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Lebanon's Politicians Insist Syrian Refugees Return Home, But to What?

Syrian Refugee Campsite near the Syrian-Lebanon border

“Uridu an aouda ela bayti fi Sourya!” (“I want to return home to Syria!”).

These are the words perhaps most regularly heard by Meals for Syrian Refugee Children in Lebanon (MSRCL) volunteers and other NGO’s who work with Syrian refugee children in Lebanon. And expressed by orphan children’s fellow squatters and remaining extended family members.



Above: A Syrian refugee encampment in Lebanon’s Bekaa Valley. Increasingly Syrians who fled the carnage in their country next door are under pressure to return to Syria

despite grave dangers from a variety of sources if they do. According to the U.N.'s refugee agency, UNHCR, 1,300 Syrian families were evicted from their settlements in the Bekaa Valley in 2017. It said close to sixty percent of the evictions were ordered by Lebanese military intelligence while another 30 percent were ordered by local officials. All of these forced evictions violate international laws relating to Non-refoulement as defined in the UN's 1951 Refugee Convention: *No refugee shall be returned to any country where he or she is likely to face persecution or torture.*" Photo: Maher Salloum 4/24/2018

One of Lebanon's most insistent advocates for Syrians seeking safety from the war in their own country next door, to return whence they came without further delay, is Lebanon's Maronite Catholic Church Patriarch Bechara Al-Rahi. His holiness claims to represent all the Patriarchs and Christians of the Middle East his spokesperson Walid Ghayyad advised this observer following a meeting with the self-styled Vicar of Christ.

Considered by many in the run-up to Lebanon's May 6, 2018 Parliamentary election as rather more politician than prelate, not unlike most of the other leaders of half a dozen Lebanese religious sects these days, there are few partisan political issues the Patriarch won't jump into. This is because the gentleman eschews any notion of the Separation of Religion and Government (Church and State.)

During our meeting, the Patriarch donned what must have been perhaps 40 pounds of thick impressive bright colored robes, and a huge gold cross as he sat below a large painting of Jesus Christ. He had just arrived from a religious event and did not bother to change into something more layman-like. The Patriarch had been advised that I asked to see him to seek his support for Lebanon's Parliament to take 90 minutes of its time to grant Palestinian refugees in Lebanon the same elementary civil rights to work and to buy a home that every refugee on our planet is granted, Except Palestinians in Lebanon.

I had heard his electoral stump speech a couple of times about how the "500,000" Palestinian refugees were ruining Lebanon's economy, social order, morality and politics and must leave Lebanon and find other host countries to populate. As the Patriarch is surely aware, last year's first in-depth population count of Palestinians in Lebanon is half his preferred figure or 270,000 at most. In addition, there are probably 15,000 Palestinians from Syria still here.

Most Palestinians who were forced from the war in Syria to Lebanon have returned and my friends from Yarmouk "camp" in Damascus, now nearly destroyed, all express how shocked they were to find the conditions their countrymen are forced to live under is

Lebanon. Yet, like the Syrians still seeking refuge in Lebanon, most cannot return at this time for a variety of political and security reasons, some of which are noted below.

His holiness was not amused when this miscreant gestured toward the painting of Jesus Christ the Righteous above him and inquired: “Sir, with respect to the Palestinian gentleman in the painting above you who the Bible reports enjoyed visiting Qana and Sidon in Lebanon, what shall we do about him?” The Patriarch glared and ignored my impudent query and abruptly turned the subject to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon whom he sees as an even a greater existential threat to Lebanon’s 18 oft-feuding sects.

As is the case with virtually every politician in Lebanon, Patriarch al-Rahi knows the Palestinian civil rights issue and I was sure he would be a tough sale. But the gentleman did give this observer a fair hearing on the facts as I see them, and I could not have asked for more. But clearly, he is opposed, like most of his Christian sisters and brothers in Lebanon, to granting Palestinians even the most elementary civil rights and has done nothing to encourage his flock to apply to Syrian refugees Jesus Christ’s plea, found in Luke 6:31: “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.”

For many in Lebanon, including Patriarch al-Rahi, the return of refugees to Syria is vital to the very future existence of the Lebanese state. Nearly every Lebanese political party, irrespective of their current alliances, have called for the repatriation of refugees, whether they are pro or anti the Assad regime.

Some Lebanese authorities mistreat Syrians to pressure them to return home

Lebanon’s Prime Minister Saad Hariri recently promised that Syrian refugees would not be forced to leave Lebanon until it was safe for them to return. But this week, while seeking billions in grants from countries attending the Brussels conference, he stressed to would be donors that Lebanon has become “one big Refugee camp” as he inflated by one-third the UN estimated number of Syrians here. In fact, UN agencies report that the number does not exceed one million with 70% living in poverty.

The increasingly toxic Lebanese electoral environment in which the current debate is taking place increases pressure for the forced return of vulnerable refugees to Syria despite unsafe conditions. Probably most of the Lebanese population approve because they are influenced by fear-mongering and anti-refugee campaign speeches. The latter are intensifying and becoming ever more strident with national elections less than two weeks away and politicians making the refugees a main ballot box issue. Lebanon’s Foreign Minister Jebran Bassil, who leads President Michel Aoun’s Free Patriotic Movement party and is the president’s son-in-law, has been stridently insisting since last January that it’s

past time for all Syrian refugees to return home. He and other Christian politicians warn voters that the overwhelmingly Sunni Muslim Syrian refugee population is a threat to Lebanon's national identity. Many Shia Muslim politicians tell their voters that there must not be more Sunni Muslims in Lebanon.

Iran and its Shia basij brought into the region, for among other reasons, to seek to help shrink the Sunni population of Syria by as many as ten million to give Tehran better control for its projects. To achieve this goal there continues to be ever more illegal civilian ethnic cleaning and population transfer schemes in the name of "reconciliation agreements" or "deconfliction zones". Long story made short, if one supports the Assad regime (most Shias) the person wants the refugees seeking safety in Lebanon pushed back into Syria to face whatever is to be their fate. If one opposes the Assad regime (a majority of Sunni) the person is more apt to want the Syrian refugees to receive international refugee status and humanitarian assistance until they can safely return home.

The U.N. and human rights groups insist that Syria is not safe for refugees to return. The country has suffered catastrophic damage, and many men say they are afraid they will be arrested when they return, on charges of fleeing military conscription or having family members who support the opposition to the Assad regime. Nevertheless, according to Human Rights Watch, local officials in Lebanon are forcing Syrians out of their towns in a violation of their rights as refugees and residents. HRW has also reported this week that: "Local officials in several municipalities ordered Syrians out en masse, posting eviction notices on their doors, and sometimes sending the police to physically intimidate the refugees if they did not comply."

Syrian refugees also face numerous barriers to employment, education and housing in Lebanon, with many forced to survive in an "informal economy" without documentation because Lebanon ordered the U.N.'s refugee commission to halt refugee registrations in 2015.

Even as donor nations raise money at the Brussels gathering for Syria's neighbors to host refugees from the country's civil war, a leading international rights group and the U.N.'s refugee agency claim that Lebanese authorities are evicting refugees from towns and camps in the country on questionable legal grounds. Some Syrian refugees have reported this week that if they ask for help from local officials to stop summary evictions they are being told, "Go back to Syria." Human Rights Watch has documented evictions in 13 towns and villages putting more than 3,600 Syrians on the streets since 2016. It said the

Lebanese Army uprooted another 7,500 refugees near a military base around Christmas 2017.

Meanwhile, earlier this month, Lebanon's General Security police agency, which handles border security, escorted 500 refugees in the Shebaa farms area of South Lebanon with instructions to return to their villages in western Syria. The U.N. did not participate in the operation claiming that it did not believe Syria was safe enough for returnees. According to the U.N.'s refugee agency, UNHCR, another 1,300 Syrian families were evicted from their camps and homes in the Bekaa Valley in 2017. It said close to sixty percent of the evictions were ordered by Lebanese military intelligence. Another 30 percent were ordered by local officials.

Unfortunately, there are serious barriers for millions of Syrians in surrounding countries and Europe wanting to return to their country. More than 3 million refugees from Syria are estimated to be wanted by various regime security agencies and it's very difficult to learn if one's name is listed. Many who returned to Syria have disappeared without a trace with their families worrying that they ended up in one of Syria's security "slaughter houses" widely reported on by human rights organizations and regime deserters.

Millions of displaced Syrians stand to lose their homes and property

Under a new property law issued by the Syrian government on instructions from Iran's Qassim Soleimani, Syrians have just 30 days to prove ownership of these houses. Introduced on April 2, 2018, Law 10 sets in motion a massive overhaul of the government land registry across Syria. Law 10 as it is commonly called, gives property owners both in Syria and abroad just 30 days—starting 4/11/2018—to present their deeds to local council offices in the country. Otherwise, the state can liquidate their titles and seize their holdings. Once the registration window closes, "the remaining plots will be sold at auction," according to Article 31 of the law. Billions of dollars in real estate are expected to go to certain regime approved 'investors' while millions of Syrians, mainly Sunni, lose their property in Syria. An estimated 5.7 million Syrians have fled the country as refugees, and a further 6.5 million people are displaced inside Syria, thus more than 12 million Syrian's risk losing their homes. The UN estimates that only approximately 9 % of Syrians who fled the slaughter even have in their possession or access to documentation showing ownership. Most Syrian refugees lost them during the war. But there are many other barriers that await the 9%.

Perhaps most ominously for opponents of the regime, who constitute a large majority of the Syrian population who were forced to flee, as well as those who cannot now flee, all

property owners wishing to register their lands must first obtain approval from various regime security officials. The need for security clearance could exclude a majority of the Syrian population inside and outside the country with outstanding arrest warrants or anti-government sympathies from registering their property.

Lacking security agencies approval, Syrian refugees are not allowed to prove ownership of the property and it ends up sold at auction or claimed by another person who supports the regime or is part of a certain pro-government sect.

Law 10 comes in the immediate wake of the Syrian government's recapture of East Ghouta, one of the last major rebel-held areas near Damascus, in early April. The forced transfer of more than 60,000 residents to opposition territory leaves the fate of thousands of properties near Damascus uncertain. Under the new law, former residents of the enclave would now need family members to register property on their behalf or go to government territory themselves and risk arrest.

One Damascus lawyer reports that the timing of Law 10 makes its motives suspect. "The timing of the decree, in light of the war which has seen millions displaced and the creation of refugees who cannot return to their homes because of the security situation, certainly raises doubts," she said. Even before the latest property law, international aid agencies warned of legal ramifications surrounding the issue of lost or damaged property in Syria. A Norwegian Refugee Council report this past February estimated that the state could face more than 2 million lawsuits from Syrians seeking restitution for lost or damaged property in the wake of the civil war.

As reported in a recent Carnegie Middle East Center report, the subject of property titles and deeds in Syria is greatly complicated by the existence of parallel administrative systems that sprang up across a patchwork of opposition areas during the conflict. When government forces recapture these areas, documentation produced by opposition is often destroyed.

The Syrian conflict has resulted in the destruction of many Syrian land registries also based on sectarian motives. For example, when a Sunni area has been depopulated the Property Registry Office is often burned by Shia regime supporters to facilitate population transfers. This practice has been carried out extensively from Damascus north to Homs and Aleppo on to Latakia Governorate to secure the area to assure future control by non-rebel sects and for the "Tehran to Mediterranean" corridor project.

This observer believes that it will be several years before most Syrian refugees forced into Lebanon or other countries will be able to return to their own beloved but largely

destroyed country. The war is far from over as “defeated” militia and rebels regroup and launch asymmetrical and guerilla warfare that will likely last indefinitely until a new order is in place that grants the average Syrian citizen dignity, full civil rights, economic opportunities and participation in Syria’s local and national government. Intense military operations are ongoing in several regions, resulting in new waves of population displacements.

Syria remains fragmented into multiple zones of influence, making future conflict very likely. Even de-escalation zones have proven unstable, with numerous violations being recorded in recent months.

Approximately one-quarter of Syrians live in exile and almost one-third has been internally displaced. Yet but their priorities are not being represented in the claimed “negotiations” over a postwar political settlement. The Geneva process and talks in Astana have focused on” stabilization” and “de-escalation” efforts, while largely ignoring the plight of refugees and internally displaced populations.

From the perspective of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and in view of the current conditions in Syria, their return over the next few years is increasingly unlikely. And contingent on issues beyond their control.

Lebanon’s government should continue to receive international aid to help host Syrian refugees if it accounts for how the funds are spent and treats Syrian refugees consistent with the principles and standards laid out in the 1951 UN Refugee Convention Article 33 (1) that provides: *No Contracting State shall expel or return (“refouler”) a refugee in any manner whatsoever to the frontiers of territories where his life or freedom would be threatened on account of his race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.”*

While Lebanon has refused to sign the Refugee Convention, it is nevertheless fully bound by its provisions under standards of International Customary Law including the prohibition of forced return (non-refoulement).