

Maria SPYCHAŁA-KIJ

Uniwersytet im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu  
ORCID: 0000-0001-6793-9440

## Refugees in Lebanon and their influence on the political stability of the state

**Abstract:** In October 2019, civil unrest in Lebanon organized in the form of protests against the political establishment. The continuing, or even deepening, mass social unrest and the inability or unwillingness of the political authorities to provide an adequate response to the socio-political and economic crisis, contributed to the positioning of Lebanon among the countries coined by the term of political instability. In the Global Conflict Tracker conflict database – the *Center for Preventive Action's (CPA) Global Conflict Tracker*, Lebanon is categorized as a conflict with an unchanging status. Since the explosion in Beirut in August 2020, proposals for a further specification of the Lebanese scene began to appear – suggesting a move from an unstable state to a failed state, further implying a deteriorating condition.

In the context of Lebanon's current critical social, economic and political situation, and the long history of internal and external conflicts that precede it, this article aims to look at the phenomenon of migration, and more specifically the refugee influx, as possibly, one of the factors that can contribute to and determine political (in)stability of a state. The article describes the refugee presence in Lebanon and explores the question of its influence on the current socio-political scene in Lebanon. It shows that in the face of the specificity of the Lebanese political system, the stability of which is strongly correlated with the adequate representation of individual religious sects on the political scene, migration may be considered as one of the determinants affecting the stability of the state, and issues related to it should be taken into account when trying to solve the prevailing social discontent and the state of political instability.

**Key words:** Lebanon, Political Instability, Refugees

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### Introduction

In October 2019, civil unrest in Lebanon organized in the form of protests against the political establishment. The continuing, or even deepening, mass social unrest and the inability or unwillingness of the politi-

cal authorities to provide an adequate response to the socio-political and economic crisis, contributed to the positioning of Lebanon among the countries coined by the term of political instability. In the Global Conflict Tracker conflict database – the *Center for Preventive Action's (CPA) Global Conflict Tracker*, Lebanon is categorized as a conflict with an unchanging status. Since the explosion in Beirut in August 2020, proposals for a further specification of the Lebanese scene began to appear – suggesting a move from an unstable state to a failed state (Robinson, 2020), further implying a deteriorating condition.

In the context of Lebanon's political crisis and the long history of internal and external conflicts this article aims to look at the phenomenon of migration, and more specifically the refugee influx. The author poses a hypothesis that migration may be one of the factors that can contribute to and determine political (in)stability of the state as a result of overlapping external and internal mechanisms of international relations. Lebanon constitutes an interesting case due to its large refugee population, unique political structure and demographic makeup of social fragmentation. The author further hypothesizes, that just like migration can be a factor of instability for any state, Lebanon's features make it especially vulnerable to such influence. The chosen research goals are to firstly, present the stage and characteristics of the Lebanese political system, the refugee population and their conditions of life in Lebanon. Secondly, the main research goal is to identify the main areas of refugees' influence on political instability. Such objectives will allow the author to explore the course of migration in Lebanon, receive a broader picture of the state's socio-political situation, its conditions and future perspectives for stability. The goal is approached from a qualitative method, through a mix of descriptive, legal-institutional and historic explanations. The findings of the article are grounded in books, academic articles, indexes, online publications and online news release. The article is divided into three parts. In the first part, the theoretical framework, the author provides a general conceptual understanding of political stability and migration. It then justifies approaching the two concepts together through exploring a theoretical influence. The second part of the work is a qualitative, historic account of the refugee presence in Lebanon. The first two parts provide an analytical and contextual background leading up to the final part of the work in which the author explores the hypothesis through the question of refugees' influence on the current socio-political scene in Lebanon.

## **Theoretical Framework**

Any considerations about migration and its impact on political stability must be firstly preceded by and embedded in the theoretical background. Therefore, it is crucial to begin by exploring and defining the core concepts of the study. While in the case of migration, the meaning of the concept is established by *i.e.* the international law and regional conventions, as well as by non-governmental organizations; the state of political stability/instability is more problematic, and at the same time extremely critical to the undertaken research goal. The way its definition is formulated and understood directly influences any conclusions we are to make regarding the hypothesis of whether or not the presence of refugees in Lebanon determines its political stability.

Following Andrew Heywood, we can combine the notion of stability with legitimacy, *i.e.* the question of the legitimacy of a given regime or political system, which would aim to seek answers to basic questions about the conditions and processes that make citizens support those in power, and moreover maintain political stability. Here, however, further clarification is needed, because if it is the citizens who maintain political stability through their obedience, is it also the citizens who are responsible for situations where such stability is lacking? The theory of social contract, regardless of the school of thought we choose to follow, assumes a two-way relationship – citizens give up some of their freedom (*i.e.* legitimize the regime), but they do so in exchange for those in power fulfilling their expectations, with the provision and maintenance of the citizens' security as the most basic demand. I therefore assume that the agreement (the social contract) must be kept by both sides in order to ensure political stability. Further, if we perceive the causes of instability as a logical consequence of the failure to meet the requirements of maintaining the state of stability, we can look for clues in Max Weber's theory of the three ideal types of power – traditional, charismatic and legal. As possible factors of instability, we would then be given the lack of "sanctification" of power through history, the absence of a strong and charismatic authority, and the possible absence of clearly defined and legally established rules of authority (Heywood, 1997). However true it may be, that legitimacy maintains political stability and the authority of exercising power, the author believes it does not reflect the complexity of the problem. A more complete picture will be obtained by placing a given actor (state) in the context of the international environment in which a given agent operates. Thus, as

determinants of stability, we will obtain both internal and external factors and the question of how a given system or political regime responds to internal and external pressures. The extension of the view and the inclusion of external factors thus also suits better and enables the pursuit of this research's objectives – analysing the possible relationship between migration and instability. Here, of course, further questions arise regarding what exactly the external and internal determinants are. However, for the simplified needs of this article, we can adopt an assumption that these influences are present, and in this case, we will only investigate whether migration is also one of those determinants. This hypothesis is further grounded and built up by the pluralist theory, linking social fragmentation (a phenomenon also present in migration) with political instability (Almond, 1956). In conclusion, “political instability arises as a result of the inability of the government and society in general to adequately address the grievances of the population or particular subsets of that population. The source of grievance can be internal, external, or political, depending on the circumstances” (Akongdit, 2013).

Historically, in Lebanon, the stability of the state was enshrined in and expected to be maintained by the National Pact (*muhasasah ta'ifiyah*) of 1943, which introduced the division of powers between religious communities within the country (Madeyska, 2003). It was to ensure an appropriate representation of individual religious sects distributed in proportion to the size of their population. The crucial aspect, however, is that the Pact was drawn up on the basis of the 1932 demographic census, and since then, no further census has been drawn up (Zdanowski, 2020). Therefore, the number of seats allocated to certain groups to grant them adequate representation in the government has also not been kept up to date. Hence, the hypothesis on the potential impact of migration on stability, as any movements of people that took place in the country after 1943 could have influenced the demography of the society. Therefore, analogically, could have a destabilising factor on the political scene maintained by a highly demographically conditioned National Pact.

When it comes to migration, it is generally understood as a change of place of residence from or to a given area in a given period of time. Migration itself is a broad term therefore, it is usually approached by dividing it based on its different characteristics such as internal and external movements, temporary or permanent, voluntary or involuntary (Castles, Miller, 1998). Although each type of migration is related to the

mobility of the population and therefore, influences the demographical makeup of the society, in order to avoid an overly simplified and superficial analysis, this article will be limited to the movements of refugees. Therefore, of an external and involuntary aspect of migration, in search of protection or resettlement and without sufficient travel documentation; also termed as irregular secondary movement of migrants (European Commission, 2021). This article's focus on refugee movements may constitute an introduction to considerations and to a further, broader analysis of the relationship between migration and political stability in Lebanon. As further theoretical basis, I adopt the international law that defines refugees as persons "who need international protection due to a serious threat to their life, physical integrity or freedom in the country of origin as a result of persecution, armed conflicts, violence or social disorder" (UNHCR, 2020).

## **Refugees in Lebanon**

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) estimates the number of refugees (including asylum seekers) in Lebanon for 2019 at 936,164 (UNHCR, 2020). Comparatively, this number has been decreasing year by year, as in 2017 it was still over a million. According to other data, also provided by UNHCR, the Lebanese government estimates the presence of Syrian refugees alone at 1.5 million, plus some 300,000 Palestinian refugees and 18,500 refugees from other regions such as Ethiopia, Iraq and Sudan. Overall, according to these figures, Lebanon currently hosts 1,181,500 refugees. When the total population of Lebanon is estimated at 6.8 million (World Bank, 2018), this indicates that refugees account for 27% of the population, therefore, more than a quarter. Additionally, there is the issue of the spatial distribution of the arrived population. As Lebanon does not conduct systematic demographic censuses, the available data are inconclusive, but according to a 2014 study by OCHA, UNHCR and UNRWA, the highest percentage of refugees live in the Bekaa region, where Lebanese nationals make up only 60% of the total population. In other regions, such as Akkar, Tripoli, Mount Lebanon (from arabic: *ننابل لبلج*), Beirut and South Lebanon, distribution varies between 60 and 85 percent. These data are all the more significant when we consider the relatively small area of the country. Further looking through the prism of the population density, we come to the conclusion that Leba-

non has the largest refugee population per capita in the world (UNHCR, 2020).

There are twelve officially recognized refugee camps within the national territory and they are classified as camps intended for the Palestinian refugees. In practice, they are also inhabited by refugees of other nationalities, yet the Palestinians remain in the majority of said habitants. Informal tent settlements have also been established in Lebanon, these in turn inhabited mostly by Syrians with a smaller presence of other nationalities. Additionally, refugees also settle in abandoned buildings, cramped, separated spaces with only a much smaller part of the refugee population managing to find shelter among the nationals. The official camps were established in 1948, when the first Palestinian refugees fleeing the Arab-Israeli war arrived in Lebanon. They were established as temporary centres, but over the years, inhabited by successive descendants of the refugee community, they turned into makeshift settlements, and the buildings that were originally intended only for temporary residence, were gradually yet drastically destroyed with time. Due to the existence of Lebanese laws that restrict construction options within refugee camps, their residents are doomed to the worsening housing conditions with no perspective for aid coming from the state or other non-state actors, nor the permission to improve the existing infrastructure conditions themselves. The fact that the Palestinian camps are officially recognized by the state could suggest better conditions than those in the informal tent settlements, however it is not always the case. Likewise, the position of Palestinian refugees could be seen as comparatively more favourable than that of the Syrian refugees, mainly due to their earlier arrival and a smaller refugee population at the time, therefore, less legal restrictions that have increased over the years with the influx of successive waves of refugees and with it, a rising hostility from the Lebanese society. From a different perspective, however, the large influx of asylum seekers had an impact on the situation of all of the refugees, including those who came to the country earlier. All refugees face discriminatory laws preventing them, for example, from owning or inheriting property, restricting their access to public education, health services and the labour market, where even the “long-term” Palestinian refugees, with a relatively granted permission to stay, still cannot work in at least 36 professions (Amnesty, 2019).

The current legislation regarding refugees in Lebanon has last been updated in 2015. Before then, the borders were relatively open, allow-

ing a relatively free flow of refugees (especially Syrians regarding whom those changes are the most visible) without the need of obtaining additional visas, permits or fees. There was also no specific or compiled national law on the issue of refugees, other than the 2003 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the issuing of provisional residence permits concluded under UNHCR's initiative with the government of Lebanon (UNHCR, 2004). The changes, regarding the intensity of restrictions, that took place in 2015 can be interpreted as a response to the influx of refugees seeking refuge in the face of the ongoing war in Syria, when in Lebanon, in less than a year, between 2013 and 2014, their number increased almost threefold and exceeded a million. Less than three years earlier, the number of Syrians in Lebanon was just two thousand. Lebanon's newly adopted policy was therefore aimed at making it more difficult for refugees (with a focus on those fleeing from Syria) to enter the state and to maintain their legal status thereafter. Under the 2015 legislation, refugees are divided into two categories – those seeking asylum through the UNHCR and others who must prove that they have a so-called “sponsor” in Lebanon in order to be allowed a legal stay in the country. Additionally, according to the Human Rights Watch, residence permits are only granted for temporal period, and the annual renewal fee is 200USD per person, which is further problematic when we take into account the fact that more than “70% of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living below the poverty line” (HRW, 2016).

The above outline of Lebanese policy towards refugees already indicates the dire living conditions that they are faced with. The problem, however, is not just in the strict policy. There is a difference between selectiveness and limitation of the movement of people between the borders in order to respond to the capacity of a given state when it comes to the number of people it can accept, so as not to violate the stability of its own social system, social welfare and security, hence also political stability; but nevertheless, eventually ensuring the basic rights and needs after a person had already gone through the said restrictive and selective system. In Lebanon, on the other hand, we encounter a situation where the legalization of one's stay does not significantly improve his or her living conditions. Further, the administrative and legal requirements allow for abuse and even contribute to an emergence of a whole business at the expense of refugees as i.e. a well-paid profession of a sponsor (Country Information Service of the Finnish Immigration Service, 2016).

## **The influence of refugees on political stability**

Lebanon's large refugee population can imply its openness and being a "praise-worthy" sanctuary for displaced people. Maintaining this identity complements another image that the state wishes to secure – the image of a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society coexisting in peace and harmony thanks to the guaranteed political representation through the denominational, sectarian, power-sharing framework. Further argued by Lebanon in 1943–75 actually being given as a successful case of a power-sharing democracy, a model for maintaining peace and unity in deeply divided societies (Mühlbacher, 2007). However, over time, the burden that this small country "took on" (voluntarily or not) began to influence the increasingly restrictive policy of the state towards refugees – one of the evidence that the theory of social and political order, therefore stability, is not tantamount to the practice and realities of the state. The way in which the Lebanese government responds to the refugee "problem" may be a direct proof of the changing stability/instability of the state.

Since Lebanon's political stability is by definition directly grounded in the National Pact, how migration affects stability can be seen as synonymous with how it affects the provisions of the said document. As mentioned previously, the stability to be sustained by the Pact produced a religious system characterized by a proportional distribution of political power among the various religious communities (sects) according to their demographic "weight" – size and distribution. The eleven officially recognized and represented sects in power include: Shi'a, Maronite, Druze, Sunni, Alawite, Greek Orthodox, Greek Catholic, Armenian Orthodox, Armenian Catholic, Protestant and Jew (Minority Rights Group, 2020). Despite the fact that censuses are not regularly carried out, therefore they cannot "officially" influence the statistics, the presence of refugees affects the size of individual sects, which may further influence the voices of dissatisfaction and discontent within the society, depending on the interests of a given group. Although the population seeking refuge in Lebanon is not homogeneous, most of the refugees in Lebanon are Syrians, and among them there is a Sunni majority. The census of 1932 gave a demographic majority to Christians, but now the number of Muslims (in total) is estimated at 57.7%, and Christians at 36.2% (Minority Rights Group, 2020). Granting citizenship to refugees would thus entail their permanent incorporation into the national statistics, further increasing



the Muslim population in the official registers. Such incorporation would imply the need to change the power apparatus by increasing its Muslim representatives. It would entail an undesired (for the now dominant party) shift in the balance of power. Thus, the analysis of restrictions introduced against granting political status to refugees, carried out from this perspective, means that migration rights are or can be a tool to try to control stability within the state. Further efforts to influence demographics are seen in further restrictions that deprive refugees of the right to register births, marriages and deaths. The effectiveness of such a procedure is of course questionable, because the statistics remain unreliable according to the public perception, which means that the instability is present even without official data updates.

In light of the continuously deepening economic crisis in Lebanon, the presence of refugees is seen as an additional burden. The fact that the Lebanese themselves are struggling with problems related to the access to basic services, to the labor market, the housing market, and even with widely present hunger, leads to some of that social discontent being directed against the refugees; the difficult situation is “pinned” on the once “Syrian brothers” but now unwelcome intruders who start to be perceived as competition. However, this phenomenon is not surprising, but rather, to some extent, ubiquitous among all the refugee receiving countries. The economic aspect of the impact of refugees on Lebanon’s instability contributed to the government’s questionable policies – which make it difficult for refugees to obtain legal status, which, however, also increases the risk of their exploitation and limits their access to the labor market, education or health care. “When renewing a temporary residence permit, a notarized declaration must be submitted not to seek employment [...] by Syrian refugees holding UNHCR certificates” (HRW, 2016). Such action by the Lebanese authorities, which is aimed at reducing the number of refugees in the country, can be interpreted as a response to the pressure they pose on the country’s economy. However, on the other hand, it also contributes to further deterioration of the economic situation of the refugees who stay in the country illegally, thus they remain to constitute an even greater burden on the state’s economy than if they were able to earn their livelihood, and even become self-sufficient and not have to seek support from state finances. Thus, they could obtain funds for further emigration, e.g. to Australia, which would even be in line with the inherent position of the Lebanese authorities regarding only the temporary stay of refugees in their country.

## **Conclusion**

International migration is a phenomenon that carries with it complex social processes brought about by human mobility. It leaves its mark on both the environment actively participating in this mobility as well as on the local community of the so-called receiving or host countries passively experiencing its influences. Migration, hence, refugees require the reaction of local communities, the government and institutions; it calls for adequate mechanisms and effective management so as to minimize its negative effects while respecting the value of human life – of both refugees and the citizens of a given country.

In the beginning of this work, the author has set out a hypothesis about one of the possible negative effects resulting from migration – its impact on instability. Throughout the work the author has met the established research objectives that now allow for verification and acceptance of the hypothesis that migration is one of the factors that can contribute to and determine political (in)stability of a state as a result of overlapping external and internal mechanisms of international relations. Lebanon, due to the numerous admissions of refugees and its unique political system, which places emphasis on the demographic and religious structure of the nation, faces additional challenges associated with hosting individuals seeking refuge. In addition to the socio-economic dilemmas, which are shared also by other receiving countries (competition on the labour market, housing, issues of maintenance, integration, assimilation), there is also the problem of ethnic origin and religious beliefs of the arriving refugees, who could even more deeply question the apparent order and political stability maintained by the National Pact. Which confirms the second hypothesis of Lebanon's internal conditioning making it especially vulnerable to such influence.

It is important to underline the fact that migration, including being a refugee, cannot be seen as a direct or an only factor influencing the current fragile political situation in Lebanon. As previously outlined, Lebanon is facing a deeply embedded political, social and economic crisis, which has deepened even more in the wake of the events of the past year (the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut port explosion). Migration, especially in view of the specificity of Lebanon, may, however, be considered as one of the determinants that affects the stability of the state, therefore, issues related to it should be taken into account when trying to solve the prevailing social discontent and the state of instability.

Comparatively, the “refugee problem” is not considered as “important” or “urgent” in the face of the current crisis, however, the author recommends to, remember Lebanon’s history and the not-so-distant civil war, which was directly caused by the presence of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (Madeyska, 2003). Therefore, although at first glance migration may not seem to be a significant determinant of political stability, it nevertheless points to its potential ability to exert such influence as well as reveals the multiple layers of problems standing before Lebanon. The author suggests that Lebanon cannot solve its political instability through the methods applied by the ruling regime till this point i.e., restricting migration policies or denying citizenship in order to conceal the changes in the demographic makeup of the society. Not only do they not resolve the instability but also worsen the humanitarian crisis, hence, result in social discontent, which further fuels instability. The author suggests that stability cannot be achieved without legitimacy and support of the society towards the ruling apparatus, hence, the government ought to respond to the calls of the population, including the calls of the refugees.

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## Sytuacja uchodźców w Libanie oraz ich wpływ na stabilność polityczną państwa

### Streszczenie

W październiku 2019 roku, obecne w Libanie niepokoje społeczne zorganizowały się przybierając formę protestów przeciwko rządowi politycznemu. Wciąż nieustające, a wręcz pogłębiające się masowe niepokoje społeczne i nieumiejętność, bądź niemożność udzielenia adekwatnej odpowiedzi ze strony władz politycznych przyczyniły się do umiejscowienia Libanu wśród państw określanych terminem – państwa niestabilnego politycznie. W bazie danych na temat trwających konfliktów – *the Center for Preventive Action's (CPA) Global Conflict Tracker*, Liban jest przyporządkowany do kategorii konfliktu o niezmiennym statusie. Od eksplozji w Bejrucie w sierpniu 2020 roku zaczęły pojawiać się propozycje o kolejnej zmianie statusu państwa – z państwa niestabilnego na państwo już upadłe (z ang. *failed state*).

W kontekście obecnej sytuacji społecznej, ekonomicznej oraz politycznej Libanu, jak i poprzedzającej ją długiej historii konfliktów wewnętrznych oraz zewnętrznych, ten artykuł ma na celu przyjrzenie się zjawisku migracji, a dokładniej uchodźctwu, jako jednemu z czynników, który może przyczyniać się do stabilności, jak również niestabilności politycznej państwa. W obliczu specyfiki systemu poli-

tycznego Libanu, którego stabilność jest silnie skorelowana z adekwatną reprezentacją poszczególnych sekt religijnych na scenie politycznej, migracja może być uznana jako jeden z determinantów mających wpływ na stabilność państwa, a kwestie z nią związane powinny być brane pod uwagę przy próbach rozwiązania panującego niezadowolenia społecznego oraz stanu niestabilności politycznej.

**Słowa kluczowe:** Liban, niestabilność polityczna, uchodźcy

### **Informacja o autorce**

**Maria Spychała-Kij** (marspy7@st.amu.edu.pl) – studentka trzeciego roku studiów pierwszego stopnia na kierunku International Relations oraz studentka pierwszego roku filologii arabskiej na Uniwersytecie im. Adama Mickiewicza w Poznaniu. Ukończyła miesięczny staż w Centre for International Peace and Stability w Islamabadzie. Jej zainteresowania badawcze to: niestabilność polityczna, konflikty, odbudowa i rozwój po konflikcie, pomoc humanitarna, interwencje.

