

## **Ghata: a Portable Refuge and a Healing Environment**

The clash of group feelings (*a'sabiyat*) among various sectarian constituents, fueled by venomous regional rivalries across the Middle East and exacerbated by the dangerous meddling of international powers, have merged to formulate the current perdition of Syria. As thousands continue to flee the ravages of the war in search of safety and stability, neighboring countries struggle to meet the needs of this growing refugee population.

Of the 5 million Syrians registered as refugees with UNHCR in bordering countries, Lebanon's share is the highest per capita, worldwide. Around 1.1 million registered Syrian refugees, in addition to 300,000 to 500,000 unregistered individuals, have settled across 1,700 locations across Lebanon, the majority of which are situated within the most marginalized districts<sup>1</sup>. The sheer numbers of Syrian refugees<sup>2</sup> rekindle subdued anxieties among the Lebanese sectarian groups<sup>3</sup> and evoke images of the country's own civil war<sup>4</sup> (1975-1990), initially triggered by the presence of Palestinian refugees<sup>5</sup>. Accordingly, formal Lebanese authorities, municipal police, and various vigilante groups have enforced strict measures to control and limit the mobility of refugees. A clenched fist regarding security is the primary national response to the refugee crisis while relief work is abdicated to international agencies and non-governmental actors.

The protracted stay in a country that rejects the concept of integration perpetuates the feeling of instability and loss of hope for many refugees, especially among the younger generation. As over half of the Syrian refugees living in Lebanon are under the age of 18, international actors have become concerned with the repercussions of a Lost Generation<sup>6</sup>. Despite increasing efforts by UNICEF and the Ministry of Education and Higher Education to ensure children receive an education, only an estimated 40% of refugee children of primary school age (6-14) are enrolled in formal schooling, and just 2% are enrolled in secondary school (15-18). Initiatives to boost refugees' enrolment in public schools face serious challenges due to financial constraints, limited mobility, security threats, discrimination, and lack of psychological and social support, among other barriers.

The design intervention *Ghata*<sup>7</sup> was framed within this complex landscape of humanitarian needs and national constraints. *Ghata* was initially conceptualized to serve as a temporary shelter that would ensure humane conditions for refugees during a protracted stay. The design of the *Ghata*

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<sup>1</sup> The total area of Lebanon is 10,452 square kilometers (4000 square miles) and an overall local population of around 4.5 million.

<sup>2</sup> The overwhelming majority of refugees are Sunnis.

<sup>3</sup> Lebanon is comprised of 18 sectarian groups that participate in a confessional power sharing governance model. The main constituents that influence the country's sensitive balance are the Maronites represented by the President of the State, Shiites represented by the Speaker of the House, and the Sunnis represented by the Prime Minister.

<sup>4</sup> The Lebanese civil war caused the killing of an estimated 150,000 and the displacement of around 1 million.

<sup>5</sup> Around half a million Palestinians are registered in Lebanon with UNRWA that was established in 1948 following the *Nakba* (Arab – Israeli war). Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 Refugee Convention accordingly, the 'displaced' (official term adopted for *communiqué*) are denied their basic civil rights.

<sup>6</sup> No Lost Generation is the campaign spearheaded by UNICEF in response to "an entire generation of children that is being shaped by violence, displacement, and a persistent lack of opportunity – and could be lost forever, with profound long-term consequences for Syria, the region, and beyond".

<sup>7</sup> *Ghata* means "cover" in Arabic. The first unit was assembled in August 2013 and following further structural adjustments, the Ministry of Social Affairs issued an approval to use the *Ghata* for educational purposes in February 2014.

unit is based on simplicity, portability, adaptability, scalability, climatic responsiveness, and economic efficiency. Under the supervision of the Center for Civic Engagement and Community Service (CCECS) at the American University of Beirut (AUB), and in partnership with various academic departments, the Ministries of Social Affairs and Education, and local NGO (Kayany), *Ghata* units have been adapted to serve as educational centers for refugee students. Eight *Ghata* schools and two vocational training centers have been assembled in the Beqaa region (east Lebanon), each accommodating an average of 700 refugee students.

*Ghatas* are more than just schools. These structures play an important role in the relief and recovery activities organized in each refugee community. Local and international relief agencies utilize the space to provide psycho-social support services and after-school activities to students and as a central location to distribute aid rations. In addition, *Ghata* structures are used as community shelters in times of severe weather conditions and to host events organized by refugees to commemorate cultural celebrations.

In the midst of chaos and uncertainties *Ghata* structures represent an ordered environment, offering refugees a sense of stability and normalcy. It is here, among the ecstatic faces of children in classrooms, their loud and gleeful voices in the schoolyard, where the healing can start and where a brighter future seems possible.

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