**UNRWA under scrutiny**

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At around the time the State of Israel came into being, something over half the non-Jewish population of what used to be called “Palestine” – some 750,000 people – left their homes, some on advice, some from fear of the forthcoming conflict, some during it.

The UN body set up to assist them – the United Nations Relief and Works Agency – began its work in May 1950. While the General Assembly resolution establishing UNRWA called for the alleviation of distress among the Palestine refugees, it also stated that “constructive measures should be undertaken at an early date with a view to the termination of international assistance for relief.” In other words, the new refugee agency’s mission was intended to be temporary.

By 2018, the “temporary” UNRWA had been transformed into a bloated international bureaucracy with a staff of 30,000 and an annual budget of around $1.2 billion. As for the number of Palestinians registered by UNRWA as refugees, that had mushroomed to 5.6 million as a result of its decision to bestow refugee status upon “descendants of Palestine refugees” in perpetuity – children, grandchildren and great-grandchildren. The growth in UNWRA’s client base was therefore exponential year on year, justifying an ever-expanding staff and an ever-increasing budget.

It was at this point that US President Donald Trump decided enough was enough. He slashed US funding from $364 million to $60 million and announced that, from 2019, US funding would cease. “The United States will no longer commit further funding to this irredeemably flawed operation,” stated the US State Department.

While the main UN agency dealing with refugees – the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees – concentrates on resettling them, facilitating their voluntary repatriation or their local integration and resettlement, UNRWA maintains millions of people in their refugee status decade after decade, expandimg the numbers year on year.

Organizations secure in the knowledge of an ever-expanding client base, thus justifying continuous growth and an ever-increasing budget, provide ripe ground for malfeasance and internal corruption. So it has apparently proved in the case of UNRWA.

On July 20, 2019, it suddenly emerged that seven months previously, a 10-page confidential internal report, with input from dozens of current and former UNRWA staff, had been sent to UN Secretary General António Guterres. According to the Agence France-Presse news agency, the report alleged that UNWRA’s commissioner general, Pierre Krähenbühl, and other top officials, had been guilty of a range of abuses including “sexual misconduct, nepotism, retaliation, discrimination and other abuses of authority, for personal gain, to suppress legitimate dissent, and to otherwise achieve their personal objectives.”

The Al Jazeera media network claims to have obtained a copy of the ethics office report from a source close to UNRWA, who said that much of it focuses on allegations surrounding the conduct of Krähenbühl, citing a range of corrupt and unprofessional activities.

Shortly after the details of the report became known, the Netherlands and Switzerland suspended their funding of UNRWA. They were followed in August 2019 by the government of New Zealand.

UNRWA’s mandate from the General Assembly, which comes up for renewal every three years, was renewed during the session of the UN General Assembly that came to end on September 30, 2019. Nothing has emerged in the media to suggest that Guterres’ investigation into the ethics report came up in the discussions.

Speaking during the 42nd session of the UN Human Rights Council on September 23, 2019, former UNRWA general counsel James Lindsay declared that the agency’s major structural problem is its unique definition of who qualifies as a refugee. This differs fundamentally from the definition used by the UNHCR, which is responsible for all other refugees around the world. By not demanding that UNRWA adopt this definition,” says Lindsay, “the General Assembly has elevated politics over morality.”

Also speaking on September 23, former Knesset member Einat Wilf said that the Palestinians had “hijacked” UNRWA after refusing to accept the outcome of the 1948 war that led to the creation of the State of Israel. “In their mind,” she said, “the State of Israel is temporary. If they view Israel as temporary, they will never sign an agreement that will bring peace. They will wait it out.”

All in all, the Palestinian refugee story is one of heartless exploitation of Arabs by Arabs – the callous manipulation of powerless victims for political ends, with little regard for their welfare or human rights. Whatever the result of the inquiry into the UNRWA ethics report, this inhumanity must be brought out into the open, the UNRWA farce of “refugee status” in perpetuity must be ended, and steps must be taken to allow people and their families who may have lived in a country for 50 years or more to settle and become full citizens.