Overview

Balata camp is located in the northern West Bank in Nablus city. Originally intended to serve approximately 5,000 Palestine refugees, it is today the largest camp in the West Bank and home to 27,000 people. Overcrowding and poor infrastructure is common throughout the camp. Over the years, construction of new residences has encroached on public spaces, with many streets having become narrow alleys with barely sufficient space for people to pass. The lack of space has also meant that many refugees now live without a sense of privacy and living space. UNRWA facilities remain one of few safe spaces for children to play outdoors.

Life in the camp is intensified by weekly search and arrest operations conducted by Israeli Security Forces (ISF). These often occur at night, resulting in damage to residents’ homes and a sense of fear and anxiety, especially among young children. Residents also report that ISF use the camp for training and regularly enter the camp when accompanying settlers visiting Joseph’s Tomb, located nearby.

Residents consider high unemployment to be one of the main challenges in their lives, with the level of poverty and food insecurity among the highest in the West Bank camp. With almost 60 per cent of camp residents under the age of 25, youth are especially affected. This has contributed to a pronounced sense of frustration about their immediate prospects as well as the future.

Despite the major challenges facing residents, Balata camp is known for its strong civil society and has a large number of active community organizations.

UNRWA in Balata camp

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>General information</th>
<th>UNRWA in Balata camp</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Established: 1950</td>
<td>Main UNRWA installations:</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Size: 0.25 sq km</td>
<td>- Four schools</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Population before 1967 (OCHA): 10,776</td>
<td>- One health centre</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated population (PCBS): 17,700</td>
<td>- One distribution centre</td>
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<tr>
<td>Registered persons (UNRWA): 27,000</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Estimated density: 108,000 per sq km</td>
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<tr>
<td>Places of origin: 60 villages and cities of Lydd, Jaffa and Ramleh. A large number of residents are of Bedouin origin</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Education

UNRWA has two girls’ schools and two boys’ schools in Balata camp, which serve a combined 2,500 students. In 2014, UNRWA reconstructed one of the Balata boys’ schools. The second is prioritized for rehabilitation. Facilities in the four schools include libraries and both computer and science laboratories. UNRWA psychosocial counsellors are present in the camp’s schools. Remedial classes in Arabic and mathematics are offered on Saturdays. However, there remains a lack of after school activities for children, which would have a positive social and academic impact.

Socioeconomic and political problems in the camp are reflected in the children’s behaviour, contributing to discipline difficulties and incidents of violence among students. Children often come to school without having eaten and without money for lunch. Despite limited resources and intense workloads, teachers work hard to keep the children engaged and enrolled in school.

Health

The Balata health clinic serves almost 50,000 refugees from both inside and outside the camp. The clinic provides primary health care, including reproductive health, infant and child care, immunizations, screening and medical check-ups, and treatment of communicable and non-communicable diseases. Psychosocial counselling and family and child protection are also available, as is a dentist five times per week. The centre has access to an x-ray machine and provides physiotherapy services.

While the Balata health clinic is one of the smallest in the refugee camps of the West Bank, it serves the largest number of beneficiaries and provides one of the most extensive lists of services. For this reason, UNRWA has prioritized the reconstruction of the health centre.
Relief, Social Services and Emergency Response

Three UNRWA social workers conduct regular home visits in the camp to identify families requiring special assistance. UNRWA provides food parcels to approximately 2,500 impoverished refugees in the camp – approximately 9.3 per cent of registered persons in the camp – through the Social Safety Net Programme.

The Emergency Cash for Work Programme assists food insecure families by offering three-month work opportunities inside the camp. The family receives a cash subsidy in return for the work, helping them meet basic food needs. The projects on which they work are designed to benefit the camp community as a whole, for example, sewerage and water network repairs, road rehabilitation, and painting of buildings. Cash for Work labourers have also contributed to the construction, rehabilitation and maintenance of camp facilities including the Ajyal Cultural Centre, the Al Azem Health Centre, the Technology Centre and the Disabled Centre.

UNRWA maintains warehouses in Balata camp in which it stores food commodities for distribution to abject poor refugees in the north of the West Bank. These installations have been prioritized for reconstruction.

Environmental Health

Nineteen UNRWA sanitation workers collect and remove solid waste from Balata camp five days a week. The sanitation foreman conducts daily water examinations and manages the team of sanitation workers. The environmental health team also maintains the sewerage and storm water network in the camp.

There are 12 collection containers for solid waste; these are located outside the camp because of a lack of adequate space within the camp itself. This, in addition to the large camp population, makes waste management challenging in Balata camp. Some residents dispose of livestock waste in the containers. This has contributed to a rodent infestation that poses a health risk for residents and requires continuous attention from UNRWA sanitation workers.

Main Challenges

Protection Issues

Incursions by Israeli Security Forces occur on a weekly basis. These incursions often result in clashes and arrests. Frequent use of tear gas and raids on private homes severely impact family and community life in the camp. Early exposure to violence has been an underlying factor in the emotional and psychosocial difficulties experienced by many children, leading to behavioural difficulties both at home and at school.

Overcrowding

Given the growing population density and limited space available in the camp, residents have built both on public spaces and upwards to accommodate expanding families. Most buildings in the camp have three or more floors, with residents continuing to build on existing structures in an ad hoc, unregulated manner. In the absence of public space, children in the camp are forced to play in the streets. Many households are overcrowded and lack adequate ventilation and lighting, affecting the physical and mental well-being of families and children. In recent years, UNRWA has rehabilitated 96 shelters and reconstructed 14 shelters in Balata camp.

Unemployment

Unemployment and food insecurity in Balata camp remains high. Many residents who previously worked in Israel have been unable to find equivalent employment, with access restrictions and the permit regime continuing to underlie the poor socioeconomic conditions in the camp. The marginal growth of the Palestinian economy has also limited opportunities for self-development and workforce mobility within the West Bank.
Spotlight: Sanitation

Balata camp is the largest camp in the West Bank. With an estimated population of 27,000 residents, the camp produces roughly 1,600 cubic metres of solid waste each month. For this reason, Balata has the highest number of sanitation workers (19) in West Bank camps. This is still far below the UNRWA standard of one worker per 1,000 residents. Moreover, the population density and narrow streets make the work in the camp a challenging task for the sanitation workers. Despite these challenges, the sanitation team continues to keep the camp clean and is highly respected by the community.

The environmental health programme in the camp also maintains the sewerage and storm water networks, in addition to providing pest control. The sanitation foreman also conducts hygiene checks and water chlorine tests on a daily basis. In 2012, rehabilitation of sewerage and storm water systems was undertaken at a cost of US$50,000.

Devoted sanitation teams, such as the one found in Balata camp, assist UNRWA in ensuring that camp residents live in a safe and clean environment.

“I want to live in Jerusalem and be a translator”

Amal Talib Muhammad is a 20-year-old refugee living in Balata camp. Born in 1993, Amal grew up in a large family with five sisters and two brothers. As she sits before us on her couch – with her mother, Jameela, and her youngest brother, Abdullah, by her side – Amal smiles brightly as she explains how, despite adversity, she came to be a university student. Amal, like her brother Abdullah, is blind.

“When I think of my childhood, I think of the Helen Keller School,” she tells us. Established in 1954, the Helen Keller School for the Rehabilitation of Visually Impaired Girls in Jerusalem was founded to provide young girls and women with the opportunity to develop mobility skills, acquire vocational training and attain a sense of independence. Girls who attend the school are provided housing and meals on the school grounds, and return home only on weekends. “It was very difficult at first and I didn’t like being away from home,” remembers Amal. She recalls how the first evening she asked her mother to stay the night with her in her new room, and her mother smiles at her side.

It didn’t take long, however, for Amal to develop an affinity for her new home. She recalls fondly the many years she spent there. “Every morning, all the girls would eat breakfast together and then sing in the hallways before class,” she tells us. She enjoyed the classes, especially English, which she says was her favorite subject. “Half of the teachers were blind,” she says, “so they really knew the best way to instruct us.” Her favorite part of the school day was the afternoon, when she and her fellow classmates would play in the school yards. “I loved the swings,” she says.

At the Helen Keller School, Amal participated in ballet classes, and in doing so developed a love for performing that remains with her to this day. “I really love to sing,” she tells us, and her mother nods in agreement, clearly proud of her daughter’s strength and artistic talent. “I participated in and performed at all the school celebrations,” she says. When we ask her if performing before and audience makes her nervous, she shakes her head; “No,” she giggles, “not anymore.”

The Helen Keller School provides instruction only until the seventh grade, and when Amal finished her time at the school, she began attending the UNRWA school in Balata camp. “It was very difficult at first because I was the only blind student at the school,” she says. She tells us that some children even threw rocks at her and her brother in the streets. Eventually, however, Amal grew comfortable in the UNRWA school, and excelled academically.

Amal is now in her second year at An-Najah University, where she studies English. Her favorite course is English Literature, and she names Shakespeare’s King Lear among her favorite works. “I love to learn and I love English,” she tells us. We ask Amal to picture her life 10 years from now. As she does, she reverts once again to the Helen Keller School. She recalls her time living and studying in Jerusalem and says, “I want to live in Jerusalem and be a translator.”

Despite her circumstances, Amal exemplifies determination and resilience. It is only fitting then, that her name, Amal, means hope in Arabic; hope for her country, hope for her family’s prosperity, and hope for her future.
UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank, and the Gaza Strip to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight. UNRWA’s services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

Who is a Palestine Refugee?

A Palestine refugee is defined as any person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict. The descendants of Palestine refugee males, as well as legally adopted children, are also eligible to register as refugees.

Palestine Refugee Camps

There are 58 Palestine refugee camps located in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank. The camps were first established as temporary tented cities for Palestine refugees who fled their homes during the 1948 conflict. For more than 60 years, this unresolved situation has challenged the camps and its residents.

The 19 Palestine refugee camps throughout the West Bank have since developed into urban areas home to more than 200,000 people (almost a quarter of the total registered persons with UNRWA), with the population in each camp varying from 2,500 to 27,000. The camps face challenges related to overcrowding, poor infrastructure, high levels of unemployment, food insecurity, and protection issues.

Number of UNRWA Refugee Camps per Field

West Bank
Lebanon
Jordan
Syria
Gaza Strip

West Bank Refugee Camps
Estimated populations
Total population West Bank camps: 222,500

West Bank Refugee Camps
Camp surface in square kilometer

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General Overview West Bank Refugee Camps