The Uses and Abuses of Refugee Status

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<https://spectator.org/the-uses-and-abuses-of-refugee-status/>

In a [bold reversal](http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/Netanyahu-puts-UNRWA-and-foreign-funded-NGOs-in-his-sights-496552) of longstanding Israeli policy, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu recently called for dismantling the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) and rolling its functions into the United Nations High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), which handles the rest of the world’s refugees. Previously, despite the multitude of failings of UNRWA, Israel has long cooperated with the group and hitherto opposed proposals to shut it down, fearing the humanitarian consequences and resulting instability. “I regret that UNRWA, to a large degree, by its very existence, perpetuates — and does not solve — the Palestinian refugee problem,” Netanyahu said, referring to UNRWA’s expansive definition of a “refugee.”

The Prime Minister’s call was well-timed: UNRWA just used a picture of [a Syrian child](http://www.timesofisrael.com/unrwa-urges-donations-for-gazan-children-using-photo-of-syrian-girl/) as propaganda, suggesting incorrectly she was a Gaza resident, and revelations of [Hamas using UNRWA schools](http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-protests-hamas-tunnel-under-gaza-un-schools/) as cover for tunnels aimed at kidnapping and murder have flooded the news. While UNRWA [was initially intended](http://www.meforum.org/3344/unrwa-special) to resettle refugees, it has since dropped that task from its mission. Indeed, it resists resettlement and has continually [changed its definition of a refugee](http://www.danielpipes.org/10695/unrwa-palestine-refugees) to include people generations removed from the conflict, people who are citizens of new states, and people who are in their internationally recognized home of the West Bank and Gaza. No other organization uses a similar definition.

While the U.S. originally protested UNRWA’s evolving definition, in recent years, the State Department has [defended](http://www.meforum.org/4836/why-state-dept-defends-unrwa-artificial-refugee) UNRWA’s current definition. In practice, this means is that while there were about 700,000 refugees in 1950, there will be [a projected 6.4 million](http://www.meforum.org/3344/unrwa-special) faux “refugees” in 2020, even though most live normal lives for people in the region. An estimated 2 million are Jordanian citizens. This bizarre definition is purely political, aimed at protecting the so-called “right of return,” a novel legal claim that people generations removed from the conflict have the right to return to a country their ancestral leaders tried to destroy.

The reasoning behind merging UNRWA into UNHCR is that UNHCR does not work to perpetuate the conflict, but to improve the lives of their clients. UNHCR, unlike UNRWA, actually works to resettle refugees ([over 600,000](http://www.unhcr.org/en-us/protection/resettlement/559ce97f9/unhcr-refugee-resettlement-trends-2015.html) to new countries between 2005 and 2015). UNHCR disallows “citizen refugees” and does not automatically confer refugee status to descendants. UNRWA does the opposite. As I’ve [witnessed first hand](http://www.meforum.org/6253/the-truth-about-unrwa), UNRWA camps are dedicated to violent anti-Israel propaganda and indoctrinating their clients into demanding a “right of return,” above all else, unlike UNHCR camps.

However, in practice, transferring existing UNRWA infrastructure to UNCHR’s charge would likely have little practical effect. UNRWA is staffed largely by Palestinians who are hostile to Israel and have worked to feed incitement and terrorism. Many would [likely continue](http://www.meforum.org/3404/reforming-unrwa) in their jobs under new management, merely renaming the problem. Moreover, UNHCR’s definition of a refugee, while different from UNRWA’s, has [significant loopholes](http://www.apple.com). For example, while UNHCR does not generally allow for generational refugee status, it has made exceptions in some cases, including by taking “[emotional dependency](http://www.meforum.org/3344/unrwa-special)” into consideration, a concept prone to abuse by Israel’s foes.

In any event, UNRWA can only be dismantled by a vote of the UN General Assembly. As UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres made clear in his quick rebuke of Netanyahu’s statement, there is little appetite in the UN to implement such a change, and it would be virtually impossible for the U.S., or any other country, to achieve it.

The most effective thing the U.S. can do to combat the pernicious impact of UNRWA is surprisingly simple — start applying its own laws and policies, which disallow both citizen and generational refugees, and would disallow West Bank and Gaza residents to be refugees in their own home, to its transactions with UNRWA. In other words, in the eyes of America, you are a “refugee” only if you would meet America’s standard of a refugee, otherwise, you are simply a Palestinian in need. UNRWA funding would continue, but while reserving the designation of “refugee” only for those few who left their homes during Israel’s War for Independence (by [some estimates](http://www.defenddemocracy.org/media-hit/senate-fight-today-over-palestinian-refugees/), as few as 30,000 people).

As UNRWA’s biggest donor since its inception, the U.S. can persuade other donors, many of whom agree concerning UNRWA’s problems (Canada went so far as to [withhold UNRWA funding](http://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/Politics-And-Diplomacy/After-six-years-Canada-resumes-funding-for-UNRWA-473000) before political winds changed), to do the same. Together, they can exert pressure on UNRWA to change its destructive definition, and perhaps eventually to dispense with its propaganda about six million Palestinian “refugees” altogether and stop preaching that the life goal of every Palestinian should be to “return” to a place he or she has never known.

It will take time, but ending this destructive belief is possible. The first step, however, is to stop paying homage to it ourselves.