

UNRWA IN FOCUS

Briefing Papers

Briefing Paper No. 7

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UNRWA and the Gulf States

This Briefing Paper will analyse the relationship between UNRWA and the Arab Gulf States of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait. As it has proven difficult to locate scholarship directly analysing the relationship of the Gulf States with UNRWA, this Briefing Paper outlines the relationships between the Gulf States, Israel, and Palestine in order to provide context for the refugee situation and then extrapolates the relationship with UNRWA by analysing UNRWA's donor charts.

The Gulf States and Israel

According to Jonathan Ferziger and Gawdat Bahgat, the majority of Arab peoples and governments would like to see a Palestinian State with East Jerusalem as its capital and a fair solution to the Palestinian refugees.¹ Although the Gulf States have not engaged in direct conflict with Israel, their relationship has been largely acrimonious since the six-day war in 1967, in which Israel occupied the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem, among other areas.² In 1981, Saudi Arabia presented the "Fahd Plan" for peace, which included the right of Palestinian refugees to either return to their homes or receive compensation should they not wish to return.³ This implicitly provided an offer of recognition of Israel – up until this point, no Arab State except Egypt had recognised Israel.

1990-2000s - Hostilities

During the 1990s, however, the meagre progress made during Palestinian-Israeli talks caused the Gulf States to harden their rhetoric against Israel, even denying its right to exist as a sovereign state. The signing of the Oslo Accords in September 1993, though, caused the Gulf States to terminate their policy of boycotting companies which had economic relations with Israel (indirect boycott) maintaining only

the direct boycott of Israel and Israeli companies themselves.⁴

In 2002 Saudi Arabia proposed another peace plan, the Arab Peace Initiative, which required Israel's full withdrawal from the Occupied Palestinian Territories and offered in return a normalisation between the Arab and Muslim worlds and Israel.⁵ Oman and Qatar, however, had generally tried to avoid entanglement in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict and never fully enforced the economic embargo against Israel pursued by the other members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Oman, and Kuwait).⁶

2010 onward – Increasing Cooperation

In recent years, however, the nature of the Gulf States' relationships with Israel have changed. The rivalry between the GCC and Iran is now much more central to the Gulf States than the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.⁷ The Gulf States have a common enemy in Iran and Saudi Arabia and the UAE consider political Islam and the Muslim Brotherhood as existential threats. Given Turkey's support for these groups and President Recep Erdogan's presentation of himself as the

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

¹ Jonathan H. Ferziger and Gawdat Bahgat, *Israel's Growing Ties with the Gulf Arab States*. (Atlantic Council, 2020): p. 7

² Yoel Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States: From Tacit Cooperation to Reconciliation?" *Israel Affairs* 21, No.1 (2015): 131-133.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid

⁵ Guzansky, "Israel and the Arab Gulf States", 133.

⁶ Ibid., 134-135.

⁷ Suliman Al-Atiqi and Claire Beugrand, *The Gulf States and the Palestinian-Israeli Conflict*. (Gulf Research Centre, Cambridge): p. 2.

protector of Palestinians, this presents Turkey as another potential threat in the region.⁸

Increasingly, the Gulf States also fear that American commitment to defending the region is waning. This has made Israel, with its greater military capacity and common enemies, an attractive partner.⁹

Consequently, the UAE and later Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords in August 2020, normalising their relations with Israel, while other Gulf States increase their covert ties with the state.

The Gulf States and Palestine

Rapprochement between some of the Gulf States and Israel has caused relationships with the Palestinians to deteriorate significantly.

Historically, Arab countries have provided significant support to Palestinians. When the Palestinian Liberation Organisation emerged fully in the 1970s for example, Kuwait taxed its Palestinian residents in order to provide support for the PLO.¹⁰ The Gulf States also committed to providing support for institution building in Palestinian territories. In the 1970s and 80s, this meant the rapid development of Palestinian civil society in the West Bank and Gaza.¹¹ This relationship has been strained at times, however, especially since PLO leader Yasser Arafat expressed support for the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, leading Kuwaiti allies to believe that the Palestinians had sided with Iraq.¹²

Deteriorating Relationship

Ferziger and Bahgat argue that Gulf leaders have recently become less willing to commit strategic and financial capital to the Palestinian cause. This is because divisions among Palestinians have become deeper, for example between the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, since Arafat died in 2004, and Gulf leaders have come to believe that there is no strategic partner to negotiate with.¹³ Emirati Political Scientist Abdulkhaleq Abdulla maintains that the Gulf countries remain committed to the Palestinian cause but

harbour deep frustrations with the Palestinian leadership. He claims that they are displeased that Palestinians have formed partnerships with Turkey and Iran and believe that Palestinians have taken Arab support for granted.¹⁴

Professor Shibley Telhami has warned, however, that Palestinian frustrations should not lead to the severance of their relations with the Arab Gulf, because the importance of the issue to the rest of the world is probably predicated on its importance to the Arab world.¹⁵

Qatar's Different Role

Due to the tensions between Qatar and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain, who have been leading a blockade of the nation since 2017, Qatar's relationship with the Palestinians is somewhat different to the rest of the GCC. Qatar feels threatened by its Gulf neighbours and sees its regional status in the Palestinian arena as an insurance policy for its strategic influence in the area.¹⁶ It is less inclined, therefore, to normalise its relations with Israel.

Funding UNRWA

Overview

The Gulf States have worked closely with UNRWA in the past, providing funding for projects such as the reconstruction of health care centres in Gaza.¹⁷ The Gulf States have been particularly prominent donors in terms of funding emergency projects, and they massively increased funding in 2018 and 2019 in order to help fill the void left by the US withdrawal of funds.¹⁸

In 2020, however, funds were drastically reduced, with the UAE in particular ceasing almost all assistance.¹⁹ The UAE claims that it does not plan to resume funding to the UNRWA until steps are taken to manage funds more efficiently. It argues that the COVID-19 pandemic was a revealing period regarding funding

⁸ Ferziger and Bahgat., *Israel's Growing Ties*, p. 6.

⁹ Ibid., pp. 6-7.

¹⁰ Nathan J. Brown, *Time to Rethink, But Not Abandon, International Aid to Palestinians*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, (2018), p. 6.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 7.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ferziger and Bahgat., *Israel's Growing Ties*, p. 7.

¹⁴ Dale Sprusansky, "Tensions High Between Palestine and the Arab Gulf States." *Washington Report on Middle East Affairs*, (2021).

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Kobi Michael and Yoel Guzansky, "Might Qatar Join the Abraham Accords?," *INSS Insight*, No. 1391, Institute for National Security Studies (2020), p. 3.

¹⁷ UNRWA Newsroom, "Gulf Cooperation Council Funding Paves Way for Health Centre Reconstruction for Gaza Refugees", *UNRWA*, (12th March 2015)

<https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/gulf-cooperation-council-funding-paves-way-health-centre-reconstruction-gaza>

¹⁸ Lamis El-Sharqawy, 'The Gulf Reconsiders UNRWA', *Ahram Online*, 9th February 2021, <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/50/1203/402736/AIAhram-Weekly/World/The-Gulf-reconsiders-UNRWA.aspx>

¹⁹ Reuters Staff, 'UAE halts funding to UN Palestinian Agency in 'reset' of aid programme', *Reuters*, February 8th 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/emirates-palestinians-aid-int-idUSKBN2A81W8>

and that their moral responsibility to the Palestinian cause should be pursued under a different mechanism.²⁰ It claims that the halt to funding was not a result of its closer ties with Israel.

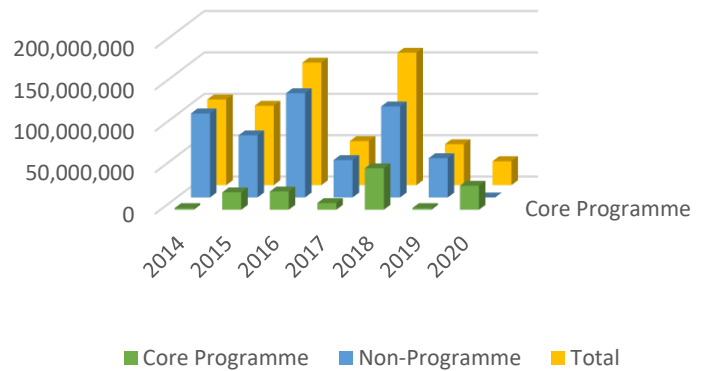
The graphs below show the contributions of GCC members from 2014 to 2020, drawn from UNRWA's publicly available donor charts. It uses only the donations attributed directly to the nation state and not to charities or organisations affiliated to the state. Saudi Arabia is by far the largest contributor to UNRWA of the Gulf States and mostly funds the emergency appeals, providing much smaller sums, or nothing, to UNRWA's core programme budget.

Oman follows a similar strategy, generally contributing to the emergency fund and not the programme budget and its funding has been the most stable in recent years, between USD600,000 and 800,000 annually. Qatar's contributions are minimal, except in 2018 and 2019 in response to UNRWA's appeals for support, but it reduced its funding again in 2020. Kuwait and Bahrain both provide sporadic contributions, with Bahrain's fluctuating between USD50,000 and nothing from year to year. Up until it ceased funding in 2020, the UAE contributed consistently to the programme budget and not to the emergency fund.

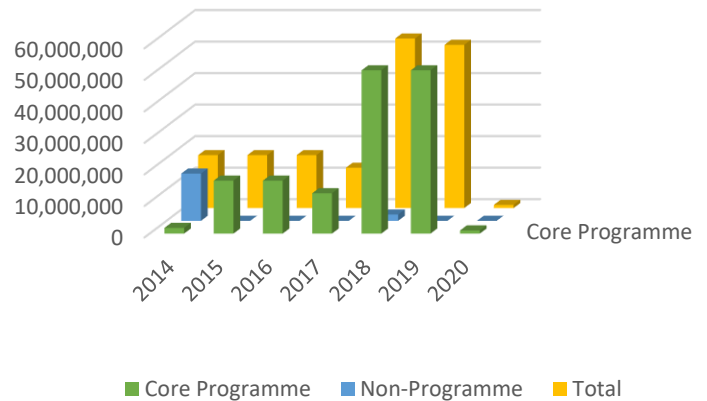
All of the Gulf States reduced their funding in 2020. The data for 2021 has not yet been published, but the UAE has already stated that it will not increase its funding under the previous model. Whether the rest of the Gulf States will increase their funding is unclear, though the previous years seem to show a general downward trend in funding, with the exception of 2018.

By Jack Williams-Sharkey

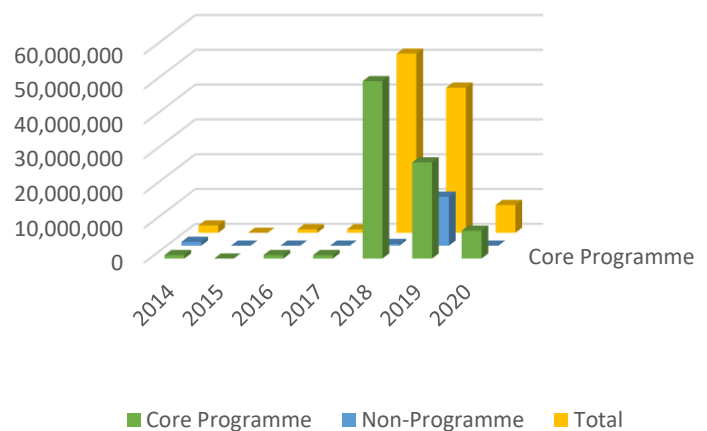
Saudi Arabia Contributions to UNRWA USD



UAE Contributions to UNRWA USD

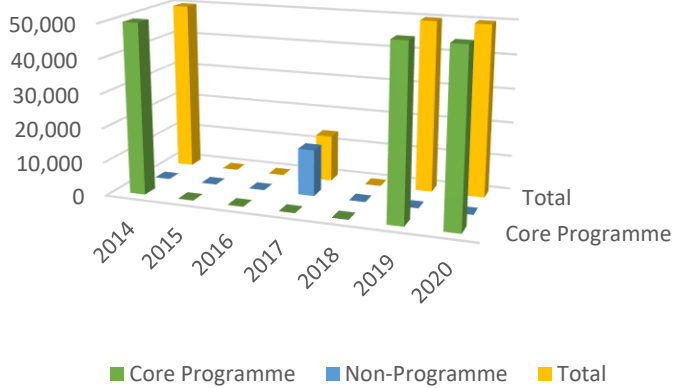


Qatar Contributions to UNRWA USD

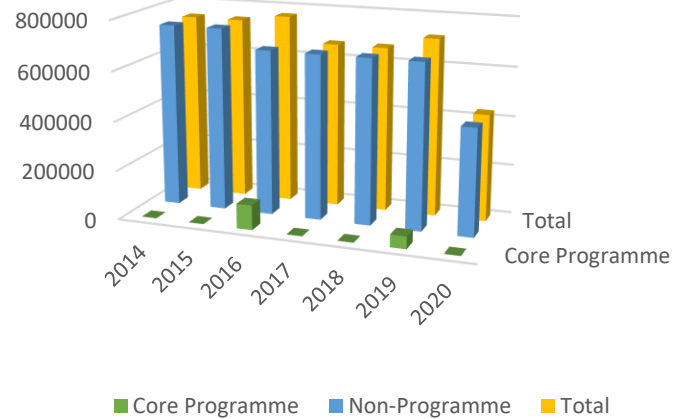


²⁰ Ibid.

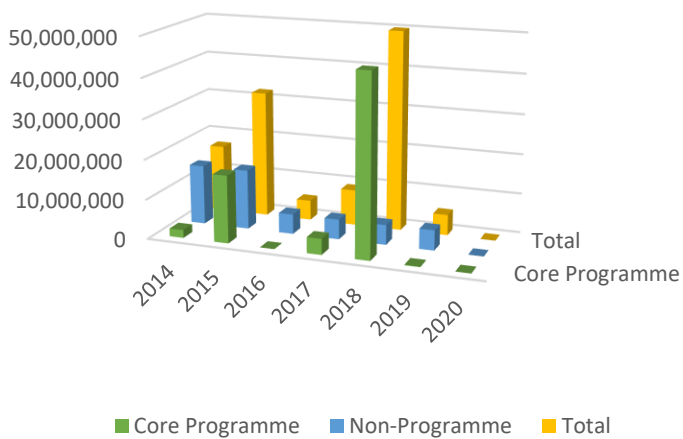
Bahrain Contributions to UNRWA USD



Oman Contributions to UNRWA USD



Kuwait Contributions to UNRWA USD



Useful Links

UNRWA's Annual Donors and Funding Breakdowns:
<https://www.unrwa.org/how-you-can-help/government-partners/funding-trends/donor-charts>

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Ahram Online, 9th February 2021,
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Further Reading

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