ESCALATING CONFLICT IN SYRIA'S COASTAL REGION: DISPLACEMENT AND SPILLOVER RISKS TO LEBANON
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Tents of Syrian refugees burned in al-Aaqbiya in southern Lebanon, March 9, 2025

Syria has witnessed a surge in violent unrest following the ouster of President Bashar al-Assad in late 2024. Clashes in the coastal governorates of Latakia and Tartous between alleged pro-Assad loyalists and the interim government forces have intensified, with civilian populations—particularly from the Alawite sect—bearing the brunt of the violence. This spike in hostilities has triggered a wave of displacement into neighboring Lebanon, placing additional pressures on a country already grappling with its own socio-economic crises. Tensions have escalated further due to an incident in al-Aaqbiya, southern Lebanon, where an altercation between locals and Syrian refugees resulted in gunfire and the burning of refugee tents. This report examines the key developments in Syria's coastal conflict, the resulting refugee flows, the risks of spillover into Lebanon, and the challenges NGOs face in accessing and supporting both Syrian and Lebanese communities.

Recent Developments in Syria's Coastal Region

In early March 2025, security forces loyal to the interim government attempted to arrest what they describe as "Floul" or remnants of the former Assad regime in Latakia. A skirmish erupted, quickly spiraling into broader hostilities across both Latakia and Tartous. Reports indicate heavy gunfire, destruction of property, and targeted killings in predominantly Alawite villages. Monitoring groups have documented extrajudicial executions, though each side blames the other for violations. Rights organizations cite over 1,000 fatalities since the fighting began, a large proportion of them civilians from Alawite-majority areas. Local sources suggest many non-combatants were caught in crossfire or were deliberately targeted as part of sectarian reprisals.

President Ahmad al-Sharaa deployed additional troops to the coast, vowing to "restore order" and offering amnesty to low-level loyalists who disarm. He also formed an investigative committee to look into allegations of atrocities. Despite claims of reestablishing control in some towns, sporadic firefights continue. The Alawite community's historical association with Assad has placed them in a precarious position after his removal. Accounts of collective punishment and retaliatory attacks by Sunni extremist elements have drawn wide condemnation. The U.S. State Department deplored what it terms "massacres" against civilians and urged accountability, while regional actors, including Turkey and Iran, called for de-escalation but exchanged accusations over external interference. Electricity and basic services are severely disrupted in several coastal villages, driving families to flee en masse. While many move northward toward the Lebanese frontier, others seek refuge in central Syrian governorates. Recurrent violence threatens any early efforts at reconstruction or inclusive governance, as loyalist remnants retain strongholds in key pockets.

Displacement into Lebanon

Thousands of Alawite families fled the coastal fighting and crossed into Akkar in northern Lebanon via informal border points. Municipalities report up to 5,000 arrivals within days. The official border posts in northern Lebanon (Arida, Aboudiyeh, Bqayaa) remain partially non-functional due to damage from last year's conflicts, forcing refugees to bypass formal registration. Many newly arrived persons stay with relatives in Lebanese Alawite-majority villages or occupy municipal halls. Local charities attempt to distribute basic necessities such as food, blankets, and medical aid, but resources are stretched. In an unrelated development, tensions flared in al-Aaqbiya, south Lebanon, where an argument between local residents and a group of Syrian refugees led to gunfire. Subsequent retaliation saw the torching of several refugee tents. The Lebanese Army deployed to the area to contain the violence and prevent broader unrest. While geographically distant from the northern border influx, this incident underscores rising resentment toward Syrians across different Lebanese regions. Economic hardship, limited job opportunities, and strained public services have compounded frustration among host communities.

Lebanon already hosts an estimated two million Syrians, and many municipalities, especially in the north, have limited capacity to absorb new arrivals. Persisting economic and political crises—alongside severe currency devaluation—generate hostility toward refugees, reflected in sporadic acts of violence like that in al-Aaqbiya. NGOs, local charities, and faith-based organizations mobilize to provide immediate relief, but the absence of a formal registration process makes it difficult to track displacement flows or coordinate aid distribution effectively.

Community Tensions and Spillover Risks

In Tripoli, Lebanon's second-largest city, there is a historical pattern of clashes between Sunni-majority Bab al-Tabbaneh and Alawite-majority Jabal Mohsen. Renewed tensions could arise if refugees perceived as sympathetic to Assad settle in Jabal Mohsen, raising fears of retribution from local Sunni hardliners. Meanwhile, Akkar's rural districts, which comprise both Sunni and Alawite populations, face the possibility of disputes if competition over limited resources intensifies. The Lebanese Armed Forces have increased patrols near Tripoli and at informal border crossings, and in the south, a significant contingent remains in al-Aaqbiya to deter follow-up attacks on refugee clusters. Authorities also express concern that some pro-Assad fighters might mingle with civilian refugees, yet security checks are limited due to the informal nature of their entry. Both refugees and host communities contend with Lebanon's deteriorating economic situation, high unemployment, rolling blackouts, and minimal public services. Municipal officials in Akkar and the south lack the funds to expand infrastructure or deliver essential services, raising the risk of further tensions if fighting in Syria continues and more people flee.

Humanitarian and Operational Challenges

Humanitarian access within Syria's coastal region remains severely restricted by ongoing violence. Aid workers face risks of abduction or reprisal, and multiple armed actors—interim government forces, local militias, and loyalist remnants—complicate negotiations for safe passage. Even before these clashes, millions of Syrians needed emergency assistance, and the current turmoil intensifies these needs, particularly for medical care, shelter, and food. In Lebanon, the lack of formal registration for new arrivals impedes NGOs' ability to gauge their needs accurately. Security incidents, such as the burning of tents in al-Aaqbiya, further deter open engagement with refugee communities. Decade-long displacement from Syria has strained Lebanon's infrastructure, as housing, education, and healthcare systems are overburdened. Donor fatigue is also pronounced, with insufficient funding to meet both Lebanese host community needs and emergent refugee requirements. While Lebanon's leadership has publicly encouraged Syrian refugees to return home when conditions permit, it lacks a cohesive policy, and political factions differ on whether to engage with Syria's interim government. At the local level, some municipalities impose curfews or deportations following security incidents, whereas others request international support to prevent unrest.

Impact on Lebanon's Stability

Lebanon's political parties rarely align on refugee policy. Some advocate for closer coordination with Syria's new administration to facilitate organized returns, while others remain wary of normalizing relations prematurely. Populist rhetoric capitalizing on anti-refugee sentiments may gain traction in the wake of violent incidents like the one in al-Aaqbiya, further undermining social cohesion. The Lebanese economic collapse has pushed a significant portion of the population below the poverty line, and the influx of additional refugees, many requiring immediate assistance, further strains local communities. Escalating tensions in areas such as Tripoli, Akkar, and now the south risk leading to wider unrest if unchecked. The Lebanese Army has thus far contained flashpoints, but maintaining stability requires resources that are increasingly scarce. There is also apprehension that individual disputes could intersect with wider sectarian divides, especially given that communal fault lines from past conflicts remain active. Any broader breakdown in security would be difficult to manage, given the country's limited capacities.

Future Outlook

The evolving situation in Syria's coastal region and its effects on Lebanon present several key areas that require close attention. In Syria, the ability of relief agencies to access affected areas remains uncertain, with the establishment of humanitarian corridors in contested regions being a potential factor in addressing civilian needs. The role of local community leaders in facilitating aid distribution and reducing sectarian reprisals will also be significant, as tensions between different groups continue to shape the security landscape. On the other hand in Lebanon, the registration and tracking of new arrivals in Akkar and other northern areas remains fragmented, making it difficult to assess the scale of displacement and direct resources accordingly. How the Lebanese Armed Forces handle security at informal border crossings and in host communities, particularly in areas prone to unrest, will be a crucial indicator of stability. Additionally, the strain on municipal infrastructure—particularly in housing, healthcare, and education—will likely escalate if displacement continues without external support.

Tensions in Tripoli and Akkar, both of which have a history of sectarian violence, require close monitoring, especially as more displaced Alawite families settle in areas with existing Sunni-Alawite divisions. In the south, the situation in al-Aaqbiya may signal wider host community resentment, making further localized incidents possible if tensions are not addressed. The ability of local dispute resolution mechanisms, including religious and community leaders, to de-escalate tensions could shape the trajectory of intercommunal relations in the coming weeks.

Border management remains another key issue. The continued use of informal crossings raises security concerns, with limited oversight on both the humanitarian and security fronts. Whether Lebanese authorities move to restore official crossings or implement alternative control measures will impact both displacement patterns and national security. The risk of armed infiltration—whether by pro-Assad loyalists seeking refuge or non-state actors exploiting the displacement crisis—remains a concern for Lebanese security forces.

On the diplomatic front, engagement between Lebanon and Syria's interim government is limited but could become increasingly necessary as the displacement crisis grows. The extent to which regional actors such as the Arab League involve themselves in stabilizing Syria's coastal regions—and whether this leads to more structured coordination on refugee management—will be worth following.

Finally, the long-term prospects for Syrian refugee returns remain unclear. If instability persists in Latakia and Tartous, the potential for large-scale repatriation will likely diminish, further entrenching Lebanon's refugee burden. In the absence of a broader political settlement in Syria, the risk of prolonged displacement and economic strain on Lebanon will continue to grow.

Conclusion

The surge of violence in Syria's coastal region has renewed sectarian divides and prompted sizable displacement into northern Lebanon, while an incident in al-Aaqbiya highlights heightened tensions facing Syrians across the country. Although Lebanon's security forces have managed to prevent escalation into wider conflict, the underlying strains—economic distress, overburdened infrastructure, and political fragmentation—are significant. NGOs and donors face a complex operational environment, characterized by restricted access within Syria and inadequate resources in Lebanon. A combination of coordinated humanitarian action, firm security arrangements, and political engagement is necessary to contain the crisis and avert further destabilization. Failure to address immediate relief needs and longer-term solutions in both Syria and Lebanon risks deepening a humanitarian catastrophe and igniting broader unrest.

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