

The impact of residency regulations on the situation for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

In January 2015, the Government of Lebanon (GoL) instituted new residency regulations for Syrians already present in Lebanon¹ requiring that (1) refugees hold a valid UNHCR Registration Certificate and signed a 'Pledge not to Work'; or (2) obtained a Lebanese Sponsor. Both pathways – until recently – required refugees to pay a \$200 residency renewal fee provide other difficult-to-obtain documentation. The number of Syrians without valid residency increased from 9% in January 2015² to provide up to 80% by the end of 2016³. Whilst changes to the residency regulations for Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been made, including the replacement of the 'Pledge not to Work' with the 'Pledge to abide by Lebanese law' (Jun 2016) and the waiving of the \$200 residency fee for some Syrian refugees registered with UNHCR (Feb 2017) the actual impact of these changes remains limited and many barriers to obtaining residency remain, including due to limited implementation of the fee waiver by some General Security Offices (GSOs).

One of the key impacts that the lack of legal status has on refugees is that it restricts their freedom of movement, curtailing access to assistance and services such as education and healthcare⁴. Refugees' perceived threat to safety and subsequent restrictions on movement are directly linked to a very real risk of arrest for lacking valid residency. Reports by LHIF members found that the majority of cases of arrest/detention in monitored areas were due to lack of valid residency⁵. Whilst many of these arrests happen at checkpoints, considered by refugees to be the greatest barrier to free movement, others are arrested during raids, which can further exacerbate fear of authorities, particularly after security incidents.

In addition the lack of legal status exposes refugees to increased vulnerability to exploitation and abuse, particularly related to livelihoods. The lack of valid residency reduces mobility to find work, forces refugees to accept exploitative conditions and very low wages when they can find work, and limits their access to legal redress in cases of abuse, putting refugee households in an extremely vulnerable position where they are easily exploited and often have to accept lower wages. While refugees who lack legal status are vulnerable to exploitation at any time, including by taxis (to avoid checkpoints) and possibly by landlords (since the majority of refugees do not have rental contracts), the majority of abuses seem to be related to the workplace. A survey by a LHIF member found that more than half of abuse and exploitation cases reported by Syrian refugee men were related to livelihoods (including withheld wages, deceived and robbed on the promise of work, and other workplace exploitation)⁶. Most Syrian refugees - regardless of their legal status - are forced to work informally with poor working conditions and wages: 92% have no written contract and 86% have no job-related benefits⁷. The growing informality in response to the existing regulatory framework is inevitably driving working conditions and wages down for all workers, including Lebanese as well as Syrians and Palestinians, whether they are working formally or informally.

Increased exploitation, especially in the workplace, is not only linked to refugees who lack residency but also to refugees who access residency through sponsorship. For refugees who have been unable to register with UNHCR, for example arriving in Lebanon after January 2015 and those who have had their UNHCR registration inactivated (due to expiration for 3+ months, lack of contact with UNHCR, or other reasons), sponsorship is the only option for maintaining legal stay in Lebanon. In addition, monitoring by UNHCR and partners indicated that 57% of General Security Offices sometimes or always refused to grant residency to Syrian refugees who held a valid UNHCR certificate but who were perceived to be working – and told them to obtain a sponsor⁸. Those who have been pushed towards sponsorship – including those registered with UNHCR – are explicitly excluded from the recent fee waiver. Sponsorship often incurs significant additional informal costs (as much as \$1000) to obtain a sponsor and refugees have practically no recourse if their sponsor threatens to withdraw the sponsorship, requests additional work, reduces wages or commits other abuses. Syrian refugees who obtain residency through sponsorship cannot return to a residency based on UNHCR registration.

Whilst there have been positive steps in the right direction, broader changes to residency regulations in both policy and practice are needed to meaningfully change the situation of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. **The Government of Lebanon, with the support of the international community, must address ongoing barriers to residency to ensure that all refugees, regardless of their UNHCR registration status, means of entry to Lebanon and means of self-support once in Lebanon, are able to obtain and maintain valid residency, through a clear, simple and reliable process that does not require sponsorship or fees.**

¹ Additional, but more restrictive pathways, were created for newly arriving Syrian nationals

² Data Analysis from Household Visits conducted by the Basic Assistance sector January 2015.

³ Université Saint Joseph, Survey on Perceptions of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, 2016

⁴ The impact of lack of valid residence on access to Education and Healthcare is further expanded in separate LHIF briefing notes.

⁵ Oxfam et al., Joint Protection Monitoring Report, p. 16.

⁶ IRC, Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugee Men, p9

⁷ ILO (2014). Assessment of the Impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and their Employment Profile

⁸ Protection Working Group Meeting, Beirut, 26 May 2017

