Evolution of the stability sector in Lebanon: the role of civil society

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In recent decades, civil society has played a fundamental role in supporting social stability in Lebanon, including efforts at improving social cohesion between different groups.

Lebanon has recently experienced multiple crises: the COVID-19 pandemic, an unprecedented currency collapse, nationwide protests against a corrupt sectarian state, and the Beirut Port explosion in August 2020. State and humanitarian actors have therefore become increasingly concerned about inter-communal tensions and other threats to national stability, most recently between Lebanese nationals, displaced Syrians, and stateless people. Policy discourse in the country has focused on occasional – and often isolated – outbreaks of collective violence, as well as on a Tension Monitoring System administered by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). But there is limited scrutiny of what 'stability' has meant and continues to mean in Lebanon and how it is experienced by different groups.

These concerns build upon a much longer history of attempts by external actors to promote stability across the different ethnoreligious groups in Lebanon.[1] In 1860, France sent troops to quell the fighting between the Maronite Christian and Druze population of Mount Lebanon. After World War I, France created 'Greater' Lebanon, a new nation-state with a sectarian system of governance that regularly broke down. The civil war between 1975 and 1989 saw fighting both between and within various Christian and Muslim factions. The Syrian military then occupied Lebanon until 2005. This convoluted political history has resulted in serious concerns among civil society and government about tensions among the different groups that make up the Lebanese population.

Displaced Syrians in Lebanon

The concerns about the de-stabilising effects of displacement from Syria must be understood in the light of this history. Since 2011, 1.1 million displaced Syrians have entered Lebanon, who now make up 25% or more of Lebanon's current population. Refugee movements on such a scale elsewhere might well have triggered a major internal security operation or even military action. In Lebanon, however, the government's 'humanitarian' response has been minimal, with Syrians largely receiving assistance from international and nongovernmental organisations. Lebanon's political parties and population are split between supporters and opponents of the Assad government in Syria.[2] UNHCR's request to set up refugee camps for the displaced Syrians was rejected for fear that this might result in outbreaks of violence and undermine social cohesion in Lebanon. Such violence had erupted previously: in Karantina, a Palestinian refugee camp which was razed to the ground at the outbreak of the civil war in 1975, and in 1982 when Israeli forces backed Christian Lebanese militias in their massacre of Palestinians in Sabra and Shatila refugee camps.

In such a divided context, the survival of the state relies upon the idea that civil rather than customary or religious governance benefits the 'common good'. Civil society actors have made significant efforts to maintain and extend ties across Lebanese political and religious groups. The recent Syrian influx can best be understood by examining this search for stability which is intrinsic to the historical nature of the governance structure over the past century.

Displaced Syrians in Lebanon span the socio-economic spectrum: from millionaires to poor, unskilled labourers. In addition to a large number of Lebanese NGOs set up to assist displaced Syrians, many of the better-off Syrians in Lebanon have created NGOs to help Syrians cope with impoverishment,

lack of access to government services and the uncertainty of life in exile. Although there have been instances of violence against displaced Syrians, such as a mass eviction in Bsharre and the burning of shelters in Bhanine in late 2020, these are few and far between. Even the large-scale imposition of night-time curfews on Syrians often reflect positioning among pro- and anti-Assad Lebanese political parties, rather than a direct response to individual displaced Syrians.

Until very recently there were no visa restrictions between the two countries, allowing Syrians to easily enter and remain in Lebanon. Before 2011, half a million Syrian workers formed an essential part of the Lebanese agricultural and construction industries. These mainly male workers brought their families to join them once it became too dangerous to stay in Syria. Therefore, the majority of displaced Syrians in Lebanon are familiar to the Lebanese people, but nonetheless are separate from them[3]. It is this separateness that has made efforts to bring hosts and refugees together so difficult.

Civil society encouraging social cohesion

Over the decades, most social cohesion projects in Lebanon have been directed at bridging divides between the country's various ethno-religious sects and sect-based political parties. Displaced Syrians have rarely been involved in these projects, either in designing or in benefitting from them. Many of these projects have focused particularly on youth, including United Lebanese Youth Project, Tomorrow's Youth Organization, Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training, and Youth Development Organization.

Increasingly cohesion and stability projects have attempted to address relations between displaced Syrians and Lebanese host communities. In 2015, actors including government ministries, national NGOs, and international organisations came together to form a 'Stability Sector' aimed at addressing these inter-communal tensions. Their activities included establishing a Tension Monitoring System administered by UNDP. Research by the 'Social Cohesion

Across the Beqaa Valley in eastern Lebanon, tens of thousands of Syrians have taken up residence in tented settlements, just kilometres from the border with Syria (credit: Watfa Najdi)

as a Humanitarian Objective' project[4] has identified various strategies to encourage more welcoming attitudes towards Syrians in Lebanon. Some programmes that were originally designed to provide aid solely to refugees have incorporated Lebanese beneficiaries. Other programmes have created spaces for positive interaction between hosts and displaced Syrians, in the hope of building social connections and trust. These have been led by NGOs and international organisations such as the Norwegian Refugee Council and the International Committee of the Red Cross.

Stability in Lebanon is hardly threatened by the large number of Syrians it hosts, as many have long-established social ties and kinship in the country. Exclusion and hostility across sects have been a steadfast part of Lebanon's short history as a nation-state. Its response to displaced people, including Armenians, Palestinians, Iraqis and now Syrians, has been marked by discrimination. However, solidarity and support for displaced Syrians relies heavily on the role of civil society. Many of the most successful initiatives have been collaborations between Syrian and Lebanese actors. Two NGOs, Multi Aid Programs and Basmeh & Zeitooneh, for example, were founded by upper- and middle-class Syrians and were offered significant start-up support by members of Lebanon's civil society. The often closely related and intertwined Syrian and Lebanese civil society actors share the same goals; maintaining stability in the country that has provided asylum to so many displaced Syrians. Civil society is fundamental to the aims of the 'stability sector' in Lebanon.

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1. For historical background see Fawaz L (1992) *An Occasion for War: Civil conflict in Lebanon and Damascus 1860*, Berkeley: University of California Press

2. Dionigi F (2017) 'Rethinking borders: The dynamics of Syrian Displace to Lebanon', *Middle East Law and Governance*, Vol 9 (3): 232-248

3. Chatty D (2017) 'How Syrian Refugees Survive', *Current History*, Vol 116 (794):337-341

4. bit.ly/social-cohesion-socho