In choosing to ban UNRWA, Israel has entrenched itself as a pariah state

written by Mohammad Abu Hawash | November 29, 2024



Introduction

In choosing to ban the *United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA),* Israel has permanently branded itself as a pariah state. However, what is more important is what this ban means for millions of Palestinians who live under Israeli occupation and rely on UNRWA for daily essential services like education, medical care, and life-saving humanitarian aid in times of crisis.[1] The international community's response to this travesty must be two-pronged; there should be immediate measures taken to force Israel to backtrack before more Palestinians die as a result of reduced humanitarian aid, but there should also be consequences for Israel's other actions. This attempt to curtail UNRWA's operations is part of a wider strategy and hence should not be seen in isolation of the atrocities that Israel committed in Gaza, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

How did Israel Justify the Ban? And was this Justification Merited?

Last week, the Israeli parliament passed two laws that essentially prevent UNRWA from carrying out its internationally approved mandate of providing life-saving relief and essential services to millions of Palestinians. The first law ordered an immediate halt of all Israeli government communication with UNRWA, while the second law prohibits UNRWA from conducting any activities within annexed Israeli territory.

These laws are part of a long-running campaign by the Israelis to discredit and destroy the agency, which failed to gather momentum for years, until Donald Trump cut funding to UNRWA in 2018 despite global outcry. The Biden administration resumed funding in 2021, only to cut it again after Israel claimed that a "significant number" of UNRWA staff were involved in the Gaza uprising of October 7, 2024 (in fact, the Israelis could only name 12 out of 13,000+ UNRWA staff in Gaza, which is hardly a significant number, and most of those named were only marginally implicated). Had it been true, such an accusation would have constituted a breach of the agency's neutrality. However, an independent investigation absolved UNRWA of this accusation, showing that less than 0.001% of its Gaza staff had been implicated (even marginally) in the events of October 7—all of whom had their contracts terminated and none had any influence on the agency's policies. Although the investigation did note that some UNRWA staff unions have become politicized, it is important to note that those unions are independent of the agency's governing structure and have no bearing on its neutrality framework.

Unfortunately, however, Israel doubled down on its claim with the passage of these two laws, and the damage has already been done.

Repercussions of the UNRWA Ban

This ban comes at a time when the ethnically cleansed and plausibly genocided Palestinian communities of the Gaza Strip need aid and essential services more than ever. The ban is already hampering the deconfliction of humanitarian work in Gaza and complicating the agency's activities in the occupied West Bank.

Israel strategically scheduled the ban to take effect right after the ascension of the next US president in January 2025. This was presumably done to minimize the global backlash against the ban, although that is turning out to be a failed strategy as the delay in implementation gave the other side an opportunity to rally and plan a counterstrategy.

Israel is already facing global condemnation for its actions against UNRWA, although it appears that its leadership has become desensitized to international sentiments thanks to political cover from a handful of complacent, hegemonic governments (namely the US, UK, Germany, France, and a few others).

The chief of the United Nations Children's Relief Fund (UNICEF), Martin Griffiths, lamented the UNRWA ban in the harshest possible terms, saying that Israel found a "new way of killing children." The spokesperson of the League of Arab States, Jamal Rushdi, said that the implications of this ban would amount to "confiscating the future of millions of Palestinians." A group of sixteen countries including Ireland, South Africa, Norway, Jordan, and others also issued a joint statement in which they deplored the measures taken.[2] Even countries that Israel claims to have friendly ties with, like the United Arab Emirates, slammed Israel's decision to ban UNRWA. Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry described the move as emblematic of Israel's "persistence in committing crimes of ethnic cleansing against the Palestinian people and erasing the Palestinian identity, and stifling efforts to achieve comprehensive and just peace."

The condemnations go far beyond that; some of Israel's closest allies – Germany, Canada, France, Australia, and the United Kingdom – who have shamefully defended its most atrocious actions in the last year, joined Japan and South Korea in calling on Tel Aviv to preserve UNRWA's' ability to provide "sorely needed basic services." Even US state department spokesperson Matthew Miller—dubbed 'Count Smirkula' (a play on 'Dracula') on social media for smirking when questioned about reports that as many as 186,000 have died in Gaza in the past year—stressed that the ban of UNRWA could have legal implications for Israel under US law. But such tame, tone-deaf statements are reminiscent of the complacency of Western Europe and the US in the apartheid regime of South Africa. As Israel's staunchest enablers, they should not be praised for doing the bare minimum.

However, there is cause for hope. The leniency of Israel's western hegemonic allies is having an adverse effect on the country's future. Israel is becoming more isolated and creating more mortal enemies. In doing so, Israel's leaders are sowing the seeds of their own demise, which will resemble the demise of apartheid South Africa. However, ending this injustice will not be possible without the continued active involvement of the sympathetic masses and world leaders.

How to Respond to Israel

International solidarity is the most effective pathway to bringing justice to the Palestinian people after nearly a century of colonization, oppression, and daily humiliation. In addition to issuing condemnations, conscientious world leaders should finally cross the fear barrier and use all

diplomatic leverage against Israel. Closing embassies in Israel is an essential first step, followed by issuing sanctions and endorsing popular boycotts. We must cross the point of no return: either Israel dismantles its repressive regime and ends the massacres, or the international community steps in to do that.

Arab countries should take the lead, with the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan withdrawing from the Abraham Accords. Egypt and Jordan should also take measures to penalize Israel, although they are in a weaker position because Israel's energy and water exports to Amman and Cairo give Tel Aviv significant leverage; Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu could inflict harm on Jordanian and Egyptian civilians by cutting off water and natural gas in response to the Jordanian and Egyptian governments choosing to annul their peace agreements with Israel. However, the Jordanian and Egyptian leadership should at the very least endorse the highly popular (and successful) boycott movements in their countries and step-up their support of South Africa's genocide tribunal against Israel in the International Court of Justice.

Sympathetic countries throughout Asia, Africa, and South America should follow suit, closing their embassies in Israel and severing all diplomatic ties until Israel dismantles its repressive apartheid regime. This is necessary to give Arab countries cover when the expected backlash from the US and its allies comes. Joint action could be coordinated through the non-aligned movement, which is currently chaired by Uganda. Other multilaterals should also step up their solidarity efforts, particularly the League of Arab States and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation.

The horrifying acts of indiscriminate murder, domicide, urbicide, and ecocide in Gaza must have consequences. Otherwise, a dangerous precedent will be set for Sudan, the Democratic Republic of Congo, and other areas where grave human rights violations are being perpetrated. Additionally, failing to act on Gaza will delegitimize the international rules-based order in irreparable ways.

This is why it is important to hold Israeli officials at all levels accountable for the violence they sanctioned regardless of whether they cave in to global pressure and end their military campaigns in Gaza and Lebanon or not. The war has already gone on for too long and irreparable damage has been done. Therefore, Israeli leaders must answer for the crimes they sanctioned. Lower-ranked Israeli military commanders and soldiers such as those implicated in torture and sexual violence at the Sde Teiman concentration camp should also answer for their crimes.

Conclusion

What the UNRWA ban has shown is that Israel will not stop its onslaught until the Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank are either killed, displaced, or completely subjugated. Israel is isolating itself through its own actions, but we still need to act to stop the flagrant disregard of human rights, international norms, and basic decency. The key to success here, as was seen in the case of apartheid South Africa, is in coordinated and sustained international action. If Israel is turning itself to a pariah state, then the rest of the world should treat it as one.

Notes

[1] It is assumed that UNRWA's operations outside of Israeli-controlled territory will continue unimpeded, which is essential for the stability of Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan.

[2] The full list of sixteen countries is: Algeria, Belgium, Brazil, Guyana, Indonesia, Ireland, Jordan, Kuwait, Luxembourg, Norway, Portugal, Qatar, Slovenia, South Africa, Spain and the State of Palestine.