On the Role of Policies, Institutions and Society in Managing Syrian Displacement in Lebanon

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When the uprising in Syria started in 2011, it was widely assumed that the evolving war would easily spill over to Lebanon (ICG 2013). The two countries’ political affairs are deeply intertwined and the events in Syria reverberate strongly in Lebanon. With over 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees, more than every fifth person in Lebanon is from Syria. The solidarity with the refugees is generally very high, but with severe overstrain of public services, and infrastructure, and no end in sight tensions have been mounting. The Lebanese government does not have a comprehensive strategy on how to deal with the crisis; it rather deploys a politique du laissez-faire towards the engagement of local, regional and international actors. Though the security balance is precarious and escalates from time to time into local warfare, it is remarkable how the Lebanese society has managed to absorb so many refugees. In the following, the context in which this displacement happens will be explored by outlining the socio-political relations, the plurality of organizations and the conflict dynamics connected to the displacement from Syria.

I. Displacement to Lebanon

Lebanon, with its porous borders to neighbouring Syria, has for a long time pursued an open door policy towards Syrian nationals. Yet, in autumn 2014, the Lebanese government significantly restricted entry to Syrian refugees for the first time, followed by visa restrictions in January 2015.

In addition to the more than 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees, an estimated number of around 300,000 Syrians live in Lebanon without being registered with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (Mitri 2014; UNHCR 2014a). From the onset of the crisis, Palestinian refugees from Syria faced more restrictions for entering and staying in
Lebanon. Nevertheless, they had better chances to enter Lebanon than any of Syria’s other neighbouring countries and about 53,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria have registered with United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA 2014).

Mainly due to the experiences with the Palestinian refugee camps, the Lebanese government refuses the establishment of new camps. The Palestinian refugee camps were set up in 1948 and 1967; they were supposed to be temporary but they stayed and even developed autonomous military structures. As a result of the Lebanese no-camp policy, the Syrian refugees stay virtually everywhere. Spread over more than 1,750 locations, they rent flats, garages, ruins, spaces in half-constructed houses and on fields where makeshift camps are set up. About 15% of the refugee population lives in 600 so-called informal tented settlements (UNHCR 2014b). As there are no designated refugee camp areas, the decision where to seek shelter depends heavily on financial means and work opportunities, but also social contacts and political affiliations are driving reasons.

II. Socio-political relations

Traditionally, family relations and economic ties were strong across the two countries’ borders. Before the outbreak of the war, agricultural goods were mainly exported via the Syrian land border and many Lebanese families used to go to Syria for shopping. People married across borders and many Syrians used to work in Lebanon. Following the Syrian army’s interference in the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990), Lebanon was under Syrian military occupation until 2005. A major division in Lebanon’s fragmented proportional system developed between those that were for and against Assad. As regional powers are aligned with the Lebanese parties, the Syrian conflict fuels and catalyses tensions in Lebanon. Even though the Lebanese government had declared a policy of disassociation from the events in Syria in June 2012, the Lebanese Iran-near Shiite party Hezbollah has...
been fighting openly on the side of the Syrian army since May 2013 and has significantly altered the power balance inside Syria (Koß 2014; Mohns and Bank 2012).

Tied together in the so-called government of national unity, Lebanon’s opposed parties often produce a stalemate to the implementation of policies. Thus, the Lebanese government has not developed a coherent strategy on how to deal with Syrian displacement (El Mufti 2014). Only in the fourth year of the crisis was displacement from Syria recognized as a “national” problem – or in the words of social minister Rashid Derbas: “[...] all parties had come to realize that the crisis was a ‘Lebanese matter rather than sectarian or partisan’ issue” (Knutsen and Kullab 2014). While state institutions are weak, Lebanon has a very active civil society. It is partly organized along sectarian lines, and partly it is explicitly seeking to overcome sectarian politics. The presence of regional and international donors in humanitarian and development projects is not new, the Syrian crisis, however, gave an unprecedented boost to the plurality of these actors in Lebanon.

III. A plurality of organizations

The plurality of stakeholders, the lack of clear regulations by the government and the sheer magnitude of the crisis make it difficult to oversee who is doing what in response to the emergency. In this situation, UNHCR jumped forward and took a quite dominant role in the crisis response. It spearheads the coordination meetings that mainly include big international NGOs and some local NGOs. While the cooperation with local implementing partners is a declared aim, local civil society organizations (CSOs) and faith-based organizations (FBOs) often participate only indirectly in the interagency coordination. Reasons for this might be in the different operating modes, standards and principals, language barriers, the demands for proposal and report writing, or lack of continuous funding and planning.

CSOs and FBOs generally claim their help should be more direct and are critical of how many hands and organizations money must go through before finally reaching those affected. Moreover, the interviewed CSOs and activists often expressed frustration that their knowledge and experience are not adequately acknowledged. The interviewed Islamic charities seemed less concerned about acknowledgment. Though they criticized the lack of coordination, they made clear that they do not depend on the rules established by UN-institutions and Western donor states; “We would like to coordinate more with the UN-institutions, but we are not willing to lose our time and money on writing reports. And we also do not have to because we have other donors (...).” The representative of another charity highlights how many volunteers his organization has, but, at the same time, admits that they do not deliver on a regular basis. This corresponds also to the pace of donations from Gulf States who are among the major donors for the Syrian crisis and the subsequent emergency in Lebanon; their contributions are not only more directed to the ground but also more spontaneous and less regular (FTS 2014). With the arrival of the refugees, the number of Islamic charities rose so quickly that they have developed their own coordination mechanisms that function outside the UN-led response (Hasselbarth 2014).
IV. Refugee policies and rising tensions

9 Not seeing an end to the conflict in Syria and confronted with a severe overstrain of infrastructure and public services, such as rising rents, overcrowded schools and hospitals, shortages in water and electricity supply, the public discourse on how to deal with the refugees has become increasingly tense. Moreover, the war in Syria has affected the Lebanese economy and, particularly in the low-income sector, competition on the labour market has grown.

10 Against this background, the displacement from Syria turned soon from a mere refugee crisis to a wider humanitarian crisis. Now in the fourth year, calls for more long-term planning and sustainability have become louder. The United Nations Development Program (UNDP) strengthened its involvement. Projects in this connection focus mainly on municipalities and aim to strengthen local institutions, infrastructure and employment opportunities; thereby they tackle conflict issues between host and community (LCRP 2014). Clashes between the Lebanese army and jihadists further increased tensions. However while the public discourse on refugees became generally more focused on security, these events and associated discourses translate differently in the municipalities (al-Masri 2015). While humanitarian and development projects might successfully mitigate conflict between refugee and host population, Syrians are generally not part of decision-making processes. Though there are numerous Syrian aid initiatives, Syrian refugees as a group have almost no political or rights-based voice and rarely report incidents of discrimination and attacks. Therefore, they often rely instead on local patronage networks, which can also leave them prone to exploitation (al-Masri 2015).

Conclusion

11 The overall lack of comprehensive regulations imposed by the government and its no-camp policy make the coordination of the crisis response difficult and often less effective than it could be. The plurality of actors and the lack of coordination, on the one hand, give way to creative strategies in dealing with the displacement and enable refugees to find individual niches and strategies to make a living in Lebanon. On the other hand, it makes it difficult to oversee which services and options are available, to appeal to international, and especially national, standards of humanitarian assistance and to report discrimination. Syrian refugees are a large group in Lebanon that, so far, is not very politicized. As they are structurally vulnerable, they might not only be at risk of economic exploitation but also at risk of being hired by militias. At the same time, social and economic relations play an important role in providing housing and work opportunities and can thus be regarded as the backbone of Syrian displacement to Lebanon.
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NOTES

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