

STUDIES

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Privatizing Displacement

How the Burden of Humanitarian Crisis
Shifted from Institutions to Displaced
Households in Lebanon



Arab Center for Research & Policy Studies - Beirut



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Executive Summary

The findings indicate that approximately 85% of displaced persons reside outside the existing formal shelter system

The recent wave of displacement in Lebanon reveals a profound shift in the dynamics of humanitarian crises and the modalities through which they are managed. While conventional response frameworks continue to revolve around collective shelters and life-saving relief, most displaced persons today reside outside such facilities, relying instead on rented accommodation, staying with host families, or social support networks. This study argues that displacement in Lebanon is no longer a transient humanitarian condition; rather it has evolved into a protracted urban phenomenon that is increasingly managed through market mechanisms and individual self-reliance strategies rather than through formal institutions and conventional protection systems associated with humanitarian crises.

Drawing on focus group discussions with displaced persons living outside collective shelters, as well as consultations with humanitarian practitioners and public policy experts, the findings indicate that approximately 85 percent of displaced persons reside outside the existing formal shelter system. As a result, the burden of securing housing, livelihoods, protection, and basic services has effectively shifted to displaced households themselves, given the limited capacity of official and humanitarian responses to keep pace with this structural shift.

Housing emerges as the principal entry point for understanding the current dynamics of displacement. The rental market has become the primary arena in which the crisis is reconfigured, and its burdens redistributed, as reflected in sharp increases in rental costs, discriminatory access to housing, residential overcrowding, and widening disparities in the ability to secure adequate shelter. Accordingly, housing has ceased to be merely a basic human need; it has become the primary mechanism through which the costs of displacement and its management are transferred to individuals and households.

The study further reveals mounting economic pressures. Many displaced persons have lost sources of income tied to their areas of origin, while the cost of living has increased in displacement sites. Households have resorted to depleting their savings, incurring debt, reducing consumption, and relying on family and social support networks. Although these coping strategies enable short-term survival, they undermine the prospects for medium- and long-term recovery and stability.

The findings also demonstrate that the experience of displacement cannot be assessed solely in terms of availability of material assistance; it is inextricably

The current crisis comes 18 months after the unprecedented displacement crisis of September 2024 — the largest displacement wave Lebanon had witnessed in decades

bound up with questions of human dignity and social relations. Despite the solidarity displayed by some host communities, many displaced persons have experienced forms of stigmatization, discrimination, and a sense of exclusion, rendering the preservation of dignity and privacy a core element of their daily struggle for survival.

At the public policy level, the most significant finding is the widening gap between the realities of urban displacement and the currently adopted response models. While the bulk of assistance remains concentrated around collective shelters, the majority of displaced persons reside beyond the formal shelter system. This imbalance limits access to aid and reinforces what may be described as the "privatization of displacement management," wherein displaced households themselves become the primary actors managing the crisis and bearing its costs.

The study concludes that there is an urgent need to move beyond an emergency humanitarian approach centered on collective shelters toward an integrated urban planning approach that links immediate relief to housing policies and social protection schemes, as well as livelihood support, local development, and the reinforcement of social cohesion. It further underscores the importance of empowering municipalities and local governance structures as first responders on the ground. Without such a shift, displacement will remain a crisis managed through market forces and social relations, with displaced households bearing the greater share of its burdens and costs.

Recommendations

This study demonstrates that the challenges of responding to the current displacement crisis in Lebanon are manifold. The vast majority of displaced persons residing outside collective shelters have found themselves compelled to secure housing and meet their basic needs through their own resources or via their social networks. Meanwhile, official response mechanisms have lagged behind developments on the ground, remaining constrained by the traditional logic of emergency shelter provision in often inadequately equipped facilities. Consequently, there is an urgent need to reorient the humanitarian response toward the current reality of the displacement crisis, namely the forced relocation of displaced persons into private housing and residential units across cities and urban areas.

Five priorities for intervention emerge from this analysis:

1. Regulating the Rental Market

The study demonstrates that the rental market has, in many instances, become a site of "outrageous exploitation," particularly in the absence of effective government intervention to regulate prices. Given that housing has emerged as the central axis of the current displacement crisis, it must be treated as a core component of the response. This requires the development of innovative policy instruments that respect the principles of the free market in Lebanon, while simultaneously curbing exploitative practices, and ensuring equitable access to housing for displaced households. In this regard, consultations with humanitarian practitioners in the discussion session proposed several measures to mitigate exploitation in the rental market, including enhancing the regulatory role of municipalities and local authorities, activating the use of underutilized buildings and resources, and adopting alternative models such as "rehabilitation in exchange for affordable housing". Furthermore, participants in the discussion session with experts and practitioners cautioned against the exclusive reliance on rental cash assistance, noting that such measures are unsustainable and may contribute to entrenching inflated rental prices. Testimonies collected from displaced persons and humanitarian practitioners indicate that rental costs have often doubled, ranging between USD 1,000 and USD 3,000 per month for housing units that would typically rent for half—or even a quarter—of those amounts. Respondents also reported cases of discrimination and refusal to

rent. These findings suggest that the housing crisis is not merely a question of housing unit availability, but also of equitable access and the ability of displaced households to afford available accommodation.

2. Shifting toward an Urban Response Approach

The current reality of displacement, in which the overwhelming majority of displaced persons reside outside collective shelters, requires a fundamental shift in the logic of the response. This entails moving toward community-based interventions rooted in the cities and neighbourhoods where displaced persons actually reside, through community support programmes that take into account the needs of both displaced persons and host communities.

3. Supporting Daily Livelihoods

The study demonstrates how displaced households have relied on a range of daily coping mechanisms to survive, including reducing expenditures, depleting savings, and accumulating debt. While these strategies may provide short-term relief, they gradually erode household resilience and make recovery more difficult over time. This underscores the importance of structured cash assistance, enhanced social protection measures, and temporary income-generation opportunities. Such interventions can help households maintain a minimum degree of autonomy, preventing them from falling into a cycle of poverty and deprivation.

4. Enhancing the Role of Local Authorities

Municipalities and municipal federations play an essential role as first responders. However, the recent humanitarian crisis exposed significant constraints stemming from their insufficient resources and unclear coordination mechanisms. This points to the need for a transition toward a more decentralized governance framework that endows municipalities with explicit mandates and adequate resources, complemented by accountability mechanisms that ensure operational efficiency, effectiveness, and equitable distribution.

5. Upholding Human Dignity as a Standard of Response

The study demonstrates that human dignity is not a secondary consideration in assessing humanitarian responses; rather, the modalities of aid delivery, the suitability of available housing, and the ways in which displaced persons are treated within host communities directly shape the displacement experience. Discussions during the session revealed that inflammatory rhetoric and social stigma constituted tangible challenges in the daily lives of displaced persons. This highlights the importance of placing dignity considerations at the heart of response efforts.



Introduction

In the context of the ongoing regional war, which began with the US-Israeli military strike against Iran on 28 February 2026 and extended to Lebanon on 2 March 2026 following Hezbollah's direct involvement in the confrontation, the fragile de-escalation arrangements established under the November 2024 cessation of hostilities agreement between Lebanon and Israel collapsed. This development led to an expansion of Israeli military operations and aggression within Lebanese territory, accompanied by a large-scale wave of displacement affecting more than one million people⁽¹⁾, including hundreds of thousands of children⁽²⁾, driven by the widening scope of military targeting and the rapid issuance of evacuation orders⁽³⁾. This new wave of displacement is placing immense pressure on response systems and displaced households, particularly given its recurrence on such a massive scale just eighteen months after the unprecedented displacement crisis of September 2024—the largest such wave Lebanon had witnessed in decades.

Displacement is defined, under the United Nations *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, as the forced movement of individuals or groups from their habitual places of residence as a result of armed conflict, generalized violence, or disasters, without crossing an internationally recognized border⁽⁴⁾. Internally displaced persons (IDPs) now constitute the majority of the world's forcibly displaced population, accounting for approximately 65 percent of all forced displacement cases globally⁽⁵⁾. The majority of internally displaced persons reside outside camps and collective shelters

and are accommodated in standard housing units, while displacement is assuming an increasingly urban character across low- and middle-income countries⁽⁶⁾.

In Lebanon, this transformation takes on a highly complex dimension as forced displacement intensifies in both frequency and duration, evolving into a humanitarian, social, and urban phenomenon that intersects with challenges related to housing, labour markets, infrastructure, and daily living conditions, particularly in the absence of comprehensive social protection frameworks. Of greater significance is the fact that this shift has

This shift reflects the emergence of what may be termed “privatized displacement management”

extended to the very mechanisms governing the management of the humanitarian crisis itself. The majority of displaced households now bear primary responsibility for securing their own housing and meeting their basic needs, drawing on their own resources or leveraging their social networks and personal connections, amid the declining capacity of official

and organized response mechanisms. A growing pattern has emerged whereby displaced persons are no longer moving to collective shelters, which constituted the principal channel of organized response in previous conflicts, but are instead opting for rented accommodation, hosting arrangements with relatives, or other temporary housing solutions. These choices are dictated almost entirely by housing costs and the financial means available to each household. This shift reflects what may be termed “privatized displacement management,” whereby the management and burdens of a substantial portion of the humanitarian crisis are

(1) International Organization for Migration (IOM), "Emergency Relief Items Airlifted to Lebanon as 1 Million Remain Displaced," 11 May 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SIA>

(2) United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), "Children Caught in Escalating Violence in Lebanon," *Situation Update*, UNICEF Lebanon, 19 March 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SY2>

(3) "Lebanon at 'Breaking Point' as Displacement Soars and Strikes Intensify," United Nations News, 31 March 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SkC>

(4) United Nations Commission on Human Rights, *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement*, E/CN.4/1998/53/Add.2, 11 February 1998, p. 5, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SyJ>

(5) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), "Internally Displaced People," 2025, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SoS>

(6) World Bank Group, *Forcibly Displaced: Toward a Development Approach Supporting Refugees, the Internally Displaced, and their Hosts* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2017), pp. 15, 26, 28, 33, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2STM>

transferred to the affected households themselves. Consequently, securing housing, protection, and daily necessities becomes more contingent upon individuals' capacities, resources, and social ties than upon a structured institutional response.

This study therefore focuses specifically on displaced persons residing outside collective shelters, who account for approximately 85 percent of the total displaced population in Lebanon⁽⁷⁾. Distributed across rented accommodation, relatives' households, and various temporary housing arrangements, this group often lacks stability and adequate protection. Yet, it represents the most instructive entry point for understanding the transformation of displacement dynamics underway in Lebanon, and indeed globally, whereby displacement is increasingly managed through market mechanisms and social networks rather than through institutional response systems alone⁽⁸⁾.

Methodology and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative methodology to understand the lived experiences of displacement outside formal collective shelters, given the significant underrepresentation of this population in statistical frameworks—a limitation that constraints the ability of conventional quantitative tools to adequately capture and analyse its experiences. The study seeks to examine displacement through the perspectives of displaced persons themselves, drawing on eight focus group discussions (FGDs) conducted during the first week of April 2026 with displaced persons from South Lebanon and Beirut's southern suburbs (*Dahiyeh*). Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure demographic diversity in terms of age, gender, and housing arrangements, thereby enabling an in-depth exploration of their daily lives, including housing conditions, economic coping mechanisms, patterns of interaction with host communities, the reorganization of everyday life under displacement,

and their perceptions of the current humanitarian response⁽⁹⁾.

In addition to the focus group discussions, and with a view to enriching the analytical interpretation of the findings, the preliminary results of the study were presented during a discussion session held in Beirut on 17 April 2026, attended by humanitarian practitioner, representatives of local institutions, and public policy experts. The session provided an opportunity to test and validate the initial findings against practitioners' field experience, particularly with regard to the limitations of the humanitarian response, the role of local actors, and the challenges associated with managing displacement outside formal institutional frameworks. These discussions demonstrated a clear convergence between the views and perspectives of practitioners and those expressed by displaced participants.



Accordingly, this study combines **two** levels of analysis:

First, an analysis grounded in the lived experiences of displaced persons, as articulated in their own words;

Second, an analytical framework that situates these empirical experiences within a broader context through engagement with the insights of stakeholders and experts.

(7) "UN Official Says 100,000 Lebanese are in Shelters after Unprecedented Israeli Warnings," *Reuters*, 6/3/2026. at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2Sjh>

(8) United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *Global Trends: Forced Displacement in 2023* (Copenhagen: 2024), at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SOB>

(9) Richard A. Krueger & Mary Anne Casey, *Focus Groups: A Practical Guide for Applied Research*, 5th ed. (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2015).

This complementary, dual-layered approach enables a deeper understanding of the current displacement crisis—one that moves beyond a descriptive account of prevailing conditions toward an interpretative reading situated within an urban paradigm characterized by self-reliance.

I. From Organized Shelter to "Self-Reliance"

The study's findings indicate that only around 15 percent of displaced persons accessed formal collective shelters, while the majority relocated to cities, suburbs, and other urban areas, securing housing through rental arrangements or by staying with relatives and friends. This pattern emerged as the dominant mode of displacement. In the contemporary literature on forced displacement, this phenomenon is commonly referred to as "urban forced displacement," whereby displaced persons are thrust into complex urban environments and confronted with the costs of housing, commodified services, and the demands of daily life⁽¹⁰⁾. The literature consistently suggests that this form of displacement requires a fundamentally different institutional response framework, as the city ceases to function merely as a place of refuge and instead operates as a complex system encompassing housing, employment, and service provision⁽¹¹⁾. Participants in the discussion session underscored that the prolonged gap between the onset of displacement and the provision of official support compelled households to rely entirely on their own resources from the very first day. This situation deepened their sense of abandonment, as they were left to cope with the consequences of displacement on their own from its earliest moments. One participant captured this reality vividly in his testimony: *"We were stuck on the road for 12-13 hours ... sleeping in the car and on the street before we could find somewhere to sleep."*

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It is worth noting that Lebanese cities were structurally unprepared to absorb such a mass influx of displaced persons, which exceeded 20 percent of the country's population. Already burdened by

a chronic economic crisis and severely deteriorated infrastructure networks, these urban centers offered a transition from one form of vulnerability to another. Participants and experts alike stressed during the discussion session that cities had reached their absorption limits and had themselves become an additional source of strain. Rather than providing greater protection, urban areas exposed displaced persons to new hardships, including rising rents, limited employment opportunities, and deteriorating public services.

The burden is not limited to housing. In the absence of stable income sources and adequate support from official bodies, international and local organizations, displacement places households under mounting daily financial pressure. Over time, what begins as an emergency crisis gradually evolves into a persistent daily strain that steadily erodes households' resilience and capacity to cope.

Thus, what may be termed "privatized displacement management" has emerged, whereby individuals find themselves securing access to housing, food, and basic needs through their own resources or social networks, in the absence of an effective official response. One participant in the discussion session succinctly captured this reality: *"This time, people have been left to face their fate alone."* This absence was also evident in displaced persons' experiences with official registration platforms established by public authorities to facilitate access to assistance: *"We registered, but no one responded,"* and *"We called the number, but nobody answered."*

II. Housing as a Market for Managing Urban Displacement and Redistributing Burdens

The study shows that, in contexts of displacement, the housing market does not operate as a neutral mechanism. Rather, it has become an

(10) International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), *Displaced in Cities: Experiencing and Responding to Urban Internal Displacement Outside Camps* (Geneva: 2018), at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2St8>

(11) Swati Sachdeva et al., *Forced Displacement: An Agenda for Cities and Towns* (Washington, DC: World Bank Group, 2025), p. 1, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SEk>

unregulated space governed by the dynamics of supply and demand, through which economic and social inequalities are reproduced. Testimonies from displaced persons pointed to sharp increases in rental costs, often reaching several times their pre-displacement levels, ranging between USD 1,000 and USD 3,000, even for unfurnished accommodation or housing lacking basic amenities. Some displaced persons expressed their sense of exploitation by saying: *"They see us as a bag of money, so they raise prices."* Yet, families' decisions to rent accommodation or stay with relatives also reflect a deliberate choice to avoid collective shelters, which, in the perception of some participants, are associated with poverty and the loss of privacy. One participant described these facilities in stark terms: *"Collective shelters are decorated prisons, not shelters. Let's be realistic."* Even under difficult displacement conditions, displaced persons and their families seek to preserve a measure of privacy, independence, and dignity.

Participants in the discussion session described this situation as "outrageous exploitation," noting that some landlords had been anticipating crises of this kind in order to capitalize on surging demand. Despite the fact that regulating rental market is a core component of state policy, there has been a complete absence of any effective intervention. Specialized literature on housing and displacement emphasizes that monitoring and reforming rental markets constitute a key mechanism for expanding housing options for displaced persons and reducing housing costs.⁽¹²⁾

This pressure on the housing market cannot be understood without examining how displaced persons themselves perceive collective shelters. Participants in the discussion session noted that these facilities are socially viewed as a last resort for the most vulnerable groups, prompting many displaced persons to avoid them, even in the absence of stable alternatives. The search for alternative housing is therefore driven not only by cost considerations but also by efforts to preserve a minimum degree of dignity and privacy, within a context in which housing needs intersect with fears of stigma and discrimination within host communities.

Beyond the prohibitive costs, several displaced persons reported difficulties in securing residential

accommodation, as some landlords either refused to rent to them or imposed discriminatory conditions based on regional affiliation or religious appearance. As some participants recounted: *"We do not rent to displaced persons,"* and *"We don't rent to women wearing hijabs."* Access to housing is thus contingent not only on financial means but also on social acceptance, a dynamic that reproduces forms of exclusion within urban space.

Faced with these constraints, many displaced persons have resorted to staying with relatives or sharing accommodation with other households. While this option reduces financial costs, it often results in severe overcrowding, with some housing units accommodating twenty or more individuals. Among those residing with relatives, a persistent sense of being "guests" emerged. One displaced person summarized this feeling succinctly: *"A person is only comfortable in their own home."*

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The housing situation of displaced persons thus becomes a concrete illustration of the broader redistribution of responsibility away from public authorities and international humanitarian organizations, and onto displaced households themselves. It demonstrates how the burden of managing displacement is transferred to affected individuals and households, who find themselves either at the mercy of an unregulated housing market that exploits heightened demand for residential units, or compelled to draw on their social networks to secure a minimum level of stability and protection. This structural offloading of burdens runs counter to core principles governing responses to displacement, particularly urban displacement, which identify housing, land, and property (HLP) as essential components of any humanitarian response framework and advocate interventions within existing housing systems rather than treating shelter

(12) Ombretta Tempa & Heather Elizabeth Elaydi, *Policy Directions: Housing, Land and Property Solutions to Resolve and Prevent Displacement*, United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) & Global Land Tool Network (Nairobi: 2024), pp. 18-19, 48, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SZn>

as an isolated solution detached from the broader urban fabric of the city⁽¹³⁾. Instead of benefiting from organized protection pathways, displaced persons find themselves compelled to search for accommodation, negotiate rental arrangements, or rely on relatives and acquaintances to secure the minimum conditions necessary for stability.

III. Economic Pressure and Coping Mechanisms in Urban Displacement

Displaced persons in cities and urban areas confront a difficult daily reality: rising and accumulating expenditure set against declining or interrupted income. Relocating to an urban environment entails paying directly for every necessity, including rent, food, transportation and services, often in addition to furnishing a new place of residence from scratch. These pressures emerge at a time when displaced households are experiencing either a loss or a reduction of income. One displaced person described this reality succinctly: "*Expenses without income.*"

This situation is attributable in part to the structural characteristics of the Lebanese labour market, where many displaced persons depend on informal sector employment and location-specific sources of daily income, such as work in local retail shops, seasonal agricultural labour, or low-skilled occupations. These sources of income are often disrupted immediately upon displacement, resulting in a sharp decline or complete loss of earnings. Some participants in the discussion session noted that displacement resulted in the loss of an entire agricultural season or the holiday season, which constitutes a critical period of economic activity for large segments of the population. Displaced persons themselves described this reality bluntly: "*We lost the most important work season of the year.*" At the same time, many were unable to secure alternative sources of income in their areas of displacement.

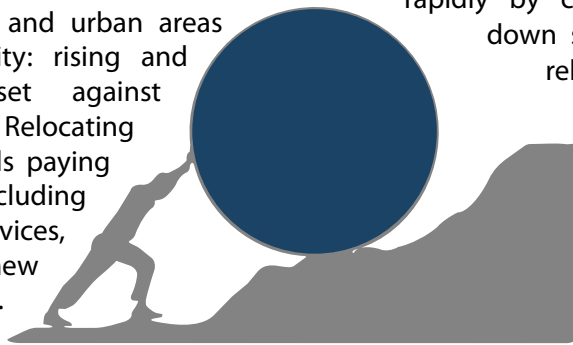
The nature of economic pressure varies according to the area of origin. Those displaced from South Lebanon lost livelihoods tied to their location, whether local employment, an agricultural season, or a commercial enterprise in their villages and towns. By contrast, those displaced from Beirut's southern suburbs faced the primary challenge of costs associated with urban displacement itself, particularly rent and the need to establish a temporary home from scratch. This suggests that some households were affected not only by the loss of income, but also by the obligation to bear additional financial burdens beyond their means. In both cases, households were compelled to adapt

rapidly by cutting expenditures, drawing down savings, seeking support from relatives, or incurring debt. In some instances, austerity measures reached the point of reducing consumption to its bare minimum, including limiting the number of daily meals. As some participants explained: "*We eat only once a day.*" The literature on forced

displacement warns that such coping strategies may enable households to endure temporarily, they become increasingly erosive over time when they involve the sale of productive assets, the depletion of savings, or the reduction of food intake, thereby rendering post-war recovery more difficult⁽¹⁴⁾.

In the absence of alternative employment opportunities in areas of displacement, economic and livelihood pressures cease to be merely a matter of balancing income and expenditure and instead become a daily condition of managing scarcity. As households lose the capacity for self-reliance, individuals become increasingly dependent on family and social support networks, or more susceptible to clientelist relationships. In the absence of effective state intervention, these informal coping mechanisms become entrenched, further deepening vulnerability over the medium term.

Development-oriented approaches to displacement reaffirm that breaking out of this



(13) United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), *Towards Inclusive Solutions to Urban Internal Displacement: A Global Framework for Governments, UN Agencies, the Resident Coordinator System and Partners* (Nairobi: February 2025), pp. 32-33, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SA4>

(14) World Bank Group, *Forcibly Displaced*, pp. 81, 90.

cycle cannot be achieved through immediate relief alone; it requires medium-term support that enables households to regain a degree of economic autonomy while ensuring that their basic needs are met until more stable sources of income become available⁽¹⁵⁾.

IV. Host Communities and Human Dignity in the Context of Displacement

The experience of displacement is not confined to its material dimensions. Displaced persons do not simply move to a new location; they enter a network of daily interactions with landlords, neighbours, relatives, and other local actors, including representatives of local authorities, political parties, and civil society associations. Through these interactions, their social position is reconfigured not only as individuals seeking safety, but also as individuals who are sometimes viewed through the lens of their regional, sectarian, or political identities.

Moreover, relations with host communities have been characterized by a complex dynamic that combines solidarity and support on the one hand with tension and discrimination on the other. In certain cases, kinship networks and socially proximate environments provided an initial space for accommodation. However, this accommodation remained contingent upon unwritten rules governing the behaviours expected by host communities, resulting in forms of self-restraint and the avoidance of social friction. Displaced persons expressed this tension clearly,

noting that they often felt reduced to a single political identity: "*They see us all as Hezbollah.*"

This tension does not stem solely from daily interactions; rather, it is also sustained by broader societal discourses—particularly the sectarian and inflammatory rhetoric that has emerged as an influential factor in determining the boundaries of social acceptance for displaced persons. Participants in the discussion session pointed to manifestations of "othering" and social stigma, suggesting that the relationship had evolved from situational friction into deeper patterns of exclusion. This dynamic is consistent with findings in the social cohesion literature on displacement, which indicate that pressure on services, markets, and housing tends to reinforce negative perceptions among host communities, undermine social cohesion between groups, and exacerbate social tensions⁽¹⁶⁾.



On an everyday level, this tension often manifests itself as direct confrontation. Yet it is also reflected in the adoption of "avoidance strategies", including curtailing movement, lowering one's voice, and adhering strictly to local norms and expectations. In cases where displaced persons reside with relatives or in shared housing, they are often required to manage their presence carefully in order to preserve

(15) Ibid., pp. 81, 90.

(16) World Bank Group, *Social Cohesion and Forced Displacement: A Synthesis of New Research* (Washington, DC: 2022), pp. 1-2, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2Sut>

their relationship with their hosts. Participants described this reality by noting that they always had to "*sit respectfully*." Displacement thus becomes a daily experience that compels individuals to continually adjust their conduct and presence within a new space in which they enjoy neither the same degree of freedom nor the same sense of stability.

From this perspective, the concept of human dignity emerges as an analytical entry point for understanding the experience of displacement, conditions of accommodation, as well as response mechanisms and the social relations within host communities. The United Nations *Guiding Principles on Internal Displacement* affirm that displaced persons are entitled to the same rights and freedoms as all other citizens and must not be subjected to discrimination on account of displacement. However, participants' testimonies in the discussion session reveal that dignity is tested in the details of everyday life: in the ability to secure housing without stigma, to move freely without constant caution, and to access assistance without marginalization. Furthermore, contributions during the discussion session indicated that weak trust in formal institutions drives some displaced persons to rely on informal channels of support, thereby reshaping their relationship with the state and directly affecting their sense of autonomy and dignity. Dignity, in this context, is measured not merely by the provision of shelter or assistance, but also by the terms on which these are obtained and the nature of the social relations produced by the conditions of displacement. When displaced persons are compelled to curtail their social presence or accept an unbalanced housing arrangement for fear of losing the only available alternative, displacement becomes an experience that affects the very core of personal autonomy

From this perspective, human dignity cannot be separated from the nature of relations with host communities. These relations, with all their ambiguities, are not a peripheral dimension of the crisis; rather, they constitute a fundamental component of its structure. They shape the ability of displaced persons to live in urban settings without fear or stigma, while also influencing the capacity of host communities to absorb the shock of displacement without generating further tensions. Participants in the discussion session noted that the overlapping roles of political and sectarian actors in the response effort have contributed to reshaping

these relations within unequal frameworks. Any urban approach to displacement therefore remains incomplete unless it places social cohesion and the preservation of human dignity at its core.

V. The Limits of Humanitarian Response and the Need for an Integrated Approach

The recent displacement crisis in Lebanon has exposed a significant gap between the realities of urban displacement and response mechanisms that remain largely governed by the logic of traditional collective shelter-based approaches. While displaced persons relocate to cities and urban areas and rely primarily on individual housing arrangements, assistance continue to be concentrated on those residing in collective shelters and remains largely unable to reach those living outside them. Displaced persons themselves have expressed this absence bluntly: "*The state is absent*," and "*Nobody even knows we exist*."

This institutional vacuum was particularly evident in the experience of registration and assistance requests. Displaced persons living outside collective shelters reported that registration on official platforms, which were designed to identify and register displaced persons and assess their needs, rarely resulted in tangible support or meaningful follow-up. Participants in the discussion session noted that registration has increasingly come to be viewed as a data collection exercise rather than a gateway to accessing assistance, contributing to declining trust among displaced persons in these mechanisms.

This absence had a direct impact on families who remained in affected villages and localities. One participant in the discussion session observed that "*families in the villages that remained steadfast survive on what they can provide for themselves or obtain by seeking assistance from various sources; otherwise, the situation would have deteriorated even further*." He added that, in many cases, the response remained contingent on awaiting official decisions and administrative procedures.

In contrast, the fastest interventions were channelled through local actors and networks, including municipalities, civil society associations, and informal social support networks. Participants in the discussion session stressed that "*the response comes from the ground*," and that municipalities, municipal federations, and governors' task forces served as the effective first responders. However, this local role remained largely unintegrated into formal institutional frameworks, resulting in unequal access, duplication in some instances, and gaps in others. As a result of this institutional vacuum, the bulk of interventions took place outside established formal frameworks through informal coordination with municipalities aimed at addressing urgent needs.

The scale of the international response was lower than during previous waves of displacement. Experts participating in the discussion session noted that organizational budgets had declined, and that the response in 2026 was more limited than in previous years in light of shrinking international funding and the complexity of coordination mechanisms, which several experts described as "cumbersome" and responsible for delaying the delivery of assistance.

Participants provided a practical example of these challenges, noting that the first humanitarian aid convoy sent to families who remained in Nabatieh Governorate did not depart until 24 March, despite the onset of the displacement wave and military escalation on 2 March. One participant described the process as the product of "*an extremely exhausting mechanism that remains so to this day*," adding that the 22-day delay before the departure of the first convoy reflects the gap between the urgency of needs on the ground and the slow pace of administrative procedures and institutional coordination. Another participant summarized the situation by stating that "*people were left to face their fate on their own*," arguing that the cumbersome structure of the response and the complexity of coordination mechanisms contributed to delays in reaching those most in need.

This reality is consistent with contemporary displacement literature, which underscores the need to move beyond temporary relief responses toward

approaches that integrate displacement into local and national planning frameworks and programmes, including urban planning, service provision, and social protection systems. Participants in the discussion session pointed out that existing national plans had not been effectively operationalized on the ground, and that the slow pace of a unified national response, compounded by a multiplicity of actors and fragmented centers of decision-making, constituted one of the principal shortcomings of the response⁽¹⁷⁾. Discussions revealed that these plans remained, to a large extent, "ink on paper," and that the coordination framework adopted often impeded intervention rather than accelerating it. In this context, participants stressed that field experience during the recent war demonstrated that any effective response requires the state to recognize municipalities and municipal federations as first responders and to integrate them meaningfully into planning and implementation systems, rather than leaving their role outside the institutional framework.

The scale of the international response was less compared to previous waves of displacement

Accordingly, there is a need for an integrated approach that engages with displacement through the existing urban systems and frameworks, including housing, service provision, and livelihood opportunities within the local economy, rather than confining interventions to the logic of emergency shelter provision. This also requires adapting the response to the realities of urban displacement by reaching displaced persons where they actually reside and linking interventions to accurate needs mapping. The central challenge is that, if the current response model persists, it will further shift the burdens of the crisis onto displaced individuals and households within their urban environments, thereby exacerbating vulnerability rather than mitigating it.

(17) United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Lebanon: Flash Update #12 – Escalation of Hostilities in Lebanon*, (as of 26 March 2026), 28 March 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2SJv>; United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), *Lebanon: Flash Update #16 – Escalation of Hostilities in Lebanon (as of 9 April 2026)*, 11 April 2026, at: <https://acr.ps/hBy2T9e>

VI. Policy Implications

This study demonstrates that the challenges of responding to the current displacement crisis in Lebanon are manifold. The vast majority of displaced persons residing outside collective shelters have found themselves compelled to secure housing and meet their basic needs through their own resources or via their social networks. Meanwhile, official response mechanisms have lagged behind developments on the ground, remaining constrained by the traditional logic of emergency shelter provision in often inadequately equipped facilities. Consequently, there is an urgent need to reorient the humanitarian response toward the current reality of the displacement crisis, namely the forced relocation of displaced persons into private housing and residential units across cities and urban areas.

Five priorities for intervention emerge from this analysis:

1. Regulating the Rental Market

The study demonstrates that the rental market has, in many instances, become a site of "outrageous exploitation," particularly in the absence of effective government intervention to regulate prices. Given that housing has emerged as the central axis of the current displacement crisis, it must be treated as a core component of the response. This requires the development of innovative policy instruments that respect the principles of the free market in Lebanon, while simultaneously curbing exploitative practices, and ensuring equitable access to housing for displaced households. In this regard, consultations with humanitarian practitioners in the discussion session proposed a number of measures to mitigate exploitation in the rental market, including enhancing the regulatory role of municipalities and local authorities, activating the use of underutilized buildings and resources, and adopting alternative models such as "rehabilitation in exchange for affordable housing." Furthermore, participants in the discussion session with practitioners cautioned against the exclusive reliance on rental cash assistance, noting that such measures are unsustainable and may contribute to entrenching inflated rental prices. Testimonies collected from displaced persons and humanitarian practitioners

through the study indicate that rental costs have often doubled, ranging between USD 1,000 and USD 3,000 per month for housing units that would typically rent for half—or even a quarter—of those amounts. Respondents also reported cases of discrimination and refusal to rent. These findings suggest that the housing crisis is not merely a question of housing unit availability, but also of equitable access and the ability of displaced households to afford available accommodation.

2. Shifting toward an Urban Response Approach

The current reality of displacement, in which the overwhelming majority of displaced persons reside outside collective shelters, requires a fundamental shift in the logic of the response. This entails moving toward community-based interventions rooted in the cities and neighbourhoods where displaced persons actually reside, through community support programmes that take into account the needs of both displaced persons and host communities.

3. Supporting Daily Livelihoods

The study demonstrates how displaced households have relied on a range of daily coping mechanisms to survive, including reducing expenditures, depleting savings, and accumulating debt. While these strategies may provide short-term relief, they gradually erode household resilience and make recovery more difficult over time. This underscores the importance of structured cash assistance, enhanced social protection measures, and temporary income-generation opportunities. Such interventions can help households maintain a minimum degree of autonomy, preventing them from falling into a cycle of poverty and deprivation.

4. Enhancing the Role of Local Authorities

Municipalities and municipal federations play an essential role as first responders. However, the recent humanitarian crisis exposed significant constraints stemming from their insufficient resources and unclear coordination mechanisms. This points to the need for a transition toward a more decentralized governance framework that endows municipalities with explicit mandates and adequate resources, complemented by accountability mechanisms that ensure operational efficiency, effectiveness, and equitable distribution.

5. Upholding Human Dignity as a Standard of Response

The study demonstrates that human dignity is not a secondary consideration in assessing humanitarian responses; rather, the modalities of aid delivery, the suitability of available housing, and the ways in which displaced persons are treated within host communities directly shape the displacement experience. Discussions during the session revealed that inflammatory rhetoric and social stigma constituted tangible challenges in the daily lives of displaced persons. This highlights the importance of placing dignity considerations at the heart of response efforts.

Conclusion

This study reveals that displacement in Lebanon, in the context of the recent war, has evolved beyond a temporary forced relocation from areas affected by conflict to safer locations. It has also surpassed the conventional understanding of a humanitarian crisis measured solely by the number of displaced persons or the volume of assistance provided. Rather, the field findings reveal that displacement has become a complex urban experience, navigated daily through housing markets, kinship networks, and individual coping strategies, amid the limited regulatory and response capacity of public institutions. In this context, the experience of displacement is also shaped by the quality of social relations and networks.

Housing lies at the heart of this experience. In this context, housing is not merely a form of temporary shelter; rather it constitutes the sphere in which the costs of displacement become more visible and through which broader dynamics of social and economic relations, discrimination, overcrowding, loss of privacy, and dependence on others, are expressed. Consequently, pressure on the housing market is not a secondary consequence of displacement, but one of the principal mechanisms through which the crisis is managed and its burdens redistributed among displaced households, host communities, and local actors.

The study further shows that the "privatization of displacement management" is driven not only by insufficient assistance, but also by a deeper gap

between the realities of displacement as it unfolds in urban settings and a response model that continues to treat it as a short-term emergency. When the majority of displaced persons are dispersed across rented accommodation and relatives' homes, and when displacement extends over months rather than days, conventional response mechanisms become less capable of assessing needs, setting priorities, and reaching households that bear the cost of displacement outside formal shelter settings.

Addressing this reality requires an integrated urban approach that combines a focus on displaced persons and their needs with equal attention to the cities, neighbourhoods, services, markets, and local institutions that host them. The discussion session clearly reflected this perspective. Participants emphasized that the challenge lies not only in resource constraints, but rather in the weak institutionalization of the response, the fragmentation of the coordinating authority, and the continued reliance on bureaucratic approaches to managing the response. They further noted that national contingency plans, despite their existence, have remained largely ineffective in addressing the needs of the majority of displaced persons. By contrast, participants highlighted the importance of engaging with municipalities and municipal federations as critical first responders, given their proximity to affected communities and their ability to identify needs and reach households residing outside collective shelters.

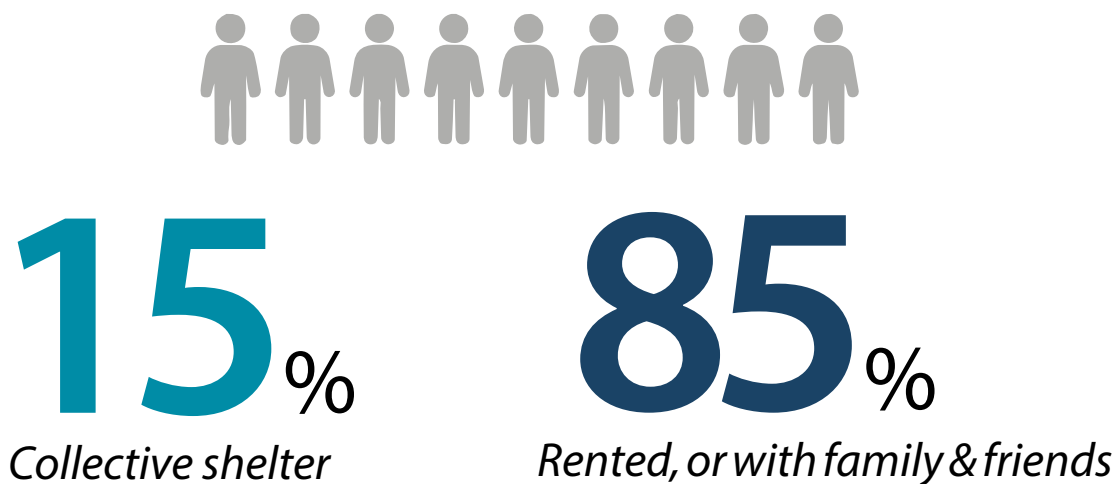
Accordingly, transitioning from a temporary humanitarian response toward a state-led framework requires linking immediate relief efforts to more effective and equitable policies across housing, service provision, social protection, and local governance. The *Guidance on Solutions to Internal Displacement* issued by the United Nations Sustainable Development Group (UNSDG) and the Inter-Agency Standing Committee (IASC) emphasizes that sustainable solutions to displacement require clear government leadership capable of mainstreaming displaced persons into development policies, basic services and social protection systems.

Although this study focuses on the experience of displacement, it proceeds from a growing recognition that the challenge extends beyond displacement itself. It raises questions about the post-war phase, as attention gradually shifts from

managing displacement to addressing more complex and far-reaching issues: Who will return? To which areas? Under what conditions? And with what form of support? The immediate aftermath of a cessation of hostilities does not signify the end of the crisis; rather, it ushers in a new set of challenges related to managing return, restoring stability, and the capacity of institutions to respond to them.

Ultimately, the study exposes a fundamental imbalance in official response programmes, which remain overwhelmingly oriented toward supporting displaced persons in collective shelters, even though they constitute a minority representing no more than 15 percent of the total displaced population. The

vast majority resides in private accommodation. As a result, response programmes that focus primarily on collective shelters effectively transfer the burden of displacement management onto displaced households themselves, leaving them vulnerable to the dynamics of an unregulated housing market and to the availability of social support networks. Therein lies the structural imbalance. Without an integrated approach that restores a more equitable balance between the state, the housing market, and society, displacement will continue to impose its heaviest burdens on individuals and households, while its broader structural costs accumulate to the detriment of cities and the country as a whole.



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