



UNRWA: US CUT IN FUNDING LEAVES PALESTINIAN REFUGEES IN A LURCH

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(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)



The Trump administration announced on September 1, 2018 that it will cut its entire budget to United Nations Relief Works Agency in charge of providing assistance to Palestinian refugees and their descendants.¹ According to officials, the Trump administration is considering alternative options to solve the Palestinian refugee problem. The alternatives however, have not been specified.

The United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine refugees was founded in 1948 following the Arab-Israeli conflict. The Agency was aimed at addressing the refugee problem emanating from the conflict, resulting in the loss of homes and livelihoods. Since then, UNRWA, funded by voluntary contributions, as well as funding from the regular budget of the United Nations has been continuing to provide education, healthcare, emergency assistance, social services, and among others, relief during armed conflict. UNRWA has catered to several generations of Palestinian refugees and the recent funding cuts announced by the Trump administration have dealt a severe blow to the relief agency and can also be seen as a blow to multilateralism as embodied by the UN system. The UNRWA funding cut is a flagrant assault on the needy refugees, heavily dependent on the relief works agency to help Palestinian refugees survive. As of now, five million² Palestine Refugees are eligible to receive assistance from UNRWA. The United States, among others has been one of the top donor governments to have donated to UNRWA.

¹ Column Lynch, "U.S. to End All Funding to U.N. Agency That Aids Palestinian Refugees" *Foreign Policy* August 28, 2018 <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/28/middle-east-palestinian-israel-pompeo-trump-kushner-u-s-to-end-all-funding-to-u-n-agency-that-aids-palestinian-refugees/>

² United Nations Relief Works Agency website <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>

The funding cut to UNRWA will adversely affect the five million³ Palestinian refugees, as well as undermine their cause for a homeland, to which their claim remains valid. Any funding to any kind of agency which provides support to the Palestinian refugees does validate the cause of millions of these refugees, who live with the hope that their dream for a homeland is a possibility. Undermining UNRWA by inflicting a blow to it in the shape of funding cuts, the Trump administration is making an attempt to reset the terms of engagement as far as the Palestinian issue is concerned. This is evident from the fact that the United States also extended recognition to Jerusalem as Israel's capital in December 2017. It may be noted that since the year 2010, the average contribution of the United States to UNRWA has been 247 million dollars, which is a quarter of the agency's budget and the US contribution in 2017 was 364 million dollars.⁴ However, in 2018, the US State Department released 65 million dollars, with the announcement that it was withholding another 60 million dollars. This was followed by the recently announced absolute funding cuts, which are likely to cause severe damage to those affected refugees, dependent on UNRWA's support.⁵

Hence, the due amount of 300 million dollars is going to affect the lives of two million refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. This assault on UNRWA is politically motivated and has a direct impact on the Palestinian refugees. Under the Trump administration, the Israel-Palestine question remains uncertain and with measures like funding cuts to UNRWA, it is evident that a more harsh approach is being undertaken by the United States in order to undermine the Palestinian struggle. In Gaza, more than 60 per cent of people rely on food coupons provided by UNRWA.⁶ Defunding the agency is a foremost crime against millions of Palestinians who have already paid a very high price for several decades as generations have grown up in refugee settlements, with very little access to basic amenities and a very high dependence on UN agencies for their survival. The UNRWA aid cut is not just costly in terms of the consequences on the refugee population, but also in terms of the politicization of humanitarian aid. The underlying message by the Trump administration is to give the signal that the Palestinian question stands on a very slippery slope, and clearly, such measures are intended at facilitating those opposed to the Palestinian demand for a just return to their homeland.

³ Wishing away Palestinian refugees: End of US' UNRWA aid explained, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/unrwa-funding-cut-deeply-regrettable-shocking-180901071620633.html>

⁴ Donor Charts https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/overalldonor_ranking.pdf

⁵ Edward Wong, "US to End Funding to UN Agency That Helps Palestinian Refugees", *The New York Times*, August 31, 2018 <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/31/us/politics/trump-unrwa-palestinians.html?smid=fb-nytimes&smtyp=cur>

⁶ Osama Al Sharif, "UNRWA's defunding is the dismantling of the Palestinian question", *Arab News*, July 31, 2018 <http://www.arabnews.com/node/1348621>

The multilateral effort to provide health, education and shelter to refugees has now been put in jeopardy and is likely to have very perilous consequences. This can be assessed by the fact that a great portion of the UNRWA budget goes towards educating children and without sufficient funds, it is likely that the vulnerable refugee population, dependent on UNRWA funds for education is expected to suffer immeasurably. The cuts by US can also be labeled as a likely blow to the United Nation's Sustainable Development Goal No. 4 with an aim that every child is in school by 2030. The social consequences of this funding cut could also be very serious in case the UNRWA sponsored school children are out of school, which may increase the danger of them being exploited by child traffickers or being hired as child labor.

In the face of funding cuts by the United States, the European Union, the second largest contributor to UNRWA has announced that it will increase funding to the donor agency where deemed necessary. This was announced in order to dispel uncertainty about the future of the refugees heavily dependent on UNRWA funding. Other countries have also pledged to contribute to the agency in the face of US cuts. However, the UNRWA funding cut by United States means a lot more than just funding cuts to the vulnerable Palestinian populace; it is viewed as an attempt by the Trump administration to thwart the Palestinian cause, and above all, politicize a humanitarian issue. A blow to the United Nations' multilateral endeavors is also evident with this funding cut as a major power has taken such a drastic step which undermines the most vulnerable refugees in an extremely volatile region where such multilateral endeavors are considered a symbol of peace.