

‘Without UNRWA We Have Nothing’: Palestinian Refugees Speak Out Against US Aid Cuts

By [Jaclynn Ashly](#)

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Featured image: Abbas Thaher (Photo: Jaclynn Ashly)

Palestinians in Bethlehem’s Aida refugee camp have expressed their mounting anxiety over a US decision to slash funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

Earlier this month, the US State Department informed UNRWA that it would be [withholding over \\$100 million from the organization](#). Heather Nauert, the department’s spokesperson, said that the funds “will be held for future consideration. It’s money that’s being frozen at this time.” The US wants to “see some revisions made in how UNRWA operates,” she said.

She added that the decision was “not aimed at punishing anyone.”

Palestinians in Aida refugee camp disagree, telling [Mondoweiss](#) that the cuts are a continuation of US policies aimed at strangling the lifeline of Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA was established in 1949 to provide services to some 750,000 Palestinians expelled from their homes and lands during Israel’s creation in 1948.

The UNRWA refugee status is passed down to children via their fathers; the number of Palestinian refugees under UNRWA’s responsibility is now more than five million — all of whom are scattered across Syria, Lebanon, Jordan, the occupied West Bank and the besieged Gaza Strip.

‘Erosion of services’

Aida refugee camp is located adjacent to Israel’s separation wall and an Israeli military tower in northern Bethlehem city. On the roof of some homes, an illegal Israeli settlement can be seen beyond the cement wall that snakes around the camp.

The camp is the site of frequent Israeli military raids and a [recent study](#) conducted by UC Berkeley School of Law concluded that the camp was the most tear-gassed area in the world.

The some 3,150 residents of Aida are dependent on UNRWA to provide food and cash programs to vulnerable refugees, school and healthcare.



Sajida Allan (image on the right), a 24-year-old who volunteers at the Aida-based NGO al-Rowwad, told *Mondoweiss* that

“we already face so many hardships in the camp. Cutting this aid will only make our lives more difficult.”

Chris Gunness, UNRWA’s spokesperson, said that owing to US cuts the agency is facing the “worst financial crisis in its 70-year history” with a \$440 million deficit — at least \$250 million of which was expected to originate from the US. The agency has reportedly begun [laying off](#) dozens of its workers since the US announcement.

Camp residents noted that concern over the future of UNRWA services has been swelling years before these most recent cuts.

According to residents, for the past decade UNRWA services have been steadily reduced. UNRWA’s shrinking budget coupled with austerity measures has shifted some of the financial burdens on Palestinian refugee families.

Gunness told *Mondoweiss* that UNRWA has experienced a “slow erosion of its services” owing to a prolonged financial crisis.

He said that UNRWA’s teachers and doctors are “working against all odds because the infrastructure that supports them is crumbling.”

Former construction worker Abbas Thaher, 67, remembers when UNRWA covered 100 percent of healthcare costs, school supplies and stationeries for Palestinian students at UNRWA schools, and even distributed free clothes to refugees twice a year.

Now, however, he says that UNRWA does not cover school expenses and clinics often lack various medications, forcing families to buy medicine and seek treatment outside UNRWA facilities. In 2016, UNRWA reformed their healthcare system to require refugees pay five to 20 percent of their secondary healthcare costs.

Thaher pays 4,000 shekels (\$1,172) a month on treatment for his ill wife. He says that UNRWA does not assist him with the costs.

“I’m not worried about losing UNRWA services,” Thaher said, frustrated.
“Because they barely provide any as it is.”

But at the same time, he acknowledged that Palestinians “need UNRWA just to have a basic life.”

‘UNRWA is all we have’



Camp resident Jaida Abu Srour (image on the left), 22, told *Mondoweiss* that UNRWA’s Cash for Work program is central for the livelihoods of Palestinian refugees. The program hires refugees on a temporary basis to provide them financial support.

According to Aida residents, even this program has been peeled back. Abu Srour's uncle suffers from health complications that prevent him from being employed. The Cash for Work program is often a lifeline for sick or disabled refugees who cannot find alternative employment.

"He has been unemployed for two years now. And he is not getting help from UNRWA," she said, adding that as services continue to be cut amid the West Bank's soaring unemployment rates refugees are becoming "desperate" to land temporary work with UNRWA.

Many residents fear that the program will be further scaled down owing to US funding cuts, which could leave scores of refugees without a livelihood, Abu Srour told Mondoweiss.

According to Gunness, 60,000 Palestinians are currently participating in UNRWA's Cash for Work program in the West Bank. Meanwhile, the agency provides food and cash programs to an additional 1.7 million Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East.

He added that "well over 95 percent" of UNRWA's some 30,000 employees are Palestinian refugees.

"When you start disturbing an institution that is so deeply-rooted in these communities the consequences are likely to be profound and unpredictable," Gunness said. "Who knows what kind of consequences this US reduction will have."

The US cuts to UNRWA came two weeks after Trump threatened to cut US aid to the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the wake of a US decision to officially recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital, prompting Palestinian leaders to boycott Trump's so-called "peace process."

"This is just a continuation of US policies that were happening before Trump," Allan explained to Mondoweiss. "They are recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital, threatening to cut funding to the PA and then slashing their support to UNRWA. These policies have a goal: squeeze us into a corner and make our lives so miserable that we just give up our rights."



Ahmad Abu Salem (image on the right), 59, owns a small shop in Aida camp. He says he is most concerned about the schooling and healthcare provided by UNRWA, noting that these are the most basic service provisions needed in the camps to prevent dangerous social consequences.

"UNRWA is all we have. We don't have any alternatives if they continue cutting services. Without UNRWA we have nothing," he said, adding that the PA is not financially capable of making up the gaps in services.

Abu Salem expressed fear that the slow collapse of UNRWA would create a vacuum of unemployment, prompting Palestinians to turn to crime to make ends meet.

“We would have no jobs and nowhere to go. If these cuts continue the situation here could explode,” he said.

Refugee Identity

For Palestinians in Aida camp, the most important aspect of UNRWA is its “confirmation of the refugee identity.”

“The camp itself is like my passport,” Taher told Mondoweiss. “It shows the world that I am a refugee and that I had a home I was expelled from.”

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for UNRWA to be [dismantled](#) and has alleged that the agency “incites” against Israel. He has [referred](#) to Palestinians expelled from their homes during Israel’s creation as “fictitious refugees.”

“When I call myself a refugee, people are sympathetic to me and my story,” Allan said. “But if they take that label away from us, it will be easier for Israel to paint us as terrorists, erase our history and dehumanize us.”

While residents noted that UNRWA does not directly help with fulfilling the Right of Return — upheld by [UN Resolution 194](#) which supports the return of Palestinian refugees to their homes in what is now Israel, its continued existence is crucial to maintaining the historical narrative of this displacement.

UNRWA is connected to the status of Palestinian refugees so much so that Allan believes the gradual reduction of the agency’s services represents “the slow erasing of the refugee identity.”

“The US and Israel want to force UNRWA to continue reducing their services to Palestinian refugees, so that we have to find services elsewhere,” Allan explained. “Once fewer and fewer refugees rely on the agency, they can more easily close it down. And with it, our dreams of returning home.”

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Jaclynn Ashly is a journalist based in Bethlehem, Palestine. You can find her on twitter @jaclynnashly.

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