

UNRWA's work is at risk again

On Oct 28, 2024, the Israeli Knesset passed a bill banning the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) from operating in Gaza, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem.¹ UNRWA was established in 1949 by UN Resolution 302 in order to support Palestinians who had been forcibly displaced from their homes in Palestine during the Nakba.² The agency subsequently took an active role in the construction of Palestinian refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza, and continues to provide a multitude of essential services.

For 75 years, UNRWA has been instrumental in delivering crucial health and social services to Palestinians. In 2022, UNRWA maintained 278 schools with over 290 000 students in Gaza and 96 schools with over 45 000 students in the West Bank.³ Staff in UNRWA health centres administered routine vaccinations and ran maternal and child health programmes, while the agency distributed food to over 1.7 million people.⁴

Since October, 2023, UNRWA has maintained a crucial presence in Gaza despite escalating violence from the Israeli military. The organisation has conducted emergency food distributions, ensured shelter for over 700 000 people, and facilitated polio vaccination campaigns, among many other life-saving and life-sustaining activities.⁵ With support from UNRWA, nearly 1.9 million people have received essential food items in Gaza.⁵ The agency has also provided essential water, sanitation, and hygiene services by maintaining water wells and distributing hygiene kits to displaced Palestinians.⁵ In the West Bank, UNRWA has expanded its services in the wake of escalated violence from the Israeli military in August, 2024, providing shelter, health services, psychosocial support, and other

necessities for Palestinian refugees.⁵ This work has not been without profound risk to UNRWA staff and its services; at least 190 UNRWA facilities have been damaged or destroyed and at least 233 UNRWA employees have been killed by the Israeli military.⁵

We recognise UNRWA's pivotal role in sustaining essential services and providing a foundation for public health, education, and social welfare through its comprehensive and well established programmes. More importantly, we acknowledge the dire consequences that could result should Israel's UNRWA ban be brought into effect. We call on all global leaders, diplomatic institutions, and public health professionals and policy makers to not only explicitly recognise UNRWA's vitally important role, but to advocate the agency's ability to support the populations it was created to assist. This requires the removal of juridical impediments, a commitment to sustained levels of adequate funding, and respect for the space required to operate safely and effectively as codified under international humanitarian law. Several UN agencies have been clear that UNRWA is irreplaceable, particularly in Gaza,^{1,6} without it, many more Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank will be subjected to death, disablement, malnutrition, and the deprivation of access to essential water, food, health, education, and protection programmes.

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to Palestinians across the occupied Palestinian territories and elsewhere (appendix).

Editorial note: The Lancet Group takes a neutral position with respect to territorial claims in published text and institutional affiliations.

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