

Protection brief

Palestine refugees living in Lebanon

Updated in September 2020

Overview

- 475,000 Palestine Refugees from Lebanon (PRL) are currently registered with UNRWA in Lebanon. However, this figure does not represent the actual number present in the country as, for example, many have left over the years. For planning purposes UNRWA and the Government of Lebanon (GoL) estimate that there are 180,000 PRL in Lebanon.
- According to a 2017 headcountⁱ nearly half of the PRL live in the country's 12 official Palestine refugee camps. Conditions in the camps are characterized by overcrowding, poor housing conditions, unemployment, poverty and lack of access to justice. The PRL arrived – or are descendants of those who arrived – in Lebanon following the 1948 conflict in Palestine. In addition, the conflict in Syria forced many people living in Syria to flee to neighbouring countries including Lebanon, which currently hosts around 1.5 million displaced Syriansⁱⁱ and 27,700 Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS). This makes Lebanon the country hosting the largest number of refugees per capita in the world.
- Palestine refugees in Lebanon face substantial challenges to the full enjoyment of their human rights.. PRL are socially marginalized, have very limited civil, social, political and economic rights, including restricted access to the Government of Lebanon's public health, educational and social services and face significant restrictions on their right to work and right to own property. In 2016, 65 per cent of PRLⁱⁱⁱ lived under the poverty line, as did 87 per cent of PRS in March 2020^{iv}.
- The conflict in Syria has not only caused additional strain on services within Lebanon, but has also significantly impacted its economy. The fragile financial situation was most recently exacerbated by the depreciation of the Lebanese Lira and the global COVID-19 pandemic. The significant financial challenges facing Lebanon have had deep socio-economic consequences for both Lebanese and non-Lebanese residents. This includes a significant impact on the Palestine refugee population, already vulnerable due to their poor socio-economic situation and precarious legal status in the country.
- COVID-19 hit Lebanon in the midst of an economic crisis, where inflation and their precarious legal status had already made many refugees even more vulnerable to economic shocks. As in many other countries, containment measures including lockdowns further hindered economic activity and resulted in increased unemployment and poverty. In Lebanon's already fragile financial situation, this has led to an increase in prices of consumer goods and an overall increase in the cost of living, in turn leading to an increased number of refugees who are in urgent need of financial support to be able to purchase essential items such as food and medicine, pay their rent and avoid evictions. An inter-agency assessment showed that in May 2020 80 per cent of Palestinians in Lebanon had already either lost their

livelihoods or had a significantly reduced income.^v

- The social, political and economic situation in Lebanon deteriorated further in 2020, marked by street protests, the COVID-19 outbreak and associated measures such as lockdowns and successive confinements, loss of livelihoods, and disruption of regular life and education. These developments have increased the levels of mental distress and exacerbated the protection risks especially for children and women. An increase of child labour, including begging, rubbish collection and working regularly on the street, , and increased cases of child marriage, child abuse and harassment and violence against girls and women have been observed during the pandemic^{vi}. In addition, although the Palestinian community was not directly affected by the 4 August 2020 blast in the port of Beirut, the tragic events have impacted all residents in the country, exacerbated mental health and psycho-social support (MHPSS) needs, and are expected to add to the growing tensions and the economic crisis.

Major protection concerns

Right to work

- According to available data, in 2015 the unemployment rate of PRL was estimated at 23 per cent and in 2020 it was 49 per cent for PRS^{vii}. Positive changes to the Lebanese legal framework in 2005 and 2010 have in principle improved PRL's right to access formal employment and related social protection mechanisms, removing the principle of reciprocity between countries on labour issues, allowing PRL to access 75 professions, and giving them partial access to the National Social Security Fund (NSSF). However, while PRL are required to fully contribute to the NSSF, they are not able to fully benefit from the system, as they are still excluded from family allowance and the sickness and maternity fund. They are also still required to obtain an annual work permit through a lengthy administrative process which depends on the willingness of the employer to request it from the Lebanese authorities. Syndicated liberal professions have not been required to amend their bylaws, and as a result, PRL are prevented from employment in 39 professions such as medicine, law and engineering. Moreover, PRS, like Syrian Refugees, do not benefit from any labour law facilitation, even the standards applicable to PRL. As a result, 93 per cent of employed PRS work in the informal private sector, leaving them vulnerable to abuse. 98 per cent of PRS do not hold a work permit, and 49 per cent of PRS families report severe food-insecurity. 93 per cent of PRS households rely on UNRWA assistance as their main source of livelihood^{viii}.
- Palestine refugees consistently report experiencing discrimination in hiring practices and opportunities for employment. They are faced with informal restrictions on the types of jobs and industries they can be hired for due to additional bureaucracy around contracts and workpermits, and discrimination; in 2015, 36 per cent employed in occupations such as agricultural labourers, domestic workers and

construction workers^{ix}. Beyond this, Palestine refugees face precarious working conditions including lack of written contracts and lack of employment benefits, as well as insecure job tenure. Differential treatment in the workplace is also an issue as Palestine refugees are often unable to access better paid positions and are paid less than their Lebanese counterparts for the same work.

- Their precarious status vis-à-vis the Lebanese labour law, coupled with the ongoing economic crisis, has left many Palestine refugees vulnerable to exploitation. Following the outbreak of the economic crisis from October 2019, UNRWA has recorded a significant increase in arbitrary dismissals and absence of end-of-service indemnities due to lack of adherence by employers to the labour rights of their Palestine refugee workers^x.

Right to adequate housing

- Around 45 per cent of Palestine refugees reside in the 12 official Palestine refugee camps. The camps are overcrowded and are affected by substandard infrastructure, sanitation and housing conditions. In addition, camp inhabitants have limited opportunities to improve their housing conditions, and the movement of building materials into the camps requires the authorization of the Lebanese authorities. The remaining Palestine refugees reside in gatherings or cities in Lebanon
- Since the adoption of Law 296/2001, Palestine refugees are prevented from legally acquiring and transferring immovable property in Lebanon. This has led to insecurity of tenure as many have been forced into informal rental arrangements and have been deprived of the benefits of property ownership.
- As a result of the ongoing economic crisis, Palestine refugees are increasingly at risk of evictions. Furthermore, the crowded nature of the Palestine refugee camps, and the often high number of household members inside the home, has made it especially difficult to adhere to COVID-19 related social distancing measures and to isolate, while further exacerbating any family conflict, psychosocial distress and violence in the home.

Rule of law and access to justice

- With limited control exercised by Lebanese authorities within Palestine refugee camps, Palestinian political factions are responsible for camp governance and exercise security functions within the camps. The environment in many camps is characterized by insecurity, with sporadic fighting between armed groups, clashes involving drug dealers and occasional violence over personal disputes. There is limited access to the Lebanese justice system for all camp inhabitants^{xi}, including Syrian refugees and other populations such as migrants and Lebanese citizens.
- While Palestinian women subject to personal violence can obtain a variety of protective orders issued by the Lebanese courts, in practice the limited control exercised by Lebanese authorities within Palestinian refugee camps makes it impossible to ensure that such orders are upheld for women residing within camps.
- Also, PRS not holding legal residency in Lebanon are unable to seek legal divorce due to the legal residency of one of the two parties being a prerequisite for the court. They are also in general unlikely to approach authorities, including to seek justice, due to fear of detention and deportation, which puts PRS women at heightened risk of continuous abuse.

Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon

- In 2011, at the onset of the Syrian conflict, the General Security Office (GSO) initially facilitated access of PRS to Lebanon. However, these measures were never formalized by the GSO and in August 2013 and May 2014 facilitating measures were removed and additional restrictions imposed. Restrictions on Syrian arrivals were in January 2015. Since then, entry visas are only granted at the border to PRS with either a verified embassy appointment in Lebanon or a flight ticket and visa to a third country. Most are issued with a 24-hour transit visa. In addition, a very limited numbers of PRS can secure a visa for Lebanon by obtaining prior approval from the GSO, which requires a sponsor in Lebanon and cannot be processed at border posts.
- Some PRS have sought to enter Lebanon through irregular border crossings, placing them at additional risk of exploitation and abuse both during the crossing and once they arrive in Lebanon.
- Irregular entry into Lebanon is an obstacle to later regularizing one's legal status and while several memoranda have been issued by the GSO since October 2015, allowing for a free-of charge renewal of residency documents, persons who have entered irregularly are exempted. A considerable number of PRS are therefore still unable to regularize their stay in Lebanon. In addition, lack of awareness has meant that some PRS have not renewed their documents and are therefore considered by the authorities as illegally staying in Lebanon.
- PRS children who turned 15 years old in Lebanon and who do not have a passport or national identity card are granted a temporary residency document by the Lebanese authorities if they present an individual status record^{xii} that was issued in the last two years by the Syrian authorities in Syria (GAPAR) and officially stamped by the Lebanese Embassy in Syria and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Syria and Lebanon.
- The General Directorate of General Security announced on 17 July 2020 that Arab citizens and foreigners who entered Lebanon irregularly and those whose legal residency and work permit have expired are able to regularize their status between 31/07/2020 to 31/10/2020. However, regularisation is only possible by securing a sponsor and a work permit. Hence, the impact on PRS is expected to be minimal.
- The lack of legal residency means that, particularly in the South of Lebanon where the Lebanese Army controls entry and exit to camps, PRS often do not leave the camps in which they are living nor enter them if they live outside, restricting their movement out of fear of arrest, detention and deportation, which poses challenges to accessing basic services and justice functions. A survey conducted during the first half of 2020 indicated that 34 per cent of PRS in Lebanon do not hold valid residency documents. Out of this group, 79 per cent reported that their mobility was constrained^{xiii}.
- On 24 April 2019, a series of decisions announced by the High Defence Council in Lebanon resulted in stricter enforcement of national laws and the promulgation of a new regulation affecting refugees. The decision to deport Syrians who entered the country illegally after 24 April 2019, coupled with departure orders issued to Syrians and PRS without valid residency who entered before that date, has resulted in an increased fear of deportation among PRS. UNRWA recorded the first cases of PRS deportations, including of two women and four minors, in late 2019 and early 2020. However, deportations were also put on hold due to COVID-19 related border closures.
- In recent years, UNRWA has also recorded a number of spontaneous returns by PRS families and individuals to Syria. In 2019, UNRWA recorded the return to habitual residence of 2240 PRS individuals. The numbers for 2020 were significantly lower, including due to COVID-19 containment measures.

Non-ID Palestinians

- There are an estimated 4,000 Non-ID Palestinians in Lebanon. These are Palestinians who began to arrive in Lebanon in the 1960s and do not hold formal valid identification documents recognized by the GoL. They are not registered as Palestine refugees with UNRWA in Lebanon and are not recognized by the GoL as they do not have valid legal status in the country.
- Without documentation and legal status in Lebanon, Non-ID Palestinians face restrictions on movement, risk detention and face severe obstacles in completing civil registration procedures. This situation has acute humanitarian consequences, in particular limiting access to public services from Lebanese educational and medical services, bank accounts and access to justice and formal employment. They are also denied the possibility to travel abroad.
- UNRWA has extended a number of Agency services to Non-ID Palestinians, notably its education and primary health care services.

Civil Registration

- Until October 2017, a valid legal status was a prerequisite for most civil registration processes in Lebanon. Difficulties in obtaining legal residency documents had a far-reaching impact on PRS and Non-ID Palestinians. Based on a circular issued by the Ministry of Interior in October 2017, valid legal residency is no longer required for all parties in civil registration of births, marriages, deaths and divorces. The fears and lack of awareness of the community related to the complexities of legalizing their stay remain obstacles for registration of births and marriages with the Lebanese authorities, leading to children not having a legal status, creating long-term difficulties for them.
- In March 2019, a new circular was issued by the Ministry of Interior, no longer requiring costly court proceedings to obtain birth registration of PRS children aged one year or older who were born in Lebanon between January 2011 and February 2019. There is still a need, however, for proof of marriage – for which a legal residency of at least one party is still a requirement.

Gender-based violence

- Risk factors including difficult socio-economic conditions, including overcrowded living conditions, lack of privacy and high levels of poverty, the limited control exercised by Lebanese authorities within Palestinian refugee camps and an environment characterized by insecurity and violence, contribute to a high prevalence of violence against women and children amongst the Palestine refugee community. Fear of retaliation or escalation of violence, as well as shame and stigma experienced by survivors, lack of confidentiality and limited availability of protective services within the camps, result in high levels of underreporting of gender-based violence (GBV), especially for domestic violence and sexual exploitation. Furthermore, the lack of formal legal authority within the camps has resulted in limited access to safety and justice for survivors of GBV and children at risk of violence.
- Based on GBV case management undertaken by UNRWA in Lebanon, between 2013 and 2018, the following statistics and key trends among reported GBV incidents have been identified:
 - 38 per cent of reported cases concern incidents of

physical assault; 22 per cent of reported cases concern incidents of emotional and psychological abuse; 23 per cent of reported cases concern incidents of sexual violence, of which 7 per cent of cases concern rape.

- 65 per cent of reported sexual violence incidents were perpetrated against minors; 89 per cent of forced marriage incidents were perpetrated against minors and 43 per cent of all identified survivors were minors.
- Domestic violence, sexual violence (rape and sexual assault) and exploitation, as well as child marriage, were the most commonly reported incidents connected to the reported cases of emotional and physical abuse.
- In addition, GBV risk within the home has been exacerbated by COVID-19 related measures across refugee communities in Lebanon. 54 per cent of women and girls interviewed for an inter-agency assessment reported observing an increased risk of GBV incidents in their households, such as emotional abuse, violence and denial of resources^{xiv}. Furthermore, UNRWA's legal aid unit registered a significant increase in the number of family law cases related to domestic violence and child protection received during the lockdown period.

Child protection

- Overcrowded living conditions, insufficient livelihood and employment opportunities and high poverty rates are some of the factors exacerbating the exposure of Palestine refugee children to different forms of violence, exploitation and abuse in Lebanon. Violence within the home is a main child protection issue. The use of physical and psychological violence against children, including violent discipline and hitting, is considered as a generally accepted and commonly applied method of discipline in PRL and PRS households. Overall 77 per cent of PRL children and 72 per cent of PRS children experienced psychological aggression, while 59 per cent of PRL children and 55 per cent of PRS children were subjected to some form of physical punishment^{xv}.
- Palestine refugee children risk being exposed to armed violence in the Palestine refugee camps particularly, including recruitment and use of children by armed actors, with disruption of education and severe consequences on their wellbeing and development^{xvi}.
- Child labour and families resorting to negative coping mechanisms are increasing. Five per cent of PRL and four per cent of PRS children are reportedly involved in different forms of child labour, with a rise among Palestine refugee families' common belief that labour provides more opportunities than education in a context of limited access to the job market^{xvii}. As a result, many children are spending a considerable amount of time on the streets, vulnerable to all kinds of exploitation, and missing out on their education in the process. In November 2018, an estimated 4,500 Palestine refugee children were engaged in different forms of child labour^{xviii}.
- Substance abuse and involvement in often violent drug related networks is anecdotally reported as on the rise, in particular for adolescents, youth, and even children, with an increasing number resorting to the distribution or transportation of drugs. Data is limited on this growing phenomenon due to its sensitive nature.

ⁱ LPDC, Population and housing census in Palestinian camps and gatherings in Lebanon, 2017.

ⁱⁱ UNHCR <https://reporting.unhcr.org/sites/default/files/UNHCR%20Lebanon%20Fact%20Sheet%20-%20January%202020.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ AUB, socio-economic study, 2015

^{iv} UNRWA, 2020 socio-economic survey, 2020

^v In Focus: Rise in evictions due to increased economic vulnerability, July 2020, <https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/77872>

^{vi} COVID-19 Rapid Needs Assessment in the Palestinian Camps of Lebanon, Terre des hommes Foundation, June 2020

vii UNRWA, socio-economic survey, 2020

viii UNRWA, socio-economic survey, 2020

ix AUB, socio-economic study 2015

x In the months of March, April and May 2020, UNRWA's legal aid unit received around four times the number of labour law cases, compared to the same months in the previous year (94 individuals were counselled in this period in 2020 compared to 23 individuals in 2019, and 14 persons were assisted with representation, compared to four in 2019). Most cases were related to arbitrary dismissal and/or issues of end-of-service indemnities.

xi Governance, Governmentalities, and the State of Exception in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon - Journal of Refugee Studies, 2010; Human (in)security: Palestinian perceptions of security in and around the refugee camps in Lebanon - Conflict Security and Development Security & Development, November 2010

xii Identification document – not considered as an official ID

xiii UNRWA, 2020 socio-economic survey

xiv Impact of COVID-19 on the SGBV Situation in Lebanon. Inter-Agency SGBV Task Force Lebanon, May 2020

xv UNRWA, Violence affecting Palestine Refugee Children in Lebanon, Situation analysis, January 2018

xvi Report of the SG on Children and armed conflict, 9 June 2020

xvii Drivers and Causes of Intimate Partner Violence, VAC, Child Marriage and Child Labour, Magenta & Unicef Lebanon, August 2019

xviii In Focus: Child Labour in Lebanon, Interagency Coordination Lebanon, November 2018