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Keep UNRWA Alive in Gaza and the West Bank

New Israeli legislation, if fully enforced, would prevent the UN Relief and Works Agency from serving Palestinian refugees in the occupied territories. Such a de facto ban would be disastrous. Questions about the agency's future should wait until after the Gaza war ends.

On 28 October, the Israeli Knesset passed two bills that will make it impossible for the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which serves Palestinian refugees, to keep operating in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories (East Jerusalem, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip). In the 75 years since the UN General Assembly established it in 1949, UNRWA has provided vital assistance to Palestinians. The bills, which are set to enter into force after a 90-day period, bar the agency from working in Israel and make it illegal for Israeli officials to interact with UNRWA staff. Although the legislation does not explicitly forbid UNRWA from working in the occupied territories, it will result in something similar: the new laws would, in effect, prevent agency staff from getting into, much less operating in, these places absent coordination with Israeli authorities. On 4 November, the Israeli government took an additional step to curtail UNRWA's activities by informing the UN Secretary-General that it will withdraw from a 1967 agreement providing the basis for its cooperation with the agency.

The impact will be felt especially strongly in Gaza, where, for all its challenges, UNRWA has been a pillar of life for three quarters of a century. The agency is the enclave's largest and most capable provider of humanitarian aid. It offers services that governments typically do, such as education, health and sanitation. It is also widely seen as representing an international commitment to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and protecting the Palestinian right of return.

The need for organisational reform is not a secret. Indeed, as Crisis Group has previously [reported](#), UNRWA officials had begun to moot possible changes before the 7 October 2023 attack. But while the issue is, if anything, more pressing today, a serious conversation about reform must realistically wait until the Gaza war ends. It does not justify binding UNRWA's hands in the meantime.

Imposing a de facto ban on the agency amid a humanitarian catastrophe bordering on famine would show a profound disregard for human life and dignity, one that governments must not just denounce but do everything in their power to reverse. Neither of Israel's main proposed alternatives – which would involve relying on independent charities or the commercial sector – can remotely rival UNRWA's capacity. Moreover, if the Israeli legislation succeeds in barring UNRWA, it will place yet another hurdle in any path Gaza may have to recovery, while simultaneously worsening the situation of Palestinians in the West Bank. It will thus further reduce the likelihood of a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which most UN member states continue to say is essential even as the prospect recedes from view. For all these reasons, it is imperative that the agency continue to operate at full capacity in the occupied territories, pending a time when reforms can be soberly assessed and realistically pursued.

On Borrowed Time

Since its founding, UNRWA has offered support to Palestinian refugees and their descendants in both the Israeli-occupied territories and neighbouring countries, in particular Jordan, Lebanon and (in lesser numbers) Syria. The agency's mandate is broad: it not only provides humanitarian aid but also offers services including primary health care, basic education, sanitation and employment to Palestinians. If Israel follows the new laws to the letter, the immediate effects in Gaza and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, will be severe. Palestinians there will lose access to the supplies and services that UNRWA offers, and thousands of the agency's 18,000 local employees will lose their livelihoods. The agency oversees the schooling of over 50,000 children in the West Bank – in addition to over 300,000 in Gaza before war began there on 7 October 2023. Before the war, it also operated 65 primary health care centres in the West Bank and Gaza, serving almost half the Palestinian refugees in the former and 84 per cent in the latter. (Many of the Gaza centres have since been destroyed.) Although other UN agencies deal with health and education in emergencies elsewhere, none has experience in managing a range of services comparable to those provided by UNRWA.

For both Israel and the Palestinians, UNRWA's significance goes beyond those services. The agency's 1949 mandate, set by the UN General Assembly, rests on the Palestinians' right to return to territories from which they fled and were expelled in the first Arab-Israeli war in 1947-

1948, a right that is widely seen as rooted in [UN General Assembly Resolution 194](#) and the [Universal Declaration of Human Rights](#). For both the Palestinians and Arab governments, UNRWA's continued existence is an institutional expression of this right and helps keep it alive. By contrast, as Crisis Group [noted](#) in September 2023, most Israelis "dislike the agency's symbolism for precisely the reason that it resonates with Palestinians".

Prior to the present war between Hamas and Israel, Israeli officials were frequently critical of UNRWA, but views of the agency lay on a spectrum. Much of the country's security establishment considered that the agency, like the Palestinian Authority, helped maintain a degree of stability by providing basic services, which Israel might otherwise face pressure to provide itself. But right-wing elements in Israel have long held a more uniformly negative opinion of UNRWA; they see it as an obstacle to Israel's permanent control or annexation of the occupied territories and, more broadly, as a symbol of Palestinians' claims to their ancestral lands and a means of keeping the Palestinian refugee question on the international agenda. When the current Israeli government took office in 2022, that dimmer view became much more prevalent, and Israeli officials report that they (together with some UNRWA donor states) began thinking more concretely about how to replace UNRWA.

Anti-UNRWA sentiment sky-rocketed after Hamas's 7 October 2023 attack, fuelled in part by serious charges levelled by Israel against UNRWA. In January, Israel accused nineteen of UNRWA's 13,000 staff members in Gaza of participating in the Hamas attacks. UN investigators concluded that there was evidence to support this allegation [in nine cases](#), finding no or insufficient evidence in the other ten. Israeli officials also say UNRWA has served as a front for Hamas, publishing images of militants using UNRWA facilities, including tunnels underneath them, for military purposes. (UNRWA has protested that it has neither the equipment nor the mandate to probe for these tunnels.)

Against this backdrop, UNRWA officials report feeling over the past year that they are operating on borrowed time. In May, Israeli authorities summarily ordered the agency to vacate its long-time offices in East Jerusalem, following a directive from the government barring it from operating on state-owned land. Then, when it came time to vote on the constraining legislation, Zionist political parties unified against the agency, with most of them (even those in opposition to the government) joining the new legislation's far-right sponsors. The two bills passed by large majorities (92 to 0 and 87 to 9, respectively).

Flawed Alternatives

Israel has outlined two alternatives to UNRWA's aid delivery.

One is for other UN agencies such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and the World Health Organization (WHO) to take over basic humanitarian operations. UN officials say this idea is unrealistic – at least in the short term – because the WFP and other UN entities already do considerable work in the West Bank and Gaza that relies heavily on UNRWA's infrastructure. No other entity is presently equipped to provide assistance of the kind that UNRWA does and at the necessary scale and speed without the agency's help. Even in a hypothetical scenario in which UNRWA withdrew, other UN entities would need to hire its former staff to run operations. UN Secretary-General António Guterres has directed UN agencies to reiterate that UNRWA is irreplaceable.

Israel's second proposal is that independent charities and commercial suppliers relying on private security contractors for safety could replace the UN altogether. While Israel has previously collaborated with various NGOs on aid deliveries to Gaza, these organisations lack the extensive networks, situational awareness and expertise necessary to conduct large-scale operations on par with the UN. UNRWA's deep understanding of the evolving needs and priorities in Gaza enables it to provide the professional, well-coordinated, multi-sectoral response that smaller NGOs would struggle to replicate. The idea of bringing in private security contractors to protect aid shipments is still more worrying. Unless this arrangement comes in the framework of a political agreement, it would amount to swapping occupying Israeli troops for even less regulated, and hence more unaccountable, forces.

Despite the UN's insistence that the agency is irreplaceable, many within both organisations have been discussing what alternatives might look like. One would be for UNRWA to cease or significantly reduce operations in the West Bank and Gaza, but retain a role as a sort of international advocacy body for Palestinian rights – including the right of return. In addition to keeping up direct operations in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, it could also coordinate aid efforts led by other UN agencies such as the WFP and WHO in the West Bank and Gaza, which would need time to gear up for stepping into UNRWA's shoes. Such measures would create a degree of formal separation between Israel and UNRWA. But aid experts caution that UN agencies other than UNRWA would struggle to take on tasks going beyond basic humanitarian aid delivery – like health care, sanitation and education – and also worry that many Palestinians will view these alternative aid providers negatively, or even with hostility, putting them at risk. It is also not clear that Israel would agree to such an institutional fix, which would not achieve the core Israeli goal of neutralising the agency as a symbol of Palestinian refugees' right of return.

A Political Choice

In political terms, the new laws regarding UNRWA will heighten fears among Palestinians that in dismantling UNRWA the Israeli government is clearing the way for further radical steps, up to and including full-scale annexation of the West Bank and permanent expulsion of Palestinians from parts or the whole of the Gaza Strip. Even if Israel does not pursue these far-reaching options, halting UNRWA operations in the West Bank will cause significant social and economic disruption, and potentially fresh disorder, as the agency is the second biggest employer in the territory after the Palestinian Authority.

Gutting UNRWA and dealing a symbolic blow to Palestinian refugees' right of return could also create frictions in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, where Palestinian refugees have lived for decades but often have precarious relations with the host communities. Jordanian officials have made it clear to UN representatives that they see maintaining the agency as politically essential. UNRWA's closure would also contribute to the downward spiral of relations between the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and the UN – on top of Israel declaring Guterres persona non grata in response to his persistent criticisms of Israel's military operations and limits on aid delivery.

Senior UN officials still hope that Israel will not fully enforce the new laws regarding UNRWA, due to its own interest, if nothing else, in preventing an explosion in the West Bank. Yet even if Israel applied the legislation only patchily, it would create legal quandaries for UN officials and discourage donors from investing more in the agency's work. The United States, which suspended its own financing for UNRWA in response to the allegations of collusion with Hamas, and other large donors to the agency have urged Israel to relent. Norway has proposed that the General Assembly ask the International Court of Justice to rule on Israel's obligations to facilitate humanitarian aid to the Palestinians as an occupying power.

These steps are unlikely to generate sufficient pressure to get Israel to change course, however, and in any case UNRWA officials harbour doubts about how staunchly donors will back the agency if Israel does not back down. Donald Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election will doubtless deepen their scepticism, as the first Trump administration was highly critical of UNRWA and cut off U.S. funding to the agency. Elise Stefanik, Trump's nominee to be U.S. ambassador to the UN, has declared that money for UNRWA should be "permanently cut off", accusing the agency of anti-Semitism, storing weapons for terrorists and misusing aid. Some donor countries have reportedly been reaching out to non-governmental organisations to assess what capacity they have to fill in should UNRWA suffer a financial collapse.

There is a risk that, facing pressure from the incoming U.S. administration, other UN members will equivocate over UNRWA's future and focus on the

technicalities of aid delivery rather than the full humanitarian and political implications of the new laws. The major questions hanging over UNRWA today are not just about the mechanics of aid delivery. They also concern Israel's commitment to maintaining a viable service infrastructure that can be the foundation for a post-conflict Palestinian order – and, eventually, a Palestinian state. Handcuffing UNRWA without having answered these questions will confirm what [Prime Minister Netanyahu has already suggested](#): that his vision for Gaza extends far beyond security to fundamentally transforming Palestinian life and society.

UNRWA's future should not be decided while the Gaza war rages and Palestinian needs multiply. The overwhelming priority remains a ceasefire that halts the devastation of the strip and the suffering of the Palestinians living there, while seeing the safe return of the remaining Israeli hostages in militants' hands. UNRWA will be needed to oversee the massive infusion of aid that should accompany a ceasefire. In the meantime, its services are vital to the lives, livelihoods and life chances of millions of Palestinian refugees in Gaza and elsewhere.

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