

Society

Interview

Lebanon seeking a long-delayed Syrian refugee policy

Samar Kadi

Beirut

They constitute more than one-fourth of the population, their needs are huge and some have been staying in Lebanon for almost six years, putting pressure on the small country's vulnerable infrastructure. However, Syrian refugees will only be repatriated once their safe and voluntary return is assured, whether through the creation of safe zones or a political settlement that would end their country's civil war.

"The Syrian refugee crisis is overwhelming and Lebanon cannot continue dealing with it in an improvised and reactive way, hence the creation of a ministry to deal with this issue," said Lebanese State Minister for Refugee Affairs Mouin Merhebi, who holds the government's newly created portfolio.

Merhebi said the ministry was specifically established to devise a clear policy for the government on the issue of Syrian refugees.

"We need to have a national strategy coupled with a working plan. In fact, we are late, and this should have happened much, much earlier," Merhebi said. "I am sure that their number has reached 2 million at some point but it has decreased after a few have returned to Syria, while others were resettled in third countries or migrated to Europe."

An estimated 1.011 million refugees are registered with the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) in Lebanon but the government puts the figure at 1.5 million.

"We have stopped registering the refugees through UNHCR since 2015. As such, we do not know their exact number... I believe it was a wrong decision, because we should know who is in our country, what is their condition and what are they doing in order to be able to track them," Merhebi said.

About one-in-four people living in Lebanon is a refugee from the Syrian war, giving Lebanon more refugees per person than any other country.

Unlike the neighbouring countries – Turkey, Jordan and Iraq – hosting refugees from Syria, Lebanon has no formal refugee camps. With refugees scattered across the country, government control over them is a



Lebanese State Minister for Refugee Affairs Mouin Merhebi.

(Lebanese National News Agency)

much harder task.

"The problem is that certain political groups (Christians) opposed the creation of camps fearing that some Lebanese (Sunnis) wanted to resettle the Syrians in Lebanon. This is not true. I am a Sunni and I humanely welcome anyone who is exposed to tyranny, killing and massacre but I am against the resettlement of any refugee. They are here on a temporary basis, not indefinitely," Merhebi said.

Lebanon's experience with Palestinian refugees, 400,000 of whom have lived in the country for more than 60 years after UN camps were established for them in Lebanon, has left deep scars. Many say that creating formal refugee camps for Syrians would encourage them to settle in Lebanon permanently.

Merhebi said Lebanon would welcome the creation of safe zones in Syria to facilitate the repatriation of refugees, stressing that it should be part of a global arrangement that would ensure the refugees' safe and voluntary return.

"We are keen on their return to preserve the Arab character of

"There will be no forceful repatriation of Syrian refugees by the Lebanese government."

State Minister for Refugee Affairs Mouin Merhebi

Syria. We are keen on them to return to prevent the 'Persianisation' of Syria and to rebuild their country," said Merhebi, a member of Prime Minister Saad Hariri's Future Movement, a staunch opponent of the Syrian regime. "Lebanon supports UN efforts to settle the Syrian crisis and consequently ensure the safe return of refugees to their country."

"If safe zones are established, we would consider it a good thing because this would reduce the killings in Syria. Lebanon will ensure that Syrian refugees return willingly and voluntarily. There will be no forceful repatriation by the Lebanese government, in line with our commitments to international human rights," he said.

Many hurdles hinder the eventual return of refugees, including scores of unregistered children born to Syrian refugee parents who are considered stateless. Aid agencies suggest the number of children whose births remain unregistered in Lebanon could be as high as 50,000.

"This is an important matter that we will tackle in the national policy. If we are really keen on

them to return one day, they should be registered somewhere, have papers to be able to cross the frontier back to Syria," Merhebi noted.

Syrian refugees are mainly concentrated in remote under-privileged areas in northern Lebanon and the eastern Bekaa Valley, where a creaky infrastructure existed long before the Syrian crisis. Half of the Lebanese population in these areas lack essential services, which were further depleted with the massive influx of refugees.

The World Bank said the refugee crisis has inflicted \$15 billion in economic losses on Lebanon, already crippled by \$75 billion in public debt.

"Our economy cannot put up with this anymore. We call on the international community to assist Lebanon and invest in stabilising it because that will help combat extremism and terrorism, to which people are driven by injustices, marginalisation and hopelessness," Merhebi added.

Samar Kadi is The Arab Weekly Travel and Society sections editor.

Arabs of Germany extends web lifeline to migrants

Jona Kallgren

Berlin

Migrants navigating a new language, unfamiliar cultural conventions and Germany's multitude of rules and regulations are finding help online in their adoptive country courtesy of one of their own.

The website *arabalmanya.com* – which translates to *Arabs of Germany* – was founded a year ago by Syrian IT expert Talal Mando. The site contains a range of information, including news about Germany, feature stories explaining German culture and crucial job offers for newcomers.

"No one came to Germany to sit around," Mando, who was among the 890,000 migrants who arrived in Germany in 2015, said of the site's success. "The people want to work and learn new things."

Mando said the idea for the site came after the soft-spoken 28-year-old reached Germany and started looking for guidance about how to apply for asylum, learn German and

find work.

He quickly realised that most written information was available only in German or English – not a problem for him as a fluent Eng-

lish speaker but a major barrier for many Syrians and other migrants who spoke only Arabic.

"That's when I got this idea to make a website for Arab people who are in Germany," Mando said in the living room of his Berlin apartment, which doubles as headquarters for the free website.

Since the website's launch in December 2015, it has received more than 1.1 million visits and more than 4 million page clicks, nearly all from users inside Germany, Google Analytics data indicate.

Many German organisations have reached out to help migrants get settled and some television networks offer Arabic language programming. Mando said he thinks *arabalmanya.com* has resonated particularly well with newly arrived Syrians because he and others working on the site have shared their experience.

He has five people writing for the website, all Syrian migrants working for free after a small startup grant from a local organisation ran out.

Mando, who works as a freelance web designer, estimates he has put about \$5,800 of his own money into the project.

■ Since its launch in December 2015, the website has received more than 1.1 million visits.

The volunteer staff has written more than 1,400 posts, many of them job listings they have translated into Arabic. They answer about 50 e-mails a day seeking advice on where to find a doctor, where to learn German, how to register for school, and what documents to bring and clothing to wear to job interviews.

"I do it because people need it. It's that simple," he said. "People need information and jobs here in Germany and we provide it."

(The Associated Press)

Talal Mando (L) works with writer Mohanad Al-Naheel on his website *arabalmanya.com* in Berlin, on January 19th.

(AP)