

Irregular Syrian Migration in Lebanon



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Chapter I: Introduction to Irregular Syrian Migration in Lebanon

Irregular migration, particularly among Syrian refugees, has become a notable phenomenon in Lebanon, with far-reaching implications for both the refugees themselves and the host country. Irregular migration refers to movements that occur outside the regulatory norms of the sending, transit, or receiving countries. As the conflict continues to unfold, Lebanon has become a primary destination for Syrians seeking refuge from violence, persecution, and economic hardship. However, the journey to Lebanon is often fraught with challenges, leading many refugees to resort to informal migration channels as a means of survival and hope for a better future.

In the context of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, irregular migration often involves the use of informal channels and undocumented routes due to various socio-economic and legal constraints.

According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), Lebanon hosts one of the largest populations of Syrian refugees per capita globally. Since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011, Lebanon has received a significant influx of refugees, leading to strained resources and heightened socio-economic challenges.

The nature of irregular migration among Syrian refugees in Lebanon is multifaceted, shaped by a combination of factors including political instability, economic hardship, and limited legal pathways for migration. As a result, many refugees resort to irregular migration as a means to seek safety, livelihood opportunities, or family reunification.

The status quo of informal migration of Syrian refugees to Lebanon is characterized by several key factors:

- **Scale of Informal Migration:** Despite efforts by the Lebanese government and international organizations to manage refugee flows, informal migration remains prevalent among Syrian refugees. The exact number of Syrians engaging in informal migration is difficult to ascertain due to the clandestine nature of these movements. However, it is evident that a significant portion of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon relies on informal channels to enter and reside in the country.
- **Drivers of Informal Migration:** The decision to engage in informal migration is driven by a myriad of factors, including limited legal pathways for migration, economic instability, and family reunification needs. Many Syrian refugees opt for informal routes due to the absence of viable alternatives, risking their safety and well-being in pursuit of basic necessities and opportunities for livelihood.
- **Challenges and Risks:** Informal migration routes present numerous challenges and risks for Syrian refugees. These include exposure to exploitation by smugglers, precarious living conditions, and the constant threat of deportation or arrest by Lebanese authorities. Moreover, the lack of legal status leaves migrants vulnerable to exploitation and abuse in the informal labor market.

In this report, we aim to explore the status quo of irregular migration in Lebanon, shedding light on its prevalence, underlying drivers, and implications for both refugees and the host country. Through a comprehensive review of existing literature, reports from humanitarian organizations, and data from governmental and non-governmental sources, this study seeks to illuminate the complexities of informal migration in the context of the Syrian conflict. The report endeavors to contribute to a deeper understanding

of the phenomenon and inform policy and intervention strategies aimed at addressing the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Chapter II: Socioeconomic Challenges Due to Informal Migration of Syrian Refugees to Lebanon

The informal migration of Syrian refugees to Lebanon has generated significant economic, political, and social changes within the country. This chapter delves into the multifaceted impacts of this phenomenon, examining its effects on various aspects of Lebanese society.

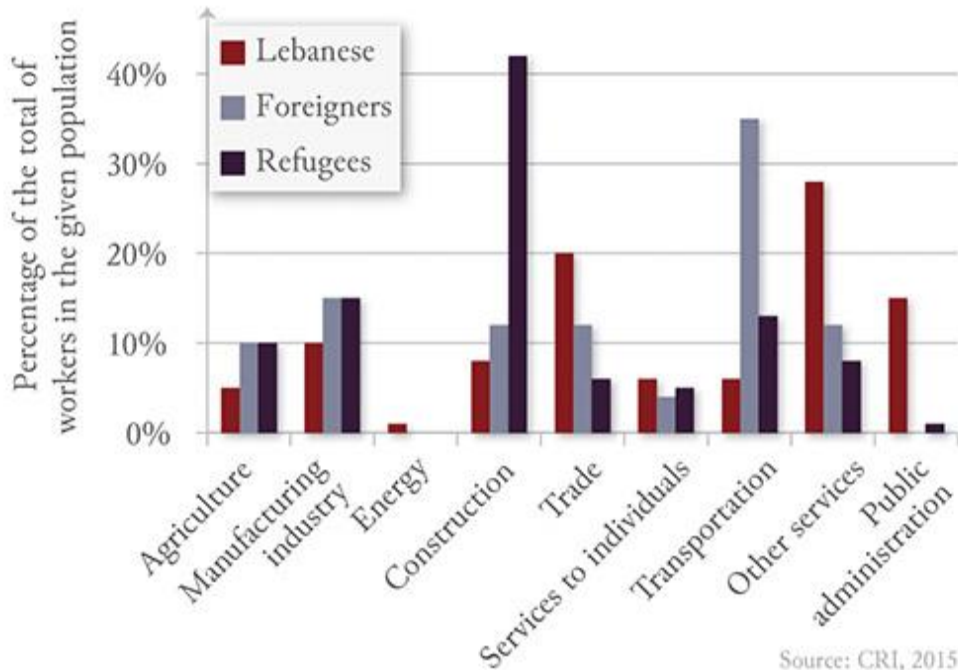
1. Economic Impact

The influx of Syrian refugees has placed immense strain on Lebanon's economy. Studies such as the World Bank's Lebanon Economic Monitor (2019) underscore the economic challenges posed by informal migration, including increased pressure on infrastructure, social services, and labor markets. The informal labor sector, where many Syrian refugees find employment, often leads to competition for jobs and downward pressure on wages, affecting both migrants and native workers (UNDP, 2017). Additionally, the demand for housing and basic services has surged, driving up prices and exacerbating inequalities (UNHCR, 2018).

The informal migration of Syrian refugees has exacerbated unemployment and labor market challenges in Lebanon. UNDP Lebanon's report (2017) highlights barriers to accessing formal employment, pushing many refugees into the informal sector where job opportunities are limited and working conditions are often precarious. This influx of informal labor has contributed to increased competition for jobs and reduced wages, particularly in low-skilled sectors (World Bank, 2019). Furthermore, the informal nature of employment for Syrian refugees makes them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse by unscrupulous employers (ILO, 2020).

The rapid increase in population due to Syrian informal migration has strained Lebanon's public services and infrastructure. UNHCR's report (2018) notes the significant demand for health, education, and housing services, stretching resources and leading to overcrowding in urban areas. This strain on public services has resulted in longer wait times, reduced quality of care, and increased competition for limited resources (World Bank, 2020). Additionally, the informal settlements housing many Syrian refugees lack basic amenities and infrastructure, further exacerbating living conditions and social disparities (NRC, 2019).

The economic changes and challenges resulting from Syrian informal migration to Lebanon underscore the need for comprehensive and sustainable solutions. Addressing these challenges requires coordinated efforts from both the Lebanese government and the international community to alleviate pressure on the economy, support livelihood opportunities, and ensure the well-being of both Syrian refugees and host communities.



2. Political Dynamics

The informal migration of Syrian refugees to Lebanon has not only impacted the country's economy but has also brought about significant changes and challenges in its political dynamics.

The influx of Syrian refugees has raised concerns over border security and national identity in Lebanon. With porous borders and informal entry points, the Lebanese government faces challenges in regulating migration flows and ensuring security. The presence of Syrian refugees has prompted debates over Lebanon's national identity and sovereignty, with some segments of society expressing fears of demographic shifts and cultural changes. These concerns have fueled political rhetoric and influenced government policies regarding border management and refugee integration.

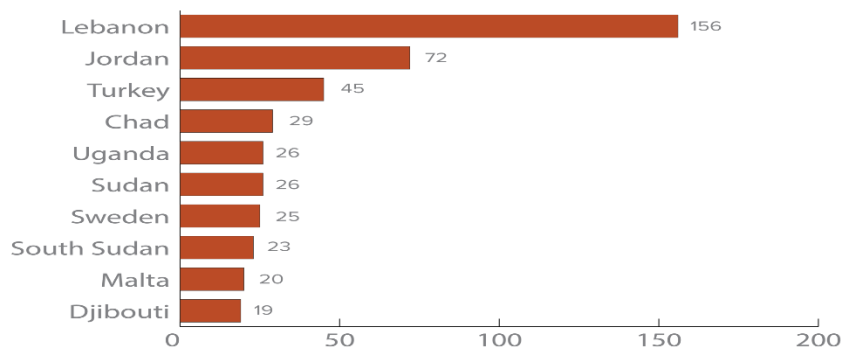
The Syrian refugee crisis has exacerbated political polarization and sectarian tensions within Lebanese society. Research by Harb and Leenders (2013) highlights the deep-seated divisions and rivalries among Lebanon's political factions, which have been further inflamed by the influx of Syrian refugees. Sectarian-based political parties and militias have capitalized on anti-refugee sentiments to advance their agendas, contributing to social fragmentation and political instability. This polarization hampers efforts to develop cohesive and inclusive policies for addressing the needs of both refugees and host communities.

The presence of Syrian refugees has posed policy dilemmas and governance challenges for the Lebanese government. The rapid increase in population and strain on public services has stretched government resources and institutional capacity, limiting its ability to effectively respond to the crisis (Diwan and Zein, 2020). Policy responses to the refugee influx have been characterized by ad-hoc measures and short-term fixes, rather than comprehensive strategies addressing long-term integration and humanitarian needs (World Bank, 2019). This lack of coherent governance exacerbates tensions and undermines trust in state institutions, further complicating efforts to manage the crisis.

3. Social Transformations

The informal migration of Syrian refugees to Lebanon has led to profound social transformations within the host country. These transformations encompass various dimensions, including social cohesion, cultural diversity, and community dynamics. One significant aspect is the strain on social cohesion, as the sudden influx of refugees has tested the resilience of Lebanese communities. Social tensions have arisen due to competition for limited resources, increased pressure on infrastructure, and cultural differences between Syrian refugees and the Lebanese population. Additionally, the presence of Syrian refugees has reshaped cultural dynamics, contributing to the diversification of Lebanon's cultural landscape. This has led to both challenges and opportunities for intercultural exchange and understanding. Furthermore, informal settlements housing Syrian refugees have emerged as distinct communities within Lebanon, influencing local social structures and dynamics. Overall, the social transformations resulting from Syrian informal migration to Lebanon highlight the need for inclusive policies and initiatives that promote social cohesion, address integration challenges, and foster mutual understanding between refugees and host communities. (UNESCO, 2020).

Lebanon has the most refugees per capita in the world
Number of refugees per 1,000 inhabitants at the end of 2018



Source: UNHCR

The economic, political, and social changes resulting from Syrian informal migration to Lebanon underscore the complexity and magnitude of this phenomenon. By addressing the interconnected challenges and leveraging opportunities for cooperation and innovation, Lebanon can navigate the impacts of informal migration more effectively and work towards sustainable solutions that benefit both refugees and host communities.

Chapter III: Quantifying The Scale of Refugee Arrivals, Gender and Age Distribution, and Duration of Stay

The Syrian refugee crisis has had profound implications for neighboring countries, including Lebanon.

By delving into the nuances of informal migration, this chapter aims to illuminate the challenges and opportunities faced by Syrian refugees in Lebanon, shedding light on their living conditions, employment realities, and access to essential services. Additionally, it underscores the importance of robust data

collection and analysis in informing evidence-based policies and interventions to support the needs of Syrian refugees and promote durable solutions in Lebanon's humanitarian context.

1. Annual Arrival Estimates:

- According to UNHCR data, the number of Syrian refugees arriving in Lebanon has fluctuated over the years. For example, in 2020, around 22,000 Syrian refugees were newly registered in Lebanon.
- However, these numbers may not fully capture informal migration flows, as many Syrian refugees enter Lebanon through unofficial channels or do not register with UNHCR.

2. Gender and Age Distribution:

- Gender and age distribution among Syrian refugees in Lebanon vary, but data suggests that women and children constitute a significant portion of the refugee population.
- For instance, UNHCR reported that in 2020, approximately 50% of registered Syrian refugees in Lebanon were children under the age of 18, while around 23% were women and girls of reproductive age.
- These numbers highlight the vulnerability of women and children within the Syrian refugee population and underscore the importance of targeted assistance and protection measures.

3. Stability of Refugee Population:

- The stability of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon is influenced by various factors, including changes in the security situation in Syria, economic conditions in Lebanon, and shifts in government policies.
- While some Syrian refugees have returned to Syria voluntarily, particularly as conditions improve in certain areas, others continue to seek refuge in Lebanon due to ongoing conflict and insecurity.
- Data on the exact number of Syrian refugees leaving Lebanon annually may be more challenging to ascertain due to the informal nature of migration and the lack of systematic tracking mechanisms.

4. Informal Settlements and Living Conditions:

- A significant proportion of Syrian refugees in Lebanon reside in informal settlements, including makeshift camps, rented apartments in urban areas, and abandoned buildings.
- According to a study by the International Rescue Committee (IRC), as of 2019, approximately 70% of Syrian refugee households in Lebanon lived below the poverty line, with many residing in inadequate housing conditions lacking basic amenities.

5. Informal Employment:

- Informal employment is prevalent among Syrian refugees in Lebanon, with many working in low-wage sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work.
- Exact numbers regarding the proportion of Syrian refugees engaged in informal employment are challenging to determine due to the lack of formal registration and documentation in the informal economy.

While these data points provide insights into the quantifiable aspects of Syrian informal migration to Lebanon, it's essential to acknowledge the limitations in data collection and the dynamic nature of migration patterns in the context of complex humanitarian crises. Continual monitoring and research efforts are crucial for understanding and responding effectively to the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Furthermore, tracking the exact numbers of Syrian refugees staying in Lebanon for specific durations or leaving the country can be challenging due to several factors, including the informal nature of migration, limited access to data, and the dynamic nature of refugee movements.

1. Duration of Stay:

- Many Syrian refugees in Lebanon have been displaced for several years, with some residing in the country since the onset of the Syrian conflict in 2011.
- Data from UNHCR and other organizations indicate that a significant portion of the Syrian refugee population in Lebanon has been in protracted displacement, facing challenges related to livelihood opportunities, access to education, and legal status.
- While some Syrian refugees may have intended their stay in Lebanon to be temporary, the prolonged nature of the conflict and ongoing challenges in Syria have led to protracted displacement for many individuals and families.

2. Return Movements:

- Over the years, there have been sporadic reports of Syrian refugees returning to Syria voluntarily, particularly as conditions improve in certain areas.
- However, the scale of return movements has varied, and many Syrian refugees continue to express concerns about the security and stability of their areas of origin in Syria.
- Return movements are influenced by a range of factors, including security conditions, access to basic services, livelihood opportunities, and perceptions of safety and stability in Syria.

3. Challenges in Tracking Departures:

- While some Syrian refugees may choose to return to Syria voluntarily, others may leave Lebanon for alternative destinations, including resettlement to third countries, irregular migration routes, or reintegration in other host countries.
- Tracking departures from Lebanon can be challenging due to the informal nature of migration, lack of comprehensive exit data, and the diversity of migration pathways chosen by individuals and families.
- Additionally, some Syrian refugees may opt to remain in Lebanon despite facing difficulties, including limited access to basic services and legal protections, due to factors such as family ties, economic considerations, or concerns about safety and security in Syria.

Overall, while there are indications of both return movements and onward migration from Lebanon among Syrian refugees, precise numbers and patterns of departure can be difficult to quantify due to the complexities of refugee migration dynamics and the lack of systematic data collection mechanisms. Efforts to enhance data collection, improve coordination among relevant stakeholders, and provide support for durable solutions are essential for addressing the needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon effectively.

Chapter IV: The Impact of Lebanon's Crisis on Refugees and Migrants

Lebanon's overlapping socio-economic, political and health crises have had a particular impact on the country's most vulnerable refugee and host communities. In 2022, the UN's Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon revealed an ongoing struggle to secure basic needs, with 90 percent of Syrian refugees still living in extreme poverty, and found that negative coping mechanisms, deterioration in the food security situation of families, and living in substandard shelter conditions remain prevalent. Rates of food insecurity among Syrian refugees sharply increased from 49 percent in 2021 to 67 percent in 2022, while the percentage of households with inadequate food consumption rose from 46 to 57 percent. Over two-thirds of Syrian refugees were found not to have the economic capacity to afford the minimum essential items needed to survive, with 90 percent of the Syrian refugee households surveyed unable to meet their survival needs in remote regions. As of 2022, close to the entire Syrian refugee population (more than 94 percent) had accrued debts to cover their essential food and non-food needs, and 97 percent had resorted to negative coping strategies to meet their food needs, including reducing meal portions and the number of meals consumed each day. The percentage of working Syrian refugees in 2022 stood at 33 percent. However, employed Syrians were found to be unable to adequately cover the costs of basic food and non-food needs without the additional humanitarian and/or financial aid. The percentage of children aged between five and 17-year-old who were engaged in various forms of child labour in 2022 stood at just four, with this proportion being dominated by boys.

Almost all (93%) of the 498 Palestinian refugee households that took part in a separate socio-economic survey conducted by UNWRA in 2022 were found to live below the poverty line, as a direct result of the increase in consumer prices stemming from Lebanon's ongoing economic crisis. Some 62 percent of respondent households had reduced the number of meals they consumed, and about half had begun to accumulate debt to secure basic needs. Employment remained precarious in 2022, with 61 percent of those interviewed having been employed for fewer than nine months out of the year, and 50 percent having not had a contract with their employer throughout these unstable periods of employment. As the majority of Palestinian refugees continue to work in the informal economy as a result of the fact that they are not naturalised, Palestinians continue to be denied access to more than 39 professions, including medicine, law and engineering. They are further denied entry to professions that encompass membership in a syndicate or trade union.

In 2021, Lebanon's Ministry of Labour relaxed labour laws to allow Palestinians to work in managerial, business, tourism, industrial, information, health, education and service sectors, but this right was restricted to Palestinians born in Lebanon, born to a Lebanese mother, or married to a Lebanese citizen. According to UNRWA's survey, employment conditions of Palestinians in 2022 did not improve over 2021, with only 12 percent of those surveyed having an official written contract with their employer. According to the International Labour Organization, the majority of Palestinian refugees are engaged in low-status jobs that are "poorly paid, insecure and lack adequate social protection." Decades of marginalisation and exclusion have left the refugee community in Lebanon vulnerable to exploitation in the workplace, insecure contracts, as well as inter-generational poverty. (Less information is available about the realities and impacts of the country's ongoing crisis on other smaller refugee groups, such as Iraqis and Sudanese).

MDWs have been particularly impacted by Lebanon's crisis, as they continue to be governed under a system that deprives them of their basic human rights. The onset of the crisis in 2019, coupled with the limitations imposed by the *kafala* system, has also led to many MDWs losing their employment, leaving them homeless and unable to meet their basic living needs or the cost of their flight home should they wish to leave the country. For MDWs who were still employed, lockdowns during the Covid-19 pandemic left them isolated in the homes of their employers, many of whom are mentally and physically abusive. According to multiple local reports, since 2019, MDWs have suffered worsening financial

constraints due to being fired from their jobs or facing cuts to their salaries, while a rapid devaluation of the Lebanese pound reduced the purchasing power of wages. Consequently, many MDWs are being pushed into severe poverty, and are unable to secure food and shelter.

Well over half (58%) of migrant workers surveyed for a local NGO's rapid needs assessment in 2020 reported having lost their jobs since the beginning of the economic crisis, and 49 percent said they wanted to return to their country of origin. Respondents further reported living in multi-dimensional poverty and lacking sufficient funds to send remittances to their families back home. Almost two-thirds (62%) of respondents said they were unable to pay their rent and were at risk of eviction, 61 percent did not have access to the medication they needed, 60 percent had limited access to hygiene supplies, 51 percent had limited access to food and 34 percent had limited access to drinking water.

A 2022 survey of migrant households conducted by the UN's migration agency, IOM, across all governorates of Lebanon found that close to a quarter (23 percent) of people in respondent households were unemployed and seeking work, and that 26 percent of such households were in debt. In half of these cases, this debt was incurred in order to meet basic household needs. In 60 percent of surveyed households, at least one occupant had reduced their food expenditure, and 12 percent of surveyed households reported moderate or severe hunger. Over one-third of surveyed households reported that at least one member had spent some or all household savings on food. The main forms of assistance received by migrant households were food, followed by cash.

Deportations and Returns

In 2019, Lebanon's Higher Defence Council ordered security forces to begin deporting Syrians entering Lebanon through "illegal border crossings." The General Directorate of General Security reportedly deported more than 6,800 Syrians in 2019 and 2020, only to halt deportations when Covid-19 lockdowns began. In late 2022, Lebanon's caretaker minister of the displaced announced a plan to repatriate 15,000 Syrian refugees to Syria every month, insisting that the war in Syria was over and the country had become safe. No clear strategy or official agreement between the Lebanese and Syrian governments has been announced, and Lebanese authorities are not coordinating these efforts with UNHCR. In 2018, Lebanon opened registration for voluntary return for Syrians, which according to Lebanese officials resulted in the return of 21,000 refugees in 2020. According to UNHCR, 76,500 Syrians have returned voluntarily from Lebanon since 2016.

When it comes to Syrian refugee return, in the absence of discussion on different and intersectional forms of persecution, conversations on safety remain difficult to frame. The lack of a comprehensive domestic legal framework for refugees in Lebanon has resulted in a series of directives and decisions that are politically charged and that have frequently changed over the last decade. This has led to a failure to address the protection concerns faced by refugees in all their diversity, as well as in the homogenisation of refugees and the lack of an intersectional approach to refugee management. Alongside reports about Syria by international humanitarian organisations and testimonies highlighting forced conscription, torture and detention, as well as persecution on the grounds of religion, nationality, gender, membership of a particular social group and political opinion, have long formed part of Syrians' realities. Despite these realities, 168 Syrians were reportedly forcibly returned from Lebanon in April 2023 alone. In April and May, the Lebanese Armed Forces conducted a series of raids and arrests that led to the deportation of displaced Syrians, including people registered with UNHCR, and to "an overall reduction of protection space in Lebanon".

Chapter V: Solutions and Recommendations for Addressing Informal Migration of Syrians to Lebanon and Its Challenges

Addressing the informal migration of Syrians to Lebanon and the challenges it presents requires a comprehensive and multi-dimensional approach. This chapter provides a detailed examination of potential solutions and recommendations to mitigate the impacts of this issue.

1. Enhancing Integration:

- **Community Integration Programs:** Develop initiatives that foster interaction and collaboration between Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities, promoting social cohesion and mutual understanding.
- **Language and Cultural Exchange:** Facilitate language and cultural exchange programs to bridge the gap between refugees and host communities, fostering empathy and reducing stereotypes.
- **Promotion of Inclusive Policies:** Advocate for policies that promote the inclusion of Syrian refugees in all aspects of society, including education, healthcare, and employment.

2. Strengthening Governance and Policy Frameworks

- **Policy Coordination:** Improve coordination among government agencies, international organizations, and civil society to ensure a unified approach to addressing the needs of Syrian refugees and managing migration flows.
- **Legal Reforms:** Enact legal reforms to enhance the protection of refugees' rights and facilitate their access to essential services, including healthcare, education, and legal employment.
- **Capacity Building:** Invest in capacity-building initiatives to strengthen the ability of local authorities and institutions to effectively respond to the challenges posed by informal migration.

3. Empowering Communities

- **Community Empowerment Initiatives:** Support grassroots organizations and community-based initiatives that empower refugees and host communities to address common challenges and build resilience.
- **Psychosocial Support Services:** Provide accessible and culturally sensitive psychosocial support services to address the mental health needs of Syrian refugees and mitigate the impact of trauma and displacement.
- **Youth Engagement:** Engage youth from both refugee and host communities in activities that promote social cohesion, leadership development, and positive community engagement.

4. International Cooperation and Support

- **International Partnerships:** Strengthen partnerships with international organizations, donor agencies, and neighboring countries to share the burden of hosting refugees and mobilize resources.
- **Humanitarian Assistance:** Ensure adequate humanitarian assistance and support for Syrian refugees, including food aid, shelter, and healthcare, to meet their basic needs and alleviate their vulnerability.
- **Diplomatic Engagement:** Engage in diplomatic efforts to address the root causes of the Syrian conflict and promote peace, stability, and reconciliation in the region.

Conclusion :

In confronting the complex issue of informal migration of Syrians to Lebanon, it is imperative to recognize that solutions must be comprehensive, collaborative, and rooted in principles of humanity and solidarity. By embracing integration, strengthening governance frameworks, empowering communities, and fostering international cooperation, Lebanon can navigate the challenges posed by informal migration with resilience and compassion. Together, through concerted efforts and unwavering commitment, we can not only address the immediate impacts of informal migration but also pave the way towards a future where all individuals, regardless of their origins, can thrive and contribute to a more prosperous and harmonious society. The path ahead may be challenging, but with determination and solidarity, we can overcome these challenges and build a brighter future for Lebanon and its people.

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