

The Corona Virus Impact on the Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

A General Overview

General Background: Lebanon Crises

Lebanon is experiencing a strict lockdown and curfew currently in an attempt to contain the COVID-19 spread. Enormous numbers of people got infected by the virus with no available appropriate health care. Patients wait on pavements outside hospitals in Beirut, where emergency rooms are packed and intensive care beds full, according to the reports.

As Lebanon struggles to contain COVID-19 infections, the number of people suffering from extreme poverty has tripled in the past year. A situation analysis published in Human Rights Watch World Report 2020 stressed the dire need in the country. The lives of Lebanon's citizens and that of the refugees are becoming more unbearable as the poverty rate has doubled and the extreme poverty rate has tripled¹.

The effects of the explosion at the port of Beirut (Aug. 4th, 2020) on the Lebanese economy and supply chains are seen to worsen an already deteriorating socio-economic situation. It resulted into a further increase in the number of the poor and extreme poor among the Lebanese people, reaching 45% of the population according to the World Bank².

Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

For over 72 years of residing in Lebanon, 45% of the total Palestinian refugees still live in 12 official refugee camps scattered around the territories. Conditions in the camps are dire and characterized by overcrowding, poor housing conditions, unemployment, poverty, lack of access to justice³, and lack of civil rights.

The living conditions of the Palestinians living outside the camps are no better. 55% of the refugees living in 156 Informal Gatherings (areas around the camps and adjacent areas)⁴, suffer total absence of services. The Gatherings fall outside the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the sole official service provider to the Palestinian refugees.

¹ <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020>

² <https://reliefweb.int/report/lebanon/beirut-port-explosion-impact-key-economic-and-food-security-indicators-august-2020>

³ <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/lebanon>

⁴ The Palestinian-Lebanese Dialogue Committee (LPDC): Consensus in Palestinian Camps and Gatherings (2017)

The decline of the Lebanese economy hits refugees double or three times more than the Lebanese, bringing Palestinian refugees to the brink of survival⁵. Depletion of the UNRWA services has been in constant increase since 2010, and reaching its peak in 2018, when the USA halted its support to UNRWA⁶. In 2019, an unjust decision by the Lebanese Ministry of Labor added to the unemployment number of the workforce among the Palestinians. Despite the intense protests, little has changed. Later in 2019, the break of the Lebanese popular protests nationwide eliminated any hopes of economic improvement.

Another factor is the Syria crisis which has added the intense level of vulnerability among the Palestinians in the camps and the gatherings. Now hosting Palestinian Refugees from Syria (PRS) and Syrian refugees, additional socioeconomic difficulties have existed. As a result, extreme poverty rates have increased among the Palestinian refugees reaching up 80%⁷. And while many Palestinians have been hit hard by the Corona virus – UNRWA says unemployment in camps has shot up from 65 to 90 percent⁸.

Hence, the traditional social networks in the camps have been significantly challenged by the influx of refugees. Thus, an increase in internal tensions among the communities sharing overcrowded distance and jobs occurred.

Violence as Result of Socioeconomic Conditions

Marginalized, deprived of basic political and economic rights, trapped in the camps, the Palestinian refugees are bereft of realistic prospects and hopes. Such a living environment nurtures risky behaviors of delinquency and crime, especially among the youth. According to a study published by the Norwegian People's Aid (NPA), Palestinian youth in the camps have turned to drugs and enrolment in armed factions and radical groups that encourage violence as they have desperately reached a deadlock⁹.

The increased poverty rate caused by the overall conditions and the COVID-19 lockdown has consequently increased the crime rate in the whole country. Cases of theft, burglaries, violent assaults and killing are frequently seen on the news. Hunger and need are the main motivational incentives of the perpetrators.

The Palestinian refugee camps are no void of similar actions. Increased violence domestically and in the streets has been frequent. In the past year and early in 2021, several cases of murders in the camps made up national news stories¹⁰. Some of those crimes were the causes of theft, while others reported to be the result of family dispute. In addition, victims of gender-based violence have increased recently, according to reports. In short, the crises have laid heavy influence upon the

⁵ <https://www.thenewhumanitarian.org/feature/2020/05/27/Lebanon-Palestine-coronavirus-aid>

⁶ Ibid, 5

⁷ <https://www.aa.com.tr/en/middle-east/ngos-offer-lifeline-to-palestinian-refugees-in-lebanon/2089203>

⁸ Ibid, 5

⁹ <https://daleel-madani.org/civil-society-directory/norwegian-peoples-aid-lebanon/resources/future-without-hope>

¹⁰ <https://observers.france24.com/en/20200617-footage-shooting-death-mother-insecurity-shatila-camp-traffic-drug>

Palestinian refugee communities in Lebanon demonstrated by increased drug abuse and smoking, increased depression and mental disturbances, and an increase in domestic problems leading to divorces.¹¹

The COVID-19 Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps

UNRWA specified the total number of people infected with Covid-19 among the Palestinian refugees had reached 4,681 cases since the beginning of the crisis. During the Health Committee meeting held on Feb. 02/2021, UNRWA identified the number of active cases has reached 660 and the deaths totaled at 163 (as of January 27, 2021); the death cases being mostly among the elderly and those with chronic diseases. The first week of this February recorded additional 519 positive cases among the Palestinians (56 in the southern camps and gatherings; 138 in Beirut camps and the surroundings; 150 cases in Ein el Hilweh camp, and 175 in Saida area).

Regarding the vaccine for the Covid-19 virus, UNRWA indicated that the Lebanese Ministry of Health confirmed that Palestinian refugees will be included in the national plan for vaccination free of charge. Similar to the Lebanese, vaccination will be given according to WHO standards that determine priorities. In Lebanon, and representatives of UNICEF and the Disaster Management Committee, it was agreed to cooperate to find vaccination centers close to Palestinian camps and settlements. The vaccination will be phased. The first phase is to include workers in the health sector and the elderly from the age of 75 and over, in addition to patients suffering from diseases that may affect them if they are infected.

COVID-19 poses a particular risk for the overcrowded dwellings that Palestinian refugees have to call home as they navigate the camps plagued by unhygienic conditions and decaying infrastructure¹². According to experts, people in low-income groups, countries and societies, were the most affected by the pandemic. The Palestinians in Lebanon are one of those.

Being under the pressure of the economic situation, the Palestinian refugees in the camps tend to neglect the safety measures needed to protect themselves from the pandemic. They prioritize providing food for their families rather than spending money on hygiene materials, sanitizers and face-masks.

Conclusion

UNRWA has been under serious financial crisis since 2015. That resulted in depletion of the main services to the Palestinian refugees. Hence, non-governmental organizations have stepped up efforts to ease the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon who suffered cutbacks in a multitude of services (from health care to education, to food rations), in attempt to at least partially meet the needs of the Palestinian refugees in the camps and gatherings.

¹¹ <https://www.alzaytouna.net/2021/01/28/>

[التقدير الاستراتيجي\(124\): تأثيرات تطورات الأزمة اللبنانية على اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في لبنان](#)

¹² [ibid.](#) 7

Of all the Palestinian refugees in the five areas where UNRWA operates, Palestinians in Lebanon suffer the most. In addition to their un-identified status by the local government, Palestinians face discrimination and racism. Lack of integration within the local community makes life conditions for the Palestinians much harder. Palestinians who came from Syria (PRS) experience the same suffering. Their presence in Lebanon has also added to the already overburdened UNRWA budget.

About The National Institution of Social Care and Vocational Training

The National Institution of Social Care and Vocational Training (NISCVT) works in this context and focuses on providing assistance to those most in need through a multi-dimensional approach. The offered aid services include: the identification and referral of vulnerable individuals facing protection risks; the coordination and delivery of mental health and psychosocial support services; access to case management and psychosocial support for survivors of gender-based violence; child protection; protection mainstreaming; and engagement with duty bearers to advocate for Palestine refugees' rights.

NISCVT, known as Beit Atfal Assumoud, is a humanitarian, non-sectarian and non-governmental organization, and is not related to any political or religious groups. Founded in August 1976 in direct response to Tal Al Zaatar massacre, NISCVT provides services to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon (PRL), Palestinians displaced from Syria (PRS), as well as other disadvantaged people of other nationalities living in the camps or gatherings.

NISCVT-BAS contributes to the development of the Palestinian community in Lebanon. It aims to address the needs of the families through various gender-balanced projects, empowering the potentials and skills of children, youth and their parents or guardians.

NISCVT programs and activities include:

- Sponsorship for the children of hardship families, kindergarten children, elders and for children with multiple special needs "MSN" through its Family Happiness Program;
- Health programs and clinics: Mental Health, Reproductive Health and Peer Education; Pediatric Clinic, Dental Care Clinics; and psycho-social support program;
- Education Programs: Kindergartens, education support classes, special needs classes, drop-out classes and vocational training programs;
- Women's Programs: embroidery, awareness, and recreational activities;
- Art and Cultural Programs: cultural events, musical bands, libraries, dancing groups, computer labs, choirs, cultural exchange program, comics drawing, drums, and handicrafts;
- Sports: NISCVT-BAS sport club was established in 1989 in Nahr El-Bared center to give the Palestinian youth the opportunity to practice all kinds of sports activities which include Football, Ping Pong, Marathon and Chess.

- Scouts: aims at strengthening the nationalism, cooperation, and other scout duties that play an important role in building the individual's personality. Scout activities include bagpipes band that participates in national and social occasions, and in local and abroad festivals.

NISCVT-BAS runs 12 community centers, of which 10 centers are inside the Palestinian refugee camps and 2 outside the camps. Those centers are located in: Beirut, South Lebanon (Saida and Tyre areas), North Lebanon, and Bekaa (Baalbek). In addition, BAS reaches out to Palestinian refugee gatherings around Lebanon.

Until the Lebanese government is able to ensure constant food security and monitor the prices, NISCVT will continue to ensure necessary programmatic changes. Based on the above contextual summary, intervention mechanisms focus on filling the gaps with the necessities of the camp residents essential for their survival. In addition to providing the families with mental health support, the mechanisms include basic family support with edibles and distribution of food parcels to those highly affected by the ongoing crises.