

UNRWA briefing

Update 30th January 2025: UNRWA has ceased operations in East Jerusalem following laws passed by the Israeli Knesset in October 2024 banning UNRWA for operating inside Israeli territory, and banning any Israeli state cooperation with the agency, curtailing UNRWA's operations in Gaza and the West Bank. The ban came into effect in January 2025 following a decision by the High Court of Justice in Israel to reject injunction requests against the two laws.

The court accepted the Israeli government's response to the injunction requests which notified the court that the Jerusalem Ministry had completed preparations to replace UNRWA activities in East Jerusalem. UNRWA provided education, health and sanitation services particularly in the Shuafat Refugee Camp in East Jerusalem, a part of the city occupied by Israel in 1967 and formally annexed in 1980, but not internationally recognised.

Civil society organisations have warned that the preparations made by the Jerusalem municipality are insufficient and would leave civilians lacking access to basic services.

Following allegations and ongoing investigations into the involvement of some UNRWA employees in the October 7th Hamas massacre, Israeli Members of Knesset voted on 28th October 2024 by 92-10 to approve **a law barring UNRWA from operating in Israeli territory**, and also passed another law by 87-9 to **ban state authorities from having any contact with UNRWA**, restricting UNRWA's activities in Gaza and the West Bank.

Without entrance permits issued by Israeli authorities, or coordination with the IDF, **UNRWA will find it nearly impossible to continue to operate in Gaza or the West Bank**. Due to Israeli military control of access to Gaza via Egypt, UNRWA will not be able to enter Gaza from the Egyptian border either. The legislation will also likely lead to the closure of UNRWA's headquarters in East Jerusalem, which was annexed by Israel in 1967.

Key points to consider:

- There is a strong case for reform and change within UNRWA, allegations of staff involvement in terrorism must be taken seriously and appropriate action must be taken to tackle this issue and prevent further incidents.
- In spite of these allegations against individuals, it **remains the case that UNRWA is currently the largest provider of aid in Gaza and has a well-established infrastructure for delivering essential services**, including education and healthcare.
- **Dismantling UNRWA abruptly could destabilize the region even further and worsen the humanitarian situation** in Gaza.
- The ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza is the worst in the history of the conflict, and the international community cannot allow for further destabilisation and human suffering by dismantling UNRWA.

- This is not the first time Israel has come under scrutiny for not allowing sufficient aid to enter Gaza since the start of the war.
 - o In October 2024, a letter was sent from US secretary of State Anthony Blinken and the defence secretary, Lloyd Austin, pressing the Netanyahu government to ease humanitarian suffering in the territory by lifting restrictions on the entry of assistance within 30 days or face unspecified policy “implications”.
- The United Kingdom must continue its support for UNRWA and pressure the Israeli government to allow aid into Gaza – the aid provided is lifesaving and must be non-negotiable. **UNRWA is the best placed organisation to provide this aid, and the UK must put clear pressure on the Israeli government to allow its continued operation.**

Background on UNRWA’s Role, Challenges, and Recent Investigations

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established in 1949 by the UN General Assembly to provide relief to Palestinian refugees after the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. It now covers 5.9 million individuals in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. UNRWA is not a peacekeeping entity; it is a social and humanitarian agency focusing on basic services like education, healthcare, and infrastructure, especially within recognised refugee camps. Crucially, UNRWA provides emergency humanitarian aid during conflicts, particularly in Gaza.

UNRWA’s budget primarily relies on voluntary contributions from states, with the United States as the leading donor in 2023, providing \$422 million. Donors, including the United Kingdom, paused their contributions in early 2024 due to growing concerns over allegations related to UNRWA’s neutrality and possible affiliations with Hamas, affecting UNRWA’s financial stability.

In July 2024, the British Foreign Secretary David Lammy announced that the UK would restart funding to UNRWA in order to ensure aid is delivered to people in Gaza.

Allegations and Controversies Surrounding UNRWA since October 7th 2023

Long-standing concerns include accusations of Hamas influence within UNRWA. Given its extensive Gaza operations and predominantly local staff, UNRWA is seen by some as vulnerable to Hamas infiltration. Some degree of engagement with Hamas would likely have been necessary for the provisions of UNRWA’s services in Gaza, as Hamas is the organisation in charge of Gaza’s infrastructure.

Post-October 7th 2023, additional allegations arose, including reports of UNRWA facilities being used by Hamas for weapon storage or launching sites, along with serious allegations of certain staff members’ involvement in attacks against Israeli civilians. These accusations led to further scrutiny and a pause in funding by some donors.

Investigations and Their Findings

Two major investigations were conducted in response to these concerns:

1. **The OIOS Investigation:** Initiated by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, this investigation focused on specific allegations of staff involvement in the October 7, 2023 attacks. The investigation examined claims that 19 UNRWA staff members participated in or supported armed attacks. By August 2024, findings revealed insufficient evidence in ten cases, while nine cases resulted in terminations due to probable involvement in hostilities.
3. **The Colonna Report:** This independent review, led by Catherine Colonna, assessed UNRWA's adherence to neutrality. The Colonna Report did not investigate individual allegations but provided recommendations to strengthen UNRWA's oversight mechanisms. It suggested reforms in staff vetting, especially for neutrality, enhanced transparency with donors, improved internal oversight, and stricter educational content review. The report also recommended stronger UNRWA engagement with Israel and host countries to address facility misuse by militants, such as the possible use of UNRWA sites for weapon storage.