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THE PROBLEM WITH **UNRWA**

UK/ UNRWA relations

The UK government has announced its commitment to providing additional funds to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, (UNRWA). Following a meeting between PM Starmer and UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini, the PM committed to an additional £13 million in order to “support vital services for Palestinian refugees in the OPT (Occupied Palestinian Territories) and the region. The two also reiterated the urgent need for an immediate ceasefire in Gaza, the release of all hostages and an increase of humanitarian aid, adding that they would continue to work together with international partners to strive for peace in the Middle East.

That follows a UK decision to renew funding in July 2024, after the UK government and many countries had frozen donations due to accusations of UNRWA’s involvement with Hamas. The UK, along with other donors such as the EU and the US, suspended aid to UNRWA following reports of staff involvement in the October 7 Hamas attack. However in July 2024, Foreign Minister David Lammy confirmed in the House of Commons that the UK government was reversing its suspension of funding for UNRWA. He announced that Britain would provide £21 million in new funds, with some allocated to support the management reforms recommended in a review undertaken by Former French Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna. Ultimately all countries apart from the US resumed UNRWA funding.

UNRWA’s operations and funding appeals primarily rely on voluntary contributions rather than via the UN Assessed Contributions System. Approximately 93% of the agency’s funding comes from UN member states and the EU, with the remainder sourced from other UN agencies, businesses, charities, and individuals. Since 1949 the US has been the organisation’s largest bilateral donor (although in January 2024, the Biden Administration temporarily paused all US funding to UNRWA citing allegations that 12 UNRWA employees were involved in the Hamas attacks). In 2021, UK aid amounted to £39.7 million in 2021 and £26 million in 2022. Some of these funds provided to UNRWA’s core budget were spent in in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and other regions of the Middle East in addition to in the West Bank and Gaza.

The Conservative Party questioned the PM’s policy and called for UNRWA to sever links with Hamas. Shadow foreign secretary Dame Priti Patel wondered how “securing the release of hostages in Gaza, getting more aid in to alleviate the humanitarian crisis faced and establishing a sustainable peace” were advanced in the discussions with Philippe Lazzarini. Patel called on UNRWA “to fire nine staff after investigations into their involvement in the appalling attack on Israel on October 7 last year” adding that “all links to the Hamas terrorist group must be severed. Shadow justice secretary Robert Jenrick said: “The UK Government should not be providing any aid to UNRWA until it has ridded itself of Hamas operatives.”

Israel has long accused UNRWA staff of being involved with Hamas – and directly complicit in the October 7 massacre. In light of this, the Knesset recently voted to end ties with the aid agency. The Knesset approved UNRWA’s Law. From January 2025 UNRWA’s activity in Israel will end.

This paper looks at the history of UNRWA as well as Israeli claims of its involvement with Hamas and inability to maintain neutrality as its principles demand. It also considers what alternatives to the organisation might be found.

History and funding

UNRWA was established in 1949 to specifically implement direct relief and development programs for Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria who left their homes during Israel’s War of Independence 1947-49 and their descendants. More Palestinians were dispersed following the 1967 war.

UNRWA defines refugees in a different way to the accepted norm. UNRWA defines Palestinian refugees 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 conflict.’ Meanwhile, the organisation that deals with other displaced persons, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) defines a refugee – based on the 1951 Refugee Convention – as someone who ‘owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of

his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it.’

UNRWA also has a limited mandate, which prevents the integration of refugees in their existing locations. Whereas UNHCR has a mandate to seek durable solutions, including the integration of refugees into host countries that provide citizenship, UNRWA’s mandate is limited to providing aid. UNRWA also defines refugees as those whose parents were refugees.

These definitions are at the source of what has become a dispute between Israel, the Palestinians, and UNRWA. For the Palestinians, UNRWA is part of the fabric of the Palestinian society. The Israeli Government argues that that UNRWA’s overly expansive definition lacks parallelism, preserves the status of the Palestinians as refugees, fosters false hope of return for all Palestinians, and forms part of the Palestinian ethos that includes the right of return, the rejection of a Jewish State and harms efforts to secure peace along the principle of two states for two peoples.

Links to Hamas

Before October 7, UNRWA and the UN acknowledged that Hamas had financially exploited its employees and utilised its facilities to conceal weapons. Between 2009 and 2022, the IDF documented several incidents where UNRWA allowed Hamas to use its schools to launch rockets and construct tunnels beneath them. For example, in July 2014, UNRWA discovered rockets hidden in a vacant school in the Gaza Strip, UNRWA Jabalia Elementary ‘C’ and Ayyobiya Boys School, followed by the UN inquiry. The 2015 report concluded that it was highly likely that a Palestinian armed group might have used the premises to hide weapons but was unable to confirm with certainty what type of weapon might have been hidden at the school. Moreover, UNRWA schools also follow the curriculum and use textbooks dictated by Hamas, as UNRWA does not create its educational materials. A [2021 EU report](#) indicated that these Palestinian textbooks incite hatred against Jews.

Following October 7 Israel accused UNRWA employees of being directly involved in the massacre. In February 2024, former Defence Minister Yoav Gallant alleged that at least 12 UNRWA employees were directly involved in the October 7 atrocities, with an additional 30 reportedly assisting in these crimes, suggesting that up to 12% of the organization's staff may be affiliated with terrorist organizations.

In August 2024, following UNRWA's internal investigation, **the organisation terminated the employment of 12 staff members because of their involvement in the Hamas attacks.** Two other employees who were found involved in the attack died. According to intelligence reports reviewed by *The Wall Street Journal*, "at least 12 employees of the U.N.'s Palestinian refugee agency had connections to Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel, and around 10% of its Gaza staff have ties to Islamist militant groups"

In the same month, the **Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) completed its investigation into 19 area staff members of UNRWA,** regarding allegations of their involvement in the armed attacks of 7 October. In respect of nine cases, the evidence obtained by OIOS indicated that the UNRWA staff members may have been involved in those attacks, and the employment of these individuals was terminated.

Israel's Foreign Ministry announced that **Israel had handed over a large amount of materials on the subject to the UN which was ignored by the organisation.** This included a list of 100 Hamas military operatives employed by UNRWA as early as last July.

Hamas operatives killed by Israel have also been found to be UNRWA employees. For example, one UNRWA employee – who appeared on Israel's list – Mohammad Abu Attawi, participated in the massacre in a roadside shelter near Kibbutz Re'im. When Attawi was ultimately killed in an IDF operation after which UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres chose to express sorrow over his death. In October 2024, IDF assassinated the Hamas Nukhba Commander Mohammad Abu Itiwi, who led the Nova Festival Massacre. He was also UNRWA's employee. Hamas also confirmed that its leader in Lebanon was also the Head of the UNRWA Teachers Union. Many more

UNRWA employees have been found to be terrorist operatives from Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) with new incidents of the involvement of the organisation's employees in terrorism are constantly being uncovered.

While many **military acts were carried out by Hamas from UNRWA facilities during the war, UNRWA did not inform Israel (even once) of the improper use of its facilities by a terrorist organisation**, which contravenes its obligations to maintain neutrality.

In a separate investigation, **Former French Foreign Minister, Catherine Colonna, led an investigation to assess whether UNRWA was doing everything in its power to ensure neutrality**. The findings indicate that there are major problems deriving from the fact that the majority of UNRWA's employees are Gazans. These problems are mainly: neutrality regulations are not implemented, employees feel insecure and afraid to report, abuse of humanitarian aid, and lack of cooperation with international organisations.

Israel/UNRWA Relations

In late October, the Israeli parliament passed two bills by 92-10 targeting UNRWA due to its **partnerships with Hamas and its direct involvement in the events of the October 7 massacre**. The first bill prohibits UNRWA from operating within Israel, including East Jerusalem. The result of this is that residents of East Jerusalem will no longer receive services such as education and sanitation from UNRWA, but rather be under the administration of Israel's Jerusalem municipality. The second bill restricts Israeli authorities from engaging with UNRWA's activities in Gaza and the West Bank. Israel will thus not coordinate with international organisations which collaborate with UNRWA on the ground.

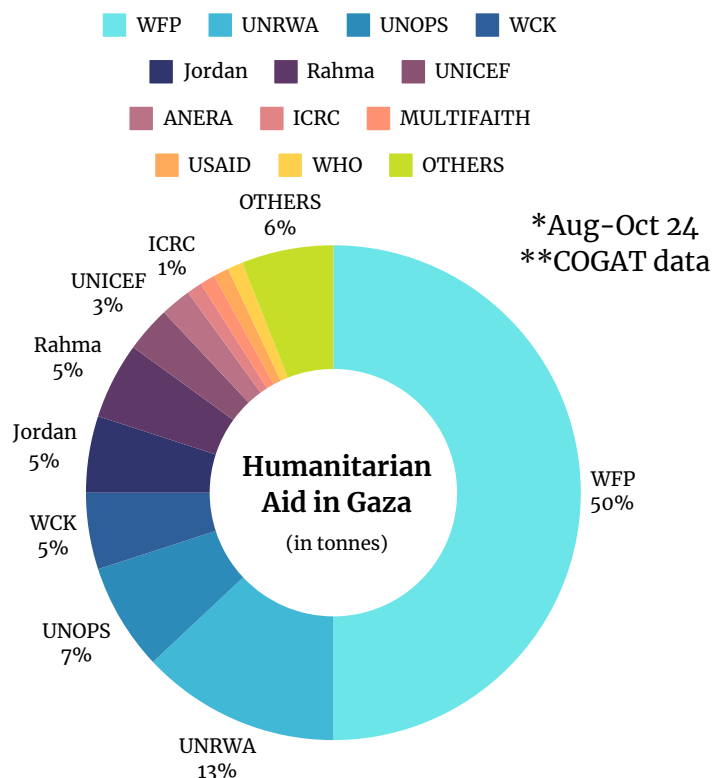
By the terms of the law, the legislation on UNRWA will enter into force in a period of 3 months. Israel plans to expand the already extensive activity with other international organisations that are not tainted by terrorism, and begin preparations to end the connection with UNRWA and to boost alternatives to UNRWA, all in accordance with international law.

Following the legislation, Israel officially notified the President of the General Assembly of the termination of cooperation with UNRWA with the cancellation of the 1967 agreement between Israel and UNRWA which formed the legal basis for relations between the two.

Foreign Minister Israel Katz emphasised that UNRWA was part of the problem, not the solution. “UNRWA – the organisation whose employees participated in the October 7 massacre and many of whose employees are Hamas operatives – is part of the problem in the Gaza Strip and not part of the solution.” He added that “The UN was presented with countless pieces of evidence that Hamas operatives are employed by UNRWA and about the use of UNRWA facilities for terrorist purposes yet nothing was done about this. Moreover, UNRWA chose to not implement the recommendations of the UN itself, which were published in the Colonna report on UNRWA.” Israel’s Ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon, said UNRWA did not even take the minimum measures required of it in the UN’s own document, the Colonna report. No employees who are Hamas or Islamic Jihad operatives were fired, nothing was done regarding the violation of the neutrality of UNRWA facilities, and the organisation did not change the textbooks or the incitement content being taught in UNRWA schools – this despite UNRWA’s commitments to donor countries and Israel to remove these materials immediately.

Israel/UNRWA Relations

Israel argues that even today UNRWA is not the main deliverer of aid to Gaza with data from Israel’s Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT) showing only 13 percent going through UNRWA. Instead, WFP, which has been on the ground in Gaza since the beginning of the crisis, provides most of the humanitarian aid.



Israel claims that substitutes for UNRWA exist, emphasising that, the vast majority of humanitarian aid for the population of the Gaza Strip is delivered through other organisations, with only 13% of it is delivered through UNRWA. The State of Israel is committed to international law and will continue to cooperate with UN agencies and international organisations that are not tainted by terrorism in bringing humanitarian aid to the Gaza Strip in a manner that does not harm the security of its citizens.

Alternatives to UNRWA

Israel believes that multiple organisations working on the ground could replace UNRWA and that its ban on UNRWA does not imply that civilians in Gaza will be deprived of humanitarian assistance. Currently, international aid organisations such as WHO and UNICEF are permitted to operate in Gaza, supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Moreover, Israel feels that UNRWA is not equipped to deliver humanitarian aid effectively as its primary focus is on providing state services such as welfare, social services, and education. UNRWA operates 706 elementary and preparatory schools and 140 primary healthcare facilities, with approximately 20,000 employees engaged in educational services. This contrasts sharply with the UNHCR, which provides emergency relief services to refugees worldwide.

The government argues that it aims to strengthen international organisations that are not affiliated with Hamas. Some Israeli officials have long advocated for shutting down UNRWA, accusing the agency of perpetuating the conflict. Possible options for replacing UNRWA indicate that this transition is feasible and could address the main challenges:

- **Employing UN OCHA's Cluster System:** This option would involve transferring UNRWA's duties and responsibilities to other agencies through the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (UNOCHA) cluster system, which is already operational in Gaza.

- **Mixed Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons (IDP) Management:** This approach would recognise that Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank comprise a mix of refugees and internally displaced individuals (those who left their homes but not their country). Responsibilities would thus be shared between UNHCR and UNOCHA under joint guidelines.
- **Transitioning into a Regional Hub:** This proposal suggests transforming or expanding UNRWA into a regional hub that serves refugees from all countries in the Middle East, rather than solely Palestinians.
- **Reforming and Restructuring UNRWA's Roles:** This would involve establishing a new organisation tailored to provide services that meet the specific needs of the Palestinian population in Gaza.
- **The Sudan Model:** Inspired by the coordinated approach currently managing one of the world's largest humanitarian crises in Sudan, this model emphasises coordinated humanitarian interventions led by major donors in close cooperation with the host government.



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