

Historical divides, a refugee crisis and economic turmoil: The perfect setting for a Peace Centre

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In northern Lebanon, young Syrian refugees have spent the last decade grappling with the reality of growing up in a largely unstable environment. Despite the various challenges thrown at them, these young people have been given the chance to change their future through education alongside local Lebanese students.

This opportunity comes in the form of a small but unique and driven NGO based in Akkar: Relief and Reconciliation for Syria (R&R). In an attempt to not only serve local and Syrian children through education, but to also bridge divides between the two communities, R&R has become a centrepiece in the lives of many.

R&R is not only educating children of all ages and backgrounds at its three schools, but also laying down the blueprints on how to effectively provide support and conflict resolution in a highly volatile environment.



One of Relief and Reconciliation's three schools in Koucha, northern Lebanon. Lessons are taught here for both Lebanese and Syrian children. Image: Callum Sutherland

In March 2011, fierce anti-government protests in the Syrian city of Daraa would eventually develop into the greatest migration crisis since World War 2. The Syrian Civil War has not only permanently changed the landscape of Syria itself, but the reality of life in the countries that surround it.

Lebanon has experienced this change arguably more than anywhere else. With an estimated population of 5.5 million, roughly 1.5 million are Syrian refugees who have arrived over the last decade. This high influx of people, along with corruption, an already diverse population and an economic crisis, have all contributed to a contemporary Lebanon with ongoing turmoil.

This setting is where the organisation Relief and Reconciliation for Syria (R&R) currently finds itself. After the opening of the 'Peace Centre' in northern Lebanon in July 2013, R&R has remained a constant in an ever-changing country. It began with the aim of serving both Syrian refugees and local Lebanese communities with education and psychological support as both adjusted to the new environment thrust upon them by the civil war.

Its co-founder and director general Friedrich Bokern says: "We wanted to provide relief services and humanitarian aid, not only fighting the effects of oppression and war, but the root causes."

The Mission

Mr Bokern, also known as Fritz, founded the organisation alongside Paolo Dall'Oglio, an Italian priest and activist he met whilst visiting Syria in 2008. 'Father Paolo' was later kidnapped by ISIS in 2013, with his whereabouts and condition still unknown.

Fritz, who lives at the Peace Centre, has delivered on their shared vision ever since. Relief and Reconciliation is based in Akkar, Lebanon's northernmost and poorest region. With a population here of roughly 450,000, almost 40% are Syrian refugees. Its mission is focused on communities understanding one another from the start.

It aims to unite opposing groups and different communities, "preserving the Syrian mosaic of so many religions living side by side," Fritz explains.

He continues: "Trying to create a common good based on human, community and individual rights but working together and forming democracy. This is still the aspiration we pursue today."



Relief and Reconciliation staff members and local volunteers celebrating the success of recent exams taken by students in the town of Michmich. Image credit: Relief and Reconciliation for Syria

Lebanese populations in Akkar and nearby Syrian populations of course have their differences, but also find similarities. There is a shared Arabic dialect, similar cultures, and importantly both areas are home to a variety of religious communities. Maronite Christian, Greek Orthodox, Sunni Muslim and Alawite Muslims are all significant demographics in Akkar and the bordering Syrian regions.

This diversity has at times led to conflict between communities in recent decades, no more so than during the 15-year long Lebanese Civil War. Differences have now become even more relevant since 2011, as hundreds of thousands of Syrians have fled bombs and persecution with many settling in Akkar.

It was recognised from the start that dialogue was needed between these communities in order to support them. Mr Bokern says: "Trust comes from cooperation, especially at a community level and if there was violence involved before, of course it takes years to build up trust."

“This does not come from words alone, it comes from working together, pursuing an objective together,” He continues. This objective, set out by R&R, was to build up such trust, both between local communities and the NGO themselves.

This ultimately came through assistance, dialogue and education.

Dialogue and education

Mohammad Ghiye is another crucial cog in the Relief and Reconciliation operation. After working in the United States and Qatar for 30 years, Mohammad returned to his native Akkar and joined R&R in 2018.

‘Mo’ explains: “I started as a teacher initially and then progressed to be where I am today as a right-hand man for the director. I discovered the joy and meaningfulness of working in humanitarian work.”

Primarily, R&R provides education for Syrian and Lebanese children and teenagers living in Akkar. Three small schools and the Peace Centre is where this work takes place. “Education, I think it is the best gift for any child, especially those who are most vulnerable,” explains Mr Ghiye.



Alongside his usual duties, Mohammad ‘Mo’ Ghiye often teaches and plays music with Relief and Reconciliation’s students. Image credit: Callum Sutherland

Having supported over 3,000 children over the last decade, R&R has relied on hundreds of volunteers from all over the world to achieve its mission. One of these volunteers is Shinno Taguchi, a Syrian-Japanese who has worked with the organisation since July 2022.

Shinno grew up in Damascus and left Syria in 2010, a year before the civil war began. “I have a lot of memories there... ever since the conflict in Syria started, I wanted to somehow help. I wanted to grow as a person before I went back to assist,” he says.

After working in computer programming in Japan for several years, Mr Taguchi decided it was the right time to start giving back to fellow Syrians. In Akkar, he has been teaching mainly computer literacy, alongside a few classes in maths and general literacy.

“The way R&R talked about cooperation resonated with me, looking at history and what contributes to conflict. It’s very practical,” says Shinno.

Lebanon's recurring roadblocks

The country's worsening economic crisis has resulted in a higher need for assistance to both Lebanese and Syrian families. Despite limited resources, both practical and financial, R&R has managed to step up.

Mr Taguchi is well aware of these problems in his work. "When you have certain limitations, it paves a way for more creative ways to do things. This was something that I found interesting, struggling through limitations to create a cause that is meaningful and educational," he says.



Lessons are also taught at the 'Peace Centre' like this English class. The centre is also where volunteers live, work and eat together. Image credit: Relief and Reconciliation for Syria.

Alongside education, R&R has given financial and medical support to families. Crucially, it has also brought communities together.

For the first time in history, R&R also facilitated the meeting of the leaders of the four main religious groups in Akkar together. Ever since, this dialogue between groups has continued. It is a mutually beneficial dynamic as well, as R&R is able to work more effectively through this cooperation.

Mohammad Ghiye explains: “It is our mission to remedy the political and religious divide that has been the cancer of Lebanon, a beautiful country that has suffered from this divide.

“This is done through bringing children together and giving them education. Children from all religions and politics should see other children as friends, as children like themselves,” continues Mr Ghiye.

At community, leadership and youth levels, Relief and Reconciliation continues to build bridges, easing the hardship experienced by Lebanese and Syrians alike in Akkar.