

UNRWA as the Lung Through Which Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon Breathe: A Documented Legal Analysis

Introduction

The latest official statistics indicate that the number of Palestinian refugees effectively residing in Lebanon as of mid-2025 stands at approximately 231,515 individuals, with a demographic distribution of around 33% children and 10% elderly persons. Approximately 94% of them benefit from the services of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

The number of refugees registered with UNRWA in Lebanon exceeds 470,000 persons, noting that not all of them reside physically in the country. For more than seven decades, tens of thousands of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon have lived under difficult legal, social, and economic conditions. In the absence of refugees' ability to enjoy fundamental rights—such as education, healthcare, and employment—through Lebanese state institutions, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has emerged as their primary lifeline.

UNRWA effectively constitutes the “lung through which Palestinian refugees breathe” in Lebanon, functioning as a de facto alternative government that secures the minimum level of essential services and basic rights, including education, healthcare, social protection, relief assistance, and shelter.

This analytical report, supported by official evidence, examines how UNRWA has become the backbone of the survival of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon. It highlights the international legal foundation of this role (United Nations General Assembly Resolution 203 of 1949), the near-total dependence of refugees on the Agency's services, and the risks associated with any reduction in its mandate or resources. The report concludes with recommendations addressed to donors, the international community, and the Lebanese government to ensure the continued fulfillment of the fundamental rights of these refugees.

The UN Mandate and International Responsibility under Resolution 203

UNRWA was established pursuant to United Nations General Assembly Resolution 203, adopted on 8 December 1949, which created a specialized agency mandated to provide relief and works programs for Palestinian refugees pending a just resolution of their plight. Resolution 203 emphasized the necessity of continuing international assistance to prevent conditions of hunger and destitution among Palestinian refugees and to promote peace and stability.

The resolution further called upon all United Nations Member States to provide the financial and in-kind contributions necessary to ensure adequate funding for refugee

relief and works programs. This reflects the collective responsibility assumed by the international community toward Palestinian refugees under international law and UN resolutions. UNRWA's mandate has been repeatedly renewed over the decades through successive United Nations resolutions affirming the international community's commitment to supporting the welfare of Palestinian refugees until a just and lasting solution to their question is achieved.

In the Lebanese context, the State welcomed the establishment of UNRWA and regarded it as a framework through which the international community would assume responsibility for the burden of caring for refugees on Lebanese territory. In 2017, during the launch of the official census results of Palestinian refugees, the Lebanese Prime Minister stated that “the international community, Arab states, and United Nations organizations are responsible for addressing the situation of Palestinian refugees” in Lebanon, calling upon donor states to increase their support to UNRWA.

This statement reflects an official Lebanese understanding that UNRWA's mandate embodies a legal and moral international commitment toward refugees, and that any failure to support the Agency constitutes a breach of that collective responsibility.

UNRWA as a De Facto Alternative Government: Its Vital Role in Providing Essential Services

In practice, UNRWA operates in Lebanon as a parallel service system to the State, with Palestinian refugees relying almost entirely on the Agency to secure essential services. This is due to their status as one of the most marginalized and deprived groups in Lebanon and the region, with extremely limited access to public services or the Lebanese labor market.

Lebanon does not grant Palestinian refugees fundamental rights such as access to numerous professions, social security benefits, or property ownership. As a result, UNRWA has become the almost exclusive provider of education, healthcare, and relief services for this marginalized population.

In the field of education:

Approximately 86,400 Palestinian children benefit from education through UNRWA programs in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan as of mid-2025, reflecting the Agency's continued commitment to education despite significant field challenges. In Lebanon, UNRWA operates free schools that provide basic education to children who cannot access Lebanese public schools on an equal footing with citizens.

UNRWA employs approximately 1,687 teachers in its schools, making it one of the largest employers within the refugee community.

Data from UNRWA and the United Nations indicate that around 80% of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were living below the nationally adjusted poverty line (adjusted for inflation) as of March 2023. This figure reflects the extreme fragility of living conditions and the near-total dependence on the Agency's services amid successive economic crises.

The overwhelming reliance on UNRWA to meet educational needs underscores the centrality of its role in safeguarding the right to education for refugees—who, in its absence, would face widespread illiteracy and educational deprivation.

In the Field of Healthcare:

UNRWA operates a network of 26 primary healthcare centers distributed across areas where refugees reside in Lebanon. These clinics provide essential healthcare services either free of charge or at a nominal cost, including general and specialist consultations, medication, immunization, and maternal care.

According to the 2025 Emergency Response Campaign Progress Report issued by the United Nations and UNRWA, the Agency delivered approximately 570,000 primary healthcare consultations across its fields of operation (Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan) during the first half of 2025, including core healthcare visits benefiting Palestinian refugees in Lebanon.

Approximately 450 staff members, doctors, nurses, and administrative personnel—work within these centers. This demonstrates that UNRWA not only provides essential healthcare services to Palestinian refugees but also serves as one of the main employers within the refugee community itself in the health sector, through the recruitment of local Palestinian professionals in its medical facilities.

It is important to note that most Palestinian refugees are excluded from enrollment in Lebanon's National Social Security Fund and from benefiting fully from Ministry of Public Health services, which significantly heightens the importance of UNRWA's role as their primary—often sole—provider of healthcare.

In the Field of Relief and Social Protection:

UNRWA provides social safety nets aimed at supporting the poorest and most vulnerable families. For example, the Agency operates a Social Safety Net Programme for

households classified as living in extreme poverty, which includes quarterly cash assistance to secure minimum food and basic living needs.

In recent years, amid the severe deterioration of economic conditions in Lebanon, UNRWA has launched additional relief programs for all refugees (including those not categorized as extreme poor), funded through emergency appeals. In 2022 alone, the Agency provided approximately USD 81 million in cash assistance distributed to Palestinian refugees in Lebanon through quarterly payments under emergency response and cash-support programs aimed at mitigating the effects of the economic collapse.

UNRWA also implements emergency food assistance programs as part of its humanitarian response in Lebanon, providing periodic food support to refugee families facing food insecurity and worsening living conditions. Official statistics indicate that reliance on emergency food assistance remains high amid rising poverty levels among Palestinian refugees, more than 80% of whom face levels of poverty that severely limit their ability to access adequate food without international support.

These forms of assistance constitute a lifeline for thousands of families who have fallen below the poverty line and lack stable sources of income. In the absence of any meaningful support from Lebanese state institutions for these refugees, reliance on UNRWA assistance has become, in the words of a senior Agency official, “a matter of life or death” for many.

In the Field of Infrastructure and Shelter:

UNRWA manages communal services within the 12 officially recognized Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon, where approximately 246,000 refugees live in densely populated and resource-constrained environments.

The Agency’s services include housing rehabilitation and infrastructure improvement, such as daily provision of clean water networks, maintenance of sewage systems, wastewater management, solid waste collection, and ongoing efforts to address electricity shortages and environmental challenges within the camps. Camp residents rely almost entirely on these services to maintain minimum standards of dignity and public health.

UNRWA teams work continuously to maintain camp facilities to ensure acceptable levels of public health and environmental safety. The Agency has implemented major projects in this regard, most notably the reconstruction of Nahr al-Bared Camp, which was almost destroyed during armed clashes in 2007. The reconstruction initiative was launched as one of the largest humanitarian projects undertaken by UNRWA, aimed at rebuilding thousands of housing units and essential infrastructure within the camp.

This effort was funded by international donors and partner governments and carried out in partnership with the Lebanese government to restore stability and rehouse families displaced by destruction and forced displacement. These initiatives included improvements to water, sanitation, and electricity networks, as well as support for livelihoods within the camp and surrounding areas—reflecting UNRWA’s continued role in meeting the basic needs of the population after years of conflict and devastation.

UNRWA also provides rental subsidies to families from Nahr al-Bared Camp whose homes have not yet been reconstructed. In a previous phase, the Agency carried out housing rehabilitation for Palestinian refugees residing outside the officially recognized camps or in informal gatherings spread across various Lebanese regions. These gatherings—recently estimated at approximately 651 informal residential clusters—lack basic services and legal protection, rendering UNRWA’s intervention in housing improvement and compensation a vital component of its relief programs (Methodology of Data on Informal Gatherings in Lebanon). However, these projects have been suspended for several years due to funding constraints.

During major humanitarian crises—such as the Syrian conflict and the 2020 Beirut Port explosion—UNRWA provided temporary shelter centers and rehabilitation assistance to affected Palestinian refugees, ensuring continued access to essential services amid the absence of meaningful state support. These interventions illustrate UNRWA’s function as a de facto local authority within refugee communities, assuming responsibilities typically falling under municipalities and government institutions, including housing provision, infrastructure management, and humanitarian service delivery.

Since its establishment 57 years ago, UNRWA has remained the principal institution delivering humanitarian assistance—food, healthcare, education, and shelter—to Palestinian refugees. This reflects its central role in protecting refugee rights and meeting their basic needs in the absence of adequate support from host states. The Agency has succeeded in building an integrated service system that has enabled refugees to maintain at least a minimum standard of dignified living.

Without exaggeration, the daily lives of approximately 230,000 Palestinian refugees in Lebanon—representing the number of those effectively residing in the country according to the latest official census—depend fundamentally on these services: education and schooling for their children, healthcare for the sick, food assistance for the poor, and water and infrastructure for their homes. The United Nations itself has acknowledged that, because of decades of deprivation, there is today “a greater need than ever for the assistance and essential services provided by UNRWA to refugees in Lebanon.”



+96178809659



www.pahrw.org



witness@pahrw.org



witness.hokook



witness.pahrw



rights_witness

pahrwitness@gmail.com

The Socio-Economic Reality of Palestinian Refugees in Lebanon in Figures

Palestinian refugees constitute one of the most deprived and impoverished groups within Lebanese society. Studies and official reports consistently depict alarming human development indicators among this population, resulting from chronic marginalization. The following provides a concise overview based on the most recent available data:

Number of Refugees and Their Distribution:

According to the 2017 General Census of Population and Housing in Palestinian Camps and Gatherings, conducted by the Lebanese Central Administration of Statistics in partnership with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics under governmental supervision, the number of Palestinian refugees effectively residing in Lebanon was 224,471 persons.

The 2017 census indicated that approximately 54% of refugees reside in the officially recognized Palestinian camps, while roughly 45% live in Palestinian gatherings and various areas outside the camps. The largest concentration of refugees is in the Saida (Sidon) governorate (approximately 63%), followed by the North (52%), Tyre in the South (51%), Beirut (31%), Iqlim al-Kharoub (7%), and the Bekaa (4%).

It is noteworthy that the number of refugees officially registered with UNRWA in Lebanon is significantly higher, estimated between 450,000 and 505,000 refugees. This discrepancy is since UNRWA registration includes all individuals who have registered with the Agency over decades, including those who have left Lebanon or emigrated, not only those currently residing in the country. Registration with UNRWA is voluntary, and names are not removed upon relocation or emigration, whereas the 2017 census reflects the actual resident population at the time of enumeration.

In addition to registered refugees, Lebanon also hosts approximately 13,500 Palestinian refugees displaced from Syria, who arrived during the Syrian conflict.

Poverty and Food Insecurity:

The overwhelming majority of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon suffer from poverty. A socio-economic survey conducted by United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in partnership with American University of Beirut in 2015 revealed that 56% of Palestinian refugee households residing in Lebanon were living below the poverty line, compared to 66% in 2012. The rate rose dramatically to 90% among Palestine Refugees from Syria (PRS) who sought refuge in Lebanon.

The same survey indicated that certain groups were living in conditions of extreme poverty; notably, 90% of PRS were unable to meet even their basic food needs. Since then, the situation has further deteriorated due to successive crises in Lebanon—including the currency collapse (2019–2021), the Beirut Port explosion in 2020, and the COVID-19 pandemic—driving poverty rates to unprecedented levels.

In 2023, the United Nations indicated that approximately 80% of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon were living below the national poverty line amid the economic collapse. It further warned that without the periodic cash assistance provided by UNRWA, totaling approximately USD 18 million, poverty levels would have exceeded 90% of the refugee community—clearly illustrating the extent of refugees’ dependence on Agency support to prevent their descent into extreme destitution.

Food insecurity is also widespread, particularly among PRS. According to UNRWA’s 2023 socio-economic survey estimates, approximately 61.9% of PRS households in Lebanon face food insecurity, reflecting their limited ability to secure adequate food without external assistance. These alarming figures demonstrate that any interruption of UNRWA’s relief services would directly deprive tens of thousands of individuals of access to food and basic subsistence.

Unemployment and Lack of Economic Opportunities:

Palestinian refugees consistently face unemployment rates significantly higher than those of Lebanese nationals. The 2015 survey cited above reported an unemployment rate of 32.2% among long-term Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, rising to a catastrophic 52.5% among PRS. Meanwhile, the official 2017 census—using a different methodology—estimated the overall unemployment rate among Palestinian refugees at 18.4%.

Despite variations in figures, all sources confirm the magnitude of the problem compared to Lebanon’s general unemployment rate (which ranged between approximately 6% and 21% prior to the economic crisis). Youth unemployment is particularly acute: the 2017 census recorded unemployment at 34.7% among those aged 15–29 and 25.8% among those aged 30–44. These are deeply concerning indicators, reflecting an entire generation facing limited prospects for decent work.

This situation stems from legal and structural factors, including Lebanese laws that prohibit Palestinians from practicing dozens of professions (such as medicine, engineering, and law) unless they meet nearly unattainable conditions. Employers also tend to favor Lebanese nationals or other foreign labor in available sectors, while restrictions on work permits further compound the problem.



+96178809659



www.pahrw.org



witness@pahrw.org



[witness.hokook](https://www.facebook.com/witness.hokook)



[witness.pahrw](https://www.instagram.com/witness.pahrw)



[rights_witness](https://twitter.com/rights_witness)

pahrwitness@gmail.com

As a result, most Palestinian labor is confined to the informal sector—daily wage work with low pay and no legal protection—or many young people resort to irregular migration in search of opportunities abroad. These dynamics have entrenched a cycle of poverty and aid dependency across generations. A 2023 UNRWA report noted that the fourth generation of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon has grown up unable to access the economic middle class, remaining confined to low-income employment or unemployment, making the need for UNRWA services “greater than ever” to ensure their resilience.

Housing and Living Conditions:

Refugees endure harsh housing conditions in camps and gatherings. Palestinian camps in Lebanon are characterized by severe overcrowding; camp areas have not expanded in decades despite population growth, leading to the construction of additional floors in an unregulated manner, tightly packed buildings, and poor ventilation and sunlight exposure.

The 2017 census data show that the average Palestinian household consists of four members, with many families living in cramped spaces. Infrastructure in the camps is aging and suffers from insufficient maintenance, resulting in recurring water shortages, electricity outages, and severe rationing.

Although UNRWA has sought to improve these conditions through housing rehabilitation projects and infrastructure programs, chronic funding shortages have prevented it from meeting all needs. Moreover, Lebanese law has prohibited Palestinian refugees from owning property since 2001, depriving them of the ability to legally improve their housing conditions outside the camps and confining many to rental or informal housing arrangements.

Taken together, these factors place refugees in a fragile living situation in which they depend on UNRWA not only for services within camps but also for financial assistance to offset housing costs outside them.

Considering these indicators collectively, it becomes clear that the Palestinian refugee community in Lebanon is structurally dependent on UNRWA services to secure a minimum standard of living. Without the Agency’s schools, tens of thousands would be deprived of education; without its clinics, patients would be left without treatment; and without its food and cash assistance, thousands of families would face hunger.

The United Nations itself has acknowledged that Palestinian refugees in Lebanon are “among the most deprived in the region,” noting that they have “very limited access to government services or the labor market and are forced to rely almost entirely on UNRWA.”



This official acknowledgment encapsulates the reality of refugees in Lebanon and confirms that UNRWA is not merely an additional relief agency, but truly an essential lifeline for the Palestinian community in the country.

Risks of Reducing UNRWA Services and Their Consequences

Given the centrality of UNRWA's role for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon, any infringement upon its mandate or resources would have grave humanitarian consequences. Recent years have witnessed developments that clearly demonstrate the dangers of reducing UNRWA services for refugees' lives and stability:

• The 2018 U.S. Funding Cut:

In 2018, the United States—traditionally UNRWA's largest single donor—decided to halt all funding to the Agency, creating a massive financial gap of approximately USD 300 million in that year's budget. This decision plunged UNRWA into a severe financial crisis, forcing it to adopt stringent austerity measures: freezing new recruitment, laying off some daily-wage workers, reducing certain non-core services, and nearly failing to meet payroll obligations absent urgent interventions by other donors to partially bridge the deficit.

In Lebanon, the decision triggered widespread anxiety among refugees and translated into protests and sit-ins in front of UNRWA offices, as refugees feared losing their children's education, food assistance, and healthcare services. UN and Lebanese officials warned at the time that the collapse of UNRWA or a significant reduction in its services would result in humanitarian and security catastrophe, as there was “no alternative to UNRWA” capable of delivering services at that scale.

In 2018, then-Prime Minister Saad Hariri warned that “UNRWA's financial crisis threatens its programs and directly and negatively affects the basic needs of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon,” calling upon donor states to increase their contributions to enable the Agency to fulfill its obligations. Many states subsequently stepped in to offset the shortfall, and international fundraising campaigns were launched, enabling UNRWA to continue operations—albeit under chronic financial strain.

• The 2023 Funding Crisis:

Concerns resurfaced in 2023 when UNRWA faced another funding crisis following the temporary suspension of contributions by several European countries amid political allegations. After the outbreak of the Gaza war in October 2023, countries such as Germany, United Kingdom, and Netherlands announced temporary freezes of funding pending investigations into allegations—many of which were later discredited—related to educational materials or Agency positions.



+96178809659



www.pahrw.org



witness@pahrw.org



witness.hokook



witness.pahrw



rights_witness

pahrwitness@gmail.com

This dealt another blow to UNRWA’s financial planning capacity. In November 2023, the Commissioner-General warned that the Agency was on the verge of being unable to pay the salaries of its 82,000 staff members across its five fields of operation. In Lebanon, UNRWA continued to provide services but remained under threat of having to curtail vital programs if the European suspension was not reversed.

The United Nations issued clear warnings that any prolonged suspension or termination of UNRWA funding would have “catastrophic consequences” for refugees, as no other entity can deliver services at the scope and scale UNRWA provides, particularly in places such as Gaza and the camps in Lebanon. Following these pressures, most donor states reaffirmed their commitment to funding the Agency, and the United Nations General Assembly overwhelmingly voted in December 2023 to renew UNRWA’s mandate for an additional three years, until June 2026—sending a strong international message rejecting attempts to undermine its mandate. Nevertheless, financial deficits remain alarming, with UNRWA entering 2024 facing a funding gap exceeding USD 70 million in its core services budget.

Reducing UNRWA’s services is not merely a matter of budgetary figures; it directly impacts people’s lives, dignity, and fundamental rights. Cutting education funding, for example, could force the Agency to increase classroom density, suspend school transportation, or reduce psychosocial support services—thereby jeopardizing the right to education for tens of thousands of children who have no alternative schooling options.

Any reduction in healthcare services could result in clinic closures or shortages of free medication, exposing refugees to severe health risks, particularly given their inability to afford private-sector treatment. Similarly, reductions in relief programs would immediately translate into higher levels of hunger and poverty, potentially triggering social unrest due to escalating despair in overcrowded camps.

Moreover, UNRWA plays a recognized stabilizing and security role. It functions as a safety valve preventing the eruption of social anger or the transformation of camps into volatile hotspots resulting from collective frustration. Lebanese officials have warned that any vacuum left by UNRWA would place the Lebanese government before a serious humanitarian and security dilemma, as it would suddenly confront tens of thousands of deprived individuals without services or prospects—potentially leading to social unrest or increased irregular migration by sea, with its attendant tragedies.

From the perspective of international law and human rights, reducing UNRWA services without providing an equivalent alternative would constitute a clear violation of refugees’ fundamental rights as enshrined in international instruments, including the United Nations framework and core treaties such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. The

responsibility to ensure the rights to education, healthcare, adequate food, and housing falls upon the international community in the case of Palestinian refugees, given their unique legal situation: their state of origin (Palestine) is unable to protect them, while the host state (Lebanon) is either unwilling or unable to fully assume that responsibility for internal political reasons.

Accordingly, UNRWA remains the principal instrument through which the international community fulfills its legal and moral obligations toward them. Any unconsidered reduction in its operations may therefore amount to a failure of international responsibility.

Concluding Recommendations: A Roadmap to Safeguard Refugees' Fundamental Rights

Considering the foregoing analysis, this report proposes the following recommendations addressed to key stakeholders:

1. To Donor States and the International Community:

• Ensure sustainable and adequate funding for UNRWA:

Traditional and emerging donor states should increase financial contributions and commit to multi-year funding frameworks that address the Agency's chronic deficits. Multi-year financing would enable stable planning and service improvement, rather than annual crisis management. The donor base should also be expanded to include non-traditional donors from Asia, Latin America, and capable Gulf states to share the financial burden.

At the same time, UNRWA funding should be insulated from political conditionality. Humanitarian assistance and basic services must not be used as political leverage, and the international community should collectively reject attempts to link UNRWA financing to political agendas inconsistent with its humanitarian mandate.

• Strengthen oversight and transparency mechanisms:

To maintain international confidence, UNRWA should further enhance financial and administrative transparency, and facilitate independent oversight mechanisms—particularly concerning educational curricula and service neutrality—to preempt malicious allegations and shield the Agency from political pressure.



+96178809659



www.pahrw.org



witness@pahrw.org



[witness.hokook](https://www.facebook.com/witness.hokook)



[witness.pahrw](https://www.instagram.com/witness.pahrw)



[rights_witness](https://twitter.com/rights_witness)

pahrwitness@gmail.com

- **Renew international political commitment to the refugee issue:**

UN Member States should continue adopting resolutions reaffirming UNRWA's mandate, as demonstrated by the 2023 renewal vote. Sustained political backing is essential to signal that the international community will not abandon Palestinian refugees until a just resolution of their plight is achieved, in accordance with international legitimacy resolutions—particularly UN General Assembly Resolution 194.

2. To the United Nations and Relevant Agencies:

- **Safeguard and actively support UNRWA's mandate:**

The United Nations, particularly the General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, should continue closely monitoring the situation of Palestinian refugees and maintain UNRWA support as a standing priority. The Agency's mandate remains valid as long as the root causes of Palestinian displacement remain unresolved.

Enhanced coordination between UNRWA and other UN agencies—such as the World Food Program and the United Nations Development Program—should be strengthened to ensure integrated humanitarian and development responses within camps, especially during exceptional crises.

- **Consider partial inclusion of UNRWA funding within the UN regular budget:**

As an innovative step to address chronic deficits, the United Nations could explore allocating a portion of its assessed (mandatory) budget to finance UNRWA's core activities. Currently, UNRWA relies entirely on voluntary contributions; integrating part of its funding into the UN regular budget would enhance financial sustainability and reflect institutional prioritization of its mandate.

- **Elevate the international response plan in Lebanon:**

The United Nations should lead a coordinated effort—together with UNRWA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and other stakeholders—to develop a comprehensive plan aimed at improving the living conditions of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon in the short term. This plan could be integrated into Lebanon's broader crisis response framework and mobilize additional resources for infrastructure rehabilitation in camps, expansion of health and educational facilities, and temporary employment programs for Palestinian youth.

Such development-oriented initiatives would ease pressure on UNRWA services and provide refugees with opportunities to improve their livelihoods beyond complete dependence on humanitarian aid.



+96178809659



www.pahrw.org



witness@pahrw.org



[witness.hokook](https://www.facebook.com/witness.hokook)



[witness.pahrw](https://www.instagram.com/witness.pahrw)



[rights_witness](https://twitter.com/rights_witness)

pahrwitness@gmail.com

To the Lebanese Government and Official Authorities:

Reforming the Legal Framework Governing Refugees' Rights:

The Lebanese authorities should undertake a comprehensive review of the laws and administrative measures that restrict the rights of Palestinian refugees in areas such as employment, property ownership, and related civil rights. Despite the political sensitivity of this issue domestically, there are gradual reform steps that can be implemented without threatening Lebanon's national identity or political balance yet would make a significant difference in the lives of refugees.

Among these steps is amending labor laws to abolish the reciprocity requirement for Palestinian refugees (as "reciprocity" is impossible in the absence of a fully recognized Palestinian state), thereby allowing them to work legally in professions needed by the Lebanese labor market without excessive administrative barriers. It is also essential to lift restrictions on regulated professions and allow Palestinians to join professional syndicates (such as medicine, engineering, and law) based on objective criteria—such as qualifications and examinations—rather than maintaining the blanket prohibition that has been in place for decades.

Regarding property ownership, it is advisable to reconsider the 2001 property law to permit Palestinians to own at least one residential apartment to ensure family stability, or at a minimum to exempt those born in Lebanon or married to Lebanese citizens from the absolute prohibition. These legal reforms, beyond being a human rights obligation, would help reduce total dependence on the services of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) by economically and socially empowering refugees to become more self-reliant.

Strengthening Official Cooperation with UNRWA:

The Lebanese government and its institutions should enhance coordination and institutional support for UNRWA's work rather than leaving the Agency to operate in isolation. For example, the Ministry of Public Health could support UNRWA clinics by incorporating them, in some form, into public hospitalization schemes—such as covering part of the hospitalization costs in public hospitals for cases referred by UNRWA clinics.

Similarly, the Ministry of Education and Higher Education could coordinate with UNRWA in curriculum development or allow high-achieving Palestinian students access to public schools or public universities through scholarship programs, fostering integration rather than maintaining a complete separation between the two educational systems.



+96178809659



www.pahrw.org



witness@pahrw.org



[witness.hokook](https://www.facebook.com/witness.hokook)



[witness.pahrw](https://www.instagram.com/witness.pahrw)



[rights_witness](https://twitter.com/rights_witness)

pahrwitness@gmail.com

More broadly, the needs of refugee camps should be incorporated into Lebanon's national development plans and municipal programs, particularly regarding infrastructure and essential services. Such an approach would benefit both refugees and host communities alike. Treating camps as areas in need of sustainable development would promote local stability while simultaneously alleviating some of the burden borne by UNRWA.

Rejecting Hate Speech and Promoting Respect for Rights:

Lebanese officials should adopt responsible and balanced rhetoric when addressing the issue of Palestinian refugees and refrain from inflaming negative sentiments or attributing internal crises to them.

These refugees have been born and raised in Lebanon for generations, and respecting their dignity and fundamental rights is both a humanitarian and moral obligation. Ensuring the security and stability of the camps is a shared responsibility; Lebanese security forces should cooperate with camp committees and UNRWA to protect civilians during periods of unrest (as seen in the recent events in Ain al-Hilweh).

Respecting the humanity of Palestinian refugees and treating them in accordance with international human rights standards will not only safeguard their rights but will also preserve Lebanon's image as a host country committed to humanitarian values, while preventing the emergence of environments conducive to extremism or instability.

Conclusion

This report affirms that UNRWA will remain an indispensable lifeline for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon if the current conditions persist. The Agency ensures access to basic education, healthcare, and social relief services that refugees are otherwise denied through other channels.

From a legal and human rights perspective, supporting UNRWA constitutes a continuation of the international community's commitment to its obligations toward Palestinian refugees and a practical translation of their right to live in dignity until a just and lasting solution is achieved.

Accordingly, any weakening of the Agency without establishing an equivalent alternative would effectively sever the lifeline of an entire community, with serious humanitarian, social, and security consequences. Strengthening UNRWA and reinforcing the resilience of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon is not merely a humanitarian necessity; it is an



investment in regional stability and human dignity—until the day a just solution allows these refugees to return to the homes from which they were displaced decades ago. Only then can the international community truly say it has fulfilled its responsibilities in full, and only then may UNRWA no longer be needed as a relief agency—a hope to which we all aspire.

It is worth noting that this report was prepared by the Palestinian Association for Human Rights (Witness) through a comprehensive research process that combined both desk-based legal analysis and field research. The preparation of this report involved reviewing relevant legal frameworks, official documents, and international standards, in addition to conducting field observations and consultations with affected stakeholders. UNRWA was formally informed of the report and its findings as part of our commitment to transparency, constructive engagement, and ensuring that all concerned parties are aware of the issues raised and the recommendations proposed.



+96178809659



www.pahrw.org



witness@pahrw.org

pahrwitness@gmail.com



[witness.hokook](https://www.facebook.com/witness.hokook)



[witness.pahrw](https://www.instagram.com/witness.pahrw)



[rights_witness](https://twitter.com/rights_witness)