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Nakba Genocide 2023/24: Attacks on UNRWA and the Colonial Attempts to Annihilate the Palestinian Right of Return

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(UNRWA)

The Israeli state's longstanding objective of annihilating the right of return of Palestinian refugees, a final status issue, has spurred the settler-colonial apartheid state to intensify its attacks on UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. As the largest humanitarian aid agency in Gaza, UNRWA has been a lifeline for the population, providing assistance to some two million Palestinians since Israel launched its genocidal war in early October 2023. Throughout the last five months, Israel has systematically targeted the agency's functioning, operations, and capacity, delivery of aid, as well as its staff (by killing them or denying them visas).¹ Today, UNRWA is on the brink of collapse after being subjected to its most severe assault since it was established by UNGA Resolution 302 (IV) in 1949 in the aftermath of the Nakba when 750,000 Palestinians were ethnically cleansed and became refugees. Within hours of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) ruling on 26 January 2024, which found that Israel was plausibly committing genocide, Israel alleged that twelve of UNRWA's employees in Gaza were involved in the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation on 7 October. Eighteen countries immediately suspended funding to the agency, including the US and EU states, which account for 75 per cent of UNRWA's \$1.16 billion budget, some \$865 million.² Several news outlets as well as US intelligence sources have asserted that there was no direct evidence of Israel's claims after they examined a six-page dossier on its allegations which Israel provided to UNRWA donor countries.³

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In addition to being catastrophic for the Palestinians, over 1.2 million of whom are currently facing starvation, famine, and infectious disease epidemics, the consequences of funding cuts fly in the face of provisional measures issued by the ICJ. These demand that Israel enable “the provision of urgently needed basic services and humanitarian assistance” to Gaza's civilian population and that it desist from acts that

fall under Article II of the Genocide Convention,⁴ including the killing of Palestinian civilians and UN staff, targeting humanitarian aid convoys, and the bombing of UNRWA installations and facilities sheltering thousands of internally displaced Palestinians. Moreover, the ICJ measures allude to the prevention of forced displacement, which is now imminent given Israel's plans for a full-scale invasion of the city of Rafah where over one million Palestinians have sought refuge. According to Director of UNRWA Affairs in Gaza Tom White, an assault on Rafah would completely disable UNRWA capabilities,⁵ which is already the case in Northern Gaza where the Israeli authorities have not allowed the entry of aid convoys for weeks. A week after the ICJ's ruling, a group of UN experts warned that those defunding aid operations in Gaza during the current war would be violating the Genocide Convention.⁶

The decision to halt funding to UNRWA is a form of collective punishment, affecting all UN-registered Palestinian refugees in UNRWA's areas of operation. Today, 5.9 million Palestinian refugees are eligible for UNRWA services, one third of them living in 58 recognized Palestinian refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt, that is, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza).⁷ More than an aid agency, UNRWA functions like a quasi-government in that it provides education and vocational training, health, relief, and emergency response services, infrastructure improvement schemes, and works programs. If funding to UNRWA is not restored immediately, the aid cuts to the agency will have untold political, economic, and social repercussions across the region, particularly in Gaza where the humanitarian crisis has reached catastrophic levels.

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Ethnic Cleansing Through Genocide

The unprecedented attacks on UNRWA are part of Israel's enduring colonial strategy to eliminate the inalienable rights of the Palestinian people, including their right of return, which has been enshrined in various UN resolutions, and specifically UNGA Resolution 194. As a settler-colonial project, Zionism cannot realize its territorial and political ambitions so long as Palestinians remain on their lands or uphold claims to return to the homes and lands from which they were expelled.⁸ The right of return threatens Zionism's chief aim of bringing about an exclusive Jewish nation-state and also calls into question the sustainability of the settler colony in its current ethno-nationalist form. A recurrent Israeli refrain for the past 75 years has been to "eliminate" the right of return and thereby "solve" the refugee issue.

Palestinians, particularly those in the oPt, live in a permanent "state of exception,"⁹ meaning that they are subject to being evicted from the ambit of the law and are effectively denied the right to have rights. The state of exception has been so normalized in Palestine that it has led to the normalization of extraordinary colonial and imperialist violence. The dehumanization of Palestinians and Israel's security justifications¹⁰ have intensified the ongoing state of exception, which has facilitated the perpetration of the current genocide with impunity; as Israeli Agriculture Minister Avi Dichter crowed, Israel has rolled "out the Gaza Nakba," that is, ethnic cleansing as part of the genocidal process bankrolled by US imperialism.¹¹ Ignoring the ICJ's provisional measures is yet another manifestation of the state of exception, with Israel yet again ignoring and therefore suspending international legal norms where they concern Palestinians, and asserting Zionist colonial sovereignty and autonomy to act in its own interests irrespective of international legal obligations.

Annexing Gaza to Israel through Genocide and Ethnic Cleansing

An Israeli Intelligence Ministry document outlining plans for the ethnic cleansing and mass forcible transfer of Palestinians from Gaza to the Egyptian Sinai desert was leaked just six days after the Al-Aqsa Flood Operation on 7 October 2023.¹² And ten days later, the think tank Misgav Institute for National Security and Zionist Strategy released a paper suggesting that the October 7 attack provided "a unique and rare opportunity to evacuate the whole Gaza Strip in co-ordination with the Egyptian government,"¹³

adding that it was “unclear when such an opportunity will arise again, if at all.”¹⁴ Both these documents clearly reveal intent to destroy in whole or in part a protected national, ethnic, religious and racial group--the very definition of genocide. The ethnic cleansing invoked bears ominous similarities to the violence of Zionist militias which drove out thousands of Palestinians during the 1948 Nakba, and the desire for an analogous catastrophe has been clearly spelled out by numerous Israeli politicians. Israeli Knesset member Ariel Kallner wrote on social media after 7 October, “Right now, one goal: Nakba! A Nakba that will overshadow the Nakba of 48”¹⁵ while Deputy Speaker of the Knesset Nissim Vaturi declared, “Nabka! Expel them all. If the Egyptians care so much for them, they are welcome to have them wrapped in cellophane tied with a green ribbon,” he added.¹⁶

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The expulsion of Gazans into the Sinai is part of the colonial continuum of territorial expansion that also rids Israel of as many Palestinians as possible. This constitutes “structural genocide,” the systematic violence towards and dispossession of Indigenous people which are enacted using mechanisms that run the gamut from physical extermination and forcible transfer to land theft, cultural erasure, and destruction of ways of life.¹⁷ Israeli governments have repeatedly fielded proposals to resettle Palestinians into the Egyptian Sinai. In 2004-05, on the eve of Israel’s so-called disengagement from the Gaza Strip, General Giora Eiland developed a plan to transfer

Palestinians from Gaza to the Egyptian Sinai in exchange for providing Egypt with debt relief and other financial aid packages that would help alleviate the country's financial crisis. Known as the Eiland plan, the proposal would have required Egypt to give up control of a territory five times the size of Gaza and "compensating" it with land in the southeast of Israel that would allow for a car tunnel to be constructed between Egypt and Jordan.¹⁸ Egypt refused the proposal as did other Arab countries. However, the current Egyptian regime appears to be shifting position: it is reported to be in talks with the International Monetary Fund over a multi-billion dollar loan package to help it weather its most severe economic crisis to date (a deepening debt crisis, soaring inflation, devaluation of the Egyptian pound, and capital flight) as the country braces for the forcible transfer and mass displacement of Gazans.¹⁹ Satellite photos and videos released by the Sinai Foundation for Human Rights reveal that Egyptian construction firms are building an enclosed area surrounded by seven-meter high concrete walls along the Sheikh Zuweid Rafah Road in the Sinai desert near Gaza as part of a coordinated plan with the US and Israel to create a "buffer zone" for Israel to "push" the Palestinians into--in other words, to ethnically cleanse Gaza.²⁰

Pushing Gaza's Palestinians into the Northern Sinai has a long history, going as far back as the 1950s. Not long after UNRWA was established, the Israeli state lobbied the UN to dissolve UNRWA saying that the agency "perpetuates the refugee issue."²¹ John Blandford, UNRWA's second director at the time, went ahead and created economic integration plans for Palestinian refugees near the Gaza-Egypt border that included resettlement schemes and agricultural development programs in the Sinai.²² In response, Palestinians in Gaza mobilized to resist the substitution of their right of return with economic rehabilitation and in 1955, they launched the March Intifada, an unarmed uprising advocating for a political solution to address the plight of Palestinian refugees, as vividly described in *Descent on Water*, the memoir of Gaza's most famous poet, Muin Bseiso. Palestinian resistance against so-called economic rehabilitation, specifically organized by the Palestinian communists in Gaza, led UNRWA to change course. Blandford's successor, Henry Richardson Labouisse abandoned the economic integration programs and acknowledged that the Palestinian refugees' plight could only be addressed by a political resolution,²³ affirming that the Palestinians were a people and nation with the right to self-determination. Israel's failed diplomatic efforts to get rid of UNRWA led to it to alter its tactics: going forward,

the settler-colonial state would undermine the Palestinian right of return by repeatedly using the discourse of terror, accusing UNRWA of supporting “terrorism” and attacking it on that basis.

“Pushing Gaza’s Palestinians into the Northern Sinai has a long history, going as far back as the 1950s”

Israel’s most recent diplomatic attempts to convince foreign governments to defund UNRWA is in line with Orientalist and racialized discourses of terror and security that have fueled Zionism’s colonial aspirations to territorial conquest and acquisition of Palestinian and Arab lands for over 75 years. Since October 7, Israeli officials have openly expressed their view of UNRWA as a strategic threat to Zionism’s territorial and political aims. Noga Arbel, a former official of the Israeli foreign ministry who now heads the right-wing Kohelet Foundation, told the Israeli Knesset on 4 January 2024, “It will be impossible to win this war if we do not destroy UNRWA, and this destruction must begin immediately.”²⁴ Arbel, like current and former Israeli officials, framed UNRWA and the very existence of Palestinian refugees as a strategic obstacle to Zionist settler sovereignty and an exclusively Jewish state. For the current Zionist regime, “victory” entails mass population transfers and voiding of meaning UN Resolution 194, among other UN resolutions pertaining to the Palestinian right of return, once and for all.

Historicizing the Elimination of the Palestinian Refugee Right of Return

As a political aim, the elimination of any Palestinian right of return began during the Nakba, even prior to the establishment of the Israeli state or UNRWA. In his report to UN Secretary-General in 1948, Folke Bernadotte, the Swedish diplomat appointed as the UN Mediator for Palestine, outlined the need for the right of return because

Palestinians were “rooted in the land for centuries.”²⁵ Bernadotte was assassinated in Jerusalem on 17 September 1948 by Lehi (the Stern Gang) who were opposed to his proposed peace plan, which included the right of return and the repatriation of Palestinian refugees to their homes and lands.²⁶ Many Zionist leaders, including David Ben-Gurion, Golda Meir, Menachem Begin, Moshe Sharett, and paramilitary groups such as the Irgun, Haganah, and Stern Gang, as well as Zionist organizations such as the Jewish Agency were unequivocal in their opposition to the return of any Palestinians after their expulsion from their lands and homes in what has been extensively documented as ethnic cleansing during the 1948 Nakba. They feared that the right of return would reconfigure the demography of the Israeli state, leaving the Jews a minority, and thus cast the return of Palestinians to their lands as a security threat to the settlers pouring in. Return was ipso facto criminalized.

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On 16 June 1948, during a cabinet meeting of the newly formed Israeli state, Prime Minister Ben-Gurion obtained approval for a policy that effectively denied the Palestinians any possibility of return²⁷ by destroying Palestinian villages and towns, much in the way the Israeli army has destroyed over 70 per cent of Gaza’s residential areas, buildings, and infrastructure since October 7. In the years after the Nakba, destroyed Palestinian areas were systematically transformed into Jewish settlements or national forests. In an all-too-familiar “next step,” the Israeli real estate firm Harey Zahav has already outlined a capitalist-imperialist venture for settlement construction plans in Northern Gaza after the bloodletting is over, even though settlements continue to be deemed illegal under international law.²⁸ Also, the Israeli Ministry of

Energy has granted six gas exploration licenses to Israeli and international companies within Gaza's maritime areas, which are declared exclusive Palestinian economic zones,²⁹ in preparation for occupying the coastal region after the ethnic cleansing through genocide.

The no-return policy was enforced both militarily and legally. During the Nakba and the 1967 Naksa, Israeli occupation forces set up checkpoints, border controls, and other barriers to prevent Palestinians who had been displaced from returning. Those that tried to do so were shot at, as has been well documented in hundreds of testimonials. In a similar vein, Palestinians are being shot and summarily killed at Israeli checkpoints in Gaza, or are being kidnapped, detained, tortured, and sexually assaulted as they attempt to flee to safety. On the legal front, the new Israeli state adopted the Absentee Property Law (whereby the state is able to seize any property whose owner is absent, even if he or she can prove that they did not leave the territory of what was mandatory Palestine) and the Nationality Law (aka the Law of Return which allows Jews from anywhere in the world to come to Israel and claim Israeli citizenship) early in the 1950s, legitimating the colonial theft of Palestinian property and restricting the rights of refugees. To facilitate more colonial land theft in Gaza during this current war and deny Palestinians their rights to their homes and property, Israeli forces have destroyed Gaza's Central Archives,³⁰ where all legal documents are stored, including land deeds, property records, planning and development records and building permits, administrative records, historical records, as well as historical manuscripts, correspondence between government agencies and political parties, and a plethora of Palestinian cultural heritage material. For the settler society to replace the Palestinian people in its colonial nation-building project, eliminating the right of return is pivotal, clearly exposing the genocidal nature of Zionist settler colonialism.

***“The no-return policy was enforced both
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Israel's attack on UNRWA is part of its Eliminary Logic

To extinguish Palestinians' inalienable rights, such as the right of return of refugees, Israel is attempting to shut down UNRWA operations entirely. Since the beginning of the current assault on Gaza, over 158 UN staff have been killed in Israeli airstrikes, the highest number of aid personnel killed in UN history.³¹ Approximately 180 UNRWA facilities have been targeted and bombed, including UNRWA schools, while 153 have been reported as damaged. More than 320 incidents impacting UNRWA's premises have been recorded, including 45 incidents of Israeli military use or interference at these sites.³² The agency estimates that in total some 400 internally displaced people sheltering in UNRWA buildings have been executed and 1,383 have been injured in the past four months.³³ Israeli occupation forces have systematically targeted Gaza's entire educational infrastructure, including all its universities, government schools and 84 UNRWA schools, which constitute 44 per cent of Gaza's total. The term scholasticide has been coined to designate Israel's colonial policy of systematic and wholesale annihilation of the Palestinian education system and knowledge systems particularly during this genocidal war.³⁴

Just as the Nakba has been ongoing, so too have Israel's attacks on UNRWA. One of UNRWA's darkest moments occurred in 1982. Israeli Defense Minister Ariel Sharon ordered and facilitated the massacre of Palestinian refugees in the UNRWA-run Palestinian refugee camps of Sabra and Shatila in Lebanon.³⁵ Lebanese right-wing Phalangist militiamen besieged the camps and brutally slaughtered, raped, and mutilated thousands of Palestinian refugees and Lebanese civilians from 16-18 September 1982, deemed an act of genocide by the UN. And during the first named operation against Gaza in 2008-09, Israeli forces bombed UNRWA warehouses and schools with white phosphorous, killing and injuring scores of and civilians sheltering in the facilities.³⁶ UNRWA health facilities and schools were also targeted during the 2018-19 Great March of Return protests and again during Israeli's 11-day bombardment of the besieged occupied territory in 2021. Attempts to defund UNRWA also did not begin after 7 October. In 2018, the Trump administration cut funding to the agency from \$365 million to \$125 million in an attempt by the US-Israeli alliance to "resolve" the details of a final settlement based on the notion that the refugee issue was fueling the Israeli-Palestinian "conflict."³⁷ Against its own US military and intelligence advice, US imperialist support for Zionism's political aim to eliminate one

of the most important pillars of the Palestinian struggle, namely the Palestinian refugee question, was paramount.

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End Nakba Genocide

The Nakba’s genocide-time signals the temporal edifice through which violence enacted in 1948 has structured the present. The Nakba was and continues to be a consequence of Zionism’s aim of expansion, consolidation, control, and settler sovereignty, predicated on the elimination of the Palestinian people in whole or in part, with Palestinian refugees being a central target. Countries that are signatories to the Genocide Convention have a duty to prevent such elimination, by disarming, defunding, and sanctioning the colonial, apartheid state enacting genocide and ethnic cleansing through genocide, Nakba 2023/24. A political solution rather than collective punishment is crucial and urgent, at the bare minimum a ceasefire, ending the genocidal war, ethnic cleaning and the siege of Gaza. So long as colonial imperialist violence persists, so too will the aspirations for liberation of the Palestinian refugees, including their rights to resist and return.

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- ¹ <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/letter-commissioner-general-president-general-assembly>
 - ² <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/02/1146867> and <https://unwatch.org/updated-list-of-countries-suspending-unwra-funding/>
 - ³ <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2024/feb/22/us-intelligence-unrwa-hamas>
 - ⁴ <https://www.icj-cij.org/sites/default/files/case-related/192/192-20240126-ord-01-00-en.pdf>
 - ⁵ <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-76-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-Jerusalem#:~:text=The%20Director%20of%20UNRWA%20Affairs,assault%20from%20the%20Israeli%20army>
 - ⁶ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/states-must-reinstate-and-strengthen-support-to-unrwa-amid-unfolding-genocide-in-gaza-un-experts-un-human-rights-office-2feb-2024/>
 - ⁷ <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>
 - ⁸ https://www.freedomarchives.org/Documents/Finder/DOC12_scans/12.zionist.colonialism.palestine.1965.pdf
 - ⁹ <https://www.sup.org/books/title?id=2003>
 - ¹⁰ <https://www.palestine-studies.org/en/node/1655200>
 - ¹¹ <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/2023-11-12/ty-article/israeli-security-cabinet-member-calls-north-gaza-evacuation-nakba-2023/0000018b-c2be-dea2-a9bf-d2be7b670000>
 - ¹² <https://www.cbc.ca/news/world/israel-gaza-palestinians-concept-paper-1.7015576>
 - ¹³ <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2023/10/25/feature/politics/the-sinai-solution-reimagining-gaza-in-the-post-oslo-period/>
 - ¹⁴ <https://mondoweiss.net/2023/10/israeli-think-tank-lays-out-a-blueprint-for-the-complete-ethnic-cleansing-of-gaza/>
 - ¹⁵ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231009-israel-mk-calls-for-a-second-nakba-in-gaza/>
 - ¹⁶ <https://www.mei.edu/publications/five-scenarios-gaza-and-how-international-community-can-shape-its-future>
 - ¹⁷ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14623520601056240>
 - ¹⁸ <https://www.madamasr.com/en/2023/10/25/feature/politics/the-sinai-solution-reimagining-gaza-in-the-post-oslo-period/>
 - ¹⁹ <https://thecradle.co/articles-id/23572>
 - ²⁰ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/2/16/satellite-photos-show-egypt-building-gaza-buffer-zone-as-rafah-push-looms>
 - ²¹ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240201-what-is-unrwa-and-why-is-israel-trying-to-have-it-closed-down/>
 - ²² <https://carnegieendowment.org/sada/90869>
 - ²³ <https://newlinesmag.com/essays/how-plans-to-move-palestinians-to-egypt-backfired/>
 - ²⁴ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240129-former-israeli-official-noga-arbell-urges-for-destruction-of-unrwa-in-parliamentary-discussion/>
 - ²⁵ <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/bernadotte-his-legacy-palestine-refugees>
 - ²⁶ Ibid.
 - ²⁷ <https://yplus.ps/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Pappe-Ilan-The-Ethnic-Cleansing-of-Palestine.pdf>
 - ²⁸ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20231218-as-genocide-unfolds-israel-settlers-plan-dream-beach-house-in-gaza/>

²⁹ <https://www.alhaq.org/advocacy/22619.html>

³⁰ <https://librarianswithpalestine.org/gaza-report-2024/>

³¹ <https://www.unrwa.org/resources/reports/unrwa-situation-report-79-situation-gaza-strip-and-west-bank-including-east-Jerusalem>

³² Ibid

³³ Ibid

³⁴ <https://theconversation.com/the-war-in-gaza-is-wiping-out-palestines-education-and-knowledge-systems-222055>

³⁵ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt18fs4j6>

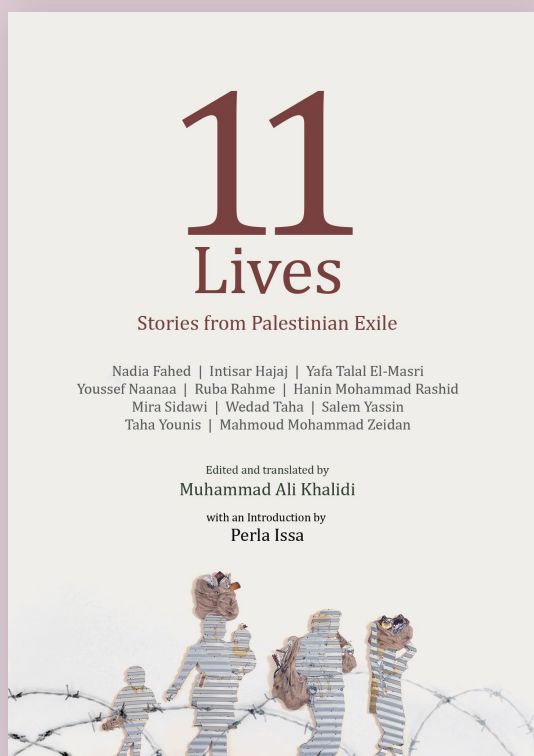
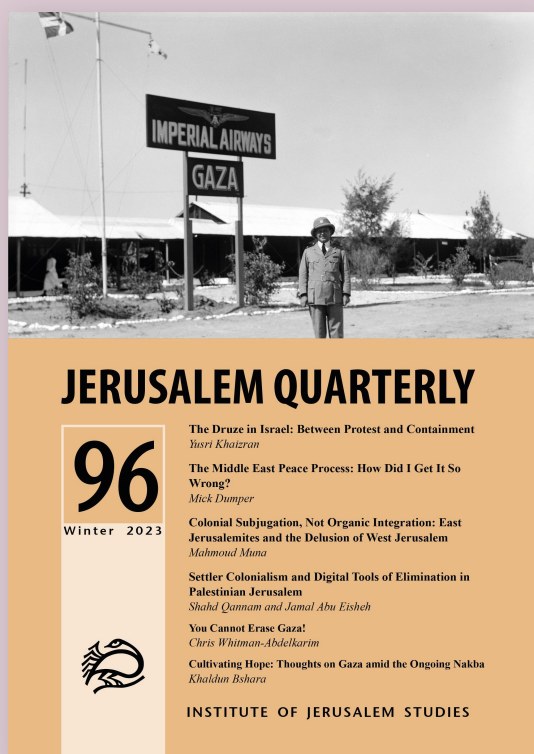
³⁶ <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20240201-what-is-unrwa-and-why-is-israel-trying-to-have-it-closed-down/>

³⁷ <https://www.dohainstitute.org/en/PoliticalStudies/Pages/Why-Trump-Administration-Suspended-UNRWA-Funding.aspx>

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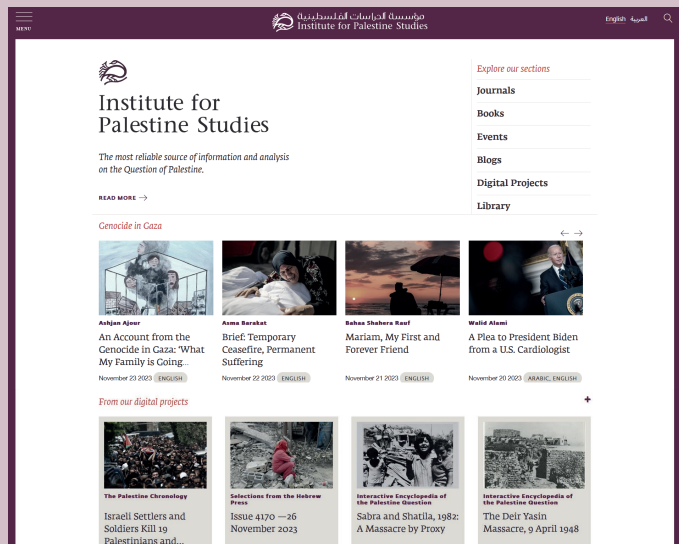
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