

UN agency micro-loan helps courageous Palestine refugee's small business thrive amid rubble of Syrian war

19 May 2017 – Hidden literally under the rubble of the Syrian war is the economic success story of a widow who, refusing to submit to despair, founded a thriving micro-enterprise venture with assistance from a United Nations agency loan.

Hanan Odah is a 30-year-old Palestine refugee who, living in the Jaramana refugee camp in the Syrian capital, Damascus, supports her displaced family of three with a stationery and perfume business that she first founded with a loan from the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)).

“Young, innovative and courageous, she is living proof that as large businesses have collapsed, small scale enterprises can survive and even thrive in the markets opening up at the grassroots,” said UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl in an [opinion piece](#) published today.

As senior leaders and key business figures gather this week at the World Economic Forum in Jordan, Mr. Krähenbühl hopes that they find Hanan's story “revealing, instructive and perhaps even inspiring,” flagging UNRWA's micro finance initiative as a rare but significant example of optimism in the country.

Calling her “an extraordinary young woman who in the face of untold adversity is bravely transforming her community from within, one business plan at a time,” he adds that that “is what the World Economic Forum, at its best, is striving to achieve.”

According to the Syrian Centre for Policy Research, de-industrialization has inflicted \$254.7 billion in economic damage on Syria. In 2015 alone GDP loss was \$ 163.3 billion. As a result of the economic collapse, more than 85 per cent of Syrians were living in poverty by the end of 2015, with more than 69 per cent of the population barely surviving in extreme poverty. Nearly three million jobs have been lost and unemployment is now over 50 per cent.

However, Mr. Krähenbühl pointed out: “With recent donor funding, in particular \$1 million from the European Union, we have expanded our micro finance outreach. Always searching for new openings, we have been actively mapping new locations of internally displaced people to reach the Palestine refugees we serve and to deliver loan products where market opportunities open up.”

In a country where nearly three million jobs have been lost and unemployment is over 50 per cent, the UN has expanded its [Microfinance programme in Palestine](#). Worth nearly \$2 million, UNRWA's programme supports the resilience

of Palestine refugees and Syrians alike.

For many beneficiaries these loans are vital to support their families and rebuild their homes but, most importantly, they provide a renewed sense of hope and dignity in a country devastated by six years of conflict.

“Across Syria, UNRWA’s Micro Finance Department disbursed a staggering 9,520 loans in 2016, worth nearly two million dollars. We can build on this track record and expand with the support of donors and partners,” stressed Mr. Krähenbühl.

“Our loans have also developed flexibly in response to the evolving conflict. There are currently five products that respond to the deepening emergency situations in Syria and help Palestine refugees re-build their houses and maintain stable incomes for themselves and extended families; no small achievement as war rages relentlessly in the country,” he concluded.