AUB’s Issam Fares Institute and the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee Co-organized a Roundtable Discussion on Palestinian Refugees from Syria Living in Lebanon
February 4, 2016
By Elena Grissom

Speakers: Chairman of the LPDC, Hassan Mneymneh; Issam Fares Institute Director, Tarek Mitri; Associate Professor at AUB at FHS, Sawsan Abdulrahim; Assistant Professor at AUB and Director of Research at the Issam Fares Institute, Nasser Yassin.
One often-neglected result of the Syrian refugee crisis has been the plight of the Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS). Prior to the war, the number of Palestinian refugees in Syria had reached around 560,000 individuals, of which 80,000 fled to Lebanon, Jordan, and Turkey. As of May 2015, 42,000 PRS have registered in Lebanon, adding to the already existing Palestinian refugee population of 450,000. Unlike Syrian refugees, who register with the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), PRS are not covered under that mandate, but rather qualify for the already-limited resources of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). This influx has led to a specific humanitarian crisis as a result of the legal status and lack of resources available to meet their needs.

In response to this crisis, the Issam Fares Institute and the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC) co-organized a roundtable discussion on the legal, social, and physical challenges facing PRS living in Lebanon. Taking place on the same day as the Syria Donors Conference in London, representatives from embassies of donor countries, the Ministry of Interior and Municipalities, and the Ministry of Social Affairs, the Director of UNRWA in Lebanon, along with a number of academicians and researchers met at the Grand Serail for the discussion.

The roundtable began with introductions given by former ministers Dr. Hassan Mneymneh, chairman of the LPDC, and Dr. Tarek Mitri, director of the Issam Fares Institute. Mneymneh’s opening remarks emphasized the importance of this issue in that it involves refugees who are experiencing a double displacement, after their first displacement from Palestine. He lamented PRS also suffer from dual marginalization, as the aid and protection they receive is incomparable to that of their fellow Syrian refugees. Lastly, he urged UNRWA to maximize the provision of urgent services in the sectors of education, health, food security, and shelter, though specifying this should not absolve the Lebanese state of its responsibilities as a host country.

Mitri, on the other hand, highlighted his vision of the mitigating role LPDC may play in making sure PRS are treated in accordance with international humanitarian rights. Mitri emphasized that the double displacement encountered by this population prompts them to demand to be treated as refugees and not merely foreigners. He continues to say that Issam Fares Institute harnesses policy-related research, aiming to facilitate dialogue between researchers and knowledge producers and decision-makers in Lebanon, while cooperating with international organizations and neighboring countries. Mitri concluded by stating that the ultimate purpose of this discussion is to create an action platform to alleviate the impact of injustice suffered by PRS today.

Following the opening remarks, Dr. Sawsan Abdulrahim, Associate Professor at AUB, presented the findings of an extensive study done in collaboration with UNRWA entitled “Profiling the vulnerability of Palestine refugees from Syria living in Lebanon 2015.” The study focused on the demographic distribution of an estimated 44,200 PRS living in Lebanon. The assessment profiled the PRS population according to various sectors, including economic, education, food security, health, protection, shelter, water, sanitation
and hygiene. The report also highlighted a significant gap in terms of the distinct legal status of PRS

Dr. Nasser Yassin, Assistant Professor at AUB and Director of Research at the Issam Fares Institute, presented the findings of a study conducted by the Institute entitled “Double Refugees: The Crisis of Palestinian Refugees from Syria in Lebanon.” Yassin’s study involved interviews with key stakeholders, including representatives of UN agencies, international and local NGOs, in addition to Lebanese and Palestinian officials, in Ain al-Hilweh, a refugee camp in Saida hosting the largest PRS population in the country. Study findings drew a comparison between the status of Syrian refugees and that of PRS. Differences in terms of international response, protection and services offered were highlighted, with emphasis on the higher vulnerability of PRS. Findings also underscored the responsibility of the Lebanese government, UNRWA, the PLO, the Palestinian embassy, and the LPDC in responding to the needs of Palestinian refugees from Syria.

An open dialogue followed the presentations, in which issues such as the role of UNRWA, protection and security, social and living conditions, and employment opportunities for PRS were further discussed. The importance of coordination between concerned parties, including the UNRWA, LPDC, the Ministries of Interior and Social Affairs, international organizations, and donors was emphasized, as well as the need to enhance both financial and human capacities for continuous support of PRS.