UNRWA has No Place in Gaza on the Day After Hamas

written by Dr. Adi Schwartz | 05.12.2023

Key Messages:

- No other international organization in the past 75 years has enabled, supported, fostered and empowered the Palestinian rejectionist and anti-Israel ideology (the "from the River to the Sea" concept) as UNRWA has done.
- Alternatives exist for providing humanitarian aid, welfare, health and education services to the Palestinians, other than through UNRWA.
- The Palestinians in the Gaza Strip should not have been treated as refugees in the first place, and the provision of aid to the Strip's residents should not have been tied to refugee status.The promises of a reform in UNRWA should not be relied upon; numerous such attempts have been made in the past – and all have failed.
- **Introduction**One of the Israeli hostages abducted to Gaza on October 7 revealed, on returning to Israel, that he had been held at the home of an UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) teacher[1]. In the past two weeks, IDF forces have presented evidence of weaponry and ammunition having been found under UNRWA crates[2]. However, the true problem with UNRWA is not one specific incident or another. The true problem with UNRWA is its very existence.No other entity in the past 75 years has enabled, actualized, supported, fostered and empowered the Palestinian rejectionist ideology as UNRWA has done. This ideology denies the basic legitimacy of the existence of a State of Israel, nurtures a perpetual refugee status of the majority of Palestinians, and demands a massive return of those "refugees" into the State of Israel (referred to as the "Right of Return"). This ideology played a key role in the horrors of October 7.**Background**

  UNRWA was founded in December 1949[3] as a temporary agency for 18 months, to rehabilitate the Arab refugees from Israel's War of Independence. Ever since, the agency has been operating as a temporary entity whose mandate is extended every three years, without having stricken off even a single person's name from the lists of refugees. Instead

of an agency for **aiding** or **rehabilitating** the Palestinian refugees, UNRWA has become an agency for **perpetuating** the Palestinian refugees' existence until they can 'return' en masse to Israel.

According to the agency's records, there are 1.6 million "registered Palestinian refugees" in the Gaza Strip today (as of 2022)[4], out of a total of 2.1 million Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip[5]; i.e., over 75%. The Palestinians and the Arab countries have always refused to include the Palestinian refugees under the auspices of the UN's global refugee agency (UNHCR). As a result, the definition of a "Palestinian refugee" differs from that of any other refugee in the world.

In the context of the Gaza Strip, there are several key differences between the definitions. The first is that a refugee anywhere in the world must be located outside their country in order to be considered a refugee, whereas a Palestinian refugee need not be. "Palestinian refugees" currently living in the Gaza Strip view the Strip as part of Palestine; meaning, they are in "Palestine", yet are nevertheless treated as "refugees from Palestine". Such a state of affairs does not exist anywhere else in the world. Refugees all over the world are people who have left their country and crossed an internationally-recognized border. The Palestinians who relocated from Jaffa or Ashkelon to Gaza during Israel's War of Independence did not cross such a border, and accordingly should never have been treated as refugees in the first place.

Another difference between UNRWA and UNHCR concerns their treatment of offspring. In the case of the Palestinians, any child born to a "registered refugee" is **automatically** registered as a refugee. UNHCR has a more complex process, with registration not being automatic and being considered on a case-by-case basis[6]. It is only in the case of the Palestinians that a state of affairs has come about where the number of the refugees' descendants registered as 'refugees' far exceeds the number of the original refugees. The result is that hundreds of thousands of the people living in Gaza have never left their homes, are living in what they themselves consider to be Palestine, yet are nevertheless treated as refugees from Palestine. This is completely absurd.

The Problem

UNRWA grants a fictitious refugee status to over 75% of Gaza's population, thereby providing them with international endorsement of their belief that their true home is not in Gaza, but rather in the Israeli cities of Ashkelon, Ashdod, Jaffa or Beersheba. This is a political refugee status, intended to perpetuate the conflict. This refugee status provides the Palestinians with a pretext to continue their war against the Jews.

Demanding their 'return' into Israel is the principal mechanism through which they hope to transform Israel from a Jewish state into an Arab one.

UNRWA, which is funded by the international community at a cost of about one billion dollars every year, sends the Palestinians the exact opposite message from the one they should receive. Instead of conveying to them an unequivocal message that the world has no intention of supporting the Palestinian delusions to supplant Israel, the world is doing the opposite. The messages conveyed by the mere fact of UNRWA's existence, and naturally also through the education system and the diplomatic and public mantle provided to the Palestinians by the agency, are that the demand for Israel's destruction is a legitimate one. UNRWA is the international expression of the antisemitic calls of "from the River to the Sea", since both mean the same thing: a demand for the elimination of the Jewish state and its replacement with an Arab state.

For the Palestinians, UNRWA primary importance lies not in its role as a technical agency providing education and health services. For the Palestinians, UNRWA serves as an insurance policy issued to them by the international community, and an endorsement both of their own self-concept as having experienced the greatest calamity in the history of humanity (the "Nakba") and as being entitled to one day return to the territory of the State of Israel. When, in 2018, the U.S. government decided to cut off the agency's funding, Palestinians' reactions did not focus on the possible impairment of the quality of education and health services; rather, they expressed indignation and outrage that their "Right of Return" was being tampered with.

The Solution

As long as Gazans believe themselves to be refugees and harbor hopes of

one day returning into Israel's territory, funds and aid delivered to the Strip for purposes of constructing housing will actually be used for constructing terror infrastructure aimed at advancing the vision of 'Return'.

For this reason, UNRWA must be dismantled, and any aid of any kind that the international community wishes to provide to Gaza must be provided through other avenues. The best option is to provide such aid through the national aid agencies operated by various countries, some of which are already active in Gaza (and in many other places around the world.) Thus, for example, the U.S. provides aid all over the world, and in Gaza as well, through USAID. Similar government agencies exist in the EU, UK, Norway, Sweden and many other European countries. Apolitical U.N. agencies, such as the World Food Programme, can also play a role. In any case, the aid must be completely unassociated with any political aspect of the conflict, and from the fictitious refugee status. Just as the international community has provided aid in numerous countries around the world, such as Haiti or Turkey, in recent years, without tying that aid to refugee status, such should be the case in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority as well.

Conclusion

UNRWA fuels the mindset of a Palestinian 'Return' and serves as an important pillar of the rejectionist Nakba ethos. Since Israel's cooperation with UNRWA has been voluntary from the outset, Israel can terminate its cooperation with UNRWA.

Any international aid to the Gaza Strip, whether in welfare, health and education services or in any other field, must be provided through other channels, and in no case through UNRWA.

Attempts to "fix" or "improve" UNRWA should in no case be relied upon. This is an agency whose primary purpose is to perpetuate the Palestinian ideology of return. All past attempts to carry out reforms of UNRWA have failed – and for good reason. Such is the organization's very DNA, and it cannot be changed. Therefore, UNRWA should have no role in a post-Hamas Gaza.

[1] https://x.com/bokeralmog/status/1729929618742755477?s=20

[2] https://www.mako.co.il/news-military/6361323ddea5a810/Article-b3b05439b5a2c81027.htm

[3] UN General Assembly Resolution 302, Assistance to Palestine Refugees, A/RES/302(IV) (December 8, 1949). https://documents-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/051/21/PDF/NR005121.pdf?OpenElement

[4] "UNRWA in Action" Factsheet. https://www.unrwa.org/sites/default/files/content/resources/unrwa_in_numbers_eng_1.pdf

[5] CIA World Factbook. https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/gaza-strip/

[6] "Procedural Standards for Refugee Status Determination under UNHCR's Mandate," https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/577e17944.pdf.