

Lebanon as another gatekeeper for the terrified EU?

from Anja Pilchowski together with Ahmad Ibrahim, May 2024



Since the Syrian uprising in 2011 and the consecutive brutal counterinsurgency, neighbouring Lebanon has become a place of refuge for Syrian refugees in their hope that the turmoil would calm soon and they will be able to return. However, even now, 13 years later, the majority of Syrian refugees are still in the hope of returning. But “[c]ompared to the findings of [the 2022] survey, an increasing percentage of respondents who do not intend to return to Syria in the next 12 months indicated a hope to move to a third country” (UNHCR, 2023, p. 2). People with Syrian nationality are now the largest group of migrants/refugees in Lebanon. However, the Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees (a.k.a. 1951 Refugee Convention) does not apply to Lebanon, since Lebanon has never ratified that very convention. The “[a]dmission to Lebanon is [therefore] currently restricted to those who can provide valid identity documents and proof that their stay in Lebanon fits into one of the approved reasons for entry. Seeking refuge in Lebanon is not among the valid reasons for entry, other than in exceptional circumstances approved by the Ministry of Social Affairs” (UNHCR Lebanon, n.d.). As a result of these circumstances, only ~800,000 of the 1.5 million Syrian refugees are registered with the UNHCR. Not being registered with the UNHCR usually means not being eligible to receive resources to meet the basic needs. And since 2019, Lebanon has been suffering from an exacerbating economic crisis that has gripped the country and led to a high percentage of the population living in precarious living conditions.

Not being able to make ends meet is not the only consequence for Syrian refugees. The situation in Lebanon today seems to be developing into a physical, mental and social death bringing zone for Syrian refugees. There are indications that a considerable number of Syrian refugees are being held in Lebanese prisons because they are accused of being 'terrorists' for opposing the Syrian state (Amnesty International, 2021). In addition, unregistered and registered Syrian refugees are often unlawfully extradited to Syria, even though Syria is not safe (OHCHR, 2024). And also so-called safe zones do not exist, even if European officials try to declare such. There are reports of Syrian people that were kidnapped, held hostage and only released after their relatives paid a ransom (The New Arab, 2023; The Washington Institute, 2024). Syrian people are deliberately targeted for extortions because the kidnappers are aware that they are i.a. afraid of being handed over to the Lebanese or Syrian authorities.

Recently, the crackdown on Syrians is upscaling. In March 2024, the NGO World House of Lebanon launched the smear campaign 'Undo the Damage' against Syrians, repeating the right-wing conspiracy narrative of population exchange by saying "[t]he first half [of the society in Lebanon] is made up of Syrian refugees, and the second half is of Lebanese wanting to migrate" (L'Orient Today, 2024). And most recently the General Directorate of General Security of Lebanon published eight points concerning the Syrian people residing on Lebanese ground (General Directorate of General Security, 2024). These include that Syrians who do not have a legal residency have to expose themselves to the border departments to settle their situation and leave the Lebanese territories. Lebanese citizens are requested to not employ, shelter or provide housing for Syrians who are residing in Lebanon sans papiers. Syrians who are registered with the UNHCR should not engage in any paid work outside the labour sectors designated for them. Residency permits are no longer renewed based on a housing lease contract or personal liability pledge. In the future, the renewal of residencies will be connected to a deposit of a financial guarantee, which most Syrians simply do not have. Lebanon will resume its organisation of so-called voluntary and safe return operations for Syrian nationals. And last but not least, all so-called offensive establishments and shops managed or invested by Syrians shall be closed and appropriate measures against anyone who employs foreign workers in violation of the residency system and the Labour Law shall be applied. These latest publications of the General Security have led to the fact that since then several raidings of workplaces and living spaces where Syrian people are suspected to be were conducted. It is like a legalised hunt for Syrian people now. They are the scapegoats of any maldevelopments in current Lebanon. Thorough investigations into the actions and decisions of the leading heads and employees of the state apparatus that might have led to the maldevelopments have not yet made it into the mainstream media.

All of the above aspects add up to the fact that the pressure on people with Syrian nationality is enormous. On 12 May 2024, the youth Syrian refugee B. W. Al-M. took his own life, because he was outworn by the daily struggles of being a Syrian refugee in contemporary Lebanon. He left the following words to his mother:

"يا أمي سمحني

الدنيا صعب علي أنني تعبت و الله"¹

(Dear mother, forgive me,

but this life is too hard for me. I swear I am tired.)

Others try to find ways to leave Lebanon in vain. Escaping Lebanon comes with many challenges that only a few are able to face, since the already marginalised people lack all the necessary resources, especially money. The most prominent migration route is currently the boat crossing via the Eastern Mediterranean to Cyprus, as leaving Lebanon via Syria is explicitly dangerous for Syrians and travelling by land is generally very restricted, i.a. because Turkey has closed its land border with Syria. Going on this maritime journey has several challenges. First of all, boats are most of the time unseaworthy. On 11 December 2023, a group of 85 people left from Lebanon by boat - the majority were Syrians. It was confirmed by relatives that they had left the Lebanese territorial waters, but since then, their whereabouts remain unknown. It is assumed that the human remains that washed up on the Turkish coast nearby Antalya in early 2024 belong to the people who left Lebanon in December 2023. But if people are able to make it autonomously to Cyprus or are rescued to Cyprus, they usually land in the Pournara or the Kofinou reception centre. Due to their incapacity to deal with the arrival of 2,000 Syrians in the first three months of 2024, the Cypriot authorities have decided mid-April 2024 to discontinue the processing of asylum applications of Syrian nationals (ECRE, 2024). Furthermore, the 225-km-long Lebanese maritime border is monitored by the maritime component of the UNIFIL which i.a. German troops are tasked with (The Federal Government of Germany, 2022), and the maritime border of Europe is hyper-surveilled by Frontex in cooperation with national authorities. Thus, once discovered, Lebanese and e.g. Cypriot authorities try to do everything in their power to hinder the movements of people. This happens with pushbacks, pullbacks, non-rescues and driftbacks (The Public Source, 2023). On 17 April 2024 several boats attempted to reach Cyprus via boat from Lebanon. All the boats were forced to return since Cypriot authorities refused to rescue the people on the boat and even intimidated them. And Dutch authorities together with the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) are aiming to establish Lebanon as a driver of regional border management with a project that supports Lebanese border agencies in professionalisation of border management capacities. The project started in March 2022 and will last until February 2025 (ICMPD, n.d.). And now,

¹ NB: We have not changed the last words in order to recite them exactly as the person left them.

against the systemic, discriminatory and misanthropic violence against Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the President of the European Commission, Ursula von der Leyen, together with the Cypriot minister Nikos Christodoulides announced on 2 May 2024 "a financial package of EUR 1 billion for Lebanon that would be available from this year until 2027. (...) [This financial package shall contribute to] security and stability (...) [and] will support the Lebanese armed forces as well as the general and internal security forces. This will be mainly focused on providing equipment, training and the necessary infrastructure for border management. In addition, it would be very helpful for Lebanon to conclude a working arrangement with Frontex, particularly on information exchange and situational awareness" (European Commission, 2024).

As the number one donor, the EU recognised very early on that Lebanon plays a crucial role in keeping migrants out of Europe. Therefore, the EU has provided



significant funding since 2011 to strengthen the resilience of the Lebanese state and improve the living conditions of refugees and vulnerable Lebanese, as well as to promote economic growth and employment (Andreou, 2022). However, as the previous elaborations have shown, the situation for Syrian refugees has not improved at all since 2011 - on the contrary. And in view of the recently concluded deal between the EU and Lebanon, do we have to expect situations similar to those in Tunisia or Libya? Where local authorities and militia do the dirty work for the racist Fortress Europe and brutalise Black refugees and migrants on a daily basis. And in general, if Syrians cannot go back to Syria, cannot stay in Lebanon and cannot leave to Europe, what shall they do?

Human rights and freedom of movement cannot only apply to a privileged few. They must be indisputably accessible to all.

Photos by Anja Pilchowski

Tripoli. View of the Qobbeh neighbourhood, where many Syrian refugees live

Port of Tripoli

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