Zahle and Bar Elias: Municipality-Led Evictions in Central Bekaa

Conflict Analysis Report – September 2018

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Acronyms

3RP	Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan
CDR	Council for Development and Reconstruction
CIMIC	Civil-Military Cooperation
EDL	Electricité Du Liban
FGD	Focus Group Discussion
GoL	Government of Lebanon
HRW	Human Rights Watch
INGO	International Non-Governmental Organization
ISF	Internal Security Forces
IS	Informal Settlement
LAF	Lebanese Armed Forces
LCRP	Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
LHSP	Lebanon Host Communities Support Programme
MOIM	Ministry of Interior and Municipalities
MOSA	Ministry of Social Affairs
MRR	Mapping of Risks and Resources
NGO	Non-Governmental Organization
SAA	Syrian Arab Army
SDC	Social Development Centres
UKDFID	United Kingdom Department for International Development
UN	United Nation
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

I. Executive Summary

With over a million refugees, constituting around a fifth of its population, Lebanon is the host country with the highest number of refugees per capita in the world.[1] The majority of the refugees are Syrians who started fleeing to Lebanon with the onset of the Syrian uprising in 2011, or Palestinians who fled to Lebanon during the 50s and 60s, but most of them are still living in camps and dire conditions with no rights or access to proper jobs. There are a couple of other nationalities, such as Iraqi and Sudanese refugees, but their numbers are quite modest compared with the former two.[2]

The topic of refugees in Lebanon has long brought wide disagreements within the various sectarian communities; concerns about naturalization upsetting the demographic balance is a genuinely perceived threat. And any changes to that balance might spur an unwelcomed discussion, at least by most political and religious leaderships, about the social contract and power-sharing agreement that was reached after a fifteen-year civil war. Though it was a rather regional proxy war fought on Lebanese soil, the civil war created numerous unsettled scars in the collective memory of different Lebanese communities because of the strong roles of both the Palestinians and the Syrians.[3] This adds another historical layer to the complexity of the current relationship between refugees and host communities.

Most recent studies and perception surveys, including the Ark & UNDP 'Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon', highlighted the fact that the perceived tensions are mainly revolving around issues related to competition over lower-skilled jobs and livelihoods.[4] This is yet another reason for increased animosity and friction which observers fear might escalate into conflict and security incidents if coupled with other localized critical factors. So far, throughout Lebanon, the situation is contained and limited to shy demonstrations of discontent in some areas, especially since many notable community members and religious figures play a key role in mitigating conflict-triggering incidents. But there is a very high rate of public approval regarding restrictions from local authorities on movements of or curfews for foreigners, mainly Syrian refugees, as a means for improving safety when needed.[5] This might lead to breaches of human rights or to illegal activities, including arbitrary evictions or detentions through random arrests.

This report examines the cases of municipality-led evictions in Central Bekaa, namely in Zahle and its surrounding areas. It attempts to understand the various factors triggering these evictions and their impact on both the refugee and the host community from a socio-economic and services lens, rather than a purely human rights or protection lens. Municipality-led evictions are less common than evictions ordered by the Lebanese security agencies or driven by landlords. Even though most municipalities that have conducted evictions claim to rely on legal advice or consultation, all these evictions do not fulfill the legal or human rights standards, nor do they adhere to the circulars of both the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) and the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities (MOIM). While many Syrian refugees are staying without legal documentation or permits, the real reason for the evictions is most often triggered by other factors as discussed hereafter in this report.

[1] UNHCR, Lebanon Fact Sheet, https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/UNHCR-Lebanon-Operational-fact-sheet-January-2019.pdf

[2] UNHCR, Vulnerability Assessment of Refugees of Other Nationalities in Lebanon, VARON 2017 https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/64387.pdf

[3] Krayem, H. The Lebanese Civil War and Taif Agreement. http://ddc.aub.edu.lb/projects/pspa/conflict-resolution.html

[4] Ark & UNDP "Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon" WAVE IV, September 2018 https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/67048

[5] Ibid.

In the case of Zahle in Central Bekaa, several factors contributed to the municipality-led evictions. The first are **historical factors,** whereby the people of Zahle still recall the three-month siege in 1981 by the Syrian Arab Army (SAA) during the Lebanese Civil War.[6] That siege, which included the heaviest bombardment on Zahle in its history, is recalled by most Lebanese interviewees from the city. And most of them do not hesitate to connect that history with their hesitation or open rejection to host Syrian refugees. For many, this scar never healed properly, and a true reconciliation never happened. In fact, Zahle commemorates the martyrs of this battle annually, keeping their memory and that of the war alive. But whenever there are key political or electoral milestones, the remembrance becomes of higher significance and stronger rhetoric.

Sociocultural differences between the Syrian refugees and their Lebanese host communities are yet another factor. What some key informants referred to as 'lifestyle' can, in fact, embed several meanings. One is confessional, whereby most refugees are Muslims while the majority in Zahle are Christians. Hence, cultural lifestyle differences are related to social norms, ways of living, early marriage, dress code, and many other specific details. The perception that the incoming 'others' might one day impose their own lifestyle, which includes a different set of values, is of concern to the hosts. Even the mayor of Zahle mentioned the specificities of each community group and his objection to any type of fusion with refugees who do not share the similar characteristics and lifestyle of his constituencies. There is a lot of sensitivity in describing specificities as they might entail a discriminatory character, but one of the alarming issues around this factor is the way Lebanese communities are divided about it. For example, the way Zahle's neighbouring villages, including Bar Elias, are perceiving the evictions or

any restrictive measures against Syrians is mainly filtered through a sectarian or religious lens. The perception of Muslim interviewees from Zahle's surrounding communities is that these actions are primarily triggered for sectarian reasons, especially considering that Christian Syrian refugees were not asked to evict Zahle like Muslim Syrian refugees. Therefore, the focus should be to rectify any misconceptions and to make sure relevant stakeholders are aware of the unforeseen consequences that such actions might have on the social stability among Lebanese communities.

Politically, periodic parliamentary and municipal elections are usually quite tense in Zahle. This plays a role in forming the dynamics between constituencies as well as with Syrian refugees. Nationally, the rhetoric against Syrian refugees was used to mobilize certain communities who are against the Syrian presence in Lebanon. This rhetoric occurred in the last parliamentary elections with politicians speaking about the return of Syrian refugees to safe zones in Syria. There were also unprecedented attacks against humanitarian organizations, primarily UNHCR, who were accused of conspiring to keep refugees in Lebanon.[7] This reflects on local politics and dynamics in municipalities where politically supported mayors and councils have more freedom during heightened electoral times to take controversial actions against Syrian refugees residing in their jurisdictions. These actions, sometimes entailing human rights breaches, are believed to be used primarily for political mobilization purposes.

While some evictions are politically motivated, some come from popular discontent and the need for local leaders to be seen taking firm action against refugees. Thus, community grievances that push municipalities to take action have

[6] Schodolski V. "After 91 days, Syria lifted the siege of Zahle" UPI https://www.upi.com/Archives/1981/06/30/After-91-days-Syria-lifted-the-siege-of-Zahle/9682362721600/

[7] Geha C., Talhouk J. "Politics and the Plight of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", Political Brief on the Return of Syrian Refugees. August 2018 https://www.aub.edu.lb/Documents/Politics-and-the-Plight-of-Syrian-Refugees-in-Lebanon.pdf

to be considered – although not necessarily validated – in order to come up with responses that might mitigate the problem. One of the main grievances of the Lebanese host communities is the perception of high levels of competition over jobs and livelihoods with Syrian refugees. Therefore, the **economic and livelihoods** factor is always one of the major triggers to local tensions. In Zahle, Lebanese business owners in the industrial zone organized a couple of sit-ins to voice their concerns about the competition from Syrian refugees. The concern was that the Syrian refugees used to work and live in those premises, thereby reducing their cost of living and rent, which allowed them to accept lower wages. The Zahle municipality ordered evictions of refugees living in the industrial zone by claiming that to preserve the functionality of the zone, it needed to remain industrial and not residential. The burden perceived from competition is also felt in Bar Elias, although it is a much more permissive environment in terms of residency and work of refugees. But the local community had almost the same concerns as in Zahle, especially as they see their village becoming a hub for evicted refugees in addition to the tens of thousands of people already residing there.

When looking at **security,** 78.4% of people in the Zahle district responded that they either agree or strongly agree with the statement 'when tensions are high, some restrictions on foreigners' movement or curfews can help keep this area safe' according the Ark & UNDP 'Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon: Wave IV,' September 2018. More specifically, interviewees in Zahle recalled few incidents involving Syrians that took place sporadically during the past few years, highlighting raids on weapons hideouts and arrests of individuals affiliated with extremist groups. Even the explosion that took place in front of the industrial zone is perceived to be related to the presence and operations of some Syrian refugees. There is an overall feeling of alert and precaution in the city, whereby restrictions on movements, such as curfews or other forms of security grip, become much more accepted.

And finally, the **donor aid** factor also comes into play when taking into consideration the social stability theme, as a lot of the funding is intentionally meant to reduce tension. Even though increased presence and engagement of donor-funded programs with host communities has been evident, the practice or impact on the field does not necessarily reflect the initial intentions while certain communities continue to feel that aid distribution lacks fairness. That was the case with Zahle key informants who felt that aid is going to the surrounding villages and many other locations across the country. They felt their city is not being supported with any priority projects despite their belief that they still face a strain on resources and economy because of the refugee presence. On the contrary, in Bar Elias there was a clear message of gratefulness to the support provided by the international community and donors. The support was directly correlated with enhanced services, reduced service strain, and reduced stress and tension. But the sensitive issue remains the competition or friction that might erupt between Lebanese communities or municipalities that perceive that aid is being funneled to its neighbouring municipalities and not benefitting them in any way.

To be able to understand and analyze critical municipal decisions related to restrictions on Syrian refugees, or more radical decisions such as collective evictions, key actors should be looking into the multiple layers that constitute the various factors. Historic, sociopolitical, economic, political, aid-related, and security-related factors should all be considered to have a holistic and accurate understanding of the situation and dynamics.

II. Introduction

This Conflict Analysis Report is part of a series of research studies commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and funded by United Kingdom Department for

International Development (UKDFID) that aim at assessing the recent developments, atmospherics, and programming opportunities related to the municipality-led evictions in Central Bekaa. This issue has been given utmost importance by UN agencies and the international community because of its consequences on the overall stability and the socio-economic and psychological impact on the refugees.

This report does not aim to raise awareness of or advocate with or against municipality-led evictions, but rather to focus on the triggers that led to them, to recommend approaches that might ease the tensions surrounding the whole issue, and to provide recommendations to counter the negative impacts of evictions on both refugees and host communities. It is nevertheless important to disclose that almost all municipality-led evictions that have occurred in Lebanon so far do not fulfill the basic legal and human rights standards. The Human Rights Watch latest report titled 'Our Homes Are Not for Strangers' states that 'At least 3,664 Syrian nationals have been evicted from at least thirteen municipalities from the beginning of 2016 through the first quarter of 2018, and almost 42,000 Syrian refugees remained at risk of eviction in 2017, according to the UN refugee agency.'[8] These numbers include all the related cases reported to the UNHCR all over Lebanon. These evictions usually entail a rather complex set of reasons compared with those triggered by security or financial reasons. Another important aspect considered in this report is the impact these evictions are having on the new host community, mostly Bar Elias in the case of Central Bekaa.

III.   Objectives

The report attempts to answer the following questions:

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[8] Human Rights Watch "Our Homes Are Not for Strangers" Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities. April 2018 accessed on July 15th at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon0418_web.pdf

1)   What are the main factors that triggered the municipality-led collective evictions in Central Bekaa?
   a.   Are they interrelated?
   b.   How were they affected by elections and the latest political developments?
2)   What are the dynamics/relations between key actors who play a role in the evictions and crisis response?
   a.   Are there political/sectarian dynamics that play a role in fuelling these tensions?
   b.   Are they elections-related?
   c.   What impact do these evictions have on former/new host communities as well as evictees?
   d. How are relationships (Lebanese-Lebanese and Lebanese-Syrian) affected by evictions?

V. Methodology

The research methodology of this report consists of the following:

1)   Primary Data:
   a.   **Two key informant interviews** with the mayors of Zahle and Bar Elias aimed to dig deep into the perspectives, perceptions, and priorities of two of the most engaged local authority figures on the issue of municipality-led evictions (Zahle being a lead in terms of conducting collective evictions and Bar Elias being a lead recipient of refugees in the Bekaa).
   b.   **Twenty key informant interviews** with stakeholders from the villages of Zahle and Bar Elias, including municipal members, local businessowners, Syrian refugees (both evictees and non-evictees), local activists, and Lebanese living in neighbourhoods where evictions took place. Among the key stakeholder interviewees were also UNDP's area manager, UNHCR protection department employees, and the

MOSA coordinator responsible for the evictions follow-up. These meetings reflected various perspectives of directly affected individuals and gave an idea about the local nuances in terms of relationships and dynamics, particularly with local authorities and how their actions are perceived by the residents.

c. Participation in the **Human Rights Watch** 'Our Homes Are Not for Strangers' presentation at the UNDP Peacebuilding project premises.

2) Secondary Data:

a. **Desk Study and Background Analysis:** A review of UNDP reports related to the area, especially those uploaded on the Regional Refugee and Resilience Plan (3RP) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) portal or shared on Lebanon
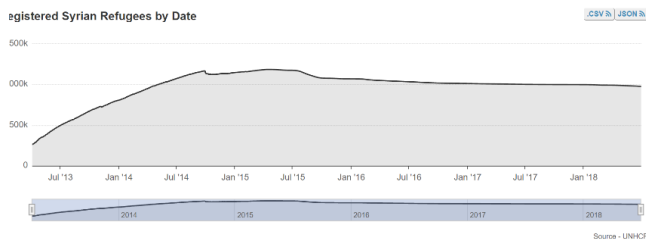
Figure 2. UNHCR numbers of registered Syrian refugees

Support, as well as the related maps or documents that can provide needed background on the area and the previously identified themes or priorities.

District Context

The protracted Syrian refugee crisis has had a profound socioeconomic, political, and humanitarian impact on the Lebanese host community. According to the UNHCR numbers,[9]

the mark of a million registered Syrian refugees was crossed in 2014 before it decreased to just under a million in 2017 due to resettlement programs, illegal immigration, and returns of refugees to Syria, as well as the decision by Government of Lebanon (GoL) to halt registering any additional refugees by UNHCR since May 2015.[10] Nevertheless, Lebanon continues to be the world's highest per capita hosting country in
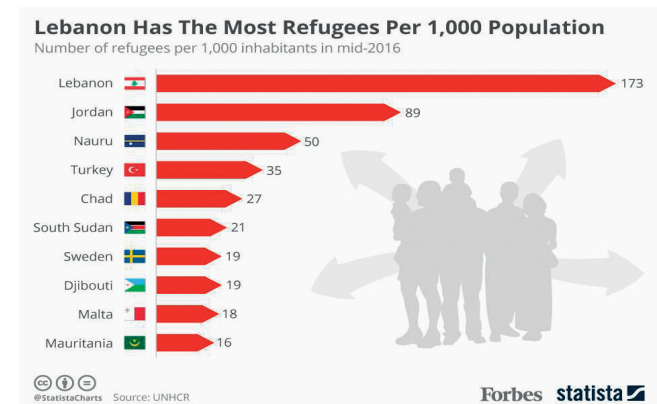
Figure 1. Forbes comparison of refugees' host countries per 1,000 inhabitants in mid-2016

the world with around 173 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants.[11] This number is added to around 174,000 Palestinian refugees, according to the latest census by the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee.[12] In fact, according to the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UN OCHA), the population living in Lebanon increased by 28% in the last five years due to the crisis.[13]

With estimates of around one million vulnerable

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[9] UNHCR Operational Portal, Refugees Situation. Accessed on July

20th, 2018 at: http://data2.unhcr.org/en/situations/syria/location/71

[10] Ibid.

[11] McCarthy, N. '*Lebanon Still Has Hosts The Most Refugees Per Capita By Far [Infographic]*' Forbes, April 3rd, 2017 Accessed on July 20th, 2018 at https://www.forbes.com/sites/niallmccarthy/2017/04/03/lebanon-still-has-hosts-the-most-refugees-per-capita-by-far-infographic/#6e795f1b3970

[12] '*Population and Housing Census in Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon 2017*' http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/DocumentFiles/Key%20Findings%20report%20En-636566196639789418.pdf

[13] Ibid.

Lebanese, more than a third of Lebanon's residents are now below the national poverty line.[14] These figures are mainly fuelling the negative perceptions among Lebanese host communities who blame the refugees for soaring unemployment especially among youth,[15] high inflation, local tensions, socioeconomic distress, and fragile security and stability. On the other hand, a few studies, such as the study conducted by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University in Beirut, highlighted a positive face of the crisis on the Lebanese economy, or at least tried not to put all the blame for the stagnation of the economy on the Syrian crisis. The research, titled '101 Facts and Figures on the Syrian Refugee Crisis' aims to shed the light on some trends and numbers about the refugee crisis to counter xenophobia and discrimination against refugees by sharing the facts about their presence and contributions in the economy. But the impact of these academic researches on the general perceptions of the Lebanese public remain minimal. This is shown in the percentages of Lebanese blaming Syrians for tensions, competition over low-skilled labour, and strain on resources. According to the Ark & UNDP's 'Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon: Wave IV' data, 'competition for lower-skilled jobs' is a primary source of tension, with 62.9% of Lebanese and 47.3% of Syrians specifying this as a tension factor. Across all governorates, 'competition for lower-skilled jobs' was the most cited tension

factor. A significant plurality (58.4% in Wave IV, up from 18.8% in Wave I) reported that inter-communal relations have deteriorated, rating the relationships between Lebanese and Syrians who in live in the Bekaa to be either negative or very negative. This increase indicates that tensions between refugees and host communities residing in the Bekaa might be on the rise because of the perceived deteriorating relationships.

Geography

1) **Bekaa Governorate** is one of Lebanon's eight governorates. It constitutes 1,433 km² (13.7%) of Lebanon's area. It includes the three districts of West Bekaa, Rachaya, and Zahle, which is the governorate's capital. The governorate is uniquely located on the eastern entrance of Lebanon from Syria, linking the two capitals, Damascus and Beirut, through the biggest border crossing with Syria in Al Masna'a, located in Zahle District. It consists of eighty-seven municipalities[16] and is home to both Muslim and Christian religious communities, who account for around 520,000 residents.[17]

2) **Zahle District** is one of the three districts located in the Bekaa Governorate. It is also known as Central Bekaa. It is located approximately fifty-five kilometres away from Beirut. Zahle, the capital of Zahle District, is known for its vineyards, agricultural lands, and wineries, as well as other touristic attractions.

Political Context

To better understand the dynamics and relations at the local level, it is important to understand key local actors in the Zahle District, their political orientations and affiliations (if any), and their

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[14] According to UN OCHA *"poverty and food insecurity levels are high with 27 to 30 percent of people in Lebanon living beneath the national poverty line. Among refugees, the situation is dire, with an alarming 76 per cent of Syrian refugees under the poverty line, along with 65 per cent of Palestine refugees in Lebanon (PRL) and 89 per cent of Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS)."* https://www.unocha.org/lebanon/about-ocha-lebanon

[15] According to UN OCHA *"More than 500,000 youth between 15-24 (both Lebanese and Syrian) are considered particularly "at risk," meaning they are both out of school and have no formal employment."*

[16] Inter-Agency Lebanon: Bekaa Governorate Profile: https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/44895.

[17] http://investinlebanon.gov.lb/en/lebanon_at_a_glance/invest_in_regions/bekaa_governorate.

influence both locally and nationally. The below presents some of the key actors in Zahle at both the social and political scenes.

The main local authorities in the Zahle District are the Governor, who has the highest local authority representing the GoL, and the Municipal Board represented by the mayor. As the Syria crisis intensified and the number of refugees increased, the Governor issued a series of circulars 'requiring all municipalities to start and regularly update databases on the refugees they are hosting and urging them not to recognize any birth certificates, rent or shelter agreement for any refugee who is not registered.'[18] This decision was followed by another circular prohibiting Syrian refugees from setting up additional informal tented settlements or moving from one settlement to the other. Albeit, these types of restrictions are not unique to Zahle District and were witnessed in other locations, from the North to the South, mainly in Mount Lebanon. The impact in terms of the numbers of refugees it affects is the highest since Central Bekaa is the largest host community in the country.

During the municipal elections in 2016, both Bar Elias and Zahle witnessed heated elections resulting in Mawas Araji and Asaad Zoghaib winning the elections as the mayors respectively. Also, because of the long debates around lists' formations and coalitions in Bar Elias, the Future Movement decided to remain at equal distance from all candidates;[19] hence the competition was purely familial rather than political like in 2010. In Zahle, on the other hand, the situation was different as most Christian political parties aligned together in support of Asaad Zoghaib's list, which he claimed was an apolitical list against the one formed through a coalition of families headed by

the Skaff family.

The Parliamentary election of 2018 was characterized by introducing the proportional system for the first time in Lebanon. This had brought into the political scene first timers in the parliament, such as Paula Yaacoubian in Beirut representing the civil society coalition 'Kulluna Watani'. While, in general, the proportional system and a few other reforms enhanced representation of the different traditional political parties on the electoral districts level, it did not bring any major changes in the overall parliament composition. In

Figure 3. Location of Zahle District in the Bekaa Governorate

Zahle, as has been the trend, the parliamentary elections marked a very important milestone in the political scene in the district. With the system in place, this election has put out of power traditional political actors like Fattoush and Skaff families and brought into the parliament people like Michel Daher, a businessman backed by the Free Patriotic Movement, and Eddy Demerjian, a doctor who won with seventy-seven preferential votes. The Sunni MP for Zahle continues to be from Bar Elias (Assem Araji, Future Movement), the Lebanese Forces maintained two seats represented by Cesar Maalouf and George Okais, and the Free Patriotic Movement won two seats as well, while the Shiite representative, Anwar Jomaa, was on Hezbollah's list. Interestingly, the Kataeb did not win any seats. Despite their spread over different competing lists, most candidates had clear positions against the Syrian refugee

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[18] Abla, Z. and Al Masri, M.: "The Burden of Scarce Opportunities: The Social Stability Context in Central and West Bekaa", Conflict Analysis Report UNDP 2017

[19] https://www.almodon.com/politics/2016/5/6/بر الياس معركة عائلية بترسبات سياسية

presence in Lebanon and called for their return to Syria. The intensity of describing the threat of their presence varied from some who saw a threat to the identity of Lebanon to others who linked it directly to strain on employment and services.

The table below lists the winners in the 2018 elections in Zahle.[20]

Name	Seat	List/Political Affiliation
Cesar Maalouf	Christian – Greek Orthodox	Zahle Kadeyetna (Zahle Our Cause – Lebanese Forces)
George Okais	Christian – Greek Catholic	Zahle Kadeyetna (Zahle Our Cause – Lebanese Forces)
Anwar Jomaa	Muslim – Shiite	Zahle Al Khayar Wal Karar (Zahle is the Choice and the Decision – Hezbollah)
Eddy Demerjian	Christian – Armenian Orthodox	Zahle Al Khayar Wal Karar (Zahle is the Choice and the Decision)
Salim Aoun	Christian – Maronite	Zahle lal Kel (Zahle for Everyone – Free Patriotic Movement)
Michel Daher	Christian – Greek Catholic	Zahle lal Kel (Zahle for Everyone – Independent backed by Free Patriotic Movement)
Assem Araji	Muslim – Sunni	Zahle lal Kel (Zahle for Everyone –Future Movement)

Economic Context

The main economic activities in Zahle and the Bekaa in general are: Agriculture, Tourism, and Industry. According to the Ministry of Agriculture, the governorate's permanent agricultural land covers an area of 165,660 donums, 31% of which is dedicated to the plantation of raisins, followed by stone fruits (28.4%), and olives (20.9%).[21] The area is known for the best soil quality in Lebanon, allowing it to play a leading role in the agriculture sector nationwide.

While there are 323 industrial companies in the Bekaa, accounting for 8% of total industrial firms in Lebanon, 43% of those firms operate in the agro-food sector. Industrial activity is concentrated in Zahle, which accounts for 278

industrial companies.[22] This provides leverage for businessmen investing in this field, some of whom hire thousands of employees from Central Bekaa to reserve a seat on the political parties' lists or influence decisions. And even though some of those business owners, especially in the agro-food industry, might be affiliated to political parties who are strongly against the presence of Syrian refugees, they themselves know of the critical importance of Syrians in the agricultural sector. For decades, and long before the Syrian refugee crisis, the Bekaa fields were primarily harvested by Syrian workers. This might be the reason why this sector is one of only three sectors, along with construction and waste collection, that Syrians are officially allowed to work in. Traditionally, landlords used to have the strongest political leverage because of their feudal relationship with the farmers and labourers who worked in their fields. More recently, political parties are playing a bigger role in mobilizing voters, but they seem to value the presence of strong businessmen and landlords on their competing lists.

Refugees

According to UNHCR numbers of registered refugees, both Bar Elias and Zahle host around

[20] www.elections.gov.lb

[21] http://investinlebanon.gov.lb/en/lebanon_at_a_glance/invest_in_regions/bekaa_governorate

[22] Ibid.

30,000 refugees each.[23] While mayors report much higher numbers of refugees hosted (72,000 in Zahle and 45,000 in Bar Elias). 80 to 90% of the refugees are seasonal agricultural workers as reported by the mayors.

Yet, both municipalities face similar challenges in responding to the crisis, as will be explained further in the data analysis section. Both municipalities are recipients of funds and work with most international and local NGOs to respond to the crisis.

Figure 4. Map of Central Bekaa showing UNHCR registered Syrian refugees' numbers (above) and Zahle specifically (below)

Key Findings

According to the latest Human Rights Watch report, 'Under Lebanese law, labor or visa violations are not a legal basis for eviction from one's home'. Therefore, these evictions have been conducted while failing to meet international procedural standards for lawful evictionswith 'no opportunity for genuine consultation, adequate and reasonable notice, or any possibility of appeal.'[24] Even the Lebanese Minister of Social Affairs issued a circular stating the illegal status of municipality-led collective evictions and requested that they do not occur unless there is a clearly valid reason, in which case MOSA would coordinate and follow up on the case.

Despite the conundrum over their legal status, evictions and other restrictions by authorities on Syrian refugees have become more popular among a wide array of the Lebanese population. The Ark & UNDP 'Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon' report[25] showed 'considerable support in most areas of the country (76.4% in the Bekaa according to Wave IV data) for restrictions on refugees' freedom of movement, with agreement with the statement, "When tensions are high, some restrictions on foreigners' movement or curfews can help keep this area safe." ' And only limited number of individuals or groups stood against the discrimination represented by these restrictions, but their voices remained very shy and unheard, in many instances only limited to the virtual social media space such as the effort of Legal Agenda[26] and other human rights groups. In fact, it was reported that many families from host

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[23] https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/64929.

[24] Human Rights Watch "*Our Homes Are Not for Strangers*" Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities. April 2018 accessed on July 15th at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon0418_web.pdf

[25] Ark "*Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon*" July 2017. https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/60272

[26] http://www.legal-agenda.com/article.php?id=1729

communities in Bcharre, Hadath, Mezyara, and Zahle, where evictions took place during the past couple of years, were cheering the security forces who were enforcing these evictions supported by a traditional and social media uproar.

Despite the public support for increased restrictions on refugees, municipality-led evictions are not a common action taken by municipalities. Around fifteen municipalities, the latest being Kahhale in Aley District, have taken such drastic measures of expelling refugees from their localities.[27] Some, in fact, requested evictions of certain sites or Informal Settlements (ISs) near main roads or sensitive locations but kept refugees within the boundaries of their municipalities. These are usually at the request of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and its Intelligence Directorate. Putting aside the security-related evictions requested by the LAF, the number of municipality-led evictions has gone down significantly. But the potential triggers to these evictions remain unclear or unspecified, not because of their absence, but rather because they are multilayered and complex. They combine historic grievances from the years of the Lebanese Civil War and post-war Syrian Arab Army (SAA) presence in Lebanon with myriad recent triggers on the political, security, social, economic, religious, cultural, and demographic levels, among others.

When the case of Zahle municipality-led evictions was brought up with interviewed activists, it was not a big surprise to most of them. A lot of them acknowledged the complexity of reasons that might have driven that decision, without necessarily approving or encouraging it. Even the humanitarian workers interviewed tried to explain how the many different layers of conflict triggers intertwined would explain the nonacceptance of refugees in Zahle, especially at the centre, or the heart, of the city compared with its outskirts.

Given the multiple, compounding factors that are reportedly at play, this report is structured to examine each type of factor that has driven municipality-led evictions. Therefore, these factors should be taken as mutually reinforcing and should not be treated in isolation.

Historical Factors

Lebanese cities and towns experienced the 1975–1990 Civil War differently as a result of the armed groups that controlled these localities throughout the conflict. But the differences were also related to the intensity of clashes and battles that occurred between the different armed groups and, in certain cases, traditional armies – mainly Israeli or Syrian. In Zahle, the residents' collective memory of the war would directly recall the so-called 'Battle of Zahle'[28] between the Kataeb and the SAA in 1981.[29] This battle of around one hundred days included a siege which ended up with 200 civilian casualties and over 2,000 injured along with the withdrawal of the Christian troops from the city.[30] A 'scar that will always be felt,' as one interviewee describes it and adds that this memory 'left Zahle with a lot to mourn, especially with all the destruction and the lives that were lost.'

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[27] Al Jadeed television news report on July 15th, 2018. Accessed on July 30th 2018 at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mpiFIR-uMl0

[28] Al Kassis, Samer هكذا حطمت زحلة دبابات الأسد وأحلامه Al Massira Issue number 1501, March 27th, 2015 on the commemoration of the Battle of Zahle. Accessed on July 15th at: https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2015/03/26/al-massira-7/ and https://www.facebook.com/161175377755883/photos/pcb.275760709630682/275760549630698/?type=3&theater

[29] Accessed on July 20th at: http://www.kataeb.org/local/2017/03/30/kataeb-party-to-pay-tribute-to-zahle-heroes-on

[30] Auerbach, Stuart *"Pullout Ends Siege of Lebanese Town"* The Washington Post, July 1st, 1981. Accessed on July 20th at: https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/07/01/pullout-ends-siege-of-lebanese-town/89d75f8e-849c-4566-b09c-48b0fc-c4e2f8/?noredirect=on&utm_term=.a0d05427bbf4
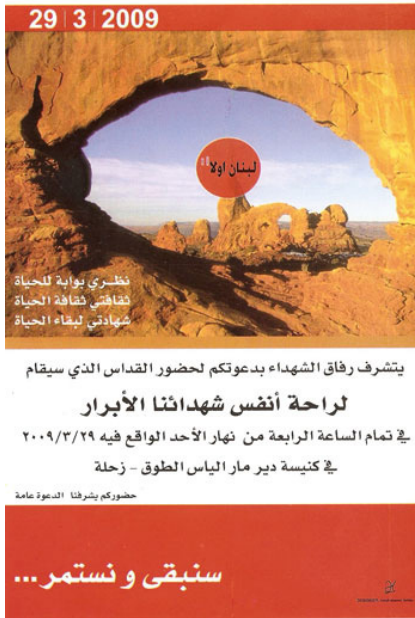
Figure 5. Poster for the Commemoration of Zahle Resilience Martyrs. March 2009

Figure 6. Poster for the commemoration of Zahle Martyrs by LF. April 2016

In nearly every interview with someone from Zahle, this memory came up to explain why they might not be very welcoming to Syrians in general. In one interview, the claims went even a step further to state that 'Some of the refugees were actually the ones torturing us in the past. Some were perpetrators but when they came as refugees no one did any retaliatory actions or acted negatively to them.'

As for refugees in Zahle, many of them do not necessarily know more than headlines about the 'Battle of Zahle' or about the role of the SAA during

the Lebanese Civil War in general. In fact, former president Hafez Al Assad claimed in a speech for Syrian media that 'the Syrian involvement in the Lebanese war was the most brilliant achievement of Syria and the Arab world' stressing on the positive role of the SAA in bringing peace and stability to Lebanon and even protecting minorities and various allies from their enemies.[31] Refugees might have understood more recently about the perpetrations of their army during the past decades from the limited interactions they have with their Lebanese neighbours. But a lot more information is still needed for a real empathy to an unsettled history.

While the mayor of Zahle remembers that 'during the civil war, we were also displaced from our city and I remain grateful to those who helped us. But no one stood next to us on the expense of their country. No one was destroying their future for us. We are ready to keep helping the Syrians but not on the expense of our country and future.' In general, the mayor of Zahle showed, despite a tough character which can be mistaken for insouciance or even as discriminatory, a lot of understanding to the multi-layered challenges that face any sort of communal acceptance by his constituencies for their refugee guests. 'Historically, the community of Zahle has always been close to the Syrian community' explained the mayor. 'We always had a 2% influx of Syrians through intermarriages and familial relationships during the pre-war years. But nowadays what is being planned is a fusion. And this is not something we accept. Everyone, especially the international community, should understand that each community in Lebanon has its own specificities, traditions, culture, and history, which makes each of us unique and we should preserve that and celebrate it.'

In line with the mayor's viewpoint on the Lebanese communities' differences, historically many other Lebanese towns and cities have suffered from the

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[31] https://foreignpolicy.com/1978/12/15/syria-in-lebanon-as-sads-vietnam/

scars of war and its consequences, especially in relation to the role of the SAA; but there are variations in the attitude towards that history. Tripoli in North Lebanon, for instance, also witnessed a significant massacre perpetrated by the SAA and local allies in 1986 and suffered for years from the repercussions of the SAA control on all the social, economic, and political levels. Despite the animosity that most Tripolitans still show to the Assad regime because of that bloody history, which also spilled over to a delicate relationship with the refugees in the city,[32] the municipality did not show any signs of specific restrictive actions against Syrians. On the contrary, the overall tension levels as per the Ark perceptions survey are lower in places like Tripoli since a permissive environment often leads to greater social stability. Other critical factors have weighed in favor for that reality, primarily the political and sectarian considerations.

Tripoli, as is the case of Bar Elias, has a majority of Sunni Muslims, unlike the predominantly Christian Zahle. In fact, Sunni Muslim communities in Lebanon showed a much clearer stance with the Syrian uprising against the Assad regime since 2011. According to an interviewee in Bar Elias, areas such as Akkar, Aarsal, Tripoli, Minieh, Donnieh, Bar Elias, Joub Jannine, and Saida, among many other cities and towns, have all been safe havens for hundreds of thousands of refugees fleeing the war. In contrast, Christian communities have kept a cautious position when it comes to being very open to hosting refugees as a statement of standing against the Assad regime. The local media reported on this in the past couple of years.[33] According to one of the Lebanese interviewees who identified the Syrians as one enemy, 'In 2005, and after thirty years of

occupation, we were victorious and the Syrians were kicked out of our country. But those who were kicked out from the door, came back from the window!' he said, referring to the refugee influx that happened few years later.

In general, the Lebanese community still lacks a grassroots and communal reconciliation that deals properly and scientifically with the consequences of fifteen years of civil war and another fifteen of the Syrian army presence post–Taif Agreement. But continuous peacebuilding interventions to promote reconciliation and coexistence between Lebanese have been ongoing since the days of the civil war. Similarly, interventions can engage Lebanese and Syrians currently residing in Lebanon who share different perspectives about that war and how it impacted them.

Possible Entry Points

- Promote initiatives in Zahle that aim to heal psychological wounds from the past and help families of victims have satisfactory closure of their losses within a humanitarian instead of political lens. Illustrative activities can include peacebuilding projects and activities, including psychosocial interventions.
- Creating support groups for similarly affected individuals, such as war windows, disabled people, displaced people, who can come together in small groups on a regular basis to talk about their distress and develop empathy with the wider community.
- Supporting refugees in initiatives, including symbolic sentiments or messages that would reiterate to the host community the disconnection between them and the past perpetrators.

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[32] Al Ayoubi, B. "*The Roadmap to Reconciliation in Tripoli*" April 2016. Accessed on July 1st at: http://civilsociety-centre.org/resource/roadmap-reconciliation-tripoli-creating-inclusive-process-launching-communal-reconciliation

[33] http://www.aljoumhouria.com/news/index/360052

Sociocultural Factors

One of the main sociocultural factors that seemed to trigger the evictions in Zahle, at least according to the evictees, is the religious factor. Most of the evictees met, and those who were quoted in the Human Rights Watch (HRW) report[34] stated some act of discrimination on religious bases, knowing that the vast majority of evicting municipalities are in Christian towns. Some noted that there are many Syrian refugee families who were not even given notice to evict from Zahle because they were Christian. While others said that veiled women were followed home to be identified and later ordered to evict with their families. Even though most of the Syrian refugees fleeing from the Alawite regime of Bashar Al Assad are Sunni Muslims, a minority of Christians have also sought refuge in predominantly Christian villages and towns such as Zahle. This minority benefitted from a clear positive discrimination because local resources led by the church were always mobilized to accommodate the new arrivals and to help them integrate in the community.[35] The same was offered to Iraqi Christian families fleeing ISIS in 2014.[36]

The alarming part of this rising perception regarding religious discrimination can be felt during interviews with Zahle's surrounding Muslim host community, such as Bar Elias. There, pinpointing the fact that Zahle evicted Muslim refugees, many of whom ended up in their village, while keeping the Christians, was mentioned in most interviews. This can open the door for more misconceptions and a potential drift knowing the complexity of the issue.

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[34] Human Rights Watch *"Our Homes Are Not for Strangers"* Mass Evictions of Syrian Refugees by Lebanese Municipalities. April 2018 accessed on July 15th at: https://www.hrw.org/sites/default/files/report_pdf/lebanon0418_web.pdf

[35] Annahar newspaper (2013), Accessed on July 30th at: https://bit.ly/2HEWZlJ

[36] Caritas providing help for Syrian and Iraqi refugees in Lebanon, accessed on July 30th at: https://www.caritas.org/2014/09/caritas-providing-help-syrian-iraqi-refugees-lebanon/

On the other hand, Zahle key stakeholders have another side of the story. They refuse, of course, to be described as discriminatory, especially on basis of religion. Accounts of thousands of Syrian refugees who continue to live and work in Zahle are a solid proof according to the municipality. 'There are full buildings currently rented to Syrian refugees and no one is putting any pressure on them to leave because all their papers are legal' stated one Zahle municipal member. The issue of these papers, and the extent to which they represent a legal basis to conduct the evictions or not, will be further discussed later in this report. But during his interview, even the mayor mentioned the key role that Zahle, through its cafés and restaurants on the Berdawni River, plays in being a meeting point of all the Bekaa with its various constituents. 'We are proud of being a meeting place for all Bekaaies and Lebanese. Our Berdawni cafés are famous for being a romantic destination for Muslims before Christians.' All key stakeholders in Zahle defended the role of the city in being the Bekaa's center for interreligious interaction and coexistence. Even a governmental employee interviewed, who was not from Zahle, mentioned the active role of an Archbishop in Zahle in reducing the 'phenomenon of collective evictions.' He stated that 'the religious leaders know very well their ethical duties in preventing such actions from happening and they did play that role.'

While rejecting claims of religious discrimination against Muslim Syrian refugees, the mayor of Zahle and other key stakeholders stressed upon another sociocultural variation between them and the refugees. 'For us it's a matter of lifestyle and culture. We're a village and they have to understand that,' said one municipal member. Under the term 'lifestyle' lies many hidden layers of hurdles to social cohesion. Here is mainly where the municipality was receiving the highest volume of complaints from the Lebanese households against their refugee neighbours. 'No one had complained to us that their Syrian

neighbour had no registered documents. But they complain on daily basis about the noises they hear all night long from apartments were Syrians reside,' said the municipal member. 'And we're taking these complaints seriously.' She adds that, 'I even received a complaint from a Syrian family who said to me that they cannot bear the noise coming from the apartment of their Syrian refugee neighbours. Both were from same nationality and sect.' Pointing out that the issue of lifestyles had nothing to do with religion or nationality but more so involved upbringing and awareness. A Syrian interviewee who still lives in Zahle mentioned that they are 'used to staying up late and sitting in front of the houses or on the balconies, but since this was a reason for many complaints by our Lebanese neighbours who don't tolerate our noises, we stopped doing this.'

When asked about the complaint she filed to the municipality, another Lebanese lady said '[Syrians] might want their little daughters to marry at the age of twelve or thirteen. It is their decision, but I do not accept motorcycles of potential husbands to keep roaming outside my balcony until midnight. That is what I reported.'

Even the noises by motorcycles, which represent a major, if not the sole, means of transportation for the low-income refugees, was a matter of dispute and numerous complaints leading to severe measures against their movement, including continuous checks on their registration documents. Motorcycles with no proper documentation are usually confiscated. In Bar Elias, for instance, the mayor also mentioned the issue of complaints from noise, especially motorcycles at night. He stated that the municipality 'erects police checkpoints to ask for registration papers, which we know most of them don't have, in order to confiscate their motorcycles for a couple of days, hoping that they would learn a lesson. Then we give it back because we know that it is their only way of commuting.' But in general, the matter of lifestyle as a sociocultural factor was reported more in communities where

the hosts and refugees are from different sectarian and socioeconomic backgrounds.

These factors were taken to an extreme by a Lebanese housewife interviewed in Zahle when even the Syrian dialect was referred to as a trigger for discomfort. 'I can't even hear their dialect,' she said, 'it brings the worst of memories to my head.' This refers to an unsettled past experience with the SAA during their presence in the town, which continues to spillover onto Syrian refugees who happen to speak the same dialect. But even for someone who did not have a tough experience with the SAA, another Lebanese lady who was interviewed in Zahle expressed her discontent mainly through focusing on her 'worry about the future and that of our children. This country is not for us anymore. The dream of our kids is to immigrate because they believe there is no future for them here.' Then she explained how this apathy is related to the presence of refugees stating that, 'I don't believe the Syrian children who are born in Lebanon will ever return to Syria. And we will never accept that they get the nationality. Our country is barely fitting us as Lebanese. Look at the roads in Zahle; they're overcrowded by cars, motorcycles, and people. Which puts even more pressure on law enforcement units who are barely handling.'

While most of these sociocultural factors seem to be a common denominator to similar trends among the Lebanese communities, and not only between Christian Lebanese and Muslim Syrian refugees, there are a few success stories and approaches to promote social stability through enhancing interactions and inter-communal communications.

Possible Entry Points

- Facilitate the creation of neighbourhood committees that comprise representatives from the various communities, including both Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees but also various sectarian and political

constituents in Zahle. These committees can interfere to reduce tensions and promote communication between wider sectors of the community.

- Create a committee of key stakeholders, including religious, political, civil society, and local authority figures from a couple of villages in Central Bekaa that would hold facilitated meetings through which open and honest discussions can be held regarding sensitive topics.

- Promote joint activities between Lebanese and Syrian communities to showcase sociocultural differences and similarities in a positive way, including food, traditions, and folk music and dances, among others.

- Hold awareness sessions about culturally varied topics such as early marriage, hijab, or others, whereby religious figures can be panelists for a mixed audience.

- Create promotional materials such as brochures, flyers, posters, or short videos that highlight culturally undesirable or discomforting issues for both sides and distribute them to both communities as part of raising awareness about each other's needs and promoting tolerance.

Political Factors

The political scene in Zahle has always been influenced by the developments and interrelations between the Republic of Lebanese and the Syrian Arab Republic. And Zahle, as a major city in Lebanon and the Bekaa with its location near the international road connecting Beirut to Damascus, has always been a host destination for heads of states, kings, and ambassadors who visited Lebanon since independence. It hosted their important meetings while they enjoyed a beautiful touristic area in the valley of Bekaa.[37] An

interviewee pointed out that now 'Presidents visit to see refugee camps instead of the beauty of our country, referring to the visit of president François Hollande of France to the Bekaa in 2016."[38]

Figure 7. Historic pictures from Zahle and Central Bekaa at Hotel Kadri in Zahle

Figure 8. President Hollande of France visiting one of the ISs in Central Bekaa

Therefore, in the collective memory of Zahle, as well as on the historic pictures hung on the walls of its famous hotels,[39] it is this strategic and political role that they sought their city to play. That role is what they consider Zahle was highly contested and heavily targeted for during the Lebanese Civil War. The Syrian control over the city was cautious in maintaining some sort of a strategic role for

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elias-hrawi-an-earthy-politician-who-makes-both-ends-meet.html

[38] http://www.dailystar.com.lb/Opinion/Editorial/2016/Apr-18/347880-much-ado-about-nothing.ashx

[39] http://www.yellowpages.com.lb/en/business/hotels/cristal-grand-kadri-hotel?lang=en

[37] https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/25/world/man-in-the-news-

it, despite the magnitude of military assault and later grip on the city's security. Zahle was given the privilege over other Lebanese cities for having the first post-war president of the republic, Elias Hraoui, be from Zahle. Hraoui came from a very well-known Christian Maronite family of Zahle and had a very good relationship with the Syrian regime back then. And it is believed that the consensus built for electing Hraoui after the Taif Agreement of National Accord was also an attempt from the Syrians to reconcile with the city's constituents by giving them the highest rank in the State.[40]

The 'Cedars Revolution', or what was later known as the March 14 Coalition, which started after the public demonstrations on March 14, 2005 protesting the presence of the SAA in Lebanon, witnessed a relatively high level of participation from Zahle. That was especially highlighted when the coalition had a sweeping victory in the 2009 parliamentary elections by winning the seven electoral district seats, providing the coalition a majority in the Lebanese Parliament with sixty-eight MPs.[41] Later in 2011, during the early years of the Syrian uprising, the political strife between the March 8 and the March 14 political blocs was still sharp. Most areas that were sympathizers with March 14, especially the Futures Movement (FM), were the first to host refugees in Akkar, Tripoli, Aarsal, and Central Bekaa. Another March 14 party, the Lebanese Forces (LF), had declared support to that uprising,[42] which was deemed a progressive Christian stance with the Syrian opposition against the regime. But the progressive political rhetoric of the LF towards the Syrian uprising was not translated in more openness towards hosting more Syrian refugees in Christian areas, which

in turn remained relatively conservative in that regards. This explains the significant variations when it comes to numbers of registered refugees in Muslim (specifically Sunni) versus Christian communities.

In 2016, when Prime Minister Saad El Hariri formed the cabinet, one of the three ministers representing the LF was Pierre Bou Assi who became the Minister of Social Affairs.[43] MOSA spearheads the response supporting the Lebanese host communities in response to the Syrian crisis.

The whole crisis response by the GoL suffered for years from the lack of clarity and policy because of disagreements by the various political parties that make up the Lebanese governments. These disagreements were mainly reflected on policies starting with the denial of refugees' presence in Lebanon,[44] to their registration,[45] erecting camps,[46] to almost all other aspects of the response. Therefore, it is very important to consider the gaps in understanding the roles and responsibilities that govern the relationships between various ministries involved in the crisis response and specifically in what relates to the case of evictions. Although each ministry should have its own mandate, certain staff supported by their respective political parties and driven by

[40] https://www.nytimes.com/1989/11/25/world/man-in-the-news-elias-hrawi-an-earthy-politician-who-makes-both-ends-meet.html

[41] *"Lebanon's March 14 Claims Victory"* Carnegie Middle East Center, June 09, 2009. Accessed on July 20th at: http://carnegie-mec.org/2009/06/09/lebanon-s-march-14-claims-victory-pub-23246

[42] " القوات اللبنانية" في قلب "الربيع العربي" بالذكرى الـ 18 لحلّها " April 1st, 2012. Accessed on July 20th at: https://www.lebanese-forces.com/2012/04/01/204098/

[43] http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/222334

[44] Saghieh N, Frangieh G *"The most important features of Lebanese policy towards the issue of Syrian refugees: From hiding its head in the sand to „soft power"* 30 December 2014, Accessed on July 30th at: https://lb.boell.org/en/2014/12/30/most-important-features-lebanese-policy-towards-issue-syrian-refugees-hiding-its-head

[45] On May 6, 2015, the UNHCR suspended the new registration of refugees at the Lebanese government's request.
Amnesty International, *"Pushed to the Edge: Syrian Refugees Face Increased Restrictions in Lebanon,"* Amnesty International, June 15, 2015, 16, https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/mde24/1785/2015/en/

[46] Yahya M. *"Unheard Voices – Policy Framework for Refugees in Lebanon and Jordan"* Accessed on July 30th at: https://carnegie-mec.org/2018/04/16/policy-framework-for-refugees-in-lebanon-and-jordan-pub-76058

partisan agendas tend to act without necessarily abiding to these guiding principles, according to one of the employees met. For instance, the MOSA minister issued a circular stating that no evictions are permitted anywhere in the country, especially if there is no logical and strongly convincing reason, which MOSA would then need to deal with it. But still, evictions did take place and they were supported by other ministers for political agendas. This was also reflected on a municipal level with certain municipalities, also for political reasons, not coordinating at all with MOSA. It was reported that sometimes the employees of the Social Development Centers of MOSA were not welcomed, or even met, by the mayor or municipality to follow up on eviction cases because they are not willing to work under the umbrella of MOSA on this issue.

Another institutional layer that was highly influenced by political interference is the fragmentation of authority between ministries and security forces regarding registration and handling evictions. In 2013, MOIM requested, for the first time since the refugee crisis started in 2011, that all the municipalities in Lebanon report on the number of refugees in their localities. Later in 2015, the GoL requested that UNHCR stop registering Syrian refugees to curb their influx. A lot of dynamics had changed since. Most recently, the General Directorate of the General Security requested that municipalities report on numbers again from municipalities across the country. The mayor of Bar Elias, for instance, expressed his frustration about the lack of coordination among governmental and security agencies in the country, especially that this puts additional pressure on the municipalities to gather this information especially that it will need human and financial resources to be mobilized for that task. 'Not having a central information unit or database that all the governmental institutions can share or refer to is just unacceptable after seven years on the crisis,' said a municipal member in Bar Elias. 'This adds to the chaos which then reflects badly on our municipalities.' On the other hand, there are positive lines of communication reported

between some employees at MOSA and the office of the Governor of Bekaa. According to that interviewee, 'It is the Governor's role to request from all municipalities to coordinate with MOSA on the Syrian refugee issue. Some municipalities coordinate with us while others do not. There is no mechanism for such coordination in Baalbek-El Hermel Governorate. The Governor there, for instance, can give an approval for eviction without going back to MOSA. While in the Bekaa there is more coordination between us [MOSA] with him and MOIM.' The lack of coordination, according to few key stakeholders, is one of the reasons why municipalities 'dared to act solo without going back to the responsible ministries and references. For them, if they are backed up politically, they think they can do whatever they want.'

Figure 9. Personal Information form for Palestinian and Syrian refugees requested by the General Security from the municipalities

Another political factor that was reported to have contributed to collective evictions was the

elections. According to some activists who were following the heated campaigns, especially in Zahle and other areas where the anti-Syrian refugee sentiment was one of the agenda items, 'The fear that politicians were spreading regarding the whole citizenship issue of Syrian refugees was purely electoral. They wanted to create an enemy that is nonexistent and then win over it.' According to them, this whole sentiment was being used to mobilize voters after convincing them that the international community is pressuring Lebanon for the naturalization of Syrians. The elections 'gave the leeway for mayors to also push the envelope since they knew politicians cannot stand against their actions or else they will lose voters. It's like anything else in the country; before the elections you can do whatever you want, and they will cover you just to get your vote!' According to these activists, 'politicians wanted something to blame their underperformance for years on, and that was the refugee crisis.'

Elections are local in so many ways, but a lot of the partisan rhetoric promoting fear and hate is national. On the other hand, local political dynamics can come down to land ownership, for instance. According to one of the landlords in Zahle, most of the lands that were rented to Syrians belong to some expats or politicians, such as the Skaff family, who are either not represented in the municipality or, more specifically, might have been an opponent to the current council. These are usually non-sympathizers of the municipality-ordered evictions because of the direct negative impact on them. According to UNHCR, the relationship between the municipality and the landlords is reflected in the relationship with the tenants in many cases.

From the perspective of the mayor of Zahle, the 'real political threat' is that of the naturalization of refugees in Lebanon. 'All international media and newspapers write about the international community's plans to keep refugees,' he describes. 'And this is something we will never accept. If the donor funding to Zahle will come on condition that we keep the refugees forever, then simply we do not want this aid.' The mayor's stance on

this issue seems non-negotiable. But other than international media articles, the mayor did not reference any specific concrete information about offers or conditional aid. In fact, even sympathizing aid workers and governmental employees are very clear in rejecting naturalization. 'We do not want to create a special community for the Syrians in Lebanon like the case with Palestinian camps. And we do not want to give Syrians the Lebanese nationality. We are not allowing them to even build any cement walls in the camps although it can protect them in cases of extreme weather conditions. But such construction is not allowed,' explains a humanitarian worker in Central Bekaa, and he adds, 'But they are fleeing the killing and persecution in their country and we shouldn't pressure them to the extent that they end up joining the extremists to fight back.' While Zahle's mayor challenges this theory, stating, 'Let's not exaggerate who is with and who is against the regime. Most of the refugees are seasonal workers who have nothing to do with politics and they are not on bad terms with the regime. But they are here for work.'

In conclusion, the political dynamics in Zahle can be quite tense in certain periods depending on the national political context. And knowing that refugees are treated, in most cases, as the weak link in some communities, abuses against them become more common during heightened political periods. Other national political campaigns that include incitement against refugees because of the fear from naturalization or their indefinite stay usually come on top of the other local factors in play.

Possible Entry Points

- Encourage increased central–local level communication and coordination between municipalities, governors, and central level MOIM and MOSA.
- Continue to analyze local nuances through conflict analysis research that can help donors and implementing partners understand not only national or regional politics, but also very local, municipal-based dynamics and

atmospherics.

- Train staff of ministries and security forces, including the municipalities, on topics that are related to dealing with refugees, including but not limited to protection, conflict sensitivity, peacebuilding, human rights standards, etc.
- Clearly communicate the international community's position regarding unconditional aid, especially stressing the position of the refugees' return to Syria which does not advocate for their indefinite stay in Lebanon. The role of ambassadors and international donor agencies is critical in reducing anxiety and collective fear of this point on a national level.
- Closely track the changes that will take place due to the formation of the new cabinet, including political swaps of ministries. This will affect dynamics in certain ministries and might even divert or disrupt relationships with some of them and will affect the relationship vis-à-vis position on refugees. Meanwhile high-level coordination with the PM is needed as it sets the stage for the general tone of the relationship with the cabinet.
- In cases where communication with some mayors is tough or unfruitful, identifying local municipal members who can play a mediation role might be of high impact.

Economic Factors

There is no scientific data, either at the municipal or any other local entity's level on the economic burdens created by the Syrian refugees on Zahle and its host community. Nor are the contributions of refugees to the economy found, especially in terms of the benefits from cheaper labour and other factors. Therefore, it is very difficult for any key stakeholder to conduct a cost–benefit analysis of the evictions in Zahle from an economic perspective. In all cases, from a conflict analysis perspective, perceptions are more important than reality. Hence, we look into the Ark & UNDP 'Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon.' In all its reports (Waves I, II, III, and IV) it stated that 'competition for lower-skilled jobs

was cited as a primary cause of tensions across all districts.' However, according to the Wave IV, it was in the districts of Zgharta (93.1%), Zahle (87.5%), Rachaya (89.9%), and Koura (91.1%) where respondents were most likely to pin tensions on this factor.[47] The interviews conducted with a few Lebanese, not only with low-skilled labourers, but also business owners, validated this result when interviewees confirmed the belief that Syrians are

Figure 10. Lebanese business owners protest competition of Syrians at Zahle Industrial Zone. El Nashra

taking their jobs in Zahle. In his opinion, the mayor stated that '30% of the Lebanese nationwide live under the poverty line. These are the ones feeling the Syrian burden. They are the ones competing over jobs. Syrians are competing with the poor Lebanese while they receive free education, food, water, and shelter. How is this fair?' And he adds, 'Let the international community treat these 30% of Lebanese the same way they treat the Syrians and no tensions will take place.' This competition

[47] Ark "*Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon*" September 2018.

was given as a reason by some residents for supporting any restrictive measures taken by the municipality, including evictions. 'Let them go away, they took all our jobs and we can barely find a living because of them,' said a plumber who lives in Zahle. While a blacksmith stated that 'Syrians almost took over our industrial zone before the municipality kicked them out.' The mayor clarified regarding that eviction: 'People should know, whether it is the Syrian refugees or the international community, that our industrial zone is not a residential quarter. Syrians divided the shops and began to live there instead of just performing daily labour. Then each family started getting their extended families to live with them. It became unbearable.' Therefore, the mayor seemed to be comfortable with getting the local Lebanese public's support for any restrictions he inflicts on Syrians limiting their ability to compete with the Lebanese over any types of jobs except agriculture and construction, which the Lebanese usually do not work in.

According to several businessowners, including two supermarkets owners and a mechanics workshop owner, these evictions only affected the refugees' residences, but not their workplaces. And it did not disrupt the labour market in Zahle. 'Those who left their apartments in Zahle are staying somewhere around Central Bekaa in most of the cases and they continue to come to work as usual. For us nothing changed. And even if they leave, there are thousands of other Syrians looking for work in the area.' Most stakeholders share the similar perspective that the collective evictions do not seem to be significantly disrupting the economy or raising the cost on the businessowners, especially as most of the refugees are relocating to nearby areas. For them, the labour market is already saturated enough that such small changes will not disrupt it. And even though Syrians in the Bekaa work primarily in agriculture and construction sectors, which Lebanese do not usually work in, there seem to be other sectors, especially low-paying skilled jobs, where there is competition

between the Lebanese and Syrians. The Bar Elias mayor mentioned, for instance, 'that Syrians are working as drivers competing with the poorest of the host community.' But it is not only the poorest Lebanese who are feeling the heat of competition, according to one municipal member in Bar Elias who is an owner of a mechanics workshop, 'Micro, small, and medium enterprises are all being affected as well.'

On the other hand, Zahle municipality had already implemented the Minister of Labor's decision number 29/1, dated February 18, 2018,[48] preventing Syrians from opening their own shops. Unlike in Bar Elias, where hundreds of shops are owned by refugees, the evictions did not much disrupt the supply side or businesses in the city. However, the evictions in Zahle have caused local landlords, who have lost monthly income, to feel the loss from an economic perspective. According to one of the Syrian refugees, 'the Lebanese are benefitting from every inch of their property through renting it to Syrians. They're making a lot of money and you could not find an empty apartment two years ago in Zahle. I know a Syrian family of four who are living in Zahle; they pay 1,000 USD for one apartment that they rent. This is crazy!' But this is not the average rate that Syrians are paying on a monthly basis. Rather, it is 'around 300 to 400 USD per family,' according to a Syrian who still lives and works in Zahle. But the number can go slightly higher if the legal documents, including registering the rental agreement at a notary, are to be done. Most landlords are refusing to pay these fees, or any other taxes on rental fees, themselves and they are putting that burden on the tenants. Although, for the sake of this research, none of the landlords agreed to go on record, but it is very likely that there are many who are benefitting from rental fees provided by Syrian refugees who reside in ISs, apartments, or shops in and around Zahle.

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[48] Posted on the website of the Ministry of Labor: http://www.labor. gov.lb/Temp/Files/74a11682-051a-4d83-a8fe-905a54b3968f.pdf

Possible Entry Points

- Support studies that focus on the impact of refugees on major hosting communities, such as Bar Elias in Central Bekaa, to understand the situation and come up with potential recommendations for the local authorities and key stakeholders. Studies can also address the economic impact of evictions on communities, such as Zahle or others in Lebanon.

- Make plans and strategies to prepare Central Bekaa to play a role in any future developments across the borders, especially as refugees begin to go back to Syria. That entails the potential rise in the cost of labour, alternative income sources for landlords, and so on. One side of the study shall also include the cost of rehabilitating and reusing the land that is now used as ISs in agriculture. There might be a need for an intervention from the Ministry of Agriculture or other governmental entities to support this transition.

- Continue to explore options with new markets for the agriculture sector since the situation in Syria might still need time to go back to normal in terms of commercial routes and demand for goods.

- Create programs that focus on promoting innovation in the agribusiness sector through local entrepreneurship competitions, camps, courses, and so on. This can be done through local vocational training institutes, specialized civil society organizations, or even the private sector.

- Support nano, micro, small, and medium enterprises in Central Bekaa to help them overcome part of their challenges and enhance their capacity to absorb a percentage of the unemployed.

- Work with the Ministry of Labor and Ministry of Economy to enhance communications about decisions and decrees taken in relation to the Syrian refugees' work permits. These decisions can also be reconsidered to ensure they are fair but also able to be implemented.

Legal Factors

Most municipalities that conducted evictions in various regions across Lebanon claim to rely on some sort of a legal advice or consultation, but in fact all these evictions do not fulfill the legal or human rights standards. For many local leaders, the illegality of the Syrian residency is used often as a ruse. Though the Syrians' stay may be illegal, the real reason for the eviction is most often triggered by other factors, as discussed earlier in this research, as with the case of the Zahle municipality-led evictions.

According to most interviewees, except local authorities, the legal factor of tough conditions set by the municipality of Zahle on Syrians to get their legal rental documents, among other requirements, was a tool to facilitate the collective evictions from the city. On one end, the industrial zone evictions, which included around 300 families according to UNHCR, took place because of the proclaimed illegal usage of the designated workshop area for residential purposes. For the municipality, this was illegal because it was changing the function of the zone which was not designed to be residential. Let alone the fact that shops were being overcrowded by families.

This issue of over-crowdedness was also witnessed in apartments around the centre of Zahle. According to a municipal member, 'they used to rent the apartment for one family, but then with time things change, and when they were evicted, we discovered more than five families leaving the apartment.' She added that 'our neighbours here, they were only one family. During nights, noises used to come from their apartment. Then we discovered that workers used to come to the apartment sleep at 9 p.m. and leave at 5 a.m.' According to the mayor, this is 'absolutely unacceptable behaviour that the municipality will not permit anymore. The law clarifies the conditions and prohibitions for being a tenant and hence allows only one family to stay in a certain accommodation.' In his opinion, the actions of the

municipality in this regard are 'neither arbitrary nor unlawful…on the contrary, we were guided by the Lebanese law and we had lawyers who studied this case well and backed us up.' Even a former MP from Zahle confirmed that the municipality was referring to the Lebanese law before performing any action. But a local activist challenges this claim, saying 'if this was a step according to the law, how come it was implemented in such a short timeframe of weeks or few months without giving the chance for tenants to appeal to court or get legal consultations? The families that were kicked out were not illegally occupying these apartments, but they were paying rent like any other Lebanese who rarely registers their contracts as well.'

A municipal member said that there was a real effort exerted by the municipality over two months to deliver the circular stating the conditions and rules that tenants should abide by. 'It was a door-to-door mapping, and we notified all Syrians that their rent contracts need to be registered. Those who got the eviction notices then registered or fixed their status were left in their apartments. There are more than 20,000 refugees still residing in Zahle.' And she adds, 'We told UNHCR that those refugees staying in camps or ISs are different than those living in the city or inside the town. The latter need to respect the Lebanese law if they decide to live like Lebanese citizens.'

An evicted Syrian interviewed confirmed the multiple-families-per-apartment issue in many cases, assuring that in his case, they were all paying rent to the landlord. In his opinion, 'the evicted Syrians were really treated unfairly because it is not their fault that the landlord refused to register the rental contracts at the municipality because of his greed and unwillingness to pay the required taxes.' He added that 'even if we did something wrong, the humiliating way in which the municipal police was treating Syrians during the evictions was just unacceptable. Having a policewoman hit them on their legs cannot be correct.' According to the municipality, during the execution of eviction orders, the municipal police were tough only with
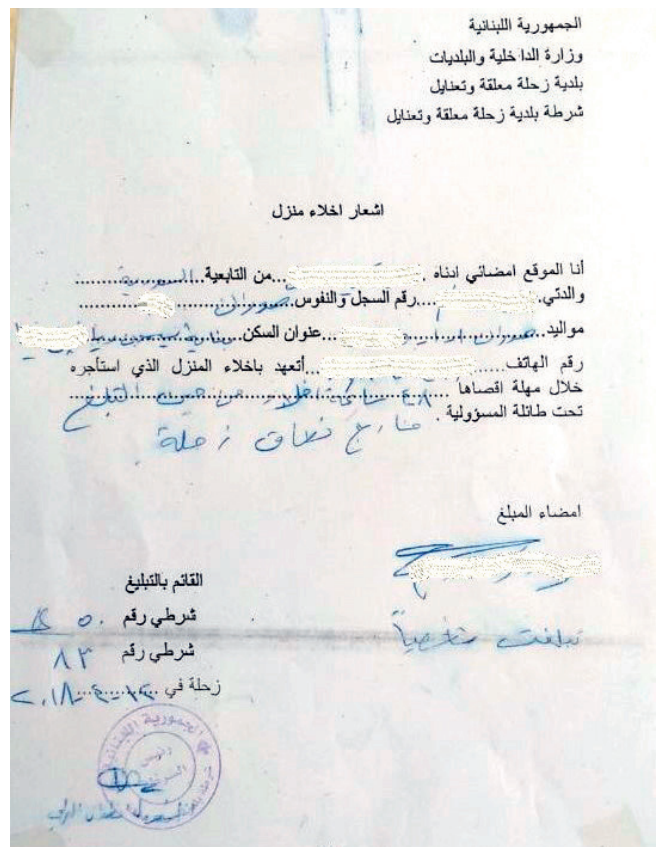

Figure 11. Eviction notice from the Municipal police of Zahle to a Syrian family ordering them to evict outside Zahle boundaries within forty-eight hours

those who refused to abide, but 'the police were always accompanied by LAF intelligence who were backing us up just in case anything happens. They were escorting even though they weren't directly involved.'

Another municipality decision that led to evictions was that agricultural lands were not allowed to become residential. Therefore, no collective shelters or ISs were allowed in these designated agricultural lands. Even though the mayor of Zahle previously had a plan to collect 20,000 Lebanese Liras from each tent in these ISs to provide services such as electricity, water, and sewage for them. But it seems the process was not deemed feasible. In fact, the mayor of Bar Elias, where most agricultural lands were transformed into ISs, acknowledges that landlords find it more appealing to rent their land to Syrian families as this makes more money for them than agriculture. 'But they are not calculating the environmental

or long-term impact of this on their lands. Each cement foundation will need hundreds of dollars to be removed in case they want to go back to agriculture after Syrians go back home or relocate. But due to the closing of the borders with Syria, these farmers were hit hard economically, so they're not thinking long-term now. And we cannot prevent them from getting this income.'

There are other non-eviction related legal restrictions, such as curfews, that also made it harder for Syrians to live and work in certain communities, such as Zahle. A Syrian refugee describing his experience with the curfew said, 'last year, the curfew started at 8 p.m., but my employer wanted me to work until 10 p.m., so we were being harassed in the street. The employer had told him, "this is your problem if you don't come until 10, then don't come to work".'

According to all Syrian refugees met, both evicted and non-evicted, there is a lot of unfairness in how the multiple restrictive measures are enforced with no consideration on how they would affect the daily life of the refugee families. For example, adding the cost of the notary registration of the apartment rental contract, the annual fees of renewing the residency permit, the work permit or Kafala fees, and the registration of the motorcycle along with all the various costs of commuting to do the papers, mukhtars, and validations could sum up to at least two or even three monthly salaries for each refugee. One Syrian labourer said, 'I've been working in Lebanon for years, even before the crisis started, and it was never this difficult, costly, and complex.' For that reason, some activists recommend that there needs to be differentiation between the Syrian worker and the refugee, or else it will be unfair for both. It only makes sense that each category would have its special requirements or documents. The MOSA coordinator in the Bekaa suggested the creation of a team to start the thinking process on how to identify and what to require from each category.

MOSA and UNHCR continue to closely monitor not only on the cases of evictions, but also the overall restrictive measures implemented by various Lebanese authorities, whether national or local, security or civil. They are also monitoring how these measures impact the lives and livelihoods of Syrian refugees. With every introduction of a new measure, fears rise about the precedent adopted by other municipalities, which can be disruptive to the whole crisis response efforts, and fuel additional tensions. The UNHCR, for instance, initiated an eviction task force last year that meets regularly to follow up on collective evictions. They also developed a Zahle evictions Standards of Procedures. According to them, they even offered support to the municipality several times, and in turn the municipality of Zahle had agreed to creating a technical group to look at issues of rental agreement, taxes, and distance between tents, but this did not materialize, and evictions continued to occur.

Possible Entry Points

- Advocate for clarity and fairness in terms of the law on the national and municipal levels, but also on the institutional level, such as General Security (GS) and others. And support info centres, apps, or other mechanisms of access to information among refugees.
- Support training for municipal police and relevant council members, including mayors, on human rights standards, legal measures, and the Lebanese law on related issues.
- Provide legal aid for any refugee family, allowing them to appeal and demand fair trials when needed.
- Support Human Rights monitors, which can keep track and record any breaches.
- Encourage continuous dialogue between UN agencies, donors, and the municipalities, especially those where sensitive factors might trigger additional tensions towards refugees. During these meetings, open and honest dialogue about any critical matters or grievances is encouraged.

Security Factors

According to a municipal member in Zahle, security factors should also be taken into consideration because 'many in Zahle are afraid from security incidents that might take place in the city. There were such incidents across the country, but in Zahle specifically after the explosion incident[49] and that of the Industrial Zone where the LAF found a workshop for preparing bombs[50] the people are more cautious.' And the municipal member adds that 'in other cases, prostitution was being reported by Zahlawis who do not accept their neighbourhoods to become brothels.' In Zahle, the fear from 'sleeper cells for Islamist extremists' is present according to many interviewees, even though the Lebanese security agencies are well trusted and respected. But since this risk cannot be ruled out, then the approach of 'better safe than sorry' is prevalent. For example, one of the interviewees had mentioned an incident about 'a Syrian man who was seen on the rooftop of a building several times, which was enough of a reason for Zahle municipality to evict him. Even though there was nothing specific about what he was doing. They thought he was engaged in a security related activity and staying at the rooftop to monitor certain movements in the city.' A local authority figure advised Syrians that '[they] should take care and make sure their actions or movements are not suspicious, especially in areas where there are longstanding grievances and mistrust.'

When it comes to the ISs, the Lebanese residents feel safer as they perceive the situation to be a bit more controlled. One key stakeholder stated that 'we know that the LAF Intelligence are overlooking and keeping an eye on the 1,333 ISs

in the region. And even though ISs are scattered all over the area, it is not permitted by the LAF Intelligence to allow anyone into the ISs if they did not coordinate beforehand with MOSA." In that case, the coordination seems to be comforting residents, but it is not the same with the private apartments scattered in the city. One activist noted that 'as long as the situation in Syria is bad, there will always be a risk of a terrorist attack anywhere in Lebanon. Therefore, coordination between all relevant stakeholders, including the Syrian refugee community, is important.'

Key challenges might be the fragmentation of the security apparatus and the overlap in the mandates of the multiple stakeholders who are engaged in security. This makes it harder to identify who is responsible for what, where, and when. The LAF Intelligence plays a key role in monitoring the security situation, the ISF and GS intelligence in the region, and the local municipal police. They all closely follow up on matters related to the Syrian refugee presence and the potential risks on the host communities. This is surely confusing to refugees who do not necessarily know the difference between the various agencies or their mandates, but also makes it harder to create reliable communication channels between key actors or figures among the refugee community and the security apparatus.

Possible Entry Points

- Expand the capacity building programs for the various security forces agencies in Lebanon (LAF, ISF, GS, and municipal police), including topics of human rights, community policing, and coordination while building their systems and structures to allow for such standards.
- Encourage the Civil Military Cooperation Unit of the LAF to play a larger role in dealing with communal conflicts and issues related to communications between security forces and the public.
- Promote coordination with security agencies, including municipal police heads, by inviting their representatives to attend specific

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[49] *"Explosion in East Lebanon leaves one dead and 11 injured"* Al Shark Al Awsat archives. September 1st, 2016 accessed on July 30th at: https://eng-archive.aawsat.com/tag/zahle

[50] August 19th, 2015. "هكذا أوقعت المخابرات بصانع المتفجرات في زحلة" Accessed on July 30th at:
https://www.tayyar.org/News/Lebanon/22458/هكذا أوقعت المخابرات
ب - -صانع المتفجرات - -في زحلة

working groups that they might not be part of now, such as the Social Stability Working Group, whereby they can debrief attendees on security related issues.

Aid-Related Factors

Donor funding and aid funnelled to Lebanese municipalities and various institutions as a response for the Syrian refugee crisis has been generous, but it is not enough. In fact, according to UNHCR's portal, the humanitarian fund appeal for Lebanon has been only half funded until 2018, with a current gap of around 1.5 billion US dollars.[51] The international community acknowledges the striking burdens on Lebanese host communities, especially those that doubled or tripled in volume of residents with the refugee influx.
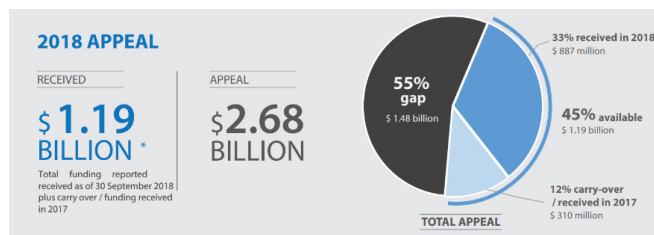

2018 APPEAL

RECEIVED
$1.19 BILLION *
Total funding reported received as of 30 September 2018 plus carry over / funding received in 2017

APPEAL
$2.68 BILLION

55% gap
$ 1.48 billion

33% received in 2018
$ 887 million

45% available
$ 1.19 billion

12% carry-over / received in 2017
$ 310 million

TOTAL APPEAL

Figure 12. LCRP 2018 Quarter 3 Funding Update. UN Inter-Agency Coordination

Despite underfunding, many local authorities and host communities appreciate the support that has been provided so far. The Bar Elias mayor, for instance, has shown high appreciation and gratitude to all donors and international organizations who supported his municipality, and he pointed out that 'this support, which helped tens of thousands of our community and refugees, wouldn't have been dedicated to our community if we were not one of the largest host communities of Syrian refugees in the Bekaa Governorate. Although we did not think about this support when we were doing our humanitarian duty with our guests, but it is nevertheless an important factor in reducing tensions and strengthening the local host community's resilience in the absence of major governmental support from central government (...) Our community benefitted a lot

from the donor funding that came to us as part of the crisis response. On the other hand, many families benefitted from the presence of refugees through income from rental fees and services of NGOs. And as a municipality we were also privileged to receive the Doctors Without Borders hospital as well as the environmental dumpsite, which can manage up to 150 tons of garbage per day, in addition to other projects.'

The garbage situation in Bar Elias, due to the increasing number of refugees, reached a critical and alarming point before the multiple interventions from international NGOs and donors to alleviate the burden. The mayor adds that 'for the past two years, we used to take seventy tons of solid waste off the streets daily, but twenty to twenty-five tons used to remain. Any small delays in taking these off would accumulate garbage in a weird way. And we had only the open-air dumpsite, which used to catch fire frequently and caused a lot of problems. We also had to bring sand trucks to cover it up and other machinery to spread the sand on a daily basis. All these expenditures were direct costs on the municipality that were draining our resources and taking it away from services to our constituencies. Almost 12,000 USD per month plus the follow-up time and stress were being lost.'

Of course, not all local authorities share the same positive attitude towards the international aid. In Zahle, statements such as 'no one is looking after Zahle' or 'we only get promises while others get the funds; were among the resonating perceptions towards donor funding. One local authority figure stated that 'the lack of support to Zahle is surely a trigger of tensions between the refugees on one hand and the host community along with the municipality on the other hand.' The mayor explained the huge burden that the municipality bears for being a host community and having to provide basic services for refugees without any support from the aid community. 'The cost of hosting the Syrians in Zahle is being paid by the Lebanese residents who received no support whatsoever. On a yearly basis, we spend an additional 3.5 million US dollars on waste

[51] https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/66829.pdf

collection (garbage), one million US dollars on sweeping streets and sewage, and one million US dollars on additional police personnel. This is all on the expense of projects that we could have implemented for our community.' He adds that 'there are 200 tons of additional solid waste because of Syrian refugees, while Zahle used to produce only 170 tons before.' Even in Bar Elias, the local community expressed in the past a rising concern in conjunction with a campaign by the Litani River Authority against polluting the river with solid waste and waste water from the increasing population. 'Six hundred cases of cancer are present in Bar Elias alone,' one protester told the news as he held a leaflet that read '600' in red to signal the dangers facing the local population from this rising pollution of the river that irrigates all surrounding agricultural lands.[52]

From a municipal point of view, it is a matter of having the international community understand all the various conflict triggers and local nuances, including the historical, sociocultural, political, legal, economical, and security factors that fuel potential animosity and create barriers between the host community and refugees. But it is also important to highlight that the municipality of Zahle stressed the fact that tens of thousands of refugees continue to live and work in Zahle without having any issues. Therefore, the municipality asks for fairness when providing support to refugees by providing the same support to the most vulnerable Lebanese communities who live under the poverty line.

The lack of trust in the intentions of the international community regarding the future of the refugees is another critical issue. The mayor of Zahle holds firmly to his position rejecting any aid that is conditional to the long-term stay or naturalization of refugees in Lebanon. So even though MOSA and various international organizations, including UNHCR, have reiterated that they do not have such intentions,[53] the need

for tangible assurance or serious action taken by the international community to help with the return of Syrian refugees to safe zones in Syria remains of essence according to him. The Bar Elias mayor shares a similar stance regarding the long term stay of refugees. He stated during the interview that 'the country cannot bear the burdens of this protracted crisis; we cannot continue like this for long.' In fact, both mayors suggested that for refugees to return to Syria, they need to start receiving aid there. Or, in other words, the international donors need to make the return appealing. Both mayors offered also to be part of any roundtable discussions or task force that would help consider, and later implement, a strategy for the return of refugees to Syria. 'There were 500 refugees who returned to Syria from Chebaa and we didn't hear that they died. So why not explore this option more seriously?' stated the mayor of Zahle.

Another hurdle was represented in the expectations of the municipality regarding the process of developing the Mapping of Risks and Resources (MRR) led by UNDP and MOSA, which did not translate into any tangible support of initiatives or projects. 'We were engaged in the MRR process for over six months, and we developed a full strategy, but nothing of that was implemented. We assessed the needs and listed the priorities in every sector. But we were not getting any proper responses about funding and that was even before the evictions issue started,' said one municipal member. "We were really looking forward to receiving support from the international community. That support would have helped in reducing some of the tensions that took place during the municipal elections period by building on the momentum that this municipal council created being represented by most of the political parties along with independents. We expected support, but nothing happened.' From UNDP's side, the MRR development process is not a prerequisite for funding, nor is it binding in that

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[52] https://bit.ly/2rcRTmH

[53] EU, U.N. Deny Refugee 'Naturalization' Claims after Lebanon

Uproar, April 27th, 2018. Accessed at http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/245481

Figure 13. Documents of the Zahle Mapping of Risks and Resources

Syrian communities as long as the discussions are open and honest about intentions and local nuances with the donor. "Zahle UNESCO's city of Gastronomy"[54] can be one of these initiatives whereby Syrians who are allowed to work in agriculture can benefit while Lebanese can be supported in the rest of the food production value chain. It can be a win-win situation.' But to agree on any of these interventions there needs to be proper mediation by a trusted entity, perhaps MOSA or the governor's office, who have a mandate in the crisis response or oversight over local authorities respectively.

In Bar Elias, there is an issue of expectations and sustainability as well. 'The first few months after we got elected, donors were excited and encouraged to support,' describes the mayor. 'We used to meet with them all the time and talk about projects. Some were implemented, but a lot of other promises were made and for two years nothing happened. There are real pressing needs in our community that should be addressed by either the government or the international community. Rainwater drainage canals, a waste-water treatment unit, sewage networks for two thirds of our village, pumps to get the sewage to flow into network, even paving roads are all critical projects. We also do not have a municipal space or a venue for social events in the village.' Regarding sustainability, he added 'some NGOs used to deliver water and dislodge seepage pits for refugees. Now they stopped. And refugees take our water and keep it running or misuse it because they are not paying for it. Service provision programs need to think about the environmental impact as well as a proper exit strategy instead of just cutting support without a plan.'

regard. But one of the main hurdles to providing funds to Zahle municipality, according to a senior staff member in UNDP, was that 'Zahle municipality was rigid in requesting very high budget projects of millions of dollars which were not feasible.' This statement was validated to an extent by the mayor who said, 'when we seek funding, it should be for sustainable projects that would really benefit the community. We don't want a truck or a park because that's something the municipality is able to do. We have other priorities and plans that are more important, not only to Zahle, but to the whole region, such as the slaughterhouse or the Wadi el Aaraysh touristic project which will actually provide more than 500 jobs for the whole community.' But another municipal member who was closely following up on the MRR process pointed out that the mayor 'is flexible in terms of collaborating with all international agencies to bring meaningful projects to the town the same way he was with UKDFID, who funded the environmental dumpsite for Zahle.' He added that 'there are other important interventions that can be of great benefit to both Lebanese and

One of the common issues noted by several interviewees was that, despite the gratitude that many have shown for the work that the international community has been doing during the past years, there are questions about the high

overhead a lot of INGOs spend on cars, offices, staff salaries, and so on. Corruption remains a hot topic mentioned several times, whether regarding the choice of projects an INGO pushes a municipality to implement – even if that was not a local priority – or the quality of implementation, as well as the lack of coordination with MOSA as per the guidelines of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP).

Therefore, due to the need for mediation in some cases and coordination with all relevant stakeholders in all cases, and to make sure there is no overlapping or fraud and favouritism taking place in selection of localities, more coordination is needed between all sides, including the donor, municipality, MOSA, and all other relevant stakeholders. But for that coordination to happen, especially on MOSA's end, there needs to be additional capacity building for the ministry and its staff. The same applies to the governor's office, whereby a special unit (Local Development Office) can be created, like the one in the Akkar Governorate,[55] to help in coordinating with municipalities whenever needed. A MOSA employee explains that 'there are enormous pressures on our teams. Imagine that this whole crisis response, which is spread over 261 municipalities in the region, is being handled by a team of fifty individuals doing almost everything. Moreover, the teams have no specific technical focus such as social stability, health, livelihoods, protection, etc. Who follows up on child trafficking? On prostitution cases? On substance abuse in Syrian refugees' gatherings? Everyone ends up doing everything and less time is given to follow up or mediate between donors and municipalities.' He also flagged out a couple of important gaps, such as not having convenient and well-equipped offices to work from, not having a refugee database at MOSA, or the aforementioned lack of clarity under the LCRP of the specific roles and relationships between the Lebanese ministries involved in the crisis response.

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[55] Akkar governor launches the LDO office, 2015: http://nna-leb.gov.lb/ar/show-news/197160/nna-leb.gov.lb/ar

Possible Entry Points

- Advocate for social tensions to be taken into consideration as a targeting criterion to ensure that tense areas, particularly those near areas hosting large numbers of refugees, are also supported, given Ark Wave III report findings.
- Provide the Lebanese ministries and institutions with the needed capacity to coordinate and respond to the crisis. The institutions can benefit from tangible or physical resources, such as office spaces and equipment, as well as intangible resources, such as training and capacity building.
- Support the Bekaa Governor in establishing a Local Development Office that can play the role of a regional hub for coordination and data collection to be shared with relevant stakeholders and Lebanese security agencies.
- Provide capacity building and training for MOSA staff, which co-leads the crisis response from the GoL's end, before supporting their specialization according to the needs. It is important to have technical staff at MOSA that can respond to various sectors' needs such as protection, health, livelihoods, social stability, and peacebuilding, etc.
- Continue to update the MRR and support Mechanisms for Social Stability whenever needed. And if MOSA continues to lead on facilitating the process, their staff can also play a mediation role between the local authorities and international donors.
- Ensure better communication of selection criteria for municipalities that receive support and aid after making sure that the selection process is fair to all concerned.
- Larger projects for a cluster of municipalities can also be appealing and respond to higher needs by certain communities such as a slaughterhouse that can benefit not only Zahle, but all Central Bekaa. A cluster approach to Central Bekaa can also reduce potential tensions between cross-confessional communities and open a door for dialogue and coordination.

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