

Ending UNRWA and Advancing Peace

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A Palestinian rides his bicycle as he passes the United Nations Works and Relief Agency (UNRWA) headquarters at Shati refugee camp in Gaza April 26, 2008. (Courtesy REUTERS/Ismail Zaydah).

Since the end of the Second World War, millions of refugees have left refugee camps, and refugee status, and moved to countries that accepted them—quickly or slowly—as citizens. Post-World War II Europe was an archipelago of displaced persons and refugee camps, housing 850,000 people in 1947—Czechs, Poles, Lithuanians, Germans, Latvians, Greeks, and many more nationalities. By 1952, all but one of the camps had closed. Hundred of thousands of Jewish refugees from Europe went to Israel after 1948, and then hundreds of thousands more arrived from Arab lands when they were forced to flee after 1956 and 1967. The children and grandchildren of these refugees, born after their arrival, were never refugees themselves; they were from birth citizens of the new land, as their parents had become immediately upon their own arrival. In this process many nations and agencies have played wonderful roles, not least the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

The exception to this refugee story is the Palestinians. In most of the Arab lands to which they fled or travelled after 1948 they were often treated badly, and refused citizenship (with Jordan the major exception) or even the right to work legally. And instead of coming under the protection of UNHCR, they had a special agency of their own, UNRWA, the UN Relief and Works Agency. In the decades of its existence, it has not solved or even diminished the Palestinian refugee problem; instead it has presided over a massive increase in its size, for all the descendants of Palestinian refugees are considered to be refugees as well. Once there were 750,000; now there are five million people considered by UNRWA to be “Palestinian refugees.” And UNRWA is now the largest UN agency, with a staff of 30,000. UNHCR cares for the rest of the world with about 7,500 personnel.

The political background to this story is simple: only in the case of Israel was there a determined refusal to accept what had happened during and after World War II, with the establishment of the Jewish state and the increase in its population by the acceptance of refugee Jews. Of all the world’s refugees, whom UNHCR tries normally to resettle, only the Palestinians are an exception. UNRWA presides over generation after generation of additional refugees, and Arab states and leaders make believe that some day they can turn back the clock and send them—and their children and grandchildren and great-grandchildren—to Israel.

To say this is not necessarily to criticize the day-to-day activities of UNRWA, for it was handed a mission by the UN. There are and have always been many UNRWA officials who are reliable international civil servants. And no doubt, any change in UNRWA’s role should come slowly and carefully so as not to harm innocent people caught up in international political struggles. But UNRWA should cease to exist, and Palestinian refugees should be handled by UNHCR with the intention of resettling them. That process should begin with a redefinition of who is a refugee entitled to benefits, so that benefits are based on need rather than on status. Moreover, Palestinians who have citizenship in other countries should not be

considered refugees at all—the standard practice for every other group of refugees in the world. Why, for example, should the nearly two million Palestinians in Jordan, over 90 percent of whom have Jordanian citizenship, today be considered refugees by UNRWA at all?

Lest that position seem idiosyncratic, consider this: in 2010 Canada cut off its funding of UNRWA, and just now the Netherlands government has said it is considering the same action. How did they explain this? The foreign minister told parliament that Holland would “thoroughly review” its policy and the ruling party called UNRWA’s refugee definition “worrying.” UNRWA, said the party spokesman, “uses its own unique definition of refugees, different to the UN’s. The refugee issue is a big obstacle for peace. We therefore ask the government acknowledge this discrepancy, which leads to the third-generation Palestinian refugees.” Correction: fourth-generation, actually.

It is worth noting that there are many other criticisms of UNRWA: that it overlooks terrorist group activity in some camps, or allows members of Hamas and other terrorist groups to hold UNRWA staff positions. But those are criticisms of how UNRWA is carrying out its mission, while the deeper problem is the mission itself. That mission might accurately be described as enlarging the Palestinian refugee problem forever and thereby making any Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement tremendously more difficult if not impossible to achieve.

Closing UNRWA would in the end be a great favor to Palestinians who live outside the West Bank and Gaza, assuming that the needed services it provides them could be provided by other agencies or the governments of the countries in which they live. Some of those individuals will some day move to the West Bank or Gaza, but they do not need UNRWA to do that. None of them will ever move to Israel, and the existence of UNRWA helps to maintain the cruel myth that they will.

The “peace process” seems stalled today; no negotiated final settlements is on the horizon. But there are many things that can be done that move toward peace, such as the building of Palestinian institutions and improvement of the economy in the West Bank. Starting the process of closing down UNRWA would be a move toward peace, as it would replace the permanent perpetuation of the Palestinian refugee problem with a process designed to reduce it in size and some day solve it.