



## Improving the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)

*ODU United Nations Society*

### Introduction

Established in December 1949, during the most violent fighting that followed the creation of the State of Israel, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) is the principle source of international humanitarian assistance for the refugees rendered homeless by that war.

Today UNRWA (pronounced *un-ruh*) provides humanitarian assistance and basic social services to Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, including food, schools and medical care. It is the UN's only refugee program specifically dedicated to a single conflict. All others are organized under the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Like everything else relating to the Israel-Palestinian conflict, it also attracts bitter controversy.

With Palestinian refugees often excluded from the economies of the host countries, and denied most social services there, UNRWA's role is especially vital in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and in Palestine's Gaza Strip. For many Palestinian refugees, it often offers the only support available. In Gaza, the tiny, over-populated, isolated, impoverished and volatile Palestinian enclave, about two-thirds of the 1.86 million residents (or some 1.2 million Gaza residents) are registered refugees and depend on assistance from UNRWA. Since the Shi'ite political party Hamas took control of

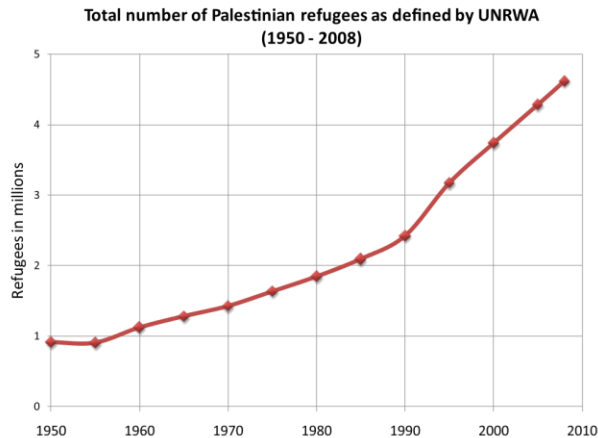
Gaza in 2007, Israel and Egypt have imposed a land, sea and air blockade of the territory, which further increased Palestinian refugee dependence on UNRWA.<sup>1</sup>



*Palestinian* is defined by UNRWA to mean 'Persons whose regular place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.' Originally it helped both Israel and Palestinian refugees of the fighting, but in 1952 Israel took direct control over assistance to Jewish refugees. Since then, UNRWA has helped the remaining Palestinian people displaced by war in the region in 1948, 1956 and 1967.

<sup>1</sup> Isabel Kershner, 'U.N. Agency for Palestinian Refugees Faces Accusations of Misconduct', *New York Times*, 30 July 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/07/30/world/middleeast/un-palestinian-agency-misconduct.html>



Total number of Palestinian refugees registered by UNRWA (1950–2008). Source: ‘UNRWA’, *Wikipedia*, n.d., [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNRWA#cite\\_note-15](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/UNRWA#cite_note-15)

Families have received assistance for the full seventy years UNRWA has existed. UNRWA allows refugee status to be inherited by descendants of male refugee, including legally adopted children. This reflects both the determination of UN Member States to support the Palestinian people, as well as the determination of countries hosting Palestinian refugees that they will not be permanently resettled there, but must be returned to their lost homes in territory controlled by Israel. In 1949 UNRWA helped 750,000 million official Palestinian refugees. Seventy years and three generations later, the population of officially registered refugees is 5.5 million.<sup>2</sup> Keeping the organization working efficiently, with resources far below needs, and angry dispute over all its activities, requires constant massaging by the UN and its Member States.

<sup>2</sup> ‘Palestine refugees’, *The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees*, n.d., <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>; and ‘Who we are’, *The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees*, n.d., <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>

## Nothing Uncontroversial in the Middle East

While UNRWA plays a crucial role maintaining the welfare of the world’s single largest refugee community in the world’s tensest region, it is not beyond criticism, mostly concerning its efficiency, the work of specific officials, choice of partner organizations, and specific program priorities. This changed in 2011, the year that UNRWA became the target of a sustained attack, mostly from the United States.

While criticism of UNRWA comes from all directions—from Israel which accuses it of doing too much, to Arab states who insist it does too little—criticism is strongest by Israel and the United States. While many Israelis support UNRWA’s work, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for it to be closed, and Palestinian refugees to be absorbed as citizens in neighboring countries; Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Those countries want nothing to do with this proposal, which was long the preferred option of the Israeli far-right, and insist the refugees must be allowed to recover their lost homes in Palestine.

The most assertive critics in the United States argue UNRWA is a socialist welfare program that does not solve anything. Rather, it perpetuates problems and solves none.<sup>3</sup> Essentially this argument takes a standard political criticism of social welfare programs from U.S. domestic politics—welfare does not solve problems and inhibits people from finding their own solutions—and applies it to an international problem. It also fits into an

<sup>3</sup> Asaf Romirowsky and Alexander H. Joffe, ‘Defund the UNRWA’, *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 April 2011, <http://www.romirowsky.com/9019/defund-the-unrwa>



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American political narrative that combines praise of Israel with criticism of Palestinians.

These criticisms found a welcome audience among Republicans in Congress in 2011-16, but had no broader effect until the election of President Trump in November 2016. The Trump Administration abandoned America's traditional role of mediating between Israel and Palestine. It abandoned the long proposed Two-State Solution, the foundation of all previous peace initiatives. It moved the U.S. Embassy from its neutral location in Tel Aviv to the Israeli capital of Jerusalem, acknowledging sole Israeli control of the city which both sides claim as their capital. And then it began to undermine the role of UNRWA.

UNRWA defenders admit that reform is helpful, but deny such problems outweigh the importance of the organization's mission. The biggest problem, they maintain, is not bureaucratic weakness, but the basic problems of the Palestinian people:

Palestinian refugees continue to be refugees because the issues which caused their exile remain outstanding. Only by addressing in a just and durable fashion the underlying causes of conflict – and by doing so in accordance with international law and the rights of refugees – can the refugee issue be laid to rest. This is the responsibility of the parties and international political actors. It is wishful, cynical thinking to suppose that Palestinian refugees can be made to "go away" by dispersing them around the globe or by dissolving the Agency established to protect and assist them pending a just and lasting solution to their plight.<sup>4</sup>

Statements like this support the consensus that there are no simple alternative solutions to the

woes of the Palestinian people. From this perspective, it cannot be found by the Palestinian themselves. Their own governments—the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the West Bank and Hamas in Gaza—are too poor, too weak, and too dependent on Israel to solve the problems of their people. Nor can neighboring Arab states be expected to absorb them into their own populations and make the problem magically disappear. Ending UNRWA would only bring misery to millions and make a massive guerrilla war inevitable. Solving the problems of Palestinian refugees requires resolution of the underlying conflict with Israel. In lieu of peace breakthrough, UNRWA will remain essential to the welfare of the Palestinian people.



### The Effect of US Budget Cuts

In May 2018 Secretary of State Pompeo approved the US budget cuts for Palestinian aid. The US budget for UNRWA operations in the occupied Palestinian territories went from USD 360 million to just USD 65 million. The following year, US contributions were eliminated altogether.

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<sup>4</sup> Chris Gunness, 'UNRWA: Beyond the Myths', *Huffington Post*, 30 August 2011,

<https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/features/unrwa-beyond-myths>



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This effectively cut the total UNRWA budget of USD 1.2 billion by twenty-five percent.<sup>5</sup> The immediate result was massive firings of the agency's Palestinian employees and full-time international staffers.<sup>6</sup> Two months later, the United States announced it was stopping its historic bi-lateral aid to Palestinian humanitarian assistance and assistance to the Palestinian Authority (PA), the de facto government of the West Bank. This ended a further USD 200 million a year from Palestinian support.<sup>7</sup> Left untouched was the American aid program to Israel, worth over USD 3.1 to 3.8 billion annually in military assistance alone.<sup>8</sup>

The justifications centered on distrust of Palestinians, their political organizations and supporters. In a statement, the US State Department's spokesperson Heather Nauert said that UNRWA's '... endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries is simply unsustainable and has been in crisis mode for many years... The administration has carefully reviewed the issue and determined that the United States will not make additional contributions to UNRWA.'

Others put the American decision in broader context. 'They (the US) are justifying this largely on the grounds that the funding is mismanaged and that the agency itself wastes

money and is inefficient... This is part and parcel, together with the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, of an effort by the Trump administration to really affect some radical changes and try to re-set the table in the Middle East.' The US government is also pushing for a reduction in the number of Palestinian refugees, from five million to 500,000, and wants to count only those who were directly displaced from their homes seven decades ago.<sup>9</sup>

"The situation of Palestinians is defined by great anxiety and uncertainty, first because Palestinian refugees do not see a solution to their plight on the horizon," Pierre Krahenbuhl, UNRWA's director told a UN conference. The loss of support has been especially acute in Gaza, which has been pushed to the verge of a "humanitarian catastrophe".<sup>10</sup>

After the US, its single largest financier, completed its combined cuts, UNRWA and other Palestinian aid programs were left with budget deficits of more than USD 440 million. These problems forced UNRWA and its supporters to beg for additional donations from Europe and the Gulf Arab States. They have made up some of the shortfall, but far from all. The United Arab Emirates, for example, raised their funding by USD 12.5 million.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Bel Trew, 'Gaza crisis: UN says 1 million Palestinians could go hungry as it warns of 'humanitarian catastrophe'', *The Independent*, 9 May 2019,

<https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gaza-crisis-palestine-refugees-un-funding-israel-egypt-middle-east-a8906641.html>

<sup>6</sup> US ends all funding for UN's Palestine refugee agency', *Al Jazeera*, 1 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/ends-funding-palestine-refugee-agency-180831203947486.html>

<sup>7</sup> US cuts over \$200m in aid to Palestinians', *Al Jazeera*, 24 August 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/cuts-200m-aid-palestinians-180824200738805.html>

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> 'US ends all funding for UN's Palestine refugee agency', *Al Jazeera*, 1 September 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/08/ends-funding-palestine-refugee-agency-180831203947486.html>

<sup>10</sup> Bel Trew, 'Gaza crisis: UN says 1 million Palestinians could go hungry as it warns of 'humanitarian catastrophe'', *The Independent*, 9 May 2019, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/gaza-crisis-palestine-refugees-un-funding-israel-egypt-middle-east-a8906641.html>

<sup>11</sup> 'UNRWA receives new funding from UAE', *Middle East Monitor*, 23 November 2019,



## Adding Mismanagement to Injury

As if budget woes were not enough, in 2019 UNRWA was subject to a UN-mandated audit that revealed widespread problems of mismanagement.<sup>12</sup> A confidential internal report from the UNRWA's ethics office detailed alleged abuses of authority among the organization's senior management team. Based on input from dozens of current and former staff, the 10-page document—which has not been made public—reportedly cited 'credible and corroborated reports' that members of an 'inner circle' of top UNRWA officials engaged in 'abuses of authority for personal gain, to suppress legitimate dissent and to otherwise achieve their personal objectives.'<sup>13</sup>

The report specifically named Commissioner-General Pierre Krahenbuhl, Deputy Commissioner-General Sandra Mitchell, Chief of Staff Hakam Shahwan, and Senior Adviser to the Commissioner-General Maria Mohammed. All these officials have since resigned.

The UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) opened a probe into allegations in the report. The UN Secretary-General's spokesman, Stephane Dujarric, confirmed that '...the Secretary-General is committed to acting swiftly upon receiving the full report.'<sup>14</sup> In response, Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland, suspended payments to UNRWA.<sup>15</sup>

<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20191123-unrwa-receives-new-funding-from-uae/>

<sup>12</sup> Ian Williams, 'Ethics report accuses UNRWA leadership of abuse of power', *Al Jazeera*, 29 Jul 2019,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/ethics-report-accuses-unrwa-leadership-abuse-power-190726114701787.html>

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.



## Previous UN Responses

UNRWA was established by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 of 8 December 1949, adopted and passed unopposed, supported by both Israel and the Arab Member States, with only the Soviet bloc and South Africa abstaining.<sup>16</sup>

Since the initial authorization of UNRWA in 1949, the Member States of the UN have been committed to maintaining the organization, which is widely seen as the primary mechanism of humanitarian support for Palestinian refugees. Criticism has had an effect, making support less automatic, more conditional on internal reform. There is slightly less support among European Member States in particular, although this does not yet translate into actual votes against key resolutions. European governments, even those critical of specific Palestinian policies, still believe humanitarian support for Palestinians is essential, both for humanitarian reasons, and to

<sup>15</sup> 'In Face of U.S. Opposition, U.N. Renews Agency Helping Palestinian Refugees', *Reuters*, 13 November 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/12/13/world/middleeast/13reuters-un-palestinians-refugees.html>

<sup>16</sup> 'General Assembly resolution 302, A/RES/302 (IV)', 8 December 1949, *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees*, n.d., <https://www.unrwa.org/content/general-assembly-resolution-302>



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make solution of the conflict possible. Some European Member States also support any program for refugees that might slow their migration to Europe.

Less successful is the American-led effort to make aid to Palestinians dependent on first ending the conflict with Israel, on Israel's preferred terms, on stopping all violence by rejectionist factions, or prosecuting specific crimes. Some critics also would like to see UNRWA's work concluded, arguing that few recipients are actual refugees. Rather, the vast majority are the family of people who were forced to flee Palestine in 1948, and no longer qualify under most international accepted legal definitions as refugees. Defenders argue this is part of the exception that makes UNRWA's work possible.<sup>17</sup>

In response to American criticism of UNRWA, in 2018 the General Assembly passed a resolution, *Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*, (A/RES/73/94), of 7 December 2018.<sup>18</sup> This resolution urged all Member States to re-commit to supporting UNRWA and the needs of the Palestinian people, especially to compensate for the loss of financial support from the United States.

In 2019 there was greater concern, triggered by the loss of American money, and the discovery to systematic mismanagement.<sup>19</sup> The 2019 General Assembly resolution supporting UNRWA was notable not just for supporting reform and refinancing, but also because of the diffidence of many Member States. While virtually all voted for the resolution in the end, many did not join the original text as co-sponsors. This is best seen in comparison to 2018:

### **2018 UNRWA resolution co-sponsors:**

Bahrain, Bangladesh, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Bosnia and Herzegovina, Brunei Darussalam, Cuba, Cyprus, Djibouti, Ecuador, Indonesia, Ireland, Jordan, Lebanon, Luxembourg, Malaysia, Malta, Mauritania, Nicaragua, Norway, Portugal, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Senegal, Serbia, South Africa, Sweden, Tunisia, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of) Yemen and State of Palestine (29 co-sponsors).<sup>20</sup>

### **2019 UNRWA resolution co-sponsors:**

Algeria, Bolivia (Plurinational State of), Cuba, Djibouti, Egypt, Gambia, Indonesia, Jordan, Kuwait, Maldives, Morocco, Nigeria, Oman, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, United Arab Emirates, Venezuela (Bolivarian Republic of), Yemen and State of Palestine (18 co-sponsors).<sup>21</sup>

<sup>17</sup> Yara Hawari, 'Do not punish Palestinian refugees for UNRWA dysfunction', *Al Jazeera*, 1 August 2019,

<https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/punish-palestinian-refugees-unrwa-dysfunction-190731134611877.html>

<sup>18</sup> *Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*, (A/RES/73/94), New York: UN General Assembly, 7 December 2018

<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/operations-of-unrwa-ga-resolution-ares7394/>

<sup>19</sup> 'In Face of U.S. Opposition, U.N. Renews Agency Helping Palestinian Refugees', *Reuters*, 13 November 2019,

<https://www.nytimes.com/reuters/2019/12/13/world/middleeast/13reuters-un-palestinians-refugees.html>

<sup>20</sup> *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*, A/C.4/73/L.16, New York: Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee), UN General Assembly, 18 November 2018

<https://undocs.org/en/A/C.4/73/L.16>

<sup>21</sup> 'Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East', GA Draft Resolution (A/C.4/74/L.12), Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee), 11 November 2019,

<https://www.un.org/unispal/document/operations-of-unrwa-ga-draft-resolution-a-c-4-74-l-12/>



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Despite growing discomfort with automatic renewal of UNRWA's mandate, support for its work remained strong. UNRWA's mandate was overwhelmingly renewed for another three years, despite opposition led by US and Israel.<sup>22</sup> Fourth Committee approved the 2019 text, by 167 votes in favor to 5 against (Canada, Israel, Marshall Islands, Federated States of Micronesia, United States), and 7 abstentions (Australia, Cameroon, Guatemala, Nauru, Papua New Guinea, Rwanda, Vanuatu).<sup>23</sup> In the words of the UN's semi-official summary:

By that text, the General Assembly expressed deep concern about UNRWA's critical financial situation, caused by its structural underfunding and by rising needs and expenditures resulting from the deterioration of socioeconomic and humanitarian conditions. It also noted that contributions have not been predictable enough or sufficient to meet growing needs and remedy persistent shortfalls, which were exacerbated by the 2018 suspension of contributions from the Agency's largest single voluntary donor.

The Assembly commended UNRWA for taking measures to address its financial crisis, including by implementing the medium-term strategy for 2016–2021 and various internal measures to contain expenditures, reduce operational and administrative costs, maximize the use of resources and reduce funding shortfalls. However, it expresses profound concern that, despite such measures, the Agency's programme budget faces persistent shortfalls that continue to

threaten the delivery of core programmes to Palestine refugees.

The Assembly expressed its appreciation for the efforts of UNRWA's Commissioner-General and staff, particularly considering the difficult conditions, instability and crises of the past year. Moreover, the Assembly expressed its grave concern over attempts to discredit the Agency despite its proven operational capacity and consistent implementation of its mandate. It also commended the Commissioner-General's continuing efforts to increase budgetary transparency and efficiency, as reflected in the Agency's proposed programme budget for 2020.

The Assembly also urged Israel to expeditiously reimburse UNRWA for all transit charges incurred and other financial losses sustained as a result of delays and restrictions on movement and access imposed by that country. Moreover, it called upon Israel to cease obstructing the Agency's movement and access as well as to cease levying taxes, extra fees and charges.<sup>24</sup>

## Country and Bloc Positions

**China** generally supports the Non-Aligned Movement on all Palestinian issues. Critics say this is hypocritical, since China represses its own Muslim minorities, and imprisons over one million. But Beijing sees no difficulty with the two positions, noting its Muslim polices are an

<sup>22</sup> 'UN extends mandate for agency supporting Palestinian refugees', *Al Jazeera*, 13 December 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/renews-agency-supporting-palestinian-refugees-191213172530511.html>

<sup>23</sup> 'Fourth Committee Approves 8 Draft Resolutions, Draft Decision, Concluding its Work for Main

Segment of Seventy-Fourth General Assembly Session', *UN General Assembly*, 15 November 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/gaspd713.doc.htm>

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*



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internal, domestic matter, while the Palestinians are an accepted international issue.

**European Union (EU):** The 27 Member States of the EU support UNRWA, but some are making support more conditional on administrative reform. None want to see the Palestinian people affected. There is growing concern that failure to support UNRWA could lead to more Palestinians migrating to Europe. Some European governments, led by authoritarian leaders like Hungary and Poland, are more sympathetic to Israel, but still support the Two-State Solution.

**Non-Aligned Movement (NAM):** the 120 Member States of NAM, all former colonial states, strongly support the independence and sovereignty of the Palestinian people. They demand unconditional support for UNRWA. They expect wealthier countries to finance UNRWA, especially those like France, the United Kingdom and the United States, who they say were complicit in the problems of the Palestinians.

**Russia** strongly support the rights and welfare of the people of Palestine.

**The United States** is the only country besides Israel that consistently criticizes Palestinian organizations and the Two-State Solution in UN fora. A few countries, sometimes vote in favor of the American position, now including Canada, but they are more careful when speaking.

### Possible Proposals for Action

**Re-commit the United Nations** to the strongest possible support of UNRWA, after the US withdrawal of assistance. Accepting the new reality and adjusting to it, this would involve recalculating Member States donations to

compensate for the loss of US support. Not all Member States will accept such a reallocation; they may prefer to keep pressure on the US to restore its support.

**Demand the United States restore funding for UNRWA.** Rather than accept the change in American policy, UN Member States may insist the US return to its historic support for all sides in the Middle East peace process, and restore its financial engagement.

**End UNRWA and transfer responsibility for Palestinian refugees to UNHCR.** This would remove immediately responsibility for some three million Palestinians living in Gaza and the West Bank, since they do not meet the classical definition of refugees; they have not crossed an international border. UNHCR instead would focus on Palestinian refugees living in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and elsewhere.

**Create a new oversight body to monitor UNRWA** spending and program implementation. A major issue is who would staff the oversight body; professionals like UN International Civil Servants, representatives of any UN Member State government, or donor governments only. Member States are unlikely to support the first option—professional monitoring—since it gives them little new influence or control. Non-Aligned Movement states will support the middle option—any UN Member States—since it maximizes their influence. Donor governments generally will want to keep control themselves.

**Demand Israel and its supporters facilitate the work of UNRWA** by restoring full funding and easing trans-border shipments of goods and services to Palestinian refugees. Additional measures could include provisions to reduce isolation, facilitate international trade and economic development in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPTs).





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