Mandatory Transition:

UNRWA's Mandate Evolution during the Oslo Peace Process

How did the Oslo Accords Affect the Interpretation and Implementation of UNRWA's Mandate?

Wordcount: 29, 461

Candidate number: 1088560

MPhil Modern Middle Eastern Studies

Table of Contents

Table of Figures 4

Abbreviations 5

1. Introduction 6

2. Historical and political context 10

2.1. UNRWA's mandate and early reorientation (1949-1957) 10

2.2. Consolidation as a long-term service provider (1957-1967) 14

2.3. Regional conflict and host-state politics (1967–1982) 16

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework 20

3.1. Humanitarian governance 20

3.2. The bureaucracy of International Organisations 22

3.3. Humanitarian aid in the post-Cold War period 23

3.4. UNRWA's quasi-sovereignty 25

3.5. The right of return 26

4. Literature review 29

4.1. UNRWA's history 29

4.2. UNRWA's role 30

4.3. UNRWA's mandate 31

4.4. The Oslo Peace Process 33

4.5. UNRWA during Oslo 34

4.6. Synthesis and research gap 36

5. Methodology 37

5.1. Data collection 39

5.1.1. Archival sources 39

5.1.2. Oral history interviews 40

5.2. Analytical framework and data analysis 42

5.2.1. Critical discourse analysis 42

5.2.2. Thematic coding 43

5.4. Limitations 44

5.5. Reflexivity and ethical considerations 46

6. Laying the groundwork: 1989-1993 48

6.1. The First Intifada 48

6.2. Protection 52

6.3. New programmes 54

6.4. Finances 55

6.5. The European Gaza Hospital (EGH) 56
6.6. Analytical discussion 60
7. The Oslo period: 1993-1996 62
7.1. The Oslo Peace Process 63
7.1.1. Implementation of the Accords 65
7.1.2. UNRWA during the peace process 66
7.1.3. Atmosphere in UNRWA 69
7.2. UNRWA relations with the Palestinians 70
7.2.1. Providing practical support to the Palestinian Authority (PA) 70
7.2.2. Arafat and the refugee question 72
7.3. Harmonisation 74
7.3.1. Core services 74
7.3.2. Capacity building 77
7.4. Development 80
7.5. Finances 82
7.6. Moving headquarters to Gaza 84
7.7. Analytical discussion 87
8. Post-Oslo: 1996-2002 90
8.1. A new political landscape 90
8.1.1. Disillusionment 94
8.2. UNRWA Post-Oslo 95
8.2.1. Relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA) 95
8.2.2. Core Services 97
8.2.3. Capacity building 99
8.2.4. The Peace Implementation Programme (PIP) 101
8.3. Finances 103
8.4. Analytical discussion 105
9. Conclusion 108
10. Bibliography 111

Table of Figures

Figure 1 *Map depicting the territorial boundaries of Israel-Palestine in 1949 ..... 13*

Figure 2 *Map depicting the territorial boundaries of Israel-Palestine after the 1967 War ... 17*

Figure 3 *Table of Palestinian casualties during the first five years of the First Intifada 50*

Figure 4 *The European Gaza Hospital in Khan Younis in the late 1990s 57*

Figure 5 *The European Gaza Hospital in Khan Younis in the late 1990s 58*

Figure 6 *Map of the West Bank depicting the territorial division in Israel-Palestine after signing of Oslo II 93*

Abbreviations

DOP	Declaration of Principles
EC	European Community
ECOSOC	United Nations Economic and Social Council
EGH	European Gaza Hospital
EMOT	Extraordinary Measures in the Occupied Territories
EPA	Expanded Programme of Assistance
ICRC	International Committee of the Red Cross
IO	International Organisation
NGO	Non-Governmental Organisation
OPT	Occupied Palestinian Territories
PA	Palestinian Authority
PIP	Peace Implementation Programme
PLO	Palestinian Liberation Organisation
PNM	Palestinian National Movement
PVO	Private Voluntary Organisation
RAO	Refugee Affairs Officer
UN	United Nations
UNCCP	United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organisation
UNGA	United Nations General Assembly
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UNRWA	United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East

1. Introduction

> "When I retired, I sent a letter to all the UNRWA staff. I wrote to them something like this: UNRWA was my birthplace, that was the tent. UNRWA was my hospital, that was the clinic. UNRWA was my school. UNRWA was my shelter. UNRWA was my life, because it employed me."
>
> - Ramadan Al-Omari[1]

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) occupies a unique and often contested position with regards to the Israel-Palestine conflict. The Agency was established in 1949 as a temporary body to provide emergency relief to Palestinian refugees displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli war.[2] This displacement, which is known in Palestinian historiography as the *Nakba* (meaning catastrophe in Arabic), saw approximately 700,000 to 750,000 Palestinians flee or be expelled from their homes between 1947 and 1949.[3] This represents the majority of the Arab population of the territory that became Israel. Many were unable to return following the cessation of hostilities, as Israel denied large-scale repatriation despite international calls for their return under UN General Assembly Resolution 194.[4] Initially, these refugees sought shelter in neighbouring regions, remaining close to their place of origin. Later, settling more permanently in what would become UNRWA's five fields of operation: Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and the Gaza Strip.[5] In places such as the Gaza Strip, 250,000 Palestinian refugees fled their homes to take refuge, tripling the population of the small enclave overnight and changing the internal

[1] Ramadan Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords', 18 November 2025, Microsoft Teams.
[2] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*.
[3] Khalidi, *All That Remains*; Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*; Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.
[4] Quigley, *The Case for Palestine*; Akram and Rempel, 'Temporary Protection as an Instrument for Implementing the Right of Return for Palestinian Refugees'.
[5] Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*, 210.

dynamics of the territory forever.[6] It is in this context, with hundreds of thousands of displaced Palestinians concentrated in the territories surrounding historic Palestine, often in camps established on land provided by host governments, that UNRWA was established.

Today, it has evolved into a quasi-permanent institution providing education, health care, and social services, to some 5.9 million eligible Palestinian refugees across the Middle East.[7] UNRWA is unique among United Nations (UN) refugee organisations for three main reasons: it provides services to a specific refugee population, it provides direct services (in education, health, and relief) at a massive scale, and it has an unusually narrow and yet open ended mandate.[8] These peculiarities are the result of the Agency's political context in which it operates, notably, the unresolved status of Palestinian refugees and their "right of return" which remains a contested and unresolved question at the heart of the Israel-Palestine conflict. For over seventy decades since the establishment of the Agency, there is still no just and practical solution to the "refugee question". This raises the question: how does a humanitarian agency, formally mandated to provide "relief and works",[9] adapt its role in the absence of a political resolution, particularly during a moment of anticipated transition towards the establishment of a Palestinian state?

This dissertation addresses this question by examining how UNRWA interpreted and implemented its mandate during the Oslo peace process. The signing of the Oslo Accords marked a critical juncture in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and by extension the broader architecture of international aid for Palestinian refugees.[10] For the first time in the history of the conflict the road towards Palestinian self-governance seemed possible, generating the

[6] Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*, 218.
[7] UNRWA, 'Palestine Refugees'.
[8] Bocco, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees'; Al Husseini and Bocco, 'The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East'; Al Husseini, 'UNRWA and the Refugees'.
[9] Bartholomeusz, 'The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty'.
[10] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*; Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*.

expectation that UNRWA would eventually transfer its services to the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA). In the background, the post-Cold War period was witnessing a global shift in humanitarian practice, characterised by the increased overlap of development and relief with state-building. These dynamics affected the way UNRWA interpreted and implemented its role *vis-à-vis* the Palestinian refugees using its services. This dissertation treats UNRWA's mandate as a site of ongoing negotiation, identifiable through institutional bureaucracy and the lived experience of staff, rather than a fixed legal framework or document.[11] It asks: how did UNRWA reinterpret its mandate during the Oslo period, and how was this reinterpretation implemented in practice? To answer this question, this study draws on a combination of archival sources and oral history interviews with former UNRWA staff employed during the Oslo period, allowing for an analysis of both official institutional discourse and lived experiences. This approach allows us to move beyond merely analysing formal mandate language and examine how institutional change was understood and enacted in real time by people at the Agency.

This dissertation argues that UNRWA's mandate did not formally change during the Oslo period, but that it was reinterpreted in practice through a shift towards development and capacity-building. This reinterpretation was expressed in two ways; through changes in institutional language, with the Agency increasingly presenting itself as a development actor, and through the expansion of project-based programmes aligned with state-building. Crucially, this shift was accelerated by the influx of foreign funding associated with the "peace dividend" of the Oslo peace process, which supported the expanding development projects despite increasing strain on the Agency's core service provision.

[11] Bartholomeusz, 'The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty'.

This reinterpretation placed the Agency as a key player in early Palestinian state-building efforts, while it was continuing its state-like services. This support for the nascent Palestinian state was constrained, however, by the limitations of the Oslo process itself, notably its deferral of the refugee question[12] and reliance on donor-driven development *in lieu* of peacebuilding.[13] As the peace process faltered and slowly collapsed, UNRWA's anticipated dissolution never materialised. Instead, the Agency became more entrenched as a quasi-governing institution, providing state-like services and maintaining a close relationship with the PA by providing technical assistance and authority within the refugee camps.

The dissertation is structured as follows. Chapter 2 provides a brief historical overview of UNRWA, focusing on the origins of the Agency's mandate and contextualising its operations before the signing of Oslo I. Chapter 3 outlines the theoretical and conceptual framework used for this analysis of UNRWA during the Oslo period, situating it within critical approaches to humanitarian governance and bureaucracy in international organisations, as well as post-Cold War aid regimes. Chapter 4 reviews the existing literature on the topic, identifying key debates and gaps that this study seeks to address. Chapter 5 sets out the methodology, explaining and justifying the use of archival sources and oral histories for the purpose of this study. Chapters 6, 7, and 8 form the empirical sections of the dissertation, analysing the implementation of UNRWA's mandate throughout the First Intifada running up to the Oslo Accords, the interim period between Oslo I and II, and the post-Oslo period up until the outbreak of the Second Intifada. The final chapter draws together the findings and reflects on their implications for understanding humanitarian

[12] Shlaim, 'The Oslo Accord', 1994; Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences'; Malik, 'Analysis of Oslo Accords', 2001.
[13] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*; Roy, 'De-Development Revisited'.

governance in protracted conflict settings, with reflections on the uniqueness of the Palestinian "refugee question".

2. Historical and political context

This chapter traces UNRWA's institutional evolution from its establishment in 1949[14] to the 13th of September 1993 with the signing of the Declaration of Principles (Oslo I).[15] Illustrating how the agency's adaptability, mandate ambiguity, and quasi-governing role were established long before the 1990s.[16] It demonstrates that UNRWA entered the Oslo peace process in the early 1990s with a long history of navigating unresolved political conflict, financial issues, and refugee contestation. UNRWA's shift toward developmental and protection-oriented functions in the 1990s was shaped by earlier moments of crisis and institutional recalibration, including the early failure of resettlement schemes, the expansion of social services across UNRWA field sites, regional conflicts such as the 1967 War and the Israeli invasion of Lebanon.

2.1. UNRWA's mandate and early reorientation (1949-1957)

The "Palestinian refugee problem" was born as a result of the forcible displacement of three quarter of a million Palestinians from their homes in 1948-49.[17] Generally Palestinians clung to their ancestral homeland as much as they could; those from southern parts of the Palestinian Mandate crowding into the Gaza Strip, those from the centre dispersing into the

[14] *Resolution 302 (IV)*.
[15] Bauck and Omer, *The Oslo Accords*.
[16] Bocco, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees'.
[17] Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*; Flapan, *The Birth of Israel*.

West Bank and Jordan, and those from the north spreading into southern parts of Lebanon and Syria.[18] This mass displacement unfolded in the context of the United Nations General Assembly's adoption of Resolution 181 in November 1947, which proposed the partition of Palestine into two separate Jewish and Arab states under an economic union. This plan was accepted by Jewish leadership but rejected by Palestinian Arab representatives and neighbouring Arab states, who opposed both the principle and the territorial arrangement of partition.[19] As violence escalated into full-scale war in 1948, military operations, such as the Haganah's Plan Dalet (Plan D) initiated in March of that year, contributed to the depopulation of large areas of Palestinian-inhabited territory.[20] Despite calls for a ceasefire from the United Nations Security Council hostilities continued. As a result, the UN appointed Count Folke Bernadotte as a mediator, who was later assassinated by the Zionist paramilitary group Lehi (Stern Gang).[21] Before his death Bernadotte reported to the UN what would become one of the foundational principles of the refugee question, stating that "refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date,"[22] and that compensation should be provided for those choosing not to return. His recommendations were subsequently incorporated into United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of December 1948.[23] This resolution not only affirmed the principle of refugee return and compensation but also established the United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP), which was composed of representatives from the United States, France, and Turkey, tasked with facilitating a political

[18] Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*; Khalidi, *All That Remains*; Flapan, *The Birth of Israel*.
[19] Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*; Pappé, *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*.
[20] Masalha, *Expulsion of the Palestinians*; Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*.
[21] Morris, *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*; Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*.
[22] UN. General Assembly (3rd sess. : 1948-1949 : Paris, etc.), *Palestine-Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator*.
[23] *Resolution 194 (III)*.

settlement.[24] Despite the UNCCP formally continuing to exist, it has been effectively inactive since the early 1950s, leaving the political dimensions of the refugee question unresolved.

In the immediate aftermath of displacement, relief for Palestinian refugees was provided by private voluntary organisations (PVOs), such as the International Committee of the Red Cross. However, these organisations were unwilling to assume long-term responsibility for what was rapidly becoming a protracted refugee situation and sought to transfer this burden to the UN.[25] In response, the UN General Assembly established the United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNPR) in 1948 as an interim coordinating mechanism to find and organise these relief efforts.[26] As it became increasingly clear that the refugee crisis would not be resolved quickly, and following the withdrawal of many PVOs from relief operations, the UN created a more formal institutional framework. In December 1949, through Resolution 302 (IV), it established the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).[27] Conceived as a temporary humanitarian agency, UNRWA was tasked with providing relief and implementing public works programmes aimed at integrating refugees into regional economies, pending a political resolution to the conflict.[28]

[24] Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*; Quigley, *The Case for Palestine*.
[25] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*.
[26] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 3.
[27] *Resolution 302 (IV)*.
[28] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*; Al Husseini, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process'.



Figure 1 *Map depicting the territorial boundaries of Israel-Palestine in 1949*[29]

Hence from the outset, an institutional separation was entrenched where humanitarian management (UNRWA) was separate from the finding of a political resolution (UNCCP).[30] Despite UNRWA not being responsible for a durable solution, from the beginning the agency has been deeply involved in a highly politicized context.[31] What makes UNRWA's operations in the region successful is the Agency's ambiguities and its capacity to manage them, this was clear from the onset and remains the case today.[32] This ambiguity is apparent from the outset with the birth of the agency; UNRWA was never provided with a specific statute or charter. Furthermore, the UNGA has offered little guidance concerning the evolution of the Agency's mandate. This has led to positive adaptation, which can be seen

[29] *BBC News*, 'Israel's Borders Explained in Maps'.
[30] Terry Rempel, 'Unrwa and the Palestine Refugees: A Genealogy of "Participatory" Development', *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2/3 (2009): 412–37.
[31] Bocco, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees'.
[32] Bocco, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees'.

from its early days. For example, planners from the United States visualised UNRWA as something like the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA), created in 1933 by President F. D. Roosvelt to revive Tennessee and surrounding states from the Great Depression by comprehensive regional planning. It was hoped that UNRWA might become a developmental project that would encourage cooperation among nations and integrate Palestinians as labourers in a new Jordan Valley region.[33] However, this development scheme was rejected by the refugees, who did not want to be resettled, as well as the host-countries who profoundly rejected assimilation of the newly created refugee population.[34] As a result, the "works" component of the Agency was abandoned, and it reoriented its activities towards its now core programmes: relief, health, and education. This early reorientation marked the first of several moments in which UNRWA adapted its mandate in response to political pressure, both from refugees themselves as well as host-states, reinforcing the agency's reliance on institutional flexibility as a survival strategy.

2.2. Consolidation as a long-term service provider (1957-1967)

UNRWA evolved into a quasi-governmental authority throughout the 1950s and 1960s through the consolidation of education, health, and welfare provisions. This period saw the Agency's distinctive form of refugee governance emerge and be consolidated, with a particular emphasis on its educational programme for refugees in the region. As Schiff notes, the dismal predictions that UNRWA would become "trapped with the burden" of the Palestinian refugees, by 1957 unfortunately became true.[35] During UNRWA's first seven

[33] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 13.
[34] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 46.
[35] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 49.

years its developmental "self-help" projects sank, refugees dug in their heels against resettlement, and donor generosity dried up. The agency was not able to find a durable solution to the "refugee issue" through mass resettlement and integration, as a result all that remained were the core programmes which were helping the refugees survive.[36] These programmes were designed as short term solutions, however, when by the late 1950s it became clear that the Palestinian "refugee question" would not be resolved quickly, the funding and structure of these programmes created an issue as they were ill-equipped to support long-term programmes. On one hand critics within the Palestinian community, PVOs, and donor government aid agencies argued that UNRWA had become a welfare bureaucracy; breeding dependency amongst refugees. To which Agency officials responded that its resources were already overcommitted to its minimal health, relief, and education programmes, without the capacity for longer-term projects or programmes.[37] Education became UNRWA's flagship programme, with the agency seeking to shift funding away from emergency relief. The resulting UNESCO/UNRWA collaboration proved highly effective and to this day is one of the Agency's defining features, operating the largest non-state education system in the Middle East.[38] UNRWA decided to use host-state curricula, mainly due to its limited funding options and its reliance on existing schooling resources. Aligning the education with host government systems meant that students could access higher education and certification. But it also meant that UNRWA struggled to include content about political or cultural identity.[39] This did not go unchallenged, however, with refugees themselves exercising significant leverage to shape how schooling was delivered despite UNRWA's formal power; becoming a significant sight for growing political consciousness.[40] For

[36] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 46.
[37] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 52.
[38] UNRWA, 'What We Do: Education'.
[39] Kelcey, 'Curriculum Choices for Refugees'.
[40] Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance*.

example, in the 1970s in Lebanon, periods of heightened Palestinian mobilisation saw the informal incorporation of Palestinian nationalist content in UNRWA schools.[41]

This period in the 1950s and 1960s saw UNRWA become further entrenched as a quasi-permanent authority, exercising administrative control over large populations through the institutionalisation of "Palestinian refugee" as a population category; the arbitrator of which was the Agency and its officials.[42] This role was sustained throughout this period, and beyond, by means of repeated three-year mandate renewals, institutionalising temporariness as a mode of governance for the Agency.[43] The consolidation of UNRWA during this period occurred alongside growing refugee political mobilisation, particularly with the emergence of the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO) in the 1960s and their presence in Palestinian refugee camps,[44] further complicating its claims to impartiality.

2.3. Regional conflict and host-state politics (1967–1982)

Starting with the Six-day War of 1967 up until the Israeli Invasion of Lebanon in 1982, UNRWA's operations were reshaped by the political contexts of occupation, war, and complicated host-state dynamics. The Agency continued to discursively maintain the impartiality of its operations, whilst its gradual embeddedness in the region made it impossible to remain completely uninvolved in the politics of the region. Operationally, UNRWA's activities after the 1967 war were a *déjà-vu* of sorts.[45] In the East Bank of Jordan UNRWA took over the activities that the PVOs carried out in 1948 and then handed over to

[41] Irfan, 'Internationalising Palestine'; Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*.
[42] Al Husseini, 'UNRWA and the Refugees'.
[43] Bartholomeusz, 'The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty', 454.
[44] Irfan, 'Internationalising Palestine'.
[45] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 67.

UNRWA in 1950; emergency assistance. On the other hand, political and military instabilities after the 1967 war prevented normalisation of the new refugee areas.[46]



Figure 2 *Map depicting the territorial boundaries of Israel-Palestine after the 1967 War*[47]

The occupation of the West Bank from the rest of Jordan after 1967 initially raised unemployment, as the West Bank had been the most vital part of the Jordanian economy. However, within a few years many Palestinians found day work within Israel, this new link brought with it negative side effects such as inflation which limited the positive effects of increased employment and further exacerbated the agency's financial problems.[48] As for Gaza, the post-1967 environment saw their trade completely cut off from Egypt, worsening already "pathetic" economic circumstances and staying one of the "grimmest of the fields".[49] Generally, in all five field sites, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza Strip,

[46] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 68.
[47] *BBC News*, 'Israel's Borders Explained in Maps'.
[48] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 68.
[49] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 69.

Palestinian political agitation grew. Indicatively, PLO membership boomed when the refugees realised that the Arab states would not solve their problems for them as the 1967 conflict had illustrated. The PLO tried to use UNRWA infrastructure and services as much as possible, to strengthen the material and ideological support amongst refugees for the Palestinian National Movement (PNM).[50] This, predictably, caused problems for UNRWA, creating tensions between the Agency and host countries. Notably, in most cases the refugee camps became operational bases for political activism, in some cases such as Lebanon, the camps even became paramilitary bases.[51] The Palestinians who fled the West Bank for Jordan in 1967 gravitated towards the PLO as an outlet for their political frustrations. They created enclaves in the Jordan Valley and Amman area, where they sought to create independent authority to the Jordanian government.[52] The Jordanian government resisted this, and subsequently fighting broke out in September 1970 (also known as Black September) which turned into a civil war between the Jordan and the PLO that lasted 10 months. The Jordanian army defeated the Palestinians, in doing so severely damaging UNRWA facilities.[53] After this conflict, Jordan banished the PLO fighters and from that moment prevented any form of political mobilisation on the basis of Palestinian national identity.

Most of the fighters driven from Jordan during 1971-1972 fled to Lebanon, Agency officials estimating a few tens of thousands, expediting Lebanon's descent toward civil war.[54] Encouraged by the 1969 Cairo agreement, giving the PLO control of Palestinian areas in the south of Lebanon, these areas soon became the kind of "state within a state" attempted in Jordan. By 1970 the PLO began usurping some of UNRWA's buildings for its own purposes.

[50] Bocco, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees', 240.
[51] Bocco, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees', 240.
[52] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 69.
[53] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 69.
[54] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 70.

As a result of this occupation Israeli aircraft bombed UNRWA facilities.[55] From 1975 onwards the Palestinians were involved in a full-scale civil war, using Agency facilities which as a result struggled to maintain operations. Normal headquarter operations in Beirut ground to a halt in 1975 and with continuing violence was shifted to Vienna in June 1978. Israeli attacks in 1977 and invasion into southern Lebanon in 1978 forced schools to close and heavily damaged refugee camps and agency facilities.[56]This context led to increasingly militarised and politicised camp environments, increasing the fragility of UNRWA's technical impartiality.[57] Official relations between the PLO and UNRWA were only established in 1975, and notwithstanding episodes of collusion in funding between the Agency and the PLO, UNRWA was able to keep its distance from the PLO's influence. In Syria, the relationship between UNRWA and the host state took a more institutionalised, cooperative form. The Syrian government established the General Authority for Palestinian Arab Refugees (GAPAR) in 1949 to administer Palestinian refugee affairs, this created a dial governance structure with GAPAR handling civil and legal matters, while UNRWA remained responsible for education, health, and relief services.[58] This division enabled a higher level of socio-economic integration of Palestinian refugees into Syrian society, albeit without full citizenship rights.[59] Regardless of the Agency's relation to host governments, across its field sites it emerged as a major employer of Palestinian refugees.[60] By recruiting predominantly Palestinian staff, the Agency both reduced operational costs and contributed to the formation of a professional refugee middle class, further embedding the Agency in the everyday lives of Palestinian refugees.

[55] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 70.
[56] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 71.
[57] Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies*.
[58] Al Mawed, *The Palestinian Refugees In Syria Their Past, Present and Future*, 59.
[59] Chatty, *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*, 214; Al Husseini and Bocco, 'The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East'.
[60] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*.

Thus, UNRWA entered the early 1990s not as a static humanitarian actor, but as an institution shaped by decades of crisis management and political constraints, and very capable of change. The preceding periods of conflict, and as will be covered in Chapter 6, the First Intifada, reinforced the ability of the Agency to operate under conditions of uncertainty, all while negotiating access and authority with multiple actors. While the fundamental political question for the refugees, the right of return, remained unresolved, the Agency had developed the operational experience necessary to respond to shifting political frameworks. Considering this history, the emergency of the Oslo-era development discourse did not represent a wholly new departure, but rather a reconfiguration of earlier approaches, echoing the Agency's abandoned developmental ambitions of the 1950s. UNRWA's previous experience in managing tensions, between humanitarian provision and political impartiality, positioned it well to engage with these shifts without a fundamental rupture in its mandate.

3. Theoretical and conceptual framework

3.1. Humanitarian governance

This dissertation employs a critical approach to humanitarian organisations and challenges the idea that humanitarianism can be a neutral moral practice. Rather, this research sees humanitarianism as a politically embedded project. Looking to humanitarianism on the macro-level, Fassin introduces the concept of "humanitarian reason" as the dominant moral and political logic that governs how modern society perceives suffering. While this form of governance is seemingly grounded in compassion and the goal of protecting life, he argues that it is also deeply ambivalent, becoming a tool with which to depoliticise suffering and mask power relations. Inspired by Foucault's genealogy of sexuality, Fassin writes a moral genealogy of the present, asking: "why today are we so attached to both showing and talking

about suffering?"[61] He finds that this new modality of governance prioritises the preservation of biological life, or Agamben's "bare life", over political rights. In doing so, rather than alleviating the root cause of suffering, the unequal treatment of lives is legitimised. The fact that certain lives are worth more than others is normalised, and the unequal power relations in caring for those who are suffering are obscured by a sense of moral legitimacy.

Similarly, Barnett and Weiss argue that in the post-Cold War period humanitarianism witnessed a "deep ontological insecurity"[62]; wanting to emphasise its impartiality and apolitical nature whilst at the same time become more embedded in the domain of politics and state functions. This idea that humanitarianism can be a neutral moral practice is once again challenged, arguing instead that it is an alternative form of governance legitimated through technocratic expertise and moral authority. This is then directly applied to governance practices of humanitarian organisations; specifically interrogating the accountability of these structures. Quoting Stein, they argue the way aid organisations are constructed ensures only weak accountability mechanisms to the affected populations, with, on the other hand, strong accountability upwards towards donors.[63] Hence, humanitarian organisations are powerful structures of governance whose position is justified through their expertise and moral legitimacy rather than any democratic mechanisms towards affected populations.

This framework of understanding humanitarian governance applies to an analysis of UNRWA in various ways. Firstly, in the way that the agency's education, healthcare, and camp management services form governance practices. Secondly, the way in which UNRWA camps form concentrated spaces of administered life, where livelihood without political

[61] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*, 62.
[62] Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*, 3.
[63] Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*, 153.

status is prioritised over a political resolution. Lastly, it places (technocratic) language around the agency's mandate as a key site where UNRWA's governance is articulated and legitimated. This concept will be applied as a framework through which to analyse both the Commissioner-General reports, and staff narratives as reflections on governance practices.

3.2. The bureaucracy of International Organisations

Furthering the argument that humanitarianism is both political and a constitutes a form of governance, this research further challenges the view that International Organisations (IOs) are purely technical actors that reflect state preferences. Drawing on Barnett and Finnemore's research on IO bureaucracies, humanitarian organisations are treated as exercising autonomous power derived from rational-legal authority that their bureaucracies embody.[64] Their bureaucracies make rules, which in turn create social knowledge. This approach to understanding IOs is important to this project as it complicates the idea that these organisations are merely reflections of state preferences, but rather that they can be autonomous powerful actors in global politics in and of themselves. Furthermore, because of their highly bureaucratic nature, these organisations can often be unresponsive to their environment, obsessed with their own rules, and ultimately inefficient in their behaviour. [65] This presents IOs as both powerful institutions that derive their legitimacy from their bureaucratic structure, as well as facing weak accountability mechanisms. By extension comes a framing of ethical errors as technical errors, obscuring the political element of these organisations. Barnett and Finnemore's argument has a normative implication, asking us to look at IOs as political actors that require greater scrutiny, especially with organisations

[64] Barnett and Finnemore, 'The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations'.
[65] Barnett and Finnemore, 'The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations', 700.

where their moral legitimacy derived from "humanitarian principles" shields them from criticism.

This framework for understanding the role of bureaucracy in IOs is vital to the analysis of how UNRWA functioned and adapted as a result of the Oslo Accords. As a humanitarian organisation that derives its legitimacy both through its humanitarian mandate and its technical capabilities, Barnett and Finnemore's analysis of IO bureaucracies is very fitting. This lens also allows us to understand how UNRWA's power is derived from its highly bureaucratic structure.

3.3. Humanitarian aid in the post-Cold War period

Duffield argues that most aid agencies operate on the assumption that there is a clear difference between relief and development. Despite being interconnected, separate approaches and priorities are involved.[66] Humanitarian relief is described as impartial and short-term, whereas development is longer-term help aimed at improving self-reliance. Noting that the line is blurred between the two, Duffield states that since the period of decolonisation the need to protect "the non-insured peoples"[67] exposed to emergency has been an essential element of the globalisation of the liberal governance project. Thus, for development organisations to provide either emergency relief or development, paradoxically, they require a state of emergency for justification of their operations. Following this line of argument, it is not in the interest of humanitarian agencies to actually solve the emergency that justifies their presence, but rather to manage the crisis.[68] Situating this within the context of US global hegemony of the post-Cold War period, Duffield argues there was a global shift

[66] Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*, 46.
[67] Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*, 47.
[68] Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*, 47.

in the way humanitarian governance was viewed; humanitarianism and security fusing into a single global liberal governance project. Development aid became a technology of security.[69] His critical reflection of the incorporation of war into development discourse (and vice versa) illustrates how this new form of governance through aid contains conflict rather than solve it structurally and invited humanitarian aid agencies to become part of security governance structure.[70] He notes that weak or "failed" states in the global south were increasingly being governed through international networks of NGOs, UN agencies etc., forming a diffused system of international liberal governance. These networks acquired quasi-political roles, without formal democratic accountability. Furthermore, the aid that they provide was often tied to political conditionality, institutional restructuring or market reform.[71]

This is directly applicable to UNRWA in the 1990s, especially in critically understanding its shift in institutional language from relief, towards development. Furthermore, it allows us to conceptualise the role that UNRWA played in terms of security, and "crisis management" across its field sites, exemplifying the new form of liberal humanitarian governance that emerged in the post-Cold War period. This framework provides the conceptual basis for later claims about UNRWA as an indirect contributor to state-building and developmental discourse around the formation of the nascent Palestinian state. This contribution is illustrative of the broader trends in aid agencies of the 1990s, in that the agency was performing both a development and security role, whilst discursively maintaining their humanitarian impartiality.

[69] Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars*.
[70] Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars*, 2.
[71] Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars*, 93.

3.4. UNRWA's quasi-sovereignty

Drawing on Hanafi's article "UNRWA as a 'phantom sovereign'"[72] this research treats UNRWA as an agency that exercises authority without any formal, democratic sovereignty. Hanafi writes using the example of refugee camps in Lebanon; however, the argument can be extended to the other refugee camps and even outside of this realm. He argues that UNRWA performs many of the functions associated with the state: welfare, service provisions and governance, without any formal sovereignty or democratic accountability. Thus, *de facto* governing the refugee camp without formal acknowledgement of the fact; acting as a "phantom sovereign". The argument is not that UNRWA plays a specific political role, but rather in the municipal realm through technical expertise and administrative infrastructure. This framework becomes particularly relevant when assessing UNRWA' s relations to host-state government. For example, the governance structure that divides the labour between GAPAR in Syria and UNRWA formalises UNRWA's authority. Whilst GAPAR formally represents state sovereignty, managing legal and civil matters related to Palestinian refugees, UNRWA exercises significant authority through its administrative presence and service provisions.[73] This concept of "phantom sovereign" that Hanafi develops is vital to the analysis in the substantive chapters of this research as it allows us to better understand the precarious position that UNRWA is balanced in: both as a temporary relief provider avoiding a political role, as well as the system of governance in the Palestinian refugee camps. The latter, Hanafi notes, is partly enabled by refugees assigning UNRWA a key role, holding them responsible for things that go way beyond the realm of its mandate.[74]

This framework for understanding how UNRWA governs is vital for our understanding of UNRWA's mandate. Essential to the concept of "phantom sovereign" is that

[72] Hanafi, 'UNRWA as a "Phantom Sovereign"'.
[73] Al Mawed, *The Palestinian Refugees In Syria Their Past, Present and Future*.
[74] Hanafi, 'UNRWA as a "Phantom Sovereign"', 129.

UNRWA maintains a certain ambiguity: it governs, but it is not a government, it has sovereignty, but is it not elected, it is accepted by Palestinian refugees as essential, but also not a democratic representation of their politics. This concept will support the analysis on the intricacies that UNRWA balances in the way it presented, and people viewed, its role in the period after the signing of the first Oslo Accord.

3.5. The right of return

Any theoretical framework applied to UNRWA needs to directly engage with the legal and political centrality of the "right of return", since this principle fundamentally distinguishes Palestinian refugeehood from other protracted refugee situations and complicates the previously introduced frameworks on humanitarian governance.

The right of return is grounded in international law, most notably in UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) (1948),[75] which states that refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so and that compensation should be paid for those choosing not to return.[76] More broadly, the right to return is a principle anchored in international human rights law, including Article 13(2) of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights[77] and Article 12(4) of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights,[78] which affirms the right of individuals to return to their country. Legal scholars such as Akram have noted that the Palestinian refugee case represents one of the most obvious and sustained assertations of a legally grounded right of return in international refugee law.[79] Compared to many refugee populations whose status are resolved

[75] *Resolution 194 (III)*.
[76] *Resolution 194 (III)*.
[77] *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 13(2)*.
[78] *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 12(4)*, 12.
[79] Akram, 'Palestinian Refugees and Their Legal Status'.

through resettlement or integration, Palestinian refugeehood remains juridically and politically tied to the unresolved question of return, and by extension statehood. This legal distinctiveness is reinforced by the institutional architecture of the international system. Palestinian refugees fall under a separate regime from the 1951 Refugee Convention due to Article 1D,[80] which excludes them from receiving assistance from any other UN agency but UNRWA. Other scholars have gone so far as to argue that this creates a *sui generis* framework where Palestinian refugees are simultaneously recognised as refugees under international law and yet governed through a distinct institutional mechanism.[81] Unlike UNHCR, UNRWA has no mandate to pursue durable solutions such as resettlement or integration; its mandate is limited to relief and development until a "just solution" has been found.[82] This legal structural limitation embeds the unresolved question of the right of return at the heart of the agency's existence.[83] In this light the right of return is not merely a legal claim but also a central component of identity and political mobilisation. Several scholars emphasise that the right of return functions as both a collective political demand and a symbolic anchor for refugee identity across generations and geographies.[84] As such refugee camps are not only humanitarian spaces but also political spaces where memory and claims to homeland are reproduced. UNRWA's operations and governance within these spaces thus provides services that sustains daily life while simultaneously serving as a reminder of an unresolved political injustice and a symbol of the international community's responsibility towards them.

[80] *Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees*.
[81] Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*.
[82] *Resolution 194 (III)*; *Resolution 302 (IV)*.
[83] Akram and Rempel, 'Temporary Protection as an Instrument for Implementing the Right of Return for Palestinian Refugees'.
[84] Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*; Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies*.

This concept of "right of return" thus complicates the previously mentioned frameworks which depict humanitarian organisations as neutral, technical actors. In the Palestinian case, compared to aid agencies operating in other contexts, service provision and development are inseparable from the broader claim of the right of return. UNRWA's continued operations both reflect and reproduce the persistence of refugee status, the very existence of which is tied to the absence of a political solution. Furthermore, it emphasises how the highly contentious political context makes it practically impossible for the agency to function "neutrally".

Ultimately, the frameworks outlined in this chapter recast UNRWA not as a purely technical relief agency, but as a politicised institution with governmental practices. Humanitarianism, as Fassin and Barnett & Weiss demonstrate, operates through moral authority and technocratic expertise, often depoliticising suffering while simultaneously exercising political power.[85] Barnett and Finnemore's analysis further reveals how international organisations derive autonomous authority from their bureaucratic structures, shaping norms and practices in and exercising power in their own right; at times without state support. Duffield situates these dynamics within the broader post-Cold War transformation of aid into a tool of liberal governance and security management, a shift that is particularly relevant to UNRWA's political context in the early 1990s.[86] Hanafi's notion of UNRWA as a "phantom sovereign" deepens this analysis by highlighting the agency's governmental practices. Occupying an ambiguous position: governing refugee populations without sovereignty, administering welfare without democratic mandate, and occupying a space between temporariness and

[85] Fassin, *Humanitarian Reason*; Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*.
[86] Duffield, *Global Governance and the New Wars*; Duffield, *Development, Security and Unending War*.

permanence.[87] This ambiguity is not incidental but characteristic of the agency's functions. It becomes even more pronounced when situated alongside the legal and political centrality of the Palestinian right of return. Unlike many contexts where humanitarian agencies operate within frameworks oriented toward durable solutions such as refugee integration or resettlement, UNRWA functions within a political landscape defined by an unresolved claim of return.[88] As a result, its service provision cannot be disentangled from broader questions of sovereignty and historical justice.

4. Literature review

4.1. UNRWA's history

A substantial body of scholarship highlights UNRWA's adaptability as key to understanding both its endurance and its claim to political ambivalence. Bocco emphasizes that the agency's success lies in its ability to manage ambiguity; of mission, temporality, and constituency, enabling it to survive amid chronic political uncertainty.[89] Schiff similarly traces UNRWA's transformation from a temporary relief body into a quasi-permanent provider of public services, noting how its entrenchment has created a paradox of dependency among refugee populations.[90] Schiff's notion of "refugees unto the third generation" encapsulates how an ostensibly temporary humanitarian structure became institutionalized across generations. Building on this, Irfan situates UNRWA within Palestinian nation- building processes, focusing on the 1960s and 1980s, showing how the agency's educational and administrative

[87] Hanafi, 'UNRWA as a "Phantom Sovereign"'.
[88] Akram, 'Palestinian Refugees and Their Legal Status'; Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*; Sayigh, *Too Many Enemies*; Khalidi, *Palestinian Identity*.
[89] Bocco, 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees'.
[90] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*.

roles inadvertently nurtured political consciousness among refugees.[91] Irfan also highlights how refugees themselves contested and reshaped the agency's practices, making UNRWA a mediator between international governance and local politics. Dumper complements these analyses by situating UNRWA within the regional and diplomatic architecture of the Arab–Israeli conflict.[92] He highlights how host-state politics, donor priorities, and inter-UN coordination mechanisms have shaped the agency's room for manoeuvre, embedding it within the political economy of Middle Eastern governance rather than isolating it from it. Together, these authors underscore the central paradox of UNRWA's existence: its institutional ambiguity has ensured both its durability and its depoliticization, allowing it to function within and alongside broader political processes without being officially political itself.

4.2. UNRWA's role

Theoretical work on UNRWA has increasingly framed the agency as a major actor in the governance of Palestinian life. Rempel analyses how UNRWA's activities extend beyond technical service provision. He explores how participatory rhetoric evolved from a managerial tool into a rights-based discourse, reflecting the global humanitarian turn of the 1990s.[93] He notes, however, that a major challenge for the agency remains ways of engaging refugees in conversations about a durable solution to their long-standing plight. Gabiam argues that UNRWA camps are not exceptional humanitarian zones outside of normal politics, taking the example of camps in Syria, these places are socially integrated and politically active.[94] She argues that suffering is interpreted differently by different actors in

[91] Irfan, 'Internationalising Palestine'.
[92] Akram et al., *International Law and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*.
[93] Rempel, 'Unrwa and the Palestine Refugees'.
[94] Gabiam, *The Politics of Suffering*.

the camps, to humanitarian institutions it is seen as a vulnerability requiring relief, thus a category of governance. Whereas, to refugees it is an injustice requiring a political resolution. By extension the development programmes implemented to deal with the vulnerability of the refugees, reframes discourse around refugee issues as apolitical, thus normalising protracted displacement. Feldman furthers this argument in her work by focusing on how humanitarian bureaucracies generate their own political orders. Drawing on ethnographic research in Gaza, Feldman illustrates how the routines and rationalities of relief, registration, distribution, documentation, all constitute a form of governmentality that produces subjects, enforces norms, and sustains social order even in the absence of formal sovereignty.[95] Irfan complicates these top-down analyses by focusing on Palestinian agency in their relationship to UNRWA after the 1950s, positing that UNRWA became a political arena through which Palestinians articulated their claims.[96] Rather than merely depicting refugees as subjects of humanitarian governmentality, this analysis foregrounds the dynamic relationship between UNRWA and the refugees, where governance is exercised by UNRWA and constantly challenged by the refugees the Agency serves. Throughout this literature, UNRWA emerges not merely as a service provider but as a political apparatus of care, embodying the paradox of power exercised in the name of humanitarian care.

4.3. UNRWA's mandate

The legal and institutional dimensions of UNRWA's mandate have received detailed analysis. Akram argues that UNRWA's mandate as established by UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) (1949) was intentionally limited to "relief and works" and did not include the

[95] Feldman, 'Refusing Invisibility'; Feldman, 'What Is a Camp?'; Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief : Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics*.
[96] Irfan, *Refuge and Resistance*.

authority to pursue durable solutions of resettlement or integration.[97] Differentiating the agency from UNHCR, UNRWA was not given a protection or resettlement mandate, the political element of the Palestinian refugee question was to be handled separately through the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP). She argues that Article 1D of the 1951 Refugee Convention excludes individuals receiving protection or assistance from other agencies (i.e., UNRWA) from UNHCR's mandate.[98] The exclusion of Palestinian refugees from the refuge convention was not to deny them rights, but because they were already supposed to receive equivalent protection elsewhere. However, when the UNCCP ceased functioning a "protection gap" emerged, which UNRWA could not technically fill as it was originally only mandated as a service provider.[99] Despite this, she argues that whilst UNRWA is not explicitly mandated to provide legal protection to the refugees, through practice UNRWA has engaged in protection-related activities, thus whilst the legal definition of its mandate is narrow (relief and works) practically speaking it is much broader.[100] Takkenberg similarly acknowledges this "protection gap"; but holds a slightly different interpretation. He argues that UNRWA's protection role has not developed formally but informally through practice and General Assembly resolutions, gradually expanding UNRWA's operational role without formally revising its mandate language.[101] Using the examples of UNRWA's expansion of services to include education, public health, and later on a microfinance programme, his work illustrates how UNRWA's mandate interpretation is bureaucratic and discursive rather than purely legal.

Bartholomeusz traces successive General Assembly renewals, showing how each iteration recalibrated the agency's role in response to shifting geopolitical realities and donor

[97] Akram, 'Palestinian Refugees and Their Legal Status'.
[98] Akram, 'Palestinian Refugees and Their Legal Status', 39–40.
[99] Akram, 'Palestinian Refugees and Their Legal Status', 43.
[100] Akram and Aruri, 'Reinterpreting Palestinian Refugee Rights Under International Law'.
[101] Takkenberg, *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*.

priorities.[102] Al Husseini conceptualizes this evolution as a "difficult but lasting marriage" between UNRWA and the refugee community; balancing impartiality, legitimacy, and responsiveness.[103] Both stress the fluidity of the mandate as a living framework rather than a fixed legal text. At the global level, Barnett and Weiss provide an essential framework for understanding how humanitarian mandates evolve alongside transformations in international order.[104] They argue that humanitarian institutions periodically undergo "transformative moments," where shifts in political context, donor expectations, and moral discourse compel a redefinition of their purpose and scope. Applying this to UNRWA situates the agency within the wider genealogy of humanitarian governance, in which mandates expand from relief to development and from apolitical assistance to indirect forms of political engagement.

4.4. The Oslo Peace Process

The Oslo Accords have been widely critiqued for their asymmetrical power structures and their limited prospects for Palestinian sovereignty. Shlaim provides an early diplomatic analysis, highlighting the accords' structural imbalance.[105] Roy argues that Oslo deepened Palestinian economic dependency, transforming the occupied territories into fragmented zones of managed underdevelopment.[106] Khoury further problematizes Oslo's "liberal peace" discourse, showing how it reproduced Israeli narratives of sovereignty and control.[107] Scholars such as Wake and Brynen look at patterns of international aid during the period, arguing that donor assistance, though central to Oslo's implementation, often reinforced structural asymmetries.[108] Le More expands on this critique, showing how international

[102] Bartholomeusz, 'The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty'.
[103] Al Husseini, 'UNRWA and the Refugees'.
[104] Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*.
[105] Shlaim, 'The Oslo Accord', 1994.
[106] Roy, 'De-Development Revisited'; Roy, 'Why Peace Failed'.
[107] Khoury, 'National Narratives and the Oslo Peace Process'.
[108] Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*; Wake, 'An Unaided Peace?'

assistance after Oslo reflected "political guilt" rather than genuine empowerment.[109] Giacaman provides a crucial social-sector perspective, showing how health and welfare services under Oslo became arenas of fragmented governance, as overlapping authorities, UNRWA, NGOs, and the PA, competed for legitimacy within donor-driven frameworks.[110] Her analysis underscores how social policy became a microcosm of the broader political economy of Oslo: fragmented, externally oriented, and structurally constrained. Parsons complements this with a detailed account of the institutional development of the Palestinian Authority, illustrating how its administrative frameworks were shaped by international donors and the peace process itself, producing a state apparatus whose sovereignty was more procedural than substantive.[111] Together, these works frame the 1990s as a tumultuous period in which development aid became a substitute for peacebuilding and sovereignty, a context crucial for understanding UNRWA's shifting orientation.

4.5. UNRWA during Oslo

Within the Oslo context, scholars have examined UNRWA's response to the peace process and its evolving relationship with the nascent Palestinian Authority, asking whether the agency was affected by a potential handover, changes in donor behaviours, or the global trend towards developmentalism. Bocco and Al Husseini identify the 1990s as a turning point in which UNRWA began to adopt developmental and participatory approaches, aiming to reduce dependency and prepare for a potential service handover to the PA.[112] Besson emphasizes the need for cooperation frameworks between UNRWA, host states, and donors to facilitate a

[109] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*.
[110] Giacaman et al., 'Health Sector Reform in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT): Targeting the Forest or the Trees?'
[111] Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority : From Oslo to Al-Aqsa*.
[112] Al Husseini and Bocco, 'The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East'.

stable transition, focusing his analysis on UNRWA's operations in Lebanon.[113] At the end of Schiff's historiography of the agency, which he published in 1995, he anticipated two possible trajectories for UNRWA: integration into a Palestinian state structure or continued operation as the main conduit of international aid in the event of political failure.[114] The persistence of the latter scenario underscores the enduring relevance of the agency's mandate and its position within a stalled state-building project. This shifting discourse around humanitarian aid did not occur in isolation, as previously stated, humanitarian missions in the post-Cold War era often expanded beyond emergency response into projects of institutional engineering closely intertwined with liberal peacebuilding agendas.[115] Within this global shift development and institution building functioned not merely as economic or political reform, but also as containment. As Chandler argues, state building projects of the 1990s externalised governance, meaning sovereignty became conditional and procedural.[116] This links to UNRWA's position in the 1990s where its development role almost served as substitute for formal sovereignty, justified by an indeterminate "transition period". Feldman's work provides an important ethnographic lens through which to interpret this institutional moment for UNRWA. In *Life Lived in Relief*, Feldman shows how humanitarian bureaucracies such as UNRWA produce political orders through routine practices of care, recordkeeping, and service provision.[117] Applying her insights to the Oslo era reveals how UNRWA's embrace of developmental discourse represented not only a policy adjustment but a transformation in bureaucratic ethos.

[113] Besson, 'UNRWA and Its Role in Lebanon'.
[114] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*.
[115] Barnett, *The Empire of Humanity*.
[116] Chandler, *Empire in Denial*.
[117] Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief : Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics*.

4.6. Synthesis and research gap

Throughout the literature UNRWA is defined by a series of paradoxes: temporary yet enduring, humanitarian yet political, and limited in mandate yet expansive in practice. Scholars emphasise the Agency's adaptability and institutional ambiguity as central to its survival, conceptualising it as a quasi-sovereign exercising governance through bureaucratic, humanitarian frameworks. Legal analyses similarly show that, although formally anchored in "relief and works," UNRWA's mandate had evolved in practice. Studies of the Oslo Accords further highlight how development became intertwined with the management of Palestinian political aspirations. Taken together, this literature demonstrates that UNRWA is neither a neutral service provider nor a conventional political actor, but rather an IO deeply embedded in regional and international power structures, which became particularly evident during the 1990s shift towards development-oriented aid.

Despite this, an important gap remains. While scholars acknowledge that UNRWA's mandate had evolved through practice, few have examined how this reinterpretation occurred internally, in particular through the lived experiences of staff. The Agency's shift from relief to development is often treated as inevitable, a product of the context, rather than as a negotiated process. Moreover, existing studies tend to prioritise either institutional power or refugee agency, with limited attention to how UNRWA staff understood and navigated these dynamics during the Oslo period. This research addresses these gaps by analysing mandate reinterpretation through both archival sources and oral history interviews, focusing on how institutional change was articulated and implemented in practice. In doing so, it shifts the focus from whether the mandate changed to how it was discursively presented and administratively implemented, highlighting UNRWA's role in the governance of Palestinian life during a moment of political transition.

5. Methodology

This research employs a critical qualitative historical approach that allows us to analyse UNRWA's mandate within the post-Oslo Accord context. This approach is well suited to the study of UNRWA, as it enables an analysis of how its institutional identity and practices existed and developed in response to the agency's shifting political environment. It is useful in finding generalisable macro-level trends, that still do justice to historical particularities.[118] For example, understanding how organisations and institutions stagnate and on the other hand develop over time in response to their political context.[119] As well as producing in-depth case studies capturing the interplay of multiple factors that lead to specific historical outcomes.[120] This study employs the latter approach, using qualitative historical methods to understand how the Oslo Accords, understood in this research as a critical juncture in UNRWA's history, affected mandate interpretation. Thus, rather than producing a comprehensive institutional history, this study focuses on a bounded period of 1989-2000 which includes the years before the Accords were signed, the in-between period, and the immediate aftermath. This time period (1989-2000) was chosen because it allows us to include some background on the agency before the signing of the first Oslo Accords (1993), especially since many of the programmes and policies that are relevant to this analysis trace their origins to the First Intifada. The year 2000 was chosen as a cut-off since this is the beginning of the Second Intifada, which represented another critical juncture for the agency and very different political environment. Change within the agency is slow, and takes time to implement, hence the importance of a wide time frame for the analysis.

The critical approach relates to not reading the archives as neutral repositories of facts, but rather as a site of contestation where power relations are manifested. Critical

[118] Mahoney and Rueschemeyer, 'Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences'.
[119] Thelen, 'How Institutions Evolve'.
[120] George and Bennett, *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*.

approaches in historical research are often characterised as reading "against the grain" of the archives, emphasising the need for looking for silences, exposing bias, and where possible recover subaltern voices that may have been silenced.[121] Whilst this is a valuable approach for understanding histories from the bottom up, placing the subaltern at the centre of the study, this research focuses on UNRWA's institutional practices. As such the critical approach in this case reads "along the archival grain" meaning that the archive is taken as a structured epistemic system in itself. [122] Stoler uses this approach to understand colonial archives, placing archives both as technologies of governance and revealing of bureaucratic uncertainties. Stoler argues that through classification systems, bureaucratic language, and categorisation, these archives represent a powerful form of rule.[123] This approach will be revealing of institutional anxieties over issues including potential handover, the Palestinian Authority (PA), and donor pressures. It will also allow us to trace how categories like "development" and "transition" emerged and were employed. Finally, it will allow us to capture its uncertain navigation around sovereignty and responsibility *vis-à-vis* its Palestinian refugee beneficiaries.

The Oslo Accords as a time period was chosen because it represents a critical juncture in the history of the humanitarian agency. The signing of the Accords and the period immediately afterwards were not only the closest we have come to a resolution of the Palestine-Israel conflict, but it also constitutes a significant moment for UNRWA due to the convergences of several other factors related to the peace process. Namely, the establishment of the PA, the proliferation of donor-driven development discourse, and widespread expectations that UNRWA would eventually transfer its responsibilities or be phased out altogether. This period of anticipated transformation for the agency provides us insight into

[121] Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*.
[122] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.
[123] Stoler, *Along the Archival Grain*.

how humanitarian institutions reinterpret their mandates to reassert their relevance in changing political contexts.[124] Especially when it became clear that the accords would fail, UNRWA provides an interesting case of how aid organisations operate to make sense of and reinforce their relevance. Whilst there will be takeaways from this study that will be applicable to other humanitarian institutions, this research will focus on UNRWA as a critical case of prolonged humanitarian governance, ensuring in-depth analysis rather than comparative breadth.[125]

5.1. Data collection

5.1.1. Archival sources

The documentary corpus consists of two sources, firstly, the publicly accessible repository of official UN documentation called the United Nations Information System on the Question of Palestine (UNISPAL). The materials prioritized in this repository will be the UNRWA Commissioner-General Annual Reports from 1989-2000. These reports provide the agency's understanding of political developments, accounts of programmatic priorities, and the agency's financial constraints. Furthermore, it provides a means of analysing the agency's institutional language. These reports will be supplemented by United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) resolutions relating to UNRWA, as they are the UN bodies that determine UNRWA's mandate, as well as statements by the UN Secretary-General addressing the agency.

This study also draws on internal UNRWA documentation that was located in the UNRWA archives in Amman. Focusing on policy memoranda from (1995) and (1996) these

[124] Barnett and Weiss, *Humanitarianism in Question*.
[125] Flyvbjerg, 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research'.

planning documents include overviews of institutional reform and potential service transfer to the PA. Furthermore, such internal records offer valuable insight into institutional deliberations that may not be fully reflected in public-facing reports.

The study treats these documents not only as objective sources of information but, through a constructivist approach, view these archival materials as expressions of institutional self-understanding and claims to legitimacy, reflecting broader dynamics of humanitarian governance and their relations to donors and the populations they serve.[126]

5.1.2. Oral history interviews

To complement these archival sources, this study incorporates semi-structured oral history interviews with former UNRWA staff who worked at the organisation during the 1989–2000 period. This source of data is appropriate for research on institutional histories as it captures informal practices, internal tensions, and subjective experiences that are absent from the archives. As Abrams notes, oral histories are not a distortion of history but rather places subjectivity as a central element for understanding a historical period.[127] In addition to "filling in the gaps" of the written archives, as Portelli notes, the use of oral histories is important since memory-making is in itself important data.[128] The way people understood, and understand UNRWA's role during this period is an important element of historical research, revealing power dynamics present and the ways in which institutional change is narrated retrospectively.[129]

[126] Barnett and Finnemore, 'The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations'.
[127] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*.
[128] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*.
[129] Portelli, *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories*.

The interviews as a source are co-produced by the interviewer and interviewee, and reflect both the power dynamics and relationships of the interlocutors as well as the dynamics at the time of the interview.[130] Drawing on memory studies, Abrams argues that oral histories are valuable because people remember the past through the lens of current political developments, later developments, and institutional narratives in relation to their own identity.[131] Hence, oral histories of UNRWA sere not only to recall the events of the Oslo period neutrally, but these events are also reconstructed in light of ongoing political contestation and power dynamics. Ultimately, these oral histories serve to humanise the archival materials, fill any gaps that may have presented themselves, and understand what this period of UNRWA's history means in relation to current politics. In the context of humanitarian organisations, where bureaucratic language becomes a means of masking political complexity and internal power dynamics, oral histories provide critical insight into how change was experiences and interpreted by those involved in its implementation, and how people understand its relevance today.

Five participants were selected for interviews, to reflect a range of different roles from field-level operator to programme officers, to senior administrators. Interviews were conducted remotely using a semi-structured format relying on guiding questions, allowing participants to reflect on UNRWA's self-understanding, mandate interpretation, and institutional change during and after the Oslo Accords. Certain additional questions, tailored to the roles and experiences of the interviewees, were occasionally added. This included topics such as finance, UNRWA-PA relations, and the role of UNRWA in the broader context of the peace process of the 1990s, specialised information that certain interviewees were well-positioned to provide. However, the majority of the questions were related to the central

[130] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*.
[131] Abrams, *Oral History Theory*.

themes of institutional change and self-understanding during the Oslo period, enabling comparative analysis between interviews.

In terms of ethical considerations and consent, all participants provided informed consent and were offered anonymity, in line with the Oral History Association's Principles and Best Practices.[132] Ethical approval was obtained from the relevant university review board prior to data collection.

5.2. Analytical framework and data analysis

5.2.1. Critical discourse analysis

The analysis of archival material will draw on critical discourse analysis (CDA) to examine how UNRWA articulated its mandate during the given time period. CDA is concerned with the relationship between language and power, viewing language as a form of social practice, hence reflecting the power relations and ideology embedded in the social context that the discourse is produced.[133] This approach is suitable for this research as it does not take at face value UNRWA's operational output or bureaucratic paperwork, instead allowing one to pick apart how the agency presents itself, carefully balancing its claims of impartiality whilst exercising forms of governance. UNRWA holds a difficult position as an agency that should operate as "neutral" in a context where neutrality is virtually impossible. Furthermore, during this moment of political transition the agency's role is unclear, despite its operations being ongoing. CDA approach, grounded in contextual evidence, will allow this research to pick apart how constraints are understood and mediated through language. While this approach provides an effective tool for examining the relationship between language and power,[134] it

[132] 'OHA Principles and Best Practices - Oral History Association'.
[133] Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*; Wodak and Meyer, *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*, v.v. 113.
[134] Fairclough, *Analysing Discourse*.

has been critiqued for its potential interpretive overreach and lack of transparency. These concerns will be addressed in this study by analysing recurring patterns across multiple documents whilst making sure to situate the textual shift within archival context.

The analysis focuses on recurring concepts within the UNRWA reports, namely, development, capacity-building, and institutional transition. Special attention will be paid to shifts in language over time, as the political context shifts and the progress of the Oslo Accords seems to slow down. As well as omissions and ambiguities around sovereignty and political constraints faced by the agency. This approach to researching the archival documents see them not only as important documentation of what was happening in the agency at that time but also acknowledges how these documents were instruments through which UNRWA legitimised its evolving role within the changing landscape it was living through in the 1990s.[135]

5.2.2. Thematic coding

The oral history interviews were analysed using thematic coding in order to identify recurring patterns across participants' narratives. A grounded-theory approach was employed, meaning that the materials were read first to identify categories, to avoid the researcher from forcing data into pre-existing framework.[136] Excerpts from the interviews were first categorised from which patterns and hypotheses could then be extracting. Initially the transcripts were coded *in vivo*, meaning that the participants language was preserved during the process of categorisation. This was done because the topic of the interviews were both sensitive and filled with a lot of jargon/professional terminology that might get lost if imposing broader

[135] Barnett and Finnemore, 'The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations'.
[136] Glaser, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

concepts immediately.[137] A second round of pattern coding was then conducted to synthesize the initial codes into broader analytical concepts.[138] This approach avoids using data only to confirm working theory and the starting fixed hypothesis, rather working with the data in a way that the "theory" can emerge.[139]

Interviews were recorded online via Microsoft Teams and then transcribed using AI. The transcripts were then edited to ensure that the AI transcription was correct. Initial *in vivo* coding was then conducted on a line-by-line basis with codes developed inductively, into categories such as: "harmonization", "funding", "peace process", these initial codes were subsequently grouped into broader analytical themes through a second round of pattern coding.

These broader analytical themes included "anticipation of institutional handover", "development versus relief", "impartiality and political constraint", "donor influence" and "UNRWA as a form of governance". These themes were not assumed in advance but emerged through engagement with the data and were interpreted in light of the conceptual frameworks of humanitarian governance, quasi-sovereignty, and developmentalism. Attention was paid in tensions between narratives, as well as ambivalences within narratives, which can reflect important information about the contested nature of former employee's views on UNRWA's institutional role.

5.4. Limitations

This study has several limitations. Firstly, the small number of interview participants limits the generalisability of the findings, and the retrospective nature of the interviews introduces

[137] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*.
[138] Saldaña, *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*.
[139] Glaser, *The Discovery of Grounded Theory*.

the possibility of recall bias. Additionally, all former staff interviewed were employed as international staff within UNRWA. Although one interlocutor was originally from Gaza, they were nonetheless employed under international staff terms, in a management position, and received an international salary. This creates a limitation with the data, as it excludes the perspectives of the majority of UNRWA employees who are classified as "local staff," and receive lower salaries, and work under different contractual and employment conditions.

This distinction is particularly important given UNRWA's unique staffing structure. Of its approximately 30,000 employees, the overwhelming majority are Palestinian refugees, while only a small number are internationally recruited staff.[140] Despite this, the upper echelons of the agency remain largely composed of international career civil servants. Furthermore, most interviewees held senior positions within the organisation and were employed for extended periods, which may skew the oral history data toward leadership perspectives. Their accounts are also likely shaped by strong normative commitments to the agency, which they consistently expressed, as well as by the effects of hindsight. The, largely, positive bias of these career civil servants were taken into account and reflected on throughout the analysis.

Regarding the archival component of the research, access to internal UNRWA documentation was limited. Entry to the archives in Amman is restricted, and beyond a small number of documents made available, much of the material used in this study derives from publicly accessible sources. While this does not inherently undermine the research, it is important to acknowledge that additional official documentation relevant to this study exists. However, access to these materials is either restricted or, in some cases, the documents have

[140] UNRWA, 'Working at UNRWA'.

been destroyed, particularly those previously housed in Gaza during the recent violence in the territory.

5.5. Reflexivity and ethical considerations

Reflexivity is vital to this research, especially given the political sensitivity of the subject matter and the positionality of the researcher. As a young, white researcher educated in the Global North, my intellectual formation has been shaped by particular academic traditions, normative assumptions about humanitarianism, and dominant discourses surrounding refugeehood, governance, and state-building. The university and scholarly canons within which I was trained tend to privilege particular modes of knowledge production, such as institutional archives over informal memory, formal policy discourse over lived experience, and conceptual frameworks deeply rooted in European and North American intellectual traditions. While analytically valuable these traditions also carry with them assumptions about modernity and liberal governance that do not fully capture locally grounded political imaginaries. This positionality also intersect with questions of power, as an external researcher with the backing of a prestigious university in the Global North, I occupy a position that carries symbolic authority in academic and policy spaces. This could influence the way interviewees respond, especially on politically sensitive topics such as refugeehood. At the same time, my distance from the lived reality of displacement and occupation creates limitations to my understanding. Despite the inclusion of personal narratives of this contentious period, I remain an interpreter of those narratives. These dynamics do not invalidate this research but rather situates it. Reflexivity here indicates an ongoing effort to reflect on how analytical categories are shaped and how institutional power relations may be

reproduced in the act of scholarship.[141] However, the aim of this study is not to produce a definitive institutional account of UNRWA during the 1990s, rather to offer a contextualised and critically informed interpretation of how UNRWA navigated a period of political transition.

Ethical considerations include protecting participant confidentiality and avoiding any possible harm based on politically charged topics. All the interviews were conducted in accordance with established ethical guidelines, and care was taken to contextualise and remain loyal to the narratives given. Interviewees who requested anonymity were assigned pseudonyms, while those who consented to be identified are quoted using their full names. UNRWA is an agency that has been subject to sustained scrutiny from refugees, donors, and the wider public, and many interlocutors expressed concern about being misquoted or perceived as overly critical of the organisation. The aim of this research is not simply to critique UNRWA, but to offer a critical evaluation that helps clarify some of the central tensions within the agency without reproducing extractive or adversarial research practices. In this spirit, particular care was taken to ensure the accuracy and integrity of interview interpretation, including checking with interviewees where appropriate that quotations were used correctly, and situating all testimony within its broader historical, institutional, and political context. This ethical and reflexive attentiveness is especially important given the difficult position UNRWA occupies today, alongside its continued necessity in the region.

[141] Finlay, 'Negotiating the Swamp'.

6. Laying the groundwork: 1989-1993

The First Intifada (1987–1993) marked a critical turning point in the political and humanitarian landscape of the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT). Beyond a mass uprising against Israeli occupation, it transformed the conditions under which humanitarian organisations operated. For UNRWA, the Intifada represented not simply a rise in humanitarian need, but a shift in its institutional role. The Agency was compelled to adapt to a volatile environment characterised by violence, movement restrictions, and political pressure by expanding beyond its traditional service provision. This included the development of protection-oriented practices and the growth of emergency and development programming supported by increased donor funding. This chapter argues that the Intifada reconstituted UNRWA's role, moving away from its previous relief-oriented services, and sowing the seeds for a more developmental role, operating at the intersection of humanitarianism and political constraint. It first outlines the dynamics of the uprising, before examining the expansion of UNRWA's protection role and the emergence of new development programmes, demonstrating how both were shaped by the conditions of occupation.

6.1. The First Intifada

Jabalia refugee camp witnessed the outbreak of the First Intifada on 9 December 1987, following an incident in which an Israeli truck driver collided with parked civilian vehicles, killing four Palestinian workers. [142] The Palestinian response was characterised by widespread protest, civil disobedience, and strikes, which were met with forceful repression

[142] Edward, 'Intifada and Independence'.

by Israeli security forces. [143] Whilst the timing of the Intifada was a surprise, the outbreak of such a protest was not. For the preceding 20 years Palestinians under military occupation in the West Bank and Gaza had been subjected to harsh repression and brutality while watching what remained of their country disappear before their eyes due to the expanding Israeli settlement programme.[144] While Palestinian protest under occupation since 1967 had often been violently suppressed and quickly dissipated, the events of December 1987 marked a significant departure. Rather than subsiding, demonstrations expanded in both scale and intensity, at times overwhelming Israeli military units. Over the following years, the uprising developed into a sustained campaign of predominantly civil resistance across the West Bank and Gaza Strip. [145] This included boycotts of Israeli Civil Administration institutions, refusals to work in Israeli settlements or consume Israeli goods and other forms of economic and social non-cooperation. Israel responded with extensive military deployment, reaching approximately 80,000 troops, and a range of coercive measures, including curfews, mass arrests, deportations, and the closure of universities. The use of live ammunition and other forms of force was widely criticised by international organisations, including Human Rights Watch, as disproportionate. [146] Over the course of the Intifada, at least 1,087 Palestinians were killed, including 240 children.[147] Figure 1 provides an overview of Palestinian casualties and fatalities from beatings, shooting, and firing of rubber bullets and tear gas by the Israeli military between 1987 and 1992.

[143] Lustick, 'Writing the Intifada'.
[144] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 4.
[145] Lustick, 'Writing the Intifada'.
[146] *The Israeli Army and the Intifada Policies That Contribute to the Killings*.
[147] B'Tselem, 'Fatalities in the First Intifada'.

TABLE 1 *Palestinian casualties and fatalities during the first five years of the First Intifada*

December 1987–June 30, 1988	casualties	7,969
	fatalities	156
July 1, 1988–June 30, 1989	casualties	22,177
	fatalities	303
July 1, 1989–June 30, 1990	casualties	23,300
	fatalities	255
July 1, 1990–June 30, 1991	casualties	13,874
	fatalities	157
July 1, 1991–June 30, 1992	casualties	5,360
	fatalities	121

Source: Data aggregated from Schiff (1995, 237–238).

Figure 3 *Table of Palestinian casualties during the first five years of the First Intifada*[148]

For humanitarian actors operating in the occupied Palestinian territories (OPT), this escalation fundamentally altered the operational environment. Movement restrictions, widespread violence, and administrative controls disrupted existing service provision and necessitated the expansion of emergency programming. Organisations such as UNRWA and the ICRC were increasingly required to negotiate access with Israeli authorities while responding to rapidly growing humanitarian needs.[149] At the same time, the period witnessed a significant expansion in human rights documentation, with both local and international organisations developing new monitoring and reporting practices.[150] The Intifada thus highlighted how the OPT represents a highly politicised humanitarian space, where relief, protection, and politics are deeply intertwined.

A defining feature of the uprising was its grassroots organisation. Across refugee camps, villages, and urban neighbourhoods, "popular committees" emerged to coordinate everyday life, including food distribution, healthcare, education, and protest activities. [151]

[148] Kelcey, 'An (A)Political Education?'
[149] Feldman, *Life Lived in Relief : Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics*.
[150] Allen, *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights*.
[151] Lustick, 'Writing the Intifada', 565.

Alongside these local structures, the Unified National Leadership of the Uprising (UNLU), operating in coordination with the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), issued communiqués that guided collective action. While internal leadership structures gained prominence, the external PLO leadership retained strategic authority, particularly in diplomatic matters. [152] Importantly, the Intifada elevated a new cadre of Palestinian political figures within the OPT, such as Hanan Ashrawi and Sari Nusseibeh, who would later play key roles in negotiations.[153] The uprising thus not only reshaped internal Palestinian political dynamics but also reinserted the "Palestine question" into international diplomatic agendas. [154] The extensive media coverage of the uprising, often depicting Palestinian youth confronting heavily armed Israeli soldiers, contributed to a shift in global public opinion and generated renewed international engagement.[155] This culminated in the Madrid Conference of 1991, the first instance in which all parties to the conflict were brought together in a formal diplomatic setting, laying important groundwork for the Oslo process. [156]

For UNRWA, the Intifada represented a moment of institutional transformation. As Schiff notes, the uprising "infused UNRWA with a vitality it had not known since the 1950s."[157] This transformation occurred along two key axes. First, the Agency expanded its role to include forms of protection in response to the intensification of violence and human rights violations. Second, increased donor funding enabled the development of new programmes that extended beyond immediate relief towards longer-term infrastructural and

[152] Lustick, 'Writing the Intifada', 565.
[153] Lustick, 'Writing the Intifada', 565.
[154] Cobban, 'The PLO and the "Intifada"'.
[155] Hass, 'Broken Bones and Broken Hopes'; *The Los Angeles Times*, 'Colonel Says Rabin Ordered Breaking of Palestinians' Bones'.
[156] Quandt, *Peace Process*, 311.
[157] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 227.

developmental initiatives. Together, these shifts marked a transition towards a more complex form of humanitarian governance under conditions of occupation.

6.2. Protection

The escalation of violence in the early weeks of the Intifada prompted international concern. On 22 December 1987, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 605, which deplored Israeli violations of human rights, reaffirmed the applicability of the Fourth Geneva Convention in the occupied territories, and called on Israel to comply with its provisions. [158] A subsequent report by Under-Secretary-General Marrack Goulding, based on a visit to the OPT, confirmed the severity of the situation, documenting mass arrests, ongoing deportations, and increasing casualties. Crucially, the report rejected Israel's position that the Fourth Geneva Convention did not apply and argued that full compliance would provide the most effective protection for the civilian population. [159] However, in the absence of such compliance, the report turned to alternative, practical measures. Developed in consultation with UNRWA leadership, these recommendations provided the legal and operational basis for expanding the Agency's role. [160] Protection was conceptualised across four dimensions: physical protection, legal protection, general assistance, and the more indirect notion of "protection by publicity."[161] For UNRWA, the most significant of these was general assistance, which involved the presence of international staff to engage with authorities, facilitate operations, and mitigate risks faced by the civilian population. The Secretary-General therefore requested the expansion of international staff within existing UNRWA

[158] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 227.
[159] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 228.
[160] *Resolution 605*, 9.
[161] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 228.

structures and authorised, on a temporary basis, the provision of emergency assistance to non-refugee populations. [162] This led to the creation of two new roles: Refugee Affairs Officers (RAOs) and Legal Officers (LOs). These positions were designed to provide a form of passive protection through presence, negotiation, and reporting. RAOs, in particular, were tasked with monitoring incidents, ensuring the integrity of UNRWA installations, and liaising with Israeli authorities. [163] As one interlocutor, Mathias, who was employed at UNRWA as a RAO during the Intifada recalled: "This was quite novel at the time… there were many non-refugee communities that needed assistance."[164] He further described how this role often involved mediating between local practices and military authority: "In the end we had to talk to the head teachers to make sure the kids would not throw stones from the schools, or we would build a fence."[165] This illustrates that "protection" in practice was not primarily about enforcing rights, but about managing risk and maintaining operational space through negotiation. [166] It reflects a form of humanitarian governance in which the presence of international actors provided a limited buffer, rather than a direct challenge to structures of control. However, this expanded role also generated tensions. The more UNRWA appeared to adopt functions associated with human rights monitoring, the more Israeli authorities resisted cooperation. [167] As Mathias noted, such roles might elsewhere be termed "human rights observers," [168] but the designation of RAOs was deliberately framed as more neutral. This semantic distinction underscores the political constraints within which UNRWA operated: protection had to be carefully calibrated to avoid jeopardising access.

[162] *Resolution 605*, 13.
[163] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1988-89*.
[164] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords', 10 September 2025, Microsoft Teams.
[165] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[166] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 233.
[167] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 251.
[168] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

6.3. New programmes

Alongside these shifts in mandate, the Intifada also triggered a significant increase in donor funding, enabling UNRWA to expand its programming. In early 1988, the Agency developed proposals for both emergency relief and longer-term interventions. By mid-year, over $32 million had been pledged for immediate assistance, with additional $10 million in funding allocated to improving living conditions in the OPT. [169] In the Autumn of 1988, the General Assembly approved the proposed measures and instructed UNRWA to carry them out.[170] These initiatives were formalised through two key programmes: the Extraordinary Measures in the Occupied Territories (EMOT), focused on short-term relief and the Expanded Programme of Assistance (EPA), which targeted longer-term infrastructural development. EMOT addressed urgent needs such as food aid, shelter, and medical support, and by the end of 1989 about $35 million was being spent on the programme. [171] While EPA funded projects including sewage systems, housing repair, and the expansion of health and education facilities, projects that were long proposed but that the agency did not have enough funding.[172] While these programmes built on previously proposed initiatives, the availability of funding during the Intifada allowed them to be implemented at scale for the first time. In this sense, the period marked a shift towards development-oriented programming that would later underpin post-Oslo interventions. However, these efforts remained politically constrained. Israeli authorities generally supported increased funding for humanitarian relief

[169] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1987-88*, 10.
[170] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 230.
[171] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 231.
[172] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 231.

but viewed longer-term development projects with suspicion, particularly where they might contribute to forms of Palestinian institutional capacity. [173]

6.4. Finances

The first Intifada had a significant impact on UNRWA's financial structure, mirroring its shift from primarily a service provider towards providing a more complex combination of emergency relief and development programmes. Donor funding increased to support the EMOT programme, by 1989-90 the programme cost approximately $22 million annually.[174] This not only covered expanded health services and food distribution, but also a growing range of interventions required to sustain operations under conditions of curfew and other economic disruptions. For example, funds were used to extend clinic hours, maintain 24-hour services in Gaza, and support emergency food distribution networks adapted to movement restrictions.[175] This reflects a stabilisation of expenditure following the initial surge in funding at the outset of the Intifada, when EMOT spending had rapidly expanded to around $35 million by the end of 1989.[176] In subsequent years financing for the programme remained consistently high, with costs rising to $29 million by 1991.[177] This trajectory reflects the institutionalisation of emergency programming, which would later expand to EMLOT to include Lebanon.

Financial data from this period also demonstrates the increasing importance of large institutional donors, particularly the European Community (EC), whose contributions rose substantially and were often directed towards both emergency operations and infrastructure-

[173] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 263.
[174] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1989-90*.
[175] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1991-92*.
[176] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 231.
[177] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1990-91*.

related projects. EC donations stood at approximately $31.3 million 1986 and $41.1 million in 1987,[178] rising significantly during the early 1990's, reaching $74.3 million in 1991 and remaining high at $67.1 million in 1992.[179] This influx of earmarked funding enabled UNRWA to sustain parallel tracks of intervention, both immediate humanitarian relief as well as longer-term improvement in camp infrastructure. By the early 1990s, this dual structure became firmly embedded, with emergency programmes absorbing significant resources, while development-oriented initiatives expanded in scale.

These reports also illustrate the limits of this funding environment. Much of the increased donor support was tied to specific projects or emergency appeals, rather than the Agency's core budget, creating an early form of imbalance that would become more pronounced in the Oslo period. For example, a significant portion of the EC's contributions were earmarked for specific purposes, including $2.3 million allocated to emergency operations in 1992 alone.[180] Furthermore, the implementation of funded projects remained subject to external constraints, with Israeli authorities delaying or blocking certain activities. Thus, the Intifada both expanded UNRWA's operational capacity, whilst also exposing the fragility of the funding model and the political conditions shaping how the resources could be deployed.

6.5. The European Gaza Hospital (EGH)

The construction of the European Gaza Hospital provides a clear illustration of how ostensibly technical development projects were shaped by political constraints. Initiated in

[178] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1988-89*.
[179] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1990-91*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1991-92*.
[180] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1991-92*.

1989, the project aimed to provide primary and secondary healthcare to approximately 400,000 people in southern Gaza. [181] It was also envisioned as a model for broader development within the Palestinian health sector. [182]



Figure 4 *The European Gaza Hospital in Khan Younis in the late 1990s*[183]

[181] Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*, 196.
[182] Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*, 196.
[183] Lex Takkenberg, 28 August 2025.

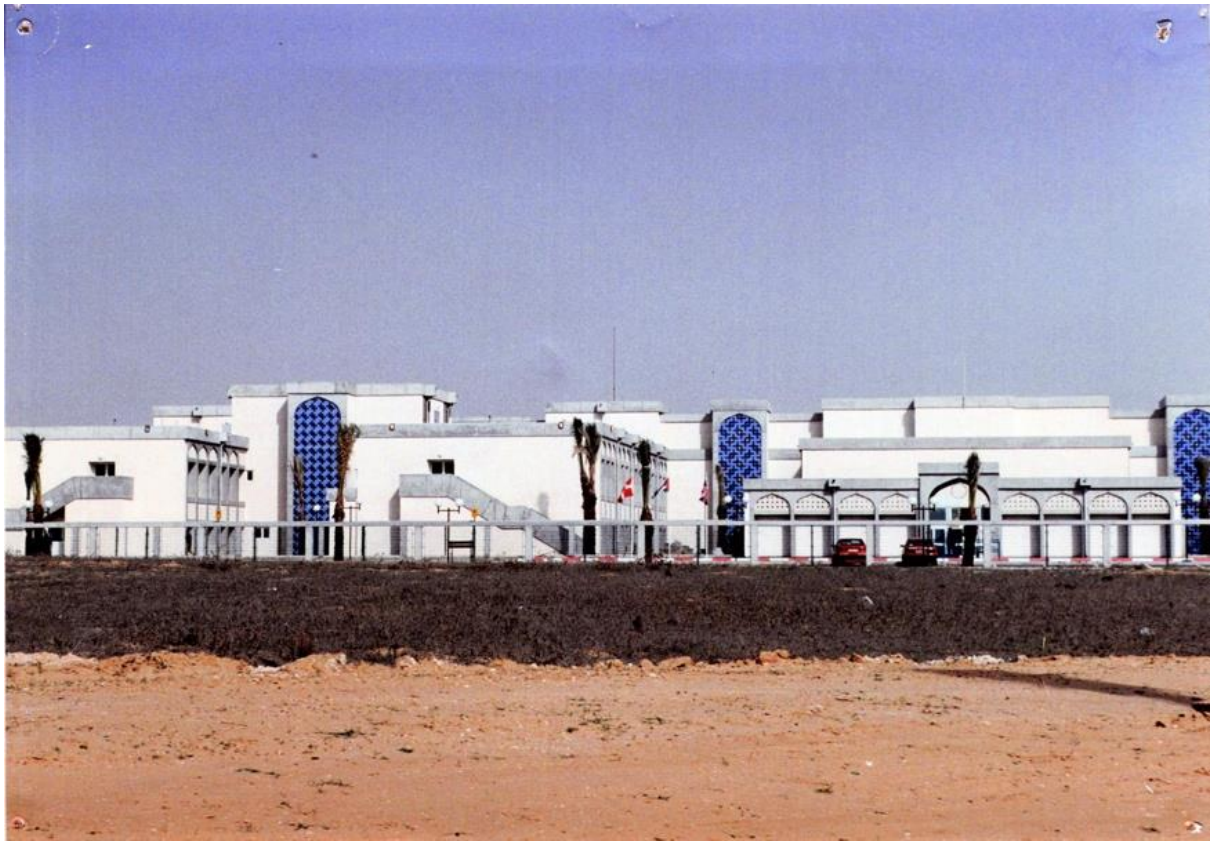


Figure 5 *The European Gaza Hospital in Khan Younis in the late 1990s*

Given the absence of a Palestinian governing authority and the political sensitivities of funding through Israeli structures, UNRWA assumed responsibility for implementing the project, with financial support from the European Union. [184] The Agency coordinated design, construction, and consultation processes, working with Irish contractors named Mivan Overseas Ltd. and Architects Co-Partnership as design engineers and construction supervisors.[185]

[184] Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*, 196.
[185] UNRWA, 'Briefing Note: European Gaza Hospital Project'.

Official institutional accounts emphasise the consultative nature of the project, highlighting engagement with Palestinian healthcare providers and agreement on its implementation. UNRWA's Annual Report of 1991 states that:

> "UNRWA carried out thorough consultations with all providers of health care in Gaza to decide on the types of services and specialization needed. Substantial funds were still needed before the Agency could start construction. By the end of the reporting period, however, agreement had been reached with concerned parties on a site for the hospital in the south of the Strip between Rafah and Khan Younis, and the decision was taken to proceed with tendering for the architectural design."[186]

The Annual Report stresses the consultation of "providers of health care in Gaza" in the development of the project, emphasizing Palestinian participation in the project. It also states that by the end of the reporting period an agreement was reached. This account is complicated by one of the interlocutors, Mathias, who was a RAO at the time. He recounts how the plan to build the Gaza European hospital was heavily affected by the wishes of the Israeli authorities. Stating:

> "The original idea was to build a hospital in Gaza city, and the Palestinian Red Crescent society which was headed by Haider Abdel Shafi, the one I mentioned before as the leader of Palestinian delegation to Madrid, he gave us a plot of land as the head of the Red Crescent Society. But the Israeli authorities, the health department, didn't want us to build a hospital in Gaza City because they said there are already three-four hospitals, so you don't know one there, build one in the south. So, then we had to change the plans and the UNRWA hospital, which was actually called the European Hospital, was built between Khan Younis and Rafah, which is still there today. This is just an example of how the operations, how the technical part

[186] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1989-90.*

of what UNRWA was doing was influenced or affected by whoever was politically in charge. But it didn't matter who it was, someone was always in charge."[187]

This account demonstrates how political authority shaped even highly technical decisions such as location. While Palestinian actors advocated for a centralised facility in Gaza City, Israeli authorities redirected the project southward. UNRWA thus operated as an intermediary, navigating between competing demands in a context where ultimate authority remained external. This example underscores a broader point: development interventions during the Intifada were not autonomous. Rather, they were embedded within a system of political control that conditioned their scope and implementation. UNRWA's role was therefore not simply that of a service provider, but of a mediator operating within, and constrained by, the structures of occupation.

6.6. Analytical discussion

The First Intifada constituted a turning point in the political and operational environment in which UNRWA functioned. Rather than simply intensifying humanitarian need, the uprising fundamentally reconfigured the relationship between humanitarian actors, occupying authorities, and the Palestinian population. The scale of civil mobilisation, coupled with the visibility of Israeli countermeasures, transformed the occupied territories into a highly politicised humanitarian space, in which the boundaries between relief, protection, and governance became increasingly blurred.

In this context, UNRWA's role expanded beyond its traditional service-delivery functions. The introduction of protection-oriented practices, most notably through the

[187] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

deployment of Refugee Affairs Officers and legal staff, represented a significant, if cautious, shift towards a more politically engaged form of humanitarianism. However, as the archives and oral history testimonies suggest this expansion was less a formal transformation of mandate, rather an adaptive response to the constraints of operating under occupation and the violence of the First Intifada. Israeli resistance to the reframing of UNRWA's role, combined with the Agency's own need to maintain operational access, meant that "protection" was often enacted in indirect and negotiated forms, rather than through overt rights-based advocacy. As reflected in staff accounts, protection in practice took the form of mediation, presence, and risk management, illustrating the limitations of humanitarian action in a highly politicized context of occupation.

At the same time, the influx of donor funding during the uprising enabled the Agency to expand into longer-term, development-oriented programming. Initiatives such as the Extraordinary Measures in the Occupied Territories (EMOT) and the Expanded Programme of Assistance (EPA) marked a shift towards infrastructural and institutional interventions that extended beyond immediate relief. Yet, as both the documentation from this period and interview material demonstrate, these ostensibly technical projects remained deeply intertwined in political structures of control. The case of the Gaza European Hospital demonstrates how decisions over location, implementation, and scope were shaped not only by humanitarian considerations, but by the preferences and constraints imposed by Israeli authorities, as well as the absence of a sovereign Palestinian administrative body. Thus, the shifting focus on development during this period did not represent a departure from political contention, rather it reconfigured how UNRWA related to the unresolved political issue of Palestinian refugees and deepened its embeddedness in the everyday governance of Palestinian lives.

All together, these developments reveal that the Intifada did not simply "revitalise" UNRWA but rather reconstituted it as a more complex actor operating at the nexus of humanitarianism, governance, and political negotiation. The Agency's evolving practices during this period reflect how humanitarianism functions as a form of governance, UNRWA's new protection role representing an important authority and legal bureaucratic presence throughout the crisis of the First Intifada. Furthermore, the early signs of the expansion of the Agency's role towards development further illustrate UNRWA's governmental role through the provision of care. At the same time both archival sources and former staff narratives underscore the difficult conditions and structural limitations that the Agency was operating under, particularly the absence of a formal sovereign body to represent the Palestinian refugees, the unresolved question of the right of return, and the ongoing violence of occupation.

The Agency's evolving role during this period this laid important groundwork for its later engagement with the Oslo Peace Process, particularly in relation to its development programmes and its role in Palestinian state-building and conflict mediation. However, it also exposed enduring tensions, between impartiality and advocacy, relief and development, and humanitarian action and political constraint, that would remain an issue in UNRWA's operations in the years that followed.

7. The Oslo period: 1993-1996

The signing of the Declaration of Principles (DOP) in 1993 marked a decisive turning point in UNRWA's institutional trajectory. While the Agency remained formally excluded from political negotiations, the peace process reshaped its mandate in practice, positioning it as a

key actor within this context of transition, with the ultimate goal of Palestinian self-governance. Within UNRWA, this period was widely understood as the beginning of a transitional phase that would culminate in Palestinian self-government and, ultimately, statehood. As one interviewee recalled, it was "always clear… there would be a Palestinian state coming,"[188] In this context, UNRWA expanded beyond its traditional service provision to become an institutional support for the emerging Palestinian Authority (PA), contributing to early state-building efforts through infrastructural and development projects and technical assistance. This transformation, and effort of institutional harmonization, unfolded under conditions of growing financial instability, as donor priorities shifted towards project-based funding and support for the PA. This section argues that the interim period (1993–1996) redefined UNRWA's role along three interconnected lines: the expansion of development-oriented programming, the deepening of its support to PA governance, and the emergence of structural financial constraints that shaped both.

7.1. The Oslo Peace Process

In September 1993, United States President Bill Clinton oversaw a handshake between Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and Palestine Liberation Organization Chairman Yasser Arafat on the White House lawn.[189] This handshake represented a historic moment in the Palestine-Israel conflict; the announcement of the Declaration of Principles (DOP) for a political settlement of Palestine-Israel conflict, a result of secret meetings in Oslo sponsored by the Norwegian government.[190] This was a result of independent negotiations that had been underway since November 1991, with the Madrid conference, and had continued under the

[188] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[189] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 1.
[190] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 1.

guiding hand of the United States. The Palestinian delegation consisted of Palestinians from within the Occupied Territories ('internal Palestinians') and was led by Haider Abdel Shafi.[191] The PLO ('external Palestinians') were based in Tunis and headed by Yasser Arafat and were excluded from the negotiations, although they did have an unofficial observer Faisal Husseini. As for the Palestinian refugees, they were totally excluded, with no regards to their rights.[192] Throughout the Madrid negotiations and the secret Oslo negotiations, the settlement programmes expended rapidly, first under the Yitzhak Shamir and then Yitzhak Rabin, who became the prime minister in 1992.[193] As for the Palestinian camp, the Intifada had placed a lot of political power in the hands of 'internal Palestinians' and grassroots organisations, increasing the alienation of the 'internal Palestinians' from the PLO leadership abroad in Tunis.[194] It was in this context that Arafat sought a way to reestablish PLO authority, and thus welcomed the opportunity to participate in secret negotiations between him and the Israelis under Norwegian auspices, in doing so completely undercutting the local leadership.[195] Palestinian reactions to the Oslo Accords were mixed, a few had high hopes, but other saw very little to celebrate. Faisal Husseini, who was close to Arafat and had represented the PLO at the Madrid conference said that the accord was "definitely not the beginning that our people were looking for."[196] Certainly, upon a closer look the DOP was unbalanced, for example, the security arrangements allowed Israel to retain control over borders, security, and movement in much of the territory, whilst the PA was given limited administrative power.[197] Furthermore, what this episode illustrated was how the PLO leadership ignored 'internal

[191] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 2.
[192] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 2.
[193] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 5.
[194] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 6.
[195] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 6.
[196] Chomsky, 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences', 7.
[197] Shlaim, 'The Oslo Accord', 1994.

Palestinians' who had suffered through twenty-seven years of Israeli occupation and of course the Palestinian refugees.

7.1.1. Implementation of the Accords

The implementation of the Oslo framework appeared, at least initially, to translate this diplomatic breakthrough into tangible political change. The Cairo Agreement of May 1994 formalised the first stage of Palestinian self-rule, granting the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA) limited jurisdiction over the Gaza Strip and the city of Jericho, to be followed by a phased extension of autonomy to other areas of the West Bank.[198] Despite the symbolic advances of the peace process, historic mutual recognition between Israel and the PLO, the accords provoked intense opposition on multiple fronts.[199] Within the Israeli camp, the Likud party and settler movement denounced the Accords as a dangerous concession, while amongst Palestinians, Hamas rejected the process outright, launching a wave of attacks against Israeli civilians between 1993-1997.[200] These attacks, and Israel's subsequent retaliatory measures, including border closures that severely disrupted Palestinian labour flows and targeted killings of Hamas leaders, further strained the fragile trust underpinning the process.[201] The signing of the Interim Agreement on the West Bank and Gaza Strip (Oslo II) in 1995, once again under US auspices on the White House lawn, marked the high point of the process. Yet, this moment once again exposed the fragility of the negotiated peace, although Oslo II passed in the Knesset, it did so by a single vote, reflecting the deep political divisions within Israel.[202] These tensions culminated dramatically in November 1995 with the

[198] Malik, 'Analysis of Oslo Accords', 2001, 136.
[199] Usher, *Dispatches from Palestine*, 9.
[200] Usher, *Dispatches from Palestine*, 9.
[201] Rynhold, *The Failure of the Oslo Process* (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2008).
[202] Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*, 629–31.

assassination of Yitzhak Rabin by a Jewish extremist, this even both galvanised short-term public support for peace whilst simultaneously removing one of its principle architects. [203] Under Shimon Peres, implementation of the Accords continued, and by early 1996 most Palestinians in major urban centres were living under some form of PA administration. However, this autonomy remained limited, as Israel retained control over significant portions of the territory, including key areas such as Hebron, as well as borders, security, and movement, underscoring the incomplete and uneven nature of the transition envisioned by Oslo.

7.1.2. UNRWA during the peace process

The Madrid Conference and signing of Oslo I dramatically changed the environment in which UNRWA operated, however, UNRWA remained outside these formal negotiation processes.[204] In the letter of transmittal prefacing UNRWA's 1993 Annual Report, the then commissioner-general Ilter Turkmen notes the "positive developments in the direction of peace which have taken place since the end of the reporting period"[205] and in the preface notes that these developments "will have an impact on the operations and programmes of UNRWA in different ways."[206] Turkmen acknowledged that:

> "There is no doubt that from now on the other programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations system, and the World Bank, will have an important contribution to make to economic and social development in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip and therefore towards political stability. Because of the scale of its presence in the area, its largely Palestinian staff

[203] Morris, *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*, 629–31.
[204] Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*, 281.
[205] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1992-93*, 2.
[206] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1992-93*, 3.

and its historical experience, UNRWA will, I hope, be a major contributor to this combined effort."[207]

This excerpt illustrates how the signing of Oslo I represented a dramatic shift in UNRWA's operational landscape, with increased involvement of other International Organisations and more donor contributions. It also emphasises the importance of UNRWA in terms of its governing capacity, citing its "scale of presence in the area" and "historical experience" as illustrative of its technical abilities. That being said, despite UNRWA's central role in implementing the changes that would be brought about as a result of Oslo I, the Agency was not officially involved in the political process. Jonah, a senior UNRWA official at the time, describes UNRWA as being "at the recipient end of Oslo rather than the participating negotiating end."[208] Similarly, Angela notes that UNRWA did not perceive a role for itself in nation-building or political negotiation, stating: "that was outside our remit."[209] Rather, UNRWA's role was to ensure that its activities remained consistent with the evolving political context.

This marginality *vis-à-vis* the peace process was not accidental but rather reflected the structure of the peace process. Bilaterial negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, or rather the PLO, took place through secret channels, whereas UNRWA's involvement took place through multilateral forums.[210] But even in these forums, such as Minster Lovell talks organised by Chatham House, the Agency's participation was limited. As Lex observed, UNRWA's presence at these discussions were "by and large cosmetic"[211] focusing more on technical humanitarian issues rather than substantive political questions.

---

[207] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1992-93*, 3.
[208] Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords', 18 November 2025, Microsoft Teams.
[209] Angela Williams, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords', 18 November 2025, Microsoft Teams.
[210] Mick Dumper, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords', 19 November 2015, Microsoft Teams.
[211] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

However, this exclusion from formal diplomacy did not imply irrelevance. On the contrary, the peace process created different expectations of the Agency. It is clearly reflected in UNRWA's internal planning that the Agency saw itself as a key agent in implementing technical transition on the ground. An internal policy planning document published January 1995 titled "*UNRWA and the transitional period: a five-year perspective*"[212] conceptualises UNRWA's new role. It maintains that UNRWA should keep its core services, but that in response to the political context and its new role, it should expand its development and coordination role in relation with the newly established Palestinian Authority (PA). The document emphasises that UNRWA's mandate has previously been sufficiently flexible to adapt to changing circumstances and frames its new role as consistent with its long standing objective of finding a solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. A second policy document, titled "*Harmonization of UNRWA services: challenges and progress"*[213] published in 1996 provides more detail on the harmonisation process and an evaluation of the progress the Agency had made up to that point. This second document is explicitly presented as following up on the 1995 report, to "review progress" and plan "next steps."[214] Thus, whilst UNRWA remained outside the formal architecture of peace negotiations, it was positioned as a key operational actor within the emerging post-Oslo order. Internal documentation reflects that the Agency was aware of this position, and keen on providing a roadmap for a smooth transition of the Agency's self-proclaimed "quasi-governmental services."[215]

[212] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*.
[213] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996).
[214] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), i.
[215] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 1.

7.1.3. Atmosphere in UNRWA

The early 1990's were characterised by a strong sense of optimism for UNRWA, interlocutors who were employed at UNRWA during the time described this period as one of hope and anticipation. Ramadan recalled about the period: "everybody was so optimistic"[216] Many believing that a Palestinian state would emerge within a few years: "And we were, at least on my part as a Palestinian, myself, [believing] that we will be soon, in a few years' time, having our own state."[217] Lex described a similar optimism, adding that the Accords brought international attention to the region, and Palestinian refugees. He noted that "every head of state was visiting Israel" and that he was "doing nothing but organising VIP tours."[218] This optimism was extended to internal planning within UNRWA about the Agency eventually handing over its functions to the Palestinian Authority, as exemplified by the document published in January 1995 previously mentioned.

This optimism was tempered, however, by underlying scepticism of the DOP. The Agreement was completely silent on vital issues such as the right of return for 1948 refugees, the borders of the Palestinian entity, the future of Jewish settlements in the West Bank and Gaza, and the status of Jerusalem.[219] The likelihood of an agreement being reached if these issues were discussed being very slim. Furthermore, the agreement contained a lot of ambiguities and contradictions, making it open to widely different interpretations to both parties.[220] Lex reflecting on the period stated that, even at the time, after a careful reading of the Oslo Agreement illustrated that the process was fragile: "I think most of us knew this would never work because of the incremental approach."[221] This incremental approach

[216] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[217] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[218] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[219] Shlaim, 'The Oslo Accord', 1994, 34.
[220] Shlaim, 'The Oslo Accord', 1994, 38.
[221] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

depended on a sequence of steps, each vulnerable to disruption. To illustrate this the start of final status negotiations in 1996, and the resolution of core issues such as refugees, never materialised. In retrospect this failure to begin with the final status negotiations would prove decisive in the unfolding of the process, but even in the early years there was an awareness that the process was sensitive. This combined hope and fragility of the process was what shaped UNRWA's approach. The Agency prepared for transition while simultaneously maintaining its existing operations; reflecting their uncertainty about whether and when a full handover would occur.

7.2. UNRWA relations with the Palestinians

7.2.1. Providing practical support to the Palestinian Authority (PA)

Despite UNRWA not functioning as a negotiating actor, it became a facilitator of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) early functioning. Two interlocutors recalled how UNRWA was asked to help pay the salaries of PA police officers who were brought in under Oslo and initially lacked a functioning payroll system.[222] Before banking arrangements were formally established, for a short period, UNRWA staff carried suitcases for of cash into Gaza to renumerate the police officers. This is also mentioned in official documents, the 1995 internal planning document stating that the Agency should continue responding to requests by the PA "such as operating a payment mechanism for the Palestine Police Force"[223] Lex also described how UNRWA provided logistical support during the 1996 Palestinian elections, when the Agency made schools available as polling stations and physically stored and moved

[222] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[223] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, i.

ballot boxes.[224] The 1996 policy document includes the same point, stating that these elections were a "milestone in the peace process" and added that they hoped the elections would "continue and expand the dialogue on harmonization."[225] These examples illustrate how UNRWA provides practical infrastructural support, using its wide operational presence to stabilise the new political order. As Lex stated, UNRWA was the largest operational presence in Gaza and Jericho, and as such "became a facilitator practical supporter of the emerging Palestinian Authority."[226]

The 1995 internal paper clearly anticipates this role. In the summary of UNRWA's evaluation and recommendations stating that the Agency should begin discussion with the PA on "the matter of handover of services" specifically addressing "the harmonization of public sector and UNRWA services" and any other steps necessary to prepare for "an eventual hand-over."[227] The paper also identifies the creation of joint committees in education and health, the provision of data for financing and delivery of services, archives with the main historical records of the Palestine refugee population.[228] This illustrates that UNRWA was not waiting for an eventual handover of services, but ensuring the practical conditions for one. The document makes clear the political developments of the peace process fundamentally reshaped the Agency's planning horizon. It notes that, within the five-year transitional period outlined in the Declaration of Principles (DOP), at the end of which final status negotiations on the refugee question were to begin, "UNRWA's ultimate dissolution"[229] was expected to be tied to the resolution of that issue. In this sense, the Agency's planning framework was

[224] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[225] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 5.
[226] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[227] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, ii.
[228] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 11.
[229] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, i.

explicitly aligned with the timetable of the DOP. The 1996 policy document also makes the UNRWA-PLO cooperation explicit, stating that there was an exchange of letters between the two in June 1994, where the "PLO requested that UNRWA continue its services in the self-rule areas during the interim period."[230]

This coordination between UNRWA and the PA was also evident in camp governance; one interlocutor describes an example where there was ambiguity in who was the governing authority. Lex describes PA planners approaching him with ambitious plans to integrate refugee camps into urban development plans. His response was open, but cautious, stating that he was "not sure whether the PA is really ready to integrate the camps in urban planning"[231] and that they should check with Arafat. When the planners eventually returned after consulting the Chairman, they confirmed that there would not in fact be any changes to camp structure or governance arrangements. This episode captures an important feature of the period after the signing of the DOP: the PA was developing state-like ambitions, but the refugee question and with it camps remained a politically sensitive and unresolved topic. In this sense UNRWA's presence and technical expertise represented a form of institutional continuity that the new authority did not yet want to disturb.

7.2.2. Arafat and the refugee question

The relationship between UNRWA and Palestinian leadership was a decisive factor in the formation of the Agency's role during this period, and as Chairman of the PA, Arafat's stance was particularly significant. The oral history interviews present a close working relationship between the Chairman and UNRWA, showing that Arafat was very reluctant to see the Agency replaced, both on a practical and political level. On a political level, UNRWA

[230] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 5.
[231] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

represented a form of international legitimacy that he was eager to preserve. As Jonah, who had a close working relationship and regular contact with Arafat, emphasised the presence of UNRWA symbolised an ongoing international engagement and commitment to the Palestinian cause, and an asset in the development of the peace negotiations.[232] This position included symbolic matters, for which Jonah had a telling anecdote about flags:

> "Let me give you another little episode that you could not find in the archives: at one point when the new Palestinian "UN ministers" [quotation marks indicated] in the Palestinian Authority came into office, […] the Minister of Education said, well, you have the UN flag flying there, but we should put in a Palestinian flag over the UN flag. And I said, well, that's an interesting proposition, but you know, this is a symbolic issue that reaches much further than the immediate hoisting of a flag on a flagpole. So let me have a chat with Arafat about it, which I did. And I said, you know, would you like to have the Palestinian flag above [on top of] the UN flag on UNRWA schools and institutions? And he responded immediately: no way should the Palestinian flag fly over the UN flag on institutions we are closely cooperating with UNRWA, but we are not aiming at replacing UNRWA and phasing out UNRWA and taking over everything from UNRWA."[233]

This anecdote is illustrative of Arafat's attitude towards UNRWA during this period; valuing the UN Agency's presence over nationalist Palestinian symbols. UNRWA's presence in the OPT was vital as it represented the unresolved issue of the refugees, which was supposed to be addressed in the final status negotiations, as well maintain a flow of technical and financial support.[234] Another interlocutor, Mathias, emphasised that Arafat wanted to maintain the refugee status of Palestinians in the OPT, and by extension UNRWA's presence,

[232] Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[233] Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[234] Anne Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*, (Routledge, 2008), 155, https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203928332.

both because of the financial implications and because the refugee issue remained a "pawn in the final status negotiations."[235] Arafat's position towards UNRWA reveals a key tension: while the DOP envisaged an incremental transition towards statehood, it also preserved the unresolved "refugee issue." Thus, UNRWA's presence, and the PA's close collaboration with the Agency, was not simply a matter of administrative necessity, but also part of a political strategy to keep the "refugee issue" on the table.

7.3. Harmonisation

7.3.1. Core services

The central concept to UNRWA's approach to this period was the concept of "harmonisation" This refers to the effort to align UNRWA's services, operations, and administrative system with those of the PA in preparation for a potential handover. This is evident in the annual reports from the period, 1993-1996,[236] as well as the previously mentioned 1995 and 1996 policy documents[237] which outlines this process in detail. The documents emphasise that in light of the Agency's services to a 1.2 million registered refugee population, of 2.3 million in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, "it is obvious" that its main interlocutor and partner for this process is the PA.[238] In the education sector UNRWA ensured that teaching methods and standards be compatible with those offered by the receiving authority. The 1995 report comments that the PA asked UNRWA to "assist in up-grading the skills of serving teachers

[235] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[236] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1993-94*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1994-95*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1992-93*.
[237] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*; *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996).
[238] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 7.

through the provision of in-service training"[239] as well as point to the establishment of a joint committee between UNRWA and the PA Education Ministry to discuss issues ranging from curricula to infrastructure. [240] By 1996, the report notes that the committee had unfortunately not met since the signing of the Memorandum of Understanding in May 1994.[241] Despite this, the report notes success in that Agency schools used PA study plans and textbooks in the 1995-96 school year. Furthermore, the 1995-1996 calendar for the school was coordinated; including examinations, vacations, and official holidays. [242] The report further states that UNRWA is participating in the design of a new Palestinian curriculum, providing support through staff participation. The report notes that due to "its wide experience in this sector" the Agency's views are given strong consideration and it is taking a leading role in the revision of the PA vocational training study plan.[243] Additionally, the report notes that in November 1995 the Agency provided the PA with training programme and instruction materials for the in-service training course for head-teachers.[244] During this time period, UNRWA elementary and preparatory schools accounted for 58% of all such in the Gaza Strip and 15% in the West Bank.[245]

A committee was also established in the health sector to discuss "issues such as health insurance, hospital care, immunization, and the Gaza Hospital project." [246] The 1996 report notes that a major issue that the PA faced when it assumed responsibility for the public health care system in the Gaza Strip in May 1994 and West Bank in November 1994 is the highly

---

[239] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 11.
[240] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 11.
[241] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 12.
[242] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 12.
[243] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 12.
[244] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 13.
[245] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 7.
[246] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 11.

fragmented nature and maldistribution of resources.[247] The document states that the Agency is committed to resolving this problem, but noted that there are difficulties in terms of communication and financing of this transition.[248] It noted that the expansion of its vaccine programme to abide by PA, and by extension Israeli, standard proved very costly.[249] The report also mentions several large environmental health programmes, aimed at improving sewage, drainage, and solid waste management in camps. It notes that the implementation of these projects require close coordination with municipalities and the PA, stating that this "has proven difficult" but that these projects require involvement of local and regional authorities.[250] By 1996 the Agency provided 23% of the total health clinics in the Gaza Strip and 9% in the West Bank, however, as noted in the policy document this does not reflect the level of activity and population served. Citing the example of the Tulkarm Area in the West Bank, average daily consultations for clinics inherited by the PA is 4, in NGO clinics is 6, and in UNRWA health centres is 133.[251]

For the relief and social services, the 1995 policy document states that issues will be addressed on a programme-to-programme basis, with special hardship programmes needing to be replaced by "an alternative national social security policy." [252] The 1996 report again stressed that the PA was insistent on UNRWA continuing the special hardship programme, "owing to political sensitivities", and that at the time of the report it was not feasible for the PA to embark on developing a social protection policy for the future.[253] In April 1995 the PA and UNRWA agreed to formalize coordination regarding relief services on two levels: a

[247] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 13–14.
[248] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 14.
[249] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 6.
[250] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 15.
[251] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 7.
[252] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 11.
[253] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 16.

technical working group would meet on specific issues and present recommendation to a policy and planning group. These working groups were made up of both PA and UNRWA officials.[254] In terms of service provision, as of 1996 UNRWA provided 95% of all direct relief services and 35-40% of all social services in the Gaza Strip; in the West Bank the Agency provided 75-80% of direct relief services and 20-25% of social services.[255] Between 1993-1996 UNRWA continued providing its services to the 1.2 million registered refugees in the OPT, whilst coordinating alignment with planned PA services. Ultimately, the goal of this process was the rendering of UNRWA and PA services as "mirror images of each other"[256] ready for handover with full Palestinian independence.

7.3.2. Capacity building

Harmonisation also took the form of capacity building; UNRWA coordinated major infrastructure projects, engaged in institution and human resources building, and other logistical issues. Major projects were projected to be transferred to PA control such as the European-Gaza hospital, which would be run by Palestinians after an initial interim period.[257] The 1996 report stated that the hospital should be finished by the end of the year, upon its completion representing an important addition to the Palestinian health infrastructure.[258] A joint committee was set up with representatives of UNRWA and the PA to discuss the future management and operation of the hospital, with close consultation of the EU. This project was a major concern to the Agency, in terms of funding and equipment, but the report states

[254] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 16.
[255] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 7.
[256] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 11.
[257] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 16.
[258] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 15.

that a response from the PA on this matter was still pending by April 1996. [259] The report cites the Peace Implementation Programme (PIP) as another venue through which there was extensive dialogue between the Agency and the PA, stating that the structure of these projects were intended to reflect the PA's longer term priorities, citing multiple environmental health projects in the Gaza Strip as examples.[260] The document also mentions its commitment to building institutions, such as the Law Centre at Birzeit University in the West Bank, to assist in the development of legal structures benefiting the needs of the population of the new Palestinian state.[261] Human resource development is also mentioned, noting that the Agency's experienced staff would play a useful role in the public and private sectors of the area. It states that the Agency launched an Organization Development Initiative (ODI) in December 1995 to develop "the competencies and enhance the professionalism" of Palestinian managerial-level UNRWA staff in the West Bak and Gaza Strip.[262] It states that the increase of senior-level Palestinian staff would make the Agency more in harmony with the local milieu and facilitate the transition of the Vienna Headquarters to Gaza.[263] In terms of administration, efforts were made to make structures easy to handover, such as aligning UNRWA salaries to local salaries. Contrary to other UN Agencies, UNRWA made a conscious effort to pitch salaries to the local PA salaries, making an eventual transition smoother.[264] Similarly, the 1995 report highlights the importance of sharing data systems, arguing that without institutional administrative compatibility a smooth transition would not be possible. The document states that the records covering almost 1.2 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza Strip "are not at present in a form which could readily be made use

[259] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 15.
[260] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 20.
[261] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 19.
[262] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 19.
[263] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 19.
[264] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 8.

of by the PA."[265] The 1996 report mentions that the Agency was exploring ways to store and make available the vast repository of data and archival resources in the Agency's possession. It mentions its efforts to finish the computerisation of the unified registration system (URS), an integrated computer data base system that would contain the registration data, socio-economic information, and family files, noting that the completion of this project would be beneficial both to the final status negotiations and future PA governance of the area (such as the establishment of a comprehensive social security and welfare system).[266] The report also mentions the potential integration of the Agency's successful micro-finance scheme in the Gaza Strip, stating that it is expected to be self-sufficient by the end of 1997, and could potentially be independently incorporated or integrated with another financial or banking organisation.[267]

Despite all these preparations, the anticipated handover never occurred. Initial preparations for staff transfer were quickly halted, as several interlocutors noted, due to the uncertain political context.[268] Arafat's reluctance to absorb UNRWA's functions and the failure of the peace process to progress to final status negotiations, meant that the planned transition remained incomplete. This failure reflects the limits of the Oslo framework, rather than a lack on UNRWA's part. While the Agency adapted its operations in anticipation of statehood, the political conditions necessary for a full transfer of responsibilities never materialised.

[265] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 11.
[266] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 20.
[267] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 18–19.
[268] Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

7.4. Development

This period saw UNRWA expand its development-oriented programming. UN General Assembly resolution "Assistance to Palestine Refugees" clearly situates UNRWA's work within the "positive developments" of the peace process and encourages coordination with other actors to sustain and expand UNRWA's traditional services.[269] Illustrative of this shift is the establishment of the Peace Implementation Programme (PIP) in October 1993, following discussions with the PLO, the Advisory Commission and major donors, which was supposed to bring tangible socioeconomic improvements and stabilised conditions for refugees in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.[270] This project was specifically tied to the idea of "peace dividend"; that the signing of the DOP would bring economic growth and development to the region.[271] The programme emphasised infrastructure upgrading (such as schools and health centres), income generation, job creation, and generally projects to strengthen public services. All with an eye to handing over these assets to the emerging PA authority.[272] The structure of PIP differed from UNRWA's traditional programmes in that the services were more "projectized"; purely donor-funded and donations were earmarked for specific projects.[273] UNRWA's 1995 policy document provides a clear overview of this shift, describing PIP as a mechanism for public investment. The document stresses that PIP is aimed at improving infrastructure, specifically mentioning environmental health infrastructure in the Gaza Strip, where UNRWA has a dedicate programme.[274] These programmes include the Rafah sewage scheme, the Gaza wastewater project, and the Jabalia sewerage and drainage project.[275]

---

[269] UN General Assembly, *Assistance to Refugees*.
[270] *UNRWA - Fourth Committee Debate - Summary Record*.
[271] *UNRWA - Fourth Committee Debate - Summary Record*.
[272] Rempel, 'The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and a Durable Solution for Palestinian Refugees'.
[273] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 2000-2001*.
[274] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 19.
[275] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 15.

Notably the 1996 report notes that coordination on these projects was a problem area, and that a new approach was being trialled where the Agency encouraged bilateral cooperation between the donors and the PA, with UNRWA providing technical assistance when required.[276] The 1995 document stresses the "forward looking" nature of this programme, stating that all the projects undertaken as part of PIP are seen by UNRWA as a "means of ensuring that the infrastructure received by the Palestinian Authority when it assumes responsibility for Agency services will be adequate to the needs of the population." [277] As of June 1996 the Agency had received a total of $192.6 million in pledges and contributions under PIP.[278] The report states that the Agency will start with a second phase of the PIP in light of its initial success, stating that PIP II "will be the final investment initiative undertaken by the Agency."[279] The projects under the second phase are more long-term in the needs that they target, and there is a particular emphasis on the environmental health sector.

The oral history interviews reinforce this picture; Ramadan described a dramatic increase in funding after the signing of the DOP: "money was pouring in during that period."[280] He mentioned large-scale infrastructure and service expansion and stated that these projects were all explicitly framed as preparatory steps for a future Palestinian state. This turn towards development projects was not a purely technical decision, as Mathias observed, funding flows were closely tied to political dynamics. Resources were funnelled to UNRWA and the PA depending on political developments and donor perceptions. Mathias stated: "When the PA was in the good books, they were getting more money than UNRWA.

[276] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 15.
[277] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 19.
[278] Svein, *Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*.
[279] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 20.
[280] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

When the PA was not in the good books, because whatever Arafat was doing or not doing, then UNRWA was getting more money."[281] Thus the development programming was deeply entangled with the broader politics of the peace process and donor interest. Complicating this account of a shift towards development was Angela's account of PIP. She argued that the groundwork for a development approach was already present at UNRWA, with programmes such as EMLOT and the EPA. In fact, a financing report published in 1996 states that the establishment of PIP made the EPA redundant, and that the later would be phased out completely. What changed was the environment during this period, where it was suddenly "politically possible to talk about peace implementation."[282] The Agency's approach was already shifting, but the signing of the DOP and the influx of donor funding allowed a rebranding in the way that UNRWA's operations were presented.

7.5. Finances

After the DOP, UNRWA's funding entered a period of growing imbalance and uncertainty. Overall aid to the Palestinians increased substantially, representing a "peace dividend" of sorts, and with it donor priorities shifted to supporting the newly established PA and financing short-term and visible projects in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.[283] As Le More argues, aid to the Palestinians after Oslo, 1993 marked "a watershed in the decline of the Agency's income,"[284] with UNRWA's regular budget remaining stagnant through the 1990s despite continued population growth, rising living costs, and expanding service demands. The agency annual increase of income between 1993 and 1999 was about US $1.7 million, compared to

[281] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[282] Williams, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[283] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*, 154.
[284] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*, 154.

an average annual increase of income of US $12.3 million during the period 1985-1992.[285] This stagnation was in stark contrast with the significant increase in earmarked, project-based funding, specifically through initiatives such as the PIP, creating a disconnect between development projects and the resources required to sustain core services.[286] As the 1995 policy document states new classrooms were being built to accommodate the rapidly expanding student population, but there were not enough funds to employ the teachers to make use of these classrooms.[287]

The 1995 policy document similarly highlights how persistent shortfalls in the regular budget forced the Agency into repeated austerity measures. In 1993, and again in 1994 these measures amounted to about $25 million total. [288] A finance report published by the Working Group on the Financing of UNRWA in 1996 further states that despite austerity measures UNRWA still entered the 1994-95 biennium with an adjusted deficit of $14.4 million in its regular budget.[289] These austerity measures included hiring freezes, salary constraints, and reductions in expenditures. As Ramadan noted, UNRWA had long been operating under a "structural deficit,"[290] but this condition became more acute in the post-Oslo period. In this context of financial precarity donors demonstrated a clear preference for funding new programmes rather than sustaining existing ones, reflecting the expectation that UNRWA's functions would eventually be transferred to the PA following final status negotiations.[291] While these programmes expanded the Agency's activities, they were funded on a temporary

[285] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*, 154.
[286] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 7.
[287] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 7.
[288] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 7.
[289] Svein, *Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*.
[290] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[291] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*, 154.

basis, creating long-term liabilities without guaranteed support, which as Mathias stated, "came to haunt UNRWA later because the funding obviously was not guaranteed forever."[292] This made the Agency increasingly reliant on fragmented and unpredictable funding streams, entrenching UNRWA's financial precarity.

7.6. Moving headquarters to Gaza

UNRWA moved its headquarters from Vienna to Gaza in 1996, cementing its commitment to handing over services and its eventual dissolution.[293] The move reflected donor expectation that UNRWA would play a central role in the transitional phase and eventually hand over its functions to the PA. This move was funded through extra-budgetary contributions, amounting to $9.6 million by mid-1996,[294] and was explicitly framed as part of a transition of services. [295] The argument was that the headquarters' relocation would align the Agency physically with the emerging PA, as well as contribute to a modest increase in job opportunities in the Strip.[296] After the signing of Oslo I (1993) and later the Gaza-Jericho Agreement (1994) Arafat returned from exile in Tunis to establish the PA's initial headquarters in Gaza. As such, Gaza became the first centre of Palestinian self-rule, often referred to as "Gaza First"[297] With this in mind, the 1995 policy report on harmonisation asserts that the move was important in terms of "political symbolism"; underlining the commitment of the United Nations in

[292] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[293] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*, 154.
[294] Svein, *Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*.
[295] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 12.
[296] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 12.
[297] Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*.

supporting the PA which was at this point based in Gaza.[298] A few interlocutors noted that this decision to move headquarters was driven less by operational logic, that of facilitating a handover of services, but rather political considerations. All interlocutors mentioned that the move was motivated in part by the then Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali to demonstrate UN support for the peace process and the new PA.[299] Ramadan notes that Boutros Boutro-Ghali "thought he would give a boost to Gaza if
he moves the UNRWA headquarters there" But that in hindsight "this did not really prove to be a practical solution, actually."[300] The move was thus envisaged to signal a shift from a detached, managed externally from Vienna organization to one embedded in the field of operations.

The move exposed significant tensions, whilst it brought UNRWA into closer contact with the PA and the population is was serving, it also reduced the institutional distance that had allowed the Agency to operate with a degree of attachment. The then Commissioner-General of UNRWA, Peter Hansen, oversaw the move from Vienna to Gaza. In one interlocutor's words he came into office with a "mandate to be the last Commissioner General of UNRWA […] he led the return of UNRWA headquarters from Vienna to Gaza"[301] he further emphasized that he "brought in new blood and thinking."[302] After the Agency's move to Gaza the Commissioner General took initiative to meet the local area staff and local Palestinian communities, which one of the interlocutors stated "had never been done before"[303] Despite the advantages of understanding the operational environment better

[298] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 12.
[299] Williams, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[300] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[301] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[302] Takkenberg, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[303] Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

because of direct exposure, there was significant internal resistance to the move. Staff were reluctant to leave the stability of Vienna for a politically volatile, as well as logistically challenging environment.[304] Indeed, even the 1995 policy report mentions "losing competent and experienced staff" as a result of the planned move.[305] In practice, the result of the move was fragmented headquarters structure across Gaza, Amman, and Jerusalem, reflecting the operational constraints of operating in such a volatile field. As Angela explained, there were already headquarter offices in Amman, and because not everything could be done from the Gaza headquarters a small headquarter office was started in Jerusalem.[306] Ramadan went so far as to state that "practically speaking, we moved to Amman, Jordan"[307] The move to Gaza was clearly not an operational one, in many ways hindering the Agency's operations, but UNRWA was instructed to move so, as Angela noted, "we had to."[308] The decision proved difficult to sustain, interlocutors cite restrictions of movement, the ever present funding challenges, and general instability in the Strip as key issues.[309] As such key functions were gradually relocated elsewhere, to this day UNRWA's offices in Gaza still being one of the official headquarters.[310] The headquarter move in many ways encapsulates the contradictions of the Oslo period, both in symbolizing the expected transition and the enduring political constraints that prevented it from being fully realized. Also, in terms of UNRWA's expertise in the area being sidelined, despite their vast operational and technical capacity being relied on in the transition process.

[304] Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[305] *UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements*, 12.
[306] Williams, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[307] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[308] Williams, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[309] Jonah, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'; Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[310] UNRWA, 'Organizational Structure'.

7.7. Analytical discussion

The period between 1993-1996 highlights a fundamental transformation in the way UNRWA's mandate was interpreted and implemented, in simple terms it transformed from a relief agency to a development actor. Read through the combined lens of archival documentation and oral history interviews, this transformation is apparent, representing a moment where the Agency was required to reinterpret its existing functions in light of a completely new political horizon. The official record, comprised of annual reports and notably internal policy documents, illustrate UNRWA's support for the peace process and that it understood itself as operating within a framework of harmonisation with the PA, this coordination presented as a necessary response to the political context. Oral testimonies confirm this sense of anticipation regarding potential handover but also reveal a strong sense of anticipation and uncertainty that accompanied it. Former staff repeatedly stress that the Agency was expecting and preparing for change and yet never assumed that a complete handover would occur, especially in light of the final status negotiations remaining unresolved.

This tension is central to understanding UNRWA's position during the Oslo years. The discourse of harmonisation did not merely describe a technical process of administrative alignment; it functioned as a way of organising the Agency's relationship with the emerging PA, to anticipate political transition, but in the meantime remain relevant and with authority. Categories such as development, coordination, and transition, are not neutral descriptors, but part of the way in which UNRWA represents its authority and negotiates its relevance. The Agency's reports repeatedly frame its services as technical and transferrable, yet the oral interviews illustrate that this flexibility was highly constrained by political uncertainty and financial precarity. UNRWA during this period was not just a passive recipient of the Oslo

accords, but was a highly relevant institutional actor producing language and a mission through which its future could be made legible.

This chapter also confirms the usefulness of understanding UNRWA through the lens of a quasi-sovereign form of humanitarian governance. During the interim period, between Oslo I and II, the Agency did far more than deliver services: it helped stabilise the emerging Palestinian state, supporting the functioning of PA governance structures through its technical expertise, preparing infrastructure, personnel and data systems for a transfer of responsibility. Yet, this governing role remained without sovereignty. UNRWA had no democratic mandate from the refugee population it served, and its capacity to act was completely reliant on donor funding, Israeli consent, and for the first time an embryonic Palestinian state. The result was that UNRWA was left in an ambiguous position; expected to support state-building, but never formally part of the sovereign structures that such state-building implied. Thus, the Agency's practices were governmental but always confined by the complicated political order that it was operating in and did not control.

The financial documentation from this period reinforces this interpretation. The shift towards project-based funding and earmarked development assistance, particularly through the PIP, illustrates the post-cold War trend of fusing humanitarianism and development with state building and security. In line with Duffield's argument, development in this context was not separate from crisis management, becoming one of its principal forms. Yet, as the archival records show and interviewees highlighted, this transition towards development was uneven and unsustainable. Donor enthusiasm for the peace process generated new resources, but those resources were increasingly tied to visible, short-term, and politically salient projects, while UNRWA's core budget remained under significant strain. This produced a structural

mismatch between the Agency's expanding responsibilities and its limited financial base. The result was a deepening dependence on fragmented and conditional support.

Finally, the Oslo period demonstrates the continuing centrality of the refugee question, specifically the right of return, to UNRWA's operational environment. Although the peace process created expectations for transition, the omission of refugees from the core political settlement meant that the most fundamental issue remained unresolved. As the interviews make clear, this omission from the Accords was highly significant, and shaped the way UNRWA staff understood and evaluated the limits of the process. The Agency, and its employees, therefore understood its role of harmonisation and support for the PA within the broader context where the refugee issue remained unresolved and politically sensitive. UNRWA's work during this period was thus caught between the hope and promise of eventual handover to a Palestinian state and the persistence of displacement as an unresolved and highly contentious issue.

All together, these developments show that the Oslo period did not place UNRWA in a new political context; it redefined the terms on which the Agency understood its own mandate. The documentation from this period demonstrates how UNRWA sought to narrate this transition in technocratic terms, while the oral histories reveal the uncertainty and scepticism that underpinned those narratives. Read alongside the theoretical framework, UNRWA's role during this period sits at the nexus of post-Cold War development, quasi-sovereignty, and the yet unresolved question of the right of return. While UNRWA planned for a straightforward dissolution and handover of services to the PA, instead it headed towards a yet more ambiguous governmental and politically charged role; combining service provision, supporting state functions, and the management of unresolved political claims. This is the central tension that emerged from this period and explains why the Agency emerged from this

period with an expanded mandate even as its future, and that of a Palestinian state, remained unsettled.

8. Post-Oslo: 1996-2002

The post-Oslo period marked a profound reorientation in UNRWA's institutional environment. What began as a moment of cautious optimism, gradually gave way to disillusionment, renewed violence, and ultimately the failure of the peace process. For UNRWA this meant an intensification of demands on the Agency, including expectations to sustain core services, support the emerging Palestinian Authority (PA) and contribute to capacity-building of a future Palestinian state, all under the conditions of chronic financial instability. This chapter traces how the historical context shaped UNRWA's relationship to the PA, its service delivery, development projects, and finally its precarious financial situation. Altogether, the failure of the Oslo Peace process did not return UNRWA to an earlier humanitarian role, but rather enforced its state-like governance practices, adding complexity to its already ambiguous position at the intersection of relief, governance, and state-building.

8.1. A new political landscape

The dissolution of the peace process reflected both the structural fragilities of the accords themselves, postponing discussion on the most contentious issues such as the refugee question, as well as the rapid erosion of trust on the ground. Following Rabin's assassination in 1995, Shimon Peres sought to capitalized on public sympathy in Israel by holding early elections. However, his campaign was derailed by a wave of Hamas suicide attacks, which heightened Israeli suicide concerns and shifted the political climate decisively to the right, as

well as his failed campaign in Lebanon in April 1996.[311] Against all odds, on the 29th of May 1996, Binyamin Netanyahu was voted into power in a Likud-coalition government.[312] His victory marked a turning point in the peace process; although he formally accepted the Oslo Accords, he insisted on strict Palestinian "reciprocity" and was reluctant to engage with Arafat directly.[313] This hesitation was evident in delays to agreed withdrawals, particularly in Hebron, and controversial actions around religious sites that inflamed tensions. Such as the opening of the Western Wall tunnel in September 1996, which triggered another round of violence and underscore the unresolved issue of Jerusalem's status.[314] This was all occurring with the backdrop of continued Israeli settlement expansion around East Jerusalem, furthering Palestinian disillusionment, whilst Arafat's suspension of security cooperation and release of Hamas prisoners further undermined the fragile framework of mutual commitments.[315]

At the level of everyday life in the OPT, the Oslo process failed to deliver the material improvements that had been anticipated. Rather than facilitating economic development, this period was marked by increasing fragmentation of Palestinian space through checkpoints and permit regimes. Israel's policy of "closure", introduced in the early 1990s and intensified after 1993, severely restricted the movement of Palestinian labourers into Israel and between the West Bank and Gaza Strip, contributing to rising unemployment and economic decline.[316] These restrictions were frequently tightened in response to security incidents, producing a cycle where political violence led to further economic deterioration and social hardship. Furthermore, the territorial division of the West Bank into Areas A, B, and C under Oslo II

[311] Usher, *Dispatches from Palestine*, 96.
[312] Usher, *Dispatches from Palestine*, 55.
[313] Usher, *Dispatches from Palestine*, 113.
[314] Usher, *Dispatches from Palestine*, 117.
[315] Usher, *Dispatches from Palestine*, 113.
[316] Roy, 'De-Development Revisited'; Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*.

institutionalised a fragmented system of governance. The PA gained only a limited administrative control, with full administrative control over Area A and shared administrative control with Israel over Area B, whilst Israel retained full control over borders, movement, and the majority of the land (Area C; the area in white in figure 6), where settlement expansion continued throughout the period.[317] This produced what Roy describes as "de-development"; where the Palestinian economy became increasingly dependent and structurally constrained rather than moving towards self-sufficiency.[318] Thus, for many Palestinians, the Oslo Accords did not represent a meaningful transition towards sovereignty, but rather a reconfiguration of occupation. Specifically, the continuation of settlement construction during this period further undermined confidence in the process, reinforcing perceptions that Oslo was consolidating rather than dismantling Israeli control.[319] These developments illustrate both the failure of implementation, caused by cycles of violence, political mistrust, and weak enforcement mechanism.[320] As well as the deeper structural flaws within Oslo itself, particularly its deferral of core issues and asymmetrical power dynamics, which allowed the process to stagnate and ultimately fragment instead of progressing toward a final settlement.[321]

[317] Parsons, *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority : From Oslo to Al-Aqsa*; Shlaim, *The Iron Wall*.
[318] Roy, 'De-Development Revisited'.
[319] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*.
[320] Rynhold, *The Failure of the Oslo Process* (Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2008).
[321] Malik, 'Analysis of Oslo Accords', 2001.

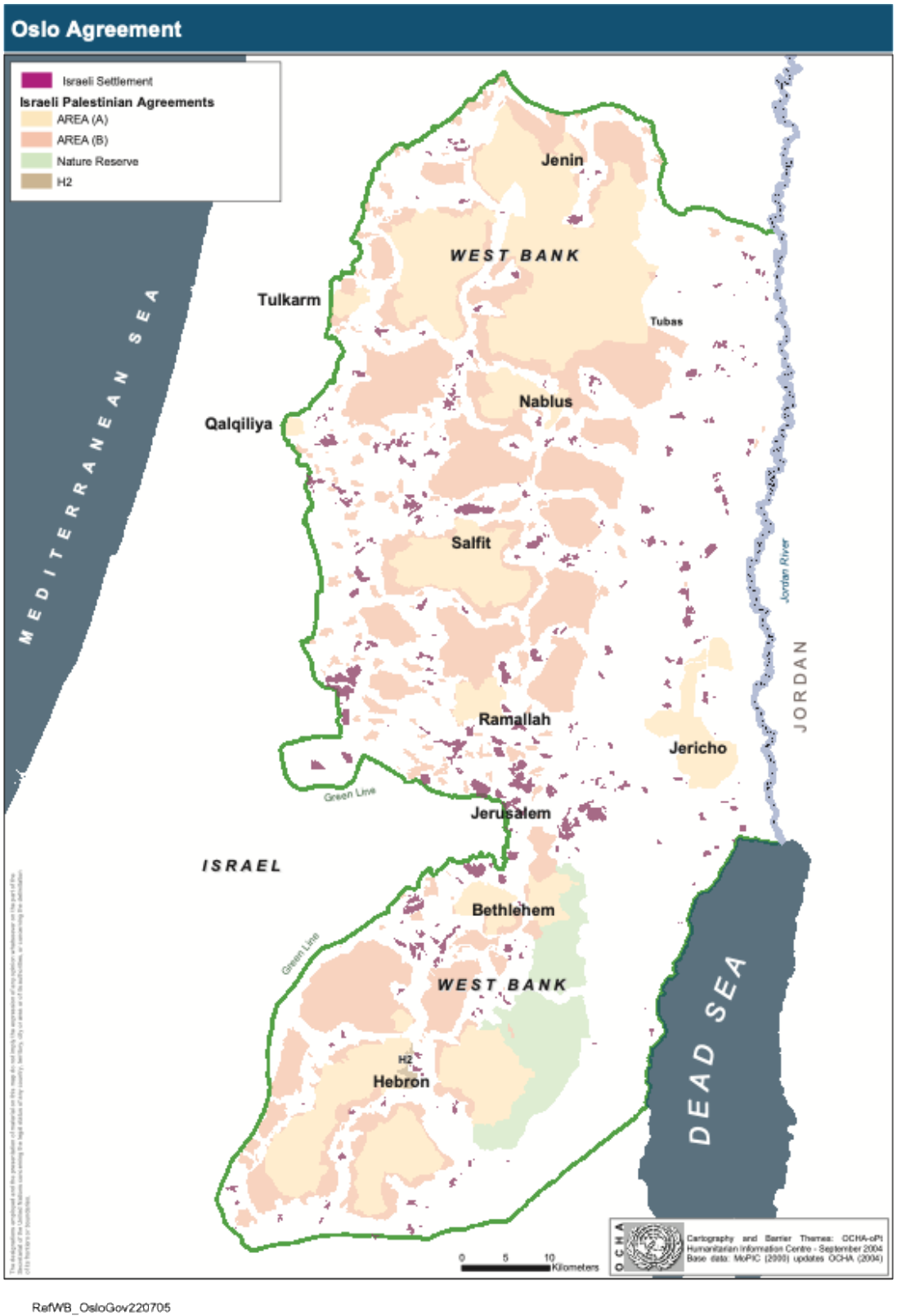


Figure 6 *Map of the West Bank depicting the territorial division in Israel-Palestine after signing of Oslo II*[322]

[322] OCHA, 'West Bank'.

8.1.1. Disillusionment

Former UNRWA employees underscored how the breakdown of the Oslo peace process was not experienced as a single rupture, but as a gradual erosion of expectations. Angela recalled that the early Oslo years were marked by cautious optimism within the Agency, noting that this optimism was unevenly distributed, with international staff having more belief in the process. She noted that Palestinian staff remained sceptical of the accords from the outset.[323] By the late 1990s, and certainly by 2000 with the outbreak of the Second Intifada, it had become clear that the five-year transitional framework envisaged by Oslo would not culminate in statehood, producing what Williams described as a "devastating" sense of disillusionment.[324] Ramadan similarly characterized the process as an "unseen fading away" rather than a clearly identifiable collapse, reflected in the tightening of Israeli restrictions on movement between Gaza and the West Bank.[325] This not only fragmented Palestinian territorial contiguity, but also impeded on UNRWA's operations, with even some senior officials facing obstruction. This is reflected in official UNRWA documentation, with the 1996 policy report noting with concern the "jolting" of the peace process due to Rabin's assassination and the series of bomb attacks inside Israel in February and March 1996.[326] It states that the indefinite postponement of Palestinian-Israeli negotiations and closures imposed on the West Bank and Gaza Strip has a negative impact on the peace process, and furthermore, "leading to severe management and administrative problems for the Agency and disrupting operations."[327] Mathias's reflections on the period highlight how the outcome of the accords was, in some respects, anticipated due to the incremental structure of Oslo.[328] The reliance on phased implementation and deferred final status negotiations created multiple

[323] Williams, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[324] Williams, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[325] Al Omari, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.
[326] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 5.
[327] *Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress* (UNRWA, 1996), 5.
[328] Mathias, 'UNRWA During the Oslo Accords'.

points at which progress could be stalled or derailed. The failure to initiate meaningful final status talks after 1996 confirmed these concerns, reinforcing a growing perception within UNRWA that the peace process was not simply faltering but structurally incapable of delivering its promised outcomes. The 1997 Annual Report notes that by mid-1997 the peace process was widely acknowledged "to be in deep crisis" and that the prevailing atmosphere was "one of tension and mistrust."[329] The 1998 report mentions the Agency's work against the backdrop of "the continuing impasse" of the peace process.[330] The 1999 report mentions the absence of "tangible process" in the peace process.[331] By 2001, with the outbreak of the Second Intifada, UNRWA's annual report notes "an abrupt end to the hopes that had arisen."[332] Altogether, these accounts of the post-Oslo period reveal how the disillusionment within the Agency broadly mirrored Palestinian frustrations, and caused the Agency to recalibrate its operations to the persistence, rather than resolution of the conflict. The Second Intifada marked the ultimate failure of the peace process, and a new phase of operations for UNRWA. The Agency developed another emergency programme of humanitarian assistance and the conversation about handover was no longer on the table.[333]

8.2. UNRWA Post-Oslo

8.2.1. Relations with the Palestinian Authority (PA)

In the post-Oslo period, UNRWA's relationship with the PA retained a governmental role *vis-à-vis* Palestinian refugees, notably in mediating between donors and Palestinian institutions and ensuring the continuity of service provisions. The 1997 Annual Report notes that the

[329] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[330] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1987-88*.
[331] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*.
[332] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 2000-2001*.
[333] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 2000-2001*.

Agency's move to Gaza has provided UNRWA with the opportunity to strengthen its relations with the PA.[334] The report notes the establishment of the "PLO department for refugees and displaced person" responsible, *inter alia*, for relations with UNRWA a positive development. It also appreciates the support given by the PA to facilitate the Agency's work in self-rule areas and the support provided by the Authority in efforts to overcome the Agency's financial crisis.[335] On a more critical note it also states that the harmonization of Agency services with parallel PA services has progressed at a slower rate than in previous years. Despite this the Agency reinforces its commitment to cooperate and "render assistance" to the PA by, including accommodating refugee families newly arrived in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and providing "technical" and "ad hoc" support.[336]Annual reports note that bilateral cooperation between donors and the Authority should be encouraged, the Agency remains an important played in terms of providing "technical assistance" and "logistics support" in project implementation.[337] A salient aspect of the Annual Reports from 1996 to 2000 is the frequency at which the Palestinian Authority is mentioned, specifically in the "General Developments in Agency Programme" sections of the report. They are mentioned more frequently, and in more detail, emphasizing the cooperation between the new governing authority and UNRWA. This cooperation includes "participation in policy development" as well as participation in "initiatives" and "campaigns".[338] The other Agency fields are briefly mentioned, but in less detail and more as a general update, for example: "Cooperation in the relief and social services sector also remained strong in Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic."[339] This illustrates that the Agency's cooperation with PA was an area of change for

[334] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[335] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[336] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[337] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[338] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1987-88*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1988-89*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1989-90*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 2000-2001*.
[339] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.

the Agency, furthermore it illustrates the governmental role that the Agency plays towards Palestinian refugees and its efforts to "cooperate" in order to hand over these services.

8.2.2. Core Services

Service delivery remained a core element of UNRWA's operations in the post-Oslo period; however, these provisions became increasingly politicized by the Agency's evolving relationship towards the PA. There was acknowledgement that UNRWA needed to maintain its services until the final status negotiations, as the refugee question had not been solved, a 1997 report making explicit that any reduction in core services would have "serious consequences"[340] This sentiment underscores how the Agency's basic services, education, health, and relief, were more than just humanitarian obligations but also a stabilizing mechanisms with a fragile political context. Even minor administrative adjustments revealed how the service delivery was highly sensitive politically. For example, the 1998 decision to standardize co-payment rates at Qalqilia hospital in the West Bank provoked public resistance and required several months of diplomacy and dialogue before the matter could be resolved with the PA.[341] This episode illustrates how the "operational task of providing basic services" was inseparable from the unresolved refugee question, and by extension how UNRWA enacted a de-facto governance role by offering services traditionally provided by the state and mediating with the future governing authorities, the PA. Across the different areas of service delivery, a pattern of coordination and partial integration to PA structures was increasingly apparent. In education, UNRWA maintained its extensive service provision, but also contributed directly to the development of an emerging Palestinian education system. For example, the UNRWA/UNESCO Institute of Education in Amman provided "guidance for the

[340] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[341] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.

in-service training programme" for teaching staff and participated in the curriculum development for certain educational programmes in the West Bank and Gaza.[342] On larger projects, such as the school mapping project conducted by the PA in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, there is evidence of cooperation 1998 Annual report mentions that UNRWA and the PA "agreed to share information"[343] Similarly, in the health sector, UNRWA's service delivery was characterized by an effort to embed itself in an emerging sustainable health-care system in the self-rule areas. Annual reports mention joint initiatives with the PA, WHO, and UNDP, such as the brucellosis surveillance programme, maternal health projects, and epidemiological training,[344] demonstrating how UNRWA's general service programmes focused on capacity-building as well as providing humanitarian assistance. The harmonization of immunization schedules and UNRWA's participation in technical committees further highlights this convergence. In terms of social welfare, UNRWA cooperated closely with new PA ministries on developing disability policy and supporting poverty alleviation and youth engagement programmes.[345] The reports stress the a-political of the Agency's support, emphasizing participation on "practical aspects"[346] The internal documentation illustrates how UNRWA maintained continuity in its service provisions, albeit these provisions were increasingly shaped by political constraints and institutional collaboration with the PA. Thus, the service delivery was not merely how the Agency addressed humanitarian needs, but it was also a key site through which the Agency contributed to state-building in the aftermath of the Oslo Accords.

[342] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[343] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[344] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[345] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[346] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*.

8.2.3. Capacity building

UNRWA's development orientation in the late 1990s was increasingly defined by the expansion of its income-generation and microfinance activities. The programme was established in 1991 in response to unemployment and worsening socio-economic conditions in the Gaza Strip.[347] It broadened significantly between 1996 and 2000, again specifically in Gaza, where it supported small-scale enterprises, microenterprises, women's solidarity groups, and business training revolving around loan funds.[348] The programme was designed to fill the gap left by limited access to formal credit. Using flexible guarantee mechanisms to provide working capital, and capital investment loans, it quickly became one of the most successful non-profit credit schemes in the Palestinian territories.[349] By 1997 and 1998, lending had expanded sharply; thousands of loans being issued, high repayment rates, and an increasing emphasis on women borrowers and the informal sector.[350] The programme responded directly to the constraints made by closures and movement restrictions, especially in Gaza, by shifting towards working-capital lending that helped businesses survive through difficult conditions. The West Bank programme was also restructured and expanded.[351] Throughout the reports it is mentioned that in the long run the programme "could be independently incorporated or integrated with another financial or banking organization" [352] suggesting incorporation by the PA. By 2000, UNRWA described the programme as having made a practical contribution to employment creation, poverty reduction, and the

[347] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[348] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*.
[349] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*.
[350] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[351] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[352] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.

empowerment of refugees, and its growing self-sufficiency was presented as evidence of its credibility.[353]

This commitment to capacity-building can also be seen in projects such as, the still incomplete, European Gaza Hospital (EGH) project. The project was initiated in 1993, and by 1996 was largely constructed.[354] Its development was overseen by UNRWA, the PA, and the European Union, reflecting the spirit of "peace dividend". The 232-bed hospital project was no small project, conceived to be a cornerstone of the emerging Palestinian health system in Gaza, upon completion it would be the second largest hospital in the Gaza Strip.[355] Despite funding shortfalls and disruptions caused by closures, physical construction of the hospital progressed relatively smoothly, the issue was rather the management and eventual integration into PA structures. By mid-1990s international consultants were engaged to guide this transition, local managerial staff were recruited in preparation for eventual handover of operations.[356] Throughout the later part of the 1990s the project's progress was notably constrained by financial and political difficulties, such as delays in donor funding preventing the full implementation of parallel commissioning.[357] By 1999 the project faced a significant budget deficit, with UNRWA advancing funds to avoid costly delays.[358] Despite this, cooperation between UNRWA, the PA, and the EU was strong, with a tripartite project board being formalized in 1997.[359] By 1999 an international management team had been appointed to oversee final preparations and manage initial operations.[360] From its inception, the project was envisaged to be a part of the PA's health-care system, and the commissioning process

[353] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*.
[354] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*.
[355] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[356] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*.
[357] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[358] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*.
[359] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[360] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*.

was designed as a transitional phase toward Palestinian control.[361] This culminated in 1999-2000 with the transfer of management authority from UNRWA to the international management team, operating in coordination with the PA Ministry of Health, alongside the PA's gradual adoption of financial and operational responsibilities.[362] Like the microfinance programme, the EGH project captures the broader logic of UNRWA's engagement with development in the post-Oslo period. The project aimed to build local capacity, in a context highly impacted by insecure donor funding and volatile politics. The EGH thus both represents an achievement in expanding Gaza's health care capacity, as well as UNRWA's ambiguous position towards development and state-building during this tumultuous period.

8.2.4. The Peace Implementation Programme (PIP)

The principles vehicle for development programming in the post-Oslo period remained the Peace Implementation Programme (PIP); linking humanitarian service provision to the broader objectives of the peace process. The main reason for this programme's conception as a means of showing the "tangible", economic benefits of peace,[363] as such much of the funding was channelled to long-term projects with the aim of improving living conditions for Palestinian refugee communities across UNRWA's sites of operations. This translated, in practice, to the construction of rehabilitation projects, in 1996 alone PIP funding enabled: the building of 13 schools, multiple health and community centres and the rehabilitation of hundreds of shelters for special hardship cases, all for the PA.[364] These projects accounted for a significant proportion of Agency expenditure, in 1996 accounting for 16%.[365] Across

[361] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[362] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*.
[363] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*, 154.
[364] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*.
[365] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*.

subsequent years, similar patterns continued, with dozens of schools, health facilities, and community institutions being built or upgraded, as well as shelter-rehabilitation programmes.[366] Aside these projects, the PIP also played a stabilizing role within UNRWA's wider operations. The annual reports after 1996 repeatedly emphasize the chronic shortfalls in the regular budget, as such PIP funds allowed the Agency to meet urgent needs and "sustain"[367] regular Agency programmes and prevent the deterioration of the services. The trajectory of the during this period reveals the financial and political constraints that shaped UNRWA's developmental role. Initially, the programme attracted substantial donor support, reaching $219 million in cumulative funding by mid-1997, but contributions declined steadily thereafter.[368] Annual funding fell from $26.9 million in 1997 to under $10 million by 1998 and continued to decrease after 1999.[369] This downturn in funding, attributed to donor fatigue and competing funding channels, led the Agency to conclude that PIP funding had peaked. Leading the Agency to shift its focus towards completing existing projects and adopting more targeted fundraising strategies. Regardless, by the turn of the new millennium, the PIP had funded hundreds of projects and made a "very practical and tangible"[370] contribution to improving refugee living conditions, whilst supporting institutional development in the West Bank and Gaza Strip in preparation for self-rule. The transition in 2000 to a new programme-based budgeting framework, including the introduction of a dedicated projects budget,[371] further reflects the entrenchment of this development approach. The PIP illustrates how UNRWA was deeply embedded within the logic and frameworks of peacebuilding and state

---

[366] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*.
[367] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*.
[368] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[369] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 2000-2001*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[370] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*.
[371] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 2000-2001*.

formation and yet remained dependent on volatile donor funding and always exposed to the political volatility of the unresolved refugee question.

8.3. Finances

UNRWA entered the post-Oslo years with an unresolved financial crisis, Annual Reports from 1996-2000 make it evident that the peace process did not resolve the Agency's funding problems. The Agency was still almost completely dependent on voluntary contributions, with a small proportion from in-kind donations and the UN covering staffing costs.[372] This funding model left UNRWA chronically exposed to shortfalls, by 1996, the Agency had already accumulated a series of deficits that pushed it into what the reports repeatedly describe as a precarious, and even "technically bankrupt" position.[373] The problems were that funding did not keep up with natural refugee population growth and the increasing cost of sustaining constant service levels, whilst the political transition after the Oslo Accords generated new expectations for UNRWA that they could not meet without expansion of secure funding. This period sees UNRWA drawn into a broader, international, donor-driven effort to stabilize the Palestinian territories through institution building.[374] This coincides with the general trend post-Oslo of peacebuilding through development, asking UNRWA to expand its operations with less resources. Le More's argument that post-Oslo aid was politically shaped and often structurally ineffective further illuminates the fragile financial state of affairs UNRWA faced.[375] Aid was abundant in project form, funnelled into the PIP or big projects like the EGH or headquarter move, but this did not translate into long-term fiscal security for UNRWA's core operations. The annual reports repeatedly stress that earmarked

[372] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*.
[373] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[374] Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*.
[375] Le More, *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo*.

project funds could not be used to cover recurrent deficits in the General Fund. This dynamic created a persistent imbalance between the visibility of development funding and the weakness of the Agency's everyday financial base.

In 1996-1997 the reports indicate how close this imbalance in funding came to producing operational crisis, to which UNRWA responded by imposing austerity measures, among which: reducing spending across salaries, medical supplies, and travel.[376] The "extraordinary" meeting of donors and host governments in Amman on 23 September 1996 illustrate the gravity of the situation.[377] UNRWA warned that without emergency assistance, it risked being unable to pay salaries or continue services. Donors did respond with additional pledgees, preventing immediate collapse, but the underlying structural deficit remained intact. The same pattern continued throughout 1998 and 1999, with the language of crisis becoming more normalized, and the Agency carrying forward austerity measures introduced in 1997.[378] The reports note the financial burden of unpaid reimbursements form the PA for VAT and related charges, as well as the costs of major projects such as the EGH and the headquarter move to Gaza. These additional commitments put the Agency under a lot of pressure, making it live "from hand to mouth"[379] as one report puts it. The financial precarity of the Agency is illustrative of a broader contradiction at the heart of the post-Oslo order: the Agency was expected to maintain refugee services, contribute to capacity building with an eye to eventual transfer of services to the PA, and generally support stability in the region, but it was denied the fiscal architecture that would have made those responsibilities attainable. These deficits and donor behaviours have a wider significance, illustrating the belief at the

[376] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[377] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*.
[378] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*.
[379] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99*.

time that infrastructure and institution-building would lead to peace,[380] as well as the issues related to committing only fragmented and conditional financial support.[381] By 2000, UNRWA had made some progress through cost-containment and a new programme-based budget structure, but the broader pattern of financial difficulties had not changed.[382] The Agency still faced a liquidity crisis, a large unfunded liability for termination indemnities, and continuing dependence on ad hoc support. The Agency's financial crisis was not solved by the "peace dividend" that the post-Oslo period was supposed to herald. In fact, the financial issues facing the Agency mirrored broader issues at play with the peace process during this period, namely ignoring vital unresolved issues such as the "refugee question".

8.4. Analytical discussion

The post-Oslo period reveals that the collapse of the peace process did not return UNRWA to its previous role of relief and service provider, rather the failure of Oslo pushed the Agency further into the new kinds of governmental practices that had begun to emerge during the interim years. Read through this combination of archival documentation and oral history interviews, this period appears less as a rupture but rather an intensification of UNRWA's hybrid position: it remained a provider of relief but also became more embedded in the administration of Palestinian life. As the optimism of the mid-1990s gradually gave way to political impasse, UNRWA was required to manage continuity in services for approximately 3.5 million registered Palestinian refugees, rising to nearly 4 million by the turn of the century,[383] in a context of heightened political fragmentation and fiscal instability.

---

[380] Brynen, *A Very Political Economy*.
[381] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*.
[382] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*.
[383] *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97*; *Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000*.

Looking at UNRWA's internal documentation through the lens of the theoretical frameworks developed in Chapter 3 it is clear that the language the Agency used to describe its work is intentional. The annual reports continue to describe its work in the language of harmonisation, capacity-building, and transition, even as the anticipated transition stalled. These terms do not merely describe technical adjustments; they were also means through which the Agency narrated its own relevance within a deteriorating political environment. In this sense, the language of the reports reflects the bureaucratic practices of IOs identified by Barnett and Finnemore, where the bureaucracy legitimises the technical expertise of the Agency, which in turn provides the Agency authority. Furthermore, the emphasis of this period of development and institutional support exemplifies the post-Cold War fusion of relief, development, and security described by Duffield. Thus, we can look at UNRWA's development programmes in the period, the PIP, EGH, and microfinance programme, as a part of the international community's effort of crisis management.

This reading is further deepened by the oral history interviews, showing how staff experienced the post-Oslo period as a moment of gradual disillusionment rather than sudden collapse. Interviewees described the peace process as weakening over time, with a steady rise in political violence, while UNRWA's presence remained strong. Their accounts, read in tandem with the annual reports, suggest that the Agency's cooperation with the PA was understood not simply as a transitional arrangement, but as time went on, a form of governance undertaken in the absence of a fully functioning Palestinian state. Here Hanafi's notion of UNRWA as a "phantom sovereign" is very useful: the Agency did not have any sovereignty, but it continued to exercise administrative and logistical authority in a political environment where state institutions remained incomplete.

The financial data on this period confirms these broader patters, the post-Oslo period being marked by a widening gap between the political expectations attached to UNRWA and

the resources available to sustain them. While donor funding supported a wide range of visible development projects, the Agency's regular budget remained chronically underfunded. This created a structural imbalance between the rhetoric of the peace dividends and the realities of day-to-day service delivery. The reports indicate that there was an influx of funding for infrastructure-related projects, but none directed towards UNRWA's underlying fiscal fragility. Thus, the Agency was expected to support state-building and was regarded as a means of maintaining regional stability, whilst lacking the financial architecture and resources to do so securely.

Finally, the post-Oslo years reaffirmed the centrality of the unresolved refugee question. The failure of the final status negotiations to be held by 1996 meant that the most contentious political issues, saliently the right of return, remained untouched. The historical material show that the Agency's was shaped, and hindered, by this absence. Service delivery, institutional coordination with the PA, and the new development programmes all took place in a context where the foundational political question remained unresolved. This question is foundational to UNRWA's existence, thus without a solution to the "refugee question", the Agency's presence in the region became more entrenched and intertwined within the political and administrative life of the Palestinian Territories.

Altogether, these developments show that the post-Oslo period was defined not by the disappearance of UNRWA's political and administrative significance, but rather by its consolidation. The collapse of the peace process intensified the Agency's role as a quasi-governing institution, while the legal issues surrounding Palestinian refugees' right of return remained unresolved, making its continued existence necessary. The archives show how UNRWA attempted to adapt to this changing environment; the oral histories illustrate how staff experiences its uncertainty; coming together to explain why this period produced not institutional retreat, but deeper entanglement. UNRWA emerged from the post-Oslo years and

into the Second Intifada not as an obsolete agency, but one whose mandate and political relevance became even more embedded in relation to the unresolved conflict.

9. Conclusion

This dissertation has examined how UNRWA interpreted and implemented its mandate during the Oslo period, a moment widely understood as a transition towards Palestinian self-rule. It has argued that rather than undergoing a formal mandate transformation, the Agency experienced a moment of practical reinterpretation, shifting towards development and capacity-building. This reinterpretation was reflected both in institutional language, with the Agency increasingly presenting itself in developmental terms, and in the expansion of project-based programmes aligned with state-building. These changes reinforce UNRWA' position as a central actor in the governance of Palestinian life, deepening the Agency's entrenchment in the political and administrative infrastructure in the region, while maintaining its core service provision.

Crucially, this shift towards development was enabled by the political and financial context of the Oslo Accords. The influx of donor funding associated with the "peace dividend" supported the rapid expansion of development initiatives, particularly through programmes such as the Peace Implementation Programme (PIP). However, this transformation was uneven and constrained by the structure of the Agency. While project-based funding increased, UNRWA's core services in education, health, and relief came under growing financial strain, creating a widening gap between the Agency's expanding developmental role and its limited fiscal base. This institutional shift occurred in the context of a broader structural limitation within the international refugee regime. UNRWA's formal mandate remaining restricted to the provision of relief, human development, and basic

services, while responsibility for a political resolution to the "Palestinian refugee question" formally lies with the largely defunct UNCCP. As a result, UNRWA was excluded from formal negotiations during the peace process, despite being one of the most significant actors shaping the everyday lives of Palestinian refugees. Its role during the Oslo period was therefore indirect but central: facilitating governance of Palestinian refugees, supporting the PA, and contributing to institution-building without formal political authority.

The analysis has also shown how this reinterpretation was not entirely new but rather built on earlier developments during the First Intifada, when UNRWA expanded its activities to include protection and limited development programming. The Oslo period, however, provided the political conditions and financial resources necessary for these practices to be scaled up and reframed in explicitly developmental terms. During the interim years (1993-1996), the Agency actively prepared for a potential handover of services to the PA through policies of harmonisation and investment in infrastructure and institutional capacity building. Yet, as the peace process stalled and ultimately collapsed, this anticipated transition did not materialise. In the post-Oslo period, UNRWA did not revert to a purely relief-oriented role. Instead, its developmental and capacity-building functions became further entrenched, even as its financial situation remained precarious. The persistence of reliance on voluntary funding and a structural deficit highlighted a central contradiction of the Oslo-era aid regime: the expectation that development and institution-building could substitute for a political resolution. Practically, this translated to an expansion of project-based interventions without a corresponding strengthening of the Agency's core operational base.

These findings contribute to three broader debates. Firstly, they reinforce critical scholarship on humanitarianism by demonstrating that organisation such as UNRWA have a semi-governmental role, exercising authority through bureaucratic practices and technical expertise rather than formal or democratic sovereignty. Secondly, they extend existing

literature on UNRWA by showing how mandate reinterpretation occurs not only through formal legal changes but also through policy change, institutional language, and everyday practices. Thirdly, they highlight the role of international aid in the Oslo process, supporting the argument that development initiatives were used to stabilise a fragile political order rather than resolve its underlying problems. Overall, this dissertation argues that humanitarian mandates in protracted conflicts are inherently dynamic, shaped by shifting political dynamics and donor priorities. In the Palestinian case, this dynamic is further complicated by the centrality of the right of return. This anchors refugee status in an unresolved political claim, making impartiality difficult to sustain. Thus, UNRWA's continued existence is largely thanks to its institutional adaptability, but also the persistence of the political conditions, in other words the "refugee problem", that necessitate it. Ultimately, the Oslo period did not mark the beginning of the end of the Agency, as many had anticipated. Rather, it deepened the Agency's embeddedness within the political and administrative fabric of the region. The signing of the Oslo Accords, guided UNRWA towards a path of dissolution, from which the Agency emerged as a durable component of a fragmented landscape of Palestinian refugee governance.

10. Bibliography

Abrams, Lynn. *Oral History Theory*. Second edition. Routledge, 2016. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315640761.

Akram, Susan M. 'Palestinian Refugees and Their Legal Status: Rights, Politics, and Implications for a Just Solution'. *Journal of Palestine Studies* (Berkeley, United Kingdom) 31, no. 3 (2002): 36–51. https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2002.31.3.36.

Akram, Susan M., and Naseer Aruri. 'Reinterpreting Palestinian Refugee Rights Under International Law'. In *Palestinian Refugees: The Right of Return*. Pluto Press, 2015.

Akram, Susan M., Michael Dumper, Michael Lynk, and Iain Scobbie. *International Law and the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict: A Rights-Based Approach to Middle East Peace*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2011. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=668187.

Akram, Susan, and Terry Rempel. 'Temporary Protection as an Instrument for Implementing the Right of Return for Palestinian Refugees'. *Boston University International Law Journal* 22, no. 1 (2004): 1.

Al Husseini, J., and R. Bocco. 'The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: The Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, nos 2–3 (2009): 260–85. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdp036.

Al Husseini, Jalal. 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process'. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 29, no. 2 (2000): 51–64. https://doi.org/10.2307/2676536.

Al Husseini, Jalal. 'UNRWA and the Refugees: A Difficult but Lasting Marriage'. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 40, no. 1 (2010): 6–26. https://doi.org/10.1525/jps.2010.XL.1.006.

Al Mawed, Hamad Said. *The Palestinian Refugees In Syria Their Past, Present and Future*. The Expert and Advisory Services Fund International Development Research Centre, 1999. https://prrn.mcgill.ca/prrn/al-mawed.pdf.

Allen, Lori. *The Rise and Fall of Human Rights: Cynicism and Politics in Occupied Palestine*. Stanford University Press, 2013. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=1179266.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1987-88. UNRWA, 1988.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1988-89. UNRWA, 1989.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1989-90. UNRWA, 1990.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1990-91. UNRWA, 1991.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1991-92. UNRWA, 1992.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1992-93. UNRWA, 1993.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1993-94. UNRWA, 1994.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1994-95. UNRWA, 1995.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1995-96. UNRWA, 1996.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1996-97. UNRWA, 1997.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1997-98. UNRWA, 1998.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1998-99. UNRWA, 1999.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 1999-2000. UNRWA, 2000.

Annual Report of the Commissioner-General 2000-2001. UNRWA, 2001.

Barnett, Michael N. *The Empire of Humanity: A History of Humanitarianism*. 1st ed. Cornell University Press, 2011. https://doi.org/10.7591/9780801460616.

Barnett, Michael N., and Martha Finnemore. 'The Politics, Power, and Pathologies of International Organizations'. *International Organization* 53, no. 4 (1999): 699–732.

Barnett, Michael, and Thomas G. Weiss. *Humanitarianism in Question: Politics, Power, Ethics*. Cornell University Press, 2008. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3138168.

Bartholomeusz, Lance. 'The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, nos 2–3 (2009): 452–74. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdp033.

Bauck, Petter, and Mohammed Omer. *The Oslo Accords: A Critical Assessment*. The American University in Cairo Press, 2017.

BBC News. 'Israel's Borders Explained in Maps'. Middle East. 15 September 2020. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-54116567.

Besson, Yves. 'UNRWA and Its Role in Lebanon'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 10, no. 3 (1997): 335–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/10.3.335.

Bocco, Riccardo, (Guest Editor). 'UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History'. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, nos 2–3 (2009): 229–52. https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdq001.

Brynen, Rex. *A Very Political Economy: Peacebuilding and Foreign Aid in the West Bank and Gaza*. United States Institute of Peace Press, 2000.

B'Tselem. 'Fatalities in the First Intifada'. Accessed 16 March 2026. https://www.btselem.org/statistics/first_intifada_tables.

Chandler, David. *Empire in Denial: The Politics of State-Building*. 1st ed. Pluto, 2006.

Chatty, Dawn. *Displacement and Dispossession in the Modern Middle East*. Cambridge University Press, 2010. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=501371.

Chomsky, Noam. 'The Oslo Accords: Their Context, Their Consequences'. In *The Oslo Accords: A Critical Assessment*, edited by Desmond Tutu, Össur Skarphéðinsson, Petter Bauck, and Mohammed Omer. American University in Cairo Press, 2017. https://doi.org/10.5743/cairo/9789774167706.003.0001.

Cobban, Helena. 'The PLO and the "Intifada"'. *Middle East Journal* 44, no. 2 (1990): 207–33.

Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Treaty. United Nations, 1951.

Duffield, Mark. *Development, Security and Unending War: Governing the World of Peoples*. Polity Press, 2007. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=1179717.

Duffield, Mark. *Global Governance and the New Wars: The Merging of Development and Security*. Zed Books, 2009. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=435190.

Edward, Said. 'Intifada and Independence'. In *Intifada: The Palestinian Uprising Against Israeli Occupation*. South End Press, 1989.

Fairclough, Norman. *Analysing Discourse: Textual Analysis for Social Research*. Routledge, 2003.

Fassin, Didier. *Humanitarian Reason: A Moral History of the Present*. University of California Press, 2012. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb33897.0001.001.

Feldman, Ilana. 'Refusing Invisibility: Documentation and Memorialization in Palestinian Refugee Claims'. *Journal of Refugee Studies* 21, no. 4 (2008): 498–516. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fen044.

Feldman, Ilana. *Life Lived in Relief : Humanitarian Predicaments and Palestinian Refugee Politics*. University of California Press, 2018. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=5516497.

Feldman, Ilana. 'What Is a Camp? Legitimate Refugee Lives in Spaces of Long-Term Displacement'. *Geoforum* 66 (November 2015): 244–52. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2014.11.014.

Finlay, Linda. 'Negotiating the Swamp: The Opportunity and Challenge of Reflexivity in Research Practice'. *Qualitative Research : QR* (Thousand Oaks, CA) 2, no. 2 (2002): 209–30. https://doi.org/10.1177/146879410200200205.

Flapan, Simha. *The Birth of Israel: Myths and Realities*. Pantheon Books, 1987.

Flyvbjerg, Bent. 'Five Misunderstandings About Case-Study Research'. *Qualitative Inquiry* (Thousand Oaks, CA) 12, no. 2 (2006): 219–45. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800405284363.

Gabiam, Nell. *The Politics of Suffering: Syria's Palestinian Refugee Camps*. Indiana University Press, 2016. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=4529424.

George, Alexander L., and Andrew Bennett. *Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences*. 1st edn. A BCSIA Book. MIT Press, 2005.

Giacaman, Rita, Hanan F Abdul-Rahim, and Laura Wick. 'Health Sector Reform in the Occupied Palestinian Territories (OPT): Targeting the Forest or the Trees?' *Health Policy and Planning* 18, no. 1 (2003): 59–67. JSTOR.

Glaser, Barney G. *The Discovery of Grounded Theory: Strategies for Qualitative Research*. With Anselm L. Strauss. Aldine Transaction a division of Transaction Publishers, 2006.

Hanafi, Sari. 'UNRWA as a "Phantom Sovereign": Governance Practices in Lebanon'. In *UNRWA and Palestinian Refugees*. Routledge, 2014.

Harmonization of UNRWA Services: Challenges and Progress. Discussion Paper. UNRWA, 1996.

Hass, A. 'Broken Bones and Broken Hopes'. *Haaretz*, 4 November 2005. https://www.haaretz.com/2005-11-04/ty-article/broken-bones-and-broken-hopes/0000017f-f6e1-d47e-a37f-fffda3b20000.

Irfan, Anne. 'Internationalising Palestine : UNRWA and Palestinian Nationalism in the Refugee Camps, 1967-82'. Ph.D., London School of Economics and Political Science (United Kingdom), 2018. https://www.proquest.com/docview/2340730938?pq-origsite=primo&sourcetype=Dissertations%20&%20Theses.

Irfan, Anne. *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System*. Columbia Studies in International and Global History. Columbia University Press, 2023. https://doi.org/10.7312/irfa20284.

Kelcey, Jo. 'An (A)Political Education? UNRWA, Humanitarian Governance, and Education for Palestinian Refugees During the First Intifada (1987–1993)'. *Harvard Educational Review* 92, no. 3 (2022): 391–412. https://doi.org/10.17763/1943-5045-92.3.391.

Kelcey, Jo. 'Curriculum Choices for Refugees: What UNRWA's History Can Tell Us about the Potential of UN Education Programs to Address Refugees' 'Unknowable Futures'.

Journal of Refugee Studies 36, no. 4 (2023): 629–48. https://doi.org/10.1093/jrs/fead034.

Khalidi, Rashid. *Palestinian Identity: The Construction of Modern National Consciousness*. With American Council of Learned Societies. ACLS Humanities E-Book. Columbia University Press, 1997.

Khalidi, Walid. *All That Remains: The Palestinian Villages Occupied and Depopulated by Israel in 1948*. Institute for Palestine studies, 1992.

Khoury, Nadim. 'National Narratives and the Oslo Peace Process: How Peacebuilding Paradigms Address Conflicts over History'. *Nations and Nationalism* 22, no. 3 (2016): 465–83. https://doi.org/10.1111/nana.12166.

Le More, Anne. *International Assistance to the Palestinians after Oslo: Political Guilt, Wasted Money*. Routledge, 2008. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203928332.

Lustick, Ian S. 'Writing the Intifada: Collective Action in the Occupied Territories'. *World Politics* 45, no. 4 (1993): 560–94. https://doi.org/10.2307/2950709.

Mahoney, James, and Dietrich Rueschemeyer. 'Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences'. In *Comparative Hist Analysis Soc Sci*. Cambridge University Press, 2003.

Malik, Iffat. 'Analysis of Oslo Accords'. *Strategic Studies* 21, no. 2 (2001): 134–45.

Masalha, Nur. *Expulsion of the Palestinians: The Concept of 'Transfer' in Zionist Political Thought, 1882-1948*. Institute for Palestine studies, 1992.

Morris, Benny. *Righteous Victims: A History of the Zionist-Arab Conflict, 1881-2001*. Vontage Books, 2002.

Morris, Benny. *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem Revisited*. Second edition. Cambridge Middle East Studies 18. University Press, 2004.

OCHA. 'West Bank: Oslo Agreement'. United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 22 July 2005. https://www.unocha.org/publications/map/occupied-palestinian-territory/west-bank-oslo-agreement-jul-2005.

‘OHA Principles and Best Practices - Oral History Association’. 30 August 2018. https://oralhistory.org/principles-and-best-practices-revised-2018/.

Pappé, Ilan. *The Ethnic Cleansing of Palestine*. Oneworld, 2006.

Parsons, Nigel. *The Politics of the Palestinian Authority : From Oslo to Al-Aqsa*. Taylor & Francis Group, 2005. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=214860.

Portelli, Alessandro. *The Death of Luigi Trastulli and Other Stories: Form and Meaning in Oral History*. State University of New York Press, 1991. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=6409488.

Quandt, William B. *Peace Process: American Diplomacy and the Arab-Israeli Conflict since 1967*. Third Edition edition. Brookings Institution Press and the University of California Press, 2010.

Quigley, John B. *The Case for Palestine: An International Law Perspective*. 2nd ed. With John B. Quigley. Duke University Press, 2005. https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822386766.

Rempel, Terry. ‘Unrwa and the Palestine Refugees: A Genealogy of “Participatory” Development’. *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, no. 2/3 (2009): 412–37.

Rempel, Terry. ‘The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and a Durable Solution for Palestinian Refugees’. Information & Discussion Brief. BADIL, 6 July 2000. https://badil.org/phocadownload/Badil_docs/bulletins-and-briefs/Brief-No.6.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

Resolution 194 (III). UNGA Resolution. United Nations General Assembly, 1948.

Resolution 302 (IV). UNGA Resolution. United Nations General Assembly, 1949.

Resolution 605. United Nations Security Council, 1987.

Roy, Sara. ‘De-Development Revisited: Palestinian Economy and Society Since Oslo’. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 28, no. 3 (1999): 64–82. https://doi.org/10.2307/2538308.

Roy, Sara. ‘Why Peace Failed: An Oslo Autopsy’. *Current History* 101, no. 651 (2002): 8–16. https://doi.org/10.1525/curh.2001.101.651.8.

Rynhold, Jonathan. *The Failure of the Oslo Process: Inherently Flawed or Flawed Implementation?* Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 2008. https://www.jstor.org/stable/resrep04265.

Saldaña, Johnny. *The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers*. The Coding Manual for Qualitative Researchers. Sage Publications Ltd, 2009.

Sayigh, Rosemary. *Too Many Enemies*. Zed, 1994.

Schiff, Benjamin N. *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians*. Syracus University Press, 1995.

Shlaim, Avi. *The Iron Wall: Israel and the Arab World*. Updated and Expanded. W.W. Norton & Company, 2014.

Shlaim, Avi. ‘The Oslo Accord’. *Journal of Palestine Studies* 23, no. 3 (1994): 24–40. https://doi.org/10.2307/2537958.

Stoler, Ann Laura. *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*. Princeton University Press, 2008. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=617242.

Svein, Aass. *Report of the Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East*. Financial Report. The Working Group on the Financing of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), 1996. https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-190209/.

Takkenberg, Lex. *The Status of Palestinian Refugees in International Law*. Clarendon Press, 1998.

The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights Article 12(4). UNGA Resolution. United Nations General Assembly, 1966.

The Israeli Army and the Intifada Policies That Contribute to the Killings. Human Rights Watch, 1990. https://www.hrw.org/legacy/campaigns/israel/intifada-intro.htm.

The Los Angeles Times. 'Colonel Says Rabin Ordered Breaking of Palestinians' Bones'. 22 June 1990. https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-06-22-mn-431-story.html.

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights Article 13(2). United Nations General Assembly, 1948.

Thelen, Kathleen. 'How Institutions Evolve: Insights from Comparative Historical Analysis'. In *Comparative Historical Analysis in the Social Sciences*, 1st edn, edited by James Mahoney and Dietrich Rueschemeyer. Cambridge University Press, 2003. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511803963.007.

Trouillot, Michel-Rolph. *Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History*. Beacon Press, c2015. https://hdl.handle.net/2027/heb04595.0001.001.

UN General Assembly. *Assistance to Refugees*. Resolution. 1994. https://www.worldlii.org/int/other/UNGA/1993/65.pdf.

UN. General Assembly (3rd sess. : 1948-1949 : Paris, etc.), ed. *Palestine-Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator*. 1948. https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/210025.

UNRWA. 'Briefing Note: European Gaza Hospital Project'. Gaza, 8 April 1999.

UNRWA. 'Organizational Structure'. Accessed 24 March 2026. https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are/organizational-structure.

UNRWA. 'Palestine Refugees'. Accessed 1 April 2026. https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees.

UNRWA. 'What We Do: Education'. Accessed 3 March 2026. https://www.unrwa.org/what-we-do/education.

UNRWA. 'Working at UNRWA'. Accessed 24 February 2026. https://www.unrwa.org/careers/working-unrwa.

UNRWA - Fourth Committee debate - Summary record: Hearing before the Special Political and Decolonization Committee (Fourth Committee) (1994). https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-187691/.

UNRWA and the Transitional Period: A Five-Year Perspective on the Role of the Agency Its Financial Requirements. UNRWA, 1995.

Usher, Graham. *Dispatches from Palestine: The Rise and Fall of the Oslo Peace Process*. Pluto Press, 1999. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=3386097.

Wake, Chris. 'An Unaided Peace? The (Unintended) Consequences of International Aid on the Oslo Peace Process: Analysis'. *Conflict, Security & Development* 8, no. 1 (2008): 109–31. https://doi.org/10.1080/14678800801977138.

White, Benjamin Thomas. *The Emergence of Minorities in the Middle East : The Politics of Community in French Mandate Syria*. Edinburgh University Press, 2011. http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/oxford/detail.action?docID=767131.

Wodak, Ruth, and Michael Meyer. *Methods of Critical Discourse Analysis*. 1st edn. V.v. 113, with Ruth Wodak and Michael Meyer. Introducing Qualitative Methods. Sage, 2001. https://doi.org/10.4135/9780857028020.