'Biden administration remains blind to inherent flaws of UNRWA'

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The US State Department's Population, Migration and Refugees Bureau ended 2021 with another payment to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), a move some experts have criticized as wrongheaded and in line with an eagerness to blindly reverse policies put forth by the Trump administration.

On Dec. 30, the bureau tweeted that it was proud to announce that it was providing $99 million for UNRWA, which it claimed will go towards the "education, health care and emergency relief of hundreds of thousands of Palestinian children and families."

It also noted a focus on the agency's accountability, transparency, neutrality and stability – all issues that UNRWA has been criticized for.

Hillel Neuer, executive director of UN Watch, called the funding a mistake and quickly pointed out in a Twitter thread that UNRWA has long been the antithesis to those standards, opposing and criticizing attempts to hold it accountable.

"If you are truly focused on UNRWA 'accountability, transparency and neutrality,' why are you silent as UNRWA aggressively attacks efforts to apply oversight – and why reward their bad actions with even more money?" he wrote.

The move was not surprising, as the Biden administration announced last April that it will reverse the cash freeze applied to UNRWA by the Trump administration and has funded the organization $417.8 million in 2021.

Asaf Romirowsky, executive director of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East and author of Religion, Politics and the Origins of Palestine Refugee Relief, said the UN agency is the gatekeeper of the one single issue that sustains the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, ensuring it will never end – the "right of return" for Palestinians to the entire territory of what was once British Mandatory Palestine.

Unlike other refugees recognized by the United Nations, UNRWA is unique in conferring refugee status to its descendants, some of who are five generations removed from actual purported refugees.

"And so, you have every year, based on that, a so-called 'natural growth' of Arab-Palestinians based on a fictitious amount of individuals, where they demand more money to receive aid. And that's how the cycle plays out," said Romirowsky. "And this is why – if you go to UNRWA's website today – they will tell you they got millions and millions of refugees."

"Where did all the million come from?" he posed. "The millions come from this growth. And so what Washington is doing now is basically trying to jumpstart the flow of money because when you say the word refugee to Westerners and Americans and others, the perception is that people are fleeing for their lives with no running water, let alone WiFi. That's not the case within the refugee camps."

The organization, he said, sustains the concept of a refugee not aligned to that of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, arguing that the identity of a Palestinian is synonymous with them seeing themselves as refugees who can never agree to give up their so-called "right of return."

"There's no endgame to this," he said. "This is basically taxpayer dollars that are being thrown into an enterprise that is bottomless."

Even some former UNRWA employees, he said, say those considered refugees by UNRWA have been resettled.

The funding of UNRWA also undermines America's goal of supporting the Palestinian Authority. Romirowsky said UNRWA duplicates services that should be provided by the Palestinian government, creating a "shadow government" and keeping the areas in which it operates dependent.

"All these services – education, social services, medical services – should be, if Palestinians want a functioning state, funded by the Palestinian Authority," said Romirowsky. "It is a case study where the client has hijacked the service provider in marketing terms."

UNRWA's critics have long complained about the textbooks used in UNRWA schools, which contain incitement against Israel.

#### 'Compel specific, tangible and constructive actions'

James Lindsey, visiting scholar at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and former legal advisor and general counsel for UNRWA, wrote in early September that the United States, which funds a significant portion of UNRWA's annual budget, should have used UNRWA's dire financial straits to push for greater reforms in the organization prior to restarting its funding.

Instead, it settled for a US-UNRWA Framework of Cooperation signed on July 14, which while touching upon some of the well-known deficiencies of the organization, "mostly focuses on process-related items, such as reporting modalities and on aspirational statements."

"More effective would have been to use UNRWA's tenuous financial position to compel specific, tangible and constructive actions … ."

[Einat Wilf](https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/galling-global-criticism-of-israel/), a former Labor party Knesset member and co-author of the book [The War of Return](https://www.israelhayom.com/2018/05/25/israel-keeps-the-palestinian-dream-of-return-alive/) said the re-funding of UNRWA was disappointing and will achieve nothing but to underwrite the continued conflict.

"I don't think the Biden administration supports the UNRWA agenda, which is ultimately the whole idea that the Palestinians are perpetual refugees possessing of the right to undo Israel through this notion of return, but I think they're deeply blind to what they're funding," said Wilf. "I think this is a case where domestic and partisanship issues are leading to foreign-policy mistakes. I think this administration was quick to undo the policy of President [Donald] Trump just because it was Trump, but I don't think a serious administration should operate in this way."

Wilf said that no matter what the Americans seek to achieve with their funding, the Palestinian perception is more important.

"The way that American and all Western funding of UNRWA is perceived by Palestinians – and again we have ample evidence of that in the book – is perceived as Western legitimacy for the idea that they are refugees, that the war of 1948 is not over and that it could one day be won to their cause of no Israel," she said.

The money, she said, will serve as fuel for another generation of conflict despite America's good intentions.

"I think one of the biggest problems of US foreign policy and Western foreign policy is that they prioritize feeling good over doing good," said Wilf. "And that this is a classic case in point. They feel good about giving money, but they're actually doing something very bad. They're literally pouring money that translates into many more years of conflict."

Yet Israeli governments, with the exception of former Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have not prominently opposed the funding of UNRWA. Wilf said that this is due to a mistaken notion among the Israeli security establishment that UNRWA is a stabilizing force. Yet, she pointed out, it's not a coincidence that the places where UNRWA is most active, such as Gaza and southern Lebanon, are also the areas where Israel has found itself involved in wars combatting terrorism.

Romirowsky pointed out that Israel doesn't contribute to UNRWA; rather, it's American taxpayers that do, making it an American issue where the United States should ask what exactly it is funding.

Wilf noted that is especially true in Gaza, where 80 percent of the population is registered as refugees by UNRWA, despite being born there. The funding of UNRWA by the United States and Western nations has convinced the Palestinians that their place in Gaza is temporary.

"This means that they have exactly zero incentive to turn Gaza into the Singapore of the Middle East or the Dubai of the Mediterranean," she said. "Because Gaza, in their view, is not their home and every dollar that goes to UNRWA merely sustains and fuels the Palestinians in their view that Gaza is a temporary station. They can have it until they take back … 'Palestine from the river to the sea.' "

Instead, Wilf said that the Biden administration would be better served by defunding UNRWA, making it clear to the Palestinians that they're not refugees, that the 1948 war is over, and that Israel is here to stay.

The Biden administration, according to Wilf, should demonstrate that they would be "thrilled" to fund Palestinians with a goal of living next to Israel, rather than instead of Israel, but that it has no intention of underwriting a worldview that seeks to "eradicate, annihilate and erase an ally of the United States."