

UNRWA: A Milestone in a Final Struggle

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The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has been at the center of diverse reactions following the withdrawal of U.S. funding. This orchestrated campaign, rooted in falsehoods and distortions, is driven by the U.S. and Israel, with various countries joining at different stages over the years (UNRWA, 2024). Numerous reports and studies have scrutinized the motives behind this long-standing campaign, offering analyses of both its origins and strategies for counteraction (Salah, 2018; Azza, 2008).

Some argue that the resulting financial crisis could pave the way for the political erasure of the refugee issue (Al-Sahli, 2022). In broader terms, the prevailing consensus points to a shared objective: to dissolve the rights of Palestinian refugees, particularly their right to return to the homes from which they were forcibly displaced. Anis Mohsen highlights that efforts to undermine this right have been ongoing since the aftermath of the Nakba and persist to this day (Mohsen, 2019, p. 83).

Since the beginning of the war on Gaza, the campaign against UNRWA has intensified, driven by accusations aimed at demonizing the agency, even labeling it as a terrorist organization. This rhetoric seeks to justify its termination. Central to this effort is a broader strategy, employed by both the U.S. and Israel, to reshape identities, creating a sharp division between “us” and “them.” This tactic, as Graham (2011) notes, turns the «other» into a despised enemy, thus rationalizing their targeting (p. 36, 348).

One striking example of this approach is the allegation that 190 UNRWA employees in Gaza are affiliated with Hamas and Islamic Jihad. Further accusations claim that agency employees have participated in kidnappings and killings (Russia Today, 2024). However, some researchers and media outlets view the post-war campaign as a separate phase from the earlier years. For instance, media reports mention a «top-secret» plan by Israel’s Foreign Ministry, drafted in December 2023, entitled “No UNRWA After the War on Gaza” (Yaghi, 2024).

This article seeks to place these developments in the broader context of global,



regional, and local shifts. The drive to end UNRWA's operations cannot be understood without considering parallel efforts to dissolve the Palestinian refugee issue and even the Palestinian cause itself. The agency, therefore, is just one target in a larger campaign, which extends beyond the right of return and aims at a comprehensive liquidation of Palestinian aspirations.

The Centrality of the Right of Return in the Palestinian Cause

The Palestinian cause has traversed numerous historical phases, with the Nakba serving as a pivotal event, despite conflicts preceding it, such as the Great Arab Revolt (1936–1939) (Kanafani, 1980). The Nakba, however, marked a turning point, cementing the refugee issue as the core of the conflict (Qatamesh, 2003, p. 195). Refugees played a crucial role in the struggle, particularly through their involvement in the Palestine Liberation Organization (Baumgarten, 2006, pp. 73-81).

From its inception, this stage included UN Resolution 194, which called for the return of refugees. The establishment of UNRWA was intended to address their humanitarian needs, though it was not tasked with pursuing a political solution—this responsibility was assigned to the International Conciliation Commission (Qatamesh, 2003). Over time, the camps became vibrant centers of political activism, driving the struggle for liberation and return (Baumgarten, 2006, p. 79).

While many phases followed, the Oslo Accords marked a critical turning point. This phase, deliberately orchestrated by Israel, postponed negotiations on core issues, transforming them into “final status” matters, including the right of return for refugees. This strategic delay led to the failure of progress on these essential issues, a situation encapsulated by Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin's 1995 speech before the Knesset. As Seth Anziska (2022) observes, Oslo represented a “lost deal,” a peace process that was “born dead,” blocking the path to Palestinian statehood (pp. 343-347).

This solution, and the negotiations that followed, remained stagnant under American control, despite long-standing criticisms of the U.S. role. For years



before the negotiations, the United States was seen as the imperial power backing the Zionist project, framing the conflict as one «between the Arab liberation movement on one side, and imperialism, Zionism, and Arab reactionaries on the other» (Habash, 1985, p. 11). Israel, described as a «functional entity» created to serve the interests of imperialism and colonialism in the region (Al-Masry, 2003, pp. 44-61), became the focal point of this struggle.

While much can be said about this topic, it exceeds the scope of this study. What is clear, however, is that events unfolded to shape a new reality, marking a stage of deeper Zionist colonial settlement in Palestine. The second intifada signaled the end of the Oslo phase, ushering in a period marked by the absence of key Palestinian leaders such as Yasser Arafat, Ahmed Yassin, and Abu Ali Mustafa. This new era plunged the Palestinian cause into a liminal state of neither peace nor war, compounded by political divisions and ongoing settlement expansion across Palestine.

At the onset of this phase, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon fell ill, halting his efforts to implement a unilateral withdrawal from Gaza and the West Bank. As a result, the unilateral solution collapsed. During this period, Palestinian politics faced a decline after the second intifada, culminating in internal division and a lack of progress toward reconciliation or national elections—whether for the Legislative Council or the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) institutions.

This division profoundly shaped American and international policies toward the Palestinian issue (Serwer, 2016, p. 7). Claims of the absence of a Palestinian partner, the lack of democracy, widespread corruption, and a leadership crisis informed these policies. Meanwhile, on the Israeli front, a new era began with Benjamin Netanyahu's rise to power as Prime Minister. Known for his focus on peace through economic cooperation (Ahren, 2008), Netanyahu's approach offered the Palestinians only scraps of geography and economic opportunities, coupled with a limited security role for the Palestinian Authority. None of the final status issues were addressed, leaving the Palestinian cause sidelined, even as tensions and conflict persisted.

A New Phase in the History of the Conflict

The Palestinian issue is inseparable from broader global shifts. In recent years, as American influence has evolved, a major turning point has been the U.S. administration’s focus on China’s growing global power, reshaping its priorities and policies. Any analysis of the Palestinian issue must, therefore, be linked to regional and global dynamics. These include the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan and Iraq, the failure to secure victory in Syria, Syria’s re-admittance to the Arab League, and a host of other significant developments in the region (Commuri, 2023).

These changes began under President Obama and continued through the Trump and Biden administrations. Each administration faced similar challenges and pursued comparable goals, though their approaches varied. Despite these differences in style and strategy, the core objectives of safeguarding American interests remained unchanged. However, as Hisham Safi al-Din observes, U.S. policies are not always successful or fully realized. He highlights a pivotal moment in which “the countdown began with the rise of military resistance movements in Afghanistan and Iraq, and the victories of the resistance in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008. Washington, meanwhile, capitalized on the Arab uprisings of 2011, diverting their course” (Safi al-Din, 2024).

During Obama’s presidency, U.S. priorities included modernizing its ballistic missile defenses and nuclear arsenal. There were also signs of America’s gradual retreat from its traditional leadership role in the Middle East. Instead of dominating the region directly, the U.S. actively sought to share leadership with regional partners, and in some cases, even relinquished it altogether (Sayigh, 2012). The policy shift allowed regional powers to step forward, as Obama’s administration began to reduce American investments and presence in the area (Baran & Yilmaz, 2014).

Donald Trump made these changes explicit. “We are now the number one producer of oil and natural gas anywhere in the world,” he declared, “we are independent, we don’t need Middle East oil.” Trump emphasized the so-called

«Iranian threat» and urged NATO to play a larger role in the Middle East (The White House, 2020). Throughout this period, the demonization of perceived enemies persisted. Washington and its allies in the region shifted the narrative, portraying Iran, rather than Israel, as the existential threat to the Arab world (Safi al-Din, 2024).

In a striking example, Trump told representatives of the Zionist lobby and Jewish religious leaders that before his inauguration, the question was not how powerful Iran would become, but rather, “When will they take over the entire Middle East? And this may include Israel,” he added, reflecting concerns voiced by many (The White House, 2020). His efforts to involve NATO and Arab countries were part of a broader strategy to reduce America’s direct responsibility in the region by fostering partnerships, though this did not signal a full retreat from control.

As for the Arab countries, Trump emphasized that each would play its part. He acknowledged Jordan’s critical role in hosting refugees, especially Syrians, and pledged additional U.S. funding for humanitarian assistance until it became safe for the refugees to return home (The White House, 2017). This reduction in direct American dominance created space for key regional actors—Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—to expand their influence (Yom, 2020).

In this complex landscape, the shifting dynamics of global power continue to shape the trajectory of the Palestinian issue, weaving it into the broader fabric of geopolitical change.

The Biden administration has shifted U.S. policy in the Middle East, moving away from its traditional role as the region’s unmatched security guarantor in key bilateral relationships. Instead, it now seeks to be an integrated regional player, addressing a broader spectrum of issues such as security, economics, and energy (Katulis & Juul, 2021). Early in Biden’s term, this change was evident when he delayed contact with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and halted American support for Saudi Arabia’s war in Yemen (Bertrand & Seligman, 2021). These actions, along with other measures, reflect a reordering of U.S. priorities, where the Middle East takes a back seat

to the larger strategic focus on China and Russia.

These shifts have prompted a reevaluation of U.S. Middle East policy, steering it away from resolving the Palestinian issue and toward normalizing relations between Arab states and Israel. The U.S. has adopted the view that “many Arab countries are ready to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict and want to form partnerships with Israel to tackle the region’s serious challenges” (The White House, 2020, p. 7). This reflects a broader American strategy of fostering Arab-Israeli normalization without addressing Palestinian grievances, reshaping regional alliances by defining those who align with this vision as part of an inclusive «we,» and casting those who oppose it as a destabilizing «other.» Iran, in this framework, emerges as the chief threat to the region’s new order, extending beyond Arab states to affect the entire Middle East.

For the Palestinians, this stage has brought the promise of a so-called «viable state project,» or what Trump’s plan termed “prosperity” (The White House, 2020). In reality, this represents a wholesale embrace of expansionist colonialism, sidelining the Palestinians through either collective punishment or economic dependency under U.S.-Israeli dominance. The overarching goal of this new era appears to be the complete dissolution of the Palestinian cause, while advancing a broader regional redesign.

Key milestones of this phase include the normalization of Arab-Israeli relations, the relocation of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, the annexation of the Golan Heights, and moves toward annexing the Jordan Valley. Additionally, efforts have been made to eliminate the refugee issue and dismantle the United Nations agency responsible for Palestinian refugees. These policies culminate in the document known as the «Deal of the Century,» titled Peace to Prosperity (White House, 2020). This document explicitly outlines the U.S. and Israeli vision for the region, including the stipulation that any Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement must abandon all claims related to refugee status and reject the Palestinian right of return.

The Trump plan outlines three options for Palestinian refugees seeking permanent residence:

1. Absorption into the State of Palestine (with certain limitations).
2. Local integration in their current host countries (pending consent from those nations).
3. Admission of 5,000 refugees per year over a decade (a total of 50,000 refugees) into Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) member states that agree to resettle them (subject to each country's approval).

The plan also specifies that once a peace agreement is signed between Israel and Palestine, the status of Palestinian refugees will officially end. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) will be dissolved, and its responsibilities transferred to local governments. Part of Trump's economic initiative will fund the replacement of refugee camps in the State of Palestine with new housing projects. Consequently, all Palestinian refugee camps will be dismantled, replaced by permanent housing within the State of Palestine (The White House, 2020, pp. 32-33).

UNRWA and Refugees

The campaign to dismantle UNRWA is part of a broader regional and global effort to resolve the Palestinian issue by imposing settlement solutions. This movement, led by the U.S. in cooperation with other countries, seeks to present these settlements as irreversible realities. Central to this effort is the erasure of Palestinian refugees' right of return—one of the most contested issues. Ending UNRWA's work and resettling refugees are critical components of this agenda. Israel, as part of its normalization strategy, has prioritized the agency's termination, viewing it as a step toward erasing its history of forced displacement (Badil, 2021).

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) holds great significance in the Palestinian refugee issue. Though its mandate does not include securing refugees' return or finding a political solution, it has become a vital front in the defense of the right of return. Its archives serve as a rich repository of information on Palestinian camps and refugee history (Editorial Staff, 2023). As a result, UNRWA has come to be seen as part of the «other.»

facing increasing incitement and being targeted for elimination.

Nidal Al-Azza outlines Israel's justifications for its campaign to end the agency's work as follows (Azza, 2008):

1. Palestinian refugees are unique in having an institution dedicated to their welfare, which perpetuates their refugee status and asylum.
2. Refugee status is inherited by descendants, leading to a continual rise in the number of Palestinian refugees.
3. UNRWA continues to provide services to refugees who have obtained citizenship in other countries or live outside the refugee camps in its five areas of operation.
4. The agency strengthens the belief among Palestinians that they are victims with legitimate claims on the United Nations and other nations.
5. UNRWA creates employment opportunities for Palestinians, with the majority of its staff being Palestinian.
6. It fosters the belief among refugees in their right to return to Israel, as the agency regularly affirms this right in its publications and through its officials.
7. Palestinian camps are viewed as sources of threat and danger to international peace and security.

The U.S. administration has explicitly highlighted the inheritance of refugee status as a critical issue. The Deal of the Century states that «for an individual to be eligible for any refugee rights under the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Agreement, they must hold UNRWA-registered refugee status as of the date of this Vision [the Deal of the Century].» It clarifies that while UNRWA's definition of refugees is used to identify claimants, this should not be interpreted as the U.S. accepting the definition as permanent or multi-generational in the absence of a peace agreement (The White House, 2020, p. 32).

UNRWA's mandate, along with its multi-generational definition of refugees, has intensified the ongoing crisis. According to the Trump administration's Deal of the Century, individuals who have already been permanently resettled (as further defined in the Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement) will not qualify

for resettlement, but will instead be eligible only for compensation (The White House, 2020, p. 32).

The issue of Palestinian refugees and their right of return permeates all regions where they reside, particularly in the Levant, which has absorbed the largest numbers. Efforts to undermine this right have taken various forms, and the refugee camps in these areas have faced significant upheaval. In recent years, major camps in Syria and Lebanon have been the sites of violent events, displacing countless refugees. One stark example is the Yarmouk camp, the largest Palestinian refugee settlement in Syria (UNRWA, 2021), which was decimated by foreign militants. Mustafa al-Hirshi described the destruction, noting the involvement of groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra and ISIS, and emphasized that “there are those who wish to prolong the crisis rather than resolve it” (Al-Hirshi, 2014).

Similarly, in Lebanon, Ain al-Hilweh—referred to as “the capital of the Palestinian diaspora” (Hamoudi, 2023)—has been plagued by violence, resulting in the displacement and deaths of many refugees (Al-Jazeera, 2023; Al-Dahibi, 2023). These tragic events, coupled with ongoing resettlement efforts, highlight the complex challenges facing Palestinian camps in Syria and Lebanon—challenges that demand more in-depth exploration.

The Al-Aqsa Flood: The End of One Era, the Dawn of Another

The Al-Aqsa Flood and the ongoing war mark the beginning of a new chapter. This moment has undoubtedly disrupted America’s efforts to reshape the region by normalizing Arab-Israeli relations and reducing regional responsibilities. While it is too early to predict the outcomes, understanding this phase requires linking it to what preceded it. This is emphasized in the Hamas document, «This is Our Narrative: Why the Al-Aqsa Flood?», which questions the world’s expectations after more than 75 years of occupation, suffering, and the failed hopes of liberation and return.

The document highlights the plight of 7 million Palestinians, asking, «What must be done to fulfill their hope of returning home after 75 years in exile?»



(Hamis, 2024, p. 6). It speaks to the loss of hope for liberation and the return of refugees—central elements in the Palestinian struggle. The call for liberation encompasses not only the land but also the people, including the refugees scattered across camps and the diaspora.

The document does not specifically list the right of return among the immediate objectives of Operation Flood of Al-Aqsa. This omission may be due to various factors. One interpretation is that the right of return is seen as encompassed within broader national rights. The document describes the operation as «a necessary and natural response» to Israeli actions intended to dismantle the Palestinian cause, Judaize the land, assert control over Al-Aqsa Mosque and other sacred sites, lift the Gaza siege, and resist the occupation. It aims to reclaim national rights, achieve independence, and establish a Palestinian state with Jerusalem as its capital (Hamis, 2024, p. 6).

The right of return, though unstated, may be implied as part of this broader vision for national restoration.

Alternatively, the omission could reflect a pragmatic understanding of the current stage of the conflict, which involves ongoing attempts to displace more

Palestinians. The document warns against further displacement and calls for resisting efforts to relocate Palestinians from the 1948 territories, the West Bank, or Gaza to places like Sinai or Jordan. It asserts that any transfer of refugees should only be toward their original homes, from which they were expelled in 1948, a right that has been reaffirmed in international resolutions over 150 times (Hamas, 2024, p. 16).

The Al-Aqsa Flood marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Palestinian people, reigniting the confrontation with the Zionist colonial settlement project. This struggle, an existential battle, had been obscured by media manipulation throughout previous stages. It is, however, too early to fully assess the outcomes of this phase. What is clear is that this shift represents a return to the liberation project, confronting the same old alliance led by the United States. While victory in this phase did not entirely dismantle the plans of the past, it succeeded in disrupting them, altering their trajectory, and destabilizing the regional and global balance.

Safi al-Din describes this shift as the Al-Aqsa Flood “turning the scene upside down.” The sectarian narrative is no longer a viable tool, and the world can no longer ignore Israeli arrogance and brutality, backed by Western support. On a geo-strategic level, the Zionist entity now requires direct and continuous military aid from Washington (Safi al-Din, 2024). At this stage, the U.S. administration reaffirmed its unwavering support for Israel, citing its «right to self-defense»—a familiar stance. However, unlike in previous stages, the U.S. has returned its forces to the region in greater numbers and at higher cost, abandoning its earlier strategy of reducing military involvement and sharing regional responsibilities with NATO and other countries.

This shift forced America to reengage in less strategically significant fronts, despite its previous efforts to minimize its presence and investments there. The American military footprint in the region became larger than ever, diverting attention from other priorities, such as China. As a result, the Palestinian issue once again took center stage, overshadowing other regional projects.



Yet, the core objectives of the U.S. and Israel remain unchanged. What could not be achieved through negotiation, they now seek through force and normalization with Arab nations. This explains, for instance, the refusal to return control of Gaza to the Palestinian Authority. As Firas Yaghi notes, the plan also hinges on the principle of “No UNRWA after the war on Gaza” (Yaghi, 2024).

Ultimately, the campaign against UNRWA is a clear extension of the American camp’s efforts to reshape the region in line with U.S. interests, with benefits for its allies as a secondary priority. These efforts have repeatedly clashed with resistance movements, particularly the Palestinian resistance. As a result, both America and Israel are determined to dismantle the Palestinian cause in order to advance their vision of a «new Middle East» built on normalization. In this strategy, dismantling UNRWA is a key step toward eliminating the right of return for refugees—a pivotal issue in the conflict. By targeting this, they aim to erase the Palestinian cause, which remains the central obstacle to redrawing the region’s political and geographic landscape.

It is important to note that the Al-Aqsa flood did not alter the long-standing objectives of the U.S. and Israel. Instead, it has brought their goals into an open confrontation that will persist until one side emerges victorious.



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