

Syrian Unrest and the Bekaa: A Loss of the Basic Necessities



Abdo Salam H. Hamade
Master of Public Health (MPH '15)
Faculty of Health Sciences
American University of Beirut

It is inevitable that the unrest occurring in the Syrian Arab Republic is spilling over to our small sized, but rather strategically important, Lebanon. The Bekaa Valley, an agricultural demography, was the source of bread and butter for thousands of Syrian workers who crossed the borders into Lebanon daily. Syria, a socialist country, supplied many commodities to its population at unified affordable prices. The government included free access to compulsory education, affordable hospitalization, national affordable pharmaceutical industry, affordable food supply, and most notably an enabled Ministry of Agricultural which supported the agricultural sector. The commodities offered by Syria to its people were reached by the Lebanese as well, especially the population in the Bekaa Valley which shares almost 100 km of borderline with Syria.

It is evident that the populations of both countries have mutual benefits, as security used to prevail across the shared borders. Syrian workers sought after employment in agriculture or construction. As for the Lebanese, their destination to Syria was in search for affordable hospitalization, supply of food, and of course the purchase of cheap medicine – produced locally.

According to the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, Lebanon is considered to have relatively poor health and education indicators, especially in the public sector. In addition, there are important regional disparities in access to services. Furthermore, at the socio-economic level, the situation is marked by the increase of

inequality and level of poverty, the erosion of the purchasing power – in particular of the middle class – and the increase of geographic disparities in poverty and level of development. Subsequently, poverty is concentrated in urban suburbs, particularly in those around of Beirut, and predominantly in the rural areas of South and North Lebanon.

The Living Status in the Bekaa Valley:

In the region of Northern Bekaa, which is the Baalbek and Hermel Caza, is characterized by its aridity and the high percentage of uncultivated lands. Undersized ruminants herding systems are the widespread profession in the region alongside with minimal agricultural activity. [1] Further on extending to central and south-western parts of the Bekaa, the weather is more suitable for agriculture which is a primary source of living in the region. Additionally, large dairy farms of cows and sheep herds are managed by the local population. In a nutshell, the sources of income and living standards can be reflected by the nature of the



workforce in the Bekaa Valley. According to FAO, almost two thirds of the population depends on goat and/or sheep products as their main source of income (sale of milk and milk products and animals). The rest of the locals have an additional source of income from agriculture, such as fruits and vegetables, and from forest products like charcoal and aromatic plants.

The Absence of the Government:

The absence of the government in implementing sustainable development projects in the Bekaa Valley dates back to the sixties, if not prior to that. The legal punishments for cultivating opium were not taken seriously and farmers did not stop their illicit farming and substitute it with vegetables and fruits due to soft penalties. Nowadays, opium cultivation has more severe penalties which drove people to stop such activities. However, the government through the Ministry of Agriculture gave minimal support to the farmers to cultivate crops. Furthermore, actions such as stopping the cultivation of beetroot in Western Bekaa and importing sugar instead.

The Advantage of Having an Accessible Syria:

In Lebanon, Doctor visits and medical check-ups such as routine x-rays costs may range from 80,000 LP to 150,000 LP depending on the hospital, medical laboratory, or physician. In Syria, an overall checkup including a routine X-ray wouldn't exceed the sum of 30,000LP, thus including that at every visit to Syria people may have a medical checkup, shop for needed material, fill-up gas from a Syrian gas station and head back home spending much less than what they would spend in Lebanon. Aside from seeking food and house material, medical care, the affordability of Syrian national pharmaceuticals was a reassurance for the deprived faction of Bekaa population that they may still strive to live. An example would be given for a seizure control medication packaged in Lebanon which roughly costs 19,000 LP; while on the other hand the one produced in Syria would cost around 3000 LP.

With the current unrest in Syria, the Lebanese decreased their crossing of the borders to seek the services offered in their neighboring sister cities and villages. Having this reality of depravation being flagged the government faces a moral obligation towards taking into consideration the socio-economic status in the Bekaa Valley and making sure that the basic living pillars ranging from the supply of



food to healthcare are within the approach of the population. The urban habitants – most cabinet ministers – do not realize the suffering of the rural areas and seek to maximize their personal benefits through their ministers. There is no doubt that they will not take lead in assuming the responsibility of filling the gap of access of supply that the Bekaa is suffering or will surely suffer in the near future as the global war on Syria is to grow more fierce.

In conclusion, the lack of a centralized government with enabled ministries will force political and social parties in the Bekaa region to support and sustain the well-being of their factions in the region. Therefore, the member of parliaments representing the Bekaa Region must work towards providing suitable living patterns through enabled ministries which can be held accountable at times of peace, unrest, or war.

References

[1]. <http://www.fao.org/newsroom/common/ecg/1000445/en/LebanonDNAMFinalReportTCP.pdf>