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Commentary

## Refugees in the MENA: How Food Insecurity Hits the Most Vulnerable

Irene Tuzi (/en/bio/irene-tuzi) | 11 July 2020

**T**he outbreak of the Coronavirus has affected the entire world in an unprecedented way. The virus has hit without making distinctions of class, gender, ethnicity, or nationality. Yet, the crisis engendered by the pandemic has **exacerbated discriminations and exposed the most vulnerable groups of society to greater risks**. While the pandemic is disrupting the food supply worldwide (<https://www.unsctn.org/en/news-events/recent-news?idnews=2039>), many find it difficult accessing or affording food. In this regard, the World Food Programme has warned that the Covid-19 pandemic is likely to increase the number of people facing acute food insecurity to 265 million (<https://www.wfp.org/news/covid-19-will-double-number-people-facing-food-crises-unless-swift-action-taken>) in 2020. Among the most exposed groups, the crisis is putting a particular strain on migrants and displaced communities in the Middle East (<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/covid-19-among-mena-refugees-great-humanitarian-concern-25679>).

Even before the Covid-19 crisis, Palestinians under Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza were faced with one of the highest unemployment rates in the world, and many depend on the UNRWA for services and work. During the pandemic lockdown, in Nablus and Ramallah, most stores closed and for many it became **difficult accessing food**, or affording it. Most Palestinians in the West Bank depend on day labour and with the restrictions imposed by the Palestinian Authority in coordination with Israel, many families have remained without a salary since March 2020. The UNRWA has provided **food assistance to families in need**, but many Palestinians in the West Bank did not have access to it. In a weak attempt to respond to the increasing food insecurity, the Palestinian Authority distributed seedlings to 30.000 households (<https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/palestine-encourages-residents-to-grow-vegetables-in-lockdown/1823978>) encouraging them to grow their own food.

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To prevent the spread of the virus, Jordan has imposed a strict curfew since March 2020. For this reason, unemployment has also increased among the 660.000 displaced Syrians, who are now even more dependent on UN assistance. In March 2020, the WFP transferred additional cash assistance to refugees' electronic cards in order to allow them to stock up on food in preparation of a full lockdown (<https://insight.wfp.org/four-things-to-know-about-wfps-covid-19-response-in-jordan-a7a66a47c161>). Nonetheless, those living in host communities, outside the camps, are **more vulnerable to food insecurity**. Left with no income and excluded from external support they are less able to meet their basic food needs. According to a survey conducted by UNRWA (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/77093>), the disruption of the global supply chain has prevented Jordan from importing flour from Russia, rice from India, and bulgur, wheat, and legumes from Egypt. This will eventually lead to an **increase in food prices at a local level**.

Refugee communities in Lebanon, where a multi-layered crisis has turned into one of the direst emergencies the country has ever been confronted with, are among those in most vulnerable conditions. Even prior the Covid-19 outbreak (<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/download/77304>), 92% of Syrian refugee families, and 95% of Palestinian refugees from Syria faced some level of food insecurity.

## A multi-layered crisis as a turning point for food security

With a minor industrial and manufacturing sector and few natural resources, Lebanon is among the largest food importers in the world. According to the World Bank, food imports in Lebanon were reported to be at 17.78% in 2018 (<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/TM.VAL.FOOD.ZS.UN?contextual=similar&end=2018&locations=LB&start=2000>). Because of this dependence, the country is vulnerable to food-price shocks and quantity risks. As Lebanon's borders remained closed for several weeks, as part of the lockdown, **the food supply chain was disrupted and less food became accessible to the population**. Between October 2019 and March 2020, food imports decreased by 14.4 % (<https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116234/download/?iframe>) compared to the same period in previous years. However, the pandemic is only in part responsible for today's food insecurity in Lebanon. In fact, it is generated by a multi-layered crisis that has mainly **economic and political roots** and has deteriorated since the outbreak of the October Revolution (<https://www.ispionline.it/it/pubblicazione/between-famine-and-pandemic-lebanon-ticking-time-bomb-25689>). Basic food prices have doubled in only a few months, with some prices growing up to 98% (<https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116234/download/?iframe>) since October 2019.

## The impact of food insecurity on refugees

Lebanon has currently the largest number per capita of refugees in the world, with an estimated number **of over 1 million Syrian refugees**, as well as 175.000 Palestinians displaced since 1948. As a response to the Syrian crisis, the government rejected encampment to prevent the Syrian presence in Lebanon from becoming permanent, as had happened with the Palestinians. As a result, a number of Syrians live in informal tented settlements throughout the country, in overcrowded contexts and in extremely vulnerable conditions. While many families in the largest camps receive

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some financial assistance, those living in the smaller settlements are often left behind. Moreover, since the official registrations for Syrians stopped in 2015, many remained outside the formal protection channels, with **no access to basic services**.

A [report by the WFP](https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116234/download/?iframe) (https://docs.wfp.org/api/documents/WFP-0000116234/download/?iframe) has estimated an increase of the so-called Survival Minimum Expenditure Basket (SMEB) for Syrian families from 37,706 to 58,868 Lebanese pounds between September 2019 and April 2020. Moreover, with food prices increasing in the country, those receiving humanitarian assistance through the UN electronic card have reportedly being barely able to survive for two weeks with the monthly allowance. The situation is not better for the Palestinian population, who have struggled to receive a long-awaited [one-time payment](https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2020/05/27/Lebanon-Palestine-coronavirus-aid) (https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2020/05/27/Lebanon-Palestine-coronavirus-aid) of around 35\$ by the UNRWA in May 2020. Palestinians all over the 12 official camps in Lebanon have been complaining and protesting for years about the decline of UNRWA services. The agency is the only entity responsible for them and with the reduction of its assistance, even before the Covid-19 outbreak, **the consequences on the refugee population had been devastating**. However, many are also the Palestinians and Syrians who are excluded from humanitarian aid. These people are even more challenged by the high price inflation and the loss of income resulted from salary cuts and unemployment. These challenges continue to reduce people's ability to access sufficient food, pushing more and more families below the poverty line.

## Coping strategies

Food insecurity among displaced communities in Lebanon is triggering several coping strategies, which are likely to increase vulnerabilities. In the struggle to find a way to deal with food shortage, for instance, some families are **reducing their number of meals to only one per day**, while others are selecting those who will eat according to their role in the households. Men who work and young children are generally given priority, with women often being those who avoid eating in order to put enough food on their table. These strategies are not sustainable in the long term and can negatively affect the nutritional health of households.

While stored food is running out, families have also reduced food shopping to basic nutritious products such as beans, wheat, rice, bread, za'atar, and olive oil. Some families in the Beqaa Valley, where a great concentration of Syrian refugees live, have reported **surviving only with olive oil, za'atar, and bread** for several days. With the Lebanese pound continuing to depreciate, many families can no longer afford products like meat or milk. In particular, formula milk has become a luxury good, with some shops selling it for 45.000 Lebanese pounds. For this reason, some families have started giving cow milk to toddlers, although it is not recommended. In certain areas, supermarkets have started selling items that are about to expire, while butchers have reported having lost 70% of their clients since the crisis has emerged. Private donations and [food baskets provided by local organizations](https://www.instagram.com/stories/lebfoodbank/2339511214656592793) (https://www.instagram.com/stories/lebfoodbank/2339511214656592793) is only of little help in solving the problem of food insecurity.

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The only households who seem to be able to endure, among refugees and the local population, are **those who can rely on remittances** sent by family members abroad, especially if these are in dollars or euros. Nonetheless, in the chaotic fight for survival, some OMT agencies have started applying different exchange rates to transactions or charging ad hominem.

# Food insecurity triggering more displacement

In this desperate turmoil, a consideration can be made about the risk that food insecurity in Lebanon and elsewhere in the region could trigger more displacement, especially among Syrian refugees. As a matter of fact, according to humanitarian workers in Lebanon, a number of families have now **started considering returning to Syria**. Although it really depends on individual cases, and especially on whether families have a place to return in Syria, for some this could be the most favourable option. Syria and Lebanon have always been interconnected in terms of political and economic events and Syria is also facing a dire economic crisis today, which is likely to deteriorate now that the [Caesar Act sanctions \(https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/us-caesar-act-sanctions-and-could-devastate-syrias-flatlining-economy\)](https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/12/us-caesar-act-sanctions-and-could-devastate-syrias-flatlining-economy) have been applied. Nonetheless, food prices are still a bit cheaper in Syria and for some families it would be easier to rely on social networks in their home country. For those who can return to the countryside, living off the land would be **a better option than starving in Lebanon**. A further motivation, which could encourage return to Syria, is that the health system remains more affordable than in Lebanon. In this regard, humanitarian workers in Lebanon argue that home births as well as infant mortality are increasing among Syrian refugees.

Finally, it is also likely that **more and more people will try to reach Europe** from Lebanon and the Middle Eastern region in the coming future. Nonetheless, while many [have remained stuck at the border \(https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51781394\)](https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-51781394) between Turkey and Greece since before the Covid-19 outbreak, and Greece has stopped the asylum applications in violation of international laws, it is also likely that Europe will use the Coronavirus excuse to avoid dealing with another refugee crisis – and with **the threat of Turkey**.

Due to the unprecedented scenarios that are arising, projections about the future are difficult to make. However, what is certain is that the food emergency, together with the health, economic, and political crises in the region, will only intensify the everyday insecurities and hardships that Syrians, Palestinians and other vulnerable groups have to face in their daily life.

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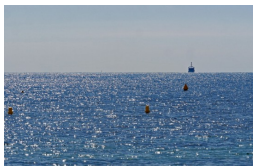
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