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Syria's refugees are Lebanon's nightmare

By Sami Atallah

Lebanon is facing two major problems today. The first is the entry of Syrian refugees whose numbers have exceeded 1 million, a five-fold increase from a year ago; and the second is the absence of political leadership to do anything about it. These two problems are linked. Lebanese politicians and parties are anticipating (and some are influencing) the events in Syria in order to find out how best to proceed.

Meanwhile, Syrians are dying at home and those who have fled are suffering from neglect. The Syrian crisis threatens to engulf Lebanon in many different ways, even if violence does not spill over into Lebanon.

The number of Syrian refugees, which would double if violence reaches Damascus, already represents some 20 percent of the Syrian population. Many of the displaced Syrians are homeless and poor and they require help in obtaining shelter, food, health care, schooling and other services such as water and sanitation in order to survive. In fact, 75 percent of the refugees are women and children. There is a high threat of epidemic diseases spreading across the country due to the abject conditions that the refugees live in.

The increase in the number of Syrian refugees has effectively increased the labor supply for unskilled and low-skilled workers in Lebanon. This has put a downward pressure on wages and, hence, exacerbated unemployment among the poorer unskilled Lebanese.

Tensions among the refugees are widespread, as they come from various different Syrian factions, some opposing and some supporting the regime. Furthermore, a majority of refugees are Sunnis, bringing demographic and social change and posing serious hazards to the confessional power-sharing system in Lebanon – contributing to the divisions and political tension among the Lebanese themselves. In addition, there are increasing security threats around the border areas that threaten stability and prevent assistance from reaching deprived groups. With no response or support, militarization and social crime are increasing and form a serious security threat across Lebanon.

Among the reasons why the government has not responded to the crisis is a lack of funds. Lebanon has received only \$78 million out of the \$1.6 billion promised in the Kuwait conference on refugees last January. It is argued that the reasons behind this are political, as the money was transferred to Jordan due to its proximity to the Gulf States. Others have argued that Lebanon's high level of corruption made international donors shy away from transferring money. However, many countries whose corruption score is worse than Lebanon's have become recipients of international aid after putting watchdog mechanisms in place.

Studies show that only one fourth of civil wars since 1945 last for two years and the remaining 75 percent last between two and 15 years. With no end in sight, the Syrian crisis may last for a substantial number of years. Furthermore, other studies have shown that 70 percent of refugees remain refugees for at least five years after the end of the war. With 400,000 destroyed households and another 800,000 that are not fit to be inhabited, there are currently at least 5 million Syrians who do not have a home to which to return. In effect, many of the refugees in Lebanon will stay even after the end of the war. Therefore, it is essential that the government address the refugee crisis not as a short-term problem, but as a medium-term issue.

To address these problems, the Lebanese Center for Policy Studies held a discussion group with government officials, international agencies, local governments, non-governmental organizations, experts, and civil society activists. They recommended six immediate actions on how to manage the Syrian refugee crisis:

First, the government must coordinate not only with international donors but also with municipalities, municipal unions and NGOs. Since government agencies are too weak to handle this challenge, the government must develop and implement a comprehensive plan in collaboration with local and international actors, and civil society groups that are specialized in refugee issues and humanitarian intervention.

Second, crisis management units with technical capacities must be established at the municipal union level. The municipal unions can act as intermediaries between government, municipalities, local associations and international organizations to implement the government plan. The municipal unions can respond more quickly to local challenges and avoid the bureaucratic procedures that hinder the government and international organizations. Ultimately, they are the actors that have the best knowledge on the ground.

Third, align humanitarian aid with small-scale development efforts based on local conditions. A multi-disciplinary technical team at the level of crisis management units should develop local strategies tailored to the specific needs and conditions of regions. Building on the resilience of local communities, Lebanese families who are hosting Syrian refugees should be assisted.

Fourth, set up a development fund using the revenues collected by the Telecommunications Ministry for the municipalities and municipal unions. To address the shortage of funds, the government must distribute the money that has been collected but not distributed to municipalities and municipal unions. It is estimated that there is \$1.8 billion in the independent municipality fund. The Syrian refugee crisis ought to trigger development in poorer regions. There should be active expert involvement from crisis management units in planning developmental projects in line with the central government's vision.

Fifth, facilitate educational opportunities for the refugees. The Lebanese authorities must facilitate access to schools for all refugees. Based on a good example in Sidon's schools, where new sections were opened for Syrian refugees – mixing with Lebanese students in all activities. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency has also implemented a good approach, extending the academic year to the summer to help the Syrian refugees switch gradually to the Lebanese curriculum to help them prepare for official examinations.

And sixth, develop awareness and information campaigns for the refugee population and host communities. The government should provide support to host communities and refugees by raising awareness. In order to facilitate the cooperation between municipal unions, international organizations and local associations, a communication campaign on refugee reception, rights and a guide to the government's comprehensive plan should be communicated and promoted through nationwide information campaigns.

Lebanon needs a political leadership that responds to people's needs. With a million refugees on Lebanese territory, it is even more imperative now to deal with a crisis that will be us for years. Instead we are stuck with political parties that are sitting on the bench, fighting the war of others, or are politicizing the refugees issue for political ends. Meanwhile, Lebanese and Syrians are suffering.

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