

The Benefits of Sustaining UNRWA and the Costs of Not Doing So

Since its [establishment](#) by the UN General Assembly in 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has been “the custodian of Palestine refugee rights”. The Agency is now providing 6 million Palestine refugees with education, healthcare and social services in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT) as well as in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.

According to the [Strategic Assessment](#) of UNRWA by Ian Martin, commissioned by the UN Secretary-General in 2025, UNRWA will collapse unless urgent action is taken to strengthen its governance structure and to render its financing more secure and predictable. Replacing the current Advisory Commission with an Executive Board akin to the governing bodies of other subsidiary organs of the UN General Assembly, will strengthen UNRWA’s governance, enhance donor confidence and facilitate predictable multi-year funding to the Agency.¹

Context

1. UNRWA was seeking a more sustainable funding model well before the current financial crisis. The Agency has already taken several initiatives to improve cost-sharing by UN Member States and to supplement the voluntary contributions which constitute more than 90% of its core funding. For example, it has been:
 - Seeking to expand its donor pool and to diversify its sources of funding including Islamic philanthropy and private sector donors
 - Transitioning to multi-year agreements with traditional donors
 - Exploring loans and grants from international financial institutions
 - Modernizing and digitalizing its services; and
 - Introducing the use of renewables and the green economy.²
2. The global funding crisis coupled with greater conflict in the region and around the world threatens the sustainability of the whole UN system especially, but not exclusively, UNHCR and UNRWA. Despite shrinking resources, UNRWA’s responsibilities has been continuously expanding with new generations being born into refugeehood - from 750,000 in 1949 to nearly 6 million today.
3. In the absence of a political solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, UNRWA is obliged to deliver basic services, education and healthcare to an ever-growing population. The prospect of UNRWA’s collapse increased exponentially as a result of Israel’s unsubstantiated allegations against the Agency in the aftermath of the Hamas attack on 7 October 2023.³
4. A strategic alliance to support and sustain UNRWA is a moral, legal and practical imperative:
 - Moral - because the lives and livelihoods of Palestine refugees depend on UNRWA’s survival.
 - Legal - because UN Member States are obligated under the UN Charter to assist the implementation of UNRWA’s mandate which the UN General Assembly established in 1949 and extended continuously most recently through June 2029; and

¹ By way of example, the UNICEF Executive Board (UNGA Resolution 57(I); UNDP Governing Council (UNGA Resolution 2029 (XX)) and UNHCR Executive Committee (UNGA Resolutions 428(V) and 1166(XII))

² Dumper, M., et.al. (2022). *Financing of UNRWA 2020-2030 from a Palestinian Refugee Perspective: Strengthening Refugee Rights under the Current Model of Member State Contributions*. Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute – MAS

³ Bergi, Kjersti G., et. al. (2022). *UNRWA, Funding Crisis and the Way Forward*. Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI)

- Practical - because the stability of the region depends on the important work UNRWA does especially under the current catastrophic circumstances arising from the genocidal military campaign in Gaza and surging settler violence in the West Bank including East Jerusalem.

Benefits of Sustaining UNRWA

5. In the strategic assessment, Ian Martin pays tribute to UNRWA's "indispensable role" in protecting Palestine refugees, preserving Israel's security, and promoting regional stability as widely recognized by UN Member States, host governments, and international partners.
 - In Palestine, UNRWA delivers essential services, responds to humanitarian crises, and mitigates the drivers of conflict
 - For Israel, UNRWA not only performs the Occupying Power's obligations under international humanitarian law, it also contributes to Israel's security by preserving stability in fragile environments and alleviates social and economic tensions
 - In Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, UNRWA provides services that reduce pressure on the national governments all of which have confirmed that they are not in a position to assume responsibility for the services UNRWA is providing
 - In the Middle East at large, UNRWA preserves the prospect of a two-State solution.
6. As such, UNRWA's mandate is essential to regional stability; the international community's obligations toward Palestine refugees; and the UN's permanent responsibility for the Palestine Question until a political resolution is achieved.

Costs of Allowing UNRWA to Collapse

7. The collapse of UNRWA, would lead to dire consequences for the people of Gaza nearly half of whom are children. It may even lead to mass displacement from Gaza due to service collapse. The reduction of UNRWA to services in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria would heighten the risks of recruitment into extremist networks in the absence of UNRWA's schools and youth engagement. The breakdown of UNRWA's health and sanitation services could trigger public health threats beyond the refugee population.
8. As noted in the strategic assessment, such an eventuality would also increase humanitarian need, social unrest, and regional fragility in the host countries at a time when their governments are trying to ensure stability and stem refugee flows. The scarcity of resources and services UNRWA provides could give rise to tensions between refugees and host communities.
9. Finally, losing UNRWA could also risk losing UNRWA's registration records and archival system which maintain family files dating back to 1948 for nearly six million registered Palestine refugees. It would also represent the UN Member States' abandonment of Palestine refugees and the Palestine Question further undermining the UN's credibility and legitimacy in the eyes of the peoples of the world. It may also jeopardize the prospects of peace in the Middle East.

Conclusion

10. If avoiding UNRWA's collapse is not in and of itself a sufficient incentive to sustain UNRWA politically and financially, then maximizing the above benefits and minimizing the above costs should be – for the sake of Palestine and Israel; for the sake of their neighbours; and for the sake of the region as a whole.

The Palestine Refugee Policy Forum is an ad hoc group of independent analysts who seek to generate informed discussion on the future of UNRWA. Participants include Kjersti Berg, Mick Dumper, Mona Ali Khalil, Mezna Qato, Lex Takkenberg and Andrew Whitley.