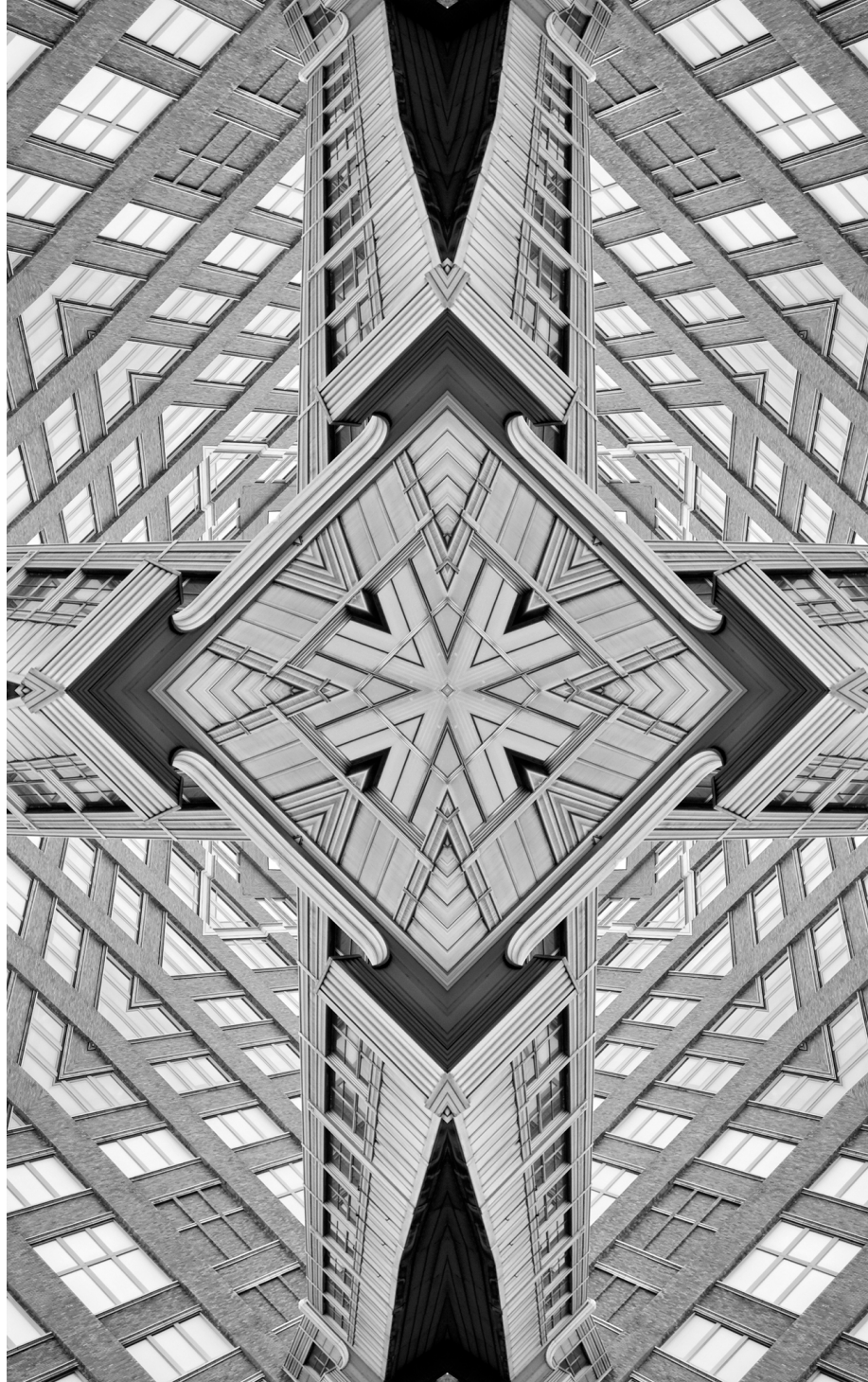


Issue

Brief

ISSUE NO. 714
JUNE 2024



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India's Multilateral Commitment to Gaza through the UNRWA

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Abstract

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is facing pushback from a number of large donor countries due to the alleged involvement of some of its employees in the October 2023 attack on Israel. India's contributions to the agency, meanwhile, remain stable. This brief examines the nature and significance of India's financial commitment to the UN body.

The violence that has engulfed Gaza since October 2023 has led to the loss of over 35,091 Palestinian lives at the time of writing.¹ Most early assessments of the initial response from India, a close ally of Israel, described it as favouring Israel.² For one, India abstained from a UN General Assembly (UNGA) resolution in October 2023 proposing a humanitarian truce in Gaza.³ A more nuanced assessment of India's engagement with the conflict, however, requires a scrutiny of other multilateral organisations. These include the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), a self-declared “apolitical”⁴ multilateral agency, which is the focus of this brief.

The UNRWA is a vital multilateral organisation in Gaza, performing functions equivalent to those of a host-state⁵ or quasi-government⁶ since Israel's occupation of the territory in 1967.⁷ The agency is mandated by the UNGA⁸ to provide services such as healthcare and education to Palestinians in Gaza amid the lack of adequate state machinery to support the territory's population especially following Israel's blockade of Gaza since 2007.⁹ Notably, the UNRWA is the only agency designed to care for a particular group of people—i.e., Palestinian refugees—who are geographically dispersed across Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem. Additionally, more than 99 percent of its employees are Palestinian refugees¹⁰ and the agency generates jobs in the Gaza strip.^{11,12}

Unlike other UN agencies that rely on an international workforce, the UNRWA's operations in Gaza are closely enmeshed with the social setup of refugees. Despite its presence in multiple countries, it primarily operates in Gaza, with about 41 percent of its programme budget earmarked for that region in 2021.¹³ Most of its staff were located in the region before the Israel-Hamas conflict broke out in October 2023.¹⁴ This has also meant that, amid the ongoing conflict, the UNRWA has the strongest ground presence of health workers in the area,¹⁵ and has suffered a high number of deaths in the process—¹⁶ 189 staff members since 7 October 2023. This is the highest number of UN staff deaths in any conflict since the UN's founding in 1945.¹⁷

The funding support for the UNRWA is provided by donor member states under two main categories: programme budget contributions; and contributions to emergency appeals (see Figure 1 for the US’s donation patterns). Programme budget contributions support the provision of core services (basic education, health, infrastructure, refugee camp improvement, and relief and social services).¹⁸ These funds fulfil the agency’s salary obligations to its Palestinian staff, and keep its humanitarian programmes running. The organisation also occasionally issues emergency appeals to seek additional funds for responding to humanitarian crises, such as during the ongoing conflict in Gaza. Emergency appeals are not a recurring expenditure given their very nature, and are directed towards fire-fighting efforts in areas where a sudden crisis emerges. This means that the programme budget contributions directly sustain the UNRWA whereas the emergency appeal contributions help it address specific crisis situations.

The agency has long faced the threat of collapse due to budgetary deficits,¹⁹ which has had a direct impact on the large numbers of Palestinian refugees that rely on the agency for various services,²⁰ especially in Gaza where the UNRWA was also providing near-universal food assistance even in the absence of a full-blown conflict.²¹ The UNRWA is also particularly vulnerable to low funding assistance given the experience of the UN Conciliation Commission on Palestine (UNCCP)—both agencies were established by the UNGA in 1949, but the UNCCP faced constant defunding, resulting in its eventual demise.²²

Table 1: UNRWA Donors (2022)

Donor State	Status of Funding (following the 7 October attacks)	Programme Budget (in US\$)	Non-Programme Budget (in US\$; Only Emergency Appeals for Occupied Palestinian Territory)	Total Contributions (in US\$)
US	Funding frozen in January 2024	221,971,188	53,524,000	343,937,718
Germany	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	37,363,434	57,298,720	202,054,285

Funding the UNRWA

Donor State	Status of Funding (following the 7 October attacks)	Programme Budget (in US\$)	Non-Programme Budget (in US\$; Only Emergency Appeals for Occupied Palestinian Territory)	Total Contributions (in US\$)
EU	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	100,518,135	4,071,459	114,199,150
Sweden	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	56,752,648	2,480,854	60,969,987
Norway	No change in funding	22,548,515	1,162,837	34,180,677
Japan	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	4,395,559	16,846,434	30,152,202
France	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	24,175,705	2,119,495	28,909,838
Saudi Arabia	No change in funding	27,000,000	0	27,000,000
Switzerland	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	24,417,882	0	25,534,028
Turkey	No change in funding	10,000,000	15,199,080	25,199,080
Canada	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	19,032,514	0	23,713,560
Netherlands	Funding frozen	20,681,768	0	21,189,038
UK	Funding frozen	14,348,786	6,809,496	21,158,281
Italy	Funding frozen	7,440,273	4,912,436	18,033,970
Denmark	No change in funding	15,749,171	0	15,885,563

Funding the UNRWA

Donor State	Status of Funding (following the 7 October attacks)	Programme Budget (in US\$)	Non-Programme Budget (in US\$; Only Emergency Appeals for Occupied Palestinian Territory)	Total Contributions (in US\$)
Australia	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	13,797,995	0	13,797,995
Spain	No change in funding	8,431,334	1,477,232	13,592,803
Belgium	No change in funding	8,176,958	0	12,558,653
Kuwait	No change in funding	12,000,000	0	12,000,000
Qatar	No change in funding	10,500,000	0	10,500,000
Ireland	No change in funding	7,414,436	0	8,509,726
Austria	Funding frozen	3,164,447	2,897,276	8,091,406
Finland	Funds frozen in January 2024; later reinstated	7,807,565	0	7,807,565
Luxembourg	No change in funding	6,972,925	0	7,488,329
Palestine	No change in funding	5,491,361	0	5,760,830

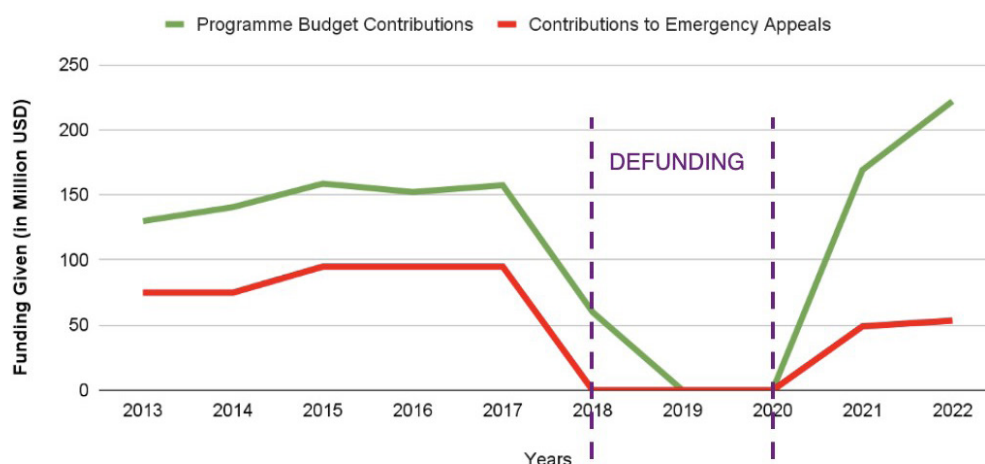
Sources: UNRWA²³ and UN Watch²⁴

As the UNRWA's largest donor, the US's policy is crucial to the organisation's sustainability. In 2018, for instance, the UNRWA suffered a setback when the US under then President Donald Trump announced in January that it will truncate the annual funding from the previous year's US\$364 million²⁵ to a much lower US\$60 million (see Figure 1).²⁶ In August of the same year, the US announced a complete defunding of the agency.²⁷ However, funding resumed

in 2020 under President Joe Biden, with his administration pledging to provide the agency with US\$235 million.²⁸

In January 2024, the Biden administration suspended its donations as a response to reports that 12 UNRWA employees were involved in the Hamas terrorist attacks on Israel on 7 October 2023.²⁹ It was a point of inflection in the reliability of UNRWA's primary donors, triggering successive announcements in January 2024 that these countries would be pausing their donations to the UNRWA: the European Commission,³⁰ Germany, Austria,³¹ Sweden, Japan,³² France,³³ Switzerland,³⁴ Canada,³⁵ the United Kingdom,³⁶ the Netherlands, Australia,³⁷ Italy, Finland,³⁸ New Zealand,³⁹ Iceland,⁴⁰ Romania, and Estonia.⁴¹

Figure 1: US Funding to UNRWA (2013-2022)



Source: UNRWA⁴²

The successive donor backsliding at a time when Gaza was facing a severe humanitarian crisis indicates two trends. First, US policy on the UNRWA is vital to the organisation's survival: not only is it the largest donor to the agency, it also influences the behaviour of other donor countries, as seen in their decision to defund the UNRWA following the US's freezing of its own

Funding the UNRWA

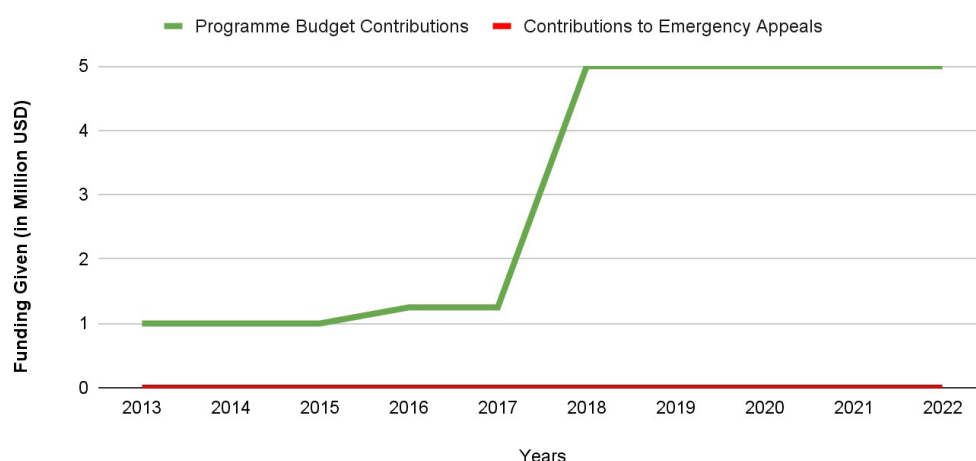
donations. Second, the Biden administration's decision to suspend funding for the multilateral agency signals that the US can use financial castigation as a tool to exert influence on the UNRWA irrespective of the need for humanitarian deliverables on the ground. By May 2024, a majority of the donors that paused their funding in January, had reinstated their commitments to the agency;⁴³ the US Congress has suspended funds till March 2025.⁴⁴

“The successive donor backsliding at a time when Gaza was facing a severe humanitarian crisis showed that US policy on the UNRWA is vital to the organisation's survival.”

A Stocktaking of India's UNRWA Financing

India is not a principal funder to the UNRWA. It provides financing for the annual programme budget but has not contributed to the agency's emergency appeals (see Figure 2). This is because the Indian government determines its commitment to the agency on a "multiple-year basis".⁴⁵ In 2017, during a Non-Aligned Movement Ministerial meeting on Palestine, India sought support for the UNRWA by calling on the larger membership of NAM to contribute funding to the UN agency.⁴⁶ The then External Affairs Minister, Sushma Swaraj reiterated that the UNRWA was the most practical route for 'non-aligned' states to show support for the Palestinian cause and the people.⁴⁷

Figure 2: India's Funding to UNRWA (2013-2022)



Source: UNRWA⁴⁸

India contributed about US\$1 million annually till 2017 (an increase from about US\$20,000 prior to 2009).⁴⁹ In 2018, following Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi's visit to Palestine, India increased its funding to the UNRWA to US\$5 million, and in December 2020, it joined the UNRWA's Advisory Commission (AdCom).^{50,51}

Its presence in the AdCom is significant for two reasons. First, being on the AdCom indicates that India is now a key stakeholder in the organisation.⁵²

A Stocktaking of India's UNRWA Financing

Moreover, the UNRWA is directly accountable to India given its primary accountability to the AdCom. The AdCom approves the UNRWA's draft annual report before it is submitted to the UNGA.⁵³ India's presence in the AdCom enables it to initiate institutional discussions on the changes needed to allow the UNRWA to better assist Palestinian refugees. However, as the key donors to the UNRWA, Western countries dominate the AdCom proceedings.

Table 2: Members of UNRWA's Advisory Commission

1	Australia	16	Lebanon
2	Belgium	17	Luxembourg
3	Brazil	18	Netherlands
4	Canada	19	Norway
5	Denmark	20	Qatar
6	Egypt	21	Saudi Arabia
7	Finland	22	Spain
8	France	23	Sweden
9	Germany	24	Switzerland
10	India	25	Syrian Arab Republic
11	Ireland	26	Turkey
12	Italy	27	UAE
13	Japan	28	UK
14	Jordan	29	US
15	Kuwait		

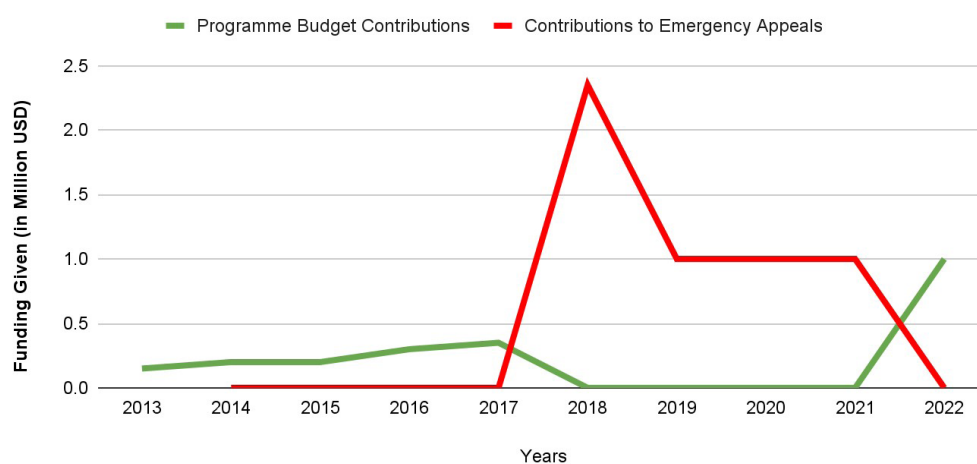
Source: UNRWA⁵⁴

Second, as a member of the UNRWA's AdCom, India has a higher stake in the organisation than China and Russia, which also hold interests in West Asia. China's funding approach to the UNRWA is largely inconsistent (see Figure 3), especially when compared to India's multi-year commitments. Even China's highest-ever annual funding (in 2018) is only half of India's current annual contributions. In an official 2023 position paper, China affirmed support to

A Stocktaking of India's UNRWA Financing

the UNRWA, not in the form of increased direct donations but through other platforms (such as the UN Security Council where China has a dominant position because of its veto power).⁵⁵ Still, from the UNRWA's standpoint, China is a major untapped donor nation with the capacity to provide adequate financial support to the agency.⁵⁶

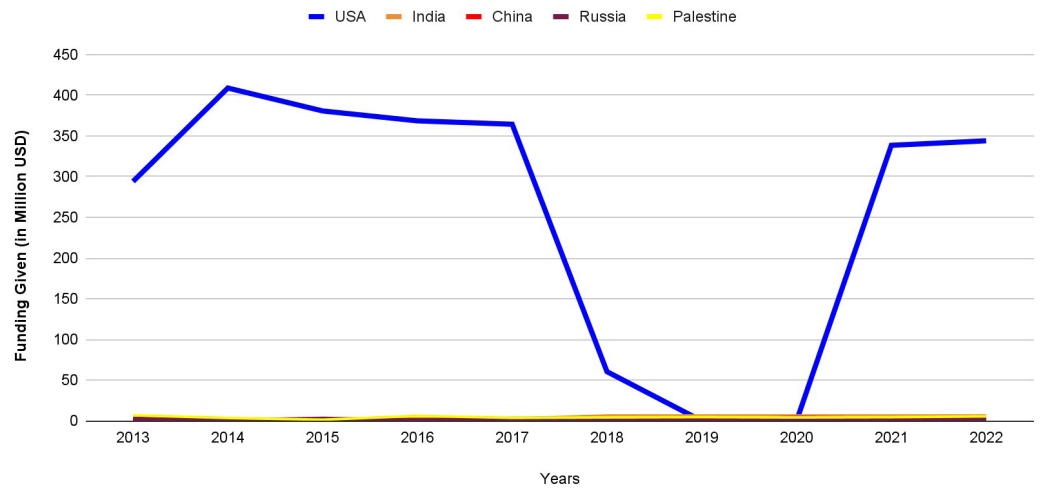
Figure 3: China's Funding to UNRWA (2013-2022)



Source: UNRWA⁵⁷

The US has historically been the largest donor to the UNRWA (see Figure 4). For its part, India may be contributing US\$5 million annually to the agency, giving it a place in the AdCom, but such amounts are not a fiscal lifesaver for the UNRWA. It could thus be argued that India gains more from the UNRWA (in terms of significance) than it gives to the multilateral organisation (in terms of funding).

Figure 4: Financial Support to the UNRWA (US vs Others, 2013-2022)



Source: UNRWA⁵⁸

India takes the position that the Palestinian resistance is de-hyphenated from the militant struggle led by Hamas,⁵⁹ and therefore opposes the October 2023 attack even as it affirms support for the Palestinian cause.⁶⁰ Such a policy orientation facilitated a close alignment between Indian and US statements on supporting Israel following the Hamas attack.⁶¹ This same stance on terrorism guided India's decision to abstain from the UNGA resolution in late October 2023 calling for a truce, as it made no mention of Hamas or the terrorist attack.⁶²

Mechanics of India's UNRWA Engagement During the Ongoing Conflict

The UNRWA offers India a viable platform to continue its policy of opposing terror activities globally while aiding the Palestinians in Gaza, where Hamas remains a key Palestinian player. The UNRWA is an avowed neutral organisation, given its very nature as a body of the UN. Neutrality as a humanitarian principle is formally adopted by the UNGA and is followed by all UN-based humanitarian agencies.⁶³ Moreover, UNRWA staff are governed by UN-wide documents and guidelines, such as the UN Charter, Standards of Conduct for the International Civil Service, and UNRWA Area and International Staff Regulations.⁶⁴ This principle guides India's assertion of non-alignment, allowing it to focus on welfare goals for the Palestinian people.

“The UNRWA offers India a viable platform to continue its policy of opposing terror activities globally while aiding the Palestinians in Gaza.”

The Politicisation of the UNRWA

Despite its ostensible apolitical nature, the UNRWA has been politicised on two levels. First, the agency is exposed to political attacks due to a perception of a lack of neutrality. There are claims, for example, that Palestinian terrorists were using UNRWA refugee camps and schools to store rockets and ammunition.^{65,66,67} Israel has often criticised the UNRWA's lack of control over its UN infrastructure in Gaza as Hamas fighters have allegedly used these locations for their activities on several occasions. To be sure, such aspersions are not new. There have been instances in the past where third parties have been found to be using UNRWA's infrastructure, like in 1982 when a Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) training camp was discovered at an UNRWA Vocational Training Centre (VTC) in Sibliin.⁶⁸ The January donor backsliding was a response to a similar attack on neutrality of UNRWA where its employees were allegedly seen as complicit to the Hamas terror attacks on Israel.

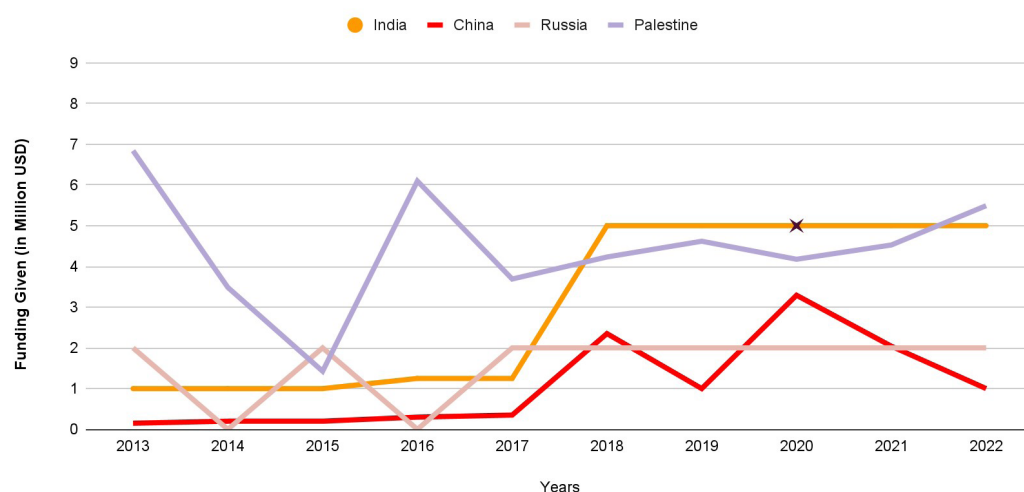
The second level of politicisation is beneficiary driven, unlike neutrality attacks which come mostly from donors. Palestinian refugees see the agency's existence "as a sign of international responsibility for their plight."⁶⁹ The funds flowing to the agency are therefore perceived as a symbol of international debt towards the Palestinian refugees.⁷⁰ Conversely, this indicates that the refugees view any funding cut by the agency's donors, primarily Western states, as a relinquishment of duty by the international community.⁷¹ The refugees take the agency for more than its humanitarian services and attach political significance to its operations. The January donor backsliding exerted pressure on both the UNRWA and its beneficiaries.

After 18 donors suspended funds in 2024, the UN Secretary-General appointed an Independent Working Group (IWG) on 5 February 2024 to "to assess whether UNRWA is doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and respond to allegations of serious neutrality breaches."⁷² The IWG's report was instrumental in apparently de-politicising the UNRWA as it reaffirmed that the agency holds a more developed approach to neutrality when compared to similar UN bodies or NGOs.⁷³ The IWG's role was crucial for UNRWA to regain donors like Germany,⁷⁴ Japan,⁷⁵ and the European Union.⁷⁶

The Politicisation of the UNRWA

However, India kept its contributions to the agency separate from these politically charged issues. When viewed as a trend line, India’s multilateral support appears consistent at an annual US\$5 million since 2018 (see Figure 5). It is evident that New Delhi has adopted a stable human-centric strategy towards the UNRWA, continuing to support the organisation even when other countries do not. Therefore, any analysis of India’s position on the Palestinian issue must account for the UNRWA funding trends to provide a holistic and informed picture of how India is navigating its ties with Israel while supporting the welfare of refugees in Palestine.

Figure 5: Financial Support to the UNRWA (2013-2022)



Source: UNRWA⁷⁷

As the conflict in Gaza prolongs, India's approach to the UNRWA—and, by extension, its stance on its ties with Israel while supporting the welfare of Palestinian refugees—becomes increasingly precarious. At this juncture, it is unclear if Gaza will undergo peacetime reconstruction led by Israel or the UNRWA. Furthermore, with the US's funding to the UNRWA suspended until March 2025, and with a possible Trump victory in the presidential elections in November 2024, there is uncertainty about the UNRWA's future. India cannot prevent such an event if it were to happen.

However, if the UNRWA remains functional and is able to fulfil its mandate in Gaza, India can render assistance via the AdCom. In the final report submitted by the Independent Working Group reviewing the UNRWA, members of the AdCom were criticised for not addressing the organisation's neutrality (or lack thereof). But this lack of discussion was perhaps because engaging in any such dialogue will only highlight the political differences between the Western and non-Western members of the AdCom.

The AdCom is also known to not table issues due to a lack of consensus among its members. India can leverage its image as a neutral force from the Global South and work towards realising the recommendations of the Independent Working Group at the AdCom. One such crucial recommendation remains the addition of 'neutrality' as a standing agenda item at the AdCom meetings. Leveraging support among other AdCom members to realise this aligns with India's broader efforts to make the multilateral order a more neutral and representative setup. India's stable funding and stake in the governance structure of the UNRWA will also play a role beyond Gaza as the agency is of massive importance to Palestinian refugees across the globe. [ORF](#)

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