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Opportunity to change Lebanon's asylum policy

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“Lebanon is not a country of asylum” has been the official Lebanese cry for decades. Lebanon is not a signatory to the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol, and lacks a comprehensive or adequate national refugee legal framework. Refugees and asylum seekers are treated as irregular migrants and are subject to arrest and deportation following prolonged arbitrary detention solely on grounds of lack of legal status. Refugees who do manage to enter Lebanon tend to live in urban areas in private lodgings and only Palestinian refugees live in camps. Non-Palestinian refugees or undocumented Palestinian refugees do not have their refugee status recognised by the Lebanese authorities.

Lebanon's standard justification includes that the country is small and for decades has hosted the largest Palestinian refugee population, who make up around 10% of its total population, and that as such it has taken more than its share of the international community's refugee ‘burden’.

Yet today we see what is being referred to as the ‘Syrian exception’. Syrians have been allowed safe admission, could not be detained for illegal entry and have received assistance and facilitation of assistance including for housing. Nevertheless Syrian refugees continue to be arrested for illegal entry or stay, albeit in very small numbers when

compared with the overall population of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Deportation orders – sometimes solely for the ‘crime’ of illegal entry or stay – are, however, not being implemented and in practice the moratorium on deportation of Syrians appears to have been upheld by the Lebanese authorities.

However, this positive policy towards the Syrian refugees today has shown up shortcomings in the government's management and running of assistance and other protection related issues. It has brought to light the weakness and lack of preparedness of the Lebanese government to handle and manage refugee issues and to elaborate adequate programmes and procedure.

This experience should also raise awareness among Lebanese political decisionmakers and all stakeholders of the urgent need for the elaboration of a clear and consistent asylum policy in Lebanon. It is to be hoped that the attitude towards the ‘Syrian exception’ can be used as the starting point for such a policy to come into line with international refugee and human rights norms, standards and protection.

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UNHCR/M. Hofer

Syrian refugee women wait to register with UNHCR in the town of Arsal, Lebanon, 2013.