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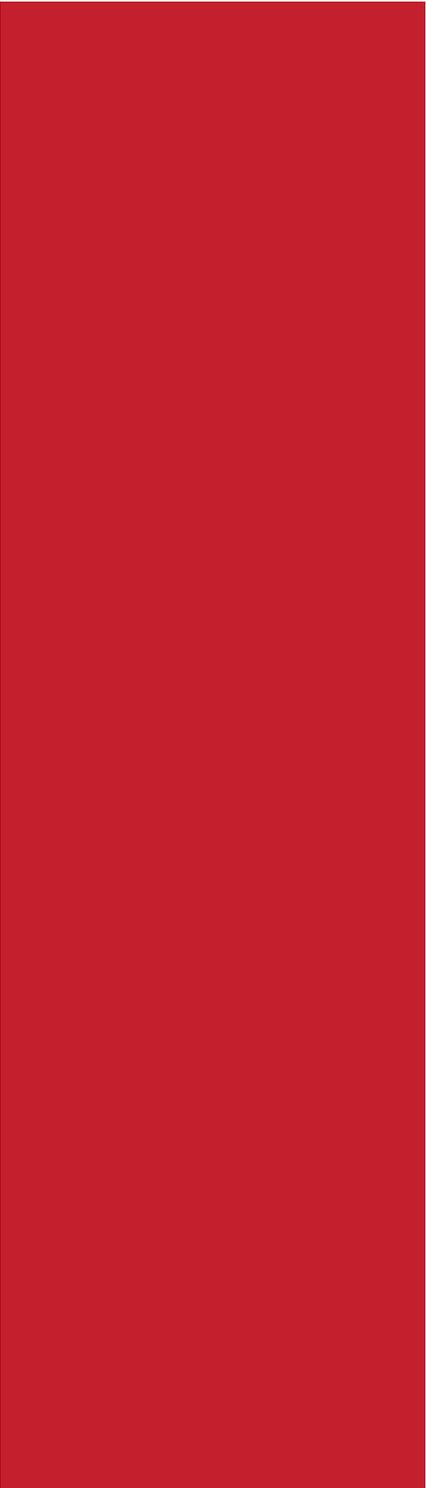
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## LEBANON AND THE SYRIAN EXODUS: TOWARDS A LOOMING OPPORTUNITY

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***N.B. The article only reflects  
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# LEBANON AND THE SYRIAN EXODUS: TOWARDS A LOOMING OPPORTUNITY

## BACKGROUND

Since the outbreak of the Syrian war in 2011, Lebanon has been struggling with an escalating Syrian displacement crisis, compounded by the Palestinian refugees Nakba and the flight of Iraqi refugees.

Some may consider that the crisis, the Nakba and the flight are peerless, for each has its own specificity in terms of its causes and the prospects for its solution.

While recognizing this disparity, Lebanon is still, at the very least at the level of policy formulation, suffering from a structural deficiency in managing these crises, despite several rectification attempts to properly deal with the Syrian displacement crisis, adopted by PM Saad Hariri Government

since its formation in December 2016. In this context, the designation of a Minister of State for Displaced Affairs was crucial by way of ushering the establishment of a single reference instance liable for dealing with this thorny issue, or in terms of developing a correlated comprehensive national policy.

Although this positive institutional breach is applauded, a holistic evaluation of Lebanon's response to the Syrian displacement crisis is imperative in order to account for the encountered challenges, shed lights on the foregone principles for developing a national public policy, scrutinize regional and international factors adjacent to this crisis and finally, provide insight on how

to forge a coherent procedure for coordination among stakeholders.

### 1. Lebanon and the Syrian Displacement (2011-2016) Dispersion and lack of national public policy

Lebanon's baffling belated and inept handling of the Syrian displacement crisis between 2011 and 2013 came as no surprise. The lone plausible explanation for this kind of response is that at the time, the Lebanese Government has evaluated the crisis to be a short-term one with limited repercussions, expecting the number of displaced crossing to Lebanon to remain restricted. Nevertheless, we should recognize that historically Lebanon has hosted between 500,000 and 900,000 Syrian workers, though till the present their presence in Lebanon as working force is not regulated. In this context, it is necessary to complete a legal scientific classification that distinguishes between the displaced and the

workers.

Such an attitude was predictable for several reasons the first of which is Lebanon's long history in forcibly or voluntarily mismanaging the Palestinian refugees' portfolio. Indeed, it was not expected from those who had waited until 2006 to establish a Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee in the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, to properly deal with the Syrian displacement crisis touting it instead as transient and fleeting. The Lebanese response to this crisis appeared to be shortsighted.

The second reason lays in official claims that recognizing the existence of a Syrian displacement crisis would engulf Lebanon in the midst of antagonist agendas endorsed by rival local political actors: Those who support the opposition and rebels in Syria and those who support the Assad regime. This response did not leverage

Lebanon's national security, prioritizing instead regional and international agendas.

As for the third reason, it is directly connected to Lebanon's longstanding affinity to plunge into a cycle of political polarization, wherein any attempt to uphold the logic of developing national public policies was doomed to failure; the purpose was maintaining the bargaining approach in managing domestic and foreign affairs in order to perpetuate the fragility of state interests in favor of asserting the power of different political actors.

Between 2013 and 2016, and as the Syrian displacement crisis worsens, the Lebanese Government has embarked on humanitarian mobilization and relief intervention on two levels: The spontaneous popular level and the level of United Nations agencies and programs. Of course, public sector institutions such as ministries and councils provided limited

assistance to displaced people pushed by social solidarity, but also by concern of protecting civil peace; at this level, the Lebanese military and security forces deserve exceptional praise.

It is noteworthy to mention that Lebanese communities have displayed extraordinary resilience and shown an immense sense of hospitality to peacefully and civilly accommodate the huge influx of Syrian displaced, despite tainted relation between Syrians and Lebanese by decades of Syria's iron grip on Lebanon. In spite of the two response levels mentioned above, some deficiencies should be reported:

a- Failure to launch census of Syrian displaced and lack of official relevant data on their number allowing an objective assessment of economic and social repercussions of their presence.

b- Political polarization

and contradictory choices have prevented devising an inclusive national policy to address the crisis.

c- The lack of a unified reference entity entrusted to develop and implement an inclusive national policy, along with the conflict of powers and inconsistencies among concerned ministries.

d- Prioritizing the logic of conducting incoherent development activities over the comprehensiveness of national public policy.

e- Limpness of the coordination with United Nations agencies and programs, as well as the insubstantiality of the organization of relief interventions.

f- Lack of a developmental vision to support host communities

g- Use of heavy-handed security measures to deal with legitimate concerns, which has minimized the possibility of

resorting to the philosophy of "Human Security".

h- Ignoring the need to adopt offensive diplomacy away from rhetoric slogans that neglect the geopolitical situation.

i- Lack of preparedness for post-war reconstruction or even the possible establishment of safe zones.

Owing to the above diagnosis and analysis, it is clear that Lebanon's response to the Syrian displacement was until 2016 characterize by the following features:

- a- Demagoguery
- b- Populism
- c- Improvisation
- d- Phobia
- e- Solicitation

These features mirror a long-standing Lebanese pattern in dealing with existential glitches starting with the Palestinian exodus to the Syrian exodus, along

with frequent internal conflicts flogged by regional and international interferences and ramifications.

It is thus primordial to deeply muse on how Lebanon should deal with the Syrian crisis displacement in a proactive and preventive manner, rather than continuing in the same vicious circle path, emphasizing the demographic, financial, socio-economic, environmental, legal, security, diplomatic and moral challenges, embedded in a sectarian background, especially with the newly PM Hariri Government showing keenness to seriously deal with this thorny issue.

### 2- Lebanon and the Syrian Displacement: Complex Problems

The Lebanese from all walks of life are voicing fundamental concerns over the potential long term presence of Syrian displaced persons in their country, especially

with no political solution to the Syrian war looming in the near future. This would leave Lebanon with a lone realistic option: Continuing to host the Syrian displaced persons until a prospect of safe return is foreseeable. These concerns revolve around the repercussions of the displaced influx on several levels:

- Lebanon is a pluralistic country with an extremely vulnerable demographic balance that has shifted from religious lines to sectarian lines; to what extent a dramatic alteration of Lebanon's demographics makeup can be avoided?

- No country has bear the burden of the Palestinian Nakba like Lebanon; the country has grappled in the past with severe security problems emerging from the Palestinian refugees camps leading at the end to a war that could have crippled both the Lebanese and the Palestinian causes. Within this background, how civil peace would be protected

when the Syrian displaced persons account for 30% of Lebanon's population? What are the guarantees to neutralize Lebanon from conflicts in which the country could be used as a bargaining ship?

- Lebanon is already gripped by an economic decline, weak social protection networks, depleted infrastructure, and increasing general debt transgressing all red lines. Weighting down on Lebanon with additional burdens would simply exacerbate the vulnerable situation and fuel socio-economic tensions that foreign agendas could capitalize on.

These queries, repercussions and dilemmas, indicate that in order to protect the pluralistic patchwork of the Lebanese landscape, maintain civil peace by neutralizing Lebanon from regional and international conflicts, and burst into a systematic socio-economic revival, it is imperative to seriously explore

ways that ensure the return of Syrian displaced persons to Syria when safety is restored. Of equal significance is to capitalize on the principle of international burden and responsibility sharing in reducing the burdens of host countries, called upon in the final declaration of the 28 Arab Summit held in Jordan (28-29 March 2017), which gave a special attention to the Syrian displacement crisis. It is also crucial to understand the importance of ensuring the transition from short-term relief and humanitarian interventions to sustainable development of hosting countries, as stated by PM Saad Hariri while addressing the conference «Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region» held in Brussels (4-6 April 2017).

### 3- Lebanon and the Syrian Displacement: Foundational Questions

A - Lebanon rejects all forms of settlement or

gradual social integration; The Lebanese Government has emphasized on all instances its long-established stance confirming that Lebanon is not an ultimate destination for refugees, an asylum country, or a resettlement country deeming individuals who have fled from Syrian borders to Lebanese borders beyond March 2011 as “displaced”. Yet, how it will manage the crisis of the Syrian displaced persons, whom number have reached according to the Lebanese authorities 1,500,000, with no foreseeable prospect for safe return? In this context we should admit the lack of accurate data pertaining to the number of Syrian displaced persons in Lebanon due to ill management of their influx and presence in Lebanon.

B - How will Lebanon deal with proposals of open doors, legal integration and resettlement in a third country, while protecting at the same time its national identity and that of refugees and displaced

persons?

C - How can the crisis of the Syrian displacement to Lebanon be isolated from the geopolitical fluctuations the region is witnessing?

D - What is the most effective way to combat extremism and terrorism in light of rampant poverty and ignorance, suspicious breaches, along with adopting traditional heavy handed security measures?

E – What is behind the lack of regional coordination among host countries to prepare for the displaced return phase, including to safe areas?

All these questions need to be addressed in depth by formulating multiple scenarios that upheld Lebanon’s national security agreed upon by the state, the private sector and the civil society. Of equal if not more significance is to instate a sole reference instance to deal with the displaced portfolio, and

this remain impossible in light of the current distribution of tasks in dealing with the crisis, among those who accentuate its socio-economic dimension and those who are concerned with the security challenges it poses, and those who consider it as an existential threat. While this issue encompasses all of the above mentioned three dimensions, the coordination mechanism is oscillating between the ambition of institutionalization and the more suboptimal realistic acceptance of distributing responsibilities among political elite left to devise intervention measures at their own whim. Nonetheless, the need for a sole reference instance to organize response efforts remain vital, as it is the only mean to ensure the unity of the state and avoid further divisions among its components. And that is what counts the most.

#### 4. Policy principles: Benchmarks for an effective coordination

As much as Lebanon is keen to host Syrian displaced for its long standing heritage in championing human rights being a founding member of the Arab League and the United Nations, as much as it should be involved in the process of ensuring their return in safety and dignity.

Notwithstanding, Lebanon is invited to create an opportunity from this crisis, especially within the international community's commitment to the country stability and its adopted policy in dealing with mass influx that seeks to go beyond simple aid relief to supporting sustainable development of host countries, provided the existence of a national comprehensive policy to deal with the crisis and not merely procedures taken based on the area of competence of the parties in power as well as their concerns! Easing concerns can only be done through adopting a response policy in the short, medium and long term, featuring strong pillars, restraining for example

from lashing at the fact that Syrian displaced are spread all over the country, while refusing at the same time to organize their presence by setting up temporary shelters to host them within a specific geographic area. One should acknowledge having made bad choices; it is a virtue, while sticking to defending mistakes is destructive.

Ensuring dignity for the Syrian displaced under the sovereignty of the State until safe return, and the development of host communities are the basis of any effective policy.

As for the benchmarks that should be set to revise an effective coordination policy, their cornerstone reside in the establishment of a Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs, which is supposed to develop a merging mechanism that combine response efforts by public institutions, the private sector, civil society, donors, United Nations agencies and

programs, within the principles of inclusiveness, partnership, effectiveness, transparency and non-duplication.

Lebanon and the Syrian exodus: Towards a looming opportunity ... The hope may be colossal; however, side conflicts must be avoided!

This is a choice and a path!

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