

# Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon

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## *Executive Summary*

Syria's conflict is dragging down its neighbours, none more perilously than Lebanon. Beirut's official policy of "dissociation" – seeking, by refraining from taking sides, to keep the war at arm's length – is right in theory but increasingly dubious in practice. Porous boundaries, weapons smuggling, deepening involvement by anti-Syrian-regime Sunni Islamists on one side and the pro-regime Hizbollah on the other, and cross-border skirmishes, all atop a massive refugee inflow, implicate Lebanon ever more deeply in the conflict next door. It probably is unrealistic to expect Lebanese actors to take a step back; Syria's fate, they feel, is their own, and stakes are too high for them to keep to the sidelines. But it ought not be unrealistic to expect them – and their international partners – to adopt a more forward-looking approach to a refugee crisis that risks tearing apart their own country's economic, social and political fabric, igniting a new domestic conflict that a weak Lebanese state and volatile region can ill afford.

This is a story numbers tell best. Over one million Syrians are in Lebanon – registered and unregistered refugees, as well as migrant workers and others. That figure – more than 25 per cent as great as the approximately four-million citizen population million – is rising and likely will soar if and when the battle for Damascus is fully joined. It would be staggering anywhere but is truly frightening when one considers the state's institutional frailty, meagre resources and, perhaps above all, highly sensitive sectarian balance. Unsurprisingly, the government – divided and polarised, on this issue as on most others – was slow off the mark.

The day-to-day impact is palpable. The demographic change can be felt in virtually all aspects of life, from the omnipresent Syrian dialect, to worsening traffic congestion, mounting housing prices and rising delinquency. Yet, the refugees do not pose a humanitarian problem alone. Their presence also has been politically deeply polarising. The vast majority are Sunnis who back the uprising. Most Lebanese view the conflict through a sectarian prism, and thus their attitude toward refugees from the outset has largely been informed by confessional considerations, as well as by their potential security impact and implications for future domestic politics.

Refugees generally have moved to hospitable, predominantly Sunni areas. Even there, however, patience is beginning to wear thin. Hatred for the Syrian regime remains acute and tends to dominate other feelings. Still, there is growing anger at the fact that they are attracting Syrian fire by providing succour and cover to anti-regime rebels. Besides, a history of stereotypes is at play: as many Lebanese see them, Syrians fall into broad categories: low-income, poorly uneducated, menial workers, criminals or abusive security officers and soldiers. Complaints go both ways: from Lebanese who fault their guests for introducing greater insecurity, to Syrians who accuse Lebanese of disrespecting, exploiting or even assaulting them. Street fights and criminality have trended upwards.

Hostility and suspicion are far more discernible among Shiites and Christians. In predominantly Shiite areas now witnessing refugee arrivals, many local residents express concern that the numbers could grow, while Hizbollah fears that refugees' anti-regime sentiment could be a prelude to activism against the movement itself. Many Christians feel even more vulnerable, alarmed at a demographic balance that

continuously tilts against them. The current human wave harkens back to the community's experience with Palestinian refugees whose initial, theoretically short-term resettlement turned into a massive, largely Sunni, long-lasting, militarised presence. And it feeds into a more general belief that Lebanon's Sunni community – more specifically, Islamists in its midst – are being empowered, riding an irresistible regional tide.

The refugee issue is only one aspect of a far broader challenge Lebanon faces as a result of the Syrian conflict. The political demography of the area that includes the two countries is shifting as borders become ever more permeable. Lebanese Islamic organisations set up to assist Syrian refugees also are instruments of socialisation; they threaten to radicalise a generation of Syrians, inculcating militant anti-Shiite and anti-Alawite outlooks. Sunni Islamist militants in Lebanon smuggle weapons and join their Syrian brethren's struggle in what has become jihadis' destination of choice. There is risk of blowback: once their work in Syria is done, they might well turn their sights back home.

If anything, Hizbollah's involvement is more intense. What began as relatively modest help to the regime over time has mushroomed into what now appears to be direct, comprehensive, full-fledged and less and less concealed military support. Israel's recent (officially unconfirmed) air attacks against targets in Syria – supposedly Iranian arms shipments destined to the Shiite movement – and heightened Hizbollah rhetoric reflect growing possibilities of regional entanglement involving Lebanon. All in all, even as the government in Beirut hangs on to its policy of dissociation, non-state actors hardly feel so constrained. Lebanon's hopes of being immune to the conflict have been brushed aside by domestic parties for whom its outcome is quasi-existential.

Historically, and to a far greater extent than any other neighbour, Lebanon's fate has been deeply intertwined with Syria's. As Syria heads even more steadily toward catastrophe, there is every reason for Lebanese of all persuasions to worry about their own country – and to do something about it. Regrettably, it is likely too late for them to wind back the clock and revert to a policy of non-interference in the Syrian war. But if the country's various political forces cannot agree on what to do in Syria, at least they might agree on a sensible approach toward the refugee tragedy. A population influx of such magnitude would be a huge problem anywhere. In Lebanon – with fragile institutions and infrastructure; a delicate political and sectarian balance; tense social fabric; and declining economy, all of which the refugee crisis worsens – it is a nightmare.

## *Recommendations*

### **To Lebanon's incoming government:**

1. Focus on the refugee crisis by:
  - a) making it a priority of the forthcoming ministerial program; and
  - b) seeking additional Western and Arab funding.
2. Allocate immediately any available resources in money and personnel to handle the refugee flow, even while awaiting such assistance.
3. Reiterate commitment to Lebanon's policy of welcoming all refugees;
4. Prepare a contingency plan to deal with a new refugee influx, notably from Damascus, by:
  - a) planning with all political parties the establishment of small refugee camps;
  - b) specifying regions away from the borders where such camps could be established;
  - c) exploring with security and military authorities means of ensuring camp safety without excessively intrusive measures; and
  - d) coordinating the establishment of these camps with local authorities and host communities and allocating funds to improve infrastructure in concerned towns.

### **To allies of the Syrian regime:**

5. Refrain from political statements hostile to refugees.
6. Agree in principle to the establishment of refugee camps.

### **To allies of the Syrian opposition:**

7. Agree to address potential security liabilities of refugee camps.

### **To the donor community:**

8. Provide Lebanon, UN agencies and their partners the approximately \$1 billion they have assessed as necessary to address the refugee crisis until December 2013.

### **To Gulf countries, the U.S. and European states:**

9. Ease visa rules for Syrians fleeing the conflict in order to mitigate the strain on neighbouring countries, notably Lebanon.

### **To UN agencies and non-governmental organisations (NGOs):**

10. Extend humanitarian support to the most deprived Lebanese families in areas of high refugee presence and those hosting refugees, in order to prevent further deterioration of relations between host communities and refugees.
11. Involve Lebanese communities in the support of Syrian refugees by organising volunteer relief programs.

**Beirut/Brussels, 13 May 2013**

# Too Close For Comfort: Syrians in Lebanon

## I. Introduction: Redrawing the Map

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The Syrian conflict is not only causing the death of tens of thousands, destroying a society and wiping out a state. It also is spilling over into neighbouring countries, destabilising their internal equilibrium, redefining cross-border interactions and fundamentally reshaping the region's human topography. In the words of an observer, frontiers are becoming less and less relevant, and more and more "liquid".<sup>1</sup>

As Crisis Group recently described, Turkey hosts more than 300,000 Syrian refugees, as well as a plethora of anti-regime armed groups; humanitarian aid but also weapons cross the border; and the conflict next door has exacerbated inter-communal tensions at home, notably between Sunnis and Alevis, while fuelling Turkish fears about the rise of the Kurdish Partiya Yekîtiya Demokrat (PYD) in northern Syria.<sup>2</sup>

There are profound implications for the Iraqi-Syrian geographic space as well. As the de facto alliance between Baghdad and Damascus solidifies, the predominantly Sunni populations caught in between gradually are distancing themselves from their respective capitals and forging closer bonds to one another: both share a conflictual relationship with their respective state authorities,<sup>3</sup> both are deeply tribal, and both have witnessed Islamist jihadi advances in their midst. While the announcement of a merger between Syria's al-Nusra and al-Qaeda in Iraq was quickly disavowed by the former, it nonetheless suggested potential ties between militants on both sides of the border.<sup>4</sup> Meanwhile, the Iraqi government reportedly is providing material assistance to its Syrian counterpart, as well as allowing Iran to use its airspace to transfer arms, and both weapons and Shiite fighters find their way across the border to bolster Assad's regime.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Crisis Group interview, April 2013.

<sup>2</sup> Crisis Group Europe Report N°225, *Blurring the Borders: Syrian Spillover Risks for Turkey*, 30 April 2013. Ankara views the PYD as indistinguishable from its sister party, Turkey's insurgent Partiya Karkarane Kurdistan (PKK). On the Kurdish issue, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°136, *Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, 22 January 2013.

<sup>3</sup> Postings on popular social media pages run by Syrian and Iraqi activists illustrate the extent to which the Assad and Maliki governments are viewed as partners in an Iran-led regional Shiite axis. See, eg, [www.facebook.com/Syrian.revolution](http://www.facebook.com/Syrian.revolution) and [www.facebook.com/Iraqe.Revolution](http://www.facebook.com/Iraqe.Revolution).

<sup>4</sup> On 9 April 2013, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, leader of al-Qaeda's Iraqi affiliate (the Islamic State of Iraq (Dawlat al-Iraq al-Islamiya), often called AQI by Western analysts), released an audiotape announcing that Jabhat al-Nusra, the leading Salafi-Jihadi militant group in Syria and his own organisation would merge, becoming the "Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant" (Al-Dawla al-Islamiya fi al-Iraq wa al-Sham). The next day Abu Muhammad al-Jolani, Jabhat al-Nusra's purported leader, issued a statement denying the merger and defending al-Nusra's decision to refrain from declaring an Islamic state. He also lauded al-Baghdadi for providing funds and a small contingent of fighters to his group. Even as he distanced al-Nusra from its Iraqi counterpart, al-Jolani confirmed his ties to al-Qaeda's global network by pledging loyalty to al-Qaeda leader Ayman al-Zawahiri. Al-Baghdadi's statement is at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HPQxA3catY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2HPQxA3catY), al-Jolani's at [www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFu9Sq8qwIs](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gFu9Sq8qwIs).

<sup>5</sup> Crisis Group interviews, U.S. and French officials, February-April 2013; also see "Iran supplying Syrian military via Iraqi airspace", *The New York Times*, 4 September 2012; "John Kerry urges Iraq

Whatever has occurred in the Syrian-Turkish and Syrian-Iraqi arenas has happened in the Syrian-Lebanese one as well – and then some. Like Turkey, Lebanon has seen a vast inflow of refugees, indeed on a proportionally much greater scale. Already, they account for roughly 10 per cent of Lebanon’s population; when guest workers and others (members of the middle and upper classes that have moved across the border) are added, the number of Syrians living in Lebanon jumps to about one million out of a total of four million. As in Iraq, the citizen population is deeply divided: Sunnis tend to back the Syrian opposition, while Shiites, and notably Hizbollah, increasingly are invested on the regime’s side. Porous borders have encouraged smuggling. Lebanese Islamists have crossed into Syria, while Hizbollah has sent fighters to help the regime.

Yet, unlike both Turkey and to a lesser extent Iraq, Lebanon lacks an effective central state. It does not possess adequate resources to address refugee needs. Its outgoing government has had to walk a fine line, with its centre of gravity (the March 8 coalition) close to the Syrian regime, but its prime minister seeking to maintain a healthy distance to the conflict.<sup>6</sup> And it relies for its stability on an extremely brittle confessional balance that, in the not distant past, already gave way when thousands of Palestinians upset the equilibrium. The influx of Syrian refugees exacerbates all three problems: it highlights and aggravates state dysfunctions; taxes its already limited resources; and – by reigniting fears of a shift in the confessional make-up – risks triggering violent reactions. Lebanon’s inherent weakness also makes it more vulnerable to the Syrian regime; of late, Damascus has struck at targets across the border in an effort to discourage assistance to rebels.<sup>7</sup>

The Syrian refugee crisis confronts Lebanon with numerous challenges, as this report describes. So far, despite these difficulties, Beirut has maintained an open border policy toward both Syrians and Syria’s Palestinians, a stance saluted by UN officials and Western diplomats.<sup>8</sup> Still, one has to wonder how long this can last. And what will happen when it no longer does.

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to help stop Iranian arm shipments to Syria”, *The Guardian*, 24 March 2013; “Iraqi Shiite militants start to acknowledge role in Syria”, Reuters, 10 April 2013.

<sup>6</sup> The government in theory has followed a dissociation policy, seeking not to be involved in the Syrian conflict and maintaining neutrality in international institutions. Critics have questioned this. A senior official with Saad Hariri’s Future Current said, “I believe Lebanon’s relations with Syria since the uprising have been a reflection of the government that was in power when it began – namely a government led by Mikati that we all along have considered a Hizbollah-led government. Although verbally it claimed to have adopted a dissociation policy, unfortunately it was not translated into practice. We asked that it send the army to the borders; that it ask UNIFIL [the UN forces in Lebanon] to help at the border; and that it urge Hizbollah not to get involved in Syria. None of this happened”. Crisis Group email correspondence, April 2013.

<sup>7</sup> In March 2013, for example, Syrian air strikes targeted the north-eastern village of Aarsal. “Syrian planes bomb Lebanon border area”, Al Jazeera English, 19 March 2013.

<sup>8</sup> Crisis Group interviews, UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) officials, Western diplomats, Beirut, February 2013.

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## II. A Massive Refugee Inflow

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### A. *Syrians in Lebanon*

In early March 2013, according to the UN, the number of registered Syrian refugees and those awaiting registration in neighbouring countries hit the one million mark.<sup>9</sup> Lebanon was among the most affected; as of 9 May 2013, 463,000 Syrians were registered or awaited registration with the Lebanese bureau of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).<sup>10</sup> If one includes refugees (both registered and unregistered), Syrian workers (estimated at more than 350,000) and families sufficiently wealthy to merge almost seamlessly into local society, Lebanese authorities estimate that the total number of Syrians currently in their country exceeds one million, over 25 per cent of its population of approximately four million.<sup>11</sup>

Relatively limited during the first year of the Syrian conflict, the refugee influx intensified in 2012. Since October 2012, it has been rising at an ominous pace; around 50,000 additional Syrians register every month.<sup>12</sup>

Judging by figures published in late April 2013, the largest contingent of those fleeing the conflict originates from central Syria; over 32 per cent of registered refugees claim they came from Homs. Idlib, Aleppo, rural Damascus and to a lesser extent Hama come next as sources of displacement. At that time, refugees from Damascus itself were only 3.8 per cent of the total.<sup>13</sup> Still, escalating violence there, combined with its proximity to Lebanon, raise concerns among officials and UN representatives about new waves of refugees were battles to reach the heart of the capital.

The refugees' geographical distribution for the most part has followed a sectarian pattern: Sunnis tend to find shelter in predominantly Sunni regions, whereas Christians and Alawites tend to settle in predominantly Christian and, to a lesser extent, Shiite areas.<sup>14</sup> Approximately one third have congregated in North Lebanon, another third in the eastern Bekaa Valley, 17 per cent in Beirut as well as adjacent Mount Lebanon, and 14 per cent in South Lebanon.<sup>15</sup>

According to a UNHCR official, Sunnis account for 95 per cent of those registered with the agency. Although a mere 5 per cent reportedly belong to minority communities, notably Alawites and Christians, actual numbers likely are larger; minorities tend to adopt a lower profile and thus often shun registration, and many of the affected Christian areas are home to relatively well-off families that may be less inclined to

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<sup>9</sup> "UN inter-agency response for Syrian refugees", UNHCR, Beirut, March 2013, [www.unhcr.org/515a8fe89.html](http://www.unhcr.org/515a8fe89.html). See also "Number of Syrian refugees hit 1 Million, UN Says", *The New York Times*, 6 March 2013.

<sup>10</sup> See [data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122](http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122). The number of Syrian refugees exceeds 431,000 in Jordan, 326,000 in Turkey, 144,000 in Iraq and 62,000 in Egypt. Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese officials, economist, Beirut, January-February 2013. [www.almodon.com/Politics/Articles/-!يحتفل-النازحين-يعدلم-لبنان-](http://www.almodon.com/Politics/Articles/-!يحتفل-النازحين-يعدلم-لبنان-)

<sup>12</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>13</sup> "UNHCR registration trend for Syrians", UNHCR, 26 April 2013.

<sup>14</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees, UNHCR official, social workers, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, the Bekaa, December 2012-February 2013. There are some exceptions, with a number of Sunnis living in Hizbollah-dominated regions, chiefly Syrian workers who brought their families to the location of their employment. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian workers, social workers and residents, Beirut, Saida, Bent Jbeil, December 2012-February 2013.

<sup>15</sup> "UNHCR registration trend for Syrians", *op. cit.*



declare themselves as refugees.<sup>16</sup> Palestinians are more conspicuous. By April 2013, 50,000 Palestinian – refugees twice over, first in Syria, then in Lebanon – had registered with the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) in Lebanon.<sup>17</sup> Their numbers apparently spiked in December 2012, when fighting engulfed the large Palestinian camp of Yarmouk, prompting many of its residents to flee.

In a small country of roughly 10,450 sq km, the influx of Syrians can be felt in virtually all aspects of daily life. Coffee shops teem with Syrians and Lebanese discussing developments in the two countries. The Syrian dialect is omnipresent in streets, restaurants, grocery shops and shopping malls. Traffic congestion, already bad, has appreciably worsened. Street begging, not uncommon prior to the conflict, has vastly increased, as many Syrian women and children have joined the ranks.<sup>18</sup>

The rental market for houses and flats is saturated, creating problems for both Lebanese and Syrians. Syrian refugees and non-refugees alike often are packed in small spaces, as newcomers move in with fellow Syrians or Lebanese friends. For actual refugees, of course, the situation is worse; in areas like Akkar, the Bekaa and some Tripoli neighbourhoods, they are turning old dilapidated buildings or schools, prayer facilities (*mossalat*), garages and even animal stalls into makeshift shelters. A UNHCR official said, “all kinds of places, even the most appalling ones, are occupied by refugees. Increasingly, they are living in very dire, inhuman conditions”.<sup>19</sup>

As a result, a sense of weariness regarding the refugees has been growing, even among the most compassionate Lebanese.<sup>20</sup> But complaints also go the other way: many Syrians accuse Lebanese of disrespecting, exploiting or even assaulting them.<sup>21</sup> Unsurprisingly, disputes, skirmishes and criminality all have risen of late.<sup>22</sup>

Funding is presently the most critical challenge for the UN agencies, humanitarian organisations and, in a sense, even the Lebanese state. On 9 April, UNHCR warned it was reaching “breaking point”, while a World Food Programme official said, “in one month, and with the current funding, more than 400,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon will no longer receive food assistance”.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, UNRWA – which, in addition to providing basic services to Lebanon’s longstanding population of Palestinian refugees must now face two other major tasks, reconstructing the Nahr al-Bared camp

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<sup>16</sup> “Minorities are reluctant to approach UNHCR. Many fear being considered as disloyal to or as having betrayed the regime by fleeing. Others are concerned they may become targets of Sunnis were sectarian violence to erupt in Lebanon”. Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Beirut, February 2013. Moreover, those minority groups that Damascus has sought to placate may feel less threatened by the regime’s proxies and allies in Lebanon and therefore less in need of formal UN protection. Alawite villages and neighbourhoods, well-defended by the regime’s military and militias, have rarely witnessed the wholesale destruction to which their Sunni counterparts have been subjected.

<sup>17</sup> Crisis Group email correspondence, UNRWA special assistant to the director, May 2013.

<sup>18</sup> Crisis Group observations and interviews, Lebanese and Syrians, Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, Bekaa, Saida, December 2012-February 2013.

<sup>19</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>20</sup> A Tripoli resident said, “I really feel sorry for what is happening to Syria and the Syrians. It breaks my heart. However, at times I can’t help feeling annoyed by their massive presence. It is affecting our daily life. Almost everyday, someone is knocking on my door asking for money”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>21</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrians residing in Lebanon, Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, Bekaa, December 2012-February 2013.

<sup>22</sup> Crisis Group observations and interviews, Lebanese and Syrians, Beirut, Tripoli, Akkar, Bekaa, June 2012-February 2013.

<sup>23</sup> “UN may cut food aid to Syrian refugees due to cash shortage”, Reuters, 9 April 2013.

destroyed in 2007<sup>24</sup> and dealing with the influx of Palestinians from Syria – is struggling to secure funding at a time when Western economies are in difficulty.<sup>25</sup>

### B. *Lebanon's Struggle to Respond*

The refugee crisis – and Lebanon's attempts to cope with it – has highlighted both the dysfunctions and erosion of state institutions. At first, the government essentially turned a blind eye, only seriously addressing it once the situation had spiralled out of control. It took until December 2012 before it adopted a comprehensive plan to assess needs and monetary requirements.<sup>26</sup> Prime Minister Najib Mikati's resignation in March 2013<sup>27</sup> further complicated the situation, halting in its tracks implementation of the plan, which remained unfunded. Negotiations over the formation of a new government (to be headed by Tammam Salam, a Sunni leader considered close to March 14 but who has been accepted by March 8) are ongoing.

Overall, and although state institutions are not entirely absent, host communities, civil society networks and UNHCR constitute primary providers for Syrian refugees.<sup>28</sup>

If limited capacity, dearth of resources and lack of expertise help explain Beirut's tardiness in addressing a predictable crisis,<sup>29</sup> politics arguably played a larger role. Mikati's detractors accused his government of toeing the Syrian regime's line by deliberately ignoring or downplaying the issue.<sup>30</sup> A Syrian activist asserted that "acknowledging the existence of refugees amounted to accusing Assad of displacing his people";<sup>31</sup> at a minimum, it meant contradicting his regime's claims that it was ably handling the situation and that a return to calm was around the corner.

Too, divisions within the executive contributed to paralysis – in this field as in most others.<sup>32</sup> While Mikati reiterated his government's commitment to help refugees – a pledge echoed by President Michel Suleiman and ministers close to Walid Jumblatt,

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<sup>24</sup> For more on the Nahr al-Bared camp, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°117, *Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared*, 1 March 2012.

<sup>25</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNRWA director, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>26</sup> See "Response of the government of Lebanon to the crisis of Syrian displaced families", presidency of the council of ministers, December 2012.

<sup>27</sup> Mikati had insisted on renewing the mandate of Internal Security Forces General Director Achraf Rifi, perceived among Lebanese Sunnis as a rare sympathetic heavyweight in the security sector and one of the last obstacles to Hizbollah's complete domination of it. When Hizbollah and its allies rejected his demand, he immediately submitted his resignation.

<sup>28</sup> These include the High Relief Commission (HRC), a body affiliated to the prime minister that is tasked to deal with emergency situations, as well as the social affairs, education and public health ministries. The HRC occasionally distributes in-kind aid and provides shelter to a limited number of refugees; together with the public health ministry, it covers hospital expenses of wounded civilians, although at times it faces funding shortages that force it to stop health coverage. The education ministry allowed Syrian students to enrol in public schools. Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese officials, Beirut, January-February 2013. See "Lebanon suspends treatment funding for wounded Syrians", Reuters, 11 July 2012; "Lebanon: Syrian students prop up public schools", *al-Akhbar*, 12 February 2013.

<sup>29</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese officials, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>30</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Future Current and March 14 officials, Lebanese and Syrian activists, Tripoli, Beirut, Saida, January-February 2013. The predominantly Sunni Future Current, led by Saad Hariri, is the principal component of the March 14 coalition of organisations that were opposed to Syria's presence in Lebanon.

<sup>31</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian activist, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>32</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°132, *A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict*, 22 November 2012.

the Druze leader – others insisted on the need to stop the influx rather than manage it. This notably was the case of the then-foreign minister – who enjoyed close ties to the Syrian regime – as well as of cabinet members affiliated with Michel Aoun, a Christian leader allied with Hizbollah.<sup>33</sup> In February 2013, an official said:

Until very recently, a political decision on the refugee question was out of reach. Governmental parties couldn't agree on a unified approach. Instead, they buried their heads in the sand, hoping the problem would vanish. Only when it got much worse did they feel compelled to reach an understanding.<sup>34</sup>

Such delays in decision-making had serious repercussions, of which some appear irreversible. For example, authorities stopped monitoring refugee arrivals in 2011, as a result of which they now face the problem of tracking down a large number of individuals scattered around more than 1,100 locations across the country.<sup>35</sup> In turn, this lack of basic information complicated the situation of refugees and of the organisations charged with assisting them. Most refugees, forced to flee due to violent clashes, left possessions behind and spent their remaining income on transportation. Upon arrival, they received little to no help or guidance; many destitute families spent several nights on the streets before humanitarian organisations could identify and take care of them. A refugee said:

I left my town under heavy bombing and shelling. I wasn't thinking at the time. I took my three children and ran. Finally, I got to Tripoli [in northern Lebanon]. Suddenly, I realised I was facing the unknown. I didn't know what to do. I spent two nights on the street with three children, one of them an infant, until some benefactors offered help.<sup>36</sup>

The absence of an early identification and monitoring mechanism harmed aid distribution; in several regions, where needs far exceeded local capacity, resources quickly were depleted. Aid workers point out that, given the refugees' haphazard distribution across the country, far more resources were required than would have been the case had they been settled according to a predetermined scheme.<sup>37</sup>

All in all, the refugee crisis aggravated pre-existing structural problems, stretching state resources to the breaking point. A Lebanese official explained:

We are facing trouble across the board. The state's resources are scarce and in many regions its infrastructure is dilapidated. It fails to meet its own population's basic needs. With the flow of refugees, areas where sewage and water systems were built to accommodate 10,000 people now have to accommodate twice as many. The number of students has doubled in some public schools that already were running short of essential utilities. Hospitals are overstretched, and our

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<sup>33</sup> See "Mikati says Lebanon committed to helping Syrian refugees", *The Daily Star*, 28 November 2012; "Mansour calls for halting Syrian refugees influx", LBCgroup, 20 December 2012.

<sup>34</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lebanese official, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>35</sup> According to a UNHCR representative, "initially the government jointly registered Syrian refugees with UNHCR through its High Relief Commission. It stopped in 2011, as the numbers mounted due to insufficient capacity". Quoted in "Lebanon asks for \$180 million to aid Syrian refugees", Reuters, 4 January 2013. Crisis Group telephone interview, Mikati adviser, April 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugee, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Crisis Group interviews, NGO workers, Tripoli, Beirut, Saida, Beirut 2013.

prisons can't handle additional inmates. We couldn't provide for Lebanese, let alone Syrians.<sup>38</sup>

The government's make-up – chiefly comprising members of the so-called March 8 coalition of pro-Syrian parties<sup>39</sup> – also arguably proved costly in this regard. International fundraising likely would have been easier for a cabinet more sympathetic to the West or Gulf Arab countries, and more in line with their Syrian policies. The head of a local Islamic organisation working with refugees asserted: “Gulf donors would rather direct their funds to more trustworthy anti-regime organisations or to the UN”.<sup>40</sup> Statements by Lebanese officials either backing the Syrian regime or the (predominantly Shiite) Bahraini opposition hardly encouraged Gulf generosity.<sup>41</sup> By the time Mikati resigned on 22 March, Lebanon had not raised any of the estimated \$180 million that the government had assessed was required to address the crisis in December 2012.<sup>42</sup>

Too, the cabinet's make-up hurt relations with many refugees. A large number of Syrians, viewing the government as allied with Damascus, feared that disclosing names and place of residence to state authorities would bring retaliation. When figures belonging to the Hizbollah-led March 8 coalition expressed hostility toward refugees,<sup>43</sup> or when anti-regime activists residing in Lebanon were arrested and deported,<sup>44</sup> those concerns intensified. Rather than register with UNHCR – which

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<sup>38</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lebanese official working on refugee question, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>39</sup> The name refers to a massive demonstration organised by pro-Syrian Lebanese parties on 8 March 2005, expressing gratitude to Damascus. It includes the two principal Shiite movements, Hizbollah and Amal, and other pro-Syrian parties. The Christian Free Patriotic Movement, led by Michel Aoun, joined the coalition following its alliance with Hizbollah in 2006.

<sup>40</sup> Crisis Group interview, head of an Islamic organisation working with refugees, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>41</sup> Foreign Minister Adnan Mansour, a close aide to Nabih Berri, the pro-Syrian parliament speaker, departed from official policy by calling on the Arab League to reverse its decision to suspend Syria's membership. His stance prompted harsh criticism from Gulf Arab countries. In a similar vein, Michel Aoun provoked Gulf countries when he remarked: “It is unfortunate that a peaceful revolution [in Bahrain], which has been oppressed and going on for three years, has not been recognised enough by the world”. See *An-Nahar*, 9 March 2013; “GCC issues a protest letter against Aoun's statement”, *Ya Libnan*, 18 February 2013.

<sup>42</sup> Crisis Group telephone interview, Mikati adviser, April 2013. The government has received only in-kind donations. As of 22 April, UN agencies and their partners had received \$128 million of the \$267 million they estimated to be necessary until June 2013. On 28 May 2013, the acting government, UN agencies and their partners are expected to unveil a consolidated “Syria Regional Response Plan” in Geneva. The plan is not yet finalised, although it apparently assesses that over \$1 billion will be needed for refugees through December 2013. The new figures reflect rising numbers of Syrian and Syria's Palestinian refugees and requisite support to host communities. Crisis Group email correspondence, UNHCR official, May 2013; “Syria Regional Response Plan funding update”, 22 April 2013, at [www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php](http://www.data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/regional.php).

<sup>43</sup> Lebanon's foreign minister said, “Syrian refugees fleeing the conflict in their country should not consider entering Lebanon, since its capacity to accept refugees is limited. Syrian families could turn to Syrian cities located away from fighting, since Lebanon cannot contain a great number of refugees. ... Lebanese authorities should focus on controlling the border”; the energy minister asserted: “When we say we don't want Syrian and Palestinian refugees, it is because they take our place”. “Lebanese FM: Syrian refugees should avoid Lebanon”, *Now*, 20 December 2012; “Gebran Bassil: Curb Lebanon to refugees”, *al-Akhabar*, 24 December 2012.

<sup>44</sup> See, for instance, “Deportation of anti-regime Syrian creates political storm”, *The Daily Star*, 3 August 2012. A human rights activist clarified: “Although worrying, these practices are not con-

must operate in partnership with the Lebanese state – many sought help from local NGOs and other aid networks instead. Even some NGOs workers were uncomfortable sharing information with the authorities, both for security reasons and in response to pleas by anxious refugees.<sup>45</sup> In turn, the government’s lack of knowledge reinforced its misgivings and general wariness. An official said, “we don’t know where most refugees are, and we don’t have the means to monitor their movements. We simply have lost control”.<sup>46</sup>

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ducted systematically and remain an exception to the rule”. Crisis Group interview, September 2012.

<sup>45</sup> Crisis Group interviews, representatives of organisations working with Syrian refugees, Tripoli, Beirut, Saida, February 2013.

<sup>46</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lebanese official, Beirut, February 2013.

### III. The Politics of the Refugee Issue

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The presence of the refugees is not only a humanitarian problem for Lebanon. It also has had a deeply polarising political effect. Most Lebanese view the next-door conflict through a sectarian prism, and thus their attitude toward the refugees from the outset largely was informed by confessional considerations, as well as by their potential security impact and implications for future domestic politics.

#### A. Refugees in “Friendly” Territory

Most refugees sought and found refuge in predominantly Sunni areas, which they perceived as more hospitable.<sup>47</sup> Still, their massive presence has not come without problems and, over time, is prompting increasingly mixed feelings.

In the early stages, Syrians tended to converge on northern Lebanon, Akkar and Tripoli; as the war spread to areas abutting the eastern Bekaa Valley, they sought refuge in its Sunni villages. They met with considerable support and even warmth; beyond feelings of compassion, host communities believed they were engaged in the same fight and thus that they shared a similar fate. A resident of Wadi Khaled, a border village in northern Akkar, said, “to free Syria from Assad also would amount to freeing Lebanon from Assad and from his Lebanese allies. Helping refugees is the least we can contribute to this battle”.<sup>48</sup> Yet, as what host communities expected to be a temporary situation dragged on, and as an increasing number of refugees arrived with ever-greater needs, hospitality frayed, and initially welcomed guests became more of a burden.

The most important causal factor unquestionably is economic. Areas that shelter refugees tend to be among the most destitute, belonging to traditionally peripheral regions of the country, whose original residents themselves often live in dire conditions.<sup>49</sup> Good-will notwithstanding, their ability to cope with a massive refugee inflow was at best temporary. At the same time, they have felt a measure of resentment at the attention and aid provided to refugees by Lebanese and international organisations, which stands in sharp contrast to their own history of neglect. An Akkar resident, expressing a shared if almost certainly overblown perception, said, “refugees live in better conditions than we do. UNHCR and charity organisations satisfy all their needs. They receive shelter, food and other goods; their children are enrolled in schools. Meanwhile, I had to pull my own sons out of school in order to be able to feed my family”.<sup>50</sup>

More broadly, and as previously described by Crisis Group, Lebanon’s economy has suffered from growing regional and local upheaval, as well as from the Syrian conflict’s specific consequences.<sup>51</sup> Again, areas with the greatest concentration of

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<sup>47</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees, Tripoli, Akkar, Aarsal, January 2012-February 2013.

<sup>48</sup> Crisis Group interview, resident hosting a Syrian family, Wadi Khaled, March 2012.

<sup>49</sup> According to the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Akkar and the Bekaa Valley are the country’s two poorest regions. Likewise, most Tripoli areas that shelter refugees suffer from difficult socio-economic conditions. See [www.undp.org.lb/WhatWeDo/poverty.cfm](http://www.undp.org.lb/WhatWeDo/poverty.cfm). Crisis Group observations, Akkar, Bekaa, Tripoli, January-February 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Crisis Group interview, Akkar resident, January 2013.

<sup>51</sup> “Among the most significant economic consequences [of the Syrian uprising on Lebanon] are the drop in Lebanon’s exports to Syria – the country’s primary outlet; the substantial price increase for a number of basic goods, many of which were imported or smuggled from Syria; a drop of as much

refugees have borne the brunt of these negative implications: high inflation, labour competition, the drying up of certain relatively lucrative activities, the redirection of foreign funding from Lebanon to its neighbour and Syrian retaliation. An economist explained:

There are many reasons behind the economic crisis. They include a drop in tourism-related income as well as Syria's loss as a market and transit route for Lebanese products. At the same time, the flood of refugees prompted an enormous rise in demand for basic goods and housing in specific areas; this was made possible because international and Arab organisations provided the refugees with monetary grants. Yet, the purchasing power of host communities remained essentially the same; indeed, in some instances it decreased due to the economic downturn provoked by the Syrian crisis.<sup>52</sup>

Over time, many Lebanese have felt threatened by Syrian labour, historically cheaper than its local equivalent and even cheaper now that it comes in large numbers and under harsh circumstances.<sup>53</sup> A historian from Tripoli said, "traditionally, Syrians work in construction and agriculture. Now, the competition has expanded to other sectors. To mention one example: Syrians have taken the place of many Lebanese employees in the furniture and upholstery business".<sup>54</sup> Some Lebanese used to make money by labour-intensive, cross-border smuggling; that too has been curtailed due to escalating violence. Gulf Arab, and notably Saudi funds that used to go to Lebanon – particularly after its 2005 political crisis – have been diverted toward Syria, today's more significant hotspot.<sup>55</sup> Finally, some regions have paid a political price for sheltering refugees. Accused of harbouring militants by both pro-regime Lebanese officials and authorities in Damascus, they suffer from public disparagement, stringent security measures and, increasingly, cross-border shelling and raids by the Syrian military.<sup>56</sup>

The net effect is that, even among communities most sympathetic to the refugees' plight, sentiments have soured. Hatred toward the Syrian regime remains acute and tends to dominate other feelings. Refugees, nevertheless, might well outlive their

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as 80 per cent in tourism revenues in the first nine months of 2012 due to the prevailing sense of instability; a 20 per cent drop in real estate sector investments; and a drop in GDP growth from an average of 8 per cent between 2007 and 2010 to less than 2 per cent in 2012". Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., pp. 27-28.

<sup>52</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lebanese economist, Beirut, July 2012.

<sup>53</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian and Lebanese workers and employers, Beirut, Tripoli, January-February 2013.

<sup>54</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lebanese historian, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>55</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Future Current officials, NGO representatives, Beirut, Tripoli, January 2012-February 2013.

<sup>56</sup> For instance, Lebanon's pro-Syrian defence minister accused the eastern town of Arsal of harbouring "al-Qaeda" militants". Quoted in *al-Akhbar*, 27 December 2011. In February 2013, in the eastern village of Arsal, Lebanon's army sought to arrest an Islamist with close ties to the armed opposition; he was accused of engaging in terrorism and was killed, prompting violent clashes with local residents. Two soldiers lost their lives. In the wake of this incident, the army imposed strict security measures. See "Several residents arrested as army draws tight dragnet around Arsal", *Naharnet*, 2 February 2013; "Arsal ambush kills two Lebanese soldiers hunting wanted fugitive", *The Daily Star*, 2 February 2013. On Syrian attacks, see "Syrian jet flies into Lebanon, fires missile", *Reuters*, 3 April 2013; "Shells fired from Syria kill Lebanese", *The Associated Press*, 7 July 2012; "Syrian troops shell Lebanese village: officials", *Agence France-Presse*, 31 August 2012; "Shells from Syria land on Lebanon border villages: residents", *The Daily Star*, 13 April 2013.

welcome; in particular, there is growing anger that they are attracting Syrian fire by providing succour and cover to anti-regime rebels.<sup>57</sup>

Such tensions are nothing new. Both during and after Lebanon's civil war, Syria's military presence was particularly heavy in Sunni (and Christian) areas. A pattern of arbitrary violence, extortion and humiliation by security officers and soldiers manning checkpoints, not to mention atrocities carried out during combat – some perpetrated by Sunni conscripts – deeply scarred the regions' collective memory.<sup>58</sup> A Tripoli resident said, "today Syrians oppose their regime. But when they were in Lebanon, when Lebanese were being humiliated and killed by Syrians, they belonged to it".<sup>59</sup> In time, recollection of that past coupled with problems in the present could place refugees in a precarious situation. A local leader in Akkar explained:

Relations between Syrians and their hosts are far from perfect. They are affected by economic problems, cultural differences and the chequered history of Syrian-Lebanese relations. Some Lebanese feel that they are paying an excessive price for sheltering refugees.<sup>60</sup>

For their part, many Syrians complain that they are poorly treated and ostracised by Lebanese. One lamented:

Not only is our country at war – a war in which we have lost everything: family members, homes, belongings and work – but on top of it, we feel humiliated, even as we beg for food and shelter. We are insulted and victims of racist remarks on a daily basis – and this by people who consider themselves friends of the revolution.<sup>61</sup>

A Lebanese official said, "numerous unreported incidents are occurring in areas hosting refugees. We try to keep these under wraps so as not to highlight and heighten the problem".<sup>62</sup>

These difficulties are symptomatic of the historically complicated relationship between Lebanese and Syrians that goes beyond purely sectarian or political considerations. Both sides bear the burden of a shared and at times conflictual history, as well as of deeply entrenched perceptions born of Syria's prolonged and heavy-handed presence in Lebanon over the past decades. As many Lebanese see them, Syrians fall into broad categories: low-income, poorly uneducated, menial workers; criminals; or abusive security officers and soldiers. Several Lebanese officials have reinforced the prejudice, playing and preying on the stereotype, nurturing popular resentment and suspicions toward refugees and using them as scapegoats for more structural fail-

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<sup>57</sup> For more details, see Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., p. 2.

<sup>58</sup> See Crisis Group Middle East Reports N°96, *Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, 26 May 2010, pp. 5-7; and N°78, *The New Lebanese Equation: The Christians' Central Role*, 15 July 2008, pp. 2-4.

<sup>59</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>60</sup> Crisis Group interview, Akkar, February 2013. An adviser to then-Prime Minister Mikati acknowledged the problem: "We are seeking to establish transition centres to temporarily house refugees upon their arrival, before they are reassigned to other regions. Naturally, these centres could only be located in Sunni areas. However, in many villages, local communities, municipal leaders and parliamentarian refused". Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>61</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugee, Tripoli, December 2012.

<sup>62</sup> Crisis Group interview, Lebanese official, Beirut, February 2013.



ings.<sup>63</sup> Such perceptions form an integral backdrop to the refugee crisis, which paradoxically brings the two societies physically closer even as it plants the seeds for a widening of their mutual misunderstanding.

### B. *Hizbollah and the Shiite Community*

Its support for the Syrian regime notwithstanding, and unlike some of its coalition partners, Hizbollah has been careful to project a relatively welcoming attitude toward Syrians fleeing the conflict. It has offered in-kind assistance, medical care and shelter to refugees in the Bekaa valley and Beirut.<sup>64</sup> Hassan Nasrallah, its secretary general, has insisted that the country should “deal with the presence of Syrian refugees in a purely humanitarian manner”.<sup>65</sup> As Sunni-dominated areas reach saturation level, unable to care for larger numbers of refugees, an increasing number of them (roughly 60,000 by late April) have been heading toward southern Lebanon, a Hizbollah stronghold;<sup>66</sup> there, the Shiite movement has mobilised social networks and municipalities under its control to lend a hand.<sup>67</sup>

Nevertheless, the movement’s overriding security preoccupation is to prevent refugees and associated support networks from serving as cover for anti-Assad activities, such as the smuggling of weapons and fighters. Tellingly, in parts of the country it controls, Hizbollah has closely monitored organisations offering services to refugees, at times curtailing their work. A senior Hizbollah official said:

We opposed the idea of allowing some international organisations to operate in the Bekaa region under the pretext of helping Syrian refugees. We respect refugee rights and repeat that the government should take care of them. But we cannot let the humanitarian aspect be used as an entry point to boost support for the insurgents.<sup>68</sup>

In predominantly Shiite areas now witnessing refugee arrivals, many local residents express concern that the numbers could grow; tensions appear to be on the rise.<sup>69</sup> A

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<sup>63</sup> Marwan Charbel, the then-interior minister, with close ties to President Suleiman, said, “felonies recently have increased by 50 per cent. ... The situation in Syria ... turned security upside down here. Everyday there is some kind of incident – whether thefts or some other kind – carried out by Syrians who recently have entered Lebanon”. Similarly, then-Prime Minister Mikati said, “we say that we support refugees. However, we won’t allow their presence to affect the security situation in Lebanon. Security is a fundamental issue”. See “Marwan Charbel: I’m not racist”, *al-Akhbar*, 27 April 2012; <http://ara.reuters.com/article/topNews/idARACAE9B2T3N20130313>. A Lebanese anti-Assad activist expressed his concerns: “Officials sometimes create links between security issues and Syrians generally. Refugees are becoming the usual suspects whenever anything happens in the country, from petty theft to greater threats. A serious incident with no relation whatsoever to Syrians might occur, and yet it could escalate and hurt them”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>64</sup> That said, according to anti-regime Syrian and Lebanese activists, several refugees and NGOs have rejected Hizbollah’s aid. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, January 2013.

<sup>65</sup> “Hizbollah rejects politicising case of Syrian refugees”, *The Daily Star*, 3 January 2013.

<sup>66</sup> “UNHCR registration trend for Syrians”, op. cit.

<sup>67</sup> Crisis Group interviews, aid workers, Hizbollah officials, Beirut, Saida, January-February 2013.

<sup>68</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>69</sup> Refugees who no longer can settle in northern Lebanon and the Bekaa due to saturation have been forced to go elsewhere, including highly sensitive locations such as al-Jiyeh and al-Naameh, neighbourhoods on the outskirts of Beirut that link the capital to the Hizbollah-dominated south, as well as the southern, confessionally-mixed towns of Saida and Tyre. Crisis Group observations and

Shiite resident said, “we believe that Hizbollah is next on the list of targets for Syrian refugees, after they get rid of the regime”.<sup>70</sup> Although the movement publicly – and rightly – dismisses such fears,<sup>71</sup> many of its rank and file and even cadres share this exaggerated anxiety. A Shiite local leader in Beirut, with close ties to the movement, went further:

We are concerned that the refugees are encroaching on areas close to where Hizbollah is. Their movements are not innocent: they are trying to encircle the party and monitor its movements. In turn, we have been observing them very carefully. Among them are sleeper terrorist cells, some Syrian-Lebanese, others international, whether in Beirut or elsewhere. In Tariq al-Jdideh [a predominantly Sunni neighbourhood of the capital] alone, there are 2,000 Syrian militants. They could try to destabilise the country, attack us or even plant a bomb in a Shiite neighbourhood. Sunnis are not weak as in May 2008 now that they have joined forces with Syrians.<sup>72</sup>

That such highly speculative and unfounded assertions are made is indicative of a dangerous political and psychological mindset that can only further aggravate Sunni-Shiite tensions. Syrian refugees bear little responsibility for this, yet they inevitably have been sucked back into the very conflict they were hoping to flee. A Syrian activist said:

We [Syrian refugees] are keeping a low profile. We don't want to intervene in Lebanon's internal affairs, and we don't want to become a party to the conflict. However, Hizbollah itself is interfering in Syria and sending fighters to kill our people. As a result, it's getting harder to convince some refugees to stay away from Lebanese politics.<sup>73</sup>

This last point is critical. As further discussed below, recent months reportedly have seen a significant deepening of the Shiite movement's direct involvement in the Syrian conflict. That, in turn, has heightened tensions not only with Lebanese Sunnis but also with Syrian rebels and refugees. In February 2013 and again in March, Syrian armed opposition groups threatened to target Hizbollah assets in Lebanon should it continue to fight across the border.<sup>74</sup> In April, rebels shelled Lebanese Shiite villages, killing two residents and injuring three.<sup>75</sup>

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interviews, Syrian refugees, NGOs representatives, Beirut, Saida, February 2013. See “Syrian refugees head to Lebanon's Shia south”, IRIN, 13 January 2013.

<sup>70</sup> Crisis Group interview, Shiite resident, Al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq, January 2013.

<sup>71</sup> A Hizbollah official said, “refugees present no risk as long as they do not get involved in military activities. We look at them mainly from a humanitarian vantage point”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013. Nasrallah called on Shiites to receive Syrian refugees in their homes. *Al-Manar*, 3 January 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Crisis Group interview, Al-Khandaq al-Ghamiq, February 2013. In May 2008, Hizbollah temporarily took over areas of the capital against little resistance. See Crisis Group Middle East Briefing N° 23, *Lebanon: Hizbollah's Weapons Turn Inward*, 15 May 2008.

<sup>73</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian activist, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>74</sup> See “Syrian Rebels threaten to hit Hezbollah targets in Lebanon”, *The Washington Post*, 19 February 2013.; “Syria conflict: Suspicions of deeper Hezbollah role grow”, BBC, 1 March 2013. A leader of the Free Syrian Army (a collection of opposition armed groups) warned: “al-Qusayr will be the graveyard of Hizbollah if they ever think of invading it”. Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> “Lebanon/Syria: End indiscriminate cross-border attacks”, Human Rights Watch, 22 April 2013.

### C. *Christian Anxiety*

Among Lebanese communities, Christians tend to express the most vivid concerns regarding the growing Syrian presence. For those who form part of the March 14 coalition,<sup>76</sup> which is opposed to the Syrian regime, anxiety is somewhat diluted by their political alliance with former Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Sunni-dominated Future Current. As a result, leaders have tended to adopt a relatively low profile on the issue.

Their rank and file do not necessarily see things similarly. For now, while they do not hide their concerns about rising Islamism and growing numbers of Syrian refugees, many still consider the Syrian regime, Hizbollah's military might and Iran a greater threat for Lebanon in general and Christians in particular.<sup>77</sup> But those sentiments are not static. Notably at times when Christians are targeted by Syrian opposition groups, fears associated with Sunni Islamism peak. A Christian activist explained:

The abduction of two Syrian bishops [by a rebel group in Aleppo in April 2013], the previous kidnapping of two priests [in February 2013], attacks against churches [by armed opposition groups in November and December 2012 in Northern Syria], the Christian exodus – all this affects the mindset of Christian supporters of the March 14 coalition. They don't necessarily support the Syrian regime but increasingly are hostile toward the opposition. As a result, it is becoming harder and harder for [Lebanese Forces leader] Samir Geagea to convince his base to back the Syrian uprising.<sup>78</sup>

Hizbollah's Christian ally, the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), is less ambivalent and has exhibited far less restraint. Led by General Michel Aoun, it has vocally expressed hostility toward the refugees, employing at times deeply inflammatory rhetoric.<sup>79</sup> Energy Minister Gebran Bassil, Aoun's son-in-law, went as far as to urge the government "to seriously discuss [their] expulsion".<sup>80</sup> The party's cabinet members were alone in voting against the government's December 2012 plan to address the refugee crisis.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> The March 14 coalition derives its name from massive anti-Syrian demonstration organised on that day in 2005. At the time, the coalition included the predominantly Sunni Future Current, the Lebanese Forces and Phalanges, two Christian parties led, respectively, by Samir Geagea and former President Amine Gemayel, and Walid Jumblatt, the Druze leader. Jumblatt withdrew from the coalition in 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Christian movements' officials and partisans, Beirut, Jounieh, Koura, January-February 2013. Several Lebanese Forces and Phalanges partisans criticised what they described as "shameful" or "racist" statements by leaders of Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement toward the Syrian refugees. Others, while disagreeing with the vitriolic language used by their Christian opponents, conceded that the presence of hundreds of thousands of Syrians, most of them Sunnis, was a real concern. Crisis Group interviews, Beirut, Jounieh, January-February 2013. According to a Lebanese Forces representative, movement officials hold regular meetings and discussions to educate their rank and file on issues related to Sunni Islamism and the presence of refugees and dissipate some of their fears. Crisis Group interview, Dbayeh, February 2013.

<sup>78</sup> Crisis Group interview, Christian activist involved in interreligious dialogue, Beirut, May 2013.

<sup>79</sup> For more on the Christian community and its politics, see Crisis Group Report, *The New Lebanese Equation*, op. cit.

<sup>80</sup> "Bassil draw racism charges over call to expel refugees", *The Daily Star*, 24 December 2012.

<sup>81</sup> *An-Nahar*, 4 January 2013.

Several reasons account for this stance. Most important is a deeply-felt, widespread sense of vulnerability among Lebanese Christians, fearful because the demographic balance between them and Muslims for decades has been shifting in the latter's favour. The fear has historic roots: it echoes the community's experience with Palestinian refugees, whose initial, theoretically short-term resettlement turned into a massive, largely Sunni, long-lasting, militarised presence.<sup>82</sup> Many are quick to compare Syrian refugees with their Palestinian predecessors. As a result, they tend to view the Syrian influx as a demographic threat to the fragile status quo. An FPM official said:

At the beginning, Palestinians were few; their presence was supposed to be temporary. 65 years later, they still are here. From a peaceful constituency fleeing violence, they became a belligerent one, and as a result we went through fifteen years of a destructive civil war.<sup>83</sup> How can we guarantee that history won't repeat itself? What we are seeing of the Syrians is not at all encouraging.<sup>84</sup>

This apprehension regarding permanent refugee settlement is aggravated by intense interpenetration between the two neighbouring societies and the fact that, historically, a significant number of Syrians either have based themselves in Lebanon or worked there as seasonal labourers.<sup>85</sup> Many Christians thus take the view that their presence will not be as short-lived as the refugees insist.<sup>86</sup> One asked:

What makes you sure that Syrians will go home? How long will it take for the conflict to end? And how many years before Syrian towns and villages are rebuilt and the economy recovers? By then, many will have settled here with their families. Will they choose to leave? I doubt it.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> A video circulating on the internet and entitled "Before it's too late" stresses the similarities between Palestinian and Syrian refugees and poses the question, "Will History repeat itself?". See [www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player\\_embedded&v=oaUTu96sFec#](http://www.youtube.com/watch?feature=player_embedded&v=oaUTu96sFec#).

<sup>83</sup> In the early 1970s, the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) advocated waging armed struggle against Israel from Lebanese territory. It launched several military operations against Israel from south Lebanon, provoking clashes with the Lebanese army as well as Israeli retaliation. By the middle of the decade, Lebanon was divided between Palestinians and their predominantly Muslim allies on the one hand, and predominantly Christian anti-Palestinian forces on the other. The various parties' militias engaged in a violent conflict that lasted years. See Crisis Group Middle East Report N°84, *Nurturing Instability: Lebanon's Palestinian Refugee Camps*, 19 February 2009

<sup>84</sup> Crisis Group interview, FPM official, Beirut, February 2013. Gebran Bassil, Aoun's son-in-law, said, "when we say we don't want Syrian and Palestinian refugees, it is because they take our place. ... Do we not have enough Palestinians in Lebanon? Do we have to let the rest of the refugee camps come to Lebanon too?". "Gebran Bassil: Curb Lebanon to refugees", *op. cit.* Aoun himself stated: "Accumulation of refugees on the Lebanese border confirms that they are not all refugees, and this poses a threat, especially if they are fighters taking part in the war in Syria. Everyone knows that the issue of asylum starts with individuals asking you for help and ends with them mutineering against you". "Aoun: Syrian refugees a major threat, we urge president to ask army about its defense capacity", *Naharnet*, 20 November 2012.

<sup>85</sup> FPM officials point to a 1994 naturalisation decree allowing a number of mostly Sunni Palestinians and Syrians to become Lebanese citizens as justification for their concern. Crisis Group interviews, 2008-2012.

<sup>86</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian refugees, Tripoli, Akkar, Aarsal, Beirut, Saida, January 2012-January 2013.

<sup>87</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013.

Politically, this massive Syrian influx feeds into a more general belief that Lebanon's Sunni community – and, more specifically Islamists in its midst – are being empowered, riding an irresistible regional tide. For Aoun supporters in particular, the ascent of Sunni Islamism is nothing short of an existential threat.<sup>88</sup>

The FPM has some reason to be concerned. Unlike its March 14 Christian counterparts, the party has profoundly antagonised Lebanese Sunnis, because of its tightly-knit alliance with Hizbollah, repeated anti-Sunni statements<sup>89</sup> and, more recently, overt backing for the Syrian regime.<sup>90</sup> By promoting and exacerbating Christian fears and insecurities, the FPM leadership helped fuel its base's radicalism, which, in turn, has generated increased distrust and animosity among Syrians. As a refugee put it, "I think Aoun's policy is very short-sighted. He is turning us into foes even though originally we had no problem with him".<sup>91</sup> A Lebanese journalist warned against the FPM's potentially self-fulfilling prophecy:

By constantly accusing Syrians in Lebanon, singling them out and labelling them a danger to our country, we [Lebanese] are pushing them into a corner. We are making them feel targeted and helpless. In doing so, we are making them more aggressive and hostile toward Lebanon.<sup>92</sup>

#### D. *The Controversy over Refugee Camps*

The issue of whether to establish refugee camps within Lebanon has served as a lightning rod for domestic disputes. As early as November 2011 – at a time when only 3,643 refugees had registered with UNHCR<sup>93</sup> – the Future Current urged the government to set them up.<sup>94</sup> Other Sunni leaders and Islamist figures echoed this stance. Although they justified their position on humanitarian grounds, other motivations almost certainly were at play.<sup>95</sup> Indeed, the existence of camps would have served the highly political purpose of shaming Damascus, negating its claims of normalcy and showcasing the consequences of regime repression on thousands of people forced to live in tents, under dire conditions. A journalist with close ties to the Future Current

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<sup>88</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., pp. 3-5, 11-12.

<sup>89</sup> The Lebanese daily *al-Jumhuriya* reproduced a cable published by WikiLeaks in which the former justice minister is said to have explained that "Aoun told him that the Sunnis in Lebanon are 'animals' and 'terrorists' and the 'Maronite-Shiite alliance is the best way to confront the local and foreign Sunni threat". Although Aoun denied these allegations, they provoked a flurry of reactions among Sunnis. *Al-Jumhuriya*, 20 May 2011; "Iran and Aoun: Thinking alike according to Charles Rizk", U.S. embassy Beirut cable, 9 August 2007, as reported by WikiLeaks; "Aoun denies insulting Muslim Sunnis", *Ya Libnan*, 28 May 2011; "Dar al-Fatwa seeking lawsuit against Aoun, sheikh says", *Now*, 26 May 2011. Aoun's nephew and FPM parliamentarian Alain Aoun, warning against Sunni Islamism, compared the predominantly Sunni city of Tripoli to Kandahar, an Afghan town considered an Islamist stronghold. *LebanonFiles*, 11 December 2012.

<sup>90</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., pp. 11-12.

<sup>91</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>92</sup> Crisis Group interview, *an-Nahar* journalist, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>93</sup> According to UNHCR, many were returning to Syria at the time. See "Lebanon Update, Situation in North Lebanon", 11-18 November 2011, [www.unhcr.org/4ec6605f9.html](http://www.unhcr.org/4ec6605f9.html).

<sup>94</sup> See "Politicians call for establishment of Syrian refugee camps in Lebanon", *The Daily Star*, 8 November 2011.

<sup>95</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Future Current and March 14 officials, Beirut, Tripoli, November 2011-January 2012.

conceded, “early calls for refugee camps were aimed at blaming Assad for displacing his people”.<sup>96</sup>

There were other political benefits. Its proponents knew that the government was bound to reject the idea, creating an opportunity to accuse Mikati and Hizbollah of simultaneously neglecting the Syrian people and serving the Syrian regime, and thereby stimulating Sunni indignation.

For Hizbollah and its allies, the proposal was a non-starter. They considered it a none too subtle way of creating safe havens for anti-regime fighters and of using humanitarian activities as a wafer-thin façade for militancy. In June 2012, a senior party official said:

We will not tolerate Lebanon becoming a corridor or base for foreign meddling in Syria. This is why we rejected the establishment of refugee camps in Lebanon despite repeated calls by March 14 to that effect. They would become areas on which armed groups could fall back and in which they could seek refuge.<sup>97</sup>

Hizbollah stuck to that position, even as the numbers of refugees mounted. Months later, as the issue was reaching crisis proportions, a movement official said, “we will keep rejecting the establishment of refugee camps because they would turn into military sanctuaries”.<sup>98</sup> Indeed, and in light of the country’s weak security institutions, establishing camps in Sunni areas supportive of the uprising might have facilitated the smuggling of weapons and fighters. A UN official took this view, acknowledging that “militarisation of refugee camps is a serious risk”.<sup>99</sup>

Still, camps present several important benefits. Aid workers and officials involved in refugee relief point out that they would facilitate humanitarian support, reduce costs and thus promote financial sustainability and help monitor as well as manage refugee movements. A Mikati adviser concurred: “Ultimately we may well have no choice. Lebanon has reached the limit of its absorptive capacity. Besides, camps would enhance governmental control and oversight of the refugees’ activities”.<sup>100</sup> Too, security risks could be significantly alleviated were the camps well-designed, well-located and well-run. For instance, they could be set up at a reasonable distance from the borders and kept relatively small, thus making them easier to regulate without burdensome safety measures.

Ultimately, camps are not a panacea but, at current rates, could well become a necessity. As a UNHCR official put it:

From a logistical viewpoint, camps are easier to manage than refugees dispersed across the country. But they also are a very delicate matter and ought to remain the solution of last resort. They usually engender greater dependency on UN and humanitarian organisations. They can become militarised, and, as they do, risks of violence against refugees simultaneously rise. But the fact is that Lebanon has reached saturation point, notably as far as shelters are concerned. Many refugees today live in extremely dire conditions. Should additional waves of refugees reach Lebanon, there might well be no other alternative.<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>97</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., p. 16.

<sup>98</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hizbollah official, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>99</sup> Crisis Group interview, UN official, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>100</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mikati adviser, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>101</sup> Crisis Group interview, UNHCR official, Beirut, February 2013.

Already, de facto makeshift camps have begun to crop up in parts of Akkar and the Bekaa.<sup>102</sup> As a result, Lebanon might be forced to bear the costs of refugee camps while foregoing their potential benefits – leaving authorities with a *fait accompli* hard both to reverse and to manage. Instead, all Lebanese factions ought to discuss how best to deal with this issue from a practical – as opposed to political – vantage point, bearing in mind that security concerns cannot be ignored, but nor should they be used as an argument to peremptorily quash the idea.

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<sup>102</sup> Crisis Group observations, Akkar and Bekaa Valley, January 2013. In some instances, Islamic organisations distributed tents to Syrian families, coordinating their assistance with local authorities; in others, refugees moved into tents alongside tribal Bedouins. Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees, Akkar and Bekaa Valley, January 2013. See also “Bekaa town opens its own refugee camp”, *The Daily Star*, 21 December 2012.

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#### IV. Redefining the Lebanon-Syria Landscape

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The two neighbours have long had intimate social, economic and political ties. Inter-marriage between their citizens is common, as a result of which families and tribes extend across the borders.<sup>103</sup> Historically, the economies are closely intertwined, both complementary and interdependent. Lebanon has attracted Syrian capital since the 1940s;<sup>104</sup> hundreds of thousands of Syrian workers flocked to Lebanon after its civil war, attracted by jobs related to the reconstruction process;<sup>105</sup> Beirut's free-market system, coupled with Damascus's domination in effect of its neighbour, stimulated networks of corruption in which both countries' elites were entangled; and, during the many years of its heavy presence in Lebanon (it deployed over 30,000 soldiers), the Syrian regime developed massive and deeply-entrenched political and security networks.<sup>106</sup>

Syria's hegemony lasted several decades and only occasionally faced serious resistance. Its army brutally repressed anti-Syrian Lebanese Islamists in the 1980s – shortly after having violently suppressed its own – and kept doing so throughout the 1990s and early 2000s.<sup>107</sup> The Christian opposition did not fare much better. Most of its leaders were ousted from the political arena, and both the Beirut and Damascus security services neutralised its rank and file.<sup>108</sup>

Former Prime Minister Rafic Hariri's assassination in 2005 – which most Lebanese Sunnis but also Saudi Arabia and the West blamed on Syria – gave rise to a fervent movement opposed to the Assad regime.<sup>109</sup> Still, the movement failed to develop significant ties to its counterpart in Syria, where dissent immediately was put down.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>103</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese and Syrians, Tripoli, Akkar, Bekaa, Beirut, 2011-2012. See also Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., pp. 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> "Since the end of the 1940s, Lebanese banks formed a haven for Syrian deposits in search for stability and better investment opportunities following the turmoil and military coups" in Damascus. In the wake of the 1963 Baath party coup and naturalisation decision, that stipulated expropriation of private properties and wealth by the state, many Syrian businesses and financiers crossed the border, bringing their capital with them. "Syrian capital in Lebanese banks: between myth and reality", Information International, 9 April 2009.

<sup>105</sup> The precise number of Syrian workers in Lebanon during the post-war years is unknown. According to some observers, at times it exceeded one million. See "La situation des réfugiés et travailleurs syriens au Liban suite aux soulèvements populaires en Syrie", Robert Schuman Centre for Advanced Studies, 2011, p. 7.

<sup>106</sup> The regime developed powerful alliances with several Lebanese and Palestinian actors. Moreover, decisions on cabinet make-up as well as nominations to key security and military positions required Syria's approval.

<sup>107</sup> Between 1982 and 1986, Tripoli was the theatre of bloody confrontations between the Syrian army and Lebanese Islamists who had sheltered their Syrian counterparts after Damascus's 1982 crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood. In the 1990s, hundreds of Islamists were jailed and tortured by Syrian and Lebanese security services. See Crisis Group Middle East Reports, *Lebanon's Politics*, op. cit., pp. 24-29; and N°29, *Nouvelle crise, vieux démons au Liban: les leçons oubliées de Bab Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen*, 14 octobre 2010, pp. 6-7.

<sup>108</sup> Michel Aoun, head of the Free Patriotic Movement, and Amine Gemayel, leader of the Phalanges, were forced into exile; Samir Geagea, who led the Lebanese Forces, was jailed for over a decade. For more, see Crisis Group Report, *The New Lebanese Equation*, op. cit., 15 July 2008.

<sup>109</sup> Earlier, several Christian figures as well as Walid Jumblatt had voiced their opposition to Syria's hegemony but to little effect.

<sup>110</sup> In 2006, a group of Syrian activists and intellectuals signed the Beirut-Damascus Declaration, which called for improved bilateral relations and for Syria to respect Lebanon's sovereignty; signa-



In many ways, the Syrian uprising has altered this reality. Not only did it give birth to a myriad of anti-regime alliances that cut across the border, but it also transformed the nature of the two countries' pro-regime networks.

#### A. *Anti-regime Networks*

##### 1. The paramilitary dimension

With undemarcated, poorly controlled and porous borders, smuggling between Lebanon and Syria has long been pervasive. While, on the commercial side, goods and notably fuel were involved, the Syrian regime also engaged in military and paramilitary business. Both its Lebanese foes and the West repeatedly accused Damascus of delivering weapons to its various Lebanese and Palestinian allies, notably Hizbollah, the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command and Fatah al-Intifada.<sup>111</sup> In the wake of the 2003 U.S. occupation of Iraq, Washington likewise blamed Assad's regime for serving as a conduit for Lebanese and Palestinian Islamists heading to the new anti-American battlefield.<sup>112</sup> Critics also claim that Syria allowed jihadis to cross its border into northern Lebanon.<sup>113</sup>

The Syrian uprising is turning this reality on its head. Today, the flow is going in the other direction, as anti-regime forces in Lebanon engage in paramilitary activity of their own. They not only offer shelter and medical treatment to Syrian rebels, notably in Tripoli, Akkar and Sunni parts of the Bekaa Valley,<sup>114</sup> but they also have been known to smuggle weapons into Syria;<sup>115</sup> more recently, Lebanese Islamists appear to have joined the fight across the border. Persistent rumours to that effect seemingly were validated in November 2012, when some fifteen to twenty Lebanese, mostly from northern Lebanon, were ambushed by Syrian troops while attempting to cross into Syria to join opposition forces in Tall-Kalakh, a Syrian village to the west of Homs, a few kilometres from Lebanon's northern border.<sup>116</sup>

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tories were arrested and imprisoned by the regime. See "Dissident writer Michel Kilo freed in Syria", BBC, 20 May 2009.

<sup>111</sup> The two Palestinian factions maintain military bases outside the camps. See Crisis Group Report, *Nurturing Instability*, op. cit., p. 6.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid, p. 25; Crisis Group interviews, Lebanese and Palestinian officials and Islamists, Beirut, Tripoli, Palestinian camps, 2008-2009.

<sup>113</sup> At the time, Syria's detractors, notably March 14 coalition leaders, accused it of permitting fighters from Fatah al-Islam, a jihadi group, to cross into Lebanon; in 2007, the group fought Lebanese troops in the Palestinian Nahr al-Bared refugee camp. Shaker al-Absi, the group's leader, had been jailed in Syria and was set free in 2005. His release at a time when Damascus was confronting fervent opposition in Lebanon, fuelled suspicion that Syria was seeking to destabilise its neighbour. Crisis Group Report, *Nurturing Instability*, op. cit., p. 28.

<sup>114</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian and Lebanese activists, sheikhs, and local leaders, Tripoli, Akkar, Aarsal, December 2012-February 2013.

<sup>115</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., pp. 1-2. In May 2012, Terje Roed Larsen, the UN Special Envoy for the implementation of Security Council resolution 1559 (2004) said, "there are reasons to believe that there is a flow of arms both ways – from Lebanon into Syria and from Syria into Lebanon". Quoted in "Arms flowing' between Lebanon and Syria", Al Jazeera, 9 May 2012.

<sup>116</sup> Pictures of the killed fighters purportedly were sent to their parents. Crisis Group interviews, Islamist militants, Tripoli, January 2013. "Twenty Lebanese killed in Syria Ambush", *The Daily Star*, 30 November 2012.

According to several Tripoli sheikhs, more than 200 Islamist militants from the city alone have crossed into Syria since late 2012.<sup>117</sup> A sheikh explained: “Many Lebanese who fight in Syria do so to support their Syrian brethren. But they also see this as an opportunity to settle scores with a regime that has oppressed Islamists for decades”.<sup>118</sup> Lebanese jihadis also reportedly have set up training camps to prepare their followers to fight together with the Syrian opposition.<sup>119</sup> A Salafi militant said, “Syria is the new jihadi destination of choice”.<sup>120</sup>

Members of the Syrian opposition have acknowledged receiving such help. In early March, the Islamic Free Sham Movement (Harakat Ahrar as-Sham al-Islamiyya), a leading Syrian salafi militant group whose various affiliated factions are active throughout the country, posted a YouTube video in which it thanked “the people of Tripoli for their support to their Syrian brethren”.<sup>121</sup>

The situation could escalate. In April, responding to a Hizbollah statement claiming to be fighting in Syria to defend Lebanese Shiites,<sup>122</sup> Lebanese Salafis urged jihad there. Ahmad al-Assir, a leading Saida Salafi sheikh known for support of the opposition, said, “there is a religious duty on every Muslim ... to enter into Syria in order to defend its people, its mosques and religious shrines, especially in al-Qusayr and Homs”.<sup>123</sup> Salem al-Rafei, a Tripoli Salafi leader, echoed this: “We also have our people who are Lebanese Sunnis in al-Qusayr and Tall-Kalakh. Our calls for jihad will stop once Hizbollah withdraws from Syria”. Both asked young Sunnis to sign up and prepare for combat in Syria. The exchange continued with a response by Hassan Nasrallah to charges Hizbollah was participating in the war: “No party can claim being innocent of an involvement in the Syrian conflict”. Pointing to those he labelled “*takfirists*” [Islamists who denounce others as infidels or impious], he added: “Fatwas, speeches and the sending of money, arms and fighters have not stopped since two years ago”.<sup>124</sup>

Assessing the precise extent of Lebanese Sunni Islamist involvement in the conflict is difficult. It still appears both relatively limited and slightly amateurish, as the

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<sup>117</sup> Crisis Group interviews, sheikhs and Islamist militants, Tripoli, January-February 2013.

<sup>118</sup> Crisis Group interview, Salafi sheikh, Tripoli, January 2013.

<sup>119</sup> See “Exclusive: Veteran Lebanese fighter trains new generation of jihadis – for Syria”, *The Christian Science Monitor*, 30 May 12. As noted above, Hizbollah’s involvement in Syria incites Lebanese Islamists to do the same. A Lebanese Islamist said, “whatever support we [the Islamists] provided to the rebellion, it is nothing compared to Hizbollah’s help to the regime. Is it fair that the party sends well-trained and well-equipped fighters into Syria, yet we are scrutinised for the smallest thing we do?” Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, January 2013.

<sup>120</sup> Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, January 2013. For more, see Crisis Group Middle East Report N°131, *Tentative Jihad: Syria’s Fundamentalist Opposition*, 12 October 2012.

<sup>121</sup> See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPs59qKFuHM&feature=player\\_embedded#](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qPs59qKFuHM&feature=player_embedded#). Similarly, a YouTube video posted in January 2013 apparently depicts Syrian fighters announcing the formation of the Ahmad al-Assir battalion – a reference to a highly controversial Lebanese Salafi sheikh from Saida known for his violent anti-Hizbollah rhetoric as well as his support for the Syrian uprising. He has called for rallies in support of Syria’s rebels in the centre of Beirut. See [www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRZMNq761H8&feature=player\\_embedded](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fRZMNq761H8&feature=player_embedded).

<sup>122</sup> See below, Section IV.B.

<sup>123</sup> “Lebanese Sunni cleric calls for jihad to aid Syrian rebels against Hezbollah”, al-Arabiyya, 23 April 2013.

<sup>124</sup> “Nasrallah: We won’t hesitate to help Lebanese in Qusayr and we pride ourselves in our martyrs”, Naharnet, 30 April 2013. [www.naharnet.com/stories/en/81489-hizbullah-chief-sayed-hassan-nasrallah-in-televised-address](http://www.naharnet.com/stories/en/81489-hizbullah-chief-sayed-hassan-nasrallah-in-televised-address).

Tall-Kalakh ambush and even theatrical calls for jihad suggest.<sup>125</sup> Yet, it undoubtedly is on the rise, reflecting mounting defiance toward Hizbollah and state authorities.

Lebanese participation in the Syrian war also poses a real risk of future blowback. Precedent is instructive: Lebanese and other Arabs who fought in Afghanistan and Iraq later moved on to other battlegrounds.<sup>126</sup> Permeable Syrian-Lebanese borders, Lebanon's weak security apparatus, the country's multi-confessional identity and heightened Sunni-Shiite tensions make it all the more likely – and all the more worrying – that Lebanon might become the next arena for jihadi returnees from Syria.

## 2. Renewed political ties

As a result of the uprising, political ties between anti-Syrian regime groups on both sides of the border, whether Islamist or non-Islamist, are being forged for the first time in decades. This has been true, in particular, at the local level. Syrian activists regularly hold meetings with March 14 and other Lebanese opposition figures<sup>127</sup> and political Islamist forces from the two countries have reconnected after a long hiatus. Notably, Jamaa Islamiyya, the Lebanese branch of the Muslim Brotherhood, re-established ties to its Syrian counterpart; their respective leaders have met several times, in Istanbul and elsewhere.<sup>128</sup>

For Syrian refugees, enjoying connections to March 14 officials has proved helpful, a source of material support and a form of protection.<sup>129</sup> An activist said:

Our Lebanese allies played an important role in counterbalancing the actions of allies of the regime. Several officials intervened on our behalf before Lebanese

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<sup>125</sup> A Lebanese Islamist said, “they were not well prepared. They should have possessed better knowledge of Syria’s geography and in particular of regime-controlled areas. Plus, they probably were infiltrated by Assad’s agents”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli sheikh, Tripoli, January 2013. Public calls for jihad by the two Salafi clerics appeared designed to placate Sunni Islamist anger at reports of Hizbollah’s involvement in Syria more than to signal a concrete plan of action. By urging volunteers to sign up for jihad, the clerics risked exposing potential recruits to state authorities; besides, armed groups in Syria rejected the calls, exposing the lack of prior coordination. “Lebanese Sunni youth sign up for holy war against Hezbollah”, *al-Arabiyya*, 24 April 2013; “Free Syrian Army rejects Lebanon Salafis’ jihad calls”, *Naharnet*, 24 April 2013.

<sup>126</sup> Fatah al-Islam, whose conflict with the Lebanese army proved devastating for the country, Palestinian refugees and the Islamist group itself, provides an apt illustration. As Crisis Group wrote, “Fatah al-Islam brought together the disparate faces of jihadism: Afghan-Arabs; Lebanese militants influenced by local movements; internet-recruited young volunteers from around the Arab world; Palestinian camp activists; and returnees from Iraq”. Crisis Group Report, *Lebanon’s Politics*, op. cit., pp. 26-27. Among other examples: Bassam al-Kanj (Abou Aïcha), a Lebanese who fought in Afghanistan and whose group clashed with the Lebanese army between December 1999 and January 2000, leaving more than 30 people dead. *Ibid.*

<sup>127</sup> Several Syrian activists have participated in official Lebanese events, such as the 14 February ceremony commemorating Rafic Hariri’s assassination and the funeral of Wissam al-Hassan, former head of the Internal Security Forces’ information branch.

<sup>128</sup> In addition to providing support to Syrian refugees, the movement has organised rallies on behalf of the Syrian uprising that many Syrians – including officials from the Muslim Brotherhood – attended. Crisis Group interview, Jamaa Islamiyya officials, Beirut, Tripoli, December 2012-January 2013.

<sup>129</sup> Relations with anti-Syrian officials facilitated operations of the Syrian Refugees Coordination Committee in Lebanon. A member explained: “Thanks to some Lebanese anti-regime politicians, we were able to bring those who were wounded or in need of medical care to hospitals in the north. They also provided some funding and helped us secure money from Gulf donors”. Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli, February 2013.

judges and security officers, for example when activists were arrested. They represent a kind of deterrence to keep agents of the Syrian regime in check and prevent them from going too far.<sup>130</sup>

As of yet, this new patchwork of connections has not translated into particularly close relations between the organised Syrian opposition and March 14. True, the Lebanese anti-Syrian coalition expressed support for the Syrian National Council (SNC) – the opposition group that was formed in 2011 – and, then, the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces.<sup>131</sup> In return, the SNC sent a message on the occasion of the commemoration of Rafic Hariri’s assassination<sup>132</sup> and addressed an “Open Letter to the Lebanese People” that echoed many of March 14’s positions concerning future relations between the two countries.<sup>133</sup> Beyond that, however, interaction between the two groups has remained relatively superficial.<sup>134</sup>

Although the fact that the Syrian opposition has developed closer ties with one side of the Lebanese political spectrum is understandable and even inevitable, it is not without longer-term risks. Already, many Syrian activists are being sucked into Lebanon’s sectarianism and polarisation, in various instances adopting the rhetoric and worldview of their Lebanese allies – for example by minimising Hizbollah’s staying power, military strength and popularity among Shiites after the Syrian regime’s putative collapse or by failing to expand their connections to more “centrist” players such as former Prime Minister Mikati.<sup>135</sup> Clearly siding with one side of the spectrum

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<sup>130</sup> Crisis Group interview, Syrian activist, Tripoli, February 2013. In a few instances, Lebanese security services with close ties to Hizbollah or the Syrian regime reportedly have detained Syrian activists or repatriated them. Crisis Group interview, human rights activist, Beirut, September 2012.

<sup>131</sup> See “Middle East Panorama”, March 14 coalition communiqué, 14 November 2012. A March 14 official pointed out: “They [the March 14] didn’t represent an official state force. Thus, their communiqué came short of recognising the Syrian Coalition. It instead called on the government to do so”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, December 2012.

<sup>132</sup> The letter saluted “the martyrs of the Cedar Revolution [the Lebanese uprising against the Syrian presence that gave birth to the March 14 coalition]” and said that the SNC “considers your victory against Assad’s army as the first blow to this regime. Assad’s regime will ultimately collapse and Syria will have the best relations with Lebanon, a relation based on brotherly ties, not based on slogans that the regime had adopted”. “March 14 salutes the Syrian opposition”, *The Daily Star*, 15 February 2012.

<sup>133</sup> The SNC committed to, inter alia: “Review agreements signed between the two countries and reach new agreements based on the independent and common interests of both nations; Focus on a relationship between the two nations within the framework of diplomatic representation by our respective embassies; Abolish the Syrian-Lebanese Higher Council [a council created by the Syrian regime and viewed by many as the symbol of Damascus’s hegemony over its neighbour]; Demarcate the Syrian border, particularly in the Shebaa Farms; End the intelligence and security role, which previously intervened in Lebanese affairs (including arms smuggling); Form an inquiry commission to resolve the issue of detained and missing Lebanese nationals in Syrian prisons”. “Open Letter to the Lebanese People from the SNC”, Syrian National Council website, 26 January 2012, [www.syrian-council.org/en/news/item/531-pen-letter-to-the-lebanese-people-from-the-snc.html](http://www.syrian-council.org/en/news/item/531-pen-letter-to-the-lebanese-people-from-the-snc.html).

<sup>134</sup> One reason has to do with intense divisions and fragmentation within the Syrian opposition; as an official with the March 14-affiliated Lebanese Forces said, “the Syrian opposition has gone through several shifts, divisions and internal fights. We had to be cautious, wait for a new balance to appear in order not to side with one party against another”. Crisis Group interview, April 2013.

<sup>135</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Future Current officials, Syrian activists, Tripoli and Beirut, 2012. A representative of the Syrian Refugees Coordination Committee in Lebanon went so far as to describe Mikati as “an agent of the Syrian regime”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013.

against the other could backfire, entangling Syrians in their neighbour's political and communal divisions and alienating important segments of the local population.

### 3. The role of Islamic charities

As discussed in a previous report, the uprising has significantly boosted connections between Syrian and Lebanese Islamists, both of whom had suffered during the years of Syrian control.<sup>136</sup> This revival does not pertain to militants alone; a wide range of Islamic charitable organisations that, UNHCR and its partners aside, have done the most on the refugees' behalf have been beneficiaries. Active throughout the Arab world, most notably in the Gulf, Lebanese Islamic charity groups have raised funds and partnered with counterparts at the international and local levels.<sup>137</sup> The transnational nature of Islamic networks – whether affiliated with the Muslim Brotherhood or with Salafis – also plays an important part, insofar as individuals, organisations and a few official donors funnel money to refugees through these groups. They have also profited from the void left by their non-Islamic counterparts.<sup>138</sup>

Finally, and unlike organisations such as UNHCR that must follow specific rules and closely coordinate with the Lebanese state, Islamic charities operate in a far looser, informal environment that allows them to reach a wider range of beneficiaries. These include Syrian fighters, army defectors and refugees reluctant to share personal information with official institutions or living in towns and villages where their numbers are limited.<sup>139</sup>

The provision of humanitarian relief aid also has allowed Islamic organisations to deepen their sway on a social and religious level. Many refugees attend mosques and have come under the influence of Lebanese sheikhs whose popularity is growing among both Syrians and Lebanese.<sup>140</sup> More importantly, these organisations are assuming a major role in educating thousands of Syrians who attend Islamic-leaning schools.<sup>141</sup> All in all, the refugee crisis has provided a significant opportunity for organisations at the intersection of charity and missionary work to gain in influence.<sup>142</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> See Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., pp. 3-5.

<sup>137</sup> For instance, the Federation of Relief Organisations for the Support of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon brings together more than 70, mostly Islamic, associations from Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the Palestinian occupied territories, Turkey and even the UK. They include, inter alia, the Saudi International Islamic Relief Organisation, the International Islamic Charitable Organisation of Kuwait, Islamic Relief and Muslim Aid-UK.

<sup>138</sup> This has been the case in particular of the Hariri Foundation, which has suffered from serious financial difficulties. It was forced to shut down several community service centres – in Akkar, Tripoli and the Bekaa valley. Crisis Group interviews, representatives of Lebanese and international Islamic organisations, Beirut and Tripoli, February 2013; Future Current senior official, Beirut, 5 February 2013.

<sup>139</sup> For instance, UNHCR registers only refugees with civilian status and does not operate in areas with relatively small numbers. Crisis Group interviews, UNHCR official, NGO representative, Beirut, Saida, February 2013; representatives of Islamic organisations, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, January-February 2013.

<sup>140</sup> Crisis Group interviews, Syrian refugees, Tripoli, Akkar, Beirut, Saida, January-February 2013; representatives of Islamic organisations and Syrian refugees, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, January-February 2013.

<sup>141</sup> Although the government has allowed refugees to enrol in public schools, most face considerable difficulties because of differences between the two countries' curriculums and foreign language obstacles (Lebanese schools, unlike their Syrian counterparts, teach some subjects in English or French). According to UNHCR, student enrolment has been limited to roughly 30 per cent of the total pool. Islamist organisations have stepped in to fill the void; Jamaa Islamiyya, which runs a wide network

This has generated concern among both Lebanese and Syrians. These organisations and their activities are difficult to monitor and – if they are used for military ends – hard to prevent. An adviser to then-Prime Minister Mikati warned: “A number of these organisations are not known to Lebanese authorities. Money flows and the state knows neither its origin nor its destination. It could be used to fund military actions, and nobody would be able to control it”.<sup>143</sup> To an extent, the provision of relief has been tainted by sectarian bias, with some refugees claiming they have been denied aid because of their identity.<sup>144</sup>

The influence of Islamic organisations also risks deepening Syrian divisions by radicalising a generation of Syrians, inculcating militant anti-Shiite and anti-Alawite worldviews.<sup>145</sup> A Lebanese official said, “we don’t know much about these classes that are taught using a Syrian curriculum. We don’t know what kind of education or ideas they are transmitting to Syrian children”.<sup>146</sup> A Syrian activist warned: “These Islamic organisations are imposing their sectarian perspective on our revolution. The more this situation lasts, the more likely it is that sectarianism will become engraved in the refugees’ minds”.<sup>147</sup>

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of state-approved schools, opened classes that use Syria’s curriculum. According to the head of its political bureau, the movement’s schools service over 13,000 Syrian students and employ some 600 teachers. Down the road, however, the fact that Lebanon does not officially recognise the Syrian curriculum could pose problems; depending on the Syrian authorities’ stance, the credentials of thousands of Syrian students might not be recognised. Crisis Group interviews, UNHCR official, Jamaa Islamiyya’s head of political bureau, Lebanese officials and Syrian families, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, January-February 2013.

<sup>142</sup> The head of Jamaa Islamiyya’s political bureau said, “if the capacity of Islamic forces were at the same level as two years ago, they wouldn’t have been able to handle the refugee issue the way they are today. The extent of their work and the support they enjoy are clear signs of their growth”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013. The head of an Islamic NGO echoed this: “Since the Syrian uprising, we have expanded exponentially. Our staff grew from 25 in 2011 to more than 70 today. We are involved in new fields, like education. Our budget tripled if not quadrupled”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>143</sup> Crisis Group interview, Mikati adviser, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>144</sup> A Syrian Kurdish activist said, “several Kurdish refugees told me that, in the wake of the Ras al-’Ayn battle [which opposed Kurdish to opposition forces], several Islamist NGOs denied them aid, accusing Kurds of being Assad agents”. Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013. Although this appears to be the case with Salafi-leaning organisations, many Islamic organisations provide aid regardless of recipients’ political or sectarian identity. The low number of Alawite and Christian beneficiaries likely results from their own reluctance to seek help from organisations considered anti-regime. Crisis Group interviews, representatives of Islamic charity organisations, Beirut, Tripoli, Saida, February 2013. The head of an Islamic charity said, “we don’t deny aid to Alawites, we don’t ask for the religious affiliation of potential beneficiaries. But many non-Sunni refugees have refrained from seeking help from Islamic charities, even if they are non-sectarian”. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>145</sup> Several Lebanese and Syrians said that a number of Islamic organisations were using such rhetoric. Crisis Group interviews, Tripoli, Saida, February 2013. That said, the head of Jamaa Islamiyya’s political bureau said the organisation monitored its schools’ teachings and banned the use of sectarian rhetoric. Crisis Group interview, Tripoli, February 2013.

<sup>146</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>147</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, February 2013.

## B. *The Consolidation of Pro-regime Networks*

Its acute domestic crisis notwithstanding, the Syrian regime has maintained an impressive array of Lebanese allies and proxies that, to an extent, has shielded it from next-door threats. Officially, Mikati's government abided by a policy of dissociation, pursuant to which Beirut abstained from taking positions in regional or wider international forums.<sup>148</sup> However, regime allies have not only helped keep support to the Syrian opposition in check, at least in early stages of the uprising; they also have deepened political and military cooperation with Damascus.<sup>149</sup>

This task principally has fallen to Hizbollah. During the first year of the uprising, the Shiite party apparently mainly extended political backing to its ally, though the U.S. accused it of giving the regime "logistical [and] operational support".<sup>150</sup> Over time, this developed into what appears to be far more comprehensive, full-fledged military involvement to defend the regime. Allegations, signs and now quasi-open acknowledgments abound. To begin, media reports and claims by both Western officials<sup>151</sup> and the Syrian opposition pointed to military activities in support of the regime or to defend the small number of Syrian Shiites, notably in the border area near al-Qusayr, strategic both for proximity to Lebanon's Bekaa and its closeness to the Damascus-Homs highway.<sup>152</sup> Movement officials played down the extent of involvement. In October 2012, its secretary general admitted only that some Lebanese Shiites living in Syria had defended their towns against opposition attacks.<sup>153</sup> He added: "If the day comes when our responsibility requires that [we fight in Syria], we will not conceal it".<sup>154</sup>

A clear signal of deeper participation came in March 2013 when *al-Akhbar*, a generally pro-Hizbollah daily, provided a detailed account of the movement's role in Syria. Its editor-in-chief, known for close ties to Hizbollah wrote:

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<sup>148</sup> Moreover, pro-Syrian partisans have organised several rallies in support of the regime. They also have physically attacked anti-regime demonstrations. Crisis Group interview, anti-regime Lebanese and Syrian activists, Beirut, January 2012. See also, *an-Nahar*, 4 August 2011.

<sup>149</sup> Security forces generally perceived as close to the Syrian regime have intercepted several arms shipments destined for the Syrian opposition; in a number of cases, they have arrested Lebanese and Syrian anti-regime activists; regime allies regularly issue statements condemning Lebanese support to the Syrian opposition. For more, see Crisis Group Report, *A Precarious Balancing Act*, op. cit., pp. 2-4, 10-11.

<sup>150</sup> [www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196335.htm](http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2012/08/196335.htm).

<sup>151</sup> According to U.S. and French officials, Hizbollah – operating hand in hand with Iran – is now fully invested in the conflict. Crisis Group interview, U.S. official, Washington, February 2013. A U.S. official said, "Hizbollah's support far exceeds what we expected. They are all in. A very large number – as many as 2,000-2,500 – of their fighters are in Syria. They are very effective and professional, and wherever they are present, the regime performs far better, as it did at one point to retake Aleppo airport. The fact is that there is not a single rebel-held position that Hizbollah could not retake". Crisis Group interview, Washington, March 2013. That number subsequently was repeated by another U.S. official; see "Hizbollah Steps Up in Syria as Israel Tries to Ease Tension", *The Wall Street Journal*, 7 May 2013.

<sup>152</sup> See, eg, "Video appears to show Hezbollah and Iraqi Shiites fighting in Syria", *The Christian Science Monitor*, 18 January 2013; "The reasons behind Hezbollah's decision to fight in Syria", *al-Monitor*, 11 April 2013; "FSA says Hezbollah has thousands of fighters in Syria", *al-Arabiyya*, 11 April 2013.

<sup>153</sup> Borders between Lebanon and Syria remain undemarcated, and some villages straddle the line; it is not uncommon to find Lebanese nationals living on Syrian territory and vice versa.

<sup>154</sup> *Al-Manar*, 11 October 2012.

Hizbollah trains, arms, and provides sufficient logistical support to Lebanese inhabitants of border villages; [it] took over the task of protecting the Sayida Zaynab shrine<sup>155</sup> [a major Shiite pilgrimage site] south of Damascus after its Iraqi guards left. Party members are deployed there under a plan that restricts their responsibility to the immediate vicinity of the shrine; Hizbollah, which has security and military ties to the regime, assists Syrian forces in providing protection to scientific academies and missile factories that were built over the past decade largely with aid from Iran.<sup>156</sup>

Moreover, the movement's acknowledgment of its combatants' deaths bolstered the view that its fighters were involved in clashes with the Syrian armed opposition.<sup>157</sup>

By April 2013, Hizbollah had gone a step further, officially admitting that party fighters were engaged in battles to protect Shiites in Syria. A senior official described this as a "moral and national duty ... Hizbollah's martyrs are the nation's martyrs because they were defending their Lebanese families".<sup>158</sup> The movement gradually became more candid about its role. Most recently, on 30 April, in his most extended speech on the matter, Nasrallah suggested that Lebanese militants had crossed the border to defend Qusayr and protect Shiite shrines:

We won't leave the Lebanese in Qusayr's countryside vulnerable to attacks, and we will not hesitate to help them .... Armed groups are only hundreds of metres away from the Sayyeda Zainab shrine, and *takfirist* groups launched clear threats on the internet that they will destroy the shrine should they enter the area .... We are not accusing the Sunnis at all. Our problem is with the *takfirist* groups, and everyone must stand in their face and prevent them from destroying the shrine .... Fighters that are falling martyrs are the ones preventing sectarian strife .... I have already talked about the issue of Qusayr and said that 30,000 Lebanese Muslims and Christians were targeted, torched and prevented from going to work. These people have the right to do everything to defend themselves and have the right to receive assistance, and this is a moral and humanitarian thing.<sup>159</sup>

He also more than hinted at the lengths to which the movement would go should the regime come under real threat: "So what then will happen if things deteriorate, and countries and powers are forced to intervene? Syria has true friends who will not let it fall in the hands of the U.S., Israel, and *takfirist* groups. How will they prevent this? The answer will come later, but what I am saying is a fact".<sup>160</sup>

The temperature rose appreciably in early May, with a rapid succession of practical and rhetorical developments that suggested both greater potential regionalisation of the conflict and growing fusion between Hizbollah's and the Syrian regime's outlooks, interests and actions. On the 3rd and then again the 5th, air raids – widely

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<sup>155</sup> A Facebook page entitled "Campaign for the defense of Sayida Zaynab shrine" celebrates "Hizbollah martyrs" allegedly killed while defending the shrine; their photos and résumés are posted on the page. [www.facebook.com/SYria.AL.Assad.SYR](http://www.facebook.com/SYria.AL.Assad.SYR).

<sup>156</sup> "Hizbollah's role in Syria", *al-Akhbar* (English), 22 March 2013.

<sup>157</sup> Many Hizbollah fighters have been buried without the party clarifying the circumstances of their death. This behaviour is atypical; the movement tends to publically glorify combatants killed in combat against Israel.

<sup>158</sup> "Defending Lebanese in Syria is a moral duty: Hizbollah", *The Daily Star*, 22 April 2013.

<sup>159</sup> "Nasrallah: We won't hesitate to help", *op. cit.*

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*



believed to be Israeli and suspected of being aimed at weapons systems that could be transferred to Hizbollah – struck Syrian targets.<sup>161</sup> A few days later, Nasrallah stated that “we are ready to receive any game-changing weapons” and “the same as Syria stood by Lebanon, we in the Resistance declare that we will stand by the Syrian popular resistance that is aimed at liberating the Syrian Golan”.<sup>162</sup> Simultaneously, Assad is said to have emphasised the degree to which the two entities were working as one:

We have decided to give them [Hizbollah] everything .... For the first time we feel that we and they are living in the same situation, and they are not just an ally we help with resistance .... We have decided that we must move forward towards them and turn into a nation of resistance like Hizbollah, for the sake of Syria and future generations.<sup>163</sup>

Hizbollah’s increased involvement has not gone without internal debate. According to an official:

There are two trends, although it would be wrong to describe this as a clash. One camp believes Hizbollah should have kept at a distance. But it clearly lost the argument. The other is convinced that all that is happening in Syria is both an outgrowth of earlier attacks against the movement and a prelude to more aggressive ones in the event the regime were to fall. According to this view, Qatari and Saudi policies are dictated by our real enemies, the U.S. and Israel; their objective is to weaken the axis of resistance; and our best answer is to pre-empt this by directly confronting them in Syria.<sup>164</sup>

The movement’s stance prompted sharp threats from the Syrian opposition. In February 2013, the Free Syrian Army – alleging that Hizbollah fighters were supporting regime forces by shelling Syria from the north Lebanese town of Hermel – warned that, should this not stop, “we will take matters in our own hands to respond to the sources of the shooting and stop it inside Lebanese territory”.<sup>165</sup> On 22 April, the acting head of the National Syrian Coalition described Hizbollah’s role in central Syria as “a declaration of war against the Syrian people”.<sup>166</sup>

Hizbollah’s approach appears motivated by several considerations: ensuring the regime’s survival; protecting sensitive areas along Lebanon’s eastern borders so that the Syrian opposition does not come excessively close to the movement’s stronghold in the Bekaa Valley; and guaranteeing contiguity between swathes of territory critical

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<sup>161</sup> Israel neither confirmed nor denied responsibility for the attacks, the second of which reportedly struck an important regime military nerve centre and killed dozens of military personnel. See *Today’s Zaman*, 7 May 2013.

<sup>162</sup> *The Daily Star*, 9 May 2013.

<sup>163</sup> The statement was reported in the pro-Hizbollah *Al-Akhbar*, 9 May 2013.

<sup>164</sup> Crisis Group interview, Beirut, May 2013.

<sup>165</sup> Quoted in *The Washington Post*, 19 February 2013.

<sup>166</sup> “Syria rebels warn Hizbollah fight role ‘declaration of war’”, *Now*, 22 April 2013. Two days later, Moaz al-Khatib (who had resigned as head of the coalition) personally addressed Hizbollah’s secretary general in an emotional speech: “The blood of your sons in Lebanon should not be wasted while fighting our oppressed sons in Syria. I urged you to withdraw all Hizbollah troops from Syria and begin communicating with rebels in all Shiite villages, to secure the safety of all. ... Hizbollah’s intervention in Syria has complicated matters greatly; I had expected someone of your political and social stature to act as a positive factor, halting the shedding of blood of Syrians”. [www.facebook.com/ahmad.mouaz.alkhatib.alhasani](http://www.facebook.com/ahmad.mouaz.alkhatib.alhasani).

to the regime and Hezbollah-controlled areas, so as to link the Damascus/Homs/Hama corridor to the Shiite party's eastern Hermel stronghold. A retired general with close ties to the movement said, "Hezbollah cannot accept having a hostile armed group within its sight".<sup>167</sup>

Just as Islamists justify their actions by pointing to Hezbollah's involvement, so the Shiite movement explains its actions by highlighting what the Islamists, as well as Gulf countries and Turkey, do. A movement official said, "the greater the scope of activities by allies of the Syrian opposition, the deeper the involvement by allies of the regime".<sup>168</sup>

In the future, Hezbollah arguably could seek to serve as protector of an alliance of minorities on both sides of the border threatened by the Sunni rise. According to *al-Akhbar*, the movement has "received delegations from a considerable number of [Syrian] Druze, Christian, Shiite and Ismaili groups which felt their minority communities were under serious threat. It did not meet their training and arming requests but provided them with the means to prevent their displacement".<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Crisis Group interview, retired general with close ties to Hezbollah, Beirut, February 2013.

<sup>168</sup> Crisis Group interview, Hezbollah official, Beirut, December 2012.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid. To some extent, the alliance between Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement and Hezbollah is motivated by sectarian reasons, insofar as the Christian leader sees the Sunnis' regional predominance as a threat to his community, necessitating closing ranks with Shiites. See Crisis Group Report, *The New Lebanese Equation*, op. cit., p. 9.

## V. Conclusion

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The Syrian conflict once more has demonstrated, if additional proof was needed, the degree to which the fates of the two neighbouring countries are intertwined. Syria's growing fragmentation and descent into chaos fuel Lebanon's sectarian polarisation, just as Lebanon's sectarian polarisation adds to its neighbour's travails. The boundary risks becoming increasingly irrelevant, as cross-border ties – political, militant, even military – intensify.

Arguably the greatest surprise, so far, is that Lebanon – despite its vulnerability, weak state institutions and brittle sectarian balance – has fared as well as it has. But there is every reason to fear that the situation will worsen. The refugee inflow, already stretching its political, social and economic capacity to breaking point, is likely to increase dramatically if and when the battle for Damascus is joined. At the same time, Lebanese forces' deepening involvement in the war places their country's fragile stability in serious peril, while ensuring that border communities pay a heavy price.

Of the two dynamics, meddling by Lebanon's actors is almost certainly the hardest to contain; the official policy of dissociation notwithstanding, Sunni Islamists and, especially, Hizbollah appear persuaded that the Syrian conflict is existential, and thus will not take a step back. But, at a minimum, more ought to be done to address the question of refugees, in order to tackle its humanitarian dimension, minimise any negative social or political consequence and prepare for the predictable new waves. Instead, Lebanon's fractured political class has been content to manipulate the issue, allowing the various parties' agendas to dictate their approach at the expense of both the nation's and the refugees' well-being.

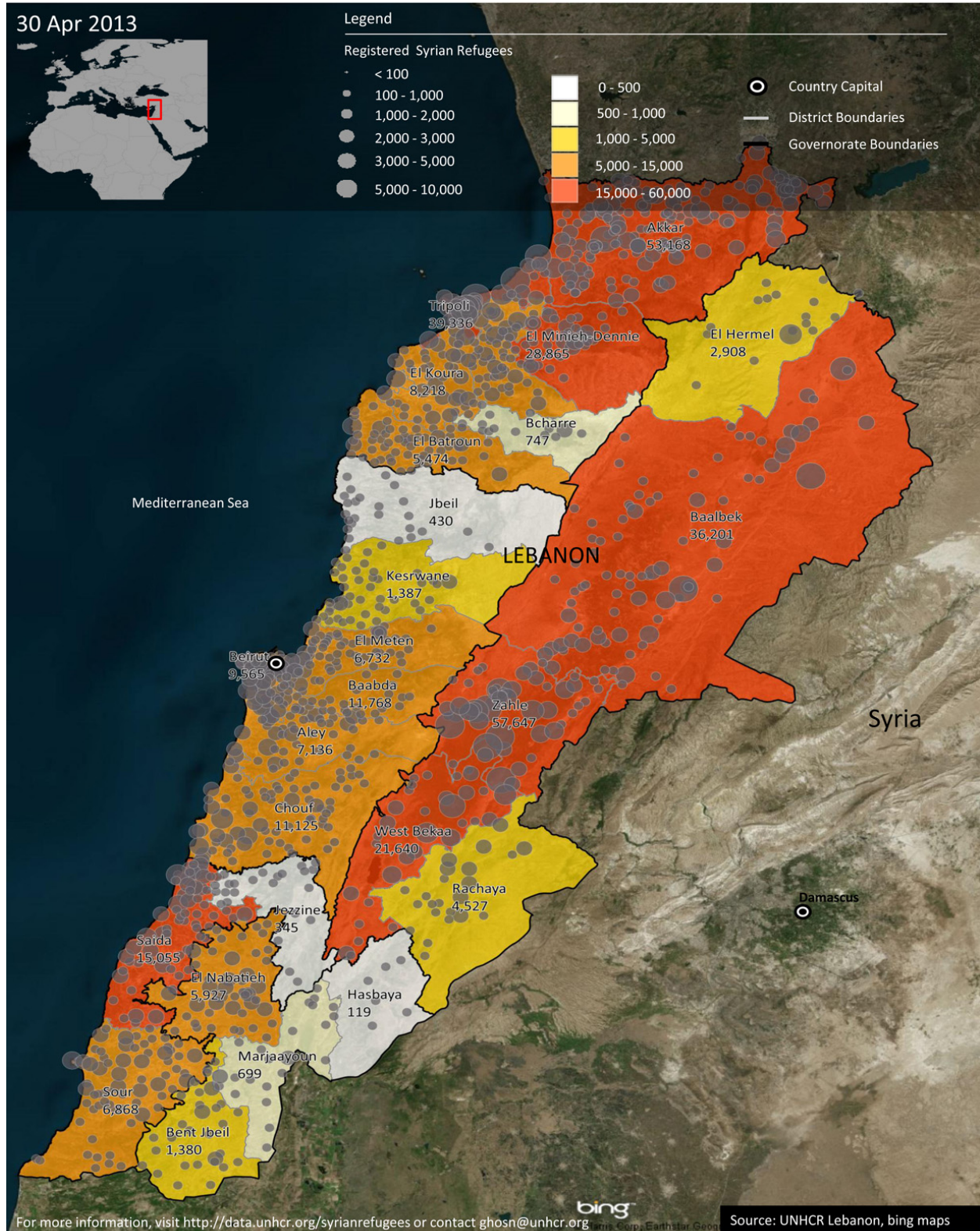
This should change. As soon as it is formed, the new government ought to make the refugee question a priority, initiating proactive steps to address it: allocating additional funds; and, together with the full spectrum of political parties, seriously and honestly exploring the establishment of refugee camps – away from today's demagoguery and political manipulation. The donor community, too, will have to do its share – vigorously addressing a problem that, left unattended, will become one more calamity in an arc of crisis that can ill afford another.

**Beirut/Brussels, 13 May 2013**

Appendix A: Syrian Refugees Registered in Lebanon

453,495 refugees in Lebanon, 343,843 registered, 109,652 awaiting registration.

Source: UNHCR. Reproduced with kind permission.



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## Appendix B: About the International Crisis Group

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The International Crisis Group (Crisis Group) is an independent, non-profit, non-governmental organisation, with some 150 staff members on five continents, working through field-based analysis and high-level advocacy to prevent and resolve deadly conflict.

Crisis Group's approach is grounded in field research. Teams of political analysts are located within or close by countries at risk of outbreak, escalation or recurrence of violent conflict. Based on information and assessments from the field, it produces analytical reports containing practical recommendations targeted at key international decision-takers. Crisis Group also publishes *CrisisWatch*, a twelve-page monthly bulletin, providing a succinct regular update on the state of play in all the most significant situations of conflict or potential conflict around the world.

Crisis Group's reports and briefing papers are distributed widely by email and made available simultaneously on the website, [www.crisisgroup.org](http://www.crisisgroup.org). Crisis Group works closely with governments and those who influence them, including the media, to highlight its crisis analyses and to generate support for its policy prescriptions.

The Crisis Group Board – which includes prominent figures from the fields of politics, diplomacy, business and the media – is directly involved in helping to bring the reports and recommendations to the attention of senior policy-makers around the world. Crisis Group is chaired by former U.S. Undersecretary of State and Ambassador Thomas Pickering. Its President and Chief Executive since July 2009 has been Louise Arbour, former UN High Commissioner for Human Rights and Chief Prosecutor for the International Criminal Tribunals for the former Yugoslavia and for Rwanda.

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**May 2013**

## Appendix C: Reports and Briefings on the Middle East and North Africa since 2010

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*Tipping Point? Palestinians and the Search for a New Strategy*, Middle East Report N°95, 26 April 2010 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Drums of War: Israel and the "Axis of Resistance"*, Middle East Report N°97, 2 August 2010 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).

*Squaring the Circle: Palestinian Security Reform under Occupation*, Middle East Report N°98, 7 September 2010 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Gaza: The Next Israeli-Palestinian War?*, Middle East Briefing N°30, 24 March 2011 (also available in Hebrew and Arabic).

*Radical Islam in Gaza*, Middle East/North Africa Briefing N°104, 29 March 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

*Palestinian Reconciliation: Plus Ça Change ...*, Middle East Report N°110, 20 July 2011 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

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*Light at the End of their Tunnels? Hamas & the Arab Uprisings*, Middle East Report N°129, 14 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

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*Extreme Makeover? (II): The Withering of Arab Jerusalem*, Middle East Report N°135, 20 December 2012 (also available in Arabic and Hebrew).

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*Lebanon's Politics: The Sunni Community and Hariri's Future Current*, Middle East Report N°96, 26 May 2010 (also available in Arabic).

*New Crisis, Old Demons in Lebanon: The Forgotten Lessons of Bab-Tebbaneh/Jabal Mohsen*, Middle East Briefing N°29, 14 October 2010 (only available in French and Arabic).

*Trial by Fire: The Politics of the Special Tribunal for Lebanon*, Middle East Report N°100, 2 December 2010.

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (I): Egypt Victorious?*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°101, 24 February 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Uncharted Waters: Thinking Through Syria's Dynamics*, Middle East Briefing N°31, 24 November 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VI): The Syrian People's Slow-motion Revolution*, Middle East Report N°108, 6 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (VII): The Syrian Regime's Slow-motion Suicide*, Middle East Report N°109, 13 July 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Lebanon's Palestinian Dilemma: The Struggle Over Nahr al-Bared*, Middle East Report N°117, 1 March 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Now or Never: A Negotiated Transition for Syria*, Middle East Briefing N°32, 5 March 2012 (also available in Arabic and Russian).

*Syria's Phase of Radicalisation*, Middle East Briefing N°33, 10 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Lost in Transition: The World According to Egypt's SCAF*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°121, 24 April 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Mutating Conflict*, Middle East Report N°128, 1 August 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Tentative Jihad: Syria's Fundamentalist Opposition*, Middle East Report N°131, 12 October 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian conflict*, Middle East Report N°132, 22 November 2012 (also available in Arabic).

*Syria's Kurds: A Struggle Within a Struggle*, Middle East Report N°136, 22 January 2013 (also available in Arabic).

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*Popular Protests in North Africa and the Middle East (IV): Tunisia's Way*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°106, 28 April 2011 (also available in French).

*Popular Protest in North Africa and the Middle East (V): Making Sense of Libya*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°107, 6 June 2011 (also available in Arabic).

*Holding Libya Together: Security Challenges after Qadhafi*, Middle East/North Africa Report



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*Tunisia: Combatting Impunity, Restoring Security*, Middle East/North Africa Report N°123, 9 May 2012 (only available in French).

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*Spider Web: The Making and Unmaking of Iran Sanctions*, Middle East Report N°138, 25 February 2013 (also available in Farsi).

*Yemen's Military-Security Reform: Seeds of New Conflict?*, Middle East Report N°139, 4 April 2013 (also available in Arabic).

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