

## The Syrian refugees in Lebanon and the EU-Lebanon Partnership Compact – new strategies, old agendas

*Peter Seeberg*

### News

UNHCR spokesman Andrej Mahecic told at a news briefing 6 June 2017 in Geneva that the current funding gap for the Syria crisis in 2017 is now more than US\$ 1 billion, adding that the “funding gap spells uncertainty for desperate Syrian refugees.”<sup>1</sup> This is in particular the case in Lebanon and Jordan, where disruption of cash assistance and other aid create problems for the international organizations working with the forced migrants from Syria. As the “temporary” refugee situation is gaining a more permanent character a need has appeared for new strategies.

### Summary

The article discusses the cooperation between the EU and Lebanon with a focus on the newly launched EU-Lebanon Partnership Compact, based on a decision by the EU-Lebanon Association Council of 11 November 2016. The Compact describes the suggested (and partly mutual) commitments by the EU and Lebanon aiming at securing the stabilization of Lebanon in general, but also measures attempting to “provide an appropriate and safe environment for refugees and displaced persons from Syria during their temporary stay in Lebanon.”<sup>2</sup> An important discussion in connection with that is the question of easing the refugees’ controlled access to the Lebanese labour market – obviously a controversial issue. The article concludes that the main EU interests are twofold. Firstly, it is about avoiding destabilization of Lebanon by supporting the integration of refugees in the Lebanese society. Secondly, the reputation of the EU institutions is at stake: it is important to demonstrate to the EU member states that something is done, which contributes to keeping the Syrian refugees in third countries far away from the European borders.

### Key Words

Lebanon, EU, UNHCR, refugees, EU-Lebanon Compact, labour market integration.

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1. This information was also presented in an article at the UNHCR Media Centre homepage, see Charlie Dunmore, "Funding Gap Spells Uncertainty for Desperate Syrian Refugees," (Beirut: UNHCR Media Centre, 2017).

2. This can be seen in the Annex of EU-Lebanon Association Council, "Decision No 1/2016 of the EU-Lebanon Association Council Agreeing on EU-Lebanon Partnership Priorities," (Brussels: The European Union, 2016).

## Analysis:

### The Lebanese economy and the refugee challenge

“Nowhere have the spillover effects of the overlapping domestic, regional and international war proved more devastating than in Lebanon.”<sup>1</sup> This description by the Lebanese political scientist Bassel Salloukh seems to summarize a widespread opinion within research of the consequences for Lebanon of the war in Syria. The relatively weak Lebanese economy has significantly been impacted by the critical situation in the region. Lebanon experiences deepening poverty – in particular in the country’s poorest localities, where the unemployment is alarmingly high.<sup>2</sup>

The Lebanese economy has suffered from several problems over the last years. Despite the positive effect of the decline in international oil prices, the national fiscal deficit has widened and the public debt has increased. External trade has also weakened, with lower exports and imports as well as decreased capital inflows. The war in Syria has furthermore influenced the tourism sector, witnessing a generally low and declining income since 2010.<sup>3</sup>

Added to this the difficult situation in Lebanon is also a result of the continued presence of up to 2 million refugees and migrants in a country covering 10,452 square kilometres – one fourth the size of Denmark. For several years after the start of the civil war in Syria in 2011 Lebanon maintained a policy of open borders for the Syrian refugees. The combination of the open borders and a non-encampment practice made Lebanon receive praise from human rights groups and also from the UNHCR.<sup>4</sup> Later on the open borders policy was tightened, so that relatively expensive visas had to be obtained, which reduced the length of the stay in Lebanon. Still, however, more than one million Syrian are registered as refugees in Lebanon.

### *EU-Lebanon agreements and the recent partnership priorities*

The agreements between the EU and Lebanon are generally designed to work from a broad perspective. This goes for the EU-Lebanon Association Agreement, which entered into force in 2006 and for the Action Plans related to the European Neighbourhood Policy since 2004 – the latest one planned to cover the period 2013-2015, but, since it hasn’t been renewed, still functioning. Specifically concerning

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<sup>1</sup> Bassel F. Salloukh, "The Syrian War: Spillover Effects on Lebanon," *Middle East Policy* 24, 1 (2017).

<sup>2</sup> MENA, "The Middle East and North Africa 2016," (London: Routledge, 2017). See also & Lebanon UN, "Lebanon Crisis Response Plan 2017 - 2020," (Beirut: Government of Lebanon, United Nations, 2017).

<sup>3</sup> MENA.

<sup>4</sup> Lewis Turner, "Explaining the (Non-)Encampment of Syrian Refugees: Security, Class and the Labour Market in Lebanon and Jordan," *Mediterranean Politics* 20, 3 (2015): 390.

migration Lebanon has since December 2014 been engaged in talks with the EU on developing a Mobility Partnership (MP) agreement (like the ones with Jordan, Morocco and Tunisia), but recently the scene has been set for the launching of a new strategy for the challenges related to migration and refugees by the presentation of the EU-Lebanon Compact, a set of commitments for the EU and Lebanon, aiming at dealing with the challenges in connection with the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, but also to “provide a beneficial environment for Lebanon, host communities and vulnerable groups.”<sup>5</sup>

The first of the main elements in the Compact is to enhance stability by working together on security and counter-terrorism issues. The cooperation within those fields focuses on coordination of security activities, for instance by developing the Integrated Border Management through technical assistance, new equipment, and training.<sup>6</sup> Secondly, the Compact includes commitments related to governance and rule of law. The EU commitments within these areas have the character of declarations of intent and aim at supporting progress both regarding key democratic functions at national level and regarding local authorities, civil society, etc., whereas the Lebanese commitments seem limited. Probably the political crisis in Lebanon over the last years and the presence of Hezbollah – pursuing its own agendas – lead to the obvious lack of optimism within this field.

Thirdly, the Compact brings forward elements aiming at fostering (economic) growth and job opportunities. The measures here are concentrated on economic recovery in the private sector, improvements regarding infrastructure, stimulating the export sector and developing the energy, water and waste management, etc. It is an interesting fact that the concrete actions lined up do not explicitly mention integration of the Syrian refugees into the Lebanese labour market. However, in the Introduction to the Compact it says that “aiming at easing the temporary stay in Lebanon of Syrian nationals who have fled the war in Syria, Lebanon commits to continue seeking, in conformity with Lebanese laws, ways to (...) easing their controlled access to the job market in sectors where they are not in direct competition with Lebanese.” Fourthly, the EU and Lebanon agree that they will implement the elements of the MP once they have been negotiated and adopted, but since the MP is still work in progress, this aspect of EU-Lebanese cooperation is not further elaborated in the Compact.

### **Perspectives and concluding remarks**

The ambitions behind the Compact seem relevant. Regarding different aspects of Lebanese security there is no doubt that the EU and Lebanon share an interest in

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<sup>5</sup> Council.

<sup>6</sup> EU-Commission, "Report on the Implementation of the European Neighbourhood Policy Review, 18.5., Join (2017) Final," (Brussels: European Commission, 2017).

fighting terrorism and the spreading of jihadist groups in the Levant. However, the character of the phenomenon is not perceived in the same ways by all involved actors – in particular in the sense that the direct involvement of Hezbollah forces in the war in Syria on the side of Bashar al-Assad is a permanent source of political confrontations and instability in Lebanon. As described by Salloukh the influential non-state actor Hezbollah argues that a main reason for them to take part in the war in Syria is to fight Sunni jihadi groups, thereby stabilizing the Syrian regime.<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, Hezbollah argues that they are against refugee camps in Lebanon, because these might turn into safe havens for Syrian radicals and could be used as planning grounds for attacks against Syria. The second item on the Compact agenda, governance and rule of law, has as mentioned primarily the form of declarations of intent. It is difficult, given the recent political conditions in Lebanon, to see how the EU should be able to strengthen key democratic functions in Lebanon, as it says in the Compact.

The ambitions of easing the stay in Lebanon for Syrian refugees by allowing them to work could prove more realistic. According to International Labour Organization (ILO) “only around half of Syrian refugees are economically active and just one-third have access to overwhelmingly informal and low-skilled employment.”<sup>8</sup> A similar reality in Jordan, hosting around 1.3 million Syrians of which 660,000 registered with UNHCR<sup>9</sup> has resulted in the launching of a Jordan Compact. One of the activities under this umbrella is a project according to which significant numbers of work permits have been promised for Syrians. Besides funding the project, the EU has accepted to reduce customs for commodities produced in the context of the agreement between the EU and Jordan. Preliminary assessments in Jordan indicate that the project might prove worthwhile, helping the Jordanians solve some of the problems related to the Syrian refugees stay in Jordan, which – as in Lebanon – no longer can be characterized as temporary.

For the EU several interests are at stake. First of all the ideal result of the activities brought forward in the Compact is that Lebanon will continue to host high numbers of refugees, so that only relatively few attempt to leave and try to reach Europe. In addition to that the security dimensions are significant. The migration crisis, including the more than five million refugees having left Syria, constitutes an obvious field of cooperation between the EU and Lebanon, both having interests in Lebanon not being (further) destabilized. On the European side it is furthermore a question of internal coherence between the EU member states and of the reputation of the EU institutions

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<sup>7</sup> Salloukh: 69.

<sup>8</sup> ILO, "Assessment of the Impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and Their Employment Profile," (Beirut: International Labour Office, 2014).

<sup>9</sup> UNHCR, "Syria Regional Refugee Response. Inter-Agency Information Sharing Portal. Jordan," (New York: UNHCR, 2017).

among the EU member states. The EU Commission and the EEAS need – in times of Brexit and a general scepticism regarding the ability of the EU leaders to solve the migration crisis – to prove that they do something about one of the most significant recent political challenges – the Mediterranean migration crisis.

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