Educating Lebanon's neglected Syrian refugee children

by **Loubna Mrie** and **Youmna Al Hourani**

AS THE civil war in Syria enters its seventh year, the future of the war-torn country continues to dominate conversations in Washington DC policy circles. While these conversations have mostly focused on rebuilding Syria through internationally-backed infrastructure projects, more attention must be paid to education, particularly for young refugees in neighbouring countries, like Lebanon.

These children have been without schooling since their families fled Syria. As long as this generation is deprived of an education, there is no hope for rebuilding Syria, if and when the war ends.

According to a recent report by Human Rights Watch, 250,000 Syrian refugee children in Lebanon are not enrolled in public schools, and less than 3 per cent of Syrian refugees aged fifteen to eighteen were registered in Lebanese secondary school in the 2015–2016 school year. Since education is free for refugees under international law, one is compelled to ask why so many Syrian children in Lebanon are not enrolled in school.

One reason is the challenging financial situation for Syrian families, most of who fled to Lebanon from rural areas around Homs and Damascus. Many had a good life before the conflict, but lost all their possessions when they left.

To make matters worse, Lebanon has imposed harsh residency regulations on registered Syrian refugees, who must pay 200 dollars per person every six months to stay in the country. As these refugee families lose more and more of their financial wherewithal, they often depend on their children to put food on the table — a basic necessity that has taken priority over their children's education.

And, even where schooling is free, many associated expenses are not. It costs between 15 to 33 dollars per month for a child to have the supplies necessary to attend school. This is extremely costly for most families. Many refugee camps are also far away from educational institutions, so transportation is an issue as well.

Another major problem is that public schools require a vaccination report and identification papers, which many refugees lost during the war or left behind in Syria. Particularly for those families who left as political refugees, there is no way to return and retrieve this documentation.

The ministry of education in Lebanon has taken several steps to alleviate these problems and try and fulfil its obligation to provide education, a fundamental human right, to Syrian refugee children.

The ministry has established a double shift system, which allows Syrian kids to attend school in the afternoon while their Lebanese peers go in the morning. For those who cannot attend, the Lebanese government is giving funds to many NGOs to help them provide informal education to these children.

There is, however, no magical solution for the refugee education problem in Lebanon. Public schools are already underfunded. Lebanese teachers have long demanded higher wages and have been protesting and striking to have their wages increased in the 2017 government budget.

While these challenges make it difficult to meet the educational needs of Syrian children, there are some other measures the Lebanese government could take. It could, for example, hire qualified Syrian teachers from amongst the refugees, in cooperation with and using funding from international organisations. The Lebanese government could also work more systematically than it already is with NGOs and support informal education within these organisations.

Beyond these state interventions, Lebanese private schools can and should play a role in addressing the crisis. These institutions have enough resources to accommodate, at least, some Syrian refugees. While many of these schools teach in French and English, there are still quite a few Arabic-speaking private schools. Though the budgets for these schools tend to be more circumscribed, compared to their English and French counterparts, international organisations could step in and sponsor refugee students' admission to these institutions.

Perhaps the most important reform, however, is for the Lebanese government to change its residency requirements and allow those whose status has expired to become legal and remain in the country. Lebanon did recently reform its residency rules — waiving the 200-dollar fee for Syrian refugees who are registered but officially unemployed. If refugees are sponsored by a Lebanese national, however, then they must continue to pay the fee every six months. The revised rule also does not apply to unregistered refugees or to Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria. As a result, the reforms only help a very small minority.

Sadly, there is little light at the end of the tunnel for Syrian refugee children seeking an education in Lebanon. Similarly, there is minimal hope for these children in other countries, whether in Europe or the United States, where anti-refugee policies are preventing refugees of all ages from reaching these states in the first place. In these circumstances, then, international organisations and refugee activists have little choice but to advocate for better education and refugee policies in Lebanon, for the sake of Syria's children and their future.

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