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Lebanon, Populations

Civil War and Refugees: Lebanon's Food Crisis

Since the beginning of the Syrian Civil War in March of 2011, the conflict has propelled disastrous effects far beyond the nation's borders. Nearly 5.6 million Syrians have become refugees in other nations ("Syrian Refugee Crisis"). In the small Mediterranean nation of Lebanon, with a native population of only four million, the influx of over one million Syrian refugees into the nation has put tremendous pressure on the labor market, driving down wages while simultaneously driving up prices for shelter and consumer goods. Between 2011 and 2014, the years of the first waves of refugees, the number of people living under the poverty line in Lebanon rose by 66% (Kukrety). Cultural barriers inhibit Syrian immigrants from becoming socially and economically integrated into society. Without being able to actively participate in the economy, which provides reliable income and its subsequent stability and autonomy—refugees face unpredictable sources of food and all of the challenges of a life without basic necessities.

Nestled between Syria, Israel, and the Mediterranean Sea, Lebanon is a tiny nation with a rich history as an economic crossroads between Asia and Europe. President Michel Aoun, along with the presidentially appointed Prime Minister Saad Hariri, head the nation's parliamentary republic. The religious makeup of the population is 27% Sunni Muslim, 27% Shiite Muslim, 22% Maronite Catholic, and 5% Druze. The remaining 19% is mostly other branches Christianity. The religious diversity of Lebanon is the reason that upon its independence in 1943, Shia, Sunni, and Maronite leaders cooperated to write the National Pact. The National Pact stipulates a variety of requirements, including that the President of the Republic will always be Maronite Catholic, the Prime Minister always Sunni Muslim, and the Speaker of the Parliament always Shia Muslim. This explicit multiconfessionalism demonstrates the strength of religion in Lebanese life. ("Lebanon")

Lebanon's population totals just over 6.2 million people; 4.1 million of them are Lebanese nationals and roughly 1.5 million are registered Syrian refugees. There is an estimated population of 450,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon ("Lebanon"). Though the Palestinian refugee population is a large concern and requires similar attention as their Syrian counterparts, this paper will focus exclusively on the Syrian refugee population due to its significant size. Many of the dangers of refugee life and solutions described for the Syrian population is also applicable to the Palestinian refugees.

88% of Lebanese citizens live in urban areas, especially in the capital of Beirut. Beirut's urban area houses nearly 55% of the total population. The Lebanon Mountains run north to southwest, separating much of the nation diagonally, while the Anti-Lebanon Mountains run along much of the Lebanon-Syria border. Between the two mountains lies the Beqaa (sometimes spelt Bekaa) valley, the region's namesake. Most of Lebanon's fertile land lies in the Beqaa region, which houses the valley and extends to the Syrian border ("Lebanon"). The current cultivated area of Lebanon is estimated to be 231,000 hectares, 22% of the nation's total size ("Strategic Review"). This cultivated land produces a wide variety of significant export crops that value around \$104 million American dollars and include apples, citrus, grapes, tomatoes, potatoes, olives, and tobacco ("Lebanon"). Major non-agricultural exports include jewelry and base metals, both of which tap the nation's abundant natural resources. Despite its small geographic coverage, Lebanon has multiple climates; lower areas near the sea have a wet, mild Mediterranean climate the while the Lebanon Mountains see snow and very cold temperatures. Most crop production occurs in the lower, warmer altitudes ("Geography & Climate").

Upper-income Lebanese families indulge in the lifestyle of most developed Western nations. There has

been no official census since 1932, when Lebanon was under French mandate, making official data hard to find. Despite this, some significant research has gone into understanding modern Lebanon. Most middle and upper class families live in western-style apartments with urban necessities (water, toilets, electricity, etc.) and are furnished with a mix of traditional Lebanese and European furniture (Darwiche). Families in these cities purchase food from grocery stores and local markets and consume Mediterranean staples like beans, rice, pasta, red meat, and chicken (“Food in Lebanon”). Families must have a strong and stable income to pay for this urban lifestyle. Although no census information is gathered to analyze the careers of the Lebanese, the most popular job listings are in the service sector—which indicates a more developed economy—and include positions in sales, engineering, accounting, and information technology (Darwiche). A functional education and healthcare system is also in place. These resources are not, however, accessible to everyone. Of the 6.2 million people living in Lebanon, 3.3 million people are living in need. About 45% of those 3.3 million are Lebanese nationals (people with Lebanese citizenship) (“Lebanon Crisis”). These citizens live in poverty that is comparable to the conditions of the refugees. Many of them suffer from unemployment, poor living conditions, and limited access to healthcare and education. With approximately 25% of all Lebanese nationals already living in poverty, it is incredibly difficult for Lebanon to effectively take in another one million people in need.

More than one half of the one million Syrian refugees living in Lebanon are living in extreme poverty (“Survey”). 53% of households report living in shelter that is overcrowded, structurally dangerous, or in urgent need of repairs (“Vulnerability Assessment”). Refugees have limited access to healthcare and the care they receive is poor. For those that do have some access to healthcare, 66% stated that the fees of a doctor visit or the cost of treatment inhibited them from following through with medical treatment. The average refugee household is comprised of 4.9 members, 1.6 of which are children aged six to seventeen and 1.1 of which are children aged five and under (“Vulnerability Assessment”). These children have slightly better access to education than they do healthcare; 70% of children aged six to fourteen are enrolled in school. The same numbers do not, however, carry over to children aged fifteen to seventeen, who have school enrollment rates of just 22% (“Vulnerability Assessment”). Education is forfeited as older children search for nearly nonexistent jobs; only 32% of displaced Syrians are employed with regular work. This statistic includes the significant outlier of Beirut, which has a far higher employment rate than other regions (while still being only 60%) (“Vulnerability Assessment”). The life of Syrian refugees in Lebanon is marked by a poverty and neglect that sharply contrasts lifestyle of Lebanese nationals living in cities and in relative abundance.

Of the many issues Syrian refugees face, food insecurity and instability is the largest source of concern. When people lack the basic requirements for survival, they are unable to integrate into society and flourish above the levels of mere survival. The average refugee household spends US\$98 per person per month; about 45% of that is spent on food. This is compared to the average Lebanese household, which spends only 22% of their expenditures on food (Chami and Mikhael).

Two main forms of aid are used to lessen the severity of food insecurity. The first type of aid, cash-based assistance, is cash or vouchers that act as currency. Those currently using cash-based food assistance in Lebanon are almost entirely refugees (“Lebanon: Food Security”). In 2016, 23,000 vulnerable people were reached with the other type of assistance, in-kind food assistance (“Lebanon: Food Security”). In-kind assistance is tangible aid for direct use of the recipients. In this case, the food that refugees receive is the in-kind assistance. Despite these aid plans, refugees’ access to quality food has been worsening in the last few years. The number of families that are moderately to severely food insecure has increased by 12% between 2015 and 2017 (“Syrian Refugees in Lebanon”). 9 out of 10 refugees said that they were in debt and 72% of heads of household reported the need to borrow money to buy food (“Vulnerability Assessment”). When these households do get food, they often lack a diversified diet. Though there are geographic variations, refugees generally have very low dietary diversity and spend upwards of 60% of their food expenditures on bread and pasta. Fruits and vegetables are eaten about once a week while bread

and pasta is consumed about 6.5 days a week (“Vulnerability Assessment”). A lack of dietary variety leads to malnutrition, which in turn can lead to reduced muscle mass, fertility problems, a slower immune system, breathing difficulties, and decreased mobility (“Malnutrition”). The isolation and the limited income of refugees—not to mention the incredibly high price of food—restricts diets and inhibits the healthy growth of refugee populations.

Although the influx of refugees has been a large factor in the expansion of Lebanon’s food instability, international trade and foreign aid have also significantly impacted the issue. Lebanon relies heavily on imports, importing \$16.7 billion USD and exporting only \$2.44 billion USD. This trade deficit makes the Lebanese economies reliant on foreign markets and international trade policies, which is not innately bad, but can devastate the economic structure of the nation if major trading partners undergo political shifts. Domestic agriculture is a minor industry; it only employs about 6% of the active workforce. A vast majority of food consumed in Lebanon is sourced externally (“Lebanon - Economy”). Without a self-reliant economy, it is difficult for the governmental powers of Lebanon to address the issues of refugee populations because they are unable to plan too far in advance due to the uncertain nature of their access to resources. The government’s inability to invest in food stability plans encourages foreign aid. Most international programs that aid Syrian refugees in Lebanon focus on relief-based monetary donations. For example, in 2017, the United States pledged to give \$140 million USD to Lebanon as aid with the intention of providing “food, shelter, and medical assistance for Syrian refugees” (“U.S. Pledges”). On a smaller scale, charities like Save the Children and OXFAM use donations to provide immediate relief, often in the form of medical or household supplies. Though these charities are clearly a positive force in the communities they work in, they are not focused on long-term solutions. Directing resources towards immediate aid takes them away from researching into eliminating the roots of food insecurity and creating long-term solutions. Though the food crisis can be mostly contributed to the growth of Lebanon’s refugee population, international trade and foreign aid must also be considered.

Both the United Nations and the Lebanese government have instituted several plans to improve the standard of living of Syrian refugees. The strongest programs are multi-year strategies developed by the Lebanese Ministry of Education, known as RACE I and RACE II (“3RP Regional”). These are intended to improve access to quality education to underprivileged children in Lebanon. Improving the quality of education in impoverished areas has been repeatedly proven to reduce child marriages, forced labor, and general exploitation of refugees (“Education”). Education gives children the skills and resources they need to escape a cycle of poverty and become strong candidates for jobs whether they stay in Lebanon, return to Syria, or develop livelihoods elsewhere. Though education improvement programs have clear benefits, it is difficult to see an immediate return on investment from them. It takes decades to see results from these programs, and a large percentage of children will likely be pulled away from school to work or run the home (“Education Data”). Increasing the caliber and availability of education is proven to be a strong solution to improving quality of life, but it is slow, expensive, and difficult to recognize.

Specifically pertaining to agriculture, 3RP, an international committee researching the impacts of the Syrian crisis, has developed a plan that combines food assistance programs with livelihood opportunities in rural areas. This fosters increased production yields and better distribution of resources among refugees and poor nationals (“3RP Regional”). One such program teaches Lebanese farmers about sustainable agriculture and its long-term benefits. Currently, less than 1,200 Lebanese farmers have been trained in sustainable production of crops and livestock (“3RP 2017”). The program hopes to encourage domestic agricultural production and help the nation wean off of its import-heavy food system (“Lebanon Economic Outlook”). As the Lebanese economy becomes more independent, food can be more efficiently distributed without the tariffs that accompany agricultural imports.

Lebanon is not the only country confronting major refugee populations. Surrounded by nations in turmoil, Uganda accepts refugees from South Sudan, Sudan, The Democratic Republic of the Congo, Ethiopia,

Eritrea, Burundi, and Rwanda. Uganda is now home to more than 1 million registered refugees. The nation has implemented a development-based program that promises refugees the right to a primary education, the right to own and dispose of property, the right to practice a profession and to find employment. Not only does it guarantee those rights, but it also allows refugees to move into large cities and become separated from refugee-focused aid programs sponsored by the government. (“Refugees in Uganda”). These freedom-promoting programs have been very successful. In Kampala, Uganda’s capital city, 21% of refugees run businesses and employ others and 96% of refugee households have some sort of income source independent from the government (“Viewpoint”). Because the similarly-poised nation of Uganda has been able to provide hundreds of thousands of refugees opportunities for success, it is likely that Lebanon will also be able to see refugees succeed in a similar way.

The current Ugandan strategy is loosely modeled after the Mexican approach to waves of Guatemalan refugees in the late 20th century (Conde). The Mexican government used money from European sponsors to encourage the agricultural development of the Yucatan peninsula by launching a land-grant program that gave independent farms to thousands of Guatemalan refugees. A vast majority of the refugees touched by this program established successful farms that helped shape the then-undeveloped Yucatan Peninsula into a prosperous region. By running independent farms, the refugees were able to establish livelihoods and settle into stable communities (“Five History Lessons”). By sponsoring agricultural development through land-grant programs, Mexico reaped the benefits of an economically productive region and a healthier refugee population. Refugees were also able to establish permanent ties to the land that aided them in the push for citizenship if they decided to stay in Mexico (“Viewpoint”).

The situational parallels between modern Lebanon and 1970s Mexico show that a similar land-grant program could easily be beneficial to both the Lebanese government and Syrian refugees. Though the geographic area of Lebanon is small, the soil is fertile and mostly undeveloped, especially in the Beqaa region, where most refugees are already located. By encouraging refugees to farm via a land-grant or another financial independence program, Lebanon would benefit from increased domestic agricultural production, thus aiding in evening the trade imbalance, and refugees would become independent and more prosperous. Obviously, Lebanon is too geographically small for a majority of Syrian refugees to utilize such a program, but the effects are so positive that it would absolutely be a worthy investment. This solution would take considerable time and resources, but if more resources were allocated towards a long-term plan instead of short-term relief, both refugees and nationals will be benefitted.

Lebanon is a nation divided. Prosperous wealth and crushing poverty coexist in Beirut, and Syrian refugees live in horrid conditions with limited access to food, education, and healthcare. The temporary nature of refugee populations makes lasting solutions difficult to implement, but lessening Lebanon’s trade imbalance and focusing on long-term solutions in agriculture and education show promise in improving the quality of life of refugees and Lebanese nationals alike.

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