

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): Overview and U.S. Funding Prohibition

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On January 26, 2024, the Biden Administration temporarily “[paused](#)” all U.S. funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), citing allegations that 12 UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7, 2023, attacks led by [Hamas](#) (a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization) against Israel. According to the State Department, the pause prevented approximately \$300,000 in unobligated FY2024 funds and just over \$2.5 million in obligated but unpaid balances for FY2023 from being disbursed to UNRWA. In March 2024 (in Division G, Section 301 of the Further Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2024, P.L. 118-47), Congress prohibited U.S. funding to UNRWA from (1) any amounts provided in prior fiscal years or in FY2024, or (2) for amounts provided in FY2025, until March 25, 2025.

Some other major UNRWA donors also paused their funding in January, though many—including the European Union and Germany—have since [resumed contributions](#), based partly on the urgent humanitarian crisis in Gaza, and partly on UNRWA’s [reported assurances](#) that it would take additional measures to mitigate future risks of possible involvement of its staff and assets in terrorist activities. [Arab states](#) criticized the January suspension of funding to UNRWA, and Israel [has lamented](#) some countries’ [resumption of contributions](#).

In response to the allegations about UNRWA staff, UNRWA issued a [public statement](#), saying that it would “immediately terminate the contracts of these staff members and launch an investigation.” U.N. Secretary-General [António Guterres](#) also activated an immediate [U.N. Office of Internal Oversight Services \(OIOS\)](#) investigation. On April 26, 2024, the Secretary-General’s spokesperson provided an update on the OIOS investigation, stating that OIOS expanded it from 12 to 19 persons, based on information received since January. OIOS has subsequently suspended efforts in four cases for insufficient evidence, and closed one case because it said Israel had not provided any supporting evidence. Fourteen staff members remain under OIOS investigation.

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A separate review took place in parallel with the OIOS inquiry during early 2024. In mid-January, UNRWA announced a “full, independent review of the organization.” Following the Israeli allegations, the independent review was elevated and subsumed under the auspices of the Office of the U.N. Secretary-General. The Secretary-General appointed an independent group—headed by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna—to assess UNRWA’s neutrality and response mechanisms, which publicly released its final report on April 20, 2024. The findings acknowledge that UNRWA has many mechanisms in place to ensure compliance with humanitarian principles, including that of neutrality. The group also identifies some gaps, and offers recommendations.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has called for UNRWA’s mission to end, and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) has reportedly decided to work to weaken UNRWA and attempt to have other organizations replace its humanitarian assistance functions. While Israel has accused UNRWA of employing hundreds of staff in Gaza linked to militant groups, and alleged that Hamas has accessed electricity from UNRWA facilities, UNRWA has stated that it consistently shares information with Israel and takes other actions to prevent developments that could compromise UNRWA’s neutrality. UNRWA also has said that some employees have reported being “pressured by Israeli authorities” into false statements about the alleged actions and organizational links of UNRWA staff.

UNRWA: An Overview

The U.N. General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a temporary mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestinian refugees (5.9 million as of 2023) living in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. (UNRWA is distinct from the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees [UNHCR], with each operating under separate organizational mandates.) UNRWA provides food and other essential supplies, health care, education, and other assistance directly to its beneficiaries, in coordination with public services provided by the host authorities. Some 1.4 to 1.7 million of Gaza’s roughly 2.1 million residents are registered Palestinian refugees, and many have relied on humanitarian assistance for decades. With no political resolution on the refugees’ status, the General Assembly has regularly extended UNRWA’s mandate; it expires on June 20, 2026. UNRWA is funded primarily through voluntary contributions from governments and also through the U.N. regular budget. For 2023, UNRWA’s funding totaled \$1.47 billion.

Conditions in Gaza were already dire before the Hamas-led attacks against Israel. The current conflict has exacerbated the humanitarian situation and resulted in massive population displacement and infrastructure damage, tens of thousands of Palestinian casualties, and famine-like conditions in some areas. UNRWA is the largest humanitarian organization in Gaza and the primary provider of direct services and assistance to Palestinian refugees, including operating temporary shelters for those displaced, running mobile health teams, and distributing food, water, and other necessities. The intensity of the ongoing hostilities and situation on the ground greatly constrain the ability of UNRWA and other humanitarian organizations to access areas in Gaza, assess conditions, and deliver life-saving assistance and supplies. As of June 9, 2024, at least 193 UNRWA staff had been killed in the hostilities since October 7.

U.N. officials have emphasized the importance of land routes to deliver large volumes of humanitarian assistance, but delays and other obstacles to transporting assistance through crossings and Israeli checkpoints and safely delivering it have hampered progress. In March, the United States and other countries began providing additional humanitarian assistance to Gaza via airdrops; on May 17, a temporary U.S.-built pier off Gaza opened, enabling humanitarian assistance to enter the Strip via a sea corridor from Cyprus, although it has since faced a number of operational and security challenges.

The Secretary-General has appealed to governments to guarantee the continuity of UNRWA’s operations, an appeal supported by international humanitarian agencies and nongovernmental organizations. In addition to the flow of assistance and funding, the International Committee of the Red Cross and other

organizations have emphasized the need for a ceasefire, for the parties to adhere to international humanitarian law in the conduct of hostilities, and for humanitarian access to be granted to the Israeli hostages and Palestinian detainees.

U.S. Funding, Oversight, and Policy Options

The United States has historically been the largest financial contributor to UNRWA, with U.S. funding totaling more than \$7.3 billion since 1950 (**Table 1**). According to UNRWA, in 2023, U.S. contributions accounted for nearly 30% of its donor contributions. U.S. contributions have been provided primarily through the Migration and Refugee Assistance (MRA) account in annual Department of State, Foreign Operations, and Related Programs (SFOPS) appropriations acts.

Table 1. Historical U.S. Government Contributions to UNRWA

(in \$ millions, non-inflation adjusted)

Fiscal Year(s)	Amount	Fiscal Year(s)	Amount
1950-1999	2,216.7	2013	294.0
2000	89.0	2014	398.7
2001	123.0	2015	390.5
2003	134.0	2016	359.5
2004	127.4	2017	359.3
2005	108.0	2018	65.0
2006	137.0	2019	-0-
2007	154.2	2020	-0-
2008	184.7	2021	318.4
2009	268.0	2022	364.0
2010	237.8	2023	371.0
2011	249.4	2024	121.0
2012	233.3	TOTAL	7,303.9

Sources: U.S. State Department and UNRWA.

Notes: All amounts are approximate. As of January 2024, \$2.5 million of FY2023 contributions had not been disbursed. Congress does not usually specify a funding amount for UNRWA; it appropriates a lump sum to the MRA account, and the executive branch allocates funds based on humanitarian needs and U.S. foreign policy priorities.

U.S. contributions to UNRWA are subject to various legislative [conditions and oversight measures](#). Section 301(c) of the 1961 Foreign Assistance Act (P.L. 87-195), as amended, states that the United States shall provide contributions only if UNRWA takes “all possible measures” to ensure that no contribution shall assist any refugee “who has engaged in any act of terrorism.” Some Members of Congress have regularly [raised concerns as part of the legislative process](#) about UNRWA’s effectiveness and neutrality, and have [supported legislation](#) to increase oversight of UNRWA, limit U.S. funding and strengthen vetting procedures to prevent any diversion to terrorists, [screen any educational materials](#) for UNRWA-administered schools and summer camps that might generate anti-Semitic or other incitement, and examine the definition of Palestinian refugees and their “right of return.” Other Members, including some who have voiced concerns about some aspects of UNRWA, have argued that the organization’s activities are critical and [advocated for continued or greater financial support](#). These debates [have intensified](#) since the January allegations surfaced.

When deliberating on U.S. policy response to the situation in Gaza, Congress and the Administration may consider the following selected issues:

- **U.S. funding.** Whether to continue, lift, or alter the current prohibition on UNRWA funding through March 2025.
- **UNRWA investigations.** How, if at all, the United States will support and/or monitor the OIOS investigation and Colonna group review, as well as the implementation of any recommendations, and to what extent, if at all, it will conduct its own investigation.
- **Possible UNRWA reforms or alternatives.** Whether and how to [pursue reforms](#) by UNRWA and/or explore if [other humanitarian organizations](#) have the capacity or are willing to be the primary provider of humanitarian assistance and protection to Palestinian refugees in Gaza. In April, a [State Department official said](#) that U.S. assistance could flow through other organizations, while also asserting that UNRWA carries out functions that other entities cannot readily replace.

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