

Policy and Governance in Palestinian Refugee Camps

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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.

Addressing Poor Living Conditions to Improve Health in Palestinian Camps in Lebanon

According to research carried out at the American University of Beirut, the living environment of Palestinian refugees residing in Bourj el Barajneh camp in Beirut lacks the basic services and infrastructure necessary to safeguard the health of community residents.

Established in 1948 by the International League of Red Cross Societies, Bourj el Barajneh camp is one of the largest and oldest refugee camps in Lebanon. Housing more than 20,000 refugees, the camp is over-crowded according to humanitarian standards. Because of the poor socio-economic situation of the majority of the residents and the control imposed on entering building materials into the camps, many structures are poorly constructed and irregular. Palestinian and Lebanese residents in the camp also suffer from a lack of basic service provision, such as electricity and water. Over 1,900 people are classified as Special Hardship Cases by UNRWA – these people lack “basic medical and social facilities, live on food rations with no main breadwinner member in the household” (UNRWA, 2009).

Residents of the camp are among the poorest in Lebanon and possess few other resources to improve their living situations (Tiltne, 2005). The economic conditions in the camp are partially due to the legal restrictions placed on refugees in Lebanon. While Palestinians have free access to casual, manual and agricultural work, they are required by law to have a permit, obtained only by a ministerial decree, in order to work in professional occupations. Despite a poor living situation, rampant unemployment, and continued political turbulence, the community in Bourj el Barajneh camp, including 3548 households, remains tightly knit and unified.

Policy Recommendations

- Stakeholders and camp actors need to act immediately to address poor housing and socio-economic conditions in the camps.
- To improve the health of residents of the Bourj el Barajneh camp, policymakers should develop comprehensive solutions targeting education and living conditions.
- Structural and institutional restrictions need to be lifted: the Labor, Building Materials, and Housing, Land and Property laws need to be amended to ensure basic human rights.

Study Design and Sample

Data on a two stage probability sample of 860 households in Bourj el Barajneh camp were collected in the Urban Health Survey carried out in 2002 by the Faculty of Health Sciences at the American University of Beirut. The data included information on housing conditions, infrastructure and environmental services in the camp, and socio-demographics and health history of 3924 household members of all age groups.

Main Findings

- **Economic Indicators** showed that about one third of household heads were unemployed. Of those who were employed, one third worked in craft vocations, while 40% earned a monthly salary less than 300,000 LBP (200 USD).
- **Environmental services** were predominantly inadequate. More than 85% of households reported problems with the sewage system and garbage disposal, while two thirds of households did not have access to adequate electrical power. Since the camps fall outside the local municipalities' reach, maintenance of such services is left to Palestinian popular

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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committees who have few resources to carry them out systematically.

- **Housing quality** was generally unsatisfactory. Around 50% of homes had inadequate or poor indoor lighting and poor ventilation was a problem affecting 80% of the households. More than 60% of households experienced the effects of high humidity, leading to general discomfort. The majority of households were cockroach and rat infested, and the absence of proper heating systems and exposed electrical wires posed a risk to the well-being and health of camp residents.
- **Household health** was generally poor. Around 70% of the households reported the presence of illnesses among household members. Results showed that the majority of the illnesses were those of the circulatory system (22%), the musculoskeletal system (19%), and the respiratory system (15%).
- **Health and housing conditions** analyses revealed a significant association between housing and living conditions and the presence of illness among household members. Results showed a significant positive gradient between the number of housing problems and the reported illnesses among camp residents: those living in households with 5-7 housing problems were 50% more likely to report an illness compared to residents living in households with 4 or fewer problems, while residents in households with 8-15 problems were twice as likely to report illness compared to the baseline.
- **Education and health** showed a strong correlation. There was a negative gradient between level of education of the head of each household and the reported number of illnesses: Households whose head completed a higher education (intermediate and above) were the least likely to report an illness and households with a head completing a primary to intermediate education reported fewer illnesses than those attaining an elementary education or none.

Conclusions and Policy Implications

- Poor housing conditions in Bourj el Barajneh are strongly associated with poor health among residents. The rate of reported illness increased with the number of housing problems affecting a residence.
- This study indicates that there are dangers to the well-being of those living in Bourj el Barajneh. As no corrective measures have been undertaken since the study was carried out in 2002, it is unlikely that the housing, living and health conditions have improved.
- Policymakers urgently need to address the political deadlock that has stifled progress and cemented many Palestinian refugees into poverty. Accomplishing this required that structural and institutional restrictions be lifted: amending the Labor, Building Materials, and Housing, Land and Property laws will go a long way towards improving the physical condition of housing and infrastructure in the camp.
- The Lebanese Government, UNRWA, and the Palestinian Popular Committee in the camp must work with NGOs and environmental and public health professional to elaborate an action plan for the camp. The Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee can play a role in mediating these efforts between different stakeholders. This process should establish a prioritized list of improvements in environmental conditions that will return health benefits to camp residents.



Further Reading:

Habib, R.R., Basma S., Yerezian J. "Harboring Illness: On the Association between disease and living conditions in a Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon." *Fafo Report* 464 (2005).

Tiltnes, A. "Falling Behind: A brief on the living conditions of Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon." *International Journal of Environmental Health Research* 16 (2006): 99-111.

UNRWA. "Profile of Bourj el-Barajneh Refugee camp." Web. 3 Mar. 2010.

<<http://www.un.org/unrwa/refugees/lebanon/barajneh.html>>.