

Report

Palestine: UNRWA services



LANDINFO

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SUMMARY

UNRWA is the UN agency providing education, health care, relief and social services to Palestinian refugees in five areas, including the Gaza Strip and the West Bank.

Due to the 300 million USD cut in funding from the United States in 2018, UNRWA has been compelled to reduce the scope of its services. Through emergency appeals and global fundraising efforts, the organization has been able to reduce the budget deficit somewhat, but it is still uncertain whether UNRWA will have the means to run its schools throughout the year. Likewise, UNRWA still lacks funds to uphold the food rations to the refugees in the Gaza Strip for the last quarter of 2018.

UNRWA's local employees are among those affected by the funding shortfall. More than 250 have already lost their jobs in Palestine, and several hundreds of other employees have been forced into part time work.

The reduction in staff will affect the qualities of UNRWA's services and lead to increased poverty. This will have severe consequences for the Gaza Strip where the humanitarian situation is already critical and the unemployment rate is high.

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1. INTRODUCTION

UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency),¹ the United Nations organisation for assistance to Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza Strip, is in its biggest financial crisis since its establishment. The acute crisis is mainly due to the fact that in 2018 the United States cut USD 300 million in anticipated support to the organisation.

This report describes UNRWA's operations on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as the consequences of the financial crisis for refugees in these areas. The report will also briefly illustrate how humanitarian and security challenges in the Gaza Strip affect UNRWA's operations.

The information is mostly based on the organisation's web pages and from other open online sources. Landinfo has also had a meeting with a source that has worked for many years at the UNRWA headquarters in Amman, Jordan.

2. UNRWA'S MANDATE

UNRWA's mandate is to provide assistance and protection for registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank and Gaza Strip. The aim is to secure the living conditions of Palestinian refugees in these five operating areas, pending a fair and lasting solution to their refugee problem (UNRWA, n.d.a).

UNRWA's services include elementary education, vocational education, primary health services, social assistance, camp development, microfinance and relief, including in armed conflict situations.

Palestinian refugees include all Palestinians living in Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, who lost both homes and livelihood as a result of the conflict in 1948. Descendants of male refugees, including legally adopted children, also have a claim to refugee status.

UNRWA has offered services to Palestinian refugees since 1 May 1950. In the absence of a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, UNRWA's mandate has been regularly renewed. The mandate has been extended until 30 June 2020 (UNRWA n.d.a).

3. UNRWA'S FUNDING

UNRWA operates with two budgets. The biggest is the programme budget, which covers expenses for UNRWA's core tasks within the sectors of education, health, social support and protection (UNRWA n.d.h). Funds for the programme budget are mainly collected through voluntary contributions from UN member states, the EU and

¹ UNRWA was established by UN Resolution 302 (IV) dated 8 December 1949.

other countries in the region and are distributed to the five UNRWA Operational Areas (UNRWA n.d.g).

Also, UNRWA operates an Emergency Aid Budget, where funds are covered by so-called Emergency Aid Appeals, which are sent annually to the donor community. These are earmarked funds for the operation of projects aimed at the most vulnerable of refugees, such as food aid and financial support (UNRWA n.d.i). Each operating area sends its own appeals for assistance to the donor community (Potpara, meeting in Oslo September 2018).

Additionally, UNRWA receives earmarked funds from the donor community for specific projects donors want to implement (UNRWA 2018e).

3.1 CUT IN CONTRIBUTIONS FROM THE UNITED STATES IN 2018

The United States has been the largest contributor to UNRWA until January this year. However, the President of the United States announced in January 2018 that his administration would hold back 65 of the USD 125 million promised to assist UNRWA's programme budget for 2018. In 2018, the United States has only paid USD 60 million, as against 364 million in 2017. UNRWA and others regard the cut as a punishment of the Palestinian leadership for not resuming peace talks with Israel without conditions (UNRWA 2018f; Simmons 2018; Ma'an News Agency 2018; Abunimah 2018).

US Department of State, however, has stated that resumption of support is subject to significant structural changes in UNRWA (al-Mughrabi 2018). What these changes should consist of is not explicitly stated, but it is rumoured that the United States wishes to change the definition of the refugee concept. US senators have argued that refugee status should not be inherited and that the Palestinian refugee group could thus be reduced from today's 5.3 million to 40,000 (Al Sharif 2018).

In addition to the cuts in budget support for UNRWA, the United States has also cancelled a USD 200 million assistance package to other Gaza and West Bank humanitarian projects (Lee & George 2018) with effect from 1 September 2018. According to local aid organisations, this will in particular affect support for food and health services for the poor (Estrin 2018).

3.2 BUDGET DEFICIT IN RECENT YEARS

The fact that the number of Palestinian refugees is increasing each year is the main reason why UNRWA has had significant budget deficits in recent years. This is despite a sustained high level of donations from the international community and comprehensive UNRWA efficiency enhancement measures. In 2000, the number of Palestinian refugees was 3.8 million, as against today's 5.3 million (UNRWA 2000; UNRWA 2017). Increased poverty is another factor playing a part.

4. UNRWA'S ASSISTANCE ON THE GAZA STRIP AND THE WEST BANK

Below is a brief account of UNRWA's services on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. The information is mainly obtained from the UNRWA Annual Report for 2017 (2018a) and the organisation's website.

4.1 WEST BANK

UNRWA has registered 809,738² Palestinian refugees on the West Bank (UNRWA n.d.b). About a quarter of them live in one of the 19 refugee camps located near the largest cities and in rural areas. The others live mostly in cities and villages.

UNRWA offers mainly services in the camps, but refugees living outside the camps also have the opportunity to avail themselves of them.

4.1.1 Education

UNRWA runs 96 schools with about 49,000 students (UNRWA n.d.b). In addition, the organisation runs two vocational schools.

4.1.2 Health

UNRWA operates 43 health clinics offering primary health services, including pregnancy control, maternity care and minor psychological treatment. 24 of the clinics also offer dental care (UNRWA 2017).

Also, UNRWA has six mobile clinics that assist refugees living in places with difficult access to UNRWA's permanent clinics (UNRWA 2018a, p. 59).

By 2017, more than 1.1 million patient visits were registered at UNRWA's clinics on the West Bank (UNRWA 2017).

4.1.3 Social and civil support

Figures from 2016 show that this year UNRWA supported more than 36,000 disadvantaged refugees through the programme known as the Social Safety Net (SSN). This represents 4% of all registered refugees in the West Bank (UNRWA 2017). This group includes those defined as *abject poor* and *absolute poor*, who are living on below USD 1.74 and USD 3.78 per day (UNRWA n.d.d) respectively. The SSN consists of food aid and cash payments intended to meet essential needs.

Food aid is provided in various ways on the West Bank. Together with the World Food Programme (WFP), UNRWA provides vulnerable refugees with electronic cards (e-vouchers). UNRWA deposits money on these cards, which can be used to buy food in some stores. According to the 2017 annual report, only 30% of the 49,000

² This figure is taken from a fact box dated 31 December 2016 on UNRWA's website about the organisation's operations in the West Bank. However, in the text on the same page it is stated that there are 775,000 refugees living there.

impoverished refugees living outside camps who had been given such e-cards actually received money on the cards (UNRWA 2018a, p. 59).

Other food aid is provided in-kind. In collaboration with the WFP, this is given to around 37,000 Bedouin and shepherds.

“Cash for work” commitments were offered to 8,300 refugees as part of food security in 2017.

Of other civilian support programs, UNRWA operates 15 local rehabilitation centres for persons with disabilities and supports 19 Women’s programme centres operated by community based organisations (UNRWA 2017).

Women’s centres work as social meeting places as well as arenas for light vocational training and cultural activities. The centres also provide assistance to women who wish to establish their own small businesses.

4.2 GAZA STRIP

Of the 2 million inhabitants on the Gaza Strip, 1.3 are registered as refugees. About half a million of them live in one of the eight refugee camps there (UNRWA n.d.c).

UNRWA offers elementary education, primary health services, mental health services, assistance to the most vulnerable and social services, in addition to micro-finance and emergency services. On the Gaza Strip, UNRWA continues to distribute food aid instead of coupons, as opposed to the practise in the West Bank. According to UNRWA’s director for Gaza, Mathias Schmale, 77% of the refugees live in poverty and depend on the food aid offered by UNRWA (Simmons 2018).

An overview of the scope of the services is provided below.

4.2.1 Education

UNRWA operates 275 schools on the Gaza Strip, from the 1st to the 9th grade. In the academic year 2017/18 around 270,000 students were enrolled at these schools (UNRWA 2018c).

4.2.2 Health

UNRWA operates 21 health centres (UNRWA n.d.c). In addition to regular primary health care, they offer pregnancy control, mother-child healthcare and basic psychological treatment.

The most vulnerable refugees receive assistance from UNRWA to apply for secondary and tertiary health services. On the Gaza Strip, 366 men and 1,888 women received necessary hospital treatment through UNRWA in 2017 (UNRWA 2018a, p. 63).

The total number of patient visits at UNRWA clinics in 2016 was above 4.1 million (UNRWA 2017). Patients with diabetes and high blood pressure form a large part of the patient group.

4.2.3 Social and civil support

UNRWA operates 16 offices for assistance and social services, 3 offices offering microfinance and 12 centres for food distribution. UNRWA has ceased to dispense

food aid in most of its operation areas, but this is maintained on the Gaza Strip (and in Syria), where such a large proportion of the population depend on them.

The poorest refugees (abject poor) receive food aid to cover 80% of their nutritional needs, while those who are considered “absolutely poor” (see definition under section 4.1.3) get rations that cover 40% of their nutritional needs. By 2017, 530,348 refugees received the highest level of food aid, while 363,884 received the lowest level (UNRWA 2018a, p. 61).

The abject poor also receive paid cash payments intended to cover the most essential needs beyond the food aid they receive. In 2016, more than 98,000 refugees received assistance from SSN, which represents 7% of the registered refugees on Gaza Strip (UNRWA 2017).

Refugees on the Gaza Strip who have suffered extensive damages to their houses have also received assistance from UNRWA, either for reconstruction, if the damage was not total, or for temporary housing.

Among other support programmes, UNRWA operates seven local rehabilitation centres for persons with disabilities and supports seven women’s centres run by community based organisations.

5. CRITERIA FOR UNRWA ASSISTANCE

Persons who want to access services, must be registered with UNRWA. In addition to those who are registered refugees according to the definition described above, there are also some other groups that receive UNRWA assistance even if they do not have refugee status. They are registered by UNRWA as “Other Registered Persons” (UNRWA 2006).

This applies to the following categories:

- The poor in Jerusalem and on the Gaza Strip already registered by UNRWA. Descendants, through the male line, of this group qualify for assistance from UNRWA. No persons other than such descendants can today be registered in this category with UNRWA.
- Frontier villagers. This category includes:
 - Persons (or descendants of persons) who lived on the Jordanian side of the ceasefire line/green line, who lost their livelihood when they were banned from farmland on the Israeli side of the border.
 - Persons from Gaza who were in the same situation.
 - Bedouins who lost their grazing areas on the Israeli side.
 - Palestinians living in areas outside refugee camps where UNRWA has its services (Perez 1995).

Persons already registered in this category are entitled to UNRWA support. This right is also enjoyed by their descendants through the male line. No others than such descendants can today be registered in this category with UNRWA.

- Compromise cases. Persons already classified in this category are entitled to UNRWA services. However, their descendants do not have this right. UNRWA does not include new persons in this category. It is not apparent from UNRWA's report, to which reference is made, what the previous requirements were for being registered as a compromise case.
- MNR (married to non-refugees) family members. Male spouses and descendants of women who are registered refugees and who have been married to men who do not qualify for assistance from UNRWA on their own.
- Female spouses to registered Palestinian refugees. Registration requires the presentation of ID cards and marriage certificates.
- *Kafalah children*. These are children whom Palestinian refugees or other registered persons care for according to Islamic *kafalah* practice. These children can receive UNRWA services as long as they live in the household until they are 18.

On the West Bank 187,435 Palestinians are registered as “other registered”, while the corresponding number is 87,080 on the Gaza Strip (UNRWA 2017).

Besides offering services, UNRWA is an important employer for Palestinian refugees. With its approximately 13,000 employees, UNRWA is one of the Gaza Strip's biggest employers (Simmons 2018). Of these, approx. 9,000 are teachers and headteachers in the 275 schools that UNRWA operates there. The average unemployment rate on the Gaza Strip is 44% according to the World Bank (2018).

On the West Bank, around 4,600 Palestinians are employed in UNRWA (UNRWA 2017). The unemployment rate is 18%, according to the World Bank (2018).

6. UNRWA'S REDUCED CAPACITY AS A RESULT OF THE BUDGET CUT

After the United States declared in January that it would hold back funds which had already been appropriated to the organisation, UNRWA immediately issued an emergency appeal to the international community. The appeal was called the Dignity is priceless campaign (UNRWA 2018b). Some countries have promised to increase their contributions to the institution, but currently these contributions have not been large enough to replace the loss of funds from the United States. Between March and June, UNRWA collected USD 238 million in new donations (Abu Tomaeh 2018). According to a press release from UNRWA in September 2018, the organisation still needs USD 200 million to maintain its services for 2018 (UN Department of Public Information 2018).

It is still too early to say what effect the deficit in UNRWA will have on service provision on the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where the organisation in 2017 used respectively 39% and 12% of its total funds.

An indication of what the budget cut can really mean is the organisation's spending on the Gaza Strip in 2017. Of nearly USD 530 million spent last year, 219.4 million was spent on education and 169.6 million on food, housing and environmental health measures (UNRWA 2018a, p. 22). A further USD 51.6 million was spent on

healthcare. The rest was mainly used to promote refugees' rights, and for work promotion and administration.

6.1 CONSEQUENCES FOR SCHOOLS AND HEALTH SERVICES

According to UNRWA spokesperson, Sami Mshasha (UNRWA 2018g), education and primary health care will be shielded against cuts as far as possible. Nevertheless, it can be assumed that the budget deficit will adversely affect these sectors as well.

The consequences of the cuts in education will be fewer teachers and larger classes (Potpara, meeting September 2018; UNRWA 2018g). Employees who retire are not being replaced and employees who have worked for ten years and who previously could get a permanent position with pension rights will no longer receive this offer. Many will have to expect to lose their jobs, and most of those who gain employment, will only get temporary contracts that do not provide security or pension rights. This makes UNRWA less attractive as an employer and will probably have a negative effect on the quality of UNRWA's school services (Potpara, meeting 2018) in the long term.

By August 2018, the organisation only had funds to run the schools through the month of September (UNRWA 2018h). According to UNRWA's director, they still lacked USD 217 million to ensure operations throughout the year. Belgium contributed 4 million Euros in September for this purpose (UNRWA 2018i).

UNRWA is trying to protect primary health services (UNRWA 2018e), but the cuts will also hit this sector for the same reasons as mentioned above. A doctor in the UNRWA clinics sees an average of 113 patients per day (UNRWA n.d.f). Fewer doctors will put further pressure on those who remain.

6.2 IMPACT ON OTHER SOCIAL SERVICES

As for social assistance given to the abject poor, UNRWA is doing what it can to continue food delivery to this group (UNRWA 2018e; UNRWA 2018d; UNRWA 2018g). The refugees on the Gaza Strip live under very difficult humanitarian conditions, and it is important to ensure that those in the most difficult situation are provided with the most essential basic needs to avoid a total humanitarian disaster.

Services deemed to be terminated, unless the UNRWA budget deficit is covered by other donor countries, is employment and housing support to those who had their houses destroyed during the war in 2014. Also, it is likely that the support for the women's centres and perhaps also the rehabilitation centres will end. Alternatively, there could be impairment in other services, including in the mental health service.

According to Dejan Potpara (meeting September 2018), who has worked at the UNRWA headquarters in Amman for a number of years, UNRWA has already cut costs and streamlined operations enormously over the last few years. One major form of streamlining has been to shift from the distribution of food aid to providing financial support. By distributing money instead of food, the organisation has saved large sums on shipping, storage and administration. In Gaza, however, food is still being distributed.

6.3 TERMINATION OF EMPLOYMENT IN UNRWA

One of the consequences of the budget deficit has been a termination of employment contracts (The New Arab 2018; UNRWA 2018g). In the first half of 2018, UNRWA used the programme budget to run emergency aid programmes (al-Mughrabi 2018). This could no longer be continued, and according to UNRWA spokesperson Sami Mshasha, they had to terminate the employment of employees who had no contract after 31 July 2018. In the Gaza Strip this involved 113 persons, while on the West Bank the number was 154. Also, 580 employees have had to move to part-time positions (al-Mughrabi 2018).

We provide information below, including from an internal UNRWA memo from July 2018 to which Landinfo has gained access (UNRWA 2018e), on how UNRWA is planning to downscale and run further operations in 2018. Some of the information is also available in a public statement by a UNRWA spokesperson (UNRWA 2018f).

6.4 PLANNED SERVICES IN THE WEST BANK IN 2018

UNRWA closed its Cash for Work activities on 31 July 2018. Households that have been considered to be “abject poor” for the last two years were moved to UNRWA’s Social Safety net programme from 1 August 2018. This will ensure continued assistance to the poorest persons in the camps.

UNRWA will continue to distribute electronic food vouchers in 2018. Households that have been considered “abject poor” for the last two years should then be moved to UNRWA’s Social Safety Net programme. This will ensure continued assistance to the poorest outside the camps.

The food assistance program for Bedouins and shepherds will continue throughout 2018, and UNRWA and WFP will try to ensure continued operation next year.

The local mental health programme was terminated on 1 September 2018. UNRWA is trying to find other actors to take over the work in some areas.

Mobile health clinics will be shut down from 1 November 2018. UNRWA will try to find other actors to continue this work.

Other assistance functions will continue, but will be streamlined with reduced staffing.

6.5 PLANNED SERVICES IN GAZA IN 2018

UNRWA wants to continue the distribution of food aid to nearly one million refugees in Gaza after September. The programme will continue if the organisation receives additional funds from other donors. However, as of July 2018, UNRWA did not have the money to run this programme in the last quarter of 2018 (UNRWA 2018d).

The community mental health programme will continue throughout 2018, but from August 2018 the programme has been incorporated into the primary health and education sector. This will lead to some redundancies of highly qualified health workers.

UNRWA’s reconstruction assistance for housing that has been damaged as a result of acts of war ceased after the final payments in July 2018.

The job creation project was reduced by 50% during the first half of 2018 and will have to be reduced further.

Projects funded by the UNRWA emergency appeals, such as school materials and operating costs of projects UNRWA has with local organisations, will expire if there are no new funds for this purpose.

The assistance programmes (Protection functions) will continue, but will be streamlined with some reductions in the number of international employees.

7. UNRWA'S CAPACITY IN THE LIGHT OF HUMANITARIAN AND SECURITY CHALLENGES IN THE GAZA STRIP

The humanitarian and security challenges in the Gaza Strip have consequences for UNRWA's operations in the area. During the last war with Israel in 2014, several of UNRWA's schools and clinics were destroyed by acts of war. UNRWA has spent substantial resources on the reconstruction of these buildings.

Also, UNRWA has contributed to the reconstruction of the homes of refugees who had their homes destroyed or ravaged during the war. The reconstruction has taken a long time and is not nearly completed, even four years after the war. Persons who cannot rebuild their houses, not least because of restrictive import rules on cement and other building materials, have been given assistance to rent other housing. The damages caused by the war has thus led to extraordinary expenses for UNRWA on the Gaza Strip, and have led to increased poverty among both refugees and the rest of the population. This increases pressure on UNRWA's social services.

Almost 1 million refugees are dependent on UNRWA food aid, and the situation will become critical if aid is discontinued. Continuation of the programme is dependent on further assistance from the international community. In July, UNRWA only had funds throughout September (UNRWA 2018e).

7.1 DEMONSTRATIONS AGAINST THE UNRWA OFFICES IN GAZA

UNRWA has occasionally had to close its offices in Gaza because of demonstrations and dissatisfaction with the UN organisation. This occurred as late as in July and August 2018 as a result of the redundancies and changes in working conditions for several hundred UNRWA employees (The New Arab 2018; UNRWA 2018g). The director of UNRWA in Gaza had to close the headquarters for over two weeks due to large crowds that blocked the building. Such events make the working conditions for UNRWA personnel very challenging.

UNRWA's director for Gaza, Mattias Schmale, described the situation and relationship with UNRWA's personnel to AFP (as reported in The New Arab 2018) as follows on 9 August: "I am the captain of the ship which has 13,000 sailors on it and they have basically thrown me off the bridge and consigned me to my captain's quarters".

Schmale accused the trade union of repeated cases of threats and harassment against UNRWA's local affiliates, their joint colleagues, and this, he thought, crossed a red

line. He then said the following: “I am very concerned about the safety and security of my Palestinian colleagues’ (The New Arab 2018).

Trade union leader Amir Al-Mishal, on the other hand, maintained that the demonstrations at the UNRWA headquarters were peaceful and that the purpose was to secure the employees’ jobs. He claimed that some of those who had been affected by the cuts had worked for UNRWA for more than 30 years, and on this basis, they were seeking dialogue with management.

7.2 OTHER DEMONSTRATIONS ON THE GAZA STRIP

Another security challenge on the Gaza Strip, which also affects UNRWA, is ongoing demonstrations by returning refugees which started on 30 March 2018 (known as the Great march of return). Every Friday thousands of Palestinians gather near the border with Israel to demonstrate for the right of refugees to return to the areas their families originally came from.

The demonstrations are also a protest against eleven years of blockade of the Gaza Strip and the continuing deterioration of humanitarian conditions as a result of it. So far, 179 Palestinians, including 136 civilians, have been killed and more than 19,000 wounded by Israeli soldiers (OCHA 2018b; PCHR 2018). Among the killed are 28 children, and over 1,200 children have been wounded. Many of the injured receive health care at UNRWA clinics, and this obviously demands great resources from an otherwise pressed service.

Among those killed are also three Palestinian aid workers (OCHA 2018a). 370 others have been wounded, according to the UN Permanent Representative and Humanitarian Coordinator in Palestine, Jamie McColdrick.

8. SUMMARY

UNRWA’s director, Pierre Krähenbühl, has described the United States cuts in budget support as an existential threat to UNRWA (UNRWA 2018g). As a result of the crisis this has created, the organisation has launched a comprehensive fundraising campaign to minimise the budget deficit. However, as of September, the deficit remains significant, which has led to the termination of work contracts in UNRWA and changes in working conditions for many of those who can keep their jobs.

UNRWA prioritise to maintain operations in schools and health centres, as well as social assistance to the poorest refugees. However, the quality of education could be impaired by poorer teacher capacity and higher classes. The health sector is initially affected by the inclusion of mental health services in primary care, but here too, redundancies and changed working conditions may be at the expense of the quality of the services.

Continuation of food distribution on the Gaza Strip for the last quarter of 2018 is uncertain and depends on further assistance. On the West Bank, the programme of electronic food vouchers will continue throughout the year.

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