

## **A Blow to the Healthcare System**

### Funding Cut

“We [Americans] pay the Palestinians HUNDRED [sic] OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect. They don’t even want to negotiate a long overdue peace treaty with Israel... With the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?” The President of United States (U.S.), Donald J. Trump, expressed this statement in a pair of tweets on January 2, 2018.<sup>i</sup>

His proclamation constitutes the Trump administration’s broader punishment methodology and their strategy to advance the peace conversation between Israel and Palestine. This punishment methodology is why the United States is slashing its funding for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA). Since the organization’s establishment in 1949, the United States has been UNRWA's biggest donor, but on January 16, 2018, they announced that they would be withholding \$65 million from a scheduled payment of \$120 million.<sup>ii</sup> A few days after this decision, the State Department declared that it would also be halting a \$45 million payment it had pledged to UNRWA in December, 2017 for food aid for the West Bank and Gaza.<sup>iii</sup>

The international community has been shocked by America’s decision to withhold half of its planned funding for UNRWA, a move that is risking the health, education, and security of millions of Palestinian refugees in need of emergency food assistance and other support in the Middle East.

What is the impact of this funding cut?

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) is a relief and human development agency responsible for the welfare of 5.6 million Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank.<sup>iv</sup> It was founded in December, 1949 under the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV), following the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict.<sup>v</sup>

The Agency began operations on May 1, 1950, responding to the growing needs of Palestinian refugees. UNRWA provided relief to Jewish and Arab Palestine refugees inside Israel following the 1948 conflict, until the Israeli government took over responsibility for Jewish refugees in 1951.<sup>vi</sup> Due to the lack of a concrete solution to the Palestine refugee issue, the General Assembly has repeatedly renewed UNRWA's mandate. Today there are 5.6 million registered Palestinian refugees and their descendants who live in precarious statuses in the West Bank and neighbouring countries.<sup>vii</sup>

UNRWA provides services and administration of camp installations. To put this into numerical context, UNRWA is in charge of nearly 700 schools, in which approximately 500,000 children across the Middle East receive an education.<sup>viii</sup> Its unique structure employs approximately 30,000 people – including at least 150,000 trained teachers, doctors, nurses, and social workers<sup>ix</sup> – most of whom are refugees themselves.<sup>x</sup> This cut to the Agency's funding would lead to the loss of employment for these people, along with the significant loss of healthcare and education support so vital in a politically unstable region. It will also affect the 1.7 million refugees who are already suffering from food insecurity.<sup>xi</sup>

What is the impact of this funding cut on healthcare system?

UNRWA has a history of commitment to refugee health in the Middle East region as they provide health services to over 5.6 million Palestinian refugees.<sup>xii</sup> This cut in funding will have a direct impact on the healthcare support provided by UNRWA.

Approximately 53% of the funding required for UNRWA is used for humanitarian intervention activities regarding health,<sup>xiii</sup> such as the provision of food security, shelter, water and sanitation, and education to Palestinians.<sup>xiv</sup>

The Agency's extraordinary work is admirable in supporting primary health care, tertiary and secondary care, and health education. UNRWA has reduced the average infant mortality rate from 160 deaths per 1000 live-births in the 1960s to less than 25 deaths per 1000 live-births in the 2000s.<sup>xv</sup>

Furthermore, UNRWA employs more than 3,200 health staff in 143 health facilities and provides medical payments annually to more than 100,000 refugees for their medical care at hospitals.<sup>xvi</sup>

The Trump administration's funding cut is a gross disregard towards the healthcare system in refugee camps, and the blatant destruction of an Agency that has been providing healthcare support so efficiently since the 1950s. It also undermines the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that aimed to "end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all," highlighted in SDG 16. These goals assert the need for peace, justice, and strong institutions, and this cut in funding is a blow to the healthcare system for Palestinian refugees.

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- <sup>i</sup> Peter Beaumont, "Trump Threatens to Cut US Aid to Palestinians," *The Guardian*, January 03, 2018, , accessed April 14, 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2018/jan/03/trump-threatens-cut-aid-palestinians-peace-talks>.
- <sup>ii</sup> Sara Roy, "Trump's Move to Slash Aid for Palestinian Refugees Will Lead to Tragedy," *The Nation*, January 24, 2018, , accessed April 11, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/trumps-move-to-slash-aid-for-palestinian-refugees-will-lead-to-tragedy/>
- <sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>iv</sup> Karen J. Greenberg, "Why the Acquittal of Noor Salman May Be a Turning Point in the 'War on Terror'," *The Nation*, April 04, 2018, , accessed April 11, 2018, <https://www.thenation.com/article/why-the-acquittal-of-noor-salman-may-be-a-turning-point-in-the-war-on-terror/>.
- <sup>v</sup> "Who We Are UNRWA," UNRWA, , accessed April 11, 2018, <https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are>.
- <sup>vi</sup> Howard Adelman and Elazar Barkan, *No Return, No Refuge: Rites and Rights in Minority Repatriation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011). p.12.
- <sup>vii</sup> "Who We Are UNRWA," UNRWA.
- <sup>viii</sup> Roy, "Trump's Move to Slash Aid."
- <sup>ix</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>x</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xi</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xii</sup> UNRWA, "Amid US Funding Cuts, UNRWA Appeals for Health and Dignity," , accessed April 14, 2018, [http://www.bing.com/cr?IG=BB13A544446F4DEA92B52A4812401A40&CID=3933E8BBD2E365B30218E36AD34C647C&rd=1&h=KSAnlNFd91oio1wvm0c9ExlNYh\\_a1Xd32T4-SNUAMXU&v=1&r=http://www.thelancet.com/pb-assets/Lancet/pdfs/S0140673618301132.pdf&p=DevEx,5068.1](http://www.bing.com/cr?IG=BB13A544446F4DEA92B52A4812401A40&CID=3933E8BBD2E365B30218E36AD34C647C&rd=1&h=KSAnlNFd91oio1wvm0c9ExlNYh_a1Xd32T4-SNUAMXU&v=1&r=http://www.thelancet.com/pb-assets/Lancet/pdfs/S0140673618301132.pdf&p=DevEx,5068.1).
- <sup>xiii</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xiv</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>xv</sup> UNRWA. Health Department annual report 2016. 2017. <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/health-department-annual-report-2016> (accessed Jan 19, 2018).
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Ibid.*