



# unrwa: claims versus facts

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UNRWA has long faced misinformation and disinformation, including about its staff and operations. This has intensified since the war in Gaza began on 7 October.

This document outlines UNRWA's positions—based on objective, ascertainable facts, data, and firsthand information—on some of the most frequent claims and allegations made against the Agency in the media and social media by various individuals, organizations, public and private entities.

### Background

- On 17 January, the UNRWA Commissioner-General announced his intention to commission an independent review to identify and assess the adequacy and implementation of the Agency's mechanisms and procedures to ensure neutrality. On 5 February, the Secretary-General appointed a Review Group, headed by Catherine Colonna, former French Minister of Foreign Affairs, to "assess whether the Agency is doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and to respond to allegations of serious breaches when they are made." For more information on the terms of reference of the review, click [here](#).
- On 26 January, in response to allegations received orally from Israeli officials regarding the alleged involvement of 12 UNRWA staff in the 7 October attack against Israel, and upon ascertaining that the individuals were indeed UNRWA staff members, the UNRWA Commissioner-General decided to immediately terminate the appointments of these staff "in the interest of the Agency," in accordance with applicable staff regulations, in order to protect its ability to deliver humanitarian assistance. This decision was communicated through a [statement](#).
- At the request of the UN Secretary-General, the Office of Internal Oversight Services (OIOS), the highest investigative body in the United Nations, launched an investigation into these specific allegations. The UN Secretary-General requested in interim report within four weeks of OIOS starting work.
- On 27 January, the UNRWA Commissioner-General issued another [statement](#) in response to several donor countries suspending, pausing, or temporarily freezing funding to UNRWA.



**The claim: Citing alleged intelligence estimates, several media have relayed claims that around 10 per cent of all UNRWA staff in Gaza, or about 1,200 people, have links to Hamas or the Palestinian Islamic Jihad.**

**The facts:** UNRWA has not received any information, let alone any evidence, from the Israeli Authorities or any other Member State about the above claim. UNRWA became aware of this claim first from international media and later from a press briefing by an Israeli government official.

Like any other UN organization, UNRWA carries out detailed reference checks on any staff the Agency recruits. In addition, UNRWA shares the names, employee numbers, and functions of all staff members every year in all five areas of operations with the host authorities (Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and the Palestinian Authority) and, for the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, and Gaza, with Israel as the occupying power. This means that at all times, host states and Israel are fully informed and aware of the details of all staff members working for UNRWA. Other UN Member States also receive these lists upon request.

The names of the 12 individuals against whom allegations were made were all shared multiple times with Israel and other Member States. Prior to January 2024, UNRWA did not receive any indication from the relevant authorities of any involvement of its staff in armed or militant groups. In addition, the Agency screens its staff on a biannual basis against the UN Security Council Consolidated Sanctions List.

**The claim: Israeli officials have stated that “UNRWA’s problem is not just ‘a few bad apples’ involved in the 7 October massacre,” and that the “institution as a whole is a haven for Hamas’ radical ideology.”**

**The facts:** UNRWA has more than 30,000 staff across the region, including 13,000 in Gaza, the majority of them Palestinian. UNRWA takes seriously its responsibility to ensure that its operations and staff adhere to UN values and core humanitarian principles.

UNRWA has always taken very seriously any allegation regarding staff misconduct –including allegations of neutrality breaches. The Agency takes swift action whenever any staff member is found to have acted in contravention of its regulatory framework. The range of disciplinary sanctions applied include, often in combination, fines, suspension from duty, demotion, up to termination of employment.

Since 2022, 66 investigations, out of 30,000 staff across UNRWA and not just in Gaza, looked at a range of allegations related to neutrality breaches, including alleged support for Hamas and other groups. Some of these investigations are still ongoing. **Sixty-six cases out of 30,000 staff – not all of which have been substantiated – is just 0.22 per cent. There is absolutely no ground for a blanket description of “the institution as a whole” being “totally infiltrated.”** Rather, the small percentage underscores that the absolutely overwhelming majority of UNRWA’s highly dedicated staff adhere to the principles to which they commit when they join the Agency. In any event, as indicated previously, the matter is now under assessment by the Review Group appointed by the UN Secretary-General, whose findings are expected to be released by April 2024.

In addition, staff members receive regular reminders and take mandatory trainings to ensure they understand and abide by the UN standards of conduct for International Civil Servants. These include that any political activity must be consistent with, and not reflect adversely upon, the independence and impartiality required by serving the United Nations, and that support for violence and hatred in any form runs counter to UN values and is unacceptable.

**The claim: Several media have relayed claims that Israel has documented deepening ties between UNRWA and Hamas, the de facto authorities in the Gaza Strip, since 2007.**

**The facts:** As elsewhere around the world, the UN works in complex environments, including in areas under the control of a de facto government or armed groups. The United Nations engages with all parties to facilitate delivery of services and humanitarian assistance – that’s a standard. In the Gaza Strip, UNRWA’s engagement with the de facto authorities takes place solely at an operational level with the exclusive purpose of delivering humanitarian aid and ensuring the safety of our staff.

Since UNRWA is operating in a conflict environment in Gaza, its activities need to be coordinated and “deconflicted” with all relevant parties to enable the implementation of its humanitarian mandate. The Agency is thus constantly in contact with the Israeli authorities and with the de facto authorities simultaneously to inform them about our movements and operations.

**The claim: Aid from UNRWA keeps getting diverted by Hamas.**

**The facts:** UNRWA is not aware of and has received no specific allegations regarding any systemic diversion of aid in Gaza by Hamas or other armed groups. Should it be revealed to be the case, UNRWA will strongly condemn any diversion of humanitarian supplies and immediately inform its donors to determine appropriate next steps.

Across the world’s conflict zones, the UN works in complex environments, including in areas under the control of de facto governments or non-State armed actors, to deliver humanitarian aid, and has extensive experience in delivering aid in accordance with humanitarian principles, including neutrality, impartiality, and operational independence, and mitigating the risk of diversion of aid.

UNRWA's distribution of aid is implemented through a robust system of oversight and checks:

- UNRWA uses a direct implementation modality (no intermediaries) which means that the Agency has full control of the supply chain from receiving the goods at the crossing points of Gaza to bringing them to UNRWA warehouses and distribution points, where aid is delivered directly to registered beneficiaries, checked against a pre-established list, and according to needs.
- All movements of aid (including fuel) from point of departure to point of arrival inside Gaza are coordinated with and notified to the parties, including the Israeli authorities, to “deconflict”, or ensure the safe passage of the aid convoy’s movements and ensure safety of humanitarian workers. The convoys are also escorted and monitored by UN security personnel. UNRWA is currently working with other UN Agencies to establish common warehousing for materials brought into Gaza, which will improve overall monitoring and security of the goods.
- UNRWA takes measures to ensure that it has no financial ties with any individual or organization on the UN Security Council Consolidated Sanctions List. During periods of escalation, we have emergency screening procedures to ensure the provision of aid in an effective manner, such as rapid screening of new vendors. Subcontractors and implementing partners are also vetted.
- UNRWA operates in five fields: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank- including East Jerusalem, and Gaza. It shares full lists of staff members, including functions, names, and IDs, with all the host authorities and, for the West Bank and Gaza, with Israel, every year.

**The claim: Hamas has stored weapons in UNRWA schools and dug tunnels under UNRWA buildings, but the Agency has done little to stop this.**

**The facts:** Since the mid-2000s, during conflicts in Gaza, there have been instances when armed actors from both sides have violated the neutrality of UNRWA sites, which are protected by international law. They have, for example, entered UNRWA buildings or used them for military purposes. UNRWA has systematically condemned such violations of UN premises. See an example [here](#) from 2014 of UNRWA condemning the placement of rockets inside its schools.

**Every time that UNRWA has discovered that the neutrality of its facilities has been compromised by third parties, including being used by armed groups in Gaza to cache munitions, it has protested to de facto authorities in Gaza, condemning the fact that these weapon components had been stored at a UN facility, in breach of their inviolability under UN Privileges and Immunities. UNRWA also immediately informs the Palestinian Authority and**

**and Israel as well as its main donors.** Moreover, in its annual reports to the UN General Assembly, the UNRWA Commissioner-General has also consistently reported and described any such instances. These reports are shared with all Member States of the United Nations.

When suspected tunnels are discovered under UNRWA facilities, the Agency follows a similar protocol to the one used when it has discovered that its installations were being used to cache munitions. This includes sealing cavities by injecting cement whenever discovered, immediately informing the Palestinian Authority and Israel as well as its main donors and reporting to the UN General Assembly. When cavities under buildings or our grounds have been identified, the Agency has also put out public statements – you can find an example from 2022 [here](#).

Ensuring that its facilities are not utilized for any purpose other than the provision of services by UNRWA to Palestine Refugees is critical for UNRWA's operations. The Agency dedicates significant resources to regularly assess its facilities, including to ensure neutrality. This means not only that there is no misuse of its facilities, but also ensuring that installations are clearly marked as UN facilities, that signs about them being weapons-free areas are present at entrances, and that the internal and external walls are free of any messaging that is political or in any way places the neutrality of the installation into question.

This is done via quarterly assessments by specially trained staff of all of UNRWA's almost 1,000 facilities across its five fields of operation: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank—including East Jerusalem, and Gaza. These assessments review adherence to neutrality and the level to which UNRWA installations are able to provide safe, inclusive, accessible, and dignified services to Palestine Refugees. During each of the second and third quarters of 2023 for example, UNRWA assessed 99 per cent of active Agency installations. The assessment of all Gaza installations was completed in September 2023. There is also a system of follow-up in place to ensure that issues identified are addressed in a consistent manner. Active conflict and insecurity can significantly impact the ability of the Agency to conduct these assessments.

UNRWA also trains all staff on the humanitarian principles, including neutrality, and provides dedicated training to managers of UNRWA installations.

**The claim: UNRWA schools in the oPt, which use textbooks approved by the Palestinian Authority, have used materials that glorify terrorists and promote hatred of Israel.**

**The facts: UNRWA uses host government textbooks, in line with UN best practice for providing quality education in refugee settings.** UNRWA reviews all the textbooks used in its schools to identify sections that may not be in line with UN values and UNESCO standards for teaching. UNRWA has zero tolerance for hate speech and incitement to discrimination, or violence. Independent analysts and international education experts have vouched for the quality and content of the education that UNRWA provides in its schools.

Using host country curriculums in refugee situations is standard for the UN around the world. It is considered a best practice that helps ensure that students can matriculate into host country educational systems at any level and more broadly participate in the social and economic life of the host country. This is particularly relevant for UNRWA as our school system ends after grade 9, except in Lebanon, and students transition to local schools for upper secondary, then university.

**UNRWA enriches the curriculum it uses by adding a unique programme on Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance, and has also established school parliaments run by students in every institution.**

UNRWA teachers are trained to address any problematic content in the classroom, using guidance documents developed by UNRWA headquarters. The teachers are required to and accountable for following this approach. When it comes to Palestinian Authority textbooks, UNRWA refers systematically to UN positions on issues such as the occupation, borders, the Barrier, and others. UNRWA is not in a position to – nor it is mandated to – reconcile the Israeli and Palestinian narratives.

Thousands of self-learning materials produced in-house to support distance learning have also been reviewed through a robust three-tier review process and uploaded on [UNRWA's Digital Learning Platform](#). Teachers are regularly reminded that only material uploaded on the platform can be used. Meanwhile UNRWA is progressing with digitalization of its education. It includes a gradual transition to digital teaching and learning materials which will be uploaded on the platform and become the sole source of materials to be used by students and teachers in the classroom, at home and remotely.

In addition, an Education Expert Advisory Group, composed of globally recognized experts representing renowned institutions such as UNESCO and the World Bank among others, advises UNRWA on its digital transition as well as curriculum-related matters more broadly.

Internationally recognized outside evaluations – including a [2021 World Bank-UNHCR study](#) – empirically demonstrated that UNRWA's educational outcomes are among the best in the region and at the lowest cost per student. UNRWA's students in Gaza, the West Bank, and Jordan “scored an average of a quarter of a standard deviation higher in international assessments than public school children, implying an advantage of almost a year of learning.”

Regarding the textbooks produced by the Palestinian Authority, UNRWA's own stance on these materials closely aligns with the [Georg Eckert Institute's findings](#) in the study commissioned by the European Commission and published in 2021.

**The claim: A 2019 U.S. Government Accountability Office report allegedly said that UNRWA has not always implemented measures to address problematic content in school textbooks.**

**The facts:** The 2019 report reaffirmed UNRWA's unwavering commitment to UN values, and, where there was need for better implementation,

this was done – you can find our statement about this [here](#).

UNRWA undertakes regular and meticulous review of all textbooks and learning materials used in the schools to ensure their compatibility with UN values and UNESCO standards, promoting educational excellence and reinforcing tolerance and human rights.

**The claim: Members of a Telegram group of 3,000 UNRWA teachers allegedly supported violence, including in the 7 October attacks against Israel, and there have been similar cases in the past involving UNRWA staff.**

**The facts: The most recent claims, made by the organization UN Watch in January 2024 refer to exchanges found on an open Telegram chat that was not set-up, nor authorized, nor managed by UNRWA. The use of the UN and UNRWA logo on this Telegram group has not been authorized.**

Due to the nature of Telegram, it is impossible to verify the allegation that all members of this group are UNRWA employees. The group seems to be formed around job seeking, so it is unlikely that its members are all UNRWA staff (already employed by the Agency).

Previous claims by UN Watch and other organizations about the behavior of individuals have often misidentified as UNRWA staff the people allegedly involved. For example, in various claims made since 2022, concerning a total of 129 people, more than half turned out not to be UNRWA personnel.

Of the 30 people named as UNRWA staff in a report about this Telegram group, only 18 could be properly reviewed as the other 12 provided only first names or nicknames. From the 18, it has been confirmed that three do not work for the Agency and six have so far been inconclusive, requiring further review. The remaining nine may be active personnel. These cases have been referred to the UNRWA investigation department, in accordance with the Agency's procedures.

UNRWA, like all UN Agencies, has a system in place to investigate allegations and disciplinary action is taken in all substantiated cases.

**The claim: Rather than being part of the solution, UNRWA perpetuates the refugee problem, including by reminding Palestine Refugees of their history and telling them their home is in Israel.**

**The facts:** When the UN General Assembly created UNRWA by passing a [resolution](#) in 1949, it did not mandate the Agency to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict nor the



Palestine Refugee issue or find durable solutions for refugees.

Rather, UNRWA was set up as temporary organization to carry out “direct relief and works programmes” for Palestine Refugees. In 1952, the UN General Assembly explicitly tasked UNRWA to serve any person whose “normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.”

UNRWA has a humanitarian and development mandate, repeatedly renewed by the UN General Assembly, to provide assistance and protection to Palestine Refugees pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. This is done by delivering essential public services, primarily basic education, health care, relief and social services, microcredit, and emergency assistance, including in situations of armed conflict.

**The fact that UNRWA is still in place 75 years later is not a choice by the Agency but the result of a collective failure by Member States to resolve a political problem.**

Protracted refugee situations are the result of the failure to find political solutions to underlying political crises – sometimes leading refugees to retain their status across generations. Meanwhile, the international community has continued to support UNRWA and recognizes the role it plays in addressing human development issues and the long-term impacts of conflict.

**Palestine Refugees do not get special treatment compared to other refugees. Under international law, refugees and their descendants may retain their status until a durable solution is found to the situation that made the population into refugees in the first place.** In this sense, Palestine Refugees are no different from other people in protracted refugee situations. [As stated by the United Nations](#), this principle applies to all refugees and both UNRWA and UNHCR have recognized descendants as refugees on this basis.

Furthermore, the UN General Assembly in 1949 adopted a [resolution](#) stating that “refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.”

This is not an UNRWA position, this is a UN and a Member State position.

In addition, Palestine Refugees, like all other refugees globally, have a right to learn about their history, including their displacement. UNRWA does not intend to – nor does it have a mandate to – reconcile Israeli and Palestinian narratives. What UNRWA teaches in its schools is in line with UN positions on the conflict.

**The claim: Other UN agencies deliver humanitarian assistance in crisis zones across the globe. They would be better placed to do UNRWA's job.**

**The facts:** UNRWA directly manages critical public-like services (schools, health centers, social protection) in its 5 areas of operations, relying on a staff corps of 30,000 people, most of them Palestine refugees, thus serving their own communities. UNRWA's established infrastructure and its cost-effectiveness – especially as the majority of its staff are part of the UNRWA Area Staff (national) category, with salaries pegged to public sector comparators) – have no equivalent elsewhere in the UN. This means that UNRWA Area Staff are paid on average between 40 per cent and 70 per cent less than other UN locally recruited staff, as the comparators used for their salary scales are the host governments in the countries and areas of operations where UNRWA works.

In addition, UNRWA responds to emergency situations, such as in Gaza today, using its staff, community acceptance and knowledge, and their longstanding experience gained over several conflicts and crises. With over two million people in dire need of life-saving humanitarian assistance in Gaza, no other Agency is able to respond at the scale needed at present. UNRWA has 13,000 staff and over 300 installations in Gaza, far surpassing the capacity of all other humanitarian actors. The UN Secretary-General has called UNRWA the backbone of the humanitarian response there. Other UN Agencies and international NGOs have recognized the irreplaceable role of UNRWA in Gaza, and publicly announced their support for the Agency.

For example, even if another agency supplies vaccines, it is UNRWA medical staff that get those vaccines into the arms of children at UNRWA clinics. So, UNRWA is an essential link in the chain. UNRWA's main activity is education. [With 709 schools and some 543,000 students](#) across its five areas of operations, there is no easy substitute, not even at government level, for UNRWA's work.

It was hoped that UNRWA local staff would be folded into Palestinian public institutions once a political solution was reached. This is why also their salary scales are aligned to those entities in the public services where they work.

Other UN agencies have around 220 staff combined between international and national, and they do not have the same public service roles.

**The claim: UNHCR is mandated to resettle refugees and solve refugee issues. It could take over UNRWA's job.**

**The facts:** The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 and UNHCR in 1950, providing them each with distinct mandates to assist and protect refugees. These decisions are enshrined in the UN General Assembly [resolution](#) that created UNRWA in 1949 and has been renewed ever since, the [UNHCR Statute](#), which was also adopted by the UN General Assembly, and the [1951 Refugee Convention](#), which is an international treaty. Neither UNRWA nor UNHCR can unilaterally change their mandates.

UNRWA and UNHCR have very distinct functions. UNRWA is a direct service provider. At the core of these services are education and health. UNRWA provides public-like services. UNHCR does not have a mandate over Palestine Refugees within the UNRWA areas of operations. However, in certain circumstances, UNHCR has a mandate regarding Palestine Refugees when they are outside the areas where UNRWA operates.

Unlike UNHCR, UNRWA does not have a mandate to resettle Palestine Refugees and has no authority to seek lasting durable solutions for refugees. UNRWA is mandated by the UN General Assembly to provide services to Palestine Refugees in five fields of operation: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Gaza. And it is mandated to do so pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. Palestine Refugees within UNRWA's fields of operations are specifically excluded from the mandate of UNHCR, which has a resettlement mandate. However, according to UNHCR, [only a fraction of refugees around the world who need resettlement](#) actually get it each year.

It is worth noting that the protracted situation in which Palestine Refugees live is not unique. Resettlement requires the consent not only of refugees but also of the receiving state. [UNHCR](#) estimated that 78 per cent of all 16 million refugees under its mandate were in protracted refugee situations in 2022. Of the 29.4 million refugees under UNHCR protection that year, only about 1.15 per cent (339,300) were repatriated to their country of origin.

Less than half a per cent (114,300) were resettled in a third country or naturalized as citizens in their country of asylum (50,800). The vast majority remained refugees, pending a solution to their plight.

**The claim: Donor money would be better spent supporting governments in the region to assist Palestine Refugees, rather than doing so via UNRWA.**

**The facts:** UNRWA's mandate was first set out by the UN General Assembly in 1949. UN Member States decide where and how UNRWA should operate.

During regular reviews of its mandate, UN Member States have continued to task UNRWA to provide support to Palestine Refugees throughout its five fields of operation: Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and Gaza. It is tasked with doing so pending a just and lasting solution to the plight of Palestine Refugees.

In addition, UNRWA runs essential public services for Palestine Refugees, such as schools and clinics. It does this with some 30,000 personnel, most of whom are Palestinian, and whose pay scale is aligned to that of the local civil services where they work. The reason for this is that it is hoped that they will transition into Palestinian public institutions once a political solution is reached.

While some Palestine Refugees have citizenship in their host countries, many do not, and lack legal status thus depending on UNRWA for access to basic services and assistance.

**The claim: UNRWA does not take reports against it seriously.**

**The facts:** UNRWA has zero tolerance for hate speech, discrimination, or incitement to violence as well as any action that could be viewed as taking sides in conflict. Adherence to UN values and upholding humanitarian principles, including neutrality, represents a fundamental pillar of UNRWA's value system and is critical for the Agency to be able to operate on the ground. The Agency systematically reviews all allegations of misconduct, including breaching UN values and humanitarian principles and launches investigations into any credible allegation, applying disciplinary measures where misconduct has been established up to and including separation.

Please refer to the 'Background' section above for details of the very swift steps taken by UNRWA concerning the allegations that 12 of its staff members were involved in the 7 October attacks on Israel.



[www.unrwa.org](http://www.unrwa.org)

UNRWA is the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The United Nations General Assembly established UNRWA in 1949 with a mandate to provide humanitarian assistance and protection to registered Palestine refugees in the Agency's area of operations pending a just and lasting solution to their plight. UNRWA operates in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, The Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Tens of thousands of Palestine refugees who lost their homes and livelihoods due to the 1948 conflict continue to be displaced and in need of support, nearly 75 years on. UNRWA helps Palestine Refugees achieve their full potential in human development through quality services it provides in education, health care, relief and social services, protection, camp infrastructure and improvement, microfinance, and emergency assistance. UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions.