



schools on the front line

the impact of armed conflict and violence on UNRWA
schools and education services

schools on the front line

the impact of armed conflict and violence on UNRWA
schools and education services

© 2016 UNRWA

About UNRWA

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and mandated to provide assistance and protection to some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and the Gaza Strip achieve their full human development potential, pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, protection and microfinance.

Cover Photo: A Palestinian child among the destruction in an UNRWA school in Qabr Essit camp, Syria. © UNRWA Photo

table of contents

introduction	1
unrwa schools	2
syria	2
gaza strip	3
west bank	4
lebanon	4
jordan	4
impact on palestine refugee children	5
deaths and injuries	5
psychosocial	5
access to education	5
the unrwa response	8
ensuring access to education	9
psychosocial support	9
safe and secure learning environment	12
monitoring, reporting and advocacy	13
recommendations	14
endnotes	15

introduction

It is estimated that nearly 24 million children living in conflict zones around the world are out of school.¹ The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) operates 692 elementary and preparatory schools in the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, as well as eight secondary schools in Lebanon, providing free basic education for around half a million Palestine refugee children. Yet many UNRWA schools are on the front line of armed conflict and violence, which has endangered the lives of Palestine refugee children and posed serious challenges to providing for their education. **UNRWA estimates that, in the last five years, 302 (or 44 per cent) of all its schools have been directly impacted by armed conflict and violence, either causing physical damage to the schools or significantly disrupting education services.**

Even in emergency situations, quality education helps provide physical and psychosocial protection that can sustain and save lives, while providing a sense of routine, stability, structure and hope. Innovative education services can also enable students to continue learning even in times of crisis.

This report documents the impact of armed conflict and violence in recent years on UNRWA schools and the education services provided by the Agency. In **Syria**, five years of conflict have rendered over 70 per cent of UNRWA schools inoperative, due to damage to school infrastructure, access restrictions or the need for schools to be used as collective centres sheltering internally

displaced persons (IDPs). In **Gaza**, the Israeli-imposed blockade and repeated hostilities have had a devastating impact on Palestine refugee children. During the hostilities that took place during the summer of 2014, six UNRWA school buildings used as designated emergency shelters for IDPs were hit directly or indirectly, causing deaths and/or injuries, and at least 83 school buildings were damaged.²

In the **West Bank**, including East Jerusalem, nearly 50 years of military occupation has hindered the education and development of children and youth – even more so with the upsurge in violence since October 2015. In **Lebanon**, Palestine refugee camps have been marked by clashes and UNRWA schools have been physically damaged and exposed to instances where schools were used by armed factions.

Importantly, this report also provides an overview of UNRWA's response to addressing such challenges, including efforts to continue to deliver education services to thousands of Palestine refugee children, even in such adverse conditions. This includes ensuring Palestine refugee children can continue learning through self-learning materials and safe learning spaces, addressing the psychosocial needs of children, rebuilding and repairing damaged schools, and advocating to prevent, and seek accountability for, attacks against UNRWA schools and ensure that their inviolability under international law is respected.³ Finally, the report presents a set of recommendations to relevant actors.

“In the Ein El Hilweh camp in Lebanon, a school principal introduced me to a 13-year-old Palestine refugee girl from Syria. On her flight to Lebanon, she had lost a father and a brother and yet was the highest performing pupil in the school. To me she illustrates how deeply Palestinians value learning and developing skills, often against all odds, and how they seek to rebuild after so much has been lost. I see her and others like her helping their shattered communities recover after the conflict is brought to an end. Education is what makes UNRWA unique in many ways. When most of the time people affected in crises are seen as ‘victims’, UNRWA provides the essence of hope to Palestine refugee boys and girls and looks at people as actors of their own destiny.”

Statement of UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl at the high-level ministerial meeting on the financial sustainability of UNRWA in New York, 26 September 2015

unrwa schools

UNRWA estimates that at least 302 (or 44 per cent) of UNRWA schools have been directly impacted by armed conflict and violence over the past five years, either causing physical damage to the schools or significantly disrupting education services. A number of schools included in this total have experienced repeated incidents.

These different kinds of incidents include when UNRWA schools have been subject to physical attacks or situations where they have been caught in crossfire during hostilities and security operations, as well as when the schools have been used or entered by armed actors. It also includes situations in which UNRWA schools were evacuated or forced to close because of their vicinity to conflict or when they have been used as collective centres for IDPs. The following section provides examples of such incidents from the Agency's five fields of operations in the last five years.

Syria

Prior to 2011, Syria was home to 560,000 Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA. Since the outbreak of the conflict, an estimated 450,000 refugees remain in the country, some 280,000 of which are internally displaced and in need of humanitarian assistance. Of those who

have fled the country, around 42,000 are in Lebanon while Jordan hosts some 16,000.

Before the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, UNRWA operated 118 schools throughout Syria, in 67 buildings, providing basic education to over 67,000 Palestine refugee children. Due to the instability in the country, of the total 118 UNRWA schools pre-conflict, 34 have been fully or partially damaged and, as of April 2016, only 44 schools are open. At the same time, 12 UNRWA schools operate as collective centres for over 2,500 IDPs.

Because so many UNRWA schools are unusable due to conflict, the Agency is temporarily using 55 government school buildings in afternoon shifts to continue to deliver education services to Palestine refugee children. As of April 2016, UNRWA is able to run 99 schools in total, which are attended by over 45,000 students.

Since the beginning of the conflict in Syria, there have been at least 29 security-related incidents in which UNRWA schools were physically affected by shells, mortars or barrel-bombs; vehicle-borne improvised explosive devices; stray bullets; and unexploded ordnances. In addition, at least one UNRWA school witnessed a military incursion. These numbers, however, do not necessarily account for all incidents given the difficulties in reporting in the country because of the

UNRWA School, Husseinyeh, February 2015, Syria.
© 2015 UNRWA Photo by Taghrid Mohammed



Jabalia Elementary Girls School, August 2014, Gaza.
© 2014 UNRWA Photo by Shareef Sarhan



inaccessibility of many locations. In all these incidents UNRWA schools sustained damage, and in three of them injuries and/or casualties were reported. For example, on 17 November 2012, a shell hit an UNRWA school in Yarmouk camp, injuring two Palestine refugees, and on 25 February 2013, a shell that fell in the vicinity of an UNRWA school in the Damascus area took the life of a 14-year-old Palestine refugee boy.

Gaza Strip

The Gaza Strip is home to approximately 1.3 million Palestine refugees who constitute about 71 per cent of the total population. Since 2008, there have been three episodes of intense hostilities in Gaza, the most recent of which took place over a 50-day period in July-August 2014, which had a devastating and unprecedented impact on the lives of Palestinians. During this period, 1,462 civilians (of whom 551 were children) were killed and 11,231 injured (of whom 3,436 were children).⁴ The degree of the destruction of civilian infrastructure was enormous.

Prior to the summer of 2014, UNRWA operated 245 schools in 156 buildings in Gaza, many operating on double or triple shifts, serving more than 240,000 students. At least 83 UNRWA schools buildings were damaged during the 2014 hostilities.

At the peak of the crisis, 90 UNRWA school buildings were also used as designated emergency shelters for almost 300,000 displaced Palestinians, including at least 150,000 children. Six of the UNRWA school buildings used as designated emergency shelters for IDPs were struck directly or indirectly by shells or other munitions, causing deaths and/or injuries. Another UNRWA school that was evacuated at the time was demolished by Israel Defense Forces (IDF) bulldozers and damaged by an Israeli projectile.⁶

UNRWA repeatedly provided the coordinates of the location of schools used as designated emergency shelters to the Israeli authorities. For example, the precise location of Jabalia Elementary Girls School, which was housing 3,300 displaced Palestinian civilians at the time it was hit on 30 July 2014 causing the deaths of 15 civilians (including four children), was repeatedly communicated to ensure its protection.⁷

There is nowhere to be safe in Gaza. We thought that the school would be a safe place for me and my family. This was not the case.

Woman at Jabalia School who lost her husband and whose children were injured⁵

The Board of Inquiry (BOI) established by the United Nations Secretary-General to investigate, among other things, the seven incidents mentioned above that occurred in the Gaza Strip between 8 July and 26 August 2014 in which death and/or injuries occurred and /or damage was done to UNRWA schools found that all of the seven incidents were attributable to the IDF.⁸

In addition, during the hostilities, weaponry placed by Palestinian militant armed groups was found in three empty UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip.⁹ Following the discovery of these weapons components during its inspections, UNRWA alerted all relevant parties to their existence and strongly and proactively condemned the placement of the weapons in its schools.¹⁰

West Bank

In the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, nearly 800,000 Palestine refugees are registered with UNRWA, including some 250,000 Palestine refugee children. The Agency operates 96 schools reaching almost 50,000 students.

The Agency's delivery of education has been facing increasing challenges in a context marked by military operations, settler violence, delays at checkpoints and school closures. The upsurge in violence in the West Bank since October 2015 has put an even greater burden on UNRWA schools.

Throughout 2015, the United Nations documented a total of 286 education-related incidents affecting both UNRWA and government schools compared to 151 in 2014. For its part, UNRWA experienced 39 violent incidents that interfered with the normal operation of 22 of its schools.¹¹ Twenty-six of these incidents alone occurred in the last quarter of 2015 with the upsurge in violence.

In 25 of these incidents, tear gas canisters, plastic-coated metal bullets and other types of ammunition that were fired landed in UNRWA school premises. In particular, in 2015, 33 tear gas canisters fell or were fired into UNRWA schools. In addition, on eight separate occasions, UNRWA students and education staff had to be evacuated and classes were disrupted due to heavy tear gas shot by Israeli security forces (ISF) during confrontations. On two occasions, UNRWA schools were evacuated due to clashes or violence between Palestinian armed actors, including Palestinian security forces (PSF). In addition, in 2015, the Israeli Border Police entered UNRWA school premises in four instances.

Lebanon

In Lebanon, there are nearly 500,000 Palestine refugees registered with UNRWA, with an estimated 280,000 actually remaining in the country. The Agency also assists an estimated 42,000 Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS). In total, UNRWA provides education to around 36,000 students in Lebanon, including more than 5,000 from Syria, in 68 UNRWA schools throughout the country.

Palestinians living in the 12 recognized refugee camps in Lebanon experience sporadic fighting among armed factions in the camps. For example, between 22 and 26 August 2015, widespread armed clashes erupted between factions in Ein El Hilweh camp in southern Lebanon, which had a significant impact on the civilian population, including children, as well as on the provision of education to Palestine refugee children.¹²

During the fighting, six out of nine UNRWA schools in the camp sustained major damages, while the remaining three sustained minor damages. Additionally, seven UNRWA schools were used and/or entered by members of the armed factions during the clashes. Damage to the schools was caused by small-arms fire and rocket-propelled grenades.

Prior to the violence in August 2015, Ein El Hilweh also experienced armed clashes in February 2014, which caused all 20 schools in the Saida area to close and affected 12,106 UNRWA students. In addition to Ein El Hilweh, armed clashes also disrupted schooling in the Bab el Tabbaneh and Jabal Mohsen neighbourhoods of Tripoli in northern Lebanon in January 2014, which disrupted UNRWA operations over the course of a week. Ten schools were closed, affecting a total of 4,732 students. Stray bullets caused property damage to one school in Tripoli and two schools in Beddawi camp. Again in October 2014, clashes between the Lebanese Armed Forces and armed groups forced all 16 UNRWA schools in the north Lebanon area to close, affecting 9,996 students.

Jordan

This report does not cover UNRWA schools in Jordan as there is no armed conflict in the country. However, it does offer information on the Agency's response to the protection needs of Palestine refugee children in Jordan that have been displaced from the conflict in Syria as included below.

Incursion into an UNRWA School in the West Bank

On 2 December 2015, the ISF entered Shu'fat camp to carry out a punitive demolition of the house of a refugee. The operation involved 1,200 security forces who entered the UNRWA Shu'fat Boys School compound on two separate occasions, initially preventing the evacuation of students from the compound. During the incident, two UNRWA Shu'fat girls schools were surrounded and two UNRWA staff members were injured by plastic-coated metal bullets. The operation disrupted classes for several hours before the two schools were evacuated. Several children and staff from the school suffered from tear gas inhalation. One student from the Shu'fat Boys School subsequently lost an eye and suffered from brain damage after being shot outside his home.

impact on palestine refugee children

Although occurring in different contexts, the incidents described above have had a profound impact on the lives and well-being of Palestine refugee children, which is reflected in the number of children killed, injured or traumatized by armed conflict and violence. In addition, the violence has impacted on the ability of thousands of Palestine refugee children to enjoy access to education. UNRWA teachers have also been severely impacted, both by the threat of violence and the challenges of providing education in such difficult circumstances.

Deaths and Injuries

The incidents above have resulted in many deaths and injuries, including of Palestine refugee children. UNRWA does not have figures on how many children in total have been killed and injured in these incidents. In **Gaza**, however, at least 44 civilian fatalities, including 14 children and three UNRWA staff members, and 227 injuries occurred when six UNRWA school buildings being used as collective centres for IDPs were hit either directly or indirectly during the hostilities.¹³ In total, during the 50 days of hostilities in the summer of 2014, 551 Palestinian children were reported killed; this included 138 UNRWA students with a further 814 injured.

In **Syria**, while the current instability in the country makes it difficult to collect comprehensive data on war-related casualties among the Palestine refugee population, there are strong indications that a significant number of children have been exposed to horrific levels of violence, resulting at times in trauma, injuries and deaths. Most recently, on 21 February 2016, explosions in the vicinity of two UNRWA schools and one government school in Damascus resulted in the deaths of 31 Palestine refugees, including at least four children and one UNRWA staff member, and injured 13 Palestine refugee children.¹⁴

In the **West Bank**, including East Jerusalem, 12 of the 145 Palestinians killed in 2015 were Palestine refugee children. At least one case occurred in the surroundings of an UNRWA school: on 5 October 2015, Abd el Rahman, a 13-year-old boy, was fatally shot in the chest by a single bullet in front of the UNRWA office in Aida refugee camp on his way back from school. The Agency's investigation indicates that at the time of the shooting, the boy did not pose any threat.¹⁵ These and other instances where Palestinian children were killed were protested by UNRWA with calls for investigations and accountability for those found to have been in violation of the law.

Psychosocial

In situations of crisis, especially those marked by violence, children have their familiar world disrupted, including the people, places and routines that make them feel secure. The incidents impacting UNRWA schools have been traumatic for the affected children and have had a deep impact on their psychosocial needs. UNRWA

teachers also bear the brunt of living and teaching in such challenging contexts, since – as educators and caregivers – they have to seek to ensure not only their own safety and well-being, but also that of the children they are responsible for.

In **Syria**, Palestine refugee children have been exposed to prolonged violence, displacement and hardship. Anecdotal reports suggest that the level of disruptive behaviour in UNRWA schools is on the rise and requires additional support to children and education staff alike. In **Gaza**, as a result of the 2014 hostilities, Palestine refugee children suffered from bed-wetting, shaking at night, clinging to parents, nightmares and increased levels of aggression. At the time, UNICEF estimated that 373,000 children in Gaza were reported as in need of psychosocial support.¹⁶ UNRWA has found that psychosocial trauma persists a long time after the violence has subsided, with many cases being referred for support significantly after the end of the hostilities.

In the **West Bank**, the upsurge in violence since October 2015 has given rise to unprecedented levels of intra-student violence and alarming levels of despair, trauma and anxiety among children, according to a needs assessment carried out by UNRWA psychosocial counsellors in November 2015. UNRWA health staff have observed developmental regression in some schools evidenced by bed-wetting and diagnosed post-traumatic stress disorder at a rate not witnessed since 2000, during the second intifada. Cases of generalized anxiety and depression are also more present than previous years. In **Lebanon**, after the clashes in Ein El Hilweh in August 2015, school principals reported that students were showing strong traumatic reactions such as bed-wetting, while other students experienced fainting and would scream whenever they heard gunfire.

Access to Education

Armed conflict and violence not only cause physical and psychosocial damage to the children and teachers concerned, but they also compromise the fundamental right to education by disrupting schooling and denying access to education. In **Syria**, while before the conflict 96 per cent of Palestine refugee children in Syria were enrolled in UNRWA schools, enrolment figures have dropped from 67,000 students in 2011 to 45,000 in 2016. Throughout the country, many UNRWA schools are located in areas that face restrictions on humanitarian access because they are under the control of armed groups, notably in Yarmouk, Hajar al Aswad, parts of Rif Damascus and Dera'a governorates, and Ein el Tal. UNRWA has not had access to some of these locations for more than two years. As of April 2016, all 29 UNRWA schools in Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus are closed, with a major impact on the education of the children who remain trapped there.



Al-Rameh collective shelter, Jaramana, Damascus, December 2013.

© 2013 UNRWA Photo by Carole Alfarah

The need to turn UNRWA schools into collective centres for IDPs has further hampered Palestine refugee children's access to education: out of the 12 schools operating as shelters, two have been forced to close in order to operate solely as shelters.

The majority of UNRWA schools in Syria operate on double shifts, and over 400 qualified teachers have left the country, forcing UNRWA to hire untrained teachers to bridge this gap. Most UNRWA schools affected by the crisis have been looted, causing loss of equipment and learning materials. The shortage of teachers and school supplies puts great pressure on the quality of service provided.

“Today I was supposed to be studying among my friends and teachers, but I can't because my school has been turned into a shelter. I live in my school now – it is where I sleep and spend my days.”

Sabrina, UNRWA student, September 2014, Gaza Strip

In **Gaza**, because the conflict in 2014 took place in July and August, UNRWA schools were closed due to the summer break. However, Palestine refugee children's return to school was delayed for three weeks. Moreover, of the 90 UNRWA schools acting as collective centres for almost 300,000 IDPs at the peak of the crisis, 18 remained as shelters even after a ceasefire was reached in August for approximately 62,000 IDPs whose homes were rendered uninhabitable. It was not until 11 months later in June 2015 that all of these families were able to find alternative housing and the last schools serving as collective centres were finally closed. School buildings operating as collective centres put increased pressure

on the students, teachers, school principals and the education services, and many schools had to operate on a double- or triple-shift basis to compensate for the unavailability of school buildings.

“[...] We develop and progress through education. Education is the main pillar of any society.”

Amal al-Masri, speaking at UNRWA Rafah Preparatory Girls School, November 2015, Gaza Strip

In the **West Bank**, ongoing occupation and clashes has frequently disrupted schooling. For example, UNRWA students lost 83 days of school between 1 October 2015 and 9 March 2016, due to security operations in the vicinities of UNRWA schools.

In **Lebanon**, as a consequence of the fighting in Ein El Hilweh camp in August 2015, a total of eight UNRWA schools where summer learning activities were taking place closed down, directly affecting 654 students and indirectly reducing overall school attendance in the Saida area. While children were able to return to school at the start of the academic year on 7 September 2015, a large number of parents have requested to transfer their children from schools in the camp to schools in Saida since these events because of the precarious security situation. In total, 810 students have left schools in the camp.

Additionally, Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) in Lebanon face uncertain legal status and discrimination that frequently make it so that such children are unable

to access education services not provided by UNRWA. The Lebanese curriculum is predominantly taught in English or French and does not prepare students for Syrian curriculum exams held in Arabic, which is also problematic.

I should be in the eleventh grade this year, but instead I have been forced to put on hold my dream of an education. I sat for the ninth-grade exam at an UNRWA school in Sidon (Lebanon). I passed, but it is not recognized by the Syrian Ministry of Education.

Alaa, UNRWA student from Damascus, Syria

As of October 2015, over 5,000 PRS children were registered in UNRWA schools across Lebanon, and 81 per cent had been integrated into the regular UNRWA system in the country while 19 per cent were accommodated in five schools that continue to run afternoon shifts for PRS children due to limited space.

In **Jordan**, as of the 2015/16 school year, 732 Palestine refugee children from Syria and 736 Syrians (including children of Palestinian women married to Syrian men) were registered in UNRWA schools.

The Different Impact of Armed Conflict and Violence on Girls and Boys

It is important to bear in mind the gender specificities of the impact of armed conflict and violence on children, as boys and girls are affected differently. In the **West Bank**, for example, UNRWA boys schools have been disproportionately impacted by the armed violence – the majority of education-related incidents recorded by UNRWA in 2015 occurred in boys schools. Notably, boys school buildings witnessed 23 incidents of evacuations, military incursions or different types of ammunition landing in their premises, in comparison to 13 incidents in girls school buildings. On the other hand, in **Syria**, anecdotal evidence suggests that girls, more than boys, are prevented by their parents from going to school due to the lack of security, which shows a greater impact of conflict on girls' ability to access education in the country.

An UNRWA school serving as collective shelter in Gaza. © 2014 UNRWA Photo by Shareef Sarhan



Government school used by UNRWA students in Jaramana, Damascus, Syria.
© 2013 UNRWA Photo by Carole Alfarah



the unrwa response

In view of the different impacts highlighted above, the UNRWA response is multifaceted in order to address the various challenges. In particular, as a direct provider of education, UNRWA aims to ensure that Palestine refugee children enjoy to the fullest extent possible their basic right to education. The Agency's education programme emphasizes the need to identify and respond to the diverse learning, health and psychosocial needs of children to help them realize their full potential. Even in conflict settings in which Palestine refugee children

are exposed to violence and displacement, UNRWA strives to maintain its educational services that have the additional role of bringing children a sense of normalcy and hope for the future. The Agency seeks to attend to the specific needs of children in its schools affected by armed conflict and violence through the provision of self-learning materials, identification of alternative safe learning spaces, provision of psychosocial support, strengthening of the safety and security of schools, and engaging in advocacy.

Education in Emergencies

Through its Education in Emergencies (EiE) programme, UNRWA has been actively working to ensure access to quality education for Palestine refugees in conflict situations, providing inclusive, equitable, quality and safe education. This approach builds on the Agency's existing education programme, while introducing innovations and keeping children at the heart of what the Agency does. The strength of the EiE programme is that it links emergency and development approaches by addressing the immediate needs of children, but also facilitating longer-term strengthening of the UNRWA education system. While context-specific, the approach ensures that the most vulnerable children and youth are not left behind as they are given the type of support they need to continue their education, even during times of emergencies. The key dimensions of the UNRWA EiE approach are: a safe and secure learning environment, quality teaching and learning, and community engagement and parental participation.

Ensuring Access to Education

UNRWA has come up with innovative ways to ensure that children can still access its education services even in the most difficult of times during conflict. In **Syria**, for example, UNRWA has developed and provided self-learning materials (SLMs) to students in hard-to-reach and besieged areas that have witnessed repeated school closures. In 2015, the Agency distributed a total of 10,619 SLM sets. Moreover, at the end of 2015, UNRWA operated 21 recreational spaces and eight safe-learning spaces across Syria, supervised by teaching staff and psychosocial support counsellors, to provide protected spaces where Palestine refugee children can learn and engage in recreational activities. Throughout the year, the safe-learning spaces provided support to 5,525 students.

“I was living in Yarmouk Camp and I had to flee my house. I was in the third grade when I left. Now we are living in an UNRWA collective shelter in Damascus. I faced lots of difficulties reintegrating within the school, but then I found some of my friends from my previous school in Yarmouk. My friends and teachers helped me a lot.”

Qamar, UNRWA student, Damascus, Syria

The Agency also provided summer learning activities and catch-up classes to 10,000 students in Syria who had missed out on classes during the school year and who required additional support to pass their end-of-year exams.

“I come to the school here because it is the only place near my house where I can play sports and be with friends. There are no safe open spaces or playgrounds.”

Ahmad, UNRWA student, from Yarmouk, Syria, speaking about the 2015 Summer Learning Programme in Damascus

In **Gaza**, following the August 2014 ceasefire, as the population in UNRWA collective centres decreased, the Agency was able to rehabilitate and return school buildings to their intended purposes and to re-engage education teams. In March 2015, UNRWA reopened the last of the total of 83 damaged school buildings. Among those was Khuza'a Elementary Co-Educational A/B School in Khan Younis, which was partially destroyed on or around 28 July 2014. At the reopening ceremony, Rua' Kdeih, an 11-year old student, read a poem of hers found amid the rubble of the school in August 2014. The poem

demonstrates the resilience and resolve of Palestine refugee children in the midst of conflict:

“Do not panic from facing hard times

It strengthens your heart, gives you the taste of healthiness,

Supports and empowers you, enhances your vision,
And shows your patience.

Hope is a wonderful friend that might disappear

But it will never betray.

Happiness is inside your home

Do not search for it in the gardens of strangers.”

Poem by Rua' Kdeih, UNRWA student, Gaza Strip

UNRWA TV

In 2012, UNRWA launched its own educational satellite channel broadcasting from Gaza and providing additional support to students and their parents with their education. UNRWA TV has facilitated access to education to thousands of children who, in situations of armed conflict and violence such as in Gaza and Syria, would have otherwise been denied access to education. The channel works as a long-distance learning tool, broadcasting lessons covering the core subjects of English, maths, Arabic and science. It also contributes to increasing the safety of children in contexts of ongoing conflict by broadcasting videos that raise awareness about explosive remnants of war (ERW). In February 2016, UNRWA and Al Jazeera Children's Channel renewed their Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), enabling UNRWA teachers and students to have access to Al Jazeera Taalam TV's online services and content, technical support, and training to enhance the Agency's own programmes.

In **Lebanon**, with the support of the Palestinian and Syrian embassies in Beirut, UNRWA facilitated the return to Damascus of 143 young Palestine refugees from a private school in order for them to complete their Syrian ninth-grade exams in May 2015. These exams are an essential milestone for students who wish to continue on to secondary school and higher education in Syria due to Syrian Ministry of Education policies toward the recognition of foreign exams.

Psychosocial Support

In order to meet the increasing psychosocial needs of Palestine refugee children, UNRWA has recruited and trained psychosocial counsellors in its schools. The

counsellors not only give individual support to children, but also conduct recreational activities in UNRWA schools. These services are available in all circumstances but are critical in times of conflict.

In **Syria**, in 2015, 1,165 children received psychosocial support (PSS), and over 2,500 staff members received training in protection in emergencies and psychosocial support.

“What I love the most about school is the psychosocial support sessions. During these sessions, we feel relieved from the pressure we live in, as well as the crisis and conflicts. I dream that my school stays as it is and that I continue going there every day.

Doha Ali Ahmad, 14 years old, Qabr Essit, Syria

“I feel happy coming to the school because teachers help to reduce our stress and cope with our problems. The activities also give me the chance to escape from boredom.

Alaa, UNRWA student from Yarmouk, Syria

UNRWA also provides psychosocial support to Palestine refugee children from Syria in **neighbouring countries**. In Lebanon, UNRWA has provided activities for students in its schools through sensitization sessions and counselling. In 2015, a total of 2,645 students received individual counselling and support services provided by school counsellors and 85 education staff members were trained to deliver psychosocial support in Lebanon. In Jordan, in 2015, 1,319 children received psychosocial support services (PSS) and UNRWA provided guidance and supervision to 173 teacher counsellors for the delivery of psychosocial support services to 1,319 children.

In **Gaza**, during the 2014 hostilities, about 100 UNRWA Community Mental Health Programme (CMHP) counsellors were present in the collective centres for IDPs on a daily basis, providing psychological and psychosocial support to displaced families and children. Individual counselling was provided to those who suffered from distress, and psychosocial activities were organized, such as playing, relaxation and meditation exercises, drawing, and storytelling.

To support children's return to school just three weeks after the ceasefire in August 2014, the first few weeks of the school year were devoted to a specially developed



Psychosocial support activity at Nablus Girl School, Saida, Lebanon, April 2014. © 2014 UNRWA Photo by Monica P. Gonzalez



Bassema Ghanem, one of about 100 UNRWA Community Mental Health Programme counsellors.
© 2014 UNRWA Photo by Shareef Sarhan

programme of psychosocial and recreational activities and student counselling in order to help children and school staff cope with their traumatic experiences and transition back to learning. In addition, 7,800 UNRWA teachers were trained in the provision of psychosocial support.

“Through these training sessions the teacher will develop new techniques in order to recognize their own psychosocial needs and that of children and parents.”

Abrar Abu Mughasib, UNRWA School Counsellor, Gaza Strip

In the **West Bank**, in the last quarter of 2015 in response to the upsurge in violence, UNRWA undertook a series of activities seeking to break the cycle of despair by relieving stress and identifying children at risk of violent behaviour or showing serious signs of severe distress. These activities were carried out in all UNRWA schools, providing group stress-relieving activities aimed at identifying children in need of individual counselling and dialogue with parents to provide tools to assist them in coping with the surrounding environment. Such activities received a positive response from parents,

#MyVoiceMySchool in Syria

The turmoil faced by students in Syria makes education all the more precious for those enrolled in UNRWA schools. Over the last two years, UNRWA students have participated in the #MyVoiceMySchool global education project, in which students are paired with their peers in European schools to explore how education can help them meet their future aspirations. Through live video Skype conversations and customized teaching materials, the students and their teachers share their ideas and classwork. The exchanges bring the students new insights and enable them to discover common areas of concern, such as safe school environments and access to good education.

#MyVoiceMySchool provides students a platform to become effective advocates and take concrete action in their schools and communities. In times of conflict this project provides a sense of hope and normalcy for Palestine refugees and an escape from their daily reality.



Palestine refugee students in Homs, Syria, bid farewell to their peers in Brussels after a Skype exchange. © 2015 UNRWA Photo by Taghrid Mohammad

“We shared our opinions about the surveys we conducted and discussed the problems we face at school and our views on improving education. We learned that the differences between us are only due to the different living conditions.”

Rima, UNRWA student, Damascus, Syria

teachers and counsellors and yielded a noticeable increase in positive dialogue and emotional expression with children.

In **Lebanon**, with regard to the clashes in Ein El Hilweh in August 2015, UNRWA offered staff support to address the psychological impact of the violence and to enhance preparedness for further incidents. School counsellors also targeted group and PSS activities within schools to address the psychological consequences of the violence on children.

Safe and Secure Learning Environment

In order to mitigate the security threat to schools and provide a safe and secure learning environment, UNRWA has undertaken a number of activities to develop awareness and build capacity, ranging from trainings and workshops to the development of risk management plans and security drills in schools. In **Syria**, for example, the UNRWA Safety and Security Division (SSD) has been working towards improving the safety of schools and the students and education staff concerned. This initiative has included the provision of security training materials to key staff and encompassed the completion of security risk assessments and evacuation plans in some high-risk schools.

In **Gaza**, to reduce and minimize the risk of injury and death to Palestine refugees and UNRWA staff from remaining explosive remnants of war (ERW), UNRWA delivered ERW risk education trainings to 941 teachers from all 257 UNRWA schools in Gaza, who, in turn, passed this knowledge on to over 250,000 school children. These activities started immediately after the hostilities ended in August 2014 and, as of April 2016, almost 3,000 ERWs (out of over 7,000) have been destroyed since then. Still, since 2014, 115 civilians in Gaza have been victims of ERW-related accidents.

Schools on the Front Line in the West Bank

In the West Bank, UNRWA is piloting a strategy called 'Schools on the Front Line' (after which this report has been titled), involving both psychosocial support and safety and security elements to address child protection issues in schools where children and communities are particularly affected by violence and military occupation. Sixteen schools are participating in the initiative to prevent and respond to protection threats linked to their proximity to military structures and settlements. Key responses include community involvement in school governance, security plans, psychosocial activities for children and teachers, and advocacy with duty bearers.



A school principal conducts an assessment and triage during a mass casualty and medical training simulation. Jordan, April 2014. © 2014 UNRWA Photo by Monica P. Gonzalez

Monitoring, Reporting and Advocacy

As part of its approach to protection, UNRWA documents key alleged violations of international law relating to the rights of Palestine refugees and engages in private and public advocacy with relevant authorities to prevent violations from occurring and seek accountability and remedial measures for violations that have occurred. UNRWA engages with the international human rights system to promote greater respect for and protection of the rights of Palestine refugees. For example, the Agency provides regular inputs to the Monitoring and Reporting Mechanism (MRM)¹⁷ on grave violations of child rights to the UN Security Council. The Agency also engages in a series of activities to underline the neutrality and inviolability of UNRWA schools to ensure, as far as is possible, that they are not used by armed actors during hostilities. UNRWA schools are all clearly marked as UN installations with a UN flag and are always painted blue and white.

In terms of public advocacy, the Agency has frequently spoken out on the need to protect Palestine refugee children and UNRWA schools impacted by armed conflict and violence. In **Gaza**, for example, during the 2014 hostilities, UNRWA publicly condemned the incidents in which its school buildings were hit either directly or indirectly.¹⁸ The Agency briefed the UN Security Council and the General Assembly on such incidents and cooperated with the UN Secretary-General's Board of Inquiry mentioned earlier. UNRWA has consistently called for accountability for violations of international law in Gaza, including the incidents affecting its schools. Almost two years after the end of the hostilities, however, accountability for the victims remains unaddressed.

In **Syria**, UNRWA has also repeatedly condemned attacks that have impacted its schools, most recently in

response to the incident of 21 February 2016 mentioned earlier in which explosions in the vicinity of two UNRWA schools in Damascus resulted in deaths and injuries, as well as similar incidents in previous years.¹⁹

In the **West Bank**, in several instances UNRWA has protested to the Israeli authorities on child fatalities and injuries caused by armed violence in or near the Agency's schools, with calls for such cases to be investigated and for those found to have been in violation of the law to be held accountable. This included protesting the death of 13-year-old Abd el Rahman, mentioned earlier, who was killed by live ammunition in Aida refugee camp in October 2015. A main focus of the Agency's advocacy in the West Bank involves conducting field visits to the UNRWA schools for diplomats and other stakeholders who meet with school parliaments and hear from the students themselves about their protection concerns.

In **Lebanon**, during the clashes in Ein El Hilweh in August 2015, UNRWA protested the unauthorized use of its schools by the armed factions during the fighting and called on the armed factions to respect the inviolability and neutrality of UNRWA schools.²⁰ Following this advocacy intervention, the Ein El Hilweh Higher Security Committee released a statement on 29 August 2015 condemning the use of UNRWA installations for armed operations, stating that this should not be repeated.

Despite the aforementioned advocacy efforts, however, the attacks on UNRWA schools detailed in this report have frequently occurred in a climate of widespread impunity without the perpetrators being brought to justice. UNRWA has highlighted this lack accountability for the victims of such incidents and the need for action to address them.

recommendations

In recent years there has been increased attention from the international community to the issue of attacks on schools in situations of armed conflict. In 2011, the UN Security Council adopted the landmark resolution 1998, which highlighted the impact of attacks on schools on the safety, education and health of children during armed conflict. Following the Oslo Conference on Safe Schools in May 2015, 52 States have now endorsed the Safe Schools Declaration – including Jordan, Lebanon and the State of Palestine – and committed themselves to better protect educational facilities, students and teachers from attack, including by incorporating the Guidelines for Protecting Schools and Universities from Military Use during Armed Conflict. The Declaration and Guidelines represent important international action to address this issue, although they are not directly applicable to UNRWA schools which, as UN premises, have additional protection under a separate legal framework that guarantees the inviolability of such premises at all times. UNRWA also takes a wide range of measures itself to ensure that its schools are not used by armed actors.

In light of the findings of this report:

- UNRWA urges all armed actors **not to target UNRWA schools**, either directly or indirectly, including through shelling, bombing, firing or any other form of violence that might incur physical damage to school buildings and/or harm those in their premises including students and teachers. UNRWA also urges all armed actors not to fight in, or in the vicinity of, UNRWA schools;
- UNRWA urges all armed actors **to respect the civilian character of UNRWA schools and ensure that they are free from military use**, including use as a military base, barracks, weapons storage, and detention and interrogation centres, and military incursions, including military search operations;
- UNRWA calls on all relevant actors **to guarantee children's safe access to schools**, which includes ensuring students' passage through checkpoints in a timely manner, free from intimidation, harassment and violence, and not conducting military operations near schools during school hours;
- UNRWA urges all relevant actors **to refrain from any other actions that impede Palestine refugee children's right to education** and access to education in situations of armed conflict and violence;
- UNRWA calls on relevant actors **to respect the inviolability under international law of UN premises at all times** to ensure the security of UNRWA schools and the Agency's staff;
- UNRWA urges all relevant authorities **to introduce and adopt measures that prevent the risk of UNRWA schools being attacked or used by armed actors** during times of armed conflict and violence;
- UNRWA encourages all relevant authorities **to monitor and properly investigate** attacks on schools, students and education staff in violation of international law with a view to holding those responsible accountable for such actions and providing victims with effective remedies, including reparations in accordance with international standards;
- UNRWA urges donors to continue **to fund its education, protection and psychosocial activities**, which enable the Agency to respond to the incidents affecting its schools, and to ensure all Palestine refugee children are able to access quality education in a safe learning environment.

endnotes

1. UNICEF, One in four children in conflict zones are out of school, 12 January 2016, available at http://www.unicef.org/media/media_89782.html.
2. In some cases, an UNRWA school building may host more than one school, with separate administration and different students. This might occur when there is more than one shift or when different groups of grades function in the same building. The total of 692 UNRWA schools corresponds to administrative schools and not school buildings. This report seeks to distinguish between school buildings and administrative schools whenever appropriate. For example, in Gaza, during the 2014 hostilities 83 UNRWA schools buildings were damaged, which corresponds to an estimated 138 schools.
3. As UN premises, UNRWA schools enjoy inviolability under international law, as laid out in the 1946 International Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations. This inviolability applies at all times and is not subject to exceptions for military expediency.
4. UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the independent commission of inquiry established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-21/1*, 25 June 2015, A/HRC/29/52, para. 20.
5. These incidents involved UNRWA Maghazi Preparatory Girls A/B School on 21 and 22 July 2014, UNRWA Deir El Balah Preparatory Girls C School on 23 July 2014; UNRWA Beit Hanoun Elementary Co-educational A/D School on 24 July 2014, Zaitoun Preparatory Girls B School on the night of 28/29 July 2014, UNRWA Jabalia Elementary Girls A/B School on 30 July 2014 and UNRWA Rafah Preparatory Boys A School on 3 August 2014 – all of which were active collective centres at the time – as well as UNRWA Khuza'a Elementary College Co-educational 'A' and 'B' School between 17 July and 16 August 2014 that was evacuated at the time. See United Nations Security Council, Summary by the Secretary-General of the report of the United Nations Headquarters Board of Inquiry into certain incidents that occurred in the Gaza Strip between 8 July 2014 and 26 August 2014, 27 April 2015, S/2015/286, para. 16-48.
6. UNRWA, *UNRWA strongly condemns Israeli shelling of its school in Gaza as a serious violation of international law*, 30 July 2014, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-strongly-condemns-israeli-shelling-its-school-gaza-serious>.
7. UN Human Rights Council, *Report of the detailed findings of the independent commission of inquiry established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-21/1*, 22 June 2015, A/HRC/29/CRP.4, para. 433.
8. For a list of the incidents, see supra fn.7. United Nations Security Council, *Summary by the Secretary-General of the report of the United Nations Headquarters Board of Inquiry into certain incidents that occurred in the Gaza Strip between 8 July 2014 and 26 August 2014*, 27 April 2015, S/2015/286, para. 21, 25, 32, 36, 40, 43-44, and 48. The inquiry was established to review and investigate 10 incidents, in which death or injuries occurred at, or damage was done to, United Nations premises, or in which the presence of weaponry was reported at those premises.
9. United Nations Security Council, *Summary by the Secretary-General of the report of the United Nations Headquarters Board of Inquiry into certain incidents that occurred in the Gaza Strip between 8 July 2014 and 26 August 2014*, 27 April 2015, S/2015/286, para. 49-82; UN General Assembly, Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - 1 January-31 December 2014, 31 January 2014, A/70/13, para. 56.
10. UNRWA, *UNRWA strongly condemns placement of rockets in school*, 17 July 2014, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-strongly-condemns-placement-rockets-school>; UNRWA, *UNRWA condemns placement of rockets, for a second time, in one of its schools*, 22 July 2014, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-condemns-placement-rockets-second-time-one-its-schools>; UNRWA, *Cache of rockets found in un school in Gaza*, 29 July 2014, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/cache-rockets-found-un-school-gaza>.
11. Aida Basic Boys School, Arroub Basic Girls School No. 1, Balata Basic Boys School No. 1 and No. 2, Balata Basic Girls School No 1 and No 2, Beit Jala Basic Co-educational School, Dheisheh Basic Boys School No. 1, Fawwar Basic Boys School No. 1 and No. 2, Fawwar Basic Girls School No. 1 and No. 2, Hebron Basic Boys School, Jalazone Basic Boys School, Jalazone Basic Girls School, Jenin Basic Girls School No. 1 and No. 2, Qatanna Basic Girls School, Shu'fat Basic Boys School, Shu'fat Girls School No. 1 and No. 2 and Surif Basic Girls School No. 1.
12. UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), *The Situation of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon*, February 2016, pp. 17-18, available at <http://www.refworld.org/publisher/UNHCR/LBN,56cc95484,0.html>.
13. See UN General Assembly, *Report of the Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East - 1 January-31 December 2014*, 31 January 2014, A/70/13, para. 55; United Nations Security Council, Letter dated 27 April 2015 from the Secretary-General addressed to the President of the Security Council, 27 April 2015, S/2015/286, p. 3; UN Human Rights Council, Report of the detailed findings of the independent commission of inquiry established pursuant to Human Rights Council resolution S-21/1, 22 June 2015, A/HRC/29/CRP.4, para. 421.
14. UNRWA, *UNRWA condemns explosions targeting civilians in Sayyida Zeinab*, 24 February 2016, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-condemns-explosions-targeting-civilians-sayyida-zeinab>.
15. UNRWA, *UNRWA calls for political action and accountability to stem the current spiral of violence and fear*, 12 October 2015, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-calls-political-action-and-accountability-stem-current-spiral>.
16. UN News Centre, *Gaza: UN says over 370,000 Palestinian children in need of 'psycho-social first aid'*, 21 August 2014, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=48532#.VysSDpx95dg>.
17. The MRM is currently compiled for Israel and the State of Palestine, Syria, and Lebanon. UNRWA is an active member of the respective working groups in these areas.
18. See, e.g., <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-strongly-condemns-shelling-school-gaza-sheltering-civilians-and-calls>; <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-strongly-condemns-israeli-shelling-its-school-gaza-serious>; and <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-condemns-israeli-strike-next-unrwa-school-killing-civilians>.
19. See for example *UNRWA condemns explosions targeting civilians in Sayyida Zeinab*, 24 February 2016, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-condemns-explosions-targeting-civilians-sayyida-zeinab>; *UNRWA condemns bombardment killing Palestine refugee woman and destroying school*, 18 June 2015, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-condemns-bombardment-killing-palestine-refugee-woman-and-destroying>; *UNRWA strongly condemns school explosion in Southern Syria*, 11 February 2014, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-strongly-condemns-school-explosion-southern-syria>; UNRWA, *UNRWA condemns attacks on Palestinian children in Syria*, 27 February 2013, available at <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-condemns-attacks-palestinian-children-syria>.
20. UN News Centre, *UN agency expresses concern over plight of civilians in southern Lebanon refugee camp*, 25 August 2015, available at <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=51719#.VwosjNJ95dg>; UN Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, *Highlights of the noon briefing by Eri Kaneko, Associate Spokesperson for Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon*, 25 August 2015, available at http://www.un.org/sg/spokesperson/highlights?HighD=8/25/2015&d_month=8&d_year=2015.



united nations relief and works agency
for palestine refugees in the near east

وكالة الأمم المتحدة لإغاثة وتشغيل
اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الشرق الأدنى

Protection Division
Headquarters - Amman

Amman, Jordan

Tel: +962 (6) 580 8536

www.unrwa.org



unrwa
الأونروا

دائرة الحماية
الأونروا - عمان
العنوان البريدي: ص.ب: ١٤٠١٥٧، عمان ١١٨١٤
الأردن

هـ: ٥٨٠٨٥٣٦ (٦ ٩٦٢ +)

protection division
unrwa headquarters - amman
po box 140157, amman 11814
jordan

t: (+962 6) 580 8536

www.unrwa.org

وكالة الأمم المتحدة لإغاثة وتشغيل اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الشرق الأدنى | united nations relief and works agency for palestine refugees in the near east