

UNRWA IN FOCUS

Briefing Papers

Briefing Paper No. 6

May 2021

Criticisms of UNRWA 2: *UNRWA The Pacifier?*

This Briefing Paper will examine the criticisms of UNRWA usually made from a Palestinian perspective.

Without being able to access Arabic language sources, pro-Palestinian criticisms have proven harder to pinpoint than the pro-Israeli criticisms examined in Briefing Paper No. 5. As in that Briefing Paper, these criticisms are not endorsed by the UNRWA in Focus Project.

Generally, criticisms of UNRWA from a Palestinian perspective focus on UNRWA's perceived subordination to the US and Israel, its failure to protect refugees, the fact that it operates as a palliative rather than providing a solution to the problem, its colonial structure or lack of organisational transparency, and the inadequate services it provides.

'UNRWA Does Not Help Enough'

UNRWA is criticised over not doing enough for Palestinian refugees. The Near East Project Survey, carried out in 2005, indicated that the majority register with UNRWA for proof of their refugee status above access to services; 10-15% of respondents in the West Bank, Syria, and Lebanon described UNRWA as having "no use."¹ The fact that only a minority of refugees, roughly 1/3, perceived access to UNRWA's services as the major advantage of registration, reflects dissatisfaction with these services.²

¹ Jalal Al Hussein and Riccardo Bocco, "The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: The Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, No. 2&3 (2010): 276.

² Ibid., 276-284.

³ Jaber Suleiman, *The Ongoing UNRWA Crisis: Context, Dimensions, Prospects and Responses*. Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, Common Space Initiative, (August 2018): p. 15.

Criticism of services in the areas of education, health, and employment relates strongly to the limitations of UNRWA's financial situation.

Education:

In response to funding cuts in 2018, UNRWA reduced the age of retirement for teachers from 62 to 60, with employees to be removed from the system by July 2018 and not to be replaced by new teachers.³ This entailed merging some schools and increasing the number of students per classroom.⁴ With classroom sizes of 50 students and above, it is impossible for students to learn properly in school and children must rely on being able to do so at home.⁵ Overall, however, UNRWA schools still achieve literacy rates which compare favourably regionally and globally, despite funding difficulties.⁶

Medical:

In 2018, UNRWA stopped paying medical bills for Palestinian women having normal pregnancies in hospitals in Lebanon, meaning that they had to cover

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/>

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local." *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, No. 1 (2019): 34.

⁶ Lina Brooks-Rubin, 'Whither UNRWA?', in Rex Brynen and Roula El-Rifai (eds.), *The Palestinian Refugee Problem: The Search for a Resolution*. London: Pluto Press, 2014: p. 62.

the USD400-500 fees themselves, as well as ending a co-payment system which saw UNRWA cover 10% of the costs of secondary hospitalisations for some refugees.⁷ Without these financial support systems, the cost of healthcare becomes prohibitive for many refugees in Lebanon, 65% of whom were already under the poverty line in 2017.⁸ It also reduced the number of working days for health clinics in South Lebanon to its minimum.⁹

Employment:

Many UNRWA employees do not feel that UNRWA is “committed to protecting” them at a time when their jobs and their futures are at risk.¹⁰ This is epitomised by the thousands of workers on daily contracts, *dailies*, who are given work on an ad hoc basis and easily made redundant during times of cost-cutting. Locally recruited staff also receive salaries considerably lower than those of national staff employed by other UN organisations because, under UNRWA’s pay policy, local staff are paid against host government wages in equivalent functions.¹¹ Furthermore, in 2018 the Amman Head Office announced that it would no longer be filling posts vacated by retirees, meaning that young Palestinians aspiring to work for the institution find themselves with little employment opportunity.¹²

These limitations, however, are determined by the funding situation, which is out of UNRWA’s control. UNRWA has demonstrated great flexibility in adapting to different circumstances and addressing issues far beyond its traditional activities in health and education.

Lower grade employees can, however, often be excluded from UNRWA circulations as they do not have access to email, while the circulars are always issued first in English and subsequently, though not always until days later, in Arabic, meaning that the message is often lost on these employees.¹³ The sending of multiple circulars in a matter of days with contrasting messages (which often withdraw and then

reinstate certain rights) arouses the suspicion that it is done to distract employees from more significant incremental changes.¹⁴ This demonstrates the perceived lack of transparency within the organisation.

‘UNRWA has a Colonial Structure’

While most international staff members are financed by the UN and junior professional officers by their own countries, national employees are paid through the general or emergency budgets, leaving them more exposed to funding deficits than their international colleagues.¹⁵ Further disparity between national and foreign staff is caused by the hiring of foreigners to fill senior positions within UNRWA, when many Palestinians are well-educated enough, and even more qualified, to hold the posts, often taking responsibilities away from Palestinian employees and paying an international hire more to do the same duty.¹⁶ This contributes to a colonial structure in which international employees hold more power and influence, as well as better wages, than Palestinian employees in UNRWA.¹⁷

Yara Harawi writes that Palestinians have long heard anecdotes about the problematic culture of entitlement and abuse perpetuated by well-paid foreign staff at UNRWA, such as decision making being concentrated in the hands of a select few individuals.¹⁸ In times of austerity, support programmes are also usually cut before the salaries of senior and foreign staff, while high-level employees have been known to rent houses in Jerusalem taken from Palestinian refugees in 1948.¹⁹

Recurrent budget cuts have shaken the trust of Palestinian refugees in the Agency, magnifying their concerns about the international community’s ability, and willingness, to address their most basic needs in an unstable region, though this should reflect on the international community in general and not specifically on UNRWA.²⁰

⁷ Ibid., 33.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Suleiman, ‘The Ongoing UNRWA Crisis’, p. 16.

¹⁰ Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, ‘The Changing Faces of UNRWA’, 35.

¹¹ Kjetil Halvorsen, *Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*. United Nations General Assembly, Report A/71/350, (22nd August 2016): p. 8.

¹² Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, ‘The Changing Faces of UNRWA’, 36.

¹³ Ibid., 37.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Berit Angelskâr, “A Humanitarian Solution to a Political Problem” *UNRWA Between Globalised Values and Localised Meaning*. PhD Dissertation, University of Bergen, (2015), p.174.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 175-178.

¹⁷ Ibid., pp. 175.

¹⁸ Yara Harawi, “Do not Punish Palestinian Refugees for UNRWA Dysfunction.” *Al Jazeera*, 1st August 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/8/1/do-not-punish-palestinian-refugees-for-unrwa-dysfunction/> [Last Accessed 20th April 2021].

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Halvorsen, *Report of the Working Group*, p.3

'UNRWA Pacifies Palestinians'

Another key criticism is that UNRWA is complicit in pacifying Palestinian refugees by providing basic services without providing for their independence in the future.²¹ The *modus operandi* has enabled Palestinians to normalise rather than to resist their situation, accepting UNRWA's support rather than demanding sustainable and effective alternatives, such as a political solution.²² In addition to pacification, UNRWA's operation is accused of normalising the refugee status. UNRWA's funding model gains international support for its programme budget and for the refugees in their current situation but it does not demand any contingent support for the Palestinian right of return or a state solution to their plight. This is seen as cementing refugeehood as the norm in international eyes and hindering efforts to produce change.

It is not UNRWA, however, which is failing to produce a durable political solution – this is the responsibility of the wider international community. In providing services, UNRWA prevents millions of refugees from living in abject poverty and it is hard to fathom how eliminating such assistance would produce a durable solution to the crisis.²³

By Jack Williams-Sharkey

Useful Links

Yara Harawi, "Do not Punish Palestinian Refugees for UNRWA Dysfunction." *Al Jazeera*, 1st August 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2019/8/1/do-not-punish-palestinian-refugees-for-unrwa-dysfunction/>.

Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local." *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, No. 1 (2019): 28-41, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/332237242_The_Changing_Faces_of_UNRWA

International Crisis Group, "Bringing Back the Palestinian Refugee Question." *Crisis Group Middle East Report*, No.156 (9th October 2014), <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/eastern-mediterranean/israelpalestine/bringing-back-palestinian-refugee-question>

Nathan J. Brown, *Time to Rethink, But Not Abandon, International Aid to Palestinians*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2018): <https://carnegieendowment.org/2018/12/17/time-to-rethink-but-not-abandon-international-aid-to-palestinians-pub-77985>

Further Reading

Angelskår, B., "A Humanitarian Solution to a Political Problem" *UNRWA Between Globalised Values and Localised Meaning*. PhD Dissertation, University of Bergen, (2015).

Dumper, M. *Challenges Facing UNRWA in an Uncertain Future: A Study for the Department of International Development UK*. University of Exeter Consulting, (March 2016) http://socialsciences.exeter.ac.uk/media/universityofexeter/collegeofsocialsciencesandinternationalstudies/politics/projects/powerpiertypeople/UNWRA_dumper.pdf.

Halvorsen, K., *Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*. United Nations General Assembly, Report A/71/350, (22nd August 2016) <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-177104/>.

Suleiman, J., *The Ongoing UNRWA Crisis: Context, Dimensions, Prospects and Responses*. Al-Zaytouna Centre for Studies and Consultations, Common Space Initiative, (August 2018), <http://www.badil.org/phocadownloadpap/badil-new/resources/docs/individuals/unrwa-crisis-lebanon-en.pdf>.

²¹ Mick Dumper, *Challenges Facing UNRWA in an Uncertain Future: A Study for the Department of International Development UK*. University of Exeter Consulting, (March 2016): pp. 36-38.

²² Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 'The Changing Faces of UNRWA', 30.

²³ Nathan J. Brown, *Time to Rethink, But Not Abandon, International Aid to Palestinians*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. (2018): p. 6.