If not for UNRWA, there would be no Palestinian refugee problem

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In his last week’s highly tendentious article in the American magazine Foreign Policy, Khalil E. Jahshan, the executive director of the “Arab Center” in Washington D.C., asserts that US President Donald Trump’s yet-to-be-released peace plan (he prefers calling it Jared Kushner’s Peace Plan) would “turn Jordan upside down.” His somewhat lopsided reasoning is that if the Palestinian refugees in Jordan are stripped of their refugee status, it would destabilize the Hashemite Kingdom, “one of America’s closest allies in the region.”

Jordan is indeed a close ally of the US and one can assume that its leaders are fully aware of the benefits of this to their country. Mr. Jahshan’s argument goes something like this: if UNRWA stops supporting the refugees in Jordan, this will create a serious economic burden for the country and potentially unhinge it politically. However, that argument can surely be discounted by the fact he himself mentioned – that the US would almost certainly compensate Jordan directly for any additional costs it would incur as a result of UNRWA being out of the picture.

Jahshan and I have one thing in common: neither of us has actually seen the Trump peace plan or its details. His solicitude for Jordan is commendable, although a bit undercut by his not very positive views about the country’s ability to manage its own affairs – and in addition to more than a few inaccuracies about the origins of the Palestinian refugee problem as well as cavalierly forgetting that Trans-Jordan at the time created part of the problem by annexing most of the parts of Palestine which the UN had intended for a future Arab state. He tries to shift the emphasis from the basic issue of the unresolved refugee problem, i.e. perpetuating it by assuring that three generations, often in inhuman conditions, are left in camps all over the Middle East without providing them with basic civil, political, economic or other rights.

The reason for the Arab states’ refusing to integrate the above derives both from the stance of the Palestinian leadership, which cynically seeks to preserve the refugee problem as a political cudgel against Israel, thus sabotaging all attempts to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict – and from the “host countries” interest to continue the exploitation of the refugees for their own economic purposes. The refugees’ lack of basic civil rights makes them largely defenseless (Jordan has actually treated them better than most). We all saw what happened to many of the refugees in the camps in Syria, falling victim to the brutalities of both President Assad and ISIS during the civil war there.

After World War II, there were greater refugee problems in the world than the Palestinian one – the difference being that with the help of national governments and international bodies they were solved, not to mention Israel, which successfully absorbed hundreds of thousands of Jewish refugees, including many from Arab countries, while the Palestinian refugee problem has been deliberately perpetuated with the help of UNRWA, whose activities reinforced the deliberately misleading illusion that those refugees or their third-, fourth- and even fifth-generation descendants will one day be sent to Israel, rather than helping to permanently resettle them in the countries in which they reside. Plus generous financial benefits are provided by the international community.

Thus, UNRWA has been an accessory to the crime of condemning these people to permanent refugee status. Even if a separate Palestinian state should one day come into being, few of those unfortunate permanent camp dwellers will actually choose to live there (as I have heard myself from refugees in Lebanon), so that keeping up the pretense of UNRWA supposedly aiding the refugees only serves the purpose of the enemies of peace.