

The Syrian Refugee Crises in Lebanon

by Sara Bousleiman

Abstract

Since 2011, Syria has been embroiled in a violent and deadly civil war. As a result of this conflict, over ten million Syrians have been displaced, and over one million wounded or killed. The children have been uniquely impacted by this violence as they have been wounded or killed by traumatizing violence, separated from their families, and prevented from receiving a proper education. I traveled to Lebanon, a country that has accepted a large number of Syrian refugees, in order to gather more information about how the Syrian crisis has impacted school-aged children, particularly regarding the effect of the war on their education. Lebanon's Ministry of Education, in collaboration with several NGOs and foreign donors, has made significant changes to the educational system in order to accommodate the large influx of Syrian children. Given the complex needs of these refugees, the Ministry's efforts are constantly evolving.

While in Lebanon, I conducted interviews with four individuals who all have an intimate understanding of the current educational initiatives within the country, but are working towards advancement in different capacities. I interviewed an employee of the Ministry of Education, an employee of an NGO operating in Lebanon, a school director at a public school in Lebanon, and a professor at a Lebanon university who researches educational policy. These interviews, transcribed below, gave me a unique insight into the immense efforts underway to provide Syrian refugees with a formal education and the complex problems that come with these goals.

Introduction

During the summer of 2016, I conducted research on the Syrian refugee crisis in Lebanon. I was particularly interested in the impact of the civil war on one of the most vulnerable Syrian populations: school-aged children. In order to better understand the current situation, I conducted interviews with four individuals who approached the crisis from different vantage points to elucidate the most prominent issues that currently face Syrian children.

To appreciate the complex factors that created the Syrian refugee crisis, it is important to reflect back on how the Syrian conflict escalated to this point. The roots of the Syrian Arab Spring and resulting civil war can be traced back to the period following Syria's transition to independence in 1946. A coup just three years later ended democratic rule, and over the next several decades Syria would experience several transitions of power until 1971, when Syria became a country ruled by a single party and a single leader (British Broadcasting Corporation, 2016). Hafez al-Assad, president from 1971 until his death in 2000, presided over a secular government that set restrictions on civil liberties (Ghadry, 2005). When his son Bashar al-Assad took power in 2000, Syrian and international communities were hopeful that the new leadership would initiate democratic reforms (Lesch, 2011). Bashar al-Assad promised that modernization and social reform would accompany his accession to power. He encouraged political debate, loosened restrictions on freedom of expression, allowed the publication of private newspapers, and granted amnesty to political prisoners – this time is often referred to as the Damascus Spring (Lesch, 2011). However, this period was short-lived, perhaps due to the intensity and amount of criticism that surfaced against the regime (Lesch, 2011). Many activists

were imprisoned without effecting change (Sarihan, 2012). Eventually, al-Assad reinstated the strict and repressive laws that had been present before his rule (Ghadry, 2005; Zisser, 2003). During al-Assad's short rule, Syrians experienced increased crime, high unemployment rates, and severe drought (Kelley, Mohtadi, Cane, Seager, & Kushnir, 2015).

The Arab Spring uprising in Tunisia and nearby countries represented a major turning point across the Middle East (Dalacoura, 2012). Other countries followed suit, overthrowing their oppressive governments in favor of greater representation by the people. Many Arab countries would be thrown into years of civil unrest over which groups would retain power, and how that power would be utilized. Syria, in particular, has been an example of incredible strife and conflict (Dalacoura, 2012). Al-Assad responded to the Syrian uprising with swift violence, but the militant opposition, known as the Free Syrian Army, was too large by this point to be put down. However, this strength also became its demise, and the Free Syrian Army split into several violent factions (e.g., ISIL, rebel groups) that have occupied separate parts of the country and continue to fight one another over land, power, and political influence (Blanchard, Humud, & Nikitin, 2014). The Syrian Center for Policy Research estimated that over 1.2 million Syrians had been wounded or killed in the conflict by 2014 (Syrian Center for Policy Research, 2014). Over ten million Syrian civilians have been displaced and over 4.5 million have left as refugees, with over 1 million escaping to Lebanon (Amnesty International, 2016). Approximately 50% of these refugees are children, and 45% of these children have posttraumatic stress disorder (Sirin & Rogers-Sirin, 2015).

With displacement on such a massive scale, the social and educational effects are profound. I hoped that these interviews would shed light on the gravity of this situation and the ongoing efforts to educate Syrian refugee children in Lebanon.

My first interview was with Dr. Maha Shuayb, Director of the Centre for Lebanese studies at Lebanese American University. Educated in England, her research focuses on the relationship between education and policy, with a particular interest in refugee education. Dr. Shuayb is the first author of the 2014 report “Widening Access to Quality Education for Syrian Refugees: The Role of Private and NGO Sectors in Lebanon”. This report examines the educational experience of school-aged Syrian refugees in Lebanon. Her research spans private and NGO-related educational initiatives and focuses on access to educational opportunities and the quality of these programs. Dr. Shuayb has seen the disparities in refugee education first-hand, and was able to tell me about specific issues regarding the implementation of Lebanon’s educational programs.

My second interview took place at the Lebanese House of Parliament. Here, I met with Ms. Iman Assi, who is a coordinator at the General Directorate of Education at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education. Ms. Assi provided a completely different perspective from Dr. Shuayb. While she had less experience at the schools, she was able to provide insight into the mindset of the governmental representatives who are responsible for developing and implementing educational policies and programs.

For my third interview, I spoke with Ms. Eliane Abi Gerges Ibrahim, an Education Specialist at the World Vision NGO. This NGO is a Christian-based organization that has been working in Lebanon and Syria for over forty years. World Vision focuses on developing programs that work with local citizens to improve food

security, child welfare, education, child protection, and water safety. Like Dr. Shuayb, Ms. Ibrahim has first-hand experience with the implementation of the educational programs developed to target Syrian refugees in Lebanon.

Ms. Najah Elbana Elhalabeh, a school director at a public school in Lebanon, provided my fourth and final interview. Ms. Elhalabeh also has first-hand experience with the Educational Ministry's school-related initiatives. As the director of a school program, she is a liaison between her school and the government agency responsible for creating policies and implementing educational programs.

Interview #1

Dr. Maha Shuayb - Director of the Centre for Lebanese studies and author of the 2014 report: "Widening Access to Quality Education for Syrian Refugees: The Role of Private and NGO Sectors in Lebanon"

Meeting Location: Lebanese American University, Ateya Building, 7th floor conference room

Date & Time: August 11th, 2016 10-10:30AM

Question 1: I understand that the Syrian crisis is now in its sixth year, and there are approximately a half a million school-aged Syrian refugees in Lebanon. How would you describe the current state of Syrian refugees' education? Can you approximate the percentage of refugees that are in private versus public schools and the percentage that are not in school at all?

"The situation is "challenging" and "unpredictable". My experience with Iraqi and Palestinian refugees tells us that this is not a short-term problem; this situation will persist for a long time before we are able to settle on a sustainable solution. Right now, situation is dire - less than half of school-aged refugees are enrolled in school of any kind. Less than 2% of refugee children are enrolled in secondary school. Where are these children if they are not in school? We know they are on the streets. They are not being

educated, they are not learning, they are not accumulating the tools they will need to thrive in the future. It will not be an easy road for them.”

Question 2: In your report from September 2014 you write that “the majority of Syrian students enrolled in Lebanese public schools reported regular physical and verbal abuse from the teaching staff and principals, as well as bullying from their Lebanese peers.” Two years later, do you believe there has been any improvement in this situation? If so what is the most important factor that has led to this improvement? If not, what is the key to decrease this abuse?

“The bullying and abuse of Syrian refugees by Lebanese teachers and students is still extremely common. When asked why they engage in these actions, teachers and students both claim that it is a cultural norm. Lebanese society tends to blame the victim, not the offender. This belief is especially prominent when the victim is “foreign”. The social norms that lead to this abuse are so ingrained that it is hard to determine how commonplace bullying truly is. Unfortunately, this abuse occurs both within and outside of school. Teachers are resistant to guidance and assistance from NGOs, who are attempting to address this problem by promoting awareness and psychological support for all parties involved. There are also major language barriers, which is also part of the problem. Syrian students are not being taught any additional languages while Lebanese students learn three languages, including French and English. Syrian students would greatly benefit from learning either of these two additional languages; the language barrier significantly impacts their scores in math and science. Despite the potential benefits, educators refuse to expand language offerings to refugee students. They blame these inequalities on sectarianism.”

Question 3: As you point out in your report, the accelerated learning program proposed by the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE), which offers afternoon “second shift” schooling of Syrian refugees in the public schools, can be seen as a segregated approach rather than inclusive. What are some of the short and long-term concerns that you have about these programs?

“Although these types of programs sound promising, they are not without major problems. The quality of education during the second shift is lower, the teachers are tired, and newly hired teachers are not qualified to deal with the complexities associated with educating Syrian refugees. Segregation has created a rift in accessing high-quality education. Even though some public schools have empty spots available during normal school hours, they will not accept Syrian students, citing concerns that integration will lower the standard of education. Furthermore, foreign donors (e.g., the European Union, World Bank, United Nations) will pay approximately \$650 per year for a Syrian student who goes to school during the second shift, in comparison to \$150 for a Syrian student who is taught during the first shift. There is a great economic advantage to this segregation. In addition, the MEHE does not allow Syrian teachers to teach the Lebanese curriculum to Syrian students. There is great discord in this area, and it is a complicated issue strongly influenced by politics.”

Question 4: Successful results were reported when one private school translated the English curriculum into Arabic. In your opinion what has been the most successful strategy utilized to help Syrian refugees integrate into Lebanese schools?

“Several NGOs offer educational services to Syrian refugees. There is a wide variety in the efficacy and success of these programs. One NGO uses an “integration “ period, which lasts 1-2 years, during which students are taught a foreign language that would enable them to “catch up” to the Lebanese students. Teachers prepare students to enter the appropriate grade for their educational history and age group. This program has seen some success. Other NGOs focus on vocational education with varying success. There are programs that provide parents with financial support if they enroll their children in school to avoid having these children work to earn additional income for their

families. Private schools are not utilized enough, and when they are used, they are often used ineffectively. In one town, Saida, the coalition of private schools divided 2,000 refugee students among each private school and waived their tuition and school fees. However, they only did this to obtain compensation from international donors. Scholarships given to students are a more effective tool for improving access to education.”

“Tutoring is another potentially successful strategy. El- Jusun (“The Bridges”) at the American University of Beirut has started implementing this strategy. Lebanese students are paired up with Syrian refugees, and they tutor one another, Syrian students tend to be stronger in Arabic and Lebanese students are typically stronger in English and French.”

“Street children are the most vulnerable population. Paying the family a nominal fee of \$200 per month for rent will encourage them to send their children to school (typically, each family has 4-5 children). However, it does not help these families address transportation-related issues. How do they get their children to school from their home? The Centre for Lebanese Studies is starting a pilot program that can provide a school bus for Syrian families who live in the same neighborhood. I love hearing about these initiatives because this is an area that I can help with - I can help fundraise for transportation because this is not something that is paid for by national or international funding agencies.”

“The scale of need is very large, but if we can help a few families, the most vulnerable, in small steps, the reward is great and long lasting. There are also many other

issues besides education that need attention. For example, it is critical that we address the psychological trauma that comes from being displaced and penniless.”

Interview #2

Ms. Iman Assi – Project Coordinator at the General Directorate of Education at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education

Meeting Location: Sarai – Lebanese House of Parliament

Date & Time: August 11th, 2016 1:15-1:45 PM

Question 1: I understand that MEHE received financial and system support from the Paris III Agreement to improve the public education infrastructure in Lebanon. Can you tell me more about these improvements? What educational challenges is Lebanon facing today?

“The Lebanese public schools were in need of a major overhaul and we were in the midst of a 5-year strategic plan at the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) when the Syrian crisis occurred. At the beginning of the Syrian Crisis, the Lebanese education system was already absorbing about ten thousand displaced children. Since 2011, this number has doubled and sometimes even quadrupled with each passing year.”

“The Lebanese public schools are utilized by one-third of school-aged Lebanese children and the remaining two-thirds attend private schools. Free public education is required until 15 years of age (9th grade). The remaining higher grades (10, 11, and 12) are not obligatory, and only require a nominal fee from the parents as they are still subsidized by the government. Considerably fewer Syrian children attend secondary public schools for several reasons. Some parents send their children into the workforce to earn income from menial jobs. Girls are not encouraged to go to secondary school;

families often prefer to keep the girls at home to help their mothers or to prepare for marriage.”

Question 2: I read about the Accelerated Learning program (ALP) enacted to help transition Syrian refugee school-aged children from non-formal to formalized education. Can you tell me how the program fared when it rolled out this past year? What are the lessons that your department learned, and how is MEHE addressing challenges before the next rollout in September?

“The RACE initiative, which provides a second-shift school program for Syrian refugees, was created by the MEHE to ensure that all school-aged children are enrolled in school, receive high-quality education, and obtain psychological support to enhance their well-being. This program was also developed to strengthen the infrastructure of the education ministry by training teachers, creating a database of educational services, and providing support staff for the program. The MEHE developed second-shift school programs because of the high demand for children to be enrolled in schools and exceeded the capacity in some concentrated areas. The ALP was introduced to help displaced children who were out of school to have the chance to bridge in the formal system. Syrian students need support classes to learn English – in Lebanon, math and science are taught in English or French. Refugee children were never exposed to the Foreign language in Syria, so special classes are needed. To address this issue, the MEHE created the second-shift school whereby displaced children are taught from 2:00 pm - 6:00 pm, after the Lebanese children are taught from 8:00 am – 2:00 pm. All children are taught at the same school, ideally by the same teachers. This is not always possible, so several new teachers were hired for the second shift.”

Question 3:

I would like to believe that there are simple, low-cost solutions that can bring about small differences that snowball into big changes (such as donating textbooks from

private schools to public school students). Is there a role for communities or individuals to help with those small differences?

“Individuals or communities that would like to offer assistance must submit their request to the PMU. We then assess the need and ensure equity among all communities who need support. We also provide guidance for these voluntary efforts, be it in terms of physical improvements, the rehabilitation of existing structures, or providing personnel assistance.

“Donors and UN Agencies and many NGOs / INGOs are contributing in donating equipment to schools. For example, the USAID funded a program called DRASATI, which provided 126 schools with IT equipment and tablets in the effort to encourage the use of technology in education. Teachers were trained to help them use this equipment in their daily teaching classes. Students typically do not have access to the Internet at home, and only have access to technology while they are at school. The MEHE is now developing a reliable Internet infrastructure that would be implementable in a large number of schools and community buildings. MEHE aims to provide tablets and laptops in all schools to encourage the use of these technologies. We are currently in the planning phase of this project.”

Interview #3

Ms. Eliane Abi Gerges Ibrahim – Education and Life Skills Specialist at World Vision

Meeting Location: Mountazah Villa Sinyora, Mansouriyet el-Matn

Date & Time: August 11th, 2016 3:00-3:30 PM

Question 1: You are an Education and Life Skills Specialist. Can you tell me more about your position and what interests you most about it?

“It is my responsibility to support vulnerable children living in Lebanon – whether they be of Lebanese, Palestinian, or Syrian descent. The education sector of my NGO has many goals, but our current focus is on improving early childhood care and development. We mostly work with children under six years old and their families. We educate and coach parents regarding how to use appropriate parenting skills and how to incorporate educational principles into the family infrastructure. This has become a very important avenue for improvement, as many of these young students are not enrolled in formal kindergarten programs and will be unprepared for primary school should they attend. We are trying to encourage the development of community-based initiatives that target informal early childhood education, as many students do not have access to formal, government-initiated programs or are unable to attend for a variety of reasons.”

Question 2: In your opinion, what are the major educational challenges that Lebanon faces today?

“I believe that the main issue in Lebanon’s educational infrastructure is that there is a high influx of refugees who are not attending school. Almost 20-25% of the Lebanese population is from Syria. There is a great deal of pressure on the public schools that struggle to absorb these refugees. At the same time, Lebanese students are leaving the public school system to attend private schools, which are subsidized by the government and often do not provide a good education. A number of the Syrian children attending Lebanon’s public schools experience significant language barriers and struggle to keep up with the level of instruction because they have been out of school for several years. Less than 40% of Syrian refugee children are getting any kind of education. That is a major problem.”

Question 3: Is there a role for communities or individuals who would like to help with these challenges?

“Given the magnitude of the need, fundraising for education is encouraged. This need is especially prominent within the communities that provide non-formal education for young children. Several NGOs provide financial support for the Ministry of Education’s efforts to expand access to formal education. But even with this support, there is not enough capacity for the large influx of refugees, and potential students lack the transportation needed to attend these programs. This is why informal education is so critical – teaching basic literacy and math can make a big impact on future success. Several private donors support the World Vision, my employer. Most of our donors are from Christian families. Our efforts target all vulnerable populations within Lebanon, not just Syrian refugees. For example, public schools do not offer kindergarten classes or early childhood education, which is why World Vision has opened several kindergarten programs for students of any nationality. Most of our programs are in the Bekaa Valley because it has one of the highest concentrations of children in need. These families are living in tents or in large buildings that house several families in the same room. World Vision also has special programming that prioritizes child protection by providing resources to help children who do not attend school and who are at greater risk of engaging in child labor. These children are often forced to relocate to Shatila or Beirut to work.”

“Lebanon currently needs more English language educators. Syrian refugees did not study English in their public schools in Syria, but Lebanese public schools require knowledge of the English language in order to understand the curriculum. This makes it

very hard for Syrian refugees to learn at their appropriate grade level. With funding from the Canadian government, World Vision developed a free e-learning platform which digitized the Lebanese curriculum and made it accessible online. We call this online learning platform “Tabshoura”, and it allows children to use laptops with Internet or server access at community centers to access Lebanese curricula. World Vision is currently looking for additional sponsors to make Tabshoura into an “app” that can be downloaded onto smart phones and iPads. Many Syrian refugees have smart phones because it is the only way to communicate with family inside and outside of Lebanon, and it allows them to access news and information about the ongoing Syrian civil war. They primarily use text messaging to maintain communication. Even if a family doesn’t have enough money to buy food, they will find a way to purchase a cell phone. To our refugees it is not a luxury, it is a necessity. Most purchase a plan that gives them limited 3G connection and text messaging service for \$10 per month.”

Interview #4

Ms. Najah Elbana Elhalabeh – School Director at Mtein Public Schools, Mtein Lebanon

Meeting Location: Mtein Public School, Mtein, Lebanon

Date & Time: August 13th, 2016 9:00-10:30 AM

Question 1: What has been your experience with Syrian Refugees coming to your school?

“When the first Syrian refugee children arrived, our school was very chaotic. Many of the Syrian students had not attended school since they were displaced in 2011. In some cases, the refugees seemed to be placed in classrooms and grades without much forethought, and there was no method of academic assessment. About three years ago, the Lebanese Education Ministry determined that the presence of Syrian refugees within the

Lebanese school system was associated with a decrease in the quality of the education being provided to the Lebanese children. Refugee students do know French and English whereas Lebanese children their age speak these languages. Science and math are taught to Lebanese children in English but Syrians learn it in Arabic. Suddenly, there was a division of knowledge within the same class. Teachers could not teach all students at the same time, which obviously created many issues. The Lebanese Education Ministry decided to address these issues by creating the RACE program. RACE created a second-shift school program. Lebanese children are taught together, usually during the first shift, which takes place predominantly in the morning. Syrian students are taught during the second-shift, which takes place during the afternoon. Syrian students must meet certain requirements in order to be registered for the morning program. For example, refugee students must have proof that they have been living in Lebanon for several years. Furthermore, Syrian students cannot account for over 20% of the morning program's enrollment."

"The second shift was organized to address the specific needs of Syrian refugees. My school has 580 students, 16 sections, and has a very wide age range. Lebanese students who are six years old start at the first grade, even if they haven't attended kindergarten. Syrian children have a different system because many children have been out of school for several years. A nine-year-old Syrian refugee who has never attended school may register for the Lebanese public school system. This student will have to start in the first grade because he/she is at that knowledge level. He or she will be taught language, math, science, social studies, and geography. Fast learners and will advance to higher grades quickly. However, many students will drop out at the higher elementary

levels and never register for school again. Each class must have 25 students enrolled or students will have to travel to a different school, often farther away, to ensure that there are enough students to begin instruction.”

Question 2: What are some of the critical needs that you have identified for Syrian students?

“Many of the children have lived through the war and have been traumatized by this experience. I think it is very important to place a psychosocial assistant at the school for the second-shift. Our Syrian refugee students are prone to aggressive and belligerent behaviors, like getting into physical confrontations on the playground. Our psychosocial assistant has helped to defuse these situations and works with these children to help them develop better coping skills. Now, we rarely have to involve parents because our assistant can handle these situations. Although our assistant is not qualified to treat these students, she acts as an intermediary to help the students adjust to their new environment. Our school also has a medical assistant who does an initial physical assessment with each student. The social and medical assistants play very important roles. Our medical assistant has helped identify initial health issues, such as chicken pox and lice, which can be resolved quickly before they spread to other students.”

Question 3: What has been your experience with RACE and external support?

“Thanks to RACE, our school receives a great deal of financial support from the Education Ministry and foreign non-profit organizations. The most prominent organization that has invested in our school is a British NGO called Their World. They did a pilot program at our public school; it was the only school they piloted. The NGO’s objectives are to improve educational and health-related outcomes for Syrian refugee

children. They created a technology room for students that contained laptops and tablets to teach children how to use these devices and how to access information and educational resources online. Their World also provides milk and a snack for each student. This pilot program has had great success, and it is continuing through this school year. The NGO purchased Kano Computer Kits, laptops, and iPads for the technology room that used to teach students coding and programming. Working with the DOT (Digital Opportunity Teaching), a Lebanese organization that educates teachers, Their World trained our teachers on the use of technology in education. Their World also provides salary funding for a full-time supervisor at the school who supports the technology room. Lebanon's Minister of Education has a plan to promote education by technology, and with Their World's help, our school is ready to meet these new goals."

"Our school requested that all aid for the Syrian refugees be equally granted to the Lebanese students who attend during the morning shift. I support technology-based initiatives because I believe technology is the future of education. I requested meetings with Microsoft and other technology companies to try and obtain additional resources and financial support, and I was successful in obtaining enough money to support both refugee and Lebanese students. The school was so successful that Tom Fletcher, a member of the Business Coalition for Education (which also runs Their World) visited our school. He was very satisfied with the program, but he was unhappy with the maintenance of the school property. Now, our school is under renovation. The top floor will be dedicated to kindergarten programs for young children. Kindergarten programs are rare and our school did not provide that service before the renovations. UNICEF is sponsoring these kindergarten classes. The school windows are being replaced with ones

that are better equipped to insulate the building during the colder winter months. An Italian NGO is providing the financial support for new windows.”

“Despite the influx of Syrian refugees, the presence of these students has actually benefited this school instead of putting them at a disadvantage. Teachers report that students have started to perform better in the new school. Syrian students now get attached to their Lebanese teachers. At the end of the year the children leave in tears because they are so grateful and happy to be at school and don’t want to return to the streets.”

Concluding Thoughts

Conducting these four interviews gave me unparalleled insight into the experience of Syrian refugees within Lebanon’s educational system. Although one can read sterile reports about the educational initiatives funded by the Ministry of Education and foreign NGOs, these interviews helped me to understand what these programs look like in practice for the students who actually attend these schools. I was saddened to learn about how many challenges still remain regarding access to school programs and the integration of Syrian children into the educational system, but I was encouraged to hear about the ongoing efforts underway to remedy these issues.

There were several themes that stood out in all four interviews. First, language is a major barrier for Syrian refugees, and the RACE program’s segregation policy may not be the best way to handle this issue. Second, refugee children have been exposed to severe psychological trauma and may not be receiving adequate psychological care. Posttraumatic stress disorder and related issues may be impacting school performance or

the ability to attend school at all. Third, there is a major stigma against the refugee population within Lebanon. This prejudice is expressed in many forms, including bullying and segregation. Greater resources are needed to induce social and political change within Lebanese society, which will eventually help improve educational inequality. Finally, there may be a need for improved communication between individuals who work for the Lebanese government and those who work with the displaced. The MEHE is working hard to implement change across a number of schools that are responsible for educating a large and diverse student body. Such a task is very challenging, and the MEHE requests that NGOs submit program applications through their department in order to better streamline and organize services. However, based on my interviews, I heard several suggestions regarding how to improve the current programming from individuals who witness the implementation of the programs first-hand. Facilitating communication between the MEHE, the Lebanese schools and the NGOs, may help the Ministry accomplish its main goal: improving the educational opportunities available for both Syrian and Lebanese students.

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