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## FLUID BORDERS, TEMPORARY REFUGE: THE CYCLICAL NATURE OF DISPLACEMENT BETWEEN LEBANON AND SYRIA



In September 2024, the escalation of year-long hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah intensified, plunging Lebanon into yet another humanitarian disaster.<sup>1</sup> As Israeli airstrikes targeted civilian areas, over one million people, including Lebanese citizens, Syrian and Palestinian refugees, and migrant workers, were displaced within the country.<sup>2</sup> Yet, a significant phenomenon occurred away from the southern border: the movement of people fleeing from Lebanon into Syria. With an estimated 400,000 individuals crossing the border into Syria through overcrowded checkpoints, this movement is not to be confused with a definitive return but rather an emblem of the cyclical and fluid nature of displacement in the region.<sup>3</sup>

This research note's main aim is to explore how the simultaneous displacement of both Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees into Syria challenges the simple binaries often associated with the refugee experience. The fact that both groups are now seeking shelter in Syria underscores the volatility of regional displacement patterns and highlights the inadequacy of traditional one-directional migration models that fail to account for the often-reversible nature of displacement. By examining this ongoing movement, this piece disrupts the prevailing political narrative that casts host-refugee dynamics as fixed and unidirectional.

As part of our ongoing study at the Institute for Migration Studies at the Lebanese American University, we are using snowball sampling to identify Lebanese and Syrians who are either considering crossing the border into Syria, have already sent parts of their families there, or have crossed themselves. Thus far, we have conducted interviews with forty individuals, and their testimonies shed light on the complex decision-making processes behind these movements. As one displaced person from Beirut explained, "Syria was certainly not a

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'better' option than Lebanon six months ago, but in the last week, since the attacks on Beirut and political assassinations, Syria is safer – despite everything it is going through. That's how unsafe we feel in Beirut – we are bouncing between one war-torn country and another."<sup>4</sup>

The relationship between Lebanon and Syria is marked by moments of refuge and conflict. During Lebanon's civil war from 1975 to 1990, thousands of Lebanese fled to Syria to escape sectarian violence.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, during the 2006 July War, an estimated 180,000 Lebanese sought safety across the border in Syria.<sup>6</sup> This history of reciprocal refuge highlights the fluidity of displacement in the region, where borders are crossed based on the shifting tides of conflict.

With the onset of the Syrian war in 2011, the roles were reversed as over one million Syrians fled to Lebanon, which, despite not signing the 1951 Refugee Convention, became the country hosting the highest number of refugees per capita globally.<sup>7</sup> The lack of formal refugee status for Syrians in Lebanon meant they lived in legal ambiguity, reliant on humanitarian aid but lacking fundamental rights.<sup>8</sup> "For many Lebanese, this influx of Syrian refugees rekindled memories of their own displacement," one Lebanese aid worker shared, "but for others, it fueled anti-refugee sentiments."<sup>9</sup>

Now, as the Israel-Hezbollah conflict intensifies, the movement of Lebanese citizens and refugees into Syria marks a reversal of the patterns established over the last decade. These movements should not be confused with permanent return, as many of those fleeing into Syria describe their situation as "temporary." One Syrian refugee who had been living in Lebanon for years explained,

No, I am not returning. I am rather leaving one foot in Lebanon and one in Syria. Syria is in no way a safe place. As men, we are at risk of arrest and forced conscription. However, Lebanon is momentarily, at this point in history, much less safe. We do this assessment week by week.<sup>10</sup>

Similarly, Lebanese citizens entering Syria have emphasized the temporary nature of their displacement. One Lebanese man fleeing from South Lebanon said, "Syria is not foreign to us. It feels close and familiar. But most importantly, it feels temporary and is the right proximity to Lebanon. As soon as things calm down, we will come back to our homes."<sup>11</sup> These testimonies reveal a reality in which displacement is often cyclical, and refuge in one country may not signal

a permanent solution but rather a temporary escape from immediate danger.

The current displacement crisis in both Lebanon and Syria has strained both countries' already fragile infrastructures. Lebanon's economic collapse has left 80 percent of its population in poverty, and the government remains paralyzed by political deadlock.<sup>12</sup> Internally displaced people within Lebanon rely heavily on aid and community networks, as there is little state support available. Meanwhile, Syria's infrastructure remains devastated by more than a decade of civil war, and the country is ill-prepared to handle an influx of new arrivals.<sup>13</sup> Humanitarian organizations are working with limited resources to manage the situation, but the capacity to absorb more displaced individuals is stretched thin.

Despite these challenges, those fleeing Lebanon see Syria as a temporary refuge, albeit an unstable one. The cyclical nature of displacement between these two countries challenges the prevailing political narrative of host-refugee dynamics as one-directional. For years, Syrian refugees were framed by some Lebanese politicians as a burden on Lebanon, receiving aid while Lebanese citizens suffered.<sup>14</sup> However, this new wave of displacement reveals that displacement can flow in both directions, undermining simplistic narratives and demonstrating the fluidity of refuge. As one Syrian refugee put it, "We are not moving forward. We are stuck between two war zones, making decisions based on which place is less dangerous this week."<sup>15</sup>

The reversal of roles between Lebanon and Syria complicates the common perception of refugees as passive recipients of aid in a host country. Instead, the experience of both Lebanese and Syrian refugees reflects a deeper regional pattern where displacement is not static but cyclical, reactive to shifting geopolitical pressures. This constant movement across borders highlights how fragile and temporary notions of "safety" and "home" can be in conflict zones.

This reality raises critical questions about the sustainability of international refugee systems, which often rely on rigid, one-way models of migration and protection. The situation between Lebanon and Syria reveals the limitations of these models, particularly in regions like the Middle East, where borders are porous, and displacement is recurrent. Humanitarian systems are ill-equipped to deal with such fluid and temporary migratory flows. As one displaced Lebanese person explained, "We are not 'returning' to Syria. It's just a safer place at this moment. We're waiting for the moment we can go back to Lebanon. But what if that moment never comes?"<sup>16</sup>

Ultimately, the ongoing displacement crisis in Lebanon and Syria serves as a stark reminder that refuge is often fleeting, contingent on the shifting geopolitics of the region. The histories of these two countries, where both have served as havens for the other's displaced populations, reveal the complexity of displacement in the Middle East. The fact that Lebanese citizens are now seeking shelter in Syria, a country from which over one million refugees fled just over a decade ago, underscores the volatility of regional displacement patterns. It also challenges the traditional understanding of host-refugee dynamics, making clear that the labels of "refugee" and "host" are not permanent roles but ones that shift with the winds of conflict.

As part of this ongoing study, we continue to interview Lebanese and Syrians affected by these movements, examining how they perceive their displacement and what factors drive their decisions to cross borders. The findings thus far underscore the urgent need to rethink how we understand and address displacement in conflict zones like Lebanon and Syria. Refuge, in this context, is not a fixed location but a fluid and temporary state—one that is continually renegotiated as conflicts evolve.

In the coming months, we aim to expand our sample size and incorporate a broader range of testimonies from those on both sides of the border. Our goal is to build a more nuanced understanding of how displacement operates in the region and to challenge the static models of migration that dominate international discourse. This crisis highlights the need for a more flexible and adaptable approach to refugee protection—one that acknowledges the cyclical and often reversible nature of displacement in conflict zones.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Magramo, Antoinette Radford, Aditi Sangal, and Elise Hammond, "September 24 Israel-Lebanon News," CNN, 25 September 2024, <https://edition.cnn.com/world/live-news/israel-lebanon-hezbollah-09-24-24-intl-hnk/index.html>.

<sup>2</sup> Sami Halabi, "Left Unchecked, Lebanon's Displacement Crisis Could Tear the Country Apart," *Opinions, Al-Jazeera*, 19 October 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2024/10/19/left-unchecked-lebanons-displacement-crisis-could-tear-the-country-apart>.

<sup>3</sup> "Lebanon Says over 400,000 People Fled to Syria in Around 2 Weeks," *Arab News*, 7 October 2024, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/2574332/middle-east>.

<sup>4</sup> Participant A, personal communication with the author, September 2024.

<sup>5</sup> Jasmin Lillian Diab, "Bouncing between War-Torn Countries: Displacement in Lebanon and Syria Highlights Cyclical Nature of Cross-Border Refuge," *The Conversation*, 16 October 2024, <https://theconversation.com/bouncing-between-war-torn-countries-displacement-in-lebanon-and-syria-highlights-cyclical-nature-of-cross-border-refuge-241168>.

<sup>6</sup> Annette Rehr and Jack Redden, "Lebanese Stream Out of Syria, More than a Third Now Back in Lebanon," UNHCR, 16 August 2006, <https://www.unhcr.org/news/stories/lebanese-stream-out-syria-more-third-now-back-lebanon>.

<sup>7</sup> Maja Janmyr, "No Country of Asylum: 'Legitimizing' Lebanon's Rejection of the 1951 Refugee Convention," *International Journal of Refugee Law* 29, no. 3 (October 2017): 438–65, <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijrl/eex026>.

<sup>8</sup> Nora Stel, "Uncertainty, Exhaustion, and Abandonment beyond South/North Divides: Governing Forced Migration through Strategic Ambiguity," *Political Geography* 88 (June 2021): 102391, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0962629821000512>.

<sup>9</sup> Participant B, personal communication with the author, September 2024.

<sup>10</sup> Participant C, personal communication with the author, September 2024.

<sup>11</sup> Participant D, personal communication with the author, September 2024.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> UN Press Office, "Tensions in Syria, Region 'Have Reached Dangerous New Levels', Special Envoy Warns Security Council, Calling for Inclusive Political Process," Meetings Coverage and Press Releases, United Nations, SC/15802, 28 August 2024, <https://press.un.org/en/2024/sc15802.doc.htm>.

<sup>14</sup> Cathrine Brun and Ali Fakih, "Debunking the Dangerous Myth That Refugees Are an Economic Burden in Lebanon," *New Humanitarian*, 26 September 2022, <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/opinion/2022/09/26/Syrian-refugees-Lebanon-economics>.

<sup>15</sup> Participant E, personal communication with the author, September 2024.

<sup>16</sup> Participant F, personal communication with the author, September 2024.