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The Impact of
Lebanon's
Economic Crisis
on Palestinian
Refugees

A Working Paper by
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ABSTRACT

This report assesses the impact of Lebanon's current economic crisis on the socio-economic status of 180,000 Palestinian refugees living in the country.

Since 2019, Lebanon's economy has been locked in a prolonged crisis triggered by a debt default that has seen the currency lose 98 per cent of its value and inflation rocket to 200 per cent. This has caused a surge in the prices of daily necessities such as food, domestic fuel and transportation. Palestinians have been on the frontline of this economic crisis. Displaced from their homeland since 1948, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have never been naturalized, are excluded from 39 syndicated occupations and denied property rights. Their marginal status has been exacerbated by the arrival of 29,000 Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) who have fled the civil war in Syria. This has created a race to the bottom in terms of competition for low paying jobs in the informal sector. Palestinians have also been severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, and their health, education and living conditions are deteriorating as a consequence of Lebanon's economic meltdown.

The report is based on three field visits to nine Palestinian camps in Lebanon in 2022 and the latest research by UN agencies working in the country.

Key words:

Palestinian Refugees | Lebanon | Economic Crisis | Health | Education | Human Rights

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1] Introduction

This report is based on field visits carried out in May, September and November 2022 to nine Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The camps visited were: Al-Jalil, Beddawi, Burj Barajneh, Ein el-Hilweh, El-Buss, Mar Elias, Mieh Mieh, Rashidieh and Shatila. The purpose of the visits was to assess the impact of Lebanon's economic crisis on the social and economic conditions experienced by Palestinians and other residents of the nine camps. The visits included meetings with, and briefings from, the staff of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), school principals and teachers, UNRWA Chief Area Officers (CAOs) with over-arching responsibility for all services in the camp and surrounding locality, and the Camp and Community Services Officer (CCSO) who manages UNRWA services in the camp. The itinerary of a typical camp visit was as follows: meet initially with the CAO to discuss health, education and economic issues impacting Palestinian refugees in the camp specifically and the wider locality; meet the CCSO to receive an overview of the camp including the number of residents, the range of installations (primary and post-primary schools, health clinics, water treatment stations) and services (shelter rehabilitation, primary healthcare, relief and social services); take a walking tour of the camp with the CCSO to learn about population density, infrastructure and layout; visit a school, meet the principal and teachers, and take a tour of the school; and visit a health clinic and discuss the challenges presented by healthcare in a densely populated and high impoverished environment.

The extreme levels of social and economic poverty experienced by Palestinian refugees have multidimensional causes. They include social discrimination which in Lebanon means that Palestinians are denied citizenship, property rights and excluded from practising 39 syndicated professions, such as law, medicine and engineering (UNRWA, 2018: 1). This in turn forces Palestinian workers into the low-paid, unregulated informal economy where they are denied work contracts, labour rights and social protection. Palestinians are excluded from participation in the political process and lack representation in government institutions to raise their concerns. Palestinian refugees are also subject to spatial disadvantages as their lack of economic and property rights in Lebanon mean that nearly half (45 per cent) live in the twelve camps operated by UNRWA (UNRWA, n.d. f). The living environment in the camps is often overcrowded, unsanitary and unsafe, particularly in the larger densely populated camps such as Burj Barajneh and Shatila in Beirut and Ein El-Hilweh in Sidon (Ibid.).

The electricity and internet cabling in the camps dangerously intertwine with water pipes causing the threat of electrocution for residents (Palestine Return Center, 2020a). The surface areas of camps are

restricted which means the only form of expansion is available through vertical extensions that are often poorly constructed and unsafe. For young people, the living environments of the camps lack safe places to play and their opportunities for education are compromised by a system struggling with high classroom averages between 35 and 40, and spiralling costs for resources and transport. Lebanon's economic crisis has forced many Palestinian families to transfer their children from private and state schools into UNRWA schools which has increased classroom sizes and pressure on resources. Given their social and economic conditions in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees struggle to manage the fees needed to send their children into higher education although UNRWA provides in-country vocational training opportunities and qualifications.

There are more than 479,000 Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon with 180,000 estimated to be in-country calculated by the number of refugees accessing services with the remainder having temporarily or permanently left Lebanon (UNRWA, n.d. f). They have been living in Lebanon since 1948 and were among the 750,000 Palestinians forcibly displaced from their homeland by Zionist militias during the *Nakba* or catastrophe (Pappé, 2006: 6). Approximately 100,000 Palestinians from Galilee (Suleiman, 2006: 4) and coastal towns including Haifa and Acre fled north to Lebanon. Seventy-five years later there are now 5.9 million Palestinian refugees accessing UNRWA services with 568,730 registered in Syria, 2.3 million in Jordan, 1.4 million in the Gaza Strip, 871,537 in the West Bank and 479,537 in Lebanon (UNRWA, n.d. a). These figures are estimates only given the upheaval caused in the Middle East by the war in Syria which has forced 29,000 Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) to flee to Lebanon. This forced migration has increased pressure on UNRWA services with the majority of PRS seeking sanctuary in the twelve camps in Lebanon (UNRWA, 2022c: 4). Lebanon and Syrian refugee camps were also severely impacted by the two major earthquakes that hit southern Turkey and northwest Syria on 6 February 2023. A total of 104 Palestinians have been reported killed in the earthquakes; 53 in Turkey and 51 in Syria, with many more injured (Middle East Monitor, 2023). The infrastructural damage has been severe with UNRWA launching an emergency appeal for funding for both emergency humanitarian support for survivors of the earthquakes and infrastructural repair (UNRWA, 2023a). While the Palestinian camps in northern Syria have been most severely impacted by the earthquakes with 46,534 persons suffering physical harm or displacement, the already dilapidated housing stock and infrastructure in the twelve Palestinian camps in Lebanon also sustained major damage (Ibid.: 5). UNRWA has reported that 'essential services such as medical and educational facilities, in addition to water towers, have also sustained significant damages' (Ibid.: 6).

But the main focus of this report is on Lebanon's economic crisis sparked in 2019 by protests against planned austerity measures and deepened by a default on a loan repayment (Agence France-Presse, 2020) which has resulted in the Lebanese pound (LBP) losing 98 per cent of its value against the United States dollar (Al Jazeera, 2023). Lebanon's rapid economic decline, according to the World Bank, 'ranks among the worst economic crises globally since the mid-nineteenth century', and has resulted in the state being re-categorised as a lower-middle income country, down from upper middle-income status in July 2022 (The World Bank, 2022). This downgrading has been accelerated by the economic contraction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and a catastrophic explosion in Beirut's harbour on 4 August 2020 that caused infrastructural damage estimated between \$10-15 billion. For Palestinians, already on the margins of Lebanese society, the sharp economic contraction and currency depreciation, have hit particularly hard. By September 2022, 93 per cent of Palestinian refugees were reported as living below the poverty line with household budgets under severe strain and key public services such as transportation and medical care no longer affordable for many (UNRWA, 2022d). An indication of the desperation caused by the crisis has been an increase in the number of Palestinians attempting to emigrate from Lebanon by boat. Thirteen Palestinians from the Nahr El-Bared camp in Tripoli, northern Lebanon, were among the 94 people who drowned when a boat sank off the coast of Syria on 22 September 2022 (UNRWA, 2022d). 'No one gets on these death boats lightly', argued Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of UNRWA. 'People are taking this perilous decision, risking their lives in search of dignity' (The Observer, 2022).

The precarious living conditions of Palestinian refugees are also threatened by a financial crisis in UNRWA itself with Philippe Lazzarini announcing in June 2022 that the agency faced the 'most threatening financial situation of its recent history' (Lazzarini, 2022). This situation is the result of multiple crises hitting the agency at once: the COVID-19 pandemic which increased humanitarian need and worsened the economic circumstances of Palestinian refugees; deepening political and economic crises, particularly in Gaza, Lebanon and Syria; donor fatigue from repeated emergency funding appeals; annual rather than multi-annual funding allocations; the rising cost of food and energy; and the absence of any meaningful political process to bring resolution to the conflict in Middle East. Moreover, UNRWA employs 29,000 staff, most of whom are Palestinian refugees, so any cuts to UNRWA services resulting from reduced donations or pressure on resources could potentially mean job losses for Palestinians across all five of the agency's fields (UNRWA, n.d. b). Thus, regional instability in the Middle East and the deteriorating economic crisis in Lebanon make this report urgent and timely. The report will begin with an overview of the economic situation in Lebanon since 2019 and then consider in subsequent sections its impact on the socio-economic status of Palestinian refugees and on their education and healthcare.

2] Lebanon's Economic Crisis

Background to the crisis

Located between Syria to the north and east and Israel to the south, Lebanon is a small nation of 6.7 million people, mostly Christian and Muslim, but, according to UNHCR, hosting the largest number of refugees per capita in the world (UNHCR, 2022: 1). The government estimates the total number of Syrian refugees in Lebanon at 1.5 million with more than 12,000 refugees from other countries. This large refugee population has further destabilised a country already riven with sectarianism and corruption and currently ranked 154 out of 180 countries by Transparency International on its 2022 Corruption Perceptions Index (Transparency International, 2022). The origins of Lebanon's sectarian and corrupt polity lie in the post-World War One colonial carve-up of the Middle East that followed the collapse of the Ottoman Empire. The five Ottoman provinces constituting modern-day Lebanon came under the French mandate for Syria and Lebanon. In the inter-war period of 1923-43, France ruled Lebanon under a League of Nations Mandate and in 1926 the State of Greater Lebanon was constituted as the Lebanese Republic. During the Second World War, the French Mandate was terminated and its 'parting gift, the so-called National Pact, was in reality a curse' (Marlowe, 2020).

The National Pact resulted in high-level political offices in Lebanon being filled by religious affiliation - so the president must always be a Christian Maronite, the prime minister a Sunni Muslim and the speaker of the parliament a Shia Muslim - which 'has created fierce loyalty to family and community, but no sense of the common good' (Ibid.). 'The very certainty of power-through-religious-sect ensures corruption', argued the journalist Robert Fisk (2020), who lived in Beirut for over forty years. 'There can be no checks on dishonesty when power rests on mutual fear rather than compromise' (Ibid.). The connection between the confessional political pact and prevalence of corruption lies in a system in which citizens look to their local chieftain (za'im) rather than central government for the provision of services (Marlowe, 2020). This has created a hollow, ineffective centre lacking the political leadership to reach beyond their class and religion.

Lebanon's sectarianism was inflamed into full-scale civil war between 1975 and 1990 when religious factions allied themselves with military forces from Syria, Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO). In his masterful history of the country, *A House of Many Mansions*, Kamal Salibi described the civil war as 'being fought between Lebanese groups flying different historical banners: the Lebanese particularist and Christian on one side; the Arab nationalist and Islamic - not to speak of the Sunnite, Shiite and Druze - on the other' (Salibi, 1998: 17). The multifaceted and inter-factional

violence of the civil war had a devastating impact on Lebanon's economy and deepened the sectarian malaise. Rafic Hariri, a successful businessman who served two terms as Lebanon's prime minister, succeeded in 1989 in forging a peace agreement among 'Lebanon's fractious, ageing parliamentarians' (Marlowe, 2005). He invested heavily in the country's infrastructure and brought inflation under control. Hariri's decision to take the Sunni Muslim community into an anti-Syrian coalition almost certainly lay behind his assassination in 2005. His dream of a united, non-sectarian Lebanon seemed to die with him.

The enduring and, at times, absurdist nature of Lebanon's sectarian malaise was reflected in a decision by caretaker prime minister Najib Mikati to delay moving clocks forward an hour into Summer Time on 26 March 2023 to enable Muslims to break their fast during Ramadan at 6.00pm instead of 7.00pm (Astier, 2023). The Christian Maronite Church rejected the decision and pressed ahead with the time change meaning that Lebanon temporarily had two time zones causing chaos for airlines, businesses, schools and the media. Although the decision was quickly reversed and the country collectively moved into Summer Time, the fiasco was a telling example of politicians appealing to their base rather than considering the needs of the country as a whole.

Austerity and meltdown

For the past four years, Lebanon's economy has been locked in a prolonged crisis that has seen the currency lose 98 per cent of its value and inflation rocket to 200 per cent (Al Jazeera, 2023). The World Bank has described this brutal contraction as one normally associated with 'conflicts or wars' (The World Bank, 2022). While the official exchange rate has the Lebanese pound pegged at (Lebanese Pound) LBP15,000 to the US dollar, the exchange rate on parallel markets on 29 March 2023 was LBP142,000 to the dollar. The economic crisis was the culmination of decades of sectarianism, political corruption and financial mismanagement. In October 2019, the government introduced new taxation measures, including a tariff on the free messaging service WhatsApp, which sparked a wave of anti-austerity protests ([Amnesty International, 2020](#)). In March 2020, this political and economic crisis triggered a default on a \$1.2 billion Eurobond repayment due to unavailable foreign reserves as Lebanon's debt burden reached 170 per cent of GDP (Agence France-Presse, 2020).

The October uprising was characterised by a wave of non-sectarian and peaceful protests against the country's confessional and corrupt political system and resulted in the resignation of the government. But these protests were soon met by 'excessive force' by the military and political factions (Amnesty International, 2020). The economic crisis deepened further when Beirut was rocked by 'one of the largest non-nuclear explosions in history' at its port where 2,750 tons of ammonium nitrate recklessly

stored in a warehouse ignited on 4 August 2020 to kill 217 people and injure 7,000 (Amnesty International, 2021). The blast left 300,000 people homeless and the cost to the economy was estimated at USD \$15 billion (Azhari, 2020).

Leaked documents, revealed by Amnesty International (2021), have shown that successive governments were warned at least ten times of the dangers of stockpiling the chemicals in the port, but either ignored the problem or passed the responsibility on to others. Public officials and politicians have used the right to immunity to shield themselves from an investigation into the blast. For the majority of Lebanese, the port explosion was reflective of a state in the grip of cronyism, unaccountability and political negligence, with Amnesty accusing authorities of ‘shamelessly obstructing victims’ quest for truth and justice’ (Ibid.). The port explosion has compounded the hardship experienced by Lebanese citizens with Save the Children (2021) finding a year after the blast that ‘hundreds of thousands of children are going to bed hungry, often without having eaten a single meal that day’. One of the consequences of these multiple crises has been a spike in emigration with a total of 215,653 people leaving the country between 2017 and 2021 (Moussa, 2022). Most of those leaving have been young professionals causing a ‘brain drain’ in a number of vital sectors, particularly medicine.

The devaluation of the currency has meant spiralling prices for food and energy, a severe drop in disposable income and an increase in unemployment to nearly 30 per cent in 2022 (ILO, 2022). As a consequence, multidimensional poverty in Lebanon almost doubled from 42 per cent in 2019 to 82 per cent in 2021, signalling a society collapsing in key services such as health, education, utilities and housing (ESCWA, 2020). The weakness of Lebanon’s pound caused a spike in the cost of transportation by 508 per cent, and the prices of food and non-alcoholic beverages surged to 304 per cent by October 2021 (UNRWA, 2022c). Bank account holders have been denied access to their savings owing to the liquidity problems of Lebanese banks (Middle East Monitor, 2021). Some desperate citizens in urgent need of hard currency for their families have taken to robbing banks, not to steal the bank’s money but to access the funds in their own accounts (Al Jazeera, 2022).

COVID-19

Yet another major contributor to Lebanon’s economic slump was the COVID-19 pandemic which resulted in a 68 per cent drop in tourist spending in 2020. The lack of funds, resources and foreign currency meant that the government was unable to provide a stimulus package to equip public and private hospitals with much-needed resources to combat the virus (Bizri et al., 2021: 491). Also connected to the global slowdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic was a drop in remittances as a source of external inflows. Overall formal remittance flows have decreased over the past five years,

down to USD 6.6 billion in 2021, from a peak of USD 7.8 billion in 2016 (Mercy Corps and US Aid, 2022: 3). However, as the rest of the economy has collapsed to a much greater extent, remittances sharply increased to a staggering 53.8 per cent of GDP in 2021, the highest level of dependence in the world (Ibid.). The health emergency lockdown measures implemented by the government to prevent the spread of COVID-19 particularly impacted the hundreds of thousands of people dependent on small businesses.

By the end of 2020, a confluence of major debilitating crises had impacted the country: the October 2019 anti-austerity revolt; the default on a Eurobond and subsequent currency devaluation; the Beirut port explosion; and the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions which choked off tourism and small business trading. The effects of these crises were very visible on the streets of the capital Beirut, with adults and young people, sometimes working in teams, rummaging through rubbish tips on a daily basis to look for food or gather plastic bottles to recycle for a pittance.

Between 2019 and 2021, Lebanon's GDP per capita dropped by 36.5 per cent and it was re-classified by the World Bank as a lower-middle income country from an upper middle-income status in July 2022 (The World Bank, 2022). Lebanon's economy shrank for the fifth consecutive year in 2022 despite the tourism sector rallying somewhat post-COVID-19. The outlook for 2023 is bleak as the continuing depreciation of the currency is reducing the purchasing power of consumers, a new president has yet to be appointed since the resignation of Michael Aoun in October 2022, and the country continues to be governed by a caretaker cabinet and prime minister (Focus Economics, 2023). This lack of political unity and agency is likely to perpetuate the current crisis.

The strategy advanced by the government to address the country's economic crisis is to secure a \$3 billion 'fund facility' over four years from the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to 'put the economy back on a sustainable growth path' (IMF, 2022). So far, the Lebanese government has resisted implementation of the multi-pronged reform programme needed to secure the IMF loan, which is often mistakenly described as a 'bailout' (Ibid.). A briefing by Bretton Woods, an NGO that challenges the World Bank and the IMF lending programmes, suggests that Lebanon's political elites and private sector interests are strongly opposed to the root and branch reforms needed to restructure the financial sector including a 'forensic audit of the Central Bank, a default and haircut on internal debt owed to private banks' (Bazzi and Hassan, 2020). They also argue that a classic IMF bailout could worsen the economic crisis as it would involve 'fiscal consolidation, devaluation of the local currency, shrinking the public sector and removing subsidies on energy, gasoline and wheat', which could

ultimately ‘worsen the social crisis, cause more poverty and potentially lead to destructive social tensions’ (Ibid.).

A UN report has found that Lebanon has one of the most unequal wealth distributions in the Arab region with a wealth Gini coefficient of 81.9 per cent, and has one of the highest concentration of billionaires per capita; seven with total wealth in March 2020 of \$10.2 billion (ESCWA, 2020: 13). The same report estimated personal wealth in Lebanon at \$232.2bn, which suggests that the country could go a long way toward easing the plight of the most vulnerable by mobilising ‘its own substantial resources’ with a ‘fair and progressive system of shared responsibility’ (Ibid.: 17). The alternative of borrowing from the IMF is likely to result in the restructured debt being socialised and falling mostly on the shoulders of the majority of citizens rather than sheltered financial elites.

As one of the most marginalised and impoverished communities in Lebanon, Palestine refugees have been on the frontline of Lebanon’s economic crisis. Their lack of access to property, employment and citizenship rights in Lebanon meant that they entered the economic crisis in a state of precarity which has negatively impacted their socio-economic status.

3] The Socio-Economic Status of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

There are over 479,000 registered Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, 45 per cent of whom are living in twelve camps operated by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA, n.d. f). UNRWA is the UN mission established to provide for the welfare of Palestinian refugees following the ethnic cleansing of Palestine in 1948 (Pappé, 2006). UNRWA is additionally providing monthly cash assistance and services to 29,000 Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) who fled to Lebanon after the start of the war in Syria in 2011. Sixty per cent of PRS (262,000) have been displaced at least once by the war, 4,000 have been killed and 50,000 are estimated to have left Syria (UNRWA, 2019).

There are four categories of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (UNRWA, 2022d: 1). These legal categories directly influence their capacity to access services and thereby impact their socio-economic status. The largest grouping is Palestine Refugees in Lebanon (PRL) who are descended from those who lived in Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and were ethnically cleansed from their homeland during the Catastrophe (Nakba). The second category are those not registered with UNRWA who were displaced in the 1967 Arab-Israeli war and subsequent hostilities, and who are registered with the Lebanese government (known as 'Not-Registered' or 'NR' by UNRWA). The third category are Palestinian refugees who lack identity documents and are neither registered with UNRWA nor with the Lebanese authorities (and referred to as 'Non-IDs'). The fourth category are PRS, who have arrived in Lebanon since the 2011 Syrian war and who may or may not have regular status in Lebanon (Ibid.). UNRWA (2023c: 16) estimates half of all PRS in Lebanon to be without residency rights and, therefore, 'restricted in their movements and ability to gain employment'. Moreover, the prevalence of public sector strikes in Lebanon in 2022 meant that PRS found it difficult to renew residency permits which restricted their movement and access to employment. This is an example of how historical and contemporary events beyond their influence greatly impact the socio-economic status of Palestinian refugees.

A third of Lebanon's 180,000 Palestinian refugees depend on quarterly cash assistance from UNRWA and 62 per cent experienced a drop in income during the COVID-19 pandemic (UNRWA, 2022c: 5;6). While people across Lebanon are suffering from the economic crisis, it is particularly impacting Palestinian refugees denied the property, employment and citizenship rights of the Lebanese. In December 2021, Lebanese Labor Minister, Mustafa Bayram, announced a relaxation of the labour laws to allow Palestinians the right to work in managerial, business, tourism, industrial, information, health, education and service sectors, if they were born in Lebanese territories, born to a Lebanese mother

or married to a Lebanese citizen (Houssari, 2021). Whilst these changes are welcome there are some caveats attached to them: occupations that require trade union affiliation such as law, medicine and engineering are unlikely to be open to Palestinians as they require legal changes within the syndicates; and, second, as the law has been changed by ministerial decree rather than legislation that would make it permanent, the next Labor Minister could reverse the decision (Ibid.). Nonetheless, the Alliance of Palestinian Forces, a loose Damascus-based alliance of eight Palestinian political factions, welcomed the decree as likely to ‘widen the margins of job opportunities available to Palestinian workers’ (Mahfouz and Sewell, 2021). In indicating why he issued the decree, Minister Bayram said ‘We are in trouble in the job market and trying to fill the gaps’, adding that ‘The Lebanese market needs foreign labor’ (Houssari, 2021). This is recognition of the fact that Palestinians in Lebanon have been living with a perpetual foreigner status in the country for seven decades and been unable to secure a life of dignity consistent with fundamental social and economic rights.

Despite the modesty of the changes to the labour laws proposed by the decree, they were strongly criticised by the Kataeb Party and Free Patriotic Movement, representing Christian factions in Lebanon, as signalling a slippery slope toward the naturalisation of Palestinians and displacement of Lebanese workers from their occupations (Ibid.). However, UNRWA’s socio-economic survey suggests that little has changed in the employment conditions of Palestinians with only 12 per cent of those surveyed having a written contract with their employer (UNRWA, 2022a: 1). As the International Labour Organisation (ILO) found, the majority of Palestinian workers are ‘engaged in low-status jobs that are poorly paid, insecure and lack adequate social protection’ (ILO, n.d.). This leaves Palestinians open to exploitation in the workplace and vulnerable to dismissal or temporary layoff without pay in an economic downturn or crisis such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

PRL and PRS

Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) are often competing with PRL for employment, often in low-paid, manual jobs which perpetuate poverty. This is one of the consequences of the labour restrictions imposed on Palestinians which deny them access to syndicalist positions in the formal employment sector such as law and medicine. The parlous state of the economy and squeeze on jobs creates a race to the bottom which inevitably depresses wages and creates vulnerability in the workplace. The UNRWA 2022 socio-economic survey of Palestinians in Lebanon found that 37 per cent of workers had a verbal agreement with their employer and 50 per cent had no contract at all (UNRWA, 2022a: 1). The same survey found that a massive 94 per cent of women aged over 16 years and 33 per cent of men were unemployed. Sixty-one per cent of all those surveyed had been in work for less than nine months over the previous year which has resulted in almost all Palestinian families living below the

poverty line (Ibid.). UNRWA found that traditional coping mechanisms in times of economic crisis had been exhausted which meant that many families were turning to ‘maladaptive coping mechanisms’ including: ‘selling belongings, missing meals, child marriage, child labour, incurring debts and unsustainable borrowing practices’ (UNRWA, 2023c: 5). With no resolution to the economic crisis in sight, increasing numbers of Palestine refugees are risking their lives by taking overcrowded boats across the Mediterranean to what they hope is sanctuary elsewhere (Murphy, 2022).

UNRWA has responded to the crisis by providing cash assistance to PRL and PRS in US dollars. Eighty-six per cent of PRS relied on UNRWA cash assistance as their main source of income in the first quarter of 2022 as government subsidies to refugees were withdrawn as a result of the crisis (UNRWA, 2022c: 6). For the average family, travel to work or education has become increasingly difficult as a result of spiking fuel and transport costs. Similarly, food staples have surged in price with an UNRWA food price survey carried out between October 2019 and July 2022 finding that the average cost of a food basket in Palestine refugee camps in Lebanon had increased from LBP130,441 per month to LBP860,000 per month, a rise of approximately 560 per cent (Ibid.: 15). The World Food Programme reported in 2022 that, at 351 per cent, Lebanon had experienced the sharpest annual increase in the cost of a food basket across the Middle East North Africa (MENA) region, followed by Syria at 97 percent (World Food Programme, 2022: 2)

Protection issues

In addition to the material hardship caused by Lebanon’s economic crisis, Palestine refugees are also experiencing mental health problems. In 2020-21, UNRWA screened over 12,000 Palestine refugees for mental health and psychosocial support (MHPSS) with 2,500 beneficiaries receiving mental health consultations by specialists with symptoms including depression, anxiety, psychosis, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), behavioural problems, dementia, and family related issues (UNRWA, 2022b). UNRWA is also anticipating an increase in protection issues emerging in the twelve Palestinian camps including drug and sexual abuse and gender-based violence (GBV). In a 2023 emergency funding appeal for Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, UNRWA anticipates that a total of 4,000 PRL and PRS based in Lebanon will require protection interventions including: emergency cash in the case of eviction; support to survivors of child abuse and GBV; psychosocial care in the community; improved security in the camps to address an increase in crime and theft; and programmes to ensure ‘gender mainstreaming, disability inclusion, [and the] prevention of sexual exploitation and abuse (PSEA)’ (UNRWA, 2023c: 37). These interventions reflect the social pressures exacted on an already vulnerable population by Lebanon’s economic unravelling since 2019. UNRWA estimates that at least 20 boats with Palestine refugees on-board have left Lebanon irregularly since June 2022 (Ibid.: 16).

4] Education

There are 39,144 Palestinian refugees attending 65 elementary, preparatory and secondary UNRWA schools in Lebanon (UNRWA, n.d. d). Elementary schools cater for grades 1-6 (6-11 years), preparatory schools for grades 7-9 (12-14 years) and (eight) secondary schools for grades 10-12 (15-18 years). UNRWA schools teach the host country curriculum but deliver supplementary programmes such as Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) which has been taught across all their fields since 1999 to ‘sustain a culture of human rights’ in the classroom (Ibid.). Teachers receive professional opportunities through a School Based Teacher Development programme (SBTD I and II) and Principals and Deputy Principals are offered in-career ‘Leading for the Future’ (LftF) programmes to support reflection on their leadership (Ibid.).

On a visit to six Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon in September and November / December 2022, I learned about some of the key challenges confronted by schools in the first term of the academic year caused by the economic crisis. For parents and teachers, a major concern is the cost of transport for students and teaching staff which has increased by over 500 per cent and is not included in UNRWA’s education budget (UNRWA, 2022f). For many refugee families, bearing the cost of sending their children to school is beyond them and may result in student withdrawals. For example, Shajara Preparatory School in El-Buss camp in Tyre, around 80 km south of Beirut, has 639 students (555 PRL and 84 PRS) of whom 294 (46 per cent) depend on transportation to get to school. UNRWA staff estimate the cost of sending a child to school on public transport for a month at \$20 which is a considerable sum when set against the competing costs of food and domestic fuel. Walking to school for most students is either unsafe because of the state of the roads and lack of pedestrian areas, or unfeasible because of long distances.

UNRWA monitoring teams have reported the increasing prevalence of Palestine refugee children arriving at school ‘on an empty stomach and without food’ (UNRWA, 2023c: 15). This is particularly common in the central Lebanon area where Burj Barajneh and Shatila camps are located as well as camps in northern Lebanon and the Beqaa Valley. Recurring concerns across all the camps visited included the withdrawal of Palestinian students from Lebanon’s public and private schools because families could no longer afford the fees. This in turn was increasing enrolment in UNRWA schools already struggling with classroom sizes of 30-40 students. Deir Yasin Secondary School in El-Buss had an additional 110 new entrants from Lebanese private schools in September 2022 to add to its existing school population of 530 students and class averages of 35-39 students. Classes of this size impose enormous work pressures on teachers to cater for students of different levels of ability, particularly when some students are wrestling with psychosocial distress and consequent behavioural problems.

Furthermore, many school buildings are located in rented accommodation unsuitable for education and lacking facilities for physical education and playground use at break-times. For example, on a visit to Askalan Elementary School in Mieh Mieh camp, which caters for 486 students south of the city of Sidon, I found the students playing in a confined entrance to the school before class as the school lacked a designated space for the children to play. The use of rented accommodation creates challenges with overcrowding, small classrooms, and poor lighting and ventilation, as well as a lack of facilities for information technology, science and other curricular and extra-curricular activities. It results from a shortage of school buildings to cater for the increasing student population, budgeting constraints and the construction constraints within the camps.

COVID-19

The school closures and health emergency lockdowns necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic had a particularly severe impact on the education of Palestinian refugee children. The demands of home schooling in the 2020-21 academic year were challenging for Palestinian families in an environment with intermittent electricity, a limited Internet connection and shortage of electronic devices. Many families had access to just one mobile phone which made it difficult for children, particularly in large families, to access lessons and correspond with teachers on WhatsApp and other online programmes. The 2021-22 school year was a hybrid of home schooling and face-to-face learning in the classroom with full-time education in school only resuming in September 2022. The staff of Al Qastal School in Al-Jalil refugee camp in the Beqaa Valley combined printed materials, WhatsApp groups for students and teachers, Zoom and Google platforms to maintain education programmes during lockdowns. However, almost every school and principal visited discussed the negative impact of home schooling on student competencies, particularly in literacy and numeracy. On the resumption of education post-lockdown, schools often detected major regression in core areas of the curriculum as students struggled to maintain normal educational progression at home.

I encountered very similar issues on a field visit to four Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan in November 2021 where some students commented on the mental stress of home lockdowns and isolation from peers (McCloskey, 2022). They also shared their difficulty with home schooling and accessing and completing lessons without the assistance of smart phones and learning devices such as Tablets. Other consequences of COVID-19 in Lebanon included increases in school dropouts, mental health problems and child labour as some young people contributed to the family income in a period of severe economic contraction.

Table 1. Non-attendance at UNRWA Schools (2017-22)

Age Range	Non-Attendance Rate 2017 (%)	Non-Attendance Rate 2022 (%)
6-12	0.1	3
13-15	0.2	15
16-18	0.2	41

Source: UNRWA, 2022d.

Table 1 shows the highest school drop-out rate in the 16-18 age range which can be attributed to the limited number of UNRWA secondary schools in Lebanon, the increasing cost of school fees in Lebanese public and private schools and the pressure on young people to work and supplement the family income. Yet another factor is the demotivating employment situation for Palestinians in Lebanon given the entry barriers to occupations in the regulated formal sector. Moreover, the costs of higher education can dissuade parents and students from working toward a school leaving *certificate* called the *Baccalaureate* which is needed to pursue an under-graduate course in university. However, Manor Mahmoud, principal of Nazareth Secondary School in Beddawi camp near Tripoli in northern Lebanon, said that 60 per cent of her students in the 2021-22 academic year secured the Baccalaureate and attended Lebanese universities. She said that they pursued careers in the business, non-governmental, science and education sectors. This suggests that the dedication of education staff and sacrifices made by parents and children is enabling good practice in the most challenging of circumstances.

For Palestine Refugees from Syria, the situation in Lebanon became much more precarious in 2019, when the government's General Security Office decided to deport Syrians who entered the country illegally after 24 April (Palestinian Return Center, 2020b). This means that students who successfully completed Grade 12 are unable to claim their certificate because of a lack of residency. PRS without legal residency documents live under fear of arrest, detention and deportation, and subsequently lack freedom of movement.

Yet another cross-cutting issue for nearly all schools was a lack of school supplies such as stationery and textbooks, and equipment deficits in crucial subjects including Information Technology and science. Some of the schools visited lacked a functional computer suite and science laboratories for practical teaching. In some cases of overcrowding, students lacked a designated classroom and were using ad hoc spaces such as the school library. This in turn impacted the morale of both teachers and students.

A potential concern for students, parents, teachers and principals going forward is the possibility of an increasing numbers of UNRWA schools having to double-shift. This would involve the same school building being used by two different student populations every day in the morning and afternoon. The growing number of Palestinian students migrating to UNRWA schools from the Lebanese public and private education sector will add pressure on classroom sizes, teachers and resources. Class sizes in many schools are already averaging forty students or more which precludes expansion and most school buildings are at maximum capacity. Double-shifting is already a common practice in other UNRWA fields, particularly in Jordan at 88 per cent of schools and Gaza at nearly one-third. It will result in children receiving a part-time education when there are already so many other barriers to education in Lebanon: lack of resources and equipment; high levels of poverty and deprivation; lack of learning devices to support home schooling; and lack of residency status and documentation among PRS. Many of these problems could be addressed if Palestinians were naturalised in Lebanon and had equal access to employment and education. It would potentially enhance their economic status and the means to sustain young people in education.

5] Health

In Lebanon, there are 27 UNRWA healthcare facilities in Palestinian camps with 299 staff serving 150,000 patients per annum (UNRWA, 2023b: 7). In Ein el-Hilweh, the largest Palestinian camp in Lebanon (population 50,000) each health centre receives 600-800 patients per day. The share of Palestinian households suffering deprivation in Lebanon as a result of healthcare increased from 9 per cent in 2019 to 33 per cent in 2021 (ESCWA, 2021: 4). As 55 per cent of the Palestinian population is not covered by health insurance, it will be unduly impacted by the removal of government subsidies on drugs. This problem is compounded by the collapse of the Lebanese pound which further inflates the cost of medical drugs and, as Palestinians are not naturalised, they are ineligible for state-provided social services, including healthcare.

Fifty-five per cent of Palestinian refugees access UNRWA's primary health services that include: outpatient consultations, health screening, laboratory testing, ante- and post-natal care, dental treatment and specialist consultations (UNRWA, n.d. c). Each health facility has a full complement of family health teams (doctors, nurses, pharmacists and health clerks), in addition to midwives and laboratory technicians. The most common health conditions among Palestinian refugees are non-communicable diseases (NCDs) including cancers, chronic diseases including hypertension, chronic pulmonary diseases (including asthma), diabetes and cardiovascular disease (Chaaban et al., 2016: 192). A UNICEF report found that over 40 per cent of all women and children in Lebanon (refugees and Lebanese nationals) are affected by anaemia, an iron deficiency caused by food and nutritional insecurity which can impact the cognitive development of future generations (UNICEF, 2022: 3). UNRWA subsidises treatment for more serious conditions such as cancer or heart surgery requiring hospitalisation but this will also require a contribution of around 50 per cent from the family of the refugee. The social and economic determinants of these health problems include high unemployment, lack of clean water and sanitation, food poverty, the stressful physical environment of the camps and unhygienic and poorly maintained homes.

Lebanon's economic slump means that many basic and essential drugs cannot be produced locally and are no longer available in pharmacies. The removal of state subsidies on essential medications has priced them beyond the reach of a large percentage of the population. This is particularly serious for Palestine refugee cancer patients who are excluded as 'non-citizens' from obtaining cancer medications at subsidised prices. In a 2023 emergency funding appeal, UNRWA aims to provide 8,126 vulnerable Palestine refugees (1,620 PRS, 5,796 PRL and 710 non-IDs) with subsidised hospitalisation admissions for non-COVID-19 related treatment. UNRWA is already subsidising 90 per cent of secondary hospital admissions for PRS and non-IDs.

A 2021 report from UNRWA's Department of Health stated that the number of COVID-19 cases recorded among Palestinian refugees in Lebanon was 13,246 and the total number of deaths 384 (UNRWA, 2021: 12). The total number of COVID-19 related deaths across all of UNRWA's five fields in 2021 was 2,063 (Ibid.). Dr Firas Al-Abiad, the General Director of the Rafic Hariri Government Hospital in Beirut, found at the height of the pandemic that the COVID-19 mortality rate among Palestinians in Lebanon was 2.4 per cent, 'more than double Lebanon's 1 per cent rate' (Nasreddine, 2020).

UNRWA estimates, on the basis of its experience during the COVID-19 pandemic, that it will need an additional 173 health workers to meet the health needs of Palestinian refugees in 2023. The Agency anticipates 180,000 visits by Palestinian refugees to health centres in 2023 given the level of health screening needed for cholera, COVID-19 and cancers (breast cancer being particularly virulent among women in the camps). Managing these health needs amid a collapsing medical infrastructure in Lebanon will be a huge challenge.

6] Conclusion

On 15 May 2023, Palestinians commemorated the 75th anniversary of the Nakba when Zionist military forces displaced 750,000 Palestinians from their homes, occupations and lands, and seized 78 per cent of historic Palestine (Haddad, 2022). The United Nations General Assembly passed a motion to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Nakba (UN General Assembly, 2022). It is important to recall at this juncture that the 1949 UN Resolution 194 (III) (UN General Assembly, 1949) asserted the right of Palestinian refugees to return to their homes and, in the 1974 Resolution 3236 (XXIX), the UN 'reaffirmed the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people to self-determination, national independence and sovereignty, and the right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property' (UN General Assembly, 1974). In regard to Israel's breach of these rights, Amnesty International (2019) states clearly that:

"Israel's failure to respect the right to return for Palestinians who were forced to flee their homes in 1948 is a flagrant violation of international law that has fuelled decades of suffering on a mass scale for Palestinian refugees across the region".

Since 1948, successive generations of Palestinians in Lebanon have been cast into the life of a refugee and subjected to a permanent foreigner status. The experiences of Palestinians in Lebanon illustrate all too painfully how refugee status leaves them vulnerable to the vagaries of the cultural, social, economic and political situation in the countries and regions where they have been hosted. The exclusion of Palestinians in Lebanon from forty syndicated occupations in the formal employment sector has mostly confined PRL and PRS to the unregulated informal sector with its low pay and precarious status. Despite their longstanding presence in Lebanon, PRL have never been naturalised and remain excluded from key aspects of social, political, and economic life. As a socio-economic survey of PRL in 2015 found, 'they face legal and institutional discrimination; they are denied the right to own property and face restrictive employment measures' (Chaaban et al., 2016: 7). PRL have been trapped in a limbo situation unable to elevate their social and economic status, denied political representation and participation, and increasingly dependent on UNRWA for their social and economic needs.

This report has documented how Lebanon's economic crisis sparked by 2019's anti-austerity protests but rooted in a colonial history, decades of cronyism and a sectarian polity have deepened the multi-dimensional poverty of Palestinian refugees. UNRWA's latest socio-economic survey², carried out in September 2022, found that 93 per cent of Palestinians in Lebanon live below the poverty line (UNRWA, 2022a: 3). Palestinians have been on the frontline of Lebanon's economic crisis because

they were already living in vulnerable conditions 'characterized by overcrowding, poor housing conditions, unemployment, poverty and lack of access to justice' (UNRWA, n.d. d). The war in Syria has resulted in 29,000 PRS fleeing to Lebanon since the start of the conflict in 2011, most of whom have taken refuge in the same twelve camps. This has further depressed the labour market for PRL and PRS as increased competition for informal jobs has decreased wages. It has also left many PRS, who lack registration and status in Lebanon, vulnerable to arrest and deportation, and unable to access vital services. As the AUB report found: 'PRS are regarded as wartime refugees; their status in the eyes of the Lebanese government and the international community is wholly different to that of PRL, who are now in their third generation of displacement' (Chaaban et al., 2016: 6).

The rapid depreciation of the Lebanese pound to LBP142,000 to the dollar (29 March 2023) has been catastrophic for the majority of Lebanese citizens but particularly for PRL and PRS. The surge in the cost of transportation has forced families to choose between sending their children to school or purchasing essentials such as food and fuel. The transferral of Palestinian children from Lebanese private and public schools to UNRWA's 65 preparatory, elementary and secondary schools is increasing average classroom sizes and creating unprecedented pressure on school resources, many of which are housed in unsuitable rented buildings. The cost of healthcare and medication is also spiking which is particularly problematic for Palestinians in need of secondary or tertiary hospitalisation. The combination of poor sanitation and inadequate housing in the twelve camps, together with a limited diet and low incomes contribute to illness and mental health problems. For children in particular, the camps lack safe spaces to play, and the intertwining of electricity cables with sanitation and water pipes pose the constant threat of electrocution.

These problems have been compounded by three additional crises in Lebanon. First, the 4 August 2020 Beirut port explosion which killed 217 people, injured 7,000, made 300,000 people homeless and cost the economy up to \$15 billion. Second, the earthquake in Turkey and Syria on 6 February 2023 and subsequent aftershocks which caused significant destruction to Palestinian camps in northern Syria and infrastructural damage to the twelve camps in Lebanon. Third, the COVID-19 pandemic and related health emergency lockdowns which severely impacted the education of Palestinian children and caused economic hardship for families who suffered from a loss of employment. An additional ongoing crisis is the existential financial threat to UNRWA services and the 29,000 mostly Palestinian refugees who work for the Agency. As donor funding has stagnated over the past decade, 'the refugee population has continued to grow while poverty and vulnerabilities have skyrocketed' (Lazzarini, 2021). UNRWA is the sole agency responsible for assisting Palestinian refugees

and ensuring the long-term financial security of the agency is essential as the need for its services grow.

However, the most just and sustainable solution to the Palestinian refugee crisis in Lebanon lies in ensuring that Israel respects the right of Palestinian refugees to return home as established in Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948). It is essential that all international development agencies, development ministries and UN member states work toward the inalienable right of the Palestinians to return to their homes and property from which they were displaced in 1948 (UN, 1948).

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