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Pressure to return builds on Syrian refugees in Lebanon

Abdel-Monhem Amiri/IRIN

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Despite UN concerns that much of Syria is still unsafe, political support has been mounting in Lebanon for the nearly one million registered refugees in the country to return home and, within the past month, both the Lebanese government and Hezbollah have opened centres to register Syrians wishing to do just that.

Even as President Bashar al-Assad consolidates control over Syria, the seven-year war is not over and much of the country remains a war zone. The UN's refugee agency, UNHCR, **maintains** that significant risks remain for civilians and that "present conditions in Syria are not conducive for voluntary repatriation in safety and dignity."

The take-up of return programmes so far has been low and, for most Syrians in Lebanon, hardship here is still better than uncertainty, or potentially worse, at home.

At a small camp near the town of Khirbet Qanafar in eastern Lebanon, flies from a nearby dump swarmed 38-year-old Walid Al Aqra and his family as they cooked breakfast on an open fire outside their tent.

Last year, Qanafar's municipality relocated families living closer to town to this field. The town has enacted a **curfew** for Syrians, as have many others in Lebanon.

Despite daily reminders that he and his family are increasingly unwelcome here, Walid says he cannot imagine going back to Syria.

He fled Idlib – a rebel-held province where millions of people are displaced and a government offensive is looming – in 2011, and was unnerved by the new Hezbollah centres.

"We are afraid they may try to force us out in the future," he said.

Over the past few years, many (but not all) Lebanese have come to see the refugees as a burden on their small country, and politicians have been ramping up their rhetoric on the subject.

Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil **said Monday** that refugee return should not be tied to a political solution in Syria, and that "the circumstances in Syria have changed and many areas are safe... there is no reason for the refugees to stay."

President Michel Aoun has gone so far as to accuse the international community of planning to permanently resettle large numbers of Syrians in Lebanon, a fear that stems from the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who have lived in Lebanon for decades.

In April, Lebanese authorities

negotiated the return of 500 Syrians directly with the Syrian government. Since then, a few thousand people have gone back, mostly in **groups** of a few hundred.

“We are afraid they may try to force us out in the future.”

In early August, Lebanon’s General Security agency, which handles residency permits, announced it would be setting up centres to coordinate returns. This came the month after Hezbollah, the Lebanese political party whose militia has been key to helping al-Assad slowly turn the tide in the war, announced a similar programme. Together, they are the most coordinated efforts to facilitate returns from Lebanon so far.

Parallel programmes

The efforts of the Lebanese government and Hezbollah are both still in their infancy. A spokesman for General Security told IRIN that 17 offices across Lebanon began taking applications on 6 August, but could not immediately provide a number for how many people might have registered to return.

A spokeswoman for Hezbollah said the group would continue its own registration drive in parallel to the state’s, and that the two programmes were unrelated.

Hezbollah’s efforts have had a bit more time to get moving, but at a registration centre the group runs in the southern Lebanese city of Nabatiyeh in late July, registration was still low. An employee in the office said that about 80 families had registered so far, out of approximately 5,000 Syrian families they estimate live in the area.

“We don’t want anyone to say we are forcing people to return,” the employee said, speaking on condition of anonymity because he was not authorised to speak to the media.

Over the course of an hour, three Syrians came to the office to fill out questionnaires on behalf of their families – these include requests for information about their legal status in Lebanon and on which factions currently control the areas they came from in Syria.

Many men fled Syria to escape fighting for the army or rebel factions, and the registration centre employee said many potential returnees are fearful of being drafted into the government’s military upon return. “Most people ask about military service,” the Hezbollah employee said.

There have traditionally been other barriers to return, although some appear to be being relaxed now in order to encourage more Syrians to go home.

Syrian refugees living in Lebanon not registered with UNHCR **must pay** \$200 to the government each year and have a Lebanese sponsor to maintain legal residency, an ask that is out of reach for many. If Syrians wish to reapply after letting residencies lapse, the Lebanese government requires back-payment of any fees. Lebanon estimates that in addition to the million refugees registered with UNHCR, an additional half a million Syrians in Lebanon are not signed up with the agency.

Many refugees also entered Lebanon via smuggling routes without a visa, making it difficult to return through legal border crossings without paying the \$400 fine that unregistered refugees must pay as they leave.

However, the registration centre employee said Hezbollah was negotiating debt forgiveness with the Lebanese government in order to allow refugees who owe money to return without paying, and that the group is also providing free transportation to Syria.

The Lebanese government has also **said** it will forgive unpaid residency fees for those not registered with UNHCR.

Lebanon's shifting position

While the Lebanese government has officially maintained a position of neutrality toward returns and insists they should only be carried out with the support of the UN, in practice that policy has already shifted.

Prior to the recent wave of returns, more than **7,000 people** left the area around the northeastern Lebanese city of Aarsal in 2017 after deals that followed military operations against Syrian Islamist and rebel groups by Hezbollah and the Lebanese army.

UNHCR was not given access to most of those returnees, and the deals that were struck raised concerns that refugees had been coerced or even not given any choice at all about whether to return to Syria and what their final destination would be.

Lebanese politicians have also been stepping up pressure on the UN's refugee agency, with foreign minister Gebran Bassil freezing residency permit applications for foreign UNHCR staff earlier this year after claiming the group was trying to "scare" refugees out of returning to Syria.

“We know that 50 to 60 percent of the [refugees in Lebanon] are not with the regime.”

The new return initiatives follow a **proposal** by the Russian government in early July that nearly 900,000 Syrians in Lebanon could return to the country without fear of reprisals by the Syrian government for real or perceived roles in the rebellion that sought to unseat president al-Assad.

Lebanese Prime Minister-designate Saad Hariri has **discussed the issue** with Russian officials, further suggesting a non-UN track for returns could be in the offing.

Lisa Abou Khaled, a spokeswoman for UNHCR Lebanon, said the agency is withholding comment on both the Russian proposal and Hezbollah's efforts, as it is "seeking more information" about the processes being proposed.

With regards to the Lebanese government's efforts, she said "UNHCR is not involved in the registration of requests for return at these centres, and UNHCR is still not organising or promoting return at this point in time."

Given its close relationship with al-Assad, the Hezbollah employee in Nabatiyeh said the group is sensitive to accusations they are pressuring people to leave.

"We are responsible for safe transport and for returning people to a safe place," he said, adding: "we can't send people back to Idlib".

Asked about the Russian assertion that large numbers of Syrians could return from Lebanon without fear of arrest by the Syrian government, the employee answered diplomatically: "We know that 50 to 60 percent of the [refugees in Lebanon] are not with the regime."

(TOP PHOTO: Syrian refugees leave the Lebanese city of Aarsal to return to Syria on 22 July 2018. CREDIT: Abdel-Monhem Amiri/IRIN)

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