

# Crippling UNRWA: The Knesset's Collective Punishment of Palestinians

By [Dr. Binoy Kampmark](#)

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*The man has a cheek. Having lectured Iranians and Lebanese about what (and who) is good for them in terms of rulers and rule (we already know what he thinks of the Palestinians), Israeli **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** has been keeping busy on further depriving access and assistance to those in Gaza and the West Bank. This comes in draft legislation that would prevent the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) from pursuing its valuable functions in the Occupied Palestinian Territory.*

The campaign against UNRWA by the Israeli state has been relentless and pathological. Even before last year's October 7 attacks by Hamas, much was made of the fact that the body seemed intent on keeping the horrors of the 1948 displacements current. Victimhood, complained the amnesiac enforcers of the Israeli state, was being encouraged by treating the descendants of displaced Palestinians as refugees. Nasty memories were being kept alive.

Since then, Israel has been further libelling and blackening the organisation as a terrorist front best abolished. (Labels are effortlessly swapped – “Hamas supporter”; “activist”; “terrorist”.) Initially came that infamous dossier pointing the finger at 12 individuals said to be Hamas participants in the October 7 attacks. With swiftness, the UN commenced internal investigations. Some individuals were sacked on suspicion of being linked to the attacks. Unfortunately, some US\$450 million worth of donor funding from sixteen countries was suspended.

UNRWA **Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini** was always at pains to [explain](#) that he had “never been informed” nor received evidence substantiating Israel's accusations. It was also all the more curious given that staff lists for the agency were provided to both Israeli and Palestinian authorities in advance. At no point had he ever “received the slightest concern about the staff that we have been employing.”

In April, Lazzarini [told](#) the UN 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 agency to deliver aid to northern Gaza had been refused, staff barred from coordinating meetings between humanitarian actors and Israel, and UNRWA premises and staff targeted.

Israel's campaign to dissuade donor states from restoring funding proved a mixed one. Even the United Kingdom, long sympathetic to Israel's accusations, [announced](#) in July that funding would be restored. In the view of UK Foreign Secretary David Lammy, UNRWA had

taken steps to ensure that it was meeting “the highest standards of neutrality.”

In August, the [findings of a review](#) of the allegations by **former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna**, instigated at the request of the UN **Secretary-General António Guterres**, were released. It confirmed UNRWA’s role as “irreplaceable and indispensable” in the absence of a political solution between Israel and the Palestinians, 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.”

In identifying eight areas for immediate improvement on the subject of neutrality (for instance, engaging donors, neutrality of staff, installations, education and staff unions), it was noted that “Israel has yet to provide supporting evidence” that the agency’s employees had been “members of terrorist organizations.”

On October 24, UNRWA [confirmed](#) that one of its staffers killed by an Israeli strike in Gaza, **Muhammad Abu Attawi**, had been in the agency’s employ since July 2022 while serving as a Nukhba commander in Hamas’s Bureij Battalion. Attawi is alleged to have participated in the killing and kidnapping of Israelis from a roadside bomb shelter near Kibbutz Re’im in October last year. His name had featured in a July letter from Israel to the agency listing 100 names allegedly connected with terrorist groups. But no action was taken against Attawi as the Israelis failed to supply UNRWA with evidence. Lazzarini’s letter urging, in the [words](#) of **Juliette Touma**, the agency’s director of communications, “to cooperate ... by providing more information so he could take action” did not receive “any response”.

Having been foiled on various fronts in its quest to terminate UNRWA’s viable existence, Israeli lawmakers are now taking the legislative route to entrench the collective punishment of the Palestinian people. Two bills are in train in the Knesset. The first, [sponsored](#) by such figures as **Yisrael Beytenu, MK Yulia Malinovsky and Likud lawmaker Dan Illouz**, would bar state authorities from having contact with UNRWA. The second, sponsored by Likud **MK Boaz Bismuth**, would critically prevent the agency from operating in Israeli territory through revoking a 1967 exchange of notes justifying such activities.

Even proclaimed moderates – the term is relative – such as former defence minister **Benny Gantz** support the measures, [accusing](#) the UN body of making “itself an inseparable component of Hamas’s mechanism – and now is the time to detach ourselves entirely from it”. It did not improve the lot of refugees, but merely perpetuated “their victimisation.” Evidently for Gantz, Israel had no central role in creating Palestinian victims in the first place.

By barring cooperation between any Israeli authorities and UNRWA, work in Gaza and the West Bank would become effectively impossible, largely because Jerusalem would no longer issue entrance permits to the territories or permit any coordination with the Israeli Defense Forces.

UN Secretary-General Guterres [was aghast](#) at the two bills. “It would effectively end coordination to protect UN convoys, offices and shelters serving hundreds of thousands of people.” Ambassadors from 123 UN member states have echoed the same views, while the Biden administration has, impotently, [warned](#) that the proposed “restrictions would devastate the humanitarian response in Gaza at this critical moment” while also denying educational and social services to Palestinians in the West Bank and Jerusalem.

In their October 23 [statement](#), the Nordic countries also expressed concern that UNRWA's mandate "to carry out [...] direct relief and works programmes" for millions of Palestinian refugees as determined by UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) would be jettisoned. "In the midst of an ongoing catastrophic humanitarian situation in Gaza, a halt to any of the organisation's activities would have devastating consequences for the hundreds of thousands of civilians served by UNRWA."

The statement goes on to make a warning. To impair the refugee agency would create a vacuum that "may well destabilise the situation in [Gaza, and the West Bank, including east Jerusalem], in Israel and in the region as a whole, and may fundamentally jeopardize the prospects of a two-state solution."

These are concerns that hardly matter before the rationale of murderous collective punishment, one used against a people seen more as mute serfs and submissive animals than sovereign beings entitled to rights and protections. Israel's efforts to malign and cripple UNRWA remains a vital part of that agenda. In that organisation exists a repository of deep and troubling memories the forces of oppression long to erase.

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**Dr. Binoy Kampmark** was a Commonwealth Scholar at Selwyn College, Cambridge. He currently lectures at RMIT University. He is a Research Associate of the Centre for Research on Globalization (CRG). Email: [bkampmark@gmail.com](mailto:bkampmark@gmail.com)

*Featured image: Families have been forced to moved repeatedly in Gaza. UN United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).*

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