Will the World Finally Turn Off the UNRWA Spigot?

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It’s been a rough few months for UNRWA — the UN agency dedicated to providing care for more than five million Palestinians in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Gaza, and the West Bank. And the worst may be yet to come when UNRWA’s principal donors meet in Amman in June.

According to sources close to events, the discussions may touch on the agency’s future.

Portents of bad news arrived in December, with the results of Lebanon’s first-ever census of Palestinian residents. The count showed the number of Palestinians living in Lebanon was only one third of the number on UNRWA’s official rolls — 174,422 people instead of 449,987.

The discrepancy of 272,565 people who either never existed or relocated was waved away by UNWRA spokeswoman Huda Samra, who stated that UNRWA doesn’t count anyway. “UNRWA does not have a headcount of Palestinian refugees in Lebanon,” she said. “What we have are official registration records for the number of registered Palestine refugees in Lebanon. If someone registered with UNRWA in Lebanon decided to live outside Lebanon, they don’t notify us.”

Yet a drop of 66% in numbers has significant implications for UNRWA’s funding stream.

January also brought bad news for the organization. Because of long-held doubts about UNRWA activities — and what it was actually doing with foreign contributions — the US withheld half of the first tranche of aid that it was expected to deliver to the agency, releasing only $60 million of an anticipated $125 million.

The US is UNRWA’s largest donor. Last year, it supplied $360 million of UNRWA’s $1.2 billion yearly budget.

E.J. Kimball, director of the Israel Victory Campaign at the Middle East Forum, said that the Trump administration’s position on foreign aid is, “If we’re not getting the benefits that we want, then we should not be giving funds. This is opposed to … previous administrations, which said, ‘Let’s keep the status quo while we seek change.’”

It now appears that the US will not be supplying further funds to UNRWA this year.

The perennially cash-strapped agency undertook a well-rehearsed response: it hired a large New York City PR firm and launched a new fundraising effort called #DignityisPriceless to make up its anticipated $500 million shortfall. Reports vary on the campaign’s success, with one suggesting that only $5 million in new money was actually collected. With 65 million new refugees worldwide in dire need, the Palestinian refugee issue — now 70 years old — is suffering from donor fatigue.

The issue is not whether aid should be offered to the needy — it should be. The first question is whether UNRWA, with its unique mandate and lack of fiscal oversight, is the right agency to control it. And the second question is how many Palestinians can realistically be considered refugees.

At the same time the US announced it was withholding support, the European Union, the UK Parliament, and the Finnish government began ratcheting up the pressure to hold UNRWA-run schools accountable for promoting curricula that incite hatred against Jews and Israelis.

The EU went even further, writing legislation to make future funding to UNRWA contingent on the Palestinian education curriculum meeting standards of peace and tolerance.

The European action was taken in response to a study from IMPACT-se, an international NGO that analyzes educational materials. Explains IMPACT-se CEO Marcus Sheff, “We sat with ministers of state, senior government officials, and members of parliaments across Europe, and when we showed them the translated contents of the textbooks, I saw shock in their faces. The vast majority of people had no idea — and these people are paying the bills. One woman said, ‘I can’t believe we are paying for this %$#&.’”

April was the cruelest month for UNRWA, however, when members of the US Congress turned their own critical eyes on the agency.

On April 26, a General Accounting Office report on incitement in the PA curriculum was delivered to Senator James Risch (R-ID), but he was prevented from releasing it to the public. Apparently its conclusions were so incendiary that it was classified by the US Department of State.

Representative Doug Lamborn (R-CO) roundly criticized State’s embargo of the study. “I am not surprised that this report was classified,” he said, “because various government officials have classified other important eye-opening documents about UNRWA’s policies in the past.”

Lamborn was referring to the State Department’s classification, just eight days earlier, of yet another study of UNRWA — its own report on the original number of refugees from Israel’s 1948 War of Independence.

On April 18, Lamborn sent a letter to President Trump, co-signed by 50 additional members of Congress, requesting that the president declassify the State Department report, which determined “the approximate number of people who, in the past year, have received UNRWA services: (1) whose place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948 and who were displaced by the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict; and (2) who are descendants of persons described in subparagraph (1).”

It is believed the total number of original refugees is 20,000-30,000, not the millions that UNRWA claims.

UNRWA was originally created as a temporary agency to offer relief to the 700,000 Palestinians who fled conflict zones in 1948. Successive changes to UNRWA’s rules have since expanded its definition of Palestinian refugees to include ALL descendants of the original ones, including adopted children — even if they hold citizenship in other countries or live in the Palestinian-governed territories: the West Bank and Gaza.

How can a Palestinian be a refugee in his own future home?

UNRWA’s definition of a refugee is far more expansive than that recognized by the UN High Commissioner of Refugees (UNHCR), which cares for all the other refugees in the world besides the Palestinians. The US definition of who qualifies as refugees for admission to this country would not confer refugee status on most UNRWA recipients.

The ever-growing number of Palestinians refugees, estimated to reach 20 million by 2060, are almost completely supported by the taxpayers of Europe and the US.

“Why weren’t these individuals settled or offered citizenship where they have been living for 70 years?” asks Asaf Romirowsky, an author and historian of Arab Palestinian refugees.

“[The world has seen] millions and millions of refugees since World War II, and the only ones who are still not settled are Palestinians.”

The answer is UNRWA, which is “the only internationally funded ‘relief’ organization that is run not only for, but by its clients,” according to Romirowsky.

UNRWA’s 30,000 employees are mostly Palestinians, and many are Hamas members. UNWRA has said it does not and will not discriminate against them.

UNRWA, a permanent bureaucracy that has not settled a single refugee, is designed to keep Palestinians stateless and dependent on charity. It also helps maintain the expectation, which comprises the golden thread of the PA educational system, that one day all Palestinians will return to the homes that their grandparents abandoned in 1948 — and thus overrun and destroy the Jewish state.

Yet even Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas has recognized that this is an illusory goal.

“On numbers of refugees,” he has said, “it is illogical to ask Israel to take five million, or indeed one million. That would mean the end of Israel.”

“In reality,” says the Middle East Forum’s Kimball, “UNRWA is abusing the human rights of the Palestinians by inflicting on them an identity of permanent victimhood through decades of statelessness.”

In May, Switzerland’s new Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis appeared to agree. He told a Swiss newspaper that UNRWA was no longer part of the solution, but had become part of the problem.

He suggested in a press conference that the international community should focus on integrating Palestinian refugees into the countries in which they live and have lived for decades.

“By supporting UNRWA, we keep the conflict alive. It’s a perverse logic,” he said.

These criticisms may very well be taken up at the major donor’s forum in June with an eye towards permanent change.