

Unrwa may be forced to stop saving lives in Gaza. Will the world let that happen?

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Outrage over Israel's attempt to dismantle our UN agency has largely petered out. The stakes are very high now

• **Philippe Lazzarini is commissioner-general of Unrwa.**

Workers on an Unrwa truck in Khan Yunis, Gaza, 3 December 2024. Photograph: Bashar Taleb/AFP/Getty Images

The UN agency entrusted with the protection and welfare of Palestine refugees for three-quarters of a century, Unrwa, which I lead, was always meant to be temporary. The conclusion of its mandate was foreseen at [its establishment](#). The choice before us today is whether to jettison a decades-long investment in human development and human rights by chaotically dismantling the agency overnight, or pursue an orderly political process in which Unrwa continues to provide millions of Palestine refugees with education and healthcare until empowered Palestinian institutions take over these services.

The agency may be forced to halt its work in the occupied Palestinian territory next month if [legislation passed](#) by the Israeli parliament is implemented. The laws would cripple the humanitarian response in Gaza and deprive millions of Palestine refugees of essential services in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. They would also eliminate a vocal witness to the countless horrors and injustices Palestinians have endured for decades.

The government of Israel's brazen effort to thwart the will of the international community – expressed through multiple UN resolutions – and single-handedly dismantle a UN agency has been met with public condemnation and outrage that has largely petered out into political inertia. The dearth of political courage and principled leadership when it matters most does not bode well for our multilateral system.

What is at stake? For Palestine refugees, it is their very lives and future. The impact of barring access to education, healthcare and other social services will be devastating and multigenerational. Complicity in this endeavour erodes not only our humanity but also the legitimacy of our multilateral system. The near total absence of political, economic or legal penalties for flagrant violations of the [Geneva conventions](#), utter disregard for the resolutions of the security council and the general assembly, and open defiance of the rulings of the international court of justice is making a mockery of the rules-based international order.

The war on Gaza and Palestinians is coupled with an extraordinary assault on those who speak or act in defence of human rights, international law and the victims of a barbaric war. Humanitarian workers with decades of service to war-affected populations are suddenly [labelled as terrorists](#) or

terrorist sympathisers. Critics of Israeli government policies and actions are intimidated and harassed. Inflammatory [propaganda sponsored](#) by the Israeli foreign ministry is now splashed on billboards in prime locations in the US and Europe, complemented by Google ads promoting websites replete with disinformation. These are well funded efforts to distract from the brutality of an unlawful occupation and the international crimes being committed with total impunity under our watch.

The government of Israel and its affiliates justify actions against Unrwa by claiming that the agency is infiltrated by Hamas, even though all allegations for which any evidence has been offered have been thoroughly investigated. Meanwhile, Hamas accuses Unrwa's leadership of colluding with the Israeli occupation and opposes the agency's efforts to promote human rights and gender equality. Far from being a party to the conflict, Unrwa is a casualty of this war.

The objective of efforts to malign and eventually dismantle Unrwa is simple - to eliminate the refugee status of Palestinians and shift, unilaterally, the long-established parameters for a political solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The blind pursuit of this goal has overlooked the fact that the refugee status of Palestinians is not tied to Unrwa and is enshrined in a general assembly resolution that predates the creation of the agency.

Today, the international community is at a crossroads. In one direction lies a world where we have reneged on our commitment to provide a political answer to the question of Palestine. It is a dystopian world, where Israel, as the occupying power, is solely responsible for the population in the occupied Palestinian territory, possibly subcontracting the occupation to private actors who are even less answerable to the international community.

In another direction lies a world where the guardrails of the rules-based order hold firm and the Palestinian question is resolved by political means. This is the path currently being pursued by the global alliance for the implementation of the two-state solution, led by Saudi Arabia, the EU and the Arab League. This effort, which revives the Arab peace initiative, aims to lay down an irreversible pathway towards a two-state solution, and to build the capacity of a Palestinian administration that will govern a future state of Palestine, including Gaza.

This is the path Unrwa was created to support. Pending the establishment of a Palestinian state, the agency will be critical for ensuring that children in [Gaza](#) are not condemned to live in the rubble, without education and without hope. No other entity except a functioning state can provide education to hundreds of thousands of girls and boys, and primary healthcare for millions of Palestinians. Within the framework of a political solution, Unrwa can progressively conclude its mandate, with its teachers, doctors and nurses becoming the workforce of empowered Palestinian institutions.

We still have a window of opportunity to avert a cataclysmic future where firepower and propaganda construct the global order, determining where and when human rights and the rule of law apply, if at all. The tools and institutions needed to defend and reinforce our multilateral system and the rules-based order exist and are adequate - we need only find the political courage to use them.

Philippe Lazzarini

P.S.

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