



## When Aid Falls Short: UNRWA and the Palestinian Crisis

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### Abstract

Millions of Palestinians are currently affected by an ongoing humanitarian crisis, with limited access to essential aid and services. Since [1949](#), the UN agency UNRWA, has [provided](#) healthcare, education and humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees, following the displacement of Palestinians during the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>1</sup> Two years have passed since UNRWA funds were reduced, significantly affecting the lives of approximately [2.5 million Palestinian refugees](#). This blog examines the Arab-Israeli conflict and UNRWA's role from a historical and legal perspective, assessing the implications of these developments for humanitarian assistance and human rights protection. It argues that recent funding cuts and political pressures on UNRWA not only undermine humanitarian assistance but also expose structural weaknesses in international protection systems.

**Key words:** UNRWA, Palestine Crisis, Human Rights, Humanitarian Aid, Refugee Protection

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### Introduction

A severe and complex humanitarian crisis is currently affecting millions of Palestinians, whose access to aid and services is severely restricted.<sup>2</sup> This is an ongoing crisis for many, including Manwra, an 80-year-old refugee in Gaza, expressing her wish for "safety and a little peace of mind".<sup>3</sup> Such realities are described in a [Situation Report](#) published by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East ([UNRWA](#)) in March of 2026.<sup>4</sup> UNRWA is forming a primary source of [humanitarian assistance](#) since its establishment in 1949,<sup>5</sup> and receives most of its funding from UN member states. However, recently the agency has come under increasing scrutiny.<sup>6</sup> Consequences of this include [restricted access](#) to deliver assistance, as

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East

<sup>2</sup> UNRWA, *Situation Report #213*.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>5</sup> UNRWA, "What Is the Mandate of UNRWA?"

<sup>6</sup> Keene, *UNRWA Quick Guide*, 2024–25.



well as funding cuts, limiting the agency's ability to provide urgently needed support, raising serious concerns regarding the protection of human rights.<sup>7</sup>

### **Origins of UNRWA in historical context**

Undeniably, the conflict has far more complex historical roots than can be addressed in this blog post. However, because this blog focuses on UNRWA, it examines the conflict specifically through the lens of the UN's involvement, beginning with the [UN General Assembly Resolution 181 \(II\)](#), commonly known as the Partition Plan for Palestine. The historical context is essential to understanding UNRWA's unique legal mandate today. Adopted in 1947, the Resolution planned an 'independent Arab and Jewish States and the Special International Regime for the City of Jerusalem' to 'come into existence in Palestine.' [Following the Resolution](#), violence between Arab and Israeli communities in Mandatory Palestine intensified and developed into a broader regional conflict after David Ben-Gurion proclaimed the establishment of the State of Israel in May 1948 and the intervention of neighbouring Arab states. During the 1948 Arab Israeli war, an estimated 700,000 Palestinians became refugees, after fleeing or being displaced from their homes between 1947 and 1949. This occurred in several phases and resulted from a combination of factors including military assaults, expulsions, fear of attack, and the collapse of Palestinian urban society. Many refugees fled to Jordan, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Lebanon, and Syria, which remain UNRWA's main areas of operation today.<sup>8</sup>

In response to this refugee crisis, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) adopted [Resolution 302](#) in December 1949, establishing UNRWA. UNRWA's [services](#) apply to those who fall within its [definition of a Palestinian refugee](#), namely '[a]ny person 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 conflict, and descendants of such persons, including legally adopted children, through the male line.' For the purpose of this definition, Palestine refers to 'the territory formerly designated as British Mandate Palestine.'

### **UNRWA's legal mandate and operational framework**

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Morris, Benny. *The birth of the Palestinian refugee problem, 1947-1949*. Cambridge University Press; Middle East Library, 15, 1987.



As an UN agency, UNRWA operates in accordance with a [mandate](#) primarily directed by [UNGA Resolutions](#).<sup>9</sup> These are passed annually and make out its decentralised legal framework.<sup>10</sup> UNRWA was created in line with [Article 7\(2\)](#) and [22](#) of the UN Charter, establishing it as a subsidiary organ of UNGA.<sup>11</sup> In this light, the agency is obliged to report back to its principal organ, which is responsible for its operations.<sup>12</sup> UNRWA's mandate is renewed every three years, most recently in December 2025.<sup>13</sup> As part of this mandate, the agency acts in accordance with the [core objectives of the UN](#), including peace, development and human rights.<sup>14</sup> Based on these core objectives, UNRWA aims to provide humanitarian and developmental support and protection.

With the recognition of UNGA, these aims are considered inherent in UNRWAs role in enabling refugees to live dignified lives in secure environments. In this light, initiatives include delivering services of [education, health care, social support and emergency care](#).<sup>15</sup> These services are provided in areas covering Palestinian refugees, displaced persons, their family members, as well as non-refugees struck by poverty, all of which are covered by UNRWAs mandate that is described as "[rich](#)", and "[flexible](#)" by experts, as it allows for contemporary adaptation.<sup>16</sup>

Though UNRWA seeks to provide durable conditions, its mandate is limited to humanitarian assistance.<sup>17</sup> This means that it is neither allowed nor able to negotiate peace or influence policies. Although the agency has a limited political role, it still depends on appropriate national policies.<sup>18</sup> In 2023, 90% of the total budget consisted of funding from UN member states, amounting to [US\\$1.46 billion](#), which underlines the essential nature of contributed financing.<sup>19</sup> Besides from financial contributions, the organization receives wide institutional support, including EU-backing. This is reflected in the statement of the European Commission's former Vice-President Joseph Borrell, expressing that the future of UNRWA is "[a test of our humanity](#)".

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<sup>9</sup> Bartholomeusz, "Mandate of UNRWA," 453.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 454.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> Magid and Scheer, "Israeli Authorities Raid UN Palestinian Refugee Agency."

<sup>14</sup> UNRWA, "What Is the Mandate of UNRWA?"

<sup>15</sup> Bartholomeusz, "Mandate of UNRWA," 462.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 460; 474.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 470.

<sup>18</sup> Borrell, "The Future of UNRWA."

<sup>19</sup> Keene, *UNRWA Quick Guide*, 2024–25.



While UNRWA has broad recognition, it has also received stark allegations questioning its integrity. Notably, Israel has claimed that its staff has involvement in the attacks of [7 October 2023](#), claiming to have decisive evidence on the matter.<sup>20</sup> Following this was the [termination of 19 staff members](#) as well as [broader UNRWA reviews](#).<sup>21</sup> While acknowledging the possible contribution of these members, UNRWA remarks that [not all allegations are backed by evidence](#).<sup>22</sup> Although the UN took action, Israel expressed its opposition by banning all UNRWA operations in Israel.<sup>23</sup> Criticism has also come from the US, discussing the imposition of [terrorism-related sanctions](#) onto UNRWA following the allegations of Hamas affiliation.<sup>24</sup> This development has been described as ["unprecedented"](#) by an UNRWA official.<sup>25</sup>

### UNRWA's current situation

Two years have passed since UNRWA funds were drastically cut, significantly affecting the lives of approximately [2.5 million Palestinian refugees](#) across the occupied Palestinian territories.<sup>26</sup> One of the major funding cuts affecting the agency comes from the US that in 2023 had contributed to [75% of the agency's budget](#). However, because of the allegations of UNRWA employees participating in the Hamas attacks of October 7<sup>th</sup>, the US decided to temporarily pause its funds until 2025.<sup>27</sup> However, instead of re-initiating funds in 2025, the White House officially reported it would stop funding the organisation entirely. As reasons for this decision, the US claimed that contributions to UNRWA would be contrary to the US's interest, as it would support "attacking our allies and propagating anti-semitism".<sup>28</sup> This year, UNRWA has been forced to reduce its services by an [additional 20%](#).<sup>29</sup> These reductions have resulted from the agency's financial crisis which has projected a deficit of approximately \$220 million.<sup>30</sup> Consequently, this shortfall has led to terminating employees' contracts and halting essential humanitarian programmes that provide

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Magid and Scheer, "Israeli Authorities Raid UN Palestinian Refugee Agency."

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Slattery and Pamuk, "Exclusive: US Weighs Hitting UN Palestinian Refugee Agency."

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Valente, "UN agency for Palestinian refugees forced to cut services by 20% due to severe funding shortfall"

<sup>27</sup> The White House, "Withdrawing the United States from and ending funding to certain United Nations organizations and reviewing United States support to all organizations"

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Valente, "UN agency for Palestinian refugees forced to cut services by 20% due to severe funding shortfall"

<sup>30</sup> Maram Humaid, "UNRWA staff cuts deepen in Gaza as Israel restricts critical aid access"



Palestinian refugees with access to fundamental resources such as education and healthcare.<sup>31</sup>

Additionally, the agency's facilities and humanitarian services have repeatedly been targeted by Israeli military operations, destroying tons of food supplies and medical resources.<sup>32</sup> On January 20th, 2026, Israeli troops entered and [demolished the UNRWA headquarters](#) in East Jerusalem.<sup>33</sup> In accordance with the provisional measures of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) of the case brought by South Africa, as well as recent ICJ opinion, a press release of the UNHR office of the high commissioner affirms that “Israel has no right to interfere with UNRWA work”, particularly due to the fact that Israel is an established member state of the UN.<sup>34</sup> The OHCHR has described this event as an [“unprecedented”](#) and “outrageous attack”, thereby urging the international community to act. Nevertheless, Israel affirms that the UNRWA headquarters located in East Jerusalem are within Israeli territory, therefore the state must abide by its [Knesset law from October 2024](#) which banned UNRWA from operating in its territory.<sup>35</sup> This legislation was enacted after the Hamas attacks on October 7th due to the allegations of numerous UNRWA employees affiliated with Hamas attacks, as reported by *The Jerusalem Post*.<sup>36</sup>

If funding cuts and interference with humanitarian operations by UNRWA continue, it is claimed by OHCHR that the severity of the humanitarian crisis will only worsen.<sup>37</sup> Hence why, it is critical to recognise that the current situation raises serious concerns regarding compliance of several human rights, including [Article 25 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#); which affirms that every individual has “... the right to a standard of living adequate for the health and well-being of himself and of his family, including food, clothing, housing and medical care and necessary social services...”.<sup>38</sup> Furthermore, recent UNRWA reports indicate that both the [health and educational sectors are experiencing a crisis that is drastically worsening](#) and will continue worsening with such limited resources.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Valente, “UN agency for Palestinian refugees forced to cut services by 20% due to severe funding shortfall”

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

<sup>33</sup> United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, “Demolition of UNRWA premises is symbolic of Israel’s attack on the United Nations system: UN expert.”

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

<sup>35</sup> Herb Keinon, “Israel demolishes UNRWA’s Jerusalem HQ, but fails to explain why it had to go – comment.”

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> UNRWA, *Situation Report #212*.

<sup>38</sup> United Nations, 1948. *Universal Declaration of Human Rights*.

<sup>39</sup> UNRWA, *Situation Report #212*.



## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the current situation of UNRWA depicts the difficulties of the long-standing political and humanitarian conflict. UNRWA continues to play a central role in providing fundamental humanitarian assistance to millions of Palestinian Refugees. The current funding cuts and operational restrictions have created major consequences for the people relying upon its assistance. This is primal, as it provides refugees to access vital services and resources including food, potable water, cleaning, psychological support and child protection services.<sup>40</sup> Nevertheless, with the persistence of the current crisis, the international community faces the ongoing challenges of responding to the current conflict in a manner that upholds humanitarian principles whilst acknowledging the wider political realities of the affected regions.

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<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



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