

PALESTINIAN REFUGEE DEMOGRAPHY: CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES

UNRWA IN FOCUS

BRIEFING PAPER 9

POPULATION INCREASE

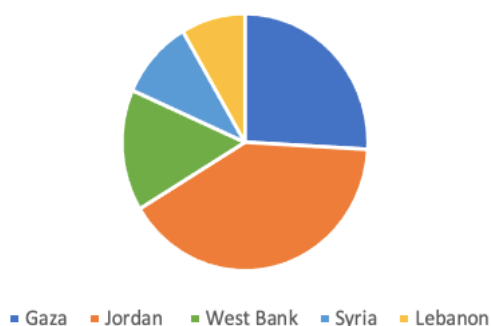
There are currently 5.7 million (December 2021) registered Palestinian refugees who come under UNRWA's mandate, in distinction from the 20.7 million refugees under UNHCR's mandate.¹ The population has increased year on year creating greater demand for its services. The positive population change has not been mirrored by increasing financial resources available, stretching the services UNRWA can provide to the maximum.²

There is some indication that the population growth is levelling off, with a percentage change of 0.95 in 2020 compared to a consistent 1.9% change in the preceding 6 years.³ The total fertility rate has decreased from 4.7 to 3.2 in the last decade. This may be attributed to family planning programs, greater uptake of tertiary education among women, and improvements in healthcare reducing infant and maternal mortality rates.⁴

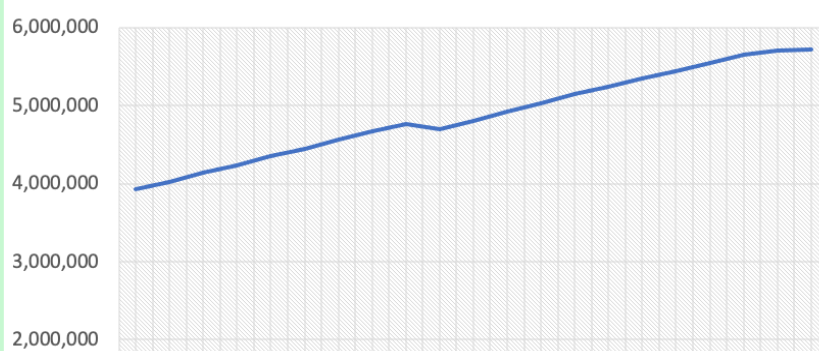
UNRWA projected a population growth of registered refugees and other registered persons to 8.5 million by 2030.⁶ In 2017, the UN Population Fund projected the refugee population in Gaza and the West Bank to reach 3.1 million by 2030.⁷ If the proportion of total refugees in these areas remains at its current 41%, extrapolation gives us a total projected population of 7.4 million by 2030.⁸ UNFPA's projections were exclusively based on 1997 and 2007 census data which makes their projection, and any extrapolation, statistically imprecise.

As well as projecting population growth to 2030, UNRWA also published a prediction of 6.46 million registered persons by 2021.⁹ This has been shown to have been an accurate projection, with 6.5 million registered refugees and other registered persons accounted for in December 2021.¹⁰

Total Refugee Population (March 2022)¹¹
5,711,102



Population Change (2001-2020)¹²



¹ UNRWA, 'Registered Population Dashboard' <<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/relief-and-social-services/unrwa-registered-population-dashboard>>.

² UNRWA, 'Budget Proposal 2022' <<https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/unrwa-2022-budget-proposal-enar>>.

³ UNRWA, 'Registered Population Dashboard' <<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/relief-and-social-services/unrwa-registered-population-dashboard>>.

⁴ UNRWA, 'Health' <<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/life-cycle-approach>>.

⁵ UNRWA, Annual Operational Review 2020, pp.39-53 <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/about-unrwa/annual-operational-report-2020>>.

⁶ UNRWA, 'Medium-Term Strategy 2016-2021' <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/strategy-policy/medium-term-strategy-2016-2021>>.

⁷ UNFPA, 'Palestine 2030: Demographic Change, Opportunities for Development', p.7 <<https://palestine.unfpa.org/en/publications/palestine-2030-demographic-change-opportunities-development>>. Projection is based on extrapolated data from 1997 and 2007 censuses.

⁸ UNRWA, 'Registered Population Dashboard' <<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/relief-and-social-services/unrwa-registered-population-dashboard>>.

⁹ UNRWA, 'Medium-Term Strategy 2016-2021' <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/strategy-policy/medium-term-strategy-2016-2021>>.

¹⁰ UNHCR 'Refugee Statistics Database' (2001-2021) <<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=ESYGx3>>.

¹¹ UNHCR 'Refugee Statistics Database' (2001-2021) <<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=ESYGx3>>.

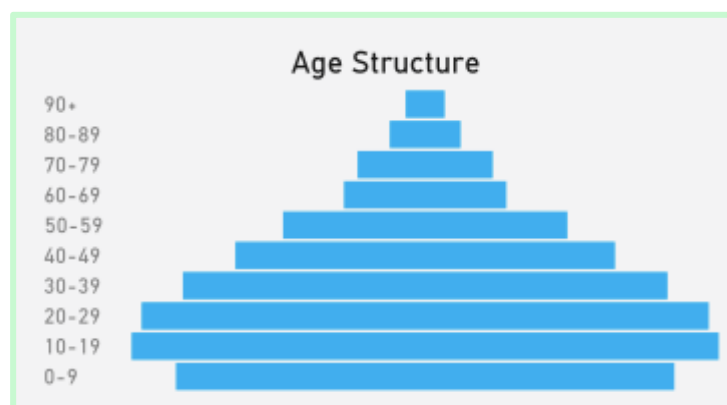
¹² Ibid.

YOUTH DEMOGRAPHIC

The youth population of refugees is disproportionately high, 32.1% are under 17 years.¹⁴ The youth bulge presents UNRWA and national governments with the challenge of providing education and job opportunities for young adults. It also presents a potentially positive economic implication as a large number of refugees approach working age. How far this opportunity can be seized depends on UNRWA's ability to provide adequate education and vocational training, host countries' labour laws allowing greater access to formal employment and the overall state of labour markets in the upcoming years.¹⁵

UNRWA's education system has many successes, often with higher literacy rates than host communities.¹⁶ However, with the population increases and budget shortfalls, school infrastructure and numbers of teachers trained are failing to meet the demands. 53% of classes have over 40 students, which will inevitably impede attainment.¹⁷ UNRWA coped remarkably throughout the pandemic, developing a digital learning platform that may alleviate educational detriment whilst funds are found to expand school sizes and train more teachers.¹⁸

Youth unemployment is high, peaking at 70% among 15-29 year olds in Gaza.¹⁹ Emergency cash-for-work schemes only provide temporary solutions. Disillusionment, reluctance to engage in secondary education or vocational training and frustration regarding stagnation of a political settlement raise fears of political instability. FAFO however draws upon evidence of the 2011 Arab Uprisings to suggest Palestinian refugee youth are unwilling to engage in political protest, showing trust in leaders and preference for stability.²⁰



Age Distribution of Registered Persons Across All Areas¹³

0-17	2,054,179	32.1%
18-59	3,709,639	57.9%
60 +	828,208	12.9%
Total	6,401,166	

COMPARISON WITH AFGHAN REFUGEES

As of December 2021, there are 5.7 million Afghan refugees in neighbouring countries, numerically on par with Palestinian refugees.²¹ In contrast to the steady increase of Palestinian refugees, the Afghan refugee population has swelled inconsistently in accordance with the unstable political situation in Afghanistan. Distance has grown between the social demographic profiles of Afghan and Palestinian refugees in recent decades as Afghans remain primarily rural dwellers and agricultural workers whilst Palestinians have urbanised by necessity as residents of urban refugee settlements. 43% of Afghan refugees are under 18 years old, bringing similar challenges regarding education and similar fears for young people driving political instability.²² Palestinian refugees have benefitted from a unitary education system under UNRWA in contrast to the disjointed education implemented by a multitude of actors for Afghan refugees in the region, reflected in disparate attainment levels. There is however greater inclusion of Afghan refugees in Pakistani and Iranian education systems.²³ Both Afghan and Palestinian refugees have a strong desire for repatriation but, in both cases, political circumstances and insecurity make this untenable.

¹³ UNRWA, 'Registered Population Dashboard' <<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/relief-and-social-services/unrwa-registered-population-dashboard>>.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ UNRWA, 'Medium-Term Strategy 2016-2021' <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/strategy-policy/medium-term-strategy-2016-2021>>.

¹⁶ Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (2019), Press Release <<https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/site/512/default.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=3486>>.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ UNRWA, Annual Operational Review 2020, p.50 <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/about-unrwa/annual-operational-report-2020>>.

¹⁹ oPT Emergency Appeal 2022, p.14 <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/emergency-appeals/syria-lebanon-and-jordan-emergency-appeal-2022>>.

²⁰ FAFO, Noreff Report, 'Palestinian Youth and the Arab Spring' (2012) <<https://fafo.no/images/pub/2012/20236.pdf>>.

²¹ UNHCR, Operational Data Portal, Afghanistan <<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/country/afg>>.

²² UNICEF, 'Child Displacement' <<https://data.unicef.org/topic/child-migration-and-displacement/displacement/>>.

²³ UNHCR, 'Refugee Education Strategy- Pakistan' <<https://data2.unhcr.org/en/documents/details/73890>>.

AGEING POPULATION

Almost 13% of the total population are aged over 60, consistent in all areas, bringing challenges to UNRWA's healthcare and social welfare systems.²⁴

Non-communicable diseases (NCDs) such as hypertension and diabetes are already the primary cause of death.²⁵ NCDs will increase in impact as the population ages and becomes more susceptible. Healthcare is part of UNRWA's core budget but what treatments are freely available to refugees is being restricted in line with budget shortfalls. 'Unessential' areas of healthcare are defunded yearly, for example glasses and mobility aids have been unavailable free of charge since 1998.²⁶ The quality of life for an ageing population is under threat as the budget further compresses.

The optimistic perspective of the youth bulge is that it brings a decreasing dependency ratio as more working-age people can support elderly relatives. However, since unemployment rates are already high, a population increase of working-age people will only increase competition for scarce jobs. This means elderly Palestinian refugees will lack familial economic support and will reach retirement age without adequate savings or pensions. UNRWA will therefore experience greater pressure to provide social services to this demographic.²⁷

With unemployment rates high, Palestinian refugees are concerned about their access to pensions in later life. UNRWA is thus under pressure from Palestinian refugees to find funds to provide social security for its ageing population.²⁸

The 'UNRWA In Focus' Project²⁹

The UNRWA In Focus project is a student-centred activity at the University of Exeter, led by Professor Mick Dumper. The project is designed to provide a platform for the publication of the student's research on one of the UN's largest institutions. Project briefing papers are concise overviews providing useful information on the activities of UNRWA to explore the notion of UNRWA as a significant political actor in the Middle East and its trajectory over the next 10-15 years.

Further Reading

Chatty, D., 'Palestinian Refugee Youth: Agency and Aspiration', *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 28 (2009), pp. 318–338.

Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, E., 'The Changing Face of UNRWA: From Global to Local', *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 1 (2019), pp. 28-41.

Strong, J., et al. 'Health Status and Health Needs of Older Refugees from Syria in Lebanon' *Conflict and Health*, 9 (2015).

Useful Links

BADIL Resource Centre, (2018) 'Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced People, 2016-2018'.
<<https://www.badil.org/publications/survey-of-palestinian-refugees>>

UNRWA, (2016) 'Medium-Term Strategy, 2016-2022'
<<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/strategy-policy/medium-term-strategy-2016-2021>>

UNRWA, 'Registered Population Dashboard'.
<<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/relief-and-social-services/unrwa-registered-population-dashboard>>

UNHCR 'Refugee Statistics Database'
<<https://www.unhcr.org/refugee-statistics/download/?url=ESYGx3>>.

²⁴ UNRWA, 'Registered Population Dashboard' <<https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/relief-and-social-services/unrwa-registered-population-dashboard>>.

²⁵ UNRWA, Annual Operational Review 2020, p. 37 <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/about-unrwa/annual-operational-report-2020>>.

²⁶ E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'The Changing Face of UNRWA: From Global to Local', *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 1 (2019), pp.28-41 (p.32).

²⁷ UNRWA, Annual Operational Review 2020, p. 54 <<https://www.unrwa.org/resources/about-unrwa/annual-operational-report-2020>>.

²⁸ E. Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'The Changing Face of UNRWA: From Global to Local', *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs*, 1 (2019), pp.28-41 (p.38).

²⁹ UNRWA In Focus Webpage available at: <<https://blogs.exeter.ac.uk/unrwainfocus/unrwa/>>.