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**JOINT LEARNING INITIATIVE on
FAITH & LOCAL COMMUNITIES**

Interreligious Platform for
Dialogue and Cooperation in the
Arab World

Local Humanitarian Leadership The Role of Local Faith Actors in Implementing the Global Compact on Refugees

Beirut Seminar June 18, 2019
Issam Fares Institute, American University of Beirut,
10 am – 1 pm

Co Hosts:

1. Joint Learning Initiative on Faith and Local Communities
2. World Vision
3. KAICIID Dialogue Centre
4. Islamic Relief Worldwide
5. ACT Alliance
6. The Middle East Council of Churches
7. Interreligious Platform for Dialogue and Cooperation in the Arab World



Event Summary:

With more than 1.5 million estimated refugees, Lebanon is one of the world's largest refugee host countries and today roughly one in every four people in the country is considered a refugee. The overwhelming majority of refugees came as a result of the Syria conflict that broke out in 2011, but Lebanon has a long history of hosting refugees and displaced people from Iraq and Palestine.

The influx of refugees has come at a time of economic stagnation and has also tested the country's fragile religious balance, which is epitomised by Lebanon's institutionalised power sharing governance system that guarantees that the president is a Christian, the prime minister a Sunni, and the parliamentary speaker a Shia.

Ensuring that religious leaders are properly integrated into the refugee response is therefore critical in a country like Lebanon where the issue threatens to prove particularly divisive.

The Seminar on **Role of Faith Actors in Implementing the Global Compact on Refugees**, that took place in Beirut on June 18, 2019, sought not only to bring together leaders and faith-based organisations from the three main sects together, but to also engage government officials and secular NGOs in order to propose a more unified and strategic response to the crisis.

Together they united in recognition of the important role that faith and faith-leaders can, and increasingly must, play in all areas of the refugee response – from preventing the break out of conflict, to helping refugees integrate into their host societies when they are forced to flee, to even helping to resolve conflicts once violence breaks out, and setting durable foundations for peace.

The seminar took place just ahead of World Refugee Day commemorated on 20 June. It was the second in a series of global events on refugees hosted by JLI and partners, with the third and final edition scheduled to take place in Brussels later this year. The final recommendations and learnings from the sessions will be presented at the high-level UNHCR Global Refugee Forum taking place in December.



Seminar Goals:

- Present robust evidence on faith actors and their work to support refugees and migrants.
- Call for greater consultation and collaboration with faith actors, particularly local faith actors, delivering refugee protection and humanitarian assistance.
- Encourage the humanitarian community (donors, NGOs and coordination bodies) to build and sustain partnerships with local actors, including local faith actors.
- Formulate relevant policy recommendations for global and national governmental agencies, and humanitarian NGOs with regards to multi-stakeholder response and implementation of the GCR.
- Provide support for the UNHCR December Forum on Refugees.



Participants: 60 people

- UNHCR and other UN agencies representatives
- National and Local government Humanitarian agency representatives
- National and local religious leaders and FBOs serving refugees
- National and local secular NGOs serving refugees
- Local academics and policy makers



Speakers:

- **Robin Saghbini**, Ministry of Social Affairs representative and Head of the Lebanon Crisis Response Plan
- **Mireille Girard**, UNHCR Lebanon Representative
- **Thurayya Al-Abdallah**, Syrian Refugee Speaker
- **Dr. Elena Fiddian Qasmiyeh**, Professor of Migration and Refugee Studies and JLI
- **Sheikh Hassan Dali**, the Mufti of Hasbaya and Marjeeyoun and the head of Lebanese organisation Iftaa House
- **Ziad El Sayegh**, Policies and Communication Advisor at the Middle East Council of Churches
- **Bishop Elia Toumeh** of Syria's Greek Orthodox Church
- **Lucas Shindeldecker**, Director of Middle East Revive and Thrive (Merath)
- **Joelle Bsassoul**, Regional Media Manager, Save The Children
- **Hans Bederski**, World Vision National Director in Lebanon
- **Zeina Zoueïn**, Partnering Manager, World Vision Lebanon
- **Dr. Nasser Yassin**, Director of Research at the Issam Fares Institute for Public Policy and International Affairs at the American University of Beirut



Lebanon specific recommendations:

- Faith leaders need to be more effectively utilised to stem the rising threat of xenophobia and Islamophobia that is emerging after years of instability, which has been exasperated by the war in neighbouring Syria but is due to a host of domestic issues like water and electricity shortages, as well as inadequate education and healthcare provision. To do this, faith actors must shift away from just distributing relief to trying to affect national policy and decision-making. To do this effectively a council that brings together leaders from all of Lebanon's key religions and denominations which deal with the refugee response should be formed to promote their influence in the decision-making process.
- The main UN agencies operating in Lebanon – namely UNHCR and UNICEF – must ensure to cooperate more closely with faith actors because at this unparalleled time of crisis, it is imperative that all resources are utilised more effectively to help people in grave need and the host communities that have been negatively impacted by conflict in neighbouring countries. While recognising that working with individual churches or mosques or smaller faith organisations continues to pose some coordinating challenges, Lebanon has a host of larger and better organised umbrella groups that are well positioned and eager to take this relationship forward in the short-term. In the long-term more resources should be devoted to training and building the capacity of smaller faith actors to allow them to play a more meaningful role. Training and capacity building for social workers should also be provided.

- Faith actors have tended to work too much in silos and a more collaborative and inter-faith approach was recommended, with calls for the various religions to do more to help arrivals of all faiths, just not their own. This would allow the UN organisations to coordinate more closely with various faiths actors and to more easily roll out a national plan which integrates faith actors. In addition, faith actors could help set up youth activities, such as sports training or life skills, where children or different faiths would be taught about integration and acceptance.
- Faith leaders should engage in public and high-profile de-escalation efforts that seek to bring together the Lebanese and Syrian communities and reduce tensions.
- Religious leaders and faith actors should come together and jointly endorse an action plan that will focus on issues like the protection of child rights and education but also propose a realistic timetable for capacity building. Agreements should be signed to promote and establish these shared beliefs and priorities.
- In future, refugee registration forms could be edited to include refugee affiliation that would make it easier for them to access religious services and spiritual support through affiliated places of worship.
- Work opportunities for refugees must be recognised in some capacity to allow refugees to live in dignity. While jobs are scarce in urban areas, and the right to work fiercely contested, the Bekaa region, which hosts a significant proportion of refugees, has potential to increase agricultural production and this avenue for employment generation could be explored more meaningfully.

Broader Recommendations:

- Humanitarian actors and other institutions need to recognise faith actors in all aspects of refugee response and ensure that faith actors are able to meaningfully take part and share responsibility.
- International actors should expand engagement with faith actors, especially local faith actors in refugee response, with donor agencies stepping up support to build the capacity and compliance of those on the ground.
- Financial barriers that exclude and discriminate against faith-based organisations need to be removed and donors must support faith actors that provide key services in support of refugees and members of host communities. Direct contact should be made with donor countries that participate at the “Brussels 3” conference in Syria in March 2019 and pressure kept up to ensure their promises are kept.

- Access to spiritual support must be available to displaced people alongside psycho-social and humanitarian support.
- Faith leaders need to be recognised for the role they can and do play in promoting Gender Justice, often countering - not advocating for - issues like FGM and child marriage.
- Inter- and multi-faith initiatives should be supported to aid integration in host countries and help reconciliation upon return.

Key Comments:

UNHCR’s Representative in Lebanon Mireille Girard said: “At a time of unprecedented displacement across the world, there is a growing consensus that we need to work together towards more effective responses. The Global Compact for Refugees recognises that we need to do better. We all have a role to play and need to mobilise everyone.

“Faith-based organisations are relevant throughout this cycle of displacement – from arrival, to eventual return. Faith-based organisations have a sound knowledge of the context and have a lot of experience in relief support. They also have a role to play in conflict prevention and reconciliation where they can be especially relevant.

“With economic crises and unemployment prevailing in many parts of the world, refugees are increasingly being stigmatised and seen as the reason for these economic crises. These sentiments are widespread so we have to ask ourselves what we can do together to address this phenomenon.”

Robin Sghbini, the Minister of Social Affairs representative and the Head of the Resettlement Response Plan in Lebanon, stressed that religious leaders have an important role to play because they exert great influence in their local communities. He said that local faith leaders can move quickly in emergency situations and hence pledged greater cooperation with his ministry.

“Their role is not only to ease tensions between the displaced and the host communities, but to reach cooperation in order to resolve other societal issues affecting the refugee community,” he said. “In the past the ministry of social affairs has cooperated with many religious leaders to protect children and women from early marriage and other social and humanitarian issues that protect and support refugees in Lebanon.”

Sghbini also welcomed the idea of partnership between religious leaders and other institutions concerned with the protection of refugee rights because “the crisis of displacement has reached its maximum and we need to join all our efforts”

Professor Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Academic Chair of the JLI's Refugee and Forced Migration Hub, Professor of Migration and Refugee Studies and Co-Director, UCL-Migration Research Unit University College London, said:

“When a person is forced to leave their home and their country in search of refugee and international protection, they are uprooted from their relatives, communities and lives. Often, they will see loved ones killed or injured and face immense barriers as they seek safety. The distress that these experiences and barriers cause is profound, often leaving people struggling to cope in their new surroundings.

“In times like these, faith is one of the only things that many people have left. Yet all too often even this is restricted as people lose access to religious support when they are displaced. What we have seen around the world, though, is that faith can be a key tool in helping people to recover and pursue their quest for protection and social justice. We have also seen that, when harnessed effectively, faith can bring communities together and help prevent future conflict.

“The international community has already recognised the role of faith actors in the Global Compact on Refugees, but it is up to us to ensure that displaced people are able to seek, and be granted, protection, to translate these noble words and intentions into concrete actions.”

MECC Policies and Communication Advisor Ziad EL Sayegh explained that “Both Global Compacts for Migrants and Refugees are built on the obligation to respect human dignity and peace in society and to implement justice. These are fundamental values in all religions”.

“It is disappointing to stay imprisoned by suicidal political choices, instead of adopting public policies based on respecting human dignity and endeavouring to lighten the burden of human misery”, he said, while calling out the rise in nationalist extremism and xenophobia in the Middle East and in Europe.

Thurayya Al-Abdallah, Syrian Refugee speaker, said that she was forced to flee Syria to Lebanon when she was just 9 years old. The displacement was very difficult on her and she found it hard to integrate into the Lebanese education system.

“Secondary school in Lebanon was very difficult for me. It was difficult in many ways – and I had to deal with a new community, new country and a new school. Plus, I also had a new curriculum that uses a lot of English and all of this made it very hard for me to adapt.

“When I went to university, my only option was to study Social Science. I had no interest in it, but I wanted to do it to pass the time. However, I didn't like my degree or the university, and found that the racism I faced was even worse than what I experienced in school.

“I became withdrawn due to the way I was treated as a Syrian refugee and I would attend one day and then miss the next ten.”

However, Thurayya was able to attend a five-day training with some friends and said it helped her improve her self-confidence and taught her that she can add value to society and should be treated with dignity.

“When I left the training, I promised myself that I would leave the old Suraya behind and try to be positive and more active. Within a year I was working with refugees as a volunteer with a lot of different organisations, because I knew there were a lot more children like me – like Suraya - so I started working on the ground and trying to help. The projects I worked on focused on coexistence between Syrians, Lebanese and people of different faiths. My friends and I have now taken this further and set up our own group, called the Makers of Peace. We do fun activities for children to try to lift their spirits.”

The Joint Learning Initiative Refugee Hub’s [Policy Brief](#) provides more information on how faith actors can deliver on the Global Compact on Refugees.

For more information, please contact info@jliflc.com or visit the [JLI website](#).