

DOES UNRWA NEED AN EXECUTIVE BOARD? ¹

BACKGROUND

UNRWA is a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) and has an Advisory Commission². Other subsidiary organs of the General Assembly have governing bodies including:

- the UN Children’s Fund (UNICEF),
- the UN Development Programme (UNDP)
- the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
- the World Food Programme (WFP)
- the UN Entity for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women (UN Women).³

In its resolution on the restructuring and revitalization of the United Nations, Resolution [48/162](#)⁴, the UNGA:

- Decided that the current governing bodies of the UN development funds and programmes shall be transformed into Executive Boards;⁵
- Recognized that “there is a need for a substantial increase in resources for operational activities for development on a predictable, continuous and assured basis”;
- Called upon all participating countries to demonstrate their responsibility and commitment to the programmes and funds.

While an Advisory Commission advises and assists⁶, the Executive Boards have greater initiative and broader functions including but not limited to⁷

- Implement the policies formulated by the UNGA
- Ensure that activities and operational strategies are consistent with the overall policy guidance set forth by the UNGA
- Monitor performance
- Recommend new initiatives
- Encourage and examine new programme initiatives and, crucially
- Decide on administrative and financial plans and budgets

UNRWA (unlike UNICEF, UNDP and UNHCR) never had a governing body but only an Advisory Commission. This is in part due to the fact that UNRWA’s mandate in UNGA resolution [302 \(IV\)](#) was

¹ UNRWA Strategic Assessment - UN80 Initiative, *Report to the Secretary-General, 20 June 2025*

² UNGA established: UNRWA and its Advisory Commission in its resolution [302 \(IV\)](#);

³ UNGA established UNICEF and its Executive Board in its resolution [57 \(I\)](#); UNDP and its Governing Council in its resolution [2029 \(XX\)](#); UNHCR and its Executive Committee in its resolution [428 \(V\)](#) and its Executive Committee in its resolution [1166 \(XII\)](#) as well as ECOSOC resolution [672 \(XXV\)](#); WFP was established jointly by the UNGA and the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO)

⁴ Paragraph 21 of the Annex to UNGA resolution [48/162](#)

⁵ The UNDP Executive Board also governs the UN Population Fund (UNFPA) and UN Office for Project Services (UNOPS)

⁶ Paragraph 8 of UNGA resolution [302 \(IV\)](#)

⁷ Paragraph 22 of the Annex to UNGA resolution [48/162](#)

intended to be and expected to be of a temporary nature pending the return of the Palestine refugees to their homes in accordance with paragraph 11 of UNGA resolution [194 \(III\)](#).

UNRWA (like UNICEF, UNDP and UNHCR) is funded almost entirely by voluntary contributions with a small portion from the UN's regular budget for staffing. UNRWA provides state-like services to six million beneficiaries. However, while the number of Palestine refugees dependent on UNRWA increases steadily, the level of donor funding varies considerably from year to year putting UNRWA in a unique bind.

UNRWA (like UNICEF, UNDP and UNHCR) should benefit from a governing body; predictable, continuous and assured funding; as well as the UN membership's shared commitment and collective responsibility.

STRATEGIC ASSESSMENT

One of the four scenarios presented in the UNRWA Strategic Assessment Report is “the creation of a new Executive Board with a mandate to advise and support the Commissioner-General” of UNRWA. The Strategic Assessment Report recognizes the following pros and cons:

Pros:

- Seeks to institutionalize collective responsibility and enhances accountability
- Instils responsibility for securing multi-year funding
- Aligns UNRWA's funding and services

Cons:

- Does not necessarily resolve UNRWA's financial crisis
- Does not resolve UNRWA's current political problems
- Does not resolve UNRWA's operational constraints

PROPOSAL

UNRWA's current mandate expires on 30 June 2026. On 5 December 2025, the General Assembly overwhelmingly voted to extend UNRWA's mandate for another three years - until 30 June 2029.

At its resumed spring session, the UNGA should adopt a resolution requesting the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) to submit a report assessing the need for an UNRWA Executive Board and other measures considered capable of strengthening the Agency's independence and financial sustainability. The SG should set forth his recommendation(s) by 31 August 2026 with a view to the 81st Session of the UNGA acting on these recommendations by 31 December 2026.

In preparing his report, the UNGA should request the UNSG to invite the views of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA as well as the State of Palestine and neighbouring States hosting Palestine refugees including Jordan, Lebanon and Syria; other members of the UNRWA Advisory Commission including Egypt as well as key donor States and any other interested Member States. Independent experts and civil society groups familiar with the unique circumstances surrounding UNRWA as well as those familiar with successful U reform processes should also be invited to contribute written and oral submissions.

The Palestine Refugee Policy Forum is an ad hoc group of independent analysts who seek to generate informed discussion on the future of UNRWA. Participants include Mona al-Khalil, Kjersti Berg, Mezna Qato, Lex Takkenberg, Andrew Whitley and Mick Dumper.