



# Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon

**ANERA**

Improving Lives in the Middle East

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**ANERA Reports**  
on the ground in the Middle East

Volume 3 | June 2012

## THE FORGOTTEN PEOPLE

The list of challenges Palestinian refugee families living in Lebanon face is long and overwhelming. They live in overcrowded camps and have to deal with discrimination, isolation and social exclusion.

The refugees often refer to themselves as “forgotten people” and feel they are living in a hostile environment where their basic human rights are not represented or protected. Caught in the middle of an unsettled political conflict beyond their control, they manage to survive with limited resources and a restricted legal, economic and social system.

The Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon are considered the worst of the region’s refugee camps in terms of poverty, health, education and living conditions. Families crowded into what was designed as “temporary housing” have to cope with open channels of sewage and rotting piles of garbage, which make conditions ripe for the spread of disease. But there are few clinics and hospitals to treat the sick. A tangle of electrical wires hang dangerously low over narrow, unlit alleyways, within reach of children playing there.

With staggering rates of joblessness, Palestinian families trying to improve their lives in Lebanon face restrictions and complicated formalities in the labor market.



*These narrow mazes of paths and low hanging wires overhead in Ein El Helweh are ubiquitous to every camp in Lebanon.*

## CONDITIONS

Since 1948 in Lebanon, some 425,000 Palestinian refugees have registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the official body mandated to provide the basic services to the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon’s camps.<sup>1</sup> Today 260,000-280,000 refugees are currently estimated to reside in Lebanon, most of them in the camps, half of whom under the age of 25.<sup>2</sup> Though born and raised in the country, they are denied political, economic and social rights.

Lebanon is not a signatory of the 1951 U.N. Refugee Convention and its 1967 protocol does not recognize the basic rights and legal obligations to people with refugee status. Palestinians cannot attend Lebanese public schools or own property. They do not have access to national health services and the social security system. Stateless Palestinians who came from outside Lebanon do not enjoy the rights given to foreigners holding citizenship from another country. Checkpoints restricting access to most of the camps thwart trade and commerce with neighboring communities.

This leaves the majority of the camps’ population completely dependent on UNRWA and other non-profits - local and international - for everything from schools to humanitarian assistance. The government does not provide a social safety net for Palestinians living in Lebanon. In the camps and gatherings, refugees confront challenging environmental conditions, infrastructure decay and health hazards.

### VOICES FROM THE CAMPS

*Jana | Burj Al Barajneh*

*“I work and I work but at the end we don’t get anything. No social security, no end-of-employment benefits. I just wish that they would treat us better. Don’t they know how much we have to go through?”*

Six out of ten registered refugees live in 12 UNRWA camps while 38% live in approximately 27 “gatherings” (informal communities) near the camps or are scattered in Lebanese communities.<sup>3</sup> The average family is made up of 4.5 members and 53% of the refugees are women.<sup>4</sup>

UNRWA provides Palestinians in the camps with education, health care and infrastructure including shelter, electricity, water and sanitation. Due to legal aspects of land ownership, UNRWA is limited in their ability to provide assistance (housing, water and sanitation) to those refugees living outside the camps.

### What is UNRWA?

UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) was established in 1948 following the Arab-Israeli conflict to bring relief and works programs to Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the Palestinian Territories. Originally viewed as a temporary organization, UNRWA is the main source of assistance and development for Palestinian refugees. The agency currently operates or sponsors over 900 installations with nearly 30,000 staff. UNRWA cooperates closely with governmental authorities and with international and local non-profits which also provide some services to refugees.

Today, UNRWA runs education, health, microfinance, relief and social services programs as well as infrastructure maintenance and emergency response in times of crisis in all its official refugee camps.

Source: [unrwa.org](http://unrwa.org)

## Crumbling Infrastructure

The official refugee camps and gatherings are notoriously overcrowded, squeezing an ever-increasing population into a finite area. Most of the structures, built as temporary shelters, have deteriorated over the decades from lack of funding for proper maintenance.

Poor housing conditions, leaky pipes, deteriorated water and sewage treatment systems, contaminated water, and jerry-rigged electrical connections all contribute to sub-standard living conditions. The smell of open drainage ditches filled with garbage permeates the air.

There are very few open areas in the camps for playgrounds and parks, so youth play in the streets, in dark alleyways amid open sewers, drainage ditches and damaged buildings, which only increases the risk of injury and illness.

Over-crowding increases health risks – from respiratory infections to mental health disorders – which are exacerbated by social tensions among a population that has quadrupled since the camps were established.<sup>5</sup> Expansion of the camps to accommodate the increased population is prohibited by local laws. There are also restrictions on rehabilitation work, however minor, and on the entry of materials into the camps needed for repairs and renovation.

Nahr El Bared camp in northern Lebanon, for example, was destroyed in 2007 during fighting between external extremists and the Lebanese army. Reconstruction has been slow due to bureaucratic snags and lack of funding. Reconstruction of camp housing probably won't be completed for another two years, leaving more than 27,000 refugees internally displaced.



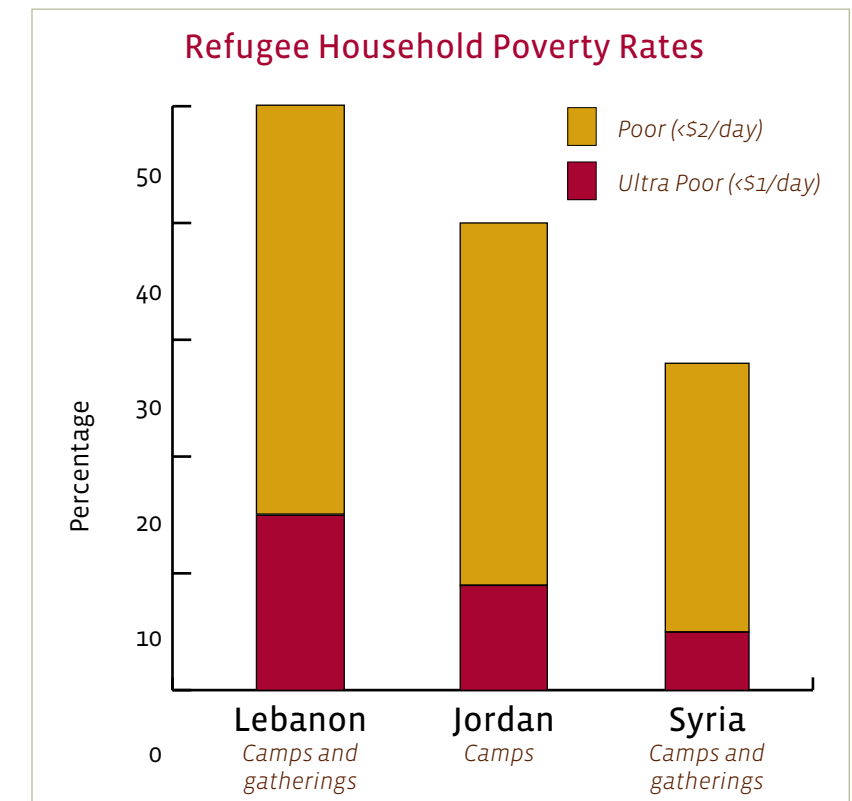
## Economic Livelihoods

Palestinian refugees face discrimination in the labor market. Despite their educational background or competency, they are restricted from all but menial jobs. Roughly 56% of Palestinian refugee workers are jobless, leaving only 37% of the working age population employed.<sup>6</sup>

Lebanon has the highest percentage of Palestinian refugees living in extreme poverty. Two out of three Palestinian refugees subsist on less than \$6 a day.<sup>7</sup>

Forty percent of employed refugees living in camps and gatherings represent the lowest national income group in Lebanon.<sup>8</sup> Most refugees lucky enough to work end up in menial labor jobs in the construction, electrical, sanitation, agricultural and textile fields. They also find work as servants, cooks or nannies.

Though it seemed promising at first, the labor law amendment in 2010 affecting Palestinian refugees' right to work in Lebanon does not address the exclusion of Palestinian refugees from 30 syndicated professions. As such, hiring practices are not likely to change as Palestinian refugees are still not able access the majority of white collar positions in areas like banking, medicine, management, law, and education. They also will not benefit from fair working conditions and basic social protection.



A view of the destruction at the Nahr El Bared camp in 2009.

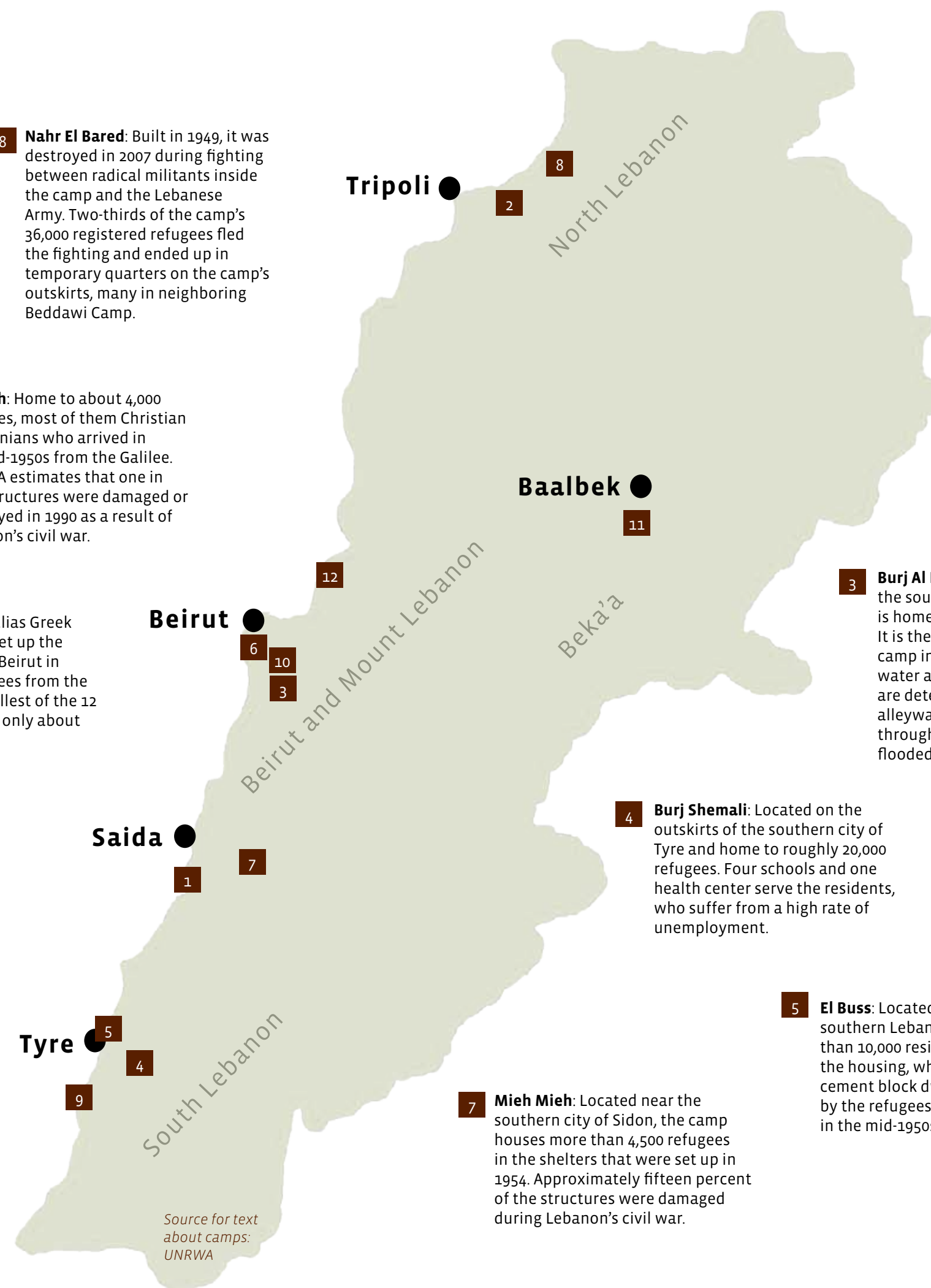
Source: Palestinian Refugees: Identity, Space and Place in the Levant, Edited by Are Knudsen, Sari Hanafi, Google EBook, 2011

## VOICES FROM THE CAMPS

Nawar | Nahr El Bared

*"I am the son of the camps. This is my home. Why do I need a permit to enter my home? If I lose my card I can't get in, I just sleep on the roads. This is how it is at Nahr El Bared. Other camps are not like that. If someone wants to come visit you they need to get a permit. Nahr El Bared used to be the main artery of commerce in Tripoli. All the people from around the camp would come here to buy stuff. But now all these new security measures and checkpoints are getting in the way."*

# THE CAMPS



**2 Beddawi:** Set up in 1955, five kilometers north of Tripoli, Beddawi is one of the newer camps in Lebanon and had a population of 15,000. Violence in nearby Nahr El Bared in 2007 forced thousands of residents there to seek refuge in Beddawi, nearly doubling its population.

**8 Nahr El Bared:** Built in 1949, it was destroyed in 2007 during fighting between radical militants inside the camp and the Lebanese Army. Two-thirds of the camp's 36,000 registered refugees fled the fighting and ended up in temporary quarters on the camp's outskirts, many in neighboring Beddawi Camp.

**11 Wavel:** Began as a French army barracks opened to shelter Palestinian refugees in 1948. Many of Wavel's 8,000+ residents still live in the poorly ventilated army barracks. The camp is located near Baalbeck in the Bekaa Valley.

**1 Ein El Helweh:** The largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon, with more than 50,000 residents. Many refugees were evacuated to the camp during Lebanon's civil war in the 1980s. Violence between 1982 and 1991 caused many casualties and near total physical destruction.

**12 Dbayeh:** Home to about 4,000 refugees, most of them Christian Palestinians who arrived in the mid-1950s from the Galilee. UNWRA estimates that one in four structures were damaged or destroyed in 1990 as a result of Lebanon's civil war.

**10 Shatila:** Established in 1949, Shatila was devastated during the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, along with the nearby gathering known as Sabra. The camp also came under fire frequently during the civil war, causing extensive physical damage displacement of residents. There are roughly 9,000 refugees registered in the camp. Living conditions are very bad, with open sewers, overcrowded housing and only one health center to service residents.

**9 Rashidieh:** First established in 1936 to house Armenian refugees. UNRWA expanded the camp in 1963 to accommodate Palestinian refugees, who number more than 29,000 today. The jobless rate is high and most men seek seasonal work in construction or farming.

**6 Mar Elias:** The Mar Elias Greek Orthodox convent set up the camp southwest of Beirut in 1952 to house refugees from the Galilee. It is the smallest of the 12 UNRWA camps with only about 600 residents.

**3 Burj Al Barajneh:** Set up in 1948 in the southern suburbs of Beirut, it is home to about 16,000 refugees. It is the most overpopulated camp in the Beirut area. The water and sewage systems are deteriorated. The narrow alleyways and roads running through the camp are often flooded in the rainy season.

**4 Burj Shemali:** Located on the outskirts of the southern city of Tyre and home to roughly 20,000 refugees. Four schools and one health center serve the residents, who suffer from a high rate of unemployment.



*This resident of Beddawi, like so many refugees, has kept the key to her family's home in Palestine, which she left in 1948.*

*Source for text about camps: UNRWA*

## Number of UNRWA registered refugees in the 12 camps

Burj Al Barajneh	16,888
Shatila	9,154
Dbayeh	4,237
Mar Elias	627
Wavel	8,308
Ein El Helweh	50,309
Mieh Mieh	4,958
Beddawi	7,866
Nahr El Bared	36,338
Burj Shemali	21,205
El Buss	10,559
Rashidieh	29,363

*These numbers do not include unregistered refugees.*

## Education System

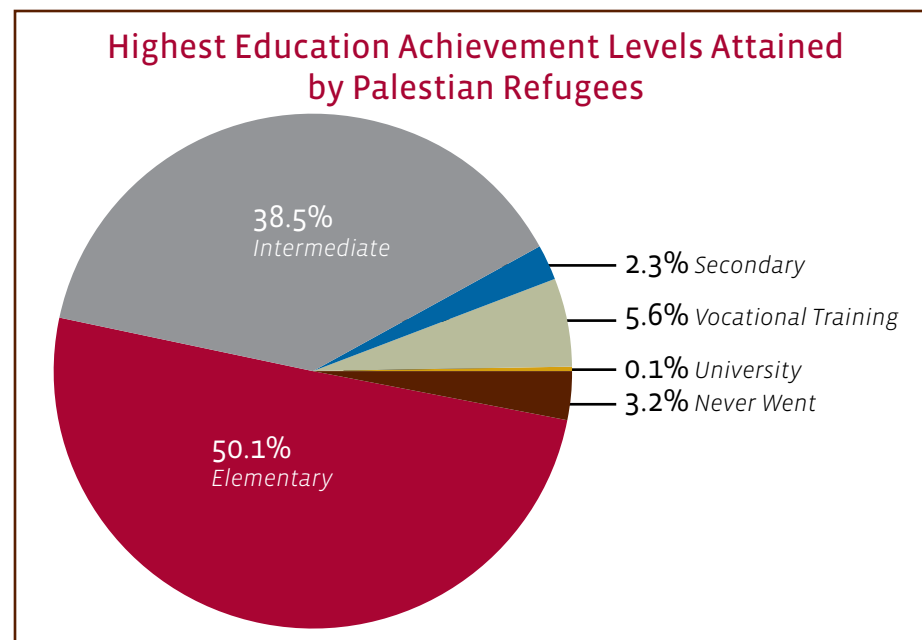
Palestinians cannot access the public school system in Lebanon. UNRWA runs 74 schools across Lebanon and two vocational education centers that cannot meet all the needs of an increasingly young population.<sup>9</sup> Non-profits play a key role in complementing UNRWA's services, particularly in early childhood and vocational education.

Palestinian refugee children in Lebanon enroll in the UNRWA elementary school at age six and may attend two years of non-compulsory preschool. Preschools are available for Palestinian children through non-profits, but the quality varies. About 9,100 children attend preschools, leaving more than half the preschool-age population without access.

UNRWA estimates that half of Palestinian teenagers leave school before their education is complete. A high percentage of male drop-outs resort to working in temporary jobs in construction and in agriculture.<sup>10</sup>

Some children feel obliged to find work to help support their families. Others quit school out of despair over future professional prospects. Because they are prohibited from working outside of the camps in most professions that would necessitate a higher degree, refugee children often feel that it is not worth the effort to continue their studies, even if finances permitted.

Many refugees turn to vocational training to learn marketable skills, mostly in service industries. A 2007 study by the research foundation Fafo found that 12% of the Palestinian workforce acquired vocational training skills through the formal education system, while 33% received vocational training outside the non-formal education system or through on-the-job training.<sup>11</sup>



Source: Restoring Dignity | Comprehensive Appeal Responses to the Critical Needs of Vulnerable Palestine Refugees in Lebanon, 2012-2016. UNRWA

## Health Issues

As a result of years of conflict, dire poverty, and poor environmental conditions, Palestinian refugees suffer from a multitude of disabilities, mental health problems and malnutrition. One out of three refugees suffers from a chronic illness such as hypertension, cancer and diabetes.<sup>12</sup> Infant, child, and maternal mortality rates are high.

Palestinian refugees do not have access to Lebanon's public health system. Those living in refugee camps can get primary health care at UNRWA and non-profit clinics, which are understaffed and underfunded. The ratio of doctors to patients is very low: a doctor at an UNRWA health clinic usually sees 117 patients per day.<sup>13</sup>

Not all medical services are provided in every camp. So refugees may need to visit another camp for dental work or laboratory tests. There is only one kidney dialysis center, located in Saida. Patients must travel from across Lebanon three times a week for dialysis, which is not covered by UNRWA.

Hospital care is often beyond the reach of the refugees since most cannot afford the expense and UNRWA can only offer partial coverage in UNRWA-contracted hospitals. Patients, especially those suffering from chronic diseases, must seek financial help from family, individuals or local charities to cover hospital expenses.

**One doctor  
sees about  
117 patients  
per day.**

The PRCS (Palestinian Red Crescent Society) Al Hamshary Hospital dialysis center provides 680 free dialysis sessions per month, six days a week. It is the only dialysis facility for Palestinian refugees, like Bilal, who come from all over Lebanon for their services three times a week. ANERA delivers donated medicines and supplies, like tubing and filters, for the hospital's 16 dialysis machines.



### VOICES FROM THE CAMPS

Aya | Ein El Helweh

"I want to be a communications engineer, but people keep telling me that even the Lebanese aren't finding jobs so I won't. Even if I did, it would be at half pay. So Dad told me that being a teacher was the best option for girls. Now I want to teach. If I could teach at UNRWA schools that would be the best."



ANERA provides scholarships for tuition, room and board so that young Palestinians from the camps can attend the Al-Kafaat Foundation, a premier training institution in Lebanon. Sajida, from Beddawi camp, is enrolled in a jewelry-making course.



ANERA supplies the only hospital inside Ein El Helweh, the largest camp in Lebanon, with 30% of its total drug supply.



Almaza El Sirqawi, one of the women participating in ANERA's home gardens project in Ein El Helweh, is proud of the plants she has raised.



The playground in Nahr El Bared is one of three that ANERA built in the camps and gatherings, thanks to Playgrounds for Palestine and funding from the Middle East Council for Churches and the Mazen Afifi family.

## ANERA IN LEBANON'S CAMPS

Since the 1980s, ANERA has been providing assistance to local organizations to better address the health and welfare of refugee families and support community services. With a staff of six professionals, ANERA is supporting vocational training, providing agricultural assistance, delivering needed medicines and spreading messages of health. Everything ANERA does is through strong partnerships with local non-profits.

### Vocational Training

ANERA is committed to providing vocational training opportunities for jobless youth in need of skills. We provide financial assistance and work with institutions to develop curricula that educate and train people in skills needed by local industries. This includes programs in information technology, building trades, and other professional, technical skills.

### Delivering Medicines and Health Care Supplies

In collaboration with Health Care Society and UNRWA, ANERA delivers millions of dollars of donated health care supplies and medicine to Palestinian health care providers. The program also raises awareness about the rational use of medicine and trains health and social workers involved in dispensation of medicine.

### Greening the Camps

In partnership with Women's Program Center (WPC), ANERA and the American University of Beirut initiated a project to bring green to the bleak concrete landscapes of Ein El Helweh camp. Dozens of women have planted vegetables and herbs from rooftops, window sills and balconies. WPC itself is transforming into a greenhouse as a prototype of the "green vision." We are now replicating the project in Nahr El Bared.

### Rebuilding Nahr El Bared

For the 27,000 refugees displaced from the destroyed camp of Nahr El Bared, the list of needs is tremendous. ANERA is helping local non-profits restore needed services, delivering medical supplies, creating safe places to play, and connecting families to water. We also rebuilt a vocational training center, a community center and other service centers.

### Improving Opportunities for Children and Young People

ANERA builds safe and child-friendly playgrounds that encourage interactive play and contribute to children's development. We also promote sports, arts and cultural activities that build the resilience of refugee children and ultimately break the confinement of social exclusion and poverty.

### Promoting Good Health Practices

ANERA promotes healthy practices and designs programs that allow community members to take control over their own day-to-day health issues. Positive youth development, mother and child health, and the rational use of medicines are examples of locally-established health priorities.

## MEETING THE CHALLENGES

UNRWA bears most of the burden of caring for Palestinian refugee families in Lebanon's camps. But budget cuts and other constraints make it impossible for the UN agency to meet all their needs. Until the situation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is resolved, international foundations, institutions, non-government organizations and local community-based organizations have joined together to help bridge the gap.

The list of needs is long. Priorities range from repairing water and sewage networks, providing much-needed equipment and medicines for camp clinics, pharmacies and hospitals, improving health care and health education, expanding social services and vocational education centers, improving early childhood development programs, creating employment opportunities, supporting child care and women's development programs, building infrastructure and more.

International institutions and foundations from the Gulf, Europe, Asia and North America have joined forces with local groups to help provide basic services. Hundreds of small, dedicated, community-based organizations manage on shoe-string budgets to serve their neighborhood communities. With courage, willpower and perseverance, as well as financial and logistical support from the international community, these groups provide a lifeline to refugee families who more often than not have nowhere else to turn for help. The staff of these organizations are typically comprised of volunteers from the camps who know and share the same daily struggles.

More than 60 years after displacement, their statelessness is still a destabilizing factor in the region, Palestinian refugees in Lebanon deserve more than ever priority attention in assistance and protection. International aid needs to be maintained, not out of charity but out of responsibility.

### ENDNOTES

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6. AUB Study, page x
7. AUB Study, 2010 page xi
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9. UNRWA in Figures, 2010, <http://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/20100628261.pdf>
10. AUB Study, page 7
11. Characteristics of the Palestinian Labour Force in Lebanon. <http://www.fafo.no/ais/mideast/lebanon/labourforcestudy/ppt-pres-beirutworkshop070302.pdf>
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### SPECIAL ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In 2008, Jennifer Ibrahim published an article in The Palestine-Israel Journal, Volume 15, about the conditions of Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon. The article served as an important reference and basis for this report. Jennifer has been an ANERA staff member since 2010.

"Voices from the Camps" come from interviews conducted in camps across Lebanon by Mariam Klait, who is working on a master's thesis on Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

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## **ABOUT ANERA'S ON-THE-GROUND SERIES**

The ANERA on-the-ground series is designed to add a humanitarian voice to the story of life in the Middle East. With data from ANERA's professional staff, people who live and work in the communities they serve, and with over 40 years of experience in the region, ANERA has a unique opportunity to build a fuller understanding of what life is like for families struggling to survive within an atmosphere of severe political strife and daily turmoil.