Free the Palestinians: End UNRWA funding

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By Shoshana Bryen

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It is time to resolve the issue of the imprisoned Palestinian population. The one imprisoned by the United Nations and its own unrealistic vision of the future.

President [Donald Trump](http://origin-nyi.thehill.com/people/donald-trump)’s announcement that the U.S. contribution to United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) could be eliminated might be the catalyst important and positive changes, if people can get over the moaning and [crying](https://www.haaretz.com/opinion/1.833009) about killing poor refugee babies. It’s not likely. The U.S. [contributes](https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/donor_ranking_with_un_agencies_overall.pdf%20) more than $368 million annually to UNRWA, more than double the next two closest donors and more than quadruple the next several on the list. But the top three donors provide more than half UNRWA’s budget – leaving lots and lots of rich countries that could fill the gap if they choose.

They shouldn’t do it.

UNRWA is a huge impediment to actionable understanding in the Arab world – and particularly among Palestinians – that Israel is a *legitimate* and *permanent* part of the Middle East. Making Israel real to people who delude themselves on that point is key to honest negotiations about the future of a Palestinian state.

In 1947-49 a lot of people believed the Arab states would erase the nascent State of Israel. In 1950, 711,000 Arabs registered with UNRWA, the newly created UN organization designed to imprison them until it happened, even if it took forever. They didn’t say it that way. UNRWA’s mission, however, is to take care of them and their children until their ["status is resolved."](http://jcpa.org/article/un-relief-works-agency-unrwa/%20%20%20%20)

In 2011, [UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Huffington_Post) wrote that “Palestinian refugees continue to be refugees because the issues which caused their exile remain outstanding. Only by addressing in a just and durable fashion the underlying causes of conflict… can the refugee issue be laid to rest.”

Try saying, “Vietnamese boat people” instead – no one ever suggested Vietnamese refugees wait until the fall of communism in their homeland in order to return them there. Not even Syrian refugees in Europe are told they can’t be resettled until the war is over and they return to Syria.

But taking at face value Gunness’s concern for “underlying causes,” there are actually two: the lingering, vain hope that Israel can still be erased and UNRWA itself.

First, international Arab wars in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, 1982; terror wars (so-called *intifadas*) in 1989 and 2001; and rocket wars in 2006, 2009, and 2014 have left Israel not only standing, but economically strong, militarily strong, and with increased trade, political, and foreign aid programs around the world. Even tourism set a record in 2017. Israel isn’t going anywhere and it is lunacy for a UN agency to perpetuate the fraud that 1947 will come again.

As an aside, to understand how much this is about negating Israel, notice the absence of UNRWA outrage over the government of Iraq’s decision to [strip Palestinian "refugees"](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20171221-iraq-to-abolish-rights-given-to-palestine-refugees/) living there of their “right” to “travel documents, identification papers, free education, healthcare insurance, financial stipends and free homes.”

The second “underlying cause” is UNRWA. It may not believe great-grandchildren of the original refugees will one day claim apartments in Tel Aviv, but as one of the largest UN agencies, it has an interest in self-perpetuation – which means lying to refugees about the chances of a “right of return” ever occurring. UNRWA has an interest in a) keeping the refugees poor enough to need them and b) cozying up to repressive Palestinian governments – Hamas and the Palestinian Authority – and terror organizations including Hezbollah in Lebanon to continue working.

UNRWA perpetuates the notion that as the refugee population grows, it needs more money. Today UNRWA claims about [30,000 -50,000](http://www.timesofisrael.com/us-senate-dramatically-redefines-definition-of-palestinian-refugees/) original refugees, and 4,950,000 descendants. (Palestinians claim there are 6 million refugees – a number with historic resonance.) But watch out for those numbers. The Jewish Policy Center wrote a [recently](https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2017/12/26/unrwa-refugees-gone/%20%20) about an enormous over count of refugees in Lebanon:

UNRWA in Lebanon reports on its website that 449,957 refugees live under its protection in 12 camps, but a survey by Lebanon’s Central Administration of Statistics, together with the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics, could only find 174,535.

Notice that UNRWA had nothing to do with that census. Would the same discrepancies emerge if a similarly serious census was taken on the West Bank and in Gaza, where UNRWA claims 2.15 million registered refugees? Is UNRWA taking more and more money for fewer and fewer actual clients?

Rather than trying to unwind a 67-year-old agency, the Trump administration’s policies can render it moot.

First, transfer the U.S. contribution and control of the refugees to the UN High Commission on Refugees – which has the mission of resettling people in countries that will have them. It doesn’t have to be done all at once, but it will have the effect over time of caring for the original refugees and organizing their children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren for productive citizenship.

Second, to underpin the importance of the change, stop granting “refugee” status to the descendants of the original refugees – no other population is permitted to hand down both status and stipends that way. (Material claims are something else.) Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza are in the putative State of Palestine – they are Palestinians, not refugees, not now, not ever. And with fair and clever management, future generations of Palestinians won’t be either.