

Forum: Political Committee

Issue: Restructuring the workings of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency

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Introduction

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was established on December 8th, 1949 by the United Nations General Assembly. Their main goal is to collect immediate relief and assembly work programmes for Palestine refugees. The UNRWA solely focuses on Palestinian refugees, a unique quality amongst UN agencies. UNRWA describes the Palestinian refugees they assist “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.” (UNRWA) The agency’s services are available to refugees who are registered and require assistance. Currently, 6 million individuals are qualified to be served with “education, health care, relief and social services, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance and emergency assistance.” (UNRWA) The agency is funded by voluntary contributors from UN member states, demonstrating the importance of collaboration in bringing peace to all. The UN also has a regular budget allocated to the UNRWA that is utilized for international staffing costs. (UNRWA) However, the UNRWA faces multiple challenges such as operational costs, political activities, and security issues that disrupt their work. These limitations raise concerns over the benefits of the UNRWA and the effectiveness of the UN in eliminating the damages of the Israeli-Palestinian war on individuals. (Nicholas & Farge, 2025)

Definition of Key Terms

De facto state: De facto states are political authorities with qualities of statehood without being internationally recognized as a full state. (Ker-Lindsay, 2022) (Özpek, 2014)

Quasi-autonomous non-governmental organization: An organization that allows governments to assist operations financially without bearing the day-to-day operations under political control. Governments may appoint the agencies but don’t indulge themselves in the details. (Quasi-Autonomous Non-Governmental Organization, Oxford Dictionary of Economics)

General Overview

Historical Background of the UNRWA

The UNRWA was established by the United Nations General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) to provide urgent care and aid to displaced Palestinians after the Arab-Israeli War of 1948. The UNRWA is the only UN agency dedicated to one group of individuals. The agency originally emerged as a temporary solution to the issue, however, due to the extensive need for humanitarian aid in the region and the ongoing conflict the agency's operations have been continuously extended to June of 2026. Operating in five fields: Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza, they aim to provide Palestinian refugees with services. Due to the specific focus of the UNRWA, Palestinian refugees have been excluded from the works of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Anne Irfan from the London School of Economics and a departmental lecturer at the University of Oxford refers to the UNRWA as a “*de facto government for the refugees, its authority buttressed by its UN status.*” (Irfan, 2023) She mentions how the UNRWA has become a quasi-government for Palestinians, showcasing how their achievements and successes reduced the Oslo Accords' attempts in creating the Palestinian Authority in 1994. The UNRWA issues identification cards, birth certificates, and more allowing Palestinians to be registered with legal documents. The UNRWA is mandated to serve only a group of individuals that fit the following criteria: *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.*” but the UN General Assembly has mandated the UNRWA to serve individuals who have been displaced and in need of immediate assistance in the above mentioned five fields (UNRWA). However, the UNRWA states that descendants of male refugees are eligible to be registered with the UNRWA, implying a patriarchal system as women refugee descendants are not able to be assisted. These limitations on who is eligible for service is a discriminatory approach as Palestinian refugees who do not qualify or cannot prove their living status and identity are denied aid. (UNRWA)

Past Campaigns of the UN Relief and Works Agency

1) Education Response in Syria (ongoing)

By implementing active learning platforms and providing mental support for children, UNRWA has continued its education programs during the Syrian conflict, making sure that kids are not deprived of their development. The program prevents a lost generation of students by ensuring that they are always experiencing and gaining new knowledge.

2) Polio Vaccination Campaign in Gaza (2024)

After the spotting of a severe polio spread in Gaza, UNRWA launched a vaccination campaign

immunizing close to 90% of all children in the area. Alas, the outbreak was circumvented, which was essential as the area is condensed in its population. The second dose of the vaccinations was provided in September 2024. (UNRWA)

3) Save Yarmouk Campaign (2015)

After the Syrian conflict social media figures, celebrities and online media utilizers came together generating close to 32 million impressions to encourage governments to allow humanitarian aid to reach refugees, children, and all individuals in Yarmouk. The UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness said, “We urge the parties to listen to the voice of the international humanitarian community” (UNRWA). Celebrities such as Mia Farrow, Hugh Grant, and Mohammed Assef cooperated with other UN agencies such as UNICEF and UNHCR to ensure aid was brought to these displaced individuals. Thousands of people signed up on Thunderclap, who sent 12 million tweets concurrently to engender even further social media impressions. (UNRWA)

4) COVID-19 Response Appeal (2020)

The UNRWA launched an appeal for US \$94.6 million during the COVID-19 outbreak. The amount was added up by the education, health, and cash assistance programs the agency prepared. The agency aimed to reduce the worst influences of the pandemic on the registered Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, which was close to 6 million. UNRWA has especially assisted in home delivery of medicines, telemedicine, and triage systems as well as assuring that education programs continue as the local economies of regions struggle. (UNRWA)

Limitations of the UNRWA

As the UNRWA is a mandate of the UN, they face multiple challenges in their activities. The first and foremost challenge is that the UNRWA receives funding from international Western powers and only a specific portion of the UN budget is allocated to the UNRWA, implying the instability of the financial system of the organization. (Irfan, 2023) In fact, the greatest donors of the UNRWA have been the US and UK as well as host countries that allow the body to operate. Only receiving funding from voluntary member states serves as a significant limitation to the organization as refugees cannot always rely on them to make significant improvements in conflicts.

The UNRWA operates in highly politically polarized regions making reaching refugees and assisting them adequately increasingly difficult. As an example, the Israeli Knesset, in October 2024, passed a set of laws legally banning the UNRWA's operations in the territories that it governs, which was made active in January 2025. As the UNRWA is not allowed on this territory anymore, their operations' span is severely restricted. Leading activities in these regions also lead to severe security constraints. The main premise for the passing of these regulations is that the Israeli government and some officials believe that the presence of the UNRWA further instigates conflict and “*is not an innocent*”

humanitarian organization, as it pretends to be", a member of the Knesset states. (Illouz)(Bigg, 2024)

The agency's resources are strained as conflicts proceed. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) has reported that hostilities have led to infrastructure damages, fuel shortages, and access restrictions. As the UNRWA only operates in the five fields mentioned above, they cannot assist a large number of individuals in need of humanitarian assistance. Overcrowding in camps and restricted access to sanitary water and resources have significantly strained the expansion of aid. (UNRWA)

Another limitation of the UNRWA is that they utilize educational tools provided by the host countries they are working with. This has led to some controversy as some stakeholders argue that countries might include their own ideologies and try to coerce children from a younger age when their brains are developing. However, the UNRWA has argued that they always check the validity of the educational tools they provide to children before they utilize them in schools.

The UNRWA is also vulnerable to being infiltrated as they mainly employ volunteers. They have fired 12 people as they received information they have contributed to the October 7th Hamas attack on Israel. These allegations have alerted some countries, eventually leading them to suspend their funding. UNRWA announced in their report titled "Claims vs. Facts" published in February 2024, that they conduct biannual checks on all their staff and report their information to the five fields of operations, where the related member states have knowledge on the working staff members. (CRS, 2025)

Major Parties Involved and Their Views

Israel

Israel has been criticizing the UNRWA for presumptuously cooperating with the Hamas organization. They hold concerns over the organization's neutrality and believe that their presence will only lead to a refugee crisis to perpetuate. In fact, in January of 2025, Israel passed legislation banning the UNRWA from providing humanitarian aid to refugees in East Jerusalem. (Bigg, 2024)

Jordan

Jordan has always supported UNRWA's presence and has consistently encouraged the UN to renew their mandate. Jordan is the second most refugee-hosting country, and the UNRWA assists them in balancing the socio-economic impact of hosting such a large number of refugees. UNRWA will continue hosting education programs and will provide emergency cash assistance. (UNRWA)

Lebanon

UNRWA will provide cash assistance, education, and health care to 168,700 displaced Palestinians from the conflicts that arose. (UNRWA)

Palestine

The Palestinian Authority (PA) views the UNRWA to be vital and lobbies at the UN to encourage their continuance. As the UNRWA is solely responsible for Palestinian refugees' welfare, this organization is integral to them. In fact the Oslo Accords' failure in empowering the PA rather than the UNRWA demonstrates their necessity. (Irfan, 2023)

Syria

There are half a million displaced Palestinians registered in Syria, whom the UNRWA will provide with immediate health care, education, and hygiene services. The agency will also revitalize their operation sites in Yarmouk, Damascus; Ein el Tal, Aleppo; Khan Eshieh, Damascus. (UNRWA)

United States

The US has been one of UNRWA's greatest donors. The Trump Administration had previously paused any funding to the UNRWA deeming the organization lacking in any success. (Beaumont & Holmes, 2018) The Biden Administration reinstated funding in 2021 yet paused after allegations were made of the organization being infiltrated by militia members. (CRS, 2025) As the US is a global power both financially and politically, their absence in funding challenged the budget of the UNRWA, specifically an amount of \$2.5 million.

Timeline of Events

15 May 1948 – 10 March 1949	Arab-Israeli War
8 December 1949	The UN General Assembly, by adopting the resolution 302 (IV), establishes the UNRWA
1 May 1950	UNRWA begins operating in the Near East supporting Palestinian refugees with relief and works
5-10 June 1967	The Six-Day War displaces a wave of Palestinians leading to the extension of UNRWA's mandate
16-18 September 1982	The Sabra and Shatila massacre in Beirut, Lebanon impacts several Palestinian refugees in the area under the UNRWA's care.

30 October 1991	Madrid Conference was held to extend dialogue amongst Israel and neighboring member states
28 September 2000	Second Intifada: the rebellion of Palestinians against Israel - increasing struggles of the UNRWA in assisting Palestinians who lost their homes (Wikipedia, 2025)
18 January 2009	End of the Gaza War where close to 100,000 Palestinians were displaced (Wikipedia, 2025)
8 July 2014	The beginning of the seven week long - one of the most destructive wars between Israel and Palestinian militia groups - Operation Protective Edge. UNRWA housed thousands of displaced Palestinians (UNRWA)
31 August 2018	US withdraws from funding the UNRWA over worries of the agencies' neutrality. The stability of the agency is threatened as one of their major contributors halts funding. (Beaumont & Holmes, 2018)
26 January 2025	Legislation of Israel banning the UNRWA from providing humanitarian aid to individuals, compelling them to vacate operations in East Jerusalem, passes

UN Involvement

The UNRWA was established by the United Nations to assist with relief and work for the Palestinian refugees who are eligible to fit the descriptions mentioned above. The UN has the power to control the mandate of the UNRWA and extend its presence if necessary. The UNGA advocates for funding from member states making the organization financially unstable. UNRWA cooperates with other UN bodies such as UNICEF, UNHCR, and WFP to provide aid. Whilst Israel and other UN member states argue that the presence of the UNRWA perpetuates the conflict, the UN Security Council (UNSC) has emphasized the role of the organization in maintaining stability within the territory even though they do not behold control over their operations. They have also encouraged Israel to adhere to UN values and democratic values and prioritize humanitarian aid aiming to overturn the newly passed legislation. The UN makes sure that the UNRWA has a legal basis to operate and that it is recognized, however, their assistance is limited. (UN,2024)

The UN cannot implement resolutions to address the main causes of the issue. The right of return of Palestinians remains the main and most controversial topic yet. As the UNRWA relies on member

states their operations are often paused due to disputes over funding, mandate renewal, and more.

Evaluation of Previous Attempts to Resolve the Issue

Madrid Conference: The conference was planned to entertain a framework for negotiations both featuring talks between Israel and its neighbors as well as issues of refugees, or economic development. The Palestinians were not permitted to represent themselves as the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) and, hence, were represented by the joint Jordanian-Palestinian delegation. This went in history as the first time that Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, and Palestine were in direct engagement with Israel on peace. The Madrid Conference was insufficient as it only engaged nations to converse to promote negotiations rather than solving the issue once and for all. (Association for Diplomatic Studies Training)

Oslo Accords: Even though the Madrid Conference did not lead to the creation of any solutions to the issue it created the ground base for the Oslo Accords. The Oslo Accords created the Palestinian Authority (PA) to reduce the authority of the UNRWA. The UNRWA was no longer the only group that focused chiefly on Palestinians and PA-issued documents were more legally superior. Although Oslo underestimated the UNRWA - ever since the Israeli blockade in 2007, the assistance of the UNRWA has been crucial for the survival of Palestinians and has only multiplied. (Irfan, 2023)

Notes from the Chair

Consider the following links whilst writing your resolutions and clauses. Consider the past attempts made in conferences, the approaches, the implementations - the strengths and weaknesses of the UNRWA. Consider member states' approach to the UNRWA and how this can be affected. Consider whether increasing humanitarian aid would mitigate conflict or do the opposite.

- This article might be beneficial to evaluate this:

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/flooding-gaza-with-aid-might-lessen-security-challenge-say-s-unrwa-chief-2025-01-17/?utm>

- This article provides insight into the Oslo Accords' impacts on the UNRWA

sussex.figshare.com/articles/presentation/Institutionalised_regulation_UNRWA_s_institutional_frame_work_before_and_after_Oslo/23451794?file=41160863

- This report provides some claims made by social media and the facts responded by the UNRWA. Assess how accurately the UNRWA is responding and how social media might have heightened the magnitude of minimal issues to seem greater and converted them for political gain.

https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_claims_vs_facts_02_2024_v6.pdf

- This NYT article assesses how the banning of the UNRWA would impact conflict and what led to it in the first place.

<https://www.nytimes.com/2024/10/29/world/middleeast/israel-gaza-unrwa-ban.html>

- This article demonstrates the current situation in Gaza.

https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-153-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem?utm_source=chatgpt.com

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