

**The Role of UNRWA in Empowering Palestinian Refugees: Case Study on the
Educational Sector**

By

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I. Introduction

I grew up in Al-Arroub Palestinian refugee camp in northern Hebron in the West Bank, which shelters more than 10,000¹ Palestinian refugees who were displaced from their original countries in 1948. I have experienced directly the daily challenges of life in my camp, where the ongoing Israeli occupation and oppression impacted our lives created an atmosphere of uncertainty. One vivid memory that captures the uncertainty we faced is a routine trip to the market with my father. I was approximately 8 years old at that time.

As we walked through the narrow alleys of Al-Arroub camp, we suddenly heard commotions and shouts. Israeli military jeeps had entered the camp, escalating tension immediately. The Palestinian refugees in the camp urgently closed their stores, while children hurried home, fearing Israeli arrests and attacks. My father held my hands tightly, hurried me back to our home, this incident had left a lasting impression on me, the obvious anxiety in the camp, the sudden disruption of daily life, and the ongoing uncertainty of what each day would bring under Israeli occupation. Living in the camp has taught me resilience and fueled my determination to advocate for Palestinian causes on international scale. It is why my work at the United Nations, reporting on ethnic cleansing of Palestinian civilians, and crimes against humanity in Palestine, is more than a job; it's a personal mission to present the realities of my local community and advocate for justice and self-determination.

In this context, education emerged as the most effective tool for not only better understanding our realities, but also honing the abilities required to improve them. From my

¹ Oweiw, Anas I. B. R. A. H. I. M. Al-Twayha, Mohammed Qutteneh, Rami Dandis, and T. A. R. I. Q. Al-Sadi. "Evaluation and Design of Infrastructure in the Palestinian Camps Case study: AL-Arroub Camp." (2012).

experience, UNRWA is more than just a humanitarian organization, It is a place that I learned, aspired, and dreamed for a better future despite the difficulties that we faced. The UNRWA agency serves as a vital source of education and upholds my and the other residents of the Al-Arroub camp's basic rights. Many teachers in our community are themselves Palestinian refugees, deeply familiar with our daily struggles and committed to our success. The camp's overcrowded and poorly equipped infrastructure worsens insufficient living conditions, leading to restricted sanitary facilities, lack of clean water, limited job opportunities, and inconsistent electricity.

The basic key moment when I did my basic study at UNRWA schools from first grade until 9th grade, UNRWA's role in my life and the lives of many others of my camp has been a cornerstone of our empowerment and enhancement through access to quality education, and extracurricular activities, including leadership and communication skills. This agency has provided us with knowledge and resilience tools to overcome the numerous challenges of living in such a camp, where lack of healthcare, restricted economic opportunities, and overcrowded living conditions are daily realities. Their programs and initiatives supported me in pursuing basic education and opened the doors to many opportunities, such as higher education scholarships, international exchanges, and extracurricular trainings.

In 1949, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) passed Resolution 302², which led to the creation of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) (Baruch 2018, 6). This agency tackles various issues faced by Palestinian refugees, including their right to return, as well as essential services such as healthcare, education,

² UN Resolution 302, adopted by the UNGA on December 8, 1949, is titled "Assistance to Palestine Refugees, which contains 22 articles and mandate of the (UNRWA). It is important to articulate the purpose of UNRWA, aiming to support emergency relief for Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1948 Arab Israeli conflict (Rastan 2009,1-10).

infrastructure, camp improvement, protection, microfinance, and social services. When the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1949, key stakeholders such as Syria, Jordan, other Arab countries, Israel, and the United States agreed to designate UNRWA as an independent agency specifically for Palestinian refugees, rather than placing them under UNHCR's broader mandate (Akram 2002, 39).

Therefore, UNRWA's mandate is confined to empowering Palestinians through material and humanitarian aid, and it explicitly does not address the political aspects of Palestinian suffering under Israeli occupation³. UNRWA operates an extensive network of dental care, health clinics, and disease prevention for children and women. It also works to provide Palestinian refugees with clean water, sanitation facilities and roads programs. Through the various agency microfinance emergency relief programs, UNRWA provides business development services, loans, food assistance, shelter, and medical care that address the Palestinian immediate demands and needs while also contributing to their resilience and rehabilitation (Schulz 2021, 4). For over 75 years, UNRWA has remained dedicated to aiding Palestinian refugees, who constitute 78% of the Palestinian population in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria (Southey 2021, 2).

Nevertheless, since its founding, UNRWA has faced a lot of controversy, including issues such as political neutrality, allegations of inefficiency, accusations of corruption, financial challenges, and security concerns. In 2018, the United States withdrew financing from UNRWA, resulting in a one-third reduction in the agency's budget. This resulted in cutbacks to some of its services for Palestinian refugees, including housing, healthcare and emergency response programs

³ The Israeli occupation refers to Israel's authority over specific Palestinian territories, primarily East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank since 1948.

(Gottheil 2006, 419). More recently, Israeli officials suggested as much as 10% of UNRWA's staff had ties to Hamas, with some participating in the attacks of October 7th⁴. These accusations led to 19 states and the EU suspending their funding for UNRWA, just as the humanitarian conditions on the ground in Gaza continued to rapidly deteriorate.

These two images of UNRWA—one as an essential lifeline for Palestinian survival and empowerment, and the other as an overtly political actor and existential threat stand in stark contrast to each other and drives my investigation: How can we reconcile the images of UNRWA as both 'political' and as 'educational', humanitarian organization? How did an organization whose work has been about empowering Palestinian people come to be seen as an overtly political actor and existential threat? To answer these questions, I explore the contradictions and perspectives surrounding UNRWA's reputation, and the impact it has had on the lives of millions of refugees. I use the educational sector as a case study because I believe that education is a key source of empowerment for Palestinians, providing them with creativity, problem-solving abilities, and critical thinking skills to navigate solutions to political, economic, and social challenges. Additionally, it helps them access employment opportunities and participate in educational trainings and workshops on specific topics such as human rights, gender equality, justice, and accountability.

This project examines the importance of UNRWA for Palestinian refugees, using the educational sector as a case study. It also analyzes the quality of education provided by UNRWA

⁴ International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, "UNRWA: Countering Financing of Terrorism and Swinging Back from Post-9/11 Hard Security Reflexes," accessed June 9, 2024, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/unrwa-countering-financing-terrorism-and-swing-back-post-911-hard-security-reflexes>.

schools and identifies main periods of educational change. I also argue that the educational system of UNRWA provides a revealing case study and method for elaborating developmental aid and humanitarian needs to the Palestinian refugees, demonstrating that it is a welfare and humanitarian organization rather than a political agency. Despite being principally a humanitarian organization, however, this does not mean it is not *politicized* in the arenas of international and geopolitical governance.

II. Historical Background

To understand the causes of the Palestinian refugee crisis, it is important to consider the historical context of UNRWA. These issues, including displacement, statelessness, poor living conditions, the right of return, economic obstacles, lack of access to education, and political instability, remain unresolved. They need to be addressed within the framework of humanitarian assistance and international cooperation. UNRWA was established in the aftermath of Al-Nakba⁵ in 1948, which marked the first Arab Israeli war and resulted in the creation of Israel and the displacement of over 700,000 Palestinians and 530 villages were eliminated (Khalidi 2005, 43-44). As Rastan (2009) also notes:

“1948 was the year of the first Arab Israeli war, the creation of the state of Israel, and the displacement of approximately 750,000 Palestinian Arabs, who became the Palestine refugees. During the 65 years since 1948 the area has been the scene for several conflicts and the Palestine refugees have grown in numbers. The increase is not merely due to a normal growth in population, but also an effect of the war in 1967⁶ and the following occupation, which forced many Palestinians to relocate” (Rastan 2009, 4).

The ongoing denial of the right of return to Palestinians has been perpetuated by Israel, leading to statelessness and displacement. Since the establishment of Israel, it has considered Palestinian refugees as a threat to its ethnonationalist Jewish character (Shabaneh 2010, 7), enshrined recently in the Jewish Nation-State Law, passed in 2018. This initial perception has impacted Israel policies toward the Palestinian refugees.

⁵ The name al-Nakba refers to the atrocities that occurred in 1948. It translates to 'catastrophe' in Arabic.

⁶ The war 1967, known as the Six-Day war, which occurred between Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Syria and Palestine. It was started from June 5 to June 10, 1967. It is considered as a continuation of Al-Nakba.

“Israel’s Jewish Nation-State Law is the “law of laws”, capable of overriding any ordinary legislation. It alters the constitutional framework of the state, making changes that violate established international norms: there is no democratic constitution in the world that designates the constitutional identity of the state on racial grounds, as serving one ethnic group” (Jabareen 2019,43).

The citation highlights the Israeli violation and discrimination against international standards through policies that prioritize one ethnic group's identity over others within a democratic context. Moreover, Al-Nakba had a profound impact on Palestinian lives, resulting in the loss of their homes, livelihoods, and cultural heritage, as well as causing significant socioeconomic hardship. It also led to a lack of political representation and inflicted psychological trauma on generations of Palestinians. Essentially an event of ethnic cleansing, which forced Palestinians to leave their lands, homes, and memories behind. The concept of ethnic cleansing refers to the expulsion of Palestinians from their original towns and villages, resulting in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians during the establishment of Israel in the Nakbah year (Pappé 2006, 6). So, the essence of the instrumental role of UNRWA has been begun after Al-Nakba atrocities and Israeli occupation impact on Palestinian lives. The organization strives to serve the Palestinian population to get basic services and humanitarian aid under these conditions.

“UNRWA has a strict mandate and no real power to solve the problem, but it remains the actor who is seen as the main actor to aid the Palestine refugees. Since no actor, apart from the UNRWA, has any mandate of responsibility for the Palestine refugees, it is hard to see any other possible institution to enforce the Human Rights of the Palestine refugees, apart from the UNRWA” (Rastan 2009, 31).

The quote clearly explains the main scope of UNRWA's critical responsibility, which is focused on providing relief and humanitarian assistance to Palestinian refugees. It does not have the ability to address the political issues which related to the refugee problems and causes.

Another main reason for the crucial role of UNRWA is that Palestine is a non-member observer state according to the UN Resolution 67/19, which adopted in 2012 (Sakran 2017, 7). This was an important phrase towards Palestinian membership, though it is yet to materialize into a full UN membership. However, the challenge is based in the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) inability to fully enforce the causes of these refugees.

“The Palestine Liberation Organization is the general organizational frame- work within which all Palestinian organizations - commando groups, trade unions, professional associations, as well as prominent national figures - meet to work for the achievement of Palestinian national goals. Established in 1964” (Hamid 1957, 2).

Despite being the sole political representative of the Palestinian people, the PLO has failed in building a sustainable political project; indeed, its inactivity in the last two decades and its succumbing to international aid has meant a political vacuum in Palestinian politics. In this context, UNRWA's mission is to fill the gap for Palestinian refugees left behind by supporting essential services such as healthcare, education, and social cohesion that provide Palestinian refugees. The agency's work is vital in promoting that Palestinian refugees receive necessary support despite the political restrictions faced by the PLO (Hamid 1957, 7). So, UNRWA expanded its educational effects by implementing gender equality in all schools, “throughout its history, UNRWA has worked closely with the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) to ensure that its programs reflect the very best practice in healthcare and education provision” (McCann 2008, 3).

III. Internship at The Mission of the State of Palestine to the United Nations: First-Hand Seat to the Controversy Over UNRWA

During my internship at the State of Palestine Mission to the United Nations, I worked closely with Dr. Riyad Mansour, the Palestinian Ambassador to the UN, and Feda Abdelhady Nasser Deputy, Permanent Observer of the State of Palestine to the UN, and other Mission members. This internship provides a unique opportunity to explore the research question I have posed: how can we reconcile the images of UNRWA as both a ‘political’ and an ‘educational’ humanitarian organization? Through direct cooperation with Palestinian diplomats and other political leaders from diverse backgrounds, I have gained insights into the interactions and perceptions regarding UNRWA as both a humanitarian organization and a political entity. My approach involves analyzing these political discussions with stakeholders involved in Palestinian causes, particularly the refugees in the West Bank camps. By examining UNRWA’s programs within political dynamics, I aim to develop an analytical understanding of how an organization initially focused on educational empowerment has come to be viewed through a political lens, influencing perceptions of its mission. We crafted funding reports after attending international and geopolitical meetings with donor countries to secure urgent financial assistance for UNRWA. I had the chance to attend meetings at both the Security Council (SC) and the General Assembly (GA), and to analyze and cover the issues related to UNRWA work, funding crisis, and how these financial circumstances affect all basic sectors for Palestinians, particularly education. Additionally, I reviewed numerous reports related to UNRWA's operations and funding.⁷ In my

⁷ Berg, Kjersti G., Jørgen Jensehaugen, and Åge A. Tiltne. "UNRWA, funding crisis and the way forward." CMI Report (2022).

analysis, I will explain the funding challenges faced by UNRWA, utilizing insights gained from these reports and meetings. This will indicate exploring the discussions made at the UNSC and UNGA, as well as the financial data and narratives presented in the reports.

Through this analysis, I will provide a detailed understanding of the financial difficulties that impact UNRWA's capacity to maintain its main services. According to a report by the Palestinian Mission to the United Nations (2024),

“All States and organizations donors to UNRWA and the members of its Advisory Commission must act to defend the Agency and ensure its indispensable operations are sustained with necessary political and financial backing, pending a just solution for the Palestine refugee plight in line with international law and relevant UN resolutions, including resolution 194 (III).”⁸

The Mission's role is to advocate for Palestinian rights and needs in accordance with UN resolutions, and international law, including education sector, in line with equality, justice and humanity. In this context, the UNRWA faces financial challenges, though the main challenge remains to find a political solution for Palestinian refugees and the continuous expulsion of Palestinians from their homes. In other words, under the Israeli occupation, the numbers of Palestinian refugees are only growing, hence proving the necessity for a political solution. In this regard, the Mission's advocacy for the education sector is an integral element of its commitment to the promotion of Palestinian rights within the framework of rights principles. (Shabaneh 2010, 4). While UNRWA operates hundreds of schools in the Gaza Strip, West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria, any cut in funding to UNRWA will directly affect the educational system, reducing

Seita, Akihiro, Amelia Goldsmith, Majed Hababeh, and Yousef Shahin. "Amid US funding cuts, UNRWA appeals for health and dignity of Palestinian refugees." *The Lancet* 391, no. 10118 (2018): 294-295.

⁸ Mansour, Riyad. *Attacks by Israel on UNRWA*. SGC. 111/24. New York. 2024

resources and infrastructure. Since these educational platforms support children and young people, a reduction in funding will have significant adverse effects (Menon 2010, 5).

Another important point that we worked on at the Palestinian Mission was to highlight how the United States and the European Union have used funding to UNRWA as a political pressure card:

“Any decision to pause funding for UNRWA will not just dramatically weaken the backbone of the humanitarian response for 2.2 million Palestinians in Gaza, but for the wider region as well. In total, UNRWA serves almost 6 million Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria.” (Welander EU Advocacy Director IRC, 2024)

Considering the ongoing humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the more recent Israeli advance on Rafah, many people and communities are concerned about the potential and current and future suspension of funding for the UNRWA. The main tragedies that are looming are disease, famine, and destruction of all schooling facilities. Half of two million Palestinian civilians are children who rely on UNRWA assistance in Gaza. So, the suspension of funding by donor states to the main aid provider for millions of Palestinians in Gaza and the region. According to a collaborative NGOs⁹ statement, including International Rescue Committee, Humanity and Inclusion, War Child Alliance, Oxfam and other 13 more humanitarian organization who signed the statement:

“We urge the EU and Member States to take note that other aid agencies cannot replicate UNRWA’s central role in the humanitarian response in Gaza, and amidst the current crisis many will struggle to even maintain their current operations without UNRWA’s partnership and support. (UNRWA, 2024)

⁹ UNRWA. "Joint NGO Statement: EU and Member States Must Sustain Funding for UNRWA." Last modified April 13, 2023. <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/joint-ngo-statement-eu-and-member-states-must-sustain-funding-unrwa>.

According to a UN News report, in early April 2024¹⁰, an important report by the United Nations' top investigative agency focused on Israel's allegations that UN workers participated in the October 7 attacks. Since Israel issued the claims against the UN workers, some major donor nations, including the United States, suspended funding and support for UNRWA, the main lifeline for providing Palestinians with food, water, medicine, and shelter in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank. As a result, the already dire circumstances for Palestinian refugees have worsened, causing further deprivation among these vulnerable communities.

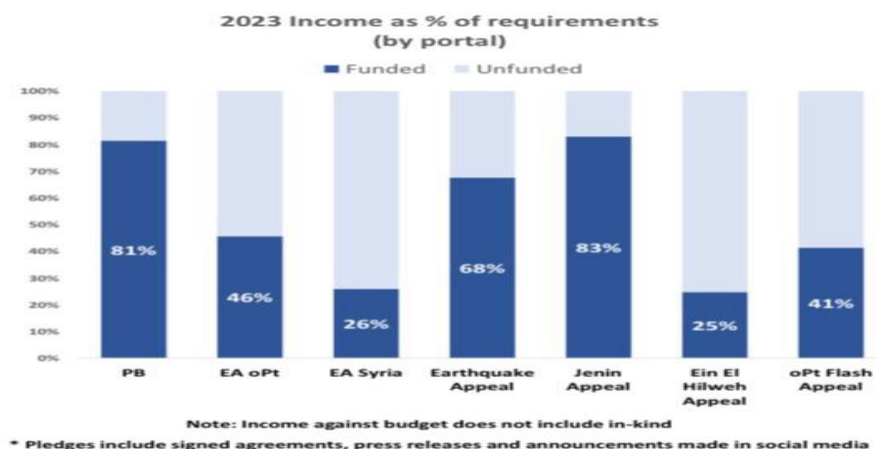
UNRWA is the most significant humanitarian organization in Gaza. The fact of its vision is that UNRWA's humanitarian involvement in this crisis is vital, including but not limited to the delivery of education and health services, solid water and food, so it should not be a way by any organization to be substituted. In the course of unfolding war, the Israeli state had made allegations that some of the UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7th attacks into Israel. While "It is important to ensure a thorough investigation into the grave allegations by the Israeli authorities that 12 UNRWA employees directly participated in the attacks on October 7, and to ensure full transparency and accountability going forward." (UN News 2024).¹¹ It is questionable that these yet to be investigated claims were taken seriously at face value to bring into question the entire humanitarian mission of the organization. Such these investigations are important to uphold the existance of UNRWA and confirm that its objectives remain focused on humanitarian assistance without being criticized by security and political issues.¹²

¹⁰ International Centre for Counter-Terrorism, "UNRWA: Countering Financing of Terrorism and Swinging Back from Post-9/11 Hard Security Reflexes," accessed June 9, 2024, <https://www.icct.nl/publication/unrwa-countering-financing-terrorism-and-swing-back-post-911-hard-security-reflexes>.

¹¹ UN News. 2024. "UN Updates on Probe into Allegations of Staff Collusion During 7 October Attacks." United Nations. April 26, 2024. Accessed June 2, 2024. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1149081>

¹² UN News. 2024. "UN Updates on Probe into Allegations of Staff Collusion During 7 October Attacks." United Nations. April 26, 2024. Accessed June 2, 2024. <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/04/1149081>

These accusations have put into jeopardy UNRWA's ability to carry out its humanitarian mission. For example, as a November 2023, the agency had received a project income of US \$ 85.6 million (Alabed, Rifai, 2023). UNRWA's general budget for its main operations among all fields of services is 81% funded, with confirmed pledges of US\$ 690.5 million against a budget of US\$ 848 million. The Emergency appeal for Syria is only 26% funded, with US\$ 113.1 million pledged against a US\$ 437 million appeal. The Earthquake Appeal is 68% funded, with \$10.94 million contributed of a \$16.2 million target. The Jenin Appeal is 83% funded, with US\$ 19.9 million against a US\$ 24 million appeal. Ein El Hilweh ¹³Appeal is underfunded at 25%, with US\$ 3.84 million against a US\$ 15.5 million appeal. The oPt Flash Appeal is 41% funded, with US\$ 199.3 million against a revised appeal of US\$ 481.3 million. Under these extreme conditions, it is hard to imagine the organization being able to carry out the work.



UNRWA Report, Financial Update, November 2023.

¹³ Ein El Hilwe is the largest Palestinian refugee camp in Lebanon.

IV. Case Study on the Educational Sector

One of the most important sectors that UNRWA has been providing Palestinians are the strong educational services for over more than 70 years (Spencer 2010, 1). UNRWA's students in Palestine are one of the most successful in the Middle East region. With around 700 schools under its responsibility and accountability, UNRWA has contributed importantly to the region's educational landscape, and it has managed to maintain a comprehensive and high equality educational system, ensuring access to education for Palestinian students. Therefore, the agency's educational services have not only met the basic needs, but they have also provided opportunities for Palestinians to do extracurricular activities, allowing them to engage in arts, sports, economics and cultural events, exchange programs and other enrichment activities. These extracurricular initiatives are crucial for the holistic improvement of students and to enhance their overall personal skills and well-being (Spencer 2010, 7) such as critical thinking, leadership and communication skills.

Considering the protracted situation of Palestinian refugees, UNRWA began providing long-term services, specifically education, starting in May 1950 (Irfan 2021, 6). It established and managed schools in Lebanon, Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip. As Irfan (2021) notes, "Momentously, UNRWA introduced free education for registered Palestinian refugee children across the geographical fields in which it worked" (Irfan 2021, 8). The UNRWA education program has played a fundamental role in shaping the social, political, cultural and economic landscapes of Palestinians. Through UNRWA educational programs, generations of Palestinians became main figures in the political science, international relations and the social sciences of the

Middle East. For example, Naji al-Ali¹⁴ and Ghassan Kanafani¹⁵, graduates of the UNRWA schools, went on to become influential figures in Arab literary and artistic practices. Thus, their programs have fostered a sense of support, community engagement, schools infrastructure, and educational resources.

UNRWA offers free educational services to all registered Palestinian refugee girls and boys. These services are supported by 9,325 headteachers and teachers, and around 70% of UNRWA staff are dedicated to its education system. The service is compulsory, free of charge, and available to all registered refugees. "The elementary cycle is served by 9,325 teachers, headteachers and assistant headteachers, with the corresponding figure for the preparatory cycle being 5,706. 52% of UNRWA's budget, and 70% of UNRWA staff, are allocated to the agency's education program" (Sultana 2007, 10). Additionally, UNRWA established the first women's training center in the Middle East in 1962, highlighting its commitment to women's empowerment and gender equality. These initiatives have empowered Palestinian women by providing access to educational and vocational programs, promoting cultural identity, and improving literacy (Sultana 2007, 15).

The article, "Women's Community Peacebuilding in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT)" by Ibrahim Natil, emphasizes UNRWA's role in specifically empowering Palestinian women. "In 2001, UNRWA introduced its Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) Program for delivery across all grades and schools in each of UNRWA's five fields of operation in the West Bank, the Gaza Strip, Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon." (Natil 2020, 10). This

¹⁴ Naji al-Ali was a Palestinian cartoonist, well-known for his political caricatures.

¹⁵ Ghassan Kanafani was a major spokesman for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and his short tales and novels have appeared in sixteen languages (Kanafani, 2000).

initiative underscores UNRWA's commitment to fostering humanity and human rights among Palestinian refugees. It takes on a primary role in empowering women in the community and encouraging their political participation. Some of these programs include, for example, education programs, awareness workshops about gender equality and the role of women in their local communities, community engagement, leadership development. In turn, this helps Palestinian society to have various changes in advancement of their communities (Natil 2020).

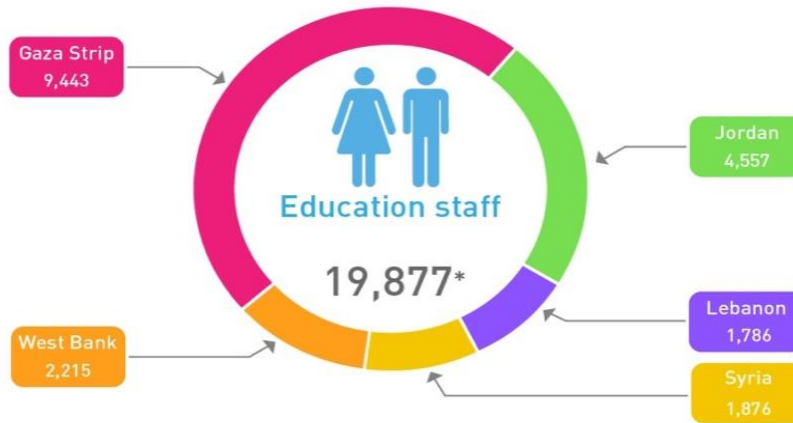
Quality of Education - Limitations and Challenges

The educational sector of UNRWA has been chosen for its relevance to the project objectives, which confirms the important role of UNRWA for all Palestinian refugees in all sectors generally, and the educational sector particularly. In Palestine, the link between education equity and quality is crucial. The years after Al-Nakba and its aftermath affected educational sector in many areas of Palestine. Both students and teachers' Palestinian schools have been significantly affected by the actions of the Israeli occupation. "The combination of very rapid expansion of basic education with the effects of the ongoing political conflict on the school system has led to a widespread perception that the quality of education is declining in Palestine." (Menon 2010, 4). Israel, as the occupying power, has committed actions that severely impact health services and education for Palestinians, leading to long-term financial, regional, and national repercussions. These actions have specifically targeted fundamental rights, including the right to quality education, academic freedom, democracy, and stability. Such measures undermine Palestinians' access to essential services and their overall development prospects (Al-Awar 2008, 15)

UNRWA's educational services have faced various challenges due to political and economic contexts, but the agency remains committed to ensuring a high standard of education. Limited resources, overcrowded classrooms, and political instability have all affected the agency's work.

Firstly, the agency's budget limits its capacity to provide educational methods and academic services, especially due to the reduction of some donors, specifically the United States, when the Trump administration announced that there would be no financial assistance to the agency (Pierce, 2019). The cuts in funding to the agency have often been in response to political developments and have meant a politicization of its humanitarian role. The focus on UNRWA comes from its essential role in supplementing basic services to Palestinian refugees, including healthcare, and education. It's one of the longest-standing humanitarian agencies dedicated to the Palestinian refugee's population. The organization funding allocations, and advocacy for Palestinian rights are often impacted by geopolitical perspectives, therefore politicizing its humanitarian objectives. Addressing the politicization of UNRWA's humanitarian purpose requires recognizing how external political pressures create perspectives of its neutrality. The cutting of funding from main and basic donors like the United States illustrates how financial support may be exploited as a tool of political power, influencing UNRWA's ability to deliver necessary services while upholding its neutrality. Secondly, UNRWA schools are overcrowded, which can affect the quality of education and the learning environment, making it challenging for both teachers and students. To address this challenge, UNRWA has implemented double shift schooling in some areas, such as the West

Bank, meaning one group of students attends morning classes and other attends in the afternoon.



UNRWA. (2023). Annual Report 2023: Education in the Middle East

This chart illustrates the distribution of UNRWA staff members in different regions where the agency works. Using various colors for each area conveys the message to compare the number of education staff assigned to each region. The central image of a female and male figure demonstrates the human resources related to the role of delivering education needs to Palestinian refugees. The total number of educational staff of early 2023 is 19,877. The largest percentage of education staff is mainly based in the Gaza Strip, with 9,443 individuals, which shows the most important educational workforce. The second-largest number of education staff, with 4,557 is Jordan, which has a huge number of Palestinian refugees. Then, the West Bank indicates a solid educational system empowering Palestinian students and teachers in this area. The fourth region

is Syria, which indicates 1,876 education staff members, regardless of the conditions because of the ongoing war¹⁶, but UNRWA continues to supply educational services to Palestinian refugees.

Period of Educational Change (1948-50)

UNRWA become closely linked with the Palestinian refugee's educational system, which have put the first hand to support schooling. "Many of the first classes were set up by refugees who had been teachers in Palestine and were determined that the Nakba would not put a stop to children's education (UNESCO 1953)" (Irfan 2021, 4). In fact, the very first attempts to facilitate education for Palestinian children in diaspora¹⁷ were started by residents of the Palestinian community rather than organizations (UNRWA 1990). At the begging of 1948, some educational classes were held in outdoors or tents, with Palestinian innovative individuals finding ways to teach without pens, furniture or books. "As Maya Rosenfeld and Yezid Sayigh point out, the camp refugees were overwhelmingly of peasant origin; having lost the land that had defined them and been their main currency for generations, they now looked to education as the key to improving their prospects (Rosenfeld 2010; Y. Sayigh 1997)" (Irfan 2021, 7). The quote examines the top priorities for Palestinian refugees in camps, as presented by Maya Rosenfeld and Yezid Sayigh. These refugees who lost their lands, and prosperities, turned to defend their economic stability and original Palestinian identity. In this context, education became a crucial principle for socio-economic improvement and stability. In turn, Palestinians became very keen and interested in any chance to educate their children and young youth, as education became a way of garnering some stability in

¹⁶ The Syrian Civil War, which began in 2011 and has created hardship and disruption in the country, affecting all aspects of life, including education.

¹⁷ Diaspora refers to the Palestinian people who live outside their original homeland due to exile and displacement (Schulz,2005)

the face of political and socioeconomic precarities. Although, the educational opportunities were not only from Palestinian refugees, but also from a wide range of international organizations supporting supplies in the camps. For instance, United Nations Disaster Relief Project (UNDRP)¹⁸, International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC)¹⁹, the League of Red Cross Societies (LORCS)²⁰, and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) (Irfan 2021, 7).



The first school in the Jalazone Refugee Camp, West Bank © 1950 UNRWA, Photographer unknown.

¹⁸ The United Nations Disaster Relief Project (UNDRP) refers to initiatives organized by the United Nations to support disaster relief and emergency humanitarian assistance in the aftermath of man-made and natural disasters.

¹⁹ The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) is an independent organization that operates worldwide to enhance the laws that protect victims of war and armed conflict.

²⁰ AFSC's commitment to peacebuilding and social justice, rooted in Quaker values of nonviolence.

Discussion and Recommendations

The mission of UNRWA in the educational sector is to support educational skills to Palestinian refugees, assisting them in achieving their future goals, regardless of their difficult circumstances. Despite this success, UNRWA still faces challenges as mentioned above, limited budget, political instability and overcrowded classrooms. By addressing some recommendations, UNRWA can continue to strengthen Palestinian refugees through education.

1. Engaging actively with Palestinian refugees' local communities in the educational arena is very important to UNRWA's improvement of educational programs. This can be achieved through community support, cultural integration, and parent-teacher associations. This active empowerment of Palestinian local communities helps the agency strengthen its programs, and improve communication, cooperation, and trust with Palestinians. This collaboration between UNRWA and Palestinian communities might be seen as a threat to the Israeli occupation, as it could lead to increased activism and mobilization.
2. Utilizing media platforms to distribute information about educational needs for Palestinian students through advocacy campaigns. This can enhance global solidarity and support, which can influence stakeholders and policymakers to take actions.
3. Following new monitoring mechanisms to implement new policies to avoid violations affecting Palestinian students. This includes that educational environments are safe to learning as well as creating educational channels for the students to confidentially improve their overall personal development and educational experiences.
4. Advocating for consistent international financing to guarantee the long-term sustainability of UNRWA's educational programs. This constituency is crucial for keeping the impact of

UNRWA's services, which include well-equipped learning environments and well-trained teachers.

5. Safeguarding schools from aggression is essential to guarantee the continuity and for Palestinian refugees in UNRWA educational schools. It involves implementing international rules, laws and agreements that highlight the safety of educational institutions in crisis and conflicts zones. A particular agreement is the Safe Schools Declaration (SSD), stating, "The Safe Schools Declaration (SSD) is a tool for strengthening norms towards the goal of fully protecting civilians from the impacts of armed violence, focused on protecting education from attack" (Briefing 2021,1). By adhering to the SSD, UNRWA is still determining to build safe learning environments that is free from violence and to protect children's right to have their right of education even during times of wars.

V. Conclusion

The goal of this project has been to shed light on the role and the importance of UNRWA toward Palestinian refugees. It has also addressed the questions of how we can examine the dual perception of UNRWA as both an educational humanitarian organization and a political entity. What factors contributed to the change from its mission of empowering the Palestinian people to being viewed as a politicized entity and potential existential threat? In exploring these questions, it has also demonstrated a range of points about the UNRWA services for Palestinian refugees, including healthcare, education, and community empowerment. It has proven that the main concern for UNRWA is to help Palestinian refugees, to empower them locally and internationally, to support them with a sense of hope to return to their home countries, and to enhance accountability, transparency, and neutrality, which are essential for upholding the agency humanitarian goals; there is no political aims around its mandate.

Finally, it is important to note that UNRWA's programs, including educational initiatives, have become crucial supportive methods for Palestinians. As noted at the outset of this project in the case study section on the education sector, the first step in creating an educational system was taken by individual refugees who created makeshift classes for their children. Palestinians strive to be educated and strong even in times of war, and UNRWA's assistance is essential in helping them achieve this. It is difficult to deny the significant of this significant agency, which serves millions of Palestinians in four main areas: Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip. Despite the challenges that the organization faces, including funding cuts from some Western countries like the European Union and the United States, as well as the destruction of many schools sheltering forcibly displaced families in Gaza, UNRWA continues its work for Palestinians. Palestinian refugees continue to benefit from the UNRWA education services. The only solution

beyond UNRWA is to think about a lasting and just solution for Palestinian refugees, who have displaced from their hometown and villages since 1948. Until that solution is achieved, UNRWA and international community more widely will have to think about the provision of services for Palestinians.

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