



ENGINEERED COLLAPSE: The United Nations' Strategic Assessment of UNRWA and Palestinian Refugee Rights

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Position Paper:

Engineered Collapse: The United Nations' Strategic Assessment of UNRWA and Palestinian

Refugee Rights

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BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights is an independent, non-profit human rights organization working to defend and promote the rights of Palestinian refugees and Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). Our vision, mission, programs and relationships are defined by our Palestinian identity and the principles of international humanitarian and human rights law. We seek to advance the individual and collective rights of the Palestinian people on this basis.

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The implication of these scenarios lies in their fundamental contradiction with the primary objective of the assessment, which is to safeguard UNRWA. They treat the agency's collapse as an inevitable conclusion and outline the pathways through which UNRWA can be dismantled. Therefore, the rejection of these scenarios is not only based on impractical grounds, but more importantly, because they contradict UNRWA's founding mandate and international law.

1. INTRODUCTION

At the request of the United Nations Secretary-General (UNSG), a strategic assessment [Hereinafter: Assessment] was initiated to evaluate the implications of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Its stated focus is reviewing UNRWA's impact, its implementation of the mandate under prevailing political, financial, security, and operational constraints, and the potential consequences and risks for Palestine refugees.¹ Prior to the Assessment² being published in June 2025, Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini stated that “the Strategic Assessment will propose how the rights of

1 United Nations. *Ian Martin Appointed Head of the Strategic Assessment of UNRWA* | United Nations. accessed July 23, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/delegate/ian-martin-appointed-head-strategic-assessment-unrwa>.

2 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary General UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025., accessed July 23, 2025, <https://www.un.org/pga/wp-content/uploads/sites/109/2025/07/Report-to-the-Secretary-General-UNRWA-Strategic-Assessment-20-June-2025-002.pdf>.

Palestine Refugees can be protected amid the immense political, financial and operational pressure the Agency is under.”³

Unfortunately, this subsequent Assessment did not defend UNRWA’s legal mandate or reaffirm its foundational role in protecting refugee rights. Instead, it reframed the Agency’s future as a political burden to be managed, rather than an international responsibility to be upheld, outlining four proposed scenarios: (i) inaction and potential collapse of UNRWA; (ii) reduction of services; (iii) institutionalizing collective responsibility; and (iv) maintaining UNRWA’s rights-based core while gradually transferring service delivery. Though a purportedly technical and operational response to a United Nations (UN) request, the Assessment ultimately normalizes and renders inevitable the dismantling of the Agency - rather than reinforcing its mandate. All scenarios advance a political agenda that bypass the foundational commitments of the UN system to Palestinian refugees. As UNRWA struggles to continue to serve millions amid genocide in the Gaza Strip and mass forcible displacement in the West Bank, the Assessment threatens to institutionalize its collapse and dismantlement in all areas of operation.

2. DECONTEXTUALIZATION OF THE MANDATE

The Assessment acknowledges UNRWA’s legal establishment through the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) Resolution 302⁴ and its responsibility to provide humanitarian protection for Palestinian refugees

3 United Nations. *Press Conference by UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini in Berlin*. UNRWA. accessed July 23, 2025, <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/press-conference-unrwa-commissioner-general-philippe-lazzarini-berlin>.

4 United Nations. General Assembly, Resolution 302 (IV): *Assistance to Palestine Refugees*, adopted 8 December 1949, <https://www.unrwa.org/content/general-assembly-resolution-302>.

“pending a just and durable solution to the question of Palestine.”⁵ However, it quickly reframes the Agency’s purpose through the lens of regional political dynamics and the Israeli regime’s ‘security’ interests. In doing so, it reiterates Israeli demonization of UNRWA and its colonial agenda.

Crucially, within the scenario framework, the Assessment detracts from one of the central legal foundations for Palestinian refugee rights: **UNGA Resolution 194** and in particular, Article 11 which affirms their right to reparations (including return, property restitution, and compensation, rehabilitation and non-repetition) for those displaced in 1948 and their descendants.⁶ This resolution predates the establishment of UNRWA and remains the legal, political, and moral foundation of refugee rights.⁷ Article 5 of Resolution 302 explicitly links UNRWA’s mandate to the unfulfilled right of return outlined in Article 11 of Resolution 194,⁸ stating that its operations are “without prejudice” to that right.⁹ Therefore, UNRWA’s continued existence is inseparable from the ongoing non-implementation of Article 11 of Resolution 194, serving as both a humanitarian response and political acknowledgement of the failure to fulfill the right to reparations for Palestinian refugees. The two resolutions are inextricably linked: Resolution 302 operationalizes the international community’s

5 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 5.

6 United Nations General Assembly. *Resolution 194 (III), Palestine — Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator*. A/RES/194, December 11, 1948. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCE9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20ARES%20194.pdf>.

7 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. *UNRWA’s Role in Protecting Palestine Refugees*. 2004. accessed July 23, 2025. https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/19/wp-e-09-1618822871.pdf.

8 United Nations General Assembly. *Resolution 194 (III), Palestine — Progress Report of the United Nations Mediator*. A/RES/194, December 11, 1948. <https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCE9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/IP%20ARES%20194.pdf>.

9 United Nations. General Assembly, *Resolution 302 (IV): Assistance to Palestine Refugees*, adopted 8 December 1949, <https://www.unrwa.org/content/general-assembly-resolution-302>.

responsibility to uphold the right of return. To be clear, the only just and legal cause for the dismantlement of UNRWA is the exercise of the right of return for Palestinian refugees.

While acknowledging this point,¹⁰ the Assessment treats humanitarian provision (UNRWA's mandate) as administratively and politically separable from the implementation of a just and durable solution—particularly the right of return—and implicitly attempts to normalize a framework of indefinite assistance absent legal and political accountability for refugee rights.

3. POLITICIZED GOVERNANCE AND SCENARIOS OF COLLAPSE

While presented as distinct alternatives to safeguard UNRWA's mandate, the Strategic Assessment's four scenarios in fact converge around two trajectories: **disorganized collapse** through inaction and undermining of regional stability; and **organized collapse** via institutionalizing the transfer of UNRWA's responsibilities away from its mandate. These scenarios, through technical-sounding governance reforms, service transfers, and donor-led restructurings that obscure violations of international law, enshrine into UN policy what have historically been **ad hoc coping mechanisms**, and reframe UNRWA as a logistical service provider. Given that the United Nations Conciliation Commission on Palestine (UNCCP)¹¹ is no longer operational and that Article 1D of the 1951 Refugee Convention has been wrongly interpreted to exclude Palestinian refugees from the United Nations High Commissioner for

10 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 6.

11 "United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine," *The Interactive Encyclopedia of the Palestine Question*, Institute for Palestine Studies, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.palquest.org/en/highlight/24260/united-nations-conciliation-commission-palestine>.

Refugees (UNHRC) mandate,¹² dismantling UNRWA would eliminate the last operating institutional mechanism specifically mandated to protect and support Palestinian refugees. Both trajectories serve the same goal: erasing the legal and political characters of the question of Palestinian refugees from the agenda of international institutions which would transform Palestinian refugees from victims of the international crime of displacement and rights-holders, to just a group in need, requiring only the provision of humanitarian aid.

Despite the importance of conducting an assessment and presenting scenarios to address the ongoing UNRWA crisis, especially in light of the increasing needs of refugees, this evaluation and the proposed scenarios ignore the political, legal, and historical causes that led to the establishment of UNRWA in 1949. Instead, the Assessment focuses on dealing with the outcomes of the crisis and aligns with Israeli regime ambitions aimed at dismantling UNRWA, disregarding the true roots of their displacement.

Dismantling UNRWA has long been an Israeli regime objective, one that has accompanied the agency throughout the past seven decades.¹³ While

12 United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). *Note on UNHCR's Interpretation of Article 1 D of the 1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees and Article 12 (1)(a) of the EU Qualification Directive in the context of Palestinian refugees seeking international protection*. May 2013. Refworld. Accessed July 28, 2025, <https://www.refworld.org/policy/legalguidance/unhcr/2013/cn/41179>. For more details also see: BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, *Survey of Palestinian Refugees and Internally Displaced Persons, 2019–2021*, Volume X (Bethlehem: BADIL, 2022), accessed July 28, 2025, https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2022/10/31/survey2021-eng-1667209836.pdf.

13 In 2018, the Israeli regime blocked UNRWA's efforts to rebuild schools in Jerusalem. In 2021, the US imposed funding conditions requiring UNRWA to vet staff and beneficiaries to ensure alignment with US definitions of terrorism. Also in 2021, the Israeli regime launched a campaign targeting UNRWA's school textbooks, pressuring donors to defund the agency as part of a broader strategy to delegitimize Palestinian education and undermine UNRWA's role. For detailed analysis, see BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, "Understanding the Political Underpinnings of UNRWA's Chronic Funding Crisis," Bulletin, no. 27 (June 2018), https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/19/bulletin-no27-unrwa-financial-crisis-1618827651.pdf. and UK Parliament. House of Commons Library. "Armed Forces Recruitment and Retention." *Research Briefing*, CDP 2021-0105. July 8, 2021. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cdp-2021-0105/>.

the Assessment acknowledges this broader historical campaign, it presents recent efforts to dismantle UNRWA as a recent development after 7 October 2023. It highlights actions such as formally banning UNRWA in Jerusalem and blocking aid convoys and staff from entering the Gaza Strip.¹⁴ Instead of challenging the Israeli regime's laws and measures targeting UNRWA, through reinforcement of the legal mandate and its humanitarian imperative, the Assessment states that, "Israeli authorities have asked private entities to assume UNRWA's responsibilities and have threatened third parties, including UN agencies, with repercussions for supporting UNRWA operations, such as by providing fuel or humanitarian aid."¹⁵

Nevertheless, rather than proposing scenarios that align with the UNRWA's founding legal basis and mandate, it highlights the Agency's role in maintaining regional politics and contributing to the "security" of the Israeli regime. It states "that the Agency has contributed to Israel's security by preserving stability in fragile environments"¹⁶ and "absorbing social and economic tension."¹⁷ The Agency was created with a mandate to fulfill obligations owed to Palestinian refugees, not the 'security' of the colonial regime.

The failure to treat the Israeli regime's campaign to dismantle UNRWA¹⁸

14 Knesset News. "Approved in Final Readings: Prohibition on UNRWA's Activity within the Sovereign Territory of the State of Israel." accessed July 23, 2025. <https://main.knesset.gov.il/en/news/pressreleases/pages/press291024q.aspx.ibid36>

15 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 16.

16 Ibid., 1.

17 Ibid., 14.

18 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, "Israel's Ban on UNRWA: A Calculated Attack on Palestinian Refugees' Rights and the UN System," press release, BADIL, January 2025, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://badil.org/press-releases/15697.html> and BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, *Confronting the Campaign Targeting the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA): Determination of Principles and Proposal of a Palestinian Strategic Plan* (Bethlehem: BADIL, September 2018), https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/20/unrwa-crisis-determination-of-principles-and-proposal-of-a-palestinian-strategic-plan-badil-sep-2018-eng-1618907779.pdf.

as a legal emergency, rather than a political challenge, reinforces a normalization of the Israeli regime's obstruction as an administrative issue rather than a violation of **UN privileges and immunities** under the 1946 Convention.¹⁹ The Assessment's limited treatment of these attacks stands in contrast to the gravity of what is described: "**the gravest loss of life for any UN agency in history,**"²⁰ with over **330 UNRWA personnel murdered** and over **311 UNRWA installations destroyed** in Gaza since the Israeli genocide commenced.²¹

The four proposed scenarios do not aim to safeguard the UNRWA's mandate, rather they advance the political goals of the Israeli regime. All scenarios are decontextualized from the political and historical conditions that gave rise to the Israeli genocide on the Gaza Strip, forced displacement, enforced starvation, and wilful killing. The scenarios are framed as solutions to funding sustainability challenges. At the same time the scenarios ignore the political implications of such a shift: the de-internationalization of the Palestinian refugees' cause and rights, including their right of return; eliminating international responsibility, recasting it as a regional or Arab internal issue; and, weakening the symbolic and legal infrastructure supporting it.

19 United Nations General Assembly, "Resolution 22 (I) of 13 February 1946 (Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations)," approving the Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations, in *Convention on the Privileges and Immunities of the United Nations*, adopted 13 February 1946 (entered into force 17 September 1946).

20 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 15.

21 United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), "UNRWA Situation Report #181: Situation in Gaza Strip and West Bank, Including East Jerusalem," accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-181-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-jerusalem>.

4. UNDERSTANDING THE IMPLICATIONS OF EACH SCENARIO

4.1. Scenario One: “Inaction and Potential Collapse of UNRWA” - The Colonial Fantasy of Spontaneous Disappearance

Framed as the worst-case, the first scenario—continued inaction—rests on the myth that collapse is accidental or organic. In reality, disorderly collapse is the direct outcome of decades of political sabotage, service reduction, and delegitimization. The idea that UNRWA might simply “fail” due to lack of donor coordination masks the settler-colonial desire for erasure: collapse without accountability. Given that the Assessment itself concedes the second scenario would neither resolve the financial crisis nor prevent service disruptions, and that the third is politically infeasible due to a lack of international political will, this scenario, while framed as undesirable, echoes the logic of austerity capitalism. It **naturalizes the end of UNRWA** as the result of unfortunate circumstances rather than a deliberate policy. But the implications are clear: the sudden disappearance of services would create a humanitarian catastrophe and strip 5.9 million refugees²² of their institutional identity and internationally recognized rights, leaving behind not only a service vacuum but a legal and political void.

4.2. Scenario Two: “Reduction of services” - Collapsing UNRWA by Fragmentation

Scenario Two offers a slower form of collapse, cloaked in fiscal logic. It proposes transferring replaceable services to other UN agencies or

²² United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), “Palestine Refugees,” *UNRWA*, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>.

humanitarian actors, while retaining core functions like education and health which are, paradoxically, the most expensive. This creates a structural contradiction: retain the hardest services to sustain, but outsource the rest, creating fragmentation without functionality. Yet the deeper implication lies in **the political logic** of fragmentation: transferring responsibilities strips UNRWA of its identity as the only active UN body ensuring the international community's responsibilities toward Palestinian refugees' rights. The refugee body becomes scattered across multiple actors, erasing the unified legal status that ties them to a historical injustice and future reparation and restitution. It reproduces imperialist control, while shifting the cost burden of oppression.

By embedding service reduction into permanent policy, this scenario would **institutionalize UNRWA's collapse**. It masks withdrawal in the language of efficiency, while erasing the connection between services and Article 11 of Resolution 194. It is, in essence, **UNRWA without UNRWA**—a shell of operations emptied of political meaning, delivered through a colonial veneer of cost-benefit analysis.

The Assessment recognizes its own fallacy, stating “This scenario would not fundamentally resolve the financial gap and would carry risks of service gaps and loss of institutional memory, as well as resistance from stakeholders.”²³

4.3. Scenario Three: “Institutionalizing collective responsibility” - Collapse by Co-optation

This scenario proposes “institutionalized collective responsibility” through a new Executive Board composed of major donors. It does not offer any meaningful reform as this solution is partial and contingent on the political will and preferences of states, and, as the report itself

23 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 24.

acknowledges, subject to geopolitical fluctuations. Instead of relying on UNRWA's existing Advisory Commission composed of 28 member states, the review suggests transitioning to an executive board made up of 36 member states, to seek further funding at more senior levels and relocating the entity from Geneva to New York.²⁴ In practice, this scenario preserves and deepens the same donor-driven, voluntary, and politically contingent funding structure that has contributed to UNRWA's ongoing funding crisis.

Introducing an Executive Board structure, like that of United Nations Development Programme, United Nations Population Fund and United Nations Office for Project Services, would fundamentally change this dynamic by shifting authority from an advisory role to a governance model where a rotating group of states could exercise direct control over UNRWA's strategy, operations, and budget - as decreed by the UNGA Resolution 48/162 of 1993 for the respective UN agencies.²⁵

This scenario frames **collapse as reform**: UNRWA continues to exist, but in a form that is compliant, donor-governed, and stripped of its political autonomy. It institutionalizes even deeper conditionality and reinforces the same donor-driven system that enables certain member states to dictate the terms of support. This entrenches the voluntary funding model and empowers states most invested in preventing the international will to uphold the rights of Palestinian refugees and UNRWA itself. Far from rescuing UNRWA, this pathway turns it into a humanitarian subcontractor, a mechanism to contain and manage Palestinian displacement. Further restructuring constitutes a retreat from the UNGA's and Commissioner-General of UNRWA's exclusive authority over a subsidiary organ,

24 Ibid., 22

25 United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA), *Executive Board*, accessed August 1, 2025, <https://www.unfpa.org/session-and-informals/executive-board-undp-unfpa-and-unops-annual-session-2025>.

marginalizes other non-donor states and those outside of the Executive Board, while widening the door for states complicit in the Israeli genocide of Gaza and their conditionality. Such a move would further detach the Agency from its rights-based mandate into a donor-governed aid provider. Ultimately, this shift would marginalize refugee voices, increase the risk of institutional capture, and pave the way for UNRWA's depoliticization and eventual collapse.

It would be more appropriate and effective for the UNGA to incorporate UNRWA's core budget into the UN's regular assessed budget. The UNGA has the authority to impose **assessed contributions**—mandatory payments by member states—for UN operations. Just as the budgets of many UN bodies (like UNESCO or UNHCR) are partially or fully funded through the regular UN budget,²⁶ the UNGA could integrate a larger portion of UNRWA's core funding into the UN's regular budget or establish a dedicated assessed fund, ensuring stable and predictable financing. This solution to UNRWA's ongoing funding deficits reflects the legal and moral responsibility of the international community for the protection and support of Palestinian refugees, stemming from their displacement in 1948 and the ongoing denial of their right of return.

Alternatively, a complementary special fund could be established to for UNRWA, drawing on mandatory state contributions and revenues from Palestinian refugees' properties confiscated by the Israeli regime—resources the UN has a legal and moral duty to manage in trust for the

26 Under Articles 17 and 57 of the UN Charter, the UNGA holds the authority to approve the United Nations' budget and apportion its expenses among Member States through assessed contributions—mandatory payments based on capacity to pay to UN agencies. While some UN entities receive core funding through this assessed system, others, like UNRWA, rely entirely on voluntary contributions from Member States. Coalescing the UN's budget with UNRWA's would uphold the mandate of UNGA Resolution 302. See the *Charter of the United Nations*, Articles 17 and 57, accessed July 31, 2025, <https://www.un.org/en/about-us/un-charter/full-text>, and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and UN Multi-Partner Trust Fund Office, "Total Revenue of the UN System," Financing the UN, accessed July 31, 2025, <https://financingun.report/un-financing/un-funding/total-revenue-un-system>.

benefit of the refugees.²⁷ The UN has a duty of care in managing these properties, and any revenues derived from them (e.g. rents, agricultural use, or other income-generating activities) should legally be **held in trust and directed toward the benefit of the refugees themselves**.²⁸ These revenues could partially fund services provided by UNRWA, consistent with the UN's fiduciary responsibilities.

The UNGA's Resolution 36/146C of 1981,²⁹ recognizes refugees' rights to both their properties and the income generated from them. It calls on the UNSG, in consultation with the UNCCP, to take steps to protect these assets and to establish a fund to receive the revenues. If fully activated and implemented, though continuously prevented from doing so by the Israeli regime since 1949,³⁰ a **UN-administered fund** could ensure that the income from refugee properties is directed toward supporting Palestinian refugees—including through partially financing UNRWA's essential services—until restitution and return are fulfilled.³¹

These are but two alternative financing pathways that could be

27 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. *Forced Population Transfer: The Case of Palestine – Denial of Reparations*, Working Paper No. 22. Bethlehem: BADIL, October 2018. https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/19/wp22-reparations-of-reparations-1618823911.pdf.

28 United Nations Conciliation Commission for Palestine. *Measures for the Protection of the Rights, Property and Interests of the Palestine Arab Refugees*. UN Doc. A/AC.25/W/81/Rev.2. New York: United Nations, (11 March 1964). <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-179612/>.

29 United Nations General Assembly, *Resolution 36/146C: Palestine Refugees' Properties and Their Revenues*, A/RES/36/146C (December 9, 1981). <https://documents.un.org/doc/resolution/gen/nr0/407/72/pdf/nr040772.pdf>.

30 Adnan Abdelrazek, "Israeli Violation of UN Resolution 194 (III) and Others Pertaining to Palestinian Refugee Property," *Palestine-Israel Journal* 15–16, no. 3 (2008), <https://pij.org/articles/1220>; United Nations General Assembly, *Report of the Secretary-General on Palestine Refugees' Properties and Their Revenues*, A/72/334 (August 14, 2017). <https://docs.un.org/en/A/72/334>.

31 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. *Forced Population Transfer: The Case of Palestine – Denial of Reparations*, Working Paper No. 22. Bethlehem: BADIL, October 2018. https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/19/wp22-reparations-of-reparations-1618823911.pdf.

explored, amongst the plethora of studies on the same topic. Yet, the Assessment is absent from even exploring such options to defend UNRWA's mandate. The third scenario is not a break from the existing order, but rather an extension of the current situation that undermines UNRWA's mandate.

4.4. Scenario Four: “Maintaining UNRWA’s rights-based core while gradually transferring service delivery” — Collapse Rebranded as Transition

The fourth scenario claims to preserve UNRWA's core by transferring its “state-like public services”³² to host governments, with the Agency retaining minimal functions such as registration and advocacy. This approach seeks to transform the UNRWA into an ineffective agency, similar to the UNCCP, that exists in name only, without any meaningful role on the ground. The so-called “core” is politically neutralized, operationally reduced, and detached from its historical function.

The logic behind this scenario mirrors colonial transitions elsewhere: retreating formal control while embedding structural subordination. Refugee registration may be maintained, but without institutional power or political mobilization, it becomes a bureaucratic residue. Meanwhile, the shift of services to overburdened or unstable host states without meaningful guarantees, burdens the very communities UNRWA was created to protect. Also, such a scenario, in light of the incapability and instability of host countries, could result in more secondary displacement of refugees and/or forcible (involuntary) integration or resettlement.³³

32 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 20.

33 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights, *Trump’s So-Called Vision/Deal of the Century: A Move to End the Palestinian Refugee Issue Through Serious Breaches of International Law* (Bethlehem: BADIL, May 2020), https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/20/deal-of-the-century-refugee-issue-positionpaper-may2020-1618905452.pdf.

This is the final absorption of the refugee into nation-state logic, erasing the refugee's legal and political status in favor of coerced assimilation into states that are themselves subordinated in the imperial hierarchy. The transfer of services to host states is an abandonment, a reconfiguration of oppression from donor regimes to other host state entities, enabling the diffusion of accountability and violations of Resolution 302 and Resolution 194. Palestinian refugees become surplus populations in systems that do not accommodate them, effectively pushing them further into informal economies, and marginalization. This is the scenario that most clearly signals the institutional liquidation of Palestinian refugees as rights-holders.

Scenario four is a blueprint for the **final enclosure** of Palestinian refugeehood by neoliberal statecraft through bureaucratic erasure. It asks Palestinians to accept less in the name of stability, to trade rights for survival, and to normalize a future without UNRWA. This scenario does not negate the Palestinian refugees' right to reparations, including durable solutions, as it is grounded in customary international law. However, it constitutes a denial of the international community's responsibility for the forced displacement of Palestinians since the Nakba, displacement that was triggered by the adoption of UNGA Resolution 181 (the Partition Plan) in 1947. It fragments the refugees and their issue as a national group with well recognized rights by localizing their status, conditions and rights. Additionally, it reflects the international community's ongoing failure to provide a just and durable solution in the face of the Ongoing Nakba in accordance with Resolution 194.

5. REJECTING THE BLUEPRINT FOR DISMANTLEMENT

The Assessment frames UNRWA's neutrality as a central concern, yet redefines the concept through the lens of political appeasement. It praises the Agency for developing "one of the most robust neutrality frameworks among any comparable organization,"³⁴ but undermines that very neutrality by emphasizing the Agency's political and security roles. Simultaneously, it proposes further restructuring in response to donor and host state concerns—concerns driven less by humanitarian imperatives than by political agendas. These recommendations are made without acknowledging how **the Israeli regime's repeated accusations of neutrality violations** function as a **tool of colonial coercion**—a strategy to delegitimize Palestinian institutions, weaken UNRWA's mandate, and erase the political identity of the refugee population.

By centering donor expectations and **colonial narratives of the Palestinian people as 'passive victims'** the Assessment undermines UNRWA's humanitarian principles and reinforces a double standard. It suggests that neutrality means disavowing any proximity to resistance—regardless of legality, legitimacy, or historical context. In doing so, it ignores the fact that resistance against colonial domination and by all means necessary is a right enshrined in international law.³⁵ Yet nowhere does the Assessment attempt to engage with this context, nor does it assert that UNRWA has no obligation to speak colonial language in defending its mandate.

Rather than defending UNRWA's integrity against these weaponized

34 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 2.

35 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. *The Palestinian People Have a Right to Armed Struggle by Virtue of Their Inalienable Right to Self-Determination*. 2023. accessed July 23, 2025, https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2023/12/15/resistance-paper-1702636476.pdf.

claims, the Assessment proposes restructuring the agency to satisfy the **very actors seeking its dismantlement**. In doing so, it not only compromises the agency's independence—it also capitulates to a framework in which **Palestinian political life is criminalized by default**, and neutrality is defined by proximity to Israeli political comfort, rather than international law. This is not neutrality; it is **colonial compliance**.³⁶ The only reason UNRWA should be dismantled is when a durable solution is concluded, including the Palestinian Right of Return.

All scenarios reflect a growing trend over the last two decades among Western donors and the Israeli regime to replace UNRWA with fragmented service delivery via other UN agencies and host states³⁷ —bypassing the refugee status tied to UNRWA registration and eroding claims to reparations and return. As the Assessment admits, “UNRWA has emerged as a central target of a concerted effort to delegitimize its role and dismantle its functions.”³⁸ The Assessment's own recommendations contribute to that goal.

What is new is the UN's formal endorsement of these pathways. By embedding these scenarios into its strategic planning architecture, the UN transforms past service reductions into a permanent institutional blueprint that negates both Resolutions 194 and 302.

At the core of the Assessment lies the invocation of “regional stability”—a phrase repeated throughout as justification for preserving UNRWA's presence. Yet stability here is not defined in terms of international law or

36 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. *A Critical Analysis of the Biased Review of UNRWA's Neutrality*. 2024. accessed July 23, 2025. https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2024/08/19/pos-paper-unrwa-neutrality-1724051314.pdf.

37 BADIL Resource Center for Palestinian Residency and Refugee Rights. *The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and a Durable Solution for Palestinian Refugees*. 2000, accessed July 23, 2025. https://badil.org/cached_uploads/view/2021/04/19/brief-no-6-1618826582.pdf.

38 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 23.

the protection of refugee rights. It is instead shorthand for a long-standing **colonial logic**: preserving the geopolitical status quo, preventing refugee return, and ensuring the containment of Palestinian political identity within fragmented, aid-dependent systems. This securitized framework prioritizes the interests of the Israeli regime and Western donor states over the liberation, and justice owed to a forcibly displaced Palestinian population.

As the Assessment itself states, UNRWA has “contributed to Israel’s security by preserving stability in fragile environments.”³⁹ In other words, the Assessment portrays UNRWA’s survival not as a safeguard of refugee rights until the implementation of Resolution 194, but **as a buffer to prevent the destabilization of the Israeli colonial-apartheid regime**. Regional “stability” in this context is a euphemism for **maintaining displacement, colonialism, and enforced dependency**—allowing the Israeli regime to entrench its crimes while outsourcing the humanitarian fallout to international actors.

Ultimately, the Assessment fails to center UNRWA’s mandate and its crucial role in supporting the fulfillment of Resolution 194, particularly the right to reparations and reconstruction in Gaza. The Assessment acknowledges that UNRWA’s collapse would mark a “significant abandonment of Palestine refugees by the international community at a time of great suffering.”⁴⁰ However, it frames this collapse as a threat to the two-state solution, as it is “receiving renewed commitment, and when the staff of UNRWA are crucial to recovery in Gaza and to Palestinian governance in the West Bank.”⁴¹ The cessation of UNRWA is not (and should not be) tied to the two-state solution, as long as that solution is enforced without implementing Article 11 of Resolution 194, which affirms the rights of

39 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 1.

40 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 24.

41 United Nations. *Report to the Secretary-General: UNRWA Strategic Assessment*, 2025, 24.

return for Palestinian refugees to their original homes and to reparations. These rights are fundamentally incompatible with a partitioned outcome that legitimizes their forced displacement/transfer and dispossession. As previously explained, this right is not only central to Resolution 194 but is also embedded in Article 5 of Resolution 302, which defines UNRWA's purpose as providing relief pending the implementation of Palestinian return. Promoting the two-state framework, prioritizes preserving the status quo of the Israeli regime and its colonial, apartheid, and forced displacement policies, reinforcing structures that obstruct restitution, accountability, and return.

By refusing to anchor the conversation in UNRWA's original mandate, rooted in international responsibility for displacement caused by the Israeli colonial-apartheid regime, the Assessment shifts the debate from **decolonization and return** to risk management and containment. Its silence on the systemic nature of Israeli attacks against UNRWA—and the historical campaign to destroy its infrastructure and legitimacy—only deepens this erasure.

6. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the above BADIL Resource Center and the Global Palestinian Refugee and Internally Displaced Persons Network (GPRN) make the below recommendations.

To UNRWA and Its Leadership

UNRWA must not enable its own dismantlement and therefore, it must:

1. Reject being redefined as purely humanitarian. The Agency must not be reduced to a purely humanitarian actor. Its role stems from the international community's legal and political responsibility for the displacement of Palestinian refugees and remains inseparable from the pursuit of justice and accountability, including the implementation of UNGA Resolution 194.
2. Refuse policies that fragment the refugee body or formalize withdrawal through outsourcing or transition schemes.
3. Demand UN protection from Israeli regime attacks as legal violations, not just humanitarian concerns.
4. Ensure refugees have a voice in all strategic decisions—through field offices, unions, and youth bodies.
5. Reassert the Agency's mandate across all UN forums and resist pressures to depoliticize or technocratize refugee rights.

UNRWA's collapse would sever the last institutional link between Palestinian refugees and international responsibility toward them on one hand, and their rights under international law on another hand.

To the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO)

The PLO must challenge and take measures to support UNRWA by:

1. Rejecting the Strategic Assessment as a colonial framework that reduces a political crisis to a technical issue and detaches services from the right to reparations (return, property restitution, compensation, and rehabilitation and non-repetition) and assert clear red lines: no service transfer, no donor-led Executive Board, no reinterpretation of the mandate outside UNGA Resolutions 302 and 194.
2. Leading a diplomatic campaign to ensure any restructuring includes host states and refugee representatives.
3. Demanding that UNRWA's future be addressed through decolonization, return, and restitution—not downsizing.

To the International Community

States must move beyond symbolic support and:

1. Reaffirm UNRWA's mandate under Resolutions 302 and 194; reject separating services from refugee rights.
2. Oppose the shifting of services to host states or UN agencies, which de-internationalizes responsibility and undermines refugee status.
3. Take concrete material measures to prevent and challenge Israeli regime attacks and protect UNRWA as violations of international law and UN privileges.
4. Reject parallel or replacement systems that fragment responsibility and enable UNRWA's collapse.

5. Defend UNRWA's neutrality as defined by international law—not donor or Israeli regime terms that silence political truth.

Failure to uphold UNRWA's mandate will hollow out commitments to Palestinian rights and accelerate the erasure of refugee claims.

“ The implication of these scenarios lies in their fundamental contradiction with the primary objective of the assessment, which is to safeguard UNRWA. They treat the agency’s collapse as an inevitable conclusion and outline the pathways through which UNRWA can be dismantled. Therefore, the rejection of these scenarios is not only based on impractical grounds, but more importantly, because they contradict UNRWA’s founding mandate and international law. ”