

POVERTY IN PALESTINIAN REFUGEE CAMPS: Challenges and Prospects



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PALESTINIAN RETURN CENTRE

Organisation in consultative status with the Economic and Social Council since 2015



The **Palestinian Return Centre** is an independent consultancy focusing on the historical, political and legal aspects of the Palestinian Refugees. The organization offers expert advice to various actors and agencies on the question of Palestinian Refugees within the context of the Nakba - the catastrophe following the forced displacement of Palestinians in 1948 - and serves as an information repository on other related aspects of the Palestine question and the Arab-Israeli conflict. It specializes in the research, analysis, and monitor of issues pertaining to the dispersed Palestinians and their internationally recognized legal right to return.

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Biographies

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Sameh Habeeb is the Head of Media and PR at Palestinian Return Centre (PRC). Sameh has worked as a journalist in the Gaza Strip during Operation Cast Lead, and from 2000 to 2015 he also led PRC's successful application for the United Nations NGO consultative status.

Rohan Talbot is the Campaigns and Media Officer at Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP), which works with local health providers and hospitals in refugee camps in Lebanon, Gaza and the West Bank. Previously, Rohan also worked for a local Palestinian NGO in Northern Lebanon.

Pietro Stefanini is a Researcher at Palestinian Return Centre (PRC). He has an MSc in Politics, Conflict, Rights and Justice from SOAS. He has lived in Damascus, Syria, and in Jerusalem, prior to coming to study in the UK. He has a forthcoming article in the Journal of Palestinian Refugees Studies, and he frequently writes reports and briefings.

Aimee Shalan is the Director of Friends of Birzeit University as Director of Friends of Birzeit University and also the Co-director of Pressure Cooker Arts. She was previously the Director of Advocacy at MAP, but also worked for Caabu, the Council for Arab-British Understanding. She writes for many publications like the Guardian and New Statesman.

Ben Bradshaw is the MP for Exeter since 1997. He has worked as a Minister in a number of departments, including the Foreign Office. He supports the recognition of the State of Palestine and the refugees' right of return. He is also a supporter of Labour Friends of Palestine.



Preface

On Monday, 25th January, the Palestinian Return Centre (PRC) held a seminar in the Houses of Commons titled “Poverty in Palestinian Refugee Camps: Challenges and Prospects”. The event was hosted by MP Ben Bradshaw and focused on the adverse conditions that Palestinian refugees - particularly in Lebanon - face living in camps due to high poverty rates and lack of state or proper UN support. Speakers concluded that implementing the right of return is essential to providing a solution to the suffering of the Palestinian refugees as well as to achieving a peaceful settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Speakers

Chair of the event: Sara Apps, Interim Director at Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC)

Sameh Habeeb, Head of Media and PR at Palestinian Return Centre (PRC)

Rohan Talbot, Campaigns and Media Officer at Medical Aid for Palestinians (MAP)

Pietro Stefanini, Researcher at Palestinian Return Centre (PRC)

Aimee Shalan, Director of Friends of Birzeit University

Ben Bradshaw, Labour MP for Exeter



Speeches

Sara Apps

Sara Apps is the Interim Director at the Palestine Solidarity Campaign (PSC) and chair of the seminar. She introduced the event by highlighting the importance of the right of return for the “here and now” and not just for the future.

Welcome everybody to this Palestine Return Centre event. Good to see such a good number of people here. My name is Sarah Apps and I’m the Interim Director of Palestine Solidarity Campaign, I started a couple of weeks ago. I’m very honored to present this great panel before you today. Just before I introduce them, I want to say a few words. Which is to say, obviously we tend to speak a good deal about Palestinians, focusing a good deal on what’s happening in the West Bank and sometimes in Gaza and East Jerusalem, but it’s an absolute core principle of our movement, certainly at the PSC and of course of the PRC, to talk about the right of return and about the status of refugees within that. But of course as well as that, it’s also important to remember that it’s not just about refugees and their rights; it’s also about their welfare. So I hope we will talk a good deal about that. It is not just about the future it’s also about the here and now.

Sameh Habeeb

Sameh Habeeb presented the work of PRC explaining that the right of return is a fundamental political issue. Although international law is clear about the right of return, this goes largely ignored at the expenses of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees around the world.



I'd like to welcome everybody here and thank you for coming on behalf of the Palestinian Return Centre, the chairman, the executive director and the staff as well as the board of trustees. We are delighted to have you today to talk about a very touchy and important topic which is poverty in Palestinian refugee camps. Yes, it's important and it's a humanitarian issue, but what lies behind this issue is more the political issue of the right of return, which I'm briefly going to touch upon. The centre has been established in 1996, and it's dedicated to advocate for the Palestinian refugees; mainly the right of return, which is guarded by international law as well as the many UN resolutions famously ignored by the international community, by their utter silent on Israel's constant crimes against the Palestinians. International law is clear about the right of return but with the cover of international community, the US, the European, especially the Western European governments, sadly this issue has been ignored. We're trying to get something here, within the mainstream here in Europe and newly within the United Nations, which we are forcing the debate to be always on the agenda of politicians, governments and NGOs to say: Palestinian refugees have the right of return and it's guaranteed. Although the Israelis are just turning their bats to us with the support of some countries, we're trying to enforce the agenda for those politicians and governments.

When it comes to the right of return, it's been guaranteed, as I said, by many laws and regulations such as the International Declaration of Human Rights, Article 13, by its two items 1 and 2 within the Article 13, and Israel is turning a blind eye on this. Also the United Nations resolution 194 and other UN resolutions affirm and reaffirm and stress the importance to implement this resolution. But at last, Israel every time gets away with this and as you know, the UN Security Council in the last few years was just another theatre where we've seen the American veto all the time trying to give Israel another sponsorship license to kill more Palestinians and not only to escape from the right of return and its implementation.



So yes, it's important to touch upon poverty today but what lies behind this is a political problem. Yes, we need to focus on poverty and the methods and means to improve the conditions of Palestinian refugees, at least for the time being; because we believe this is a temporary situation for the Palestinian refugees until they're granted their rights back, so they can return to Palestine, to their villages and homes of residence where they were kicked out from in 1947 and 1948. Israel is trying, as I said, to get away with its refusal to implement the United Nations resolutions and the international laws in relation to the UN.

Within the past few years we've been witnessing a campaign against the right of return which is represented by Israel's pressure on the UNRWA, which is the main body to cherish and support the Palestinian refugees by giving them the due aid and educational and health and medical support. Israel through its pressure on some of the main UNRWA donors is trying to restrict the funding for UNRWA, in hope that this would make the Palestinian refugees disperse, leave to Europe, resettle somewhere else so this right of return would be dismantled. So this would be another stake for them to facilitate the peace process and the Israelis have rode closely with the American leadership over the past few years, even the Israeli leadership, even the extreme left have had preliminary agreements with the PLO, with Mahmoud Abbas in 2008 and before in Geneva, in which to replace the UNRWA with another body, to oversee the status of the refugees wherever they are in an attempt to dismantle UNRWA and by then dismantle the whole issue of Palestinian refugees; but apparently this is going to fail. We've seen the refusal of the Palestinian refugees across the camps and lately, last month, in Lebanon protesting the planned UNRWA cuts which is affecting the services, the basic services, medical and educational services. We've also seen a hole within the services of UNRWA at the beginning of this school year in September 2015 where the UNRWA failed in supporting the refugees with their educational system. And we've been witnessing an increase within the UNRWA cuts within its services over the past few years which never used to be the case before; but now, there is a clear sign that Israel is interested, with its allies, to dismantle UNRWA and by then, to dismantle the right of return.

But this is not going to happen, the ambassadors across the refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon as well as Gaza Strip and West Bank and Occupied Jerusalem are clearly demonstrating that their utmost goal is to return to their homes of origins where they were kicked out of. According to the Israelis and their claims, they say, "the old will die and the young will forget", but it seems it's working the other way. We have more Palestinian refugees; the new generations are in Europe now, calling clearly on the right of return. They are dual citizens of Europe, they have Palestinian citizenship, European citizenship, but they're still calling for their right of return.

At the PRC, we are one of the key organizations leading this debate. Successfully we've had the UN special consultative status where we are now advocating the right of return and lobbying. We had a big fight with the Israeli lobby within the UN; Israel has done their utmost efforts to block the application of PRC from 2011 to 2015 but we had the support of so many countries, we

won the vote twice in June 2015 and in July 2015 and Israel was defeated twice. PRC got the votes and now we have more allies to work in Geneva, New York, and Vienna in Austria, and we are keen to boost our work and to enforce the agenda of the Palestinian refugees on the main agenda, not only within the activism and solidarity world but within the UN and the related bodies. I hope you'll be having a lot of valuable information, I just touched upon the political part of it but we have distinguished speakers here who will be touching upon poverty and the other humanitarian aspects of this issue. Thank you.

Rohan Talbot

Rohan Talbot discussed the poor conditions and principal issues in Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon and how these affect the health of the Palestinian population. He reminded that in the humanitarian discussions around refugees, we should always ask where the Palestinians are, as their multiple displacements are not covered by politicians and the media.

Thank you very much and thank you Sara for the introduction. As you've heard, my name is Rohan, I work for MAP as a campaigner. I had the privilege of working in two of the camps in Lebanon as well, back in 2012, both of them up in the North of Lebanon. The topic in front of us today, "Poverty in Palestinian refugee camps: challenges and prospects", is a pretty broad one. I think what I'll do is cover a little bit of the context, talk about what we're talking about when we talk about the camps, obviously with a sort of health angle to poverty. And I'll end with a couple of case studies of people that we met on a recent visit to some of the camps in our project there.

So the history of MAP for those of you who don't know; to some extent the Palestinian refugee experience in Lebanon runs through MAP's veins, we were established in response to the Sabra and Shatila massacres in 1982 by a group of British medics who had been working there and had experienced firsthand the horrors perpetrated, and decided they needed to set up an NGO, a charity to help provide direct medical care and the realization of the right to health for Palestinians living as refugees since Oslo, before they moved on to work in Gaza and the West Bank. Our model, as Sarah mentioned, is partnership, we work with local NGOs, we work within the community itself and support the provision of medical care. In terms of conditions in the camp, I'll give a sort of a brief overview; I think Pietro will give some more information on this.

Currently the estimates of the number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is between 300 and 450 thousands, depends who you ask. Many of them live in 12 camps spread around the country, as you can see on that map. The camps are all distinct. Each one has its own community, its own culture, its own history, its own politics and social lives but there are some challenges which I think are common to many if not all of them. Overcrowding, poor housing conditions, poor environmental conditions, overhanging wires as you can see in this, poor drainage, poor sewage, and all these sort of challenges bring with them various

health challenges that have direct impact on the physical and mental health of the people who live within these camps. Obviously a lot of them are very densely packed, and if you are for example someone with a physical, mobility, or visual impairment, you're gonna struggle to go around. What we see is that people with disabilities do struggle, they struggle to access healthcare, they struggle to access clinics and many of them end up simply at home.

Unemployment inside the camp is particularly severe, running at around 56 percent. 60% of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live below the poverty line and lots of this is to do with restrictions on the civil and political rights of Palestinians living in Lebanon, who are effectively barred from a number of professions within the country and aren't allowed to own property, certainly not outside of the camps.

In terms of healthcare, you've heard, UNRWA is definitely struggling to cope with the needs of the people. It's suffered a budgetary shortfall in the tens of millions of dollars for a long time now. Just to give you an example, in the UNRWA health clinic such as this one in the picture, doctors see roughly 107 patients a day, compared to what would be considered a sort of acceptable level of around 70. Surgery care, operations, this sort of things is similarly overbooked. The Palestinian Red Crescent Society runs 5 hospitals across Lebanon but the limited services they provide means that health continues to be a problem, medics don't have incubators for newborns, they can't provide complex surgeries such as heart operations, which are available in Lebanese hospitals but the cost is obviously prohibitive. This was a situation until 2010-2011.

Since then, these already overburdened camps and infrastructure within them has been much further stretched by the influx of Palestinian refugees fleeing the war in Syria. Now, we're talking about 45 thousand, roughly, Palestinian refugees from Syria inside Lebanon now. Many of them fleeing camps such as Yarmouk, I'm sure all of us here have seen the really harrowing images in April last year with people inside the besieged camp of Yarmouk in Syria near



Damascus, unable to access food, unable to access healthcare, besieged on one side by government forces, infiltrated on the other side by militant factions and that number hasn't really increased recently because of restrictions by the Lebanese Ministry of Interior on Palestinian refugees actually coming into the country. In actual fact we've also seen cases, Human Rights Watch documented roughly 36 cases last year in May, of Palestinian refugees from Syria being forcibly returned back to Syria; obviously with extreme risks to life and health. The reason partly for this is that the Ministry of Interior demands \$200 per person per year for an extension of the residence permit for the visa effectively for these Palestinians, which is something that many of these refugees are unable to pay.

Inside the camps, this is Nahr El Bared Camp, some of them live inside these shipping containers which were put in place in 2007 in response to the almost entire destruction of Nahr el Bared camp in fighting between militants and the Lebanese army. They were supposed to be there for 2 years, they're still there and instead of, as they were previously, Nahr El Bared residents, they're now largely Palestinian refugees from Syria. Others live in garages, single room apartments, they struggle to make it through. Many are unable to afford to renew their visas, as I mentioned, they suffer extra-marginalization. Those who can't afford to renew their visas are effectively trapped in some of the camps because to go through the Lebanese army checkpoints that surround Ein El Helweh or Nahr el Bared camp they risk being deported effectively back to Syria if they're found without a valid visa. Also they're at increased risk of things like child exploitation. Families struggle to make ends meet and they're forced to send their children into the workforce. In addition to this, families can be devastated by the cost of treatment. If members of the family are ill, the cost of healthcare can completely devastate the household economics of these families.

So in terms of case studies, I'll run through them quickly. This is a woman that we met in Ein El Helweh camp, in a gathering of Palestinian refugees from Syria who are living at the sort of edges of the camp; this is one of the camps



which are surrounded by the Lebanese army. She had fled with her son from Yarmouk camp. She had been shot in her hip by a sniper as they were fleeing and her son, who was living with her, had been shot through the shoulder as well. Now, she needed desperate treatment, her son went into severe debt in order to make sure that she had treatment, as you can see she's mobile, she's up and about, but he's still suffering. He'd been shot, the bullet had entered through his shoulder and got lodged in the back of his shoulder where the bullet was still lodged over a year later. He's unable to pay to get the treatment. Because he's a Palestinian refugee, he's not covered by UNHCR provisions for injuries for refugees who are fleeing, because he's in a country with UNRWA provision. UNRWA doesn't provide for the costs for medical treatment for those who have been injured in conflicts. He's unable to work because of his injury, he's in severe debt and the family is in pretty dire stretch.

Here is another young man who we met in Nahr el Bared camp up in the North of Lebanon. We actually went to visit his wife, who had been visited by a midwife who provided maternal and childcare program inside the camps, outreach for new mothers, to be able to seek, to be able to access even basic prenatal and postnatal care. As we arrived, she looked a little bit flustered and informed us that her waters had just broken. So obviously we thought, well, visit over, wished her the very best and sent her on her way but we saw that he was staying. So we asked him, why are you not going with her, this is your first child, you're not going to the hospital. He said, well, I can't. The hospital is outside the camp and if I had to go through the checkpoint, the Lebanese checkpoint around the camp, they'll see that I haven't been able to afford \$200 in order to renew my visa, they might deport me back to Syria. His wife was in the hospital by that point. So he stayed behind and wasn't able to go to the birth of his first child. He told us a little bit about his family. He'd fled Yarmouk as well. His mother, his three brothers were still inside Syria; one of his brothers is inside a Syrian jail, another brother joined the Syrian Army in order to protect his family. He struggles to get work inside Nahr el Bared camp; there are very few jobs, there are some in construction as the camp is still rebuilding, as I mentioned, after 2007. But he says he's paid half the amount of a Palestinian refugee already in Lebanon, so around \$10 for a 14-hour day. He can get maybe 1 week of work in a month. He said to us, I would try to flee via Turkey but I don't have the money to pay the traffickers and my wife and I can't swim. He said he's got friends who managed to make it to Europe by paying \$7,000 to a trafficker to transition to Europe. He doesn't have the money, he is too afraid.

But many do, many of the bodies that we see washing up on the shores of Europe at the moment are Palestinians. And many of them are not just Palestinian refugees from Syria fleeing war, fleeing conflict, fleeing devastation. There are also Palestinian refugees from Lebanon, those who have seen their parents and their grandparents without hope, without prospects of changing their current situations, who had given up hope and were willing to risk the icy water for the slim hope of a better life. So what's to be done about this. Obviously, NGOs like MAP play a part, we provide things like medical care in our project,

in partnership with UNRWA actually, to help people cover the cost of their treatments, cancer treatment, heart treatments, this sort of things. We provide psychosocial support for children fleeing the horrors of Syria, we provide as I mentioned, a team of midwives.

As was mentioned before, events like this are vital. I'm sure lots of us in the room have been to events about Palestinian issues, largely focused, I'm sure, on Gaza and the West Bank. The Palestinian refugees, the Palestinian diaspora are a very very small portion of events, of conversations within the politics of the UK as well as internationally. International support is extremely vital, UNRWA operating in such a shortfall, obviously has been forced to cut services and advocacy to make sure that those services continue, that the money is there for really vital health services is really important.

And the other thing that I'd say is that whenever we're talking about humanitarian response, at the moment it's something that we've all definitely been seeing in the news, in parliament all the time, focusing on humanitarian response for Syria, for the Middle East generally, the question needs to always be asked, where are the Palestinians in this. Obviously the line showed that people that are fleeing this context are Syrians, but Palestinians being doubly displaced, are falling through, as we mentioned the woman and her son, falling through gaps in humanitarian response because they are not covered by the UNHCR. We need to ask, are they being covered.

I know that the UK government is supporting the donor conference for Syria in the next few weeks and the question needs to be for politicians here, for advocates, for people here, are the Palestinians included in this, how are we making sure that they are covered by any agreements that are coming out of this. Obviously in terms of the medium in the long term, the right of return is really really important. 67 years in exile is too many.

Next year, we're going to be marking, we're going to be noting lots of anniversaries. It'll be 50 years of occupation in Palestinian Territory, it'll be 10 years of the Gaza Blockade, it'll be 100 years since the signing of the Balfour Declaration and that is a moment for the UK to really focus on promises and the commitments and the responsibilities especially of the UK in this context. To ask, what should the UK be doing in order to make sure that the Palestinians are not again falling through the gaps. 67 years is entirely too long for a displacement. The UK can do more and it really must.

Pietro Stefanini

Pietro Stefanini discussed his recently published report, “The Forgotten People: Assessing Poverty Among Palestinian Refugees”. His research addressed the socioeconomic conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon. He affirmed that the right of return is not an obstacle to peace but it is simply non-negotiable as it is the basis for dignity.

Good evening and thanks everyone for coming, thanks also to Sameh and the PRC for giving me the opportunity to speak tonight. My presentation is based on a report I've written for the Palestinian Return Centre at the end of 2015 titled 'The “Forgotten People” Assessing Poverty Among Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon'. For those that are interested in reading the report we have brought some free copies here for you to take or alternatively you can access it online through PRC's website. Because of the time limit I can't go into too much detail of each section that I explored but I will differentiate between two groups that I've labeled. One is Palestinians refugees in Lebanon and the other is Palestinian refugees from Syria that since 2011 have entered Lebanon. Before I get into the findings of the report I want to say that the information I used was based predominantly on secondary sources; I also had personal correspondence, with an UNRWA Lebanon worker, Valeria Moro. She is the Coordinator of Career Guidance Unit, she's not here tonight but I want to thank her for reading a draft of the report and providing me with updated statistics and valuable knowledge on the development of certain projects.

I want to quickly point out the lack of accurate statistical data, and this is difficult to obtain because of the absence of systematic monitoring and registration of all displaced Palestinians in Lebanon. So for example there is a large amount of population that falls outside of UNRWA's area of operations. Consider that there are almost 500'000 refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon, but only 60 percent, actually live in the 12 official refugee camps that the agency manages. The others live in 42 informal gatherings or in towns and cities. So the statistics that UNRWA provides do miss out a large chunk of the refugee population. And on top of this the Lebanese government does not provide official statistics on Palestinians, so you can understand the difficulty to produce a truly representational account of poverty among Palestinians refugees in Lebanon. In this report I used a multidimensional approach to poverty, I analyzed economic status, education, food security and housing, I'm not going to cover the section on health since we have Rohan from MAP who has some really good knowledge from the field on this issue.

To fully understand how poverty is manifested among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, we have to start with talking about their legal status. Since being displaced in 1948 during the Nakba the catastrophe, Palestinians in Lebanon never benefited from key aspects of social, political and economic life. Before to 2005, Palestinian refugees were banned from working in more than 70 professions. Currently they are still barred from working over 30 professions, including engineering, many positions in the health sector, teaching, architecture, and many other areas. Other legal restrictions essentially mean

that refugees have limited access to state-provided services such as health and education. In essence the Lebanese government does not provide a social safety net for the refugees. These legal restrictions cause the majority of the refugee population to be completely dependent on UNRWA and other NGOs. They provide for everything, from schools to humanitarian assistance.

Among this group of Palestinian refugees it has been calculated that two-thirds are considered to be poor or extremely poor. That means 160,000 individuals survive with under \$6 a day, which is the calculated poverty line. In terms of extreme poverty, that represents those who attempt to survive with \$2 a day, and they amount to 16,000 people. Employment and the type of jobs refugees are engaged in are extremely important predictors of poverty. The uncertain and low-pay jobs that Palestinian refugees typically hold continue to impose a negative burden on their lives. An UNRWA statistic suggests that the unemployment rate has reached an historical high. This could also be attributed to the influx of Syrian and Palestinian refugees from Syria that has now become competition in the Lebanese labor market. In terms of food security I'm just going to mention that approximately one third of the refugee population in Lebanon is not meeting their micronutrient requirements. And it is widely recognized not meeting those standards can cause numerous health risks to the development of children.

In regards to education, this is a very important determinant of poverty. Recent studies have highlighted the rising percentage of early school drop outs. Structural and institutional reasons I think can be considered to have been the cause of this. The structural factors include the legal restrictions Palestinians face. So the limited prospect to attend university, which is mainly because of the lack of funds, Lebanon has one the highest fees in the region, and also because most graduate jobs are denied to them. The institutional aspects relate to UNRWA's management of its educational programs. Unfortunately the lack of extracurricular activities, which is a result of the limited resources as well as the poor sanitary conditions of the camps all contribute to the high levels of school dropout.

The poor quality housing continues to be a problem in communities where most Palestinian refugees live in Lebanon. It is reported that almost half of the households have water leaking through their roof or walls. And some even still have metal sheet roofing. When we talk about Palestinian refugees from Syria we are referring to those who have been displaced since 2011.

It has to be said that the conflict which erupted in Syria has certainly added a new dimension to the Palestinian refugee crisis. Lebanon effectively closed its borders to Palestinians in May 2014. The Lebanese government set new visa requirements that practically apply only to Palestinians and not to Syrians. Similarly, when Palestinian refugees are attempting to enter European countries, they face enormous difficulties because of their stateless condition. At times it has been reported that they've even started to claim they were Syrian in order to obtain asylum. Currently the number of PRS in Lebanon 33,000 which has decreased in the past 2 years of almost 20,000, so there has been a huge surge in migration.



Palestinians from Lebanon have been increasingly taking the so-called “death boats” to Europe. And people are taking this risky journey because they are desperate and tired of being humiliated in Lebanon, and they are seeking a normal life, where they can own property, work, and send their kids to school. And we can’t even imagine what it is like to take on a journey through the sea, to reach Europe on a boat. On this topic, I was recently talking with a Palestinian in the UK and he was telling me about his cousin who had managed to do the trip on a boat through the Mediterranean sea and at one point he had to throw away all he owned and he just hold on to his passport, and when finally he reached the shore he described the way he felt as he was just born again. And as you may know many people continue to die attempting to reach Europe, but they are taking on this risk because of the conditions they currently face.

The situation of PRS in Lebanon is really among the worse. Almost all families lack an income and are relying on UNRWA’s cash assistance program. Poverty levels reached a staggering 89% in 2015, while extreme poverty 9%. Hunger is major issue for these families. Food is simply too expensive for the majority. Two-thirds of all families are not able to provide three meals a day. In 2015, the vast majorities of families had at least one child who is not attending school. Many Palestinian children from Syria have witnessed horrible violence, so adding to this, having to adapt to a new system is causing many problems. According the UNRWA Lebanon worker I have spoken to, an assessment for the school drop outs is under way but unofficial estimates seems to suggest that the majority are leaving school early, either because they have decided to leave the country or are seeking job opportunities.

Finally in terms of housing, a 2013 survey showed that 74% of households interviewed are crowded with more than 10 people. And most of all these families are crammed into one room. The huge influx of people from Syria has greatly worsened the already terrible living conditions of the camps but refugees that previously resided there have been extremely welcoming of these new refugees, sharing their food and whatever resources they have.

Now I’d like make three quick points that I think are interrelated, one is on UNRWA, the second is on the issue of Tawteen, which means resettlement in Arabic, and the last point is on the right of return. In regards to UNRWA, you might have heard in past 6 months that the agency is facing a severe lack of funds which is greatly affecting many of their services. It is critical that UNRWA and other agencies continue to support Palestinian refugees in order for them to survive. A

couple weeks ago a 23 year old Palestinian set himself on fire over desperation from the aid cuts. Though, lack of funding at UNRWA distracts us from the wider issue: it is the lack of a political solution, not funding, that leaves Palestinian refugees vulnerable. The issue shouldn't be how the increase in demand for essential services can be met, but rather how this demand can be reduced. This involves addressing the root causes of the Palestinian refugee problem.

Within Lebanese political discourse Tawteen, resettlement or assimilation, is the scarecrow that has been used to cause public phobia against conferring civil rights to Palestinians. This discourse is often invoked as saying that assimilation would prevent the right return of the refugees, but in reality is only used to justify the fear of changing the demographics of the country. Not just Lebanon but also the other Arab countries have consistently justified their discriminatory policies against the Palestinians by arguing that this is the only way to ensure that the refugees will one day return to their former homes inside Israel. Lebanon has a clear responsibility to lift the Palestinian refugees they host out of the most appalling poverty. They have chosen not to. This ultimately causes refugees to be treated just as figures awaiting return, lacking any political agency. At the same time, Palestinians are also seen by humanitarian organizations as bodies to be fed and sheltered without political existence. This fully explains why among refugees they refer to themselves as the "forgotten people".

The right of return is very present in the political discourses of Palestinian refugees, in fact contrary to those who think that the right of return is obstacle to peace or that it can be somehow negotiable, It is simply not negotiable mainly because I think that the right of return encompasses, and stands for, a wider universal demand for freedom, dignity and rights, including the right to go back or to stay, or to move across borders. I think that it is important to emphasize how Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are increasingly seeking to take simultaneously two projects and discourses. One is the right of return and the other is the right to rights, which means participation now in the host country. I think this shows how refugees want to say is that integration and return are compatible, they can coexist. And in fact, an argument conveyed by refugees themselves is that the more politically, economically and socially integrated they are, the more likely they would be to have the ability to mobilize and advocate for the right of return.

Finally, to conclude, Israel, the main cause of the Palestinian refugee problem continues to deny any responsibility, and it continues with its colonial project to which its fundamental denying the refugees the right to return to their homes. At the same time Israel's supporters in North America and European governments have actively decided against providing any form of justice to the refugees, which I think you can clearly see from the astonishingly high levels of poverty I have discussed tonight. Thank you.

Aimee Shalan

Aimee Shalan talked about the life in higher education for Palestinian refugees and the constant obstacles that the Israeli occupation presents. Access to higher education has become political as a way to counteract the Israeli occupation.

I'll begin by describing the work that Friends of Birzeit University does. Basically, we're a UK based charity that started in 1979, promoting and supporting the right to education of Palestinians, really supporting Palestinians at Birzeit University. Over time, obviously the situation in Palestine has disintegrated further. And while it used to be the case that Birzeit was maybe the leading university in Palestine, it's now very difficult for students to access it and particularly for the students in Gaza, and there are other very good universities across Occupied Palestine that struggle to survive. In 2014, we actually changed our object so that we could support students at university across Occupied Palestine because we didn't feel that it was suitable to support just one university. So our work really is supporting those Palestinians in greatest financial needs and that means we do really concentrate on refugee students but also students with disabilities and students from poor rural areas.

One of the things that we've been doing more recently is, we've partnered with another organization called Ahdaf and, as part of the scholarships that we offer for Palestinians to study at university in Palestine, we ask them to organize voluntary projects in their own communities at no extra costs. They have to think of an idea that isn't expensive and get them actively involved doing whatever project that they want to do. And they've come up with some really great ideas from running a film club, which is showing films from different parts of the world, to book fairs and also raising money, students in the West Bank raising money for students in Gaza, when they were attacked in 2014. So they've come together to do all sorts of things by Skype in different parts of Palestine and it's a really great project. Another part of our work is advocacy, raising awareness over here about the obstacles to education.

One of the things I want to talk about in relation to what you were saying about politics and the politics of this issue is that education and higher education in particular and access to higher education for refugee populations is also political. The lack of access to higher education is a way of stopping a population, and especially a refugee population, from actually blossoming and taking charge of its own destiny. That's why I feel it's very important from a political perspective as well as from an educational one. Palestinians in general, I'd say, place education very highly and attached a greater importance to education.

Literacy in Palestine is one of the highest in the region. Palestine has also got 43 institutions of higher education throughout the West Bank and Gaza and that's including the Edward Said National Conservatory of Music and the International Academy of Art. But as I was saying, education is not only seen as a means of increasing employability and standards of living, but also as a means of countering attempt by Israel to destroy Palestinian identity and Palestinian



culture. I'm gonna talk largely about the West Bank and Gaza because that's where we focus our work, but I'm also gonna touch on Lebanon and Syria as well. There is a major difference really for Palestinian refugees living in refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza in terms of their education. It's not the same as other Palestinians living under occupation. So it is important to remember that there is a large refugee population inside both the West Bank and Gaza and they are also under the auspices of UNRWA.

UNRWA operates one of the largest school systems in the Middle East with nearly 700 schools for primary, secondary and vocational educational institutions and it's been the main provider of free of charge basic education for Palestinian refugees for over 60 years. Its education programme consists of 685 schools in its five areas of operation and it provides education for around half a million rural students and 49.9% of whom are female. If you go higher up the educational levels, then the female numbers unfortunately drop, but at that level there is certainly equality there. Vocational and higher education is provided at 8 vocational training centres for around 7,000 Palestinian refugees in all of UNRWA's fields of education and for 2100 students in 2 educational science faculties and teacher training institutes, one of them in the West Bank and one in Jordan. And that's a small number of students if you think of how large the refugee population is, but there is an effort to do some sort of access for higher education and vocational training.

Now, Rowan was talking about the difference between UNHCR support and UNRWA support, but it's also important to remember that Palestinians that are under the auspices of UNRWA receive rather different support in different geographical areas. So they're facing very different issues in different places. In Syria, before the outbreak of the conflict, all of UNRWA's 118 schools were running double shifts already to provide around 67,000 students with primary and secondary education. Violence, damage, and closure, and other factors

however have left only 42 of those schools open and that was as of March 2014. Some of the schools are now operating 3 shifts and UNRWA's also educating some students in government's schools, which is negotiated with the Ministry of Education and they're allowed to use them in the afternoon. In Lebanon of course, the schools were already hugely overcrowded and even more so now, and the problem there is that they teach a different syllabus to the one that the Palestinian refugees from Syria would have been taught. So they are now coming to a whole different educational system when they come to Lebanon. The Lebanese curriculum is largely taught in English or French so they're at a real disadvantage, they've missed an enormous amount of school and then suddenly there is a whole different curriculum as well. UNRWA has been struggling with trying to deal with these two different systems as well.

Rohan or Pietro, I can't remember who, also mentioned that access to higher education in Lebanon is hugely difficult for Palestinian refugees. I mean, why would you if your job prospects are extremely low, the only real hope you have is to get a scholarship outside of the country, I would say, and hope that then you would be employed in another part of the world. And then there's the case of Occupied Palestine. Perhaps the situation is less acute there but I would say that there is still a problem of assimilation inside the refugee camps, not nearly the same as Lebanon but nevertheless there is an issue.

I was very struck the first time I went and worked in Askew refugee camp in Nablus that some of the Palestinian volunteers that I was working with had never been into the refugee camp before, even though they had grown up in Nablus and the refugee camp was right next to them. It was a real eye-opener that actually there wasn't always the kind of mixing that one would expect. There is a sort of situation where there are levels of perception that apparently are shared by teachers and students and community as a whole that somehow students are not at the same educational standard when they've come from an UNRWA school.

The Institute of Community and Public Health at Birzeit University did some research into how the notion of dignity impacts on young people in Palestine and this is something that came up, the stigma of having come from a refugee school is something that was mentioned time after time again both by students and teachers. Some of that may be prejudice, but a large amount of it is because UNRWA's schools actually aren't resourced in the same way as other schools, particularly since the cuts have kicked in.

UNRWA has been forced to implement austerity measures in recent years due to cuts in funds and of course education has been hit by that immensely. Education somehow becomes a bit of a luxury rather than a basic necessity in these sorts of situations. According to their own website, this has resulted in a reduction of services to an extent that the average annual spending per refugee has fallen from about \$200 in 1975 to around \$110 today, which is an extraordinary drop. There are however extraordinary efforts to continue to ensure that refugee communities are able to continue their education.

Last year on the 30th of May, we saw a handful of students from Yarmouk refugee camp, UNRWA managed to negotiate for them to come out of

Yarmouk camp and go to Damascus to take their 12th grade exams and this was a very small kind of victory, but what was very apparent from that was the importance that these students place on actually being in a position under those sorts of conditions to be able to take their exams in the first place. In the refugee camps in Lebanon, following the Syrian refugee crisis, we've seen a rise from 2 to 3 shifts a day catering for the different needs of students there. And then we have schools in Gaza having to deal with the impact of Israel's offensive in 2014. They're doing what they can do to support their students and universities are also trying to do what they can do to try and allow students who are coming from poverty-stricken backgrounds to get access into their universities. They're offering scholarships, some partial, and also loans to students to try to get them to be able to access higher education. But frankly, their situation is untenable. The universities are really struggling to survive themselves; they rely on fees from students so it's very difficult for them to continue.

And then in the West Bank, I just want to read a few sort of experiences from some of the students that we've been supporting, so you have a sense of how they're living in their camps as well and what they've been growing up with. This is Munjad, who said: "Since I was a child, soldiers have come every day to my camp. It's a natural thing to throw stones. We don't want to hurt the soldiers, but we want to say to them, no to the occupation, no we do not want you here. The Israeli occupation has taught me a lot; how to challenge the situation, how to keep working and not to give up."

And then Shahd: "I live close to the settlement Beitar Illit. When I was a child, soldiers were always there. Last week, at 1am, they started to play music and make noise, and shout that they would come for us with their guns. That night we stayed up until 6am waiting for them to leave."

And Raad: "I remember small details about the year 2000. Everything was happening in the camp - in Jenin this is - near me. I could see all the rockets; we had no shelters, so we had to go away from the glass windows. We had to stay all day in our house and the soldiers were in front of our houses in my village and I was always sneaking and taking a look from the windows. It was scary. Then a few months ago, I was asleep at my sister's house in Birzeit. I heard someone knocking on the door at 3am. Six soldiers came in; I had a complete panic attack. It was the first time that that had happened. There were babies there, my nieces. Everyone was crying. They searched my entire room, books, bed, every single detail and question me. How's Birzeit? How are the students? How's the situation there? They all had guns."

So again it's that background, where I think that the resilience of the students that I've met and who are part of our scholarship scheme is quite extraordinary. And they put it down to the fact that they are able to access higher education. One of them said, "With spirit and inner power you can live in any way and with anything". Another said, "The occupation's main goal is to stop education. That is why there are lots of checkpoints to make it difficult to come to university."

Coming to the university is resisting.” And another, “you can get your voice about a situation louder with your education.”

And finally, Munjad, “I do not want to stay; I am a refugee; my situation is bad. My scholarship has given me the drive to make this world better. Of course we have the power to change this, if you hear again about Mahatma Gandhi and Mandela, you know a single human being can change the world.”

So I think whatever political decisions are taken there, it is very important that they are taken with the media seeing it. Remedying the shortcomings of education for Palestinian refugees, whether that is in the West Bank, Gaza or other Middle Eastern countries, is going to be incredibly difficult. But there is a great deal of commitment in these young people.

My father was 17, when he was one of the 750,000 Palestinian refugees that were kicked out of their homes in 1948. As a result, I’ve often wondered, I was very lucky in my upbringing, I’ve often wondered, what my life would have been like, if I had grown up in a refugee camp in Lebanon, or the West Bank or Gaza. And I’m not sure that I would have had the extraordinary resilience and commitment and innovation that the young people I’ve had the honor to meet in my work had, I’m not sure I would have had that.

Ben Bradshaw, MP

Ben Bradshaw, MP contributed to the seminar by reaffirming his commitment to the issues faced by the Palestinian refugees. The danger is that the stories of Palestinians get lost. The issue of Palestinian refugees is the only way to bring peace to the Middle East.

Thank you. I’ll be very brief, because my role is to formally welcome you as the MP that helped you book the room, but an MP with some history of commitment on this issue. I remember my first visit to refugee camps in Jordan, and I’m sure a lot of you have had the same experience, of an old gentleman taking out the key of his family home. I mean, this is a very common phenomenon. It really hit me, from the first time, of the magnitude of the Nakba and the ongoing effects it was having on families and successive generations of these families. As it’s just been said, there is a real danger in the current debate around the refugee crisis and the mass migration into Europe that the story of the Palestinians of displacement and the refugees gets lost, and gets forgotten.

So I just want to commend sincerely the work that this organization does, the commitment and the expertise, the monitoring and the documentation, all of this is absolutely essential if we’ve ever to see, as I hope we will in our lives time, a just settlement, which of course must include the right of return for those Palestinian refugees and their descendants who were displaced. It’s the only way that the Middle East is ever going to live in peace; it’s the only way

Israel will ever find a lasting and sustainable peace with its neighbours. It's great to see people from all over the Middle East in this audience, and from all political persuasions in this audience. This has to be a cross-party campaign. I'm pleased to be a supporter of Labour Friends of Palestine. We're continuing to do what we can to highlight this with trips organized, visits to the region.

Almost the most effective thing, I think, we can do is to encourage and held funds through organizations, visits by parliamentarians and not just British, but American and Western Europeans, so they can see with their own eyes the reality of the situation on the ground. Those visits should and must include taking them to refugee camps, because that is such an essential and central part of this as yet unfinished story.

Questions and Answers

The Q&A session was introduced by Sara Apps, who invited the panel to think of one recommendation each. The following questions have been summarized.

Question 1, was about the link between the political and the economic situation of the Palestinian refugees and how these affect the type of solution needed.

Question 2, invited politicians to go to the refugee camps in Lebanon to see what the creation of Israel actually created.

Question 3, suggested that we should look at the British government's involvement in the region, as well as that of other Middle Eastern countries, as they are part of the problem and therefore should be part of the solution.

Question 4, was raised by a survivor of the 1967 Six Days War, who appealed to the panel for ideas on ways to support the growing voice of Israeli citizens disagreeing with their government on the Palestinian issue. Maybe the solution can come from within.

Question 5, posed by a representative of Jews for Justice for Palestinians, who affirmed the importance of pressuring the UK government and lobbying the European Union as well as of participating in the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement within the UK as well as worldwide.

Question 6, queried whether schools in refugee camps have access to electronic journals, as these can be very expensive.

Recommendations

The following recommendations were put forward by the speakers as part of their answers to the questions posed by the public, as well as in conclusion to their speeches. They address the key issue of what a solution of the Palestinian refugee problem envisions. These recommendations urge the UK government as well as other Western and Middle Eastern governments to take action to bring a solution to the displacement of the Palestinian refugees as well as to implement the right of return. They also provide guidance for civil society and individual actors to contribute and coordinate their efforts of solidarity.

Sameh Habeeb (PRC) recommends that:

- Israel must face its responsibilities for the numerous violations of international law, including the denial of the right of return of the Palestinian refugees.
- The focus of discussions about Palestinian refugee issues should lie on the Israeli occupation as root cause of the problem. Israel is the key player, with its supporters from Western countries, in the creation of the refugee problem.
- The public is invited to join and support the 'Sorry campaign' over the Balfour declaration to ask the government to officially apologise for the problems it created. PRC invites David Cameron to join the Palestinian refugees for lunch or dinner in a refugee camp on the centenary of the Balfour declaration, instead of celebrating the day with the Jewish community, as previously announced.

Ben Bradshaw MP recommends that:

- MPs should visit Palestinian refugee camps with the Council for Arab-British Understanding, or other organisation, to better understand the issue. UK residents should encourage their MPs to do so.
- The British government should recalibrate its policies towards Israel. The public should encourage the government to do so.
- The government must remember its overwhelming vote in Parliament of two years ago, led by Ed Miliband, on state recognition. The democratic will of the Parliament on that occasion decided to recognise the State of Palestine. The UK should now live up to its promise.

Aimee Shalan (Friends of Birzeit University) recommends that:

- The public should pressure everyone else to take action, not just MPs. Action must encompass everybody as the issue of refugee is current and worsening.

- UNRWA and other organisations working in refugee camps should facilitate access to education not just for children and women but also for young men.
- Debates on refugees should understand that the situation of refugees being 'stuck', or 'on hold' in a place, is not a mindset but a real abomination resulting from practical conditions around them.

Rohan Talbot (MAP) recommends that:

- MPs should join one of MAP's guided trips to refugee camps to see the direct impact of the occupation, displacement and conflict on the Palestinian people.
- Civil society and individual actors should ensure that refugee issues remain forefront in their minds. The media and civil society organisations should provide a space to have discussions on these topics.
- The UK government as well as other governments that have relations with Lebanon should apply pressure and provide support to initiatives (such as the Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee) that have attempted and continue to work to improve the law whereby this discriminates against Palestinians (e.g. the 2010 initiative to increase access of Palestinians to labour force).

Pietro Stefanini (PRC) recommends that:

- The international community should begin addressing the implementation of the Palestinian right of return. Civil society members should pressure governments to do so.
- Israel should recognize its responsibility for the Palestinian refugees' displacement for the past 68 years and accept their full repatriation to their place of origin which is guaranteed by International law and the related UN resolutions. This should include granting them financial and moral compensation for their loss.
- UNRWA must continue to provide its support to Palestinian refugees until a solution is found, including providing professional training and employment services.

Sarah Apps (PSC) recommends that:

- The public should pressure their MPs to visit Palestinian refugee camps with organisations that give the issue of refugees proper attention.
- Discussions on the humanitarian responses to the refugee crisis should also focus on Palestinian refugees to give them a platform to share their stories.



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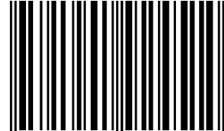
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