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AMEL center offers breathing space to Iraqi refugees

By James Goodman

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BEIRUT: "You know, the life of a refugee in Lebanon is such a difficult one," explains Haidar. "We are treated as undesirables, as trouble-makers, even as terrorists. Society is hostile toward us and the authorities don't recognize us as equals; we suffer from abuse, exploitation and the constant fear of arrest."

The AMEL Association has been working with people like Haidar, Iraqi refugees on the fringes of society, for many years. In partnership with the UN Higher Council for Refugees (UNHCR), they provide advice, training and safe spaces to get away from the turmoil of everyday life to some of Lebanon's large and ever-expanding Iraqi refugee community.

The association believes that one of the primary benefits of the center is that it provides refugees with an opportunity to participate directly in the running of the services provided by the NGO. This participatory approach relies on a commitment to allowing refugees to take direct responsibility for the provision and maintenance of services. This week, AMEL took steps in realizing this vision, by organizing a democratic vote to elect a Youth Committee to represent the interests of the NGO's six hundred plus beneficiaries, the first of its kind in Lebanon.

In their inaugural meeting, the Youth Committee outlined a commitment to playing a direct role in the management and direction of the NGO.

The committee will act as an intermediary between AMEL and the refugee community, proposing new ideas, evaluating existing schemes and providing valuable first-hand experience about the situation of refugees in Lebanon.

In addition, they will assume direct control over the running of AMEL's Youth Center in Tayyouné, with its library and internet facilities.

"One of the primary motivations for getting involved was my personal experience as a refugee in Lebanon," said Suleiman, a newly elected committee member.

Another member of the committee, Sajed, elaborates by saying that many Iraqi refugees are afraid to leave their immediate area for fear of running into the Lebanese authorities.

He goes on to say that even those refugees who are registered with the UNHCR and possess UN papers are not safe, seeing as the Lebanese authorities do not recognize the status of refugees and will arrest and detain anyone who is caught. As a result, Sajed concludes, "many refugees cannot travel, but must remain in or close to their homes in [Beirut's southern suburbs], where the local security forces are sympathetic to their situation."

Haidar highlights this fear as the main reason why so many refugees live isolated lives. "As refugees we lack normal everyday interaction with a community, opportunities to hear advice and be supported by your peers are severely limited." He adds that social pressures are also brought to bear on refugees, with many Lebanese treating them with mistrust and disdain.

The committee hopes that by becoming elected representatives, they can help to break the sense of isolation felt by refugees. Sajed explains the importance of the AMEL center as a safe space where people can meet and relax. "It is a place where we are able to do the sorts of everyday things that, as refugees, we are normally deprived of." Committee members all agree that it is through being at the center, making friends, sharing experiences, offering and asking for advice and engaging in dynamic activities that people are able to stop thinking about themselves as refugees and start to live more normal lives.

Another representative, Zaman, says that "it is very difficult for individuals to achieve anything alone, but through this association we are able to build relationships and work together to help each other."

A combination of this community-based mentality and a participatory approach can be seen in action through the educational and vocational training programs provided by the AMEL center. Instead of recruiting staff from outside, the center aims to recruit trainers and teachers directly from the Iraqi refugee community. For example, one of the committee members, Sajed, a long-term refugee in Lebanon, works at the center as an Arabic literacy and history teacher. Sajed hopes that by reaching out to the community, they will find other people with skills who are willing to share them. This way, Sajed hopes, the community will be able to provide for its own needs rather than being reliant on external help.

It is through the Youth Committee, explains Hussein, another refugee, that they are given a platform to put some of these ideas into action. Through involving the service-users in the running of the center, AMEL hopes that services are better tailored to the needs of the community and furthermore that existing skills are put to good use.

One of the first projects the committee hopes to start is the production of an information pack that contains advice and information useful to the refugee community. Once compiled, they hope to distribute this leaflet to some of the estimated 40,000 Iraqi refugees and many other refugees from Ethiopia, the Philippines, Sudan and Syria, who are not currently registered with the UNHCR.

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