



What's Behind Israel's Decision to Ban UNRWA?

Earlier this week, Israel's parliament passed two laws banning the humanitarian aid organization United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) and outrageously declaring it a terror group. The measures were enacted despite universal pressure and opposition against the move from the United States and others. These entities all highlighted the vital humanitarian services that UNRWA provides, which are especially imperative now in light of Israel's ongoing and destructive Gaza War that has decimated the territory and left civilians in desperate need of essential resources, shelter, and safety. To many observers, the actions did not come as a surprise due to the blatant longstanding Israeli desire to wrongfully smear and dismantle the aid agency. For years, Israeli officials have sought to undermine UNRWA and its work in an effort to, in their eyes, erase the Palestinian refugee issue and the internationally-recognized right of return to lands that they were forcibly displaced from. In fact, not long ago just back in early 2024, Israel made [false accusations](#) regarding UNRWA and the October 7th Hamas attacks that were subsequently debunked. Now, what has transpired in recent days is merely Israel's latest attempt aimed at hindering the aid agency and the important role that it plays.

Across the board, rights activists, government officials, and experts have criticized the Israeli ban of UNRWA and warned that it will worsen the already dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza. As such, world leaders have condemned the legislation and outlined that it will have devastating consequences. Humanitarian groups that have worked on the ground with UNRWA point out that the ban will severely debilitate aid services – something that has already been obstructed by Israeli forces as it is. One aid organization's statement on the ban commented that "Israel has bombed Palestinians to death, maimed them, starved them, and is now ridding them of their biggest lifeline of aid...Piece by piece, Israel is systemically dismantling Gaza as a land that is autonomous and livable for Palestinians...Its banning of UNRWA is condemnable and another step in this crime." Human rights advocates also emphasized how the efforts to stamp out UNRWA predate the October 7th Hamas attacks and have nothing to do with purported security or terrorism. Instead, they have always been about eroding Palestinian rights and stripping them of any potential refugee status that paves the way for their right of return under international human rights law. UNRWA serves as a constant reminder that Palestinians were forcibly displaced from their ancestral homes and has therefore been a target of Israeli officials for decades who seek to, in essence, sweep the Palestinian refugee issue under the rug.

Even prior to the ongoing Gaza War, many in the territory were reliant on humanitarian aid resources like those that UNRWA provides and this has only increased due to the continued devastation brought about by the Israeli military operations which have destroyed health care facilities, hospitals, and shelters, while displacing at least 90% of civilians. UNRWA is the largest humanitarian agency in Gaza with over 13,000 workers in the enclave alone. It offers critical health care, education, food, water, employment, emergency, and social services – resources that are especially needed now for the 2 million or more civilians who have been displaced since the onset of the war. The organization has played a key role in aiding the lives of millions of civilians since its founding in late 1949. Dismantling UNRWA would be catastrophic, as the aid agency's network of warehouses and staff form the backbone of humanitarian relief distribution in Gaza. Without it, civilians will lose their last remaining access to food, water, medicine, and other basic resources.

On top of this, UNRWA's aid services are also essential because of Israel's obstruction of humanitarian relief into Gaza, which has even prompted the United States to criticize this in recent weeks and demand that improvements be made. Back in mid-October, the Biden administration warned Israel that it must increase the amount of humanitarian aid it is allowing into Gaza within the next 30 days, or risk losing access to U.S. weapons funding. Aid groups and human rights advocates have been seeking to draw attention to this for months, and the fact that U.S. officials have publicly done so again as they did back in April speaks volumes, as it demonstrates that Israel's impeding has gotten so flagrant that even those who have seemingly found ways to try and shield misbehavior have grown unable to ignore the degree of violations and abuses that are taking place. The glaring Israeli obstruction of humanitarian aid is one of the reasons why there has been such widespread concern and denunciation regarding the UNRWA ban, since as so many have pointed out, the relief agency plays such an irreplaceable role in providing much-needed assistance services.

Israel's banning of UNRWA is yet another example of its long track record of overt disregard for international institutions and norms. By seeking to do so, it is applying a policy of collective punishment against Palestinian civilians in Gaza and cutting off an indispensable line of aid. Outlawing the humanitarian aid agency will only worsen the circumstances in Gaza and fuel more animosity across the region towards Israel's unethical practices. Thus, the United States, the United Nations, and others should pressure Israel to reverse its decision or risk being ostracized from the global community.