New report highlights how UN gives singular treatment to Palestinian refugees

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Uri Akavia, a researcher at Kohelet Policy Forum, recently published a new paper titled “Is UNRWA’s hereditary refugee status for Palestinians unique?” In it, of course, he details the origins of the issue since 1948, the year Israel was established, and its ensuing state of affairs.

“People have finally realized that UNRWA [U.N. Relief and Works Agency], is a very large and important organization that is perpetuating a problem that should not have even existed after 70 years,” he told JNS.

When U.S. President Donald Trump announced last year that he would pull $300 million in funding for UNRWA, which is in charge of resolving the Palestinian refugee problem, Jerusalem’s Mayor Nir Barkat realized that he now had an opportunity to [kick UNRWA out of Shuafat](https://www.jns.org/group-raises-alarm-over-unrwas-anti-israel-incitement-within-its-jerusalem-schools/), a Palestinian neighborhood in Jerusalem the body considers to be a refugee camp.

“The U.S. decision has created a rare opportunity to replace UNRWA’s services with the services of the Jerusalem Municipality,” he said. “We are putting an end to the lie of the ‘Palestinian refugee problem’ and the attempts at creating a false sovereignty within a sovereignty.”

For Akavia, Barkat and those who have followed the situation closely, UNRWA, tasked with resolving the Palestinian refugee problem, has only perpetuated and not solved the refugee problem. They argue, and many Israelis agree, that it has utterly failed in its mission.

According to Dore Gold, president of the Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs, “UNRWA has so many problems,” he told JNS. “The fact is that so many of the worst Hamas terrorists were educated in UNRWA schools, and UNRWA was used as a place where Hamas could store its weaponry in violation of all kinds of U.N. resolutions that prohibit conversion of refugee camps to military facilities.”

However, Gold pointed to what he thinks is UNRWA’s worst sin: The “conversion of the Palestinian refugee problem to a challenge locked into perpetuity.”

In other words, he said, “if you look at other refugee situations—Europe after World War II—all those refugees have been settled. Whereas, in the case of the Palestinian refugees who are taken care of by UNRWA, the numbers have only increased from about half a million in 1948 to what UNRWA claims is over 5 million today. That represents a total failure of UNRWA as a refugee organization.”

Other refugees around the world have been repatriated. Of the millions displaced after World War II, not one is a refugee today. The 15 million Hindus and Muslims forced to move when India and Pakistan split, are no longer refugees. Bosnian and Kosovar Muslims kicked out of Serbia are no longer refugees. Not a single one of the 850,000 Jewish refugees from Arab lands is today a refugee.

So why are Palestinian refugees treated differently than other refugees?

Palestinian Authority leader Mahmoud Abbas has answered this question himself. He has referred to Palestinian refugees everywhere as “guests” waiting to return to their homes and has refused to allow Palestinians to be repatriated in their host countries so as not to give up their “right of return.”

And P.A. spokesman Nabil Abu Rudeina has said, “The issue of the Palestinian refugees and their right of return is one of the issues in a permanent arrangement, and no one can make changes to it … ”

The Palestinian leadership themselves, together with other Arab states as well as UNRWA, refuse to allow any repatriation of Palestinian refugees outside of Israel. The responsibility for a “just and lasting solution” for the Palestinian refugees, as per UN resolution 194, has been laid squarely on Israel’s shoulders, while ignoring the responsibility of the Arab states that refuse to absorb the Palestinian refugees already residing within their borders.

According to many well-documented statements by Palestinian and Arab leaders themselves, the Palestinian refugees have been used as pawns and a weapon in the fight against Israel.

In addition, the automatic majority against Israel at the UN has ensured that UNRWA retains the sole responsibility for Palestinian refugees and that the body helps perpetuate the problem.

In his report, Akavia explains that there are two separate U.N. agencies in charge of aiding refugees: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and UNRWA. UNHCR is responsible for all refugees except the Palestinians, who fall within UNRWA’s exclusive jurisdiction.

**‘A political actor aimed at perpetuating the problem’**

Akavia compared UNRWA’s methods of classification with that of UNHCR to demonstrate how the former’s methods perpetuate the problem. “There is only one case in the world of a refugee problem that has lasted over 70 years so far. And there is only one case in the world where the sons and grandsons of a refugee automatically are recognized as a refugee, even if he is a Jordanian citizen,” he said.

However, Akavia explained that there are indeed cases in which the UNHCR recognizes the children of refugees, but only when the children are dependent on their parents and need support. This is called “derivative refugee status” and, according to Akavia, “is a fair thing to do.”

What UNHCR doesn’t do, Akavia emphasized, is allow for other family members to acquire this derivative refugee status. “So if a representative of UNRWA tells you they aren’t the only ones recognizing children of refugees, he is telling the truth,” said Akavia. “But he is also misleading you because UNHCR recognizes only those who really are in need, that have a humanitarian problem and they don’t recognize them after the age of 18. UNRWA, meanwhile, recognizes them automatically for second generation, third generation and so forth.”

Akavia pointed out other key differences in his report between the two organizations and the clear bias towards Palestinian refugees. “UNHCR does not define as refugees people who acquired new citizenship. The Refugee Convention of 1951 has a cessation clause, which clearly says that a person ceases to be a refugee if he acquires a new citizenship. UNRWA acts differently: More than 2 million ‘Palestine refugees’ hold Jordanian citizenship.”

According to Akavia, as per the rules applied by UNHCR, most of the Palestinians are not refugees. “UNRWA’s claim that their policy is identical to UNHCR’s is a lie and shows that they are not a neutral humanitarian organization, but rather a political actor aimed at perpetuating the Palestinian refugee problem.”

So is UNRWA’s hereditary refugee status for Palestinians unique?

The answer is “yes,” replied Akavia. He believes that today the atmosphere has changed, and people are more aware of the issue. “We really have an opportunity to change something,” he said.

“The fact is that refugee organizations are supposed to reduce the scale of refugee problems, and in the case of UNRWA, they have only increased,” said Gold. “As long as UNRWA is making the refugee problem worse, some fundamental thinking has to be done about the future of that organization.”