

# The Role of United Nations Specialized Agencies in Addressing Humanitarian Crises in Palestine: A Comparative Analysis between UNRWA and the World Health Organization in the Gaza Strip

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Copyright © 2025 The Author(s): This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC) which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium for non-commercial use provided the original author and source are credited.	<p><i>Humanitarian crises in Palestine, particularly in the Gaza Strip, represent one of the most complex challenges due to the ongoing blockade and recurrent conflicts, making the intervention of United Nations specialized agencies essential to mitigate their impacts. This study aims to analyze the role of UNRWA and the World Health Organization (WHO) in responding to humanitarian crises in Gaza by clarifying the conceptual framework of humanitarian crises and the role of international organizations in managing them, identifying the legal and organizational foundations of UN specialized agencies, analyzing UNRWA's efforts in supporting refugees, and assessing WHO's role in strengthening the health system. The research adopts the descriptive-analytical method to compare the approaches and mechanisms used by both agencies. The findings reveal that UNRWA has demonstrated institutional resilience by continuing to provide education, health, and relief services despite the blockade, while WHO has contributed to supporting the local health system by providing medical supplies, training health workers, and enhancing emergency and epidemic response capacities. The study recommends diversifying funding sources, improving coordination between UN agencies and local authorities through a unified data system, strengthening WHO's role in supporting health facilities and training staff, and establishing rapid response units to ensure timely and effective delivery of humanitarian assistance to the most vulnerable groups.</i></p>
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## Introduction

The number of international organizations tackling global issues has significantly increased in the twenty-first century, reflecting the interconnectedness of our world and the dependence of governments on international collaboration to manage transboundary issues. These organizations deal with a wide range of issues, including public health, poverty, inequality, and climate change, but because armed conflicts and wars have severe and long-lasting humanitarian repercussions that impact entire civilizations, they continue to rank among the most urgent problems. One of the most notable instances is the Gaza conflict, which has resulted in thousands of families being displaced, severe limitations on access to basic necessities, widespread infrastructure destruction, and profound

psychological and social crises within the Palestinian community (Jayawardene, 2025).

One of the most complicated and drawn-out humanitarian disasters in contemporary history is the Palestinian refugee dilemma. The direct and continuous effects of conflict continue to affect refugees, especially in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon. Access to food, water, healthcare, and education has been severely hampered by ongoing violence and worsening living circumstances. These refugees need ongoing assistance to lessen their everyday suffering since they are in a position of chronic vulnerability.

Since its founding in 1949, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) has been a significant player in this environment. It was established to give Palestinian refugees relief and basic services. It offers a wide range of programs, such as social safety, education, healthcare, and relief. UNRWA is renowned for its capacity to respond successfully to protracted crises and to adjust to emergencies. It has grown to be an essential source of assistance for Palestinian refugees and a major factor in lessening the effects of ongoing hostilities in Gaza (Bocco, 2010).

The World Health Organization (WHO), in addition to UNRWA, is essential in bolstering the regional health system by supplying medical equipment, educating medical staff, and enhancing emergency and epidemic response capabilities. Despite the ongoing security and humanitarian issues, the collaboration between these organizations and local authorities strengthens the resilience of the health sector and vital services. This emphasizes how crucial it is for specialized UN organizations to provide humanitarian aid in a complicated and dynamic context (Balkhy, 2025).

### **Problem Statement**

Recurrent humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip are brought on by persistent armed wars, an economic blockade, and regular disruptions of basic services including electricity, water, healthcare, and education. People's lives are significantly impacted by these circumstances, especially those of Palestinian refugees, who comprise a sizable portion of the local population and greatly rely on humanitarian aid. In this regard, UN specialized agencies—especially the World Health Organization (WHO) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)—are essential in delivering humanitarian aid, safeguarding refugees, and bolstering the health system in times of emergency. However, a number of obstacles impede the efficiency of these agencies' activities, such as a lack of funding, political limitations, poor coordination between various actors, and complicated security and economic circumstances that make it difficult to deliver and sustain humanitarian relief. Furthermore, there is still a dearth of scholarly research on the evaluation of these interventions' effects and efficacy. In order to assess the performance and efficacy of both UNRWA and WHO in handling humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip, a comparative analytical study is therefore required. Thus, the primary research question is: What is the role of United Nations specialized agencies—specifically UNRWA and the World Health Organization—in addressing humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip?

### **Research Questions**

- What is the concept of humanitarian crises, what are their types, and what role do international organizations play in managing them?
- What are the legal and organizational foundations governing the work of United Nations specialized agencies in the humanitarian field?
- What is the role of UNRWA in addressing humanitarian crises and supporting refugees in the Gaza Strip?
- What is the role of the World Health Organization in strengthening the health system and managing humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip?
- What are the key challenges faced by United Nations agencies in carrying out their humanitarian mandates in Gaza, and what are the future prospects for enhancing cooperation and developing their humanitarian roles in Palestine?

### **Research Objectives**

- To clarify the conceptual framework of humanitarian crises and the role of international organizations in managing them.
- To identify the legal and organizational foundations governing the work of United Nations specialized agencies in the humanitarian field.
- To analyze the role of UNRWA in addressing humanitarian crises and supporting refugees in the Gaza Strip.
- To assess the role of the World Health Organization in strengthening the health system and managing humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip.
- To identify the challenges and explore potential prospects for enhancing cooperation and developing the humanitarian role of United Nations agencies in Palestine.

### **Significance of the Research**

#### **• Practical Significance**

This study's practical value is found in its recommendations for humanitarian actors and decision makers to improve the efficacy of UN specialized agencies' actions in Palestine, especially in the Gaza Strip. The study provides useful insights for creating policies and procedures that improve agency coordination and collaboration and enhance their response to humanitarian crises by examining the functions of UNRWA and the WHO and highlighting the difficulties they encounter. Additionally, it aids in strategic planning

and resource allocation for humanitarian operations, which lessens suffering and raises the standard of care given to impacted communities.

### • **Scientific Significance**

This study, which uses the Gaza Strip as a case study, is scientifically significant because it advances scholarly knowledge of how UN specialized agencies handle humanitarian crises. By highlighting the two agencies' advantages, disadvantages, and complementarities as well as illuminating the organizational and legal structure guiding their operations, it offers scholarly value. This advances theoretical understanding of international humanitarian assistance and lays the groundwork for creating crisis management plans that are more successful in areas affected by violence. As a result, the study adds significantly to the body of knowledge regarding crisis management and humanitarian aid in Palestine.

## **Operational Definitions**

### **1. Humanitarian Crises**

Bloxham (2022) defines a humanitarian crisis as an event—or a sequence of events—that poses a severe threat to the life, health, safety, security, and overall well-being of individuals. Such crises often extend across wide geographical areas and generate acute disruptions to the fundamental patterns of daily life within affected communities. Although widely used, the term humanitarian crisis does not have a single, universally accepted definition. In contemporary studies, it is frequently used interchangeably with humanitarian emergency to describe situations in which urgent intervention is required to deliver essential assistance and prevent further deterioration of living conditions.

Some scholars distinguish between three main types of humanitarian crises:

- Natural disasters, such as earthquakes, floods, and hurricanes.
- Man-made crises, such as wars and armed conflicts.
- Complex crises, where natural, political, social, and economic factors interact to produce compounded impacts on affected societies.

In this regard, Olsson, Gardell, and Verbeek (2018) contend that humanitarian crises cannot be understood as isolated or sudden events; rather, they constitute complex social and political processes shaped by the interaction between the international system and the capacities of states and humanitarian actors. This interplay transforms humanitarian response into a measure of how effectively multilateral institutions function and how robust international solidarity mechanisms truly are.

Operationally, "humanitarian crises" in this study refers to the extraordinary circumstances that exist in the Gaza Strip due to siege, armed conflicts, and declining living conditions that endanger human life and call for immediate relief and medical measures. Here, the phrase refers to circumstances that put UN specialized agencies—especially UNRWA and WHO—to the test in terms of mitigating the effects of such crises and enhancing the humanitarian circumstances of impacted communities.

### **2. United Nations Specialized Agencies**

According to Higgins et al. (2017), UN specialized agencies are sophisticated institutional models of international cooperation that effectively address transboundary crises and advance global humanitarian and social stability by combining functional independence with coordinated collective action within a single framework. Operationally, "UN specialized agencies" in this study refers to UN-affiliated organizations—specifically, UNRWA and the World Health Organization (WHO)—that directly address humanitarian situations in the Gaza Strip. The phrase refers to their methods, actions, and efficacy in providing health and relief services with the goal of enhancing the humanitarian circumstances of Gaza's Palestinian population.

### **3. United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA)**

According to Bocco (2010), UNRWA represents the international community's continuous commitment to the Palestinian refugee crisis as a political and humanitarian organization in addition to being a relief agency. The Independent Review Group on UNRWA (2024) claims that the organization represents one of the most important types of international humanitarian action, contributing significantly to regional stability and offering vital services to millions of refugees. In terms of operations, UNRWA in this study refers to the UN organization in charge of resolving humanitarian crises in Gaza through its many relief, health, education, and emergency support programs. The concept is used to evaluate the agency's effectiveness in mitigating crises and to analyze its coordination mechanisms with other UN agencies—particularly WHO—within a comparative framework that reflects the overall humanitarian role of UN entities in supporting Palestinian resilience.

### **4. The World Health Organization (WHO)**

The World Health Organization (2024) notes that the agency's duties include addressing health emergencies, preventing disease, bolstering health systems, and assisting member governments with capacity-building and health planning. In order to provide immediate medical aid during emergencies, WHO also organizes humanitarian responses

in collaboration with governments and international partners. Fitzsimons (2013) further argues that the World Health Organization should not be regarded solely as a technical entity producing standards and recommendations; rather, it functions as a political and humanitarian actor embedded within the broader structure of the international system. Its health policies and operational frameworks constitute direct mechanisms for confronting humanitarian emergencies, pandemics, and conflict-related health crises, thereby positioning the Organization as a cornerstone of global health security.

Operationally, this study uses the term World Health Organization to denote the United Nations agency charged with leading and coordinating health and humanitarian interventions in the Gaza Strip, particularly during periods of armed conflict and acute humanitarian distress. The concept is employed to examine the Organization's role in emergency health response, the delivery of essential medical services, and the reinforcement of the Palestinian health system in collaboration with other UN agencies, most notably UNRWA. It also serves as a basis for evaluating the effectiveness of WHO's interventions in safeguarding the right to health and in mitigating the humanitarian consequences of recurrent crises for the population of the Gaza Strip.

### Research Boundaries

**First: Temporal Boundaries:** From 2023 to 2025.

**Second: Geographical Boundaries:** The Gaza Strip, Palestine.

**Third: Thematic Boundaries:** The research focuses on examining the role of specialized United Nations agencies—particularly UNRWA and the World Health Organization—in addressing humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip. This includes analyzing the humanitarian and health-related activities and programs provided by the two agencies, assessing the challenges they face, and exploring potential prospects for enhancing cooperation and developing their humanitarian roles.

### Research Methodology

The study employs two main research methods: the descriptive-analytical method and the comparative method.

#### First: Descriptive-Analytical Method

This approach makes it possible to provide a thorough and in-depth explanation of the roles played by UN specialized agencies, particularly UNRWA and WHO, in resolving humanitarian problems in Gaza. It focuses on their health and humanitarian initiatives, evaluating how well they assist refugees and enhance the healthcare system while highlighting the main obstacles they encounter. This

method offers a precise and impartial comprehension of the humanitarian situation and the range of services provided by the organizations.

#### Second: Comparative Method

The functions of UNRWA and WHO in the Gaza Strip are contrasted using the comparative technique. It identifies the degree of complementarity or gaps in their humanitarian responses and shows their own strengths and limitations. Through this analytical comparison, the study makes recommendations to strengthen inter-agency collaboration and the humanitarian response in the area, as well as practical conclusions about the efficacy of each agency's tactics.

### Previous studies

#### First Theme: Studies Addressing Humanitarian Crises and the Role of International Organizations in Responding to Them

1. **Erica-Irène Daes (1995)**, *The Involvement of the United Nations System in Providing and Coordinating Humanitarian Assistance*. Daes's study sought to analyze how the United Nations system organizes and administers humanitarian responses, with particular attention to the mandates of UN agencies and the agreements that guide their operations. The research further examined the effectiveness of inter-agency coordination mechanisms during emergencies, identified key financial and administrative challenges, and proposed strategies for improving field-level coordination and advance crisis planning. The study concluded that the UN system encompasses an extensive network of specialized agencies whose roles complement one another across all phases of humanitarian action—from immediate relief to long-term development. Agencies such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, the Food and Agriculture Organization, UNICEF, the World Food Programme, and UNRWA each contribute in distinct ways to supporting the social and economic recovery of affected communities by integrating emergency assistance with development-oriented initiatives. Daes recommended strengthening coordination among UN agencies through the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs to avoid duplication and ensure more efficient use of resources. The study also emphasized the need for more effective mechanisms linking relief efforts with rehabilitation and sustainable development, arguing that such integration enhances social and economic stability and improves the overall efficiency of the UN's response to humanitarian crises (Daes, 1995).

2. **Abdel-Aal Abdel-Rahman Al-Derbi (2022)**, *United Nations Efforts in the Protection of Human Rights: A Study of Experiences and Practices*. Al-Deirbi's study examined the role of the United Nations as a global institution in

safeguarding human rights, with a particular focus on the monitoring and oversight mechanisms implemented by its principal organs and specialized agencies to ensure the protection of fundamental rights. The research analyzed the accumulated experiences and practices resulting from UN policies in this field and employed both comparative and descriptive-analytical approaches to provide a comprehensive assessment of the UN's effectiveness in promoting human rights. The findings indicate that the United Nations remains firmly committed to human rights protection through its various organizations and specialized agencies, which engage in continuous monitoring and reporting on violations within Member States and work to develop international legislation and institutional mechanisms to ensure respect for basic rights. The study also demonstrated that the UN exercises a global mandate in this domain, with the Security Council, the Human Rights Council, and the treaty-based committees playing influential roles in reducing violations and strengthening human rights protections worldwide (Al-Deirbi, 2022).

**3. Zara Nahyma Yusseff-Vanegas (2023), The Responsibility to Protect in Palestine: Analyzing UN Actions and Refugee Voices.** Yusseff-Vanegas's study examined the application of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle within the context of the Palestinian conflict, focusing on the gap between the principle's normative aspirations and its practical implementation. The research analyzed Palestinian refugees' perceptions of the effectiveness of United Nations measures in safeguarding their human rights and investigated the operational and political constraints that limit the UN's capacity to provide meaningful protection to affected populations. The findings indicate that, although UN efforts under the R2P framework have delivered important humanitarian assistance, they have fallen short of addressing the deeper structural crisis confronting Palestinians. The study shows that implementation has been significantly constrained by the geopolitical interests of Member States, which shape the boundaries and impact of UN action. Interviews with refugees further revealed critical shortcomings in the UN's ability to offer genuine and sustained protection. Consequently, the study recommends the development of more robust and rapidly deployable operational mechanisms and calls for translating R2P from a largely theoretical construct into practical tools capable of ensuring effective and lasting protection for vulnerable populations (Yusseff-Vanegas, 2024).

**4. Study of Harun Semercioğlu (2024), "The Effectiveness of the United Nations in Preventing Conflicts in the World in the Context of the 2023 Palestine-Israel War and a Model Proposal".** This study aimed to analyze the current structure of the United Nations and assess its impact

on the organization's ability to ensure global peace, investigating the reasons for its failure to prevent conflicts, particularly in the context of the recent Palestinian-Israeli conflict in Gaza in 2023. It also sought to propose a model for reforming the international system to prevent future conflicts, address power imbalances in the emerging global order, ensure fair representation for all countries and communities worldwide, and enhance the effectiveness of the UN as an international organization capable of addressing humanitarian and political crises in a comprehensive manner. The study's findings indicated that the current UN structure enables dominance by major powers, particularly the five permanent members of the Security Council, which limits the organization's capacity to effectively manage global conflicts. This limitation was evident in the recent Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where the international community was unable to protect civilians and prevent a large-scale humanitarian tragedy. Based on these findings, the study recommended substantive reforms, including restricting the veto power of permanent members, enhancing regional representation in the Security Council, and establishing a permanent committee for conflict prevention and peacebuilding to monitor potential conflicts, intervene early when necessary, and oversee post-conflict reconstruction. These reforms aim to build a fairer and more effective global system capable of responding to humanitarian and political crises and ensuring sustainable peace. (Semercioğlu, 2024).

**5. Xinlu Zhang (2024), Analysis of the Role of the United Nations and Its Humanitarian Organizations in Solving Human Rights Issues: The Case of Syrian Refugees.** Zhang's study analyzed the role of the United Nations and its humanitarian agencies in addressing human rights challenges, using Syrian refugees as a primary case study. The research aimed to explain why the UN and its affiliated humanitarian organizations often struggle to respond effectively to refugee crises, examining political, economic, and legal constraints that limit their operational performance. The study also provided an in-depth assessment of the obstacles facing the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), highlighting issues such as limited resources and the political balancing required among Member States. The findings reveal that the Syrian civil war not only triggered a large-scale humanitarian catastrophe but also exposed significant limitations in the UN's ability to manage complex crises. Despite extensive efforts in humanitarian relief and preventive diplomacy, the performance of the United Nations and its agencies has remained restricted by several factors, most notably geopolitical rivalries among Member States and the inherent challenges of international diplomacy. Based on these insights, the study recommends adopting innovative strategies to address refugee crises,

including the establishment of humanitarian visa systems and the creation of special economic zones designed to provide employment opportunities and longer-term stability for refugees. Such measures, the study argues, could help transform humanitarian emergencies into opportunities for development and social integration (Zhang, 2024).

### **Second Theme: Studies Examining the Efforts of United Nations Agencies—Particularly UNRWA and the World Health Organization—in the Gaza Strip**

**1. Riccardo Bocco (2010), UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History.** Bocco's study examined the historical and humanitarian role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) since its establishment in 1949 as one of the United Nations' primary instruments for humanitarian assistance. The research traced the evolution of UNRWA's mandates and functions across education, health care, and relief services, analyzing how the Agency's work has interacted with the political and social transformations experienced by Palestinian refugees, particularly in the Gaza Strip. Using historical and analytical methods, the study found that UNRWA represents far more than a relief agency; it stands as a historical witness to the Palestinian refugee experience and as an active actor in sustaining Palestinian national identity. The persistence of its operations—despite recurring political and financial pressures—highlights the enduring significance of the UN's role in protecting refugee rights and ensuring access to essential services. The study also revealed that aspects of UNRWA's work have been subject to politicization due to regional and international pressures, which at times hinder its ability to perform its humanitarian mandate independently. In light of these challenges, Bocco recommended strengthening international support for UNRWA to safeguard the continuity of its services and protect it from political manipulation or funding reductions. He further emphasized the need to enhance coordination between UNRWA and other UN agencies, particularly the World Health Organization, to respond more effectively to the escalating humanitarian and health crises in the Gaza Strip (Bocco, 2010).

**2. Moqaddam Rachid (2020), UNRWA and the Global Refugee Problem: The Case of Palestinian Refugees.** Rachid's study examined the role of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) in preserving the Palestinian refugee issue, focusing on the Agency's core mandate to safeguard refugee rights—particularly the right of return as articulated in paragraph (11) of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 194. The research also aimed to highlight the significance of UNRWA's continued operation amid

contemporary political and international pressures that threaten both its existence and its humanitarian role. Drawing on historical, analytical, and forward-looking approaches, the study offered a comprehensive perspective on the Agency's function. The findings revealed that UNRWA is subject to intense political and financial pressures aimed at diminishing its influence and reducing the visibility of the Palestinian refugee question within the international arena and in relation to Israel. The study further demonstrated that the Agency's continued provision of humanitarian services affirms the legitimacy of the refugee cause and counters efforts to eliminate or transfer its mandate to other organizations such as the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees. Rachid recommended strengthening popular mobilization in support of UNRWA, alongside increasing Arab financial and political backing for both the Agency and the broader refugee issue. He also underscored the need to reject resettlement schemes that undermine the right of return and emphasized the importance of UNRWA enhancing the independence of its decision-making processes to shield itself from external political pressures, while ensuring the continuity of its services to Palestinian refugees as a central component of protecting their identity and legitimate rights (Rachid, 2020).

**3. Yahya Hammoudi and Zahia Naïmi (2020), The Role of the World Health Organization in Eliminating Epidemics and Diseases in Africa.** Hammoudi and Naïmi's study examined the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) as one of the most significant specialized agencies within the United Nations system by analyzing its efforts to combat diseases and epidemics across the African continent. The research reviewed the Organization's support programs and humanitarian assistance initiatives provided to African states, while also evaluating the outcomes achieved in strengthening public health and addressing epidemic-related challenges. The study adopted a historical approach to trace the establishment and evolution of the WHO from its founding in 1948 to the present, complemented by a descriptive-analytical method to assess the state of health conditions in Africa. The findings indicate that the WHO is a leading multilateral agency grounded in the principle that health is a fundamental human right. With 194 Member States, the Organization has played a pivotal role in promoting public health across Africa, particularly through large-scale vaccination campaigns, epidemic control programs, and notable achievements such as the eradication of smallpox. The study also highlighted WHO's contributions to improving maternal health, nutrition services, and access to clean water, as well as advancing prevention initiatives for communicable diseases. Based on these findings, the authors recommended sustained African support for the

WHO and the expansion of international health cooperation. They emphasized strengthening national health systems and achieving universal health coverage as essential foundations for ensuring the long-term sustainability of epidemic control efforts and for improving overall healthcare outcomes across the African continent (Hammoudi & Naïmi, 2020).

**4. Nabil Ahmed Al-Sulaymani (2021), the Humanitarian Crisis Management System of Specialized International Organizations: The Role of the World Health Organization in the Humanitarian Crisis in Yemen (2015 -2018).** Al-Sulaymani's study examined the humanitarian crisis management systems employed by specialized international organizations, focusing on the humanitarian situation in Yemen between 2015 and 2018 and analyzing the role of the World Health Organization (WHO) in managing the country's health crisis. The research aimed to assess the effectiveness of the Organization's response to the complex humanitarian challenges posed by the armed conflict and the severe deterioration of health conditions in Yemen. The study adopted a functionalist approach to analyze the organizational structures and operational mechanisms used by international agencies in humanitarian crisis management, supplemented by a case study methodology that enabled a detailed examination of WHO's intervention in Yemen. The findings indicate that international organizations employ a continually evolving crisis management system designed to adapt to the shifting nature of humanitarian emergencies. While the WHO played a central role in addressing the health crisis in Yemen, its performance fell short of expectations when measured against the scale of the humanitarian disaster and the requirements for an effective response. The study therefore recommended a comprehensive reassessment of the role of specialized international organizations in humanitarian crises and called for enhanced performance across pre-crisis preparedness, crisis response, and post-crisis recovery phases. It further emphasized the need for stronger coordination and integration between international agencies and national and local authorities to ensure a more effective and coherent humanitarian response (Al-Sulaymani, 2021).

**5. Mohamed Ramadan (2021), The Role of the World Health Organization in Combating the Coronavirus Pandemic in Light of Public International Law** Ramadan's study examined the extent to which the World Health Organization (WHO) bears international responsibility for its actions under the rules of public international law, with a particular focus on its global mandate to protect public health. The research explored the historical development of the Organization, the evolution of its competencies, and its functions at the international level. This was conducted

through a legal analysis that clarified the relationship between the WHO's operational responsibilities and its international obligations during major health emergencies such as the COVID-19 pandemic. Using analytical and applied methodologies, the study assessed relevant international legal texts and applied them to the Organization's conduct during the pandemic. The findings revealed that COVID-19 exposed significant deficiencies in the international legal framework governing global public health, as well as weaknesses in international leadership during the crisis—a leadership role that the WHO was expected to fulfill more effectively. The study therefore recommended the adoption of a multilateral international agreement establishing a form of "global health constitution" that would set out fundamental principles and general guidelines for public health governance. It further proposed incorporating the provisions of such an agreement into the national legal systems of Member States to strengthen international coordination and improve collective preparedness for future global health emergencies (Ramadan, 2021).

### **Analysis of Previous Studies**

The body of previous studies addresses the role of the United Nations in confronting humanitarian crises from a broad institutional perspective. Daes (1995) examined coordination mechanisms among UN agencies and their capacity to deliver humanitarian assistance, highlighting strengths within the organizational structure and the networks that facilitate inter-agency cooperation. In a similar vein, Al-Deirbi (2022) focused on human rights protection and the UN's monitoring of violations, emphasizing relevant legal frameworks and international policy instruments. However, despite their conceptual contributions, these studies did not provide evaluative assessments of how agency interventions affect beneficiaries' lives, nor did they analyze variations in performance across different UN organizations—revealing a limited practical dimension in the studies. Yusseff-Vanegas (2023) explored the application of the Responsibility to protect principle in Palestine, drawing on refugee perspectives to assess the UN's effectiveness. Yet the study did not offer a comparative analysis of specialized agencies such as UNRWA or the World Health Organization, nor did it examine the degree of integration or overlap between their humanitarian interventions.

Semercioğlu (2024) shed light on the political structure of the United Nations and its influence on conflict prevention, particularly within the Israeli–Palestinian context. While the study underscored the political and structural constraints that restrict UN effectiveness, it did not address the operational interventions of UNRWA or the World Health Organization in the Gaza Strip, nor did it provide an

objective assessment of the on-the-ground challenges or the coordination mechanisms among specialized agencies. Other studies addressing global humanitarian crises and human rights primarily focused on theoretical frameworks, international policy dynamics, or case studies from different regions. These contributions enrich broader discussions on humanitarian governance but do not offer a focused, context-specific analysis of the Gaza Strip, nor do they undertake a systematic comparison of specialized UN agencies. As a result, their practical relevance to the Palestinian context remains limited.

Consequently, a clear gap emerges in the existing studies: no comprehensive study has examined the roles of specialized United Nations agencies—particularly UNRWA and the World Health Organization—in managing humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip, evaluated the effectiveness of their interventions, or investigated the operational and political challenges they encounter. Moreover, the degree of complementarity between these agencies in supporting Palestinian refugees and the wider conflict-affected community has not been systematically assessed. Addressing this gap constitutes the central aim of the present research.

## Research Structure

### **First: The Conceptual and Legal Framework for the Work of UN Agencies in Humanitarian Crises.**

1.1 Humanitarian Crises and the Importance of International Organizations' Intervention in Managing Them.

2.1 Legal and Regulatory Foundations for the Work of UN Specialized Agencies in Humanitarian Crises.

### **Second: The Efforts of UNRWA and the World Health Organization in Addressing Humanitarian Crises in the Gaza Strip**

1.2 The Role of UNRWA in Addressing Humanitarian Crises and Supporting Refugees in Gaza.

2.2 The Role of the World Health Organization in Strengthening the Health System and Managing Humanitarian Crises in Gaza.

### **Third: Challenges and Prospects for Enhancing the Humanitarian Role of UN Agencies in Palestine.**

1.3 Challenges Facing UN Agencies in the Gaza Strip.

2.3 Prospects for Enhancing Cooperation and Developing the Humanitarian Role of UN Agencies in Palestine.

### **First: Conceptual and Legal Framework Governing the Work of UN Agencies in Humanitarian Crises**

Understanding the conceptual and legal foundations that govern the work of United Nations specialized agencies

constitutes an essential starting point for analyzing their roles in managing humanitarian crises. Responding to complex emergencies—such as the protracted crisis in the Gaza Strip—requires a precise grasp of the core principles of humanitarian action, the international legal norms that regulate such interventions, and the institutional mandates on which UN agencies rely when operating in affected contexts.

### **1.1 Humanitarian Crises and the Importance of International Organizational Intervention**

Humanitarian crises represent one of the most complex phenomena facing the contemporary world. They rarely emerge abruptly or in isolation; rather, they are the product of long-term accumulations of political, economic, social, and environmental pressures that interact to generate exceptional conditions threatening human life and community stability. When such crises unfold, they produce severe and wide-ranging consequences: national economies contract, social services collapse, and the suffering of vulnerable groups intensifies. Armed conflicts, civil strife, epidemics, and natural disasters constitute among the most significant drivers of humanitarian emergencies, often intersecting to create catastrophic conditions that necessitate swift and coordinated international engagement (Olsson Gardell & Verbeek, 2013).

The impact of humanitarian crises is uneven across population groups. Women, children, and marginalized communities typically experience disproportionate harm due to their limited adaptive capacity and lack of access to essential resources. Sudden-onset events—such as earthquakes, floods, industrial explosions, or the deployment of biological or chemical weapons—exacerbate the crisis due to the element of surprise and the compressed decision-making timeframe. These shocks frequently disrupt state institutions and impede rescue and relief efforts. Conditions deteriorate further in protracted emergencies linked to prolonged hostilities, where millions may live for years under instability, as evident in the occupied Palestinian territories. Such environments generate recurrent waves of displacement, chronic food insecurity, and long-term degradation of health and education systems (Morgan et al., 2025).

Humanitarian emergencies today are more frequent, more complex, and more protracted than at any point in recent history. As a result, their human and economic costs have dramatically escalated. The growing intensity of natural hazards, pandemics, and armed conflicts has stretched the humanitarian system to its limits, compelling international organizations—including UN agencies—to mobilize vast resources to confront multi-dimensional challenges. These crises are no longer geographically contained; they have

become global phenomena with far-reaching implications for international human security, requiring broad-based cooperation to mitigate their effects.

A deeper analytical understanding of humanitarian crises requires attention to several interrelated dimensions. The temporal dimension concerns the duration of a crisis, from onset to containment, shaping the design of appropriate policy responses. The substantive dimension relates to the nature of the crisis—economic, political, social, or health-related—thereby defining the type of interventions required. The impact dimension assesses direct and indirect repercussions on individuals and communities, while the spatial dimension identifies affected areas and geographic patterns of spread, guiding field coordination and resource allocation. The human dimension focuses on affected population groups and their specific needs, whereas the institutional dimension examines the actors responsible for crisis management and the mechanisms for cooperation among local and international institutions. An additional environmental dimension addresses the natural and ecological factors that contribute to crisis emergence and influence a state's capacity to respond (Olsson Gardell & Verbeek, 2018).

Humanitarian crises also possess distinctive features that set them apart from ordinary administrative or economic disruptions. They often erupt suddenly and violently, producing confusion, information gaps, and difficulties in rapid decision-making. Decision-makers frequently confront blurred situational awareness and a shortage of reliable data necessary for developing effective strategies. Crises further represent inflection points for institutions and societies; administrative systems lose full control, and new patterns of individual and collective behavior emerge as populations attempt to adapt to the unfolding emergency. Leaders are frequently forced to make high-stakes decisions under severe time pressure, risk, and uncertainty (Morgun et al., 2025).

Despite their destructive consequences, humanitarian crises also carry potential opportunities for constructive change. They can provide openings for institutional reform, improved governance, and strengthened national resilience. By exposing systemic weaknesses, crises can catalyze domestic and international cooperation, community mobilization, and the development of more effective response mechanisms.

International organizations—most notably the United Nations and its specialized agencies—play a central role in the governance of humanitarian emergencies through established institutional frameworks and globally recognized policies. The UN coordinates international relief efforts through a broad system of programs, funds, and specialized agencies tasked with facilitating rapid and

coherent response mechanisms. The Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator in the affected country is mandated to ensure that international assistance is efficient, complementary, and well-integrated, working closely with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). In carrying out these functions, the UN upholds the core humanitarian principles of humanity, neutrality, and impartiality, and ensures that assistance is delivered in a manner that respects state sovereignty and national unity. Interventions are conducted with the consent of the concerned state—except in extreme cases where the magnitude of the crisis exceeds national response capacity (Olsson Gardell & Verbeek, 2018).

The UN's humanitarian crisis-management architecture operates through three interdependent phases. The first phase, preceding crisis onset, focuses on preparedness: building national and institutional capacities, strengthening early-warning systems, pre-positioning essential supplies, and enhancing coordination among relevant stakeholders. The second phase, the emergency response, involves providing immediate relief, assessing the scale of the crisis, identifying the most affected population groups, and delivering shelter, food, and medical assistance in collaboration with national authorities, civil society, and other humanitarian actors. The third phase encompasses post-crisis recovery, including rehabilitation, reconstruction, restoration of essential services, and supporting national recovery plans to facilitate the transition from emergency relief to sustainable development. In practice, these phases often overlap, and the UN system typically engages in continuous, integrated support to affected populations to ensure a coherent and comprehensive response.

## **1.2 Legal and Institutional Foundations of the Work of United Nations Specialized Agencies in Humanitarian Crises**

The humanitarian work of United Nations specialized agencies is grounded in a comprehensive legal and institutional framework that delineates their responsibilities, mandates, and operational mechanisms during crises and disasters. This framework reflects decades of development within international relations since the mid-twentieth century, driven by the global recognition of the necessity of collective action to address humanitarian challenges and shield populations from the consequences of conflict and disaster. The legitimacy of these agencies derives from the UN Charter and from a broad set of international agreements concluded among Member States to regulate humanitarian action and coordinate emergency response.

The 1945 UN Charter affirms, among the purposes of the Organization, the promotion of international cooperation in

solving economic, social, cultural, and humanitarian problems, and in advancing respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms without discrimination. Guided by this mandate, several specialized agencies were established through independent international conventions and linked to the United Nations through relationship agreements that define their roles and collaboration with the Economic and Social Council. Notable among these agencies are the World Health Organization (WHO), the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), the International Labour Organization (ILO), UNICEF, and UNRWA. Despite their diverse mandates, these organizations share a core objective: upholding human dignity and alleviating suffering caused by disaster or conflict (Government of Saint Christopher and Nevis, 2002).

The legal basis for UN agency intervention in humanitarian crises rests on two foundational principles. The first is the principle of collective international responsibility to protect individuals affected by disasters and conflicts. Human suffering is not considered a purely domestic issue; rather, it holds a universal humanitarian dimension requiring global solidarity. The second principle is respect for state sovereignty and non-interference in internal affairs, whereby humanitarian operations may only proceed with the consent of national authorities, unless explicitly authorized by the Security Council in situations deemed threats to international peace and security. This balance seeks to reconcile the imperative of humanitarian protection with the norms of national sovereignty.

The 1949 Geneva Conventions and their Additional Protocols of 1977 and 2005 constitute the most authoritative legal references governing humanitarian conduct in armed conflict, as they codify the protection of civilians and outline the obligations of parties to a conflict toward affected populations. Another key milestone is General Assembly resolution 46/182 (1991) on strengthening the coordination of humanitarian assistance in emergencies. This resolution established the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) and reaffirmed the fundamental principles of humanity, neutrality, impartiality, and independence. Subsequent Security Council and General Assembly resolutions have further shaped the legal contours of humanitarian intervention, particularly in complex emergencies where governments are unable to meet the basic needs of their citizens (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2016).

UN specialized agencies operate within an integrated institutional architecture designed to ensure coherence and effectiveness in crisis management. At the central level, headquarters in Geneva, New York, and Rome are responsible for global policy formulation, adoption of

emergency strategies, and allocation of resources. The regional level monitors developments across specific geographic areas and facilitates coordination between country offices and partner organizations. The field level, however, constitutes the operational core of the system, where country offices implement relief programs in close cooperation with national authorities and civil society actors. Within this architecture, OCHA plays a pivotal role by consolidating information, analyzing humanitarian needs, setting intervention priorities, and allocating responsibilities across agencies to avoid overlap and ensure complementarity. The UN Resident Coordinator or Humanitarian Coordinator leads the overall UN response at the country level, working closely with national governments and the UN Development Programme (UNDP).

One of the most significant operational innovations adopted by the UN in recent decades is the Cluster Approach, introduced in 2005 to enhance the effectiveness of humanitarian response. Under this system, humanitarian activities are organized into specific sectors—such as health, shelter, food security, water and sanitation, and education—with each sector led by a designated UN agency in collaboration with local and international partners. For example, WHO leads the health cluster, while UNRWA or the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) typically play a central role in the shelter and refugee-protection clusters. This approach has substantially improved coordination and helped channel resources toward the most vulnerable groups, although field-level challenges remain, particularly in contexts where mandates overlap and agency capacities vary (Higgins et al., 2017).

UN agencies also adhere to a set of ethical and legal principles that govern humanitarian action. Chief among these are: Humanity, which obliges actors to protect life and alleviate suffering without discrimination; Neutrality, which requires agencies to refrain from taking sides in a conflict or using aid for political purposes; Independence, which ensures that humanitarian decisions are guided solely by actual needs; Transparency and accountability, essential for responsible resource management; and Coordination and complementarity, necessary to maintain coherence and avoid duplication of efforts. Practical experience demonstrates that the effectiveness of UN specialized agencies in humanitarian emergencies depends heavily on the clarity and flexibility of the legal and institutional frameworks governing their work. The more coherent and adaptive these frameworks are, the more capable agencies become of delivering timely, coordinated, and impactful responses.

## **Second: Efforts of UNRWA and the World Health Organization in Responding to Humanitarian Crises in the Gaza Strip**

The Gaza Strip represents one of the most fragile territories globally—both humanitarian and economically—due to prolonged blockade, recurrent armed hostilities, and the collapse of critical infrastructure and basic services. Within this context, the role of specialized United Nations agencies, particularly UNRWA and the World Health Organization (WHO), has been indispensable in alleviating humanitarian suffering and enhancing the resilience of the local population.

### **2.1 The Role of UNRWA in Addressing Humanitarian Crises and Supporting Refugees in Gaza**

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is one of the UN's most significant humanitarian institutions. It was established in 1949 under General Assembly Resolution 302 (D.4) with the mandate to provide direct relief, social services, and humanitarian protection to Palestinian refugees, improve their living conditions, and support regional stability. UNRWA operates across five fields of operation—Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), and the Gaza Strip—with liaison offices in New York, Washington, Brussels, and Cairo. The agency is currently headed by Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini, a senior humanitarian and development official with extensive experience within the UN system since 2003. He assumed leadership in March 2020, continuing international efforts to deliver comprehensive services to Palestinian refugees across the region (Congressional Research Service, 2024).

This legal framework, derived from the United Nations Charter, is clearly reflected in the case of UNRWA, which was established by a resolution of the General Assembly in 1949. The Agency's mandate subsequently expanded through a series of later resolutions adopted in response to evolving political and humanitarian conditions in the region. Among the most significant of these is General Assembly Resolution 614 (VII) of 1952, which highlighted the need to increase expenditure on relief efforts, and Resolution 916 (X) of 1955, which addressed the urgent requirement to provide assistance to border-area populations in Jordan and Gaza, as well as to refugees in Egypt. Furthermore, Resolution 2252 (ES-V) of 1967 called upon the Agency to continue offering humanitarian aid to 300,000 newly displaced persons, including 120,000 Palestinian refugees who had lost their homes in the aftermath of the war. In 1982, Resolution 37/120 (J) expanded UNRWA's responsibilities to include protection functions—covering the security, safety, and legal and

human rights of refugees living in the occupied territories (Aouf, 2024).

UNRWA's work is structured around three core pillars—education, health, and relief services—in addition to the protection of refugee rights. The agency implements vocational and economic empowerment programs aimed at strengthening self-reliance, while coordinating closely with host governments and donor states. Its services include primary healthcare, vaccination campaigns, basic education, food and non-food assistance, and psychosocial support for children, women, and other vulnerable groups. UNRWA's operational presence becomes particularly critical during major emergencies, such as the conflicts in Gaza and Lebanon, where it provides emergency shelter, protection for civilians, and continuity of essential services under extreme conditions (Bocco, 2010).

Before the outbreak of the 2023 Gaza war, UNRWA had been delivering comprehensive healthcare for more than six decades through 22 health centers equipped with clinics, laboratories, maternal and family-planning services, and mental-health support for children through counselors stationed in schools and specialized education units. Alongside this, the agency administered one of the region's largest education systems, operating 284 schools housed in 183 buildings, serving nearly 300,000 students and employing more than 10,500 staff members. These schools follow curricula aligned with UN values and human-rights principles, ensuring a stable and safe learning environment for refugee children.

The escalation of hostilities on 7 October 2023 brought unprecedented challenges. Extensive damage to health and education infrastructure—including direct strikes on hospitals such as Kamal Adwan Hospital in northern Gaza—resulted in the deaths and injuries of children, infants, and critically ill patients. Despite these conditions, UNRWA succeeded in keeping eight of its health centers operational and delivering approximately 6.2 million primary healthcare consultations in 2024, a dramatic increase from 2.6 million the previous year. The agency also played a key role in Gaza's polio vaccination campaign, reaching around 560,000 children during the first round and 545,000 in the second, despite mass displacement orders, bombardment, and the continuous deterioration of access conditions (Jayawardene, 2025).

Maintaining education became equally challenging. Roughly, 85% of UNRWA schools were damaged or destroyed, and most were converted into shelters for displaced populations, effectively halting formal schooling. Even so, the agency launched alternative education initiatives providing safe learning spaces for approximately 9,500 children—60% of whom were girls—across 36 shelters distributed throughout the Gaza Strip. These

programs offer foundational learning, recreational activities, and psychosocial support designed to help children cope with the trauma of war. Such initiatives underscore UNRWA's central role in protecting children's rights and sustaining education under some of the most extreme humanitarian conditions (UNRWA, 2024).

Taken together, the evidence demonstrates that UNRWA has been—and remains—a vital pillar of humanitarian resilience for Palestinian refugees in Gaza. By sustaining access to education, healthcare, and emergency assistance despite immense operational risks, the agency ensures that the most vulnerable groups receive life-saving support. Its efforts are crucial not only for safeguarding civilian populations, but also for preserving fundamental rights and mitigating the profound humanitarian consequences of ongoing conflict.

This pivotal role became particularly evident during the unprecedented humanitarian crisis that erupted in October 2023, when UNRWA emerged as the most present and active humanitarian actor on the ground. The Agency provided shelter to hundreds of thousands of displaced persons within its schools and facilities. UNRWA reported that the entire population of Gaza had become completely dependent on humanitarian assistance for survival, given the collapse of local production and the disruption of supply chains. Humanitarian aid operations have faced severe challenges due to the closure of most border crossings, the multiple inspection procedures imposed on aid trucks, and the constantly shifting frontlines. Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini emphasized that “the flow of aid is extremely limited compared to a sea of humanitarian needs,” warning that the risk of famine is rising daily—particularly in northern Gaza, where hunger, malnutrition, and disease are spreading as a result of acute shortages of food and clean water (Aouf, 2024).

## **2.2 The Role of the World Health Organization in Strengthening the Health System and Managing Humanitarian Crises in Gaza**

The historical relationship between health and armed conflict is well documented; throughout modern history, disease has often claimed more lives than weaponry. During the First World War, for example, an estimated two-thirds of the 37 million deaths resulted from infectious diseases such as trench fever rather than combat itself, while the Spanish influenza pandemic killed more people than battlefield injuries. These legacies reinforced the understanding that health workers play a central role not only in mitigating the consequences of conflict, but also in advocating for peace. This sentiment was famously articulated by British physician Richard Doll in *The Lancet* in 1951, where he argued that medical professionals bear a moral responsibility to oppose war because it destroys the

very lives they are dedicated to protecting (Khorram-Manesh & Burkle, 2024).

Against this historical backdrop, the World Health Organization (WHO) has assumed a pivotal role in reducing the health-related impacts of violent conflict—most notably during the current crisis in the Gaza Strip. Since the escalation of hostilities in October 2023, Gaza has become a stark illustration of the intersection between armed violence and systemic health collapse. Prior to the conflict, WHO supported approximately 36 hospitals and 140 primary healthcare centers across Gaza and worked closely with the Palestinian Ministry of Health and UNRWA to ensure the availability of medicines, essential supplies, vaccination programs, and primary care services. With the intensification of attacks, however, the health system suffered catastrophic damage: more than 70% of health facilities ceased functioning, and 886 health workers were killed and 1,355 injured—a loss WHO described as devastating for an already fragile system.

In response, WHO established field operations centers to coordinate the humanitarian health response with the Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA), the Palestine Red Crescent Society, and international partners. Despite severe access restrictions, the organization succeeded in delivering more than 400 metric tons of medicines and surgical supplies to Gaza, supplied fuel to keep hospital generators running, and supported mobile primary-care clinics in displacement areas. According to WHO reports, emergency medical teams supported by the organization conducted over 2.5 million medical consultations in 2024, while UNRWA and its partners provided an additional 7.8 million consultations, despite constraints on staff movement and shortages of supplies (Balkhy, 2025).

The health crisis in Gaza extends far beyond war-related injuries. The collapse of infrastructure has intensified the burden of chronic diseases, infectious outbreaks, and preventable deaths. The territory hosts more than 2,000 cancer patients, 1,000 individuals requiring dialysis, and roughly 1,000 children living with Type 1 diabetes—all facing life-threatening treatment disruptions. Historical evidence underscores the severity of such interruptions; during the 2008–2009 conflict, nearly half of dialysis patients died due to the interruption of medical services. The shutdown of wastewater treatment facilities has further fueled the spread of waterborne diseases: diarrheal cases among children under five increased 23-fold between 2022 and 2024, with more than 700,000 reported cases in a four-month period, according to WHO and the Palestinian Ministry of Health.

Gaza's population also faces acute food and water insecurity. Approximately 70% of residents are compelled

to consume contaminated or saline water, while half the population experiences severe food insecurity, and 25% face famine conditions. These factors weaken immune systems, heighten susceptibility to infection, and accelerate disease transmission. The crisis has also taken a profound psychological toll on the health workforce. A 2024 study found that 52% of healthcare professionals in Gaza experience emotional exhaustion due to chronic stress and excessive workloads, with direct consequences for patient safety and quality of care. Recognizing that health workers form the backbone of any functional health system, WHO launched a regional initiative to strengthen workforce capacity through training in trauma care, mental health, nutrition, and infectious-disease management, with particular emphasis on resilience-building and psychological well-being (Ekzayez, 2024).

In the medium term, WHO is developing a comprehensive strategy for rehabilitating the Palestinian health system in partnership with the Ministry of Health and international stakeholders. This strategy includes the expansion of digital health technologies, improved disease surveillance systems, and the establishment of a modern health information infrastructure. WHO stresses that a permanent cessation of hostilities is a prerequisite for any meaningful reconstruction and for ensuring the sustainability of the health system (Khorram-Manesh & Burkle, 2024).

Taken together, the evidence illustrates that WHO's work in Gaza extends well beyond emergency relief. The organization is shaping a long-term vision for sustainable health recovery—protecting the right to health as a fundamental human entitlement and strengthening the capacity of the local system to withstand future shocks. Through its collaborations with UNRWA and international partners, WHO remains a cornerstone of the humanitarian effort to reduce suffering and uphold the dignity and well-being of Gaza's population.

### **Third: Challenges and Prospects for Strengthening the Humanitarian Role of United Nations Agencies in Palestine**

Despite the extensive efforts undertaken by United Nations agencies in Palestine, their operations continue to face a series of complex challenges that constrain the effectiveness and sustainability of their interventions. Political, security, and financial conditions create an environment in which humanitarian action becomes extraordinarily difficult. Nevertheless, these agencies remain indispensable pillars of the humanitarian response and key sources of support for Palestinian communities.

#### **3.1 Key Challenges Facing United Nations Agencies in the Gaza Strip**

United Nations agencies operating in Gaza—most prominently UNRWA and the World Health Organization—function within one of the most demanding and volatile humanitarian landscapes in the world. For more than seventeen years, the Gaza Strip has been subjected to a comprehensive blockade that has eroded every dimension of economic, social, and health life. These structural pressures intensified further after the outbreak of hostilities in October 2023, when international organizations encountered unprecedented restrictions on movement and supplies, alongside the direct targeting of civilian and humanitarian infrastructure. These conditions profoundly limited the ability of agencies to reach affected populations and maintain essential services.

The unstable security environment constitutes the most immediate challenge facing UN agencies in Gaza. Repeated military operations, widespread attacks on civilian areas, and the destruction of public facilities have greatly undermined operational safety. UNRWA's offices, warehouses, schools, and health centers have all been struck, resulting in the deaths of numerous humanitarian personnel. UN reports confirm that the number of staff members killed in Gaza in 2023 is the highest recorded since the organization's founding. This reality renders field operations extremely hazardous. Delivering aid now requires elaborate coordination with multiple actors to secure safe passages—often impossible due to ongoing bombardment and the collapse of communication and transport networks (Amin et al., 2025).

The blockade enforced since 2007 imposes severe restrictions on the entry of fuel, medicines, medical equipment, food supplies, spare parts, and materials essential for operating hospitals, schools, and shelters. UNRWA and WHO must rely on a limited number of humanitarian corridors that open intermittently, complicating relief planning and causing lengthy delays that disrupt life-saving programs. The destruction of roads, crossings, and storage facilities has rendered internal distribution extremely difficult—especially in northern areas that have suffered near-total devastation. These logistical barriers remain among the most significant constraints on the efficiency and coverage of humanitarian operations, while also dramatically increasing their cost.

Financial fragility is another major obstacle threatening the continuity of UN operations. UNRWA has faced a persistent budget crisis for more than a decade due to declining donor contributions and the suspension of funding by some states for political reasons. This has produced recurring deficits that jeopardize the agency's education, health, and relief programs—services on which

more than 1.6 million refugees in Gaza depend. WHO experiences similar pressures as demand for emergency medical support rises and operational costs increase under blockade conditions. Irregular and unpredictable funding streams impede long-term planning for recovery and reconstruction, forcing agencies to adopt short-term emergency strategies rather than sustainable development approaches. This financial vulnerability reflects a structural challenge inherent in the dependence of humanitarian agencies on the political will of donor states (Congressional Research Service, 2025).

The excessive politicization of humanitarian work represents one of the most acute challenges confronting UN agencies in Gaza. UNRWA and other agencies are frequently subjected to accusations of bias despite their adherence to neutrality, impartiality, and independence. These narratives erode donor confidence and have fueled media and political campaigns aimed at undermining the agency's legitimacy or altering its mandate. The instrumentalization of humanitarian aid for political leverage fundamentally contradicts the normative foundations of the United Nations and places field staff in a precarious position: they must navigate the tension between upholding humanitarian principles and engaging with de facto authorities to ensure that life-saving operations can continue (International Crisis Group, 2023).

The phenomenon of politicizing humanitarian action became especially pronounced after the "Al-Aqsa Flood" operation in October 2023. In its aftermath, UNRWA faced an unprecedented wave of allegations following Israel's claim that 12 of the Agency's staff were involved in the events of 7 October—claims made without any evidence being submitted to the United Nations. This prompted several donor states to suspend their funding, posing a direct threat to the Agency's operational capacity. In response, the UN Secretary-General initiated an investigation through the Office of Internal Oversight Services, in addition to establishing an independent review panel chaired by Catherine Colonna to assess UNRWA's mechanisms for ensuring institutional neutrality. A UNRWA report published in February 2024 stated that a number of its employees detained in Israeli prisons had been subjected to pressure to extract false confessions regarding alleged links to the attack or to Hamas. During the same period, media reports circulated suggesting that 10% of UNRWA staff in Gaza were affiliated with Hamas or Islamic Jihad. However, the Agency affirmed that it had not received any evidence from any Member State to substantiate such claims. Israel also accused UNRWA of using school textbooks containing incitement, but the Agency clarified that it relies on host-country curricula that conform with UN and UNESCO standards, and that these

materials undergo regular reviews to remove any content inconsistent with human rights principles. UNRWA further faced accusations relating to the presence of tunnels beneath its facilities or the storage of weapons in its schools. The Agency has consistently condemned such violations since 2014 and has reported them to the de facto authorities in Gaza, the Palestinian Authority, Israel, and donor governments. It has also implemented engineering measures to seal underground voids and prevent their use for any military purposes (Aouf, 2024).

UN agencies also face substantial administrative and human-resource challenges. UNRWA alone manages a workforce of more than 13,000 local staff in Gaza—many of whom are refugees themselves and therefore directly affected by the conflict. This reality imposes significant psychological and operational pressures, particularly in the context of bereavement, insecurity, and prolonged exposure to trauma. The scarcity of specialized personnel and the difficulty of deploying international experts due to security restrictions further impede field effectiveness. WHO encounters parallel challenges, as health workers in partner facilities endure extreme workloads, physical exhaustion, and psychological distress—conditions that inevitably affect the quality and safety of healthcare delivery.

Despite the presence of OCHA and the Cluster Approach, coordination remains an enduring challenge. The multiplicity of agencies and the diversity of mandates—UNRWA, WHO, WFP, UNICEF, among others—often leads to overlapping activities and fragmented responsibilities. In Gaza, the convergence of these mandates highlights the need for a more integrated coordination system supported by unified data platforms that can identify priorities and allocate resources more effectively. Weak institutional complementarity not only wastes scarce resources but also undermines public trust in humanitarian efforts and slows the overall response (International Crisis Group, 2024).

Humanitarian operations in conflict zones also face inherent legal and ethical dilemmas. Under international humanitarian law, an occupying power bears responsibility for protecting civilians and ensuring access to humanitarian assistance. However, the continuation of Israeli occupation and the absence of a political settlement render these obligations difficult to implement in practice, placing an additional burden on specialized UN agencies. This context forces the UN to navigate a delicate balance between respecting sovereignty and fulfilling urgent protection responsibilities—raising persistent questions about the boundaries and limits of its legal mandate.

Beyond operational constraints, UN agencies confront a deeper normative and ethical challenge: a shifting global attitude toward the values embodied in the United Nations

Charter. Principles of dignity, justice, and equality—central to the UN's founding—are increasingly overshadowed by geopolitical interests. The Palestinian case has become emblematic of this tension, revealing stark inconsistencies in the application of international law and a weakened political commitment to civilian protection. This erosion of normative consensus places UN agencies in a continual test of credibility, requiring them to uphold humanitarian principles amid diminishing international solidarity (UNRWA, 2025).

### **3.2 Prospects for Strengthening Cooperation and Expanding the Humanitarian Role of United Nations Agencies in Palestine**

The future prospects for enhancing the effectiveness of United Nations agencies in Gaza hinge on rebuilding the international humanitarian system on foundations of greater equity, transparency, and operational coherence. This need has become urgent given the scale of violations endured by the Palestinian people and the persistent failure of the international community to enforce international humanitarian law. More than seven decades after the Nakba, Gaza now faces an unprecedented humanitarian catastrophe—one that transcends the confines of a localized crisis and has become a global test of the credibility of the United Nations system itself.

Among the actors confronting this historic responsibility, UNRWA and the World Health Organization remain at the forefront. Yet their continued operation requires a legal and ethical environment that shields humanitarian action from politicization and criminalization. In her October 2025 report, *Gaza Genocide: A Collective Crime*, the UN Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories, Francesca Albanese, argued that the destruction in Gaza is not solely the outcome of Israel's military campaign, but is also enabled by systematic international complicity. This includes the provision of military, economic, and diplomatic support by powerful states, the obstruction of legal accountability mechanisms, and the manipulation of humanitarian aid itself. Such findings expose a profound ethical crisis within the international order and underscore that strengthening the humanitarian role of UN agencies in Palestine requires rectifying these deep structural failures (United Nations Development Programme, 2025).

UNRWA employs a direct-implementation mechanism without intermediaries, granting the agency full control over the supply chain—from the receipt of goods at crossing points to storage and distribution sites within the Gaza Strip. Staff rosters are shared annually with Israeli authorities and host governments, and United Nations security personnel accompany aid convoys to ensure their protection. The agency also affirms that it maintains no

financial dealings with individuals or groups listed on international sanctions regimes (Aouf, 2024).

In this context, reinforcing the international legal framework governing humanitarian protection in Gaza emerges as a strategic imperative. As Albanese's report highlights, international law imposes both positive and negative obligations on states: the duty to prevent violations, the obligation not to recognize or assist unlawful situations, and the requirement to refrain from actions that sustain or worsen them. Yet state practice has revealed a pattern in which powerful countries not only failed to uphold their duty of prevention, but also actively contributed—directly or indirectly—to the continuation of violations through military and commercial ties with Israel. For the United Nations, the central challenge now lies in transforming these legal obligations from abstract principles into enforceable mechanisms of accountability.

The pathway to strengthening the humanitarian role of UN agencies in Palestine therefore rests on two interconnected tracks. The first is operational and field-oriented, requiring the development of stronger institutional capacities within agencies—especially UNRWA and WHO—in areas such as coordination, digital transformation, local capacity building, and sustainable financing. The second is legal and political; necessitating unified international action to hold supporting states accountable and to curb the systemic political interference that conditions humanitarian work on geopolitical calculations. At the operational level, diversifying UNRWA's funding base has become essential. The agency's recurring financial crises, exacerbated since several donors' suspended contributions following politically motivated campaigns, have threatened its ability to provide core services. Albanese's report demonstrates that the suspension of funding at the height of Gaza's humanitarian disaster amounted to a form of weaponized aid, using financial pressure to weaken the agency and undermine its ability to support more than one million refugees who depend on it. A priority for the coming period is therefore the establishment of a neutral humanitarian financing mechanism within the UN system that guarantees continuity of essential services, free from political manipulation or selective funding (United Nations, 2023).

In the health sector, WHO faces a dual challenge: saving lives in a devastated environment while navigating barriers that obstruct the entry of medical supplies. Enhancing its role requires the development of a sustainable emergency health system built on local training, the creation of independent field medical centers, and deeper collaboration with civil society and Palestinian medical organizations. The integration of digital health technologies—including telemedicine, unified electronic databases for injured and chronically ill patients, and early-warning systems for

epidemic outbreaks—could significantly transform crisis management under blockade conditions (United Nations, 2025).

On the political front, the United Nations must intensify efforts to uphold international accountability. As the Special Rapporteur emphasized, international complicity has rendered the atrocities in Gaza possible at a systemic level. Reforms to strengthen the UN's humanitarian role must therefore contend with entrenched double standards, particularly within the Security Council. The organization may need to employ alternative mechanisms—such as the Uniting for Peace resolution or General Assembly recommendations to suspend Israel's membership under Article 6 of the UN Charter—as symbolic and legal steps to restore the authority of international law and affirm the rights of victims.

Rebuilding community trust in humanitarian work is equally vital. The targeted killing of more than 190 UNRWA staff since October 2023 has produced a crisis of confidence among Gaza's population and raised existential questions about the safety and neutrality of humanitarian actors. Restoring this trust requires enhanced field protection for aid workers, secure and unhindered access for humanitarian convoys, and psychosocial support programs for both affected communities and humanitarian personnel working under conditions of extreme collective trauma (UNRWA, 2025).

In the longer term, the effectiveness of UN agencies in Gaza cannot be realized without structural reform of the international humanitarian system itself. The future of UNRWA and WHO in Gaza must be rooted in a new partnership between the United Nations and Palestinian civil society—one defined by transparency, accountability, and independence from the political dictates of great powers. Enhancing the humanitarian role of the United Nations in Palestine is not merely a matter of improving existing operational capacities; it fundamentally requires the restoration of the ethical foundations of international legitimacy. International humanitarian law must function as a binding normative framework rather than an instrument invoked selectively. The international community's failure to prevent mass atrocity or to hold complicit actors accountable undermines the very essence of the United Nations and threatens its credibility in future global crises.

## Results

The comparative analysis of UNRWA and the World Health Organization in the Gaza Strip yields several findings that illuminate the current state of international humanitarian intervention and the effectiveness of the policies and operational mechanisms employed. These results highlight institutional performance, the importance

of inter-agency coordination, and the extent to which security, political, logistical, and financial constraints shape the delivery of essential services to refugees and affected communities.

1. UNRWA demonstrated a strong capacity for institutional resilience, maintaining education, health, and relief services despite severe security restrictions and the longstanding blockade. Its ability to sustain operations under protracted crisis conditions reflects high adaptability and operational continuity.
2. The World Health Organization played a critical role in supporting the local health system, providing medical supplies, strengthening emergency response capacity, training health personnel, and addressing the needs of the most vulnerable groups, particularly in the context of widespread injuries and disease outbreaks.
3. Restrictions on the entry of essential supplies and repeated destruction of infrastructure significantly hindered aid delivery, illustrating the direct link between the security environment and the overall effectiveness of humanitarian action. These constraints complicated logistical planning and delayed life-saving interventions.
4. Both UNRWA and WHO face persistent financial pressures that undermine the sustainability of humanitarian programs and limit the capacity for long-term planning. Their operational continuity remains highly dependent on the political will and financial commitments of donor states.
5. Despite adherence to the principles of neutrality, impartiality, and independence, attempts to politicize humanitarian assistance continue to challenge the ethical foundations of field operations, eroding trust and complicating engagement with local and international stakeholders.
6. Existing coordination mechanisms—such as the Cluster Approach—have improved inter-agency collaboration, yet overlapping mandates and the multiplicity of actors occasionally lead to delays, duplication of efforts, and inefficient use of resources.
7. Strengthening agency capacities and enhancing collaboration with local authorities and civil society can substantially improve the effectiveness of

humanitarian response. Building local ownership and integrating community-based structures are vital for ensuring sustained protection and more agile crisis management.

## Recommendations

A set of practical recommendations aims to enhance UN agencies' ability to address humanitarian crises in Palestine and improve field program effectiveness while considering Gaza's political, security, and social complexities:

1. Diversify funding sources and reduce reliance on short-term emergency contributions from donor states to ensure continuity of core education, health, and relief programs, and to protect essential services from political volatility.
2. Strengthen coordination mechanisms between UN agencies and local authorities by establishing a unified data and information-sharing system that facilitates equitable resource allocation, minimizes duplication, and enhances overall operational efficiency.
3. Expand the role of the World Health Organization in supporting local hospitals and health centers, with emphasis on training medical personnel, equipping facilities to manage emergencies and epidemics, and strengthening the resilience of the health system.
4. Establish specialized rapid-response units in the key sectors of food assistance, shelter, and health care to ensure timely delivery of life-saving aid to the most vulnerable populations during escalations.
5. Adopt transparent and accountable mechanisms for humanitarian assistance, reinforcing monitoring and evaluation processes to build community trust and uphold the core principles of humanitarian action.
6. Provide sustained psychosocial support and continuous training for field staff, mitigating the effects of stress, trauma, and insecurity on their well-being and professional performance.
7. Promote deeper collaboration between local civil society, regional organizations, and international partners, fostering complementarity of efforts, expanding the reach of humanitarian interventions, and supporting sustainable recovery and capacity-building initiatives.

## Conclusion

It is clear from the results and analysis that the humanitarian crises in the Gaza Strip are an example of a complicated model of long-term crises in which humanitarian, political, economic, and human rights issues are intricately linked.

The study's findings show that the mainstay of crisis management in Gaza is the involvement of UN specialized organizations, especially in view of the Strip's prolonged siege, weak local governance institutions, and frequent waves of military escalation. Notwithstanding its shortcomings, the UN's role continues to be the most reliable framework for providing humanitarian aid and guaranteeing the civilian population a minimal quality of existence.

The World Health Organization (WHO) and UNRWA undertake different but complementary roles in handling the crises' aftermath, according to a comparison of the two organizations. While WHO plays a technical and professional role in helping the Palestinian health system and enhancing its ability to respond to health emergencies, UNRWA is the UN's principal humanitarian organization that provides education, health, and relief programs for Palestinian refugees. The study demonstrates that the degree of mutual coordination between the two agencies and the stability of foreign funds and support allotted to their activities have an impact on their efficacy.

The research does, however, also highlight a number of structural and political issues that impede the UN's effectiveness in the Gaza Strip, chief among them being persistent financing shortfalls, limits on supply and mobility, the politicization of aid, and competing donor objectives. In addition to limiting the effectiveness of humanitarian relief efforts, these difficulties also have an impact on the United Nations' credibility and its capacity to remain impartial and independent in a highly complicated combat situation. Therefore, strong international political will is needed to address these concerns in order to guarantee adherence to international humanitarian law, bolster accountability, and effectively protect humanitarian workers.

The study also highlights that strengthening the operational capacities of UN agencies in Gaza necessitates improved coordination mechanisms, including unified information platforms for resource allocation and priority setting. Enhancing the skills of local and international staff—through integrated crisis-management training that accounts for the social, economic, and psychological dimensions of displacement—is equally essential. The findings indicate that effective humanitarian response is not solely dependent on increased funding; it relies fundamentally on institutional structures capable of strategic planning and rapid adaptation to the fluid conditions of armed conflict.

The results highlight the necessity of persistent diplomatic pressure at the level of international policy to guarantee donor governments' compliance with humanitarian laws and norms, with a focus on preserving the independence

and impartiality of UN agencies functioning in the Strip. In order to improve social and economic stability, strengthen community resilience, and lessen the effects of ongoing conflicts on civilians, the study also suggests integrating humanitarian efforts with long-term development plans. This will create a sustainable framework for handling future humanitarian crises in Gaza.

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