AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT
ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
معهد عصام فارس للسياسات العامة والشؤون الدولية

THE IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT AND WAR THREATENS LEBANON'S ALREADY FRAGILE SOCIO-ECONOMIC FABRIC

POLICY BREIF

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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This paper was commissioned during the most recent war on Lebanon and finalized in November 2024. Although some of the figures used throughout the paper may have changed, the overall analysis and long-term ramifications still hold, and the reason why we have gone ahead with publication, trusting it will be of added value to the literature on the subject at this critical time. This paper was edited by Anastasia Rassi.

This Policy Brief is published by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy & International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut and is available on the following website: http://www.aub.edu.lb/ifi.

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INTRODUCTION

The ongoing military escalation in Lebanon, which began in October 2023 with Hezbollah's involvement in the conflict in Gaza, escalated dramatically in September 2024 when Israel intensified its military operations in Lebanon. The human toll is very heavy — 3,452 deaths and 14,664 injuries as of November 16 — the scale of destruction is massive and forced population displacements are unprecedented. In addition to its human cost and the political and geopolitical upheaval it triggers, this conflict represents an exceptional challenge for a country that has yet to recover from the unresolved 2019 financial crisis, which the World Bank has classified as one of the most severe in modern times.

In addition to its human cost and the political and geopolitical upheaval it triggers, this conflict represents an exceptional challenge for a country that has yet to recover from the unresolved 2019 financial crisis.

The forced displacement of 1.3 million people represents a new demographic and socio-economic shock added to multiple other recent internal and external crises, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Beirut blast in August 2020, and the Syrian refugee crisis that has been ongoing since 2011, all of which have continued to degrade the country's social systems and essential infrastructure.

The overlapping and increasingly violent crises complicate any analysis of the economic and social impact of each one independently. While the unique aspects of each crisis remain, it is their cumulative effect that confronts Lebanon with an extremely difficult economic and social challenge, with the stakes being nothing less than the preservation of Lebanese society and the prevention of a total collapse of its economy.

A COUNTRY UNDER INTENSE DEMOGRAPHIC PRESSURE WITH MASSIVE URGENT NEEDS

Lebanon, a small yet densely populated country, is buckling under immense demographic and humanitarian pressures brought on by successive crises. The country hosts the largest number of refugees per capita worldwide, while also grappling with internal displacement caused by escalating violence. These challenges, compounded by economic collapse and political paralysis, have created a catastrophic humanitarian situation, necessitating immediate international intervention.

Displacement on a Massive Scale

The ongoing conflict has displaced over 1.3 million people in Lebanon. Israeli airstrikes have devastated one-quarter of the country's territory, forcing residents to flee southern Lebanon, the Bekaa Valley, and southern suburbs of Beirut. Cities like Nabatiyeh, Tyre, and Baalbeck have seen whole neighborhoods destroyed, and entire villages have been wiped out.

While many internally displaced people (IDPs) have sought shelter with relatives or in rented accommodations, 188,190 are living in 1,173 overcrowded collective shelters. These makeshift accommodations, including public schools and unused buildings, were almost at full capacity

by mid-November. Beirut, for instance, saw its population swell by 50% virtually overnight, according to Lebanon's caretaker Environment Minister, Nasser Yassine. Despite extensive preparations modeled after the 2006 war, the rapid pace and sheer magnitude of displacement have mirrored the impact of a natural disaster, overwhelming the government, UN agencies, and humanitarian partners.

Longstanding Refugee Populations

This internal displacement compounds an existing crisis involving long-term refugee populations. Since 2011, Lebanon has hosted approximately 1.5 million Syrian refugees—constituting a quarter of its population—alongside 180,000 Palestinian refugees, 23,000 Palestinian refugees from Syria, and 11,000 individuals of other nationalities. Syrian refugees face deteriorating living conditions, with over 70% living in extreme poverty and half lacking regular income. Similarly, 80% of Palestinian refugees live below the national poverty line, with camp infrastructure struggling to meet basic needs.

As violence spread, many refugees fled again, joining Lebanese IDPs or seeking exits from the country. Airstrikes in areas like Tyre even targeted Palestinian camps, exacerbating vulnerabilities. Local authorities often denied displaced Syrians access to collective shelters, prompting them to cross the border. From September 23 to November 16, 2024, General Security recorded the crossing of 382,682 Syrian citizens and 218,755 Lebanese citizens into Syrian territory. Additionally, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) estimates that one in ten of the 180,000 migrants has been displaced by the conflict and has received over 3,000 requests for assistance to return home. Reports suggest that thousands of Lebanese have also sought refuge in Iraq.

Escalating Emigration

These departures by land are part of a larger migratory wave that also includes air and sea routes. While airport traffic has sharply declined due to the suspension of all civilian flights except those operated by Middle East Airlines, a net number of departures has been recorded, alongside dual nationals evacuated by their embassies and others leaving by sea.

This new wave of emigration—though the balance between temporary and permanent departures remains unclear—reflects an acceleration of Lebanon's long-standing emigration trends. Pre-war studies estimated that nearly half of Lebanese residents aged 15 would likely emigrate by the end of their working lives. Lebanon has historically experienced a net loss of approximately 25,000 emigrants annually, or 0.7% of its population. This outflow nearly offsets the country's natural population growth, with annual births at around 50,000 and deaths at approximately 27,000. The trend is particularly acute among younger demographics, with young men emigrating at notably higher rates than young women.

Unprecedented Humanitarian Needs

The humanitarian demands arising from the current crisis surpass those of the 2006 war, both in terms of scale and duration. These needs are multifaceted, encompassing assistance for IDPs, support for refugee populations, and addressing the vulnerabilities of Lebanese communities already affected by economic collapse.

The international community has taken steps to respond. On October 24, the International Conference in Support of Lebanon, organized by France and the UN, pledged $1 billion, including $800 million for humanitarian aid. However, of the $426 million requested in a Flash Appeal in early October, only 23.5% has been received as of November 15, according to preliminary information reported through the Lebanon Aid Tracking. This appeal is supposed

to complement the 2024 Lebanon Response Plan (LRP), an integrated humanitarian and stabilization response plan co-led by the Government of Lebanon and the United Nations, supported by international and national partners, which seeks $2.72 billion in funding. By the end of September, only $972.4 million had been secured, including $657 million received in 2024 and $315.4 million carried over from 2023.

Immediate Needs of IDPs

IDPs require urgent assistance, having fled with few belongings. Relief efforts led by the National Disaster Response Coordination Committee (NDRCC) and supported by UN agencies include the daily distribution of 200,000 meals as well as the provision of mattresses and hygiene kits. However, public shelters are ill-equipped for long-term housing, lacking adequate water, electricity, and sanitation infrastructure. As winter approaches, additional resources will be needed for heating, fuel, and clothing. Children's education has also been disrupted, with nearly half of Lebanon's student population affected by school closures and displacement.

Refugees in Crisis

Syrian and Palestinian refugees continue to endure harsh conditions. Most rely on humanitarian aid, which is stretched thin. UNRWA shelters, accommodating Palestinian refugees, are at full capacity and face critical shortages in health, sanitation, and protection services. Female-headed households and children are among the most vulnerable, often requiring specialized support.

Pressures on Host Communities

Lebanese host communities, already struggling with economic collapse, are also in urgent need of assistance. Over 3.7 million people in Lebanon now require humanitarian assistance, according to the UN. In response to the crisis, several cash assistance programs have been implemented to support vulnerable populations.

MAJOR SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACT PUTTING THE STATE AT RISK OF TOTAL COLLAPSE

The socio-economic landscape in Lebanon is being rapidly reshaped by the ongoing conflict, worsening an already fragile economy that has been in freefall for several years. The war has inflicted severe physical damage, disrupted essential services, and led to substantial revenue losses, while further deepening Lebanon's dependence on external aid. The compounding crises have not only crippled the economy but have also pushed the country dangerously close to the point of state collapse.

> ***"The war has inflicted severe physical damage, disrupted essential services, and led to substantial revenue losses, while further deepening Lebanon's dependence on external aid."***

Physical Damage and Loss of Revenues

The economic toll of the current conflict has already far exceeded that of the 2006 war, which caused approximately $2.4 billion in direct damage, with an additional $700-$800 million in losses from indirect impacts. According to a preliminary report by the World Bank, the total cost of the conflict has surpassed $8.5 billion, representing nearly 40% of Lebanon's GDP.

Physical damage alone amounts to at least $3.4 billion, with the housing sector accounting for 82% of this total. A total of 99,209 housing units have been affected, representing over 8% of the housing stock in the assessed areas, with 18% of these completely destroyed. Another estimate, provided by Jihad el-Bina—a construction company affiliated with Hezbollah and responsible for rebuilding Beirut's southern suburbs in 2006—reports the total destruction of 45,000 housing units, including 7,000 in the southern suburbs alone. Jihad el-Bina also notes that an additional 30% of demolitions may be necessary due to collateral structural damage. Across Lebanon, 1.2 million cubic meters of debris need to be cleared.

The broader economic losses from the conflict are estimated at $5.1 billion. The war has caused widespread production disruptions in nearly every sector. Seventy-seven percent of the damage is concentrated in three key sectors: trade, tourism, and agro-food. Although agro-food plays a relatively small role in Lebanon's service-oriented economy, it has been severely impacted by bombings in the South and Bekaa regions, where 80% of GDP is tied to agriculture. The effects vary by region, with border areas being hardest hit, suffering from scorched lands and destroyed orchards. The broader agricultural losses, compounded by a loss of market access and reduced demand, will have long-term repercussions on food security and rural livelihoods.

Trade, which accounts for about a third of Lebanon's economic activity, has been significantly affected by the near-total halt in consumption in bombed regions. While consumption in relatively spared areas such as Beirut, Mount Lebanon, and the North has risen, it has not been sufficient to offset the decline in other areas, especially as tourism—a key driver of Lebanese consumption—has been devastated by the conflict.Tourism, largely fueled by Lebanese expatriates who frequently return, often with greater purchasing power than local residents, has ground to a halt. All commercial airlines, except for Lebanon's Middle East Airlines, have suspended flights to Beirut.

According to BLOM's Purchasing Managers' Index (PMI), the private industrial sector experienced its steepest decline since February 2021, dropping from 47.0 in September to 45.0 in October 2024, signaling a sharp contraction. The conflict has drastically reduced both new orders and exports, crippling business activity. The impact varies by region and sector. Businesses outside the conflict zones or those able to maintain supply chains and workforce access are faring slightly better. Some industries, such as food, pharmaceuticals, and bedding, have even seen increased demand due to the needs of displaced populations. However, Lebanon's industrial sector overall faces a significant setback.

As a result of these compounding factors, Lebanon's GDP is projected to contract sharply in 2024. The World Bank has revised its forecasts, predicting a 6.6% drop in real GDP. This follows five years of sustained economic contraction, which has already resulted in a loss of over 34% of GDP since 2019. Lebanon has lost the equivalent of 15 years of economic growth. As the economy continues to shrink, the country's classification has been downgraded from upper-middle-income to lower-middle-income status, reflecting the accelerating economic collapse and the erosion of Lebanon's economic capacity.

The war has not only deepened the financial crisis but also triggered a significant increase in unemployment and poverty, further eroding the middle class. Approximately 166,000 individuals are estimated to have lost their jobs, according to the World Bank. Over 44% of the population now lives below the poverty line, and multidimensional poverty—which encompasses factors

like access to education, healthcare, and basic services—affects nearly 80% of the population. Additionally, the conflict has exacerbated food insecurity with only 40,000 tons of wheat available as of November 2024-equivalent to 1.3 months of consumption. Communities that were once economically stable are now dependent on remittances or humanitarian aid to meet basic needs, creating a cycle of dependency that is difficult to break.

The Intangible Losses

While the physical and economic damages are immediately evident, the long-term impacts on Lebanon's social and institutional fabric are harder to measure but equally significant. The country's already overstretched infrastructure—damaged by years of financial crisis—has now been pushed to its limits. Essential services such as water, electricity, telecommunications, and waste management are now severely disrupted. For instance, only 8 percent of waste is treated, with the remainder managed through basic collection systems and limited sanitary disposal options.The healthcare and education systems are under extreme pressure, struggling to accommodate both the influx of displaced populations and the collapse of local institutions.

The healthcare sector, which is predominantly private with 83% of hospital beds in privately-owned facilities, has long struggled with fragmentation, inefficiency, and insufficient coverage. Already underfunded and lacking infrastructure, the sector is now overwhelmed by the war, with many hospitals in conflict zones targeted by airstrikes. In addition to being overwhelmed by casualties from the conflict, many healthcare facilities have been deliberately attacked, in violation of international law. Additionally, the ongoing influx of displaced people is putting immense strain on health services in host communities, leading to longer waiting times, reduced access to care, and growing health disparities. The threat of disease outbreaks, such as cholera, has resurfaced, exacerbating public health risks that Lebanon is ill-equipped to manage. The country's struggle to provide adequate healthcare for both its citizens and displaced populations presents a critical challenge for the state in protecting its people, potentially further undermining social stability.

Similarly, the conflict has severely disrupted Lebanon's education system, worsening existing challenges. Over 800 schools in conflict zones remain closed, while many public schools in host areas have been repurposed as shelters for 200,000 displaced individuals. As a result, nearly half a million students—150,000 in public schools and 300,000 in private schools—have been unable to start the academic year. Public school students, who already experienced only 270 days of in-person teaching instead of the expected 600 between 2019 and 2023, now face even greater setbacks. These disruptions risk creating a "lost generation" of both Lebanese and Syrian youth lacking the education or skills necessary for upward mobility or to help rebuild the country. The long-term impact on Lebanon's human capital and development prospects is profound, threatening both economic recovery and social stability for years to come.

In addition to these immediate social challenges, Lebanon's social and demographic fabric is undergoing a major shift. The ongoing war, combined with the country's economic collapse, is accelerating patterns of emigration, particularly among the skilled workforce. A growing number of young Lebanese professionals are seeking employment abroad, drawn by better opportunities in neighboring Gulf economies. The exodus of human capital further weakens Lebanon's ability to recover and rebuild, as the country loses some of its most talented and educated citizens.

"The exodus of human capital further weakens Lebanon's ability to recover and rebuild, as the country loses some of its most talented and educated citizens."

The emigration of Lebanese citizens, combined with the steady increase in the Syrian refugee population, is leading to significant social reconfiguration. Projections suggest that, within the next 15 years, Lebanon could see its population of foreign nationals surpass that of its Lebanese citizens, a demographic shift that will fundamentally alter the social and political landscape of the country.

Prolonged Humanitarian Dependency and the Risk of State Collapse

Lebanon's increasing reliance on international aid, while essential for supporting its most vulnerable populations, poses significant medium-term challenges. The transformation of Lebanon into a "humanitarian feat" reflects the state's growing inability to meet its citizens' needs without external assistance. International pledges, such as the $1 billion promised at the Paris conference in October 2024, account for a third of the country's budget. However, despite these commitments, the disbursement of funds has been slow, and only a fraction of the requested amounts have been received, deepening the widening aid gap.

This reliance on external aid distorts Lebanon's economy in several ways. When combined with billions in remittances by the Lebanese diaspora, it fosters an economy driven by rents, where consumption is artificially sustained through external sources rather than through the development of domestic production. This creates a feedback loop of economic distortion, preventing Lebanon from establishing a sustainable economic model due to insufficient investment in infrastructure, industry, and national capital. On a macroeconomic scale, this resembles "Dutch disease," where foreign currency inflows exacerbate inflation and distort the labor market. For instance, the NGO sector, which has become a significant employer, is siphoning skilled workers away from the private sector.

"Lebanon's failure to establish an efficient and transparent public administration at both the national and local levels has deepened its dependency on international aid. Despite repeated calls for urgent reforms in public finances and the financial sector, the government has instead become a coordinator of aid with no clear strategy for economic recovery or self-sufficiency."

Lebanon's failure to establish an efficient and transparent public administration at both the national and local levels has deepened its dependency on international aid. Despite repeated calls for urgent reforms in public finances and the financial sector, the government has instead become a coordinator of aid with no clear strategy for economic recovery or self-sufficiency. Meanwhile, the projected surplus in the 2025 draft budget is a clear disconnect from the country's fiscal reality and the ongoing war, further exposing the state's dysfunction.

In this context, austerity measures are unjustified. By the end of September 2023, Lebanon had collected $3.3 billion in revenue while spending just $2.7 billion. Rather than using the funds to stimulate economic recovery, the government allocated the $600 million surplus into the central bank's reserves, which have increased by $1.7 billion since July 2023, reaching $10.26 billion by October 2024. The process works as follows: the central bank prints Lebanese pounds to purchase dollars on the exchange market, but this injection of currency does not lower the exchange rate. Meanwhile, the government raises taxes while keeping public spending low, effectively pulling Lebanese pounds from circulation and counteracting the central bank's actions, thus preventing the currency from depreciating.

This policy of currency stabilization mirrors practices under former governor Riad Salamé. The central bank's short-term measures, such as easing withdrawal conditions to provide liquidity during the war, are inadequate to address the deeper structural issues. Had Lebanon's banking sector been restructured, over 90% of depositors with balances under $100,000 would have had access to their savings. To date, the central bank has not initiated the necessary restructuring, even as consolidated losses exceed $70 billion.

The real cost of this misguided fiscal and monetary approach is the state's withdrawal from the economy. As the war escalates and public expenditure needs grow, relying solely on international aid in the medium term becomes unsustainable. The contribution of bilateral donors, including Gulf countries, will not materialize without a comprehensive restructuring.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

Policy recommendations are currently constrained by Lebanon's lack of a functional state capable of effective implementation. Urgent action is needed to prevent the political fragmentation of the country's national fabric. In the absence of a government capable of taking effective action, a range of actors will need to play a role in shaping Lebanon's future. This requires an immediate response to address the most critical needs, with a strong focus on maintaining essential services to safeguard the country's future. At the same time, preparations must be made for the "day after," adopting a mindset focused of foundational rebuilding rather than mere reconstruction.

International Community

The most crucial action the international community can take is to impose an unconditional ceasefire, the only viable step to preserving Lebanon's stability. Despite the significant political challenges that lie ahead, halting hostilities is essential to create the conditions necessary for negotiating a lasting truce. The ceasefire must also guarantee the full right of displaced persons to return, while preserving the integrity and unity of Lebanese territory. Until such a ceasefire is secured, every effort is needed to safeguard relief efforts and access to healthcare and protect Lebanon's supply chains.

Humanitarian Agencies and International organizations

Humanitarian agencies, skilled in disaster management, have effectively prioritized Lebanon's urgent needs. Among the many players in this sector, there is increasing awareness of the risks of transforming Lebanon into a long-term humanitarian dependency. The critical challenge is ensuring that emergency responses not only avoid undermining recovery and development efforts, but also actively lay the foundation for future rebuilding.

However, humanitarian aid naturally functions as a form of rent, and its negative effects must be minimized, for example, by redirecting funds into local value-creation circuits. This includes maximizing the involvement of Lebanon's public institutions, as revitalizing these entities will be essential to the country's future. Such involvement spans numerous sectors, from national security—particularly the Lebanese Army—to vital public services like healthcare, education, water utilities, civil defense, telecommunications, and tax administration.

At the same time, international organizations like the World Bank and bilateral donors, such as the EU, should be preparing for the "day after." Given Lebanon's severe economic and institutional decline, it is evident that the country will require dedicated, multimodal support along with the mobilization of specialized teams.

Sectarian Leaders

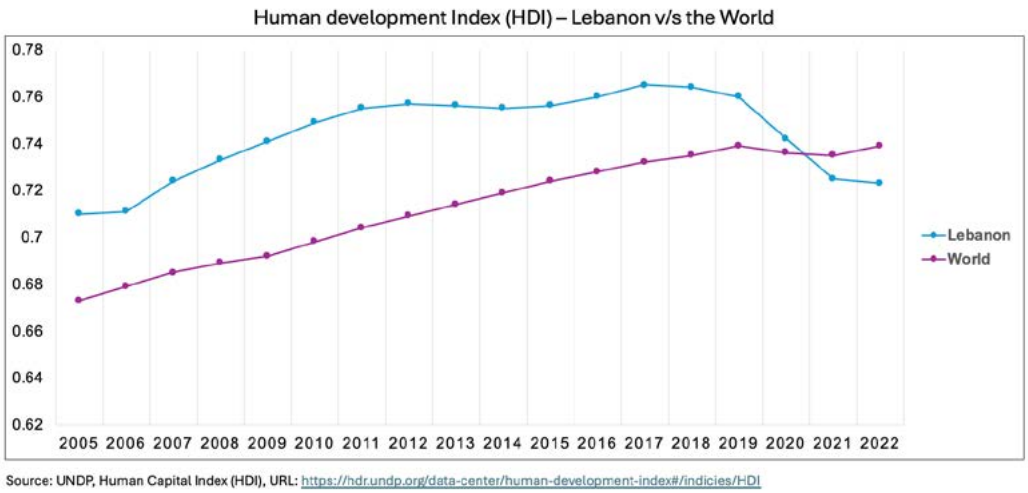
Nothing can be achieved without political will on the Lebanese side. The sectarian leaders who led the country into bankruptcy and war need to review their mindset. Even if the war were to end tomorrow, the idea that "reconstruction" could proceed as it did after 2006 is a dangerous illusion. While funds may restore some physical infrastructures, Lebanon urgently needs substantial financial inflows to address decades of underinvestment in productive capital, institutions, and social protection systems. Achieving this will be impossible without a dual restructuring of public finances and the financial sector, alongside the implementation of new fiscal and monetary policies.

A sustainable future demands a strategic vision that repositions Lebanon within the global system and acknowledges the need for the country to restore its productive engagement with the world economy. Lebanon possesses assets to leverage. However, these resources will remain untapped without a political transition that establishes an effective state capable of implementing necessary reforms.

Moreover, establishing a new social contract is essential—one that learns from the failures of a system built solely on sectarian clientelism, whether autonomous or reliant on the capture of public resources. A sustainable future demands a strategic vision that repositions Lebanon within the global system and acknowledges the need for the country to restore its productive engagement with the world economy. Lebanon possesses assets to leverage, including its significant gold reserves, currently valued at approximately USD 25.6 bn, representing over 100% of GDP. However, these resources will remain untapped without a political transition that establishes an effective state capable of implementing necessary reforms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Lebanon's socio-economic fabric is disintegrating at an alarming pace. The combination of direct physical destruction, economic contraction, and social fragmentation is driving the country toward collapse. While international aid is necessary, it cannot replace a functioning state capable of implementing structural reforms and addressing the long-term needs of its population. Without a profound shift in governance and a sustained effort to rebuild the economy, Lebanon faces a future defined by instability, poverty, and the erosion of national sovereignty.



Source: UNDP, Human Capital Index (HDI), URL: https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/human-development-index#/indicies/HDI

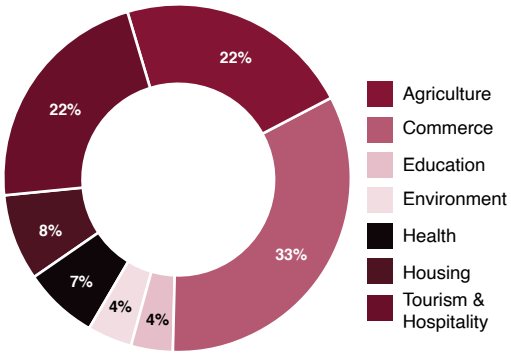
CHARTS AND TABLES

Break-down of damages and losses according to a first assessment by the World Bank

Sector	Damage (US$)	12-Month Losses (US$)	Key Impact/Breakdown
Agriculture	124 million	1.1 billion	• Crops: $601 million (incl. $25 million in damage) • Bananas: $353 million • Olive harvest: $58 million • Citrus: $16 million • Potatoes/vegetables: $111 million • Livestock: $99 million in damage, $533 million in losses (incl. $297 million for poultry, $154 million for cattle)
Commerce	178 million	1.7 billion	• 11% of establishments damaged • Displacement of employees and business owners • Disruption in supply chains
Education	N/A	215 million	• $198 million from reduced private school revenues • $17 million for temporary learning spaces
Environment	221 million	214 million	• Ecosystem services: $198 million (incl. $163 million for riverine ecosystems, $28 million for coastal ecosystems) • Solid waste management: $16 million
Health	74 million	338 million	• $201 million in lost revenue from inoperative facilities • $91 million due to reduced healthcare personnel availability • $47 million for increased healthcare costs
Housing	2.8 billion	389 million	• 99,209 housing units damaged (18% completely destroyed, 82% partly damaged)
Tourism and Hospitality	18 million	1.1 billion	• $183 million in lost wages • 75% reduction in airport arrivals • Hotel occupancy below 10%

Table 3: Summary of 12-month loss estimates per sector

Sector	12-month losses (US$ millon)
Agriculture	$ 1'134
Commerce	$ 1674
Education	$ 215
Environment	$ 214
Health	$ 338
Housing	$ 389
Tourism and Hospitality	$ 1'097
Total	$



Source: World Bank - Interim Damage and Loss Assessment - NOVEMBER 2024

Lebanon' GDP per capita fell to $3824 in 2022 from $9226 in 2018

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