



United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees

Topic A: Provision of Aid to Palestine Refugees

Introduction

The provision of aid to Palestinian refugees remains a pressing humanitarian concern, reflecting both the complexities of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the broader geopolitical landscape of the Middle East.¹ Since the mid-20th century, millions of Palestinians have been displaced from their homes due to conflict, occupation, and systemic violence.² As of now, approximately 5.94 million Palestinian refugees are registered with the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), relying on various forms of aid for basic survival.³ The role of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and other humanitarian organizations is critical in addressing their needs, but ongoing political tensions, funding shortages, and deteriorating living conditions complicate this task.⁴

Background

The plight of Palestinian refugees can be dated back to 1948, during the Arab-Israeli conflict, when approximately 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes.⁵ The subsequent establishment of the state of Israel marked the beginning of a protracted humanitarian crisis, characterized by multiple conflicts and ongoing disputes over land and sovereignty.⁶ The creation of UNRWA in 1949 aimed to provide relief and support for displaced Palestinians, establishing a framework for their humanitarian assistance, education, and healthcare.⁷ The *1951 Refugee Convention* and its *1967 Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees* are the primary legal instruments safeguarding refugees.⁸ They establish the universal definition of a refugee and set forth the minimum standards for their treatment.⁹ Additional United Nations agencies are at work in the region of Palestine to get aid to Palestinians residing in the conflict zone including the Food and Agriculture Organization, the International Labour Organization, the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, and more.¹⁰

¹ United Nations. "History of the Question of Palestine." 2023.

² Ibid.

³ United Nations. "Global Issues: Refugees." 2023.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ United Nations. "About the Nakba" 2023.

⁶ United Nations. "History of the Question of Palestine." 2023.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. "Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees." 1951 and 1967.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ United Nations. "UN Entities in Palestine." 2024.

Over the decades, the situation for Palestinian refugees has remained precarious.¹¹ Many reside in overcrowded camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip, facing socioeconomic challenges such as unemployment, inadequate housing, and limited access to education and healthcare.¹² The ongoing Israeli occupation of Palestinian territories has further compounded these issues, restricting movement and access to resources.¹³ Moreover, the Palestinian refugees' status remains unresolved, as many are denied the right to return to their homeland, making their situation unique compared to other refugee populations globally.¹⁴

In 2024, the humanitarian situation for Palestinian refugees has become increasingly alarming.¹⁵ The ongoing blockade of Gaza has created dire living conditions, with significant shortages of food, clean water, and medical supplies.¹⁶ Recent escalations in violence have exacerbated these challenges, leading to further displacement and violations of human rights among the refugee population.¹⁴ The COVID-19 pandemic has only worsened the situation, straining already limited healthcare systems and highlighting the vulnerabilities of these communities.¹⁷

UNRWA has reported severe funding crises, resulting in cuts to essential services, including education and healthcare.¹⁸ The reliance on international donor support is critical; however, fluctuations in political priorities among donor countries have resulted in inconsistent funding levels.¹⁹ As a result, many Palestinian refugees are experiencing increased hardships, with many children out of school and a growing number of families unable to meet basic needs.²⁰ The international community's response continues to be hindered by the complex political environment, which complicates the provision of humanitarian aid.²¹

Current Situation

Over the past year, the conflict between Israel and Palestine has escalated dramatically, prompting urgent calls for international intervention and a renewed focus on humanitarian aid.²² The United Nations (UN) has expressed deep concern over the growing toll on civilians, with thousands of casualties reported on both sides.²³ As violence continues, especially in Gaza, the UN has emphasized the need for immediate cessation of hostilities and the restoration of basic services to Palestinian

¹¹ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "UNRWA in Action." 2024.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ United Nations. "History of the Question of Palestine." 2023.

¹⁴ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "UNRWA in Action." 2024.

¹⁵ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Gaza Strip The Humanitarian Impact of 15 Years of the Blockage". 2022.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Department of Economic and Social Affairs Sustainable Development. "United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)" 2022.

¹⁸ Council on Foreign Relations. "The UN's Palestinian Aid Controversy." 2024.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Reported impact snapshot | Gaza Strip (19 November 2024)." 2024.

²³ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Flash Appeal for the Occupied Palestinian Territory 2024." 2024..

communities.²⁴ Widespread displacement and destruction has led to an urgent appeal for humanitarian assistance, including the reopening of critical border crossings to allow aid into Gaza.²⁵ The UN Security Council has been engaged in discussions, but divisions among Member States have hindered the effectiveness of any binding resolutions.²⁶ The most recent resolution from the Security Council came in May of 2024 which welcomes the ceasefire proposal announced by the United States.²⁷

The UN has also called for the protection of civilians under international law, stressing the importance of adherence to the *Geneva Conventions* and important human rights documents such as the *Universal Declaration on Human Rights*.²⁸ The continued use of heavy artillery, airstrikes, and ground operations has resulted in significant damage to infrastructure, including hospitals and schools, exacerbating the suffering of those already living in dire conditions.²⁹ Despite efforts to broker ceasefires, the violence persists, with no significant progress toward a sustainable peace agreement.³⁰ The UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process has called for a two-state solution as the only viable path to long-term stability, urging both Israel and Palestine to return to negotiations.³¹

Diplomatic efforts by the UN and its Member States have faced numerous challenges, including the lack of consensus on how to address the underlying issues of the conflict, such as territorial disputes, security concerns, and the status of Jerusalem.³² The United Nations has called for all parties to de-escalate the situation and engage in dialogue, but the political realities on the ground remain deeply entrenched.³³ As the humanitarian crisis deepens, the UN continues to monitor the situation closely, working with NGOs and other partners to provide relief, while also pushing for renewed efforts to reach a comprehensive and lasting peace agreement.³⁴

Humanitarian Assistance and Funding Challenges

Humanitarian assistance for Palestinian refugees is severely affected by funding challenges.³⁵ UNRWA, which relies almost entirely on voluntary contributions from Member States, has faced persistent budget deficits, leading to the scaling back of services.³⁶ As of late 2022, UNRWA reported a funding shortfall of nearly \$100 million, impacting its ability to deliver essential services such as food assistance, education, and

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ United Nations News. "UN chief welcomes re-opening of key Gaza border crossing." 2024.

²⁶ United Nations Security Council. "S/RES/2735." 2024.

²⁷ United Nations Security Council. "S/RES/2735." 2024.

²⁸ "The Geneva Convention." 1949.

²⁹ Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs. "Reported impact snapshot | Gaza Strip (19 November 2024)." 2024.

³⁰ United Nations. "History of the Question of Palestine." 2023.

³¹ Tor Wennesland. "Statement by UN Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process, Tor Wennesland, on the Situation in the Gaza Strip" 2024.

³² Security Council. "9534th Meeting: Ministers Urge Efforts towards This End as Regional Tensions Rise" 2024.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "UNRWA in Action." 2024.

³⁵ Council on Foreign Relations. "The UN's Palestinian Aid Controversy." 2024.

³⁶ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "The Gaza Strip: Humanitarian crisis deepens at a time funding suspensions put UNRWA aid operations in peril." 2024.

healthcare.³⁷ Refugee host countries spend millions of dollars a year maintain infrastructure and providing services to refugees within their borders.³⁸

The fluctuating political landscape often influences donor countries' priorities, which can lead to unpredictable funding patterns.³⁹ For instance, shifting U.S. policies towards UNRWA have resulted in significant cuts in recent years, while European countries have been more consistent in their support.⁴⁰ This subtopic will explore strategies for mobilizing international support, enhancing donor engagement, and creating a more stable funding environment for humanitarian assistance.⁴¹

Education and Employment Opportunities

Education and employment are vital components of sustainable development especially in support of the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* for Palestinian refugees, impacting their long-term prospects and integration into host societies.⁴² However, access to quality education remains a significant challenge, particularly in overcrowded camps.⁴³ Many children are unable to attend school due to economic constraints, lack of resources, or safety concerns, leading to a generation at risk of losing educational opportunities.⁴⁴ UNRWA runs 706 elementary and preparatory schools, including eight secondary schools in Lebanon, offering free basic education to approximately 543,075 Palestinian refugee children. Additionally, it provides technical and vocational education and training at eight Vocational Training Centers, benefiting around 8,000 Palestinian refugees in all fields.⁴⁵ It also offers higher education through two educational science faculties—teacher training institutes located in the West Bank and Jordan.⁴⁶

Moreover, the unemployment rate among Palestinian refugees is alarmingly high, particularly among youth.⁴⁷ Article 6 of the *International Covenant on Economic Social and Cultural Rights* recognizes the right to work.⁴⁸ Barriers to employment include restrictions on movement, limited job opportunities, and discrimination in host countries.⁴⁹ The International Labour Organization (ILO) operates existing educational and vocational training programs that have empowered refugees through skill development and employment opportunities.⁵⁰ The ILO engages partnerships with local

³⁷ General Assembly Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee). "A/C.4/77/SR.22" 2023.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ AlJazeera. "Which countries have cut funding to UNRWA, and why?" 2024.

⁴⁰ Ibid.

⁴¹ General Assembly Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee). "A/C.4/77/SR.22" 2023.

⁴² United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "UNRWA and the Sustainable Development Goals." 2020.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "What We Do: Education." 2024.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ International Labour Organization. "A Year of War in Gaza: Impacts on Employment and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza Strip." 2024.

⁴⁸ General Assembly of the United Nations. "International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights." 1966.

⁴⁹ International Labour Organization. "A Year of War in Gaza: Impacts on Employment and Livelihoods in the West Bank and Gaza Strip." 2024.

⁵⁰ International Labour Organization. "Country Profile: Occupied Palestinian Territory." 2024.

governments and NGOs to facilitate access to education and jobs for Palestinian refugees in refugee host countries and the Occupied Palestinian Territory.⁵¹

Future Outlook

The future outlook of the Palestinian refugee crisis remains deeply concerning and fraught with uncertainty.⁵² The situation has persisted for over seven decades, with millions of Palestinians still living in exile or in refugee camps across the Middle East. UNRWA continues to provide essential services—such as education, healthcare, and food assistance, but its resources are stretched thin, and funding shortfalls are a constant challenge.⁵³ The long-term prospects for these refugees are heavily influenced by the stalled peace process, the lack of a political resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the region's volatile geopolitical dynamics.⁵⁴

The United Nations has repeatedly called for a just and durable solution to the refugee issue, grounded in international law, particularly the right of return for refugees or their compensation, as stipulated in *A/RES/194*.⁵⁵ However, with Israel and Palestinian factions deeply divided over the future status of refugees, and the international community at an impasse, the prospect of a negotiated solution in the near future seems unlikely.⁵⁶ The worsening humanitarian conditions in the occupied territories, particularly in Gaza, and in refugee camps across neighboring countries, further complicate efforts to resolve the crisis.⁵⁷ The rise in regional instability, particularly in Lebanon and Syria, has also created new vulnerabilities for Palestinian refugees, who are increasingly at risk of being caught in conflicts that further marginalize them.⁵⁸

Looking forward, the UN's role will remain vital in providing humanitarian aid and advocating for the rights of Palestinian refugees.⁵⁹ However, the UN recognizes that without a comprehensive peace agreement that addresses the refugee issue, the crisis will likely persist for generations.⁶⁰ The international community is urged to renew its commitment to finding a lasting solution, but the outlook remains grim, with no clear path forward to resolving the core issues of displacement, refugee rights, and the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict.⁶¹ The UN continues to stress the need for dialogue, peace-building efforts, and a reinvigorated focus on human rights to offer hope for a better future for Palestinian refugees.⁶²

⁵¹ International Labour Organization. "Country Profile: Occupied Palestinian Territory." 2024.

⁵² United Nations. "History of the Question of Palestine." 2023.

⁵³ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "The Gaza Strip: Humanitarian crisis deepens at a time funding suspensions put UNRWA aid operations in peril." 2024.

⁵⁴ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "UNRWA and the Sustainable Development Goals." 2020.

⁵⁵ United Nations General Assembly. "A/RES/194." 1948.

⁵⁶ Security Council. "9534th Meeting: Ministers Urge Efforts towards This End as Regional Tensions Rise" 2024.

⁵⁷ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. "The Gaza Strip: Humanitarian crisis deepens at a time funding suspensions put UNRWA aid operations in peril." 2024.

⁵⁸ Amnesty International. "Middle East and North Africa 2023." 2023.

⁵⁹ United Nations Security Council. "S/RES/2735." 2024.

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ United Nations General Assembly. "A/RES/78/170." 2024.

⁶² United Nations General Assembly. "A/RES/78/192." 2023.

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