

Averroes Policy Forum

Advancing Policy Dialogue



Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

From difficult to precarious
living conditions

Civil Society Series

Averroes Policy Forum Papers discuss timely policy topics impacting the MENA region featuring insights from active civil society leaders. The papers are also used to create an active engagement with decision makers amid more inclusive policy dialogue.

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At glance

National and Regional Factors Affecting Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon:

- The existing economic crises in the country have created additional unemployment within the Palestinian refugee's community.
- Assuming the precarious living conditions in the camps, refugees registered a higher COVID 19 mortality rate than the entire population.
- Successive budget reductions to UNRWA hinder the UN agency

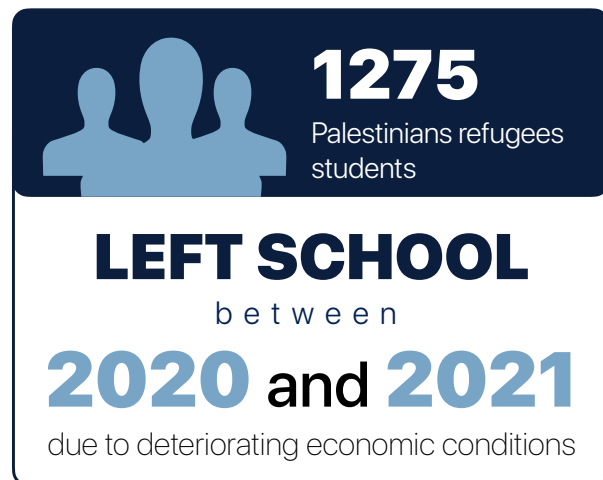
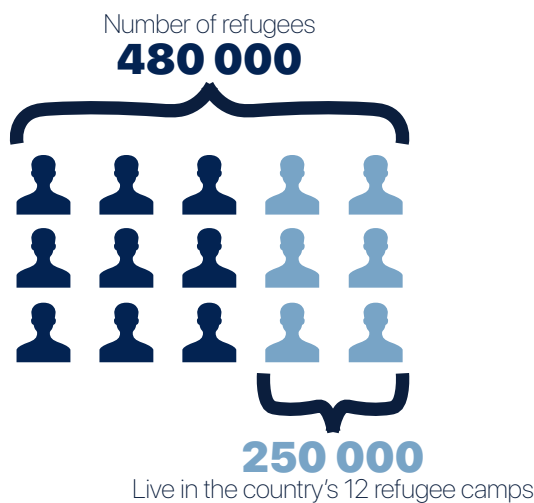
ability to cater for the basic needs of the Palestinian refugees.

Associated Risks:

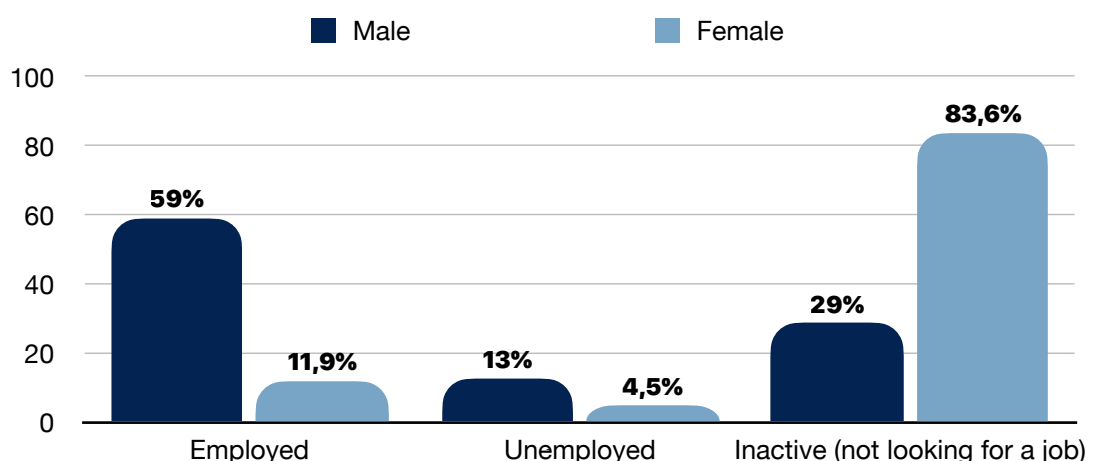
- Gender-based violence is escalating within the camps.
- Acute danger of crimes proliferation including theft, smuggling and joining outlawed groups have been observed.
- More endeavors to illegally reach Europe in pursuit of better living conditions are also intensifying.

In numbers:

Registered Palestinian refugees (2019 UNRWA estimates)



Employment status (as of 2019)



Economic Collapse in Lebanon generating more difficulties for the Palestinian refugees

The current economic collapse in Lebanon is contributing to a worsening of the already complicated socio-economic situation of the Palestinian refugees in the country. Observers report that the living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are now mirroring their situation in Syria and even in Gaza.

There are about 400,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. About 86% of them live under the global poverty line (1.9 dollars a day) which has resulted in food insecurity, lack of access to water and electricity, and limited access to health care. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) has issued several alarms when it comes to those realities on the ground. In term of working opportunities, UNRWA has largely been the employer of these refugees. Traditionally, Palestinians have been excluded from higher skilled positions in the Lebanese labor market. It was only in 2021 that Lebanon partially removed restrictions on Palestinians entering different sectors of the job market.

In addition to the systemic discrimination in terms of access to the job market, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are negatively impacted by the current massive economic crisis in the country. Lebanon is facing a deep economic crisis with multiple ramifications. Banks which are pivotal to the country service-oriented economy are paralyzed. Savers have been partially or totally denied access to their dollar accounts. The Lebanese pound has also crashed, driving a major segment of the population into poverty.

Lebanese economic situation at glance, long standing unaddressed issues backfiring at all levels

Some economists are referring to the Lebanon's financial system as a nationally regulated Ponzi scheme, where new money is borrowed to pay existing creditors making the system temporary holds until running out of money.

About 86% of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon live under the global poverty line (1.9 dollars a day)

It was only in 2021 that Lebanon partially removed restrictions on Palestinians entering different sectors of the job market

The Lebanese economy relied traditionally on foreign aid, tourism, earnings from its financial industry and remittances from the diaspora. The volatile nature of both aid and remittances have had cyclical adverse impacts on the country's economy. Remittances started slowing from 2011 and Sunni majority countries of the region drastically cut their financial support due to the rising power of Hezbollah.

To tackle the economic downturn, the Lebanese central bank introduced a range of mechanisms offering banks high returns in exchange for new dollars. Such financial incentives were not followed by needed economic reforms leading to further disengagement of international donors and investors which in turn further hampered the economic situation.

While the current economic crisis impacts different segments of the population, Palestinian refugees find themselves more severely impacted. The precarious economic situation pushed companies to either dispose of their workers or reduce their salaries to less than 50%. Due to their high representation in informal sectors and low skilled occupations, Palestinian refugees found themselves particularly impacted. Additionally, banking impediments associated with money transfer from some Palestinian expatriates to their families has also exacerbated the living conditions of those families.

The economic crisis impacts on the Palestinian refugees has been multifaceted. At the educational level for instance, an important portion of Students in universities stopped their studies due to their inability to cover tuition and transportation fees. When it comes to housing, most Palestinian refugees have stopped paying their rents, especially hundreds of families from Nahr al-Bared camp who are still waiting for the reconstruction of their homes since 2007.

COVID 19 Pandemic: Enormous effects on the Palestinian Refugees

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are three times more likely to die with COVID-19 than the rest of the population, according to U.N. figures that highlight the pandemic's outsized impact on

The economic crisis effects on the Palestinian refugees have been multifaceted impacting health, employability, housing and education

Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are three times more likely to die with COVID-19 than the rest of the population, according to U.N

the community. Difficult living conditions in camps makes social distancing unmanageable. Precarious living conditions inside the camps coupled with the need to go out to work made the Palestinian refugees more exposed to the virus. Vulnerable communities tend to have poorer baseline health conditions favoring more co-morbidities and chronic health conditions. It is very probable that the total number of infections among Palestinians was higher than the reported one given limiting COVID 19 test screening inside the camps. While there were initial worries on refugees' access to vaccination, the Lebanese government vaccinated Palestinian refugees along with the rest of the population.

Threatening the social fabric within the refugees' camps:

The current economic situation nurtures major concerns within the refugees' camps including:

- A. Fear of major protests against both UNRWA and the Palestinian factions on the ground of accusations of not shouldering their responsibilities towards the refugees.
- B. Stark Fear of the spread of crimes, Theft and smuggling inside the camps.
- C. Fear of the emergence and strengthening of radical and outlawed groups inside the camps.

Palestinian refugees from Syria, from war to hazardous living conditions

Going from a few thousands in late 2012 the Palestinian refugees from Syria (PRS) in Lebanon peaked in 2015 at an estimate of 44,000 refugees registered with UNRWA. As of August 2018, UNRWA confirmed the presence of 29,145 PRS in Lebanon down from 32,042 recorded at the end of 2016. The gradual reduction is due to either movement to third countries or unassisted returns to Syria. Most of the Palestinian refugees from Syria initially settled in overcrowded camps or informal settlements. Almost 90 per cent of PRS in Lebanon live under the poverty line and 95 per cent are food insecure.

UNRWA provides PRS families with a monthly multi-purpose cash grant worth US\$ 100 per family and an additional US\$ 27 for each family member per month to cover food costs. Although insufficient to ensure descent living conditions for PRS, those cash transfer further stresses the UNRWA budget which has been subject to multiple cuts.

Budget Cuts: An Existential Crisis for UNRWA

Budget cuts for UNRWA are jeopardizing the functioning of the agency. The latest of which has been the UK reducing its core grant by more than 50% from £42.5m in 2020 to £20.8m in 2021.

Prior to the UK budget cut, the UN agency was badly hit by President Donald Trump's 2018 decision to cut all U.S funding to UNRWA, which amounted to more than \$300 million a year. The United States was by far the biggest donor to UNRWA. There have also been cuts from other donors, including the Gulf states.

The budget cuts create a situation in which the UN agency is struggling financially to deliver the most essential services which in turns lead to a deep sense of abandonment within refugees. Worth noting that the agency operates about 700 schools catering for 550,000 children and provides health centers and social welfare to Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA budget cuts create a situation in which the UN agency is struggling financially to deliver basic services leading to a deep sense of abandonment within refugees

CIVIL SOCIETY LENS

Insights from the interview with Carole Mansour, lawyer and legal coordinator at UNRWA.

- > The economic impacts associated with COVID 19 were severely felt by the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon as many of them reported being either fired or experienced salary cuts due to crisis.
- > Additionally, the crash down of the Lebanese pound pushed landlords to request total or partial payment in US dollar putting further burden on Palestinian refugees. This created a situation in which sizable segment of them were not able to pay their rent.
- > The economic crisis extended to elementary everyday commodities. Against this backlash UNRWA tried to mitigate such costs by continuing to provide basic goods.
- > In term of addressing the COVID 19 immediate health impacts, the UNRWA and some grassroots organizations provided shelter for Palestinian refugees COVID 19 infected patients in addition to the distribution of hygiene kits.
- > In terms of COVID response UNRWA provided 90% hospital coverage of all COVID cases in need of hospitalization and 10% were covered by the Palestinian Embassy. Medications as well as consultations were provided free of charge in UNRWA health centers and UNRWA coordinated with local NGOs and the Ministry of Public health awareness raising on preventative measure and distribution of hygiene kits as well as vaccination.
- > UNRWA is also providing legal support for Palestinian refugees engaged in lawsuits against their landlords or formal employers.
- > The situation of the Palestinian refugees who fled the war in Syria is even more dramatic as they are not allowed access to the formal job market. The allowances provided by the UNRWA remain insufficient to cover their basic needs.
- > While there are no official statistics on the subject, the number of Palestinian refugees who are now trying to make their way illegally to Europe has increased. A Number of those trying to reach Europe in pursuit of better living conditions drown while others are still stuck in Turkey.
- > Gender-based violence in the camps has escalated alarmingly following the COVID 19 pandemic and the economic crisis creating further challenges for UNRWA.

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