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**TRENDING** News / Explained / Explained Global / What is UNRWA, and why have Western countries paused its funding amid Gaza war?

# What is UNRWA, and why have Western countries paused its funding amid Gaza war?

The US and eight other Western countries, which together provided more than half of UNRWA's 2022 budget, have decided to pause funding for the agency. The development could have severe implications for Palestinians in Gaza.

Written by **Alind Chauhan**  
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A Palestinian man holds a flour bag as others wait to receive theirs from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) during a temporary truce between Hamas and Israel, in Khan Younis in the southern Gaza Strip, November 29, 2023. REUTERS/Ibraheem Abu Mustafa/File Photo

UN officials on Sunday (January 28) urged countries to reconsider their decision to suspend the funding for the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA), assuring that it would take strict action against any staff member found to be involved in Hamas' October 7 attack on Israel.

The agency also highlighted that two million Palestinians in Gaza are dependent on UNRWA services that would be scaled back as soon as February if the funding is not restored.

**The US and eight other Western countries**, which together provided more than half of UNRWA's 2022 budget, cut the money after Israel accused some of the agency's staff members of involvement in the October 7 attack.

### What is UNRWA?

UNRWA stands for UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East. It was founded in 1949 to provide aid to about 700,000 Palestinians who were forced to leave their homes in what is now Israel during the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.



The UN agency operates in Gaza and the Israeli-occupied West Bank, as well as Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan — countries where the refugees took shelter after expulsion. According to UNRWA's website, it runs education, health, relief and social services, microfinance and emergency assistance programmes inside and outside refugee camps based in the aforementioned areas.

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Currently, around 5.9 million Palestine refugees — most of them are descendants of original refugees — access the agency's services. The *Associated Press* reported that in Gaza, where some 85% of the enclave's 2.3 million people have fled their homes after the latest Israel-Hamas conflict, over 1 million are sheltering in UNRWA schools and other facilities.

UNRWA is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions by donor states like the US. It also gets a limited subsidy from the UN, which is used only for administrative costs, the agency's website said.

### What has Israel accused UNRWA of?

The details of the accusations are scant. Israel has alleged that 12 staff members of UNRWA were involved in the October 7 attack. It has also claimed that Hamas siphons off funds given to UNRWA and fights from in and around the agency's facilities.

Israel has alleged that "Hamas tunnels (are) running next to or under UNRWA facilities and accuses the agency of teaching hatred of Israel in its schools," *AP* reported.

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### How has UNRWA responded?

The UNRWA has denied all the allegations, saying it has no links to Hamas. In the statement, UN officials said out of 12 staff members who were accused of being involved in the attack, nine have been terminated. One is confirmed dead and the identity of the two others is being clarified.

“Any UN employee involved in acts of terror will be held accountable, including through criminal prosecution,” the statement added.

Chris Gunness, a former UNRWA spokesman, told *Al Jazeera* that the allegations against the agency are a “coordinated political attack” by Israel. “The Israelis said they cannot win the war on Gaza unless UNRWA is disbanded. So what signal do you want?” he added.

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### What happens now?

UNRWA is crucial for the survival of people living in Gaza, which has plunged into a humanitarian crisis after the outbreak of the conflict. The agency has been the main supplier of food, water and shelter to civilians of the enclave. UNRWA, however, would run out of money needed for its aid work within weeks if the funding isn't restored, according to Gunness.

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