



# protecting palestine refugees

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“We will also show determination in speaking out about the need to protect and promote Palestine refugee rights and dignity. Humanitarian aid is not a substitute for the denial of dignity or rights. Palestine refugees need more than assistance. They need to enjoy the human rights that international law guarantees to all people and they need a just solution.”

**UNRWA COMMISSIONER-GENERAL PIERRE KRÄHENBÜHL**

*UNRWA@65 CONFERENCE  
UNITED NATIONS HEADQUARTERS, NEW YORK*

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## About UNRWA

UNRWA is a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949 and is mandated to provide assistance and protection to a population of some 5 million registered Palestine refugees. Its mission is to help Palestine refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and Gaza to achieve their full potential in human development, pending a just solution to their plight. UNRWA services encompass education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.

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**COVER PHOTO:** © 2014 UNRWA Photo by Shareef Sarhan

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## protection in unrwa at a glance

### Key Issues

More than at any time in the past, Palestine refugees are in need of protection. They represent the largest refugee population in the world, with more than 5 million registered with UNRWA in its five fields of operation – Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and Gaza. Across the region, Palestine refugees are facing a profound protection crisis due to the spread of conflict. The Syrian conflict has displaced hundreds of thousands of Palestine refugees, including tens of thousands to neighbouring countries, while Gaza has seen three rounds of hostilities in seven years. The Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza also continues to deprive Palestine refugees of their rights on an unprecedented scale. For a wide range of reasons, Palestine refugees do not enjoy basic human rights, and the vulnerability of women and children to violence and abuse is also increasing.

Today, UNRWA has integrated human rights and protection in its operations more than at any time in its history. With more than 65 years experience and 32,000 staff across the region who are largely embedded in the Palestinian community, UNRWA is uniquely placed to contribute to the protection of Palestine refugees. While each field of operation has its own priorities, UNRWA aims to focus its protection work across the

Agency on:

- Protection challenges from the ongoing occupation in West Bank and Gaza
- The impact of armed conflict in Syria and Gaza
- The plight of Palestine refugees from Syria (PRS) in Jordan, Lebanon and elsewhere
- The lack of legal status and denial of certain rights for Palestine refugees in host countries
- Protection risks facing women, children and persons with disabilities
- Protection challenges within the Agency's own service delivery programmes

### The Protection Mandate of UNRWA

The UN General Assembly acknowledges the protection mandate of UNRWA by recognizing in its resolutions "the valuable work done by the Agency in providing protection to the Palestinian people, in particular Palestine refugees." The Agency's protection mandate specifically addresses the rights of vulnerable groups – women, children and

persons with disabilities – and the General Assembly has encouraged UNRWA to further address their needs and rights in its operations in accordance with relevant international instruments (General Assembly resolution A/RES/69/88 of 11 December 2014).

Protection is what UNRWA does to safeguard and advance the rights of Palestine refugees under international law.

**UNRWA PROTECTION DEFINITION**

**The UNRWA Protection Framework**

In recent years, UNRWA has significantly strengthened its capacity to provide protection to Palestine refugees through various initiatives, including protection trainings, dedicated protection activities, and the introduction of protection staff both at headquarters and in all field offices. In 2012, UNRWA adopted a protection policy and has developed other protection tools and standards. In particular, a ‘Tool for Incorporating Minimum Standards on Protection into UNRWA Programming and Service Delivery’ was launched in 2010, along with a set of protection standards against which progress is measured through annual protection audits. UNRWA has an extensive gender-based violence (GBV) programme and is currently developing a child protection framework.

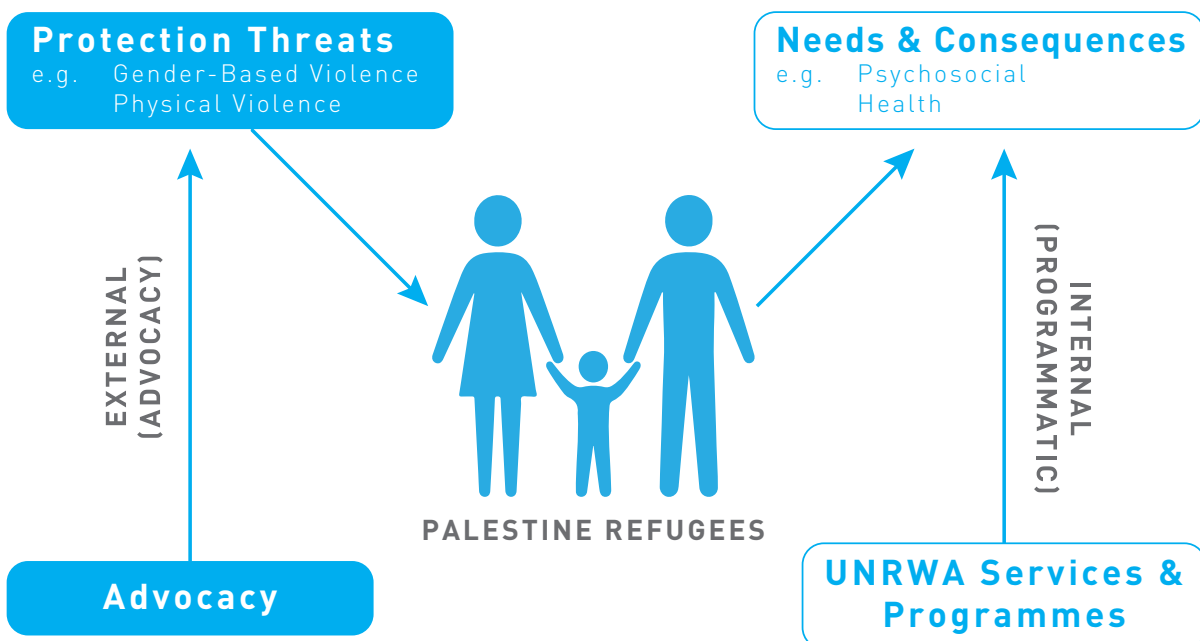
UNRWA applies a holistic approach to protection. This includes an ‘internal’ dimension, focused on realizing the rights of Palestine refugees in and through the Agency’s service delivery programmes, and an ‘external’ dimension involving engagement with relevant duty bearers to ensure respect for Palestine refugee rights. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive, and through its protection actions UNRWA seeks to implement the UN Secretary-General’s ‘Human Rights Up Front’ initiative.

There are four complementary elements to the Agency’s protection approach, as articulated in its Medium Term Strategy (MTS) for 2016-2021:

- UNRWA ensures that it provides protection in and through its service delivery programmes by meeting minimum protection standards.
- UNRWA implements protection programmes that respond to protection threats and promotes the resilience of Palestine refugees.
- UNRWA addresses cases of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation of vulnerable groups, including women and children.
- UNRWA promotes the rights of Palestine refugees under international law, through the monitoring and reporting of violations and by engaging in private and public advocacy.



**UNRWA PROTECTION FRAMEWORK**



# protection in and through service delivery

As a service provider to registered Palestine refugees, UNRWA delivers basic services, including education, health, shelter, environmental health, food and cash assistance, on a daily basis. The service delivery role of UNRWA provides significant opportunities for ensuring that assistance is provided in accordance with protection standards. In this way, UNRWA contributes to the fulfilment of basic human rights and the human development of Palestine refugees. Examples of protection mainstreaming in UNRWA services include:

## Inclusive and Safe Education

Protection is integral to the vision of the UNRWA Education Programme, which aims to achieve quality, equitable and inclusive education for all children within a healthy, safe and violence-free school environment. It does this implicitly, through its school and teacher development policies, strategies and programmes, and explicitly, through its admissions criteria and the specific programmes of 'Inclusive Education' and 'Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance'. UNRWA also works to uphold the students' right to education through its 'Education in Emergencies' response for children affected by conflict. This approach ensures access to learning through alternative education modalities (including student self-learning materials), equipping safe spaces to be used as teaching and learning points, the provision of psychosocial support for students, and capacity development for education staff on safety and security.

## Food Distribution in Safety and Dignity

In the West Bank, UNRWA reformed its food distribution practices to prioritize vulnerable Palestine refugees (including

persons with disabilities and the elderly) and improve the safety of distribution points. Accessibility was increased and waiting times were reduced.

## Health

UNRWA aims to ensure accessibility for vulnerable groups to the Agency's health services and that its family health package includes a medical response to protection cases. In Gaza, through the Community Mental Health Programme, UNRWA provides mental health and psychosocial services through 203 school counsellors, 13 community counsellors, 25 health centre counsellors and 22 support staff. Services focus on children, youth, parents, the elderly, and persons with disabilities, and the programme works in partnership with local committees, organizations, professionals and students. Referrals are also made to legal aid when required. In 2014, UNRWA provided counselling to over 15,000 individuals, with more than 78,000 individual consultations and group counselling to almost 12,000 individuals.

## Infrastructure and Camp Improvement

UNRWA continues to enhance social and physical accessibility of persons with disabilities to schools, health centres and other public spaces in the camps. This includes the revision of design standards and the dimensions of ramps and hallways. UNRWA addresses inadequate housing and emergency shelter, especially for those families affected by conflict, prioritizing protection and gender considerations. In planning reconstruction, UNRWA works towards ensuring that Palestine refugees' social fabric and livelihoods are strengthened.



## PROTECTION AUDITS

Protection audits are planned every year in each of the Agency's field offices. They involve a consultation with UNRWA staff working in different areas, such as education, health, and relief and social services, to evaluate if UNRWA protection standards have been taken into account in the planning and delivery of services. Guidance notes are used to introduce the standards in the assessment, design, monitoring and evaluation of programmes, as outlined in the 'Tool to Assess Degree of Alignment of Programming and Service Delivery with UNRWA Protection Standards'. In 2014, 238 UNRWA staff participated in protection audit workshops. The overall degree of alignment with protection standards across all field offices and programmes assessed in 2014 was 49 per cent, compared to 46 per cent in 2013. Recommendations from the audits are incorporated into relevant planning processes.

## EMPOWERING PALESTINE REFUGEE STUDENTS THROUGH HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION

The UNRWA Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) Programme empowers Palestine refugee students to know and exercise their rights, uphold key values, be proud of their Palestinian identity and contribute positively to their society. Human rights education is integrated into all subjects taught in UNRWA schools for all grades. Through child-friendly activities, children also explore protection-related issues, such as violence, bullying, discrimination and gender equality, and how to address them. Teachers are trained to create a learning environment in which human rights are practised and experienced every day. The HRCRT Programme also raises awareness about child rights in the community in order to respect and protect these rights. The participation of children in decision-making is enhanced by school parliaments in place in all UNRWA schools.



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# protection of at-risk groups

All Palestine refugees are at risk of violence, abuse, exploitation and neglect; however, certain individuals are particularly vulnerable. Protection cases addressed by UNRWA include child protection issues within the family and GBV, as well as other forms of violence and abuse. UNRWA programmes and protection teams are involved in providing a response to individuals at risk, which includes psychosocial support, medical aid and referrals to specialized services. UNRWA is currently strengthening its front-line staff capacity to identify protection cases and safely and confidentially refer them to specialized

services, both internally and to external partners.

In recognition of the heightened vulnerabilities of certain individuals in times of crisis, UNRWA mainstreams GBV, disability and child protection interventions in its emergency response. This includes the establishment of safe spaces for women and children in displacement centres, as well as ensuring that assistance reaches households headed by children and persons with disabilities. UNRWA implements a multisectoral programme to respond to and prevent GBV (*see box below*).

## GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE PREVENTION AND RESPONSE

The UNRWA GBV programme provides prevention and response by increasing survivors' access to services, training staff, developing referral pathways, building partnerships with external service providers and raising awareness of GBV within the community. From 2011 to 2014, referral systems have expanded to more than 100 facilities and locations in the Agency's five fields of operation, including refugee camps, schools, health centres and shelters for internally displaced persons (IDPs). During this time, UNRWA identified 6,803 GBV survivors, 3,778 of whom were referred internally and externally for assistance. In total, 7,677 services were accessed, including psychosocial counselling, legal counselling and legal aid, medical services, and social services. Overall, 7,433 UNRWA staff, including doctors, nurses, school counsellors, teacher counsellors, and social workers, have been trained on GBV response.





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## COMMUNITY-BASED PROTECTION IN THE WEST BANK

The Family and Child Protection Programme in the UNRWA West Bank office was established in 2009 to protect the rights of vulnerable groups in refugee camps from all forms of violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. The programme builds multisectoral social safety networks through community-based committees, with a particular focus on prevention through child, youth and family participation in peer and supportive groups. Beneficiaries are engaged in a variety of psychosocial interventions, using participatory tools – including expressive and creative arts therapy, the development of animation films, radio spots, drama, and sports – to strengthen their ability to protect themselves. In 2014, 485 people accessed GBV and psychosocial services through the programme and more than 10,000 community members participated in awareness-raising sessions. In addition, 10 child information centres, 18 mother-to-mother groups, 22 peer groups and 15 support groups for UNRWA sanitation workers were established.



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## PROTECTION REFERRAL SYSTEM IN UNRWA COLLECTIVE CENTRES IN GAZA

During the hostilities in Gaza in the summer of 2014, a referral system was established in the collective centres for displaced refugees from the conflict to identify and respond to protection cases in a systematic and timely manner, prioritizing child protection and GBV. The referral system included the training of protection focal points, which were tasked with reporting and monitoring protection concerns. Identified cases were referred to relevant services within UNRWA, including social interventions, legal advice, and psychosocial support and counselling.

## CASE MANAGEMENT AND MULTISECTORAL RESPONSE IN JORDAN

In Marka refugee camp in Jordan, the UNRWA Family and Child Protection pilot project has developed a case management system, which includes the documentation of cases, assessment of needs and risks, case planning and referrals to other service providers. The multidisciplinary project team provides integrated services for vulnerable children and their families. Families experiencing a range of protection concerns, such as family disintegration, child abuse, school dropouts, disability, mental health issues, child marriage and status as non-nationals, have been assisted. Since the beginning of 2013, 163 cases have been addressed. UNRWA plans to roll this pilot project out in other refugee camps in Jordan.

## CAMP ACTIVITIES FOR ELDERLY PERSONS IN LEBANON

In 2013, UNRWA launched the Sanabil Elderly Care Programme in Lebanon to improve the well-being of one of the most vulnerable and neglected groups in the community – the elderly – through comprehensive health, psychosocial, cultural, sports, recreational and home support activities. The centre, with its newly renovated hall and outdoor garden, has become one of the main means for the participation of the elderly in their community through diversified activities benefitting more than 600 Palestinian refugees living in Rashidieh camp.



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Protection of Palestine refugees through the delivery of the Agency’s services and the engagement of relevant parties, must continue to be at the core of the work of UNRWA.

**CHAIR’S SUMMARY, UNRWA@65 CONFERENCE**

# protection programming

In addition to its regular service delivery, UNRWA implements dedicated protection programmes to respond to specific protection concerns, which may arise in a variety of contexts, including armed conflict and displacement, or targeted

to specific groups. These programmes differ from regular UNRWA interventions in areas such as health, education, or relief and social services by providing an integrated response or a specialized service to address protection needs.

## ‘CRISIS INTERVENTION’ PROTECTION RESPONSE IN THE WEST BANK

Since 2010, UNRWA has provided emergency cash assistance to Palestine refugees in the West Bank affected by armed violence and Israeli security forces operations, including those whose homes have been demolished or damaged. The programme targets Palestine refugees that are vulnerable to, or victims of, forced displacement. Cash assistance for victims of house demolitions is delivered within 72 hours, following an UNRWA needs assessment. The response is coordinated and integrated with a post-demolition response system across the West Bank. In 2014, 3,718 individuals received cash assistance and 1,402 individuals were referred to specialized services.



© 2012 UNRWA Photo by Alaa Ghonshen

## LEGAL AID IN LEBANON

UNRWA Lebanon’s Legal Aid Unit provides legal counselling, referrals for civil court cases, and awareness sessions to Palestine refugees from both Lebanon and Syria. Services focus mostly on registration issues, family law, property, and labour law, while PRS concerns relate to visa renewals, border issues, advice on humanitarian admissions and civil registration. Legal aid services are delivered by a small team throughout the country and with the use of a hotline. In 2014, nearly 4,000 people were counselled, 1,600 participated in awareness sessions, almost 1,000 used the hotline, and more than 100 people were directly represented in court for civil matters.



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## monitoring, reporting and advocacy

Throughout its operations, UNRWA promotes respect for the rights of Palestine refugees under international law through monitoring, reporting and advocacy. UNRWA engages in advocacy on numerous protection issues, including the legal restrictions of host authorities that limit the rights of Palestine refugees, as well as protection risks related to conflict-related displacement of Palestine refugees within its area of operations, such as PRS seeking refuge in Lebanon and Jordan. It also includes advocacy on protection issues related to the Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza and armed conflict, particularly in Gaza and Syria.

The Agency's approach in this area includes the following modes of action:

- UNRWA documents alleged violations of international law, including humanitarian and human rights law.
- UNRWA engages in private advocacy with relevant authorities to prevent violations from occurring, as well as to seek accountability and remedial measures for violations that have occurred.

- UNRWA generates awareness and influence of third parties, such as donor governments, NGOs, civil society, the diplomatic community, and regional or international organizations, that are able to affect protection outcomes for Palestine refugees.
- UNRWA engages with the international human rights system in accordance with its 2011 'Framework for Effective Engagement with the International Human Rights System' (*see box on page 13*) to ensure that the protection concerns of Palestine refugees are addressed.
- UNRWA uses public advocacy, including through the media, social media and by holding its own campaigns, to raise awareness of protection concerns affecting Palestine refugees among a global audience.

In its advocacy work, UNRWA strives to provide a platform for Palestine refugees to raise their concerns directly with decision makers and policymakers. This has included organizing various events on thematic issues and organizing mobilization visits of Palestine refugees with key audiences, including in New York, London and Brussels.

## ACCESS TO YARMOUK REFUGEE CAMP IN SYRIA

In early 2014, UNRWA launched #LetUsThrough, an advocacy campaign to demand humanitarian access to the besieged Yarmouk refugee camp in Damascus, Syria, where 18,000 civilians, including Palestine refugees, were trapped without humanitarian assistance. This included a 'Thunderclap' social media campaign on Twitter in which people were asked to share a series of tweets with 23 million people, the pre-war population of Syria. The campaign was backed by international celebrities and many others and secured more than 40 million social media impressions. An iconic photograph of Yarmouk taken in January 2014 was displayed on electronic billboards in Tokyo and New York's Times Square, where a 'flash mob' event was staged in which a crowd of people held up pita bread in an act of global solidarity; images from the event were tweeted back to Yarmouk. The campaign ultimately allowed UNRWA to distribute food parcels into Yarmouk for the first time in months.

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## ENGAGING THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS SYSTEM

The International Human Rights System (IHRS) represents a strategic forum to advance the protection of the human rights of Palestine refugees. UNRWA identifies human rights mechanisms most relevant to the concerns of Palestine refugees and prioritizes interactions where it can provide timely, factual and reliable information. This has included interventions relating to the economic, social and cultural rights of Palestine refugees, such as the rights to adequate housing, health, education, and water. UNRWA has provided relevant information to a range of UN human rights mechanisms, including human rights treaty bodies, the UN Human Rights Council and its Universal Periodic Review working group, and UN human rights mandate holders (special procedures). In 2014, UNRWA made dozens of written and oral engagements with IHRS mechanisms.



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## ACCOUNTABILITY FOR GAZA

The hostilities in Gaza between July and August 2014 caused unprecedented death and destruction. UNRWA lost 11 colleagues and 118 of its installations were damaged, including 83 school buildings and 10 health centres. On seven separate occasions, UNRWA schools, which were being used as shelters for civilians, were either directly hit or struck in the immediate vicinity by air strikes or shelling, resulting in the deaths of at least 44 persons and injuring about 230. As expressed at the time by the UNRWA Commissioner-General, "We have moved beyond the realm of humanitarian action alone. We are in the realm of accountability." UNRWA contributed information to United Nations accountability mechanisms, in particular the independent Board of Inquiry established by the United Nations Secretary-General, and consistently advocated for accountability along with other senior United Nations officials.

# overview of unrwa field protection priorities

UNRWA has protection teams and staff deployed in all five fields of operation and at its headquarters in Amman and Jerusalem. Protection staff engage in each of the activities highlighted above and in support of its service delivery programmes. In order to deliver on its protection outcome outlined in the MTS for 2016-2021, UNRWA is in the process of reforming its organizational structure to ensure a more integrated and coherent approach to protection across the Agency. At the same time, UNRWA faces serious challenges to implementing its protection mandate, with the protection needs of Palestine refugees significantly outstripping the capacity of the Agency to respond. More resources are required, as well as partnerships with other protection actors. The following are field protection priorities:

## Lebanon

In **Lebanon**, **455,000** Palestine refugees are registered with UNRWA; however, the actual number living in the country is estimated to be far less. Palestine refugees in Lebanon are excluded from key facets of social, political and economic life. They face legal restrictions that limit their rights, including the

right to work and to own property, and have reduced access to state-provided services such as health and education. In addition, some 42,000 PRS in Lebanon face specific protection risks, including limitations on their access to Lebanese territory since August 2013. PRS already in Lebanon face difficulties in maintaining regularized legal status in the country, which has wide-reaching protection implications, including restricted access to civil documentation, curtailed freedom of movement, and increased vulnerability to abuse. UNRWA Lebanon's protection response focuses on providing assistance to those most in need through a multidimensional approach, which includes: the identification and referral of protection cases, the provision of legal aid services, access to specialized services for survivors of GBV and child protection, protection mainstreaming, and engagement with duty bearers to advocate for Palestine refugees rights. In 2014, UNRWA Lebanon identified 476 protection cases and assisted almost 2,000 Palestine refugees facing protection concerns. The Legal Aid Unit also provided legal services, including legal counselling and legal representation, to over 4,018 Palestine refugees.





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## West Bank

In the **West Bank**, where approximately **780,000** Palestine refugees live, protection challenges resulting from the Israeli occupation include armed violence, military incursions into refugee camps, detentions, settlement expansion, restrictions on movement, forced displacement, demolitions of homes, land grabs and settler violence, which are increasingly affecting the daily lives of Palestine refugees. From 2012 to 2014, 39 Palestine refugees were killed and at least 1,302 Palestine refugees were injured by Israeli security forces, with the increasingly prevalent use of live ammunition during operations resulting in a higher incidence of severe injuries and death. Over the same period, UNRWA recorded 509 demolitions of refugee-owned structures, displacing 1,149 Palestine refugees. Children are particularly exposed to high levels of violence not only related to the Israeli occupation, but also due to abuse and violence suffered in their homes and communities. Youth, particularly young men, are disproportionately more likely than either their female counterparts or other age groups to experience conflict-related violence. Women face cultural restrictions on their movement, which are exacerbated by the Israeli checkpoints and access regime. UNRWA West Bank prioritizes activities to mitigate the consequences of forced displacement – for example, of Bedouin communities in East Jerusalem – and

violence through the delivery of emergency cash assistance. It also engages in community mobilization to support resilience and self-protection, vulnerability-focused programming, protection of children and youth, documentation of violations, and advocacy. In 2014, UNRWA raised 123 documented protection incidents and met with the Israeli authorities on 26 occasions.

## Jordan

In **Jordan**, **2.1 million** Palestine refugees enjoy broad inclusion in social and economic life. The vast majority have Jordanian nationality, with the exception of some 153,000 ‘ex-Gazan’ refugees – Palestinians who fled from Gaza to Jordan in the aftermath of the 1967 war – for whom several legal restrictions limit their rights and contribute to their vulnerable living conditions. Jordan also hosts over 15,000 PRS who are being assisted by UNRWA, but who also face several protection threats due to their precarious legal status. There are vulnerable groups among the Palestine refugee population in Jordan, such as those living below the poverty line, women and children exposed to different forms of violence including GBV, and persons with disabilities suffering social exclusion. UNRWA Jordan targets the specific vulnerabilities of individuals and groups through a range

of protection interventions, including enhancing access to UNRWA services and assistance; strengthening referral pathways with external service providers; improved case tracking and case management mechanisms; and monitoring, reporting and advocating with duty bearers to promote respect for the rights of Palestine refugees in accordance with international law.

## Gaza

In **Gaza**, home to **1.29 million** Palestine refugees, repeated hostilities in recent years have had a devastating impact with unprecedented levels of destruction of physical infrastructure, loss of human life and serious deterioration of the social fabric. The illegal blockade of Gaza is severely affecting the human rights and freedoms of Palestine refugees and causing great hardship. With so little reconstruction after repeated conflicts, many fear a return to conflict is inevitable. UNRWA Gaza undertakes a number of protection activities including protection mainstreaming, as well as activities related to child protection and GBV prevention and response. While conducting home visits in the framework of its poverty assessment (covering more than 800,000 Palestine refugees), protection concerns are recorded focusing primarily on violence, abuse, neglect and exploitation. Specific cases are referred to a protection committee for appropriate responses, including referrals to existing UNRWA services.

## Syria

In **Syria**, the conflict which started in 2011 has had a devastating impact on the more than **530,000** Palestine refugees in the country. More than half have been displaced, with those who have fled the country particularly vulnerable due to their precarious legal status, limited freedom of movement and lack of civil registration, and many live in constant fear of arrest and deportation back to Syria. Palestine refugees who are internally displaced within Syria have limited access to assistance and are increasingly exposed to protection threats. The location of Palestine refugee camps in urban areas, particularly in Damascus, has exposed their inhabitants to disproportionately high levels of armed conflict. Tens of thousands of Palestine refugees have been left trapped in areas of active conflict, such as in Yarmouk, where civilians have been reliant on the Agency's irregular distributions of food and other assistance because of limited humanitarian access. GBV and exposure to kidnapping are other protection threats. In the context of protracted armed conflict, persons with disabilities, the elderly and single-parent households are significantly affected. At the programme level, UNRWA Syria's services have been modified and expanded to respond to specific protection needs, such as the introduction of a GBV response capacity in UNRWA health facilities and the deployment of psychosocial counsellors in UNRWA schools.





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for palestine refugees in the near east

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اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الشرق الأدنى