

The Future of UNRWA and Hamas in Gaza

Interview by Rick Sterling with Peter Ford

By [Rick Sterling](#) and [Peter Ford](#)

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Peter Ford has an extensive career in the UK Diplomatic Service, including serving as UK Ambassador to Bahrain and then Syria. He then served for many years as Special Representative to the Commissioner General of UNRWA – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. In this interview, he discusses the background, importance, and how Israel wants to “replace” UNRWA.

Rick Sterling (RS): How did you come to work for UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency?

Peter Ford (PF): Well, ever since I was a young cub Arabist, I have been exposed to the work of UNRWA. My first job was in Lebanon. I saw its work firsthand in the Palestinian camps there. Every exposure I had increased my admiration for the organization. As I approached retirement, I was attracted to the idea of working for UNRWA.

By chance, I read in The Economist magazine that UNRWA was looking to create a new post, a fundraiser in the Arab world. And the requirements were diplomatic experience and knowledge of the Arabic language. Wow, I thought this is tailor-made for me. And so it proved. I think I was chosen from a shortlist of one.

Knowledge of Arabic was a great help. I didn't benefit from any support from the British government, I have to say. And that is an issue with UNRWA. Many of the top jobs are earmarked for particular countries. So the Commissioner General, by custom is always either a European or American. And the deputy head of UNRWA, Deputy Commissioner General, is also an American or a European.

RS: What does UNRWA do in Gaza and beyond? How big an organization is it?

Peter Ford: UNRWA began operations in 1950 in the aftermath of the conflict in Palestine that led to the creation of Israel and the expulsion of half of Palestine's population. And the mandate given by the UN General Assembly to UNRWA was to look after these refugees and very significantly their children. The status of refugees was defined as people who were being helped by UNRWA and their descendants. And this became very important because most refugees around the world from other countries, the status of refugee is not handed on father to son or daughter. But in the case of Palestine refugees, because of the special circumstances where they lost their country, their homes and their livelihoods, they were accorded permanent refugee status for as long as they were unable to exercise their right of return.



UNRWA building shelled by Israeli army, 15 January 2009 (Licensed under CC BY-SA 2.0)

As the years passed, this became very important politically. And as it became more difficult

to envisage the right of return, the mere existence of UNRWA and its according refugee status to several million Palestinians perpetuated the right of return. And this became a major problem with Israel.

From 1950, UNRWA's mandate has been to look after the relief and welfare of the Palestinian refugees in terms of education, healthcare, social services, the refugee camp infrastructure, houses, the social services for the vulnerable, and some microfinance and job creation in recent years.

The core activities are the schools. There is a huge network of UNRWA schools and medical centers. And these are spread across the Middle East in Palestine itself, in the occupied West Bank, in Gaza, in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan.

Overall, there are almost 6 million Palestinians who qualify for UNRWA support. And of those, about 1.9 million are in Gaza, and about half a million are in Syria, and the rest are shared between Lebanon and Jordan. So it's serving almost as a micro-state. Six million people is a big responsibility and one that requires a lot of coordination with the host authorities.

Of these, the most problematic by far is Israel as the occupying power in the West Bank and Gaza. Relations with other governments have by and large been cooperative. There is occasional friction, but on the whole there are very good relations. It's often forgotten that Jordan and Lebanon and Syria give a lot of support in addition to the support that UNRWA gives. And they host these millions of refugees without complaint.

RS: Doesn't UNRWA in some ways relieve Israel of responsibility for the people that it's got under its control?

Peter Ford: Well, yes, it does. Under international law, the power that has physical control as the occupying power has responsibility to provide the basic services which UNRWA provides: healthcare, education, and housing. So this burden is taken off the shoulders of Israel. If UNRWA didn't exist, the Israelis would have to carry the burden of looking after all those millions of refugees. But you'd be mistaken if you thought they were grateful at all.

RS: A few months ago, Israel made accusations and somehow persuaded several countries to stop their donations to UNRWA. What do you make of this?

Peter Ford: Well, this was a fabricated story the Israelis came up with about three months after the alleged events, they came up with a story that staff had been involved in the 7th October breakout and had carried out crimes. This was announced with great fanfare. Knee-jerk reactions followed on the part of the usual suspects. Americans, Europeans and Britain suspended their vital payments to UNRWA.

UNRWA is a beggar. It's an international beggar. It receives almost nothing from central UN funds. The rest is voluntary, which makes life very difficult for UNRWA. It has to go cap in hand and cannot afford to upset any of its important donors. And that means the United States, the EU, and Britain.

In fact, my job, the reason I was recruited, was to try to diversify UNRWA's funding so that it could be a little less dependent on the Western powers. And I had some success in that, garnering about half a billion dollars of contributions from mainly Gulf and North African

countries.

But to go back to your question, Israel came up with this story. Just on the basis of the Israelis accusations, the Western powers cut the aid. Unwisely, to my mind, UNRWA immediately suspended the staff who were accused. This only tended to give credence to the Israeli claims. But this shows the weakness, the political weakness of UNRWA . It finds it very difficult to stand up to bullying by these powerful countries, by the United States and Europe.

Eventually, about three weeks ago, an independent investigator, a former French foreign minister, carried out an investigation and concluded that there was no proof. The Israelis were unable to provide any proof to back up their allegations. And most countries are now going back or have already gone back to lift their suspension.

RS: I think even the original accusations were that some 12 or 13 individuals from a staff of 13,000 staff had participated in October 7. And now even that's been discredited, you're saying?

Peter Ford: Yes, that's exactly what has happened. It would have been surprising, actually, if there hadn't been some younger employees, but the Israelis couldn't provide evidence for a single one.

RS: Yes. And I understand that UNRWA gives the names of all their employees to Israel every year for them to almost vet the list.

Peter Ford: That's right. Israel has an amazing oversight of the activities of UNRWA, at least as far as the occupied territories are concerned. Over 90% of the employees of UNRWA are Palestinians, the vast majority of Palestinian refugees themselves. But the hierarchy is Western or non-Palestinian. Anyway, as I mentioned earlier, the top employees, the director general and immediate close staff are European or American, but over 90% of the staff are Palestinians. And that is something the Israelis don't like either. The Palestinians have agency in the sense of some measure of control over their lives.

RS: I have the impression that UNRWA has done a very good job in the education field. And that, again, is something Israel doesn't like.

Peter Ford: Yes, Israel doesn't like the fact that so many Palestinians have received a good education under UNRWA's supervision. Many Palestinians have gone on to higher education, to distinguished professorships having emerged from UNRWA schools in the camps over the years.

It's a badge of honor for a Palestinian to have passed through an UNRWA school. In Syria, where I was, Syrians wanted to enroll in UNRWA schools. It was one of the bribes that we could use to leverage favors from the Syrian government. So that's testimony to how good these schools are and their reputation.

A bone of contention with the Israelis concerns what's taught in the schools. And again, the Israelis make lurid, unsupported claims about the pupils being taught Palestinian propaganda. And this is just fake news. In the UNRWA schools, they follow the curricula of the Arab country or authority where they are.

So UNRWA schools follow the curriculum of the Palestine Authority, which is vetted by Israel,

of course. In Jordan, they follow the Jordanian curriculum, etcetera. But the Israelis love to make up any propaganda they can about UNRWA, and they try to limit UNRWA funding. They use any method to try to stymie, block, or make more difficult the operations of UNRWA. They really do want to bring an end to this agency.

In a way, you can understand it because the agency is synonymous with Palestinian rights and in particular with the right of return. This implies the Palestinians have a right to return to those towns and villages from which their forebears were expelled back in 1948.



A view of a United Nations Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) school sheltering displaced Palestinians in Khan Yunis, Gaza on October 22, 2023 [Abed Zagout/Anadolu Agency]

So this is why UNRWA is a thorn in the side of Israel and one they would love to destroy completely. Their ambition has no limit. And we've seen this during the Gaza crisis. They have used this to try to exclude UNRWA, make propaganda against UNRWA, and create substitutes for UNRWA. Creating a substitute is the latest strategy. The organization that had some of its staff killed by the Israelis is one of these. In fact, that organization was particularly friendly to the Israelis and the Israelis facilitated its entry to Gaza. And it was a tragic irony that the Israelis ended up killing employees of this agency, World Central Kitchen. The Israelis aim to replace UNRWA with organizations they can control like this. That's part of the plan with the port to be created by the Americans and the British in northern Gaza. It would be serviced by organizations other than UNRWA.

RS: What's the status of UNRWA in Gaza now? Is it able to operate as in the past, or are they being restricted?

Peter Ford: UNRWA is very much restricted as far as traditional activities are concerned. The healthcare clinics, hospitals and schools have been either destroyed or badly damaged or they don't have equipment or they don't have medicines. So there's no schooling going on except in home environments. But on the other hand, UNRWA is busier than ever on

relief services. It's more like 1950 when UNRWA was providing tents and the most basic water and food supplies. You'll recall that UNRWA stands for UN Relief and Works. And by "works" was meant education, healthcare, and housing. Today UNRWA is doing far more relief than works .

RS: We've seen pictures of thousands of tents to temporarily house the hundreds of thousands and even more than a million refugees. Have those been set up by UNRWA?

Peter Ford: Yes, and temporary housing also happens in the UNRWA schools. These are now occupied by many thousands of families. The schools are being converted into accommodation. And the healthcare centers, to the extent it's physically possible. And the hospitals, they've also been converted into temporary housing. There are other UN agencies involved. It wouldn't be fair not to mention the UNICEF, the Children's Agency, the food agency, all the international agencies are there.

RS: What do you think will be UNRWA's role in the future?

Peter Ford: In the future? Well, in a single sentence, its role will be to run Gaza alongside Hamas. Now, that's controversial, obviously. But I think that the day after will look very much like the day before. I don't think the Israelis will succeed in crushing Hamas.

Eventually the Israelis will be forced to withdraw as they have been forced to withdraw in the past. There will be vastly more reconstruction to do. But UNRWA has the experience and the workforce in place. Any outside agency would have to bring in thousands of workers.

And after the Israelis leave, of course, the authorities, which are bound to be the people with guns, the resistance, will be more than glad to go back to the old basis of effectively a condominium with the UN agencies. And this is as it should be.

RS: Some people think that October 7 and what's happened since then has really changed things. Is that your perspective also?

Peter Ford: Wishful thinking is not a good basis for policy. And I'm afraid the Israelis, indulged by their Western backers, go in for a lot of wishful thinking. Though in the last couple of months, one hears less about the day after. It seems the Israelis are focused on just how the hell can they get out, how can they extricate themselves without massive humiliation? There's very little chatter now about bringing in an Arab defense force to police the Gaza Strip or any nonsense like that. So I believe there will be no alternative. The day after will look like the day before.

RS: What do you think of the latest (May 31) Biden plan?

Peter Ford: Better late than never. As much by what it omits as by what it says. The plan recognizes that Israel must withdraw with Hamas undefeated and set to resume control of Gaza. All fantasizing about 'eliminating' Hamas, about setting up a quisling regime, about an Arab peacekeeping force, about two states – all dropped. It is an unspeakable, unbearable tragedy that it took this amount of killing, maiming and mindless destruction with American bombs to come to this obvious realization.

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Rick Sterling is an independent journalist in the San Francisco Bay Area. He can be contacted at rsterling1@gmail.com. He is a regular contributor to Global Research.

Peter Ford is a former British Ambassador to Syria and Bahrain, he also served as a UN expert on refugees.

Featured image: Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) holds press conference in Jerusalem on October 27, 2023 [Mostafa Alkharouf/Anadolu Agency]

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