UN agency for Palestinians is too corrupt to save

August 19, 2019

By David May

The Hill

<https://thehill.com/opinion/international/457965-un-agency-for-palestinians-is-too-corrupt-to-save>

The UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which is dedicated exclusively to assisting Palestinians, has begun to lose the support of some of its most loyal donors. Following [reports](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-appoints-acting-deputy-at-scandal-hit-unrwa/) of widespread corruption and abuse at the highest levels of the organization, [Switzerland](https://www.timesofisrael.com/switzerland-suspends-funding-to-un-agency-for-palestinians-after-damning-report/), the [Netherlands](https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/netherlands-switzerland-suspend-unrwa-funding-ethics-report-190731074050968.html), and [Belgium](https://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Belgium-suspends-UNRWA-funds-following-reports-of-ethical-misconduct-597561) have suspended their contributions. This action may signal the readiness of other countries to pull their support if a full investigation confirms the initial allegations. What may be emerging is a rare opportunity to dismantle a wasteful organization whose ties to the Palestinian cause have protected it until now.

An internal UNRWA ethics report leaked by the press in late July contained shocking [allegations](https://www.france24.com/en/20190730-palestinian-territories-United-Nations-Relief-Works-Agency-UNRWA-refugees) of “sexual misconduct, nepotism, retaliation, discrimination and other abuses of authority, for personal gain, to suppress legitimate dissent, and to otherwise achieve their personal objectives." UN investigators are now reviewing these initial findings.

The internal ethics report found that UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krahenbuhl created a senior advisory role for Maria Mohammedi, with whom he was romantically involved, allowing her to take business class flights with him across the globe. Krahenbuhl, Mohammedi and others circumvented regular decision channels and created a toxic work environment, according to the report. While Krahenbuhl is holding on, UNRWA’s deputy commissioner-general and chief of staff have resigned as a result of abuses separate from those allegedly committed by their boss.

The corruption allegations come only a year after the U.S. decided to zero out its $360 million annual contribution to UNRWA, which covered around one quarter of the agency’s $1.2 billion budget (or all of its original 1950 [budget](https://www.unrwa.org/content/general-assembly-resolution-302), accounting for inflation). There was ample cause for this action. As Swiss Foreign Minister [Ignazio Cassis](https://www.timesofisrael.com/swiss-fm-questions-unrwas-role-in-aiding-palestinians/) has warned, UNRWA is exacerbating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by turning millions of Palestinians into permanent refugees. European leaders have traditionally brushed off such criticism, but the current investigations seem to be opening their eyes to UNRWA’s serious flaws.

One way that UNRWA worsens the Palestinian refugee problem is by granting the descendants of the original Palestinian refugees inherited refugee status in perpetuity, a practice unheard of in other conflicts. Of course, increasing the number of refugees increases the amount of work for UNRWA and the size of the donations it can justify. Moreover, UNRWA has stifled Palestinian development and resettlement through aid dependency.

From an initial refugee population of around 700,000, UNRWA now has responsibility for more than 5.4 million Palestinians — a number that includes only about [30,000 individuals who fled their homes during Israel’s war for independence](https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/05/21/status-update/). Nonetheless, UNRWA schools promote a “right of return” to Israel for all 5.4 million refugees, even those who now reside in Gaza and the West Bank, which would be part of a future Palestinian state. This sort of return would make Jews a minority in the world’s only Jewish state. It also seems especially menacing given that UNRWA schools, textbooks and teachers often [promote](http://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/PA-Curriculum_2017-Grades-5-11.pdf) martyrdom, violence, the demonization of Israel, and religious bigotry.

Moreover, the UN’s outsize focus on Palestinian refugees has come at the expense of the world’s 71 million forcibly displaced persons. UNRWA spends nearly twice as much per refugee and has 30,000 staff, compared to 16,800 for the [UN High Commissioner for Refugees](https://www.unhcr.org/en-us/figures-at-a-glance.html) (UNHCR), which deals with all other displaced populations. Regrettably, UNHCR struggles to secure adequate funding.

The United Nations General Assembly renews UNRWA’s mandate every three years and is expected to rubber-stamp its extension this November. Perhaps the assembly would reconsider if UNRWA’s top donors — the European Union, Germany, Britain, and Saudi Arabia — made clear that their patience is at an end.

Instead, UNRWA donors should call on the UN to treat Palestinian refugees like all other refugees in the world and address their needs through the UNHCR, which is less prone to corruption, though still not [immune](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uganda-refugees/un-audit-finds-graft-and-misconduct-in-its-uganda-refugee-program-idUSKCN1NY230). The provision of services to Palestinians in need would continue or even improve. The U.S. could incentivize the proposed reform by offering to restore most or all of its $360 million annual funding if the UNHCR takes charge.

Additionally, as [President Trump](https://thehill.com/people/donald-trump)’s special envoy Jason Greenblatt [suggested](https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20190524-us-calls-to-dissolve-unrwa-hand-responsibilities-to-host-countries/), nearby countries hosting Palestinians should assume many of UNRWA’s responsibilities — with donor support — so that these populations can finally start building lives outside the camps.

Corruption within a self-serving and self-preserving bureaucracy is entirely predictable. UNRWA has become a vestigial organ, no longer serving its purpose of helping actual refugees. Eliminating a bloated, bureaucratic UNRWA and redirecting its work towards more efficient bodies determined to solve the problem will ultimately serve all interested parties. It would cause some pain, but it is better than condemning another generation of Palestinians to grow up in the camps, where they learn to blame Israel for their suffering.