



# LEBANON'S DISADVANTAGED

face a long, uphill battle

**Bitte Hammargren**  
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## EDITORIAL NOTES

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# PREFACE

**THE SWEDISH ASSOCIATION OF LOCAL AUTHORITIES AND REGIONS** (SALAR) has since 2018 partnered with Unions of Municipalities in Turkey and Lebanon to assist their local municipalities to address the needs of the millions of Syrian refugees which both countries have accommodated. This resulted in the Resilience in Local Governments (RESLOG) Project being implemented in both countries by SKL International, SALAR's international development agency. The RESLOG Project is funded by the Swedish International Development Agency (Sida).

In 2017, SKL International undertook the RESLOG feasibility study, and in 2018, RESLOG implementation started with partners in Lebanon and Turkey. The guiding principles of the project are those of the United Nations (UN) Agenda 2030 (with 17 Sustainable Development Goals to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all), Swedish development cooperation policy in general, and Sweden's Regional Strategy for the Syrian Crisis 2016–2020 in particular.

Since RESLOG was initiated, the situation in the two partner countries, as well as in Syria, has changed significantly, and continues to do so. For most Syrian refugees, the prospects of a safe return are not on the horizon. Meanwhile, host communities in Lebanon have experienced deepening political, financial and humanitarian crises, with increasing numbers of vulnerable Lebanese. As it is now time to review the RESLOG Project and plan its continued implementation, this study is designed to support this by providing a comprehensive understanding of the current situation in Lebanon, and its implications for the RESLOG Project's continuation.

In order to compile this report, the researcher consulted and interviewed

- experts at the United Nations and other international agencies working in the field of migration and social cohesion in Lebanon
- the heads of the two Unions of Municipalities (UoMs) in the governorate of Akkar, which are partners in the RESLOG Lebanon Project
- advisors and team members of RESLOG Lebanon
- community workers, volunteers and civil society activists in Akkar
- Lebanese and Syrian academics in and outside Lebanon
- Lebanese and Syrian refugee students in Akkar.

Most sources are quoted by name, but some remain anonymous, at their own request.

As the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon needs to be understood in its wider context, this report starts with a brief overview of Lebanon's recent history, and its current financial, political and health crises. The study then focuses on the situation in the Akkar Governorate, where the RESLOG Project works with two Unions of Municipalities, Dreib al-Awsat and Jurd al-Qayteh. The report also explores child and gender-related issues with a focus on Syrian refugees, national views on migration in Lebanon, and the day-to-day situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and particularly in Akkar. The report ends with conclusions, including possible ways to address migration-related issues and strengthen the resilience of displaced Syrians and Lebanese host communities.

Due to the intensified Covid-19 Pandemic in Lebanon during the winter of 2020–2021, the planned field study to Akkar could not be undertaken, which was a major challenge, as complex contexts are best understood via local field visits and face-to-face interviews. It should be noted that the situation in Lebanon is highly volatile, and tensions in the region at large have escalated significantly, which may result in unforeseeable events which affect the RESLOG project, after this report is submitted.

4 March 2021

# ABBREVIATIONS

- FPM Free Patriotic Movement (founded by President Michel Aoun)
- GBV Gender-based violence
- IDF Israel Defence Force
- IMF International Monetary Fund
- ISF Internal Security Forces
- LAF Lebanese Armed Forces
- LBP Lebanese Pounds (Lira)
- NGO Non-governmental organization
- PLO Palestine Liberation Organization
- RESLOG Resilience in Local Governments
- SALAR The Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions
- SKL International SALAR’s international development agency
- STL UN Special Tribunal for Lebanon
- UNHCR United Nations High Commission on Refugees
- UoM Union of Municipalities
- USD U.S. Dollars

## UNHCR MAP OF LEBANON



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# 1.

## LEBANON IN CRISIS

**This section gives a brief overview of the political and economic crisis in Lebanon, aggravated by corruption and impunity, the continued war in Syria, the August 2020 explosion in the Port of Beirut, the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the resulting surge in consumer prices, energy shortage, food insecurity, increased unemployment and political tensions.**

### 1.1 Impunity and corruption are chronic diseases

No festivities marked Lebanon's anniversary on 1 September 2020 to commemorate the birth of the State of Greater Lebanon, which was carved out of Greater Syria as a separate nation by France in 1943.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the centenary was marred by multiple crises: the devastating explosion in the Port of Beirut on 4 August, the Covid-19 Pandemic, and the financial and political crises. A non-sectarian, national protest movement had brought about the fall of Saad al-Hariri's premiership in October 2019, only to see him designated to form a new government one year later. However, in early March 2021, Hassan Diab still led a 'caretaker' government, while the old power structures remained intact behind the scenes.

Lebanon continues to exhibit the characteristics of a dysfunctional state. Earlier, this was manifested during the 1975–1990 civil war, during the 30 years of Syrian control of Lebanon, the Israeli incursions in 1978 and 1982, followed by Israel's lengthy occupation of south Lebanon, and the standoff in Beirut in 2008, when the country was on the brink of a new civil war. The current combined crisis of Covid-19, corruption,

economic collapse, and a political class that rejects transparency, accountability and a new constitution have resulted in Lebanon tail-spinning to disaster at an increasing pace.

Some factions in the Lebanese system, especially the Shiite Islamist Hezbollah (Arabic for God's Party), are deeply involved in the war in Syria, supporting the Assad Regime. Simultaneously, Lebanon hosts the world's largest refugee population per capita, due to the huge influx of Syrians, who are mostly enemies and/or victims of the Assad Regime.

In April 2011, one year after the Arab Spring and the eruption of civil protests in Syria, Lebanon hosted some 33,800 Syrian refugees or Syrians awaiting registration by UNHCR. By October 2018, after seven and a half years of devastating war in Syria, this number had risen to 1.5 million, equal to a quarter of the total Lebanese population, according to Lebanese government estimates.<sup>2</sup>

In addition to the Syrians, Lebanon has hosted Palestinian refugees since 1948, who remain stateless and lack basic civil rights, due to Lebanese fears that including Sunni Arab Palestinians would threaten Lebanon's fragile sectarian system.

Since its independence from France in 1943, Lebanon has had a sectarian political system, which prescribes that the President is a Christian Maronite, the Prime Minister is a Sunni, and the Speaker of the Parliament is a Shiite. Lebanon's population is divided into 18 different religious sects. Civil marriage in the country is not possible, which forces Lebanese who wish to marry across sectarian lines to travel abroad, often to

1 Associated Press (31 August 2020)

2 UNHCR (2019 update), 'Lebanese crisis response plan 2017–2020'

Cyprus. Unlike in the Parliament, seats in local government are not based on religious affiliation.

In spite of its sect-based political system, Lebanon has not held a census since 1932, when there were considerably more Christians residing in the country than today. Unsurprisingly, tensions have repeatedly emerged, with various leaders calling for support from external actors. In 1958, the United States intervened to bolster the Maronite Camille Chamoun's pro-Western government against a perceived threat from Nasserists<sup>3</sup> and international communists. In 1975, a civil war erupted, which pitted Palestinian guerrilla factions, the Druze leader Kemal Jumblatt and Sunni leftist groupings against Lebanese Christians, who received military support from Syria. This civil war soon became a proxy war, which led to Israeli invasions and occupation, Syrian control and Iranian interference. In the midst of the civil war, the Shiite Hezbollah was created with the help of Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), following the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979.

In 1982, after an Israeli invasion, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and its armed factions were forced to leave Lebanon. The void left by the departure of the Palestinians guerrillas led to massacres in the Sabra and Shatila refugee camps, and Hezbollah's armed rebellion against the Israel Defence Forces (IDF), which stayed in south Lebanon as an occupying force until 2000. Hezbollah's armed resistance to the IDF ultimately led to Israel's rushed evacuation from south Lebanon in May 2000, excluding the disputed Shebaa Farms. The Israeli withdrawal gave Hezbollah a moral and military boost, which they have built on, as was seen during the Second Lebanese War in 2006 between Israel and Hezbollah.

Syrian forces intervened in Lebanon's civil war in 1976 and stayed on for 30 years. Syria's intervention at first had the blessing of the United States under President General Ford and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger.<sup>4</sup> The Syrian forces remained in the country after the Ta'if Accords, which ended the civil war, were concluded in Saudi Arabia in 1979. One of the outcomes of the Ta'if Accords was the impunity of nearly all militia leaders who had fought the civil war, and Lebanon's failures to deal

with its past has cast long shadows which continue to haunt the present.

The Lebanese multi-billionaire Rafiq al-Hariri, who built his fortune in Saudi Arabia and who was a key player during the Ta'if negotiations, became Lebanon's first post-civil war Prime Minister. As such, he rebuilt Lebanon's infrastructure, largely with the help of foreign investors who were given generous tax breaks. Hariri, who was also a Saudi national, became a figurehead of the factions that were against Syria's control of

Lebanon. In September 2004, he defended UN Security Council Resolution 1559, which called for "all the remaining foreign forces to withdraw from Lebanon". One month later, he resigned as Prime Minister, ostensibly after a dispute with Syria's President Bashar al-Assad, who was adamant that Émile Lahoud should have a second term as Lebanon's President.<sup>5</sup>

On 14 February 2005, Rafiq al-Hariri was assassinated in central Beirut by a huge car bomb. The murder triggered the so-called Cedar Revolution, a civil protest which led to the retreat of Syria's military forces and security agents, and the UN set up a Special Tribunal for Lebanon (STL) to investigate the murder. After 15 years of work and 415 court hearings, the STL final verdict on 8 August 2020, found only one accused, a mid-level operative of Hezbollah, guilty in absentia of conspiracy to commit a terrorist crime, and of the premeditated murder of Rafiq al-Hariri. Three other defendants were found not guilty.<sup>6</sup> With this anti-climax, the judges dashed initial hopes in many circles that the STL would find damning evidence against the Assad Regime and Hezbollah's top brass. Instead, the court found "no evidence that the Hezbollah leadership had any involvement in Hariri's murder, and no direct evidence of Syrian involvement".

Whereas Syria's military and security forces withdrew from Lebanon in 2005, the influence of Hezbollah and other pro-Syrian forces grew over the years, as was manifest in 2016, when the ex-army chief Michel Aoun, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) and an ally of Hezbollah since 2005, was elected President by Parliament. Aoun previously belonged to an anti-Syrian camp, but made a U-turn in 2005, after the departure of

3 Leftist Arab nationalists, inspired by Egypt's president Gamal Abdel Nasser

4 Wight (2013)

5 Blanford (2006), pp. 71–99

6 Special Tribunal for Lebanon, 'The Cases'



Beirut port in the aftermath of 4 August 2021 explosion  
Photo: Rashid Khreiss, unsplash.com

Syrian troops. Even after Syria's military retreat, the country was marred by repeated assassinations of politicians and journalists who opposed Syria's continued influence, such as Gibran al-Tueni, publisher of al-Nahar Newspaper, and the influential columnist Samir al-Kassir, to name but two.<sup>7</sup> The pattern of impunity after political assassinations has continued, with the slain Lokman Slim, a prominent political activist and Shiite critic of Hezbollah, as the latest example, in February 2021.<sup>8</sup>

Since the end of the civil war, the lack of transparency, impunity and deep-rooted corruption have become part of Lebanon's chronic disease as a nation, which the recent nation-wide protest movement tried to change. However, the political elite has too much to lose, and has showed time and again that it will not heed calls from the streets to resign and open a new chapter for Lebanon. The 'Lebanese street', with its slogan *Killoun, yani killoun* (All of them, means all of them),

has not been able to 'rock the boat' sufficiently, and appears unlikely to do so in the future.

This was repeated after the Port of Beirut blast in August 2020, when 2,700 tons of ammonium nitrate exploded, killing over 200 people, injuring 6,500, and causing 15 billion USD worth of damage. An estimated 300,000 were left homeless, and parts of Beirut's historical neighbourhoods lay in ruins. According to devastated citizens, the explosion caused more physical damage to Beirut than 15 years of civil war. Several months later, a contracted German firm found 52 containers of lethal chemicals such as nerve gas, hydrofluoric acid and formic acid in the port, which could have caused a second catastrophe, according to the firm's CEO.<sup>9</sup>

The landmark silos in the port, which had stored more than 80% of Lebanon's imported cereals, were severely damaged.<sup>10</sup> The investigation dragged on, while mistrust in the central authorities increased. Rumours spread that repeated fires

7 'Lebanon bombings and assassinations' (2004- 2021), Wikipedia. Retrieved October 2020

8 Amnesty International (2021)

9 Süddeutsche Zeitung (10 February 2021)

10 Bar'el (2020)



in the country were intended to destroy evidence related to the blast<sup>11</sup>. In December 2020, caretaker Prime Minister Hassan Diab and three of his ministers were charged with negligence. Two months later, however, the judge leading the investigation was removed after complaints by two former ministers charged in the probe<sup>12</sup>. Lebanon was back to square one, as the Justice Minister had to propose a new investigator, to be approved by the higher judicial council before a new investigation could start. In Beirut, families of victims protested in front of a court house against the stalled investigation, which they saw as characteristic of ‘a rotten country’.<sup>13</sup>

Prime Minister Hassan Diab, who formally resigned after the explosion, was described by Joseph Bahout, Director of the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut, as the leader of a ‘ghost government’ which perpetuated the status quo, but by no means led the country.<sup>14</sup> National top figures, including former Prime Ministers, other relevant ministers, and heads of the security services and the Lebanese Armed Forces were spared from investigation and prosecution.<sup>15</sup> Behind Diab’s caretaker government stood the more powerful interests of Lebanon’s two main political factions, the March 14 and March 8 Alliances.

The March 14 Alliance is led by the Sunni ex-prime minister Saad al-Hariri, head of the Future Movement, but also encompasses Christian factions led by Pierre Amine Gemayel<sup>16</sup> and Samir Geagea<sup>17</sup>. Saad al-Hariri, son of the martyred former Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri, is generally seen as pro-United States, but has not been willing to confront Hezbollah. A Saudi passport-holder like his deceased father, he has close ties to the House of Saud. However, his loyalty to

the Saudi royals waned considerably in 2017, when he was kidnapped by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, taken into custody in Riyadh, and forced to sign his resignation in front of TV cameras.<sup>18</sup> He was set free after French President Emmanuel Macron intervened to secure his release.<sup>19</sup>

The March 14 and March 8 Alliances do not have a distinct fault line, as was evident in 2009, when the Druze leader Walid Jumblatt left March 14, following political changes at the regional and international level.<sup>20</sup> Saad Hariri’s attempt seven years later to split the March 8 Alliance only further divided the March 14 Alliance.<sup>21</sup>

The March 8 Alliance consists of President Michel Aoun, a Christian Maronite, and the Lebanese Shiite-Islamist movement Hezbollah (God’s Party), which is a strategic ally of Iran with strong ties to the Assad Regime, plus Amal, another Shiite faction lead by the Speaker, Nabih Berri. Scores of well-trained Hezbollahis have fought on the side of Assad, a secular Alawite, during the war in Syria. Hezbollah remains Iran’s closest ally in the Arab world. Geo-politically, Hezbollah functions as an external line of defence for Iran’s interests in the region. During the Trump administration, analysts did not exclude a standoff between the United States and Iran, which could have dragged Lebanon into another war, as a usual battleground for proxy wars.<sup>22</sup>

In its maximum pressure campaign against Iran, the Trump Administration targeted certain political figureheads in Lebanon for their alleged ties to Hezbollah. In November 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department imposed sanctions on Gebran Bassil, leader of the Free Patriotic Movement, a Maronite Christian and son-in-law of President Michel Aoun. Gibran Bassil previously served as Foreign Minister, as well as Minister of Telecommunications and Energy. While loathed by the protest movement, he was often depicted as a frontrunner for the Lebanese Presidency, should his father-in-law resign. However, the former U.S. Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, stated that

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11 Interviews online with sources in Lebanon, August–October 2020

12 Financial Times (18 February 2021)

13 Tweeted by Aya Mazjoub, Lebanon researcher for Human Rights Watch, 18 February 2021

14 Interviewed by Le Commerce du Levant, 3 July 2020

15 Le Commerce du Levant, 3 July 2020

16 Pierre Amine Gemayel is the grandson of the founder of Lebanon’s Phalangist Party (Kataeb) and the nephew of the former president-elect Bachir Gemayel who was assassinated in 1982.

17 Samir Geagea, chairman of the Lebanese Forces, led one of the militias during the civil war.

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18 Hubbard (2020)

19 Reuters (May 28, 2018), ‘Without France, Lebanon would probably be at war, Macron says’

20 Salem (2009)

21 Dagher (2016)

22 Azhari (2020)

Bassil had “contributed to the prevailing system of corruption and political patronage that plagues Lebanon, which has aided and abetted Hezbollah’s destabilizing activities.” In November 2020, the U.S. Treasury Department applied the Magnitsky Act to Bassil<sup>23</sup>, who responded defiantly.

### 1.2 Economic meltdown

Lebanon’s economic ordeal can partly be attributed to developments beyond its control, such as the global Covid-19 Pandemic and tensions between the United States and Iran. However, Lebanon’s economic meltdown is also due to domestic mismanagement, ranging from the national level to local governments tainted by corruption, sectarianism, patronage, and neglect of the basic needs of citizens by Lebanon’s political class. Tellingly, Lebanon is sometimes called a ‘cheese republic’ – full of holes where money disappears.<sup>24</sup>

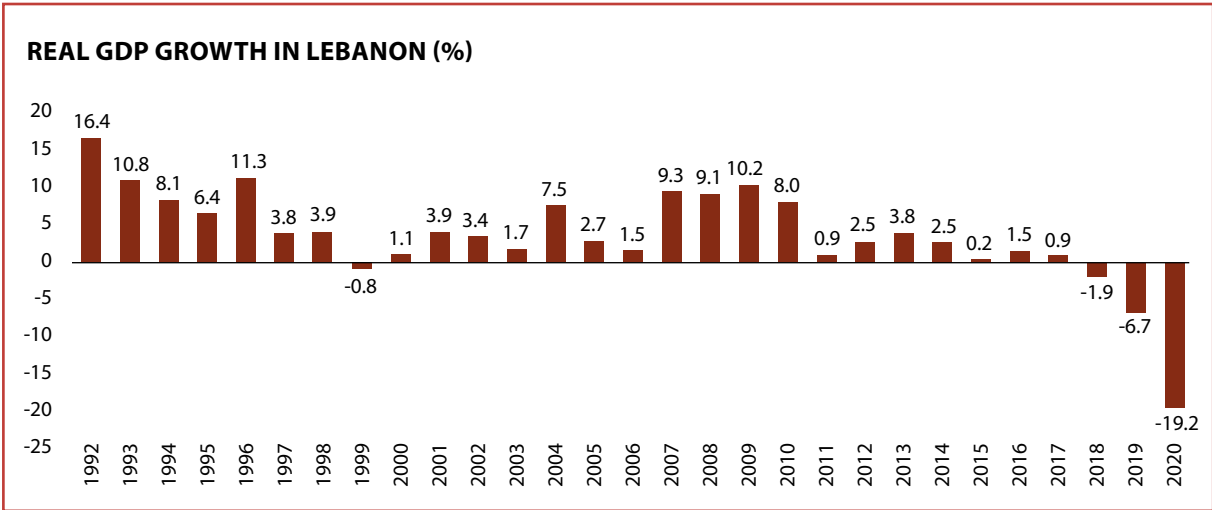
International geopolitics also reverberates on Lebanon’s domestic scene, particularly events in Syria, but also the conflict between Iran and its regional adversaries. For decades, Lebanese civil society activists have argued that there is an organic link between foreign meddling and the corruption and patronage in the political system. “Almost no one believes that it is possible to respond to the

economic and social disasters by continuing to act according to the codes of the existing political system, which simply isn’t working. It has to undergo a deep reform,” commented Joseph Bahout, Director of the Issam Fares Institute.<sup>25</sup>

While parts of civil society have called for an immediate overhaul of the political system, others advocate gradual change towards better governance, thus hoping to prevent the state from imploding. Choosing between uncertainties, some analysts propose stabilization via a political deal in the short term. But for the medium term, Lebanon risks ‘Somalization’ if the system is not reformed.<sup>26</sup> A Somalia-like scenario poses the risk of a new civil war and implosion of the state.

Moreover, the United States’ sanctioning of anyone doing business with the Assad Regime in Syria adds to Lebanon’s economic woes. The U.S. Caesar Civilian Protection Act of June 2020 sanctions any actor who provides significant business, military or reconstruction assistance to Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad.<sup>27</sup>

While aiming to promote a political transition in Syria, the Caesar Act, as a side-effect, increases the tension inside Lebanon between the March 14 and March 8 factions. The United States denies that the Caesar Act targets the Lebanese people or the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon.<sup>28</sup>



Source: World Bank, Lebanon Economic Monitor Dec 2020

23 The New York Times (6 November 2020)

24 Le Commerce du Levant, 3 July 2020

25 Le Commerce du Levant, 3 July 2020

26 Le Commerce du Levant, 3 July 2020

27 The Senate of the United States (2020). This bill is named after a Syrian military photographer, codenamed ‘Caesar’, who smuggled some 55,000 photographs out of Syria, providing graphic evidence of systematic torture and killings by the Assad Regime.

28 Azhari (2020)

However, as many essential goods are subsidized by the government, the increase in clandestine trade with Syria has drained the foreign-currency reserves of Lebanon's Central Bank even further<sup>29</sup>.

The dwindling exchange rate of the Lebanese pound (down 80% to the USD in a year from October 2019) has led to hyperinflation, rapidly increasing poverty, and widespread desperation. The World Bank estimated that 50% of the population lived under the poverty line during the summer of 2020.<sup>30</sup> In June 2020, Lebanon's Minister of the Economy predicted that 60% of the population would be living in poverty by the end of the year.<sup>31</sup> The public debt amounted to USD100bn, or 160% of GDP.<sup>32</sup>

The government's empty Treasury and the Beirut blast precipitated a food and energy crisis. For example, Lebanon imports ±80% of its grain<sup>33</sup>. But with the depleted exchange rate, the Lebanese state did not have enough dollars to pay for imports of essentials, food prices spiked, and hunger became a tangible problem in a country where the middle class is now close to extinction.<sup>34</sup> Observers note that as a result, suicides have become more frequent.<sup>35</sup>

The situation has also created greater inequalities between those who have access to USD and those who do not. "Things are still very cheap for those who buy with dollars, but for others, things have become very expensive. Local production is also becoming increasingly expensive, as local producers need imported diesel for their generators," says Marija De Wijn of UNDP-UN Habitat.

The reduction in economic activity due to the pandemic and the currency devaluation led to a price increase of at least 50% for ordinary households, with some prices increasing even more.<sup>36</sup> For example, Lebanon's standard breakfast bread, *mana'ish*, became eight times more expensive in a year. A source in Akkar stated: "A teacher with

over 40 years of experience earns only 368 USD/month. My sister, a doctor specializing in infectious diseases, works seven days a week due to the pandemic for a monthly salary of only 180 USD".<sup>37</sup> Adding to their woes, Lebanese depositors are no longer authorized to withdraw dollars they had saved in Lebanese banks, while their Lebanese savings have lost ±80% of their value. Ad hoc banking restrictions prevent most people from making foreign transfers, although many ordinary Lebanese suspect that people with political connections squirrel billions out of the country.<sup>38</sup>

Unemployment has soared. Before the economic crisis the unemployment rate was 20–30%. Reliable statistics are hard to find in the Middle East, but with the crisis, the unemployment rate is estimated at ±50 percent, according to Joseph Bahout of the Issam Fares Institute in Beirut.<sup>39</sup>

The Governor of the Central Bank, Riad Salamé, once considered a guarantor of Lebanon's financial stability, is now seen as a symbol of corruption. Abroad, he and his family members hold assets worth ±100 million USD, mostly invested in real estate.<sup>40</sup> Salamé claims that it was legal to transfer wealth abroad at the time when he did so. Meanwhile, he objected to assessments that the Lebanese state was almost bankrupt.<sup>41</sup> A French MP close to President Macron responded that the Governor of the Central Bank is 'intolerable', and that France has been waiting for the real Central Bank figures for months.<sup>42</sup> In January 2021, Switzerland opened an investigation into money laundering and possible embezzlement tied to Lebanon's central bank and its Governor.<sup>43</sup>

### 1.3 Covid-19 strikes Lebanon

The Covid-19 Pandemic placed Lebanon in a state of medical emergency. On 19 March 2020, Lebanon closed its land, sea and air borders due

29 Azhari (2020)

30 Yahya (2020)

31 Lewis (2020)

32 Centre Arabe de Recherche et d'Études Politiques de Paris (2020)

33 Krantz (2020)

34 Vohra (2020)

35 Centre Arabe de Recherche et d'Études Politiques de Paris (2020)

36 ESCWA (2020)

37 Interview December 2020

38 Financial Times, 19 January 2021

39 Centre Arabe de Recherche et d'Études Politiques de Paris (2020)

40 Reuters (12 August 2020)

41 L'Orient le Jour (10 November 2019), 'Le Liban n'est pas à proprement parler "en faillite", selon Salamé'

42 Gwendal Rouillard on Twitter: [https://twitter.com/G\\_ROUILLARD/status/1326533293773238278](https://twitter.com/G_ROUILLARD/status/1326533293773238278)

43 Financial Times, 19 January 2021

to the pandemic, though Hezbollah was reportedly exempt from this restriction.<sup>44</sup> During the following summer, a rapid increase of Covid cases occurred in terms of both infections and ICU admissions.<sup>45</sup> Lebanon now stood on the brink of a combined economic and medical abyss.

One of the problems of fighting Covid-19 was a belief shared by many that talk of a pandemic was a conspiracy aimed at halting the protests against the central government.<sup>46</sup> A Lebanese RESLOG volunteer in Akkar said: “It’s true that many have seen the lockdowns and all the talk about the Corona Virus as a conspiracy, but this attitude started to change after awareness campaigns in local schools”.<sup>47</sup> Later, following an increasing number of infections and a rising death toll, “many of those who did not believe that there was a Covid Pandemic, now see people falling sick around them,” commented Khalid al-Hamwi, Syrian Refugees Liaison Officer for RESLOG, and himself a Syrian refugee in North Lebanon.<sup>48</sup>

In Akkar, RESLOG initiated *Salamati*, an educational campaign to spread awareness of how to combat the pandemic. It started at a time when Lebanon lacked a national plan to deal with Covid-19. *Salamati* volunteers in Akkar, including both Lebanese and Syrians, work in small groups, visiting homes, and tracking cases that need treatment or quarantine.<sup>49</sup> Poor people, regardless of nationality, could not afford to pay for facemasks. With a nadir of trust and depleted municipal resources, people did not expect their municipalities to provide face masks for the needy. “Instead, we as volunteers had to collect money in our communities to pay for face masks to distribute. Expectations regarding municipalities are very low,” said a Lebanese volunteer in *Salamati*.<sup>50</sup> Poverty-stricken Syrian refugees often find the cost of a Covid-19 PCR test unaffordable.<sup>51</sup>

In early 2021, Lebanon’s caretaker government had still not presented a plan for mass vaccination. Neither did the government have resources to buy vaccines for a nationwide immunization programme. Given the strain on both health and energy systems, there were also logistical hurdles to overcome, such as safe storage of the vaccine. “Mass vaccination has to be done by the international community,” commented an international aid worker who preferred to remain anonymous. Consequently, in January 2021, the World Bank announced financial support of USD 34 million to provide vaccines for over 2 million people in Lebanon. This came as the country experienced a record-breaking official ±5,500 new Covid cases per day,<sup>52</sup> though many feared that the actual figure was much higher.

Free vaccination campaigns were supposed to begin in the first half of February, according to the outgoing Lebanese Health Minister.<sup>53</sup> The immunization programme was to be handled by private hospitals and clinics, according to sources. However, concerns were raised regarding the need for transparency of the immunization campaign, to prevent it being subject to politicization and patronage.<sup>54</sup> Although the Ministry of Public Health claimed to work according to WHO recommendations “it has ignored one of its most important guiding principles: open and inclusive decision-making,” according to *The Arab Reform Initiative*.<sup>55</sup>

The Kingdom of Jordan was praised by the head of UNHCR for including refugees “in every aspect of the public health response to the pandemic, including the national vaccination campaign, showing how it should be done if we are to keep everyone safe”.<sup>56</sup> A similar announcement could not be made regarding Lebanon’s caretaker government. Given Lebanon’s history of corruption, fears arose that mass vaccination would not be offered first to the most vulnerable but to the most influential. As of late February 2021, only around 30,000 doses of vaccines had been administered in a country which is home to

44 Porter (2020)

45 Ministry of Health Lebanon, 23 July 2020. See tweet: <https://twitter.com/firassabiad/status/1287251226149769216>

46 An assessment confirmed by several interviewees, December 2020

47 Interview December 2020

48 Interview February 2021

49 Interviews December 2020

50 Interview December 2020

51 Saferworld (2020)

52 World Bank (2021)

53 ‘Covid: Lebanon, Pfizer-BioNTech vaccine coming in February’, 8 January 2021. Ansa, Italy

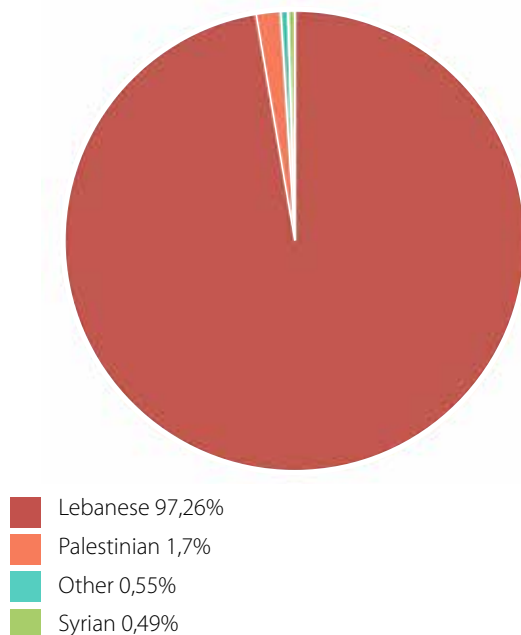
54 L’Orient le Jour (9 January 2021)

55 Arab Reform Initiative (2021)

56 UNHCR (2021)

### VACCINATED AS PER NATIONALITY

Status vaccinated per nationality as of 5 March 2021. From The Inter Ministerial Platform for Assessment, Coordination and Tracking Info (IMPACT).



<https://www.impact.gov.lb>.  
Data obtained from webpage 5 March 2021

more than 6 Million people. News that individuals in the political elite had been jumping the queue, further increased the popular anger and threatened the World Bank lifeline to Lebanon.<sup>57</sup> Sweden's embassy in Beirut joined others in the international community who called for vaccines against Covid-19 to be distributed in a transparent and fair way.<sup>58</sup>

Questions also remained about the implementation of the vaccination programme, including how individuals who lack online access could sign up. In Akkar, the number of people who had registered to get the vaccine was very low at that time. "It is probably due to lack of trust in the government, or because some believe it's a conspiracy. Or maybe due to the digital sign-up process which is not easy to follow," commented a Lebanese in Halba, the regional capital of Akkar. The pandemic constitutes a prime example of why inclusiveness and basic health services for every

one are crucial. "But Syrians are afraid to access government agencies," an international aid expert commented.<sup>59</sup>

In early 2021, hospitals in Lebanon were overloaded with patients. The occupancy rate of intensive care beds was  $\pm 93-95\%$ , according to WHO. The record number of Covid cases was reportedly aggravated by a spree of partying over New Year 2021. The medical crisis led to hospitals turning away Covid patients, and barely finding beds for the most critical cases.<sup>60</sup> Also, admittance to hospitals for Covid treatment usually came at a high cost. "To enter a Covid ward in a private hospital, a patient has to pay 30 million Lira, which at the black market exchange rate is  $\pm 3,000$  USD. There is no way even the middle class can afford that," commented a young Syrian refugee.<sup>61</sup>

As a new wave of Covid-19 hit Lebanon in early 2021, the country began its fifth and strictest nationwide lockdown, forcing restaurants and shops to close, whereas supermarkets were able to recruit staff to deliver goods. However, as repeated lockdowns had already become a heavy burden on the Lebanese, many disobeyed the rules, even though being caught without a permit incurred heavy penalties. "Moving around without a mask risks a fine of 5 million LBP," a RESLOG affiliate commented.<sup>62</sup>

At the end of January 2021, protests against corruption, poverty and the lockdown erupted in Tripoli, Lebanon's second largest city, culminating when protesters torched the municipal building. As anger was raging, one protester said in front of the cameras: "You blew us up (on August 4) and now you're faulting us for pelting you with stones? We have no food, no work, no heating, no education and now you're suffocating us at home..." Kim Ghattas, a renowned Lebanese journalist and writer in exile, commented that this demonstrator expressed what most Lebanese felt these days.<sup>63</sup> However, an interviewee in Tripoli, who saw the city hall set on fire, abhorred such violence: "It also led to more conspiracy theories. Many are saying that the Hariri people were behind the fire, whereas others defended those who did it, saying

57 Financial Times, 28 February 2021.

58 Embassy of Sweden, 3 March 2021, on a Facebook posting.

59 Interview January 2021

60 Sherlock (2021)

61 Interview February 2021

62 Interview February 2021

63 Kim Ghattas on Twitter, 28 January 2021

they were hungry.” A Lebanese woman in Akkar commented that “the reason for the rage has not ended. It can spread to other areas, especially due to the extended lockdown.”

However, neither of the heads of the two municipal unions, which are partners in the RESLOG project, saw the risk of the rage of Tripoli spilling over to Akkar. “Tripoli is a large and open city, but in Jurd everyone knows everyone. Here, violent actions may lead to the blocking of roads, but I have no fear of vandalism,” said Mr. Abdulilah Zakaria, head of the UoM in Jurd al-Qayteh.<sup>64</sup>

Neither did Mr. Abound Mere, head of the UoM in Dreib al-Awsat see a risk of vandalism against municipalities in Akkar. “The real target in the Tripoli demonstrations was not local government, it was about national politics in Beirut. Here we have all religions living together, and even during the civil war it was quiet in Akkar. There is more solidarity here,” he commented, explaining that the relative calm in Akkar was due to the governorate’s close ties to Lebanon’s multi-religious army.<sup>65</sup>

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64 Interview, 19 February 2021

65 Interview, 19 February 2021

# 2.

## MULTIPLE CRISES AFFECTING AKKAR

This section gives an overview of the economic, social and political situation in Akkar, where RESLOG is conducting its project in two Unions of Municipalities.

### 2.1 High levels of vulnerability

SKL International is implementing its Lebanon RESLOG Project in Akkar in the north, one of the most under-developed regions of the country, which hosts a large Syrian refugee community. Akkar is representative of the larger picture in

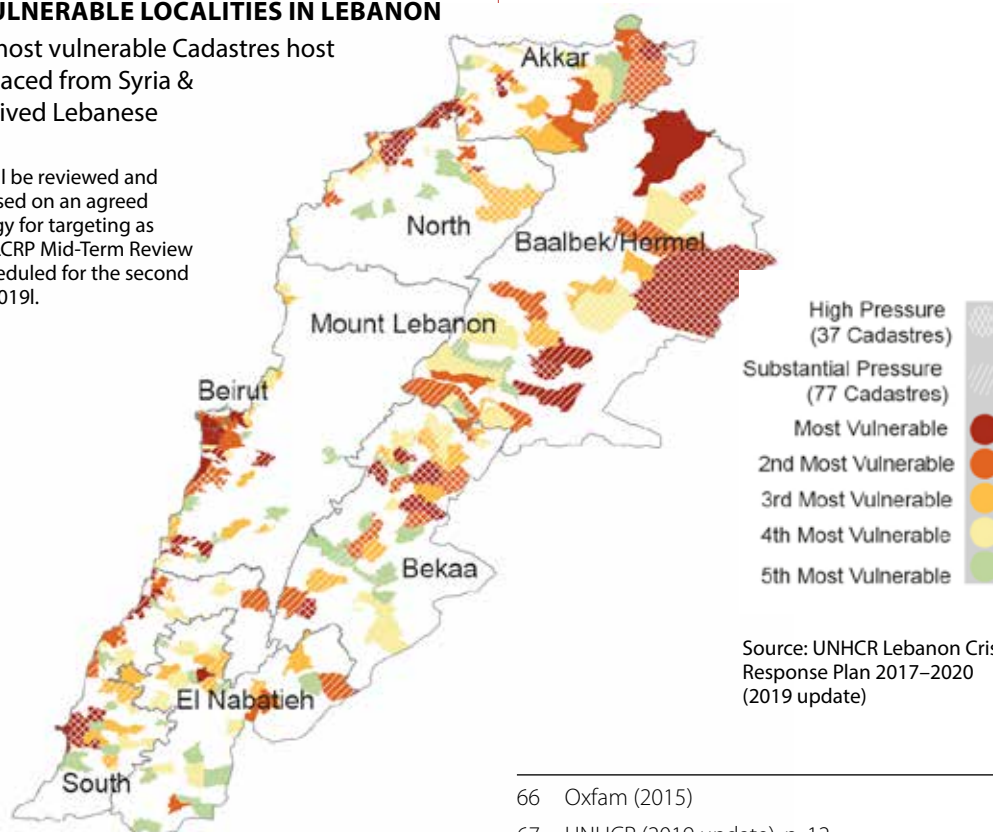
Lebanon, where the majority of Syrian refugees have settled in the country's poorest regions, due to their lower living costs.<sup>66</sup>

A UN study found that many of Lebanon's 251 most vulnerable localities hosting large numbers of deprived Lebanese and displaced Syrians were in Akkar, as shown on the vulnerability map below. These 251 locations host 87% of refugees from Syria, and 67% of deprived Lebanese. This vulnerability means increasing numbers of households sinking deeper into poverty, debt and food insecurity, as is the case in Akkar.<sup>67</sup>

### MOST VULNERABLE LOCALITIES IN LEBANON

The 251 most vulnerable Cadastres host 87% displaced from Syria & 67% deprived Lebanese

The map will be reviewed and updated based on an agreed methodology for targeting as part of the LCRP Mid-Term Review process scheduled for the second quarter of 2019.



66 Oxfam (2015)

67 UNHCR (2019 update), p. 12

The population in the governorate is estimated at ±260,000 Lebanese,<sup>68</sup> plus ±106,000 registered Syrian refugees, and an unknown number of unregistered Syrians.<sup>69</sup> The governorate consists of 216 settlements (villages and/or municipalities) and is divided into seven zones. RESLOG operates in two zones where Unions of Municipalities have been established: Dreib al-Awsat (Middle Dreib) and Jurd al-Qayteh. Economically, the governorate used to rely on agriculture, but given the decline of this sector, the majority of the Akkaris are now employed (or seek employment) in the army or security forces.<sup>70</sup> “We can say that Akkar is a reservoir for the army,” says Mr. Abboud Merheb, head of the UoM in Dreib.

The refugee crisis has placed tremendous pressure on the UoMs in Akkar to provide housing, quality services and jobs for host communities, as well as displaced Syrians. But the municipalities and their Unions suffer from a lack of funding and staff. For example, Jurd al-Qayteh, has two administrators plus a driver, whereas Dreib al-Awsat has only one administrator plus a driver. Municipalities operate within a highly centralized system, their mandates are not clear to citizens<sup>71</sup> and local host communities, and coordination with donors is weak.

However, according to some officials, smaller municipalities are easier to run, especially if they consist of more homogenous communities, as is the case in Jurd al-Qayteh, where most inhabitants are Sunni Muslims and many reportedly support the March 14 Alliance. One observer reasoned that this makes it easier for the Head of the Union in Jurd to be influential, and a source of reference for the municipalities in his union.

Municipal responsibilities range from construction and maintenance of local roads, management of primary health care centres and schools, solid waste management, and local policing and public safety. Municipalities authorize and regulate zoning, housing, healthcare, public facilities and businesses.<sup>72</sup> UNDP-UN Habitat

points out that areas with a high concentration of displaced Syrians suffer from heightened insecurity, and higher levels of tension and violence than other areas in Lebanon.

Agriculture has traditionally been the backbone of Akkar’s economy, but locals fear that they will ‘soon be losing their bread’ due to the economic crisis, the pandemic and pollution. Water meant for irrigation is polluted due to a lack of sewage systems, while mushrooming construction of informal settlements for displaced Syrians transgresses the delineation of agricultural land, according to observers. Inflated prices of imported pesticides, seeds and fertilizers leave farmers with very little profit and put the agricultural industry in further danger, according to Nour Arab, a former communications expert at SKL International.<sup>73</sup>

Many local farmers transform their agricultural land into informal settlements for refugees to make more profit, she says. “The average tent rent in Akkar is 80 to 120 USD, which gives landlords more profit in the short term, but ruins the soil which will be polluted with unsanitary pit latrines and cement casting in the long term.” Nour Arab fears that rehabilitation of polluted soils will become so expensive that landlords will not afford it in future, due to the economic crisis and hyperinflation.

Moreover, many young people in Akkar, who used to work in the service sector in Beirut or Tripoli, have stayed at home for months, jobless and without an income, due to the pandemic. Local observers mention numerous cases of Akkaris who have lost their jobs or had to close their small businesses. Those still on a payroll have seen their salaries whittled down due to the depreciation of the Lebanese pound. “Every employee is losing money monthly, as salaries are pinned to the official exchange rate with the dollar, whereas prices of goods follow the market rate,” says Souraya Hammoud, Project Manager for RESLOG in Akkar. Many professionals such as teachers have not received their salaries for months since the closure of schools and businesses.<sup>74</sup> Army officers have also seen their salaries plummet. “An army officer used to make 1,000 dollars/month. Now it’s down to 100 dollars,”

68 OCHA (2018) ‘Lebanon: North & Akkar Governorate Profiles’

69 OCHA (2018) ‘Syria Refugee Response Lebanon’

70 Haddad & Abl (2019)

71 UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), ‘Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project’

72 UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), ‘Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project’

73 Interview in January 2021

74 Saferworld (2020)



says Abboud Merheb, Head of the UoM in Dreib al-Awsat.

Medical care is another weak area. Hospitals in the governorate were affected by the economic crisis long before the explosion in Beirut in August 2020.<sup>75</sup> According to Souraya Hammoud, the crisis is so deep that it is no longer relevant to talk about the local unemployment rate. “It is easier to talk about who is employed. In Akkar, the only people still working are in the military, health and education sectors, or are staff of international agencies and NGOs. But taxi drivers, daily workers and construction workers are all jobless and without an income.”<sup>76</sup>

## 2.2 Limited municipal capacity and services

Like the rest of the country, Akkar became engulfed in the popular protests that erupted in October 2019, including against the local administration, according to reports from Saferworld.<sup>77</sup> Municipalities were seen as intermediaries between the national elites and citizens, and studies showed an “ongoing lack of trust between municipalities and communities, linked to nepotism and lack of communication and accountability mechanisms.”<sup>78</sup>

However, the above assessment was disputed by some interlocutors. One Lebanese local observer<sup>79</sup> interviewed was adamant that the protests in Akkar were only directed against leaders at national level. “Otherwise, it could have led to violent clashes between the important families, like a civil war.” Nonetheless, there were many accounts of protesters demanding the construction of hospitals and the establishment of a state university. Many students complain about shortcomings in the educational system, including the stress of unsatisfactory e-learning during the pandemic. Another grievance concerns Qlayaat Airport in Akkar which needs restoration, which would boost the local economy.

As Lebanon’s state finances began to tail-spin, funding of municipalities decreased, affecting their capacity to plan and deliver services. Since 2017, only a minority of Lebanon’s UoMs have a strategic plan,<sup>80</sup> and bureaucratic hurdles delay timely decision-making. For example, municipalities are required to obtain pre-approval from the District Head or the Governor, and from the Minister of Interior and Municipalities according to set expenditure thresholds, according to a UNDP-UN Habitat report.<sup>81</sup> Unclear or overlapping mandates between UoMs and the Ministry of Social Affairs also lead to competition and confusion regarding decision-making.

To borrow money, municipalities need approval from the Parliament in Beirut, and depleted national reserves limit funding for municipalities and their services. Under normal circumstances, intergovernmental fiscal transfers account for up to 70% of their budgets.<sup>82</sup> “But municipalities have not been paid by government since 2018, which means that everything has been put on hold, as we can only pay contractors once we get paid,” says Abboud Merheb, head of the UoM in Dreib al-Awsat.

Municipal revenue collection systems are also inadequate. Fees for services used to be a secondary source of income for municipalities. “It was difficult to collect fees before, but with the economic crisis, it has become impossible,” says Abdulilah Zakaria, head of the UoM in Jurd al-Qayteh.

Municipalities have been largely dependent on volunteers for awareness campaigns regarding Covid-19, and for collecting money to buy protective gear. Mr. Abboud Merheb in Dreib al-Awsat noted that “there is a lot of solidarity among young people.” For example, a Syrian RESLOG volunteer described a local initiative to raise money to buy oxygen machines. Informal fundraising from individual donors abroad has also become a way to help people in need.

With their small populations and insufficient revenues, 40% of municipalities have only one employee, often working on a part-time or

75 Associated Press (2020)

76 Interview in February 2021

77 Saferworld (2020)

78 Interviews in December 2020, underpinned by an analysis from Saferworld, March 2020

79 Interview December 2020

80 UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), ‘Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project’

81 UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), ‘Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project’

82 UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), ‘Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project’

voluntary basis.<sup>83</sup> Hiring procedures are extremely slow, uniform recruitment policies are lacking, and critics say that *wasta*, or good connections have become essential. Municipalities often rely on staff recruited on contracts, which are likely to change after local elections, due to the changed political affiliations of those elected onto municipal boards.<sup>84</sup>

For Lebanon's regions, the role of Governors is crucial, a system which resembles that of France's 4th Republic, as a French legacy after Lebanon's independence.<sup>85</sup> "This means that the Governor of Akkar keeps the municipalities on a tight leash, using the Municipal Act, which gives him substantive powers",<sup>86</sup> said Ziad Moussa, a Senior Advisor for RESLOG in Lebanon.<sup>87</sup>

### 2.3 Ethnic pluralism and differences

Under normal conditions, Latakia and Homs in Syria are only one hour's drive from Akkar, whereas Beirut is three hours away. Its location has strengthened Akkar's ties to Syria, supported by the fact that many Akkaris have family relations in Syria dating back generations.

The governorate has a Sunni Muslim majority, most of whom are Arabs, and a minority which speak Turkish. Around 10% of Akkar's inhabitants are Christians, most of whom are Greek Orthodox, with Maronites being the second largest Christian community. Akkar also has Lebanon's biggest Alawite minority, which constitutes 10% of the population, and many are said to be loyal to the Alawite regime in Damascus.<sup>88</sup> Many Alawite families in the governorate have a second home in nearby Tripoli, particularly in neighbourhoods

where sectarian tensions have run high against Sunni Arabs in times of armed conflict.<sup>89</sup>

Some villages in Akkar have distinct Christian and Sunni areas. There is also a small minority of Twelver Shiites. Jurd al-Qayteh, which is largely Sunni, has both small Christian and Shiite villages, according to the head of the UoM. Local Christians in Akkar are often affiliated to the faction of President Michel Aoun, whereas most Sunnis support the Future Movement, led by the Hariri family. "Every time before elections, Ahmed al-Hariri [a cousin of Saad] comes to Akkar and promises things," says a disillusioned local. One of the Hariri allies is Walid al-Baarini, a parliamentarian from Akkar who arouses strong and divergent emotions.<sup>90</sup>

As mentioned above, some local Sunni Muslims belong to a Turkish-speaking minority, largely descendants of Ottoman Turkish settlers from Anatolia, who have maintained their own language and traditions. This is the case in Dreih al-Awsat's largest village Kaweishra.<sup>91</sup> Settled Turkish-speaking inhabitants have close ties to Turkoman tribes which are still nomadic.<sup>92</sup> Some of the tribes are stateless to this day. "Given that the Turkoman community is nomadic, they move a lot and have been exploited by all means," says Nour Arab, a former communications expert for SKL International.<sup>93</sup>

The ethnic mosaic has paved the way for the Turkish government to use its soft power in building closer relations with Turkic-speaking locals.<sup>94</sup> After the blast in Beirut, Turkey offered scholarships and residence to the Turkish minority in Akkar and elsewhere in Lebanon. Syrian Turkomans in Lebanon were included, provided they could verify their ethnic background with

83 Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (2015), 'Local Governments and Public Goods: Assessing Decentralization in the Arab World'

84 UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), 'Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project'

85 Lebanon became independent in 1943, 15 years before President De Gaulle established France's 5th Republic

86 Government of Lebanon (1977) 'Municipal Act'. See in particular: Articles 61, 65 and 112.

87 Interview in January 2021

88 Haddad & Ablu (2019)

89 The Alawite neighbourhood Jabal al-Mohsen and the Sunni Bab al-Tabbaneh neighborhood in Tripoli are divided by the famous Syria Street, which has repeatedly become a front line during clashes.

90 Some locals criticize Baarini for alleged sexist attitudes.

91 The village name can be transcribed to Latin letters in different ways, for instance Kouachra.

92 Interviews, and Orsam (2010), 'The forgotten Turks: Turkmens of Lebanon'.

93 Turkoman tribes used to wander across the Ottoman Empire, often employed as seasonal workers. Turkoman also live in Iraq and in the Turkish Republic.

94 Haddad & Ablu (2019). The Turkic language family comprises Turkish, Turkoman and a whole set of other languages.

Syrian ID cards, as speaking Turkoman is not enough to prove this, according to a Syrian in Akkar.<sup>95</sup>

Though the Future Movement has a stronghold in the governorate, some experts claim it is too simplistic to describe Akkar's political map in binary terms of March 8 vs. March 14. As an example of the complex situation, a number of local Sunni Muslims support the Syrian Nationalist Party,<sup>96</sup> an ally of Hezbollah and the March 8 Alliance.<sup>97</sup> The Governor, Imad Labaki, an ex-army commander, is not from Akkar. He was described as 'Aouni' or even 'extremely Aouni' by one interviewee.

## 2.4 Corruption at the local level

Municipalities and their Unions in Akkar are based on strong family or tribal ties, often dating back centuries. Some locals speak about a traditional, albeit hidden, feudal structure with rivalries between notables, as well as between landlords (*bakawat*) and local peasant families (*fellaheen*).<sup>98</sup> An earlier RESLOG report concurred regarding enduring feudal structures, which often pit clans against each other.<sup>99</sup>

Citizens largely lack awareness of what services and information they are entitled to from municipalities, according to the Access to Information Law. Opaque budgets often spare elected municipal councils from being held accountable.<sup>100</sup> "People don't know what they should expect from local government. But they may ask local politicians to get their relatives out of prison, and things like that," says a Lebanese volunteer with the RESLOG project.<sup>101</sup>

There is a general awareness of corruption at national level, while corruption at the local level is debatable. Saleem Haddad, a consultant for Saferworld, describes the corrupt, nepotistic and dysfunctional Lebanese state as a top-down rather

than bottom-up problem. "It trickles down to the local level, when it comes to having access to budgets, for instance".<sup>102</sup> He underscores that "Akkaris understand that the core problem is at the national level. When people went out to protest, wanting to change the sectarian system, their primary focus was the national level."

The founder of a local CSO in the village of Mishmish in Akkar, Mrs. Ghalia Taleb, said: "We know that corruption goes from the top of the pyramid down to the bottom".<sup>103</sup> Ziad Moussa, a RESLOG advisor, stated that in spite of Lebanon's "very sad track record when it comes to corruption, it is more systemic at the top than at the bottom." However, many locals paint a bleaker picture when their anonymity is guaranteed, as illustrated below.

The running of local elections is a hot topic. In 1996, Lebanon held its first local elections since the civil war, and local elections have been held regularly every six years without postponements since then, the latest in 2016, and the next scheduled for 2022. However, electoral registers are out-dated, as millions of Lebanese emigrants are still listed. Voters are also listed according to the places from which their families originate, not where they actually live.<sup>104</sup> Given these discrepancies, Ziad Moussa, for one, does not see voter turnout in local elections as a fair measure of trust in local councils.

However, in his view, Lebanon's national political system, in which candidates run for Parliament based on religious quotas, means that there are confession-driven parliamentarians who do nothing. According to Ziad Moussa "Luckily, this system of religious quotas does not apply at the municipal level in local elections. These rather reflect the tribal/family structures in villages and the Muslim/Druze/Christian dynamics in mixed villages. The proximity of municipalities to their constituencies makes corruption at local level a secondary issue, due to close scrutiny by inhabitants."

Nonetheless, some Akkari residents claim that local elections are corrupt in other ways: "Big families may take advantage of out-dated lists,

95 Interview in December 2020

96 Hizb al-Suri al-Qawmi al-'Ijtima'i. الحزب السوري القومي الاجتماعي

97 Interview in December 2020

98 Assessment based on several interviews, December 2020

99 Haddad & Ablal (2019)

100 UNDP-UN Habitat (2020), Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project. See also: Saferworld (2020)

101 Interview December 2020

102 Interview December 2020

103 Interview 7 December 2020

104 Republic of Lebanon, Ministry of Information, 'Lebanese Electoral Law 2018'

using ‘slaves’ who vote in the name of those who are absent, due to illness or even death,” said one interviewee, based on personal experience. “Before the last local elections, we got a call from someone who wanted to find out whether our grandma would vote, even though she had been dead for many years. If we had told them that she was dead, they might have replaced her with someone else at the polling station,” this source said.<sup>105</sup>

Some interviewees allege that a feudal past, plus small voting districts make it easy to rig elections in Akkar. One said: “Some villages have only ±1,000 residents, and maybe only 200 ballots are cast at each polling station during the local elections. It is thus easy for people who have been given power by specific political parties to go through the ballots in their villages and analyze who voted against them.”<sup>106</sup> Allegations of bribes in times of elections were also heard. “Bribes may vary from a prepaid card, up to 100 USD. Vulnerable citizens in Lebanon, especially in Akkar, would do anything for this money. People over 50 are in many cases illiterate, and are often not clear about who they will vote for, so they can be influenced in polling stations regarding how to vote.” Ziad Moussa has a different view regarding bribes during elections. “Cash floats all over the place during parliamentary elections, but not during municipal ones, with a few exceptions in big cities.”

Many stories of corruption are impossible to verify for an outsider, and few locals are willing to speak openly, for fear of reprisals. However, some alleged examples of corruption appear easier to verify, such as claims regarding a solid waste management project “which was completed five years ago, but is still not operational, in spite of the garbage crisis.”<sup>107</sup>

One interviewee saw a slight ray of hope: “After the October 2019 protests, every government official is afraid to lose his seat, realizing that he is no longer untouchable.”<sup>108</sup> This source elaborated, “Protesters entered the office of the Governor, himself an *Aouni*,<sup>109</sup> and presented evidence of his

corruption. He had been giving people licenses to carry weapons, most likely to get political support, rather than money.” In general, interviewees described a system rooted in *wasta* [clout / good connections] and *tanfiyah* [benefits] which limits local development in Akkar. “It’s embedded in our system,” said one disillusioned interviewee.<sup>110</sup>

Some interlocutors raised concerns that RESLOG might be perceived as rewarding bigger villages at the expense of others.<sup>111</sup> This view is not shared by senior advisor Ziad Moussa, who does not see any risk that RESLOG might be contributing to local family feuds. “RESLOG is not giving more access to some clans, as training is done for all in the municipalities, and is done at the Union level, irrespective of tribal settings. The same could be clearly observed in the municipal services projects that were implemented in the second half of 2020.”

## 2.5 Prospects for the future

Akkar is close to Tripoli, Lebanon’s second largest city and home to its second largest port,<sup>112</sup> as well as to Homs in Syria. Given its location, the region has great future potential, provided the war in Syria ends and reconstruction begins. In such a future scenario, Tripoli could become a regional hub for transport supporting the reconstruction of Syria. Akkar also has Qlayaat Airport, with potential to expand. “Qlayaat is better equipped than Beirut International Airport, and has a longer runway, so the day the rebuilding of Syria starts, Qlayaat could put half of Akkar back into business,” a local source hoped.<sup>113</sup>

Tripoli also has plans to become the centre of Lebanon’s first economic zone. This, combined with plans for the construction of a new railroad connecting the city to Syria, would invigorate the economy of north Lebanon.<sup>114</sup> However, the explosion at the port of Beirut, which affected the whole country, and the United States’ Caesar Civilian Protection Act have restrained the economic revival of Tripoli and north Lebanon.<sup>115</sup>

105 Interview in December 2020

106 Interview in December 2020

107 Interview in December 2020

108 Interview in December 2020

109 Someone loyal to President Aoun’s FPM

110 Interview in December 2020

111 Haddad & Ablu (2019)

112 Port of Tripoli, Wikipedia (2020)

113 Interview December 2020

114 Tripoli Special Economic Zone

115 Kranz (2020)

While Tripoli's plans for an economic revival were put on hold, clandestine trade across the Syrian-Lebanese border continued to thrive.<sup>116</sup> With a land border to Syria that is only 100 years old, many entrenched channels for illegal trade exist. Smuggling of subsidized Syrian fuel is a lucrative contraband,<sup>117</sup> which has caused Lebanon's Central Bank to lose up to USD 400 million annually.<sup>118</sup> Smugglers have also added wheat to their contraband, as its price is more than double in Lebanon, as compared to Syria.<sup>119</sup> The growing economic crisis in Syria is also likely to affect the Lebanese economy negatively.<sup>120</sup>

For Akkar with its striking natural scenery, eco-tourism has potential in future, provided the pollution of soil and water is dealt with. One Lebanese volunteer for RESLOG says: "We have been promoting eco-tourism in Akkar, preparing hiking trips, and inviting people to contribute to protecting the area. The problem of solid waste is a crisis for all of Lebanon. We try to act as role models, showing that we care about nature, and we organise the local community to prevent forest fires".<sup>121</sup> However, as things stand today, visionary ecologically aware social entrepreneurs are swimming against the tide.

The multiple crises in Lebanon have reached a point where most appear not to think about either the future or the past, as they are so preoccupied with the present. As Khalid al-Hamwi, a Syrian Refugees Liaison Officer for RESLOG, puts it: "The only ones who do think about the future are those who are planning to leave. They have become cynical realists."

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116 Azhari (2020)

117 Interviews with Lebanese source over several years

118 Asharq al-Awsat (2020)

119 Asharq al-Awsat (2020)

120 World Food Programme (2021)

121 Interview November 2020

# 3.

## REPERCUSSIONS OF SYRIA'S ENTRENCHED CONFLICT FOR REFUGEES

**This section considers the repercussions of Syria's entrenched conflict for the Syrian refugee community in Lebanon. Questions asked are: In what ways are Syrian refugee communities affected by the current financial crisis, the Covid-19 Pandemic and the Beirut blast? Is there an increased motivation to return? Are there voluntary returns? Are there particular patterns of discrimination against Syrian refugees at the local level in Akkar? How can the relationship between the host community and refugees be described from the perspectives of both groups?**

### 3.1 Day-to-day life for Syrian refugees

During the war in Syria, which has lasted for nearly a decade, 14 million people, or more than half the population, have been displaced. Over seven million have fled to neighbouring countries such as Lebanon, where they have settled in the most vulnerable areas.

Syrians in Lebanon are subject of an official 'no camp' policy. Government refused to let displaced Syrians settle in official refugee camps, and temporary camps are called Informal Tented Settlements (ITS). Akkar has many such informal settlements.<sup>122</sup> The situation for those living in tents is particularly stressful during the winter with decreasing temperatures. This 'no-camp' policy emerged from Lebanon's history of hosting Palestinian refugees since 1948, which led to a militarization of their camps. Romala Sanyal, a scholar at the London School of Economics,

explains the current conditions of the Syrians:

*As a result of this 'no camp' policy, Syrians are forced to either live in private rented accommodation in towns and cities throughout the country, or in informal settlements built on private, often agricultural land. These informal settlements are built and developed through a complex assemblage of humanitarianism, hospitality, and security, economic and political considerations.*

Syrian refugees in Lebanon also need to strike a balance in their daily lives between providing income for their families and avoiding being perceived as a threat to the Lebanese majority. Unemployment has increased greatly, which has left both Syrian and Lebanese families without an income.<sup>123</sup> This places an extraordinary burden on those seeking safety in Lebanon. "Even if only one local Syrian commits a crime, the whole Syrian community is affected," says a young man who fled from Syria to Akkar in 2011. "Even if only 10–15% of the local Lebanese disagree with us being here, we know that there is a risk that new tensions might flare up. For example, there are manual jobs that Lebanese don't want to do, but if a Syrian takes the job, the Lebanese complain."

Some Lebanese describe the rivalry between destitute people of different nationalities from a different perspective. "A year before Lebanon's economic collapse, there was a slight tension, and a belief that Syrians workers were cheaper. Now people see Syrians supported with credit cards in dollars by international organizations, and the Lebanese see the Syrians as better off," comments Abdulilah Zakaria, head of the UoM in Jurd al-Qayteh.

122 Arab (2019)

123 Arab (2019)

However, Syrian refugees who receive food and so-called winter assistance in USD have not been allowed to withdraw the money in dollars, or in LBP according to the black-market exchange rate, which is considerably higher than the official exchange rate. Yet landlords demand that rent is paid in USD or in the equivalent LBP amount according to the black-market rate.<sup>124</sup> In addition, not every Syrian who is registered with UNHCR, not even those who came prior to 2015, gets medical or food assistance, according to local Syrian sources.

In 2020, the UNHCR Regional Bureau for Middle East and North Africa issued alarming reports of increasing mental health cases among Syrian refugees. The combination of economic decline and the lockdown had severe repercussions for the physical well-being of Syrian refugee families, and for their mental health. In April 2020, UNHCR Lebanon reported multiple incidents of suicide among those forcibly displaced. By October 2020, UNHCR Lebanon's national call center noticed a threefold increase in reported cases of suicide and self-harm.<sup>125</sup> UNHCR-funded mental health services, which help Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese, also noticed an increase in children suffering various types of psychological distress. (For more on how women and children are affected, see Chapter 4). Stories of self-harm and suicide have appeared on social media, in many cases involving Syrians in Lebanon.<sup>126</sup>

Saferworld's Rapid Conflict Analysis shows that the Covid-19 Pandemic in Lebanon is particularly difficult for Syrians who live in cramped conditions in informal settlements, and many Syrians are hesitant to go to doctors, as they lack ID documents.<sup>127</sup> The blast in Beirut also affected Syrian refugees, bringing back memories of what they had fled, hoping to find safety in Lebanon, but in vain.

### 3.2 Is there increased motivation to return?

As the domestic crisis worsened and the war in Syria became an entrenched conflict, the Lebanese authorities made life harder for displaced Syrians by threatening to deport them, on top of their daily struggle to make ends meet. This constituted a shift compared to the initial stages of the Syrian refugee crisis, when many Lebanese engaged in acts of solidarity with newly arrived Syrians, as victims of war and persecution.<sup>128</sup> However, as the war in Syria dragged on and poverty increased among the Lebanese, sentiments altered, both at local level and on the part of the central authorities.

In May 2015, UNHCR had to suspend all new registrations of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, on request from the Lebanese government.<sup>129</sup> Prior to that, movement between Syria and Lebanon for both nationalities had been relatively unrestricted, following years of visa-free travel, including for Syrian migrant workers who came to Lebanon to work in agriculture and construction.<sup>130</sup> The new restrictions and the refusal to register more refugees from 2015 on led to two parallel ways of counting Syrians in Lebanon, with the official numbers lower than the actual numbers. (The reverse is probably the case for Palestinians in Lebanon).

As an illustration of this change of mood, a senior Lebanese academic in 2018 asked this researcher to take a message back to Europe, that the European Union must change its policies and help Lebanon to repatriate the Syrians. He highlighted the fact that the EU, with over 440 million inhabitants<sup>131</sup> had accepted fewer Syrians than Lebanon, with ±5 million citizens.<sup>132</sup>

By 2019, the central authorities ordered Syrians in the border town of Aarsal to demolish their makeshift homes. Security forces burst into refugee camps and detained Syrians on charges of having entered Lebanon illegally.<sup>133</sup> In Beirut, they cracked down on posh bars and restaurants,

124 In 2019, the exchange rate at the black market was estimated 33 percent higher. See: Arab (2019)

125 UNHCR, Lebanon, 11 October 2020

126 See for instance: Kareem Chehayeb of @ThePublic-Source. Twitter, 5 November 2020: <https://twitter.com/chehayebk/status/1324315168764022785>

127 Saferworld (2020)

128 This assessment derives from the researcher's previous visits to Lebanon.

129 UNHCR, 'Syria regional refugee response: Lebanon'

130 Sanyal (2017)

131 The European Union, 'Living in the EU'

132 Interview in Lebanon, 2018

133 Vohra (2019)

searching for Syrians without work permits or long-term residence permits among the staff. Employers were threatened with heavy fines unless they fired Syrians who did not have permits. In the summer of 2019, Lebanese security agencies deported ±2,730 Syrians for having entered the country illegally after April 24, 2019 which was set as a deadline. The deportees were handed over to the Syrian authorities. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reported some cases of arrests.<sup>134</sup> In other cases, Syrians claimed that they had been tricked into signing documents stating that they returned voluntarily from Lebanon.<sup>135</sup> HRW emphasised that as a party to the Convention against torture,<sup>136</sup> Lebanon may not extradite anyone in danger of being tortured. Forced return also contradicts the principle of non-refoulement in international customary law.<sup>137</sup>

Numerous Syrians and Lebanese in Akkar interviewed for this report shared stories about individual returnees to Syria (mostly female and elderly), and young Syrian males often underlined that they cannot return for fear of being forced to join the Assad Regime's military forces, or ending up in the regime's interrogation centers. A young Syrian man who left his family behind in Syria, commented that "today our family members are better off in Syria. However, it all depends on the age and gender of the individuals. Young men who return will be forced to join the military, even if they have already done their 18 months of military service".<sup>138</sup>

A Commander in the Syrian army announced that Syrians over 42 who evaded military service would have to pay 8,000 USD as an exemption fee, or the authorities would confiscate and sell their property or that of their immediate family, which put an extra burden on already destitute Syrian refugees in Lebanon.<sup>139</sup>

The lack of infrastructure and livelihoods in Syria constitute an additional obstacle to safe

return. One Syrian male refugee said that "no one wants to go back without having basic services such as electricity, water, and internet. The cost of living is high, there is a lack of jobs, and we may face security issues such as the threat of conscription, or being arrested for having taken part in the [Syrian] revolution."

Lack of work permits for Syrian professionals in Lebanon, even if there is a societal demand for their skills, may become a motivation to return. One Syrian man described the situation of a refugee relative, an experienced surgeon in his 50s: "Before he fled from Syria, he was about to take on a position as director of a hospital. Here in Lebanon, he cannot even get a permit to work as a physician, although medical doctors are needed. Instead, he works illegally from his temporary home, doing minor medical consultations for a fee of 2 USD per patient. He got requests to do surgery without a permit, but he declined, as he wants to abide by the law".<sup>140</sup> A Lebanese woman, listening to the account, commented that she felt ashamed of the impediments that prevent the surgeon from working legally in his profession.

The difficulties of Syrian professionals getting work permits in Lebanon not only affect them, as it coincides with a 'brain drain' from Lebanon, as highly skilled citizens, including doctors and nurses, have been emigrating.<sup>141</sup> According to diplomatic sources in Beirut, 800 Lebanese doctors left the country after the Beirut blast in August 2020. "The situation in the health sector is catastrophic, with hospitals occupied at 90% of their capacity," according to Souraya Ham-moud, Deputy Project Manager for RESLOG in Akkar.<sup>142</sup>

Stories of Syrian professionals who are not permitted to work in their professions in Lebanon abound. A young man from Homs related: "I know a civil engineer who did his master's degree in Syria, but here in Lebanon he works as a cleaner for 3 USD per day".<sup>143</sup> However, Ziad Moussa, senior advisor for RESLOG, had a different view on this issue: "Doctors and other syndicated professionals such as engineers, lawyers, pharmacists,

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134 Human Rights Watch (2019)

135 Vohra (2019)

136 UN Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, Convention against Torture and Other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment

137 Human Rights Watch (2019)

138 Interview 7 December 2020

139 Enab Baladi (11 Feb 2021)

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140 Enab Baladi (11 Feb 2021)

141 United Press International (2020)

142 Interview in January 2021

143 Interview December 2020



auditors, etc. are a sovereign issue, and there are minimum standards that they need to meet according to national legislation”.<sup>144</sup>

Displaced Syrians in Lebanon emphasize that they are not entitled to name organizations as NGOs. “We can only operate in a voluntary organization without a name,” said one interlocutor.

### 3.3 Are there special patterns of discrimination in the north?

Akkar has a large Syrian refugee population, and is one of the economically weakest areas in Lebanon. Some local experts describe the Syrian refugees in the governorate as belonging to the lowest educational and social strata.<sup>145</sup> In Dreib al-Awsat, around half of the inhabitants are Syrians. Figures from 2018 indicated that some 35,000 were Lebanese, while 18,500 were registered Syrians and 14,200 unregistered Syrians.<sup>146</sup> More recent demographics, mentioned by the head of Dreib’s Union of Municipalities, show a similar pattern. Many of the displaced Syrians live in one of Dreib al-Awsat’s 29 informal tent settlements. In nearby Jurd al-Qayteh there are ±5,000 Syrians and ±120,000 Lebanese, according to Mr. Adbulilah Zakaria, head of the local UoM.<sup>147</sup> “The majority of Syrians in Jurd live in flats, as there are only two camps here,” he said.

Experts from the United Nations estimate that 90% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon live below the poverty line, with thousands of families sinking further into poverty and vulnerability.<sup>148</sup> But neediness is growing among the Lebanese as well, and many nationals stress that ‘poverty has no nationality’. The situation has become so dire that a middle-class Akkari asked herself “Is it a shame to put meat on your table, when others can’t?”<sup>149</sup>

In Akkar, there are fewer aid agencies compared to central parts of Lebanon.<sup>150</sup> Some

donors who used to focus only on refugees, have reportedly felt the need to reorient their programmes to assist all vulnerable people, regardless of nationality, in the current dire situation. Some Lebanese underscore that Lebanon’s Red Cross, which is not affiliated to any political or religious group, could serve as a role-model. “The Lebanese Red Cross is trusted by everyone, and in the health sector it plays a huge role. They are directly linked to the crisis units in governorates,” says Souraya Hammoud of the RESLOG team.

At a time when the lockdowns, growing unemployment and the currency crisis have affected both Lebanese and Syrians, many emphasize the need to enhance the educational system in north Lebanon, by improving access to the internet and laptops, and by giving teachers training in e-learning. Teenagers and university students also need professional career guidance to enter the job market. A young volunteer and university graduate in Akkar, Noor Noeman, has initiated a civil society organization called *Khotwa al-Shababah* (Youth Step Association). Her aim is to get support for a youth center in Akkar, which can empower young people and help them match their skills and education with job market opportunities. In her experience, a scarcity of educational guidance has exacerbated youth unemployment.<sup>151</sup> “Those who finish their studies have difficulty finding jobs, and teenagers need vocational guidance. We want to create a center for both Syrians and Lebanese,” she says.<sup>152</sup>

Most Lebanese locals in Akkar Province are Sunni Muslims, as are the vast majority of Syrian refugees, but there are also some Alawite villages, belonging to the same religious minority as Syria’s President Bashar al-Assad. “In the Alawite villages, they don’t accept Syrian refugees – it’s not safe for Syrians to be there. But with the majority Sunni population, we share social norms and also historical relations,” says a young male Syrian refugee.<sup>153</sup> A Lebanese volunteer from Jurd al-Qayteh gave a similar assessment, claiming that the Sunni majority in Akkar holds no grudges against the Syrians.

144 Since this is not a comparative study, it does not reflect on different systems for validation of exams from foreign universities in various countries.

145 Interviews, January 2021

146 Akkar Union Mapping 2018

147 Interview in February 2021

148 UNHCR Lebanon (December 2020)

149 Interview in February 2021

150 Saferworld (2020)

151 From a proposal shared with the author of this report

152 Interview 7 December 2020

153 Interview 7 December 2020

# 4.

## PROBLEMS SPECIFIC TO WOMEN AND CHILDREN

**This section presents the situation of female and child Syrian refugees in Lebanon, but given the decline of the economy, it also considers vulnerable Lebanese women and children.**

Since any donor approach which focuses only on Syrian refugees in Lebanon is highly controversial, gender and child perspectives are first discussed in general terms. Expert analysis suggests that increased poverty, due to the economic implosion and the pandemic, have exposed children and women to a greater risk of violence, and in the case of girls, to child marriages.

Furthermore, the closure of schools due to Covid-19 has increased the risk of children being exposed to violence in households, and has increased the number of working children.<sup>154</sup> “Incidents of domestic and intimate partner violence have been on the rise since the outbreak of Covid-19 and the implementation of lockdown measures,” according to a GBV report after the explosion in Beirut.<sup>155</sup>

Data from the GBV Information Management System indicates a 6% increase in child marriages between August and September 2020, in Beirut Mount Lebanon. Child marriages are reported in all areas in Lebanon. Focus group discussions in Beirut Mount Lebanon indicate that “parents are resorting to child marriage as a negative coping mechanism in the harsh economic conditions.” Many adolescent girls are also subject to domestic

violence at home, and are turning to early marriage as an escape.<sup>156</sup>

In this regard, Akkar is not different. The governorate has a high rate of early marriages and births.<sup>157</sup> Since 2019, local experts have observed an increase of child marriages, as a means for vulnerable families to cope with increased costs of living. Due to the pandemic and lack of prospects for the future, experts from Save the Children expect the number of child marriages to increase even further. It is a paradox that persons under 18 years are considered minors by Lebanese law, yet this age limit does not apply to child marriages. Various religious communities have different customary laws regarding family matters, and Lebanon lacks a clear definition of what constitutes a child marriage.

In Akkar, an expert on child protection notes that some girls marry at the age of 14 or 15. “When we discuss this with religious leaders, they say that the courts consider the physical and psychological status of the girl to determine whether the marriage can be registered. There is no law to prevent a religious leader from registering a marriage. If one religious leader does not agree to register a marriage with an under-age girl, her family can go to another religious leader to get his approval. In this regard, some community leaders support a social behaviour change strategy, whereas others are against it.”<sup>158</sup>

“We hear stories of fathers who force young daughters to marry, but these cases have not been followed up,” said one expert. Without analysis

154 Gender-Based Violence Information Management System, Quarter 3/2020

155 Gender-Based Violence Information Management System, Quarter 3/2020

156 Gender-Based Violence Information Management System, Quarter 3/2020

157 Haddad & Abla (2019)

158 Interview in January 2021



Qmamin Village, Akkar governorate, Lebanon  
Photo: Rodrigue Zahr

of individual cases, it is hard to determine what is a forced marriage. “For example, in the Wadi Khaled area in Akkar, where there are lots of Syrians, you find many Lebanese men marrying Syrian girls, who may prefer this to living as refugees,” commented Hanine Ibrahim, who works for Save the Children in Akkar.

Lebanon ratified the Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1991 without reservations, along with the Supplementary Protocol on Child Trafficking. However, Lebanon has not yet ratified the Protocol on the Involvement of Children in Armed Conflict. The risks that many children face due to armed conflicts thus needs to be further analyzed.

Polygamy, however, appears not to be on the increase, according to experts from Save the Children: “We have asked this question to focus groups of women and men. They answer that it is very rare due to the economic situation. Also, attitudes are changing, against polygamy,” said Hanine Ibrahim.

Income generating activities are often beyond the mandate for international donors, yet they are widely seen as the most proactive measure to improve the livelihoods of vulnerable people,

not least women and girls. However, most jobs available in Akkar are not considered suitable for girls. Nevertheless, in harvest times, much of the picking and agricultural work is done by women and girls, often from refugee communities, since landowners consider female workers to be cheaper. The manual work is usually organized by a *shawish*, a person who recruits other refugees and who is in some cases someone managing an informal tent settlement, from which day-labourers are transported to the fields. “It’s quite normal to see more than 30 women being transported in a truck, with no safety measures whatsoever, in agricultural areas in Lebanon. You find girls from the age of 7 and up working in the fields,” said Nour Arab, a former communications expert at SKL International.

A female worker usually earns 5 USD per day, but from this, she has to pay the *shawish* a 1 USD commission. The pay and conditions for seasonal workers are harsh, as working hours range from 10 to 14 hours in the sun, according to Nour Arab. As an example of the tough working conditions, she witnessed one female agricultural worker who “delivered her baby in the field, cut her newborn son’s umbilical cord against a rock

and continued to work. Female agricultural labourers face an increased risk of harassment and rape (and sometimes involuntary pregnancy) by landowners and other men in the industry, who always reject the child, which in most cases ends up in an orphanage, stigmatized and called a bastard for the rest of his/her life.”

Women are not part of any local municipal council in Akkar, and have marginal roles as administrative staff in the Unions of Municipalities. However, young female activists in Akkar speak of increased participation by women at different levels, suggesting that gender structuring may have a potential to change.<sup>159</sup>

As noted in Chapter 3.1, UNHCR data reveals increased mental distress among Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese. In 2020, the UN refugee agency saw “a spike in instances of threats to self-harm and harm to others, while family disputes, domestic violence, and divorce cases have increased. Family members and children are those primarily at risk of domestic violence, in particular women and girls. Unable to pay rent and facing evictions, refugees are forced to share sub-standard accommodation, further increasing the risk of sexual and gender-based violence.”<sup>160</sup> This assessment is corroborated by experts from Save the Children. “Families may not know how to feed their children, or the children themselves suffer mental distress due to living in an over-crowded environment. Sometimes they have to live with perpetrators of child abuse under the same roof.”

Female heads of households are the most vulnerable in terms of food insecurity and poverty. This has added to increased levels of violence against women and children, according to UN reports.<sup>161</sup> Well before the aggravated economic and health crisis, UNHCR concluded in a report on Lebanon:

*There is continued reliance on harmful practices such as child marriage, with 22 per cent of displaced Syrian girls aged 15 to 19 being married. Women and girls bear the brunt of incidents of gender-based violence (GBV), and whilst incidents of GBV are underreported, 93 per cent of survivors*

*who reported and sought assistance were women and girls, 7 per cent men and boys. Children in female headed household are twice as likely to work as children with a male headed household.*<sup>162</sup>

Local experts observe an increase of child labour as a result of the crisis. “As the rate of unemployed men has increased, more children are trying to substitute for their jobless fathers or big brothers, by working. Therefore, you see an increased number of children working in construction, mechanics and supermarkets. Also, the age of working children is decreasing,” says Hanine Ibrahim from Save the Children in Akkar.

Such assessments are difficult to break down according to nationalities, given the lack of solid data. Child labour may well occur among Lebanese and Syrians as well as among stateless groups in Lebanon such as Palestinian refugees, Roma people and stateless people with other origins.<sup>163</sup>

Some female activists in CSOs avoid drawing a line between different ethnic communities. This is the case for *Akkar Beituna* (Our Home Akkar), a CSO founded and led by Mrs. Ghalia Taleb. Akkar Beituna runs various activities for women and girls in Mishmish, a traditionally conservative village with around 18,000 inhabitants, mostly Sunni, and a high number of Syrians. She underlines that the organization reaches both Syrian and Lebanese women, providing vocational training, education in English and French, as well as summer camps and sports activities for children. It runs a programme against sexual and gender-based violence, provides information on family health, has created a public garden, and plans to open a public theater and a new road.

Ghalia Taleb stresses that there are structural problems for females in the male-dominated conservative environment. She says: “The biggest challenge faced by CSOs, especially if they are led by women, is the municipalities. They would never admit that a woman-led organization can provide more services than they do. From now on I will refuse any funding from the municipality, because otherwise they will take the credit for all our achievements, making our lives harder.”

The second challenge for Akkar Beituna, according to Ghalia Taleb, is donor priorities, which often differ from the needs that locals

159 Interviews in December 2020

160 UNHCR Regional Bureau for Middle East and North Africa (June 2020)

161 UNHCR (2019 update), p. 12

162 UNHCR (2019 update), p. 12

163 UNHCR Lebanon, Stateless persons

identify. “We need projects that generate income for women so that they can make a living and be empowered. With Covid-19, as men don’t have a job to go to, gender-based violence is increasing. The solution is income generating projects for women”<sup>164</sup>

In addition, judicial discrimination affects Lebanese women who marry non-Lebanese men, as they cannot pass their citizenship on to their offspring. This affects the children of Lebanese women who marry Syrian refugees or stateless Palestinians. This discrimination has been highlighted for years, including during the latest popular protests. Lebanon does not have a civil code that regulates matters of personal status. Instead, there are 15 separate personal status laws, based on the legal codes on family matters of different religious communities.<sup>165</sup>

The problem of undocumented children in Lebanon is likely to increase with childbirths of refugees who do not have the necessary paperwork. Contrary to its international obligations, Lebanon lacks a birth registration system which covers all childbirths in the country. This affects children of unregistered Palestinians and Syrians in Lebanon, and children of undocumented Lebanese families. “In Wadi Khaled, on the border with Syria, between 120 and 150 families have one or more members who are undocumented,” says Hanine Ibrahim of Save the Children. As noted above, there are also stateless Lebanese of Turkoman ethnicity in the governorate.

“Being undocumented increases the social risks for the individual, and makes it difficult to attend school, access services or enter a university. Being unregistered is a huge handicap when it comes to child rights,” according to experts from Save the Children, who add that Lebanon lacks official statistics on the number of separated and unaccompanied children.<sup>166</sup>

For Syrians, missing documents may prevent families from claiming their land and property in Syria. There is also a gender disparity, since most households and property in Syria are registered in men’s names, due to conservative social

norms. This particularly affects Syrian widows and female heads of households, since a widow who lacks a Syrian identity card, or a death certificate for her husband, “may be unable to secure her inheritance or hold on to the family home,” stressed Syria expert, Aron Lund.<sup>167</sup>

Given the disastrous economic situation, there are accounts of child trafficking from Lebanon, particularly from the informal refugee camps to the Gulf states. One interviewee from Akkar said: “If you enter an informal refugee camp in Akkar, you notice the absence of women, while males are high on drugs. They may have sent the women to beg or prostitute themselves outside the camp. Allegedly, there are also cases of a beautiful child without papers being sold to a pervert or paedophile in the Gulf. The government will not act if the child has no papers, and the child thus cannot be traced. There is also organ trafficking. A kidney can be sold for 20,000 USD. In the camps in Akkar, a lot of trafficking is going on”<sup>168</sup>

Abuse of children may not involve crossings of borders. “There are many stories circulating in Akkar about men whose second marriage is to a young woman or a child, in exchange for rent. We are speaking of girls of 14–16 years old. If you say it’s too early for marriage, they laugh at you,” says Nour Arab, a former communications expert at SKL International. She remembers how she was once stopped by a 12-year-old pregnant refugee child in Akkar (outside the RESLOG area of operation). “She took my hand, telling me that she would like to have her own tent, separate from her family tent, so that she could have some privacy with her husband. The child’s husband was the landowner, who had offered her family a free tent in exchange for the girl.”

The U.S. State Department 2020 *Trafficking in Persons Report: Lebanon* found that the Government of Lebanon does not fully meet the minimum standards for the elimination of trafficking, but is making significant efforts to do so. The anti-trafficking unit of the Internal Security Forces (ISF) is understaffed and underfunded, with no field offices outside of Beirut.<sup>169</sup>

164 Interview 7 December 2020

165 Human Rights Watch (2015)

166 Save the Children in 2020 managed to target 20 unaccompanied and 35 separated children whose cases were followed up to ensure the well-being of the children and the families that they are living with.

167 Lund, Aron (2020), ‘Who pays the price for Syria’s broken documentation system?’

168 Interview December 2020

169 U.S. Department of State, ‘2020: Trafficking in Persons Report: Lebanon’

When it comes to plausible ways of addressing and countering gender bias, experience from a gender-awareness workshop in 2019 showed that mixed focus groups do not necessarily facilitate communication. On the contrary, integration of women, especially Syrian women, can even trigger conflicts, if not well facilitated.<sup>170</sup> The RESLOG project has thus resorted to women-only sessions. “This is part of cultural sensitivities,” said RESLOG senior advisor Ziad Moussa, adding that “RESLOG could have a dedicated gender component, e.g. working with women committees in municipalities, with gender expertise, but that is easier said than done”.<sup>171</sup>

Lebanese, Syrian and Palestinian children have huge learning gaps to fill after months of closed schools. This loss of learning is a concern for local government. “Many houses are without internet, or the internet is not stable, as high-speed services are not provided in the area. Some households have only one mobile phone, but 4 or 5 school-going children. With the economic crisis, people cannot afford to buy laptops. This has become a very tiresome situation for students, teachers, parents,” says Abdulilah Zakaria, head of the UoM in Jurd al-Qayteh.

By February 2021, many children had not attended school for almost a year, and teachers were not trained to handle online teaching, according to Souraya Hammoud, a RESLOG Project Manager. Her assessment was corroborated by Hanine Ibrahim of Save the Children. “Education during closures has been a total mess, and has been inconsistent across the country, and families have had to organize themselves. Even small children have to learn online,” she said. Educational shortcomings will have long-term consequences for Akkar and for Lebanon. One young volunteer, Noor Noeman, highlighted the declining skills levels in reading and writing Arabic and French.<sup>172</sup>

Another gender-related issue is the high cost of hygiene products, which means that an increasing number of girls and women cannot afford to buy sanitary products during their periods. Exact numbers of how many are affected by ‘period

poverty’ in Lebanon are lacking, but according to Asma Kurdahi, head of the UN Population Fund office in Lebanon, anecdotal evidence shows that it is “visibly increasing”.<sup>173</sup>

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170 Haddad & Ablal (2019)

171 Interview 17 December 2020

172 Interview December 2020

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173 Lewis (2020)

# 5.

## CURRENT VIEWS AND POLICIES REGARDING MIGRATION IN LEBANON

**When asking both ordinary Lebanese citizens and academics about the attitude in host communities towards Syrian refugees, the standard answer is that there is a national consensus that they have to return. Saleem Haddad, a consultant for Saferworld, said “Lebanon has no capacity (to host them all), so people in Lebanon feel strongly that Syrians have to go back.”**

Some interviewees mention fear-mongering against Syrian refugees, particularly by far-right Christian groups. But with today’s multiple crises, tensions do not simply follow sectarian fault lines. In late December 2020, hundreds of Syrians from 75 families were forced to flee to temporary shelter after their tents were burned down in a makeshift refugee camp in Bhannine in the Miniyeh District, next to Akkar. According to reports, Lebanese youth set the tents on fire after a fight between local families and some Syrians in the camp.<sup>174</sup>

A young Syrian researcher, Mohammed al-Masri, who used to live in the area, and who happens to be an alumnus of the Swedish Institute’s Young Leaders Visitors Programme,<sup>175</sup> commented after the fire that locals in the Miniyeh District are good-natured and stood with the Syrian refugees for years. But as the situation has deteriorated for the locals, their desperation has grown. “It is human nature that the Lebanese

point a finger of accusation regarding the cause of poverty, suffering and unemployment from which they suffer at somebody weaker, and the easiest target is the refugee who breaks a stick.” The primary cause of individual acts of violence against Syrians in Lebanon is “frustration due to the systemic destruction of the country by the Lebanese authorities,” according to the young researcher.<sup>176</sup>

Souraya Hammoud, project manager for RESLOG in Akkar, has a somewhat different view.

“This happened because people are hungry. It is not an issue of nationality, but of who ate and who didn’t,” she said. From descriptions such as hers, it appears that Lebanon’s most disadvantaged are engaged in a Darwinian struggle for survival, which erodes the dignity of individuals.

Mr. Abboud Merheb in Dreib al-Awsat admits that he fears increased tensions between Lebanese and Syrians, the day the lockdown ends. He emphasized that the best remedy against such tensions would be job creation. Mr. Adbulilah Zakaria in Jurd al-Qayteh does not see a risk of tensions between Lebanese and Syrians turning violent. “If there is a risk of confrontation and escalation, there are committees in the family and tribal system to handle this,” he said, referring to the system of sulha, a traditional method of settling disputes between feuding communities.

Local experts emphasize that in order not to aggravate ethnic or sectarian tensions, aid organizations need an in-depth understanding of Lebanon, its history and demography. According to Lebanese stakeholders, international donors sometimes lack such knowledge and sensitivity.

174 Lkaderi, Suleiman (2020), ‘Hundreds of Syrians flee camp after it is burned down’, Middle East Eye

175 Mohammed al-Masri public posting in Arabic on Facebook, 27 December 2020 <https://www.facebook.com/Masri.Mo86>

176 Mohammed al-Masri in a public posting in Arabic on Facebook, 27 December 2020



The fire in the makeshift camp in al-Miniyah.  
Public posting by Mohammed al-Masri on Facebook, 27 December 2020

Donors may come to Lebanon with the best intentions, but scant knowledge of the country's demographic and historic complexities. Lacking a deeper understanding, they may ignite new tensions between communities.

For example, any suggestion that Syrian refugees should be involved in local Lebanese affairs is anathema to most Lebanese, given a history of 30 years of Syrian control of Lebanon. Syrians are more than aware of such attitudes and keep a low profile, especially when it comes to political activities and competition for jobs. Formal participation at the municipal level is not open to refugees or displaced populations,<sup>177</sup> and any discussion on that topic is taboo in Lebanon. Tellingly, two young male refugees from Homs, residing in Akkar, confirmed that they had no intention whatsoever to meddle into Lebanese affairs. "We definitely did not take part of the political protests in Akkar. We stayed indoors, showing that we are neutral," they emphasized.<sup>178</sup>

The UN Sustainable Development Goal #16 is 'peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, to provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive

institutions at all levels'.<sup>179</sup> In Sweden's Regional Strategy for the Crisis in Syria, access to inclusive and equal social services is one of the goals in relation to Syrian refugees in neighbouring countries.<sup>180</sup>

However, the word 'inclusion' in relation to Syrian refugees triggers strong reactions in Lebanon. In official government communication regarding people who fled from Syria after March 2011, they are referred to as 'temporarily displaced individuals', not 'refugees', according to Ziad Moussa, a senior advisor to RESLOG. From his point of view the word 'inclusion' must be removed from the lexicon of the donor community working to support Syrians in Lebanon. He explains this with reference to Lebanon's experience of the Palestinian exodus from 1948.<sup>181</sup> "Palestinians came as 'refugees' to Lebanon, lived in 'camps', and armed themselves to the extent that this was one of the triggers (if not the major trigger) of the Lebanese civil war." He continued: "Talk about resilience and livelihoods, but always mention that the Syrians have to return one day!"

177 UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project

178 Interview November 2020

179 United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Sustainable Development Goals

180 Sveriges regering, Utrikesdepartementet (2020). [In Swedish]

181 More than 70 years after the Palestinian Nakba of 1948, Palestinians remain stateless in Lebanon.



Whoever does otherwise plays with fire”.<sup>182</sup>

Marija De Wijn, Chief Technical Advisor for the Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project, a UNDP-UN Habitat EU-funded project addressing the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon, is well aware of how sensitive the word ‘inclusion’ is. Nonetheless, her perspective is different: “Our projects are the result of the Syrian crisis, this is why we are here in Lebanon to strengthen municipalities and communities. But whenever I say this, particularly now, it is almost out-dated for the Lebanese, as they are confronted by so many crises. They respond: “All development agencies only talk about the Syrians.” But we say that if you strengthen resilience, it is not for one crisis, it is broader than that. So, when some municipalities say “It’s only about Syrians”, we say “No, it’s also about migrant workers.” This way you can sell it. If you have a population of 100,000 and 10,000 of them are Syrians, and if you want to have results for everyone, you need an inclusive approach. The Syrians don’t live in a vacuum”.<sup>183</sup>

For example, UNDP-UN Habitat established a hotline for Bourj Hamoud, a multi-ethnic municipality in Beirut. The project stresses that the hotline is for all residents who have complaints related to three local issues: Covid-19, Damaged housing, and Support for people with disabilities. “If you only address Covid cases among the Lebanese, everyone is going to be affected. So, we need to encourage Syrians to call.”

Ziad Moussa believes it is natural to strengthen local governments and make them more resilient, so that they can help to address the Syrian influx, and argues that their improved capacities will remain after the Syrians have been repatriated to their country.

Saleem Haddad, a consultant for Saferworld, has a similar view: “Donors often have a desire to target Syrian refugees only in Lebanon. However, when beneficiaries are targeted on an ethnic basis, tensions are created. Donors in general have contributed to massive tensions on the ground between locals and refugees, and to an anti-refugee discourse in Lebanon. Donors need to take a more holistic approach.” In Akkar, with its historical and family connections and movements between Lebanon and Syria, singling out one

community before the other creates many problems. He emphasized that: “The NGOs who came in at first didn’t understand the Lebanese context, and started to distribute aid only to Syrians. Now they understand the need to be more holistic”.<sup>184</sup>

Discussions indicate a growing desperation among many young Lebanese who see no future in their own country. A yearning to leave is common among young Lebanese, especially if they have an academic degree. A student of electrical engineering in Akkar says: “I expect the situation to get worse. I will leave Lebanon if I get a chance.” Anecdotal comments like his are confirmed by the latest *Arab Youth Survey* by a Dubai-based agency. Findings from 2020 showed that Lebanon risks a ‘talent erosion’ in the coming years: In Lebanon, 77% in the age group between 18 and 24 wish to emigrate, according to the survey. Out of the 17 Arab countries studied, including Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen and Palestine, Lebanon had the highest ratio of youth who consider leaving their country.<sup>185</sup> Economic factors, corruption and bad governance are drivers of emigration, but Covid-19 has made young Lebanese even more prone to emigrate. A UN report also stresses the risk that many in Lebanon’s shrinking middle class – those who used to constitute the bulk of country’s human capital – may seek to emigrate.<sup>186</sup>

When asking young Syrians and Lebanese in Akkar what people in power should prioritize, the answers are often identical: “Improved education and development projects, and access to job opportunities.” Syrians in Akkar emphasized that they are affected by decreased funding from UNHCR, and restrictions for Syrians in the labour market.

Since UNHCR stopped registering Syrians coming to Lebanon in 2015, after a request from the Lebanese government, many Syrians have an uncertain legal status. Two young men from Homs, who fled to Akkar in 2017, say that they cannot have residency in Lebanon and are therefore “in the country illegally”, since their Syrian ID cards are kept at the General Security’s office.

“This means that we have no freedom to move,” they say. If stopped at a checkpoint without ID cards “we will be taken to jail, though we

182 Interview December 2020

183 Interview 4 January 2021

184 Interview 11 December 2020

185 Arab Youth Survey (2020)

186 ESCWA (2020), Policy Brief 15

won't be deported," said one of the displaced men from Homs, who has already been taken to prison twice for this reason.<sup>187</sup>

Regarding the question, which country is the safest for their families, the answer in December 2020 was: "If this question had been asked three years ago, I would have said Lebanon. But today, our families would be safer in Syria." To the question what it would require for them to return to Syria, they say: "A policy change and a different regime in Damascus." Socially, these young men do not find great difficulties in living in a Sunni-dominated host community in Akkar, due to "our common social norms and historical relations."

A Lebanese RESLOG volunteer stated that "After the latest crises in Lebanon, more are returning to Syria, finding it much better there than in Lebanon. Aid agencies must thus help the Lebanese also!" This message is confirmed by some Syrian interviewees in Akkar.<sup>188</sup>

However, some remind that when the RESLOG project started, tensions in Akkar were not as high. "Akkar is a good location for the RESLOG approach. A project like RESLOG can contribute to improving relationships and communications channels, and building transparency," said Saleem Haddad of Saferworld.

Another expert on international aid, who preferred to remain anonymous, believes that the RESLOG project should combine its approach with a national perspective on Lebanon. However, given the limits of SKL International's mandate, this cannot be easily achieved, the source admitted.

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187 Interview December 2020

188 Interviews December 2020

# 6.

## CONCLUSIONS

**This section concludes the study and considers its implications for RESLOG continuation.**

The RESLOG Project in Lebanon aims to promote good governance, resilience and active citizenship in Akkar, by strengthening municipal capacities, advocating for national dialogues, and engaging different community groups in decision making through an area-based approach.

Such aims are particularly hard to achieve during the combined health, political and economic crisis in Lebanon, caused by the unwillingness of the political elite in Beirut to accede to demands for accountability and transparency. Since the end of the civil war, deep-rooted corruption and impunity have become a chronic social disease in Lebanon, which the nation-wide protest movement tried to change. However, the political elite has repeatedly shown that it is not willing to heed calls from the streets a new, corruption-free and accountable government in Lebanon.

Local governments, e.g. in Akkar, are not immune to the failings of a dysfunctional state. However, judging from the interviews for this report, most locals in Akkar see corruption in Lebanon as emanating from the top of the pyramid and percolating down to the local level, where some influential politicians are equally unwilling to change ‘the rules of the game’.

The heads of the two Unions of Municipalities which are partners in the RESLOG project both raised the problem of how the political stalemate in Beirut is affecting Akkar.

“If the political crisis in Beirut deteriorates, it will have a bad impact on our status quo, not to mention on the religious tensions which are nurtured by some parties,” said Mr. Adbulilah

Zakaria in Jurd al-Qayteh.

“What we need first of all is jobs. People don’t want to be begging. When Beirut is locked down, people in Akkar lose jobs. Our problems won’t be resolved until the problems in Beirut are resolved. And when the lockdown ends, new problems will appear, such as tensions between Lebanese and Syrians. That’s what I’m afraid of,” says Mr. Abboud Merheb in Dreib al-Awsat.

Several other sources fear that growing unemployment and loss of incomes after Covid-19 in already deprived areas may lead to increased tensions. A UNDP-UN Habitat report concludes that: “Both Lebanese and refugees perceive that long-standing inequalities are deepening and competition for jobs and access to resources and services remain drivers of tension at the local level”<sup>189</sup>.

The challenges for RESLOG are thus manifold, as the Lebanese in general have lost faith in the political class and central government. Nobody knows how deep the country may sink before it passes its nadir. As highlighted by UNDP-UN Habitat, vulnerable areas in Lebanon such as Akkar, which host a high number of displaced Syrians, suffer from heightened insecurity, and are more exposed to violence. And as underlined by female activists, job creation is not only important to mitigate tensions between different ethnic communities, but also to empower women and girls.

Income generating activities are generally identified as the most efficient way to mitigate social tensions. The Project Manager for RESLOG in Akkar, Souraya Hammoud, concluded that “flare-ups and social tensions are not based on

<sup>189</sup> UNDP & UN Habitat (2020), ‘Municipal Empowerment and Resilience Project’

nationality, but on who ate and who didn't.”

In a crumbling state system, the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) is one of the few national institutions that is still held in high regard by citizens, regardless of their religious or political affiliations. Interestingly, the LAF has drawn political and economic support from such different quarters as Hezbollah, the United States, France and Arab Gulf States. However, as the Army's resources decrease, and if regional differences between the United States and Hezbollah's backers in Iran increase, disagreements within the rank and file of the Army may come to the fore. Experts note that the LAF is not homogenous, and that there may be the risk of an implosion, which would exacerbate an already disastrous situation in Lebanon, including in Akkar.<sup>190</sup> The United States Caesar Act and its sanctioning of actors doing business with the Assad Regime is also likely to affect Lebanon negatively for a long time to come. Meanwhile, the delay in forming a new government in Beirut is tightly connected to the wider geopolitical tensions, depending on whether the Biden administration in the United States will come to terms with Tehran on the Iran nuclear deal or not.

Educational shortcomings due to the pandemic and the lockdown will have long-term consequences for Akkar and Lebanon. The huge learning gaps to fill after the nearly year-long closure of many schools in Akkar are a major concern, also for local governments. The lack of high-speed internet and of laptops in many ordinary homes, and teachers not trained to conduct online teaching, has led to what one expert describes as 'a total mess', while Mr. Adbulilah Zakaria, head of the UoM in Jurd al-Qayteh, talks about "a very tiresome situation for students, teachers, parents."

However, even in desperate times, entrepreneurship and ingenuity can be found, and have the potential to thrive. Local small-scale production has started to mushroom during the crisis. For example, many Akkaris have started to grow vegetables on their balconies, roof tops or pieces of land. "We try to get people to grow food, to get people back to farming, and for those who have land, to start using it," says Mr. Abboud Merheb,

head of UoM in Dreib al-Awsat. Ms. Souraya Hammoud of the RESLOG project mentions other types of innovation and entrepreneurship: "Some are turning to online business. Others have started to handcraft local products like soap, or become good chefs, or find other new ways to cope. For instance, we now find note books made from recycled paper, and in Tripoli a business is recycling broken glass from Beirut."

Creative thinking is also flourishing among young people with leadership skills, as can be seen among the volunteers in RESLOG. The *Salamati* initiative, an educational effort aiming to spread awareness of how to combat Covid-19, is an example. Another by a young graduate student and RESLOG volunteer, Noor Noeman, aims to provide vocational guidance to teenagers and to create new opportunities for youth by networking with the labour market.<sup>191</sup> She stresses that many students have had difficulties in completing their academic studies or, as is the case for many Syrian refugees, have difficulties in obtaining certificates and diplomas for their academic achievements, sometimes due to differences in curricula.

Others emphasize how solidarity has been strengthened in a desperate situation. "When everyone is poor, locals rely on each other," says Khalid al-Hamwi, Syrian Refugees Liaison Officer for RESLOG. "The only exception is that if there is a job offer, in that case they want a Lebanese," he adds.

Practically all interviewees for this report stressed that it is crucial for international agencies in Lebanon to provide assistance to disadvantaged families and individuals regardless of their nationality. Providing assistance to one group while neglecting another, may trigger violence. "This is the case for agencies who deliver cash to Syrians, while their Lebanese neighbours who are just as vulnerable are left without," says Souraya Hammoud of the RESLOG team. Mr. Adbulilah Zakaria, head of the UoM in Jurd al-Qayteh, concluded that "the Lebanese nowadays regard Syrians as better off, as they see Syrians supported with credit cards in dollars".<sup>192</sup>

Given the many shortcomings of the Lebanese state and local governments, there is a debate among donor agencies as to whether to strengthen

190 Centre Arabe de Recherche et d'Études politiques de Paris (2020)

191 Proposal shared with author of the report, January 2021

192 Interview, 19 February 2021

Lebanon's existing structures or not. Some interviewees wish to see RESLOG and other donors pushing local governments more to provide services. "Municipalities should be encouraged to be more transparent," says Nour Arab, a former communications expert at SKL International. She advocates more systematic efforts to promote active citizenship among inhabitants who are still unaware of the concept.

Nour Arab finds it particularly important that RESLOG helps to increase awareness of active citizenship among the youth, so that they will ultimately "understand the role of local authorities and what makes a candidate eligible." She wishes to see a more proactive approach to identify young people with leadership skills and the potential to become community leaders, members of municipal councils, or even mayors. More efforts should be made to promote transparency and local initiatives, she believes. "These people need help, they don't have the tools to become better at local governance. It is also good to keep advocating for Akkar on a national level."

The problem of corruption casts its shadows from the central government to the provinces in Lebanon. Far from having any illusions, Marija de Wijn from UNDP-UN Habitat sees "a high level of corruption, with people taking advantage of a flawed system, not only at the national level, but also at local level." She fears that some parameters in the system will not change.

Some critics have argued that it would be more appropriate for international agencies to operate via civil society organizations (CSOs). However, this may not be the solution at the local level, where understaffed and underfinanced municipalities work with weak mandates. Marija de Wijn states that even though CSOs have a vital role to play, they cannot take over the role of government, as "direct service delivery by them would undermine local governance. As a principle, to strengthen vertical relationships between communities and local governments is crucial at the local level. We try to work with those who are more open and have a more developmental perspective. In municipalities, we seek out those who are open to change, and then try to convince others to follow their examples."

She stresses the need to combine such efforts with strict criteria: "We ask municipalities to submit concept notes on their ideas. But they need to

undergo training. We don't just give them money, they have to do something in return. And we look at the demand side. Working with local government is just as important as working with CSOs. There is a bias in some donor agencies that one should just work with CSOs in Lebanon, but I don't think it's the right approach, you need to do both."

From this perspective, international organizations like SKL International can play an important role in building local capacity. This is the time to build momentum and to prepare for the post-Covid period. "We give municipalities a reason to survive," said RESLOG Project Manager Souraya Hammoud.

Inclusiveness, a key word used by many donors, including SKL International,<sup>193</sup> is a highly controversial concept in Lebanon, more so than in Turkey,<sup>194</sup> due to Lebanon's experience of hosting Palestinian refugees since 1948, and three decades of the Syrian regime's control over Lebanon, followed by a huge influx of Syrian refugees in the past decade. However, the Covid-19 crisis serves as an example of why public health programmes that reach out to all inhabitants, regardless of their nationality, are vital. This approach could also be applied in other areas that are vital for building resilience.

To conclude, the RESLOG Project is situated in an underprivileged area of Lebanon, with highly vulnerable people, high unemployment and economic decline. The only locally accepted way for foreign donors to operate in this context is by addressing the needs of Syrian refugees and deprived Lebanese in host communities equally. This is even more important, as displaced Syrians have mostly settled in the poorest areas in Lebanon, where domestic poverty and unemployment have risen significantly in the past decade.

In this time of crisis, and given the risk of increasing social tensions between deprived locals and displaced Syrians, certain features of the project may need to be reconsidered, or improved. However, continuing to promote resilience and good governance at the local level is of vital importance in Akkar. This approach is welcomed by representatives of local governments, and by local community workers and Syrian and Lebanese volunteers.

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193 SKL International, 'About the RESLOG Project'

194 Hammargren (2020)

# 7.

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