

As Gaza is rebuilt, the toxic Unrwa structure must be dismantled

written by Dr. Adi Schwartz | 16.10.2025

As the world turns its attention to Gaza's ruins and the growing calls for reconstruction, a familiar cycle threatens to repeat itself. The guns fall silent, aid convoys roll in, diplomats speak of "political horizons" - and within a few years, or sometimes even less, rockets once again rain on Israel.

If the war that began on 7 October, 2023 is not to become yet another round in this endless loop, one lesson must be faced with honesty: what Gaza desperately needs is deradicalisation.

No amount of reconstruction will bring peace if the ideological foundations of Hamas - and of Palestinian society more broadly - remain untouched. The massacre of October 7 was not an aberration born of despair; it was the logical outcome of an idea that has animated Palestinian politics for a century: the refusal to accept Jewish sovereignty anywhere between the river and the sea. Until that changes, no peace plan will succeed, and no ceasefire will hold.

For decades, Western diplomats have misdiagnosed the conflict as a territorial dispute - about borders, settlements, and security arrangements. Yet at its core, for the Palestinians, it is about legitimacy: Israel is viewed not the homeland of the Jewish people but an alien colonial implant. Jews are viewed not as an indigenous nation returning home but as foreigners who imposed themselves through force. Like the French in Algeria, they are expected to leave. At best, they might be tolerated as a religious minority under Muslim rule - never as a nation entitled to self-determination.

This ideology has not only survived for more than a century but been institutionalised and sustained - through the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, or Unrwa. Created in 1949 as a temporary body to assist the roughly 700,000 Palestinians displaced during Israel's War of Independence, Unwra has become a permanent agency with a single overriding purpose: to perpetuate the refugee status of Palestinians indefinitely. Whereas the role of the international community should be to create the circumstances for enhancing peace, in this case it did the exact opposite.

Unlike the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which resettles refugees and ends their statelessness, Unrwa enshrines it. Only in the Palestinian case is refugee status permanent and passed down to descendants for eternity. The result: the number of Palestinian “refugees” has swelled from 700,000 to some six million (Palestinian leaders routinely claim eight or nine million). In reality, more than 95 per cent of them were never displaced from anywhere. They were born in Gaza, Ramallah, Amman, or Beirut.

Unrwa has become a symbol, in the eyes of Palestinians, of their desire to “return” – in space, to their previous homes inside Israel (most of which do not exist any longer), and in time, to an era before the creation of the Jewish state. Given the demographics, such a “return” would mean the end of the Jewish state. Under the auspices of the international community, Unrwa has become the political vehicle through which the number of Palestinian “refugees” has been exponentially inflated, to serve the political goal of “return” and, ultimately, of undoing Israel’s existence.

This political mechanism has devastating consequences. It teaches generation after generation that their homes lie not in Gaza or Nablus but in Haifa and Jaffa – that their birthright is to “return” to cities inside Israel, and that Israel’s very existence is a temporary injustice waiting to be undone.

In Unrwa schools, textbooks glorify “martyrs,” maps erase Israel, and pupils are taught that “return” – meaning the destruction of Israel – is not a dream but a duty. Unrwa has become part and parcel of Palestinian rejectionism.

The leaders of Hamas, including Yahya Sinwar, spoke openly in the days before October 7 of an imminent “return” – a chilling reminder that the concept is not a metaphor but a call to violent action.

If Gaza is to have a future different from its past, Unrwa must be dismantled and the very concept of a “Palestinian refugee” in Gaza must disappear. One cannot be a refugee from the place one was born.

The message should be clear: you can live next to Israel in peace, but not instead of it.

Gaza’s reconstruction must be explicitly conditional. Any new governing authority – whether local Palestinians, a joint Arab body, or an international trusteeship –

must adhere to a few non-negotiable principles: recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people and a formal end to the state of war against it; renunciation of claims inside Israel's pre-1967 borders; acceptance that Gaza's residents are not refugees and that they do not possess a "right of return"; and a firm commitment to demilitarisation, with all aid monitored to prevent its diversion into weapons or tunnels.

These are not maximalist demands but the bare minimum for any sane policy. Without ideological surrender, military defeat is meaningless. Israel can destroy Hamas's arsenal, but if children are still taught that Jews have no right to be there, a new Hamas – or any other organisation different only in name – will rise from the rubble.

For too long, Western diplomacy has tiptoed around these truths, preferring to pour concrete and hope for moderation. But real hope for a different future will come only when Palestinians choose life over grievance, reality over myth, and coexistence over the dream of "return" and erasure. The war will end only when the ideology that caused it ends.

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