No Need for UNRWA

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As The Jerusalem Post’s Khaled Abu Toameh reported on Sunday, the Palestinian Authority is concerned that the mandate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) will not be renewed next month at the 74th session of the UN General Assembly in New York.  
  
US President Donald Trump decided last year to stop funding UNRWA, depriving the organization of its major donor. Now, Abu Toameh noted, the Palestinian leadership is worried about the recent temporary suspension of UNRWA funding by the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium, following the serious allegations of corruption and sexual misconduct among UNRWA’s top brass.

The PA fears the current scandal might prepare the ground for ending the agency’s mandate or seriously reducing its scope.

UNRWA was created in 1949, and its mandate is renewed every three years by the UN General Assembly. However, the relief agency was supposed to be a temporary solution until the “Palestinian refugee problem” was resolved. Instead of helping solve the problem, UNRWA has contributed to it. All other refugees around the globe are cared for by the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees, while the Palestinians were granted the privilege of having an agency dedicated only to them. Furthermore, while refugee status should be something transient, the Palestinians have been granted the right to pass on their refugee status in perpetuity.  
  
As a result, the number of “Palestinian refugees” has ballooned from the original 700,000 or so Palestinian refugees from 1948 – who either left their homes by choice or were forced to leave – to what UNRWA claims today is five million. Grandchildren and great-grandchildren, even those with citizenship in another country such as Jordan, are still considered refugees. By comparison, the approximately 850,000 Jews who left their homes in Arab countries do not consider themselves “refugees” in Israel, and certainly are not considered refugees more than 71 years later by the UN.  
  
Fourteen years ago this month, Israel disbanded all the Jewish communities in Gush Katif (and has suffered ever-worsening violence as a result.) Paradoxically, the thousands of Jews who left Gaza (and four communities in Samaria) in the 2005 disengagement were never considered refugees, even though they lost their homes, livelihoods and community support systems.  
  
There is no refugee reciprocity.  
  
UNRWA – which employs more than 30,000 workers – has no motivation to end the “refugee crisis.” And since UNRWA’s mandate to resettle the Palestinian refugees was rescinded in 1965 without a serious reform, the numbers will keep on growing, to be used as a political tool against Israel.

The PA has reason to be concerned about UNRWA’s future, but it plays a double game, and it is time it is called out. On the one hand, the PA claims to represent the State of Palestine (which has observer-state status in the UN. and is recognized by more than 135 UN members), yet on the other hand it protests that the Palestinians continue to be refugees.  
  
Alongside the status of perpetual refugeehood, UNRWA also perpetuates a culture of entitlement. Instead of fostering self-sufficiency, it is undermining the Palestinians it professes to care for. And that is without relating to the hate-filled nature of the education being received by Palestinian children, which deprives both the Palestinians and Israelis of hope for peace in the future.  
  
UNRWA needs to be drastically reformed, with the aim of later closing it down and moving responsibility for the relatively small number of genuine refugees to the auspices of the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees. The Palestinians themselves would be the first to benefit from UNRWA being revamped. UNRWA has done nothing to build a sustainable, peaceful Palestinian state. On the contrary. The report containing allegations of serious flaws could be the wake-up call the UN needs to reexamine UNRWA’s status. It’s time for the absurdity to end.