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**Promotion and protection of all human rights, civil,
political, economic, social and cultural rights,
including the right to development**

Written statement submitted by The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status*

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement, which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 January 2026]

* Issued as received, in the language of submission only.



The Catastrophic Implications of Reductions in the Funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) on the Economic, Social and Cultural Rights of Palestine Refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic

The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd wishes to draw the attention of the Human Rights Council to the severe and escalating humanitarian and human rights consequences resulting from persistent reductions in funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), particularly as they affect Palestine refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic.

As the Council convenes its sixty-first session, Palestine refugees in the Syrian Arab Republic continue to endure an exceptionally dire reality shaped by over thirteen years of armed conflict, repeated internal and cross-border displacement, economic collapse, delayed reconstruction, and a significant decline in international humanitarian assistance. These compounded factors have led to a systematic erosion of their economic, social, and cultural rights.

This situation is unfolding amid one of the most serious financial crises in UNRWA's history. The resulting cuts to essential services most notably education, healthcare, and cash assistance have directly undermined the ability of Palestine refugees to enjoy their internationally guaranteed rights and threaten the sustainability of the protection framework established by the United Nations.

UNRWA's Mandate and International Legal Obligations:

UNRWA was established pursuant to General Assembly resolution 302 (IV) of 1949 and mandated to provide relief and works services to Palestine refugees pending a just and durable solution to their plight, in accordance with international law. The renewal of UNRWA's mandate in 2025 for an additional three-year period reaffirmed the continuing responsibility of the international community in this regard.(1)

The services provided by UNRWA are not discretionary humanitarian assistance. They constitute an international obligation arising from the responsibility of the international community for the creation and persistence of the Palestine refugee situation. These obligations are firmly grounded in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Any substantial reduction in UNRWA services, without adequate and rights-based alternatives, therefore, constitutes impermissible retrogression in the enjoyment of economic and social rights, including the rights to education, health, an adequate standard of living, and non-discrimination.

Humanitarian Impact on Palestine Refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic:

Prior to 2011, approximately 560,000 Palestine refugees resided in the Syrian Arab Republic, who enjoyed relative stability compared to other host countries. Since the onset of the conflict, this community has experienced large scale displacement, the destruction of major refugee camps particularly Yarmouk, Daraa, and Ein el-Tal, the collapse of livelihoods, and a dramatic rise in extreme poverty.

According to UNRWA data, over 90 per cent of Palestine refugees remaining in the Syrian Arab Republic now live below the poverty line and rely almost entirely on humanitarian assistance to meet their basic needs.(2) In the absence of durable solutions, UNRWA assistance has become an indispensable lifeline.

Particularly alarming are the conditions of displaced Palestine refugees in the north of the Syrian Arab Republic, including those in Deir Ballout Al-Mohammadiya camp, which hosts more than 80 Palestinian families. These families live in severely degraded shelters with minimal access to food, medicine, or basic services, exposing them to life-threatening conditions. First-hand testimonies indicate that essential services are virtually non-existent, with the suspension of bread and food distributions by charitable organizations and acute shortages of medicines and medical supplies. (3)

Reductions in Assistance and Their Impact on Economic and Social Rights:

In recent years, UNRWA has adopted repeated measures including delays or reductions in cash assistance, cuts to beneficiary numbers, reductions in health services, and measures affecting staff and educational personnel salaries.

These reductions have pushed thousands of Palestine refugee families from the Syrian Arab Republic to the brink of hunger and homelessness in the Syrian Arab Republic, Lebanon, Jordan, and Egypt. In Lebanon, for instance, more than 4,500 Palestine refugee families from the Syrian Arab Republic depend almost entirely on UNRWA assistance. Any delay or reduction leads to mounting debt, inability to pay rent, and serious threats to family stability.(4)

In practical terms, funding cuts have resulted in:

- a. Increased food insecurity.
- b. Inability to pay rent and accumulation of debt.
- c. Denial of access to medical treatment.
- d. Heightened vulnerability among women, older persons, and persons with disabilities.

Such outcomes are incompatible with UNRWA's mandate and with the obligation of donor States to prevent retrogression in the enjoyment of acquired rights.

Impact on Education and Health:

Education is a cornerstone of UNRWA's mandate. In the Syrian Arab Republic, the Agency operates approximately 104 schools serving more than 51,000 students. Funding reductions have resulted in increased dropout rates, rising child labour and early marriage, and the suspension of school rehabilitation projects, exposing an entire generation to illiteracy and chronic poverty.

Any infringement on the right to education constitutes a clear violation of the Convention on the Rights of the Child.

Similarly, UNRWA health services in the Syrian Arab Republic and neighbouring host countries have been severely affected by funding shortfalls, resulting in shortages of essential medicines, reduced hospitalisation coverage, and limited access to specialised care, particularly for persons with disabilities and older persons, especially in destroyed camps and displaced communities in the north of the Syrian Arab Republic.

Politicisation of Humanitarian Assistance:

The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd expresses deep concern regarding the increasing politicization of UNRWA funding, including attempts to condition financial support on changes to educational content or the removal of historically rooted terminology related to Palestinian identity.

Such practices undermine cultural rights and violate international standards protecting the right of peoples to preserve their historical and cultural identity.

Security and Social Consequences of Continued Cuts:

The continuation of funding reductions and policies amounting to deliberate deprivation will lead to:

- a. Social unrest: transforming camps into sites of security tension due to despair and loss of hope.
- b. Irregular migration: increased attempts to reach Europe through unsafe routes, fleeing a reality in which even minimum standards of dignity are no longer ensured.
- c. Extremism and despair: the absence of education and services creates fertile ground for negative social phenomena among youth, including radicalisation and drug abuse.

Recommendations:

Considering the above, The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd respectfully calls upon the Human Rights Council to urge:

- (a) Sustainable and predictable funding for UNRWA, including through assessed contributions.
- (b) The resumption of suspended funding by donor States, in line with humanitarian principles.
- (c) Protect Palestine refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic: Launch a dedicated emergency response addressing housing, livelihoods, and reconstruction needs, ensure legal protection in host countries, and accelerate the reconstruction of destroyed camps in the Syrian Arab Republic to reduce prolonged reliance on emergency assistance.
- (d) Enhanced monitoring by the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights of the impact of funding reductions on the enjoyment of basic rights in refugee camps, submitting periodic reports to the Human Rights Council on indicators of hunger and illness resulting from funding cuts, and rejecting any conditionality that compromises educational curricula or Palestinian national identity in exchange for funding, as this constitutes a form of cultural coercion.

Conclusion:

Palestine refugees from the Syrian Arab Republic are not passive recipients of aid but rights-holders entitled to protection under international law. Safeguarding UNRWA's ability to fulfil its mandate is essential to ensuring their dignity, stability, and future.

The continued reduction of UNRWA services threatens not only their daily survival, but also the legal foundation of the Palestine refugee question as a whole. The Palestinian Return Centre Ltd affirms that protecting and supporting UNRWA is not merely a humanitarian option, but a legal and moral obligation that cannot be deferred.

(1) UNRWA /What is UNRWA's Mandate? <https://www.unrwa.org/what-unrwa's-mandate>

(2) UNRWA / Fact Sheet - <https://www.unrwa.org/ar/resources/fact-sheet>

(3) Action Group for Palestinians of Syria - <https://www.actionpal.org.uk/ar/post/22417>

(4) Action Group for Palestinians of Syria - <https://actionpal.org.uk/ar/post/22343>