

## Lebanon through its Refugees Now What?

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Two recent developments in November 2020 have raised the question “what now?” for Lebanon, its refugees, and all those concerned with the fate of the country and its refugees. The first was the “International Conference on the Return of Refugees” held in Damascus on 11-12 November 2020. This Russian-backed conference blatantly exhibited the inconsistencies and impossibilities of the claims that the return of refugees and displaced people to Syria can be currently done without a comprehensive political solution. In the aftermath of the event, a US State Department press statement called the event “mere theatrics,”<sup>(1)</sup> while the EU announced ahead of the event that it, along with its member states, would not attend the conference as the conditions in Syria do not allow for “safe, voluntary, dignified and sustainable” returns to the country.<sup>(2)</sup>

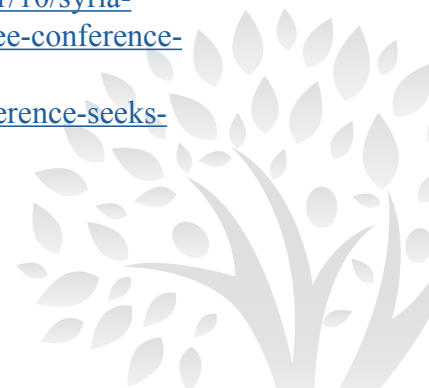
Lebanon’s engagement in the conference was marked by a last-minute decision to increase its participation, but even with a large Lebanese attendance, the conference showed the emptiness of the oft-stated Lebanese threat to return Syrian refugees through direct negotiations with the Syrian regime.<sup>(3)</sup> This continual lack of realistic options for the return of Syrian refugees directly impacts Lebanon as a state. As it is now overtly clear that the country is entering a political and economic winter, so has it become clear that the tools resorted to so far prove unable to mitigate, and are in fact intentionally

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(1) <https://translations.state.gov/2020/11/13/russia-and-the-assad-regimes-superficial-support-for-syrian-refugees/>.

(2) <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2020/11/10/syria-declaration-by-the-high-representative-on-behalf-of-the-eu-on-the-refugee-conference-in-damascus/#>.

(3) <https://today.lorientlejour.com/article/1240459/a-damascus-conference-seeks-to-promote-syrian-refugee-return-efforts-heres-why-theyve-stalled.html>



refusing to deal with the demographic pressures from the large added population.

The second development was a series of statements made during the past weeks by Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of UNRWA.

During these communications, Lazzarini has expressed with increasing urgency that UNWRA has reached a severe funding shortage and is unable to cover its costs until the end of the year.<sup>(4)</sup> While the news of UNWRA's financial troubles was not completely unforeseen, the desperate tone of its Commissioner-General marks a period for serious consideration of UNRWA's long-term existence. It is critical to frankly reconsider the future of this UN-agency. In existence since 1949, it has often been seen and depicted as consubstantial with the Palestinian problem and, as such, as a meta-historic entity immune from the impact of on-going developments and historical fluctuations. It is high time to separately reckon with the Palestinian problem and the Palestinian refugee problem. In the wake of this reckoning, the fate of UNRWA is a Lebanese political challenge as much it is a Palestinian and international one.

Both the Damascus conference and its failure (in inception and execution), and the statements by Lazzarini, are not good news for neither the direct stakeholders, Palestinian and Syrian refugees, nor those concerned and implicated by their future, including Lebanon and the Lebanese. Currently, Lebanon is facing two closed doors for the possibility of the return of refugees to Syria or Palestine, and the country needs to seriously contend with the reality of both refugee populations continuing to compose a significant proportion of its population and a large part of its identity, challenges, and opportunities as a state.



While Lebanon continues to refuse to the Syrian refugees the legal status of "refugees," preferring instead to lock them in the blurry category of "displaced" (*nazihoun*), it still enthusiastically took part in the Russian-backed, Damascus-hosted "International Conference on the Return of Refugees."

<sup>(4)</sup> <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-issues-emergency-call-humanitarian-assistance-amid-end-year-shortfall>



Much of the recent attention in Lebanon has been on the background to these two events, and one that is more likely to become progressively bleaker as the socio-economic situation in Lebanon continues to worsen and the rest of the world remained completely enraptured in COVID-19 concerns above anything else. However, as it can be expected to see a related worsening of the specific situation of Lebanon's refugee communities, these dynamics can no longer be ignored as they have. It is also expected that there will be a related increase in tensions between these communities and their Lebanese hosts, some evidence of which is already being seen in some areas around Lebanon.<sup>(5)</sup> These types of growing tensions consequently will include increased manifestations of discrimination and racism against refugees, regardless of nationality. Claims of Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon being short-lived and the reliance on UNWRA to support the contested and obscured number of Palestinian refugees in the country are now no longer realistic nor possible in any reasonable mind.

It is becoming exceeding clear that considering only what some consider to be Lebanon's own problems without taking into account the intertwined nature of refugees in Lebanon with the very identity and existence of the country is a narrow-minded view of the country that will allow for tensions and conflict to flourish. The current moment is one in which a multifaceted, holistic view of Lebanon and its many stressors need to be addressed. The country can no longer consider refugeeism issues as solely from a security or aid perspective, but instead these issues need to be considered from a political perspective as determinant factors on the present and future of Lebanon.

The Lebanese Initiative against Discrimination and Racism takes upon itself to be the "voice in the wilderness" and to call for an open, frank, and inclusive nation-wide consultation about refugeeism in which all stakeholders, including representation of voiceless Palestinian and Syrian refugees, take part and whose agenda goes beyond security and aid. Lebanon, the Lebanese, and the international community can no longer act with blinders, considering only a select few dynamics it has seemed worthy of attention (good governance, fighting corruption, strengthening the state) without a full reckoning of the issue of refugees as an integral part of Lebanon's portfolio.

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<sup>(5)</sup> <https://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2020/Nov-27/514777-hundreds-of-syrians-exit-bcharri-over-tensions-un.ashx>.

