

Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps

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Field Director Richard Cook

Richard Cook served as Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) Affairs in Lebanon between 2003 and 2008. He is now Field Director in Amman, Jordan. Before coming to Lebanon, Cook served as Field Director in the West Bank.

Palestinian Camps and Refugees in Lebanon: Priorities, Challenges and Opportunities Ahead

! Note: When the lecture was given earlier this year, Richard Cook was approaching the end of his term as Director of UNRWA Affairs in Lebanon. He is now Field Director in Amman, Jordan.

Priorities

As a humanitarian agency, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is not mandated to play a political role. However, it views a political solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and the related refugee crisis as paramount. Until a political solution is found, UNRWA will first and foremost continue to work on improving the status of the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon.

UNRWA's main priorities are to call for a change in the way Lebanese society—and by extension, the Lebanese government—has traditionally viewed the Palestinians, said Cook.

UNRWA should also encourage giving Palestinians access to public services and advocate for better employment opportunities. UNRWA will also have to address its chronic funding problems if it wishes to significantly improve its services.

Challenges

The instability that Lebanon has endured in the last few years has posed great challenges to UNRWA, especially the conflict between Fatah el Islam militants and the Lebanese Army in the Nahr el Bared camp. The crisis resulted in the displacement of most of the camp's inhabitants. It is vital that the Nahr el Bared camp be rebuilt, by providing new homes for over twenty thousand people. In addition, there has to be a concerted effort to create effective security mechanisms to avoid any future infiltration of groups such as Fatah el Islam, Cook said.

Only 53% of the registered refugees live in camps, leaving almost half of the refugee population outside of UNRWA's mandate. Formally they should be looked after by the local authorities, but their services are often less than poor and many of the refugees live without the most basic necessities.

Many of the diseases that aid workers encounter amongst the camp population originate from poor diets, poor sanitary conditions, poor ventilation, as well as diseases brought on by stress that are typically associated with the developed world. In fact, UNRWA spends more on hospitalization in Lebanon than any other field of its operations.

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are given very few civil and socio-economic rights. They are barred from working in a variety of vocations and from owning property. Palestinians also face restrictions in terms of mobility and travel within Lebanon. Cook urged the Lebanese not to perceive an improvement of the refugees' status and living conditions as a prelude to a permanent

Key points

- UNRWA has to address its chronic funding problems if it wishes to significantly improve its services.
- There has to be a concerted effort to create effective security mechanisms to avoid any future infiltration of militant groups such as Fatah el Islam into the camps.
- Lebanese must not perceive an improvement of the refugees' status and living conditions as a prelude to their permanent settlement in Lebanon.
- Lebanon is obliged under International Law to treat refugees as citizens, short of bestowing citizenship upon them.
- Improving the status and living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are a necessity for long-term stability.

Research and Policy Memo #2

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.

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.

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settlement in Lebanon. In fact Lebanon is obliged under International Law to treat refugees as citizens, short of bestowing citizenship upon them.

Opportunities

The government of Prime Minister Fouad Siniora made a clear departure from previous Lebanese governments by actively seeking to improve the conditions of those living in the camps. Siniora is building his particular approach on four pillars, said Cook: improving the humanitarian conditions in the camps, establishing diplomatic relations with the PLO, control of armament inside the camps and the decommissioning of arms outside the camps. With regards to the first point, UNRWA has gained a new partner, the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, headed by Ambassador Khalil Makkawi. Several government members have since visited some of the camps and, according to Cook, were clearly shocked by the conditions they encountered there.

The Nahr el Bared crisis has resulted in other camps forming a more united front against radical elements. Cook describes how in the past, rival factions within a certain camp would not meet with him simultaneously but now they have adapted a different outlook. The mainstream factions in the camp want to avoid a security void similar to Nahr el Bared.

Cook spoke positively about these developments but also with a note of caution for the future. It is by no means guaranteed that successive governments will continue this positive approach towards the Palestinian refugees, even though improving the status and living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are a necessity for long-term stability in Lebanon. ■

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



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

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

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