Trump is right to cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency

January 7, 2018

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The Hill

<http://thehill.com/opinion/international/367718-trump-is-right-to-cut-funding-to-the-united-nations-relief-and-works>

A few days ago, [President Trump](http://thehill.com/people/donald-trump) asked an important question in a tweet: “[W]e pay the Palestinians HUNDREDS OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect. But with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?” On Friday, Trump answered his question and cut funding to the Palestinians by freezing a $125 million transfer to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Asked about the decision, the State Department said deliberations are ongoing about how to move forward. This presents a tremendous opportunity, but it will take more bold action by the White House. The administration must continue to hold the Palestinians accountable for their rejectionism.

Like Trump’s December move on Jerusalem, this represents a bold step that is long overdue. UNRWA, the U.N.’s Palestinian refugee agency, long has needed reform, but with Palestinian leadership [unwilling](http://www.newsweek.com/trump-could-close-palestinians-washington-office-unless-leaders-starts-serious-716036) to even feign serious commitment to peace, it’s probably time to scrap the agency altogether. It stands in the way of peace.

The United States funds UNRWA to the tune of [$300 million per year](http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/24/u-s-vows-to-fund-a-u-n-agency-for-palestinian-refugees-israeli-leader-wants-shuttered/), and it does enjoy important backing and [major funding](https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/03/palestine-qatar-reconstruction-committee-gaza-consensus.html) from some in the Muslim world. But the agency runs [large annual deficits](https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are/frequently-asked-questions).

The Israeli government has remained publicly supportive of the agency, [resisting](https://www.timesofisrael.com/netanyahu-urging-americans-not-to-cut-funding-for-unrwa-tv-report/) attempts to defund UNRWA for fear of being blamed for fomenting a humanitarian crisis. But things may be changing as the world finally realizes this agency is harmful.

Founded in 1949 to carry out direct relief and works programs for Palestinian refugees from
Israel’s War of Independence, UNRWA long ago outlived its charge. When it was established, there were as many as [750,000 refugees](https://www.unrwa.org/who-we-are). Today, UNRWA considers more than 5 million people to be refugees from that conflict and provides education, health care, social programs, loans and more to people in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan and Syria.

At the Middle East Forum, we seek to bring the UNRWA definition of a refugee in alignment with U.S. law that recognizes as refugees only those displaced and their minor children who have not obtained a new nationality and are not “home.” This is a conceptual change: “Yes to assistance, no to classification as refugees.” The result would leave only about 20,000 legitimate Palestinian refugees.

Helping refugees is a noble charge, but UNRWA isn’t actually helping people. It’s perpetuating a conflict the Palestinians lost long ago and aiding Arab governments who refuse to provide for the basic needs of their people.

Between 1940 and 1945, World War II created [40 million refugees in Europe](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/historical-migrant-crisis/). The partition of India and Pakistan displaced [14 million people in 1947](https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/world/historical-migrant-crisis/). But how many people remain displaced because of these conflagrations? Zero.

Why, then, has the number of refugees from Israel’s War of Independence grown nearly sevenfold since 1949? The answer is that it’s been politically advantageous to the Palestinian leadership and to Israel’s Arab neighbors who work to ensure the conflict continues. With UNRWA’s support, they’ve become experts at perpetuating the conflict. A recent [study found](http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/New-UNRWA-textbooks-display-extreme-anti-Jewish-and-anti-Israel-sentiments-study-shows-506174) that UNRWA schools teach Palestinian children that, “Jews have no rights whatsoever in the region but only ‘greedy ambitions.’” The same study found textbooks in UNRWA schools glorifying terrorists who killed civilians as heroes.

There have been many ideas about how to reform UNRWA, including forcing host governments such as the Palestinian Authority and Lebanon to take responsibility for their people. But the time for reform has passed. It’s time to dismantle the agency.

Israeli Education Minister Naftali Bennett recently [called](https://www.timesofisrael.com/top-minister-backs-us-threat-to-cut-unrwa-aid-contradicting-foreign-ministry/) UNRWA a “terror-supporting organization” and said that “aiding the residents of Gaza should be no different than aiding the Syrian residents suffering under a terror regime, or aiding any other group of descendants of refugees.”

Ending UNRWA doesn’t mean ending humanitarian support for Palestinians. If the definition of a Palestinian refugee changes, the small number of remaining refugees could be served by the U.N. Refugee Agency [(UNHCR)](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/) and Palestinians in need could be served by the Palestinian Authority.

To help bring that about, Trump should clarify that the U.S. Government’s definition of a Palestinian refugee includes only those who are actually refugees. This change would help depoliticize the provision of aid. Importantly, this would be a step toward taking a major point of contention — the rights of Palestinians to return to Israel — off the table, just as the administration did with Jerusalem.

Ultimately, the path to peace is one that forces the Palestinian people to realize that continued rejection of Israel is a dead end. They must understand that the only way to build a better future for their children is to abandon the conflict that has been central to their identity for most of the last century.

Defunding UNRWA gives Palestinian leadership a stark choice: get serious about forging lasting peace with a Jewish state in Israel, or refuse to play ball and be forced to act like a responsible government that cares for its own people.

President Trump came into office making big promises about solving the Arab-Israeli conflict and reforming the United Nations. His announcement on Jerusalem dealt a serious blow to the Palestinian rejectionism that has prolonged this conflict for generations. Finding a way to end UNRWA’s support for the structures behind the unwillingness of Palestinians to make peace would be another important step. Freezing payments is a step in the right direction.