

Defunding UNRWA: With This Act, Western Powers Are Likely Complicit in Genocide

Forcing Unrwa to cease its operations at this crucial time serves no purpose. It contributes to the further devastation of the Palestinian people and potentially enables genocide in Gaza

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On Friday, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) [ruled](#) in favour of provisional measures in [South Africa's genocide case](#) against [Israel](#).

Finding the risk of genocide plausible, the court [ordered](#) Israel to refrain from genocidal activities, prevent their commission, and punish those inciting genocide.

Crucially, the court also ordered Israel to take immediate and effective measures to enable the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance to address the adverse conditions of life faced by [Palestinians](#) in [the Gaza Strip](#).

Just two days later, while everyone was still grappling with the implications of this ruling, [nine major donor](#) countries of Unrwa, the UN agency mandated to provide assistance and essential services to Palestinian refugees, [announced](#) the suspension of their funding to the organisation.

The countries include the United States, the United Kingdom, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, Switzerland, Finland, Australia, and Canada.

While there has been some confusion regarding the provisional measures, especially since the court did not order an immediate suspension of military operations by Israel in Gaza, the clearest measure by the court – ensuring access to adequate humanitarian assistance – has been rendered ineffective by the decision of these countries, based on the claims that [12 out of the 13,000](#) Unrwa staff were involved in the 7 October attacks against Israel.

While the world expected western governments to reconsider their *carte blanche* support for Israel after the ICJ ruling, it seems that they decided to take their stance against Palestinian people under the risk of genocide to another level.

This blatant decision, putting hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Gaza at risk, is particularly shocking after the ICJ's order to ameliorate the humanitarian situation on the ground.

Risk of Famine

Unrwa is the lifeline for Gaza, a tiny strip densely populated by refugees and their descendants. Out of the total population of 2.3 million, 1.7 million people are refugees or internally displaced. These people heavily depend on Unrwa assistance and services.

Almost all people of Gaza are now [at risk of famine](#) and plague as the food and healthcare system has been extensively destroyed by Israel.

The Israeli response to the 7 October attacks had already caused a large-scale forced displacement in Gaza, further overwhelming the operation of Unrwa. Moreover, at least [152 Unrwa personnel](#) have been killed by Israel, not to mention those wounded.

In December, in [a letter](#) to the president of the UN General Assembly, Unrwa's commissioner-general, **Philippe Lazzarini** warned that the agency is on the edge of collapsing.

He stated:

“In my 35 years of work in complex emergencies, I would never have expected to write such a letter, predicting the killing of my staff and the collapse of the mandate I am expected to fulfil.”

The 1948 Genocide Convention not only prohibits genocide but also [obligates](#) all state parties to prevent genocide to their capacity.

Francesca Albanese, the UN special rapporteur for the occupied Palestinian territories, [warned](#) this weekend:

“The day after the ICJ concluded that Israel is plausibly committing genocide in Gaza, some states decided to defund UNRWA, collectively punishing millions of Palestinians at the most critical time, and most likely violating their obligations under the Genocide Convention.”

Defunding the most crucial organisation in the strip, where the ICJ found a plausible risk of genocide not only through Israel's military operations but also due to the severe humanitarian situation it has created, only exacerbates the deterioration of living conditions of the Palestinian people. This, along with continuous support for Israel, including military assistance, potentially enables genocide in Gaza, and does nothing to prevent it.

Destructive Conditions

On the other hand, these western governments must be reminded that genocide, as defined

by the convention, involves not only killing members of a particular group or causing them serious bodily or mental harm, but also deliberately inflicting conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction, either in whole or in part.

Israel's actions are likely already creating these destructive conditions.

Knowingly contributing to the genocidal conditions in Gaza runs the risk of these states being complicit in genocide. These governments are now on the path to obtaining accomplice status.

There is a plausible risk of genocide for two million people on one side, a fact established by the World Court, vis-a-vis an "alleged" involvement of 12 out of 13,000 staff members in the 7 October attacks.

Despite Unrwa taking immediate and serious measures to [investigate](#) these allegations, these governments did not hesitate to put the lives of two million people at risk, while what needs to be done is precisely the opposite: to increase cooperation with Unrwa.

Such actions may be subject to scrutiny before national and international tribunals in the days to come.

The Refugees Problem

Israel has persistently [targeted](#) Unrwa, asserting the [unfounded argument](#) that the agency is the UN arm of Hamas. Unrwa is crucial not only for providing humanitarian assistance but also for supporting the claims of Palestinian refugees to [the right of return](#) to their homeland, a right Israel has obstructed for decades.

Since refugee status is [passed](#) through generations due to registration with Unrwa, Israel is never relieved of the burden of the refugee problem.

These western governments are seemingly unaware of the fact that defunding Unrwa and letting it collapse ironically brings the Palestinian refugee problem closer to home. Article 1d of the Refugee Convention [states](#):

"This Convention shall not apply to persons who are at present receiving from organs or agencies of the United Nations other than the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees protection or assistance. When such protection or assistance has ceased for any reason, without the position of such persons being definitively settled in accordance with the relevant resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations, these persons shall ipso facto be entitled to the benefits of this Convention".

This article was specifically crafted for Palestinian refugees. If Unrwa becomes unable to fulfill its mandate, Palestinian refugees may automatically claim recognition of their refugee status in third states, including those defunding the agency.

But apparently, this would be applicable only if they survive Israel's war on Gaza.

ICJ's provisional orders to prevent genocide in Gaza will only take effect when the letter and spirit of the ruling are respected not only by the parties to the proceedings, but also by the larger international community. Forcing Unrwa to cease its operations at this crucial time serves no purpose but to contribute to the further devastation of the Palestinian people in

this context.

Western governments must immediately cease their genocidal support to Israel.

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