

Israel's ban on UNRWA continues a pattern of politicizing Palestinian refugee aid - and puts millions of lives at risk

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The Israeli parliament's vote on Oct. 28, 2024, to ban the United Nations agency that provides relief for Palestinian refugees is likely to [affect millions of people](#) - it also fits a pattern.

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Aid for refugees, particularly Palestinian refugees, has [long been politicized](#), and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, or UNRWA, has been targeted throughout its 75-year history.

This was evident earlier in the current Gaza conflict, when at least a dozen countries, including the U.S., [suspended funding to the UNRWA](#), citing allegations made by Israel that [12 UNRWA employees participated](#) in the attack by Hamas on Oct. 7, 2023. In August, the U.N. [fired nine UNRWA employees](#) for alleged involvement in the attack. An independent U.N. panel [established a set of 50 recommendations](#) to ensure UNRWA employees adhere to the principle of neutrality.

The vote by the Knesset, Israel's parliament, to ban the UNRWA goes a step further. It will, when it comes into effect, prevent the UNRWA from operating in Israel and will severely affect its ability to serve refugees in any of the occupied territories that Israel controls, including Gaza. This could have [devastating consequences](#) for livelihoods, health, the distribution of food aid and schooling for Palestinians. It would also damage the polio vaccination campaign that the UNRWA and its partner organizations have been [carrying out](#) in Gaza since September. Finally, the bill bans communication between Israeli officials and the UNRWA, which would end efforts by the agency to coordinate the movements of aid workers to prevent unintentional targeting by the Israel Defense Forces.

Refugee aid, and humanitarian aid more generally, is theoretically meant to be neutral and impartial. But as experts in [migration and international relations](#), we know funding is often used as a foreign policy tool, whereby allies are rewarded and enemies punished. In this context, we believe Israel's banning of the UNRWA fits a wider pattern of the politicization of aid to refugees, particularly Palestinian refugees.

What is the UNRWA?

The UNRWA, short for United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near

East, was established two years after about [750,000 Palestinians were expelled or fled from their homes](#) during the months leading up to the creation of the state of Israel in 1948 and the subsequent Arab-Israeli war.

Palestinians flee their homes during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. Pictures from History/Universal Images Group via Getty Images

Prior to the UNRWA's creation, international and local organizations, many of them religious, provided services to displaced Palestinians. But after [surveying the extreme poverty](#) and dire situation pervasive across refugee camps, the U.N. General Assembly, including all Arab states and Israel, voted to create the UNRWA in 1949.

Since that time, [the UNRWA has been the primary aid organization](#) providing food, medical care, schooling and, in some cases, housing for the 6 million Palestinians living across its five fields: Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, as well as the areas that make up the occupied Palestinian territories: the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

The mass displacement of Palestinians - known as the [Nakba, or "catastrophe"](#) - occurred prior to the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), which defined refugees as anyone with a well-founded fear of persecution owing to "events occurring in Europe before 1 January 1951." Despite a [1967 protocol extending the definition](#) worldwide, Palestinians are still excluded from the primary international system protecting refugees.

While the UNRWA is responsible for providing services to Palestinian refugees, the United Nations also created the U.N. Conciliation Commission for Palestine in 1948 to seek a [long-term political solution](#) and "to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation."

As a result, UNRWA does not have a mandate to push for the traditional durable solutions available in other refugee situations. As it happened, the conciliation commission was active only for a few years and has since been sidelined in favor of the U.S.-brokered peace processes.

Is the UNRWA political?

The UNRWA has been [subject](#) to political headwinds since its inception and especially during periods of heightened tension between Palestinians and Israelis.

While it is a U.N. organization and thus ostensibly apolitical, it has [frequently been criticized](#) by Palestinians, Israelis as well as donor countries, including the United States, for acting politically.

The UNRWA performs statelike functions across its five fields, including education, health and infrastructure, but it is restricted in its mandate from performing political or security activities.

Initial Palestinian objections to the UNRWA stemmed from the organization's early focus on economic integration of refugees into host states.

Although the UNRWA officially adhered to the U.N. General Assembly's [Resolution 194](#) that called for the return of Palestine refugees to their homes, U.N., U.K. and U.S. [officials searched](#) for means by which to resettle and integrate Palestinians into host states, viewing this as the favorable political solution to the Palestinian refugee situation and the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In this sense, Palestinians perceived the UNRWA to be both highly political and actively working against

their interests.

In later decades, the UNRWA [switched its primary focus](#) from jobs to education at the urging of Palestinian refugees. But the UNRWA's education materials were [viewed](#) by Israel as further feeding Palestinian militancy, and the Israeli government insisted on checking and approving all materials in Gaza and the West Bank, which it has occupied since 1967.

A protester is removed by members of the U.S. Capitol Police during a House hearing on Jan. 30, 2024. Alex Wong/Getty Images

While Israel has [long been suspicious](#) of the UNRWA's role in refugee camps and in providing education, the organization's operation, which is internationally funded, [also saves](#) Israel millions of dollars each year in services it would be obliged to deliver as the occupying power.

Since the 1960s, the U.S. - the UNRWA's primary donor - and other Western countries have [repeatedly expressed their desire](#) to use aid to prevent radicalization among refugees.

In response to the increased presence of armed opposition groups, the [U.S. attached a provision](#) to its UNRWA aid in 1970, requiring that the "UNRWA take all possible measures to assure that no part of the United States contribution shall be used to furnish assistance to any refugee who is receiving military training as a member of the so-called Palestine Liberation Army (PLA) or any other guerrilla-type organization."

The UNRWA adheres to this requirement, even publishing an annual list of its employees so that host governments can vet them, but it also [employs 30,000 individuals](#), the vast majority of whom are Palestinian.

Questions over links of the UNRWA to any militancy has led to the rise of Israeli and international [watch groups](#) that document the social media activity of the organization's large Palestinian staff.

In 2018, the Trump administration paused its [US\\$60 million contribution to the UNRWA](#). Trump claimed the pause would create political pressure for Palestinians to negotiate. President Joe Biden restarted U.S. contributions to the UNRWA in 2021.

While other major donors restored funding to the UNRWA after the conclusion of the investigation in April, the U.S. [has yet](#) to do so.

'An unmitigated disaster'

Israel's ban of the UNRWA will leave already starving Palestinians without a lifeline. U.N. Secretary General António Guterres [said banning the UNRWA](#) "would be a catastrophe in what is already an unmitigated disaster." The foreign ministers of Canada, Australia, France, Germany, Japan, South Korea and the U.K. issued a [joint statement](#) arguing that the ban would have "devastating consequences on an already critical and rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation, particularly in northern Gaza."

Reports have emerged of [Israeli plans](#) for private security contractors to take over aid distribution in Gaza through dystopian "gated communities," which would in effect be internment camps. This would be a troubling move. In contrast to the UNRWA, private contractors have little experience delivering aid and are not dedicated to the humanitarian principles of [neutrality, impartiality or independence](#).

However, the Knesset's explicit ban could, inadvertently, force the United States to suspend weapons transfers to Israel. [U.S. law requires](#) that it stop weapons transfers to any country that obstructs the delivery of U.S. humanitarian aid. And the U.S. pause on funding for the UNRWA was only meant to be temporary.

The UNRWA is the main conduit for assistance into Gaza, and the Knesset's ban makes explicit that the Israeli government is preventing aid delivery, making it harder for Washington to ignore. Before the bill passed, U.S. State Department Spokesperson Matt Miller [warned that](#) "passage of the legislation could have implications under U.S. law and U.S. policy."

At the same time, two U.S. government agencies [previously alerted](#) the Biden administration that Israel was obstructing aid into Gaza, yet weapons transfers have continued unabated.

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[Nicholas R. Micinski](#), Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs, [University of Maine](#) et [Kelsey Norman](#), Fellow for the Middle East, Baker Institute for Public Policy, [Rice University](#)

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- [Nicholas R. Micinski](#), [University of Maine](#) et [Kelsey Norman](#), [Rice University](#)
- Dr. Nicholas R. Micinski is Libra Assistant Professor of Political Science and International Affairs at the University of Maine. His research focuses on global governance, particularly how states and international organizations respond to refugees, migration, climate change, and peacebuilding. Micinski has published two books: *Delegating Responsibility: International Cooperation on Migration in the European Union* (University of Michigan Press, 2022) and *UN Global Compacts: Governing Migrants and Refugees* (Routledge, 2021). Previously, Micinski was postdoctoral fellow at Université Laval, ISA James N. Rosenau Postdoctoral Fellow, and visiting researcher at the Center for the Study of Europe, Boston University.
- Kelsey Norman. I am a Fellow for the Middle East and Director of the Women's Rights, Human Rights and Refugees program at Rice University's Baker Institute for Public Policy. My book, 'Reluctant Reception: Refugees, Migration and Governance in the Middle East and North Africa,' was published by Cambridge University Press in 2021.
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