**Why UNRWA is an obstacle to peace**

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Many Palestinians’ very identity seems more oriented to preserving grievance than to achieving peace. Sadly, with regard to Palestinians’ far-reaching claims on the issue of refugees, as with other key aspects of their conflict with Israel, the United Nations has entrenched itself as a part of the problem rather than the solution. A U.N. body, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), funded by American and other global taxpayers to the tune of billions of dollars, has been dedicated to the perpetuation of Palestinians’ refugee status and their maximalist demands – in addition to more broadly amplifying the political narrative of just one side of one complex conflict.

Fortunately, though, senior American officials now seem committed to rectifying this state of affairs – and the time could be ripe for international backing of the effort. The White House has suspended funding of UNRWA, and is reportedly primed to announce opposition to the obdurate Palestinian posture on refugees. Both Israelis and Palestinians could benefit from these steps, along with prospects for genuine and lasting peace between them.

During and after the first war launched by Arab states against Israel upon its establishment in 1948, some 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled the country. Meanwhile, as a result of the hostilities, at least 750,000 Jews were compelled to leave Arab countries in which they had lived for centuries.

The similarities, however, largely end there. The Jews who fled Arab and other Muslim-majority lands were fully absorbed into Israel and other countries decades ago, restarting their lives despite significant challenges. The Palestinians who were displaced were spurred by Arab leaders to cling to their refugee status – and were widely denied citizenship or even basic rights as residents in Arab countries where they found themselves.

The world’s only Jewish state, Israel – a democratic country barely the size of New Jersey – now has about 1.8 million Arab citizens, not including the residents of the Palestinian territories. In the nearly two dozen neighboring Arab countries, comprising an area of over five million square miles, fewer than 5,000 Jews remain.

Palestinian leaders – from the establishment figures of the Palestinian Authority to the Hamas jihadists controlling Gaza, who openly pledge Israel’s destruction – have cultivated as sacrosanct a Palestinian right of mass “return” not to a future Palestinian state alongside Israel but to Israel itself. They do so knowing that no Israeli government – whether leaning to the left or right – could ever allow this scenario, which would amount not only to perpetual battle but to the eradication through demography of Israel as a Jewish state. Of course, rejection of Jews’ national legitimacy in their homeland is what has caused so much senseless suffering to begin with.

To make matters worse, Palestinians alone have had, since 1949, their own dedicated refugee organization at the United Nations, standing apart from the Office of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees, which focuses on all the world’s other refugees, numbering close to 17 million. UNRWA – one of the longest-lasting entities at the U.N. and likely its single largest bureaucracy in terms of personnel – has also operated under singularly expansive terms, defining as its charges not only actual refugees but all their descendants, indefinitely.

But this double standard is merely the tip of the iceberg. Over the course of years, UNRWA schools teaching a new generation of Palestinians have been found to utilize educational materials negating the existence of Israel and the rights and history of Jews. Repeatedly, UNRWA employees have been found to be associated with Palestinian extremist groups and their doctrines of hate. UNRWA spokespeople routinely promulgate anti-Israel propaganda, broadcasting incendiary, one-sided narratives on both traditional and social media. Multiple UNRWA facilities and their surroundings have even been revealed to have been utilized by terrorists to launch attacks, store weaponry or construct underground tunnels for use in cross-border violence against Israelis. And UNRWA, whose materials tout “Palestine” as if it were already a state even while also excusing Palestinians from any real obligations in peacemaking, has joined in inciting millions to dream of overrunning Israel with a mass Palestinian influx.

Over recent days, reports have emerged that White House officials, echoing bipartisan consensus, are committed to addressing the deep-rooted problems exacerbated by UNRWA and to rejecting Palestinian aspirations to overrun Israel demographically. The desire of an unprecedented number of Arab leaders to focus on foremost current priorities, including modernization and the broadly menacing policies of Iran, may yield some newfound receptiveness.

Ultimately, in a sign of impartiality consistent with the U.N.’s own founding principles, UNRWA’s work should be absorbed into the overall U.N. refugee agency. More immediately, dramatic reform of UNRWA’s mandate and operations is a necessity for restoring U.N. credibility and efficiency, ensuring fair treatment of both Israelis and Palestinians, and meaningfully pursuing peace in the Middle East. Until that long-overdue reform occurs, funds earmarked for UNRWA should be redirected in a manner that promotes, not hinders, regional reconciliation.

For too long, UNRWA has been a primary symbol of discrimination and waste in U.N. agencies that a consortium of nearly 50 Muslim states frequently exploits as political weapons against Israel. Palestinians may certainly continue to receive foreign aid and social services. However, with their utter dependency on the role played by UNRWA – not only in material assistance but also shrill political advocacy – the Palestinians have had little incentive to finally normalize their own circumstances, temper unfeasible demands and reach a mutually just peace with Israel. Indeed, the Palestinian Authority has rejected every sweeping peace proposal put to it.

Palestinians of successive generations have retained refugee status in Arab and other countries some 70 years after a similar number of Jewish refugees were fully absorbed in Israel and elsewhere. This status quo does not serve Palestinians – and it does not serve the cause of peace. It’s time for a change.