Surviving and Serving under Occupation: The case of Al-Makassed Hospital in Jerusalem

A lecture and open discussion with
Dr. Rafiq Husseini Director of Al-Makassed Hospital, Arab-East Jerusalem

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Summary by Bayan Jaber

Serving in a Palestinian hospital under Israeli occupation comes with its perils and challenges. These very challenges were discussed by Dr. Rafiq Husseini in a lecture entitled “Surviving and Serving under Occupation: The case of Al-Makassed Hospital in Jerusalem”. Held at the Issam Fares Institute at the American University of Beirut (AUB), the event was co-organized with the Collaborative for Leadership and Innovation in Health Systems (CLI), and AUB’s Faculty of Health Sciences.

Dr. Husseini discussed his experience with Al-Makassed Hospital in Jerusalem as a case study of discrimination, national duty, working towards sustainability under occupation, and as a symbol of Palestinian steadfastness and resistance in Jerusalem.

He started by presenting the repressive measures Jerusalem faces today. He pointed out that streets are being renamed, Palestinians are being denied building permits and their Jerusalem IDs are being withdrawn.

Dr. Husseini presented Al-Makassed Hospital as one that characterizes a unique case of national steadfastness. To begin with, the hospital is owned solely by Palestinian people. Overlooking Al-Aqsa/Dome of the rock, the hospital’s geographic location is considered to be a very strategic one. In fact, it represents the best location for real estate which is why there is an Israeli proposal for the construction of a cable car system.

Al-Makassed Hospital is the main pillar for the other five Jerusalem hospitals. It is a referral hospital for patients from Gaza and West Bank. Dr. Husseini revealed that the majority of the cases referred to the hospital are complex ones. It is also a teaching hospital which trains 25 doctors annually. Furthermore, it has 90 residents training in nine different specializations.

The hospital faces many political and financial challenges. It has a $30m accumulation of debt which hinders that hospital’s work and restricts the management’s ability from making any reforms. In order to overcome these weaknesses, Dr. Husseini explained that the hospital is working on implementing the following 10 steps:
STEP 1: Re-Draft Makassed Hospital’s Development Strategy (2013 – 2018)

STEP 2: Based on the Strategy, Draft a Three-Year Action Plan for the Revival of Makassed Hospital

STEP 3: Appoint Capable Senior Staff

STEP 4: Increase Income & Effectiveness & Reduce Expenses by all Available Means

STEP 5: Introduce Confidence-Building Measures

STEP 6: Professionalize Fundraising and Resource Development

STEP 7: Introduce New Essential Systems

STEP 8: Expand Capacity Despite Israeli Restrictions

STEP 9: Review Redundant/ Inefficient Staff and Retire Them ASAP

STEP 10: Start Paying Old Debts to Suppliers and Banks

Dr. Husseini ended the lecture by showing pictures of some of the cases that come into the hospital’s care. The audience grimaced at the sight of some of the patients. The images of severely burnt children were particularly gruesome. Some patients had lost limbs, others, family members. Dr. Husseini stressed that the injuries Palestinians endure are not only acute physical ones but also long term mental ones.