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Political chess with human pawns

Von der Leyen's €1 bn aid pledge to Lebanon: a genuine humanitarian effort or an attempt to gain political support ahead of the EU elections?

The timing of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's recent pledge of €1 billion to Lebanon to manage its refugee crisis – just before the European elections – suggests an electoral gamble. The circumstances that led to the agreement were precipitated by a surge in refugees arriving by boat to Cyprus, the EU territory closest to Lebanon. Out of the billion, €264 million has been earmarked for the provision of equipment, training and border management infrastructure to assist Lebanon's security services. The announcement has prompted a series of accusations against the EU for outsourcing migration control — with little consideration for human rights.

Von der Leyen's re-election depends on securing an absolute majority of the 720 Members of the European Parliament. She appears to be placing her bets on the support of frustrated conservatives and populist right-wing parties, whose popularity is surging in recent polls. This is not unexpected, given that during April's Maastricht discussions, she explicitly signalled her willingness to negotiate with the European Conservatives and Reformists (ECR) group after the elections. This latest announcement now suggests a calculated political manoeuvre by von der Leyen to secure her position and political future at all costs.

Novelty or rebranding?

Besides the questionable timing, the specifics of the novelty of this agreement remain opaque. According to official data from the European Commission, the EU has been providing Lebanon with financial support since 2011, with a total value of over €3 billion. This support is primarily funded through the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and distributed through various channels for the period 2021-2027. Of this assistance, the Commission states that €670.3 million has been allocated to Lebanon in bilateral assistance and €61 million under the Instrument contributing to

Stability and Peace (IcSP). At least one package announced to support the Lebanese security sector has been adopted through the IcSP (2018-2020).

This prompts the question of whether this is actually additional funding or merely a rebranding of financial packages previously agreed upon with Lebanon. Wadih Al Asmar, head of EuroMed Rights and the Lebanese Center for Human Rights (CLDH), believes the latter to be the case. He suggests that the new agreement may be nothing more than a guarantee of continued financial commitment, which could have been more discreetly formalised at the level of the EU delegation in Lebanon. Instead, the agreement was presented as an exceptional occurrence.

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It seems that von der Leyen has sought to gain publicity by exploiting the migration debate for her election campaign — without offering a solution to the 'migration issue' in line with European values. In fact, the opposite is the case. The announcement has caused a stir in Lebanon. It was perceived as an attempt to bribe the Lebanese government to keep unwanted Syrian refugees within the country. This has led to a new wave of anti-refugee sentiment, exacerbating the already tense atmosphere between Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community.

The EU's financial assistance to the security sector, coupled with the renewed focus on the migration debate, in fact, serves to reinforce the Lebanese security forces' capacity to violate international law. This is set against the backdrop of a dysfunctional state with no president and a caretaker government comprising a corrupt political elite. In such a context, accountability is absent, and the conduct of risk assessment and independent monitoring are impossible. The current situation will make the already marginalised Syrians even more vulnerable. In turn, more Syrians will see no alternative but to flee Lebanon, regardless of the circumstances.

It is unlikely a coincidence that only a week after von der Leyen's visit, the Lebanese General Security announced a new set of measures to further restrict the ability of Syrian refugees to obtain or renew residency permits. These measures impose an additional burden on the most vulnerable Syrians. At least 83 per cent of Syrian refugees are already undocumented.

High (political) costs

Lebanon hosts the highest number of refugees per capita in the world. The Syrian refugees have been scapegoated by a political elite seeking to hide the fact that they themselves have caused the country's downfall through decades of heavy debt accumulation, misguided neoliberal economic and social policies and widespread corruption. Their narrative is being widely disseminated by the local media and a receptive Lebanese population. Over the past months, Syrians have been subjected to rampant violence, discriminatory curfews, harassment, forced evictions, restrictions on legal residency and access to education and employment and even killings. Human Rights Watch has documented a series of arbitrary detentions, torture and forcible return to Syria of Syrians by Lebanese authorities, including opposition activists of the Syrian regime and army defectors.

Deteriorating living conditions and the fear of deportation back to Syria have left the most vulnerable with few options. It is not safe for refugees to return to Syria. The country's regime has a long institutional memory of repression against its dissidents. What Lebanese officials are promoting as a 'voluntary and safe return' is likely to be a one-way ticket to abuse, rights violations and sometimes death. Human rights organisations have documented numerous cases of returnees, including women and children, being subjected to arbitrary detention, torture, sexual assault and enforced disappearance.

The European Union's endorsement of such a 'voluntary returns' concept, as articulated by von der Leyen during her visit to Lebanon, has created an opening for other forces that have long sought to exploit Syrian refugees for their own ends. In a speech after von der Leyen's visit, Hezbollah leader Hassan Nasrallah, a close ally of Bashar al-Assad, proposed that Lebanon should facilitate the departure of Syrians to Europe. This statement can be interpreted as a form of pressure on Europe, whose alternative scenario is to re-engage with the Syrian regime on the issue of returnees — which would be a first step towards the normalisation of al-Assad's regime that he has long sought.

The expected rise of the far right in the European Union is likely to lead to an intensification of practices such as outsourcing migration

Von der Leyen's self-serving move has come at a high cost to the European Union's reputation. Preliminary findings of a study by the Swiss Network for International Studies on the interrelationship between European and regional refugee return dynamics indicate a decline in the influence of European actors and donors in ensuring respect for international

management to countries with a history of human rights abuses.

human rights in Lebanon. A significant contributing factor is the Union's own practices of pushback and externalisation, which set a poor example for the treatment of refugees. In light of the widespread criticism of the EU's double standards in relation to the situation in Gaza, this latest development serves to reinforce the Union's declining credibility and perception as a moral authority on the global stage.

The expected rise of the far right in the European Union is likely to lead to an intensification of practices such as outsourcing migration management to countries with a history of human rights abuses. This trend, if allowed to continue, will further damage the EU's global standing and consequently its ability to pursue its vital foreign policy interests.

For Lebanon, the EU must ensure that its support is aimed at promoting stability in the interests of all. Increased funding should go to local and international humanitarian organisations instead of channelling it through the corrupt government, thus reducing susceptibility to bribery. The EU should not support the growing trend of deporting Syrians to 'safe areas' in Syria, maintaining that the country remains unsafe.

In its legitimate efforts to support refugee-hosting countries such as Lebanon, but also Tunisia and Morocco, the EU must ensure that its assistance doesn't make it complicit in human rights abuses. The conditions must clearly reflect Europe's unwavering commitment to international human rights obligations.



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