

## Fixing UNRWA: Repairing the UN's Troubled System of Aid to Palestinian Refugees

[James G. Lindsay](#)

80 Pages

January 2009

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UNRWA -- is it part of the solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict or part of the problem?

The humanitarian aspect of the recent conflict between Israel and Hamas has cast a fresh spotlight on the presence in Gaza of the nearly sixty-year-old United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), raising important questions about why the UN still operates schools, hospitals, and clinics for "refugees" six decades after the partition of Mandatory Palestine.

UNRWA began providing assistance to Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon in May 1950, in the wake of the 1947-1949 Arab-Israeli war. Since then, the organization has survived wars, coups, uprisings, and, in Gaza and the West Bank, even the creation of the first-ever Palestinian governing body -- the Palestinian Authority -- which operates in parallel with, not in place of, UNRWA institutions.

Over the course of its long history, UNRWA has rarely been the subject of comprehensive external evaluation, and virtually nothing has been written on the organization's strategy and operations by a senior staff member with knowledge of how UNRWA actually works.

This path-breaking study by James G. Lindsay, UNRWA's former general counsel, offers one of the first insider accounts of the organization. In it, Lindsay analyzes the agency's evolution over the past half century, evaluates recent criticisms of its operations, and recommends bold new policies for the U.S. government -- UNRWA's largest single-country donor -- that will help repair an aid and relief system that has strayed from its original mission.

### Update: May 2014

Watch James G. Lindsay's presentation to a United Nations conference on May 19, 2014 titled, "UNRWA - Providing Humanitarian Relief or Prolonging the Palestinian Refugee Problem?"

- [Part 1](#)
- [Part 2](#)

## THE AUTHOR

**James G. Lindsay**, an Aufzien fellow at The Washington Institute focusing on Palestinian refugee issues and UN humanitarian assistance, served with UNRWA from 2000 to 2007. As legal advisor and general counsel for the organization from 2002, he oversaw all UNRWA legal activities, from aid contracts to relations with Israel, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinian Authority.

Before his UNRWA service, Mr. Lindsay spent twenty years as an attorney in the Criminal Division of the U.S. Department of Justice, with assignments in the Internal Security, Appellate, and Asset Forfeiture Sections, as well as in the U.S. Attorney's offices in Washington, D.C., and Miami. Between 1985 and 1994, he was seconded to the Multinational Force and Observers in Sinai, serving as the force counsel for legal and treaty affairs. In 2000, he took early retirement from the Justice Department to join UNRWA in Gaza.