In the aftermaths of the Arab uprisings, Doctors Worldwide Turkey (DWWT) has launched the multifaceted operation “Health Spring in Fraternal Countries” gathering projects in Libya, Syria/Lebanon, Yemen and Gaza. On the one hand some of our projects aim at meeting with the immediate needs of populations affected by internal conflicts and on the other hand, on a rehabilitation perspective, we intend to exploit the emerging opportunities for health reconstruction in these countries. As part of this operation we decided to implement a project in Tripoli district in the North of Lebanon to provide healthcare to both Syrian and Palestinian refugees living in this area.

In its January 2010 statistics report, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA), the international body set up to ensure the welfare of Palestinian refugees, stated that there were currently 425,640 Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon. Of these, 53% reside in the 12 official refugee camps, while the rest of them live in Lebanese cities and villages as well as in unofficial refugee camps. However, UNRWA’s statistics are not exhaustive as they do not include unregistered Palestinian refugees who came to Lebanon between 1952 and 1956 or those who entered the country after 1970 and are considered “undocumented” Palestinians. The issue of naturalisation of Palestinian refugees has become a thorny political issue in Lebanon, a small country built on a delicate confessional balance. Due to the sensitivity of the topic, there has been no official census in Lebanon since 1932 that could determine the number of Christians and Muslims of various sects. Since most of the refugees are Sunni Muslims, other religious communities fear that their naturalization will jeopardize an already fragile political system. Excluded from citizenship, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are also denied some fundamental civil rights such as ownership of property, access to public education, full access to employment and access to public services. Amongst these protection gaps, one of the key concerns is related to healthcare. Indeed, unlike other foreigners living in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees are denied access to the Lebanese health care system. UNRAW generally covers primary and secondary treatment but it cannot cover tertiary care. Accordingly, the cost of hospitalisation has become a burden for Palestinian families running into debts to afford adequate treatment. For the unregistered refugees, the situation is even worst, 60% of them living with at least one family member afflicted with chronic illness (cf. Danish Refugee Council Study “Incomplete Entitlement”).

Deeply concerned by the fate of the Palestinians, Doctors Worldwide Turkey (DWWT), since its creation in 2004, has been willing to take actions to meet with their needs, in Gaza, in the West-Bank and everywhere. We implemented our first projects in Gaza in 2006. The very same year, the 6th Arab-Israeli war opposing Israel to Lebanon occurred, leading DWWT to implement a project in Lebanon in order to heal the wounded. In 2010 during the month of Ramadan, DWWT was back in Lebanon to provide medical care and to distribute medicines in Palestinian refugees’ camps across the country. Our volunteer-doctors then witnessed the worrying health condition of the patients living in those “spaces of exceptions” and we were planning to renew such projects.

Yet, we were not expecting the upcoming events that would lead us back to Lebanon in January 2012. Indeed, the outbreak of the “Arab Spring” in late 2010 spreading
from Tunisia to Egypt, Libya, Yemen, Bahrain and Syria also reached refugees camps in Lebanon even though this fact did not hit the headlines. Actually, the Palestinian Spring may well have started in Lebanon, near Saida, in the largest camp of Ain-al-Hilweh, literally meaning “sweet spring” and gathering over 70,000 refugees. To commemorate the 63rd Anniversary of the Nakba on May 15th 2011, Palestinian refugees in Arab countries surrounding Israel, Palestinian of the Diaspora, Palestinian living inside the occupied West Bank and Gaza strip and Palestinian living in Jerusalem organized marches towards the ceasefire borders with Israel to commemorate the tragic event and to advocate for the right to return which is enshrined in international law. In Lebanon more than 30,000 Palestinian refugees gathered in the village of Maroun al-Ras that overlooks the border with Israel and threw stones toward it. 11 demonstrators were killed and hundreds injured by gun fire from Israeli troops. This tragic event then appeared as the first importation of the Arab Spring in Lebanon. The second one would arrive soon. From Syria this time.

Since March 2011, Syrian refugees have arrived from Homs province which has been at the epicentre of the anti-regime protests. According to UNHCR figures they were 6,133 on February 10th 2012. The flow increased in January as a consequence of the ongoing shelling on the rebel city. While the refugees arriving in the region of Wadi Khaled have escaped the immediate threats in Syria, their fears are not over once they cross the border. Indeed, in Lebanon they have to cope with an ambiguous legal status, inadequate relief efforts, Syrian troop incursions, small arms fire from across the border and inadequate healthcare, especially for the heavily wounded.

Our first team to go there was composed of 8 high-profile volunteers: 1 dermatologist, 2 ophthalmologists, 1 obstetrician and gynaecologist, 1 Ear Nose and Throat specialist, 1 paediatrician, 1 pharmacist and 1 optician. They landed in Bayreuth on January 28th where they attended a meeting with the Islamic Medical Association (IMA) to share some useful information and statistics and to visit some health facilities for further projects before heading to Tripoli district to start delivering health services.

In Wadi Khaled DWWT volunteers examined 437 Syrian patients. They also performed 195 eye-examinations and distributed 179 glasses. In the Palestinian refugee camp of Badawi, in collaboration with the Palestinian Red Crescent they examined 633 patients, performed 276 eye-examinations and distributed 306 glasses. They also provided 315 glasses to IMA and to the Palestinian Red Crescent for future distribution. In one week our team performed a total of 1070 examinations, 471 eye-examinations and distributed 800 glasses and 1600 boxes of medicines. On February 23rd, DWW will start another project in Lebanon to provide healthcare to wounded Syrian refugees. Indeed, in collaboration with IMA we will implement a triage centre in Wadi Khaled and buy two ambulances to carry the wounded from the Syrian side of the border.

Although it is difficult to have a clear picture of the current medical situation in Syria, based on testimonies from patients and doctors we can infer that the wounded cannot be treated in public hospitals where several cases of torture have been reported. Since the beginning of this internal conflict, relief organizations have been willing to enter Syria to treat the wounded but until now the humanitarian space has been denied by the Syrian regime. DWWT remains committed to responding to the humanitarian needs in Syria when access is finally granted and in the meantime we will do our best to keep on providing adequate treatment to the Syrian refugees in Lebanon as well as to the Palestinian ones.