

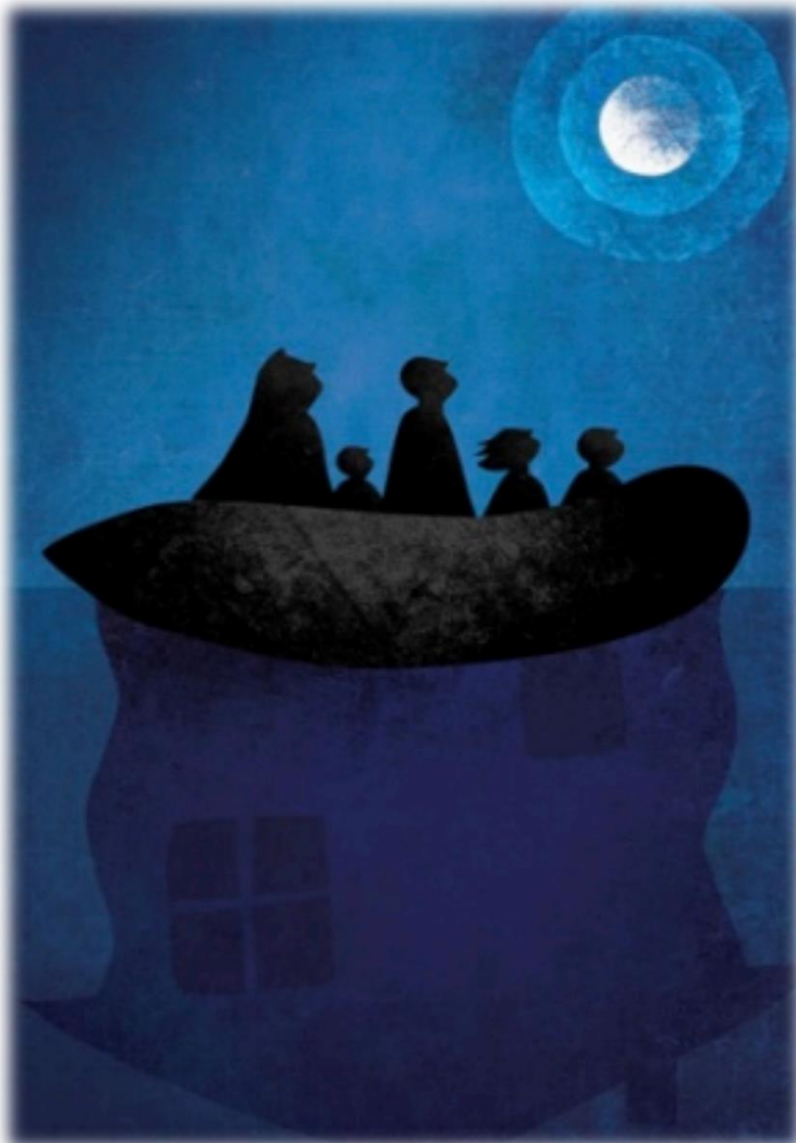


AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT
ISSAM FARES INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC
POLICY & INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS
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والشؤون الدولية



PATHWAYS TO LASTING JUSTICE: ADDRESSING GENOCIDE AND ENDING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Conference Report | December 2023



The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU Lebanon), in collaboration with the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut, organized an online conference titled: "Pathways to Lasting Justice: Addressing Genocide and Ending Human Rights Violations in the Middle East." The conference was held on Wednesday, December 7, 2023, on the occasion of the International Day of Commemoration and Dignity of the Victims of Genocide and of the Prevention of this Crime. AGBU Lebanon and IFI are long-term partners that collaborate annually on this occasion, hosting prominent speakers to discuss relevant issues related to preventing genocide and peacebuilding.

Yara Mourad, IFI Assistant Director welcomed guests and panelists and spoke about IFI's collaboration and commitment on this yearly commemoration with AGBU Lebanon for the past seven years. She remarked that "in addition to dealing with the past and previous crisis – including Armenia, Karabakh and Yazidi incidence of political violence, war crimes and genocide – this year's conference will take a particular significance given the atrocious war on Gaza."

Arine Ghazarian, AGBU Lebanon Executive Director in turn began by mentioning the United Nations Genocide Convention, which was adopted in 1948. "This was the first human rights treaty adopted by the UN General Assembly," she noted. "It remains as relevant as ever as we work to prevent genocide and other atrocities – crimes that are sadly still being perpetrated with impunity and no regard for the sanctity of human life." Ghazarian explained that "this year's theme will focus on the international protection system in the Middle East and its role in preventing, ending and punishing human rights violations and abuses against minorities in the region." In addition, "the webinar aims to shed light on the role of media and public opinion in ending all forms of human rights violations. It seeks to bolster

both national and international efforts to protect populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity, including their incitement."

PANEL 1: THE INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION SYSTEM IN MENA:

ITS CONTRIBUTION TO PREVENTING, ENDING, AND PUNISHING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND ABUSES.

Paulo Irani, a UN International Investigator, moderated the first panel, which discussed the Armenian, Yazidi, and Palestinian genocides.

The first speaker, Sheila Paylan, International Human Rights Lawyer, and Former UN Legal Advisor of Armenian origin addressed the definition of genocide. She started by providing a legal definition of genocide as "any of five acts that are committed with the intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial, or religious group as such. This means that they intend to destroy a group based on these criteria." Based on this, the five acts are, "killing members of the group, causing serious bodily or mental harm to the members of the group, deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part, imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group, which leads to lower procreation thus nulling the group, and forcibly transferring the children from one group to another so that they end up growing up as people belonging to another group or nationality." Paylan said that the definition sometimes creates confusion when used in

contexts that are sociological or historical and not legal, which doesn't necessarily mean that it's not genocide but making it legally not a genocide, as she focused on the case of the Armenian Genocide.

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Sheila Paylan

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With a focus on the incidents of September 19, 2023, committed by Azerbaijan towards the Armenians in Karabakh, Paylan said, "Azerbaijan launched an extensive military assault on the defective republic of Nagorno-Karabakh, also known as Artsakh, doing this with an anti-terrorist operation which resulted in mass killings." This has been an ongoing conflict with this being the "final solution." Azerbaijan's aim was to force a new status quo on this region on its own terms with no regard for the lives and the fundamental human rights of this population and keeping Artsakh under blockade for around ten months. This slowly starved the population of 120,000 Armenians, depriving them of necessities like food, fuel, electricity, and medicine, and which has been described as Genocidal behavior by the former ICC prosecutor and the former special advisor on the prevention of genocide. After 24 hours of heavy bombardment and a weakened population from the blockade, the authorities surrendered and laid down their arms, and the entire Armenian population went running for their lives. By the end of September, more than 100,000 ethnic Armenians had fled into Armenia, and today, having lived there for thousands of years, the UN estimates that there are less than 50 Armenians currently living in Nagorno-Karabakh.

Paylan said, "Azerbaijan denies that they committed ethnic cleansing, and that

Armenians willingly left their homes, to which Human Rights Watch responded by saying that it is not acceptable, many international legal experts also expressed their view saying that it was criminally forced." It is important to note that Armenia recently ratified the ICC statute and become the 124th member state of the International Criminal Court. For the first time, Armenia has a potentially viable avenue of accountability for heinous crimes against Armenians, including ethnic cleansing.

The second speaker, IFI Distinguished Fellow Rami Khouri, dealt with the difference between war crimes, crimes against humanity, and genocide. He believed the three sometimes overlap and cause confusion, which is why "there are lawyers in this world to help sort that out." However, it is essential to recognize that this is a "basket" of bad behavior by states or individuals. The ultimate issue is how organizations or individuals misbehave and mistreat people regarding fundamental human rights, which is why they are divided into three categories and genocide – the worst of all three – is placed in a category of its own.

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"Genocide is not just a single act but a process over time that takes away your land, culture, identity, rights, and biological humanity. A genocide that has been going on right before our eyes in the 21st century."

Rami Khouri

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Khouri addressed the current war taking place in Palestine and how it relates to genocide and other crimes. He said that "one of the most important distinctions in Palestine is that the accusations of genocide, which has to be proven in court, is that this genocide in the hands of Zionism and the state of Israel with the complicity of Great Britain, =the United States and other big western powers has been going for a century. Genocide is not just a single act but a process over time that takes away your

land, culture, identity, rights, and biological humanity. A genocide that has been going on right before our eyes in the 21st century."

The third panelist, Natia Navruzov, an International Lawyer, and Consultant, dealt with the issue of genocidal intent. "What is often very difficult in the definition and characterization of genocide is the genocidal intent," Navruzov explained. "It is tough to show and legally prove that an individual has the purpose of committing genocide. And part of genocide is targeting not only people but also their culture, destroying their places of worship or targeting their livelihoods to make sure that the people cannot survive beyond just individual attacks."

Having worked with the Yazidi community for the past five years in Iraq, Navruzov talked about ISIS crimes towards the Yazidis and ways to bring justice to the Yazidi community. She said, "what happened to the Yazidis was almost like a textbook genocide. Yazidis are an ethnoreligious minority group whose roots come from ancient Mesopotamia, who have been around for more than 6,000 years and, similarly to Armenians, have been targeted repeatedly. In 2014 in Iraq, when ISIS was advancing from Syria, they reached Sinjar, which is the homeland of the Yazidis, in August and came there with a plan including publishing propaganda magazines saying that the Yazidis need to be eradicated."

Navruzov described what happened to a group of people after the genocide of the Yazidis; ISIS destroyed 68 temples and shrines in Iraq alone and left behind 90 mass graves. It even targeted the livelihood of Yazidis, attacking wells, land, and beehives to make sure they would not return since Yazidis are known to produce honey, so that they would not have anything to come back to. Survivors say that the genocide is still ongoing, since ISIS has not been brought to justice yet, and around 2,700 Yazidis are still missing and being trafficked, and about 200,000 live in internally displaced persons (IDP) camps being displaced from their

homeland. The goal of ISIS was to destroy the diversity of Iraq and make it one community where everyone looked and lived the same, which makes their action a genocide, Navruzov concluded.

PANEL 2: MEDIA AND PUBLIC OPINION:

ITS ROLE IN PREVENTING AND ENDING HUMAN RIGHTS VIOLATIONS AND CRIMES AGAINST HUMANITY

Marie Jose Daoud, head of L'Orient Today, moderated the second panel, featuring three seasoned journalists having reported from the frontlines during different wars in the Middle East.

The first speaker, Arwa Damon, Senior International Correspondent and Founder and President of INARA, an international network for aid, relief, and assistance, talked about the role of journalists in covering and preventing genocide, how it was done in the past, and what they can do today. Damon said, "if I have to sum up my role as a journalist in the past 20 years, it would be that one of the most disheartening things has been a realization that the media can fight, bleed, and die trying to cover atrocities and crimes against humanity and mass bombardment and not be able to change the course of history. She believed that "it doesn't mean that we give up, but thinking back to what happened in Syria, where we had countless young citizen journalists crawling trying to get footage of ongoing crimes to be able to prove that civilians are being targeted, all of the Syrian and foreign journalists who died during the war makes you question what power coverage can have

at the moment trying to prevent something from happening."



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Arwa Damon



The second speaker, Karlos Zurutuza, a freelance journalist, and media trainer, addressed the role of local journalists present before, during, and after an atrocity. He covered the war in Nagorno-Karabakh and said, "During the war in Artsakh in 2020, many of the foreign reporters who traveled to report on the ground didn't know much about the conflict. We might have experience covering conflict here and there, but I realized that I felt a bit lost on the ground. On the other hand, there were the local journalists who knew what was going on, spoke the language, and were based there, but who didn't have the tools to reach the international media and, at the same time, suffered from self-imposed red lines. Armenia is a small country, so most of the population will read whatever is written. Therefore, journalists avoid writing certain things which could harm their people."

Local journalists have always been in Artsakh, but by the time foreign journalists were able to get there it was already too late, he said, because the news should have been reported months ago so that people around the world would know about the situation and be alarmed. Zurutuza noted that "the best way to ensure that these mistakes are not repeated is by training local journalists to make sure that these stories are being put out and that they are being able to reach the international media."

The third and last panelist, Taline Ounjian, a France 24 correspondent in Armenia, talked

about her experience as a local journalist on the frontlines during the Nagorno-Karabakh war. "It would be very encouraging if we could see more senior reporters from international media on the ground," she said, "willing to show solidarity and share their resources with the local journalists who very often don't have the means to start getting in touch with international media." Ounjian noted how local reporters can sometimes be considered "emotionally biased" since they are ethnically linked to the case they are covering. This can be dangerous for journalists because it shows racism towards these journalists, or it can bring the need for self-censorship in their stories where viewers would not take them seriously, which can be a barrier to the work of local journalists. She concluded that the emotional link local journalists have can be a positive trait rather than a negative one for two main reasons. The first reason is that reporters have more knowledge about the conflict and the history, meaning that their reporting is more precise. And second, they have a greater interest in being accurate and efficient about the type of information they are sharing, to bring awareness and proof about the ongoing conflict in their land.

Roy Knocke, Director of Lepsius Haus Potsdam, wrapped up the webinar by saying, "as we heard from different perspectives, the MENA region is home to many of the world's horrendous conflicts, many unsolved sectarian and ethnic tensions as well as the meddling of global and regional powers." According to Knocke, "because of the so-called Arab Spring, fragmentation and instability have grown in many countries of the region. The wars and belligerency in Ukraine, Palestine, and the South Caucasus put further fear of conflict on the table. Generally speaking, sustainable development and stable democratic institutions in the MENA region can only be achieved when all lethal and non-lethal conflicts in the region are solved politically, when the root causes are addressed, and when all the conflicting parties and affected civil society are included in this process."

ABOUT IFI

Inaugurated in 2006, the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) is an independent, research based, policy-oriented institute. It aims to initiate and develop policy -relevant research in and about the Arab world.

The Institute aims at bridging the gap between academia and policymaking by conducting high quality research on the complex issues and challenges faced by Lebanese and Arab societies within shifting international and global contexts, by generating evidence-based policy recommendations and solutions for Lebanon and the Arab world, and by creating an intellectual space for an interdisciplinary exchange of ideas among researchers, scholars, civil society actors, media, and policy makers.

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ABOUT AGBU

The Armenian General Benevolent Union (AGBU) is the world's largest non-profit organization devoted to upholding the Armenian heritage through educational, cultural, and humanitarian programs. Each year, AGBU is committed to making a difference in the lives of 500,000 people across Armenia, Nagorno-Karabakh and the Armenian diaspora.

Through the vision of its leaders and the generous support of devoted donors and members over the years, AGBU has played a significant role in upholding Armenian traditions and values by adapting to the needs of the worldwide community and the demands of the times. Since 1906, AGBU has remained true to one overarching goal: to create a foundation for the prosperity of all Armenians. AGBU currently operates with an annual budget of over \$45 million, made possible by our countless benefactors. Headquartered in New York City, AGBU has an active presence in 30 countries and addresses the needs of Armenians with traditional and progressive programs worldwide -- from schools, scouts, camps, and support for the arts to internships, virtual learning, and young professional networks.

Visit [AGBU's website](#) to know more.