



Panel Discussion

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Repercussions of the Lebanese Crisis on the Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon and Ways to Overcome Them



Organized by Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations

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This Report

Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations held a panel discussion entitled, “The Repercussions of the Lebanese Crisis on the Palestinian Refugees and the Ways to Overcome Them.” Around 30 experts and specialists in Palestinian affairs, in particular the situation of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, participated in the discussion. In this report, we present the most important information and data, in addition to the most noteworthy outputs and recommendations, proposed by participants.

Below is a list of the names of participants in the panel discussion:

- **Ahmad Sibahi:** Media figure, TV presenter at Palestine Today TV
- **Ali Azzam:** Director of INTERPAL Lebanon Office
- **Ali Huwaidi:** General Manager of Elhayya 302 to Defend Refugees Rights
- **Basem Elkassem:** Researcher, Head of the Archives and Information Department at al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations
- **Fatima Itani:** Researcher at al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations
- **Haitham Abu al-Ghuzlan:** Palestinian writer, member of the External Relations Bureau of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)
- **Ihab Toutounji:** Director of Humanitarian Relief For Development) NGO
- **Iqbal ‘Omeish:** Researcher, Head of the Academic Editing Unit at al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations
- **Jaber Suleiman:** Advisor and coordinator at the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Forum of the Common Space Initiative, Palestinian refugee affairs expert
- **Mahmud al-‘Ali:** Centre for Refugee Rights /Aidoun (CRR) Coordinator
- **Mahmud Haydar:** Lebanese researcher and analyst, Central Managing Editor of *Istighrab* Peer Reviewed Journal
- **Marwan Abdel-‘Al:** Head of the PFLP in Lebanon
- **Dr. Mohsen Mohammad Saleh:** General Manager of al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations
- **Dr. Nazih Khayyat:** Professor, President of the Lebanese National Authority for the Support of the Palestine Cause
- **Qassim al-‘Aina:** General Manager of the National Institution of Social Care (Beit Atfal Assumoud) in Lebanon
- **Ra’fat Murrah:** Journalist and writer, Head of the Hamas Media Department Abroad
- **Rana Sa’adah:** Researcher, Head of the Translation Department at al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations
- **Salah Salah:** Former leader in the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), Palestinian activist
- **Samira Salah:** Palestinian activist, especially concerning Palestinian refugee women in Lebanon
- **Saqr Abu Fakhr:** Researcher specialized in Palestinian Affairs, Managing Editor at the Arab Centre for Research and Policy Studies, Beirut Office
- **Sarkis Abu Zaid:** Lebanese writer and political analyst
- **Dr. Shafiq Shu’aib:** Professor, Coordinator of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Forum of the Common Space Initiative
- **Suhail al-Natour:** Leader in the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)
- **Tariq Akkawi:** President of the Palestinian-Lebanese Business Forum
- **‘Umar Kayed:** Media figure, producer of political programs at al-Mayadeen TV
- **Wael Sa’ad:** Researcher, assistant general manager at al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations
- **Wael Najm:** Member of the Political Bureau of *al-Jama‘ah al-Islamiyyah* in Lebanon
- **Wafa’ al-Yassir:** Former head of Norwegian People’s Aid (NPA) in Lebanon, Director of the Palestinian Students Fund in Lebanon
- **Walid Muhammad ‘Ali:** Coordinator of the Qadirun Ma’an (Together We Can) Network for Studies and Alternative Media
- **Yasser Ali:** Palestinian writer and poet, specializing in Palestinian refugee affairs
- **Yassine Hammoud:** Director General of al-Quds International Foundation

Panel Discussion Report
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in Lebanon and Ways to Overcome them

First: Highlights and Important Points:

- Poverty rates among Palestinian refugees have reached 65%, while unemployment rates have stood at 56%, according to two surveys conducted by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and American University of Beirut (AUB) in 2010 and 2015. Poverty rates among Lebanese people have hit 35%. These are likely to increase dramatically, especially after 17/10/2019. The situation of many Palestinian workers is extremely fragile, barely securing a level of subsistence. The majority have been day labourers no longer finding work.
- Unemployment rates have gone up, with many businesses, companies, factories, and shops having to reduce staff, dismiss foreign workers, or lower the wages. Palestinian workers have been among the hardest hit by this.
- Disruption of many Palestinian businesses, such as farming and construction, due to the disruption of businesses in Lebanon.
- The difficulty of receiving remittance from Palestinian families in the diaspora due to Lebanese banks measures, which are withholding depositors' and transfers' credits, handing over limited sums under strict conditions. A number of studies have shown that more than half of Palestinian households in refugee camps (RCs) receive remittances from their relatives abroad, 25% of the families have at least one individual living abroad, and the annual remittances—according to some estimates—to Lebanon exceed \$100 million.
- Many Palestinian families have spent their modest savings, thus becoming financially exposed.
- Continuous decline in UNRWA services in quantity and quality since 2015, reaching a new low during 2018-2019, while Palestinians' needs have doubled, particularly in the recent Lebanese crisis.
- Due to their financial crises, the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and the Palestinian Authority (PA) reduced their funding to the Palestinian community in Lebanon. Their funding is usually offered via a number of development, health, and educational projects and funds.

- Decreased economic activity in and around the RCs (half of the Palestinian workforce work in and around the RCs), due to the decline of the overall economic activity in Lebanon.
- Thousands of families are expected to join the already high number of individuals unable to cover health and medical expenses.
- Thousands of families are expected to join the already high number of individuals unable to cover school and university expenses.
- Thousands of families are expected to join the already high number of individuals unable to cover house rents.
- The fear that the number of Palestinians in Lebanon will further decrease due to emigration, having already been reduced by 300 thousands, or in other words, more than half of the Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon (registered refugees exceed 540 thousands, with around 250 thousands still living in the country). As the crisis worsens, the rate of Palestinian youth immigration is anticipated to increase, especially if people are encouraged to emigrate for political reasons, or if host countries facilitate the immigration process.
- The fear that social and psychological challenges suffered by Palestinian youth will be further aggravated, in light of widespread poverty, unemployment, deprivation, and Palestinian division, making it easier for some parties to try to exploit people's conditions and recruit unemployed youth for their own agendas. They may be used also to fuel these parties' competition, and internal and external conflicts.
- Youth communities inside the RCs are becoming frustrated, angry, and more critical of UNRWA and Palestinian factions.
- Palestinians have remained neutral with regard to the Lebanese events and internal situation. They have been in favour of civil peace since the Taif Agreement.
- The Palestinian refugee is too weak to influence the situation in Lebanon, and the official policies over the past years have made him unable to influence the Lebanese situation.
- In 2016, the number of work permits for Palestinian refugees reached 729, according to the Lebanese Ministry of Labour annual report, compared to 210 thousand work permits granted to foreign workers in Lebanon. Available data indicates that a mere 7% of Palestinian workers have formal contracts.
- Throughout a month of the popular uprising, the value of the Lebanese pound fluctuated and decreased in value by almost 33% (in early December 2019), which greatly reduced the purchasing power of the people in Lebanon.

- According to a number of estimates, the ratio of Palestinian consumption to the total public consumption in Lebanon is 10%.
- According to experts, Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon spend 50% of their members' salaries on Lebanese pound-based payments. Therefore, the decline in the Lebanese pound exchange rate diminishes the value of salaries and wages payable in pounds by 50%.
- There is a chance that the uprising will end at a historic crossroad; which will affect the Palestinians in one way or another. They may either enjoy its good results or pay its dues.
- There is a major Lebanese political and national crisis, and no one can predict its course with certainty. It is open to different scenarios, the likes of which Lebanon has not witnessed in all of its history. The repercussions of what is happening will impact everyone, so the Palestinians need to exercise the utmost degree of wisdom, vigilance, objectivity, and rationality, because the matter at hand is critical and complex, and the nature of the Palestinian cause itself is sensitive and complex, and so are the Palestinian refugees.
- The priorities currently identified are related to the Lebanese crisis and its repercussions, which further downplays the importance of dealing with non-Lebanese issues such as the question of refugees. Furthermore, a multi-faceted policy was used to address refugee issues prior to the crisis; in other words, vague promises to handle matters were made, then an extremely failed implementation mechanism was employed on the ground due to prioritising local interests and considerations, which resulted in overlooking the question of refugees as a result.
- There were unexpected scenes of grinding poverty suffered by certain Lebanese social groups; which united Lebanese people and Palestinian refugees. Nowadays, poor Lebanese are left without any social protection. In fact, some of them believe that Palestinian and Syrian refugees receive more assistance than they do, which led some to wage hate campaigns with bad intentions.
- Lebanon is a small country, but it represents a point of convergence for the interests and projects of major foreign and regional actors. Consequently, resolving or tackling any issue in Lebanon is a sensitive and complex process, which has its own consequences.
- The fear that the situation in Lebanon will deteriorate into a security breakdown, or a military conflict, with the potential of turning into sectarian strife, which would have implications for the Palestinian situation.
- Lebanon today is a combination of political sectarian balances (sectarian democracy), and sectarian considerations are a major factor in decision-making.

Palestinian refugees have many a time paid the price of this structure's damaging effects. This explains the conspicuous lack of legislation with regard to Palestinian refugee rights.

- The Lebanese state is responsible for impoverishing the Palestinian refugees, keeping them out of the economic cycle in the country through laws prohibiting work and ownership, and by imposing restrictions on the RCs.
- The Lebanese popular uprising that started on 17/10/2019 has eclipsed the major Palestinian uprising which began in July 2019. The Palestinian refugees have become unable to voice their suffering, which has been compounded by the general atmosphere that is too busy to take them into account, or because of their fear lest they be accused of interfering in internal affairs.
- The Lebanese state have failed to adhere to the document entitled “A Unified Lebanese Vision For the Palestinian Refugees Affairs In Lebanon,” issued by the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee in January 2017, and on which the majority of Lebanese political forces and parties agreed.
- The US-Iran clash and their struggle for power in the region, which is taking a toll on Lebanon.
- The fear of increasing international pressure on Lebanon, especially by the US, to implement the “deal of the century” (or Trump’s peace plan), seeking to settle the remaining Palestinians in Lebanon, with the aim of putting an end to the question of refugees.
- US statements about the popular uprising should be monitored, particularly the attempt to use it for the benefit of the US and Israel. For example, US Secretary of State Mike Pompeo recently gave a statement that the protests aim to remove Hizbullah from the political equation and neutralize the “resistance and its arms.” This is in addition to the extremely negative and hostile US attitude towards the Palestinian cause and Palestinian rights, as shown by Trump and his measures, including those imposed on UNRWA, negatively impacting its performance and role toward the refugees.
- Israel’s domestic crisis and how it will affect the Lebanese scene; whether the Israeli side, specifically Netanyahu, will export his crisis abroad for electoral and popular purposes.

Second: Main Outputs and Recommendations:

- Supporting the Palestinians of Lebanon should go along two parallel lines:
 - a. Provide urgent and emergency aid to cover the needs for the next months.
 - b. Develop a medium and long-term strategy to help Palestinian refugees in Lebanon achieve resilience, and provide them with the means to live with dignity and gain their civil and human rights.
- Establish economic and social safety networks for Palestinians in Lebanon, with the participation of local and international institutions. UNRWA, the PLO, Palestinian factions, Palestinian businessmen, and Palestinian charities, would be responsible for establishing such networks.
- Form an economic committee in Lebanon to improve the conditions of Palestinian refugees. It would do an assessment of their needs to survive and live with dignity. For example, it can determine the funds each sector needs to carry out certain projects.
- Pressure the UNRWA to communicate with donor countries and other donors to assume their responsibilities regarding the provision of assistance to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, and pressure it to improve its own performance.
- Requesting aid from the Muslim countries that support the Palestine issue.
- Hold an urgent conference /meeting that brings together all specialized agencies providing assistance to Palestinian refugees, at all levels, to coordinate their work and put it into operation.
- The PLO must carry out its duties and support the Palestinians of Lebanon, develop a relief plan, and rationalize aid delivery.
- Those concerned with Palestinian affairs must convey the living conditions of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, because the media has failed to do so sufficiently. Charities know about the suffering of Palestinians inside Palestine a lot more than they do about those in Lebanon.
- Awareness must be raised with regard to politics, the media, education, behaviour, and culture in a manner that boosts the resistance of the Palestinian people in Lebanon, with the aim to raise their immunity against being “driven” to immigration and resettlement, and against the negative exploitation of Palestinians by any agendas that harm Palestinian and Lebanese national interests.
- Palestinian factions need to continue their intensive contacts with the Lebanese partisan political forces, follow up with the demands of the refugees, and provide the Lebanese parties with all information related to their suffering.

- Encourage small grant projects in the RCs and strive to create the legal environment conducive to the success of such projects.
- Encourage social solidarity, no matter how little, and try not to always devote effort to large and costly solidarity campaigns.
- Direct the Palestinian workforce to specialise in different sectors, other than agriculture and construction, because any crisis affecting these two sectors impacts negatively the Palestinian workforce.
- Prepare memoranda listing medical and nutritional needs and submit them to all potential official and popular supporters.
- The need for unifying the Palestinian position so as to prevent any party from taking advantage of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon to serve its own agenda.
- The need to rebuild and re-formulate the Palestinian National Project, in a way that positively affects the Palestinians abroad, including the Palestinians of Lebanon.
- Palestinians are required to fortify their political stance by adopting a policy of dissociation, avoiding strife and sabotage, and enhancing communication with the Lebanese authorities.
- Create a media platform aimed at changing the stereotyped image of the Palestinians and activate the role of alternative media (the Social Media), for example conducting dialogues and meetings with various official, popular, and media actors.
- Restore the status of the PLO as the main representative of the Palestinians so that they can engage in dialogue with the Lebanese authorities regarding the conditions of the Palestinian refugees.
- Propose the formation of a Palestinian advisory council composed of academics, writers, businessmen, and research centres, which can contribute to the ideas and projects of the Joint Palestinian Work Commission in Lebanon.
- Study centres are required to provide awareness tools to the Palestinian people in order to enable them to persevere, and not be drawn to squares that may harm the Palestinian people in Lebanon and the Lebanese situation.
- Establish a statistical office with instruments and systems in the field that can deal directly and daily with the Palestinian situation and deliver accurate statistics.
- The fight against corruption, achievement of social justice, and application of the rule of law in the Lebanese environment are beneficial for the Lebanese, as well as the Palestinian, interests.
- A new approach must be outlined in relation to the issue of Palestinian refugee rights, in light of new developments, in particular the “deal of the century,” and

the attempt to abolish the right of return and impose resettlement. This approach is about acting in line with the common higher interests of the Lebanese and Palestinian parties. It is in the Lebanese people's best interest to move from solidarity with Palestinian refugees to partnership and alliance with them in response to the resettlement project and the repercussions of the "deal of the century."

- The need to form a high Palestinian-Lebanese national commission to coordinate in the face of challenges.
- We should not wait for the Lebanese media to invite those concerned with the affairs of the Palestinian refugees to participate, but we need to take the initiative. We have dozens of speakers (Palestinians and Lebanese) who have the ability to communicate with the Lebanese media, including satellite channels, radio stations, newspapers, and others.
- Communicate with the parties expressing solidarity with the Palestinians at the demonstrations and raise civil societies' awareness about advocating Palestinian refugee issues, starting from the Joint Paper that has been disrupted due to the Lebanese crisis.
- Encourage Palestinian contribution to the Lebanese economy for the benefit of both sides through:
 1. Calling for an increase in Palestinian money transfers to Lebanon so as to contribute to covering the needs of Palestinians, as well as restructuring the Lebanese economy, especially in the areas of agriculture.
 2. There are Palestinian experts in areas of interest to the Lebanese economy, for example in the oil industry, where Palestinians can be of use in the field of Lebanese oil exploration.
 3. Vitalize the movement of Lebanese exports across the world through the owners of Palestinian companies abroad.

These points require Lebanese openness to the Palestinian situation and amendment of Lebanese laws, especially with regard to work permit legislation.

- Hold continental conferences to crystallise Palestinian people's practices of resilience and struggle, and to develop a socio-economic identity-based project, which would strengthen Palestinians at home, too.