

MP-IDSA *Commentary*

Türkiye's Expanding Engagement with UNRWA

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S*ummary*

Türkiye is expanding its support for UNRWA, leveraging humanitarian aid as a tool of regional diplomacy and soft power.

Türkiye is expanding its support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) against the backdrop of persisting Israel–Hammas tensions and declining US backing for the agency. Ankara is leveraging humanitarian aid as a tool of regional diplomacy and soft power.

UNRWA, established in 1949 by the UN General Assembly, is mandated to provide assistance and protection to registered Palestinian refugees across its five fields of operation—the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Its core services include education, health care, people, microfinance, and relief and social services. UNRWA operates schools, clinics, food distribution centres and community programmes, supporting around 5.9 million registered refugees.¹

On 30 January 2025, Israel’s ban on the UNRWA came into effect following allegations of ties to Hamas.² The Knesset passed the ‘Law for the Cessation of UNRWA Activities in the State of Israel’ on 28 October 2024, with a margin of 92-10, alleging UNRWA staff involvement in the 7 October Hamas attack and charging it with the use of agency facilities for terror activities. Israeli officials have accused UNRWA schools of inciting anti-Israeli sentiment. Consequently, Israel ordered UNRWA to “vacate all premises in occupied East Jerusalem and cease its operations in them by 30 January 2025”.³

Israel’s Supreme Court rejected a petition filed by human rights organisations, namely Adalah and Gisha, against the ban, clarifying that the ban on UNRWA applies only within Israel’s sovereign territory, including East Jerusalem, but not in the West Bank or Gaza.⁴ The United States government, meanwhile, through an executive order issued on 4 February 2025, articulated its concerns regarding the functioning of the UNRWA and ceased all funding to the agency.⁵

Türkiye’s Support for UNRWA

Türkiye has strongly condemned Israel’s decision to ban UNRWA operations, calling it a clear violation of international law and part of broader efforts to displace

¹ [“Where We Work”](#), United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA).

² [“Israel Cuts Ties With UNRWA Over Links With Terror Groups, As Ban Comes Into Effect”](#), *The Times of Israel*, 30 January 2025.

³ [“The Government Of Israel Orders UNRWA To Vacate Its Premises In Occupied East Jerusalem And Cease Operations In Them”](#), UNRWA, 26 January 2025.

⁴ [“Israel’s Supreme Court Rejects Request to Suspend Implementation of Laws Aimed at Shutting Down UNRWA Operations”](#), *Adalah*, 29 January 2025.

⁵ [“Withdrawing The United States From And Ending Funding To Certain United Nations Organizations And Reviewing United States Support To All International Organizations”](#), The White House, 4 February 2025.

Palestinians and undermine their right of return.⁶ Emphasising UNRWA’s vital humanitarian role since its establishment, Türkiye urged the international community to support the agency and contribute to regional peace.

Ankara’s foreign policy in recent years is affirming its commitment to both UNRWA and the rights of the Palestinian people. On 23 June 2025, Türkiye and UNRWA signed a formal agreement to establish an UNRWA office within Turkish territory.⁷ The accord was signed on the sidelines of the 51st Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) Council of Foreign Ministers meeting held in Istanbul on 21–22 June 2025.

UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini acknowledged Türkiye’s strategic commitment to establishing an UNRWA office in Ankara, emphasising that this initiative would facilitate the agency’s efforts to broaden its political and financial support network.⁸ Lazzarini further acknowledged the Turkish government’s enhanced humanitarian contributions to UNRWA during the ongoing conflict, which comprised both direct funding for critical operations and wheat flour provisions for Gaza’s population.

Speaking to the OIC’s Foreign Ministers in Istanbul on 21 June 2025, Türkiye’s President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan specified that establishing an UNRWA office in Ankara would strengthen Türkiye’s institutional support for the agency.⁹ Erdoğan emphasised UNRWA’s essential function in Palestinian refugee assistance and warned against allowing Israeli actions to undermine the organisation’s operations. He remarked that the OIC “must not allow UNRWA, which plays an irreplaceable role in terms of taking care of Palestinian refugees, to be paralysed by Israel”.¹⁰

Erdoğan urged OIC member states to provide comprehensive financial and moral backing to UNRWA to counter what he characterised as Israeli interference with the agency’s mandate. The emphasis on collective support among Muslim-majority states reflects Türkiye’s long-standing use of Islamic solidarity as a foreign policy tool, particularly within OIC forums, to reinforce its image as a moral and political leader in the Islamic world.

By offering operational space to UNRWA, Türkiye is attempting to position itself as a dependable ally of the Palestinian cause while simultaneously projecting leadership

⁶ [**“No: 26, Regarding Israel’s Decision to Ban the Activities of UNRWA in the Occupied Palestinian Territories”**](#), Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, 30 January 2025.

⁷ [**“UNRWA and Türkiye Sign Host Country Agreement”**](#), UNRWA, 23 June 2025.

⁸ [**“UNRWA and Türkiye Sign Host Country Agreement”**](#), United Nations, 23 June 2025.

⁹ [**“Erdogan Says UNRWA To Open Office In Turkey, Calls For More Support For Agency”**](#), *Reuters*, 21 June 2025.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

within the Muslim world. This move aligns with Ankara’s sharp criticism of Israel’s conduct in the Gaza war and its broader pro-Palestinian stance. The Turkish government framed this as a humanitarian necessity, especially given the deteriorating situation in Gaza and the collapse of traditional funding structures. Yet, it also reflects Ankara’s foreign policy strategy of leveraging crises to assert itself as a central actor in regional diplomacy. In effect, Israel’s rejection of UNRWA created an opportunity that Türkiye was quick to occupy, reinforcing its image as a guardian of Palestinian rights and a challenger of Western and Israeli narratives on the refugee issue.

Türkiye’s Financial Contributions to UNRWA

Table 1 shows that Türkiye’s financial support to the UNRWA has been consistent in recent years. From 2018 to 2024, Türkiye has not only maintained its position as one of the agency’s top 20 donors, but has also demonstrated a rising trajectory in the scale and rank of its contributions, indicative of a sustained humanitarian commitment as well as geopolitical and ideological signalling.

Table 1. Türkiye’s Contribution to UNRWA

Year	Total Contribution (US\$)	Relative Ranking
2024	41,187,326	12
2023	22,103,820	15
2022	25,199,080	10
2021	20,471,544	13
2020	20,561,025	13
2019	11,099,308	18
2018	18,774,000	16

Source: Compiled from [UNRWA](#) donor charts.

Notably, Türkiye’s total contribution increased from approximately US\$ 18.77 million in 2018 to over US\$ 41.18 million in 2024, more than doubling over the seven-year period. The 2018 entry into the top-20 donors (16th place) corresponds with the

broader international funding crisis following the United States’ withdrawal of support from UNRWA,¹¹ in the aftermath of which Türkiye pledged an additional US\$ 10 million as emergency aid.¹² Since then, annual contributions have largely hovered above US\$ 20 million, demonstrating not just sporadic generosity but a systematic elevation of funding levels. Even in 2019, arguably the lowest point in this dataset, Türkiye still maintained a top-20 position (18th) with over US\$ 11 million in aid.

Türkiye’s annual contributions stand in contrast to the irregular support of countries such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates, especially with respect to the top 20 donor positions on the UNRWA list.¹³ For instance, Saudi Arabia, which was the 3rd largest donor in 2019 and 7th in 2020, dropped to 17th in 2023 before climbing to 11th place in 2024. Qatar showed similar volatility, ranking 8th in 2019, then falling to 20th in 2022 before rising sharply to 6th in 2024. Kuwait has not maintained a stable trajectory, being in 18th place in 2021, 19th in 2022, and 15th in 2024.

Similarly, the UAE, despite being the 7th largest donor in 2019, dropped out of the top 20 rankings in subsequent years, reappearing only at 19th position in 2023. Iraq, meanwhile, only entered the top 20 list in 2024 at 16th position, indicating a more recent but limited commitment. Apart from these, there are no other West Asian countries among the top-20 donors to UNRWA from 2018 to 2024.

These fluctuations suggest that political declarations of solidarity with the Palestinian cause by some Gulf States have not been matched by consistent and substantial financial commitments to UNRWA. Türkiye, by contrast, has aligned its political advocacy with institutionalised financial backing. This is unlike several West Asian states whose support spikes in moments of crisis or emergency need.

Conclusion

The increased political, institutional and financial support to UNRWA aligns with Türkiye’s broader regional ambitions. With declining US backing for UNRWA and growing normalisation between Arab states and Israel, Türkiye is positioning itself as a counterweight and defender of Palestinian rights. This also reflects Ankara’s desire to expand its influence in multilateral Islamic forums and challenge rival regional powers ideologically. In contrast to many West Asian powers whose

¹¹ Peter Beaumont and Oliver Holmes, “[US Confirms End to Funding for UN Palestinian Refugees](#)”, *The Guardian*, 31 August 2018.

¹² “[No: 153, Press Release Regarding Turkey’s Additional Contribution of 10 million USD to UNRWA in support of Palestine Refugees](#)”, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Türkiye, 31 May 2018.

¹³ “[Funding Trends](#)”, UNRWA, July 2025.

contributions to UNRWA remain inconsistent, Türkiye’s approach demonstrates how material commitments can enhance political credibility, with the opening of the office of UNRWA in Ankara being the latest step in this regard.

Türkiye’s expanding engagement with UNRWA serves multiple foreign policy objectives that extend beyond humanitarian support. By institutionalising its commitment through funding, advocacy and hosting a representative office, Türkiye is attempting to project itself as a defender of Palestinian rights at a time when many traditional donors are withdrawing support. This reinforces Ankara’s credentials in the Muslim world and within the OIC, bolstering its influence among Arab publics and Islamic constituencies.

At the same time, Türkiye’s actions reflect its specific pursuit of humanitarian diplomacy, allowing it to contest Israel’s narratives, challenge Western disengagement, and differentiate itself from Gulf actors whose support has fluctuated. Hosting the UNRWA office in Ankara also elevates Türkiye’s multilateral role and provides Ankara with greater institutional visibility in humanitarian governance. Taken together, Türkiye’s increasing engagement with UNRWA is an attempt by Ankara to consolidate its regional leadership aspirations, enhance its soft power image, and reinforce its identity as a norm-setting middle power in the present regional order.

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