

Concept Note

High-level Ministerial meeting on UNRWA

Side event of the General Assembly high-level segment, Conference room 3, UN headquarters, 26 September 2024, 13:00-14:30, New York

Amid continuing efforts by Member States to stabilize the region and find a political solution, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has served as an essential lifeline for millions of Palestinian refugees for 75 years, providing critical services in education, health care, social support, and emergency relief. Today, the challenges the Agency faces are only exacerbated by the war in Gaza entering its 11th month, threatening its ability to fulfill its mandate, which has been reaffirmed time and again by the United Nations General Assembly. These challenges including the attacks on the Agency also risk overturning the parameters of a future political solution – parameters long established through United Nations Security Council and General Assembly resolutions, and by the International Court of Justice.

Since day one, UNRWA has been the platform of the entire international humanitarian response in Gaza, providing protection, shelter, food, water, medical care and other essential services to 2.3 million people in the territory. In parallel with its operations in Gaza, UNRWA has continued to deliver services for millions of Palestinian refugees across its other four areas of operation in the region, namely, in Jordan, the West Bank, Lebanon and Syria. UNRWA is currently navigating through some of the most difficult circumstances in its history, marked by chronic underfunding and financial unpredictability over several years, political and reputational attacks, and legal and political undermining of the Agency. The General Assembly's mandate for UNRWA's role must be matched by providing sufficient political support and financial resources since UNRWA is not just a service provider, it is a symbol of the international community's commitment to a just resolution to the Palestinian refugee issue, in line with all relevant UN resolutions, including UNGA Resolutions 194 and 302.

One of UNRWA's most vital contributions is in the field of quality education. In Gaza, approximately 600,000 children have been out of school since 7 October 2023. The potential loss of education for an entire generation poses devastating socio-economic and developmental consequences for Gaza's future. UNRWA is uniquely positioned to re-establish education on a large scale, helping to avert these negative outcomes that threaten peace and security in the region. Nevertheless, for this to succeed, conditions on the ground need to improve and support from donors and partners to UNRWA be further strengthened to enable UNRWA to continue implementing the mechanisms put in place and strengthen its efforts to ensure UN values are upheld, including values of equal rights, tolerating differences, impartiality, and non-violence.

This high-level ministerial meeting hosted by the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan and the Kingdom of Sweden with the participation of the United Nations Secretary-General. It will emphasize UNRWA's indispensable and irreplaceable role in the lives of Palestinian refugees, particularly in Gaza, where it has been at the forefront of humanitarian efforts since day one of the war and has lost over 221 of its personnel in the line of duty while providing humanitarian assistance or medical care to the injured and sick.

It will explore ways to bolster political and financial support for UNRWA. It provides a timely opportunity to counter political and physical attacks on the Agency, to strengthen advocacy for its role, to ensure stability of its operations, and to support its efforts to continue implementing the recommendation from the Colonna Report.

This meeting represents a critical moment for the international community to demonstrate its resolve in protecting UNRWA, its mandate, and the millions of Palestinian refugees who rely on its services. By standing united in support of UNRWA, we send a powerful message that the international community will not abandon its commitment to a just and lasting solution for Palestinian refugees and will continue to uphold the principles of multilateralism and international law.