UNRWA strike is an opportunity to shut it down for good

written by Dr. Adi Schwartz | 12.06.2023

For more than three months, thousands of employees from the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in the West Bank have been on strike, protesting against the delays in the payment of their salaries.

The mounting piles of trash in refugee camps are a clear indication of the organization's financial crisis, serving as a reminder not only of its daily dysfunction but also of more significant concern. The ongoing existence of UNRWA poses a threat to the national security of the State of Israel.

UNRWA is an organization committed to the Palestinian demand for the return of refugees. While it enjoys international and UN cover, its structure, goals, and tens of thousands of employees make it a Palestinian organization that undermines Israel.

It manages to conceal its political nature under a seemingly humanitarian façade and obscures the fact that Palestinians have never wavered in their demand for a full return to Palestine and the eradication of Jewish sovereignty in the land.

However, Israel is trapped in the problematic and naive conception that it is preferable to continue supporting UNRWA in order to buy stability in the region, believing that the agency is preferable to Hamas or other extremist organizations.

This conception essentially grants UNRWA a diplomatic Iron Dome, shielding the organization from any attempt to harm or change it. This defense is particularly significant because UNRWA does not have a continuous budget and relies on annual contributions from other countries.

This situation must change through the gradual cessation of UNRWA's activities while addressing the needs of the defense establishment, which is concerned about social and security instability, as well as the international community's desire to continue assisting Palestinians.

The required change is the separation of the political dimension from welfare services. Israel does not need to oppose the economic assistance provided by the international community to the Palestinians, but it must oppose the link between these welfare services and fictitious refugee status and destructive support for the Palestinian right of return.

The international community should be allowed to continue aiding Palestinians through means other than UNRWA, whose gradual closure will clearly convey the message that the State of Israel is here to stay and that it is time to negotiate with Israel rather than delegitimize it.

The process should begin with the education system of UNRWA in the West Bank. Instead of Palestinian children attending UNRWA schools and teachers receiving salaries from the agency, they will be redirected to schools under the Palestinian Authority.

The buildings will remain the same, the classrooms will be the same, and the teachers will be the same. The practical impact on the lives of Palestinians will be minimal. This situation will greatly facilitate the support of the defense establishment since the risk of social and security instability will be minimal.

Israel will demand that donor countries transfer the proportional portion of their donations allocated to the education system to the Palestinian Authority instead of UNRWA. Most donor countries have no problem doing so. The exception is the United States, which, due to the Taylor Force Act, does not transfer funds directly to the Palestinian Authority.

However, alternative solutions can be found through other aid agencies operating in the West Bank, such as USAID or UNICEF. In the future, suitable solutions can be found for each specific region in the Middle East where UNRWA operates, based on its specific needs and the given situation: Gaza Strip, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

It can be assumed that the Palestinians will oppose such moves, and it will force them to explicitly state that they see a direct link between the existence of the agency and the fulfillment of their demand for return. Such a course of action will put them in a compromising position since they have managed to blame the continuation of the conflict solely on the Israeli side.

A gradual closure of UNRWA will focus attention on the fact that the struggle between us and the Palestinians revolves around the very existence of the State of Israel and not withdrawal from territories. Such understanding will hinder the political struggle in the international arena and lead to greater consensus within Israeli society, which is divided regarding its responsibility for the continuation of the conflict.

In the long run, the closure of the agency may trigger voices in Palestinian society that challenge the myth of return and start considering peaceful relations with the State of Israel instead of persisting in their current stance.

Published in Yent, June 12, 2023.