

# Palestine at the UN: The PLO and UNRWA in the 1970s



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This article examines the relationship of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) during the 1970s, the period when the PLO reached the zenith of its power in Palestinian refugee camps throughout the Levant. Based on archival United Nations (UN) and UNRWA documents, as well as the PLO's own communications and publications, the article argues that the organization approached its relationship with UNRWA as part of a broader strategy to gain international legitimacy at the UN. That approach resulted in a complex set of tensions, specifically over which of the two institutions truly served and represented Palestinian refugees. In exploring these tensions, this article also demonstrates how the "question of Palestine" was in many ways an international issue.

UNRWA was a crucial hub for the Palestinian refugees. . . . It became very important for us [in the PLO] to focus on those who constituted its cadres [and] take advantage of the means that UNRWA could offer.  
–Shafiq al-Hout, PLO representative at the UN, 1974–91

IN NOVEMBER 1979, Yasir Arafat wrote one of his regular letters to Olof Rydbeck, commissioner-general of UNRWA. In the letter, Arafat acknowledged the importance of UNRWA's work and thanked Rydbeck for his efforts on behalf of Palestinian refugees. His wording was warm and solicitous, even addressing Rydbeck as "dear brother."<sup>1</sup> Nothing in the letter suggested anything other than a friendly working relationship. Yet only ten months earlier, Arafat's PLO had openly accused UNRWA of capitulating to "imperialist and Zionist pressures."<sup>2</sup> And less than two years before that, the PLO had berated the agency for "playing with the lives of Palestinians."<sup>3</sup>

The contrast between these communications cannot be explained by any major changes in the PLO-UNRWA relationship at the time. Rather, the PLO's approach to UNRWA was consistently paradoxical, at times even contradictory. The organization variously criticized, praised, exploited, and berated the agency—sometimes changing tack within a short space of time. To understand this apparent inconsistency, it is necessary to situate the PLO's stance on UNRWA within the organization's broader internationalist strategy during its 1970s heyday. It is also important to

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consider UNRWA's positioning, role, and mission—subjects that hold particular weight in light of UNRWA's contemporary crisis and struggle for survival.<sup>4</sup>

Recent years have seen increasing historiographical engagement with the PLO's international diplomacy, spearheaded by Paul Chamberlin and building on Yezid Sayigh's earlier study.<sup>5</sup> Influenced by Matthew Connelly's work on the Front de Libération Nationale (FLN)<sup>6</sup>—and arguing that the PLO itself was inspired by the FLN's example—Chamberlin contends that the historiography on the PLO has wrongly subordinated its diplomatic efforts to a preoccupation with its militancy. In fact, global political diplomacy was a core tenet of the PLO's strategy, as demonstrated through the organization's continual engagement with the UN. The PLO was in many ways an internationalist organization, both ideologically and strategically. It positioned the question of Palestine as one that had international dimensions and significance, and accordingly sought to promote itself, as well as the cause, in the international arena. As Noura Erakat writes, the PLO was determined to have the UN recognize it as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinian people, and the 1970s were a critical period here. Changes in the UN's membership resulting from widespread decolonization, along with the rise of Third Worldism, provided an opportunity for the PLO to progress in its international standing.<sup>7</sup> With that premise in mind, this article examines a question that both Chamberlin and Erakat have overlooked: how did UNRWA fit into the PLO's international strategy?

The question matters because UNRWA's work encapsulates the UN's long-term involvement in Palestinian affairs. The agency was established in 1949 as a central plank of the UN's institutional system for dealing with the “question of Palestine.” The UN General Assembly (UNGA) issued the agency with a short-term mandate to provide essential relief services to registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza (known as the “five fields”).<sup>8</sup> Meanwhile, the UN Conciliation Commission for Palestine (UNCCP) was responsible for finding a durable political solution to the crisis.<sup>9</sup> Within this setup, UNRWA's role was constructed as apolitical.<sup>10</sup> Like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, and in keeping with post-1945 humanitarian norms, UNRWA was bound by the principle that humanitarianism should be neutral and separate from politics—itsself a problematic and elusive notion.<sup>11</sup> Moreover, the continuation of UNRWA's work was always precarious, given the temporary nature of its mandate, which had to be renewed by UNGA on a regular basis, meaning that the agency's termination was an ever-present possibility. To complicate matters further, by the late 1950s the UNCCP had become inactive, leaving UNRWA as the only effective body mandated to work with the Palestinian people.<sup>12</sup>

The repercussions of this setup were highly significant. Fundamentally, it meant that a stateless people came to rely on a UN body for essential services while lacking international political protection. As a result of this deficit, Palestinian refugees continually turned to UNRWA to pursue their political rights, particularly repatriation—but, of course, UNRWA's apolitical mandate did not allow it to take up their demands.<sup>13</sup> The agency's actions were further constrained by the fact that the majority of its funding came from Western governments, which were politically opposed to the refugees' return.<sup>14</sup> Thus, notwithstanding its ostensibly apolitical stance, UNRWA was deeply entangled in the politics of humanitarianism from its inception.

This took several forms. Most fundamentally, UNRWA was the product of political dynamics, having been established and mandated by Western political actors—chiefly the United States and

the United Kingdom—on the basis of political calculations.<sup>15</sup> Political dynamics dominated the context in which the agency operated, including, most importantly, the lived experiences of the Palestinian refugees it served. The realities of such a setting raises questions about what it really means to be “apolitical,” and whether this is either desirable or possible. Generally, the concept of political neutrality is constructed around the idea that humanitarian actors should remain detached from political or ideological disputes in order to maintain their independence and trustworthiness. However, such detachment comes with inherent problems; it can require humanitarians to be silent in situations of oppression and abuse, to neglect the cause of those who are suffering, and to further strengthen those who wield unjust power.<sup>16</sup> In so doing, of course, their “apolitical” detachment can end up having highly political outcomes, which may contravene the very principles of humanitarianism. UNRWA has regularly faced criticism as a result.

Arguably, the idea of political neutrality is also based on a narrow interpretation of what constitutes “the political,” disregarding the fact that modern international humanitarianism and the global refugee regime are themselves products of particular political circumstances after World War II.<sup>17</sup> By constructing humanitarian aid as something idealized and objective, rather than an order embedded in political power structures, it becomes possible to implement a selective view of what constitutes “the political” in a way that often disadvantages marginalized groups. For example, the human rights discourses that often drive humanitarian work are presented as universal and apolitical, disregarding the reality that, as Lori Allen contends, these discourses are grounded in specific political paradigms.<sup>18</sup>

To complicate the issue of neutrality even further, humanitarian actors such as UNRWA often serve, either intentionally or inadvertently, as witnesses to events that are inescapably political. This is especially significant in the case of the Palestinian refugees, who face multiple layers of marginalization as a stateless and displaced people dispersed across the Middle East. Both Ilana Feldman and Randa Farah point to how the agency has served as an international witness to the realities of Palestinian displacement, an issue with an undeniably political nature. At the same time, UNRWA’s work in improving the refugees’ socioeconomic conditions inevitably fed into debates about their future and the possibility of their permanent resettlement in Arab host states.<sup>19</sup> As such, UNRWA’s relationship to the politics of Palestinian displacement was far more complex than its apolitical claims would suggest.

What did all this mean for the PLO? On the one hand, UNRWA’s constraints reinforced the PLO’s claim to be the sole representative of the Palestinian people, as it could point out that no other actor was fulfilling this role. Yet, at the same time, the PLO did not have the resources to replace UNRWA as the refugees’ primary service provider, and it knew that the latter’s dissolution—a possibility frequently discussed in view of its temporary mandate—would not be in Palestinian interests. As a result, its relationship with UNRWA was comprised of competitive tension, juxtaposed with cooperation and support.

The relationship was further complicated by the role that UNRWA inadvertently took on in affirming Palestinian refugee identity—another potential threat to the PLO’s claim to be their sole representative. Although UNRWA was established as an apolitical aid agency, in practice it developed a *de facto* quasi-governmental function for refugees registered with the agency.<sup>20</sup> This was manifested most obviously through its large-scale healthcare and education programs,

which operated on a scale similar to that of a national government.<sup>21</sup> To this day, UNRWA fulfils more of the administrative functions of a state than almost any other humanitarian organization.<sup>22</sup> This was hugely significant in the context of Palestinian statelessness. In particular, UNRWA-issued IDs have become significant as the only “official” proof of identity for many Palestinian refugees, the majority of whom are stateless.<sup>23</sup> While UNRWA management has insisted that the ID cards hold no significance beyond verifying the eligibility of the holder for services, in practice, refugees have also used them as proof of identity when applying for a laissez-passer or for permission to work in one of the host states.<sup>24</sup> In this sense, the cards have served as vital documents for a stateless people needing to engage with state bureaucracy. Again, the PLO could not compete with UNRWA here.

There were other reasons, too, why the PLO never supported UNRWA’s dissolution. Strategically, the PLO understood UNRWA as an important component of its internationalist strategy in the 1970s. The agency comprised a local address for the UN in the region, making it a route by which the PLO could access the organization’s supranational system. In a further demonstration of international humanitarianism’s deeply political implications, UNRWA’s work also provided valuable evidence of the refugees’ plight and the problem of Palestinian statelessness,<sup>25</sup> which the PLO could use to support not only its defense of refugee rights but also its demand for recognition as the Palestinians’ representative. These dynamics meant that the PLO’s relationship with UNRWA was characterized not only by rivalry but also by political strategy. In showing how, this article enriches the historiography about the PLO’s place on the world stage. Assessing UNRWA’s role augments key existing scholarship by Chamberlin and Erakat, as well as scholarship by Helena Cobban, Kemal Kirişçi, Augustus Richard Norton, and Michael Greenberg.<sup>26</sup> In the process, it deepens historical and political perspectives on both organizations.

The article is organized into two sections. The first looks at the PLO-UNRWA relationship in the sphere of high diplomacy, examining UNRWA’s place in the PLO’s international strategy at a time when the organization was seeking legitimacy and formal recognition at the UN. The second section explores day-to-day interactions between the PLO and UNRWA in the refugee camps across the long 1970s, when the former enjoyed its greatest prominence and power in the camps; it takes the analysis of the PLO’s UN strategy to a more quotidian level, assessing the difference that formal international recognition of the PLO in 1974 made on the ground.

## The Politics of High Diplomacy: Internationalizing the Palestinian Struggle

The PLO’s strategy toward UNRWA is best understood in the internationalist context of modern Palestinian history. Palestinian national politics had been entangled with internationalism—meaning international authorities and the notion of globally fixed standards—ever since the early twentieth century, when the League of Nations provided a mandate for the British governance of Palestine. International intervention in Palestinian politics continued with the 1947 UN partition plan,<sup>27</sup> as well as the numerous UNGA and UN Security Council (UNSC) resolutions that followed the 1948 establishment of Israel and the resulting Nakba—the dispossession of the Palestinian people.<sup>28</sup>

The UN's role in the creation of Israel, which became a member state in 1949,<sup>29</sup> led former Israeli prime minister Golda Meir to later describe the country as "the first born of the United Nations."<sup>30</sup>

UNRWA's establishment, and the continuation of its work, typified the UN's ongoing presence in Palestinian—as well as regional—affairs.<sup>31</sup> After beginning operations in 1950, the agency quickly became the dominant service provider for Palestinian refugees in the Levant. It was also a major employer, as Palestinians comprised the majority of its lower- and mid-echelon staff.<sup>32</sup> Partly as a result, tension quickly arose over ownership of UNRWA, with refugee communities pushing for it to demand and represent their full political rights.<sup>33</sup> Many feared that anything less would simply facilitate their protracted exile. Further tensions emerged over the agency's services, which many Palestinians saw as entitlements stemming from their refugee status.<sup>34</sup> Accordingly, they viewed any service cuts as an infringement on their rights, something that became an increasingly heated issue after UNRWA introduced new restrictions in the 1960s.<sup>35</sup> The refugees' grievances against UNRWA were reinforced by their underlying suspicion of the UN, which they perceived as having abandoned them during the Nakba.<sup>36</sup>

For much of the 1950s and 1960s, these grievances were expressed by grassroots groups in the Palestinian refugee camps. Although the PLO had been established in 1964, it was constrained in its early years by the Arab League, which had created the organization as a means to contain Palestinian nationalism. The PLO was thus relatively toothless until the late 1960s, when Arafat's Fatah party took control and pruned it away from Arab state management. Thereafter, the PLO embraced a more radical agenda, presenting itself as the sole legitimate representative of the Palestinians and seeking self-determination as a party separate from the Arab states.<sup>37</sup> In 1969, these efforts gained a major boost when the Cairo Agreement granted the PLO *de facto* sovereignty over parts of Lebanon, most notably the south and the refugee camps, along with the right to hold arms in these areas.<sup>38</sup> It thus gained formal recognition as a pseudo-state actor, albeit in a regional rather than an international context. This served as a basis from which it then sought global recognition. From the late 1960s, the PLO twinned its militant campaigns against Israel with a diplomatic offensive on the world stage, aiming to reach out to potential allies and raise awareness of the Palestinian cause among as many parties as possible.<sup>39</sup>

In particular, the PLO engaged with the ideas of Third Worldism, an international post colonial movement that had first emerged in the mid-1950s and gathered pace in subsequent decades as decolonization swept Africa and Asia. The Third Worldist movement sought to challenge the Global North's political and economic hegemony through South-South cooperation and solidarity. Many of its leading figures, most notably Indian prime minister Jawaharlal Nehru, also called for postcolonial states to resist dominant power structures by refusing to align themselves with either of the Cold War superpowers (although some Third Worldist governments did end up in alliance with the United States or, more often, the Soviet Union).<sup>40</sup> As Steven Salaita writes, the emergence of Third Worldism as a self-consciously internationalist movement served to crystallize the notion of progressive solidarity across the Global South.<sup>41</sup> These ideas, and the explicit internationalism underpinning them, all aligned ideologically with the PLO.

In particular, Third Worldism was grounded in people's experiences of colonialism and their struggles for self-determination. This was a natural ideological fit for the PLO, which cast Israel as the colonizer and the Palestinians as the colonized<sup>42</sup>—a characterization that gained added weight

following the 1967 Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, and the birth of the illegal settler movement.<sup>43</sup> By characterizing Israel and Zionism as part of the Western imperialist order, the PLO cast itself in the resistance mold of the global anticolonial movement.<sup>44</sup> Like its counterparts across the Global South, it spoke of its struggle in terms of justice and rights; also like them, it positioned itself as part of a broader international movement.<sup>45</sup> To underline this, the PLO regularly highlighted its commonalities with other revolutionary struggles, producing posters to celebrate the emergence or victories of Fidel Castro, Che Guevara, and the Polisario Front, among others.<sup>46</sup>

The PLO's communications from this period reflect not only its emphasis on international diplomacy, but also its self-conscious positioning within Third Worldism. In 1969, its dominant Fatah party declared the Palestinian struggle "a model of resistance to neo-imperialist domination," thus asserting both its solidarity and its wider relevance.<sup>47</sup> This turned out to be prescient; the "model" of Palestine became central in decolonial circles in subsequent years, helped by the major cultural output that the PLO produced from its base in Lebanon in the 1970s.<sup>48</sup> In particular, the PLO's success in gaining global recognition at the UN in 1974 marked a huge victory for Third Worldism,<sup>49</sup> coming a decade after seventy-seven Third World countries formed the G77 voting bloc at the UN.<sup>50</sup> As such, its campaign became a model pursued by others, including the indigenous rights movement and African American political radicals.<sup>51</sup> When the PLO leadership wrote in 1980 that it was "part of the world liberation movement and the shared struggle" (*juz' min harakat al-tahrir al-'alami fi al-nidal al-mushtarik*), it was describing both a practical and an ideological reality.<sup>52</sup>

Of course, the PLO's engagement with Third Worldism had an instrumental component as well as an ideological purpose. Aligning with Third Worldism served to strengthen the PLO's clout on the world stage by presenting the organization as part of a global movement and thus increasing the perceived feasibility of its goals.<sup>53</sup> In particular, the FLN, which was prominent in the Third Worldist movement, and to which the PLO had close ties, provided a strong example of a nationalist militant movement that had achieved independent statehood.<sup>54</sup> When the PLO celebrated the Algerian revolution as a fellow popular uprising against a Western-backed imperialist regime, its ideological solidarity also came with practical benefits: the FLN regime went on to share arms and training facilities with the PLO.<sup>55</sup>

Yet the PLO's international positioning went further than the postcolonial sphere. Like many other non-state actors of the era—and along with numerous Third Worldist leaders (most prominently, Gamal Abdel Nasser)<sup>56</sup>—the PLO also participated in the global binary of the Cold War. Specifically, its political opposition to the West, particularly the United States, facilitated links to the Soviet bloc,<sup>57</sup> with Arafat visiting Moscow for talks and continually referring to the Soviet Union as a friend and ally.<sup>58</sup> It also forged close alliances with so-called Communist regimes in Romania,<sup>59</sup> China,<sup>60</sup> Cuba,<sup>61</sup> Czechoslovakia,<sup>62</sup> and Yugoslavia. It was Yugoslavian president Josip Broz Tito who first suggested that the PLO go to the UN in the 1970s, ushering in a watershed moment for the organization's international standing.<sup>63</sup>

## PALESTINE AT THE UN

As mentioned above, Palestinians—including leading PLO officials<sup>64</sup>—were generally suspicious of the UN because of its role in partitioning Palestine in 1947 and its subsequent failure to recognize

their political rights in UNSC Resolution 242 twenty years later.<sup>65</sup> Yet, notwithstanding this hostility, UN-targeted diplomacy became a central plank of the PLO's strategy from the late 1960s. In a 1976 issue of its English-language information bulletin, *Palestine*, the organization stated that "exposing the Zionist-imperialist enemy to world opinion through the U.N. bodies" was one of the three strands of its struggle, the other two being "defending the Palestinian Revolution's existence in Lebanon" and "resisting the Zionist occupation forces in occupied Palestine."<sup>66</sup>

Fatah was the driving force behind this UN-focused strategy. It had long been aware of the importance of international diplomacy, having sent its first recorded communication to the UN secretary-general in June 1965, only a few months after formally launching its armed struggle.<sup>67</sup> After coming to dominate the PLO, Fatah continued to pursue opportunities at the UN. A 1980 Fatah document for political planning, later seized by Israeli occupying forces in south Lebanon, listed securing more pro-Palestinian UN resolutions among its objectives.<sup>68</sup> This approach provoked considerable censure from some of the Palestinian diaspora, particularly in the Arab world, who continued to regard the UN as an enemy force. Shafiq al-Hout, who represented the PLO at the UN from 1974–91, recalls in his memoir how some Palestinians demonstrated against the organization's overtures to the UN as a betrayal of their stance against it.<sup>69</sup>

Despite this opposition, the PLO—or at least its dominant Fatah contingent—insisted that winning over the UN was vital to the nationalist movement's success. The rationale was simple: while many in the leadership shared the general Palestinian suspicion toward the UN, they also recognized that it had been crucial to historical Israeli successes and Palestinian defeats. They accordingly concluded that in order to reverse Palestinian fortunes, they would need to persuade the UN of their case.<sup>70</sup> Arafat in particular believed that UN recognition would legitimize the PLO's representative status and generate pressure for its inclusion in negotiations.<sup>71</sup>

In the context of the 1970s, the PLO's view on the UN was further influenced by the changes that had occurred in the latter's membership. As several leading Palestinian officials noted, by this time the composition of the UN—and particularly that of the UNGA—looked very different from the 1940s. The large-scale decolonization of Africa and Asia had precipitated the entry of dozens of newly independent states, which were largely sympathetic to the Palestinian cause.<sup>72</sup> Moreover, as noted above, the PLO had direct ideological and practical ties to many of these postcolonial governments, often made up of former liberation movements with whom it identified.<sup>73</sup> The increasing prominence and power of Third Worldist states at the UN thus reinforced the PLO's commitment to internationalism.

Indeed, the significance of these states' UN membership quickly became evident. From 1969 on, the UNGA passed a slew of resolutions in the Palestinians' favor, most notably, resolutions 2535, 2787, and 2955, which collectively upheld the Palestinian right of return and right to self-determination.<sup>74</sup> Crucially, these resolutions aligned with the PLO in addressing the Palestinian issue as political rather than humanitarian; UNGA Resolution 2649 drew explicitly on the PLO's declaration of solidarity with the rest of the Global South by comparing the Palestinian situation to that in southern Africa.<sup>75</sup> The PLO also gained a new voice on the world stage in 1970 when its representative participated in a discussion on the "question of Palestine," held by the UNGA's Special Political Committee.<sup>76</sup>

This shift toward a pro-Palestinian stance reached its apogee in 1974.<sup>77</sup> In October that year, the UNGA voted by 105 to 4 to invite the PLO to participate in its plenary discussions on Palestine.<sup>78</sup> The following month, it formally invited Arafat to address the assembly in New York. Israel opposed the move vehemently to no avail.<sup>79</sup> Arafat's speech, which was broadcast around the world amid simultaneous fanfare and controversy, articulated the PLO's internationalist strategy, calling on UN member states to implement the Palestinians' national and political rights.<sup>80</sup> He asserted both the Palestinian right to self-determination and the PLO's right to represent Palestinians internationally.<sup>81</sup> Also in November, UNGA Resolution 3237 invited the PLO to participate in UNGA sessions as an observer entity, with a similar status to that of the Vatican.<sup>82</sup> The PLO thus gained its longed-for recognition as the legitimate Palestinian representative on the world stage.

The events of 1974 marked a turning point in the international status of the Palestinian cause.<sup>83</sup> Resolution 3237 gave the PLO a higher level of UN recognition than any other non-state actor at the time and allowed it to participate in the UNGA's work and sessions. There were also limitations: the PLO was not a full UN member and remained excluded from the more powerful UNSC. Yet even the latter shifted slightly, inviting the PLO representative to address the council after the UNGA requested that it establish contacts with the new observer entity.<sup>84</sup> The PLO was now unmistakably part of the UN and much harder to ignore.

The PLO was quick to take advantage of its new opportunities, appointing permanent observers to UN headquarters in both New York and Geneva.<sup>85</sup> Its representative had a private meeting with the UN secretary-general in 1976, and it continued to appeal regularly to the secretariat and other member states for support in subsequent years.<sup>86</sup> In 1978, Arafat wrote to Secretary-General Kurt Waldheim, calling for "[the Palestinian refugees'] right to return to their homes and property in accordance with the rules of international law, the Charter of the United Nations, United Nations resolutions, and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights."<sup>87</sup> Arafat's invocation of the UN Charter and UN resolutions is highly telling here. By framing his argument in international norms, he implies that it is the UN's responsibility to support the Palestinian national cause. The letter is a clear case of the PLO's internationalist strategy in action. The question that remains is what this meant for UNRWA, as the UN's local address for Palestinians in the Middle East.

## UNRWA AND THE PLO'S INTERNATIONAL STRATEGY

UNRWA's work manifests the long-running connections between Palestinian refugees and the international order as encapsulated by the UN. Specifically, it exemplifies the involvement of the UNGA, the agency which provides UNRWA's mandate and to which UNRWA is answerable.<sup>88</sup> As such, UNRWA was directly affected by the UNGA's formal recognition of the PLO in 1974. Commissioner-General John Rennie acknowledged this in his annual report the following year: "The granting to the PLO by the General Assembly of observer status at the UN and the Assembly's request to the Secretary-General to establish contacts with the PLO on all matters relating to the question of Palestine," he said, "were of significance to the Agency."<sup>89</sup> This fleeting reference did not do justice to what this "significance" would mean in practice.

Formally, 1974 marked the beginning of UNRWA's official relationship with the PLO, as relations could only be established once the UNGA had recognized the organization.<sup>90</sup> In reality,



the agency's interactions with the PLO long predated this. On some level, the relationship was an organic one, as many of the PLO's cadres had studied in UNRWA's schools and were therefore closely familiar with the agency from a young age. Some senior Palestinian officials, including Abu Iyad and Ghassan Kanafani, even worked as teachers in UNRWA schools for a time. As Jalal Al Hussein and Randa Farah have both written, this intimately shaped the link between UNRWA and the PLO, with the former having directly informed the life experiences of many of the latter's members.<sup>91</sup>

From UNRWA's operational perspective, the PLO became a significant actor not as a result of UNGA recognition in 1974 but prior to this, when the organization gained prominence throughout Palestinian refugee camps in the late 1960s. It loomed particularly large in Lebanon, where the aforementioned Cairo Agreement gave it de facto sovereignty over the camps. This meant that the agency had to work with the PLO in order to implement its mandate. Yet it had to proceed with care. The norms of international humanitarianism bound UNRWA to political neutrality—the demands of the refugees notwithstanding—and the refugee camps were designated civilian areas.<sup>92</sup> The PLO's authority in the camps posed an obvious risk to their supposedly civilian nature, and to the agency's ostensibly apolitical status.

There were also practical considerations. UNRWA's dependence on voluntary donations meant that it could not afford to alienate its donors, the largest of which—the United States—continued to classify the PLO as a terrorist organization until 1988.<sup>93</sup> As if to underline the issue, in 1970, the United States had attached to its funding of UNRWA the condition that the agency remain totally detached from the Palestinian Liberation Army (PLA) and *fida'iyyin* groups.<sup>94</sup> The agency therefore walked a tightrope in its relations with the PLO for five years after the Cairo Agreement. Its task was complicated further by the fact that the PLO was also gaining increasing prominence outside Lebanon at this time. In 1970, the Arab host governments, on whose support UNRWA also relied, requested that the PLO participate in meetings on the agency's education program.<sup>95</sup>

UNGA Resolution 3237 thus made things slightly easier for the agency by providing an official framework within which it could conduct relations with the PLO. After the UNGA's formal recognition of the PLO in 1974, the PLO-UNRWA relationship was formalized,<sup>96</sup> with Rennie calling on Arafat in Beirut "to inform him more fully of the Agency's financial difficulties and their implications for services to the refugees."<sup>97</sup> Thereafter, the two organizations held regular official meetings in Lebanon, chaired by Lebanese government representatives, to discuss operational issues regarding the refugees.<sup>98</sup>

At the same time, the PLO increasingly made use of UNRWA to buttress its calls for Palestinian political rights, sometimes quoting its reports in official speeches at the UN and other international arenas.<sup>99</sup> Whenever possible, the PLO cited statements by UNRWA officials as evidence of the justice of their cause. A 1977 issue of the PLO's *Palestine* proudly proclaimed that the UNRWA director in Gaza had "expressed his strong criticism of the Zionist authorities' policies in the Gaza Strip," particularly the forced relocation of refugees.<sup>100</sup> The bulletin was printed in several European languages and designed to reach a Western audience. Evidently, the PLO perceived UNRWA to have sufficient clout and authority on the world stage to make the agency's words worth disseminating to this audience.

## Everyday Politics: The PLO and UNRWA in the Refugee Camps

While Resolution 3237 of 1974 was transformative at the high diplomatic level, its impact on the ground was more muted. The PLO had been on UNRWA's radar since its creation ten years earlier, and for much of the 1960s the relationship between the two was ambiguous. Formally, UNRWA prohibited its employees from publicly identifying with the PLO, in view of its neutrality obligations as a UN agency. It accordingly protested the PLO's conscription of its staff in 1965–67. Yet the PLO's role as *de facto* government of many Palestinian refugee camps in this period—first in Jordan and then in Lebanon—meant that the agency could not ignore the organization altogether.<sup>101</sup>

As Al Hussein and Benjamin Schiff have both detailed, the PLO's rising power in the camps in the late 1960s greatly complicated the situation for UNRWA, whose mandate remained the same, despite the changes on the ground.<sup>102</sup> The agency first directly encountered the PLO in Jordan after the organization rose to prominence among the country's large Palestinian population following the 1967 Arab defeat. This prominence proved unsustainable, however, as the PLO contested the Jordanian regime's approach to Israel and ultimately launched a military offensive against it. The ensuing civil war resulted in the PLO's expulsion from Jordan in 1970, in events known as Black September.<sup>103</sup> While the PLO's era of dominance in Jordan was short-lived, it precipitated new themes in the organization's relationship with UNRWA that would dominate the subsequent decade.

After Black September, the PLO established its headquarters in Beirut. In view of the Cairo Agreement, UNRWA had little choice but to engage with the PLO directly in Lebanon. At the same time, the PLO demanded that the agency recognize its role by sharing information and consulting with it over changes in service provision. Relations gradually moved from "uneasy coexistence to active partnership," in the words of Al Hussein.<sup>104</sup> From UNRWA's perspective, the impact of this shift was mixed. There were some benefits: Schiff and Sayigh both argue that at a time when UNRWA was facing severe financial difficulties, the PLO's provision of additional services in the camps, as well as its creation of job opportunities, helped relieve the level of need among the refugees and thus reduce pressure on the agency.<sup>105</sup> Yet, as Al Hussein points out, the legitimacy of the Cairo Agreement did not make any difference to the Western donor states' classification of the PLO as a terrorist organization, with the resulting challenges for UNRWA.<sup>106</sup>

The PLO took a similarly multifaceted approach to UNRWA, reflecting the views held by many refugees about the agency. Al Hussein contends that from the mid-1970s, PLO policy regarding the agency had two main aims: to maintain and increase UNRWA's services, and to ensure that UNRWA decisions were consistent with Palestinian political and humanitarian interests.<sup>107</sup> Yet these aims did not always result in consistent policy. It is, in fact, possible to identify three key strands in the PLO's stance toward UNRWA at this time: first, the organization was vocal in its endorsement of the refugees' grievances against the agency and was keen to align itself with their criticisms; second, and simultaneously, the PLO recognized that UNRWA's services were vital to the welfare and wellbeing of many refugees, and thus it campaigned behind the scenes for the agency's work to continue; and third, and most interestingly, the PLO also sought to use UNRWA's camp

infrastructure and services for its own political and nationalist purposes, particularly in Lebanon after the Cairo Agreement. Each of these three strands is now examined in turn.

### CRITICIZING UNRWA: THE PLO AS OPPONENT

The PLO's criticisms of UNRWA were largely grounded in the grievances of camp refugees. By aligning itself with their criticisms, the PLO underlined its claims to represent them. Like them, it always stopped short of calling for UNRWA's abolition or questioning the grounds for its existence. Instead, it endorsed the camp inhabitants' criticisms that UNRWA was patronizing toward the Palestinians; that it was politically aligned with their enemies, particularly the United States and the United Kingdom; and that it did nothing to put an end to the refugees' plight by working to realize their political rights.<sup>108</sup> The PLO also advocated for long-running demands by the refugees for the agency to improve its health clinics and increase its ration provisions.<sup>109</sup>

Many PLO officials were particularly keen to take up the charge that UNRWA was part of a Western-backed plot to permanently resettle the refugees in the Arab host states, and thus undermine their struggle for self-determination. The fact that UNRWA did not participate in Palestinian national politics—something attributable to the limitations of its mandate—was taken as evidence of this. As early as 1965, the PLO in Syria had issued a questionnaire for Palestinian UNRWA staff there, seeking information about their personal backgrounds and their potential to contribute to the nationalist movement. The questionnaire also asked recipients to name up to twenty acquaintances who could participate “in preparing for the battle of liberation.”<sup>110</sup> UNRWA's refusal to distribute the questionnaire, on grounds of its inappropriate political and military content, was cited as evidence that the agency was “conspiring” against the refugees' cause—a claim made in numerous PLO pamphlets over the years.<sup>111</sup>

The PLO also cast UNRWA's service cuts as politically motivated, seeing them as a precursor to the agency's dissolution and the international abandonment of the refugees.<sup>112</sup> In a 1977 statement, the PLO accused UNRWA and the United States of “playing with the lives of Palestinians” by deliberately providing inadequate welfare services.<sup>113</sup> Four years later, a PLO official warned the UNRWA field director in Damascus that service cuts would not be accepted, hinting that the PLO would organize grievous demonstrations against the agency if it continued with its planned cutbacks.<sup>114</sup> Such opposition thus became another factor that UNRWA had to take into general consideration when deciding on possible cutbacks.<sup>115</sup>

All of the above notwithstanding, the PLO's influence on UNRWA's work remained generally limited. The organization failed to prevent many of the decisions it opposed, such as the relocation of UNRWA's headquarters from Beirut to Vienna in 1978; it also failed to bring in many of the changes it demanded, such as the explicit inclusion of protection activities and political negotiations within UNRWA's mandate. This presents a striking contrast with the success of the refugees' grassroots campaigns, most notably in the 1950s, when refugee communities had successfully lobbied UNRWA to expand its education program at the expense of its job creation schemes.<sup>116</sup> Explaining the PLO's contrasting lack of success in engendering any major changes in UNRWA's operations, Al Hussein suggests that the PLO's leverage with UNRWA was limited by the fact that it could never establish comprehensive alternatives to the

agency's services. As it could not threaten to replace UNRWA completely, the PLO retained some elements of dependence on its work.<sup>117</sup>

The time and effort that the PLO expended on criticizing UNRWA's work indicate that it saw the agency as a significant, if flawed, player. Unlike its political opponents, the PLO never called for UNRWA's abolition. On the contrary, it aligned itself with the refugees in insisting that UNRWA must continue its work until their plight was resolved. For the PLO, this insistence translated into action, as its criticisms were coupled with behind-the-scenes efforts to ensure that UNRWA's programs could continue. This aspect of the PLO's relationship with the agency is examined in depth below.

## SUPPORTING UNRWA: THE PLO AS FUNDRAISER

Officially, the PLO shared the Arab states' position that responsibility for funding UNRWA lay with the Western-dominated international community on the grounds of its political responsibility for the refugees' plight.<sup>118</sup> However, in private, the PLO recognized that UNRWA's work was crucial to the refugees' wellbeing; it was therefore willing to lobby for Arab funding to UNRWA in order to prevent the agency from floundering. UNRWA staff themselves stated internally, "There can be no doubt whatsoever about [the] desire of Arab host governments and [the] PLO that UNRWA should continue [to] provide services to refugees."<sup>119</sup> In the PLO's case, this was not simply a desire but a driving force behind active fundraising work for UNRWA.<sup>120</sup>

In 1974, faced with a serious deficit, UNRWA approached the PLO for help in seeking emergency funding from the Gulf states, where the agency had previously had difficulties even getting appointments to see high officials.<sup>121</sup> It also considered asking the PLO to approach Cuba and other Communist states on its behalf<sup>122</sup>—further evidence of the PLO's success in establishing itself as an influential party in the non-Western world. The agency's overtures to the PLO on this front provide one example of how the relationship was symbiotic, with each organization seeking to use the other to its own advantage whenever possible. It is also a clear case of UNGA Resolution 3237 making a difference on the ground; without it, UNRWA would not have been able to approach the PLO for fundraising assistance.

The PLO leadership was receptive to the agency's requests. In 1974–75, it helped secure large emergency contributions to UNRWA from various Gulf states. Although these states refused to commit to regular contributions to UNRWA's General Fund, their emergency donations helped keep UNRWA afloat that year.<sup>123</sup> UNRWA acknowledged the PLO's vital role in raising these funds. In 1975, Commissioner-General Rennie reported to New York that "reconsideration by Arab Foreign Ministers of increased contributions to UNRWA is result of approach to PLO [*sic*]."<sup>124</sup> Nor was this a one-off; in 1975, Arafat asked to be kept informed of UNRWA's financial situation.<sup>125</sup> Indeed, it was Arafat in particular who was responsible for many fundraising efforts on UNRWA's behalf. Over the 1970s, he traveled to numerous Arab and Muslim states to appeal for donations, and the PLO made specific efforts to fundraise for the agency at the 1978 Arab League Summit in Baghdad.<sup>126</sup>

The records indicate warm and solicitous relations between the PLO and UNRWA leaderships over this issue, with the former speaking positively of the agency's work in support of the

refugees, notwithstanding its aforementioned claims that UNRWA was aligned with the Palestinians' political enemies. In one letter in 1979, Arafat wrote, "We cannot but express our appreciation for your concern and interest in seeking solutions to the financial crisis faced by UNRWA, in order to muster sufficient support for the maintenance of its activities. . . . We are in fact exerting efforts through our contacts with the responsible international circles concerned with a view to participating in helping UNRWA financially."<sup>127</sup> The fundraising partnership remained active throughout this period. In 1980 and 1981, Commissioner-General Rydbeck met with Arafat repeatedly in Beirut to discuss the UNRWA deficit, and the PLO chairman promised to again help raise money.<sup>128</sup> Arafat subsequently approached Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and even Japan on the agency's behalf. Faruq al-Qaddumi, head of the PLO's political department, also appealed to France to increase its contribution.<sup>129</sup> Again, emergency donations helped stave off total disaster for the agency.<sup>130</sup>

Paradoxically, these fundraising efforts occurred simultaneously with PLO criticism of UNRWA for being part of an alleged international plot to liquidate the "Palestinian problem."<sup>131</sup> This apparent inconsistency is a sign of the divisions that existed within the PLO, sometimes to the degree of generating incompatible policy positions. These internal tensions were exacerbated by the fact that, like UNRWA, the PLO had to navigate pressures on it from numerous parties. For the PLO, this meant assuring its Arab constituency that it was not "selling out" on the principle of Western responsibility for funding UNRWA. Publicly, it held fast to the official Arab line; when asked in a 1975 interview, PLO spokesman Abdul Mohsen Abu Maizar denied reports that the organization had appealed to Saudi Arabia to help fund UNRWA, stating that such funding was an international responsibility.<sup>132</sup> These public denials were necessary for the PLO to maintain its credibility and hold together despite internal conflict.

## **POLITICIZING UNRWA: THE PLO AS PSEUDO-STATE IN LEBANON**

The ramifications of the Cairo Agreement meant that the PLO in Lebanon came to present UNRWA with many of the problems the agency usually faced from the host governments. Questions of access, personnel, and the use of facilities all became topics of potential disagreement between UNRWA and the PLO. The huge controversy that surrounded the PLO in the eyes of many Western states—the same states that comprised UNRWA's major donors—rendered this especially sensitive for the agency.<sup>133</sup>

To complicate matters further, an increasing competitiveness between the PLO and UNRWA took hold in this period as the former gained its foothold in the camps.<sup>134</sup> The PLO's new authority meant that its patronage became as important and desirable to the refugees as their connections to UNRWA, if not more so. This in turn undermined UNRWA's authority, disrupting its previously exclusive status as the camps' *de facto* government.

In practical terms, the PLO made increasing use of the same sites and installations as UNRWA, albeit for different purposes. For example, the PLO Higher Political Committee for Palestinian Affairs in Lebanon sought the use of UNRWA schools to hold classes for children on the Palestinian struggle.<sup>135</sup> Farah writes that this was sometimes due to a lack of alternatives,<sup>136</sup> and it is true that in the case of the schools, there were not many other buildings in the camps of

suitable size and design. Yet the reasons were not merely practical. As this article's opening quotation from al-Hout shows, the PLO was well aware of the strategic potential that the agency's work provided. Schiff, Al Hussein, and Riccardo Bocco all note that from the late 1960s, the PLO sought to use UNRWA's infrastructure to extend its own authority and legitimacy.<sup>137</sup>

The PLO's efforts on this front took different forms. Al-Hout recalls that the organization particularly targeted UNRWA employees in its recruitment drives, aiming to take advantage of the agency's own network as a way to reach as many Palestinians as possible.<sup>138</sup> For this reason, the PLO was keen to align itself with UNRWA's Palestinian staff in their tensions with the agency, in order to win their trust and loyalty. Al Hussein argues that it was in this arena that the PLO actually enjoyed its greatest influence over the agency, albeit informally. By loudly endorsing the demands of organizations like the General Union of Palestinian Teachers, it could turn small-scale grievances into national issues and win itself a place at the negotiating table in the process.<sup>139</sup> The PLO accordingly endorsed the teachers' demands for higher salaries and supported their complaints about the prohibition of political discussion in schools.<sup>140</sup> The latter issue was of particular interest to the PLO, as UNRWA's regulations on staff neutrality, and specifically its ban on employees joining the PLO, severely limited its scope for recruitment to its ranks.<sup>141</sup>

The PLO also took up the refugees' demand for a "Palestinianized" curriculum as a key issue.<sup>142</sup> The absence of Palestinian history and geography from the curricula in UNRWA schools was a long-running grievance among many refugees, and it served to reinforce their suspicions about the agency's political positioning.<sup>143</sup> Like many other Third Worldist groups, the PLO regarded the role of education as central to its liberationist ideology. In that vein, a 1974 issue of the PLO organ *Falastin al-thawra* called attention to the agency's "suspicious attempts to keep the people ignorant."<sup>144</sup> At the UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization General Conference two years later, PLO observer Ibrahim Souss spoke of the need to "reevaluate" UNRWA's education system as part of the burgeoning relationship between the two organizations.<sup>145</sup> This is a key example of how, in alliance with the grass roots among the refugees, the PLO sought to influence the agency's policies and programs along its favored nationalistic lines.<sup>146</sup> Souss's intervention also shows how the UN's formal recognition of the PLO could intersect with the refugees' demands on the ground, in this case by giving them a voice on the world stage and boosting their leverage.

The PLO had some success in its usage of UNRWA structures in this period, albeit indirectly. When Arafat addressed the UNGA in November 1974, for example, the PLO instructed UNRWA staff in Lebanon to suspend work so as to participate in demonstrations of solidarity. UNRWA reported that nearly all field staff left work early in the morning in response.<sup>147</sup> To a lesser degree, the PLO was also able to mobilize refugees in Gaza for the same cause, using the UNRWA school network; the agency reported agitation in Jabalia and Shati' camps on the day of Arafat's speech.<sup>148</sup>

From UNRWA's perspective, the PLO's encroachment on its facilities and services caused both political and practical problems. Hasna Rida, who worked as a research assistant for UNRWA in Lebanon at this time, recalls that the agency's relationship with the PLO was an anxious one. Agency management were nervous about the PLO's power in the camps and the accompanying desire of many refugees to be actively involved in the nationalist campaign.<sup>149</sup> The possibility of

the camps becoming non-civilian areas was a major concern for the agency, not only because of its apolitical mandate, but also for fear that perceived politicization would lead its Western donors to withdraw funding.<sup>150</sup> The PLO's use of UNRWA installations for its own purposes also caused serious practical problems, as these buildings were increasingly targeted in Israeli air raids.<sup>151</sup>

The agency's inability to prevent the PLO's infringement of its spaces in the 1970s contrasts starkly with its straightforward refusal in 1965 to distribute the PLO's questionnaire in Syria. By the 1970s, the PLO's leverage had greatly increased, and the situation was much more politically difficult for UNRWA, particularly in Lebanon. The agency's problems only worsened as the Lebanese civil war escalated and UNRWA's field office in Beirut found itself frequently cut off from both headquarters and area offices, forcing the agency to appeal increasingly for PLO security assistance.<sup>152</sup> This development exemplified UNRWA's long-running, complex, and contradictory relationship with the PLO in the camps.<sup>153</sup>

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Analysis of the PLO-UNRWA relationship is vital for deepening understandings of the PLO's historical bid for legitimacy and recognition on the world stage. Analysis of the two organizations' historical relationship is no less important for understanding the full complexity of the dynamics surrounding UNRWA's role and work. Such a subject holds particular weight in view of the agency's post-2018 financial crisis and struggle for survival. UNRWA's operational reality has long compelled it to function at the nexus of politics and humanitarianism, nationalism and internationalism. The resulting tensions are critical in explaining its numerous paradoxes, especially at a time when the agency faces increasingly prolific criticism.

Ultimately, the PLO's approach to UNRWA reflects how the "question of Palestine" was inextricably tied to the international arena, particularly at the UN, and how the Palestinian nationalist movement responded to this. The relationship between UNRWA and the PLO served as a microcosm for the juxtaposition of the apparently contrasting notions of nationalism and internationalism in Palestinian history, at both the institutional and the grassroots level. Palestinian refugee history occurred not only in the regional context of the Levant but also in the context of its relevance to the history of the UN, globalism, and postcolonial constructions of nationalism.

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- 69 Al-Hout, *My Life in the PLO*, p. 127.
- 70 This strategy has not disappeared. In 2011, the Palestinian Authority applied to become a full UN member state. The following year, it gained non-member state status. See UNGA Res. 67/19, Status of Palestine in the United Nations (4 December 2012), <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/19862D03C564FA2C85257ACB004EE69B>. In his accompanying address to the UNGA, Mahmoud Abbas explicitly referenced UNGA Resolution 181 and the long history of UN involvement in Palestine. See “Statement by President Abbas before the Adoption of Resolution 67/19 on the Status of Palestine in the United Nations,” Mission of the State of Palestine to the UN, 29 November 2012, <http://palestineun.org/692/#more-692>.
- 71 Erakat, *Justice for Some*, pp. 112–113.
- 72 Rajeev Patel and Philip McMichael, “Third Worldism and the Lineages of Global Fascism: The Regrouping of the Global South in the Neoliberal Era,” *Third World Quarterly* 25, no. 1 (2004): p. 241.
- 73 Patel and McMichael, “Third Worldism,” pp. 241–42.
- 74 For example, UNGA Resolution 2535 alerted the UNSC to “the grave situation resulting from Israeli policies and practices in the occupied territories and Israel’s refusal to implement [UN] resolutions”; UNGA Resolution 2787 affirmed “the inalienable rights of all peoples, and in particular those of Zimbabwe, Namibia, Angola, Mozambique and Guinea (Bissau) and the Palestinian people, to freedom, equality and self-determination, and the legitimacy of their struggles to restore those rights”; and UNGA Resolution 2955 “strongly condemn[ed] the expansionist activities of Israel in the Middle East and the continual bombing of Palestinian civilians, which constitute a serious obstacle to the realization of the self-determination and independence of the Palestinian people.” See UNGA Res. 2535 (XXIV), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (10 December 1969), <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/41F2C6DCE4DAA765852560DF004E0AC8>; UNGA Res. 2787, Importance of the Universal Realization of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination and of the Speedy Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples for the Effective Guarantee and Observance of Human Rights (6 December 1971), [https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2787\(XXVI\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2787(XXVI)); and UNGA Res. 2955 (XXVII), Importance of the Universal Realization of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination and of the Speedy Granting of

- Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples for the Effective Guarantee and Observance of Human Rights (12 December 1972), [https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2955\(XVII\)](https://undocs.org/en/A/RES/2955(XVII)).
- 75 UNGA Res. 2649, Importance of the Universal Realization of the Right of Peoples to Self-Determination and of the Speedy Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples for the Effective Guarantee and Observance of Human Rights (30 November 1970), <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/UNISPAL.NSF/796f8bc05ec4f30885256cef0073cf3a/14da6eceed5f088a8525630a0072450d?OpenDocument>; UNGA Res. 2762, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (8 December 1970), <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/E7C4B66C913ECO DC852560DE006E8F1B>.
- 76 Cobban, *Palestinian Liberation Organisation*, p. 229.
- 77 Chamberlin, "Struggle against Oppression," pp. 26–27.
- 78 UNGA Res. 3210 (XXIX), Invitation to the Palestine Liberation Organization, (14 October 1974), [http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view\\_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3210\(XXIX\)&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION](http://www.un.org/en/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/3210(XXIX)&Lang=E&Area=RESOLUTION). Israel, the United States, Bolivia, and the Dominican Republic voted against the resolution. See also Cobban, *Palestinian Liberation Organisation*, p. 230.
- 79 Permanent representative of Israel to the UN to UNSC president, letter, 14 November 1975, S/11878, S-0359-0002-0002, UNA.
- 80 For the recording of Arafat's speech, see "Yasser Arafat General Assembly Speech (Part 1)," UN Audiovisual Library, <http://www.unmultimedia.org/classics/asset/C792/C792a/>. For the transcript, see Statement by Yasir Arafat, S-0899-0013-03, UNA.
- 81 Erakat, *Justice for Some*, pp. 97–100.
- 82 UNGA Res. 3237 (XXIX), Observer Status for the Palestine Liberation Organization (25 November 1974), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0738/39/IMG/NR073839.pdf?OpenElement>.
- 83 Erakat, *Justice for Some*, pp. 114–22. On the Palestinian reaction to Arafat's speech, see Fawaz Turki, *Soul in Exile: Lives of a Palestinian Revolutionary* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1988), p. 135; UNRWA West Bank director to commissioner-general, memo, 31 January 1975, box OR17, file OR120 2(WB)II, UHA; McElhiney to Rennie, cable, 15 November 1974, S-0169-0009-0009, UNA; John Rennie, *Report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA*, ¶ 4, UN Doc. A/10013 (30 June 1975), <https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N75/213/46/PDF/N7521346.pdf?OpenElement>.
- 84 UNGA Res. 3236, Question of Palestine (25 November 1974).
- 85 UN secretary-general, *Question of Palestine*, UN Doc. A/10265 (23 September 1975).
- 86 Cobban, *Palestinian Liberation Organisation*, p. 230; Erakat, *Justice for Some*, p. 129. See also: "Notes on Meeting between the secretary-general and Mr. Khaddoumi of the PLO on 15 January 1976," S-1066-0098-0005, UNA.
- 87 Arafat to Waldheim, letter, 22 March 1978, S-0899-0013-07, UNA.
- 88 Bartholomeusz, "Mandate of UNRWA."
- 89 UNRWA, Annual Report, ¶ 4, UN Doc. A/10013 (1975).
- 90 Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees," p. 240.
- 91 Jalal Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," *JPS* 29, no. 2 (Winter 2000): pp. 53–54; Farah, "UNRWA," pp. 406–9.
- 92 Jean-Francois Durieux, "Preserving the Civilian Character of Refugee Camps: Lessons from the Kigoma Refugee Programme in Tanzania," *Track Two* 9, no. 3 (November 2000): pp. 25–35.
- 93 Cobban, *Palestinian Liberation Organisation*, pp. 235–41; Benjamin N. Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN Aid to Palestinians* (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 1995), p. 100; Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 55.
- 94 US representative to the UN to U Thant, note, A98USUN 18 December 1970, file UN 10-4 1/1/71 subject-numeric file, RG 59, US National Archive, College Park, MD.

- 95 "Recommendations of the Meeting of Representatives of Arab Host States, UNRWA and UNESCO on the Educational Programme for Palestine Arab Refugee Children," Beirut, 25–28 June 1970, box RE28, file RE230(3)III, UHA; see also Laurence Michelmore, *Report of Commissioner-General of UNRWA*, ¶ 19, UN Doc. A/8013 (30 June 1970), <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/519871909FA2913885256A5700565639>.
- 96 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 88.
- 97 UN secretary-general, *Question of Palestine*.
- 98 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 104.
- 99 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 54.
- 100 *Palestine* 3, no. 1 (January 1977).
- 101 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, pp. 88, 102–3.
- 102 Jalal Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Refugees: A Difficult but Lasting Marriage," *JPS* 40, no 1 (Autumn 2010): p. 15.
- 103 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 69.
- 104 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 51.
- 105 Sayigh, *Armed Struggle*, p. 447; Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 83; Jaber Suleiman, "The Current Political, Organizational, and Security Situation in the Palestinian Refugee Camps of Lebanon," *JPS* 29, no 1 (Autumn 1999): pp. 66–80.
- 106 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 55.
- 107 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 55. Incidentally, it is striking how both aims align closely with contemporary Palestinian approaches to UNRWA, particularly following the Trump administration's defunding of the agency in 2018. See Albanese, *UNRWA*.
- 108 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 56.
- 109 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Refugees," p. 15.
- 110 PLO information form, n.d., S-0169-0002-0010, UNA.
- 111 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 56.
- 112 See, for example, *Palestine* 5, no. 2 (1–15 February 1979); 4, no. 8 (1–15 May 1978); 4, no. 3 (15 February 1978); 5, no. 1 (January 1979); "PLO Opposes UNRWA Cuts," *Palestine* 5, no. 11 (16–30 June 1979); and "PLO Warns UNRWA against Reducing Services," *Palestine* 5, no. 9 (16–31 May 1979).
- 113 "US-UNRWA Plays with the Life of Palestinians," *Palestine* 3, no. 17 (30 November 1977).
- 114 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 129.
- 115 See for example UNRWA Lebanon director to comptroller, confidential memo, 5 March 1970, box RE7, file RE210/03(L), UHA; see also deputy commissioner-general to commissioner-general, memo, 23 November 1979, box RE94, file RE230/12 II, UHA.
- 116 Anne E. Irfan, "Educating Palestinian Refugees: The Origins of UNRWA's Unique Schooling System," *Journal of Refugee Studies* (2019), <https://academic.oup.com/jrs/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jrs/fez051/5530722>.
- 117 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," pp. 55–56.
- 118 PLO Political Department to UN secretary-general, cable, 26 June 1978, S-1066-0066-0004; "Recanting the Rabat Resolutions," *Monday Morning*, 11 August 1975, S-0359-0002-02, both UNA.
- 119 Rennie to Beroudiaux, cable, 4 December 1974, S-0169-0009-0010, UNA.
- 120 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 82.
- 121 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 125.
- 122 Rennie to McElhiney, cable, 25 November 1974, S-0169-0009-0010, UNA.
- 123 Rennie, *Report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA*, ¶ 7. See also: Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, pp. 83, 125.

- 124 Rennie to Vanwijk, cable, 19 May 1975, S-0169-0010-02, UNA.
- 125 Rennie to Urquhart and Vanwijk, cable, 13 May 1975, S-0359-0002-02, UNA.
- 126 Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees," p. 240. See also: Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, pp. 108–9.
- 127 Arafat to Rydbeck, letter, 8 November 1979, box OR17, file OR131 II, UHA.
- 128 UNRWA commissioner-general to Jordanian minister of development and reconstruction, letter, 14 March 1980, box RE20, file RE230(J)V, UHA.
- 129 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, pp. 128–133.
- 130 The seriousness of UNRWA's financial situation in this period can be observed in its annual reports. In 1979, Commissioner-General Rydbeck reported that "financial crisis" risked the agency's "very existence"; the following year, he spoke of the "grim prospect" of "financial collapse." See Olof Rydbeck, *Report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA*, ¶ 33–34, UN Doc. A/34/13 (13 September 1979), <https://unispal.un.org/DPA/DPR/unispal.nsf/0/E8149C637F38D5398525684200539E62>; Olof Rydbeck, *Report of the Commissioner-General of UNRWA*, ¶ 4, UN Doc. A/35/13 (18 September 1980), <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-176552/>.
- 131 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 129.
- 132 PLO Political Department to UN secretary-general, "Recanting the Rabat Resolutions."
- 133 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, pp. 83, 100, 104–5.
- 134 Farah, "Uneasy but Necessary." See also, Farah, "UNRWA," p. 396.
- 135 Director general of PLO Higher Political Committee to UNRWA Lebanon director, note, 21 November 1979, box RE94, file RE230/12 II, UHA; see also Khalili, *Heroes and Martyrs of Palestine*, p. 96.
- 136 Farah, "UNRWA," p. 406.
- 137 Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees," pp. 239, 245.
- 138 Al-Hout, *My Life in the PLO*, pp. 44–45.
- 139 Al Hussein, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Nation-Building Process," p. 56.
- 140 "GUPT: Palestinian Teachers Intensify Social and Political Struggle," *Palestine* 5, no. 1 (January 1979).
- 141 Farah, "UNRWA," p. 396; Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, pp. 88, 101.
- 142 Bocco, "UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees," pp. 239, 245; Sayigh, *The Palestinians*, pp. 184–85. See for example, "GUPT: Palestinian Teachers," *Palestine*.
- 143 Irfan, "Educating Palestinian Refugees," pp. 13, 17–18.
- 144 UNRWA Note: *Falastin al-thawra*, 17 July 1974, box RE27, file RE230(1)L, UHA.
- 145 UNESCO General Conference (verbatim record) 18. Prov, 4 November 1976, box OR71, file OR230 (1–3)VI, UHA.
- 146 Sayigh, *The Palestinians*, pp. 184–85.
- 147 McElhiney to Rennie, cable, 15 November 1974, S-0169-0009-0009, UNA.
- 148 UNRWA Gaza director to acting commissioner-general, cable, UR245/4, 28 November 1974, box RE19, file RE230(G–3) II, UHA.
- 149 Hasna Rida (former UNRWA research assistant), in discussion with the author, Beirut, 7 December 2016.
- 150 Durieux, "Preserving the Civilian Character," 25–35.
- 151 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, pp. 70, 104.
- 152 Schiff, *Refugees unto the Third Generation*, p. 105.
- 153 For internal agency discussions about the PLO's use of UNRWA facilities, see UNRWA Lebanon director to commissioner-general, letter, 29 October 1979; commissioner-general to Lebanon director, letter, 13 November 1979; and Note for the Record OR210(1–2)L SC, 16 November 1979, box RE94, file RE230/12 II, UHA.