



EXPLAINER: IMPLICATIONS OF THE UNRWA CRISIS

Issue Brief #31 | January 28, 2025

On October 28th, 2024, the Knesset passed two laws targeting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) operations: the “Law to Cease UNRWA Operations” and the “Law to Cease UNRWA Operations in the Territory of the State of Israel.” These laws, set to take effect on January 28, 2025, prohibit Israeli government authorities from any interaction with UNRWA in the West Bank and Gaza, while banning its activities entirely within Israel’s sovereign territory, which Israel regards as including East Jerusalem. UNRWA [condemned](#) this no-contact policy and [called](#) the Israeli order to vacate its premises in East Jerusalem a violation of Israel’s international legal responsibilities as a UN member state — as well as an attempt to expand illegal Israeli settlements. This issue brief explains how these Knesset laws will impact UNRWA.

Visas for International Staff

Israel will deny UNRWA’s international staff the visas required to work in the occupied Palestinian territories, with existing visas expiring according to each visa term. This will leave only local staff operational, significantly undermining UNRWA’s effectiveness and international management oversight. Donor confidence in funding UNRWA will likely erode under these conditions. For instance, UNRWA’s *Protection and Neutrality Department*, responsible for ensuring impartiality at its 220 facilities, relies on 35 inspectors, including 12 international staff. Without them, the department’s functionality will be severely compromised.

Imports

All imports labeled or otherwise indicated in relevant documents as being intended for UNRWA will be blocked, as import controls are managed by Israeli authorities like the Israeli Tax Authority and the Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT). The no-contact policy will prevent the coordination necessary for customs clearance, halting essential humanitarian supplies.

Day-to-Day Operations

The prohibition of contact between Israeli officials and UNRWA will paralyze UNRWA’s operations in the West Bank. UNRWA frequently collaborates with the Israeli Civil Administration on a wide range of issues, from facilitating medical supplies during IDF operations in cities like Tulkarem and Jenin to routine logistics. Without this coordination and deconfliction channel, UNRWA’s activities will take place in higher risk settings.

Education System

UNRWA’s 96 schools, 2,215 teachers, and 46,000 students in the West Bank will face severe operational challenges. Israel’s expectation that the Palestinian Authority (PA) will assume responsibility for these schools raises concerns. For example, UNRWA has mechanisms to promote neutrality and oversight over the PA curriculum, deterring incitement in teaching materials. If the PA takes over, these mechanisms may disappear, and donor nations may be reluctant to redirect funding to the PA, given its reputation for corruption.

Impact on PA Resilience

The collapse of UNRWA's operations in the West Bank could severely undermine the already fragile Palestinian Authority. The PA faces an economic crisis exacerbated by the post-October 7 loss of 100,000 Palestinian jobs in Israel and heightened security tensions due to the Gaza war. Taking over UNRWA's responsibilities – primarily health and education – would impose an unsustainable economic burden, potentially leading to the PA's collapse. Moreover, the PA is also expected to be reluctant about assuming UNRWA's responsibilities due to historic sensitivities around the refugee issue, and with its domestic legitimacy already eroded.

East Jerusalem

In East Jerusalem, UNRWA operates six schools and one health clinic. Israel's UN ambassador has indicated that UNRWA's headquarters in Jerusalem will need to be vacated by January 30, 2025. While the Jerusalem municipality has taken steps to provide education, health, and welfare services to Palestinian refugees, parents of students are turning to alternative schools, such as Waqf-affiliated institutions, which often adopt a more radical stance toward Israel. Although the operational impact in East Jerusalem may be minor compared to Gaza and the West Bank, the move carries significant symbolic weight, as Israel views East Jerusalem as sovereign territory and the UN does not.

Gaza

In Gaza, UNRWA is a vital provider of education, health, and welfare services to hundreds of thousands of Palestinian residents. Since October 7, 2023, its operations have been almost entirely dedicated to humanitarian assistance in shelters. Of its 14,000 employees, 5,000 are involved in these operations while other UN agencies, such as the World Food Programme (WFP), have scaled up their operations, none possess the capacity, manpower or local trust of UNRWA. Since the ceasefire took effect in Gaza, aid entry into the Strip has increased significantly, with [more than 3,800](#) aid trucks recorded thus far. If UNRWA ceases to function, the impact on this humanitarian aid is uncertain, as is the eventual transition to recovery and reconstruction.

What's Next

The crisis has already taken hold, as repeated appeals to the Israeli government to amend the laws passed in the Knesset have failed. This has led to a deadlock, with Israel refusing to reverse its decisions and the UN [stating](#) that it will not propose an alternative to the services provided by UNRWA. Meanwhile, impoverished Palestinians are left stranded in the middle, with no viable solution in sight. Resolving this crisis seems impossible without bold actions and a willingness from all sides to compromise on the irreconcilable positions they have taken.

It is unlikely that Israeli authorities will reverse their decision or that contact with UNRWA will continue, given the strong Knesset support for the two laws. Israeli officials believe the UN will find alternative mechanisms to deliver services in place of UNRWA. In March 2024, then-President Biden [signed](#) into law a one-year ban on US funding to UNRWA, putting immense strain on UNRWA's budget. Upon taking office, President Trump [issued](#) an executive order freezing almost all foreign aid (except military assistance to Israel and Egypt) – upholding the freeze on US aid to UNRWA. Furthermore, UN Ambassador designate Elise Stefanik recently [testified](#) before the Senate that she supports defunding UNRWA, and she [introduced](#) legislation to defund the agency as a member of Congress during the first Trump Administration. If the new US administration intends to permanently freeze aid to UNRWA, then it must initiate negotiations with the UN, Israel, and the PA to develop alternative, practical solutions for delivering essential services in Gaza and the West Bank.