

Eternal Palestinian refugees *Special to McClatchy Newspapers*

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As Palestinians seek recognition as a state from the UN this week, many wonder what impact such a move might have on the 4.6 million Palestinians who are refugees from the 1948 Israel War of Independence or their descendants.

During the fighting between Jewish fighters and the armies of seven Arab states determined to push the Jews into the sea, some 700,000 Palestinian Arabs fled or were pushed behind Arab lines.

They ended up in refugee camps in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza. Today, the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), created in 1949 solely to care for the Palestinian refugees, finds its caseload has more than quadrupled to 4.6 million people.

Unlike the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) - which cares for 15 million refugees in 123 countries -- UNRWA counts children and grandchildren born in refugee camps as refugees too.

When I drove in Lebanon past a refugee camp a few years ago, I was stunned. All around the gleaming white houses of the Lebanese marched up the wooded hillsides in a glorious statement of prosperity and esthetics.

But the Palestinian camp was a miserable prison of dirty grey cement houses, barbed wire and misery.

I later asked General Michel Aoun, leader of the second largest bloc in parliament, why not let the 300,000 Palestinians refugees in Lebanon get out of the camps, find homes and jobs and assimilate as citizens.

“Never,” he said. The Palestinians had taken sides in the bloody civil war from 1975 to 1990 and they might shift the balance of ethnic and religious power in the country.

But beyond that, many Arab states have insisted the Palestinians not do what other refugees do if return to their place of origin is not possible - settle in the host country or a third country. The point seems to be that keeping the Palestinians in limbo for 60 years - and growing them from 700,000 to four million - creates powerful pressure on Israel. Lately most European countries see Israel as the aggressor and the presence of Arab refugees heightens that image.

UNRWA funded schools also seem determined to maintain the fiction that the four million Palestinians will somehow be able to return to their homes in Tel Aviv and Haifa and live side by side with the Zionists they have been taught to hate.

Millions of refugees since the Second World War have been cared for by international aid but have ultimately been resettled. Czechoslovakia expelled three million Sudeten Germans for siding with the Nazis. When some of them sought in 1990 to reclaim their homes, no less of a human rights advocate than then Czech President Vaclav Havel told them bluntly, no way, no how.

In 1947, millions of Hindus fled from Pakistan to India and millions of Indian Muslims went the other way. Are they kept in refugee camps to pressure the other country?

Hmong refugees fled Laos in 1975 and resettled in the United States. Are we keeping them in camps to

embarrass the communists in Laos? No. they live as U.S. citizens and have built new lives here.

Ironically, while many Arabs despise the United States for its friendship with Israel and for its racy culture, few of them know that the main source of funds for these refugees comes from America, not the Arab world. Of \$1 billion a year spent on the Palestinians, the biggest chunk is American -- \$250 million in 2010. Europe pays nearly as much.

Israel Behind the News, a U.S.-based media research group, has just released a video charging that UNRWA funds - mainly US and European funds - are being used to support Hamas and other fanatical teachers in the schools run by the UN in Gaza and the West Bank.

Children are taught to glorify suicide bombing and we see them in the video wearing mock explosive vests and chanting their determination to die fighting the "pigs, the infidels, the sons of Zion."

UNRWA operates schools for 500,000 children in the camps and it hires local Palestinians to teach. Increasingly, the teachers belong to Hamas which has also gained control over the teacher's union.

UNRWA Gaza director John Ging denies accusations that his agency is helping Hamas and other extremist groups brainwash young children. In fact, he sounds offended in the video that such a question should be raised.

Yet Arab journalists in the video, as well as Bassem Eid of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group, said UNRWA has become an empire unto itself with 22,000 teachers and a vested interest in maintaining the ever-growing Palestinian refugee population ad infinitum.

While UNHCR sets a 10 year limit on refugees to find asylum back home, in the host country or in a third country, UNRWA goes on forever.

Perhaps it is time to make some changes. UNHCR could take over the camps and schools with an aim to resettlement and ending the 60-year hostage situation the Palestinians have become. And schools that glorify suicide bombings of hospitals and buses should not get UN or US funding. US funds should go to teach peace.

ABOUT THE WRITER

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