

Israel's UNRWA Shutdown Will Fuel Chaos in Gaza, West Bank When Stability Is Needed

Wednesday 29 January 2025, by [ROZOVSKY Liza](#) (Date first published: 29 January 2025).

Israeli authorities remain unsure how to enforce laws against UNRWA, with legal hurdles ahead. While accusations stem from its role in Palestinian society, Netanyahu is blocking globally backed efforts to transfer its duties to the Palestinian Authority

A Palestinian boy carries an aid box provided by UNRWA, in Khan Yunis in the southern Gaza Strip, last week. Credit: Hatem Khaled/Reuters

Cooperation between Israel and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East has become a heated topic in the corridors of both the Knesset and the UN in recent days.

On Thursday, [laws prohibiting UNRWA activity](#) in Israel, [the West Bank](#) and [the Gaza Strip](#) will come into effect, along with a prohibition on maintaining any relationship between the agency and Israeli state authorities.

Apart from [issuing repeated statements](#) against the new legislations, the international community and the countries that fund the agency have no effective means for preventing the move.

A UNRWA Clinique in East Jerusalem, earlier this week. Credit: Sinan Abu Mayzer/Reuters

In the coming days, around 25 international employees of the agency in the West Bank [and East Jerusalem](#) will depart Israel after their visas expire. Israel is determined not to allow new UNRWA employees to enter the Gaza Strip, but those still present there have no intention of leaving and plan to continue their work for as long as possible.

UNRWA has also announced that it doesn't intend to evacuate its premises in East Jerusalem, despite an explicit demand by Israel that received unequivocal backing from the United States on Tuesday.

However, in Israel, there's still no clear understanding of how the new laws will be enforced. In a session of the Knesset Finance Committee earlier this week, it became apparent that officials from the Bank of Israel were unable to confirm whether the obligation to sever ties with UNRWA also applies to the banks.

Philippe Lazzarini, center, Commissioner-General of UNRWA, during a UN Security Council meeting at UN headquarters in New York, on Tuesday. Credit: AFP/Yuki Iwamura

The issue is expected to be discussed by the attorney general, and the prevailing assumption is that, as far as the new legislations are concerned, banks won't be considered "state authorities." UNRWA,

however, claims that Israel's Bank Leumi has already frozen \$2.8 million that belong to the agency.

It's unclear whether and how the state will address UNRWA's refusal to evacuate its premises in East Jerusalem, and the issue may ultimately be resolved by the High Court of Justice.

If this happens, a legal dilemma will arise: Is the court, which is undoubtedly a state authority, qualified to deliberate on matters related to UNRWA, with which it is prohibited from engaging under the new laws?

Absurdity also hovers over far more basic aspects of the cooperation between state authorities and UNRWA. The IDF declined to respond on Tuesday, just over 24 hours before the laws come into effect, to the question whether they'd cooperate with UNRWA in cases of danger to human lives - for example, when evacuation is needed due to [Israeli military actions in the West Bank or Gaza](#).

A Palestinian woman carries an aid box provided by UNRWA in Khan Yunis, last week. Credit: Hatem Khaled/Reuters

The Israeli contention is that UNRWA's contribution to the humanitarian effort in Gaza isn't as large as they are claiming at the UN, where they are consistently presenting numbers to the effect that UNRWA is actually feeding at least half of Gaza's population.

Israeli officials, however, aren't denying UNRWA's critical role in health and education in Gaza and the West Bank.

Israel is claiming that it won't be difficult to replace UNRWA by means of other UN subsidiaries, and the opposition to this at the top levels of the organization stems from political and anti-Israel considerations.

UN officials claim, however, that UNRWA's unique mandate, which enables them inter alia to employ scores of descendants of Palestinian refugees, is irreplaceable, and certainly not by executive order.

To alter long-standing arrangements and replace UNRWA, [which was founded in 1949](#), a completely new resolution from the General Assembly would be required. It seems that neither Israel nor the UN are expected to retreat from their positions in the near future.

Israel's main argument against the agency is that its activity "was contaminated by terror." On the other hand, UNRWA claims that apart from some 10 staff members - about whose participation in the October 7 massacre Israel has presented proof and who've been fired from the agency or were killed - it hasn't had sufficient evidence to prove that dozens more workers, whose names Israel has presented the agency, are connected to Hamas.

UNRWA officials said that they are continuing to [investigate complaints about additional workers](#).

However, the accusations against UNRWA are directly connected to its major role in Palestinian society and its administration - both in Gaza and in the West Bank. The agency, which is the second-largest employer in both regions and which has been playing state-like roles for decades, has become a telling image of Palestinian society.

The fabric of its workforce, therefore, reflects the identification of a considerable segment of the Palestinian population with Hamas.

According to many in the international community and the agency itself, the possibility of entirely

detaching UNRWA from Hamas will only be possible upon transfer of its roles to a Palestinian state, or at least to the Palestinian Authority, the so-called state down the road. And that's exactly the solution that Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's government is doing everything it possibly can to foil.

From a historical-diplomatic perspective, the meaning for Israel of dismantling UNRWA is purportedly the removal of the Palestinian refugee issue - the very topic for which the organization was established - from the agenda.

This issue, however, isn't expected to be resolved without the establishment of a Palestinian State. Therefore, the move to shut down UNRWA is a kind of "dummy foil," and is expected only to exacerbate the chaos in the West Bank and Gaza, precisely at a time of dramatic historical processes that Israel desperately needs for quiet and stability - however fragile those might be.

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P.S.

• Haaretz. Jan 29, 2025 4:54 pm IST:
<https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/2025-01-29/ty-article/.premium/israels-unrwa-shutdown-will-fuel-chaos-in-gaza-west-bank-when-stability-is-needed/00000194-b1e0-d917-a9ff-f5e876ec0000>