

SNAPSHOT OF MIGRATION TO AND FROM LEBANON IN THE LAST FIVE YEARS¹

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December 2024



BACKGROUND

Lebanon has a long history as an immigrant-sending country, with large Lebanese diaspora communities established worldwide. At the same time, it is a receiving country with a substantial labor migrant population. Lebanon is also a refugee-hosting state. Given its large Syrian and Palestinian refugee populations as well as its location, the country is also a point of origin and transit for these communities who have limited options for onwards movement (for example through resettlement with the UNHCR). Migratory movements in and out of Lebanon are affected by Lebanon's compounded crises, and at multiple levels by the spillover of regional (geopolitical) developments and their impact on the social and economic situation in the country—including the Syrian war from 2011 onwards and the more recent war on Gaza and escalation of Israeli aggressions in Lebanon (from October 2023 to date).

MIGRATION TO AND FROM LEBANON

The onset of the financial and economic crisis in 2019 and subsequent crises triggered a mass migration movement of Lebanese, with the total number of reported emigrants from the country between 2018 and 2021 estimated at 195,433.² Among the first to leave Lebanon, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, were those with good socio-economic standing and those with foreign passports, particularly to the Gulf, Europe and the USA. Lebanese also left to non-traditional destinations which provide accessible immigration pathways or

that do not require an entry visa, such as Türkiye and Armenia. Other pathways included pursuing higher education abroad, available work visa programs for high-skilled workers such as the European Blue Card Scheme, and citizenship (or residency permit) by investment programs, such as Golden Visas.

Lebanon is host to 768,353 registered Syrian refugees (as of October 31, 2024; with official estimates closer to 1.5 million), and roughly 11,200 registered refugees and asylum seekers of other nationalities, including Iraqi, Sudanese, & Ethiopian. The country is also host to some 180,000 Palestine refugees from Lebanon, and some 30,000 Palestine refugees from Syria.³ Furthermore, the IOM estimated in July 2024 that there were around 176,504 migrants in Lebanon, of whom approximately half are domestic or live-in workers, arriving under the *Kafala* (or sponsorship) system. In terms of their nationalities, according to the IOM, 38% of migrants were Ethiopian, 21% were Bangladeshi, and 9% were Sudanese, but the country also hosts migrants from other Arab countries and the West.⁴ There is also an unknown number of irregular migrants in the country.

Lebanon has also recorded fluctuating numbers of irregular departures of migrants departing for Europe in the past five years, particularly Cyprus, Greece, and Italy via the eastern and central Mediterranean routes. Most of those onboard intercepted boats were Syrian refugees, followed by Lebanese, and a smaller number of Palestinian refugees. Nevertheless, the share of irregular migrants leaving from Lebanon remains very low, as less than 1% of boats arriving in Europe in 2023 departed from the country.⁵ Notably, the increase in boat movements to Cyprus as a leading destination in 2023 demonstrates a shift in boat movements from Lebanon, which between 2020-2022 were more likely to depart towards Italy via the central Mediterranean route.

1 This brief is based on a country report and migration profile for Lebanon. The full report expands on the sections included here and includes all references and sources consulted. Baroud, M. (2024, December). Country Report: Lebanon. Friedrich Ebert Stiftung, PRIO Cyprus, ELIAMEP, Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs. <https://mena.fes.de/topics/region-al-peace-and-security-project.html> (FriSi)

2 Mendelev, M. (2022). The Lebanese trend of emigration: A new peak since 2019? LAU News.

3 UNHCR. (2024). UNHCR Lebanon at a glance.

4 International Organization for Migration [IOM]. (2024 Aug 21). DTM Lebanon - Baseline assessment round 4. LB: IOM.

5 IOM. (2024). DTM Europe — Mixed Migration Flows to Europe, Yearly Regional Report (January - December 2023). IOM, Vienna.

POLICIES

Despite relying on a large migrant workforce for certain jobs, including domestic work, and work in the agriculture, environment, and construction sectors, Lebanon does not have a comprehensive legal and regulatory framework related to migration. Migration governance is fragmented, while policies and facilitations differ based on the migrant's nationality and work category. The country is also not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol. Migrant workers as well as refugees face difficulties renewing their residency permits, including securing required documents and covering related costs, and without a residency permit are at risk of being arrested, detained, and/or deported. Lack of a residency permit may also restrict their freedom of movement, in turn affecting their access to employment and basic services. Regarding refugees, Lebanon is seen as a temporary country of refuge, and the UNHCR is responsible for supporting refugees (other than Palestinians) with onward movement, including facilitating voluntary returns, resettlement, and complementary pathways.

The EU has been cooperating with Lebanon in several areas since 2004, including on issues related to migration. Return and readmission are agreed upon in the legally binding EU-Lebanon Association Agreement (signed in 2002, and coming into force in 2006). Furthermore, a recent 1.03-billion-euro deal announced in May 2024 includes funding to support Lebanon's security forces with securing the country's borders toward reducing migration attempts to the EU. The current plan fails to address the drivers of migration from Lebanon, and without the necessary reforms and support for long-term solutions to address the country's push factors, it is not likely that these efforts will curb migration. The EU also funds projects directly to support Lebanon in securing its borders, such as projects implemented through Frontex to enhance border security.

SOCIETAL CHALLENGES

Migrants and refugees in Lebanon do not have adequate protection or access to legal services, and are vulnerable to legal, social, and economic challenges. They face several barriers to accessing formal employment, including the cost of the work permit for some nationalities, and required documentation. Foreigners wishing to work in Lebanon must be sponsored by a Lebanese national (a *kafeel*) under the exploitative *Kafala* or sponsorship system and can work within limited sectors only. Furthermore, employment is not guaranteed for refugees. As such, a significant percentage of migrants and refugees work in the informal sector where they are at risk of exploitation, including of unpaid wages and working long hours. Though facilitations to access healthcare and education exist, these are not universally available. Similar barriers to access both exist, including direct and indirect costs. Finally, integration is generally out of the question for migrants (and refugees) who reside and work in Lebanon, while pathways to naturalization are also limited.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Establishing a clear legal and regulatory framework and introducing effective coordination mechanisms across relevant government entities are necessary to ensure that migrant and refugee communities are protected and their rights are respected in line with international human rights principles, including abolishing the exploitative *Kafala* system.
- Adopting a comprehensive strategy to address the root causes of emigration and ensure the rights and protection of migrant and refugee communities is imperative. To this end, efforts should be made to strengthen social and economic development at the local level, including to improve the livelihoods and livelihood opportunities of both host community members and migrants and refugees. Efforts should also be made to ease legal restrictions that hinder the social and economic participation of migrants and refugees.
- Ensuring that continued support from the international community, including the EU and humanitarian actors, is conditional on implementing reforms (financial, economic, and banking), and incorporates proper monitoring and accountability mechanisms is important to minimize corruption and ensure that goals are being met and target communities are actually benefiting. Support must also be conditional on ensuring the protection and rights of refugee and migrant communities.
- Strengthening the available mechanisms for global responsibility sharing and re-assessing current EU policies for managing migration and related partnerships with countries in its Southern Neighborhood are also necessary steps. This is crucial when considering the potential risk of human rights violations linked to current policies and partnerships.

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ISBN: 978-9925-8195-1-5