UNRWA - the great refugee charade

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Finally, someone is shaking the foundations beneath one of the biggest charades, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency. Thanks to the twisted mandate it got from the U.N. in the 1950s, it has perpetuated the plight of Palestinian refugees from one generation to the next. The mandate prohibits UNRWA from resettling those "refugees" and find them a permanent home, ensuring that they keep entertaining the idea that one day they will get the "right of return."

Now the Trump administration has taken steps to defund the organization, perhaps not for the right reasons, if the Palestinians fail to return to the negotiating table. It has so far put on hold half of the funding it normally gives each year.

Unlike UNRWA, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees has been properly tasked with ending the plight of refugees, but UNRWA has perpetuated the status of refugees and has been essentially tasked of ensuring the Palestinians remain displaced. There is not other agency in the world that does that.

The U.N. has never asked that Hindus be allowed back to Pakistan or that Greek Cypriots be allowed back to the Turkish-controlled Cyprus, nor has insisted that Muslims be allowed to return to Bulgaria after being expelled.

Over the years, tens of millions of refugees from a whole host of ethnicities have been resettled in their new countries and rebuilt their lives.

But the sanity ends when the refugees – I mean the descendants of refugees – want to "return" to Tiberias, Lod, Nazareth, Acre, or Jaffa. In a way, UNRWA has created a lineage of displacement, almost genetic, that passes from father to son, and from one generation to the next.

The original Palestinian refugees totaled no more than 500,000 to 800,000, and their numbers are constantly in decline. But the Palestinian displacement industry is thriving because the sons, grandchildren, great-grandchildren and great-great-grandchildren have received eternal refugee status. This is in accordance with what the U.N. has decided when it gave UNRWA its mandate.

It's no surprise, then, that Palestinian refugees number 5.5 million people and counting. Unlike other displaced people who lose their refugee status once they receive citizenship from their new country, the Palestinian refugees continue to hold  that status as refugees even after they are naturalized.

UNRWA may be doing humanitarian work, but it has acted more like a large pharmaceutical corporation that makes sure the public never adopts a healthy way of life, thus ensuring that its profits continue.

The drug is addictive, and so is the refugee status. UNRWA should have been eliminated and financially depleted regardless of the state of the peace process. Its very existence is designed to maintain the notion of the right of return, another name for Israel's destruction.

Even the descendants of the original Palestinian refugees in Iraq who have recently been settled in Chile by the UNHCR because of the hardships they faced cannot relinquish their refugee status. Many of the Palestinian refugees have been leading successful and happy lives around the world, but because of the ongoing perpetuation of UNRWA, there are 59 refugee camps in Lebanon, Gaza, Judea and Samaria, Syria, Jordan and Jerusalem. These camps have ensured that a large Palestinian population would continue to entertain the illusion that they would one day return to Israel, on our backs, and kick us out.

UNRWA has made sure their problems would never end, by ensuring continued pain and by focusing attention on younger generations that still live in the camps. Billions of dollars of U.N. funds have been used over the years to ensure that the lives in camps stay as they are rather than to resettle them or shut down the camps.

It is no wonder then, that Zakaria al-Agha, who sits in the Palestine Liberation Organization's Executive Committee and is a senior official at UNHCR, told the Israeli media that defunding UNRWA would "breach a red line for the Palestinians." It is also hardly a surprise that the Palestinians have asked Arab states to apply pressure on Washington.

Without the charade called UNRWA, the Palestinians would find it extremely hard to define themselves as refugees. Without being refugees, their leaders would be unable to demand their "return" to Israeli cities.