

Parliamentary Delegation to Lebanon

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The Council for European Palestinian Relations



The Palestinian Return Centre

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Background

For over 60 years, millions of Palestinians have been living as refugees in areas of the occupied Palestinian territories and in surrounding countries. The UN Refugee Agency describes their plight as “by far the most protracted and largest of all refugee problems in the world today”⁽¹⁾

Three quarters of Palestinians from a global population of 11 million are refugees. Their plight is at the core of the Israel-Palestinian conflict. All other issues, political and humanitarian, arose as a consequence of Israel's denial of the right of refugees to return to their land.

Multiple international treaties and conventions recognise the inviolable characteristic of the right to return including the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination and the International Convention on Civil and Political Rights. The Right of Return for refugees is guaranteed under Humanitarian and Human Rights Law and countless UN resolutions.

Uniquely to the Palestinians, the UN has affirmed the right of return through Resolution 194 on 122 occasions. The UN also, after recognising the growing humanitarian disaster as Palestinians were expelled from their land in 1948, set up two different institutions to deal with the humanitarian challenges and implement the right of return. Six decades on, the United Nations Relief and Work Agency (UNRWA) remains the sole provision.

Despite these facts, in the West little is heard of the refugees, who have been relegated to ‘final status negotiations’⁽²⁾ during the Middle East peace process. The ‘Palestine Papers’ released by al-Jazeera in 2011 revealed that the Palestinian Authority (PA) was willing to virtually give up the right of return, save for the symbolic return of 10,000 refugees. Israel rejected this offer on the grounds that it did not satisfy their demands.

Palestinians from the North of Palestine, namely Haifa, Safad and the Galilee were forced from their homes due to Israeli attacks and ethnic cleansing in 1948. Around 100,000 fled to Lebanon, approximately 14 percent of the total number who became refugees that year. Initially Palestinian refugees fared relatively well in Lebanon, but their position weakened dramatically by the 1960s when Israeli refusal to accept the right of return and Lebanese sectarianism and fear of Tawtin began to take hold. Since then multiple civil wars, Lebanon's fragile geopolitical position and the failure of the Lebanese and Palestinian leaderships to enshrine Palestine rights in Lebanese law have combined to leave the Palestinian refugees in a precarious position that has seen little improvement.

⁽¹⁾ The State of the World's Refugees 2006, UNHCR Chapter 51

Inside Lebanon

Over 400,000 Palestinians live in Lebanon's 12 'official' (UNRWA-run) and its many v'unofficial' refugee camps, amounting to approximately 10 percent of the country's population.

Lebanon is the host country in which history and politics have most exacerbated the difficulties faced by Palestinian refugees. Politically marginalised, without basic social and economic rights, trapped in often squalid camps, and without hopes for the future, Palestinian refugees suffer more in Lebanon than in any of the other countries that host Palestinian refugees.

In August 2010 a law (the 17th August law) was passed in the Lebanese parliament that slightly improves the rights of Palestinians to work. The law still excludes them from many professions, and has yet to be put in to practice.

The delegation visited Lebanon at an opportune moment, with public understanding of the position of refugees in peace talks at a high point and with historic changes taking place across the Middle East. Advocates of justice have the chance to put the refugee issue back in its rightful place as the key to bringing peace to the region.

Some Key Definitions

Tawtin: Literally the permanent settlement of Palestinian refugees, refers to fears about naturalisation or granting of citizenship to refugees.

Confessional System: The highest offices of government in Lebanon are constitutionally reserved for representatives of certain religious communities. Lebanon's constitution dictates that the President is a Maronite Christian, the Prime Minister a Sunni Muslim and the Speaker of the House a Shia Muslim.

The Delegation

The delegation was led by former British government minister Sir Gerald Kaufman MP and included four members of the European Parliament and three members of the British Parliament.

The delegation's purpose was to assess the humanitarian situation faced by Palestinians living in Lebanon's refugee camps, although separating this from issues of internal Lebanese and international politics is impossible. The delegation was able to raise the issue at the highest levels of Lebanese politics in a series of meetings.

During an intense two days that included 18 meetings and visits to three camps, common themes could be identified along with practical steps to be taken to improve the dire situation.



Sir Gerald Kaufman MP and
Michael Connarty MP



Alexandra Thein MEP



Derek Vaughan MEP



Jeremy Corbyn MP



Nicolette Petersen (right), Office of Jeremy Corbyn MP



Frank Engel MEP



Robert Goebbels MEP



Majed al-Zeer (left), Director, Palestinian Return Centre



Dr Arafat Shoukri (left), Director, Council for European
Palestinian Relations



Tom Charles,
Parliamentary Officer, CEPR

“When I went to Gaza in 2010 I thought I had seen the worst that could be seen of the appalling predicament of Palestinians living in conditions which no human being should be expected to endure. But, what I saw in the camps in Lebanon is far worse and far more hopeless.

The conditions are unspeakable, but for over 400,000 of our fellow human beings this is their life: Today, tomorrow and for a future that cannot even be foreseen. At least in Gaza, frightful though the situation is, the people are free within the confines of their blockaded prison. In the camps of Lebanon they are not free and this is, to a very considerable degree, the responsibility of the Lebanese government which could allow conditions to improve and could allow the victim freedom of movement, but specifically refuses to do it.

Yet, culpable though the Lebanese government undoubtedly is, the real culprit is the Israeli government, which by refusing to come to a settlement with the Palestinians, is directly and horrendously responsible for the plight of those immured in the camps.

It makes me more determined than ever to fight for the rights of the Palestinian people and to campaign against the deliberate decision of the Israeli government to perpetuate the hell in which so many Palestinians are living”.

Sir Gerald Kaufman MP

Day one

■ Briefing with the EU Delegation in Lebanon, led by Angelina Eickhurst, Le Commodore Hotel, Hamra Street, Beirut

Referring to the law passed in the Lebanese parliament on the 17th August 2010, Ms Eickhurst stated that the EU's position is that "it is not sufficient, as access to many professions and the right to own property are denied. Nevertheless, if the proposed changes are implemented, we welcome them".

The EU plays a key role for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, donating to NGOs and focusing on the Nahr EL Bared camp, destroyed in 2007.

Money given by the EU to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) focuses on education and infrastructure.

Delegation leader Sir Gerald Kaufman MP said that the "the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon lead a totally unnatural life, with no integration in to any community".

The EU briefing highlighted a key question:

Are the changes proposed in the 17th August law an important first step or the limit to the concessions to be offered by the host country?



Meeting with EU Delegation in Lebanon, led by Angelina Eickhurst

■ Meeting with President Michel Suleiman, Lebanese Parliament

President Suleiman welcomed the delegation and gave an overview of the Lebanese political situation and how it affects the refugees:

“Lebanon does not have the capacity to absorb 400,000 people; we simply cannot offer them a good life. The truth is that we will not see peace in the Middle East without the implementation of the refugees’ right of return”.

President Suleiman explained the political dilemma that exists in Lebanon regarding the refugees:

“Lebanon’s sectarian cultural diversity makes it difficult to believe in improvements as each party is afraid they will lose ground to their opponents if they advocate improving Palestinian rights”.

Asked about the role of the International community, the President said that the EU and European states should not just focus on humanitarian aid, but “support the right of return for refugees and reconciliation between Palestinian political factions in order to create a real peace process”.

“The Israeli fear of demographic change is unfounded; the refugees surrounding Israel will keep revolution in their hearts until they return. The most suitable solution is to confine this situation by creating a Palestinian state. Otherwise, rather than facing one Gaza, Israel will face multiple Gazas in the region”.



Meeting with Lebanese President Michel Suleiman

■ Meeting with Lebanese Foreign Minister Dr Ali Chami, Foreign Ministry

Like the President, Lebanon's Foreign Minister was unequivocal about the plight of the Palestinian refugees:

"It is not acceptable that Palestinians have been living outside their own state since 1948. The half a million in Lebanon are in complete misery and a very dire situation. The clear solution is the establishment of a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital".

Echoing the words of President Suleiman, the Foreign Minister responded to the question of Europe's role by stating that more can be done to promote civil and social rights for the refugees, as well as the necessity of reinforcing the role of UNRWA by increasing donations. Lebanon's debt burden of \$55 billion means that its leaders look to the international community to boost UNRWA.

Sir Gerald Kaufman MP told Dr Chami:

"We are here to contribute to the settlement the region gravely needs. Pressure needs to be placed on the Israeli government to act in a rational way for the benefit of the region and for their own continued existence. A one state solution will soon be inevitable and that one state will not be Israel".

The Foreign Minister picked up on the theme of Israeli intransigence: "Since 1978, according to UN resolutions, Israel has violated Lebanese sovereignty every day, while the international community has failed to deter them".



Delegation meets with Lebanese Foreign Minister Ali Chami

■ Meeting with Deputy Speaker of the House Abdellatif Al Zain and MPs, Lebanese Parliament

Again, the delegation heard a consistent message from the Lebanese government: Lebanon sympathises with the plight of the Palestinian refugees, but the responsibility lies with Israel and the international community.

Referring to Israel's invasions and occupation of Lebanon Deputy Speaker Al Zain stated "Lebanon has endured a lot for the Palestinian cause".

Amal MP Ali Bazzi stated that "Israel is judaizing the state of occupied Palestine, thinking it as an exception to UN resolutions. But around the region calls for democracy are getting louder. Tunisia, Egypt, we do not know who will be next".

Ali Ammar MP of Hezbollah identified a problem with the approach of many Lebanese to the issue of Palestinian refugees: "Approaches other than a humanitarian approach always focus on the negative impact of the refugees in Lebanon. Politicising the issue places it in the wrong dimension".

"More than two million people have been killed because of this cause. There are millions of Palestinian victims around the world and the international community has paid out billions of dollars, but there is still no solution".

The deputy speaker and his colleagues focused on the role of the West. MP Ali Ammar commented: "It is high time the West liberated itself from double standards and stopped supporting satellite regimes that do not respect Palestinian rights".

Robert Goebbels MEP raised the possibility of a long-term Palestinian refugee presence in Lebanon, saying "it is incumbent upon the Lebanese government to recognise and normalise living conditions". Deputy Speaker Al Zain pointed at the role of the international community, particularly Europe and the United States: "Support for UNRWA is being withdrawn; Lebanon has been the victim of wars, invasion and destruction and is expected to make up for the failings of the West".



Meeting with Deputy Speaker of the House Abdellatif Al Zain and Amal MPs at the Lebanese Parliament

Member of the Lebanese Parliament Yassine Jaber of Amal concurred: "There needs to be seriousness in dealing with Israel and an end to backing dictatorships. Palestine had free elections in 2006, but the West conspired to undermine the results. If this corruption isn't corrected the West will face the biggest upheaval in the region since 1948-49".

On Europe's role, Deputy Speaker Al Zain said "The world needs another power to balance out America's role, Europe should fulfil this role".

■ UNRWA tour of Bourj al-Barajineh camp, Beirut

The delegation made their first visit to a camp, Bourj al-Barajineh, on the outskirts of Beirut. Clambering over rubble to get in to the camp, the delegates toured the maze-like streets and received a warm welcome from the refugees.

Bourj al-Barajineh is squalid and overcrowded, with open sewers running through streets that are in desperate need of repair. The most disturbing sight was the miles of low-hanging, bunched up electricity wires that snaked around the entire camp.

Regarding this problem, UNRWA's director for Beirut and the Bekaa, Mohammed Khaled Khaled informed the delegation that 13 people had been killed as a direct result of the hazardous wiring in 2010, but that UNRWA was waiting for financial support from the international community before dealing with it.

Despite the dire conditions of the camp, delegates were struck by the warmth of the inhabitants whose life as Palestinians is even further removed from justice than their compatriots in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Evidence that none of them have given up hope of returning was everywhere, from their proclamations to the graffiti depicting the dome of the rock in East Jerusalem, alongside pro-Italy and pro-Chelsea football slogans.



Dangerous electrical wiring is everywhere in Bourj al-Barajineh



Inadequate buildings tightly drawn together in Bourj al-Barajineh

The refugees at Bourj al-Barajineh are free to leave the camp to travel to employment, but like all Lebanon's Palestinian refugee population, they are victims of the country's laws which severely limit their access to employment, property and a dignified standard of living.

“Bourj al-Barajineh is the worst situation I have ever seen, life there is perpetually harrowing”.

Sir Gerald Kaufman MP, Leader of the delegation



Paying our respects at the Sabra-Shatila massacre memorial with the Mayor of the Ghoubeyri Municipality Abu Said Al Khansa

“A recent report put out by the American University of Beirut⁽¹⁾ states that Bourj al-Barajineh is in dire need of ‘basic services and infrastructure necessary to safeguard the health of community residents’. This isn’t something one has to read about if you pass through it. The haphazard electric wiring is enough to frighten any cautious person from going beyond the path running through the camp”.

Nicolette Petersen, Office of Jeremy Corbyn MP



Speaking to the media at the Sabra-Shatila massacre memorial

(1) ‘Socio-Economic Survey of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon’, American University of Beirut, December 2010

■ Sabra and Shatila massacre memorial

The delegation moved on to Sabra and the Shatila refugee camp, scene of the notorious massacre that took place in 1982.

The Shatila camp housed the offices of the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) and as a consequence suffered particularly heavy bombardment from Israel during the 1982 war. In September 1982, Israel's allies the Lebanese Christian Phalangists conducted massacres in Sabra and Shatila. The PLO had been evacuated from Beirut, on a promise from the United States government that their families would be safe. In September 1982 Israel encircled the area and Israeli flares lit up the night sky to allow the Phalange to see their way in to Sabra and Shatila, while Israeli troops did nothing to prevent their allies from carrying out the massacre.

Approximately 3500 civilians were slaughtered, including the elderly, children and pregnant women. Israeli Defence Minister Ariel Sharon, was found to bear "personal responsibility" in the massacres by an Israeli commission of inquiry, which concluded that he should not hold public office again.

The delegation laid a wreath at the memorial, which sits on the collective burial ground of many of the victims at the entrance to Shatila. A press conference was held at which delegation leader Sir Gerald Kaufman MP explained the importance for the delegates of being able to pay their respects to the victims of the massacre.

The delegation was also able to visit a survivor of the massacres in his home. Mohammed Omar Deeb spoke of his memories of people fleeing from the camp when the Israelis let the Phalange in. He told delegates that some camp residents who went to plead with the Israelis at the camp entrance were also slaughtered.

"The pain of the Sabra and Shatila massacres of 1982 never goes away. It was a poignant moment for the delegates to be able to lay a wreath at the memorial. It was sad to see the continued poverty in those camps nearly 30 years on, but we were inspired by the people.

The description by Mohammed Omar Deeb, an elderly survivor of the massacres and his determination that one day he would see his village in Palestine and that all his family would see a free Palestine is typical of the enduring spirit of the Palestinian people"

Jeremy Corbyn MP

■ **UNRWA Briefing, with Mohammed Khaled Khaled, UNRWA Chief Area Officer for Beirut and the Bekaa. Shatila refugee camp.**

The UNRWA representative explained the history of the Shatila camp, from its origins in 1949 as a collection of tents and makeshift buildings with zinc roofs. This 'temporary' set up under the Lebanese government lasted until 1968 and in 1969, under the Cairo agreement the PLO became the authority with responsibility for the camp.

After the bombardment of 1982, UNRWA reconstructed the camp and its population grew from 3,000 to 10,000. During the 1985-86 war of the camps, Shatila was again destroyed and had to be rebuilt.

Mohammed Khaled Khaled explained that in 2011 there is still no school in the camp and UNRWA rents private land in order to run the nearby 'Ramallah' school.



UNRWA tour of Shatila refugee camp, the most thriving of the camps visited

Severe health problems persist in Shatila, with UNRWA attempting to secure much-needed water and sewerage repairs and improve the ratio of one doctor for every 100 inhabitants.

The problems of UNRWA were explained by Mohammed Khaled Khaled who informed the delegates that "the UNRWA general fund cannot achieve what needs to be achieved in Shatila", while delegate Derek Vaughan MEP explained that "at the EU we face a fight every single year just to maintain the same level of UNRWA funding".



Visiting Mohammed Omar Deeb, a survivor of the 1982 Sabra-Shatila massacre accompanied by Mohammed Khaled Khaled, UNRWA Chief Area Officer for Beirut and the Bekaa

Meeting with Prime Minister Saad Hariri, Beirut

The delegates met with the out-going Prime Minister Saad Hariri. At the Prime Minister's official residence, the delegation again heard the complaint of Lebanese officials that the international community is not doing enough to support Palestinian refugees. "Unlike on other issues there is a lack of global leadership when it comes to Palestine" he said.

On the role of Lebanon, Hariri admitted "we should do more but Lebanon is a frail, confessional country" referring to the delicate political balance that dictates that power is shared evenly between the three major religious groupings. The Lebanese system has resulted in a paradoxical situation in which each side agrees that the refugees should not be granted Tawtin (citizenship) but all are afraid of making serious moves to improve living conditions for the refugees as their political opponents may accuse them of upsetting the delicate demographic balance.

Nevertheless, Hariri identified some slow progress. "The law passed in 2010 granting a slight improvement to the rights of Palestinians would not have happened 20 years ago" he stated, "however, Lebanon cannot credibly claim to support the refugees without implementing these moderate laws".

Hariri explained the price paid by Lebanon as a result of the country's involvement in the protection of the refugees. "Since Israel was established we have suffered six wars. Before Israel, Lebanon was not a confessional country, now this system makes Palestinians suffer even more".

Prime Minister Hariri spoke alarmingly of his fears for the region if justice for Palestinians is not forthcoming. "Extremism will occupy the Middle East if the Palestine issue is not resolved. Palestine is already 60 per cent of al-Qaeda's pretext".

Prime Minister Hariri was clear in his response to the question of Europe's role: "The problem is Europe always backs US policy. The pattern of the EU building and Israel destroying is unsustainable". Pressed on the issue of donations from the international community to UNRWA the Prime Minister observed that "after wars, donations increase, billions are poured in, and the cycle begins again...".

"Prime Minister Hariri told us of his bitterness that extremism is on the rise across the region. Sad as this may sound it is a statement of fact in the absence of justice or serious progress towards peace".

Frank Engel MEP



Meeting with Prime Minister Saad Hariri

■ Meeting with Palestinian political factions, Le Commodore Hotel, Beirut

The delegation held a meeting with representatives of all the major Palestinian political factions to hear their views on reconciliation between the Palestinian parties and to hear their views on the future for Lebanon's refugee camps.

Michael Connarty MP asked the factions what their views were on methods of resistance: "violence erodes leverage in the international community, so how do we resist effectively and non-violently?".

The representative of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine General Command responded that "the international solidarity movement is our voice towards peace. In the camps there is a conviction that Palestinians will one day return home. They will never abandon that hope. So far the success of resistance has been to remind the world that we are still here. After that, we rely on 'the might of right' and believe that justice will one day be done".

Jeremy Corbyn MP was encouraged by the ability of Palestinian factions, including Hamas and the PLO to sit down together and find common ground. "It was good to see the various Palestinian groups working together in the face of US and Israeli pressure to separate the Gaza Strip and West Bank from the rest of the Diaspora, which is a classic colonial divide and rule tactic".



Meeting with Palestinian political factions in Beirut

Day two

■ Briefing with UNRWA Lebanon Director Salvatore Lombardo, UNRWA Headquarters, Beirut



Briefing at UNRWA's Lebanon headquarters with Director Salvatore Lombardo

Mr Lombardo gave the delegation an overview of the history and current problems faced by UNRWA in Lebanon.

Of the 12 official camps in Lebanon, 11 are under UNRWA control while the twelfth, Nahr el-Bared is under Lebanese control. While UNRWA only has a remit to support the refugees created by the 1948 ethnic cleansing of Palestine, there are a significant number of Palestinians inside Lebanon as a result of the 1967 war when the remaining areas of Palestine were occupied.

Again, the delegation heard a consistent message from Mr Lombardo: “The government’s policy is that the refugees are here temporarily and the international community is required to look after them”.

“This is the starting point of the problems. After 62 years there is no solution despite the peace process. The other side of the problem is the Lebanese. Up until 2005 there existed a very dark scenario with the government being wilfully ignorant about Palestinian refugees. Today, we see a dreadful situation with massive poverty. 50 percent of Palestinian refugees live on under \$6 per day, while six per cent live on under \$2 per day”.

Mr Lombardo highlighted the problems in education: “6 – 10 percent cannot afford to go to primary school and some resort to child labour. Many 14 to 16 year olds drop out of school in order to work to support their families, further feeding the vicious cycle between education and poverty”.

Nevertheless, UNRWA plays a vital role for the refugees, with 75 percent of its annual budget going on refugee wages. UNRWA develops partnerships with Palestinian political factions and community organisations in the camps to deliver services.

Until 2005 UNRWA was unable to carry out any reconstruction of the camps. In 2005, there was a slight shift when a government committee was established that stimulated some limited political discussion on refugee social and economic rights.

The result has been a political shift, a pattern which was evident to the delegation in all its meetings with Lebanese officials, with consensus that the standard of living must rise. However this shift in rhetoric has not translated in to actual change for the refugees themselves. “Now we can carry out reconstruction, but we are subjected to strict monitoring and regulation. Lebanon is extremely bureaucratic and this causes us problems as donations are usually given with very strict timescales which are difficult to meet” explained Mr Lombardo.

Again the subject of Tawtin was identified as the key. “In Lebanon this is the magic word” said Mr Lombardo “The PLO, UNRWA and some private donors built a cemetery for refugees but some Lebanese MPs claimed that this was Tawtin. There is even paranoia about the dead settling in Lebanon”.

Of UNRWA's annual \$500 million budget, only 2 percent is provided by Arab states, who expect the West to take care of the bill. The UK is the fourth biggest donor to UNRWA, but the agency is chronically broke, with a \$60 million shortfall in 2011 following on from a \$100 million shortfall in 2010. While the Palestinian population in the camps grown, UNRWA's budget is static.

The solution is not just in raising more money. “Drawing attention to the situation of Palestinian refugees at the public and political levels in the West is just as important as increasing our budget” said Mr Lombardo.

“We were all impressed by the work UNRWA are doing on the ground to improve the conditions of the Palestinians living in the camps.

Parliamentarians must ensure that their own governments and the EU fund UNRWA adequately in the future. If not, the support in humanitarian aid will suffer as will the people it helps”.

Derek Vaughan MEP

Nahr el-Bared refugee camp, near Tripoli, North Lebanon

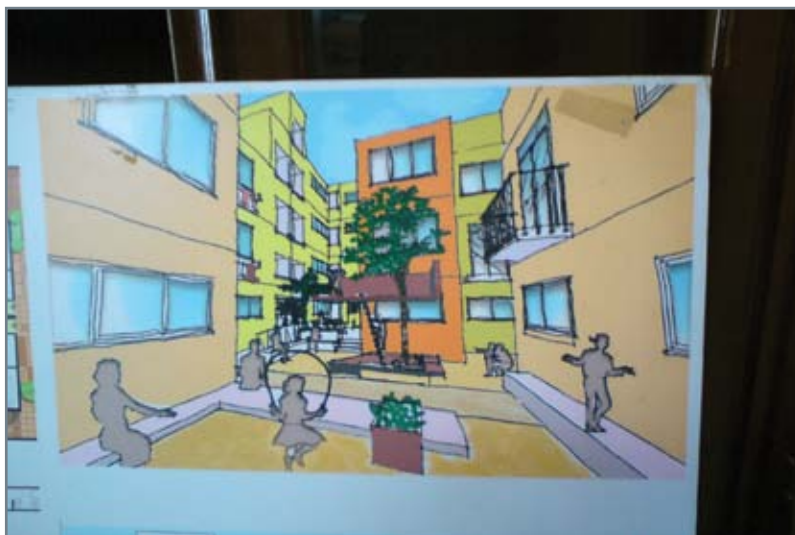
The delegates travelled north along Lebanon's beautiful coastal road to the Nahr el-Bared refugee camp near Tripoli. The entry road that took us through the old camp is guarded by Lebanese soldiers. A once-thriving market street, it is now virtually deserted and rows of shops sit closed.

Our driver informed us that he used to work as a salesman and would often do good business at Nahr el-Bared: "I would have one hand on the wheel and the other on the horn as I was constantly beeping because the streets were so crowded with people". Nahr al-Bared was an integral part of the Tripoli economy and a thriving commercial hub serving Northern Lebanon. Now, driving through the old camp, delegates saw flattened buildings and piles of rubble everywhere.

In 2007, a conflict between the Fatah al-Islam terrorist group and the Lebanese army became centred at Nahr el-Bared. The refugee camp was destroyed by the army leaving 27,000 refugees homeless. 168 soldiers, 55 civilians and approximately 200 militants were killed. International agreement was swiftly reached to control the humanitarian crisis by rebuilding the camp, but as the delegates were to see, progress has been protracted.



Image and reality. Artist's impression of Nahr el-Bared's reconstruction at UNRWA headquarters and the reality of the destroyed camp



■ Briefing with UNRWA head of reconstruction Charles Higgins, UNRWA Camp Services Office

Charles Higgins ran through a brief history of Nahr el-Bared, which was established in 1948 and originally built by the refugees themselves. Next to the sea and with excellent transport links, Nahr el-Bared grew to be a relative success story, with good relations with its neighbouring Tripoli suburbs, until its destruction in 2007.

Since 2007 reconstruction has been slow in the extreme. The discovery of archaeology at the site has further hampered progress as the Lebanese government has granted the fossils disproportionate attention ahead of building schools, health centres and NGO offices. Charles Higgins informed the delegation that Lebanese government and army demands have to be met, but these constantly shift to prolong the rebuilding progress.



Briefing with UNRWA head of reconstruction Charles Higgins, Nahr el-Bared

Touring the new camp, the delegation realised the scale of reconstruction that is necessary. Vast areas are open space, alongside huge mounds of rubble and destroyed buildings teetering on collapse. Very little labour was taking place at the camp, and delegates remarked on the absurdity of mass unemployment and the desperate need for labour for reconstruction.



Slow progress in the rebuilding of Nahr al-Bared refugee camp

■ Meeting with the Popular Committee, Community Representatives, UNRWA Camp Services Office

In 2007 the Popular Committee established a group to deal with the emergencies caused by the destruction of the camp. Since then the Committee has been opening up to increased community involvement. The Committee consists of former PLO staff, social services staff and Labour and Women's Union organisers.

The Committee outlined the precarious living situation in the camp: "We are living with no human or civil rights, therefore we feel threatened. We also suffer the humiliation of having to obtain a permit from the army in order to visit our families in other camps".

They asked the delegation to take their demands to the new Lebanese Prime Minister, Najib Miqati:

- Improved human rights including employment and ownership rights, starting with the implementation of the 17th August laws
- Removal of the military from Nahr el-Bared
- Rebuilding of homes without condition

Again, like at the camps visited the previous day, the delegates were left with no doubt about the refugees' aspirations: "Tell the Prime Minister we promise we will leave Lebanon and return to Palestine as soon as possible".

Alexandra Thein MEP picked up on the fact that only 70 percent of labourers employed at the site are Palestinian. The Committee explained that under the UNRWA contract, 90 percent of labourers should be Palestinian, but this rule was being broken by companies who were employing Syrians and Lebanese instead.



Meeting with Palestinian community representatives

■ UNRWA tour of Nahr el-Bared's temporary accommodation



Meeting refugees in Nahr el-Bared's temporary prefabricated accommodation

In the aftermath of the siege of Nahr el-Bared, some refugees were moved to and remain in the nearby Beddawi Camp, while others remain in Nahr el-Bared but have to pay rent to private landlords.

The delegation walked the roads of temporary prefabricated accommodation in Nahr el-Bared. Here, the desperation of the refugees was tangible and raw. Elderly women told us that the camp is too cold at night and is exacerbating their health problems. Delegates encountered small children who were suffering, including a two year old boy with acute asthma. His mother told the delegates that UNRWA were simply unable to supply the necessary drugs and instead were giving the child paracetamol.

Other refugees picked up a familiar theme. One man, a refugee from the ethnic cleansing of 1948 summed this up:

“We don’t want your medicine, we don’t want your money, we want to go home – To Palestine, To Palestine”

■ Visit to the Thabit Women's Centre, Nahr el-Bared

The delegation paid a visit to a women's embroidery centre in the new camp of Nahr el-Bared. The centre serves as a workshop and a shop and the women were able to show off their talents and give delegates gifts of Palestine-themed embroidered scarves and bags.

The centre aims to maintain the women's sense of Palestinian identity by focusing their work on Palestinian themes. It also enables women to make money to support their families and pay for their studies. The centre opened three years ago after the destruction of Nahr el-Bared, and the delegates were able to hear firsthand the other roles played by the workers in the camp, offering support services to victims of the 2007 conflict.



Shopping for beautiful Palestinian embroidery

■ Meeting with Prime Minister designate Najib Miqati, Miqati Group headquarters, Beirut

The delegation was welcomed by Lebanon's new Prime Minister who, at the outset, made his position clear:

"The Palestinian refugees will be a key issue for my government.. They must be allowed to live like human beings. Israel would love to draw a line under the refugees and move on, but we will not accept this".

Prime Minister Miqati said that if the PA were to give all Palestinian refugees in Lebanon a passport or equivalent identity paper, it would enable the Lebanese government to grant work permits and significantly improve property, civil and human rights, without the spectre of Tawtin. On the 17th August law, the Prime Minister said that it is "a shy law, but it is a law nevertheless and I have to implement it".

Questioned about whether Lebanon still has a trustworthy partner for peace in the shape of the PA, Prime Minister Miqati stated that he will maintain good relations with the Abbas regime.



Meeting Prime Minister designate Najib Miqati

■ Meeting with Palestinian Authority Ambassador to Lebanon, Abdullah Abdullah

Sir Gerald Kaufman MP explained to the Ambassador that in just over twelve months he had been on CEPR delegations to the West Bank, Gaza and Lebanon, and that the situation for Palestinians in Lebanon is the worst of the three.

Ambassador Abdullah agreed that “Palestinians are present and organised in 80 countries. The worst conditions are in Lebanon. 56 percent are unemployed, 66 percent are below the poverty line”.

The Ambassador identified the three levels of responsibility for rectifying the situation: “Firstly the Lebanese government must improve rights for refugees. Secondly, UNRWA remains responsible until UN resolution 1942 is implemented. Thirdly, the PLO is responsible for its people”.



At the Palestinian Embassy with Ambassador Abdullah Abdullah

At present the PLO is working on two programmes for refugees. One is to support secondary school graduates, the other to attend to the 41 ‘unrecognised’ (non-UN) refugee gatherings in Lebanon and to find Palestinian families in the Occupied Territories or Diaspora to sponsor these families. “The aim is to increase the linkage between Palestinians, in other words a rejection of the division that has been so damaging”.

² Article 11 of which calls for the right of return of all Palestinian refugees

■ Meeting with British Ambassador to Lebanon Frances Guy,
Stabilisation Advisor Jeremy Chivers and Political Officer Caroline Vent,
Ambassador's residence, Beirut

Ambassador Guy explained to the delegation that concern for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon fluctuates and that since 2007 things have worsened. "There is a high level of ignorance and, despite their close proximity, some Lebanese simply do not know of the appalling conditions in which Palestinian refugees live. On top of that there is the slow progress in rebuilding Nahr el-Bared which is purely political".

Sir Gerald Kaufman MP reflected back on the meetings the delegation had held with Lebanese officials: "Apart from Prime Minister Hariri, all of them have avoided talking about the general political situation, i.e. the two-state solution, which is approaching having zero chance of being realised. Our Foreign Secretary William Hague uses terms like 'unsustainable' to describe Gaza, but without action this is worthless".

Britain's Political Officer in Lebanon, Caroline Vent explained that things could get even worse in Lebanon. "My fear is that Nahr el-Bared, which is currently the exception, will become the rule. There is already a culture of dependency on UNRWA, and the refugees here live in great uncertainty. They are not part of the discussions on a final settlement".



The destroyed Nahr el-Bared camp

■ Meeting with Head of Hamas Foreign Affairs Division,
Osama Hamdan, Beirut



Delegation meets with Head of Hamas Foreign Affairs division Osama Hamdan

Sir Gerald Kaufman explained to Mr Hamdan what the delegation had witnessed in Lebanon, describing it as “a degradation of humanity”.

On Nahr el-Bared, Osama Hamdan explained that Fatah al-Islam, the terrorist group involved in the conflict in 2007, was not a group with Palestinian interests at its core. “ Hamas talked to Prime Minister Siniora, President Suleiman and Speaker of the House Berri and told them that this group needed to be dismantled, but we were ignored”.

Mr Hamdan complained that the PA has not kept the right of return at the centre of its negotiating position. He laid out a longer-term strategy for Hamas in which the right of return stays as the key issue in negotiations, no matter what is offered in return for compromising.

With regards to Lebanon, Mr Hamdan recalled that “when Israel left South Lebanon, Palestinians could travel to the border and see their old villages inside Israel. This is how close the refugees are to a return. This is why the West Bank and Gaza, without the return of the refugees, will never be enough for Palestinians. For Israel, they have to decide whether to be part of the region or remain a ghetto”.

On what the international community can do to help the refugees, Mr Hamdan was encouraged by the recent revolutions in Egypt, Tunisia and beyond. “They will change the strategic scene in the region” he said “and if Europe initiates a boycott like the one against apartheid South Africa, it will be too much for Israel to cope with and they will have to accept the right of return”.

“It has been a decade since I last visited the camps and I am disappointed, saddened and even angered by the lack of progress in giving Palestinian refugees dignity, improved living conditions and basic human rights.

The lack of adequate financial support by the signatories to the relevant UN resolutions clearly undermines the ability of UNRWA to offer decent living conditions and opportunities for education, health and development.

In particular the Lebanese political settlement which denies refugees many rights and the splintering of Palestinian political groupings makes me suspect that Palestinian refugees are used as pawns in a number of political strategies. This makes them doubly victimised.

What is needed is a new perspective that underlines the right of the refugees to return, should they wish, to Palestine, while at the same time agreeing practical steps to empower them in Lebanon, enabling them to fulfil their own potential to contribute to the prosperity of their own people while making a positive contribution as part of the Arab community in Lebanon.”

Michael Connarty MP

Conclusions

The Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are victims many times over. Denied access to their homeland; they are the victims of Lebanon's civil wars and the numerous Israeli invasions and occupation. They are victims of the unwillingness of the international community to secure justice and the unwillingness of the Lebanese authorities to grant them their basic human rights. At Nahr el-Bared they are the victims of the 2007 conflict, for which they pay an awful price every day.

Palestinians in Lebanon are one step further away from peace than their compatriots living in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip and within Israel, thinly spread and marginalised throughout a Lebanon that does not want them. They constitute a virtual state within a state, thinly spread and marginalised throughout a Lebanon that does not want them. They remain trapped in history, wanting a revolution in their lives but without the means to affect one or even a voice with which to call for one. They are barely mentioned in peace talks, where they have been relegated to an issue to be decided at a later, unspecified date.

But the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and in camps around the Middle East are the key to a lasting peace. Israel and the international community, if they value long-term stability in the region, need to shift their focus to delivering justice for the refugees. Failure to do so jeopardises the future viability of the state of Israel and more immediately prolongs the unacceptable agony that the Palestinian refugees live through every day.

Recommendations

The international community, including Israel, is responsible for guaranteeing the rights of Palestinian refugees and providing them with protection. While Lebanon and many members of the United Nations offer appropriate rhetoric, this must be matched with concrete steps to tangibly improve the lives of the refugees in Lebanon and put an end to the catastrophic conditions in which they live. An appropriate solution is needed that restores and protects the human rights of the refugees, including their right to return to their land.

In Lebanon, Palestinian refugees have a status that falls far short of even second class citizenship. This should be corrected without debate or delay.

- All parties should respect and enforce United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 which calls for the return of the refugees.
- As Israel has shown no inclination to respect the rights of Palestinian refugees under international law, it is incumbent on the international community to enforce a resolution.
- The European Union and its member states, including the United Kingdom, should significantly increase their funding to UNRWA to allow the agency to fulfil its remit.
- Negotiators, politicians and activists should ensure that Palestinian refugees remain at the centre of all peace talks
- Lebanon's position on the refugees is wilfully inadequate. The 17th August 2010 law should be implemented immediately as a first step to normalising the lives of Palestinian refugees by improving human, civil and property rights and lifting restrictions on the professions available to Palestinians. The above should be part of a comprehensive solution that formally excludes the possibility of Tawtin.
- **Housing:** All restrictions that limit the right to adequate housing for Palestinians should be removed, including any legislation that discriminates against Palestinians who lack official citizenship of a recognised state. A degree of security of tenure should be guaranteed and any restrictions on the entry of building materials in to refugee camps should be removed, including any fines or penalties imposed on Palestinians for attempting to make their homes habitable.
- **Environment:** Minimum levels of sanitation and access to clean water for all Palestinian refugees should be ensured.
- **Employment:** Further to the 17th August law, restrictions on Palestinian access to all professions should be lifted along with an easing of the process whereby refugees can obtain work permits.
- **Education:** Lebanon should ensure that all children under its jurisdiction have access to education equal to that enjoyed by Lebanese nationals
- **Nahr el-Bared:** This camp should be rebuilt as a matter of priority and the Lebanese army removed.
- **Non-ID refugees:** The status of non-ID refugees in Lebanon should be regularised and refugees provided with identification documents.



The Palestinian Return Centre

The Palestinian Return Centre is a London-based independent consultancy focusing on historical, political and legal aspects of the Palestinian Refugee issue. The organisation offers expert advice to various actors and agencies on the question of Palestinian Refugees and other related aspects of the Palestine question and the Arab-Israeli conflict.

www.prc.org.uk



The Council for European Palestinian Relations

The Council for European Palestinian Relations is an independent not-for-profit organisation which has been established to promote dialogue and understanding between European, Palestinian and Arab parliamentarians and policy-makers. It seeks a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on justice and the restoration of Palestinian rights in accordance with international humanitarian and human rights law.

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