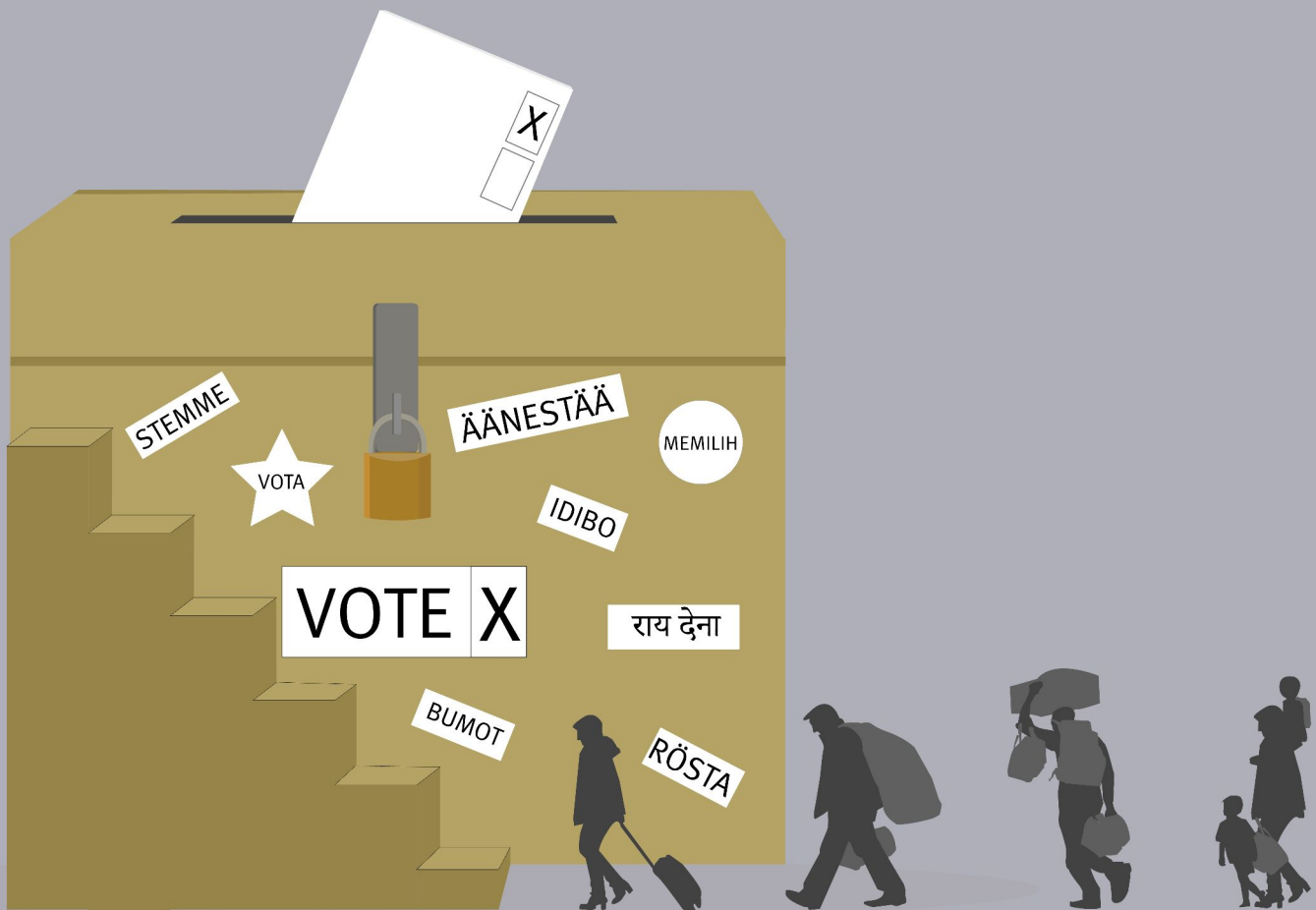


Political Participation of Refugees

The Case of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon





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Zeina El-Helou
Lina Antara (series editor)



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Abbreviations



ISIS	Islamic State in Iraq and Syria
SSNP	Syrian Social Nationalist Party
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

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1. Introduction



This case study outlines the civil and political rights of Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the opportunities for and constraints on participation in the political life of their host country and country of origin through formal and non-formal mechanisms, and was written as part of a larger research project on the political participation of refugees (Bekaj and Antara 2018). It comprises a review of the available literature on the topic, including news articles, research papers and other secondary sources. Key informant interviews were also conducted with three Lebanese and three Syrian representatives working on issues relevant to refugees' political participation. In addition, three written questionnaires were completed by two male and one female respondents. The one-to-one interviews were conducted in Beirut in July and August 2017. The questionnaires were submitted by respondents based in Tripoli.

Table 1. Case study respondents' profiles and locations

Research site	Syrian		TOTAL	Key informants
	Male	Female		
Beirut	2	1	3	3
Tripoli	2	1	3	0
TOTAL			6	3

The initial aim was to gather responses from 100 Syrian refugees to a questionnaire about their political participation in their host country and country of origin. However, this proved a challenge given the reticence among Syrian refugees to talk about political issues. The author experienced the same dynamic in March 2016 in focus group discussions conducted with Syrian refugees who showed extreme caution about discussing political issues in either the Lebanese or the Syrian context (Atallah et al. 2016). Syrian refugees across Lebanon are subject to regular raids by the security forces looking for potential troublemakers. These often target refugees facing issues with legalizing their papers. This puts Syrian refugees under pressure, restricts their mobility and compromises their basic rights. Many Syrian deserters and political activists have been arrested in Lebanon since the onset of the Syrian crisis, which has made refugees fear serious conflicts with the law if they engage in political activity. Although the primary data collection ended up being quite limited, the case study provides useful insights as a result of the secondary data review exercise, as well as the in-depth interviews with key individuals.

2. Host-country context: Lebanon

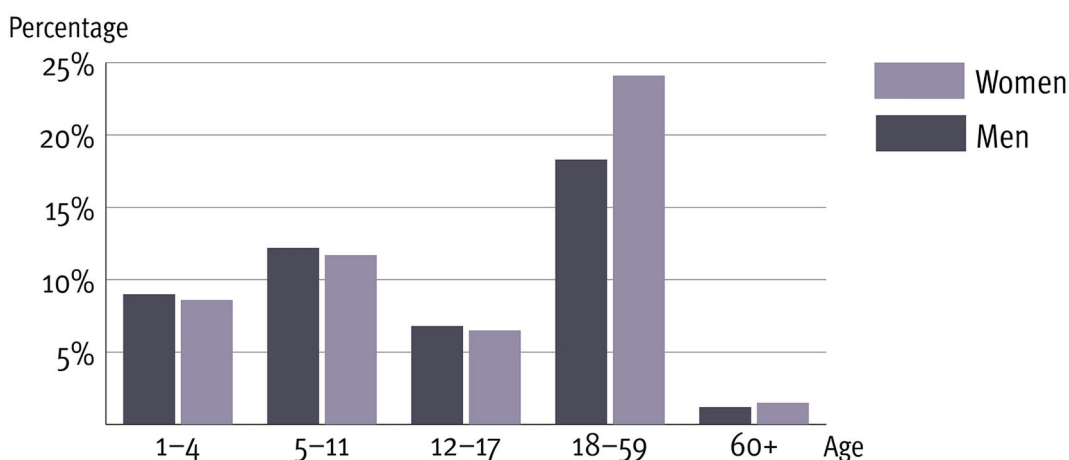


The drawing and redrawing of the map of the Middle East has entailed much human suffering, loss of life and property, and displacement. As part of the region, Lebanon, a small country with approximately 4.8 million inhabitants, has had more than its fair share. The Syrian crisis has had serious implications in terms of forced displacement. As of July 2017, Lebanon was host to the highest number of refugees per capita in the world (European Commission 2017a). According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), at that time there were 1,113,941 Syrian refugees in an estimated total population of 5,988,000 (UNHCR 2017). By 30 November 2017, this number had dropped, with a total of 997,905 Syrian refugees registered (UNHCR 2017). However, the real number of Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in the country is likely to be much higher, given that UNHCR Lebanon temporarily suspended new registrations on 6 May 2015 and this figure does not include asylum seekers waiting to be registered (UNHCR, United Nations Children's Fund and World Food Programme 2017).

In addition to Syrian refugees, Lebanon is also host to around 450,000 Palestinian refugees, distributed in 12 camps mainly situated along the Lebanese coastline (UNRWA 2014). There is an additional number of Palestinian refugees, not registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), estimated at 38 per cent of the total Palestinian refugee population in Lebanon, who live in 27 informal settlements distributed across Lebanon. In addition, since the outbreak of violence in Syria in 2011, approximately 30,675 Palestinian 'double refugees' from Syria have settled mostly inside the camps and informal settlements (ANERA 2013; European Commission 2017b). Palestinian refugees played an active role in the early days of the 15-year Lebanese civil war (Haddad 2000). The Lebanese government is therefore extremely apprehensive about the presence of large numbers of Syrian refugees and the potential implications for the country, and the measures it has taken with regard to Syrian refugees should be seen through this prism. The largest concentration of Syrian refugees can be found in three cities: Beirut, Tripoli in the north and Zahle in the Bekaa valley (UNHCR 2017). At the start of 2017, UNHCR Lebanon counted 235,024 households, made up of 47.5 per cent male refugees and 52.5 per cent of female refugees. Figure 1 provides a breakdown of individual registered refugees by age and gender. Only limited information is available about the literacy levels of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. However, they are reported to be low, in particular among women (Talhouk et al. 2016).



Figure 1. Distribution of Syrian refugees in Lebanon by age and gender



Source: UNHCR 2017b

Overview of Lebanon's refugee and asylum policy

Lebanon has not signed the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Hence, the Lebanese government considers that it is not bound by any international standards in regard to addressing refugee issues (Janmyr 2017). Officials in Lebanon refrain from describing Syrians as 'refugees', preferring to refer to them as 'displaced persons' instead, specifically to avoid the commitment to grant refugees the rights stemming from the 1951 Convention (Lebanese key informant 1, Ministry for Displaced Affairs, Beirut, 2017). Lebanese officials argue that the ratification of the 1951 Convention would result in the permanent settlement of refugees in Lebanon (Janmyr 2017). As stated by a key informant from the Lebanese Ministry of Labour: 'Syrians in Lebanon are displaced and not refugees, because Lebanon did not ratify the 1951 Geneva Convention. Calling them refugees would make us committed to give them rights of refugees, hence would put additional burdens on Lebanon's shoulders which it cannot afford. This is why we call them displaced instead of refugees, not out of discrimination.' (Lebanese key informant 2, Ministry of Labour, Beirut, 2017).

During the Iraq refugee crisis linked to the US-led operation in 2003, the Lebanese government signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the UNHCR. This still serves as the operational framework for cooperation between the two parties, and enables the UNHCR to carry out refugee status determination and register asylum seekers (UNHCR 2003). However, the Memorandum does not apply specifically to Syrian refugees. The UNHCR has been trying without success since 2013 to agree on a new Memorandum with the Lebanese government (ALEF 2013). In May 2015, the Lebanese government instructed the UNHCR to suspend registration of Syrian refugees until a new mechanism for registration could be established (Amnesty International 2015). As of November 2017, however, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the newly established Ministry for Displaced Affairs still appeared to lack a clear vision for the development of a fully-fledged asylum policy.

When the Syrian conflict broke out in March 2011 the official position adopted by the Lebanese government was that of 'disassociation'. Lebanon did not take up an official position either for or against the Syrian regime, partly to deter any possible retaliation from Assad's regime which had only left Lebanon in 2005 after nearly 30 years of military and political occupation. The Syrian army had entered Lebanon in 1976, to help end the

emerging civil war, but became a major warring party throughout the course of that war. In 2005, under tremendous international pressure, Syrian forces were driven out of Lebanon after the assassination of former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri (Whitaker 2005). Another reason for the policy of disassociation was that many powerful factions inside the Lebanese government had conflicting positions on the Syrian crisis, which could have destabilized the government. Thus, the disassociation policy was seen as a way to preserve the delicate political balance between the various sectarian forces within Lebanon (Janmyr 2016). Nonetheless, many of the country's political actors did not observe the policy and soon became deeply involved, openly interfering and aiding the various warring parties. Since the Syrian refugees were mainly perceived as opposed to the Assad regime, they received support from various opposing parties in Lebanon. This changed in May 2014, however, when massive expatriate voting in Lebanon showed support among Syrian refugees for President Assad (Associated Press 2014a and b). These divisions in Lebanon regarding the war in Syria led to a reluctance to envisage a sustainable solution. Lebanese officials refused to even discuss an offer by the Syrian government to work on a solution concerning the refugees, using the pretext of Lebanon's disassociation policy (Human Rights Watch 2016).

Furthermore, Lebanon has opted for a non-encampment policy for Syrian refugees and asylum seekers (Turner 2015). On the one hand, this policy has been praised as conducive to free movement, employment opportunities and facilitated integration into the host society, in contrast to encampment policies which encourage segregation and restrict freedom of movement (Frelick 2013). On the other hand, Lebanon's persistent refusal to allow Syrian refugees to settle in camps was seen as a way to prevent radicalization and potential militarization, as has been the case in the long-standing camps for Palestinian refugees (Hanafi and Long 2010). As a result of the policy of no formal camps, Syrian refugees are scattered throughout more than 2,100 urban and rural communities and informal settlements across Lebanon, often sharing small basic lodgings with other refugee families in overcrowded conditions.

In order to remain in Lebanon, a Syrian refugee must have a Lebanese sponsor for both their entry and stay. Under these rules, a residence permit must be renewed annually for a fee equivalent to USD 200, which is a colossal amount given the conditions in which most refugees live (Rainey 2015). In 2016, Lebanon and the European Union agreed on a four-year programme to help resolve the refugee crisis in the country. This EU-Lebanon compact foresees an allocation of at least EUR 400 million from the EU in 2016–17, in addition to bilateral assistance of more than EUR 80 million in the same period. It outlines specific mutual commitments to address the impact of the Syrian crisis and aims to turn the situation into an opportunity to improve the socio-economic prospects, security, stability and resilience of Lebanon. In turn, Lebanon is committed to ease the terms for temporary stay for Syrian refugees, in particular regarding their residency status (Council of the European Union 2016).

In February 2017, the General Security Directorate issued a statement according to which Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR before 1 January 2015 could obtain a six-month residence permit free of charge. However, the decision is limited to those who registered with the UNHCR before that date, or who obtained residency through a UNHCR certificate in 2015 or 2016. (*Daily Star* 2017a). Those who are not registered with the UNHCR must still obtain a residence permit and a work permit for USD 200 and USD 30 USD, respectively, every year. Furthermore, registered Syrian refugees are not allowed to work unless they have work permits, which can lead to them losing their registration with the UNHCR. These work permits only allow refugees to work in agriculture, construction and cleaning jobs, such as janitors or security guards. The Ministry of Labour has adopted a highly conservative approach to granting work permits to Syrians, and no work permits are granted to Syrians outside the fields mentioned above. Permits can be obtained by applying to the Ministry of



Labour and following a complicated procedure involving approximately 11 documents and sponsorship by a Lebanese national.

In addition, many Syrian refugees have limited mobility as many municipalities across Lebanon have imposed night curfews, a decision backed by the Ministry of the Interior and largely welcomed by local communities (Human Rights Watch 2017). This further reduces the ability of Syrian refugees to commit to their jobs.

Requirements for refugees' political participation and naturalization

Access to citizenship

Over the years, successive Lebanese governments have ruled out any chance of naturalizing Palestinian and Syrian refugees. Throughout several years of conflict and the creation of independent security entities within the Palestinian camps, the naturalization of refugees has been discussed and dismissed. In addition, Lebanese politicians have recently openly opposed any possible permanent settlement of Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Francis 2017). In 2017, Lebanon's Foreign Minister, Gebran Bassil, reiterated his position that Lebanon will not naturalize Syrian or Palestinian refugees living in the country (*Daily Star* 2017b). However, it is worth noting that 154,931 foreign residents, including more than 65,000 Syrians, were naturalized in Lebanon in 1994. Among those naturalized were a number of non-registered individuals and families living on the border between Lebanon and Syria. The procedure was considered controversial because it was carried out while Lebanon was occupied by Syrian armed forces. A large number of naturalized Syrians were registered in districts where politicians wanted to secure votes in elections. The naturalization decree also benefited a number of families of various nationalities who had been living in Lebanon for a long time, which meant that their naturalization was overdue. In the elections of 1996, 2000, 2005, and the by-elections of 2007 these naturalized citizens demonstrated a higher rate of voter participation than the native-born population (Hourani and Sensenig-Dabbous 2011). In 2011, six years after the withdrawal of Syrian forces from Lebanon, a presidential decree was issued seeking to withdraw Lebanese nationality from individuals who were allegedly naturalized unconstitutionally or based on false documents (Naharnet 2011). The decree was never implemented, however, so those Syrians who were naturalized retain their Lebanese nationalities.

Nonetheless, naturalization is not a legal process open to anyone living in Lebanon, but an ad hoc decree that is extremely rare. Refugees, Palestinians and Syrians, as well as immigrants of various nationalities and the children of Lebanese women married to foreign men are all excluded. At the same time, Lebanese women married to foreigners are unable to extend their nationalities to their husbands or their children—even if they have been born and raised in Lebanon.

Access to voting rights and political parties

The Lebanese political system provides only limited opportunities for inclusive participation and representation. For instance, the current electoral law does not contain any provisions on gender quotas, even though participation by women in Lebanese politics is among the lowest in the Arab region (UN Women 2017). In addition, the voting age is 21 and military personnel have no right to vote. The country has long been celebrated as a haven for Arab tourists and activists, due to its openness, freedom of expression, and civil and political rights, but refugees have only limited access to these rights (Human Rights Watch 2017). Only individuals who have been naturalized for more than 10 years are allowed to vote, except for foreign women married to Lebanese men, who automatically gain Lebanese citizenship. The same conditions on voter eligibility apply to both municipal and national elections.

Lebanon has existed in a state of civil and political instability since its creation in 1920, with a fragile system based on a precarious balance of power among various segments of society, Muslims, Christians and a number of minorities inside each of the two largest religious groups. This has kept the system closed and unwelcoming to ‘newcomers’ who are always perceived as disturbing this precarious balance. Finally, Lebanon has not had general elections since June 2009. The political and security turmoil led the Lebanese Parliament to extend its term three times, in 2013, 2014 and 2017. The next general election is due to take place in May 2018, while municipal elections took place in May 2010 and May 2016.

There is no specific legal framework for the establishment and operation of political parties in Lebanon. All associations, including political parties, fall under the 1909 law on associations, which does not prohibit the enrolment of foreign members provided that neither the founder nor the director is a foreigner, in which case the association must be registered as foreign and requires a special decree from the Council of Ministers (Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs 2004). However, it is considered difficult for Lebanese political parties to have foreign members, whether Syrian or of any other nationality. In addition, it is expected that Syrian refugees will not take part in Lebanese politics as this would be considered foreign interference in internal affairs. They can, however, provide informal support to certain political parties. For example, many of the Syrians who support the Assad regime are also supporters of Hezbollah, since Hezbollah is fighting in Syria with the regime and against opposition militants (Wight 2017).

Access to civil society organizations

The legal, regulatory and financial frameworks for NGOs in Lebanon do not specifically mention in law whether a refugee can establish a civil society organization. However, legislative decision no. 369 of 1939 stipulates that foreigners have the right to form an association by virtue of a special decree issued by the Council of Ministers (Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs 2004). This has proved to be a very difficult procedure, as various councils of ministers have adopted a conservative attitude to granting recognition for foreign NGOs in Lebanon, especially Syrian ones. Hence, Syrian refugees mainly convene in informal groups that are not officially registered or resort to Lebanese covers to register their organizations, exactly as Palestinian refugees have consistently done since they settled in Lebanon.

It should also be noted in this context that foreigners residing in Lebanon, including Syrian refugees, are not allowed to form or join trade unions. According to the Lebanese labour code, foreign workers cannot create their own unions (Associated Press 2015). The sponsorship system in Lebanon, which is applicable to Syrian refugees, domestic workers and low skilled personnel from third countries, holds the employer legally responsible for their migrant employees, who rely on their employers for their right to live and work in the country (Associated Press 2015).

3. Refugees' and asylum seekers' political participation in the host country



Formal political participation

The Syrian refugees interviewed saw themselves as just 'guests' in Lebanon, and that it was therefore normal for them not to participate in elections. 'I am not a Lebanese citizen, I am a refugee, and I am not concerned with what happens in Lebanon, on the political level' (Syrian male refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017). Furthermore, having been in Lebanon for so long, refugees have become well aware of the flaws of the political system that make participation hard for Lebanese citizens themselves. One of the Syrian respondents answered sarcastically: 'let Lebanese vote first', hinting at the postponement of general elections since 2009. It appeared more important to him that their social and economic rights be observed while in Lebanon, before refugees can think of demanding civil and political rights for themselves:

I don't think we should be concerned with Lebanese politics; we have enough on our plates.

—Syrian male refugee and political activist 2, Beirut, 2017

Interviews with key informants showed that there is little room for Syrian refugees to join Lebanese political parties, apart from pan-Arab parties (Lebanese key informant 3, Research Institute, Beirut, 2017). There are some cross-regional and cross-sectarian political parties, such as the Lebanese Communist Party, the Syrian Social Nationalist Party (SSNP) and the Baath party, and the latter two are pan-Arab parties. The Baath party in Lebanon is the Lebanese chapter of the Arab Baath party, which rules Syria. The SSNP, founded in Beirut in 1932, believes in the Syrian Nation, along with a 'fertile Crescent' that includes Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, Palestine and Cyprus, as explained on the party website (SSNP 2017). However, most political parties in Lebanon are very much constituency-based, and most constituencies are homogenous in terms of sectarian and/or regional belonging. Many of these parties do not even appeal to Lebanese citizens outside their closed constituencies. Hence, Syrian refugees are not concerned with joining any of these parties, especially if they

are not considered part of the closed group and would not identify with the political narratives of the party.

In addition, as stated by the Syrian individuals interviewed for this case study:

Syrian refugees are not engaged in Lebanese political parties. There is a kind of caution on behalf of parties about involving Syrians, because this might eventually be seen as Syrian interference in Lebanese internal politics, which is unwelcome. In addition, there are no new players on the Lebanese political scene, and old parties do not want to bring any change to the status quo.

—Syrian male refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017

It is important to keep in mind that Syrian activists have been arrested in Lebanon, which is a significant deterrent preventing Syrian refugees from becoming civically or politically active: ‘Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not take positions in relation to Lebanese politics. They would rather keep a low profile in order to avoid getting into trouble’ (Syrian male refugee and political activist 2, Beirut, 2017).

Non-formal political participation

Despite the lack of avenues for formal political participation by refugees, there is some space for non-formal participation. The Syrian activists interviewed generally considered that ‘they do not have the right’ to participate in protests over Lebanese issues. One of them said: ‘We might compromise the whole movement if we participate in protests, so it is better to stand aside’ (Syrian male refugee and political activist 2, Beirut, 2017). Other Syrian activists said they do not feel concerned about Lebanese issues and would naturally refrain from engaging in any form of political participation due to their situation as guests: ‘As refugees, we do not have the same level of rights as citizens and we have to respect that’ (Syrian male refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017).

One Syrian respondent affirmed that he had been active with the ‘You Stink’ movement in the summer of 2015. This movement was an informal platform formed by a group of activists in reaction to refuse piling up in the streets of Beirut in July 2015. It gained in popularity and attracted a lot of activists from all over Lebanon (Huffington Post 2015). Another respondent indicated that she participated in protests related to the right to Lebanese nationality: ‘I was part of the protests related to giving Lebanese citizenship to the children of Lebanese women married to foreigners’ (Syrian female refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017). Other Syrian respondents also said they participated in similar protests, as they had Lebanese mothers but were still being denied the right to a Lebanese nationality. One of the individuals surveyed said he participated in a protest against taxes (Syrian male refugee 3, Tripoli, 2017).

Nevertheless, it does not seem acceptable to most Lebanese people for foreigners, particularly Syrians and Palestinians, to participate massively in protests. For example, in 2017, the Lebanese Armed Forces carried out a major raid in Aarsal, a border town in the Bekaa valley, which had been occupied by the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and the Nusra Front since 2014 (Al Jazeera 2017a). This resulted in a large number of arrests (Human Rights Watch 2017). An outcry followed, mainly from human rights activists and left-wing groups which eventually called a demonstration in support of refugees. A Facebook page under the name of the union of Syrian People in Lebanon reposted the invitation and broadcast messages (videos, social media posts) from refugees vilifying the Lebanese Army. A number of Lebanese citizens reacted angrily in response, calling for counter demonstrations in support of the army which was being attacked by Syrians. This resulted in a vigorous



public debate that could easily have escalated, until the Lebanese Ministry of the Interior decided to prohibit both demonstrations and arrest the administrators of the Facebook page (McLoughlin 2017). This incident indicates that any form of vocal political participation by Syrian refugees in Lebanon is not seen favourably.

Some of the Syrian participants in this study were active in civil society organizations in Lebanon, mainly in the fields of emergency response and development. Despite the restrictions that non-Lebanese citizens face in registering NGOs, the Lebanese government 'takes a laissez faire approach to NGO regulation and foreign NGOs can work in Lebanon without disturbance, unless they engage in "suspicious activities"' (Elbayar 2005). The interviews showed that, despite the specific administrative challenges, there are many windows of opportunity for participation by Syrian refugees in civil society activities in Lebanon.

In 2013, our group of volunteers became an NGO. We are five founders, four Lebanese and one Syrian. Although this is not against the law, the establishment of the organization took a lot of time, because one of the founders was Syrian. The Lebanese authorities used the pretext of the US sanctions against Syrians. Even banks did not want to open accounts for us, but then it worked using connections.

—Syrian male refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017

In the same vein, another respondent stated that after futile efforts to register an NGO in Lebanon, she gave up and decided to register the same NGO in the Netherlands, which continued to operate undercover in Lebanon (Syrian female refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017). It is also worth noting that Syrian refugees often use Lebanese acquaintances or friends to help them out whenever they are stuck with a certain administrative procedure as a result of their nationality.

Throughout the Syrian uprising, Lebanon has been one of several countries in which different groups and initiatives formed by Syrian and Lebanese youth have emerged that are: 'trying together to contribute to the relief efforts of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, in order to fill some of the gaps left by a slow and bureaucratic international response' (Hallisso 2014). Since 2011, Syria has seen the emergence of several local NGOs and civil society groups. However, because activists face difficulties working in Syria linked to conflicts and prosecutions, many Syrian activists have joined NGOs in Lebanon or created their own NGOs and initiatives (Abdallah 2015).

These organizations were working for the benefit of Syrian refugees in the region at a time when these same Syrians had little to no support from the international community. However, they encountered numerous challenges, since their activities required substantial resources, most notably long-term and stable funding and the ability to hire professional and qualified full-time employees (Hallisso 2014). Other challenges emerged when international organizations and NGOs came to Lebanon to start their own projects, ignoring the initiatives and projects already being implemented by Syrian activists:

Whenever those international NGOs want to benefit from expertise on Syrian society, they hire qualified Syrian staff and pay them high salaries, instead of supporting the organizations they originally come from, or helping them to establish new organizations. This has led to an unfortunate brain drain among Syrian civil society organizations, as most of those who managed to survive the funding obstacles weren't able to maintain their membership because of their inability to compete with INGO salary scales. (Hallisso 2014)

Examples of civil society activities include NGOs and informal platforms working within the Syrian refugee community to provide services for Syrian refugee youth, especially educational services. For instance, ‘Touch of a Rose’ operates in the Tripoli region, led by Syrian refugees, to provide training aimed at introducing young Syrians and Lebanese to the concepts of civic education, critical thinking and the principles of democracy (Mohamad Ashraf Al Hafny n.d.). Others, such as the Syrian Centre for Political and Strategic Studies, publish studies on Syria-related socio-economic and political issues. Its mission revolves around educating citizens and activists about Syria’s ‘political, economic, social, and strategic perspectives’, through different types of conferences, publications and studies. The centre also translates major books and research papers that provide a thorough analysis of the Syrian case in the fields of economics, political and social science, and cultural studies (Syrian Centre for Political and Strategic Studies n.d.). Another example of Syrian-led civil society activities focused on issues of political participation is the Syrian League for Citizenship, which was founded by one of the respondents:

We work on building the capacity and raising the awareness of Syrian youth on issues related to citizenship and rights, through established contacts inside Syria whereby awareness raising sessions and capacity development workshops are conducted. The Syrian League for Citizenship is a gathering of people focusing on the values linked to the relationship between the citizen and the government and among citizens themselves. Their mission is related to the idea of citizenship and the democratic state that is founded on four principles: freedom, participation, equality and responsibility where both men and women have their rights and duties fulfilled without any form of discrimination

—Syrian female refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017

Another example is Basmeh and Zeitooneh, an organization that started working for the benefit of Syrian refugees in 2012. It began by performing field visits in areas where the most marginalized and vulnerable Syrian refugees and asylum seekers lived.

The main goal of these visits was to assess needs and find gaps left by other aid agencies. As a result of those preliminary assessments, the organization chose to concentrate its efforts in the most poorly served areas, such as Aarsal, the Bekaa Valley, Tripoli and the Palestinian refugee camps in Beirut. The purpose is also to bring peace and smiles for the refugees as well as room for support and empowerment, in addition to reviving their sense of humanity and dignity.

—Syrian male refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017

To fulfil these aims, Basmeh and Zeitooneh opened community centres in different regions of the country and formed partnerships with several organizations (Basmeh and Zeitooneh n.d.).

4. Country-of-origin context: Syria

Historically, Syria was part of the Ottoman Empire and various religious groups, both Christian and Muslim, lived alongside each other in many cities and towns. Towards the end of World War I, Arab leaders revolted against Ottoman rule and France took Syria as part of its League of Nations mandate. Syria obtained independence from the French mandate in 1945 and in 1963 the Arab Socialist Baath Party seized power in a coup, transforming Syria into a one-party state governed by emergency law. In 1970, Hafez El-Assad, the current president's father, overthrew the regime and became president through the Baath Party. When Hafez El-Assad died in 2000, Bashar El-Assad became president (Freedom House 2010). However, even though the President sought to legitimize his position through elections, the Syrian population realized early on that he was following his father's authoritarian rule, under which Syrians 'can do whatever they want, provided that they do not challenge the government' (Polk 2013). Civil and political rights in Syria were consistently compromised through the state of emergency in force between 1963 and 2011. Attempts to change the style of the regime were abruptly halted in 2001, after the first six months of Bashar El-Assad's presidency in which political prisoners were released, exiled dissidents returned and there was open discussion of the country's problems (Freedom House 2010).

In March 2011, protests erupted in Deraa, Syria, after the arrest and torture of teenagers for painting slogans on a school wall (BBC News 2016). Largely inspired by the Arab Uprising, the slogans 'talked about revolution, specifically targeting Bashar El-Assad, demanding that he leave' (Asher-Schapiro 2016). The security forces opened fire, killing several protesters. Many other protesters took to the streets as the incident sparked nationwide protests demanding the resignation of Assad. The Syrian government ordered the use of force to crush the movement. However, protesters continued to protest and eventually took up arms to defend themselves and fight against government forces (Asher-Schapiro 2016).

The use of force and the violence escalated. According to UN estimates, around 90,000 people had been killed by June 2013, and by August 2015 this figure had climbed to 250,000 (BBC News 2016). Another complication was ISIS, which actively engaged in the conflict, occupying Syrian territory and claiming sovereignty over it. Other militia groups were also created, such as the Nusra Front. Within months the conflict in Syria had become a humanitarian crisis, in which various war crimes are alleged to have been perpetrated by the warring parties, and foreign intervention was happening on both sides. A US-led coalition launched airstrikes inside Syria in September 2014, aiming to defeat ISIS, and a Russian air campaign targeted Islamist terrorists and other groups in Syria (BBC News 2016).

As of 2017, the Syrian population remaining in the country was estimated at around 19 million (World Population Review 2017). However, because of the growing conflict many had been internally displaced. As of 1 June 2017, the number of refugees created since the beginning of the conflict was estimated at just over 5 million (UNHCR 2017). The refugees went mainly to neighbouring countries but also to Europe. However, the countries most affected by the so-called refugee crisis were Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey.

5. Refugee diasporans' political participation in their country of origin



Formal political participation

During the 2014 presidential elections, tens of thousands of Syrian refugees headed to the Syrian Embassy in Lebanon, one of the very few across the Arab region where it was possible to cast a vote. This led to huge traffic jams lasting several hours. Refugees also showed support for President Assad, as chants were reportedly heard from many in the crowd along the lines of: 'with our souls, with our blood, we will sacrifice for you, Bashar' and 'long live Syria!'. As alluded to above, the result showed huge support for Assad among Syrian refugees in Lebanon (Associated Press 2014a, 2014b). This was quite a surprise to many, including opposition Lebanese politicians who were disappointed because they saw Syrian refugees as voting for someone they saw as responsible for the tragedy. As a result, in early June 2014 the Lebanese Minister of the Interior issued a statement demanding that Syrian refugees based in Lebanon should not travel to Syria, or their refugee status would be revoked. According to the Ministry, 'this measure has been taken to safeguard Lebanon's security and relations between Syrian refugees and Lebanese citizens in host areas, and to prevent any friction or mutual antagonism' (Haid 2014).

However, it was also reported that one of the main reasons why Syrian refugees cast their votes was due to fear of a backlash from the Syrian regime for not voting for the incumbent (Haid 2014). Al Jazeera reported that 'several opposition activists claim that officials from the Syrian Embassy have toured refugee encampments threatening that the regime would keep a record of all those who did not cast their ballots' (Attassi 2014). All the Syrian respondents interviewed and surveyed indicated that they had the right to vote in their country of origin. However, only one of them—a woman who said she was obliged to vote in the 2014 elections by her ex-husband—admitted that she had actually voted: 'I was married and my husband was Alawit and I was forced to vote for President Bashar El-Assad' (Syrian female refugee 2, Tripoli, 2017).

All the others said they did not want to vote because they did not support the Assad regime and would not be able to vote against him even though the polling stations were open in Lebanon. This poses serious questions about the integrity of the elections, given also that opponents of the Assad regime boycotted them, leading to a differentiated and somewhat biased turnout. When asked about their interpretation of the massive turnout observed

during these elections, some of the respondents said that many of the individuals who participated in the 2014 elections were forced to do so for fear of reprisals by the regime and its powerful supporters in Lebanon. Others believed that people might have participated of their own accord without necessarily being intimidated because things had changed by 2014. In addition, some Syrian activists interviewed believed that the Syrian refugees who voted were trying to ‘restore relations’ with the regime after they realized, three years into the crisis, that it would be impossible to throw it out. This was backed up by an Al-Jazeera report that quoted a Syrian voter as saying: ‘I do not want to lose the privileges from the regime in case I don’t vote. And I know that this regime will stay in power’.

In addition, news reports on out-of-country voting in Lebanon for Syria’s presidential elections of 2014 highlighted the chaos inside polling stations in the Syrian Embassy. Violence also erupted due to overcrowding in the vicinity of the embassy: ‘at one point around noon, soldiers began beating Syrians who were trying to storm the embassy building, using batons and sticks’ (Attassi 2014). Furthermore, poll workers were reportedly struggling to check voters’ identification. Given the large number of voters, it seems likely that there were a number of non-registered voters—or preparations would have been made for the high number of registered voters—and that ‘anyone could practically walk into the small and stuffy polling room and cast their ballot’ (Attassi 2014).

Non-formal political participation

With regard to non-formal political participation, some of the Syrian respondents started to pursue the same type of activity as they had in Syria as soon as they were settled in Lebanon, while others solely focused on assisting Syrian refugees in Lebanon, given the hardship conditions their compatriots were facing. Although some of the respondents who fled to Lebanon as a result of the Syria crisis stated that they had not been particularly politically active in Syria before the crisis, others noted that they had to flee as a result of fear of persecution for their political activities: ‘I was a researcher and was driven out of Syria in 2013 after being arrested by the Syrian regime because of a study that was published back then’ (Syrian male refugee and political activist 2, Beirut, 2017). Another respondent stated: ‘I was a women’s rights activist in Syria and I continue to pursue my activities in Lebanon, because women’s and citizenship issues have always been a priority for me, especially as the war in Syria is ongoing’ (Syrian female refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017).

Most respondents believed that they had a duty to help address the political and social challenges their country was facing, even if they did not currently live there. They were all motivated by the importance of having a say in the political processes in Syria and being able to influence the possible transition and course of reconstruction after the war is over.

My priority is to contribute to building democracy in Syria after the war is over.

—Syrian female refugee and political activist 1, Beirut, 2017

Interestingly, one of the respondents noted the efforts of Syrian civil society to engage in the Syria Peace Talks in Geneva: ‘I recently took part in the Syria Peace Talks in Geneva, where I was part of the civil society caucus. We were promoting our proposals for future alternatives for peace and development in Syria’ (Syrian male refugee and political activist 2, Beirut, 2017)

Others have just begun to be sensitized to the social and political issues in Syria since they became refugees in Lebanon. One of the activists interviewed, who has become very vocal in Lebanon about the Syrian crisis and currently leads one of the most prominent Syrian



NGOs, said he had never engaged in any kind of political activity when in Syria (Syrian male refugee and political activist 2, Beirut, 2017).

One of the key findings emerging from the interviews is that respondents prioritized addressing the most prominent challenges faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon and contributing to the political debate in Syria, rather than working on the integration of the Syrian community into Lebanon. Having said that, it seems that the majority of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are disassociated from the political life of their country of origin, as they are mainly struggling with livelihood and survival issues in their host country.

6. Conclusion and recommendations



Lebanon has been reluctant to allow any long-term settlement of refugees on its territory. Hence, the opportunities for naturalization and access to voting rights for refugees in Lebanon are very limited. Furthermore, there are strong opinions against treating Syrians as ‘fully fledged refugees’, in terms of letting them enjoy civil and political rights. Many of the interviewees for this case study expressed fear when the topic of refugees’ political participation was mentioned, and expressed clear opposition to formal participation by refugees in Lebanese political institutions and processes. Furthermore, foreign workers are not allowed to form unions, and therefore have no access to associations that could act as formal advocacy channels. Consequently, any form of formal political participation by Syrian refugees in Lebanon would appear to be very difficult for the time being and would probably face a high degree of resistance which could put refugees in an even more vulnerable position. Although there are still many legal obstacles to the establishment and operations of Syrian-led civil society organizations in Lebanon, non-formal political participation is tolerated much more when it comes to addressing ‘Syrian issues’, such as the emergency response to Syrian refugees or activities aimed at promoting peace building and social cohesion.

With regard to political participation in their country of origin, during the 2014 presidential elections, Lebanon was one of the few countries where out-of-country voting was possible for Syrians. However, the overwhelming support for the incumbent should certainly not be read as voluntary consent for the political status quo, but rather as a result of the fear and intimidation that many Syrian refugees felt. Furthermore, restrictive policies and regulations were put in place by the Lebanese authorities after the 2014 Syrian elections, as a direct response to the high voter turnout in Lebanon. In addition, the exercise of political advocacy initiatives and the role of Lebanon-based Syrian refugees in democracy building in their country of origin is limited, given the lack of basic means for survival and their precarious legal status in Lebanon. This often has negative consequences for refugees’ ability and willingness to be vocal about political issues in their country of origin or to openly engage in transnational political activities aimed at making an impact on democracy building in Syria. However, this case study illustrates that there is some room for Syrian refugees to engage in the political life of their country from Lebanon, through civil society, capacity building and advocacy initiatives.

In light of the above, the following recommendations are made to increase political participation by Syrian refugees and asylum seekers in Lebanon and Syria.



Recommendations

For the host country

- The Government and decision-makers in Lebanon should take steps to adopt a concrete refugee and asylum policy that would, among other things, ensure refugees' freedom of expression, pursuant to the international human rights instruments ratified by Lebanon.
- The Government and decision-makers in Lebanon should provide a legal path to naturalization for long-term refugees, with a view to increasing the prospects for their social and political integration.
- Government institutions and municipal authorities in Lebanon should facilitate the inclusion of Syrian refugees in their host communities by tolerating formal and informal refugee associations that could serve as interlocutors with Lebanese central and local government in order to address refugee-related issues at the national and local levels.
- Civil society in Lebanon should facilitate the establishment of platforms for Syrian refugees to make their voices heard in their host communities, especially on issues that matter to them such as basic services, education, health, and civil and political participation. This can be done by forming Syrian committees in localities that would be in charge of negotiating inclusive measures with municipalities, international donors and local civil society organizations.

For the country of origin

- The Syrian Government and opposition forces should recognize the right of refugees to actively participate in the politics of their country of origin by ensuring their representation in the UN Syria peace talks.
- The Syrian Government and electoral authorities should enable refugees to effectively exercise their voting rights in transitional post-conflict elections without intimidation through measures such as online voting and out-of-country voting in selected locations outside of Syrian embassies.
- Syrian-led civil society organizations should work to multiply civic education programmes targeted at Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
- Syrian refugee diaspora organizations should create networks, enhance knowledge sharing and coordinate with Lebanese civil society organizations in order to make their voices heard.
- Rather than solely focusing on livelihood and humanitarian responses Syrian civil society should require a more active role in the UN Syria peace talks and include the issue of political participation by refugees on the agenda.

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Syrian male refugee and Political Activist 2, author's interview, Beirut, 2017

Syrian male refugee 3, written questionnaire, Tripoli, 2017

Annex. Glossary of terms



Asylum

A form of protection given by a state on its territory based on internationally or nationally recognized refugee rights. It is granted to a person who is unable to seek protection in her or his country of nationality and/or residence, in particular for fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

Asylum seeker

A person who seeks safety from persecution or serious harm in a country other than her or his own and is awaiting a decision on an application for refugee status under relevant international and national instruments.

Country of origin

A country from which people leave to settle abroad permanently or temporarily (IOM 2011).

Diaspora

A group of individuals (and members of networks, associations and communities) who have left their country of origin but maintain links with their homeland. This concept covers more settled communities, migrant workers based abroad temporarily, expatriates with the nationality of the host country, dual nationals, and second- and third-generation migrants.

Formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, formal political participation is understood as participation in decision-making through formal democratic institutions and processes such as national and local elections, referendums, political parties and parliaments.

Host country

The country where a refugee is settled. In the case of asylum seekers, the country where a person has applied for asylum.

Internally displaced person

A person who has been forced or obliged to flee or to leave their home or places of habitual residence, in particular because of (or in order to avoid) the effects of armed conflict, situations of generalized violence, violations of human rights, or natural or human-induced



disasters, but who has not crossed an internationally recognized state border (United Nations Economic and Social Council, Commission on Human Rights 1998).

Migrant

Any person who is moving or has moved across an international border or within a state away from her/his habitual place of residence, regardless of (a) the person's legal status; (b) whether the movement is voluntary or involuntary; (c) what the causes for the movement are; or (d) what the length of the stay is (IOM 2011).

Naturalization

Granting by a state of its nationality to a non-national through a formal act on the application of the individual concerned (IOM 2011).

Non-formal political participation

For the purposes of this research, non-formal political participation is understood as participation in political affairs through non-formal means, such as civil society organizations, trade unions, consultative bodies, community organizations, grassroots movements and so on.

Refugee

'A person who, owing to a well-founded fear of persecution for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinions, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country' (Refugee Convention, article 1A(2), 1951). In addition, article 1(2) of the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention defines a refugee as any person compelled to leave her or his country 'owing to external aggression, occupation, foreign domination or events seriously disturbing public order in either part or the whole of his country of origin or nationality'. Similarly, the 1984 Cartagena Declaration states that refugees also include persons who flee their country 'because their lives, security or freedom have been threatened by generalized violence, foreign aggression, internal conflicts, massive violations of human rights or other circumstances which have seriously disturbed public order' (IOM 2011).

Resettlement

The transfer of refugees from the country in which they have sought refuge to another state that has agreed to admit them (IOM 2011).

Transnationalism

The process whereby people establish and maintain socio-cultural connections across geopolitical borders (IOM 2011).

About the authors



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About the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project



Refugees have the potential to make an impact on the political life of both their host countries and their countries of origin, as they often maintain transnational links with their homelands while at the same time becoming part of their host society. Recognizing the dual role of refugees as political actors, the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project aims to explore the challenges and opportunities related to the political participation of refugees in their host countries and countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the project explores issues of access to citizenship in host countries, electoral rights in both host countries and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, acknowledging that political life is not only confined to electoral processes, the project examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

In 2018 the project produced a report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, which draws on eight case studies carried out through interviews and focus group discussions with refugees and key informants in host countries with high numbers of refugees. It offers cross-country insights into the experiences of refugee communities originating from five of the largest source countries.

The Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project was made possible by funding from the Robert Bosch Stiftung.

Download the case studies and the full report:
<<https://www.idea.int/our-work/what-we-do/migration-democracy>>

About International IDEA



The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with the mission to advance democracy worldwide, as a universal human aspiration and enabler of sustainable development. We do this by supporting the building, strengthening and safeguarding of democratic political institutions and processes at all levels. Our vision is a world in which democratic processes, actors and institutions are inclusive and accountable and deliver sustainable development to all.

What do we do?

In our work we focus on three main impact areas: electoral processes; constitution-building processes; and political participation and representation. The themes of gender and inclusion, conflict sensitivity and sustainable development are mainstreamed across all our areas of work.

International IDEA provides analyses of global and regional democratic trends; produces comparative knowledge on good international democratic practices; offers technical assistance and capacity-building on democratic reform to actors engaged in democratic processes; and convenes dialogue on issues relevant to the public debate on democracy and democracy building.

Where do we work?

Our headquarters is located in Stockholm, and we have regional and country offices in Africa, the Asia-Pacific, Europe and Latin America and the Caribbean. International IDEA is a Permanent Observer to the United Nations and is accredited to European Union institutions.

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Drawing on individual perspectives of Syrian refugees based in Lebanon, this case study explores the formal and non-formal political participation of refugees and asylum seekers in their host country and the ways in which they are able to participate in peacebuilding and democracy-building in their countries of origin.

Among the formal mechanisms for political participation, the case study explores issues of access to citizenship in the host country, electoral rights in both the host country and countries of origin, and membership or other forms of support to political parties. In addition, it examines non-formal mechanisms for political participation, including refugees' participation in consultative bodies, civil society organizations, protests and grassroots initiatives, and other means of transnational political activism.

This case study is part of the Refugees, Asylum Seekers and Democracy project and has informed the development of a longer report, *Political Participation of Refugees: Bridging the Gaps*, published by International IDEA in 2018.