

Employment of Palestinians in Lebanon Debated

Wednesday, April 28, 2010

“After 62 years it is high time to work on a law which is fair and just to Palestinians,” said member of the Palestinian National Council Samira Saleh during a workshop entitled Employment of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon: Labour Market Realities within the Political and Legal Framework, held at the American University of Beirut through the Issam Fares Institute on April 26, 2010.



Although debated for over sixty years, there is still no conclusion on how to proceed with labor laws for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. Samira Saleh said that the Palestinian factions themselves do not have a unified answer to this question.

There are more than 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and although 60 percent of them are of working age, their participation in the labor force only stood at 37 percent, according to a 2006 survey by the independent Norwegian research foundation Fafo.

Until recently, over 70 professions were off limits to Palestinians. An amendment in 2005 allowed them to obtain work permits for low-level clerical and manual labor but maintained a veto on professional fields like medicine, law or engineering.

Moreover, a combination of low job supply in the Lebanese labor market and high unemployment rates among Lebanese nationals do not help the Palestinian labor situation.

Sari Hanafi, associate professor in AUB’s Department of Social and Behavioral Sciences confirmed this point, saying, “We as Palestinians are not ready to present a resolution to the Ministry of Labor.”

A resounding conclusion is that Palestinian employment is a “win-win situation” for everyone. The panel on advocacy and decision-making, headed by Samir El Khoury of the Committee for Employment of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon, noted the need to get not only the Lebanese government but also the public on the side of Palestinian employment. To do this the economic benefits for everyone should be highlighted.

“There needs to be more research and more data” Sawsan Abdul Rahim said, presenting the findings from the afternoon’s roundtable on research, “although we also need to remember that “Palestinians are exhausted [because] since the 1960s they have been studied a lot.” Research will feed advocacy in addressing misconceptions among the Lebanese public. Other areas not sufficiently studied include what the Palestinian elite can contribute economically to providing employment.

Samir El-Khoury pointed out that it is common to hear arguments supporting Palestinians, but the reality of actually providing support is a different story.