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THE IMPACT OF U.S. AID CUTS ON SYRIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON



ACCESS CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS (ACHR)

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• GLOSSARY

UNHCR: the **United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees** is mandated by a UN General Assembly resolution to provide international protection to refugees, stateless persons, and others of concern, and to seek durable solutions to their displacement, in line with the 1951 Refugee Convention and its 1967 Protocol.

USAID: the **United States Agency for International Development** is an independent U.S. government agency established by the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961, responsible for administering civilian foreign aid and development assistance, including humanitarian relief, governance, economic growth, health, and conflict mitigation programs worldwide. It became the largest donor of humanitarian aid before the cut.

WFP: the **World Food Programme** is the food assistance branch of the United Nations, established in 1961 by the UN General Assembly and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), mandated to combat global hunger and provide emergency food aid, nutrition support, and resilience programs in line with humanitarian law and principles

UNICEF: United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund is a UN agency created in 1946 and mandated by the UN General Assembly to advocate for the protection of children's rights, provide humanitarian and development assistance to children and mothers, and ensure access to health, education, nutrition, and protection services.

INTERSOS: An independent, non-profit humanitarian organization founded in 1992 under Italian law, mandated to provide emergency relief and long-term assistance to people affected by conflict, natural disaster, and extreme vulnerability, with particular focus on protection, health, education, and shelter in line with international humanitarian law.

MSF: Médecins Sans Frontières/ Doctors Without Borders: An independent, non-governmental humanitarian medical organization founded in 1971 under French law, mandated to provide impartial medical care to populations in crisis due to armed conflict, epidemics, exclusion from healthcare, and natural disasters, guided by the principles of medical ethics, neutrality, and independence.

IDPs: Internally Displaced Persons are persons or groups who have been forced or obliged to flee or leave their homes or places of habitual residence, particularly as a result of or in order to avoid the effects of armed conflict, generalized violence, human rights violations, or disasters, but who have not crossed an internationally recognized state border. (Definition per UN Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement, 1998).

GBV: Gender-Based Violence refers to any harmful act that is perpetrated against a person's will, based on social (gender) differences between males and females. It encompasses acts that inflict physical, sexual, psychological, or economic harm or suffering, threats of such acts, coercion, and deprivations of liberty.

PRM: Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration is a bureau within the U.S. Department of State mandated under the U.S. Refugee Act of 1980 and other legal instruments to provide protection, humanitarian assistance, and sustainable solutions for refugees, conflict victims, stateless persons, and vulnerable migrants, and to oversee U.S. contributions to international organizations such as UNHCR, IOM, and ICRC.

• EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The year 2025 marked a turning point for humanitarian assistance to Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Through Executive Order 14169 and the subsequent Rescissions Act of 2025, the U.S. government froze and rescinded billions in foreign aid, terminating more than 83 percent of USAID programs globally. This decision had an immediate and devastating impact on refugees in Lebanon, in a country already in economic collapse and hosting the highest refugee-to-population ratio in the world.

This report provides a comprehensive analysis of the consequences of these U.S. aid cuts. It draws upon testimonies from Syrian refugees, humanitarian agency reports, and academic analysis to document the ways in which funding reductions undermined survival strategies in the absence of Lebanese government support. The evidence demonstrates that due to these cuts, refugees lost access to food aid, cash assistance, healthcare subsidies, education support, and protection services and that there is still a high need of humanitarian aid support in Lebanon despite the return of the majority of Syrian refugees to Syria.

Refugees now are at higher risk of increased debt, child labour, untreated illnesses, school dropouts, eviction, and other forms of rising insecurity. Humanitarian focused UN agencies, particularly UNHCR, WFP, UNICEF, and NGOs like Médecins Sans Frontières (MSF), have been forced to drastically reduce programming due to acute funding shortages. Refugees themselves have described these cuts as a “death sentence”, with one declaring: “By cutting off aid, you are killing us”. The report concludes that the USAID cuts have not only deepened vulnerabilities but also destabilized the broader humanitarian response in Lebanon. This paper underlines the need for the restoration of USAID funding, diversification of donor support, strengthening of Lebanese institutions, and long-term contingency planning for durable solutions.

• METHODOLOGY

This report is based on 20 in-depth interviews conducted with Syrian refugees whose lives were directly affected by the suspension of humanitarian aid following the USAID funding cuts enacted under the second Trump administration. In addition, the study incorporated insights from staff members of humanitarian organizations whose programs were significantly impacted by the withdrawal of USAID funding.

Adopting a qualitative research design, the report relies primarily on direct testimonies from the refugees themselves. All refugee interviews were conducted in Arabic via telephone, in line with participants' language preferences, logistical constraints, and to ensure the safety and anonymity of interviewees. Staff members of humanitarian organizations contributed through written responses to a set of structured questions, allowing for consistency and comparability across cases.

Following the interviews, data were transcribed and systematically analyzed to identify recurring themes, patterns of impact, and narratives of resilience. To maintain confidentiality and safeguard participants, all individuals were assigned pseudonyms. This approach was chosen to foster trust, enable participants to speak openly, and preserve the integrity and accuracy of the collected data.

In addition to primary data, the report draws on secondary and open-source materials, including publicly available reports, news coverage, and legal documents. These sources were employed to contextualize the testimonies and to deepen the analysis of programmatic disruptions resulting from the aid cuts. Particular attention was given to official announcements by United Nations agencies and organizations directly funded by USAID, in order to triangulate findings and ensure a robust understanding of the broader humanitarian and institutional consequences of the funding withdrawal.

• INTRODUCTION

Over a decade into the Syrian refugee crisis, the survival of millions of Syrians in host countries like Lebanon remains deeply intertwined with the continued provision of international humanitarian assistance. For countless families, this aid is not supplementary, it is essential to their day-to-day survival. The gradual withdrawal and recent freezing of international funding has resulted in cascading humanitarian deterioration, leaving families exposed to hunger, homelessness, untreated illness, and increasing psychological trauma. Refugees, especially in Lebanon, also face several protection risks. The country's ongoing financial collapse, combined with the lack of legal protections for refugees, has left Syrian families with no access to stable income, limited access to education and healthcare, and no national safety net to fall back on. In this context, even minimal humanitarian assistance such as a monthly cash transfer, a food voucher, or access to subsidized medication can support and ease financial stress of vulnerable refugee families until their safe dignified return to their country.

Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita globally, with government figures estimating around 1.5 million Syrian refugees and over 11,000 from other nationalities as of 2024. More than 70% of Syrians in the country lack legal residency, severely restricting their mobility, access to work, and personal security. The protracted economic collapse in Lebanon has further eroded refugees' access to basic goods and services, pushing an already vulnerable population into deeper destitution. According to the UNHCR's 2023 Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, 90% of registered Syrian refugees live in extreme poverty – defined as being unable to meet basic needs for survival such as food, rent and healthcare, and require humanitarian aid to meet these needs. Also, nearly all households face difficulties in securing enough food. Many families are forced to skip meals, relying heavily on humanitarian assistance especially cash aid which, while essential, often falls short of meeting basic survival needs.

Lebanon's capacity to host and integrate refugees has been profoundly constrained by structural fragility and restrictive governance. Since the country's economic collapse in 2019, public institutions have faced chronic fiscal paralysis, with basic services in health, education, electricity, and water severely degraded. In addition to Syrian refugees, Lebanon hosts a total of 222,000 Palestinians who have also been impacted by cuts, suspensions and the defunding of the UN relief and works agency (UNRWA) over the last few years which has further caused and shaped the pressure faced by other agencies and NGOs serving Palestinian refugees.

In addition, the absence of an asylum system, combined with restrictive residency and labor policies, has excluded most Syrians from legal protection and formal access to national systems. As a result, nearly 80 percent of refugees lack valid residency and remain highly vulnerable to arrest, exploitation, and service exclusion. In sectors such as healthcare, education, and shelter, refugees encounter high costs, administrative barriers, and systemic neglect, leaving humanitarian programs as their primary source of support. Consequently, Lebanon's institutional weakness and restrictive policies have entrenched refugee dependency on external aid, making international funding an indispensable lifeline.

• BACKGROUND OF USAID FUND

USAID, founded in 1961 under President John F. Kennedy, is the United States government's main agency for delivering foreign aid and supporting development worldwide. Its mission focuses on boosting economic growth, improving global health, supporting democratic institutions, and providing humanitarian relief. Lebanon, due to its strategic importance in the Middle East and ongoing political and economic instability, has been a key recipient of USAID support aimed at promoting stability, development, and good governance. For years, the United States played a leading role in regional humanitarian efforts, providing over \$18 billion since 2011, including funding for food, healthcare, shelter, education, and cash transfers in Lebanon. In 2024 alone, Lebanon received \$219 million in US assistance, of which \$91 million was dedicated to humanitarian relief.

However, in 2025, sweeping U.S. policy shifts abruptly ended this support, leaving a significant gap in the humanitarian response. From 2011 to 2024, U.S. funding was central to Lebanon's refugee response. Through USAID and the State Department's Bureau of Population, Refugees, and Migration (PRM), the U.S. directed funding primarily to UNHCR, WFP, and UNICEF, while also supporting NGOs such as Caritas, Première Urgence, and MSF. The services varied between cash & Food Aid which were funded jointly by UNHCR-WFP programs delivering monthly multipurpose cash and e-vouchers. Healthcare services which subsidized up to 75% of refugee medical costs, including hospitalizations and emergency care. In addition to education and protection support, where education services included transport allowance coverage and school fees for refugee children through UNICEF, whereas protection and Legal Assistance supported, birth registration and civil documentation, and GBV survivor services. This landscape shifted in early 2025 when Executive Order 14169 - announced in January - froze all foreign aid disbursements for 90 days, reevaluating and realigning United States foreign aid. As of March 2025, Reports confirmed 83% of USAID programs worldwide were terminated, eliminating most refugee programs. The Rescissions Act of 2025 proposes withdrawing funds that were previously approved but remain unspent. This includes unused allocations from the Fiscal Year 2024 appropriations and the full-year continuing resolution for FY 2025. Among the cuts is a significant \$800 million reduction from the State Department's budget for migration and refugee assistance. The result is an unprecedented collapse of the humanitarian safety net in Lebanon, where refugees had no national fallback mechanisms.

This report aims to assess the consequences of the U.S. aid cuts on Syrian refugees in Lebanon. It investigates the ongoing reliance on humanitarian assistance, identifies critical gaps in existing programs, and offers policy recommendations. Drawing on firsthand refugee accounts and humanitarian data, the report presents a comprehensive analysis that blends statistical evidence with the lived realities of those most affected.

• HUMANITARIAN IMPACT OF US AID CUTS

2024

\$219M

in U.S. assistance

\$91M

for humanitarian
Relief

On 20 January 2025, the Trump administration issued an executive order halting all foreign development aid for 90 days, before deciding on 25 February to cut most funding permanently. For Lebanon, heavily reliant on US support for refugee assistance, the repercussions have been particularly severe. In 2024, Lebanon received \$219 million in US assistance, of which \$91 million was dedicated to humanitarian relief. The United States had consistently ranked among the top contributors of international aid for Lebanon.

This support has historically included monthly cash transfers for food and rent, winter assistance, medical support for chronic illnesses, childbirth, and emergency surgeries, educational support to keep children in school, legal aid for birth registration and protection, psychosocial services for children and adults affected by trauma. Even this amount aid was never fully sufficient with families often living on the edge of survival. However, this assistance allowed recipients to meet basic survival thresholds, avoid dangerous coping mechanisms, and retain a sense of human dignity. Since late 2023 and throughout 2024–2025, refugees have witnessed a rapid and devastating reduction in aid.

Medical assistance stopped or became inaccessible, leading to untreated chronic illnesses, missed treatments for cancer, epilepsy, diabetes, and psychological conditions. School support was removed, pushing children into child labor, early marriage, and complete isolation from education. Legal aid and protection programs shrunk while violations that undermine protection such as wide scale of arrests, evictions, and forced deportations are still present.

• CASH ASSISTANCE AND DEBT

Before 2025, the UNHCR-WFP joint cash program provided monthly support to over 115,000 families. The U.S. cuts forced a 40% reduction in funding, leaving tens of thousands without assistance. Refugees immediately resorted to debt and survival strategies. According to ACHR interviewees, cash assistance was reduced to \$45 per month, an amount insufficient to cover even a week's worth of food for a family. Additionally, food assistance was terminated for many, forcing households to cut back on meals, skip them altogether, or rely on debt to survive. One father stated "I reduced our food consumption to pay for my daughter's schooling. We chose to eat less so she could continue studying" Others reported working in dangerous conditions to compensate: "I worked in a stone-cutting factory, a job I wasn't experienced in and very dangerous. But I had to do it after aid stopped".

The most visible impact has been the cut of the joint UNHCR-WFP cash assistance for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, considered a lifeline and income for the most vulnerable refugees for food and other essential needs. Due to funding shortages, WFP has declared being forced to cut cash assistance to Syrian refugees from 830,000K to 500,000K starting in February 2025, reaching only 58 percent of its planned target. Similarly, the UNHCR has been forced to reduce all aspects of its operations in Lebanon in 10 thematic areas, including a 60% cut on financial assistance, a 40% cut to shelter programmes and a 32% cut to water and sanitation programmes. In fact, UNHCR cut 347,000 Syrian refugees from its component of the joint programme, as of April. Each family had been receiving \$45 per month from UNHCR, which announced it could support 206,000 Syrian refugees only until June, when its funding is expected to run out. As a result of cuts, 89 percent of Syrian refugee households are now indebted. Children are increasingly pushed into child labor, early marriage, or begging as families resort to harmful coping strategies to survive.

89%

Of Syrian refugee households are now indebted.

Before 2025



The **UNHCR-WFP** joint cash program provided monthly support to over **115,000 families**.

40%

U.S. cuts led to 40% reduction in funding, leaving tens of thousands without assistance.



Children pushed into child labor, early marriage, or begging as families struggle to survive.

• HEALTH CARE

Refugees' Share of Hospital Costs Then vs. Now

40% After

25% Before

In the healthcare sector, subsidies have been reduced, and refugees are now required to pay up to 40 percent of hospital costs compared to the 25% previously required. ACHR documented families, unable to afford treatment, with some postponing or forgoing urgent medical care. Even chronic illnesses have gone untreated, emergencies were abandoned mid-care, and maternal services were declined. These trends are likely to continue to be exacerbated given that UNHCR announced that starting on 1 December 2025, UNHCR will no longer be able to provide hospitalization support for refugees residing in Lebanon. This includes maternity delivery services and acute emergency hospital admissions. Additionally, UNHCR will no longer be engaging in agreements with hospitals to provide subsidized services to refugees.

In addition, according to the protection sector co-coordinator Myriam Francis, USAID funding cuts have had a cross-sectoral impact, and were particularly visible in the health sector, where reductions in mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) services also significantly affected protection programming across Lebanon. While precise statistical data on the number of beneficiaries impacted is not yet available, the effects are evident among the most vulnerable groups, which include Lebanese internally displaced persons (IDPs), Syrian refugees, newly arrived Syrians, Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS), and migrant communities, with women, girls, and children among the highest priorities. Serious medical conditions will likely remain untreated or be paid out of pocket by those that are unemployed or who have insufficient income putting additional pressure on their ability to afford other critical basics like shelter or food.

While Lebanon's network of Primary Health Care Centers (PHCCs) still offers medications at reduced prices, these resources are extremely limited. According to interviews conducted by ACHR, many essential medicines are either unavailable or in short supply, and the scale of medical needs far exceeds what the capacity of the system can currently provide. Furthermore, Lebanon's National Social Security Fund (NSSF) does not offer coverage to non-Lebanese, leaving refugees and other foreigners without access to public healthcare benefits. One refugee explained: "I suffered from intestinal bleeding in June 2025 but left the hospital without completing treatment because UNHCR no longer covered it and the government doesn't offer medical coverage to foreigners". In some cases, families with cancer, epilepsy, diabetes, and cardiovascular diseases stopped treatments altogether.

• NUTRITION AND EDUCATION

child nutrition and protection programmes have been cut up to 35% . The funding freeze prevented UNICEF from accessing vital resources, forcing sharp reductions in nutrition programmes and as a result, more than half of all children under the age of two in eastern Lebanon are now experiencing severe food poverty . Food insecurity has also intensified as a result with families removing key sources of nutrients from meat, dairy, fruits, and even baby formula from their diets. A mother described: “By cutting off aid, you are killing us. We can’t afford milk for our children “. Refugees interviewed by ACHR stated living acute hunger, and a life without access to clean water and electricity. Nutritional deficits often have significant domino impacts on the physical and mental health of refugees with impacts such as weakened immunity, fatigue, developmental delays in children, mental health impacts including depression and anxiety.

Education was also directly affected by USAID cuts. In Lebanon, Syrian students have been enrolled across various formal and non-formal education systems. These include public basic education (Grades 1 to 9), secondary education (Grades 10 to 12), vocational education and training (TVET), tertiary (university-level) education, and non-formal programs such as Accelerated Learning and Basic Literacy and Numeracy initiatives. One of the core services supporting this system was provided by UNICEF, including transportation and school fee programs. However, recent funding cuts have led to the suspension of many of these services, triggering widespread school dropouts.

As one interviewee told ACHR: “I had to pull my children, all under 14 years, out of school after UNICEF support stopped. Suddenly, they asked us to pay for transportation, and I couldn’t afford it.” As an indirect consequence of reduced access to education services, compounded by Lebanon’s deepening economic crisis, many families have increasingly resorted to having their children enter the labor market, particularly in agriculture and construction sectors. These work environments often involve physically demanding and dangerous tasks, exposing children to hazardous conditions and significantly increasing the incidence of injury or other protection concerns. Out of 20 interviews conducted by ACHR with affected refugees, 16 reported that they were forced to send their children to work often in unsafe environments that expose them to street harassment and sexual assault in order to help support their families financially.

Under Lebanese law, employment is strictly prohibited for children under the age of 13, while those aged 13 to 14 may only work under narrowly defined conditions, such as with a medical certificate and within limited working hours. These regulations are outlined in the Lebanese Labor Code of 1946 (as amended), as well as in Decree No. 8987/2012, which explicitly bans hazardous labor for children under the age of 16. Importantly, Lebanon has also committed to international standards by ratifying key global treaties aimed at protecting children from economic exploitation. These include ILO Convention No. 138 on the Minimum Age for Admission to Employment, which obligates Lebanon to set a legal minimum working age and align it with the age of completing compulsory education. ILO Convention No. 182 on the Worst Forms of Child Labour, which requires immediate action to eliminate hazardous child labor, forced labor, and exploitation. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), ratified by Lebanon in 1991, which obliges states to recognize the right of every child to be protected from economic exploitation and from performing any work that is likely to interfere with their education or harm their development. Despite these legal and international commitments, enforcement remains weak. The erosion of education services and social safety nets previously bolstered by humanitarian aid has created a dangerous vacuum, pushing more children into labor situations that violate both domestic law and Lebanon's international obligations.



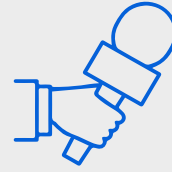
• SHELTER AND PROTECTION

UNHCR's shelter assistance, a critical safeguard against homelessness for Syrian refugees in Lebanon, has been significantly reduced following the freeze in USAID support. This has severely disrupted cash-for-rent programs, which previously helped thousands of vulnerable families meet rising housing costs. Based on ACHR interviews, refugees now face mounting eviction threats and increased housing instability, especially in urban and peri-urban areas where rent prices remain high. Organizations like INTERSOS, which operated shelter support services, have also been directly affected, resulting in the scaling back of significant portion of shelter programming, as stated by its head of programs Francesco Sinchetto. UNHCR itself described the situation in Lebanon as an "unprecedented budgetary crisis," forcing the agency to downscale or discontinue shelter support programs, including conditional cash for rent and upgrades to substandard housing units.

These shelter-related cutbacks come at a time of mounting economic pressure on both refugees and host communities, further intensifying the risk of secondary displacement particularly following the Israeli military escalation in the summer of 2024, which led to the destruction of some homes and pressure on the rental market. In several cases, Syrian refugee families were evicted after landlords chose to rent their properties to displaced Lebanese families instead. According to interviews conducted by ACHR, many Syrian tenants are now facing increased eviction threats and exploitation by landlords in the absence of institutional support. The loss of USAID funding has critically undermined Lebanon's shelter response capacity, leaving many Syrian refugees without safe or stable housing options. As one ACHR interviewee stated, "Without the UNHCR's \$120, we would be thrown onto the streets." Others reported being forced to relocate to overcrowded or unsafe dwellings, cutting back on essential needs like food to afford rent, or even selling off household belongings in order to avoid eviction.

Cuts have also undermined access to legal aid in Lebanon. Legal aid is considered a crucial service for refugees, who struggle to renew residencies, leaving them vulnerable to detention and other protection concerns. An ACHR interviewer said "I haven't left my house in 15 days out of fear of checkpoints". Women reported harassment at work, and many children without legal papers were excluded from school. Lebanon's legal national regulations present significant challenges for Syrian refugees, making access to justice and protection increasingly difficult. Complex, lengthy, and often costly legal procedures, coupled with regulations around residency, civil documentation, place refugees in a vulnerable position with little to no legal protection. Navigating issues such as obtaining or renewing legal residency permits, registering vital events like births and marriages, or defending against arbitrary detention requires specialized legal support that many refugees cannot afford or access on their own and without legal residency. In this context, legal aid services provided by humanitarian organizations are essential lifelines for Syrian refugees to be able to access their legal rights. These services not only help address immediate legal concerns but also work to safeguard refugees' fundamental rights and prevent further marginalization. Organizations like UNHCR, NRC, DRC and Intersos often offer a wide spectrum of legal assistance ranging from awareness-raising sessions and legal counselling to direct legal representation focusing on housing land and property rights, civil documentation and gender based violence support.

• URGENT NEEDS AND PROGRAMMATIC GAPS



Refugees themselves have issued direct appeals to USAID through ACHR interviews stating: “The aid you provide allows refugees to live with dignity. Continue offering support under your direct supervision.” The message highlights how funding shortages is also moral crisis demanding an urgent recommitment to humanitarian principles, sustainable program delivery, and the protection of those who remain displaced, destitute, and voiceless.

While the humanitarian needs of Syrian refugees in Lebanon have sharply increased following US aid cuts, their situation is further compounded by systemic human rights violations and mounting pressures from Lebanese authorities. Lebanon has consistently adopted restrictive and discriminatory policies toward Syrians, explicitly designed to prevent permanent settlement. Refugees have been subjected to formal and informal pressure campaigns including forced deportations , evictions , restrictive residency regulations , widescale arrests and eviction campaigns , violent security raids , bureaucratic obstacles and anti-refugee rhetoric . In parallel, the government continues to push for refugee returns through a voluntary return plan, even though conditions in Syria remain unsafe .

Although the Assad regime has long been a primary security concern and an obstacle to return for Syrians, a wide range of ongoing risks continue to shape refugees’ assessment of whether it is safe to return. Massacres and sectarian violence in the Sahel targeting Alawite and Druze communities , a terror bombing in a church near Damascus , as well as ongoing Israeli airstrikes and incursions in the south , all illustrate the persistent instability. For instance, following the massacres in the Sahel, an estimated 40,000 new refugees fled into Lebanon in March 2025 .

Beyond direct security threats, Syria continues to face conditions that undermine any prospect of safe and dignified return. The country still grapples with large-scale internal displacement, widespread destruction of homes and infrastructure, contamination from explosive remnants of war, destruction of houses and an ongoing humanitarian emergency . Each of these factors poses significant risks to returning refugees and prevents the establishment of conditions that could guarantee safety and sustainability. That said, refugees in Lebanon remain unable to return to Syria, and their humanitarian needs continue to persist. These are further compounded by the emerging needs of a new wave of displaced people who entered Lebanon following the events on the Syrian coast in March and in Sweida last July.

In a statement on 16 December 2024, UNHCR reaffirmed its long-standing position that it is not promoting large-scale voluntary repatriation to Syria. The agency emphasized the need for “favourable conditions” to be created before returns can be considered, while also reiterating that States must not forcibly return Syrian nationals or former residents, including Palestinian refugees from Syria to any part of the country . The consequences of the USAID funding cuts are unfolding against a backdrop of escalating humanitarian need and deepening vulnerability among both refugee and host populations in Lebanon. As of early 2025, the situation has sharply deteriorated, with the World Bank estimating \$14 billion in conflict-related damage, of which \$11 billion is urgently required for recovery and reconstruction. According to the United Nations' Lebanon Response Plan, 3.6 million Lebanese citizens currently require humanitarian assistance, alongside over 700,000 registered Syrian refugees and 200,000 Palestinian refugees. In this context, the reduction in international aid especially from the United States has resulted in critical gaps in life-saving services.



Refugees and vulnerable families are now resorting to harmful survival strategies, such as reducing meal portions, selling household items, taking on debt, and, alarmingly, turning to early marriage and child labour. A refugee's testimony underscores the dire situation: "We sold our inheritance. We have nothing left. Now, if we don't find work we don't eat." Despite the best efforts of organizations like INTERSOS and IOM to fill the gap through diversified donor strategies and operational shifts, the scale of the funding shortfall is overwhelming. IOM staff reported to ACHR that only 14% of its Syria-related programming is currently funded, leaving up to 90% of planned beneficiaries at risk of receiving little to no assistance. The urgency is clear: essential services such as food aid, health care, shelter support, education access, and legal protection are at risk of large-scale collapse without immediate and renewed funding commitments. Donor fatigue and geopolitical shifts have already destabilized response capacity, and unless international partners including but not limited to the U.S. reengage with flexible, multi-year support, the consequences will be profound. According to INTERSOS' Head of Programs, the recent USAID funding cuts have had a substantial impact on the organization's operations in Lebanon, particularly affecting protection services, emergency response, and a significant portion of shelter programming. These services were primarily directed toward Syrian refugees, though vulnerable Lebanese communities also benefited. While precise statistics on the number of affected beneficiaries are not yet available due to ongoing efforts to assess the full scope of the impact, INTERSOS has noted that they are actively working to bridge the funding gap through alternative sources. However, given the organization's heavy reliance on USAID funding, it has already begun restructuring programs and anticipates a reduction in interventions in the coming period. The organization is currently pursuing diversified donor engagement strategies to sustain critical services, but the loss of USAID support poses a serious challenge to the continuity and scale of humanitarian aid efforts for displaced and vulnerable populations in Lebanon. According to an interview conducted by ACHR with the Protection co-coordinator in Lebanon, NGOs have had to rely on close coordination within the Protection Working Group and among themselves to maintain continuity of support. This has become particularly necessary as some sectors, such as shelter, have ceased to operate effectively at the sub-national level, forcing organizations to coordinate bilaterally to sustain services. Alternatives to USAID funding have been sought, with some support now coming from the European Union and individual European donors. Nonetheless, there is recognition of the need to shift toward more sustainable programming models, as the current fragmented approach remains precarious.

The co-coordinator further noted that while funds are not exclusively concentrated in the South and Bekaa areas heavily affected by the Israel war, donor interest has not sufficiently extended to addressing the needs of new Syrian arrivals. Advocacy and visibility around this issue remain limited, leaving many of the most vulnerable unassisted.

Programmatic gaps are therefore stark, with urgent needs centred on advocacy for refugees' rights, particularly residency permits, as well as the continuation of cash assistance, case management, and integrated support with other sectors to ensure safe and dignified living conditions. However, in the context of shrinking funding, meeting these priorities remains an immense challenge.

RECOMMENDATIONS

TO THE INTERNATIONAL AID AGENCIES AND DONORS

- Publicly call on the United States to reconsider its decision to withdraw humanitarian funding, given the scale of its impact on refugees in Lebanon.
- Restore and scale up funding for humanitarian programmes in Lebanon that allows organizations to maintain cash assistance, food support, healthcare access, and education for refugee and host communities.
- Prioritize long-term strategies that address both immediate humanitarian needs and the challenges fuelling Lebanon's humanitarian crisis. This means investing in programmes that build sustainable institutions, promote transparency in aid delivery, and strengthen the role of local organizations, who are often the first responders and best positioned to understand affected population needs.

TO THE LEBANESE GOVERNMENT

- Facilitate access to legal work permits for refugees to reduce their dependency on aid and reduce their vulnerability to informal labour and exploitation.
- Integrate labour rights protections into national and municipal policies to ensure decent work and fair wages for refugees.
- Ensure that voluntary return policies remain genuinely voluntary, safe and dignified in line with international standards and not used to exert pressure on refugees amid reduced aid.
- Promote sustainable and inclusive policies that ease social tensions by improving access to basic services and promoting social cohesion between refugees and host communities.

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