Why didn’t we stop funding UNRWA years ago?

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When the State Department announced that the US would stop funding UNRWA, many believed it to be an ill-considered move. Some argued that it would increase the chance for another round of violence, destroy the United States’s position as an honest broker, and create a humanitarian disaster.

Nothing could be further from the truth. One comprehensive look at UNRWA’s record over the years should leave anyone with only one question: how in the world was this not done many years ago?

The United Nations Relief Works Agency was established in 1949 for the exclusive benefit of Palestinian refugees. Its core mandate was to assist and house those Palestinian refugees displaced in the war. Sadly, it has done neither of those, and in an epic way.

How do we know? Because the numbers don’t lie.

Since 1948, despite wars with neighboring countries and internal flare-ups, there has not been one single event that has left “new” displaced refugees. Yet, during these 70 years, the number of refugees under UNRWAs auspices ballooned from 700,000 to almost 5.5 million. This phenomenon of a growing, rather than decreasing, number of refugees is of course a farce. Over 50 percent of the so-called refugees found homes across the globe many years ago, and would not be considered refugees by any other standard other than that of UNRWA. UNRWA has made little progress toward “ending” the refugee status of the other 50%.

Most people are not aware of it, but the UN actually discriminates between types of refugees. Next to the UNRWA Palestinian refugees, there are all other 30 million refugees in the world, UNHCR refugees. While the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has been working overtime over the past decade due to the Syrian civil war, UNRWA operates with a budget that is four times larger — $246 per person annually. The contrast in numbers is quite astonishing. While UNRWA only treats 5.3 million people, it has 30,000 employees, three times as large than UNHCR, which treats a population that is more than 10 times larger.

So while it has abundantly failed in its core mandate, UNRWA has also become an active part of perpetuating the conflict. UNRWA schools have become a hotbed of incitement against Israel, Jews, and the West. UNRWA personnel have been caught time and again working hand in hand with Hamas, enabling terror tunnels to run under their institutions.

Will the de-funding of UNRWA create short term challenges? Of course. But those are quite realistically alleviated by transferring UNRWA budgets to either UNHCR, or the Palestinian Authority, which, as the governing body in the West Bank, should also be in charge of education and social work. The one thing donor nations should demand is accountability for use of funds.

US resources and treasure should support foreign policy that aligns with US national security interest, and promote US values of democracy, as well as assisting those less fortunate. Sixty-nine years is more than enough to realize the UNRWA model simply does not work on all counts. And while all parties need to continue monitoring the situation on the ground and finding effective ways to help the refugees, one can only commend the current administration for attempting to move one of the major obstacles to peace in our region.