



The fight against the spread of COVID-19 in the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon

April 12, 2020

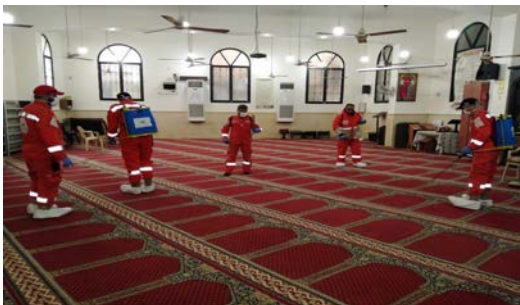
Overview

- ▶ On February 1, 2020, the first case of COVID-19 infection was detected in Lebanon. On March 10, 2020, the first COVID-19 patient died. **So far (updated to April 10, 2020), a total of 582 people have been infected in Lebanon**, 29 of them severely. A total of 19 people have died of COVID-19 and 67 recovered. There were no reports of patients among the Palestinians living in the refugee camps. However, it should be taken into account that there may be such cases which were not detected.
- ▶ The Lebanese government formulated a program to fight COVID-19 and started implementing it. The government was joined by Hezbollah and various sectarian power centers, each preparing a program of its own for the areas populated by the sect affiliated with it¹. A sector which did not receive an orderly, comprehensive response in these programs were the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians living mainly in crowded refugee camps in Lebanon, which can be a fertile ground for the spread of disease and epidemics.
- ▶ The first preventive measures in the fight against COVID-19 in the refugee camps were taken by UNRWA in late February and early March 2020. However, these steps were not sufficient. Furthermore, the **Lebanese government** (as usual) was reluctant to help the Palestinians living in the camps. Thus, residents of the refugee camps realized that they would have to manage on their own and take the necessary steps to provide a response to COVID-19 by local as well as global Palestinian institutions operating in the refugee camps.
- ▶ The leading Palestinian entity in the fight against COVID-19 is **the local popular committees**, which are present in every refugee camp and in practice function as a local authority. These committees are supported by Palestinian institutions: the Joint Palestinian Security Force, engaged in local policing functions; the Lebanese branch of the Palestinian Civil Defense; and the Palestinian Red Crescent, operating clinics in the refugee camps. Another institution is the

¹ See the ITIC's Information Bulletin from April 2020, "Hezbollah's coping with COVID-19: A test case of the conduct of the mini-state established by Hezbollah in Lebanon"

Shifa Association for Medical and Humanitarian Services, operating in Lebanon and providing health services to the Palestinians. All these institutions are supported by UNRWA and the various Palestinian organizations.

- ▶ The Palestinian organizations assist the local Palestinian institutions in coping with COVID-19 in the refugee camps. However, **the role they have played so far has been secondary**. Thus, for instance, the **Hamas movement** supported stand owners in the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp; The **Fatah movement** carried out disinfection campaigns and awareness activity in the various camps; The **Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ)** carried out large-scale disinfection campaigns in the various camps; The **Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP)** carried out disinfection campaigns, distributed food to the needy and collected donations; and the **Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine (DFLP)** engaged in disinfection and awareness activity. **The financial support** transferred by the various organizations to the local committees was also sparse and **far from meeting the needs of the fight against the virus**.
- ▶ The preventive measures taken so far in the refugee camps have focused on several issues: awareness activity among the residents; disinfection; preparations for treating confirmed COVID-19 patients; imposing supervision on the entrances to the camps; voluntary lockdown; aid to the needy and discount in payments (for electricity, rent etc.). In addition, UNRWA donated \$5 million to be distributed to the needy. Hamas announced the allocation of \$500,000, and it appears that several hundred thousands of dollars were donated from abroad. In the ITIC's assessment, these preventive measures and the resources allocated for them **will be insufficient** if there is an outbreak of COVID-19 inside the camps which will require medical treatment, mainly for moderate and severe patients. This is because of the harsh environmental conditions in the refugee camps, the lack of advanced medical infrastructure, and the difficulty to obtain significant medical assistance from the Lebanese government's medical services.



Right: Poster of the Palestinian institutions supporting the local popular committees in the fight against COVID-19: UNRWA, the Palestinian Red Crescent, the Shifa Association, the Palestinian Civil Defense, and the Human Call (*Al-Nidaa al-Insani*) Association (Burj el-Barajneh Camp Online Facebook page, March 16, 2020). Left: Mosque disinfection campaign carried out by the Shifa Association in the refugee camps (Quds Press International News Agency, March 14, 2020)

The structure of the study

► The study includes the following sections:

- ◆ **Section 1:** Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon: a fertile ground for the spread of diseases and epidemics
- ◆ **Section 2:** Initial preparations in the refugee camps for the fight against COVID-19
- ◆ **Section 3:** Entities engaged in the fight against COVID-19
- ◆ **Section 4:** Preventive measures taken so far in the large refugee camps
- ◆ **Section 5:** Financing the fight against COVID-19

Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon: a fertile ground for the spread of diseases and epidemics

► **The Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon are concentrated in 12 refugee camps and another 50 sites outside the camps.** The Palestinian population is spread throughout Lebanon, mainly **along the coast**. In 2017, UNRWA estimated that there were **463,664 Palestinian refugees** in Lebanon (Encyclopedia of the Palestinian Refugee Camps, no date), **but their real number is probably lower**. The Palestinian refugees living in Lebanon **are not recognized as citizens of the state** and do not enjoy many civil rights².

► Following are several characteristics of the Palestinian refugee camps **which increase the risk of the spread of COVID-19**:

- ◆ **Widespread chronic diseases:** According to UNRWA's data, in 72% of the families in the camps, at least one family member suffers from a chronic disease. A total of **31% of the Palestinian refugees in Lebanon suffer from chronic diseases and 32% suffer from hypertension**. Chronic illnesses common among the refugees are cholesterol, heart disease, stroke, anemia, prostate, cancer, osteoporosis, kidney disease, autism, and other neurological disorders (Al-Quds al-Araby, March 28, 2020).

- ◆ **Lack of medical services:** Most Palestinian refugee camps have **only one medical center**, which sometimes has to provide service to **tens of thousands of people** (UNRWA website, no date).

- ◆ **Density in the camps: Construction** in the refugee camps in Lebanon **is not subject to supervision and is extremely dense. The infrastructures in the camps are non-existent or substandard** (narrow roads, moisture in the houses, open drainage, sewage and water infrastructures insufficient for the number of residents, etc.). This is in addition to a **high population growth, high percentage of unemployment, and a high dropout rate**. All these further burden the shaky infrastructure (Encyclopedia of the Palestinian Refugee Camps, no date; UNRWA website, no date).

► On the other hand, **the population of the Palestinian refugee camps in Lebanon is relatively young**. This may assist in reducing the number of severe COVID-19 cases among the

² For example, they are forbidden to engage in professions such as medicine and engineering. They have a Lebanese laissez-passer rather than a passport, which makes it difficult for them to leave the country (Encyclopedia of the Palestinian Refugee Camps, no date).

residents of the camps. According to UNRWA website (no date), only about 10% of the Palestinians have passed the age of 60 and most of them (about 70%) are of working age.

Initial preparations in the refugee camps to fight COVID-19

- ▶ The first steps taken in the refugee camps to fight COVID-19 **were carried out by UNRWA**. Their purpose was to prevent infection inside the camps for fear that even a single case can lead to an uncontrollable spread. On February 24, 2020, UNRWA's health department set up a **situation room** to cope with COVID-19 in the refugee camps in Lebanon, in coordination with the Lebanese Health Ministry and the World Health Organization. The purpose was **to coordinate health, education and welfare programs** in order **to curb the spread of the virus** (Palestinian Return Center website, February 24, 2020).
- ▶ In addition, UNRWA launched a **large-scale awareness campaign in the camps; closed all its schools and purchased soap and disinfectants for its medical institutions in the camps** (Palestinian Refugees Portal, March 3, 2020; Saudi News Agency, March 4, 2020). These steps were taken **in coordination and collaboration with the Palestinian Red Crescent and the PLO** (Saudi News Agency, March 4, 2020; Al-Hayat al-Jadeeda, March 6, 2020).
- ▶ After the Lebanese Health Ministry's **National Program to Respond to COVID-19** was published on March 10, 2020, it turned out that **the Palestinian refugee camps were not particularly addressed in the program** although they constitute a potential for the spread of COVID-19. In addition, in its program, the Lebanese Health Ministry did not address **the need to prepare medical facilities in the camps to admit COVID-19 patients** (Lebanon 24, March 11, 2020; Al-Akhbar, March 11, 2020).
- ▶ Based on that, residents of the refugee camps realized that they would have **to address the situation on their own. They started to take preliminary steps to prevent the spread of the virus**. The Assembly of Palestinian Doctors in Europe (PalMed) and the Shifa Association (see below) launched an **awareness campaign** on protection from COVID-19. In addition, the Palestinian Civil Defense started to carry out **disinfection campaigns** in schools, neighborhoods and public sites in all the Palestinian refugee camps (Panet, March 10, 2020; Lebanon 24, March 10, 2020; Al-Hadaf news portal, March 13, 2020).



Distribution of leaflets on coping with COVID-19 in the refugee camps as part of an awareness campaign of the Assembly of Palestinian Doctors in Europe (PalMed) and the Shifa Association (Panet, March 10, 2020)

► At the same time, UNRWA announced a “general mobilization” and launched preventive measures such as **distribution of informative material and shifting to remote working and learning**. In addition, UNRWA approached other UN agencies asking for assistance. **A triple committee** was set up, consisting of representatives of the **Lebanese Health Ministry, UNRWA and Palestinian entities**, whose task is to coordinate the efforts to prevent the spread of the pandemic into the camps. The senior Palestinian representative in the committee is **Palestinian Ambassador to Lebanon Ashraf Dabour**. Operating alongside him are **representatives of Hamas, Fatah and the other member organizations of the PLO** (Al-Joumhouria, March 14, 2020; Al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 16, 2020). This activity was carried out in collaboration with civilian entities in the camps, headed by the **Shifa Association for Medical and Humanitarian Services**. This association started to disinfect mosques, sports clubs and other public sites and to distribute over 16,000 stickers and leaflets with instructions on self-isolation and explanation on COVID-19 and instructions on protection from it (Al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 16, 2020).

Entities engaged in the fight against COVID-19

► The fight against the spread of COVID-19 is led by **local entities in the refugee camps, which are supported by Palestinian institutions and UNRWA**. The prominent Palestinian entities participating in the fight against COVID-19 are the following:

- ◆ **Local Popular Committees:** engaged in meeting the needs of daily life: **electricity, water, and infrastructures**. All that is carried out in coordination with **the Lebanese government, UNRWA, and various social institutions**. In addition, these committees **resolve personal conflicts**. In effect, they **function as a local authority or mukhtar**.

◆ **The Joint Palestinian Security Force:** this entity comprises the representatives of the **various Palestinian factions**, which functions in all the refugee camps as a **police force and internal security of the camp**. They carry out patrols and take care of complaints by the camp residents (website of the Fatah movement in Lebanon, March 24, 2015; Palestinian Refugees Portal, October 23, 2019). This entity functions as a **municipal police**.



Right: Emblem of the Joint Palestinian Security Force in the Burj el-Barajneh refugee camp (Facebook page of the Joint Palestinian Security Force, December 7, 2019). Left: Members of the Joint Palestinian Security Force in the Mieh Mieh refugee camp (Dunya Al-Watan, March 24, 2015)

◆ **The Lebanese branch of the Palestinian Civil Defense:** The Palestinian Civil Defense was established in 1996 by the Palestinian Authority's Interior Ministry for providing **emergency services (first aid, search and rescue, firefighting and more)**. The **Lebanese branch** of this entity provides the same services in the refugee camps in Lebanon (Facebook page of the Palestinian Civil Defense, no date). It functions as an **emergency and rescue entity in the refugee camps**.



Emblem of the Palestinian Civil Defense (Facebook page of the Lebanese branch of the Palestinian Civil Defense in Lebanon, January 23, 2017)

- ◆ **The Palestinian Red Crescent:** A Palestinian national association established in 1968, it serves as a **voluntary welfare association assisting the authorities in all the territories of the Palestinian Authority and everywhere in the Arab countries where there are Palestinian refugees.** The Lebanese branch of the association has a “representation” (a clinic or hospital) in every large refugee camp in Lebanon (website of the Palestinian Red Cross, no date).



**Emblem of the Palestinian Red Cross
(Facebook page of the Palestinian Red Cross association, October 21, 2015)**

- ◆ **The Shifa Association for Medical and Humanitarian Services:** This is an association operating in Lebanon based on a license from the Lebanese Interior Ministry (2008). Its center is in the Ein Marissa neighborhood in Beirut. The purpose of its activity is **to increase awareness of health issues among the Palestinians; provide medical services to the needy; assist in obtaining medications, especially for chronic**

diseases; assist needy families and patients; provide humanitarian services etc.

(Lebanese Gazette, April 9, 2008).



Emblem of the Shifa Association for Medical and Humanitarian Services
(Facebook page of the Shifa Association in Sidon, January 10, 2020)



Right: PIJ-led training workshop in the Shatila refugee camp on the fight against COVID-19 (Shababeek, March 26, 2020). A picture of PIJ founder Fathi Shiqaqi is seen in the background.
Left: Disinfection campaign in the Shatila refugee camp (website of Group 194, March 18, 2020)

Preventive measures taken so far in the large refugee camps

The measures taken in the large Palestinian refugee camps as part of the fight against COVID-19 focused on several issues: **protection from the virus** (awareness campaigns, disinfection, preparations for treating patients); **prevention of the spread of COVID-19 in the camps** (voluntary lockdown, imposing supervision on the entrances); **and addressing the economic consequences of the protection instructions** (tax discount, distribution of food to the needy etc.). Following are the details.

Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp

► **The Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp** is situated **near the city of Sidon, in southern Lebanon**. **Over 47,500 refugees** are registered as living there. It has eight schools and two medical centers (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there so far are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaigns
- ◆ Awareness activity among the residents
- ◆ Closing shops
- ◆ Closing the entrances to the camp every evening
- ◆ Taking temperatures of those entering the camp and disinfecting incoming vehicles
- ◆ Economic support for stand owners and supermarkets in the camp
- ◆ Collection and distribution of food



Right: Emergency vehicles of the Palestinian Civilian Defense using loudspeakers to call on residents of the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp to follow the instructions on protection from COVID-19 (Dunya Al-Watan, March 18, 2020). Left: Members of the Joint Security Force disinfecting a vehicle at the entrance to the Ein al-Hilweh refugee camp (Al-Manar TV, March 21, 2020)

Mieh Mieh refugee camp

► **The Mieh Mieh refugee camp** is situated about 4 km **east of the city of Sidon, in southern Lebanon**. **Over 4,500 refugees** are registered as living there. It has two schools and one medical center (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there so far to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Setting up a checkpoint for disinfecting and taking temperatures at the entrance to the camp
- ◆ Full exemption from paying for electricity for March 2020
- ◆ Discount on rental fees in the camp

- ◆ Closing schools
- ◆ Carrying out awareness campaigns
- ◆ Soliciting donations from Palestinians living abroad for the distribution of food to the needy



**Taking temperatures at a Fatah checkpoint at the entrance to the Mieh Mieh refugee camp
(Ahfad news network, March 23, 2020)**

El-Buss refugee camp

► **The El-Buss refugee camp** is situated in **the Tyre area**. **Over 9,500 refugees** are registered as living there. It has four schools and one medical center. The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaigns
- ◆ Waiving the payment of debts for the needy because most of the residents work on a daily basis and cannot go to work.



PIJ-led disinfection campaigns on the streets of the El-Buss refugee camp and at the entrance to the camp (Al-Quds News Agency, March 20, 2020; local news website of the El-Buss camp, March 30, 2020)

Burj el-Shemali refugee camp

► **The Burj el-Shemali refugee camp** is situated **east of the city of Tyre, in southern Lebanon. Over 19,500 refugees** are registered as living there. It has four schools and one medical center (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaigns
- ◆ Preparing an isolation room at the Palestinian Red Crescent center in the camp
- ◆ Awareness activity carried out by the PIJ
- ◆ Obtaining donations of medical equipment from former residents of the camp living in Germany



Right: Hanging posters on coping with COVID-19 as part of an awareness campaign led by the PIJ in the Burj el-Shemali camp (website of the El-Buss refugee camp, March 25, 2020). Left: Members of the PFLP youth movement distributing masks and Palestinian flags to residents of the Burj el-Shemali camp on Land Day (website of the PFLP in Lebanon, March 30, 2020)

Rashidieh refugee camp

► **The Rashidieh refugee camp** is situated **5 km south of Tyre, in southern Lebanon**. Over **27,500 refugees** are registered as living there. It has four schools and one medical center (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaigns
- ◆ Closing schools
- ◆ Ban on gathering



Right: Disinfection campaign of the Shaheed Wadi' Haddad³ team in the Rashidieh camp on the anniversary of his death (website of the PFLP in Lebanon, March 28, 2020). Left: Disinfection

³ One of the founders of the PFLP. Headed the overseas terrorist attacks against Israel until he died of poisoning in March 1978 (he may have been eliminated).

campaign led by the PIJ in the Rashidieh camp on Land Day (local news website of the El-Buss refugee camp, March 31, 2020)

Beddawi refugee camp

► **The Beddawi refugee camp** is situated about **5 km north of Tripoli, in northern Lebanon**. **Over 16,500 refugees** are registered as living there. It has seven schools, a pre-school and a medical center (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaign
- ◆ Closing the entrances to the camp and imposing a lockdown
- ◆ Enforcing self-isolation
- ◆ Distribution of masks, gloves and disinfectants
- ◆ Waiving the payment for electricity for March 2020
- ◆ Awareness activity and taking temperatures
- ◆ Donation campaigns among former camp residents living in Europe for the purchase of food and assistance to the needy



Members of the DFLP youth movement distributing leaflets and taking temperatures in the Beddawi camp (Dunya Al-Watan, March 26, 2020)

Nahr al-Bared refugee camp

► **The Nahr al-Bared refugee camp** is situated about **16 km from the city of Tripoli, in northern Lebanon**. In 2007, the camp was abandoned and most of its buildings were destroyed in the confrontation between the Lebanese army and Fatah al-Islam (a radical

Sunni-Islamist group). Many families did not return to the camp (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaigns
- ◆ Awareness activities
- ◆ Closing the entrances to the camp
- ◆ Taking temperatures of those entering the camp



Right: Disinfecting vehicles entering the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp, as part of a PIJ-led disinfection campaign in the camp (Al-Quds News Agency, March 20, 2020). Left: Members of the Shifa Association taking temperatures of those entering the Nahr al-Bared refugee camp (Dunya Al-Watan, March 22, 2020)

Al-Jalil refugee camp

► The camp is situated **near the city of Baalbek, in the Bekaa Valley. About 8,000 refugees** are registered as living there. It has two schools and one medical center (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaigns
- ◆ Closing a mosque in the camp
- ◆ Lockdown and closing stores
- ◆ Distribution of food to the needy
- ◆ Discount on electricity payments
- ◆ Assistance in the early release of camp residents jailed in Lebanese prisons



Right: Disinfection campaign of the PFLP youth movement in the Al-Jalil refugee camp (website of the PFLP in Lebanon, March 24, 2020). Left: Distribution of food for the needy by the Palestinian Civil Defense in the Al-Jalil refugee camp (Facebook page of the Central Information – Al-Jalil camp, March 31, 2020)

Burj el-Barajneh refugee camp

► **The Burj el-Barajneh refugee camp** is situated **in Beirut's southern suburb**, near Beirut's airport. **Over 16,000 refugees** are registered as living there. It has seven schools, career counseling center, one medical center, and sheltered housing (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection and awareness campaigns
- ◆ Preparation of isolation rooms
- ◆ Distribution of food and detergents free of charge to self-isolating residents
- ◆ Closing the side entrances to the camp and imposing strict supervision on the main entrance
- ◆ Initiative of mass production of masks from kufiyah cloth ("Al-Quds masks"). Starting on April 1, 2020, a total of 50,000 masks per day have been manufactured in the camp.



Right: Disinfection campaign of the Palestinian Civil Defense in the Burj el-Barajneh refugee camp (website of the Palestinian Return Center, March 16, 2020). Left: Blocking a side entrance to the Burj el-Barajneh camp (Burj el-Barajneh Camp Online Facebook page, March 30, 2020). Below: “Al-Quds Mask” made of Palestinian kufiyah cloth, manufactured in the Burj el-Barajneh camp (Bint Jbeil local news website, April 1, 2020; Al-Khaleej, April 2, 2020).

Shatila refugee camp

► **The Shatila refugee camp** is situated in **Beirut**. **Over 8,500 refugees** are registered as living there. It has two schools and one medical center (UNRWA website, no date). The main preventive measures taken there to cope with COVID-19 are as follows:

- ◆ Disinfection campaigns
- ◆ Setting up emergency committees and a financial fund for emergencies
- ◆ Setting up a team of 25 medics
- ◆ Setting up isolation rooms for treating patients at a school
- ◆ Awareness activity led by the PIJ
- ◆ 50% discount on electricity payments

Financing the fight against COVID-19

- ▶ The cost of the fight against COVID-19 in the refugee camps is borne by **UNRWA and various Palestinian institutions. UNRWA allocated the sum of \$5 million** to be distributed to the needy. This amount aroused resentment among the refugees, who claimed it wasn't enough (Facebook page of the Central Information – Al-Jalil Camp, April 1, 2020).
- ▶ In addition to UNRWA, donations have been received from other sources:
 - ◆ Ismail **Haniya, the head of Hamas's political bureau**, announced the provision of urgent support to the Palestinians in Lebanon, in the refugee camps and elsewhere. The amount allocated by Hamas was **\$500,000** (Hamas website, March 29, 2020).
 - ◆ **Palestinians living abroad** transferred part of the money and equipment necessary for financing the Palestinian plan of action (Saida City website, March 22, 2020). In addition, it was reported that the Palestinian National Committee abroad donated **\$120,000 and 4,000 food rations** to be distributed to the needy (Amad News Agency, March 31, 2020).