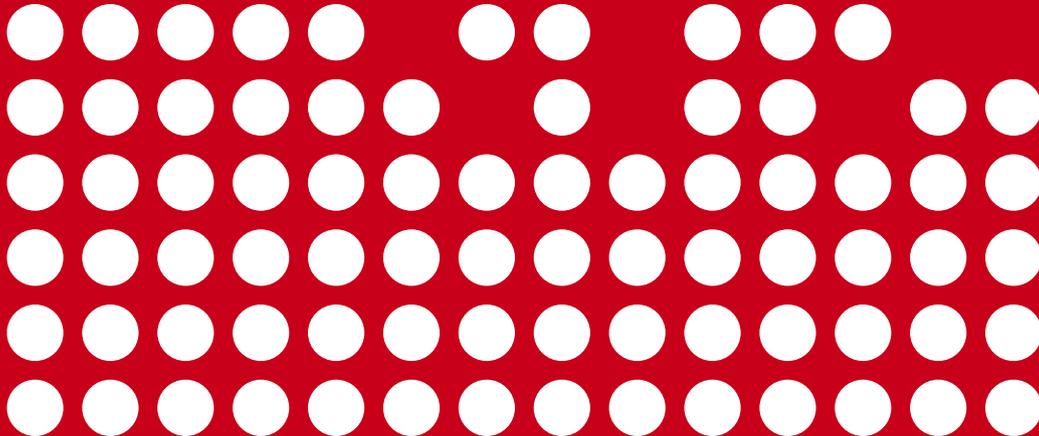


A Year of Asylum: Facts and Rhetoric

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Lebanon



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Lebanon 2017

A Year of Asylum: Facts and Rhetoric

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Refugeeism in Lebanon: A Shared Predicament in Debate

Whether the reader chooses to peruse this compilation of facts and statements pertaining to the refugee issue in Lebanon during 2017 or turns away after a glance at its title, they may wonder if this record – with all its entries of events, statements and declarations by politicians and even the public in Facebook posts and tweets – really deserves such careful attention and close reading? This hypothetical reader could be even harsher and ask the following: "What is the point of spending so much time and effort to extract, sift through and organize so much apparently useless information, wherein one piece of data is sometimes barely distinguishable from another? Would it not have been better to invest this time and effort in a more useful direction?"

Our unhesitating answer is no.

From the perspective of UMAM Documentation and Research (UMAM D&R), nothing could be more useful than recording Lebanon's daily journal through its refugees' voices and as a place of refuge. Others, of course, are free to focus on whatever they deem most deserving of their time and energy...

In 2016, with the support of Germany's *Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (IFA)*, UMAM D&R embarked on a program titled **Most Welcome? Lebanon through its Refugees**. Its primary goal was to document instances of asylum to

Lebanon (through its many facets and not only the case of Syrian asylum) since the very outset of Lebanon as a state with recognized borders that can be crossed legally, illegally or under the pressure of forced migration, and with a nationality that can be granted or denied to those seeking to acquire it. This program did not spring up from nowhere, nor was it developed for its own sake. It was devised within the specific context of Syrian asylum to Lebanon and dealt with the debate among Lebanese themselves about the way to handle this case. Needless to add, this debate frequently stirred up memories of previous waves of refugees to Lebanon, including the Palestinian ones and, to a lesser extent, the Armenian ones.

Among other components, this program aims to create a pool of information and records pertaining to incidents of asylum to Lebanon on an organized, openly accessible and searchable platform, available to all those who are interested in this topic. For UMAM D&R, this is a logical continuation of its ongoing efforts to deal with Lebanon's conflict-ridden past.

We had assumed that this endeavor would be an easy one, which comprised little more than organizing readily available information in an accessible manner, especially for the pre-war period, i.e., before 1975. However, we soon revised this assumption in light of the paucity of sources available on the topic, especially in Arabic.

This lack of documented knowledge on asylum in Lebanon is confirmed through the vague and approximate ways in which the said issue is discussed in the media. UMAM D&R experienced this vagueness and approximation first hand through the series of round tables and conferences to which it invited Lebanese individuals from various affiliations, in addition to refugees in Lebanon, including naturalized former refugees. The discussions that took place during these encounters were characterized by the approximate nature

of the information upon which the discussants built their arguments and counter-arguments. We observed the same trend while tracking media outlets, including those believed to be "serious" publications. Even individuals regarded as experts on the refugee issue often reproduced approximations pertaining to the said issue and its timeline.

UMAM D&R did not embark on this program with exhaustive knowledge about this issue, nor do we claim to possess such knowledge today. However, based on the knowledge we have gathered, we can confidently state that asylum in Lebanon — both as a concept and a set of facts — has never been given the attention it deserves, despite its significance concerning the historical formation of this country and its prominence at critical junctures in both peace and wartime. Indeed, the vagueness regarding the chronology of the Armenians' arrival and integration into the Lebanese social fabric, coupled with the uncertainty surrounding the Palestinians' early days in the country, is testament to this fact. While this remark may appear to undervalue the work done to document these two cases, the dearth of sources available regarding the same serves to confirm this claim and the pressing need for our efforts in this regard.

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As mentioned previously, this project was born into the context of Syrian asylum in Lebanon. Nevertheless, from the outset, it has focused on two earlier waves of refugees, i.e., the Armenians and Palestinians. However, it is not that it ignored other groups of refugees, such as the Russians, Greeks, Kurds, and Iraqis, nor other facets of refugeeism in Lebanon, such as the question of whether Lebanon is a country of refuge, and the shifting attitudes among the Lebanese toward the question

of whether political refugees should be accommodated. It would not be an exaggeration to say that refugeeism in Lebanon is a decisive factor when decoding not only its present but also, more momentously, its past. And, it may yet become a decisive factor in determining the country's future, in the short and long term. Given the improbable scenario of Syrians returning en masse to their country or the equally improbable realization of the Palestinians' right to return, it is only realistic — though realism may be painful in some quarters — to say that refugeeism will continue to influence Lebanon's future.

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One of UMAM D&R's foundational convictions is that any discussion of matters relating to the past cannot occur properly in the present without sufficient knowledge of the relevant context and background, along with access to an archive of records. Thus, when a particular subject falls within our scope of interest, we collect a portfolio of source materials connected to the same. In the case of refugeeism, we gathered source materials through our digital platform, *Memory at Work*⁽¹⁾, and will continue to add relevant materials and documents to it, as it is evident that the refugee issue in Lebanon deserves more extensive documentation.

Why is this the case?

To put it simply, the issue of refugees in Lebanon exerts control over the country's present, as attested by the materials provided in this volume. Moreover, alongside other issues, it is also on the path to exerting control over the country's future. In this sense, consecutive episodes of refugeeism form the chronology using which Lebanon, with all its contradictions

⁽¹⁾ www.memoryatwork.org

and shifting balances of power, can trace its origins. With an eye on the ongoing debates over Syrian refugees as well as those regarding the Palestinian case, UMAM D&R sensed the need to compile and catalog its material concerning the recent past in a way that addresses the urgent needs of the hour more than Memory at Work, which is essentially a more general repository. Our daily digest of data is drawn from freely available sources and submitted to a steering committee that sorts the incidents and events into chronological order; this journal emerged as a way of organizing the gathered material.

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Coincidences in our programming and funding dictated that we inaugurate this series of chronicles within 2017. This was an amazing coincidence as 2017 represented a turning point in Lebanese politics and in its debates over various contentious issues, including those concerning refugees.

Let us refresh our memories. Following a presidential vacancy that lasted for two years, five months and six days, General Michel Aoun, founder and leader of the Free Patriotic Movement and former Commander-in-Chief of the Lebanese army, was elected President of the Lebanese Republic on October 31, 2016, under still-questionable circumstances. However, his election reflected a drastic change in the domestic and regional balance of power from the time when the term of the previous president, former Army Commander-in-Chief Michel Suleiman, expired. Aoun's election came at a moment when "combating terrorism" had become the predominant approach to the Syrian conflict and its repercussions, foremost of which is the refugee issue. Consequently, it was no surprise that in his presidential address immediately after being sworn into

office, the question of "combating terrorism" preceded that of refugees, insinuating causality between the two:

We shall deal with terrorism by preventing, deterring, countering and even eliminating it. We also have to tackle the issue of the Syrian refugees by ensuring a quick return, striving to prevent the transformation of the displacement camps and agglomerations into safe havens,⁽²⁾ in cooperation with the concerned States and authorities, and in responsible coordination with the United Nations, of which Lebanon was a co-founder and to whose charters it is committed in the preamble of its Constitution; while affirming that there cannot be a solution in Syria that does not guarantee and begin with the return of the refugees. As for the Palestinians, we always strive to consolidate and implement the right of return.⁽³⁾

As a part of the same deal that granted Aoun presidency of the Lebanese Republic, Saad Hariri was charged on November 11 of that same year with the task of forming a new Lebanese government. This new government gained the confidence of the Lebanese Parliament on December 27, 2016. The Cabinet Statement upon which it won the vote stated the following regarding the Syrian refugee matter:

As the government reaffirms its commitment to continue working with the international community in order to face the burdens of the Syrian displacement, while respecting international charters, the Lebanese state can no longer shoulder alone these burdens that are putting Lebanon under strain socially, economically and structurally, when the number of displaced people is now greater than one-third of the overall population of Lebanon.

Therefore, we call upon the international community to fulfill its responsibilities vis-à-vis the fallout [from this situation], which has affected [public] services and the infrastructure [of the country] such as electricity, water, the condition of roads, schools, hospitals and other facilities that have been stretched past capacity. We also call upon the international community to abide by the

⁽²⁾ The Arabic original reads *mahmiyyat amniyya*, which could be translated as "security strongholds."

⁽³⁾ This excerpt is drawn verbatim from the "official translation of the full text of President Michel Aoun's speech after he was sworn in," *The Daily Star*, November 1, 2016.

commitments it made [to Lebanon] during various conferences, especially those related to maintaining and developing Lebanon's infrastructure.

The government believes that the only solution to this crisis is the safe return of the displaced to their country. It rejects any kind of integration or incorporation into the communities hosting them and is keen to see this option at the top of the list of solutions proposed for the Syrian crisis.

Regarding the Palestinian refugees, the same Cabinet Statement reads as follows:

We renew the commitment of the government to uphold the constitutional judgments that reject the principle of permanent settlement of refugees in Lebanon (*tawteen*), especially Palestinian refugees with their inalienable right of return to their homeland. In the meantime, states and international organizations should fulfill all their responsibilities and provide the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) with sustainable, not sporadic, funding, as well as fulfill their commitment to provide the funds still needed for the reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared camp.

Lebanon officially underscores the importance of strengthening Lebanese–Palestinian dialogue in order to shield the [Palestinian refugee] camps from disturbances and the use of arms inside them, which neither serves the [Palestinian] cause, nor is acceptable to the Lebanese people and their government.

Aside from the fact that these two excerpts, both taken from texts with political authority, do not go far beyond a host of clichés so frequently recycled as to have become almost meaningless, it is interesting — for the sake of contextualizing the facts and the rhetoric of this compilation — to pause and note several themes reflected in both these quotes. First, both relegate the Palestinian refugee issue to a lower status, marking a fatalistic attitude, and tacitly accepting their continued presence in Lebanon as a *fait accompli*. Second, the two texts clearly differ regarding their position on the return of Syrian refugees: the first calls for a "quick return," clearly alluding to the Palestinian precedent by expressing

its fear that groups of "displaced populations" will morph into "security strongholds," whereas the second makes return contingent on being "safe," notwithstanding the vagueness of this safety.

This brief observation concerning the two excerpts does not intend to retrospectively analyze them from the perspective of early 2018, nor does it aim to endow them with meanings that they do not carry. Our purpose is far more modest. What we mean to say is that in 2017, Lebanon — despite an apparent return to normality with a new president of the republic and a new government — had to deal not only with the myriad day-to-day problems worsened by the prior two years of presidential vacuum and political uncertainty but also with an accumulation of disagreements surrounding the refugee crisis. And, this diary of 2017 reflects this reality.

As we noted at the beginning of this preface, the following pages contain several repetitions, especially when it comes to statements made by Lebanese and foreign officials in Lebanon. The massive number of statements made in this regard in 2017 can be partly attributed to the fact that Lebanon finally formed a full-fledged government to replace the previous caretaker government, notwithstanding any lack in efficiency on the new administration's part. These statements reflect the prevailing cultural and political environment in Lebanon, which imposes itself on Lebanese nationals as well as the refugees. Many of them convey a paucity of imagination and even a misunderstanding of the issue at hand, and only merit attention for how vapid they are. However, we insist on reproducing them in full despite their intellectual mediocrity, for we believe that the way Lebanese decision-makers deal with the refugee crisis is an integral part of the very problem the same decision-makers keep seeking help to face.

This diary is titled *Lebanon 2017: A Year of Asylum – Facts and*

Rhetoric. An observant reader might object to the pairing of the concepts of rhetoric and facts. While the phrase "A Year of Asylum" describes the diary's content, we insist that the facts and opinions we document, irrespective of their tone and content, are reproduced in their original (Arabic) format, i.e., without stripping them of their own particular rhetoric. These statements display mindless repetition, pettiness and triviality, and frequently betray low intellect or poor oratory skills on the part of the speakers. At the risk of going even further, we can say that they establish the consistent low level of debate regarding the refugee question, coupled with the sheer inanity of Lebanese politics around and policy toward its refugees. With utmost confidence, we can state here that anyone patient enough to leaf through the words of Lebanese individuals — with regard to their position of power and influence on refugee matters presented in this volume — will surely arrive at the same conclusions drawn by us regarding their sheer foolishness and incompetence.

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UMAM D&R undertook this compilation primarily for the purpose of documentation. Despite the efforts made to ensure that it meets high standards of integrity and objectivity in its content, along with high standards of readability in terms of its format, we still consider it as a template likely to be amended and improved in upcoming volumes, covering other years of asylum in Lebanon. Notwithstanding these standards, we cannot be held responsible for the image this compilation reflects of the subjects it has documented. In this sense, we believe that the most interesting contribution this diary can pretend to make is to present the case for refugeeism as an integral component of Lebanon's history in the making!