

# Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps

June 2008



**Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd**

Karen AbuZayd has served as Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) since June 2005. She had previously served for five years as an Assistant Secretary-General of the United Nations and Deputy Commissioner-General of UNRWA. Before joining UNRWA, she worked at The Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees for 19 years.

## Host countries must respect international law and govern Palestinian refugee camps as distinct but not isolated

Arab countries hosting Palestinian refugees must align their local laws with global best practices, while maintaining the distinct group-identity which sixty years of exile has forged for those refugees, the United Nations' top official for Palestine refugee affairs has said. National laws governing refugee life in several Arab countries violate international standards and stifle the work of humanitarian agencies, whose role remains secondary to that of the state.

This has been the experience of UNRWA Commissioner-General Karen AbuZayd over more than 20 years in the international civil service. She shared her insights recently in the inaugural lecture of The Program on Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Middle East, one of several programs launched this year by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB). The Palestinian Camps program is managed jointly by IFI and AUB's Center for Behavioral Research. Dr. Sari Hanafi is the faculty research director for the program.

Policy-makers and aid agencies can only try to meet the practical human development needs of refugees and maintain their human dignity as individuals, said AbuZayd, until the international

community works towards implementing their self-determination as a people. Meanwhile, "states bear the primary responsibility to ensure that refugees residing within their jurisdiction are treated in a manner consistent with international law," she said.

IFI's Palestinian Camps program combines AUB field research, lectures and workshops to explore the public policy and governance challenges of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and Gaza. By suggesting how the global refugee experience and international law can be best applied to manage the delicate relationship between refugees and their Arab host communities, AbuZayd provided a line of focus for policymakers and further areas of research for academics.

The IFI would play a dual role, she said, of bringing the insights of a community perspective while maintaining the non-alignment of a non-governmental, academic institution.

"This is a potent combination, which will serve to clarify—and help craft creative solutions for—the myriad practical issues that must be tackled," said AbuZayd.

IFI Director Rami G. Khouri said the program will bring together the best available research with civil society and government actors, with the aim of promoting better policies on issues such as governance, labor rights, security, public health care, and urban planning.

### Policy Recommendations

- States hosting Palestinian refugees must recognize that they bear the primary responsibility for governing camps according to international law.
- Local legislation should facilitate, not impede, the work of humanitarian agencies.
- Labor restrictions on refugees should be eased.
- In Lebanon, the 2005 government memorandum on refugee labor rights should be implemented.
- Lawmakers should begin facilitating with humanitarian agencies for a long-term plan for refugees in the case of a political peace settlement.

**The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at the American University of Beirut (AUB)**

was inaugurated in 2006 to harness the policy-related research of AUB's internationally respected faculty and other scholars, in order to contribute positively to Arab policy-making and international relations. IFI is a neutral, dynamic, civil, and open space that brings together people representing all viewpoints in society. It aims to: raise the quality of public policy-related debate and decision-making in the Arab World and abroad; enhance the Arab World's input into international affairs; and, enrich the quality of interaction among scholars, officials and civil society actors in the Middle East and abroad.

Research and Policy Memo #1

**The Program on Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Middle East** is run jointly by IFI and the Center for Behavioral Research at AUB. It brings together academic and policy-related research on Palestinian refugee camps from around the world. The program aims to be an open and non-partisan coordinating mechanism for researchers, civil society, government officials, and international organizations, in order to generate accurate analysis and policy recommendations on Palestinian refugee camps throughout the Middle East.

Rami G. Khouri *IFI Director*  
Dr. Sari Hanafi *Program Research Director*



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## Distinct versus isolated

UNRWA serves 4.4 million of the more than nine million Palestinian refugees worldwide, said AbuZayd, and only one-third of them live in camps. In the Middle East, these refugees define their identity by “the forces inducing distinctiveness from their hosts,” which is unlike the global refugee experience, she said. This drives them into isolation from their host communities, which often apply differential treatment to what they perceive as “chronic long-stayers competing for scarce local and natural resources.”

“The message we have been giving for the last couple of years is that if you isolate and sanction people and treat them the way they’re being treated in the Occupied Palestinian Territories,” said the Commissioner-General, “you make them more extreme on one side.”

AbuZayd pointed to the Nahr El-Bared refugee camp in north Lebanon, which was destroyed last year while playing host to the battle between militants and the Lebanese army, as an example of how refugee camps hold the danger of becoming an open space for the displaced and disenfranchised. The state, as well as international authorities, bears the responsibility of regulating the relationship between people inside and outside camps, she said. The issue of regulation is especially contentious in Lebanon, where demographics and factional interests raise the stakes for all parties, but AbuZayd said the isolation and radicalization that led to the Nahr El-Bared crisis could be seen reproducing themselves in Gaza.

**“Reconstructing Nahr El-Bared will be a major event in the relationship between camps and their Lebanese host community.”**

## Humanitarian versus political

“While questions of international law, state responsibility, and the management of refugee camps are significant, our most pressing priority in Lebanon should be to ensure decent living conditions and sustainable livelihoods for Palestine refugees living in and out of camps,” she suggested.

Reconstructing Nahr El-Bared will be a “major event” in the relationship between the camps and their Lebanese host community, she said. Another challenge is creating a long-term plan for Palestine’s refugees in the case of a peace settlement, said AbuZayd. Legal issues have impeded UNRWA from taking more far-sighted initiatives, she said, noting “that’s what we hope this kind of program would help us address.”

Humanitarian work is also confined by local laws and politics. One local law that UNRWA has been working on in Lebanon is to allow the children of refugee women married to non-refugees to register under their mother, thus affording them the rights and protection of refugees. Another priority in Lebanon is a 2005 government memorandum that eased labor restrictions on refugees, but is yet to come into practical effect, rendering Palestinian workers underpaid and exploited.

While political considerations within host countries hinder action on some of these issues, AbuZayd insisted that the line separating humanitarian and political work should be maintained: “We should leave those political things to the politicians, because if we step over the line too far we will be prevented from doing our work.” ■



Audio and video of the full lecture are available on the IFI website.



**Other lectures this year in The Program on Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps in the Middle East will feature:**

**Richard Cook**, Director of UNRWA Affairs in Lebanon

**Sari Hanafi**, Program Research Director and Associate Professor of Sociology, AUB

**Jamil Hilal**, Independent sociologist affiliated to Birzeit University, Senior Research Fellow at Muwatin, the Palestinian Institute for the Study of Democracy in Ramallah

**Fateh Azzam**, Regional Representative of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights

**Nadim Shehadi**, Associate Fellow at Chatham House, Middle East Programme

**Khalil Makkawi**, President of the Lebanese government’s Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee

**Samir El Khoury**, Chair of the Follow Up Committee for Employment of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon