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**UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY FOURTH
COMMITTEE (GA4)**

**REVIEW OF THE ACTIVITIES OF THE UNITED NATIONS
RELIEF AND WORKS AGENCY FOR PALESTINE
REFUGEES IN THE NEAR EAST (UNRWA)**

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“It is imperative that we keep this long-term vision alive. It starts by replacing anger and disillusionment with hope for a future in which both Palestinians and Israelis live side by side, in peace and security.”

Secretary-General’s remarks to the General Assembly Meeting on the Situation in the Middle East and Palestine, 20 May 2021

“The General Assembly Reaffirms the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people in Palestine, including: The right to self-determination without external interference; The right to national independence and sovereignty.”

General Assembly Resolution 3236 (XXIX), 22 November 1974

“Resolves that the [Palestinian] refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law of in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible”

General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), 11 December 1948

COMMITTEE BRIEF

Introduction

Within the UN System, the most controversial bodies are the Security and the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Created by General Assembly resolution 302 from its fourth session, UNRWA formally began operations on May 1, 1950. Since its founding, UNRWA's mandate has been criticized for a lack of specificity as well as the fact that although UNRWA is still designated as a "temporary" UN body, any end to UNRWA's work does not appear to be in sight. Criticisms of UNRWA are invariably combined with broader criticisms of political and security developments within the Palestinian territories of the West Bank and the Gaza Strip as well as in Palestinian refugee camps throughout the modern Middle East. Delegates to the General Assembly Fourth Committee must analyze the activities of UNRWA and then provide appropriate recommendations to improve UNRWA's efficacy and possibly its mandate as well.

Rationale for Creating UNRWA

The creation of the state of Israel in the late 1940s was accompanied by the exodus of approximately 750,000 Palestinian refugees and the General Assembly quickly adopted the concept of the "right to return" of these original Palestinian refugees; the state of Israel and several of its allies have repeatedly objected to the language and interpretations of the "right to return."¹ The International Crisis Group states more bluntly that "this, of course, flatly contradicts the Israeli position since Israel will not grant each refugee 'the option to choose where they wish to settle' for a variety of reasons, particularly that it would upend the country's demographics by diluting the Jewish majority. In this, Israel enjoys the support of the US and Europe."²

UNRWA was established through General Assembly resolution 302 (A/RES/302 (IV)) in December 1949 to "carry out in collaboration with local governments ... direct relief and works programmes" and "to consult with interested Near Eastern governments concerning measures to be taken by them preparatory to the time when international assistance for relief and works projects is no longer available..."³ UNRWA's work today consists primarily of being "a service provider to Palestinian refugees, though it neither represents them officially nor administers refugee camps."⁴ Lance Bartholomeusz, Chief of the International Law Division for UNRWA, asserts that "while UNRWA's mandate permits it to perform an incidental role, other entities have a central role in the resolution of the Palestine refugee issue, notably the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), the Security Council, the Secretary-General, UNSCO [Office of the United Nations Special Coordinator for

¹ UN General Assembly Resolution 194, A/RES/194 (III) December 11, 1948.

² International Crisis Group (ICG), "Bringing Back the Palestinian Refugee Question" October 9, 2014 p. 12.

³ A/RES/302 (IV) December 9, 1949

⁴ International Crisis Group (ICG), "Bringing Back the Palestinian Refugee Question" October 9, 2014 p. 2

the Middle East Peace Process], the General Assembly, and the Palestine Liberation Organization.”⁵ While the successful and peaceful long-term resolution of the Palestinian refugee situation is vital for peoples throughout the Middle East as well as for the broader international community, UNRWA’s specific mandate is not designed to ultimately resolve the Palestinian refugee situation.

UNRWA’s Current Activities

Currently, UNRWA’s activities include education, health services, relief and social services, microfinance, infrastructure and camp improvement, and emergency response assistance; these activities directly impact approximately 5 million people in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank and the Gaza Strip.⁶ The continued tensions and instability within Israel and the Occupied Territories as well as the horrific civil war in Syria create sustained and increased demands for assistance from UNRWA. “Palestine refugees have been severely and disproportionately affected by the crisis in Syria, with over 60 per cent of the registered population of 540,000 displaced by the armed conflict.”⁷ UNRWA’s wide range of functions and the needs of the community have enhanced its status within the Gaza Strip to the extent that is widely seen as a form of government by many residents. “It is Gaza’s second largest employer and has remained as governments and occupations have come and gone for more than 60 years.”⁸ While many of UNRWA’s activities are considered vital by the vast majority of the international community, allegations of providing assistance to armed groups such as Hamas have been issued by Israel and the United States.

In both 2009 and 2014, UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip have been hit by explosive shells with Israel and Hamas blaming each other for the deaths, injuries and destruction accompanying these strikes. In July 2014, during the height of the most recent armed conflict between Hamas and Israel, 16 Gazans who had sought refuge in an UNRWA school were killed after explosives struck the school before those seeking shelter could be evacuated.⁹ Israel has repeatedly asserted that UNRWA schools are being used to store Hamas rockets and that Israeli security forces have provided warnings to UNRWA personnel to prevent Hamas from stockpiling rockets and other weapons inside UNRWA schools.¹⁰ UNRWA staff have publicly condemned the placement of rockets inside schools that it operates in Gaza and called for an end to this practice, as it places civilians and UNRWA staff at considerable risk.¹¹ UNRWA has also recently reassessed the damage from the July 2014 conflict and is asserting that the damage to refugee homes and shelters is twice its original estimate.¹²

⁵ Lance Bartholomeusz, “The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* Vol. 28, Nos. 2 & 3 2010 p. 471

⁶ <http://www.unrwa.org>.

⁷ UNRWA, “Cash assistance in Syria: A vital lifeline for the most vulnerable” October 17, 2014. Found at: <http://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/features/cash-assistance-syria-vital-lifeline-most-vulnerable>

⁸ Ben Hubbard and Jodi Rudoren, “Blast Kills 16 Seeking Haven at Gaza School” *New York Times* July 24, 2014.

⁹ Ben Hubbard and Jodi Rudoren, “Blast Kills 16 Seeking Haven at Gaza School” *New York Times* July 24, 2014.

¹⁰ David Horovitz, “The trouble with UNRWA” *The Times of Israel* July 31, 2014.

¹¹ UNRWA, “UNRWA Condemns Placement of Rockets, for a Second Time, in One of Its Schools” July 22, 2014.

¹² UNRWA, “Urgent Funding Required to Address Unprecedented Destruction in Gaza” December 18, 2014.

In the most recent wave of violence in the region, UNRWA reported that “there were in excess of 160 rockets and 221 mortar shells launched from Gaza as well as 1 anti-tank missile” which contributed to “damage to the main water lines in Jabalia Camp and key road infrastructure around Gaza City”.¹³ This recent wave of violence also displaced approximately “15,000” Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip bringing the total number of Internal Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Gaza to “71,232.”¹⁴

With the frequent accusations and criticisms lodged against UNRWA, it is not particularly surprising that UNRWA routinely issues press releases of its own seeking to counter the claims of bias as well as aid and support of Hamas.¹⁵ Delegates to the General Assembly Fourth Committee need to be cognizant of these claims about UNRWA’s impartiality or potential lack thereof but they must maintain their focus on ensuring that UNRWA and its related civil society partners can most effectively address the myriad issues confronted by the Palestinian refugees.

Further complicating the picture, and certainly serving as convenient fodder for critics of UNRWA’s mandate, is the fact that Palestinian refugees who receive assistance from UNRWA do not come under the domain of the UN’s Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). “The 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and the 1967 Protocol there to exclude Palestine refugees as long as they receive assistance from UNRWA.”¹⁶ The UNHCR assists Palestinian refugees outside of the areas where UNRWA specifically works, namely the Occupied Territories, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

Who Should UNRWA Assist?

The disputes between the Palestinians, their Arab and often developing world allies, and Israel and its Western allies also concern the definition of a Palestinian refugee who is eligible for UNRWA’s assistance. The International Crisis Group (ICG) notes that “on account of inconsistent criteria and incomplete data, it is hard to precisely assess the number and location of Palestinian refugees.”¹⁷ This imprecision in accounting for, as well as inconsistencies in defining, Palestinian refugees will only fuel further tensions between UNRWA, its supporters, and its critics.

The International Crisis Group further notes that “the standard definition, applied by the UN, considers those displaced in 1948, as well as the descendants of male refugees, to be refugees.”¹⁸ Many Israelis dispute this particular formulation of refugees, arguing that in fact “today, the vast majority of those classified by UNRWA as Palestinian refugees are in fact descendants of refugees, not persons who were ever refugees themselves. These are grandchildren and great-grandchildren born in Jordan, the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria,

¹³ Office of the Director of UNRWA Operations Gaza Field Office, “Situation update #9,” May 20, 2021 https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/situation_update_9_-_20_05_21.pdf

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ UNRWA, “Israel Channel Two Retracts False Allegations Against UNRWA” July 20, 2014.

¹⁶ UNRWA, “Frequently Asked Questions” 2014.

¹⁷ ICG, “Bringing Back the Palestinian Refugee Question” October 9, 2014 p. 2.

¹⁸ Ibid. p. 2.

and elsewhere—not in pre-1948 Palestine.”¹⁹ The violence and upheaval associated with previous, such as the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israeli Wars, and contemporary conflicts, including 2006, 2009, and 2014 in Gaza as well as the ongoing Syrian civil war, have at least in part propelled some of the growth in the numbers of Palestinian refugees in the Near East. With those numbers now approaching 5 million Palestinian refugees, and rising, in the Occupied Territories, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, it is clear that the demands on UNRWA are expected to increase, particularly as progress towards any long-term resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian situation has either been stalled or possibly reversed in the wake of recent conflicts.

Refugees with disabilities are also served under the UNRWA mandate. The agency operates “with a focus on four disability inclusion principles – accessibility, participation, awareness and non-discrimination. ... This is achieved by identifying and removing barriers that may exclude persons with disabilities from accessing UNRWA services and programmes, as well as by identifying and promoting enablers of disability inclusion. In addition, UNRWA makes provisions for addressing disability-specific needs, such as distribution of assistive devices and technology, as well as empowerment of persons with disabilities in its programmes and services.”²⁰ There were other areas where UNRWA provided assistance to refugees with disabilities, including: “Assistance Devices, Physiotherapy services, Speech & Occupational Therapy, Physiosocial Support, Vocational Training, [and] Awareness Session”.²¹ Any program that is designed to assist refugees must keep refugees with disabilities in mind.

It’s All About the Money

UNRWA’s funding is almost exclusively from voluntary contributions from donor governments and organizations; unfortunately, voluntary contributions have often not kept pace with the increased demands confronted by UNRWA. In December 2013, in the preamble to resolution 68/78 (A/RES/68/78), the General Assembly expressed its deep concern about “the extremely critical financial situation of the Agency, caused in part by the structural underfunding of the Agency....”²² UNRWA’s budgetary shortfall for 2014 was estimated at \$65 million and the receipt of emergency appeals for funds for the Occupied Territories as well as for Palestinian refugees in Syria were only approaching 50%.²³ Additionally, as a result of the most recent conflicts, UNRWA’s emergency appeal for 2015 is \$414 million USD above its normal funding levels.²⁴

Further critiques of the funding of UNRWA, particularly from Israel and at times its allies, focus on what they perceive to be a serious imbalance in composition of the donors to UNRWA; approximately 71% of the 2012 UNRWA budget was contributed by

¹⁹ Steven J. Rosen, “Why a Special Issue on UNRWA?” *Middle East Quarterly* Fall 2012

²⁰ UNRWA, “Disability Inclusion Annual Report 2020,” 2020, 7

²¹ *Ibid.*, 10

²² A/RES/68/78 “Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East” December 11, 2013 p. 1

²³ UN General Assembly (UNGA), Department of Public Information (DPI), “As Budget Shortfall, Insecurity Threaten Efforts of UN Agency for Palestine Refugees, 17 Member States Promise Funds at Pledging Conference” GA/11461, PAL 2169 December 3, 2013

²⁴ UNRWA, “OPT Emergency Appeal 2015” 2014

the United States, the European Union (EU), the United Kingdom (UK), Sweden, Norway, Germany, the Netherlands and Japan, with the 2 leading Muslim country contributors being Saudi Arabia at #15 and Turkey at #18.²⁵ As a result of the 6-fold growth in the number of refugees that UNRWA assists as well as rising costs for the array of services that UNRWA provides, spending per refugee has declined in recent years from approximately \$200 per refugee in 1975 to \$110 per refugee in 2014.²⁶ Increasing the number of contributing states as well as the totals of the contributions will be fundamental, particularly given the likelihood that the demands faced by UNRWA and the millions of people that it serves will not lessen within the next few years at least. Delegates to the General Assembly Fourth Committee would be best served elaborating steps to increase voluntary contributions to UNRWA, including its emergency appeals, rather than attempt to impose any form of annual assessment.

COVID-19's Impact

In light of the COVID-19 pandemic, UNRWA held numerous flash-funding campaigns to raise sturdiest funds that would support medical services in agency-run refugee camps. UNRWA predicted that they would require “\$21 million to provide health and hospitalization services to Palestine refugees impacted by COVID-19” as well as “\$44 million to provide cash and food assistance to Palestine refugees impacted by COVID-19”.²⁷ (See Chart A for COVID-19 figures provided by UNRWA).

UNRWA states that “Health systems across UNRWA areas of operation are under pressure, and cases have been reported in all fields. On 24 August, the first reported cases of local transmission of COVID-19 were reported in Gaza. The epidemiological situation has also deteriorated recently in West Bank, Syria and Lebanon, with rapid increases in the number of active COVID-19 cases and overstretched or limited response capacities to cope with the escalation.”²⁸ Because refugee populations are already some of the most vulnerable in the world, funding-deficits must not be the reason that refugees go without access to oxygen, clean water, food, medical supplies (e.g. PPE), and education.

The disruption of UNRWA-administered cannot be understated. “From March 2020 until the end of the 2019/2020 school year, all 709 UNRWA schools, eight vocational/educational training centres (VTC) and two teacher training facilities were closed due to COVID- 19 and in line with host governments instructions in each field of operation. This affected 533,342 school children, 8,270 VTC trainees and 1,840 university students as well as 20,146 education staff.”²⁹ With over half a million children now a year behind in their education, UNRWA is rapidly developing plans to ensure that children return to school safely as soon as possible. With children now just beginning to be vaccinated in the developed West,

²⁵ Timon Dias, “The UNRWA Dilemma” *GatestoneInstitute* September 17, 2013

²⁶ UNRWA, “Frequently asked questions” 2014.

²⁷ “UNRWA COVID-19 APPEAL AUGUST- DECEMBER 2020,” September 2, 2020 at <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/emergency-appeals/unrwa-covid-19-appeal-august-december-2020>

²⁸ “UNRWA COVID-19 APPEAL AUGUST- DECEMBER 2020,” 2020, https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_covid-19_appeal_august- december_2020.pdf, p.

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²⁹ *Ibid.*, 8

these children may not see vaccines for years to come. With this health intervention not available, it has become necessary for UNRWA to implement a strategy of “physical distancing and healthy hygiene practices in all UNRWA education facilities.”³⁰ This also means a continued combination of remote learning and in-person instruction.³¹ Delegates are challenged to ensure that schools have adequate funding; are safe for children, staff, and faculty to operate within; that children without access to internet are able to receive remote instruction; all the while allowing schools to become centers of humanitarian intervention by providing health checks, food, and social services to children most in need.

Conclusion

Controversies about UNRWA’s mandate, operations and staffing remain salient concerns for the Palestinian refugees, interested states, and the international community as a whole. In their deliberations, delegates to the General Assembly Fourth Committee will be afforded an excellent opportunity to directly address these controversies as well channel their collective efforts into elaborating and implementing solutions to improve the overall efficacy of UNRWA.

Guiding Questions for Debate

Does your country currently host any Palestinian refugees? If so, are these Palestinian refugees supported by UNRWA or related agencies and initiatives?

Does the mandate of UNRWA need to be updated or revised? If so, what aspects of the mandate should be revised most immediately and in what manner?

Does your country provide voluntary contributions to UNRWA? How might countries that are not currently contributing to UNRWA be effectively persuaded to contribute?

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ Ibid.

Resource Review

United Nations Documents

United Nations General Assembly. “Assistance to Palestine Refugees A/RES/302 (IV).” December 8, 1949. <https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/302%20%28IV%29.pdf>

This General Assembly resolution created UNRWA and provided for the initial mandate of the Relief Works Agency. Delegates are requested to pay attention to the ways the General Assembly allocates funding for UNRWA initiatives, promotes cooperation between existing UN-agencies to assist UNRWA activities, and establishes key UNRWA posts (e.g., the Director) along with concurrent responsibilities.

United Nations General Assembly. “The right of the Palestinian people to self-determination A/RES/75/172.” 28 December 2020 <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/the-right-of-the-palestinian-people-to-self-determination-ga-resolution-a-res-75-172/>

The latest UNGA resolution to “reaffirm[] the right of the Palestinian people to self-determination, including the right to their independent State of Palestine.” This resolution is important for delegates in their research for the basis in international law upon which the UNGA establishes their reaffirmation of Palestinian sovereignty.

United Nations General Assembly. “Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East A/RES/75/94.” 18 December 2020 <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/operations-of-the-united-nations-relief-works-agency-for-palestine-refugees-in-the-near-east-ga-resolution-a-res-75-94/>

This all-encompassing resolution addresses the current work of UNRWA and the ways in which the future work of UNRWA will be guided. Delegates are encouraged to read this resolution before writing their background guides to understand more thoroughly how UNRWA’s work can be improved and what UNRWA’s work entails before entering into debate.

United Nations General Assembly. “Assistance to the Palestinian People A/RES/75/126.” 11 December 2020. <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/assistance-to-the-palestinian-people-ga-resolution-a-res-75-126/>

This resolution discusses the varied ways that the UN system provides support to the Palestinian people through humanitarian interventions. This resolution was passed before the outbreak of COVID-19 and so does not include updates regarding the UN’s work to combat COVID-19 in UNRWA’s field operations. This resolution is important for delegates to read because it discusses ways that the UN-system and member states can still provide more assistance to the Palestinian people.

United Nations General Assembly. “Situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967 A/72/556.” 23 October 2017.

http://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/a_72_556.pdf

“The report is based primarily on information provided by victims, witnesses, civil society representatives, United Nations representatives and Palestinian officials in Amman, in connection with the mission of the Special Rapporteur to the region in May 2017. The report addresses a number of concerns pertaining to the situation of human rights in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and in Gaza” (p. 2).

Guiding Questions of Position Papers

1. Has your country provided assistance to UNRWA or the State of Palestine in the past? What forms has that aid taken in the past? What ways can that aid be improved in the future?
2. Does your country recognize the state of Palestine? Why or why not?
3. What ways can the United Nations improve its humanitarian assistance to the Palestinian people, in and around the Occupied Territories, to better reach their humanitarian needs?
4. What economic solutions does your country propose will help reestablish the domestic, Palestinian economy? What role should the UN have in this action?
5. What long term solutions does your country propose for UNRWA? Where should the people under UNRWA’s mandate live if the UNRWA mandate is ever to end?

Chart A — COVID cases in UNRWA fields of operations

