ROUND TABLE DISCUSSION: PALESTINIAN REFUGEES, HOST GOVERNMENTS AND UNRWA IN 2010

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The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB) hosted a round table discussion on October 9, 2010 to reflect on the findings and recommendations of the UNRWA-IFI Conference, “From Relief and Works to Human Development: UNRWA and Palestine Refugees after 60 Years”. Representatives of host governments, Palestinian political factions, civil society organizations, and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees, participated in the discussion which tackled the following 6 themes: UNRWA programs and service delivery, UNRWA’s protection mandate, UNRWA and community participation, camp governance, camp improvement and reconstruction, and UNRWA’s role in the context of finding a durable solution to the refugee problem.

PROGRAMS AND SERVICE DELIVERY

Wajeeh Azayzeh, Director of the Department of Palestinian Affairs in Jordan (DPA), saw that UNRWA’s role is to provide services for the refugees until they return. He added that the Jordanian state offers refugees a wide array of services, and shares UNRWA’s concept of civil enhancement. Jordan has been keen on developing the camps in a manner that preserves the refugees’ right to a dignified life without undermining their Right to Return. Azayzeh saw that UNRWA’s basic programs (health and education) should not be compromised under any circumstance.

Ali Mustafa, Director of the General Administration for Palestinian Arab Refugees in Syria, similarly noted that UNRWA’s primary function is to provide refugees with services until they return. He rejected the idea of having refugees pay for services as a means to alleviate UNRWA’s financial crisis.

Maya Majzoub, President of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC), pointed to the specificity of Lebanon’s case in comparison to other host states. She saw that UNRWA’s financial distress is critical, and wished that the microfinance program be extended once the financial crisis is over. Majzoub reiterated that LPDC’s role is to bridge between the government, UNRWA, and different Palestinian stakeholders. She stressed that the Lebanese state is open to further collaboration with UNRWA.

Mohammad Abu Baker, Deputy Director of the Department of Refugee Affairs in the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), noted that UNRWA represents the international community’s commitment to the refugee problem. Hence, it has an obligation to deliver services to the refugee population. It is an optimal tool to deal with and contain the problems faced by the refugee camps.

Sami Msha’sha’, Public Information Officer at UNRWA Head Quarters, said that the Agency needs additional funding to its core budget instead of alternative funding for additional projects. This could be ensured through urging the Arab countries to increase their contributions to cover 7 to 8% of UNRWA’s budget. He noted that Arab host countries are de-facto donors as they allocate vast funds for refugee aid; Jordan is one such case.
Yasser Azzam from Hamas noted that although refugees are not fully satisfied with UNRWA’s services, they are keen on preserving the Agency. Azzam identified UNRWA’s financial crisis as the main challenge facing its service provision. He added that this is the main responsibility of the United Nations (UN) and not that of donor states. He further called for lifting the restrictions to entering construction material into the camps of the South of Lebanon.

Imad Loubani, from the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine-General Command, discussed UNRWA’s service provision in the sectors of education and health. He identified the challenges facing UNRWA’s education sector as: high drop-out rates, overcrowded classrooms, lack of follow up on the behalf of the administration, and declining quality of education. He saw that these could be alleviated through proper training of teachers, educational support to children in danger of dropping out, and rehabilitation of schools. He also stressed the necessity of making available university scholarships so that students are able to attain higher education. As for health, Loubani noted that challenges of infrastructure and poor sanitation in the camps pose a threat to the population’s health. He added that the health services provided by UNRWA are insufficient and their quality is deteriorating. Furthermore, the services lack medication for chronic diseases, hospitalization, and surgery benefits.

Mohamad Jaradat, from Badil Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, noted that Zionist groups may misuse the refugees’ expression of their dissatisfaction with UNRWA to lobby against it in the American Congress. He highlighted the need to protect UNRWA and its resources as this is in the interest of the Palestinian people. He also noted that sometimes funds are wasted on the personal expenses of personnel, such as cars.

Issam Younis, from Al Mezan Center for Human Rights in Gaza (via teleconference call), noted that the continuity of UNRWA’s services in the Gaza Strip is unpredictable. The severe humanitarian situation in Gaza has burdened the Agency, which has been serving as the main care-taker in responding to the precarious conditions in the Strip.

**PROTECTION**

Edward Kattoura from the Palestinian Human Rights Organization noted that protection is best ensured through providing health, education, and legal protection. He saw that the latter is lacking for Palestinians in Lebanon.

Fathi Abou aL Ardat from Fatah noted that Palestinians in Syria enjoy full rights except the right to nationality, and Palestinians in Jordan enjoy all rights including nationality. Lebanon’s case is unique as Palestinian refugees are deprived of their basic rights. He explained that refugees of Lebanon are demanding the right to work, decent living, health, and education. He asked Mrs. Majzoub to reflect on this comparison and to comment on the situation of Palestinians in Lebanon.

Majzoub highlighted Lebanon’s improved policy towards Palestinian refugees and stated that attaining civil rights does not undermine the Palestinian Right of Return. She noted that while the LPDC was opting for a full-package of rights, it considered the ratification of the new labor law a positive and desirable development. The Committee will continue to advocate for the remaining civil rights on various levels.
Azzam saw that the newly ratified labor law is superficial as it led to undermining Palestinians’ rights instead of safeguarding them. He saw that a radical solution is needed for granting Palestinians full rights.

Salvatore Lombardo, Director of UNRWA in Lebanon, noted that the number of work permits to be issued over the months following the ratification will put the labor law to the test. He added that all parties must understand that, as per the new law, it is illegal to hire Palestinians without a contract that guarantees their rights.

Mahmoud Al Ali from the Center for Refugee Rights/ Aidoun noted that the refugee issue in Lebanon is exceptionally complicated because of two reasons. The first is that the Lebanese Government, unlike other host governments, had reservations regarding the Casablanca Protocols (namely on the right to work and to own property). Second, Lebanon’s confessional political system hinders the provision of civil rights to Palestinians. Further, Al Ali remarked that there are around 17,000 non-ID Palestinians in Jordan; he added that the Jordanian Government is not taking measures to address the situation.

Azayzeh responded to Al Ali by clarifying that the number of non-IDs is 3,000. He added that this is a complex issue that is to be dealt with elsewhere.

Younis noted that in Gaza, UNRWA’s decision to provide protection has depended on the personality of the Commissioner General, but was not governed by a boarder legal framework. He called for regulating UNRWA’s protection within the framework of international humanitarian law, especially the Geneva IV Conference of 1949 relevant to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War.

COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

Abou Al Ardat advised that UNRWA recognizes the importance of refugees’ involvement in processes of needs assessment. The Agency’s attempts at community participation should thus be comprehensive and not seasonal or subject-based.

Kattoura said that the Palestinian community’s skepticism of UNRWA is due to the lack of a real partnership between the two.

Ahmad Abou Widdo from the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine pointed to the inequality of knowledge between UNRWA and the parties it seeks partnership with. He called for allowing partners to access UNRWA’s assessments, evaluations, and plans in order to enhance accountability.

Sari Hanafi, Associate Professor of Sociology at AUB and Research Director of the program on Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Arab East at IFI, proposed that UNRWA should set specific mechanisms for ensuring community participation. One such mechanism could be developing its role as a mediator through giving more authority and confidence to the Camp Service Officers.

Lombardo described that UNRWA is operating in a very complex context and is facing a number of serious issues. He saw that the accountability and credibility of all parties are key factors in responding to challenges; however, the various actors’ conflicting agendas undermine the transparency of the partnership. Lombardo held himself accountable for UNRWA to emphasize the credibility of its
leadership; he made an appeal for responsibility and cooperation in order to consolidate the partnership.

Jaradat saw that transparency needs the full commitment of all parties. To that end, camp communities should be clear and thorough in identifying their needs and following up on them. But more importantly, they should recognize that UNRWA is under substantial donor pressure and thus should be keen on preserving it.

Al Ali noted that UNRWA’s partnership with local communities often excluded the communities from the area of policy making, and restricted the partnership to the implementation of programs. Participation in implementation was a necessary measure for UNRWA to protect its work and avoid confrontation with the local community. Al Ali requested that UNRWA opts for a comprehensive and meaningful partnership with the Palestinian community that includes partnership in policy making.

Azzam noted that the mutual lack of trust between UNRWA and civil society is due to political considerations.

Abou Al Ardat pointed to the prevailing trust crisis among Palestinian political factions, and between political factions and civil society. He added that all parties must cooperate to enhance people’s lives.

Msha’sha’ noted Palestinian political factions have a needs-based relationship with UNRWA, which is problematic because they do not take into consideration the Agency’s financial crisis. He added that information is not withheld from partners, and that documentation can be accessed through the UNRWA’s offices. Msha’sha’ saw that skeptical relations are exhausting to all parties and compromise the quality of the implementation of programs.

GOVERNANCE

Abu Baker said that UNRWA has a defined role which does not include camp governance and management. Historically, the Agency has been responsible for catering to the humanitarian needs of the camp population, thus providing security through services. It should continue to play such a role until a comprehensive and just solution is reached in accordance with Resolution 194.

Abou Al Ardat noted that the Palestine Liberation Organization is the only historical bearer of Palestinian legitimacy. The role of UNRWA and other UN agencies is that of an international witness and a service provider.

Younis said that UNRWA is playing the role of a de facto government in Gaza. This is because of political pressures resulting from the lack of international recognition of the Hamas-led government - a matter which makes UNRWA the primary external contact in the Strip. It is also due to the severe humanitarian crisis caused by the siege, which renders the Agency the main caretaker and protection provider.

Hanafi noted that service delivery and governance are, to a great extent, interconnected. He highlighted the need to discuss the question of who represents the Palestinian people in the camps, noting that the dominant political factions do not necessarily do so.
Loubani said that the camps of Lebanon are governed based on a military approach, especially the camps of the South. He added that the flaws in governing Nahr El Bared (NBC) and its adjacent area are the responsibility of the Lebanese government and not UNRWA.

Kattoura highlighted the worsening security situation in NBC, and emphasized the challenges people face - especially that of requiring security permits to enter the camp. He noted that the LPDC is the optimum political gate to dealing with such issues.

Majzoub noted that the period between the Cairo Agreement and 2005 witnessed a security-based approach for governing the camps. However, this approach no longer prevails. She added that the governance of NBC is an area of interest for the LPDC, especially after the camp’s crisis. She stated that she will call for a meeting to tackle the issue of security permits required to enter the camp.

CAMP IMPROVEMENT AND RECONSTRUCTION

Mustafa said that the Syrian Government pioneered the process of camp reconstruction; he noted that the Neirab Camp Rehabilitation Project (NRP) is not representative of the manner in which camp improvement was managed. For NRP, UNRWA signed an agreement with the Syrian Government guaranteeing that the project will not undermine the Palestinian Right of Return. The agreement also stipulated that the houses built within the framework of the project are the property of the Syrian Republic, to be returned to it upon the refugees’ return. He added that Syria supports UNRWA’s sustainability and stability in providing services until the refugees’ return.

Loubani stated that the NBC reconstruction process puts into question UNRWA’s ability to conduct massive reconstruction projects. Initially, it was promised that the process would be finalized in three years; today (3 years after), the first zone is yet to be finished.

Kattoura stated that the problem with the reconstruction of NBC lies in the lack of implementation of the set strategy. He thus questioned the benefit of setting strategies without providing adequate follow up.

Majzoub recalled the 2005 Camp Improvement Initiative, which was supposed to target NBC but was halted by the conflict. She noted that while reconstruction is the main responsibility of UNRWA, the Lebanese state is doing the best it can to facilitate the process. She added that setting a strategy is as important as its implementation; the process requires trust and confidence among all parties.

DURABLE SOLUTIONS

Various speakers noted that UNRWA’s presence is a symbol of the international recognition of the refugee problem. It should continue to provide services to refugees until a comprehensive and just solution is found.

Abou el Ardat said that UNRWA should recognize the highly politicized context of the Palestinian refugee problem and must take into consideration the decisions taken by Palestinian political factions. He called for putting resolution 194 into action, noting that this requires an effort on behalf of the international community to pressure Israel into respecting international resolutions.

Sha’sha’ described the intensive debate happening in Israel, North America and Europe about UNRWA’s role in exacerbating the refugee problem, and about its prospective role in the context of a
durable solution. He noted that no such research or debate is underway in the Arab World, and considered this to be the role of research centers and political factions.

Karen AbuZayd, former Commissioner General of UNRWA, said that each of the parties involved, namely host courtiers, UNRWA, and political factions, perceive their situation to be different and unique. She highlighted the importance of taking the perceptions of other parties into consideration, even if one disagrees with their viewpoints. AbuZayd added that the discussion emphasized what should and could be done. Future discussions, she suggested, should focus on the mechanisms needed for addressing the described challenges.