

# Will Israel Succeed in Dissolving UNRWA During Trump's Second Term?



Strategic Estimates

February 2025



In a historic and unprecedented move since the establishment of the United Nations in 1945, Israel's Ambassador to the UN, Danny Danon, in a formal letter to the UN Secretary-General, has set a deadline for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) to halt its operations in Jerusalem and vacate all premises under its control by Jan. 30, 2025.

This action follows the Israeli Foreign Ministry's official notification to the UN of the 1967 agreement termination that has governed its relationship with the agency. The annulment of this agreement effectively bans UNRWA's operations in Israel and prohibits Israeli authorities from cooperating with the agency in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. This move is not the first of its kind aimed at undermining the agency, as Israel has repeatedly sought to tarnish its reputation, viewing its presence and operations as support for the Palestinian position on the right of return.

The latest escalation comes in the wake of a draft resolution passed by the Israeli Knesset Nov. 4, 2024, which was approved by an overwhelming majority. The resolution bans "UNRWA activities in the Palestinian territories," citing allegations that dozens of UNRWA employees in the Gaza Strip were involved in the Hamas attack on October 7. Under the new law, "UNRWA's operations in East Jerusalem will be discontinued, and its responsibilities will be transferred to Israeli authorities." Furthermore, the 1967 agreement that permitted UNRWA to operate in Israel will be revoked, ending the agency's activities in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territories. The law also mandates that Israeli officials cease all contact with UNRWA personnel. These measures are scheduled to take effect 90 days after their approval. The decision has broader implications beyond the cessation of UNRWA's operations. The Israel Land Authority has announced the confiscation of the land on which UNRWA's headquarters is located in the Sheikh Jarrah neighbourhood of Jerusalem. The site is planned for redevelopment into a settlement outpost, which will include 1,440 housing units.

The move is expected to severely restrict UNRWA's activities in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, where the UNRWA relies on coordination with Israeli authorities to deliver humanitarian aid and essential services. The potential cessation of UNRWA's operations raises serious concerns, particularly in refugee camps across the region, where the agency has long served as a lifeline for millions of Palestinians. Arab countries hosting refugees, many of which lack the resources to fill the void left by UNRWA, fear that the suspension of the agency's services could lead to significant instability. The timing of this decision is notable, coinciding with the return of Donald Trump to the U.S. presidency. This political shift may provide Israel with a favourable opportunity to advance its goal of ending UNRWA's work.

Against this backdrop, this analysis seeks to examine the complex and often contentious relationship between UNRWA and Israel, tracing its evolution from the agency's establishment to the recent decision to ban its operations. Furthermore, this paper will explore the underlying U.S. intentions regarding the potential dissolution of UNRWA, particularly in light of Trump's return to the White House for a second term. It will also assess the broader implications of such a ban across political, humanitarian, and regional stability dimensions.

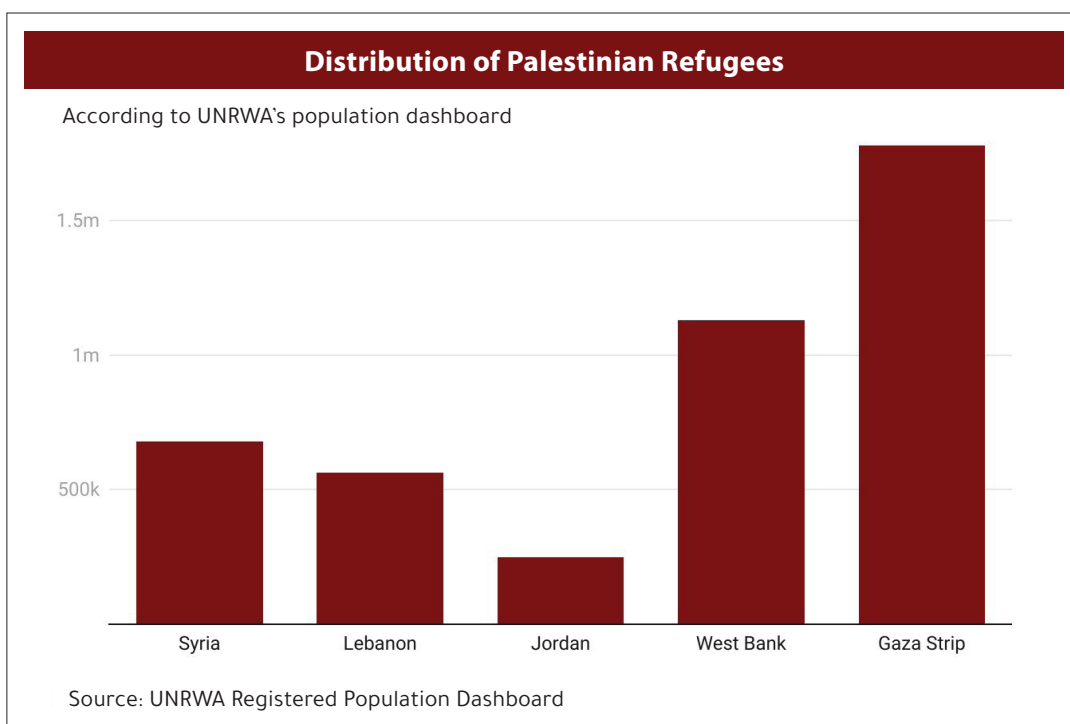


## Cause Protector

The United Nations General Assembly established the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) under Resolution 194/1948, in response to the desire of the international mediator, Count Folk Bernadotte. Pursuant to Paragraph 12 of the exact resolution, the UNCCP decided on Aug. 23, 1949, to form the “Economic Survey Mission,” also known at the time as the “Clapp Mission,” during a period of political turmoil. This came in the wake of the failure to resolve the refugee issue at the Lausanne Conference. Based on the mission’s recommendation, the General Assembly established the “United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)” under Resolution 302 on Dec. 8, 1949, as a “humanitarian organisation” to carry out relief and works programs for Palestinian refugees in cooperation with local governments. UNRWA was assigned a dual mandate: to manage relief efforts on one hand and to implement a work program aimed at achieving self-sufficiency for the refugees on the other. The agency began its operations on May 1, 1950.

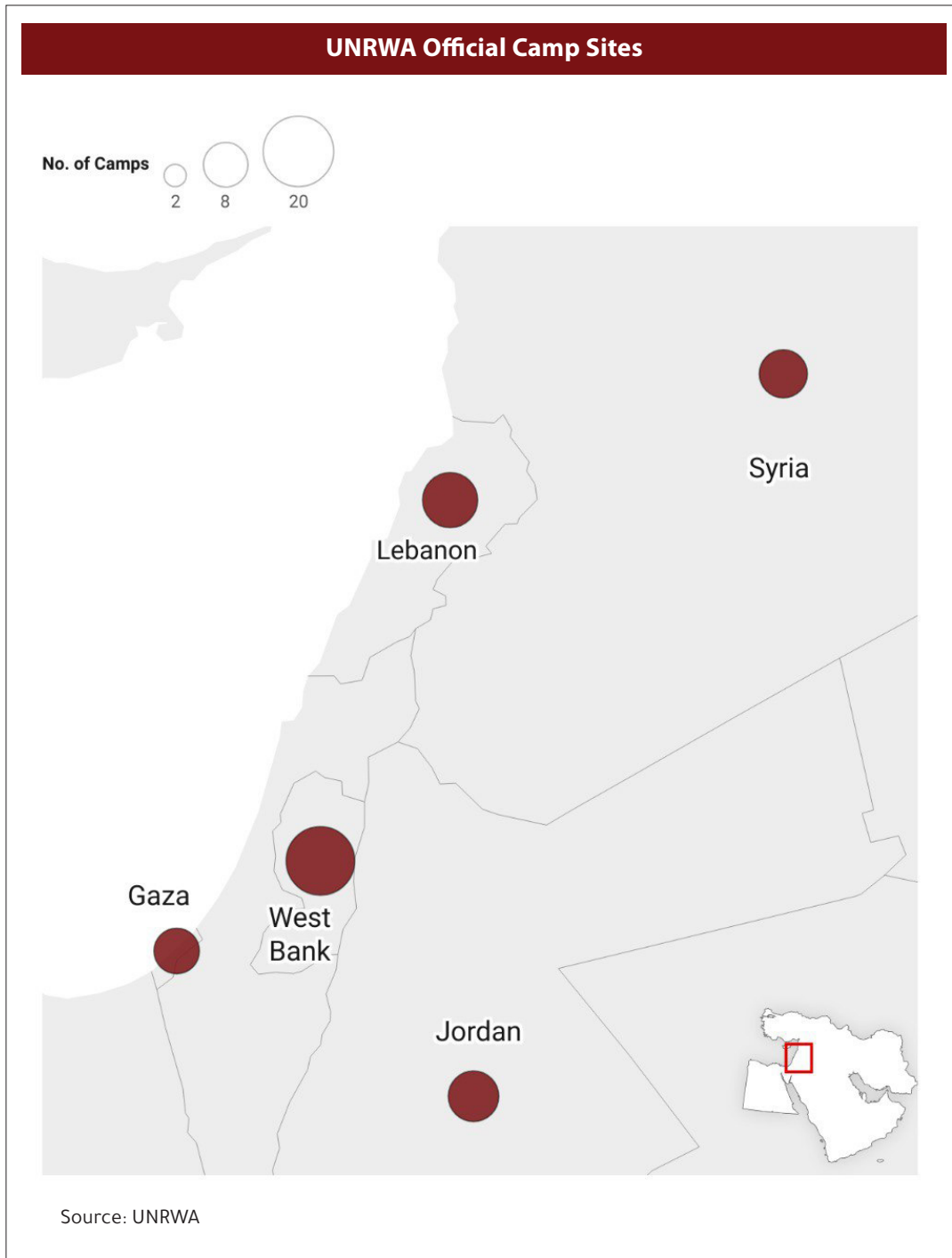
UNRWA serves as an alternative authority in providing essential services to Palestinian refugees, particularly in areas that host governments might neglect. This unique role makes it more than just a humanitarian organisation; it symbolises Palestinian resilience and the right of return. Despite UNRWA’s insistence on political neutrality, its continued presence in the region positions it as a party within the conflict. Palestinians view it as a guarantee of their right of return, while Israel and its supporting countries see it as a threat to resolving the cause

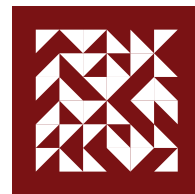
Additionally, UNRWA operates under a UN mandate to provide protection and assistance to Palestinian refugees until a just and lasting solution is achieved. This mandate is subject to renewal every three years. The General Assembly has consistently renewed UNRWA’s mandate, with the most recent extension authorising its operations until June 30, 2026.





UNRWA, unlike the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), operates with a distinct mandate, concentrating solely on delivering services to Palestine refugees within its designated areas of operation. The agency serves 5.9 million Palestine refugees registered with the United Nations, distributed as follows: 1.78 million in the Gaza Strip, 1.13 million in the West Bank, 2.56 million in Jordan, 679,000 in Syria, and 564,000 in Lebanon. Approximately 1.5 million refugees continue to reside in 58 officially recognised camps—densely populated.





The camps consist of shantytown-like settlements that have expanded over the past 75 years due to natural population growth. These camps are distributed as follows: eight in Gaza, 19 in the West Bank (including Shuafat camp in East Jerusalem), 10 in Jordan, 12 in Lebanon, and 9 in Syria.

UNRWA primarily collaborates with host governments and local authorities to administer education, health care, and other essential services to this population

## Who Funds UNRWA?

UNRWA relies almost entirely on voluntary contributions, with only minimal support from the UN's regular budget, which is allocated exclusively for administrative expenses. The UNRWA's continued operations are contingent on sustained financial commitments from states, regional governments, the European Union (EU), and other governmental partners, collectively accounting for 92.6% of its total funding in 2023.

According to UNRWA data for 2023, contributions from EU Member States represented 42% of the agency's total pledges, amounting to \$606.8 million out of \$1.46 billion (including regular budget support to the UN Secretariat for international staff). The largest donors included the U.S., Germany, the EU, and France, whose combined contributions accounted for 56% of the agency's total funding. Additionally, private partnerships contributed \$56.8 million in 2023.

The United States has historically been one of UNRWA's largest contributors, providing approximately 30% of the agency's total funding—amounting to \$7.3 billion since its establishment in 1950. In recent years, U.S. contributions have represented around 30% of donor funding, though periodic suspensions have occurred due to political disputes and allegations involving the agency's staff. The EU and its member states have also played a central role in financing UNRWA, collectively contributing approximately 60% of its budget in 2019, with Germany emerging as the largest single donor among EU countries. Other key donors include Sweden, Norway, Japan, France, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, which together account for a substantial portion of the agency's funding. As of 2023, UNRWA's total budgetary requirements stood at approximately \$2.41 billion, including a core programme budget of \$848 million and additional emergency appeals for humanitarian assistance. Despite securing a record \$1.46 billion in pledges across all funding channels that year, the agency faced a significant shortfall in meeting its operational needs.



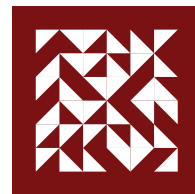
In recent years, UNRWA has faced recurrent funding shortfalls due to its reliance on voluntary contributions, a model that has proven vulnerable to geopolitical tensions and shifting donor priorities, leading to financial instability. This was evident in 2018 when the United States suspended its contributions, and again in early 2024, when several donors withheld funding following allegations of misconduct involving UNRWA staff during the conflict in Gaza. These suspensions have resulted in an anticipated funding reduction exceeding 51%.

### List of Countries Suspending and Reinstating UNRWA Funding

State	Total Funding	Status of Fund
United States	343,900,000	Funding remains frozen until at least March 25, 2025
Germany	202,100,000	Funding was reinstated on April 24, 2024
European Union	114,100,000	Funding was reinstated on March 1, 2024
Sweden	61,000,000	Funding was reinstated on March 9, 2024
Japan	30,200,000	Funding was reinstated on April 2, 2024
France	28,900,000	Funding was reinstated on March 28, 2024
Switzerland	25,500,000	Funding was partially reinstated on May 8, 2024
Canada	23,700,000	Funding was reinstated on March 8, 2024
United Kingdom	21,200,000	Funding was reinstated on July 19, 2024
The Netherlands	21,200,000	Funding reinstated
Australia	13,800,000	Funding was reinstated on March 15, 2024
Italy	18,000,000	Funding reinstated
Austria	8,100,000	Funding was reinstated on May 18, 2024
Finland	7,800,000	Funding was reinstated on March 22, 2024
New Zealand	560,800	Funding remains frozen
Iceland	558,700	Funding was reinstated on April 1, 2024
Romania	210,700	Funding reinstated
Estonia	90,000	Funding was reinstated on May 8, 2024

Source: UN WATCH

The withdrawal of U.S. contributions and similar actions by other donor states have placed UNRWA in a severe financial crisis, endangering its capacity to deliver essential services—including food assistance, health care, and education—to more than 2 million people in Gaza.



Reports indicate that without a restoration of funding, the agency may be unable to pay the salaries of its approximately 30,000 staff members or sustain critical programs beyond March 2025, raising the prospect of a complete breakdown in humanitarian aid across Gaza and other UNRWA operational areas.

The funding cuts further exacerbate Gaza's deteriorating humanitarian conditions, where widespread food insecurity and limited access to health care have been compounded by ongoing violence. The suspension of aid is expected to have the greatest impact on vulnerable groups, particularly children and the elderly.

Additionally, the decision to withhold funding has been criticised as a form of collective punishment against Palestinian civilians, with concerns raised about its broader implications for regional stability and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Critics argue that reducing support to UNRWA undermines peace efforts and intensifies humanitarian suffering in an already volatile context.

## **The Problematic Relationship Between UNRWA and Israel**

The relationship between Israel and UNRWA has been shaped by a complex interplay of historical and political factors. Given its mandate to serve Palestinian refugees, UNRWA's operations are often scrutinised through the lens of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with Israeli officials and public figures frequently characterising the agency as biased, ineffective, or even extremist. However, the historical trajectory of their interactions reveals a more nuanced dynamic. UNRWA was established to assist Palestinian refugees—those displaced from Palestine—rather than Palestinians as an ethnic group. In its early years, the agency also provided services to Jewish refugees, assisting approximately 45,000 refugees within Israel, including 17,000 Jews. To facilitate this mission, UNRWA engaged directly with the Israeli government, which initially supported its establishment at the UN.

By 1952, at the request of the Israeli government, UNRWA ceased its operations inside Israel. From that point until 1967, engagement between the two parties remained limited. However, following Israel's occupation of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank in 1967, UNRWA assumed responsibility for providing services to over half a million registered refugees across 27 camps under its administration. This development presented Israel with a strategic dilemma regarding its approach to the agency, with funding considerations playing a central role.

In 1967, Israel recognised that UNRWA's continued operations aligned with its interests and subsequently signed the "Comay-Michelmores Agreement" with the agency. Moshe Dayan, then Israel's Defence Minister, lauded this arrangement as a "huge achievement," highlighting that UNRWA had effectively agreed to shoulder the "burden" of providing services to Palestinian refugees. The Israeli government preferred to facilitate UNRWA's activities to alleviate its responsibilities as an occupying power in supporting the refugee population. In the years that followed, Israel increasingly underscored UNRWA's responsibility for Palestinian refugees while simultaneously minimising its role in this regard. This stance stood in contrast to its often-sceptical rhetoric, which framed the agency's work as antagonistic to Israeli interests.



Under the Comay-Michelmore Agreement, the Israeli government affirmed that UNRWA would continue its operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip with the full cooperation of Israeli authorities. Israel committed to facilitating the Agency's mission to the greatest extent possible, subject to regulations or arrangements necessitated by military security considerations.

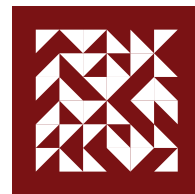
As part of this agreement, Israel undertook to ensure the protection and security of UNRWA staff, installations, and assets. It pledged to permit the free movement of UNRWA vehicles into and out of Israel and the territories concerned and to allow the Agency's international staff to travel within Israel and these areas, providing them with appropriate identification and permits. Additionally, Israel agreed to facilitate the movement of UNRWA's local staff within the territories, subject to military authority arrangements, and to grant the Agency access to essential communication and landing facilities.

This historical cooperation between Israel and UNRWA contrasts sharply with Israel's contemporary stance toward the Agency. While Israel initially viewed UNRWA as a means to manage the Palestinian refugee issue without assuming direct responsibility, its position has since evolved. Beyond security concerns, Israel argues that UNRWA perpetuates the refugee crisis by applying a unique definition of Palestinian refugees that extends to descendants, thereby sustaining demands for a "right of return" and complicating political resolutions. According to Israel, this approach not only challenges its demographic composition but also undermines prospects for a two-state solution. Moreover, Israel believes that UNRWA's preference for the return of refugees to Israel undermines its ability to survive as a state.

Additionally, Israel has long accused UNRWA of institutional bias and of allowing anti-Israel narratives within its educational programs. Israeli officials claim that UNRWA schools promote anti-Semitic and jihadist ideologies, alleging that some mathematics lessons include examples referencing attacks and militants. While UNRWA and independent investigations, including the Colonna Report, have refuted these accusations, they remain a persistent source of contention. Israel has further alleged that UNRWA maintains ties with Hamas, pointing to claims that Agency facilities have been used for militant activities and that some staff members have affiliations with the group. These allegations have prompted UN inquiries, though findings have varied in their assessment of the claims' credibility.

A significant shift in Israel's approach to UNRWA has been its support for defunding efforts, particularly during the Trump administration. The 2018 U.S. decision to suspend contributions to UNRWA was framed as a strategic move to pressure Palestinian representatives into negotiations that aligned with Israeli interests. Israel welcomed the funding cuts, arguing that they could push Palestinians toward accepting alternative solutions to the refugee issue. However, the financial strain placed on UNRWA has severely constrained its ability to deliver essential services, exacerbating humanitarian conditions for Palestinian refugees.





Furthermore, Israel has actively lobbied against UNRWA in international forums, seeking to delegitimise the agency's operations. Israeli officials have accused UNRWA of bias against Israel and of employing staff with affiliations to armed groups. These allegations have been used to support calls for the agency's reform or dissolution, with Israeli leaders asserting that UNRWA's continued existence is detrimental to peace efforts. This narrative has gained traction among certain international actors, further isolating UNRWA and complicating its funding and operational capabilities.

In addition to diplomatic efforts, Israel has taken direct actions impacting UNRWA's on-the-ground operations. Military operations in Gaza have repeatedly targeted areas where UNRWA operates, resulting in damage to facilities and disruption of services. Such actions have hindered UNRWA's ability to provide essential assistance and created an atmosphere of fear and instability for the Palestinian population it serves. Reports of military strikes on UNRWA schools and health care facilities have drawn international condemnation, but Israel has justified these actions as necessary for its security.

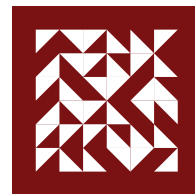
Furthermore, Israel's broader policies toward the Palestinian territories, including restrictions on movement and access, have made it increasingly difficult for UNRWA to operate effectively. The agency relies on the ability to move staff and supplies freely; however, checkpoints, border closures, and military operations often impede these efforts. Consequently, UNRWA has struggled to meet the growing needs of Palestinian refugees, exacerbated by the ongoing conflict and humanitarian crises.

Recent developments have further strained the relationship between UNRWA and Israel. In October 2024, the Israeli Knesset passed two laws with significant implications for UNRWA's operations. These legislative measures have already led to immediate consequences, including the shortening of visas for UNRWA's international staff, forcing their evacuation, and relocating the east Jerusalem office to Amman, Jordan. This highlights the substantial impact of the legislation on the agency's operations. Additionally, Israel has exerted pressure on donor countries to reduce UNRWA's budget, contributing to the financial difficulties faced by the agency.

## **Objectives of UNRWA's Defamation**

Israel is waging a systematic campaign to discredit UNRWA, employing allegations designed to depict the agency as a barrier to "peace" and to associate its operations with the perpetuation of the "Palestinian refugee crisis." Currently, Israeli efforts to undermine UNRWA focus on the claim of "separating Hamas from humanitarian aid," aiming to prevent the group from rebuilding its societal influence through aid distribution. This campaign is rooted in three primary allegations:

**Hamas Utilization of UNRWA Infrastructure During the War:** Israel alleges that UNRWA is complicit in Hamas's military activities by permitting the use of its facilities and infrastructure for military purposes.



**Aid Distribution Manipulation:** Israel contends that Hamas has control over the distribution of humanitarian aid administered by UNRWA, which it exploits for political gains.

**Affiliation of UNRWA Employees with Hamas:** Israel claims that approximately 10% of UNRWA's employees are affiliated with Hamas and other resistance factions, asserting that they work to recruit supporters and advance the political agendas of these groups.

In its most extreme accusations, Israel has gone so far as to label UNRWA as complicit with Hamas—a group it categorises as a “terrorist” organisation. These allegations prompted influential nations, including the U.S., to halt their financial contributions to UNRWA, based on claims involving the potential participation of 12 agency employees in the October 2023 attacks. In response, the UN swiftly dismissed nine employees and established an independent committee to reinforce the agency’s neutrality principles, providing 50 practical recommendations. However, these accusations reflect broader political motivations, which are discussed below.

### **- Erasing Collective Memory: Struggling Over the Right of Return and Identity**

The Israeli right-wing government perceives UNRWA as a living testament to the ethnic cleansing that took place in Palestine in 1948, which is referred to as the Nakba, a traumatic loss of homes and land. Israel’s strategy seeks to erase this collective memory on the global stage.

Israel’s targeting of UNRWA is an effort to extinguish the Palestinian refugee issue and negate their right to return, particularly following the displacement of over 900,000 Palestinians in 1948. The majority of Israelis across the political spectrum reject the concept of a Palestinian right of return, viewing its endorsement as a challenge to the legitimacy of Israel’s existence as a Jewish state, as articulated in UN Security Council Resolution 181 (1947).

By undermining UNRWA, Israel aims to reinforce the narrative of “no refugees, no Nakba,” ultimately attempting to erase the memory of the Nakba and eliminate the legal foundation for the right of return. Additionally, this campaign seeks to enhance Israel’s legitimacy at the UN by dismantling General Assembly Resolution 194, which affirms the Palestinian refugees’ right to return and receive compensation. The legitimacy of Israel’s occupation is closely tied to two pivotal UN resolutions: Resolution 181 (Partition Plan) and Resolution 194. Although Resolution 181 lost its relevance after the Oslo Accords and the Palestinian Authority’s acceptance of 78% of historical Palestine, Resolution 194 remains a critical obstacle. As such, Israel aims to invalidate this resolution by undermining UNRWA and paralyzing its capacity, ultimately aiming to extinguish the Palestinian refugee status through resettlement initiatives in host countries.

Beyond the right of return, UNRWA is entangled in the broader political context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Since the Oslo Accords, the agency has been closely linked with the international community’s two-state solution vision. This framework envisions the creation of an independent Palestinian state and considers the refugee issue as one of the final status negotiations.



However, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's rejection of a two-state solution and the diminishing prospects for Palestinian return or compensation, UNRWA is increasingly seen as a humanitarian entity serving populations impacted by an ongoing conflict, consequently, maintaining international support for the agency has become progressively difficult.

### **- UNRWA Testimonies on War Crimes**

Reports from UNRWA in the early stages of the Israel-Hamas war documented systematic atrocities committed against civilians, particularly those displaced in its centres. The highest rates of casualties were observed among women and children, alongside ongoing campaigns of arrest. These centres, far from being safe havens, became direct targets of Israeli military bombardment, as evidenced in Khan Yunis. These actions suggest a deliberate use of military force to intimidate and silence witnesses to the genocide. The field data gathered by UNRWA staff have proven to be crucial evidence of potential war crimes, compelling Israel to intensify its campaign against the agency in an effort to prevent the dissemination of this damaging information to international bodies.

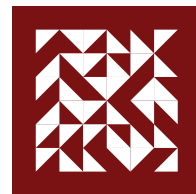
### **- Revealing Displacement Plans**

The agency's role extends beyond providing humanitarian support and relief efforts; it has also played a political role of equal importance over the past few months. This role involves exposing Israeli falsehoods on one hand and raising the alarm about the conspiracies of Netanyahu's government on the other. Since the beginning of the Israel-Hamas war, the agency has actively confronted efforts to forcibly displace Palestinians from the Gaza Strip. In a December article in the Los Angeles Times, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini warned of this plan, emphasizing that Israel is laying the groundwork for the mass expulsion of Gaza's residents to Egypt.

The worsening humanitarian crisis, coupled with the increasing concentration of displaced civilians near the border—first in the north and then in the south—has highlighted attempts to push Palestinians into Egypt, regardless of whether they remain there or are resettled elsewhere. The widespread destruction in the northern Gaza Strip and the resulting displacement marked the initial stage of this scenario at the time.

### **- Exposing the Lies Behind Closed Crossings**

The Israeli government has actively sought to undermine UNRWA's operations by blocking shipments at the Israeli port of Ashdod containing essential supplies, such as flour intended for 1.1 million people in Gaza for a five-month period. Other actions have included cancelling the tax exemptions granted to UNRWA as a UN agency, attempting to shut down the agency's offices in occupied east Jerusalem, and restricting visas for its international staff. Recently, the agency's Israeli bank account was frozen.



In response to international pressure, Israeli officials permitted the flour shipment to enter Gaza, but only under the condition that the World Food Programme—not UNRWA—would oversee its distribution.

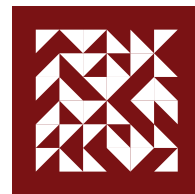
Since then, Israeli-imposed restrictions on the entry of aid through various crossings, including the Rafah crossing, combined with ongoing hostilities and attacks on aid convoys (such as the World Central Kitchen convoy).

## **The Liquidation Strategy: A Long Path of War on UNRWA**

The recent Israeli campaign against UNRWA represents just one chapter in a long-standing effort aimed at liquidating the Palestinian cause, beginning with the liquidation of its most significant symbol: the refugee issue. This strategy traces back to the Oslo Accords and later the “Deal of the Century,” both of which sought to redefine the status of Palestinian refugees, transforming them from rights holders into a “humanitarian problem.” This problem, according to Israeli and American policies, would be addressed by resettling refugees or integrating them into international frameworks like the UNHCR, which differs from UNRWA by ending the “refugee” status for future generations. These Israeli-American threats are underscored by relentless incitement against UNRWA, its role, and its continuation. Successive US administrations have coordinated with Israel to undermine the agency, culminating in Washington’s decision to cease funding for UNRWA, deepening its financial crisis and forcing austerity measures in response.

Since its founding, Israel has exerted continuous pressure on UNRWA, violating its international obligations to facilitate the agency’s work. Annual reports from UNRWA’s Commissioner-General highlight the extent of Israeli violations, including bombing the agency’s schools and centres. Efforts to influence UNRWA’s education system, particularly in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, aim to alter the curricula and undermine the agency’s role in Palestinian education, even before the Hamas attacks on October 7. Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu criticised the agency in 2018, claiming that its existence perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem and the “right of return” narrative, which some Israeli politicians argue undermines Israel’s national identity. Others have argued that it is inappropriate to call third-generation Palestinians “refugees,” even though there are generations of internally displaced families living in what is considered refugee camps and that the UN’s humanitarian efforts should be handled by a different branch. Moreover, Israel has accused UNRWA of radicalising Palestinian students, allegations that the agency has consistently rejected.

Earlier this year, Israel claimed that a number of UNRWA staff were part of armed groups in Gaza, prompting several countries to halt much-needed funding to the agency. The incitement against UNRWA extends beyond official Israeli channels, with think tanks, researchers, and media figures also calling for its closure. The 2023 workers’ strike in the West Bank provided an opportunity for Israeli researchers to amplify these demands, claiming that the agency’s continued existence threatens Israeli national security.



On the American side, support for UNRWA has fluctuated in line with the U.S. political stance on the Palestinian refugee issue. Various American initiatives have reflected a long-standing intention to resolve the refugee problem by denying the right of return, including:

- **McGhee Plan (1949):** Advocated the return of a quarter of Palestinian refugees and resettling the remainder in Arab countries.
- **Jordan Valley Unified Water Plan (1953):** Proposed settling refugees in Arab countries and offering work in water resource management.
- **Dulles Plan (1955):** Aimed to resettle most refugees in Arab countries, with a few allowed to migrate outside the Middle East, while Israel would accept limited returns with compensation.
- **Johnson Plan (1962):** Gave refugees the option to return or remain in their areas of refuge, with compensation, but allowed Israel to refuse the return of any refugees.

Following the 1967 war, additional initiatives emerged aimed at resettling Palestinian refugees, including the “Johnson” Proposals on the Palestine Refugee Problem,” the “Carter Peace Plan,” and the “Reagan Plan,” alongside subsequent proposals formulated after the Madrid Conference in 1991 and the Oslo Accords in 1993. Finally, Trump’s peace plan, the “Deal of the Century,” which Trump announced on Jan. 28, 2020.

By late 2015, Israeli-American campaigns against UNRWA intensified within the UN, seeking to undermine its legitimacy by characterising it as an “obstacle to peace,” a mechanism for “perpetuating the conflict,” and an institution that applies “double standards” and is “biased against Israel.” These campaigns extended to UNRWA’s educational curricula, with allegations that its content “demonises Israel.”

Simultaneously, members of the U.S. Congress called upon the UN Secretary-General to address what they described as “anti-Israel rhetoric” within the agency and to implement extensive reforms. In parallel, the Israeli Knesset established a committee to monitor UNRWA’s activities and advocate for modifications to its mandate.

The decline in U.S. support for UNRWA reached its peak under President Donald Trump, whose administration implemented a series of measures to reduce or suspend financial assistance to the agency, as well as broader aid to Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. Moreover, “The Deal of The Century” proposed a framework for permanently resettling Palestinian refugees in host countries, effectively nullifying their right to return.

In 2016, Yedioth Ahronoth newspaper disclosed an Israeli plan, spearheaded by Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in coordination with the Trump administration, aimed at dismantling UNRWA by cutting funding and imposing restrictions on UN employees accused of being “anti-Israel.” The U.S. subsequently imposed conditions on its continued support for UNRWA operations in Jordan and the Palestinian territories, including revising school curricula to remove references to the right



of return, the refugee issue, the status of Jerusalem, and resistance against occupation, in addition to prohibiting any form of political engagement by the agency

In 2017, the U.S. and Israel obstructed an initiative within the UN to increase UNRWA's budget, resulting in the rejection of a draft resolution submitted by the Palestinian delegation to the UN General Assembly. The Israeli ambassador justified this position by asserting the necessity of a "strict oversight mechanism" to ensure that financial allocations were directed solely toward humanitarian projects and not "anti-Israel activities." Beyond challenging the agency's continued existence, U.S. interventions sought to alter its internal structure and functions through demands for "reforms" aimed at restricting its legal and political role. These measures included:

- Removing refugees who had acquired the nationality of a host country from UNRWA's official registry;
- Limiting humanitarian interventions and prohibiting any form of political stances;
- Restricting support to individuals assessed as financially self-sufficient;
- Withholding assistance from persons classified by the U.S. as "terrorists" or "criminals;" and
- Revising educational materials to ensure they were "free from discrimination."

The campaign against UNRWA intensified further following U.S. President Donald Trump's announcement of plans to relocate the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, coupled with the UN General Assembly's resolution in December 2017, which deemed any attempt to alter the status of Jerusalem "null and void." On 2 Jan. 2018, U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley declared that the Trump administration "will no longer support UNRWA until the Palestinians agree to return to the negotiating table." Shortly thereafter, Trump tweeted: "Pay the Palestinians HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect. They don't even want to negotiate a long-overdue peace treaty with Israel. But with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?" Consequently, in 2018, the Trump administration made the decision to terminate all U.S. financial contributions to UNRWA.



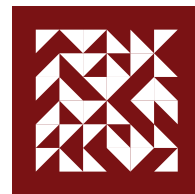
**Donald J. Trump** ✓  
@realDonaldTrump



...peace treaty with Israel. We have taken Jerusalem, the toughest part of the negotiation, off the table, but Israel, for that, would have had to pay more. But with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?

12:37 AM · Jan 3, 2018





After assuming office, former President Joe Biden sought to shift U.S. policy towards UNRWA, announcing the administration's intention to resume full support for the agency and provide additional financial assistance. However, these measures represented a tactical shift rather than a substantive policy change. The "2021-2022-US-UNRWA-Framework" agreement, signed by UNRWA and the U.S. State Department in July 2021, included conditions under the labels of "neutrality" and "objectivity." These provisions entailed monitoring all UNRWA institutions, submitting quarterly financial and security reports, excluding certain refugees from receiving support and insisting on the neutrality of UNRWA employees. From the U.S. perspective, these conditions essentially required the abandonment of support for the Palestinian cause and the rejection of resistance.

While Palestinians welcomed the resumption of U.S. support, they rejected these new conditions, viewing them as an infringement on their rights as refugees. The Jewish lobby has also exerted significant influence in accelerating the cessation of U.S. contributions to UNRWA, using it as leverage to pressure the agency into ending its operations. The primary objectives of this lobby include preventing the return of Palestinian refugees, proposing their resettlement, and imposing restrictions on their return. These goals align with the policies of Israeli governments, particularly the current right-wing administration led by Netanyahu, which aims to solidify a "national home for the Jews" while undermining the two-state solution and obstructing the refugee return.

In January 2024, the US froze its annual funding to UNRWA until March 2025, following Israel's accusations that UNRWA employees were involved in the October 7 attacks.

## **Ban's Cost**

The decision to halt funding will have catastrophic consequences on the essential services that UNRWA provides to Palestinian refugees, including health care, education, relief, infrastructure, protection programmes, and loans. During this period, efforts will be made to find alternatives to assume UNRWA's local, regional, or international tasks. Netanyahu has already initiated discussions with leaders of various countries, including Arab nations, to coordinate efforts for the next phase, particularly concerning the Gaza Strip. The ramifications of this decision are both humanitarian and political, compelling the international community to explore alternative means of providing humanitarian support to Palestinians.

## **The Cost on Gaza**

The most immediate and severe consequences of banning UNRWA operations will be felt in Gaza, where the agency is a vital provider of basic services to approximately 2.5 million Palestinian refugees.

UNRWA's services, including education, health care, and social welfare, are critical to the survival and well-being of these refugees. Without UNRWA, the education system would collapse, depriving



an entire generation of youth of formal education and vocational training essential for future employment opportunities. The agency’s schools have historically maintained high enrolment rates and gender parity. Their closure would only deepen existing inequalities and hinder the social mobility of Gaza’s population.

<b>UNRWA Activities in Palestine</b>		
<b>UNRWA activities</b>	<b>Gaza Strip</b>	<b>West Bank</b>
No. of registered refugees	1,600,000	901,000
No. of agency employees	13,000	3,850
No. of camps it runs	8	19
No. of schools it runs	706	96
No. of health centres it runs	22	43

Source: UNRWA

UNRWA operates several health clinics that provide primary health care, maternal and child health services, and mental health support. The absence of these services would precipitate a public health crisis, particularly considering the rising prevalence of non-communicable diseases and mental health issues among refugees. Without access to essential health care, both morbidity and mortality rates would increase, exacerbating Gaza’s already strained health care system, which is struggling to manage the ongoing effects of the ban and continuous conflict.

In addition, Gaza’s socio-economic conditions would further deteriorate without UNRWA’s social services, which offer relief and support to vulnerable populations. The agency’s role in alleviating poverty and fostering economic resilience is vital, especially in a region with the highest unemployment rates globally. The ban would exacerbate food insecurity and malnutrition, severely affecting children and the elderly, two of the most vulnerable groups.

### **The Cost on the UN**

The implications of banning UNRWA extend far beyond Gaza, affecting the United Nations’ credibility and effectiveness as a humanitarian entity. UNRWA is a unique body within the UN system, specifically mandated to address the needs of Palestinian refugees. Imposing a ban would undermine the UN’s commitment to humanitarian principles, such as neutrality and impartiality. It could set a harmful precedent for other humanitarian organisations working in politically sensitive environments.





This ban is particularly troubling as it targets a region considered by international law to be occupied territory where Israel holds no recognised sovereignty. The move is in clear violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2730 (24 May 2024), which requires Israel to respect and protect UN institutions and their staff. Moreover, it contradicts the International Court of Justice's ruling of 19 July 2024, which affirmed the illegality of Israeli sovereignty over occupied Palestinian territories, including Jerusalem—an area within UNRWA's mandate. The ban, therefore, represents a stark violation of Palestinian refugees' rights.

Additionally, the ban risks eroding trust among Palestinian refugees in the UN and its agencies. The perception that the UN is either unable or unwilling to meet their needs would delegitimize the agency's operations in other areas and may have long-term consequences for the UN's role in peace mediation and humanitarian relief in conflict zones worldwide.

## **The Cost on Israel**

For Israel, the consequences of the UNRWA ban could be both immediate and far-reaching. In the short-term, a humanitarian crisis in Gaza could destabilise the region, potentially fuelling unrest in the West Bank and depriving over 100,000 Palestinians in east Jerusalem of access to essential services, such as education and health care. This disruption could spill over into Israel, heightening internal tensions. The resulting humanitarian catastrophe in Gaza could provoke widespread international condemnation and place significant pressure on Israel to address the root causes of the Palestinian refugee crisis. Furthermore, the potential for increased unrest could escalate security concerns for Israel, as despair among Palestinians could lead to more significant conflict.

In the long-term, the ban could complicate Israel's standing in peace negotiations. The Palestinian refugee issue is a central pillar of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Without a comprehensive approach to addressing the needs of refugees, Israel risks hampering efforts to reach a viable peace agreement. By withdrawing support from UNRWA, Israel may isolate itself internationally, as the global community could view the ban as an attempt to avoid responsibility for Palestinian refugees and silence a key issue in the peace process.

## **The Cost on Host Countries**

The Palestinian refugee issue is not only of concern to Israelis and Palestinians but also to host countries such as Jordan, Lebanon, and, to a lesser extent, Syria. For these nations, the Palestinian refugee issue remains unresolved and must be addressed as part of a just future settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Depending on the nature of this settlement, the status of refugees may change, and at that point, UNRWA may cease to exist. Until then, however, UNRWA represents the precarious situation of refugees in their host communities, while also bearing a significant part of the financial responsibility for their care.



The precarious status of Palestinian refugees is particularly notable in Jordan and Lebanon, where these countries have struggled to stem the flow of refugees but have managed to keep them at a political and legal distance. In Jordan, the presence of UNRWA is crucial, not only because it alleviates the state's burden in hosting refugees but also because the services it provides may prevent discontent and unrest among the refugees, who comprise the most deprived segment of the population. UNRWA also symbolises the separate status of refugees.

In Lebanon, the government similarly views UNRWA as a symbol of the separate status of Palestinian refugees. The state has not granted Palestinians basic rights or access to public services, fearing this would lead to their naturalisation and disrupt the fragile sectarian balance in Lebanon's power-sharing system. Lebanese authorities support UNRWA's responsibility for Palestinian refugees as long as they remain in Lebanon but would prefer that Palestinians leave the country, thus eliminating the need for the agency's continued presence.

For similar reasons, Syria has kept Palestinian refugees stateless, with UNRWA serving these people rather than the state. However, Syria, unlike Jordan or Lebanon, does not view Palestinian refugees as an existential threat to the state. These refugees have been granted full access to the labour market and have not faced the same demographic concerns. However, since 2011, as refugees joined protests and uprisings, Syrian security services have targeted them with the same intensity as Syrian citizens. Three Palestinian refugee camps in Syria have been destroyed.

## **The Cost on the World**

On a global scale, a ban on UNRWA would have significant repercussions for international humanitarian efforts and the global refugee crisis. UNRWA serves as a model for addressing the long-term needs of refugees, and its closure could prompt a reassessment of how the international community addresses similar situations in other regions. Moreover, given the instability in the Middle East, the ramifications could extend beyond regional borders, affecting global security and economic conditions.

The ban could also escalate tensions between states and international organisations. Countries that support Palestinian rights may view the ban as a violation of humanitarian principles, intensifying diplomatic friction with states that support Israel's actions.

Israel's ongoing attempts to halt UNRWA's operations in supporting Palestinian refugees, coupled with a systematic campaign to tarnish its reputation and eliminate the Palestinian refugee issue, represents a clear violation of international law, international humanitarian law, the UN Charter, and relevant Security Council resolutions.



## Alternatives Dilemma: Who Will Fill the Void?

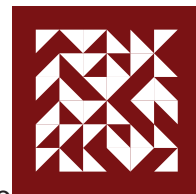
UNRWA plays an indispensable role in providing humanitarian aid, and its reduction or removal is believed to increase the risk of instability throughout the region. Abandoning UNRWA would not even serve Israel's interests, as it would be compelled to take on the responsibility of providing basic services to Palestinian refugees—services that the agency currently offers.

Israel and donor countries are exploring alternatives to UNRWA, but these options carry substantial political risks. Among the suggestions on the table are transferring responsibility to the Palestinian Authority to localise the issue, suggesting a “temporary settlement” programme through regional organisations to absorb refugees and eliminate the right of return, or integrating UNRWA's functions into the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which would end the refugee status of subsequent generations.

However, such proposals are not strongly supported by Israel or Jewish organisations abroad, as they were instrumental in the decision to exclude the International Refugee Organization from the Palestinian refugee issue. The primary motivation behind this decision was to prevent any comparisons between the Palestinian refugee situation and the situation of Jewish refugees in Europe after World War II. The International Refugee Organization had consistently recommended the right of return as a fundamental right for refugees, and Israel sought to avoid any parallels being drawn between the two refugee populations, particularly in terms of the right of return. The establishment of UNRWA in 1949 was specifically intended to address Palestinian refugee relief and employment without committing to the right of return outlined in UN Resolution 194. Israel has sought to shift the issue from a right of return to humanitarian concerns like relief, education, and health care, aiming to erase the idea of return from Palestinian collective memory. Despite these efforts, the right of return remains deeply embedded in Palestinian consciousness, and Israel attributes this persistence to UNRWA's role in keeping the refugee issue alive.

In conclusion, the relationship between UNRWA and Israel is linked to the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While UNRWA plays a critical role in providing essential services to Palestinian refugees, Israel's concerns regarding the agency's mandate, its neutrality, and its alleged connections to Hamas have fostered a complex and often adversarial dynamic. Recent developments, such as Israel's ban on UNRWA, have exacerbated tensions and raised significant concerns about the agency's future and the well-being of Palestinian refugees. The dismantling of UNRWA, in the absence of a viable alternative, could have catastrophic consequences, particularly in Gaza, where the agency is integral to the delivery of vital services and the overall humanitarian response. The risk of increased suffering, instability, and radicalisation within the Palestinians is a serious concern. The possibility of unrest in the Israeli-occupied territories, as well as the destabilisation of host countries like Jordan and Lebanon, looms large—especially if Palestinians interpret such cuts as a signal that their refugee status is being undermined.

The core issue revolves around the perception of UNRWA as a symbol of Palestinian identity and rights, particularly the right of return. Israel maintains that the refugee issue should be addressed

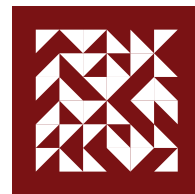


by neighbouring Arab states, which have historically resisted integrating Palestinian refugees into their societies, thereby preserving their status as refugees for decades. This position has become even more complicated in light of significant political shifts, such as the Trump administration's withdrawal of funding from UNRWA. This move was widely seen as an attempt to pressure Palestinian representatives into negotiations that align with Israeli interests. The funding cuts have severely hampered UNRWA's ability to provide essential services, such as health care, education, and social support, further exacerbating the already dire humanitarian situation for Palestinian refugees

The political narrative surrounding UNRWA is deeply entwined with the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with the right of return for Palestinian refugees remaining a significant point of contention that complicates peace negotiations. For many Palestinians, UNRWA represents a symbol of their rights and aspirations, while Israel views it as a significant impediment to the achievement of a lasting peace. The agency's continued existence is often framed within the context of a zero-sum game, in which any concessions made to the Palestinians are perceived as direct threats to Israel's security and territorial integrity. This dynamic of mistrust and hostility has entrenched the conflict, leaving little room for constructive dialogue between the parties involved.

Furthermore, Israel's actions against UNRWA may be part of a broader strategy to reshape the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and undermine the Palestinian right of return. This raises critical questions regarding the future of the peace process and the prospects for a just and lasting resolution.

Given the potential for Trump's second term, there is reason to believe he may continue to support the decision to ban UNRWA. His stance during his first term, marked by his cuts to UNRWA's funding, his support for relocating the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, and his recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, reflects a broader belief that UNRWA prolongs the Palestinian refugee issue rather than offering a solution.



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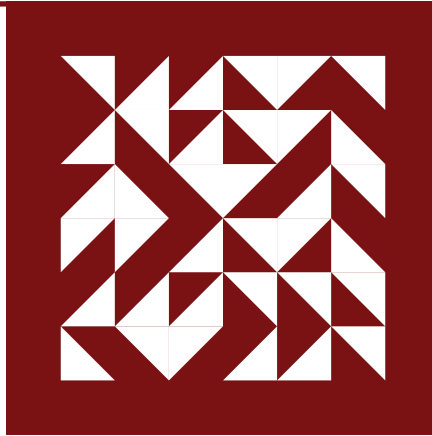


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## Strategic Estimates

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