

For Immediate Release



IFI program finds Palestinian labor rights still in need of recognition

Beirut, Lebanon- 07/12/2012 - Although Palestinian unemployment rates in Lebanon are only slightly higher than those of their Lebanese counterparts, Palestinians are being paid lower wages for the same work done by Lebanese, warned researchers at a panel co-organized by the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) at AUB. Nevertheless, the overwhelming majority of Lebanese support granting rights to Palestinians and allowing them to live in dignity.

“Palestinian employment comes at a cost, with workers accepting less pay in order to be able to secure a job,” said Sawsan Abdulrahim, AUB associate professor of public health and one of the lead researchers in the Palestinian Camps Policy and Governance Program which is managed by IFI. “Employers are breaking the law by hiring Palestinians but they do so as they also benefit from the lower costs.”

A survey of 450 Lebanese, conducted by the program, shows that only 13 percent are with *tawteen*, or the policy of giving Palestinian refugees Lebanese citizenship and full rights; however 26 percent agree to give Palestinians the right to work unconditionally. That figure jumps to 70 percent of Lebanese who agree with granting Palestinians the right to work in occupations where they do not compete with Lebanese workers. A whopping 89 percent agree that Palestinians should be assured to live in dignity.

“We have to take a pragmatic piecemeal approach which will result in 70 percent agreeing to grant rights to Palestinians and allow them to live in dignity,” added Abdulrahim.

Studies also show that the Palestinian unemployment rate stands at around 8 percent, which is only slightly higher than the Lebanese unemployment rate, at 6 percent, with unemployment defined as all those willing and able to work but unable to find a job. While this is a somewhat positive picture, the problem lies in the fact that Palestinian men are paid a lower wage as compared to their Lebanese counterparts, and Palestinian women get the lowest wages of all, warned panelists.

Abdulrahim presented these findings this week during a panel discussion held at the Nabil Boustany Auditorium and organized by IFI in collaboration with the Najdeh association’s “Right to Work Campaign.” Titled “Right to Work for Palestinians in Lebanon,” the panel was part of IFI’s Palestinian Camps Policy and Governance Program; in addition to Abdulrahim, it included panelists former Labor Minister Charbel Nahas and Aziza Khalidi, a researcher and public health and domestic violence expert, from the Najdeh association, a Lebanon-registered NGO that works to empower Palestinians, especially women and children.

“Our task, in step with AUB’s mission, is to conduct high-quality research into some of the most difficult and compelling issues that have a significant impact on current events,” said IFI Director Rami Khouri in his opening remarks. “These issues, like the Palestinians’ rights to work, have to be dealt with accurately and with integrity.”

Khalidi noted that The Casablanca Protocol of 1965, governing the rights of movement and employment of Palestinian refugees in Arab countries, and the 1969 Cairo Agreement (repealed in 1987), which allows freedom of movement, have never been implemented in Lebanon.

“Moral foundation and human rights, wherever and whenever applied, dictate that any person should benefit from the right to work, including Palestinians,” said Khalidi.

She noted how the Palestinian camps have become poverty centers, despite the fact that the people are industrious, willing and able to work, love life and want to live in dignity. Most important of all, they do want to return back to their homeland once that option becomes available.

“We are simply in a thicket and need to open a path to be able to pass through,” she added.

“Granting Palestinians rights is as old as their presence in this country,” said Abdulrahim, adding that most Lebanese agree to improve Palestinians’ living conditions but strongly oppose their integration. “Progress in the area of advocacy has been stymied by arguments that link the granting of rights with *tawteen*, the naturalization and permanent settlement of Palestinians in Lebanon.”

Tawteen is seen as spelling disaster and ending Lebanese identity. However, she added, “denying rights to prevent *tawteen* is a dangerous formula as it normalizes continuing violations.”

Meanwhile, former Labor Minister Charbel Nahas noted that the main body of Lebanese labor law was set in 1944 and 1946 requiring work permits, even before there was a Palestinian issue, and the 1964 law concerning mainly foreigners was to protect Lebanese jobs, especially vis-a-vis the French. “Unfortunately the Palestinians fell into this ‘trap’,” he said.

“It may seem inane to talk about Palestinian working rights whereas the Lebanese workers seem to be lacking their own fundamental rights in a society run by top-heavy political elites and rife with class warfare,” added Nahas.

Moreover, noted Nahas, since the Palestinians are living in Lebanon they have to bear the local cost of living; but since they spend locally, the economy is not affected negatively by their employment as is the case of other foreign workers who transfer funds overseas. As such the Palestinian and Lebanese workers’ cases are very similar.

“In a nutshell, the case of the Palestinian worker is basically on par with the case of the poor Lebanese worker mainly due to politics of partisanship in effect in Lebanon,” he concluded, projecting that there would be no changes in the near future.

ENDS

PHOTO CAPTION: [L-F] Khouri, Minna Omar from the Right to Work Campaign, Charbel Nahas, Sawsan Abdul Rahim, and Aziza Khalidi

For more information please contact:

Maha Al-Azar, Associate Director for Media Relations, ma110@aub.edu.lb, 01-353 228

Note to Editors

About AUB

Founded in 1866, the American University of Beirut bases its educational philosophy, standards, and practices on the American liberal arts model of higher education. A teaching-centered research university, AUB has more than 600 full-time faculty members and a student body of about 8,000 students. AUB currently offers more than 100 programs leading to the bachelor's, master's, MD, and PhD degrees. It provides medical education and training to students from throughout the region at its Medical Center that includes a full service 420-bed hospital.

Stay up to date on AUB news and events. Follow us on:

Website: www.aub.edu.lb

Facebook: <http://www.facebook.com/aub.edu.lb>

Twitter: http://twitter.com/AUB_Lebanon