

Center for Strategic and International Studies

TRANSCRIPT

Event

**“The End of UNRWA? Then What?—Gaza: The Human Toll”**

DATE

**Tuesday, November 19, 2024 at 8:00 a.m. ET**

FEATURING

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*Deputy Humanitarian Coordinator and Director of UNRWA Affairs in Gaza, United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees*

**Dahlia Scheindlin**

*Political Analyst and Columnist, Haaretz; Author, “The Crooked Timber of Democracy in Israel”*

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J. Stephen Morrison:

Good morning, good afternoon, good evening. I'm J. Stephen Morrison, senior vice president here at the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C., where I direct the CSIS global health work.

This is the 21st episode of our series here at CSIS Gaza: The Human Toll. Today's episode is focused on "The End of UNRWA? Then What?"

This is a production of the CSIS Bipartisan Alliance for Global Health Security. We carry out this work in collaboration with our partners here at CSIS, with Jon Alterman, who's with me here today, senior vice president and director of the CSIS Middle East Program; and Michelle Strucke, director of the CSIS Humanitarian Agenda and Human Rights Initiative. She can't be with us today.

Purpose of this series is pretty simple; it's to hear firsthand from experts in Gaza and the region who have accurate on-the-ground insights and knowledge as to what is happening in the unfolding health and humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

Special thanks to my colleague Sophia Hirshfield, who coordinates this series; and to our production team, in particular Alex Brunner and Dwayne Gladden.

We're joined today by two special guests, each of whom has kindly in the past appeared on earlier episodes.

We'll be – we'll be hearing momentarily and initially from Scott Anderson, who's the deputy humanitarian coordinator and director of UNRWA affairs in Gaza. He's served one way – in one form or another in the West Bank and in Gaza for 17 years. He's a retired major in the U.S. Army, 21 years of service.

We're also joined by Dahlia Scheindlin, political analyst and columnist at Haaretz, author of "The Crooked Timber of Democracy in Israel." She is a public opinion researcher and political advisor who's worked on eight national campaigns in Israel and in 15 other countries.

We'll be hearing – we'll be hearing momentarily from each of them. We've asked them to prepare some opening remarks, eight or 10 minutes of remarks, and then we'll have – that'll be followed by a conversation among them and Jon and myself. First, some brief framing remarks.

We started this series almost exactly one year ago, on November 13th, 2023, five weeks after the October 7 Hamas massacre of 1,200 in Israel and the seizure of 251 hostages. That triggered the subsequent invasion

of Gaza by the Israeli military and the escalation – a cross-border escalation of violence involving Hezbollah and others.

The video and transcripts from this series are posted on the CSIS homepage, where you can find them.

Today, more than a year into the war, Gaza's home to unspeakable suffering and trauma. One hundred hostages remain. Talks to bring about a ceasefire, release of hostages and prisoners/detainees, and a pathway to recovery have collapsed. There's no defined end state to this war. Hamas continues cynically to use civilians as shields and infiltrate institutions and residential areas. It appears to maximize the suffering of the Palestinian population as a tactic of war. Israel continues to engage in widespread and often indiscriminate bombing and destruction of civilian areas; and systematically block access to water, medicine, power, and food. In most recent months, the health and humanitarian situation has reached a new nadir as access has deteriorated, flows of aid have become a trickle, fighting and forced evacuations have escalated.

Many of the numbers are quite familiar: 43,000 Gazans confirmed dead, a mix of armed militants and civilians; over 70 percent of that number women and children. Over 103,000 severely injured. Thousands missing in the rubble. Twenty-five thousand severely injured by bombardment now missing limbs and requiring lifelong care. An estimated 15,000 await medical evacuations. Dangers abound on many fronts – malnutrition and threat of famine, spread of infectious disease including polio, collapse of clean water and sanitation, disruption of schooling of 660,000 students.

There has been some modest positive news of late. The second round of polio campaign was completed November 5th – 94 percent coverage of under-10-year-old children. Some gaps, however, in the north – some serious gaps in the north in the areas of most intense fighting.

There have been some very important recent developments that have put a new light on this. The U.N. Independent Commission came out just recently and presented its findings to the U.N. General Assembly. The baseline conclusion the attacks – Israeli attacks on the health sector constitute a war crime. This has become a familiar refrain in U.N. circles.

The Famine Review Committee came out with its most recent review. Food supply across the territory has sharply deteriorated in areas of the northern Gaza Strip. We should assume starvation, malnutrition, excess mortality all rapidly increasing. Quote/unquote, "Famine thresholds have already been crossed or will be in the near future."

Much attention here in Washington has been focused on the letter sent by Secretaries Blinken and Austin October 13th to their counterparts in the Israeli government enumerating 15 concrete areas where they were looking for progress and evidence of progress in a 30-day window to avoid scale back or conditionality on arms.

Right as that 30-day deadline approached a group of eight American aid groups – American and European aid groups issued a scorecard. So this was led by Refugees International and included Save the Children, Oxfam, the Norwegian Refugee Council.

They looked at 19 dimensions. They built on the 15 enumerated in the Austin-Blinken letter and concluded that in all but four of those 19 categories there had been no progress. They concluded Israel not only failed to meet the U.S. criteria that would indicate support to the humanitarian response but concurrently took actions that dramatically worsened the situation on the ground.

The Biden administration shortly thereafter did issue a decision that they would not withhold aid and that enough progress had been made at that – by the 30-day deadline. That drew quite a strong response in various places, in Washington and elsewhere.

So today what are we doing? We're here to discuss UNRWA. The U.N. Relief and Works Agency created in 1949 care for three-quarters of a million refugees who fled Israel's 1948 War of Independence.

Two laws were passed by the Knesset on October 28th that have created an existential crisis for UNRWA. One is – one ends the 1967 cooperation agreement that provided UNRWA with protection – rights of movement, mobility, and diplomatic immunity. So those have ended.

A second dimension was to end operations on Israeli territory in cooperation and contact with – in a 90-day timeline, which would put us into late January. These actions pose questions. Is UNRWA soon to have no choice but to cease operations in Gaza and the West Bank, and if so what will that mean and are there alternatives to that option and, if so, what?

UNRWA is the backbone today to the humanitarian response, care of displaced, provision of health, food, and education. One-third of the polio vaccinators came from UNRWA. One point nine million displaced persons are served with emergency shelter. One point six million receive health care. Other U.N. and international NGOs are dependent upon UNRWA for its logistical networks.

This action by the Knesset is part of a broader and escalating confrontation and tension between the Israeli government and the United Nations. In some respects, they're playing chicken with one another, and they're battling through the media, through campaigns – diplomatic campaigns, media campaigns – and on the ground. And in this process, neither is coming up with a concrete alternative to UNRWA at this moment in time.

The U.N. is responding with solidarity towards UNRWA, but it's not coming up with operational alternatives. It's pointing back to the Israeli government as having responsibility for that. The U.N. is really in a bind here in terms of thinking practically about what is possible. Authority rests with the U.N. General Assembly, the U.N. Security Council. So we have – we're not seeing action in that front.

The Israeli government has had a special longstanding opposition to UNRWA, feeling that UNRWA's existence perpetuates the refugee crisis over multiple generations. It's raised objections to Hamas being embedded within its infrastructure. There's a strong – as we'll hear, there's a strong domestic political consensus in support of this legislation. Prime Minister Netanyahu has final word on the implementation plan. The Israeli government is not taking responsibility for creating the operational new alternatives.

So where does this – we're going to be talking today about where does this leave things. Is indeed UNRWA at a moment where it will soon have to cease operations? And we're staring at the question, at a void as to what might happen. What will the – what will the consequences be? Are there – will we be creating a new catastrophe on top of this existing catastrophe?

The U.S. elections here undercut the leverage and credibility of the Biden administration, whatever it had prior to that point, the incoming Trump administration throwing its weight behind the Netanyahu government. We can assume, as of January 20th, as these actions come into force, the U.S. government will not have much political – as much political injury – energy – or bring the same level of intensity and resources to the humanitarian crisis in Gaza.

So we're staring at a very difficult and complicated situation here. And we've asked Scott and Dahlia to offer their reflections on where we are, where this might lead, and if there are solutions that we could be thinking about.

So thank you. I'm going to start with Scott and ask you to lead things off.

Thank you for taking time out of such a busy schedule to be with us again. Thank you, Scott.

Scott Anderson: Thank you and good afternoon. It's a pleasure to join you today.

Indeed, UNRWA has been the one constant for Palestine refugees for 75 years, since the creation in 1949. Throughout many trials and tribulations that the refugee community has faced, UNRWA has been the one constant that has been there to provide lifesaving services for them.

This humanitarian crisis in Gaza is unparalleled. I first came to Gaza in 2008, so I've seen this, my fourth conflict here. And this one is unlike the other three, certainly. We're now in 13 months of conflict. It's devastated the infrastructure, where two thirds of buildings destroyed or damaged; decimated livelihoods. The vast bulk of the population is now unemployed. And it's left the entirety of the population, half of whom are children, completely reliant on aid for their survival.

UNRWA has been the backbone of the humanitarian response throughout the crisis. We provide two thirds of all primary health care. We provide food to half the population, provide psychosocial support to over 700,000 people including over half a million children. But despite all those efforts, our resources are stretched quite thin and food security for the population remains very much a challenge.

The cost of this has been staggering. As you said, over 40,000 people have died. Within that, over 13,000 children were killed. Famine is booming according to the most recent IPC report. And 1.9 million people, or nearly the entire population, are displaced. Most of them have been displaced multiple times.

And unfortunately, Gaza has become a war of superlatives – most dangerous place to be a child, most dangerous place to be a humanitarian aid worker, and it's the most dangerous place in the world for children to try to learn. And it's more than just a humanitarian crisis. It's a collapse of moral responsibility.

Now, should UNRWA be unable to continue when the laws go into effect – and I think it's 67 days from today, which is January 28th – we already face critical funding gaps. Most countries that stopped funding early in the year have returned. We've been unable to import aid like many of the rest of the humanitarian community. And even before the bills went into effect, we faced challenges leading missions in the north, and we weren't able to import our own cargo from Ashdod. It has to be consigned under another agency. In the West Bank – and I don't have a lot of knowledge there – but I do know that our staff are not allowed to

interact with Israeli authorities, but a lot of logistical coordination does happen through the World Food Programme.

Solo missions are basically not going to happen now for UNRWA. We have to do these within an interagency context. And we expect that as the progression to the bills taking effect goes forward, we will continue to see constraints put on us.

You know, to avoid the collapse of UNRWA and potentially the collapse of the humanitarian response in Gaza, what is needed is a freeze on the implementation of the bills. If there is to be a transition, then it needs to be well planned, well documented, and UNRWA should be – should be part of that. And lastly, funding needs to continue so we can continue the lifesaving interventions that we are doing in Gaza.

You know, Gaza logistically is probably the easiest response in the world. It's 50 kilometers or so from Ashdod to Kerem Shalom. And inside Gaza, it's 20 kilometers, give or take, along a very flat road. With the complete lack of law and order, those 20 kilometers inside Gaza become very daunting. And this is really no longer about logistics; it's about political will, and ensuring that some sort of enabling environment exists for the humanitarian community to function inside Gaza, and to bring aid in at the correct scale needed to meet all the basic necessities of the – of the population.

But above all that, the thing that's needed the most is a ceasefire. There's over a hundred hostages still in Gaza that need to be reunited with their families. They're probably living in conditions I cannot even begin to imagine. But for anything else to take place, first and foremost a ceasefire must happen and the hostages must go home.

Now, should Gaza collapse – and it's – currently, if the bills are implemented as we understand, not only would UNRWA be unable to coordinate with Israel and with COGAT, but anybody coordinating on behalf of UNRWA would no longer be able to do that either. What that would create is for UNRWA an unacceptable security environment. International staff would no longer be in Gaza, and that would risk the collapse of the entire operation.

In addition to the services that we provide to the refugee community and to others affected by the conflict, we also provide services to the entire humanitarian community. We do all the fuel collection, storage, and distribution for all partners across Gaza, which includes some private sector like the banking and the limited telecommunications that do exist. And once the conflict does end, over 300,000 children will have nowhere to go to school. The 63 percent or 66 percent – two-thirds – of

the primary health-care services would not be implemented. And when we talk about primary health care, we're talking about things that could be lifesaving for people. We give insulin to diabetics, hypertension drugs to people with high blood pressure. Midwives look at pregnant women. And most importantly, if UNRWA goes away, people would look at something that they had lost, the refugee community.

And you know, WFP certainly could deliver food for 2 million people, but where would they be in terms of community acceptance? We rely on community acceptance as our means of security. If security goes away, then the entire U.N. could go away.

And UNRWA does play a role in the larger region, not only in Gaza and West Bank but we also operate in Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan. Without UNRWA and the services we provide, it could lead to increased extremism as a generation grows without opportunities. You know, I listened to a brief today, and just to meet the growing population in Gaza there would need to be growth in the economy of 3 percent a year. That's just to maintain current levels of unemployment. There's a lot of work to do once this conflict ends.

You know, the challenge, I think, that we all face is UNRWA is unique within the United Nations in that we directly implement services. WHO doesn't run clinics or hospitals; they advise governments how to run clinics and hospitals. UNICEF doesn't run schools directly; they work through ministries of education to help train teachers, to help develop curriculum. And within their respective mandates they're excellent, but this is far outside what they normally do.

Now, as we try to look forward and plan within the U.N., right now it's very hard to plan for UNRWA past January, especially in Gaza and the West Bank. We are still focused on resilience. We're still focused on the lifesaving interventions that we provide across the region. And we are now in a phase where four of our five fields are in very unstable environments or environments where conflict is ongoing.

Long-term sustainability in the region is going to require consistent political and financial support, not just for UNRWA but for everyone providing services to the community here. UNRWA is a stabilizing force for the region, and a lifeline for the refugees and for the community, and we remain the backbone of the operation in Gaza.

So I would close with saying that UNRWA's role is really irreplaceable. There is no plan B besides the PA in a larger, I guess, political context that would need to move forward when we look at political solutions. But most importantly, above all this, as I said earlier, what's needed is a



ceasefire, for the hostages to return home to their families, and for people in Gaza to begin rebuilding their lives.

Well, thank you again for the opportunity to join the conversation, and I'll end there.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you very much, Scott.

Over to you, Dahlia.

Dahlia Scheindlin: Hi. And thank you both for hosting me again.

I'm going to give a little bit of background to how this issue has evolved in Israel over time. And I think, you know, in order – well, in order to set the stage for what happened with this – with these laws and where we can expect them to go and what the Israeli government might have in mind after that, the first thing to remember is that this is not a new issue in Israel. Israel's accusations against UNRWA go back years – years. I mean, I can't put a start date on it, but they go far back and they are deeply political. The claims that Israel makes against UNRWA are entirely about UNRWA's – what they perceive as UNRWA's political role.

Primarily, you know, when Scott said that Israel accuses UNRWA of perpetuating the Palestinian situation, that's really just a part of it. They do make that accusation on a logistical level by sustaining people in refugee camps, et cetera, but it's more at the level – I think the deeper issue for Israel is that they believe that UNRWA has perpetuated the concept of right of return, teaches the concept of right of return, particularly to inside sovereign areas of Israel, which is something that is very controversial. And of course, there's a U.N. resolution, 194, which provides for that right of return, and it – nevertheless, it's never been accepted by Israel. And so they see UNRWA as kind of the conduit for teaching generations of Palestinians that they will be returning to sovereign Israel, which Israel sees as a threat to its existence. UNRWA is a linchpin in that campaign, from the Israeli perspective. So the – it's part of – even the attacks against UNRWA over the years have been part of Israel's longer-term campaign against the concept of Palestinian right of return. That is the real issue behind – that has been driving – the accusations against UNRWA for a long time.

Now, in addition to that, you have – you know, part of the argument is that UNRWA is a unique organization. It doesn't fall under the other U.N. agency for the protection of refugees simply because it was created separately. But all of that is lost in the Israeli discourse. They claim it's a unique organization because it fulfills what Israel sees as this unique role that is undermining Israel politically.

So the attacks go far back and they have been fleshed out by numerous actors. It's not just one government and one particular minister. It's not just right-wing governments. Just as an example, there's a book that came out, must be about seven or eight – six or seven years ago now, called "The War of Return" – "The War of Return," which sort of outlines all the reasons why right of return is not legitimate in the eyes of the Israeli authors, and UNRWA has a starring role in making the case for why right of return is unacceptable. So, again, these attacks go way back and they far preceded the war.

Now, what happened during the war, of course, is that the Israeli government found further ammunition by the evidence that certain employees of UNRWA were involved in the attacks, and so that became, you know, I think a major public issue which simply, you know, fed into this long-term – these long-term accusations.

I think that the reason why we know that these attacks were primarily political, however, over the years, and not really focused on the material problem of whether people were engaged or, you know – or whether there was overlap between Hamas or infiltration of Hamas, I mean, that would be considered an empirical problem – and I'm not, you know, taking a position on here – here on how extensive and how much of that there was, because I can't claim to have the evidence – but the evidence that we have – that Israel's – the threats were more political than they were based on those kinds of accusations is that all of those years, when UNRWA was at the heart of the Israeli accusations, the government didn't take any action like it is now. In other words, for most of this time the Israeli government did not see the need to actually take action to dismantle UNRWA or prevent its activities, which makes it sound like, you know, in practice the Israeli government knew that UNRWA provided these critical services that nobody else was there to do.

Now, I think what happened is that during the war – I don't think this was a plan that was in place, you know, on October 6th or even on October 7th. I think that quickly after the attacks of October 7th the – within, you know, some number of months, the Israeli government developed an opportunistic sense of, you know, that there was no limit to what they could do in Gaza politically, right? So, you know, the military campaign was ongoing, but it's members of the government who have been openly stating their intention to change the political status of Gaza. And frankly, you know, what I mean is annexation. And how do I know this? Not because I made it up, but because they say it quite openly. At this point there have been, you know, numerous very, very public statements by certainly far-right settler leaders, but including ministers in the government.

I would date my observation of what the government intends to do and where UNRWA fits in back to January 2024. That's when the Israeli minister of finance, Bezalel Smotrich – who is a key coalition member; he's also got a ministerial position in the Defense Ministry that effectively advances annexation in the West Bank – he began making statements that the IDF should take over humanitarian aid in Gaza. But I think in January not too many people paid attention to it, but he said it very clearly that he wanted that to happen in order for there to be a basis for what was eventually going to be a military government that would be established. That's a stepping stone towards the West Bank, right – the situation of the West Bank, which was the situation in Gaza prior to the Oslo Accords and the – and eventually the disengagement of 2005, which is that there would be reestablishment of a military government that is essentially an occupying – you know, an occupying force, theoretically conveyed as a temporary occupying force but which has become, we see in the West Bank, permanent over time. And so at the time I don't think too many people took it seriously, but the fact is that that minister has been advocating this nonstop ever since. And what we've seen over the last roughly two months is that the idea has gained traction within the government.

And so I see that, you know, the actions against UNRWA fit into this. There has been – you know, I think much of the observation of the laws that were passed is that, you know, what is – what is the alternative going to be? Which other international organization does Israel expect to step in and do that? Speculation: Is it going to be the U.N. High Commissioner on Refugees? Is it going to be, you know, other U.N. agencies – the World Food Programme or World Health Organization? Who can – other international organizations? But I think that we're missing the piece that, you know, again, senior figures of the Israeli government are saying quite openly, that it must be the IDF who takes over humanitarian aid. The reports that we're getting over the last couple of months is that not only has the idea gained some traction within the government, but the prime minister has considered it; the Cabinet has approved, you know, that the IDF would begin looking into the possibilities of how that would be done, and even preparing to do so.

Now, it's hard to know any more than that to what extent the IDF is actually making such plans. And the reason is that the IDF, when I've inquired about this, has said, no, that only the prime minister's office is in charge of that kind of thing. So everybody's trying to, you know, pass the information or pass the responsibility on to somebody else.

But what I will say is that the IDF does not want to do it. As far as we

know, the security establishment in general has been, you know, quite publicly at odds with the political level over these long-term intentions. The IDF, for professional and security reasons, does not think it's a good idea for Israel to permanently occupy Gaza and, you know, annex and rebuild Jewish settlements. And you know, it's the army that would be the first step towards that process, and they are not happy about that role. So we know that there is somewhat of a disagreement. We don't know how extensive it is or if – even if the plans are seeing this.

And I want to just say one more thing about to what extent we expect this to be implemented. I mean, the law is pretty clear. I think at first even I thought that the law was a little bit more show than – you know, than reality because it was – it specifically stated that UNRWA wouldn't be able to operate in sovereign areas, which, you know, I felt at first to be amorphous about that kind of thing. But you know, Israel does not even consider itself formally sovereign over the West Bank and Gaza. However, I think that the structure of UNRWA and how it operates and what Scott's explained to us and the level of communication that it needs with Israeli authorities makes that not a particularly relevant limitation.

The other thing that the law includes is after the 90-day period it stipulates that there is a mechanism within the National Security Council who has to actively report on how well the law is being implemented. So, I mean, Israel has a history of passing laws that are a little bit more for show than reality, but I think the fact that that – it includes that mechanism signifies a level of intent to actually implement it. I don't expect the law to be frozen at – you know, in the past we had, for example, the law on regularization of settlements that even Israel considers to be illegal that was passed in 2017. The attorney general did freeze the implementation and eventually it was overturned by the Supreme Court. I don't see that happening in this case. I haven't heard of any appeals. I haven't found any. I was trying to find out if there are but I think it would have been clear by now. I have not heard of petitions being submitted to the high court against this and anything from the attorney general indicating that that might be a possibility.

It's also worth remembering the attorney general right now is under a severe, unrelenting attack from the government over other issues. They want to dismiss her. It's very unlikely for the reasons that I mentioned before about the longer-term accusations against UNRWA, that the attorney general would make this some sort of a pause, you know, given the sensitivity of her position right now.

And so, you know, it's hard to predict that this will – you know, I was asked to answer is this the end of UNRWA. I can't really predict that but

I do think that we need to see it in the context of the Israeli government's political aims, going forward, and resting on the case that it's built within practically a consensus in Israeli society against UNRWA, going back years before.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you.

Scott, before we turn to Jon, any thoughts on what we just heard from Dahlia?

Mr. Anderson: Right. Maybe just one or maybe just a couple of things.

You know, first, for over 20 years UNRWA has given our entire staff list to the government of Israel. It's a long-standing requirement and we've done that and – I mean, I don't know what was done with it but we never heard much back is all I will say.

Second, you did talk about the right of return and this is not something UNRWA uniquely teaches. We teach the curriculum that the Palestinian Authority develops. If UNRWA stops teaching that will not stop that teaching.

And just, lastly, to say the right of return was enacted a year before UNRWA was created. They are not in any way linked. Similarly, the refugee status of people is not linked to UNRWA's existence either. It's much different and I think that some of that is often lost in the larger discussion around UNRWA and the role that we play within the services we provide to the community and that we do keep certain things alive.

I think it's a bit overstated but that's just my opinion. Thank you.

Dr. Morrison: And, Dahlia, I did hear that the AG is doing a review and I also heard that the prime minister has the right to approve or – approve the implementation plan or modify it. In other words, there's at least those two possibilities in which there could be reconsideration of the pace and focus and actual, you know, concrete details of the implementation.

So that – I see those two things as important.

Ms. Scheindlin: What I was trying to say about various controversial laws in Israel is that we've had, you know, unfortunately, a deterioration of the quality of the legislative process over recent years and a lot of times there's legislation that's passed, you know, primarily for the – frankly, the domestic publicity element.

And so we've seen in some cases that they're not implemented with any

– you know, with – in serious ways, or they can definitely be – there can be a sort of political decision, more or less formal, mostly less formal – just don't need to do very much with them. And I think one example is the nation-state law, which is a basic law that was passed in 2018 that essentially creates a higher – constitutionally defined a higher status for the Jewish population and everybody else is of a sort of lower status. But – and it even stipulates in a few areas, for example, that it formally kind of demotes the Arabic language. So this was a huge controversy with protests – justifiably so – because it is a formal, you know, two-tiered status within Israeli society right now. However, there's not much that's been done that actually implements it. It hasn't been used very often in court cases, for example, to try to back policies of inequality.

It's just – I mean, I don't want to diminish it because I think it's a real stain on Israel's constitutional makeup such as it is, given that they don't have a formal constitution. But I'm giving that as an example for the fact that if there is – you know, if the prime minister does decide that this is not in Israel's interest to actually, you know, go forward with this at the pace or at the level to the extent that it possibly could it's a possibility that this won't be implemented in a serious way.

And I think in – you know, if it had been passed not in the context of the current war, I probably would have said this is the kind of legislation of that type that's being used more as part of, you know, the populist kind of signaling and outbidding among far-right-wing communities in Israel, which – again, we've seen then with many kinds of laws that are being – or, bills that are being discussed right now. There's, you know, numerous other examples.

You know, just to give you a few, there are bills being discussed that would ban certain kinds of Arab parties from running for Knesset or for deporting Arab citizens – that one has actually been passed if they're found to be connected to terror but in very, very broad and undefined ways – all sorts of things that we don't know if they will actually be implemented, and probably not. But some of them are being legislated. Some of them will never go into law. And some of them are – have passed into law and are still not implemented in significant ways. If this was passed before and not in the context of the current war, I probably would have said it was one of those.

I think, to my mind, the political framework that changed everything is these open statements coming from senior figures in the Israeli government who are advocating annexation and rebuilding settlements, coupled with what we've seen north of Gaza, which is, you know, vast damage that involves essentially clearing the area of as many citizens as – civilians as possible and destroying the infrastructure so thoroughly

that it's like laying the groundwork for a first stage of annexation.

So between these open statements, many of them heated statements from senior Israeli government figures, and the actions we see on the ground, I think that I'm – you know, if we have to guess, and it is speculation, how this law or might not be implemented, I think this raises the possibility that it will be implemented in more serious ways. But it also depends on how long the war goes on.

And that certainly speaks to Scott's point about, you know, if there is a ceasefire, then the opportunism, that that opportunity that the far right sees for advancing plans like establishing a military government in Gaza, maybe beginning with IDF taking over humanitarian aid, there's not that much of an opportunity to do that. Those things take time to plan. If there is no ceasefire any time soon, if the war drags on, I see already how much, you know, progress has been made with what seemed like an unthinkable idea back in January 2024. And it's already, you know, reaching much higher levels and being taken much more seriously. So I think it really does depend on whether the war ends or not.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you.

Jon.

Jon. B Alterman: First, to set a little bit of context, Israel is still a traumatized society after October 7th. If you think back to the United States after 9/11, we went into Iraq 18 months after 9/11 and the country was still, I think, very much seized with the events. Dahlia can speak with much more granularity than I can, but my sense is that Israelis still feel profoundly vulnerable, profoundly injured.

I think, because of that, there is this deep sense that I've perceived when I've read the Israeli press – and I think Dahlia would probably agree – that there's a way in which UNRWA is providing aid and comfort to the enemy and that the act – what I think a lot of people outside see as necessary humanitarian assistance to civilians is seen by many Israelis – not all, but many Israelis – as aid and comfort to the enemy, and therefore, by its nature, illegitimate.

There is also a deeper skepticism or hostility to the United Nations and the U.N. system that dates back decades. It didn't start with the Zionism Is Racism resolution in the General Assembly in the 1970s, Yasser Arafat addressing the General Assembly long before he professed to give up terrorism. But there really is, I think, a – and the ineffectuality in the eyes of many Israelis of the UNIFIL operation in southern Lebanon.

There is this sense – it's not just UNRWA. I think there is a sense that the U.N. system is biased against Israel, that the U.N. General Assembly has passed any number of resolutions against Israel, to no effect. And the U.S. keeps protecting Israel in the Security Council. And therefore the U.N. system is something that Israelis don't feel comfortable with, and UNRWA's existence is sort of added to that.

The other piece of this is the incoming Trump administration. Of course, the last time around, the Trump administration cut U.S. funding to UNRWA more than \$200 million a year. It is hard for me to imagine that the Trump administration, when it comes in, will not once again cut funding for UNRWA, let alone protect UNRWA –

Dr. Morrison: In any way.

Dr. Alterman: – in any way. Elise Stefanik, in many ways, became U.N. ambassador because she attacked U.S. university presidents for not being more aggressive about anti-Israeli protests on campus. So I can't imagine that when the administration takes office that its goal will not be to reorient U.S. policy to be much more supportive or permissive of Israel. My guess is actually more permissive than supportive.

And then the question – and it's a question really for Dahlia – is the extent to which the Biden administration has been a constraint on Israeli policy, because Netanyahu can say I have to keep the Americans on side. What happens to those right-wing ministers who have been advocating for annexation, expulsion, all those kinds of things? If the U.S. government is no longer holding back the prime minister, does that change Netanyahu's calculus for how to – where he wants to strike the balance where the Israeli public is in terms of annexation, expulsion, the kinds of things that some of the ministers have talked about and that Netanyahu has always been reluctant to embrace up to now.

Dr. Morrison: Dahlia, any thoughts?

Ms. Scheindlin: Yeah. Yeah. I mean, just to go back to one – an earlier point that you made about how Israelis perceive the U.N. system, yes, this has been a very, very longstanding relationship. Skepticism would be putting it mildly. Israelis frankly have believed that the entire international system is somehow built and exists in order to condemn and criticize Israel.

I have to say that is an axiomatic view. And it spans most institutions. In other words, I can tell you from a survey I conducted, together with my Palestinian colleague Khalil Shikaki, back in July, we asked about



whether Israelis believe international – that the ICJ and ICC and broadly international institutions are biased against Israel. And we had a consensus among Israeli Jews; I mean, over – well over 75 percent.

Among Palestinians we asked a similar question, whether international institutions are ultimately influenced by the U.S. in favor of Israel, and a very similar number believed that they are. So we have a mirror image of skepticism, and I think that does raise the question of serious failures of the international community, on the one hand, to make, you know, the different sides of the conflict feel it's able to protect them.

I think a lot of this is simply – there's no good way to put it. A lot of it has been exaggeration and factual inaccuracy over the years. And some of the reasons why there is more attention to Israel, which there is, is partly because the conflict has gone on longer than most other conflicts. It goes back to, you know, 1948, if not before the beginning of the U.N. system.

And there are lots of reasons why Israelis have taken, you know, areas where the international institutions are – do seem focused on Israel and interpreted them as if they're anti-Israel. In many ways Israel has been able to conduct policies that violate international law for decades without the kind of sanctions that they would be – that other countries have received, partly because it's, of course, backed by the U.S.

So that's, you know, a longstanding point of controversy between how the Israeli public sees the international system. But you were accurate to describe it like that, right? They do see it as stacked against them.

In terms of whether the Trump administration will change its policy and thereby change Netanyahu's calculus, I would probably take issue with the idea that the Biden administration seriously constrained the Israeli government. For most of this time, the Biden administration was, you know, essentially using its power to make some requests, right, asking Israel to constrain itself in certain areas. And Israel made adjustments to its policy as a result, maybe delaying, you know, let's say, going into Rafah for a time, but ultimately did exactly what the U.S. asked it not to do for most of this time, whether it was going into Rafah or the escalations on the regional level, and also by – you know, by being one of the parties that has been an obstacle to a ceasefire up until now, not to take away from the responsibility of Hamas for that either.

And whether Trump will give Israel more of a free hand, it certainly looks like it. We didn't know when he was – given the team that he's been putting into place, it does look like he plans to give Israel much more of a free hand in general. And that's – they were – you know, you

could say, well, Netanyahu doesn't plan to move ahead faster, you know, accelerate the pace and, you know, become more decisive about these long-term political games, which I see in the government's own statements – not everybody would agree with me, by the way, but I think that – I take them at their word.

That's all very hard to say, considering that, you know, two things – even if this government does last to the end of its term, that's two years away. Two years is a long time, but it might not be long enough to implement this kind of thing.

And then, you know, when you asked about the Israeli public, this is a thornier question, because the truth is that survey research does not support some sort of consensus within Israel for annexing Gaza. There has been a surprising level of support from Israeli Jews for rebuilding settlements, but when I say surprising, I mean between 40 and 50 percent. And the higher rate of support was earlier in the war. Most extreme attitudes that I saw in the early phase of the war had declined somewhat in the later stages.

We also see that, you know, there's still not – you know, there never really was majority support for annexation in the West Bank in general in Israel, including in 2020 when it was much more of a realistic possibility. And so Israel is not entirely behind that kind of a plan, and I have a feeling that the more it becomes a realistic possibility – if the government really does move forward and start talking about – you know, more seriously about the IDF turning into the reestablishment of a military government – Israelis have a collective memory of what that meant. The military government over Gaza was one of the reasons why Israel left Gaza. It was a serious liability. It's very costly. And I – you know, I'm not sure if the public would really be behind it.

And of course, I really have to limit that observation in general to the Jewish public because the Palestinian citizens of Israel are dead set against all of this, right? So we're talking about completely different attitudes among the two populations within Israeli citizens.

Having said all of this, this is a government that has practiced in the art of ignoring the will of the majority of Israelis. It was practicing that skill throughout 2023, when it faced down mass demonstrations and numerous surveys showing that a majority consistently opposed its plans to undermine the Israeli judiciary. And we see a similar – you know, a similar dynamic at play over the course of this year, where we've had a majority in all surveys who would have preferred a hostage release deal in return for a ceasefire. Consistently a majority of the entire population, right, of all people who were surveyed, which is

Jewish and Arab citizens alike, were a plurality depending on what the tradeoffs were, and the government has managed to ignore that as well, even at the cost of losing those hostages, you know, practically, month by month, week by week, even day by day.

And so a lot of this – I can't – you know, I really can't predict all the different pathways this might play out, but I will say that the ministers of this government are certainly playing the long game. And I think it's too early to say whether they'll actually be able to implement that kind of a plan.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you.

Scott, you know, we've seen a lot of action taken in the Security Council lately – briefings, motions, unanimous decisions. We've seen a lot of expressions of solidarity. The threat of action against UNRWA has tended to be lumped, you know, or referred to the ICC or the ICJ, and it's been seen as, you know, further accumulation of evidence to be used in some, you know, prosecutorial context. But I see no planning for actual operational entities that would avoid a crash in late January or early February. That reality, that the humanitarian mission may collapse, is in tension with this – is in tension with this solidarity mission of standing by UNRWA in this period. What can be done, in your view, to avoid a crash in 60 days?

Mr. Anderson: I think, first, you know, for the sake of the argument, let's say that UNRWA is going to no longer operate in Gaza. Sixty days is impossible to turn over the operation. There's simply no way to do it. A U.N. mission, MINUSMA, shut down recently. They had six months, and they still didn't quite do it. And that was shutting down, but it wasn't handing over thoughtfully operations that are providing a lifesaving intervention to people.

Now, we talked about the two-thirds primary health care. I talked about the insulin. What that translates to is 16,000 primary medical care visits a day. That's 16,000 people every day that come into our health center health points and they get treatment. You know, how do you hand that over?

You know, one of the things that's come out of the challenges we've faced this year is a report that the French foreign minister – former foreign minister, Colonna, put together with recommendations about staff vetting, all these things. You know, absent some staff vetting, how eager is anyone going to be to take on UNRWA staff, right? I mean, Israel has said a lot about them, and I think it's in the public sphere, and it really sunk in for, you know, some people. So this is – this is very

complicated.

And 60 days or, what, I think 67 is what I said earlier, is where we're at now. It's not possible turning this over. And it would take, as I said earlier, a lot of time and thoughtful deliberation. The only thing that's going to allow this to happen is time, and time is what's going to be needed to try to figure out how to create the best environment for the civilians in Gaza.

You know, and I think something that Dahlia said earlier kind of struck me when she talked about UNRWA cannot operate in sovereign Israel. The only way I can get to Gaza is to go through sovereign Israel; there is no other path right now, right? So we can't be coordinated in, so it becomes very problematic. You know, and it, I guess, then speaks to can our local staff continue to operate.

So part of the challenge with figuring out a plan is we don't know, as I think was said earlier, how will this be implemented. What are the constraints that will be put in place? What is the intention for the government of Israel? What is the intention that will be passed to COGAT in terms of how to move this forward? You know, when I talk to people in COGAT, they have said they will implement the law as it's written. So I think, you know, what you said earlier, Dahlia, is correct, that this isn't one for domestic show; this will have some beef to it. And absent kind of all that and a, really, conversation at a higher level than mine, it's very difficult to figure out what we're going to do next, and what would happen if UNRWA can no longer operate, and how we ensure services are still provided to the community.

So I think that we need to answer a lot of questions. It's made much more difficult because there is no high-level engagement, certainly, between UNRWA leadership and the government of Israel at the moment, but also there's not a lot at the higher levels of the U.N. itself outside of those of us that are operating inside Gaza.

Dr. Morrison: I mean, it seems to me that UNRWA is staring at two things. It's staring at a crash of its capabilities in Gaza and West Bank with no plan in place for dealing with that, so a really bad situation goes into an accelerated decline, and it's very visible, and it's in both the West Bank and in Gaza but particularly in Gaza, where things are already in horrible shape. It goes into something beyond horrible to apocalyptic or however you think about it. The other is you have to figure out a way to sustain and survive for the next several years in your other operations. So you've got to rally your donors, you've got to be protecting your Lebanon and Jordan and Syria operations so that they do not somehow also stumble in this period.

Mr. Anderson: Yeah, that's correct. I mean, we do – as I said, we provide services across five fields, and it's complicated. It's a very complex political environment in every field in which we operate. You know, and the world I would use in Gaza that most likely would occur is not apocalyptic; it's famine, all right? We're on the edge of that now, I think. And it's been reported by – through the IPC, as well as WFP and others, that there are likely pockets of famine in the north now. If, you know, an agency or an entity that's over half or at half of the entire response no longer operates, we're very much headed toward famine, if not famine-like conditions across all of Gaza. And it's exacerbated further by the fact that as an entire international humanitarian community at the moment we are unable to bring aid in at the scale needed, and it's due to the lack of law and order environment particularly in Rafah.

So I think that, you know, there's political challenges to this. There are operational challenges to this. But the biggest takeaway, as I said earlier, is there is no way to solve all this and put a plan in place between now and January 28. It's just simply – it's simply not possible. And unfortunately, the people in Gaza, half of whom are children, are the ones that will bear the brunt of that decision. And if UNRWA can no longer operate, they would bear the brunt of the impact.

Dr. Morrison: But there is no active dialogue between the Israeli and U.N. leadership on trying to avoid the worst outcome. Is that correct?

Mr. Anderson: Not to my knowledge is all I can say.

Dr. Morrison: It's a standoff.

Mr. Anderson: But I'm at a – I'm at – not at the higher levels of U.N. leadership. I have enough to do inside Gaza than to worry about everything else.

Dr. Morrison: (Laughs.)

Mr. Anderson: But to my knowledge, there are not any discussions happening. And I guess that's all I can say on it.

Dr. Morrison: Right. And within the Israeli government, we have the tensions that Dahlia outlined. There's political impulses towards annexation and making use of the IDF, but the IDF is not onboard at all on that notion of becoming – taking operational responsibilities.

Ms. Scheindlin: I mean, I just want to – you know, listen, I don't want to overstate the case. I mean, the IDF is also very sensitive – it's being put in a position similar to that of the attorney general. The government has been

attacking the security establishment as well, mainly to deflect its own responsibility for having failed to detect and prevent and cope with October 7th. And so the prime minister has –

Mr. Anderson: It dismissed the defense minister.

Dr. Morrison: Right. Gallant.

Mr. Anderson: And dismissed the defense minister just a few weeks ago.

Ms. Scheindlin: Well, yes, of course. I mean, I would put that as somewhat part of this campaign and somewhat part of their personal bad blood going back to the prewar phase in 2023, because the defense minister was always a bit of a political black swan, you know, in the Likud Party of the prime minister. So they have personal tensions going back. He wasn't considered sufficiently loyalist and sufficiently populist, and he brought professional and military concerns to the judicial overhaul plan of the government. He tried to pause it, not even stop it. He was almost fired a first time. And so I think Netanyahu – how should I put it? – had been waiting for that moment for a long time. But, yes, it definitely illustrates the kinds of tensions that we're talking about between professional considerations of security matters versus political considerations of the government.

And so given those sensitivities the government has been trying to blame the security establishment as well as the legal establishment, by the way, for – which may be a little bit hard to explain in the little time we have left – and the – I would say the senior figures in the army and in, you know, the intelligence services are very sensitive about not wanting to appear to do anything as if they're – you know, not as if they are opposing the policies of the government.

And so we know this from kind of, you know, rumors and leaks and, you know, people enough on the inside to kind of know how these things are seen from the inside of these tensions. But I think that the – you know, the army and the military will be very, very cautious about doing anything that would be seen to go against the government.

So if they were directly ordered to set up, you know, for example, that very first step of taking over humanitarian aid in Gaza I can't see anybody in the military establishment actually saying, you know what, we can't do this. I mean, it wouldn't come to that. That would look like a military coup and it would very quickly be accused of being a military coup. Moreover, I think the Israeli government is building the case to say exactly for the reason – I mean, it really plays very cleverly on what Scott said. Not to sound totally conspiratory, but I think there's a fine

line between, you know, strategy and conspiracy.

If the strategy is that the IDF takes over humanitarian aid they're going to be saying exactly what Scott said. There's nobody else to do it right now. There's no plan in place. We all agree that there has to be some humanitarian support for the civilians in Gaza. We're already there. We can do it better and more efficiently. They are already making those arguments. So I wouldn't necessarily expect that the IDF is going to somehow put up, you know, serious policy opposition to this even if they might not like it, even if they may be, you know, posing it sort of in the preliminary stages.

Dr. Morrison: We've got just a few more minutes to wrap up here and this has been pretty revealing in terms of just how formidable these challenges really are. I guess I would like to ask you all, including Jon, to speak to, like, what's the message to deliver to a Washington audience today.

The Biden administration has sort of gotten to the end of the line, it seems, in its activism on these issues. It basically folded its tent or threw in the towel last week. The Trump team is busy putting the pieces together for its new cabinet – new government – and absorbed with that.

There's a 60-day window here before we get to the inauguration and we get to the – soon thereafter this moment of reckoning that's been put down in the – through the legislation.

So what is – what would – let's start with Scott and Dahlia and close with Jon. What's your advice? What are the messages you want to leave with a Washington audience now? This is a very dangerous situation.

Mr. Anderson: To me, the most important thing and the reason I'm here in Gaza is to prevent a further humanitarian catastrophe. That's what we're focused on. We're focused on delivering life-saving interventions and helping people.

As I said, I think it's impossible to – if UNRWA can no longer operate for us to have something in place that would replace us by January 28 and what's needed most importantly is time. We need to figure out a proper planning timeline and figure out the best way that we could do this.

It would be to pause implementation and have a proper discussion with UNRWA to make sure we're part of the conversation, that things are handed over in such a way if it would happen that it doesn't negatively impact the civilian population inside Gaza, and until then UNRWA still has operations ongoing in Gaza as well as across the region. Funding

needs to continue.

Thank you.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you.

Dahlia?

Ms. Scheindlin: I don't think I have an easy message but I will say, you know, believe the Israeli government. Listen to what they say. I think that it's – there's sort of a denial sometimes that they really mean it and I think that there's no other choice.

I agree with what Scott said earlier in this conversation. Nothing will really guarantee the humanitarian, you know, improvement in the lives of Gazans anything beyond, you know, tomorrow except for a ceasefire.

There's no way to have – you know, to even consider reconstructing the vast destruction of that, the desperately destroyed civilian infrastructure in Gaza, until there's a ceasefire. And a ceasefire can't be a piecemeal policy of, you know, a 10-day or a two-month or a temporary ceasefire.

It has to be part of a comprehensive political resolution to the conflict which has been delayed for decades, which sounds probably very remote in the context of this conversation because there's such urgent and immediate desperately needed solutions to the humanitarian crisis.

But we don't want to see a recurrence of this year after year. There's no other way. I don't need to remind Scott, certainly, but maybe the audience needs to be reminded that Gaza was in a desperate situation before this war. You talked about the unemployment rate. Gaza had 45 percent unemployment before the war.

Now it's, I think, you know, 90 percent. And that's not a – I mean – these are the cycles that led to where we are now. I think, you know, there's – again, there's no way to really get at these issues without both a ceasefire that then leads to longer-term comprehensive political resolution to the conflict.

Dr. Morrison: Thank you.

Jon?

Dr. Alterman: There's a tendency to see this as a microcosm. I think it's important to see it in the broader context. The Trump administration is going to



come in with profound skepticism toward the U.N. and U.N. agencies, profound skepticism about the utility of international organizations to advance shared goals; I think much less interest in a whole range of humanitarian priorities that others have had.

It seems to me that you might be able to talk about this as an example but to me it's important that we also put it in the context of a much broader set of consequences if the U.S. turns away from international organizations providing that sort of humanitarian relief.

The United States provides huge amounts of support, as you know, to people suffering all over the world, often through the U.N., and it seems to me that all of those efforts are imperiled and if people are serious about that I think we have to look at the broader issue and not just at the issue of Gaza or not just at the issue of UNRWA.

Dr. Morrison: That's a great point. I also think that we're going to see much tighter humanitarian budgets as we get into this period. I mean, when the decision was taken by the first Trump administration in 2018 to end support for UNRWA there were workarounds through UNHCR and through ICRC funding.

The budgets were much fuller at that time and that allowed a strategy to soften the blows and the Trump administration did some of that. It's going to be more difficult, I think, in this next phase.

I want to thank you both, Dahlia Scheindlin and Scott Anderson. Thank you for making the time in your crazy schedules to be here with us today and to be so candid and honest about all of this, and thank you for your leadership and commitments on these matters. And thanks to Jon for being a partner in this enterprise; and to our colleagues here – Sophia Hirshfield, Dwayne Gladden, and Alex Brunner – for making this all possible.

You can find this video and transcript later today on the CSIS homepage, CSIS.org. And we will be back in touch soon with our next episode. Thank you.

(END.)