Trump is right on UN refugee aid

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Proponents of United Nation’s Palestinian refugee aid have recently called for [a halt in funding reductions](http://en.farsnews.com/print.aspx?nn=13961212001518), claiming potential for [catastrophic consequences](http://en.farsnews.com/print.aspx?nn=13961212001518). The United States, a major volunteer funder of this aid, recently withheld millions in aid. While [President Trump](http://thehill.com/people/donald-trump) meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump should reaffirm his commitment to halting funding for the UN project that is no longer serving it’s stated purpose.

The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) [began operations in 1950](https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are) funded by individual UN member states to provide education, health care and social services to the Palestinian refugee population “[until a just and lasting solution](http://www.unhcr.org/5a86d1967.pdf)” could be found. Perversely, by [allowing the descendants of refugees](https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees), many of whom are themselves citizens of other countries, to register on its list, the agency makes the likelihood of resolving the refugee issue near impossible, as the numbers of eligible and unaccounted for refugees are condemned to rise year on year.

The fact that the UNRWA is the only refugee agency in the world [that counts a second generation as refugees](https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are) intentionally perpetuates the Palestinian humanitarian crisis for political gain and this must be challenged.

The recent announcement by the [State Department](https://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/dpb/2018/01/277473.htm) that it would be taking a closer “look at UNRWA” and making sure that its money, of which the U.S. is the largest single donor is “best spent so that people can get the services” was met with near-universal outrage by the international community.

UNRWA, unlike other UN agencies such as the UN High Commissioner for Refugees, which seeks to aid refugees from civil wars, conflicts and natural disasters wherever they occur, was founded to address the Palestinian refugee issue alone. UN High Commissioner for Refugees’ [definition of a refugee](https://www.unrefugees.org/refugee-facts/what-is-a-refugee/), as someone who “owing to a well-founded fear of persecution…is outside the country of his nationality,” highlights UNRWA’s distorted approach to the issue. While other refugee populations in the world have shrunk with time, [UNRWA’s figures have risen](https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are) from 750,000 at its inception to more than 5 million at the last count.

UNRWA receives its mandate directly from the UN General Assembly, and is subject to the majority vote of members. This is the same General Assembly that resoundingly passed a non-binding resolution last month criticizing President Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital by [128 votes in favor](https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2017/12/21/572565091/u-n-votes-overwhelmingly-to-condemn-trumps-jerusalem-decision) to nine against, with 35 abstentions. The same General Assembly that, in anticipation of the U.S. administration’s decision on Jerusalem last December, voted by a majority of [151 in favor to six against](https://www.un.org/press/en/2017/ga11982.doc.htm) to disavow Israeli tie to Jerusalem, one of six anti-Israel resolutions it passed.

This clear and consistent anti-Israel bias forms an integral part of UNRWA’s mandate and well accounts for the agency’s deeply prejudicial approach to the Middle East conflict. By grossly inflating numbers of Palestinian refugees on its list and perpetuating the so-called “right of return,” UNRWA calls its own legitimacy into question. In its claims the Palestinian refugee issue “should be resolved by the parties to conflict through peace negotiations based on UN resolutions,” the agency seeks to prejudice negotiations by dictating the substance of a political settlement that can only be determined by both Israel and the Palestinians engaging in direct negotiations.

Donations to UNRWA are made on a purely voluntarily basis. The fact that the U.S. now seeks to share the burden it has long shouldered as the body’s principle donor, to the tune of some $350 million, does not prevent the administration from reallocating this aid budget to other more effective agencies. While much has been made of the “cut” in funding, in reality, the U.S. was not bound by any specific schedule to provide specific amounts of aid. The response by UN member states including Belgium to increase their own funding to plug the gap goes some way to redressing the traditional disproportionality in its funding.

As the U.S. Ambassador to the UN [Nikki Haley](http://thehill.com/people/nimrata-nikki-haley) stated of the decision not to “pay to be abused” by the UN, the U.S. decision to freeze aid to UNRWA pending its concerns over its legitimacy was a direct response to the disproportionate bias repeatedly directed at Israel by the UN General Assembly. Another cause for concern is its role in enabling Palestinian unilateral action at the UN General Assembly. Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas’s comments in response to the Jerusalem designation made it clear that he foresaw no role for the U.S. in the Middle East Peace Process and declared his intention to proceed with further unilateral action.

While UNRWA arguably offers some stability in the West Bank and Gaza by providing education and health-care services, without which Israel would be forced to step in as provider, the agency is in desperate need of reform.

The Trump administration has adopted a robust line against organizations acting out of America’s national interests. In transferring its funding from an ineffective agency that perpetuates rather than improving the Palestinian refugee problem to other agencies with a better track record, not only would funds better reach the Palestinians in real need of them, but it would send a powerful message to all the UN bodies that it will not tolerate unilateral appeals by the Palestinians and one-sided resolutions against Israel at the UN. Former Israel Ambassador to the UN Ron Prosor is a leading advocate of merging UNRWA’s activities into the UNHCR’s mandate to better utilize available aid budgets and allow the UN to deliver a more cohesive approach to tackling the global refugee crisis.

In this way, the U.S. can build an effective roadmap for the international community to engage in decisive words and actions to facilitate constructive dialogue between Israel and the Palestinians in the hopes of reinvigorating the dormant peace process.