

Final Report

Regional Roundtable on the Role of Faith-Based Organizations in Addressing Displacement in MENA

Landmark Hotel - Amman, Jordan
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The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region continues to face a complex set of interrelated and dynamic challenges including the biggest displacement crisis since World War II. The region is affected by instability including in Syria, Libya, Iraq and Yemen, with clear spillover effects impacting neighboring countries. Most countries in the region remain countries of destination, origin, or transit for population movements. Out of 70 million refugees, IDPs and stateless persons, 40% are in the Middle East and North Africa, a region that only accounts for some 5% of the global population.

In line with the adoption of the Global Compact on Refugees (GCR), the voice and engagement of faith-based organizations has been recognized as an important component of responding to displacement. The GCR stresses that comprehensive refugee responses should involve a multi-stakeholder, “whole-of-society” approach including local authorities; international organizations within and outside the United Nations system; other development actors and international financial institutions; regional organizations; civil society, including faith-based organizations; academics and other experts; the private sector; artists, culture influencers, media; and refugees themselves.

“Faith-based actors could support the planning and delivery of arrangements to assist refugees and host communities, including in the areas of conflict prevention, reconciliation, and peacebuilding, as well as other relevant areas.” – Paragraph 41, Global Compact on Refugees

Faith-based organizations play a key role in the formulation of a humanitarian and public discourse fostering values such as respect for others, community peacebuilding and human dignity reinforcement. Such values are of importance against the backdrop of the asylum, displacement and migration crisis in the MENA region, especially in light of UNHCR’s Global Refugee Forum (GRF) held in Geneva, Switzerland on 17-18 December 2019.

More than 3,000 people participated in the forum; including four Heads of State or Government, the UN Secretary-General, and more than 90 officials at the ministerial level or above, 55 international organizations, 130 companies and foundations, and 250 civil society organizations, sports organizations,

cities and city networks, and academics. In addition, 70 refugees participated from 22 countries of origin and 30 host countries.

This broad engagement and the richness and diversity of ideas that emerged led to promising results. So far, some 860 pledges have been made, and they continue to come in. Participants also shared more than 400 examples of good practices that show how the Global Compact is already making a difference in the lives of refugees.

Faith-based organizations and affiliated individuals can provide exemplary messages and practices of hospitality, solidarity, and respect for human rights in different refugee crises in MENA. These messages complement the humanitarian work of UNHCR which is underpinned and guided by key principles such as impartiality, non-discrimination, respect for the belief and conscience of each individual, diversity, empowerment, equality, humanity, and protection of the displaced.

UNHCR recognizes the importance of its existing and potential partnerships with faith-based organizations, especially to improve the protection of refugees, internally displaced people, asylum-seekers, stateless persons and returnees. Based on this, UNHCR in the Middle East and North Africa region together with the Middle East Council of Churches (MECC), Adyan Foundation and the Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies (RIIFS) organized a regional roundtable **“The role of faith-based organizations in addressing displacement in the MENA region.”**

The purpose of the meeting was to explore the role of religion in promoting universal understanding and respect of human dignity, and faith-based responsibility towards displaced people and refugees. The main goal of the roundtable was to formulate commitments or pledges from religious actors in the region to refugees at a time of heightened tensions in some places towards the GRF.

During the opening session, the role of faith-based organizations in formulating the public narrative, and fostering dignity, peace and respect was highlighted. It was agreed that such values are now of critical importance in the context of current crises in the MENA region. Participants noted that the expectations of faith-based organizations have risen in recent years as refugee crises around the world have worsened.

There was discussion of the problem of confusion between politics and policies. Several of the participants emphasized UNHCR's apolitical mandate based upon the premise that a person whose fundamental rights and dignities are threatened in his or her home country should have the right to leave. To grant asylum to such an individual should not be perceived as a hostile act against the individual's country of origin.

THEMATIC SESSIONS

An opening session, moderated by Shaden Khallaf, UNHCR MENA Regional Bureau, covered the objectives of the meeting and provided an overview of displacement in the MENA region. Panelists Dr. Amer Al-Hafy from Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Jordan, Dr. Sorrya Bechealany from Middle East Council of Churches in Lebanon, and Dr. Nayla Tabbara from Adyan Foundation in Lebanon noted that the region is facing constant turbulence which leads to repeated waves of displacement. International institutions must therefore address and prioritize this issue. The question was posed as to how faith-based organizations and academia can collaborate to create solutions to displacement situations. Participants argued that there should be a balance between the humanitarian side of refugees' dignity and their right to return. It was pointed out that the refugee situations are often politicized, and that faith-based organizations must counter this narrative.

Shared principles underpinning faith-based responsibility for displaced persons, including refugees

This session, moderated by Dr. Nayla Tabbara from Adyan Foundation in Lebanon, consisted of an in-depth discussion with panelists Dr. Amer Al-Hafy from Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies in Jordan, and Mr. Fadi Nasr from Orthodox Youth Movement in Lebanon, on the principles underpinning faith-based responsibility for displaced persons. The discussion began with a recognition that the concept of asylum is fundamental to Christianity and Islam. The Prophet Muhammad became a refugee as an adult. In the year 620 A.D., he and his followers were forced to flee Mecca to avoid persecution, and were given asylum in the town of Yathrib, where they were permitted to practice their religion freely. Several of the Prophet's companions, or Sahaba, also migrated to Abyssinia in the year 613 A.D., where they were given asylum by King al-Najashi, a Christian monarch.

There was a discussion on the historic significance of the Waqf, or endowments. In traditional Islamic communities, Waqf was intended for refugees, and it was suggested that this concept could be revived. It was pointed out that according to Sharia, it is obligatory for Muslims to defend the freedoms of Christians or Jews if they are being oppressed. It was also pointed out that there are times in history when Christians have done likewise.

Participants described that Mary and Joseph arrived in Bethlehem seeking a form of asylum, and that Christ became a refugee when He was a baby, after Mary and Joseph were forced to flee Herod's Judea. It was explained that Christian theology is underpinned by the principle of unconditional love, a concept rooted in the Trinity. The Gospels make clear that Jesus spent time with the poor, the sick, the downtrodden and the despised, including thieves and prostitutes. There was also mention of the story of the Good Samaritan, who offered shelter to a stranger with no money and no clothes. It was suggested that modern-day Christians should do likewise by embracing refugees.

Exploring challenges and good practices for collaboration in humanitarian and refugee situations

This plenary discussion moderated by Mr. Ziad el-Sayegh from Adyan Foundation in Lebanon, focused on how to implement the principles outlined in the previous session. It was agreed that UN agencies and NGOs need to work towards the inclusion of displaced populations in host communities, with an emphasis on education, coupled with recognition of the need to respect the rights of refugees and host communities to maintain distinctive religious traditions. It was agreed that NGOs and UN agencies must combat the perception that their main concern is only refugees and not the host community.

On changing the narrative, it was noted that discourse affects policy and vice versa. The question was posed as to how UNHCR and faith-based organizations can influence public discourse in relation to refugees. The participants agreed that there could be a role for specialized education to improve communal harmony.

Finally, the participants agreed to summarize the joint pledge as follows:

- A. The refugee situation in the Middle East poses challenges of moral, economic, humanitarian, social and cultural nature. It is the social responsibility of religious communities to play a key role in promoting principles of affection, loyalty, partnership, unity and hospitality towards displaced communities.
- B. It is also essential for them to reinforce the values of human dignity, in both host and refugee communities. Thereby creating a balance between the rights of refugees and the challenges faced by host communities; on an individual as well as a national level. Active involvement of faith-based organizations can help create that balance through interacting with and addressing individuals with cultural background and raising awareness to such crucial matters.

Founding Principles:

1. Asylum and displacement constitute a human experience that transcends history and geography. It has been mentioned in Holy Scriptures and thus exemplifies the sacred duty of protecting life, committing to the service of the other and the stranger, and empathizing with the other especially as regards understanding their pain and the fact that they were forced to leave their land and society towards other territories and societies.
2. Religious heritage, with all its diversity and plurality, holds, in its core and essence, theological and doctrinal implications that lean towards ethics and morality with human dignity being the directing compass. It therefore becomes the duty of believers to combat all approaches that entail racism or fear and intimidation of the other, a matter which paves the way for dealing with refugees and displaced individuals as a humanitarian issue in order to properly face the negative generalizations resulting from policies of identity conflict.
3. The commitment to respect refugees and displaced individuals on the foundations of “human dignity” and human rights principles that refugees are entitled to, which are recognized by all religions.
4. In order to mitigate the challenges faced by refugees and displaced persons as well as the pressures on host communities, it is important to complement the advocacy approach with the

approach of partnership in social, national, local, regional, and international responsibility in order to reinforce building ties related to peace, safety, and stability in these communities.

Challenges Faced by Faith-based Organizations in Addressing Asylum and Displacement in the MENA Region

1. The need for religious narratives related to asylum and displacement which are based upon the principle of human dignity rooted in religion and humanity and the right of every human to a decent life.
2. The need to crystalize the moral and ethical standards in religious discourse to ensure the service of the other on the basis of common interests stemming from common good and human rights.
3. Absence of sustainable public policies that respect the specialization of civil society organizations, faith-based actors, and religious institutions within a comprehensive and integrated framework at the national and regional levels.
4. The treatment of refugees and displaced individuals as a burden by the host communities without acknowledging the positive effect they might have on these communities.

Practical Steps

1. Faith-based organizations and religious institutions should contribute, given their social and religious responsibility, to the elaboration of an honest description of the reality of the asylum situation – taking into consideration its causes and consequences – in such a way that this narrative is built upon human dignity and the common humanitarian factors.
2. The need for an alliance of faith-based actors to reinforce the factors common to all religious heritages in order to achieve universal human dignity.
3. Faith-based organizations and religious institutions should build an alliance to protect human dignity with the main concern being to develop sustainable public policies away from ideological, sectarian, and confessional approaches that create fear and intimidation from the other.
4. Faith-based organizations and religious institutions should cooperate with academic institutions and civil society organizations to address concerns and find common grounds for values and common interests.

5. Faith-based organizations and religious institutions should develop narratives based on the principle of shared responsibility between refugees and displaced persons and their host communities through addressing a cohesive and inclusion narratives at relevant institutions and inspire participants to abide to these principles during worship prayers.

Global Refugee Forum

These practices were presented by UNHCR in collaboration with the Arab Renaissance on Democracy and Development at the Global Refugee Forum in December 2019 at the special session on the “Whole of Society” Approach to Addressing Displacement in MENA. The session discussed the role of civil society, academia, the private sector, faith-based organizations and cultural entities in facilitating more comprehensive, sustainable, and inclusive responses to displacement. In addition, UNHCR presented a session on the role of Islamic Finance in responding to refugee crises at the Global Refugee Forum, bringing together industry experts and representatives from leading Islamic Financial Institutions to discuss their role in the response to the global refugee crisis. The session examined the various ways in which Islamic Finance can support forcibly displaced populations and create a platform to enhance institutional social responsibility.

List of Participants:

Dr. Amer al-Hafy	Deputy Director, Royal Institute for Inter-Faith Studies, Jordan
Mr. Fadi Nasr	General Secretary, Orthodox Youth Movement, Lebanon
Ms. Huguette Salameh	Communications, Middle East Council of Churches, Lebanon
Ms. Nayla Tabbara	Director of the Institute of Citizenship, Adyan Foundation, Lebanon
Mr. Nourreddin Harthi	Chief Executive Officer, Tabah Foundation, UAE
Shaykh Mohammed Abu Zaid	Professor of Islamic Studies, Jinan University, Lebanon
Dr. Souraya Bechealany	Secretary-General, Middle East Council of Churches, Lebanon
Mr. Ziad El Sayegh	Policy Advisor, Adyan Foundation, Lebanon

UNHCR Participants:

Ms. Carol el-Sayed	Protection Officer, UNHCR Lebanon
Mr. Hasan Mohamed	Community Services Officer, UNHCR Jordan
Ms. Karolina Lindholm-Billing	Deputy Representative, UNHCR Lebanon
Mr. Mohammed Abu Asaker	Senior Policy Officer, UNHCR MENA Bureau
Ms. Nour Gadella	Intern, UNHCR MENA Bureau
Ms. Shaden Khallaf	Senior Policy Advisor, Head of Policy Unit, UNHCR MENA Bureau
Ms. Zeina Jadaan	Associate Protection Officer, UNHCR Jordan