



## **Refugee and Demographic Change: Syrian Refugee in Lebanon and the Rise of the New Conflict**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to examine the influx of Syrian refugee flow and how it affects the population and shapes the demographic changes in Lebanon. Over the years, the demographic balance in Lebanon was determined by the sectarian balance which managed through its confessional proportional political system. The massive exodus of a Syrian refugee in Lebanon has changed the country's demographic composition in which the majority of Syrian refugee comes from Moslem Sunni. Thus, it challenges the other groups of Christian Maronite, Moslem Shia, and Druze that fears for the loss of their predominance in Lebanon. This paper argues that the presence of Syrian refugee has challenged the sectarian balance in Lebanon. This unbalanced condition has further endangered Lebanon security and exacerbated its stability and placed both refugees and Lebanese into severe violent conflict. Thus, the condition further challenges the human security aspect for both disputed parties.

*Keywords: Refugee, Demography, Lebanon, Syrian, Conflict, Ethnic*



## **Introduction**

The escalation of the prolonged Syrian conflict has led to the massive wave of displacement that overwhelms several countries in the Middle East, including Lebanon. A large number of refugees in Lebanon further influenced the population growth and demographic structure in the country. Since the Syrian conflict erupted in 2011, Lebanon became the second largest country in the Middle East after Turkey, which accepted Syrian refugees. Bordering directly with Syria, the influx of refugees to Lebanon has exacerbated the country's condition whereas long has been experienced with the prolonged civil war (Weaver, 2017).

Discussing the issue of a Syrian refugee in Lebanon is very interesting to study in depth. The fact that up to this day, the stability and security of Lebanon depend on demographic balance based on ethnic, religious proportions. The confessional government system has long been implemented to maintain stability over fragmented ethnoreligious groups. The presence of Syrians as the Sunni majority challenged the other sectarian groups in Lebanon such as Shiite, Maronite Christian, and Druze. While the sectarian balance becomes disturbed, the protracted Syrian refugee has turned Lebanon into a verge of security and socioeconomic problems. The purpose of this study was to examine and analyze how the presence of Syrian refugee in Lebanon, contributes to the changing of demographic balance in the country. This paper will then answer the linkages between the demographic changes in triggering the emergence of the new conflict in Lebanon.

## **Demographic Changes and the New Conflicts Nexus**

The issues related to population growth and demographic changes, as well as its relation to the emergence of new conflict, cannot be separated from the views expressed by the Neo-Malthusian. The groups suggested that uncontrolled



population growth is susceptible to the emergence of conflicts caused by the struggles over food resources and environmental damage (Urdal, 2005). However, the opinion related to this was challenged when the fact that, many conflicts occur not because of the scarcity of resources but because of limited access to these resources. Since then, the linkage between population growth and demographic changes, have gained massive attention from various academic circles especially on how it has an impact on the emergence of the new conflict.

After the cold war period, concern over the relationships between population growth and the emergence of new conflict increased significantly when intra-state conflict, begin dominating the dynamics of international conflict. Intra-state conflicts generally result from massive numbers of forced migration which fled from the prolonged conflict. During this time, many have seen displaced people as a victim of crimes of violent conflict. However, as the pattern of forced migration to host-countries countries developed rapidly, many latent conflicts were emerging within the host country, and this was linked to the present a large number of refugees in the country. According to Champion, (1994, p. 653) this pattern of migration is sufficient to have a significant impact on changes in the number, composition, and distribution of populations in both home and host country.

Salehyan (2006) is among those who see how international migration in general and migration of refugees in particular, inflict to security consequences between and within countries. In this case, the massive influx of refugees is not only seen as victims of violent conflict, but also a group that contributes to producing the conflict in host-states. Salehyan (2008) in another source mentioned several factors on how the entry of large numbers of refugees, was seen as a security threat to the host country.

First, refugees are considered as those who can bring up rebels, new militants and ideologies from their home countries, and this assumed to facilitate the emergence of conflicts between refugees and local communities. Secondly, refugees can be parties who participate in opposing the domestic government in the host country, especially when the opposition and the majority of refugees have



the same ethnic background and political views. Third, large numbers of refugees contribute to the change the sectarian balance in the host country, especially when the stability of a particular country depends heavily on the ethnic balance. Fourth and last, refugees can be a source of new conflicts related to economic balance. When the condition of the recipient country is unstable and has limited natural resources, then the struggle between refugees and residents regarding employment, access to food and water resources, housing, land and so on is seen as a threat to the national security of the host country.

From the four factors above, this paper will focus on looking at the aspects of demographic change caused by the presence of refugee, and how this could potentially lead to the new conflicts in the host country. If we look at the four factors mentioned by Salehyan above, the ethnic and economic balance was the most significant factor in generating new conflicts in the host country. This is because demographic changes have an impact on changing the sectarian balance and economy of the country.

Besides the economic issue, the presence of refugee in one country is believed to exacerbate the security condition (Nichiporuk, 2000, p. 36). This is because the pattern of forced migration is more significant in raising security threats directly, compared to migration carried out purely for economic reasons (irregular migration) (Nichiporuk, 2000, p. 35). Some of the factors mentioned by Nickiporuk are first; refugees burdened the recipient's infrastructure and natural resources. This has an impact on economic problems and the effectiveness of the use of resources. Secondly, groups of refugees who have affiliations with minority groups in the border areas of the host country can threaten the emergence of separatist groups. Third, the presence of refugees in areas with the minimal local population is feared to be an area which entirely controlled by a refugee, that is feared to minimize the role of local communities. Fourth, the presence of refugees could change the order of ethnic balance in the host country. Fifth, refugees are feared to bring the impact of conflict from their home country to the host country, so that it can trigger a new source of conflict.



In this case, in line with Salehyan, Krcmaric (Krcmaric, 2014, p. 190) reveals how the influx of refugees in a country can affect the demographic balance which influences changes in ethnic balance that has been formed. This condition is very vulnerable in creating potential conflicts between refugees and local communities. According to him, this potential conflict will subside only when refugees have returned to their home countries. However, the fact is, in many cases, the return of refugees to the country of origin is tough to do and requires a long duration. Prolonged refugee conditions (protracted refugee) are very vulnerable and have the potential to produce prolonged potential conflicts.

Furthermore, Goldstone (2002) revealed several prepositions related to the linkage between population growth and demographic changes and how it could potentially create the rise of new conflict. According to Goldston (2002), the potential for conflict in host-country mostly occurs when the large-scale waves of migration have significantly changed the demographic condition. He pointed out that, refugees in particular host-country, represents a particular ethnic group that may be different from the ethnic majority existed in the host country. This certainly has an impact on the existing ethnic balance, so that confrontation between ethnic groups becomes unavoidable.

In this case, when conflicts between refugees and residents occur, security threats between both parties are unavoidable. Refugees will continue to be pressured, discriminated against, marginalized and even exploited by local communities when they perceived refugees as an existential threat to Lebanese national security.

### **Demographic Change in Lebanon**

Since the Syrian conflict erupted in 2011, it has resulted in millions of displaced, which has spread into its neighboring countries. Bordering directly with Syria, Lebanon has become the second largest country in the Middle East after Turkey that received Syrian refugees. This proximity factor has triggered the entry of large numbers of a Syrian refugee in Lebanon (Weaver, 2017). Up to 2018, there are more than 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Among these numbers,



only 991,917 were registered by UNHCR, while the remainder was said to be illegal considering they could not fulfill the required documents (UNHCR, 2017). If we look at Lebanon's total population that reach 4 million, with the addition of 1.5 million numbers of refugees, it has turned Lebanon to be the country with the highest concentration per capita of refugee in the world. That is, 1 in 5 people in Lebanon are refugees, and out of every 1,000 Lebanese, 173 of them are refugees. This considerable number has been further contributing to the changes in demographic order in Lebanon (McCarthy, 2017).

The fact above evidently shows how the exodus of Syrian refugees to Lebanon caused population growth and changed the recent demographic condition. In the case of Lebanon, demographic changes become vital to study because it significantly affects Lebanon's security, political and economic stability. It is due to Lebanon adoption to a particular rule known as confessionalism (Nordström, 2017, p. 31). As part of the consociational form of the government system, confessionalism refers to the regulation over the division of power between various sects within a country. That is, the seat of government is arranged based on the demographic distribution of ethnoreligious groups in Lebanon (Dekmejian, 1978). Based on Lebanese 1943 constitution, demographic conditions showed that Maronite Christians dominated 54 percent of the population, followed by 44 percent Muslims and the other 2 percent consisted of other ethnic groups. Furthermore, the constitution mentioned that the Lebanese President should come from Maronite Christian, the vice-president originated from Shiite Muslims, and the prime minister comes from Sunni Muslims (Khouri, 2017a).

The power-sharing system that represents the demographics of each ethnoreligious groups was carried out to create sectarian balance, in order to avoid the cleavage caused by sectarian strife. This shows how demographic balance based on sectarianism played an important role since it significantly affects the country's stability and security (Guerrero Turbay, 2015, p. 35). However, the current conditions indicate that the demographic balance begins to change as the Syrian refugees enter Lebanon. With 95 percent of the majority of Syrian refugees



coming from Sunni, the present condition has changed the ethnic balance whereas Sunni dominates the population that encompasses 54 percent of Lebanon's total population (Guerrero Turbay, 2015, p. 24).

The dominance of Sunni Muslims in the Lebanese sectarian balance has challenged the Maronite Christians and Shiite Muslims that feel threatened by the imbalanced demographic order. Sunni dominance considered damaging the confessionals system that has been implemented for decades. However, in the midst of debates over Sunni dominance, the confessionals system has changed since the early 1950s. It is when Lebanon was overwhelmed by the exodus of Palestinian refugees caused by the Arab-Israeli War in 1948. Since then, the demographic balance based on ethnicity has changed. The Maronite and Shiite which has been used to dominate the ethnoreligious group in Lebanon show the resentment over Sunni dominance. The historical background of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon becomes a factor which determines Lebanon's attitudes and policies towards Syrian refugees in the present day.

### **Refugee and the Potential of New Conflict**

According to Schopfer (2015), the religious identity of each group in Lebanon poses more domination rather than national identity. Thus, this makes Lebanese society to be divided based on sectarian bases where the division reinforces the existence of fragmentation of the country's political culture (Schopfer, 2015, p. 29). This is not only influencing the economic and social condition further but also increasing the sectarian tension that long has been fractured (Schopfer, 2015, p. 35). Moreover, Lebanon witnessed and has been confronted by various civil war since 1975, 1989 and until the present day. The conflict that occurred in the past was mostly caused by the destruction of sectarian balances that had been formed through 1932 consensus (Dekmejian, 1978).

Lebanon has implemented more restrictive refugee policy compared to neighboring host-countries, such as Jordan and Turkey. When, for instance, Jordan and Turkey have built an official refugee camp for Syrian refugees, Lebanon prohibited the establishment of the official camps for refugees. As a



result, many have lived in the midst of Lebanese society while the others pay rents for housing or establish an informal camp (Favier, 2016). Up to this day, Lebanon implemented “Policy of No Policy” or policy without policy towards Syrian refugees (Rainey, 2015). Since 2014, Lebanon applied an immigration system that makes it difficult for Syrian to obtain legal status as refugees. This limitation has encumbered refugees to step into the Lebanon labor market. Furthermore, they are often used as scapegoats for various economic and social problems experienced by Lebanon (Ayoub, 2017; Daily Star, 2016). In this case, the issue of refugees has been securitized by government elites who feel disadvantaged with the presence of refugees that has been accused of the changing demographic proportion (Khouri, 2017).

Since the enactment of the ‘closed door policy’ in 2014, the Lebanese political elite, whose majority comes from Christian and Shiite, have conducted securitization through political discourse whereas they perceived Syrian refugees as a threat to the stability of national security. As president Michel Suleiman stated that the exodus of Syrian refugees was called as “existential crisis”. However, the perception changed in 2014 when the government could not handle the influx of Syrians and how it significantly changed demographic balance. The shifting of Lebanese policy further impacted on the changing perception of the Lebanese people about refugees. Initially, the Lebanese people showed their sympathetic attitude towards refugees, but this perception changed afterward when refugees were considered as burdens and dependents that burdened Lebanon. That then led to a perception by the community that refugees were the source of high rates of unemployment, rising food prices, electricity and crime rates (Dionigi, 2016, p. 20).

The issue of sectarian balance is also inseparable from the role of Hezbollah, the Shiite militant organization which has been helping Bashar Al-Assad government in Syria. Sunni majority refugees confront new challenge for Hezbollah, which has been feared that in the days ahead, the Sunni’s refugees will build what is called as a state within a state. It is when the refugees integrated themselves into the Lebanese system and reluctant to return to their country of





origin. This can be assumed that refugees used bargaining power in suppressing Hezbollah, to stop supporting the Assad regime (Middle East Institute, 2013).

The protracted refugee issue has then moved beyond sectarian balance in creating new conflicts. The issue now penetrated other areas such as economic and social affairs. Lebanon's GDP growth has declined where previously it increased by 10 percent in 2010 to only 1 percent in 2014, and it applied the same in 2015 which only increased by 2 percent. Currently, one in five people in Lebanon is unemployed, with unemployment rising to 34 percent and the highest peak at 50 percent during 2011. This is also compounded by the fact that one of three young people in Lebanon is finding it difficult to find jobs in the informal sector, which contributes to 56 percent of the national employment sector (Cherri, Arcos González, & Castro Delgado, 2016).

Besides, the perception of refugees as a threat is seen from how refugees are referred to as 'time bombs'. They were perceived as a threat of terrorism because the refugee camps were referred to as the source of the birth of militants who embraced extremism that can explode at any time and it is said to threaten Lebanon's national security (Daily Star, 2016).

Concerns about the emergence of new conflicts in Lebanon then can be understood given the fact that the issues of ethnic balance motivated the histories of Lebanon civil war. According to Zeid (2014), the potential of the emergence of the new conflict cannot be separated with the concern of the Lebanese government to severe past events that happened to Palestinian refugees. The Palestinian refugee camp was made safe for the armed factions and militant groups to become involved in the civil war in Lebanon in support of factions that were in accordance with their ethnicity and sect. This event was the cause which later made the Lebanese government reluctant to establish an official camp for Syrian refugees. Despite the facts, non-encampment policies are also no better especially since the central government is found it challenging to control refugees spread across various regions in Lebanon.

Henceforward, refugees are perceived as a threat to stability and security in Lebanon. The perception of refugees as a security threat cannot be separated



from the statement expressed by the Lebanese political elite. There are seven political parties in Lebanon, each of which has dissimilar sectarian ideologies, which are Kataeb (Christian), Future Movement (Sunni), Lebanese Forces (Christian), Progressive Socialist Party (Druze), Free Patriotic Movement (Christian), Hezbollah (Shiite) and Amal Movement (Shiite). The findings conducted by Atallah and Mahdi (Atallah and Mahdi, 2018, pp. 16–17) uncover that it was the rhetoric of the majority party in Lebanon that actualize a common sentiment and presumption so that refugees perceived as a burden on the economy and infrastructure, and thus exceeding Lebanon's capacity to accommodate them.

Because of these conditions, the potential for latent conflict between refugees and local communities is unavoidable. As research conducted by Christoffersen and Cathrine related to the perception of the society over the emergence of new for conflict shows that seven out of ten people in Lebanon stated that violent conflict would potentially occur within 12 months. While two out of three said, the unstable ethnoreligious balance could bring Lebanon back in the history of civil war (Christoffersen & Thorleifsson, 2013, p. 56).

These predictions and fears are not without reason, the tension between ethnic religions that occurred in northern Lebanon developed into violent conflict. This was an example of a sectarian conflict that occurred in Lebanon after the eruption of conflict in Syria. The bickering took place between two regions in Tripoli, namely the Al-Tabbaneh region which was a Sunni majority with Jabal Mohsen with predominantly Shiite Alawite. The intensity of the conflict between the two groups was inseparable from the conditions that occur in Syria, as well as the influx of Syrian refugee's majority through northern Lebanon (Christoffersen & Thorleifsson, 2013, p. 56). However, the escalation of tension does not only occur between ethnic Muslims, but also the Christian and Druze communities who feel threatened by the presence of Syrian refugees. They mainly worry about losing dominance in Lebanon's social, political and economic aspects (Schopfer, 2015, p. 35).



## **Conclusion**

The demographic balance based on the balance of religious, ethnic groups in Lebanon is significantly influencing the stability of the country's security. This can be seen from how Lebanon has applied a system of confessionalism so far where the structure of government is represented by the number proportion of each ethnoreligious groups. In this case, the influx of large numbers of Syrian to Lebanon has changed the country's demographic balance. This change was not only increasing the Lebanese population, but also affecting the balance of religious ethnicity in the country. The majority of Syrian refugees, who are Sunni, confront the new challenges to other groups such as Shiite Muslims, Manonite Christians, and Druze. The history of Lebanon has portrayed how prolonged civil war was occurring due to sectarian conflicts because of the imbalance of ethnic proportions. The exodus of refugees to Lebanon has opened up opportunities for the emergences of new conflicts. Thus, it significantly affected the measure taken by the Lebanon government in setting up the restrictive policy towards refugee.



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