Untying the Gordian Knot of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

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Last July, the Middle East Quartet was groping to find an explanation for why the Israeli-Palestinian conflict had not yet been resolved.

Israel, which had gone through an escalation of knifing attacks on its citizens rightfully stressed in its briefings the twin problems of continuing Palestinian violence and the state-sponsored incitement that promoted it. The Palestinians and their allies focused on their favorite topic – Israeli settlements – even though the original Oslo Agreements, in 1993 and 1995, did not require a freeze on settlements, and reserved them for final-status negotiations instead.

However, there was a critical factor in elongating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that was not touched by the Quartet. This past Sunday Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for dismantling UNRWA (the UN Relief and Works Agency). He charged that the very existence of UNRWA “perpetuates the Palestinian refugee problem rather than solves it.”

For years, Israeli officials have noted that UNRWA has provided a breeding ground for the growth of terrorist activity against Israel; indeed some of the greatest Hamas masterminds, like Ibrahim Maqadma and Salah Shehada, were graduates of UNWRA schools. In 2014, UNRWA used its schools for storing rockets. UNRWA building supplies were found to have been used by Hamas for tunnel construction. This month, a Hamas tunnel was discovered under two UNRWA schools.

UNWRA’s role in perpetuating the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is less well known, despite the fact that its origins date back to UNWRA’s founding in 1949. Unlike the millions of refugees after the Second World War, who were resettled in the countries in which they now resided and became citizens, the Palestinian-Arab refugees from the 1948 Arab-Israeli war maintained their refugee status.

The refugee problem eventually melted away in Europe and on the Indian Subcontinent, but the Palestinian refugee problem only got worse. UNRWA’s own data puts the number of Palestinian refugees in 1948 at 750,000; today, according to UNRWA, the number of refugees has mushroomed to roughly five million. Successful refugee programs, like the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), have led to a diminution of the refugee problem in different parts of the world. UNRWA had the exact opposite effect.

The heart of UNWRA’s problem is definitional.

UNRWA established official eligibility criteria for its services; they included those who lost their home and livelihood in the 1948 war. Unlike other UN refugee agencies, however, UNRWA added “the descendants of Palestine refugee males.” UNHCR carried no such provision for passing on refugee status to the next generation, but with UNRWA, there was no cutoff. UNRWA has now reached the fourth generation of refugees.

Refugee status has continued from generation to generation in perpetuity.

This helps explain several odd features of the Palestinian refugee problem.

There are 58 Palestinian refugee camps in the Middle East. With the implementation of the Oslo Accords in the 1990s, 26 of these camps fell under Palestinian control. Yet there was no any indication that a single Palestinian camp was about to be closed. It was clear that the Palestinian Authority wanted these camps to be retained despite the advent of Palestinian self-government. Even the new Palestinian city in the West Bank, Rawabi, was built not for refugees, but rather for upper middle class Palestinians who could afford it.

The only explanation for this behavior was that the Palestinian leadership wanted to keep their grievance with Israel alive. In other words, they wanted to perpetuate the conflict.

The problem of UNRWA is well known among experts on the Arab-Israel conflict.

Nevertheless, the effect of letting this issue fester for generations deserves greater consideration. More than any other issue, leaving the refugee problem intact for the future undermines any possibility of reaching reconciliation between the parties. You cannot resolve a conflict and perpetuate it at the same time.

Until now, international diplomats have overlooked the Palestinian refugee issue, preferring to deal first with other dimensions of the conflict. But the Palestinians’ preparedness to finally resolve this issue is probably the best litmus test of their intentions – of whether they are ready to end the conflict once and for all. If a new peace initiative is to start, it should include at the outset a program to dismantle the refugee camps and promote a massive international effort for the construction of new housing. This initiative should begin in the West Bank but also should include Jordan, which hosts the largest Palestinian refugee population in the world.

Dismantling UNRWA is critical in this effort. It is the international caretaker of the problematic definition of refugee status for the Palestinians, which has allowed this problem to expand continually.

No international convention contains so expansive a definition of refugees. It is astounding that the international community keeps demanding concessions from Israel yet to date has not done anything about the deleterious effects of allowing UNRWA’s definition of Palestinian refugees to persist.