

P O S T C A R D

26. Perceived inequalities among Lebanese nationals and Syrian refugees

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The wars in the Eastern Mediterranean region are drastically changing its demographic profile, with large-scale migration of people within and between nations. The wars in Iraq and Syria alone have displaced more than 12 million Syrians and 4 million Iraqis (Yahya, 2015), with 4 million Syrians finding shelter in the neighbouring countries of Jordan, Lebanon and Turkey. Lebanon, a small country with about 4 million inhabitants, is hosting more than 1.2 million Syrian refugees. This is 25 per cent of its population – ‘the world’s highest number of refugees per inhabitant’ (UNHCR, UNICEF, WFP, 2015, p. 1).

This sudden influx of a large number of Syrian refugees into a small country that already had a challenged infrastructure is straining Lebanon’s socio-economic fabric. With most refugees settling in some of Lebanon’s poorest areas, there is fierce competition for employment, basic services and provisions, which are seen as existential requirements. Severely diminished water supplies, daily power outages, higher unemployment rates,¹ rising poverty,² and the inability of health-care providers and educational institutions to cope with demand are exacerbating perceived inequalities and inter-group tension.

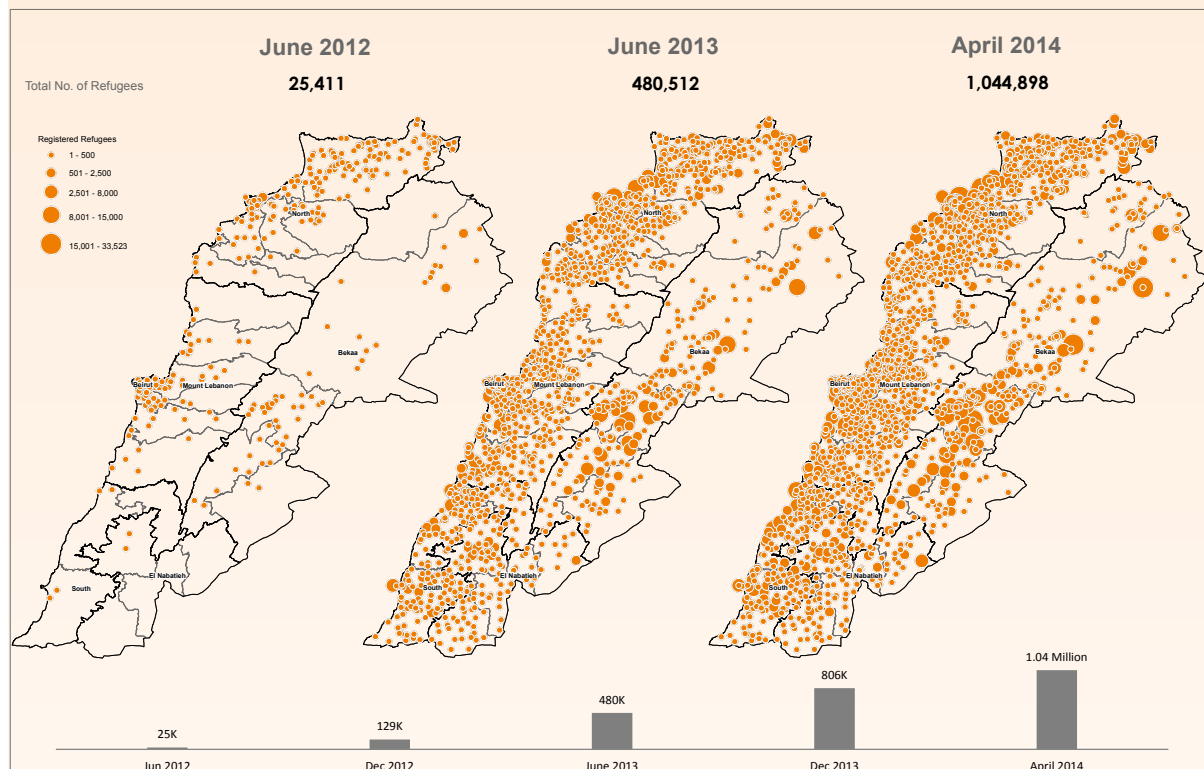
Research on intercommunity relations and perceptions by Harb and Saab (2014) showed large discrepancies in perceptions of inequality and threats between Syrian refugees and Lebanese nationals.³ Many refugees complained of widespread bias and inequality in their treatment by local businesses (such as being charged higher prices than for locals), health-care services (for instance, restricted access to emergency hospital services), property owners (such as inflated rental costs), community officials and the police. Perceptions of inequality also applied to international NGOs, which were seen as corrupt and biased in their treatment of refugees.⁴

These perceptions are compounded by the deteriorating conditions of life for Syrian refugees over time,⁵ as donor fatigue and high levels of food insecurity⁶ further affect this already vulnerable population.

Some Lebanese nationals saw Syrian refugees as disproportionately benefiting from international aid and attention, including housing subsidies, cash stipends, employment opportunities and basic health-care services, while disadvantaged local communities did not receive such treatment. These experiences of inequality heighten perceptions of threat, with more than 90 per cent of the nationals surveyed reporting refugees as a symbolic threat. That is, they were seen as a threat to their basic value system and worldview as well as an economic threat by competing with locals for jobs and economic opportunities. More than two-thirds of the respondents also saw refugees as an existential threat. These elevated threat perceptions were accompanied by equally high levels of support for restrictive policies against Syrian refugees, including support for policies that violated basic human rights,⁷ such as the rights to freedoms of movement and assembly.

While there has been sporadic and isolated violence against Syrian refugees,⁸ no organized collective action against them has been recorded to date. Similarly, while isolated incidents between refugees and NGO workers have been noted, no collective action against NGOs has been recorded. Recent cuts to international aid, and the ongoing lack of action by Lebanon’s central government, contribute to worsening quality of life indices for both communities, indicating a significant human security threat for the country and the wider region.

Figure 26.1 Time series of Syrian refugees registered by cadastral in Lebanon as of 30 April 2014



Note: The boundaries, names and designations used on this map do not imply official endorsement of the United Nations or UNHCR. All data used were the best available at the time of map production.

Source: Refugee population and location data by UNHCR as of 30 April 2014.
http://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR_LBN_REF_MAP_2014_06_06_TimeSeries_RefugeesRegisteredInLebanon.pdf

Notes

1. An assessment of socio-economic conditions in some of the affected areas shows unemployment rates averaging around 40 per cent, with a range between 23 per cent and 58 per cent (Harb and Saab, 2014).
2. More than a million Lebanese nationals live below the poverty line, and it is estimated that a further 170,000 have been pushed into poverty by the unfolding Syrian crisis (World Bank, 2013).
3. The multi-stage multi-method study involved seventeen focus group discussions and a representative sampling survey of 600 Syrian refugees and 600 Lebanese nationals in some of the more affected areas.
4. A third of the refugees perceived aid organizations as corrupt, whereas 25 per cent of the refugees are not registered with the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and are therefore denied refugee status and assistance.
5. A 2015 assessment found that more than two-thirds of Syrian refugees are living below the minimum expenditure basket (MEB). This is worse than for 2014, when less than half of the refugees were assessed below the MEB. The MEB is a way of establishing poverty lines for refugee populations (<https://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=9098>).
6. Refugees' average monthly household income was a third of their Lebanese counterparts' average monthly income (Harb and Saab, 2014), while only 10 per cent of refugees were seen to have food security (Aktis, 2015).
7. About 90 per cent of the surveyed participants would support nightly curfews and restricted political freedom, while 75 per cent want Lebanon to stop receiving refugees and forbid those who are already there from finding a job.
8. There have been forced evictions in several areas (OCHA, 2015).

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