

*Trend Assessment*

**Migration of Palestinian  
refugees from Lebanon**  
**Current trends and  
implications**

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## Executive summary

This is the first Trend Assessment in an ongoing series launched by ICMPD's Policy, Research and Strategy Directorate. These assessments engage on topics on which ICMPD can contribute knowledge and insight through our expertise. In Lebanon, current migration research, policy-making and operational priorities in Lebanon currently overwhelmingly focus on the situation of and impact of Syrian refugees in the country. While this is an important topic in and of itself, this assessment turns its focus to another group in the country – that of Palestinian refugees – in order to provide complementary information that can provide a more holistic view to the migratory situation in and from the country.

Migration of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon is not a new phenomenon, in fact having its roots in earlier migratory movements since the 1960s to Europe and the Arab Gulf region. Nonetheless, recently, increasing numbers have migrated irregularly from the country, and particularly towards Europe. This trend assessment examines this trend, as well as its root causes and implications for key stakeholders in the region and in Europe.

The root causes identified by the research can be identified as two-fold: structural issues that affect Palestinians in Lebanon's access to rights and their socio-economic situation, and recent developments that contribute Palestinians' migration decisions. These root causes in and of themselves do not lead to increased migration trends, but rather all together contribute to a feeling of precariousness among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and to their consideration of emigration as a strategy to improve their own situation. In terms of recent developments, these can be summarised as follows:

- The Syrian refugee crisis has been identified as one factor that impacts on the situation of Palestinians in Lebanon. This has been in terms of further degradation of infrastructure in Lebanon (particularly within Palestinian camps), shifting of attention away from the Palestinian issue, shifts in perceptions of foreigners in Lebanon and shifts in the acceptability of irregular migration among Palestinians.
- The aggravated current situation of UNRWA, particularly in terms of funding cuts, was also identified as a key recent factor. Such cuts have impacted Palestinians' access to services and employment in the country, and seems to serve as an indicator to Palestinians as to where their issue stands in the global political arena.
- National policy approaches in Lebanon, as well as adjustments in implementation of policies, were also noted by some stakeholders as impacting on migration decisions of Palestinians.
- Recent international engagement on the Palestinian-Israeli peace process also emerged as a contributing factor in terms of increased anxiety among the community.
- Lack of direction or engagement on "the refugee issue" at the political level was also cited as contributing to Palestinians' consideration of migration as a more immediate solution.

These root causes have contributed to Palestinians' consideration of migration as a solution to their current situation. However, the lack of legal channels has meant that an uptick of irregular migration has been observed, particularly towards Europe (Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden, via Spain or Belgium). For this recent trend, air routes from Beirut airport were identified, used by young men and/or families. Across the board stakeholders agreed that this trend will continue and potentially increase.

Finally, this trend has implications for Palestinians themselves, for stakeholders in Lebanon and for European stakeholders. In general, as Palestinian refugees in Lebanon feel their situation getting further from a resolution and/or degraded, they will continue to turn to emigration and other coping strategies.

Thus, policy changes or actions by stakeholders from the Palestinian community and institutions, in Lebanon, and in Europe, can further aggravate (or potentially alleviate) the situation. The situation of UNRWA in particular will have an impact on migration trends. On the other hand, engagement with Palestinians at the grassroots level and focused on inclusion have been highlighted as helpful in mediating tensions and making progress. If these root causes will continue or worsen, it is likely that family reunification, irregular migration and legal migration strategies will remain important and likely increase in significance for this group, especially for emigration to European countries.

## 1 Context

This is the first Trend Assessment in an ongoing series conducted by ICMPD's Policy, Research and Strategy Directorate. These assessments engage on topics on which ICMPD can contribute knowledge and insight through our expertise. The aim of the series is to contribute to areas where there is currently a dearth of knowledge or research. The trend assessment series focuses on recent migration trends and topics (including migration dynamics, root causes and emerging migration routes), as well as areas of interest where policy making could impact on a recent trend.

In Lebanon, the Syrian refugee crisis has had a significant impact on Lebanon, on ensuing dynamics in the country and on migration routes via and from the country. Current migration research, policy-making and operational priorities in Lebanon currently overwhelmingly focus on these topics – which are indeed still very relevant. However, this overshadows other groups and issues that may be relevant for migration trends, including those towards Europe. Thus in order to have a more complete picture, this assessment focuses on a complementary migratory topic for the country, namely a recent migratory trend among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Palestinian refugees<sup>1</sup> can be categorised as refugees in a protracted situation, their original displacement dating back to 1948, with additional flows arriving subsequent years, including 1967. In Lebanon, Palestinian refugees (who were displaced in 1948 and their descendants) are considered a special category of foreigners under the law, which excludes them from specific legal status and certain rights such as the right to own property and the right to work in certain professions. Palestinians displaced following 1948, or not registered with the UN Relief Works Agency (UNRWA)<sup>2</sup> in 1948, are undocumented, although have access to some UNRWA services as of 2004.<sup>3</sup> Most<sup>4</sup> Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live in one of the 12 official refugee camps in Lebanon, and most camps are 1 square kilometre or less and akin to urban areas, with ca. 4,000-31,000 registered residents per camp.<sup>i</sup> Mobility from the camp varies: many camps require Palestinians to show their identity documents to enter or leave. Those camps located in Beirut are less restrictive (i.e. do not require a permit), and are geographically akin to a separate neighbourhood of a city, with restricted access (e.g. for services or materials). Others are more similar to closed-off towns. In 2007, one camp (Nahr El Bared) was destroyed and has yet to be completely rebuilt, with some families continuing to live in temporary housing. Outside of camps, Palestinians live in 'unofficial gatherings', which are areas outside of camps with a prevalence of Palestinian families, and towns across the country.

Palestinian refugees' experiences in Lebanon are unique, as compared to other countries of displacement, due to national sensitivities, historical and (international, regional, national and even local) political experiences. For this reason, the issue of Palestinians in Lebanon is a sensitive one; even on basic questions such as number of Palestinian refugees in the country, contestations arise.

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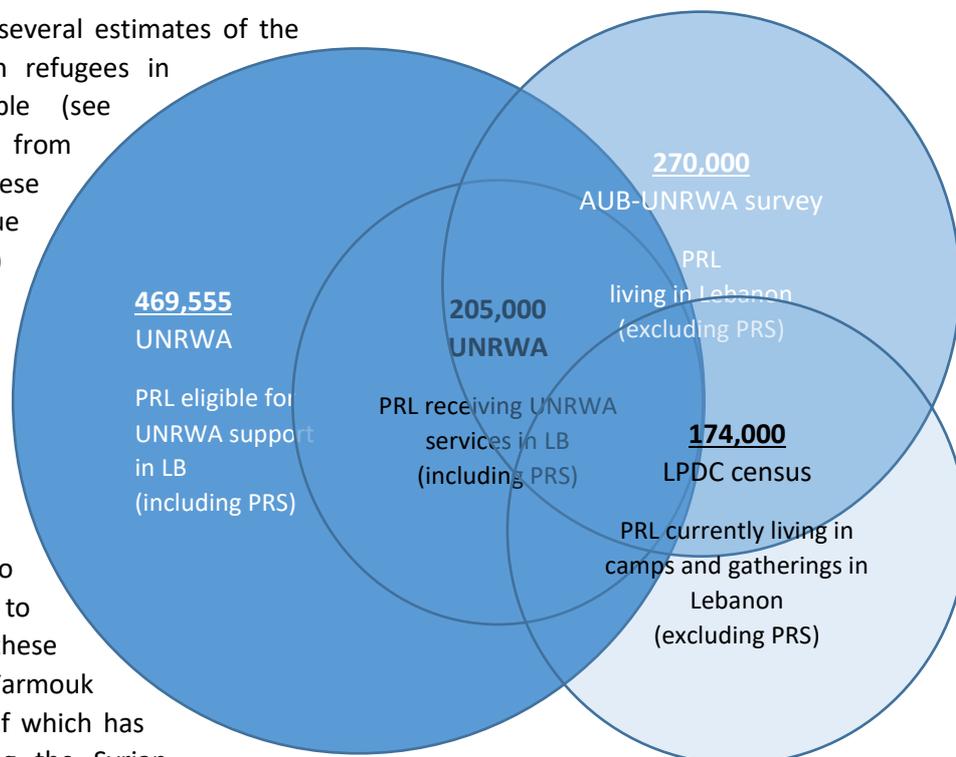
<sup>1</sup> Often also referred to as Palestine refugees. For brevity, at times in this document will also be referred to as Palestinians or Palestinians in Lebanon, which does not deny their claim to protection. In the Figure, Palestinian refugees in Syria (many of whom were forcibly displaced to Lebanon) are referred to as PRS and Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as PRL.

<sup>2</sup> The UN Agency mandated with responding to the needs of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East. This number represents all Palestinians registered with UNRWA in Lebanon and eligible for UNRWA support, including original 1948 arrivals, their children and grandchildren, as well as Palestinian refugees from Syria.

<sup>3</sup> The population of those Palestinians who entered Lebanon primarily in the 1970s are known as "non-IDs" and are estimated at around 3,000, while non-registered refugees are estimated as 35,000 in 2015. See Chaaban et al 2015.

<sup>4</sup> Estimates range from 46% (Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee census) to 63% (AUB survey).

In terms of numbers, several estimates of the number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are available (see Figure 1), ranging from 174,000 (recent Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee<sup>5</sup> (LPDC) census data) to 469,555 (UNRWA registration number).<sup>6ii</sup> These numbers do not always include Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS), who have recently fled to Lebanon. Many of these refugees came from Yarmouk camp in Syria, much of which has been destroyed during the Syrian conflict, making return to Syria presently unfeasible. As of end of 2018, UNRWA estimated their current number in Lebanon as 29,038.<sup>7iii</sup> These estimates also do not distinguish between those originally displaced and those born in displacement in Lebanon.



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**Why do these estimates vary so significantly – and why is it significant as relating to migration trends?** The variation in these numbers speaks largely to long- and short-term migration movements of Palestinians from Lebanon, and to the purpose of the estimate. In particular, the estimate changes drastically based on who is counted within the country, as well as who is counted living abroad: those Palestinians who have relocated abroad and obtained citizenship, or remain stateless, as well as those studying or working temporarily abroad. How these numbers are used also reflects the purpose: the number of Palestinians in Lebanon who would need access to infrastructure and services; the number of Palestinians without foreign citizenship, no matter the residence; the number of Palestinians awaiting a durable solution. Therefore, these numbers are used to justify or demand relevant actions depending on positioning and priorities of the stakeholder involved.

For many Palestinians, their presence as refugees in Lebanon is strongly linked to their desire to return to their ancestral homes (“right of return”): Lebanon’s proximity and their high numbers in the country

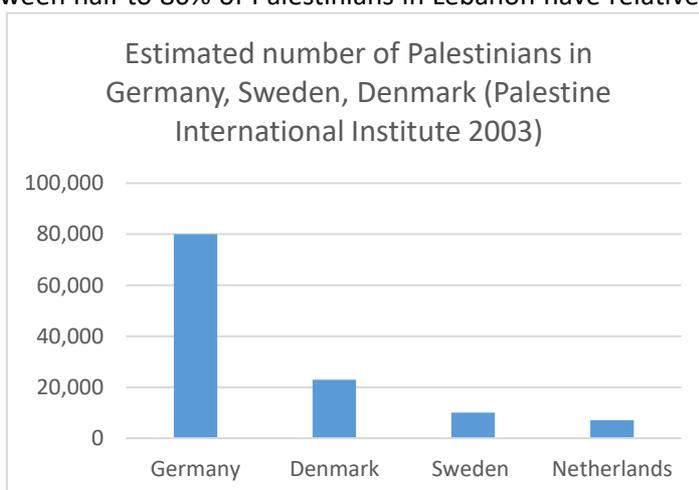
<sup>5</sup> This Committee is an inter-ministerial agency mandated to deal with Palestinian refugees’ affairs in Lebanon, serving as a focal point between Palestinian refugees and local and international stakeholders, as well as providing policy recommendations to the Government of Lebanon. Their number represents the number of Palestinians estimated to be living in Palestinian camps and gatherings in Lebanon in 2017, excluding Palestinian refugees from Syria.

<sup>6</sup> Other estimates include: UNRWA’s operational overview for 2019 notes that 205,000 people benefit from UNRWA services in Lebanon. A 2015 AUB-UNRWA survey estimated 260,000 to 280,000 Palestinian refugees currently residing in Lebanon. This number excludes Palestinians from Syria in Lebanon but includes non-registered refugees. Non-registered refugees are those who fall outside of UNRWA’s mandate, either due to their departure from Palestine after 1948, or were not in need of assistance in 1948 and therefore did not register with UNRWA at that time.

<sup>7</sup> This is already a reduction as compared to their estimated number in 2015: 42,500.

are considered key factors in this regard. Further, the situation of Palestinian refugees (the ‘refugee issue’) is considered one of the final permanent status issues yet to be resolved in negotiations related to the peace process. In this context, recent reports of lower estimates of Palestinians in Lebanon and increasing emigration have been met with concern and dismay. The Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee highlights some of the issues around these numbers head-on, emphasising that the new census estimate has caused “controversy and scepticism around its objectives and timing” as related to potential settlement of Palestinian refugees or political implications of such numbers.<sup>iv</sup> The Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee supplement notes: “Palestinians wonder if there is a political plan behind [this migration]... which seem[s] too easy. Reports... have warned that systematic migration poses a major threat to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon... amid fears that the rest of them will be permanently settled using various humanitarian and social pretexts, meaning the loss of the right of return” and the negation of UN Resolution 194.<sup>v</sup> Palestinians interviewed for this assessment reiterated such concerns.

Notwithstanding, these numbers thus **reflect a broader migration movement from the country**. Palestinians in Lebanon have left Lebanon steadily since the 1960s, as labour migrants, students, asylum seekers and irregular migrants, towards northern Europe (Germany, Sweden, Denmark) as well as Gulf countries.<sup>8vi</sup> Estimates suggest between half to 80% of Palestinians in Lebanon have relatives abroad, primarily in Europe, a higher rate than for Palestinians in Jordan and Syria.<sup>vii</sup> In more recent years, however, labour migration to the Gulf, Iraq and Libya have dried up, while European countries have also tightened their border controls and migration regulations and a trend of irregular migration to Europe has been detected.<sup>viii</sup> But more research is necessary to clarify recent factors, and to bring forth relevant implications to the international community’s attention.



For this reason, **ICMPD has undertaken a trend assessment of the situation of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, which may contribute to irregular migration from the country, in order to fill this information gap**, based on ICMPD expertise and engagement in the region, as well as **to provide targeted information to key stakeholders**.

For this assessment, ICMPD’s Research Unit conducted semi-structured interviews with experts and key stakeholders (Lebanese and Palestinian stakeholders, international and European organisations,

<sup>8</sup> Accurate statistics on the Palestinian community in Europe are difficult to obtain. Statistical categorisation for the community varies from country to country, where their numbers may be included under stateless persons, foreign born or foreign citizenship. Some European statistical offices allow the categorisation of country of birth as Palestine, others “West Bank and Gaza”. Nonetheless, considering the protracted period of displacement, this would not include generations of Palestinians born in displacement, either within the region or further afield, including in Europe. Thus both accuracy and comparability of official statistics is limited. The table presented on this page provides academic estimates for four historical countries of destination for Palestinians in Europe.

civil society, academics, Palestinian students and representatives from the labour union). A research visit was also made to Bourj El Barajneh refugee camp in Beirut, Lebanon. Interviews were conducted in August 2019.

As shown in the debate around numbers, the subject of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is a politically loaded topic, and can vary depending on whom you talk to, based also on personal and political orientations. Moreover, migration, including irregular migration, is an issue that people talk about openly and around which the atmosphere is inundated with rumours and anecdotal information. Thus this trend assessment should be considered as just one piece of the larger puzzle, and represents a snapshot of this issue for a specific time.<sup>9</sup> We hope that this can however provide a basis for future research in this area.

## 2 Root causes

The **root causes of the current migration trend are embedded in larger and long-standing structural issues** faced by Palestinians in Lebanon. As noted in the introduction, for reasons related to national sensitivities, historical and political experiences in Lebanon, the situation of Palestinians in the country is unique. This has affected Palestinians' access to rights, their economic situation and their broader living conditions in camps and unofficial gatherings. The situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon can be described as a precarious one, with high poverty (3.1% extreme poverty, 65% general poverty<sup>ix</sup>) and unemployment rates (23% general unemployment, 32% for women, 36% for youth<sup>x</sup>), poor health conditions (81.3% of households reported a family member with a chronic illness, 63% an acute illness<sup>xi</sup>), as well as decaying camp infrastructure. Their exclusion from owning property, from a significant number of jobs<sup>10</sup> and from Lebanese services further hinders their ability to improve their livelihoods. There are a plethora of academic publications and official reports documenting Palestinians' social and economic exclusion and deteriorated living conditions, including as related to access to income, property and housing, education, health, food, security and freedom of movement.<sup>xii</sup> The lack of access to jobs (and thus high youth unemployment), exclusion from owning property, the lack of access to quality education and the degraded situation in the camps were the most persistent specific structural factors highlighted by experts and refugees. Given the protracted situation, and the multiple generations now raised in displacement in Lebanon, one Palestinian student lamented: "Why would our basic needs be ignored though we were born and raised here?"

Nonetheless, there are a number of additional recent developments, which have contributed to a heightened **perception of precariousness and to Palestinians' migration decisions**. These can be summarised as follows:

**Syrian crisis:** the Syrian crisis has affected the overall situation in Lebanon, and both Lebanese and Palestinians in Lebanon have felt its economic effects. The increased number of Syrians in Lebanon has particularly affected the rental market, and has led to overcrowding, further degradation of

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<sup>9</sup> Of note is that at the time of the research, protests and activism was taking place regarding a recent change in policy implementation regarding Palestinian workers by the Lebanese Ministry of Labor.

<sup>10</sup> There was disagreement on the number of jobs from which Palestinians are excluded in Lebanon, either de jure or de facto as Palestinians would be excluded from joining the relevant union. This ranged from 39 (this number is noted by UNRWA) to 72, the latter reflecting also those professions from which Palestinians are excluded from joining the union and the usual number cited in interviews.

infrastructure and economic competition in certain Palestinian camps.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, interviewees highlighted the impact of the crisis on the political situation in Lebanon. On the one hand, the situation of Syrians in Lebanon became the focus of national and international efforts. This has meant a deprioritisation of Palestinian issues in the political sphere, a “forgotten issue” according to one expert, and decreases in funding and support to Palestinian NGOs operating in Lebanon, many of which also employ Palestinians.

On the other hand, it has also led to a more hostile atmosphere towards foreigners in general, heightened nativist rhetoric, and political decisions that impact Palestinians’ human, economic, social and cultural rights in the country, whether purposefully targeted at them or not. Finally, the irregular migration of Syrians via Turkey and Greece to Europe in 2015 and 2016 could also support emigration aspirations among Palestinians in general and the acceptability of irregular migration in particular. Experts reported that these same routes were also used by Palestinians (particularly Palestinians from Syria) during that time period and – even if they are no longer the dominant route for current trends among Palestinians in Lebanon (see next section) – could have impacted Palestinians’ perception of irregular migration as a possibility open to them.

**UNRWA:** The aggravated current situation of UNRWA – in terms of massive funding cuts and recent allegations of corruption<sup>xiii</sup> – was noted by nearly all experts as negatively affecting the situation of Palestinians in Lebanon. In particular the degraded situation in UNRWA schools was mentioned as significant, especially given the high value Palestinians place on education within their community. One Palestinian refugee cited her inability to pay for private schooling for her children as one of the main reasons why she decided to leave the country towards Europe with the support of a migrant smuggling service in 2015 (through Russia to Norway). As she was unable to bring her children to Norway, she returned to Lebanon.

At the same time, funding cuts have affected services across the board, and have also led to job cuts of Palestinian refugees employed by UNRWA. Reportedly even those jobs where Palestinians are usually employed are not filled following departure or retirement. For Palestinians and experts engaged for this assessment, the situation with UNRWA at the moment seems to serve as an indicator to Palestinians of where their issue currently stands in the global political arena. Related feelings of anxiety in this regard has been identified as a key factor for emigration decisions.

**National policies:** It is the prerogative and mandate of Lebanese policy stakeholders to develop their policy approach towards Palestinians and other refugee or migrant group in the country. Nonetheless, experts and refugees engaged for this assessment highlighted some policy aspects that in their view impact on Palestinians’ migration decisions. Many experts and refugees engaged for this assessment highlighted the recent approach taken by the current Lebanese Ministry of Labour in regard to access to the labour market and a “crackdown” on undocumented foreign labour as indicative of the changing winds of policy towards Palestinians in Lebanon.<sup>xiv</sup> From their perspective, policies or implementation rules often reflect Ministers’ affiliations rather than official policy. They also view this as a trend of

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<sup>11</sup> 50% of Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon live in the 12 refugee camps in Lebanon. In the camps that are open (i.e. entry/exit is not restricted by the Lebanese army), primarily in Beirut, there is now a large population of Syrians who live in and around the camps. Some interviewees claim that Syrians now outnumber Palestinians in Shatila and Bourj el Barajneh camps in Beirut, although these claims could not be verified. In Bourj el Barajneh, an interviewee contended that their numbers are currently equal (ca. 20,000 Palestinians plus 2,500 Palestinian refugees from Syria, and ca. 20,000 Syrians).

gradual erosion of Palestinian rights and reflective of their ever-unstable situation in the country. Experts and refugees reiterated Palestinians' sense of precariousness and pessimism regarding their current and future situation in Lebanon: "Today it's labour rights, tomorrow it's something else", according to one – "Since the mid-1990s, Palestinians can't be sure of any right", according to another. For this reason, many refugees look abroad for potential opportunities of a better life. Indeed, during recent protests related to access to the labour market, demonstrations were staged at the Canadian embassy asking for asylum in Canada.<sup>xv</sup>

**The Palestinian cause on the global stage:** Recent US administration engagement in the Palestinian-Israeli peace process has also emerged as a key contributing factor, as a cause of anxiety and even panic among the Palestinian community in Lebanon. Closed meetings and recent diplomacy related to the Palestinian cause has also contributed to rumours<sup>12</sup>, misinformation and a perception that the global and regional political situation is becoming less favourable or even hostile to the Palestinian cause, that positive steps are unlikely, and also that migration trends are linked to such political machinations.

**Institutional inertia:** A few experts highlighted a feeling of lack of direction from the PLO, a "lack of vision" for the future. On top of this, the lack of engagement on or commitment to solving "the refugee issue", described by experts as "we'll see later," has led to a feeling of hopelessness regarding any progress towards a durable solution. One refugee in the camp lamented that they have become "museums" to be visited by dignitaries or associations, without any action being taken on their behalf. From this perspective, without political progress on the refugee issue, some Palestinians may feel that migration would be a more effective immediate solution to their situation than waiting for a political resolution.

While no single factor can be cited as causal to increased migration trends of Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, all of the above – not least the long-standing socio-economic factors – contribute to a **general feeling of precariousness in the country and to a consideration of emigration as a strategy** to improve their own situation.

### 3 Current trend

If the trend of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon migrating from the country is not new – what then is new about this recent iteration? Significantly, in recent years there has been an uptick in irregular migration from the region, particularly considering the dearth of legal channels. Land and sea routes (particularly the Eastern Mediterranean route via Syria and Turkey) were reportedly more common in previous years (2014/2015), while recently air routes have become more prevalent.

Europe (in particular Denmark, Germany, the Netherlands and Sweden) was highlighted as the primary destination for a number of significant factors, including: role of diaspora networks, employment rates,

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<sup>12</sup> For example, two separate interviews noted a rumour contending US administration pressure on the Palestinian Authority, related to increased migration flows of Palestinians from the region to Canada and the US in the context of the recent "deal of the century". It is clear that misinformation and rumours on this topic circulate quickly and widely, and contribute to feelings of anxiety related to their current situation. See for example the refutation of the rumours by the Canadian government: N.A. (2019). "Liberals denounce Jerusalem Post immigration story as false" In The Guardian, 4 September. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.pe.ca/news/canada/liberals-denounce-jerusalem-post-immigration-story-as-false-348500/>.

asylum recognition rates and human rights treatment. The role of diaspora networks operates unevenly across the country: some Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are known for having large diasporas in specific European countries. Nonetheless, interviewees were clear that they observe this trend as ubiquitous and not camp- or region-specific. The human rights situation in the destination country was considered particularly relevant for migration decisions in combination with the lack of access to rights in Lebanon, with the human rights situation in the Gulf, previously a destination region for Palestinian refugees, and with their desire to continue advocating for their cause (including the right of return)<sup>13</sup> in a safe space.

There was a lack of consensus on the demographics of potential irregular migrants. Some noted the trend being prevalent among young men (18-35 years of age), and this affecting the gender balance within camps. Smuggling of young Palestinian refugee men was also a longer-term trend, pertinent for other routes previously used (e.g. 2014-2015 Eastern and Central Mediterranean routes via Turkey or Libya) and for current routes particularly for Syrians or Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon (e.g. sea route from northern Lebanon to Cyprus). Others noted families, and highlighted recent occurrences of families selling their homes to pay for smuggling services. For families, this was highlighted as a trend for them due to the safer nature of the air route, and the reliability of smuggling with this modus operandi.

The vast majority of interviews (including those with Palestinian refugees) and recent reports<sup>xvi</sup> noted the air route via Beirut airport as the primary recent and current trend, and most were already familiar with the primary facilitator operating in the country. Air smuggling routes are well recognised for requiring more resources and organisation (including provision of fraudulent documents and/or engagement of border officials to allow passage) than other smuggling types, are safer and are notoriously difficult to estimate.<sup>xvii</sup> The usual route noted was either from Beirut via South America (e.g. Ecuador, Brazil, Bolivia) to Spain (using a transit visa and disembarking in Spain), or from Beirut directly to a European country. The route via South America to Spain has been discontinued in the last year.<sup>14</sup> In both cases the country of first arrival in Europe (e.g. Spain, Belgium) serves as a transit country to their final destination in Europe. Estimated cost per person for the air route was ca. USD \$8-12,000, the amount varying over time and per destination.

What does this trend tell us? What have we learned from our engagement with stakeholders in the country is that there is **general consensus that there is a current irregular migration trend** (as of 2015 at least) **towards Europe**. General Security statistics show that the current number of Palestinians departing from Beirut airport and not returning are comparable to 2001-2006 levels, although there was a peak in 2014-2015.<sup>xviii</sup> Nonetheless, stakeholders agree that **this trend will continue, and perhaps increase**, should the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon – the root causes discussed

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<sup>13</sup> This was emphasised in all interviews with the Palestinian refugee community, as well as by many of the institutions interviewed and in recent media reports (see The Daily Star 2019). This point is significant as interviewees wanted to express that their desire to migrate abroad or leave Lebanon did not in any way imply a renunciation of their right of return. Indeed, many framed their desire as a way for them to more effectively advocate for this political right. At the same time, it's clear that Palestinian officials view such migration as a threat to the political right of return, and some interviews mentioned stigma placed on Palestinians who choose to leave, as those "giving up" regarding this struggle.

<sup>14</sup> Opinions differed on which routes were currently "open" or "closed", but recent reports on the closure of a smuggling ring operating from Beirut-Latin America-Spain suggest that this route is for the moment "closed". See: Europol (2019). European Migrant Smuggling Centre: 3<sup>rd</sup> Annual Activity Report – 2018. The Hague: Europol; N.A. (2019). The Immigration of Lebanon's Palestinians: 'Individual Choice' or 'Organised Conspiracy?' In: Jousour Issue 11, January.

above – become more precarious. Indeed, a recent poll among 1,200 Palestinian youth found that 71% supported emigration through irregular means, suggesting the acceptability and even ubiquity of this view.<sup>xix</sup>

## 4 Potential implications

What are the implications of this trend – and for whom?

For **Palestinians**, while this emigration trend highlights a dynamic currently in place within a group, a migration decision is always an individual one. Moreover, in the Palestinian case, as discussed in the introduction, it is often placed in contrast to a communal desire to remain in Lebanon in connection with their political position on right of return. However, potential emigration is one of several coping strategies. Interviews and official documents highlight that these root causes contribute to a general feeling of increased frustration and marginalisation, which have contributed to a rise in emigration but also criminality and extremism among the community in Lebanon.<sup>xx</sup> As Palestinian refugees in general and youth more particularly feel their situation getting further from a resolution, and/or degraded, individuals will continue to turn to emigration and other coping strategies. Thus, comprehensive responses addressing root causes will likely be more effective and balanced, rather than those focusing solely on an operational or mere border management approach.

Secondly, dissatisfaction with the (lack of) developments on the refugee issue (one of the final status issues for negotiation in the broader peace process) and direction at a political level have been identified as key contributing factors, particularly among youth. While this can on the one hand also contribute to apathy, emigration, activism or extremism – empowerment and participation at the structural level, on the other, may help mitigate the use of negative coping strategies.

Thirdly, the weakened capacity of UNRWA to provide basic services for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and other countries could likely imply in the mid- to longer-term a shift in responsibility to other actors, including local and international NGOs, as well as a shift of responsibility to the PLO itself, which has limited capacity to cater to the needs of all refugees.

**In Lebanon**, this migration trend reflects an increased discontentment among the population, which is long-standing but recently aggravated. The continued difficult socio-economic situation of Palestinians in Lebanon will remain an important factor for Palestinian activism and engagement with Lebanese stakeholders. Actions taken that further their feeling of uncertainty or degrade their situation – whether taken by Lebanese actors or others – can exacerbate the situation, as has been observed with recent protests.<sup>xxi</sup> On the other hand, existing and future engagement by Lebanese policy makers have helped ease such tensions and make progress. The Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee has made strides, in particular through the endorsement of their unified vision for Palestinians in Lebanon,<sup>xxii</sup> and recent engagement with Palestinian youth across the country.<sup>xxiii</sup> Their engagement as liaison and policy advisor to the Prime Minister will be important going forward in mediating difficult situations and disagreements, and in monitoring the situation. A separate ad hoc Ministerial Committee under the Prime Minister has also been established against the backdrop of

recent tensions, and it remains to be seen how its work will progress and be coordinated with the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee.<sup>15</sup>

Secondly, the impact of the Syrian crisis has been felt acutely in Lebanon, and efforts have been made in recent years to duly include the host population<sup>16</sup> in response efforts to the Syrian crisis.<sup>xxiv</sup> Palestinian camps have also hosted large numbers of Syrians and Palestinian refugees from Syria, and yet continue to struggle with infrastructure issues and access to services. Since the Syrian crisis is already a protracted situation, the development implications on Palestinian camps – and the knock-on effects on residents of these camps – are also relevant. Thirdly, since the irregular migration route by air is the primary one employed recently, this has implications related to border management and document security, of relevance to national migration stakeholders.

At the global level, it is clear that the worsening situation of UNRWA, as well as of the prospects for a just and durable solution to the ‘Palestinian issue’, will have a direct impact on (irregular) emigration trends of Palestinian refugees. These global dynamics will also **impact on Europe**. While the impact on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has already been observed here, those Palestinians with refugee status in Lebanon and living abroad (including in European countries) may also be impacted, as well as other Palestinian diaspora groups in other host countries. Family reunification, irregular migration and legal migration strategies will thus remain and likely increase in significance for this group. This is particularly relevant for European countries, especially those with larger Palestinian diasporas, and as destination countries known for their democratic and human rights ideals.

European engagement in a number of different processes at the global level can also impact on this situation further. The EU’s engagement in migration in the European neighbourhood (e.g. Mobility Partnerships), in their programmes and initiatives regarding Syrians in the region (e.g. Jordan Compact, Lebanon Compact, Regional Development and Protection Programmes) may impact on Palestinians’ perceptions of Europe and on their future possibilities. Many of the aforementioned recent root causes have not been targeted specifically at Palestinians, yet nonetheless impacted their situation. Using the same lens to examine other areas of key engagement by European actors could be a useful tactic in monitoring the impact on migration trends among this group.

Finally, **for all actors**, the role of rumours and conspiracy<sup>xxv</sup> feed into perceptions of Palestinians’ situation and contribute to their feelings of discontent and their decision-making on migration from Lebanon. Countering false narratives and misperceptions can also be key at all levels going forward.

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<sup>15</sup> During the finalisation of this document (on 13 September, 2019), the Lebanese newspaper Neda’ Al Watan published an article confirming that Palestinian Islamic and national forces drafted a “legal paper” (or white paper) entitled “Initiative for Palestinian Refugees Human Rights Law in Lebanon, which will be submitted to this ad hoc ministerial committee established on 21 August (and headed by Prime Minister Hariri), and which aims to assess the Palestinian portfolio in Lebanon from various angles. The proposition by the Palestinian national and Islamic forces essentially calls for equal rights to all Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, except the right to vote and the eligibility for employment in the public sector.

<sup>16</sup> This term usually refers to citizens of the country to which refugees are displaced, living in the same region or area as refugees or other displaced populations. In the case of Lebanon, usually the term refers to Lebanese nationals living in Lebanon in areas where refugees also live.

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