

Civil society organizations and building bridges

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The Lebanese state might be too weak to present a mature approach on how to deal with Syrian refugees in comparison to other states; one that could reduce the humanitarian and socio-economic repercussions of the crisis and encourage the use of the refugees' own comparative advantages and that could serve Syrians and Lebanese alike. The Lebanese collective memory suffers from gaps that haven't been adequately dealt with since the end of the Civil War. The country also suffers from its current political polarization, which will likely continue in the near future. This polarization prevents it from containing the massive challenge posed by the displacement of more than 1 million Syrians. Thus, it might only be reasonable to expect such a deficiency in the management of the refugee crisis, especially if measured against countries with much greater material and human resources and more resilient bureaucracies. Despite these factors, these countries are also stumbling as they deal with the refugees; this is the case in some European countries lately as well as in the Middle East both prior to and after this development in Europe.

The vacuum resulting from the Lebanese state's dysfunctions as well as other exogenous factors, has allowed many civil society organizations to intervene in various domains that are connected to refugee affairs. It has allowed them to expand the margins of relief and legal work in this regard, and has given them an additional impetus to establish bonds between the host and guest communities despite the local and regional political and security conditions that do not help in bridging social rifts.

Official Lebanese bodies have dealt with some of the problems affecting refugees after having been absent from this domain, and amid meager external financial support and poor local planning and management. In the education sector, for example, and at the beginning of this last school year, registration in Lebanese public schools up to grade nine became free for both Lebanese and Syrians (previously it included annual fees and other expenses). This allowed the number of registered Syrians in the 3 to 14 age group to increase to some 200,000 refugees, after it stood at 106,000 the previous year. However, an initiative of this sort, like many other government initiatives, still fails to incorporate productive Syrians into the field of education – Syrian instructors in this case (the profession is limited to Lebanese). In any case, prior to this initiative by the Culture and Higher Education Ministries in Lebanon in coordination with the UNHCR and UNICEF, and more than four years after the crisis in Syria erupted, a number of civil society groups had made huge efforts to bridge the gap as much as their capabilities allow. In this regard, for example, the Syrian group Jusur worked in cooperation with Lebanese schools (such as the Makassed Charitable Organization) to provide educational requirements for hundreds of refugees, before collaborating with leading international universities, including Cambridge, which offers an annual grant as part of this cooperation.

As for the field of defending the rights of refugee children, local NGOs have confronted various challenges – some related to the refugees' poor living conditions and others to restricting or conventional social norms. They have coordinated programs that create an encouraging environment for constructive interaction between Lebanese and Syrians, since both groups have the joint humanitarian concern of improving their conditions, and since the inhabitants of (the same geographical area often share the impact of a given problem). The Lebanese group Himaya undertook an initiative in this regard, providing social and psychological support to youngsters who are victims of violence. The support groups it created involve Syrian and Lebanese participants.

Other efforts in the health sector were undertaken by local associations. Of those were ones that comprised of programs that are meant to provide people's needs when it comes to water, sanitation and hygiene, from which both sides benefit. Amel Association is one which



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is active in this regard; in addition to educational and relief efforts, it sponsors water treatment projects in areas populated by Lebanese and Syrians.

Concomitantly, and as part of their efforts in the field of infrastructure rehabilitation, local groups such as Utopia conduct workshops with the participation of Syrians and Lebanese to improve the neighborhoods where they live and the roads that they use on daily basis (they also beautify areas that traditionally witness military clashes, such as Bab al-Tabbaneh in Tripoli). In terms of educational efforts, groups such as Tawasol, which focuses on capacity-building for Lebanese, Syrians and Palestinians, is creating spaces for interaction amongst these three groups, as its name indicates. On the environmental level, some groups are concerned with waste management and recycling in areas populated by refugees, such as Arcenciel (an NGO registered in both Lebanon and France). Among the Lebanese groups that are also expanding their presence, Makhzoumi Foundation is prominent. In addition to its work in relief, health and development, it offers vocational training sessions for Lebanese and Syrians and thus graduates groups of both.

The above are just a sample of the local Lebanese NGOs that work in cooperation with international associations such as UNHCR, UNDP and UNICEF as well as European Union organizations and others sponsored by individual European countries, such as DFID (UK) and GIZ (Germany), and in parallel or in cooperation

with international NGOs such as Save the Children and Doctors without Borders... The importance of their role lies in their local identity. They address educational, health, environmental, developmental, social and psychological issues and help create bonds between Lebanese and Syrians. In this scope, one should bear in mind that, when working on protracted conflicts such as the Syrian one, UN agencies devote some of their resources and assistance to NGOs in order to help host communities and develop their capacities, in parallel to other relief and development work that targets the «guest» refugees.

Despite the considerable amount of criticism regarding the growth, mechanisms and financing of NGOs, which are thought to reduce state sovereignty (some of this criticism is valid, but the topic is beyond the scope of this article), these NGOs have become an indispensable tool for addressing humanitarian needs in today's constantly changing post-modern world. In Lebanon, in light of the malfunction of the state's bureaucracies and the untreated social problems over its ongoing crises, these organizations have very important roles to play. And perhaps their most profound impact on the medium and long terms lies in the projects that bring people together, despite the unhelpful conditions and tensions between the Lebanese host communities and their Syrian guests.