

Palestinian Human Rights Organization - PHRO

In Cooperation with

Palestinian Association for Human Rights (Witness) & General Union for Palestinian Jurist Lebanon

PALESTINIAN DEBATE MEETING

What Do Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon Want?

**September 30 - October 3, 2005
Beirut - Crowne Plaza Hotel**

Statement Issued by the Meeting



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PREAMBLE

Upon an invitation from the Palestinian Human Rights Organization – Rights (PHRO), and in cooperation with the Palestinian Association for Human Rights (Witness) and the General Union of Palestinian Jurists – Lebanon, a Palestinian Debate Meeting, titled "**WHAT DO PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN LEBANON WANT?**" was held at the Crowne Plaza Hotel in Hamra, Beirut from September 30th to October 3, 2005.

Numerous Lebanese and Palestinian political, cultural, popular and religious figures, as well as ambassadors and representatives from diplomatic corps, international associations and organizations attended the opening of the meeting.

Throughout its four working days, representatives from Civil Society Organizations (Civil Associations), popular and syndical Unions and Organizations/Committees and Leagues, representatives from UNRWA, intellectuals, journalists and clerics, as well as social and cultural figures and Members in the Palestinian National Council took part in the proceedings of the meeting.

The meeting aimed at contributing to the arrangement of the Palestinian internal arena through deepening dialogue between different groups in Palestinian refugee society in Lebanon in order to crystallize a vivid Palestinian vision of all issues laid on the table. This would pave the way for a Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue in order to find effective solutions for pending problems. Hence, participants in the meeting discussed and tackled many important issues that were classified along the following axes:

FIRST AXIS: WHAT DO WE WANT FROM AND FOR OURSELVES? discussed the following topics:

1. *The Right to Return and Participation in Self-Determination*
2. *Social Security in the Camps*
3. *Unified Political Reference*

SECOND AXIS: WHAT DO WE WANT FROM OTHERS? examined the following topics:

1. *Lebanese Authority*
2. *UNRWA*
3. *International Community*

THIRD AXIS: CIVIL SOCIETY AND ITS ROLE IN ALL THE TOPICS DISCUSSED IN THE ABOVE AXES

As a result of the extensive discussion of all issues and topics listed in the meeting's action plan, and in a calm and interactive ambiance, participants agreed on a series of issues and positions that are equally significant for the Palestinians and the Lebanese.

FIRST AXIS: WHAT DO WE WANT FROM AND FOR OURSELVES?

FIRST: THE RIGHT TO RETURN AND PARTICIPATION IN SELF-DETERMINATION

The Palestinian refugees' right to return to their land, home and properties is a sacred right, which originates from the refugees' historical rights in their country. It is inalienable, supported by legal principles, and the international community have granted it complete legitimacy and endorsed it via

Resolution 194, which was promulgated by the UN General Assembly. It is an individual and collective right and cannot be relinquished in return for the establishment of a Palestinian State. Therefore, participants agreed on ensuring the following:

- Palestinian Refugees, wherever they are, are an integral part of the Palestinian people, they share the suffering and the unity of objectives and aspirations, and hence they are equal in rights, including the right to self-determination.
- The Palestinian people are not bound to accept any political decision that contradicts their rights, on top of which is the right to return since it is an inalienable right.
- The Palestinian's right to return to his/her land, home and properties that s/he was displaced from is associated with his/her right to be compensated for the damages s/he incurred.
- If a Palestinian refugee acquires the citizenship of any country, his/her rights to return and to indemnities cannot be annulled.

SECOND: SOCIAL SECURITY IN THE CAMPS

Being part of human rights, social security provides one with a stable climate in the light of which s/he can completely practice his/her rights. This is as equally applicable to the Palestinians living in Lebanon as it is to the Lebanese; all of them- according to customs and international bills- enjoy these rights equally.

Palestinian camps, gatherings and neighborhoods in Lebanon have not enjoyed social security ever since they sought refuge in 1948 due to the impact of the following factors:

1. Repetitive direct or indirect Israeli aggressions against camps
2. Lebanese State Policy towards the Palestinians, which considers the camps, the gatherings and the neighborhoods as being security zones, and deprives the Palestinians of all civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights
3. Palestinian Factions weak role in maintaining social security in the camps

Therefore, all active groups in Palestinian society: national Palestinian factions, popular and syndical Unions and Organizations/Committees and Leagues, intellectuals, clerics, and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs), bear a special responsibility to confront threats to social security through:

- The establishment of a Unified Responsible Palestinian Reference in order to start achieving steps that would create adequate conditions and climate for work (thereby creating a social safety valve), by forming popular committees, not on the basis of distribution of spoils but democratically, through free elections, and reinforcing the role of these committees with the participation of this reference.
- Organizing arms inside camps and not resorting to them in resolving internal conflicts.
- Immunizing Palestinian society and protecting it from social ills and ethical and behavioral delinquency.

THIRD: UNIFIED POLITICAL REFERENCE

The unity of the Palestinian people on the basis of a comprehensible political reference would provide a guarantee for the cohesion of the people and a protection for their identity in order to prevent deportation and disintegration. Since the political reference and the civil society organizations complement each other in preserving national constants on the internal and external level, these must be transparent and credible bodies that emanate from a democratic process to tackle the issues of interest to the Palestinians people in Lebanon. This requires a critical evaluation of the overall Palestinian experience in Lebanon in order to identify errors, avoid their repetition, and reassure Lebanese society. Hence, we recommend:

- Activate the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) since it is the legitimate and sole representative of the Palestinian people, and restructure it on a distinct and democratic basis in accordance with the Cairo Declaration. Therefore, participants recommend the necessity of working to establish a Unified Palestinian Reference in Lebanon that enjoys transparency and credibility and that expresses the interests of refugees in Lebanon without any concession of their constants and rights. This reference should witness the representation of all Palestinian Factions within it, including the civil society organizations (civil associations) in a democratic way and according to standards that meet the needs of the Palestinian society.

Tasks of the Palestinian Reference:

- Defend the interests of Palestinians in Lebanon, enable them to obtain their rights guaranteed by all regional and international bills, and work with different parties concerned with Palestinian refugees' affairs to improve the circumstances of their daily lives by providing them with necessary services on all humanitarian, economic, social, cultural and legal levels, etc...
- Organize Palestinian arms- to be considered as a political weapon and directly linked to the Palestinian Cause, of which the right to return is its essence- in the context of a joint Lebanese-Palestinian agreement.
- Reinforce communication between Palestinian delegates to Lebanon with all forces, figures and Palestinian civil society organizations.

SECOND AXIS: WHAT DO WE WANT FROM OTHERS?

FIRST: LEBANESE AUTHORITY

Since Lebanon nowadays is passing through difficult and crucial circumstances, participants are keen to ensure that the Palestinians, based on their respect for Lebanon's freedom, sovereignty and independence, are neutral concerning internal Lebanese conflicts, and they will not be influenced by any party that tries to involve them in Lebanese political or internal affairs. Palestinians in Lebanon are temporary visitors, awaiting their aspirational return to their homeland. It is strange that whenever a security incident influencing Lebanese stability takes place, some in Lebanon rush to accuse the Palestinians, directly or indirectly, of being involved in such incidents. The participants would like to emphasize that the

instability and security problems that Lebanon has been subject to recently as a result of explosions that targeted citizens, politicians, intellectuals and journalists has harmed the Palestinians as much as it has harmed the Lebanese. Vigorous security and stability in Lebanon is an element of support and strength for the Palestinian Cause. Therefore, such criminal acts, which are strongly condemned, serve the interests of Lebanon's and Palestine's enemies, the greatest of which is "Israel".

Solid Lebanese-Palestinian relations are the cornerstone that enables the two peoples to confront the possible regional and international challenges that might affect their interests. Thus, the continuous national Palestinian struggle in Lebanon should not be in conflict with the national Lebanese interest. Hence, the Lebanese government's dealing with Palestinians should be framed on the basis of rights and duties. Therefore participants call for:

- The necessity of having a joint outlook rejecting the projects of settlement and displacement, ensuring the right to return and insisting on holding to the total and inalienable legitimate Palestinian rights
- Ensure civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights, thereby lifting the burden off the shoulders of the Palestinian refugee in Lebanon, and granting him/her the humanitarian rights guaranteed by international legislation in order to serve Lebanese and Palestinian interests.
- Put an end to the security measures around camps, stop considering the camps as security zones, and find a solution to the issue of arms through constructive dialogue.
- Reopen the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Lebanon.
- Establish a Lebanese official body (committee/institute/ ...) to follow up on the affairs of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon- to include representatives from services ministries, should not be limited to security bodies/parties.

Lebanon, which takes pride in being a founding member of the Arab League and the United Nations, and one of the participants in the elaboration of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, is requested to respect all regional and international instruments relevant to the Palestinian people through:

- Guaranteeing the humanitarian rights of the Palestinian refugee, among which are his/her right to fair trial and his/her right to equality with the Lebanese citizen in any amnesty law.
- Promulgating a law specially to resolve the problem of Palestinian refugee Non-Ids (people who do not have identification papers) in order to avoid escalation of problems.
- Organizing Lebanese - Palestinian relations according to clear and codified bases in a way that serves the interest of both sides
- Introducing amendments to the laws that deprive the Palestinian from his/her humanitarian rights, the most important of which are: work, ownership and property, and freedom of association.

SECOND: UNRWA

Even though UNRWA provides many services in the fields of health, education and social affairs, and though it is the international witness to the Palestinian refugees' cause, it suffers from many shortcomings, the most important of which are the reduction and degradation of services. This requires:

- Improvement of UNRWA's performance through quickly increasing its services to keep pace with the rapid growth in the number of refugees and to meet their needs according to world standards that are set for this purpose.
- Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are one unit, and this necessitates that UNRWA widens its range of services to include all categories of refugees without any discrimination.
- In addition to its role in relief and recruitment, UNRWA should enlarge its mandate so that it can ensure legal protection for Palestinian refugees just like other refugees across the world.
- Reconsider UNRWA's strategic role to include the concepts of human development and social welfare besides relief and recruitment.
- Link UNRWA's budget directly to the United Nations (UN) so it can provide its services quickly and continuously, and does not remain dependent on policies of donor countries.
- The necessity to seriously reconsider the level of educational, medical and social services, as well as infrastructure of camps, as they need a quick solution that keeps pace with the demographic growth.
- Because of the confidence crisis between UNRWA's administration and Palestinian refugees, we call on UNRWA to organize a permanent relation with Palestinian society via civil society organizations, in order to help cover the existing shortcomings.

THIRD: INTERNATIONAL COMMUNITY (DONOR COUNTRIES AND REFUGEES' COMMITTEE IN THE DIASPORA)

“Israel” is accountable for the distress of the Palestinian people. The international community bears a legal and moral responsibility for the degradation of the affairs of Palestinian refugees in the Diaspora. It is responsible for the return of the refugees as well as for the compensation for the damages they incurred by virtue of international resolutions. Hence, separating between the humanitarian and political dimensions of the Palestinian refugees' issue empties it from its content and prolongs the state of refuge forever. This requires the following:

- Increase unconditional international benefits and aids to the Palestinian refugees to curb the terrible degradation in all aspects of the refugees' daily life.
- The international community should enforce the role of regional and local organizations and associations that are concerned with development (whether human, economic, cultural or social) by ensuring necessary funding through mechanisms that guarantee the achievement of aspirational goals, according to the needs and priorities that refugees themselves consider.
- Take into account the benefits that Palestinian refugees could receive from the clauses in any convention of a humanitarian, economic, social or cultural character that Lebanon is/could be part of.

THIRD AXIS: ROLE OF THE CIVIL SOCIETY

Civil society organizations (civil associations) are considered among the most important supporters of the Palestinian society, as they constituted a principal back up to its individuals, particularly with the lack

and degradation of the services provided to the Palestinians in Lebanon. Thus, increasing the number of civil organizations and upgrading their work has become a necessity to develop and improve the Palestinian citizen and his/her society. Therefore, the following should be carried out:

- Spread the culture of the civil society through guaranteeing human rights and public freedoms for all citizens and preserving their legitimate rights on the basis of justice and equality without discrimination.
- Build an urbane civil society that paves the way for the largest possible participation of our people through consolidating the concept of democratic participation on the basis of equal opportunities and by reinforcing the principle of free elections.
- Establish a public body to coordinate between all organization in order to improve and integrate the work.
- Promote democracy, transparency, monitoring and accountability in the work of these organizations.
- Ensure that civil society organizations (civil associations) uphold the humanitarian and resistant nature of the Palestinian national identity and do not contradict it. They should also uphold the Palestinian people's right to return, self-determination and establishment of an independent state, the capital of which is Jerusalem.
- Reactivate PLO's institutions, such as popular and syndical unions and organizations, on democratic bases.

At the end of discussions, participants agreed on forming a committee that sets mechanisms to follow up on the recommendations issued by the meeting in order to achieve the aspired objectives set by it.