

Executive Summary:

War and Displacement in the MENA: Addressing the Impact in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria

No. 1
March 2024

Policy Issue

Ongoing wars in the Middle East and North African (MENA) region are causing severe humanitarian crises. In a roundtable arranged by the Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD), panelists discuss the harsh realities of people living in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria, efforts by non-governmental agencies (NGOs) to distribute aid, and how the circumstances might be improved.

The Costs of War

The Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) held a roundtable, "[Local Responses to Conflict and Displacement](#)," on October 17, 2023. Panelists included **Khalid Medani** (Associate Professor of Political Science and Islamic Studies, McGill University), **Dina Melhem** (Program Management Officer - Leading the National Agenda for the Future of Syria at UNESCWA), and **Shibley Telhami** (Anwar Sadat Professor for Peace and Development, University of Maryland; Nonresident Fellow, Center for Middle East Policy, Foreign Policy Program at the Brookings Institute) with **Marwa Shalaby** (Associate Professor, University of Wisconsin-Madison) moderating. Their discussion focused on the impact of wars in the MENA region, specifically in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria.

The panelists noted that the wars in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria had created humanitarian disasters. In October 2023, when this roundtable was recorded, more than 15,000 Palestinians in Gaza had been killed, most of whom were civilians, and more than half a million people had been displaced. By February 2024, the number of people killed was over 30,000 (Picheta, 2024), and the number of people displaced was 1.9 million, of whom more than half are children (UNICEF, 2024). In Sudan, 5.8 million people have been displaced from their homes. Of that, 4.6 million people are internally displaced, and there are over a million refugees outside of Sudan. Syria has more than 6.7 million internally displaced people and 5.8 million refugees outside the country. Combined, this totals more than half of the country's population.

In addition to mass displacement, injuries, and loss of life, many lack access to basic necessities, including water, food, medicine, and electricity. In this environment, non-life-threatening illnesses can become life-threatening, exacerbated by widespread destruction of infrastructure. Citizens are also unable to access healthcare due to a lack of medical professionals, equipment, and the (in some cases, intentional) destruction of medical facilities. In Sudan, for instance, over 70% of the health facilities have been destroyed.

What Can Be Done?

International NGOs and other organizations have significant challenges. They are often unable to deliver vital aid due to blockades by neighboring countries or warring factions. Circumstances on the ground are compounded by under-resourced programs, leading them to start and stop aid or entirely preventing them from delivering basic necessities. There are also regional inequalities in aid delivery. In Sudan, for example, aid may reach the capital, Khartoum, but not the areas of those displaced from Khartoum.

The humanitarian crises in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria are dire, but hope remains. Khalid Medani warned against the sense of futility that comes from feeling a situation is too complex and severe that nothing can be done. Instead, he promoted working with local organizations and being flexible to circumvent local blockades and bureaucratic red tape. Medani suggested understanding the displacement patterns, mapping out where people are moving, and partnering with local organizations to deliver aid in difficult-to-reach areas. Medani further highlighted the success of working with the diaspora to fund mutual aid, such as food kitchens or paying doctors' salaries. These solutions are more important than ever as media coverage begins, or continues, to wane.

The panelists also discussed the importance of the international community's role in improving the situations in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria. For instance, to mitigate immediate harm, external pressure for ceasefires is vital. Yet, as Dina Melhem pointed out, the focus needs to be on long-term peacebuilding, including a strategy for both peace and recovery. Additionally, there is a need to hold accountable those parties responsible for war crimes. Khalid Medani enumerated the types of violence used as tools of war that are crimes against humanity and violations of international law. Shibley Telhami described how civilians in Palestine have been endangered and targeted, which is also a violation of international law. He also lamented the strategic vetoes in the United Nations that have prevented ceasefire referendums in the current war and prevented accountability in previous conflicts.

Conclusion

The roundtable panelists agreed that, while the conditions in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria are stark, it is important to support international agencies working to bring aid relief to vulnerable people. They noted many organizations worth supporting at both the local and international levels such as: [UNRWA](#), [Sudan's Doctors Union](#), [ANERA](#), [World Central Kitchen](#), [Doctors Without Borders](#), and [UNHCR](#). They also highlighted the importance of NGOs working with both local organizations and with the diaspora to circumvent blockades on the ground. Lastly, the international community must come together to [pressure for ceasefires](#) and advocate for access to humanitarian aid on the ground.

The full roundtable is available here:

GLD (2023). *Local Responses to Conflict and Displacement*. Governance and Local Development Institute (GLD) (online). Available at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1_wMJAG-jhM.

References

Picheta, Rob (2024). *More Than 30,000 Killed in Gaza since Israel-Hamas War Began, Health Ministry Says*. CNN (online). Available: <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/29/middleeast/gaza-death-toll-30000-israel-war-hnk-intl/index.html>. Accessed: 2024 February 29.

UNICEF (2024). *Children in Gaza Need Life-Saving Support: Children and Families Need Humanitarian Assistance and Protection Now*. UNICEF (online). Available: <https://www.unicef.org/emergencies/children-gaza-need-lifesaving-support>. Accessed: 2024 February 19.

How to cite:

Baxter, Megan K. (2024) "War and Displacement in the MENA: Addressing the Impact in Palestine, Sudan, and Syria." Eds. Bjurenvall, Sara; Castaman, Kiara; Lust, Ellen; and Shaber-Twedt, Rose. *Governance and Local Development Institute*, University of Gothenburg, Executive Summary no. 1, 2024.

This Executive Summary is a summary of the 'Local Responses to Conflict and Displacement' Roundtable discussion, hosted by GLD with discussion by independent, external experts. It does not necessarily reflect the views of the Governance and Local Development Institute or the University of Gothenburg.