



UNRWA funding

Why Australia and New Zealand should maintain their support for UNRWA

The concerted and sustained smear campaign against the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has reached new levels, and, worryingly, now seems to be gaining some political traction in certain countries.

Two main offensives are being led against the Agency: one concerning the alleged graft and misconduct by some of its senior officials, and the other concerning the recycled and lobby-fuelled accusation that UNRWA's curricula promote anti-Semitism and violence.

There are a few points that demand serious consideration:

1. First, the importance of UNRWA is undeniable; it's the gel that's holding everything together in both Gaza and the refugee camps on the West Bank and in adjacent Arab countries. Food security, adequate healthcare and access to quality, secular and inclusive education, among other things, should not be chipped away at or traded away for some well-promoted but non-existent alternative. In the Middle East, stability is a precious commodity, and that's exactly what UNRWA provides for more than five million people.

In a 2003 report¹ on donor contributions to UNRWA, Professor Rex Brynen of McGill University warned that because the Agency is providing essential services to a dispossessed and politically sensitive population, any substantial reduction in these services could easily lead to rising discontent, with adverse consequences for the host countries as well as regional stability.

2. Second, it is particularly important to zoom in on the critical role that the Agency plays in providing education to more than half a million Palestinian children and adolescents. The natural consequence, if UNRWA were forced to close these schools, would be a heightened and very real risk of radicalisation of young Palestinians who, with no formal educational avenues available to them, will seek purpose and fulfillment elsewhere. The risk of politico-religious ideologies filling that vacuum cannot be overstated.

¹ Brynen, R., 2003. Donor contributions to UNRWA. *Social service delivery to Palestinian refugees: UNRWA and other providers, UNRWA financial and donor environment*, 3, p172.





3. Third, regarding the allegations of graft and misconduct, even if some or all of these prove to be true, it makes no sense that vulnerable Palestinian refugees and their descendants (who are already deprived of the means to make better lives for themselves) should suffer the consequences. Ensuring the termination of the contract of any individual who is found to have been involved, and demanding tighter oversight of UNRWA's financial management, would be the rational and justifiable courses of action.
4. Fourth, the content of UNRWA's textbooks is approved and monitored by multiple third parties, including the EU. A 2018 US Government Accountability Office (GAO) report² confirms that an UNRWA review identified only 3.1 per cent of all material as being either anti-Israel or contrary to UN values, and that no cases of incitement to violence were found in the Agency's Palestinian Authority-approved textbooks. The report also made it clear that UNRWA has been addressing this identified issue comprehensively, and in a way that is consultative and transparent, involving, for example, the US State Department. This is a far cry from the persistent claim that UNRWA schools are hotbeds of anti-Israel and anti-Semitic indoctrination, and such a small percentage of problematic content hardly justifies a re-evaluation of support for the Agency.

In light of these facts – particularly that UNRWA continues to execute an essential mandate in good faith – it is clear that the campaign to delegitimise the Agency and its functions has more to do with Israel and the Trump administration's desire to wipe the refugee issue off the table (and to find any and every justification for doing this), than it does genuine concerns about alleged internal corruption or the 'dissemination' of anti-Semitic material. Paper-thin pretexts should not be used to discredit and undermine an already struggling agency that plays such a critical role in both ensuring the welfare of millions of Palestinians, and promoting regional stability.

² <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/us-government-accountability-office-unrwa-textbook-report/>

