

A Death Sentence?

UNRWA in the Trump Era

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I work part time in construction, but that is not enough to cover all my expenses. Any reduction of aid would be a death sentence for refugees in Gaza. The work is almost nonexistent. There are not enough jobs. Those who work for the Palestinian Authority receive only a stipend, and Hamas employees get a quarter of their salary.

—Ahmed al Assar from the Nuseirat Refugee Camp in Gaza

Introduction

With a family of eight who has been receiving aid from UNRWA for almost twelve years, the 42-year-old Ahmed al-Assar from the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza describes the U.S. withdrawal of UNRWA funding as “a death sentence” (Balousha and Eglas 2018).¹ As refugees, al-Assar’s family is subject to multiple forces: the state, nonstate actors, and international organizations. As an international organization, the United Nations has been the most influential body in the lives of the Palestine refugees. In 1949, the United Nations established the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency* for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) as the international body solely responsible for dealing with the Palestinian refugees’ problems in their transition to “repatriation” as laid down by the UN Resolution 194.² UNRWA

has obtained its funding from a variety of international donor countries, the United States prominently among them.

Since its establishment in 1949, UNRWA has been providing shelter, medicine, education, fresh water, and food rations to all those who live in its five fields of operation (West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon), meet the operational definition of who is a refugee, register with the agency, and require assistance. The descendants of the original Palestinian refugees are also eligible to register and receive services (Yahya 2006: 41–2).

On 31 August 2018, U.S. Department of State spokesperson Heather Nauert issued a statement titled “On U.S. Assistance to UNRWA,” declaring that “the United States will not make additional contributions to UNRWA” (U.S. Department of State 2018). In light of the U.S. withdrawal of support from UNRWA, which had been providing approximately 30 percent of the organization’s budget, UNRWA officials (UNRWA 2019b), EU representatives (Multimedia Centre European Parliament 2018), and regimes of host countries (Al-Khalidi 2018) were alarmed and issued statements detailing the cataclysmic impact of this decision on not only the welfare of the Palestinian refugees, but also on the stability of the region, as a result of the possible radicalization of a population with nothing to lose or nothing to live for.

I want to explore the consequences of the possible collapse of UNRWA from the perspective of acting bodies on the ground: UNRWA officials, Popular Committees, UNRWA employees, and UNRWA’s humanitarian aid subjects—the refugees themselves. Instead of concentrating on the political consequences, which have been the focus of EU and host countries and, to a lesser extent, UNRWA’s rhetoric, I examine what the refugees consider a “death sentence” in terms of the everyday life of refugees and refugee camps. This will reveal the situation beyond humanitarian politics and allow us to speculate about the future of the refugees amid changing funding landscapes.

Methods

The research for this chapter was conducted between June 2018 and December 2019. It is based on formal and informal interviews, as well as on observations of the refugee scene in Palestine. It also relies on exhaustive reading of news, documents, and figures related to the U.S. budget cuts to UNRWA. I juxtaposed my fieldwork and “armchair” ethnography to fill in gaps and reread what are purported to be “the facts.” In addition to several one-on-one short formal and informal interviews with laborers, refugee camps’ Popular Committee members, and administrators from the Jalazone and Dair Ammar refugee camps of the West Bank and the Al Shati (Beach) refugee camp of Gaza Strip, I interviewed university students in two groups of approximately fifteen students each. One group was from the Islamic

University in Gaza, and the other was from Al Quds University in the West Bank. My questions were identical: In light of recent U.S. budget cuts, what is the role of UNRWA in the refugees' everyday life? What is the political mandate of UNRWA vis-à-vis the refugees' right of return? Under what circumstances might UNRWA collapse, and what are the potential consequences of this collapse? I conducted these interviews and conversations in Arabic and later translated excerpts from my notes to English. The names of the informants and interviewees in this chapter are pseudonyms.

The Politics of Aid

In the early afternoon of 2 January 2018, U.S. President Donald Trump tweeted,

It's not only Pakistan that we pay billions of dollars to for nothing, but also many other countries, and others. As an example, we pay the Palestinians HUNDRED 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. We have taken Jerusalem, the toughest part of the negotiation, off the table, but Israel, for that, would have had to pay more. But with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them? (Trump 2018)

These tweets illustrated the condescension and fury with which his administration treated aid-receiving countries. The U.S. government believed that UNRWA's services had suspended the normalization process of Palestinian refugee lives and hindered the possibility of treating them as active agents in planning their own future. The U.S. administration under Trump claimed that "Palestinians, wherever they live, deserve better than an endlessly crisis-driven service provision model. They deserve to be able to plan for the future" (U.S. Department of State 2018). U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley went further, saying that Palestinian refugees' "right of return . . . ought to be off the table" ("The Guardian View on Trump's Palestinian Policy" 2018). The politics of aid were unmistakable in Haley's statement concerning the peace process and the expected output: "We still very much want to have a peace process. Nothing changes with that. The Palestinians now have to show they want to come to the table . . . As of now, they're not coming to the table, but they ask for aid. We're not giving the aid. We're going to make sure that they come to the table" (Beaumont 2018).

On the one hand, the United States believes that UNRWA, through its aid, has perpetuated the conditions that make Palestinian refugees demand their return to their places of origin, thereby preventing the normalization of refugees into citizens in their respective host countries. On the other hand, the ar-

gument has been made that the provision of shelter, food rations, healthcare, education, and social services has turned the slummy refugee camps into attractive habitats and hindered the possibility of normalizing their “diasporic” condition, a claim that the Israeli government and Israeli researchers (see Ben-Porath and Marx 1971) have long endorsed. The refugees, however, have persistently made the opposite claim, namely that the resources and the services UNRWA provides support the refugees’ desire to stay together and create a sense of community that had been shattered by displacement.

UNRWA’s Aid and the Refugees’ Right of Return

There is only weak correlation between the aid UNRWA provides and the refugees’ relentless demands for their right of return, thus negating the recent U.S. claims about UNRWA as an obstacle to the “normalization” of refugees into citizens in the host countries.

According to UNRWA, approximately 25 percent of more than five million Palestinian refugees are still living in fifty-eight recognized refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.³ The percentage of the refugees remaining in the camps versus those who left or settled in the host countries varies according to the geopolitical consideration of the host country (see table 13.1).

Palestinian refugees have been living in refugee camps for several reasons, one of which, though not the most important, is economic. Non-monetary considerations include the presence of preferred communal and societal values. This explains the voluntarily “territorialization” of refugees from the same village of origin to the same camp or even to the same neighborhood in a certain camp. It is worth mentioning that many refugees never

Table 13.1. Distribution of Palestinian Refugees around the Middle East (2014–18).

The UNRWA’s Field of Operations	Number of Official Camps	Registered Refugees in Camps	Registered Refugees	Refugee Percentage Still Living in Camps
Jordan (as of 2016)	10	397,000	2,206,736	18
Lebanon (as of 2014)	12	249,000	469,555	53
Syria (as of 2018)	9	158,000	552,000	30
West Bank (as of 2016)	19	207,000	828,328	25
Gaza Strip (as of 2018)	8	600,000	1,386,455	45
Total	58	1,611,000	5,443,074	

Source: Based on data available on the UNRWA website: www.unrwa.org.

agreed to live in refugee camps, which they consider humiliating and socially inadequate. In other words, the economic calculations that result from UNRWA's aid, on the one hand, and the living on or off refugee camps and upholding refugee status, on the other hand, are not dependent variables. Contrary to the U.S. government's claims, the collapse of UNRWA does not automatically mean the end of the right of return or the weakening of the refugees' relationship to their home of origin.

While most of the refugees I interviewed were adamant about the weak, if any, correlation between UNRWA's aid and their demand to return, few believe that the collapse of UNRWA would end the right of return. For them, UNRWA is an official international body whose existence symbolizes the continuity of the Palestinian tragedy, as my informants Safi (a refugee and political activist), Ihdoush (a camp's Popular Committee member), and Qattawi (current UNRWA employee) insist. For them, UNRWA has kept the memory of Palestinian displacement alive, sometimes explicitly (e.g., with its frequent appeals and reports to the United Nations), and at other times implicitly (e.g., with its work toward making younger refugee generations aware of their displacement through education, awareness campaigns, and testimonials). The slogans on banners distributed by the Refugee Affairs Department of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) on Palestine Independence Day in Ramallah in November 2019 emphasized the importance of UNRWA as “a living testimony of our people's catastrophe and displacement in 1948” (see figure 13.1) and demanded that the United



Figure 13.1. Banner in Ramallah: “UNRWA Remains a Living Testimony for the Catastrophe and Displacement of Our People in 1948.” November 2019. Photo by the author.



Figure 13.2. Banner in Ramallah: “We Call upon the UN to Extend the Mandate to Support and Protect UNRWA.” November 2019.
Photo by the author.

Nations “extend the mandate, the support, and the protection for UNRWA” (see figure 13.2). Palestinian artists who participated in the “Freedom for Movement” marathon in Bethlehem in April 2019 depicted the U.S. budget cuts to UNRWA as “a crime against humanity” (figure 13.3).

Palestinian Refugees and UNRWA’s Possible Collapse

On an early morning in July 2019, I sat with a few refugees around the coffee peddler at Al Shati (Beach) camp, the largest camp in the Gaza Strip. They faced the congested and graffitied structures with their backs to the Mediterranean Sea. As we talked about the fate of the refugees and refugee camps in light of UNRWA’s struggles, Abu Khamis, a retired UNRWA educator in his late sixties, was indifferent to the idea of UNRWA’s collapse. Abu Khamis reflected on the future of UNRWA, an organization that earned him a living for more than four decades:

UNRWA comes with a political agenda that is dictated by its donors. It fulfilled its mission, and it is about time to leave . . . They made us docile until Israel has become strong enough, and we have become pathetic enough. If there were no UNRWA after the Nakba era, we would have fought and re-



Figure 13.3. Street Artwork in Bethlehem Depicting the U.S. Withdrawal of Funds from UNRWA as a Crime against Humanity. April 2019.
Photo by the author.

turned to our homeland Their role was to calm us down and made our life possible in the diaspora. Now, Palestinians are dispersed politically and spatially; if UNRWA collapses, nothing would change.

One may understand an old refugee's indifference to the collapse of UNRWA as a result of its weakening over the last few decades. The organization experienced a decline in aid and relief provision and the adoption of new developmental paradigms, such as the microfinance and micro-entrepreneur programs (MMPs) in 1991. The MMPs would later become the UNRWA's Microfinance Department. This department grew exponentially over the next two decades, and in 2008 it became the largest microfinance service provider in Palestine and the second largest in Syria. Further, UNRWA launched loan products specifically targeting home-based women entrepreneurs in 2010 and young people in 2012.⁴ The bleak reality of Palestinian political division and the generally frustrating outcomes of the Arab Spring explain much of the apparent indifference. The fresh drama of the Arab Spring in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya overshadowed the Palestinian issue, specifically its refugee problem.

Although my informants Safi, Ihdoush, and Qattawi witnessed firsthand the reduction of UNRWA services, especially in the 1970s, they still considered the collapse of UNRWA to be impossible and hard to imagine. They

saw UNRWA as an international organization not solely dependent on U.S. support. They believed that the world would not allow for the collapse of UNRWA and all the chaos that might ensue.

Younger refugee generations, university students in particular, whom I interviewed in groups of around fifteen about the UNRWA's possible collapse in light of the U.S. withdrawal of its support, have mixed feelings. The Gaza Strip university students approached the issue pragmatically, inquiring about what would replace UNRWA as service provider. They were mostly indifferent to the collapse, so long as another entity would take up the UNRWA's everyday duties and responsibilities (education, healthcare, and waste management). Although most of those I interviewed believed that the UNRWA's aid to refugees had been reduced a great deal (in relief services, education, and healthcare), still, the little aid UNRWA provided was crucial for the wellbeing of the UNRWA's employees and their families and for many needy families in Gaza Strip.

Ethical and pragmatic considerations were recurring themes when I interviewed refugees from the West Bank, who were university students, laborers, and private sector employees. Some thought UNRWA's collapse would not make a difference in relation to services or right of return; others could not think of this possibility, as it was "just impossible." The majority believed that it would be catastrophic unless another body, such as the Palestinian National Authority (PNA), or even the State of Israel (in classic occupation model), would take over and compensate for the services UNRWA was providing.

My informants, young and old alike, believed that UNRWA had lost much of its credibility, as the organization could not fulfill its "ultimate purpose"—that is, repatriation. For example, Qattawi suggested that UNRWA had become "a company Ltd." Safi believed that the establishment of UNRWA for the Palestinian case was "a remedy for deportation rather than repatriation. If Palestine refugees were the responsibility of the UNHCR (not UNRWA), the refugees would have gone home like millions of refugees in post-World War II." Ihdoush thought of UNRWA as "a non-autonomous organization that has been mostly reliant on U.S. funds and hence its vulnerability."

U.S. Aid Cuts and the "Death" of UNRWA

Throughout its seven decades of work, UNRWA reformed and responded to the changing political and economic concurrent paradigms. For example, by the late 1970s, UNRWA cut its food rations program, limiting it to needy families known as the Special Hardship Cases (SHC). UNRWA introduced the SHC program in 1978, and, upon its implementation, the new program

increased the amount of assistance to needy families among the refugee population. In 1982, UNRWA totally abolished the mass distribution of food rations, leaving the SHC as the only program that has been providing food rations for needy refugees (United Nations General Assembly 2006).

Before UNRWA abolished the food program, rations and employment had been used as an apparatus to govern camps' spaces and refugees' bodies. Refugees who wished to maintain their UNRWA rations, employment, and other services had to keep clean records with UNRWA and comply with UNRWA's regulations, including the licensing of any construction activity. It is worth mentioning that UNRWA, around this era, constituted a major employer in Palestine such that by 1985, it employed 6.4 percent of the labor force of the West Bank and 11.3 percent of that of the Gaza Strip (Palestine Economic Policy Research Institute 2014).

When the food distribution program was limited to the SHC, the majority of refugees were no longer recipients and therefore no longer governed by the food-rations technology. The refugees, ironically, had become "free" and started an intensive wave of camp construction. The reduction of aid did not encourage refugees to leave camps or disregard their right of return.

The Oslo Accords of 1993 brought about conditions similar to those of late 1970. The agreement, signed between the state of Israel and the PLO, did not address the issue of Palestinian refugees, leaving it for the final status negotiation (planned to commence in 1998, after five years from the signing of the interim agreement). The Camp David and later Taba rounds of negotiations (both in 2000) reached a deadlock, mainly because of the problematic issue of the refugees' right of return. The Palestine/Israel differences deepened and accelerated toward full confrontation in 2002, putting an end to the peace process. In this era, the Palestinian refugees' demand for return got a boost. Refugee camps evolved into urban spaces, and refugees into productive subjects (both politically and economically). New paradigms related to the Palestinian right to return emerged; these included Nakba events, commemorations, memorials, oral history projects, websites, and media projects. The establishment of the PNA enabled a whole set of practices that had been infusing the imaginary of refugees' younger generations with dreams of return. In short, UNRWA's cuts of the late 1970s and the similar conditions created in the Oslo and post-Oslo eras resulted in rather unexpected outputs in relation to the normalization of refugee camps and the naturalizing of refugees into subjects.

An examination of the impact of U.S. aid withdrawal on Palestinian governmental and nongovernmental organizations sheds light on the effects of a possible UNRWA collapse. For almost three decades, the U.S. government and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) were major contributors to the PNA budget, as part of the U.S. commitment to the peace process that it helped bring about in 1993. The

U.S. government and USAID, for example, contributed around US\$1 billion to the West Bank and Gaza Strip between 2009 and 2013. In contrast, contributions over the last ten years averaged around US\$0.5 billion (USAID 2019). While the U.S. government constituted a major donor to the PNA budget, USAID supported huge infrastructural projects, including health and education facilities, as well as sewage, water, electricity, and road networks. The U.S. government believed that easing economic pressure on Palestinian communities would foster an environment conducive to peace (see figure 13.4).

U.S. aid to Palestine was withdrawn more than once. For example, the United States withdrew its support when Hamas gained control of the Palestinian legislative council (parliament) after the 2006 elections. More recently, in 2018, after Trump’s election to the presidency, the United States announced aid cuts to the Palestinian Authority. The withdrawal of U.S. aid resulted in the discontinuity of projects and the dismissing of hundreds, if not thousands, of direct and indirect employees from well-paying jobs. U.S. aid to the West Bank and Gaza Strip was dedicated mainly to three budget lines: (1) Economic Support Fund/Security Support Assistance (dispensed through USAID); (2) Narcotics Control (dispensed through the U.S. Department of State); and (3) Refugee and Migration (dispensed through the U.S. Department of State).

Job markets were disrupted. Some employees became self-employed, bolstered by experience and capital they had gained through their USAID jobs; others relocated into new jobs in the private or public sector, albeit

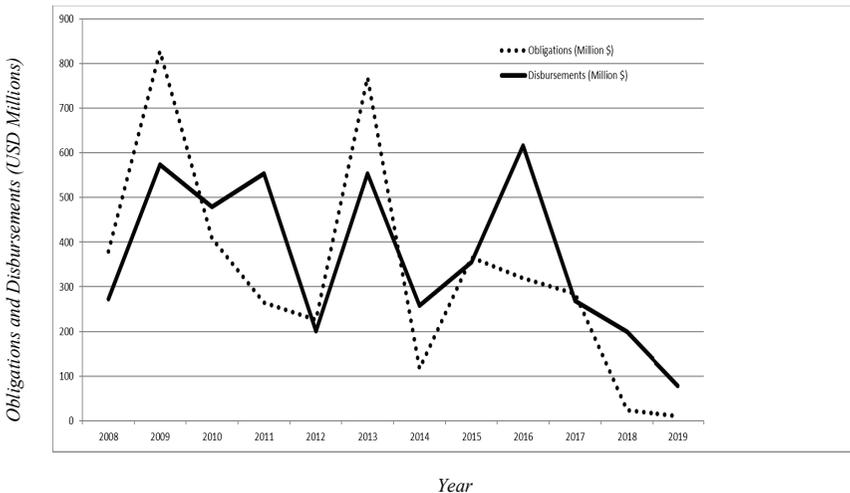


Figure 13.4. U.S. Aid (in USD) to the West Bank and Gaza Strip (2008–19). Figure created by the author based on data from USAID (2019).

with reduced salaries; others fled to the Arab oil-rich countries empowered with their acquired experiences; a minority joined the unemployed crowds in Palestine. Contractors who benefited from the USAID infrastructural projects either downsized their teams or diverted their labor surpluses to private and public sector projects with fierce competition and much lower returns.

Although the U.S. and the USAID contributions to the PNA general budget and the infrastructural projects constituted a substantial part of the Palestinian budget, the Palestinians showed resilience and flexibility in adapting to the new conditions. Of course, these major funding cuts did not transpire unnoticed; on the contrary, future plans were interrupted, individual and collective dreams evaporated, projects were postponed, budgets were cut, and salaries went unpaid. Yet the economy did not collapse; the PNA continued to govern the West Bank and paid the salaries and covered the electricity and healthcare bills of the Gaza Strip. Hamas has governed Gaza Strip since 2006, and it continues to pay reduced salaries to its employees and manages to raise funds for infrastructural works in between wars on Gaza.

UNRWA's Funding as a Zero Sum Game

Ultimately, when U.S. aid was reduced, the Palestinians relied on other resources (Arab League support, for example), activated austerity measures (reducing salaries and halting projects or employment), and relied on their own resources (such as higher taxes). In other words, Palestinians, as a quasi-autonomous state or civil society, managed to compensate for the cuts until aid was restored. Moreover, as figure 13.4 shows, U.S. disbursements to the West Bank and Gaza substantially exceeded the obligations in 2018 and 2019. In other words, the U.S. government was and still is reluctant to fully cease all U.S. aid to Palestine. In this regard, the U.S. disbursed US\$200 million and US\$78 million for 2018 and 2019, respectively, as opposed to the obligations of US\$23 million and US\$10 million (see table 13.2).

For decades, the United States provided around 28 percent of UNRWA's budget, citing the need to promote stability in the Levant. The U.S. contribution for 2018 was reduced from US\$365 million to US\$65 million, in addition to the termination of US\$200 million in funding for humanitarian aid and development assistance in the West Bank and Gaza.

UNRWA has been the major source of income for 30,000 employees in its five fields of operation. Of UNRWA's total budget allocation, education comprises 54 percent, healthcare 17 percent, and welfare, relief programs, and camp infrastructure 29 percent (Jansen 2018). This sheds light on the fate of the Palestinians in case of a potential UNRWA collapse.

Table 13.2. U.S. Aid to Palestine (2008–19)

Year	Obligations (Million \$)	Disbursements (Million \$)	Year	Obligations (Million \$)	Disbursements (Million \$)
2008	379	273	2014	117	258
2009	828	573	2015	366	355
2010	409	479	2016	319	616
2011	264	553	2017	285	268
2012	226	201	2018	23	200
2013	769	554	2019	10	78

Source: Based on data from USAID (2019).

Table 13.3, compiled and organized by the author through examining UNRWA annual budgets, available on the organization’s official website (www.unrwa.org), shows the pattern of U.S. support in relation to UNRWA’s total budget for the last ten years (2009–18). Table 13.3 indicates that, throughout this period, the United States contributed 26 percent, the European Union contributed 16 percent, and the remaining donors, including

Table 13.3. Donations (USD) by Country and Percentage of UNRWA’s Total Budget (2009–18). Note: black background indicates percentages that were well below the average; white background indicates contributions around the average; and gray background indicates contributions well above the average.

Year	Source and Percentage						Total (USD)
	United States	%	EU* & ECHO**	%	Others	%	
2018	60,429,282	5%	178,989,326	14%	1,037,000,339	81%	1,276,418,947
2017	364,267,603	32%	142,515,744	13%	614,447,046	55%	1,121,230,393
2016	368,429,712	30%	159,765,906	13%	714,719,149	58%	1,242,914,767
2015	380,593,116	31%	136,751,943	11%	729,457,556	59%	1,246,802,615
2014	408,751,396	31%	139,402,221	11%	775,701,566	59%	1,323,855,183
2013	294,023,401	24%	216,386,867	18%	708,603,948	58%	1,219,014,216
2012	233,328,550	26%	204,098,161	22%	470,480,660	52%	907,907,371
2011	239,440,945	25%	175,450,364	18%	557,792,209	57%	972,683,518
2010	247,872,993	29%	165,244,161	20%	427,625,338	51%	840,742,492
2009	267,959,631	26%	228,011,786	23%	516,245,020	51%	1,012,216,437
Total							
USD	2,865,096,629	26%	1,746,616,479	16%	6,552,072,831	59%	11,163,785,939

*EU: European Union, **ECHO: European Commission’s Humanitarian Aid Office.

Source: Based on data available on the UNRWA website: www.unrwa.org.

the Arab countries, contributed 59 percent of the total budget of UNRWA. U.S. aid fluctuated between 24 to 32 percent, and only in 2018 did it drop to 5 percent in light of the recent cut decision. European Union contributions fluctuated substantially between 11 and 23 percent. Other contributions also varied between 51 and 59 percent, with the exception of 2018, when they contributed the vast majority of the budget (81 percent). Contribution percentages, excluding 2018, were 28 percent, 16 percent, and 56 percent, respectively.

This analysis indicates that UNRWA managed to raise the funds necessary to implement its work and programs. To illustrate this, a black background indicates percentages that were well below the average; white indicates contributions around the average; and gray indicates contributions well above the average. The color code makes it easier to note that whenever there were deficits (black) in a group of donors, there were extra funds (gray) made available by other groups. This division of labor, or the “zero sum game,” among donors was almost systematic in the last ten years and shows that the international community steps in to compensate for any deficits. It also indicates that fluctuations occurred and were subject to the donor’s ability and willingness to give at that particular moment.

Politics of Aid and the Humanitarian Paradox

If table 13.3 reveals anything, it is that the international community is not ready for a “death sentence” for UNRWA. These donors were driven by their moral commitments to the Palestinian cause in general and to the refugees in particular, by their fear of the collapse of weak states in the region, or by their uncompromising belief in the peace process. On 13 December 2019, the United Nations General Assembly voted to extend the mandate of UNRWA until 2023 (UNRWA 2019d) instead of the habitual extension of one year, which some of my informants regarded as a direct challenge to U.S. cuts to UNRWA.

However, the U.S. government exhibited similar behavior. According to figure 13.4, the United States disbursed more than its obligations to Palestine during the years 2018 and 2019. As a matter of fact, almost two years after President Trump’s withdrawal of funds, he signed a “foreign aid spending legislation” that provided US\$75 million in humanitarian and economic aid for the West Bank and Gaza and another US\$75 million for security aid to support the Palestinian Authority. Moreover, to prevent the Trump administration from entirely eliminating Palestinian aid, as he did in 2018, the bill included a provision that prohibits it from diverting more than 10 percent of aid allocated to any other country (Harris 2019).

Table 13.3 also shows that UNRWA’s budget for the five fields of operation in the Middle East is so small that it does not constitute a burden on

any of the donors. The U.S. government contribution in particular is a negligible percentage of its annual budget and incomparable to U.S. support for Israel, which amounts to US\$4 billion annually (Green 2016). If U.S. aid is not restored, and UNRWA does not manage to raise the difference, services and programs would likely be cut by approximately 28 percent (the U.S. average giving over the last ten years), bringing UNRWA's budgets closer to those of 2010–12. Such cuts would activate austerity measures resulting in further expense rationalizing, service cuts (as all my informants suggested), and budgetary reforms.

The human price of aid cuts would mean further downsizing services that would affect the less fortunate refugees, the ordinary people. Camp resident Zahia Mekdad describes UNRWA's aid cut as “a purely political decision that would hurt only ordinary people There has already been a reduction of aid in recent years. If it is reduced more, it is the women, children, and young people who will suffer, not the politicians” (Balousha and Eglas 2018). Moreover, since around 70 percent of UNRWA's (2019c) budget is directed toward education and healthcare, we may also expect that these two budgetary lines would suffer the most from any future cuts. These two sectors have already been subject to cuts and have suffered greatly in the last few years. Refugee complaints about the quality of education and the moderate healthcare system have been the subject of demonstrations and strikes. We also know that while well-off refugees purchase private health insurance and enroll their children in public or private schools in nearby villages and towns, less fortunate refugees rely largely on the UNRWA's education and healthcare services. Nevertheless, the vast majority of the UNRWA's 30,000 employees are employed in these two sectors, and any cuts would be “a massacre against the employees,” according to Amal al-Batsh, deputy chairman of the UNRWA's staff union (Humaid 2018).

The 2019 UNRWA Emergency Appeal addresses the most important humanitarian needs of Palestine refugees in Gaza and the West Bank. These are the main strategic priorities:

Strategic Priority 1: Crisis-affected Palestine refugee households facing acute shocks have increased economic *access to food* through food aid, Cash for Work, and e-cards targeting the most vulnerable households.

Strategic Priority 2: Palestine refugees maintain their *access to critical services and assistance*, including education; health; water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH); and are protected from the most severe impacts of hostilities and violence through the *provision of mental health and psychosocial assistance and monitoring, reporting and advocacy*. (UNRWA 2019b, emphasis added)

The political consequences of the collapse of UNRWA have been acknowledged. Defunding UNRWA could have serious consequences for the region and for the world. The economies of the Occupied Palestinian Ter-

ritories (Gaza in particular), Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria could disintegrate as they depend on UNRWA's foreign currency injections and service provision (Jansen 2018).

Humanitarianism, the NGOization of misery, and neoliberal developmental discourses have been widely critiqued (Haddad 2016; Hanieh 2008a, 2008b; Feldman 2007a, 2007b; Ferris 2003; Le More 2005; Redfield 2005, 2006; Rieff 2002; Ticktin 2006; Walker 1997). The possibility of the collapse of UNRWA—because of U.S. cuts or for any other reason—unmasks deficiencies in political and humanitarian discourse. While the collapse of the humanitarian industry may lead to political unrest, the success of UNRWA to pull itself together and mitigate U.S. aid cuts, as the organization has managed to do throughout its history, would further normalize and prolong the refugees' misery—hence the humanitarian paradox. My informant Safi argues that there is a straightforward causal relationship between the national struggle momentum and UNRWA's strength and resilience to cope with increasing responsibility. For him, as Palestinian activism declines, the ability of UNRWA to cope with the blows of time, such as the one in which Palestinians are living, would be limited and ineffective. As such, the collapse of UNRWA is practically a symptom of the failures of the current Palestinian political struggle.

Mohsen Abu Ramadan, an economic analyst from Gaza, believes that UNRWA has launched a new policy that only entrenches the worsening situation in Gaza Strip, including the eleven-year siege, extreme poverty, and high unemployment. He says,

UNRWA and many international organizations, especially those funded by the U.S. in Gaza, are moving towards one direction, which is to replace the Palestinian cause—an end to the Israeli occupation and siege and the right of return for refugees—with a humanitarian agenda It is an attempt to apply the “economic peace” theory instead of the Palestinian national solutions. (Humaid 2018)

Conclusion

UNRWA's ability to absorb financial shocks and to mobilize funds appears to contradict the possibility of collapse as a result of the U.S. withdrawal of aid. So far, UNRWA has survived because it managed to mobilize funds from other resources, rationalized these resources, and deployed austerity measures to reduce services. In addition, since the early 1990s, UNRWA has been shifting toward development paradigms, such as microfinance programs.

My research rejects the idea that U.S. aid reduction would impose a “death sentence” on UNRWA by challenging the U.S. and other governments' claim that UNRWA's aid perpetuates the refugee problem. This

chapter shows that the reduction of UNRWA programs in late 1970s, and similar conditions post-Oslo, resulted in renewed commemorative and spatial practices. Still, a “death sentence” appears to be directed at less fortunate refugees, who are forced to endure harsh living conditions and the constant reduction of UNRWA support.

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Notes

1. The epigraph is from an interview quoted in Balousha and Eglas (2018).
2. Article 11 of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 (III), on 11 December 1948, resolves that the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible; Instructs the Conciliation Commission to facilitate the repatriation, resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees and the payment of compensation, and to maintain close relations with the Director of the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees and, through him, with the appropriate organs and agencies of the United Nations. (<http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/043/65/IMG/NR004365.pdf>)
3. These data are available on the UNRWA website: <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work>.
4. These data are available on the UNRWA website: <https://www.unrwa.org/content/microfinance-department>.

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