

# THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF ANTI-SYRIAN HATE IN POST-CRISIS LEBANON



A CRITICAL REVIEW

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## ABSTRACT

In order to develop a comprehensive understanding of Lebanon's economic structure, the integration and exclusion of Syrian workers, and the evolution of xenophobic hate speech, the methodology employed in this study includes a critical review of existing literature, including academic research, economic analyses, and media reports. Initially designed to only focus on refugee labour, it was necessary to expand the framework to understand **how the position of the refugee and migrant worker is being produced in Lebanon**. This adjustment allowed for a richer understanding of the interplay between economic factors and social dynamics. This report contributes new insights by **contextualising the plight of Syrian refugees within the broader dynamics of Lebanon's economic crisis and the structure of the Lebanese economy**.

## INTRO

Existing analyses explain the rise of anti-Syrian hate in Lebanon either as a scapegoating strategy used by political elites to channel public anger away from them or as a result of labour market competition between Lebanese and Syrian workers in the new economy. These interpretations cannot explain the causes behind **the recent intensification of anti-Syrian violence in the country**. Some analysts assume that economic conditions in Lebanon would be better off without Syrians, yet they do not consider the possibility that the economic position **Syrian refugees currently occupy may be a product of decisions regarding the structure of the Lebanese economy itself**.

An analysis of the economic history of Lebanon, focused on the role of Syrian refugee labour in the country, shows that it is not the increased influx of refugees that has intensified the negative and xenophobic response of society, but rather **recent transformations in the Lebanese economy itself**. Anti-Syrian hate currently springs not simply from the competition with the Lebanese workforce for employment, but from the underlying tendency for employment to disappear in the first place.

In other words, the source is **not how Syrians compete for the Lebanese labour market, but how the Lebanese population is reacting to its own "syrianisation" as the conditions of underemployment start to affect also the Lebanese middle class**.

## PROBLEM SETTING

It is not only necessary to analyse the responses of Lebanese society to the influx of Syrian refugees – both in the last years and in the aftermath of the recent earthquake – but we must also consider **how the consolidation of a crisis economy in Lebanon over the last decades played a crucial role in setting up the conditions for how Syrian labourers were absorbed by Lebanese economy and society**.

**An important symptom of the refugee crisis in Lebanon is the enigmatic phenomena of increasing anti-Syrian hate and xenophobia** – a problem that requires us to consider the effects of the Lebanese economic crisis, specially after the 2020 Beirut Blast, in the reception and perception of the social place of displaced populations in the country.

The xenophobic responses of the Lebanese middle-class to the recent influx of Syrian refugees tracks more profoundly with **changes on the national economy and its own thrust towards precarisation of work** than to historical transformations on migratory flows in the region – and this connection needs to be better understood.



## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- What has changed in Lebanese society and economy that has shifted the perception and response to Syrian refugees?
- What is the socio-economic role of xenophobia and how can we explain its economic conditioning?
- What type of economic dynamic profits and thrives on the crisis of social development, and what are its effects on humanitarian action and solidarity?

## ECONOMIC TRANSFORMATION

The economic crisis caused a significant shift in the Lebanese class structure, with many previously middle-class individuals now pushed to take working class jobs. This results not from direct competition with Syrian workers but from the overall contraction of the economy and the scarcity of employment opportunities.

The current alliance between the ruling class and members of the Lebanese working class when it comes to combating Syrian labour often comes with an attempt to valorise "Lebaneseness" in the labour market. This can be linked to the Lebanese workers (many ex-middle class) finding themselves in cheap labour jobs and selling their identity on the market to stand out.

## SURPLUS POPULATION

Syrian workers are increasingly being managed as a surplus population in Lebanon, treated as not only cheap labour but unwanted labour subject to intensified legal and social restrictions by the security sector. This is a result of broader economic and political strategies rather than an inherent conflict between Syrian and Lebanese workers.

## KEY FINDINGS

### PREVENTING SOLIDARITY

Key sectors of Lebanese society have been attempting to solidify their position by exploiting Syrian labour and spreading anti-Syrian hate, while continuing to avoid the need for structural economic reforms. This strategy attempts to divert public attention from the root causes of the economic crisis in order to pit different segments of the working class against each other.

## FURTHER INVESTIGATION

A deeper exploration of the problem of productive and unproductive economic sectors, especially when it comes to the (non-)production of surplus value in the form of tangible commodities, based on economies like Lebanon. Can a service sector sustain the value of a currency or is there no other option but to turn back to manufacturing and agriculture as the main producers of value?

Information about the productivity of labour in Lebanon is vague. What does it mean that wages form only 20% of the GDP, and how can we identify the current share of profits that can be attributed to the labour of workers as opposed to rentism? Which workers matter the most for the production of capital in Lebanon at the current time and have power to disrupt the interests of the ruling class?

What forms of political organising, or even knowledge sharing, about this struggle can be arranged within the existing hostile environment against refugees and various forms of labour organising in Lebanon? What kind of preparation do organisers need to go through ahead of meeting Lebanese people who are hostile to refugees? What information and strategies need to be developed? What role is played by the NGO sector? Part of answering this question involves reviewing similar social conflicts in other parts of the world, paying particular attention to what we can learn and develop from comparative analysis.

