



united nations relief and works agency
for palestine refugees in the near east

وكالة الأمم المتحدة لإغاثة وتشغيل
اللاجئين الفلسطينيين في الشرق الأدنى

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مكتب ممثلية الأونروا في
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Rt Hon. Emily Thornberry MP
Chair of the Foreign Affairs Council House of Commons
London
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6 January 2025

Dear Madam Chair,

I write to you at what can only be described as one of the most challenging moments for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). The recent legislative action passed by the Israeli Knesset represents an existential threat to the Agency and the essential services it provides to millions of Palestine Refugees. I urge you to give this matter your immediate attention and take action to support UNRWA in its critical mission.

The Knesset's legislation forbidding Israeli state officials from engaging with UNRWA and prohibiting the Agency's operations in what it terms the "sovereign territory of the State of Israel" is a significant escalation in efforts to delegitimize the Agency. It is not merely an attack on UNRWA but a broader attempt to undermine Palestinians' right to self-determination and disrupt long-standing frameworks for resolving the Israel-Palestine conflict. This legislation jeopardizes UNRWA's ability to deliver its mandate, which was conferred by the United Nations General Assembly, and threatens the lives and futures of millions of Palestine Refugees who rely on the Agency's services.

The impact of this legislation cannot be overstated. In Gaza, where the humanitarian crisis is most acute, UNRWA is the backbone of the emergency response. The people in this territory ravaged by conflict and destruction are in acute need of food aid, shelter protection, psychosocial assistance, fuel support for humanitarian operations, etc. Here, UNRWA is a lifeline for two million destitute people.

As an example, between 7 October 2023 and 10 November 2024, UNRWA provided over 6.4 million medical consultations across the Gaza Strip. Under constant attacks, with diseases spreading, these UNRWA health services are lifesaving for children, women and men, at a time when the health system in Gaza has been decimated.

In the absence of a functioning state, UNRWA is also the only organization able to kick-start education for 650,000 children. The dismantling of UNRWA's operations at this moment would leave an entire generation of children without hope to access education and plunge communities deeper into poverty and despair, sowing the seeds for further instability and extremism.

For over a year, Palestinians in Gaza have faced unconscionable levels of death, destruction, displacement, and starvation as a consequence of



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Israel's military campaign, the consequences of which were described by UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini as "post-apocalyptic".

In the West Bank, UNRWA's collapse would deprive 50,000 children of education and hundreds of thousands of refugees of healthcare and social support. The Agency is also a critical economic pillar, as the second-largest employer in the region after the Palestinian Authority, contributing between 5 and 8 percent to the GDP. Its absence would have devastating economic consequences, exacerbating an already dire situation.

As the UN Security Council itself underscored in October: "no organization can replace or substitute UNRWA's capacity and mandate to serve Palestinian refugees and civilians in urgent need of life-saving humanitarian assistance (see [here](#) text)", a statement which resonates following the Inter-Agency Standing Committee declaration of UN Heads of organizations (see [here](#)).

The international community, through a UN General Assembly [resolution](#), recently expressed its "full support" for the Agency's mandate with an overwhelming majority of 159 states voting in favor, a commitment further reflected in the [shared commitment](#) on UNRWA supported by 123 UN Member States, including the United States and Great Britain, as well as the EU. Most recently, UK Prime Minister [Keir Starmer reaffirmed](#) his commitment to the Agency, pledging further financial assistance of £13 million to support UNRWA in delivering its "vital services for Palestinian refugees" in the region.

The General Assembly also recently "deplor[ed] the legislation adopted by the Israeli Knesset on 28 October 2024 and called upon the Israeli Government to abide by its international obligations, respect the privileges and immunities of the Agency...".

Adding to the challenges that the Agency faces, UNRWA is under unprecedented attack—both physically and politically.

Tragically, over 250 staff members have been killed, and many premises have been damaged or destroyed. Humanitarian convoys that are allowed into Gaza are frequently looted or attacked, thus depriving people in Gaza of much needed aid.

Incitements of politicians have led to at least 20 despicable attacks, including arson attacks, on the UNRWA compound in East Jerusalem causing anxiety amongst staff and damages which will have to be repaired.

Additionally, social media campaigns and misinformation have falsely associated UNRWA with terrorist activities, further undermining its credibility and mission. Billboard and display ads against UNRWA in a number of large cities around the world bought by the Government of Israel aim at undermining the Agency. But the damage goes beyond its



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reputation: it puts the lives of our UNRWA colleagues, including those on the humanitarian frontline, at serious risk.

The Knesset's legislation compounds these challenges by targeting the Agency's existence which would prevent millions from receiving human development and emergency aid. The consequences of inaction regarding these bills at this critical juncture will be catastrophic. Without intervention, millions of Palestine Refugees risk losing access to essential services, and the region's fragile stability will be further undermined.

UNRWA has therefore appealed United Nations Member States to 1) oppose the implementation of the Knesset Legislation, 2) support a transition framework to ensure that any political resolution delineates a clear and structured role for UNRWA in transitioning its services to an empowered Palestinian administration, in alignment with a just and sustainable solution to the conflict, and 3) maintain or if possible increase financial support to the Agency.

UNRWA is not merely a service provider; it is a stabilizing force in a region fraught with conflict and uncertainty. It ensures access to education, healthcare, and social services that are indispensable to the dignity and survival of millions of refugees throughout the Middle East. Its survival is crucial not only for Palestine Refugees but also for the broader pursuit of peace and stability in the region.

In line with international law, UNRWA believes that the UK is well positioned to lead efforts to combat misinformation targeting UNRWA, advocate for a ceasefire, press the State of Israel for unrestricted humanitarian access, and champion accountability for violations of international law through international legal mechanisms.

I trust that the Foreign Affairs Committee will recognize the gravity of this situation and act decisively to support UNRWA and the millions of lives it serves. On behalf of UNRWA, I wish to confirm that the above information is provided on a voluntary basis to assist the Foreign Affairs Committee in its important work. The provision of such information is without prejudice to UNRWA's privileges and immunities under the applicable legal instruments, which are not waived and are expressly reserved.

Yours sincerely,

Marta Lorenzo
Director

UNRWA Representation Office for Europe