

By hurting UN agency, West sides with genocide



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OPINION

There is an important background to the decision by the United States and other leading Western states, the UK among them, to freeze funding to the United Nations' Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the main channel by which the UN disseminates food and welfare services to the most desperate and destitute Palestinians. The funding cut — which has been also adopted by Germany, France, Japan, Switzerland, Canada, Netherlands, Italy, Australia, and Finland — was imposed even though the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruled on Friday that Israel may be committing genocide in Gaza. The World Court judges quoted at length UN officials who warned that Israel's actions had left almost all of the enclave's 2.3 million inhabitants on the brink of a humanitarian catastrophe, including famine. The West's flimsy pretext for what amounts to a war on UNRWA is that Israel claims 12 local UN staff — out of 13,000 — are implicated in Hamas' break-out from the open-air prison of Gaza on October 7, 2023. The sole evidence appears to be coerced confessions, likely extracted through torture, from Palestinian fighters captured by Israel that day.

The UN immediately sacked all the accused staff, seemingly without due process. We can assume that was because the refugee agency was afraid its already threadbare lifeline to the people of Gaza, as well as millions of other Palestinian refugees across the region — in the West Bank, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria — would be further threatened. It need not have worried. Western donor states cut their funding anyway, plunging Gaza deeper into calamity.

They did so without regard to the fact their decision amounts to collective punishment: some 2.3 million Palestinians in Gaza face starvation and the spread of lethal disease, while another 4 million Palestinian refugees across the region are at imminent risk of losing food, health care, and schooling. According to law professor Francis Boyle, who filed a genocide case for Bosnia at the World Court some two decades ago, that shifts most of these Western

states from their existing complicity with Israel's genocide (by selling arms and providing aid and diplomatic cover) into direct and active participation in the genocide, by violating the 1948 Genocide Convention's prohibition on "deliberately inflicting on the group [in this case, Palestinians] conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part". The World Court is investigating Israel for genocide. But it could easily widen

its investigation to include Western states. The threat to UNRWA needs to be seen in that light. Not only is Israel thumbing its nose at the World Court and international law, but states like the US and UK are doing so too, by cutting their funding to the refugee agency. They are slapping the court in the face, and indicating that they are four-square behind Israel's crimes, even if they are shown to be genocidal in nature.

Israel's creature

The following is the proper context for understanding what is really going on with this latest attack on UNRWA: The agency was created in 1949 — decades before Israel's current military slaughter in Gaza — to provide for the basic needs of Palestinian refugees, including essential food provision, health care, and education. It has an outsize role in Gaza because most of the Palestinians living there lost — or are descended from families that lost — everything in 1948.

That was when they were ethnically cleansed by the fledgling Israeli military from most of Palestine, in an event known to Palestinians as the Nakba, or Catastrophe. Their lands were turned into what Israel's leaders described as an exclusively "Jewish state". The Israeli army set about destroying Palestinians' towns and villages inside this new state so that they could never return. UNRWA is separate from the UN's main refugee agency, the UNHCR, and deals only with Palestinian refugees.

Although Israel does not want you to know it, the reason for there being two UN refugee agencies is that Israel and its Western backers insisted on the division back in 1948. Why? Because Israel was afraid of Palestinians falling under the responsibility of the UNHCR's forerunner, the International Refugee Organisation. The IRO was established in the immediate wake of the Second World War, in large part to cope with the millions of European Jews fleeing Nazi atrocities. Israel did not want the two cases

treated as comparable because it was pushing hard for Jewish refugees to be settled on lands from which it had just expelled Palestinians. Part of the IRO's mission was to seek the repatriation of European Jews. Israel was worried that the very principle might be used both to deny it the Jews it wanted to colonise Palestinian land and to force it to allow the Palestinian refugees to return to their former homes. So, in a real sense, UNRWA is Israel's creature: it was set up to keep the Palestinians a case apart, an anomaly.

Prison camp

Nonetheless, things did not go exactly to plan for Israel. Given its refusal to allow the refugees to return, and the reluctance of neighbouring Arab states to be complicit in Israel's original act of ethnic cleansing, the Palestinian population in UNRWA's refugee camps ballooned. They became a special problem in Gaza, where about two-thirds of the population are refugees or descended from refugees. The tiny coastal enclave did not have the land or resources to cope with the rapidly expanding numbers there. The fear in Israel was that, as the plight of the Palestinians of Gaza became more desperate, the international community would pressure Israel into a peace agreement, allowing

for the refugees' return to their former homes. That had to be stopped at all costs. In the early 1990s, as the supposed Oslo "peace process" was being unveiled, Israel began penning the Palestinians of Gaza inside a steel cage, surrounded by gun towers. Some 17 years ago, Israel added a blockade that prevented the population's movement in and out of Gaza, including via the strip's coastal waters and its skies. The Palestinians became prisoners in a giant concentration camp, denied the most basic links to the outside world. Israel alone decided what was allowed in and out. An Israeli court later learnt that from 2008 onwards the Israeli military put Gaza on what amount-

ed to a starvation diet by restricting food supplies. There was a strategy here that involved making Gaza uninhabitable, something the UN started warning about in 2015. Israel's game plan appears to have gone something like this: By making Palestinians in Gaza ever more desperate, it was certain that armed groups like Hamas willing to fight to liberate the enclave would gain in popularity. In turn, that would provide Israel with the excuse both to further tighten restrictions on Gaza to deal with a "terrorism threat," and to intermittently wreck Gaza in "retaliation" for those attacks — or what Israeli military commanders variously called "mowing the grass" and "return-

ing Gaza to the Stone Age". The assumption was that Gaza's armed groups would exhaust their energies managing the constant "humanitarian crises" Israel had engineered. At the same time, Israel could promote twin narratives. It could say publicly that it was impossible for it to take responsibility for the people of Gaza, given that they were so clearly invested both in Jew-hatred and terrorism. Meanwhile, it would privately tell the international community that, given how uninhabitable Gaza was becoming, they urgently needed to find a solution that did not involve Israel. The hope was that Washington would be able to arm-twist or bribe neighbouring Egypt into taking most of Gaza's destitute population.



Refugees live in tents at Rafah, Southern Palestine, between 1948–1949.

