



UNRWA

**United Nations Relief and
Works Agency for Palestine
Refugees in the Near East**

Committee: United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)

Topic: Addressing corruption and misconduct within the governing body of UNRWA

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I. Committee Background

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was established in December 1949. It was created to provide direct relief and works programs for Palestinian refugees. Currently, the committee offers assistance and protection to over 5.5 million people in the Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank. UNRWA defines a refugee as a “person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of June 1st, 1946 to May 15th, 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” Furthermore, the descendants of Palestinian refugees are also eligible for registration as a refugee with UNRWA (Who We Are, UNRWA, 2020). The committee is the largest agency within the United Nations (UN) system and employs 30,000 people. As a subsidiary of the UN General Assembly, its mandate must be renewed every three years. Most recently, the General Assembly renewed UNRWA's mandate until June 30th, 2023 (Nicholas, Reuters, 2019). The committee is led by a Commissioner-General and supported by an Advisory Commission. The Advisory Commission is composed of 24 countries and three observer bodies. Moreover, each region of operations is overseen by a Director who is in charge of distributing humanitarian aid and managing the committee's budget. The majority of UNRWA's funding comes from voluntary contributions from UN Member States (Who We Are, UNRWA, 2020).

II. Topic Information

A) History of the Topic

According to Merriam-Webster, corruption is defined as “dishonest or illegal behaviour, especially by powerful people” (Corruption, Merriam-Webster, 2020). Misconduct means “mismanagement” or “intentional wrongdoing” (Misconduct, Merriam-Webster, 2020). Corruption involves acts that “distort policies or the central functioning of [an organization], enabling leaders to benefit at the expense of the public good.” This can include the manipulation of policies, institutions and rules of procedure in order to obtain sources or for monetary gain. It is often done in order to maintain power, status and wealth (Transparency International, 2018).

In July 2019, the United Nations released a report which contained alleged abuses of authority by UNRWA’s governing body. It stated that the committee’s leaders had committed “abuses of authority for personal gain, to suppress legitimate dissent and to otherwise achieve their personal objectives” (Williams, Al Jazeera, 2019). For instance, the report accused the committee’s Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl of nepotism and sexual misconduct. He is alleged to have used the committee’s funds to pay for personal flights and hotels. Due to these trips, Krähenbühl was rarely in Palestine to manage the UNRWA. Moreover, his relationship with advisor Maria Mohammedi was described in the report as “beyond professional.” He is accused of appointing her to a role that she was unqualified for and appropriating money from the UNRWA’s budget to fund her lifestyle. Similarly, Deputy Commissioner-General Sandra Mitchell has been accused of using her leadership position to appoint relatives, including her husband, to jobs within the committee. Furthermore, Chief of Staff Hakam Shahwan is said to have bullied

UNRWA staff members, bypassed procedures to obtain money and took bribes from government officials (Joffe and Romirowsky, BESA, 2019). This is not the first time that UNRWA's leadership has been accused of corruption and misconduct. In 1999, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services declared that "UNRWA is being run by decree. Decisions are shaped behind closed doors by a small group of individuals trusted by the Commissioner-General." Two separate investigations found that money budgeted for building projects was incorrectly used. For example, construction projects were awarded to the lowest bidders, the cheapest materials were used and safety inspections were not carried out. The leftover funds were then pocketed by UNRWA leaders. Moreover, employees that reported construction and/or safety issues were bribed to stay quiet or fired from the committee (The Daily Star, 1999).

The allegations have caused serious damage to the reputation of the committee and its ability to support millions of Palestinian refugees. Several European donor countries, including Belgium, the Netherlands and Switzerland, have suspended their annual payments to UNRWA (UN Watch, 2019). This has further exacerbated the "extremely dire financial situation" of the committee and could result in the closing of UNRWA supported schools, medical facilities and food programs (Reinl, Al Jazeera, 2019). Moreover, the United States and Israel have cited the allegations as the reason why the organization should be dissolved. Israel's UN ambassador Danny Danon said that donor funds were clearly not used to help Palestinians and instead were used to spread "false information about [the Palestinian] refugee population" for personal gain (Jansen, The Irish Times, 2019). In November 2019, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services announced the findings of its investigation into the allegations against UNRWA's governing body. It cleared Krähenbühl of fraud or misappropriation of operational funds, however, it did state

that there were multiple managerial issues that needed to be addressed. As a result, Krähenbühl resigned as UNRWA's Commissioner-General and was replaced by Christian Saunders. Saunders will act as the Officer-in-Charge of UNRWA and lead the implementation of a management plan to strengthen the committee, with a special focus in the areas of oversight and accountability (UN, 2019).

B) Current Issues

Canada: In July 2019, the Canadian government stated that it was "concerned" about the allegations of corruption and misconduct. However, it announced that it would not withdraw its support for the organization. The country has donated over US\$110 million to UNRWA since 2016. The allegations caused Canadian Jewish groups to call for the Liberal government to cease all funding until a "full investigation is completed and real change is implemented" (Global News, 2019). Canada says that it supports the UN's management plan for UNRWA and believes that Saunders will manage it in a rigorous and fair manner. Furthermore, the country will carefully review the implementation process and make future funding decisions based on its outcomes (Csillag, CJN, 2019).

Germany: Germany has called UNRWA one of its "most important partners in the Middle East" since it acts as a "regional stability factor in an unstable environment." That is why Germany will continue to financially support the committee even after the UN had found it had been improperly managed. The appointment of Saunders as the Officer-in-Charge has been well received by Germany, which called his leadership a step in the right direction. In fact, as a vote of confidence, the country announced four new projects with UNRWA valued at €59 million. These projects will fix the crumbling infrastructure of refugee camps in Lebanon, providing children with school materials and medical care for infants (ReliefWeb, 2019).

Turkey: Turkey has supported UNRWA since its foundation in 1949. In June 2019, the country pledged US\$10 million to UNRWA's reconstruction projects in the Gaza Strip (Middle East Monitor, 2019). After the allegations of corruption and misconduct had been made public, Turkey's Foreign Minister, Mevlut Cavusoglu, stated that his country would not withdraw its support from UNRWA. He further said that Turkey's "strong relationship with Palestine will always continue." Furthermore, the country has participated in several ministerial meetings of the Ad Hoc Liaison Committee, which is the international donor group for Palestinian refugees. At these meetings, Turkey urged the international community to help UNRWA move forward and implement the changes suggested in the Office of Internal Oversight Services report. Turkey believes that the changes will enable the committee to maximize its budget and reach more refugees in need of education, medical care and safe infrastructure (Yuruk, Anadolu Agency, 2019).

United Kingdom: The United Kingdom (UK) is one of UNRWA's top five donor countries. It provides UNRWA with £65.5 million (DFID, 2019). When the UN report was released in July 2019, the UK said that it was "dismayed" by the allegations of corruption and misconduct, especially since it had just promised to donate an additional £19 million. The UK has pledged to continue its support for Palestinian refugees and does not intend to withdraw funds from the committee (Deen, IPS, 2019). However, the money is now directly tied to specific projects in order to ensure that it is spent correctly. Right now, the UK's donations will be used to help Palestinians in Gaza with food vouchers, primary level education and health care services for children (DFID, 2019).

C) UN Action

The United Nations launched a full investigation into allegations of corruption and misconduct in August 2019. The investigation was led by the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services, which evaluated emails, committee policies and bank accounts. It also spoke with employees and volunteers. The findings were released in November 2019. The committee's leadership team were either dismissed or resigned (Joffe and Romirowsky, BESA, 2019). The UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, appointed Christian Saunders as the Officer-in-Charge of UNRWA in order to "to support UNRWA and ensure operational continuity." Saunders has worked for the UN since 1989 and has a history of enacting economic and budgetary reforms. Furthermore, since November 2019, the committee has been in the process of implementing a new management plan in order to strengthen the UNRWA and focus on the areas of oversight and accountability (UN, 2019). Moreover, further reforms are planned. According to Saunders, these future reforms will include input from the Advisory Commission and donors (Federal Foreign Office, 2019).

III. Essential Questions

1. What is UNRWA? How is the organization structured?
2. What has the governing body of UNRWA been accused of?
3. What disciplinary measures has the United Nations taken to address the issue?
Does your delegation agree or disagree with the measures? Why or why not?
4. How can UNRWA be reformed to prevent corruption and misconduct in the future?
5. How did the UN report on corruption and misconduct impact the committee? How did it affect Palestinian refugees?

6. What other organizations work with UNRWA? How can these organizations help prevent corruption and misconduct from happening again?
7. After multiple instances of corruption and misconduct, should UNRWA continue to exist as a committee? Why or why not?

IV. Quorum

- Afghanistan
- Brazil
- Canada
- China
- Egypt
- France
- Germany
- India
- Iran
- Israel
- Japan
- Kenya
- Malaysia
- Mexico
- Nigeria
- Pakistan
- Russia
- Saudi Arabia
- South Africa

- South Korea
- Syria
- Turkey
- United Arab Emirates
- United Kingdom
- United States

V. Resources

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