

UNRWA IN FOCUS

Briefing Papers

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The United States and UNRWA

This Briefing Paper focuses on the nature of the American relationship with UNRWA, highlighting the conditions of American funding, its monitoring of UNRWA and the cuts of the Trump administration.

Nature of American Funding

The United States was the single largest donor to UNRWA from 2009 until 2017.¹ Its funding is supplied mostly through the United States State Department, with a smaller portion made available through the federal government's development agency, USAID. The US earmarks slightly more of its financial contributions to specific Emergency Appeals than to the Core Programme Budget, from which UNRWA pays general costs such as staff salaries. In its annual Framework for Cooperation, the US agrees it will attempt to provide 18-20% of the core programme budget annually. The General Accounting Office notes that the US earmarks a small portion of its contributions to the Core Budget to support projects of mutual priority, for example the educational Human Rights, Conflict Resolution, and Tolerance project from 2015-2017.²

Conditions of American Funding

The most significant condition is that UNRWA must adhere to Section 301(c) of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act, which directs that UNRWA must take all possible measures to assure that US contributions do not provide assistance to any refugee who is

¹ Detailed lists of UNRWA's annual donors and funding breakdowns can be found here:

<https://www.unrwa.org/how-you-can-help/government-partners/funding-trends/donor-charts>.

² "State has taken Actions to Address Potentially Problematic Textbook Content but Should Improve its Reporting to Congress." Report GAO-19-448, *US General Accounting Authority*, June 2019

<https://www.gao.gov/assets/700/699477.pdf>

³ "Department of State (State) and United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Actions to Implement Section

"THE US ATTEMPTS TO PROVIDE 18-20% OF THE CORE PROGRAMME BUDGET ANNUALLY"

receiving military training as part of a guerrilla or terrorist organisation.³ Under the annual Framework for Cooperation, UNRWA commits to conforming with the conditions in Section 301(c) and providing semi-annual reports on the actions it has taken to ensure conformance.⁴ These reports describe the agency's actions to enforce rules and regulations on staff and beneficiary behaviour, to monitor UNRWA facilities in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and to screen the names of its employees against the UN terrorist watchlist.⁵ The State Department has given no definition of 'all possible measures' but states that the department must have confidence that UNRWA has taken them.⁶ The US expects to receive semi-annual

UNRWA in Focus Project

The UNRWA in Focus project is an Exeter University student-centred activity, led by Professor Mick Dumper, designed to provide a platform for the publication of the students' research on one of the UN's largest institutions. UNRWA in Focus Briefing Papers are short and concise and aim to provide useful overviews on a range of issues relating to UNRWA, with the aim of exploring the notion of UNRWA as a significant political actor in the Middle East. Other Papers in the series can be found here:

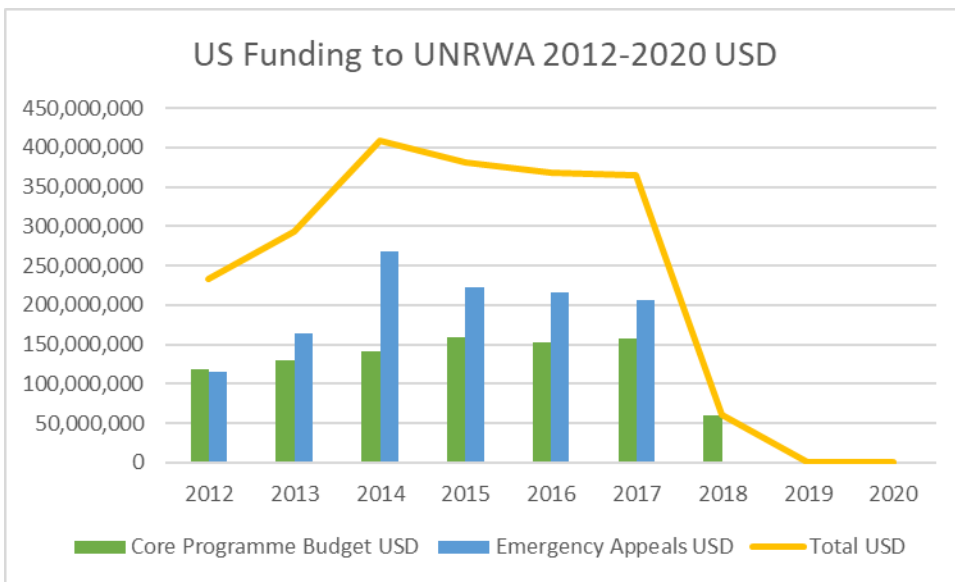
<http://sites.exeter.ac.uk/unwraifocus/briefing-papers/>

301(c) of the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961." Report GAO-04-276R, *US General Accounting Office*, November 17th 2003, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/100/92314.pdf>, p. 1.

⁴ "Foreign Assistance: Measures to Prevent Inadvertent Payments to Terrorists under Palestinian Aid Programs have been Strengthened, but Some Weaknesses Remain." Report GAO-09-622, *US General Accounting Office*, May 2009, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/290/289897.pdf>, p. 20.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ *Ibid.* p. 23.



reports on the results achieved from US contributions to UNRWA's West Bank, Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria Emergency Appeals, as well as tailored financial updates on US funding to the Emergency Appeals on a quarterly basis.

Framework for Cooperation

Each year the United States and UNRWA agree a Framework for Cooperation outlining their mutual priorities, the conditions of American funding, and the goals which the US would like UNRWA to work towards.⁷ Synthesising these Frameworks from 2012 to 2017 reveals consistent American concern with:

- addressing budget shortfalls through greater budget clarity.
- increasing donor understanding of how their funds are used.
- reforming monitoring and evaluation work to produce a results based monitoring system, which will improve resource mobilisation and UNRWA's internal oversight capacity.
- focussing programmatic reform on education and health activities and committing to reforming relief and social services in order to improve efficiency and effectiveness.

US and UNRWA Neutrality

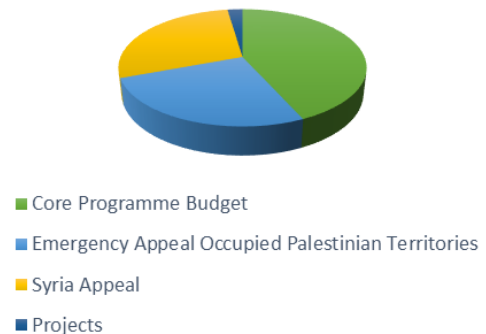
- UNRWA's neutrality is an area of increasing focus in US reports.
- 2013 - neutrality discussed in relation to UNRWA's facilities being used for military or ideological means by Israeli or Palestinian groups.
- 2013 - The US believes that Operations Support Officers, who inspect UNRWA

⁷ All Frameworks from 2009 to 2017 can be found here: <https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/prm/releases/frameworknew/index.htm>

facilities quarterly, are essential to help maintain standards of neutrality and endeavours to continue financially supporting this where possible.

- 2014 - the US notes with appreciation the addition of an equivalent Area Support Officer programme in Syria, the implementation of a donor vetting policy to ensure that donations are compliant with UN neutrality needs, the development of a stronger neutrality framework for UNRWA employees and a set of social media guidelines.
- 2016 - Even greater focus on neutrality; curriculum review, new training for UNRWA personnel on the importance of neutrality, strengthened capacity of UNRWA staff to investigate credible allegations of misconduct for violations of neutrality codes. Recommends disciplinary action such as the denial of discretionary benefits as punishment.
- 2017 - further desire to increase the capacity of UNRWA staff to investigate allegations of misconduct.

2017 Funding Breakdown USD



Graph shows US contributions to different areas of UNRWA Emergency Appeals Budget and to Core Budget.

The Trump Administration 2017-2021

In January 2018, the Trump administration cut its contributions to UNRWA to \$60,000,000 before announcing on August 31st, 2018, that it would cease funding UNRWA entirely, citing the organisation's unsustainable operational-business model as the reason.⁸ This total suspension followed the relocation of the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, the elimination of foreign aid for Palestinians, and the

⁸ Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Kobi Michael, "The End to US Funding to UNRWA: Opportunity or Threat?." *INSS Insight*, No. 1093 (September 6th 2018), 1.

closure of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation's diplomatic mission in Washington. Trump's cessation of funding was congruent with his America First policy and desire to see other governments covering UNRWA's costs. Leading academic on the politics of forced migration, Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh also suggests it was part of a strategy to force Palestinian refugees to rescind the Right of Return to Palestine, hoping to create such abject living conditions by undermining UNRWA that Palestinians would be forced to accept Trump's "deal of the century."⁹ Trump appointed Jared Kushner to start peace negotiations between Israel and Palestine; Kushner, in August 2018, expressed the belief that UNRWA "perpetuates a status quo, is corrupt, inefficient, and doesn't help peace," highlighting the administration's stance against the agency.

Prospects in the Biden Administration

Biden is a long-time ally to Israel and can be expected to return to the steadfast support which was the status quo of previous Democrats, while promoting a mutually agreed two-state solution.¹⁰ On the 7th of April 2021, the US announced it would contribute USD 150 million to UNRWA's Programme Budget. Evidently this remains below the level of historical contributions.¹¹ There is speculation that another USD 100 million will follow in June and further contributions may come in October, when USAID's next financial year begins. It is currently unclear whether US conditions to the funding will be significantly more stringent; there may be greater oversight of the contributions, though likely still

within the parameters of the 2018/19 Framework for Cooperation.

By Jack Williams-Sharkey

Useful Links

UNRWA's Annual Donors and Funding Breakdowns:

<https://www.unrwa.org/how-you-can-help/government-partners/funding-trends/donor-charts>

US-UNRWA Cooperation Frameworks 2009-2017:

<https://2009-2017.state.gov/j/prm/releases/frameworknew/index.htm>

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Further Reading

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⁹ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local." *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, No.1, (2019): 28.

¹⁰ Ian Williams, 'Biden Puts (Most of) the Wheels back on the UN Wagon'. *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, (March/April 2021), [https://www.wrmea.org/2021-march-](https://www.wrmea.org/2021-march-april/biden-puts-most-of-the-wheels-back-on-the-u.n.-wagon.html)

[april/biden-puts-most-of-the-wheels-back-on-the-u.n.-wagon.html](https://www.wrmea.org/2021-march-april/biden-puts-most-of-the-wheels-back-on-the-u.n.-wagon.html)

¹¹ "United States Announces Restoration of U.S. \$150 Million to Support Palestine Refugees". *UNRWA Press Release*, 7th April 2021.