

Aid tensions after the 2020 Beirut port explosion

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Tensions can intensify in contexts of overlapping crises: humanitarian actors must recognise the different kinds of tension resulting from aid distribution and respond accordingly.

In August 2020, a massive explosion tore through north-eastern Beirut, damaging tens of thousands of homes and buildings. As humanitarian assistance poured into the affected neighbourhoods, there was widespread public scrutiny about how aid was targeted and distributed. Amidst a broader context of financial, political and health crises, state and humanitarian actors became increasingly concerned about inter-communal tensions.

The experience of tension in Bourj Hammoud

According to Tension Monitoring Surveys administered by UNDP, social tensions intensified following the explosion,

especially between Lebanese nationals and Syrian refugees, both of whom experienced heightened socio-economic vulnerability. Both groups felt that aid had been unfairly distributed. Paradoxically, many Syrians felt discriminated against by providers of assistance, while many Lebanese complained that Syrians received an undue portion of aid.

While 'tensions' are extensively monitored in Lebanon, there has been limited ethnographic research on the experience of tension or its complex relationship with various forms of identity, such as sect, nationality, or class. To explore this issue from an ethnographic lens, I initiated a participatory research project in June 2021 with 9 residents of Bourj Hammoud, a

refugee- and migrant-hosting neighbourhood affected by the blast. Bourj Hammoud was established in the early 1900s as a place of refuge for Armenians displaced by the genocidal campaigns conducted by the Ottoman empire. It now accommodates diverse low-income groups including Lebanese, Syrian, Palestinian, and Iraqi refugees as well as migrant workers from Africa and Asia. Although the neighbourhood offers employment opportunities and relatively affordable housing, it is identified as a poor area predominantly inhabited by refugees, with crumbling infrastructure and inadequate urban services.¹

Perceptions of unfair aid distribution

Reflecting on the aftermath of the Beirut blast, research participants recalled accusations and resentment across lines of nationality and legal status. One Lebanese contributor explained that “Lebanese citizens were angry and frustrated that Syrian refugees were getting aid”. On the contrary, a Syrian contributor identified a false perception that aid was given to Syrians more than others. “Most assistance targeted Lebanese citizens only”, she added. Such stereotypes, often imposed on both citizens and foreign nationals, were used by certain individuals, media outlets and political actors. Not for the first time, rumours were woven into politicised aid narratives and circulated to aggravate anti-refugee sentiments towards Syrians and to push for their return.

These perceptions of unfair aid distribution added to longer standing tensions within Bourj Hammoud, especially in regard to an area called Naba’a. Administratively, Naba’a falls within the Bourj Hammoud Municipality. However, this area is home to a high concentration of refugees and Shi’ite residents, who stand out within the predominantly Christian population of eastern Beirut. For this reason, some see Naba’a as existing ‘outside’ Bourj Hammoud, reflecting the importance of religion and nationality as a basis for exclusion. One contributor explained, “Bourj Hammoud is divided in terms of interactions... The quarters and the buildings are segregated

according to people’s nationalities and religious beliefs”. This sense of spatial division and conflicting communal identities in Bourj Hammoud generates antipathy, particularly when it comes to divergent narratives about aid bias.

However, intercommunal divides between sects and nationalities – what is often called the *horizontal* dimension of most social cohesion frameworks – do not fully capture the image of ‘tension’ that emerged from this study. Much anger was directed at the institutions responsible for targeting and distributing aid – what is often called the *vertical* dimension. After the explosion, the army and various NGOs visited people’s houses to record the damage and provide financial assistance for repairs. According to our contributors, these assessments were uncoordinated and lacked clear criteria for targeting aid. Both Lebanese and non-Lebanese contributors described witnessing evidence of aid bias based on nationality. An Iraqi contributor explained that even though her apartment was more damaged than others in her building, the Lebanese Army gave her family 500,000 LBP, whereas all Lebanese families received 4,000,000 LBP. Meanwhile, a Lebanese contributor complained that Syrians can access more funding than Lebanese, despite the economic challenges faced by both groups. Conversely, a Syrian contributor wrote that her family was considered “ineligible to receive any financial assistance because as Syrians they should be getting aid from UNHCR”.

Vertical or horizontal?

To avoid exacerbating refugee-host tensions, these *vertical* (provider-beneficiary) dimensions must be recognised alongside *horizontal* (inter-communal) dimensions. However, despite the rise in tensions following the blast, there were no major incidents of physical violence between refugees and hosts. Our refugee contributors generally described Bourj Hammoud as a place of diversity and tolerance, where bonds have emerged through cooperative interactions and shared hardships. During our research, we heard numerous examples

of everyday cross-communal solidarity, such as borrowing money from a neighbour or offering support for a classmate after the loss of a relative. However, when anger is directed upwards to institutions – whether the state, local NGOs, or international actors – it risks being deflected laterally to neighbours. It is therefore crucial that aid actors recognise vertical tensions in their conflict sensitivity frameworks and respond to crises accordingly. This might involve working with state actors to introduce a more comprehensive social protection system² as well as learning from and supporting existing solidarity mechanisms, which tend to provide a more contextualized and conflict-sensitive response³. Additionally,

adopting more systematic and transparent targeting methods could help aid actors to address tensions resulting from perceptions of unfair aid distribution.

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