Regional developments such as the war on Gaza and the Syrian civil war have hindered the progress of The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), causing it to shift its focus from human development to "emergency relief". The Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs (IFI) held a seminar discussing the release of a book titled “UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development”, on November 14, 2014 at the American University of Beirut (AUB).

IFI’s director Dr. Tarek Mitri described the book as ‘rich’, pointing out that it adopts a critical look at the evolving role, “self-understanding”, and public perception of UNRWA. As far as public perception is concerned, Mitri believes that UNRWA is trying to fulfill its mandate within the many constraints it faces but is still failing to satisfy the Palestinian people.

Dr. Sari Hanafi, professor of Sociology at AUB, commended UNRWA for its adaptability to crisis and its ability to be hospitable in a rather hostile environment but stated that more is expected of it. Hanafi is impressed with UNRWA’s “innovation” and how it moved from working on social services to working on health and education. Hanafi also emphasized the importance of involving refugees in decision-making and pointed out that in a sense, UNRWA is a phantom sovereign. In other words, it provides services but it is not involved in governance. Hanafi believes that UNRWA should be involved in governance and that its involvement has always yielded positive results.

IFI’s director of research, Dr. Nasser Yassin, discussed camps and governance-related issues. Yassin believes that the chapter on the history of camps written by Kjersti Berg is very interesting because it doesn’t simply describe the history but also provides contextual information, whether in the administrative environment in UNRWA or the political climate of the camps. Yassin critiqued the book for not discussing refugees that are outside the camps, stating that he expected it to be discussed since UNRWA is in charge of both refugees inside and outside the camps. Yassin also critiqued the book for depoliticizing UNRWA and the refugees. He believes that the issue of the refugees should be politicized. His final critique was concerning the immense amount of praise that UNRWA has received in the book, noting that
he has nothing against UNRWA. Nevertheless, he believes that the praise given doesn’t quite match the reality of the camps. He also believes that in order to progress, UNRWA needs to receive more constructive criticism.

Mr. Lance Bartholomeusz, legal advisor and director of the Department of Legal Affairs in UNRWA, commended Kjersti Berg’s work and stated that UNRWA “is happy to take in the criticism”. Bartholomeusz emphasized the importance of Palestinian human rights, which he believes was a “golden thread” passing through the book. Bartholomeusz believes that protection is a part of UNRWA’s mandate. He also pointed out that UNRWA is not in the business of passive protection, instead, it provides active protection. Bartholomeusz stressed the importance of pursuing accountability and pointed out that there are challenges, such as neutrality.

Mr. Filippo Grandi, an IFI Senior Research Fellow, believes that several geopolitical developments have occurred in the region since 2010 which affected the situation of UNRWA. Some of the examples he gave were the Arab Spring, the advance of the right-wing in Israel, and the failure of the peace process. The impact of these regional developments has rolled back the progress that UNRWA has accomplished. Instead of working on human development, like it was doing in 2010, UNRWA has to work on “emergency relief.” Finally, Grandi discussed the issue of finance, which has always been an issue for UNRWA. The inflow of Syrian refugees makes an already challenging task of raising money for UNRWA’s core programs even more challenging. Grandi believes that the Palestinian refugee problem is here to stay and consequently, more should be done to help solve the problems that UNRWA faces.