

Defunding UNRWA aimed at starving Palestinians to death and completing Israel's plans for ethnic cleansing

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The withdrawal of funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) by the United States and other imperialist powers epitomizes their direct collusion with the Netanyahu regime in bombing and starving the Palestinians out of Gaza, with the aim of seizing it for Israel.

It is part of a broader campaign of ethnic cleansing of the Palestinians, including in the West Bank and throughout the Middle East.

On January 27, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled that Israel must “take all measures within its power” to avoid acts of genocide. Within hours, Israel launched a pre-planned counterattack. UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini, acting under instruction from Washington, reported just hours later unsubstantiated allegations handed to him a week ago by Israel's security services claiming that 12 of his 13,000 personnel in Gaza had taken some part in the October 7 Hamas-led incursion into Israel.

The US immediately suspended all funding to UNRWA. Washington was followed by 10 other states, including Germany, the UK and France.

The implications are horrific.

Some 21 international aid agencies, including Save the Children, ActionAid, Oxfam and the Danish Refugee Council, wrote that they were “deeply concerned and outraged” at the decision taken “amid a rapidly worsening humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza.”

Their joint letter continued:

The suspension of funding by donor states will impact life-saving assistance for over two million civilians, over half of whom are children, who rely on UNRWA aid in Gaza. The population faces starvation, looming famine and an outbreak of disease under Israel's continued indiscriminate

bombardment and deliberate deprivation of aid in Gaza.

Palestinian groups, including the Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), Al Mezan Centre for Human Rights and the Palestinian Centre for Human Rights in Rafah, described the move as “a continuation of the genocide practiced by the occupation forces in Gaza,” which would lead more than two million Palestinians in the Strip to “die of starvation.”

Death by starvation is the clear intent of Israel and all of its backers, no matter what cynical statements to the contrary they may occasionally make. All of the imperialist powers have unwaveringly defended Israel's supposed “right to defend itself,” as its armed forces slaughtered around 30,000 Palestinians, mostly women and children, wounded 65,000 others, razed more than half Gaza's essential infrastructure to the ground and left 1.9 million people (85 percent of its population) internally displaced.

Without blinking an eye, Israel and its allies have now signed a death warrant for tens of thousands more.

A harrowing report by CNN details children fighting over stale bread and being forced to eat grass to assuage gnawing hunger. There is no clean water and illnesses such as cholera and diarrhea are rife, with no functioning hospitals to care for the sick. Martin Griffiths, the UN's emergency relief chief, tells CNN that the “great majority” of 400,000 Gazans characterized by UN agencies as at risk of starving “are actually in famine.”

Destroying UNRWA is an explicit goal of Israel's war on Gaza, with the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) mounting hundreds of attacks that have killed over 150 of UNRWA's staff and hundreds more civilians sheltering in its facilities. A classified Israeli foreign ministry report leaked in December proposed the elimination of UNRWA, beginning with a campaign alleging cooperation of UNRWA staff

members with Hamas.

In January, Noga Arbel of the right-wing Kohelet Foundation told the Knesset, “It will be impossible to win this war if we do not destroy UNRWA” and prevent it from “allowing terrorists to be born” by providing services to Palestinian refugees. Foreign Minister Israel Katz declared that his aims included “promoting a policy ensuring that UNRWA will not be a part of the day after” an Israeli victory in Gaza.

This aim extends far beyond Gaza. Including Gaza and the West Bank, some six million Palestinians in 58 refugee camps, spread as well over Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, depend on aid funneled through UNRWA and its 30,000-strong staff.

The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was established in 1950. As with a number of short-lived organisations that preceded it, its mission was to provide aid for refugees worldwide, mostly European Jews who had survived the horrors of the Nazi regime and World War II, to seek voluntary repatriation and local integration or resettlement in a third country.

But UNRWA, established in 1949, was kept as a separate entity because repatriation for the 700,000 Palestinians who fled or were driven out of Palestine following the establishment of Israel and the 1948-49 Arab-Israeli war was anathema to the Zionist regime. Neighbouring Arab countries mostly refused citizenship, while cynically proclaiming the confinement of the Palestinians in squalid, overcrowded camps to be an expression of their opposition to dispossession by Israel.

This left the Palestinians totally at the mercy of wholly inadequate funding provided by the imperialist powers, led by the US and Germany, for food, shelter, healthcare and education. Israel has repeatedly sought to block UNRWA’s funding, claiming it to be a front for Hamas. In 2018, President Donald Trump ended US funding of the agency, which was only partially restored under Biden.

The Zionists now view UNRWA as an obstacle to the eradication of the Palestinians as a recognizable people because it keeps millions of them together and allows them to demand their right of return to their homes, enshrined in United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194.

Jonathan S. Tobin, editor-in-chief of the right-wing *Jewish News Syndicate*, laid out the Zionist position in detail, complaining: “Unlike every other refugee population, the Palestinian Arabs were not resettled,” but “kept in place to wait for the day when they could ‘go home’ to their former villages in what was now Israel... So, let’s not waste much time arguing about the details of UNRWA’s complicity in Oct. 7 or other acts of terror. The only discussion that needs to be held is one about its abolition and replacement by a

genuine refugee agency.”

A “Victory of Israel Conference” held Sunday in Jerusalem confirmed Israel’s intention to permanently annex the occupied territories. The event was attended by National Security Minister Itamar Ben-Gvir, Finance Minister Bezalel Smotrich and many other government ministers and Knesset members. It called for the re-establishment of Jewish settlements in Gaza and their expansion in the West Bank.

Workers and youth throughout the world have marched in their millions, week after week, to demand an end to the genocide in Gaza. They have been told this can be accomplished by mass pressure to demand a ceasefire, only to see their governments continue backing Israel while politely appealing for it to avoid killing so many civilians.

They were then told to rely on the UN, with the ICJ preliminary verdict hailed as proof that there was still a glimmer of hope for a return to the rule of law. Instead, not only did the ICJ not even call for a temporary ceasefire—despite this being the official majority position of the UN—but its humble appeals to Israel to rein in the IDF only solicited still greater war crimes.

Conclusions must be drawn. The fight against the genocide is a fight against US-NATO imperialism, for which Israel is the primary agent in the Middle East. Washington, London and other capitals back Israel in Gaza because eliminating the “Palestinian question” paves the way for a broader war in the Middle East targeting Iran and its allies, which is itself bound up with plans for war against Russia and China to secure unchallenged control of the world and its resources.

Preventing Israel, the US and the other imperialist powers from realizing their goal of ethnically cleansing the Palestinians therefore demands the development of an international and socialist movement of the working class against war, against both the war-mongering governments and their nominal opposition parties, and against the capitalist system of global exploitation which they all defend.



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