

Ayat Hamdan*

The Israeli War Against UNRWA and Its Impact on Palestinian Refugees**

حرب إسرائيل على الأونروا وأثرها في اللاجئين الفلسطينيين

Abstract: When Israel accused twelve UNRWA employees of participating in Hamas's military operation on 7 October 2023, more than twenty states announced the suspension of aid to the agency. UNRWA responded by dismissing 9 of the accused employees and opening an investigation, despite this measure violating its internal policy. The funding cuts to UNRWA affect about 6 million refugees, among them 1.7 million Palestinian refugees in the Gaza Strip and an additional 500,000 Palestinians without refugee status who benefit from UNRWA infrastructure and services. This paper elucidates the reasons for Israeli incitement against UNRWA and provides possible scenarios for the agency's future operations and the implications for Palestinian refugees. It calls for framing the Palestinian refugee issue and UNRWA in explicitly political terms, rather than solely humanitarian ones.

Keywords: UNRWA; Palestinian Refugees; Hamas; Aid Infrastructure.

ملخص: بعد اتهام إسرائيل 12 موظفًا في وكالة الأمم المتحدة لإغاثة وتشغيل اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الشرق الأدنى «الأونروا» بالمشاركة في العملية العسكرية التي نفذتها حركة المقاومة الإسلامية «حماس»، في 7 تشرين الأول/أكتوبر 2023، أعلنت أكثر من عشرين دولة تعليق مساعداتها للوكالة. وردّت الأونروا على هذه الاتهامات بفصل تسعة من الموظفين المتهمين، وفتح تحقيق في الأمر، على الرغم من أنّ هذا الإجراء يخالف سياستها الداخلية من الناحية العملية. سيؤثر تقليص تمويل الأونروا في نحو ستة ملايين لاجئ في أماكن تفويضها، منهم 1.7 مليون لاجئ فلسطيني في غزة، إضافة إلى 500 ألف فلسطيني يستفيد العديد منهم من خدمات الوكالة وبنيتها التحتية. تحاول هذه الورقة استجلاء أسباب التحريض الإسرائيلي على الأونروا، والسيناريوهات الممكنة بشأن مستقبل عمل الوكالة، وأثرها في اللاجئين الفلسطينيين، وتدعو إلى تأطير قضية اللاجئين الفلسطينيين والأونروا من خلال مصطلحات سياسية محدّدة، وليس بمصطلحات إنسانية فحسب.

كلمات مفتاحية: الأونروا؛ اللاجئين الفلسطينيين؛ حماس؛ البنية الأساسية للمعونات.

* Researcher, Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies.

Email: ayat.hamdan@dohainstitute.org

** This article was originally published in Arabic on: Ayat Hamdan, "al-Harb 'alā al-Unūrā wa-Muḥāwalāt Inḥā' Qadiyyat al-Lāji'īn," *Policy Paper*, Institute for Palestine Studies, 18 March 2024, accessed on 6/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3ktmfa8u>

UNRWA Funding

The UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established in late 1949 with a temporary mandate,¹ renewable every three years.² It operates in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, where about 6 million Palestinian refugees reside, providing education, health care, humanitarian assistance, and social services.³ Its mandate is limited to humanitarian relief and, unlike other cases overseen by the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), does not include finding a political solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees. However, it does have a political aim, as it is tasked with working with governments to devise temporary measures and to provide assistance and relief to Palestinian refugees “pending a just solution” to the Palestinian refugee question.⁴ UNRWA faced criticism from both Palestinians and host countries upon its establishment, as it was seen as an attempt to integrate refugees into host societies instead of promoting the right of return. UNRWA donors and Israelis have also criticized the agency for politicizing the Palestinian cause, interfering in the construction of the Palestinian identity, and upholding the right of return.⁵

UNRWA’s annual budget of \$1.17 billion⁶ is funded by UN Member States on a voluntary basis. As a result of the failure of donors to honour their pledges, the agency was operating on a deficit of \$75 million even before the recent aggression on the Gaza Strip.⁷ While donors have prioritized maintaining UNRWA as a stabilizing factor in the region and a vehicle for continued humanitarian support for refugees without reaching a just and lasting political solution based on UN resolutions,⁸ Conditional funding has also been weaponized to exercise pressure on the agency. In 2021, the European Parliament⁹ adopted a resolution withholding €20 million (\$22 million) in aid to UNRWA aimed at forcing it to make immediate changes to Palestinian textbooks to ensure that they did not contain anti-Israeli material and that they promoted the two-state solution.¹⁰ In 2018, the Trump administration suspended \$60 million in funds to pressure the Palestinians to negotiate and accept the so-called “deal of the century”.¹¹

¹ Its current mandate is valid until 30 June 2026.

² “General Assembly Adopts 33 Resolutions Recommended by Its Fourth Committee, Including Renewal of UNRWA Mandate until 30 June 2026: Texts on Space, Information, Non-Self-Governing Territories Also Adopted,” *United Nations*, 12/12/2022, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/yej84zee>

Israel, the United States, Canada, the Marshall Islands, and Micronesia voted against the resolution.

³ “Where We Work,” *UNRWA*, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/fk7zahpb>.

⁴ “Resolution 302,” *UNRWA*, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2yjs5e23> The responsibility for finding a political solution fell within the remit of the the Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), established by the UN in 1948, with the mission to seek a political solution to the Palestinian question and “facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation”. “UNCCP initially sought to resolve the problem of the refugees through return to Israel and compensation. When despite its efforts it was unable to advance the return of the refugees, it concentrated on collecting Palestinian property records with a view to facilitating restitution and compensation whenever this would become possible. Once the UNCCP had completed its meticulous work on these records, in 1964 it suspended its operations and has been effectively inoperative since”. Francesca Albanese & Lex Takkenberg, “UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: Protecting Refugee Rights While Structurally Addressing the Agency’s Financially Unsustainable Modus Operandi,” *Working Paper*, no. 138, *Refugee Studies Centre at University of Oxford*, 27 February 2023, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/368mstfz>

⁵ Anne Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2023).

⁶ “How We Are Funded,” *UNRWA*, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/v9khe733>

⁷ “al-Umam al-Muttaḥida Tuḥadhdir min Inhiyār Mālī Washik, li-l-Unūrwa wa-Tad’ū ilā Da’im Malāyīn al-Lāji’īn al-Filasṭīniyyīn,” *UN News*, 2/6/2023, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4zzaar9j>

⁸ Francesca Albanese, “Brussels International Conference on UNRWA: What really happened?,” *Arab Renaissance for Democracy and Development*, 30/11/2021, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2ftz3y9k>

⁹ “EU Makes UNRWA Aid Conditional on Textbook Changes,” *Independent Press*, 30/9/2021, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/ymxb3ch9>

¹⁰ “Making UNRWA Funds Conditional on the Content of Palestinian Schoolbooks,” *European Parliament*, 12/9/2023, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3wassnxt>

¹¹ Edward Wong, “U.S. To End Funding to U.N. Agency That Helps Palestinian Refugees,” *The New York Times*, 31/8/2018, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mtudapdy>

The Securitization of UNRWA

Since 7 October 2023, Israel's war on UNRWA has targeted the agency on three levels. First, Israel has physically destroyed its facilities, barred the entry of aid, and killed 160 UNRWA employees, in addition to displaced people taking refuge in its shelters and schools. Some 1.9 million displaced people are currently seeking shelter in or near one of UNRWA's 154 shelters, and 155 of the agency's facilities have been damaged.¹² This is not the first war in which Israel has targeted UNRWA facilities and killed displaced Palestinians seeking shelter there; similar attacks were observed in the wars of 2014 and 2021.

Second, UNRWA as an entity has been "securitized". Securitization here is defined as:

The discursive process through which an intersubjective understanding is constructed within a political community to treat something as an existential threat to a valued referent object, and to enable a call for urgent and exceptional measures to deal with the threat.

The claim of existential threat is typically used to justify some political action that would perhaps not be viewed as legitimate absent the threat. As Bezen Coşkun says, "The theory of securitisation underlined two intertwined logics, namely the claim about existential threats and the legitimisation of exceptional measures".¹³ In the past, Israeli accusations against UNRWA typically targeted its actions or programmes but did not threaten the agency's existence. However, the securitization of UNRWA, based on accusations that it is involved in military actions against Israel or acts as an arm of a political faction, makes it more vulnerable to attacks by the Israeli occupation. It puts the agency on the defensive, undermining its UN mandate and the role it has played over the past seven decades in preventing the plight of Palestinian refugees from being forgotten. Israel claims that UNRWA "perpetuates the refugee problem"¹⁴ and has "accused UNRWA staff of working for Hamas, in what represented pre-emptive justification for striking the agency's schools and facilities in the Gaza Strip, which house tens of thousands of displaced people, most of them children and women".

UNRWA is obligated to maintain neutrality, a pillar of humanitarian work, as dictated by its UN mandate, but it has long breached this principle in the service of two basic aims: to attract funding, as is the case with the framework agreement signed with the United States in 2021, and to provide reports on its staff to the states in which it operates, including Israel, as an occupying state. UNRWA provides Israel with a list of all its employees in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and its Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini meets nearly every month in Israel with Amir Weissbrod, the deputy director-general of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsible for relations with UN agencies.¹⁵ This fact alone demonstrates that allegations that UNRWA staff are involved in the resistance in the Gaza Strip are fabricated. Even if the accusations were proven true, it does not justify sweeping sanctions against an agency with 30,000 employees, including 12,000 in the Gaza Strip, which serves 6 million refugees. This is a form of collective punishment implemented by Israel and supported by its Western allies.

Third, Israel has weaponized humanitarian aid, deliberately crippling the operations of UNRWA as the largest relief organization in the Gaza Strip as a form of collective punishment. This tactic, pursued

¹² "UNRWA Situation Report #85 on the Situation in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, Including East Jerusalem," *UNRWA*, 4/3/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3bee4ew8>

¹³ Bezen Balamir Coşkun, *Analysing Desecuritisation* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011), p. 9.

¹⁴ Jacob Magid, "We Oppose Axing UNRWA Mid-War, Senior Israeli Official Says amid Funding Halt," *The Times of Israel*, 31/1/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/2hyb6vde>

¹⁵ Patrick Kingsley & Ronen Bergman, "The 8 Days That Roiled the U.N.'S Top Agency in Gaza," *The New York Times*, 3/2/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3xed2e4u>

since the war broke out,¹⁶ aims to ratchet up the pressure on the population to force their displacement. The collective punishment has been coupled with dehumanizing Israeli rhetoric that casts Palestinians as animals. On 9 October 2023, Israel announced that it was cutting off essential aid and supplies to the Gaza Strip. Israeli Minister of War Yoav Gallant declared: “We are imposing a complete siege on Gaza. There will be no electricity, no food, no water, no fuel... We are fighting human animals and we act accordingly”.¹⁷ Israel also linked the entry of aid into Gaza to the release of hostages, with Benjamin Netanyahu’s office announcing, “Israel will not allow any humanitarian aid from its territory to the Gaza Strip as long as our hostages are not returned”.¹⁸

Israel operates according to a logic of genocide and displacement, two tactics that work in tandem: Israel carries out genocide to displace Palestinians and displaces Palestinians for the purpose of genocide. Since 7 October, people have been displaced from the northern governorates and Gaza City. Some 250,000 Palestinians remain in these areas, beset by famine, killing, and the systematic destruction of infrastructure and hospitals.¹⁹ Overall, 75% of the population of the Gaza Strip (1.7 million people) has been displaced since the beginning of the aggression.²⁰ Displacement is part of the Israeli plan for the “day after” in the Gaza Strip. Articulating the underlying goal of this plan, the Israeli minister of finance stated, “If there are 100,000 or 200,000 Arabs in Gaza and not 2 million Arabs, the entire discussion on the day after will be totally different”.²¹

This is an ongoing process that proceeds systematically and deliberately from one place to another (northern, central, and southern Gaza) until the final objective is achieved: extermination, the total destruction of all aspects of life in the Gaza Strip, and the expulsion of the indigenous population.²² In addition to being physically blockaded, Palestinians’ choices are severely constrained: either death or displacement. Those who remain are killed (by weapons, starvation, or diseases), while those who leave are killed during the forced displacement.²³

In addition to displacement, starvation is another tool of incremental genocide, which Israel is inducing by barring the entry of aid to the north and severely restricting the aid allowed to reach the south. Less than 100 trucks per day enter the Gaza Strip. Under normal circumstances, Gaza requires 500 trucks per day, and this number has doubled in wartime. Some organizations estimate that 92% of the population of

¹⁶ Cutting food, water, and electricity to the Gaza Strip is not new. Israel has pursued the same policy in previous wars, and it is a key instrument of the blockade on the Strip. It is moreover tantamount to a war crime, according to various international institutions. See: “Israel/OPT: Israel Must Lift Illegal and Inhumane Blockade on Gaza as Power Plant Runs out of Fuel,” *Amnesty International*, 12/10/2023, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/46f4amcf>; “Mufawwad Huqūq al-Insān Yahuthth ‘alā Naz’ Fatīl al-Waḍ’ ‘al-Mutafajjir’ fī Isrā’īl wa-l-Ard al-Filasṭīniyya al-Muhtalla,” *UN News*, 10/10/2023, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3tJv1zU>; Sari Bashi, “Nowhere to Go in Gaza,” *Human Rights Watch*, 13/10/2023, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/46IciTM>. The disruption of food, water, and electricity is also a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and its additional protocols. Article 14 of Protocol II states, “Starvation of civilians as a method of combat is prohibited. It is therefore prohibited to attack, destroy, remove or render useless, for that purpose, objects indispensable to the survival of the civilian population, such as foodstuffs, agricultural areas for the production of foodstuffs, crops, livestock, drinking water installations and supplies and irrigation works”. See: “Protocol Additional to the Geneva Conventions of 12 August 1949, and Relating to the Protection of Victims of Non-International Armed Conflicts (Protocol II),” *United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner*, 8/6/1977, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3SaQ9Jr>

¹⁷ Sanjana Karanth, “Israeli Defence Minister Announces Siege On Gaza To Fight ‘Human Animals’,” *Huffington Post*, 9/10/2023, accessed on 6/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/p5e2uhyp>

¹⁸ “Israel Says It Won’t Block Humanitarian Aid Entering Gaza from Egypt,” *Al Jazeera*, 19/10/2023, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4a4OKdH>

¹⁹ “UNRWA Situation Report #93 On the Gaza Strip and The West Bank, Including East Jerusalem,” *UNRWA*, 22/3/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3TPDD2n>

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ Jessica Buxbaum, “For Israel’s Religious Right, Gaza Is a war of Conquest,” *The New Arab*, 11/1/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/4aicpXI>

²² This process is integral to settler colonialism in Palestine, which is based on the expulsion and extermination of the native inhabitants of historic Palestine. Today, we see this logic play out in Gaza in its most savage form. The ongoing genocide and ethnic cleansing in Palestine since the Nakba is a fundamental pillar of the Zionist project.

²³ The only ones to escape this closed loop are those who manage to leave the Gaza Strip. This option is available to the very few people who may be permitted to leave for the purpose of medical treatment or by paying exorbitant sums on the Egyptian side.

the Gaza Strip will reach catastrophic levels of hunger between March and July 2024.²⁴ As UNRWA is the largest institution providing food to the population of the Gaza Strip, the war on the agency is part of Israel's policy of genocide and displacement. "By preventing UNRWA to fulfill its mandate in Gaza, the clock will tick faster towards famine and many more will die of hunger, dehydration, and lack of shelter",²⁵ Philippe Lazzarini posted in March on the social media platform X, in response to Israel blocking UNRWA trucks' access to the northern Gaza Strip.

The New/Old Israeli Offensive

Israel's demand for the dismantlement of UNRWA as a prelude to the liquidation of the Palestinian refugee issue is not new. Netanyahu took advantage of Donald Trump's inauguration to the White House to press for the dissolution of the agency and its integration into the UNHCR in a meeting in 2017. After Trump's suspension of funding for UNRWA, Netanyahu reiterated his demand, saying: "UNRWA is an organization that perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem, and perpetuates also the narrative of the so-called right of return, whose goal is the elimination of Israel. For these reasons, UNRWA should be shut down".²⁶ During the current war, Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz posted on X, "We have been warning for years: UNRWA perpetuates the refugee issue, obstructs peace, and serves as a civilian arm of Hamas in Gaza".²⁷

Recently, Israel has exploited the current momentum and its support by Western powers to take down the agency and thereby quash the refugee issue once and for all. Israel's campaign also serves as retaliation against UNRWA for its submission of reports to the International Court of Justice, which relied on UNRWA documentation to reach its judgment that Israel is plausibly committing genocide. Netanyahu has made no secret of this: "The worst I can say is this, that many of the charges are false and unfounded, that were leveled against us in The Hague, were brought by UNRWA officials".²⁸

Moreover, the Israeli war on UNRWA seeks to discredit its reports, insinuating that they are written by Palestinians who are directly implicated in the events of 7 October. Israel's allegations against UNRWA staff were released the same day that the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ordered it to take preventive measures against genocide. Its drive to see UNRWA dismantled flies in the face of these measures.

The destruction of UNRWA would also serve Israel's goal of restoring its direct occupation and administration of the Gaza Strip, as the agency would be broken down into separate bodies controlled by Israel, aligned to its vision, and subordinate to its direct control. Netanyahu told a delegation of UN ambassadors: "I think it's time that the international community and the UN itself understand that UNRWA's mission has to end".²⁹ The Israeli Foreign Ministry, meanwhile, seeks to ensure that the agency "will not be part of the day after".³⁰ Proposals to replace the agency with the World Food Programme or the United States Agency for Development (USAID)³¹ must be read as an attempt to weaponize humanitarian aid by imposing political control and funding conditions on Palestinians to thwart their political aspirations. This

²⁴ "Imminent Famine in Northern Gaza is 'Entirely Man-made Disaster': Guterres," *UN News*, 18/3/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3Tuzfo8>

²⁵ Philippe Lazzarini, "Gaza: As of Today," X, 24/3/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://bit.ly/3PAaAh0>

²⁶ "Netanyahu Wants UNRWA Gradually Shut Down, Backs US Cuts," *The Times of Israel*, 7/1/2018, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/mr436266>

²⁷ Israel Katz, "Commending the US Government for Its Decision," X, 27/1/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/29wbp8xy>

²⁸ Tim Lister, Amir Tal & Ibrahim Dahman, "UN Agency for Palestinian Refugees Warns It May Have to Halt All Operations by End of Month," *CNN*, 1/2/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/4ezpz4xs>

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Jacob Magid et al., "Israel Wants UNRWA out of Gaza after Staffers Fired for Involvement in Oct. 7 Onslaught," *The Times of Israel*, 27/1/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/z44ryzzh>

³¹ Itamar Eichner, "Israel Considers Possible Replacements for UNRWA in Gaza," *Ynet*, 7/2/2024, accessed on 4/2/2024, at: <https://2u.pw/BDn7D21>

policy also functions as an instrument of genocide and strips Palestinian refugees of their rights. Israeli hostility to UNRWA stems fundamentally from the fact that the agency represents Palestinian refugees and is a symbol of their continued existence. Here, the position of the Israeli left is no different from the right. Einat Wilf, a former Labour Party member in the Knesset, reportedly stated that Palestinian refugees “should only be given aid on the condition that they sign a document disavowing their right of return”.³²

The Impact of Reduced Support for UNRWA and Future Prospects

The current hostility to and attempts to criminalize UNRWA, the lack of international and regional intervention to stop the war, and the failure of states to fulfil their financial pledges to the agency, could generate several scenarios. First, UNRWA may be dismantled. In this case, the burden of humanitarian assistance and relief would fall on Israel as the occupying power responsible for Palestinians.³³ If Israel does not meet its responsibility, the burden may also fall on the Palestinians, necessitating enormous financial resources. Countries hosting refugees would also confront additional responsibility. While the dissolution of the agency would not prejudice the legal status of Palestinian refugees,³⁴ it would eliminate the chief entity that provides relief and protection for refugees pending a political solution. The UN General Assembly is the only body authorized to terminate the agency’s mandate and legally dissolve it if a just and lasting solution for refugees is reached based on international law. However, concerns persist about attempts to dry up UNRWA funding, which could debilitate the agency and bring dissolution closer. The marginalization of the UNCCP is instructive in this respect. Israel’s claim that UNRWA perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem must be confronted head on. It should be emphasized that the responsibility lies with Israel, which does not allow Palestinian refugees to return to their homes pursuant to UN resolutions and is displacing more Palestinians in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Second, Funding for UNRWA may be subject to new conditions and regulatory mechanisms, which would violate the principle of neutrality in the provision of humanitarian assistance. Already some Western parties, such as the European Commission, Canada, and Sweden, have restored funding to UNRWA, with the condition that the agency fulfils its commitments to investigate any wrongdoing and implement reforms to strengthen neutrality protocols. This measure is intended to impose greater oversight on the agency.

Third, Arab states and some foreign countries may continue to provide minimal support to the agency, which will be reflected in the level of services provided by UNRWA, as well as the principle of differentiation between programmes and beneficiaries. Given the conditions in the Gaza Strip, it is vital to stop the war and prevent humanitarian assistance from being withheld as an act of collective punishment and orchestrated starvation. All legal and political means and pressures must be applied to force open the land crossings. The delivery of relief through airdrops and the temporary port is merely an attempt to prolong the crisis. The continued threat of forced displacement must be confronted, requiring humanitarian intervention and comprehensive reconstruction efforts to meet the needs of the Palestinians who remain steadfast in Gaza.

³² Riley Sparks, Hajar Harb & Omar Nabil Abdel Hamid, “Gaza In-Depth: Why Israel Wants to End UNRWA and What Its Closure Would Mean,” *The New Humanitarian*, 6/3/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/3whmx52f>

³³ Article 55 of the Fourth Geneva Convention states, “To the fullest extent of the means available to it, the Occupying Power has the duty of ensuring the food and medical supplies of the population; it should, in particular, bring in the necessary foodstuffs, medical stores and other articles if the resources of the occupied territory are inadequate”. *Convention (IV) Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in Time of War*, 12 August 1949, <https://tinyurl.com/yxhkn66u>

³⁴ “When crafting the post-war international refugee regime, the international community committed to deal with the question of the Palestinian refugee issue until it is ‘definitively settled in accordance with the relevant resolutions adopted by the General Assembly of the United Nations’ as reflected in art. 1D of the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees. The latter, in addition to article 7 (c) of the UNHCR Statute, recognizes a distribution of responsibilities among various UN agencies, primarily UNCCP and UNRWA and then UNHCR, in dealing with Palestinian refugees as internationally recognized refugees as of 1948”. Albanese & Takkenberg, p. 10.

Israel has systematically displaced Palestinians since the outset of the war, and the imminent invasion of Rafah raises the risk of further displacement. Through this campaign, Israel has deprived the Gaza Strip of the basic necessities for life and both demographically and physically changed the land, deliberately concentrating the population in the south in preparation for the military ground invasion, forcing Palestinians into densely populated, underserved areas. It has deployed starvation and collective punishment to compel them to leave Gaza and seek refuge in Sinai. Israel is currently promoting what it calls “voluntary migration” from the Strip, while promising to rebuild settlements and exert full security control over Gaza.³⁵ Israel’s plan is thus not limited to UNRWA but aims to create new realities on the ground to achieve its vision.

The Palestinian refugee issue and UNRWA must be framed in explicitly political terms, not solely in terms of humanitarian assistance and relief. Currently, the only focus is on the agency’s services. Although these are important, little attention is being paid to the political and legal implications of dismantling the agency and subordinating it to new oversight mechanisms, or Israel’s post-war plans to administer the Gaza Strip. The repercussions of this war will extend beyond Palestinian refugees in Gaza to encompass all 6 million Palestinian refugees, wherever they are, who are threatened by Israel’s attempt to eliminate the refugee issue and exclude them from any future political solution.

³⁵ Bethan McKernan, “Israeli Ministers Attend Conference Calling for ‘Voluntary Migration’ of Palestinians,” *The Guardian*, 29/1/2024, accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/y5bxwtjw>

References

- Albanese, Francesca & Lex Takkenberg. "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: Protecting Refugee Rights While Structurally Addressing the Agency's Financially Unsustainable Modus Operandi." *Working Paper*. no. 138. Refugee Studies Centre at University of Oxford. 27 February 2023. Accessed on 2/4/2024, at: <https://tinyurl.com/368mstfz>
- Coşkun, Bezen Balamir. *Analysing Desecuritisation*. Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2011.
- Irfan, Anne. *Refuge and Resistance*. Columbia: Columbia University Press, 2023.