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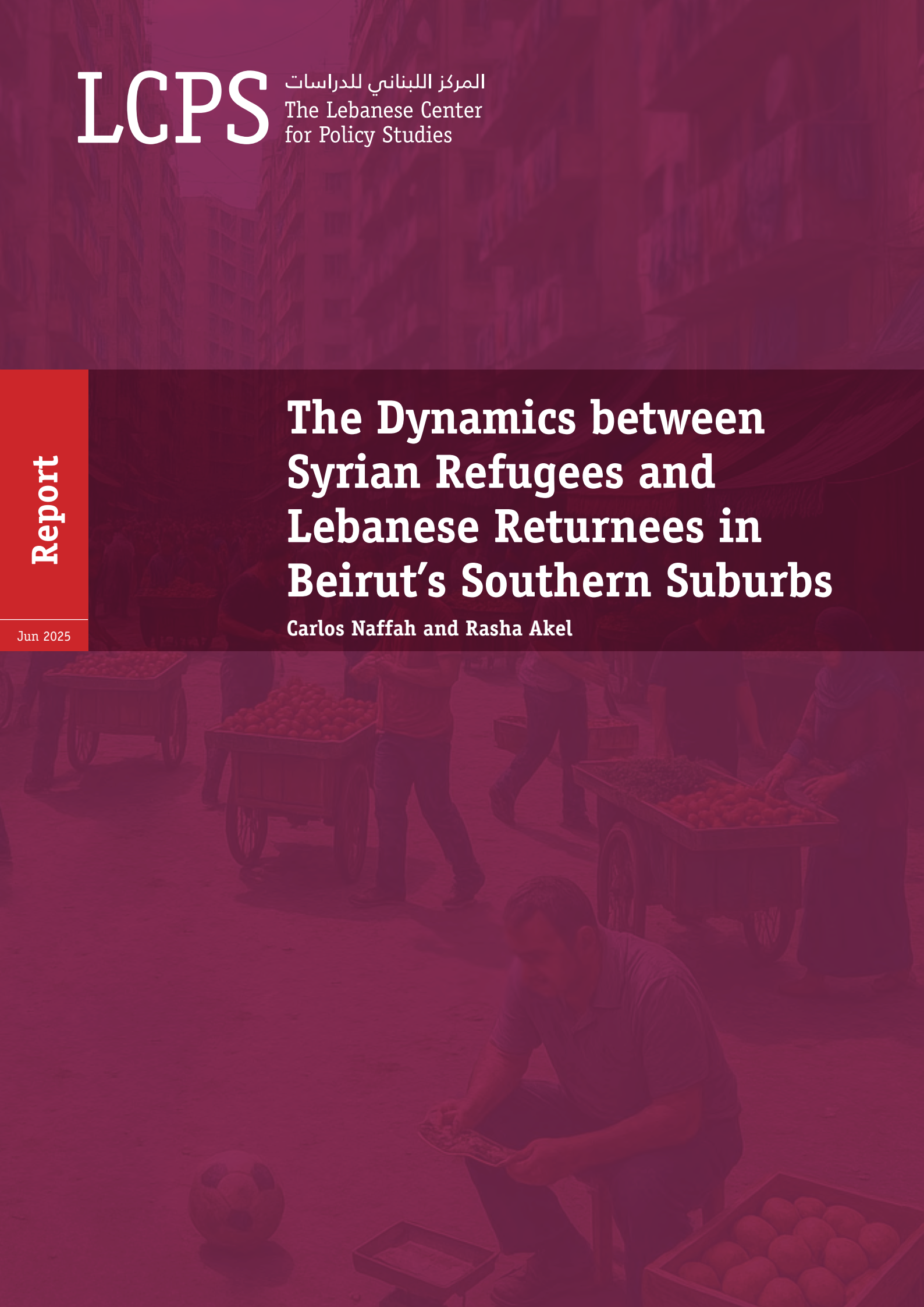
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## The Dynamics between Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Returnees in Beirut's Southern Suburbs

Carlos Naffah and Rasha Akel



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# The Dynamics between Syrian Refugees and Lebanese Returnees in Beirut's Southern Suburbs

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Lebanon has received multiple waves of Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011. The recent war between Hezbollah and Israel, which broke out in October 2023, devastated parts of Lebanon and displaced thousands. In Ghobairy, a southern suburb of Beirut, many Lebanese returnees came back to damaged homes and found themselves living under difficult conditions alongside long-settled Syrian refugees. Facing overlapping challenges, both communities compete for limited resources, employment, and basic services.

This report aims to investigate social and economic dynamics between Lebanese internally placed persons (IDPs) and Syrian refugees in Ghobairy. It seeks to understand community relationships and sources of tension to inform policy recommendations. The research is based on 15 semi-structured key informant interviews with diverse stakeholders, including Syrian refugees, Lebanese who experienced internal displacement, business owners, local leaders and activists, in addition to NGO representatives, to gain a holistic understanding of this topic.

The research identifies four primary sources of tension affecting daily life in Ghobairy: competition over housing, employment, and aid, along with difficulties in fostering social cohesion. These issues reflect broader structural inequalities and post-war vulnerabilities experienced by both communities. Despite the existence of these tensions, moments of cooperation and solidarity have also emerged between the two communities. In conclusion, the report proposes policy recommendations, such as increasing access to legal protection, expanding livelihood interventions and vocational training for both communities, and having a more integrated and inclusive approach to recovery.

## Introduction

Since the outbreak of the Syrian revolution in March 2011, Lebanon has received multiple waves of Syrian refugees, and this has had multiple social, economic, and political impacts on all of Lebanon. The recent war between Israel and Hezbollah, which broke out on October 8, 2023, had major repercussions in many areas, including the southern suburbs of Beirut, where the destruction reached USD 973 million, according to World Bank estimates (WorldBank, 2025),

and which hosts about 30,000 Syrian refugees, according to local estimates. The war and ensuing displacement shaped the multiple interactions between Syrian refugees and Lebanese internally displaced persons (IDPs).

Lebanese returning to the Ghobairy area in the southern suburb of Beirut after being forcibly displaced to escape the intense aerial bombardment found themselves in social and economic competition with the Syrian refugees for resources, job opportunities, and services. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime altered the security, political, and economic crisis in Syria.

Meanwhile, Lebanon's economic conditions continued to deteriorate despite the election of a president on January 9, 2025, and the formation of a 'reform and rescue government' on February 8. It is within this context that the dynamics between Syrian refugees and Lebanese returnees unfold, highlighting the complexities of socio-economic interactions and perception.

Security incidents along the Syrian coast and clashes with Lebanese tribes near the northern Bekaa border have heightened tensions between Lebanese hosts and Syrian refugees in various parts of the country, including in Beirut's Ghobairy area, and particularly its popular and informal neighborhoods adjacent to the Burj al-Barajneh camp.

A multifaceted relationship exists between the two groups on issues such as securing housing, daily competition in the labor market, political and sectarian affiliations, and cultural integration challenges. Despite a certain level of solidarity and shared experiences, discrimination, social marginalization, and local conflicts have also emerged. Analyzing these interactions is very important to adopt effective local and national policies. Such analyses can lead to an action plan that promotes social cohesion, mitigates tensions, and strengthens mutual support mechanisms within the affected communities.

## Objectives

This report investigates the socio-economic relationships between Lebanese IDPs and Syrian refugee returnees in Ghobairy, a southern suburb of Beirut.

Specific aims are as follows:

- *Investigate socio-economic relationships:* Probing the relationship between Syrian refugees and Lebanese returnees in employment and living standards.
- *Measure community relationships and social integration:* Examine cooperation, solidarity, and competition between the two groups.
- *Identify the primary drivers of conflict and tension issues:* Seek the root causes of tension and potential causes of conflict between these groups.
- *Evaluate socio-economic support interventions:* Examine any interventions or initiatives taken by the government, NGOs, and INGOs to support the Lebanese IDP returnee community and Syrian refugees.
- *Develop policy recommendations:* Promote evidence-based social cohesion policies that address the socio-economic challenges of both communities.

## Literature Review

The following section consists of a brief literature review pertaining to the topics of Syrian refugees and social cohesion.

Numerous researchers and non-governmental organizations have studied the Syrian refugee flow into Lebanon since 2011 and its profound impact on the country's social, economic, and political mosaic. The majority perceive Lebanon's reaction to such a crisis as unprecedented in receiving Syrian refugees. Lebanon hosts the highest per-capita number of Syrian refugees in the world (Rabil, 2016). The absence of officially designated refugee camps has resulted in Syrian refugees being integrated into villages and towns economically and socially (Kikano et.al, 2021). Such a reaction has caused immense pressure on public services and infrastructure.

Since the onset of the Syrian refugee crisis, international humanitarian agencies have been emphasizing the importance of strengthening peaceful co-existence, improving livelihoods, and supporting local services (UNHCR RRP5 Update, 2013). They have been cautioning that tensions could rise further without such support, and would place the country's capacity to protect both Lebanese citizens and refugees at risk (UNHCR RRP5 Update, 2013).

Regarding the financial implications of the refugee crisis, the World Refugee and Migration Council (2021) surveyed the financial impact



of the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon and found that Lebanon's economic decline began before 2011 due to decades of corruption, mismanagement, and systemic inequality. Although refugees are often blamed for the deteriorating conditions, the study finds that there is no statistical evidence that the presence of Syrian refugees caused worsening GDP, unemployment, inflation, trade deficits, or electricity shortages (World Refugee and Migration Council, 2021). Such evidence-based studies are important for policy planning that benefits both communities.

Social cohesion in refugee-hosting contexts has received considerable scholarly attention. The Forced Migration Review (2022) examines complexities of social cohesion among refugee communities, examining host community determinants for peaceful host-refugee relationships.

According to Chatty (2022), civil society has played an essential role in supporting social stability in Lebanon, with efforts aimed at improving social cohesion between different groups. In the context following the devastating Beirut Port explosion, Najdi (2022) finds that perceptions of unfair aid distribution contributed to heightening tensions between Syrians and Lebanese, however residents also reported interpersonal solidarity despite these narratives of tension. It is important for humanitarian actors to recognize the different tensions arising from aid distribution and respond accordingly.

In examining Syrian and Lebanese community attitudes and interactions, a study by the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (2021) deconstructs different types of relationships determined by cultural attitudes, economic competition, and historical relationship determinants. The survey found variations in attitudes between and among the communities, as well as across different municipalities.

In another study, Anouti and Enna (2023) investigate the dynamics between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities in three municipalities in the Bekaa Valley: Zahle, Qabb Elias, and Bar Elias. The study found that main drivers of tension include competition for resources (jobs, aid, housing, services), perceived preferential treatment of Syrians by aid agencies, and precarious economic conditions which are exacerbated by Lebanon's financial crisis.

Despite these tensions, the authors find that interdependence and cooperation persist at the everyday level through shared neighborhoods, economic exchanges, and mutual support mechanisms.

They note that tensions are informally normalized and contained, meaning that social instability is managed rather than resolved.

Furthermore, attempts at fostering social cohesion have been documented. A 2016 Search for Common Ground report provides case studies of social cohesion programs in Lebanon, recording the dialogue and shared activities established to help dissolve tensions and foster mutual understanding between refugee and host communities. The report finds that addressing tensions requires holistic, flexible, and locally rooted responses which ensure inclusive participation from both communities. Also, it is important to invest in relationship and capacity building for local actors to continue the work following project completion.

## Methodology

This report is based on key informant interviews (KIIs) in order to gain insight into the dynamics between Syrian refugees and Lebanese returnee IDPs in Beirut's southern suburbs. These interviews gathered detailed data from individuals with firsthand experience of social, economic, and political interactions within these groups in the targeted environment.

KIIs were conducted with multiple stakeholders to capture a holistic, in-depth understanding of the complex topic. The informants included Syrian refugees from various socio-economic backgrounds to ensure a comprehensive understanding of integration, economic hardship, and social interactions. Lebanese who experienced internal displacement were also interviewed to explore their perceptions of socio-economic interactions with refugees.

Local authorities, such as municipality representatives and local leaders, were interviewed to investigate governance issues, policy responses, and conflict resolution mechanisms. Additionally, NGO representatives from humanitarian organizations working in the area were interviewed to assess interventions aimed at promoting social cohesion and safeguarding vulnerable groups.

Community leaders and activists engaged in community development were approached to explore bottom-up initiatives fostering cooperation and alleviating tensions. A purposive sampling method was used to select participants based on their experiences, knowledge, and involvement with refugee-returnee relations, aiming



for diversity in age, gender, socioeconomic status, and geographical location in the southern suburbs of Beirut.

To ensure an inclusive analysis, 15 main informants were interviewed using a semi-structured approach, providing flexibility while maintaining a focus on core themes, such as economic interactions, social cohesion, and policy effectiveness. Ethical standards, including informed consent, confidentiality, and voluntary participation, were strictly followed. All interviews were anonymized, and findings were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key patterns and insights regarding the research objectives. By employing KIIs and a strategic sampling strategy, this study aims to provide insights into the refugee-returnee relationship and contribute to evidence-based policy recommendations.

## Syrian Refugees

### 1. Demographics and Background

The southern suburbs of Beirut accommodate diverse refugee communities from various regions of Syria who have fled due to economic uncertainty and security concerns, in addition to the Palestinian refugees living at Burj El Barajeni camp. The majority of Syrian refugees are from urban and rural communities that have experienced and endured recurrent violence, and they consist of a large proportion of families with children. Most Syrian refugees arrived in Lebanon with little economic means, and their number comprises a combination of skilled and unskilled workers, students, and professionals who had to leave their former employment.

### 2. Displacement and Living Conditions

Syrian refugees living in the southern outskirts of Beirut in the Ghobairy area, especially near the Bourj El Barajni Palestinian camp, are faced with unpredictable living conditions, often living in cramped apartments or sub-standard housing. High rent prices and financial insecurity lead many to coexist in small apartments housing several families. In addition, they have limited access to education and healthcare.

According to UNHCR, key barriers to education for Syrians in Lebanon include the cost of transportation and education materials, in addition to schools not allowing registration and having to work.

A 2022 Vulnerability Assessment for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon revealed that 44% of refugee children aged 6-17 were not in school, and a striking 35% of refugee youth aged 15-24 had no prior schooling (UNHCR, 2025). Regarding access to healthcare, refugees face financial constraints, among other barriers, making it difficult for them to afford care (UNHCR, 2024).

### 3. Economic Conditions

Government policies and labor market competition constrain work opportunities for Syrian refugees. Some find informal work in construction, agriculture, and low-skilled service sectors, but with many experiencing exploitation, precarious work conditions, and low wages. Lebanon's financial crisis also adds economic hardship to widespread unemployment and increased resentment against foreign workers.

Regarding changes in living conditions following the conflict, most respondents reported an increase in the price of housing and basic goods. As one interviewed Syrian refugee puts it: 'The prices increased for food like vegetables and meat, rent increased as well.' Another respondent reported reduced access to basic services and fewer support programs for Syrian refugees, claiming that 'access to basic services is not as easy as before, there is less support from organizations for us as Syrian refugees.'

Most Syrian refugees resort to informal economic activities or humanitarian assistance to survive. Refugees who choose to work in formal channels are registered as migrants and work under the category of sponsorship or lease agreement. Within this category, they are permitted to work only in the environment, agriculture, or construction sectors (Baroud and Zeidan, 2021).

### 4. Social Relations and Integration

#### Perceptions of Treatment by the Lebanese Community

Some Lebanese locals and organizations offer assistance to Syrian refugees, while others view refugees as economic competitors or as a security threat. Discrimination, social stigmatization, and competition for resources have created tensions in existing relations. In some cases, however, following the return of IDPs, Syrian workers have shown solidarity by offering their returning IDP neighbors some free repair services, as reflected in one of the interviews.

### Role of Syrian Refugees in Reconstruction Efforts

Despite challenges, Syrian refugees have contributed to Lebanon's economy, particularly in the construction sector, where many work under informal agreements. Despite legal barriers, some have also started small businesses that contribute to local markets. Despite their significant contributions to rebuilding efforts, Syrian refugee involvement is often unrecognized and undervalued by the public. Most interviewed returnees acknowledge the essential role of Syrian refugees in manual labor and cleaning rubble. However, some believe that refugees should hold lower-paying jobs, such as construction workers, and not compete with more skilled Lebanese workers.

## 5. Mobility and Prospects for Return

### Challenges of Returning to Syria

The collected data from the interviews showed that returning to Syria is not a priority for many refugees, due to ongoing security threats, a lack of economic opportunities, and the absence of basic infrastructure in many areas. Additionally, the legal framework for repatriation remains ambiguous, with many lacking proper documentation to return safely without losing their mobility rights between the two countries.

As one Syrian refugee stated, 'I do not have an official residence permit and if I go to Syria, the General Security will not allow me to come back without legal papers.' Many refugees express a desire to migrate to a European country like Germany for better opportunities due to the profound economic and political crisis in Syria. Regarding the impact of the Syrian regime's collapse on their decision to return to Syria, the political situation has not significantly changed their perspectives.

When asked about the kind of assistance needed that the international community could provide to facilitate their return to Syria, respondents proposed providing well-paying job opportunities, safety and security, and financial aid for reconstruction efforts in Syria.

## Lebanese IDPs/Returnees

### 1. Demographics and Background

The Lebanese residents of Ghobair in the southern suburbs of Beirut are a diverse group with many displacement experiences. Most of

them were displaced from their homes in southern Lebanon or the northern Bekaa in search of better economic opportunities starting in the 1960s. This trend continued as a result of repeated Israeli wars on Lebanon, most notably in 1978, under what was known as Operation Litani, and later in the 1982 invasion, the July 2006 war, and most recently in 2024 (Forced Migration Review, 2024).

Other residents were displaced from the Ghobairy area due to the civil war and the expansion of the Burj al-Barajneh camp. However, they did not return to Ghobairy, preferring to live in other 'safer' districts, while others emigrated altogether for economic or security reasons (Abi Samra, 2024). Some returned later based on changing social, political, security, or economic conditions.

The fabric of the area is made up of individuals from different socio-economic groups, ranging from highly skilled professionals concentrated in the eastern part of the district to poor workers concentrated in the informal settlements attached to the Burj al-Barajneh camp, Al Horsh, Farhat Street, and the Al Rehab area—these areas are home to marginalized Palestinian and Syrian refugees, as well as internally displaced Lebanese from the South (UN Habitat, 2012).

## **2. Displacement and Return**

The displacement of Lebanese residents from Ghobairy has created a complex history of return, one that is marked by efforts to rebuild destroyed and damaged homes, cope with deep psychological trauma, and reintegrate into society. While some suffered displacement within Lebanon, others endured prolonged exile abroad before returning.

After the November 2024 ceasefire, the Lebanese who returned to the southern suburbs of Beirut, especially the Ghobairy area, found themselves once again facing challenges similar to those they had previously experienced, with an added component: Syrian refugees. Lebanon's economic collapse since 2019, coupled with inflation and a shrinking labor market, has exacerbated their difficulties, especially for those without stable employment or property ownership. In some cases, returnees also reported facing social discrimination when trying to secure temporary housing, as landlords were hesitant to rent to them.

Returnees have often relied on extended family networks, political party affiliations, or humanitarian organizations to navigate the reintegration process. While some have received compensation for their damaged property, particularly through party-affiliated reconstruction efforts or limited NGO assistance, a significant majority has not.

This disparity is compounded by Lebanon's banking restrictions, which have made personal savings inaccessible, and by the near-total collapse of formal credit systems. With virtually no access to affordable loans or consistent government or international aid, many returnees remain in precarious financial situations, struggling to restore their livelihoods amid the country's deepening economic and monetary crisis. Some key informants expressed hope for sustained long-term reconstruction support, similar to that provided after the 2006 war.

### **3. Perceptions of Syrian Refugees**

The relationship between the Lebanese residents of Ghobairy who returned after their forced displacement and the Syrian refugees in the area was shaped by several factors, including historical, economic, and social factors. On the one hand, some members of the Lebanese sample expressed solidarity with the Syrian refugees, recognizing their shared experiences of displacement, suffering, and considering their presence necessary for reconstruction efforts, because of their skills in this field. On the other hand, others considered that their presence has led to competition for job opportunities, increased demand for housing, higher rents, pressure on aid resources, and caused occasional social tensions and sensitivities.

Some interviewees mentioned that Syrian refugees are receiving large amounts of humanitarian aid, while Lebanese IDPs, who lost their homes and had their cities destroyed, are not being assisted. As one interviewed returnee puts it: 'Relations are not good, we need them to go back to Syria. Everybody supports them and we are left alone without support to rebuild our apartment.' Some also expressed fears of long-term demographic shifts that could change the composition of the local community and increase social tension.

It is clear that the impact of political discourse and sectarian tensions, especially after the fall of the Assad regime, had a greater impact on attitudes towards Syrian refugees, with some calling for their immediate return to Syria, while others considered accepting their stay in the region with the need to organize their legal affairs.

Despite these divergent views, it is increasingly evident that Syrian refugees play a vital role in the local economy and social fabric, making their inclusion essential to any sustainable reconstruction and recovery efforts. One interviewed returnee had noted that 'Syrian refugees can contribute to rebuilding efforts, but they should be registered.'

#### **4. Reconstruction and Municipal Support**

Faced with the magnitude of the damage to infrastructure and residential and commercial buildings, combined with the limited finances of state institutions, government involvement was limited to removing debris from the roads to facilitate the return of residents. Most aid was disbursed to repair residential apartments rather than any large-scale reconstruction.

Despite limited material and human resources, the Ghobairy municipality faces the dual challenge of supporting its Lebanese citizens returning to their damaged and destroyed homes and managing the crisis of Syrian refugees, who also returned to their residences after the ceasefire, increasing the pressure on infrastructure, water, electricity, and social services.

The World Bank's Rapid Damage and Needs Assessment (RDNA) estimates that the damage caused by the conflict is around USD 6.8 billion, with damage being largely concentrated in housing (more than 67% of total damage), followed by infrastructure (energy, municipal and public services, transport, water, wastewater, and irrigation) (World Bank, March 2025).

With government officials prioritizing the reconstruction of residential buildings, they are unable to address the issue of social integration between citizens and refugees, leaving it to some limited private initiatives. The absence of a comprehensive state policy has left Lebanese returnees and Syrian refugees largely on their own to deal with social pressures and tensions.

### **Additional Key Informant Interviews**

In order to understand the dynamics, social changes, and pressures faced by Lebanese and Syrian refugees living in Ghobairy after their return to the area following the ceasefire in November 2024, we conducted a series of additional interviews with former candidates for parliamentary or municipal elections in this area, as well as with members of civil society organizations and merchants.

### **Municipal Candidate and Local Political Activists**

Political activists and potential candidates for the Ghobairy municipal elections interviewed for this study have expressed that the presence



of Syrian refugees could be considered a double-edged sword. If it continues unregulated, it will negatively impact the social and security stability of the area. However, if the municipality works to document, register, and legalize their presence, any future municipal plans or policies to improve the area will be based on a clear and scientific data set. This will allow Ghobairy to benefit from the skills of these refugees in the reconstruction effort.

Other interviewees expressed concern about the delay in aid and the lack of serious reconstruction efforts from the state and donor agencies, due to the economic, social, and security repercussions that could impact Ghobairy, and by extension, the capital, Beirut.

### **Civil Society Activists**

Local civil society and non-governmental organization activists working in refugee support projects stressed the urgent need for a holistic humanitarian approach that targets the community. A civil society representative stated that they cannot support only the Syrian refugees anymore; the Lebanese host community is facing a worrisome situation, and this can create future tension.

As such, the key informant noted that many initiatives, such as vocational training and psychosocial support, target Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian communities to reduce tensions and promote coexistence. However, the civil society representative noted that these initiatives face challenges, most notably a lack of funding and coordination, which weakens their impact and sometimes leads to project duplication.

Furthermore, the interviewed civil society activist pointed to the need to reduce politicians' rhetoric that blames Syrian refugees and increases social tensions amidst competition for scarce resources, which he described as a 'major obstacle' to strengthening social cohesion. Although traditionally, in the Ghobairy area, international aid is allocated to Syrian refugees and some vulnerable Palestinians and Lebanese, the interviewed civil society activists urged additional funding and programmatic support for vulnerable Lebanese populations, including returning IDPs and host populations experiencing ongoing economic distress.

## Business Owners

Employers of Syrian refugees in construction, manufacturing, and service sectors provided insightful accounts of how Syrian workers contributed to changes in the local labor market in the Ghobairy area. Most pointed to the critical role played by Syrian workers in filling gaps in labor, particularly as far as manual labor jobs are concerned, which most Lebanese are not willing to take.

Despite the acknowledged contributions of Syrian workers, interviewed business owners perceived the potential dangers of questionable labor practices, such as the exploitation of the refugees and degradation of wage levels for Lebanese workers. Small business operators interviewed described having trouble reconciling labor expenses with the enforcement of legal requirements, particularly in light of the absence of an organized regulatory system that governs Syrian employment.

Several complained about the inconsistent enforcement of labor codes and lack of policies that encourage employment within the limits of the law. Others said the heightened competition, especially in industries such as retail, food services, and transportation, compelled them to make tough workplace choices, more often than not choosing undocumented or temporary workers over more expensive formal work arrangements.

The views of these additional informants enrich the analysis of this report. Their testimonies vividly discuss the dynamics of the internal displacement of Lebanese and socio-economic reintegration between them and the Syrian refugees in the Ghobairy area of Beirut's southern suburbs. It highlights the economic pressures and the shortage of job opportunities, and reveals more profound insights into the challenges of social cohesion.

These diverse contributions provide a deeper understanding of the difficult reality and reveal the multifaceted nature of relations between Lebanese returnees and Syrian refugees post-ceasefire. They also highlight the need for multi-level policies that consider local experiences, legal constraints, and the lived realities of refugees and host communities.

## Syrian Refugee and Lebanese IDP Dynamics

### 1. Market Dynamics

Legal restrictions facing Syrian refugees, the widespread post-war destruction, the need for urgent reconstruction, not to mention the ongoing economic crisis, are all placing significant strain on the relationship between Syrian refugees and returning Lebanese IDPs. Both groups are seeking employment opportunities in a limited labor market. However, their experiences and economic roles differ due to differences in legal status, skills, and access to support networks.

### Job Competition and Market Segmentation

Syrian refugees and Lebanese returnees often compete for employment in similar sectors, particularly in low-wage jobs, such as construction, agriculture, and service industries (e.g., hospitality and domestic work). However, distinct patterns have emerged in labor market participation.

*Syrian Refugees:* Primarily engaged in informal labor due to legal restrictions barring them from many formal employment opportunities. Many work as daily laborers in construction, agriculture, and small workshops, often for lower wages and without legal protections. Some Syrian entrepreneurs have also established small businesses, such as grocery stores and tailoring shops, though they face legal and bureaucratic obstacles.

*Lebanese Returnees:* Generally seek employment in both formal and informal sectors, but often face challenges reintegrating into the workforce after periods of displacement. Many rely on personal networks, political affiliations, or previous connections to secure jobs. Those with professional skills or educational backgrounds struggle to find opportunities that match their qualifications, leading some to take on lower-skilled work.

### Wage Disparities and Employer Preferences

Employers in sectors such as services and construction tend to hire Syrian refugees because they are ready to work for reduced wages and extended working hours without the benefits accruing to social security. This has generated resentment among Lebanese returnees, who perceive the refugee workers as a barrier to their economic opportunities. Some Lebanese workers, particularly those with precarious financial situations, are compelled to apply for the same low-paying jobs to remain competitive, increasing their economic vulnerability.

### Economic Hardship and Mutual Dependence

Despite the existence of tensions, there is still evidence of economic interdependence between the two communities. Syrian workers supply key industries with essential labor, while Lebanese employers and entrepreneurs rely on refugee labor across a range of sectors.

Furthermore, Syrian refugees and Lebanese returnees sometimes cooperate in small-scale business ventures, sharing capital or informally exchanging with one another. Still, the inability to gain access to legal employment and the declining Lebanese economy complicate economic survival for both groups.

### Impact of Lebanon's Economic Crisis

Lebanon's prolonged financial crisis, marked by hyperinflation, currency devaluation, and historically unprecedented unemployment, has added economic suffering to both groups. As employment declines, frustration mounts, creating growing resentment toward foreign workers, especially Syrian refugees.

Efforts by the government to keep Lebanese workers from being pushed out of the workforce have succeeded in the short term to reverse economic tendencies, as well as create uncertainty and instability within the labor market. In 2021, the Minister of Labor published a decision (No. 96/1) specifying the professions that must be reserved for Lebanese nationals.

## 2. Community Relations

The Syrian refugee-Lebanese returnee relationship in Beirut's southern suburbs is multifaceted, with political affiliations, economic interests, social orientations, and historical ties all contributing to making it such. Although there has been some degree of co-existence between the two groups, tensions have risen because of competition for resources, varying cultural expectations, and divisive political rhetoric.

### Historical and Social Ties

Lebanon and Syria have been economically and socially interdependent for decades. Prior to the war in Syria, many Syrians were employed in Lebanon as seasonal workers in agriculture and construction. Syrian men have sought seasonal work in agriculture and industry in Lebanon since the mid-20th century (Turkmani and Hamade, 2020), and Syrians represented 90% of construction workers in Lebanon as early as 1972 (Chalcraft, 2008).

Also, there are Syrians who work with Lebanese returnees with whom they have business or family ties, creating solidarity in the context of displacement. In some neighborhoods, the social and economic ties between the two groups remain strong, especially where personal or historical ties existed prior to the crisis.

### Social Tensions and Stereotypes

Although Syrian refugees and Lebanese returnees had cooperated in the past, tensions between the two communities have increased over economic pressure and competing demands. These are the main areas of dispute:

*Competition for Housing:* The influx of Syrian refugees has raised demand for rental housing, which in turn pushed up rent in the area. This has made it difficult for Lebanese returnees to afford housing, which creates resentment against landlords who prefer to rent to refugee tenants because they are willing to live in small, often crowded, apartments. According to a key informant, the average rent in Ghobairy is USD \$500, with multiple families renting one apartment.

*Humanitarian Disparities:* Lebanese returnees complain that Syrian refugees receive regular humanitarian aid from international organizations, whereas their own economic issues are being ignored. This has helped fuel resentment and grievances of discrimination.

*Cultural and Behavioral Differences:* Social behavior differences and norms have at times fueled tensions, as Lebanese returnees have complained of transformed neighborhood life, noise, and perceived cultural change. Political rhetoric in some instances has framed Syrian refugees as a demographic threat in order to highlight such complaints.

### Political Narratives and Community Divisions

Public opinion regarding Syrian refugees has largely been shaped by the political parties and media. Certain political camps insist on the immediate repatriation of refugees to Syria and blame them for economic hardship and social tensions. Others are pragmatic, recognizing humanitarian considerations, but advocating stronger regulation of refugee work and aid distribution.

Locally, political affiliations shape the attitude towards Syrian refugees. Some neighborhoods with a dominant sectarian or political

identity may experience more tensions, but other neighborhoods with established diverse populations may reflect greater tolerance and integration.

### Local Conflict and Cooperation

While economic and social tensions have contributed to localized conflicts, such as fights over employment, rent, or services, there have also been episodes of dialogue and coexistence. One Syrian refugee stated: 'We see Ghobairy as home, we share the same destiny and suffering.'

Some Syrian and Lebanese communities have created informal systems of support, in which neighbors help each other with childcare, employment, or money lending. Community programs and NGO interventions have also facilitated discussion and shared activity that has produced social cohesion between Syrian refugees and Lebanese returnees. One interviewed returnee acknowledged that the return of Syrian refugees has contributed to reconstruction efforts.

### The Role of Local Authorities and NGOs

Local municipalities and civil society organizations also contribute significantly toward mitigating tensions and promoting coexistence. Unlike the municipality of Ghobairy, some local municipalities have imposed regulations in order to keep economic competition at bay and limit exploitation of labor markets.

Even though NGOs have launched initiatives in the form of community discussions, vocational skills training, and conflict resolution as measures to decrease social cleavages, Lebanon's general crisis and lack of resources limit these efforts. One civil society activist interviewed said: 'We use joint vocational training and psychosocial workshops to foster mutual understanding and empathy.'

The relationship between Lebanese returnees and Syrian refugees in Beirut's southern suburbs is influenced by economic factors, historical connections, and political interests. While tensions have been exacerbated by competition for jobs, housing, and assistance, there are also some examples of cooperation and solidarity.

To mitigate social tensions, policy interventions are needed at a holistic level, in addition to economic opportunities and social cohesion programs. Without collective action to alleviate economic hardship and enhance integration, tensions are likely to endure, reinforcing Lebanon's wider social and political ailments.



## Policy Recommendations

The findings revealed from the data synthesis confirm the necessity of adopting a multidimensional policy framework to address the systemic challenges confronting Lebanese IDPs and Syrian refugees in the Ghobairy area.

A key component of the framework is the urgent need to increase access to legal protection and documentation, as a significant portion of displaced communities do not possess formal identification, thus limiting their ability to obtain essential services and legal rights. Streamlining documentation procedures and providing legal aid services is critical to mitigate bureaucratic barriers and ensure displaced individuals can secure residency and work permits.

Meanwhile, the worsening economic vulnerability calls for urgent international humanitarian support funds to expand livelihood interventions. These could include direct reconstruction projects for infrastructures and housing, in addition to broader socioeconomic policies that strengthen community capacities. Priority areas include vocational training, microfinance initiatives, and public-private partnerships aimed at promoting self-reliance and aligning employment with labor market demands. Such funding and support initiatives must be channeled through official state channels whereby transparency is crucial.

The data collected also highlights the importance of targeted support through inclusive education curricula, enhanced teacher salaries, and accelerated learning programs for out-of-school children. This support should also aim at removing barriers to education like overcrowded classrooms, language differences, and lack of human capital and financial resources.

Crucial, too, is the limited scale of healthcare access for the management of chronic diseases and maternal health, as well as the needed expansion of services to provide psychosocial support to the many who are affected by mental health challenges heightened by displacement.

Solutions like rental assistance programs, infrastructure upgrades in informal settlements, and legal protections to secure land tenure and minimize the risk of forced eviction will all be needed to address the more chronic challenges of housing instability, including overcrowding and inadequate shelter conditions.

To ease the social tensions from competition over resources, policies must focus on initiatives encouraging community dialogue, social integration programs, and collaborative economic projects. These efforts can help build stronger ties between displaced individuals and the communities that welcome them.

Furthermore, enhancing humanitarian coordination means boosting collaboration between agencies, ensuring that short-term aid aligns with long-term development goals, and setting up centralized systems for sharing data. This will improve how stakeholders monitor and evaluate programs.

Altogether, these suggestions promote a well-rounded, evidence-based strategy that addresses urgent humanitarian needs while paving the way for sustainable solutions, ultimately improving displaced populations' long-term livelihood prospects and dignity.

The findings of this study point to the importance of integrating Syrian refugees and IDPs through approaches that balance economic development, social unity, and strengthened governance frameworks. Such integration is essential for achieving social stability and cohesion. With attention to employment, an inclusive policy framework and inter-municipality collaboration, policymakers will be able to spark growth that will be beneficial to both host and refugee communities.

In light of the devastating consequences of the war on the area of Ghobairy and the Southern Suburb of Beirut, securing continuous international support, along with finding local solutions to existing problems, is essential for tackling ongoing challenges and ensuring lasting stability. Moving forward, policymakers should expand their vision and embrace a comprehensive strategy that addresses the needs of both communities, fostering more resilience and unity.

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