

Forum: General Assembly 4 (GA4)

Issue: The question of the UNRWA [United Nations Relief in the Near East]

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Introduction

Established in 1949 by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly (GA) the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the Near East (UNRWA) is a suborgan of the assembly focused on humanitarian relief in the, at the time, newly established Israel-Palestine borders for the millions of relocated refugees.

Indeed, post ceasefires in October 2025, the Israeli-Palestinian border across the Gaza Strip, West Bank, and other neighboring nations incite a continuous humanitarian crisis involving a lack of potable water, collapsing infrastructure, displaced peoples, sanitation, education and more due to continued conflict.

The central questions at hand regarding the UNRWA organisation is whether the status of refugees should be solely handled by other UN organisations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), a concern over a lack of Israeli cooperation through an ongoing ban from operation within Israel, minimal funding from its largest donor the United States, occupation by Israeli forces, and most importantly access to Gaza and staff casualties.

Definition of Key Terms

Host nation

Country which receives refugees from neighboring or farther conflicts for long periods of time or even permanently. In this case, Palestine's neighbors are often regarded as the host nations

Refugee

Under the 1951 Refugee Convention, a refugee is a person who is outside their country of nationality or habitual residence. They must have a well- founded fear of persecution due to race, religion, nationality, political opinion or even due to war. This committee will be mainly focusing on refugees managed by the UNRWA, mainly from Palestine to Lebanon and Syria. A refugee cannot rely on protection from their own country.

Refugees are the approved status of an asylum seeker.

Humanitarian neutrality

This concept implies that aid groups shall not take sides in an armed conflict or engage in political, religious or ideological issues. The purpose is to ensure the safety of

workers in order for them to work cross-border.

Right to return

The right for individuals to enter, re-enter, and return to their country of citizenship or origin.

Non-Refoulement

A principle under international law which prohibits states from transferring or returning a refugee or asylum seeker to a territory where their life or freedom would be threatened

Background Information

History

Established by the UN General Assembly in Resolution 302 (IV), the UNRWA carries out direct relief for Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli war and, though created for a temporary purpose, its mandate has been renewed roughly every three years since due to enduring crises.

Education

The UNRWA operates several hundreds of schools across its operating fields (Gaza, West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria), including within displacement camps in Gaza. Schools remain an important location for Palestinian communities, acting as shelters for displaced families. Despite this high concentration of refugees, school buildings remain often targets of Israeli strikes due to their alleged usage as "terrorist" hideouts as well. Due to the various uses of these buildings classes are still periodically interrupted. 543,000 students are enrolled in UNRWA schools (UNRWA, 2026).

Health Care

The organisation runs a number of primary health clinics, providing maternal and child health services, non communicable disease management, as well as mental health/psychosocial support. Due to the violence of war, their operations have been highly weakened, operating 22 clinics before 2023 in Gaza to now only a 6 remaining and operating at more an emergency service based model. Indeed, deaths of staff members, 60% of basic medicines affected by shortages, and uncertain facilities all impact the effectiveness of the health care provided by the UNRWA to the 1.9 million people who use their services (UNRWA, 2026)

Relief and Social Services

This role of the UNRWA includes food and cash assistance, support for the most vulnerable households (people with disabilities, single mother homes, etc.). During the conflict, relief has been a top priority, focusing on food distribution to combat the ever increasing malnutrition in the Gaza region. They provide shelter materials as well as assist in

cross-boarder logistics with the UN for logistics into Gaza territory.

Camp infrastructure

Another mission of the UNRWA is maintaining access to basic infrastructure within refugee camps such as water, sanitation, sewage and housing. Independently from the conflict in Gaza, camps in Syria face a need for reconstruction.

Emergency response and Humanitarian coordination

Since October 2023, the UNRWA has acted as a central logistics and coordination hub for the wider humanitarian response in Gaza. They delivered large shares of food and non-food aid entering the Strip and maintained the displacement shelters.

The organization played a role in managing and coordinating other regional emergencies such as the Syrian and Lebanese conflicts.

Microfinance and livelihoods

The UNRWA has extended small loans to refugee households and micro-entrepreneurs to support the local economy. This activity however has been suspended in Gaza due to a collapse of the economy.

Protection

The UNRWA maintains a protection mandate which involves monitoring and reporting violations of international humanitarian law affecting Palestinian refugees including: gender-based violence and child protection. The UNRWA advocates for the rights of the refugee community.

Previous solutions

In January 2018, the first Trump administration cut US contributions to the organization from around \$360 million previously to \$60 million (Alegemeiner, 2018). The agency's leadership announced that it was their most severe financial crisis ever. An emergency appeal to European donors (Sweden, Switzerland, Germany, etc.) advanced their annual contributions. Similarly, Arab Allies such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, increased their donations. The gap was ultimately closed by the end of the year. Legal reform in 2025 by the international criminal court (ICJ) clarified legal obligations of nations for humanitarian relief (Wilkins, 2025)

Challenges faced by the Organisation

In October 2024, Israel passed two laws against the UNRWA: the first banning UNRWA activity on Israeli sovereign soil (closing East Jerusalem operations) and the second preventing Israeli authorities from contact with the agency. The Supreme Court declined to suspend the law in 2025. In 2026 Israeli forces had entered and occupied UNRWA facilities such as the Kalandia Training Centre in East Jerusalem.

Organisations and Major Countries Involved

Israel

The major occupying power in the West Bank and the state through which nearly all aid to Gaza must transit, Israel is the central actor. Its government asserts that UNRWA has been infiltrated by Hamas-affiliated personnel and that its ongoing operation on Israeli-controlled territory poses a security risk; it has legislated to end the agency's presence in East Jerusalem and cut off all contact, while stating it remains willing to facilitate humanitarian aid to Gaza Through other channels.

State of Palestine / Palestinian Authority

Without a unified country, the Palestinian Authority, together with Hamas, reign as the de facto governing authority in Gaza through much of the conflict. These governing bodies regard the UNRWA as an indispensable guarantor of refugee rights and represent the international community's continuing support towards Palestinian refugees until a final resolution can be reached.

United States of America (USA)

Historically the largest donor to the organization, the US suspended funding in January 2024 following neutrality allegations, and has yet to resume. Washington also has supported Israel's security-based objections to the agency at the UN and the ICJ. The USA equally cautioned a total collapse of UNRWA's operations and that they may worsen the humanitarian crisis it seeks to manage (CNBC, 2018).

China

Increasing its visibility as a UNRWA partner, increasing its contribution from 1 million to 1.5 million in the past year. Furthermore, China has participated in joint food-assistance initiatives in the West Bank which reflects a broader diplomatic effort to position themselves as a more influential power on the global stage.

Neighboring states (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Egypt)

Jordan is the largest host of the registered Palestine refugee population and a long security partner of the USA and Israel. They depend heavily on UNRWA's continued operation for domestic stability. Lebanon is equally home to a substantial Palestinian population, living in camps amid the country's own crises. Lebanon relies on the UNRWA for their own stability as a nation. Syria is continually amid its own reconstruction efforts. Thanks to the UNRWA's continual relief operations for Palestinian refugee camps in Syria which were damaged by the civil war.

Possible Solutions

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