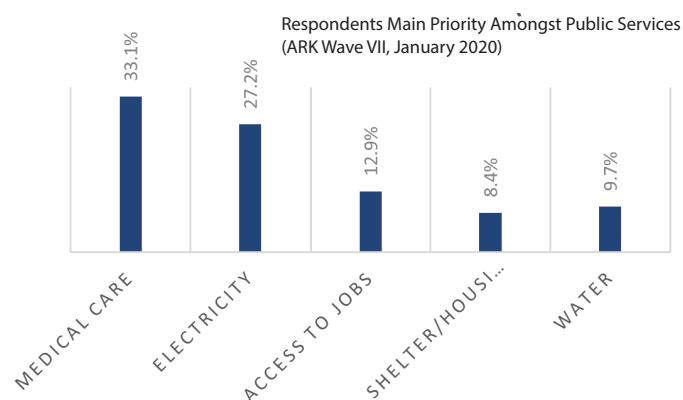**SUMMARY:** On 15 March, Lebanon's Prime Minister announced a **medical state of emergency over the coronavirus** (COVID-19) outbreak, shutting down almost all public and private institutions. The pandemic hits Lebanon at a time where the country is already facing an **unprecedented economic crisis**, impairing the capacities of already vulnerable Lebanese and refugees to subsist and **heightening the risks of social instability.** The COVID-19 outbreak is already leading to **worryingly growing community tensions** as fears of further outbreak are fuelling underlying tensions and waves of panic are spreading. Tensions are centred around **stigmatization against refugees** in cases of infection in informal settlements and overcrowded areas. The outbreak has also fuelled **intra-Lebanese tensions**. Divisions are visible online, coupled with spreading of **misinformation and fake news.**
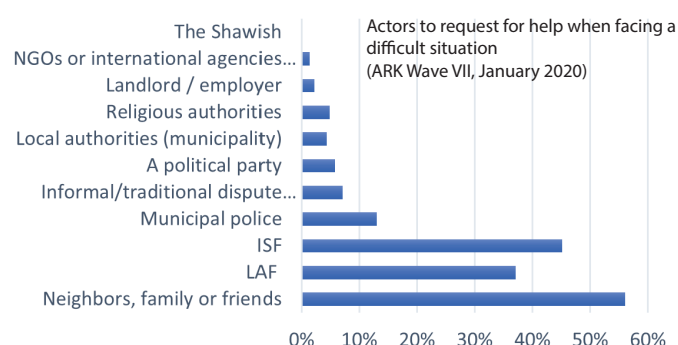
KEY RISKS: The increased tensions between host communities and refugees could decrease social stability and undermine progress made to date under the LCRP. Tensions might arise as some municipalities are raising concerns that refugees are not complying with national and municipal measures. A high disruption in services is expected and health centers may present a flashpoint in inter-communal tensions. The increased stigma towards refugees risk leading to fear of deportation, evictions and violence. Refugees also express a fear of not being able to access transport and/or services in case of an infection. These factors all risk leading to delays in self-reporting and self-isolation. Spreading of rumors, misinformation and fake new risk leading to further tensions. Intra-Lebanese relationships risk further deterioration and polarization with accusations towards authorities due to the absence of firm preventative measures.

Potential drivers of tensions

With the increased pressure on Lebanon's healthcare system, access to health services could become a major source of tensions. The recent ARK Wave VII perception survey reveals that access to health services remains the highest priority amongst refugees and Lebanese alike. Competition over access to basic services is also stated as a key source of tensions.

Respondents Main Priority Amongst Public Services
(ARK Wave VII, January 2020)

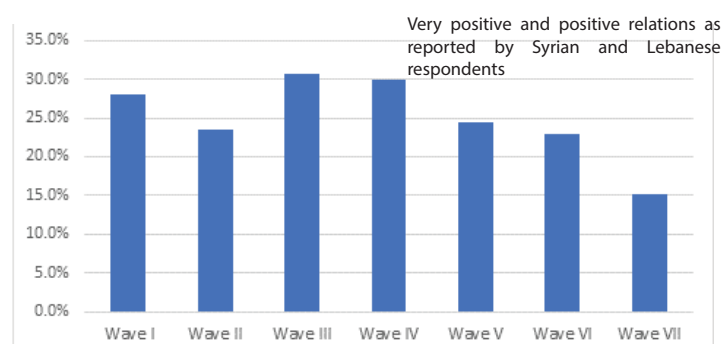| Service	Percentage
MEDICAL CARE	33.1%
ELECTRICITY	27.2%
ACCESS TO JOBS	12.9%
SHELTER/HOUSI...	8.4%
WATER	9.7%

Ensuring timely, adequate and equal access to health services during the COVID-19 outbreak therefore remains critical to mitigate tensions. Additionally, action must be taken to increase communication and community engagement through credible and trusted channels. Past perception surveys shows that these channels are mainly social networks (family & friends), ISF and LAF. Based on the findings, these channels must be built upon in the context of COVID-19, especially social networks.

Actors to request for help when facing a difficult situation
(ARK Wave VII, January 2020)

Actor	
The Shawish	
NGOs or international agencies...	
Landlord / employer	
Religious authorities	
Local authorities (municipality)	
A political party	
Informal/traditional dispute...	
Municipal police	
ISF	
LAF	
Neighbors, family or friends	

Inter-Communal tensions

Even prior to the outbreak, positive relations were deteriorating in Lebanon (decreased from 30% in 2017 to 17% in 2020).

Very positive and positive relations as reported by Syrian and Lebanese respondents

Wave	Percentage
Wave I	28.0%
Wave II	23.5%
Wave III	30.5%
Wave IV	30.0%
Wave V	24.5%
Wave VI	23.0%
Wave VII	15.0%

With the COVID-19 outbreak, inter-communal tensions are witnessing a gradual increase. Although no direct incidents have taken place to date, tensions are rising both online and offline. Opinions are surfacing in mainstream media, and polarized social media posts, often centerered around the criticality of ensuring preventative measures in informal settlements and collective shelters. Many reference to the fear of an outbreak within the refugee community. There is increased media coverage of the refugee impact and concerns regarding the lack of preparedness measures in informal settlements are expressed by politicians and community members alike.

Humanitarian actors are being accused of not having clear preventative measures in place. On 12 March, two articles were published by widely read online news platforms critizing a named IO's policy of engagement with refugees. The articles state that daily interactions with refugees lead to high risks of spreading the virus and that the lack of preventative measures, including suspending mass gatherings, puts the entire population at risk.

Following the national measures, governors circulated guidance and requests to Qaem-Makams and municipalities to implement mitigation measures and requesting alternative modalities for service provision. Several municipalities are implementing independent measures, some starting as early as 26 February.

It is noteworthy to distinguish between municipal measures that confine to the declaration of national emergency and those implementing extra-ordinary measures, specficially targeting refugees in a non-conflict sensitive manner or hindering LCRP partners from delivering critical activities. For example, in Baaloul (Bekaa), the municipality stated: "*any refugee residing in the village and returning from Syria must isolate themselves in their residence, whether be it a tent or a house, for 15 days, under penalty of sanctions*". In Bisariyeh (South), the mayor declared his concern of the absence of prevention measures by IOs towards the refugees and set up an emergency committee. Qab Elias municipality reported non-compliance by refugees and requested relevant actors to broadcast a message on the need to abide by public safety rules. Al Qaa municipality reiterated strictly imposed measures on refugees such as curfews and emphasized that refugees should not leave the ISs or host visitors. Der el Ahmar municipality, through the head of the municipal police, requested refugees to not leave their tents except for emergencies, a measure which has been implemented previously.

As of 20 March, rumors and news mention that refugees are relocating from the North to the South. Circulars have been issued by several municipalities, requesting landlords to not allow any external people to enter the villages or rent accomodation.

On 21 March, as the Minister of Public Health reported 81 new cases in 48 hours, a noticeable increase in the implementation of local authority measures was observed. Later in the evening, the Prime Minister ordered Lebanese Armed Forces and the Internal Security Forces to enforce firmer measures to ensure that all citizens abide by the strict government's measures. Following this order, the closure of roads in towns and villages, stricter measures with refugees in ISs with regards to movement, and an increase in municipal circulars, enforced by municipal police and security forces has been observed.
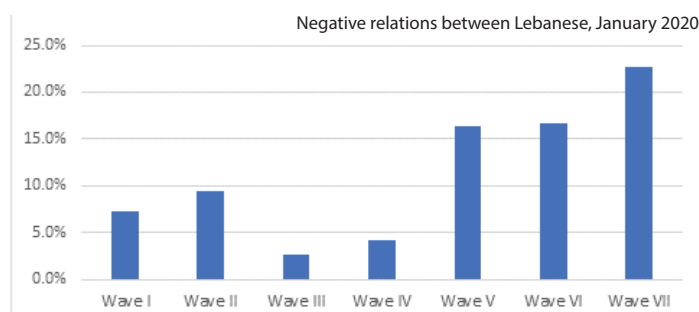
Solid waste - a possible flashpoint?

Municipalities report gaps in service provision due to the lack of funds. This is translated into increased pressures on refugees to pay taxes for basic service provision, including solid waste collection and electricity. Municipalities report gaps in service provision due to the lack of funds.

This is translated into increased pressures on refugees to pay taxes for basic services, including solid waste collection and electricity. This was reported in the North, Akkar, and Bekaa during February and March. There is a high risk of tensions related to solid waste as further disruption in activities and mounting of solid waste may increase health hazards and solid waste burning (by Lebanese and refugees). This is a pre-existing source of tension which could escalate. The lack of solid waste collection from households with individuals that are infected or targeted by rumors may lead to tensions and wide-spread negative media coverage. There is already increased pressure on IOs and NGOs to provide support in solid waste management.

Intra-Lebanese tensions

Even prior to the outbreak, Lebanese cited that negative relations amongst one another increased from 7% in 2017 to 21% in 2020.

Negative relations between Lebanese, January 2020

With COVID-19, tensions are further increasing. One example is the protests at the Masnaa border crossing on 11 March regarding buses transporting Lebanese students from Iran. This caused tensions between residents of Majdel Anjar and political party affiliates. On 12 March, the mayor held a press conference to express the community's anger over the weak border control, requesting the closure of the border and stated that other municipalities are considering similar actions. Concurrently, the social media landscape is witnessing polarized rhetorics, increasing tensions between citizens from different sects and political parties. Political divisions around the government policies to address the outbreak is stirring discussions online, a worrying trend as the most widely cited source of intra-Lebanese tensions is political and sectarian differences.

RECOMMENDATIONS

o MONITOR: Continue to monitor tensions and identify potential areas of concern where mitigation is needed.
o MITIGATE: Utilize existing tension task force mechanisms within the LCRP to identify contextualized mitigation strategies.
o COMMUNICATE: Actively communicate to and engage community members through trusted and credible channels using a risk communication and community engagement approach. Use harmonized messages, utilize existing coordination mechanisms to build trust and disseminate targeted messaging in order to prevent false information and political instrumentalization.
o DO-NO-HARM: Ensure that all interventions consider conflict sensitivity & do no harm approaches. Interventions should consider their impact on communal relations and equal access to services should be ensured.
o COORDINATE: Clearly communicate what efforts are being made under the LCRP. Linkages with national COVID-19 response should be communicated. The support to municipalities must be coordinated in order to avoid gaps and duplication.
o SUPPORT: As municipalities are increasingly requesting WASH support, including on de-sludging, funding is required to ensure that partners are able to respond to these requests. Other requests include water & wastewater services in ISs, urgent rehabilitation of facilities, support to municipalities on solid waste, awareness raising around the hazard of random disposal and burning of solid waste and hygiene awareness. Additional support to national actors and community-based organizations is needed – there are gaps in capacities and information flow towards these stakeholders.