

Book Review

The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon: The Double Tragedy of Refugees and Impacted Host Communities

by Robert G. Rabild

Lanham, Lexington Books, 2016, 125 pp. \$110.00 (hardback),
ISBN: 978-1-4985-3512-0

The main argument presented in this book is that the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon is a tragedy for both sides: for those driven out of their homes and for the communities which absorbed them. For Lebanon this has not been their first experience with refugees since in 1948 it had to deal with approximately 100,000 Palestinians who entered the country and are still there. One cannot deny the striking resemblance between the two cases since both occurred as the result of a civil war in a neighboring country which eventually spilled over into Lebanon, negatively affected its fragile domestic demographic balance, placed a heavy burden on its economy, empowered movements with extreme ideologies and thus transformed the refugees from being a mere humanitarian problem to becoming a security threat which jeopardized the republic.

Indeed, the first two chapters of the book deal with the multifaceted, even existential, threat which the Syrian crisis is posing for Lebanon. The massive influx of refugees has not only affected the demography but also the geographical and public space in Lebanon. Up till March 2015 Lebanon absorbed approximately a million and a half registered, unregistered and illegal Syrian refugees making, together with the Palestinians, the total number of refugees living in Lebanon more or less two million. Since the number of Lebanese is 4.3 million, the refugee population now constitutes almost half of the country's population and this massive refugee presence has made Lebanon the country with the highest concentration of refugees per capita in the world.

Rabil presents the issue of 53,000 Palestinians who were forced to leave their former refugee camps in Syria to live mostly around or in Lebanese refugee camps. Yet, the vast majority of refugees are Syrian citizens who, in most cases, are living in poorly accessible and serviced areas, in insecure shelters such as tents, shacks, unfinished buildings, overcrowded apartments and substandard housing in 1,700 localities throughout Lebanon (mostly in the north and the east), many of which are communities that are the poorest in the country.

Lebanon refers to the Syrians legalistically as “displaced”, rather than “refugees” and has steadfastly refused to consider establishing formal refugee camps since many Lebanese are convinced that their living in camps will inevitably lead to permanent settlement in the country. In the meantime, the Syrians enjoy the status of being residents and those who have been officially registered are able to participate in the local labor market, although they are restricted to physical work and sales. In contrast to them, the attendant rules of the “open door” policy do not apply to the original Palestinian refugees because, Rabil claims, that Lebanon’s 70 years of experience with the Palestinians “has left deep scars in the collective consciousness of the nation” (p. 18).

The assertion above is somehow simplistic as Palestinian refugees in both Syria and Lebanon are categorically treated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA while the agency in charge of the Syrians in Lebanon is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNRWA has no mandate to settle Palestinians in their host country and Lebanon’s laws bar them from both owning property and having access to the domestic welfare system. While the Syrian refugees are therefore neither dependent on UNRWA nor suffer from the “apartheid” laws they can access the social and health systems of Lebanon, conditional only upon registration and a small fee.

In the following chapters the author focuses on the socio-economic implications of the crisis and the unique intervention plans that address the problem of protecting refugees while, at the same time, help build the resilience of veteran host communities. He claims that, by helping the masses of helpless individuals, Lebanon

has welcomed more Syrians than the country can economically sustain. The Syrian crisis has placed tremendous pressure on the state and society of Lebanon and has seriously downgraded the capacity to maintain the services it provides on the local and national levels while destabilizing tensions between the Lebanese and Syrian populations. Indeed, Lebanon's GDP growth has fallen by 2.85 percent each year since 2014, has generated estimated losses of \$7.5 billion and has increased the level of poverty and unemployment. Being a cheap labor force, the refugees competed intensively with the local poor population over jobs and there were many incidents of Syrian child labor recorded. Consequently, many poor Lebanese felt that they were being negatively affected by the crisis and, regardless of Lebanon's own political and communal divisions, they began to blame the Syrians for their precarious situation and this resentment became violent. The governments of Lebanon and humanitarian aid partners have laid the foundation of a structure that has already helped many individuals but this structure is under the risk of collapsing due to financial difficulties.

The last chapter reviews the political and ideological developments that have taken place in Lebanon during the recent decades. The author argues that the Syrian withdrawal from Lebanon in 2005 increased polarization and radicalism within Lebanon which was a double collision between two political movements fighting over the nature of the political order that emerged after the Syrian withdrawal. This took place between the state and a growing Salaf-Jihadist movement that was emerging from the Palestinian refugee camps and the author's brilliant analysis provides us with a picture of the background against which the Syrian crisis spilled over into Lebanon.

In spite of the deep divisions between President Assad's supporters and his opponents in Lebanon, the senior Lebanese politicians unanimously opposed the capture of territories in the east by ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra and the campaign of car bombings across the country carried out by the local Salafi-Jihadist movements. The final liberation of these territories took place during the writing of this review but has left 1.5 million tragedies throughout the Land of Cedars yet to be solved. Rabil concludes with the following sobering forecast:

Without a settlement of the crisis, complete funding for Lebanon, a crisis response plan, and/or an internationally sanctioned safe haven within Syria to relocate most refugees, a bigger tragedy is looming as the backlash of the pent-up frustration and grievances of both Lebanon's marginalized and Syria's dispossessed people has become almost inevitable. In this case, civil strife and a perilous quest for Europe are the most likely outcomes (p. 112).

Few scholars can adequately handle such a broad issue by gathering humanitarian, economic, and political aspects of a current crisis into one book. Almost defiantly Rabil is one those few and he successfully combines his impressive knowledge of Lebanon's history and politics with the rich experience he gained from working in the Red Cross during Lebanon's civil war to produce a book that is both concise and extensive. It is a fluent read and even the technical chapters dealing with economy and intervention plans are easily accessible.

Students, scholars, humanitarian aid workers and decision makers will find *The Syrian Refugee Crisis in Lebanon* useful. Two years after its publication, the book's insights have made it possible to understand the many events that have been taking place lately such as the Lebanese politicians' adoption of the roadmap for a new political order in the country delineated in The Document of Ba'abdeh (June 2017) and the reluctance of the Lebanese government to repatriate thousands of Syrian refugees from Aarsal (August 2017), even by force, soon after its liberation from Jabhat al-Nusra including the harsh criticism levelled at the scope of Hizbullah's involvement in the fight to retrieve it.

Guy Nathaniel Ma'ayan ©

PhD student, Department of Middle Eastern Studies, Bar Ilan University.

✉ Guy.maayan@mail.huji.ac.il