

Options for UNRWA: From Systemic Reform to Dissolution

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James G. Lindsay is a visiting fellow at The Washington Institute, focusing on Palestinian refugee issues and UN humanitarian assistance.



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Israeli reports of terrorist involvement by personnel have cast the agency in an especially harsh light.

The refugee agency known as UNRWA has long weathered criticism over its tolerance of anti-Semitic material in textbooks, its overbroad definition of Palestinian refugee status, and the politicized rhetoric used by agency personnel, including commissioners-general. But the aftermath of Hamas's October 7 attack against Israel has cast the organization in an even harsher light. Israel has reported that certain personnel were deeply involved in the massacre; that more than 450 employees are "military operatives" within various terrorist organizations; and that agency institutions were used as cover for Hamas arsenals, warehouses, military installations, and computer servers. Such findings have stirred outrage from donor countries, making the agency ripe for desperately needed reform.

In this Policy Note, former UNRWA legal advisor and general counsel James G. Lindsay describes an ossified institution that ultimately does not prioritize its most deserving constituents. The incremental dissolution of the agency, he contends, should not be ruled out if UNRWA refuses to embrace and implement a comprehensive program of reform.

[Click here to read a PDF of the study. \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/7308?disposition=attachment\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/7308?disposition=attachment) ❖

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