

CITIZENS' PERCEPTIONS OF SECURITY THREATS STEMMING FROM THE SYRIAN REFUGEE PRESENCE IN LEBANON

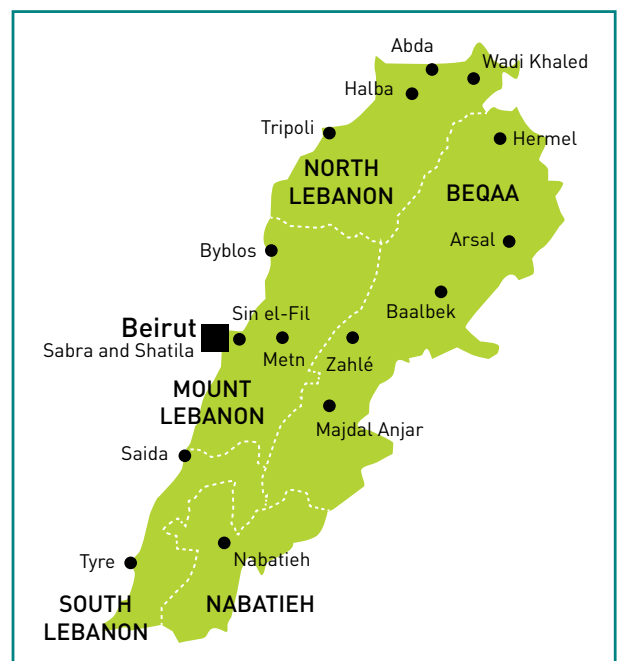
SUMMARY

In June 2013, International Alert and the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) conducted a survey in Lebanon about the public's perceptions of security and security institutions. The survey revealed that Syrian refugees were identified as a main security challenge across Lebanon. Despite having sympathy for the plight of Syrians, most respondents felt threatened and expressed increasing intolerance to the repercussions of Syria's prolonged crisis in Lebanon. The top concerns were the fear of becoming a victim of crime and the risk of falling into poverty, threats to sectarian balance resulting from the prolonged stay of a large number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, service shortages being further exacerbated by the Syrian refugee presence, and environmental risks stemming from dilapidated water and sewerage networks. In terms of solutions, most respondents favoured hosting Syrian refugees in camps co-administered by the international community and with humane conditions. However, respondents expressed serious concerns that Syrian refugee camps could threaten the Lebanese sectarian balance in the long term and create an enabling environment for the radicalisation of refugees, in turn increasing terrorism and organised crime rates.

INTRODUCTION

Context

Since the outbreak of the Syrian crisis in March 2011, people fleeing the conflict in Syria sought refuge in neighbouring Lebanon. Coming in small groups at first, Syrian refugees were easily absorbed by Lebanese communities. However, as violence steadily escalated in Syria, the number of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon hit the one million mark in April 2014, with the crisis entering its fourth year. This month it reached over 1.15 million,¹ making Lebanon the country with the highest per-capita concentration of refugees in the world. It is worth noting that these numbers do not include refugees awaiting registration, those unwilling to register, or Palestinian refugees from Syria. Different sources agree that one out of every four persons in Lebanon today is a refugee of the Syrian crisis. Scattered in 1,700 Lebanese communities,² Syrian refugees are mostly concentrated in the Beqaa and Akkar districts, Lebanon's poorest areas.³ It should also be noted that 52.6% of arriving refugees are female, 47.4% are male and almost half are children.⁴



1 Updated details of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon are available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

2 'Syrian refugees, sectarian tensions endanger Lebanon: UN', *The Daily Star Lebanon*, 14 July 2014, available at <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Lebanon-News/2014/Jul-14/263824-syrian-refugees-sectarian-tensions-endanger-lebanon-un.ashx#axzz3GhtoUGWX>

3 UNHCR map of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon is available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/download.php?id=7900>

4 Updated details of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon are available at <http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>

While Lebanese political discourse on the Syrian crisis carries contradictions depending on political and sectarian stances, a national strategy to respond to refugees' arrival and crisis impact is still absent. According to the World Bank's Economic and Social Impact Assessment issued in September 2013, Lebanon's already large fiscal deficit has been significantly affected by the Syrian crisis, reaching US\$2.6 billion over the course of the period assessed. The assessment also predicted that more than 170,000 Lebanese would be pushed into poverty by 2014.⁵ Adding to its socio-economic impact, the spillover of the Syrian crisis and Lebanon's open door policy have fuelled mounting public fears of environmental, sectarian and security threats, in view of Lebanon's overstretched resources and the infiltration of refugee waves by radical armed groups, often exaggerated in media and political discourses.

Objectives

The primary objective of the survey commissioned by International Alert and the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies (LCPS) was to answer the following questions:

- Why do Lebanese people feel threatened by Syrian refugees?
- What results have security measures implemented so far garnered?
- What can be done by responsible parties (Lebanese government, international community and awareness campaigns) to address this issue?

Methodology

A total of 15 in-depth interviews were conducted with decision-makers and public opinion makers, including national and local security officials, politicians, municipal officials and community leaders. Interviews were semi-structured to allow respondents to probe and not to give pre-determined answers. Interviewees were told they were free to refuse to answer any question for personal or professional considerations, however, a few had reservations about some questions. Several interviews with key security officials in the most affected areas were carried out in the wake of violent clashes between the Lebanese army and armed groups in the town of Aarsal in Beqaa in early August 2014.

Five focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted in Tripoli (two), Baalbek, Saida and Zahlé. Taking into account cultural sensitivities in some local communities, mixed gender focus groups were substituted by separate meetings with women and men.

Cluster surveys were also carried out in 13 local communities, including Wadi Khaled, Abda, Tripoli, Metn, Sin el-Fil, Sabra and Shatila, Saida, Tyre, Aarsal, Hermel, Majdal Anjar, Zahlé and Baalbek. The survey sample size included 260 Lebanese citizens, selected through systematic random sampling. Following the quartering of each cluster, households

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covering all four parts of a cluster were randomly selected to participate in the survey. Questionnaires included closed-ended and open-ended questions tackling different public services and institutional performance. Women constituted approximately 41% of the sample size, while young people under 30 years of age represented 43%. Although these percentages do not ideally reflect demographic characteristics of selected clusters, they reasonably meet the requirement of an indicative survey aiming to qualify

previous gaps in the overall quantitative survey on security perceptions in Lebanon in general. The cluster analysis enabled us to capture distinct characteristics between areas sharing similar sectarian identity and to understand the different factors that might contribute to shaping public perceptions within each cluster. Interestingly, local conditions in host communities seem to be a pivotal factor in shaping local perceptions regarding the Syrian refugee presence in Lebanon, regardless of mainstream political and sectarian positions.

A content analysis of mainstream Lebanese media coverage of the refugee crisis was also conducted between January and February 2014.

⁵ World Bank [2013]. *Lebanon: Economic and Social Impact Assessment of the Syrian Conflict – Executive Summary*. Washington DC: World Bank. Available at <http://www.worldbank.org/content/dam/Worldbank/document/MNA/LBN-ESIA%20of%20Syrian%20Conflict-%20EX%20SUMMARY%20ENGLISH.pdf>

MAIN FINDINGS

In order to capture the impact of the Syrian refugee presence on public perceptions of security threats, we started by analysing prevalent perceptions prior to the arrival of Syrian refugees in 2011. Aware that individual perceptions of security are shaped by various social markers – including sectarian and political affiliation, prevalent local conditions, types of common threats, gender and age group – this section summarises general and specific trends of perceptions emerging from the semi-structured interviews, FGDs and surveys.

Perceptions of safety before the arrival of Syrian refugees

The general perception that Syrian refugees are responsible for an upsurge in crime and security threats must be carefully examined. Only 40% of all respondents in the Alert and LCPS survey reported feeling safe in their areas of residence before a large wave of Syrian refugees arrived at their areas, while another 35% felt “somewhat safe” and about 25% felt unsafe. These perceptions greatly varied among districts. In the North province, 60% to 75% of respondents felt unsafe in Tripoli, Wadi Khaled and Abda. Those in Hermel and Aarsal indicated the highest perceptions of safety, followed by Tyre, Metn and Saida. These perceptions seemed to be influenced by local conditions rather than the community’s predominant political and sectarian affiliations, in view of violence rounds in Tripoli and security incidents in Akkar.

Perceptions of safety also varied with different types of feared threats. For instance, sectarian tensions were perceived to be an issue of importance across all regions in Saida and Beqaa, but did not surface at all in the North province where the main concerns seem to be petty and organised crime. Fear of politically-motivated problems (such as attacks on liquor stores and minor delinquency) were brought out as other types of security threats in some areas, such as Tyre.

As a general trend, respondents tried to distance themselves and their communities from crimes they considered shameful, such as sexual violence. The community leaders and local security officials interviewed seemed attentive to making sure that their communities were not perceived as troubled, as they tended to downplay existing problems and insisted that organised crime was a new phenomenon in their local communities.

Changes in perceptions of safety after the arrival of Syrian refugees

The vast majority of respondents said that safety conditions in their areas have worsened since the arrival of Syrian refugees. In Metn, Tyre, and Sabra and Shatila, over 50% of respondents felt that the situation did not change positively or negatively following the arrival of Syrian refugees. In Saida, only 20% of respondents felt that their city had become safer, while 60% felt it had become less safe. While this relative feeling of improved safety might be attributed to the Lebanese army’s operation ending the armed presence of Sunni cleric Ahmed Assir in May 2013, security concerns have surfaced again in Saida due to fear among the general public of the prolonged stay of Syrian refugees.

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The arrival of large waves of refugees has fuelled perceptions of insecurity across clusters (over 75% of respondents), with the exception of interfaith families and non-regular voters (30% and 35%, respectively). In general, most lay people interviewed believed that Lebanese people share, or at least understand, the fears of one another. However, community leaders and security officials tended to describe differences in perceptions along sectarian lines as they ranked higher in their positions.

Observing specific risks, the picture becomes more complex. Different types of security risks have been subject to different rates of change. In the most peculiar case, gender-based crimes were thought to have been actually reduced by 12% of respondents. The only constant phenomenon is a group of 30%–40% of respondents who consistently felt that things did not change, regardless of the type of security threat they were asked about. Metn and Sin el-Fil reported the least number of expressed worries of increased threats. Although most respondents perceived increased security risks in those two areas, they were more likely to attribute these risks to only one factor. In other areas, respondents associated increased risks primarily to petty crime and house burglary. In the North province, it is commonly felt that safety conditions have worsened in general, particularly in relation to petty crime, organised crime, morality crimes and vandalism – an almost exclusive concern in this area. House burglary is a major concern in the large urban centres as well as in remote towns where many urbanites own property. This might indicate that the correlation between worsening security conditions and the influx of Syrian refugees is far from conclusive.

Focus groups and interviewees reported being afraid of terrorism and arms smuggling, and expressed a general sense of economic unease. Respondents repeatedly indicated that extreme poverty and deprivation could push people to take drastic measures. During FGDs, it was generally agreed that socio-economic pressure had not yet reached a tipping point, but that it is weighing heavily on people's perceptions of security threats on all levels. Fear of sectarian tensions increased dramatically in Saida and Tyre, as well as in Beqaa. Again, perceptions of some risks seem to be particularly specific to some locations rather than shared along sectarian lines.

Some 15% of respondents reported personally experiencing security threats, with another 19% reporting that they heard firsthand accounts of security incidents. However, this general perception seems to be the product of inaccurate word of mouth, as indicated by anecdotes recounted during the FGDs. Respondents who claimed recently experiencing a personal security threat did not seem to differ from the sample in any significant way and were not confined to any particular cluster.

Perceptions of long-term risks to Lebanon's sectarian balance

Sectarian balance in Lebanon is framed as a critical issue as it constitutes the cornerstone of the carefully calibrated power-sharing formula resulting from the Taif Agreement in 1989, which ended the Lebanese civil war. The fighting in Syria has affected all communities, albeit to different degrees. Syria's sectarian demographics are considerably different to those of Lebanon. The vast majority of Syrian refugees arriving to Lebanon are Sunnis, which some political and media discourse represent as alarming. However, perceptions of the Lebanese public do not seem to necessarily reflect their political affiliations or sectarian identities.

Asked about their direct concern regarding their own area's sectarian balance, only 30% of respondents considered Syrian refugees to be a direct risk in this regard, whereas 55% of respondents refused to associate the presence of Syrian refugees with potential risks to their areas' sectarian balance. Another 15% of respondents did not seem to care about this issue either way. Focus groups revealed that participants tend to perceive the Syrian refugee presence as temporary, unlike the protracted refugee situation of Palestinians. Yet, considerable differences among the clusters were noticed. For instance, 80% of respondents in Zahlé and Saida felt that the sectarian balance of their own areas would be definitely threatened by the presence of Syrian refugees. However, the predominantly Sunni North province seemed by far less concerned about this issue. Different perceptions were observed within Christian and Shia areas, even within areas of similar sectarian demographics.

Data correlation showed little variation between men and women, with men having a slightly higher perception of fear concerning sectarian balance in their areas than women. The highest levels of concern were particularly noticed among the newly employed and unemployed respondents, those aged under 30 and those with the highest levels of education. The least threatened perceptions of Syrians were observed among people with lower levels of income and education, as well as families with Syrian marital ties.

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Respondents' perceptions changed significantly when asked about threats to sectarian balance in Lebanon as a whole. About 51% of respondents considered the Syrian presence to pose a threat to the Lebanese sectarian balance beyond their own areas, while a sizeable 38% still refused to consider Syrians as a threat to the sectarian balance in Lebanon. In particular, Sunni communities did not seem to be threatened by Syrians in general, but showed understanding of other sects' feelings of threat, as revealed by the focus groups and interviews.

Although the issue of preserving sectarian balance did not top the respondents' concerns, possible sectarian violence posed a serious threat to the vast majority of respondents. Asked about their perceptions of possible threats related to the direct engagement of some Syrians in sectarian violence in their immediate vicinity, about 70% of respondents reported anticipating such risks. Sunni communities tended to have slightly lower fears, similar to clusters in the North province. Among non-Sunni areas, Metn was the only area where respondents felt relatively safe from sectarian strife, with only 30% reporting concern about Syrians influencing sectarian agitation in their own area. Nonetheless, recent events in Aarsal have greatly altered Sunni perceptions and concerns. While leaders of Sunni communities continue to show tolerance of refugees on sectarian grounds, they expressed increased fears of radical armed groups infiltrating refugees. Moreover, some of the officials interviewed considered that potential Syrian armament as well as direct engagement and recruitment of local communities in violence against neighbouring communities have reached

a tipping point. In addition, mainstream public discourse among Sunnis and Shias reflects an exchange of accusation suggesting that the other sect is using Syrian refugees' presence as a pretext to settle unresolved conflicts among Lebanese communities.

Perceptions of economic and livelihood risks

The increased demand for consumer goods and housing has caused undeniable inflation. Increased productivity, economies of scale, new financial flows into the community, cheaper labour and other side-effects often associated with large numbers of refugees arriving to Lebanon have not yet clearly materialised. Economic benefits seem confined to the hands of a few in the community.

Focus groups have exposed the multiple layers and different perceptions of the economic impact of the prolonged stay of large numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Negative perceptions of competition from cheaper Syrian labour are generally common in all areas and economic sectors. Among the poor, especially in the North province, competition with Syrians over limited jobs and resources seems a major concern. Yet, Beqaa constitutes a special case, with some clusters associating positive economic effects from the presence of Syrian refugees, whose labour has significantly contributed to agricultural produce, which is considered a primary source of income in the local economy. In this case, increased demand for food has benefited large groups in the population.

However, here again, perceptions of economic threat seem exaggerated beyond its real magnitude. Asked if they perceive Syrian refugees as a direct threat to their personal economy, only 23% of respondents answered yes, compared with 72% who thought that they were not personally affected. These ratios were reversed when respondents were asked if Syrians pose a risk to other Lebanese citizens, with 74% answering yes.

In this regard, women seemed slightly less concerned than men, while younger respondents reported being worried more than older generations. As expected, relatively newly employed and unemployed respondents felt more affected by Syrian competition in the labour market than those with more secure employment. Respondents who regularly vote for the same political party tended to be more economically threatened than merit voters. It is not surprising that people with recent kinship or marital ties with Syrians felt the least threatened by Syrians on an economic level. However, as respondents' level of income and education decreased, they unexpectedly reported being less economically threatened by the Syrian presence, which contradicts mainstream political and media discourse.

During FGDs, participants identified specific threats related to the decline in the quality and availability of resources and services, including water, sewerage, electricity, telecommunications, and education and healthcare facilities. Women, in particular, identified negative effects on the physical environment of their local community, represented by overstretched local infrastructure and resources.

In this context, Arsal is facing the most severe shortage of water and electricity, while main concerns in the North and Beqaa provinces revolve around schooling and health. Crowded roads and public transport were common concerns in all areas, with respondents in Metn in particular expressing concern about public transport. Repercussions on the quality of public spaces seemed more prevalent in urban areas, with Metn and Sin el-Fil registering the highest levels of concern in this regard.

When discussing the reasons behind the decline in quality and availability of resources and services, the majority of respondents evenly attributed the worsening situation to Syrian refugees and local factors, such as insufficient funding and ineffective governance. However, around 17% of respondents blamed the situation entirely on local factors. Saida, Tyre and Arsal stood out as the three main clusters where respondents mostly attributed the situation to local conditions, while respondents from Sin el-Fil and Zahlé tended to place the responsibility solely onto Syrian refugees. Interviews with local officials, as well as FGDs, indicate a tendency to blame the Lebanese government for failing to develop a strategic response to the crisis, while politicians blamed their political opponents for the deadlock. However, some local leaders reported receiving little governmental support to respond locally to the crisis.

Analysing variations in reasons attributed to the worsening situation indicate that respondents in different clusters were primarily influenced by area-specific conditions and factors. However, dogmatic and merit voters did not conform to this general observation. While merit voters tended to blame local factors, dogmatic voters generally blamed Syrian refugees.

Almost 24% of respondents perceived cheap labour as both a threat to Lebanese wage workers and an advantage to small businesses. Christian majority clusters seem to have benefited the least from cheap labour. Income from rent and increased demand for local goods by Syrian refugees were considered as positive factors by only about 9% of respondents in these clusters, with respondents noting that the increased demand had not resulted in cheaper prices. According to respondents, economic benefits resulting from the increased demand for goods and services by Syrian consumers is being monopolised by a very small section of Lebanese society. Some participants in the focus groups reported their frustration at the increased greediness of Lebanese merchants and landlords.

There was also a general concern that Syrians pay little or no taxes. While this was highlighted by respondents as unfair competition in the labour market, perceptions of Syrian refugees as not contributing in any way to their host communities was commonly shared. Some respondents went further by expressing their frustration at wealthier Syrians, who according to them are not helping to mitigate the burden of poor Syrian refugees on Lebanon's economy and infrastructure.

Perceptions of threats to social cohesion, local culture and moral values

The interviews and FGDs also highlighted how fear that rising poverty among Lebanese and Syrians will result in an upsurge in crime rates and immoral acts seems to be the most recurrent public perception of repercussions of economic conditions on society. However, the threat to Lebanese culture posed by differences in moral values with Syrians is similarly downplayed by the majority of respondents (63%). This particular threat is especially felt in Beqaa, except for Aarsal, constituting a special case detailed in the paragraph below. In the remaining selected clusters across Lebanon, respondents seemed convinced that threats to the Lebanese culture were negligible, except for Sabra and Shatila as well as Sin el-Fil, where respondents' perceptions were evenly distributed. It is worth noting that Christian majority clusters were generally more concerned about the cultural practices of Syrians. In addition, worries that Lebanese youth might acquire bad habits and Syrian dialects were significantly present. Equally highlighted was the concern that Lebanese people might take advantage of Syrian refugees and use them as a scapegoat for economic hardships and security challenges.

The majority of participants in focus groups and interviews in the Sunni majority North province and Aarsal showed sympathy with refugees and downplayed moral differences, unlike general trends in non-Sunni areas. Yet, confidential survey answers of respondents in Aarsal proved significantly different from the aforementioned positive

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views articulated publicly. Over 70% of respondents believed that a moral conflict exists between them and Syrians. However, in the wake of the recent clashes in Aarsal, the popular public position has become more identifiable with the official stance of local leaders. Still not convinced that Syrians are morally and culturally different, they now publicly admit that some Syrians believe in radical ideas which they feel are completely alien to their local culture in Aarsal.

In Christian majority Sin el-Fil and Zahlé, 95% of respondents felt threatened by the moral values of Syrian refugees. However, 55% of respondents in Christian Metn thought that Syrian refugees share the same moral values with them, providing another example of differences in attitudes between same-sect areas. Sabra and Shatila reported high moral compatibility with Syrians.

Examining gender and age differences relating to threats posed by cultural and moral values of Syrians, it was evident that women tended to worry slightly more than men in this regard (50% compared with 41%, respectively). Similarly, younger respondents seemed more concerned than older respondents (48% and 42%, respectively). Furthermore, dogmatic voters registered the highest aversion to Syrian moral values at 65%, while families with kinship and marital ties with Syrians indicated a 90% compatibility. Respondents with lower incomes and education levels tended to perceive Syrian cultural and moral values as conforming with their own values, unlike respondents with higher incomes and education levels. Multi-sectarian families were not significantly more tolerant of perceived moral conflict with Syrians, yet they showed relatively higher acceptance levels than those prevalent in their local communities.

The above trends and figures underline an increased tendency towards prejudice against Syrians, with 55% of respondents expecting frustration from Syrians to worsen. The fear that Syrians might be subject to rising violence

by Lebanese agitators was downplayed by most community leaders and local officials. However, individual answers of survey respondents revealed a different reality in all clusters. In Saida, 95% reported their fear that Syrians could become victims of violence, while in Metn 55% rejected this possible scenario.

Almost 53% of respondents feared that some Lebanese might blame Syrians for crimes they commit. Respondents in Arsal, Metn, Sin el-Fil as well as Sabra and Shatila downplayed such a possibility, while respondents in Beqaa, Saida, Tyre, Tripoli and Abda were more convinced of its likelihood. No other patterns of correlation were noticed when comparing other characteristics of respondents to each other regarding this issue. During interviews, lower ranking officials seemed to agree with popular perceptions on this point, while higher ranking local and national officials downplayed this issue. In this context, geographical location seemed to be the most significant factor in shaping perceptions.

Allowing open and in-depth discussions, the focus groups highlighted other forms of security concerns, namely abuse of minors, especially through child marriage. During focus groups in the North province, both men and women voiced their particular concern over child marriage and marriages with no or little dowry as accepted by Syrian families, with local leaders also raising this issue. These unique perceptions of threat were associated with the social impact of men increasingly marrying second wives, often minors. Participants highlighted threats facing Lebanese first wives and their families, as well as risks endangering child brides.

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Moreover, the first round of FGDs identified some threats that have actually materialised or publicly surfaced in the last few months. Accounts of arms smuggling, infiltration by militants into refugee gatherings, and rumours of regime spies and mercenaries being sent to Lebanon have now seeped into the formal discourses of mayors and security officials, who had downplayed such threats in the past on the grounds that hosting the “mostly Sunni” refugees would not pose any threat to sectarian problems in Lebanon. Some of the mayors interviewed are now talking about “special infiltrators sent by the Syrian regime or its sympathisers to create problems in their areas”. Yet, the most dominant trend in popular perceptions and public discourse now is news of the no longer hidden radical militants who are infiltrating Lebanon’s borders, causing clashes with the Lebanese armed forces.

This recent development has already reshaped the discourse of top politicians in the country, after clashes with radical militants have resulted in direct casualties for armed and security forces. It remains to be seen in the upcoming period if such direct and existential threat to security in the Beqaa and some other areas of Lebanon will translate into shifts in political attitude. Hopefully there will be a genuine initiative to break the Lebanese political deadlock by putting into effect a national plan to respond to the Syrian crisis in Lebanon.

Public perceptions and the role of the media

Representations of security in the media play a pivotal role in shaping public perceptions of security threats. However, experience-based popular perceptions sometimes contradict the prevalent public discourse.

In this survey, the majority of respondents reported basing their opinions and perceptions on information obtained from TV and radio. Printed press, religious leaders and social media come at a distant second, along with word of mouth, as sources of information. Political party leaders and public officials are mentioned less, while non-governmental organisations (NGOs) are barely mentioned. Analysing variations in information sources between the different areas reveals interesting findings. Religious leaders appear to be the most prominent opinion makers in most Sunni clusters (except in Saida), but hardly seem to be an influence in other areas. In Christian majority areas, radio and TV are significantly more important than any other source. Interestingly, reliance on social media was reported more in Hermel and Wadi Khaled than in Sin el-Fil and Metn.

A media content analysis was conducted as part of this study, focusing on published printed reports on the Syria crisis in Lebanon in the 10 most read newspapers in the country, between December 2012 and March 2014. Selected media included those affiliated with the March 8 and March 14 alliances (Lebanon’s major political opponent coalitions), along with proclaimed neutral press. While most articles covered many themes at once, 90% of the coverage focused on the humanitarian aspect of the crisis and the plight of refugees. Security concerns and social dynamics between the hosts and the refugees were tackled in 44% of registered coverage

(or 41% in pro-March 8 press and 29% in pro-March 14 press). While the March 14 press tended to focus on the humanitarian aspects of the Syrian crisis in Lebanon (94%) and its impact on the local economy and infrastructure (64%), March 8 coverage focused to a lesser extent on the economic impact and infrastructure (38%) and on the humanitarian aspect (60%).

The press focused mainly on security and social cohesion, and to a lesser extent on sectarian tensions resulting from the crisis. This was followed by stories and anecdotes of conflict among Syrians, and by accounts of the authorities' responses in terms of security arrests, etc. However, the press was found to overemphasise crime stories involving Syrians (mainly petty crime and prostitution). This did not conform with the focus groups' registered concerns over different types of crimes (organised crime and arms trafficking), which are increasingly indicated as major public concerns. In general, neither political nor media discourse seemed to match popular perceptions of primary fears.

Lay people interviewed and focus group participants insisted that their personal fears are similar to those of their fellow citizens in Lebanon, and they actually expressed almost similar attitudes and perceptions, with minor variations between areas. When they were not particularly concerned about an issue, such as the issue of sectarian balance, they expressed high levels of empathy with other Lebanese who might feel such threats. This popular tendency does not reflect the behaviour of politicians and opinion makers, who tend to overemphasise popular differences. They fear that the perception of threats is divisive and may in itself constitute a major cause for security concern, as some Lebanese may resort to self-security.

Pre-emptive measures implemented and their effectiveness

There has been no national plan to remedy the impact of the influx of Syrian refugees on social and economic, or national levels. While central authorities have reluctantly and occasionally intervened with decrees and announcements, local authorities have been carrying the weight of the problem.

Various responses, formal and informal, were noted by both officials and citizens. In the North province, people seemed more aware of local response measures – namely, small reception camps, where rent registration and restriction of movement are prominently used. Other measures have been applied across Lebanon, including ID checks and registration.

Other policing measures were mentioned in the interviews with security officials, such as surveillance cameras, patrols, appointing elders to monitor neighbourhoods and conducting regular visits to refugee sites. People often confuse public measures with independent pre-emptive actions. Mayors often refrain from talking about independent initiatives and may only admit to commissioning some citizens to report suspicious activities – although it is evident that some of these initiatives have taken place with their knowledge, if not their direct participation.

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Increased policing and patrolling have been observed in almost all municipalities of host communities, with some municipal officials recruiting new police officers and others organising volunteer patrols. Reports of forced eviction of Syrian refugees were rare and registered mainly in Beqaa and Tripoli. Saida respondents referred

to other, unspecified measures. A mayor in Saida explained that no special measures were taken, aside from a special committee formed to manage refugee hosting and a high level of coordination among NGO initiatives. It would seem that municipal collaboration with civil society in some cases has reduced the need to take further action.

Some national officials and opinion makers have been appalled by illegal curfews and other restrictions being imposed only on Syrian refugees by municipal officials and community leaders, insisting that it violates both Lebanese law and human rights. Most mayors and local officials downplayed their own measures.

Most of the respondents (75%) doubted the effectiveness of the response measures taken. Only Sabra and Shatila as well as Tyre went against this trend – except for younger people, those with less secure jobs, unemployed people and irregular voters, who felt less safe despite the measures taken. On the other hand, only 38% of respondents felt the response measures were justified, with regular voters at 32%. However, the majority of

respondents seemed hesitant about these measures and did not have a decisive opinion about them. The majority felt a moral ambiguity on the issue and did not know what to think. Respondents primarily justify policing measures towards Syrians on the basis that Syrians are equally responsible before the law as Lebanese citizens and should therefore always carry their ID cards.

The government has convened a special committee to coordinate the work of the various security functions, working directly with *Kaemmakams* (governors of *caza* appointed by the government), who are responsible for organising local tasks in each region and coordinating responses with the municipalities. Direct monitoring is closer to the ground, while governors are not heavily involved except at a strategic level. For the most part, however, municipalities seem to be the primary line of defence. Their responses are diversified, and most reported good levels of coordination with the Internal Security Forces (ISF) and the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), but also felt alone with their scarce resources.

Interviews do not tell much about the perceived effectiveness of measures taken by local authorities. Most of the mayors and local opinion makers indicated that their personal impression was that measures were effective. On another hand, no evidence-based system has been put in place to monitor the effectiveness of the national response. Statistics on crime are not widely circulated, if available at all. Moreover, there is no strategic planning or designation of resources, as most of the measures implemented have been merely confined to policing and appear as nominal, even at the national level. Officials do not seem to follow up on the real involvement of detained people in crimes, and therefore cannot evaluate the effectiveness of the measures they have taken.

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National authorities have not published any formal guidelines on how to deal with Syrian refugees or officially changed mandates for officials. The officials interviewed felt that their mandate in dealing with the Syrian crisis was moral rather than official, with few additional resources to hand. Nonetheless, most officials indicated a high level of satisfaction with coordination among the various responsible parties. Despite limited resources, everyone seemed convinced that other stakeholders are generally committed to their work and that channels of communication are open.

Returning to popular perceptions, interestingly only about 22% of respondents felt that the political party they last voted for had a viable vision to deal with the crisis, while about 50% clearly stated the opposite. Arenal ranked first in dissatisfaction with the political party they last voted for, at 70%, followed by Metn, Wadi Khaled and Majdal Anjar. Sabra and Shatila along with Hermel were next, at below 50%. This perception holds true across all possible correlations between all variables. Even dogmatic voters did not register high rates of satisfaction regarding their political party's response to the crisis (37%).

While it is important to remember that this is an indicative survey and not a poll, the perceived failure of the political process to create a strategic response is a general one. General disappointment is even more evident when it comes to the performance of individual politicians. The majority (88%) of respondents felt that no politician in Lebanon has seriously dealt with the Syrian refugee crisis. Focus groups and interviewed officials alike indicated that the lack of political will was a primary reason for their own responses to the crisis remaining limited and nominal.

The 'dilemma' of the camps solution

General trends in the focus groups, interviews and survey clearly indicate that refugee camps are considered the most popular solution (64%) to manage the refugee crisis in Lebanon. Respondents conveyed that the crisis would not have reached the magnitude it did had the option of establishing refugee camps been considered in the first place. However, some caveats to this were put forward, such as the country's inability to afford it and its dependence on the commitment of the international community. However, the majority of respondents felt that refugee camps could still be a viable option to mitigate the impact on infrastructure, the labour market and security.

When asked what were the most positive aspects of hosting refugees in camps, the least mentioned aspect was the positive impact on sectarian balance and infrastructure, while direct control of refugees was the most cited option, notably in Hermel, Majdal Anjar and Abda. Still, a significant proportion of the respondents (12%)

believed that a camp solution had no positive aspect whatsoever. These responses were dominant in Saida and Tyre. Metn, and to a lesser extent Sin el-Fil and Wadi Khaled, tended to favour the idea of camps because it makes the Syrian refugee presence appear temporary.

Negative aspects of establishing refugee camps were also cited. The overriding concern was the fear of radicalisation among refugees (mostly cited in Abda, Tripoli, Saida and Zahlé). This was followed by concern over the threat to long-term sectarian balance in Lebanon (mostly cited in Metn and Sin el-Fil, and to a lesser extent Beqaa).

Moreover, many feared that a camp solution would deprive their areas of government and NGO attention, since aid would be solely channelled into external delivery mechanisms with no side benefits for the host communities (mostly cited in Arsal and Tripoli). A few responses indicated other fears, such as ghettoising the refugees, in turn potentially encouraging arms trafficking. A small minority thought that refugees would be better accommodated within Lebanese communities and that camps could lead to increased prejudice against Syrians.

Many people have idealised perceptions about how the Turkish and Jordanian governments accommodated refugees. While it is important to learn from positive experiences, it is also necessary to deconstruct these perceptions. Dialogue and exchange of ideas with officials and local authorities between the host countries might be useful to generate ideas and responses.

CONCLUSION

The Syrian crisis has escalated in the last four years. Millions of peaceful inhabitants have left their homes and found refuge in neighbouring countries. Lebanon has harboured over a million of these refugees, representing almost a quarter of its original population. This development has put tremendous pressure on the country's infrastructure and services. Coupled with Lebanon's already weak economy and shortages in public services, the refugee crisis has made a bleak picture even bleaker.

It is under these circumstances that the perception of security threats stemming from the presence of Syrian refugees must be observed. This research highlighted that this perception varies across different factors. While most participants in the interviews and focus groups expressed sympathy towards the refugees and their hardships, they also highlighted the potential for refugees to cause an increase in crime and poverty. Other threats identified

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during the research were the possible challenge that Syrian refugees might pose to the sectarian balance of the country in the future and the deteriorating quality of public services.

Lebanese authorities have been overwhelmed by the influx of refugees. In the absence of a clear national strategy, the international community, civil society and local players have stepped in to offer their support. At a security level, the burden has fallen mainly on the

municipalities and local authorities. Measures such as surveillance cameras, increased patrols, registrations and curfews, with varying and debatable successes, have been employed according to the focus group participants and interviews with a number of local officials.

There is no doubt that the perceived security threat related to Syrian refugees is at least partly founded on real cases and documented incidents. However, as this paper has sought to show, these perceptions are inconsistent. They differ based on regional, sectarian, social and economic elements. More importantly, the responses to these perceived threats have not been founded on solid evidence and have not been of the corresponding level.

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