Lebanon Quarterly Protection Update
1 October – 31 December 2024

This quarterly update is intended to provide information on protection risks and trends impacting Palestine Refugees in Lebanon. It reflects key protection concerns arising from UNRWA's protection monitoring and is not intended to be exhaustive.

Context Update

The final quarter of 2024 saw a significant escalation in cross-border hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah culminating in Israeli forces entering southern Lebanon in October. Israeli airstrikes and artillery shelling targeted multiple areas of Lebanon, particularly the southern suburbs of Beirut, the eastern Beqaa region, and across southern Lebanon, causing widespread damage and destruction to infrastructure, homes, and agricultural lands and leading to a sharp increase in civilian casualties, with women and children among those killed.[i] Hezbollah also continued to launch rockets into northern Israel.

The intensification of Israeli airstrikes triggered new waves of displacement towards northern Lebanon. Humanitarian needs surged, especially among the internally displaced. The conflict also disrupted UNRWA operations, with 12 out of 27 UNRWA health centres forced to close during this period. In response, UNRWA coordinated mobile clinics and the distribution of medicines on designated days in affected areas. The Agency was also forced to delay reopening all 61 UNRWA schools at the start of the new academic year scheduled to begin on 14 October 2024. In total, 11 UNRWA schools served as Designated Emergency Shelters (DES) housing displaced Lebanese and Syrian nationals as well as Palestine refugees. Damage to some UNRWA installations was reported in southern Beirut, the Beqaa and Tyre areas.

The conflict also significantly affected livelihoods, including in sectors such as construction and agriculture in the south of Lebanon where Palestine Refugees are typically employed, adding to the financial burden caused by years of economic crisis in Lebanon. Rising commodity prices and increased pressure on housing, which led to a surge in rental costs, further exacerbated this situation. The entry into force of a ceasefire on 27 November 2024 brought temporary relief. As of the end of Q4, the ceasefire remained in effect but faced significant challenges due to ongoing military activities and reported ceasefire violations.

Protection Trends

Registration and Legal Status

During Q4, 21 legal awareness sessions were held across DES attended by 548 participants. Topics included civil registration and the importance of safeguarding documents. A total of 125 individuals (49 Palestine Refugees from Lebanon (PRL) and 76 Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS)) approached UNRWA requesting legal counselling, mostly on legal residency issues, during the reporting period. UNRWA in Lebanon has provided legal awareness sessions in UNRWA shelters for beneficiaries and social workers on the importance of safeguarding civil documentation. UNRWA leaflets and public messaging on social media also highlight the importance of carrying documentation. PRS lacking legal residency in Lebanon continued to limit their movements due to the fear of detention. For some, this also impacted their calculations when considering whether or not to evacuate from conflict-affected areas. During the reporting period, the protection legal aid team visited and advocated on four cases of detained PRS at risk of deportation. Of these, three were released while one minor was deported. PRS students also expressed concern that universities were restricting their enrolment for the academic year due to lack of legal residency. Additionally, PRS continued to face civil registration challenges, particularly in registering new events such as births, deaths, and marriages again due to lack of legal residency.

Gender-Based Violence (GBV)

During Q4, the number of assisted GBV survivors fell to one-third the average of previous quarters. This is mainly the result of three factors: 1) UNRWA's service capacity to identify and provide assistance to GBV survivors was significantly reduced due to the conflict;

2) UNRWA's services were mostly prioritized for the population in Designated Emergency Shelters (DES); and 3) the DES had limited safe and confidential spaces for the survivors to disclose GBV incidents and to seek help and assistance.

Notwithstanding, the deteriorating security environment and large-scale displacement heightened GBV risks, particularly for women and girls who fled their place of residence and subsequently separated from male family members who stayed behind to protect assets. Many took on additional responsibilities, such as securing food, water, and providing care for dependents, which left them vulnerable to exploitation, abuse, and harassment. Focus group discussions conducted by UNRWA protection teams highlighted significant safety concerns, service gaps, and challenges in accessing essential services, especially outside DES. Women faced risks of sexual exploitation and assault, including by relatives or strangers in shared shelters. Some were denied entry to government-run or unofficial shelters due to nationality or perceived affiliations, forcing them to sleep outdoors with dependents.

In addition, community reports indicated that men and boys who stayed behind to protect their properties and assets experienced severe trauma during the conflict. This has contributed to increased levels of intra-family tensions. Further assessments are needed to better understand the psychosocial impact of the war especially on men and boys who stayed behind and the increased risk of domestic violence and intimate partner violence this could generate.

Many women also reportedly took on active roles in aid efforts, including supporting displaced communities in shelters.

Child Protection

Palestine refugee children have been particularly impacted by escalating hostilities. Children are least equipped to cope with the trauma of displacement and exposure to extreme violence. In addition to the mental health impacts, children faced additional protection risks associated with lack of access to services as well as the risk of family separation, GBV, and exploitation. The postponement of the 2024-25 academic year disrupted education and further exacerbated the vulnerabilities of PRS children, many of whom already face challenges enrolling with the Ministry of Education and Higher Education (MEHE) due to residency issues.

In response, UNRWA transitioned to remote learning on 18 November 2024. However, families struggled with unstable internet connectivity and a shortage of devices, limiting the ability of children to participate fully in online learning. In addition, displacement made it difficult for children to consistently engage with remote education.

Following the ceasefire agreement, UNRWA swiftly transitioned to formal in-classroom learning beginning on 2 December 2024. However, remote learning was temporarily maintained in some areas, such as in Tyre, where schools were undergoing repairs due to damages sustained during the conflict.[ii]

Mental Health and Psychosocial Support (MHPSS)

During the reporting period, according to UNRWA MHPSS specialized service providers, there was a notable increase compared to the previous quarter in diagnosed cases of depression (19%), anxiety, (31%) psychotic disorders (15%), and bipolar disorders (33%) among Palestine Refugees. The rise in mental health conditions is closely linked to the escalation of conflict, which has been marked by traumatic events, armed conflict incidents, and large-scale displacement.

Emotional and behavioural difficulties were also reported to be prevalent, particularly among individuals displaced from conflict-affected areas. Loss of safety, stability, and control – key factors for psychological well-being – significantly impacted the mental health of Palestine Refugees. Specific groups, including children, women, and older persons, were identified as being particularly vulnerable due to their heightened exposure to trauma and psychosocial distress. This vulnerability stems from their limited access to protective resources and increased dependency on others. Data collected by UNRWA Protection and partner organizations during the reporting period highlighted that women were the most supported group in terms of MHPSS interventions. This underscores the importance of targeted and inclusive MHPSS programming to address the unique needs of all at-risk populations, including children, the elderly, and individuals with disabilities.[iii]

Case-study: Palestine Refugees fleeing to Syria

Fatima* (52 years old) is one of the PRS women who, during the latest escalation of hostilities in Lebanon, decided to flee Lebanon and find refuge in Syria.

Most refugees fled from southern Lebanon, southern Beirut, and the Beqaa Valley - areas hit hardest by airstrikes. Camps like Rashidieh, Burj Shemali, and El Buss were at half their usual capacity following the mass displacements.

Many refugees used informal routes to avoid detection by authorities and potential conscription by armed groups. The journey to Syria was perilous, with airstrikes targeting border crossings, forcing people to navigate dangerous terrain in search of safety.

Fatima*, originally from Al Yarmouk, Damascus, fled to Lebanon in 2013 with her husband, daughter, and two sons. Living in Wavel camp in Baalbeck, she struggled with poor housing, inadequate healthcare for her husband, and financial hardship, relying solely on UNRWA cash assistance while her sons took informal jobs.

When war broke out in Lebanon in September 2024, an airstrike near Fatima's home forced her to flee with her extended family to Syria. "We had no choice but to leave everything behind," she said. However, life in Yalda where she fled was harsh - no ration card for food and gas, no electricity, and the fear of her sons being conscripted kept them trapped at home. Overcrowding worsened her husband's health condition, creating family tensions.

After a month, the dire living conditions pushed her to return to Lebanon, despite the risks. "We paid $300 to smugglers and endured exploitation along the way." She returned to Wavel, but Baalbeck was soon evacuated, forcing her to seek refuge in Beddawi camp in the north of Lebanon. Nine days later, she was asked to leave, pushing her back to Baalbeck, where she stayed for the rest of the conflict, suffering panic attacks and loss of appetite.

Exhausted and traumatized, Fatima continues to rely on UNRWA support and hopes that the ceasefire holds.

* The name has been changed to respect the privacy and dignity of the individual.

Feature: Displacement Trends and Cross-Border Movements of Palestine Refugees due to the Conflict in Lebanon

Year-long hostilities between Israel and Hezbollah significantly escalated on 23 September 2024 causing widespread population displacement across large parts of Lebanon.[iii] A number of Palestine refugee camps were included in areas where the Israeli army issued displacement orders, while UNRWA recorded four Israeli strikes targeting camps during the escalation: El Buss Camp on 29 September and 21 November, Ein el Hilweh Camp on 1 October, and Rashidieh Camp on 26 November. Furthermore, UNRWA recorded three strikes targeting Palestine refugees outside of the camps.[iv] These strikes inside and outside of camps resulted in at least 29 fatalities.

The displacement orders, coupled with airstrikes in areas in and around Palestine Refugee camps, resulted in displacement, casualties and damage to residential structures. It is estimated that approximately 70% of the Palestine Refugees in Tyre —around 39,900 individuals—were displaced at the peak of the emergency.

Displacement Trends within Lebanon

In line with broader displacement trends within Lebanon, Palestine refugees were primarily displaced from the southern border region of Lebanon, the southern suburbs of Beirut and the Beqaa where Israeli airstrikes have collectively been most intense and where IDF issued displacement orders forced large numbers of people to flee.

Southern Lebanon: In the Tyre district, UNRWA estimates that the majority of Palestine refugees living in Rashidieh, Burj Shemali and El Buss camps were displaced, though a number of residents returned given challenges adapting to conditions of life in the shelters, the desire to protect livelihoods, and the perception that camps provide greater safety from airstrikes. Displacements from gatherings and localities with established Palestinian populations such as Adloun, Ansariya, Zahriya, Nabatiye and surrounding areas were also reported. Large-scale displacement was reported in the Saida district, with many of those internally displaced from the Saida and Tyre areas relocating to Saida city and immediate surroundings where UNRWA operated four emergency shelters providing shelter to 1,482 individuals (Palestine refugees, as well as Lebanese and Syrian nationals).

Southern Suburbs of Beirut: Most Palestine refugees residing in the southern suburbs of Beirut, including residents of Burj el Barajneh camp, were displaced following heavy Israeli airstrikes targeting the Dahiyeh district, the Ghobeiri and Bir al-Abed areas and other southern Beirut suburbs.

Beqaa: The majority of Palestine refugees in Wavel camp in the city of Baalbeck fled to central and west Beqaa and some to Syria in response to continued Israeli airstrikes in North Beqaa (Baalbeck city and surrounding villages like Hermel and Ain) as well as Central and West Beqaa (including Chtura, Zahle main road, Jeb Janine, Kfar Zabad and Jalela). Much of Baalbeck, including Wavel camp, were subject to an Israeli displacement order issued on 30 October 2024.

IDF issued orders leading to displacement: four out of twelve Palestine Refugee camps – namely Rashidieh, Burj Shemali, El Buss, and Wavel camps – were included in areas where IDF displacement orders were issued in October and November. Of these, Rashidieh camp received a specific order calling for the evacuation of the camp itself on 31 October. Several UNRWA installations were also affected by IDF displacement orders.

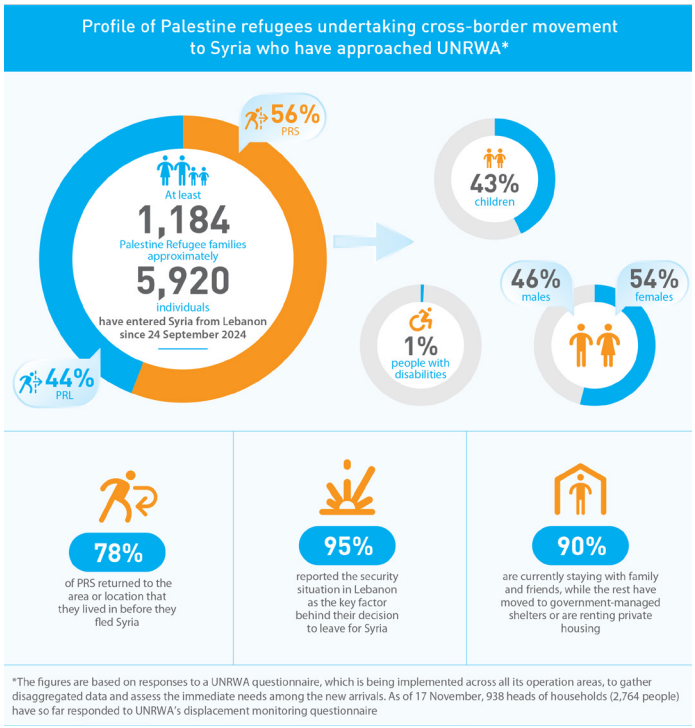
In response, UNRWA opened 11 of its schools as Designated Emergency Shelters (DES) hosting 6,172 displaced individuals including Palestine Refugees, Lebanese citizens, and Syrians, including one in Beirut, four in the Saida Area, five in the North (all in Nahr el-Bared Camp), and one in Beqaa. Following the announcement of the ceasefire on 27 November, all displaced individuals left the shelters and UNRWA resumed in full its regular service provision across all areas.[v]

Cross-Border Movement into Syria

In addition to internal displacement, a number of Palestine refugees crossed the border into Syria. They include both Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) and Palestine refugees from Lebanon (PRL). While UNRWA is only able to confirm the number of Palestine refugees who approached the Agency in Syria seeking assistance, the actual number who crossed into Syria is thought to be significantly higher, with the majority believed to have used informal border crossing points

possibly to evade detection.[vi] Returning male PRS of military age are also believed to be limiting their movements within Syria to avoid conscription into the Syrian army.

Women and children comprised nearly 80 percent of Palestine refugees who crossed into Syria from Lebanon and sought assistance from UNRWA, with adult male family members often remaining in Lebanon to protect family assets and/or to continue to receive UNRWA entitlements.



Factors Affecting Cross-Border Movement Between Lebanon and Syria

While deteriorating security conditions in Lebanon have served as the main motivation for Palestine refugees who decided to leave for Syria, other factors impacting their decision to undertake cross-border movement include:

Presence of family in Syria: over two thirds of Palestine refugees who have entered Syria are PRS believed to be staying with extended family in Syria or returning to their previous homes. The presence of family in Syria has been a key enabling factor for considering cross-border movement given the effort required to travel north and challenging conditions in Syria.

Open border policy instituted by Syrian and Lebanese authorities: Syrian authorities maintained an open-door policy for people fleeing the conflict in Lebanon, allowing entry without stamping documents or even allowing those without documents to enter, while also waiving a USD $100 exchange requirement previously mandatory for Syrian nationals and PRS crossing into Syria.[vii] Likewise, on 26 September, the Lebanese General Security Office (GSO) announced measures to "facilitate" the exit of Syrians and PRS from Lebanon.[vii]

Restrictions on PRS legal stay in Lebanon: Restrictions on legal stay for PRS in Lebanon, including recent measures preventing the issuance or renewal of residency permits for PRS, are likely to have created additional push factors for PRS in the context of current hostilities.[ix] They are also causing greater insecurity among PRS intending to return to Lebanon but fearful they will not be able to. A decision by the Lebanese authorities to resume issuing exit stamps at the border has exacerbated these concerns and is believed to have pushed more PRS to use informal crossing points.

Protection Risks Associated with Cross-Border Movement

Targeting of Border Crossing-Points

On 4 October 2024, the IDF conducted airstrikes targeting the area between Masnaa (Lebanon) and Jdaidet Yabbous (Syria) border crossing points, which is a key corridor for cross-border movement, forcing some displaced persons to continue their 4km journey through no man's land. A second missile strike on Masnaa in late October further impeded movement across the border. On 12 October 2024, an IDF drone attack hit the surroundings of Hawsh al-Sayyid Ali town in south Rural Homs, destroying an informal border crossing bridge. Between 25 and 28 October, successive IDF missile strikes in South Rural Homs increasingly targeted reception community centres at the border, irregular crossing points, and surrounding villages. While the IDF has claimed that these strikes impede the transfer of arms into Lebanon, the damage they have caused forces IDPs to travel long distances on foot through "no man's land" to reach the Syrian border.

Deteriorating Security Conditions in Syria

While the IDF has been carrying out strikes against targets in Syria allegedly linked to Iran and Hezbollah for years, these have intensified since 7 October 2023 and escalated further since 23 September 2024, with IDF air strikes reported in Homs, Hama, Damascus, and Deraa; in rural Homs alone, there were 25 IDF airstrikes between 26 September and 5 November 2024. Many locations that have been impacted are hosting large numbers of displaced people from Lebanon, notably

Sayyedeh Zeinab (Qabr Essit Camp) in rural Damascus, and Al Qusayr in rural Homs.

Lack of Legal and Civil Documentation

Many new arrivals in Syria have indicated that they do not carry legal documentation. While some people may not wish to disclose their status and/or have their travel documents stamped, it is also possible that others have lost their documents or left them in Lebanon. Lack of documentation raises serious protection concerns, creating barriers to rectification of legal status, access to services and assistance, and registration of life events (for example obtaining a birth certificate), as well as increasing the risk of family separation, exploitation and detention. In Lebanon, Palestine refugees have been excluded from measures that allow displaced Lebanese nationals to apply for civil documentation at their post-displacement location. This is compounded by the one-year term limit on birth registrations for PRLs.

Reduction of Available Support Systems in Syria

PRS and PRL arrivals into Syria have largely been hosted by relatives and friends. Yet, almost 90 percent of PRS in Syria live on less than USD $2.15 per person per day, while 62 percent are food insecure and 32 percent severely food insecure.[x] Where possible, reliance on savings is also likely to provide only short-term reprieve.

Challenges Identifying the Most Vulnerable

The likelihood that most Palestine refugees in Syria might decide not to register with UNRWA raises the possibility that vulnerable individuals, including persons with disabilities, the elderly, or unaccompanied children, will not be identified and provided the support or referrals they require.

Detention in Syria

Fears of possible arrest and detention by Syrian authorities when crossing the border or once in Syria likely also explain why some adult male family members have chosen not to return to Syria or have entered using informal border crossings.[xi] The prevalence of arrests is difficult to verify, and UNRWA does not have any information on whether Palestine refugees are affected. This nevertheless raises concerns about protection from arbitrary detention, enforced disappearances and freedom from torture and ill-treatment.

Onward Movement from Syria

Reports have surfaced of onward movement of individuals to Iraq and Jordan and potentially further afield. Before entering Jordan, individuals need to gain approval from the Jordanian Ministry of Interior (MOI) and meet certain requirements, after which they can obtain a renewable one-month visa, for a fee. These requirements raise potential risks of displaced persons, including Palestine Refugees, being stranded at the border or attempting to cross into the country through informal crossing points, including into areas of Jordan where UNRWA has no operational presence, further exacerbating their vulnerability.

UNRWA Syria and Lebanon fields have coordinated closely to support Palestine refugees displaced from Lebanon with protection related challenges, including lost documents.

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[i] As of 4 December 2024, the Lebanese Ministry of Public Health reported 4,047 fatalities and 16,638 injuries resulting from the conflict since 8 October 2023.
[ii] In total nine UNRWA schools have sustained damage and had to undergo maintenance work.
[iii] Combined data on internal displacement from IOM Mobility Snapshot - Round 63 - 18-11-2024 and on crossborder movement from UNHCR Syria Emergency Response Brief -13 November 2024.
[iv] On 30 September, an Israeli airstrike targeted a residential apartment in central Beirut killing three alleged members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). On 5 October, an Israeli airstrike targeted a residential apartment outside Beddawi refugee camp in north Lebanon killing an alleged Hamas member and his family. On 23 November, an Israeli airstrike killed two Palestinian fishers on the Tyre coast.
[v] Between 1 October and 26 November, UNRWA Protection team conducted 41 protection assessments across 11 DESs which identified a number of protection gaps requiring remediation including capacity gaps in child protection, challenges in meeting disability and inclusion standards, limited child-friendly spaces, inconsistencies around complaints systems, and insufficient access feminine hygiene products. Throughout the emergency, UNRWA worked with DES managers, affected individuals and partners to significantly improve conditions and ensure protection standards were complied with.
[vi] It is believed that the majority of Palestine refugees who have crossed into Syria have chosen not to seek assistance in Syria for fear that it will adversely aect their eligibility for assistance in Lebanon.
[vii] On 30 October, the government further extended up to 15 November the exemption to the application of Cabinet Decision no. 46 of April 2021, which required Syrian returnees, including Palestine Refugees from Syria, to exchange the equivalent of US$ 100 at the border before they could enter.
[viii] The announcement provides that all Syrian nationals and PRS, including those without regular residency status are permitted to exit Lebanese territory via land borders without incurring a re-entry ban. See https://www.general-security.gov.lb/ar/news/details/1091.
[ix] While the Lebanese authorities have not publicly commented on any changes in policy related to residency for PRS, an internal directive was reportedly issued in May preventing residency renewals for PRS. The Lebanese government publicly introduced new (though less severe) restrictions on residency eligibility for Syrian nationals in the same period.
[x] https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/news-releases/unrwa-launches-us-4154-million-appeal-palestine-refugees-syria-lebanon-and-Jordan; https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-10-syria-emergency-response-displacement-lebanon.
[xi] Statement by Paulo Pinheiro, Chair of the Independent International Commission of Inquiry on the Syrian Arab Republic at the 79th Session of the United Nations General Assembly Third Committee. 01 November 2024