



Op-ed

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By Amy Benziger and Theodore Waddelow, Co-chairs of Crisis Group's

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Lebanon Needs Help to Revive its Waning Welcome to Syrian Refugees

Eight members of International Crisis Group's Ambassador Council joined a trip to Lebanon alongside Crisis Group staff in November 2017 to understand the consequences of the Syrian war since 2011. Here two Council members reflect on the Syrian refugees they met and Lebanon's increased fragility as a result of its enormous new burdens.

Syrian accents are now omnipresent in Lebanon. Busy streets are choked with an influx of Syrian cars. At least 1,700 informal Syrian refugee settlements crowd the landscape from Beirut to the Bekaa Valley.

Everywhere we went in Lebanon this month, the impact of the Syrian war was immediately evident, as were tensions rippling out from the escalating Saudi-Iranian rivalry in the region. It is a tribute to Lebanon's generosity that this country of 4.5 million people is hosting an estimated 1.5 million refugees. That's the most, on a per capita basis, of any country in the world – akin to the United States taking in over 80 million refugees.

Travelling across Lebanon as part of a delegation from International Crisis Group, an independent conflict prevention organisation, and meeting more than 50 Lebanese and Syrian actors in the crisis, we were impressed by how Lebanon has managed to cope so far, in spite of the immense challenges it has faced. But we also heard that limits are being reached in what Lebanon can do, and in what Lebanese are ready to do. Lebanon needs help.

The outbreak of the Syrian conflict in 2011 and the huge influx of Syrian refugees since

then have exacerbated the deep structural challenges already faced by Lebanon. Poor public services are worsened by a government paralysed by sectarian divisions, amplified by external interference. Since 2011, economic growth has dropped from 8 to 2 per cent. Job creation, insufficient before the crisis, is now stagnant. 76 per cent of Syrian refugees and 29 per cent of Lebanese live in poverty.

The country is in no state to withstand a new external shock, and is vulnerable to internal political turmoil and outside proxy maneuvers. We heard that 300,000 Lebanese are working in the Gulf sending up to \$7 billion home annually. Lebanon's strong foreign currency reserves – \$50 billion, or three years of imports – mask the fact that any economic disruption will quickly strain the country's public debt, 156 per cent of GDP in 2016. Any loss of or remittance income alongside a lagging international community's commitment and donor fatigue could bring down the Lebanese economy. U.S., French and other international assistance is critical to calm regional tensions and forestall this threat.

Yet we also saw signs of hope, as we met enterprising and resourceful Lebanese and Syrians who are working to address the challenge. For example, Lebanese academic Rahib Shibli of American University in Beirut's Center for Civic Innovation is building excellent schools for deprived Syrian refugee children in Shtoura in the Bekaa valley. These temporary structures can actually be dismantled and moved back to Syria when the conflict burns out, refugees return and the country starts being rebuilt.

At one of these schools, cheek by jowl with an informal settlement, we met Syrian schoolchildren, and were moved by the sight of Syrian children being given what is the best hope for the future, an education.

In a women's support centre nearby, we met Syrian women being trained to deal with the harassment and challenging circumstances that they deal with every day. Beyond basic language, vocational and computer training, they also offer leadership courses so women can be empowered to broker peace and participate in politics in their home communities.

And Lebanon's Makhzoumi Foundation, which briefed us on the range of medical care, vocational training and microloans they are making available for vulnerable Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian and Iraqi populations, estimates that at least 1,700 informal settlements set up by Syrians are now scattered around the country.

However, these inspirational examples could not hide the difficult reality that though many Lebanese initially opened their arms to the fleeing Syrians – 80 per cent of whom are women and children – the welcome has worn off. 90 per cent of the Syrian refugees are concentrated in the most impoverished areas of Lebanon. Vulnerable Lebanese feel abandoned by the international community, seeing an influx of funds supporting newcomers while they suffer alone.

Senior Lebanese foreign ministry officials warned us that Lebanon was being pushed too far. Scarred by the destabilising influx of Palestinian refugees that led to civil war in the 1970s, officials insisted on calling Syrians “displaced persons” rather than refugees, warning against permanent stays that could cripple the fragile country.

At a “Tension Mapping” exercise of the UN Refugee Agency, we heard of Lebanese mayors setting up curfews and hanging banners telling refugees to leave. Case workers noted hostile inter-community relations doubling in recent months while indicators of community isolation rose from 22 to 55 per cent. Such frictions have been a recipe for civic unrest throughout history.

Since 2011, the Middle East has seen millions of people dragged into destructive wars in Syria, Libya and Yemen. The Lebanese fear their turn is next, and they need support to avoid falling victim to forces beyond their control.

Though these challenges seemed distant to us in California, we are now more conscious that the consequences could stretch far. The U.S. government should urge regional powers like Saudi Arabia and Israel to refrain from escalating the situation, enhance funding to UN and entities supporting the Syrian refugees, and sustain its military and civil assistance to the Lebanese government.

Amy Benziger and Theodore Waddelow are Co-chairs of Crisis Group's Ambassador Council chapter in San Francisco. Benziger leads Partnerships and Engagement for Refugees Welcome, a lab structured to incubate and spin out innovative approaches to inspire the public to take action in support of refugees around the world. Waddelow is a Director of Global Public Policy at Visa. Opinions expressed are of the individuals and do not express the views or opinions of their employers or of International Crisis Group.