

Production and Perception of the EU Border Regime in Lebanon: A Case Study of the EU-funded Qudra Programme and its Impact on Syrian Refugees and the Lebanese Host Community

Authors: Iman El Ghoubashy, Nadia Zoë Plönges & Arvid Sprenger

A chapter from: Schmiz, A., & Lehmann, S. (Eds.) (2025). Geographies of the European Border Regime. How borders shape the everyday lives of refugees and asylum-seekers. Berlin Geographical Papers, 56. <https://doi.org/10.17169/refubium-48773>

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Berlin Geographical Papers



Geographies of the European Border Regime

How borders shape the everyday lives of refugees and asylum-seekers

Edited by

ANTONIE SCHMIZ and SOFIA LEHMANN

Institute of Geographical Sciences
Freie Universität Berlin

2025

Institute of Geographical Sciences
Freie Universität Berlin

2025

Contact

Freie Universität Berlin
Department of Earth Sciences

Working Group 'Society, Space and Gender'

Malteserstr. 74-100
D-12249 Berlin

<https://www.geo.fu-berlin.de/geog/fachrichtungen/anthrogeog/index.html>



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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17466680>

Citation suggestion: El Ghoubashy, I., Plönges, N. Z., & Sprenger, A. (2025). Production and Perception of the EU Border Regime in Lebanon: A Case Study of the EU-funded Qudra Programme and its Impact on Syrian Refugees and the Lebanese Host Community. *Berlin Geographical Papers*, 56, 77–93. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.17466680>

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Production and Perception of the EU Border Regime in Lebanon: A Case Study of the EU-funded Qudra Programme and its Impact on Syrian Refugees and the Lebanese Host Community

Abstract:

The European Union externalises its migration management under the guise of development cooperation, aiming to contain refugees outside its borders. This strategy is implemented in Lebanon through crisis response planning, development policies and funding projects that promote social cohesion between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities. Economic support tied to Syrian refugees serves both as the EU's perceived 'fair share' and a strategic tool for the Lebanese government, which leverages its negotiation power despite weak state structures, often functioning as NGO-state where external funds primarily flow to local NGOs. Using the EU-funded Qudra programme as a case study, this research project examines the programme's implementation and its impact on Syrian refugees, assessing whether NGO-led economic and social support influences their migration decisions. Based on qualitative interviews from 2022, our findings indicate that refugees benefiting from EU-funded assistance are more inclined to remain in Lebanon, while those without such support exhibit stronger intentions to migrate. These results affirm the partial success of the European border regime in containing Syrian refugees through targeted funding while leaving them in vulnerable environments. The EU's involvement in the refugee crisis response and the Qudra programme is contested by Lebanese actors – including NGO workers and government institutions – who challenge this external influence, fostering discriminatory sentiments and undermining sustainable social cohesion.

1 Introduction

The contemporary European Union (EU) border regime increasingly emphasises externalisation as a strategy designed to contain refugees outside of EU territory. This involves the application of foreign policy tools with third countries and interference in foreign migration governance. The EU uses its economic and political influence to shape the migration policies of non-EU states, aiming to intercept refugees before they reach European borders. This often includes the use of economic support, development aid and political pressure to implement policies that are in line with EU interests, shifting the responsibility for managing refugee populations to countries outside of the EU and containing refugees in third countries.

With many Syrians seeking refuge in Lebanon since the outbreak of the war in Syria in 2011, 25% of the Lebanese population are Syrian refugees, making Lebanon the state with the most refugees per capita worldwide in 2022. Lebanon is of strategic interest for the EU border regime that aims to contain Syrian refugees in Lebanon to prevent them from moving on to

Europe. This paper discusses the findings of research conducted to understand the production, implementation and perception of the border regime in Lebanon. The authors analyse how the EU and an international community consisting of EU-funded actors, international organisations and the Lebanese government endorse their interests through policies and crisis response plans, and how EU-funded projects contribute to implementing these interests, using the Qudra Programme as a case study. By examining the perceptions and perspectives of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the authors assess whether the programme functions as an effective tool in upholding the EU's containment strategy.

As a case study that exemplifies how the EU's interests are implemented on the ground, this project focuses on the programme 'Qudra – Resilience for Syrian Refugees, IDPs and Host Communities in Response to the Syrian and Iraqi Crises'. Funded mainly by the EU through the EU Regional Trust Fund Syria (EUTF) and Germany's Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ), the programme is commissioned by the French cooperation agency Expertise France. Its successor, Qudra 2, focuses its support on four components in the fields of education, employment, local governmental institutions, civil society organisations and social cohesion. Reaching out to Syrian refugees in Lebanon and members of the Lebanese host community, our research examines how the programme affects their perspectives and whether the containment strategy is successful.

The paper is structured as follows: It proceeds with a review of existing studies and outlines the key theories informing the analysis. The methods chapter explains the research design, data collection and analytical approach. Results are organised into three levels consisting of the production of the EU border regime in Lebanon (state level), the implementation of the EU border regime in Lebanon (NGO level) and the perception of the EU border regime in Lebanon (individual level). The discussion chapter interprets these findings in the context of the theoretical framework. Finally, the conclusion summarises the main insights and suggests directions for future research.

2 State of the art and theoretical framework

Border externalisation encompasses a range of border management practices that extend beyond territorial limits, conceptualising borders as dynamic systems shaped by multiple actors, institutions, and policies. This approach blurs the distinction between the actions, territorial sovereignty, and jurisdiction of both outsourcing states and third countries. Increasingly, borders are not defined by geographic boundaries but by the mechanisms governing migrant mobility, operating wherever the migrant is located (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015).

Building upon this understanding of externalisation practices, this theoretical framework emphasises how such policies enforce the involuntary immobility of refugees, confining them to so-called 'regions of origin'. These policies function as 'containment strategies', predominantly employed by Global North states toward the Global South. They are often implemented through humanitarian aid, coupled with conditionalities that emphasise

eventual repatriation. Refugees in protracted displacement, meaning those with refugee status for over five years, are particularly affected (Etzold & Fechter 2022; Weima/Hyndman 2019). Such ‘remote-control’ measures fail to address the root causes of migration, instead exacerbating refugees’ precarity by keeping them in a state of limbo and exposing them to systemic abuses (Zaiotti 2016). Such containment mechanisms create structures of differential inclusion and exclusion. This results in a selective system where certain narrowly defined social groups receive humanitarian aid while others are strategically excluded (Casas-Cortes et al. 2015; Mezzadra/Neilson 2012). The mechanisms described here thus function as methods of ‘preventive dissuasion’ that aim to prevent the decision to leave the country from the outset (Collyer 2019).

The EU’s strategies for managing forced displacement in its ‘southern neighbourhood’ are driven by the security-stability nexus and the concept of ‘resilience’ (Fakhoury & Stel 2023). Resilience- and capacity-building are framed as essential policy objectives, facilitating refugee integration within host states to prevent onward migration. A key manifestation of these broader strategic aims is apparent in the EU’s response to Syrian displacement: Resilience-building initiatives are specifically designed to contain refugee populations within proximate host states, thereby preventing secondary movements toward Europe. This containment strategy seeks to confine Syrian refugees within host countries near Syria while simultaneously shifting responsibility to exact states (Anholt/Sinatti 2020). Both national and EU policies emphasise social cohesion and the mitigation of tensions between refugees and host communities. Qudra 1 and 2, co-managed by GIZ and Expertise France, operationalise EU interests by embedding resilience frameworks into their social cohesion and stability initiatives (GIZ 2024).

Lebanon serves as a relevant case study for illustrating these dynamics. Tsourapas (2019) applies the ‘rentier state’ concept, where states derive external income from resource extraction to the ‘refugee rentier state’, which secures financial support in exchange for hosting refugee populations. Unlike Turkey, which leverages migration as a geopolitical bargaining tool, Lebanon employs a cooperative approach, seeking sustained economic aid rather than using refugee flows as a direct threat (Tsourapas 2019). The Lebanese government instrumentalises the presence of refugees to negotiate broader financial support, extending these beyond refugee-related needs to benefit the state and Lebanese host population (Fakhoury 2022).

Institutionalised cooperation with Lebanon ensures the EU’s influence extends beyond its own borders. However, Lebanon’s multiple crises have altered the nature of this partnership, necessitating a shift from development cooperation to humanitarian assistance: The arrival of more than 1 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon since 2011 has created demographic pressure and highlighted the structural weaknesses originating from the creation of the modern Lebanese state and its 1975-1990 civil war. Adding to over 450,000 long-term Palestinian refugees, displaced people made up around one-quarter of the Lebanese population in 2020, making it the state with the highest concentration of refugees per capita in the world. While

most of the Syrian refugee population lives in precarious conditions, as 69% fall below the poverty line of US\$3.84 per day per person, the Syrian civil war further deteriorated the Lebanese economy as the real GDP per capita dropped by 8.3% from 2012 to 2015, further worsening Lebanon's average standard of living (Beaujouan/Rasheed 2020).

In combination with the dysfunctional political system built on structural mismanagement, corruption, cronyism and political gridlocks, a financial crisis started in October 2019. Additionally, the Covid-19 Pandemic outbreak in early 2020 and the Beirut port explosion in August 2021 further aggravated the dire socio-economic situation: The total poverty rate tripled from 25% in 2019 to 74% in 2021 as the listed events resulted in a 90% devaluation of the Lebanese pound (Abubakar Siddique 2022; Daher 2022).

Therefore, Lebanon increasingly demands that aid address not only refugee-related challenges but also the growing vulnerabilities of its own population. These deep-cutting changes suggest a complication of EU-Lebanon relations, growing divergence in policy objectives as well as a more challenging situation for Syrian refugees in Lebanon¹.

3 Methods

Our research focuses on three levels: state, NGOs and civil society. The state level serves to examine policy frameworks constituting the ground for the cooperation between the EU, the international community and the Lebanese government. The NGO level looks at how these policy frameworks are implemented on the ground through programmes funded by the EU, exemplified in the Qudra-programme as a case study. The civil society level looks at the beneficiaries of the programme, Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community.

For the state level, our research is built firstly on a document analysis examining the relevant international policies on state level that link development cooperation directly or indirectly to the presence of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Three relevant policies were identified: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) and the Lebanon Reform Recovery and Reconstruction Framework (3RF) (EU 2006; EU et al. 2020; UN & Ministry of Social Affairs Lebanon 2021).

Funded by both the EU and the German government, the programme 'Qudra – Resilience for Syrian Refugees, IDPs and Host Communities in Response to the Syrian and Iraqi Crises' serves as a case study to analyse the implementation of these political frameworks on the ground and to assess its impact on beneficiaries, Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community. As it is facilitated through NGOs and aims to promote social cohesion between Syrian refugees

¹ At the time of the case study in 2022, the Assad regime in Syria was still in power. Its overthrow, led by HTS on the 8th of December 2024, was made possible by shifts in regional and international power dynamics, including Turkish support for the HTS, the weakening of Iran and the Hezbollah and Russia's changing priorities. After this regime change initially led to a wave of enthusiasm within the Syrian population and diaspora, it remains unclear by the time of writing (mid-2025) to what extent this development influences the return of displaced Syrians from countries of refuge such as Lebanon (Adar et al. 2025; Pinfold 2025). In early 2025, the security situation in Lebanon was precarious, as Israeli airstrikes were hitting Beirut along with other cities across the country, prompting evacuations and displacements (Beirut Urban Lab 2024).

and the Lebanese host community, this case study covers the NGO and civil society level of our research (Expertise France 2019; GIZ 2024).

We conducted interviews on all three levels of state, NGO and civil society to portray the structure and the effects of the Qudra programme. Using actor-mapping, we visualised key actors and thereby showed relationships and resulting hierarchies that shape existing power structures at the time of the conducted research (Desai et al. 2017). As shown in Figure 1, Qudra represents a direct link between supranational, EU and Lebanese institutions as well as local NGOs, which then connect to Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees. We approached organisations in every actor-cluster, however, several important actors like the GIZ, Expertise France and a part of the implementing NGOs did not respond to our interview requests.

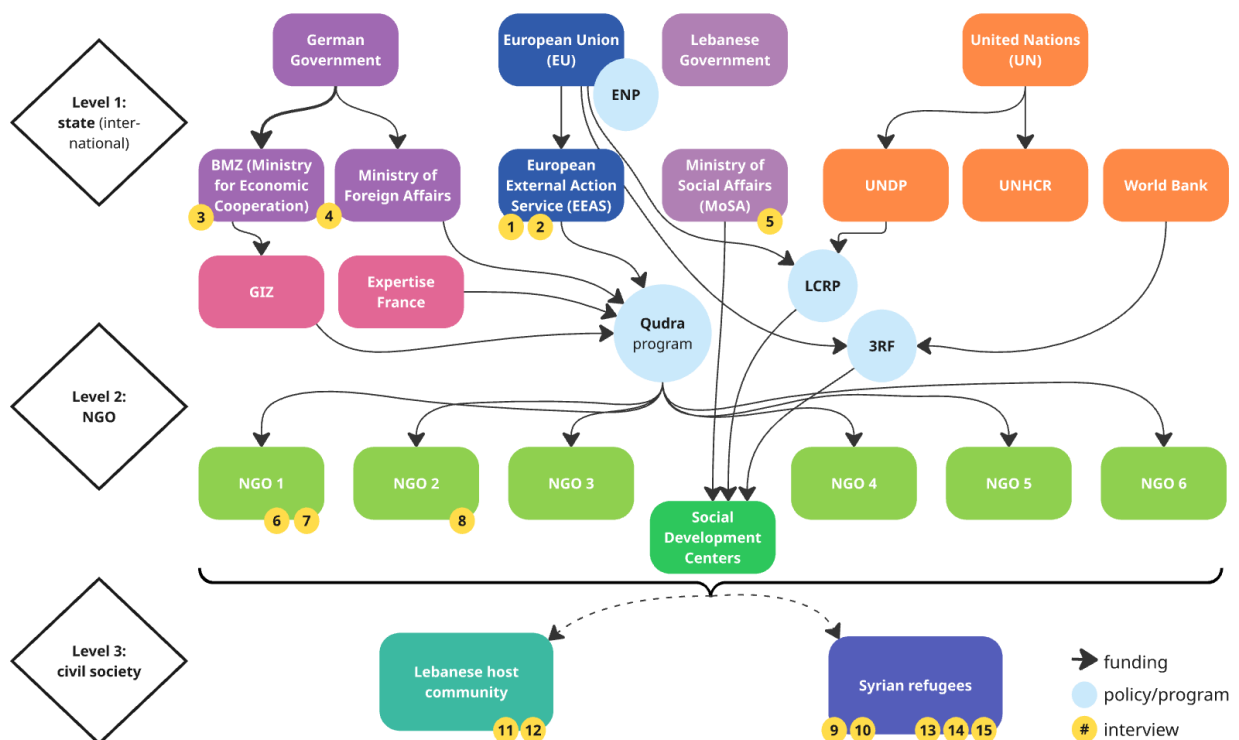


Figure 1: Actor mapping of institutions and actors in migration management, policy making and the EU-funded Qudra programme in Lebanon in 2022, created for operationalisation purposes (authors' own illustration 2022)

As shown in Table 1, we conducted five qualitative semi-structured interviews on the state level with officials of the European Delegation to Lebanon, the German Ministry for Development Cooperation and the Ministry of Social Affairs in Lebanon (I#1-5). Through purposive sampling, we accessed the relevant officials in charge of cooperation matters with or in Lebanon. Semi-structured interviews explored the dynamics, priorities and limitations of the cooperation and how the EU and international community are using policies and crisis plans as a tool to assert its interest. Furthermore, two of the six NGOs within the Qudra programme agreed to participate and serve as a purposive sample (I#6-8) to gather problem-centred expert insights through the three qualitative semi-structured interviews (Patton 2015; Stratford/Bradshaw 2021).

To assess the impact of the NGOs economic and social support, we accessed some of the beneficiaries of the Qudra programme through snowball sampling via the implementing NGOs, including Syrian refugees as well as families from the Lebanese host community. The staff of NGO 1 facilitated access by accompanying the team on home visits. This sample bias is inevitable since only the NGOs know who their beneficiaries are. Narrative interviews were conducted with two Syrian families and two families of the Lebanese host community (I#9-12). This approach enabled the research team to document individual experiences and illustrate the personal impacts of political decisions (Dunn 2021; Strübing 2018). The researchers also interviewed a group of three male Syrian refugees in the research process to further assess whether the economic and social support by NGOs is an impacting factor for the migration intention of Syrian refugees. Through convenient sampling, the researchers conducted narrative interviews with three male Syrian refugees who did not receive any economic or social support from NGOs funded by the EU (I#13-15). It is important to highlight that this research is qualitative, and that results are not representative for all beneficiaries or Syrian refugees who do not receive funding through the programme but rather offer explanatory insights.

Table 1: Overview of interviews conducted

Interview Title	Date, Place	Abbreviation
State level		
EU Delegation to Lebanon, European External Action Service	10.08.22, Berlin & Beirut (hybrid)	(I#1)
EU Delegation to Lebanon, European External Action Service, Beirut Office	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#2)
German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ): Anonymised employee	10.08.22, Berlin	(I#3)
German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ): Embassy of the Federal Republic of Germany Beirut	17.08.22, Beirut	(I#4)
Ministry of Social Affairs Lebanon (MoSA)	29.08.22, Berlin & Beirut (hybrid)	(I#5)
NGO level		
NGO 1: President of the NGO & Social Worker	17.08.22, Beirut	(I#6)
NGO 1: Project Manager	17.08.22, Beirut	(I#7)
NGO 2: Anonymised employees	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#8)
Civil Society level		
Syrian family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F1)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#9)
Syrian family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F2)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#10)
Lebanese family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F3)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#11)
Lebanese family living in a Lebanese host community in Beirut (F4)	18.08.22, Beirut	(I#12)
Syrian refugee (single, male, 20-35) (M1)	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#13)
Syrian refugee (single, male, 20-35) (M2)	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#14)
Syrian refugee (single, male, 20-35) (M3)	16.08.22, Beirut	(I#15)

4 Results

This section explores the findings about the production, implementation and perception of the EU border regime in Lebanon regarding Syrian refugees. The state, NGO and the civil society levels form the three dimensions of analysis.

4.1 State level: Production of the EU Border regime in Lebanon

To analyse the cooperation between the EU, the international community and the Lebanese state regarding Syrian refugees, three key policies were examined: the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) and the Recovery, Reconstruction, and Reform Framework (3RF). Discussions with officials of the EU, Germany and Lebanon provided further insights on challenges, limitations and contestations of political cooperation.

The EU, along with international actors, frame their externalisation policies as stability and security measures, ensuring that refugees remain in Lebanon by linking financial aid to long-term reforms. The LCRP and 3RF policies channel funding for immediate needs while conditioning support on structural changes. This approach strengthens external influence over Lebanese policymaking, often at the expense of Lebanese sovereignty. Increasingly, aid also targets vulnerable Lebanese host communities. Cooperation is disputed: EU and German officials point to Lebanon's political deadlock, lack of accountability and weak governance (I#1-4). In contrast, Lebanese officials see recent changes as an effort to regain control from international actors (I#5).

Policy and interview analysis reveal four possible scenarios for Syrian refugees in Lebanon: (1) integration, (2) resettlement to third countries, (3) return to country of origin and (4) irregular migration. The EU favours the approach of integration through financing resilience-building projects, despite Lebanese opposition. Lebanese authorities reject integration by citing legal barriers and political infeasibility, while some EU officials label this strategy as the instrumentalisation of Syrian refugees for political leverage (I#1; I#5).

Resettlement faces EU-level resistance due to political constraints. Return remains contentious: While the EU and particularly Germany rule out involuntary return, Lebanon advocates for it as an urgent solution, emphasising the deterioration of the national economy together with social tensions within society. Irregular migration via the Mediterranean is increasing (I#2), reinforcing EU arguments for on-the-ground and urgent assistance. The EU promotes integration through its implementation of various development projects, while Lebanon opposes it, though through its weaker negotiating position it can hardly draw clear boundaries. The contested 'fair share' concept, meaning economic support in exchange for hosting refugees, remains a key point of friction amid Lebanon's deepening crises.

4.2 NGO level: Implementation of the EU border regime in Lebanon

In Lebanon, NGOs are functioning as an implementing actor of EU interests. Our qualitative evaluation of Qudra at the implementational level focuses on collaboration between the EU

Delegation, MoSA and six local NGOs in Lebanon, including NGO 1 and NGO 2 (Expertise France 2019). Interviews with NGO 1 and NGO 2 revealed key insights into the Qudra's implementation. NGO 1 focuses on child protection and gender-based violence and operates in Beirut and northern Lebanon, where the target group has shifted from 70% Syrian refugees and 30% Lebanese families to a 50/50 ratio (I#6). NGO 2 runs projects in humanitarian aid, healthcare, child support, microcredit and vocational training, particularly in the Lebanese capital of Beirut. A key project within the Qudra programme was the development of a mobile activity centre to reduce working hours for street children (I#8). Main challenges voiced in conversation with NGOs include funding shortages, increasing needs within Lebanese society and administrative barriers within organisational structures. Local NGOs face declining donations and lack sufficient government support. Difficulties concerning the registration of Syrian children were mentioned by all interviewees, as many of these children lack official documents, further complicating or even restricting school enrolment and therefore leading to growing social exclusion (I#6). Furthermore, discriminatory attitudes by staff members of NGO 1 towards Syrian refugees were evident in the interviews, with some respondents expressing clear resentment and advocating for their return to Syria rather than supporting integration and social cohesion (I#6). These testimonies contrast starkly with NGO 2's stance, which downplayed social tensions and underlined the duty of humanitarian aid for all vulnerable groups, regardless of nationality (I#8).

Analysing various statements about governance structures and state frameworks, the concept of Lebanon as an 'NGO state' was frequently mentioned, meaning international funds primarily flow directly to local NGOs working on the ground and not to Lebanese state institutions (I#7). Deep-cutting dependence on external donors is seen as a threat to the sustainability and longevity of humanitarian efforts, as long-term structures are lacking. Therefore, projects are often reactive, rather than strategic and future-oriented, preventing long-term sustainable impacts. Criticism has also emerged regarding Qudra's effectiveness:

'The whole approach of dealing with refugees and host communities, in my opinion, is wrong. Unfortunately. Millions of Euros are spent. And if you measure the outcome, I say it's 30% or 25% maximum of your target. [...] The change you are doing is minimal to the resources you are allocating. Because it's allocated in the wrong place.' (I#7)

It was pointed out that interventions often fail to respond to the urgent basic needs of vulnerable populations such as food security and stable living conditions by focusing instead on soft interventions like psychosocial support or positive parenting. As one interviewee stated: '[T]hey don't need positive parenting. They need to put food on the table' (I#7), highlighting the disconnect between project design and ground realities. Furthermore, short-term interventions addressing issues like child labour were seen as ineffective, as children return to the streets once sessions end, due to the lack of structural, long-term solutions like education, housing and family reintegration. As a result, large financial investments are perceived to yield minimal sustainable outcomes, with resources allocated in ways that do not address the root causes of vulnerability (I#7; I#8).

Despite critical voices, a fragile yet persistent sense of hope remains for a more stable future on an economic, political, and social level. While one interviewee expressed deep frustration with Lebanon's political leadership, which was described as corrupt, criminal and incapable of reform, some still hold on to the belief that the country might eventually recover. One interviewee articulated this hope with symbolic gestures, like 'crossing all ten fingers' (I#6), reflecting both the uncertainty and emotional investment in a better future. Yet this hope exists in tension with a growing fear that humanitarian funding will continue to decline, making long-term recovery even more difficult to achieve (I#6; I#8).

4.3 Individual level: Perception of the EU border regime in Lebanon

Narrative interviews were conducted with Lebanese and Syrian families as well as Syrian individuals to gather insights into the lived realities under the current circumstances and the relations of individuals in society among each other as well as with Qudra-funded NGOs and state institutions (see Figure 16). These narrations give exemplary insights into the emerging fields of conflict and the impact of the externalised EU border regime on individuals. All interviewees portrayed their living conditions as uncertain and precarious and reported that their situation has been exacerbated in the recent past through the events listed in chapter two. Families that previously belonged to the middle class skidded into poverty, causing parents to selflessly resign from their individual life goals while investing all their earnings as day labourers into their children's future (I#9-12). This is represented in the statement of one of the families' mothers:

'I hope for the best for them [her children], not for me. For me it's over, I mean, for me as a grown woman [...] there is no future, there is no life [...]. For my children I hope it gets better. So, they can live a good life, a rich life.' (I#12)

As noted in Figure 2, the interviewed persons were partly supported by state institutions and Qudra-supported NGOs: NGO 1 provided long term support to all of the interviewed families while NGO 2 focussed its support on street children, mainly Syrian refugees and partly members of the Lebanese host communities. Furthermore, the interviewed families reportedly received no support from the Lebanese government and only one Syrian family was receiving support from the UNHCR (I#6-12). Regarding potential conflicts between the beneficiary groups, differentiating statements were made: On the one hand, the Lebanese families expressed discontent regarding the perceived preferential support of Syrian refugees through state and non-state actors, making partly discriminatory remarks in their accounts that originate from their increasingly precarious life situations. Noticeably, these remarks stand according to the attitudes expressed by the employees of NGO 1 (see section 4.2), which underlines the need for increased measures to foster social cohesion but also further questions the effectivity and integrity of Qudra-supported NGOs (I#6; I#7; I#11; I#12).

'When the Syrian people came here? [...] For me personally I feel like that they live here with the help of maybe the UN or something. [...] I mean they live a more comfortable life than us. They earn dollars. [...] They live better than the Lebanese, more comfortable than us.' (I#12)

The second Lebanese family expressed their discomfort in a similar way, when they reported about their financial situation and how it affects their nutrition:

‘They live better than we do. [...] It’s wrong that this happened to the Lebanese people. Specifically, to the ones who have children. [...] My son comes to me and says: “Mother, I want to eat meat”. And I can’t cook him a meal with (red) meat or chicken. Nor cheese or Labneh. Not even fruits. [...] I can’t buy it, it became increasingly expensive. This affected us in a very bad manner.’ (I#11)

These tensions with the Lebanese society were not shared by both the Syrian families and the employees of NGO 2 (I#8-10 and section 4.2). When asked if they feel that they are discriminated by the Lebanese society, one of the Syrian families answered:

‘In my experience, no. [...] No one said a bad word, not one word. No matter if you’re a Syrian, from Bangladesh or any nationality no one is saying something bad about the people.’ (I#9)

Furthermore, the lived realities of three young, male and single Syrian refugees who have fallen through the established support systems of NGOs and (inter-)national structures provided insights into the lives of excluded persons. They received no assistance from Qudra-funded NGOs and were rejected by UNHCR and governmental institutions. Some reported having threatening experiences with members of the Lebanese society, which caused them to restrict their movement to stay unnoticed. All individuals have lost hope for improvement and were solely awaiting the chance to obtain a rare visa to the EU or the US (I#13-15). Their discontent turned into despair:

‘There is a shitload of NGOs all over [...] the earth and if they were actually doing something, I wouldn’t be here. [...] They just talk. [...] The future is always in Europe for Syrian people and it’s really bad because nobody is welcoming you. [...] You’re just waiting for something to happen. For a miracle.’ (I#13)

Dimensions and interrelatedness of lived realities in assessed case study

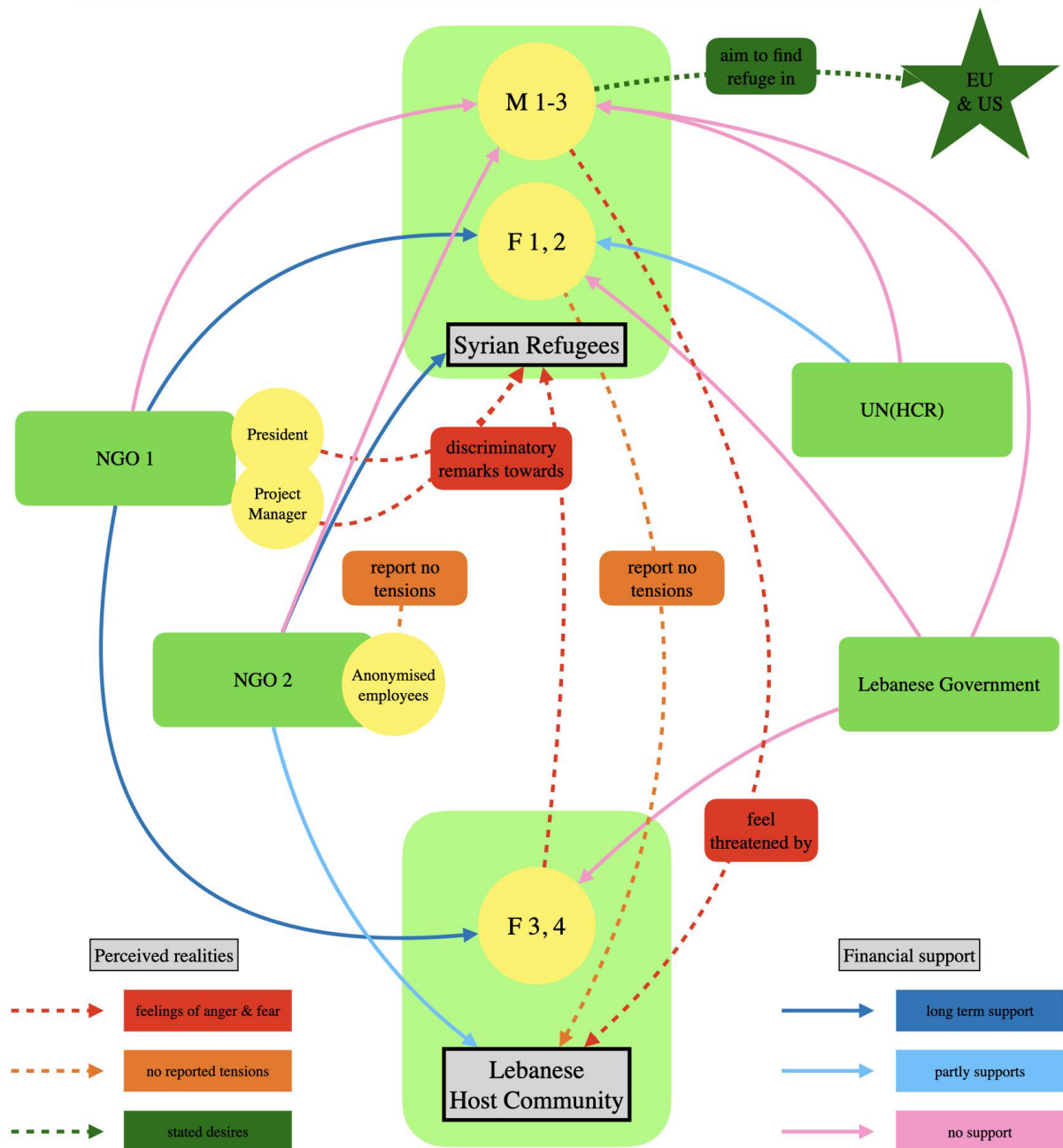


Figure 2: Interrelations of interviewed members of Lebanese host communities and Syrian refugees, with Qudra-funded NGOs and state actors (authors' own illustration 2022).

5 Discussion

These findings illustrate how the Qudra programme, as a case study for EU-funded projects, operates within the broader framework of migration management and thereby reinforces existing externalisation strategies. By embedding these insights into migration theory, it becomes evident that Qudra maintains refugee immobility through development aid, aligning with EU containment objectives. This section discusses the interplay between international

actors, Lebanese governance structures and Lebanese local NGOs, highlighting the tensions and limitations of 2022 policy approaches.

The EU, together with an international community consisting of EU-funded actors, IOs and the Lebanese government, uses policies and plans to insert their objectives whenever applicable, even going so far as to stretch these tools according to their current interests. The momentum of crises and increasing vulnerability is instrumentalised to anchor long-term goals like policy reforms in acute crisis response plans. By prioritising and conditionalising economic support through policies, plans and projects, the disclosed migration regime funded by the EU lobbies for the integration of Syrian refugees into the Lebanese society, or at least for containing refugee individuals within Lebanese borders. This approach is contested by the Lebanese government, which attempts to reclaim leadership over crisis responses. Despite growing legal and social exclusion, Syrian refugees are left with no viable alternative to staying in Lebanon. At the time of research, Lebanon was partly described as an 'NGO state' (I#7) in which international funds sustain NGOs rather than the respective state institutions. While NGOs fill governance gaps, they remain donor-dependent, limiting their ability to enable long-term impacts. This reliance creates a fragmented system where humanitarian organisations provide essential services but lack the authority for systemic reform.

The analysed Qudra programme foregrounds this dynamic by channelling monetary resources to local NGOs via GIZ and Expertise France. Qudra supports, among other objectives, humanitarian aid, development, education and the establishment of safety nets, but struggles to provide a sustainable long-term goal. This finding reflects broader migration management trends on a global level. In Lebanon's case, local NGOs act as proxies in migration control, connecting humanitarian aid with containment strategies (Weima/Hyndman 2019). EU policies reinforce these procedures by funding and collaborating with NGOs in transit countries, keeping refugees in one place without addressing root causes or providing long-term solutions.

Donor-dependencies through external fundings and bureaucratic hurdles weaken NGO effectiveness as short-term projects dominate, thus limiting sustainability regarding structures, institutions and systemic reform. Additionally, internal NGO tensions emerge, with some fostering inclusion while others echo discriminatory narratives, reflecting broader societal divisions and weakening social cohesion as biases against Syrian refugees affect integration efforts. Without stable, state-led frameworks, NGOs provide crucial aid but cannot replace systemic governance. Through donor-driven priorities, reactive policies are perpetuated at the cost of lasting positive change, therefore maintaining a cycle of dependency rather than fostering durable solutions (I#4).

Regarding the limitation of the research, it is crucial to highlight that the credibility of the findings is strengthened through the engagement with multiple institutions and including various perspectives, revealing both official narratives and underlying tensions. However, a comprehensive analysis would require a broader inclusion of additional stakeholders, representatives of the international community, other Lebanese actors, other NGOs involved

in the Qudra programme, and other EU-funded projects. Expanding the number and scope of interviews with Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities would give further comprehensive insights into the practical impact of state policies, cooperation between international organisations and governments as well as implementation processes.

To increase methodological validity, further research would need to deepen the assessment of the NGOs impact on migratory decisions. This should include the measurement of the beneficiaries' intention to migrate *before* and *after* the intervention of the NGOs. It should also include the measurement of the intention to migrate of a comparison group that is not benefiting from any NGO support to evaluate the relevance of NGO support as a factor in migration decision-making. Additionally, the reliability of certain refugee testimonies (I#9,; I#10) must be critically assessed. The presence of a social worker of NGO 1 during the interviews with the Lebanese and Syrian families (I#9-12) may have influenced responses, as NGO 1 was their primary support provider, potentially leading to an overly positive portrayal of NGO 1 and Lebanese society. Furthermore, the social worker, serving as both translator and interpreter, may have inadvertently influenced responses. This sample bias was due to the necessity for accessing these individuals through their beneficiary NGOs, as the latter had an important function as door-opener and most likely also wished to maintain control over the contact process, thus acting as gatekeepers, too. In interviews with NGOs, distinguishing between personal views and public narratives was particularly challenging. Notably, the claim of NGO 2 that no tensions exist between Lebanese society and Syrian refugees contradicts statements made by NGO 1, pointing out the political sensitivities of the issue and highlighting possible efforts to destigmatise Syrian refugees.

Another aspect worthy of further exploration is the contested role of the Lebanese government. Beyond the EU, Lebanon's exclusionary mechanisms play a pivotal role in refugee containment, directly shaping the EU's externalisation strategies. Despite assertions of a quasi-absent Lebanese government in terms of functioning ministries and departments highlighted by most of the interviewed state representatives (I#1-4), the Lebanese government pursues a re-appropriation of the refugee crisis response in an effort to position the Lebanese government as an active agent in the border regime on the ground. A better understanding of these dynamics would offer deeper insights into the multi-layered governance of forced displacement.

6 Conclusion

This research contributes to critical border studies with its insights on a concrete case of externalisation within the EU border regime. It examines whether the economic support provided by the EU, implemented through projects by NGOs, influences Syrian refugees' migratory decisions. Our findings confirm that the EU is applying a containment strategy for Syrian refugees in Lebanon which is, to some extent, successful. The EU assures through its conditional economic support that the externalisation of migration management and containment interests are imposed through policies, plans and projects. Further implemented by NGOs on the ground, the EU tries to promote Syrian refugees' integration into Lebanese

society, rather than supporting other perspectives such as resettlement to a third country or return to Syria. The case study of the Qudra programme showed that Syrian refugees supported by NGOs working within this programme tend to consider their stay in Lebanon as their best option. However, it is important to highlight that further research is needed to gather more multifaceted results on the direct impact of economic support to Syrian refugees through NGOs on their migration decisions.

This research further showed how the EU's containment strategy is contested by the Lebanese government, which tries to regain leadership in its refugee and crisis responses and opposes the idea of permanent integration of Syrian refugees into Lebanese society. The implications of this containment strategy materialise in growing legal and social exclusion. Syrian refugees who do not benefit from economic support through NGOs were more favourable to further migrate, implying either a return to Syria or the uncertain waiting for legal opportunities to migrate to the Global North. It is important to question whether the EU can maintain its strategy of externalisation and containment within the current context of decreasing funding and a growing vulnerability among a significant portion of Lebanon's population.

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