



**FRIEDRICH NAUMANN  
STIFTUNG** Für die Freiheit.

Lebanon and Syria

## **RESEARCH REPORT**

MIGRATION ASPIRATIONS AMONGST  
SYRIAN REFUGEES AMIDST  
THE FINANCIAL AND POLITICAL  
CRISIS IN LEBANON

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DECEMBER 2020

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## I. INTRODUCTION

The deepening financial and economic crisis in Lebanon since October 2019 has led to a massive wave of migration amongst Lebanese youths and migrant communities residing in the country. While this wave of migration has been slowed down by the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closing of airports around the world, in addition to the growing economic crisis globally; we have more recently witnessed a return of mass migration since August 2020. The Beirut explosion of August 4th, and the economic and security risks that came with it, led hundreds of thousands to start planning their way out of the country. While the aspirations to migrate have not yet materialized for most people, the wish to leave the country is becoming more loudly pronounced amongst various groups within the Lebanese society. Particularly vulnerable amongst those trying to exit the dire living conditions in Lebanon are the migrant workers and refugee communities. This study will focus on the migration aspirations amongst Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Syrian refugees have started to settle in Lebanon since the end of 2011 when the conflict in Syria escalated into a civil war that devastated many regions and threatened the lives and livelihoods of considerable sections of society. Since then, Lebanon has received millions of Syrian refugees who either settled in the country or used it as a transit to reach Europe or other parts of the world. Amongst those who stayed in Lebanon, many live in informal tented settlements (ITS) mainly in the Beqaa and in the Akkar region, or in the poor neighborhoods around the country. With the growing crises in Lebanon and the deepening of the financial collapse, news of Lebanese and Syrians taking the dangerous boat rides from Tripoli to reach Europe have surfaced again. Many others have not left yet but are expressing their wish to resettle and are trying to make plans for their way out of

Lebanon. In this context, it is important to understand the aspirations of these vulnerable communities and their plans and visions for their futures.

This study proposes to look into the migration aspirations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon by focusing on the Beqaa and Akkar areas since these regions have the highest concentration of Syrian refugees. The research will focus on teasing out the characteristics and aspirations of refugees who are considering leaving the country. Through a survey and a number of interviews, the research will try to understand Syrian refugees' aspirations in terms of migration.

1. There is a community of upper-middle and upper-class Syrians residing in Lebanon too, but the wide majority of Syrian refugees are economically deprived.

## II. CONTEXT OF SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON SINCE 2011

### 1. REFUGEE POLITICS

Since 2011, Lebanon has become host for 1.5 million Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict in Syria (UNHCR, 2019b, p.5), of which around 880,000 are registered with UNHCR (UNHCR, 2020d). While hosting the largest refugee population per capita, Lebanon is yet to adopt the 1951 Refugee Convention or its 1967 Protocol. This, in addition to the country's precarious political positioning in relation to the conflict disabled clear paths of policy, legal, and administrative frameworks. As a result, the lives of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are rendered quite vulnerable. In the absence of international law protection, Syrian refugees in Lebanon are forced to live with discriminatory societal, legal, and infrastructural conditions impeding their basic rights such as health, employment, education, safety, and mobility.

The most recent Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon by the UNHCR et al. (2019) reports a myriad of livelihood obstacles and complications

which Syrian refugees are forced to endure. For example, birth registration increased from 2018 to reach 30%; however, only 22% of individuals above the age of 15 reported having legal residency permits, a drop from 27% in 2018 (UNHCR et al., 2019, p.10). Legal residency affects many aspects of life in Lebanon including securing housing, accessing basic services like health and education, and facing the risk of arrest and detention. Moreover, the report indicates that 31% of refugees in 2019 live in non-permanent shelters (20%) and non-residential structures (11%) (p.11). Shelter type is correlated with overall food security status, as such, a quarter of Syrian households still face poor or borderline food consumption and buying food remains the top reason for borrowing money (75%). Other factors include basic services like rent (51%) and health care payment (34%). This takes place against the backdrop of 73% of Syrian refugees spending less than US\$ 3.80 a day, which is an increase since 2018. This increase was accompanied with a rise in the average level of debt per household, reaching the highest number in the past three years: US\$ 1,115 (p.11).

In terms of earning, the report indicates that the two main sources of income for Syrian refugees are World Food Programme assistance (24%) and informal debt from friends and shops (22%) (UNHCR et al., 2019, p.12). In parallel, the unemployment rate in 2019 is 31% with the highest rate in Beqaa (62%), and with an increase to 66% in the proportion of youth between 15 and 24 years of age who are not employed, not in education, and not attending any training (p.12-13). These numbers demonstrate the economic vulnerability Syrian refugees have been facing in Lebanon until the end of 2019.

Different areas of settlement in Lebanon come with their own set of challenges. In the North of Lebanon, relations between residents and Syrians had always been strong; however, the already economically impoverished

communities in the area could not handle the large number of Syrian refugees coming in. The United Nations Development Program's (UNDP) projects already operating in the area to supply traditional needs such as agriculture and infrastructure were diverted from locals to address the emerging community of Syrian refugees (Hourani and Van Vliet, 2014). That, coupled with the decrease in income due to perceived competition from Syrian labor and increased border control on smuggled goods, created tension between host communities and Syrian refugees. The situation is similarly difficult in the impoverished Beqaa valley, host to the highest concentration of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. For example, the Syrian population in Arsal outnumbered the Lebanese one by 5,000 in 2013 (UNHCR, 2013). Staying in Arsal and other villages in the Beqaa valley poses a threat to the Syrian population due to these areas' proximity to the Syrian borders and the threat of sectarian conflicts and security tension in the area. Similarly to the North, this precarious situation is accompanied by an increase in household spending and a 60% drop in wages due to Syrian labor competition (Hourani and Van Vliet, 2014, p.5). In fact, 54% of informal Syrian business are located in the Beqaa area which simultaneously threatens already impoverished host communities and turns Syrian refugees into targets for eviction and hostility (p.6).

Turner (2015) highlights that this labor supply competition is not merely a result of Lebanon's open border policy towards the Syrian crisis but in fact economically strategic. As such, Lebanon's commitment to non-encampment becomes intended to serve the state's interest when it comes to cheap informal labor. Reports show that 92% of Syrian working men and women have no formal work contract (ILO, 2014, p.29). A large migrant worker population operating in a deregulated labor market indicates that business owners benefit from countless Syrian refugees willing to work informally for cheap long hours, in turn compete with already impoverished Lebanese workers.

In October 2014, and for the first time since the beginning of the crisis, Lebanon's Council of Ministers adopted a policy which focused on decreasing the number of Syrians in Lebanon and encouraging their return to Syria (Janmyr, 2016, p.4). What followed was multiple restrictions imposed on Syrian refugees such as curfews, frequent renewal of residency permit, and the need for work permits. However, these constraints, supposedly also intended to regulate the labor market, have been arbitrary in their targeting since they do not necessarily interfere with the ability to work, especially not informally. Stel (2020) argues that this strategy of informal formality and no-policy policy is part of Lebanon's wider ambiguous attitude and action towards Syrian refugees. This includes not recognizing them as "refugees" but as "displaced persons", not establishing formal refugee camps but allowing for temporary and informal tented settlements to be set up, and not allowing Syrian refugees to have representation to limit attempts of mobilization, organization, and negotiation with the Lebanese state. As a result, an institutional ambiguity is strategically cast not only over the work of the Lebanese state but also humanitarian agencies attempting to help, creating a large-scale marginalization of this refugee population (Stel, 2020).

In 2018, and as tensions with host communities increased, Lebanese Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil ordered a freeze on residency permits for UNHCR staff on the basis that the agency is hindering these refugees' return to Syria. As such, Lebanon's rhetoric towards Syrian refugees became overtime split between some politicians taking advantage of the increasing Syrian resettlement to receive international funding from the international community. On the other hand, other politicians were advocating for the return of refugees to Syria to appease the rising tensions with host communities and as an excuse to defend Lebanon's sectarian demographic balance (Geha and Talhouk, 2018). In general, as a host country, the Lebanese state's dispo-

sition towards Syrian refugees has been one of securitization through speech act as strategy. In other words, the discourse of the political elite and its media painted Syrian refugees as an existential threat jeopardizing the economy, security, and sectarian demographic balance of Lebanon (Estriani, 2019). As a result, Syrian refugees suffered precarious lives as repatriation efforts were conducted, albeit UNHCR's claims that they were not done based on voluntary principles, safety, and dignity. This is especially the case when considering that repatriation necessitates that the return to Syria be safe and that people's homes and livelihood possibilities be present, which is not the case for a big number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

## **2. RETURNING TO SYRIA: THE COMPLEX REALITY OF REPATRIATION**

In late 2016, Lebanon established a Ministry for Refugee Affairs to develop the proper strategies, frameworks, and coordination to handle the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. Since then, many refugees have returned to Syria, with some prosecuted upon their arrival, many have ventured on dangerous trips to leave Lebanon, and others who have stayed in Lebanon to continue the struggle with discrimination and arbitrary targeting by local authorities. Repatriation of Syrian refugees is a policy and practice issue made complicated by multiple factors. This includes Lebanon's fragmented governance, using the refugee crisis as leverage, and the multiplicity of actors and frameworks involved in the return process.

Before considering factors affecting repatriation governance, it should be noted that many Syrians themselves are hesitant to go back. First, although other options such as integration into host countries and resettlement to a third country are viable, most host countries of Syrian refugees are pushing for return. Moreover, although returns are occurring and the war in Syria is reported by the media and official discourse as coming to an end,

the situation is still far from repatriation being voluntary, safe, and dignified (Içduygu and Nimer, 2020).

The different Syrian regions from which refugees fled differ greatly in safety and stability. While some are under the control of foreign armies and militias, others are under the Assad's Ba'ath regime which is a threat for most of the opposition activists. This places them at a high risk of detention and prosecution upon return, in addition to the Syrian crisis concluding for the continued reign of the Assad regime. Indeed, many cases of such treatment upon return have already been documented. For example, between January 2019 and October 2020, 237 returning refugees were arrested by the government including 176 who have become forcibly disappeared (Human Rights Watch, 2018; 2019; Medina, 2020). Second, the Syrian regime has adopted policies that discourage and obstruct the return of many refugees. This includes maintaining the mandatory conscription law dictating that all males aged between 18 and 42 join the Syrian army and implementing massive property seizures primarily targeting areas formerly held by rebels (Geha and Talhouk, 2018). These factors majorly discourage Syrian refugees to return to Syria whether from Lebanon or other refugee hosting countries.

While the responsibility of repatriation does not fall solely on the host country, Lebanon's fragmented and informal governance and its use for refugees as leverage politicizes refugee return (Fakhoury, 2020). Although a ministry has been established, governance in Lebanon is less institutionally focused and more fragmented through communal leaders serving as informal providers of security, welfare, and patronage. As a result, the country's refugee politics becomes the outcome of a fluid interplay between layers of governance (Fakhoury, 2020). Amidst this institutional fragmentation, Lebanese politicians have been using the Syrian refugee crisis for their geostrategic leverage in relation to the Syrian regime. Largely influenced by Lebanon's political history with Syria and Palestinian refugees, these actors were polarized. On one hand, March 14 parties, op-

posing the Assad regime, refused normalizing ties with this regime which is necessary when coordinating with the country of origin for repatriation. On the other hand, March 8 parties being the dominant ruling front in the government currently, supporting the regime, demanded that return takes place. Although one of this latter's actors, Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, expressed that return should be gradual for those willing to return, two days later the Lebanese army threatened to destroy the homes of almost 25,000 refugees near Arsal for violation of government regulations forbidding Syrians from erecting concrete structures (Crisp, 2019). While it explains why different actors have different interests in governing return, this dispersion of power in the host country increases the vulnerability of refugees and forces many into an unsafe and unsustainable return.

Another factor complicating repatriation is the multiplicity of actors and return frameworks. This dilutes decision-making and complicates sustainable solutions with international organizations such as UNHCR whose presence in the repatriation process is essential. Geha and Talhouk (2018) point out that at least three different proposals exist on refugee return to Syria from Lebanon. Although governing return with a guarantee for refugee rights necessitates coordination between host country, UNHCR, and country of origin, these frameworks come from formal and informal actors with overlapping jurisdictions. This includes the Lebanese government and General Security, UNHCR, Hezbollah, and Russia. As a result, confusion surrounds which procedures refugees would follow to secure a safe return or asylum status (Geha and Talhouk, 2018). So far, the main return initiative has been to create 'safe zones' through military intervention as areas of ceasefire between Syrian government forces and armed rebels in western and southern Syria. While these areas may offer minimal security, they are not a sustainable solution for living or evading political prosecution, nor do they reflect a voluntary and safe repatriation. They merely reflect a transition of refugees from this status to

that of internally displaced, as Syrians indicate themselves their desires to only return to their original homes (Içduygu and Nimer, 2020).

The multiplicity of frameworks, the politicization of return, and Lebanon's fragmented governance complicates coordination with international organizations attempting to coordinate return. Içduygu and Nimer (2020) highlight that, as a result, return will take place at the discretion of the host state's own governance dynamics, jeopardizing refugee rights. However, most and foremost, return must occur after the refugee community is convinced of the viability of return.

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*2. Syrian refugees are in majority Sunnis. As such they are perceived by Christians as an "existential" threat, a security threat to Shiites, and an economic one to underprivileged Sunnis living where Syrians have taken residence in masses (Geha and Talhouk, 2018).*

### **3. LEBANON: REVERBERATIONS OF THE FINANCIAL COLLAPSE AND POLITICAL INSTABILITY SINCE 2019**

In 2019, a financial crisis was beginning to show in Lebanon (ESCWA, 2020; MEI, 2019). In September of that year, the exchange rate of LBP to USD, pegged in place since 1997 at LBP 1,507 to \$1, started to slowly increase as banks faced a shortage of dollars. As a result of the looming financial crisis, nation-wide protests broke out in October 2019 declaring the start of an uprising. In the months that followed the October Uprising, the crisis of the banking sector became clearer with the currency quickly devaluating and the deposits in foreign currency (USD) becoming inaccessible to depositors. Similarly, the political instability became substantial as the economic situation reached its worst since the end of the Lebanese civil war.

Throughout this economic crisis, social tensions between host communities and refugees increased significantly with 73% of Syrian refugees living below the poverty line and 55% living in extreme poverty (UNHCR, 2019a, p.1). Unemployment rates had increased along with the prices of food, healthcare, transportation, communication, rent, and education. Competition between Lebanese and refu-

gees for basic resources and work opportunities had been exacerbated as both populations became more vulnerable (UNHCR, 2019a).

As 2020 came, lockdown measures implemented to prevent the spread of COVID-19 reflected a drop in GDP and aggregate demand. As a result, and considering the existing economic crisis, consumer prices rose to 112.4% in July 2020 (Akleh, 2020) and rising inflation resulted in 55% headcount poverty rate (ESCWA, 2020, p. 2). The lockdown also led to further depreciation in the currency exchange rate with the purchasing power of the Lebanese Lira losing around 80% of its value. In this context of economic hardship and financial collapse, the August 4, 2020 Beirut Port explosion left considerable areas of the capital Beirut in devastation, destroying Lebanon's key shipping and trading location along with many neighboring residential, industrial, and business areas. The resulting damage in lives and property directly impacted around 300,000 individuals living just within three kilometers of the explosion center (UNHCR, 2020b). Many, Lebanese and refugees, were displaced and left without food and shelter. Meanwhile, inflation continued to increase as politicians failed to form a government to mitigate the economic crisis, and authorities were unable to monitor and contain the disproportionate increase to prices (Akleh, 2020).

At this point, the situation had drastically worsened for refugees living in Lebanon. Many reported difficulties complying with imposed mobility restrictions in order to seek any form of income to feed their families, including low quality and exploitative work conditions (UNHCR, 2020c). Syrian refugees came to Lebanon to escape war and prosecution in their country. However, as shown by Alrababa'h, Casalis & Masterson (2020), the return to Syria is not an option for many of the refugees residing in Lebanon. With their lives and livelihoods becoming dangerously precarious in Lebanon, many Syrian refugees are considering leaving by way of life-threatening trips through the Mediterranean Sea, or are hoping for North through the UNHCR.

This study will further explore how refugees are living and reflecting on the crisis in Lebanon, and what options do they see or wish for themselves in these dire times.

#### **4. THE EFFECTS OF COVID-19 ON SYRIAN REFUGEES**

In 2020, Syrian refugees in Lebanon were experiencing a compound of crises. As the pandemic hit, the Lebanese government implemented many measures to combat its spread including lockdowns and curfews. On one hand, it adopted a strategy which assumes that individuals will be comfortable enough to contact the ministry of health, afford to travel, and share information and documentation about themselves (Hardman and Majzoub, 2020). On the other hand, many municipalities were implementing discriminatory COVID-19 restrictions particularly targeting Syrian refugees, based on the assumption that they carry the virus (Duclos and Palmer, 2020, p.9). These factors have affected refugees' lives on multiple levels such as social tension, safety, livelihood, and health.

First, relations between Syrian refugees and host communities have reportedly become more tense as anti-refugee rhetoric in the media continued (Hardman and Majzoub, 2020). More than 21 municipalities introduced restrictions targeting Syrian refugees such as limiting access to villages and towns, imposing financial penalties for not wearing masks, confiscation of vehicles and even of documents (DRC, 2020; Durable Solutions Platform et al, 2020; Human Rights Watch, 2020b). In fact, 64% of respondents to a phone interview reported discrimination in access to services, resources, and opportunities, including harassment, arbitrary arrests, and land or house evictions (SEED and PIN-SK, 2020). All the while, collective evictions and deportations continue, particularly for those who have entered the country illegally after 24 April 2019 (InterAgency Coordination, 2020). Naturally, all of this affects access to basic services like food, clean water, COVID-19 protection material, information on the pandemic, and healthcare services.

In addition to mobility restrictions outside camps, tensions at the household level in informal tented settlements have been increasing, as reported by refugees themselves (SEED and PIN-SK, 2020). A 12% increase in intimate partner violence and a 29% increase in violence towards children were reported (SEED and PIN-SK, 2020). Other forms of safety such as food safety and water have become a major concern. Reports indicate that to compensate for the drop in purchasing power and the rising inflation, Syrian refugees are reducing their food purchases and changing the quality of their food consumption. This is considering that food and cash assistance are no longer available, with some even buying bread on credit (Trovato, 2020; UNHCR staff, 2020). Moreover, with COVID-19 measures such as routinely washing hands, previously used water sources such as delivery by truck have become less affordable, placing refugees' lives at risk (Ghanem et al., 2017; Trovato, 2020).

Third, lockdown measures indicate that many already vulnerable refugees lost their sources of livelihoods. In addition to the existing governmental restrictions on labor and refugees status, to limit the spread of COVID-19, General Security halted the processing of residency and work permit applications (Durable Solutions Platform et al., 2020). In addition, reports indicate that 74% of Syrian refugees have lost income (SI, 2020, as cited in Trovato, 2020), while the number of refugees reporting 'not to have any household member currently working' was recorded at 70% between March and May 2020 (Duclos and Palmer, 2020, p.11). Moreover, as mentioned earlier, a main source of loans and support for Syrian refugees was friends and social networks. However, as the pandemic hit, much of this social capital was lost due to social distancing. As a result, networks previously in place to reduce the cost of rent, to look after each other's children to allow parents to work, and to help with basic needs such as food were disrupted (Uzelac et al., 2018; Trovato, 2020; Saleh and Al-Jawahiry, 2020).

Finally, the biggest roadblock put forth by COVID-19 is Syrian refugees' inability to mitigate its effects on their health. As a refugee community, international organizations play a major role in this mitigation; however, their response in regard to Syrian refugees has been reportedly not enough (Human Rights Watch, 2020b; Saleh and Bassam, 2020; Hardman and Majzoub, 2020). This response included awareness campaigns and minimal distribution of hygiene materials. Nonetheless, Oxfam (as mentioned in Human Rights Watch, 2020b) reports that "knowledge and awareness in refugee communities in both Beqaa and Tripoli on the virus, how it spreads and what are the preventive measures that should be taken, seemed minimal". Similar results were also reported concerning the lack of information communication from the Lebanese government (Human Rights Watch, 2020b). Moreover, UNHCR's main response has been subsidizing basic medical care, with testing and treatment of COVID-19 being free at Rafic Hariri University Hospital in Beirut. However, this is only after individuals contact the Health Ministry hotline and receive a subsequent screening and authorization (Human Rights Watch, 2020b). This procedure raises refugees' fear of deportation for not having legal documents, or stigmatization for living in unhygienic ITs, while most refugees are even unaware of the existence of the hotline. As a result, those experiencing symptoms would be hesitant to seek medical care. In parallel, the main barriers to accessing healthcare were reported as financial including medical care (50%), transportation fees (48%) (NRC, 2020), and the inability to afford hygiene items such as detergents, bleach, masks, and gloves (LPC et al., 2020). Finally, social distancing to avoid the virus has been difficult to practice effectively. A report by Lebanon Protection Consortium (LPC) et al. (2020) indicates that Syrian refugees are practicing social distancing by trying to avoid close contact with strangers, minimizing gatherings and crowds, and decreasing the number of movements outside and between ITs. However, most Syrian refugees live in overcrowded tents and often

share rooms with other families, so these measures are not possible for a considerable number of refugees.

The effects of the Coronavirus are felt globally, but it is Lebanon's compounded crises which increase the vulnerability of Syrian refugees drastically. The heightened deterioration of the economic situation, along with the dramatic increase in the exchange rate, had devalued both their labor and purchasing ability. Then, the Beirut explosion had left many households, Lebanese and Syrian, in distraught while also jeopardizing the country's food safety through diminishing imports and increased political instability. All of these reasons push vulnerable communities to consider leaving Lebanon.

## **5. SYRIAN REFUGEE MIGRATION PRIORITIES AND POSSIBILITIES**

Deciding to leave an area after conflict or severity depends on a combination of factors such as age, sex, religion, ethnicity, familial status, or tolerance to stress (Hébert and Harati, 2018). Choosing a migration destination is done based on a comparison of preferences concerning the options available. For example, wealthier migrants might consider safer and more comfortable means of transportation and longer paths or ranges, as they are accessible to them (Adhikari, 2012). For the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the options are to either go back to Syria despite the high risks, or stay in Lebanon despite the deepening financial, social and political crisis, or leave to somewhere new despite the difficulties of such a plan materializing.

Considering these options, many Syrian refugees – as well as other vulnerable communities in Lebanon – have been venturing on life-threatening, and costly trips across the Mediterranean to reach Cyprus and lodge an asylum claim. Between July and September 2020, at least 21 sea-crossings were attempted from Lebanon to Cyprus (UNHCR, 2020a), along with 17 attempts

in 2019 (UNHCR, 2019a, p.4). Many of those embarking on sea-crossings die at sea or never reach Cyprus. Forced to come back to the destination from which they escaped, many report they would do it again as the situation in Lebanon has become unlivable (Save The Children, 2020). After enduring an arduous trip with no food or water, migrants report that the trip was made much more difficult and life-threatening by Cypriot coast-guard vessels circling them at high speeds, swamping their boats, attempting to capsize them, abandoning them at sea without fuel and food, and even capturing them and beating them (Human Rights Watch, 2020a). After encountering the coastguards, some individuals were asked to leave the boat to take a COVID-19 test and were instead placed on another boat to go back even after protesting in refusal. Others were taken to the overcrowded Pournara Camp to stay in unhygienic conditions with no COVID-19 considerations. Most importantly, many were not given the opportunity to lodge an asylum claim, or they were not allowed to refute their claim refusal or speak to a UNHCR lawyer or seek legal assistance (Human Rights Watch, 2020a). This is due to refugee facilities and Cypriot efforts reaching capacity which led to recent amendments to Cyprus' refugee law to manage migration flows. These amendments include, first, giving the head of the asylum service the power to return, remove, or deport a migrant in a single administrative action at the same time of issuing a rejection to an asylum application. Second, the period of time an asylum seeker can appeal the rejection of their application has been shortened from 75 to 15 days, drastically limiting efforts to appeal (Andreou, 2020). As a result, in the first week of September 2020 alone, more than 200 refugees, migrants, and asylum seekers were summarily pushed back, abandoned, expelled or returned to Lebanon by Cypriot coast guards (Human Rights Watch, 2020a).

Valenta et al. (2020) argue that the dynamics of the Syrian migration including secondary migration are shaped

by the interaction between migration policies and the context of refugee reception, on one hand, and the refugees' responses to these structures on the other hand. Moreover, the change in host states' reception policies into repatriation ones, as is happening in Lebanon, in combination with refugees' reaction to this change may result in new forms of mobility, such as sea-crossings to Cyprus. They explain that previous experiences such as Bosnia and Herzegovina, Sri Lanka, Croatia, Afghanistan, and Sudan highlight how mobility is a key survival strategy in post-conflict contexts. Accepting this migration pattern by host and reception states and embracing it into their policies would be beneficial both for them and for refugees (Mandic and Simpson, 2017). Ultimately, this would reduce infringement of asylum seekers' rights, reduce rates of injury and risk to migrants' lives, and empower governments to implement migration policies more efficiently.

This study will focus on the case of Syrian refugees aspirations for a second migration from Lebanon following the drastic deterioration in their living conditions in Lebanon in 2020. The below sections will explain the methodology adopted for this study and will highlight the main findings from the research that was conducted in the Beqaa and Akkar region between October and December 2020.

### III. METHODOLOGY

The research design adopted for this research consisted of mixed methods whereby data collection relied on an administered survey in the Beqaa and Akkar regions, in addition to in-depth interviews. Special focus was given to exploring the context under which refugees in informal tented settlements in Lebanon are experiencing the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the reverberations of the financial collapse and political instability in the country, and how this affects their wishes and aspirations to stay or migrate from Lebanon. Therefore, the research design focused on studying the characteristics and factors that shape Syrian refugee migration aspirations. It also explored the migration aspirations in terms of destination, priorities and modes of travel.

The survey collected data for a sample of 600 participants. The sample included Syrian refugees residing in the Beqaa and the Akkar regions, and it included refugees who reside in informal tented settlements or other residential units. The survey adopted a stratified sample equally distributed between the regions of Akkar and the Beqaa (300 participants in each region). Similarly, the sample had 48% of female respondents and 52% of males. Results from Table 1 show that the majority of participants were between the age of 26 and 35 (38%). Moreover, Table 2 shows that the majority of the participants are married (72%). Of those, 77% have children and 86% have young children aged between 3 and 18 years old. Similarly, the majority of the participants in the survey moved to Lebanon in the first three years following the Syrian war, with 66% reporting having relocated to Lebanon between the years 2012 and 2014.

Table 1. Sample Distribution by Age Category (% , n=600)

AGE CATEGORIES	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
16-25	22	29	26
26-35	37	39	38
36-45	19	17	18
46-55	14	10	12
56-64	5	4	4
65 and above	3	1	2
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table 2. Sample Distribution by Marital Status (% , n=600)

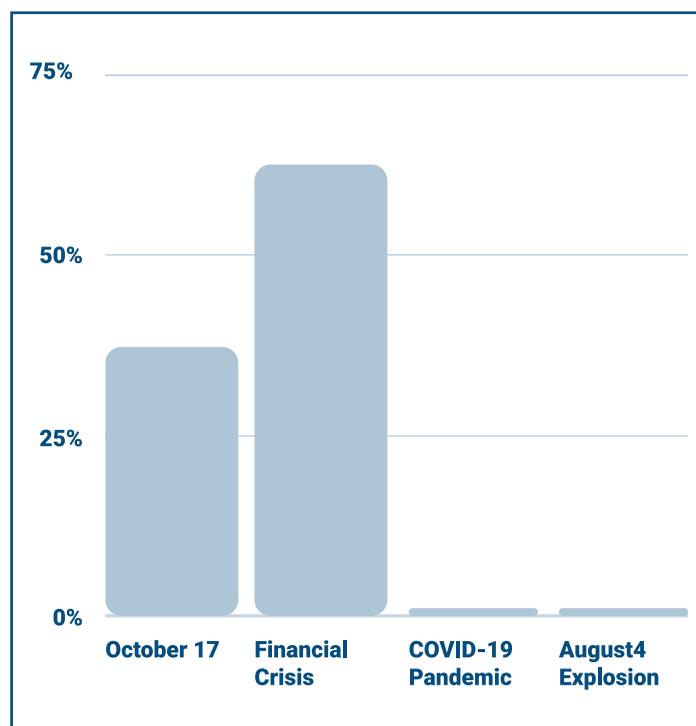
MARTIAL STATUS	MALE	FEMALE	TOTAL
Single	23	13	18
Married	76	68	72
Widow	0	15	8
Divorced/Separated	1	4	2
<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>	<b>100%</b>

In addition to the survey data, 18 in-depth interviews were conducted with refugees from both regions in order to better understand the experiences and processes shaping the aspirations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The survey and the in-depth interviews were facilitated through the help of Sawa for Aid and Development in the Beqaa, and Mishwar organization in Akkar. Fieldwork was conducted between October and December 2020.

#### IV. SYRIAN REFUGEES' ASPIRATIONS TO MIGRATE FROM LEBANON

The majority of the refugees included in this study expressed an aspiration for a second migration. This will to leave Lebanon seems to have increased considerably in the last year, given the deteriorating living conditions in the country. Survey results indicate that 88% of participants are considering leaving Lebanon. When asked if their decision to leave Lebanon changed recently, 69% said yes. Figure 1 shows that the majority of participants changed their decision due to the financial collapse (62%), while others changed their decision after the October 17 revolution (37%), the August 4 explosion and the corona crisis (1%).

**Figure 1. Events that Influenced Participants' Decision to Migrate**

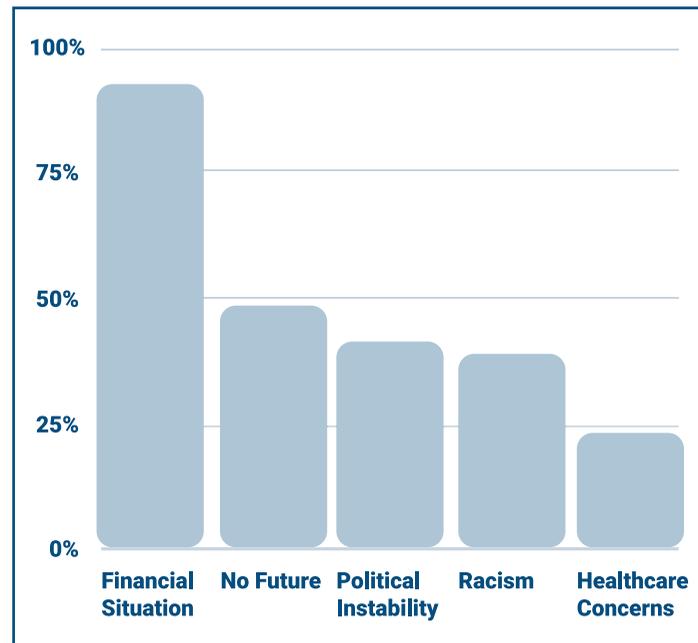


The reasons for this surge in aspiration to leave Lebanon are multifaceted. Figure 2 shows that the majority (93%) cited difficult financial conditions as the main reason for wanting to leave Lebanon, while many interviewees also mentioned the lack of future for their children (49%), political instability and fear of violence (42%), racism (39%) and health care concerns (23%). When divided by region, people interviewed in Akkar mentioned mainly the difficult financial situation (93%), and no future for kids (65%) as the reason for wanting to leave; while in the Beqaa, 93% mentioned the difficult financial situation, 55% referred to racism, 53% talked of the fear of political instability, and 37% mentioned no future for their kids as being behind their willingness to leave Lebanon.

These results were further substantiated through the in-depth interviews where most of the participants spoke of the impossibility of life in Lebanon with the increased financial difficulties this year due to the financial collapse and the loss of income and jobs for many. It was also clear that the majority of the interviewed parents worried about the future of their kids, especially that schools are inaccessible or not officially recognized for the wide majority of students. Many interviewees explained that while the UNHCR provides free schooling, it does not cover the transportation cost which is unaffordable to most parents, especially those who have several kids at school. Similarly, several parents expressed concerns regarding the fact that most schools available for Syrian refugees are not officially recognized by the state and their degrees do not give access to higher education and jobs. In addition, mentions of fear of political deterioration and of difficult experiences with racism and discrimination were also often heard during interviews. One interviewee in the Beqaa talked of how his young son would get bullied by neighbors in the building where they live simply because they are Syrian. He said that his son often asks him what it means to be Syrian and why he gets mocked for it. These experiences of

racism lived by young children, as well as their parents and relatives, have negatively shaped the lives of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Moreover, interviewees mentioned access to healthcare as a main drive for wanting to relocate to a country where sick family members can get the healthcare treatments they need. This was specifically a concern for those who have disabled family members or someone with a chronic disease.

**Figure 2. Refugees' Stated Reasons for Wanting to Leave Lebanon**



There was no significant difference in gender distribution across regions when it comes to desire to leave, both men and women are considering leaving almost equally. However, in-depth interviews suggest that most women will not leave alone, even if given a chance through the UNHCR. They would rather go with their families or send their children alone if they get the opportunity. For example, a widowed woman in the Beqaa indicated that her father and brother would not allow her and her similarly widowed sister to relocate alone

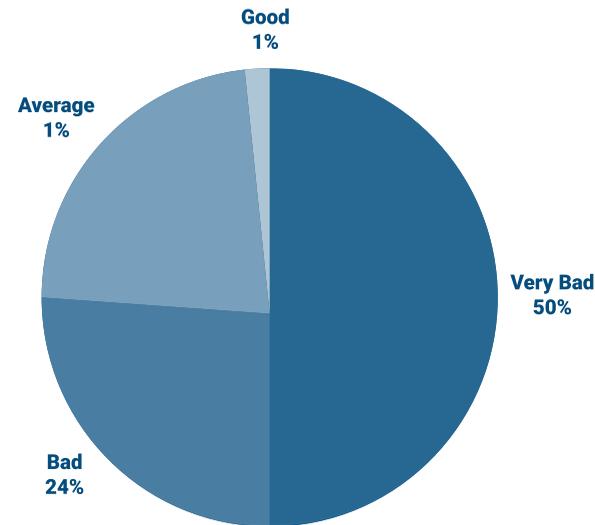
as women with their children to a country where they don't know anyone. Similarly, a divorced woman, who lives alone in one of the Akkar camps, claimed that she would not leave Lebanon alone with her children due to the fear of the unknown. Many have expressed the language barrier as a main concern, and the cultural differences as a factor that makes them prefer to stay in Lebanon rather than travel alone without their families. In the following sections, we will discuss the experience of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and how it has impacted their aspirations to migrate.

### **1. SYRIAN REFUGEES' ALREADY DIFFICULT EXPERIENCE IN LEBANON**

Numerous studies have documented the difficulties that Syrian refugees face in Lebanon, even before the start of the financial collapse in 2019 and its deepening in 2020 following the pandemic and the Beirut port explosion. This generally difficult experience in Lebanon was also reflected in our study when most participants in the survey reported that their experience in Lebanon so far has been generally negative. As per Figure 3, when asked to rate their general experience on a scale ranging from "very bad" to "very good", 50% answered "very bad", while 24% answered "bad". A quarter of the sample reported that their experience in Lebanon so far has been "acceptable", while only 1% of the sample said that their experience in Lebanon so far has been "good". These generally negative experience were also expressed during the in-depth interviews where many of the participants said that their trip out of Syria and their experience in Lebanon was extremely difficult. Several interviewees said that they would have never imagined that they would leave their houses and businesses in Syria to end up living in a tent and in such dire conditions. Here again, stories of financial difficulties, unemployment or exploitation of informal labor, loss of property and family in Syria, inability to provide education to their children, racism and discriminatory experiences in Lebanon, and difficult access to healthcare were heard

repeatedly. These difficult experiences shaped the lives of many of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon so far.

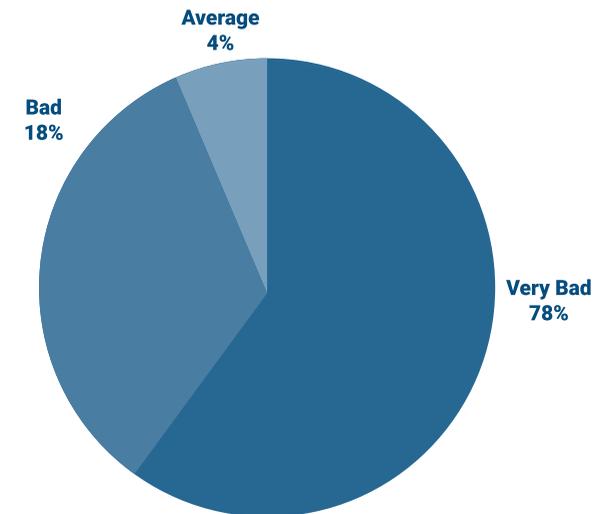
**Figure 3. Refugees' Evaluation of their Experience in Lebanon**



However, despite their already difficult living conditions in Lebanon, Syrian refugees have been hit hard by the financial crisis that started in 2019. When asked how they view the economic situation in Lebanon in 2020 in comparison to previous years (Figure 4), 78% of participants reported that it was very bad, while 18% said that it was bad, and only 4% reporting it as 'average'. A mother of three in the Beqaa relayed that the situation has been very hard this year both for Lebanese and Syrians alike. She explained that everyone has had a rough time so even those who could previously help them are now finding it hard to feed their own families. Similarly, a single young man living in Beqaa reported that he used to save up what little he could to send it back to his parents in Syria. He couldn't do that this year as he struggled to cover even his food expenses.

These experiences of increased financial difficulties in 2020 mirror those of many other Syrian refugees who are now staying in Lebanon for lack of other options, hoping to leave whenever possible. Several factors come into play to shape this situation including Lebanon's financial and political conditions.

**Figure 4. Refugees' Evaluation of the Economic Situation in Lebanon in 2020 in Comparison to Previous Years**



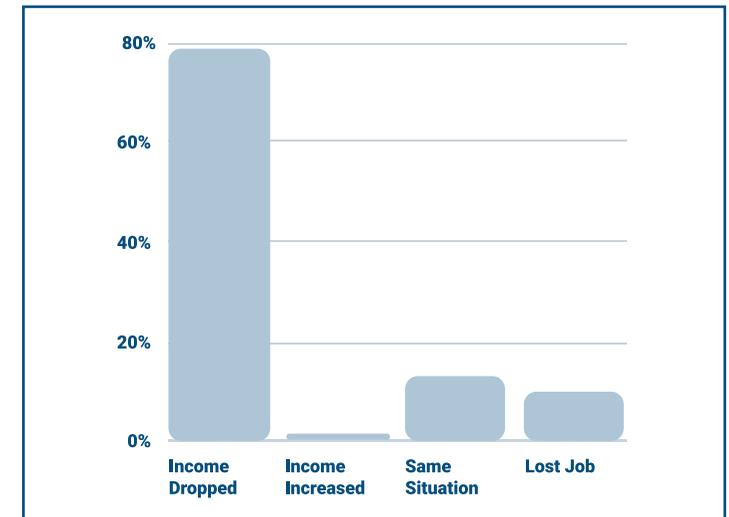
**a. Financial situation**

Survey results indicated an average household size of 6.3 individuals. 59% of the participants are financially responsible for someone other than themselves. On average, individuals are responsible for 5 to 6 people. Some of the interviewees lived in households made up of small nuclear families; however, many households contained multiple families living together such as relatives and siblings, each with their families. Of those who stated that they are financially responsible for other individuals, 77% reported that they're providing for children, 70% for their partner, 32% for their parents and 10% for extended family members.

In addition to relatively large household sizes and considerable financial dependency, unemployment shaped the financial experiences of most households. The survey results show that 62% of participants reported that they are unemployed. The majority of participants who expressed their desire to leave also happen to be unemployed. Most interviewed participants reported the absence of work opportunities, particularly in the last year, as a main reason for wanting to leave. Many also reported that when they found work, they were taken advantage of and not compensated for it. One excuse that was given for lack of compensation by an employer was lack of liquidity from the banks. However, stories of exploitation by employers who either do not pay the agreed upon fees or do not pay at all were repeatedly mentioned in the interviews.

Of those who are employed, 68% reported not having a stable income. The average monthly income of the participants is low. Survey results show that the average monthly income of interviewed people is around 364,000 LBP. The largest share of participants are daily workers and agricultural sector workers. They used the umbrella term of 'laborer' to refer to a variety of occupations such as agriculture, construction and any other type of blue collar labor that is available to them. Since many of the participants rely on unstable daily jobs (depending on availability of work, which has become difficult in the past year due to the overlapping crises), many have found themselves without an income, living day to day without a guarantee of being able to provide for themselves and their families. Given the difficulty of the financial situation faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the prospect of a stable financial situation and job opportunities abroad is serving as an incentive for them to consider leaving Lebanon.

**Figure 5. Refugees' Income in 2020 Compared to Previous Years**



Although most interviewees claimed that their situation has always been difficult, they explained that the past year in particular was worse for them (Figure 5). They cited the economic crisis and the COVID-19 pandemic as the main factors that contributed to the deterioration of their living conditions, with employment becoming almost impossible after COVID, while the devaluation of the currency meant that even those who received cash aid from the UNHCR (400,000 LBP per month) were no longer able to cover their basic needs.

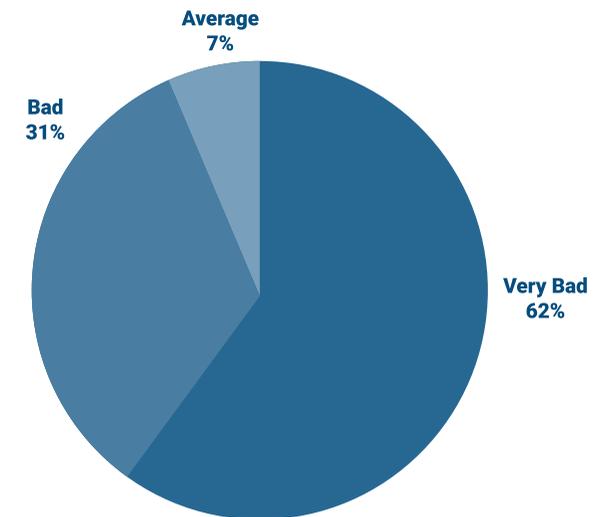
Interviewees expressed how difficult it has been to secure jobs and maintain financial stability in the past year. In an interview with a divorced middle-aged woman in one of the camps in Akkar, she explained:

***I used to work as a cleaner in a couple of houses around town and make enough money to pay for my tent and buy some groceries, but since COVID-19 hit Lebanon, my employers have not reached out to me because they are scared of the spread of the virus in addition to their deteriorating financial situation due to the economic crisis in Lebanon.***

In addition to the loss of job opportunities and the deterioration of the purchasing power of the Lebanese currency, new cuts introduced by the UNHCR in December 2020 were mentioned as having catastrophic repercussions on refugees in Lebanon. A woman in Akkar, who has 3 young children and a husband with a physical disability, said that their main source of income is the UNHCR cash aid as her husband is disabled and she has to stay at home and take care of her children. When possible, her husband takes on jobs that require little effort and usually do not pay a large sum. Her eldest son (14 years old) worked for a while as a street vendor, but he was harassed by some customers and she has since stopped him from working. Her family was informed of the UNHCR's decision to stop their monthly cash aid of 400,000 LBP while we were interviewing her. The family was devastated by this news, with the crying mother saying "We only have God by our side". For this family, the cutting of the UNHCR cash support means that they are left with no source of income to cover their rent, necessary clothing, baby diapers, medication or even food. It might also push the family to send its young children to work despite dangerous and unacceptable conditions. This recent decision to stop cash assistance by the UNHCR for many families in December 2020 will have severe implications on many refugee families.

In such a context of overlapping catastrophic conditions, we were interested in knowing what Syrian refugees are projecting for the future and how their financial expectations are shaping their aspirations to stay in Lebanon or leave.

**Figure 6. Refugees' Expectations for Future Economic Situation in Lebanon**



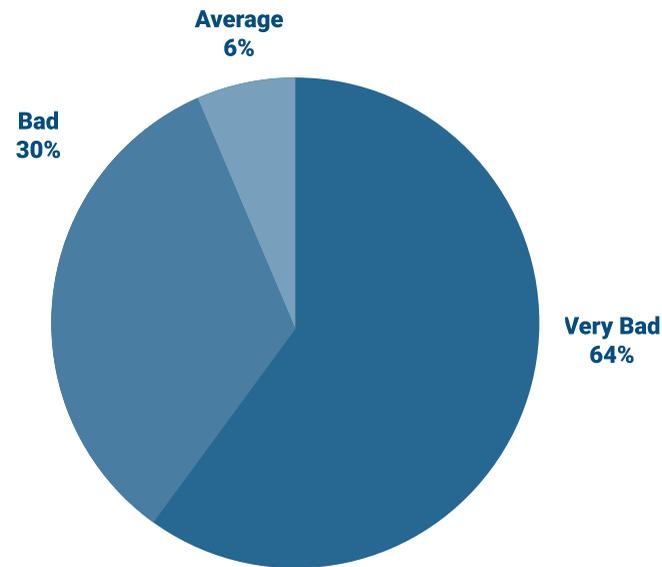
When asked how they predict the economic situation to be in the coming years (Figure 6), 62% of participants claimed it would remain "very bad", 31% said it will be "bad", while a minority of 7% said it will become "acceptable". Considering these predictions along with the findings from our fieldwork, it was made clear by the participants that the possibility of migrating to a new country seems to be the only viable solution that may alleviate some of their financial burdens and improve their economic situation. However, most participants in this study explained that while leaving Lebanon to a more stable country is their wish, they are aware of the difficulty of this happening since the UNHCR is not relocating as frequently as it used to be, and they do not have the financial means to leave, even through risky and illegal routes.

#### **b. Political situation**

Similarly, while the economic situation was quickly deteriorating, the political situation also witnessed a considerable decline. When asked how they view the

political situation in Lebanon in comparison to previous years (Figure 7), the majority of participants also answered, “very bad” (64%) or “bad” (30%). Undoubtedly, the lack of political stability in Lebanon further complicates the situation for Syrian refugees. This translates into rising tensions with surrounding communities, increased number of police checkpoints limiting their mobility, heightened fear of detention if one’s papers aren’t in order, and increased racism affecting livelihood and employment.

**Figure 7. Refugees’ Evaluation of the Political Situation in Lebanon in 2020 in Comparison to Previous Years**

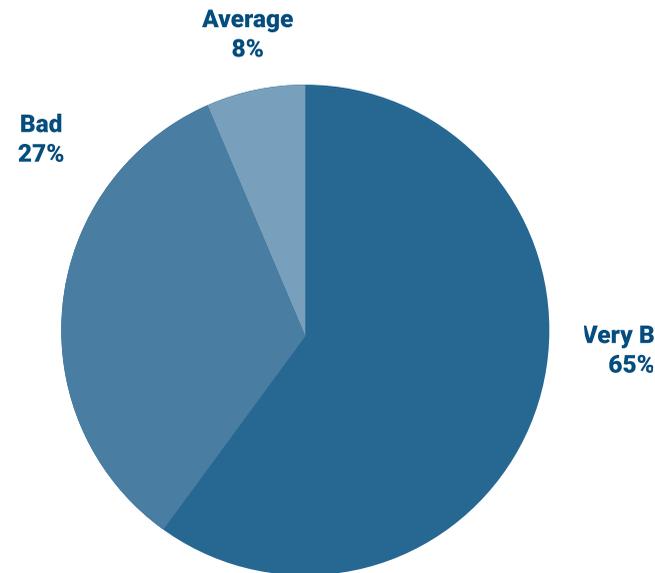


In one of the interviews, a young man in the Beqaa pleaded UNHCR to give him priority to leave. He explained that as a single young man he faces more danger than older men or families. He said that it is more likely for him to get into a fight with other Lebanese young men from the community and to get exploited or harassed at work. He expressed a deep wish to leave – even if

through dangerous routes such as the sea – in order to have a chance for a brighter future. He explained that he does not have the financial means to pay smugglers who offer illegal trips to Europe, and he also knows that he will not be relocated by the UNHCR since single young men do not have a priority. Therefore, he said that he feels trapped in Lebanon – unable to go back to Syria for security reasons and unable to leave Lebanon for financial reasons.

In light of these negative experiences and reported deterioration in the political situation in 2020, we were interested to see how refugees are expecting the political situation to unfold in the near future in order to better understand their plans to stay or relocate from Lebanon. When asked how they predict the political situation is going to be in the future (Figure 5), 65% of participants also answered that the situation would stay “very bad”. In addition to their assessment of the current situation, their expectations of what’s to come similarly shape Syrian refugees’ aspirations for migration.

**Figure 8. Refugees' Expectations for Future Political Situation in Lebanon**



Two main factors were revealed to come into play in both assessment and expectations for the political situation in Lebanon: racism and mobility.

#### **i. Racism**

An experience relayed by many interviewees is that of racism. This affected different aspects of their lives such as seeking work and tensions with surrounding host communities. Several participants reported that they felt discriminated against when it comes to jobs and education. They expressed their desire to be “treated as humans”, rather than being othered as Syrians, which has driven many of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon to consider migrating abroad.

An interviewee in the Beqaa expressed a desire to highlight his experience. He said:

*This year the economic situation is difficult for everyone (Syrians and Lebanese) but as a Syrian I have been experiencing oppression long before this year, a lot of racism. Before, my wife would work 6 hours and get paid LBP 6,000 but her wage only increased by LBP 1,000 this year. What help can this increase offer? If I work in someone’s land and get paid LBP 15,000, he will sell me a bag of potatoes for LBP 3,000 and say it’s priced based on the dollar but when I ask him to pay me based on the same dollar rate, he refuses while Lebanese workers are already receiving a raise in their wages. There’s too much oppression against Syrians. I just want to live as a human.*

A strong common sentiment among interviewees is the desire to leave in order to be treated as humans and for them and their children to feel safe. These feelings are not specific to any country, but they are ones they indicated not experiencing in Lebanon. As previously mentioned, many interviewees expressed that racist treatment is not only affecting adults but also their children. They explained that they would consider leaving Lebanon if it means that their children will grow up somewhere where they are treated fairly and without prejudice.

The Syrian refugee crisis created many tensions in Lebanon and resulted in the violation of many of the basic human rights of refugee populations. Even more so, the past year brought a new set of challenges and intensified previous ones, making it even harder for Syrian refugees in Lebanon to perform basic tasks such as buying groceries or being fairly compensated for their labor. Complications to acquiring such basic human rights tighten the grip on these individuals, pushing them to seek a better life elsewhere.

## ii. Mobility

The fieldwork showed that the UNHCR plays a big role in the livelihood and living conditions of registered Syrian refugees when it comes to mobility. Interviewed men registered with the organization explained that their residency permits have not been renewed, which has led them to fear of getting caught at a police checkpoint without a valid permit and getting imprisoned. A man from Beqaa explained that the UNHCR pushed his application renewal date multiple times until it was pushed to May 2021. He explains that this drastically limits his mobility, and therefore work opportunities, to the areas closeby since he fears running into any police checkpoints and getting taken away due to his invalid permit.

Meanwhile, multiple participants claimed that it was easier for women to be mobile than men, as women are less likely to be stopped and questioned. For example, in one of the interviews conducted in Akkar, a middle-aged man explained that while his wife goes to visit his family that is residing in the Beqaa, he does not dare take that trip for fear of being caught without a legal residency permit. Therefore, the question of restriction on mobility was mentioned by many of the interviewees. As it seemed to form one of the major problems that Syrian refugees, specifically men, face in Lebanon, it also shaped a desire to leave and seek better opportunities elsewhere.

The precarious financial and political situations, including mobility and racism, increasingly hinder Syrian refugees from their livelihood and basic human rights. The quickly deteriorating living conditions in Lebanon seem to only usher more marginalization and suffering with no resolution in sight. These dire conditions are driving refugees day after day to contemplate and seek migration.

## 2. ASPIRATIONS FOR A SECOND MIGRATION OUT OF LEBANON

### a. Aid from UNHCR

The majority of the participants receive financial support (83%), most commonly from UNHCR (91%). At the time of the interviews in Beqaa, the type of support varied from monetary assistance (400,000LBP per month from UNHCR, the equivalent of around \$50 USD at the current currency exchange rate), to food assistance and diesel, with some families receiving only one of these. With the recent cuts in UNHCR's cash assistant, most of the families that have been deprived of this payment will be left with no other income to cover their most basic needs.

Moreover, participants reported not receiving aid in covering medication costs. Several participants have medical conditions themselves or have family members who are ill. Since a lot of these participants have no support except from UNHCR, many report that they are struggling to cover medical costs related to medicine and surgeries. Thus, they would like to leave the country for better healthcare opportunities. In an interview with a middle-aged man who was imprisoned by the Syrian regime until he joined his wife and children in Akkar in 2018, he explained:

***I have shrapnel shards still stuck in my body from the bomb that was thrown in my village in Syria. I need an eye surgery as well as a result of that explosion, but I have been going to doctors for the past two years with no results. It is too costly and difficult to get proper medical care in Lebanon when you are a refugee.***

Moreover, interviewees indicated resorting to only registering the women of the family and their kids, but not the men, with the UNHCR. They explained that this is what they were advised by others who arrived to Lebanon before them since single-headed families have increased chances of being accepted and therefore receiving aid.

UNHCR has been prioritizing women-headed families in their cash and food aid, since they consider that these families have no “provider” as the man is absent. Despite unemployment rates amongst refugee men being very high, UNHCR policies do not prioritize men-headed households. Interviewees reported that in recent years, UNHCR has been rejecting applications of families who want to register if the man is present. This pushed many families not to declare that the husband is here and to register the rest of the family in order to qualify for aid. However, this registration strategy affects immigration through UNHCR as families that are headed by a man are more likely to be chosen to leave Lebanon than single-mother families, as per the interviewees.

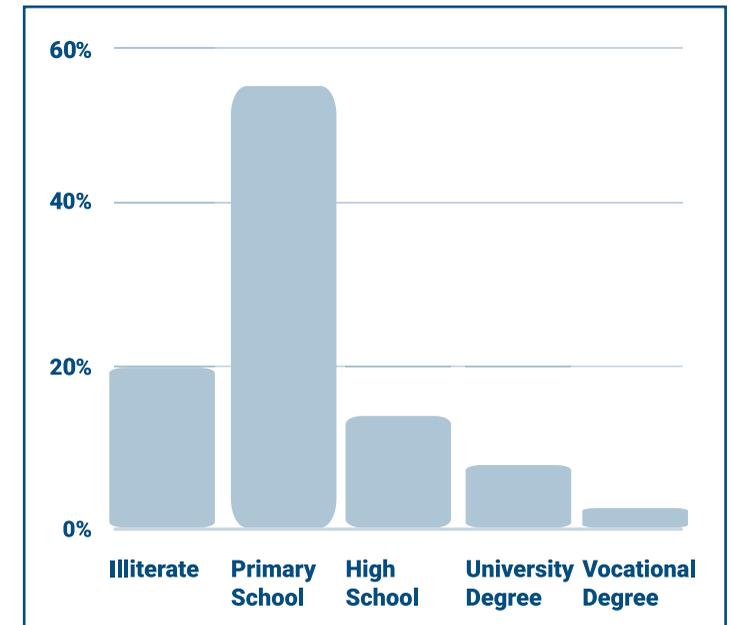
Another major issue with UNHCR aid is that it is not stable. Many interviewees mentioned being on and off the UNHCR aid list throughout the years. In addition, as previously explained, many of the participants were cut off from receiving monetary aid in December 2020, without being given prior notice. A large portion of these families rely solely on UNHCR monetary aid to survive.

UNHCR had been the last lifeline, which many Syrian refugees in Lebanon grabbed onto dearly for the most basic of their needs. After this lifeline has been cut for many families, many are coming to the painful realization that nothing is left for them in Lebanon and are thus considering leaving Lebanon in search of stability, even though this aspiration remains very hard to attain for most Syrian refugees.

### **b. Education**

Results in Figure 9 show that 56% of the participants attained an education at the primary school level, while 20% are illiterate and 8% hold a university degree. Across the regions, the results show that people who have attained primary school education are the biggest group who wants to leave (57% in Akkar and 52% in Beqaa).

**Figure 9. Participants Highest Educational Attainment**



When it comes to children’s education, 53% of the participants reported that their children do not attend school, while 25% reported some of their children go to school and 22% said all of their children go to school. Although schooling is covered by UNHCR, transportation fees to the schools are not. Therefore, many children are forced to drop out because their parents cannot pay for transportation as they are not making enough money to cover it themselves.

Moreover, many interviewed families indicated that when their children could attend they could only do so at what was described as recreational schools. As a result, children and their parents could not procure education certificates or any form of official documentation proving that education was received in relation to the Lebanese Ministry of Education.

Most interviewees with children expressed a strong desire to immigrate to secure better education for their children. Many complained about schooling during the pandemic, as their children are either learning from home or not learning at all. After describing how their situation became more difficult this past year, a man in Beqaa explained that first and foremost he would leave so his children receive an education. Another father explained that his three girls love to learn and always work hard to have good grades, as the eldest approaches grade 9 his concerns for her education grow ever stronger.

The interviewees understand that having poor or no education will directly sentence their children to a disadvantaged future. The same goes for single young men interviewed expressing a desire to leave to continue their education. Therefore, the research shows that a big drive to the aspiration for migration is education and the possibility of a better future.

### 3. GOING BACK TO SYRIA

The majority of the participants reported having family back in Syria (79%), with the majority deeming their family's location unsafe (76%). Most participants reported that they cannot return to Syria (97%) as the conditions there do not allow them to do so.

When asked why, 89% said it was unsafe and 78% said they have no house to return to. A young man with his family living in Beqaa reports:

***If I want to go back, I would have to pay \$1,000 per person to be smuggled through a military route to Al Raqqa but it's not a guaranteed route, it's very risky and I might get caught. If I go, I might take my wife and kids but I don't think her parents would agree to let her go this way. Immigrating outside of Lebanon is easier than going back to Syria.***

When asked if they would consider returning to Syria, another family in the Beqaa explained that even if they wanted to, if it wasn't risky or expensive, their house was destroyed due to the war so they have nowhere to return to. Other reasons mentioned by participants were having no family in Syria (12%), the unavailability of jobs (7%), and no schools for their children (6%). A middle-aged divorced woman, who lived alone in a camp in Akkar, claimed that although she feels nostalgic and longs for her life back in Syria, when she assesses the risks, the only thing that might drive her to return to her country is if a mass return of Syrians back home somehow occurs in the future. Moreover, many interviewed men also cited conscription and the call to military reserve as reasons preventing them from going back.

As the research has shown, returning to Syria is not an option for most Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The options available for return are highly risky and can be life-threatening for many. Even those who spoke of returning to the areas of Idlib that are considered "liberated" from the Assad regime, they mentioned that the smuggling journey is expensive and more often than not leads to a war torn area with no shelter, income, or relatives for support. This aspect may drive them to prefer seeking a new life abroad, rather than returning to Syria.

### 4. GOING ABROAD

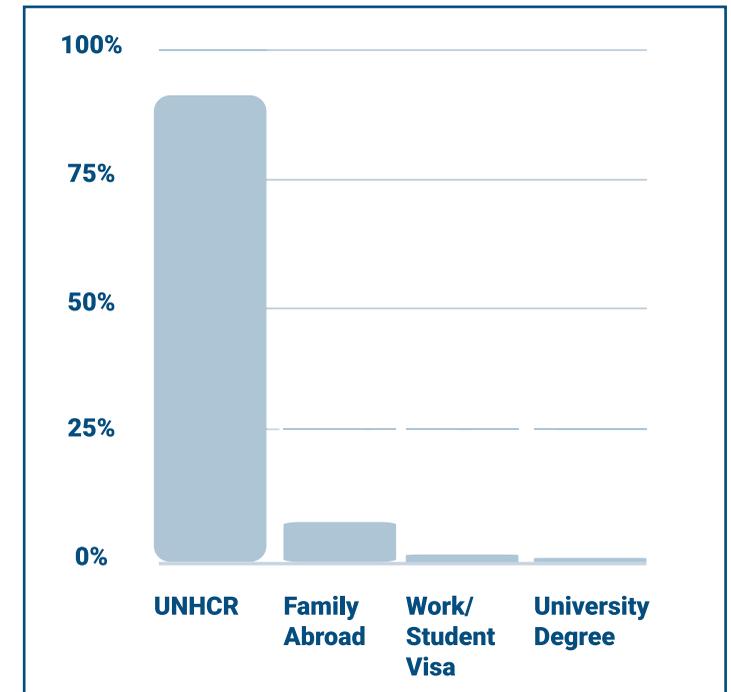
The majority of participants reported having family abroad (60%), with 99% approving of their family member's choice to move. In Akkar, people are more willing to leave if they have family abroad (74%). While in Beqaa, people were just as likely to consider leaving whether they have family abroad or not. One interviewee in the Beqaa expressed this by saying: "We'll go anywhere, just to have peace of mind".

Of those considering leaving Lebanon, 82% reported that they would not leave through illegal routes that might be risky (such as smuggling). Although the majority is not willing to risk their lives, most of those who said they would leave if there is a risk were young. A young interviewee in Akkar came to Lebanon illegally with his family when he was still a minor and has attempted to leave Lebanon illegally in the past, but he was unable to finance it. He claims that if he had the opportunity to leave again, even if through illegal means, he would take the opportunity instantly. Of the interviewees who came to Lebanon illegally, several claimed that they would not take that risk again and that if they were to migrate once more, they would only do it through legal means. Participants also highlighted the fact that illegal travel is often too expensive and the fact that there is no guarantee that the trip will actually occur/they will arrive safely. One interviewee in Akkar explained:

***Coming to Lebanon through illegal means resulted in a lot of hardship for our family in terms of mobility, jobs, education and our living situation. If my family was to move again, we would not take the risk and take the legal route instead. When you do things legally, it is a guarantee that there are no risks or complications in your future.***

When asked to choose a country where they would be able to settle, the majority reported that they would like to settle in Germany (22%) and Canada (30%). In addition to Germany and Canada, the UK, Sweden and Australia were also often mentioned. When asked why they chose these countries, the two most common reasons were that the country has the best social welfare system (45%) and that they have relatives residing there (37%).

**Figure 10. Participants' Preferred Way of Migrating Out Of Lebanon**



As shown in Figure 10, the majority of participants are relying on UNHCR to leave (90%). The rest are relying on family members abroad who will help with paperwork (7%), through student/work visas (2%) or illegally (1%).

Having networks of relatives/friends abroad made it more likely for interviewees to express their desire to leave. Many claimed that they wanted to leave to specific countries because they knew someone who moved there, making it easier for them to navigate the new country. They also made choices about which countries they may relocate to based on the experiences of friends/family who are there. One interviewee, who has a friend in Canada, is motivated to move there with his family, firstly because his friend would help him settle in and guide him around, and secondly due to the positive experience that his friend's family is having there.

Some were also hoping that having someone abroad may help them with the migration process (visas and paperwork). However, during our fieldwork, most participants said that although they have relatives abroad, they were unsuccessful when they tried to help them leave Lebanon. For instance, a woman in Akkar had her brother submit her papers to multiple organizations in the UK in hopes that they would facilitate her migration process, but to no avail. Thus, UNHCR seems to be the main way out for the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Almost all the interviews indicated that while the desire to leave is very strong, no practical steps or actual plans are in place, nor is it possible to achieve their desire to leave. A family in the Beqaa explained that the last time they visited the UNHCR office to inquire about the immigration process, they were informed that no action can be taken except for waiting. Leaving through UNHCR can only be done when the organization itself reaches out to them and chooses them as this is not something they can apply to. Therefore, many of the interviewed families realized that there is nothing they can do even if they wanted to, except to hold on to the hope that something might change and someday they will receive the call from UNHCR to leave. This situation is further complicated for single men, single mothers, and small families who are either not accepted for registration with UNHCR or do not qualify as a priority for immigration.

In addition to relatives outside of Lebanon, an important factor affecting Syrian refugees' aspirations to migrate is the preference for the whole extended family in Lebanon to leave together. In the Beqaa, an old couple are living with their children and grandchildren, each couple occupying a room with their respective family. They expressed a strong desire to leave and go anywhere else, as there's nothing left for them in Lebanon especially with everyone being unemployed. However, the head of the household and his daughter who later joined the

interview both repeatedly emphasized that either they all leave together through the UN or they all stay put in Lebanon. This sentiment of not dividing the family was present in many of the interviews, in parallel to participants understanding more or less that this complicates scenarios of migration.

## **5. STAYING IN LEBANON: A PREFERENCE FOR A FEW**

Only 10% of the surveyed refugees claimed they would like to settle in Lebanon. For the participants who reported that they would not consider leaving Lebanon, the reason mentioned the most was the fact that their family is settled in Lebanon (36%), followed by the fear of leaving and risking not being able to return (25%), or not wanting to deal with resettlement again (19%). During the interviews, it became apparent that some participants would like to stay because they are still waiting to be reunited with family back in Syria. One woman in Akkar explained that she was offered a way out with her family through UNHCR but she did not take it as her kids refused to go for the worry that this would prevent them from reuniting with their father who was imprisoned back in Syria. She said that her children refused to go and leave their father behind as they believe that when he gets released he will come search for them in Lebanon.

Although some might choose to stay, life in Lebanon has become quite difficult for Syrian refugees. Many are holding on dearly to the hope of a better tomorrow, knowing that there is no actual plan or practical steps to get them there.

## **6. TRAPPED: A REALITY AND NOT JUST A FEELING**

The common sentiment among people who were interviewed was the feeling of despair and being trapped. They feel as though they cannot return to Syria, have no way out of Lebanon, and are stuck there until a solution

is found for their deteriorating conditions. Most interviewees explained that even though they wish to leave, reality is that they are trapped here in Lebanon and only have God to rely on. In that sense, the gap between their wishes and reality makes many of them unable to plan or make a choice as their variant conditions - legal, financial, and political - make no such room for choices. As such, many described their migration aspirations as wishes, saying they will go anywhere if it becomes possible. At the end of their interviews, many individuals eventually came to the conclusion that there is nothing they can do but live day by day waiting for something to change.

A family with three kids in Beqaa reckons with this harsh reality everyday. After arriving in Lebanon through smuggling from Al Raqqah, the mother suffers from depression and vowed to never return to the border. The father is in a similarly harsh situation. In previous years, he's had to choose between retarping the shelter from rain or sending money to his ill mother. This year, his mother passed away but he can no longer find work. He explained that he lives on loans and that even bread can only be afforded on credit. Like many others, the mother and children are registered with the UNHCR; however, they still cannot afford health care to address their stressful situation in Lebanon. They cannot go back to Syria either as their home city remains a battleground between ISIS and the Kurdish army. Similarly, their refugee status without a registered father limits their immigration options drastically. The father understands this and explains:

***Immigration is hard but we are trying, we heard that UNHCR stopped working on this but we are trying to call and see... I wish I could leave with my family, maybe if we immigrate then the situation around us will be different and we can get paid for our work.***

Perhaps the feeling of being trapped is best illustrated

by noting that the most cited interview words include “we are sitting and waiting” and “we’ll go anywhere if possible”. Trapped between a longing to leave and a forced surrender to sit and wait. They live day by day and hope for change to happen, somehow, somewhere. However, their agency is heavily curbed by their limited resources and extremely disadvantaged position.

## V. CONCLUSION

At the beginning of the Syrian crisis, Lebanon’s borders were open to receive Syrian refugees escaping the war. As the incomers’ numbers continued to increase, so did tensions with host communities and anti-refugee rhetoric in the media. On one hand, there has been a politicization of the refugee crisis with each political cluster pushing its pro or counter Assad regime agenda. On the other hand, Lebanon’s fragmented governance facilitated exploiting informal Syrian labor while the multiplicity of actors involved in the repatriation process clouded clear paths of return. Until the end of 2019, many Syrian refugees were already experiencing difficult living conditions in Lebanon and might have already wanted to leave, but they were still able to manage with minimal paying jobs and aid from UNHCR.

As 2019 arrived, Lebanon’s festering economic crisis had started to reach its worse with a drastic devaluation of the local currency and increasing political instability. What followed was an increase in unemployment, inflation, poverty, and labor competition impacting both nationals, migrants and refugees. The following year 2020 was even more devastating with lockdown measures due to COVID-19 and the Beirut port explosion heightening the vulnerability of Syrian refugees. Although UNHCR covers the cost of testing and treatment of the virus, this is dependent on screening and authorization by the Health Ministry. As a result, refugee communities

are in fear of discrimination and deportation, deterring them from seeking medical health care even when showing symptoms. Moreover, the lockdown measures furthered discriminatory mobility restrictions, leaving many without work or the ability to afford basic needs such as food, water, clothing, transport to seek health-care, and healthcare itself.

At this point, many Syrian refugees had been struggling with a plethora of issues diminishing their livelihood. This includes having their mobility restricted, struggling to find any form of employment, relying solely on UNHCR's basic unstable aid, being forced to deal with racism and fear of detention, and not being able to cover education or medical costs. As a result, many are now living in extreme poverty and in fear of further tensions and political instability. These extreme conditions, coupled with expectations for worse and seeing no resolution in sight, have pushed many Syrian refugees to seriously consider leaving Lebanon. The survey conducted for this research shows that the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon aspire to leave for either Europe or Canada where they consider that a better future could be available for them and their children. Amongst those who reported wanting to leave, the majority evaluated their living conditions in Lebanon as being bad and worse in comparison to previous years. Aside from the financial situation being the main reason for wanting to migrate from Lebanon, many participants mentioned political instability, racism, lack of healthcare, and lack of education opportunities as reasons for wishing to relocate to countries with a welfare system. The survey also showed that those who have relatives or friends abroad are usually more likely to want to migrate. Finally, the survey results point to an overwhelming majority that would not leave if it is not through the legal routes of the UNHCR. While a minority expressed a willingness to leave through smuggling by the sea or the borders, this remains limited mainly to young single men.

In-depth interviews with Syrian refugees from Akkar and the Beqaa have substantiated these quantitative finds. The interviews reveal that two factors, among those previously examined, come through as important driving forces to leave: the aid from UNHCR and education. Since education has been exclusively at recreational schools and with no possibility to receive an official education certificate, most families interviewed earnestly asked to immigrate for the sake of their children's education. However, while the will is strong, the route out is nearly blocked for the wide majority of Syrian refugees. Although much of UNHCR's aid is coming to an end, it is still the main and only entity many refugees rely on to survive in Lebanon or to relocate to another country. Nevertheless, many aspects complicate relying on UNHCR to leave, such as being a single man, being a single mother either by chance or through the common practice of registering the family without the father, or a preference for the entire family to leave together or not leave at all.

On another hand, returning to Syria is not an option for many of the refugees in Lebanon either because it is too risky and unstable. As such, many Syrian refugees expressed a willingness to venture on dangerous trips across the Mediterranean instead of staying in Lebanon. Taking this trip, many met their death or were forced to return, and many more were faced with the harsh reality of their asylum applications being rejected. Although expensive and highly risky, leaving by boat is a last resort for those wanting to immigrate to Germany, Sweden, Canada or any other country that would treat them decently.

Emotionally and mentally, Syrian refugees in Lebanon feel trapped. They are experiencing extraordinary conditions and cannot do anything but wait for things to change. More importantly, they are effectively trapped. Although the desire to leave is high and strong, they are debilitated by the actual lack of opportunities and

their agency is curbed by the lack of financial means to improve their living conditions. For most Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the year 2021 will bring with it the harsh reality of worsening conditions in Lebanon and diminishing aid from international donors.

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