

Analysts say Israel's outlawing of UNRWA will make life unbearable for Palestinians

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Beirut, October 31 (RHC)-- Israel's much-criticized banning of the United Nations Palestinian aid agency (UNRWA) is part of a broader attempt to undermine the rights of Palestinian refugees and expel them from the occupied territories, analysts have told Al Jazeera.

The ban on the agency takes effect in three months and will exacerbate an already catastrophic situation in Gaza and the West Bank, including in East Jerusalem.

“The latest legislation is part of a campaign [by Israel] to kill any aid infrastructure,” said Tahani Mustafa, an expert on Israel and Palestine for International Crisis Group, a non-profit dedicated to conflict resolution.

“But it is also part of a broader objective to permanently remove Palestinians from their land,” she told Al Jazeera.

As the largest aid provider to Palestinian refugees, UNRWA has played an instrumental role in keeping people alive in Gaza, where civilians face a risk of genocide, according to the International Court of Justice.

Over the last year, Israel has uprooted almost the entire population of 2.3 million people and killed some 43,000 in Gaza. The war started after a Hamas-led attack on southern Israel, during which 1,139 people were killed, and about 250 were taken captive.

Palestinians in Gaza have been living under an Israeli-imposed land, sea and air blockade since 2007, leading rights groups to refer to the enclave as an “open-air prison.”

Israel now appears to be trying to depopulate Gaza by terminating UNRWA’s services, an irreplaceable lifeline for the population, according to analysts. “It seems very clear from the way Israel is carrying out this war...that Israel is trying to make life so difficult in Gaza that people leave,” said Khaled Elgindy, an expert on Israel and Palestine and a senior fellow for the Middle East Institute.

In 1948, Zionist militias expelled 750,000 Palestinians from their land to create the state of Israel – an event referred to as the ‘Nakba’ or catastrophe.

Many Palestinians ended up stateless, languishing in the occupied territories and refugee camps in neighbouring states, while Israel was recognised as a full member of the United Nations.

During the same year, the UN General Assembly also established UNRWA to aid Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria until they could return to their homes as stipulated in UN Resolution 194.

Israeli and U.S. leaders traditionally saw UNRWA as a way to pacify Palestinians by providing them vital provisions without granting them political rights, explained Elgindy.

However, he added that Israel and the United States have increasingly tried to sabotage the relief agency over the past decade.

Former U.S. President Donald Trump went so far as to suspend his country’s support for UNRWA in 2018, triggering a funding crisis. Palestinian refugees saw Trump’s move as an attack on their right to return to their homeland, which UNRWA enshrines.

Elgindy believes that Israel is now explicitly trying to undermine that right by erasing any legitimate reference to the Nakba or Palestinian refugees. “[UNRWA is a reminder] that Israel’s creation came at the expense – the dispossession – of the Palestinian people, and that’s what [Israel] wants to erase from history. “UNRWA is a constant reminder of the Nakba in 1948.”

Israel’s attack on UNRWA is part of a wider attempt at cutting off a vital lifeline for Palestinians, argues Zaid Amali, a UNRWA cardholder and a civil society activist in the West Bank. He noted that millions of Palestinians rely on UNRWA for employment, housing reconstruction, sanitation, healthcare and education.

The loss of these vital services, coupled with Israel's daily raids and destruction of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank, is designed to uproot the population, Amali told Al Jazeera.

"UNRWA is irreplaceable with all of its experience and staff. The mandate alone is so large that it makes it irreplaceable, so I don't see any organisation – international or local – able to fill this void," he told Al Jazeera.

Diana Buttu, an expert on Israel and Palestine and a former legal advisor to the Palestine Liberation Organisation (PLO), added that the Palestinian Authority [PA], which governs some territory in the occupied West Bank, won't be able to fill the vacuum.

The PA was born out of the Oslo Accords, which saw then-Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat shake hands with then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin on the White House lawn in 1993.

The agreement aimed at laying the foundation for a Palestinian state in Gaza and the West Bank, with East Jerusalem as its capital. Since 2006, the PA's presence has been limited to the West Bank after Hamas forced it out of Gaza after a brief conflict.

The PA could now face the impossible task of replacing UNRWA, said Buttu.

"Palestinians will either leave [the West Bank and Gaza] or they will melt into the PA's structures," she added. "That is hugely problematic because the PA does not have the resources to afford all of those schools and medical clinics. "[The PA] just can't do it. There is not even a PA in Gaza to distribute food."

The Palestinian cause is at risk if the global community allows Israel to unilaterally destroy structures and institutions that recognise Palestinians as a people with rights, warns Amali. He noted that Israel had killed hundreds of UN workers in Gaza, barred the UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres from entering the country, and the UN Israeli Ambassador Gilad Erdan even tore up the UN charter in front of the General Assembly.

Israel's provocative gesture at the UN came in reaction to a non-binding General Assembly vote that effectively recognised Palestine as a state in May 2024. "All of Israel's behaviour [towards the UN] are indicators that Palestine's presence in the international forum is threatening to Israel because it means [global] recognition of Palestinian rights," he told Al Jazeera.

Tahani, the expert from Crisis Group, believes that Israel may step up its assault on the PA next, a body that de-facto represents Palestinians at the UN and in the global community. She noted that Israel is already withholding \$188m in tax revenue, which it collects on behalf of the PA – part of the agreement in the Oslo Accords.

UNRWA, in her view, is only the main target right at this moment. "This is not just an arbitrary decision of Israel doing whatever it feels like. There is a clear objective around this, which, as I said, is to make life so completely unbearable for Palestinians on the ground," she told Al Jazeera. "That way, they are either forcibly expelled or "voluntarily" going to leave."

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