Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers, and members of the Subcommittee, on behalf of the UNRWA USA National Committee (UNRWA USA), I appreciate the opportunity to submit this statement in support of restoring humanitarian assistance to Palestinians, including resuming the nearly 70-year partnership between the United States and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). As the Subcommittee develops its FY2021 legislation, UNRWA USA respectfully requests inclusion of the requisite legislative language to restore funding for these programs to the previous annual funding levels of $360 million for UNRWA and $225 million for related Economic Support Fund (ESF) programs in the West Bank (including East Jerusalem) and the Gaza Strip.

UNRWA USA is a separate nonprofit corporation from UNRWA with the goal of promoting a life of dignity and human development for Palestine refugees by informing the American public about UNRWA’s work and generating support for its humanitarian programs in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank (including East Jerusalem), Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan. With an overall budget of $1.4 billion for 2020, UNRWA’s largest expenditures go toward running 709 schools for 533,000 children, managing 144 clinics delivering 8.5 million health visits a year, and providing relief and social services support to 360,000 refugees under the social safety net program.

UNRWA USA has received a Platinum rating, the highest level of recognition offered by GuideStar, and has received a three out of four star rating from Charity Navigator, which is awarded for a charity that “exceeds or meets industry standards and performs as well as or better than most charities in its Cause.” In 2019, UNRWA USA was able to provide UNRWA with $2.7 million to support the Agency’s program and emergency assistance budgets to provide food and cash assistance as well as life-changing education and mental health programs.

We deeply appreciate the Subcommittee’s efforts last year to restore this important humanitarian funding, terminated by the administration in 2018. Though the House proposal to restore funding to UNRWA was not included in the enacted FY20 bill, the final legislation did include $75 million in ESF dollars, funds we hope the administration will promptly obligate. Overall, the Subcommittee’s actions last year sent an important signal about the importance of humanitarian assistance to Palestine refugees as well as the generosity of the American people.

**Humanitarian assistance should not be politicized**

The United States has a long and proud tradition of providing humanitarian assistance to civilians in need across the globe. For almost 70 years, the United States demonstrated strong bipartisan
support to UNRWA, pending a just and lasting solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. With $6 billion contributed in total over seven decades, UNRWA built a highly successful education and health program and responded to emergency humanitarian needs throughout periods of violence and war. We regret that the current administration abruptly and unexpectedly stopped all funding to Palestinian civilians, including via UNRWA. This has had a devastating impact on UNRWA, a humanitarian agency charged with executing a mandate from UN Member States, and the vulnerable people it serves. Humanitarian assistance should never be withheld to any individual or population for political reasons.

Members of the Subcommittee, it’s easy for those unfamiliar with the region or UNRWA’s critical role to attempt to blame the Agency for the ongoing political challenges. However, UNRWA is not the cause of the region’s failure to reach a long-term political solution, it’s the effect. And in the midst of significant budget uncertainty, it has engaged in extreme structural efficiency and strict austerity measures in an effort to continue its life-saving operations.

**UNRWA by the numbers**

Let's look at a few facts about UNRWA. In 2020, UNRWA will utilize its proposed $1.4 billion budget to:

- Educate 533,000 girls and boys enrolled in the Agency’s 709 schools and provide vocational and technical training to an additional 8,000 Palestine refugee youth;
- Provide primary health care to 3.5 million refugees through the Agency’s 144 health clinics;
- Distribute food to more than one million destitute refugees in the Gaza Strip;
- Provide cash assistance to over 450,000 Palestine refugees affected by the Syria conflict;
- Provide social safety net support to over 360,000 abject poor refugees who are unable to meet their basic food needs; and
- Extend over 47,000 microfinance loans to men, women, and youth, with an emphasis on supporting the economic self-reliance of refugee women.

**UNRWA education is a regional treasure**

All UNRWA students receive Human Rights, Conflict Resolution and Tolerance (HRCRT) education. UNRWA is a pioneer on human rights education in the Middle East. Human rights education has been explicitly incorporated in UNRWA school curricula since 2000. The UNRWA HRCRT program is taught to all students from grades 1-10 and emphasizes respect for people of all religions, alongside peaceful conflict resolution. The vision of HRCRT is to provide a human rights education which empowers Palestine refugee children to enjoy and exercise their rights, uphold human rights values, and contribute positively to their society and the global community.

A key element of the HRCRT program is the School Parliaments, with every UNRWA school having a Parliament in place. School parliamentarians participate in an Agency-wide Parliament. The Parliaments are beacons of democratic practice, and UNRWA education continues to support the ability of the Parliamentarians to represent and engage their peers in positive school and community actions.
Chairwoman Lowey, you and the Subcommittee staff had the opportunity last spring to spend a little time with two of those parliamentarians, and I think you would agree they are a bright light toward a better future in the region.

**UNRWA’s results**

The Subcommittee asked UNRWA to provide it with a progress report on its achievements across several of its key missions. The Subcommittee’s request was an important reminder that in a region beset by political turmoil, UNRWA’s mission continues to focus on helping people and working toward better futures. As you saw in the Agency’s recent submission, UNRWA’s work has resulted in quantifiable successes including:

- **Health** - The virtual eradication of infectious diseases (malaria, cholera, TB, measles, etc.) in each of its five fields;
- **Education** - Enrollment in UNRWA schools growing from 42,000 students to 533,000 at over 700 schools, each school having obtained gender parity. Dropout rates have steadily decreased;
  - A World Bank study concluded UNRWA students outperform counterparts in public schools by a year’s worth of learning; and;
- **Microfinance** - UNRWA has issued over 549,000 microfinance loans worth $600 million including 29% to youth and 35% to women. This program is now self-sustaining and holds the region’s only MicroFinanza A+ rating.

**Coronavirus a dangerous threat to all refugees**

We now find the Agency’s 144 health centers on the front lines of combating a global pandemic. Already, the Agency has called on donor states for an additional $14 million to address the crisis. UNRWA is seeking the additional funding to ensure that the appropriate preparedness and response measures are in place at UNRWA installations, in particular health and education facilities. Provisions are also being made to cover health expenditures for vulnerable elderly populations. Currently, UNRWA schools and vocational training centers are closed in Lebanon, the West Bank, and Gaza, in line with host country directives.

While there are already reported cases in Lebanon, Jordan, and the West Bank, to date none have yet been reported in Gaza or Syria. Should the outbreak reach Gaza in particular, we are gravely concerned that it could spread like wildfire in a densely populated area with an already overburdened healthcare system.

**The time to fund UNRWA is now**

UNRWA is in dire financial straits. Reporting last week to the Arab League, UNRWA’s acting-Commissioner General Christian Saunders stated the Agency started 2020 with debts of $55 million and so far has received pledges of only $299 million out of the total requirement of $1.4 billion. Saunders added, “If we do not receive additional pledges or those who have pledged do not make good on existing pledges, then we will run out of money at the end of next month [April]. At this point, I do not see how the needs of the Palestine refugees can be met this year if support remains

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1 House Report 116-78 (page 129)
stagnant at 2019 levels, and our core programs implemented in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank including East Jerusalem will grind to a halt.”

**Conclusion**

Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers, and members of the Subcommittee, the situation of Palestine refugees is simply too serious to allow for the continuation of a policy clearly predicated on politics, completely unrelated to UNRWA and its mission.

We strongly urge you to continue the effort this Subcommittee began last year and restore this crucial humanitarian funding before it’s too late.

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2 STATEMENT OF MR. CHRISTIAN SAUNDERS, ACTING COMMISSIONER-GENERAL, UNRWA MEETING OF FOREIGN MINISTERS OF THE LEAGUE OF ARAB STATES. MARCH 4 2020, CAIRO