THE SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON, BEYOND A HUMANITARIAN PROBLEM

Elias Dahrouge

The huge number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is definitely the most obvious and visible outcome of the neighboring Syrian civil war. The country is not carrying this burden alone since all the neighbors of Syria, but also more recently Europe, are witnessing the same phenomenon. The difference is that compared to its size and population, and quoting the UNHCR in 2014, "Lebanon is already the country that in modern History, has the most important number of refugees per head of inhabitant" *(Réfugiés syriens : une catastrophe humanitaire "inacceptable", 2014)*. Back then, only around one million were registered on the UN list of refugees in Lebanon *(Liban : Plus de 957.700 réfugiés syriens sont enregistrés auprès du HCR, 2014).* Since that time, the number of registered Syrian refugees reached a peak of 1 183 327 registered persons *(migrationpolicycenter.eu, 2016)*. This peak was reached in mid-2015. Since that moment, the effectives decreased a little bit and are stabilized around one million *(migrationpolicycenter.eu, 2016).* But this number does not take into consideration the many other persons who are not registered. Some refugees are even unwilling to get registered by fear from the regime in Syria, or simply because they have to go to the offices to execute this formality.

Also, since the introduction by the Lebanese state of restrictive administrative procedures, a lot of refugees preferred to stay under the radars. Indeed, since January 2015, the Syrian nationals have to apply for residence permit which has an unaffordable price for most of the refugees *(Human Rights Watch, 2016)*. This measure was elaborated by the government in a way to contain the flood. The reason for this measure is the incapacity of the country to deal with the flood of refugees after the 5th year of the conflict, especially that the international aid is still very low compared to the real needs on the ground. Finally, a lot of wealthy Syrians passed to Lebanon were they bought or have rented apartments and so are not listed as refugees.

For these reasons, the estimations about the Syrian presence in Lebanon are much higher than those censed by the UN. The number was around 1.5 Million in 2013 according to most of Lebanese officials *("Al bank al douali: ihtiwa' makhater al nouzouh", 2013)*. This massive presence is very heavy for Lebanon in all fields. If we consider that the Lebanese population is estimated at around 4 million citizens *(La Réalité Démographique Libanaise, 2013)*, it means that Syrians constitute now at least 25% to 30% of the total residents on Lebanese soil (*Bulletin trimestriel d'information economique de la region MENA, 2014; Slavin, 2013)*. But the real problem is not linked to their number. In fact, Syrians are everywhere; we can realize the magnitude of this phenomenon by having a walk in different localities of the country. In some villages, the local Lebanese population is outnumbered by them *(lp.gov.lb, 2013)*. It is the case of the sadly famous Ersal. This 40 000 inhabitants city is located in the Anti-Lebanon

mountain range, on the border with Syria. The agglomeration's population rose up to more than 100 000 people, boosted by the Syrian refugees *(Al-Monitor, 2014)*. But they are also scattered on all the Lebanese territory, renting, squatting or regrouped in around 450 randomly established camps *(Rizk, 2013)*. It is the total inaction and passivity of the Lebanese state which, unlike the other states concerned by this flood in the region (Jordan or Turkey for instance), has not been able to organize their arrival around a structured official plan with the establishment of organized refugee camps. For cause, the fear from the repetition of the Palestinian experience: their population is around half a million and they are more or less unanimously considered as an existential threat for the future of the Lebanese entity and there is still no concrete solution for their fate *(lp.gov.lb, 2013; Slavin, 2013)*. Their presence constituted also one of the key factors in the initiation of the Lebanese civil war in the mid-70s *(Knudsen, 2007)*. As a consequence, Lebanese narrative in its majority (official, journalistic or scholar) tends to not define them as "refugees", but as "migrants"[1]. This is because Lebanon did not signed the 1951 UN Refugees Convention *(Sikimic, 2011)* by fear from any unlikely solution for the Palestinian refugees issue as said by Rabih Al-Haber, president of Statistics Lebanon *(Nharkom Said, 2014)*.

The problem of the refugees is not only connected to their important number. Actually, their number is only emphasizing the various consequences of their presence. These consequences can be sorted in the following categories: health, economic, social and security.

Concerning the health issue, we have to emphasize that the majority of the refugees are women and children *(Les enfants, victimes du conflit qui s'éternise en Syrie, 2014)*. Around 70% of the Syrian refugees' families are "without a dad" *(Nharkom Said, 2014)*, or without a patriarchal active men providing revenue to the family members. They usually live in disastrous hygienic conditions such as unorganized camps or unfinished abandoned buildings which are devoid of any canalization system and sanitary equipment *(Rizk, 2013)*. The risks of infections and decease transmissions are high, and have been concretized with the rise of some epidemics that were previously eradicated from the country. Some of them are very dangerous like the Tuberculosis or Polio according to the June 2013 declaration of the Lebanese parliamentary health commission *(lp.gov.lb, 2013)*. The Lebanese health system is not able to cover all their need, and NGO's activities are far to be enough. According to Dr. Walid Ammar, Director General of the Ministry of Public Health of Lebanon, the health sector needs more than 400 million of USD per year to cover the sanitary costs of Syrian refugees; this money, around 400USD per refugee, is the cost of several medications and vaccinations, and the service cost that the Lebanese state will have to pay to the private hospitals *(Nharkom Said, 2014)*. If foreign aid would not come, the Lebanese public deficit growth will be strongly affected. According to World Bank report, the cost of Syrian crisis for Lebanon reached as much as 7.5 billion of USD by the end of 2014 *(bb.undp.org, 2014)*. These numbers leads us definitely to analyze the economic impact of the flood of Syrian refugees to Lebanon.

The primary effect of the important presence of Syrian refugees is the huge stress on the already weak Lebanese infrastructures, essentially electricity, water, canalization system, environment, but also roads (with thousands of Syrian cars moved to Lebanon

[1] In Arabic a "refugee" is "laaji'" and a migrant is "naazih", but of course if the adoption of the second terminology is maybe sometimes made by default and can be due to its redundancy in mainstream discourses and media (on purpose or by misunderstanding), it was initially adopted because of the fact that Lebanon has not signed most of the UN refugee's treaties and protocols by fear from any responsibility towards the Palestinian refugees and avoid their naturalization.

with the refugees according to Statistics Lebanon *(Nharkom Said, 2014)*). Another very important point is that the Lebanese bread is state-subsidized, but the refugees are consuming this bread. That means that more than 5.4 million bread units are partly financed by the state on a daily basis said Rabih Al-Haber *(Nharkom Said, 2014)*. It is a crucial and very urgent problem that the Lebanese state would not be able to manage on a long run. On another hand, the Syrian refugees are turning towards the Lebanese labor market for their living. And this would not only affect the cheap labor market of unqualified jobs where Syrian workers were since decades the major offer-seekers. Unemployment is still growing, and experts are pointing out the role of the Syrian offer on the domestic labor market as being one of its causes. Thus, estimations say that unemployment increased from 11% to 20% since the start of the conflict next door *(Errighi and Griesse, 2016)*. Back in 2013 already, 170 000 Lebanese were pushed into poverty according to UNHCR High Commissioner Antonio Guterres who said that at that time "there is now not a single village or town in Lebanon that has not been affected by the presence of refugees from Syria" *(Richard, 2013)*.

All these facts, in addition to again the unorganized and random repartition of the refugees on all the Lebanese territory leads unquestionably to dangerous social tensions based on economic but also on sectarian and communitarian basis. Providing Syrian women with free medical service at birth giving, while a Lebanese woman has to pay for it, or, as presented by Dana Sleiman, the 90 000 Syrian children that are attending classes at Lebanese public schools –an almost equal number to the Lebanese students' number- are the perfect illustrations of this dangerous reality *(Nharkom Said, 2014)*. Some of these tensions have already manifested in diverse forms on the ground. As an obvious example, we can mention the falsification of Syrian identity cards by some rural peripheral Lebanese poor citizens for the goal of getting aids food rations and coupons as are their Syrian displaced neighbors *(LBC Prime Time News, 2013)*. This is a clear mark of the social tensions that is affecting the Lebanese-Syrian Refugee relationship. The competition on the labor market will also obviously lead to a confrontation between Syrian and Lebanese since there is no place for everyone warned the president of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry of Zahleh, especially that the pressure on employers is very high since it is very tempting for them to use a cheaper labor force with no obligations of providing them with social security in particular in a slow economic growth general ambiance *(À Zahlé, un malaise bien plus social qu'économique, 2014)*.

This was said without considering those Syrians who were tempted to open small businesses and concurrence by that, local Lebanese small entrepreneurs. The minister of labor's actions concerning the regulation of the working conditions and hiring of Syrian nationals is an additional proof of the growing pressure on employment. But the tensions can be also due to cultural or socio-economic milieus' differences as a result of the savage and unorganized repartition of the refugees on the country's territory. The cases of the presence of traditional rural Muslim Syrian refugees in middle or high class Lebanese Christian suburbs, or simply Sunni refugees in Shiite Lebanese agglomerations are good examples as dangerous mixture situations. This reality can lead to an identity change of some regions, especially if the unrests in Syria are long lasting. We do not have to forget also that around 80 to 100 000 of the refugees are Palestinian refugees from Syria who came to pump up the effectives of this population with all the dangers that can emanate from this fact *(Nharkom Said, 2014)*. We are witnessing a kind of a massive movement of population phenomenon that can generate with time several geopolitical issues and change the country's identity, such those that

happened in Post-WWII Europe for instance. The more the war in Syria is lasting, the more critical the problem will be for Lebanon and its existence as such.

This is how economic and health issues lead us to the dangerous security questions of the refugees' presence in Lebanon. Beside all the social tensions that can develop later into security problems, there are all the other data that are equally relevant and have to be mentioned here. The most simplistic question that can emerge here is that this huge number of people, coming from poverty mostly, to a more critical and vacillating situation, will lead or not to increasing criminality and violence *(Aalmi, 2013)*. The question is if the Lebanese Interior Security Forces, which effectives are already insufficient, are capable of taking in charge this flood or not. But reversibly, because of the weakness of the refugees, violence and racism can emanate from the Lebanese towards them, based on diverse motives mentioned earlier in the text. The typical case as an example here is the mass punishment inflicted by the population of Qssarnaba in the Beqaa to the refugees living nearby the town by burning their informal camp because some of the refugees there were suspected of raping one of the village's resident *(Lebanese burn down Syrian refugee camp, 2013)*. Finally, there is a more strategic problem related to this security theme: a large number of the refugees are anti-regime dissidents, and so they could hide or dilute within their effectives a number of fighters or militiamen from different factions of the opposition including the radical Islamists but also ISIS.

This was already proven to be an undisputable repercussion on Lebanon's stability and security, especially with the sectarian tensions due to Hezbollah's intervention in Syria's conflict *(Fleyhane, 2014)*. So far, the reactions to the refugees' issues can be measured on three different levels: a local, a national and an international level. For the first one, some of the municipalities had taken measures since the very beginning of the arrivals of Syrians. In that frame, there is a very controversial measure established by some municipal authorities in diverse regions which is the curfew imposed on Syrian Refugees who are forbidden of "wandering" on the streets after a certain hour like in Aley for instance *(Fleming-Farrell, 2013)* where some exactions against those who did not conform were registered. For the second which is the national level, as we said it earlier, the state is impotent: beside the coordination with NGO's and the health service offered by the Ministry of Public Health, there is a total paralysis. The official discourse of the state-representatives appears only when it comes to the international level, at conferences such as the March 5, 2014 reunion of the International Support Group for Lebanon in Paris *(Le Groupe de soutien au Liban assure Sleiman de la solidarité international, 2014)* where the stress is on the urgent need to help Lebanon. Finally, the international community has definitely lacked until now in its obligations of helping Lebanon which became the country with the highest rate of refugees on its territory in modern History.

The Syrian refugee problem in Lebanon is going far beyond a simple spontaneous humanitarian issue. Its repercussions on multiple levels will just start to be discovered. In fact, and as we saw it in this overview, the impact of their presence is a very delicate problem on various levels. But the most dangerous one is the fate of this population on the long run. Indeed, if their staying is prolonged and paired with some acquired rights, knowing that the majority of these refugees are coming from a single sectarian fringe, the real fear is on the future of the identity of Lebanon. Any change of demographic data will break the very fragile communitarian status-quo that defines the political system of this country. The future will make it clearer. If the conflict in Syria is continuing, there is a fear of a "Palestinianification" of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

References

"I Just Wanted to be Treated like a Person"." Human Rights Watch. N.p., 06 June 2016. Web. 26 Jan. 2017. https://www.hrw.org/report/2016/01/12/i-just-wanted-be-treated-person/how-lebanons-residency-rules-facilitate-abuse
Aalmi, M. 2013. Azmat al laji'in al souriyyin fi loubnan (Ar). [report] Beirut: Carnegie, Available at: http://carnegie-mec.org/publications/?fa=51910. [Accessed:26 Mar 2014]
Al-Akhbar (English), 2013. Lebanese burn down Syrian refugee camp. 2013. [online] 2 December 2013. Available at: http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/17783 [Accessed: 26 Mar 2014].
Al-Akhbar. البنك الدولي: احتواء مخاطر النزوح. 2014. (Arabic) "Al bank al douali: ihtiwa' makhater al nouzouh" [online] 17 June 2013. Available at: https://www.al-akhbar.com/node/185134 [Accessed: 21 Mar 2014].
Al-Monitor. 2014. Arsal strife could spread to other parts of Lebanon - Al-Monitor: the Pulse of the Middle East. [online] Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/security/2014/03/lebanon-arsal-tripoli-tension-syria.html [Accessed: 9 Apr 2014].
Bb.undp.org. 2014. Response to the Syrian Crisis | UNDP. [online] Available at: http://www.bb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/ourwork/Response_to_the_Syrian_Crisis/overview.html [Accessed: 25 Mar 2014].
Calabrese, J., 2012. The Regional Implications of the Syria Crisis. Middle east.
Errighi, L and Griesse, J. (2016): "The Syrian Refugee Crisis: Labour market implications in Jordan and Lebanon". May 2016. Accessed on the 16th of January 2017 (PDF) at: http://ec.europa.eu/economy_finance/publications/eedp/pdf/dp029_en.pdf
Facts & Figures: Syria refugee crisis & international resettlement. (2014, December 05). Retrieved January 26, 2017, from https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/news/2014/12/facts-figures-syria-refugee-crisis-international-resettlement/
Fleming-Farrell, N. 2013. Aley vigilantes enforce nighttime curfews on Syrians. [online] 8 April 2013. Available at: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2013/Apr-08/212903-aley-vigilantes-enforce-nighttime-curfews-on-syrians.ashx#axzz2x5LciZQe [Accessed: 26 Mar 2014].
Focus on Syrians. (2016). Retrieved January 26, 2017, from http://www.migrationpolicycentre.eu/migrant-crisis/focus-on-syrians/
Hamdan, S. 2014. À Zahlé, un malaise bien plus social qu'économique. [online] 12 March 2014. Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/858344/a-zahle-un-malaise-bien-plus-social-queconomique.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].
Kalam Ennas, (2014). [TV programme] LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Company). 19 September 2013.
Knudsen, A. 2007. The Law, the Loss and the Lives of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon. [PDF] Bergen (Norway): Chr. Michelsen Institute. Available through: www.cmi.no http://www.cmi.no/publications/file/2607-the-law-the-loss-and-the-lives-of-palestinian.pdf [Accessed: 25 Mar 2014].
La Réalité Démographique Libanaise. 2013. [PDF] Lebanese Information Center. http://www.lstatic.org/PDF/demographfrench.pdf [Accessed: 24 Mar 2014].
Le Monde. 2014. Les réfugiés syriens sont un « danger existentiel » pour le Liban selon son président. [online] 5 March 2014. Available at: http://www.lemonde.fr/proche-orient/article/2014/03/05/les-refugies-syriens-sont-un-danger-existentiel-pour-le-liban-selon-son-president_4378090_3218.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].

Lebanon: Residency Rules Put Syrians at Risk. (2016, January 12). Retrieved January 26, 2017, from https://www.hrw.org/news/2016/01/12/lebanon-residency-rules-put-syrians-risk
L'Orient-Le Jour. 2014. Le Groupe de soutien au Liban assure Sleiman de la solidarité internationale. [online] 5 March 2014. Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/857447/a-paris-sleiman-plaide-devant-le-gis-pour-une-aide-accrue-au-liban.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].
L'Orient-Le Jour. 2014. Les enfants, victimes du conflit qui s'éternise en Syrie. [online] 16 March 2014. Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/858960/les-enfants-victimes-du-conflit-qui-seternise-en-syrie.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].
L'Orient-Le Jour. 2014. Liban : Plus de 957.700 réfugiés syriens sont enregistrés auprès du HCR. [online] Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/858089/liban-plus-de-957700-refugies-syriens-sont-enregistres-aupres-du-hcr.html [Accessed: 12 Mar 2014].
L'Orient-Le Jour. 2014. Réfugiés syriens : Sleiman presse la communauté internationale d'aider le Liban. [online] 14 March 2014. Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/858753/refugies-syriens-sleiman-presse-la-communaute-internationale-daider-le-liban.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].
L'Orient-Le Jour. 2014. Réfugiés syriens : une catastrophe humanitaire "inacceptable". [online] Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/858760/refugies-syriens-une-catastrophe-humanitaire-inacceptable.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].
L'Orient-Le Jour. 2014. Sehnaoui s'inquiète de la présence croissante de réfugiés syriens à Achrafieh. [online] 17 March 2014. Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/859126/sehnaoui-sinquiete-de-la-presence-croissante-de-refugies-syriens-a-achrafieh.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].
L'Orient-Le Jour. 2014. Vers une plus grande collaboration entre l'UNHCR et le Liban. [online] 17 March 2014. Available at: http://www.lorientlejour.com/article/859113/vers-une-plus-grande-collaboration-entre-lunhcr-et-le-liban.html [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].
Lp.gov.lb. 2014. Lebanese Parliament | ContentRecord |. [online] Available at: http://www.lp.gov.lb/ContentRecordDetails.aspx?id=13068&title=%E1%CC%E4%C9-%C7%E1%D5%CD%C9-%C8%CD%CB%CA-%DD%ED-%E3%E6%D6%E6%DA-%C7%E1%E4%C7%D2%CD%ED%E4-%C7%E1%D3%E6%D1%ED%ED%E4-%DD%ED-%E1%C8%E4%C7%E4 [Accessed: 21 Mar 2014].
Mikati, N. 2014. Lebanon PM: My country cannot cope with the Syrian refugee crisis. [online] 21 January 2014. Available at: http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/lebanon/10587174/Lebanon-PM-My-country-cannot-cope-with-the-Syrian-refugee-crisis.html [Accessed: 24 Mar 2014].
Nharkom Said. 2014. [TV programme] LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Company International), 1 March 2014.
Prime Time News. 2013. [TV programme] LBC International, 14 November 2013.
Prime Time News. 2013. [TV programme] LBC International, 18 March 2014.
Prime Time News. 2013. [TV programme] LBC International, 21 February 2014.
Prime Time News. 2013. [TV programme] LBC International, 25 June 2013.
Prime Time News. 2014. [TV programme] LBC (Lebanese Broadcasting Company), 28 March 2014.

Richard, A. C. 2013. Humanitarian Assistance and the Syria Crisis. [online] Available at: http://www.state.gov/j/prm/releases/remarks/2013/217621.htm [Accessed: 26 Mar 2014].
Rizk, S. 2013. Valérie Trierweiler rend visite aux réfugiés syriens au Liban. [online] 5 November 2013. Available at: http://www.lefigaro.fr/international/2013/11/05/01003-20131105ARTFIG00566-valerie-trierweiler-rend-visite-aux-refugies-syriens-au-liban.php [Accessed: 24 Mar 2014].
Securitycouncilreport.org. 2014. Lebanon Chronology of Events : Security Council Report. [online] Available at: http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/chronology/lebanon.php?page=all&print=true [Accessed: 8 Apr 2014].
Sikimic, S. 2011. Refugees aplenty but no Convention. [online] 28 May 2011. Available at: http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2011/May-28/139723-refugees-aplenty-but-no-convention.ashx#axzz2wz2awtF3 [Accessed: 25 Mar 2014].
Slavin, B. 2013. Syrian Refugees Now Equal One-Third of Lebanon's Population. [online] 2013. Available at: http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/10/syrian-refugees-lebanon-crisis-assistance.html# [Accessed: 21 Mar 2014].
Tripoli: First Stop on the Mediterranean Route. (2016, April 08). Retrieved January 26, 2017, from https://www.newsdeeply.com/refugees/articles/2016/04/08/tripoli-first-stop-on-the-mediterranean-route
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). (2016, September 30). UNHCR Syria Regional Refugee Response. Retrieved January 26, 2017, from http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122
http://www.undp.org/content/dam/lebanon/docs/Poverty/Projects/Project%20Document%207.pdf [Accessed: 1 Apr 2014].
worldbank.com. 2014. Bulletin trimestriel d'information economique de la region MENA. [online] January 2014. Available at: http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/Bulletin_info_economique_MENA.pdf [Accessed: 18 Mar 2014].