

EDUCATION FOR SOCIAL CHANGE IN LEBANON

Lebanon has been hosting refugees for over half a century. While the Palestinian refugees have been present since 1948, the recently incoming one million Syrian refugees have only exacerbated the already unstable assistance the country provides for refugees. One of the most devastating consequences of this is the lack of proper education and academic opportunities for the youth. The author's organization, Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP), aims to tackle this issue through providing a holistic education for underserved children, youth, and women across the country. In what follows, the author presents an overview of the situation of the target beneficiaries and how the ULYP helps them meet the challenge of building a better future for themselves, their communities, and Lebanon at large.

Melek El Nimer*



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* Melek El Nimer is founder and Chief Executive of Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP). The author would like to thank ULYP Director Nicole Eid Abu Haydar and volunteer Helin Akcam for their contributions to this article.

Lebanon has in recent years become the country with the highest percentage of refugees per capita worldwide, according to data released by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Currently, refugees constitute over one-fourth of the total Lebanese population, with 257 refugees per 1,000 inhabitants.¹ This is primarily due to the influx of over a million Syrian refugees since the outbreak of the Syrian civil war, which moved Lebanon from being the 69th country with the largest refugee community to the second largest in just three years.² Despite these recent fluctuations, however, Lebanon's history with refugee populations is extensive and protracted.

The Current Refugee Situation in Lebanon

For over 70 years, since Israel's declaration of independence in 1948 and the beginning of the Arab-Israeli conflict, more than 400,000 (the official number as of 1 July 2014 is 449,957) Palestinians have been residing within Lebanon, dispersed among 12 different refugee camps.³ Nowadays, these camps resemble suburbs of the cities within which they are located, such as Beirut and Sidon. These camps suffer from remarkably poor living conditions, with poverty, overcrowding, inadequate basic educational services, unemployment, poor housing conditions, and a lack of infrastructure such as roads and sewers being pervasive.⁴ Despite their longstanding presence in Lebanon, which now houses its fourth generation of Palestinians, the refugees remain excluded from key aspects of social, political, and economic life; certain Lebanese laws, for example, prevent them from working in 73 different professions.⁵ This, along with the spatial isolation that comes from the strict monitoring of the camps, naturally has led to many issues of division and isolation within the larger society of Lebanon.

Furthermore, the majority of the Palestinian refugee population is extremely young: approximately half of them are under the age of 25.⁶ This is very important, considering that Palestinian refugees have extremely limited access to the Lebanese public school system. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – which was established in 1948 to address

1 "Lebanon hosts second largest refugee population: UN," *The Daily Star*, 7 January 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jan-07/283233-syrians-largest-refugee-group-after-palestinians-un.ashx>

2 *The Daily Star* (2015).

3 "Where We Work," *UNRWA*, <http://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>

4 Tommaso Della Longa, "More support needed for swelling numbers of refugees in Palestinian camps in Lebanon," *International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent Societies*, 3 February 2015, <http://www.ifrc.org/en/news-and-media/news-stories/middle-east-and-north-africa/lebanon/more-support-needed-for-swelling-numbers-of-refugees-in-lebanon-camps-68001/>

5 Haytham Mouzahem, "Palestinian-Syrian refugees face hardship in Lebanon," *Al-Monitor*, 7 November 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/palestinian-refugees-from-syria-to-lebanon-hardships.html#>

6 "Lebanon Refugee Report," *ANERA*, <http://www.anera.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LEBRefugeeReport.pdf>

the Palestinian refugee crisis that occurred after the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict – has been the primary source of assistance and development for Palestinian refugees over the years. While their mandate was – and remains – only temporary, because of the large number of refugees and the failure of the international community to find a feasible and effective solution to the conflict, the agency has remained active much longer than was intended. With their 69 established schools across the country, UNRWA has been providing free basic education to over 30,000 Palestinian students.⁷ Nevertheless, only half of young Palestinian refugees of secondary school age (15-18) are enrolled in school and only a mere five percent of all Palestinians in Lebanon hold a university degree. This is primarily a result of many Palestinian youth feeling responsible to work and provide assistance to their families, as well as the severe deficiency in vocational training and the extreme inadequacy of the school system.⁸ This has incontestably caused the further intractability of the Palestinian situation within Lebanon, as education is seen as a basic human right by the United Nations and is crucial to the development and flourishing of any society.

As mentioned above, the pre-existing refugee situation has only been further aggravated by the continuous influx of more than one million (1.2 million, as of April 2015) refugees from neighboring Syria. These individuals, displaced by the violence and socio-economic degradation in their home country, have been forced to seek refuge in countries all over the world. They currently make up the largest single refugee population under the UNHCR mandate (excluding Palestinians, who are under the UNRWA mandate), with their numbers reaching almost 3.8 million.⁹ Lebanon is hosting the largest amount of these refugees due to its extensive borders and long, intertwined history with its neighboring country.

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Naturally, the situation has severely exacerbated the already tense living conditions of Lebanon’s underserved communities. While some were absorbed into the refugee camps (for example, approximately 6,000 Syrians joined the 10,000 residents of Shatila, a Palestinian refugee camp on the southern outskirts of Beirut), others have found shelter in informal settlements, abandoned buildings, and other places dispersed across the country. These developments have undeniably put pressures

7 “Education in Lebanon,” *UNRWA*, <http://www.unrwa.org/activity/education-lebanon>

8 “Lebanon Refugee Report,” *ANERA*, <http://www.anera.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/03/LEBRefugeeReport.pdf>

9 “2014 Syria Regional Response Plan Annual Report,” *UNHCR*, <http://www.unhcr.org/syriarrp6/>

on Lebanon as a whole and the refugee communities in particular. The escalating poverty level among refugees, combined with the increased difficulty of access to basic services, taxes all aspects of life for these communities.¹⁰ Food security, shelter, public health, and other basic needs have been crucial necessities that require international and local assistance to be met. Furthermore, the influx has also caused some of the conflict to spill over into the borders of Lebanon, causing a deterioration of the already unstable political situation of the small nation.¹¹ Growing resentment among all affected parties has ultimately led to the marginalization of Syrians, especially of their underserved youth who make up their majority.¹² Education has thus become another crucial aspect of the issue, with these underserved youth barely having access to basic and sustainable educational opportunities.

Another important factor for consideration is the Syrian-Palestinian refugees that have escaped the Syrian conflict themselves and have now earned the status of being twice-displaced refugees. The number of this population is nearly 60,000, most of them having been absorbed into the already existing camps around the country.

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it.”¹³ As a consequence, the animosity between the Palestinians and the incoming Syrians and Syrian-Palestinians is becoming a major societal issue, as all groups compete over the limited number of housing and work opportunities.¹⁴ The toll of this situation is born largely by the Palestinian and Syrian youth, who have very few prospects of education and job opportunities that could enable them to help

The core of the issue seems to be the severely limited amount of resources Lebanon possesses to deal with the protracted and increasingly worsening status of its refugees. The UNHCR chief, in a recent report, stated: “The economic, social and human cost of caring for refugees and the internally displaced is being borne mostly by poor communities, those who are least able to afford

¹⁰ UNHCR (2014).

¹¹ European University Institute, “Lebanon,” *Syrian Refugees: A Snapshot of the Crisis – in the Middle East and Europe*, created in 2013, updated in February and October 2014, http://syrianrefugees.eu/?page_id=72

¹² “Assessment of the Impact of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon and their Employment Profile, 2013,” *International Labour Organization*, http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---arabstates/---ro-beirut/documents/publication/wcms_240134.pdf

¹³ “Lebanon hosts second largest refugee population: UN,” *The Daily Star*, 7 January 2015, <http://www.dailystar.com.lb/News/Middle-East/2015/Jan-07/283233-syrians-largest-refugee-group-after-palestinians-un.ashx>

¹⁴ Haytham Mouzahem, “Palestinian-Syrian refugees face hardship in Lebanon,” *Al-Monitor*, 7 November 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/11/palestinian-refugees-from-syria-to-lebanon-hardships.html#>

themselves and their families out of poverty. Provided with such opportunities, the youth could be the first and most crucial step in alleviating some of the ailments of the refugee populations by ensuring the progressive development and improved economic situation of the following generations.

Unite Lebanon Youth Project

A refugee is not synonymous with someone who does not have potential. This is the principle in which I strongly believe and upon which the organization Unite Lebanon Youth Project (ULYP) was established. ULYP is rooted in the belief that all children have the

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right to equal education and deserve the opportunity to fulfill their inherent potential as human beings. Education equips children with the tools and knowledge to build a better future for themselves and their communities. However, the aforementioned barriers and obstacles to children of extremely underserved backgrounds make it difficult for them to access the proper education and, hence, the tools they need for enhancing their lives. Instability and lack of resources have led these communities to suffer from isolation and lack of upward mobility. It is here that the organization intervenes.

The premise of ULYP has its history in my experiences and observations throughout 25 years of working within the Palestinian refugee camps. The clear social, individual, and communal isolation that these people lived in became strikingly observable in a short amount of time. My work to tackle this began with the elderly, by starting a center and offering programs for the elderly living in two refugee camps. The centers are called “Active Ageing” houses, and host those refugees who arrived in Lebanon in 1948. The core of the issue, however, could not be tackled through this alone. In 2010, I decided to turn towards the youth by focusing on the development of educational programs and services to break down the barriers of estrangement and fear created by years of conflict and isolation.

Sectarian conflict in Lebanon continues to be exasperated by poverty, a lack of educational opportunities, and the limited chances for children from different communities to meet and interact. These factors, coupled with the inherent disadvantage of their refugee status within Lebanon, prevent underserved children and youth from reaching their full potential or integrating successfully into society, thus protracting the segmentation between Lebanon’s host community and refugee populations.

Through the establishment of ULYP and its programs, we began tackling exactly these issues. Our programs are hosted on a beautiful campus of 24,000 square meters that consists of classrooms, studios, sports fields, a swimming pool, and more. First and foremost, the students already benefit just from escaping from their cramped environments to spacious scenery; furthermore, the chance to actively engage with others from different communities through attending this campus teaches them that “difference” and “diversity” are not to be feared or disliked, but to be cherished and celebrated instead.

“The elements of conflict resolution and peace-building, as well as the ideals of tolerance, mutual respect, and justice are seamlessly integrated into all [of ULYP’s] activities.”

The programs themselves are based upon a more comprehensive and holistic understanding of education that integrates skills and knowledge so that the participants may achieve success for themselves and their communities. Providing the children and young adults with the necessary tools to break the cycle of violence and build a peaceful, united society are the main objectives of all programs. This is actualized through instilling the values of respect, citizenship, and cooperation through each and

every program of the organization, regardless of the age, gender, or background of the students. Filling the gaps in the existing educational systems these youth go through, with these programs ULYP aspires to bring democratic values, freedom of expression, equality, and human rights principles to the entire community. Through the child we educate the family, and through the family we unite the country.

With this motivation as a driving force, ULYP now has the capability to reach out to and serve an average of 800 children, youth, and women each annual quarter. The target is to increase this number and work harder to empower more participants with the skills and knowledge to improve their lives, integrate better into society, and contribute to society’s stability and growth. To give an example in numbers: since ULYP’s inception we have worked with over 5,000 underprivileged Lebanese, Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian participants, of whom 700 are women, 300 vocational students, and 1,000 at risk of dropping out of school. Students have participated in programs where they learned how to communicate in English, use information technology (IT), and develop business ideas to generate income. In parallel to this, ULYP developed the BRIDGE program, which focuses on working with high school students to bridge their transition from school to higher education. To date,

we have managed to successfully counsel and advise approximately 750 students to prepare for and apply to universities both in Lebanon and around the world. This is in addition to assisting them in finding scholarships and grants to attend these schools. Currently, we have 380 students enrolled in universities on scholarships and 50 alumni already. All of ULYP's beneficiaries give back to the organization through volunteering their time to help us achieve our mission and offer the same opportunities to the following generations.

The work of ULYP is structured in a manner to meet the developmental stages of the participants and their particular needs. ULYP's intervention complements the work of the students' schools by providing a holistic education through rich extra-curricular and learning development programs. The elements of conflict resolution and peace-building, as well as the ideals of tolerance, mutual respect, and justice are seamlessly integrated into all activities. These are delivered through programs that offer services we feel are their right to have access to and our responsibility to offer. These can include a variety of subjects, including visual, musical, and performing arts; English and IT; career development; college preparation courses and career and university counseling; and sports and other recreational activities.

Conclusion

There is more to peace than the absence of conflict. For peace to thrive in areas dominated by unrest, change has to begin with the children. By engaging children, teaching peaceful conflict resolution, and encouraging them to accept each other's differences, we empower them to be leaders and role models for generations to come. This is where the true peace-building process begins. This is why I founded ULYP and why it is more important than ever with the unfortunate situation and developments occurring today. ULYP is based on the belief that education, in its broadest definition, is the best investment. Its programs encourage underserved children, youth, and women to become responsible, engaged citizens, capable of positive social change. We aim to empower these underserved youth, so that they may develop their skills and knowledge to become active agents for social change within their communities and share new ideas about each other and about their rights and responsibilities, with a shared vision for the future: a united Lebanon.