A Policy Forum:
Addressing the Impact of the Syrian Refugee Crisis on Lebanon
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Following the symposium on Syrian refugees in the Arab world entitled “Syrians in Their Neighbourhood” held in March 2014, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) hosted a one-day policy forum on the impact of the Syrian refugee crisis on Lebanon.

Organized by IFI’s Refugee Research and Policy in the Arab World Program, this event tackled the major challenges related to the increasing influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon. As such, four panels assessed current responses and formulated new alternative policies and recommendations to deal with this unprecedented crisis. Academics, NGOs, governmental representatives and students participated in this unique event, in an attempt to bridge coordination between the different actors involved. The first three panels were dedicated to both the research and practical initiatives conducted by a variety of AUB faculty members and staff who presented their field experiences and findings.

The first panel of the day dealt with public health and nutrition, followed by the second panel, which addressed the issue of social cohesion and the intricacies of the host community-refugee relationship. All of the panelists emphasized the socio-economic impact of the Syrian refugee influx on local Lebanese communities. More specifically, they highlighted the proximity of societal concerns of both communities – a critical concern to address, as 85% of Syrian refugees currently residing in some of the poorest areas in Lebanon.

Dr. Fouad Fouad from AUB’s Epidemiology and Population Health Department stated that this disaster must be “turned into an opportunity”. Touching on Dr. Fouad’s presentation, Rima Rassi from IFI stated that Lebanon must find comprehensive and inclusive solutions to deal with the Syrian refugee crisis. In other words, effective and durable long-term developmental policies should be drawn out along with quick-impact projects. Similarly, health should not be tackled in isolation from its determinants such as the social, economic and physical environment, and especially water sanitation. Dr. Mona Osman Al Hage from the AUB Medical Center (AUBMC) reiterated that, based on her own observations in the field, refugees are contracting diseases due to their poor living conditions.

On the other hand, Dr. Charles Harb, a political psychologist from AUB’s Department of Psychology presented his research conducted with Dr. Rim Saab on the socio-political indicators of this emerging conflict and the levels of support for violent forms of collective action targeting Lebanese nationals, Syrian refugees, Lebanese authorities, and International Non-Governmental Organizations (INGOs).” His findings identified areas of potential concern, such as the situation in Sahel Akkar. In their findings, Drs. Harb and Saab found that Lebanese citizens’ perceptions of threat and support for discriminatory violence towards Syrian refugees were particularly high. Furthermore, according to this survey, a significant number of Syrian refugees perceive INGOs as corrupt. Dr. Fouad reiterated that international agencies do harm more than they ‘do not’. These factors outline the need for far more transparency in
all sectors, the need to enhance coordination and cooperation of INGOs with local authorities and even with the beneficiaries themselves to create a somewhat self-sufficient environment.

The policy forum also provided insight into the practical solutions that can be adopted at the local level, even within the current living conditions of the Syrian refugee population. Dr. Majdi Abou Najm and Rabih Shibli from AUB’s Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS) highlighted their sustainable and eco-friendly efforts to create a decent, legal, and easily assembled/dissembled living space for refugees called the Ghata; small solar panels for easily accessible renewable energy; and solutions for sanitation at camps. The Ghata can be beneficial to more than one field or sector. For instance, it can be used not only for basic shelter needs, but also as a classroom for educational purposes. Dr. Salwa Tawk of the Environment and Sustainable Development Unit (ESDU) at AUB presented an innovative food security intervention that aims to heal tensions between local communities and refugees besides traditional emergency food aid. The “Community Kitchens” and “Kitchen Gardens” initiative create jobs for women – one of the particularly vulnerable members of both Lebanese and Syrian communities. In addition to aiding refugees, these initiatives increase profitability levels for local small-scale farmers, whose products are introduced in the trade chain.

The one-day forum also created a platform for different policymakers and researchers to share preliminary findings that underline the extensive effect of the Syrian refugee crisis on Lebanon. The policy recommendations discussed throughout the day stressed on the need for an agent-centered approach, based on wide-ranging strategies. At the institutional level, several academics proposed that AUB's curriculum should accommodate ‘aid in emergencies’ across all fields, so as to catch up with the prospective needs of the region. At the research level, there was a clear need for concrete studies on the implicit social determinants of symptoms such as disease and malnutrition. At the developmental level, many panelists noted that this crisis now demands long-term and double-sided solutions that would account for both the vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities and mechanisms to dissipate tensions between both.

IFI Director Rami Khouri concluded that this situation “requires getting the best out of Lebanon to keep pushing and articulating our concerns to see if there are practical solutions,” amidst a lively debate during the last panel which hosted high-ranking members from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) and the Lebanese Ministry of Social Affairs of Lebanon.