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# ‘More people will die’: How Israel’s UNRWA ban affects Palestinians in Gaza and beyond

‘How are these services going to be replaced? Who is going to provide these services?’



The outcome of the US presidential election “is going to be a key factor in how the situation across the region is going to move forward, including implications on UNRWA”, Juliette Touma, communications director for

the UN's agency for Palestine refugees, told The New Humanitarian as voting was taking place on 5 November.

Now that Donald Trump has secured a second presidential term following a four-year hiatus from power, there is even more to unpack about the broader implications of another Trump presidency for the Middle East, and specifically for the level of US support for Israel's wars in Gaza and Lebanon.

The administration of current US President Joe Biden has bankrolled Israel's military to the tune of [\\$17.9 billion](#) since October 2023. But a second Trump presidency will almost certainly spell more trouble for UNRWA, which has been facing an Israeli campaign to see the agency dismantled.

Read more:

[Why Israel wants to end UNRWA and what its closure would mean](#)

UNRWA provides services – including education, healthcare, development assistance, and emergency humanitarian aid – to 5.9 million Palestinian refugees in the Israeli-occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

According to Touma, it is also “the backbone of the humanitarian operation in Gaza”, where the 2.1 million people living in the enclave are almost fully dependent on utterly inadequate amounts of aid allowed across the border by Israel.

The US has historically been the agency's biggest donor, and it is the only donor country that has yet to restore funding after Israel [alleged](#) that a small number of employees from UNRWA's 13,000 member staff in Gaza had [taken part](#) in Hamas' 7 October attacks last year.

The chances of US funding being restored now are slim. In 2018, Trump – who has tended to echo Israeli messaging about the agency – [cut off](#) US assistance to UNRWA, which Biden reinstated after taking office in 2021.

The crisis facing UNRWA is truly existential. The Israeli parliament [passed](#) two bills at the end of October banning UNRWA from operating on Israeli soil and prohibiting Israeli authorities from communicating with its staff. The legislation is set to come into effect 90 days after it was passed.

The New Humanitarian spoke to Touma about how UNRWA is navigating the crisis, and about how the ban could affect the already dire humanitarian situation in Gaza as well as the agency's programmes in the other territories where it operates.

“In a situation that is already beyond, beyond dire – having been to Gaza during the war myself and seen it first hand – without UNRWA, it is safe to say people will die; more people will die,” Touma said.

*The conversation has been edited for length and clarity.*

## **The New Humanitarian: What impact, if any, is the passing of this legislation already having on UNRWA and its ability to operate?**

**Touma:** There has been no direct impact on our operations or our programmes. Meaning, in practical terms, our schools continue to be open in the West Bank; in Gaza, it's about the humanitarian operation, which is ongoing to the degree possible. Obviously, there are limitations and challenges that we face regardless of the passing of this bill.

So, at the immediate level, in terms of our operations and our programmes, it's safe to say that there is no impact. I think the impact on our staff, however, is immense. People are engulfed with anxiety, especially our local teams, including in Gaza, but also in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem – anxiety over the fate of the agency and anxiety over what this means in practical terms when and if this bill is implemented.

## **The New Humanitarian: Is there anything that UNRWA can do to prepare for this legislation coming into effect? And if so, what?**

**Touma:** The focus for us at the moment is to work with UN member states for them to work with the state of Israel to undo this legislation. This is really our focus. Meanwhile, we are continuing to provide humanitarian assistance in Gaza. In the West Bank, our schools are open. So, we are continuing with our plans and with our programmes with the hope that this law will not be implemented.

The question that we keep asking, including to the State of Israel, is what is actually the plan? And while we keep hearing all sorts of suggestions, statements about banning UNRWA, about dismantling UNRWA, there is no way to replace UNRWA at the moment, including and especially in the field of education.

So what is that plan? This is something that we don't get an answer to. What is the fate of the boys and girls who go to our schools? We have nearly 400,000 students between the West Bank and who used to go to our schools in Gaza. Who's going to provide these children with education?

## **The New Humanitarian: Is there a situation in which UNRWA would be able to continue operating even if the legislation goes into effect, perhaps through indirect contact with Israeli authorities, for example?**

**Touma:** In any setting the United Nations needs to have direct contact and cooperation and coordination with parties to the conflict for it to be able to deliver humanitarian assistance.

In the case of Gaza, as one example, we work at the [operational] level with the Israeli army. They give us authorisations to move to high-risk areas or to pick up supplies from the borders. We do what we call deconfliction, which is coordination for the safety of [humanitarian] movements in Gaza. So we have to continue to work with the Israeli army and the Israeli government to implement our programmes and our response and deliver assistance.

## **The New Humanitarian: If the ban does go into effect, how would it impact UNRWA's ability to operate in Gaza specifically?**

**Touma:** I really don't know what it means and to what degree it will be implemented. It's not clear at all. What I do know is that it's a race against time. We have 90 days where this has got to change.

The focus should be for the international community to reach an end to the war, release the hostages, ensure that there is a flow of humanitarian supplies into Gaza, rather than the focus being on UNRWA being banned or on funding alternatives.

That's where the focus should be: on a ceasefire, release of hostages, flow of supplies, bringing children back to their education.

## **The New Humanitarian: How does this ban fit into the bigger picture of the various barriers that the humanitarian response in Gaza has been facing since the beginning of the war over a year ago?**

**Touma:** The humanitarian operation in Gaza has very quickly, and totally unnecessarily, become a complex and cumbersome ordeal. There have been too many hurdles and complications, restrictions, challenges that

stood in the way of doing what should be a very straightforward act, which is the delivery of humanitarian assistance to people who are in need.

I think, when the war comes to an end, there is a lot to unpack and analyse and understand about why this has become so complex – again, totally unnecessarily. Who was responsible for making it so complicated, and what were the reasons behind it? At the moment, I'm not sure that this is the time to dwell on this.

The number of humanitarian trucks that Israeli authorities are allowing into Gaza right now is very, very similar to what we had one year ago. Just as the hermetic siege of Gaza that was imposed for two weeks at the beginning of the war was lifted, we started having these trickles of aid – 20, 40, 30 trucks a day. We're back at the same level. We had just over 30 trucks a day, on average, in October.

Despite the fact that two million people are in need of humanitarian assistance, despite the impact of 13 months of war, despite hunger, despite the international warnings from food security experts, despite the different pleas from the United Nations and other humanitarian agencies, there is no improvement.

## **The New Humanitarian: If it comes into effect, what impact would the ban have in the West Bank?**

**Touma:** Since the war began, because of the restrictions on movement in the West Bank – including the cancellation of permits [for Palestinians to work in Israel] – a lot of people have lost their livelihoods. Poverty has increased, which means people resort to UNRWA more for services.

Our clinics are in the camps. So people can walk to the clinics, as opposed to getting on a bus or driving to somewhere a little bit further. So, for people with special needs, for older people, for women, for children, it means they are not going to have this access to primary

healthcare. There's dental services, there's pharmacies, there's lab services. Then you have the schools. There's been an increase in the number of children who now go to UNRWA schools for the same reasons.

How are these services going to be replaced? Who is going to provide these services? If we look at an option like the Palestinian Authority, they are going through their own financial crisis and challenges, including paying salaries.

The question is, beyond the proposal, beyond the idea, beyond the headline, beyond the public relations, what is the fate of the people that this agency serves? This agency is about providing services and humanitarian assistance. It's a humanitarian-development agency. This agency is not about politics. It's not about the right of return. It was given a mandate by the General Assembly to provide services to the Palestinian refugees.

So if you take out UNRWA thinking, so naively and in such a narrow lens, that you are going to take out the rights of Palestine refugees, or you're going to take out the status of Palestine refugees, I think one should think again, because the two things are not closely connected.

Taking out UNRWA would mean that millions of people would be deprived of humanitarian assistance and basic services. It doesn't mean that they are going to stop being refugees overnight.

**The New Humanitarian: UNRWA also operates in Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria. If this ban goes into effect, would it have an impact on the agency's ability to operate outside of the Palestinian territories?**

**Touma:** From an operational perspective, if we have the funding, then there is no reason for us not to continue our operations and programmes

in these countries.

## **The New Humanitarian: This ban is part of a series of actions by Israel against UNRWA over the past year. What is the bigger picture trajectory that this move fits into?**

**Touma:** The agency is a casualty of the Gaza war, starting with a huge number of staff members who have been killed – 237 to-date, and almost on a daily basis we have an update to that death list. It's the highest number ever in the history of the United Nations; higher than in any other war zone or natural disaster.

Then you have the impact on the agency's building and facilities. Most of our schools were turned into shelters very early on. Two thirds of our buildings have been hit. That includes shelters, offices, guest houses, food distribution centres, and warehouses.

We continue to be subjected to a very heavy misinformation and disinformation attack that is absolutely brutal and relentless. That harms the agency massively in terms of the reputation of the agency, of course, on one hand, but also the risk this puts our staff in, including those serving on the humanitarian front lines in Gaza and the West Bank.

In the case of formal and direct allegations, the agency has taken the steps that it needs to take, including a [UN investigation](#). The outcomes are available online. We've spoken publicly about the findings of the investigation and these allegations. The disinformation and misinformation continued despite these actions that we have taken. Now we see the latest, which is this legislation. Clearly there is an attack against UNRWA.

## **The New Humanitarian: Are you optimistic that through international and UN pressure**

# the implementation of this legislation will be prevented before it comes into effect?

**Touma:** I wish I had a crystal ball. I wish I had a way to predict what will happen. What we are focused on right now is the here and now and working with member states, working with those who can influence or who can change the course. We thrive on hope to be able to do the work that we do, so that that will always be there.

*Edited by Andrew Gully.*

