

**Israel-Hamas war**

## Israel bill to restrict UN relief for Palestinians sparks 'grave concern'

Foreign ministers of seven major nations oppose draft legislation that could hobble UN aid agency UNRWA



Palestinians receive food aid distributed by UNRWA © Mahmoud ssa/Anadolu via Getty Images

**Andrew England** and **Neri Zilber** in Tel Aviv YESTERDAY

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A group of major western and Asian nations has expressed “grave concern” over draft Israeli legislation that would severely restrict the ability of the UN agency for Palestinian refugees to operate in Gaza and the occupied West Bank.

The bill would ban [UNRWA](#) from Israel and is expected to be debated in the Knesset after the parliament reopens for its winter session on Monday. Israeli media has reported it is likely to be passed.

The foreign ministers of the UK, France and Germany, as well as Australia, Canada, Japan and South Korea, said on Sunday any move to restrict UNRWA’s work would have “devastating consequences on an already critical and rapidly deteriorating humanitarian situation”.

“We urge the Israeli government to abide by its international obligations, keep the reserve privileges and immunities of UNRWA untouched and live up to its responsibility to facilitate full, rapid, safe and unhindered humanitarian assistance in all its forms,” they said in a joint statement.

UNRWA, which has for decades been the main UN agency working in Gaza, has come under increasing attack by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and other rightwing politicians since Israel launched its offensive in the strip after

Hamas's October 7 attack.

Netanyahu said UNRWA "perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem" and should be replaced after Israel alleged that about a dozen of the agency's staff were involved in Hamas's attack.

Earlier this year, Israeli far-right activists [attacked the UNRWA headquarters in East Jerusalem](#), with the city's deputy mayor calling the agency a "Nazi [sic] organisation" that had "no place . . . in our holy city".

The threat to UNRWA's ability to operate in the Palestinian territories comes as Gaza is enduring a deepening humanitarian crisis. Israel's year-long offensive has reduced swaths of the besieged strip to uninhabitable wastelands and forced about 90 per cent of the 2.3mn population from their homes.

The assault has killed almost 43,000 people, according to Palestinian officials, and triggered disease outbreaks and fears of famine.

Since March, UNRWA has been banned from delivering supplies into northern Gaza, where aid agencies are increasingly alarmed about the scale of the crisis as Israel has severely limited food deliveries since launching a large new offensive this month.

Hundreds of people have been killed and thousands forced from their homes since the offensive began.

UNRWA is the main UN agency responsible for more than 5mn Palestinian refugees in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan.

In January, Israel leaked a report to diplomats alleging that at least 12 of the 13,000 Palestinians UNRWA employed in Gaza had taken part in Hamas's October 7 attack.

It provided [little evidence to back its claims](#). The allegations caused the US, UK and other western nations to suspend funding to UNRWA. But many donors, including Britain and the EU, have restored aid to the agency.

After the UN launched an internal investigation, UNRWA in August said it had sacked nine staff who might have been involved in the attack on Israel, which killed 1,200 people and triggered the war in Gaza.

The seven foreign ministers said UNRWA provides "essential and life-saving humanitarian aid and basic services to Palestinian refugees in Gaza, East

Jerusalem, the West Bank and throughout the region”.

“Without its work, the provision of such assistance and services, including education, healthcare, and fuel distribution in Gaza and the West Bank would be severely hampered if not impossible,” they said.

The Israeli bill calls for a halt to all UNRWA operations “in the territory of the state of Israel” and says the agency “will not operate any representative, will not offer any services, and will not undertake any activity in the sovereign territory of the state”.

If passed, the law would come into effect three months after publication.

UN secretary-general António Guterres warned this month that restricting UNRWA’s work would “be a catastrophe in what is already an unmitigated disaster”.

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