

UNDER PRESSURE: LEBANON AND TURKEY NEED MORE SUPPORT TO ADDRESS SYRIAN REFUGEE CRISIS

At a distribution center in downtown Beirut, women line up at the gate to receive hygiene and baby kit vouchers from a local aid organization. Each woman has a story to tell about why she left Syria, how she ended up in Lebanon, and what daily life is like; and each of them has learned what it means to make choices about what is most important. One mother told RI that while her child excelled academically in Syria and had been doing well in school in Lebanon, he could no longer continue his education. Their house had been robbed not long before and so they decided to move to a safer but more expensive apartment, without a nearby public school.

The Syrian refugee populations in Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey all face significant challenges. Thousands of people leave Syria for these countries every day, but once safely across the border there is no guarantee of finding adequate support for day-to-day needs such as shelter, food, or healthcare. Longer-term assistance, including education and psychosocial care, is still in the developing stages more than two years into the crisis, and it is sometimes neglected in deference to more immediate needs as the emergency grows.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ❑ Donor states should provide bilateral support to Turkey through the Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD), particularly for its response to non-camp Syrian refugees. This should include funding for those local authorities that are supporting the refugee population.
- ❑ The Turkish government should increase its outreach and support to Syrian refugees living outside of camps by introducing better registration processes with wider coverage of the refugee population.
- ❑ In Lebanon, the UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) should set out clear criteria for its move from general to targeted assistance for the most vulnerable refugees, and should communicate more effectively with refugees regarding this initiative.
- ❑ Donor states should support the expansion of educational opportunities for Syrian refugees in Lebanon.
- ❑ In coordination with the Lebanese authorities, UNHCR should develop a shelter strategy for existing refugees and new arrivals. This should be complemented by efforts to ensure that housing contracts between non-governmental organizations, landlords, and refugees can be enforced.
- ❑ Having undertaken a detailed analysis of the refugee impact on Lebanon, the World Bank should act quickly to establish programs and projects that will help the country keep its borders open and host its very large refugee population.

TURKEY

Of the half a million Syrian refugees now residing in Turkey, about 200,000 live in more than 20 camps spread out across the southern provinces that border Syria. In general, the camps are well run, providing refugees with food, shelter, access to medical care, and education. The Turkish government has put an impressive amount of resources into these camps, estimating that it has spent as much as \$1 billion on them so far. The remaining Syrian refugees in Turkey – more than 300,000 people – are living in cities, towns, and villages across the country.

Registration

For those Syrians living outside of the camps, there is a pressing need to be able to register with an authority that can provide identity documents, assess needs, and offer appropriate services. The UN Refugee Agency (UNHCR) does not currently have its own registration process in place, and Syrians who entered Turkey without a passport have limited opportunities to register with the Turkish government.

There are currently three Turkish government registration processes that run simultaneously but separately for Syrians who are not in camps. First, there is a localized registration system, whereby refugees may receive some basic services from non-governmental organizations (NGOs). This type of system is not widely available, however, as there are relatively few NGOs working with refugees outside of camps.

Second, refugees who have a passport and are in Turkey legally may register with the Alien Police and receive a residence permit that is valid for a year.

Third, refugees with or without passports can also register with the official Disaster and Emergency Management Presidency (AFAD) through one of its coordination centers in the southeast of the country.

The AFAD registration, despite being a national government initiative, provides few benefits. Indeed, medical care is the only service that is readily available after registration and receipt of an AFAD identification card. And while this is an important form of assistance, other types of support such as food and rental subsidies are desperately needed by the large and growing portion of Syrian refugees who are not in camps.

An official at one AFAD center noted that most of the refugees who came forward to be registered were Syrian passport holders, as is the case with those who register

through the Alien Police. Unfortunately, these two systems do not share or cross-check their data, and it is hard to verify that people are not being registered twice.

There are two additional challenges confronting the registration process. First, it is possible that many (and perhaps most) Syrians without passports are not registering with either the Alien Police or with AFAD. As in other countries in the region, many Syrian refugees in Turkey choose not to be registered, due to a fear of being identified or a simple lack of information. This being the case, the number of Syrian refugees in Turkey may in fact be far higher than the current estimates.

Second, it is possible that many Syrians in the country, both legally and illegally, are falling through the cracks with regard to service access. In the absence of any comparison between the two registration rosters, any number of Syrians may be registered with one authority and not the other, while other refugees may receive no services at all.

The Turkish government should introduce better registration processes with a wider coverage of the refugee population living outside of camps.

Services and Shelter

While Syrian refugees in Turkey are eligible to access the country's healthcare services, few other forms of support are provided in a systematic manner. Many registered refugees receive no assistance in paying for food or rent, educating their children, or securing employment to support themselves and their families.

Shelter is an ongoing challenge in Turkey. All of the refugees with whom RI spoke said that rental payments consumed a significant portion of whatever income they had, and that the price of accommodation continues to increase. Syrian families living on the streets are becoming a more common sight.

Syrian refugees in some provinces are receiving help from their Turkish neighbors, from a few local and international NGOs, and from municipal authorities that are doing what they can to provide aid, even though they lack budgets and operational partners for this purpose. Several provinces in southern Turkey, for example, have set up alternative educational activities for Syrian children who are not in school due to linguistic, financial, or logistical challenges.

But such efforts are often too limited in scale. An excellent educational center in Gaziantep, for example, can only accommodate about 2,000 grade-school children in multiple shifts, even though tens of thousands need the programs that the center offers. A similar initiative in Kilis

is also providing learning opportunities to Syrian children, but places in the school are extremely limited and only a tiny fraction of the school-age refugees can be enrolled.

As it becomes increasingly apparent that there are large – and growing – numbers of Syrian refugees living outside of the camps in Turkey, new ideas are required in terms of providing the services that meet their needs. AFAD is well-placed to assume a larger role in this respect and should be supported by the U.S. and other donor states. Such support would not only help to minimize the risk of tension between the refugees and their local hosts – many of whom need help themselves – but would also encourage the Turkish government to keep the country's borders open to people fleeing the conflict in Syria.

Funding remains an ongoing challenge in Turkey. UNHCR's appeal for Turkey, for example, is only one-quarter funded, three-quarters of the way through the year. While Turkey is a middle-income country with a growing economy, it has already devoted considerable resources to assisting Syrian refugees and should have the support of the international community.

LEBANON

The sheer number of Syrians taking refuge in Lebanon and the resources required to meet their needs present major challenges to the humanitarian community. By June 2011, three months after the start of the Syrian uprising, fewer than 2,500 Syrians had fled to Lebanon. A year later, that number had risen to 25,000. By June 2013, the figure had leapt to 490,000. Just two months later, 650,000 refugees had registered with UNHCR.

Lebanon has not established any refugee camps, an approach which allows the Syrians to live in a less restricted manner and to establish better connections with local communities. However, it has also resulted in a highly varied quality of life for the refugees and has complicated the task of assistance and service delivery.

An additional factor complicating refugee assistance is a lack of funding. The UN's humanitarian appeal for Lebanon is less than half funded. Short on resources, UNHCR and its implementing partners have struggled to establish programs that keep pace with the need for aid, and, given the circumstances, they have concluded that assistance must be directed to the most vulnerable refugees.

At the time of RI's visit, some NGO representatives expressed concern about the absence of clear criteria for this targeting exercise. They also said that targeting was not well understood by UNHCR's implementing partners and

that refugees had not been adequately informed that this process was about to take place. Some asserted that the change was likely to cause resentment among refugees and between refugees and service providers.

Government officials, national and international NGOs, and refugees themselves informed RI that almost every sector of the emergency response was underfunded and lacking in coordination. Among their greatest concerns were the provision of adequate shelter options at reasonable cost, access to healthcare (particularly for the chronically ill), expanded livelihood options, and opportunities for Syrian children to attend school.

Shelter

UNHCR, its NGO partners, and the Lebanese government have adopted a variety of creative strategies to provide accommodation for Syrians while avoiding the establishment of camps. However, the country is now overwhelmed by the influx of refugees and many thousands of them have been left with inadequate shelter. The housing prospects for future arrivals are equally bleak.

There is a clear need for humanitarian and development actors, together with the Lebanese authorities, to address this issue in a comprehensive manner and in a way that reduces tension between refugees and host communities.

The lack of a concerted strategy has resulted in some wasteful spending. One NGO representative told RI that it had paid for renovations to houses owned by a Lebanese landlord, on the basis of a contract that allowed a refugee family to live there for a year. However, a few months into the contract the Syrian family was evicted to make room for another that could pay more for the improved housing.

This same NGO representative noted that aid organizations are not in a strong position to enforce these housing contracts, and that the local authorities should provide this form of protection. But UNHCR, its implementing partners, and the Ministry of Social Affairs (MoSA) do not have agreements or memoranda of understanding with most local authorities regarding the enforcement of such contracts. This gap needs to be filled. At the same time, UNHCR and the MoSA should continue to monitor those implementing partners working in the shelter sector.

While the Lebanese government has provided a list of more than a thousand buildings that NGOs could help refurbish to create additional shelter for refugees, this is a costly and time-consuming approach. It also fails to address one of the most serious problems in Lebanon: the need to upgrade the

informal tented settlements scattered across the country, which are now home to more than 100,000 refugees. The accommodation provided in such settlements, and the services their residents receive, are in urgent need of improvement before the onset of winter.

Better contingency planning with respect to shelter is also required. If a large and sudden influx of refugees were to arrive in Lebanon in the near future, it is not clear where they would be accommodated.

There has been some talk of establishing “transit sites” (which are camps in all but name), but there is concern within Lebanon that the creation of such sites would lead to a repetition of the country’s difficult experience with Palestinian refugees. Given the potential for a further refugee influx, UNHCR, its partners, and the Lebanese authorities should resolve this issue as quickly as possible and establish a coherent contingency plan with respect to the provision of shelter for new arrivals.

Services

The healthcare and education systems of Lebanon are highly privatized and fragmented, making the large-scale expansion of these services for refugees exceedingly difficult. So far, aid providers have not developed a comprehensive strategy, and their piecemeal approach is proving to be costly, inefficient, and inadequate in its coverage.

Primary healthcare clinics do not have sufficient capacity to meet refugees’ needs. RI visited a clinic in a small town in the Beqa’a Valley which had 3,000 residents before the arrival of the refugees. It now has a population of 13,000 and yet still relies on the services of one clinic. Local residents lamented the fact that they can no longer access the clinic’s services because it is oversubscribed by Syrians.

Beyond primary care, health services are very expensive in Lebanon. The majority of refugees cannot cover the cost of hospitalization or a visit to a specialist. Two health NGOs, one international and another local, told RI that their funds were running low and they had not received any assurances that additional money would be immediately available. As a result, they have both determined that they will have to terminate the small amount of secondary and tertiary care they currently provide.

To address this situation, aid providers must continue to refine health programming, directing resources to those refugees who are least able to meet their own needs.

The state of refugee education in Lebanon is particularly troubling. The majority of elementary instruction in the country is provided through private schools. The public sector educates only 30 percent of Lebanese students and is ill-equipped to expand rapidly.

The Ministry of Education and Higher Education allows schools to remain open for a second shift in the afternoon, but the government cannot afford to pay additional teacher salaries or administrative and operational costs. By the end of the year, it is expected that there will be 550,000 Syrian refugee children in Lebanon, and that 80 percent will not be enrolled in school.

RI spoke with several mothers of school-age Syrian children who cited the high cost of private schooling and transportation and the language of instruction used in Lebanon (English or French in addition to Arabic) as the main reasons why their children do not attend school.

Several refugee parents informed RI that they had little idea as to where to go in order to access educational subsidies or support. A UNHCR implementing partner that provides refugees with hygiene and baby supply coupons said that it was frequently approached for help with school fees, transportation, and supplies, but it did not know what advice it should give to the refugees.

Supporting Host Communities

Lebanon has generally kept its borders open for the growing number of Syrians forced to flee their homeland, and many sectors of Lebanese society initially welcomed them. But there is now a growing sense that the refugees are overwhelming Lebanon’s infrastructure and resources and threatening its stability. An official at the MoSA told RI that the government has a responsibility to ensure that the refugee influx does not adversely impact Lebanese citizens’ quality of life.

Increasingly, refugees are being blamed for requiring local schools to run double shifts, for driving rents up and wages down, for increasing wait times at health centers, and for putting strain on water, electricity, and waste management systems. Aid interventions must address these negative impacts and support host communities in order to reduce tension between refugees and local populations.

UNHCR and its implementing partners have undertaken quick impact projects (QIPs) in communities that are struggling to cope with the refugee influx. These have included the purchase of garbage trucks; the expansion of schools, community centers, and primary healthcare

facilities; and projects that offer training in peaceful co-existence and conflict resolution.

While QIPs are undoubtedly vital to a comprehensive and sustainable refugee response, continued effort will be required to ensure that they are based on a process of community consultation and participation, involving particularly those people whose voices may not be represented by the local authorities.

There are doubts as to whether the current array of humanitarian actors in Lebanon has the requisite data collection and planning skills to identify the most effective and efficient projects in terms of their impact on host communities. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that the scale of the refugee influx and its negative implications for host communities go well beyond the competence and resources of relief agencies.

In this context, a very positive recent development is to be found in a comprehensive World Bank assessment of the refugee impact on Lebanon – the first such study undertaken by the Bank anywhere in the world.

There is now an urgent need to ensure that donor states and development agencies act on this assessment. They must allocate substantial resources to programs and projects that expand Lebanon's capacity to host refugees and provide employment opportunities to Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees alike. In the absence of faster economic growth, there is a very real risk that Lebanon's fragile political and social structure will be further destabilized, with potentially devastating consequences for an already volatile region.

Daryl Grisgraber and Marc Hanson traveled to Turkey and Lebanon in August 2013. It was Refugees International's (RI) fifth mission related to the Syrian refugee emergency. This mission focused on refugees living outside of camps in Lebanon and Turkey. Due to security conditions, the researchers were unable to enter Syria. The RI team visited Beirut and the western Beqa'a Valley in Lebanon, and in Turkey they traveled to Gaziantep, Adana, Antakya, Reyhanli, and Kirikhan. The team held meetings with Syrian refugees, local populations and service providers, international NGOs, UN agencies, and government officials.