Uncertainty ahead for UN agency's students in West Bank camp

Qalandia (AFP) – In the crowded Qalandia refugee camp, UNRWA's training centre is an island of calm where young people from the occupied West Bank master trades, but a recent Israeli ban on all cooperation with the UN agency has left the centre in limbo.



The fate of an UNRWA-run school is in limbo after Israel banned the agency from operating on its soil or coordinating with its authorities © Zain JAAFAR / AFP

On the spacious campus a stone's throw from the wall separating the West Bank and Israel, plumbers in training assemble pipes, future electricians wire circuits and carpenters hammer together roof frames.

But how long these scenes will last is an open question after Israel last month banned UNRWA, founded in 1949, from operating on Israeli soil or coordinating with Israeli authorities.

UNRWA's ban in Israel and occupied east Jerusalem has raised fears that its West Bank employees could face problems not only accessing those areas, but also moving around more generally because they would lose the ability to coordinate with the Israeli authorities manning checkpoints.

The same fears apply to visas and permits delivered by Israeli authorities.

Eighteen-year-old Ahmed Naseef, a refugee from the Jalazone camp north of nearby Ramallah, said he didn't know what he and

his classmates would do should the Qalandia training centre close as a result of the law.

“It would disrupt my fellow students. Many don’t have the financial means to go to another institute for study. Here, it’s almost free,” he told AFP during a class in which he was learning how to install lights in a room.

“We imagine that we’re setting up a bedroom and a bathroom, installing lights, outlets and power points,” said the student, who has been a trainee for two months after graduating high school.

“If it closes, I might consider going to university,” he said, adding that this had been his original intention, but his current circumstances “don’t allow for that”.

‘Left without options’

Jonathan Fowler, UNRWA spokesman in Jerusalem, warned that if some of the services were unable to continue, the socioeconomic consequences could be “potentially disastrous”.

“If these services are not able to operate… who is going to provide education for the children and the adolescents in this camp?”



A nurse at the crowded UNRWA clinic said there is no viable alternative for residents should her facility close © Zain JAAFAR / AFP

Baha Awaad, the school's principal, said it trains 350 students but cannot provide for more due to the lack of permission to expand buildings.

Asked whether the students would be able to finish their school year, Awaad admitted: "Frankly, we don't know."

"We're operating as usual, not wanting to spread fear. We reassure students that we're doing our best to continue teaching here," he said, adding that worried students had already approached him.

As for what would happen should the school close, Awaad said: "That depends. If it's a permanent closure, they'll be left without options."

Fowler said there was no sustainable alternative to his agency's varied work on such a large scale.

“You can’t just flick a switch and UNRWA disappears and someone else steps in,” he said.



Many of the West Bank’s 912,000 refugees rely on a variety of services provided by UNRWA © Zain JAAFAR / AFP

“The law is very unclear on many fronts,” he continued, so “what the intention is, how that would be operationalised is extremely uncertain”.

Tensions between UNRWA and Israel began after Israel accused about a dozen of the agency’s staff of taking part in Hamas’s unprecedented attack on southern Israel on October 7, 2023.

A series of probes found some “neutrality related issues” at UNRWA, and determined that nine employees “may have been involved” in the October 7 attack, but found no evidence for Israel’s central allegations.

Clinics, schools

A quarter of the West Bank's 912,000 refugees live in 19 camps, according to UNRWA, and many rely on a variety of services provided by the agency's 3,800 West Bank staff.

One such recipient, teenager Naseef, graduated from an UNRWA school and received health care from one of its clinics.



The principal of an UNRWA school says she doesn't know if her students will be able to finish the school year © Zain JAAFAR / AFP

In his camp, he said, "the situation is especially hard for the clinic, which many people rely on for medications and treatments. If it shuts down, they'll be cut off."

Back in Qalandia camp's narrow alleys, among murals of deceased Palestinian fighters, a nurse at the crowded UNRWA clinic said there was no viable alternative for residents should her facility close.

At the nearby UNRWA primary school for girls, headmaster Rana Nabhan said she “doesn’t know” whether her students will finish off the school year.

Unaware of the challenges, a crowd of giggling schoolgirls run around in bright-coloured bibs during gym class, bringing the courtyard to life.

Just over their shoulders is another mural in Arabic: “I love my beautiful school,” it reads.

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