For UNRWA, the party is over

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When I heard that United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Commissioner (UNRWA) Pierre Krahenbuhl had resigned, I was shocked. After all, the United Nations does not have the best track record when it comes to investigating corruption allegations against its own agencies, let alone UNRWA, which until recently had airtight immunity from criticism.

For 70 years, UNRWA has been something of a separate entity in the United Nations, one dedicated solely to the issue of Palestinian “refugees” and operating alongside the agency that handles all other refugees in the world—the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). Unlike the latter, however, UNRWA never even tried to solve the refugee problem it was charged with, and in fact seemed dedicated to perpetuating it.

Case in point: When UNRWA was founded in 1949, there were around 700,000 Palestinian refugees in the world. Today, their number stands at 5.7 million.

But UNRWA’s data must always be taken with a grain of salt, as it tends to artificially inflate. A census that took place in Lebanon in 2017 found that 300,000 people included in the agency’s data simply do not exist and that the true number of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon was 66 percent smaller than stated on its reports.

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At the same time, the budgets appropriated to UNRWA put the United Nations’ actual refugee agency to shame.

Not only is UNRWA’s budget per refugee four times greater than that dedicated to any other refugee, but the agency employs 30,000 people. The UNHCR—which deals with 70 million refugees—employs only 10,000 people.

But it seems that UNRWA’s party is coming to an end.

It started with the Trump administration’s decision to cut funding to the agency. Then came the leak of the highly embarrassing internal report that accused the organization’s director of corruption. Later still, an increasing number of donor countries, including Switzerland, the Netherlands and New Zealand, announced they were suspending aid.

Sadly, it seems that the donor countries could live with 70 years of fostering hatred and incitement against Israel, but could not stand for the U.N. agency to be tainted by corruption.

Krahenbuhl’s resignation presents a rare window of opportunity and Israel cannot afford to miss it: It’s time to put an end to decades of bias and merge UNRWA into the UNHCR.

Those who prefer to leave UNRWA as-is for fear that they will have to deal with supplying education, welfare and health services to the Palestinian population look only at the here and now and ignore Israel’s long-term interest, namely to put an end to the Palestinian refugee problem.

Shuttering UNRWA is the smart, just and ethical thing to do, and now it is also possible. We cannot afford to miss this opportunity.