



## PERSPECTIVES

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### **It's Time to Close Down UNRWA**

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: UNRWA, the UN agency for Palestinian refugees, was created in 1949 via UN Resolution 302 (IV) with a short-term mandate. It flouted its original mission and perpetuated rather than alleviated the Palestinians' status as refugees. It has long since become corrupt and functions essentially as a front group. The UN should close it down, and Palestinian refugees should be integrated into the economic systems of the countries that sheltered them.**

In December 1949, in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established by the UN through Resolution 302 (IV) to "carry out in collaboration with local governments the direct relief and works programmes" for the rehabilitation of the Palestinian Arab refugees, and to "consult with the interested Near Eastern Governments concerning measures to be taken by them preparatory to the time when international assistance for relief and works projects is no longer." In fact, not only has the agency failed to accomplish this goal, but it has functioned instead as a *de facto* anti-Israel front group and a fig leaf for Palestinian intransigence.

UNRWA has prolonged rather than resolve the plight of Palestinian refugees. Worse, by encouraging the Palestinian fixation on the "right of return" – the standard euphemism for the destruction of Israel via demographic subversion – it impedes negotiations for a permanent peace agreement. The agency should be eliminated and the responsibility for Palestinian refugees shifted to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), like other post-WWII refugee groups throughout the world.

Not for the first time, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services is currently investigating UNRWA's top management for abuses of power, including sexual [misconduct, nepotism](#), bullying, and retaliation. [The Swiss, Dutch, and](#)

[Belgian governments](#) have all suspended payments to UNRWA while the investigation is ongoing.

UNRWA's top official, [Commissioner-General](#) Pierre Krähenbühl, was accused of appointing as an adviser a woman with whom he was romantically involved. The pair traveled on business class flights across the globe. [Deputy Commissioner-General](#) Sandra Mitchell was accused of bullying and of manipulating the system to find a well-paid job for her spouse, Robert Langridge, who was promoted. [Chief of Staff](#) Hakam Shahwan was accused of behaving like a thug, placing people loyal to him in positions of power, and lobbying to take over UNRWA operations in Jerusalem.

Perhaps not surprisingly in view of the above, the agency has adopted a culture of secrecy about itself. [It employs](#) about [30,000 people](#) (compared to the UNHCR's 11,000 for the rest of the world's 17 million refugees and displaced persons). Most of its staff are [Palestinians](#) and many are known [members of Hamas](#) (indeed, Hamas membership helps one [get a UN job](#) on the West Bank). Peter Hansen, UNRWA's former Commissioner-General (1996–2005), admitted in an interview with CBS TV that there are Hamas members on the UNRWA payroll. For example, the chairman of UNRWA's Palestinian workers' union, Suhail al-Hindi, is a member of Hamas's new political leadership.

Retired IDF Col. Yoni Fighel, a former military governor in the territories, notes that as long as UNRWA employees are members of Hamas, they are going to pursue the interests of that organization within the framework of their job.

The agency was threatened with closure after the [Trump administration](#) implemented severe cuts following reports that proved rockets had been hidden inside UNRWA schools. UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who sat on the ethics findings for months, claims he is "committed to acting swiftly on the corruption allegations."

The UN originally made clear that UNRWA's mandate would be short-term, [indicating](#) that the refugee issue should be solved expeditiously through repatriation or resettlement. In the words of former UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie, "The refugees will lead an independent life in countries that have sheltered them. Except for the "hardcore" cases, the refugees will no longer be maintained by an international organization as they are at present. They will be integrated into the economic system of the countries of asylum and will themselves provide for their own needs and those of their families."

Palestinian residents of Arab states—all of whom are considered refugees by UNRWA—[should become citizens of those states](#), as they are in Jordan.

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