Palestine refugees in Lebanon face substantial challenges to the full enjoyment of their human rights. The presence of large numbers of refugees from Syria has placed already limited resources, infrastructure and services for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon under additional strain. In recent years, the arrival of displaced Syrians (currently over a million) and Palestinian refugees from Syria (currently 32,000) seeking refuge from conflict in neighboring Syria, has impacted the Lebanese economy and exacerbated the precarious condition of the “host community” of Palestine refugees in Lebanon (PRL). The majority of PRL have either been residing in Lebanon since 1948 or have been born in the country and already face high poverty rates; it is estimated that 65% of PRL live under the poverty line. Meanwhile, communities of Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS), in addition to their original displacement in 1948 and subsequent displacement from Syria, are now exposed to a protracted displacement in Lebanon often resulting in acute vulnerability and multiple protection threats.

In December 2017, the Lebanese Government launched its report on the census of Palestinian refugees conducted in Lebanon; a total of 174,422 Palestinian refugees were counted to be living in the 12 official Palestine Refugee Camps and the 156 gatherings, while the 2015 AUB survey estimated the total PRL population in Lebanon to be between 260,000 and 280,000.

UNRWA has been providing services to Palestinian refugees since 1950 and is relying on the longstanding support of the Government of Lebanon to do so. In 2017, UNRWA provided services to close to 205,000 persons. Most Palestinian refugees in the country depend on the Agency’s services as they face limitations accessing public services. In the absence of a just and durable solution to the plight of Palestinian refugees, UNRWA services strengthen dignity and provide crucial stability to one of the poorest and most vulnerable communities in Lebanon, which has endured the effects of protracted conflicts and dispossession for over 65 years.

In the absence of Lebanese government presence in most of the 12 Palestine refugee camps, Palestinian political factions and armed groups exert some form of control. As a result, in practice, PRL are prevented from employment in 39 professions (such as medicine, law, engineering, etc.).

1. Palestine refugees from Lebanon

Right to work and access to employment

- 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, giving them partial access to the National Social Security Fund. However, they are required to obtain an annual work permit which is dependent on the willingness of the employer to request it from the Lebanese authorities and involves a lengthy administrative process.

- Syndicated liberal professions have not been required to amend their bylaws, and as a result, in practice, PRL are prevented from employment in at least 39 professions (such as medicine, law, engineering, etc.).

- Palestinian refugees’ unemployment rate was estimated at 23.2% in 2015 and Palestinian refugees consistently report discrimination in hiring and opportunities for employment due to bureaucracy and stigma. They are faced with informal restrictions on the types of jobs and industries they can be hired for; with 36% employed in elementary occupations, such as agricultural labourers, sales and service workers, cleaners, etc. Lack of written contracts (only 14% of the PRL labour force have an employment contract); lack of employment benefits (87% of employed PRL do not benefit from either sick or annual leave); as well as insecure job tenure (48% of employed PRL are paid on a daily basis, 37% on a by-piece/service basis and 8% work in seasonal employment) contribute to unstable working conditions. Differential treatment in the workplace is also an issue as Palestinian refugees are often unable to access better paid positions and are paid less than their Lebanese counterparts for the same work.
Right to adequate housing and property

- 63% of PRL reside in the 12 official Palestine refugee camps of Lebanon. The camps are overcrowded and are affected by sub-standard infrastructure, sanitation and housing. In addition, camp inhabitants have extremely limited abilities to improve their housing conditions, partly for economic reasons but also due to the Lebanese authorities’ restrictions on the movement of building materials in and out of the Palestine refugee camps. The remaining PRL reside in gatherings or cities in Lebanon.

- While prior to 2001, Palestinian refugees were entitled to property ownership, following a change in the law, Palestine refugees are now prevented from legally acquiring, and transferring immovable property in Lebanon [Law 296/2001]. This has led to insecurity of tenure as many have been deprived of the benefits of property ownership.

2. Palestinian refugees from Syria in Lebanon

Access to territory: PRS have very limited possibilities to flee Syria and enter Lebanon

- At the onset of the conflict, the General Security Office (GSO) initially facilitated access of PRS to Lebanon. However, these measures were never formalized by the GSO and since August 2013 and then May 2014, facilitating measures were removed and additional restrictions were imposed. 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 of these cases are issued with a 24 hour transit visa. In addition, limited numbers of PRS remain able to 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. Consequently, UNRWA estimates that only 12% of the PRS currently in country arrived after May 2014.

- Compared to the policy applied to Syrian nationals, tighter conditions are applied to PRS (notwithstanding restrictions on Syrians announced in January 2015). For example, Syrian nationals can, in principle, enter with ‘humanitarian’ visas, while this is not available to PRS. Some PRS have consequently sought to enter Lebanon through irregular border crossings, placing them at additional risk of exploitation and abuse. Under current regulations, irregular entry into Lebanon is also an obstacle to later regularize one’s legal status.

Legal Stay

- Since October 2015, several memoranda have been issued by the GSO, few of them accessible to the public, allowing for a free-of-charge renewal of residency documents, with the exception of those who entered irregularly. Starting in July 2017, it was specified that unlimited free-renewal is available for 6 months for those PRS who entered Lebanon before September 2016, with no penalty charge for delays. However, the July 2017 memorandum excludes persons who entered Lebanon after September 2016, as well as those who entered irregularly and those with an exit order. A considerable number of PRS are therefore still unable to regularize their stay in Lebanon. In addition, PRS children who turned 15 years old in Lebanon, without a passport or national identity card will be granted a temporary residency document by the Lebanese Authorities if they present an individual status record that was issued in the last two years and officially stamped by the Lebanese Embassy in Syria and the Ministries of Foreign Affairs in Syria and Lebanon.

- Since the arrival of the PRS in Lebanon, UNRWA has observed that the terms and conditions of these memoranda have been applied inconsistently across the country. In addition, the lack of awareness has meant that some PRS did not renew their documents and were considered to be present illegally in Lebanon by the authorities.

- As of September 2016, almost 40% of PRS present in Lebanon did not hold valid residency documents, with at least 18% stating that it was due to their previous inability to pay the fees.

Civil Registration: the impact of lack of legal status

- 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 wide-reaching impact for PRS. Of particular concern is the registration of newborns, marriages and divorces. Based on a circular issued by the Ministry of Interior on October 2017, valid legal residency is no longer required for civil registration of births, marriages, deaths and divorces. The anxiety and lack of awareness of the community related to the complexities of legalizing their stay, remains one of the obstacles for registration of births and marriages with the Lebanese authorities.

- In March 2018, a new circular was issued by the Ministry of Interior facilitating the required documentation for birth registration of PRS children above one year old, born in Lebanon between January 2011 and February 2018. In those cases, the costly court procedure is no longer required in order to register the children in Lebanon, however the need for proof of marriage remains.

Palestinian refugees from Syria displaced to Lebanon due to the conflict

+ 32,000
Palestinian refugees from Syria

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Access to services and vulnerability to abuse

- The scarcity of livelihood opportunities for Palestine refugees, as well as their extreme reliance on loans, charity and humanitarian assistance, has resulted in 89% of PRS in Lebanon living in poverty, unable to meet their basic food and non-food needs, including 9% in extreme poverty. In 2016, 78% of PRS families in Lebanon did not have a single working family member, severely reducing their resilience and coping capacity. The financial instability of PRS augments associated protection risks, such as exploitation, abuse and negative coping mechanisms, including child labour and child marriage.

93% of PRS households rely on UNRWA assistance as their main source of livelihood

- The lack of valid legal status, lack of up-to-date civil registration documents and restriction of movement severely limit access to services for PRS and also contribute to increased protection risks. Some PRS mentioned they felt restricted in taking specific routes in the camp in order to access services and due to unreliable network providers in the camps, nor were they able to reach the service providers through the phone network.

- For PRS children without legal status, access to and retention in education is particularly challenging as they face additional difficulties and limitations in obtaining official certifications for the intermediate and secondary state examinations. Alongside financial difficulties, lack of valid legal status in Lebanon is one of various factors contributing to lower enrolment of PRS children, with only 88% of those between 6 and 12 years old enrolled in schools, compared to 97% of PRL of the same age.

- PRS who are in need of secondary and tertiary healthcare may face limitations in accessing UNRWA-contracted hospitals which are located outside refugee camps, as they fear possible arrest at checkpoints and/or detention.

Freedom of movement and migration

- PRS without valid legal status face limitations to their freedom of movement, mainly due to the fear of arrest at checkpoints and detention. Many of those with expired visas have also been issued with “departure orders”. While these orders have not been actively enforced, the erosion of the protective environment for PRS means that 61% of PRS report fear of deportation which causes some to limit their movements and avoid approaching the authorities for civil registration or other services.

89% of PRS living in poverty unable to meet their basic food and non-food needs

- 55% of PRS reside in the 12 official Palestine refugee camps. In order to move in and out of some Palestine refugee camps (notably Nahr el-Bared refugee camp in northern Lebanon, Ein el-Hilweh refugee camp in Saida and the refugee camps in Tyre area), a permit is required for which a valid legal status is often a pre-requisite. Therefore, some PRS living in these areas without valid legal status in Lebanon do not leave the camps for fear of being apprehended.

- UNRWA records indicate that migration to third countries and small numbers of returns to Syria have reduced the number of PRS in the country from 41,413 in December 2014 to 32,058 as of April 2018. Restricted by non-admission policies set by some neighbouring and regional countries, some PRS have been reportedly exploited by smugglers while trying to irregularly leave Lebanon, sometimes with forged documents. When intercepted by the Lebanese authorities, such individuals were detained and, in several instances, deported to the Lebanese border with Syria where they became stranded in no-man’s-land. Following intervention by the international community [including UNRWA], some were exceptionally allowed back in the country. However, UNRWA is concerned with the deportations it observed since August 2017 and is advocating with the authorities to protect Palestinians fleeing the conflict in Syria.

- It is understood that similarly like PRS, PRL are leaving the country because of the pressure of the Syrian crisis and the hope of better perspectives abroad. Some have been returned to Lebanon, a recent phenomenon that UNRWA is monitoring in partnership with other humanitarian organizations.

61% of PRS fear deportation which causes some to self-impose limitations on their movements
3. non-id Palestinians

- There are an estimated 3,000 to 5,000 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. They are not registered as Palestine Refugees with UNRWA in Lebanon (but may be registered in other fields of operation) and are not recognized by the Government of Lebanon as do not have valid legal status in the country.

- Without documentation and legal status in Lebanon, non-ID Palestinians face restrictions of movement, risk arrest or detention and face severe obstacles completing civil registration procedures, all of which have acute humanitarian consequences, in particular limiting access to public services and formal employment. They are also denied the possibility to travel abroad.

- UNRWA Lebanon has extended a number of the Agency’s services to non-ID Palestinians, notably in UNRWA’s Education and Primary Health Care services.

4. age, gender and diversity related protection concerns

- 48% of the PRL and 54% of the PRS populations in Lebanon are under 25 years old. In 2015, 72.4% of PRL and 93.4% of PRS youth (between the ages of 15 and 25) were living in poverty, representing in both cases the most impoverished age group of their populations. Only 36% of PRS children and 61% of PRL children are enrolled in secondary school. Less than one third of Palestine refugees who graduated from secondary school in the academic year 2016-2017 are currently enrolled in university. In addition, among all age categories of PRL, youth experience the highest rate of unemployment. Furthermore the lack of livelihood opportunities, compounded by poverty and security challenges to which they are exposed, leads to an environment conducive for their recruitment by political and armed factions. As to mobility and security of young PRL and PRS, it is noticeable that approximately one fourth of them never or seldom leave the camps, with females and PRS being less likely to move compared to males and PRL. One quarter of young Palestine refugees consider checkpoints as a limitation to their movement; there is a significant positive correlation between mobility and emotional wellbeing.

- Women continue to be discriminated against within their communities and have more limited access to employment opportunities and services. Female PRL are five times less likely to be employed than males and their unemployment rate sits at 32%.

1. This briefing document provides background information on protection issues faced by Palestine refugees currently living in Lebanon. UNRWA’s consolidated eligibility and registration instructions define Palestine refugees as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of 1st June 1946 and 15th May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict. The descendants of Palestine refugee males, including legally adopted children, are also eligible for registration”. This briefing has been developed based on information collected from testimonies of Palestine refugees living in Lebanon, as well as reports of organizations working in the country and data collected by UNRWA, including the following sources:

2. LPCD, “Population and Housing Census in Palestinian camps and gatherings in Lebanon 2017”, a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon is defined as “every individual known to have registered both with UNRWA in Lebanon and to the DPRA or either one of them”. The actual counting took place on 17 July at midnight. Available online: http://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/survey-economic-status-palestine-refugees-lebanon


- 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, exploitation and abuse. In addition, difficult social conditions, including crowded living conditions and poverty, contribute to a high prevalence of GBV and child protection incidents amongst the Palestine refugee community. 13% of PRS adolescent girls and young women aged 15 to 19 are currently married or in a union, and 25% of those aged 20 to 24 were married before their 18th birthday; while 82% of PRL children under the age of 15 experience violent forms of discipline at home.

- Specialized service providers for mental health and those responding to incidents of GBV and child protection are scarce, particularly within the camps. In addition, safety concerns and stigma as well as the lack of confidentiality within the camps hinder access to existing services. Accessing services outside the camp is challenging due to limited awareness, mobility restrictions often placed on women and girls, and the strain on available services in the country.

- 1 in 10 Palestinian households in Lebanon have at least one family member with a disability. There is a strong correlation between disability and poverty in Palestinian communities in Lebanon, with the extremely poor PRL households being twice as likely to have a family member with a functional disability living in their household, as compared with the average PRL household. In addition, many Palestine refugees with disabilities and their families are marginalized due to general issues facing people with disabilities in the country; among which include: limited access to and limited availability of specialized services, inadequate awareness of needs and insufficient protection of their rights. Furthermore, Palestine refugees with disabilities are (like all other PRL) considered as foreigners and are therefore not protected by the Lebanese Law 220/2000 that recognizes the rights of Lebanese with disability. Women, children and older persons with disabilities are particularly vulnerable to discrimination, exploitation and violence and 29% of children with disabilities are not enrolled in any educational institutions.