My Word: UNRWA’s unsettling impact

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When US President Donald Trump last week tweeted about cutting aid to Pakistan and the Palestinians, the thought process was not as erratic as his style might suggest. I’m not a fan of Trump’s diplomacy-by-Twitter policy, but I drew a line between the dots: a redline.

To understand the absurdity that is UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) exchange the name India for Israel and Pakistan for the Palestinians.

The disputes in both regions began in similar circumstances following the end of British rule, in 1947 in the case of India and Pakistan, and 1948 for Israel. (At the time, not even the Arab countries that immediately attacked the nascent Jewish state referred to the Arab residents as “Palestinians.”)

An estimated 15 million people were uprooted in Hindu-majority India and Muslim-majority Pakistan. Between one million and two million were killed. It was a tragedy of epic proportions.

Seventy years on, India and Pakistan have an uneasy relationship that occasionally flares into conflict. There are still disputed areas, such as Kashmir, but there is not a “refugee problem.”

That’s because the Hindus and Sikhs who fled Pakistan for India and the Muslims who escaped in the other direction – whether from fear or violent coercion – have not spent the past seven decades constantly being sold the illusion that they will move back and destroy their enemies.

Similarly, the approximately 850,000 Jews who left/fled Arab countries do not consider themselves “refugees” in Israel. There may be ongoing arguments about the way the Sephardim were treated by the Ashkenazi elites, but it is sibling rivalry. A family is not always perfect but nonetheless it remains a family.

Strangely, there are not only still “Palestinian refugees” but the numbers have ballooned from some 700,000 in 1948 to a reported five million today. Part of the blame can be pinned on the Arab countries such as Lebanon and Syria that denied the refugees full rights, cynically using them as a tool against Israel. The Palestinian Authority, too, is guilty of a dirty double game – on the one hand claiming to represent the State of Palestine (already recognized by more than 135 countries) while on the other protesting their ongoing condition of being refugees.

Above all, the UN has contributed to the problem. When it uniquely granted the Palestinians “perpetual refugee status,” a status that is passed down through the generations, it ensured the perpetuation of their plight (and Israel’s). UNRWA is not the solution to the Palestinian refugee problem, it is the reason the problem still exists.

UNRWA was founded in 1949, ostensibly to help the Palestinians until the refugee problem would be solved. In the intervening decades it has become a big business, with a multimillion-dollar budget (some $300 million per annum courtesy of the US) and some 30,000 employees. It has no motivation to end the crisis.

All other refugees in the world, a heartbreaking 65.6 million in 2016, are handled by the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. The funding that could go to the UNHCR to help the Rohingya or the millions made homeless in the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen or throughout Africa, is instead being spent on the great-grandchildren of the original Palestinian refugees of ’48. I can’t help wonder whether the preferential treatment of the Palestinians over millions of their Muslim brethren is because they point a judgmental finger at Jews as the source of their sorrows.

UNRWA has cultivated a feeling of entitlement and need. Instead of helping the Palestinians become self-sufficient members of the societies where they live (for the most part, societies that like them speak Arabic and are Sunni Muslim), the UN body has created a welfare culture and dependency.

As a Jerusalem Post editorial pointed out this week, there is something paradoxical in the situation in which the thousands of Jews who left Gaza in the disengagement in 2005 are not considered refugees even though they lost their homes, livelihoods and community support systems, while the descendants of the Muslims who moved to the Gaza Strip in 1948 have an internationally recognized elevated refugee status.

“Inhabitants of both Gaza and the West Bank have the right to vote in Palestinian elections, when they are held. It is the Palestinians’ own failure – to either choose a more pragmatic leadership or end the rift between Hamas and Fatah or both – that has perpetuated their political limbo,” noted the editorial. “Should members of all failed societies be afforded refugee status?”

The PA sees no need to take care of the refugees, since foreign taxpayers via UNRWA and other organizations are doing it for them. On the contrary, the “refugees” are more useful to the PA than having citizens in their would-be state who would have to be funded.

Only Palestinians can hold citizenship and refugee status at the same time. Are the Palestinians who make up a significant proportion of Jordan’s population, for example, really refugees if they have homes, passports and voting rights?

The number of the Palestinian refugees keeps on growing. UNRWA itself says that in 1948 “more than 700,000 Palestine refugees [were] displaced as a result of the first Arab-Israeli war.” Naturally, it does not mention who started that war.

UNRWA now claims to care for “five million Palestinian refugees and their descendants living in the Middle East, including the West Bank, Gaza, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon.” The word “descendants” makes a world of difference. Had UNRWA’s goals included facilitating the absorption of the “refugees,” by now there would be only a few thousands left who needed help – not millions more. But UNRWA’s mandate to resettle the Palestinian refugees was rescinded in 1965.

The real hurdle is the Palestinian insistence on the “right to return,” a dream to flood Israel with the millions who claim refugee status. There is no reciprocal recognition of the right of Jews to live in places such as Hebron, Jerusalem’s Old City or the Neveh Ya’acov neighborhood, or Gush Etzion – places where Jewish residents were displaced or slaughtered in the 1948 War of Independence and returned after the Arab countries failed to destroy Israel in the 1967 Six Day War.

Far from being pro-Palestinian, UNRWA has exploited the concept of refugees to manufacture and perpetuate the problem that is its raison d’etre. UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness this week gave interviews implying that if it weren’t for the agency’s schools, Palestinian children in Gaza would all be learning in Hamas-affiliated facilities. But many studies report that the children are being taught anti-Israel texts. As recently as two months ago, terror attack tunnels were discovered under UNRWA schools in Gaza, the target being Jewish communities in the Negev. The UN has condemned the stockpiling of weapons and construction of terror tunnels under its buildings, but it is on literally shaky ground.

It’s time for UNRWA to be gradually disbanded. Its areas of responsibility – such as education and healthcare – could be transferred initially to the UNHCR and later to the hands of the Palestinians themselves. And if after 70 years UNRWA really needs to distribute food to those under its auspices, it has clearly failed at even its most basic task of providing meaningful relief.

The Palestinian refugees need to recognize some home truths. UNRWA has done nothing to build a sustainable, peaceful Palestinian state. On the contrary, for generations it has had an unsettling impact. No one can afford to have UNRWA perpetuating the refugee problem: not the Palestinians, not Israel, not the American and other foreign taxpayers – and above all not the millions of genuine refugees.