

REFUGEES AND SOCIAL COHESION: HOW TO REDUCE TENSIONS IN LEBANON

One-Day Conference

November 23, 2017

Summary by Rayan Korri

Different actors from the Lebanese society came together on the 23rd of November at the one-day conference organized by Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) in partnership with the Embassy of Canada to Lebanon under the title: “Refugees and Social Cohesion: How to Reduce Tensions in Lebanon”.

Government officials, NGO representatives, journalists, and scholars discussed through three panels the factors of radicalization and the responses of the Lebanese and the Canadian governments in that respect, the question of refugees in Lebanon and the anti-Syrian sentiment as a factor of radicalization, and the impacts of programming designed to counter radicalization and improve social cohesion in Lebanon.

Inaugural Session

Dr. Tarek Mitri, Director of the Issam Fares Institute, opened the conference with a speech examining the absence of ethical considerations when dealing with Syrian refugees’ problems in Lebanon. Mitri focused on the importance of facts and actualities when determining the numerous burdens endured by Lebanese without exaggerating them. Mitri, who did not deny the presence of those burdens, believed that overestimations became the main motivation for Lebanese to take positions against Syrian refugees; like amplifying Syrian numbers in Lebanon, augmenting the size of their competition with Lebanese in the Lebanese labor market, and accusing them for the decline in the Lebanese economic growth.

Additionally, he disapproved of the claim stating that refugees should have a safe and a non-voluntary return to their country and considered it a demand of the refugees’ deportation. According to Mitri, forcing Syrian refugees to return is a violation of the simplest Human Rights and similar unethical behaviors are morally and materially harmful for Lebanese and Syrians.

Ms. Emmanuelle Lamoureux, Ambassador of Canada to Lebanon, emphasized on the significance of the conference since “refugees” and “radicalization” are critical topics not only for Lebanon, but globally. Lamoureux spoke about the importance of defining and understanding radicalization, which became even more difficult to fight than terrorism. She questioned the link between refugees and radicalization and stressed on the role of the conference in helping to understand how refugees are victims and not vectors of radicalization.

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According to Lamoureux, exclusion, abandonment, and hatred are factors leading to radicalization on individual levels in host countries. Furthermore, Lamoureux talked about the contributions of Canada in the Middle East to counter radicalization and violent extremism through programs that promote humanitarian support to refugees, assist in the development of host communities, and aid in stabilizing vulnerable areas.

By this way, Canada promotes peaceful coexistence between host and refugees communi-



ties on one hand and contributes to the fight against radicalization to have a more peaceful Middle East on the other hand.

Mr. Safwan Mostapha, the Legal Advisor to Lebanon's Minister of State for Displaced Affairs Mouin Merhebi, represented his Excellency during the opening of the conference. Mostapha considered that radicalization is not a result of asylum and gave Canada as an example, where Syrians were welcomed in an atmosphere of freedom without the presence of radicalization. Mostapha appreciated during his talk Canada's contributions and financial aid to the Lebanese governmental and non-governmental organizations to support Syrian refugees in different fields.

As explained by Mostapha, it is unfair to connect Syrian refugees or accuse the host country with radicalization. The refugee was forced to leave his country after many losses and came to Lebanon in order to find security and better living conditions, whereas Lebanon is struggling with many issues like unemployment, poor infrastructure, discriminative speech, and decline in economic growth.

Furthermore, Mostapha indicated that radicalization cannot be fought without the investment of the international community in the host country, the responsible role of Lebanese media in promoting sober and reliable speech, and the significant positions of municipalities and organizations in supporting refugees in all domains.

Panel One: "Radicalization and Deradicalization"

Moderated by: Ms. Diana Moukalled, Journalist

Dr. Khalil Gebara, Advisor to the Minister of Interior, "The Lebanese Government Response"

Dr. Jocelyn Belanger, Assistant Professor, New York University, Abu Dhabi & Canadian expert on radicalization, "Thrilled to Pieces: On the Role of Sensation Seeking in Political Violence"

Dr. Maha Yahya, Director of Carnegie Middle East, "Radicalization Factors in Lebanon"

Ms. Ritu Banerjee, Senior Director, Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence, "Overview of Canada's Domestic Efforts to Counter Radicalization to Violence"

Dr. Gebara questioned the relationship between the Syrian war and radicalization on one hand and Syrian refugees becoming radicalized in Lebanon or Lebanese becoming radicalized after the refugee crisis on the other hand. He explained that the main causes of tensions between Lebanese and Syrians in Lebanon are rooted in economic and developmental issues like getting access to jobs and public services, especially in the deprived areas.

Additionally Gebara presented the point of view of many Lebanese, who believe that they are being neglected by the international community and not being acknowledged for what they did in favor of Syrian refugees.

Dr. Belanger presented how the life significance of every person is culturally and socially embedded. He explained that the main motivation to engage in violent and radicalized acts comes from the search of existence and life's meaning.

Belanger compared between the experiences to be engaged in boring and peaceful acts, like boycotting some products and signing petitions, and to be engaged in exciting and peaceful acts, like protesting. The result of this comparison shows that the engagement in exciting actions led to less support to violence. As said by Belanger, the main role of society is to invest in youths and help them in connecting so they will not be used by radicalized groups to fulfill their agendas.

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Dr. Yahya started her talk with questioning the correlation between refugees and radicalization on one hand and the ways radicalization as a term is being used in discussions on the other hand. Yahya stated that personal circumstances in addition to the country environment and institutions are factors that affect individuals' involvement in radicalization. Furthermore, Yahya discussed the reasons that prevent Lebanese citizens in being radicalized.

The absence of state religion, the presence of equal justice towards all religious groups, the social configuration of Lebanon in having 18 officially recognized sects, the small size of the country, the freedom of religious and ethnic practices, and the Lebanese educational system that promotes and values tolerance are the main reasons presented by Yahya.

She concluded by saying that joining radicalized groups are symptoms of a failure in integrating individuals, controlling state borders, and crating spaces for people to move to whatever promise land is been giving to them.

Ms. Banerjee explained through a video presentation the main roles of the Canada Centre for Community Engagement and Prevention of Violence, which provides policy and national

leadership on issues related to radicalization and violence, supports action-oriented research to ensure that results are meaningful and policy-relevant, and supports local programs on issues related to radicalization and violence to build community resilience.

Furthermore, Banerjee presented the overall approach of the center which focuses on issues of violence so individuals do not engage in violent activities or behaviors in the Canadian community; in addition, it looks at all forms of radicalization which is evolving through the years, and concentrates on prevention measures to a build resilient community which is tolerant and believes in multiculturalism and social inclusion.

Panel Two: “The Situation of Refugees in Lebanon”

Moderated by: Mr. Thaer Ghandour, Journalist

Dr. Jihan Rabah, Director of Research and Analysis, eConcordia, Co-principal Project SOMEONE, and Member of the UNESCO Global Chair on Prevention of Radicalization and Violent Extremism, “Building Counter-narratives to Violent Extremism and Radicalization in Canada: Possibilities and Challenges”

Ms. Karolina Lindholm Billing, UNHCR Deputy Regional Representative, “Refugees in Lebanon - Facts and Figures”

Dr. Ziad El-Sayegh, Expert on Public Policies and Refugees & Senior National Policy Advisor to the Ministry of State for Displaced Affairs, “Refugees and Human Rights”

Dr. Nasser Yassin, Director of Research, Issam Fares Institute, “Countering the Xenophobic Narrative through Data Journalism”



Dr. Rabah spoke about the necessity to produce quality learning through acquired and constructed knowledge. This necessity comes with internet, multi-media, and e-learning infiltration in our daily lives. Rabah presented the “Someone” initiative, which is a research project funded by the Canadian government. The project aims to build resilience against online hate and radicalization through multimedia materials within and now outside Canada.

During her talk, Rabah discussed the opportunities and challenges to counter radicalization and violent extremism initiatives through creating engaging spaces for communication, factoring the role of social media in intimate spaces, diversifying methodologies of outreach, addressing various populations in the campaigns, and evaluating those initiatives without excluding the gender focus.

Ms. Billing expressed the major concerns of UNHCR regarding the existing tensions between Lebanese and Syrians in Lebanon. UNHCR, which tries to slow down the continuous increase of the refugees’ vulnerability in the country, is also concerned about the challenge to preserve Lebanese hospitality towards Syrian refugees.

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Billing stated that although Lebanese and Syrians are competing over public services and infrastructure like electricity, water, and graves-sharing, there is not always a direct correlation between areas with the high presence of refugees and dissatisfaction over services provision. She stressed on the necessity to have initiatives for jobs creation on one hand and for activities that foster intercommunity interaction on the other hand as solutions to the existing tensions in the country.

Dr. El-Sayegh emphasized the need to discuss the host country’s concerns, in addition to the

issues related to Syrian refugees. According to El-Sayegh, the relief intervention used by the international community regarding the Syrian refugee crisis is of high importance but is not enough in a host country like Lebanon which lacks resources and good public policies.

El-Sayegh spoke about an existing political agenda in Lebanon that associates refugees with crimes. The debate about the refoulement and the non-refoulement is the main motive of this agenda. For El-Sayegh, it is important to discuss the details of the Syrians’ return, such as timing, method, and guarantees to assure the dignity and security of the refugees.

Dr. Yassin spoke about three Lebanese signs of fatigue when it comes to coping with the Syrian refugee crisis. Donor’s fatigue and host community fatigue are factors that partially explain the existing tensions between Lebanese and Syrians. Yassin explained the role of Lebanese media in changing the Lebanese community’s perception towards Syrian refugees throughout the years of the crisis.

Demographic exaggeration, generalization, and spread of fear are the three main dimensions of narratives used by the Lebanese media. Yassin, who compared the Lebanese view of the Palestinian refugees in the past to the one of the Syrian refugees in the present, stated that there is a regressive Lebanese position towards refugees and migrants due to institutional discrimination in the Lebanese system.

Panel Three: “Promoting Social Inclusion through Active Programming - A Canadian Contribution”

Moderated by: Mr. George Ghali, Executive Director, Act for Human Rights (ALEF)

Mr. Fadi Abilmona, Programme Manager, UNDP - Crisis Prevention & Recovery (CPR) Programme, “Locally-based Approach for Justice and Security Interventions”

Dr. Rami Lakkis, Founder and General Manager, LOST - The Lebanese Organization for Studies and Training, “Engaging Syrian and Lebanese Women in Social Stability in the Bekaa”

Ms. Renée Sabbagh, National Programme Offi-

cer, “UNODC Lebanon UNODC’s Intervention in Lebanese Prisons”

Mr. Nizar El Laz, Project Manager, The Stabilisation Network (TSN), “Empowering Youth in Tripoli, Saida and Central Bekaa to Counter Violent Extremism”

The third panel included five presentations from different national and international organizations representatives on projects done in various Lebanese regions with an approach that promotes social inclusion and diversity. The mutual aim of these projects, which receive Canadian funds and support, is to contribute in reducing tensions and preventing extremism and radicalization in Lebanon.

Mr. Holmquist started his talk by sharing the belief of SFCG that conflict is inevitable unlike violence, which makes the promotion of peaceful solutions a necessity. Holmquist spoke about “Diwan”, a project founded by SFCG to promote inclusive governance in Wadi Khaled and strengthen social cohesion and stability in the area.

According to Holmquist, although Syrians fled to Wadi Khaled due to cultural, religious, and economic common links between the region and neighboring Syria, the increase of vulnerability in the region caused the creation of tension between Lebanese and Syrians. Holmquist shared the findings of the base-line assessment of “Diwan” which are concentrated in three key issues: role of women, participatory decision-making, and social actions.

Mr. Abilmona talked about the role of UNDP in bridging the gap between humanitarian and developmental spheres through supporting local host communities for better service delivery and strengthening governmental institutions. Abilmona explained how UNDP is collaborating with the Lebanese Ministry of Interior and the Internal Security Forces (ISF) to support the role of Municipality Police. Tasks of Municipality Police are increasing under the circumstances of the refugee crisis due to the increase of safety concerns in the country.

As said by Abilmona, it is important to reduce the risk of having racism in the work of Municipal Police. Therefore, UNDP developed stan-

dard operating procedures to inhibit Municipality Police in going beyond their mandates. This was done with the support of the Ministry of Interior, ISF training academy, and the director of municipalities.

Dr. Lakkis spoke about an initiative implemented by LOST in the region of Baalbek-Hermel to engage women in the process of social cohesion. Lakkis stated the factors causing women marginalization in that region in addition to the reasons of choosing women as major actors in strengthening the social cohesion between Syrians and Lebanese.

According to Lakkis, women should take leadership roles in community affairs since it has been proven that they are more sensitive to public service issues and have a critical role in education and socialization.

Lakkis explained that the base of this project is the theory of change, where it is important to look into the sources of tension, deal with them on a micro level, and engage women through new means in that process. Furthermore, Lakkis talked about the positive impacts of the initiative on individual, social, and governmental levels.

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Ms. Sabbagh questioned in the beginning of her presentation if prisons are incubators of terrorism or agents for positive change. Sabbagh explained that isolation, concentration, and dispersal/ integration are different approaches used worldwide when dealing with a population engaged in violent extremism and radicalization.

Sabbagh talked about a Lebanese pilot experience done in the Juvenile wing of Roumieh Prison where the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Interior, and UNODC collaborated. Children charged with different types of terrorist actions were subjected to activities where self-esteem, sociability, cultural diversity, reinforcing family relations, reintegration

programs, and psychological support are promoted. The Canadian research and pedagogical tools were used for the implementation. As results, social and personal skills were empowered and disengagement with some changes in behaviors were perceived.

Mr. El Laz presented a project done by TSN through which youth in Tripoli, Saida, and Central Bekaa are empowered to counter violent extremism. The aim of the project is to change the perceptions of youth and provide them with a sense of agency, opportunities, and positive alternatives. As said by El Laz, TSN tries to identify the sources of problems before engaging in developmental solutions through qualitative and quantitative research.

Therefore, socioeconomic, political, ideological, and personal factors were classified and analyzed in order to identify any possible correlation with instability and extremism.

El Laz described the profile of youth and their perceptions to different critical issues like the Lebanese political system, discrimination, corruption in aid distribution, and restriction on legal residency. Through this project, youth were not only recipients but also partners from its designing till implementation phases and played a big role in outreaching the community.

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Watch the sessions on the IFI YouTube channel

Inaugural Session

Panel 1

Panel 2

Panel 3