



# **The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon**

**NRC Lebanon Field Assessment  
Aarsal and Wadi Khaled**

**NRC Lebanon  
December 2013**

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## NRC Lebanon Field Assessment – Aarsal and Wadi Khaled

Researched and written by the Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance Programme, NRC Lebanon, December 2013



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**Cover photograph:** Christian Jepsen. Picture of Aarsal in the northern Bekaa, eastern Lebanon.

## **Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)**

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent, international, humanitarian non-governmental organisation which provides assistance, protection and contributes to durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced people worldwide.

### **NRC Lebanon**

NRC has been working in Lebanon since 2006, and has grown significantly since the start of the Syrian crisis. Through its core activities of Shelter, ICLA and Education, NRC provides humanitarian assistance and protection to refugees from Syria, host communities, as well as to the Palestinian and Iraqi refugees already living in the country.

### **Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programme, Lebanon**

In March 2012, NRC commenced its ICLA programme in Lebanon to provide information, counselling and legal assistance to refugees and displaced persons in Lebanon. Currently, ICLA has two main areas of work: (1) the Palestinian refugee response; and (2) the Syrian response.

ICLA activities throughout Lebanon include awareness-raising, legal information, legal counselling, referrals to other service providers, training, legal research and strengthening the provision of legal aid by working with lawyers, jurists and law students.

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## 1. Executive Summary

According to Lebanese national law, without the required entry or stay documentation to be in Lebanon, refugees from Syria are considered to be ‘illegally’<sup>1</sup> present, giving them limited legal status in Lebanon. Having such limited legal status in Lebanon often has a negative impact on the lives of refugees.

Between June and October 2013, NRC conducted a qualitative assessment to identify and better understand the consequences of having limited legal status for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. The assessment focused on two geographical areas where there are high numbers of refugees with limited legal status: (1) Wadi Khaled, in the Akkar region of northern Lebanon; and (2) Aarsal, in the northern Bekaa, eastern Lebanon. The research methodology used by NRC included in-depth semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions comprised of refugees with limited legal status living in these areas, as well as interviews with service providers and local authorities. Peer review workshops with field-based humanitarian protection actors were conducted in both locations and have informed the recommendations of this report.

### A. Limited Legal Status in Lebanon

Syrian refugees<sup>2</sup> with limited legal status in Lebanon fall into three main categories: (1) refugees who have entered Lebanon through unofficial border crossings and do not possess any identity documents; (2) refugees who have entered through unofficial border crossings but have identity documents; or (3) refugees who entered Lebanon through official border crossings but have not renewed their Lebanese residency permit once it has expired.

During the assessment, refugees with limited legal status frequently reported that they felt they were not able to enter through official borders or to renew their residency permits in Lebanon. Refugees who had no identity documents or who had entered Lebanon unofficially gave reasons primarily related to the violent, dangerous and chaotic situation that prevails in Syria to explain why they were unable to enter Lebanon through an official border. Those refugees who had not renewed their residency permit overwhelmingly cited the high annual cost (USD200 per person aged 15 years’ old and above) of renewal as the reason for not having done so.

### B. Consequences of a Limited Legal Status

Refugees in this situation in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal face many challenges as a consequence of their limited legal status. The most significant challenges they face are set out below.

#### *i. Restrictions on Freedom of Movement*

Refugees with limited legal status reported being too scared or unable to cross checkpoints to access basic services, including registration with UNHCR and secondary healthcare. In particular, many refugees living in Wadi Khaled mentioned that they were systematically turned back at the Chadra checkpoint (the main checkpoint connecting Wadi Khaled to the rest of Lebanon) because they could not provide proof of legal stay

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<sup>1</sup> Throughout the report any term related to ‘legality’ refers to the position under Lebanese law and not necessarily international law.

<sup>2</sup> The assessment focused exclusively on refugees from Syria who are Syrian nationals and not other nationalities, such as Palestinian or Iraqi.

or identity documents. Some of them mentioned that they were threatened with detention and even deportation if they tried to cross the checkpoint again. In addition to the increasing risk of arrest and detention when attempting to cross official checkpoints, refugees living in Aarsal expressed general concerns about being stopped or kidnapped at non-official checkpoints in the Bekaa region.

## *ii. Legal Challenges*

According to the official birth registration procedures for non-Lebanese in Lebanon, Syrian nationals with limited legal status cannot complete the process of registering the births of their newborn babies. Not registering the births of Syrian children born in Lebanon makes it extremely difficult for people to prove the identity of their babies and the parental links to them. The lack of birth registration may also pose a serious problem for an eventual return to Syria through official borders.

Syrian refugees with limited legal status reported that, due to a fear of being arrested, they do not approach the police to report crimes or incidents. Not being able to approach the police or other official bodies may expose Syrian refugees in Lebanon to further risks of abuse, violence and exploitation. This suggests that access to justice for Syrian refugees with limited legal status is compromised.

## *iii. Difficulties in Accessing Basic Services*

Refugees with no identity documents reported facing difficulties in registering with UNHCR. These refugees recognised this as a serious obstacle to accessing basic services, such as food assistance and healthcare. Interviewed refugees also mentioned specific challenges concerning access to primary and secondary healthcare; income generating activities; and shelter support because of their inability to provide proof of identity and/or legal stay in Lebanon.

In an attempt to overcome these challenges, refugees often feel compelled to adopt strategies or coping mechanisms which expose them and their families to harm. These strategies include paying bribes to obtain documentation; paying for forged documentation; using other people's documents; or going back to Syria to get the required documents.

## 2. Recommendations

The following recommendations were informed by the assessment findings, NRC's field experience and the analysis of other humanitarian protection actors (including through the two peer review workshops facilitated by NRC) who work in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal.

### A. To the Government of Lebanon

The Lebanese Government should develop a **comprehensive refugee policy grounded in refugee rights and clear and appropriate administrative procedures** for refugees from Syria in Lebanon. The General Security office in particular could issue a circular regarding the specific situation of refugees from Syria. Refugees in Lebanon should not be considered as illegal or irregular migrants. More specifically:

- A clear procedure is needed so refugees who have entered through unofficial border crossings can regularise<sup>3</sup> their stay through accessing the Lebanese authorities. Currently, these refugees can apply for a petition of mercy (*Talab Istirham* in Arabic) to legalise their stay, but the petition is not regulated by law and is subject to the discretion of the General Security office.
- The fee for regularisation of stay for such refugees from Syria should be waived. Currently, if the petition of mercy is approved, each refugee has to pay a fine of LBP950,000 (around USD630 per person aged 15 years' old and above).
- The fee for the renewal of stay for refugees from Syria should be waived. Currently, the fee is LBP300,000 or USD200 per person aged 15 years' old and above.
- The UNHCR registration document should be regarded as valid documentation to provide proof of legal stay and proof of identity in Lebanon for refugees from Syria.
- More flexibility is needed in accepting alternative documentation from refugees who may not have a Syrian ID card or a Syrian passport, such as the UNHCR registration document or Lebanese municipality-issued documents, in order for their stay in Lebanon to be considered 'legal' under Lebanese law and in order for them to register the births of their children in Lebanon.

### B. To Local Authorities and Other Local Actors (including Mukhtars)

Until the above regulations and procedures are in place, local Lebanese authorities and other relevant local actors should recognise - and have more flexibility on - the documents provided by refugees from Syria in order for them to be able to access basic services and move freely. More specifically:

- The UNHCR registration document should be considered as proof of identity in order to cross checkpoints and approach the police.
- Local health service providers and hospitals should waive the need for documentation from refugees. They should accept the UNHCR registration document to issue birth notification documents.

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<sup>3</sup> Obtain a valid residency permit.

### C. To International Donors to Lebanon

International donors should **advocate** to the Lebanese government and provide **adequate capacity support** so that:

- The Government of Lebanon establishes a **comprehensive refugee policy grounded in refugee rights** to uphold the rights of all refugees, including those with limited legal status. Refugees in Lebanon should not be considered as illegal or irregular migrants.
- The Government of Lebanon establishes clear and appropriate **administrative procedures** which uphold the rights of all refugees in Lebanon.
- A system is established so that refugees from Syria should not have to regularise their stay in Lebanon as though they are illegal or irregular migrants.

### D. To UNHCR and Other Humanitarian Actors

UNHCR should support the Lebanese authorities to establish a **comprehensive refugee policy grounded in refugee rights** and appropriate **administrative procedures** for refugees. This should ensure that refugees with limited legal status can enjoy the following rights: freedom of movement, access to justice and access to services which enable refugees to meet their basic needs.

Practically, this should prioritise the **acceptance of alternative documentation** as proof of legal stay and identification by the Lebanese authorities, such as the UNHCR registration document.

UNHCR should strengthen its **monitoring and analysis** on specific priority issues affecting refugee rights. This can also be done through consistent protection monitoring. The priorities should be:

- Data collection and trend analysis on violations of refugee rights at checkpoints. This should be used for advocacy with the Government of Lebanon on refugee movement restrictions. Part of the humanitarian protection response could be to increase humanitarian presence at the most problematic checkpoints with the aim of deterring violations against refugees.
- Data collection and trend analysis on refugee registration rates (identifying the reasons why some refugees are not trying to register with UNHCR), arrest and detention (duration and reasons) and any type of deportation measures.
- Systematise feedback to the humanitarian community and especially protection actors on UNHCR advocacy efforts towards the Government of Lebanon to strengthen refugee policies and practices. If progress is not being made, then alternative advocacy strategies should be explored. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) should play a stronger role, which can be complementary to UNHCR advocacy efforts. More systematic negotiation and mediation with stakeholders at sub-regional and national level is required.

UNHCR and other humanitarian actors should strengthen their **information and services outreach** to refugees. This includes:

- UNHCR should establish a helpline system where refugees can report protection threats and challenges. Such reports would need to be followed up with a response.



- Humanitarian actors, including UNHCR, should prioritise addressing gaps in basic services where refugee movement restrictions are more severe, especially in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal. More efforts should be made to ensure that basic services are accessible to refugees from Syria based on humanitarian need (needs-based) and not based on their legal documentation (documentation-based).
- Humanitarian actors, including UNHCR, should increase the provision of mobile services to places where serious movement restrictions for refugees exist, especially in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal, based on contextual 'do no harm' analysis. Such mobile services should prioritise UNHCR refugee registration, NFI distributions and health services, including secondary healthcare. Mobile humanitarian services in such areas should also target refugees who have not registered with UNHCR.

**Operational humanitarian protection actors** should:

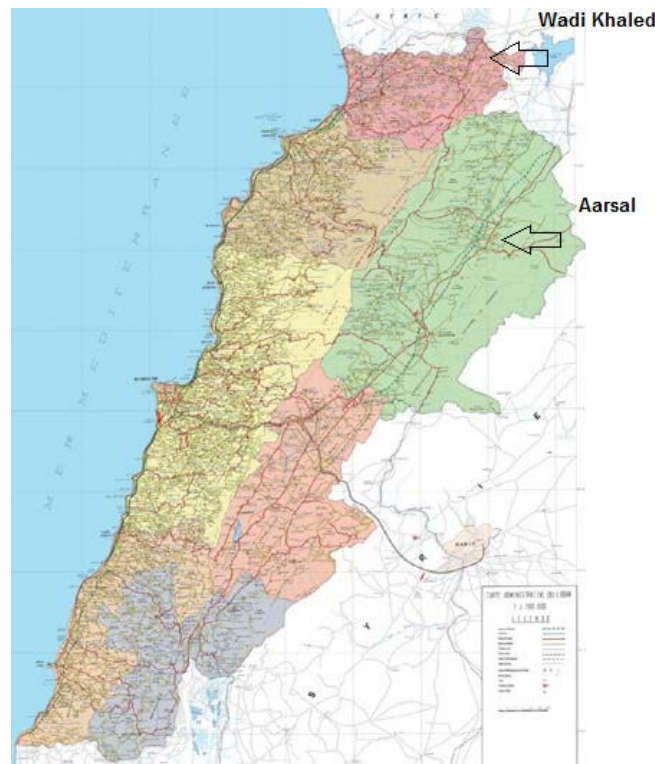
- Systematically collect and share analysis on the challenges faced by refugees with limited legal status in Lebanon and advocate to decision makers and policy makers to establish mechanisms which protect the rights of refugees of limited legal status.
- Provide humanitarian assistance and protection solely on the basis of need and not on the basis of the documentation held by refugees.
- Ensure access to services for those whose freedom of movement is limited due to their limited legal status, in particular through the systematisation of help lines and outreach activities.

### 3. Methodology of the Assessment

NRC employed several primary data collection tools in conducting the assessment. These included individual interviews and focus group discussions with affected refugees and individual key informant interviews. Through these mixed research methods, qualitative data was collected on the challenges faced by Syrian refugees with limited legal status. The assessment was carried out in two geographical areas: (1) Wadi Khaled, northern Lebanon, with the main assessment work conducted between 3 June and 3 July 2013; and (2) Aarsal in the Bekaa, eastern Lebanon, with the main assessment work conducted between 3 July and 3 October 2013. The extended period over which data was collected in Aarsal was due to the poor security situation in the area, which prevented the NRC assessment team from accessing Aarsal throughout this period and forced them to interrupt their work repeatedly.

#### A. Location Selection

Wadi Khaled and Aarsal<sup>4</sup> were chosen for the following reasons: (a) their immediate proximity to the Lebanese-Syrian border; (b) a dense refugee population since the beginning of the crisis; and (c) based on NRC's field-based experience in these areas, prior knowledge of the multiple challenges that refugees living there face due to their limited legal status. A limited number of additional interviews were conducted in Central Bekaa, in order to compare the situation of refugees living inside and outside of Aarsal, in particular concerning the fear of being exploited or of violence by non state-actors.



**Map 1<sup>5</sup>: Wadi Khaled, Akkar, North governorate and Aarsal, Bekaa governorate, Lebanon**

<sup>4</sup> According to a DRC report published in September 2013, 86% of Aarsal refugees who entered Lebanon in September 2013 did so unofficially.

<sup>5</sup> Map credited to the Permanent Mission of Lebanon to the United Nations

## B. Research Methods

Given that the purpose of the assessment was to gain a comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by refugees with limited legal status, and their coping mechanisms, the assessment used qualitative, in-depth interviews (each lasting between 1 to 1.5 hours) instead of raw quantitative or statistical data collection methodologies. While focus group discussions were also used, the assessment team prioritised individual in-depth interviews due to the sensitivity of the subject matter, and the risks foreseen with sharing sensitive personal information in a group setting.

It is worth noting that a few refugees with limited legal status, who were approached during the assessment expressed fear and reluctance to discuss the issue in part, or in its entirety. They required continuous assurances regarding confidentiality of their information, the purpose of the assessment, and that no personal data would be shared or could lead to their identification by the authorities. This reaction strongly indicates the state of fear in which affected refugees are living.

In Wadi Khaled and Aarsal, four focus groups were held, (two in each location, one with males and one with females) and 66 in-depth, individual and confidential interviews were conducted (30 in Wadi Khaled and 36 in Aarsal). All 66 individual interviewees<sup>6</sup> had previously approached NRC for assistance on legal status and agreed to being interviewed for the assessment. 28 key informant interviews were conducted in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal with representatives of the humanitarian community, private sector bodies, local institutions and authorities. The key informant interview findings were used to corroborate trends identified through the in-depth interviews with refugees.

Despite the relatively small sample size, the findings of this assessment are consistent with NRC's field experience in Wadi Khaled, Aarsal and in other parts of Lebanon. NRC ICLA has been working in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal since May 2012. Over this period, refugees in these areas have been approaching the NRC ICLA programme for assistance, often to request support with specific difficulties they face due to their limited legal status. As confirmed through the two peer review workshops facilitated by NRC, the findings of this assessment are also consistent with the field experience of other humanitarian protection actors.

Refugees for the individual interviews were selected to include a diverse range of age groups, both genders and different lengths of stay in Lebanon. Out of the interviewed refugees, 30% had entered Lebanon less than two months before being interviewed, 30% between two months and one year before, and 40% more than one year before. NRC identified individuals from three (potentially overlapping) target sub-populations: (a) Syrian refugees who entered through unofficial border crossings but hold the required identity documentation to enter Lebanon; (b) refugees who entered through unofficial border crossings and do not have the required identity documentation to enter Lebanon; and (c) refugees who entered through official border crossings but who have not reviewed their legal stay in Lebanon.

The assessment was unable to triangulate its findings by reference to secondary data, due to a lack of available data, such as prior studies on the same issue. The quantitative data which is mentioned in the report was provided by the Danish Refugee Council (DRC) on the basis of its Newcomers' Project, which covers refugees who entered Lebanon between 1 January and 31 October 2013.

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<sup>6</sup> All quotes included in this report, unless otherwise stated, are from the assessment and are unofficial translations from Arabic to English. All names used are not the real names of assessed participants, which have been changed to protect identities.

## 4. Background

Since the beginning of the Syria conflict in March 2011, more than one million refugees from Syria have been forced to flee to Lebanon<sup>7</sup>. This number is set to continue increasing with an estimated four to five thousand persons entering Lebanon on a daily basis<sup>8</sup>. Thousands of these refugees have not been able to enter through official entry points and regularise their stay by obtaining the required legal stay documents. Thousands of those who do enter officially are later not able to renew their legal stay in Lebanon.

According to Article 14(1) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights which Lebanon has incorporated into its Constitution, 'Everyone has the right to seek and to enjoy in other countries asylum from persecution'.<sup>9</sup> This means that individuals entering a third country to seek asylum should not be considered to be illegally present. However, the Lebanese authorities consider persons fleeing the Syrian conflict to be illegally present in Lebanon if they have entered through an unofficial crossing point or have not been able to renew their residency permit in accordance with Lebanese national law<sup>10</sup>. These persons find themselves in a grey area as regards Lebanese law where they are not, to date, subject to physical deportation (although NRC has received increasing reports of refugees receiving 'self-deportation' orders requiring them to leave Lebanon within a stated time). However, refugees from Syria are treated, by the Lebanese authorities, as irregularly present and may be subject to criminal proceedings that could result in deportation.

For the purpose of this assessment and report, refugees who do not have 'legal' entry or stay in Lebanon are described as 'persons with limited legal status in Lebanon' instead of being described as merely 'illegal', with the intention of recognising the limitation of their rights in practice, whilst not ignoring the international principles that underline refugee rights.

Syrian refugees with limited legal status in Lebanon encompass the following groups of people:

- (1) Refugees who entered through unofficial border crossings, but hold the required identity documentation to enter Lebanon<sup>11</sup>;**
- (2) Refugees who entered through unofficial border crossings, and do not have the required identity documentation to enter Lebanon; and**
- (3) Refugees who entered through official border crossings, but who have not renewed their legal stay in Lebanon.**

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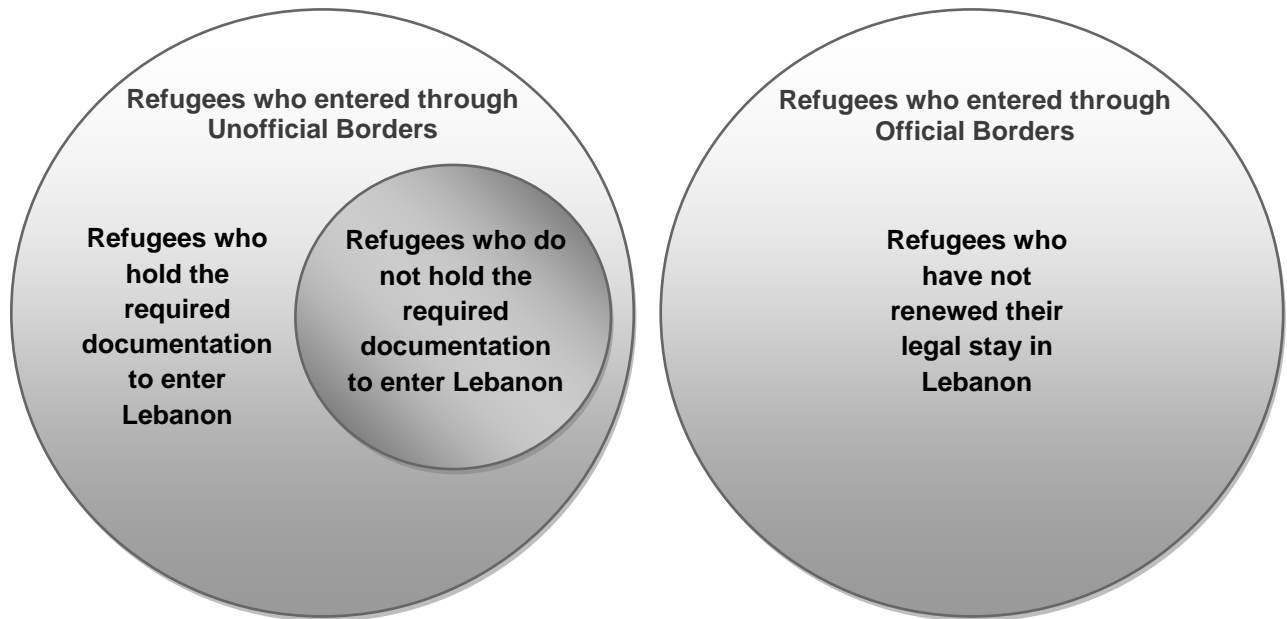
<sup>7</sup> - The number identified by UNHCR up to 5 December 2013 is 835,735 Syrian refugees. This number does not include refugees who are not identified by UNHCR for registration. It only includes Syrian refugees, not Palestinian refugees or Lebanese returnees from Syria. However, the figure the Lebanese government is using is over 1.000.000 refugees.

<sup>8</sup> As mentioned on page 3 of the Syria Regional Response Plan 5.

<sup>9</sup> Incorporated in the Lebanese Constitution in 1990.

<sup>10</sup> In Lebanon, the entry and exit of foreigners is primarily regulated by a law from 1962 (Law Regulating the Entry and Stay of Foreigners in Lebanon and their Exit from the Country issued on 10.07.1962), which states the conditions for entry into and exit from the country as well as the legal provisions for asylum.

<sup>11</sup> Lebanese law requires that Syrian nationals are in possession of an ID card or a passport when entering the country at one of the GSO checkpoints. Art. 7 of Decision Nr. 320 issued on 02.08.1962, Sader electronic publications of the Lebanese legislation.



**Figure 1: The three categories of Syrian refugees with limited legal status**

The DRC Newcomers' Project showed that, between January and October 2013, from a total of 43,225 households assessed throughout Lebanon, 10,816 Syrian households (25%) entered Lebanon through unofficial border crossings. The project did not assess the number of those who have crossed through official border crossings and have not renewed their legal stay in Lebanon. There is currently no available data for such refugees.

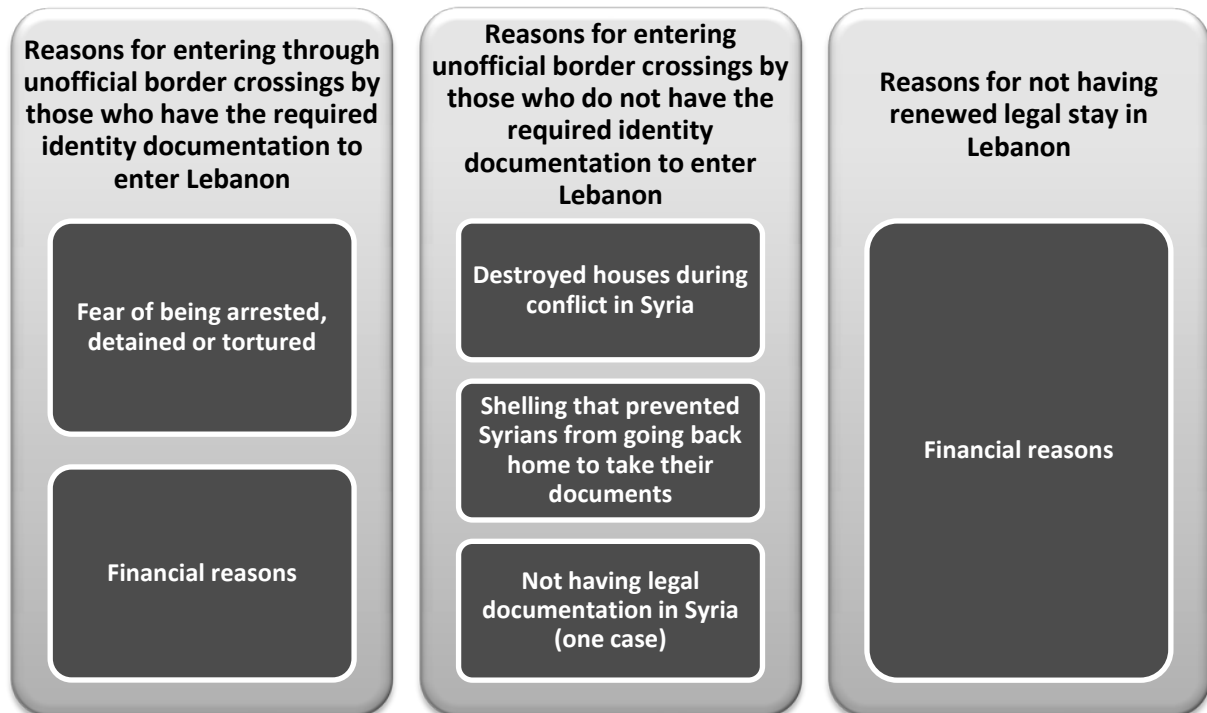
Refugees are facing a significant number of additional challenges related to not having 'legal' entry or stay in Lebanon. As the number of refugees who have limited legal status increases, there is a growing concern that their weak legal situation (with limited legal protection) under Lebanese law could lead to a substantial increase in the vulnerability of affected refugees. Despite the general indicators highlighting these issues, there is a lack of qualitative and concrete information on the situation of these specific categories of individuals.

The purpose of this report is to set out the findings of the assessment and shed some light on the numerous challenges faced by refugees who have limited legal status in Lebanon, their coping mechanisms and the related risks that such strategies can expose them to. The report also puts forward some recommendations to concerned actors to address the identified challenges faced by refugees with limited legal status.

## 5. Reasons for Limited Legal Status

This section details the reasons for Syrian refugees having limited legal status in Lebanon, based on the NRC assessment and the extensive data that has been collected by DRC in the frame of its Newcomers' Project between January and October 2013.

For the purposes of this report, the term 'legal documentation' for Syrian refugees refers to being in possession of either a Syrian identity card or a Syrian passport.



**Figure 2: Most commonly cited reasons by Syrian refugees for having limited legal status in Lebanon**

### A. Refugees who entered through Unofficial Border Crossings but who hold the Required Identity Documentation to enter Lebanon

Despite having the required identity documents, some refugees interviewed still entered through unofficial border crossings. Most of those refugees mentioned the fear of being arrested at the Syrian border and the fear of being detained, arrested or tortured as the main reason for not entering through official border crossings.

*"I came to Lebanon illegally because I was worried that I might be detained if I entered legally."*

'Majd', a 31-year old male refugee in Aarsal

Many interviewed refugees mentioned that because of intensive shelling on the road, they had to enter Lebanon in a rush through the closest border crossing and could not access the official entry point. Others mentioned that, although they had their identity documents, members of their family did not and, therefore, they could only all cross into Lebanon together by entering through an unofficial border crossing.

A few of the interviewed refugees mentioned the financial reason as the main reason why they did not cross through an official border crossing. Every Syrian has to pay 550 Syrian Lira<sup>12</sup> at the border to exit Syria.

***“Bombing started in the area and I wanted to leave right away. We arrived at 2:00 a.m. at night.”***

‘Salem’, a 30-year old male refugee in Aarsal

## **B. Refugees who entered through Unofficial Border Crossings, and do not have the Required Identity Documentation to enter Lebanon**

Among the refugees who entered Lebanon through unofficial border crossings are those without any identity documentation. Among the individuals assessed under the DRC Newcomers’ Project, approximately 36% of Syrians who entered Lebanon through unofficial border crossings did so because they lacked the documents required to pass through the official border crossing.

Most of those refugees stated that the main reason for entering through unofficial border crossings was that their documents had been lost when their homes were destroyed during armed attacks and shelling in Syria. Some of those interviewed mentioned that they ran away when shelling started and then they could not go back to their homes to retrieve any belongings (including documents).

It is worth noting that many of the refugees mentioned that they would not have entered through official border crossings even if they had identity documentation because they feared being arrested and detained in Syria while trying to cross the border. Only one interviewed refugee mentioned he did not have identity documentation because he had never obtained it in Syria.

***“My family consists of nine members. The cost of getting an exit coupon from Syria is 550 Syrian Lira per person. I cannot pay such a sum.”***

‘Amna’, a 33-year old female refugee and head of household, in Wadi Khaled

<sup>12</sup>- Which is equivalent to USD3.92/individual based on the official SYP-USD exchange rate on 3 December 2013. It was equivalent to USD11.7/individual before the Syrian crisis.

### C. Refugees who entered through Official Border Crossings, but who have not renewed their Legal Stay in Lebanon

Syrians who have managed to enter Lebanon through official crossing points are granted a free entry coupon for an initial six-month stay in Lebanon. At the time of writing, due to the crisis in Syria, revised procedures by General Security allow Syrians to renew this coupon (at a General Security Office) every six months without leaving the country. This procedure is free the first time (after six months of stay) but after one year the fees are LBP300,000 (equivalent to USD200) per individual, for each person who is 15 years' old and above. The same process applies each year in Lebanon - six months for free and then the following six months for LBP300,000 per individual (equivalent to USD200).

For an average family of five, the cost for renewal can reach USD1,000 at the end of the first year of stay, which is prohibitively expensive for most Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Refugees who have entered Lebanon through official border crossings mostly mentioned the lack of financial resources as the main reason for not renewing their legal stay after one year.

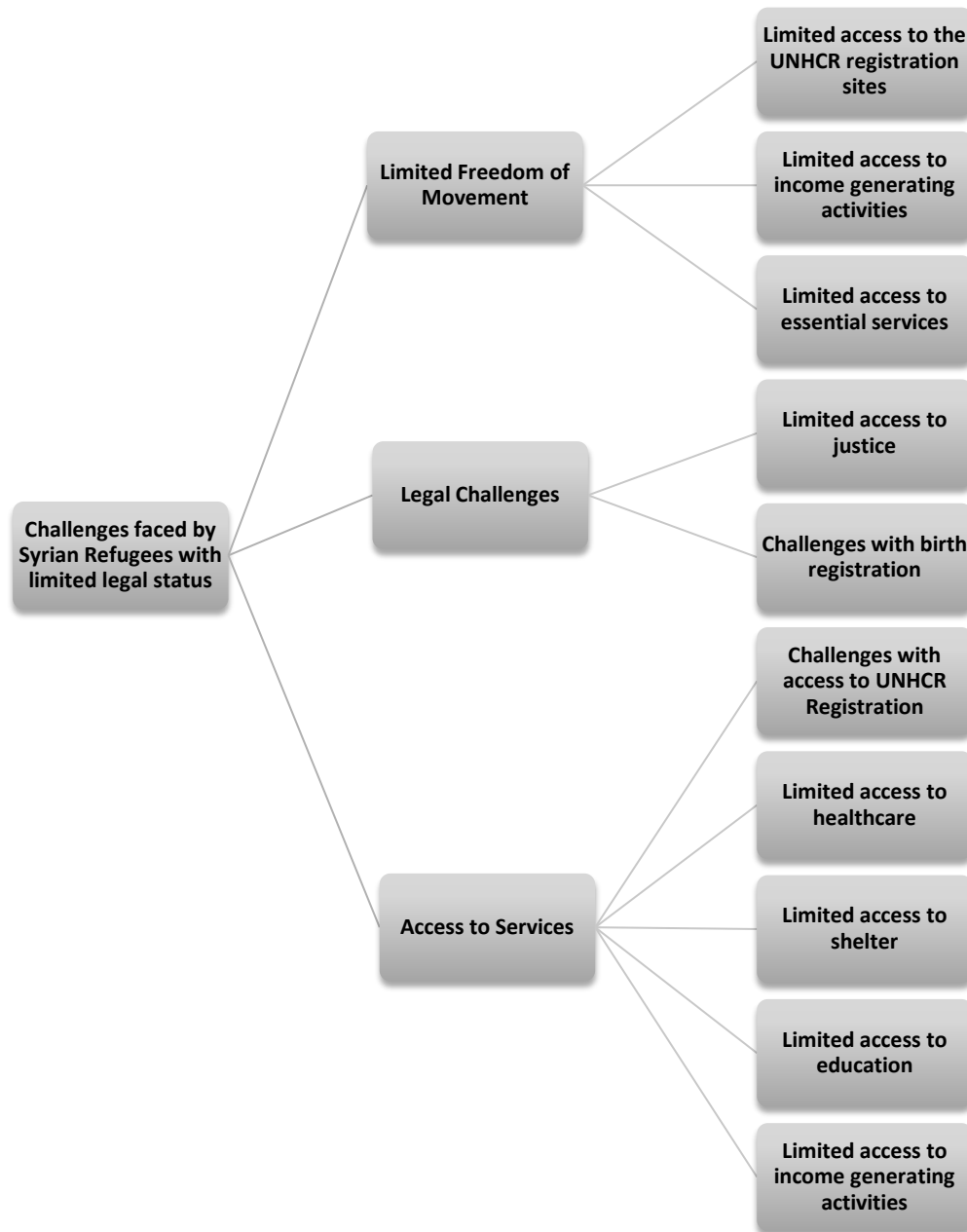
***“Time passed and I was not able to renew my stay because I was unable to pay the cost.”***

‘Mostafa’, a 34-year old male refugee in Saadnayel



## 6. Challenges faced by Syrian refugees with Limited Legal Status in Lebanon

Having limited legal status has consequences on the lives of refugees in Lebanon, as elaborated in this section. The subsequent impact on freedom of movement, legal issues and access to services will be discussed separately.



**Figure 3: Challenges faced by Syrian refugees with limited legal status**

## A. Freedom of Movement

Under Lebanese law, there are possible criminal sanctions for non-Lebanese who are considered to be ‘illegally’ present in Lebanon. Since Syrian refugees are not officially considered asylum seekers or refugees by the Lebanese government, criminal sanctions do – at least in theory – apply to them.

From its Newcomers’ Project between January and October 2013, DRC identified 1,448<sup>13</sup> refugee households who had entered through unofficial border crossings in Wadi Khaled and 1,536<sup>14</sup> households in Aarsal. These numbers do not include those who entered through official border crossings but have not renewed their legal stay. One reason NRC selected Wadi Khaled and Aarsal as locations for the assessment is because many refugees have approached the respective NRC field teams and reported issues about restrictions of movement linked to their limited legal status.

Permanent checkpoints (usually official) in Lebanon are often situated at district level borders while ad hoc checkpoints can be found in a variety of locations. The presence of frequent checkpoints may limit the movement of those without identity documentation or any proof of their legal stay in Lebanon. In order to access Wadi Khaled from the rest of the Akkar region, a specific joint Lebanese Army and General Security checkpoint has to be crossed either at Chadra or at Akroum village. The checkpoint at Chadra village (‘Chadra checkpoint’) is the one most frequently used, including by public transport (buses) to access Wadi Khaled. At both checkpoints, individuals crossing, in particular those identified as non-Lebanese, are usually asked to show their identity documents and proof of their legal stay. For Aarsal, in order to access the nearest hospital or the UNHCR registration site, several checkpoints have to be crossed, starting with one located between Aarsal and Al Labwa.

### Restrictions in Wadi Khaled

Most of the interviewed refugees with limited legal status living in Wadi Khaled considered movement restrictions as the biggest challenge they face in their daily lives in Lebanon. This feeling is particularly strong among refugees who entered Lebanon over a year ago, and who report facing frequent problems because they are not able to leave Wadi Khaled due to their legal status.

Almost all the refugees that were interviewed in Wadi Khaled expressed a deep fear of being mistreated or arrested at the Chadra checkpoint if they try to leave the confined area of Wadi Khaled to reach other places in Lebanon. Most of them told NRC that would not try to cross the Chadra checkpoint unless they are in desperate need to access services.

Most of the interviewed refugees who tried to cross once and did not succeed mentioned that they had decided to attempt to cross as a last resort to access essential services: mostly to register with UNHCR or for medical reasons. Registration with UNHCR is considered as the main route to access basic services in Wadi Khaled and, therefore, many of the refugees interviewed said that they were forced to cross the checkpoint to

***“I cannot move outside of Wadi Khaled. I am imprisoned in Wadi Khaled.”***

‘Mahmoud’, a 27 year-old male refugee in Wadi Khaled

<sup>13</sup> From a total of 4,144 Syrian households assessed in Wadi Khaled.

<sup>14</sup> From a total of 1,975 Syrian households assessed in Aarsal.

be able to register with UNHCR in order to access services. Reinforcing this point is the fact that most of the interviewed refugees who were registered by UNHCR mobile registration units early in the crisis, reported never trying to cross the Chadra checkpoint.

A significant number of the interviewed refugees mentioned that they were able to cross the Chadra checkpoint and return successfully only once out of several attempts. Some of them crossed with Lebanese citizens so they were not asked to show any identity documents; a few of them mentioned that they had to pay a Lebanese bus driver an additional USD20 per person and that they had crossed the checkpoint without being stopped or asked for any documents. Among those who crossed without proof of legal stay or identity documents, there are numerous individual stories about harassment and threats from officers at the checkpoint. Refugees with limited legal status reported frequently being threatened with arrest or being sent back to Syria if they tried to cross again.

***“The officer told me: if you try to go outside of Wadi Khaled another time, we will detain you and deport you back to Syria.”***

Hassan, a 26-year old male in Wadi Khaled

Most of those who have been able to cross at least once are women, as it is reported that controls are less strict for women than for men. Some of these women nevertheless reported that they were threatened by the officer in charge of the checkpoint on their way back to Wadi Khaled who told them they would be detained if they tried to cross another time.

Many refugees mentioned that they had never left Wadi Khaled. Some of them explained that they were systematically turned back at the checkpoint while trying to pass because they could not provide any proof of legal stay and that, therefore, they never succeeded to cross. In addition, several interviewed refugees reported verbal mistreatment and threats at the checkpoint, which then discouraged them from trying to cross again.

The general fear of crossing the checkpoint to leave Wadi Khaled, as mentioned by all refugees interviewed, seems to be fuelled by the widespread stories and rumours of people being threatened at a checkpoint with arrest and/or deportation. These stories and persistent rumours about the checkpoints explain why refugees are scared of being detained if they cross the checkpoint. This fear is another obstacle to the refugees' freedom of movement, since its consequences are as strong as the physical obstacles already mentioned.

***“He said: If you try to pass another time, we will call the Syrian forces to come and take you.”***

Mostafa, a 17-year old male in Wadi Khaled

According to several interviewees, the way officers at the checkpoint deal with refugees (including those with limited legal status) and their attitude towards them depends a lot on the officer in charge at the checkpoint. This might explain the different experiences cited by those interviewed for the assessment.

Other than moving outside of Wadi Khaled, many refugees reported challenges in accessing Wadi Khaled after having entered Lebanon through Aarsal. A number of refugees have initially entered from Aarsal (across an unofficial border crossing) although their villages are closer to Wadi Khaled, mainly as violence and checkpoints on the Syrian side stopped them crossing directly to Wadi Khaled. Some refugees reported that after entering unofficially to Aarsal, they took a bus that drove them all the way to Tripoli and then to Wadi Khaled in order for them to stay as close as possible (on the Lebanese side of the border) to their villages in Syria. They reported having been initially stopped at the Chadra checkpoint and being turned back. According to some cases, they would finally manage to enter Wadi Khaled by paying bus drivers extra money so that they would facilitate their passage through the checkpoint.

### Restrictions in Aarsal

Freedom of movement is perceived as a major challenge for refugees living in Aarsal but in their case, the fear of being mistreated or arrested at the checkpoint is compounded by the threat of kidnapping (often based on religious or political motives) in other parts of the Bekaa Valley, outside of Aarsal and sometimes at unofficial check-points.

Similarly to the reports in Wadi Khaled, most of the refugees mentioned that they never go outside of Aarsal unless they have to access essential services.

Several refugees reported having been able to cross the official checkpoints in the Bekaa Valley without being arrested, mistreated or turned back. Others mentioned that they know about other refugees who have been arrested at a checkpoint in the Bekaa. A few even reported having been arrested because of their limited legal status, even if some of them reported trying to use their UNHCR registration document as proof of identity.

Despite knowing that some essential services can only be accessed by leaving Aarsal, some refugees decide not to take the risk of exposing themselves to potential threats by crossing official and unofficial checkpoints.

Unofficial checkpoints set up by armed groups affiliated with political parties are reported to be more frequent in the Bekaa and they, as well as the broader political diversity of the area, are perceived by refugees as a serious threat, regardless of their legal status. Accessing the rest of Lebanon from Aarsal requires crossing sectarian boundaries, which adds to the factors impeding refugees from moving outside of Aarsal.

Refugees frequently hear rumours and cases of other refugees being arrested, detained and kidnapped which cause increased fear for those

***“I never left Aarsal and I would never leave it because I might be arrested or kidnapped. I feel I am imprisoned in Aarsal.”***

‘Ahmad’, a 22-year old male refugee in Aarsal

***“Whatever services may be available outside of Aarsal, I would not take the risk and get into trouble at the checkpoints.”***

‘Farah’, a 28-year old female refugee and head of household in Aarsal

with limited legal status from going outside of Aarsal.

### *i. Consequences of Limited Freedom of Movement*

Restrictions on the freedom of movement are directly affecting other aspects of refugees' lives. To be able to access certain services, the respective UNHCR registration sites in Tripoli and Zahle, and a wider range of income generating activities, refugees need to be able to leave Wadi Khaled and Aarsal.

#### **Registration with UNHCR**

Refugees perceive registration with UNHCR as essential to accessing services. However, most of the refugees interviewed agree that the UNHCR Registration document has no effect on their freedom of movement and that it does not facilitate crossing checkpoints. A few refugees in Wadi Khaled even mentioned that officers at the checkpoint ripped up their UNHCR Registration document as they presented it to cross the checkpoint.

Registration with UNHCR is the entry point to different services, including medical care and food assistance and, therefore, is considered by refugees as essential.

The UNHCR registration site in North Lebanon is located in Tripoli and so refugees based in Wadi Khaled have to cross several checkpoints, including the Chadra checkpoint to get to Tripoli. The Bekaa UNHCR registration site is located in Zahle and so refugees based in Aarsal have to cross several checkpoints to get there. Most of the assessed refugees expressed that they are too afraid to cross any checkpoint to access UNHCR registration sites.

According to many of those interviewed, this fear is based on personal experiences and on widespread reports about the checkpoints.

Many interviewed refugees also described their experiences when crossing the Chadra checkpoint to register with UNHCR. Many of them reported being turned back more than once.

***“If the UN did not come to Aarsal I would have never registered. Seven of my family members are not registered with the UN because I fear passing on the road outside of Aarsal. I do not feel safe when I go outside of Aarsal because of the checkpoints and other things.”***

‘Fares’, a 65- year old male refugee in Aarsal

In order to register with UNCHR, many refugees reported doing whatever is necessary, which can sometimes mean adopting risky coping mechanisms, such as using other people's IDs, paying bribes or crossing the Chadra checkpoint unofficially.

However, a few refugees mentioned that they decided not to register with UNHCR because they were afraid to cross checkpoints. From the assessment and information collected from NRC field teams, this trend seemed to grow in September 2013 with the increase in arrests at official checkpoints and more interviewed refugees admitting that they would rather cancel their appointment with UNHCR than risk being arrested on their way to register.

Hesitation to cross and register with UNHCR, mainly based on the fear of being arrested or stopped at official and unofficial checkpoints, has also been noted to have been enhanced by the costs of transportation and the implementation of targeted assistance.

### **Other Challenges Related to Limited Freedom of Movement**

The restriction of their freedom of movement has a direct impact on the ability of refugees to access many basic rights.

#### **Healthcare**

There is no hospital in Wadi Khaled or in Aarsal. The closest hospital to Wadi Khaled is in Qubayat after the Chadra checkpoint and the closest hospitals to Aarsal are in Hermel and Baalbek, after checkpoints. While it was reported that seriously wounded or sick individuals can cross checkpoints in Red Cross ambulances without having to provide proof of legal stay or identity papers, other refugees who need to reach hospital reported difficulties that affect their ability to get the medical care they need, for instance at the Chadra checkpoint.

***“My son needs surgery. I usually take a Lebanese ID from one of the neighbours to cross the checkpoint to get medical care. I have no other options.”***

‘Mariam’, a 44-year old female refugee in Wadi Khaled

#### **Livelihoods**

Most of the interviewed refugees reported that they cannot find jobs in Wadi Khaled due to the particularly difficult socio-economic situation, and that they would have gone outside of Wadi Khaled if they could move freely to look for job opportunities. A woman from Wadi Khaled reported having found a job in Qubayat but she was unable to commit to the job because she could not cross the Chadra checkpoint regularly because of her limited legal status.

#### **Shelter**

As for shelter options, Wadi Khaled and Aarsal are reported to be densely populated areas with very limited shelter options because of the increasing number of refugees. In Wadi Khaled, many interviewed refugees mentioned that they would like to be able to move out of Wadi Khaled to seek shelter solutions in other places.

***I really need to find a house outside of Wadi Khaled because life is unbearable here, but we cannot go out, we are imprisoned. We are living in stables here and paying high rents.”***

‘Rawad’, a 35-year old male refugee in Wadi Khaled

In Aarsal, despite the challenges for refugees with limited legal status, most refugees interviewed still said that staying there was preferable to living in another place where inhabitants and authorities may have different religious and political backgrounds to their own.

## **B. Legal Challenges**

This section elaborates on the specific challenges faced by refugees with limited legal status regarding their access to justice and legal documentation.

### *i. Challenges Related to Access to Justice*

In general, most of the interviewed refugees stated that they have never approached the police and would never consider doing so whatever may happen to them.

Some of them clearly explained that because of their limited legal status, they feared being arrested if they approached the police, while others mentioned that they did not think they would be protected by the Lebanese authorities because they are Syrians.

Only a few refugees with limited legal status mentioned they would approach the police in case of any emergency, although the general perception remained that, as refugees, they would certainly not get any benefit from the police.

The reluctance to approach the police is based on reports from refugees about difficult experiences faced by other Syrian nationals. For example, a 57 year-old refugee, whose daughter was missing, went to the police to seek assistance to find her. He reported that the police arrested him because he did not have a valid residency permit. He was then sent to Beirut where he was detained for a few days and then asked to pay LBP950,000 to be released and to regularise his stay temporarily.

If they are victims of any abuse or crime, refugees with limited legal status are not easily able to report or seek redress through official channels. This limited access to justice increases their vulnerability and their susceptibility to violence and exploitation.

***“Instead of helping me to find my daughter, the Lebanese government was unjust to me. If they let me keep looking for my daughter I would have found her. By taking me to prison they participated in keeping my daughter lost.”***

‘Ahmad’, a 57-year old male refugee in Aarsal

***“Women in general are more at risk to be abused and to be sexually harassed to get assistance, especially women living without men... especially that many of them are unregistered. We are hearing a lot about women who are being sexually harassed.”***

‘Sami’, a 30-year old male refugee in Wadi Khaled

### *ii. Challenges Related to Birth Registration*

Through its pilot project to facilitate and assist with the birth registration of Syrian children born in Lebanon, NRC has identified the lack of legal status as one major obstacle for Syrian refugees to exercise this essential right. Registering the birth of their child is indeed an essential step for parents to be able to prove the identity of their child

and the family links that unite them. The assessment confirmed these initial findings as none of the interviewed refugees who had given birth in Lebanon had been able to register the birth because they did not have proof of legal entry or stay.

Moreover, the lack of identity documentation might cause additional challenges for parents. To obtain a Birth Notification document from the hospital where the baby is delivered (which is the first step of the birth registration process), the ID cards of the parents is required. As a consequence, pregnant woman with no identity documentation who is admitted to a hospital cannot obtain the Birth Notification document because she has no proof of their identity. This document would allow them at least to prove that they have had a baby, which can assist with obtaining services, and is also an essential document to start the birth registration process. Furthermore, some women with no legal documentation feel forced to borrow other women's ID cards when they go to the hospital to give birth (this is discussed further in the section below on 'Coping Mechanisms').

These administrative requirements are a major obstacle for refugees with limited legal status to exercise their right to identity and protect their children and their family unity, and might have serious consequences (including the risk of statelessness or inability to return to Syria) in the future.

### **C. Access to Services**

Refugees without legal documentation face different challenges in accessing a wide range of basic services.

#### *i. Challenges Related to Registration with UNHCR*

Several refugees without legal documentation reported that, although they managed to get to the UNHCR registration site, they were not able to register with UNHCR or that only a part of their family was able to do so because they had no legal documentation. They explained the numerous consequences that this situation had on their living conditions.

The perception of many refugees is that undocumented refugees cannot register with UNHCR and for that reason some of them never try to contact UNHCR.

As a number of international organisations are mainly providing assistance to UNHCR-registered refugees, it is very challenging for undocumented and unregistered refugees to access services. During focus groups held for the assessment, refugees mentioned that unregistered women are particularly exposed to harassment and abuse when trying to obtain assistance because they are vulnerable and in need.

#### *ii. Challenges Accessing Healthcare*

Access to healthcare may be a challenge for refugees with limited legal status for three main reasons:



- a) Physical access to specific healthcare services and to the hospital may be restricted because of checkpoints. There are no hospitals in Wadi Khaled or Aarsal. The closest hospital to Wadi Khaled is in Qubayat, which is approximately 10 kilometres away from the Chadra checkpoint. As for Aarsal, the closest hospitals are located in Baalbek and Hermel, both of them more than 25 kilometres away from Aarsal. As explained above, refugees with limited legal status may face serious challenges in crossing checkpoints to go to the closest hospital.
- b) Refugees may be asked to show proof of legal documentation to benefit from medical services. Many primary healthcare centres are available in Wadi Khaled – a few of them run by international organisations and most of them by local organisations. Most of them offer services to Syrian refugees, whether registered or not, but do ask for identity documents. Undocumented refugees may, therefore, encounter difficulty in accessing basic health services. However, some organisations offer primary healthcare services to refugees regardless of their legal status and without requiring legal documentation, such as Doctors without Borders (MSF) and Amel Association, both operating in Aarsal.
- c) A certain number of health services, in particular secondary healthcare, are offered only to refugees registered with UNHCR. Those who were not able to register are required to pay the full cost for such services.

These challenges might force unregistered and/or undocumented refugees who need medical care to adopt certain coping mechanisms that might expose them to further risks.

### *iii. Challenges Accessing Shelter*

Neither identity documentation nor proof of legal stay is usually required to access shelter assistance provided by NRC in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal. However, interviewed refugees in Wadi Khaled reported challenges faced in renting a house or even a room with the minimum sanitary conditions because of their limited legal status.

Many of the interviewed refugees reported that landlords ask for identity documentation and sometimes for proof of legal stay before allowing any Syrian family to live in their houses. Undocumented interviewees reported having to fall back on particularly substandard shelter conditions because most landlords refuse to rent them a standard shelter if they cannot provide identity documents (despite this is not being a legal requirement).

Shelter solutions in Wadi Khaled are generally perceived as scarce, and many refugees would like to leave and find alternative housing. As mentioned before, this is particularly difficult for many of them because of the limitations to their freedom of movement.

***“We are living in a house without walls. We are living a very difficult life, and this is because we do not have documents. We cannot live in a better house because landlords ask for identity documents to host a Syrian family.”***

‘Rasha’, 50-year old female refugee in Wadi Khaled

#### *iv. Challenges Accessing Education*

Most of the interviewees did not perceive any challenges related to the limited legal status concerning formal or informal education. Legal documentation is not generally required to access informal education services provided by several NGOs in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal.

#### *v. Challenges Accessing Income-Generating Activities*

In addition to limited freedom of movement impeding access to livelihoods, other challenges concerning livelihoods were reported.

Refugees are sometimes required to present official documentation to their potential employers. A company confirmed that they ask for identity documentation before recruiting somebody. A site engineer from a construction company explained to NRC that identity documentation of employees is required by the Lebanese General Security officers who regularly visit the worksite and take copies of the IDs of employees.

Moreover, a significant number of refugees reported being subject to particular abuse in the context of their work due to their limited legal status. They are reportedly often not paid the agreed salary, as the employer knows the refugee is unlikely to take any legal action because of their legal status.

***“[The employer] told me:  
I will not give you  
anything, and go to the  
police if you would like  
to.”***

‘Fares’, a 24-year old male  
refugee in Wadi Khaled

## 7. Coping Mechanisms

To be able to overcome many of these challenges, refugees with limited legal status have adopted a range of coping mechanisms. This section discusses the coping mechanisms that were mentioned by interviewees during this assessment while briefly elaborating on the possible consequences of each.

### A. Returning to Syria

One of the most risky coping mechanisms that refugees adopt is going back to Syria in order to try to re-enter through an official border crossing and obtain valid legal stay, or in order to get their identity documents, which have been left behind. One interviewee reported such a case.

Another refugee reported that he first came through an unofficial border crossing but later returned to Syria and entered through an official crossing to obtain legal stay. Going back to Syria is extremely dangerous because of the security situation but also because of the increasing controls at the border that may prevent people from re-entering Lebanon. Only a very few refugees reported considering this option.

***“I know a woman who went back to get extracts for her children to be able to register them with UNHCR and never came back. No one knew anything about her since then. Her children are living in her sister’s house in \*\*\*\*\* village.”***

‘Jamila’, a 34-year old female refugee in Wadi Khaled

### B. Paying for Identity Documentation from Syria

A few refugees mentioned that they can pay for someone who is ‘well connected’ to get them specific identity documents from Syria, such as an individual civil extract or family booklet, which are reportedly legal as they are issued by the relevant Syrian government department. Only a limited number of interviewed refugees have done this because of the cost. Getting identity documentation is perceived as essential by undocumented refugees. However, in comparison with a refugee’s basic needs, such as shelter, food and healthcare, very few of those interviewed said they would be able to pay the high costs to obtain identity documents.

### C. Paying for Fake Documentation

Some refugees mentioned that they were offered the chance to buy fake documents (entry coupons, proof of marriage documents or Lebanese IDs) for costs between USD100 and USD400 per document. A very limited number of interviewed individuals mentioned that they were able to pay for these in order to cross checkpoints.

It was reported as well that some bus drivers distribute Lebanese documents to undocumented refugees to be able to cross the checkpoints. This was how a number of refugees who entered through Aarsal managed to travel to Wadi Khaled.

A few people reported having to use fake documentation after having been repeatedly sent away at official checkpoints.

Rumours were reported in Wadi Khaled about an individual who was detained for one month and received a deportation order<sup>15</sup> because he was caught at a checkpoint using fake documents. Although many refugees were aware of this possibility, the vast majority of them were not ready to use fake documents because of the high level of risk and costs.

The situation of refugees with limited legal status makes them more vulnerable and can expose them to significant risks. All of the interviewed refugees mentioned that, although they did not want to adopt illegal or risky coping mechanisms to overcome the challenges of having limited legal status, some of them felt they had no other choice.

#### D. Using Other People's Identity Documents

Many of the interviewed refugees mentioned using other people's documents successfully for several reasons, mostly to cross a checkpoint to go to the hospital or to get to the relevant UNHCR registration site.

People who allow refugees to use their documents are usually neighbours or relatives. None of the interviewed refugees reported having to pay to get other people's documents. Most of them were aware of the associated risks though they often reported feeling that they had no alternative:

This issue is particularly serious for pregnant women. As previously mentioned, undocumented pregnant women often consider that they have no alternative to borrow ID cards from Lebanese neighbours for their medical costs to be covered by the Lebanese Ministry of Health or to borrow from their Syrian neighbours to get assistance from local organisations who support pregnant women who have proof of identity.

When a woman is admitted to a hospital using the ID of another woman, the Birth Notification document may be issued in the name of the ID owner which could have serious legal implications. The fraudulent use of identity documents could lead to

***"I was in a bus coming from Tripoli to Wadi Khaled. Before arriving to the Chadra checkpoint, the bus driver asked us: who is Syrian and do not have a legal stay? Seven people raised their hands. He gave some of them Lebanese IDs and the others fake entry coupons."***

'Talal' a 41 year old male refugee in Wadi Khaled

***"I got food-poisoning and I had to borrow the ID of my neighbour to be able to cross the Chadra checkpoint and get to Qubayat hospital."***

'Saleh', 48-year old male refugee in Wadi Khaled

<sup>15</sup> A deportation order can be issued by the General Director of the General Security to notify a foreigner to leave the Lebanese territory by his own means within a period of time, as specified in the decision.

possible criminal sanctions. Also, the birth cannot be easily registered by the actual parents and the only legal proof of the newborn's identity would be invalid. Undocumented pregnant women who are registered with UNHCR reported not facing the same difficulties. They are being admitted and assisted by hospitals, assuming that they can pay the remaining percentage of the medical fees. In such cases, a UNHCR registration document can be used instead of an ID. A hospital manager interviewed by NRC confirmed that the hospital would be able to issue a birth notification based on a UNHCR registration document.

### **E. Paying Additional Costs for Transportation**

A number of refugees reported that some bus drivers ask them for additional money to pay if they have no legal documentation. Those drivers reportedly mentioned that the reason for the additional costs was that they were exposed to risks while transporting refugees without legal documentation through checkpoints. Refugees also reported that some bus drivers, if paid additional money by those who had no proof of legal stay, could make sure that they would cross the checkpoints without being stopped.

### **F. Avoiding the Checkpoint by using an Alternative road (Wadi Khaled)**

Crossing Chadra checkpoint was often reported as being more difficult for men than for women. Reportedly male heads of households were sometimes denied passing through the checkpoint while the rest of the family members were allowed to cross. In those cases, many refugees mentioned that they were obliged to bypass the checkpoints by taking a route through the hills to join their families. This alternative road takes around 90 minutes on foot and a few people were reportedly arrested while trying to cross it.

### **G. Obtaining Documentation from Syrian Mukhtars in Lebanon stamped by a Local Municipality and a Mukhtar (Wadi Khaled)**

A few refugees in Wadi Khaled mentioned getting a document from a Syrian Mukhtar. This document states that the document holder is a refugee from Syria who has lost his legal documents in the course of the Syrian crisis. In some cases, these documents are signed and stamped by Lebanese municipalities and Mukhtars, without any costs. However, this document was reportedly never accepted to access to services, to get registered with UNHCR or to cross the Chadra checkpoint.

### **H. Obtaining Documentation from Lebanese Local Authorities**

Refugees in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal mentioned getting legal documentation issued by municipalities and Lebanese Mukhtars to replace identity documentation for undocumented refugees. This paper often includes basic information such as refugee's names and the village of origin in Syria. Its intended use is as proof of identity. Mukhtars reportedly deliver this document for free, as a service for those who do not have legal documentation. However, a few refugees in Aarsal reported that they had to pay a small amount (around LBP2,000) to get this document from the Aarsal Municipality.

In practice, refugees in Wadi Khaled reported that this kind of document had little positive effect on their life – it was reportedly never accepted for crossing checkpoints. As for Aarsal, a few refugees reported being able to cross checkpoints and to access certain services by providing the document from the municipality; others said that it had not had positive effects on their freedom of movement.

## 8. Conclusion

Since the beginning of the Syrian crisis, hundreds of thousands of refugees have left Syria to enter Lebanon and seek safety. Some of these refugees have been able to bring their identity documents and to cross through official Lebanese borders. Other refugees, even with their identity documents, have been forced to cross through unofficial border crossings, possibly to avoid insecure parts of Syria or because some members of the family did not have identity documentation. In addition, many refugees were forced to leave their homes in Syria suddenly, often without their documentation and, subsequently, were unable to cross through official border crossings. Among those who managed to enter Lebanon officially, there is an increasing number who no longer have legal stay because financial constraints have prevented them from renewing their legal stay documentation after one year in Lebanon. All of these refugees, due to their limited legal status, are considered by the Lebanese authorities as ‘illegally’ present in Lebanon.

This assessment aims to give a voice to those refugees with limited legal status. It highlights the numerous additional challenges they face in their lives, in particular the strict limitations upon their freedom of movement, which seriously impairs their living conditions and their capacity to provide for themselves. Other restrictions include difficulties realising their basic rights such as the right to identity and the right to justice and their ability to access essential services. To overcome these challenges, refugees often adopt coping mechanisms that put them at great risk.

The Government of Lebanon and local authorities, with the humanitarian community that encompasses donors, United Nations Agencies and NGOs have a responsibility to ensure that refugees in Lebanon can (a) enjoy their rights; and (b) access the services they need to meet their basic needs without discrimination. As the number of refugees who are unable to renew their legal stay increases and refugees continue to enter Lebanon through unofficial border crossings, it will remain essential to address the obstacles faced in the everyday lives of refugees resulting from their limited legal status. The Lebanese authorities and the humanitarian community should address the situation of these refugees with limited legal status, in order to alleviate the additional difficulties already faced by this affected population.

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