



# UNRWA

## UNDERSTANDING UNRWA

First established by the UN General Assembly in 1949, to assist Palestinians who were displaced from their homes by the 1948 Arab Israeli War, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) provides an array of critical services to Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. While some have accused UNRWA of being anti-Israel or promoting Palestinian militancy, these characterizations are inaccurate. The reality is that UNRWA does not endorse, promote, or in any way support anti-American or anti-Israel ideas, rhetoric, or actions. Because of this record, the U.S. has been its biggest financial supporter for decades.



Following the 2023 Israel-Gaza War, misunderstanding and misinformation surrounding the agency has spurred conversations about the historic origins of UNRWA, its role assisting the Palestinian people, and UNRWA's unique position to help serve and rebuild in a post-war era. In February 2024, in light of allegations against 12 of the more than 30,000 staff members of the agency, more than a dozen international donors, including the U.S., suspended \$450 million in funding. As of May 2024, most donors resumed funding due to worsening conditions in Gaza and lack of evidence to substantiate allegations. Congress, however, continues to maintain its funding ban through March 25, 2025.

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## THE ORIGINS OF UNRWA

In 1950, the UN General Assembly (GA) passed Resolution 302 (IV) after the 1948 Arab-Israeli War. The intent of the body was to carry out direct humanitarian relief and vital work programs for Palestinian refugees. The GA has continued to renew UNRWA's mandate annually since.

That mandate is wide in operational scope – supporting food, healthcare and medical services, direct education, employment, job training, and much more. It's also, however, uniquely narrow in the population it serves: Palestinian refugees. UNRWA defines their constituents as “persons whose normal 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 War.” Descendants of Palestine refugee males, including legally adopted children, are also eligible for registration. When the Agency began operations over seven decades ago, it was responding to the needs of about 750,000 individuals. Today, nearly 6 million refugees can receive UNRWA services.

## UNRWA'S AID MANDATE

The agency operates a network of 140 primary healthcare centers that supported more than seven million patients between January and October 2023 (numbers that do not reflect response during the 2023 Israel-Gaza War).

Utilizing one of the region's few e-health systems, agency outcomes include reducing the average infant mortality rate from 127 deaths per

1,000 live births in the 1960s, to less than 25 deaths per 1,000 live births in the 2000s. In Gaza alone, UNRWA provides food assistance to 1.2 million refugees. The Agency's complex distribution network represents 60% of the food imported into the Gaza Strip each month. Absent UNRWA, these services would become the full responsibility and financial onus of host countries, including Israel, Jordan and Lebanon, which cannot absorb the cost of supporting millions of additional people.

## **UNRWA'S REGIONAL ROLE**

Suggestions of either replacing or eliminating the agency have been raised – and rejected – in the past. That's because UNRWA is as critical beyond the borders of the West Bank and Gaza as it is with the populations they directly serve.

Without UNRWA, Palestinian refugees would entirely fall under the responsibilities and associated financial burdens of host countries, including U.S. allies and partners like Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. Services provided by UNRWA cannot be easily replaced by host countries, and Palestinian refugees who live in poverty and rely on the agency for education, health care, humanitarian aid, and other critical forms of support would likely fall through the cracks. In fact, in Gaza, were it not for UNRWA providing these types of services, Hamas would be filling the gap, effectively allowing them to exert even greater influence over the population, particularly the education of Palestinian youth.

Importantly, a collapse of UNRWA's services would produce not only more instability in the West Bank and Gaza, but in Jordan and Lebanon, presenting Israel with unprecedented new security challenges on its northern and eastern borders in addition to Gaza and the West Bank.

This instability would also have a material impact on American taxpayers. As one of the countries that suspended UNRWA funding, the U.S. would undoubtedly be expected by Jordan, Lebanon, and Egypt to compensate with larger bilateral aid budgets to manage the subsequent regional fallout, which would still almost certainly fail to deliver the results UNRWA is already providing. Only a host government or authority could take on such an expansive and resource-intensive program, and thus far no country wishes to be in that position.

And it would cause disruption in Europe, too, which is already struggling to absorb migrants. Ending UNRWA services would add fuel to the refugee crisis regionally. This would then strengthen demands by Lebanon for significant increases in aid from Western governments, including the U.S. Already, Lebanon and Egypt are calling for another aid facility to stem migration flows – an undertaking to the tune of approximately EUR 6 billion (four times the entire annual budget of UNRWA).

## **UNRWA EDUCATION PROGRAMS**

UNRWA provides quality education to almost 550,000 children across five fields of operation – Gaza, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Unique to the region, UNRWA schools achieved gender parity in the 1960s, reaching generations of Palestinian children with a curriculum centered on UN values.

Internationally recognized outside evaluators – including a 2021 World Bank-UNHCR study – have demonstrated that UNRWA's educational outcomes are among the best in the region and at the lowest cost per student.

## DISPELLING MYTHS ABOUT UNRWA

***Over the years, UNRWA has been caught in the crosshairs of deep political divides in the region, fueling misunderstanding about the agency. Let's unpack a few of these untruths.***

### **Myth: UNRWA Staff Celebrated the Hamas Attack on Israel**

Following the Oct. 7 terrorist attack by Hamas against Israel, images circulated across social media purporting to show UNRWA employees reacting positively to the events. In fact, the photos shared were taken in 2014, and depict Palestinians demonstrating outside an UNRWA facility regarding home construction issues of an internal nature and had no relation whatsoever to the events of Oct. 7.

On February 5th, the Israeli government alleged the involvement of 12 UNRWA staff members in the October 7th attacks. Due to the seriousness of the allegations, the Secretary-General subsequently dismissed all accused staff and launched two investigations. The first, an Independent Review of UNRWA's neutrality mechanisms and procedures, recently released its final report. The investigation concluded that while some improvements in neutrality can be made, UNRWA "has developed a more developed approach to neutrality than any other similar UN or NGO entity." The report also found that Israel had not provided evidence to support its claim that a "significant" number of employees of the organization were members of any terrorist organization. UNRWA has several internal communications channels the organization uses to interact with their employees that are regularly audited for inflammatory and offensive commentary. The agency has strict codes of conduct in place that apply to staff activities and statements that extend beyond their work hours and responsibilities. Employees in violation of their obligations as UN staff are investigated and, when necessary, disciplined. The investigation was led by former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna. The second UN internal investigation into the involvement of the 12 UNRWA employees on October 7th is ongoing.

### **Myth: UNRWA Curriculum is Anti-Semitic**

Discredited claims against UNRWA include allegations that their curriculum includes anti-Semitic content. Much to the contrary, UNRWA utilizes a curriculum framework that emphasizes UN values including neutrality, human rights, conflict resolution, tolerance, equality, and non-discrimination with regards to race, gender, language, and religion. UNRWA reviews all its textbooks against these UN values and uses a Critical Thinking Approach that empowers teachers to address identified issues of concern in alignment with UN values.

### **Myth: Other Groups Benefit Financially from UNRWA Funding**

Funding to UNRWA directly benefits Palestinian refugees and does not pass through any state or non-state actors. UNRWA has a stringent staff conduct framework in place to ensure that staff members do not affiliate themselves, and by extension, UNRWA, with any other groups. In addition, all UNRWA staff, Palestine refugees, and contractors, vendors, and non-state donors, are screened against the Consolidated United Nations Security Council Sanctions List.

All UNRWA facilities undergo quarterly integrated assessments, monitoring compliance with humanitarian principles and protection standards including important neutrality aspects, such as the presence of the UN flag, UN signs and "No Weapons" signs clearly marking the buildings as United Nations installations.

Regarding staff neutrality violations, investigations are launched with involved staff members placed on administrative leave pending investigation. Where allegations are found to be true and thus contrary to UNRWA's regulations and rules, appropriate disciplinary measures are imposed up to and including dismissal. Such cases in 2021 resulted in staff receiving significant fines, deferment of eligibility for promotion, and in the case of daily-paid staff, up to two-year prohibitions on working for the Agency. Following allegations made against Agency staff in 2022, similar investigations were undertaken. Again, allegations that were found to be credible resulted in disciplinary action.

### **Myth: UNRWA is Replaceable**

“As the occupying power, Israel remains bound to provide humanitarian aid and assistance to the protected Palestinian population throughout the occupied Palestinian territory, including the Gaza Strip,” said Ardi Imseis, a Queen’s University professor of international law and a former UNRWA and UNHCR official. So, if UNRWA were to shut down, Israel would be legally obligated to fill the aid and service provision gap the agency would leave behind.

In the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority might step in, but that would require a surge in international funding. In Gaza, it is entirely unclear what entity could fill the gap – especially given the exponentially high level of devastation and large need for aid after months of conflict.

A new agency would also face the same challenges around humanitarian neutrality that UNRWA has tried to navigate – something which, experts argue, UN agencies and NGOs around the world regularly face in their work. In Gaza, any agency replacing UNRWA would likely end up employing former UNRWA staff, who already have expertise and experience, rather than being able to find or train thousands of new workers in a crisis.

Beyond Gaza and the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon are all grappling with their own political and financial problems. Having to provide education, medical care, aid, and other services for hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees suddenly cut off from UNRWA would leave them “in a state of panic.” Jordan alone is responsible for providing these services to 1 million refugees. USAID Administrator Samantha Power has stated that “the Jordanian government does not have the fiscal or human capacity to replace UNRWA.”

Without UNRWA, the provision of educational services would prove particularly challenging. Currently, UNRWA educates roughly half a million children in grades K through 10. Across the region, UNRWA operates 706 schools using 20,000 educational staff. The International Crisis Group stated that particularly within the realm of education, “No other UN agency is capable of replacing it in that function. Only a host government or authority could, but none would want to be in that position. More than half a million children would be left without schooling.” Without an alternative to UNRWA’s educational services, UNRWA Commissioner-General Phillippe Lazzarini has argued that an entire generation of children would be sacrificed, “sowing the seeds of resentment and risking future conflict.”

### **Myth: Ending the UNRWA Mandate Would Resolve Right of Return Issues**

The idea that dismantling UNRWA would bring an end to the right to return, or the issue of Palestinian refugees is also an illusion, according to Chris Gunness, a former UNRWA spokesperson. “That is a complete and deliberate misunderstanding of refugee law and practice,” Gunness said. “It’s like saying that if you get rid of Oxfam, you get rid of poor people.”