

LHIF BRIEFING PAPER

JUNE 2021

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# SLIPPING THROUGH THE CRACKS

The limitations  
of response in  
Palestinian  
communities in  
Lebanon

Photo: Zaynab Mayladan/NRC



# INTRODUCTION

Interconnected and compounded crises in Lebanon have drastically changed the humanitarian landscape, with many newly vulnerable people unable to meet their basic needs. Syrian and Palestine refugees continue to face immense barriers in accessing essential services, dignified living conditions, decent work opportunities and legal protection as a result of their status in Lebanon.

This note focuses on Palestine refugees; a population group which has fallen off the radar of many during Lebanon's 'annus horribilis'. The analysis and recommendations outlined in this document, draw on a recent survey of LHIF members currently implementing activities in Palestinian communities, in addition to interviews with local NGOs and UNRWA programme staff.

Three interconnected challenges impact the ability to respond effectively in Palestinian communities:

1. a constrained fundraising space;
2. under-documented needs; and
3. a siloed response architecture.

With this briefing, LHIF poses the following question to shape a conversation between aid actors and donors - **How do we improve the quality of life of Palestinians over the longer term, while taking a needs-based and targeted approach to respond to immediate humanitarian needs?**



# UNRWA AND NGOS— GAP-FILLING TO STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIP

Despite their longstanding presence in Lebanon, Palestinian refugees still live in a precarious situation today. De-facto access to rule of law and legal protection is extremely limited, which directly impacts the exercise of a broad range of basic rights. This includes the right to work and the right to adequate housing (1), in addition to access to public services such as secondary education for children (2) and tertiary healthcare (3). **Since 2011, the dire conditions in Palestinian camps and gatherings have been eclipsed by the Syria crisis** (4). Palestinian communities have hosted Syrian refugees and Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) (5), placing greater pressure on already limited services and debilitated infrastructure (6).

Based on its mandate, **UNRWA is the main service provider for Palestine refugees** in Lebanon and in the region. In Lebanon, in lieu of strategic partnership between UNRWA and NGOs, **NGOs continue to play a complementary role**, that includes:

a) filling coverage gaps in areas where UNRWA is the main provider;

b) leading the response in gatherings or adjacent areas where UNRWA does not work or only provides partial services; and c) supporting groups of Palestine refugees who are not or are only partially covered by UNRWA due to their specific ‘status’ including “non-registered” and “non-ID” individuals (7).

NGOs deliver services that complement UNRWA’s core services in Lebanon, such as school meals programmes in community centres in Palestinian camps. Psychosocial support, child protection services, additional medical support and hospitalization coverage (e.g. medicines, lab tests, consultation, dialysis treatment), daycare and community-based rehabilitation services, in addition to the support provided to local Palestinian organisations. Local organisations also play an important role through development programmes in Palestinian communities, such as youth, environmental and women’s empowerment projects.

**Palestine refugees are now more than ever reliant on external aid**, at a time when UNRWA's capacity is stretched and limited due to the twin pressures of COVID-19 and years of institutional funding cuts (8). The necessity of a comprehensive and better-targeted response in Palestinian communities has become more evident as the socio-economic situation in Lebanon deteriorates rapidly. According to WFP, almost 80% of Palestinians have either lost income-generating opportunities or seen a reduction in income, in the lead up to and since the onset of COVID-19 (9). A mid-2020 Rapid Needs Assessment (RNA) by one LHIF member in Palestinian camps (10) confirms that income has drastically reduced for almost two-thirds of those surveyed over the past year. Prolonged periods of lockdowns have had a hugely negative impact on vulnerable communities including Palestine refugees. The Palestinian workforce does not have access to work opportunities in 39 professional categories in Lebanon, resulting in most being employed in the informal sector. **The availability of daily labour and casual work has become increasingly scarce** (11). In addition, pre-existing legal discrimination and bureaucratic complexities further challenge Palestinian access to work.

NGOs are already seeing the impact on the ground and are facing increased pressure to deliver for a higher number of people with increasingly complex needs.

The majority of NGO responders we spoke with noted **an increase in the number of referrals from UNRWA for basic services** that the Agency previously provided but was no longer able to due to resource constraints. Examples include requests for support with assistive devices for People with Disabilities, WaSH and shelter needs, education support and coverage of related costs, in addition to *Learning Support Programmes* (LSP) for teachers. NGOs also reported increased needs for food assistance and requests for cash support, given the limited target population of UNRWA's cash assistance programme (12).

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***"My biggest fear is to grow old and not be able to provide for myself and my family.***

***Palestinians do not have a future in Lebanon. I provide for the whole family through the 'foron' [bakery] that I own, but now after the coronavirus and the financial situation that hit the country, I'm barely able to cover the bakery's rent alone, but what about the house rent and other expenses?"***

***Amer, 57, Saida (Cover photo)***

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# FOOD IS A SOURCE OF CONCERN

The drastic reduction of income coupled with hyper-inflation has made it impossible for many Palestinian families to meet basic needs, particularly food and healthcare. As per the World Food Programme (WFP) assessment highlighted above, food is a major source of concern with 63% of Palestinians worried that they would not have enough food to eat over the past month. In addition, Palestinian households who participated in an NGO RNA mentioned financial constraints as a major barrier to accessing required health services (93% of the responders in the South and 86% in Beirut/Mount Lebanon).

Despite NGOs and UNRWA responding to the needs of Palestine refugees in Lebanon for many years, the absence of a strategic partnership approach - between UNRWA and NGOs on the one hand, and between international and local NGOs on the other hand - has hindered the effectiveness and impact of the response. With the lack of comprehensive and updated mapping of I/NGOs activities in the Palestine refugee context, the risk of poor targeting and prioritization persists amongst several actors. Opportunities to engage in mid to long-term planning outside of emergency response remain limited. In addition, a critical lack of effective coordination undermines lobbying and advocacy initiatives towards donors and the international community more broadly.

NGOs therefore urge that existing coordination platforms between NGOs and UNRWA need to be strengthened and/or re-activated.

***"Our situation was very distressing. We had to live in a house with a roof made of metal sheets that did not stop rainwater from dripping in. All the electrical wires were not insulated and endangered our lives every second. The bathroom was located outside, and to reach it we had to walk in the wind and rain at night or noon. It was not a house. Our status had always been tough. We have lived with the pain of displacement twice".***  
***Umm Shadi, PRS, Al Jalil camp, Baalbeck.***



# A CONSTRAINED FUNDRAISING SPACE



Despite increased needs amongst Palestinians and UNRWA's reduced ability to respond, almost half of the LHIF members we surveyed were required to downscale their Palestinian-focused programmes due to funding cuts and a lack of donor interest. Further, local partner organizations have noted an inability to program donor resources given onerous compliance standards which are impossible for them to comply with due to short-staffed capacity or bureaucratic impediments related to employing Palestinians.

A reflection from many NGOs was that donors were less interested to fund recurrent activities, such as ongoing health or education programmes.

This was despite the fact that such programmes provided essential gap filling for social services not provided by UNRWA. Further, some donor funding guidelines have required targeting a limited number of beneficiaries in different camps or geographical locations instead of covering more people in one location. This is made all the more challenging with a lack of unified and coordinated targeting criteria.

Overall this has given NGOs active on the ground the perception that **donors in Lebanon have de-prioritized Palestinian needs as a result of the Syria crisis and more recently due to Lebanon's 'own' crisis.**

There is also a sense that Palestinian needs are politicized since funding opportunities are shaped by the geopolitics related to the Israel-Palestine conflict (13). The NGOs we spoke with believe that limited funding opportunities for Palestinians specifically, is also the result of their unclear “status” in Lebanon and the overall contested number of Palestinians residing on Lebanese soil (14).

The needs of Palestine refugees are driven by structural barriers in Lebanon. Donor governments have often been unwilling to politically engage on these barriers. Further, local NGOs reported that increasingly, opportunities to support these communities through development funding streams are limited. Most needs are met through emergency interventions; however, local responders do not always have the capacity and flexibility to shift to an emergency approach.

The reduced support to local responders has impacted all Palestine refugees in Lebanon. Even in exceptional times, for example, during the COVID-19 crisis, the majority of responders who took part in our survey have been unable to raise additional funds to cover a COVID-19 response. Almost half are using existing funds for COVID-19 response, with around a third unable to cover any response activities for Palestinians.



Photo: Taawon



LHIF members recognize that stronger coordination between NGOs working on Palestinian issues is needed, including joint fundraising efforts. However, the absence of a comprehensive nationwide assessment of Palestinian needs and updated demographic data makes it difficult for NGOs to engage with donors on projects targeting Palestine refugees.

**There is an overall understanding that funding for Palestinians, particularly for PRS, mainly exists in the Syria-crisis fundraising space. These sources of funding are no longer enough to address the pre-existing and emerging needs in Palestinian communities.** Small percentages of earmarked funding for Palestinian needs in grants focusing on Syrian refugees are insufficient to implement programmes that can demonstrate Value for Money and tangible impact.

This takes place against the

backdrop of reduced funding to the Syria-crisis response more broadly. Pledges announced at the Brussels V Conference on *Supporting the Future of Syria and the Region*, confirmed that funding cuts will occur, due to the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Pledges for Syria and neighbouring countries for 2021 were down 26.5% from 4.9 billion euro in 2020 to 3.6 billion Euro in 2021. This will have a negative impact on the capacity of actors to respond to the needs of different groups targeted under related Syria-crisis response plans, including Palestine refugees from Syria.

New funding streams such as the *European Union's Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI)* and the 2021 *Lebanon Humanitarian Fund (LHF)* Standard Allocation strategy might constitute new opportunities to target Palestine refugees as a vulnerable population group.



# UNDER-DOCUMENTED PALESTINIAN REALITIES

A likely consequence of the **absence of a comprehensive needs assessment or systematic protection monitoring is limited Palestinian-specific funding opportunities.** Conversely, conducting needs assessments requires funding, dedicated human resources and coordination to enhance UNRWA and NGO capacity to run such assessments on a regular basis. This 'Catch-22' has resulted in Palestinian issues being remarkably absent from discussions on the future of the response architecture in Lebanon.

The rapid deterioration of socio-economic indicators in Lebanon in 2020 gave rise to a plethora of reports re-evaluating the needs of vulnerable population groups. **Very few of these reports have shed light on the needs of Palestinians.** At present, we rely on anecdotal information or needs assessments with limited scope conducted by NGOs working in Palestinian communities. The limited number of assessments that were scheduled to take place in 2020 has also been derailed by COVID-19 related movement restrictions.

On the UN side, the most recent reference documents available are the *(as of yet unpublished)* results of UNRWA's socio-economic survey with PRS and UNDP's report from October 2020 which draws on results from a qualitative WhatsApp survey conducted in Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon back in October 2019 (15). In addition, a small sample of Palestine refugees (165) was part of the WFP assessment of the Impact of the Economic and COVID-19 Crises in Lebanon published in June 2020 covering Lebanese (2,418) and Syrian refugees (887). While these are useful contributions, none of them is representative of the realities in Palestinian communities today as the economic and health crises continue to unravel.

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***"The Pandemic's situation has led to reactions of fear, despair, and insecurity, thus increasing stress and aggressivity levels. The lockdown effect, worsened by the absence of income, led to the modification of the daily routine and generated a high-level of stress among Palestinians."***  
***TDH, RNA, June 2020***

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# POVERTY AMONGST PALESTINE REFUGEES IN LEBANON

The poverty rate amongst Palestine refugees in Lebanon (PRL), was estimated at 65% in 2015<sup>xvi</sup> (latest figure), however, is likely to have increased considerably over the past year. While there was no comprehensive survey on the socio-economic status of PRL after 2015, UNRWA 2020 post-distribution surveys showed that 87% of PRS live under the poverty line. The overwhelming majority (92%) rely heavily on assistance provided by UNRWA as a main source of income and are also heavily indebted (17).

**The current lack of strategic weight given to Palestinian issues is alarming and risks becoming a vicious circle.**

Strategy documents can only refer to specific needs when substantiated by evidence.

If there is none, or only outdated analysis is available, **references to Palestinian issues will remain generic.** This will fail to paint an accurate picture of the rapid deterioration we are witnessing on the ground.

## A 'SILOED' PALESTINIAN RESPONSE

The response architecture in Lebanon is complicated and overly-engineered. This relates in part to the division of roles and responsibilities between UN agencies, particularly between UNHCR and UNRWA and their relative mandates for different refugee populations. Key strategy documents such as the *Lebanon Crisis Response Plan* (LCRP) rely upon

the *Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon* (VASyR). However, the UNRWA Emergency Appeal for Lebanon, does not rely upon a comparable data set. This relates in part to UNRWA and NGOs lacking both the capacity and resourcing to deliver such evidence on needs in the Palestine refugee community.



Photo: TDH

In addition to fundraising challenges and knowledge gaps on Palestinian needs, NGOs have also noted continued access challenges to Palestinian camps. This relates to complex entry and exit regulations for Palestinian camps, in addition to access constraints impacting the delivery of construction materials. Almost half of the **NGOs surveyed faced challenges linked to access in 2020**, including the cancellation of field visits and activities due to security incidents, road closures, personal disputes, COVID-19 related movement restrictions, funerals and delays in revising documents at checkpoints, in addition to continuous changes in the local government entities (municipalities) where the camps exist, leading to changes of interlocutors and processes to access and operate in the camps.

Several NGOs also reported **facing pressure from local communities and local actors**

**to influence the admission of certain families in relief programmes or distribution activities. Vulnerability criteria adopted by UNRWA or NGOs were not well understood and accepted by communities where economic despair is widespread.** This also suggests that there is a lack of community ownership over aid processes. What this highlights is a critical need to reinforce community engagement and involvement in aid programmes. **This requires bolstering partnerships with a high number of local actors, all of whom play an important role in enabling a participatory response for and with Palestinians.**

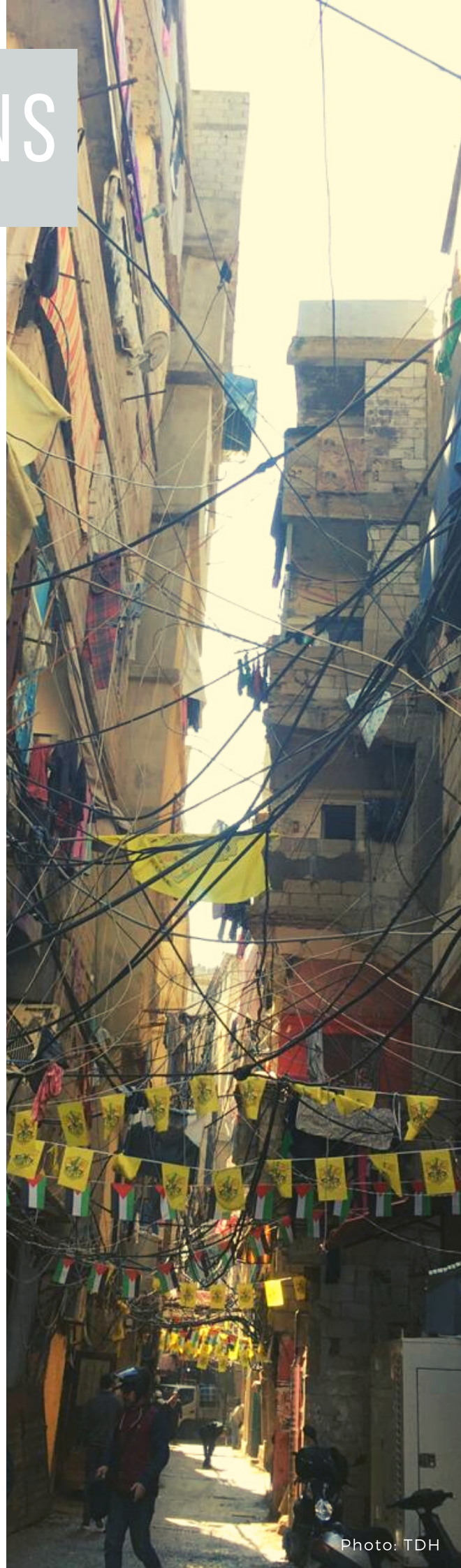


# RECOMMENDATIONS

*Given the challenges for the aid response and the dire situation confronted by Palestinian communities in Lebanon today, LHIF members active in these communities urge key stakeholders to consider the following recommendations:*

## **For donors**

- Advocate for a systematic inclusion of Palestinian needs in strategic humanitarian coordination in Lebanon.
- Ensure adequate, multi-layered funding to UNRWA and NGOs active in Palestinian communities to ensure the continuity of essential service provision.
- Create Palestinian-specific funding opportunities, including earmarked support to particularly vulnerable groups in Palestinian camps, informal settlements and urban slums.
- Allow beneficiary selection based on vulnerability criteria instead of nationality criteria to give flexibility to NGOs to address needs across all cohorts.
- Target PRL through development and long-term programming, e.g., capacity building, systems strengthening and integration within existing services.
- Over the longer term, re-initiate advocacy with the Government of Lebanon (GoL) towards a policy environment that enables self-reliance for Palestine refugees in Lebanon (e.g. lifting restrictions on professions).



- Monitor COVID-19 related and psychosocial needs in Palestinian communities and enable an adequate response through targeted funding opportunities.
- Support ongoing protection monitoring in all Palestinian communities with dedicated funding.
- Clarify the inclusion of the Palestinian response under the newly created Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) and LHF 2021.

#### **For UNRWA**

- Implement a partnership strategy, including joint planning, to enable UNRWA-NGO cooperation beyond ad-hoc requests for complementary support or gap filling.
- Strengthen and develop current efforts to establish systematic protection monitoring in Palestinian communities together with NGO partners.
- Strengthen needs analysis and information sharing in partnership with NGOs.
- Ensure the systematic inclusion of Palestinian needs in strategic humanitarian coordination documents.
- Improve information and knowledge sharing with NGOs working in Palestinian communities.

- Explore joint fundraising opportunities with NGOs in communities where UNRWA and NGOs have a clear complementary role.
- Establish an effective coordination platform to bring aid actors and local Palestinian authorities and community representatives (including the popular committees) together, which can increase acceptance, access, and ownership across the humanitarian response. This coordination effort could include the creation of specialist committees in view of a more effective follow up on key issues.

#### **For the Government of Lebanon (GoL)**

- Ensuring access to Palestinian camps to ensure continuity of humanitarian programming.
- Enable Palestine refugees' access to employment and other basic rights including improved access to the judicial system.
- Support recruitment and training of healthcare workers drawing on existing capacity in Palestinian communities to support the COVID-19 response.
- Improve access for Palestinians to some government-supported services (e.g. for children with cognitive disabilities).
- Clarify and strengthen the role of the inter-ministerial Lebanese Palestinian Dialogue Committee (LPDC).

**For NGOs working with Palestinians**

- Improve coordination, collaboration and information sharing between local and international NGOs and between NGOs, UNRWA and the Palestinian popular committees to ensure a more coherent and evidence-based response.
- Contribute to an UNRWA-led mapping of needs through multi-sectoral needs assessments in the Palestinian camps and gatherings.
- Develop a de-duplication system to track assistance and programmes and avoid duplication of services between LNGOS/INGOS/UNRWA, especially for cash assistance.
- Improve organisational and technical capacities, in addition to accountability and transparency requirements, in order to successfully meet donor requirements.
- Develop more impactful, holistic programming in addition to existing emergency response.
- Focus on all Palestine refugees, including PRL and PRS, emphasising outreach to those who do not have unrestricted access to UNRWA services.
- Continue to advocate with Palestinian stakeholders, including the representative of the Palestinian Authority in Lebanon, the Palestinian embassy, the LPDC and GoL to improve conditions for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

**For local Palestinian stakeholders**

- Reinforce community engagement through joint development and review of emergency and aid strategies.
- In collaboration with UNRWA and Lebanese authorities, develop a Palestine refugee resource centre with updated information/assessments.
- Serve the community in a principled way, based on needs alone.
- Engage actively in coordination platforms and directly with international and local aid actors to avoid duplication of services.



# NOTES

1. UNRWA Protection Brief “Palestine Refugees Living in Lebanon” (update September 2020)
2. School dropout rates are high among Palestinian children, even before the crisis and the COVID-19 related measures, with only one out of two Palestinian students making it to the secondary level.
3. Many Palestinian refugees from Syria and from Lebanon face challenges in accessing healthcare since 99% of the population has no health insurance coverage and relies solely on UNRWA services. (LCRP 2021 Update).
4. Lebanon hosts an estimated 257,000 Palestine Refugees, Palestine refugees from Syria, and other UNRWA eligible persons, in addition to 1.5 million Syrians who have fled the conflict in Syria, including 879,598 registered as refugees with UNHCR. (LCRP 2021 Update).
5. Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) fled to Lebanon as a result of the war in Syria, which started in 2011. ‘Palestine Refugees in Lebanon’, abbreviated as ‘PRL’, have been living in Lebanon since the Arab Israeli War in 1948.
6. “Nothing and Everything to Lose: Results from a Qualitative WhatsApp Survey of Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon“, UNDP, October 2020:  
<https://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/nothing-and-everything-to-lose--results-from-a-qualitative-whats.html>
7. Palestine refugees in Lebanon can be categorised into four groups with varying degrees of coverage by UNRWA’s assistance:
  - Palestine Refugees in Lebanon (PRL): Palestinian refugees who are registered with UNRWA and the Lebanese authorities. These have access to all UNRWA services.
  - “Non-registered” Palestinian refugees, who are not registered with UNRWA, but are registered with the Lebanese authorities. These have access to most UNRWA services.
  - So-called “Non-ID” Palestinian refugees, who are neither registered with UNRWA nor with the Lebanese authorities. These only have access to primary health care, education and protection services;
  - Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS), who have arrived in Lebanon since 2011 as a result of the Syria war, and are registered with UNRWA in Syria. These have access to all UNRWA services.
8. UNRWA’s current financial crisis was sparked by the loss of all funding from the United States, its largest donor, in 2018, impacting basic service provision in Palestinian communities across Lebanon and the wider region. At the time of writing, the Biden administration announced a partial restoration of the assistance cut by Donald Trump.  
<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-56665199>. The implementation of this decision and its impact on UNRWA’s activities is still to be monitored.

9. Rise in evictions due to increased economic vulnerability, July 2020, Interagency Coordination, Lebanon
10. Terre des hommes COVID-19 Rapid Needs Assessment in the Palestinian Camps of Lebanon, June 2020.  
[https://www.tdh.ch/sites/default/files/tdh\\_rna\\_june2020.pdf](https://www.tdh.ch/sites/default/files/tdh_rna_june2020.pdf)
11. UNRWA Flash Appeal for the COVID-19 response March-July 2020.
12. As a result of funding cuts, cash-based transfers under the Social Safety Net Programme (SSNP) for Palestine Refugees in Lebanon (PRL) have been frozen for six years. In spite of that, many more PRL are eligible under the SSNP today than was previously the case. For more details:  
<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/social-safety-net-programme>
13. An example of that is the drastic reduction of the UAE funding to the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) in 2020, the year it signed a United States-brokered normalisation accord with Israel that was heavily criticised by the Palestinian Authority.  
<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/2/6/uae-drastically-cut-funding-for-palestinian-refugee-agency>;
14. The National Population and Housing Census of Palestinian Camps and Gatherings conducted by the Central Administration of Statistics in Lebanon, in partnership with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, and under the supervision of the Lebanese-Palestinian Dialogue Committee, estimates the total number of Palestinian refugees currently living in Lebanon to around 174,422. This number is contested, as it is substantially lower than previous estimates cited by UNRWA based on those people registered and/or accessing services. Link to 2017 census results:  
<http://www.lpdc.gov.lb/DocumentFiles/Key%20Findings%20report%20En-636566196639789418.pdf>
15. "Nothing and Everything to Lose: Results from a Qualitative WhatsApp Survey of Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon "UNDP, October 2020. <https://www.lb.undp.org/content/lebanon/en/home/library/nothing-and-everything-to-lose--results-from-a-qualitative-whats.html>
16. AUB and UNRWA survey on The Socioeconomic Status of Palestine Refugees in Lebanon (2015).
17. UNRWA (April 2019). PRS post-distribution monitoring exercise.

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