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"What's Next for Palestinian Refugees: Gaza, the West Bank and Beyond?"

Middle East Institute

October 29, 2008 - 12:00am

<http://www.mideasti.org/summary/whats-next-palestinian-refugees-gaza-west-bank-a...> [1]

Event Date:

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Event Location:

Middle East Institute

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Event Featuring:

Karen AbuZayd

Overview

Karen AbuZayd Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), talked about the Palestinian refugee crisis in an event co-hosted by the Middle East Institute and the Foundation for Middle East Peace. In her remarks, AbuZayd commented on the current situation for Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon. Although she listed many uncertainties on the path towards peace, she expressed the view that a balanced solution could be reached if the voices of the refugees were included in the process.

Event Summary

Karen AbuZayd differentiated the Palestinian refugee crisis from those created by other conflicts by pointing out the implications of the question: "What's next?" In a typical conflict, she said, refugees suffer trauma and persecution but eventually may be presented with solutions to their plight: immigration to other countries, resettlement in their countries of origin,

or return to their original homes. AbuZayd pointed out that Palestinians have suffered trauma for 60 years, so their thoughts on the question of “What's next?” are clouded by apprehension and distrust.

AbuZayd outlined the current situation in the West Bank and Gaza. In all, 4.6 million Palestinian refugees are registered with the United Nations (UN). Almost half of them (45.8 %) are under the age of 15. AbuZayd said Palestinian refugees have huge potential with a high literacy rate and drive for education, and UNWRA strives to utilize this potential by seeking to improve education standards, but it can only do so much. She further explained that UNRWA’s mission is to provide refugees with personal security and basic services like food, health care, and education, but it does not have the capabilities to provide for more complex, intangible human needs.

AbuZayd explained that more than anything else, the second Intifada has led to a degradation of the quality of life among the Palestinians and looming uncertainties about an end to the conflict. She further observed that peace negotiations have come and gone, but none have addressed the fundamental needs of the refugees. In recent years, the EU and countries in the region have played a more direct role, which she sees as being necessary to find a viable solution. In the meantime, she explained, territory available to refugees has been shrinking and the conflict has continued.

While stating that the UN tries to take an optimistic approach, AbuZayd also listed the uncertainties refugees face for the future. Although the ceasefire is still in place and Hamas and Fatah are reconciling, there continues to be threats of extremism as well as a strong military presence. She added that in the West Bank, settler violence, high unemployment, and restrictions on movement have taken a toll on the economy, and the consequences are incalculable. Likewise, in her view, the sealing off of Gaza has led to a sense of despair and economic desolation.

According to AbuZayd, these issues must be confronted in order to adequately address the refugee problem. Furthermore, she said the voices of the refugees themselves must be included in any future peace negotiations and urged the international community to do its part in moving toward a balanced reconciliation among the different parties to the conflict.

About this Event

Remarks were given in the Middle East Institute's Boardman Room on October 27, 2008 in an event co-hosted with the Foundation for Middle East Peace.

Speaker Details

Karen Koning AbuZayd was appointed Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in 2005. Since 2000, Mrs. AbuZayd helped oversee UNRWA social service, health, education and micro-enterprise programs that reach 4.6 million Palestinian refugees. Before joining UNRWA, Mrs. AbuZayd worked in the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees in Sudan, Namibia, Sierra Leone and as Chef de Cabinet to High Commissioner Sadako Ogata. Prior to her 19 years of service at UNHCR, Mrs. AbuZayd

lectured in Political Science and Islamic Studies at Makerere University in Kampala, Uganda and Juba University in southern Sudan.

Attributions

This Event Summary was written by Shabnam Mojtahedi, a Research Intern at the Middle East Institute and was edited by Rema-Therese Beydoun, a rising senior at Arizona State University and an intern in MEI's Publication's Department.

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