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THE INSTITUTE FOR MIDDLE EAST STUDIES

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RETURN TO FATAHLAND?  
SYRIA'S REFUGEES IN LEBANON'S CONFLICT

KIRA DOAR  
JOSEPH KRAUSS

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## **Introduction**

The refugee crisis unleashed by Syria's civil war has raised fears of conflict spillover across the Middle East, perhaps nowhere more so than in Lebanon, which is bitterly divided between supporters and opponents of President Bashar al-Assad's regime. As of April 2013, Lebanon was hosting more than 428,500 Syrian refugees,<sup>1</sup> the largest influx of people since the arrival of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) in 1970, which fueled two decades of instability and civil unrest, the searing memory of which haunts discussions of the current crisis. Refugees are often seen – both in Lebanon and elsewhere – as a destabilizing force. The so-called “refugee-warrior” thesis – developed to explain conflict spillover in the Balkans, the African Great Lakes and South Asia in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century – has largely shaped the popular view of refugees. Many in Lebanon, particularly allies of the Assad regime, fear the refugees could one day carve out a new “Fatahland,” as the Palestinian para-state of the 1970s was known, and sow the seeds of a new civil war.

We will argue for a more complex model of conflict in Lebanon, in which calculations by all factions on a national level militate against a return to civil war but where dynamics generated by the refugees and the war along the border may set off violence that could prove difficult to contain. The refugees are increasingly seen by the Lebanese through a sectarian lens, with the March 14 bloc viewing them as a purely humanitarian crisis and the March 8 bloc – particularly Michel Aoun's Christian Free Patriotic Movement (FPM) – seeing them as a threat to the country's demography and stability on par with that once posed by the Palestinians. On a local level, the arrival of the refugees, the loss of much of the cross-border trade that has long sustained local economies, and clashes along the Syrian frontier have generated tensions in the

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<sup>1</sup> “Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal – Lebanon.” UNHCR. 18 April 2013. Web. 20 April 2013. <<http://data.unhcr.org/syrianrefugees/country.php?id=122>>

north and the Bekaa Valley, raising the prospect of localized disputes getting out of hand or individual acts of violence having nationwide repercussions.

Our conclusions are based on months of research and interviews in Arabic and English with more than a dozen people, including Lebanese politicians from the two main blocs, local activists, Western diplomats and aid workers, and foreign and Lebanese analysts. Our focus is not on the refugees themselves, but on the political context in which they emerge and the conditions that shape both their own choices and those of their host community. While we examine other factors that could contribute to conflict spillover from Syria, we chose to mainly focus on the refugee issue because it is the most visible manifestation of the Syrian conflict in Lebanon and a useful lens through which to examine Lebanese perceptions of the war.

In the first section, we set out our methodology and take a critical look at the refugee-warrior thesis, which shapes much of the conventional thinking about refugees and conflict spillover. In the second section, we provide a detailed overview of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon and look at how susceptible it might be to militant recruitment. In the third section we will look at the debate over the refugees on a national level and the durability of the consensus on non-involvement in the Syrian conflict. In the final section we will look at the tensions over the refugees generated at the grassroots and the potential for localized conflicts to rattle the national truce that has held since 1990, drawing on first-hand interviews and other reports from northern Lebanon, where clashes have periodically erupted between supporters and opponents of the regime.

## **Towards a Theory of “Refugee-Warriors”**

The widespread perception that refugees are inherently prone to political violence is rooted in a handful of iconic cases in which armed groups based in refugee camps carried out cross-border attacks that set off larger conflicts. These include the Khmer Rouge in the refugee camps along the Thai-Cambodian border in the 1970s and 1980s, the Afghan refugees in Pakistan in the 1980s and 1990s and the radical Rwandan Hutu militias in the refugee camps of eastern Zaire (now Congo) in the mid-1990s. In the Middle East, the classic example is the Palestinian refugees and the PLO, which went to war with Jordan's Hashemite monarchy in 1970 and then played a central role in tipping Lebanon into civil war five years later.

All of these cases suggest that sprawling, impoverished refugee camps breed conflict by providing armed groups with an internationally mandated safe haven, a pool of potential recruits and a civilian population that can be used as political leverage vis-à-vis the sending state. In 1989, Aristide R. Zolberg, Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo coined the term “refugee-warriors” to describe “highly conscious refugee communities with a political leadership structure and armed sections engaged in warfare for a political objective, be it to recapture the homeland, change the regime, or secure a separate state.”<sup>2</sup> The three scholars viewed the Palestinians as a model for emerging refugee crises in the post-Cold War period, with large populations displaced for long periods of time as seemingly intractable conflicts rage for years or even decades.

The concept of the refugee-warrior seemed to perfectly describe the Rwandan *genocidaires* who herded refugees across the border as the Rwandan Patriotic Front ended the 1994 genocide and seized power. The radical Hutu regime and its army remained intact and rapidly established control within the refugee camps of eastern Zaire. The militias treated the more than one million refugees as hostages, taking shelter in the humanitarian status of the

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<sup>2</sup> Zolberg, Aristide R., Astri Suhrke and Sergio Aguayo. *Escape from Violence: Conflict and the Refugee Crisis in the Developing World*. New York: Oxford UP, 1989. p. 275

camps while diverting aid to rearm and reorganize, eventually launching attacks on local Tutsis and deadly cross-border raids into Rwanda. As journalists who had missed the genocide raced in to cover the flight of refugees, aid agencies scrambled to set up operations in the camps. The exiled radical Hutu political and military leadership exploited the camps by taxing local aid workers, siphoning off supplies and grossly exaggerating the number of the displaced.<sup>3</sup> A subsequent multi-donor evaluation was unable to locate a third of the 170 NGOs registered in the camps and \$120 million in aid went unaccounted for.<sup>4</sup> The “refugee-warrior” phenomenon emerged as a major factor in Rwanda’s 1996 invasion of Zaire, which marked the start of a decade-long conflict now referred to as “Africa’s World War,” in which up to five million people may have died.<sup>5</sup> It also led to a major reevaluation of the ethics of humanitarian aid – and aid to refugees in particular – and how well-meaning assistance can fuel international conflicts.<sup>6</sup>

Despite the horrific model suggested by the Rwandan conflict, one of the only comparative surveys of refugees and violence that looks beyond a handful of oft-cited case studies found that very few refugee situations generate political violence, with 95 percent of all refugee-related violence taking place in fewer than 15 host states out of a total of more than 100. The study, by Sarah Kenyon Lischer, also found that the post-Cold War period had seen a massive decline in the numbers of refugees involved in violence, from eight million in 1987 to

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<sup>3</sup> Terry, Fiona. *Condemned to Repeat? The Paradox of Humanitarian Action*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2002. pp. 186-7

<sup>4</sup> Goodhand, Jonathan. *Aiding Peace? The Role of NGOs in Armed Conflict*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner, 2006. p. 91

<sup>5</sup> Prunier, Gerard. *Africa’s World War: Congo, the Rwandan Genocide, and the Making of a Continental Catastrophe*. New York: Oxford UP, 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Stedman, Stephen John and Fred Tanner, ed. *Refugee Manipulation: War, Politics and the Abuse of Human Suffering*. Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2003

4.3 million in 1998. “The essential puzzle,” Lischer concluded, “is how scores of refugee situations manage to remain relatively peaceful.”<sup>7</sup>

Lischer wrestled with the puzzle in a subsequent 2005 book, in which she again examined a wide range of refugee conflicts that did or did not generate violence and concluded that refugee violence was best explained, not by the socioeconomic conditions of the refugees, but the political context – specifically, “the origin of the refugee crisis, the policy of the receiving state and the influence of external state and non-state actors.”<sup>8</sup>

Lischer proposes three categories of refugees in her consideration of the potential for refugee-related violence. Situational refugees, as Lischer describes them, flee their homes in a panic when the fighting threatens their lives or livelihoods. They are neither direct participants in nor direct targets of the violence, and express a willingness to return home as soon as they can live there in peace, regardless of the political outcome of the conflict that displaced them. They have little political cohesion within their receiving host states and do not involve themselves in political or military activity in support of either side of the conflict in their native country.<sup>9</sup> Lischer’s second category of refugees are those who flee as a result of direct persecution or oppression by violent actors that target them for ethnic, religious or political reasons. The experiences of these persecuted refugees can generate a degree of political cohesion that could lend itself to militarization. For persecuted refugees the political outcome of the conflict in their country has a direct impact on their willingness to return home, and the cessation of war is not enough. In order to feel safe in their home state they require political guarantees in the form of a

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<sup>7</sup> Lischer, Sarah Kenyon. “Working Paper #10 - Refugee-Related Political Violence: When? Where? How Much?” Center for International Studies, Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Dec. 2001. Web. 26 March 2012. <[http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/migration/pubs/rrwp/10\\_violence.html](http://web.mit.edu/cis/www/migration/pubs/rrwp/10_violence.html)>

<sup>8</sup> Lischer, Sarah Kenyon. *Dangerous Sanctuaries: Refugee Camps, Civil War and the Dilemmas of Humanitarian Aid*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell UP, 2005. p. 10

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. pp. 20-21

power-sharing government, a general amnesty or some other mechanism. These refugees are also more likely to face cross-border attacks by the sending state, which will usually view them as a political if not military threat.<sup>10</sup> The highest propensity for violence exists among Lischer's third category, which she describes as "state-in-exile" refugees. These are either refugees who flee with an existing political and military leadership – as when the radical Hutu regime was driven out of Rwanda in 1994 – or refugees who coalesce into organized armed movements over time, such as the Palestinians in the 1950s and 1960s. In the case of a government driven from power, state-in-exile refugees will often include large numbers of soldiers who remain loyal to the old regime. In the case of a state-in-exile emerging over time, defected soldiers bring organizational skills and military expertise that speeds the emergence of armed movements, which appears to have taken place among the Syrian refugees, particularly in Turkey. In either case, even if most of the refugees are civilians, they are organized into a hierarchical political and military apparatus that is bent on regime change in the sending state. These refugees present a far greater threat than the other groups and thus are frequently the target of cross-border attacks. They typically return home either in victory or as a result of forced repatriation.<sup>11</sup>

Lischer's second layer of analysis concerns the receiving state – whether it is capable of reining in violence and whether it is willing to do so. A weak receiving state, or a receiving state that encourages refugee militancy, will make political violence far more likely. Her third layer of analysis concerns external actors, both powerful states that can pressure receiving states to act on behalf of militant refugees and international aid organizations, which in some cases – such as the Rwandan refugee crisis – can unwittingly provide vital aid and support to armed groups. In the same way that Cold War patronage fueled proxy wars across the developing world, it also saw

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pp. 21-23

<sup>11</sup> Ibid. pp. 24-25



the superpowers and their allies arm refugees to use them as political tools, perhaps most notably in the Afghan refugee camps in Pakistan in the 1980s. The end of the superpower rivalry was therefore an important factor in explaining the decline of refugee-related violence since 1989. Alternatively, external actors can provide needed support to help receiving states patrol their borders and confront and disarm militants, making the spread of war far less likely.

Lischer's analysis, based on her earlier comparative study, explicitly rules out the most common socio-economic explanations of refugee violence, including poor living conditions, the size of refugee camps, their distance from the border and the number of bored, young men among the refugees. Refugees in both large and small camps engage in political violence, and Lischer found that militant groups, like aid workers, find smaller camps easier to control and organize. In 1983, for example, Honduras was home to just 19,000 Nicaraguan refugees and 7,000 to 10,000 Salvadoran refugees, but the sending states viewed both groups as military threats. As to the placement of camps, Lischer notes that Rwandan refugees in Zaire and Tanzania lived within walking distance of the border but the former group became highly militarized while the latter did not. However, she admits that since most refugees live near borders, there is not enough evidence to draw a firm conclusion on the possible links. As to the presence of large groups of male refugees being a cause of violence, Lischer argues that such an approach ignores motivations for militarization, and would not differentiate between, say, 20,000 militiamen and 20,000 male farmers. Lischer similarly dismisses the argument that poor living conditions fuel violence, saying she found little evidence of such a correlation in her comparative work, and adding that several of the most infamous cases of refugee-warriors emerged where there was a relatively high level of international humanitarian interest and aid.<sup>12</sup> We will return

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid. pp. 34-39

to the question of refugee camps later, when we discuss the debate over whether to establish such camps for the Syrians in Lebanon.

The theory provides a persuasive explanation for why the Palestinian refugees have been such a destabilizing force in the region, and particularly in Lebanon. Regardless of whether Palestinian refugees fled in 1948 and 1967 because of direct attacks by Israeli forces or the general chaos of war, they remain refugees because of Israel's refusal to allow them to return – a determination based on their ethnicity. Virtually every Palestinian refugee, from the beginning, therefore fell into Lischer's second refugee category, making them susceptible to militant recruitment. The presence of such a large number of persecuted refugees led to the emergence of the Palestine Liberation Organization, which from its founding up until its return to the occupied territories in the 1990s was the ultimate state-in-exile, with an organized political and military leadership. As a receiving state, Lebanon – particularly in the 1970s and 1980s – was neither willing nor able to patrol its southern border, and several Lebanese factions were openly allied with the PLO. External actors also encouraged militancy, with several Arab states providing money, arms and political support to various Palestinian factions, while the UN Relief and Works Agency funneled extensive aid to the refugees themselves.

While the Palestinian case is perhaps overdetermined by Lischer's theory, she is able to point to other comparative studies that illustrate the influence of the factors she identifies. Keeping the sending state constant, her theory explains why Rwandan refugees from 1994-1996 caused the spread of war in Mobutu's rotting Zaire but were not a source of violence in neighboring Tanzania, where the state was much stronger. It also explains why the Afghan refugees in the 1980s were a source of violence in Pakistan, which along with the United States

and Saudi Arabia backed the *Mujahideen*, but did not become militarized in Iran, where the fighters had far less support.

The theory is not without its critics. Reinoud Leenders argues that the Iraqi refugee crisis, which was sparked by the 2003 US-led invasion and escalated after the outbreak of sectarian fighting in 2006, meets all of Lischer's conditions and yet resulted in virtually no political violence in Jordan or Syria, each of which received hundreds of thousands of refugees. Leenders argues that the Iraqi refugees fled from persecution at the hands of sectarian militias and questions whether Jordan and Syria were strong states capable of reining in militancy. "If one is to apply the hypotheses suggested in the comparative literature on the conditions believed to be conducive to the rise of refugee warriors, the fears for violent radicalization among Iraqi refugees are readily confirmed," he writes.<sup>13</sup> That Iraqi refugees were not involved in any widespread political violence leads Leenders to indict the entire refugee-warrior thesis as a "lucid example of conceptual overstretch" used by external actors – in this case the United States – to justify in-country solutions to refugee crises and abdicate humanitarian obligations.<sup>14</sup>

Leenders' critique, however, is not entirely persuasive. Many if not most of the Iraqi refugees were the direct victims of persecution and oppression, but this does not seem to have translated into a desire to band together by ethnicity or religion, or to settle scores. Leenders offers anecdotal evidence that a great number of the refugees were middle-class professionals with little if any interest or involvement in the country's politics. He says the refugees he interviewed "almost unanimously express strong weariness regarding the conflict in Iraq, stating their disappointment with virtually all Iraqi parties and political leaders and their disgust with the

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<sup>13</sup> Leenders, Reinoud. "Refugee Warriors or War Refugees? Iraqi Refugees' Predicament in Syria, Jordan and Lebanon." *Mediterranean Politics* Vol. 14, No. 3 (2009). p. 348

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* p. 354

sectarian and ethnic strife engulfing their country.”<sup>15</sup> This would seem to suggest that even if they were directly targeted by the country’s shadowy armed groups they are better seen as situational refugees fleeing the sectarian violence itself rather than members of an ethnic or religious group deliberately driven out of the country. Erlend Paasche, who conducted interviews with Iraqi refugees in Syria and has also questioned the refugee-warrior thesis, found that while many refugees had suffered sectarian attacks in Iraq, “grievances were not typically explained by reference to religious groups, either Sunni or Shi’a, and those whose actions stimulated the refugees’ flight were not seen as representatives of a larger group of Muslims.”<sup>16</sup>

Leenders’ doubts about the efficacy of the security states in Jordan and Syria are also not convincing. He cites an International Crisis Group report saying that neither country knew the exact number of Iraqis within its borders but makes clear that the *mukhabarat* in both countries were keeping a close eye on refugee neighborhoods. While Syria reportedly turned a blind eye to the smuggling of foreign fighters into Iraq, such activities were mainly carried out by criminal gangs and tribal networks along the border.<sup>17</sup> Whatever logistical support Syria might have provided to Al-Qaeda in Iraq and other militant groups, it does not appear to have acted through the refugees, who in any case would not have required smugglers or secret networks to return to their native country. Syria is believed to have hosted, or at least turned a blind eye, to the presence of a number members of Saddam Hussein’s toppled regime, most notably Iraqi Baath Party leader Izzat Ibrahim al-Douri, but it’s unclear what role if any they played in the insurgency, and there’s little evidence of any kind of developed Baathist state-in-exile.

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid. p. 352

<sup>16</sup> Paasche, Erlend. “Iraqi Refugees in a Damascus Suburb: Carriers of Sectarian Conflict?” *International Journal of Contemporary Iraqi Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2 (2011). p. 250

<sup>17</sup> Fishman, Brian, ed. “Bombers, Bank Accounts and Bleedout: Al-Qaeda’s Road in and out of Iraq.” Harmony Project, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, 2008. p. 7.

The Iraqi refugee experience does suggest a certain refinement of Lischer's thesis that could help to better identify when refugee crises lead to violence – namely, whether militant groups can operate within the sending state or must be based outside its borders. At least up until the Sunni awakening and the US troop surge, Iraq's militants had safe havens within the country in which to arm, train and hide out. Setting up bases in Syria or Jordan, even if it were possible, would place fighters hundreds of miles from Baghdad and other key battlefields. The PLO and the Rwandan *genocidaires*, by contrast, were unable to carry out anything more than border raids into their countries of origin and hence were forced to base themselves in neighboring states, where the refugee camps were an ideal place to hide out, train fighters and organize an insurgency. This would suggest that state-in-exile refugees are more likely to ignite a wider international conflict when they have no way of operating inside the sending state itself, but a more comprehensive comparative analysis would be needed to draw a firm conclusion.

In the following sections we will apply our slightly modified version of Lischer's theory to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon to see how likely it is that they could serve as a catalyst for conflict spillover. In the following section we will look at the refugees themselves and try to pinpoint whether they fall into the category of situation refugees, persecuted refugees or a state-in-exile. We will then look at Lebanon as a receiving state and whether it has the capability or willingness to rein in militancy, taking into consideration the role of external actors. Finally, we will look at other causes of conflict spillover, mainly localized tensions that could escalate into a larger conflict.

## **The Syrian Refugees in Lebanon**

One of the problems with Lischer's breakdown of refugee types is that many if not most conflicts can be expected to produce all three types of refugees, with some fleeing danger, others fearing persecution and still others actively taking part in the conflict and then slipping across the border for safety. There are likely individual Syrian refugees in Lebanon who would fall into all three categories, and an accurate breakdown would require extensive survey research, which we were unable to carry out during our brief time in the country. However, anecdotal evidence, media reports and our interviews with aid workers suggest that many if not most of the refugees are situational, and therefore less susceptible to militancy. The initial influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon came from Homs, where largely indiscriminate shelling by regime forces had emptied much of the city by June 2012.<sup>18</sup> As the escalating violence swept across the country, so did the points of origin of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, indicating they were fleeing from danger and not persecution. "Initially the majority were coming from Homs, now they're coming from Aleppo and Damascus and other places.... When Damascus got hit back in July [2012], there was one day when 18,000 people crossed the border," Natalie Hawwa, a spokeswoman for the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) told us.<sup>19</sup>

Despite the regime's targeting of rebel-held areas in order to root out what it describes as "terrorists" and foreign agents, the majority of refugees who fled to Lebanon are not believed to have participated directly in the violence that uprooted their lives. Although most refugees are Sunnis, there is little evidence they were persecuted because of their religious identity. Sunnis are the majority in Syria, and despite the Assad regime's legendary brutality towards advocates of political change, it has long espoused sectarian harmony, at least rhetorically. Moreover, the

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<sup>18</sup> "A Precarious Balancing Act: Lebanon and the Syrian Conflict." International Crisis Group, Middle East Report No. 132 (22 November 2012). p. 1

<sup>19</sup> Hawwa, Natalie. Interview with authors. 9 January 2013.

majority of the Syrian refugees registered with the UNHCR in Lebanon, are female and approximately 53 percent are under the age of 18.<sup>20</sup> Mads Almaas, director the Norwegian Refugee Council, shares the view that the predominantly female and child Syrian refugees are purely humanitarian cases fleeing the violence, saying that when one visits refugee areas, “males of fighting age will not be around.”<sup>21</sup>

Long before the onset of the uprising, hundreds of thousands of Syrian laborers held low-income jobs in Lebanon where they could work without visas while their families remained in Syria. Since the peaceful protests of early 2011 were met with a harsh regime crackdown and escalating violence, the nature of the influx of Syrians crossing into Lebanon has shifted from those seeking work to those fleeing the horrors of a protracted conflict. According to the UNHCR, by mid-April there were over 302,600 Syrian refugees registered in Lebanon and an additional 125,960 who had contacted the agency and were awaiting registration.<sup>22</sup> This total already surpassed the agency’s projected planning figure for June 2013 of 300,000 Syrian refugees in Lebanon.<sup>23</sup> As the conflict enters its third year, nearly every corner of Lebanon is playing host to Syrian refugees, who now outnumber the country’s Palestinians. In mid-April, the approximate in-country breakdown of Lebanon’s Syrian refugee population was 59,700 refugees in South Lebanon, 77,000 in Beirut and Mount Lebanon, 143,850 in the Bekaa and 148,000 in the north.<sup>24</sup>

While there are wealthier displaced Syrians in Lebanon, including many who fled the recent bouts of fighting in Damascus, they are not reflected in UNHCR statistics. With the financial wherewithal to rent apartments or hotel rooms in Beirut, or to transit through Lebanon

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<sup>20</sup> “Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal – Lebanon.”

<sup>21</sup> Almaas, Mads. Interview with authors. 11 January 2013.

<sup>22</sup> “Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal – Lebanon.”

<sup>23</sup> Hawwa; “Syria Regional Response Plan: January to June 2013.” UNHCR (December 2012).

<sup>24</sup> “Syrian Regional Refugee Response: Inter-agency Information Sharing Portal – Lebanon.”

en route to third countries, they have not required international aid and have therefore not registered with the UNHCR. The Lebanese Government estimates there are around one million Syrians in the country, including the above mentioned laborers and Syrians of means.<sup>25</sup> At the opposite end of the financial spectrum, those hundreds of thousands of Syrians already registered or awaiting registration with UNHCR in Lebanon are generally poor, and many crossed the border with little more than the clothing on their backs. The influx of predominantly Sunni refugees initially fled to Sunni-friendly areas in northern Lebanon, such as Wadi Khaled in Akkar, with subsequent waves heading for the Bekaa Valley and then to Beirut and the South.<sup>26</sup>

Along Lebanon's northern border with Syria, the residents of Wadi Khaled villages share extensive cross-border tribal, familial and trade linkages with Syrians and opened their homes to those first displaced by the uprising in 2011.<sup>27</sup> The majority of the first wave of Syrians who fled to Lebanon came from Homs and sought shelter with Lebanese host families. As the violence in Syria spread, refugees from Aleppo and Damascus also began entering Lebanon. While many still live with host families, others are renting or living in collective shelters such as abandoned schools and public communal spaces that were renovated by agencies participating in UNHCR's coordinated response.<sup>28</sup>

Lebanon has thus far ruled out the establishment of refugee camps, both because of local sensitivities about the Palestinian experience and the humanitarian aid community's preference for the host family approach, but the impact such camps would have on conflict dynamics is unclear. Lischer's analysis explicitly discounts any link between the socio-economic conditions of refugees and their proclivity to violence. While her analysis does not compare conflicts in

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Hawwa.

<sup>27</sup> "A Precarious Balancing Act." p. 2; "Accommodation of Displaced Syrians in Northern Lebanon: Tripoli & Akkar – June-July 2012." Danish Refugee Council (August 2012). p. 6

<sup>28</sup> Almaas; Hawwa.



which refugees fled to camps with those in which they were housed by local families, she does insist that the size and location of camps is less important than political factors in predicting whether refugees will fuel conflict. The settlement of refugees in camps might make it easier for militants to recruit fighters and organize themselves, but could also make it easier for local security forces to document and monitor refugees. A refugee camp under the close supervision of Hezbollah, for example, would not be seen as an appealing base for Syrian rebel forces. Camps tend to attract media attention, elevating the likelihood that a massive aid operation could sustain militancy, but aid workers point out that camps also make it more likely that refugees will return to their country of origin when the fighting stops. “If you stay in a shitty camp you’re more likely to return home at an earlier stage than if you’re in a host community,” Almaas told us.<sup>29</sup>

Although the majority of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are Sunni, Alawis, Christians and members of other sects have also sought refuge. Refugees tend to feel more comfortable seeking shelter among their own sect, but in multi-sectarian Lebanon many Syrians have had to take what they can get. International aid organizations whose field workers have conducted interviews with the refugees nevertheless said they had heard few accounts of direct religious persecution.<sup>30</sup> As the conflict drags on and the opposition grows more extreme and religious, more Syrians are fleeing on account of sectarian grievances, and thus may fall into the category of persecuted refugees. Syrian Shiites who have taken refuge in border villages in the Bekaa Valley claim to have fled a campaign of “ethnic cleansing” carried out by Syrian rebels and have reportedly joined forces with Hezbollah to repel attacks.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Almaas.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> McDonnell, Patrick J. and Nabih Bulos. “Syria’s Shiites offer different picture of war,” *Los Angeles Times*. 26 March 2013. Web. 30 March 2013. <<http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/middleeast/la-fg-0326-syria-shiites-hezbollah-20130326,0,5327323.story?page=1>>

Regarding the Syrian refugees' willingness to return, there seem to be characteristics of both situational and persecuted refugees. During the initial months of the conflict, many refugees would enter Lebanon for only a brief period to escape fighting and then return when the guns fell silent, according to the UNHCR, suggesting a willingness to return dependent only on a cessation of violence.<sup>32</sup> On the other hand, many Syrian refugees in Lebanon have refused to register with aid organizations because they fear that putting their names on a list could one day allow the regime to brand them or their relatives as opposition sympathizers, indicating that many fear government persecution.<sup>33</sup>

Though the Syrian regime and its supporters have repeatedly accused rebels of using Lebanon as a base of operations and a staging ground for cross-border attacks, the predominantly civilian nature of the refugees in Lebanon does not fit the state-in-exile model. Unlike the Palestinian refugees of the 1970s, the Syrians in Lebanon do not have a large and well-armed political organization that competes with Lebanese factions. Retired Lebanese American University professor and political analyst Waddah Charara points out that Lebanon's Palestinian problem did not begin with the refugees who arrived in 1948, but with the PLO and other heavily armed militant groups that took root in the 1970s. "Unarmed Syrians, Syrians who are purely refugees, are not going to cause discord," he told us.<sup>34</sup> Aid workers said they have come across little evidence of Free Syrian Army units among the refugees, and assume that armed rebels have remained in Syria to fight the regime.<sup>35</sup> Given the fractious nature of the Syrian opposition, it's far from clear whether a state-in-exile exists anywhere, but the external opposition has tended to gravitate towards Turkey and Qatar, and has never convened in Lebanon.

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<sup>32</sup> "Revised Syria Regional Response Plan: June 2012." UNHCR (June 2012). pp. 45-46

<sup>33</sup> Almaas; Hawwa.

<sup>34</sup> Charara, Waddah. Interview with authors. 5 January 2013.

<sup>35</sup> Almaas; Hawwa; Sharp, Shombi. Interview with authors. 11 January 2013.

## **A Conflict-Wary Host State**

“It is almost miraculous that it’s been almost two years and Lebanon is the way it is,” said Mohamad Chatah, a political adviser to former Lebanese Prime Minister and current Future Movement MP Saad Hariri, as the conflict in Syria approached its second anniversary. “If you told someone that there would be a war like this in Syria for close to two years and that Lebanon would be relatively OK, they would say, ‘No way.’”<sup>36</sup> On the surface, Lebanon would appear to have neither the will nor the capacity to prevent the violence in Syria from spilling across its borders. Lebanon has never had the kind of centralized security state that has prevailed elsewhere in the region, and its ever-feuding factions are deeply split on the question of Syria, with the March 14 coalition openly backing the rebellion and Hezbollah standing by its longtime ally Assad. We will argue, however, that while Lebanon does not have a strong state, it does enjoy a durable consensus among all its major power brokers against civil unrest within its borders. This is due to the still searing memories of the 1975-1990 war and the preponderance of military power in the hands of Hezbollah. These two features, along with the increasing competence shown by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) in recent years, have allowed the otherwise deeply divided country to weather the Syrian civil war up until now and make it unlikely that either the state or its security forces would tolerate or encourage militancy among the refugees.

While Lischer’s analysis treats the receiving state as a unitary actor, the consociational nature of the Lebanese government – and the presence of an armed movement like Hezbollah, which is militarily superior to the state – requires us to consider the positions of the various factions regarding the Syrian refugees and the state policies likely to result from their interactions with one another. The Syrian conflict has split Lebanese along fault lines stretching

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<sup>36</sup> Chatah, Mohamad. Interview with authors. 9 January 2013.

back to the country's own civil war, and the various factions' perception of the refugees and the appropriate response to them is largely shaped by their views of the Assad regime. Although Lebanon's Christians are split between the two rival blocs, Michel Aoun's Hezbollah-allied Free Patriotic Movement likely speaks for most of them when it expresses concerns about the potential destabilizing impact of the Syrian refugees. In December 2012, Energy Minister and FPM deputy Jebran Bassil sparked outrage when he called for a closing of the 550-kilometer (340-mile) border with Syria to halt the flow of refugees to Lebanon.<sup>37</sup> The head of diplomatic affairs for the FPM, Michel de Chadarevian, pulled back from those remarks during our interview with him, saying that the FPM was not calling for the closure of the border but for tighter controls. "[The refugees] are a threat because there is no control," said de Chadarevian. "We don't know what is the exact number of refugees.... We don't know if we have militants here or [individuals] from the [Syrian] opposition with their weapons. We don't want to transform the camp of the refugees into a military base for the opposition, or for the regime."<sup>38</sup> He went on to compare the Syrian refugees of today to the Palestinians. "We accepted the Palestinians in 1948 and they are still here, and we destroyed the country because of the Palestinians in 1975, and we had 30 years of war. We don't want to have a reason or a cause for a new war with the Syrian refugees."<sup>39</sup> Christians allied to the March 14 bloc have been less outspoken about the refugees, but many analysts believe Christians on both sides of the divide fear that any influx of Sunni Muslims could pose a demographic threat. Nicholas Blanford, journalist and author of two books on Lebanon, believes the rival Christian factions have the same "shared minority fears" about the refugees. "The grassroots of the Christian community are

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<sup>37</sup> Dockery, Stephen. "Mansour, Bassil threaten to seal border." *Daily Star*. 21 Dec. 2012. Web. 30 March 2013. <<http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Local-News/2012/Dec-21/199358-bassil-mansour-threaten-to-seal-border.ashx#axzz2OSz8eJoe>>

<sup>38</sup> De Chadarevian, Michel. Interview with authors. 11 January 2013.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

not necessarily supportive of Assad himself, but rather fearful of potential threats posed to the Christian community in a post-Assad Syria from a Sunni resurgence and accompanying radicalization.” When it comes to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, Blanford says, Lebanon’s Christians are “very wary of militant-minded Sunnis from Syria setting up shop.”<sup>40</sup>

On the other side of Lebanon’s political divide, Hariri’s opposition March 14 bloc – comprised of both Sunni and Christian political parties – has been strongly supportive of the uprising. The coalition has also advocated for the rights of the mainly Sunni Syrian refugees, demanding a swifter response to the humanitarian crisis from both the Lebanese government and international organizations. Future Movement MP Mouin El Merheby, representing the northern border region of Akkar, has led calls for the establishment of humanitarian corridors within Syria where the refugees can find safety, and for Lebanon in the meantime to keep its borders open for humanitarian reasons. He has also engaged in sharp exchanges with his March 8 rivals, accusing those who have called for closed borders of “racism.”<sup>41</sup> The Lebanese government “has dissociated itself from all humanitarian issues and takes directions from Bashar al-Assad; hence [it] will take no action in favor of refugees,” he was recently quoted as saying in local media.<sup>42</sup> Chatah, Hariri’s political advisor, suggested that the March 8 bloc’s apprehensions regarding the influx of Syrian refugees stem partly from long-held demographic sensitivities, but are also exploited as a scare tactic by Christian leaders, specifically Aoun, who are allied with Hezbollah. Emphasizing the Syrian refugee community’s civilian nature, Chatah insists that fears of a repeat of the Palestinian experience are overblown.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Blanford, Nicholas. Interview with authors. 9 January 2013.

<sup>41</sup> El Merheby, Mouin. Interview with authors. 10 January 2013.

<sup>42</sup> “Merhebi: United Nations must take charge on refugee issue.” National News Agency – Ministry of Information Lebanese Republic. 20 Dec. 2012. Web. 30 March 2013. <<http://www.nna-leb.gov.lb/en/show-news/3292/Merhebi-United-Nations-must-take-charge-of-refugees-39-issue>>

<sup>43</sup> Chatah.

Unlike its Christian allies, Hezbollah – which would seem to have the most to fear from an influx of Sunni refugees – has called for the borders to remain open for humanitarian reasons, a position that reflects its delicate balancing act between supporting its longtime ally in Damascus and distancing itself from the regime’s brutal crackdown. Hezbollah’s alliance with Assad and Syria’s importance as a conduit for arms from Iran left the movement with little choice but to recognize that the regime’s survival may be tied to its own. At the same time, its support for the regime has undermined its narrative of resistance and has caused it to lose much of the Pan-Arab popularity it gained during its 2006 war with Israel.<sup>44</sup> Hezbollah has therefore been forced to continually recalibrate its positions and public statements on Syria to maintain its political and military power.<sup>45</sup> In late 2012, when reports circulated about Hezbollah fighters in Syria, the group’s leader Hassan Nasrallah justified their involvement by saying they were defending Shia Lebanese villages inside Syria that were being attacked by rebels.<sup>46</sup> A few months later, Nasrallah issued a public statement saying Lebanon had an obligation to help the Syrian refugees, a position at odds with the border-sealing calls of Hezbollah’s Christian allies. “We should deal with the Syrian refugees with purely humanitarian responsibility, without politicization of the issue. Attention must be paid to the displaced families, whatever their political background,” Nasrallah said at a ceremony in Baalbek in January. “We, as Lebanon, cannot close the border with Syria.”<sup>47</sup> Many Hezbollah experts believe the militant Shia group is

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<sup>44</sup> Yacoubian, Mona. “Hezbollah After Assad.” *Foreign Affairs*. Council on Foreign Relations (11 Dec. 2011).

<sup>45</sup> “A Precarious Balancing Act.” p. 15; Nerguizian, Aram. Interview with authors. 5 January 2013; Yacoubian.

<sup>46</sup> Chatah; Salem, Paul. “Can Lebanon Survive the Syrian Crisis?” Carnegie Middle East Center, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (December 2012). p. 11

<sup>47</sup> Saad, Hwaida and Annie Barnard and Christine Hauser. “Hezbollah Chief Urges Lebanon to Help in Syrian Crisis.” *New York Times*. 3 January 2013. Web. 30 March 2013.

<[http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/world/middleeast/syria-hezbollah-lebanon-Nasrallah-.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2013/01/04/world/middleeast/syria-hezbollah-lebanon-Nasrallah-.html?_r=0)>

playing up its humanitarian response to the refugee crisis in order to curry domestic favor and maintain stability in Lebanon, despite its continued support for the regime across the border.<sup>48</sup>

More importantly, Hezbollah's unquestioned military supremacy – dwarfing even that of the Lebanese Armed Forces – has militated against a renewed outbreak of violence on the scale of the 15-year civil war. “Unlike 1975, when the militias were pretty much evenly matched, today you have one super-militia and basically not much else,” said Blanford, who views Hezbollah's preponderance of power as a key deterrent to conflict in Lebanon.<sup>49</sup> Chatah, of the March 14 movement, believes the memory of the civil war and fear of Hezbollah will ultimately stabilize Lebanon, even if the war of words worsens. “Underneath all this political hostility there is something that sort of protects Lebanon from sliding into something really bad,” he told us. “First of all there is the fear of seeing Lebanon in conflict again... And add to that there's only one militia in Lebanon. Even if some Sunnis thought they want war, you can't have war against Hezbollah. We don't have a militia, we don't have an army.”<sup>50</sup> Despite the deep resentment of the Damascus regime harbored by many Lebanese, and despite widespread fears for the future of minority rights and strategic partnerships in a post-Assad Syria, the Lebanese seem unwilling to involve themselves directly in the turmoil. A renewed civil war in Lebanon “doesn't suit the interests of political leaders,” Blanford said. “Lebanese have been down that road before and still remember the last one very clearly.”<sup>51</sup>

Another factor likely to limit the spillover of the Syrian conflict is the improved capabilities and cohesiveness of the Lebanese Armed Forces, which are seen as being far more competent and unified than in the years leading up to the Lebanese Civil War. “Unlike in the 70s

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<sup>48</sup> Blanford; Nerguizian.

<sup>49</sup> Blanford.

<sup>50</sup> Chatah.

<sup>51</sup> Blanford.

when the army split soon after the onset of the civil war, and the army itself became a part of the civil war... there's no risk of that happening [today],” Chatah said.<sup>52</sup> The LAF has won plaudits for acting swiftly to contain the fallout from the assassination of Wissam al-Hassan in October 2012, and in northern Lebanon it has thus far succeeded in preventing the fighting in Tripoli's rival neighborhoods of Bab al-Tabaneh and Jebel Mohsen from triggering violence in the rest of the country. That capacity could diminish, however, if the frequency and intensity of fighting between the two neighborhoods increases as the war in Syria drags on and regional dynamics exacerbate localized conflicts. The Lebanese army also remains a far weaker military power than either the Syrian army along the border or Hezbollah's forces within the country.<sup>53</sup> The LAF is further constrained by the political will of the various Lebanese factions when it comes to responding to cross-border shelling from Syria. “We have come under heavy shelling along the border, and there are Lebanese martyrs who live there, and the Lebanese army has refused to do anything. It hasn't fired one bullet,” complained Future Movement MP El Merheby.<sup>54</sup> In January he accused the Hezbollah-dominated government of ignoring the shelling, and called for a UNIFIL-like peacekeeping force to patrol the border. In March, when Syria shelled Lebanon's northern city of Aarsal, the army again failed to act. Before the attack it had done little to pursue Syrian opposition fighters in Lebanon, fearing that doing so would anger the Sunni community, and afterwards it declined to retaliate against Syrian artillery.<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Chatah.

<sup>53</sup> Foote, Michael. “Operationalizing Strategic Policy in Lebanon.” *Special Warfare*. United States Army John F. Kennedy Special Warfare Center and School, Vol. 25, Issue 2 (April-June 2012).

<sup>54</sup> El Merheby.

<sup>55</sup> Blanford, Nicholas. “Syria fires on Lebanon: Lebanese seethe, government mum.” *Christian Science Monitor*. 22 March 2013. Web. 30 March 2013. <<http://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2013/0322/Syria-fires-on-Lebanon-Lebanese-seethe-government-mum>>



## **International Actors Stand Down**

Lischer's third layer of analysis concerns the involvement of international actors in either encouraging or preventing the spread of civil war from the refugee-sending state to the receiving state. External state and non-state actors can encourage peace by bolstering the capabilities of the receiving state or fuel conflict by backing militant groups. International inaction can also exacerbate conflict, as when the great powers largely turned a blind eye to the militarization of the refugee camps in eastern Zaire and aid groups ignored the fact that they were helping to sustain the genocidal Hutu regime in exile.<sup>56</sup> Throughout its troubled history, Lebanon has often served as an arena of conflict for the more powerful states that surround it, particularly during the civil war, when Syria and Israel backed rival factions and even clashed directly on Lebanese territory. However, at present it would appear that powerful outside patrons – including the United States and Iran – are following the lead of their local proxies and refraining from actions that could destabilize the country.

The United States – which during the Bush administration had openly allied with the March 14 bloc and confronted Hezbollah as part of the “War on Terror” – has adopted a far less aggressive posture in recent years by assisting the Lebanese security forces without pressing them to confront the powerful militant group. Hoping to prevent spillover from Syria's civil war, the United States has provided arms, assistance and training to the LAF aimed at helping them to secure the border, respond to external threats and conduct counterterrorism and counterinsurgency operations.<sup>57</sup> In January the United States sent 200 M113 Armored Personnel Carriers (APCs) to the LAF. In the second half of 2012 Washington provided \$140 million in military aid to Lebanon, including six Huey 2 helicopters, a 42-meter coastal security craft, more

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<sup>56</sup> Lischer. *Dangerous Sanctuaries*. pp. 32-33

<sup>57</sup> Foote.

than 1,000 guns – including grenade launchers – and 38 million rounds of ammunition.<sup>58</sup> Washington has also provided more than \$100 million to Lebanon’s Internal Security Forces (ISF), including nearly \$10 million for a new police-training academy.<sup>59</sup> By channeling assistance through Lebanon’s multi-sectarian national security forces, the United States can improve its ability to prevent the militarization of refugees without stirring internal unrest by appearing to back one faction over another.

Those nations believed to be providing arms and assistance to the belligerents in Syria’s civil war have meanwhile steered clear of Lebanon, with Saudi Arabia and Qatar mainly channeling aid to rebel groups through Turkey and Jordan.<sup>60</sup> There have, however, been occasional reports of Saudi Arabia funneling support to the Syrian rebels through groups along the northern border of Lebanon.<sup>61</sup> Iran is meanwhile believed to be supplying the Assad regime via Iraq, and while it remains a key ally and arms supplier for Hezbollah, it seems to share the militant group’s interest in keeping a low profile in Lebanon in order to avoid further tarnishing Hezbollah’s image. Individuals are believed to be funneling aid to the Syrian opposition, but little is known about the scale or mechanisms of such assistance. In any case, with Syria’s rebels repeatedly complaining of arms and ammunition shortages, and with the Assad regime fighting for its life on the outskirts of Damascus, whatever external support exists is likely being channeled to the front lines inside Syria and not to the refugees in Lebanon.

There is also little risk of a massive humanitarian aid operation inadvertently sustaining militant refugees in Lebanon. International donors pledged \$1.5 billion for the Syrian refugee

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<sup>58</sup> “US Gives Unstable Lebanon 200 Armored Vehicles.” Reuters. 7 January 2013. Web. 1 April 2013.

<<http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/01/07/us-lebanon-us-military-idUSBRE9060FQ20130107>>

<sup>59</sup> “U.S. Assistance to the Internal Security Forces – Fact Sheet.” Embassy of the United States: Beirut, Lebanon. 6 March 2013. Web. 1 April 2013. <<http://lebanon.usembassy.gov/factsheet030613.html>>

<sup>60</sup> Salem. p. 13

<sup>61</sup> Willis, Richard S. “Opposition receiving arms through Syria’s neighbors.” *Jerusalem Post*. 17 July 2012. Web. 30 March 2013. <<http://www.jpost.com/Features/InTheSpotlight/Article.aspx?id=277794>>

crisis in the region as a whole in December 2012, but in March the UN refugee agency said it has yet to receive 20 percent of those funds and was struggling to keep up with rising numbers of refugees, particularly in Jordan. “We are facing rising needs, dwindling resources and rising numbers at the border each day,” Andrew Harper, the UNHCR representative in Jordan, told the *Washington Post*. “This is nothing short of a perfect storm.”<sup>62</sup> Unlike the post-genocide Rwandan refugees, the Syrians have elicited little international attention, in part because, with the exception of the sprawling Zaatari camp in Jordan, they have melted into host communities, their plight largely invisible to outside observers.

### **Tensions at the Grassroots: Other Sources of Conflict Spillover**

While the Syrian refugees are unlikely to precipitate large-scale violence in Lebanon for the reasons outlined above, there is a somewhat greater risk of localized violence, particularly in border communities already caught in the Syrian crossfire. Many of the communities, particularly in the north, that have come to host refugees have also lost their traditional trade routes and sources of income as the fighting has limited access or closed the border completely. At the same time, the influx of Syrians has driven up the price of apartments and other basic goods, placing added stress on host families in communities in the north and the Bekaa, which even prior to the war were among the poorest in Lebanon, according to a recent report commissioned by the UN Development Programme (UNDP).<sup>63</sup> The financial strain and competition for resources has not yet resulted in violence, but the UNDP report found growing

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<sup>62</sup> Luck, Taylor. “As Syrian Refugee Population Nears One Million, Relief Agencies Cannot Keep Up.” *Washington Post*. 4 March 2013. Web. 26 March 2013. <[http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle\\_east/as-syrian-refugee-population-nears-1-million-relief-agencies-cannot-keep-up/2013/03/04/1f0bf5f2-80f6-11e2-a350-49866afab584\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/as-syrian-refugee-population-nears-1-million-relief-agencies-cannot-keep-up/2013/03/04/1f0bf5f2-80f6-11e2-a350-49866afab584_story.html)>

<sup>63</sup> “Rapid Assessment of the Impact of the Syrian Crisis on Socio-Economic Situation in North and Bekaa.” Development Management International, funded by UNDP (August 2012).

frustration and some resentment on the part of Lebanese hosts, which could prove volatile as increasing numbers of refugees settle in multi-sectarian areas, particularly in the Bekaa. “Assuming that influx continues to be Sunni majority, we are running out of, let’s say, ‘Sunni-friendly’ places, and we don’t really know what the dynamics will be,” Almaas, of the Norwegian Refugee Council, told us.<sup>64</sup>

Many such areas have already seen spillover from the Syrian conflict, albeit on a limited scale. Syrian shells land inside Lebanon on a near-daily basis along the porous border, and in March Syrian warplanes bombed suspected rebel strongholds in the northeastern Lebanese city of Arsal. The Free Syrian Army is operating in a number of border communities, according to journalist Nicholas Blanford,<sup>65</sup> and an activist preacher in Tripoli’s Bab al-Tabaneh neighborhood told us he had helped supply aid and weapons to Syrian rebels and secured medical treatment for their wounded.<sup>66</sup> Officials and analysts we spoke to confirmed a *New York Times* report from late last year saying Lebanese fighters have crossed into Syria to fight on both sides of the civil war but have thus far observed a truce on the Lebanese side of the border.<sup>67</sup> Such clashes could easily escalate, however, and a hot pursuit could lead to fighting inside Lebanon.

To return to Lischer’s framework, the presence of organized Syrian rebel fighters in border areas could constitute a small-scale, localized state-in-exile, drawing Syrian cross-border fire and placing Lebanese troops and civilians in harm’s way. Here again, a miscalculation or particularly bloody exchange – especially in a multi-sectarian community – could get out of hand

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<sup>64</sup> Almaas.

<sup>65</sup> Blanford.

<sup>66</sup> Al-Masri, Sheikh Bilal. Interview with authors. 10 January 2013.

<sup>67</sup> MacFarquhar, Neil. “Lebanon’s Shiites and Sunnis Battle in Syria, But Not at Home.” *New York Times*. 19 December 2012. Web. 26 March 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/20/world/middleeast/lebanons-shiites-and-sunnis-fight-in-syria-but-not-at-home.html>>

quickly, posing a challenge to the national consensus in favor of neutrality. Blanford fears that clashes erupting in one Bekaa community could quickly skip down the valley as ties of sect and kinship are activated, eventually setting off conflicts in other hotspots around the country. He also fears a potential spectacular attack that could incite mass violence, pointing to the Samarra shrine bombing in Iraq in 2006, which set off a massive wave of tit-for-tat sectarian bloodletting. A car bomb that kills scores of Shiites in the Dahiya, for example, or one that strikes the shrine of Sayyida Zeinab in Damascus, could set off a chain reaction of sectarian reprisals that even the highly disciplined Hezbollah might not immediately be able to rein in.<sup>68</sup>

An International Crisis Group report on Lebanon from late 2012 maintained that none of the major Lebanese factions have an interest in armed conflict, but expressed fears about local dynamics. “The more serious danger emanates from spontaneous clashes – harder to control and thus easier to spread – between their constituencies as well as between lesser groups nominally belonging to their respective camps. Already, both Hezbollah and the Future [Movement] have proven unusually ineffective at containing grassroots violence originating from elements they traditionally can control – such as the [powerful Shiite] Meqdad family or Tripoli’s Islamists,” it said.<sup>69</sup> Sectarian anger appears to be running high in certain communities, even by Lebanese standards. Sunnis we spoke to in the north of the country casually referred to Nasrallah as the “enemy of God” – a play off his last name in Arabic – and accused the Lebanese government of conspiring with Hezbollah to aid the Syrian regime. Sheikh Bilal al-Masri, a Salafist preacher who commands a small group of fighters in the bullet-riddled Bab al-Tabaneh neighborhood, compared the fighting there to Iraq, claiming that Shiites believe “killing Sunnis brings them

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<sup>68</sup> Blanford.

<sup>69</sup> “A Precarious Balancing Act.” p. 6

closer to God. It's in their books.”<sup>70</sup> In the adjacent Alawi neighborhood of Jebel Mohsen, Ali Fidda of the pro-Syrian Arab Democratic Party, said most of the people claiming to be Syrian refugees were “terrorists or terrorist sympathizers” who want to “seize Lebanon and use it for their foreign projects.”<sup>71</sup> Both men immediately invoked the Lebanese civil war to explain the current violence, which has its roots in clashes in the early 1980s between the Syrian regime and Palestinian and leftist factions.

It may be tempting to dismiss such statements as the fighting words of neighborhood toughs who have been scrapping for decades, but such remarks point to a broader Sunni Islamist revival in northern Lebanon in recent years that has gained steam with the increasingly sectarian uprising across the border. The ICG report described the northern Islamists as increasingly organized, well-armed and confident of acting independently of their erstwhile allies in the Future Movement and in defiance of their main rivals, Hezbollah. “Efforts to boost their military capacity... are not aimed at confronting the Shiite movement, at least for now. Rather, they are intended to produce relative parity so as to deter any foray in the north by any party. In this spirit, Islamist groups are challenging the army’s position in the north in hopes of curtailing its ability to constrain them,” the ICG report says.<sup>72</sup> We heard similar sentiments expressed in the north. “Hezbollah, the party of murders and criminals, controls the Lebanese army,” El Merheby, the Future Movement MP who represents Sunnis in the border communities, told us. “Who is going to defend us if not the Lebanese army? We have no weapons and we have no militia to defend ourselves.” He has accused Syria and its Lebanese allies of deliberately targeting the north in order to drive Sunnis out and create a bridge between a future Alawi enclave in Syria

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<sup>70</sup> Al-Masri.

<sup>71</sup> Fidda, Ali. Interview with authors. 10 January 2013.

<sup>72</sup> “A Precarious Balancing Act.” p. 5

and Hezbollah's heartland in the Bekaa.<sup>73</sup> Lebanon, of course, has a rich history of conspiracy theories that long predates the Syrian conflict, and yet the harsh and clearly sectarian rhetoric indicates that the Syrian civil war has created a certain amount of tinder that could go up if touched off by the proper spark.

## **Conclusion**

It is risky to draw firm conclusions from a conflict that is still extremely fluid, and the Syrian civil war has defied repeated predictions of a fast or tidy end to the Assad regime. Our analysis indicates that the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are unlikely to be a source of political violence, either between themselves and the Lebanese or between the various Lebanese factions, but it also suggests ways of approaching future developments as the conflict unfolds. A major advance by the regime, for example, one which forces large numbers of Syrian rebel fighters across the border into Lebanon, could result in a situation in which a state-in-exile takes root there. Alternatively, the rise of a Sunni-dominated government in Beirut could undermine the state's erstwhile policy of neutrality, resulting in greater tolerance for and aid to armed groups operating among refugees.

Other developments, however, would not necessarily be as dangerous as they initially appear. The creation of large-scale refugee camps along the border, for instance, would likely provoke widespread fears – particularly among Lebanon's Christians – of a repeat of the Palestinian experience. The establishment of such camps in and of itself, however, would not make conflict inevitable. More important would be the disposition of the refugees, the presence or lack of an organized political/military movement among them, the degree to which Lebanese authorities patrol the camps and the role of international actors in encouraging or dissuading

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<sup>73</sup> El Merheby.

militancy. Such camps would justifiably raise humanitarian concerns, but could prove largely insignificant from a political and security perspective.

If our analysis eases concerns about Lebanon's refugees stoking conflict, it should elevate such fears with regard to Turkey and Jordan, where many of Lischer's conditions for conflict are met. Both host rebel leadership, both countries openly support the rebellion, and both have served as conduits for foreign powers to supply arms and other aid to rebel groups.<sup>74</sup> Here the elements are in place for a potential spillover of the conflict, but we would argue the risk is mitigated somewhat by the fact that rebel groups are able to operate in much of Syria and are at present bogged down in battles with the regime deep inside their own country, making it less likely they would want to open up a new front elsewhere. For the Syrian regime, expanding the war into Turkey or Jordan would substantially escalate the risk of a foreign intervention, which would almost certainly spell its demise.

If the Syrian refugees are not a political threat in Lebanon, they certainly constitute a humanitarian crisis, one to which the world has been slow to react. Our findings should encourage greater support for the refugees by largely dispelling fears that aid could fuel the conflict across the border. International donors and the Lebanese state should do more to aid the refugees, confident that they will be helping the victims of a terrible conflict and not its perpetrators.

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<sup>74</sup> Chivers, C.J. and Eric Schmidt. "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, with Aid from CIA." *New York Times*. 26 March 2013. Web. 24 March 2013. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html>>



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