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## Limited legal status for refugees from Syria in Lebanon

Dalia Aranki and Olivia Kalis

**Having limited legal status has direct negative consequences for Syrian refugees' access to protection and assistance during their stay in Lebanon. Limited legal status also increases the risks of abuse and exploitation.**

According to Lebanese law, without the required entry or stay documentation to be in Lebanon, refugees from Syria are considered to be there 'illegally', giving them only limited legal status in the country. Either they crossed into Lebanon through unofficial border crossings or they have not been able to renew their residency visa. As a result, they feel that they have been forced into the situation of being illegally present in Lebanon and feel compelled to limit their movements for fear of being arrested, detained or even deported back to Syria. Many refugees from Syria in Lebanon feel overwhelming concern about the potential risks they face from being in this situation. For refugees with limited legal status, their ability to access basic services, work and UNHCR registration sites and to register births and marriages is severely limited. For Palestinian refugees from Syria the situation is even more challenging, as the restrictions on entering Lebanon and on renewing their legal stay are much more severe.

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention, hence the limited legal protection for refugees and asylum seekers in Lebanon, although it is bound by the customary law principle of *non-refoulement* and by the obligations of the human rights treaties which it has signed and which are incorporated into its Constitution. International standards under these obligations recommend, at a minimum, the adoption of temporary protection measures to ensure the safe admission of refugees, to protect them against *refoulement* and to respect their basic human rights.

Although UNHCR has been permitted by the Lebanese government to register refugees,

the protection offered by such registration remains limited; being registered with UNHCR in Lebanon can provide some legal protection and is important for access to services but it does not grant refugees the right to seek asylum, have legal stay or refugee status. This leaves refugees in a challenging situation.

### Facing the challenges

In order to address the challenges that refugees with limited legal status face, they often adopt coping mechanisms which can lead to exposure to new risks. Some of the main ones are: returning to Syria in order to try to re-enter through an official border crossing and thereby get another entry coupon free of charge; paying high prices for retrieving identity documentation from Syria; buying fake documentation; or using other people's documents. Due to having limited funds and the high cost of visas, many families prioritise the renewal of the residency visa for the main income-earner in the family, usually a male member of the household. This often leaves the other members of the family without legal stay documentation.

The impact for refugees from Syria of being in a situation of limited legal status is pervasive and affects many aspects of their lives. More than 73% of the 1,256 refugees interviewed in a recent Norwegian Refugee Council assessment<sup>1</sup> reported that freedom of movement was the main challenge faced by refugees with limited legal status. They could not move out of the area where they lived; fear of crossing checkpoints was prevalent, especially in locations where there had been an increase in ad hoc official checkpoints.

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NRC/Christian Jepsen

Syrian boy in an informal tented settlement in the Beka'a Valley, eastern Lebanon.

Limitations on their movement also impeded access to services, particularly health care.

As men – who, in certain geographic areas of Lebanon, are more likely to be arrested – decrease their movements, women seem to increase theirs. Some women with limited legal status reported that their husbands prefer to send them to receive assistance because they themselves are afraid of being arrested at checkpoints, particularly in North Lebanon. While this is done so that the family can access assistance, it exposes women to risks of sexual harassment and exploitation, for example on the way to or at the distribution sites for humanitarian assistance. Due to their limited legal status, they rarely report this harassment to the police or other authorities for fear of being arrested.

Adults with limited legal status often send their children to work instead of them, since children are less likely to be arrested. As a consequence, the children cannot attend

school and are more likely to be exposed to abuse and exploitation.

For Palestinian refugees from Syria and Syrian refugees in Lebanon many serious problems emerge as a consequence of having limited legal status, including reducing their ability to seek redress and access justice. As the numbers of refugees from Syria – both Syrians and Palestinians – in Lebanon are likely to continue to increase and those who are already there are likely to stay for longer than was anticipated, the need to resolve the legal status challenges for refugees is urgent.

**Dalia Aranki** [dalia.aranki@nrc.no](mailto:dalia.aranki@nrc.no) is Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance Programme Manager and **Olivia Kalis** [olivia.kalis@nrc.no](mailto:olivia.kalis@nrc.no) is Advocacy and Information Adviser in Lebanon with the Norwegian Refugee Council. [www.nrc.no](http://www.nrc.no)

1. NRC Lebanon (April 2014) *The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon, Part 2* [www.nrc.no/arch/\\_img/9176603.pdf](http://www.nrc.no/arch/_img/9176603.pdf)