

**DISPLACEMENT IN THE CURRENT MIDDLE EAST CRISIS:
TRENDS, DYNAMICS AND PROSPECTS**

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15 AUGUST 2006

Introduction

Information on displacement in the current Middle East crisis has been scattered and not always reliable. The principal sources have been: reports from local and international NGOs, the UN and humanitarian and human rights organizations, official government statements, press articles and some personal correspondence. There are potential problems with each of these sources. Producing accurate estimates of the number of people killed, wounded or displaced by the conflict; or those returning after the ceasefire, is difficult. Even less is known about their characteristics – gender, age, socio-economic status – or their current circumstances.

I should like to do three things. For Israel first and Lebanon second, I shall provide an overview of displacement as a result of the current crisis. In each case I shall provide the most recently available estimates and trends, some insights into the dynamics of displacement, and outline some of the challenges ahead in responding to displacement. Then I would like to draw out three more systematic issues that arise that have a wider applicability than the current Middle East context alone.

Displacement in and from Israel

Displacement in and from Israel received relatively little attention during the course of the conflict, even though it took place on a substantial scale.¹ There seem to be three main reasons. One is that international aid agencies were not present in northern Israel, the burden of relief instead falling mainly on the government, local charitable organizations and the diaspora. Second, it has been suggested that the government of Israel has been keen to downplay the extent of displacement there, in order to maintain a strong external national identity. Third, and as was highlighted by a Human Rights Watch press release on the Human Rights Council on August 11, there appears to be a degree of bias on the part of certain international bodies and in certain parts of the media to

¹ For more detailed information on displacement in Israel, see the background paper prepared by Naomi Kikoler for the Brookings-Bern Project.

http://www.brookings.edu/fp/projects/idp/20060815_NK_bgpaper_Israel.pdf

underestimate the culpability of Hezbollah in the current conflict and its impact on Israel's civilians.

This is the current situation as best we have been able to ascertain it: Life in northern Israel during the course of the conflict came to a virtual standstill. At least 43 civilians were killed, and more than one thousand injured. More than 300,000 northern Israelis were displaced to other regions. Up to one million more was either living in bomb shelters, hiding at home, or alternating between the two. Just one example: an estimated two-thirds of the city of Nahariya, with a population of 56,000 prior to the conflict, fled.

There has also been a wider socio-economic impact, both in northern Israel and in the south where people are displaced. All over the north, businesses have closed or scaled down their activity. According to some estimates as many as 6,000 homes have been damaged or destroyed. The University of Haifa cancelled its students' final examinations. Tourism, a primary source of income for the north, has ceased. At the same time cities in the south of Israel have filled with people fleeing the north. Many are staying with family or friends, but others are in public spaces that have been temporarily devoted to their shelter, for example schools and Kibbutzim.

As is often the case during conflict, it appears that it is the relatively resourceful who were able to move. This includes those with the financial means to travel south – for example those who had cars when public transport between the north and the south was stopped; and those with people there to stay with. The poor, the disabled, the very young and very old, have been less mobile. Israeli Arabs comprise a considerable proportion of those who remained. Often this was because they are poor and have few options. It is also reported that some stayed because they found it hard to accept that they have become potential targets for fellow Arabs. Some have fled northern Israel to the occupied Palestinian territories of the West Bank. A significant number of immigrants, some newly arrived, also remained, in their case predominantly because they are among the poorest and most marginalized. They include immigrants from the former USSR, North Africa and Ethiopia.

Arising from this situation there are immediate challenges for the Israeli government and international community. Even if the current ceasefire means that those who still remain in northern Israel are not in physical danger and can start to leave bomb shelters, many are poor and unemployed; others have lost their source of income, and increasingly are reliant on assistance. For many who have fled, staying in temporary shelters and even with family and friends is not a sustainable option. Even if they risk the ceasefire and opt to return, in some cases their homes, places of work and the wider infrastructure have been damaged or destroyed.

Displacement in and from Lebanon

Before describing the current displacement in and from Lebanon, it is important to understand the wider context. First, Lebanon is a poor country that was in the midst of rebuilding. GDP per capita is USD 6,200 and the country is heavily reliant on food aid. Second, recent displacement overlays previous displacement. Many of those displaced by

the civil war that ended in 1990 are still displaced today. The result is that some of the people displaced by the recent conflict have already been displaced before, sometimes several times.

As is the case in Israel, numbers are not necessarily accurate, mainly because no one knows what proportion of those who have been displaced are currently residing with family and friends. Although sources vary, it is generally agreed that somewhere between three quarters of a million and one million people have been displaced in Lebanon; up to 50 percent of them are children. This total represents about one in five people in Lebanon, and puts it into the top ten countries worldwide in terms of numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs). According to the UN Interim Force in Lebanon (UNIFIL) only 18 percent of the population remained in southern Lebanon by the time of the ceasefire. It is further estimated that over 1,000 people have been killed and 3,500 injured.

The wider socio-economic impact is stark. It has been estimated that some 7,000 homes, 900 commercial buildings, 630 roads and 73 bridges have been bombed. One implication of the destruction of the infrastructure is that for those who remained in the south, fleeing north rapidly dissolved as a realistic option. Beirut has borne the brunt of temporarily housing hundreds of thousands of IDPs – UNHCR estimates that 70 percent of the total is there. All of Beirut's 154 schools are reportedly currently being used to house IDPs; the Charity School in central Beirut is apparently housing 550 IDPs who share 12 toilets and do not have access to a shower. Underground car parks and shopping malls have also become shelters; in one garage it is reported that 350 families have received one parking space each to live on. Outdoor parks have also become temporary camps.

As in Israel, there were distinct waves of displacement. The first to leave were foreign nationals and those with foreign residency papers, many of whom were evacuated via Cyprus and Syria. In contrast, nationals of less developed countries, particularly from Sri Lanka and the Philippines, who work in large numbers as domestic laborers in Lebanon, have become stranded. Some wealthier Lebanese moved temporarily to Syria, or further on to Europe and elsewhere. Of the estimated 180,000 Lebanese in Syria, on the other hand, some 67,000 are refugees living in camps and schools.

Most displacement, however, has been internal, and as in Israel it appears to be the more resourceful who have managed to leave. It was reported on July 29 that the taxi fare from Tyre to Beirut, a trip of about two hours, had risen to USD 800. An estimated 130,000 residents remained in southern Lebanon. In addition there are over 40,000 Palestinians in refugee camps around Tyre and a further 25,000 southern Lebanese remained in villages along the border. Particularly tragic is the case of IDPs who fled to Tyre and Sidon to seek refuge and became trapped there. For those in the south their condition has become fairly desperate and is only now slowly being relieved. They were caught in the middle of fighting, at least in part because of a deliberate strategy by Hezbollah to launch attacks from bases in civilian areas. They found it difficult, if not impossible to flee north within the 24-hour deadlines that were issued by the IDF, especially when bridges and roads have been destroyed. They have relied on makeshift shelters and often moved from

village to village; and they had become increasingly inaccessible to those trying to provide humanitarian assistance.

Wider issues for discussion

I should like to conclude by focusing attention on three wider issues for discussion.

First, it is important to emphasize the wide range of displacement that has occurred as a result of the current crisis. There has been significant internal displacement, both within Israel and within Lebanon. In the latter case people have sometimes been displaced for a second or third time. While most of the displaced in the current conflict have been uprooted inside their own countries, there has also been displacement across borders in both countries - of mainly Israeli Arabs to the West Bank, and of Lebanese to Syria and beyond. In addition, foreign nationals have been displaced across borders in both countries too. Furthermore, at times the distinction between those who are displaced and those not has been quite difficult to define. People who have had to leave their homes to live – albeit temporarily – in bomb shelters in northern Israel probably can be defined as IDPs; those who moved between their homes and shelters probably cannot. The point is that each of these displacement types presents different challenges and requires different responses.

Second, the dynamics of this conflict have accentuated a point that has arisen in other conflicts too, namely those in most need of immediate assistance can be the people who stay behind rather than those who are displaced. They can be triply disadvantaged: They often lack the resources to move, or are physically unable to. They are trying to survive in a conflict zone. They are the least accessible for humanitarian agencies. I have tried to explain that there is a range of reasons why people have remained in northern Israel and southern Lebanon respectively, and I have highlighted the particularly dire circumstances they face.

Finally, there is a danger in the cautious optimism of the current ceasefire of underestimating the long-term challenges of reintegrating the displaced. In the short-term, humanitarian assistance is beginning to reach those who were previously cut off, and people are beginning to return home. Had this seminar taken place a few days earlier I would have concluded by speaking about the desperate shortage of food and medical supplies in the conflict zones and the increasing strains on public resources and family and friends in cities and towns hosting IDPs. To an extent the ceasefire has relieved these immediate problems.

But many people will not feel safe returning home, and for those who take the risk the journey may not be easy. Particularly in southern Lebanon, there is widespread destruction of vital infrastructure and a significant problem of unexploded munitions – on top of land mines that still have not been completely cleared from earlier conflicts. There are already concerns that it will be impossible in the short term safely to provide shelter, food, clean water and sanitation for the hundreds of thousands of Lebanese who are reported to be on the move back to the south.

In addition the displaced on both sides face longer term personal challenges such as coming to terms with the death of family and friends, the destruction of homes, the loss of jobs and the trauma of conflict and displacement. Children are likely to be especially

traumatized. Displacement is not simply a process that reverses when a conflict ends. Even after the briefest of conflicts, and even after return, it can affect the lives of people for many years hence.