Lahza 2: A diary of displacement, seen through the eyes of Syrian children

Encounters between Syrian and Lebanese young people

The Syria “Training” Republic Workshop on building a civil society in exile

The war of images and models

Deceptive nights and liquid endings
Together facing the repercussions of the Syrian crisis

Recently we have seen growing incidents involving Syrian refugees and host communities especially in the wake or surrounding the clashes in the area of Arsal. In times as these, it is easy for some people to be aroused in the face of such unspeakable acts, but it would be unjust and irrational for the acts of misguided individuals to be generalized on a million refugees. At the same time, we applaud and appreciate the efforts of political and religious leaders in combating the excessive emotional outbursts that threaten the stability of the country.

Exacerbation of tensions is in no one's interest and every effort should be made to avoid escalation or relapse into violence. In this context, the UN is working with the Lebanese Government to develop a support programme that would further strengthen the resilience of the country and enable it to cope with the challenges it is facing.

In this fifth issue of the “Peace Building in Lebanon” joint news supplement, we take a closer look at the impact of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon with a particular focus on host communities, refugees, and other Syrian people living in Lebanon.

One person...

Damascus, a summer day in the mid-1980s

An enigmatic character. As he walks he is preceded by a pot belly that no military man, whatever his rank, has any business displaying.

Standing around him are gunmen who come from poor Syrian cities. Thanks to the weapons he’s given them they have become quasi-strongmen, but fairly low-level ones, naturally. The weapons, and the new cars that they drive, are subject to the whims of the “boss,” and his housekeeper.

At the entrance to the opulent home, the Lebanese owner and his lovely wife rush to receive their “important” guest.

It’s a great honor... The “boss” doesn’t hear the rest of the sentence; he whispers his questions, with the certainty of someone who knows that all of his commands will be obeyed: “Did you invite everyone I asked for? Did you prepare all the dishes I wrote down? Did you get the imported booze?”

Beirut, a spring day in 2005

Sahar puts her head of the window of the car as it moves through the Patriarchate neighborhood of the capital; she is yelling at three young men who are beating up a Syrian sanitation worker.

To do so, we have collected articles from Lebanese journalists and Syrian journalists residing in Lebanon representing newspapers across a diverse range of perspectives, including Al Sharq Al Awsat and Al Hayat newspapers, Al Modon electronic newspaper and Al Araby Al Jadid website, with a contribution on the back cover from the Syrian artist Tammam Azzam who has been engaged in portraying the events of the Syrian crisis through his paintings.

And as before, this joint news supplement is published jointly by As-Safir and Annahar newspapers (70,000 copies) and announced on their websites and on the National News Agency website, in addition to 2,000 copies distributed for free to all ministries, embassies, municipalities, media outlets, universities and non-governmental organizations in Lebanon together reaching a wide distribution across all segments of the audience.

I hope you enjoy this work, which is a mosaic of reflections on the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon, from new perspectives.

Ross Mountain

UNDP Resident Representative

No to hostility, no to attacks

The recent events in Arsal, with ISIS and the Nusra Front now having a direct impact on Lebanon’s security after the killing of army soldiers and General Security personnel, have led to a new, negative phase in Syrian-Lebanese relations. This is particularly true because the gunmen are terrorists who came from refugee camps inside the town, whose residents had given them shelter and protection, and supported them in a confrontation with their neighbors in Labweh and other nearby villages. They have also defied the Lebanese justice system because among them are wanted men.

The people of Arsal have sacrificed much by supporting the “Syrian revolution” without receiving the same type of treatment in return. Instead, the gunmen have tried to render them hostage to the decisions of terrorist groups, forced them into clashes with their neighbors and destroyed their homes, as well as subject them to other types of demeaning behavior.

In the wake of the events in Arsal we have begun to see a new phase when it comes to sheltering and embracing the newcomers, and offering them support. The general view of refugee camps has changed. Instead of places where displaced people are gathered, in need of assistance, they have become places where these people’s movements must be monitored – out of fear that they will turn into a terrorist fighting force that engages in kidnapping and destruction.

However, treating things requires both a vision and a long-term perspective, which deals with both the future and the past. Our experiences have further strengthened the resilience of the country and enabled it to cope with the challenges it is facing.

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Mutual understanding is fundamentally important for reducing psychological pain. Naturally, the solution for the Syrian crisis should come as soon as possible, but this doesn’t mean that we shouldn’t do anything in the meantime. We should move forward, even if only an inch at a time, so that things improve. Media outlets that publish news on the situation of Syrians and Lebanese host communities should work to increase understanding and eliminate the tension that exists between these groups.

We strongly hope that the media will carry out this mission.

Seiichi Otsuka

Ambassador of Japan

Mutual understanding to relieve suffering and solve problems

The ongoing Syrian crisis has created burdens and complicated problems for the Lebanese government, municipalities, and the Lebanese in their own country. These accumulated burdens have surfaced in the rise of socio-economic expenditure in Lebanon, as well as individual, psychological suffering for people. The organization Save the Children in Japan is active in providing this type of psychological care, primarily to Lebanese and Syrian young people. The group’s reports indicate large numbers of children and adolescents are suffering from loneliness and depression as conditions of confrontation prevail. If we try to eliminate the cases of rupture and withdrawal, we should do our utmost in creating better environments for interaction among them, and with refugee host communities.

One person...

Damascus, a summer day in 2006

An unwinding line of pots of food and trays full of beverages and sandwiches arrive at the border crossing at Jdeidet Yabous. Members of civil groups are standing there, waiting to receive poor people who have crossed over on foot from Lebanon, passing through remote areas archives hard of Israeli missiles and the buzzing of MK surveillance aircraft. They are coming with their children and elderly in tow, holding plastic bags that contain whatever they could “pack” before their sudden departure.

Hamra Street, a summer day in 2012

A woman no older than her mid-20s is standing, embarrassed, and surrounded by four or five children of different ages. She is dressed in modest, clean clothes. She is holding a purse. The children are each holding part of her abaya. She takes a step forward and tries to put out her hand, then steps back. She lowers her eyes. She tries, a second, and third time. A week later she is sitting on the ground, surrounded by her children. Her hand is held out the entire time as she talks to a woman, a fellow Syrian, who is sitting nearby with her children, her hand stretched out as well.

Beirut, an evening in the summer of 2013

The fancy car stops at the entrance of a fancy hotel on Beirut’s corniche. A large man gets out, his cigar as big as he is. From the other door exits his young wife, heavily made-up, with puffy lips and wearing European clothes. At the entrance there is a poster up for a “once-in-a-lifetime” night of entertainment with a well-known singer, in the garden of the hotel.

Arsal, a summer day in 2014

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The war of images and models

Hazem Saghieh

It isn’t easy to talk about images and models, because it gives way to generalization. Things become even more dangerous in the cases of countries such as Syria and Lebanon and the various phases they have experienced, because these two countries, with weak national communities rent by sectarian and regional fragmentation, do not produce unified images and models. What one sect or region sees is the opposite of that of another sect or region. Moreover, conditions in both countries have changed and their stormy history is undergoing rapid, massive transformations. This makes it even harder to anchor the same types of specific images and models. The “crafty Lebanese merchant” of the pre-Civil War era is not the same Lebanese of the post-war period, described as someone who has long suffered from the political winds that buffet his country, now an “arena,” crushing him and reinforcing the reasons for his anxiety. Likewise, the Syrian before the war, described as a soldier in the Arab Deterrent Force that was busy deterring the Lebanese, and the secret policeman who would count their very breaths, is not the same as the Syrian after the revolution. These Syrians are now described as brave and full of sacrifices as they confront one of the most brutal machines of oppression of our time, or as displaced people whose violent criminal regime has subjected to extremely painful suffering.

Most importantly, not all Lebanese agree on the image of Syrians described above, and the same goes for Syrians with regard to the image of the Lebanese.

In fact, the wide-scale contact between the two groups caused by the recent wave of Syrian displacement hasn’t helped create a more “disciplined” image. Many factors are likely responsible for seeing things move closer to racism; there are the fears of minorities who are always haunted by the topic of numbers, and there are reasons having to do with the economy, and available work opportunities. Meanwhile, for Syrians, there are both long-standing and newer issues of injustice and disparity, which lead in the same direction. All of this has become even more confusing and polluted due to Hezbollah’s intervention in Syria, and due to the growth of the phenomenon of ISIS and the Nusra Front and the acts they have committed.

In fact, the Syrian tragedy today is strengthening the worst aspects of the traditional Lebanese ideology, if the expression serves, namely the feeling of superiority, if not uniqueness. “They” are “people from hell” who are entering “our paradise” en masse. But in return, this tragedy is breaking down the worst aspects of the Syrian traditional ideology, namely that “authentic” Syrians are taking refuge in an “artificial” country. This means that they suffer more than they would if the country were taken seriously, or if it had elements that offer a refugee some type of consideration. This pan-Arab consciousness, which served as a traditional consensus among Syrians, works to play up the magnitude of the tragedy and play down the importance of channels of dialogue and communication. After all, Syrians – unlike Palestinians, isolated in their camps – have known Lebanon well due to the Syrian army’s presence as a “deterrent” force during the Civil War, and also, relatively easily, have had the experience of entering the low-income labor market. Traditionally, this has meant that they worked at construction sites and as agricultural workers. Moreover, one of Lebanon’s large sectarian groups has embraced them because it is confronting another large Lebanese sect as well as the Syrian regime, classified in sectarian terms as “the other.”

In any case, what we can say today with a bit of confidence is that we will be experiencing these hot and cold winds for a long period of time, until God sorts it out; the two cohesive views have yet to come together before two nations, based on a reasonable level of consensus, are formed. Unfortunately, this is unlikely both today and in the near future.
The driver doesn’t take the refugee to where he wants to go

Elie Abdo

The refugee and the taxi driver who is driving him around take turns making up stories that aren’t theirs. For them, these stories are closer to a temporary daily experience than to an actual desire, which practically disappears for both of them because of routine, and the habit of accepting what is available. This requires them to create scenarios, dramatic stories and fables that fill the void, turning the lack of desire into imagined possibilities that try to heal the self, or at least postpone its collapse.

Driving a taxi is like being a refugee, not because it involves a futile vagrancy on the streets of the city, making a living, but because it’s truly a temporary state of things that the driver experiences, out of a conviction that his circumstances will change. It takes him back to the aspirations he has left behind, hiding behind the wheel.

The first sentence out of the mouths of all drivers is, “This isn’t my real job. I’m a lawyer,” or a contractor, a technical engineer at a television station. What he wanted for himself becomes an invented drama. He begins to tell stories about his work as an attorney, or adventures he had while a contractor. It’s a desperate attempt to rid himself of the stigma of being a taxi driver.

The refugee doesn’t adopt the same strategy, even though he hates the status of refugee and tries to escape it. For him, making things up isn’t connected to his rich past, but about the country in which he’s a refugee. The refugee wants to create scenarios that distance him from the status of refugee; he might say, for example, that his mother is Lebanese, and that he lived with his family in Beirut before the revolution.

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What the driver doesn’t know about the life of the refugee serves as a way for the driver to inflate his imagined ego so that he becomes a sane alternative, which compensates for some of his self-loathing.

The ignorance on the part of the refugee is a case of fear mixed with caution – which invented story should be chosen, so as not to provoke a politicized driver? How can it be told without touching on what is taking place in Syria, turning the story-teller into the topic instead the teller of the tale, subjecting him to a string of questions that trip up the game of story-telling and counter-story-telling? But, what’s wrong with seeing this situation breached? Why not interrupt the flow with personal stories, political arguments about the regime, the revolution, the resistance, and Israel’s benefiting from what is taking place? Perhaps this will open up more margins for both parties, and bestow the game of making-up stories with more functions.

The opinions stated by the driver or the refugee are of little value after the made-up story is resumed. For example, the driver says the Syrian regime provides its people with everything they need – water, electricity, education and health care, and then returns to his story he wants to tell. He says, “When I did business in Turkey, I would pass through the Aleppo countryside and see the poverty and deprivation.” The other one says, “The regime made a mistake in dealing with its people right at the beginning, in Deraa,” and continues his story. “I tried a bunch of different fancy homes in Beirut and I like living in the southern suburbs very much, unlike the rumors you hear.” This is how the false narrative strips away the identity of both the driver and the refugee, hiding their true inclinations behind of stream of tedious tales that are difficult to realize in reality. The made-up narrative becomes a double act; firstly, it conceals their real lives. The driver began his life behind the wheel, and is still there. The refugee has left his country, with no hope of any change. Secondly, attention is diverted from the reasons behind this state of affairs. In telling these interesting stories, the driver cannot openly blame his state, while the refugee cannot blame the regime. Both of them are following the logic of making things up. They’re not driver and refugee, but people who are constantly fleeing from these two shameful things.

Perhaps we can now understand that the taxi driver doesn’t take the refugee to where he wants to go. He takes him instead, perhaps, to a side road near the place or to the beginning of a main street. It’s forbidden to take him to the actual place. They arrive together at the agreed-upon spot without arriving completely at an agreement on the truth, which they’re not particularly interested in. They’re more attracted to making things up, which creates their counter-story. Any truth, whatever its size, might take the driver back to seeking refuge behind the wheel, running away from the aspirations he hasn’t achieved, and the refugee back to the naked tent, fleeing from a cause that has no solution.
In recent years I've taken part repeatedly in discussions or events about the Lebanese-Syrian situation. But I mention this incident because I feel a new, large burden when entering a discussion of the ambiguities of the Lebanese-Syrian relationship. I have the feeling that any invitation to dialogue or discussion of this kind might be a dangerous gamble, especially with the rise in tension and clashes in the ranks of Lebanese and Syrians – even among those who are assumed to be confronting the obstacles in the complicated relationship between the two sides, which has now exploded into a series of crises. In fact, like other Syrian and Lebanese I know, I have experienced different phases of understanding and misunderstanding. The past several years have seen large numbers of Syrians take up residence in Lebanon, whether they are fleeing their country, seeking refuge, or moving on to another country; this period has helped bring people together and discover friendships, while also leading to clashes and sharp debates on other levels. Perhaps the first years of what began as a revolution were like lighting the fuse for an explosion on all of the various Lebanese and Syrian fronts. I don't wish to merely repeat what has been said previously about the difficult situation of refugees, or the division in Lebanon over Hezbollah's fighting in Syria, or the anxiety over the entrance of extremist elements into Lebanon, the most dangerous incident being the recent battles in Arsal between the Lebanese Army and gunners from the Nusra Front and ISIS. The reasons for anxiety are legitimate, even if there hasn't been enough effort to deal with them, and are moving in the direction of making the problem worse instead of containing it. It certainly isn't in my power, or in the power of others who are caught in this part of the world, to confront a complicated problem such as the Syrian situation and its huge impact on Lebanon. However, in the end our world is made up of a group of individuals like me, and like others, who form small communities that feed off of personal, human relations and off of the experiences and interactions that accumulate, producing a certain meaning and value. Our moving closer to one another as individuals has revealed spaces for both friendship and difference; this has offered us models that we didn't know previously, due to prejudice. However, at the same time, we discover that the two political regimes and social orders are different, and that they have produced different individuals. Moving closer to one another certainly enriches our experience, but it reveals that the process of coexistence is not an automatic one; it must be put to use, and it requires mutual acceptance of what is different. Yes, there is Lebanese prejudice that stereotypes Syrians. But this was prior to the revolution in Syria, and it has continued as the revolution became a war. In return, there is generalization and dissatisfaction about the Lebanese model on the part of Syrians. As Lebanese and Syrian individuals we should confront the necessity of seeing Syrians accept Lebanon and its modern history, and its political model, and understand the country's various crises. In return, Lebanese should try to distinguish between Syrians who are refugees and a regime that oppressed Syria before it oppressed Lebanon. This is no easy challenge; there is a feeling of hopelessness about the future, making any attempt to bring people together and discuss the issue less attractive, after everything that has taken place. For me, the challenge is something I experience every day. I accept the disappointments and celebrate the achievements, but the important thing is to refuse to surrender to the misery toward which many are trying to push us.
Lahza 2: A diary of displacement, seen through the eyes of Syrian children

Lebanese professional photographer Ramzi Haidar didn’t hesitate when it came to reprising his project Lahza, in which he shot the daily life of Palestinian refugees; the Lahza 2 project came along to complete this earlier effort.

In this project, dozens of Syrian refugee children document through the lenses of “their cameras” the details of their long days in refugee camps and centers.

With the number of Syrian refugees arriving in Lebanon rising throughout the Syrian crisis, Zakira – The Image Festival Association undertook a unique effort by targeting Syrian children, as the weakest and most fragile social group. The working team from the association, led by Haidar, decided to distribute cameras to Syrian children and encourage them to document their lives where they reside in Lebanon. UNICEF promptly embraced the project, which will be completed by documenting the photographs in a book and producing a documentary film covering the various stages of the project. In addition, there will be short videos featuring the words of Syrian refugee children.

Although the idea wasn’t new for the association or the group Dar Al Mussawir, as it is a repeat of the Lahza project for the Palestinians, the Syrian version is special; it largely reflects the conditions of the refugees and the instability and chaos they experience.

Haidar links the idea that led to the Palestinian project in 2007 and the Syrian version in 2013 to his long career in places that have witnessed conflict – Darfur, Iraq, Turkey, Jordan and Yemen. He says that through photographing regions of conflict, he discovered that children are usually the most exposed to harm.

“Children are the victims of war, because they are young, and slow, and have little knowledge; they always attract the lens of a camera,” he says. In the same context, he notes that memories of war and its images are portrayed harshly in children’s imaginations because they are living in a vacuum, with no work or tasks to carry out.

Initially, Haidar and his team handed out cameras to 500 children in 12 Palestinian camps and areas of congregation. They took pictures of the details of their lives over two years. When Syrian refugees started to arrive, and because he often went as a photographer to camps and refugee centers for Syrians, Haidar observed that most of this new group was also made up of children. That’s when he decided to repeat the Lahza project.

The 500 cameras were handed out to children ranging from the ages of 7 to 12, in 70 different places. Five hundred cameras, for the same objective: photographing simple lives in places where people live. Haidar says that anyone who goes frequently to Syrian refugee areas must certainly notice quickly that children are anxious to experience everything from clothing and shoes to food, as well as entertainment, and knowledge.

“Since we were a group of photographers, activists, artists and journalists, we are concerned with the image, and photographing. We decided to repeat the first experiment, but through the eyes of Syrians this time, to discover the difference between the two experiences and how children deal in technical terms with cameras, and to give them the opportunity to interact with new people, from outside the camp,” he says.

The project’s goals, according to the organizers, combine entertainment with
enriching children through learning, and giving them a real chance to express themselves. The first phase, as Haidar explains, began with getting to know child refugees and building bridges of communication between them. During an early session they were asked to draw what came to mind, to test their technical ability and how receptive they were to the notion of the image. Noticeably, most of them drew a house.

“They drew the houses they had lost, stored in their imaginations, to escape from the place where they currently are,” he says. “Children can get their ideas across more than photographers, because we picture an objective or an idea, but when we give them the camera we discover what they want, and what they want to shed light on.”

The cameras that the children received didn’t require much technical knowledge, but training certainly took place before they were handed out. The children were instructed on how to use and deal with the cameras. Haidar noticed that the majority of families keep the camera away from the children and forbid them from dealing with it, instead of giving it to them as a present and allowing them to photograph what they want and discover their talents.

“The objective behind distributing cameras to refugee children is for them to portray to us their lives inside the camp. The image is part of the memory of the place,” he says. At the same time, Haidar was disappointed that the children were unable to bring out certain aspects and details of their lives via the image. He attributes this to the unstable conditions they live in, unlike the experience of the Palestinians.

“Palestinian children were born here and live in stability. Their lives are organized. They have homes, and friends and interests. They Syrians’ lives are unstable and they live in tents in many cases, with no window to the outside.”

“Refugee children take pictures of their simple lives inside the camps,” he says. “This life is very simple, so much so that there is nothing there to take pictures of.” There is a tent in which they live, resembling all tents, and thus most of them take pictures of themselves inside the tents, although this doesn’t prevent them from discovering some of their pronounced talents.

Among the problems faced by the project team was when refugees moved from one place to another, which often required moving with them to their new location and following up with them in their photography as well as their psychological and social and even economic conditions, as Haidar notes.

“We are trying to be the best of our ability to help them and their needs are constant, on all levels.”

Haidar acknowledges that working with children whose lives are unstable is a difficult task.

“The problems and crises came to us. After nine months of work we were worn out,” he says, giving the example of a child suffering from cancer in her face. The team volunteered to treat her ailment.

“The doctor told us that the initial stage of treatment, for a year, required $2,500, which for us was an astronomical sum. But through our friends and contacts, we gradually put together half of the amount. She has now begun the first six months of treatment,” he says.

Lahza 2 also targets Syrian adolescents, especially around the ages of 12 and 13.

“There is a lethal vacuum in their lives. This is the result of the change in location, after they lost their villages, surrounding environment, families and friends, and live in a valley, or a camp, with no controls over the rhythm of their lives like before - before they were displaced and came to Lebanon.”

Lahza 2 doesn’t end when the cameras are distributed and the children take pictures; it extends to documenting the photos by providing the children with copies of them and publishing them in a book to be distributed for free at the exhibition that Zakira – the Image Festival Association intends to organize in cooperation with UNICEF, which adopted Lahza 2. In addition, there will be an exhibition of selected photographs and a documentary about the project through the testimony of four children. Short videos and excerpts of 25 stories told by the children, in which they talk about their dreams and hopes and wishes, will also be distributed.

Haidar said the idea of filming video excerpts came about because of the relationship that links the team to children through their work over the past months with them, and the goal of documenting these testimonies for memory.
The Syria “Training” Republic Workshop on building a civil society in exile

Khaled Elekhetyar

The establishment of the first known civil association in Damascus dates back to 1880, and much water has passed under the bridge since then. The current Syrian authorities, upon taking power around four decades ago, quickly worked to empty Syrian civil society of any meaning and subject it to the long arm of the security bodies, or contain it by establishing affiliated institutions dressed up as civil groups, known as GNGOs. Meanwhile, the activities of more than 80 percent of authorized Syrian organizations and associations are restricted to charitable work (compared to 53 percent in Lebanon).

With the upswing in popular protests beginning in 2011, voluntary civil associations sprang into existence, trying diligently to bridge the gap generated by the government’s blockade of their work and the interruption in basic services. They were active in nursing, sanitation campaigns, relief, and media services. The activists quickly became a preferred target of the oppressive authorities, and were later targeted by the violations of extremists classified as anti-regime. Some estimates put the number of Syrian civil organizations at around 2,000, both inside the country and abroad, but they exhibit low levels of efficiency and expertise; they lack clear administrative organizational structures and also compete for resources. Moreover, everyone continues to suffer as Syria’s nascent civil society moves from the era of government-imposed weakness to one of militarization, caused by the revolution. It has been a painful jump and the impact of the shock remains visible for everyone to see. This has required “training” activities, represented mainly by the many workshops that are announced, seemingly around the clock. These workshops are trying to compensate for the lack of expertise, develop individual skills and create new, institutionalized structures.

Lebanon is one of the countries that has hosted a large number of such training activities, especially as the UNHCR updates on a monthly basis the numbers of refugees registered with the agency (currently at 832,000), while independent or conflicting numbers, all taken together, put the total number at around 1.5 million people. However, many questions are being asked today about the efficiency of these training activities and the strategies of the groups organizing them. This came in for particular criticism by Akram, one of the many Syrians who have taken part in a number of training workshops.

"About the only benefit we get from the workshops we take part in is networking," he says. "I meet other Syrians and we have been able to form relationships that later lead us to joint activities that have little to do with the goals of the training session that brought us together." The 30-something Akram, who finished university studies and found himself in prison for anti-regime activities, doesn’t hide his annoyance with "the lack of any organizing strategy for these training activities."

"The working projects that were suggested turned into individual projects," he says, concluding: “It seemed like there’s no need for these workshops, since no one is left in Syria. The activists who do remain there are now unable to move around. Where were all these training activities during the first two years, when there was still room for civil work?”

Jean Corse, a Lebanese trainer and the director of the International Center for Organization Development (ICOD), has a different opinion when it comes to the usefulness of training, although he agrees with Akram about the lack of strategy and coordination.

“Yes, things are always changing in Syria," Corse says. "But our response as a civil society organization should take this into account, and we should be dynamic. What we need to do, when we're talking about transferring skills, is to undertake a contextual analysis upon which we build our response. Our goal is to develop individual capacities so that these people can carry out this analysis, and not just offer direct assistance. Capacity building is a developmental goal, and not a purely relief-related activity."

As for the lack of coordination among training institutions, Corse acknowledges that when he used to work as an international relief coordinator, there was practically “no coordination,” before adding that “the poor coordination applies to other sectors when it comes to the situation in Syria.”

“Ts is one of the problems that we’ve suffered from in other countries as well. There are sessions that are repeated, and no oversight. We’re nowhere near the required level of integration, or where we should be when it comes to reducing the gap between the reality and our objectives. If some parties exploit these sessions, we don’t recognize them, and most of the people we work with know this.”

For Akram, another problematic issue lies in the ready-made models that some rich countries try to pass off on Syrian trainers. He cites the example of distributing food parcels in some parts of Syria, containing large quantities of rice. It appeared that this was based on a training model taken literally from the international relief efforts after the tsunami of 2005.

Corse disagrees with this, saying, "We don't want to work according to pre-conceived agendas or programs, whether from the west or the east."

"Even when it comes to benefiting from other lessons, such as the Lebanese case, for example, we should pay attention to the fact that the local context should have the highest priority," he says. "A change in the data requires us to change the nature of the response. We always need experts from the region and the only expert in Syria is the Syrian people. Naturally, Syrians should examine other experiences and form their own opinion. What we're doing is empowering people from the country with the skills needed to perform the tasks, and not undertake these tasks on their behalf.”

Akram insists that spending an informal evening with friends who are serious about their work can take the place of a training workshop costing thousands of dollars in a Lebanese hotel. However, Corse states firmly that, based on his experience, the trainings do have long-term development dimensions, and that the objectives of institutions committed to this approach aren’t just about trying to bring Syrians to Lebanon.

“But since we can't be present in Syria, our focus is to train Syrian trainers who can carry out these humanitarian missions themselves in their own areas,” he says.
Encounters between Syrian and Lebanese young people

Doha Hassan

When his new Syrian neighbor Ziad arrived last year, Beirut native Wael became curious. Neither one of them tried to meet the other, but a chance event forced them to exchange greetings. Wael approached Ziad cautiously, and before putting out his hand he heard the sounds of explosions; the two of them ran in the direction of the sound.

Group encounter
The first phase can be called a “group encounter,” in which Ziad sums up the characteristics of those coming from Syria. They constitute a group, united by the feeling that they are cast-outs, and are despised by the second group, that of Wael. This group cannot break the linkages between the Syrian regime, which ruled Lebanon with the same iron fist as it did Syria, and the refugees from Syria’s violence and the violence of the war raging in their cities and villages. In this meeting of the two groups, historical images and prejudices are recalled. Wael looks at Ziad as if he is a mukhabarat officer from the days of Syrian hegemony over Lebanon. Ziad and his group, who are fleeing from the same mukhabarat officer, want only to break completely with the Lebanese group, and Wael feels likewise. The gulf between them widens endlessly. It is the gulf between two victims of the same situation.

Under such conditions, it’s as if the first meeting is taking place in a psychiatric hospital treating war victims. When a new mental patient enters, a Syrian in this case, he is ruled by a desire to not mix with the former victims, and exhibits violent, insular behavior. The older patients treat him the same way, before time passes and they develop a curiosity to get to know the new patient, who experiences something similar.

Necessity, time and experience
During a time of “excessive death” such as this, we’ve begun to see attempts to rebuild social relations, independent from the weight of history, have begun, especially when it comes to those related to the war, killing and destruction. We are still talking about revolutions and new awareness, despite the violence around us. A real revolution is not just what astonishes us by virtue of its magnitude; it also affects our opinions and conceptions, and a review of Lebanese-Syrian relations might be one of these revolutions.

In one of the joint meetings between Syrians and Lebanese, a Syrian young man talked about being attacked at a Syrian checkpoint; a Lebanese young man had a similar experience at a Syrian checkpoint in Lebanon. The session quickly turned into one of telling experiences that shared details about loss, death, war, and coexistence amid bombing, blockade and battles. Despite what many Syrians in Lebanon might feel, strong ties and joint cultural, artistic and social projects between Syrians and Lebanese, especially of the younger generation, are taking place, out in the open.

“Children today in Syria
Children in the past in Lebanon

A few days ago and during another session of Syrian and Lebanese friends, a Syrian girl talked about cartoons that used to be shown on Syrian television in the late 1980s. These cartoons were a prime component of the memory of that generation of Syrian young people during a time of media and artistic blockade directed against the Baathist regime. The young girl assumed that the memory of these shows was also shared by the Syrian, who is a child today, says, “In those days, during the war, there wasn’t any electricity in our country and we didn’t watch television, or cartoons.”

This answer didn’t pass unchallenged, and it took the session’s Syrian participants to a scene imagined 15 years from now: a similar discussion takes place between two young men, one Syrian and one Lebanese, in a given place in a given city, about the memories of their childhood, and cartoons.

It might be normal for a new relationship to experience periods in which the impact of accumulated history and inculcated knowledge explodes; doing away with stereotypes and feelings dating back 30 years isn’t easy.

The Syrian, who is a child today, says, “In those days, during the war, there wasn’t any electricity in our country and we didn’t watch television, or cartoons.”
Deceptive nights and liquid endings

Roger Outa

This story is taken from the testimony of Obeida Ibrahim, who came to Lebanon as a student in 2009 before leaving and then returning to Beirut in 2012, to work in the field of antiquities excavation; he also writes poetry. They left their shoes in the street and ran in every direction, bullets raining down on them from all sides. At first, I decided to fall back with them because the soldiers were on the roof of one of the buildings in front of us, trying to pick people off. They shot one of the demonstrators dead, and a pool of blood took shape. But I didn't fall back. When I looked at the dead body, above it a cloud of black dust from the burning tires, I said to myself that the night had come down.

The regime can't see all of us now, as we've become invisible to them. This is why they fire bullets randomly in our direction, to hit the largest number of people. As for the plastic slippers on the ground, they were still being worn, but by people whose bodies had disappeared. People say that we go out into the streets during the day but this isn't true. Without the darkness the authorities would be able to see us clearly; they have put us in their frozen time, which has no light or darkness.

The first demonstration I took part in was the “Friday of the Tribes.” A week earlier, a friend of mine had managed to smuggle out a piece of video footage on his cell phone, taken in our part of Idlib province. It was footage of a funeral for someone killed by the regime at one of the protests. My friend took the video from Syria to Lebanon and arrived in the Bekaa Valley. I saw him at a university where I was studying. I looked at the footage and noticed that people in the public square where funerals used to be held were now receiving the dead with applause, singing and holding up banners. When they were bidding farewell to the dead man they were actually staging a reception for themselves. I saw this, and felt like I was plummeting through the sky. That's when I decided to go to Syria to take part in the street protest movement.

The “Friday of the Tribes” was my first training course in deception as a means to confront the regime. On that day, when the security forces were trying to hunt us down with their bullets, we came up with a ruse to frighten them. We began to bang on metal doors in the street to make a noise similar to that of bullets, to deceive them into thinking that we were using weapons, so that they would hesitate a bit before shooting at someone running past.

We would make this deceptive noise in order to wage our struggle at night – we would go out at night to protect people, who quickly began gathering their own weapons, mainly hunting rifles and light arms. I think that the “Friday of the Tribes” was when the armed resistance began and spread among the people. I thus learned something of immense importance at that demonstration: the street, as defined by our protest movement, was helping us to escape, but not to get anywhere. I would walk, sometimes run, not knowing where I was headed, knowing only that I was preventing the security forces from seeing me. Along my way I would bang on metal, pretending to fire bullets at the killers. In any case, that was the day I realized that the meaning of everything had changed, or at least the old meanings had disappeared. The proof? I was frightened, but I couldn't stop laughing.

I returned to Lebanon. However, this time it was to work in Beirut, which had always conjured up an ugly image for me: a huge bridge, and under it a dead body. This image never left me, even after I began living in the city. A while later, I began to wonder about the source of this image. Was it one of the stories I had heard about the conditions of Syrians in Lebanon, reinforced by how Lebanese treated me when I was a student in the Bekaa? I really don't know. But upon returning to this country, I wanted to meet others and tell them about our nights, and about our revolution that erupted in order to topple the regime – they, just like us, had suffered from its occupation. But I faced a number of roadblocks; most important was their conception of me, based on racism and classism, only made worse because I was a refugee.
After I created a new self, which had nothing to do with the regime or its permanence, I wanted to contact people whom the Baath Party had long prevented me from interacting with. Naturally, the first encounter with others was harsh and painful. At times, I was convinced that they hated me, and that I hated them. I had come here from a ship of death, very delusional, and the roadblocks placed before me by others were formidable ones. Was it my corpse under the bridge, or did it belong to someone else? In the night of Beirut, I discovered that it was the corpse of all of us.

At night, the city flows like water, into the streets and sidewalks of the nightlife, where everything becomes jumbled together. The ties between us are alcoholic, par excellence. The alcohol melts the pressure of the previous day, reproducing it at a later date. Partygoers meet under its influence, and I have gradually become one of them. In the beginning, when I would drink I would become nostalgic and start talking to others about my country. Later, I would drink and talk about my sufferings in Lebanon, or my city Beirut. In both cases, people were silent in response. “The other”, whom I encounter during the day, looks at me with varying degrees of distaste and suffers from no obstacles – but most of the time, nothing is said. After being prevented from getting to know each other for decades, we feel no tension when an alcohol-based encounter takes place. At the same time, we have not shared anything before. At night, the differences between us are calm, as if a truce is in effect.

For the most part, I used to feel that the night of Beirut was like the end of a demonstration in Syria. We made ourselves invisible to deceive the security forces, who see no trace of us except shoes with no bodies, and hear the sound of bullets, with no guns being fired. Perhaps, in my second city, alcohol and the accompanying conversations make up our deception. We use such devices to escape the regime, just like in Syria, and also ourselves, to say that we are alive. Beirut engages in its liquid lack of awareness at night and bottles it up during the day. The evening acquaintances disappear and strangers return to their conception of me, while I cling fast to my wounds.

In any case, even these nighttime experiences cannot be shared by many refugees who live where curfews have been established. Those responsible for the curfews want them to be workers, and only workers. These people spend their days at worksites but are kept at home throughout the evening. By the way, a friend of mine has a job delivering bags of ice to restaurants and bars in Mar Mikhael and Gemmayzeh. He places the ice on the doors at night and then rushes back to where he lives, where there is a banner instructing him to be home before 7 p.m., before the day melts into the glasses.
The UNDP “Peace Building in Lebanon” project aimed since 2007 at enhancing mutual understanding and social cohesion in a participatory approach with youth, educators, media, NGOs, municipal council members and mukhtars and local leaders.

In response to the repercussions of the Syrian crisis on Lebanon and in order to alleviate the growing tensions in the country, the project works on enhancing the capacities of different society groups from local leaders to educators, media and civil society, on crisis management, peace building and conflict resolution. The project supports these groups in developing both medium- and long-term strategies for peace building.

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