

A Year of Asylum: Facts and Rhetoric

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Lebanon



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Lebanon 2018

A Year of Asylum: Facts and Rhetoric

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Refugeeism in Lebanon: A Shared Predicament in Debate

This is the second volume dedicated to tracking *refugeeism* facts and rhetoric in Lebanon, published by UMAM Documentation and Research (D&R). Out of practical considerations, the first volume addressed 2017, and these yearly diaries ultimately aim to capture the last decade of refugee and asylum dynamics in Lebanon. The general premises guiding our documentation of 2018, exposed below, are the same as the ones which guided our work on 2017. However, in a departure from the previous volume, UMAM D&R opted to separate the exposé of these general premises from an introductory analysis specific to 2018, one which aims to place dynamics and development around refugees in Lebanon within their domestic and broader international context.

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The importance of a focus on refugees in Lebanon must first be explained as a motivation for undertaking this project. Critics could question the pertinence of focusing on the refugee issue in Lebanon, and wonder if the data collected and analysis conducted is worthwhile. The question has been posed: do all the entries of events and declarations by politicians, as well as those of the public on social media, really deserve such careful attention and close reading? Our unhesitating answer is yes!

While to some the amount of time and resources spent on organizing and exploring these large amounts of data may not initially appear worthwhile, UMAM D&R shows that this is an area of fruitful analysis that is, in fact, vital to understanding interconnected domestic and regional themes and trends.

Therefore, with the support of Germany's Institute for Foreign Cultural Relations (ifa), UMAM D&R embarked on the program *Most Welcome? Lebanon through its Refugees* in 2016. Asylum and its surrounding debates have existed since the establishment 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. Therefore, the primary goal is to document dynamics around asylum to Lebanon through its many facets.

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The focus of this program did not spring up from nothing, nor was it developed for its own sake: it was devised within the specific context of Syrian asylum to Lebanon and the resulting debate among Lebanese themselves about the way to handle this case. Importantly, the debates around Syrian refugees has frequently stirred up memories of previous waves of refugees to Lebanon, notably Palestinian and Armenian refugees. Therefore, all demographics seeking asylum in Lebanon are addressed, not just the case of Syrians.

The program's main aim is to create a pool of information and records pertaining to facts related to asylum to Lebanon in 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. The project initially believed this endeavor would be an easy one, comprising little more than organizing readily available information in an accessible manner, especially for the pre-war period before 1975.

However, this assumption was promptly revised in light of the paucity of sources available on the topic. The lack of documented knowledge on asylum in Lebanon is due to the vague and approximate ways in which the said issue is discussed. UMAM D&R first noticed this while tracking reporting on asylum among media outlets, including those considered to be reliable publications. UMAM D&R additionally experienced this phenomenon first-hand through the series of round tables and conferences it hosted. These events brought together Lebanese individuals from various affiliations, as well as individuals representing a range of refugee communities in Lebanon, including naturalized former refugees. The discussions that took place during these encounters were characterized by the continually approximate nature of the information upon which the discussants built their arguments and counter-arguments. Therefore, it can be said that even individuals regarded as experts on refugee issues in Lebanon often rely on questionable facts and assertions pertaining to the said issues.

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UMAM D&R did not embark on this program with exhaustive knowledge about this issue, nor does it claim to possess such knowledge today. However, based on the information gathered, UMAM D&R can confidently state that asylum in Lebanon 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 times of peace and of war. 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. Indeed, the dearth of sources available serves to confirm the pressing need for our efforts in this regard.

While this project was born into the context of Syrian asylum in Lebanon, from the outset it has focused on two earlier waves of refugees: Armenians and Palestinians. Additionally, this project does not ignore other groups in Lebanon, such as the Russians, Greeks, Kurds, and Iraqis. Nor does it shy away from addressing 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.

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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. Thus, when a particular subject falls within our scope of interest, we collect an archive of source materials connected to the issue. In the case of refugeeism, we gathered source materials through our digital platform *Memory at Work* and will continue to add relevant materials and documents to it, as part of our assertion that that the refugee issue in Lebanon deserves more extensive documentation.⁽¹⁾ Our digest of daily data is drawn from open and available Arabic sources, and processed by way of synthesizing and categorizing

⁽¹⁾ www.memoryatwork.org

developments: this journal emerged as a way of organizing the gathered material.

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 that cover other years of asylum in Lebanon. Notwithstanding these efforts, we cannot be held responsible for the image this compilation reflects of the subjects it has documented.

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It would not be an exaggeration to say that refugeeism in Lebanon is a decisive factor when decoding not only its present but also its past. Perhaps more momentously, it may yet become a decisive factor in determining the country's future, in the short and long term. Given the unlikely 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.

The materials provided in these volumes attest to the fact that the issue of refugees in Lebanon is a determining factor in the country. In this sense, consecutive episodes of refugeeism form the chronology which Lebanon, with all its contradictions 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. We believe that the most interesting

contribution this diary can make is to present the case for
refugeeism as an integral component of Lebanon's history
in the making.

Lebanon 2018: Keys and Perspectives

In 2018, tensions over refugee and asylum issues remained central in Lebanon and Lebanese debates. The events that unfolded in Lebanon this year were the result of both external and internal factors, and while some of them were a continuation of events from previous years, others were fully unexpected.

The challenges Lebanon and the international community had to contend with throughout 2018 included the surprising withdrawal of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies from the “Presidential Deal” established in Lebanon at the end of 2016, which seemed to have installed a status quo from which various regional actors involved in Lebanese affairs could profit.

The following will briefly outline events that set the stage for 2018, before discussing the main refugee- and asylum-related highlights of the year. This introduction then concludes with five identified “syndromes” that can be seen from presented events and dynamics in Lebanon. These range from the pervasiveness of issues surrounding asylum in Lebanon, to political convergences and divergences between Lebanese political groups on the case of asylum, and finally to the implications of the clash over this issue between Lebanon and the international community.

Setting the Scene for 2018

Lebanon was without a President for nearly two and a half years, ever since President Michel Suleiman's term expired in May 2014. On October 31, 2016, however, Lebanese political actors—under the auspices of their respective regional patrons—managed to elect General Michael Aoun as the country's 13th president. Previously the commander of the Lebanese Army, Aoun was also previously the leader of the largely Christian Free Patriotic Movement and a prominent Christian ally of Hezbollah. Aoun's "election" by the parliament was nothing but a polite euphemism barely hiding what the Lebanese jargon came to designate as the "Presidential Deal." According to this Deal, Aoun would occupy the supreme office while Nabih Berri, head of the AMAL Movement/militia and Hezbollah's alter-ego, would remain in place as Speaker of the Parliament, and Saad Hariri, scion of Rafic Hariri and Saudi Arabia's touchpoint in Lebanon, would be the Prime Minister.

As Aoun's presidency neared the end of its first year, Lebanese were hoping to see the second year of his tenure bring about reforms and changes upon which he had been elected. Instead, unprecedented external and internal dynamics began to rock Lebanon's politics. On November 4, 2017, Saudi Arabia summoned Prime Minister Saad Hariri to Riyadh. The reason for this order was soon made clear when Hariri unexpectedly announced his resignation, which he did by publicly reading from a prepared statement with lackluster tone in a broadcast by the Saudi-funded Al-Arabiya news network. It seemed, and as was indeed proven later, that Hariri was being held in Saudi Arabia and his fate was hanging in Saudi hands.

Through its theatrical orchestration of Hariri's resignation,

Saudi Arabia signaled to Lebanon, as well as other regional and international stockholders, that the balance of affairs reached at the end of 2016 and materialized through the “Presidential Deal” was no longer tenable. Against the backdrop of tension between Saudi Arabia and Iran, the circumstances that originally gave way to the elevation of pro-Hezbollah Aoun to the presidency were no longer aligned with the vision and interests of Saudi Arabia and its Gulf allies. It took a series of extreme interventions to secure the release of Hariri and the withdrawal of his resignation, but the message was sent that Saudi had rescinded its approval for the Deal.

The Saudi shakedown sent reverberating waves of concern about Lebanon's stability throughout the international community. The alarm was largely rooted in a fear that turmoil in Lebanon would push refugees, as well as Lebanese nationals, to the western shores of the Mediterranean and from there to fortress Europe’s heartland. As Lebanon hosts 1.5 million Syrian refugees and an indefinite number of Palestinian refugees,⁽¹⁾ the threat of population spillover from Lebanon to Europe was, and continues to be, a prominent political concern among European countries. France played an instrumental role in securing the release of Saad Hariri from Saudi Arabia and rushed to call for an international conference that would bring together an array of donors to support Lebanon. The CEDRE conference was held in March 2018, amidst a culmination of forces around the issue of asylum in Lebanon, which will be elaborated below.

While the above may give the impression that the challenges

⁽¹⁾ As explained below, the number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is itself politically contested.

battering Lebanon leading up to 2018 were solely external and due to overambitious regional geopolitical gambits, Lebanon had also been experiencing its own turmoil within the country. Internally, the most burdensome of challenges was the lack of citizens' confidence in the ruling class. 2015 saw large-scale popular protests against the government, known as the *Garbage Uprising*. Demonstrators filled the streets and political halls, fuel by the government's inability to collect garbage, resulting in piles of trash accumulating on streets and public areas throughout Lebanon. While the surge in mobilization was triggered by poor garbage management and associated corruption, widespread frustration soon spread to other venues of political life and government services, as people began calling into question the very basis of the *nizam*, system in Arabic. Much of the protests called to mind similar grievances articulated against the ruling class during the so-called "Arab Spring."

The 2015 *Garbage Uprising* stemmed mainly from domestic factors worsened by the inclement regional context. While the Lebanese political establishment did in fact succeeded in suppressing the protest movement and in buying more time, the 2017 crisis compounded these issues as it openly involved regional and international actors and further put at risk Lebanon's stability. In addition to the above-mentioned CEDRE conference, the international community encouraged the Lebanese ruling class to save face and contain the popular uproar by holding parliamentary elections according to a new electoral law. Important to note that Lebanon's parliamentary elections were last held in 2009. The parliament that was elected that year ended up extending its term three consecutive times (in 2013, 2014, and 2017). This was another source of public anger, as per the constitution the parliament is supposed to

have a mandate of only four years. Hariri's cabinet which was formed on December 18, 2016, in the wake of the "Presidential Deal" was the government that upheld executive powers until the end of 2018. Once elections ultimately took place in May 2018, two months after the CEDRE conference, Saad Hariri did not emerge particularly strong from this electoral test. However, he was tasked with forming a new government, and the government established through the 2016 Deal technically became a caretaking government after these elections.

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Lebanon in 2018: Strain from Refugee Populations

Upon the stage set by the above conditions, an important area for analysis of the dynamics between domestic and international trends in Lebanon is that of the case of asylum. As stated above, Lebanon is home to a large proportion of refugees, both Palestinian and Syrian, and tensions arose around both populations in 2018.

Palestinian Refugees and the Issue of Tawteen

Due to the strong international attention on the Syrian conflict in recent years, it was with some irony that the beginning of 2018 brought a spotlight on the case of Palestinian, not Syrian, asylum in Lebanon. It is not that the subject of Syrian refugees, with its many dimensions addressed in intra-Lebanese debates, was less present or less followed in 2018. Rather, a focus on Palestinian asylum gained precedence as a consequence of two back-to-back announcements, one internal and the other external to Lebanon.

In December 2017, a few weeks after his return from his Saudi misadventure, caretaker Prime Minister Saad Hariri announced with great fanfare that a census had been conducted jointly by Lebanese Central Bureau of Statistics

and its Palestinian counterpart and that it had found the number of Palestinians in Lebanon to be 174,422. This census of Palestinians intended to demystify the demographical weight the population carried in the country, but the findings were met with skepticism. In fact, the data would likely have been disregarded altogether had there not emerged almost simultaneous reports from the UN Security Council meeting that the United States would be cutting its financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). This announcement was followed by the United States withholding a previously scheduled disbursement of funds to UNRWA the next month, January 2018.

These two announcements triggered a resurgence in the public fixation with the idea of permanent settlement of refugees in Lebanon, known in Lebanese political language as *tawteen*. The concept of *tawteen* has been on the minds of Lebanese since the civil war, when Christian-affiliated groups took up arms over the issue of Palestinian refugees permanently settling in Lebanon. The arrival of Syrian refugees has rejuvenated these tensions, largely around concerns of demographic shifts brought to the country by incoming refugee populations.

The concerns around settlement remained dominant throughout the year due to several developments. The 2018 budget included an article, referred to as Article 49,⁽²⁾ that stated that “each Arab or non-Arab foreigner who buys a housing unit in Lebanon [shall be granted] for himself, his wife, and his underage children residency in Lebanon for the

⁽²⁾ As part of the controversy it stirred up, this article was sometimes referred to as Article 50 since it replaced the preceding article that had been abolished.

duration of his ownership.” The article originally intended to help the financially decaying Lebanese state bring in funding, but political objections emerged centered around concerns that that Lebanese citizenship was for sale and that perhaps some of the Palestinians and Syrians might buy their way into permanent settlement, retriggering concerns around *tawteen*. As a result, the Constitutional Council has since abolished this article.

In the aftermath of the May 2018 elections, the Lebanese government issued a naturalization decree which gave citizenship to around 400 people, drawing accusations from various corners of the social-political sphere that steps were being taken to permanently settle refugees, again igniting concerns and debates over the concept of *tawteen*. The controversy around the decree was additionally spurred by the fact that President Michel Aoun and Prime Minister Saad Hariri enacted the decree in private. Once the act was leaked to the public, it ignited debates over the limits of their powers and legality of their actions.

There were also violent clashes at the end of 2018 within the Miye ou Miye Palestinian refugee camp located east of Saida. This fighting was significant for two reasons. First, the skirmishes spilled out of the camp and affected the neighboring cluster of Christian Lebanese villages. The fighting demonstrated tensions over the de facto geographical expansion of the camp over its original limits, once again triggering issues over *tawteen*. The conflict reaffirmed prominent concerns around the fact that the Lebanese state does not have the final say when it comes to refugee camp security, and that Lebanese-Palestinian relations need to be addressed.

Second, a deeper look at the dynamics leading to the violence prompts analysis of camp security and what it means for the Palestinians, as well as the people outside the camps' boundaries. Notable questions are to which entity or individual does one look to for safety, and does this responsibility change hands? The fighting began in the camp between the Fatah Movement and the Ansar Allah Movement. Central to the fighting was Jamal Suleiman, who for more than 25 years was the most Hezbollah and Iran's important ally embedded in the Palestinian camps around Saida. The violence ended with an agreement pieced together behind closed doors by the engineers of camp security. As a result, Jamal Suleiman and about 20 of his family members and associated individuals were smuggled out of the camp, and taken to Damascus, Syria under the cover of darkness, as part of a joint Lebanese-Palestinian operation.

Based on the above chronicle of developments, the line between security and insecurity is quite blurred, and "safe" is a rather fluid term. Lebanese and Palestinian security officials maintain order in the camps with participation from a series of security contactors, affiliated with apparatuses of the Lebanese state. These groups, such as *Osbat al-Ansar* and *Al-Haraka al-Islamiyya al-Moujahida*, are largely led by individuals whom have undergone an image transformation; some of whom started off as Islamists and were considered terrorists before transforming into crucial interlocutors between camp populations and state officials. These newly minted security "experts" run a mix of groups whose control over parts of certain neighborhoods or alleys does not have any logical explanation. As long as life crawls along, most everyone is spared the need to understand the enigma of camp security.

In conclusion, while talk surrounding the actual number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon slowly subsided, there remained an active discussion of UNRWA's budget, attempts to redress its needs to sustain its mandate, its position in the Palestinian asylum narrative, and civil protests in camps against the UNRWA's forced austerity measures. Additionally, clashes both between Palestinian and Lebanese communities and within groups vying for control and security in the Palestinian camps play a role in the Lebanese awareness and discourses around *tawteen*. These developments are important for Palestinian asylum in Lebanon, which has become permanent until further notice. Subsequently, many of its secondary developments have been—so to speak—*Lebanonized*. This is to mean that many of the issues addressed here are not exclusive to Palestinians, nor more relevant for Palestinians, than for other marginalized communities in Lebanon. Concerns over services, support, and security—whether from UNRWA or Palestinian actors, or their Lebanese counterparts—all are embedded within Lebanon, not derived from the nature of these individual communities.

Syrian Refugees and the Issue of Return

At the beginning of 2018, the bodies of a dozen Syrians—mostly women and children—who were trying to cross into Lebanon on a snowy night, were discovered.⁽³⁾ The discovery once again cast the issue of Syrian asylum in Lebanon to the forefront of public conscience and showed that the proposed closing off borders to asylum seekers (in Lebanon and elsewhere) was not the panacea to the asylum problem.

⁽³⁾ Sources set different numbers for the victims, especially with bad weather conditions leading to the discovery of more bodies later on.

It also served as a reminder that tolerating the prevailing situation in Syria would simply cause more Syrians to flee, if not for security reasons then due to financial and economic ruin.

In 2018 there were growing tensions between Lebanese internal domestic pressures and the international community over Syrian refugees in Lebanon. These dynamics can be seen in the weeks leading up to the CEDRE conference in March, and the Conference on Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region in April, also known as the Brussels Conference. Prior to these events, Filippo Grandi, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, undertook a tour to parts of Syria and Lebanon. Upon concluding his trip, he asserted that “it is too soon to talk about the return of refugees.”⁽⁴⁾ What began to be clear in 2018 was the direct and indirect opposition of certain members of Lebanon’s ruling class to both Grandi's position and the position of the broader international community over Syrian refugees in the country.

By the end of 2018, Grandi's assertion was proven correct, as the situation in Syria consistently proved to not be supportive of fostering safe and dignified returns for refugees. Nevertheless, within Lebanon, neither the existing situation in Syria nor the international reading of it was enough to cease the debate about Syrian refugees’ presence in Lebanon, both at the official and non-official levels.

⁽⁴⁾ “Grandi at the end of his visit: It is too soon to talk about the return of refugees to Syria;” an-Nahar, March 10, 2018.

The conflict between the Lebanese state⁽⁵⁾ and the international community over Syrian asylum was hardly unique to 2018. The framework and language of this conflict had been put on display over the previous years. Lebanese President Aoun gave a speech at the UN General Assembly meeting in September 2017 which encapsulated this position.

Aoun unambiguously stated that “the need to regulate the return of displaced persons to their homeland has become urgent as the situation in most of their first places of residence has settled.” He continued, claiming that

“As for the current form of the collective asylum in Lebanon, it has happened for economic and security reasons and as an escape from the dangers of war. Therefore, we consider it a displacement rather than asylum; it was not coupled with the acceptance of the host country and was not limited to 'individual' asylum, but rather in the form of a population invasion. As for the claim that these people will not be safe if they return to their country, we are all aware that this pretext is unacceptable.”

During his speech, he once again expressed the burden placed on Lebanon due to the large number of Syrian refugees, in conjunction with the lengthy stay of Palestinian refugees and the collapse of UNRWA funding.⁽⁶⁾

⁽⁵⁾ We say the Lebanese state while aware that some partners in the authority, led by Saad Hariri, did not call for this conflict. It is useful not to forget that Saad Hariri completely changed after his Saudi ordeal; his positions on many issues, including refugee resettlement, became characterized by inferiority and defeat.

⁽⁶⁾ See the text of President Aoun's speech at: https://gadebate.un.org/sites/default/files/gastatements/72/lb_en.pdf

Hence, it came as little surprise that elements within the Lebanese government tried to prove their claims that Syria was ready for the return of its refugees in a preamble to the CEDRE and Brussels conferences. In March 2018, the General Directorate of the General Security in Lebanon sought to organize a pilot repatriation of hundreds of Syrian refugees from a Lebanese village in Shebaa via buses operated by the Syrian regime. The trip was postponed twice and finally occurred in April. In keeping with Grandi's position, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) issued a statement absolving itself of any responsibility for this controversial return.⁽⁷⁾ The announcement drew ire from the Lebanese Foreign Ministry and began a diplomatic dispute. Tensions reached an apex when the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates, Gebran Bassil, instructed the Directorate of Protocol to freeze UNHCR residency applications in Lebanon until further notice.⁽⁸⁾

In the midst of this aggravation between Lebanon and the UNHCR over the conditions and requirements of repatriation, external developments once again swayed the situation in Lebanon. In the middle of July 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump and Russian President Vladimir Putin came together for a summit in Helsinki to discuss American and Russian involvement with Syrian refugees

⁽⁷⁾ UNHCR's statement on this return stated that it "is not involved in the organization of these returns or other returns at this point, considering the prevailing humanitarian and security situation in Syria." It adds: "UNHCR, yet, respects the individual decisions of refugees to return to their country of origin, when taken without undue pressure, and having carefully weighed the information available to them;" (al-Mustaqbal, April 19).

⁽⁸⁾ "Bassil Freezes UNHCR's residency applications, and Hamade criticizes his unilateral approach to refugees and international organizations;" an-Nahar, June 9, 2018.

and repatriation. At the meeting, Russia proposed to the United States a “cooperation to guarantee the return of refugees to Syria,”⁽⁹⁾ a proposal that changed the direction and tone of the Lebanese discourse about Syrian asylum.

Publicly, on the surface at least, the Russian initiative appeared to gain widespread acceptance from Lebanese political actors. However, Lebanese stakeholders had a nuanced range of reactions, ranging from ones of convenience to ones of genuine support. Prime Minister Saad Hariri, busy running the caretaking government and trying to form a new one, saw in the Russian initiative a welcome opportunity to join the chorus of those advocating for the return of Syrian refugees without having to accept the idea of holding direct negotiations with the regime of Bashar Assad. However, Hariri comparatively bet much less on the Russian initiative than he did on the CEDRE and Brussels conferences, and as a result he did not sustain any considerable political losses when it ultimately failed. Rather than try to see it through to completion, he used the initiative as a way of showing—or trying to show—that he possessed the same refined international relations skills for which his father was known. Indeed, Hariri was hedging his bets on the international support he could leverage from hosting refugees. The purposed of CEDRE's can be summed up in the statement made by Hariri:

“We host 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This is a fact [...] until they leave, we are doing a general favor to the international community as a whole. No matter how much we pay for the refugees, this will not create jobs and businesses. What we should do is create jobs

⁽⁹⁾ An-Nahar, July 21, 2018.

for the Lebanese and the Syrians and start investing and preparing the infrastructure and the jobs.”⁽¹⁰⁾

The conference ended up bringing in over \$11 billion in aid pledges from international entities, with the intention of giving Lebanon the necessary means to hold the economic and financial distress at bay, thereby ensuring enough prolonged stability to continue hosting refugees.

Conversely, other Lebanese political actors did stake a great deal in the initiative put forth by Moscow. Reasons for support for the plan ranged from poor understanding of Syrian affairs, to a blind loyalty to the Assad regime, including acceptance of its narrative of the regime's victory over "terrorism." All of these motivations have which have precarious undertones and potentially problematic implications. It needs to be noted that despite the loftiness of the rhetoric that accompanied the Russian initiative between its public launching and quiet disintegration, the great expectations among members of the Lebanese elite remained until its last moments and were much bigger than the actual promises made to the Lebanese. Indeed, the realistic expectations of the initiative by the Russians paled in comparison to what some Lebanese leaders believed it could achieve.

Such a disparity is evident when looking at political weight given to Lebanese-Russian engagement in 2018. Incoming Prime Minister Saad Hariri and then-Minister of State for Displaced People's Affairs in the caretaking cabinet met with a Russian delegation. During the meeting, a Russian

⁽¹⁰⁾ “Hariri: Disassociation Is First Step for Lebanon's Neutrality; We Need International Political and Financial Support,” *Al-Mustaqbal*, December 14, 2017.

counterpart asserted that it would be possible to return 300,000 Syrian refugees from all over the world, while the remaining refugees could be returned once acts were taken to rebuild Syria and its infrastructure. Out of these 300,000, he claimed that around 100,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon could return to Syria.⁽¹¹⁾ While these are not significant numbers, these views were exchanged between other Russian and Lebanese officials, supporting those that had been arguing that conditions for return were ripe in Syria. The General Directorate of the General Security was among those attempting to prove such a notion by organizing the return convoys. Additionally, other state and non-state entities also sought to support such a concept, including the Secretary General of Hezbollah and the spokesperson of the Association of Syrian Workers in Lebanon (which has never hidden its ties to the Syrian regime's security agencies).

Support from various corners of the Lebanese government for repatriation and capitalization on the Russian impetus begs the question: why insist that it is time for refugees to return? When put in a wider regional context, as well as within the domestic game of tug-of-war between Lebanese ruling parties, the answer to the above can be seen. A prelude to the claim that the conditions of return are in place is the acceptance of the Assad regime's narrative about Syria's developments, past and present, as well as the acceptance of normalizing ties between the Lebanese state and Damascus. Lebanon not only verbally defended the Assad regime and bet on its endurance, but Hezbollah also sent fighters to support and defend it. Given this assistance, a party that sent

⁽¹¹⁾ Majd Bou Moujahed, "300,000 Syrian refugees around the world can return home... 2,000 left Lebanon in two months, and Hezbollah is partner to the crisis," *an-Nahar*, August 20, 2018.

fighters to die in defense of this regime is able to mislead itself into thinking it can have the final say over Lebanon's official posture towards the Syrian regime. In sum, those who called for the return of refugees back to Syria on the pretext that the conditions of return were in place did not do so because they wanted the refugees returned, as much as they wanted to argue for the Syrian regime's legitimacy.

Lebanon's optimism over the Russian initiative continued, as did Lebanese political convoys to Moscow, until mid-November 2018. It was then when a Lebanese institution with strong ties to the Vatican organized a visit to the Papal seat by a number of Lebanese "notables," including lawmakers of various political and confessional affiliations. After the delegation returned and the content of the discussions between the Vatican and the visitors became more widely known, optimism about the initiative in Lebanon turned to pessimism and talks about "return" regained some realism. The change in opinion was largely facilitated when the direct and candid message delivered by Paul Richard Gallagher, the Holy See's Secretariat of Relations with States, became public. It was reported that he had asked the Lebanese delegation in a strongly-worded statement to "avoid childish dreams and fairytales," while adding that many challenges face the return of refugees, including the fact that the Syrian state, with its numerous devastated regions, is incapable of accommodating the returning citizens. It was finally from this statement that it became understood that the Russian initiative would not be successful at the present time, posing a counterargument to what many Lebanese officials had believed would be possible at this point.⁽¹²⁾

⁽¹²⁾ Radwan Akil, "No government before yearend and the Vatican shows

Conclusion and Analysis

The above events and dynamics highlight key asylum-related developments from 2018 in a context that accounts for previous events, while providing understanding for the future. Among these highlights, there can be seen trends that marked asylum this year, including on-going syndromes that are extensions from previous years and some that will likely be repeated in the coming years.

- First, the issue of asylum has been mentioned in nearly every field, news item, public or private development, and positive or negative event. Be it in discussions around security, the economy, labor markets, infrastructure, healthcare, education, or others, seemingly everyone could not help but talk about asylum in one way or another regardless of asylum's relevancy to the subject. Put simply, asylum has become a seasoning that is sprinkled all over Lebanon's day-to-day life. The commonplace of references made to the case of asylum in Lebanon embodies an intentional scapegoating: it places the blame for all of Lebanon's woes on asylum seekers. The ubiquity of mention of the case of asylum in Lebanon can seem over the top, but largely it shows a firm will to turn a blind eye towards specific home-grown Lebanese challenges that either predate the arrival of refugee populations or that is just simply overall unrelated to their presence.

- Second, in 2018 the most outspoken Lebanese political group when it came to the Syrian asylum question was the Free Patriotic Movement and its leader, Gebran Bassil. However, this does not mean the group will necessarily

interest in the refugees issue," *an-Nahar*, November 24, 2018.

have the final say, or even the “political rights” to decide on the matter. Conversely, while Hezbollah is one of the groups with the strongest sway and stake in issues regarding Syrian asylum in Lebanon, it is simultaneously one of the most publicly reserved and often vague groups on the issue. For example, on August 30, 2018, Hezbollah called for the Lebanese government and the Lebanese political forces “to take advantage of the regional developments to review its strategic positioning and its regional and international relationships.” Behind this abstract language, Hezbollah was hinting encouragement to develop the Lebanese-Syrian relationship on one the hand, and to support the Russian initiative on the other hand. The message did not fall in deaf ears: as soon as the statement was published, the debate about these two issues was indeed bolstered with positivity among Hezbollah’s allies, and more or less negatively from Hezbollah's opponents.

- Third, there is an often-overlooked xenophobic similarity between the stances of the President and his cronies – including his son-in-law and the Foreign Minister Gibran Bassil – and the stances of the head of the Maronite Church, Patriarch Bechara Rai. After a meeting with President Aoun, the Maronite Patriarch publicly expressed his ideological support and alignment with Hungary, stated that “the only country that we share the same ideas with about this issue is Hungary, which emphasizes on the right of the displaced Syrians and Iraqis to return home, and we have to help them achieve this.”⁽¹³⁾ Hungary has one of the strictest anti-immigration policies in the EU, and its xenophobia has come into question in its treatment of refugees and

⁽¹³⁾ *Al-Mustaqbal*, August 30, 2018.

asylum-seekers. This alignment may explain why some of the Christian political groups that are not aligned with Hezbollah—and who actually oppose an alliance with the group—have nevertheless a similar position as Hezbollah on asylum in the country. These groups often express their concerns over asylum and warning of the consequences of settlement, evoking in their audience a threat of demographic disturbance aligned with the concerns of their constituents.

- Fourth, there has been a major expansion of the role of the General Directorate of the General Security in public affairs. This can be seen both through an increase in its physical presence, such the opening of centers in a number of regions ostensibly to serve refugees, and through an increase in political responsibilities, such as the political roles assigned to the Director General, especially in the so-called “security coordination” with Syria. Evidence of this can be seen in the Direct General’s leadership in organizing the return convoys of Syrians from Lebanon to Syria. This was done under the mandate the General Security Directorate claims it has from the Lebanese government to “implement the mechanism of voluntary and safe return of the displaced Syrian to the Syrian territories.”⁽¹⁴⁾ Within the Lebanese system of partisan patronage over the state’s institutions, it is an open secret that this security apparatus is closely linked to Hezbollah. Consequently, the expansion of the role of this Directorate is tantamount to the expansion of Hezbollah.

- Lastly, the developments of this year that showed a fierce political clash between the Lebanese government and the UNHCR and the international community behind the

⁽¹⁴⁾ General Security Directorate website, August 31, 2018.

organization. It is clear that differences between the two parties' approach to asylum are not only about policies, but also about asylum's ambiguous place in Lebanon's memory and the Lebanese parties exploiting asylum for political goals. There is no current negotiable resolution for these differences, and hence, it is perhaps the most important syndrome of asylum in Lebanon in 2018. As a result, no significant partnerships or engagement between Lebanon and the international community can be successful if this facet is neglected or underestimated.