UNRWA Ban Is 70 Years Overdue

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<https://www.meforum.org/mef-observer/unrwa-ban-is-70-years-overdue>

On October 28, 2024, Israel’s Knesset banned the United Nations Relief and Works Agencyfor Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) from operating in Israel and banned Israeli officials from contact with UNRWA employees. Israel’s move comes after UNRWA employees participated in the October 7, 2023, massacre, facilitated Hamas terrorism and, in many cases, moonlit as Hamas members. On September 30, 2024, an Israeli air strike killed Fatah Sharif, the top Hamas commander in Lebanon; he was also a UNRWA employee.

The interplay between Hamas and UNRWA was long and deep. Fifteen years ago, James Lindsay, UNRWA general counsel, [acknowledged](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/fixing-unrwa-repairing-uns-troubled-system-aid-palestinian-refugees) that UNRWA did not ban Hamas members from its ranks nor even ask about affiliation in employment interviews. Both former U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his successor António Guterres were aware of the problem they just chose not to reform.

European officials responded to Israel’s actions with histrionics. Michael Higgins, the president of Ireland, said it is ‘time to stop this horror of history.’ Norwegian Foreign Minister Espen Barth Eide said that ‘Norway strongly rejects the [Knesset] legislation’ and that the end of Israel’s cooperation with UNRWA would make impossible supporting the Palestinian population.

None of this is true, of course. If Higgins wished to address the ‘horror of history,’ he might begin with the Sudan, though in the European mindset, black lives do not always matter. In February 2024 Senate testimony, Tom Perriello, the U.S. Special Envoy for Sudan, [said](https://www.dabangasudan.org/en/all-news/article/senate-hears-urgent-plea-from-u-s-envoy-on-sudan) that some estimates put Sudanese deaths since the civil war at 150,000, with nearly eight million displaced.

Nor, despite Eide’s belief, is UNRWA essential to Palestinian wellbeing, for two reasons.

First, UNRWA removes accountability from Palestinians, retarding their governance. When Hamas authorities in the Gaza Strip turn schools into depots or hospitals into military headquarters, they know that UNRWA will rebuild any infrastructure lost in fighting, thereby disincentivizing Hamas to govern well or abide by the rules of armed conflict. This is why there appears to be a direct relationship between the money that countries like Ireland and Norway donate to UNRWA and the failure of Palestinian governance.

Second, UNRWA is redundant. The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) addresses the needs of refugees and the displaced across the world—except for Palestinians, whom UNRWA claims as its own. If UNRWA dissolved tomorrow, UNHCR could assist those in need. The reason some Palestinians and their most polemical supporters oppose this is that UNRWA uses its own unique definition of ‘refugee,’ which continues into perpetuity and across generations, long after the refugees themselves have settled into new countries or passed away. If UNHCR applied the UNRWA definition of refugee to the 1947 partition of India, for example, it would count more than 300 million refugees today, just on the Indian subcontinent.

Two decades ago, the late University of Illinois economist Fred Gottheil wrote about the moral hazard of UNRWA. UNRWA’s founders agreed. In 1951, the agency [reported](https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-179699/), ‘There must be a firm goal of terminating relief operations. Sustained relief operations inevitably contain the germ of human deterioration.’

The UNRWA founders were right, but rejectionist Arab states decided to keep UNRWA alive to use it as a wedge against peace and to weaponize it against Israel. How unfortunate that Ireland and Norway today join the likes of Nasserite Egypt and Saddam’s Iraq.