The Establishment of UNRWA: The United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees

On **December 8, 1949**, the United Nations General Assembly adopted **Resolution 302 (IV)**, establishing the **United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)**.

The agency was created in response to the enormous Palestinian refugee crisis produced by the **Nakba of 1948**, when approximately three-quarters of a million Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes during the war and were largely prevented from returning after the fighting ended.

Hundreds of thousands of people who had only recently lived in Palestinian cities, towns, villages, and Bedouin communities suddenly found themselves displaced in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and elsewhere.

For Palestinians, UNRWA would become much more than a relief organization. Over the following decades, its schools, clinics, registration records, food distributions, and refugee camps became intertwined with the history of Palestinian exile and with an unresolved political question that began in 1948 and continues across generations.

The Refugee Crisis Created by the Nakba

By the end of the 1948 war, Palestinian society had undergone a profound transformation.

Major Palestinian urban communities had been depopulated, and the inhabitants of more than 400 villages had been displaced.

Approximately **725,000 to 750,000 Palestinians** became refugees.

Many had fled with little more than what they could carry, believing that they would return once the fighting ended.

Instead, the new Israeli authorities largely prevented their return, while homes, agricultural lands, businesses, and other properties left behind were brought under Israeli control.

Families that had owned houses, farms, orchards, shops, and workshops found themselves dependent on emergency food, tents, clothing, medical care, and international assistance.

Before UNRWA

UNRWA was not the first international body to provide relief to Palestinian refugees.

During the immediate aftermath of the Nakba, emergency assistance was provided through organizations including the **International Committee of the Red Cross**, the **League of Red Cross Societies**, and the **American Friends Service**

Committee.

In November 1948, the United Nations had also established **United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR)** to coordinate emergency assistance.

These mechanisms were designed to respond to an immediate humanitarian emergency. As the refugee crisis persisted, however, it became clear that a larger and more organized United Nations institution would be required.

Resolution 194 and the Question of Return

One year before UNRWA was established, the United Nations General Assembly adopted **Resolution 194 (III)** on December 11, 1948.

Paragraph 11 addressed the Palestinian refugee question and stated that refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date.

It also called for compensation for the property of those who chose not to return and for certain lost or damaged property.

When the General Assembly adopted Resolution 302 the following year, it expressly recalled Resolution 194 and affirmed, in particular, the provisions of its paragraph 11.

This relationship is important: **UNRWA was created to provide humanitarian relief and employment programmes; it was not created to replace the political settlement of the refugee question or to determine the fate of the right of return.**

United Nations Resolution 302

On **December 8, 1949**, during its fourth session, the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 302 (IV), titled **“Assistance to Palestine Refugees.”**

The resolution recognized that continuing assistance was necessary to prevent starvation and severe distress among Palestine refugees and to promote conditions of peace and stability.

It consequently established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

UNRWA was given two principal initial functions:

- To carry out **direct relief and works programmes** for Palestine refugees in cooperation with local governments.
- To consult with governments in the region concerning arrangements for the time when international relief and works assistance would no longer be required.

The agency was therefore conceived as part of an emergency response to a refugee crisis that the international community initially hoped would not become permanent.

Why “Relief and Works”?

The name of the agency reflected the strategy originally envisioned by the United Nations.

Relief meant immediate humanitarian assistance: food, shelter, health care, clothing, sanitation, and other necessities required by hundreds of thousands of displaced people.

Works referred to employment and development projects intended to provide refugees with income and reduce long-term dependence on direct humanitarian aid.

Early UN planning included public works, agricultural development, infrastructure, irrigation, and other economic projects.

These programmes did not resolve the underlying political question of whether

refugees would return to their homes, be compensated, or remain permanently in exile.

UNRWA Begins Operations

UNRWA formally began operations on **May 1, 1950**.

When it started work, the agency was responding to the needs of approximately **750,000 Palestine refugees**.

It took over much of the relief work previously carried out by emergency humanitarian organizations and inherited extensive refugee-registration records.

Its operations were concentrated in five principal fields:

- **Gaza Strip**
- **West Bank, including East Jerusalem**
- **Jordan**
- **Lebanon**
- **Syria**

These remain UNRWA's five fields of operation.

Who Is a Palestine Refugee According to UNRWA?

For operational purposes, UNRWA developed a specific definition of a Palestine refugee.

It defines Palestine refugees as people whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period from **June 1, 1946, to May 15, 1948**, and who lost both their homes and their means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.

Refugees meeting the agency's eligibility requirements and living within its fields of operation could register for UNRWA services.

Descendants of registered Palestine refugee males, including adopted children under the agency's rules, are also eligible for registration.

This registration system allows UNRWA to maintain extensive family records tracing the history of refugee families back to the generation displaced in 1948.

The Refugee Camps

During the first years after the Nakba, refugee camps became one of the most visible symbols of Palestinian displacement.

It is not entirely accurate to say that UNRWA itself simply “created” the camps.

In recognized camps, land was generally made available by the host government or relevant authorities for the accommodation of Palestine refugees, while UNRWA established and operated facilities and provided essential services.

The tents of the early refugee camps were gradually replaced by more permanent structures.

What had originally been expected to serve as temporary shelter increasingly became permanent neighborhoods as years of exile turned into decades.

Today, refugee camps remain in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and the Gaza Strip.

Food and Emergency Relief

In its earliest years, a large proportion of UNRWA's resources was devoted to immediate survival.

Refugees received basic food rations including flour, rice, cheese, and other necessities.

Depending on available funding, the agency also distributed clothing, shoes, bedding, and household items.

Water, sanitation, shelter, and medical assistance were essential in camps where displaced families had initially arrived with almost nothing.

Education Becomes Central to UNRWA

Education gradually became one of UNRWA's most important responsibilities.

Schools were established throughout the refugee communities, and generations of Palestinian children received primary and preparatory education through the agency.

For refugees whose families had lost land, businesses, homes, and economic security, education became one of the few forms of capital that could not easily be confiscated.

Palestinian teachers and students consequently transformed UNRWA's schools into institutions that shaped generations of refugee society.

The classrooms also became spaces in which children from displaced families encountered others carrying memories of hundreds of Palestinian villages and towns.

Health Care and Social Services

UNRWA also developed an extensive network of health centers and social-service programmes.

These services came to include primary health care, maternal and child health, vaccinations, disease prevention, relief and social assistance, camp infrastructure, emergency response, and later microfinance and other development programmes.

In many refugee communities, UNRWA clinics and schools became the principal institutions providing basic public services.

A Temporary Agency That Did Not Disappear

UNRWA emerged from a refugee emergency that the United Nations initially expected to address through temporary international assistance and an eventual political settlement.

But no comprehensive solution to the Palestinian refugee question was reached.

The refugees were not permitted to return on the scale contemplated by Palestinian demands and the interpretation of Resolution 194 advanced by Arab governments and refugee representatives.

A comprehensive system of compensation was never implemented.

Nor was the refugee question resolved through the peace arrangements that followed the 1948 war.

As a result, the United Nations General Assembly repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate.

An agency created to address the immediate consequences of the Nakba consequently continued from one generation to the next.

UNRWA Is Not a Political Settlement

A fundamental distinction must be maintained between UNRWA's humanitarian role and the political rights claimed by Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA does not decide whether refugees possess a right of return, determine the borders of a future Palestinian state, negotiate compensation, or impose a political settlement on Israel and the Palestinians.

Its mandate is principally humanitarian and developmental.

Responsibility for finding a just and lasting political solution to the refugee question remains with states, the United Nations, and the parties to the conflict.

UNRWA itself describes its work as providing assistance and protection to Palestine refugees **pending a just and lasting solution to their plight**.

UNRWA and the Palestinian Right of Return

Although UNRWA does not implement the right of return, its existence became closely associated in Palestinian political consciousness with the unresolved refugee question.

The agency's creation followed directly after Resolution 194, and Resolution 302 expressly reaffirmed the provisions of paragraph 11 concerning refugees.

The continued existence of millions of registered Palestine refugees therefore reflects a basic historical reality: displacement created in 1948 has never received a comprehensive political resolution.

From a Palestinian perspective, humanitarian assistance cannot substitute for political rights.

Food, schools, health care, and shelter may protect refugee communities from destitution, but they do not answer the fundamental questions of return, lost property, compensation, citizenship, national self-determination, and historical justice.

The Importance of UNRWA's Archives

UNRWA's importance is not limited to humanitarian assistance.

The agency possesses extensive registration records documenting generations of Palestine refugee families.

Many of these records trace families to the original refugees displaced in 1948 and form an important historical archive of Palestinian displacement.

UNRWA itself recognizes these records as a valuable historical resource and treats preservation of refugee documentation as an important element in protecting

refugee rights.

For Palestinians, such records also counter the erasure of communities destroyed or depopulated during the Nakba by preserving evidence of the people and families who came from them.

From 750,000 Refugees to Generations of Exile

When UNRWA began operations in 1950, it was responding to approximately **750,000 Palestine refugees**.

Over subsequent generations, the registered refugee population expanded as families grew.

By 2026, approximately **5.9 million registered Palestine refugees** fell under the agency's mandate across its five fields of operation.

This increase does not represent repeated new refugee events for every registered person. It reflects the passage of refugee status within UNRWA's registration system to eligible descendants of the original displaced population.

For Palestinians, this demographic continuity is inseparable from the absence of a lasting solution to the displacement created in 1948.

UNRWA and the Continuing Political Dispute

Because of its connection to the Palestinian refugee question, UNRWA has repeatedly become the subject of political controversy.

Israeli governments have criticized aspects of the agency's structure, curriculum, refugee-registration system, and continuation across generations, while Palestinian representatives and refugee communities have frequently viewed efforts to weaken or replace UNRWA as attempts to separate humanitarian assistance from the political and historical claims of the refugees.

These disputes intensified dramatically in the years following the outbreak of the

Gaza war in October 2023.

In **2024**, the Israeli Knesset adopted legislation intended to prevent UNRWA from operating within Israeli sovereign territory and severely restrict official interaction between Israeli authorities and the agency.

The United Nations warned that restrictions on UNRWA could seriously affect the provision of humanitarian assistance and essential services to Palestinian refugees, particularly in the occupied Palestinian territory.

Whatever political debates surround the agency, its mandate can be defined or changed only by the United Nations General Assembly, which created it.

UNRWA as a Witness to an Unresolved Nakba

From a Palestinian historical perspective, UNRWA embodies a profound contradiction.

It was established because hundreds of thousands of Palestinians had been displaced from their homeland and required emergency international assistance.

More than seven decades later, the agency continues to exist because the political questions that created the refugee crisis remain unresolved.

Its schools, clinics, refugee-registration files, camps, and emergency operations are therefore also records of the durability of Palestinian displacement.

The agency has never been a substitute for Palestine, nor can humanitarian relief replace the homes, lands, communities, and political rights lost during the Nakba.

Yet for generations of Palestinian refugees, UNRWA has provided the basic institutions that allowed families to survive exile: a school in a refugee camp, a health clinic, food during crisis, shelter after displacement, and an official record linking one generation to another.

In this sense, UNRWA remains both a humanitarian institution and an enduring

international witness to a refugee question that began with the **Nakba of 1948** and has yet to receive the just and lasting political solution envisioned when the agency was created.