebanon accepts around 5,000 refugees from Syria.

*2012* – Lebanon has around 18,000 Syrian refugees.

*April 2013* – Lebanon reaches 1 million refugees in their territory.

*2013* – The UNHCR initiates to only provide aid to those who are most vulnerable.

*2015* – Lebanon implements a new visa policy on the incoming refugees.

*2017* – The government bans approximately 250,000 migrant workers from labor law protections.

*February 2020* – COVID-19 spreads throughout Lebanon, and the refugees became especially vulnerable due to their lack of sanitation and health care system.

*August 2020* – The Port of Beirut explodes, leaving both the refugees and the local citizens unsecured.



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