UN Palestinian refugee agency ‘part of the problem’ — Swiss minister

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The UN agency for Palestinian refugees is fueling “unrealistic” hopes of return after 70 years and is therefore helping keep the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alive, Switzerland’s foreign minister said Thursday.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was established after Israel’s War of Independence in 1948, when around 700,000 Palestinians fled or were expelled from their homes.

But Swiss Foreign Minister Ignazio Cassis pointed out that the number of Palestinians characterized as refugees — the vast majority of whom are descendants of refugees — living in Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza has swelled to more than five million.

“It is unrealistic that this dream [of return] will be fulfilled for all,” he said in an interview given to several German-language papers owned by the Swiss NZZ group.

“But UNRWA maintains this hope. For me, the question is whether UNRWA is part of the solution or part of the problem,” he said, concluding that “it is both.”

The UN agency, he said, “worked as a solution for a long time, but today it has become part of the problem.”

### Fueling the conflict?

“It provides ammunition to continue the conflict. For as long as Palestinians live in refugee camps, they will want to return to their homeland,” he said. “By supporting UNRWA, we are keeping the conflict alive.”

His comments came after a month and a half of mass protests and clashes along the Gaza border, calling for the descendants of Palestinian refugees to be able to return to their ancestors’ homes in what is now Israel.

The largest demonstrations, which coincided with the move of the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem on Monday, saw Israeli forces kill some 60 Palestinians, pushing the overall toll well over 100.

Israel claims that Hamas is spurring the violence and using it for cover for attacks. That allegation was seemingly confirmed by Salah Al Bardawil, a Hamas lawmaker and spokesperson in Khan Younis, who on Wednesday said that 50 out of the 62 people listed as killed Monday were members of his organization.

UNRWA is, meanwhile, struggling to cover a massive budget shortfall, after major donor Washington slashed its 2018 funding.

The administration of US President Donald Trump has opted to cut the $360 million offered in 2017 to a commitment of just $60 million this year, leaving UNRWA scrambling to raise nearly half a billion dollars to guarantee services until the end of the year.

Switzerland is among a group of countries that together pledged about $100 million in March to help fill the shortfall.

Despite his skepticism of the role UNRWA is playing in the Middle East, Cassis warned that the sudden funding cut facing the agency posed “a big risk.”

“Millions of Palestinians could take to the streets,” he said, cautioning that lacking funds could cause the breakdown of a “machinery that provides stability.”

“This is a risk that Switzerland cannot afford,” he said.

Cassis said his country would continue funding UNRWA, but he also called for a heavier focus on integrating Palestinian refugees into their host communities.

He said for instance that “instead of supporting UNRWA schools and hospitals, we could help the Jordanian institutions promote integration of Palestinian refugees.”