



Conflict and  
Civicness  
Research  
Group  
at LSE ■

# **Syrian Refugees in Global Context: Protection, Insecurity and Governance**

Responsible Deal Project  
**CONFERENCE READOUT**

18<sup>th</sup> July 2022

**A note containing key points made at the public  
conference organised by LSE IDEAS – Responsible  
Deal Project on the 21<sup>st</sup> June 2022 at the RSA.**

## Background

On the 21<sup>st</sup> June 2022, LSE IDEAS, the in-house foreign policy think tank of the London School of Economics, convened a one day public conference to discuss the legacies, current trajectories and challenges facing Syrian refugees in Europe and the Middle East, as well as the connections to the new wave of refugees fleeing the Russian war on Ukraine. The conference assessed shifting conditions in host countries, looked at how international organisations and states could support lasting solutions to humanitarian needs, and the effects of past policy failures on the current situation. The conference brought the project, 'Responsible Deal; where and how to protect Syrian refugees?', to its conclusion and drew the research consortium together.

Responsible Deal was initiated and led by Professor Erik Berglof, and its last completion phase in 2022 was co-led by Dr Rim Turkmani. The conference took place on an 'on the record' basis and the note contains some of the key points made across some of the presentations. Please note that not all presentations from the conference are included, and none are 'verbatim' transcripts but offer summaries of the some of the main points from the individual speaker.

The Conflict and Civicness Research Group are an autonomous unit within LSE IDEAS. Our work investigates the causes and dynamics of conflict, and the survival strategies employed in everyday life, in situations of war and intractable violence in Europe, Africa and the Middle East.

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## Opening Statement

**Vicky Tennant, UNHCR Representative London  
(formerly UNHCR Deputy Representative in Syria)**

My last assignment was as UNHCR's Deputy Representative in Syria. I was based in Damascus from 2020 to 2021 and more recently covered the Syria operation from outside the country. Before that I followed the Syria situation from a more global perspective, working as part of our High Commissioner's executive office and travelling to the country and the region with him on a number of visits.

The pace and scale of the Syrian refugee crisis called for extraordinary responses from host countries, communities and donors across and beyond the region, and in many ways helped reshape the world engages with refugees. The Global Compact on Refugees drew very substantially on the Syria experience and the various approaches that were developed to respond to it.

But what will always resonate for me are the experiences and stories of the people that I met inside Syria – trying to piece together a future amidst unthinkable hardship, with the very foundations upon which our lives are constructed having been torn away – home, family, security. I was based in Damascus, but as part of my work I travelled to visit urban and rural communities that had been deeply affected by conflict and displacement – in places like Aleppo, Der-Ez-Zor, Homs and Hama.

When I look back, I will certainly remember Syria's rich history and its deep and sophisticated culture – something no visitor can ever forget. But I will also remember the extraordinary resilience of the people I met – the elderly lady in Al Mayadin who refused to leave the village where she had spent her entire life, even as it was taken and retaken in the course of the conflict; the father and sons in East Ghouta rebuilding the family home with their own hands; the teenage girls in a school in Aleppo determined to recover years of missed education. Meeting them was humbling and inspiring, and something I will carry with me for the rest of my life. And for the UNHCR colleagues working on the ground, those interactions are what drive and motivate our work.

But on the edges of those conversations, there was also a strong sense of absence – family members killed or missing, large parts of the community still displaced inside the country or living as refugees abroad. The desperate socio-economic situation, and ongoing instability mean that for many, life is becoming more precarious, not less. It is absolutely vital that the interests, rights and aspirations of Syrians, including those displaced inside the country and abroad, remain on the international agenda. This conference – and the huge body of research that it draws on – can, and I believe will, play an important role in facilitating that.

Over the last decade over half of Syria's population of 22 million has been displaced. This includes some 5.8 million Syrian refugees who sought asylum in the immediate region - in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt. And many more have been received in Europe and beyond, often after a desperate and hazardous journey.

Well over a million Syrian children have been born in exile, never knowing anything but life in asylum. Many more Syrian children fled when they were so young that they cannot remember Syria and those they left behind. Some of these are soon to enter adulthood, having developed connections and a deep affinity for the countries who generously hosted them – but without any idea of where their futures lie.

The response to the crisis in Syria at the political level is not one of which the international community should feel proud. That the crisis has entered its 12<sup>th</sup> year without a resolution; the political polarization and the resulting stalemate is a failure. The human cost has been horrific.

At the same time, there have been moments of hope and inspiration, as I have spoken about just now. Syrians have shown remarkable resilience and fortitude - parents who have sacrificed, who have adapted, who have learnt new skills, all while keeping their children - or trying to keep their children - in schools. Children and young people who don't give up on their dreams even when their futures are in limbo, their opportunities limited by forces outside of their control.

The international community's response to the displacement crisis was nonetheless significant and timely. Tens of billions of dollars have been donated by states that care about the future of Syria and the region, including through the Refugee and Resilience Response Plan – the 3RP – which combines humanitarian and development programming with national leadership and has channelled well over 20 billion USD to the region since 2016. Hundreds of international and national aid agencies and partners are working day and night to help those in need, across the region.

And the host countries, especially Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq and Egypt have stepped up to host millions of Syrians, even while facing their own political and economic challenges. Host communities have shown incredible solidarity in sheltering refugees, sharing their homes, their schools, their hospitals.

On the other hand, entering the 12<sup>th</sup> year of the crisis, and despite the massive aid effort, the situation for Syrians has become worse, not better. The region has been particularly affected by the economic impact of COVID-19 and the conflict in Ukraine. With every year, Syrian families and the poorer host communities see their assets further depleted. The vast majority of Syrian refugees are surviving below the poverty line and are being pushed further into debt with less capacity to cope. Poverty has also increased dramatically among host communities. The international community needs to respond accordingly, increasing funding of aid programmes that support both Syrians and vulnerable host communities.

There are more and more voices in some host countries calling for Syrian refugees to start returning home. This is partly driven by domestic political issues, including upcoming elections in Turkey. Other concerns, such in Lebanon, relate to the perceived risks to social stability and national identity should such large numbers of Syrians stay. And many of these concerns are real and legitimate.

Lebanon has an approximate population of 7 million, and has taken in up to 1.5 million Syrians – 20% of the population. Imagine if this happened in the UK. This is the equivalent of the population of London and most of South East England doubling in size, absorbing people of a different nationality. Would we cope as well as Lebanon and Jordan have done? The international community has a clear moral, as well as strategic interest, in supporting these host countries. We need to listen to their concerns.

At the same time, repatriation is guided by clear international standards. It must be voluntary; undertaken in safety and dignity. The majority of Syrian refugees have objective and well-founded concerns about returning to Syria. Their concerns, intentions and hopes also have to be front-and-centre, and the voluntary character of return respected. And by engaging with refugees and empowering them to steer their own futures, return is more likely to be sustainable

UNHCR conducts annual intentions surveys and their responses in 2022 are largely consistent with previous UNHCR surveys: most refugees continue to speak of a future back in Syria, but very few are considering going back in the near term, at least not until certain concerns inside Syria are

addressed.

These concerns include guarantees for personal security and respect of rights; access to livelihood opportunities, basic services and housing. The current rules on military conscription remain a major disincentive to return.

Of course, the primary responsibility for addressing these concerns is the Government of Syria. Our role is to advocate on behalf of refugees, to raise their concerns, to call for legal guarantees that could protect them and that these guarantees are respected. We also support refugees to access civil documentation and to claim their rights through existing legal frameworks, including through legal aid.

And while the majority are not intending to return soon, a relatively small number of refugees are already exercising their right to return back to Syria, - some 35,000 in 2021 and over 300,000 since 2016. Along with IDPs and other vulnerable people, they need help. Together with the humanitarian community, UNHCR works to integrate returning refugees into ongoing humanitarian programmes inside Syria to gradually address obstacles that relate to food security, education, health, water, shelter and livelihoods. The shift towards Early Recovery programming is an important step in expanding the scope of much needed aid to those in need already inside Syria, and we hope that such programmes could gradually improve conditions in places where refugees might return.

### **Summary: what do we need to do?**

- The vast majority of Syrian refugees are still in need of international protection and will need this protection for some time.
- We need to invest in host countries and expand policies that support host communities and refugees, relieving the pressure on host countries. We aim to ensure refugees do not feel pushed to return because of a lack of assistance or access to services.
- In Europe, we need to work towards integrating refugees into national systems, supporting them to reach their potential, contributing economically and socially where they have sought asylum.
- In parallel, we need to gradually remove the obstacles to return inside Syria. The Syrian government needs to provide amnesties and guarantees for personal security and show that these are implemented in practice. Issues such as military service will need to be addressed before the majority of Syrian refugees will feel confident to return.
- The international community should also scale up its humanitarian support inside Syria, primarily to address the hardship driven by the terrible socio-economic situation in the country, but also so that people who are choosing to return do not find their chances of a future blocked by lack of schools, or health clinics, or by the absence of decent shelters, or the chance to find a job.
- While refugees of course have a right to return home, they also have a right not to be forced or coerced to return. States must therefore continue to offer protection, supported by the international community.

**Keynote lecture****The Impact of the “Syrian Refugee Crisis” on the EU Asylum Policy**

**Sarah Leonard, Professor of International Security, University of the West England**

My work is at the intersection between security studies and migration studies and considers how some issues come to be seen as security issues, especially in the European Union (EU).

I have used refugee crisis in the title of the presentation, but I have put it in inverted commas, because I know that there are a lot of people who would argue that this wasn't really a crisis. If you compare the number of people who came to Europe at the high point in 2015 - 2016, even if it was as many as a million or more, it's not really a crisis for a region of such size and wealth.

In contrast, to a number of the other presentations today, my speech may appear Eurocentric, but I want to emphasise that even in European Security Studies, a traditionally very Eurocentric subject, there is a growing focus on de-centring the topic and framing it through global interrelationships, including the many connections between the EU and the wider European neighbourhood.

At the high point of the so-called 'crisis', the number of people who came to Europe bore no comparison to the number of people who went to Turkey, or to Lebanon. Many argue that Europe should not have considered this a "crisis" and would have handled the situation much better if they had not done so. While this is a valid point, it's important to realize that for a lot of European governments and for the EU, this was seen as a crisis.

In Brussels, most refer to the arrival of Syrian refugees and the conjuncture of 2015-16 as a crisis; as a big shock to the system. We can disagree with that but it's how it was perceived. This is how the crisis was socially constructed in European states, and reflects how migration and asylum have gone on to be socially constructed as security issues.

To be clear, it's not that I believe that migrants and asylum seekers are security threats. Rather, this process of securitisation of migration is happening whether we like it or not. I appreciate that many argue by researching this topic I am part of this process of securitisation, and I acknowledge that, but I think at the same time this process of securitization is happening outside academia, outside of my research.

Amongst European countries there has been increasing cooperation on matters related to asylum, immigration and border controls for many years. In fact, already some forms of cooperation existed in the 1970s, and then the beginning of Schengen and then the creation of the Common European Asylum System (CEAS). The aim of the latter is to ensure that asylum seekers are treated equally and fairly wherever they apply for protection in the EU. So the idea is that if you apply for asylum in Spain, or in Estonia, or in Germany, you should be processed in the same way and the outcome should be the same. Of course, this hasn't actually happened in practice. There have been considerable divergences. But the EU has been negotiating and trying to establish a series of instruments to try and harmonize various aspects of the CEAS.

The Dublin system has been at the core of this attempt to harmonise. It seeks to overcome the problem that the same asylum seeker could be assessed multiple times (so-called "asylum shopping"), leading to a duplication of efforts. There was also the problem of the so-called "refugees

in orbit", where authorities would refuse to process an asylum application on the grounds that the applicant came from another EU country they could have applied from. This has led to a situation in which it is usually states that initially host the asylum seeker as they arrive in the EU that are responsible to process their application for protection which means that some states have received far more applications than others. There have been many attempts to reform the system because some states like Italy have been quite vocal about how unfair it is.

From the EU's point of view, the Syrian refugee crisis really began in 2015. There is not really a recognition that there were large numbers of displaced people prior to this. From this point over 1 million people arrived, not only from Syria but also from Iraq and Afghanistan. The response of the EU combined a humanitarian, asylum protection dimension and a border control, surveillance and security dimension. On the latter, one of the main measures was to increase the operations of FRONTEX, which became the European Border and Coast Guard Agency, in the Mediterranean (it was previously referred to as the 'European Agency for the Management of Operational Cooperation at the External Borders'). FRONTEX saw a significant increase in its staffing and budget. These operations had a dual nature, concerning both border surveillance and, at the same time, search and rescue (the positive aspect). There was also an emphasis on targeting smugglers and criminal networks.

The EU also pursued a relocation strategy. States which were not first-entry, reception countries were asked to take some of the refugees that had arrived in Greece, Italy, etc. The EU started with a voluntary scheme but then moved to a mandatory one. As the scheme was moving very slowly, the European Commission attempted to force three non-compliant states – Hungary, Poland the Czech Republic – to accept relocated refugees by bringing cases to the European Court of Justice.

The European Commission has been attempting to pursue this for many years in light of the asymmetries between reception countries, on the one hand, and destination and transit states, on the other. The EU argues that, according to the Dublin rules, states should support each other in an emergency situation, like that seen with Syrian refugees. But this is a form of solidarity that has proven unpopular.

There were two other aspects to the EU strategy; first, helping frontline member states such as Greece through technical assistance; second, supporting refugees to stay in Syria's neighbouring states. This led to the EU-Turkey agreement, which has been largely contentious due to the way both sides instrumentalised the refugee question to prioritise their own interests and position.

So, turning to the medium and longer term impact of the Syrian refugee response, we can really see how the so-called "crisis" has led to this securitisation dynamic in EU migration policy. Around the time of the high point of the crisis, the EU experienced a combination of small and large scale terrorist attacks, e.g. in Paris in 2015 and in Brussels in 2016. Some of those who had carried out these atrocities had travelled to Syria, received training and then returned using irregular migration routes. We are talking about very small numbers of people, but they tended to already be known to the security services and the asylum wave allowed them to avoid detection at regular border checkpoints.

As such, there was an interaction here between the asylum and terrorist 'crises' – and, indeed, the flows themselves were often triggered by Daesh carrying out atrocities in Syria and other countries.

Against a backdrop of far right instrumentalization of these crises, the EU acted to considerably reinforce and extend border control. This saw the reinforcement of the external border agency, FRONTEX, the roll out of the so-called 'common risk indicators' at the external borders, and far more cooperation between border guards and the law enforcement community.

So, in conclusion, I would argue that the Syrian refugee crisis can be seen as a turning point in the securitisation of asylum seekers in the EU. Although the wider literature often emphasises the longer-term process of securitisation, I would argue that asylum seekers were kept apart from this process for a fairly long time, even events like 9/11 did not alter this. Unfortunately, because in 2015 there were cases, not of asylum seekers becoming terrorists, but terrorists *posing* as asylum seekers, the process we saw was one of securitisation of the whole question of refugee protection.

### Roundtable discussion

## The Refugee Challenge in Lebanon, Turkey and Jordan

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### Jordan

**Ala' Alrababah, Postdoctoral Fellow at  
Immigration Policy Lab (IPL), ETH Zurich**

We conducted a representative survey of about 1500 Jordanians to examine public attitudes toward Syrian refugees. According to the UNHCR, Jordan is the third largest host state for Syrian refugees. While the majority of Syrian refugees are hosted in the global south, political science research on refugees has often tended to focus on North America and Europe. This research seeks to redress the balance, analysing how Jordanians perceive Syrian refugees and how the characteristics of Syrian refugees shape the attitudes of Jordanian citizens.

Perceptions about the impact of Syrian refugees on housing, the economy and crime were overwhelmingly negative, with close to 90% of Jordanians saying the impact on housing was negative. Most respondents also thought the overall impact of refugees and the impact on services, education and terrorism was negative. The major exception to the general negative perception was that Jordanians viewed the impact of Syrian refugees on Jordan's image abroad to be overwhelmingly positive.

Perceptions of potential policies towards refugees were more mixed. A slight majority supported policies such as quarantining Syrian refugees and denying them work permits. However, slightly less than 50% of respondents supported closing the border and sending refugees back to Syria.

Attitudes towards Syrian refugees themselves are, for the most part, positive. Most Jordanians think Jordan should host and assist refugees and most Jordanians perceive Syrian refugees positively, despite viewing their overall impact (e.g., as above, on housing and the economy) is negative.

The paper also analysed how different personal characteristics of Syrian refugees impacted Jordanians' perceptions. In a conjoint experiment, respondents viewed pairs of hypothetical refugee profiles, with randomly varying demographic characteristics. Respondents were then asked whether Jordan should host each refugee profile or not. Respondents were more willing to support hosting refugees with characteristics associated with vulnerability; female, people with kids, or fleeing to avoid violence.

Syrians and Jordanians have very similar characteristics; including culture, language, ethnicity, religion etc. Yet, the survey showed much more willingness to host Sunni refugees rather than

Christian and Alawite ones, suggesting that cultural differences still matter in this context. Economic and occupational characteristics did not significantly impact the likelihood that Syrian refugees would be welcomed.

Overall, the research challenges the Western-dominated consensus about the importance of interpersonal (or 'sociotropic') economic concerns on the attitudes of host populations towards refugees.

## **Lebanon**

**Yara Mourad, Deputy Director Issam Fares  
Institute, American University of Beirut**

During the launch of the 2022 Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP), which was an appeal for an additional \$3.2 million in international funding to address the effects of the crisis, the Minister of Social Affairs explicitly stated that the government plans to announce a new plan for the return of refugees. Meanwhile, the prime minister Najib Mikati called on the international community to 'cooperate with Lebanon to return the displaced Syrians to their country, otherwise Lebanon will have a situation that is not desirable for the Western countries, which is to work to get the Syrians out of Lebanon by legal means through firm application of the Lebanese laws'. This speech ironically coincided with World Refugee Day.

Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 UN Refugee Convention, nor the 1967 protocol. However, they have signed several human rights treaties. The word 'refugee' is not used by the government, they prefer to use the word 'displaced'. We have a variation of positions and a multitude of perspectives that reflect the country's political context and history.

Institutionalized sectarianism shapes how parties approach the Syrian issue, specifically whether the groups are pro or anti the Assad regime. However, one consensus among all the parties has always been that there will be no settlement or nationalization of Syrian refugees.

So, what's really changed here in the last few years, which makes the position of the Lebanese government even more resistant to accepting refugees? In short, a political, economic, financial and social crisis, by far the worst that the country has seen for some time.

Since 2019, and even before, Lebanese politics has been marked by political deadlock that has prevented successive governments from implementing urgent reforms. The Beirut port explosion in August 2020 was devastating and further exacerbated the situation; many people lost their lives, their homes and their jobs. The port channelled more than two thirds of the country's total external trade.

Moreover, the Lebanese pound has lost 90% of its value in the past two years. People often get only two hours of electricity per day, the healthcare sector is at a breaking point, and the country is witnessing a dramatic collapse in the basic services provided by the state.

As per the World Bank, the real GDP is estimated to have declined by 10.5% in 2021, and it is projected to contract even further by 6.5% in 2022, and still policymakers in Lebanon have not agreed on a plan to address the collapse of the country's development model. The geopolitical developments in 2022, particularly the hike in national fuel prices are also adding to the dire situation and the ongoing inflation, which we're witnessing. According to the World Bank, the prolonged

depression Lebanon is facing is likely to rank in the top 10, possibly even the top 3, worst crisis episodes seen globally since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, i.e., it is an extraordinarily serious collapse.

So, how does this affect the situation of Syrian refugees? Lebanon hosts approximately 850,000 refugees, the government estimates at 1.5 million - 90% of them are now living in extreme poverty. Compare this figure to early 2019, before the financial meltdown in Lebanon, where the number was at 55%. The latest UN Vulnerability Assessment Report estimates that 88% of Syrian refugee households are below the survival minimum expenditure basket, which is the absolute minimum amount required to cover lifesaving needs.

This situation has been associated with several coping strategies. Some are borrowing money, some are selling their assets, decreasing healthcare expenditure, decreasing food intake and, of course, their expenditure on education. The latter leaves many children increasingly involved in child labour. But although the Syrian refugee population is suffering in a similar way to the Lebanese, we have a very common sentiment of blame. The Lebanese Government has time and again depicted the presence of the Syrian refugees, as a burden, and the cause of this economic deterioration. Although we know that it is really because of a lack of management and proper governance in Lebanon.

The Ministry of Social Affairs placed the full burden of the economic crisis on the refugees and accused them of committing 85% of crimes and benefiting from the state's subsidized services. The Minister of Foreign Affairs also called for the repatriation of the refugees.

Moving forward, what is needed in Lebanon is a proper response which meets the needs of all vulnerable people, the host community and refugees. Financial aid should be increased but in a more transparent way. We need to have more monitoring. Civil society can play a bigger role as 'watchdogs', so to speak. While the government cannot and should not be ignored, aid and humanitarian relief has to be channelled to the country in a more open and transparent manner.

## **Turkey and Turkish-Controlled Northern Syria**

**Mazen Gharibah, Associate Researcher, LSE IDEAS**

Since 2011, Turkey has been hosting approximately 3 million Syrian refugees – three times higher than any other neighbouring country. More than 250,000 have been granted Turkish citizenship, and a lot more have also been granted relief payments. So, for many years now, Syrians have been positively integrating in Turkish society, the economy and labour market. New generations have been studying in Turkish schools, moving into the university sector. For many Syrian children, Turkey is the only country that they have known.

However, for the past four years a series of limitations have been placed on Syrian refugees by the Turkish authorities. For example, restrictions on freedom of movement between Turkish provinces have been introduced for protection card holders. While you always needed permission to make these journeys, it was previously a straightforward process – now it can take several weeks and you may even be refused permission. The naturalisation process, which never had very clear criteria in the first place, i.e., was often random and arbitrary, has also now been stopped. Work permits are becoming harder to receive – in some provinces, being granted a permit is the exception not the norm. Random security checks have been introduced in major cities and at metro stations. Failure to show a valid identification card can lead to deportation to Turkish-controlled Northern Syria.

This is occurring against the backdrop of approaching elections. Opposition parties have put

pressure on the regime over the Syrian refugee question and the subject has become highly contentious. At the external level, there is on-going political tension between Turkey and its European partners. Refugees are central to this tension and are unfortunately being used as a bargaining chip.

In a well-known speech a few months ago, President Erdogan pledged to 'voluntarily' return 1m refugees to Turkish-controlled Northern Syria within 12 months. As such, we now face a new reality.

It's very important to look at these areas, the dynamics of this, to understand where these refugees are being returned to. I'm not going to discuss Afrin because, according to our sources, most of the refugees who are going to be returned are not going to be settled there.

Turkish-Controlled Northern Syria, excluding Afrin, currently hosts around 3 million Syrians. This is approximately three times the pre-war population of what are historically underdeveloped areas. We used to call this part of Syria 'the Forgotten areas'.

Almost all hospitals and medical centres in these areas were built by Syrian medical and NGOs after 2011. Most of the school infrastructure will also be built by Syrian NGOs after 2011. These areas were historically used for smuggling but now host 3m people and have a new economy and dynamic. 80% of the population is from other provinces in Syria, primarily from Damascus and Homs. So, we have a kind of "mini Syria" taking root here.

Currently, the access of Turkish authorities and charities mean that there is a degree of stability in service provision. For example, they have access to more electricity, clean water and lower food prices than other parts of Syria (though this is, of course, a highly relative statement).

However, it's also very important to note, that the absence of any unified government entity to oversee these areas has created a governance and political vacuum. We have the Syrian interim government, but they're for the most part very weak and irrelevant. There is the 'salvation' government, which is linked to the terrorist organisation, Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (HTS), but they are considered a terrorist organisation and lack support by relevant actors. As a result, there is not a government entity responsible for these areas, which has legitimacy. Instead, there is a local council structure that carries the burden of providing all of these services. Heads of the local councils are not elected and most are simply appointed by the Turkish authorities. So, there is inevitably a tension with the local population as they play a kind of intermediary role in the situation.

The main power, the main actor – which has almost absolute power in the situation – is the armed groups, and, primarily, the Turkish national army and Turkish-backed forces. This bloc as it exists in Turkish-Controlled Northern Syria consists of different factions and is not a homogenous army in the traditional sense. This bloc has absolute authority. Unity amongst this alliance was achieved through external factors, political expediency and mutual interest. But in the last period, we have seen tensions emerge and clashes between different factions in the ruling bloc. At the same time, there have been military movements by the Al-Qaeda-affiliated, HTS.

So, overall this military alliance and power structure is not very stable. It relies upon coercive measures to generate clients in the local population. An autonomous space, which might be occupied by civil society, therefore does not really exist in Turkish-Controlled Northern Syria.

While at the beginning the city of Azaz, for example, was something of a hub for resistance, due to the relationship with and close proximity to Turkey, the ability to undertake overseas financial transactions, the relatively open environment, and so on, this is sadly no longer the case. The space for civil society actors has shrunk dramatically. In this space, there has been a rise of religious movements and religious figures, which are now the de facto judicial authority and legal structure in

these areas. There is no actual legal system or legal structure capable of upholding the rule of law.

Last year, a "Grievances and Reconciliation Committee" was established by these forces. It has 18 members, none of them are lawyers and all act on the basis of religious authority and identity.

In short, the space of civil society is shrinking. In its place an exclusionary religious order is emerging, utilising aggressive rhetoric and creating an environment very hostile to women. So-called "honour crimes" are increasing, women centres are being closed down, sometimes by force, i.e., imposed by the ruling military bloc, but on other occasions just through fear of this anti-feminist rhetoric.

After the announcement by Turkey that they are thinking of returning 1 million or 1.5 million Syrians, a number of Turkish and Syrian companies have taken up construction projects. But there are two problems. First, the governance and political vacuum issues we have discussed. Second, these construction initiatives are being pursued without regard to the need to combine residential buildings with requisite public infrastructure (e.g. sewage systems, schools and hospitals). As a result, something akin to a refugee-camp-style development approach is emerging, but in the form of physical, residential infrastructure. This is a good opportunity for investors but it is hard to see how this offers human conditions for those living in these areas.

In conclusion, this turn of the Turkish authorities will destabilise North-Western Syria, it will add fuel to the fire of conflict, and will end up costing the Turkish authorities more financially in the longer-term. Sadly, the 'voluntary' character of the turn is not credible, as many of those signing the agreement to move are doing so without understanding what it means. This means it is, in effect, a forced return in all but name, which should be opposed by stakeholders and international authorities.

## **Lebanon and the regional and international dynamics**

**Joseph Bahout, Director, Issam Fares  
Institute, American University of Beirut**

We can no more talk about an economic 'crisis', but a complete economic collapse, a kind of coma, which Lebanon has fallen into. Within this coma, the Syrian refugee situation, as well as the broader Syrian reality and its relationship to Lebanese politics, exists in a paradoxical way as a set of perceptions and misperceptions which are shaping the country's internal reality. There is now a unified conception, across all of the country's religious groups and communities, that Syrian refugees are living in a position which is better than the Lebanese. This sentiment highlights the access that Syrians have to some humanitarian relief, including in dollar form, as well as the movements that some refugees have undertaken, returning to Syria episodically and then coming back. It also tends to highlight the question of electricity (the number of hours available in the day) with the question, 'if you have more electricity in Syria than in Lebanon, why don't you go back there?'

The media also picks up on the few cases of Syrians that have returned, highlighting how they have been able to resume some form of normal life, even though the scale of this is, in truth, minimal.

So, in short, there is something that is evolving and becoming more and more skewed in the perception that the Lebanese have of the Syrian refugee question. They believe that Syria is becoming a more and more safe place economically and socially compared to Lebanon – of course, this is completely false, but it is the perception that is shaping the current political dynamic.

On the political level, we have recently had the Lebanese elections, which many expected to mark a

turning point and a moment of change. But, while there have been modest changes, for the most part they signalled the on-going durability of the established order. What we can expect, at least on everything related to Syria and Syrian refugees, a growing polarisation at the political level. If you look at the parliament, there is a renewed division between the March 14<sup>th</sup> Alliance (the anti-Syrian regime bloc) and the March 8<sup>th</sup> Alliance (the pro-Syrian regime bloc). Going forward, we can expect the discourse about Syria itself to become more tense, and the refugee issue particularly so. In relation to the refugee question, the March 8<sup>th</sup> Alliance have notably adopted a more critical stance, including the current Prime Minister, who has previously been softer in his choice of language.

Due to the close historic ties between Syria and Lebanon, the composition of the refugees is also somewhat different to Turkey and Jordan, and the belief among the Lebanese population that they are not victims of the regime in a political sense also shapes how they view their stay in the country.

Furthermore, there is a feeling in Lebanon that the war is over – and this is not completely untrue. Of course, certain fronts are still in a state of conflict. But the feeling in Beirut is that waiting for a political solution is not viable, as this could drag on through negotiations for 10 or 20 years. So, in the meantime, they argue that most of these refugees, at least on the physical level, are secure to go home. There is also a further view that on matters of practical economic cooperation – trade, agricultural products, and so on – Lebanon needs to have a pragmatic approach. For instance, Lebanon has just signed a gas and electricity agreement with Syria, Egypt and Georgia. In the context of this gradual emergence of some forms of inter-state cooperation, there is pressure to include the refugee issue.

But this brings us back to the reality of the geopolitical context. There are several areas in Syria where the conflict could easily ‘heat up’ again. There is the North West (see Mazen Gharibah comments, pp. 11 - 13), which could see tensions between the Turkish forces and others breakout into violence. In addition, and this is just a hypothesis which may seem far-fetched at the moment but needs to be considered, if the war in Ukraine drags on and Russia considers itself under significant pressure, it may seek to adopt a more aggressive posture within the Syrian context. This could, for instance, take the form of giving the Syrian regime leeway and supporting it to pursue reconquest. For many Lebanese, this is a significant concern, because it would mean a new influx of refugees.

The same applies to the south of Syria, where the front is still open and could heat up, especially with tension between Iran and Israel a factor in this theatre. This obviously has implications for Jordan but could reverberate onto Lebanon, too.

Finally, there is the on-going process of Arab normalisation of ties with the Syrian regime. This is more than a thaw, involving the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain and soon, probably the Saudis, will also pursue this path. There is a re-deployment of not only Arab diplomacy, but also Arab money and investment into Syria. This is forcing certain segments in Lebanon, which could have been much more amenable to Syrian refugees like the Sunni constituency, to say, “Okay, if our Arab brethren are talking to the regime, then this is an additional reason to put the refugee question on the table”.

The other additional aspect to the broader international context is, of course, Ukraine. And this poses a ‘looming interrogation’ of Syria and, indeed, for the broader region. Namely, what exactly is the state of Russian power in the Middle East after Ukraine? Is it weaker or stronger? Is it weaker, but owing to this weakness it actually becomes emboldened and still more aggressive? Ukraine raises these huge questions of Russian power. What, for example, does it mean for Russia-Iran equilibrium and the relationship of the Syrian regime to these actors? Does the Syrian regime now move closer to Tehran vis-à-vis Moscow? Many people anticipate a Russian shyness in Syria, which could be replaced by Iran, but also, in this context, Turkey will be a very important player, too.

This will impact the refugee question. Both Turkey and Iran, for different reasons, are pushing for the return of Syrian refugees. But there may no longer be a Russian umbrella overseeing these moves.

This is a big, open question. Russia has a very important strategic presence in Syria, which it is not clear whether it can sustain.

In conclusion, if we add up all of this, it seems clear that the refugee question will not go away. It is subject to all these political and geopolitical dynamics, there is fatigue internationally and in host countries, and there are changes in Syria, too. This will require an on-going research orientation which is alert and sensitive to these changing patterns and risks.

#### **Other selected presentation summaries**

### **The Dynamics of Refugee Return**

**Ala' Alrababah, Postdoctoral Fellow at  
Immigration Policy Lab (IPL), ETH Zurich**

We turn now to looking at Syrian refugees and their migration intentions. This data is based on an original survey of Syrian refugees in Lebanon conducted between August and October 2019. Since then, we've stayed in touch with the same respondents and have surveyed them multiple times. Once the project is completed, this will allow us to make an assessment regarding the pattern of change and continuity.

Our project sought to shed some light on the question of *how do refugee crises end?* Every year very few refugees are resettled in other countries, and even fewer are granted citizenship in host countries. Most refugees face either prolonged displacement or decide to return home.

These decisions on whether to return or stay influence the economic, political and security issues, both in the country that is hosting the refugee and those of the country that they have fled.

In this piece of research, we were interested in who decides to return, when and why? To answer these questions, we conducted a representative survey and combined an analysis of observational data and with a conjoint experiment to examine the relationship between conditions in Lebanon and Syria on the one hand and return intentions on the other.

Findings from the research align well with the UNHCR return intentions survey (see above, pp. 4 – 5). So, in the short-term, very few Syrians have said they wanted to return – only 5%. In the long-term, the majority (63%) wanted to return to Syria. We also ask about wanting to return to Syria 'within two years', which just over a quarter selected.

Based on the tailored and comprehensive survey, we studied the relationship between return intentions and plans and conditions in Lebanon and Syria. We used these survey answers to create several indices under the categories: conditions in Syria, conditions in Lebanon, mobility costs (of return) and confidence in information about the situation back in Syria.

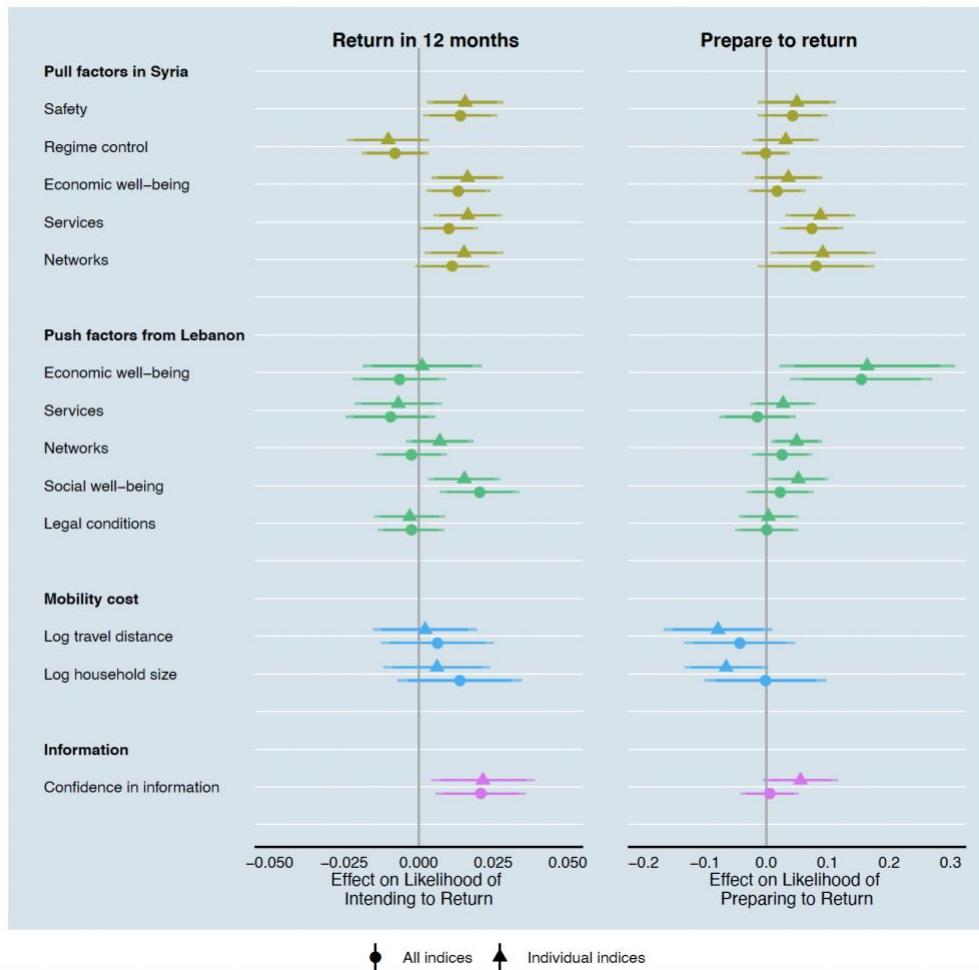
In terms of the results, most of the conditions in Syria tend to predict return intentions. For example, when people tell us their place of origin is safe, they are more likely to say they plan to return in 12 months or prepare to return. Similarly, when public services are functioning in their area they are

more likely to return. The one exception is when people say that the regime controls the area they are from, which is not significantly correlated with return intentions.

When it comes to conditions in Lebanon, we expected to find evidence of push factors, i.e., where Syrian refugees have poor conditions in Lebanon, they would be more likely to favour return. However, our results did not support this. Economic wellbeing and access to services in Lebanon, did not predict return intentions. Where individuals saw their social wellbeing in Lebanon as positive, i.e., they had better relations with the host community, they were actually more likely to want to return.

The table, 'Predictors of Intentions and Preparations', outlined the results:

## Predictors of Intentions and Preparations



The conjoint experiment sought to move beyond this correlational analysis. We read to the respondents a hypothetical description of a future situation in Syria and Lebanon in which we randomly varied a number of different features, such as the security situation in Syria, economic prospects in both countries, and military conscription. In this experiment, those that were asked to imagine a situation where they had good conditions in Lebanon (e.g., a job) and so on were not significantly less likely to return, illustrating again that push factors were weak predictors of return intentions in this context.

Both the correlational analysis above and the conjoint experiment suggest that the most important consideration when it comes to return intentions was the security situation in Syria. The second were economic conditions and public service provisions in Syria and next were networks of family and friends. The least important were conditions in Lebanon. So, whether they are much better or much worse should be seen as unlikely to affect the return intentions of Syrian refugees in the years ahead.

As such:

- The results reaffirm the fundamental importance of the humanitarian mandate in refugee protection;
- Provide clear grounds for questioning the effect of 'push factors' on return decisions.
- Illustrate the need to combine seeking improvements in the host country alongside the country of origin as part of a joined-up effort;
- And the need to ensure refugees have access to quality information in order to make informed decisions.

## Perspectives From Stakeholders and Refugee Youth in Turkey

**Maissam Nimer, Assistant Professor  
Istanbul University**

This presentation synthesises two pieces of research which were undertaken for the Responsible Deal project. The first researched the experiences of refugee youth in Turkey and was led by Koç University, the second investigated stakeholder perceptions of the Turkey-EU migration deal and was led by the American University of Beirut. Together they involved the following methodologies:

- In-depth interviews with 16 stakeholders working on migration in Turkey, with a range of different institutional positions (state and non-state; national NGO and international NGO);
- In depth biographical interviews with 100 Syrian youth across 5 different cities in Turkey, complemented with a survey of 500 individuals.
- Participant observations in youth organisations and gathering spaces.

So, the overall approach was a mixed-method and 'multipronged' one.

Across the board we found considerable uncertainty regarding the future of the Syrian refugee population in Turkey. There was a sense (as recounted explicitly in one interview from a Turkish state actor) of a general lack of planning for a long-term Syrian population. However, as time passed the Syrian population has adapted and this has, itself, created a 'new reality' for policy-makers.

While a clear majority of interview subjects expected the Syrian population to become a lasting feature of Turkish society, they observed a mismatch between this realism and the political debate on return. This uncertainty also finds an echo in the perspectives of Syrian youth. Naturally aware of the debate taking place over their status in the country, many still wanted to remain, while others were realistic about the environment that awaited in Europe if they attempted to make the crossing. One interviewee said that while there was a group of Syrians that saw Europe as a 'salvation', they were realistic, seeking a transit to Europe was a means to receive a proper ID and some assistance to establish a new life, but nothing more than that. Another interviewee talked about continuing their studies in Turkey, hoping to progress to a PhD eventually.

While voluntary repatriation often seems to be the international community's de facto 'durable solution', research illustrates the tendency on the micro, i.e., individual, level for the desire to return to reduce overtime. As individuals put down greater roots within a society, they are less likely to countenance a potentially dangerous return to Syria. After gaining work and learning the Turkish language, there is less incentive for individuals to move back to their homeland. At the same time, uncertainty about the situation and the public debate in Turkey makes it difficult for Syrians to plan for the future.

Among interview subjects, factors that indicate return decisions often focus on everyday life environments; i.e., the security situation, access to electricity and the availability of work. Concerns about the security situation, the activity of armed groups and the availability of weapons came up repeatedly, including in relation to Turkish-controlled Northern Syria.

At the same time, Syrians in Turkey are facing a situation marked by rising societal tensions. There is growing discontent and fading solidarity in host communities. A steep recession, rising unemployment and galloping inflation are making life extremely difficult and igniting xenophobia. The shift in political discourse, from both the Turkish regime and the opposition, has created a fear of reprisals amongst the refugee population. This is a factor in the debate in the younger parts of the refugee population about leaving Turkey.

With regard to the proposal for 'voluntary' repatriation to Turkish-Controlled Northern Syria, the topic was considered highly contentious among stakeholders. Since the research was undertaken this is now being actively pursued by the Turkish government, reflecting an electoral repositioning in advance of forthcoming elections. There was a general reluctance to discuss and more sympathy for the proposal amongst Islamist NGOs aligned with the Turkish regime.

Lastly, in terms of the 500-strong survey of Syrian youth we asked 'if the conditions don't change, where do you think you will go in the future?' Some 72% expressed the belief they would stay in Turkey, 20% said they would move to another country and only 8% said they would return to Syria.

Overall, the interviews demonstrate the dynamism of mobility as an issue, and how perceptions and attitudes change overtime.

## **Internally displaced populations**

**Fouad M. Fouad, Associate Professor of Public Health Practice, American University of Beirut, and Senior Research Fellow, Kings College London**

It is worth considering whether the question at hand is really about refugees in the sense of the international legal definition used by UNHCR of someone that has crossed an international border, or is it about space? My research has focused on a different but closely related topics: internal population displacement.

One consideration here is that the strict definition of a refugee may sometimes be unhelpful if the reality of the lives that we are analysing is more fluid than this suggests. In addition, the circumstances *within* an international border that they encounter may also be more fluid. For example, in relation to healthcare, Syria actually has at least three different health systems in the same society. The internally displaced will encounter different fees and administrations. They face different bureaucracy and it illustrates some of the challenges the internally displaced face.

Internal displacement is a massive problem, which should be receiving more attention than it is currently in academic and policy circles. According to the data from UNHCR, in 2022 the total global displaced population hit the milestone of 100m – more than half of these are internally displaced. Ukraine, Iraq, Afghanistan, Sudan, and South Sudan are the major cases.

## Experiences of integration and UK government policy

### Moaz El Sayed, Rethink Rebuild Society

Rethink Rebuild Society is a Manchester-based charity that works towards improving the lives of refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants, mainly but not limited to Syrians in the UK, helping them become positively established within British society.

In addition to advocacy work, we provide a range of support services including advice on integration matters, organising ESOL classes, and professional seminars and events in order to help tackle issues of joblessness and isolation and to improve the quality of life of Syrian community and refugees. Additionally, we hold cultural events on regular basis to celebrate Syrian arts and culture, deconstructing misconceptions on Syria and Syrians and reconstructing the relationship between Syrians and the British society.

We have been working with Syrian refugees in the UK since the Syrian uprising started in 2011. Following the uprising, thousands of Syrians arrived in the UK. They preferred the UK over other countries for different reasons such as having relatives, being able to communicate in English, and the perception that the UK is tolerant to other cultures, especially Muslims.

Apart from Syrians who were already here in the UK before 2011 and those who came after that mainly to work or to study, Syrians who sought asylum in the UK arrived through 3 routes. The first is arriving in the UK through a visitor or student visa and applying for asylum after their arrival. The second is by smuggling, and the third is through the Resettlement Programme, which is facilitated by UNHCR.

It is widely believed that the socio-economic conditions of Syrian refugees are generally fine regardless of their means of arrival. However, some Syrians, who arrived through the resettlement programme were located in remote or unmixed areas, which led them to feel isolated and unable to integrate with their surroundings.

Apart from the elderly and the severely ill, Syrian refugees generally manage to secure jobs, even some housewives who have older children have started to engage in the job market. Handy men/women find jobs easier than those with degree, who should undergo further training and exams for their degrees to be recognised in the UK, which is both challenging and time-consuming. For example, Syrians who have years of experience in dentistry or pharmacy suffer a lot as they are required to take a lot of exams before they are re-qualified.

As time goes on, people are generally adapting and learning English. They are connecting with their surroundings. But there are still barriers for people, especially those who spend most of their time at home such as the elderly and the unemployed.

As for the Rwanda plan, Rethink Rebuild Society appreciate that the crossings in the channel have

become difficult for the UK government, especially after Brexit. But we express a great concern about the way in which the government is handling this issue. The problem is that there is no mechanism that enables people to seek asylum or a refugee status whilst they are outside the UK.

Therefore, some people are left with no option but to risk their lives to cross the channel and reach the British territories to be able to seek asylum. The only other option left for asylum seekers is through the UN resettlement programme but only a few people are accepted, and the criteria is often ambiguous.

Whilst it is true that the lives of vulnerable individuals are risked at the hands of traffickers every day, UK government rhetoric does not help and suggests that the Rwandan plan will not be implemented with any compassion.

The emphasis on stopping "illegal entry" is particularly worrying as this implies connotations that an individual may be deemed less worthy of asylum based on their route into the UK. Individuals do not make the decision to endanger their lives without significant fear of persecution or danger. They should be given the opportunity to select a county that ensures their safety and wellbeing and enables them to reunite with relatives and friends. This is an essential step for the rebuilding of their lives.

It is also necessary to remind ourselves that whilst building a humane asylum system in the UK is important, it is equally important to preserve the rights of individuals to be safe in their own countries. We call on the UK government and decision makers to play their role in ending the conflicts in war-torn countries like Syria in a fair manner, and help communities work to get rid of authoritarian and corrupt leaderships.

## **Surveying Migration and Immobility in the Context of Conflict**

**Lucinda Platt, Professor of Social Policy and Sociology, Head of Department of Social Policy, LSE**

*This research is being undertaken in collaboration with Tymofii Brik, Rector of Kyiv School of Economics*

The research is at an early stage and is based on the first wave of a three-wave survey of Ukrainians, between the ages of 18 to 60s using a mobile app developed by an organisation called Gradus. The first wave was conducted on 26<sup>th</sup> April and there will be a second (July) and third wave (August/September) with the same panel of respondents.

The aim of the survey is to capture early moves, reasons for moving or not moving, access to the resources for doing so and why movers went where they went. Rather than addressing the question retrospectively, the survey seeks to address reasons for moving or staying prospectively. In addition, the survey aims to shed light on the networks that frame destination choices. It is a c.30-question survey. The initial sample, from which this sub-survey of 1000 respondents was drawn is representative of respondents from large urban conurbations. The urban conurbations selected cover different parts of the country, with different experiences of the war. The specific sample has been weighted to be representative of the overall population. The aim of the research was to capture moves and rationale, not experiences of the war and trauma.

Among the respondents to this survey, the vast majority were still in Ukraine (88%), with some in

Poland (6%) and some elsewhere (6%). 3% were planning to move outside Ukraine. 31% had moved since the start of the war, i.e., were either internally displaced or had moved outside of Ukraine. Among movers there was considerable uncertainty among how long they expected to stay. 14% said 'more than a week but less than a month', 19% said '1 to 3 months', but some 51% said 'don't know'. Among the non-movers, 9% were planning to move, 68% were not planning to move and 26% had already moved and returned.

There is considerable economic precarity among both movers and stayers. See table:

		With your current income do you have enough to live off?			
		Yes	Yes, but only for a short time	No	Can't say
Stayers	21.1	35.8	36.2	6.9	
Movers	11.7	47.4	34.0	6.5	

So, we can see there is a high degree of uncertainty and a high degree economic precarity in the Ukrainian population. The survey also revealed a sense of optimism and belief in the future of Ukraine. 67% of stayers and 61% of movers agreed with the statement that Ukraine's 'best years are ahead of it'. When asked about their own future, this fell to 50% (stayers) and 44% (movers).

It will be interesting to see the extent this shifts overtime in waves 2 and 3.

## Local Polish Responses to the Russian War on Ukraine

**Karolina Czerska-Shaw, Assistant Professor  
Jagiellonian University**

Presentation offers an 'initial map' of the civil society responses to the migration challenge in Poland over the last four months, drawing on personal experience of involvement in civic activism and establishing points of connection and analysis to the broader political context.

Prior to 24<sup>th</sup> February 2022, i.e., the start of the war, Poland had *by Polish standards* an existing migration wave. The migrant population at the start of the war was only 2%. However, this was a relatively new migrant population. Since 2016, Poland has been a net migrant recipient country and not a net emigration country. In fact, in the last five years Poland has been the top EU country for the issuing of temporary work permits.

A large part of this migrant wave was made up of Ukrainians – many of whom were fleeing the war in the East of the country following the 2014 Russian invasion. However, for legal purposes they were not considered refugees but were simply issued with work permits by the government. This foreign-born population tended to be young, well-educated and concentrated in big cities. Many Ukrainians come to Poland as students, too, and if they can demonstrate Polish ancestry they can study on the same terms as Polish students. All this activity takes place against a backdrop of an expansive Polish economy with many sectors experiencing growth. There are now also migrant associations – and a broader pro migrant civic space, in which Ukrainians are playing a leading role.

So, although the big political picture has been dominated by the story of illiberalisation, rule of law

crisis, democratic backsliding and so on, at the bottom-up, civic and local government levels there is an alternative process occurring based on supporting diversity and integration initiatives.

Overall, this was the broader context in Ukraine on February 24<sup>th</sup> 2022. The start of the war gave this existing civil society space a huge new mass audience and level of participation. Ukrainian NGOS in Poland came to the forefront of this civic response. What I call 'freelancers', individual volunteers organising collectively, became the first responders to the migrant wave. There was a flourishing of 'volunteerism', above all, the private hosting of Ukrainian families, but also neighbourhood support groups, train-station 'sandwich bearers', and activity amongst the schooling and business communities. As there was little in the way of a national crisis-response from the Polish government, there were inevitably tensions between this civic and local government activity and the Polish state.

The wider geopolitical and identity-based dynamics create a situation that was ripe for mass solidarity. There was – and is – a very clear victim/perpetrator narrative. There are also longstanding and deeply embedded historical and cultural ties between Ukraine and Poland. Many felt a collective imperative to help in this context. And while the civic activist response to the crisis on the Polish-Belarus border in 2021 was strong, it was not able to tap into any mass supportive sentiment (which instead tended to strongly align with the position of the Polish government).

Nonetheless, there are clearly faultlines, and points of tension, ahead. There remains an absence of joined up coordination between local, regional and national levels – with little sense of a coordinated plan for the future. In addition, big international aid players are entering Poland with considerable resources, creating competition between civic actors. There is a danger of aid and war fatigue, rising concerns about the economy (especially in relation to inflation) and pressure on the education system. Taken together, this all creates an environment conducive to xenophobic sentiment, and will pose a challenge for the mass civic movement. The question is whether the current progressive dynamic can be sustained, and whether the Ukraine refugee response can shift broader public narratives around migration in the direction of solidarity and internationalism.





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