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United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

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UNRWA

Background

In November 1947, the [United Nations Partition Plan for Palestine](#) sought to create separate Jewish and Arab states. The resolution led to conflict between Arab and Jewish groups, which, following the declaration of the independent State of Israel on 14 May 1948, escalated into war, with other Arab forces joining the fight. Israel and the Arab countries signed separate armistice agreements in the first half of 1949, with Egypt taking the Gaza Strip, Transjordan controlling the West Bank, and Syria holding the Golan Heights. This would last until the [Six Day War](#) in 1967 when Israel took control over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, as well as the Sinai Peninsula, East Jerusalem and the Golan Heights.

At the December 1949 UN General Assembly, with no clear path forward for the establishment of a Palestinian state, [Resolution 302 \(IV\) – Assistance to Palestine Refugees](#) established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to carry out ‘direct relief and works programmes’ in support of [Palestine refugees](#) ‘who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 war’. In the absence of a more permanent solution, ‘the General Assembly has [repeatedly renewed UNRWA’s mandate](#), most recently extending it until 30 June 2026’.

UNRWA operations

Commencing operations on 1 May 1950, UNRWA’s role was to provide essential services for the wellbeing, human development, and protection of Palestinian refugees across its 5 fields of operation (Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank including East Jerusalem).

In 1950, UNRWA supported the needs of [around 750,000 Palestinian refugees](#). By 2023, this number had increased to [5.9 million](#), and as at [1 January 2023](#) UNRWA was:

- providing services to 58 refugee camps
- assisting 706 schools with 543,075 students and employing 19,725 education staff
- running 140 primary health-care facilities, facilitating more than 7 million annual patient visits
- providing emergency food and cash assistance to over 1.8 million refugees
- providing social protection services for 325,180 highly vulnerable persons
- providing 23,517 microfinance loans to the value of US\$31.5 million.

UNRWA is a [major employer of Palestinian refugees](#), who comprise the vast majority of its 30,000 staff, particularly those based in the Occupied Palestinian Territories.

UNRWA is also a key source of data in the region, which it collects to inform its own practices, and publishes for general use. Examples include weekly [situation reports](#) detailing the current conflict and its impacts, and [monitoring the dispatch of supplies into Gaza](#).

In October 2024, UNRWA produced the [One year of war – fast facts](#) report, which outlined the impact of the conflict and UNRWA’s response. According to this report, in the one-year period since the attack on Israel by Hamas in October 2023:

- up to 1 million people sheltered in UNRWA facilities
- UNRWA distributed over 167,000 hygiene kits
- over 24,000 displaced persons received psychosocial support
- some 660,000 children were forced out of school, half of whom attended UNRWA schools
- 226 UNRWA staff were killed
- nearly 200 UNRWA facilities were damaged
- UNRWA distributed over 4.6 million litres of water after 70% of the networked water supply was lost due to damage
- UNRWA distributed food parcels to over 200,000 families and over 3 million bags of flour.

Funding

UNRWA started in 1950 with an operating budget of US\$33.7 million granted by the UN on behalf of member states. In 2023, UNRWA had a total budget of US\$1.46 billion, 90% of which was comprised largely of [contributions](#) from [UN member states](#), with the remainder from other UN bodies and private interests. UNRWA also receives [in-kind contributions](#) from UN partner agencies in the form of skill-sharing and expertise, with an estimated value of US\$15 million per annum.

[UNRWA manages its funding](#) via 2 main streams – its [core program budget](#) and the [emergency appeals budget](#). Both budgets are guided by the objectives and priorities outlined in its [Strategic plan 2023–28](#), which are based on human development priorities in the [UN Sustainable Development Goals](#).

UNRWA has a [Department of Internal Oversight](#) that reports directly to the UNRWA Commissioner-General on matters including auditing funds, promoting good administrative practice and improving program performance. UNRWA is also audited annually by the UN Board of Auditors.

Australia's funding

In 2025–26, [Australia's funding to UNRWA](#) sits at \$20 million. The Australian Government is a long-standing supporter of UNRWA, [contributing every year since 1951](#). Since 2011, the Australian Government has contributed \$20 million a year to UNRWA, except in the [2020–21 Budget](#) when the Morrison Government halved the funding to \$10 million. This was restored to \$20 million by the Albanese Government in late 2022.

Also in 2021, the Morrison Government [ceased a long-standing funding arrangement](#) under the Australian Middle East NGO Cooperation Agreement (AMENCA), despite a positive evaluation of it by an [independent review](#). Not only was this a further reduction of aid funding to the region, AMENCA could have provided an additional pathway for aid into the [Occupied Palestinian Territories](#).

Following the 7 October 2023 attacks by Hamas, and Israel's retaliatory actions, the Australian Government committed an [additional \\$10 million in emergency assistance](#). On 16 January 2024, in the lead-up to Foreign Minister Penny Wong's trip to the Middle East, the [Australian Government pledged an additional \\$21.5 million](#) for humanitarian assistance, focusing on women and children. The funding package included \$6 million to UNRWA,

\$4 million to the Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement and \$11.5 million to refugee programs in Lebanon and Jordan.

Allegations against UNRWA

In January 2024, Israel alleged that [UNRWA staff had been involved in the 7 October 2023 attacks](#) on Israel. Addressing the Munich Security Conference on 16 February 2024, [Israeli Foreign Minister Israel Katz](#) claimed to have ‘decisive evidence of UNRWA’s involvement in Hamas’ terrorist activities’, which was said to be contained in a dossier. The [dossier](#), which later found its way to [the British media](#), listed the names and jobs of 12 UNRWA employees and the allegations against them, including that 10 were members of Hamas and one a member of Islamic Jihad. Other claims made against UNRWA staff included kidnapping, handing out ammunition, and taking part in a massacre at a kibbutz where 97 people were killed.

Following these allegations, the UNRWA Commissioner-General terminated the contracts of 19 UNRWA staff, pending investigation. In March 2024, UNRWA released its [UNRWA: claims versus facts](#) report, which lists Israel’s accusations against UNRWA, and UNRWA’s response.

UN investigations

Following the allegations made by Israel, the UN commissioned 2 reviews: one of UNRWA itself focusing on [how it manages staff neutrality](#), and the other more directly [responding to the allegations made against 19 UNRWA staff](#).

The [final report](#) by the independent panel examining UNRWA’s approach to ensuring neutrality in its operations found room for improvement and made 50 recommendations. However, the panel found no evidence of the alleged widespread wrongdoing.

The review examining allegations against particular staff was managed by the [Office of Internal Oversight Services \(OIOS\)](#), and on 5 August 2024, the office of the UN Secretary-General [noted](#):

OIOS made findings in relation to each of the 19 UNRWA staff members alleged to have been involved in the attacks.

In one case, no evidence was obtained by OIOS to support the allegations of the staff member’s involvement, while in nine other cases, the evidence obtained by OIOS was insufficient to support the staff members’ involvement. With respect to these ten cases, appropriate measures will be taken in due course, in conformity with UNRWA Regulations and Rules.

In respect of the remaining nine cases, the evidence obtained by OIOS indicated that the UNRWA staff members may have been involved in the armed attacks of 7 October 2023. The employment of these individuals will be terminated in the interests of the Agency.

Both reviews found that Israel had not raised any concerns with UNRWA directly and had not provided reviewers with supporting evidence of its claims.

Impact in Australia

Following the allegations made by Israel, Australia withheld the additional \$6 million for UNRWA that it had announced on 16 January 2024. [Posting on X \(formerly Twitter\)](#) on 27 January 2024, Foreign Minister Wong said that Australia was ‘deeply concerned’ about the

allegations against UNRWA staff and that it would therefore ‘temporarily pause disbursement of recently announced funding’. When pressed on the matter a week after the pause was announced, Minister Wong acknowledged that the [government had no proof](#) of Israel’s allegations, but had withheld funding ‘because the allegations were serious and because UNRWA itself recognised that those allegations were serious’.

On 15 March 2024, following the release of the UN investigation reports, the [Australian Government announced](#) that it would ‘lift its temporary pause’ on funding to UNRWA, and provided the previously committed \$6 million to UNRWA’s flash appeal.

The [Australian Government said](#) that its new funding agreement with UNRWA will place more stringent conditions on staff neutrality and confidence of supply lines. It also said that it would look to diversify Australia’s aid funding, contributing a further \$4 million to UNICEF, and providing \$2 million to the UN’s new Senior Humanitarian and Reconstruction Coordinator for Gaza. On 23 September 2024, Foreign Minister Wong announced [an additional \\$10 million](#) in emergency aid for the Occupied Palestinian Territories, to be distributed by UNICEF and the United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA).

Further developments

- In late 2024, [Israel passed legislation](#) prohibiting its officials from having any contact with UNRWA, and banning UNRWA from conducting any activity or providing any service inside Israel or in areas under Israeli control. The ban, which came into effect on 31 January 2025, makes it impossible for UNRWA to obtain entry permits to operate in Gaza and the West Bank.
- On 5 February 2025, US President Trump announced he would [cease funding to UNRWA](#). This removes UNRWA’s largest individual donor, which [in 2022 provided 30% of UNRWA’s total funding](#).

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