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Article

## **UNRWA and the Education of Palestinian Refugees: An Interview with Anne Irfan**

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## Abstract

*This article discusses the history and educational activities of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), an agency created in 1949 immediately after the founding of the state of Israel and the initial dispossession and displacement of the Palestinian people (1948). The trajectory of this organization and current uncertainty about its future, as well as how it has integrated human rights into its curriculum, sheds light on the rights and realities of Palestinian refugees.*

**Keywords:** refugee education, Palestine, United Nations, conflict

## Introduction

This article presents excerpts from a discussion with scholar Anne Irfan, Lecturer at University College London (UCL) and author of *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (Columbia University Press, 2023), and the Editor-in-Chief (Monisha Bajaj) and Managing Editors (Jazzmin Gota and David Tow) of the *International Journal of Human Rights Education* (IJHRE). The conversation took place on January 17, 2024, with follow up correspondence afterwards.

Following the brutal events of October 7, 2023 in Israel and the ensuing bombardment of Gaza and horrific killing and displacement of its residents, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has been under heightened global scrutiny. This article aims to illustrate the history and context, as well as the mandate and complex work, of the organization. To that end, the article is organized into the following sections, prompted by questions from IJHRE's editors: (1) the history of UNRWA; (2) UNRWA's education programs; and (3) UNRWA's present and future. Since 1999, UNRWA has been implementing the [Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance Program](#),<sup>1</sup> developed by educators in collaboration with donor partners. We seek through this article to offer greater understanding of UNRWA, its history, and the realities Palestinian refugees

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/human-rights-education>

face in the distinct areas in which UNRWA operates: Gaza, the West Bank, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.<sup>2</sup>

Since it began operations in 1950, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) has continuously provided essential services to Palestinian refugee communities in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip (the “five fields”). Formally classified as an aid agency, it has often been described as a “quasi-state” due to the nature of its role and services. UNRWA is mandated to serve registered Palestinian refugees in the five fields, where it runs large-scale health and education programs akin to those usually provided by national governments. It also issues officially recognized identity documents to stateless Palestinian refugees. Over more than seven decades, UNRWA’s role has therefore, come to transcend that of an aid agency, evolving into an extensive and complex system that operates across international borders and rivals the scope of national governments in places.

The dynamics between UNRWA and Palestinian refugee communities reflect its quasi-state nature. Throughout their years and exile, Palestinian refugees have overwhelmingly resisted UNRWA’s formal designation as an apolitical aid agency, instead insisting that its services are entitlements stemming from their political refugee status (Irfan, 2023, pp. 2-3).

***Can you tell us about your background and how you became interested in this research?***

*Anne Irfan:* It started out as my Ph.D. and before that, as a Master’s project. I first spent time in Palestine in the West Bank as a volunteer teaching English in an UNRWA school. That was where I first engaged with UNRWA and became interested in it. I discovered over the course of my studies that UNRWA’s archive was closed, and very few researchers have been able to access it. I also observed, hand in hand with that, that there was very little historical scholarship on UNRWA, and one of those things that at least

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to William McInerney and Basma Hajir for their advice on including an article about UNRWA in Volume 8 of the *International Journal of Human Rights Education*.

partially explains the other, so I became very interested in wanting to undertake a study of it from a historical perspective.

Most of what is out there about UNRWA is more in the field of international development, which is all important, but it has a very contemporary focus. I was interested in the historically framed context for UNRWA, and I was very lucky to get access to the archive which is in Jordan, and that was doubly fortuitous, because I was not allowed access to Palestine for the entirety of my research.

However, the archive in Jordan does contain materials relevant to all five of UNRWA's fields of operation, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It also contains information relevant to Syria, because Syria is another field that for obvious reasons,<sup>3</sup> I was not able to visit and do research in. So I mostly worked in Jordan and Lebanon.

I think the other key factor in how this project came about is that in the second half of the project, the Trump Administration announced it was defunding UNRWA. That's obviously a decision that was later partially reversed by the Biden Administration,<sup>4</sup> but it suddenly threw UNRWA into the spotlight (Irfan, 2023, p. 199). It was... an agency that had been fairly below radar, at least in the Western media. The Trump defunding brought about a lot of interest in UNRWA and a lot of discussion about its significance, and in turn more discussion of the Palestinian refugees.

## **The History of UNRWA**

### ***Can you tell us about your recent book and the history of UNRWA?***

The book, *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System* (Columbia University Press, 2023),

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<sup>3</sup> Due to the ongoing civil war in Syria. For more information, see: <https://www.usip.org/syria-timeline-uprising-against-assad>

<sup>4</sup> On January 27th, 2024, Biden announced, as did several other donor states, the revocation of aid to UNRWA due to allegations by Israel (unsubstantiated by evidence at the time of this writing), that UNRWA staff members were involved in the October 7 attack on Israel by Hamas. For more information, see: Al-Mughrabi & Farge (2024), Bigg (2024), Rogin (2024), and Crowley (2024).

tells the story of Palestinian refugees' relations with UNRWA in its early decades, from the initial aftermath of their dispossession in 1948 up until the collapse of the Palestinian national movement's refugee camp base in 1982. Within this time frame, I trace how Palestinian refugees across the five fields navigated their relationship with UNRWA. I show how they negotiated and even sought to leverage this relationship as they struggled for international recognition of their political and national rights. This often necessitated renegotiating their place and international politics, with UNRWA inadvertently taking on an added significance as a local address for the UN. As a result, [that]

UNRWA... came to develop as the Palestinian refugees' de facto quasi-state was not simply imposed by the international directorship of the UN; it was created through continual negotiations and renegotiations between institution and population. (Irfan, 2023, p. 3)

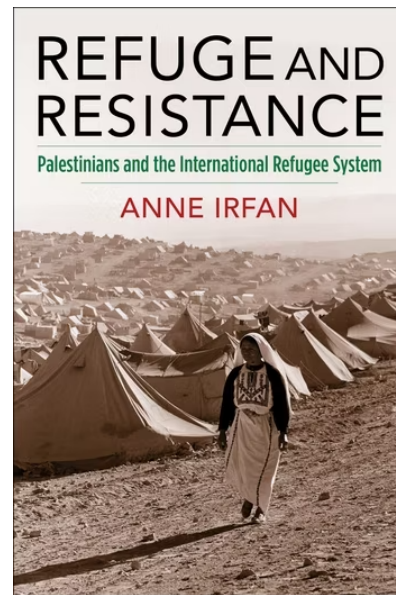


Figure 1: Cover of *Refuge and Resistance* (Irfan, 2023).

*Irfan*: When UNRWA was created it was not the only UN agency that had been created on the Palestine issue. UNRWA was created at the end of 1949 and started operations in May 1950. By that time, we've already had the creation of the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP). The UNCCP's role was to find a political solution, and that's really important for understanding why, or one reason why, UNRWA was given its particular mandate.<sup>5</sup> It was not given a mandate to do anything around political solutions, because that was already the remit of another UN agency.

Now, obviously, in reality, UNCCP was ineffectual, and became dormant pretty quickly. But that was a key factor behind the setup. The

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<sup>5</sup> The agency and its purview are the product of UN General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), which articulated a "humanitarian and development mandate to provide assistance and protection to Palestine refugees pending a just and lasting solution to their plight" (UNRWA, n.d.).

official story behind UNRWA was always that it was apolitical and that it would set up to do “just humanitarian work;” but, we know from the behind the scenes communications that the United States and the United Kingdom, which were the main diplomatic and financial supporters of UNRWA in that early period, did not see its role as apolitical. I think there's a bigger discussion we could have here about the politics of humanitarianism itself, and the whole problem with conceiving of it as apolitical in the first place.

But nevertheless, I have a quote in the book that's from the British Foreign Office in 1974, where they're talking directly behind the scenes about “the need to ‘reduce [UNRWA’s] political overtones to the minimum’ while admitting internally that it funded the agency for ‘overwhelmingly political’ reasons” (Irfan, 2023, p. 95).

In that early period, they were also actually writing to other states, trying to convince them to fund UNRWA. So the question is, what were those political purposes? One, broadly, was that we're talking here about the context of the late 1940s and the early 1950s, and the major concern for the UK and certainly the US at that time was communism. The major policy or global policy from the US in that period to combat or to try and combat communism was the whole approach of Marshall aid.<sup>6</sup> The idea that if you give people socioeconomic support, they will be less susceptible to communism. So that was definitely one factor, that they did not want this large dispossessed refugee population that was now across the Middle East to, “fall to communism.”

But then the other thinking that was more specific to the Palestine situation was that UNRWA might be a way to bring about what was sometimes called “reintegration,” the idea that Palestinian refugees could essentially be permanently settled in the Arab host states; this was never said publicly. There's a relationship here to the types of programs that UNRWA pursued in that early period. But unofficially, there was this idea that UNRWA might be a way to try and facilitate that resettlement.

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<sup>6</sup> The European Recovery Program, colloquially known as the Marshall Plan (after George C. Marshall, then-U.S Secretary of State), was a post-World War II program designed to transfer capital and material to Western Europe, promote trade with the United States, and prevent the spread of communism. For an exhaustive analysis, see McCourt & Mudge (2023).

***In what ways are the experiences of Palestinian refugees in the 'five fields' (Gaza, West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon) similar or different?***

*Irfan:* I talk in the book about this combination of entitlement and suspicion that underpins historically a lot of the relationship that transcends the borders of the five fields. This is a dynamic whereby Palestinian refugees construct and conceptualize and understand UNRWA's work as essentially not charity, but as a right on account of the contravention of their political rights and their national rights in 1948 and ever since. That's been crucial to how they've understood UNRWA's role, the idea that it's not doing them a favor, to put it bluntly. And that's gone hand in hand with the suspicion often related to the fact that UNRWA receives a lot of its funding from particularly the United States, and generally from Western states that are politically aligned to Israel.

That being said, obviously, we're talking about 76 years at this point since the original dispossession of Palestinians and 74 years since UNRWA began operations. So in that time there has been a lot of divergence in the events across these nation-states, and that has had an impact on what role UNRWA has taken on.

For example, for a long time UNRWA's role in Lebanon was more akin to emergency relief, because for so many years Lebanon was essentially in a state of civil war, and more recently it's been in an ongoing, protracted crisis. Because of that, UNRWA's role has in many ways reverted to immediate emergency relief and away from the long-term development that characterized its work more in Jordan.

The other key issue in determining the relationship has been what's been going on with Palestinian national politics. For a long time, the PLO<sup>7</sup> (Palestine Liberation Organization) was based in Lebanon, and it had a really established power base there, which gave the Palestinian people more leverage with UNRWA and in demanding how they wanted UNRWA to change.

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<sup>7</sup> The Palestine Liberation Organization is a Palestinian nationalist group that has sometimes also served as the de facto international representative of the Palestinian people (Parsons, 2013).



That obviously collapsed in 1982, which is where I end most of the book's analysis. But then subsequently, we have the First Intifada in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip [from 1987 to 1993].

As a result, UNRWA begins to take more of an openly protection role in those spaces than it's ever taken before. It starts introducing officers who do things like observing rights violations. And then we have the establishment of the Palestinian Authority (PA) in the 1990s in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip, and that brings out another shift where, in that early period of the PA, UNRWA is trying to work with the PA for an eventual handover. This is a period where there's more optimism that there's going to be a Palestinian state, and in that period, many Palestinians in, say, Syria and Lebanon feel that they're being left behind, and that their refugee status is not being part of the dynamic. The details or the nature of that relationship shift depending on what it is those refugees are experiencing.

The final thing I'd add that gets lost in a lot of these conversations is that since 2011, huge numbers of Palestinians in Syria have been displaced. They've either become refugees and sought refuge outside of Syria, or they've been internally displaced. That's had a big impact not only on UNRWA's role in Syria, but also on their relationship with UNRWA, because if they've been displaced to Lebanon or Jordan, they have at least, in theory, been able to continue receiving services from UNRWA. But some of them have been displaced to Turkey or to Egypt, or to places where UNRWA doesn't operate.

***In your book, you describe that UNRWA was increasingly drawn into the UN's explicit engagement with the political dimensions of the Palestinian situation, especially in the 1970s. Can you discuss the impact of that?***

*Irfan:* What happens in the 1970s is that the PLO brings its struggle very definitively to the UN. Arafat addresses the UN General Assembly in 1974 and the PLO gains a formal place in the General Assembly as an observer entity. It gains this new level of recognition in the General Assembly, and the General Assembly is the same body that mandates UNRWA, so this has a knock-on effect on UNRWA. The General Assembly recognizes the PLO at a

time when it is situated very much towards the politics of the Global South, towards anti-colonial politics. The PLO is invited to address the General Assembly when it is under the presidency of Algeria, which is in its immediate post-revolutionary phase.

The General Assembly is coming at the Palestine issue from that angle, and in the immediate aftermath of recognizing the PLO, it starts pushing for the UN to do more to engage with the Palestinian struggle and to recognize Palestinian rights. It starts requesting that the Security Council monitor this more closely, and that's where UNRWA starts to more explicitly be brought into the fray because it talks about things like drawing on UNRWA's reports as evidence for the violation of Palestinian rights.

Now this puts UNRWA in quite a difficult position, because, obviously, it's receiving most of its funding from the US, and the US continues to classify the PLO as a terrorist organization right up until the end of the following decade. So UNRWA has to walk this very delicate tightrope where, on the one hand, it's being requested to engage with the politics of the Palestine issue in a way that's more open than it has been before.

There's also a practical element that in the 1970s the PLO essentially runs parts of Lebanon – not the whole country but parts of it – so practically for UNRWA to work, it has to work with the PLO. The PLO is the de facto host state in parts of Lebanon. But at the same time it has to do that in such a way that's not going to aggravate the U.S. too much. You have UNRWA moving in the orbit of these different actors, and sometimes being pulled more into the orbit of one or more into the orbit of another. There are definitely communications in the archive that come from the U.S. towards UNRWA where they're warning and saying, “We're hearing reports of things like the PLO maybe using your facilities for arms training,” and basically threatening to withhold funding if there's evidence found of anything like that.

## UNRWA's Education Programs

### *Can you discuss the curriculum of UNRWA schools as a site of contestation across different periods?*

*Irfan:* UNRWA management takes issue with even just the phrase "UNRWA curriculum," because there is not really any UNRWA curriculum; UNRWA schools use the curricula of the host states. So, Jordanian curriculum in Jordan, Lebanese curriculum in Lebanon, Syrian curriculum in Syria. In the West Bank, it used the Jordanian curriculum up until Oslo; in the Gaza Strip, they used the Egyptian curriculum up until Oslo;<sup>8</sup> and post-Oslo, the Palestinian Authority has had its own curriculum that's been used in those spaces.

At the same time, from the beginning, there's been an adaptation of those curricula to ensure they run along approved UN lines. There are materials that have been removed or taken out that were deemed incompatible with what's termed "UN values." The UN and The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) were involved in this process for many decades. In the case of the West Bank and Gaza, the inspection process was stepped up after 1967 with the beginning of the Israeli occupation, as the Israeli occupying authorities intervened and wanted to directly sign off on the textbooks that were being used.

The other key point here is that more recently, UNRWA has introduced what's called human rights education in its school, which is supplementary material. This is again meant to be about essentially promoting those UN values in schools—things like peace, tolerance, international cooperation, respect for gender equality, etc. But what's been missing from a lot of those discussions and what's been a big issue for many Palestinians, pretty much from the beginning, is that this setup whereby UNRWA uses the host

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<sup>8</sup> The Oslo Accords, named such because of the role the Kingdom of Norway and the country's then-deputy foreign minister Jan Egeland in facilitating them, are two agreements between the PLO and the State of Israel in 1993 and 1995 that advanced a framework for a sustained peace process. (Shlaim, 2005; Waage, 2005).

state curricula has often meant that Palestinian refugee children are not being taught their own national history.

This is a subject of a huge discussion because it's not only seen as failing to respect Palestinian national rights, but it's also been seen as arguably a pedagogical failure, because it means that Palestinian refugee children are not being taught the background to understand their own situation. There's a quote I have in the book from Fawaz Turki, a Palestinian writer from Haifa who grew up in a refugee camp in Lebanon, where he says:

... the schools that UNRWA sponsored were designed—unwittingly or not—to raise Palestinian children on, and educate them in, accepting their plight of life as a preordained thing... No attempt was made to explain the situation and the forces behind it that ruled their lives, or how they were to respond to them. ... No courses were offered to show where they came from, the history of Palestine. (Irfan, 2023, p. 169)

There's a strong connection there; it's not only a political objection, but there's also a pedagogical argument for it. In the late sixties and early seventies, Palestinians in Lebanon, after decades of lobbying on this issue, finally had some success, and UNRWA modified its teaching in Lebanese schools, and it brought in the teaching of Palestinian history and Palestinian geography. That was done again in a supplementary way. So it didn't replace anything that was being taught, but it was additional subjects. It's quite an interesting case study for anyone who does work on the history of education because it was really this kind of Palestinian initiative.

What I found in the archives was correspondence between the Palestinian education consultants that UNRWA had hired, and they were writing and corresponding with leading academics all around the world trying to get advice on how to put together this curriculum. I saw correspondence in the archives of these consultants with leading scholars such as Albert Hourani of the Middle East Center at Oxford. They ended up with quite a developed set of materials. They had guidebooks for teachers, they had textbooks, and they also had all these things like historical maps they'd put together. They had their own notes that they put together, based on quite advanced academic

books that these consultants were using as the basis of it. This was all developed, and it was implemented in schools in Lebanon in the 1970s.

But what's not clear from the records and what I wasn't able to find is what happened to that, because at some point, that disappeared. It was initially talked about as potentially going to be rolled out across all the five fields, and that never happened. And more recently, Palestinian educators have again sort of raised this question of what's being taught, and that comes to the forefront, because whenever there are attacks on UNRWA, one element always focuses on accusations: that what's taught in UNRWA schools is violent, and that the textbooks are antisemitic—those things are very regular accusations for UNRWA.

***Do you see tensions in regards to teaching the concepts and principles of international human rights, particularly the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the Genocide Convention, considering that these foundational pieces were codified by the UN at the same time as the 1948 dispossession of Palestinians and the creation of the state of Israel?***

*Irfan:* The main issue that's come up there is this feeling that first of all, many Palestinians are aware that human rights education, which UNRWA has been implementing since 1999,<sup>9</sup> is being taught often at the behest of the donor states, and it's sort of seen as something that's being imposed by the donor states. But there's also often a frustration for the fact that at the same time, any teaching around Palestinian national political rights is not allowed because that's seen as unacceptable. So again, that feeling of kind of selectivity or double standard definitely comes up.

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<sup>9</sup> UNRWA first began teaching supplementary content called Human Rights, Conflict Resolution, and Tolerance (HRCRT) in 1999, which hoped “to promote non-violence, healthy communication skills, peaceful conflict-resolution, human rights, tolerance, and good citizenship” (UNRWA, n.d.). The most recent update to the curriculum, published in 2012, seeks “to empower Palestine refugee students by encouraging them to know and exercise their rights, uphold the rights of others and be proud of their Palestinian identity.” United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA, 2012; UNRWA, 2021).

And there's also one other criticism I've heard: that it can be a little bit disjointed, because with all of this on human rights—let's say you're at school in the West Bank, or, before recently, in Gaza, and you're being taught about human rights and your day-to-day life is so far removed from that in how you're being treated and how your family and your neighbors are being treated. It can be very abstract and disconnected from reality. That can also go hand in hand with this feeling that it's just something being imposed by the outside and that teaching about human rights is not aligned with living under occupation. But there are ways you can teach that.

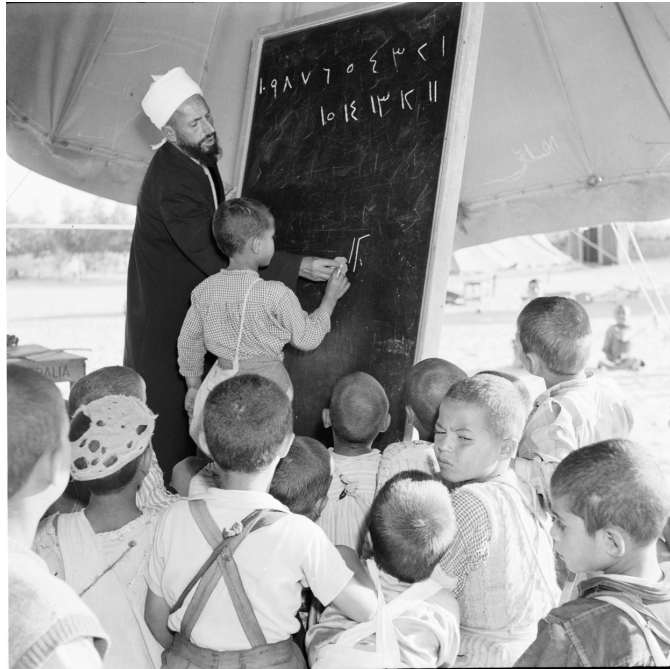
***How have Palestinians resisted the erasure of their culture, history, and identity in the type of education they receive?***

*Irfan*: The main way this has come up has definitely been in the demands for the inclusion of Palestinian-specific subjects in teaching. It's important to keep in mind many Palestinians have been very aware of the political place of education, of precedents, like the one you mentioned, of how education was used in the genocide of Indigenous peoples in North America.

It's worth keeping in mind that the very first schools that were set up for Palestinian refugees were set up by Palestinians. They weren't set up by UNRWA. When UNRWA arrived on the scene, there were already schools there, maybe not schools in the formal institutional sense, but there were systems that had been set up predominantly by Palestinian refugees who'd been teaching in Palestine. Very soon after the *Nakba*,<sup>10</sup> many Palestinians prioritized education. Even when they were really struggling to survive, they prioritized education which I think is not uncommon among refugees. It was seen as essential and there are fascinating historical photographs of these early classes operating out of tents, or sometimes operating in the open air.

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<sup>10</sup> Nakba, which is Arabic for “catastrophe,” refers to what is called the 1948 War for Palestine by Palestinians, and the War for Independence by the State of Israel. It describes the dispossession and displacement of Palestinians from land that became the State of Israel (United Nations, n.d.).



*Figure 2: UNRWA Tent School in Khan Younis Camp, Gaza<sup>11</sup>  
©1950 UNRWA Archive, reprinted with permission.*

There's long been this understanding of education as power. The dedication to education was very closely connected to Palestinians' dispossession. For one thing, many of the refugees who ended up in the camp, the poorest refugees, had been farmers in Palestine. All of their wealth had historically been in the land, and they lost that land.

That was part of the impetus behind them then prioritizing education because they felt they needed to give their children some kind of capital that was portable. Having lost the land, it was a shift toward social capita from land capital. The other thing was, among some refugees, an assessment that they'd been at a disadvantage compared to Israel, because the Jewish community in Palestine had generally been more highly educated prior to 1948.

The point I'm trying to make is that the dedication to education was very closely entangled with the politics of the dispossession from the

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<sup>11</sup> This photograph was taken in 1950, one year before the adoption of the United Nations Refugee Convention in 1951. More on the convention: <https://www.unhcr.org/us/about-unhcr/who-we-are/1951-refugee-convention>

beginning. When UNRWA first arrived on the scene, it took over the schools, but they weren't its priority at all early on. And one of the reasons why UNRWA came to focus more on education was because the refugees were demanding it and were lobbying for it. Then, hand in hand with that from very early on, many Palestinian refugee teachers, students, and parents were lobbying for Palestinian history and geography to be taught in the schools. And often you would have teachers teach it informally themselves. There were many strikes by teachers in UNRWA schools over conditions and pay, and many times the teaching of Palestinian history was included as a demand in the strike. So it was integral to all of these conversations.

The vast majority of teachers in UNRWA schools are themselves Palestinian refugees. So I want to avoid giving any suggestion that this is a gift that the UN has externally given to Palestinian refugees. It's much more something that they've generated for themselves. Now, on that basis, education is widely seen as being critical in national identity building and in nation building. There's a lot of interesting work on how that applies in a refugee setting or in a setting of statelessness.<sup>12</sup>

In the Palestinian case what's significant is that the schools are set up as essentially Palestinian spaces. There are sometimes a tiny number of non-Palestinian students. But that plays a significant role, that it's Palestinian students being taught by Palestinian teachers. That creates its own dynamic for a community - who are stateless and who are in exile. In the second half of the twentieth century, probably at the period where Palestinians were sort of at the peak of their reputation as the world's best-educated refugees, it became quite a recognized phenomenon that you would have Palestinian graduates of UNRWA schools who would go on and get well-paying employment in the Gulf in general, and particularly in Kuwait, often as engineers, and then they would send remittances back to the camps. That also became economically very significant, and that played into all other kinds of political

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<sup>12</sup> For more on the education of refugees and how it connects to the building of national identity, see Dryden-Peterson (2020), or Shabaneh (2012) for the case of the Palestinians in particular. In addition, Kelcey (2020; 2023) and Kelcey and Irfan (2024a; 2024b) have also written on Palestinians in the context of UNRWA.



dynamics. Some of them would also then go on to financially support the PLO, or financially support Palestinian nationalist organizations.

There's also the element of education often giving people another tool with which they can push for their rights and campaign for their rights. The other thing is many Palestinian refugees came out [of UNRWA schools] with a very good standard of English as a result of their education. And that became significant when they were trying to make their case on the world stage.

A big part of education is designed to be preparing people for employment, and that really does vary a lot across the five fields. In Lebanon to this day, Palestinians are barred by law from working in most of the professions. So that's created this almost feeling of futility towards some of the education; they come out very highly educated, but struggle to get a job that matches their level of education.

By contrast, historically, prior to 2011, Palestinians in Syria had equal access to the job market and to higher education. The access was equal to that of Syrian citizens. So that was a very different setup. And then if you look at the West Bank and Gaza historically, it would depend on the time period, but if you look at the period of the first Intifada, there were widespread economic boycotts going on, and many people were not working as part of that activism.

The other element that can drive those dynamics is: What are your hopes? What are your prospects once you finish school? And say in Gaza, since the blockade,<sup>13</sup> there has been such widespread unemployment, that de facto, what are the prospects?

## UNRWA's Present and Future

***How has UNRWA responded (or not) to the demands of the Palestinian refugees? Can you talk about the staffing of UNRWA in this regard as well?***

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<sup>13</sup> The current blockade began in 2007 after Hamas' electoral victory, though there had been other blockades, often limited and temporary, in 1991, 1993, and 2000 (UNICEF, 2022).

*Irfan*: First, there has never been a Palestinian head of UNRWA. They've pretty much all been Westerners, North Americans, and Western Europeans. There was one Turkish Commissioner General and that was it. All of the senior management are "international," which means non-Palestinian, which in practice really means Western. And that's another cause of huge resentment that the majority of UNRWA staff are Palestinian, but at the senior management levels, none of them are.



*Figure 3: Four forces impacting UNRWA.*

The bigger question about these tensions, I think this actually gets to the heart of understanding UNRWA, because it is, I call it in the book, a "hybrid organization" (Irfan, 2023, p. 91). It's caught up in these tensions. Sometimes, when I'm lecturing on it, I draw a diagram where I have UNRWA in the middle, and then I argue there are four forces that pull on it – the donor states, the Palestinian refugees themselves, the Arab host states, and Israel, and all of them are pulling on UNRWA. Those four actors have interests, motivations, and demands that might sometimes align in unexpected ways. Israel and the Arab host states are often actually quite aligned, and what they want from UNRWA at different times over history, depending on all kinds of political dynamics. UNRWA has moved or been pulled more into the orbit of one or of another, or maybe of two, and it moves in that space.

Recently, I would say it's moved in the last five years closer than ever to the orbit of the donor states. UNRWA's been struggling so much financially, and because the Trump administration made it this politically contested issue, it's been forced to prove itself to the donor states; so it's much more in that sphere now than it's probably ever been. But if you were to look at that period in parts of the 1970s, certainly in Lebanon, it was closer to the Palestinian refugees than it is now. So that's loosely how I see it. And I think that also reflects the setup because it's mandated and created by the General Assembly at the UN, but the General Assembly doesn't give it any money. UNRWA answers to the General Assembly officially, but unofficially, it's answering to the people who are actually funding it.

***What has happened since October 7th, 2023 and how has it impacted UNRWA's operations and its mandate?***

*Irfan:* Gaza is just one place where UNRWA operates. If we look at history over the last 74 years, UNRWA was set up immediately to provide emergency relief after the Nakba. And as the years passed and Palestinians remained in exile, it started to shift from that emergency relief to longer term, sort of almost development services. And then across all five fields, at times, crises have happened, and it's been pushed back into emergency relief mode. And those dynamics have happened across time and space in all five fields at different moments.

What's happening in Gaza now since October 7th is that dynamic, but in an incredibly acute form. The situation in Gaza is really akin to 1948, if not worse than 1948. More people have been displaced in Gaza since October than in the entirety of the Nakba, which initiated the Palestinian refugee crisis. So the primary answer to your question is that it's gone into the ultimate emergency relief mode, but it's done so at a time when, prior to October the 7th, UNRWA was probably facing its worst existential crisis ever, so it's in a very weak position to be doing so. It's incredibly overstretched. It's incredibly underfunded.

It's also facing serious political attacks on a level that haven't been seen previously. UNRWA remains the most significant relief actor in Gaza.

The other thing that I think often gets lost is that UNRWA is a major employer in Gaza. So the other issue here is how, whenever UNRWA faces financial crises, a large number of Palestinians either lose their jobs or risk losing their jobs. That's especially significant in Gaza because of the high unemployment rate.

So the Israeli war on Gaza since October has resulted in the deaths of more UN staff than any other war in history [at the time of this writing, the death toll of UN employees in Gaza stands at 178 as of April 19, 2024.]<sup>14</sup> And they're all UNRWA staff. UNRWA is a UN agency. We often think of it as an external body operating in Gaza, but in terms of how its operations are run, it's local Palestinians. It's often local Palestinian refugees who are actually on the ground. So it's directly caught up in the war itself.

***What do you see as the future of UNRWA given what's happened since October 7th?***

*Irfan:* No one can give a firm answer to this question, but there are a lot of warning signs that the Israeli government may be seeking as part of this war to bring about the dismantlement of UNRWA, certainly in Gaza. There's been a strong propaganda campaign against UNRWA to discredit it through claims of things like claiming they've been finding Hamas hideouts in UNRWA installations and claims that UNRWA has essentially been aligned with Hamas. There are uncorroborated claims that have been made that some of the hostage takers were UNRWA teachers or employees.

UNRWA responded by requesting that the Israeli journalist who reported the story contact them so that they could investigate. The last I heard was that UNRWA said that the journalist had not responded to those requests (*see postscript for more updated information*). But there has been generally this rising discourse whereby UNRWA has been portrayed as more or

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<sup>14</sup> At the time of this writing, 1.7 million Palestinians are internally displaced, and more than 33,000 people have been killed (33,899+ Palestinian and 1,200+ Israeli.) See OCHA, 2024.

Data from UNRWA: <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports>

Daily Palestinian and Israeli death tolls are updated here: <https://www.ochaopt.org>

less part of Hamas. The latest poll<sup>15</sup> that I saw said that the majority of Israeli people think that UNRWA should be dismantled, and that UNRWA is part of the problem.

There's also a bigger conversation going on about whether there are Israeli plans or moves to try and permanently displace and expel Palestinians from the Gaza Strip, possibly into Egypt, and that would in itself have major implications for UNRWA if that were to happen. UNRWA obviously does not only work in Gaza, but Gaza is one of the places where its work and its role are the most significant. We don't know at this moment exactly what's gonna happen in Gaza. But it seems increasingly clear that we're at a moment of transformational change for the worse in Gaza, and UNRWA is probably on the cusp of a major change itself as a result.

***Your book came out a few months ago based on many years of research. How do you hope it contributes to current conversations about Palestinian refugees?***

*Irfan:* In the current moment, there are a lot of discussions about UNRWA in particular, and Palestinian refugees in general. I've heard a lot of people asking, "Who are Palestinian refugees?" "Why are there refugees in Gaza?" "Why are they considered refugees?" I hope that the book goes some way toward answering those questions. I hope the book also illuminates things like why Palestinians respond to suggestions that they evacuate Gaza with such horror. The book can shed light on what the collective memory and the history are there and why that's such a loaded suggestion.

More broadly, I hope what the book does is also make the case for framing and understanding refugees not simply as people who receive services from international actors. I've tried to show in the book that we most accurately understand UNRWA as the product of these interactional dynamics between the refugees and the UN, rather than something that simply goes in one way that's imposed by the UN on the refugees. That's something that's

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<sup>15</sup> Survey results published through the Jerusalem Post, January 8, 2024, "76% of Israelis support removal of UNRWA" <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/article-781311>

not unique to the Palestinian case, and and that's something that I hope will be of interest and relevance to people who are researching and interested in all kinds of regional cases that may be far away from Palestine, because that's a theme that is common across cases of displacement and refugee history.

[R]efugees themselves are constructed within humanitarian regimes as mere aid recipients, lacking any agency or autonomy. The identity category of “the refugee” is stripped of political context and thus silences a critical part of what displacement means.

Palestinian refugees themselves have long been in the vanguard of making such criticisms. From the beginning, Palestinian refugee communities across the Middle East have agitated for UNRWA's reform, seeking to counter the potential depoliticizing impact of humanitarianism. Their resistance on this front is part of this book's title: I use the word *resistance* to refer not only to the Palestinian's national struggle *for* statehood, but also to their struggle *against* depoliticized constructions of their displacement, as encapsulated by the UNRWA regime. In these ways, their refugeehood and their resistance have been inextricably linked from the beginning. (Irfan, 2023, p. 6)

### **Postscript**

Since the conversation between IJHRE's editors and Anne Irfan on January 17, 2024, presented in this article, UNRWA has been increasingly visible in the news. The initial suspension of funding by major donor countries came after Israel made allegations against 12 members of UNRWA's staff in the Fall of 2023 and in early 2024 (Beinart, 2024; Democracy Now!, 2024a; Democracy Now!, 2024b; Reuters, 2024a; UNRWA, 2024b). As of this writing, there are pending investigations into these allegations by multiple countries and stakeholders (Beinart, 2024; Hilsun, 2024). However, there are also multiple reports challenging these investigations (Democracy Now!, 2024b; Sinmaz, 2024). A report from UNRWA in March 2024 claims the workers' admissions of connections to Hamas followed coercion by Israeli authorities (Reuters, 2024b). Since October 7, 2023, events in Israel and Gaza have been fluid, unclear, and muddied by both the fog of reporting from conflict zones

and the political challenges of the conflict, within which UNRWA has found itself to be an unwilling co-star.

In their research, Anne Irfan and Joe Kelcey (2024a) emphasize that UNRWA has frequently been the target of accusations - of intolerance, of hostility, of antisemitism. They remark that these accusations,

that the PA curriculum promotes hatred and intolerance, have been stoked by such organizations as UN Watch and IMPACT-se, which have long demonstrated hostility to the UN, deny the applicability of international law to Palestinian refugees, and adopt dubious and unsound methodologies (including mistranslations, taking content out of context, and reviewing material that is not even taught in UNRWA schools). Moreover, these accusations willfully ignore the fact that UNRWA has a multitier curriculum review process. This includes examining all curriculum content to ensure that it aligns to UN standards and developing alternative teaching material and teacher guidance to address the small number of instances when it does not. Experts have also pointed to the lopsided and narrow obsession with Palestinian textbooks, which overlooks problems with the Israeli education system and the oppressive realities that shape Palestinian children's learning under occupation. (par. 13).

As mentioned in our interview, the precarity of UNRWA has been a longstanding issue stemming from its original mandate; its reliance on donor funding and the politics of that funding, the tense relationship between UNRWA and Israel, and the latter's stated intentions to abolish it (Beinart, 2024; Democracy Now!, 2024b; Irfan & Kelcey, 2024a; Irfan & Kelcey, 2024b; Lema, 2024).

While UNRWA acted immediately to address Israel's allegations of employee misconduct related to Hamas and the October 7 attack, including the firing of those accused even before the internal investigation was launched or concluded (Lema, 2024), many of the largest nation-state donors halted aid in January 2024, including the United States that has halted all aid through at least March 2025 (Reuters, 2024a). With little evidence provided to back up Israel's claims (Borger, 2024) and reports of UNRWA staff being waterboarded to extract confessions (Reuters, 2024b), Canada, Australia,

Sweden, and other nations resumed their funding of UNRWA in March 2024 (Ables et al, 2024).

Other nation-state donors, notably Ireland, Norway, Portugal, and Spain (Bigg, 2024), never halted but instead increased their contributions to UNRWA in light of the dire humanitarian crisis unfolding in the region (Fouche & Perry, 2024). Without the continued support of countries like the United States, however, UNRWA will be tasked with navigating this situation with a close to USD 350 million deficit, which, according to Bill Deere, the U.S. Congressional Advisor to the Washington, D. C. office of UNRWA, “will mean less food aid, lost jobs, and schools and health clinics will be shuttered in impoverished Palestinian refugee camps across the region, including in deeply unstable Lebanon” (Hauslohner, 2024, para. 17).

At the time of finalizing this article in April 2024, the humanitarian situation in Gaza continues to deteriorate, and UNRWA remains the best-positioned organization able to provide relief to the large numbers of starving, displaced people in Gaza. Throughout this crisis, it remains important to remember that UNRWA is responsible for the education of more than 500,000 students across its five fields of operation. As of early 2024, “Approximately 378 schools have been destroyed or damaged. The Palestinian Ministry of Education has reported the deaths of over 4,327 students, 231 teachers and 94 professors” (Desai, 2024, para. 3). This amounts to the destruction of 76% of schools in Gaza (Abu El-Haj et al, 2024). Irfan and Kelcey (2024) observe,

...No thought has been given to what could replace UNRWA. The suggestion that UNHCR could take over not only is based on a flawed misunderstanding of the right of return in international law and the two agencies' mandates, but also fails to account for the fact that UNRWA educates more than half a million children, provides basic health services to almost 6 million people, and employs more than 30,000.

Far from perpetuating the conflict and reflecting a bias toward Palestinians, UNRWA's longevity and anomalous status as a service provider reflect the failure of the parties concerned to engage in good



faith, legally grounded discussions about the refugees' future. Arguably, the biggest irony in this tragic situation is the in-built mechanism to disband UNRWA: to find a just and durable solution to the Palestinian refugees' protracted crisis. (para. 15–16)

*Refuge and Resistance* opens with the description of the self-immolation of 23-year-old Palestinian Omar Khudeir outside of a UNRWA health care clinic in southern Lebanon in 2016 (Irfan, 2023, p. 1). On February 25, 2024, 141 days after the events of October 7, 2023, the deaths of an estimated 29,594 Palestinians, the loss of 128 UNRWA staff, and the internal displacement of 1.7+ million from Northern Gaza to the besieged south (UNRWA, 2024a), 25-year-old U.S. Air Force serviceman Aaron Bushnell self-immolated in front of the Israeli embassy in Washington, D.C., in protest of his country's support of Israel's actions in Gaza (Kim, 2024).

After three failed and one successful ceasefire resolution at the United Nations (with the United States' abstention), and an International Court of Justice ruling which Israel has failed to comply with, alongside continued protests calling for the resignation of the Netanyahu government in Israel, even if there were a speedy end to the conflict, the seriousness of the situation in Gaza would be far from resolved (AFP, 2024; Amnesty International, 2024; United Nations 2024). Amidst these massive human losses, social and political turmoil, and hostages still being held (at the time of this writing), the tremendous impact of the current crisis on educational opportunities and the abrogation of the basic rights of Palestinian refugees will be felt for many decades to come.

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