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## Some refugees who returned to Syria fled back to Lebanon: NGO



A view of a damaged site is seen in Raqqa, Syria September 16, 2017. REUTERS/ Rodi Said

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BEIRUT: Amid increasing calls for Syrian refugees to return, a Lebanon-based NGO said in a report earlier this week that its researchers had spoken to refugees who returned to Syria only to flee back to Lebanon after encountering unexpected dangers and obstacles.

Researchers with SAWA for Development and Aid, a small NGO that has been working with refugees in the Bekaa Valley for the past seven years, interviewed 40 refugees living in various parts of Lebanon - most of them in camps - about conditions in Lebanon and the factors that influenced their decision to return or stay in Lebanon.

Among the factors pushing refugees to go back to Syria, the report cited increasing economic pressure, including crackdowns on Syrian-owned businesses and Lebanese businesses employing unauthorized Syrian workers; cuts to aid programs; increasing levels of debt among the refugees; and financial and bureaucratic obstacles to obtaining legal residency.

Lebanese political leaders have increasingly called on the international community to facilitate refugee returns, with some arguing that much of Syria is now secure. President Michel Aoun used the platform of last month's Arab Economic and Social Development summit held in Beirut to do so; and Foreign Minister Gebran Bassil, at a meeting in Brussels earlier this month, called on the European Union to "start redirecting the aid sent for refugees staying in Lebanon to be used to support a safe and dignified return for those who can."

But in some cases, the SAWA report argued, those returns may be premature. Researchers spoke directly to two families who reported having returned to Lebanon after making unsuccessful return journeys to Syria. The report also contained anecdotal information on a third case.

Elena Hodges, a policy, research and advocacy officer with SAWA, said that finding

those cases had not been the main objective of the report and that the information was not comprehensive. "There are more of these stories," she said. "They're not represented in this report, and we don't know what the incidence is in terms of percentage of returnees."

One family from Raqqa told researchers they had sold their belongings in Lebanon and returned to Syria with their six children in January 2018, after the wife became sick and the family was unable to meet her medical expenses, the report said. Upon arriving back in their city, they found the extent of the destruction to be worse than they had been led to believe - their house was partially collapsed and looted, with roving militias occupying the area. Discouraged, they borrowed money and returned to Lebanon.

"We lost everything by going back to Raqqa," the report quoted the father of the family as saying. "It cost \$400 in transport to and from Raqqa within Syria, \$233 to rent the house outside Raqqa, hundreds of dollars for price-inflated food and water, and \$900 for the smuggler. We sold everything before returning, so when we fled back to Lebanon we had nothing."

Another woman, a widow, told the NGO that she had left her children in a neighbor's care in Lebanon and returned to Homs to see if conditions were ready for return. She found her house intact but occupied by squatters who refused to let her in. On top of that, she was slapped with about \$200 in phone bills and \$2,500 in unpaid electricity bills that accumulated over the six years she and her children had been in Lebanon.

Although the woman had documents proving ownership of the house, she told researchers she felt helpless to do anything: "The authorities are part of the problem, so how could I go to them asking for justice?"

She too returned to Lebanon, traveling via a smugglers' route through the mountains as she had been banned from entering Lebanon for five years when she returned to Syria.

In a third case, a woman in her 60s attempting to return to Damascus had reportedly been detained at the border and jailed for 45 days for reasons that were unclear, but possibly related to her grandson's involvement in the Free Syrian Army, the report said, citing another refugee who knew the woman. Upon her release, the woman reportedly fled back to Lebanon, but Hodges said the researchers were not able to reach her to confirm the story.

At a forum at the American University of Beirut's Issam Fares Institute, where the report was discussed Wednesday, Amnesty International researcher Diana Semaan said refugees in Lebanon have difficulty getting accurate information on conditions in Syria.

The U.N. and international NGOs have not been able to get permission to access returnees in some areas, and Syrians inside the country may be hesitant to share negative information with friends and family in Lebanon, concerned about surveillance of their communications, she said.

"Refugees may have relatives inside, but the relatives are so afraid to speak about the situation that they give them false information," Semaan said. "There's serious misinformation coming out from inside Syria that doesn't allow refugees to make an informed decision."