

Situation Critical: UNRWA and Its Continued Operations

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*In April last year, UNRWA **Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini** [told](#) the United Nations Security Council that “**an insidious campaign to end UNRWA’s operations is under way**, with serious implications for peace and security”. Repeatedly, requests by the relief and works agency responsible for providing welfare and aid to Palestinians to continue its work, notably in northern Gaza, had been rebuffed. Its staff had been barred from coordinating meetings between other humanitarian agents along with Israeli officials. UNRWA premises and staff had also been targeted. This, it transpired, was a foretaste of things to come.*

Israel’s campaign against the agency has been a matter of faith, a sickening reminder of its necessity in the aftermath of 1948. Following the Hamas-led attacks of October 7, 2023 on the state, UNRWA was added to a to-do list of Israeli expectations. First followed an international campaign of accusation, with the UN body accused of employing Hamas sympathisers, activists and direct participants in the attacks that left 1,200 people dead and saw the capture of over 200 hostages.

Despite scanty evidence to buttress the grave Israeli claims, many donor countries were swift in suspending funding.

The UN was equally swift in sacking several alleged suspects. A [review](#) of the allegations by former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna, instigated at the request of the UN Secretary-General António Guterres, accepted that claims of bias could be addressed in eight areas, including neutrality of education, installations, and staff and better engagement with the relevant donors. Importantly, it also noted that “Israel has yet to provide supporting evidence” that the agency employees had been “members of terrorist organizations.” The “irreplaceable and indispensable” role of the agency in the absence of a political solution between Israel and the Palestinians made it a “pivotal” body that provided “life-saving humanitarian aid and essential social services, particularly in health and education, to Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank.”

The restoration of funding by donor states so irked Israeli officials as to prompt the next phase of the campaign: the passage of legislation in the Knesset legalising the effective crippling of the agency’s mandate and work, both coming into effect at the end of this month. Two laws, passed on October 28, 2024, are relevant here. The first prohibits Israeli officials from having any contact with UNRWA or any individual or agency acting on their behalf. The second [attacks the functional presence](#) of UNRWA, barring it from operating any representative office or provide any services, or carry out activities, directly or indirectly, in Israel proper.

The interpretation of sovereignty as outlined in the legislation does not accept the international position on the status of East Jerusalem, which Israel has occupied since 1967. In treating East Jerusalem as Israeli territory, UNRWA's presence to aid Palestinians in the West Bank as facilitated by its field office will essentially come to an end.

In addition to the consequences that will arise to a Palestinian populace so heavily reliant on the UN body's services, there are also logistical matters. How severely will the laws be read? Not only will staff no longer be able to engage in any concrete way with the Israeli Defense Forces, UNRWA staff and installations risk being open targets of IDF operations. On January 8, UN **Secretary-General Stéphane Dujarric** [revealed](#) that the UN had yet to receive "any real clarity on how the laws will be applied" from any official Israeli source.

The moves by Israel did draw the necessary, if somewhat ineffectual condemnation needed, from the UN Secretary-General to the ambassadors representing 123 UN member states, to an impotent Biden administration in its dying days. "In the midst of an ongoing catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza," warned the Nordic countries in an October 23, 2024 [statement](#), "a halt to any of the organisation's activities would have devastating consequences for the hundreds of thousands of civilians served by UNRWA."

This month, Axios [reported](#) that officials from the US State Department had also warned the Trump administration transition team about the impending humanitarian catastrophe should the Israeli legislation be implemented to the letter. "We wanted them to know what is going to happen 10 days into their presidency," explained one of the officials. "We thought it was the responsible thing to do. It's a catastrophe waiting to happen."

Given the form of **President Donald Trump** in his first term, this may simply be the wishful utterings of a few troubled souls. Trump, for his part, delighted in ceasing US funding to the agency in 2018. "We are not paying until you make a deal," [he told](#) the Palestinians with typical boisterousness, showing his remarkable capacity to treat all matters of money as instruments of bullying and machismo.

On January 17, the Security Council, at Algeria's prompting, are [scheduled](#) to have closed consultations on the issue of UNRWA's continued operations after the end of this month. Lazzarini is expected to brief the members, a situation that is bound to be influenced, in part, by the recent announcement of an Israel-Hamas ceasefire. As part of the agreement, some [600 daily shipments](#) of humanitarian aid will feature. But any ceasefire, already soured by the killing of over 100 Palestinians since its announcement, does little to address the institutional chasm that will be left were UNRWA to cease operating in any meaningful way.

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Featured image: Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works

Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) holds press conference in Jerusalem on October 27, 2023 [Mostafa Alkharouf/Anadolu Agency]

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