



The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

NRC Lebanon Field Assessment
Part Two: North, Bekaa and South.

NRC Lebanon
March 2014

The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon

NRC Lebanon Field Assessment – North, Bekaa, South

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Humanitarian Aid and Civil Protection



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Cover photograph: NRC/Ingrid Prestetun. Picture of an Informal Settlement in Central Bekaa, Lebanon.

Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC)

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent, international, humanitarian non-governmental organisation which provides assistance, protection and contributes to durable solutions for refugees and internally displaced people worldwide.

NRC Lebanon

NRC has been working in Lebanon since 2006, and has grown significantly since the start of the Syrian crisis. Through its core activities of Shelter, ICLA and Education, NRC provides humanitarian assistance and protection to refugees from Syria, host communities, as well as to the Palestinian and Iraqi refugees already living in the country.

Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance (ICLA) programme, Lebanon

In March 2012, NRC commenced its ICLA programme in Lebanon to provide information, counselling and legal assistance to refugees and displaced persons in Lebanon. Currently, ICLA has two main areas of work: (1) the Palestinian refugee response; and (2) the Syrian response.

ICLA activities throughout Lebanon include awareness-raising, legal information, legal counselling, referrals to other service providers, training, legal research and strengthening the provision of legal aid by working with lawyers, jurists and law students.

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1. Executive Summary

According to Lebanese national law, without the required entry or stay documentation to be in Lebanon, refugees from Syria are considered to be 'illegally'¹ present, giving them limited legal status in Lebanon. Having such limited legal status in Lebanon often has negative consequences on their ability to access their rights to protection and assistance during their displacement.

In December 2013, NRC launched a report entitled '*The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: NRC Field Assessment in Aarsal and Wadi Khaled*' (Part One)² based on the findings of an assessment that NRC conducted between June and November 2013. While Part One focused on two specific locations with high numbers of refugees with limited legal status: Wadi Khaled and Aarsal, it was deemed important to conduct a second assessment (Part Two) in order to identify and better understand the situation for refugees from Syria with limited legal status in other parts of Lebanon. Part Two was conducted in the additional following locations: the North, the Bekaa, and the South. The new locations also feature sizeable populations of refugees from Syria and are within NRC's areas of operations. The presentation of these findings aims to provide a broader geographical overview and a more comprehensive understanding of key challenges faced by refugees with limited legal status in Lebanon, and offers insights into some differences encountered in the various locations.

Throughout 2014, NRC will continue to monitor the challenges that refugees from Syria with limited legal status face, in order to better understand their evolving situation and to seek ways to strengthen their access to protection and assistance. It is recommended that this report (Part Two) is read in conjunction with Part One.

A. Key Findings

i. Limited Legal Status in Lebanon

Over half of the 1,256 Syrian refugees interviewed are in a situation of limited legal status. Almost one third of those interviewed by NRC stated that they could not renew their residency visa³, and in 85% of these cases it was due to the high cost. A minority (11%) reported that in order to renew their expired legal stay documentation (or residency visa), without having to pay the annual renewal fee of USD200, they had returned to Syria and then re-entered into Lebanon, taking dangerous security risks.

¹ Throughout the report any term related to 'legality' refers to the position under Lebanese law and not necessarily international law. Under Lebanese legislation, the term used is 'illegal'.

² 'The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon: NRC Field Assessment in Aarsal and Wadi Khaled', NRC Lebanon, December 2013. Weblink: <https://www.nrc.no/?did=9687067>

³ 'Simat Alikamah' in Arabic.

Almost a third of those interviewed, reported that even though they did have identity documentation when fleeing from Syria, due to security considerations, they had not entered Lebanon through an official border crossing.

ii. Consequences of Limited Legal Status

More than 73% of all (1,256) refugees interviewed reported that freedom of movement was the main challenge that refugees with limited legal status face and, as a result, they did not move out of the area where they lived. Fear of crossing checkpoints was prevalent, especially in locations where there has been an increase in *ad hoc* official checkpoints, such as in Tyre and Tripoli. Another key challenge reported due to the lack of movement for refugees with limited legal status was access to services, particularly healthcare.

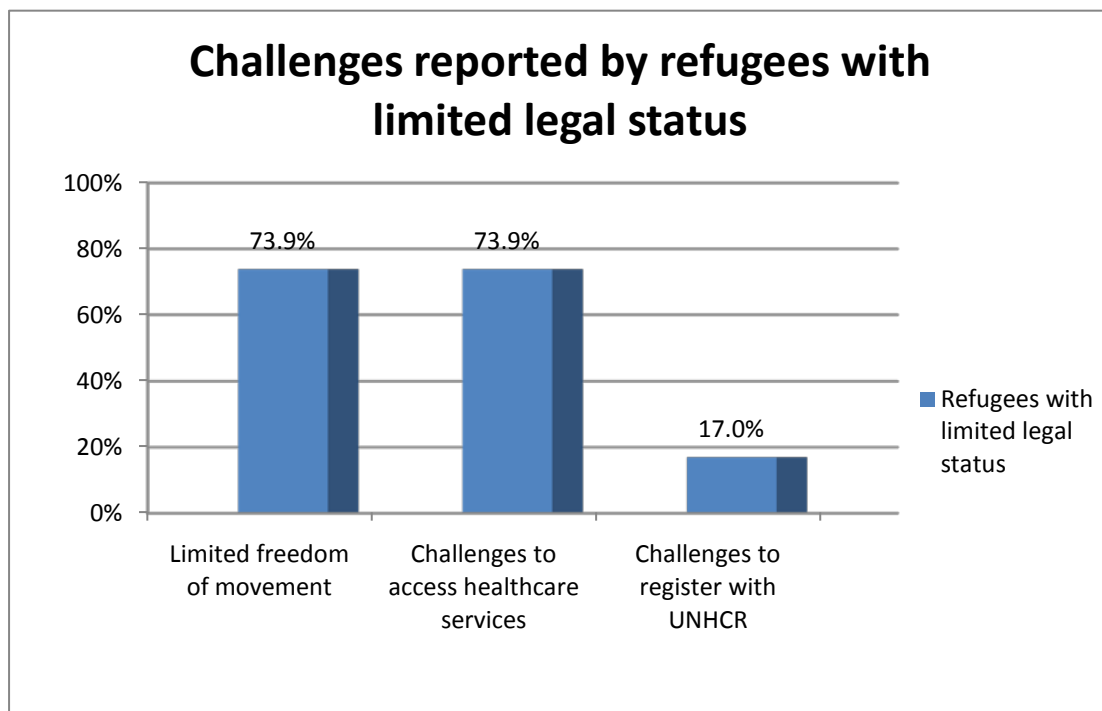


Figure 1: Main challenges for refugees with limited legal status per area: the percentage of 218 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status (39 in the Bekaa, 175 in the North and 4 in the South). See section 6A.

2. Recommendations

The following recommendations are informed by a combination of the findings of this assessment and NRC's previous assessment (Part One)⁴ on the same issue, NRC's ongoing field experiences as well as the on the ground experience and analysis of other operational humanitarian protection actors.

⁴ The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon', NRC Field assessment Aarsal and Wadi Khaled, NRC Lebanon, December 2013. Weblink: <https://www.nrc.no/?did=9687067>

A. To the Government of Lebanon

The Lebanese Government should develop a **comprehensive refugee policy grounded in refugee rights and clear and appropriate administrative procedures for refugees from Syria in Lebanon**. While some positive steps have been taken towards extending legal stay for Syrians in Lebanon, the General Security Office in particular could issue a circular regarding the specific situation of refugees from Syria. Refugees in Lebanon should not be considered as illegally present or irregular migrants. More specifically:

- A clear procedure is needed so refugees who have entered through unofficial border crossings can regularise⁵ their stay through accessing the Lebanese authorities. Currently, these refugees can apply for a petition of mercy (*Talab Istirham* in Arabic) to legalise their stay, but the petition is not regulated by law and is subject to the discretion of the General Security Office.
- The fee for regularisation of stay for such refugees from Syria should be waived. Currently, if the petition of mercy is approved, each refugee has to pay a fine of LBP950,000 or USD633 per person, aged 15 years' old and above.
- The annual fee for the renewal of stay for refugees from Syria should be waived. Currently, the fee is LBP300,000 or USD200 per person, aged 15 years' old and above.
- The UNHCR registration document⁶ should be regarded as valid documentation to provide proof of legal stay and proof of identity in Lebanon for refugees from Syria.
- More flexibility is needed in accepting alternative documentation from refugees who may not have a Syrian ID card or a Syrian passport, such as the UNHCR registration document or Lebanese municipality-issued documents, in order for their stay in Lebanon to be considered 'legal' under Lebanese law and in order for them to register the births of their children in Lebanon, as well as marriages.

B. To Local Authorities and Other Local Actors (including Mukhtars)

Until the above regulations and procedures are in place, local Lebanese authorities and other relevant local actors should recognise - and have more flexibility on - the documents provided by refugees from Syria in order for them to be able to access all necessary basic services⁷ and move freely. More specifically:

- The UNHCR registration document should be considered as proof of identity in order to cross checkpoints and approach the police if necessary.
- Local health service providers and hospitals should waive the need for legal stay documentation from refugees. They should accept the UNHCR registration document to issue birth notification documents⁸.

⁵ Obtain a valid residency visa.

⁶ The UNHCR registration document is issued regardless of the possession of proof of legal stay.

⁷ Some basic services in some areas can be accessed without requiring a valid residency visa.

⁸ While this system is supposed to be in place, the assessment found that in practice, many health service providers are still asking for legal stay or ID documentation from refugees.

C. International Donors to Lebanon

International donors should **advocate** to the Lebanese government and **provide adequate capacity** support so that:

- The Government of Lebanon establishes a **comprehensive refugee policy grounded in refugee rights** to uphold the rights of all refugees, including those with limited legal status. Refugees in Lebanon should not be considered as illegal or irregular migrants.
- The Government of Lebanon establishes clear and **appropriate administrative procedures** which uphold the rights of all refugees in Lebanon.
- A system is established so that refugees from Syria should not have to regularise their stay in Lebanon as though they are illegal or irregular migrants.

D. To Humanitarian Actors, including UNHCR

Humanitarian actors should support the Lebanese authorities to establish a **comprehensive refugee policy grounded in refugee rights** and **appropriate administrative procedures** for refugees (including Palestinian refugees from Syria⁹). This should ensure that refugees with limited legal status can enjoy the following rights: freedom of movement, access to justice and access to all necessary services which enable refugees to meet their basic needs and rights.

Practically, this should prioritise the **acceptance of alternative documentation** as proof of legal stay and identification by the Lebanese authorities, such as the UNHCR registration document.

Together with other humanitarian actors, UNHCR should strengthen its **monitoring and analysis** on specific priority issues affecting refugee rights. This can also be done through consistent protection monitoring. The priorities should be:

- Data collection and trend analysis on violations of refugee rights at checkpoints. This should be used for advocacy with the Government of Lebanon on refugee movement restrictions. Part of the humanitarian protection response could be to increase humanitarian presence at the most problematic checkpoints with the aim of deterring violations against refugees.
- Data collection and trend analysis on refugee registration rates (identifying the reasons why some refugees are not trying to register with UNHCR), arrest and detention (duration and reasons) and any type of deportation measures. Recently initiated and ongoing protection monitoring efforts on these topics should continue, be harmonised amongst all protection actors and be strengthened.
- Systematised feedback, including through the Protection Working Group (at national and field levels), to the humanitarian community and especially protection sector actors on

⁹ Although documenting the consequences of limited legal status for Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) was outside of the scope of this assessment, from NRC ICLA's fieldwork, PRS face many of the same consequences as Syrian refugees. NRC ICLA will continue to monitor and understand this situation more in the course of its fieldwork to ensure that the consequences of limited legal status for all refugees from Syria is better understood and addressed.

UNHCR advocacy efforts towards the Government of Lebanon to strengthen refugee policies and practices. If progress is not being made, then alternative advocacy strategies should be explored. International non-governmental organisations (INGOs) should play a stronger role, which can be complementary to UNHCR advocacy efforts. More systematic negotiation and mediation with stakeholders at sub-regional and national level is required.

Humanitarian actors including UNHCR should strengthen their **information and services** outreach to refugees. This includes:

- UNHCR should continue and expand the helpline system where refugees can report protection threats and challenges. Such reports would need to be followed up with a response.
- Humanitarian actors should prioritise addressing gaps in basic services where refugee movement restrictions are more severe. Since it is easier for refugees with legal stay to access services as their movements are less restricted, more efforts should be made to ensure that basic services are accessible to all refugees from Syria based on humanitarian need (needs-based) and not based on their legal documentation status (documentation-based).
- Humanitarian actors should increase the provision of mobile services to places where serious movement restrictions for refugees exist based on contextual 'Do No Harm' analysis. Such mobile services should, when necessary, prioritise UNHCR refugee registration including appointments and verification exercise for the renewal of the registration document¹⁰, food assistance, NFI distributions and health services, including secondary healthcare. Mobile humanitarian services in such areas should also target refugees who have not registered with UNHCR. Such efforts to cover populations who are not registered with UNHCR could be coupled with sensitisation efforts on UNHCR registration.

3. Methodology of the Assessment

A. Research Methods, Target Group and Scope

For the assessment, NRC interviewed 1,256 Syrian refugees in November and December 2013 in the following locations: Minieh, Donniyeh, Wadi Khaled, and Tripoli in the North; Central, North and West Bekaa and Tyre in the South.

Based on the objectives of the assessment, NRC identified individuals from three sub-groups (1) Syrian refugees who have entered

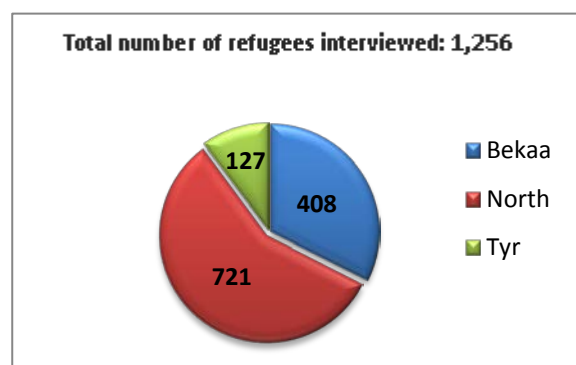


Figure 2: Breakdown of locations of 1, 256 refugees interviewed for this assessment.

¹⁰ More UNHCR mobile registration, such as the ones carried out recently in Wadi Khaled should be considered.

Lebanon through unofficial border crossings and do not possess any identity documents; (2) Syrian refugees who have entered through unofficial border crossings but have identity documents; or (3) Syrian refugees who entered Lebanon through official border crossings but have not renewed their Lebanese residency visa once it has expired.

The assessment employed a mixed research methodological approach, collecting both quantitative and qualitative data through several primary data collection tools including:

- **Quantitative:** individual interviews using a short, anonymous questionnaire with closed questions also used for the identification of candidates for in-depth interviews on their personal experience and experience of their close relatives; mixed groups discussions in order to collect perceptions on the general situation, using a short, anonymous questionnaire with closed questions; and
- **Qualitative:** ten individual, in-depth interviews, three in each area, lasting for about one hour and using open questions to gather confidential information about interviewees' personal experiences; five focus groups with affected refugees and key informant interviews.

The mixed and focus group discussions provided an overview of the main trends while the in-depth interviews provided a nuanced understanding of the issues being explored.

A total of 1,256 Syrian refugees participated in the assessment through the individual interviews and group discussions: 417 people participated in short, individual interviews (using closed questions) conducted at NRC's Community Centres and 839 people participated in 75 mixed group discussions which took place in informal settlements and collective shelters.

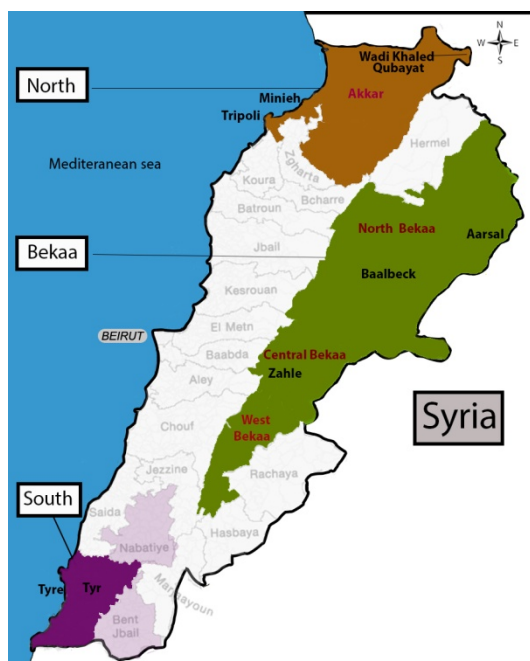


Figure 2: geographic scope of the assessment: North, South and Bekaa.

The 417 refugees from Syria who were interviewed individually had approached NRC for information and counselling services. Of these, 10 who had faced significant challenges due to their limited legal status participated in one hour in-depth individual interviews. An additional five focus groups composed of people with limited legal status (either with expired legal stay or without legal stay documentation) were organised with individuals of a similar gender and from the same location.

In addition to interviews with refugees, 14 key informant interviews were conducted in the North, Bekaa and the South, including five with Mukhtars, two with government hospital staff, two with medical INGO actors, four with UNHCR protection staff and two with INGO protection actors.

The assessment was conducted by NRC/ICLA staff. Consent was sought from all participants and it was clarified to them that their willingness to participate in the assessment would not impact on their access to NRC services. Specific measures were taken to ensure

the confidentiality of the interviews and safety of the interviewees, as well as to obtain their free and informed consent in relation to the purpose, expected use and methodology of the assessment. 990 interviewees were anonymous and 266 people were asked to share their contact information. However 92 of these (36%) did not feel comfortable to have their names recorded by NRC, which was interpreted as an indicator of the sensitivity of this topic for refugees from Syria.

B. Limitations

The geographic scope of the assessment and the number of interviews conducted was reduced due to the following unforeseen circumstances: In November 2013, a mass influx of refugees into Aarsal meant that NRC's emergency response activities took precedence over the assessment work in this area so as a result only one focus group discussion was carried out in Aarsal. Harsh weather conditions in early December 2013 limited NRC's access and restricted refugee movements, especially in the North and the Bekaa, which resulted in a reduced number of planned interviews being conducted in these areas (15 fewer group discussions and 60 fewer individual interviews).

Lastly, in some locations there were challenges in ensuring the privacy of interviews and the confidentiality of data. Consequently, the assessment was not conducted as had been originally planned in the areas of Nabatieh and Bint Jbeil (South Lebanon). This led to a significantly smaller sample size from the South which meant that it could not be compared with the datasets from the other locations.

4. Legal Status of Syrian Refugees

In order to cross from Syria to Lebanon through official borders, at the official Lebanese checkpoints, Syrians need to have official identification documents, either a passport or a personal Syrian ID card. The majority of refugees interviewed (66%) as part of this assessment reported having entered Lebanon through official borders and possessing identity documentation¹¹. However, almost one third of the

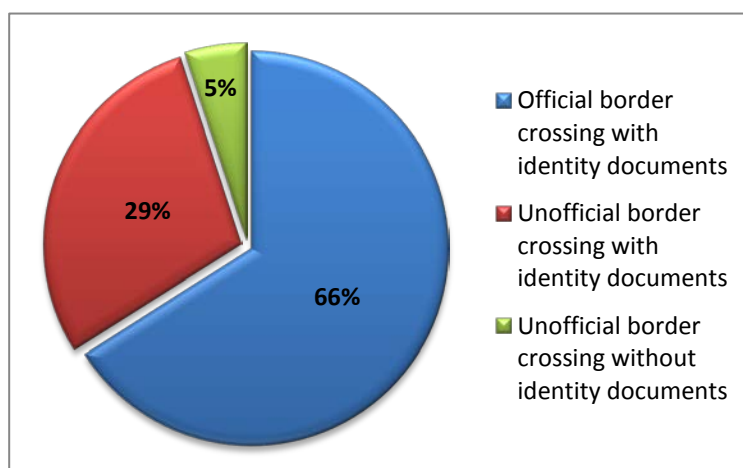


Figure 3: Method of entry into Lebanon and availability of identity documentation: the percentage of 417 individually interviewed refugees.

¹¹ According to UNHCR's registration database, 88% of registered Syrian refugees enter Lebanon through official border crossing points. DRC newcomers assessment conducted in Lebanon in November and December 2013 indicates that 66% and

interviewees (29%) reported not being able to enter officially despite being in possession of identity documentation and 5% reported not being in possession of any identity documents and having entered Lebanon through unofficial border crossings.

The 29% who reported not being able to enter through official borders despite having the required documents gave the following as the main reasons:

- **Personal Safety:** the violent and chaotic situation in Syria forced them to flee through the safest (unofficial) border crossings.
- **Fear of Military Conscription:** attempts to avoid military service conscription for men aged 18 years and above, who were at risk of being arrested at the official Syrian border checkpoints.
- **Fear of arrest:** the fear of being arrested at the Syrian border based on personal profile, including alleged or real political affiliation, name, or place of origin.

A. Renewal of legal stay documentation

Syrians, including refugees, who enter into Lebanon through an official border crossing¹² can be granted an entry coupon free of charge for an initial six-month stay in Lebanon. This coupon can then be renewed after six months for free and then after 12 months for LBP300,000 or USD200 per person (fifteen years' old and above).¹³ In recognition of the challenges to go back to Syria because of the conflict and an effort on the part of the Lebanese Government to facilitate legal stay for Syrians, the General Security Office revised procedures to allow for the in-country renewal of the coupon.¹⁴ This extends the legal stay without having to return to Syria and re-enter into Lebanon. Prior to this revision of procedures, Syrians had to leave the country after 12 months and, if re-entering Lebanon again, would get a new free entry coupon for six months.

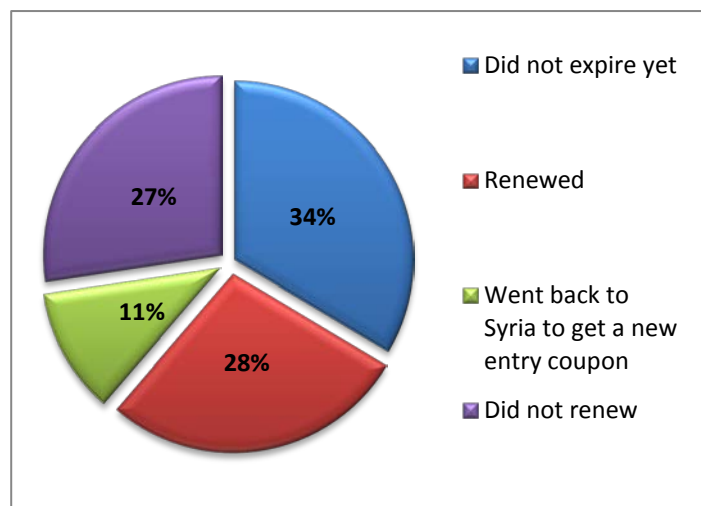


Figure 4: **Renewal of legal stay documentation: the percentage of 274 individually interviewed refugees who entered officially.**

61%, respectively, of the households assessed during these months entered Lebanon through official crossing points. This divergence between the different figures may be explained by the difference in the sample size as well as in the geographical coverage.

¹² The official borders are land, water and aerial borders. Land borders: AlMasnaa, Alboqayaa, Alqaeh, Alareeda, Alaboudieh, AlNaqoura. All these land borders are with Syria except AlNaqoura which is on the southern border. Water borders: Beirut, Jounieh, Tripoli, Aljeh, Alzahrani, Sidon, Tyre Ports. Aerial borders: Rafic Al Hariri International Airport.

¹³ For more information about legal status for refugees in Lebanon, please see Annex, NRC Brochure on the Legal Status of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.

¹⁴ See the circular issued by the General Security Office on 3 June 2013, available at http://www.general-security.gov.lb/news_det.aspx?d=75

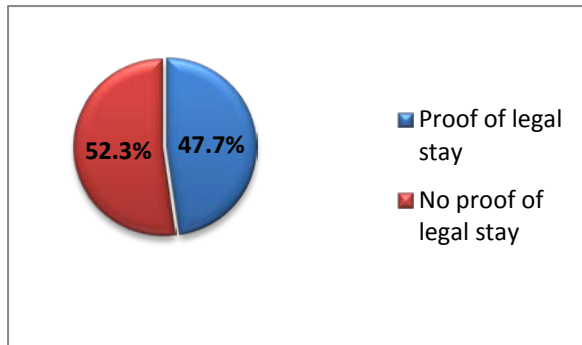


Figure 5: Legal status of refugees: percentage of 417 individually interviewed refugees with or without legal stay.

Of the 274 interviewed refugees who had legal stay when they entered Lebanon, 92 people (34%) still had legal stay at the time of the interview because it had not yet expired; 76 people (28%) had been able to renew their entry coupon by paying the fee; 31 people (11%) reported having gone back to Syria in order to obtain a new free coupon upon re-entry into Lebanon; and 75 people (27%) reported that they had not been able to renew their legal stay and had therefore lost their legal status in Lebanon. Of these, 85% (64 out of 75) cited the cost of renewal as the

major inhibiting factor. So, even though they had had legal status for their first year in Lebanon, they could not afford to renew it when it expired.

All 31 people (11%) who went back to Syria in order to officially re-enter Lebanon reported that they had been able to re-enter and had successfully obtained a new entry coupon. While this coping mechanism has been adopted by some refugees, it is extremely dangerous. A minority of refugees adopting this coping mechanism is consistent with the findings in Part One of the assessment¹⁵.

Over half of the individually interviewed refugees (52.3% of 417 people) did not have proof of legal stay. The remaining 47.7% included those whose legal stay had not expired at the time of the interview, those who renewed their legal stay by paying the renewal fee, and those who went back to Syria and re-entered Lebanon officially.

5. Legal Stay Renewal Fees for Syrian Refugees

Of the 75 interviewees who did not renew their legal stay documentation once it expired, 85% reported that they failed to do so because they could not afford the cost. On the whole, the earning capacity of many refugees in Lebanon is low while the cost of living is high, and consequently many cannot afford to cover their basic needs. When making difficult choices about spending limited funds, refugee families are not likely to prioritise the renewal of legal stay documentation over other basic needs which are critical to survival.

From NRC ICLA fieldwork in the Bekaa, NRC has also noticed that, due to limited funds, many families prioritise the renewal of the residency visa for the main income-earner in the family, often a male member of the household. This often leaves the other members of the family without legal stay documentation and subject to the consequences outlined in this report. NRC ICLA will continue to monitor this coping mechanism and what consequences it may have on the lives of Syrian refugees.

¹⁵ 'The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon', NRC Field assessment Aarsal and Wadi Khaled, NRC Lebanon, December 2013. Weblink: <https://www.nrc.no/?did=9687067>, p.27.

Table 1- Opportunity cost of paying the fee to renew legal stay for families deciding whether to renew residency visa documentation.

The average family earns USD250 per month which they need to cover a range of household needs¹⁶. The table below captures a selection of competing priorities for household expenditure, and gives an indication of what households consider when deciding whether they can afford to renew their residency visas.

Renewal of residency visa documentation (2 adults for one year)	Rent	Self-Built Shelter ¹⁷	Food	Fuel	Birth	Monthly Minimum Expenditure Basket (MEB) ¹⁸
USD 400	Equal to 4 months of rent for one room in an unfinished building	Equal to material for 1 low standard shelter in an informal settlement	Equal to Food for 1½ months	Equal to Heating for 4 months	Equal to 1 non-caesarean birth in hospital	Equal to 55% of MEB

6. Challenges faced by Syrian Refugees with Limited Legal Status in Lebanon

In Part One¹⁹ of the NRC assessment, conducted in Wadi Khaled and Aarsal, refugees reported several challenges linked to their legal status, in particular: freedom of movement, access to healthcare services and access to UNHCR registration. It emerged in this assessment that these three issues remain the key challenges for refugees with limited legal status in all locations where this assessment took place.

In Wadi Khaled and Aarsal freedom of movement continued to be the biggest challenge that refugees with limited legal status reported. In Tripoli and Baalbek, it was reported that it had become more difficult to move since an increase in checkpoints following the deterioration of the security situation in these areas. It emerged from the group discussions that the general perception among refugees was that those among them with limited legal status face more challenges in terms of freedom of movement, access to healthcare and access to UNHCR registration. All of the 218 refugees with limited legal status who were individually interviewed reported that they personally faced all three above-mentioned challenges as a result of their limited legal status.

¹⁶ The revenue from labour and food expenses are based on an Oxfam survey on the livelihoods of Syrians in Lebanon: <http://www.oxfam.org/sites/www.oxfam.org/files/rr-bric-livelihoods-syrian-refugees-lebanon-211113-en.pdf>

¹⁷ These are the shelters typically found in informal settlements and built by refugees themselves.

¹⁸ Minimum expenditure basket: average minimum amount of money a Syrian refugee family living in Lebanon needs to survive.

¹⁹ 'The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon', NRC Lebanon Field assessment Aarsal and Wadi Khaled, NRC Lebanon, December 2013. Weblink: <https://www.nrc.no/?did=9687067>.

The two biggest challenges that 218 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status reported were restrictions on their freedom of movement (74%) and challenges accessing healthcare services (74%). The third biggest challenge reported (17%) was in accessing UNHCR registration.

A. Restrictions on Freedom of Movement

Out of the 218 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status, 74% reported fear of movement as being a key challenge, stating that they did not feel that they could move beyond their immediate surroundings. This can have a detrimental impact on refugees, including their ability to access employment, income and services. In the North, 79% of 175 refugees with limited legal status interviewed reported fear of movement. In the Bekaa 54% of the 39 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status reported restrictions on their freedom of movement. (see figure 1 - Main challenges for refugees with limited legal status).

*In the **North**, 138 refugees reported having no freedom of movement: 93% of these said it was due to official checkpoints.*

*In the **Bekaa**, 21 refugees reported no freedom of movement: 67% of these said it was due to official checkpoints.*

*In the **South**, 2 refugees reported no freedom of movement and both of them said it was due to official checkpoints.*

i. Fear of crossing official checkpoints

Of the refugees that reported no freedom of movement due to their limited legal status, 89% reported fear of mistreatment or arrest at checkpoints, citing personal experiences²⁰. In the North, the overwhelming majority (93%) of these refugees (128 of 138) reported fear crossing checkpoints. This could in part be due to an increase in ad hoc and temporary official checkpoints mainly in El Bireh and Halba regions (in the North) following the August 2013 bombing incident in Tripoli.

In the Bekaa, 67% of 39 refugees with limited legal status also reported that their fear of moving was due to checkpoints. In the South, the percentage of refugees reporting fear of crossing checkpoints was very high, however the sample size was small (4 people with limited legal status and 21 with legal status), due to limitations explained in the methodology section above. In general, it is believed that most refugees who settled in the South did have proof of legal stay when they first arrived there. Those who now have limited legal status are in this situation either because they entered through unofficial borders, or more frequently because they could not renew their legal stay documentation. Those with limited legal status

“We heard that fourteen passengers who were returning to Aarsal in a van were stopped at a checkpoint. They were mistreated and only two who had proof of legal stay were allowed to continue to Aarsal. They said they didn’t know what happened to the others. Since that incident, refugees feel they don’t have any freedom of movement.”

Community Focal Point in Aarsal (focus group participant).

²⁰ When references are made to checkpoints in this report it is always official checkpoints, manned by Lebanese government authorities.

reported fear of being stopped at checkpoints and arrested. While this sample size was small and may not be representative, it nevertheless reflects the experiences of a number of refugees in an area where there are often ad hoc, official checkpoints.

ii. Fear of kidnapping and fear of violent attack

Beyond the fear of crossing checkpoints, the second biggest reason given for restrictions on freedom of movement for all interviewed refugees (including those with legal status) was the exposure to the risk of kidnapping or violence by armed groups or members of the host community.

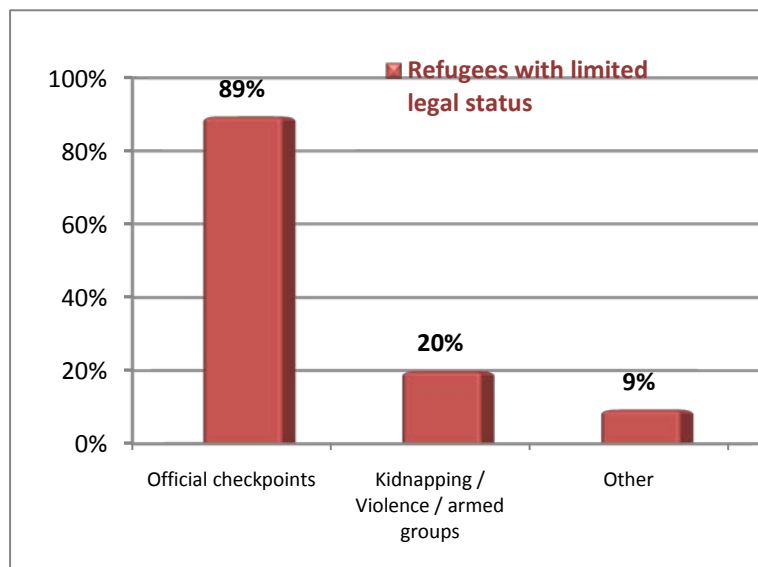


Figure 6: Reasons for fear of movement based on personal experience as reported by 161 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status.

20% of 161 refugees interviewed reported that they had personally been a victim of such violence. Such incidents reportedly tend to occur in locations where there is a sizeable and visibly concentrated population of refugees such as in big informal settlements; where there are tensions between refugee and host communities or between populations from different religious backgrounds, regardless of whether they are Lebanese citizens or refugees.

iii. Incidents at checkpoints

Although, as discussed above, the majority of refugees with limited legal status reported fear of arrest and detention at checkpoints, only a minority of interviewed refugees with limited legal status reported actually having been arrested or detained at checkpoints, due to their limited legal status. Key informant interviews also confirmed that, although there was an increase during the second part of 2013, the overall detention rate remains low, when considered against the number of refugees present in the country with limited legal status.

The general perception of many refugees who were interviewed, based on what they had heard from others, was that - in the absence of proof of legal stay - there was a high risk of arrest, detention, deportation to Syria, or of having their identification documents confiscated or damaged at checkpoints.

The highest figures of incidents at checkpoints were reported in Wadi Khaled where out of 87 refugees with limited legal status who were individually interviewed, 30% reported having been turned back at the Chadra checkpoint, 10% reported having been threatened or mistreated and 13% reported having been arrested or detained. In the rest of the locations where the assessment took place, out of the 141 refugees with limited legal status who were individually interviewed, only 4% reported being turned back at checkpoints, 3% being mistreated and 2% being arrested.

The higher figures for Wadi Khaled, in comparison to those from the other assessment areas, could be explained by the prevailing insecurity in Wadi Kaled as well as the need for many to cross the checkpoint in order to access services and work opportunities. As was reported in Part One²¹ this generalised fear of crossing the Chadra checkpoint to leave Wadi Khaled in order to access services is an obstacle to refugees' freedom of movement with consequences as strong as physical obstacles. Stories and rumours of people being threatened, mistreated and deported at the checkpoint continue to be widespread.

Some refugees with limited legal status reported that after several attempts they had only succeeded in crossing the checkpoint once and had been threatened that they would not be allowed back into Wadi Khaled. Several people reported that it was easier for women to cross than men and that treatment could vary significantly depending on the officers on duty.

While detention at checkpoints was perceived as a risk which mainly men with limited legal status were exposed to, there were a few cases of children (mostly between 15 and 18 years old) and women being arrested for crossing through unofficial borders. Such cases were confirmed for the Tripoli area by key informants. When refugees with limited legal status are released from detention, they often have their documents confiscated until they can regularise their stay by renewing their entry coupon or applying for (and if successful, obtaining) a residency visa in case of unofficial entry. In most cases refugees cannot afford the legal stay fees and so they risk being arrested again.

In Aarsal²², refugee community focal points in informal settlements told NRC that those with limited legal status were facing many challenges. In particular they reported that it was very difficult for men to cross the Labwa checkpoint in North Bekaa in order to move in and out of Aarsal. A commonly cited concern was the fear of refugees having to leave Aarsal in order to go to Zahle to register with UNHCR²³.

B. Legal Challenges

Many Syrian refugees with limited legal status reported that they do not approach the police to report crimes or incidents due to the fear of being arrested. Several similar cases have been reported to other humanitarian organisations in the North and in the Bekaa. As a result, access to justice for Syrian refugees with limited legal status is compromised which in turn limits their ability to seek redress and leaves them more exposed to exploitation, abuse and violence.

"I lost my seven year old and went to the police to help me look for her. They arrested me for six days because I had no proof of legal stay and did not look for my daughter-she is still missing."

Ali, 35 years old, Aarsal.

²¹ "The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon", NRC Field assessment Aarsal and Wadi Khaled, NRC Lebanon, December 2013", page 18-19.. Weblink: <https://www.nrc.no/?did=9687067>, p.19

²² The sudden influx of 20,000 refugees into Aarsal in November 2013 drastically increased the number of refugees with limited legal status, as the vast majority crossed through Aarsal unofficial borders.

²³ UNHCR reports having registered 30,000 out of the estimated 52,000 refugees in Aarsal, with an additional 2,689 waiting to be registered, as of the third week of March 2014.

C. Challenges Accessing Assistance and Services

i. Access to healthcare services

In Part One of the assessment, it emerged that access to healthcare was among the top three challenges for refugees with limited legal status. This assessment's findings confirm this, especially for refugees in the North, but also for those living in the Bekaa and in the South. Out of 218 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status, 62% reported that the biggest challenge to accessing healthcare services was the fear of movement, 55% reported that it was the cost of the service, 22% the cost of moving and 8% the lack of legal documentation.

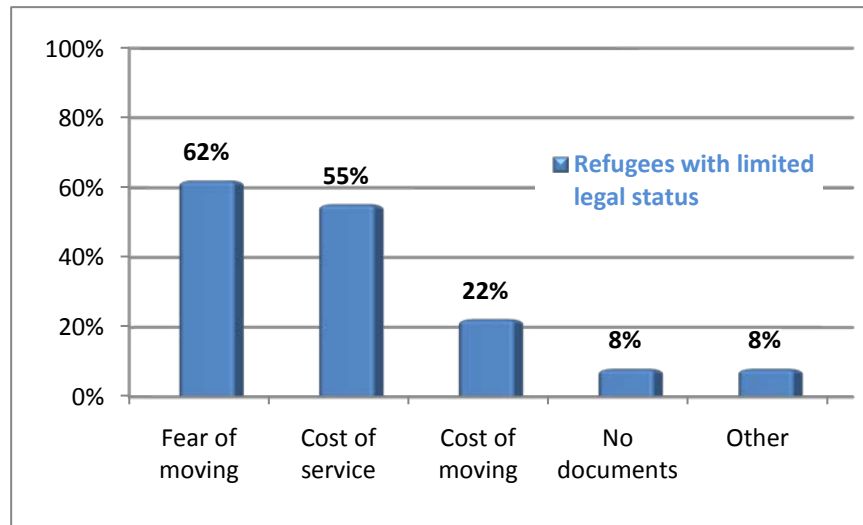


Figure 7: Type of challenges in accessing healthcare for refugees with limited legal status: Percentage of 218 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status.

1. Challenges accessing healthcare services due to fear of crossing checkpoints

Refugees with limited legal status reported having limited physical access to hospitals and healthcare centres due to the presence of checkpoints.

For example, in Akkar in the North, hospitals are few and their services are limited. Many patients need to be transferred to the Tripoli public hospital, which requires crossing an official checkpoint. Almost 70% of 137 individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status in the North stated that this was the reason they could not access healthcare – as they were afraid of being arrested at the checkpoint. Similarly, in the Bekaa, 20% of 20 people reported a lack of accessing healthcare services due to a fear of crossing checkpoints, while in the South it was one 1 of 4.

“I live with my son and the rest of my family in Central Bekaa. He has no entry coupon since we entered Lebanon unofficially. He got sick so we took him to the nearest hospital where we paid USD50 for the consultation. For the medical tests we paid USD350 which were covered by a Lebanese friend. We were not able to seek medical healthcare elsewhere because we feared our son could be arrested at checkpoints on our way.”

[The family now has to pay back the loan on a monthly basis.]

Hassan, 55 years old – Saadnayel, Bekaa

Consequently, many refugees with limited legal status are often confined to pharmacies or to doctors and hospitals that charge them amounts they cannot afford instead of being able to access the hospitals and medical clinics where healthcare services are partially or completely covered by humanitarian actors.

2. Challenges accessing healthcare services due to lack of legal documentation

Refugees may be asked to show proof of legal (identity) documentation, such as a Syrian ID card or passport, in order to benefit from medical services. While refugees registered with UNHCR should be able to access medical services at a partially subsidised cost, most primary healthcare centres require legal documentation. This is kept by the centre until the refugee can repay the remaining cost for the medical service (beyond the subsidised part). Out of the 21 interviewees without legal documentation (see figure 3), 4 who were in the North had problems accessing medical services even though 2 of the 4 were registered with UNHCR. Some interviewees reported that in order to access healthcare, undocumented refugees were using fake Syrian or Lebanese IDs which could lead to criminal sanctions. This trend was also reported in Part One of the assessment, particularly in the North, with serious implications for pregnant women and for subsequent attempts to access legal proof of identity of the newborn²⁴. However, some humanitarian health actors do offer primary healthcare services to refugees, regardless of their legal status and without requiring legal documentation which partially helps to address the limited access to services described above.

“It’s very difficult to leave Wadi Khaled because of the Checkpoint. So it’s hard for me to reach the UNHCR office in Tripoli.”
Fatima M, Wadi Khaled

3. Challenges in accessing healthcare services due to lack of UNHCR registration

A certain number of health services, in particular secondary healthcare, are partially subsidised (up to 75%) but only for refugees who are registered with UNHCR. Those who are not registered with UNHCR are required to pay the full cost for such services. As an alternative, refugees reported seeking assistance from religious or political parties to help them cover their medical expenses.

ii. Challenges links to non-food items and food assistance

Since the autumn of 2013, targeted assistance for food and non-food items has been implemented by the UN and its partners across Lebanon, so certain types of assistance are limited to refugees who are considered to be in most need. Some refugees that were excluded from such humanitarian assistance reported that they will need to find ways to compensate for that loss by going outside the area they live in to seek employment or assistance from elsewhere. They expressed their worry that moving increases their exposure to arrest and detention, due to their limited legal status.

Key informants also raised concerns regarding families with limited legal status who were initially excluded from the targeted assistance because the head of the family was able to work and to provide for the family, but whose situation has since changed due to increased movement restrictions and risk of arrest in relation to their limited legal status, and, therefore, no longer has an income.

iii. Access to education

Even though children with limited legal status²⁵ are generally not asked for documentation at checkpoints or by the police, they still suffer from its consequences. Some refugee parents with limited legal status reported that they were hiding, minimising movements and

²⁴ ‘The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon’, NRC Field assessment Aarsal and Wadi Khaled, NRC Lebanon, December 2013, page 28. Weblink: <https://www.nrc.no/?did=9687067>

²⁵ Children under 15 years old are considered to be ‘illegally present’ in Lebanon if they do not have a residency visa.

sometimes unable to find jobs, which has consequences on their children, including their access to education through enrolment at school. Parents in this situation cannot accompany their children to school, primarily because they cannot afford the transportation and are too afraid to cross checkpoints. Second, when parents have limited work opportunities due to their limited freedom of movement often children will join the labour market to raise the family income.

iv. Access to UNHCR registration

Most refugees were aware of the importance of registering with UNHCR, which can provide them with access to protection, health care as well as food and non food items through targeted distribution. 83% of the individually interviewed refugees with limited legal status were able to register with UNHCR, though 17% reported that they were not, or not yet, registered. 60% of the unregistered reported that they were planning to register and either had an appointment or intended to request one. The rest reported not being able to do so for several reasons with 38% stating that it was due to fear of movement, including fear of arrest at official checkpoints or by armed groups while trying to reach the UNHCR registration centres.

While legal stay is not a requirement for UNHCR registration, accessing the UNHCR registration centres in Zahle and Tripoli was reported to be a challenge for those with limited legal status who feared crossing checkpoints. Some refugees reported that while they had proof of legal stay when they first approached UNHCR for registration, it had since expired and they had not been able to renew it. Refugees who were initially able to move freely to register with UNHCR in the first instance now may be unable to move and access UNHCR registration sites in order to renew their registration certificate.

D. Exposure to abuse and exploitation

Interviewed refugees with limited legal status highlighted another challenge that they face in their daily life: exposure to abuse and exploitation.

Refugees with limited legal status reported experiencing exploitation when it came to renting apartments, tents or seeking other forms of shelter. Reportedly, landlords rented their properties to refugees with limited legal status without a tenancy agreement and evicted them when they got a tenant that would pay more. In other cases, neighbours reportedly harassed refugees by cutting off the water supply from their flats or attacking them in their tents at night. In such cases refugees reported the extreme vulnerability they face and the particular exposure to exploitation as they were unable to defend themselves or seek redress through the police since they would risk being arrested.

“The neighbours threatened to destroy my son’s ID card. They know that it is a weak point for us refugees.”

Ali H, 19 years old, Minieh.

Refugees also frequently reported exploitation in the workplace such as men, women and even children with limited legal status receiving extremely low pay²⁶ or not being paid at all and working for long hours. Some reported being physically mistreated.

Exploitation due to limited legal status was mentioned by refugees as a reason for not wanting their legal status to be discussed in a group, as they feared that within the refugee community itself some could take advantage of those who had limited legal status.

E. Coping mechanisms

In order to address the multiple challenges that refugees face due to their limited legal status, they often adopt coping mechanism, some of which can lead to exposure to new risks. As in Part One²⁷, the main coping mechanisms identified in this assessment are as follows:

- returning back to Syria in order to try to re-enter through an official border crossing and get an entry coupon;
- paying high prices for obtaining identity documentation from Syria;
- paying for fake documentation; or
- using other people's documents.

This report highlights that refugees avoid checkpoints by using alternative roads or by paying for higher transportation costs. Some refugees also reported obtaining some forms of documentation issued by municipalities and Lebanese Mukhtars to replace identity documentation for undocumented refugees; though it was reported that this documentation was generally not useful, in particular to cross check-points. Also, as mentioned above, a number of refugees have reported to the NRC ICLA field teams in the Bekaa (not as part of this assessment) that they prioritise the renewal of the residency visa for the main income-earner in the family, often a male member of the household, leaving other members of the family without legal stay documentation.

In addition to the above, two new coping mechanisms were identified in this assessment:

During the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, some women with limited legal status reported that their husbands preferred to send them to receive assistance because they were afraid of being arrested at checkpoints. This was particularly the case in areas where it is known that men with limited legal status were more at risk of arrest. Women also reported that on the way to, and at, the distribution sites they were verbally harassed and threatened with sexual assault in return for assistance. Due to their limited legal status, they did not report this harassment to the police for fear of being arrested²⁸.

Another coping mechanism was identified during this assessment was in families with limited legal status where parents who feared being arrested if they moved would send their

²⁶ As low as LBP10,000 or USD7 per day.

²⁷ 'The Consequences of Limited Legal Status for Syrian Refugees in Lebanon', NRC assessment Aarsal and Wadi Khaled, NRC Lebanon, December 2013, page 27. Weblink: <https://www.nrc.no/?did=9687067>

²⁸ Human Rights Watch also reported that women do not report incidents to local authorities for several reasons including not having a valid residency visa <http://www.hrw.org/news/2013/11/26/lebanon-women-refugees-syria-harassed-exploited>

children to work instead of them, since they were less likely to be arrested. As a consequence, the children could not attend school and were likely exposed to abuse and exploitation.

7. Conclusion

As the Syrian conflict enters its fourth year, hundreds of thousands²⁹ of Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in a situation of limited legal status, as they are considered to be 'illegally present' in the country. With the cost of renewing legal stay disproportionately high and the high number of refugees continuing to enter through unofficial border crossings, this number looks set to continue increasing. This assessment found that many are in this situation because – in an attempt to safely flee Syria - they did not manage to enter Lebanon through an official border crossing. Many others who did manage to enter Lebanon through an official border crossing, and therefore did initially have legal stay in Lebanon, now find themselves in a situation of limited legal status because their legal stay documentation has expired and they cannot afford to renew it. Some who cannot afford the renewal fees have decided to take the risk of returning to Syria and re-enter Lebanon in order to obtain valid legal stay documentation. Others pay for fake documentation or use other people's identity documentation. Even the hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees in Lebanon who currently do have legal stay are at risk of limited legal status if they cannot renew it once it expires.

Being in a situation of limited legal status has direct negative consequences on Syrian refugees' access to protection and assistance during their stay in Lebanon. This second assessment confirmed findings of NRC's 2013 Part One assessment including the following three main consequences of limited legal status for Syrian refugees: 1) no freedom of movement, 2) restrictions on access to healthcare services, and 3) challenges registering with UNHCR. Fear of crossing checkpoints without proof of legal stay emerged as the main reason that refugees restrict their movements to the confines of where they live, or go to often expensive lengths to avoid crossing them. For those with limited legal status, the main challenge in accessing healthcare was fear of crossing checkpoints, whereas for refugees with legal stay documentation, the cost of the service featured as a much bigger obstacle to accessing healthcare services.

Limited legal status also opens refugees up to increased risks of abuse and exploitation, decreasing their ability to seek redress and access justice. In addition, coping mechanisms adopted by refugees to deal with their situation of limited legal status exposes them to new risks and increases their vulnerability. The newly identified coping mechanisms included children working instead of parents who have no freedom of movement and women increasing their movements while men - who were more likely to be arrested – decrease their movements. While this is done so the family can access assistance, it also exposes women to risks of sexual harassment and exploitation.

²⁹ According to UNHCR recent planning figures, it is estimated that by the end of 2014 over 800,000 Syrian refugees will be in a situation of limited legal status in Lebanon.

Consequently, for Syrian refugees in Lebanon many serious problems emerge as a consequence of having limited legal status. As the numbers of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is likely to increase and those who are already here are likely to stay for longer than was anticipated, the need to resolve the legal status challenges for refugees is urgent.

Annex: Brochure on the Legal Status of Syrian Refugees

Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance Programme, Lebanon



How to enter Lebanon?

Any entry into or exit from Lebanon should be done through the official posts of the General Security Office (GSO). When entering Lebanon through one of the official posts of the GSO, Syrian refugees will automatically receive an "Entry Card" ("Bitakat dukhul") from the GSO without prior authorisation, which includes the entry stamp to Lebanon and acts as a residency visa valid for six months from the date of entry. Syrian refugee children get their own "Entry Card" free of charge or are included on the "Entry Card" of their parents.

Syrian refugees who did not enter through an official GSO post can apply for a petition for mercy ("Talab Istirham") to legalise their stay. Please contact ICLA lawyers for more information about the procedure.

- one statement confirming residence from the relevant *Mokhtar* closest to the place of residence (some GSOs only) and
- registration number from the municipality (some GSOs only).

Fees?

A fee of 300,000 LBP is required for every Syrian refugee above the age of 15 years when the stay exceeds one year. Another fee is required when the stay exceeds two years.



Renewal fees for Syrian refugees		
Status and number of renewals	Duration of months	Fee
Residency visa	0-6	No
1 st renewal	7-12	No
2 nd renewal	13-18	Yes, 300,000 LBP
3 rd renewal	19-24	No
4 th renewal	25-30	Yes, 300,000 LBP
5 th renewal	31-36	No

How to renew a visa in Lebanon?

The residency visa for Syrian refugees, issued automatically and valid for six months, can be renewed for another six months. Syrian refugees then have to renew their residency visa every six months, and, if renewed in time, can stay a total of three years in Lebanon without having to return to Syria.¹

Where and when?

The renewal application can be submitted at any GSO regional office located within the applicant's area of residence. The application for renewal can be filed up until the last day of the valid residency visa.

What should I bring with me?

Syrian refugees must present

- three photographs,
- three copies of their ID or passport,
- three copies of the Lebanese "Entry Card" that they received from the Lebanese GSO upon entering the country,
- three copies of the Syrian "Return Coupon", a card provided by the Syrian authorities when they exited Syria,²

¹ There are also other residency visa, e.g. for work another visa is required.
² The copies of the ID or passport, "Entry Card" and "Return Coupon" have to appear on the same page.

Who is the NRC?

The Norwegian Refugee Council (NRC) is an independent, international humanitarian non-governmental organisation which provides assistance and protection to refugees and internally displaced persons in over twenty countries worldwide. NRC has been working in Lebanon since 2006. In early March 2012, NRC commenced its Information, Counselling and Legal Assistance ICLA (ICLA) programme in Lebanon, with a focus on assisting refugees and displaced persons to understand and enjoy their rights. **All NRC services are free of charge.**

Contact us:

For legal assistance or more information on NRC's legal activities in Lebanon, please contact from Monday to Friday, 09:00 to 17:00 h NRC

North Bekaa Hotline	76000613
Central Bekaa Hotline	76000614
North Hotline	76700525
South Hotline	70-951978
Beirut and Mount Lebanon Hotline	76-666950

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