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# The UN agency for Palestine refugees on its way to abolition



The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) was unlikely to survive, being severely compromised by the participation of some of its employees in the terrorist attacks of Hamas on Israel on October 7.

The Agency will not be able to continue its work since its funding has been suspended by the largest donors, starting with the US, outraged by evidence of the participation of UNRWA members in terrorist attacks on Israel.

With around \$340 million, the US is by far the largest donor to UNRWA and accounts for **almost half** of its budget of \$777 million. Together with Germany's annual donation of \$176 million, the 2 countries cover two-thirds of the expenses of the UN Palestine Mission.

After the decision of the US administration to pause the financing of UNRWA, a series of cancellations from large donors - the UK, Italy, Canada, Australia, Finland - followed.

UNRWA's operations remained almost completely unfunded just a day after the Agency acknowledged Israel's allegations that some of its members had participated in terrorist attacks.

UNRWA will conduct an internal investigation and has already cancelled the suspects' contracts. But whatever the findings of the investigation and the measures the UN agency will take, it cannot avoid complete marginalisation, and probably imminent abolition.

## Irreparable harm

A small number of UNRWA employees are the subject of the investigation - only 12 of them (according to the US State Department) - which, in relation to the total of 13,000 members of the mission, really represents a very small minority.

However, even if UNRWA reaches for that argument, it cannot defend itself against criticism and accusations that it is deeply

contaminated, highly biased, politicised, and is failing to fulfil its mission.

Israel is not the only country that has warned about the UN agency operating outside its mandate for years and that one side has compromised it with its political and even military influence (Palestinian). Accusations of direct involvement in terrorist attacks are something the Agency could not survive.

## UNRWA will continue its humanitarian operations in Gaza as long as Israel's conflict with Hamas continues

The Palestinian **reaction** to the suspension of support for UNRWA is understandable because this mechanism has been connected to their community for 75 years.

"At this particular time... we need the maximum support for this international organisation and not stopping support and assistance to it", Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO) Secretary-General Hussein al-Sheikh stated last Saturday. He called on all countries that have suspended UNRWA funding to "immediately reverse their decision".

UNRWA will continue its humanitarian operations in Gaza as long as Israel's conflict with Hamas continues, given that Israel has also focused on its demand for the termination of UNRWA once the conflict ceases.

## The political dimension of UNRWA

However, the humanitarian aspect of UNRWA's work has not been disputed by anyone. The agency has specific and unique **competences** that set it apart from others in the UN system, and which, over the past decades, made it a prisoner of one side in the conflict, and eventually a part of its more militant structure.

In the Palestinian territories, including Gaza, UNRWA acted as a quasi-state because its mandate provided significant public services which the local administration could not provide. This primarily regards health and education.

It was these 2 systems in Gaza that served as a framework for Hamas to infiltrate them with its combat infrastructure, and badly exploit and abuse them.

### The structure of UNRWA is deeply embedded in the Palestinian social framework

UN officials have long denied any responsibility for the fact that kilometres of channels for the movement of Hamas fighters, and that it has carried out combat operations built under UNRWA schools. And hospitals have been used as shelters for terrorists, including hostages they kidnapped in Israel.

The structure of UNRWA is deeply embedded in the Palestinian social framework. Almost all of its 13,000 activists are Palestinians, and 2 vital social systems rest on it. It has been the principal vehicle for the flow of humanitarian aid on which numerous Palestinians live.

Over the decades, UNRWA has become an inextricable part of the corrupt and militant order in Gaza, and the participation of some of its members in terrorist attacks was only the expected climax of a strangely set-up structure.

## Why is there resistance to ending UNRWA?

The abolition of UNRWA will certainly cause political resistance among the Palestinians above all, but also among their Arab partners in the region.

This would also abolish the exclusivity of this agency, which it has had from the start regarding the issue of refugees. It is the only

UN refugee agency that deals with only one population. Everything else in the world is taken care of by UNHCR.



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The possible transfer of jurisdiction over Palestinian refugees to the UNHCR and their "immersion" in the umbrella UN structure would indirectly mean a step towards the loss of a significant feature of the Palestinians for any further agreements on their overall status, including the status of the Palestinian state.

The humanitarian aspect of UNRWA's work so far could be easily compensated by UN decisions or even by establishing other specialised international agencies which would continue delivering humanitarian aid to Palestinian refugees.

However, its current discrediting shows that UNRWA is not just a humanitarian agency. It has been regarded as a political factor among the Palestinians and their partners.

It is theoretically possible that wealthy Arab countries would take over funding of UNRWA's operations from the major Western countries (who at the same time, are Israel's allies).

The question is why they have not done so in the past decades, given they are politically and verbally strong supporters of the Palestinian cause. Even if that happened, UNRWA's credibility would be non-existent. It has already been destroyed.