



# Correcting the Palestinian Refugee Distortion

## Aligning U.S. Treatment of Palestinian Refugee Status with Internationally-Accepted Standards

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*Palestinian demonstrators at the Gaza-Israel border fence, April 2023 (Shutterstock/Anas-Mohammed)*

### Executive Summary:

- UNRWA's *sui generis* criteria for defining Palestinian refugee status fundamentally diverges from the approach employed by the international community with regards to other refugee populations around the world. UNRWA's approach has inflated the number of individuals classified as Palestinian refugees, **by a factor of nearly 1,000**.
- UNRWA's definition serves only to perpetuate conflict and entrench rejectionist attitudes among much of the Palestinian population, threatening Israel's security, encouraging terror, and undermining the chances for advancing regional stability.
- Palestinian refugee status must be brought into alignment with internationally-accepted standards. The current exceptionalism runs counter to U.S. foreign policy interests.
- In order to advance U.S. interests, and promote regional stability, the U.S. should:
  - **Apply internationally-accepted standards:** Ensure that Palestinian refugees are treated under the same criteria as all other refugee populations.
  - **Establish an official position on refugee numbers:** The U.S. should adopt a formal position recognizing that, under international standards, **approximately 7,500 individuals** today qualify as refugees from the 1948 conflict.



- The status of additional descendants should be assessed individually, based on dependency and other criteria, in line with global practices.
- The U.S. decision to cease funding of UNRWA was an extremely important step. By helping shape a new international norm whereby Palestinian refugee status is aligned with international standards, the U.S. can help remove one of the key obstacles to lasting stability in the region.

### **Background and Objective:**

Since the emergence of the Palestinian refugee issue in 1949—following the pan-Arab war against the newly established State of Israel—the international community has treated Palestinians in a manner fundamentally different from any other refugee population worldwide. This divergence is rooted in political considerations. During the Cold War, Western powers were reluctant to antagonize the Arab world, fearing it might align with the Soviet bloc. Today, this exceptionalism persists, despite it running counter to U.S. foreign policy interests.

Rather than promoting peace, this approach to the refugee issue has proven detrimental. It has neither moderated Palestinian positions nor fostered a mentality conducive to coexistence. On the contrary, it has vastly inflated the number of individuals classified as Palestinian refugees—by a factor of nearly 1,000<sup>1</sup>—entrenched rejectionist attitudes among Palestinians and reinforced the refusal to accept the legitimacy of a Jewish state.

This policy brief examines how the unique treatment of Palestinian refugees—exemplified by the distinct mandate and practices of UNRWA—has distorted the refugee issue, inflated its scope, and obstructed its resolution. It offers recommendations for aligning policy with international norms and promoting a more effective and equitable framework for resolution. Finally, it urges the adoption of an official U.S. position recognizing that approximately 7,500 individuals meet the accepted definition of a refugee. The number of descendants who should be granted refugee status should be determined on an individual basis.

### **1. Definitional Discrepancy:**

- UNRWA Definition: A refugee is anyone whose “normal place of residence was Palestine between 1 June 1946 and 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.”<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See detailed explanation below.

<sup>2</sup> “Palestine Refugees,” UNRWA website, <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>.



- 1951 Refugee Convention: A refugee is a person who, “owing to well-founded fear of being persecuted... is *outside the country* of his nationality and is unable or... unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country” (emphasis added).<sup>3</sup>

UNRWA’s definition has led to the continued registration of millions of individuals—including citizens of sovereign states, residents of what they themselves define as Palestine, and persons naturalized elsewhere—as “refugees,” often across generations and in perpetuity.

## 2. Country-Specific Analysis:

- Jordan: The 1951 Refugee Convention includes clauses terminating refugee status upon naturalization.<sup>4</sup> Yet UNRWA continues to classify 2.4 million Palestinian Jordanians—most of whom were born, raised, and have full civil rights in Jordan—as refugees. This is a globally unique situation in which citizens of a fully functioning state are designated as refugees from another.<sup>5</sup>
- West Bank and Gaza Strip: Over 2.5 million registered Palestinian refugees live under the governance of the Palestinian Authority (West Bank) or Hamas (Gaza), in territories they themselves claim as Palestine. They actively pursue recognition of Palestinian statehood—yet continue to be classified as refugees from that same land.
- Lebanon and Syria: Though still registered with UNRWA, many of the approximately one million Palestinians listed in Lebanon and Syria no longer reside there. Some have emigrated and obtained citizenship in other countries, such as Germany or the U.S. UNRWA does not track these changes, and continues to list them as refugees. For example, a 2017 Lebanese government census revealed that only one-third of those registered by UNRWA as refugees were actually in Lebanon.<sup>6</sup> Given the Syrian civil war, actual numbers in Syria are likely even lower.
- Descendants: The 1951 Convention does not allow refugee status to be transmitted by descent. UNHCR interprets the Convention as supporting family unity, granting derivative refugee status on a case-by-case basis. In contrast, UNRWA automatically assigns full refugee status to all descendants of Palestinian refugees—regardless of personal

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<sup>3</sup> “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” UNHCR website, <https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/3b66c2aa10>.

<sup>4</sup> “Convention and Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees,” Geneva, July 28, 1951, as amended by the Protocol Relating to the Status of Refugees, New York, January 31, 1967, article 1C(3), <https://www.unhcr.org/3b66c2aa10>.

<sup>5</sup> UNHCR, Cessation of Refugee protection, <https://www.unhcr.org/419dbce54.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> Amira Hass, “Lebanon Census Finds Number of Palestinian Refugees Only a Third of Official U.N. Data,” Haaretz, December 25, 2017.



circumstances, country of residence, or changes in political status. No other refugee population in the world is treated in this way.<sup>7</sup>

### 3. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations:

The status of Palestinian refugees must be brought into alignment with that of all other refugees worldwide—not only because this is the fair and just approach, but because the current exceptionalism has long served a political agenda that runs counter to key U.S. foreign policy interests, including advancing regional stability and peace, and strengthening Israel’s security as a sovereign Jewish state.

The artificial and exponential inflation of the number of Palestinian refugees has served a single purpose: to undermine the existence of Israel. Rather than encouraging compromise or integration, this politicized and exaggerated approach has entrenched rejectionist attitudes among Palestinians and prolonged the conflict. After nearly 80 years of failed policy, it is time to adopt a new framework—one grounded in internationally accepted standards and committed to real solutions rather than symbolic entrenchment.

Accordingly, we recommend the following:

- **Apply internationally accepted standards:** Ensure that Palestinian refugees are treated under the same criteria as all other refugee populations.
- **Establish an official U.S. position on refugee numbers:** The United States should adopt a formal position recognizing that, under international standards, approximately 7,500 individuals qualify as refugees from the 1948 conflict (see details below). The status of additional descendants should be assessed individually, based on dependency and other relevant criteria, in line with global practices.

**Table: Geographic Overview**

Area of Operation	Registered Refugees <sup>8</sup>	Estimated Actual Refugees (per international standards)	Relevant Legal Standard

<sup>7</sup> “Procedural Standards for Refugee Status Determination under UNHCR’s Mandate,” <https://www.refworld.org/pdfid/577e17944.pdf>; see also “Legal and Protection Policy Research Series: The ‘Essential Right’ to Family Unity of Refugees and Others in Need of International Protection in the Context of Family Reunification,” <https://www.unhcr.org/5a8c413a7.pdf>.

<sup>8</sup> As of 2 April 2025, based on UNRWA numbers. <https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work>.



Gaza Strip	1.58 million	0	A person cannot be a refugee within their own country <sup>9</sup>
West Bank	913,000	0	Same
Jordan	2.39 million	0	Citizenship terminates refugee status (1951 Convention, Article 1C) <sup>10</sup>
Lebanon	500,000	~3,500 <sup>11</sup>	
Syria	587,000	~4,000 <sup>12</sup>	
<b>Total</b>	<b>5.9 million</b>	<b>~7,500 (0.1 %)<sup>13</sup></b>	

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<sup>9</sup> Article 1A(2) of the Convention. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees>.

<sup>10</sup> Article 1C(3) of the Convention. <https://www.unhcr.org/media/1951-refugee-convention-and-1967-protocol-relating-status-refugees>.

<sup>11</sup> The number of refugees is estimated based on the assumption that approximately 2% of the 175,000 Palestinian refugees residing in Lebanon (according to the 2017 census) are over the age of 77 and were therefore alive in 1948. In addition, there are 172,000 descendants of these refugees, whose individual status should be assessed through a detailed vetting process.

<sup>12</sup>

The actual number of Palestinian registered refugees currently residing in Syria is estimated at 205,000, based on the assumption—similar to the case in Lebanon—that only about one-third of those listed in UNRWA records remain in the country. Of these, approximately 2% are estimated to be over the age of 77 and were therefore alive in 1948. In addition, there are 201,000 descendants of these refugees, whose individual status should be determined through a thorough vetting process. In addition, there are some 373,000 descendants of refugees, whose status should be determined individually through a thorough vetting process.