

UNRWA

United Nations Relief and Works Agency
(for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East)

Ref. Wikipedia – 10-2-24

10-2-24

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East^[a] (UNRWA,

- A UN agency that supports the relief and human development of Palestinian refugees
- Encompasses Palestinians who fled or were expelled during the 1948 Israel-Arab war and subsequent conflicts, as well as their descendants and legally adopted children
- As of 2019, more than 5.6 million Palestinians are registered with UNRWA as refugees.

Establishment of UNRWA

- UNRWA was established in December 1949 by the UN General Assembly (UNGA)
- The resolution was adopted and passed unopposed, supported by Israel and the Arab states, with only the Soviet bloc and South Africa abstaining.
- It also provided relief to Jewish and Arab Palestine refugees inside the State of Israel until the Israeli government took over responsibility for them in 1952
- As a subsidiary body of the UNGA, UNRWA's mandate is subject to periodic renewal every three years, currently until 30 June 2026

Operations

- **UNRWA employs over 30,000 people, mostly Palestinian refugees, and some internationals**
- **Its mandate has broadened to include providing education, health care, and social services**
- **UNRWA operates in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank (including East Jerusalem)**
- **Aid for Palestinian refugees outside these five areas is provided by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), established in 1950 as the main agency to aid all other refugees worldwide.^[13]**

Uniqueness

- **UNRWA is the only UN agency dedicated to helping refugees from a specific region or conflict.**
- **Unlike UNRWA, UNHCR has a specific mandate to assist refugees in eliminating their refugee status by local integration in the current country, resettlement in a third country or repatriation when possible.**

Incidents

- In recent decades, UNRWA has been involved in controversial incidents connected to its relationship with Hamas, and textbook content.
- The most recent controversy over the alleged involvement of 12 of its employees in the October 7 attacks
- Prompted lay-offs, an investigation, and the temporary suspension of funding by several major donor countries, including the US, Germany, Canada, Italy, UK, Netherlands, Switzerland, Australia, Sweden, Switzerland and France

Mandate

- The initial scope of its work was "direct relief and works programs" to Palestine refugees, in order to "prevent conditions of starvation and distress... and to further conditions of peace and stability".[\[25\]](#)
- UNRWA's mandate was soon expanded in 1950 which instructed the agency to "establish a reintegration fund which shall be utilized ... for the permanent re-establishment of refugees and their removal from relief".
- A subsequent resolution, dated 26 January 1952, allocated four times as much funding on reintegration than on relief, requesting UNRWA to otherwise continue providing programs for health care, education, and general welfare.[\[21\]](#)

UNRWA definition of a refugee

- UNRWA has developed its own working definition of "refugee" to allow it to provide humanitarian assistance. Its definition does not cover final status.^[26]
- Palestine refugees are "persons whose regular place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict."

Six-day War

- The Six-Day War of 1967 generated a new wave of Palestinian refugees who could not be included in the original UNRWA definition.
- While focused on Palestine refugees, it also extends to persons displaced by "the 1967 and subsequent hostilities" and, occasionally, to a broader cross-section of the local community.
- Several categories of persons have long been registered as eligible to receive UNRWA services although not "Palestine refugees". [\[27\]](#)

Organization and mandate

- Unlike other UN agencies, such as the WHO or the Office of the UNHCR, it lacks a constitution or statute
- The General Assembly passes a series of resolutions annually that address UNRWA's responsibilities, functions, and budget, as it is technically a temporary organization,^[29]

Refugee Camps

- UNRWA provides facilities in 59 recognized [refugee camps](#) in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, and in other areas where large numbers of registered Palestine refugees live outside of recognized camps.
- For a camp to be recognized by UNRWA, there must be an agreement between the host government and UNRWA governing the use of the camp.
- UNRWA does not itself run camps, has no police powers or administrative role, but simply provides services in the camp.
- Refugee camps, which developed from [tent cities](#) to dense urban dwellings similar to their urban surroundings, house around one-third of all registered Palestine refugees. [\[citation needed\]](#)

Education programme

- **Education is UNRWA's largest area of activity, accounting for more than half its regular budget and the majority of its staff¹**
- **It operates one of the largest school systems in the Middle East, spanning 711 elementary and preparatory schools, eight vocational and technical schools, and two teacher training institutes**

Curriculum

- **UNRWA schools follow the curriculum of their host countries.**
- **This allows UNRWA pupils to progress to further education or employment holding locally recognised qualifications and complies with the sovereignty requirements of countries hosting refugees.**
- **Wherever possible, UNRWA students take national exams conducted by the host governments.**

Aid Supplied

- UNRWA provides food aid, cash assistance, and help with shelter repairs to these families.
- In addition, children from special hardship case families are given preferential access to the Agency's vocational training centres, while women in such families are encouraged to join UNRWA's women's programme centres.
- UNRWA provides them with technical and small sums of targeted financial assistance, but many have formed links of their own with local and international NGOs.

Health program

- Basic health needs are met through a network of primary care clinics, providing access to secondary treatment in hospitals, food aid to vulnerable groups, and environmental health in refugee camps.
- Key figures for 2014 are:
 - 139 primary health facilities based in or near UNRWA settlements/camps
 - 3,107 health staff
 - 3,134,732 refugees accessing health services
 - 9,290,197 annual patient visits
- The health of Palestine refugees has long resembled that of many populations in the transition from developing world to developed world status.
- However, there is now a demographic transition.

Family Health Team

- The Family Health Team (FHT) approach, based on the WHO-indicated values of primary health care, in our primary health facilities (PHFs).
- The FHT offers comprehensive primary health care services based on wholistic care of the entire family, emphasizing long-term provider-patient relationships and ensuring person-centeredness, comprehensiveness, and continuity.
- Moreover, the FHT helps address intersectional issues that impact health, such as diet and physical activity, education, gender-based violence, child protection, poverty, and community development.

Medical services

- Medical services include outpatient care, dental treatment, and rehabilitation for the physically disabled.
- Maternal and child healthcare (MCH) is a priority for UNRWA's health program.
- School health teams and camp medical officers visit UNRWA schools
- All UNRWA clinics offer family planning services with counselling
- Agency clinics also supervise the provision of food aid to nursing and pregnant mothers who need it, and six clinics in the Gaza Strip have their own maternity units.

Trends in Health in Gaza

- Infant mortality rates have for some time been lower among refugees than the WHO benchmark for the developing world.
- UNRWA provides refugees with assistance in meeting the costs of hospitalisation either by partially reimbursing them, or by negotiating contracts with government, NGOs, and private hospitals.
- UNRWA's environmental health services program "controls the quality of drinking water, provides sanitation, and carries out vector and rodent control in refugee camps, thus reducing the risk of epidemics."

- **In 2007, Israel expressed its continued support for UNRWA, noting that despite "concerns regarding the politicization" of the agency, the country supports its humanitarian mission.^[85]**
- **On 17 January 2024, US State Department Spokesperson rejected calls to defund UNRWA,**

Controversies about the involvement of UNRWA with HAMAS

The Guardian 22-2-24

- “A US intelligence assessment of Israel’s claims that UN aid agency staff members participated in the Hamas attack on 7 October said some of the accusations were credible, though could not be independently verified, while also casting doubt on claims of wider links to militant groups.”
- Earlier this year, Israel accused 12 employees of UNRWA of participating in the 7 October attacks alongside Hamas. It also said 10% of all UNRWA workers were affiliated with Hamas.”

End