

Destroying UNRWA Disastrous, Destabilising for the Entire Region

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The United States has long called itself the "indispensable nation" to justify its claim to global leadership. Through its inane policies and destructive actions, the US has lost both international regard and support from world leaders who expected better of the world's hyperpower. The latest outrage is the Biden administration's decision to cut existential funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) because a dozen of its 13,000 employees in Gaza were allegedly involved in the December 7th Hamas surprise attack on Israel.

The Israel-blinded Biden administration does not comprehend that UNRWA is the "indispensable organisation" which provides food, shelter, health care, education and 30,000 jobs for the 5.7 million UNRWA-registered Palestinian refugees in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. UNRWA is and always was a quasi state-within-a-state serving a stateless people. What would happen to these survivors of Israel's 1948 and 1967 wars and their descendants if there was no UNRWA?

The agency was created in 1949 to care for the 750,000 Palestinians driven from their homes in villages and towns during that war. If Israel had heeded and implemented UN General Assembly resolution 194, paragraph 11, and allowed the Palestinians to return home and paid them compensation for their losses, there would have been no UNRWA and no permanent stateless Palestinian refugee population living in limbo for 75 years until the world decides what to do with them.

Israel's main objection to UNRWA is its registration as refugees the descendants of Palestinians driven from their homes in 1948. This has perpetuated "refugeedom" in the Palestinian camps in East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Gaza and in host countries. Many live in

camps among fellow villagers and townspeople from Palestine. This fosters a sense of community and solidarity which Israel seeks to erase.

In response to statelessness, young Palestinians have formed resistance groups which since the 1950s have mounted attacks on Israel and in the 1960s hijacked civilian aircraft. Resistance put Palestine back on the world map and reclaimed the stolen Palestinian identity.

The powers-that-be have promised a “two state solution” to the Palestinian predicament by founding a Palestinian state alongside Israel but have never made a serious effort to deliver on this promise which has been revived in recent months. It is too late. Israel says there can be no Palestinian state between the Mediterranean and Jordan River.

The two-state solution has become a mirage which has faded. Without serious US and international opposition and sanctions, Israel has illegally planted 750,000 colonists in occupied East Jerusalem and the West Bank, the areas which would make up 98-99 per cent of a Palestinian state while Gaza would contribute only one or two per cent.

In the absence of a two-state solution, UNRWA has become all-the-more indispensable for stateless Palestinians. Paradoxically, Israel has always been critical of UNRWA and eager to see its relief and works infrastructure dismantled and its 30,000 employees out of jobs. I say, paradoxically, for without UNRWA, Israel would have to assume responsibility for the lives and welfare of Palestinian refugees in all the areas it occupied in 1967 although Israel, as occupying power, has refused to provide for Palestinians who dwell there but are not refugees.

Over the decades, Israel has accused UNRWA of inciting young Palestinians through the textbooks in agency schools. This can be achieved only by leaving out the history of Palestine during the 20th and 21st centuries, which has been 123 years of colonisation, displacement and warfare. In East Jerusalem, Israel has tried and failed to impose Israeli approved textbooks and the Israeli curriculum.

While the European Union and various countries have joined Israel in mounting the textbook charge, UNRWA’s accusers do not investigate the incitement of Palestinian children by Israeli soldiers and settlers who harass them as they walk to school or play football in neighbourhood streets. The situation became so ugly in Khalil (Hebron) in the West Bank that the Temporary International Presence in Hebron was deployed to protect Palestinian children in that city between 1994 and 2019. No UNRWA detractors mention the actions of Israeli troops who in the West bank and East Jerusalem — as testified by Israeli soldiers in *Breaking the Silence* — crash into Palestinian homes at the middle of the night, beat and arrest males, or confine families in single rooms while taking over entire floors as observation posts.

UNRWA schools have also been accused by Israel of hiding weapons used to resist Israeli incursions into Gaza and, since it took control of Gaza, collaborating with Hamas. On the latter charge, UNRWA has had no choice but to have and maintain contacts with the Hamas-run administration in Gaza.

Although Hamas is Israel’s current enemy, since the First Intifada (1987-1993), successive Israeli governments had fostered the growth of Hamas with the objective of undermining Fatah which led the resistance during the initial uprising and the Second Intifada

(2000-2005). Israel relished the rift between Fatah and Hamas which drove Fatah's security agents from Gaza in 2007 and assumed control of the narrow coastal strip. Israel switched to the Fateh-dominated Palestinian Authority in 1993 following the signing of the Oslo accords and discouraged Palestinian reunification, splitting Gaza from the West Bank. Today, Israel is reaping the harvest of its wrong-headed policies. Destroying UNRWA would be disastrous and destabilising for the entire region.

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Featured image: Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) holds press conference in Jerusalem on October 27, 2023 [Mostafa Alkharouf/Anadolu Agency]

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