

AMERICAN UNIVERSITY OF BEIRUT

UNRWA BETWEEN AUTONOMY AND GEOPOLITICS: AN
INSTITUTIONAL APPROACH TO THE PALESTINE REFUGEE
AGENCY'S STRUGGLE FOR SURVIVAL

by
RANA MOHAMED ALI MAKKI

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for the degree of Master of Arts
to the Department of Political Studies and Public Administration
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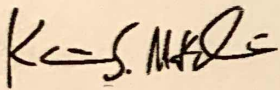
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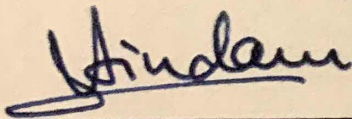
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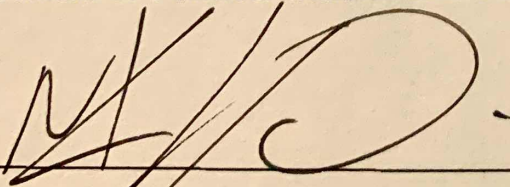
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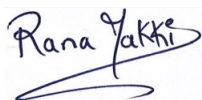
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This thesis is the product of over three years of constant procrastination and mounting fear of having to leave my most comfortable bubble, the AUB, in a country that treats its refugees in the most brutal way. The biggest stumbling block through it all, however, has been my fear of delivering an average thesis about a topic connected to the dearest cause to my heart, Palestine. Even with what seemed to be a never-ending project, I have always had my advisor Karim Makdisi by my side. I am very grateful to Professor Makdisi for his enormous support throughout every phase of this thesis and for his meticulous revisions of my writing. His commitment to UNRWA and dedication to Palestine have been a constant source of inspiration. Had it not been for him putting up with my procrastination, I would have given up on this project a long time ago. So thank you Prof!

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS OF

Rana Mohamed Ali Makki for Master of Arts
Major: Public Policy and International Affairs

Title: UNRWA Between Autonomy and Geopolitics: An Institutional Approach to the Palestine Refugee Agency's Struggle for Survival

This thesis explores the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the Near East (UNRWA) institutional response to the dramatic decision by the United States of America in 2018 to eliminate all funding to the organization, and to do so, will emphasize the role that factors internal to UNRWA play with regards to the survival of the organization. It argues that UNRWA: (1) carved out a place for itself in the political arena through crafting a political rationale for its existence; (2) became self-aware of its standpoint in the multilateral system and promoted a narrative that fit this end; (3) and most importantly, utilized autonomous characteristics that are inherent to it as an international organization that operates in the complex context of the Middle East.

This research challenges the narrative that depicts UNRWA as an institution that lacks its own identity and as purely a tool of another party, whether it be Israel, Palestinians, or the US, and it tries instead to reframe the discussion around UNRWA using the organization's own terms. As an International Organization (IO), UNRWA has been able to carve a place for itself within world politics as an autonomous actor that has managed to defy and outlive, thus far, the growing political 'limitations' imposed on its mandate by member states, and in particular the US. Taking this research inquiry as a starting point, this thesis explores the following main question: How does UNRWA's autonomy contribute to its survival against the recent threats made by the United States? A sub-question that is also relevant to this thesis is: To what extent do the internal measures taken by UNRWA in response to political attacks on its existence reflect the institutional resilience of the organization? By answering these questions, this thesis aims to examine the shift in the dynamics of the UNRWA-US relationship, and hence formulate a better understanding of how UNRWA's institutional response has allowed it to defend itself against the attacks from the Trump administration.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

A. Research Problem and Significance

1. Background and Problem Statement

Since its establishment in 1949, the vote for the renewal of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency in the Near East (UNRWA) – the United Nations agency tasked with providing humanitarian and economic assistance for Palestine refugees displaced in the wake of the 1948 Nakba – has been largely an uncontroversial process that takes place every three to five years at the United Nations General Assembly. The year 2019, however, saw a dramatic change in this standard procedure and for the challenges faced by UNRWA overall. This thesis explores UNRWA’s institutional response to the dramatic decision by the United States of America to eliminate all funding to the organization, and to do so, will emphasize the role that factors internal to UNRWA play with regards to the survival of the organization. This thesis argues that UNRWA: (1) carved out a place for itself in the political arena through crafting a political rationale for its existence; (2) became self-aware of its standpoint in the multilateral system and promoted a narrative that fit this end; (3) and most importantly, utilized autonomous characteristics that are inherent to it as an international organization that operates in the complex context of the Middle East.

As United States President Donald Trump began advancing in 2017 what he called the ‘Peace to Prosperity’ Plan – commonly referred to as the Deal of the Century – as a

breakthrough comprehensive peace initiative to the Arab-Israeli conflict, he and his team took unilateral steps towards changing the reality on the ground. They formally recognized Jerusalem – including the occupied eastern half of the city – as Israel’s capital in December 2017, closed the Palestine Liberation Organization’s (PLO) mission in Washington in September 2018, and recognized the occupied Golan Heights as part of Israel in March 2019, and suggested they would even recognize lands in occupied West Bank that Israel has long sought to annex.¹ Most significantly, the Trump administration focused on a core issue that has represented the collective sense of Palestinian nationhood – that is, the Palestinian refugees – and sought to delegitimize it in every way possible. For these refugees, UNRWA has long been seen not only as an operational agency providing them services, but also as the embodiment of their internationally recognized right of return. This made the organization a principal target for the US as the latter initiated a series of fierce attacks on UNRWA’s very existence and relevancy.

As a result, and less than a year after assuming office as the new President of the United States, Trump announced in January 2018 a cut of more than half of his country’s planned budget to the United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees;² and only a few months later in August of that year, he stopped all American funding to UNRWA,³ thus putting an end to an era during which the US acted as the organization’s largest single donor. But Trump and his team did not stop at this point; they launched, together with

¹ Al Jazeera News, “Trump and the Palestinians: A timeline,” *Al Jazeera*, November 19, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/09/trump-palestinians-timeline-180910164949522.html>

² Ibid.

³ Heather Nauert, The US Department Spokesperson, *On U.S. Assistance to UNRWA – Press Statement*, August 31, 2018, Washington DC. <https://www.state.gov/on-u-s-assistance-to-unrwa/>.

Israel, a concerted and sustained smear campaign to delegitimize UNRWA and lobby against it ahead of the United Nations vote on the organization's mandate renewal. This resulted in several European countries suspending their funds to the already underfunded organization, as well as the resignation of UNRWA's then-Commissioner General amid an investigation into misconduct.⁴

The US administration led by Trump's senior advisor and son-in-law Jared Kushner, saw in the United Nations General Assembly's vote for the renewal of UNRWA's mandate in December 2019 an important opportunity in its battle to legitimize its unilateral policy and break the overwhelming international consensus on the matter of the inalienable rights of Palestine refugees. Specifically, it sought to undermine the Palestinians' political claim by discrediting and defunding UNRWA for two main reasons: first, forcing the organization to redefine who it considers to be a Palestinian refugee with the aim to reduce the number of refugees;⁵ and second, bringing the Palestinians to "the brink of social death" that they are forced to accept the deal that the US has to offer them.⁶ As an illustration, on January 11, 2018, Kushner wrote in confidential emails leaked by Foreign Policy magazine

⁴ Live News, "Report Alleges Ethical Abuses at UN Agency for Palestinians", *France24*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.france24.com/en/20190729-report-alleges-ethical-abuses-un-agency-palestinians-0>; Ian Williams, "Ethics Report Accuses UNRWA Leadership of Abuse of Power", *Al Jazeera*, July 29, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/ethics-report-accuses-unrwa-leadership-abuse-power-190726114701787.html>

⁵ Karen DeYoung, Ruth Eglash and Hazem Balousha, "U.S. ends aid to United Nations agency supporting Palestinian refugees", *The Washington Post*, September 1, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle_east/us-aid-cuts-wont-end-the-right-of-return-palestinians-say/2018/08/31/8e3f25b4-ad0c-11e8-8a0c-70b618c98d3c_story.html

⁶ Neve Gordon, "UNRWA and Trump's attempt to erase the Palestinian people", *Al Jazeera*, September 3, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/unrwa-trump-attempt-erase-palestinian-people-180903135218614.html>

that “it is important to have an honest and sincere effort to disrupt UNRWA”;⁷ while a senior advisor to the US Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt took it further by proposing that “UNRWA should come up with a plan to unwind itself and become part of the UNHCR (the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees) by the time its charter comes up again in 2019”.⁸ This proposal to fold UNRWA into UNHCR is especially controversial as it suggests that the latter would carry out its mandate and settle refugees outside today’s Israel, whereas the Palestinians’ right to self-determination is enshrined in international law and UN resolutions and the fate of refugees ought to be achieved as part of a negotiated political agreement between Palestinians and Israelis.⁹

However, and despite the massive US lobbying, the General Assembly overwhelmingly voted for a 3-year extension of UNRWA’s mandate on December 13, 2019, with 165 votes in favor of renewal, 2 against and 9 abstentions, thus confirming the international community’s unambiguous commitment to the organization.¹⁰

Shortly after the vote for renewal, Trump finally released in late January 2020 his long-awaited peace plan in which it was bluntly stated that “there shall be no right of return by, or absorption of, any Palestinian refugee into the State of Israel”.¹¹ This formulation

⁷ Colum Lynch and Robbie Gramer. "Trump and Allies Seek End to Refugee Status for Millions of Palestinians." *Foreign Policy*, August 3, 2018, <https://bit.ly/3976bKe> (Accessed on December 3, 2019).

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Liana Brooks-Rubin, “Wither UNRWA?” in *The Palestinian refugee problem: The search for a resolution*, ed. Rex Brynen and Roula El-Rifai (London: Pluto Press, 2014), 64.

¹⁰ United Nations, UNRWA Newsroom, Immense Support for the Renewal of the UNRWA Mandate at the UN General Assembly. 16 December 2019, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/immense-support-renewal-unrwa-mandate-un-general-assembly>

¹¹ United States Government, White House, *Peace to Prosperity*, January 2020, Washington, DC. Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperty/>

echoed Israel's formal position under Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and reversed the Americans' long-running self-appointed role as a 'neutral' mediator in the peace talks that launched in Madrid and Oslo in the early 1990s between Israelis and Palestinians.¹²

2. Research Question

The question that compelled this research was whether or not the vote at the United Nations General Assembly reflected some sort of autonomy on the part of UNRWA or perhaps it was simply good fortune that the international community, including major European states, was signaling a rejection of the Trump administration's unilateral actions. To examine this as well as the reasons behind this overwhelmingly pro-UNRWA vote, this thesis will challenge the narrative that depicts UNRWA as an institution that lacks its own identity and as purely a tool of another party, whether it be Israel, Palestinians, or the US, and it will instead reframe the discussion around UNRWA using the latter's own terms. As such, I argue that as an international organization, UNRWA was able to carve a place for itself as an autonomous actor that has managed to defy and outlive the growing political 'limitations' imposed on its mandate by UN Member States, and in particular the US. In

¹² On the eve of election day in Israel in September 2019, Netanyahu pledged in public that he will not recognize Palestinians' right of return to their homeland if re-elected, I quote "I said that no one will be uprooted, I won't recognize the [Palestinian] right of return and I said that Jerusalem must remain united. All these things were said", retrieved from <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/netanyahu-tells-army-radio-kiryat-arba-will-be-annexed-into-israel-601824>. Moreover, relinquishing the Palestinian refugees' right of return has always been a cornerstone in Netanyahu's policy. In a speech at the Knesset Special session in 2009, Netanyahu stated that regarding the Palestinian issue, "The first one is the demand that the State of Israel be recognized as a Jewish state. This includes relinquishing any claim to a right of return – code for the destruction of the State of Israel – and an end to all other claims. This will guarantee that peace is genuine and not just a tactic to continue fighting." Retrieved from <https://mfa.gov.il/MFA/PressRoom/2009/Pages/PM-Netanyahu-addresses-%20Knesset-Special-Session-23-Dec-2009.aspx>

doing so, I will use Reinalda and Verbeek's definition of autonomy which refers to an international organization's ability to propose policies that are closer to its own interests than to those of the Member States.¹³ This line of thought enables me to deduce whether the organization has acted in an autonomous, or more specifically, 'resilient' way at the specific moments of interpretation when the American threat to withdraw funding was first made and later when it was carried out. Resilience in this thesis refers to alternative and preemptive tactics that UNRWA resorts to in order to guarantee the continuation of its operations against the expressed will of its biggest donor, the US.

Taking this research inquiry as my starting point, and focusing on UNRWA's endurance in the face of the recent US attacks, I suggest that UNRWA can be viewed as an autonomous agent and so I am interested in exploring the following main question: How does UNRWA's autonomy contribute to its survival against the recent threats made by the United States? A sub-question that is also relevant to this thesis is: To what extent do the internal measures taken by UNRWA in response to political attacks on its existence reflect the institutional resilience of the organization? By answering these questions, this thesis aims to examine the shift in the dynamics of the UNRWA-US relationship, and hence formulate a better understanding of how UNRWA's institutional response has allowed it to defend itself against the attacks from the Trump administration.

All of the above is indeed framed within the larger geopolitics of the question of Palestine, and in particular, UNRWA's evolving relations with the US and presently the Trump administration. It is impossible, thereby, to understand UNRWA politically as an

¹³ Bob Reinalda and Bertjan Verbeek. *Autonomous Policy Making by International Organizations*. vol. 5., (London: Routledge, 1998), 3.

autonomous actor without examining its changing relations with the US who was the driving force behind its creation in the first place, and who has today reversed its 70-year old policy of support for the organization and has decided to effectively kill it.

3. Significance

The broader discussion on international organizations that this thesis seeks to contribute to is the debate over the autonomy and resilience of an international actor in world politics, and that is beyond the shackles of state-centric approaches. Despite being a rich subject of inquiry in academic circles, very little is found in the literature on the autonomy and role of UNRWA as a significant and self-governing player in international politics. There is, conversely, an abundance of research on UNRWA's core programs,¹⁴ while most literature on the organization's history and administrative structure is outdated.¹⁵

Several major players have impacted the work of UNRWA – mainly Member States such as the US, the European Union and other key stakeholders like the Palestinian leadership – and each one has pulled the agency's strings to force it to take actions that serve their own best interests. But amidst all of this, there was a body of staff within UNRWA striving to defend the organization's mission against attempts to undermine it, and struggling to prioritize their commitment to the welfare of Palestinian refugees over all

¹⁴ See Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik, *The UNRWA Archives on Palestinian Refugees: A Feasibility Study for Policy and Applied Research*, (Jerusalem: Institute for Palestine Studies, 1996); also see Henri Rueff, Alain Viaro and Philipp Misselwitz, Sari Hanafi's contributions in the special edition of *Refugee Survey Quarterly on the Agency*.

¹⁵ Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Lex Takkenberg, eds. *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development*. (Routledge, 2014), p.2.

political considerations. It is this gap in literature on UNRWA that overlooks the authority and ability of the organization itself, in particular its leadership, to have a say in shaping its own future that this thesis seeks to fill.

B. Literature Review

The literature section is made up of four parts. In order to locate and identify UNRWA's intrinsic autonomy which I argue has contributed to the organization's survival, I will briefly contextualize and introduce in the first part the scope and nature of UNRWA's work in its fields of operation. In the second part, and in order to account for the latest existential threat on UNRWA, and thus understand the impact of the US withdrawal of funding on the organization's institutional adaptation, I will examine UNRWA's relationship with the United States. In the third part, and as this thesis assumes that there is a margin of autonomy for UNRWA, I will discuss the concept of autonomy in the context of international organizations. To do so, I will explore the question of international organizations and the extent of their agency as autonomous actors within world politics, or, in other words, the 'agency of the Agency', which is UNRWA in this case. Autonomy as previously stated pertains to an international organization's ability to carry out measures that serve its own interests rather than those of the Members States. Building on UNRWA's changes in autonomous policy making, and especially its recent reaction to the US's withdrawal of funds where its Commissioner-General decided to appeal to other countries and sources as an alternative solution to bridge the funding gap, this thesis explores the considerable policy discretion that UNRWA enjoys. It uses on the one hand the principal-

agent theory to analyze the boundaries imposed by the US on UNRWA and which the latter still takes into consideration even after the elimination of US funding, and on the other hand it employs the sociological approach which allows it to open up the “black box” of the organization and look to the inside interactions taking place and that, I contend, contributed to building up UNRWA’s capacity to recover after every blow. This ability to adapt and recover is what this thesis designates as UNRWA’s ‘resilience’, which will be discussed in the fourth part.

At the end of this section, this chapter will have developed an institutional and ontological framework within which to look at UNRWA throughout this thesis.

1. UNRWA: An ‘Apolitical’ Organization in a Highly Politicized Environment

The year 1948 saw a fundamental transformation in the social, political, demographic and economic fabric of the Middle East. More than a three-quarters of a million people, representing 50% of the indigenous Arab population, were violently expelled from Palestine by the Zionist forces in order to make way for the establishment of the state of Israel on May 14, 1948. Turned overnight into refugees in neighboring Arab countries (Figure 1), most Palestinians found themselves in desperate situations that they soon realized would not be short-lived.

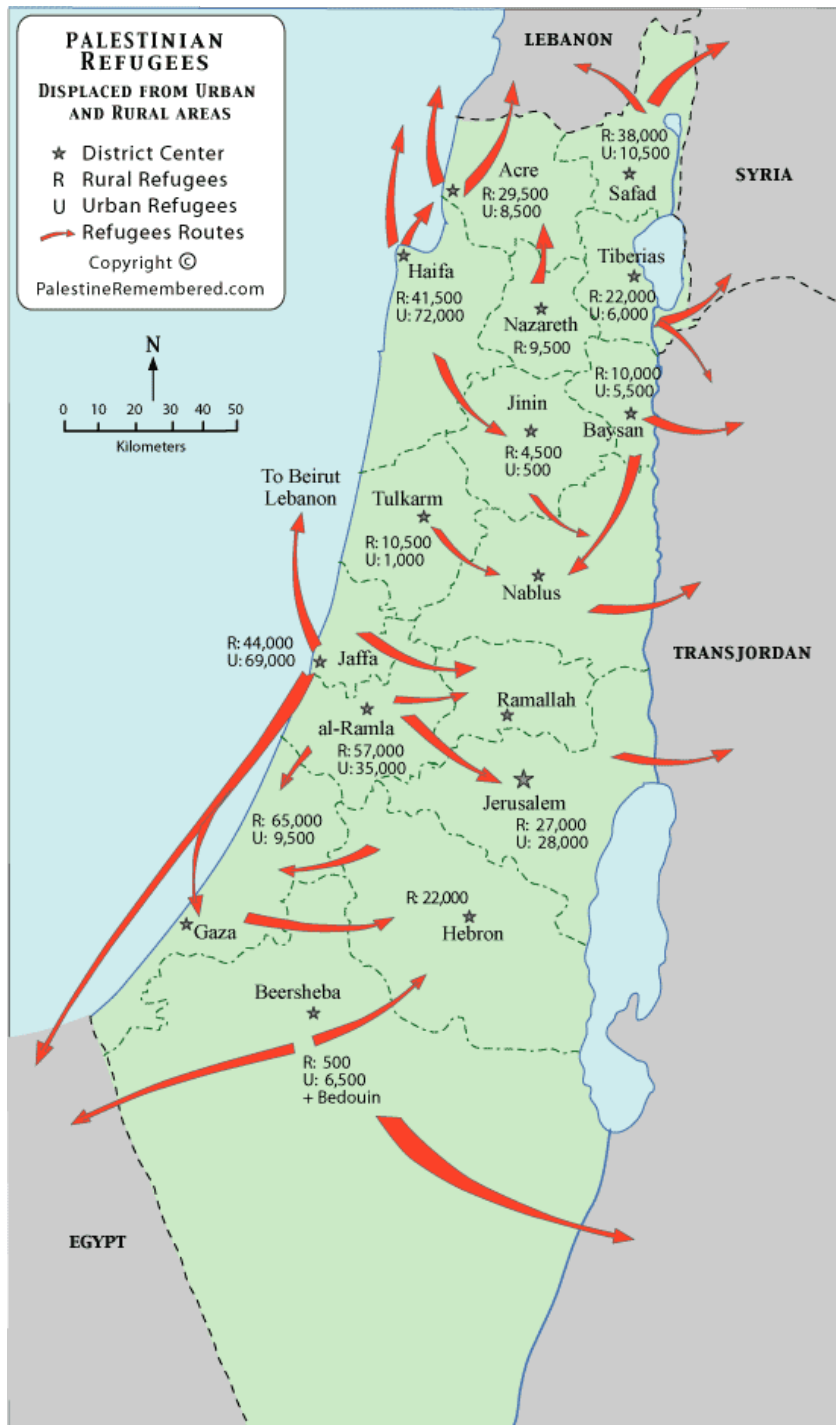


Figure 1: Palestinian Refugees' Migration Routes During Nakba in 1948 ¹⁶

¹⁶ "Palestinian Refugees' Migration Routes During Nakba In 1948", 10 September 2001, <https://www.palestineremembered.com/Acre/Maps/Story578.html>

Palestinian refugees, unable to provide for themselves, became a source of concern to the international community that, spearheaded by the US and the UK, launched a relief campaign to aid them.¹⁷ The temporary structure of the aid scheme that was in place became impractical as soon as the international community came to the realization that a solution to the refugee problem was no longer achievable in the foreseeable future. As a result, the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees, which had served as the umbrella structure for private voluntary organizations that were tasked to carry out relief efforts with Palestine refugees in 1948, was dismantled in late 1949 and its tasks were transferred to the newly-founded United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). By authority of the United Nations General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV), UNRWA has served as the primary provider of healthcare, education, and other humanitarian and development services to the millions of Palestinian refugees living in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria, until the time comes “when international assistance for relief and works projects is no longer available”.¹⁸ Today, the organization runs 59 camps distributed along its five fields of work (Figure 2).

¹⁷ Simon A. Waldman, *Anglo-American Diplomacy and the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1948–51*. (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), 40.

¹⁸ General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), Assistance to Palestine Refugees, A/RES/302 (IV) (8 December 1949), available from <https://www.unrwa.org/content/general-assembly-resolution-302>.

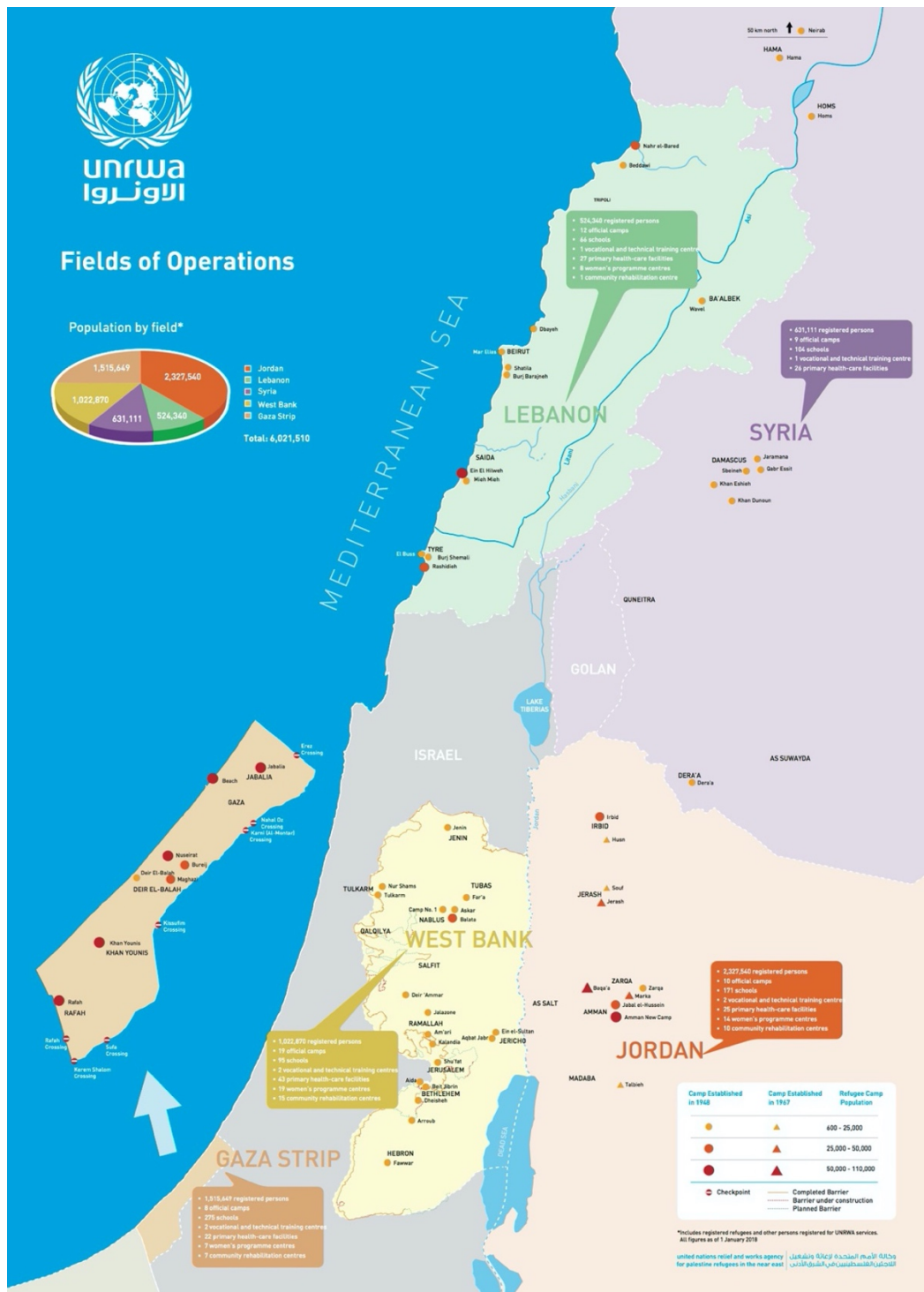


Figure 2: UNRWA Fields of Operations Map 2018¹⁹

¹⁹ UNRWA Fields of Operations Map 2018, 6 February 2019, available from <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/about-unrwa/unrwa-fields-operations-map-2018>

As per its founding resolution, UNRWA was to confer with the host countries – who retain substantial control over the organization’s activities, as the latter is required to “consult with each near Eastern Government concerned in the selection, planning and execution of projects”²⁰ – on measures to take to reduce the need for international assistance. Over time, the Agency’s role has evolved to incorporate developmental and protection programs as well,²¹ and unlike other international organizations, UNRWA directly implements and runs its own programs,²² which has allowed it to establish an immediate and sustainable relationship with its ‘clients’. Financially, while the General Assembly covers the salaries of UNRWA’s professional staff members, the vast bulk of the requirements are sustained outside of the UN’s general budget through voluntary contributions from UN members, a process that gives key donor states considerable influence over the organization.

As early as the 1960s, however, UNRWA started experiencing financial and political challenges that have threatened its sustainability and *raison d’être*. But the organization’s biggest funding source and the main driving force behind its creation,²³ the

²⁰ General Assembly resolution 302 (IV), “Assistance to Palestine Refugees”, Paragraph 8, A/RES/302 (IV), 8 December 1949, available from <https://www.unrwa.org/content/general-assembly-resolution-302>.

²¹ Leila Hilal, "Business as usual? The role of UNRWA in resolving the Palestinian refugee issue", in *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees: From Relief and Works to Human Development*, ed. Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Alex Takkenberg (London: Routledge, 2014), 284.

²² Jalal Al Hussein and Riccardo Bocco. "The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: The Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28.2-3 (2009): 268.

²³ In *Anglo-American Diplomacy and the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1948–51*, Simon Waldman outlines the US and British concerted efforts to respond to the refugee crisis that ensued as part of the 1948 creation of Israel, and showcases the enormous effort put by the US then to establish the agency, starting with the creation of UNRPR (Relief for Palestine Refugees), see p. 16-17 & p.166 – 185. Also, the memorandum by the Coordinator on Palestine Refugee Matters (McGhee) to the Secretary of State on March 15, 1949, articulates the strong connection between the liquidation of the refugee problem and the fulfillment of the US interests, see <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v06/d533>. In addition, Benjamin Schiff in *Refugees unto the third generation: UN aid to Palestinians*, p. 4, stresses the American heavy investment in creating UNRWA.

United States, continued to consider the organization to be of paramount importance.²⁴ US officials in the 1950s predicted that the refugee “problem” would persist for at least 15 years following the implementation of any of the proposed solutions, hence, they saw an integral need for UNRWA.

2. UNRWA’s relationship with the United States of America

With a British and American support, the Jewish immigration to Palestine increased exponentially leading up to the creation of the state of Israel in May 1948. The subsequent refugee crisis that emerged compelled the US and Britain to lead a relief initiative in response to the rising numbers of Palestinian refugees. In his book *Anglo-American Diplomacy and the Palestinian Refugee Problem*, Waldman cites the US Special Assistant to the UN Affairs Director Dean Rusk, Robert M. McLintock, when he said in a memorandum in 1948:

*I do not care a dried camel’s hump [about the refugees]. It is, however, important to the interests of this country that these fanatical and over-wrought people do not injure our strategic interests through reprisals against our oil investments and through the recision [sic] of our air base rights in that area.*²⁵

Although assisting refugees was a calculated tactic that sought to secure their interests in the region, both colonial powers dealt with the issue in “humanitarian” terms and overlooked its political character, thus pushing their own interests rather than the local interests in the region, primarily so in fear that the refugee crisis would jeopardize their

²⁴ April R. Summi, "Perspectives on Power: John F. Kennedy and U.S.-Middle East Relations." PhD diss., Western Michigan University, 2002. <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/dissertations/1307>

²⁵ Waldman, *Anglo-American Diplomacy*, 41.

strategic investments in the region, and in an attempt to ease the Arab anger for their role in the Palestinian Nakba.²⁶ This approach resulted in the refugees being reduced to merely economic subjects yearning for survival, without any consideration for their political rights and concerns. Furthermore, the US insisted at the time on distancing the UN from any “legal responsibility for refugee relief”,²⁷ and preferred that the issue stayed within the premises of the General Assembly first and foremost, and described this relief effort as being “a question involving humanitarian as well as political elements which would have to be met on an ad hoc basis without establishing a precedent for similar United Nations action in other cases”.²⁸

Yet all of this began to change when the peace talks between Palestinians and Israelis got underway in early 1990s. The US, particularly the Congress, made use of the opportunity to launch serious attacks against, and call for imposing restrictions on UNRWA.²⁹ In consequence, America reduced its contribution to the organization below an adequate level,³⁰ and being the largest single-state donor to the UN agency, this gave it the upper hand when discussing the latter’s priorities and course of action at the UN.³¹ After

²⁶ Ibid., 41.

²⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa, Volume VI*, eds. McGhee and Webb (Washington), Document 533.
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1949v06/d533>

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Giora Goodman, ““Operation Exodus”: Israeli government involvement in the production of Otto Preminger’s Film Exodus (1960)”, *Journal of Israeli History*, 33:2, (2014): 209-229, DOI: 10.1080/13531042.2014.946301; also check the following which keeps track of all Congress attacks on UNRWA: “Congressional Attacks on UNRWA: A History”, *Foundation For Middle East Peace*. 10 August 2018, <https://fmep.org/resource/congressional-attacks-unrwa-history/>

³⁰ Jalal Al Hussein, "The Arab States and the refugee issue: a retrospective view." *Israel and the Palestinian refugees*. (Springer, Berlin, Heidelberg, 2007): 462.

³¹ Susan F. Martin and Elizabeth Ferris. "US Leadership and the International Refugee Regime." *Refuge: Canada's journal on refugees* 33.1 (2017): 26.

years of increased criticism post-Oslo, by the late 1990s Congress had begun demanding that a long list of conditions must be met in order for UNRWA to continue to receive American funding.³²

When the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis started, the US followed a policy that vehemently opposed Palestinian self-determination and deconstructed the question of Palestine into several components that were dealt with separately, thus undermining the collective sense of a single Palestinian nation.³³ The succeeding US presidents all showed strong commitment to this policy throughout the different phases of peace negotiation. President Bill Clinton was the first American president to act as the chief mediator in the Palestine-Israel conflict, and promoting peace in the Middle East was the main presidential legacy he wanted to leave behind after serving his two terms.³⁴ Most notably, Clinton facilitated the Oslo Accords that were signed in 1993, and that left the fate of refugees open to negotiation. In the lead up to the signing, however, Clinton asserted that Israel has no obligation to return Palestinian refugees who were forcibly expelled from their lands in 1948.³⁵ But under his successor George W. Bush, the US administration tried as much as possible to distance itself from the negotiation process and to dissociate from Clinton's proposals; however, the September 11 attacks shifted Bush's position as he

³² Jim Zanotti, "US foreign aid to the Palestinians." Library of Congress, Congressional Research Service, (2012), 22.

³³ Abu-Lughod, Ibrahim. "America's Palestine Policy." *Arab Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1/2 (1990): 191.

³⁴ William B. Quandt, "Clinton and the Arab-Israeli Conflict: The Limits of Incrementalism." *Journal of Palestine Studies* 30, no. 2 (2001): 26.

³⁵ Stephen Zunes, "The United States and the Breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process." *Middle East Policy*, Vol. 8, no. 4 (2001): 72.

became ready to assume an “active” role in the Middle East.³⁶ He thus introduced his ‘Roadmap to Peace’ in June 2002, and during the negotiation process he stated very frankly in a correspondence with the then-Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon that refugees will not be allowed to return to their original homelands.³⁷ Despite his promise, Bush later announced that the final status issues, including refugees, will not be predetermined and instead should be negotiated between the relevant parties.³⁸ Barack Obama’s tenure, on the other hand, marks an era when the American administration was more of a bystander in the Palestine-Israel conflict.³⁹ As Obama side-stepped Palestine as a secondary issue on his administration’s agenda, the fates of Palestinian refugees as well as UNRWA were left stranded. Needless to say, all rounds of peace talks facilitated by the US ended with utter failure.

This series of developments that helped set the stage for the current US foreign policy towards the UN Agency for Palestine refugees, provides a background for understanding the US limitations that UNRWA abides by.

³⁶ Anat Niv-Solomon, "Chasing the Holy Grail of Mediation: US Efforts to Mediate the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process since 1993." *International Negotiation*, Vol 24, no. 3 (2019): 443.

³⁷ In a correspondence with Ariel Sharon, Bush wrote: “*It seems clear that an agreed, just, fair and realistic framework for a solution to the Palestinian refugee issue as part of any final status agreement will need to be found through the establishment of a Palestinian state, and the settling of Palestinian refugees there, rather than in Israel.*” Available from: Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, *Letter from US President George W. Bush to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon*, 14 April 2004.
<https://www.mfa.gov.il/mfa/foreignpolicy/peace/mfadocuments/pages/exchange%20of%20letters%20sharon-bush%2014-apr-2004.aspx>

³⁸ Daniel C. Kurtzer et al., *The Peace Puzzle : America's Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace, 1989–2011*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2012), 184.

³⁹ Geoffrey Aronson, "Policy Options in a Time of Transition: The US and the Israel-Palestine Conflict." *Middle East Journal* 67, no. 2 (2013): 249.

3. Autonomous International Organizations in IR Scholarship

This thesis aims to understand the internal strengths and capacities of the non-state actor, UNRWA, and which I contend have played a crucial role in helping the organization to continue to exist and operate beyond the firm control of its Member States. For this reason, this section will map the theories that will allow me to study the changes in the internal policies of UNRWA as well as the role that the organization's leadership played in response to exogenous attacks on its operations.

While realism is important to acknowledging power as the most important element in international relations, it falls short of understanding and exploring the influence of international organizations such as UNRWA, since it mainly views them as actors who are politically insignificant and who exist to serve the interests of the great powers.⁴⁰ By the same token, neoliberal institutionalism views international organizations as structures, rather than purposive agents, through which states act to further their interests and solve their own problems.⁴¹ Yet, this theory shows more tolerance to the idea of inter-state cooperation and, by extension, the role that international organizations can play in facilitating such cooperation in a way that realism does not do.⁴² But since this thesis seeks to go beyond power analysis and inter-state cooperation and sets out to investigate the internal workings of UNRWA, neither neorealism nor neo-liberal institutionalism will be

⁴⁰ See Barnett and Finnemore. "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations": 704; J. A Verbeek, "International organizations: the ugly duckling of international relations theory." *Autonomous Policymaking by International Organizations*. Routledge, (1998); John J. Mearsheimer, "The false promise of international institutions." *International security* 19.3 (1994); and J.M Grieco, *Cooperation among nations. Europe, North America, and non-tariff barriers to trade*, (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990).

⁴¹ Barnett and Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies": 700.

⁴² Robert Powell, "Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist - Neoliberal Debate." *International Organization*, vol. 48, no. 2, (1994): 320.

useful for this, as both explain international organizations as “empty shells or impersonal policy machinery” that are shaped and manipulated by the political bargains of states.⁴³

Alternatively, constructivism will be particularly suitable for the study of UNRWA as an autonomous actor, for the reasons stated below.

Constructivists build on Max Weber’s theory on ‘rational-legal authority’ to acknowledge the power and agency of international organizations, which is what this thesis seeks to do with UNRWA. Rational-legal authority is practiced in bureaucracies where a formal set of rules grounded in “rationally established norms” is in place, and where “a belief in the legality of enacted rules and the right of those elevated to authority under such rules to issue commands” is established.⁴⁴ Constructivism, hence, challenges the microeconomic approach of realism and neo-liberal institutionalism to international politics, and adopts a sociological outlook to international political life through which it gives a key role to the social dimension of the interests and preferences of actors.⁴⁵ These interests and preferences are considered to be dependent firstly on the social context in which they take place, such as norms and codes of conduct, and secondly on the identities of the relevant actors. In this way, an international organization, in a constructivist sense, is made up of a “relatively stable set of identities and interests” that are constructed socially.⁴⁶

⁴³ Barnett and Finnemore. "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies": 704; Also see Robert Powell, "Anarchy in International Relations Theory: The Neorealist - Neoliberal Debate." *International Organization*, vol. 48, no. 2, (1994): 320 and Robert Keohane, *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1984).

⁴⁴ Max Weber, *Economy and society: An outline of interpretive sociology*. Vol. 1. (Univ of California Press, 1978), 215.

⁴⁵ Ahmed A Salem, *International Relations Theories and International Organizations: Realism, Constructivism, and Collective Security in the League of Arab States*, ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, (2006), 31.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 32; Paul Kowert, “Toward a Constructivist Theory of Foreign Policy”, in *Foreign Policy in a Constructed World*, ed. Vendulka Kubalkova, (London: M. E. Sharpe, 2001), 275.

This line of reasoning pays a particular attention to the ideas and interests as well as the activities of the actors who generate them, and hence serves the objective of this thesis where UNRWA is treated as an autonomous actor, and where the activities of its international staff leading its response in the face of the American measures are assessed.

Building on this, I will tackle in the narration that follows the autonomy of international organizations by using two models that stem mainly from the constructivist theory: the rationalist model, and in particular the principal-agent theory, and the sociological approaches.

a. The Rationalist Model

The principal-agent approach, to start with, is a rationalist international relations theory that is most relevant to this thesis given that it probes the autonomy of international organizations. As an unfolding branch of neoliberal institutionalism, the principal-agent theory understands international organizations as autonomous ‘agents’ who are delegated by Member States, or ‘principals’, and who can make moves that are at times unfavorable to their principals when they are afforded some “leeway.”⁴⁷ Agents are able to bypass their principals in cases when they, for example, get hold of more pertinent information than Member States, thus acquiring more decision-making leverage that is invested in their knowledge.⁴⁸ However, this free leeway given to them under the principal-agent model remains conditioned upon the Member States’ interests, which are translated on the ground

⁴⁷ Karim Makdisi and Coralie Pison Hindawi. "Exploring the UN and OPCW Partnership in Syrian Chemical Weapons Disarmament." *Global Governance: A Review of Multilateralism and International Organizations*, vol. 2019; 25; no. 4, (2019): 538.

⁴⁸ Reinalda and Verbeek. *Autonomous Policy Making*, 21.

via ‘control mechanisms’ imposed on international organizations such as reporting, monitoring, and agenda setting.⁴⁹

By applying this logic to the case of UNRWA, this thesis detects an inherent interconnectedness between the organization and Member States, as the latter allocates a big part of its time responding to its ‘principals’ and reporting to them in return for their voluntary donations and in order to keep the money flowing in. In this sense, and since the principal-agent approach accounts for the underlying forces that govern the relationship between UNRWA and its biggest donor, the US, it hence allows for an explanation of the scope of the organization’s response, which I contend takes into consideration the restrictions that UNRWA has to adhere to when dealing with a great power such as the US. This thesis, therefore, will employ the principal-agent model when exploring the options that were available to UNRWA when the US decided to defund it.

However, it is worth noting that despite it being useful to our analysis of UNRWA as a nexus of regional and international power struggle, the principal-agent approach permits little room to examine the internal dynamics and circumstances within UNRWA and that play a vital role in the latter’s institutional autonomy. Also, another substantive drawback is that this theory bases its argument on the fact that international organizations, in their fields of operation, are often predominantly staffed by international personnel who are expected to pursue their home country’s interests.⁵⁰ In UNRWA’s case, however, Palestinians consist the vast bulk of the organization’s staff on the ground, whereas only

⁴⁹ Darren G. Hawkins et al. *Delegation and Agency in International Organizations*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 179, 194.

⁵⁰ Reinalda and Verbeek, *Autonomous Policy Making*, 7.

senior positions are filled by internationals. This split in the organization's staff is incongruous with the conflicting loyalties of the majority of personnel that the principal-agent theory suggests, and the latter thus easily overlooks the pressure that UNRWA's Palestinian staff are able to practice on the organization's international leadership.

With this in mind, I posit that since the US has already halted its funding to UNRWA, then the principal-agent model becomes impractical particularly when trying to understand the opportunity that turned up for UNRWA to do away with the American funding and all the limitations that come with it. There is a good chance that the defunding would allow the organization to have a bigger 'margin' to push its preferences and interests now that the American constraints have diminished, and it is this margin that this paper will explore from a sociological perspective.

b. The Sociological Approach

The sociological arguments employ a 'bottom-up' logic in their explanation of bureaucracies,⁵¹ and hence demonstrate that they are better equipped to analytically examine the autonomous characteristics of an international organization than the principal-agent theory. And being an institutional variant of non-state-centric constructivism, the sociological theories go as far as to highlight an international organization's independent activities and "emphasize norms and principles in international politics."⁵² These approaches understand bureaucracies as "social facts" that yield authority and influence

⁵¹ Daniel L. Nielson, Michael J. Tierney, and Catherine E. Weaver. "Bridging the rationalist-constructivist divide: re-engineering the culture of the World Bank." *Journal of International Relations and Development* 9, no. 2 (2006): 107.

⁵² Salem, *International Relations Theories*, 30-31.

over world politics and that develop their own agendas,⁵³ and they do so through acquiring power derived from two factors: (1) the legitimacy of their ‘impersonal’ rational-legal authority that is vested in legal obligations, procedures, and regulations; and (2) the authority of the information they possess.⁵⁴ In other words, international organizations do more than just confine themselves to the states’ interests and commands; they also exercise power by constructing the social world when they create new actors and generate new interests and social purpose.⁵⁵

In this sense, and while sociological approaches treat international organizations as autonomous and purposive actors that impact world politics, they also allow for an investigation into the role of individuals as actors and decision-makers, and hence give researchers the chance to factor in an organization’s leadership as an element that either leads to more autonomy or reduces the chances for independent decision-making, contingent on the international organization’s level of strength.⁵⁶ In this thesis, I employ the sociological theories because they give me more room to explore sources of autonomy within UNRWA that are worth studying, and by extension they place emphasis on the organization’s role as an active player while toning down the state-centric narratives that often dispossess UNRWA of its agency.

⁵³ Makdisi and Hindawi. "Exploring the UN and OPCW Partnership", 538.

⁵⁴ Barnett and Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies": 707.

⁵⁵ Ibid.: 700, 702.

⁵⁶ Reinalda and Verbeek, *Autonomous Policy Making*, 59.

4. What Does Institutional Resilience Mean?

This part explores the literature on institutional resilience, which is a relevant concept that I employ to identify the criteria that make UNRWA a resilient institution. This step comes to analyze my findings after I employ the sociological and principal-agent theories to gain access to the internal workings of UNRWA. In particular, I use the resilience approach to make better sense of the internal and external dynamics within the organization at instances of disturbances, and that is through understanding the social processes as well as the adaptive capacity and forms of governance of UNRWA.⁵⁷

Several definitions of resilience have been advanced by different disciplines, most notably psychology and ecology. Psychologists usually refer to resilience in the context of a positive adaptation by individuals to hardships or adverse events,⁵⁸ while ecologists and biologists, for their part, define resilience as

*The ability of a social or ecological system to absorb disturbances while retaining the same basic structure and ways of functioning, the capacity for self-organization, and the capacity to adapt to stress and change.*⁵⁹

Inspired by the aforementioned interpretations, the multifaceted and highly political concept of resilience was brought into the field of international relations to examine four

⁵⁷ T. Dietz, E. Ostrom, and P. Stern, "The Struggle to Govern the Commons". *Science*, no. 302 (2003); C. Folke, T. Hahn, P. Olsson, J. Norberg, "Adaptive governance of social-ecological systems". *Annual Review of Environment and Resources*, no. 30 (2005).

⁵⁸ M. D. Seery, A. E. Holman and R. C. Silver "Whatever Does Not Kill Us: Cumulative Lifetime Adversity, Vulnerability, and Resilience." *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, no. 99(6) (2010); Norman Garmezy, "The Study of Competence in Children at Risk for Severe Psychopathology", (1974); John Bowlby and Institute of Psycho-analysis, *Attachment and Loss*. Vol. no. 79, 95, 109. (London: Health Press, 1969).

⁵⁹ Mark Pelling, *Adaptation to Climate Change: From Resilience to Transformation*. (London: Routledge Ltd, 2011), 55.

main domains in world politics: (1) resilience in the face of economic liberalization;⁶⁰ (2) positive adaptation of individuals and communities in cases of wars, disasters, and conflicts;⁶¹ (3) community preparedness in the contexts of terrorism and counterterrorism;⁶² and lastly (4) ‘social resilience’ in the face of challenges provoked by neoliberalism.⁶³ In response, however, Philippe Bourbeau contended that these contributions on the interconnectedness between IR and resilience are incomplete since they do not account for the negative impact of the concept nor do they consider the dynamic and multilayered nature of it in a complex social world. Instead, scholars of IR have treated resilience as an “all-or-nothing concept”, or in other words, an institution, individual, or community can either be resilient or fragile.⁶⁴

Following Bourbeau’s observations, I assert that UNRWA’s survival shows the positive side of resilience as the organization continues to be needed by Palestinian refugees and host governments. However, an infinite lifetime of an aid scheme as embodied by UNRWA hurts the Palestinian refugees’ capacity to self-organize and become a self-

⁶⁰ See Yan Kong, T. (2006). 'Globalization and Labour Market Reform: Patterns of Response in Northeast Asia.' *British Journal of Political Science* 36(2): 359-383; Ross Schneider, B. (2008). 'Economic Liberalization and Corporate Governance: The Resilience of Business Groups in Latin.' *Comparative Politics* 40(4): 379-397.

⁶¹ See Davies, D. E. (2012). *Urban Resilience in Situations of Chronic Violence*. Final Report. Cambridge, MA, United States Agency for International Development and MIT Center for International Studies; Williams, P. D. (2013). 'Protection, Resilience and Empowerment: United Nations Peacekeeping and Violence against Civilians in Contemporary War Zones.' *Politics* 33(4): 287-298.

⁶² See Schoon, I. (2006). *Risk and Resilience*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press; Coaffee, J. and D. Murakami Wood (2006). 'Security is Coming Home: Rethinking Scale and Constructing Resilience in the Global Urban Response to Terrorist Risk.' *International Relations* 20(4): 503-517

⁶³ See Hall, Peter A., and Michèle Lamont, editors. *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*. Cambridge University Press, 2013; Duffield, M. (2012). 'Challenging Environments: Danger, Resilience and the Aid Industry.' *Security Dialogue* 43(5): 475-492; Chandler, D. (2012). 'Resilience and human security: The post-interventionist paradigm.' *Security Dialogue* 43(3): 213-229; Evans, Brad, and Julian Reid. "Dangerously exposed: The life and death of the resilient subject." *Resilience* 1.2 (2013): 83-98.

⁶⁴ Philippe Bourbeau, "Resilience and International Politics: Premises, Debates, Agenda." *International Studies Review*, vol. 17, no. 3, (2015): 378.

sufficient community, and it confines them to a static condition where they will always be a people “in need”. That being said, this thesis will not venture into evaluating the quality of resilience, it will rather track down the process of “resilience-as-maintenance” within UNRWA, which refers to an ongoing practice that allows the organization to constantly develop preemptive measures in the face of potential disturbances.⁶⁵ Hence, by studying the period between January 2018 when the threat to stop funding was first made by the US, and August of that year when the defunding was irrevocably realized, I maintain that UNRWA was preparing for the worst and that it was engaged in developing preemptive measures to counter the unavoidable.

However, the question remains: how can one tell if UNRWA’s response qualifies as resilient or not? Does the mere ‘survival’ of the organization count as resilience? Or can the preemptive measures abovementioned that UNRWA develops in preparation for a challenging scenario be considered proper criteria for the organization’s resilience, and that I will consequently need to identify? As proposed in existing analysis in the literature, there are characteristics for a resilient behavior. Barany and Rauchhaus, for instance, contend that the enlargement of operations and the widening of the scope of work of the North Atlantic Alliance (NATO) are factors that make the organization resilient. They analyze the Atlantic alliance’s successful empirical record by examining specifically two IR-related areas: the NATO’s membership enlargement, and the development of out-of-area operations in the post-Cold War era.⁶⁶ Other scholars suggest that securing favorable

⁶⁵ Philippe Bourbeau, 'Resiliencism: Premises and promises in securitization research.' *Resilience: International Policies, Practices and Discourses*, 1(1) (2013): 3-17.

⁶⁶ Zoltan Barany & Robert Rauchhaus, “Explaining NATO's Resilience: Is International Relations Theory Useful?”, *Contemporary Security Policy*, 32:2 (2011): 286-307.

outcomes – in UNRWA’s case this entails the simple survival of the organization against increased calls to dismantle it – when an organization finds itself in unfavorable circumstances is also considered a sign of resilience.⁶⁷ Marcos Ancelovici, on his part, sets the following conditions for an organization to qualify as resilient in his comparative study of two French labor organizations: (1) a heterogeneous cultural repertoire defined by a flexible policy and decision making process, which translates into an institutional ability to adapt through devising new solutions and strategies; and (2) an organizational structure defined by an autonomous and centralized leadership that is able to implement and institutionalize a certain strategy.⁶⁸ It is this latter point on the role of an organization’s leadership that I plan to delve into in my thesis.

But given that there are different routes to follow depending on the senior officials who design and lead the response of UNRWA, this thesis adopts Bourbeau’s proposition to establish a dynamic nature for resilience that does not define it as either a positive or a negative notion, but rather as “a socio-historically informed, dynamic, and varied process” that is constantly evolving in nature and that is contingent on the case or shock – be it endogenous or exogenous – to which it responds.⁶⁹ In other words, this thesis refrains from adopting any preconceived criteria that prove a resilient character of the organization at a specific moment, and instead it follows the contextual contingency that Bourbeau suggests to argue that, in the case of UNRWA, merely surviving can qualify as resilience. In this

⁶⁷ Peter A. Hall and Michèle Lamont, eds. *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 13.

⁶⁸ Marcos Ancelovici, “The Origins and Dynamics of Organizational Resilience”, eds., *Social Resilience in the Neoliberal Era*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 347-348.

⁶⁹ Bourbeau, “Resilience and International Politics”: 376.

sense, UNRWA's resilience cannot be studied at the level of the institution, since UNRWA can show resilience in certain contexts but not in others. In this sense, I will examine the Agency's responses at the two inescapable moments of interpretation in January and August 2018 where the organization was grappling with shocks, and that is in an attempt to decide whether the organization acted in a resilient way or not at those specific moments in its lifetime.

C. Methods

The research design is two-fold. First, a desk review of secondary sources was performed on selected literature such as books, academic journals, recent news articles that report on statements and measures taken by the agency in response to the latest attack on its entity, in addition to public statements and interviews. Second, semi-structured informal interviews was held with two individuals:⁷⁰ one high-level UNRWA employee who preferred to remain anonymous, and a consultant for the Swedish foreign ministry on the issue of Palestine. In my interviews, I intended to understand how decisions are made at the higher level of UNRWA and other stakeholders at times of attacks on the Agency's existence, and what factors influence the decision-making process, and how. In this sense, I wanted to determine what UNRWA perceived as a threat and how it defined an "attack" on its entity and legitimacy. I also examined the counter-attack measures that UNRWA has brought into play to face the latest challenge brought on by Trump and his team.

⁷⁰ I submitted my IRB application with the intention of conducting more interviews, but due to the late response from the IRB office, I ended up with only two informal interviews.

Equally important, I must acknowledge that my own personal experiences as a Palestinian refugee in Lebanon affect my approach to this topic, as a lot of insights I employ in this paper are drawn from my own personal involvement in and informal discussions among my fellow Palestinians peers. In particular, and owing to the fact that I have acquaintances within UNRWA at the local level, I am inclined to give more weight to the pressure that the Palestinian staff are able to exert on the international leadership of the Agency, and that gears UNRWA in a certain direction that could end up being more suitable to the Palestinian refugee population than Member States.

Along those lines, and as UNRWA operationally defines Palestine refugees as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict”⁷¹, I choose in this thesis to adopt Michael Dumper’s definition of a refugee where he says:

One needs to recognize that, whatever the legal definition, in terms of political action, it is the self-perception of being displaced or being a refugee that is important to the people concerned and which should be taken into account.”⁷²

Finally, and before proceeding into the substance of this study, it is important to clarify the choice of some terms, as terminology in the case of Palestinian refugees is of utmost importance. This study does not claim to scrutinize the Palestine-related terms that are conventionally used in academic circles, however, it does point out misconceptions formed due to the unfiltered use of certain designations. In our case, this paper does not

⁷¹ For more information, visit www.un.org/unrwa.

⁷² Michael Dumper, ed. *Palestinian refugee repatriation: global perspectives*. (London: Routledge, 2006), 7.

refer to Palestinian refugees as a “problem”, as most studies effortlessly do, but rather as a byproduct of the actual problem, that is the Israeli settler-colonial project. Also, the “right of return” is treated as synonymous to the “refugee issue” in a lot of the literature, which in its turn is used interchangeably with UNRWA, as is evident in the 181-page of the so-called ‘Deal of the Century’. In this study, I would like to set a clear dividing line between the future of UNRWA and that of the refugees, and by extension between the right of return and UNRWA, since that analogy is by itself a political burden thrown upon the agency with no justification.

D. Thesis Structure

This paper is a study of the institutional resilience that UNRWA has grown in the face of exogenous attacks on its legitimacy, and in it I seek to make sense of the way in which the organization responded to the latest attack by the Trump administration to effectively dismantle the organization, in an attempt to get a grasp of the ‘defense tools’ that UNRWA has at its disposal.

The research is divided in four parts. Chapter 1 offers a quick background on the current developments with respect to UNRWA. It also presents the research questions, methods used, and the chapters’ structure in the thesis. Moreover, this chapter studies UNRWA as an institutional structure by using the principal-agent and sociological theories, where it outlines the main players and distinctive features that characterize UNRWA. Chapter 2 analyzes UNRWA’s institutionalism and shows how UNRWA enjoys policy discretion and is not merely an agent for the great powers. It examines the foundational

elements that have contributed to UNRWA's autonomous character, and that is through focusing in on one particularly consequential case from the organization's history. Chapter 3 analyzes the changes in the international political system and outlines the characteristics of the contemporary world order, in an attempt to provide an examination of the contested multilateral background against which UNRWA produced an action plan to answer to the new American approach advanced by the Trump administration. Chapter 4, meanwhile, examines the distinct political role that UNRWA played when it adopted a political narrative and took part in the political debate around its existence, and that is in order to ensure its own survival. This political capacity opened up a window for UNRWA – at the behest of its Commissioner General – to position itself at the intersection of the various players, including the multilateral system led by the European Union, the Islamic World headed by the Gulf States, and finally the Global South. The conclusion, lastly, analyzes the empirical findings of this thesis against the backdrop of the theoretical framework discussed in Chapter 1 which was based on the concepts of organizational autonomy and resilience. Moreover, it examines the position that such an organization occupies - or tries to occupy - in international politics in a manner that ensures its sustainability, and it does so through assessing where UNRWA stands today.

CHAPTER II

THE INSTITUTIONAL SOURCES OF UNRWA'S AUTONOMY

This chapter will examine the foundational elements that have contributed to UNRWA's autonomous character. It will look at the sources of autonomy inherent to UNRWA at the time of its establishment, then will trace the organization's history to highlight the autonomous characteristics that it has developed over time – specifically, at one of the crucial moments in which it struggled to prove its relevance in order to ensure the continuation of its operations. This is not to reject the view that Member States exert heavy influence on the organization, but rather that UNRWA has succeeded in carving out a space for itself to act independently in international politics. This chapter will demonstrate that UNRWA has in certain cases favored the demands of the refugees – which was primarily the result of the calls from the refugees themselves – over the wishes of Member States and other main stakeholders, such as the PLO. Furthermore, this chapter seeks to add to the existing literature on international organizations – especially those that are seen as politicized due to their work with refugees in general, and Palestinian refugees in particular – by emphasizing the role that factors internal to an international organization such as UNRWA play with regards to the survival of the institution.

The first section in this chapter will analyze the elements of UNRWA's autonomy that were both built into the organization and still to this day hold relevance through their ability to justify the organization's mission. The second section will examine the crucial moment in the 1950s when UNRWA successfully played a role in diverting discussions about its at-the-time inevitable termination in 1960 and reorganized itself into an education-

focused organization that aligned with the interests of the international community. By employing sociological and principal-agent theories, we can see that at that temporal milestone in the 1950s, UNRWA developed new elements that added to its existing autonomy and that helped negotiate the organization's relevance in the face of calls to dismantle it. My choice of this particular moment lies in its resemblance to UNRWA's contemporary crisis, where the organization has to deal with the overtly belligerent US foreign policy that seeks to undermine UNRWA's mission and definition of Palestinian refugees. In a similar fashion, in the 1950s UNRWA was questioned for its inability to fulfill the economic purposes for which it was originally established, and was preparing for self-liquidation. Furthermore, the analysis of this chapter will illuminate how UNRWA's autonomous tendencies and independent decision making are rooted in the earliest days of the organization, and it will put us in position to consider, in later chapters, these elements as key players in what I argue to be UNRWA's resilience. Above all, this chapter will argue that UNRWA's internal restructuring in the 1950's provides a clear example of how the organization is capable of undergoing significant changes in response to existential challenges.

A. UNRWA's Inherent Sources of Autonomy

In this section, I analyze the central innate characteristics that have formed an integral part of UNRWA's structure since its creation. I contend that these characteristics granted UNRWA some degree of credibility among Member States and in the UN circles, which enabled it to prioritize its own interests whenever the chance permitted.

1. *Role as a knowledge broker*

Over time, UNRWA has become an increasingly grounded source of information and expertise for the international community. This primarily stemmed from the fact that the organization has been the only authority that collected all types of information on Palestinian refugees, and with time this made it the go-to data source for anything related to the refugee population. As discussed in Chapter 1, both the rationalist model and the sociological approach to international organizations demonstrate that UNRWA's unique hold over information puts it in an uncontested position to make informed decisions with regards to Palestinian refugees. To that effect, the organization secured for itself partial autonomy vis-à-vis the international community as it became capable of promoting its preferred policies on the grounds that it holds "more relevant information... [than Member States]" which allowed it "to exploit differences of opinion" between stakeholders.⁷³ With this "knowledge-broker" attribute as well as its first-hand experience in its fields of operations,⁷⁴ UNRWA became a "de facto expert" on Palestinian refugees and their needs and aspirations, in Michael Dumper's words.⁷⁵ While any international organization dealing with refugees will possess some level of statistical data, UNRWA's unusually high share of the available data on Palestinian refugees brings the organization past a "normal" international organization's function and into the sphere of autonomy. Another distinctive

⁷³ J. A. Verbeek, "International Organizations: The Ugly Duckling of International Relations Theory," in *Autonomous Policymaking by International Organizations* (Routledge, 1998), 21.

⁷⁴ Farrah Nicole Brake, "The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA): An Evolving Autonomous Actor in the International Community" (2013), 76.

⁷⁵ Michael Dumper, *The Future for Palestinian Refugees: Toward Equity and Peace* (Lynne Rienner Publishers, 2007), 132.

aspect to the position of UNRWA as a source of data has been its ability to counteract politically-driven narratives on Palestinian refugees with on-the-ground empirical evidence. It has done so by acting not only as a provider of data and statistics on refugees, but also as an analyst of sensitive issues such as security and social disturbances in the Middle East. Although this role has existed for many years, it has taken on a heightened importance particularly in today's climate where a "war over narrative" exists between the US and what UNRWA stands for.

UNRWA's status as the leading source of information on the refugees from Palestine quickly allowed the organization to gain a considerable amount of leverage. In one of its first steps toward assuming an autonomous role in the region, UNRWA soon after its creation started channeling its knowledge and expertise to serve its own interests as an institution with a life of its own and to promote policies that favor the continuation of its operations among Member States. It participated in drafting reports and policy papers on the refugees situation for major stakeholders and earned a seat at the table of decision making among the major players.

To illustrate with a pertinent example, the US State Department conducted in 1957 a pair of reviews of the Palestine refugee issue to help draft an informed policy towards the matter. The first review from July 1957 based its recommendations on the long-held American position that the refugee situation be dealt with in isolation from "the main body of unresolved Palestine issues and attacked as a thing in itself,"⁷⁶ and as a result of adopting

⁷⁶ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1957, Volume XVII*, eds. Wilcox, Rountree and Herter (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 349.
<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v17/d349>

this position, the report concluded that liquidating UNRWA must be completed by the time its mandate ends in 1960. While this first report incorporated little input from UNRWA's then-director, the second report, known as the Villard study (named after its main investigator, Henry S. Villard, who was then-Under Secretary of State's Special Assistant) was released four months later and was based on active participation on the part of the organization's director and extensively cited and quoted UNRWA's annual reports. As a result, it endorsed UNRWA's own approach to the refugee question as one that was "inextricably linked" to the political context of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.⁷⁷ Eventually, UNRWA's contribution became instrumental in laying the foundations for an American vote favorable to an extension of the organization's mandate beyond 1960. The Villard report introduced a new policy proposal to the US State Department that overruled the first report by placing more emphasis on the widespread antagonistic political feeling against Israel within the Arab world, and as a result, recommended that UNRWA continue its operations.

By adopting the Villard report and implicitly shelving the first report, the State Department overturned nearly a decade of US policy that had handled the refugee component as an entirely separate issue from the larger picture of the Palestine-Israel conflict.⁷⁸ It was this latter study that had UNRWA's fingerprints all over it that shaped and guided the US policy toward refugees during that crucial period of the late 1950s.

⁷⁷ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1957, Volume XVII*, eds. Villard (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 407.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v17/d407>

⁷⁸ Ibrahim Abu-Lughod, "America's Palestine Policy," *Arab Studies Quarterly*, 1990, 191.; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1957, Volume XVII*, eds. Wilcox, Rountree and Herter (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 349.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v17/d349>

2. *Employees as beneficiaries*

As UNRWA is in a unique position as an international organization staffed by the same people who benefit from its services, it has an extra incentive to fight for its survival vis-à-vis Member States. UNRWA came to be considered a “quasi-state”, or “Blue-State” in the eyes of the refugee population, although without any coercive political power.⁷⁹ This was largely due to its provision of ‘permanent state-like services,’⁸⁰ such as education, health care, vocational training, social services and human development in its five fields of operation, and also given its status as the biggest employer of refugees⁸¹ as well as the “main depository of data on registered Palestinian refugees.”⁸² Some scholars attribute this quasi-governmental character to the fact that UNRWA brings all refugees in host countries under one umbrella, especially in the continued absence of Palestinian institutions and a Palestinian state, which in turn contributes to the formation of a distinct Palestinian identity.⁸³ Other scholars argue that the quasi-state trait is rooted in the consultation approach that the organization adopts toward its refugee staff on management issues and

⁷⁹ Riccardo Bocco, “UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2009): 234.

⁸⁰ Ronny Patz, Svanhildur Thorvaldsdottir, and Klaus H. Goetz, “International Public Administrations and the Perception of Crisis: The Case of UNRWA and Palestine Refugees,” in *Panel Regional and Global Crisis Management (P317), ECPR General Conference, Oslo, 2017*, 4.

⁸¹ Jalal Al Hussein, “UNRWA: An Agency for the Palestine Refugees?,” in *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations and the Arab World*, ed. Karim Makdisi and Vijay Prashad (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2017), 307; Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, “The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local,” *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2019): 30,35.

⁸² Salim Tamari and Elia Zureik, *Reinterpreting the Historical Record: The Uses of Palestinian Refugee Archives for Social Science Research and Policy Analysis* (Institute of Jerusalem Studies, Jerusalem, IL, 2001), 1.

⁸³ Ghassan Shabaneh, “Refugees, International Organizations, and National Identity: The Case of Palestine,” *New Political Science* 32, no. 2 (2010): 217; Jalal Al-Husseini, “UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000): 53.

service provisions,⁸⁴ and which has seemingly made the refugee staff – who are themselves in a unique position to benefit from the organization – more empowered to campaign for their rights and services.⁸⁵ This empowerment of staff was by default extended to the refugee population who found in UNRWA’s local staff a direct liaison through which they could lobby for their national rights and material needs rights. Consequently, an informal link was set up between UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees through the former’s refugee staff. The additional fact that UNRWA is the only UN body that is strictly dedicated to the welfare of one group of refugees and that implements and runs its programs directly⁸⁶ has allowed the organization to reinforce this immediate relationship with its “clients” and has resulted in a proactive attitude on the part of refugees toward the organization. The refugees, whether approving or rejecting UNRWA policies, have therefore obtained an unconventional power as stakeholders on account of their day-to-day interaction with their primary service provider through their fellow refugee staff.

This direct, if unofficial, link between UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees served the organization in its negotiations with Member States. UNRWA has used the needs and demands of refugees to justify its opposition to some policies imposed upon it by donors, as I will illustrate in the next section of this chapter in relation to the case study from the 1950s where the organization successfully lobbied a shift toward its educational

⁸⁴ Terry Rempel, “From Beneficiary to Stakeholder: An Overview of UNRWA’s Approach to Refugee Participation,” in *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees*, ed. Sari Hanafi, Leila Hilal, and Alex Takkenberg (London: Routledge, 2014), 150.

⁸⁵ Edward Henry Buehrig, *The UN and the Palestinian Refugees: A Study in Nonterritorial Administration* (Indiana University Press, 1971); Al-Husseini, “UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process”; Shabaneh, “Refugees, International Organizations, and National Identity: The Case of Palestine.”

⁸⁶ Jalal Al Hussein and Riccardo Bocco, “The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: The Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2009): 268.

program, as desired by the refugees. Specifically, UNRWA's position on certain policies proposed by the international community is influenced by the fact that the organization is heavily staffed by refugees – who at the same time are its beneficiaries – which lends it a sense of local identity and adds a Palestinian dimension to its work whereby humanitarian principles and needs are defined and re-defined by these same refugees as per their own perception and interpretation of international law.⁸⁷

3. UNRWA's necessity reinforced by an endless conflict

With the often interlinked and overlapping conflicts between regional players in the area where it operates, UNRWA finds itself in a position where its services can always be justified. The regional circumstances have played a major role in renewing the need in the international community for an organization like UNRWA, and have kept the reasons for its establishment alive and relevant to the present day. Moreover, the political context has allowed space for UNRWA to maneuver relatively freely and to prioritize its own interests. Not only does the organization operate in a turbulent and uncertain geopolitical environment, but this turbulence is one of the chief justifications of its existence in the first place, and is entangled in UNRWA's foundational resolution. As per the path-dependency concept that gives weight to the historical context of an organization's creation,⁸⁸ the founding moment of UNRWA is crucial to understanding the original source of organizational autonomy. That moment also rationalized UNRWA's operations by

⁸⁷ Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History," 236–45.

⁸⁸ Lucio Baccaro and Valentina Mele, "Pathology of Path Dependency? The ILO and the Challenge of New Governance," *ILR Review* 65, no. 2 (2012): 218, <https://doi.org/10.1177/001979391206500201>.

organically linking them to the failure of reaching a resolution for the Palestine-Israeli conflict as a whole. UNRWA's charter stipulated that the organization would not end until the conflict ended, and by linking its existence to a wide-ranging conflict rather than a singular event, it naturally led to UNRWA being able to maneuver to a much greater extent as compared with similar organizations. In particular, and prior to the adoption of UN General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) which established UNRWA, the Arab countries were resolute about instituting an organic link between the organization's mandate and the implementation of UNGA resolution 194 (III), which acknowledges the rights of repatriation, resettlement, and compensation of refugees.⁸⁹ Jalal Al Hussein termed this structural link as the Arab states' "lasting imprint on UNRWA's mandate,"⁹⁰ as it has succeeded in associating UNRWA's raison d'être with the UN's responsibility for finding a solution to the Palestinian refugees' plight. As an organizational principle on which UNRWA was founded, this foundational connection has legitimized the position of UNRWA against attempts to do away with the rights of Palestinian refugees as stated in resolution 194 (III). As such, the incorporation of the resolution 194 by Arab states into UNRWA's founding resolution 302 (IV) has made the connection become part and parcel of UNRWA's original mandate, and has thus secured the normative support of Member States for the organization that is based upon UNRWA's conformity with its founding

⁸⁹ Riccardo Bocco and Jalal Al Hussein, "Dynamics of Humanitarian Aid, Local and Regional Politics: The Palestine Refugees as a Case Study," in *Palestinian Refugees: Identity, Space and Place in the Levant*, ed. Are Knudsen and Sari Hanafi (London, UNITED KINGDOM: Taylor & Francis Group, 2010), 131; Jalal Al Hussein, "The Arab States and the Refugee Issue: A Retrospective View," in *Israel and the Palestinian Refugees* (Springer, 2007), 443,444.

⁹⁰ Al Hussein, "UNRWA: An Agency for the Palestine Refugees?," 302.

mandate.⁹¹ As such, and as the continuation of the organization became exclusively conditioned upon the settlement of a very complex conflict, resolution 302 (IV) came to give UNRWA a larger margin of purpose for existence, and by extension autonomy and self-governance that remain permissible and relevant as long as the conflict continues to be unsolved. This in tandem with the previously-listed factors are elements that granted UNRWA a basis to be autonomous, and served to prove the organization's continued relevance.

The following section will present the background of what I claim is UNRWA's first instance of asserting its autonomy with regard to its Member States, namely in the 1960s when the organization dropped the works scheme and shifted to education and medical care despite the stated interests and declared wishes of Member States.

B. The Shift From The Works Scheme to Education: A Case Study of Organizational Autonomy

With an end date rapidly approaching in the summer of 1960, UNRWA not only managed to convince Member States of their continued need for its services, but the organization also successfully lobbied for a shift in its original mandate as it dropped the main mission for its establishment and shifted to its most successful program, education. The original mission of UNRWA was the implementation of regional development schemes with the goal to resettle refugees in host and Arab countries. But this political

⁹¹ Nitsan Chorev, *The World Health Organization between North and South* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 23.

mission conceived in economic terms soon failed primarily as a result of the Palestinian refugees' relentless opposition to it. This failure should have in realist terms led to the dissolution of the organization, as UNRWA was proven to be incompetent and could not fulfill the role it was created to play. But that was not the case.

This chapter focuses on how by “rebranding” its education sector, UNRWA was able to present its most successful program in a new light by arguing that education served the objectives of the economic development scheme. By doing this, the organization intended to prove that it was still relevant to the current political climate which favored the resettlement of refugees over their repatriation to their original homelands, in order to ensure its own survival as an institution that meets the needs of Palestinian refugees. More specifically, UNRWA contended that its education program prepared refugee youths and equipped them with the needed tools and knowledge to become self-supportive and to find their place in local job markets where they reside, in preparation for their de-facto resettlement.

By choosing to defend its existence and reorganize its program priorities despite the massive failure it had suffered when trying to implement the economic development projects imposed by Member States, UNRWA was also tacitly reclaiming and redefining its own identity and purpose that put the refugees' demands and needs first, without entering into an explicit clash with the international community.

1. *The original political mission of UNRWA*

Two years after its birth in 1945 in San Francisco, the United Nations (UN) was assigned to assume its first mission in the Middle East, specifically in the complex scene that was unraveling in Palestine after Britain had relinquished its responsibilities there as a mandate power.⁹² From that moment and by the time of the creation of the State of Israel in May 1948, the United Nations had adopted a strictly political approach by shifting its functions from being a legislative power that recommended and attempted to implement resolutions to becoming a mediating organ between Arabs and Israelis.⁹³ As part of this political track, in less than two years the intergovernmental organization had formed several bodies to address the conflict in Palestine including the UN Special Committee on Palestine, the UN Consular Truce Commission, and the Palestine Conciliation Commission.⁹⁴ In parallel with this political approach, however, the UN was compelled to launch an ultimately ineffective humanitarian operation in response to alarming appeals made by the Arab League about the increasingly grave situation of Palestinian refugees.⁹⁵ As a result, the UN created and recreated multiple bodies to meet the growing needs of refugees: first, it established the UN Disaster Relief Project (UNDRP) in July 1948, which was “some form of interim relief machinery,”⁹⁶ which was soon replaced by the UN Relief

⁹² Karim Makdisi and Vijay Prashad, *Land of Blue Helmets: The United Nations and the Arab World* (Oakland, California: Univ of California Press, 2016), 1.

⁹³ Elad Ben-Dror, “How the United Nations Intended to Implement the Partition Plan: The Handbook Drawn up by the Secretariat for the Members of the United Nations Palestine Commission,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 6 (November 1, 2007): 998, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00263200701568402>.

⁹⁴ David P. Forsythe, *United Nations Peacemaking: The Conciliation Commission for Palestine* (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1972), 24.

⁹⁵ Channing B. Richardson, “The United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees,” *International Organization* 4, no. 1 (1950): 45.

⁹⁶ Richardson, 44.

for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR) in November 1948, an umbrella structure for private voluntary organizations who were already working in the region and who came forward to help.⁹⁷

Having been inefficient in carrying out relief operations, however, these two organs were criticized at a very early stage by their own international staff,⁹⁸ and they were dismantled and replaced by the newly-founded United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWAPRNE or UNRWA). In a stark contrast to its predecessors, however, UNRWA was not envisioned as just another relief organization, it was essentially designed as a tool to solve political hurdles by implementing a strategy of economic betterment in the Middle East region.⁹⁹ This strategy had American fingerprints all over it. The capitalist economic principles on which UNRWA was founded served to further the interests of the United States in its competition with the Soviet Union by preventing the encroachment of communism in the Middle East through the gate of Palestinian refugees.¹⁰⁰ Moreover, it was the American Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA)¹⁰¹ delegated by the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine – a political body responsible for the search for a durable solution in Palestine¹⁰² – that

⁹⁷ Lex Takkenberg, “UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees after Sixty Years: Some Reflections,” *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2009): 254; Benjamin N. Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians* (Syracuse University Press, 1995), 14–15.

⁹⁸ In one of the early works on relief operations in response to the Palestinian plight, Channing B. Richardson, a PhD fellow at Columbia University and a camp administrator in Gaza with the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC) - which was operating under the auspices of UNRPR - raised red flags regarding the UNRPR’s dependency on governments and emphasized the importance of having absolutely no national or political biases when delivering aid to refugee communities, in Richardson, “The United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees.”

⁹⁹ Simon A. Waldman, “UNRWA’s First Years, 1949–1951: The Anatomy of Failed Expectations,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 25, no. 4 (2014): 630–45.

¹⁰⁰ Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 8.

¹⁰¹ The Tennessee Valley Authority was then the largest federal development project in the United States.

¹⁰² Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 18–21.

recommended the creation of UNRWA to carry out public works projects intending to render refugees as self-supporting and thereby facilitate their resettlement.¹⁰³ The United States' heavy involvement in the work of UNRWA was also manifested in the nationality of the organization's directors, as 5 out of 7 directors who headed the organization during its first 30 years of operations were all American, and all of whom were diplomats who had served as officials in the different US governments before joining UNRWA.¹⁰⁴

It was therefore out of this political vision presented in economic terms and inspired by American experience that UNRWA, with its precarious humanitarian and development modus operandi, was born. But the political ambitions to resettle Palestinian refugees in Arab countries were soon shattered, and with them the main purpose behind UNRWA's creation collapsed. Despite this, UNRWA persisted. How then did UNRWA manage to survive after it failed to realize the original mission envisaged for it by Member States, particularly the US? According to the realist logic, and deriving from the states' focus on their national interests above all, UNRWA should have been dismantled at that moment because it was not able to fulfill the job it was created for.¹⁰⁵ But instead, the organization founded for itself another mission that kept it relevant to the political scene at the time.

¹⁰³ As the Tennessee Valley Authority's Interim Report was being drafted, Britain and the US were discussing the future establishment of an organization which would not only facilitate work and long-term development projects in the Middle East, but "would also utilize the productivity of the Arab refugees", in a sign of their capitalist approach to the refugees' plight. In S. Waldman, *Anglo-American Diplomacy and the Palestinian Refugee Problem, 1948-51* (Springer, 2016), 167.

¹⁰⁴ The title Commissioner General replaced Director to designate the head of UNRWA in 1962.

¹⁰⁵ Michael N. Barnett and Martha Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations," *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (1999): 704; Verbeek, "International Organizations: The Ugly Duckling of International Relations Theory," 14.

2. The shift from the works scheme to education

As a large-scale development agency, UNRWA was born with an unconventional threefold mandate: (1) to create employment opportunities for refugees with an overt objective to resettle them in Arab countries of refuge;¹⁰⁶ (2) to consult with Arab governments as well as Israel regarding steps to be taken in preparation for a time when international assistance for works and relief programs is no longer needed; and (3) to take over the relief programs from its predecessors.¹⁰⁷ In other words, UNRWA's main task was the implementation of regional economic projects that facilitated the resettlement of Palestinian refugees, which was to take precedence over the direct relief program that was supposed to diminish while the works scheme expanded.¹⁰⁸ To this end, UNRWA established the "Reintegration Fund" in 1950 and channeled its resources towards projects of resettlement.¹⁰⁹ The term "reintegration" was deliberately used as a euphemism to avoid admitting that the objective was resettlement and not repatriation,¹¹⁰ and thus to prevent Arabs from opposing the plan.¹¹¹

In spite of this, and while the US was using UNRWA's termination date of June 1960 to pressure Arab states to approve and allow the execution of economic development

¹⁰⁶ Article 7 of UN Resolution 302 states that UNRWA is tasked: "To carry out in collaboration with local governments the direct relief and works programmes as recommended by the Economic Survey Mission," and the Economic Survey Mission's interim report that this resolution is based on associates very clearly between the works plans and resettlement. Also see Buehrig, *The UN and the Palestinian Refugees: A Study in Nonterritorial Administration*, 6.

¹⁰⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution, "302 (IV). Assistance to Palestine Refugees" (A/RES/302 (IV) 8 December 1949, paragraph 6, 1949).

¹⁰⁸ Buehrig, *The UN and the Palestinian Refugees: A Study in Nonterritorial Administration*, 36.

¹⁰⁹ Don Peretz, *Israel and the Palestine Arabs* (Washington, D.C: Middle East Institute, 1958), 196.

¹¹⁰ Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 20.

¹¹¹ With this in mind, I opt to use the term resettlement in this thesis as a more accurate designation of UNRWA's mission in its early phases, instead of reintegration.

projects,¹¹² Palestinian refugees rose against the works scheme and expressed vociferous political opposition to the employment plans. They published manifestos denouncing the economic plans,¹¹³ went on strikes and labeled the works program an “Anglo-American imperialist scheme”,¹¹⁴ and called to boycott employment opportunities via the works plan which resulted in a severe drop in the numbers of refugees employed from 12,000 to merely 812 in a course of a few months only.¹¹⁵ But at the same time, these same refugees showed massive support to and campaigned for the enlargement of UNRWA’s education program: they themselves were the first ones to provide schooling for refugee children in tented camps in the early days of their exile,¹¹⁶ and they acted later as the driving force behind expanding the program when they petitioned humanitarian organizations to open more schools and accommodate more students.¹¹⁷ By virtue of the refugees’ endorsement and contribution to education versus their vehement opposition to the works program, and with the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956 and the ensuing political turmoil in the region, UNRWA was forced to cut short its ambitious development ventures and shift its focus to its core programs: relief, health, and education.¹¹⁸

That being said, this narration alone of the external elements responsible for this shift in UNRWA’s mission does not do justice to the active role that the organization has

¹¹² *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1–July 26, 1956, Volume XV*, eds. Russel (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 386. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v15/d386>

¹¹³ Fawaz Turki, *The Disinherited: Journal of a Palestinian Exile* (NYU Press, 1974), 35.

¹¹⁴ David P. Forsythe, “UNRWA, the Palestine Refugees, and World Politics: 1949–1969,” *International Organization* 25, no. 1 (ed 1971): 34, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0020818300026102>.

¹¹⁵ Turki, *The Disinherited*, 36.

¹¹⁶ “Schools in the Sand; Saving Half a Million Arab Refugee Children - UNESCO Digital Library,” accessed May 10, 2020, <https://unesdoc.unesco.org/ark:/48223/pf0000069029>.

¹¹⁷ Anne E. Irfan, “Educating Palestinian Refugees: The Origins of UNRWA’s Unique Schooling System,” *Journal of Refugee Studies*, 2019, 3–6.

¹¹⁸ Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 8.

played in ensuring its own survival. After all, the organization replaced its predecessors because it held the works program as its sole added value, and an UNRWA without a works program should have been dismantled much like its predecessors . But the fact that it survived indicates that UNRWA reached an advanced position in negotiating an independent space for itself with the Member States. The logic that underlies UNRWA's abandonment of the regional development program by the late 1950s is especially important as it raises questions on how the organization was able to prove its continued relevance amidst an unwelcoming international environment for yet another relief mechanism. The UN General Assembly for instance welcomed half-heartedly the shift from the works scheme to education, as it decline to make any declaration in support of it nor were there any fundraising efforts launched to assist UNRWA's shift toward education.¹¹⁹

The following section will discuss UNRWA's negotiations to ensure a positive vote at the UN for a mandate extension beyond 1960, and it will analyze archival US official documents as well as UNRWA's annual reports to the United Nations General Assembly during the period ranging from 1955 to 1960 showing that UNRWA played a significant role in shaping its own future as a relatively independent organization.

3. UNRWA's active role in prioritizing education

As its mandate was due to end in June 1960, UNRWA became the subject of heated discussions in the corridors of the United Nations. In particular, the US was the country most invested in the move to dismantle UNRWA to which it contributed more than 70% of

¹¹⁹ Maya Rosenfeld, "From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back: UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees, 1950–2009," *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2–3 (2009): 299.

the budget, and which Congress was growing hesitant to funding indefinitely without any solution on the horizon.¹²⁰ The American officials deemed the termination of UNRWA to be inevitable, and refused to make any commitments to funding the organization beyond its mandate's termination date in 1960.¹²¹ To this end, they enthusiastically sought to carry out a study to find a replacement for the organization in view of its approaching end date.¹²²

The international community, for its part, had an initial position to terminate UNRWA as well. This manifested in meetings between Member States and the UN Secretary General where discussions of a dissolution arrangement for the organization were underway. The international community's disapproval of the extension of UNRWA's mandate also showed in the funding cuts to the organization which led to UNRWA's first financial crisis with most of the funds channeled into unsuccessful resettlement programs, while expenses on relief, education, and health were increasing precipitously.¹²³ Meanwhile, the Arab states expressed their opposition to the termination of UNRWA by threatening to jeopardize good relations with the US in case any suggestion other than the continuation of the organization was put forward.¹²⁴

¹²⁰ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume XIII*, (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 48.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d48>

¹²¹ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume XIII* (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 51.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d51>

¹²² *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume XIII* (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 48.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d48>

¹²³ Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 46.

¹²⁴ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume XIII* (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 48.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d48>

Eventually, and despite the clashing interests between stakeholders, the United Nations General Assembly voted in favor of the renewal of UNRWA's mandate, owing largely to the organization's own lobbying with Member States and its efforts in designing a special character for itself that made it appear necessary in the region outside of the works scheme.

One of the first steps that UNRWA took to secure its continued existence was to capitalize on its most successful program and the one most accepted by refugees: education. From 1949 to 1954, the number of schools had risen from 39 to 242 in the organization's five fields of operation,¹²⁵ free access to education was granted to registered refugees,¹²⁶ and soon enough education became UNRWA's largest sector in terms of staffing, funding, and donor investment.¹²⁷ These efforts as well as UNRWA's efficiency in delivering education and medical care were complimented by the international community and enthusiastically supported by host states and refugees, thereby constituting a solid ground for UNRWA to advance its position in negotiations over the indispensability of its services, particularly education.

Furthermore, UNRWA made use of the fact that the largest pool of its employees consisted of Palestinian refugees to argue that the organization adhered to the employment scheme that the international community, specifically the US, was promoting. For instance, in a meeting between then-Director of UNRWA Henry R. Labouisse and US officials, a question came up about the appropriate mechanism to take over operations from the

¹²⁵ George Dickerson, "Education for the Palestine Refugees: The UNRWA/UNESCO Programme," *Journal of Palestine Studies* 3, no. 3 (1974): 123.

¹²⁶ Irfan, "Educating Palestinian Refugees: The Origins of UNRWA's Unique Schooling System," 9.

¹²⁷ Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History," 232.

organization by the time its mandate ended in 1960. Labouisse replied by simply stating that UNRWA employed 10,000 people, “only 120 of whom were not Arab and almost all of whom were refugees”, insinuating that dissolving it would exacerbate the unemployment problem that was the international community’s central resettlement tactic.¹²⁸ In addition to showcasing the improvement that UNRWA has brought to the education sector as well as the heartfelt welcoming of the program by both Arab states and Palestinian refugees, the organization decided to reframe its educational activities and present them as an essential service that corresponded with the economic development scheme on the longer term. The reasoning behind this lied in the fact that UNRWA’s relief operations did not figure high on the international community’s list of priorities, they were instead seen as a “temporary task” that was to be discontinued soon in contrast with the development projects designated as “continuing long-term tasks.”¹²⁹ Thus, by positioning education as part of the organization’s long-term projects, UNRWA was ensuring the continuation of its education program, and by extension its own continuation as an organization. Soon after, the US decided that “it is an overriding political necessity not to permit UNRWA’s operations to lapse,”¹³⁰ and after extensive talks and debates within the UN, all main stakeholders agreed to continue UNRWA for a period of 3 years.¹³¹

¹²⁸ *Foreign Relations Of The United States, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume XIII* (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 18.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d18>

¹²⁹ United Nations, General Assembly, *Annual Report of the Director of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East: General Assembly Official Records, A/4213* (30 June 1959), available from <https://unispal.un.org/UNISPAL.NSF/0/7F43E1C5AFF52925052565A10074D7EB>.

¹³⁰ *Foreign Relations Of The United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, 1957, Volume XVII*, eds. Wilcox and Herter (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 323.

<https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v17/d323>

¹³¹ General Assembly resolution 1456 (XIV), *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, A/RES/1456 (XIV)* (9 December 1959), available from <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/0B0C9E537E40877D852560DF006CE497>

But the role that UNRWA was playing was not restricted to furthering its educational activities. It also played the role of knowledge-broker and policy advisor with the main stakeholders, namely the US and the United Nations Secretary General. In the course of the US commissions of inquiry into their policy towards the Palestinian refugee question in the 1950s, US officials did not rely simply on statistics about refugees produced by UNRWA to draw their own conclusions and make their own policy recommendations. Rather, they essentially reiterated and built upon UNRWA's own assessments of the regional situation. As a matter of fact, the head of UNRWA at the time, Henry Labouisse, was closely involved in discussions with US and UN officials regarding the cancellation of the organization.¹³² He himself contributed to devising a plan to dismantle UNRWA and transfer its responsibilities to host governments with the aim of accelerating the resettlement of refugees within their host countries.¹³³ These discussions and the ensuing dissolution plan were largely informed by UNRWA officials who played the role of “knowledge-brokers” throughout the process, and who relied on UNRWA's credibility to derive their legitimacy as experts on the matter of Palestinian refugees.

In the final analysis, we can say that UNRWA deployed a tactic of “strategic resistance”, as Nitsan Chorev terms it, where it altered the meaning of economic

¹³² Check *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume XIII*, (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 48. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d48>; *Foreign Relations Of The United States, 1958–1960, Arab-Israeli Dispute; United Arab Republic; North Africa, Volume XIII* (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 18 <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1958-60v13/d18>; *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1–July 26, 1956, Volume XV*, eds. Russel (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 386. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v15/d386>

¹³³ *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1955–1957, Arab-Israeli Dispute, January 1–July 26, 1956, Volume XV*, eds. Russel (Washington: Government Printing Office), Document 386. <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1955-57v15/d386>

development that Member States were advancing, and incorporated within it its most successful program of education.¹³⁴ In other words, by arguing that education is able to fulfill the prophecy intended from the works scheme, UNRWA was in fact defending its goals that aligned with the needs of refugees rather than the interests of Member States. These goals had yet to be picked up by the international community, but UNRWA promoted them in an attempt to prove that it was still relevant and needed in the regional scene. This strategic resistance tactic showed that the organization was able to exercise ‘partial autonomy’ and pursue its own agenda by tailoring the message behind its own programs to align with the Member States’ expectations.¹³⁵ Lastly, considering the refugees’ interest in and substantial contribution to the education program, it is clear that UNRWA had its ‘clients’ (i.e. the refugees) in mind when it decided to fight for its survival in service of the needs of the refugees as they expressed them.

Having analyzed UNRWA’s inherent sources of autonomy as well as those that the organization has developed over time, chapter 3 will examine the contested multilateral world order that UNRWA finds itself operating in.

¹³⁴ Chorev, *The World Health Organization between North and South*, 11.

¹³⁵ Chorev, 229.

CHAPTER III

SETTING THE BACKGROUND: THE POLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF UNRWA IN THE TRUMP ERA

This chapter describes the most pertinent developments that set the stage for the contemporary political environment that UNRWA finds itself in. By analyzing the changes in the international political system and by discerning the characteristics of the contemporary world order, this section provides an examination of the contested multilateral background against which UNRWA produced an action plan to answer to the new American approach advanced by the Trump administration. In the past decade, the global system saw fundamental transformations following the demise of the Cold War's bipolar geopolitical order through the subsequent rise of a unipolar order led by the United States, and finally to the recent rise of new centers of power. At the core of this international system – be it bipolar, unipolar, or multipolar – there has always been a global movement that emerged in the wake of World War II and that has consistently evolved into what Michael Barnett calls the “international humanitarian order.”¹³⁶ At the intersection of this humanitarian order and the transforming international political realm, UNRWA carries out its relief and human development operations. The organization's work is constantly adapting to new realities created and recreated by both the humanitarian and the political

¹³⁶ Michael Barnett, *The International Humanitarian Order* (Routledge, 2009).

spheres, as seen most evidently in the context of the latest Trump administration’s approach to the Agency and the latter’s ability to re-strategize. To track these transformations in the work of UNRWA in response to the US, this chapter considers the United States’ approach to the United Nations and its specialized agencies, in particular UNRWA, in an attempt to draw the contours of the US-UNRWA relationship before moving on in the next chapter to study UNRWA’s response to the latest American cuts in funding. Therefore, this chapter has two primary goals; first, to understand UNRWA’s place in the post-Cold War era; second, to see from the American perspective what UNRWA represents and why it must be dismantled.

A. Groundwork for a New World Order

In the wake of the collapse of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, the international order saw an American takeover of its governing principles and rules, and a US-led neoliberal approach to political economy came to define the post-Cold War world.¹³⁷ With free and self-regulating markets as well as multilateral cooperation and collaborative policies at its center, the neoliberal order, or ‘Pax Americana’, set out to weaken the role of states in the equitable distribution of social welfare services, and it resolved instead to embolden the standing of the private sector in social provision. In this multilateral world, the US saw in UNRWA an arena for “contested multilateralism”¹³⁸ and a microcosm of the UN, and for that it had to be deliberately excluded from the Israeli-Palestinian peace

¹³⁷ Salvador Santino F. Regilme Jr, “The Decline of American Power and Donald Trump: Reflections on Human Rights, Neoliberalism, and the World Order,” *Geoforum* 102 (2019): 160.

¹³⁸ Makdisi, Karim, "Contested Multilateralism: The United Nations and the Middle East." *Menara Project*, Menara Working Papers 31 (2019).

process starting with the Madrid Conference in 1991 and continuing on past the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, in an attempt to curtail the ‘internationalization’ of the Palestinian cause.¹³⁹ To illustrate this point, consider the memorandum of understanding between the United States and Israel in 1991 where both signatories agreed that “the UN representative will have no authority [and] He may hold talks only in the hallways, note down the content of the talks, and report to the Secretary-General,” and his participation will be limited to the opening ceremony only.¹⁴⁰ Likewise, calls from the Israeli side emerged to warn against the international dimension that UNRWA adds to the Palestinian refugee question. For instance, America’s Pro-Israel Lobby (commonly known as AIPAC) – which is the most influential lobby in the US especially when it pertains to the Palestine-Israel conflict – views that peace should be achieved through “direct talks” only between the Israeli and Palestinian parties;¹⁴¹ the lobby also works on pressuring the US to encourage Palestinian leaders to “stop internationalizing the conflict and to instead pursue direct negotiations.”¹⁴² Asaf Romirowsky points to the limits of internationalization – which UNRWA is at the core of – and explains that “once the moral hazard of responsibility for refugees is spread too widely (meaning that it is made international) this reduces the incentives for refugees and the international community to resolve the problem

¹³⁹ Stephen Zunes, “The United States and the Breakdown of the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process,” Middle East Policy 8, no. 4 (2001): 82.

¹⁴⁰ “Approaches Towards The Settlement of The Arab-Israeli Conflict and The Question of Palestine”, Issue 5, August 1991, United Nations New York. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-202854/>

¹⁴¹ As was the case in the previous Arab-Israeli peace agreements, only direct talks between the parties can lead to a real and lasting peace. The United States can play an important facilitating role, but it cannot dictate the terms of peace. And the Palestinians will not achieve real peace by seeking to utilize international organizations such as the United Nations and the International Criminal Court to impose their will on Israel.” In <https://www.aipac.org/learn/issues/issue-display/the-peace-process>

¹⁴² AIPAC, “The AIPAC Briefing Book”, 2019 Edition, 116th Congress, 1st Session. p.53. Retrieved from <https://www.aipac.org/resources/aipac-briefing-book>

through political processes.”¹⁴³ This indicates that in the eyes of the US and Israel, UNRWA is associated with the international outreach and exposure that the Palestinian demands receive on the international stage, and for that the organization had to be reworked.

The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon in Washington, DC, however, came to threaten this multilateral order and almost put an end to international cooperation in favor of a unilateral system governed by America’s increasingly securitized foreign policy led by then-President George W. Bush as part of his global “war on terror.”¹⁴⁴ But despite the great opportunity that was presented at the time to the US administration to cement a unilateral arrangement, Bush did not exactly do away with the shackles of the American commitments to a post-Cold War liberal internationalism. Although he had a firm belief in the righteousness and ability of his country to work unilaterally and independently of alliances and treaties on trade, military and security levels, then-US President did not go as far as to abandon multilateral treaties and traditional allies of the US.¹⁴⁵ In terms of UNRWA, the organization’s relations with the US have been conditioned by local, regional, and international circumstances. The historical record of the consecutive US administrations since the signing of the Oslo Accords shows that the US has always associated UNRWA’s operations with perpetuating the status of Palestinian refugees, and for that it was proposed early-on that UNRWA be dismantled. On these grounds, US presidents— from Bill Clinton to George W. Bush and

¹⁴³ Asaf Romirowsky, *Israeli Studies*, p. 92.

¹⁴⁴ Richard Higgott, “US Foreign Policy and the ‘Securitization’ of Economic Globalization,” *International Politics* 41, no. 2 (2004): 147–75.

¹⁴⁵ Higgott, “US Foreign Policy and the ‘Securitization’ of Economic Globalization.”

later Barack Obama – have articulated the impossibility of the return of refugees to their original homes inside present-day Israel. They have stressed consistently that the refugee component, putatively part of the final status negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians, is crossed off the list of demands to realize as a *fait accompli*.¹⁴⁶

Almost two decades later, though, the ground became fertile for the US to effectively abandon multilateralism, and by extension the UN and UNRWA. The neoliberal international order – which Inderjeet Parmar accurately designates as “imperialism by another name”¹⁴⁷ – did not only fail to ensure the security of the world, particularly the Western part of it, it also proved with time to be inherently self-contradictory as it could not secure social satisfaction for all, and thereby resulted in social conflicts over “material insecurities.”¹⁴⁸ Ironically, these domestic instabilities were most striking in the case of the great power, the US, as their growing prevalence contributed to the decline of the American power on the world stage, and as they concomitantly accelerated the birth of a multipolar world order that was “diversified and decentralized,” and that involved “established and emerging powers, states, global and regional bodies, and transnational non-state actors.”¹⁴⁹ The growing social disturbances and material grievances in today’s US have turned the tide and given rise to an anti-globalization bloc that demands from the US to abdicate its role as

¹⁴⁶ Kurtzer, Daniel C., Scott B. Lasensky, William B. Quandt, Steven L. Spiegel, and Shibley Telhami. “The Peace Puzzle: America’s Quest for Arab-Israeli Peace, 1989–2011.” Ithaca: Cornell University Press, (2012): 181; Anat Niv-Solomon, “Chasing the Holy Grail of Mediation: US Efforts to Mediate the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process Since 1993.” *International Negotiation* 24, no. 3 (2019): 443 & 445;

¹⁴⁷ Inderjeet Parmar, “The US-Led Liberal Order: Imperialism by Another Name?,” *International Affairs* 94, no. 1 (2018): 151–72.

¹⁴⁸ Regilme Jr, “The Decline of American Power and Donald Trump: Reflections on Human Rights, Neoliberalism, and the World Order,” 160.

¹⁴⁹ Amitav Acharya, *The End of American World Order* (John Wiley & Sons, 2018), 7–8; Immanuel Wallerstein, “The Eagle Has Crash Landed,” *Foreign Policy*, no. 131 (2002): 60.

an enforcer of the international free-trade regime and as a protector of the UN system, and to instead shift its focus to domestic economy. These factors contributed to the ascension of the populist candidate Donald Trump and his “America First” policy in the 2016 presidential election,¹⁵⁰ thus posing a threat to the ‘liberal order’ – of which the UN system is one of the pillars – and laying foundations for a model of “authoritarian neoliberalism.”¹⁵¹ With Trump’s tendency towards an isolationist approach to foreign policy, the role of the United Nations in the international arena was bound to change.

To the US, the United Nations has historically represented a “hard-ball” game of politics over which powerful states compete for influence and various US administrations try to preside as the most powerful and influential actor rather than to pull out of the UN altogether.¹⁵² However, Trump’s presidency brought to play a blatant departure from this more multilateral approach towards a more aggressive unilateral one, and this underlies the current US administration’s skepticism to multilateralism and “its main institutional embodiment”, the UN.¹⁵³ As an illustration, in his speech to the UN General Assembly in 2019, Trump stated that: "The future does not belong to globalists. The future belongs to patriots. The future belongs to sovereign and independent nations,"¹⁵⁴ in an indication of his

¹⁵⁰ Marwan Kabalan (2017) "انقلاب" في السياسة الخارجية أم نسخة باهتة من الجاكسونية [President Trump's Worldviews and the Post - Second World War International Order : A Revolution Or a Watered Down Version of Jacksonian Foreign Policy?] *Siyāsāt ‘arabiyyā* (24): 97-112.

¹⁵¹ C. Tansel, “Authoritarian Neoliberalism,” in *States of Discipline: Authoritarian Neoliberalism and the Contested Reproduction of Capitalist Order*, 2017, 1–28.

¹⁵² Nitsan Chorev, *The World Health Organization between North and South* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 127, 128.

¹⁵³ Makdisi, Karim. "Palestine and the Arab–Israeli Conflict: 100 Years of Regional Relevance and International Failure." Barcelona: Menara (2018): 3.

¹⁵⁴ Donald Trump, “Remarks by President Trump to the 74th Session of the United Nations General Assembly”, Speech, United Nations Headquarters New York, NY, September 24, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-74th-session-united-nations-general-assembly/>

challenge to the authority of the UN and his championing of a “power-based international system.”¹⁵⁵ But almost a year prior to that speech, Trump had already taken his first concrete steps towards undermining what the UN represents by suspending all funding to the United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees.¹⁵⁶

Although the US approach has been to consistently delegitimize UNRWA since the early 1990s, what is different about the Trump administration’s attack on the organization in the current moment, and by implication Palestinian refugees, is that concrete measures rather than general informal assertions are being taken to prevent the very principle of right of return before any final negotiations could occur. Furthermore, this attack on UNRWA comes at a historic crossroads. First, it seemingly constitutes a pre-requisite for the implementation of the American vision of an Arab-Israeli “peace” that supports Israeli claims with respect to final status issues, including the status of Jerusalem and refugees.¹⁵⁷ Second, it comes at a time when the international order is undergoing a rapid change in its balance of power and where UN resolutions are no longer as universally respected as in previous eras. This invites a new reading of the US-UNRWA relationship under Trump’s presidency.

On the international level, Trump made promises during his electoral campaign against the United Nations for its record of denouncing Israeli occupation and human rights abuses. During his run for the presidency, Trump lamented in an AIPAC convention that

¹⁵⁵ David Whineray, “The United States’ Current and Future Relationship with the United Nations,” New York: United Nations University, (2020): 2.

¹⁵⁶ The US Department Spokesperson Heather Nauert, ‘On U.S. Assistance to UNRWA’ (Press Statement, 31 August 2018). Retrieved from <https://www.state.gov/on-u-s-assistance-to-unrwa/>

¹⁵⁷ Makdisi, Karim. "Palestine and the Arab–Israeli Conflict: 100 Years of Regional Relevance and International Failure." Barcelona: Menara (2018): 3.

“the United Nations is not a friend of democracy, it's not a friend to freedom, it's not a friend even to the United States of America [...] And it surely is not a friend to Israel [...] An agreement imposed by the United Nations would be a total and complete disaster.” He went on to say that “when I’m president, believe me, I will veto any attempt by the U.N. to impose its will on the Jewish state. It will be vetoed 100 percent.”¹⁵⁸ Even more importantly, he added that “meanwhile, every single day you have rampant incitement and children being taught to hate Israel and to hate the Jews. It has to stop.” By stating this, Trump launched an implicit attack against UNRWA’s education system, and called for it to be completely reformulated.

On the domestic level, the most important factor that influenced Trump’s approach was the Israel lobby in the US along with the ardent Zionists within the President’s inner circle of advisors and family members. This new team strained the US-UNRWA relations during Trump’s first year in office, as the organization dealt cautiously with the administration; in August of 2017, long before Trump implemented his first steps of his peace plan, UNRWA’s leadership withdrew a proposal to the UN General Assembly to increase its funding out of fear of an American reprisal to the move.¹⁵⁹ Despite this vigilance and the US continued threats, a cut in American funding remained unexpected. In fact, only one month before announcing the decision to reduce funding in January 2018, the US signed a framework for an agreement with UNRWA in which it discussed funding and

¹⁵⁸ Sarah Begley, “Read Donald Trump's Speech to AIPAC”, *Times*, March 21, 2016. Retrieved from <https://time.com/4267058/donald-trump-aipac-speech-transcript/>

¹⁵⁹ Ashraf Al Hour, « تكشف: الأونروا طلبت تأجيل التصويت على زيادة موازنتها في الجمعية العامة خشية الغضب الأمريكي [“Al-Quds Al-Arabi” reveals: UNRWA asked to postpone the vote on increasing its budget in the General Assembly for fear of American anger], *Alquds Alarabi*, August 4, 2017. Retrieved from <https://bit.ly/33NTlki>

reforms, yet did not touch upon the prospect of reducing funding nor withdrawing completely.¹⁶⁰ This sudden reversal suggests behind-the-scenes political maneuvering.

The Las Vegas casino mogul and powerful political donor, Sheldon Adelson – who prioritizes the support of Israel in his political agenda¹⁶¹ – has been one of the biggest contributors to Republican candidates, including Trump, with a donation of over \$82 million in the 2016 election. As Adelson has also been a Likud megadonor and has backed Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in his bid for another re-election, he constitutes a strong link between two of the world’s leading far-right figures, Trump and Netanyahu.¹⁶² He has also had a major power in the current US administration’s foreign policy, especially in matters related to the Palestine-Israel conflict where he champions “the sovereignty of Israel over Palestinian calls for independence.”¹⁶³ His donations to the US president made the latter’s campaign pledge to relocate the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem a top priority,¹⁶⁴ and in May 2018, Adelson was among the front-row attendees of the

¹⁶⁰ Agencies And TOI Staff, “11 Countries Speed Up Funding For Palestinians After US Cuts”, *Times of Israel*, January 30, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/11-Countries-Speed-Up-Funding-For-Palestinians-After-Us-Cuts/>

¹⁶¹ Camille Erickson, “What Have The Top Trump Donors Been Up To Since 2016?”, *Open Secrets*, May 14, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2019/05/what-have-the-top-trump-donors-been-up-to-since-2016/>

¹⁶² Peter Stone, “Sheldon Adelson To Donate \$100m To Trump And Republicans, Fundraisers Say”, *The Guardian*, February 10, 2020. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2020/feb/10/sheldon-adelson-trump-donation-republicans-congress>; Robert Mackey, “Trump and Netanyahu Dictate Terms of Palestinian Surrender to Israel and Call It Peace”, *The Intercept*, January 29, 2020. Retrieved from <https://theintercept.com/2020/01/28/trump-netanyahu-dictate-terms-palestinian-surrender-israel-call-peace/>

¹⁶³ Camille Erickson, “What Have The Top Trump Donors Been Up To Since 2016?”, *Open Secrets*, May 14, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.opensecrets.org/news/2019/05/what-have-the-top-trump-donors-been-up-to-since-2016/>

¹⁶⁴ Debra J. Saunders, “Adelsons Meet With Trump, Discuss Las Vegas Shooting”, *Las Vegas Review Journal*, October 3, 2017. Retrieved from: <https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/politics-and-government/adelsons-meet-with-trump-discuss-las-vegas-shooting/>

opening ceremony of the embassy in Jerusalem.¹⁶⁵ A look into the major Israeli newspaper owned by Adelson, Israel Hayom - which best represents the intersection between Trump and Netanyahu's policies - provides a lead on the billionaire's perception of UNRWA as an organization that perpetuates the refugee issue and keeps the undesirable right of return alive. Through this newspaper, Adelson promotes his stance on the need to close down the organization.

But the presence of Adelson represents just one side of the coin. Equally important is the role of Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law who was tasked with spearheading the administration's Middle East policy upon Trump's arrival in Washington. Kushner nudged Trump away from the liberal Zionist emphasis on the two-state solution and peace process embraced by his predecessors and into the more aggressive Likud camp long before he took office. Without Kushner in the fold, Trump likely would still have been very pro-Netanyahu, as evidenced by his clear admiration for far-right strongmen around the world (Putin, Bolsonaro, Orban, etc.). Yet the outsized role played by Kushner has resulted in the president essentially duplicating the line on UNRWA and refugees presented by the Likud Party.

This does not suggest, however, that economic considerations were not accounted for when ending contribution to UNRWA. Partly, the decision to defund was indeed motivated by economic concerns, as Trump's "America First" campaign entailed a sharp decline in the US foreign aid and development assistance and a rolled-back American

¹⁶⁵ Robert Mackey, "Ivanka Trump Opens U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem During Israeli Massacre of Palestinians in Gaza", *The Intercept*, May 14, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://theintercept.com/2018/05/14/ivanka-trump-opens-u-s-embassy-jerusalem-israeli-massacre-palestinians/>

support to multilateral bodies such as UN agencies. In fact, Trump has in each year of his presidency proposed a budget that included major cuts in US foreign aid, only for the proposal to be rejected by the Congress.¹⁶⁶ But to reduce this decision to economic reasons would be flawed. The US foreign assistance consists only less than 1% of the federal budget, in which UNRWA’s funding ranks 3rd or 4th among US’s contributions to UN specialized agencies.¹⁶⁷

2017	WFP	12,450,000	—	1,537,184,030	1,075,740,987	2,625,375,017
	UNHCR	1,460,580,952	—	—	—	1,460,580,952
	UNICEF	216,561,160	—	190,977,625	48,589,253	456,128,038
	IOM	259,403,860	—	150,660,267	—	410,064,127
	UNRWA	359,265,585	—	—	—	359,265,585
	WHO	5,544,487	—	118,050,231	—	123,594,718
	FAO	—	—	89,180,788	—	89,180,788
	UNOCHA	\$1,400,000	—	84,608,162	—	86,008,162
	UNDP	10,022,888	—	5,595,185	—	15,618,073
	ILO	7,707,066	—	—	—	7,707,066
	UNFPA	5,750,000	—	—	—	5,750,000
	Other ^c	1,000,000	—	12,590,693	—	13,590,693
2017 TOTAL		2,339,685,998	—	2,188,846,981	1,124,330,240	5,652,863,219

Figure 3: Global Humanitarian Accounts: U.N. and U.N. affiliated Entities, FY2015 to FY2017 (in current \$ U.S. dollars)¹⁶⁸

¹⁶⁶ Carol Morello, “Trump Administration Again Proposes Slashing Foreign Aid”, *The Washington Post*, February 10, 2020. Retrieved from https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-administration-again-proposes-slashing-foreign-aid/2020/02/10/2c03af38-4c4c-11ea-bf44-f5043eb3918a_story.html

¹⁶⁷ George Ingram, “What Every American Should Know About US Foreign Aid”, *Brookings*, October 2, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/what-every-american-should-know-about-u-s-foreign-aid/>; “U.S. Funding to the United Nations System: Overview and Selected Policy Issues”, *Congressional Research Service*, April 25, 2018. Retrieved from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45206.pdf>

¹⁶⁸ “U.S. Funding to the United Nations System: Overview and Selected Policy Issues”, *Congressional Research Service*, April 25, 2018. Retrieved from <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45206.pdf>

Against this background of a changing world order, the next chapter will examine how UNRWA responded and adjusted to the new reality it found itself in, and how and why major stakeholders, in particular the European Union (EU) and its member states, reacted to Trump's confrontational strategy regarding the relief agency.

CHAPTER IV

FILLING THE GAP: THE MULTILATERAL COMEBACK TO SAVE UNRWA

Following Trump's arrival in Washington, the multilateral world system immediately came under attack. At the core of this multilateral order is the UN, and in particular UNRWA which became the first UN organization to be targeted by the Trump administration in his attempt to establish a unilateral, "America First" system. However, in addressing Washington's decision to freeze its financial contributions to the organization, UNRWA did not stand idly by. The organization followed twofold levels of action: on the international level, it intensified its fundraising efforts and reached out to new states and private actors outside the realm of its traditional donors, whereas internally, it initiated a swift set of cost-saving measures that for the most part affected its Palestinian staff members and beneficiaries. In what follows, I argue that in handling its crisis, UNRWA assumed a distinct political role that cannot be brushed aside as it adopted a certain political narrative, and not only a humanitarian one, to ensure its own survival. This political capacity opened up a window for UNRWA – at the behest of its Commissioner General – to position itself at the intersection of the various players, including the multilateral system led by the European Union, the Islamic World headed by the Gulf States, and finally the Global South.

A. UNRWA's Response

1. *International Mobilization*

Less than a week after the US State Department announced its withholding of \$65 million in contribution to the United Nations Agency in charge of Palestinian refugees,¹⁶⁹ UNRWA's Commissioner General Pierre Krahenbuhl promptly launched a high profile and "hypervisible" global fundraising campaign under the hashtag of #DignityIsPriceless.¹⁷⁰ Being UNRWA's biggest fundraising effort since the organization was created in 1949, the campaign's title, Dignity Is Priceless, was arrived at as a result of a participatory approach that involved brainstorming sessions between UNRWA's leadership and Palestinian staff members, refugees and students.¹⁷¹ The cash-strapped organization aimed to raise \$500 million to bridge the funding gap left by the Americans' withdrawal, and through its campaign it addressed "all people of good will, all institutions, members of the Palestinian diaspora, private companies, and foundations" and urged them to support its work.¹⁷² From January 2018, the date of its launching, and by September of that year, the campaign had raised over \$238 million USD, but this amount was still short of covering UNRWA's yearly budget of well over \$1 billion, and alone, it could not ensure the sustainability of the

¹⁶⁹ Gardiner Harris and Rick Gladstone, "U.S. Withholds \$65 Million From U.N. Relief Agency for Palestinians", *The New York Times*, January 16, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/16/us/politics/us-palestinian-aid-refugee-un.html>

¹⁷⁰ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local," *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2019).

¹⁷¹ Daoud Kuttab, "'Dignity Is Priceless': UNRWA Chief Talks To Arab News About Funding, Pride In Helping Palestinians Under Israeli Blockade", *Arab News*, May 15, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1302801/middle-east>

¹⁷² United Nations, The Question of Palestine, "UNRWA Launches the "Dignity Is Priceless" Global Funding Campaign in Gaza." January 22, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/unrwa-launches-the-dignity-is-priceless-global-funding-campaign-in-gaza/>

organization's operations.¹⁷³ As such, and in parallel with the fundraising appeal, Krahenbuhl embarked on a diplomatic journey around the world, with a particular focus on the East this time in place of the more traditional donors in the West, in an attempt to raise the needed funds to keep UNRWA working. As a result of this extensive resource mobilization strategy, by the end of 2018 UNRWA had managed to overcome the financial shortfall and had made a surplus of \$105.01 million for 2018, compared with a deficit of \$71.55 million recorded in 2017.¹⁷⁴ To give an in-depth examination of the #DignityIsPriceless campaign at the level of its political message, outreach and the language it employs, the following section applies the method of discourse analysis to speeches, interviews, and media reports written about the campaign. I argue that the role of UNRWA's head, Pierre Kranhenbuhl, has been largely overlooked, and his efforts in determining the organization's response have garnered the widespread support of the international community. I also argue that a closer examination of the maneuvers undertaken by Kranhenbul demonstrates that UNRWA's head decided to face the challenge head-on within the political arena rather than the expected humanitarian sphere.

a. #DignityIsPriceless Global Campaign

On account of its overwhelming success, the campaign was decried by Israelis who accused it of being “a private fundraising campaign outside of UN purview” in an attempt

¹⁷³ State of Palestine, Palestine Liberation Organization, Negotiations Affairs Department, *The Implementation Of UNGA Resolution 194 International Support to UNRWA Is a Must*, September 2018, p.4. Retrieved from: <https://www.nad.ps/sites/default/files/09252018.pdf>

¹⁷⁴ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, *Financial report and audited financial statements for the year ended 31 December 2018 and Report of the Board of Auditors*, A/74/5/Add.4 , (New York: United Nations, 2019), available from <https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/a-74-5-add.4.pdf>

to delegitimize its accomplishments, while the US persisted in its offensive that it had started in early 2018 and concluded it with a cancelation of all funding to the Agency in August 2018.¹⁷⁵ Despite their ceaseless attempts to deny it, US officials had flagrantly, on many occasions, associated the funding cuts with the political pressure that Washington sought to impose on Palestinians to lower the ceiling of their demands in the negotiating process. Namely, the US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley accused UNRWA of being a “political arm” and “faulty political organization,”¹⁷⁶ and stated that the US would not provide aid to the Palestinians until they agree "to come back to the negotiation table" and reach a peace deal with Israel.¹⁷⁷ Similarly, in a tweet few days before the announcement of reductions in funds, the US president drew a parallel between funding UNRWA and pressuring Palestinians to enter negotiations, when he said: “with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?”¹⁷⁸ This political correlation did not go unnoticed, however, as UNRWA picked it up and accentuated the political aspect of the American defunding in order to reclaim its legitimacy as a humanitarian actor being targeted on political grounds. This account of events displayed Trump’s move in an even more abhorrent light in the eyes of the international community.

¹⁷⁵ Ruthie Blum and JNS, “Schadenfreude and The UNRWA Scandal”, *Israel Hayom*, July 31, 2019. Available from <https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/schadenfreude-and-the-unrwa-scandal/>

¹⁷⁶ UN Watch, Twitter post, September 26, 2018, 2:02 a.m., <https://twitter.com/UNWatch/status/1044723737667538945?s=20>

¹⁷⁷ Compiled from Wire Services, “UN Palestinian Refugee Agency Facing 'Existential Crisis,' Officials Say”, *Daily Sabah*, February 9, 2018. Available from: <https://www.dailysabah.com/mideast/2018/02/09/un-palestinian-refugee-agency-facing-existential-crisis-officials-say>

¹⁷⁸ Donald Trump, Twitter post, January 3, 2018, 12:37 a.m., <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948322496591384576>

During the launching ceremony of the campaign in Gaza in January 2018, UNRWA chief Krahenbuhl was resolute and forthright in his challenge of Trump's underlying political motives. He reassured his audience of Palestinian refugees and promised them that UNRWA will remain their witness to their historic plight, and added that "no money can buy dignity and respect of their rights."¹⁷⁹ This speech drew the political contours of the battle that UNRWA was preparing to engage in. By establishing the organization's role as a witness to the refugees' plight as an essential component in a global campaign endorsed by the United Nations, Krahenbuhl was placing the refugees' demands for acknowledgment and justice at the center of the international sphere. In a sense, he was going against the standard operating procedure, or as Rex Brynen describes it: "the international community typically views the refugee problem as simply a 'problem,' all too often abstracting it from its historical roots and paying little attention to issues of justice and acknowledgement,"¹⁸⁰ For Krahenbuhl, the "problem" must be returned to square one: the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of Palestinians from their homeland at the hands of Zionist paramilitary groups.

Even though the role of leaders of international organizations has often been neglected in international relations literature,¹⁸¹ this thesis proposes to move away from such approaches and asserts that executive heads are "not simply pawns of powerful member states [...]. Rather, they can navigate and push back against three constraints

¹⁷⁹ Daoud Kuttab, "'Dignity Is Priceless': UNRWA Chief Talks To Arab News About Funding, Pride In Helping Palestinians Under Israeli Blockade", *Arab News*, May 15, 2018. Available from: <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1302801/middle-east>

¹⁸⁰ Rex Brynen. "UNRWA As Avatar: Current Debates on The Agency—And Their Implications." In *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees*, Routledge 2014, 264.

¹⁸¹ A. Moravcsik. "A New Statecraft? Supranational Entrepreneurs and International Cooperation". *International Organization* (1999), 53(2): 267–306.

emphasized in the IR literature: legal-political, resource and bureaucratic.”¹⁸² From this perspective, UNRWA’s leadership had the option to stress only on the humanitarian repercussions of the financial crisis, but instead, it chose to permeate the political discussions and adopt combative political tactics. It made use of the opportunity to raise global awareness of the plight of Palestinian refugees¹⁸³, and needless to say, to garner support for UNRWA along the way. For instance, Krahenbuhl repeatedly referred to the lack of political horizon for Palestinian refugees as his greatest concern, in what appeared to be a pressure to grant more political agency and voice to displaced Palestinians¹⁸⁴. This advocacy was supposed to be the responsibility of Palestinian factions, but it was the chief of UNRWA who took the initiative himself to shed light on this. In the same fashion, the Director of the organization’s operations in Gaza Matthias Schmale engaged in the political dispute and unveiled an Israeli plan by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to transfer UNRWA’s responsibilities to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), and warned that this step would liquidate the cause and rights of Palestinian refugees, and by implication, would lead to disbanding UNRWA.¹⁸⁵ Hence, and while in

¹⁸² Nina Hall and Ngaire Woods. "Theorizing the role of executive heads in international organizations." *European Journal of International Relations* 24, no. 4 (2018): 868.

¹⁸³ State of Palestine, Palestine Liberation Organization, Negotiations Affairs Department, “The Implementation Of UNGA Resolution 194 International Support to UNRWA Is a Must”, September 2018, p.4. Retrieved from: <https://www.nad.ps/sites/default/files/09252018.pdf>

¹⁸⁴ Georgi Gotev, “UNRWA chief: For Syrians and for Palestinians, a horizon needs to be recreated”, *Euractiv*, March 13, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/interview/unrwa-chief-for-syrians-and-for-palestinians-a-horizon-needs-to-be-recreated/>; United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, “UNRWA Launches 2019 Emergency Appeals And Budget Requirement Totaling Us\$ 1.2 Billion,” January 29, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-launches-2019-emergency-appeals-and-budget-requirement-totaling-us-12>

¹⁸⁵ Al Rai, «فتح» تطرح مقترحات جديدة للمصالحة... و«حماس» تتهم السلطة بالعمل لنزع سلاحها. ننتياهو يزوج أزمة «زائفة» للدفع»، *Al Rai*, March 12, 2018. Retrieved from <https://www.alraimedia.com/article/801753/-خارجيات/ننتياهو-يزوج-أزمة-زائفة-للدفع-نحو-انتخابات-مبكرة>

public Washington made it seem as if it were simply disquieted about UNRWA's operations and wanted the organization to make unspecified reforms, Krahenbuhl regularly took to the public sphere to shift the narrative and re-center the discussion around the political quintessence of Trump's decision and tie it to the so-called "deal of the century". "It is very clear that the decision by the United States was not related to our performance," Krahenbuhl said, "this has to be part of the debate that took place around Jerusalem,"¹⁸⁶ in reference to Trump's announcement on the relocation of the American embassy to Jerusalem a month earlier. Given this context, it appears that UNRWA under Pierre Krahenbuhl's leadership was far from being "apolitical." In fact, following allegations of mismanagement and sexual misconduct, Israeli media and officials linked Krahenbuhl's resignation to the prevention of UNRWA's politicization, in an indication of the political dimension that Krahenbuhl has accorded to the organization.¹⁸⁷

b. Turning Elsewhere: The East and the Islamic World as an Alternative

2018 was indeed *the* year for UNRWA. It was the most challenging year as the organization faced its "greatest and gravest financial crisis ever,"¹⁸⁸ but at the same time, UNRWA was able to unleash its diplomatic capabilities as it was released from the

انتخابات-مبكرة

¹⁸⁶ "Germany and other donors speed up funding for Palestinians after US aid cut", *DW*, January 30, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-and-other-donors-speed-up-funding-for-palestinians-after-us-aid-cut/a-42373586>

¹⁸⁷ Ariel Kahana , Reuters and Israel Hayom Staff, "Head of UN Palestinian Refugee Agency Quits Amid Misconduct Inquiry", *Israel Hayom*, November 7, 2019. Retrieved from: <https://www.israelhayom.com/2019/11/07/head-of-un-palestinian-refugee-agency-quits-amid-misconduct-inquiry/>; Tovah Lazaroff, "Israel Pushes For UNRWA's Closure As Leader Quits Amid Misconduct Probe", *The Jerusalem Post*, November 6, 2019. Retrieved from <https://www.jpost.com/breaking-news/un-palestinian-refugee-agency-replaces-boss-pending-inquiry-outcome-607028>

¹⁸⁸ United Nations, UN News, "Donors come to UN agency's aid with extra \$118 million to help Palestine refugees", September 27, 2018. Retrieved from: <https://news.un.org/en/story/2018/09/1021202>

shackles of the American scrutiny on its day-to-day operations. Consequently, the organization turned to new potential donors and reached out to non-traditional donors as well as the private sector, and along the way, it brought the Palestinian demands back to light and introduced new nations to the long-forgotten Palestinian plight.

In response to the existential crisis in 2018, UNRWA's Commissioner-General began assuming an increasingly critical and decisive diplomatic role; in particular, he advanced fundraising strategies that painted UNRWA not only as a humanitarian player, but more significantly as an organization that is rooted in a multilateral system that was in imminent danger. This was well expressed by Krahenbuhl in his statement to UNRWA's Advisory Commission: "We are doing this not for the sake of UNRWA itself, but for Palestine refugees. It is very important for the preservation of their hope, rights and dignity. It is also essential for the safeguarding of regional stability and defense of robust multilateralism."¹⁸⁹ So, the message that was seemingly conveyed in diplomatic circles was that if UNRWA cannot survive, then neither can the multilateral system. This approach, in turn, positioned UNRWA at the forefront of the political battle against unilateralism and nationalist foreign policy led by Donald Trump.

In parallel to this, UNRWA's leadership represented by the Commissioner-General engaged in international fundraising conferences and ministerial meetings, and was present in Arab League summits and conventions. Although these high-level meetings were attended by dozens of countries, they alone failed to fill the funding deficit faced by

¹⁸⁹ Pierre Krähenbühl, "Statement Of UNRWA Commissioner-General, To The Advisory Commission – 2019", UNRWA Advisory Commission Dead Sea, Jordan, June 17, 2019. Available from <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/statement-unrwa-commissioner-general-advisory-commission-2019>

UNRWA. In 2018 for example, and in the midst of an acute financial crisis, the annual donors’ pledging conference raised only \$40 million out of the \$250 million needed by the Agency.¹⁹⁰ These insufficient figures should be viewed as a sign of the serious ramifications that the American withdrawal of funds has had on Member States. However, it remains that the most distinctive new resources that joined the donor scene and addressed the funding shortfall came from the Eastern World, in particular the emerging BRICS states, in addition to the Islamic world.

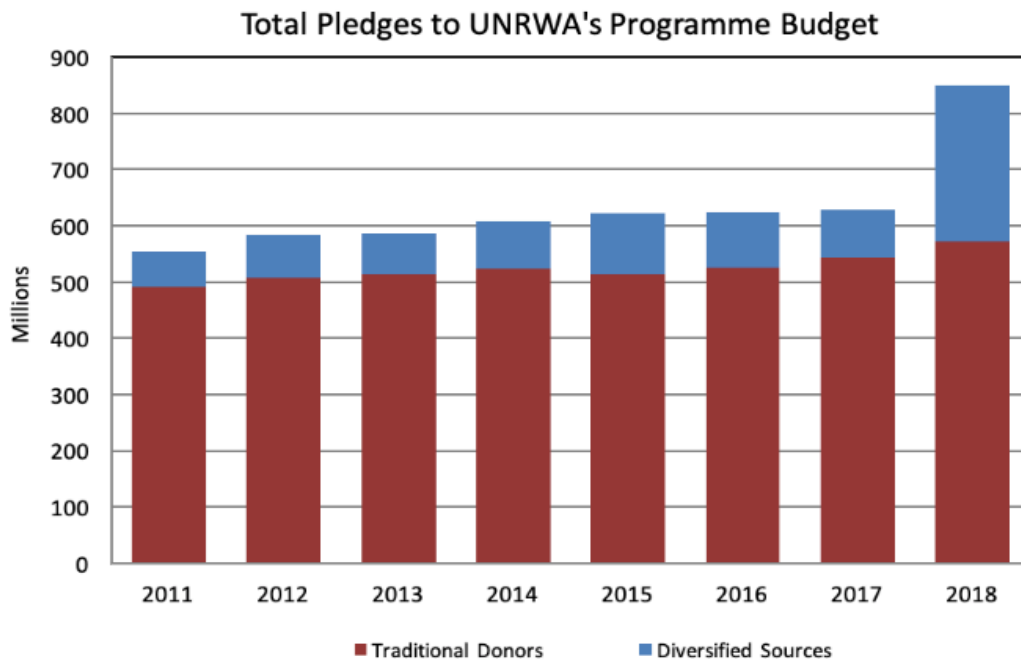


Figure 4: 2018 UNRWA Annual Operation report

¹⁹⁰ Margaret Besheer, “UN Fails to Get Major New Funding Pledges for Palestinian Refugees”, *VOA News*, June 25, 2018, Available from <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/un-fails-get-major-new-funding-pledges-palestinian-refugees>; “UNRWA receives pledges that would triple its aid funding”, *i24news*, June 26, 2019. Available from <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/middle-east/1561493736-unrwa-almost-triple-pledges-in-funding-conference>

As shown in the graph, contributions from diversified sources were the highest compared to the previous years and they represented a “milestone” in 2018, according to UNRWA.¹⁹¹ These sources stand for income streams received from parties outside the base of traditional donors, and they refer mainly to: (i) multi-year agreements with international financial institutions such as the World Bank and the Islamic Development Bank; (ii) partnerships with private corporations, especially those interested in the corporate social responsibility scheme; and lastly (iii) partnerships with local groups like the League of Arab States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.¹⁹² Strategically speaking, by diversifying its resource base, UNRWA was building a network of non-traditional “influential partnerships” with actors based in the Eastern side of the world. Read broadly, UNRWA sought to position itself within a “South-Muslim” context.

The organization approached the National Zakat Foundation Worldwide to inquire about its status as a Zakat eligible organization. Following deliberations and a careful study of its areas of work and growth in 2017, the Zakat Foundation affirmed that the organization’s food aid and cash assistance programs are eligible for Zakat donations.¹⁹³ This new status paved the way for UNRWA to sign its first multi-year agreement with

¹⁹¹ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, *Annual Operational Report 2018 for the Reporting Period 01 January – 31 December 2018* (Amman: UNRWA, 2019): 121. available from

https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/2019_annual_operational_report_2018_-_final_july_20_2019.pdf

¹⁹² Ibid.; United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, *Resource Mobilization Strategy 2019-2021* (Jerusalem: UNRWA, 2019). available from

https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/rms_2019-2021_eng_final_10292019.pdf

¹⁹³ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, “National Zakat Foundation Worldwide Declares UNRWA Programmes for Vulnerable Palestine Refugees Zakat Eligible,” November 20, 2017. available from <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/national-zakat-foundation-worldwide-declares-unrwa-programmes-vulnerable>

Indonesia's national Zakat agency (BAZNAS) in October of 2018.¹⁹⁴ Moreover, and as per the recommendations of the UN Secretary General in his 2017 report "Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East,"¹⁹⁵ UNRWA concluded months of talks with members of the Saudi-based Organization of Islamic Cooperation, which resulted in the establishment of a "Waqf" development fund for the organization in March 2019.¹⁹⁶ Administered by the Islamic Development Bank, the fund ostensibly aims at ensuring the predictability of UNRWA's funding. However, the timing of the agreement raises red flags given that Trump's "Peace to Prosperity" plan (or Deal of the Century) singled out the Organization of Islamic Cooperation as the sole domain under which falls a proposed Islamic (not Arab) framework for the Palestinian refugees' plight. The plan suggested:

The acceptance of 5,000 refugees each year, for up to ten years (50,000 total refugees), in individual Organization of Islamic Cooperation member countries who agree to participate in Palestinian refugee resettlement (subject to those individual countries' agreement).¹⁹⁷

Certainly, Saudi Arabia and its allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council have filled UNRWA's budgetary gap at the behest of the US, as strong relations with the American administration remain at the top of their priorities. The GCC should not be assumed to have

¹⁹⁴ United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, "Indonesian Zakat Authority Baznas Signs Its First Ever Agreement In Support Of UNRWA," October 17, 2018. available from <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/indonesian-zakat-authority-baznas-signs-its-first-ever-agreement-support>

¹⁹⁵ United Nations, General Assembly, *Operations of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East: report of the Secretary-General*, A/71/849 (30 March 2017), available <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/1816868FB86D36D9852580FB0050B0A6>

¹⁹⁶ Rasha Abou Jalal, "Islamic group OKs fund to support Palestinians via UN", *Al-Monitor*, March 17, 2019. Available from <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2019/03/palestinian-refugees-unrwa-budget-oic-waqf-fund.html>

¹⁹⁷ United States Government, White House, *Peace to Prosperity*, January 2020, Washington, DC, 32. Retrieved from: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/peacetoprosperity/>

benevolent intentions, however. The way that these countries have trended in recent years vis-à-vis their relations with Israel and the West indicate that their sudden entry into the UNRWA scene cannot be built upon, but rather should be seen as a temporary measure that could be reversed at any time.

A notable development in UNRWA's search for funding has been the case of the Global South. Vijay Prashad argues that the BRICS states "have [...] supported [in a conservative rather than a confrontational way] the idea of "multilateral diplomacy" instead of U.S. primacy" in the UN hallways. He also adds that "this is a significant departure from the generally quiescent BRICS states, notably China, which have been uncomfortable asserting themselves into conflicts outside their boundaries," including the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.¹⁹⁸ In this regard, and following UNRWA's financial crisis in 2018, the BRICS countries doubled their contribution to the organization¹⁹⁹. To analyze this through a political lens, it seems that UNRWA's move towards the East, particularly the BRICS bloc, is rooted in economic concerns, but at the same time, it fulfills a long-held political objective of breaking away from the stranglehold of the US-led Western world. In parallel to this, and considering that it was recommended by the UN Secretary General himself in 2017, the East-centric strategy ushers in a gradual and steady turn by the UN away from the North and towards a neoliberal world but with "Southern characteristics", as per Prashad.

¹⁹⁸ Vijay Prashad. "Neoliberalism with Southern characteristics." *The rise of the BRICS*. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung, New York Office. Online(2013): 13. http://www.rosalux-nyc.org/wp-content/files_mf/prashad_brics.pdf

¹⁹⁹ United Nations, Department of Global Communications, *Briefing on the situation of UNRWA*, 4 September 2018. Available from <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/regular-press-briefing-information-service-4-september-2018>

With the US out of the picture, UNRWA was given leeway by the UN to operate with more independence, represent itself, and negotiate directly with states and non-state actors. This diplomatic opportunity that was opened up for UNRWA accentuated the organization's standing both in the international community and within the Palestinian refugee communities themselves, as UNRWA tends to be one of the few issues that nearly all Palestinians agree on. This consensus, however, came with a price, as the organization adopted harsh austerity measures of which Palestinian refugees were its primary victims. In what follows, the effects of the internal cost-reducing measures that UNRWA implemented will be elaborated on.

2. UNRWA's Internal "Cost Saving" Measures

While in public UNRWA promoted and defended Palestinian refugees' dignity and rights, internally, the organization launched 'private' responses to gradually render refugees 'self-sufficient' by reducing their benefits, services and the pension rights of its Palestinian employees.²⁰⁰ The emphasis on self-sufficiency happens to be in alignment with the American demand to create a new definition of Palestinian refugee that would only apply to the most vulnerable groups among this population. The internal cost-cutting measures that UNRWA set in motion in response to Washington's decision took place on the 'invisible' level, as per the notion introduced by Elena Fiddiyan-Qasmiyeh, as they were overshadowed by UNRWA's omnipresent fundraising efforts in the international scene where the organization presented itself as the chief promoter of Palestinian rights.

²⁰⁰ Elena Fiddiyan-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local," *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2019): 29.

In her study of the first 6 months after Donald Trump announced the reductions in financial contributions to UNRWA in January 2018, Fidayyin-Qasmiyeh makes the case of how the organization pleaded for the international community on behalf of Palestinian refugees, while at the same time directly harming the refugees themselves and enacting extensive cutbacks on the operational level. As a pre-emptive step in preparation for potential slash in funding, the organization immediately resorted to tightening austerity measures that started in 2015, and it began to lay off its own employees in Jordan, West Bank, and Gaza, even before the Department of State first announced its decision to freeze more than half of the funds earmarked for UNRWA for the year 2018.²⁰¹ This series of layoffs escalated gradually and reached its peak when UNRWA terminated about 1,000 staff members in the Gaza Strip in July 2018 – one month before the US completely ended its aid to the Agency – in an attempt to scale down on its emergency program, thus sparking protests and outrage among refugee employees who were caught completely off guard with this abrupt decision.²⁰² Employment terms, on the other hand, became more stringent as the organization limited employment contracts and eliminated the option of permanent contracts, replacing them with annual ones.²⁰³ The retirement plan was also amended to

²⁰¹ Jack Khoury, “UNRWA Begins Laying Off Workers Ahead of Expected Cut in U.S. Aid”, *Haaretz*, 16 January 2018. Available <https://www.haaretz.com/middle-east-news/palestinians/unrwa-begins-laying-off-workers-ahead-of-expected-cut-in-u-s-aid-1.5742386>

²⁰² 1000-مايقارب-تفصل-اونروا-959374 [UNRWA separates approximately 1,000 employees from the Gaza Strip], *RT Online*, 25 July 2018, <https://arabic.rt.com/middle-east/959374-1000-مايقارب-تفصل-اونروا-959374>; Maram Humaid, “UNRWA job cuts in Gaza ‘a massacre for employees’”, *Al Jazeera*, 29 July 2018. Available

<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/07/180729105810213.html>; Nidal al-Mughrabi, “U.N. agency for Palestinian refugees to reduce jobs after U.S. cuts”, *Reuters*, 25 July 2018. Available <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-unrwa-gaza-idUSKBN1KF1ZW>

²⁰³ Saber Halimeh, “أونروا في ظل سياسات استهدافها مالياً و محاولات تقليص دورها” [A reading into the fate of “UNRWA” in light of the policies that target it financially and the attempts to cut down its role], *Palestinian Refugees Portal*, February 4, 2020: 15. Available <https://bit.ly/36KlaKT>

prevent national staff – 99% of whom are Palestinian refugees²⁰⁴ – from extending two years beyond their retirement age of 60,²⁰⁵ while still allowing its international staff to retire at 62 or 65 years of age.²⁰⁶ In addition, UNRWA began encouraging staff to opt for early voluntary retirement while refraining from making new recruitments to fill vacant positions.²⁰⁷

These decisions have markedly had self-destructive effects on UNRWA, as they further jeopardized the culture of trust between the leadership of the organization and its local employees. According to the president of the UNRWA Employees Union in Gaza, Amir al-Mishal, the organization’s dismissal of Palestinian staff was a political move that came in line with Trump’s political bid to terminate UNRWA, and was not due to financial considerations.²⁰⁸ Al-Mishal explained that the Union had already taken initiative and shared with the leadership of UNRWA a proposal to overcome the financial crisis without affecting the job security of employees, but to no avail.²⁰⁹ This lack of trust grew exponentially following the intensification of UNRWA’s austerity measures, which coincided with a heightened sense of suspicion on the part of refugees following blatant

²⁰⁴ Randa Farah. "UNRWA: Through the eyes of its refugee employees in Jordan." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2-3 (2009): 401.

²⁰⁵ "UNRWA Takes Austerity Measures to Protect its Services", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 8 March 2018. Available <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/1198456/unrwa-takes-austerity-measures-protect-its-services>

²⁰⁶ Check <https://www.unrwa.org/careers/you-apply>

²⁰⁷ Saber Halimeh, "قراءة لمصير "أونروا" في ظل سياسات استهدافها مالياً و محاولات تقليص دورها", 14. Available <https://bit.ly/36KJaKT>; Khaled Abou Amer, "الأونروا تفتح باب التقاعد الاستثنائي لموظفيها في غزة", *Arabi 21*, 21 September 2018. Available <https://bit.ly/3qwOD47>

²⁰⁸ "Hundreds of Employees Demand Departure of UNRWA Director in Gaza", *Asharq Al-Awsat*, 24 July 2018. Available <https://english.aawsat.com/home/article/1341566/hundreds-employees-demand-departure-unrwa-director-gaza>

²⁰⁹ "UNRWA emergency personnel organize a sit-in at the Agency's headquarters in Gaza", *Shehab News*, 24 July 2018. Available <https://shehabnews.com/post/36356>

statements by Washington regarding its plan to terminate the refugee question. This led laid-off UNRWA employees in Gaza to demand the removal of UNRWA's Operations Director in the Strip, as he was seemingly seen as a collaborator and implementer of Donald Trump's peace plan. On the other hand, UNRWA viewed these austerity measures as not only necessary, but also a display of the organization's own cost-efficiency. In reality, however, UNRWA's actions began to take the organization down on a path that renders it useless in the eyes of its most important constituency - the refugees themselves. As shown in chapter 2, in the late 1950s, the leadership of UNRWA defended its existence by using the large number of Palestinian refugees it employed as a pretext to justify its contribution to the employment scheme championed by the United States at the time. This move played a part in ensuring UNRWA's continuity back then. Today, however, and especially in light of UNRWA's response policies that always end up harming refugees more than anything else, the organization has grown increasingly detached from its constituency to an extent that large numbers of Palestinians, who in the past viewed a job with UNRWA as highly desired, were now seeking employment and opportunities in other organizations and elsewhere where jobs are more stable.²¹⁰ Moreover, the organization has been following a patronizing approach with its Palestinian employees when it opts to communicate its decisions and changes in policies by sending notifications in "complex English sentences" that are often misunderstood, and sometimes not understood at all.²¹¹ This has contributed to widening the gap between the Palestinian refugee employees and their organization that

²¹⁰ Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, Elena. "Representations of displacement from the Middle East and North Africa." *Public Culture* 28, no. 3 (80) (2016): 468; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA," (2019): 36.

²¹¹ Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA," (2019): 37.

is increasingly looking to please the international community first and foremost. This detachment has also severely impacted the points of communications between UNRWA and its aid recipients, thus necessitating the organization to implement in 2020, 70 years after its establishment, programs and discussion sessions to re-introduce and re-familiarize the same Palestinian refugee community with its long-standing services.²¹²

In addition to employment, UNRWA has been imposing severe restraints on the education sector since before Trump decided to end funding. As of 2016, the organization increased the number of students to reach almost 50 pupils per a single classroom in some schools, thus resulting in overcrowded spaces that hindered the learning process and added immense pressure on the student.²¹³ Also, and in an attempt to reduce operational costs, schools were merged thereby forcing substantial numbers of students to commute longer distances.²¹⁴ Most devastatingly, and since 2017 the organization has put into force a policy of automatic promotion for all Palestinian students in Lebanon, including those who do not meet the needed academic requirements.²¹⁵ This decision has backfired on UNRWA and resulted in a high rate of failure among Palestinian students in the Lebanese official exams in the academic year of 2018-2019, where only 44% of applicants passed their official

²¹² For more information on the program, please see: <https://www.giz.de/en/worldwide/78139.html>

²¹³ Isabel Debre, “As UN budget dries up, Palestinian classrooms swell in size”, *AP News*, 3 June 2019. Available <https://apnews.com/a555eed9477c4bb7be5d6a41a64760d2>;

²¹⁴ The Palestinian Association for Human Rights "Witness", “قراءة في تدهور معدلات النجاح لطلاب مدارس الأونروا في الامتحانات الرسمية المتوسطة للعام الدراسي 2018/2019 عوامل مزمنة وأخرى ناتجة عن سياسات تربوية غير مدروسة low success rates of UNRWA students in the official intermediate exams for the academic year 2018/2019: chronic and other factors resulting from unexamined educational policies”, 4 July 2019. Available <http://pahrw.org/portal/ar-LB/وأبحاث-تقارير/17/c/قراءة-في-معدلات-النجاح-لطلاب-المدارس-الأونروا-مدرسة-غير-تربوية-سياسات-عن-ناتجة-وأخرى-مزمنة-عوامل-2018-2019-الدراسي-للعام-المتوسطة-الرسمية-1093/>

²¹⁵ The Palestinian Association for Human Rights "Witness", “قرار الأونروا بالترقية الآلي لعام 2016-2017 هل يحقق مصلحة الطلاب؟ [Is UNRWA’s decision to automatically promote students for the year 2016-2017 in the interests of the students?]”, 2017. Available <https://bit.ly/2VIwdz5>

exams, compared to 74% of success rate in the previous year.²¹⁶ Simultaneously, and in order to alleviate some financial burden off its shoulders, UNRWA turned to privatize its health and educational services by relegating the costs onto the realm of the refugee families.²¹⁷ To take the case of education in Lebanon as an example, Fiddayin-Qasmiyyeh argues in her study that education was moved to family circles and relatives. However, UNRWA's self-weakened education program has also led to the proliferation of relatively expensive private tutoring centers and initiatives within Palestinian camps.²¹⁸ In a field study in 2011 conducted by the Palestinian Association For Human Rights (Witness), it was reported that almost 75% of Palestinian students in the North of Lebanon, to give an example, receive private tutoring in addition to their regular learning hours in UNRWA schools (refer to the table below).²¹⁹

Palestinian students who receive private tutoring	District in Lebanon
55%	Sidon
25%	South
75%	North
25%	Bekaa

Figure 5: Private Tutoring Trend in Palestinian Camps in Lebanon. ²²⁰

²¹⁶ The Palestinian Association for Human Rights "Witness", "قراءة في تدني معدلات النجاح لطلاب مدارس الأونروا"، Available <http://pahrw.org/portal/ar-LB/وأبحاث-تقارير/17/c/قراءة-في-تدني-معدلات-النجاح-لطلاب-مدارس-الأونروا-مدارس-النجاح-معدلات-تدني-في-قراءة/17/c/وأبحاث-تقارير> 1093/مدرسة-غير-تربوية-سياسات-عن-ناتجة-أخرى-مزممة-عوامل-2018-2019-الدراسي-للعام-المتوسطة-الرسمية-الامتحانات

²¹⁷ Fiddian-Qasmiyyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA," (2019): 33.

²¹⁸ The Palestinian Association for Human Rights "Witness", "واقع واحتياجات المخيمات والتجمعات الفلسطينية في لبنان"، [The status and needs of Palestinian camps and gatherings in Lebanon]", 2011. Available <http://pahrw.org/portal/ar-LB/دراسات/16/c/احتياجات-والمخيمات-التجمعات-الفلسطينية-والتجمعات-المخيمات-احتياجات-واقم/16/c/دراسات>; Ahmad Al Hajj, "51/لبنان-في-الفلسطينية-والتجمعات-المخيمات-احتياجات-واقم/51/لبنان-في-الفلسطينية-والتجمعات-المخيمات-احتياجات-واقم", [Private tutoring is a reflection of the failure of the UNRWA educational system?]. Available <http://laji-net.net/portal/ar-LB/5/c/إخبارية-تقارير/5/c/إخبارية-تقارير> 12408/الأونروا-في-التعليمي-النظام-لفشل-انعكاس

²¹⁹ The Palestinian Association for Human Rights "Witness", "The Status and Needs of Palestinian Camps and Communities in Lebanon", 2011. Available <https://pahrw.org/portal/en-US/studies/45/c/the-status-and-needs-of-palestinian-camps-and-communities-in-lebanon/556/>

²²⁰ Table based on information provided in: <https://pahrw.org/portal/en-US/studies/45/c/the-status-and-needs-of-palestinian-camps-and-communities-in-lebanon/556/>

This trend of privatizing education has become a remarkable phenomenon in Palestinian camps via which the burden of education was transferred from UNRWA to Palestinian teachers running tutoring centers or offering tutoring classes. To give a personal anecdote, in the academic year of 2018/2019, a friend of mine in Burj el Barajneh camp was in his final school year in Al Jalil UNRWA school, which is the only secondary school in Beirut catering to Palestinian students. In his class there were 30 students, 25 of whom were enrolled in private tutoring classes during after school hours, my friend included. When the time came for the official exam results, my friend learned that he had failed his first round. His parents' initial reaction was to blame the tutoring center for not doing the job effectively as well as the teacher for wasting their money without delivering educational success for their child. It was not until a few days later that his family was able to put things into the proper context and reached the conclusion that UNRWA was no longer the only player to count on for their son's education. The family had no confidence in UNRWA's ability to take care of their son's education on its own, and believed that private tutoring was an essential component of his educational success. This instance shows the low ranking that UNRWA's education has come to occupy in the minds of Palestinian families in Lebanon, and it highlights the self-sabotage that UNRWA has brought upon itself by following donor-oriented policies and by losing the confidence of its only constituency and most important stakeholder, the Palestinian refugees.

With its fragile and plummeting financial security, UNRWA would very likely continue down a path along which it progressively transfers the burden of some of its services to the private sector for the sake of survival, to the detriment of Palestinian

refugees. From the Palestinian refugee perspective, UNRWA's "#DignityIsPriceless" campaign was targeted at ensuring the organization's own survival at the expense of the refugees' rights and welfare.²²¹ This angle of campaigning for funds is often overlooked in academic research and public debates, as it is usually overshadowed by UNRWA's visible public campaigning that conceals the inner battlefield at which the organization takes the most severe actions. In this sense, UNRWA's Palestinian staff and beneficiaries represent that slight 'margin' in which the organization is able to shuffle priorities and reorganize its internal structure for the sake of surviving as an institution. In a flawed way, Palestinian refugees, whether staff of UNRWA or simply recipients of aid, are UNRWA's immune system, yet also its primary victim.

B. External Actors' Response

1. *The European-American war within UNRWA*

Subsequent to the US-initiated budget cut (and a few months before UNRWA's mandate renewal at the General Assembly in November 2019), the organization came under heightened scrutiny after an internal report drafted by its ethics office was leaked to Al Jazeera and Agence France-Press, prompting immediate backlash from several European countries that decided to suspend their funds to the already underfunded organization.²²² The timing of the report, which accused UNRWA's senior staff of abuse of

²²¹ Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA," (2019): 32.

²²² AFP, "Report alleges ethical abuses at UN agency for Palestinians", *France 24*, 29 July 2019. Available <https://www.france24.com/en/20190729-report-alleges-ethical-abuses-un-agency-palestinians-0>; Ian Williams, "Ethics report accuses UNRWA leadership of abuse of power", *Al Jazeera*, 29 July 2019. Available <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/ethics-report-accuses-unrwa-leadership-abuse-power-190726114701787.html>

power, sexual misconduct, and nepotism, coincided with Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's efforts to push the Palestinians into the corner by forcing them into accepting the 'Deal of the Century' in its entirety. This smear tactic fits the scheme advanced by Nitsan Chorev in her book "The World Health Organization between North and South" in which she argues that international organizations exhibit three levels of dependence on member states: (1) resources, or funds dependence; (2) normative dependence, in reference to the organization's legitimacy; and (3) procedural dependence, which pertains to the organization's need for members' votes.²²³ According to this division, it appears that the new American policy towards UNRWA had until that date blocked two out of the three conditions above-mentioned: first, the US discontinued funding the agency, then used propaganda to undermine UNRWA's reputation—all in preparation for the UNGA's vote on the agency's mandate renewal, a vote that fell under UNRWA's procedural dependence on Member States. As such, the US challenge to UNRWA has turned existential this time around, and the organization has responded by instituting amendments and cutbacks to its internal policies and programs targeting more than 5 million refugees in its five fields of operations, hence making the refugee population the primary victims of the cuts at a critical juncture.

Yet another side exists to this story. According to a source in the Swedish Foreign Ministry, it was the European states - in particular Sweden, Netherlands, and Switzerland - which in early 2019 pressed for the investigation into UNRWA's alleged corruption. The case involved three high-level UNRWA employees, including the Commissioner General

²²³ Nitsan Chorev, *The World Health Organization between North and South* (Cornell University Press, 2012), 10, 23, 25.

Pierre Krahenbuhl, and in what became the first case of an UNRWA chief being unceremoniously removed from office, Krahenbuhl was ultimately pushed out of the organization. The Israeli media met the scandal with utmost interest, as it extensively covered it and exploited it to amplify its calls for disbanding the organization. Although the scandal gave ammunition to UNRWA's critics, the rapid and efficient damage control undertaken by the organization showed its competence and ability to reform itself. The European states contributed at this crucial moment both by filling the funding gap following the American withdrawal as well as presenting UNRWA's response to the scandal as a clear example of its ability to stand firm in the face of criticism of corruption. The above account on the European role in uncovering corruption cases within UNRWA shows the divergent strategy that it adopts in comparison to the American approach to dealing with the organization: the Europeans prefer to launch an investigations and press the organization to implement reforms, whereas the US simply bashes the organization without making any effort to solve its problems. This difference in these lines of action is rooted in the European vision of UNRWA as a source of stability (especially in the context of the refugee crisis) juxtaposed with the American vision of UNRWA as a nuisance. A thorough analysis of the coverage offered by the Israeli newspaper Israel Hayom (owned by Sheldon Adelson) following the scandal reveals a heightened criticism of the role that the Europeans played in saving and defending UNRWA. Several articles described the EU and its member states as Israel's "European challenge," "European enemy," and (sarcastically) "European 'friends.'" The paper also warned of European opposition to Trump's Peace

Plan and hailed Israel's "divide-and-rule" strategy with EU members.²²⁴ Evidently, the right-wing pro-Trump newspaper adopted an anti-European attitude through which it undermined and demonized the European role in the peace process.²²⁵

It remains however to unpack the European Union's interests in fighting corruption inside UNRWA, and examine, retrospectively, its coping mechanism to the new reality of a post-US UNRWA, in which it assumed a leading role in defending the multilateral system that UNRWA stands for.

2. The EU: It is not only financial, but also political

In the eyes of the European bloc, UNRWA represents a microcosm of the United Nations' system in all its manifestations. By pulling out of the organization - which was the first UN agency to suffer from the new US administration's blows - Donald Trump was attacking not only UNRWA, but also the multilateral system encapsulated in the United Nations. European countries in particular have invested a great deal in building and reinforcing the multilateral order following WWII, at the core of which lies the UN. Not only that, but the European Union itself was built on principles of multilateralism, with the European Commission's President-elect calling the Union 'the guardian of multilateralism.' In this light, Europeans in general and the European Union in particular find it in their

²²⁴ Emmanuel Navon, "The 'deal of the century' and Israel's European challenge", *Israel Hayom*, 18 February 2020. Available <https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/the-deal-of-the-century-and-israels-european-challenge/>

²²⁵ Victor Rosenthal, "Our European Enemy", *Israel Hayom*, 10 February 2020. Available <https://www.israelhayom.com/opinions/our-european-enemy/>

interest to continue to fund UNRWA as it encapsulates in miniature the characteristics and challenges of the UN system.

In this context, and less than a month after the US announced reductions in funds to UNRWA in early 2018, the EU Parliament adopted a resolution on February 8, 2018 where it applauded “UNRWA for its extraordinary efforts,” and recommended, among other things, that “any long-term solution to the recurrent financial shortages of the Agency can only be achieved through a sustainable funding scheme in a global multilateral framework”. This statement refuted the US proposal to “regionalize” UNRWA, as Trump’s peace plan later revealed, and contradicted the call to render the organization an Arab-Arab responsibility.

In addition to this, the European Parliament’s statement reiterated the EU’s “main objective to achieve the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of the 1967 borders, with Jerusalem as the capital of both states, with the secure State of Israel and an independent, democratic, contiguous and viable Palestinian State living side by side in peace and security, on the basis of the right of self-determination and full respect for international law.” This commitment to the two-state solution guides the EU’s policy towards UNRWA and is grounded in the 2017 Joint Declaration that both parties signed and that is governed by “the EU’s overarching objective to implement the two-state solution.” The rationale behind this particular solution is based on a future Palestinian state’s need for “educated, skilled and healthy citizens”, and that’s where UNRWA comes to play with its education sector to serve this vision. The EU also imposes a political dimension on the organization that is vital to its favored two-state solution, as it views that

UNRWA's work "provides political space for the efforts to conclude a peace deal and state building."

At the present moment, Europe seeks to uphold the established political order which prioritizes multi-lateral cooperation within a liberal humanitarian framework, and its firm defense of UNRWA arrives in this context. However, the growing wave of right-wing nationalism entails a trend towards countries seeking to reject internationalism in favor of strengthening their own borders. In this particular case, European countries would have to individually focus on securing their borders in the face of a potential new refugee influx stemming from the dismantlement of UNRWA. Whether internationalism sustains itself or a nationalist world system eventually prevails, Europe will seek to safeguard UNRWA.

In the final analysis, we can deduce three main takeaways from this predicament: first, that the chief of UNRWA is not just a "yes man" who simply follows the UN instructions. The Commissioner General Pierre Krahenbuhl showed that the head of an international organization can play a role as an independent decision maker. Second, that UNRWA clearly made use of the very small margin of autonomy that it possessed prior to the American attack. This autonomy allowed UNRWA to manifest itself as a political player, however, the effectiveness of the political moves made by UNRWA today show that the organization's ability to play the role did not simply emerge out of thin air, but rather has existed in a dormant state. Third, that the US withdrawal from UNRWA was just a microcosm of its withdrawal from the multilateral system, which in turn resulted in a backlash from the system's primary stakeholders (especially the European states and the UN Secretariat). These stakeholders stepped in initially to defend UNRWA, yet during this

process of keeping the organization afloat, the now-European led UN system enabled UNRWA and enlarged its room for maneuvering. As a result, the cash-strapped organization reinforced its relations with its traditional donors, and as a means to diversify its resources it looked East - most notably to the Islamic World and the Global South. Internally, it 'cracked down' on its own constituencies of Palestinian staff and refugees, and implemented austerity measures that ushered in a new approach which refugees are its primary victims.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

This thesis has attempted to gain a greater understanding of UNRWA's place in the world by engaging in a deeper examination of its historical growth, contemporary decision-making, and future potential. While the organization is often either brushed aside as a bureaucratic institution incapable of much independent self-determination or belittled as a mere puppet of various powers, I contest rather that UNRWA has developed a considerable amount of autonomy over the years and that without its effective utilization of this self-made independence, the organization likely would have been abolished—perhaps from the Trump administration's budget cuts in 2018, or perhaps earlier. The organization began proving that it would not just be another weak bureaucratic institution from the very beginning, as demonstrated by its foundational moment as well as the resiliency demonstrated in the 1950s. Its unique position as a body whose employees benefit from its existence coupled with its position within a seemingly never-ending conflict region has also contributed to the creation of a space to demonstrate its autonomy.

In particular, UNRWA's actions in response to the American withdrawal of funds reflected a high degree of autonomy that aligned with the constructivist outlook among international organizations. However, the retaliation by some Member States that resulted in Pierre Krahenbuhl's departure returned the organization to what can be seen as a textbook case of the principal-agent dynamic. In other words, the leeway that was given to

UNRWA in the wake of the withdrawal of its biggest donor was very soon contained and subjected to the Member States' conditions and interests, which prioritized keeping channels open with the US in preparation for a reinstatement of funds. That being so, when investigating the role of UNRWA's leadership from a sociological lens, this thesis has deduced that when the leadership acted upon its small margin of independence, it was replaced and forced to submit to the interests of Member States who could not afford to fully go against the wishes of the biggest donor (the US). As such, the flexibility of decision-making that was granted to the organization at the particular instance of disturbance when the US withdrew funding, was valid only for a limited period of time – after which, UNRWA was expected to be back to the principal-agent protocols and re-align its vision with the Member States' interests. However, utilizing this margin of autonomy by UNRWA in 2018 guaranteed a shift – even if slight – in the balance of power between the interests of the organization and those of the Member States, and ipso facto created new “norms and principles in international politics,”²²⁶ and generated new interests on the international geopolitical scene.²²⁷

The Trump administration and its attack has presented a new problem, however. While each American administration in the post-Oslo era has been even more pro-Israel than the one that preceded it, Trump has taken the pro-Israel approach in Washington to a new level. No longer is any façade of concern about Palestinian refugees rights being presented, and it appears that Benjamin Netanyahu and Jared Kushner are essentially the men in charge of crafting US policy towards the refugees. As evidenced by Trump's moves

²²⁶ Salem, *International Relations Theories*, 30-31.

²²⁷ Barnett and Finnemore, "The Politics, Power, and Pathologies": 700, 702.

regarding Jerusalem and the Golan Heights, Trump has no problem with pulling the trigger and implementing Likudnik policies that Obama, Bush, etc. would have surely viewed as too extreme and contrary to the fundamental principles of the “peace process.” Netanyahu and his cadre seized on the window opened by Trump to push for UNRWA’s dismantlement, yet the best they could do was end American funding for the organization, but this funding was quickly restored by other external sources. Evidently, UNRWA’s status as a knowledge broker that so many parties and individuals rely on made it much more difficult for its opponents to simply kill off the organization with one fatal swoop. This thesis has contended that much of the credit for UNRWA’s repeated ability to fend off existential threats must be given to the organization itself and its “resilience-as-maintenance” approach. This is not to say that Trump and Netanyahu have not achieved a substantial victory, as by shifting much of the responsibility for UNRWA on to the Arab states, they have fulfilled an Israeli dream extant since 1948 of disconnecting the Palestine refugee situation from international responsibility.

This thesis has placed the Trump administration’s attack front and center and has operated under the assumption that the 2018 defunding marks a new era in UNRWA’s history. Yet it must be acknowledged that it is entirely possible, if not probable, that Trump will be a one-term president and lose to Democrat Party challenger Joe Biden in the November 2020 elections.²²⁸ Biden’s campaign is currently emphasizing the candidate’s time as Obama’s Vice President above all, and has pushed the narrative both explicitly and implicitly that a Biden presidency would be a return to what the Democratic Party

²²⁸ This thesis was completed in October 2020 before the US elections took place.

perceives as the “normalcy” of the Obama era. This could possibly entail an attempt at reversing some of Trump’s foreign policies that stand in the starkest contrast to Obama’s—for example, a Biden administration may seek to reinstate the nuclear agreement with Iran. Yet all indications from the Biden camp indicate that the potential incoming American administration intends to continue the trend of being just as, if not more so, pro-Israel than its predecessor. While the Democrats may pay lip service to opposing Trump’s moves with regards to Israel, it seems highly unlikely that anything regarding Jerusalem, the Golan Heights, UNRWA, etc. will be seriously up for reconsideration. Therefore, Trump’s impact appears to be long-lasting, whether he ends up being a one-term president or not. But what does this all mean for UNRWA today? Where does the organization stand two years after the de-funding? The day-to-day operations of UNRWA seem to have continued at their normal pace, and the COVID-19 outbreak slowed world politics down to some extent, including easing pressure on UNRWA in the organization’s race towards survival. Above all, as this thesis has attempted to show, in the face of vicious political attacks on its existence, UNRWA has grown as a political force and has shown the ability to reinvent itself at times of crisis. This role must be recognized and understood first and foremost whenever future issues around UNRWA arise.

Future research should address the contribution of the general staff of UNRWA, and especially the lower-level staff in the decision making process of the organization. Moreover, a more-in-depth investigation into the status of UNRWA in the international scene should be carried out and should include more lengthy interviews with high-ranking officials at the organization, as well as UN staff and members of key diplomatic missions,

such as Sweden, the EU, the Palestinian National Authority, and others. Lastly, future research should carefully consider the normalization trend that is sweeping the Arab region and examine its impact on UNRWA's future.

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