The Lebanese return context: political actors and their influence on the immediate return of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon

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Abstract

Since the Syrian civil war emerged in 2011, 1.5 million Syrian refugees fled to their neighboring country Lebanon. An increasing amount of actors is now encouraging these refugees to immediately return, before certain standards set by the international community for these returns are reached. My thesis aimed to fill the gap that current research has left by giving a comprehensive overview of how different political actors practically and politically influence the return context in Lebanon through their efforts. Additionally, through discussing these efforts I demonstrated how the involved actors approach the obligation of a refugee hosting country to not return refugees if this exposes them to persecution (the principle of non-refoulement). Interviews with several civil society actors were used as the main source of data collection and supported by information from media articles and organizational documents. My findings showed that the UNHCR and civil society actors work against the encouragement of the refugee returns, because they have argued that the conditions in Syria are not safe and accessible enough to consider them conducive for refugee returns. Some Syrian refugees have signed up for facilitated returns but the majority has indicated to not want to return on the short term out of fear for persecution and being forced to join the army. At the same time, various actors within the Lebanese government also have an influence on the refugee returns. Examples are the Lebanese security organization (GSO) and the political and military party Hezbollah. My research also showed that an actor’s practical influence on the returns does not automatically mean he also has a strong political influence and vice versa. Analyzing the Lebanese government as one entity showed that it has implemented several push policies to make the refugees decide to return ‘voluntarily’. I argued that all those involved should look beyond the dichotomy of deportation vs. voluntary return, as there seems to be room in between those measures in which host countries can work around the principle of non-refoulement. Ultimately, neglecting this space can be detrimental to the protection of (the Syrian) refugees.

Keywords: refugees; voluntary return; political actors; host country; Syria; Lebanon; principle of non-refoulement; safety guarantees; political solution
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<td>AVR programs</td>
<td>assisted voluntary return programs</td>
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<tr>
<td>EU</td>
<td>European Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>community-based organization</td>
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<td>FM</td>
<td>Future Movement</td>
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<td>FPM</td>
<td>Free Patriotic Movement</td>
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<tr>
<td>GSO</td>
<td>General Security Office</td>
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<tr>
<td>(I)NGO</td>
<td>(international) non-governmental organization</td>
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<td>IS</td>
<td>Islamic State</td>
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<td>LCRP</td>
<td>Lebanon Crisis Response Plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>LRA</td>
<td>Litani River Authority</td>
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<td>MOSA</td>
<td>Ministry of Social Affairs</td>
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<td>Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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1. Introduction

935,454 people. This many Syrians that are currently registered as a refugee in Lebanon (UNHCR, 2019). The exact number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is expected to be much higher, because another half a million Syrians are estimated to be living in Lebanon unregistered. Considering that Lebanon now still only has around 6.3 million inhabitants, this makes it the country with the highest number of refugees per capita in the world (Yahya, 2018). Unsurprisingly, the presence of such a large group of refugees in a small country like Lebanon has taken its toll on the host country. As a result, mostly the Lebanese government but also other actors have increasingly started to advocate for the return of these Syrian refugees. But the international community argues that the time is not yet right for this and is against these encouragements for return. The discrepancy between the several involved actors who are trying to persuade or possibly even force the Syrian refugees to return to Syria and the opinion of those who argue that Syria simply is not safe enough for this yet, creates a complicated situation. One that might even end up influencing the actual policies that are executed, officially or unofficially, regarding the return of these Syrian refugees and eventually risks the lives of these people. For this reason, I will discuss how different political actors shape the Lebanese return context through their influence on the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

But first, I will shortly explain the different conflicts and tensions that have led to the strained situation between the Lebanese and the Syrians in Lebanon. Secondly, I will elaborate on the way the Lebanese government’s response to the large influx of the Syrian refugees changed over time and thirdly, I will explore the arguments of the actors that oppose the encouragements of the return of the refugees.

1.1. Regional conflicts

1.1.1. Syrian Civil War

Before we can move on to the impact that the presence of the Syrian refugees has on Lebanon, it is important to know why these Syrians fled to Lebanon. As I already mentioned, it started in 2011 when the Syrian Civil War emerged. What started as peaceful protests by Syrian citizens, escalated into clashes between the Syrian president, Bashar Al-Assad, and various Syrian opposition forces or ‘rebels’ (Ostrand, 2015). These opposition forces mainly existed of Sunni Muslim groups and Sunni Muslims constitute the majority of Syrian population. Al-Assad belongs to the minority Alawite
sect, that has been in control of Syria since the 70’s and has favored attributing governments positions to its ‘own’ people instead of to other religious groups (Tyyskä, 2017). This has contributed to sectarian and political conflicts in Syria, that are part of the root causes of the Civil War. It is important to take this into account when trying to understand the motives of the Syrian president to encourage or not to encourage these Syrian refugees in Lebanon to return. Especially knowing that most of those refugees are Sunni Muslims.

Next to these rebels, the Kurds in the North in Syria and the Islamic State (IS) also joined the conflict. On top of that, the internal conflict further escalated into a war influenced by the interests of multiple global powers when Assad’s allies, Russia, Iran and other Shia groups such as the Lebanese Hezbollah, and Turkey and other international actors also got heavily involved. The result was a war that has displaced over 6 million Syrians within the country and pushed over 5.6 million Syrian refugees to flee to safer countries in the region (UNHCR, 2019).

1.1.2. Recent struggles between Syria and Lebanon

But already before Lebanon started noticing the spillover of the Syrian conflict, the relationship between Lebanon and Syria had been compromised. After having been closely tied to Syria under the French mandate, Lebanon finally became independent in 1943 (Traboulsi, 2015). Shortly after the Lebanese Civil War broke out decades later, Syrian military forces entered Lebanon in 1976, supposedly to end the internal conflict (Yahel & Honig, 2016). However, the Syrians did not leave but instead tightened their grip on the country. In times of conflict, the country had an incredible amount of soldiers on Lebanese ground (up to 30,000 at peak times) and in times of peace, it controlled Lebanon’s politics and economy (The New York Times, 2005). In 1991, this military presence was formalized with the creation of the ‘Brotherhood, Cooperation and Coordination’ treaty, which obligated Lebanon and Syria to support each other militarily if necessary (Hajjar, 2009). Syria’s occupation of Lebanon did not end until years later, when in April 2005 the Syrian forces were pressured to withdraw from Lebanese soil, because they were being held accountable by many for the assassination of the former Lebanese prime minister Rafic Hariri in Downtown Beirut (Alamuddin & Bonini, 2014).

Now that we are aware of some of the historical events that preceded before the Syrians arrived in Lebanon, we will continue with how the Lebanese government has approached the arrival and presence of these Syrians over the last years.
1.2. From open borders to a growing discontent

What is remarkable about the Lebanese case is that although the amount of refugees Lebanon is hosting is high, its government has never formed a real, unified refugee policy. Instead, the initial approach to the influx of Syrians in Lebanon was to keep the borders open and to allow the refugees to enter Lebanon. But what explains this lack of a refugee policy in Lebanon?

1.2.1. Non-signatory to the UN’s Refugee Conventions

It started when Lebanon refused to sign and ratify the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees. The Lebanese government responded the same way to the successor of this agreement, the 1967 Protocol. By refraining from doing so the Lebanese government refused to recognize fleeing people as refugees and instead identified them as ‘displaced’. Not having ratified these agreements also means they are not obligated to grant refugees access to certain services or rights. In addition, the Lebanese government did not allow displaced Palestinians to integrate in Lebanon and similarly, this is now also not considered as an option for these Syrian refugees. Because this group of Syrians nonetheless had to be managed in some way, the Lebanese government shifted the key responsibility of providing them with day to day management, support and protection to the refugee organization of the United Nations (UN), UNHCR.

1.2.2. Division within the Lebanese government

Another reason that the Lebanese government has not managed to create a unified refugee policy regarding the Syrian refugee issue has been the division within the government. Until 2014, there were two different ‘camps’ within the Lebanese government. One was convinced that the Lebanese-Syrian border should be closed and that the Syrian refugees who had already fled to Lebanon should live in not too comfortable circumstances, because else they would never go back to Syria again. The other camp recognized the humanitarian aspects of the crisis and took a less critical approach to the stay of the Syrian refugees. However, Lebanon uses a particular political system that allocates the seats and power within the government strategically, based on the different religious sects (Hajjar, 2009). This is to prevent that some sects become minorities while others gain more influence. In accordance with this, the government needs to reach a consensus when making political decisions on policies. This system is known as the Ta’if agreement, which was signed in 1989 to put an end to the Civil War. Because the government did not succeed to reach a consensus on how to approach the situation of the Syrian refugees, a potential unified policy became stuck in a
political deadlock and not having a policy at all. Despite this, Lebanon demonstrated her intention to help the Syrian refugees by maintaining its open border policy with Syria until late 2014 (Yahya, 2018).

1.2.3. Growing discontent among the Lebanese
But since 2011, Lebanon’s attitude towards the Syrian refugee situation gradually changed. Whereas some of the Lebanese politicians used to be relatively understanding towards the situation of the Syrian refugees, as time passed by the presence of these refugees started to become more pressing on the already strained Lebanese economy. It also fed into rising tension between the Lebanese and the Syrians, which were feared to be risking the sectarian relations in Lebanon. As a result, the Lebanese politicians now agreed that the Syrian refugees could not stay in Lebanon for much longer and should return. In the following section, I will describe the different approaches to how to return these Syrian refugees.

1.3. Approaches to encouraging the return of the Syrian refugees
Governments that are hosting refugees have several measures to turn to regarding the return of these refugees. A well-known measure is deportation, which in the case of returns revolves around the forced removal of a refugee from the host country to the country of origin. According to Human Rights Watch (2019), it is estimated that about 30 Syrians have been deported from the Beirut airport this year. In most cases they were not given the opportunity to work against this deportation and had to sign so-called forms stating they were returning voluntarily. Although these examples show that deportation is not absent in Lebanon, international law actually states that refugee hosting countries have the obligation to not return refugees if this exposes them to persecution. This is also known as the principle of non-refoulement. In the case of the Syrian refugees, many do indicate they fear to be persecuted and this concern is underlined by various involved (I)NGO’s. Deporting these Syrian refugees is thus against international law and for this reason, Lebanese politicians insist they want the Syrians to return voluntarily. They are also supported by the Russian government, which presented a proposal last year that is meant to help Lebanon facilitate the return of the Syrian refugees (The National, 2018). This Russian Initiative would executed be in cooperation with the Syrian regime. However, not all involved actors seem to be convinced that these voluntary returns are genuinely voluntary. Instead, the Lebanese government might be creating an environment that incentivizes these refugees to return (SAWA for Development and Aid, 2019). Although academics have written plenty about deportation and voluntary return as return methods, far less is mentioned in literature about the various ways through which
governments encourage refugees to return ‘voluntarily’. Thus, my research also aims to fill this gap and to supplement existing literature about refugee returns measures.

1.4. Working against the encouragement of refugee returns

In the previous section I mentioned how Lebanese politicians and some of their allies want the Syrian refugees to return and how other actors question the voluntariness of the returns. Because of this, they oppose current efforts to encourage the refugees to return. According to the United Nations, the European Union and involved international and local civil society actors, up until now the situation in Syria has not become safe enough yet for the Syrian refugees to return. Especially politically and security wise many would be in danger if they would go back. The need for a safe haven for the Syrian refugees has thus barely decreased and this is also supported by the fact that relatively few of these refugees have actually gone back to Syria, despite the difficulties they are facing in their host countries (Alex & Paf, 2016). Because of this, several actors work against the encouragement of the refugee returns. It is important to make a distinction between working against the encouragement of the refugee returns and between actually encouraging refugees to return.

Some Lebanese politicians accuse these different actors who are working against encouraging returns of trying to keep the refugees in Lebanon. But in practice, it seems like very few to none of the actors involved actually want the refugees to settle down in Lebanon on the long term. For example, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, Filippo Grandi, said the following during a meeting with Lebanese prime minister Hariri: ‘the best solution for the Syrian refugees in this region, and there are more than 5 million, is to have voluntary, safe and dignified return to their country’ (NNA, 2018). Also among the Syrian refugees themselves, at least 89% of the refugees who spoke with UNHCR indicated they wanted to return at some point (UNHCR report, 2018). Thus, it is not the case that the actors that work against encouraging refugees to return do not agree that the refugees should go back but they question whether it is already safe for them now to return to Syria.

These different opinions of the involved actors show that the refugee situation in Lebanon is subject to several complicated influences and underlying explanation. With my research I aim to give a comprehensive overview that reveals the various reasons that the Lebanese have to encourage the refugees to return. In this thesis, I will first explore how different involved actors influence the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon through their encouraging efforts, and how other different involved actors influence the Syrian refugee returns by working against these encouragements. This will help understand how different political actors influence the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon to shape the Lebanese return context. To take this analysis to a
higher level and to replicate my findings to a more general context, I will also analyze how these efforts in favor of and against the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon contribute to our understanding of refugee returns. But first, I will dive deeper into the concepts that give direction to this research, namely the political actors and different types of approaches that are used to return refugees.

2. Theoretical Framework

Many scholars have written about how host governments and different other involved actors use a variety of measures to accomplish the return of refugees to their country of origin. In the first section of this chapter, I will describe what measures are commonly used and also why and how. In the second section of this chapter, I will elaborate more on the different actors that are involved with the shaping and implementation of these different measures. Not only will I describe which actors have the most influence on these return measures according to academics but I will also explain how the actors work together and/or pressure one another.

2.1. Return measures

2.1.1. The ‘deportation turn’

As I described in the introductory section of this thesis, Lebanese politicians argue that the removal of the Syrian refugees is vital to the Lebanese economy and the safety of Lebanese citizens. This is in line with Abdou and Rosenberger (2019, p. 102), who clarify that ‘the state’s political commitment to deportation is often pursued in the name of ‘the people’’. While the international community, among whom the United Nations (UN) and the European Union (EU), have urged the Lebanese government not to send the Syrian refugees back before the circumstances in Syria are suited for this, several researchers describe how deportation is no foreign concept to the European Union either. Fekete (2005, p. 64) somewhat ironically states how ‘we live in an age in which the rich industrialized world pronounces on human rights abuses abroad while failing to live up to its own standards at home’. In an analysis of Europe’s deportation programme, she mentions how governments argue that removal is an essential part for maintaining a credible asylum system. Kalir and colleague Wissink (2016) describe how in the Netherlands deportation is seen as a form of migration management.
But although deportation indeed is the last phase of a fair asylum process (Fekete, 2005), De Genova and Peutz (2010) state that in recent decades, immigration procedures are increasingly being adjusted to raise the number of refugees eligible for deportation. According to them, it has become the way to go for governments when it comes to dealing with unwanted foreigners. Gibney (2008) uses the term the ‘deportation turn’ to indicate this increased use of deportation to deal with rejected asylum seekers. The example of the EU illustrates this phenomenon, as a decreasing amount of asylum seekers is nowadays eligible for asylum while the budget for the removal of asylum seekers has increased (Fekete, 2005). Even refugees who have fled some of the most dangerous areas of the world, such as Afghanistan, Iraq and Somalia, are being sent back to their countries of origin.

Going back to the Syrian refugees living in Lebanon, we see that physical safety indeed is part of the return question. But the fear for persecution is a much larger aspect. For this reason, the situation described in this thesis is not merely about deportation and other ways through which states remove unwanted foreigners from their ground, but particularly about how a government approaches its obligation to not force refugees to go back to an unsafe situation. Although the different involved actors have acknowledged this obligation, the wish to send the refugees back to Syria seems not to have decreased. As a result, efforts are undertaken by the Lebanese government to work around this principle of non-refoulement. This is a phenomenon that is not unique to the Lebanese case and one that has become an increasingly discussed topic in academics over the last years. Therefore, in the next section I will explain the views of different scholars who have written about the alternative ways through which involved actors try to encourage refugees into returning to their country of origin.

2.1.2. Voluntary return as an alternative to deportation

Despite the increased political will for using deportation in migration management, it should not be overlooked that states also attempt to return refugees through more subtle and ambiguous ways (Koch, 2014). This is not entirely surprising, since deportation is not always successfully enforced by states. Either because international treaties restrict this possibility legally (such as through the principle of non-refoulement) or simply because logistically speaking it is very difficult to actually forcibly expel refugees from a host country. This is especially the case when they are present in large numbers (Cleton & Chauvin, 2019). Another restraining factor for host countries in returning
refugees is the unwillingness of the countries where the refugees originate from to cooperate on this (Gibney, 2008). This is even though by international law, citizens have the right to return to their home countries and the latter are even obliged to take their nationals back. Some academics stretch the understanding of the right to return even further and argue that the right to return also involves having the right to housing and property restitution after someone has returned to his or her country of origin (Philpott, 2006). But when countries of origin fail to cooperate, an alternative option for host countries becomes persuading the refugees in their country to return voluntarily.

This is often managed through official programs that are indicated as ‘AVR’ programs, meaning assisted voluntary return. Positive sides of these programs are the compensation of costs that are made when refugees return, such as travel costs, and the giving reintegration assistance after refugees have returned (Leerkes et al., 2017). However, Webber (2011, p. 3) argues that these programs are often mainly offered as a ‘less painful alternative … to (inevitable) compulsory return’. In addition to these programs that are intended to assist refugees to return voluntarily, states can also implement certain laws and policies to steer or influence migration patterns. Limited access to accommodation and the labor market, residency permit restrictions, the closing of borders and putting refugees into detention are examples of these regulations. Consequently, refugees regularly feel pressured to make use of an AVR program (Wijk, 2008).

Coutin (2014) has argued that migration policymaking by host governments is influenced by various actors, such as economic capacity and social receptiveness. According to Massey (2015) push policies can indeed be more permissive in times of economic prosperity and more restrictive in times of an economic recession. In light of these arguments, Lebanon is an interesting example. As I explained before, the government has implemented several measures that have led to the Syrian refugees leading very restrained lives. And the refugees being a heavy burden on the Lebanese economy has indeed been given as one of the main reasons. The idea behind these policies seems to be that if the circumstances for the refugees are worse enough, this might end up being a more subtle way to make sure that they leave than deportation is. Through this thesis I aim to find out whether this indeed is the case. Ullah (2018) gives examples of restrictions for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, such as being barred from working in particular professional fields (engineering, medicine, law), not having access to healthcare and not being allowed to work. Basically, the only care given to these refugees is the so-called ‘care and maintenance’ model of assistance. This means that the basic needs of refugees who are living in refugee camps are met but that local integration is absent (Jacobsen, 1996). Similar efforts have been undertaken regarding the Syrian refugees, which has created harsh and highly undesirable conditions for the refugees and has made a large number
of them living in the country illegally (Janmyr, 2018).

2.1.3. How voluntary are voluntary returns?
The attempts of host states to pressure refugees into returning home by implementing such push policies have not gone unnoticed in academic literature. Particularly, debate has risen about the concept of ‘voluntariness’ that states use as a justification for their return practices. Various scholars question whether seeking AVR or attempting returns without assistance can actually be framed as a voluntary decision. The idea of ‘voluntary’ return is sometimes linked to neoliberalism, in the sense that the decision to leave or stay is considered a free and rational choice of ‘autonomous individuals who are able and expected to conduct themselves responsibly’ (Kalir, 2017, p. 67). Cleton and Chauvin (2019) add to this that the intention of voluntary return is that refugees are persuaded to leave out of own initiative, based on their own choice and for their own benefit. They also mention how their research shows that return officers also repeatedly emphasize this decision-making power in their conversations with potential returnees. Even though it is clear for these employees that the only alternative would be that the refugees will still be forced to leave, if they do not decide to return themselves.

Several other scholars are not fully convinced either about the level of voluntariness involved in voluntary returns. According to Kalir (2017), the circumstances that are created by the policies discussed in the previous section leave refugees with few other options available and ensure that refugees eventually decide to return. In his opinion, most of those who request AVR do so because the host governments’ policies have made them vulnerable, instead of doing so out of a real hope and motivation for their future. Blitz, Sales & Marzano (2005) particularly question how voluntary returns are when the individuals in question would most likely have not returned if they had been able to obtain a residency permit in the host country. Thus, classifying return as either ‘voluntary’ or ‘forced’ is a too simple dichotomy, since the absence of force is not a thorough enough criterium to assess the nature of the return on (Leerkes et al., 2017). In practice, the latter seems to be more complicated and less clear cut. As an alternative, the term ‘soft deportation’ has recently been included in academic research Kalir (2017). This relatively new concept has so far been used for returns that have the characteristics of both voluntary returns and deportation.

2.1.4. Immediate returns
To answer my research questions, I will specifically focus on the concept ‘immediate returns’. The
reason for this is that I make a clear distinction between those who want the refugees to return when the circumstances in Syria are safe enough for return and those who argue that refugees can already return right now. According to the UNHCR’s handbook on voluntary repatriation (1996), a tripartite agreement is usually made between UNHCR, the host country and the country of origin. Such an agreement is only made after some requirements are met by the country of origin, so that UNHCR is confident enough that returning refugees will be safe. First, before UNHCR starts facilitating returns, the country of origin (Syria, in this case) needs to provide some guarantees that ensure the safety of the returning refugees. Furthermore, some form of a political settlement must be reached in the country of origin and UNHCR should have unhindered access to the returnees. The organization should also be able to open UNHCR offices within the country of origin. In my thesis, ‘immediate return’ will refer to returns that take place before such as tripartite agreement is made and the other requirements and conditions of UNHCR that I just mentioned are met. It does not necessarily mean that the Syrian refugees are expected to return as soon as possible by those actors who encourage returns but rather that these actors do not believe that the returns should only happen after these required conditions are in place in Syria.

In this research, the efforts undertaken to ‘voluntarily’ repatriate Syrian refugees in Lebanon will be evaluated through the lens of the literature discussed above to see whether the Lebanese government applies soft deportation to encourage refugees to return. But first, I will explore in the following section what academics say about the influence of different actors that are involved in migration policies and specifically return policies, since these actors are the ones who are actually responsible for those return efforts.

2.2. Actors that have an influence on returns

2.2.1. The host government as the main actor

Some scholars writing about refugee policies describe how the host government is the main responsible actor in refugee policies and how it has some autonomy from transnational forces (Jackson, 1987). The assumption has been made that governments are powerful enough to decide on policies related to refugees and are also able to implement these. But this is only the case if the state is also capable of controlling its borders (Jacobsen, 1996). In the case of Lebanon, the Migration Policy Centre (2013) argues that the governments that followed the two most recent civil wars have not been able to ensure they have full control over their borders nor over their political agenda. The organization also describes Lebanon’s borders as so-called ‘thin borders’. With this it means that in certain areas, such as economically wise, one can barely speak of a border because of the high level
of exchange with other countries. However, in terms of migration they do have the authority to regulate their border activity, as the earlier mentioned closing of their border with Syria in 2014 demonstrates. In addition, Jackson (1987) claims that governments are also capable of making decisions regarding refugee policies that might be against the recommendations of (I)NGO’s or donor countries. Thus, according to his theory, refugee policies, of which (soft) deportation policies and return initiatives are a part of, are primarily determined and executed by the state.

2.2.2. Deportation regimes: state institutions vs. civil society actors

The earlier mentioned researchers Kalir and Wissink (2016) have written about so-called deportation regimes that revolve around the forcing of undocumented migrants and illegitimate asylum seekers out of the country. But they offer quite a different argument than the scholars in the previous section and do not view deportation as the unilateral expulsion of non-citizens of a country. According to them, deportation regimes have two opposite sides. One of them consists out of state institutions that work to enforce the law and facilitate deportations. The other consists out of local civil-society actors, such as non-governmental organizations (NGO’s) and community-based organizations (CBO’s), whose volunteers and employees work against these deportation policies and who aim to protect the rights of the illegalized migrants. Generally speaking, (I)NGO’s seem to play an interesting role between trying to support and protect the rights of refugees, while at the same time also working within the legal framework offered by the host country they are working in (Agamben, 1998). Some argue that because governments are increasingly unable and unwilling to take care of welfare functions, this gives opportunity to civil society actors to take up that emerging political space and offer a functional response (Lipschutz, 1992). Kalir and Wissink (2016) also state that in practice, civil-society actors hold an equally as important role in shaping and executing migration regulations as the host authorities do. This makes it even more interesting to research their role and influence within the field of political actors involved in the immediate return policies for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

2.2.3. Actors who pressure the host government

In determining and executing these refugee policies, governments can feel different sources of pressure. Jacobsen (1996) mentions three of those: the international refugee regime, the local host community and the refugees themselves. I will explain each separate actor more extensively.

The ‘international refugee regime’ consists of international institutions and individuals who are
most concerned with the welfare of the refugees. UNHCR is the main actor within this regime but also civil society actors, donor countries, volunteers, the media and lawyers helping refugees are often involved. The assistance provided by these actors is the most important source of assistance when a refugee influx happens and in the case of UNHCR, it takes on the role of watchdog and sets the standards for the approach taken. Fekete (2005) emphasizes that organizations such as UNHCR should not be seen as solely receiving state orders but also as purposely carrying out policy themselves.

Walters (2002) also emphasizes the political character of the interaction between host countries and the international refugee regime. In the case of Lebanon, this interaction becomes particularly clear on the topic of the return of the Syrian refugees. This is because Lebanon’s desire to return the refugees opposes the stance of the UN that the situation in Syria is not conducive for returns yet. Local, Lebanese authorities have become highly dependent on international aid in their management with the large influx of refugees (POMEPS, 2017). Reasons for this are the inaction of the Lebanese government and their denying of central funds to the municipalities. When a country is heavily dependent on foreign financing it simultaneously means this same country becomes extra vulnerable to the corresponding interests of these foreign actors. This means that the latter can also apply diplomatic pressure and even threaten the host government with negative publicity, so that they adopt more positive refugee policies. In countries where governments are highly dependent on the support of UNHCR, such as Lebanon, the threat of withdrawing that support can also function as leverage for the former. However, the presence of these international actors also has benefits to host countries. For example, they help governments reach their migration objectives and thus contribute to the state’s sovereignty and agency in their management of migration. Furthermore, the international actors and their work can be used as an alternative way of executing policies without governments having to carry the main responsibility for those. This is particularly beneficial for governments who want to implement restrictive policies but who look to avoid being scrutinized by their citizens.

The second pressuring actor is the local community who receives the refugees and who is most affected by their presence. In Lebanon, this is the Lebanese community and its response can potentially influence the government, both for political reasons and security reasons. Especially the latter reason is applicable to the situation in Lebanon, since the country already has a history with a lot of tension between different (sectarian) groups (Traboulsi, 2015). If the Lebanese community increasingly experiences dissatisfaction from living together with the Syrian refugees, it also
increases the risk of new sectarian conflicts emerging. With several recent wars, this seems to be a particular point of attention for the Lebanese government.

The third actor that Jacobsen (1996) describes are the refugees themselves. If many of them are present in a host country and if they have enough resources and networks, they can try to directly influence the host government or influence other factors that might play a role in policymaking. For example, if they experience pressure to return but do not wish to do so.

Coutin (2014) adds a fourth pressure on host governments, namely the countries who that the refugees in question originate from. They can also exert influence on the refugee policymaking of the country that hosts the refugees. For example, earlier in this chapter I discussed how the unwillingness of these countries of origin can be a restraining factor for host countries in returning refugees (Gibney, 2008).

2.2.4. Pressure tools of the host government

Despite the influences that host countries experience from these different actors, they are not powerless themselves either. The involvement of multiple actors in carrying out tasks related to returns are even seen as ultimately serving the interests of the governments of those host countries (Fekete, 2005). In addition to that, Jacobsen (1996) describes how host countries also have some pressure tools themselves. For example, they can threaten to refuse to accept refugees into their countries if they do not get the financial reimbursement they want to receive. The consequence of this could for example be that refugees travel further to Europe. Since the discourse of an increasing number of European countries is becoming more and more negative towards refugees, the EU is particularly sensitive to these kind of threats (SAWA for Development and Aid, 2019). Host countries can also worsen the relationship they have with a country by accepting refugees fleeing from that country, because it means that the host country acknowledges that the country of origin is not capable of taking care of its own people. This might also be an incentive for an actor to argue in favor of sending the refugees back home.

Furthermore, UNHCR can only do her work in a refugee hosting country upon the invitation of the government of that country and the organization’s staff is dependent on this invitation for their access to the host country. If governments experience UNHCR’s pressure as uncomfortable or undesirable they may react to this. For example, by expelling the employees, denying the validity of voluntary agency staff and interfering in work permit procedures. Ultimately, this will negatively
influence the refugees, as they can no longer access the help originally given by UNHCR or the particular (I)NGO. This happened in July last year, when the Lebanese Minister of Foreign Affairs demanded UNHCR to present a clear plan on the refugee returns and until they would do so, the residency applications for their staff would stay on hold. This shows how political actors try to complicate and influence the work of those not supporting their (refugee)policies.

2.3. Concepts
Based on the theory I have discussed and the research questions I formulated in the introduction, I operationalized four specific concepts. The first one, ‘political actors’, consists out of four different levels: the Lebanese government, the Syrian regime, the international refugee regime and the Syrian refugees. The Lebanese government will first be discussed as one entity and then through the influence and efforts of separate political actors. The international refugee regime includes UNHCR and international and local civil society actors.

The second concept, ‘influence’ (on the refugee returns), is operationalized into two different types of influence. The political influence of the political actors is understood as the ability of political actors to steer the return of Syrian refugees through political channels, for example through lobbying. The practical influence of the political actors is understood as the ability of political actors to steer the return of Syrian refugees through practical efforts, for example through facilitating returns or implementing policies related to returns. Actors can have one of both types of influence or both.

The third concept, ‘immediate return’, should be understood as a return of a Syrian refugee that takes place before a tripartite agreement between the country of origin (Syria), the host country (Lebanon) and UNHCR is made. In addition, these returns take place before the Syrian government has given guarantees related to the safety of the Syrian refugees that return to Syria and before it grants UNHCR unrestricted access to (the refugees in) Syria.

The fourth and final concept, the ‘return context’ (in Lebanon), captures all different efforts that are undertaken in Lebanon that we consider to be an act of deportation, pushing refugees out of Lebanon (also referred to as ‘push policies’) and/or as a contributing to the voluntary return of a Syrian refugee. A more elaborate explanation of these concepts can be found in the
3. Methodology

My research focused on how political actors influence return efforts targeted at Syrian refugees in Lebanon to shape the Lebanese return context. Prior to starting this research, I imagined different actors would have different ideas about the extent to which and how this potential influence exists. Thus, the outcome of the research would depend on how people interpreted the political interplay and how they, as a result, created reality through the choices they made and the actions they took based on these interpretations. The idea was to collect all these individual experiences and ultimately work towards one argument or theory. This inductive approach fits the social constructivist paradigm best and because of the focus on individual interpretations and experiences rather than on one objective reality and a measurable collection of data, using qualitative research methods was the logical path to choose for my research (Bryman, 2012).
3.1. Units of analysis
As soon as I knew I was using qualitative research methods I had to find out which specific methods I would use. I chose to conduct interviews as my main source of data gathering, for whom my units of analysis would be organizations. Specifically, international and local civil society actors that are familiar and involved with the topic of refugee returns, such as development (I)NGO’s, refugee organizations, human rights groups and research centers. I chose for in-depth interviews, as this allowed me to somewhat steer the interviews while also leaving room for the interviewees to talk more freely and possibly provide additional information that I did not specifically ask about. Prior to starting with the interviews, I also made an item list with specific words (codes) I expected to talk about with the interviewee. This was to make sure I would stay focused on the topics that are most relevant and important to my research. These codes consisted out of the different political actors that are involved, such as ‘Hezbollah’.

Thinking about who to interview and especially how to reach them also led me to think about the sensitivity of my topic. Return efforts often have both opponents and supporters and are often politically loaded. Especially in a country as Lebanon, where many different actors appear to be involved in the return efforts, it seemed likely that this would also be the case. This also would make it more difficult to find people who were willing to be interviewed about this topic. For example, I could imagine that most political leaders and street-level agents would not want to or would not be allowed to participate. And although I tried to get in contact with some of the political actors, such as Hezbollah, the Minister of State for Displaced Affairs and the Lebanese Promise Party, I indeed did not manage to interview any of them. Because I had already expected that this would happen, I chose in advance to back up the information from my interviewees about these political actors with documents and relevant media articles about/of the involved organizations and governmental institution. The item list I used was the same as for the interviews and the units of analysis were artifacts (Web Center for Social Research Methods, 2006).

3.2. Participant recruitment
If I could not reach the political actors, then who would I interview? Civil-society actors who work with the Syrian refugees and who are knowledgeable about the return efforts that are in place in Lebanon seemed to be important and approachable actors in this return context. This is why I chose to interview employees working for civil society organizations. Specifically, refugee organizations, human rights organizations, research centers and NGO networks. When it came to finding
employees of those organizations that wanted to talk to me, I was luckily put into contact with someone who used to work for a development INGO in Beirut. She was able to connect me to some (I)NGO employees, who I interviewed and who then also linked me to other potential interviewees. This way of snowball sampling was very beneficial to my research, as my interviewees knew through the questions and topics we discussed which other people I should talk to. In addition, I also found some interviewees through Twitter (although also through the profiles of the people I had already spoken to), and through browsing through the platform ‘Daleel Madani’, which is a network of Lebanon’s civil society. On top of that, I gained insightful data from a report launch and panel discussion organized by the grassroots organization SAWA for Development and Aid, which was specifically about refugee returns.

Eventually, I gathered data from eight interviews with employees from different civil society organizations and from the SAWA event. The interviews lasted between 35 minutes and 1.5 hours, whereas the report launch and discussion lasted about 2.5 hours in total. I transcribed them and used Atlas.ti for the data analysis. For the in total 47 media articles and organizational and governmental documents I analyzed I used Evernote, because this program allowed me to store the files very easily and in an ordered manner.

3.3. Ethical considerations
While doing research for my thesis, there were several ethical considerations I had to keep in mind. First, it was important to make sure that my interviewees were voluntarily participating in the research. To ensure they did not feel pressured, I approached them through email. Calling them or stopping by their offices might have been more effective in terms of getting more interviews, but I felt this would be too pushy. If I sensed the people I approached were not really up for it, I withdrew. For example, I once approached a potential participant and even though she gave me her phone number and agreed to meet with me for my research, she kept stalling and not replying when it came down to setting a time and place, twice. I decided to stop contacting her, because I knew it would either not happen anyway or that she would end up participating involuntarily.

Secondly, getting informed consent from my participants was crucial. I mainly interviewed civil society actors and my topic is a rather sensitive one for them to talk about in public. Because of this, I imagined they would not feel comfortable with signing a piece of paper confirming they voluntarily participated in an interview. I chose to use a more informal way of asking for their
consent to participate, namely verbally. I also emphasized that the confidentiality of their participation was ensured and I promised to not use any names.

Thirdly, I feel that the trust that the interviewees had in my capability to keep their participation in the research confidential, is aligned with whether they felt participating was safe for them. One of them did emphasize that if I wanted to use certain quotes with the name of her organization, I had to check with her first. Of course I agreed. Another interviewee seemed slightly nervous about participating in the research, as his organization is in a particular tight spot and his statements could have quite negative political consequences. I promised that I would run everything I would draw from the conversation by him first.

3.4. Positionality

Furthermore, thinking about ethics made it inevitable to think about positionality and my personal and geographical background. Being a young, Dutch woman meant I had to be more careful regarding my personal safety. More than for example when I would be a man or if I would look less Western and more Arabic. Although I do not like writing this down in such a stereotypical way, it was important to keep this in the back of my mind and to not put myself in situations that would be uncomfortable or unsafe for me. For example, when I contacted political parties, I already decided in advance that if they would respond, I would try to interview them through a video call. Or that I would bring a friend if the former was no option.

In addition, I realized it was important to take my positionality into account when it came to the opinions I held about the refugee returns and the different involved actors. I was raised in a Western society and used to mostly acquired my knowledge about the Middle East through information from European or American sources. It was only when I started reading academic articles for my classes at the university that I learned more about different topic related to the Middle East from a different point of view. Reading information from a different stance than I was used to, made me aware of the mark that consuming Western produced information has left on the way I look(ed) at Lebanon as a country and the Middle East as region. This also played a role during my interviews, because I learned that it was not only important to refrain from giving my own opinions during the interviews. I also had to try to be as neutral as possible in the way I interpreted the data and in how I tried to understand the whole context of these refugee returns. I learned that although I thought I was open minded, I still could be more open to information or opinions that did not necessarily align with what
I believed to be true.

3.5. Quality of the research

Having a prior background in quantitative research, I was initially inclined to test the quality of my research based on validity and reliability checks. However, I concluded that these two measures are not as fit for a qualitative research like this one. As I mentioned earlier in this section, my research fits the constructivist paradigm and based on this paradigm, Guba and Lincoln (1994) came up with two different quality criteria. The first one, ‘trustworthiness’, can be addressed through several indicators, such as the level of credibility, transferability and confirmability of the research. The second one, ‘authenticity’, refers to the impact the research has on a social and political level. Ontological authenticity, educative authenticity and fairness are three indicators that are part of this second quality criterium (Bryman, 2012).

3.5.1. Trustworthiness

One of the criteria that helps to accomplish a trustworthy research is credibility. To make sure that the findings I would derive from my interviews could be considered as credible, I used different types of methods for my data collection, also described by Denzin as multiple triangulation (Gray, 2014). I supplemented the interviews with two other ways of data collection: attending one panel discussion in which experts from various backgrounds (research, (I)NGO’s, government) took part and who spoke specifically about the topic of the returns of Syrian refugees in Lebanon, and supporting my interview data with information from media articles and organizational and governmental documents.

To ensure that my findings would potentially be applicable to other environments and circumstances and thus transferable, I provided relevant, contextual details about the Lebanese culture, history and political system in my introduction. However, the complexity of giving an overview of the influence of all involved actors regarding the return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon lies exactly in Lebanon’s uniqueness, with all her religions, history, political parties and alliances that cross many borders. On one hand, these factors make it difficult to apply my findings to similar situations. But on the other hand, that is exactly one of the main points I have tried to make in this thesis. My intention was to show that the complexity of the Lebanese case also makes it easy for outsiders to judge the position the Lebanese are in and that the uniqueness of the situation requires a carefully curated solution, instead of a standardized approach for dealing with refugee returns.
Another criterium that helps ensure the trustworthiness of my research is the level of confirmability it has. This revolves around the question of whether I have allowed to let my own personal values and opinion influence the results of my research (Bryman, 2012). This was indeed something I needed to pay attention to while interviewing. Already during the first interviews, the answers I received did not always coincide with what I thought I would find, based on the theory in my theoretical framework. For example, initially my entire research was built around the idea of Syrian refugees being deported back to Syria. But my findings showed that none of my respondents viewed the returns as deportations. In addition, some of my interviewees argued in favor of the returns and one of them had even conducted a plan to contribute to them. Hearing these answers that were conflicting with my own thoughts and opinions and with the theories I used, made me realize rather quickly that I had to remain objective and as open minded as I could be to get the bottom of the situation as much as I could. So, this process of internal conflict with the answers of my interviewees made sure that I paid extra attention to not steering the findings towards my own opinion, hereby strengthening the quality of my research.

3.5.2. Authenticity
As mentioned earlier, Guba and Lincoln’s second quality criterium authenticity includes ontological authenticity, educative authenticity and fairness. These all revolve around the extent to which the researcher has taken different voices and perspectives into account and the conflicting realities that can exist within these.

Ontological authenticity relates to whether my research helps understand the context and different considerations related to the Syrian refugee returns better. The aim of my research was to find out which different actors are involved with the returns and to clarify the approaches and underlying reasons for each of their specific efforts. Thus, I could even say that maximizing ontological authenticity was a goal of this research. Educative authenticity is about helping members appreciate the perspectives that others might have regarding a certain issue or setting better. Since I specifically asked my interviewees to reflect on the roles and interests of the different actors, I would say this at least gave them the chance to appreciate these different perspectives. In practice, most of my interviewees indeed showed an understanding for the different positions of the actors they discussed. Speaking for myself, I can say that conducting the interview gave me the opportunity to grasp the different considerations of the actors better, which to an extent also made it easier to appreciate their actions and perspectives.
For my research, fairness refers to how much the research represents the different viewpoints of the different members in the setting (or, of the actors involved in the refugee return debate). Since I was not able to perfectly achieve this, I have included this in the following section, as the first limitation of my research.

3.6. Methodological limitations
Already before but also during my research I stumbled upon some limitations. First, as I expected, it was indeed not possible to interview political actors, such as people working for ministries, embassies or political parties. And thus, I was not fully able to represent the viewpoint of all different actors. Because my interviewees belonged to a specific actor, namely civil society, their perceptions and opinions have also been established based on their specific background and experiences. However, I tried to balance this out through supporting the claims I made in my thesis with the information I drew from the media articles and organizational documents.

This also leads me to the second limitation of my study. Although the sensitivity of the topic was probably partially the reason it was difficult to get access to most of the political actors, my limited amount of time also played a role. With only nine weeks of fieldwork, it was difficult to really establish connections with the right people, since time is often a prerequisite for building connection and trust.

A third limitation was that I felt that the level of my research was another reason why some people did not take the time to meet with me. During my time in Beirut I met and heard of many researchers who were studying refugees and even returns (though this was often focused more on the conditions for and consequences of return). Most of them were PhD-students or beyond this level and I sometimes felt that in comparison my master research was sometimes undervalued. However, those people also came across as very busy and I of course also understand that their time is valuable and can only be spent once.

3.7. Conceptual framework

| Independent variable | Dependent variable |
4. Actors who encourage immediate Syrian refugee returns through their efforts
In this chapter I will discuss the actors that are in favor of an immediate return of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon and how they have an influence on these returns through their various efforts. As I explained in my theoretical framework, I will make a distinction between their political and their practical influence. I will start by explaining some of the ways the Lebanese government functions and how influential they are as one entity. Then, I will move on to separate actors within the Lebanese government that each have their own stances on the return issue and to their own efforts and political and practical influences. I will conclude the chapter by discussing the efforts and influence of Syrian refugees. To prevent too much repetition I have chosen to not continuously repeat that we are talking about ‘immediate’ returns. Unless stated otherwise, it can be assumed that in this chapter we are talking about returns that take place before a tripartite agreement is reached, before a political solution is found and before the Syrian government fulfills certain requirements of UNHCR.

4.1. The Lebanese government
4.1.1. The dynamics of Lebanese politics
As I discussed in the introduction of this thesis, Lebanese politicians agree with each other that the return of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon to Syria is the most desirable solution. One of my interviewees even stated that the refugee issue is now probably one of the few issues on which the politicians agree. However, the politicians do differ on the specific areas in Syria the refugees should return to and whether the international community or the Syrian regime is responsible for ensuring certain safety guarantees for the Syrians. Lebanese politicians also do not agree on the political actors they should communicate and work with to facilitate these returns (interviewee 7, legal specialist at a refugee INGO). Within the government there are several parties, led by Prime Minister Al-Hariri, who refuse to work together with the Syrian government. Other parties, led by Hezbollah, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Lebanese president, claim that working together with the Syrian government is crucial to an effective return of the refugees (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2017). Because the political system in Lebanon requires political decisions to be taken by consensus - despite the high level of political pluralism and diversity within the government - this has made it impossible for the politicians to form a unified response to the return issue. For this reason, the division within the government, which has remained unchanged until this day, is considered as a weakening factor for the practical and political influence of the Lebanese government.

4.1.2. Meaningless portfolios
Not only did my interviewees suggest that the Lebanese government is divided and does not perform as one entity but politicians also seem to get involved with each other’s responsibilities. This was illustrated perfectly when I tried to understand which ministry holds the ‘refugee portfolio’. My interviewees answered that it did not matter who holds the portfolio, because portfolios are meaningless in Lebanon anyway. This is because the division within the Lebanese government has prevented it from establishing a government position on the return issue. As a result, there is no clear policy to be implemented by a certain ministry. Furthermore, my interviewees also mentioned how even among the ministers themselves there is unclarity on who is responsible for what, because the ministers are not sure about what their mandates are. This unclarity about who is responsible for what issue and the lack of a return policy has given room to politicians to step forward and unilaterally pursue his or her political stance on the issue. Because the stances of the ministries in Lebanon are tied to that of the serving ministers, it is possible for a portfolio holder to adapt what happens at the ministerial level to his or her political position (interviewee 2, executive director of a Lebanese human rights organization). This also means that when a new government is formed, like last February happened, a minister with a completely different and opposite view from the previous minister can take office. This makes it very hard to implement long term, efficient initiatives, which in turn also weakens the position of the ministries (interviewee 3, executive director of a development NGO network).

4.1.3. Two ministries, one portfolio

4.1.3.1. Approaches and efforts towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

Despite the limitations to the influence of the Lebanese ministries, there are two specific ministries that have the mandate to deal with matters related to the Syrian refugee issue: the Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs (MOSDA) and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA). MOSDA was created by the previous government and initially its mandate was quite vague and it was unclear what the tasks, jurisdiction or capabilities of the new ministry were (interviewee 6). According to interviewee 1, the policy lead of a development INGO, this ministry currently particularly serves a political purpose and it is led by Minister Saleh al Gharib. He is a member of the pro-Syria Alawite Lebanese Arab Democratic Party. Concurrently, the minister has been suspected to have ties to the Syrian regime, as well as to the Free Patriotic Movement. The previous minister of MOSDA, who was described as against the return of the Syrian refugees (interviewee 1), even refused to officially hand over the portfolio of the ministry to al Gharib, as he saw the latter as ‘the Syrian representative of the Lebanese government’ (Enab Baladi, 2019). Al Gharib himself has argued that coordination between the Lebanese and Syrian government is ‘compulsory’ to the return of the Syrian refugees (Naharnet, 2019) and has also expressed support for refugee returns through the Russian Initiative.
In a video on Al Gharib’s Facebook-account that was posted the 16th of June (2019), the minister mentions that the decision of the refugees to return must be a voluntary decision and that they are not forced to return.

The Ministry of Social Affairs (MOSA) has played a practical role in the approach to the refugee influx since it started in 2011. It was the holder of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan (LCRP) (interviewee 1, 2, 6), which involved anything related to the practical matters of the refugee issue, such as the registration, documentation, funding, the services for and the management of refugees (interviewee 1, 2, 6; Geha & Talhouk, 2018). According to interviewee 2, because the consensus at the government level around the LCRP makes it possible for 'the portfolio holder, which is MOSA, to operate.’ The current minister of MOSA is Richard Kouyoumdijan, a member of the Lebanese Forces party, that is in favor of an establishment of specific safe zones in Syria by the international community to which the Syrian refugees could return to (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2017). Both Al Gharib and Kouyoumdijan have each presented proposals of their political party to return the refugees (Lebanese National News Agency, 2019).

4.1.3.2. Influence on returns
When I discussed the individual influences of MOSA and MOSDA on the refugee returns, the Ministry of Social Affairs came out as having the most practical influence. Interviewee 3, executive director of a development NGO network, described that although the responsibility for the refugee portfolio is supposed to lay with MOSDA, the minister of MOSA, Kouyoumdijan, claims responsibility over it as well and is therefore viewed as having a practical influence. The latter’s recent proposal of a return plan, while there is another ministry that is dedicated to dealing with matters related to displaced persons, shows this. When it comes to the political influence and especially political involvement, Al Gharib, MOSDA’s minister, seems to have a larger presence. For example, there has been media attention for his visit to Syria (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019) and his meeting with the UNHCR delegation about safe refugee returns (Al Manar, 2019).

4.1.4. Push policies
Lacking a solid, unified return policy and the option to deport the refugees, the Lebanese government decided to implement several ‘push policies. Most of my interviewees mentioned that these were designed to make the refugees decide to go back. Interviewee 5, an advocacy and communications officer who works for an INGO network, described her interpretation of the stance
of the Lebanese government as follows: ‘We want to get rid of them and we will do anything we can in terms of policies, so that they go back. It’s like intentional harassment.’ For example, formally, Syrians are only allowed to work in three different sectors, namely construction, the environment (also indicated as cleaning or waste management by my interviewees) and agriculture (Nasser Yassin, 2018; SAWA for Development and Aid, 2019). Furthermore, the determination of the Lebanese government to prevent the Syrian refugees from settling down permanently is illustrated clearly by the threatened Arsal demolitions. In this city in the Northeast of Lebanon, thousands of refugees live in an informal settlement with concrete shelters. The Lebanese government asked the refugees to demolish the existing shelters in the settlement and transition to shelters that are made of either timber or plastic, before the 9th of June (The Daily Star Lebanon, 2019). If the refugees would fail to do so, the Lebanese government would give an order to nonetheless make it happen. According to Al Jazeera (2019), ‘many Syrians see it as part of efforts to send them home’. The Lebanese government eventually extended the deadline until the 1st of July and in the meantime has demolished the shelters.

Interviewee 7, a legal specialist at an INGO, also described how the Lebanese government decided to ignore all existing bilateral treaties between Syria and Lebanon by closing the border. At the end of 2014, the Lebanese General Security Office (GSO), which is legally mandated to deal with all things related to visas and residency permits, implemented new regulations that further restricted this prior freedom of movement. This made it more expensive and complicated for Syrians to legally stay in Lebanon. To apply for a residency permit or to renew it, Syrians now have to pay $200 dollars annually, demonstrate to the GSO that they have a valid ID or passport and also find a Lebanese national that is willing to sponsor them (and their family) (Yaha, 2018). As a result, it is estimated that currently around 73% of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are living there illegally (UNHCR, 2018). This means that the GSO can put these refugees into detention at any time, and in practice it seems that this indeed regularly happens (UNDP, 2016). Often they are released after a few days, for example after their family has paid a fee in exchange (Interviewee 7, legal specialist at a refugee INGO). In addition to facing this continuous risk, the lack of residency status also limits these Syrians to essential services and registering births and marriages (SAWA panel discussion participant Diana Semaan, Amnesty International).

With these push policies the Lebanese government has managed to increase its practical influence, making up for their lack of a unified return approach. Apart from these push policies of the Lebanese government and the efforts of the two ministries, MOSA and MOSDA, there are also
other initiatives initiated by various governmental actors. I will discuss the stance of these actors on the refugee return issue, their efforts to encourage the returns and the political and practical influence of the actors.

4.2. Initiatives among separate Lebanese government actors

4.2.1. Prime Minister Saad Hariri

4.2.1.1. Approach towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

After already having served as the Lebanese Prime Minister between 2009 and 2011, Saad Al-Hariri, son to the in 2005 assassinated Rafik Al-Hariri and leader of the Lebanese party the Future Movement (a Sunni Muslim party), once again took office as Prime Minister in December 2016. At that time, different actors such as the GSO had already implemented stricter regulations targeted at the Syrian refugees. However, Al-Hariri strongly opposed calls for returns, as he questioned whether the refugees would be safe after return (interviewee 1). However, he was also in a tight spot, since an increasing number of involved actors, both inside and outside of Lebanon, were advocating for returns. As an alternative, he proposed the creation of safe zones in the Syrian border zone to which the Syrian refugees could return to voluntarily under the supervision of the UN (Reuters, 2017). This establishment of safe zones in Syria by the international community has also remained the main return approach of Al-Hariri’s party, the Future Movement but also of the Lebanese Forces and the Kataeb Party. According to interviewee 4, the president of a Lebanese human rights organization, Al-Hariri’s stance on the refugee returns is close to the international standards. He described how he thinks the Prime Minister is refraining from getting engaged in the political battle and that al-Hariri acknowledges that Lebanon has some international commitments (such as to the principle of non-refoulement) to respect.

4.2.1.2. Efforts that encourage the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

The fact that Al-Hariri expressed his doubts about the safety of Syrian refugees who return to Syria also reflects his stance towards the Syrian regime. Unsurprisingly considering he suspects the Syrian regime to be responsible for the murder on his father, Al-Hariri distrusts the Syrian regime and refuses to coordinate with it (interviewee 5). Supposedly, at a meeting with his political party (FM), in August last year, he even said he would never meet with the Syrian president, even if it would cost him his position as the Prime Minister of Lebanon (Middle East Monitor, 2018). But since many Lebanese politicians are calling for working together with the Syrian regime, Al-Hariri has looked for alternative cooperations. This became visible in for example his support for Russia’s return initiative for Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Interviewee 2, executive director or a Lebanese
human rights organization, mentioned how Russia is seen as the political extension of the Syrian regime. But working together with this country does enable the Prime Minister to continue his refusal of reestablishing ties with the Syrian regime. His efforts to work with the Russians also show the Lebanese public that he seriously wants to work on the topic. This could be the reason why he has appointed the head of the Lebanese security organization to discuss refugee returns with the Syrian government instead of doing it himself (interviewee 4). In his position as the Lebanese Prime Minister, Al-Hariri also actively lobbies for more financial support from international actors. For example, last March he requested more than 2.5 billion dollars from the international community at the EU Brussels conference about the future of Syria, to support the return of the Syrian refugees (The Daily Star Lebanon, 2019). In addition, he also insisted the EU should exert pressure on the Syrian regime to facilitate Syrian refugee returns (An-Nahar, 2019).

4.2.1.3 Influence on the returns
Al-Hariri’s stance on the Syrian refugee returns seems to lie closer with the international community than with some of his colleagues in Lebanon and he has refused to directly coordinate the returns with the Syrian regime himself. Although I expected that these aspects would make it more difficult for the Prime Minister to be influential, my interviewees indicated that Al-Hariri has managed to remain a highly influential political actor regarding the refugee returns. According to interviewee 6, vice president of a Lebanese research institute, the decisions and efforts of the different involved Lebanese ministries and institutions, such as GSO, are ultimately tied to the opinion of the Prime Minister. This means that Al-Hariri not only has a political influence but also a practical one.

4.2.2. The Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gebran Bassil, and President Aoun
Next to the Prime Minister and the ministers of MOSA and MOSDA, there are two other Lebanese, political actors that have a prominent voice on the return of the Syrian refugees. President Aoun, and the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bassil, who is also the son-in-law of the former. Even though they of course have a different position within the Lebanese government, their political affiliations and their approaches and efforts to the refugee returns are very much aligned. For this reason, I will discuss both in one section. First, let me explain their approach to the return of the Syrian refugees.

4.2.2.1. Approaches towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees
Aoun and Bassil are both distinguished members of the Free Patriotic Movement (FPM), the largest
Christian party (interviewee 1). Whereas the President founded the party in 1994, his son-in-law became the leader of the party in 2015. Regarding the refugee issue, the political party (and accordingly these two politicians) believes that there are certain areas in Syria that are safe enough for Syrian refugees to return to (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2017). The FPM also regards the Syrian regime as its ally and is thus also in favor of reestablishing diplomatic relations between Syria and Lebanon and of coordinating the refugee returns with the regime (Refugees Deeply, 2018; Geha & Talhouk; 2018)). During a press conference with the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs, Bassil also emphasized that he supports the ‘formation of a Syrian constitution and all efforts aiming at facilitating a safe return of Syrian refugees to their homeland’ (Al-Manar, 2019; Lebanon’s National News Agency, 2019). Bassil often uses words like ‘safe’ to refer to the returns but avoids classifying them as ‘voluntary’ returns (Syria Direct, 2019).

Bassil has also repeatedly stressed that he does not believe that the Syrian refugees should stay in Lebanon until a political solution in Syria is found. According to him, the Syrian regime currently already gives enough guarantees that allow refugees to return before a solution to the Syrian conflict has been found (Lebanon’s National News Agency, 2019; The Daily Star Lebanon, 2019). President Aoun repeated the same message during a meeting with the Swiss president and in addition, also emphasized Lebanon’s full support for the Russian Initiative in helping with the facilitation of the Syrian refugees to Syria (Al-Manar, 2018). After a meeting with the Russian Foreign Minister, Bassil said that the Russian government is the first international actor to initiate a proposal that helps to facilitate the refugee returns and praised the country for this (The National, 2018). Minister Bassil also opened a discussion about the name of MOSDA, when it was initially founded with the name ‘Ministry of State for Refugee Affairs’. His reason for this was that Lebanon’s lack of commitment to the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees means that the Syrians are not called ‘refugees’ but considered to be ‘displaced’ people (interviewee 1, policy lead of a development INGO that works in Lebanon). According to him, the ministry should thus also not be named ‘refugee’ affairs. His argument worked, because as the present shows, the Ministry is now related to displaced affairs. In the next section, I will elaborate on other efforts that he undertakes, specifically to encourage the return of the Syrian refugees.

4.2.2.2. Efforts that encourage the immediate return of the Syrian refugees
Practically speaking, one of the main efforts from Minister Bassil and his political party is the establishment of a committee last year, to facilitate the return process of the Syrian refugees and ‘to encourage the Syrians to return’ (Free Patriotic Movement Diaspora Newsportal, 2018; The Daily...
Star Lebanon; 2018). In his announcement of the launch of the committee, Bassil also indicated he would work together with municipalities and the Lebanese security service, which I will discuss extensively after concluding on the influence of Bassil and Aoun to facilitate these returns. According to interviewee 1, the policy lead of a development INGO, the committee is not as visible or active as some of the other Lebanese actors that are involved in facilitating returns.

Furthermore, both Aoun and Bassil extensively advocate for the returns of the refugees abroad. I already gave the examples of their meetings with the Iranian Foreign Minister and the Swiss President but there are many more. For example, in May this year, President Aoun met with the Spanish Foreign Minister and expressed his disappointment regarding the lack of support of the European Union (EU) for the return of the Syrian refugees that currently live in Lebanon. Aoun also seemed to imply that if the EU would continue to not facilitate returns supervised by the UN, the Lebanese government would organize them through coordination with the Syrian regime (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019). In meetings with the Hungarian anti-immigration Prime Minister and European far-right parliamentarians, Aoun and Bassil have emphasized the risk of the Syrians fleeing to Europe if the European countries continue to not support the refugee returns (Refugees deeply, 2018).

Minister Bassil has also undertaken attempts to discredit actors that do not agree the refugees should start to return already. In an attack on those actors, he argued that there is an ‘international conspiracy’ to keep the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, with the aim of weakening the country (Refugees Deeply, 2018). According to interviewee 8, repatriation expert at an international refugee organization, Bassil has been seeking fights with particularly UNHCR and international INGO’s and putting pressure on them, to intimidate them. And in practice, he has demonstrated that he indeed has this leverage to pressure them. For example, June last year Minister Bassil froze the UNHCR staff’s residency applications, because he believed the organization is discouraging the return of the refugees by spreading fear about the circumstances in Syria (interviewee 5; Reuters, 2018). In the next section, I will explain more about how much influence Bassil and Aoun are considered to have, according to my interviewees, on the refugee returns.

4.2.2.3. Influence on the returns
Most of my interviewees believed the minister of Foreign Affairs is one of the most vocal actors in the return issue and that he has a significant political influence on the returns. According to
interviewee 6, the vice president of a Lebanese research institute, the minister does not have a specific role in the issue but he nonetheless tries to. I have given several advocacy examples of Bassil that indeed illustrate his vocality on the issue. Interviewee 6 and interviewee 4, the president of a Lebanese human rights organization, also explained that because the party that he leads (FPM), the largest Christian party, is generally a strong party in Lebanese politics, it enables the minister to influence political decisions in general. Bassil’s efforts to make himself relevant to the refugee issue enable him to also influence political decisions on this topic. Practically speaking he may not have much influence when it comes to actually facilitating the returns through his party's initiative but he has shown with UNHCR's visa applications that he can obstruct the efforts of those who work against the encouragement of immediate refugees returns.

But interviewee 7, legal advisor at a refugee INGO, attributed more political influence to President Aoun. According to her, the Foreign Affairs Minister is mainly taken seriously because he is the son-in-law of the President. Furthermore, she argued, Aoun can use Bassil to have him express opinions that he himself, being the Lebanese President, cannot make public. Another interviewee (2), who is the executive director of a Lebanese human rights organization, explained how the Foreign Affairs Minister could become more influential regarding the refugee returns in the future, if he would use his diplomatic power and that of his embassies to actually influence the Syrian Peace Process, so that it actually would address the refugee returns. But because Bassil argues that the aspects that are seen as obstacles to the success of the Peace Process, such as conflict resolution, are irrelevant to the return of the refugees I do question whether he will indeed put in this effort in the future. The Lebanese President does not seem to have a real practical influence on the refugee returns.

4.2.3. The General Security Office (GSO)

4.2.3.1. Approach towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

One of the most prominent and most often mentioned actors that actively contributes to the return of Syrian refugees is the General Security Office (GSO), the Lebanese security organization that was established in 1921 and is under the supervision of the Ministry of Internal Affairs (General Directorate of General Security, 2019; interviewee 7). Among having other responsibilities, the organization oversees the Lebanese borders and of who enters and leaves Lebanon. It also deals with all legal issues related to residency and work permits (interviewee 1,4,5).

4.2.3.2. Efforts that encourage the immediate return of the Syrian refugees
Interviewee 5, communications and advocacy officer for a humanitarian INGO network, described how the GSO encourages returns by organizing them for refugees. This process works as follows. First, the Syrian refugees who wish to go back sign up for return with the GSO, who then gives the list of names to the Syrian government. Then, the refugees on the list go through security checks and are screened by the Syrian intelligence services. The latter then give the refugees approval or refusal to return to Syria. Sometimes the refugees receive no answer at all. In the next chapter, I will discuss the Syrian government and some of its reasons (as mentioned by my interviewees) to approve or refuse certain refugees. After the screening process, the GSO organizes returns for those Syrian refugees for whom they received an acceptance from the Syrian regime to return. GSO coordinates the names of the refugees who are allowed to return with UNHCR, so that UNHCR can help prepare these refugees for their return as much as they can. Over the last months, there have been several return pick up points throughout Lebanon where groups of refugees came together and boarded busses heading to the border of Syria. When these returns initially started, the returns only took place once every month but this has increased to at times weekly organized returns. Prior to departure, the GSO also allows refugees to opt out in case they last minute decide not to return (Diana Semaan, Amnesty International).

However, despite it coming across as quite a streamlined and organized effort, several of my interviewees emphasized how slowly this whole process is going. According to interviewee 4, the president of a human rights organization, the first time the GSO sent a list of names to the regime, only 100 out of 1300 refugees could go back. Interviewee 7, a legal specialist at an international refugee organization, added that ‘the GSO in Beirut takes six weeks to get clearance for 50 people.’ But, it seems that the GSO has managed to increase the return numbers. For example, on the 1st of June the GSO stated on their official Twitter account that in coordination with UNHCR it managed to send a total of 621 Syrian refugees from different parts of Lebanon back to Syria. Several of my interviewees did emphasize that although published return numbers might seem substantial, they should be compared to the large, total amount of refugees that are currently based in Lebanon. During our interview, one of my interviewees (4) even calculated that at the current return rate, it would still take decades to return all Syrian refugees.

4.2.3.3. Influence on the returns

Once it became clear how the exact process of the returns organized by GSO works, my interviewees elaborated further on the actual influence of the organization. The efforts of GSO in facilitating these refugee returns show that GSO has a major practical influence in the return context
of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Two of my interviewees (2 and 3) very clearly stated that GSO’s practical influence is mostly related to the implementation of measures. The GSO also mentions many of her tasks related to the implementation of policies or measures in its Code of Conduct. But according to some of my other interviewees, the GSO’s mandate goes beyond mere implementation. For example, interviewee 5, advocacy and communications advisor at a humanitarian INGO network in Lebanon, mentioned that the GSO has a shaping role and makes decisions. This was supported in a report from Lebanon Support (2016), which describes how in 2014 the GSO was assigned with the task of not only the implementation, but also the drafting of new residency regulations. This responsibility was given to them to help the Lebanese government reduce the refugee numbers in Lebanon, the objective of a 2014 Policy on the Syrian Displacement (Lebanon Support, 2016). It resulted in the more expensive and complicated residency permit rules that are currently still in place, with only minor adjustments having been made up until this day. This contributes to the push policies of the Lebanese government.

Other interviewees specifically spoke about the political role and influence of the GSO. My fifth interviewee said that the GSO has a substantial political influence in Lebanon. To illustrate this, she explained that when UNHCR does advocacy, the organization does not only talk to the Prime Minister. It also discusses with GSO's director directly, because of the influence he has on how policies are implemented. Interviewee 7, a legal specialist at a refugee INGO working in Lebanon, added that the GSO is ‘an extremely powerful security apparatus … that also has quite a grip on Lebanese [nationals] and all other foreigners. Ziad el Sayegh, expert in public policy and former advisor to MOSDA, argued during the SAWA panel discussion that the director of the GSO, Abbas Ibrahim, was appointed as a sort of ambassador by prime minister Hariri to discuss the coordination of the returns initiated by the Russians with the Syrian regime. Interviewee 4, the president of a Lebanese human rights organization, agreed that Ibrahim is part of the political game and also argued that these discussions between the GSO’s director and the Syrian regime are only framed as being about security. This is because acknowledging them as political meetings would embarrass the Lebanese Prime Minister, who refuses to communicate with the Syrian regime. GSO itself argues quite the contrary, as it states in its Code of Conduct that neither the General Security officer nor its superior can engage in political or partisan meetings (The Government of Lebanon, General Directorate of General Security, Security Office).

In conclusion, not all my interviewees agreed on whether the GSO mainly has an implementing role or also a policy shaping role. Regardless of this disagreement, they all acknowledged that the
Lebanese GSO has a major practical influence and some political influence, even though the organization itself argues that her employees are not allowed to engage in politics.

4.2.4. Hezbollah

4.2.4.1. Approach towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

Another party that is one of the key actors in the refugee returns is the Lebanese Hezbollah. The Shia Muslim party has a political and military wing and became one of the most represented political actors with the formation of the new government last February (FDD, 2019). Hezbollah was founded after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982. In addition to being affiliated to Iran (Reuters, 2017), Hezbollah has also supported the Syrian regime since 2012 during the Syrian civil war through its military presence on Syrian ground. Two objectives for Hezbollah’s military interference in Syria are the protection of Lebanon’s security and as a cooperation with the Syrian regime against rebel Sunni individuals and/or groups (Tokmajyan, 2014). Going back to the refugee debate, it has become clear that Hezbollah encourages the Syrian refugees, of whom the majority are Sunni Muslims, to leave Lebanon and go back to Syria. Hezbollah believes that the Syrian refugees should choose themselves whether to return to areas controlled by the government or to areas held by rebels (The Lebanese Center for Policy Studies, 2017).

4.2.4.2. Efforts that encourage the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

Hezbollah has started similar return efforts as the GSO, through which it also collects the names of Syrian refugees who wish to return and then communicates the list with names to the Syrian regime. According to an article published by Al-Manar English (2018), a news agency that is part of a Hezbollah’s affiliated tv station, the party even opened specialized registration centers last summer and broadcasted an announcement for this on television, mentioning the addresses and phone numbers for the center. As part of facilitating these returns, the party also works on cleansing the papers of the Syrians if this is necessary. This means that if one of the refugees who wants to go back has committed a crime in Syria in the past, Hezbollah acts as a sort of mediator between that refugee and the Syrian regime to make sure that there will not be any problems with his or her papers upon return to Syria (interviewee 1, 7).

4.2.4.3. Influence on the returns

Looking at Hezbollah’s influence, my interviewees agreed that the party is considered as generally being quite influential, both politically and practically, and that their role in the return matter does not seem to be an exception to this. That Hezbollah has initiated return movements without having
been assigned to do so by the Lebanese government, is a first indicator of this political influence. According to interviewee 7, a legal specialist at a refugee INGO in Lebanon, Hezbollah’s return efforts might even have been a response to the government’s failure to take effective initiative in the matter. She added that Hezbollah’s efforts might be mostly for PR purposes, to show the Lebanese population, their constituencies, that they are taking active, practical measures, unlike the Lebanese government. Interviewee 2, a policy lead at a development INGO, added that the party’s initiative was also not that surprising because they are very good at logistics and at being responsive. According to him, the party probably just picked up the increasing calls for refugee returns.

Secondly, because Hezbollah has been supporting the Syrian regime military wise during the Syrian civil war and still is in the ongoing conflicts in Syria, politically speaking the party has enough leverage among the Syrian regime to push for the returns. At the same time, this cooperation with the regime could also mean that their organization of Syrian refugee returns are actually more of a favor to the regime (interviewee 2). For example, because the Syrian regime can show that the situation in Syria is improving if small scale returns are taking place (De Correspondent, 2018).

4.2.5. Local Lebanese authorities

4.2.5.1. Approach and influence towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

Most of the actors that I have discussed so far were mentioned in every interview and thus quite clearly key actors in the debate around Syrian refugee returns. However, my interviewees rarely spoke about the efforts and political and practical influence of Lebanese municipalities and other local authorities. Interviewee 7, a legal specialist at a refugee INGO, was the exception, as she brought up her concerns over management efforts that municipalities have been undertaking the past 1,5 years. While they may not be directly involved with efforts that encourage the return of Syrian refugees, their actions can have a profound impact on the quality of the daily lives of the refugees in Lebanon. These efforts can contribute to the pushing policies of the Lebanese government that I discussed earlier in this chapter, and eventually indirectly encourage Syrian refugees to return. Examples of these efforts are checking people’s residency permits, cracking down smaller shops and putting pressure on refugees to leave the municipality area. Although municipalities legally might not have the mandate to control refugee presence on their territory, the lack of action by the Lebanese central government has pushed the municipalities to take action themselves. Mostly, to respond to their own citizen’s complaints. Interviewee 7 also added: ‘What is the central government going to take away from refugees that they have not already? … But the municipalities can still do things to make peoples’ lives more miserable. … That is where the actual
factual power currently lies.’ Even though the local, Lebanese authorities might not have the most political influence in this return context but their practically speaking they are one of the most influential actors.

4.2.5.2. Efforts that encourage the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

There are concrete examples of municipalities that illustrate this practical influence. First of all, a recently published report by SAWA for Development and Aid (2019) described how several municipalities in the Bekaa Valley had given refugees in camps forms with questions about their intentions and opinions about returning to Syria. The report mentioned that these questions were considered as encouraging returns and that they potentially made the refugees feel threatened in their ability to stay in that area. Another example of a local authority taking manners into its’ own hands is the Litani River Authority (LRA), a public Lebanese institution that was established in 1954 with the aim of facilitating ‘the integrated development of the Litani River’, the largest river and water source in Lebanon (Assaf & Saadeh, 2006, p. 2). One of the issues the LRA has been dealing with is the deterioration of the water quality of the river, which is the result of the dumping of waste into the river by local residents. After accusing Syrian refugees of contaminating the Litani River in Southern Tyre, the LRA has undertaken several eviction attempts since the beginning of this year and in total, around 1500 Syrians have been sent away (Aljazeera, 2019).

Another incident that not only shows the restrictions of municipalities but also the strained interactions between Lebanese and Syrians, is the fire that broke out in a refugee camp in Deir al-Ahmar, in the Bekaa Valley. The fire followed after more than 700 refugees had not complied with an order to leave the camp after tensions with locals had risen (Arab News, 2019). Although there is no clarity on who exactly started the fire, it resulted in a dispute between refugees and local firefighters about the latter’s purposely late arrival to the scene, according to the former (Al Jazeera, 2019). In addition, locals threatened to burn down the Syrian refugee camp and to attack its’ residents. Ever since, the camp has been closed and the Baalbek-Hermel governate, where the refugee camp was located, has banned Syrian refugees from the area (Asharq Al-Awsat, 2019). Similarly, one of Lebanon’s most known ski towns, Faraya, has banned Syrian refugees from being on the main streets (The Daily Star Lebanon, 2019).

During my fieldwork, I once discussed my thesis topic with a mayor of a small municipality in the Jounieh area, close to Beirut. After a few minutes into the conversation, he turned to the friend I
was with and explained in Arabic how 300 Syrian refugees had previously lived in his municipality. According to the mayor, the Syrians had stolen belongings of the villagers and there had also been an increase of violence since they had arrived to his town. Eventually, he had terminated the leases of these Syrians, so they would leave his area. According to my friend, the mayor said that he did not want to say it in English, because he thought I would not understand it anyway and that I would see it as a racist move. Apart from me finding this latter aspect already quite interesting, this is foremost once again an example that shows the impact municipalities can have on the daily lives of the refugees and how their efforts contribute to the push policies of the Lebanese government.

4.3. The Syrian refugees

Another actor that might be overlooked rather easily but is central and essential to the refugee return context, is of course the Syrian refugee him- or herself. If international law is upheld, particularly the principle of non-refoulement, it should be the choice of the Syrian refugee whether he or she wants to return or not. As I mentioned before, refugees also have the right to return to their own country of origin. Interviewee 8, repatriation expert at an international refugee organization, even categorized the individual refugee as ‘the most important entity, because it is about their choices and it is very personal, related to whether they see opportunities or not.’

However, some of the interviewees seem to question the level of individuality when it comes to making these decisions. For example, interviewee 7, legal specialist at a refugee INGO in Lebanon, criticized the assumption that ‘every individual has the kind of power to really decide important things in their own life’. She noted that cultural, socio-economic and gender related aspects can also play a role in determining whether one will go back or not. ‘And of course, we cannot generalize, but does a 22-year-old Syrian man really decide whether he and his wife and the three children are going back? Or is it his father who decides that he will go back, or is it the community leader, or the grandfather or the mayor of the village in Syria who is now in the same camp with them here?’

Interviewee 2, executive director of a Lebanese human rights organization, also mentioned how within one household a man might decide to stay in Lebanon, whereas a woman might be able to go back. For example, because she will not be forced to conscription whereas he would.

In conclusion, the Syrian refugees are one of the most influential actors practically speaking, because, supported by international law, it is ultimately their choice whether to return or not. However, some do question to which extent the decision of the refugees to return or not really is an
individual choice, as this decision is influenced by different factors. The refugees do not seem to have a specific political influence.

5. Actors who work against encouraging immediate Syrian refugee returns through their efforts

In the previous chapter, I described several actors that collectively play a role in encouraging the Syrian refugees to return to Syria as soon as possible. In my theoretical framework, I described how simultaneously there are actors who do not agree that the refugees should return immediately and for this reason, they work against these encouragements to return. Scholars describe the international refugee regime, such as UNHCR and international and local civil society, as belonging to these actors. From my interviewees, I concluded that many of the efforts of these actors align but that the practical and political influence somewhat differ between UNHCR and the civil society actors. For this reason, I first discuss UNHCR separately and then continue by discussing INGO’s and local civil society actors together. The last two actors that I will discuss are the Syrian regime and the Syrian refugees and accordingly, their efforts and political and practical influences. Just like in the previous chapter, I will be referring to ‘immediate’ returns unless I indicate otherwise.

5.1. The Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)

The office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, also known as UNHCR, represents the stance of the international community on saving, protecting and supporting refugees (interviewee 1). The global organization was invited by the Lebanese government to take responsibility over the management and protection of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. This means
they are also highly involved with matters that are related to the future of these refugees, such as their potential return.

5.1.1. Approach towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

Generally, UNHCR has three different approaches to the future of refugees: resettlement to a third country, integration in the host country and voluntary repatriation to the country of origin. The first option, resettlement, could potentially be a good alternative in situations like the one the Syrian refugees in Lebanon are in: many are hesitant to return to Syria and at the same time, the circumstances in the host country are considered quite hostile. In the whole of 2018, 9800 Syrian refugees left Lebanon to find a better life in a resettlement country (UNHCR, 2019). However, the amount of refugees in Lebanon that gets resettled is very low in comparison to the actual demand for it in the country. Meanwhile, the global political will to host refugees seems to be shrinking rapidly. For this reason, my interviewees believed resettlement does not seem to be the long-term solution for most of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Integration in the host country, the second approach, is also not an option in this case, since the stance of the Lebanese government has always been that it does not want refugees to integrate and has also actively taken measures to ensure this. This leaves us with exploring the repatriation of the Syrian refugees and UNHCR’s approach to this.

One of my interviewees (8), who works for an international refugee organization and specializes in the repatriation of refugees, explained that UNHCR approaches voluntary repatriation through three different phases. The first one is non-facilitation and this is the phase that the UNHCR in Lebanon is currently in. It means that UNHCR does not initiate conversations about returning, nor actively helps refugees return, since the require conditions for safe and dignified returns are not present right now (UNHCR, 2018). The second phase exists of the facilitation of returns, for example by providing refugees with the financial means to make the trip back to Syria. The third and final phase is actively promoting voluntary repatriation. Reaching the second phase is already quite difficult, since the circumstances in the country of origin already need to meet 21 different criteria before UNHCR is willing to facilitate returns. Before UNHCR in Lebanon would start to encourage returns, which happens in the third phase, the living circumstances in Syria must improve in such a way that there does not seem to be a reason anymore for Syrian refugees not to go back. This third phase usually coincides with the making of the tripartite agreement that I explained in my theoretical chapter (UNHCR, 1996; interviewee 7). In the Lebanese case, this third stage is a difficult one to reach, since these tripartite agreements require at least some form of political
settlement and the ability of the UN to have a peacekeeping mission present in Syria. And although the UN and other involved actors have been working on this during the Geneva Peace talks, there have not been any positive developments that make it likely that either one of these requirements will be met soon. But until then, what does UNHCR currently do in Lebanon as part of the first phase of the voluntary returns of Syrian refugees?

5.1.2. Efforts against encouraging immediate returns

Already in the previous chapter, I mentioned one of UNHCR’s practices, namely coordinating with the Lebanese GSO which Syrian refugees applied for return. The GSO thus already shares the lists with names of these returnees with UNHCR but if it would do this sooner, UNHCR could improve the protection of the refugees. The organization could do this by having more time to reach out to them for one-on-one meetings and to properly inform them about what situation in Syria they go back to (Diana Semaan, Amnesty International). This way UNHCR (and similarly, other international refugee organizations) can help refugees better to make a well-informed decision about their future. Next to that, knowing well upfront who will return gives UNHCR the possibility to help the refugees obtain the legal documents they need to have upon arrival in Syria (interviewee 1).

Another measure of UNHCR is their presence at repatriation points. Not to support the return of the refugees or to talk them out of returning but rather to observe and assess what is happening (interviewee 8, repatriation expert). Next to that, they offer basic and practical support and care, such as vaccinations. (interviewee 5). Furthermore, UNHCR does advocacy and lobbying with different political actors, such as the Lebanese and the Syrian government but also other international actors. For example, for more funding that can be used to improve the circumstances in Syria for those refugees who want to return and for funding that UNHCR can use to protect the refugees from the consequences of the push policies of the Lebanese government. Interviewee 2, the executive director of a Lebanese human rights organization, explained how UNHCR has been lobbying to have certain Syrian laws adapted, such as the Syrian conscription law that forces Syrian men over the age of 18 to join the military and the property law that complicates the return of Syrian refugees to their own homes.

5.1.3. Influence on the returns

Since UNHCR represents the international community and is one of the main actors in the refugee
issue, my interviewees agreed that the organization certainly has some influence. However, they also acknowledged that the UN’s refugee organization is in a very tight spot as the pressure of the Lebanese government restricts their ability to work and advocate freely. The visa restrictions UNHCR faced in July last year are a clear example of this. Interviewee 1, the policy lead of a development INGO working in Lebanon, said that if it could be verified that a return movement was coerced, a collective effort among (I)NGO’s speaking up against this would only have a real impact if UNHCR would be leading it. Nevertheless, he also acknowledged that it would never lead such an action exactly because of these political pressures the organization faces. One of my interviewees (8) described UNHCR’s position as ‘walking on egg shells’, as it has to work within legal frameworks and practicalities, and with refugees and the host government. Interviewee 6, the director of a research institute in Lebanon, also spoke about the ability of the Lebanese government to pressure UNHCR to work in a certain way. UNHCR works in Lebanon based on an agreement with the Lebanese government, which could be renegotiated.

The influence of UNHCR thus seems to be substantial but strained at the same time. Being the refugee organization of a body that represents the international community ensures them of a certain amount of political influence. But in practically every interview it was mentioned that the political pressure of the host government on UNHCR also limits both the practical and political influence of the organization. Looking at the practical influence specifically, UNHCR plays an important role in ensuring that the refugees who have decided to return are well-informed about which situation in Syria they are going back to and in helping them arrange the necessary legal papers before they return. However, this does not really work against the encouragement of the return of the refugees.

5.2. International and local civil society actors

Another relevant group of actors for this research is the civil society, which consist of different types of organizations and actors. For my research, I have mostly focused on international and national NGO’s, (I)NGO networks and/or platforms, grassroots organizations, human rights organizations and research centers, as these seemed to be most involved with the topic of Syrian refugee returns. As I mentioned before, my interviews were conducted with mainly civil society actors and this has resulted in an extensive overview of their efforts, influences and more. In the next sections, I will discuss these different aspects. First, I will discuss civil society’s main criticisms on the employed definition of ‘voluntary return’ as used by the Lebanese government, and what their general understanding of this term is. Then, I will continue with the different efforts that civil society actors undertake and which constraints they experience in doing so. Finally, I will
conclude this section by discussing how much influence civil society has in the return issue. Most of my findings attribute to international and local civil society actors in general, but in some instances my collected data relates to a specific type of civil society actor. This will be specified explicitly when this is the case.

5.2.1. Approach towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees
As I explained in my theoretical framework, several scholars question the extent to which (assisted) voluntary returns can really be considered as voluntary. They argued that the circumstances in host countries in which the refugees who consider voluntary return find themselves in, might be pushing refugees to decide to return. Not only did my interviewees mention similar arguments but they also collectively criticized the way the Lebanese government interprets the meaning of ‘voluntary return’. The interviewees and their organizations have a more limited understanding of the term. Most of them indicated three different requirements that together determine whether a return really is voluntary. The first requirement is the most obvious one, namely that a refugee’s decision to return must be made out of free will instead of him or her feeling pushed to do so. Secondly, he/she also must be well-informed about the situation in Syria where he or she goes back to and thirdly, that situation must be safe. Not only in terms of physical safety but also in terms of not risking prosecution.

My interviewees mentioned several difficulties in becoming well-informed about the situation in Syria. For example, interviewee 5, who works for a humanitarian INGO network, and interviewee 2, the executive director of a human rights organization, mentioned the lack of information that their organizations receive from inside of Syria. According to her, they only have anecdotal evidence about what is happening, which is not enough to have an accurate view on what the situation is. The reason for this is that the access to Syria is very restrictive and that there is little monitoring and evaluating. The organizations who are working are considered to understand the current internal struggles in Syria, but they are not able to share this information, for security and safety reasons. Interviewee 2 emphasized that receiving this information could also reveal other reasons that are hindering the return, that might not necessarily be politically related and more ‘easily’ solvable by civil society actors.

Furthermore, the information that is coming out of Syria is difficult to rely on and not always correct (interviewee 7). During the SAWA for Development and Aid report launch Elena Hodges,
one of the researchers of the report, illustrated this with the example of refugees who are given false
information about the situation from relatives who are still living inside of Syria. These relatives are
often so afraid to speak about the situation, that they refrain from telling the truth. During that same
event, Diana Semaan, Syria expert for Amnesty International, also explained that many refugees
told her that the only questions they asked their relatives were for example ‘How is the weather
there?’ Or ‘What did you eat today?’ . This lack of (correct) information about the situation in Syria
is one of the reasons why some civil society organizations cannot support the returns of the
refugees, because they simply do not know whether the circumstances in the country are conducive
for returns. Until civil society actors (and actors such as UNHCR) are given enough access to
determine whether these circumstances are good enough for returns, they cannot support them.
Other civil society actors that I interviewed stated that the third requirement for a voluntary return,
namely having a safe situation to return to, is also related to why they cannot support returns.
According to these interviewees, the circumstances in Syria are unsafe and thus not yet suitable for
refugees to return to. Interviewee 1, the policy lead of a development NGO that works with Syrian
refugees, elaborated on this understanding of safety, by stating that safety does not just mean that
bombs stop dropping. Not being persecuted is also an important factor of safety, and many refugees
have expressed their fear of risking persecution upon return. Thus, according to these civil society
actors, with the absence of safety in Syria, the returns that are currently happening cannot be
considered voluntary. Furthermore, some of my interviewees indicated that they feared that
encouraging refugees to return prematurely can end up making the other refugees more reluctant to
go back. Because when refugees are going back before it is safe enough in Syria and they are for
example put in jail, tortured, killed or forced to go into the army or even return to Lebanon again,
other refugees will be less willing to go back in the future.

5.2.2. Efforts against encouraging immediate returns

Because most civil society actors do not believe that the timing is currently right for Syrian refugees
to return, they are taking different efforts to influence the encouragements of those who argue
otherwise. One of the most important ones is advocating and lobbying with donors and member
states, both inside and outside of the country (interviewee 1). To have enough credible information
to support their advocacy, many civil society actors conduct research with refugees. So how does
this advocacy work? Inside of the country, the civil society actors sometimes discuss their concerns
with for example different actors within the Lebanese government and the GSO. However, the
majority of the civil society actors indicated that they did not have enough leverage to discuss the
return topic with the Lebanese government officials and therefore lobbied with donors and donor
governments. The latter actors do have a lot of influence on the Lebanese government, as they
support them financially and Lebanon is very dependent on external funding, especially with the current economic crisis (interviewee 5).

Not only do civil society actors advocate for the lack of (clarity on the) safety in Syria, but they also advocate for better circumstances for the Syrian refugees that are still in Lebanon. This is because they still make up the vast majority, by distance. In line with this, interviewee 7, legal specialist at an international refugee organization, stated ‘while you are busy sorting out if it is 1 or 2% [“of the Syrian refugees that are returning”], I’m busy with the remaining 98%.’ Civil society actors also often lobby for the importance of upholding international treaties and honoring Lebanon’s reputation as being one of the founders of the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights from the UN, Human Rights Convention. Outside of the country, the civil society actors lobby with the international community. Interviewee 3, the executive director of a Lebanese NGO network, the president of a Lebanese human rights organizations, gave the example of the EU Brussels conference, where about 45 civil society actors participated in and where a group of seven to ten of those were very actively working on the political level. Meeting with European officials and having panels and discussions, ‘to put in place a strong position from the civil society perspective’.

Civil society actors also debunk myths about Syrian refugees and try to change the idea of most Lebanese that the Syrian refugees must return immediately. Interviewee 3, the executive director of a Lebanese NGO network, explained that the politicians who are advocating in favor of the refugee returns are gaining momentum because they play into the fact that many Lebanese citizens feel threatened by the Syrian refugees, especially economically wise. He proposed that civil society actors have to create a clear vision together and have to elaborate more on the counter narrative to what politicians are saying. According to him, explaining that the Lebanese government helps create the competition on the labor market between the Syrians and the Lebanese, by allowing or even facilitating an environment in which Syrians can be paid much less than Lebanese citizens for the same work, can take away the latter’s fear and the racist approaches towards the Syrian refugees. This will hopefully push the Lebanese government to adapt the current policies. He stated that trying to change the opinion of the Lebanese citizens is the most direct way in which civil society actors can be influential. My first interviewee, the policy lead of an international NGO, actually praised a civil society actor that has been doing very well in this regard, namely the director of the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut, Nasser Yassin. He has created a booklet in which he uses clear statistics and facts to debunk some of the most common myths around Syrian refugees.
Civil society actors try to prevent the push factors that might encourage refugees to return by refraining from initiating any conversation themselves about a refugee’s future or him/her stance on potentially returning. Partially because they are afraid this would make the refugee consider returning, but also to prevent that he/she would feel pushed to return and out of fear would stop asking (I)NGO’s for support, as a result. Some of my interviewees (1 and 2) emphasized how semantics are very important in the current stage of the Syrian refugee returns and that the civil society actors want to prevent that this topic becomes the next ‘hot topic’. Convincing a few actors to it is indeed the right time for returns could potentially trigger a domino effect that causes more actors to start pushing for returns and this is exactly what most civil society actors (and UNHCR) are trying to stop from happening.

Despite all these efforts, my interviewees also admitted that civil society actors cannot deny that some refugees want to go back and that it is not up to them to prevent them from doing so. What they can do is to help the refugees make an as much informed decision as possible. For example, they try to give information about the current Syrian policies around forced conscription, and/or about how much access the refugee will have to their property. Interviewee 7, legal specialist at an international refugee organization, added to this that they give legal assistance on the things that specifically need to be done in Lebanon. For example, by making sure that the refugees who have already decided to go back have the necessary birth documents for their children, so that they have a legal identity, and to arrange their education certificates, so they can go back to school after returning to Lebanon. She emphasized that these practical and pragmatic things might not be the first things that are on the minds of refugees who are preparing for a return to their home country, but it are efforts through which civil society actors can really make a difference.

5.2.3. Influence on the returns

When I asked my interviewees how influential they thought civil society actors are regarding the Syrian refugee returns, it appeared that they can exert more political influence through lobbying with non-Lebanese actors than they can by lobbying with the Lebanese government. This is because civil society actors do not have that much political leverage inside of Lebanon, whereas some other actors do. For this reason, they use every potential opportunity or meeting to lobby with donors and EU member states and to uphold their key message of approach the issue with a human-rights-based approach (interviewee 1 and 3) but nonetheless their impact stays limited.
Most of my interviewees were also not too positive about the influence they have in practice as civil society actors. For example, interviewee 4 thought that they have very little ability of action and that from their side, they do not have any tools to really prevent potential future large-scale deportation of Syrian refugees by the Lebanese government. He did give the example of how his human rights organization has legally supported some of the refugees that fell victim to deportation in Lebanon but also acknowledged that they were not able to block all the deportations. Interviewee 2 even went as far as stating that ‘we cannot assume that we are in any way influential at this point … because some of us have positions that make us unable to discuss.’ This refers to the consequences that openly advocating against the refugee returns could have for the work these civil society actors are able to do. As I mentioned before in the section about UNHCR, interviewee 1 explained that civil society actors could have a real impact if they would collectively speak out if large-scale deportations would happen. However, he also said that this can only be successful if UNHCR would lead to effort and expressed his doubts about whether this would ever happen.

In conclusion, civil society actors do have a practical and political influence on the refugee returns and eventually on shaping the Lebanese return context but these are limited influences.

5.3. The Syrian regime

5.3.1. Approach towards the immediate return of the Syrian refugees

In the previous chapter, I mentioned how the Syrian regime and her powerful intelligence services work together with the Lebanese GSO and Hezbollah to screen Syrian refugees that can potentially return to Syria. But when I asked my interviewees what they thought the intentions of the Syrian president regarding the returns of the Syrians are, they argued that they do not think he wants them to return (right now). Because of this, I chose to only discuss the Syrian regime as part of the actors who work against the encouragement of the Syrian refugees and not also in the previous chapter, as part of the actors who do encourage the refugees to return. My interviewees mentioned several reasons for why the Syrian regime probably does not want the refugees to return. First, they mentioned how a large influx of Sunni Syrians, who are generally considered as being anti-Assad, would disturb the homogenous, pro-Assad society that the Syrian president has managed to create. A return of the refugees would be a threat to this and to his position as President of the Syrian Arab Republic. Secondly, my interviewees mentioned how the country currently simply does not have the capacity to deal with the return of over a million Syrians, as it lacks the resources within Syria. In addition, some argued that the large number of displaced people within Syria could be of more
immediate, pressing concern to the Syrian regime than the millions of Syrians that are currently outside of Syria’s borders.

5.3.2. Efforts against encouraging immediate returns

So how does this unwillingness to support returns to Syria translate into practice? A first and strong indicator is the low amount of refugees that the Syrian regime has allowed to come back. Because if al-Assad would want these Syrians to return, why would he only accept a few and reject the vast majority? The mere fact that the GSO and Hezbollah must send these lists with names of refugees who want to return to the Syrian intelligence services is already quite unusual. By law, refugees are supposed to be able to return to their country of origin if that is what they want. During the SAWA panel discussion, Swiss diplomat Roethlisberger mentioned how everyone’s right to return has been highly underrepresented in the return debate. The latter has mainly focused on a host country’s obligation, in this case Lebanon’s, to uphold the principle of non-refoulement. But the right to return is equally as important as it is an obligation on the country of origin, in this case Syria, to create the conditions under which a safe return can take place.

This also brings me to the second indicator as to why the Syrian regime does not want the refugees to return: information on the conditions in Syria shows that the situation is nowhere near conducive for a safe return. For example, Syrians lack sufficient housing and access to water, electricity and essential services. In addition, men who meet the military service age criteria are forced to join the army a few months after they return to Syria. Many Syrian refugees have indicated this as being one of their main fears regarding returning to their home country. The option to buy off this obligation to join the army does exist, but after years of displacement most of the refugees do not have any savings left to afford this fee.

As I mentioned earlier in this chapter, the Syrian regime has been discussing some of the technical issues with UNHCR and working on these does improve the situation for Syrians that still are or are already back in Syria. However, the UN and civil society actors are still only given limited and restricted access to the country, which makes it difficult if not impossible for them to contribute to the reconstruction of the country. In addition to this, most of my interviewees agreed that it is a more important question whether Syrian refugees will be safe upon return. Not only from violence and conflict in the country, but perhaps more importantly, from persecution by the Syrian regime. And this is more of a political issue, that requires certain safety guarantees by al-Assad. Currently,
due to the little access to Syria, it is still very difficult to indicate how safe returnees are in Syria and what happens to them once they have crossed the Lebanese-Syrian border.

5.3.3. Influence on the returns
Whether one thinks the Syrian regime wants the refugees to return or not and which reasons are connected to this, the regime’s influence on the return of the Syrian refugees currently is undeniably substantial. According to Diana Semaan, Syria expert at Amnesty International, the lack of compromise, concession and reform of the past seven years has showed how powerful the Syrian regime has become politically wise. In addition, the lack of commitment of the Syrian regime is clearly obstructing the return of the Syrian refugees in a very practical way. One of my interviewees mentioned how even if Hezbollah or the Lebanese government would manage to create the political will and logistical means to return all Syrian refugees, they are still dependent on al-Assad’s approval to allow refugees to cross the Lebanese-Syrian border. Since the border between both countries is closed, Syrian forces only let them through if they are assigned to do this by the Syrian president. Interviewee 4 described this as follows: ‘Even if you bring one million Syrians to the border, it will be the Syrian army who will start shooting and try to prevent them from going back. … We all know that one time it [the refugee returns] became serious, the Syrian regime was like ‘wow, stop guys, I don’t want them back’. Furthermore, al-Assad’s commitment to ensuring certain guarantees regarding the safety and well-being of the Syrian refugees are required for achieving support for facilitation and/or encouragement of the return of the refugees from the international community, incl. UNHCR, and civil society actors. Thus, the Syrian regime is one of the most influential actors in the Lebanese return context, both practically and politically.

5.4. Syrian refugees
5.4.1. Approach towards immediate return
In the previous chapter, I described that refugees who wish to go back to Syria might reach out to GSO or Hezbollah. However, despite the slowly increasing number of returnees, for now most of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon do not wish to go back under the current conditions. In 2017, UNHCR conducted group discussions and interviews with Syrian refugees to learn more about their intentions for and perceptions of their future. The result was published in a report in January 2018 and described how only 2% of the 86% that said they wanted to return to Syria at one point,
considered going back within the next six months. Due to the principle of non-refoulement they cannot be forced to go back to Syria, technically. But as I mentioned before, the hostile environment in Lebanon is making it increasingly difficult for the refugees to manage.

5.4.2. Influence on returning
To ensure they are protected as much as possible, refugees can and should reach out to UNHCR or other organizations, such as human rights organizations or (I)NGO’s, that offer protection and support. As I mentioned before, one of the available options is UNHCR’s resettlement operations. Although the number of refugees that gets resettled is low, resettlement as such is a very good alternative for those Syrian refugees in Lebanon who do not want to return to Syria nor wish to stay in Lebanon. Another way Syrian refugees could avoid a return, as interviewee 1 argued, is by being smart about where to settle down in Lebanon. Especially refugees that are anti-Assad and who are often among the refugees who do not wish to return can benefit from avoiding areas controlled by allies of the Syrian regime, such as Hezbollah. It is quite well known that this party controls the Northern Bekaa, Southern Lebanon and the South of Beirut, so as an anti-Assad refugee it would make sense not to move to those areas to avoid even more pressure to return.

To recap, I described in this chapter how UNHCR and international and local civil society actors, as actors of the international refugee regime, work against the encouragement of the immediate return of the Syrian regime. I also discussed the efforts and influence of the Syrian regime. This important actor seems to work together with others to facilitate the refugee returns but according to my interviewees, it is quite clear that he does not actually when the refugees to return to Syria. I concluded this chapter by discussing how the Syrian refugees who do not want to return work against being encouraged to return.

6. Discussion

This research focused on how different actors shape the Lebanese return context through their
influence on the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon. To understand this overarching research question, I looked at the different efforts that political actors undertake to encourage the Syrian refugees in Lebanon to return immediately to Syria and which efforts other political actors undertake to work against these encouragements. Additionally, I tried to grasp how these different efforts contribute to our understanding of refugee returns. In this chapter, I will first conclude on the efforts and stances of these different actors. Then, I will analyze their influence by making a distinction based on their political influence versus their practical influence. Throughout the interviews it became clear how some actors mostly exert practical influence, for example through the implementation of return measures and through facilitating refugee returns. Other actors seemed to have more of a political influence on the refugee returns, for example by lobbying with donor countries, enhancing Lebanon’s diplomatic relations with Syria or by influencing politicians within the Lebanese government. It was important to make this distinction, as my research showed that the extent to which an involved actor is vocal about a topic does not mean they are also influencing the refugee returns on a practical level and similarly, because an actor does not stand out in the political debate about the refugee returns it does not mean this actor is not having an impact practically speaking. The political influence of the Lebanese Foreign Minister and the practical influence of the local Lebanese authorities illustrate this well. Finally, I will continue by describing the nature of the various return measures of these actors and what the existence of these measures means for the return environment that has been created in Lebanon for the Syrian refugees. More generally, what do these measures mean for refugee returns as such?

6.1. The efforts and influence of involved political actors

Several scholars who have written about the key players that are involved in the shaping and execution of refugee regulations, describe the following as the most important actors: the government of the country that receives the refugees (in this case Lebanon), the international refugee regime (such as UNHCR and international and local civil society actors), the country of origin (in this case Syria) and the refugees themselves. In terms of return measures, the host government is often the actor that is pushing for returns the most, whereas the civil society actors and the international refugee regime are considered to mostly be protecting the rights of the refugees. In practice, this often means the latter work against efforts that jeopardize these rights. The refugees themselves are usually also not in favor of return efforts initiated by the government, since these efforts have the purpose of sending them back to the country they fled from. After analyzing the different stances of the involved actors, we can see that this indeed applies to my research but only to a certain extent. Although the Lebanese government and all its separate political actors have indeed by far been encouraging the immediate return of the refugees the most,
there have also been some thousands of Syrian refugees who indicated they do want to return. In most cases, through signing up for return with the GSO or Hezbollah, or with one of the other three return facilitating initiatives that I have mentioned.

In addition, I made a clear distinction in the introduction of my thesis between discouraging and refraining from encouraging returns and I emphasized that the discouragement of returns does not seem to be the aim of any of the involved actors. In Lebanon, UNHCR and (I)NGO’s have expressed their worries about the different pressures that are put on the Syrian refugees to return immediately. But they have also acknowledged the wish of some of the refugees to return and have offered practical support to those refugees who have already decided to return. The efforts of UNHCR and INGO’s should not be seen as discouraging immediate returns, but as a way to protect and support the refugees. According to these organizations, working against the encouragement of the return of the refugees, is a part of that.

6.1.1. Lebanese government actors

Now that it is clear which involved actors have a key role in the return efforts and on which ‘side’ of the returns (encouraging returns vs. working against encouraging returns) their efforts belong, I will elaborate further on the political and practical influence of each of these actors. I will start with the mutual influence that the Lebanese community and the Lebanese government have on each other. Jacobsen (1996) has described how the local community that receives the refugees can also pressure their government if it disagrees with the government’s refugee policies, both for political and security reasons. My interviewees and many researchers have mentioned several drivers that explain the efforts of the Lebanese government to encourage the immediate return of the Syrian refugees. Among these drivers is the fear that the presence of a large group of Sunni Syrians will lead to a conflict with Lebanese citizens, who already have delicate sectarian relations among themselves. Lebanese citizens I spoke with during my fieldwork also overwhelmingly expressed their discontent with the impact of the Syrian refugees on the Lebanese economy. Interestingly, many of my interviewees argued that the refugee hostile and fear inducing narrative that is used by many Lebanese politicians has also highly contributed to the negative opinion of the Lebanese citizens towards the Syrian refugees. In the Lebanese case, it thus seems that the local community not only influences the Lebanese government but also vice versa.

More than anything, analyzing all the different initiatives that exist within the Lebanese government to facilitate refugees returns, illustrated that the government is highly fragmented and does not perform as one entity. Because of this, the Lebanese government has not managed to create one
policy that effectively addresses returns and based on this, most of my interviewees believed the Lebanese government as one entity has a weak influence. However, within the government there are separate initiatives that exert practical influence. Two of the most important ones are the General Security Office (GSO) and Hezbollah, whom both actively facilitate returns for Syrian refugees. The GSO falls under the supervision of the Lebanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and should have more of an implementing than a political role, if we should believe the Code of Conduct that the GSO has published on its website. In practice, it can be questioned whether the discussions between the GSO’s head, Abbas Ibrahim, and the Syrian regime are indeed only held to improve the facilitation of refugee returns, rather than to reestablish diplomatic relations between Lebanon and Syria. According to some of my interviewees, the GSO thus not only has a practical influence, but might also have a political one. I would like to emphasize that most of my interviewees also agreed that this political influence only exists because it is given to them by the Lebanese government. This means that this influence could also be taken away from the GSO. But considering the political importance that is given to the return issue in Lebanon, it is not likely that the latter would indeed happen.

Hezbollah seems both practically and politically influential. Practically speaking, Hezbollah’s military party is good at logistics and being responsive to the demand for return. Politically speaking, the political wing of Hezbollah is one of the strongest parties in the Lebanese government and because of its (ongoing) military support to the Syrian regime during the conflicts in Syria, it also has some political leverage with the Syrian president, Al-Assad.

In addition to Hezbollah and the GSO, I also mentioned the efforts of President Aoun, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, Gebran Bassil and the ministers of the Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs and of the Ministry of Social Affairs. From my interviews I concluded that politically speaking, especially Aoun and Bassil seem influential. First, both Aoun and Bassil have a political influence because they are prominent members of the largest Christian party of Lebanon, FPM. Secondly, Aoun’s position as the President of Lebanon gives him a political relevance and in turn, Bassil’s family ties to Aoun (he is his son-in-law) have made Bassil more influential. Practically speaking, the four actors have not been exceptionally influential.

The final Lebanese actors that I will discuss are the local authorities, such as Lebanese municipalities. I believe that the influence of these actors on the encouragement of refugees to
return is highly underestimated. A reason for this might be that these local authorities might not be as openly and politically advocating for the returns as officials in the Lebanese government might be. I would also argue that their political influence is not exceptionally strong when compared to that of other actors that I have discussed throughout this thesis. However, the practical influence of the local authorities on the encouragement of the return of the Syrian refugees is substantial, at the very least. While the push policies of the Lebanese government are not such a new topic anymore, far less has been mentioned about the push policies of the local authorities. I have given several examples of how the efforts of municipalities have worsened the circumstances in which the Syrian refugees in Lebanon live and in my opinion, there is a serious chance these efforts eventually indirectly contribute to the decision of a Syrian refugee to return to Syria.

6.1.2. Syrian refugees and the Syrian regime

Jacobsen (1996) described how refugees can be influential by pressuring governments to adapt their refugee policies. Through my research I mostly found that their influence does not necessarily lay in their ability to pressure for policy change. Rather, some of my interviewees indicated refugees as being one of the main influential actors because it is ultimately their decision to return to Syria or not. However, it was also questioned to which extent refugees really are in a position to make these decisions for themselves and often cultural, socio-economic and gender related factors also weigh into this decision.

The right of an individual to return to his or her own country is also one of the arguments that is given for the influence of refugees. After all, by law he or she is allowed to return. But in practice this seems to work a bit differently and this is where the influence of the Syrian regime gets involved. The Syrian regime oversees its own borders and it uses this to regulate which Syrians re-enter the country. This means that unless the Syrian regime accepts the refugees’ requests to return, the Syrian army that is stationed next to the Lebanese-Syrian border will not allow the refugees to enter Syria. Similarly, this restricts the practical influence of the Lebanese government, since encouraging the Syrian refugees to return is only useful if the Syrian regime also actually allows them to return. This can also be linked to Coutin (2014) and Gibney’s (2008) arguments that the country of origin can influence the policymaking of the host government, by restraining their ability to return the refugees. The topic of the returns has been highly politicized in Lebanon and also outside, as the involvement of the different actors has shown. As a result, the Syrian regime does not only play an important practical role in achieving the refugee returns but the Syrian regime also has political leverage. The Syrian regime thus seems to have a political and practical influence.
6.1.3. The international refugee regime

Looking at the actors who work against the encouragement of immediate refugee returns, we see that international and local civil society actors undertake various efforts. Politically speaking, they indirectly exert influence by lobbying and doing advocacy with donor governments. For example, this can be about the importance of voluntary returns and about upholding the principle of non-refoulement. These donor governments can then influence the Lebanese government. Civil society actors do not often lobby directly with the Lebanese government, because they lack the political power to do this and have a difficult relationship with the government. As I mentioned before, civil society actors are often accused by them of being against refugee returns. It has been argued that the civil society actors can only have a direct influence on the Lebanese government’s policymaking if UNHCR would lead a collective lobby effort. This shows that in the Lebanese case, Kalir and Wissink's (2016) argument that civil society actors hold an equally as important role in shaping and executing migration regulations as the government, does not fully apply. Practically speaking, the international and civil society actors help refugees who have already decided to return with arranging their legal documents and they work against the consequences of the restraining push policies of the Lebanese governments. Furthermore, these actors play a role in debunking myths, which can reduce tensions between the Lebanese and Syrians and thus improves the living circumstances of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon. However, if the Lebanese government would start the large-scale deportation of Syrian refugees, civil society actors would not be able to prevent it. Thus, civil society actors do have practical influence but they themselves perceive this influence as very limited.

The practical efforts of UNHCR are closely related and intertwined with those of the civil society actors, as both actors aim to protect and support the refugees in similar ways and often also cooperate on this in practice. Politically speaking, it has very often been mentioned that UNHCR has restricted influence because it is pressured by the Lebanese government. This is in line with Jacobsen (1996), who says that host governments can push back if they do not agree with the policies implemented by UNHCR. The Lebanese government has leverage to do this, because UNHCR works in Lebanon upon invitation and can thus also be expelled. At the same time, the Lebanese government is also dependent on UNHCR’s refugee management and it has repeatedly said that Lebanon is barely able to carry the burden of 1,5 million Syrian refugees. For this reason, some of my interviewees raised the question whether UNHCR should not emphasize their role in Lebanon more often to fight back against the pressure of the Lebanese government in a diplomatic manner. This could be risky since the Lebanese government has the power to prevent UNHCR from continuing its current support and protection of the refugees in Lebanon. But my interviewees
explained that by being open and transparent about the efforts of the organization, UNHCR can show that it is not doing anything different from what it does in other refugee crises and that it fully works within its mandate in Lebanon.

6.2. The return context of Syrian refugees in Lebanon
Exploring the different policies and efforts that are in place regarding the return of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon illustrated the complexity of the local return context and showed how the general understanding of refugee return management might be too limited. While I initially started by looking at the deportation efforts undertaken by different involved actors, I soon realized that there was a wider variety of measures that were being used to work way past the concept of deportation. It is true that media and actors that are part of the international refugee regime have reported several accounts of deportation cases. But most of the efforts from the Lebanese government are targeted towards encouraging the refugees to return voluntarily. Whereas in other refugee return managements (I)NGO’s often work together with the local government to help realize these voluntary returns (Kalir, 2017), the Lebanese case appears to be different. UNHCR and civil society actors are for now refusing to support the refugee returns because of the lack of safety in Syria. Their stance is in line with the principle of non-refoulement, that prohibits refugee hosting countries to send refugees back to their country of origin if they risk persecution when they return. As a sort of golden mean between deportation on one side and voluntary return on the other, the Lebanese government and its municipalities have implemented several policies to push these Syrian refugees towards choosing to voluntary return. After all, refugees have the right to return to their country of origin and if they decide to do so, it is not the responsibility of the Lebanese government nor the international refugee regime to discourage them to do this.

The findings of this research show that it is important to look beyond this dichotomy of deportation versus voluntary return. The Lebanese case illustrates that the return context should be seen as a continuum with deportation and voluntary return on opposite sides but with a variety of return measures in between. This is in line with Kalir’s (2017) description of ‘soft deportation’, a term that refers to returns that include characteristics of both deportation and voluntary return.
6.3. Future prospects of the Syrian refugee returns

Although it is difficult to predict what the future holds, there are certain actors and developments that could have an impact on the Syrian refugee return process. The most influential actor could be the Syrian regime, if it decides to cooperate with the Geneva Peace Process and contribute to a political solution. If the Syrian regime would be willing to guarantee that the circumstances for Syrian refugees that return to Syria will be safe and would manage to also convince the international refugee regime that these guarantees are credible, it could be the start of a massive return of the Syrian refugees. However, this research has also shown that few involved actors believe this will actually happen in the near future. Some of my interviewees pointed out that some regional and global powers, such as Russia, Iran and Turkey, could potentially pressure the Syrian government to create an enabling environment for refugees to return to. Alternatively, Russia, Iran and Turkey proposed in 2017 the establishment of safe zones in Syria, through which they could contribute to guaranteeing those safe circumstances for Syrian refugees themselves.

However, this idea also received some criticism for various reasons. Primarily, because the creation of safe zones does not solve the root causes of the conflict. Iran and Russia’s close ties to the Syrian regime also makes some wonder whether these safe zones would indeed be safe for the Syrian refugees, of whom many are part of the opposition against the Syrian president (The Atlantic, 2017). As I mentioned in the introduction, the Russians have established an initiative that could help the Lebanese government return the Syrian refugees. The reason I have not mentioned Russia as one of the key actors in my thesis, is that most of my interviewees explained that its initiative lacks a concrete plan to logistically accomplish the return of large amounts of Syrian refugees that are currently living in Lebanon. It also lacks funding and support of the international community. Although the Russian Initiative has been highly praised by the Lebanese government, my interviewees have argued that this is mainly because it is the only international initiative on the table and that these restraints must be solved before it could actually become a successful initiative.

As the largest donor for the management of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon, the EU is another
influential actor. However, in terms of its influence on the refugee returns I would argue that the EU would mostly have a real impact if it would contribute much more to the resettlement of the Syrian refugees to Europe. Repeating that the conditions in Syria are not conducive for returns yet is not enough. Unfortunately, it does not seem like European countries will resettle more Syrian refugees from Lebanon to Europe. And unless Syria’s allies will start pressuring the Syrian government to commit to improving safety and living conditions for Syrian refugees, the Syrian government has the power to stall the return of the 1.5 million Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

7. Conclusion

With this thesis I have illustrated the Syrian return context in Lebanon, that is characterized by its complex combination of history, religions, conflicts, political parties and border-crossing alliances. Based on my research, I concluded on four main takeaways. First of all, the complexity of the Lebanese case conceal the various reasons that the Lebanese have to encourage the refugees to return. This makes it easy for other countries and global institutions to judge the position the Lebanese are in. As the Lebanese Foreign Minister, Gebran Bassil, already remarked: ‘We hope that you respect our privacy by not shaming our insistence on the [refugees] returning home, while all of you combined could not bear what we did alone’ (The Daily Star Lebanon, 2019). Although I do not agree that the Syrian refugees (in Lebanon but also in other places) should return home immediately, I do think that we should acknowledge how much responsibility Lebanon has already taken upon itself. And personally, I am convinced that the international community not only could but also should do more to help these refugees by offering them a safe home.

Secondly, the complexity of the Lebanese situation also shows its uniqueness. Because of this, the international refugee regime should stay away from treating these refugee returns as they do with any other refugee return situation. Instead they should use a conflict sensitive approach to try to come up with practical solutions that make it somewhat easier for Lebanon to host this many Syrian refugees without compromising the protection of these Syrians.

Thirdly, my interviews and media and document analysis showed how the main focus regarding the refugee returns is on the importance of the Lebanese government’s obligation to upholding the principle of non-refoulement. But it seems that the Lebanese government has found ways of working around this obligation. For this reason, I argue that all those involved should look beyond
the principle of non-refoulement and pay more attention to the impact that the push policies that are implemented by the Lebanese government have on the return of these Syrian refugees. More importantly, how these push policies ultimately impact the lives of these Syrians. The impact of the push policies and how the Lebanese government uses them to work around their obligation to uphold the principle of non-refoulement has made me wonder whether international law currently offers enough legal protection for refugees. Scholars who share my curiosity on this could pursue future research to explore whether our current understanding of the principle is sufficient.

Fourthly, the focus on the Lebanese government as the main Lebanese influence on the refugee returns should be further expanded or perhaps even shifted to the role that local authorities play. It seems that they might have a larger practical impact on the daily lives of these refugees than the Lebanese government currently has and underestimating this limits the protection of these refugees. Future research could focus on exploring the practical role of local authorities, so that we can see whether their role is equally as important in other refugee return contexts.

Finally, I have tried to cover as many aspects, actors and efforts that are related to the return of the Syrian refugees in Lebanon as I could but certain things appeared to be outside the scope of this research. Especially the potential role of the Russian Initiative and that of regional actors could not be discussed as much as I wanted to. Although this has somewhat limited the inclusiveness of the overview I aimed to give with my thesis, this does offer a good opportunity for further research.
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9. ANNEX

9.1. Operationalization table

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Subquestion</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Focus on</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Political actors</td>
<td>How do different political actors shape the Lebanese refugee return context through their influence on the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon?</td>
<td>The international refugee regime</td>
<td>International and local civil society actors</td>
<td>- Development (I)NGO’s</td>
<td>- Which (I)NGO’s working in Lebanon are most involved in the return efforts for Syrian refugees?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Refugee (I)NGO’s</td>
<td>- How do they work against the encouragement of immediate refugee returns?</td>
</tr>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Human rights organizations</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Research institutes</td>
<td></td>
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</tbody>
</table>


### Concept

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Subquestion</th>
<th>Dimensions</th>
<th>Indicator</th>
<th>Focus on</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Intergovernmental (refugee) organizations</td>
<td>UNHCR</td>
<td>- How is UNHCR involved in the management and protection of the Syrian refugees - How does UNHCR uphold its own mandate in a political refugee return environment that does not align with this mandate?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foreign governments</td>
<td>The Syrian regime</td>
<td>How does the Syrian regime influence the refugee returns? And through which efforts?</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


**Political actors**

How do different political actors shape the Lebanese refugee return context through their influence on the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon?

**Lebanese government**

- prominent politicians
  - involved ministers and their political parties
  - local authorities
  - involved governmental institutions

- president Aoun
- prime minister Hariri
- Foreign Affairs minister Bassil
- Displaced Affairs minister al-Gharib
- Social Affairs minister Kouyoumdjian
- Hezbollah
- municipalities
- General Security Office (GSO)

**Syrian refugees**

- Those Syrian refugees who wish to return
- Those Syrian refugees who do not wish to return

- How can Syrian refugees who wish to return to Syria achieve this?
- How can Syrian refugees who do not wish to return manage to stay in Lebanon?

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
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<th>Focus on</th>
<th>Interview questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Influence (on the refugee returns)</th>
<th>How do different political actors shape the Lebanese refugee return context through their influence on the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon?</th>
<th>Political influence</th>
<th>The ability of political actors to steer the return of Syrian refugees through political channels, for example through lobbying with various actors or influencing political actors within the Lebanese government</th>
<th>Do actors have a political influence on the returns of the Syrian refugees? If yes, how is this visible?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Return context</td>
<td>How do different political actors shape the Lebanese refugee return context through their influence on the immediate return of Syrian refugees in Lebanon?</td>
<td>Various return measures that together shape the return context</td>
<td>The ability of political actors to steer the return of Syrian refugees through practical efforts, for example through facilitating returns or implementing policies related to returns.</td>
<td>- Do actors have a practical influence on the returns of the Syrian refugees? If yes, how is this visible?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| Immediate return                  | This concept is used in the main RQ and all subquestions | | | - Deportation  
- Push policies  
- Voluntary return  
- Which different efforts are undertake in Lebanon that contribute to refugee returns? |
| | | | | - Which actors are in favor of immediate returns?  
- Why are other actors against immediate returns? |