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Policy Brief

Absorbing Displacement Under Fire: Municipal Pressure, Host-Community Capacity, and Service Delivery During Lebanon's 2026 war

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Introduction

The outbreak of hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah on March 2, 2026, led to the displacement of more than one million people in Lebanon. However, many of them have not yet been able to return to their homes despite the declaration of a partial ceasefire in June of the same year. As of 1 September 2026, 329,240 people remained internally displaced, of whom 311,674—or 94.7%—were residing outside collective shelters (IOM DTM, 2026). Consequently, the response was not limited to shelters but also relied on residential neighborhoods, rented housing, host families, and municipal services.

This brief is based on a comparative qualitative study of six areas in Lebanon—Ain Sa'ada, Aley, Dekwaneh, Fanar, Sidon, and Zahle—which included semi-structured interviews with municipal officials and staff along with supplementary field interviews. The most notable findings relate to the institutional dimension, as municipalities reported incurring additional costs on their budgets—including meeting new demands for water, waste collection, traffic management, security, and administration—without receiving emergency government funding specifically allocated to offset these expenses.

The municipal reports were cross-checked and corroborated with information from the Ministries of Social Affairs, Education, and the Interior. Nevertheless, displaced families living outside the shelters received cash assistance, while those in the shelters received in-kind assistance. A dedicated integrated digital crisis coordination platform was developed for this purpose and made available to the Disaster Risk Management (DRM) Unit at the Presidency of the Council of Ministers who worked directly with the Lebanese Red Cross (LRC), the National Council for Scientific Research (CNRS), government ministries, and UN agencies. to ensure that aid reached those entitled to it and to coordinate donor efforts (UNDP,2026).

The report identifies seven interrelated yet distinct findings. In Saida, using public schools as shelters disrupted instruction, placed a disproportionate burden on the poorest host families, and worsened conditions because distance learning was ineffective due to power outages and insufficient internet access.

In Aley, municipal officials reported that they had preemptively verified the identities of displaced tenants in coordination with security forces and political parties in the area, and that they had imposed restrictions on the registration of new commercial lease agreements for institutions from outside the town to avoid social tensions between the displaced and the host community, while other municipalities reported registering displaced persons outside shelters and sharing information with official security forces.

At one shelter in Dekwneh, a director attributed the absence of tensions between displaced persons and the host community to the distance of the educational complex housing of the displaced from densely populated residential neighborhoods.

In Sidon, Ain Saadeh, and Dekwaneh, some landlords were reluctant to rent out their apartments due to security concerns that the displaced might be targeted by direct shelling. Selected online posts on social media also contained hostile or sectarian remarks, and follow-up interviews documented economic strain among some residents of the host areas.

Meanwhile, municipal workers described the erosion of their wages and occupational burnout following successive crises; in a separate testimony, a displaced person described the loss of employment, rising costs of healthcare, food, water, and electricity, and repeated displacement as exhausting and unbearable. However, due to their limited scope, these testimonies do not prove the widespread prevalence of exhaustion, the rise of hate speech, or the existence of a causal relationship between displacement crises and societal trends.

Accordingly, policies should address municipal funding gaps, disruptions to basic services and the paralysis of the formal education system, administrative constraints, security concerns related to housing, and manifestations of exhaustion. Social cohesion initiatives may play a useful role, but they are no substitute for direct municipal funding during crises, the continuity of services, legal safeguards, addressing housing risks, and targeted support for economically vulnerable families in host communities.

Background

The 2026 Israel-Hezbollah war displaced more than one million people at its height (Chouayfati, 2026). On 16 March 2026, 1,049,328 people were recorded as displaced, and displacement orders covered about 14% of Lebanon's territory, across the South, Beirut's southern suburbs, and parts of the Bekaa (UNICEF, 2026). Displacement eased slowly: 329,240 people were still displaced on 1 September 2026 (IOM DTM, 2026).

Few internally displaced persons (IDPs) lived in collective shelters. On 16 March 2026, 134,601 people, about 13% of the displaced, were in 660 official collective shelters, most of them public schools (UNICEF, 2026). By 1 September 2026, about 17,500 people remained in 184 shelters, and 94.7% of the displaced lived outside collective sites (Chouayfati, 2026; IOM DTM, 2026). Most of the pressure therefore fell on IDPs renting houses, host communities, and on municipalities servicing IDPs.

The government coordinated its response to the displacement crisis from the National Emergency Operation's Room under the Minister of Social Affairs, with governors opening shelters and organizing assistance outside the shelters (Chouayfati, 2026). Assistance went mainly to households: the Shock Responsive Safety Net reached around 140,000 households within weeks. The Flash Appeal from March to August 2026 was funded at 52% when it closed on 31 August 2026 (Chouayfati, 2026). Municipalities handled local services,

registration, and coordination under Decree-Law No. 118/1977, which defines their responsibilities.

Methodological Note

This brief is based on a qualitative comparison of Saida and Zahle—the two largest municipalities studied—with Aley and Dekwaneh—two medium-sized municipalities—and Fanar and Ain Saadeh—two small municipalities. The researcher conducted 24 semi-structured interviews with municipal officials and staff in September 2026, four per municipality. Supplementary data included 12 interviews with staff at schools used as shelters; 24 interviews with residents of host communities—an average of four per municipal area—followed by follow-up conversations in early October; interviews with property owners and real estate brokers in Saida, Ain Sa'ada, and Dekwaneh; and a narrative account from one displaced person.

The seven formal institutional interviews included the Ministry of Social Affairs, one governor, officials from the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and representatives of three nongovernmental organizations. Ministry interviews were conducted in October 2026 to verify the consistency of some of the institutional findings, while public reports, local documents, and online materials provided context for the analysis. The shelter interviews conveyed the perspectives of shelter administrators; they were not field assessments of shelter conditions.

The study reports findings and possible explanations; it does not establish causal effects or national prevalence. Statements from residents and property owners do not constitute statistically representative data, nor do online posts reflect general trends. Municipal spending records or central government expenditure data were unavailable for independent verification. Furthermore, interview statements regarding donor decisions, shelter admissions, or reluctance to relocate were not verified against donor administrative records, shelter admission records, or population-wide surveys.

Why This Matters

Pressures on host communities in Lebanon are often understood through the lens of the response to the Syrian refugee crisis, during which municipalities faced increased demand for services and some local authorities imposed restrictions on refugees (Harb and Saab, 2014; Human Rights Watch, 2014; Kikano et al., 2021). However, the displacement crisis caused by the 2026 war calls for a more nuanced analysis; it involved widespread internal displacement of Lebanese citizens and followed a war and displacement crisis in 2024. Although the experience of hosting refugees provides a relevant context, it does not constitute an inevitable trajectory that explains every local response.

Municipalities assume local service and administrative responsibilities under Legislative Decree No. 118/1977. However, meeting the needs of the displaced and distributing the responsibilities for their care and the financial burdens at the national level were clearer for collective shelters than for families residing in rented housing or with relatives. Consequently, the study found no emergency government funding allocated to compensate municipalities for the additional costs incurred due to the displacement crisis.

A distinction must be made between national and international assistance to families and compensation to municipalities for their expenses. The Ministry of Social Affairs' shock-responsive social safety net provided emergency cash assistance to families affected by the war who were living outside shelters, in addition to support from nongovernmental organizations and the United Nations; however, these programs did not cover the additional costs incurred by municipalities (Chouayfati, 2026).

Inter-institutional coordination also affected access to services. A representative of a nongovernmental organization attributed delays in accessing some shelters—including those providing psychosocial support—to delays in approvals from the Ministry of Social Affairs. Furthermore, municipal authorities maintained separate registration lists for displaced persons, which complicated referrals of individuals residing outside shelters to services.

What The Research Found

1. Municipalities carried additional service costs

Municipal participants in all six cases reported increased demand for water, waste collection, traffic management, local security, and administration. While the Zahle Municipality described the rise in demand for water, the Aley Municipality worked to balance the needs of residents and shelters. The Dekwaneh Municipality sought to repair the sewage system at one of the shelters, and the Fanar Municipality focused on providing water, waste collection, and security at the shelter at the Lebanese University, which falls within its municipal jurisdiction. An official in Zahle noted that a lack of funding limited the response and that the increase in the number of municipal police officers to cover new services was funded from the municipal budget.

The municipalities also registered displaced persons and coordinated with the governor and security agencies, sometimes using separate lists of displaced persons. None of the six municipalities reported receiving an emergency government payment intended to reimburse their expenses. Representatives from the Ministries of the Interior, Municipalities, Finance, and Education and Higher Education confirmed these statements. Because we did not have access to municipal or central government spending records, this study cannot quantitatively estimate the municipalities' additional costs.

2. The use of schools as shelters disrupted education

In Saida, a local official described how using 24 public schools as shelters disrupted instruction, placing an additional burden on poor host families who cannot afford private education. The report noted that disparities in lost educational opportunities led to tensions. The evidence does not indicate the extent to which these tensions are prevalent across all six municipalities combined.

3. Some municipalities used preventive administrative screening

In Aley, a member of the municipal council reported that displaced tenants are subject to prior municipal review and that the registration of new commercial lease agreements for institutions from outside the town has been suspended. They noted that these measures began in the first week of the crisis, before any locally reported incidents, citing security considerations aimed at preventing tensions and protecting the town's tourism identity and local economy. The study did not obtain the written municipal decisions nor verify their full legal scope.

Other municipal representatives reported that security forces had verbally requested that they register arrivals and share the information with them for security purposes, while the Ministry of Social Affairs also requested information to verify eligibility for support and provide assistance. Therefore, any scrutiny, restriction on renting, or data sharing should be evaluated in terms of its legal basis, necessity, proportionality, equal treatment, duration, and the possibility of review.

4. Managers of one shelter attributed the limited reported tension to the shelter's location

At a shelter in Dekwaneh, the facility's administrators attributed the lack of reported tension with the neighborhood in part to the complex's distance from residential areas. This statement does not establish a causal relationship, greater trust, or adequate access to services. Monitoring should include residents' access to services and their complaints. Furthermore, the statement does not allow for conclusions about the situations of families outside the complex, which are difficult to monitor through shelter-based systems.

5. Some landlords withheld housing because of perceived security risks

Landlords and real estate brokers in Saida, Ain Sa'ada, and Dekwaneh reported reluctance to rent certain apartments, fearing that buildings housing displaced families might be targeted by Israeli airstrikes, as well as concerns about property damage or a lack of compensation. A member of the host community expressed similar concerns about displaced tenants in a neighboring building. One landlord cited an Israeli airstrike on an apartment in Ain Sa'ada on April 5, 2026, which, according to his account, killed three people.

These accounts suggest that the perception of physical danger and uncertainty about pending compensation may deter some landlords from renting. The sample does not allow determination of how common such decisions are. Any pilot program to guarantee rent or cover potential housing damage addresses only one aspect of financial uncertainty; it cannot eliminate the risk of military attack.

6. Hostile online discourse is an unquantified warning sign

Selected online posts contained hateful or sectarian expressions about internal displacement. The selection criteria and reach of these posts were insufficiently documented to infer prevailing societal trends. In a separate statement, a representative of a nongovernmental organization noted that some displaced families were reluctant to move to areas prepared to host them because of memories of inadequate services and tensions during the 2024 displacement. The study does not specify the number of families who refused to move.

7. Economic fatigue affects host households and displaced families differently

In interviews conducted in early October, some residents of host areas reported job losses, declining incomes, and a diminished ability to continue assisting displaced families. In separate accounts, municipal workers described exhaustion and wage erosion due to inflation and a succession of crises and wars. One displaced person also described severe exhaustion resulting from repeated displacement, loss of work and income, and the costs of healthcare, food, water, and electricity. These accounts point to material hardship among various groups, and not to a measurable declines in social trust or a shift in public opinion.

Policy Priorities

The following proposals translate the findings into practical actions. Some require administrative coordination, while others require funding, political consensus, or pilot testing. In the absence of municipal cost records, the study does not provide cost estimates. The proposed mechanisms should also be evaluated against the legal mandates and operational capacities of the relevant institutions.

Priority action	Lead actors	First steps	Suggested indicators
1. Create a verifiable municipal emergency-cost window	Ministry of Interior and Municipalities; Ministry of Finance; municipalities and municipal unions; audit bodies	Develop a common template for eligible emergency service costs. Pilot a lawful financing and reimbursement process with independent verification, published procedures and safeguards against double funding. Municipal unions may consolidate smaller municipal claims where authorized.	Documented claims; decision and payment time; share of eligible costs paid; service interruptions.
2. Establish a safe registration-and-referral standard	Ministry of Social Affairs; disaster-risk-management structures; Ministry of Interior and Municipalities; municipalities	Agree a minimum dataset for households seeking assistance inside and outside shelters. Specify lawful purpose, access, correction, retention and secure sharing. Assistance records should not automatically be used for security screening.	Coverage outside shelters; completed referrals; duplicate records; corrections and protection incidents.
3. Review the legality of local restrictions	Ministry of Interior; governors; municipal councils; legal advisers	Identify and review rental-screening and commercial-lease restrictions for legal basis, legitimate aim, necessity, non-discrimination, duration and appeal. Amend or suspend measures that fail these tests after legal review.	Restrictions reviewed; measures revised or withdrawn; complaints resolved.
4. Institutionalize municipal crisis capacity	Municipalities and municipal unions; Ministry of Interior and Municipalities; disaster-risk-management authorities	Conduct short after-action reviews and document service roles, crisis-cell procedures, focal points, referral routes and escalation rules. Clarify coordination with district crisis structures and plan for staff turnover.	After-action reviews; tested procedures; trained staff; current focal points.
5. Protect schooling and minimum shelter conditions	Ministry of Education and Higher Education; Ministry of Social Affairs; municipalities; shelter partners	Map safe non-school sites; define sanitation, accessibility, and safeguarding standards and timely partner-access approvals. Plan education continuity for host and displaced pupils, reopening triggers, and transport or alternate learning support for vulnerable pupils. Avoid unsafe relocation.	Teaching days lost; schools occupied; partner approval times; shelters meeting standards.
6. Review compensation and test safer rental support	Competent compensation authority, including Higher Relief Commission where applicable; Ministry of Social Affairs; partners	Audit eligible unresolved claims, including those from 2024; publish eligibility and decision procedures; clarify which claims can lawfully be funded. Assess a capped rental-deposit or damage-guarantee pilot with clear eligibility, tenancy safeguards and independent evaluation. No guarantee can prevent a strike.	Claims decided; processing time; pilot tenancies and cost; complaints and safety incidents.
7. Assist vulnerable hosts and monitor fatigue separately	Ministry of Social Affairs; municipalities; donors; independent researchers	Use transparent criteria for direct food, utility and healthcare support for eligible host households without reducing aid to displaced people. Monitor host hardship, displaced-household coping, staff strain and hostile attitudes separately; evaluate any cohesion initiatives.	Households reached; staff absence; service interruptions; comparable questions with documented sampling; distinguish changes in respondents from changes over time.

Implementation Sequence And Safeguards

Before any new crisis, particularly displacement, a model for documenting emergency costs should be prepared, along with minimum standards for registration and data protection, a legal review of local restrictions, written procedures for crisis response teams, arrangements for qualified nongovernmental organizations to access shelters, and the identification of safer

locations outside of public schools. Mechanisms are also required to identify and reimburse new expenses and compensation. Safeguards for rental support for displaced persons, however, require limited pilot testing subject to evaluation.

Three safeguards apply to these priorities: that registration for assistance does not become an unmonitored security screening system; legal review must protect equal access to housing and services; and safety must be prioritized, as rental guarantees may address some financial concerns but do not eliminate physical danger, and relocating families from shelters must not jeopardize their safety. Monitoring should distinguish between service issues, families' hardships, restrictive practices, hostile rhetoric, and documented exclusion, rather than combining them into a single indicator of tension.

Conclusion

The most consistent problem across the six municipalities was the expansion of local service and security responsibilities without a dedicated government emergency channel to offset the associated costs. The seven findings also document disruptions to formal education; preventive controls on rents and commercial activity; limited visible tension at a remote shelter; security concerns affecting housing; hostile online rhetoric; and economic strain among some municipal workers and residents of host communities.

These qualitative observations do not establish nationwide prevalence of these phenomena, the prevalence of hostility, or causal relationships. The response should prioritize funding for documented municipal expenses, continuity of education and shelter, the legality of restrictions, safe referrals, crisis preparedness, rent assistance subject to careful assessment, and direct assistance to economically vulnerable families.

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