Kushner is right about the United Nations

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By Dave Harden

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Jared Kushner may be right in seeking to disrupt the current structure of US assistance to the Palestinians. Since 1950, America has contributed more than $6 billion to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). UNRWA supports roughly 5 million registered Palestinian refugees, and their descendants, in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, who were displaced during the 1948 and 1967 Israeli-Arab wars. About 30,000 of UNRWA’s 5 million Palestinians are first generation refugees. UNRWA’s most visible operations are in Gaza, a nearly impossible responsibility made even more difficult, as Hamas and the Israelis are on the brink of a fourth war in the last decade. Like any organization established in the 1950s, it is time for 21st Century disruption. Re-visioning UNRWA, however, requires thoughtful diplomacy and economic nuance.

The international community should not regard UNRWA as a monolith. Circumstances in Jordan, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem are vastly different than in Gaza, Syria, or the sealed refugee camps in Lebanon. UNRWA primarily provides health, education, and social services; make no mistake this assistance is life-saving to the most vulnerable. But after 70 years, the structure and incentives have ossified to create welfare dependency. Most Palestinians would prefer the dignity of a state, a job, and the potential of a real future than food basket deliveries, generation after generation. While acknowledging its good work in tough places, UNRWA subsidizes dysfunctionality and an unsustainable status quo in most of the Levant. Here are three suggestions to hack UNRWA.

First, set a 10-year exit strategy. UNRWA’s exit cannot prejudice the Palestinian claim to the right of return which, if ever to be resolved, will have to be negotiated in a comprehensive settlement with the Israelis. Rather, a 10-year timetable with a clear exit date will help focus both the Israelis and Palestinians on the existential questions separating them. For instance, UNRWA’s school system is radically moderate compared to what Hamas would impose in Gaza. With an UNRWA withdrawal from the West Bank, the Palestinian Authority or, if it collapses, the Israeli government, will have to finance health and education for potentially a million people. A 10-year exit requires the parties to begin a purposeful, planned wind-down and, in so doing, will place inevitable severe stress on the status quo.

Second, begin UNRWA’s exit plan in Jordan. The UN, through UNRWA, should fund a 10-year block grant to Jordan at $500 million per year. Most of the two million Palestinian refugees in Jordan are politically, economically, and socially integrated into the Hashemite Kingdom. Yet, Jordan would take a huge economic hit to incorporate the social welfare benefits for two million people. In the UNRWA exit strategy, half of the annual block grant would provide social services for the next decade, and the remaining balance would be used to drive private sector trade and competitiveness so the Jordanian economy could grow to absorb the shock of the withdrawn entitlement.

Third, shift refugee operations in Syria and Lebanon from UNRWA to the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), which has the mandate to protect refugees and assist in their voluntary repatriation, local integration, or resettlement to a third country. This UN interagency move would maintain the right of return as a political issue to be negotiated between the Israelis and Palestinians. Further, UNHCR is already operational in both Syria and Lebanon, runs a massive global enterprise, and would bring best practices to the Palestinians. In Syria, the situation is so unsettled that the Palestinians, like Syrian refugees and internally displaced people, must be protected under international humanitarian law. In Lebanon, any abrupt move to fully integrate Palestinians into economic and political life would likely threaten the fragile demographic knitting which barely holds that country together. In fact, the consequences of changing the status quo for Palestinian refugees in Lebanon could have grave and unpredictable consequences as Hezbollah would likely assert greater control over state functions.

Kushner is right to demand a fundamental re-ordering of UNRWA. The UN agency serves as a welfare and humanitarian relief provider which after 70 years subsidizes despair and continued conflict between the Palestinians and Israelis. Yet, hacking UNRWA raises a few cautionary flags given that disruptive change can do real harm. The administration must ensure that UNRWA can start the school year for all of its students, particularly in Gaza. Imagine the Israelis and Palestinians on the brink of war with schools closed indefinitely. Further, an UNRWA exit strategy will require intense international cooperation. Lastly, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is the death bed of big ideas and failure is a real possibility. The world today is vastly different from the one in 1950 when UNRWA was created. Disrupting the UNRWA’s organizational model is essential if the Middle East wants to see a different future.