

The Information War on UNRWA

Background

1. Soon after the Hamas-led attack on Israel on 7 October 2023, the Israeli government escalated its ongoing campaign of unsubstantiated allegations against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) accusing it of being an illegitimate body supporting terrorism; infiltrated by Hamas; and doing nothing to stop Hamas from using its headquarters as command centres and its schools for weapons storage.¹
2. The most serious allegation was made public by Israel on 26 January 2024, just as the ICJ was announcing its preliminary findings on the plausible genocide in Gaza. Israel accused 12 (later 19) UNRWA staff members of participating in the Hamas attack and implicated UNRWA as being complicit in the attack. The United States immediately froze all aid to UNRWA, and within 48 hours, 16 international donors followed suit. UNRWA's budget was cut by half, even though Israel did not then and has not yet presented verifiable or corroborated evidence to the agency.
3. Israel's allegations have been made in official statements and interviews and echoed as facts in the media. Some of the allegations have gone viral, amplified through social media. Cyber tools such as paid Google ads have been funded by Israeli Ministry of Diaspora Affairs and bot-driven campaigns have targeted members of the US Congress.² Videos recordings have also shown Prime Minister Netanyahu meeting with paid influencers in the US.
4. On a far smaller scale, and much less reported in the media, Hamas has also accused UNRWA of colluding with Israel, including in the development of its education programs.

Why disinformation campaigns?

5. The purpose of dis/misinformation campaigns is to construct alternative realities that justify Israeli policies, undermine trust in UNRWA, and undermine donor support. The end goal is to dismantle UNRWA and to erase the underlying purpose of its mandate: the protection of Palestine refugees' right of return and the international community's permanent responsibility for the Question of Palestine including the unresolved refugee crisis since the Nakba in 1948.
6. The claim that UNRWA "perpetuates refugee status" has also been levelled repeatedly. However, refugee status and the right of return are enshrined in international law and would persist even if the agency ceased to exist. Ending UNRWA would result in severe human rights violations, jeopardizing children's access to education and basic health services and further undermine regional stability. Attacks on UNRWA constitute attacks on the United Nations and are violations of international law.
7. Yet another misinformation campaign targets UNRWA's use of Palestinian Authority schoolbooks in its schools. Claims that such use promotes antisemitism and hate against Israel have been debunked.³ Moreover, such claims ignore the evidence that radicalisation arises from violent displacement, brutalization, occupation and the denial and violation of inalienable human rights – not from textbooks.

Implications of information war

8. These allegations have caused serious harm at a critical time. They have been a major force in undermining UNRWA's standing and finances and have served to popularize and normalize a wide array of serious attacks on the agency and its staff without foundation. For example:

¹ See for eg. [Technical Report for the United Nations Secretary General](#) (2024, April)

² Jones, M. O. (2025). *Evidencing alethocide: Israel's war on truth in Gaza*. *Third World Quarterly*; Benjakob, O. (2024, March 19). «Israeli influence operation targets U.S. lawmakers on Hamas-UNRWA».

³ See [Report on Palestinian textbooks \(PalTex\)](#) (2021). See also [GAO report](#) (2026)

- In Gaza, 382 UNRWA and related personnel killed and 312 installations damaged or destroyed.
- Israel has significantly reduced the UN's presence in East Jerusalem, including UNRWA's education and health services, most recently demolishing UNRWA headquarters in East Jerusalem.
- Two laws passed banning UNRWA, denying visas and halting all Israeli contact with UNRWA.
- By late 2025 Israel passed new legislation, cutting UNRWA's electricity, fuel, water and communications and purporting to strip UNRWA, its premises and personnel of UN privileges and immunities.

Despite such attacks, UNRWA continues to operate in Gaza (relying on its local staff), and across the region.

10. The loss of donor support has led to a shortfall of USD 220 million for 2026 which threatens UNRWA's survival. In January 2026, UNRWA announced a 20% salary cut for all Area staff, and corresponding reduction of staff hours and education and health services provided for Palestinian refugees, signalling the severity of the crisis.
11. Israel began by banning UNRWA and has since banned 37 INGOs in addition to numerous local NGOs.

The importance of knowing the facts

12. In the OPT, UNRWA operates in highly challenging context: a protracted conflict marked by Israel's military attacks and ongoing occupation, annexation and apartheid-like policies. UNRWA faces difficulties delivering services in refugee camps where militant groups such as Hamas and Islamic Jihad are present. As a UN agency, UNRWA does not have policing or criminal investigative powers; responsibility for security lies with UN member states, ie. host authorities.
13. Both Israel and Hamas have violated UNRWA installations, albeit far more the former than the latter. In its annual reports, UNRWA extensively document its efforts to report and protest such violations to the parties.
14. Independent investigations have noted the absence of evidence to support the allegations.
 - The International Court of Justice (ICJ) found that Israel had not substantiated the claims against UNRWA itself.⁴
 - As for the accused UNRWA staff, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS) has cleared 10 and concluded that the evidence— "*if authenticated and corroborated – could indicate*" that the remaining 9 '*may have been involved*'.⁵
 - The Colonna Report found that UNRWA has stronger neutrality monitoring mechanisms than any other UN agency.⁶ Nevertheless, UNRWA has taken substantial additional steps to mitigate risks in accordance with recommendations of the Review.
 - Beyond the independent investigations, Israel has not pursued its own criminal proceedings or shared evidence with the UN to allow further substantiation of allegations.
15. Despite lack of verified claims, these allegations continue to hurt UNRWA. Israel and the US are not interested in "cleaning up" the agency; they appear intent on dismantling it. The international community has a binding obligation and a shared responsibility to ensure respect for international humanitarian and human rights law in the OPT. At this critical time, a fair and fact-based approach to UNRWA, its mandate and activities is crucial.

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.

⁴ [Advisory Opinion](#), International Court of Justice. (2025, October 22).

⁵ [OIOS UNRWA staff investigation](#) (United Nations. (2024, August 5).

⁶ [Independent review on neutrality](#) (2024, April).