What Should Be Done with UNRWA?

September 12, 2018

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The Jerusalem Post

<https://www.jpost.com/Opinion/What-should-be-done-with-UNRWA-567070>

Hady Amr, former Obama State Department deputy special envoy for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, wrote in The Hill that the administration’s defunding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) undermines a “cornerstone of America’s support for stability in the Middle East and flagship of our values to provide for the most vulnerable… UNRWA is so in-sync with our (American) values that American citizens directly donate millions of dollars to UNRWA.”

While it is true that UNRWA provides important health services to Palestinian civilians, Amr chooses not to comment about the State Department designated Hamas group’s infiltration of UNRWA facilities in Gaza, or UNRWA teachers glorifying terrorism, or UNRWA refusing to take off its rolls the two million Palestinians living as full citizens of Jordan. He also ignored a 2013 UN audit that found UNRWA vulnerable to “misappropriation, graft and corruption,” while a Newsweek op-ed in 2016 asked, “Why Are American’s Paying for (UNRWA) Antisemitic Textbooks?”

UNRWA considers Palestinians living in the West Bank and Gaza as stateless refugees, despite the fact that they are already living in the land the international community says will be their eventual state. The problem is that the Palestinians living in the West Bank (Judea/Samaria) and Gaza, as their “Mass March of Return” clearly states, consider themselves refugees from today’s Israel within the 1949 armistice line, demanding an unlimited right of return that UNRWA’s mission advocates for and which would effect the demographic destruction of Israel.

According to James Lindsey, UNRWA’s own general council from 2000 to 2007, “More than two-thirds of the registered refugees have moved out of refugee camps and into the general population of the countries or areas in which they live.” Yet UNRWA still adds “10,000 new fifth- and sixth-generation refugees to its lists per month” according to the Institute of National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

Stephen Rosen, writing in the *Middle East Forum*, said that the “‘Right of Return’ symbolized by UNRWA’s very existence, is a sacred issue to Palestinians.”

During a discussion last month with a current Middle East State Department official, I recommended that if you truly want to advance a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and not perpetuate it, you need to change UNRWA’s mandate allowing every descendant of an original Palestinian refugee from 1946 to 1948 to claim an eternal refugee status.

What must be clearly differentiated, but too often is treated as one issue, are UNRWA’s definition of refugees, which is counterproductive to resolving the Israeli Palestinian conflict, and the important humanitarian aid it provides, which as Amr and many in the IDF and within the Israeli government believe, is an essential stabilizing force. Let’s leave aside that much of this is self-inflicted by Hamas rule in Gaza, and by 70 years of discrimination against Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria.

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As happens so often with today’s hyperpolarized politics and Middle East analysis, the discussions about UNRWA are fraught with half-truths and historical revisionism.

According to a news article in *the Washington Post*, “Many UNRWA critics appear to believe incorrectly that UNHCR (the refugee agency for every other refugee in the world) does not recognize descendants of registered refugees as genuine refugees themselves. The two organizations have the same definition — giving assistance to those driven from their countries because of a well-founded fear of persecution, war or violence and to their descendants for as long as that status continues.”

This seems to be a half-truth. Although there are descendants of refugees other than Palestinians who are still counted as refugees, the vast majority of refugee populations throughout the world have decreasing populations of refugees over time, as the priority of UNHCR is to find a permanent home for the world’s refugees. Palestinians, on the other hand, have a perpetually growing refugee population, without a single descendant of a Palestinian refugee ever taken off the UNRWA roll.

Two million Palestinians have Jordanian citizenship but are still counted as full-fledged stateless refugees by UNRWA; they would not be considered refugees if they were part of UNHCR. These Palestinians have no “well-founded fear of persecution, war or violence.” In fact, Palestinians constitute the majority of the Jordanian population!

According to UNHCR, “Our ultimate goal is to find solutions that allow them to rebuild their lives. Many refugees cannot go home… UNHCR helps resettle refugees to a third country.”

UNRWA refuses to help any Palestinian resettle outside of Israel. It will only remove Palestinian refugee status voluntarily, which does not follow the UNHCR vision, but instead is in lockstep with the Palestinian Authority agenda that does not want a single Palestinian anywhere in the world taken off its census, which works directly against a resolution of the conflict. It is essential to those who wish to destroy the Jewish state that the “refugees” and their descendants not disappear from the news by becoming anything other than displaced persons, instead of living as citizens of Arab or other countries.

PA President Mahmoud Abbas’s office accused the Trump administration of “stripping millions of Palestinians of their refugee status” because it would negate the true agenda of the PA and Hamas, which can never accept a state of the Jewish people with full minority rights living in peace next to a totally Judenrein state of Palestine in today’s West Bank and Gaza.

If this weren’t the truth, then Abbas would have accepted the Israeli offer in 2008 for a Palestinian state on 100% of the territory with land swaps, east Jerusalem as its capital, and continued Muslim control of the Temple Mount.

There is also the hypocrisy of UN refugee agencies ignoring the millions of Jews descended from the 750,000 Jews who lived in Arab countries for millennia, who were expelled from their native lands in response to the creation of Israel.

Those Jews who had all their property confiscated by Arab governments aren’t counted by any UN agency, but an Arab migrant worker who came from outside the British Mandate area and happened to live for two years in Mandate Palestine between 1946 and 1948, is counted to this day as a refugee, as well as the hundreds of thousands of his descendants who are entitled to indefinite UNRWA services.

Emphasizing the absurdity and danger to American interests of continued funding of UNRWA without a change in its definition of refugees is indeed a step toward destabilizing the current unsustainable situation, a step away from funding the Islamist desire to destroy Israel, and a step toward a genuine peace.

Let the Palestinians have a normal economic life, exchanging productivity with their neighbors, including Israel, to everyone’s benefit, instead of maintaining a desolate state of war, propped up forever by foreign aid, with the corruption that it almost always entails. Palestinian “refugees” receive more aide than any other refugees in the world.

America can find another way to support legitimate humanitarian aid to Palestinian civilians, while insisting on reform of their anti-Israel, anti-peace, anti-American educational system.

Alternatively, the international community could also simply demand that Hamas stop firing its rockets against Israeli civilians over the internationally recognized Gaza-Israeli border and stop attacking the very checkpoints that bring humanitarian aid into Gaza. Israel would then happily open its borders to trade, give humanitarian help, set up desalination plants and move toward an equitable final resolution.