UNRWA to cut services after fundraising falls short

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<https://www.jns.org/israel-palestinianconflict/israeli-palestinian-conflict/23/6/7/293320/>

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency raised just $107 million during a pledge conference on Friday, well below the $300 million mark it says it needs to continue its operations in Judea and Samaria and neighboring countries.

The countries pledging funds were not announced.

While UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini expressed gratitude for the new pledges, he had stated previously that $300 million was required in order to keep over 700 UNRWA-run schools and 140 clinics open from September through the remainder of the year. Without the funding, he said, UNRWA would also struggle to continue its food distribution in Gaza and cash handouts in Syria and Lebanon.

UNRWA was created in 1949 to assist those Arabs who fled or were displaced during Israel’s War of Independence. Unlike every other refugee agency, however, UNRWA is not allowed to attempt to resettle its refugees, and designates their descendants as refugees as well.

One of the effects of this strategy is that UNRWA’s costs balloon each year, as the population it serves—now at six million—necessarily increases, thereby driving up its operating costs.

U.N. Secretary-General Antonio Guterres said on Friday that UNRWA was already operating with a nearly $75 million shortfall and is on “the verge of financial collapse.” The agency has a core budget of $850 million.

While UNRWA has been sounding the alarm regarding financial crises for around a decade, Lazzarini insists the current crisis is “massive,” calling it “our main, existential threat.”

Lazzarini took over as commissioner general following the abrupt [departure](https://www.jns.org/unrwa-head-resigns-over-misconduct-allegations/) of his predecessor in 2019 amid misconduct allegations.

Pierre Krähenbühl’s resignation was the latest in a series of setbacks suffered by the agency; in 2018, the Trump administration cut all funding for UNRWA, describing it as “irredeemably flawed.”

The agency has a lengthy history of providing its schools with an antisemitic and inciting educational materials, and its employees have been documented on multiple occasions calling for violence against Israelis and Jews. The terrorist groups controlling Gaza have been found to store weapons and launch rockets from UNRWA schools and other sites.

UNRWA officials have also openly advocated for the “right of return” for all original Palestinian Arab refugees and their descendants, which would bring about the end of Israel as a Jewish state. This goal is part and parcel of UNRWA’s unique mandate to avoid resettlement to other countries and to keep adding new “refugees” to its rolls.

Multiple countries have cut or decreased funding UNRWA funding as a result of these controversies, and also due to budget pressures stemming from the coronavirus pandemic.

However, the Biden administration restored the funding cut under Trump, announcing just last week a contribution of $154 million.

The United States and UNRWA signed a Framework for Cooperation last week setting forth understandings for 2023-24 funding. It includes commitments on accountability, transparency and consistency with U.N. principles, including neutrality. Specifically, UNRWA pledged that it would exert all efforts to ensure that U.S. funding did not reach anyone who has engaged in terrorism or is undergoing military training.

Hamas denounced the agreement, accusing UNRWA of bowing to U.S. pressure.