Shut down UNRWA

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The US under the leadership of President Donald Trump is rightly reconsidering the logic of funding the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine – at least as it operates presently.

Some $125 million, which makes up about a third of the United States’ annual support for the organization, has already been frozen.

Judging from a tweet by Trump that preceded the decision to freeze aid, it seems the US president wants to make funding conditional upon Palestinian cooperation in helping to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Trump’s concern is legitimate. UNRWA, which has been around since 1949, was supposed to be a temporary solution, until the “Palestinian refugee problem” was sorted out. But with the Palestinian Authority refusing to cooperate with the US in solving the problem, there is little reason for the US to continue footing the bill for the agency indefinitely.

We can think of a few additional reasons why UNRWA – which employs 11,500 employees in Gaza alone – should be radically revamped, if not disbanded altogether.

The first problem is that UNRWA perpetuates the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. While the original Palestinian refugees from 1948 – both those who left their homes willingly and those who were forced – might legitimately have deserved refugee status, why should their grandchildren or great-grandchildren share that status? Most other refugees are cared for by the UN’s High Commissioner for Refugees, and their status is not passed on to grandchildren or great-grandchildren. The Palestinians, on the other hand, have their own agency.

This leaves millions of Palestinians in a state of limbo. Instead of getting on with their lives, the Palestinians in places like Gaza continue to grasp a false dream of one day returning to Jaffa, Haifa or Jerusalem. This also allows the kind of apartheid that takes place in Lebanon, where more than one million Palestinians live without official status. They do not have Lebanese citizenship and are confined to dismal refugee camps where terrorism and crime thrive. But because they are refugees, the Lebanese government can wash its hands of having to integrate them into society.

All this can change if UNRWA is reformed or shut down. While UNRWA is an organization that nominally is dedicated to transforming refugees into fully self-sufficient individuals, it has allowed the myth of the “right of return” to persist. Within UNRWA it is heretical to say that repatriation to Israel is unrealistic.

UNRWA also perpetuates a culture of entitlement. For generations, Palestinians in Gaza – as well as in Jordan, the West Bank and Lebanon – have come to see handouts from the agency as a right, not a favor. The US should be promoting personal initiative, not undermining it by fostering a welfare culture.

Twelve years after Israel removed all Jewish communities and military positions from the Gaza Strip, UNRWA continues to treat Palestinians who live there as refugees. Why? And why should Palestinians living under the rule of the Palestinian Authority on the West Bank be considered refugees? What differentiates these so-called refugees from their fellow non-refugee Palestinian brothers and sisters? Why does Palestinian refugee status get handed down from generation to generation, something not shared by any other refugee in the world?

Inhabitants of both Gaza and the West Bank have the right to vote in Palestinian elections, when they are held. It is the Palestinians’ own failure – to either choose a more pragmatic leadership or end the rift between Hamas and Fatah or both – that has perpetuated their political limbo. Should members of all failed societies be afforded refugee status?

Trump clearly has every justification for questioning whether US tax money is being properly used. It is, of course, wise not to allow UNRWA to topple without first putting in place a plan to prevent humanitarian disaster in Gaza. But it has been abundantly clear for some time that UNRWA, at least the way it operates presently, should be shut down.