

## Humanitarian Catastrophe in Gaza, Palestinian Refugees, and the Campaign Against UNRWA

*Interview by FMEP non-resident fellow Peter Beinart with former UNRWA spokesperson Chris Gunness 2/13/24, for FMEP's Occupied Thoughts podcast -- for audio & show notes see: <https://fmep.org/resource/humanitarian-catastrophe-in-gaza-palestinian-refugees-and-the-campaign-against-unrwa/>*

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**Peter Beinart:**

Hello and welcome to Occupied Thoughts, a podcast brought to you by the foundation for Middle East Peace. I'm Peter Beinart, non-resident fellow at the Foundation for Middle East Peace. Today is Tuesday, February 12th, 24, and I'm delighted to be here with Chris Gunness. Chris worked for the UN for many years and was spokesman and director of strategic communications at UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency for more than 10 years, leaving the position in 2019, I wanted to speak with him about its history, its function, and the current campaign against it. Chris, thank you so much for joining me today.

**Chris Gunness:**

That's my pleasure. Good to be with you and your listeners.

**Peter Beinart:**

So let's start with the moment that we're in today, and then we'll explain UNRWA's role in it. Can you talk about the humanitarian conditions, particularly in the part of Gaza that's called Rafah today?

**Chris Gunness:**

So Rafah is in the deep south of Gaza adjacent to the Egyptian border. And before the 7th of October, there were about a quarter of a million people there. Today, in the last 24 hours, I should say, that number is rising as tens of thousands of people flee from the town of Khan Younis to the north, south to Rafah. And the figure now is about 1.8 million people. That's really the majority of people living in Gaza.

And in the last 24 hours, I think we've moved from just talk about safe areas. This is now a humanitarian catastrophe on the same scale of any natural disaster that this world has seen in the last 20 or 30 years. So think of the Haiti earthquake in 2010. Think of 3 million people who were affected, all of the infrastructure destroyed. They had absolutely nothing, no toilets, no water, no housing, no electricity, no medicine.

That's where we are today. The area which the Israeli authorities have designated as a safe area, Al Mawazi, is about the size of Ben Gurion Airport. Now that's about six square miles. You simply cannot fit 2 million people into six square miles. And as they are being crammed in that direction, it's about four kilometers from Rafah, there's no water there, there's no electricity, there are no toilets, there's no hospital, there's nothing. This is just 2 million people potentially in the open air.

And that's why I say I talked about Haiti in 2010. At that time, President Obama through an executive order mobilized 20,000 US personnel, 2,000 Marines, warships floating hospitals in order to stave off a humanitarian catastrophe. And I'm talking of tens of thousands of people falling sick, starving, and dying. There has to be an international global humanitarian effort, probably led by the American Army. That's where we've got to in the last 24 hours. And I urge President Biden to move from talking about saying things like Mr. Netanyahu's going over the top, would he please abide by international humanitarian law. We have now crossed that moment. We have arrived at a moment that might define the Biden presidency. It's time for global humanitarian leadership from the world's last remaining superpower of the sort that we saw under Barrack Obama.

**Peter Beinart:**

Thanks. So let's talk about UNRWA, the UN Refugee Works agency. What role is it playing in Rafah and in Gaza more generally?

**Chris Gunness:**

Well, to be clear, UNRWA fled south because it was instructed to by the Israeli army that was within a month or so of the fighting actually beginning, and it moved its headquarters down to Khan Younis. But the training center there, which in ordinary days was a place for 2,000 people, suddenly had 25,000 people. So UNRWA is doing its best. It's distributing food, it's trying to distribute the supplies that come in. But of course, because the Israelis have really squeezed the humanitarian supplies to a trickle, a fraction of what's needed, UNRWA is completely overwhelmed. There are riots over food in its distribution centers over water. UNRWA is completely overwhelmed, but it is the main and the biggest game in town. So it's doing what it can in terms of humanitarian relief. It's still got some of its shelters operational where there are people crammed into those shelters. They are managing to deliver some food, some water, some medicines. But things are absolutely desperate. When the UN Secretary General said the humanitarian system is broken, he could have been talking about UNRWA, because in ordinary times UNRWA was pushed with a massive financial crisis. But now UNRWA is pushed to breaking point. And of course, as I'm sure we'll talk about, there's an existential political threat now, besetting the agency.

**Peter Beinart:**

Right. So before we get to that, just for people who are not familiar, maybe you can just talk a little bit about when and why UNRWA was set up and what it's supposed to do.

**Chris Gunness:**

So in response to the 1948 war, which saw 750,000 people either fleeing or being forced from their homes into neighboring countries. So some went north into Lebanon, some went north-east into Syria, some into Jordan, some down into Gaza, some into the West Bank. UNRWA was established to do two things basically as its name suggests, the relief and works agency relief for the 750,000 people. So food and water, emergency shelter, that kind of thing, but also works. So there were job creation programs because they had to feed themselves and it was thought that this was a temporary agency. They would have the right of return home within a matter of months, and therefore UNRWA would not be needed.

But of course, that isn't how things turned out. The nation Israeli, the state of Israel, made it clear that they would not have the right of return.

And so what began life as a temporary population became more and more permanent in these areas. So UNRWA suddenly realized it had children that needed to be educated. So it began an education department. There were people who needed primary health services. So UNRWA established a health department. There were people who were vulnerable, who needed relief and social services. So UNRWA set up a relief and social services department. So those three broad areas, education, health, relief, and social services are what are known as the core services of UNRWA. And that through time has grown and grown and grown to the point where there are 550,000 children across the Middle East in Syria, Jordan, the West Bank, Gaza, and Lebanon, who need educating in UNRWA schools. UNRWA's health clinics, for example, every year do 7 million patient visits, and the relief and social services department brings emergency services to some half a million or so people.

So it's perhaps best for your audience to conceive of UNRWA, not as an aid agency, but perhaps as a government because in terms of delivery of services, education, health, et cetera, it's much more like a government with one crucial difference. Unlike a government, UNRWA does not have a tax levying capacity, therefore it relies on its donors for that money, which is partly what led to this current crisis. And just before I finish this answer to say that as well as those core services, education, health, relief and social services, because UNRWA is in this highly unstable environment, emergencies happen, like in Gaza and suddenly UNRWA has to keep these other services, the core services ticking over, but then suddenly turn to dealing with about 2 million desperate people as we're seeing today in Gaza.

**Peter Beinart:**

So one of the things that UNRWA's critics sometimes point out is that UNRWA exists for Palestinian refugee populations, other refugee populations around the world are all within, under a different agency, the UN High Commission for Refugees, UNHCR. So why is it that Palestinian refugees have a separate agency for them and are not part of that larger umbrella of UNHCR?

**Chris Gunness:**

That's a very significant important and useful question to address. UNRWA was set up, as I said, in the wake of the 1948 war. It actually became operational on the ground in May, 1950, but the refugee convention was not until 1951, and that is what brought into existence UNHCR, the other refugee agencies. So the first article of the refugee convention basically says, if you are already receiving services from UNRWA, there's a get out clause. You can't carry on being protected under this, under the refugee convention. So it's a historical thing, but it's become highly politicized because there is this mistaken notion, particularly amongst many Israelis, many in the far right who say that UNHCR resettles refugees, and therefore if you fold up UNRWA, give the Palestinians over to UNHCR, they can resettle 'em in Arab countries or Canada or wherever. Unfortunately, that isn't how it works and it isn't how it works for several reasons.

First of all, UNHCR doesn't just do resettlement. UNHCR helps people back to their homes. UNHCR helps people integrate where they are. There are three choices classically, which under international

humanitarian law and refugee best practice are offered to refugees. One is the right to stay where you are local integration. Another is resettlement in a third country. So some other country gives you a passport, gives you a home, and off you go. And you do that, or the right of return. And that's a choice which all refugees have everywhere and it's enshrined in the universal declaration. So UNRWA is absolutely no different as in UNHCR is in having those three choices available for refugees. The other thing that is said is that UNRWA registers the children of refugees and UNHCR doesn't, that also is completely wrong, UNHCR, according to the principle of family, unity also registers the children of refugees.

So for example, Afghan refugees in camps in Pakistan, say, where they have children in camps administered by UNHCR, their children would be registered. And that's true of all. So-called protracted refugee situations around the world, refugee children are themselves registered refugees where they're living in camps in the way that Palestinians also are. So it's good to be able to answer that question because from this misreading of UNRWA's mandate comes a lot of politics. And in a way that brings us to where we are now with, I was going to say the far right, but it's become a common trope, I think across the Israeli body politic that UNRWA must be defunded, UNRWA must be destroyed. And then the sort of slightly, I have to say fascistic fantasy at that point is that the refugees would suddenly go away. They would vanish and so would their right of return.

But the truth is, if UNRWA were to disappear this afternoon, the refugees would remain human beings with inalienable rights, with individual rights, with group rights, the right to self-determination, the right to development, the right to prosperity, the right to education, the right to health, all those things would pertain and the question would not go away. Those refugees are all individuals with a dignity and a destiny, which has to be respected under international law. So a far-right politician in Israel can make a speech and think they're waving a magic wand. But that does not magic away international law, the Universal Declaration, and all the frameworks that the world community uses to deal with refugees.

**Peter Beinart:**

I want to get in a second to the particular charge that's been made since October 7th, but there is another longstanding charge that critics make against UNRWA, and that is that the curriculum in the UNRWA schools is antisemitic or at least incites hatred of Israel. I wonder if you can talk a little bit about the curriculum that's taught in the UNRWA schools.

**Chris Gunness:**

Sure. So UNRWA in these five areas, which I mentioned, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, West Bank, and Gaza, UNRWA is preparing children for public exams. So it's logical that UNRWA would use the curriculum of the host authorities. So in Syria, it uses the Syrian textbooks in Lebanon, Lebanese textbooks in Jordan, Jordanian textbooks, and in Gaza in the West Bank, since the Oslo accords, since the mid 1990s, it's used the PA textbooks. And what UNRWA does is every year there's a big education department in Amman headquarters in Amman, the education is the biggest of all UNRWA's programs. The textbooks are always checked. So the PA will deliver the textbooks to UNRWA educators in Amman. They are assessed according to three criteria, one, political bias, neutrality issues, call it what you will, including

such issues as antisemitism; age-appropriate violence, and thirdly, gender representation. So it's made sure that the genders are properly represented.

Historically, UNRWA has found that between 3 and 4% of the textbooks, which the PA deliver, have materials which are problematic. UNRWA then produces what they call enrichment materials. Now, they call them enrichment materials for an interesting reason. It won't surprise you to learn, Peter, that the question of a curriculum is highly politicized. I mean, imagine if a UN agency turned up in New York or wherever you live and said, Peter, your children aren't going to be able to use these textbooks because we don't think it portrays the history of the Irish or Native American Indians or whatever it might be, and therefore we're going to change the textbooks unilaterally, and you'll just have to suck it up and get used to it. So what UNRWA does, it produces enrichment materials to replace those problematic passages, as I say, less than 4%. It then has teaching programs for the teachers who are instructed about how to teach these alternative materials.

They are then inspected as best can be done, given that there are 550,000 children being educated in UNRWA classrooms across the region. Where there are specific complaints, they are always investigated and there's always some kind of action taken. But as you can imagine, there's a constant battle that goes on, for example, with the PA, the Palestinian Authority, over what Palestinian children can be taught, and the fact that a UN agency. And it's no mystery to the Palestinians, it's being driven by a far right Israeli agenda. So not only is it a sovereignty issue for the Palestinians, a UN agency is telling its children what it can learn in its classrooms, but it's well known because this is such a public campaign against UNRWA that it's being driven by politicians in Israel. And that makes it even more problematic. When I was a spokesman for Unah, I want to say to these Israeli politicians, if you just shut up, it will be so much easier for UNRWA to be able to teach this stuff.

I mean, there was a wonderful example where UNRWA started teaching the Holocaust in Gaza. They developed curriculum material, which it wasn't Holocaust studies ala Hebrew University in Jerusalem, but it certainly was an honest attempt by UNRWA to explain to children in Gaza what the Holocaust was about. The Simon Wiesenthal Center discovered this, decided that the books didn't go far enough, didn't tell the whole story, this, that, and the other. This then became a huge political row, and in the end there was a big fight in Gaza because UNRWA wanted to put these materials through. And in the end I left, so I don't know where it all went. But because it was so heavily politicized as it is being today, it was very hard for UNRWA to get these books into the classroom. I would stand by UNRWA and say that the frameworks are there, the training is there, the alternative materials are there.

And I think that a lot of what is leveled against UNRWA, frankly, is misguided and misinformed. I mean, one very good example, UN Watch and Impact SE two organizations, which testified in Capitol Hill a few weeks ago. They issued a big attack on UNRWA's curriculum a couple of years ago. And when the education department in UNRWA started to investigate, it turned out that these weren't UNRWA materials at all. In a previous incarnation, Impact SE, which is this organization that UN Watch is working with, did a big attack on what it thought was the PA, the Palestinian curriculum. And, in fact, it was the Syrian and the Jordanian curriculum. So there's much misinformation out there. UNRWA is

using UNESCO standards to assess these books and wherever there are problematic issues found, UNRWA always does this enrichment replacement text and does its best to teach that.

**Peter Beinart:**

So just in the last few weeks, there have been these allegations by the Israeli government that I think they said alleged that 12 UNRWA employees were involved in some way in the October 7th massacre, and that perhaps as many as 1,200 or roughly 10% of UNRWA staff in Gaza had some connection to Hamas or other militant groups. So I wonder if you can talk about what is known about those allegations, the evidence behind them, and then what UNRWA has done in response.

**Chris Gunness:**

Well, Peter, to be clear, although I'm the former UNRWA spokesman, I was a spokesman for 13 years. I have been very closely in touch with former colleagues since this whole controversy began. First of all, UNRWA has never been given the allegation, has never been given the evidence. So this dossier, which appears to have been handed over to the New York Times and was splashed over the front page, that was never given to UNRWA even though the UNRWA Commissioner-General was called from Amman to Tel Aviv for a meeting with a fairly junior official in the international organizations department of the Israeli Foreign Ministry. So UNRWA has not been given the evidence, it's been told what the allegations are, neither the Americans, neither the Brits nor the Canadians, nobody has given UNRWA the evidence. It's heard about the allegations. And in fact, Canadian officials and British officials are now saying they don't have it either.

And US Secretary of State Blinken actually said on the record that the US has not been able independently to confirm this yet. In the same sentence he said he found the allegations credible. It's hard to know how he found them credible if they'd not been independently confirmed.

But UNRWA's Commissioner General, as part of a zero-tolerance policy, even being given the allegations decided in the interest of the agency, which he's permitted to do, he separated these people immediately, even though three of them were either dead or missing, he has then ordered or requested an investigation by the Office of Internal Oversight by New York. So that's an internal UN, though nothing to do with UNRWA, it's independent of UNRWA. And at the same time, an external review under the leadership of a former French minister has also been ordered.

So UNRWA, as I say, as part of this robust policy has got rid of these people even though there's absolutely no evidence that's been passed over, and there is both an independent and an external review. And what I'd like to say is you could say that this story illustrates that the policy is working because if it's just, and any number of people taking part UN workers taking part in those massacres, that is completely condemnable and wrong. But the fact is that this could also be spun as an example of very few bad apples in an organization that's been working frankly under blockade since 2007, occupation since 1967, and with people who have been dispossessed since 1948. So there's a very, very long history. I'm not justifying the attacks in any way whatsoever. I'm saying that UNRWA staff are apart of a community that's been dispossessed, has been occupied and has been blockaded. And I think that also needs to be addressed moving forward out of this terrible crisis. I think as think the American Administration is starting to do, to talk about some kind of two-state solution and that would resolve

some of these problems. And not just think of recognition by the US administration that this terrible massacre didn't come in a vacuum. It came out after 75 years of real tension and friction between these communities

**Peter Beinart:**

So in response to these Israeli allegations, the United States and quite a number of other donor countries to UNRWA, because as you're saying that UNRWA gets its money from foreign donors, have suspended that money. What are the consequences for UNRWA's ability to operate of that, of these suspensions?

**Chris Gunness:**

Well, to take one step backwards before I answer that specific point, there's a fourfold illegality taking place or violation taking place here. First of all, what the donors have done is a violation of humanitarian principles because it's weaponized humanitarian aid, it's weaponized UNRWA, it's a violation of international humanitarian law, which expressly prohibits the use of food aid and humanitarian aid as a weapon of war, politically. It's a violation of the provisional measures of the 26th of January from the International Court of Justice, which made it very clear that all parties, not just Israel, but all state parties to the Genocide Convention, must facilitate the safe passage of humanitarian aid. And what have these donors done? They've cut off humanitarian aid. And very lastly, you could argue the fourth layer of illegality is you could argue that it's a violation of the Genocide Convention itself, which is very clear that state parties must prevent genocide.

And what this arguably is doing is increasing the amount of deep hunger and starvation already Martin Griffith, the most senior humanitarian in the UN system, has said that 400,000 people are actually starving. And that was a couple of weeks back. So what these donors are doing is effectively forcing more people into starvation. Starvation has been described and I think correctly as a slow motion massacre, and already UN agencies are saying that more people are likely to die of starvation than they are by the Israeli bombs. So to be clear, UNRWA, before the 7th of October, had 1.2 million people on its food distribution lists. As we've been saying, that is likely to have doubled or nearly doubled. And as a result of this donor defund, those people may well be deprived in a matter of days of food aid. So let's keep a very eyes wide open here. What this donor defund has done, apart from all those layers of illegality and violation that I mentioned, it is also significantly going to contribute to mass starvation.

And that is something I think all of these donors should be aware of. And I would say that as well as UNRWA being held accountable in the spirit of transparency, which by the way it is, UNRWA has worked with these donors to the satisfaction of these donors to put in place neutrality frameworks. It's very much a partnership, but I think we should turn the spotlight on the donors. I would like to ask the question, well, how did they ringfence their humanitarian decision-making from these political considerations to prevent the weaponization of a, what frameworks do they have in place to make sure that this political stranglehold over UNRWA does not morph into the mass starvation of hundreds of thousands of people? There are many more questions that I think should be asked and they should be asked of the donor community because make no mistake, this is a partnership.

UNRWA I know from the inside. UNRWA has worked with these donors, the government, the GAO, the government audit office or its accountability office in the US, they came about four years ago to UNRWA. They did a root and branch branch audit. And guess what? They found that the systems of neutrality, the textbooks, all these issues they turned over were basically in place and they carried on giving UNRWA \$350 million taxpayers dollars to the agency.

So I don't think we have to reinvent the wheel. Of course, donors will want to have us, they want to be put in their comfort zone, but it's a partnership. It's a longstanding partnership. And these audits have been going on for decades. But let's see what the two investigations that are going on, the external and the internal, come up with. But I think that questions also need to be asked about the politicization, the weaponization of UNRWA by the donors.

**Peter Beinart:**

What do you think is likely to happen? Do you think that the aid will be restored, do you think UNRWA will continue but kind of crippled in a way that doesn't allow it to provide services? Or do you think there's a real chance that actually UNRWA may cease to exist?

**Chris Gunness:**

Well, I mean, I certainly think that there is a very real existential threat facing UNRWA, particularly in Gaza in the West Bank because as I mentioned earlier, UNRWA also works in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon. But I do think, and I'm not being glib here, that reports of UNRWA's death are perhaps premature. And I think that what we are going to see, as we saw in 2018, former President Trump defunded UNRWA to the tune of over \$300 million. And we found out not because we were told advanced and could plan, we found out when the check didn't arrive in the mail, and yet, the then Commissioner General went on a massive global fundraising effort. Arab states stepped up to the plate. The Europeans certainly dug deep. And other donors did. And in the end, that shortfall was filled. I think now there's the added political edge to this attack, and I think that makes it more complicated.

But I think that UNRWA, certainly in Syria, Jordan, and Lebanon, I don't think it's facing an existential threat there, though, politically, but, I think its services are certainly under threat.

But to be clear about Gaza: this humanitarian crisis in the last 48 hours is way, way bigger than UNRWA. We are now talking about a global aid effort, which I think should probably be led by the military. I think Israel needs to be told by Mr. Biden, we are going to come and guarantee the safe zone. So Israel has shown that it can no longer be relied upon to have a safe zone. And there are indiscriminate attacks, disproportionate attacks going on all the time. Amnesty International just today put out another report about these indiscriminate attacks. So I think America has got to guarantee that. I think there's got to be a huge effort. I mean, 20 people per latrine, that's going to be about 75,000 latrines. They've got to be brought. Eight person tents, do the math, divide 2 million by eight. That's how many tents need to be brought in. There need to be hospital ships off the coast of Gaza as there were in Haiti in 2010, when 2,000 Marines, 18,000 plus other American service personnel.



That's the scale of what we're talking about, Peter. This has moved way beyond a crisis for UNRWA. This is something of the scale of the biggest natural disasters and humanitarian disasters the world has seen for decades. That's what we are now looking at today. And of course, once we've decided where these people have got to be looked after, arguably Rafah is not the place, there's nothing there. Should they be moved into the Negev? I mean, clearly the Egyptians are not going to have them in Sinai, but Israel is the occupying power. And under the fourth Geneva Convention has an obligation to look after to protect these people. Who is going to protect the Palestinians?

The Haitians were protected by a massive American military led operation in 2010 when 3 million Haitians were desperate for protection and services. Do the Palestinians not have the right to those services? Also, standing back, big picture, do the ordinary people in Gaza, many of whom were too young even to have voted for Hamas in the 2006 elections, why are they being collectively punished, a war crime incidentally. Why do they not have the right to protection under international humanitarian law? And why do they not have the same rights that the most vicious criminals in America, the pedophiles or the rapists, they are treated better than the people of Gaza are being treated today? So I would say, let's look to something of the scale of Haiti in 2010. That's what we're looking at. Mr. Biden needs to do what President Obama did in 2010, an executive order, which sees a huge US-led humanitarian and protection force move to protect the 2 million people that have taken refuge in Rafah.

Because unless that happens, we are going to see starvation. We are going to see death by communicable diseases on an industrial scale. And that is what we're looking at tonight. And in the next days, it's going to be crucial. It's a defining moment for the Biden presidency. He needs to step up to the plate. It's no good saying that Bibi's going over the top and the Israeli army has to abide by IHL. That language is now for the birds. There's too much at stake here. It's a massive test of our time. And I pray that the American administration can help the world come through that by exhibiting global humanitarian and political leadership

**Peter Beinart:**

On that very grim note, an important note, thank you so much, Chris, for sharing your time and analysis today. And thank you for our listeners for tuning into this episode of Occupied Thoughts. Please make sure to check out the FMEP website [fmepp.org](http://fmepp.org) for resources related to this podcast and lots of other great content related to Palestine and Israel. And please make sure you're subscribed to this podcast to stay up to date. You can find us on iTunes, SoundCloud, or Spotify, and you can also watch video versions of our podcast, including this one on YouTube. And with that, I'm Peter Beinart signing off until another episode of FMEP's Occupied Thoughts.