



**“Asylum” versus “migration”:
Time for a painful re-evaluation in Lebanon**
Riviera Hotel, October 10, 2020

“Take Away My Passport!”
- *Passport*, Mahmoud Darwish

Lebanon throughout the years has been marked by migration and asylum, both into and out of the country. Yet the dynamics and context surrounding these respective population flows have not been adequately addressed. During the famine in Lebanon, as well as due to the civil war, Lebanese citizens fled the country in search of safety and better opportunities. Those of these communities who found financial success abroad posed a source of revenue for the country in the form of remittances and were glorified as integral members of the Lebanese community.

Overlapping with these periods of exodus of Lebanese have been periods of influx of other nationalities into Lebanon: notably Armenian, Palestinian, and most recently, Syrian. Some individuals and institutions have aimed to undertake unbiased and critical analysis of asylum in Lebanon, both its positive and negative impacts. Despite these attempts, there has instead been a vague and pervasive belief among large sections of Lebanese society that refugees pose a threat to Lebanon’s very existence as an entity, as well as its demographic and economic balance. These sentiments, which at present-day focus on Syrian refugees, can be historically contextualized, as Lebanon’s civil war from 1975-1990 was complicated by the presence of Palestinian refugees. Despite the issue of refugees in Lebanon playing a major role in the 15 years of civil war, no post-war reconciliation attempted to come to terms with the past and recover from the effects of this dynamic on the war. It is therefore perhaps no wonder that a new wave of refugees, albeit Syrian this time, arriving once again into Lebanon has triggered memories of earlier waves of asylum.

This is the background of the past year in Lebanon. In the span of one year, from October 2019 to October 2020, there has been a massive popular uprising, a collapse of the financial and economic systems, a global pandemic that has permeated into Lebanon, and massive explosions at the Port of Beirut that destroyed lives, homes, and livelihoods. While no one can yet predict all the consequences of the explosions that struck Beirut on August 4th, the fallout from the explosion has centered around forecasts for the country that range from bad to worse.

The reality of the situation is that many Lebanese men and women were already reconsidering the feasibility of remaining in Lebanon, even before the explosion of the port and the conditions that have been unfolding in the year preceding it. A study by research center found that that the number

of Lebanese who left the country and did not return in 2019 was 61,924, compared to 41,766 in the same time frame of the previous year, thus having increased by over 40 percent.¹ We do not yet know what the numbers will be for 2020, but can safely assume that, with all the catastrophes inflicted on Lebanon, the statistics in the coming years will show a further increase of the number of Lebanese men and women who Lebanon leave via legal and organized migration methods.

Yet in the aftermath of the blast has there has been increased attention to a new dynamic of this phenomenon. Media outlets and public discourse ran wild in September 2020 with the news of a group of Lebanese youths who went missing at sea after setting off from the country's northern shores. They had boarded light boats and set off towards Cyprus and Greece in attempts to flee Lebanon. While some were allowed entry to Cyprus, Cypriot authorities deported dozens of others and rescue ships recovered other boats, on board of which were both Lebanese and non-Lebanese individuals.²

What is needed now is a frank and critical reckoning of the perceptions and impact of asylum, migration, and refugeeism on Lebanon. While previously the Lebanese culture of prosperity had elevated migration of its citizens to the level of an achievement that one can admire and take pride in, there is a need to assess the challenges that Lebanon is facing from this multitude of population dynamics. The conditions of the global economy have also been changed in past years, as have perceptions towards refugee and migration influxes: therefore, the context of the global system must be addressed as well.

In the aftermath of the explosion at the port of Beirut, photos of the destruction of the area surrounding the port were widely circulated by the media. One striking photo is of the statue of the Lebanese migrant, erected in 2003 on the road passing by the port, still erect despite the nearby explosions. A second photo that was widely shared on social media is of an alarm clock stuck at 6:07 – the exact moment of the blast – amid the rubble of a house. Given the number of those killed, wounded, and still missing in the explosion, there is no doubt that time has stopped at six and seven minutes for many. Given what was confirmed by the explosion, which came after political, economic, and social collapses, we are now in an hour of review to address the state of despair facing the present and future of Lebanon. Poignantly, as the statute of the Lebanese emigrant remains standing, so does the complicated issue of migration and asylum as one of the most pressing, even if painful, areas to critically address.

¹ "Those Lebanese Who Only Want One Thing: To Leave," *L'Orient-Le Jour*, July 13, 2020.

² "Those fleeing Lebanon by 'death boats' reveal to Alhurra the details of their journey," *Al-Hurra*, September 9, 2020.