Trump Gets UNRWA Right

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By [Elliott Abrams](https://www.cfr.org/experts/elliott-abrams)

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The Trump administration has announced a large cut in U.S. payments to UNRWA, the UN agency that handles Palestinian “refugees.” The United States has been giving UNRWA about $150 million a year (for its regular budget), and the next tranche of $125 million has been cut back by $60 million. Needless to say, this decision has been greeted by a good deal of hand-wringing, teeth-gnashing, and plain opposition. But it was the right decision.

Why? With one exception all refugees in the world are assisted by the UN agency that is supposed to attend to them: UNHCR, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. This admirable organization works in 130 countries with a staff of about 11,000. In 2016 it resettled 190,000 people. One of its core missions is “ending statelessness.”

The sole exception is Palestinians. UNRWA handles them, and its mission appears to be “never ending statelessness.” A phrase such as “ending statelessness” would be anathema and is found nowhere on its web site. Since 1950, UNHCR has tried to place refugees in permanent new situations, while since 1950 UNRWA has with its staff of 30,000 “helped” over 5 million Palestinian “refugees” to remain “refugees.”

These and other UNRWA numbers tell several stories. First, UNRWA has three times as large a staff as UNHCR—but helps far fewer people than the 17 million refugees UNHCR tries to assist.

Second, one does have to wonder why the United States is giving UNRWA two or three times as much as all Arab donors combined. Just to take an example, the immensely rich Qatar gave a grand total of one million dollars to UNRWA in 2016.

Third, the refugee numbers ought to raise some questions. As late as the 1950s Europe was still an archipelago of displaced person—hundreds of thousands of them—and refugee camps. Germany’s last camp for “DPs” was not closed until the early 1960s. But all that is history—so why is it that the number of Palestinian “refugees” keeps growing, not declining?

Because [UNRWA defines a Palestinian “refugee”](https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees) this way:

Palestine refugees are defined as “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.”

UNRWA services are available to all those living in its area of operations who meet this definition, who are registered with the Agency and who need assistance. The descendants of Palestine refugee males, including adopted children, are also eligible for registration. When the Agency began operations in 1950, it was responding to the needs of about 750,000 Palestine refugees. Today, some 5 million Palestine refugees are eligible for UNRWA services.

In other words, if you were born in Amman, Jordan to a mother and father born in Amman, Jordan, and you are all Jordanian citizens, you are still a “refugee” according to UNRWA. In fact the vast majority of “Palestinian refugees” whom UNRWA helps in Jordan are Jordanian citizens. Under normal international definitions, and UNHCR definitions, they are not “refugees” at all. To make the point even more strongly, under UNRWA definitions one can be a U.S. citizen and a “Palestinian refugee.” This is absurd.

The argument for cutting funding to UNRWA is not primarily financial. The United States is an enormously generous donor to UNHCR, providing just under 40 percent of its budget. I hope we maintain that level of funding, and if the administration tries to cut that amount I hope Congress will resist.

The argument for cutting funding to UNRWA instead rests on two pillars.

The first is that UNRWA’s activities repeatedly give rise to concern that it has too many connections to Hamas and to rejectionist ideology. (See for example these analyses and stories: <https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-agency-no-longer-employing-gaza-staffer-accused-of-hamas-ties/>, <https://www.jewishpolicycenter.org/2007/08/31/how-unrwa-supports-hamas/>, <http://www.jpost.com/Middle-East/Report-UNRWA-violating-regulations>, and <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus91.pdf>.)

But even if those flaws were corrected, this would not solve the second and more fundamental problem with UNRWA –which is that it will perpetuate the Palestinian “refugee” problem forever rather than helping to solve it. In this sense, cutting funding to UNRWA is of a piece with the Trump administration’s decision to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. That Israel was the sole country in the world not allowed to choose its capital, and have that choice respected, was part of the long assault on Israel’s legitimacy and permanence. Similarly, that the sole group of refugees whom the UN keeps enlarging is Palestinian, and that the only way to remedy this under UN definitions would be to eliminate the State of Israel or have 5 million Palestinian “refugees” move there should simply be unacceptable.

So the Trump administration is once again upsetting the apple cart and defying conventional wisdom when it comes to Israel. And once again it is right to demand change. Perpetuating and enlarging the Palestinian “refugee” crisis has harmed Israel and it has certainly harmed Palestinians. Keeping their grievances alive may have served anti-Israel political ends, but it has brought peace no closer and it has helped prevent generations of Palestinians from leading normal lives. That archipelago of displaced persons and refugee camps that once dotted Europe is long gone now, and the descendants of those who tragically lived in those camps now lead productive and fruitful lives in many countries. One can only wish such a fate for Palestinian refugee camps and for Palestinians. More money for UNRWA won't solve anything.