



**BASMEH & ZEITONEH**  
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## **Strengthening Social Protection Systems in Lebanon: Challenges and Responses to the 2024 Aggression**





***Much of the information in this paper was gathered by the Field Engagement Officers team operating in three areas of Lebanon: Bar Elias in Beqaa, Tripoli, and Beirut. These contributions will be cited as sourced from FEOs.***

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The views expressed in this document are solely those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Basmeh & Zeitooneh Organization.

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# I. Introduction

In the context of humanitarian crises, **Social Protection** is commonly conceptualized as an integrated system of policies and programs designed to reduce poverty, address social vulnerability, and promote social inclusion, particularly among at-risk populations ([Devereux & Sabates-Wheeler, 2004](#); [ILO, 2023](#)). As a protective mechanism, social protection systems aim to secure basic needs and resilience among affected populations, offering critical support in regions with widespread displacement and limited access to essential resources ([Bowen et al., 2020](#)).

The recent Israeli aggression on Lebanon in September 2024 has triggered a severe humanitarian crisis, impacting both Lebanese citizens and the significant population of Syrian refugees in the country. Lebanon, already burdened by economic instability, political fragmentation, and an overstretched social infrastructure, has seen these vulnerabilities worsen due to the ongoing conflict, exacerbating an already existing crisis in which the majority of residents were already facing severe hardships. Before the aggression WFP report indicated that 2.5 million people needed food assistance, and 47.5% of the population, including both Lebanese citizens and refugees, was food insecure. ([UNDP](#), [WFP](#)) . This situation underscores the urgent need for effective social protection mechanisms to support both Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities facing heightened insecurity and diminished access to essential resources and services.

Lebanon's social protection landscape is primarily anchored in two main safety net programs: the National Poverty Targeting Program ([NPTP](#)) and the Emergency Social Safety Net ([ESSN](#)). The NPTP is being phased out as Lebanon navigates a significant economic crisis. In a context where the informal economy is substantial, the targeting algorithms employed by these safety nets are prone to errors, and neither program extends its coverage to refugees and migrants. Consequently, Lebanon's social protection system is predominantly non-inclusive, with approximately 62.6 percent of Lebanese households lacking access to social protection benefits before the 2019 socioeconomic crisis ([ARI](#)).

In the last two years, some notable enhancements have been made to the system. The introduction of the National Disability Allowance (NDA)—Lebanon's first universal social assistance program—marks a significant step forward, as it uniquely covers refugees. Additionally, the adoption of the National Social Protection Strategy (NSPS) and Pension Law (319) aims to bolster the social safety net framework, although only the NDA has been fully implemented to date. ([Cameleon](#))

Since the October 2023 displacement from southern Lebanon, the response has mainly involved one-time cash transfers for Lebanese IDPs, which have proven insufficient, covering only [25%](#) of their humanitarian needs while there are expectations for another round in November 2024 including around 5000 Households. The escalation to full-scale conflict in September 2024 has dramatically increased the number of IDPs and their urgent needs—safety, shelter, food, water, sanitation, healthcare, education, and psychosocial support. The Lebanese government and international community announced a need for [\\$425 million](#) for a comprehensive response on October 1, 2024, highlighting the system's inability to respond effectively to shocks and its lack of resilience.

This paper aims to analyze the current state, challenges, and outcomes of social protection initiatives targeting both Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities in the wake of the recent Israeli aggression. It will explore key protection issues—including forced displacement, safety and security, access to essential services, and economic instability—as observed by our field engagement officers stationed in three regions of Lebanon: Bar Elias in the Beqaa, Tripoli, and Beirut. By evaluating the

response efforts of governmental and non-governmental actors, this paper aims to offer insights and policy recommendations to strengthen social protection systems, reduce vulnerability, and enhance resilience among the affected populations in Lebanon.

## II. Impact of the Israeli Aggression on Refugee and Host Community Protection Needs

The recent Israeli aggression in Lebanon has magnified protection needs among both Syrian refugees and Lebanese host communities. Rising violence has caused widespread displacement, hindered access to essential services, deepened economic hardships, and strained social cohesion both between refugees and Lebanese and within various sectors of the host community as mentioned by our field engagement officers in Tripoli and Beirut. The complex landscape of needs and vulnerabilities highlights the urgent necessity for enhanced protection measures and community support systems, particularly as Lebanon's already fragile infrastructure struggles to respond to the compounded demands.

## III. Increased Displacement and Security Concerns

The recent escalation of aggression in Lebanon has resulted in a significant increase in displacement, affecting approximately [1.2 million](#) individuals from the Beqaa Valley, Baalbek, southern Lebanon, and the southern suburbs of Beirut. Since October 8, 2023, there have been [2,710](#) reported fatalities and [12,592](#) injuries.

As Israeli airstrikes escalated in late September and continued through October 2024, the scope of bombardments expanded across various regions, driving large numbers of internally displaced persons (IDPs) to seek safer locations. [Northern Lebanon](#), particularly Akkar, remains the primary destination for many IDPs; however, shelter options there are increasingly strained, with over [85% of available](#) facilities now at full capacity, underscoring the severe shelter shortages amid this influx.

In addition to internal displacement, cross-border movement has also surged. About [13,000](#) individuals have fled to Iraq, while others—primarily those with kinship or social ties in Syria—have crossed the border into Syria seeking temporary refuge. The latest figures indicate that at least [461,172](#) individuals have moved into Syria, escaping the conflict. However, the lack of regulatory oversight has exposed these displaced populations to exploitation by transportation providers, who have reportedly inflated fares along the Lebanon-Syria border route (FEOs). Moreover, the recent arrests of five individuals on human trafficking charges reveal an underlying issue of criminal networks exploiting vulnerable populations amidst the crisis ([Relief Web](#)). The massive surge in displacement and the disruption to services also puts children at risk of protection issues, including being separated from their families. Since 8 October 2023, [UNICEF](#) and partners have identified 67

unaccompanied and separated children and have since reunited 65 of these children with their families.

The threat of airstrikes has greatly intensified both physical insecurity and psychological distress for families. With recent Israeli warnings of expanded bombardments targeting new areas, including Baalbek and Hermel—where some IDPs initially sought refuge—many displaced individuals have been forced to relocate yet again ([NPR](#)). Additionally, the strict time limits set in these warnings, combined with the constant presence and noise of drones, contribute to a pervasive sense of unease, further eroding feelings of safety among both Lebanese citizens and the refugee community ([Diwan](#)).





## IV. Access to Basic Services

The ongoing conflict has severely hindered access to vital healthcare, education, and social services for both Lebanese citizens and refugees. In conflict-affected areas, particularly southern Lebanon, healthcare facilities have experienced a [30%](#) drop in accessibility due to increased security risks and acute shortages of medical personnel and supplies. Out of 207 primary healthcare centers and dispensaries in these areas, 100 have ceased operations ([WHO](#)). Numerous hospitals have also been forced to close or evacuate because of structural damage or their proximity to heavy bombardments ([CNN](#)).

The influx of displaced families has strained available shelters, leading to a critical shortage of housing and rental properties across Lebanon (FEOs). This scarcity has driven rental prices up sharply, making it increasingly unaffordable for many displaced families to secure adequate shelter. As a result, the competition for affordable housing has intensified, placing additional pressure on both displaced populations and residents in already burdened communities (FEOs). In areas such as Beqaa and Beirut, refugees have been denied entry to shelters, with only a few exceptions made in Tripoli ([UNHCR](#)). Additionally, schools—many already serving as temporary shelters—are at full capacity, further limiting options for displaced children to access education. ([AUB](#)).

Meanwhile, IDPs face escalating health and protection risks, including exposure to waterborne diseases like cholera, hepatitis, and diarrhea, as continued bombardments further disrupt essential services. Overcrowding in shelters lacking sanitation supplies has raised concerns about the spread of infectious diseases among displaced families. [UNICEF](#) has reported instances of scabies and lice among children in these shelters and warns of a heightened risk of respiratory infections as colder, wetter weather approaches. Thousands remain without adequate shelter, bedding, or clothing, increasing their vulnerability to both health issues and weather conditions (FEOs).

Access to education for children has been significantly disrupted, with schools in high-risk areas halting operations, leaving both Lebanese and Syrian children without consistent schooling. Approximately [40%](#) of children in affected areas have lost access to regular education, exacerbating pre-existing educational challenges for refugee children. This interruption threatens their fundamental right to education and undermines future opportunities for development. Lebanon's Ministry of Education reported that Israeli airstrikes have displaced around [40%](#) of Lebanon's 1.5 million school-aged children from their homes, leading to a delayed start for public schools, now postponed from October 14 to November 4. ([Save the Children](#))

At present, approximately [500](#) public schools—nearly half of Lebanon's public educational institutions—are being repurposed as shelters in response to the escalated violence since September 23, which has displaced over [1.2 million](#) people, or roughly 20% of the population. This marks the sixth consecutive year of significant disruptions to education in Lebanon. The lack of school access also heightens children's vulnerability to injury, exploitation, and child labor.

In addition to healthcare and education, other essential services are overwhelmed. Access to water, sanitation, and electricity is inconsistent, while local social services are inundated with requests for support. Communities in Beirut and Mount Lebanon are struggling to meet the increasing demand for water and essential supplies as displaced families continue to arrive in search of safety and

assistance ([MSF](#)). In numerous refugee areas, access to electricity and internet from private providers is limited to just a few hours each day. The cumulative impact of these service disruptions places both Lebanese citizens and refugees at significant risk of deteriorating health and well-being (FEOs).





## V. Economic Hardship and Livelihood Challenges

The ongoing aggression has exacerbated Lebanon's economic crisis, putting further strain on the livelihoods of both Lebanese citizens and refugees who depend on low-wage, informal employment. Data from September and October 2024 reveals that approximately [65%](#) of refugees in conflict zones have lost their income sources, primarily in agriculture and construction, due to displacement and security threats. This loss heightens poverty levels among refugee communities that are already facing limited job opportunities ([Info pro](#)). Lebanese citizens are also suffering intensified hardships, with rising inflation making essential goods increasingly unaffordable. Food prices have surged by around [20%](#), placing additional pressure on already strained household budgets. Furthermore, the United Nations Development Programme ([UNDP](#)) has released a rapid assessment indicating that Lebanon's economy could contract by as much as 9.2 percent if these hostilities persist through the end of the year. This potential decline in Gross Domestic Product (GDP) follows a 28% contraction between 2018 and 2022 and would undo the economic stability gains achieved in 2023.

The rapid appraisal conducted by [UNDP](#) on October 23, 2024, indicates that the conflict has significant short-term economic repercussions, leading to a substantial contraction in key sectors such as tourism, agriculture, manufacturing, trade, and other services. Disruptions to trade routes and supply chains, along with direct shelling and decreased consumer demand, have compelled many businesses, particularly micro, small, and medium-sized enterprises, to close or suspend operations. [UNDP](#) estimates that rising unemployment could impact around 1.2 million workers nationwide, with the unemployment rate potentially reaching a staggering 32.6 percent by the end of the year.

## VI. Social Protection Responses During the Aggression

During the escalation of conflict in September and October 2024, social protection responses in Lebanon have been crucial for addressing the intensified needs of both refugees and Lebanese host communities. The combined efforts of the Lebanese government, international organizations, refugee-led organizations (RLOs), and community-based initiatives have helped provide emergency relief, although limited resources and restricted access have created significant challenges. This section examines these response mechanisms and highlights their role in addressing the urgent protection needs of vulnerable populations.

## VII. Government and International Organization Responses

The Lebanese government, alongside international organizations such as UNHCR, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme (WFP), mobilized to support vulnerable communities affected by the recent aggression. Government initiatives included emergency shelter provisions and temporary food assistance programs aimed at aiding displaced populations, especially in heavily impacted areas. However, Lebanon's ongoing political and economic instability has constrained the government's ability to coordinate large-scale responses, leading to inconsistent service delivery ([WFP](#)).

International organizations have stepped in to address these gaps, implementing emergency assistance programs designed to meet immediate needs for food, water, and healthcare. For example, WFP reported a [40%](#) increase in food distribution for refugee and host communities in October 2024 to address rising food insecurity due to disrupted supply chains and inflation ([WFP](#)). [UNHCR](#) is enhancing its emergency response by prepositioning stocks for quick dispatch across Lebanon and providing urgent humanitarian and protection support to displaced families. They have supported approximately 8,500 people with Emergency Protection Cash Assistance (EPCA), assessed over 100 collective shelters for needed repairs, and expanded cash assistance to vulnerable refugee families. Additionally, [UNHCR](#) is collaborating with the Lebanese Public Health Ministry and WHO to deploy trauma kits, expand its network of hospitals, and provide psychosocial support and non-formal education activities for affected children. However, the Basmeh&Zeitouneh FEOs highlight that despite these efforts, many areas remain underserved, particularly in remote and conflict-affected regions where access is severely restricted due to security concerns.

## VIII. Community-Led Crisis Response:

Local Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), Community-Based Organizations (CBOs), and Refugee-led organizations (RLOs) have played a crucial role as first responders, deeply integrated into the communities they serve through local staff. Their immediate presence enables them to quickly mobilize aid and assistance, especially when government support has faced delays due to limited resources and logistical challenges. Organizations such as the [Lebanese Red Cross](#), [B&Z](#), [Nabad for Development](#), Medair, and others have mobilized to provide emergency medical services, psychological support, and essential supplies to both displaced Lebanese citizens and refugees.

Local organizations and Refugee-led organizations (RLOs) such as Basmeh & Zeitouneh ([B&Z](#)) and House Of Peace ([HoPe](#)) have played an essential role in filling critical gaps left by larger governmental and international actors. As locally embedded organizations, RLOs possess the unique advantage of rapid mobilization and community trust, which allows them to effectively reach vulnerable populations, particularly in areas that are difficult for other agencies to access. For instance, B&Z established Rapid Response Networks that provided emergency shelter enhancements, food, and psychosocial support (PSS) for both Lebanese and refugee populations affected by the aggression. These networks were vital in areas such as Tripoli, Akkar, and the Beqaa

Valley, where many informal settlements experienced displacement or damage due to nearby airstrikes ([B&Z, 2024](#)).

Additionally, CBOs and NGOs, including [Kayany](#) and the Frontliners For Change ([FFC](#)), have established special shelters specifically for Syrian refugees who are hesitant to return to Syria. These refugees often face challenges in securing affordable housing due to the high demand for shelter spaces. By offering alternative accommodations, these organizations provide safe spaces where Syrian refugees can find refuge and support, bypassing the difficulties of accessing government facilities. These organizations significantly increased their coverage in October, focusing on high-need areas where government and international assistance was lacking (FEOs).

Despite their crucial role, RLOs, CBOs, and LNGOs have faced significant challenges, particularly in terms of limited funding and restricted access to conflict zones. Many RLOs reported shortages in essential supplies like food and non-food items like mattresses and hygiene kits, forcing them to prioritize aid distribution based on the most urgent cases (FEOs). Additionally, the B&Z FEOS stated that security risks in high-conflict areas have complicated RLO efforts to reach all affected populations, limiting their ability to provide consistent support. Many B&Z employees and volunteers have also reported fatigue due to prolonged periods of high-intensity work under dangerous conditions, further underscoring their resilience while highlighting the strain on these essential grassroots actors. In addition to this fatigue, they express a deep sense of satisfaction in their efforts to support vulnerable communities (FEOs).

Despite facing significant challenges, both RLOs and local NGOs have played a crucial role in promoting social cohesion by supporting both refugee and host communities. This has helped alleviate some of the social tensions exacerbated by the aggression. Their crisis response efforts demonstrate the effectiveness of community-led initiatives in expanding the reach and impact of humanitarian aid, particularly in fragile contexts where conventional approaches may fall short. However, NGOs, like RLOs, struggle to secure funding and access high-risk areas, especially border regions with strict security restrictions. Additionally, their reliance on volunteer networks, which can be unsustainable during prolonged crises, further strains their ability to maintain operations. These difficulties highlight the need for sustained international support and collaboration among local actors to ensure continued assistance for vulnerable populations.

## IX. Challenges in Ensuring Social Protection for All

### Challenges Facing IDPs and Refugees in Lebanon

- ❖ **Ongoing Displacement:** The Israeli warnings and attacks on new areas have exacerbated the ongoing displacement crisis in Lebanon, forcing many individuals and families to flee their homes once again. This situation increases the number of IDPs and strains already limited resources.
- ❖ **Refusal to Disclose Information:** Many IDPs are reluctant to share their names and situations due to fears of repercussions, complicating efforts to provide adequate assistance and protection. In some cases, essential documents may have been lost, or IDPs may have had to flee in haste, making verifying identities and addressing their needs even more challenging.



- ❖ **Funding Constraints and Resource Shortages:** Limited funding and resource shortages significantly impede social protection initiatives in Lebanon. Organizations often have to prioritize immediate needs due to inadequate financial support, leading to difficult choices that may deprioritize essential services and compromise the quality of assistance.
- ❖ **Economic Crisis Impact:** The ongoing economic crisis has severely restricted the Lebanese government's ability to provide financial aid and social protection. With soaring inflation and diminishing public resources, the government struggles to maintain existing support systems, let alone expand them. This situation further exacerbates the vulnerability of marginalized communities, leaving many without necessary safety nets.
- ❖ **Access to Aid and Humanitarian Corridors:**
  - **Logistical Challenges in Conflict Areas:** Delivering aid in conflict zones presents significant logistical challenges. Restricted access to certain areas and environmental volatility complicates the effective distribution of humanitarian assistance. Organizations encounter difficulties mobilizing resources and ensuring that aid reaches those in need promptly and safely.
  - **Impact on Vulnerable Groups:** Access restrictions disproportionately affect the most vulnerable populations, including children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities. Limited humanitarian corridors mean that essential services, such as food, healthcare, and psychosocial support, are not consistently available, further entrenching their precarious circumstances.
- ❖ **Psychosocial Support and Mental Health Services:**
  - **Psychological Toll of Conflict:** The ongoing conflict has taken a severe psychological toll on both refugee populations and Lebanese communities, leading to increased levels of trauma, stress, and mental health issues that require urgent intervention and support.
  - **Need for Mental Health Services:** Despite the evident need for mental health services, Lebanon faces a significant shortage of resources in this area. The limited availability of trained professionals and facilities has made it challenging to effectively address the growing mental health concerns. Additionally, scaling up these services during times of aggression is particularly difficult, as both funding and access to care are constrained.

## X. Policy Recommendations

### ❖ Create a National Displacement Policy Framework for IDPs

- **Establish Formal Recognition and Rights:** The Lebanese government should adopt a national policy that formally recognizes the status and rights of IDPs, providing them with legal protections and access to essential social services. This would include access to healthcare, education, shelter, and financial support, irrespective of whether they are Lebanese citizens or refugees.
- **Implement a Registration and Data Collection System:** Develop a centralized, real-time registration and tracking system for IDPs to better understand their locations, needs, and demographics. This data can inform targeted social protection interventions and reduce gaps in aid distribution, especially for vulnerable groups such as children, the elderly, and persons with disabilities

### ❖ Establish Safe and Adequate Shelter Options

- **Expand Public Shelter Capacity:** Utilize underused public buildings (e.g., schools, community centers) as temporary shelters, ensuring they meet basic standards for safety, sanitation, and accessibility. Create a national registry of shelters with standardized guidelines to avoid overcrowding and ensure equitable access for Lebanese and non-Lebanese IDPs.
- **Partner with Local Organizations for Rapid Shelter Response:** Work with RLOs, local NGOs, and community leaders to create rapid-response shelter options that can be scaled up during crises. These partners often have the local knowledge and community trust needed to mobilize and manage resources efficiently in high-conflict zones.

### ❖ Enhance Social Protection and Cash Assistance Programs for IDPs

- **Targeted Cash Assistance for IDPs:** Develop an emergency cash assistance program specifically for IDPs that includes Lebanese citizens and Syrian refugees alike. This assistance should be tiered based on needs, prioritizing those with specific vulnerabilities such as families with young children, the elderly, and those with health concerns. Cash transfers can help IDPs meet urgent needs like food, medicine, and temporary accommodation.
- **Access to Social Protection for All Displaced Populations:** Advocate for donor support to expand Lebanon's social protection programs to all IDPs, regardless of nationality, by including them in the National Poverty Targeting Program (NPTP) or a similar framework. This integration would help mitigate tensions between Lebanese citizens and refugees by ensuring equitable access to social services.

## ❖ **Strengthen Health and Mental Health Services in IDP-Receiving Areas**

- **Deploy Mobile Health Clinics:** Increase the presence of mobile health clinics in areas with high numbers of IDPs to provide essential health and mental health services. These clinics should address both immediate medical needs and offer psychosocial support to reduce trauma-related impacts.
- **Integrate Mental Health Support into Community Centers:** Partner with local organizations to create mental health support hubs in shelters or community centers, providing group therapy, peer support, and one-on-one counseling. These hubs should cater to both Lebanese and refugee IDPs, fostering resilience and easing psychological distress caused by displacement.

## ❖ **Promote Social Cohesion and Community Integration Initiatives**

- **Inclusive Community Programs:** Develop programs that encourage interaction and cooperation between displaced Lebanese citizens, Syrian refugees, and host communities. Initiatives like joint educational workshops, community service projects, and dialogue sessions can reduce stigmatization and promote a sense of shared purpose.
- **Civic Engagement and Volunteer Programs:** Engage Lebanese citizens and IDPs in volunteer initiatives that focus on community improvement, such as rebuilding public spaces, organizing community meals, or addressing shelter needs. These programs help foster unity by building empathy and reinforcing solidarity among diverse community members.

## ❖ **Strengthen Access and Safety in Humanitarian Corridors**

- **Establish Safe Humanitarian Corridors:** Advocate with international partners to establish secure humanitarian corridors that allow safe movement for IDPs seeking refuge and enable delivery of essential supplies. These corridors are essential for accessing hard-hit or remote areas where IDPs face high risks.
- **Monitor and Coordinate Aid Delivery:** Coordinate aid distribution through a dedicated task force within the government to ensure even coverage, prioritizing areas experiencing significant IDP influx. This task force should work closely with local actors to ensure that aid reaches both Lebanese and Syrian IDPs without discrimination.

## ❖ **Long-Term Investment in Social Protection Resilience**

- **Expand Social Protection Infrastructure:** Increase investment in Lebanon's social protection infrastructure to better withstand crises. This includes strengthening the existing social safety nets to support both displaced Lebanese and Syrian refugees through predictable and inclusive policies.
- **Build a National Contingency Fund for Crisis Response:** Establish a fund that can be quickly mobilized in times of conflict or crisis. Contributions from international donors and local resources can ensure Lebanon has a financial safety net to address the needs of displaced populations without delay.



## XI. Conclusion

The recent Israeli aggression has deeply impacted Lebanon's already strained humanitarian infrastructure, escalating the need for protection services and social support for displaced communities. This crisis has underscored Lebanon's systemic vulnerabilities, including its limited social protection coverage, economic instability, and restricted humanitarian access. Syrian refugees and Lebanese communities alike face mounting challenges, from forced displacement and resource scarcity to increasing psychological distress and community tensions. Without comprehensive policy reform and expanded social protection mechanisms, Lebanon risks further fragmentation and long-term instability.

This paper highlights the need for resilient, inclusive social protection systems that are adaptable to crisis conditions. Prioritizing the roles of RLOs and local NGOs, implementing tiered assistance for vulnerable groups, expanding mental health services, and securing international support are essential steps toward a more responsive and sustainable system. By investing in these areas, Lebanon can build a foundation for social cohesion and recovery, ultimately strengthening both the refugee and host communities' resilience to future shocks.

Moving forward, sustained commitment from both local and international actors will be crucial. Strengthening community-based organizations, engaging with affected populations directly, and fostering long-term partnerships are critical to ensuring that Lebanon's social protection systems are not only reactive but proactive in meeting the needs of its diverse communities. In times of crisis, a robust, inclusive social protection framework can serve as a lifeline for millions, helping to mitigate the impacts of conflict and laying the groundwork for a stable and resilient Lebanon.

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