

# In waging war on the UN refugee agency, the West is openly siding with Israeli genocide

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***Israel has long plotted the downfall of UNRWA, aware that it is one of the biggest obstacles to eradicating the Palestinians as a people***

There is an important background to the decision by the United States and other leading western states, the UK among them, to [freeze funding](#) to the United Nations' Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the main channel by which the UN disseminates food and welfare services to the most desperate and destitute Palestinians.

The funding cut – which has been also adopted by Germany, France, Japan, Switzerland, Canada, Netherlands, Italy, Australia and Finland – was imposed even though the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled on Friday that Israel may be [committing genocide](#) in Gaza. The World Court judges [quoted](#) at length UN officials who warned that Israel's actions had left almost all of the enclave's 2.3 million inhabitants on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, including famine.

The West's flimsy pretext for what amounts to a war on UNRWA is that Israel claims 12 local UN staff – out of 13,000 – are implicated in Hamas' break-out from the open-air prison of Gaza on October 7. The sole evidence appears to be coerced confessions, likely extracted through torture, from Palestinian fighters captured by Israel that day.

The UN immediately sacked all the accused staff, seemingly without due process. We can assume that was because the refugee agency was afraid its already threadbare lifeline to the people of Gaza, as well as millions of other Palestinian refugees across the region – in the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria – would be further threatened. It need not have worried. Western donor states cut their funding anyway, plunging Gaza deeper into calamity.

They did so without regard to the fact their decision amounts to collective punishment: some 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza face starvation and the spread of lethal disease, while another 4 million Palestinian refugees across the region are at imminent risk of losing food, health care and schooling.

According to law professor Francis Boyle, who filed a genocide case for Bosnia at the World Court some two decades ago, that shifts most of these western states from their existing complicity with Israel's genocide (by selling arms and providing aid and diplomatic cover) into direct and active [participation in the genocide](#), by violating the 1948 Genocide Convention's prohibition on “deliberately inflicting on the group [in this case, Palestinians] conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part.”

The World Court is investigating Israel for genocide. But it could easily widen its investigation to include western states. The threat to UNRWA needs to be seen in that light. Not only is Israel thumbing its nose at the World Court and international law, but states like the US and UK are doing so too, by cutting their funding to the refugee agency. They are

slapping the court in the face, and indicating that they are four-square behind Israel's crimes, even if they are shown to be genocidal in nature.

## **Israel's creature**

The following is the proper context for understanding what is really going on with this latest attack on UNRWA:

1. The agency was created in 1949 – decades before Israel's current military slaughter in Gaza – to provide for the basic needs of Palestinian refugees, including essential food provision, health care and education. It has an outsize role in Gaza because most of the Palestinians living there lost, or are descended from families that lost, everything in 1948. That was when they were [ethnically cleansed](#) by the fledgling Israeli military from most of Palestine, in an event known to Palestinians as the Nakba, or Catastrophe. Their lands were turned into what Israel's leaders described as an exclusively "Jewish state". The Israeli army set about destroying the Palestinians' towns and villages inside this new state so that they could never return.

2. UNRWA is separate from the UN's main refugee agency, the UNHCR, and deals only with Palestinian refugees. Although Israel does not want you to know it, the reason for there being two UN refugee agencies is because Israel and its western backers insisted on the division back in 1948. Why? Because Israel was afraid of the Palestinians falling under the responsibility of the UNHCR's forerunner, the [International Refugee Organisation](#). The IRO was established in the immediate wake of the Second World War in large part to cope with the millions of European Jews fleeing Nazi atrocities.

Israel did not want the two cases treated as comparable, because it was pushing hard for Jewish refugees to be settled on lands from which it had just expelled Palestinians. Part of the IRO's mission was to seek the repatriation of European Jews. Israel was worried that very principle might be used both to deny it the Jews it wanted to colonise Palestinian land and to force it to allow the Palestinian refugees to return to their former homes. So in a real sense, UNRWA is Israel's creature: it was set up to keep the Palestinians a case apart, an anomaly.

## **Prison camp**

3. Nonetheless, things did not go exactly to plan for Israel. Given its refusal to allow the refugees to return, and the reluctance of neighbouring Arab states to be complicit in Israel's original act of ethnic cleansing, the Palestinian population in UNRWA's refugee camps ballooned. They became an especial problem in Gaza, where about two-thirds of the population are refugees or descended from refugees. The tiny coastal enclave did not have the land or resources to cope with the rapidly expanding numbers there. The fear in Israel was that, as the plight of the Palestinians of Gaza became more desperate, the international community would pressure Israel into a peace agreement, allowing for the refugees' return to their former homes.

That had to be stopped at all costs. In the early 1990s, as the supposed Oslo "peace process" was being unveiled, Israel began penning the Palestinians of Gaza inside a steel cage, surrounded by gun towers. Some 17 years ago, Israel added a blockade that prevented the population's movement in and out of Gaza, including via the strip's coastal waters and its skies. The Palestinians became prisoners in a giant concentration camp, [denied](#) the most basic links to the outside world. Israel alone decided what was allowed in and out. An Israeli court

later learnt that from 2008 onwards the Israeli military put Gaza on what amounted to a [starvation diet](#) by restricting food supplies.

There was a strategy here that involved making Gaza [uninhabitable](#), something the UN started warning about in 2015. Israel's game plan appears to have gone something like this:

By making Palestinians in Gaza ever more desperate, it was certain that militant groups like Hamas willing to fight to liberate the enclave would gain in popularity. In turn, that would provide Israel with the excuse both to further tighten restrictions on Gaza to deal with a "terrorism threat", and to intermittently wreck Gaza in "retaliation" for those attacks – or what Israeli military commanders variously called "[mowing the grass](#)" and "[returning Gaza to the Stone Age](#)". The assumption was that Gaza's militant groups would exhaust their energies managing the constant "humanitarian crises" Israel had engineered.

At the same time, Israel could promote twin narratives. It could say publicly that it was impossible for it to take responsibility for the people of Gaza, given that they were so clearly invested both in Jew hatred and terrorism. Meanwhile, it would privately tell the international community that, given how uninhabitable Gaza was becoming, they urgently needed to find a solution that did not involve Israel. The hope was that Washington would be able to [arm-twist or bribe](#) neighbouring Egypt into taking most of Gaza's destitute population.

### **Mask ripped off**

4. On October 7, Hamas and other militant groups achieved what Israel had assumed was impossible. They broke out of their concentration camp. The Israeli leadership's shock is not just over the bloody nature of the break-out. It is that on that day Hamas smashed Israel's entire security concept – one designed to keep the Palestinians crushed, and Arab states and the region's other resistance groups hopeless. Last week, in a knockout blow, the World Court agreed to put Israel on trial for genocide in Gaza, collapsing the moral case for an exclusive Jewish state built on the ruins of the Palestinians' homeland.

The judges' near-unanimous conclusion that South Africa has made a plausible case for Israel committing genocide should force a reassessment of everything that went before. Genocides don't just emerge out of thin air. They happen after long periods in which the oppressor group dehumanises another group, incites against it and abuses it. The World Court has implicitly conceded that the Palestinians were right when they insisted that the Nakba – Israel's mass dispossession and ethnic cleansing operation of 1948 – never ended. It just took on different forms. Israel became better at concealing those crimes, until the mask was ripped off after the October 7 break-out.

5. Israel's efforts to get rid of UNRWA are not new. They date back many years. For a number of reasons, the UN refugee agency is a thorn in Israel's side – and all the more so in Gaza. Not least, it has provided a lifeline to Palestinians there, keeping them fed and cared for, and providing jobs to many thousands of local people in a place where unemployment rates are among the highest in the world. It has invested in infrastructure like hospitals and schools that make life in Gaza more bearable, when Israel's goal has long been to make the enclave uninhabitable. UNRWA's well-run schools, staffed by local Palestinians, teach the children their own history, about where their grandparents once lived, and of Israel's campaign of dispossession and ethnic cleansing against them. That runs directly counter to the infamous Zionist slogan about the Palestinians' identity-less future: "The old will die and the young forget."

## **Divide and rule**

But UNRWA's role is bigger than that. Uniquely, it is the sole agency unifying Palestinians wherever they live, even when they are separated by national borders and Israel's fragmentation of the territory it controls. UNRWA brings Palestinians together even when their own political leaders have been manipulated into endless factionalism by Israel's divide and rule policies: Hamas is nominally in charge in Gaza, while Mahmoud Abbas' Fatah pretends to run the West Bank.

In addition, UNRWA keeps alive the moral case for a Palestinian right of return – a principle recognised in international law but long ago abandoned by western states.

Even before October 7, UNRWA had become an obstacle that needed removing if Israel was ever to ethnically cleanse Gaza. That is why Israel has repeatedly lobbied to stop the biggest donors, especially the US, funding UNRWA. Back in 2018, for example, the refugee agency was plunged into an existential crisis when President Donald Trump [acquiesced](#) to Israeli pressure and cut all its funding. Even after the decision was reversed, the agency has been limping along financially.

6. Now Israel is in full attack mode against the World Court, and has even more to gain from destroying UNRWA than it did before. The freeze in funding, and the further weakening of the refugee agency, will undermine the support structures for Palestinians generally. But in Gaza's case, the move will specifically accelerate famine and disease, making the enclave uninhabitable faster.

But it will do more. It will also serve as a stick with which to beat the World Court as Israel tries to fight off the genocide investigation. Israel's barely veiled claim is that 15 of the International Court of Justice's 17 judges fell for South Africa's supposedly antisemitic argument that Israel is committing genocide. The court quoted extensively from UN officials, including the head of UNRWA, that Israel was actively engineering an unprecedented humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Now, as former UK ambassador Craig Murray [notes](#), the coerced confessions against 12 UNRWA staff serve to "provide a propaganda counter-narrative to the ICJ judgment, and to reduce the credibility of UNRWA's evidence before the court".

Extraordinarily, the western media have done Israel's PR work for it, happily focusing more attention on Israel's claims about a handful of UNRWA staff than it has on the World Court's decision to put Israel on trial for genocide.

Equally a boon to Israel is the fact that leading western states have so quickly pinned their colours to the mast. The funding freeze cements their fates to Israel's. It sends a message that they will stand with Israel against the World Court, whatever it decides. Their war on UNRWA is intended as an act of collective intimidation directed towards the court. It is a sign that the West refuses to accept that international law applies to it, or its client state. It is a reminder that western states refuse any restraint on their freedom of action – and that it is Israel and its sponsors who are the true rogue states.