



# General Assembly

Distr.: General  
16 September 2024

English only

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## Human Rights Council

### Fifty-seventh session

9 September–9 October 2024

Agenda item 4

**Human rights situations that require the Council's attention**

### **Written statement\* submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status**

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[18 August 2024]

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\* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



## **Depriving Displaced Palestinians in the Northern Region of the Syrian Arab Republic of their Right to Receive the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Services Deepens Existing Vulnerabilities**

Since 1948, Palestinian refugees have endured protracted cycles of displacement and expulsion, a tragic legacy that continues unabated. The armed conflict in the Syrian Arab Republic, which erupted in 2011, has only exacerbated this plight. Today, approximately 438,000 Palestinians remain in the Syrian Arab Republic, the majority of whom have been displaced at least once and now live in dire poverty.(1)

The Syrian conflict has inflicted severe losses on the Palestinian refugee community, with 4,256 reported deaths, 3,085 forced disappearances in Syrian prisons, and the displacement of over 60% of the Palestinian population. A third of Palestinian refugee homes in the Syrian Arab Republic have been partially or completely destroyed, leading over 200,000 Palestinians to seek refuge in neighboring countries and the European Union.(2)

In response to the 1948 Nakba, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established by UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) on 8 December 1949.(3) UNRWA's mandate, which has been renewed through 30 June 2026, encompasses providing education, healthcare, and humanitarian services to Palestinian refugees in its five areas of operation: Jordan, Lebanon, the Syrian Arab Republic, and the occupied Palestinian territories. However, UNRWA has regrettably excluded Palestinian refugees forcibly displaced by the Syrian authorities to northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic since 2018 from its critical services.

In 2018, approximately 2,000 Palestinian families were forcibly uprooted from their homes and properties in the Palestinian refugee camps of Yarmouk, Khan El-Sheih, Hindarat, Deraa, and southern Damascus by Syrian authorities. These families were relocated to areas in de facto control of the Syrian opposition in northwestern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, following intense bombardment that claimed thousands of lives, including those of women, children, and the elderly. Despite their dire need, these displaced Palestinians have been deprived of UNRWA's vital services, including primary and vocational education, healthcare, and social assistance, which are still provided to other families in government-controlled areas.(4)

Moreover, these families have been unable to update their civil status records with UNRWA, a clear legal violation that undermines their right to identity and protection. The agency's neglect was further highlighted during the 2023 earthquake that struck southern Türkiye and northwestern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, where over 20 displaced Palestinians lost their lives; Yet UNRWA failed to include them in its emergency appeal.

The situation went far worse in April 2024 when UNRWA suspended financial assistance to Palestinian families in Aleppo Governorate, including areas such as Manbij and the northern outskirts. This decision has left 200 families without any form of support, exacerbating their already precarious living conditions and deepening their vulnerabilities.

The absence of UNRWA's assistance in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic has had severe repercussions for the displaced Palestinian community, particularly for women and children. They continue to face extreme hardship, with poverty, unemployment, and lack of basic necessities, including clean water, shelter, and healthcare, reaching critical levels. Humanitarian organizations in the region report that poverty, hunger, and unemployment in northwestern region of the Syrian Arab Republic have reached unprecedented levels, with an average poverty rate of 88.82%.

Up to the moment of writing, hundreds of Palestinian families continue to endure life under ramshackle and sub-standard tents in the Deir Ballout and Al-Muhammadiyah camps in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic. These tents offer no protection from the searing heat of summer or the biting cold of winter, and children are deprived of adequate spaces where they can safely play and learn.

In these camps, approximately 285 Palestinian families struggle with severe shortages of potable water, healthcare, and education. The lack of UNRWA's educational services has forced hundreds of children to study in overcrowded, makeshift classrooms, where the quality of education is severely compromised.

The dwindling international support has significantly hindered educational prospects for university students in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, many of whom must overcome long distances, inadequate resources, and financial hardship to pursue their studies. The absence of UNRWA's health services has left the displaced Palestinians vulnerable to diseases and epidemics, including cholera and COVID-19, which disproportionately affect children and the elderly.<sup>(5)</sup>

The desperation of the Palestinian refugees has driven many to seek dangerous migration routes, risking their lives in attempts to cross into Türkiye and beyond. Many have drowned in the Aegean Sea, perished in the forests of Greece, and/or fallen prey to human trafficking gangs or brutal border controls.<sup>(6)</sup>

The international community must address the root causes of this crisis to prevent further loss of life.

Despite the presence of over 105 humanitarian organizations in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, Palestinian refugees continue to suffer from hunger, cold, and homelessness. UNRWA, in coordination with the Turkish government and the “directorate of Palestinian refugees” run by the “Syrian interim government”, must take immediate action to provide essential services to displaced Palestinians in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic.

The exclusion of displaced Palestinians in northwestern region of the Syrian Arab Republic from UNRWA's mandate is a violation of their rights under international law. Refugees are entitled to an adequate standard of living, including housing, education, and healthcare, without discrimination. UNRWA's own mandate requires the inclusion of all Palestine refugees in its areas of operation, including those in the Syrian Arab Republic.

Today, there are approximately 2,000 Palestinian families dispersed across three main areas in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic: Azaz and its countryside, Al-Bab (Euphrates Shield), and Afrin and its countryside (Ghush Al-Zaytoun).

## Recommendations

- We call on UNRWA to reassess the situation of Palestinian refugees in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic and to live up to its mandate by extending its services to these areas, recognizing them as part of its legal jurisdiction.
- Immediate and practical steps must be taken to address the unprecedented humanitarian crisis facing Palestinian refugees in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, with a focus on alleviating poverty and ensuring access to essential services.
- UNRWA must provide physical and legal protection to Palestinians in northern region of the Syrian Arab Republic, in accordance with international agreements, including the 1951 Refugee Convention, which guarantees basic rights to all refugees.
- We urge UNRWA to find a legal mechanism for updating the civil status of Palestinian refugees, which has been marginalized since 2011. Coordination with the “Syrian interim government's directorate of Palestinian refugees” should be considered to facilitate this process.
- Donor countries are called upon to address the financial shortfall facing UNRWA to ensure the continued provision of vital services to Palestinian refugees pending their return to their homeland.
- Efforts must be intensified to uphold the rights of children to education, healthcare, and a promising future, free from the scars of displacement and conflict.

- (1) <https://www.unrwa.org/syria-crisis#:~:text=The%20majority%20of%20the%20438%2C000,meet%20their%20most%20basic%20needs>
- (2) <https://actionpal.org.uk/en/>
- (3) <https://www.uneval.org/about/memberagencies/detail/52#:~:text=The%20United%20Nations%20Relief%20and,works%20programmes%20for%20Palestine%20refugees.>
- (4) <https://www.unicef.org/media/77311/file/Syria-Crisis-SitRep-March-2018.pdf>
- (5) <https://speakingofmedicine.plos.org/2023/02/07/the-cholera-outbreak-in-northeast-syria-water-conflict-and-humanitarian-challenges/>
- (6) <https://www.fmreview.org/morrison/>