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Reframing the Middle Eastern and Palestinian Refugee Crises

Alex Joffe and Asaf Romirowsky



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Cover image: “Still Refugees” poster from UNRWA website, via Middle East Forum

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Reframing the Middle Eastern and Palestinian Refugee Crises

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Reframing the Middle Eastern and Palestinian Refugee Crises

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are two Middle Eastern refugee crises currently vying for resources and attention. One is nominally focused on Syria but in fact extends from Libya to Afghanistan. The other crisis is Palestinian and has supposedly been going on since 1948. A closer look at the causes of these crises shows the former to be primarily the result of the collapsing Arab state system and the rise of militant Islam, while the latter cannot be considered a crisis at all.

The history of international responses to wartime refugee crises over the past century demonstrates how anomalous the Palestinian situation is, particularly with regard to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA – a distinctly unique agency in the annals of international organizations. It is the only “relief” effort aimed at a single population; it is seemingly permanent, if not eternal; and its mission is ever growing. It is the world’s only internationally funded “relief” organization that is run not only for but by its clients.

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As the de facto health, education and welfare ministry, UNRWA both competes with and complements the Palestinian Authority (PA), thus relieving the PA from assuming responsibilities for crucial fields of activity that are the routinely exercised by normal, even aspiring states. And UNRWA's existence is fundamental as a symbol within Palestinian society, as a pivot around which key identity concepts revolve, the ideas of Palestinian victimhood and "refugee-ness," and (the supposed) international responsibility for their fate.

By examining a number of dimensions related to UNRWA's approach to the Palestinians, lessons can be learned for application to the broader Middle Eastern crises. Among these are the moral hazard of assigning responsibility for refugee relief to the international community, and the dangers of institutionalizing refugee relief in a dedicated organization, which can be captured by the population that it serves.

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century Middle East there are two refugee crises vying for attention and resources.

The first is an all-encompassing regional crisis. It began in 2003 with the US-led international invasion of Iraq, which led to a vicious Sunni insurgency and the ethnic cleansing of Christians from that country and further degenerated with the mass murder and enslavement of Yazidis, the effective partitioning of Iraq, and its growing domination by Tehran.

The crisis cascaded outward through the Arab upheavals of late 2010 and skyrocketed to horrific heights during the attendant Syrian, Lebanese and Yemen conflicts. In Syria alone, some 500,000 people have been killed and nearly five million displaced,¹ with countless others maimed, tortured, and even sold into slavery. In Libya, the destruction of the Qaddafi regime destabilized the country and the sub-Saharan regions to its south, making them the gateway for mass migration and human trafficking into Europe with more than 180,000 reaching Italy alone in 2016.² Meanwhile the civil war in Yemen between the regime and its Iranian-backed proxies against its Saudi-propped rivals has created some 200,000 refugees.³

The situation is complex and shifting but the results in terms of refugees are clear. There are more than 650,000 refugees in camps in Jordan, stretching the kingdom's relief and security resources to the breaking point. Another one million Syrian refugees languish in Lebanon and over three million in Turkey.⁴ To these must be added more than five million

Afghani refugees in Iran and Pakistan, and 1.5 million South Sudanese refugees, including one million who fled to Uganda since July 2016.⁵

The other, far more limited, refugee crisis is that of the Palestinians. Conventional wisdom holds that this crisis has been underway since 1948 and was exacerbated by the June 1967 war. Palestinians displaced from their homes in what became Israel have been considered refugees since 1950, passing down what has become a formal, legal status and being provided for by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees or UNRWA.

The shape of this crisis is well known. Palestinians have been maintained in camps in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip (ruled by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas, respectively), and in Lebanon and Syria, where they have limited rights to property and employment. Palestinians have been offered property and employment rights, as well as citizenship, only in Jordan. All this is underpinned by direct support for Palestinian health, education, and social services from UNRWA – *the sole international relief agency created for the benefit of a specific population*. According to the agency's estimates, there are over five million Palestinian "refugees" in the world, many of whom are citizens of other states.

As the Palestinian refugee "crisis" enters its seventh decade, its scope and severity are dwarfed in comparison to the regional refugee crisis. Yet the international community continues to devote disproportionate attention and resources to this problem, in stark contrast to its haphazard response to the far more acute regional crisis.

Thus, for example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) has addressed the world's estimated 65 million displaced persons (55% of whom come from the Sudan, Syria, and Afghanistan) with a staff of just over 10,000 and a 2017 budget of \$7.7 billion.⁶ In contrast, global support for UNRWA, with a staff of over 30,000 – one relief worker per 166 refugees or forty times the allocation to non-Palestinian refugees – and a 2016 budget of \$1.45 billion – \$290 per refugee, or 24 times the relative investment in a non-Palestinian refugee – continues with little disruption. A comparative analysis of the Palestinian refugee issue, its origins and the international response, in the context of pressing contemporary needs and changing circumstances, is therefore long overdue.

A new US administration presents a unique opportunity to comprehensively reassess Middle Eastern refugee crises and international responses. The issue is pressing. For example, the looming presidential succession crisis in the Palestinian Authority (PA), where the 82-year-old Mahmoud Abbas is in the 14th year of a four-year term, is an incentive to comprehensively rethink the ways in which UNRWA competes with the PA and how, among other things, refugee claims underpin Palestinian politics and culture as a whole.

As if more incentives were need, the collapse of the Arab state system, the rise of ISIS and the virtual caliphate, the wars in Syria, Yemen and Libya, and the flood of Middle Eastern, African, and Afghan refugees banging on the gates of Europe, are forcing the international community to rethink how it approaches the problem of refugees as a whole. All these problems are unrelated to the Palestinians and usefully undermine decades of the international community seeing Palestine and refugees as pivots in global affairs. They also highlight the exceptional status of Palestinian refugees in international affairs. This status, at the center of which is UNRWA, is unsustainable.

But the Palestinian example also offers many lessons for addressing the 21st century refugee crisis. Many of the same questions faced, often unsuccessfully, with regard to the Palestinians are being confronted today. Who is a refugee and who is an economic migrant? Do international relief efforts alleviate or intensify refugee crises? What impact does relief have on local cultures in terms of encouraging dependence or autonomy? And how are fundamentally political decisions regarding solutions to refugee crises made in larger geopolitical contexts, including superpower competition?

The dogged entrenchment of the Palestinian refugee claim and its many facets, including a narrative of dispossession, the centrality of refugee status and the “right of return” to Palestinian identity and culture, and the unique international response, namely UNRWA, offer important lessons for the present. A comparative perspective on 20th century refugee crises, especially in the Middle East, acts as counterpoint to the unique political and cultural experience of the Palestinians. In particular, the contrast between temporary and permanent mechanisms for refugee relief, including non-governmental organizations that became self-

perpetuating institutions, provides important lessons to be applied to both the Palestinian issue and the present crisis.

The goal of this study is to suggest new policies that can help policymakers allocate attention and resources to pressing refugee crises. Doing so will assist Palestinians, Israelis and the international community in making long-needed changes to policies and to culture, which will address the issue of Palestinians in the Arab states and advance the cause of peace. In doing so, new perspective on the Middle Eastern refugee crises will be attained making new policies possible.

REFUGEE CRISES IN THE EARLY 20TH CENTURY

Refugees have existed since the first wars, as have the politics surrounding them. But since the Treaty of Westphalia in 1648 the problem of refugees has come into focus first as a problem for sovereign states and then for the emerging international system; and as international norms regarding the problem developed, so too did legal regimes of emigration and immigration and the expulsion and reception of refugees.⁷

By the 19th century, most Western states formally or informally accepted that refugees were to be offered protection. Organizations like the International Committee of the Red Cross and its local societies had also emerged in the later 19th century but were initially oriented towards alleviating the suffering of wounded and captured soldiers. This remained the organization's primary focus until after World War I.⁸

The first half of the 20th century was defined by global conflict and massive refugee crises. The international response to these new crises was twofold. On the one hand, there was a growing array of international legal regimes offering protections to refugees. Innovations like the Nansen Passport for stateless refugees emerged in the aftermath of World War I, along with international instruments like the League of Nations, additional Geneva Conventions, the Declaration of the Rights of the Child, and an enlargement of international communities of expertise addressing areas such as law, science, medicine, and labor.⁹ New concepts of humanitarianism and legal discourse on human rights also began to take root.¹⁰

Table 1:
Refugees and Displaced Persons in the 20th Century, Selected Examples

Period/Conflict	Number of Refugees	Repatriated	Resettled
Balkan wars, 1912-13 ¹¹	400,000 Muslims to Anatolia 400,000 Christians to the Balkans		100%
Armenian genocide and diaspora, 1915 ¹²	750,000-1.2 million killed, 750,000 dispersed	ca. 100,000 to Soviet Armenia 1945-1947 ¹³	
Greek-Turkish population exchanges, 1922-23 ¹⁴	1.2 1.million Christians to Greece (unofficial total) 350,000 Muslims to Turkey (official total)		100%
Finns from Russian-occupied Karelia to Finland, 1940 ¹⁵	420,000		100%
World War II, European refugees and deportees	20 million ¹⁶		100%
1947 partition of India and Pakistan	12 million total ¹⁷ 14 million total ¹⁸		100% ¹⁹
Expulsion of ethnic Germans 1945-47 ²⁰	12 million		100%
Jews expelled from Arab countries, 1948-1967 ²¹	900,000		100%
Hungary, 1956	200,000 ²²		ca. 180,000
Algeria, 1960-62	900,000-1.3 million <i>pied noirs</i> to France ²³		100%
Creation of Bangladesh, 1971	10 million refugees to India ²⁴	6 million ²⁵	
Turkish invasion of Cyprus, 1974 ²⁶	185,000-200,000 Greeks Cypriots to the south 60,000 Turkish Cypriots to the north		100%
Balkan war, 1992-95	2,000,000 from Bosnia and Herzegovina	1,000,000 by 2004 ²⁷	

On the other hand, actual delivery of refugee relief remained largely the responsibility of individuals or non-governmental organizations, like the Red Cross, or organizations set up as short-term public-private partnerships. One salient feature of the newly formed NGOs, however,

is that once they addressed the specific problem for which they had been created, they routinely morphed into permanent institutions. An early example of this is the American Jewish Committee (AJC), founded in 1906 in response to pogroms against Jews in the Russian Empire, only to quickly assume vastly wider international and domestic roles, addressing issues ranging from Jewish life in the United States, to Jewish-Catholic relations, to international human rights. So, too, with its subsidiary, the American Joint Distribution Committee, which sent relief to Jews in Ottoman Palestine and in Russia. Both organizations still exist today, but whereas the AJC continues to assume a variety of political roles, the American Joint Distribution Committee focuses primarily on relief for global Jewish communities.

In contrast, one of the most important private World War I-era relief initiatives was the Committee for Relief in Belgium, organized by future US President Herbert Hoover, which shipped almost 6 million tons of food from 1914 to 1919. Though the initiative was entirely funded through voluntary donations, in order to protect relief supplies from being requisitioned by German occupiers, they remained the property of the American ambassador through their distribution.²⁸

The operations of the Committee were unique and unprecedented. As its official history described it, the Committee “had, for example, its own flag; it made contracts and informal treaties with belligerent governments; its ships were granted privileges accorded to no other flag; its representatives in regions of military occupation enjoyed powers and immunities of great significance. The Commission itself was neutral as between the opposing lines, but in the pursuit of its duties it waged frequent controversy with both belligerents, and it received aid and essential co-operation from both.”²⁹

Another public-private partnership was the American Relief Administration, which operated in Europe from 1919 to 1923. Also directed by Hoover, the organization grew out of the United States Food Administration that had been formed during World War I to oversee American food production and government purchases. Funded by the US government but relying on private organizations for distribution, the American Relief Administration delivered food to almost two

dozen European countries including the Soviet Union.³⁰ The relief aid offered to the new Polish republic was especially critical for stabilizing food production and bringing about economic recovery.³¹ Like the Commission for Relief in Belgium, the American Relief Administration ceased operations and was dissolved.

In the Ottoman Empire, providing what would today be called social welfare services, including to refugees, was the responsibility of individual religious communities. After the *Tanzimat* reorganization of the mid-19th century, the Ottoman state and various *waqfs* or religious endowments were responsible for social welfare for Muslims. This became an especially important problem as the empire's European territories were lost and Muslims fled to Anatolia.

The empire's Christian and Jewish communities had long exercised autonomy over internal affairs including social welfare and had long traditions of charitable institutions. These communities also had the haphazard advantage of support from co-religionists outside the empire. Institutions, including churches and their missionary wings, and philanthropists supported networks of schools and hospitals which were vital to supporting local Christian and Jewish communities.

Support for Middle Eastern Christians was intimately connected to Western imperialism but was also motivated by Ottoman persecution of Christians and others that intensified throughout the 19th century. By the 20th century, as the empire entered its period of terminal decline, persecutions reached immense proportions. The Balkan Wars of 1912-13, the Armenian Genocide, the Pontic Genocide, the Assyrian massacres, and the ethnic cleansing of Greeks from Anatolia, exacted human tolls numbering in the millions.

A number of relief efforts were launched to respond. The best known was the American Committee for Armenian and Greek Relief, founded in 1915, and later Near East Relief, and which exists today as the Near East Foundation. US Ambassador Henry Morgenthau Sr. had sent horrifying reports on the unfolding Armenian Genocide and these catalyzed a group of prominent US citizens to create a private relief organization.

The Near East Foundation was active throughout Syria and the Levant and later Russia, delivering food and supplies to Armenians, as well as setting up refugee camps, vocational training centers, hospitals and orphanages. It was also a pioneer of raising money directly from the American public using mass media and evocative imagery, techniques that have become standard for humanitarian groups. Coming out of a Christian missionary background and set against the already longstanding public image of Turkish barbarism, Near East Relief emphasized the antiquity of the Armenians and the responsibilities of global, especially American, Christians.³²

In the vast dislocations of World War I, the collapse of empires and the formation of new states and new boundaries, hundreds of thousands of Armenian, Kurdish and other refugees were shunted back and forth, deprived of political representation and other rights. Eventually, they fell inside new states and mandatory territories that continued to make border adjustments and population exchanges, via treaties and informally, through the 1930s.³³ As the refugee situation stabilized, the Near East Foundation and the League of Nations' Rescue Movement continued to deliver aid and to extend help, in particular to women and children who had been displaced after the genocide.³⁴

The Near East Foundation was not the only relief organization aiming to help Christians and Jews. The Relief Committee for Greeks of Asia Minor,³⁵ the Serbian Relief Fund, and a number of others addressed pressing needs in the short term and then went out of existence. The trajectory of the Near East Foundation, however, is instructive. Like several other World War I era organizations founded to address specific crises, it has become a permanent fixture of the NGO landscape.³⁶ Rather than focus exclusively on refugee relief and rehabilitation, it has moved into social and economic development, realms that are effectively open-ended, and it relies to a great extent on government contracts. And it has completely jettisoned explicit emphasis of Christians, either as victims or saviors, focusing almost exclusively on servicing Muslims of the Middle East and North Africa.

Another case study in the perpetuation of relief and advocacy is the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), formed during World War I to provide alternative "service" for pacifist Quakers, with a special

emphasis on helping displaced refugees create temporary shelters and returning refugees rebuild. This took place at practical levels, through the provisioning of food and tools, including such things as beehives, cows, and school supplies, and the contribution of AFSC labor. Teaching skills was as important as providing relief, since skilled refugees would contribute to the reconstruction of self-reliant families and communities.

The success of AFSC in France was such that after the end of World War I the organization was providing medical aid and relief in Serbia, Austria, and Germany as the organization shifted its focus towards refugee relief and development. It was active around the world including in the United States during the Great Depression. The AFSC's work in Europe during and especially after World War II was so successful that, along with its British Quaker counterpart, it was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1947. This success drew it into providing refugee relief for Palestinian refugees when the United Nations asked the organization to administer refugee operations in Gaza in 1949 under the auspices of the newly created interim United Nations Relief for Palestine Refugees (UNRPR) program.³⁷

In his report to the General Assembly on September 16, 1948, the United Nations Mediator for Palestine Folke Bernadotte set the number of refugees at 360,000; and this estimate was raised to 472,000 by the supplementary report submitted a month later by Bernadotte's successor, Ralph Bunche, which anticipated the figure to reach some 500,000 in the near future.³⁸ Estimates from Palestine Arab and Arab League sources were consistently and dramatically higher, from 631,000 to 780,000. When UNRPR began operation on December 1, 1948, it found 962,643 persons registered on its relief rolls.³⁹

The UNRPR, however, would find that this higher number included many non-refugees, such as Bedouin, and numerous fraudulent registrants. In Gaza, the AFSC succeeded in purging Gaza refugee rolls of fraud and duplication and also created schools and vocational education, clinics, and other local infrastructure. But the UNRPR's contractors in Syria and Lebanon – the League of Red Cross Societies and International Red Cross – did not attempt these tasks and only provided direct aid. The numbers of claimants thus continued to grow, even as the real number of refugees remained unknown.

After a year, the UNRPR was at an impasse. The AFSC abruptly withdrew from the program saying “that prolonged direct relief contributes to the moral degeneration of the refugees and that it may also, by its palliative effects, militate against a swift political settlement of the problem”⁴⁰ – a prescient observation encapsulating the Palestinian refugee situation even seven decades later. For their part, the refugees showed little interest in anything except continuing to receive relief until the increasingly unlikely day when full repatriation and reparations would be possible. But as political solutions were outside the ability of UNRPR (or any other relief enterprises for that matter), the program was ended and a new, more expansive international program was assisting the Palestinian refugees, and they alone: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East, or UNRWA.

THE UNIQUE INDULGENCE OF THE PALESTINIAN REFUGEES

UNRWA was created on December 8, 1949 as the UN General Assembly passed Resolution 302 (IV):

[The resolution] *Establishes* the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East: (a) To carry out in collaboration with local governments the direct relief and works programmes as recommended by the Economic Survey Mission;

(b) To consult with the interested Near Eastern Governments concerning measures to be taken by them preparatory to the time when international assistance for relief and works projects is no longer available.⁴¹

The laconic authorization in the original resolution has not prevented the General Assembly, and UNRWA itself, from expanding the agency's mission. UNRWA is unique in the annals of international organizations: it is the only “relief” effort aimed at a single population; it is seemingly permanent, if not eternal; and its mission is ever-growing. It is the world's only internationally funded “relief organization” that is run not only for but by its clients. As an educational institution, it is a repository and transmitter of Palestinian culture and identity.

Within Palestinian political economy, it both competes with and complements the Palestinian Authority (PA), with areas of separate and overlapping responsibilities. Overall, its existence relieves the PA from assuming responsibilities for health, education, and welfare that are the routinely exercised by normal, even aspiring states. And UNRWA's existence is fundamental as a symbol within Palestinian society, as a pivot around which key identity concepts revolve, the ideas of Palestinian victimhood and "refugee-ness," and international responsibility for their fate. Several of these dimensions are discussed below.

Few refugee situations have been studied so intensely.⁴² The amount of attention focused on the Palestinians in refugee studies is so pervasive that some scholars have expressed concern that "Palestinian exceptionalism" has led to insufficient attention to other Middle Eastern refugee populations.⁴³ The contemporary Middle Eastern crises should intensify this concern. But several aspects of the Palestinian refugee experience related to UNRWA are particularly valuable for the lessons they provide.

Moral hazard and its perils

The relationship between UNRWA and the Palestinians, in terms of politics, institutions, and culture, is an example of two profound problems in refugee relief, moral hazard and "regulatory capture."

Moral hazard is the situation where a party that is insulated from risk behaves differently than if it lacked that protection. Parties with protection undertake riskier behavior, while those without protection pay the price or otherwise suffer the consequences of failure.

The role of moral hazard in international civil society and the world of NGOs and international relief and development projects is becoming better understood. Some studies have shown that NGOs in developing economies are increasingly involved as participants in political and economic processes that redistribute risk and uncertainty between specific populations and state or international institutions.⁴⁴ As participants or mediators, they stand to gain but are exposed to little or no risk themselves should policies or programs fail. The transnational and networked basis of modern NGOs is another source of insulation from risk and from failure. Things may go badly but an organization, and more broadly speaking, the "cause," can survive or reconstitute itself elsewhere on the globe.

The United Nations itself assumed the moral hazard with respect to the Palestinian refugee problem.⁴⁵ UNRWA is effectively protected from any consequences of its actions or those of its clients by the UN General Assembly, and by external political dynamics that support those organizations. Western powers that brought the program into being and funded it are mired in the “humanitarian trap,”⁴⁶ where interventions and then a huge welfare infrastructure substituted for hard political decisions and compromises. Withdrawing that welfare infrastructure would, it is claimed, create immense hardship or worse, despite the fact that the Palestinians have an institution, the Palestinian Authority, that is widely recognized as a state.

UNRWA itself is protected in part by the “halo effect” surrounding international organizations and NGOs, the presumption that these are uniformly and unequivocally instruments for good, representing the values of the liberal international order. The reality that UNRWA is an instrument both for and more importantly by the Palestinians, which is internationally funded but not directed, is disregarded. UNRWA is also protected by the “CNN Effect”;⁴⁷ perceptions created by international media regarding the agency’s values and direction, as well as individual incidents (understood solely with the values of the liberal international order) initiate and drive crises and their responses. In many respects, UNRWA is the tail wagging the dog of the international system and the media.

The deleterious effect of UNRWA on Palestinian politics and culture are equally clear. Dependence on the agency is enshrined as a Palestinian cultural norm. From the beginning, efforts to defund UNRWA have produced strident threats from Palestinians and dire warnings from Western policymakers about the inevitable humanitarian disaster and radicalization attending such a move. Historically, the threat and the perception of Palestinian radicalization went through several phases. During the 1950s, it was cast both in terms of potential communist influence and the likelihood the issue would help destabilize Arab states.

As time went on, these threats and fears intensified. With the failure of economic development schemes in the mid-1950s, and with the generalized anger in the wake of the 1956 Suez Crisis, Western states recognized that “the political repercussions in the Middle East would

have been disastrous”⁴⁸ if they curtailed, much less ended, aid to the Palestinian Arab refugees, or made the Arab states responsible for supporting refugees in their territories.

During the 1960s, as Palestinian national identity became fixed around the symbols of the *fedayeen* and the idea of “resistance,” the possibility of withdrawing aid was even more fraught with peril. To do so would have, presumably, radicalized Palestinians still further, destabilized friendly or allied Arab regimes, and reduced Western influence in the region still further.⁴⁹

It was precisely during the later 1950s and throughout the 1960s, however, that UNRWA unilaterally shifted its mission from relief and settlement to education, along with health and welfare. The organization itself played a key role in the problem of Palestinian radicalization, on the one hand representing itself as a bulwark, and on the other, educating successive generations of Palestinians into the culture of “resistance.” At the same time, the agency unilaterally perpetuated its own existence – and the Palestinian refugee issue as a whole – by successively redefining Palestinian refugee status. This problem is discussed below.

Conditions of entitlement and dependence have only deepened since the onset of the Oslo negotiations between Israel and the PLO in 1993. Predictably, UNRWA felt threatened and catalyzed grassroots resistance to the process, ostensibly to incorporate voices neglected by traditional politics. But the effect, and intent, was to create new obstacles to negotiations in the form of demands from non-elites and, above all, to preserve UNRWA’s own prerogatives. As the Palestinian Authority emerged, UNRWA became at once a subsidiary or annex, providing services, and a competitor for international aid.

The international community has been called upon to assume moral hazard for Palestinians twice over. The first is the PA’s – permanently mired in internal corruption and power struggles with Hamas but always threatening to cease cooperation, or even to cease operations and to demand that Israel assume its responsibilities in the West Bank. The second is UNRWA’s, always claiming to be in a financial crisis but continually expanding its services in order to make itself even more indispensable to the Palestinians and to the international community.

Effective Palestinian control of UNRWA

An important additional difference between UNHCR and UNRWA is the role of the refugees themselves in these organizations. Whereas the UNHCR employs few locals to support its temporary missions, over the decades of its existence UNRWA has employed progressively more and more locals in place of international personnel to the extent where they have effectively taken charge of the agency and its operations.

This was an important issue in a series of early disputes with local governments, such as Jordan's, which wanted its nationals to capture as much of the UNRWA income stream as possible. The numbers of these positions were small: during the 1950s and early 1960s the UNRWA headquarters staff was minute and even in the 1980s never numbered more than 130 with no more than seven positions in the field offices.⁵⁰ This, however, did not prevent the tremendous expansion of refugee participation in UNRWA during the 1960s and 1970s, along with costs, as education, health, social service, and infrastructure were enlarged. By the mid-1970s, the number of local Palestinians employed by UNRWA had risen to 15,000, and today the agency employs some 30,000 Palestinians and only a few hundred internationals, mostly in its various headquarters.

This process of clients coming to control the agency that provides for them has fundamentally changed the relationship between the agency and the refugees as the PLO gained both practical authority in refugee camps and international political status. Through agreements with the Lebanese government in 1969, and then with formal observer status at the United Nations, the PLO gained a quasi-governmental role in local and international Palestinian affairs, without, however, assuming any responsibilities for the refugees. Among other things, the PLO began exercising political authority over the lives of refugees through adjudication of local disputes and also began using UNRWA facilities as terrorist bases.⁵¹ The pioneering role of Palestinians in creating the contradictory problem of "warrior refugees" has long been recognized by scholars.⁵² The problem itself has grown exponentially and is now a global threat, compounded by that from "returnee warriors."⁵³

In the 1980s and 1990s, refugee participation in UNRWA increased still further into “planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of Agency programmes.”⁵⁴ Israeli plans to construct housing for refugees during the 1980s were rejected by the refugees themselves and by UNRWA, and by the UN General Assembly, which declared that “measures to resettle Palestine refugees in the West Bank away from the homes and property from which they were displaced constitute a violation of their inalienable right of return.”⁵⁵

During the Oslo process, UNRWA began working with the Palestinian Authority to plan for an eventual handover of responsibilities, but also reminded the General Assembly that “The majority of refugees had not seen any concrete benefits from the countries and were concerned that UNRWA services might be curtailed owing to political considerations or financial constraints.”⁵⁶ Thus, to its growing list of prerogatives, UNRWA added political commentary and advice regarding peace negotiations.

The later 1990s was a period of “situated” analysis of refugee needs being balanced against “rights” for UNRWA. This appears to be another way of saying that as a negotiated peace agreement appeared on the horizon refugee representatives, facilitated by UNRWA itself,⁵⁷ reemphasized the “right of return” – that is to say, Israel’s demographic subversion through complete repatriation and compensation – as a political and social goal, thus hardening Palestinian intransigence on this issue.⁵⁸ In turn, this prompted mechanisms for even greater UNRWA facilitation of refugee politics, such as camp committees and Youth Activity Centers, in the name of increasing refugee stakeholders in future agency projects. UNRWA had thus progressed still further towards becoming an active participant in the political process.

With the collapse of the Oslo process in 2000, UNRWA undertook a series of organizational development plans to brace itself for the next phase of open-ended support. Increasing stakeholder participation even further is an explicit goal. One scholar describes this, again euphemistically, as a shift from UNRWA’s previous top-down decision-making process to “a horizontal one characterized by mutual co-operation, collective decision-making, and shared responsibility.”⁵⁹

As noted above, UNRWA now has some 30,000 employees, the largest of any United Nations agency, and only a small number of international employees. It maintains two headquarters offices in Gaza and Amman, with field offices in Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and the West Bank, and four Representative offices, in New York, Geneva, Brussels, and Cairo. There are some 3,000 employees in Lebanon and 10,000 in Gaza. Most funds come from the United States and the European Commission.⁶⁰ The assumption of moral hazard by the US alone through contributions to UNRWA has amounted to some \$4 billion since 1950.⁶¹

The Palestinian takeover of UNRWA is similar to “regulatory capture,” namely the takeover of a state regulatory authority by the interests or industries that it is designed to oversee. UNRWA is an international agency that is effectively managed by the interests it is intended to serve. The full weight of the organization’s coercive “soft power” and halo effect have been brought to bear on local and international political and media processes in order to shield it and keep the rent-seeking cycle in operation. This has been done in large part members of the “refugee” population itself working within UNRWA, with the help of the senior international managerial staff. By acting as a pressure group, the organization has thus been able to extend its mandate, and ward off or shape oversight and reform.

Regulatory capture in international settings has been studied with respect to NGOs, such as those involved in environmental regulation where non-state market driven governance systems gain control over local regulatory processes.⁶² But the larger issue of international organizations themselves being captured does not appear to have been considered. This concept, however, might have considerable applicability to other UN organs such as the vast bureaucracies of the Secretariat and the General Assembly. Indeed, it might also be asked whether UNRWA’s prerogatives and operations also constitute a deliberate infringement on the sovereignty and legitimacy of the Palestinian Authority.

Who is (still) a refugee?

Not only have the Palestinian refugees enjoyed far superior treatment than any other refugee group over the past hundred years, but their exceptional indulgence by the international community goes back to the basic question of how refugees are defined.

The 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees defines a refugee as a “person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group, or political opinion, is outside the country of their nationality, and is unable to or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail him/herself of the protection of that country.”⁶³ This definition was subsequently expanded by the Convention’s 1967 Protocol⁶⁴ and regional conventions to include persons fleeing war or other violence in their home country, blurring the lines between refugees, internally displaced persons, and migrants. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) currently defines refugees as those “who are outside their country of nationality or habitual residence and unable to return there owing to serious and indiscriminate threats to life, physical integrity or freedom resulting from generalized violence or events seriously disturbing public order.”⁶⁵

Yet, while these definitions have invariably been applied to all refugee crises in the post-World War II era, the Palestinian refugees have been defined under an entirely different set of criteria established by UNRWA itself.

As early as 1950, a year before the publication of the UN’s refugee convention, the nascent agency offered to define a refugee as:

a needy person, who, as a result of the war in Palestine, has lost his home and his means of livelihood.... In some circumstances, a family may have lost part or all of its land from which its living was secured, but it may still have a house to live in. Others may have lived on one side of the boundary but worked in what is now Israel most of the year. Others, such as Bedouins, normally moved from one area of the country to another, and some escaped with part or all of their goods but cannot return to the area where they formerly resided the greater part of the time.⁶⁶

Interestingly enough, the 1951 Convention (which also established the UNHCR) specifically excluded the Palestinian Arabs from its jurisdiction, stating that it “shall not apply to persons who are at present receiving from organs or agencies of the United Nations other than the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees protection and assistance.”⁶⁷ This decision to exclude Palestinians from international regimes being extended to others resulted from pressure from both Western and Arab states. France, for example, had moved to exclude the Palestinian refugees from the UNHCR mandate on the grounds that a number of UN organizations were already active in that arena. Arab delegates supported the exclusion, arguing that a universal definition of refugees would “submerge in the general mass of refugees of certain groups which were the particular concern of the General Assembly and the right of which to repatriation had been recognized by General Assembly resolutions.”⁶⁸

As a result, UNRWA continued to develop and refine its own definition of the Palestinian refugees. In 1954, a temporal qualification was introduced:

The definition of a person eligible for relief, as used by the Agency for some years, is one whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum period of two years preceding the outbreak of the conflict in 1948 and who, as a result of this conflict, has lost both his home and means of livelihood.⁶⁹

The 1955 report of the UNRWA commissioner-general introduced an informal rationale for including other claimants, namely Palestinian Arabs who were not displaced in 1948 but who had lost some or all of their livelihoods:

There is only a difference of degree between, on the one hand, the situation of the man whose home was on the Jordan side of the demarcation line but whose land is now cut off in Israel, or who worked in what is now Israel[i] Jerusalem, or who sold his produce in the coastal towns or exported it through Palestinian ports, and, on the other hand, the situation of the man who has lost his home as well as his means of livelihood. All of these have lost, in varying degrees, a place in which to work and a way of life. They have

that in common. Yet in some cases, the family which continues to reside in its former home, but whose nearby fields are no longer in its possession, may be in a more serious plight. The very proximity of its former possessions – the situation in which the original inhabitants must watch newcomers till their former fields and harvest crops from their former groves – increases the tensions and the psychological strain.⁷⁰

In 1965, the definition was again revised to introduce the unprecedented concept of inter-generational refugee status – nonexistent in any other refugee situation worldwide:

Recently a new problem of eligibility has arisen with the appearance of a third generation of refugees (i.e., the children of persons who were themselves born after 14 May 1948). On a literal interpretation of the definition of eligibility as it now stands, there may be some doubt whether these persons are eligible for UNRWA assistance. Under the proposals set out... they would clearly be eligible... subject to their being in need, and this would apply to subsequent generations also.⁷¹

By 1971, the refugee definition had been expanded yet again with a view to further institutionalizing the inheritability of refugee status enjoyed by Palestinian refugees, and them alone:

A Palestine refugee, by UNRWA's working definition, is a person whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years preceding the conflict in 1948 and who, as a result of this conflict, lost both his home and means of livelihood and took refuge, in 1948, in one of the countries where UNRWA provides relief. Refugees within this definition or the children or grandchildren of such refugees are eligible for agency assistance if they are (a) registered with UNRWA, (b) living in the area of UNRWA's operations, and (c) in need.⁷²

Today, UNRWA's definition is so expansive that it includes descendants of Palestinian refugees who have citizenship in other countries, a complete absurdity that makes a mockery of the entire notion of the refugee.

LESSONS LEARNED

The uniqueness of the Palestinian case – at least in terms of its treatment by the international community – was already anomalous in 1951 when UNHCR was established. It is even more anomalous today, when Middle Eastern and global refugee crises are growing rapidly. The Palestinian example shows the danger of moral hazard and internationalization, and the potential for regulatory capture of relief agencies by their clients. In practical terms, it suggests above all that the responsibility for Palestinians must be shifted to the Palestinian Authority. Proposals to shift responsibility to the UNCHR will only corrupt that agency and dilute its global relief and resettlement missions.

Adopting the Palestinians as a cause marginalizes all other refugees as well as migrants, and injects more politics than necessary into even the most technical decisions. NGOs in search of self-perpetuation and hence a refugee populace to service, whether through relief or advocacy, like Near East Relief or the AFSC, will be attracted to the Palestinian issue because of its long established political and economic dynamics.

Indeed, as a general rule, freestanding NGOs should be suspect precisely because of their need to perpetuate themselves. Witness, for example, the scandal surrounding Human Rights Watch's fundraising in which officials appeared to tout the organization's obsessive focus on Israel to potential Saudi donors.⁷³ Relief organizations that are dedicated to a single population should also be viewed with suspicion. Are they dedicated to resolving the problem or to perpetuating it, and themselves? Other lessons may also be derived from the UNRWA experience.

Continually expanding the definition of "refugee" is bad

The UNRWA example shows that continually expanding the definition of the word "refugee" perpetuates the problem, along with the relief mechanisms. The Palestinian example also shows that long-term maintenance of refugees effectively converts them into migrants, often without legal rights and protections in host countries. But the unique features of the Palestinian experience, the culturally enshrined demand that they *not* give up refugee status and become citizens of other states, and the unwillingness of certain host countries to permit them to do so,

are unusual. The Palestinian refusal to integrate culturally and adopt new identities is also a fateful harbinger.

At the same time, it is increasingly evident that the wider Middle Eastern refugee crisis has become an inter-hemispheric migration crisis. Without demanding that the majority of refugees return to their own countries, and the political will to create solutions to make that possible, Mediterranean and European states will be fated to accept millions of migrants. Social welfare systems, national economies, and national identities will be overwhelmed. Social disturbances and collapse are not unthinkable. In parallel, demanding that migrants fully integrate into host countries must also be a priority. To date, it has not been.

Welfare is bad for refugees and their advocates

In late 1949, the American Friends Service Committee informed the UN that it would no longer participate in Palestinian refugee relief in Gaza, explaining:

Following a review of the refugee situation in Palestine generally and more particularly in the Gaza strip, the AFSC wishes to state its position regarding the continuance of the refugee relief program. The AFSC wishes to withdraw from direct refugee relief in the Gaza strip at the earliest possible moment compatible with the fulfillment of its moral obligation to the refugee population. It is obvious that prolonged direct relief contributes to the moral degeneration of the refugees and that it may also, by its palliative effects, militate against a swift political settlement of the problem.⁷⁴

Like other welfare recipients, refugee ideology breeds anger, idleness, dependency and “moral degeneracy.” Palestinian society displays this in terms of dependence on UNRWA and the demand that the agency continue to support it until the attainment of a political solution to its own liking, which presumably would entail both a “right of return” (the Palestinian-Arab euphemism for Israel’s destruction through demographic subversion) and compensation. This zero-sum attitude is the foremost obstacle to Palestinian-Israeli peace. In the broader sense of the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, the lesson is that the longer difficult negotiations between warring parties are postponed, the harder it will become to repatriate and resettle refugees and to dismantle relief infrastructures.

Permanent institutions directed at a single population are bad

The story of UNRWA demonstrates that permanent international institutions dedicated exclusively to serving a single population are highly dysfunctional. UNRWA's promotion of the Palestinian "right of return" through its education curriculum and political agenda, its program of expanded legal protections, its role as the shadow health and foreign ministries, its competition with the Palestinian Authority, and much more, show how it has become a rent seeking organization. Its prerogative in the first instance is its own existence, rather than the wellbeing of its clients. The question of peace is barely on its agenda. The assumption of moral hazard by the international community, in effect the lowest common denominator of the United Nations General Assembly, and where tales of impending doom routinely blackmail donor states, complete the dysfunction. UNRWA holds the international community hostage.

The international community's approach to the Middle Eastern refugee crisis, and more broadly the global migration crisis, are similar. Humanitarian NGOs and the global resettlement industry act as independent agents, taking political decisions that affect states and societies, while at the same time blackmailing donors and governments. Their moral halo makes critical assessment impossible. One example is the role of European NGOs as "taxi services"⁷⁵ shuttling migrants across the Mediterranean to Italy and Greece, where migrants then become the responsibility of the host states. Another is the US resettlement industry, which, with government funds and collusion, has undertaken the demographic reengineering of communities across the country, implanting culturally divergent migrants into locations where they become the financial responsibility of local economies, as well as major security concerns.⁷⁶

One factor that can be quantified is cost. The overall costs for the Syrian refugee crisis and UNHCR operations have been cited earlier. But there are also local impacts. It has been estimated that each Syrian refugee resettled in the US costs over \$60,000 for the first five years in terms of direct and indirect costs. In contrast, in 2015 UNHCR requested a little more than \$1,000 per refugee in countries surrounding Syria.⁷⁷ Nonetheless, UNHCR has continued to emphasize resettling refugees far from Syria, with 62% being referred to the US.⁷⁸

Coupled with the low skill levels and consequent employment rates of refugees, particularly in European economies with low mobility levels, the result is persistent high unemployment and welfare levels for refugees and depressed wages for local workers.⁷⁹ Germany has estimated that costs for refugees, including housing, training, and welfare, will total \$46 billion for 2016 and 2017 alone.⁸⁰

This approach and its costs are unsustainable. Providing funds and support for resettling refugees in culturally similar contexts, closer to their points of origin, will avoid the disruptions seen today in Europe and the ghettoization experienced by Palestinians in Lebanon and Syria. Repatriation of refugees and internally displaced persons is vital to any final status agreements.

Treaties and population exchanges are good

Since the 1950s, Israeli diplomats have periodically emphasized that an effective exchange of population took place during the formation of the state, between Palestinian Arabs who fled the new State of Israel and over 900,000 Jews who were expelled from the Arab states. This is the same situation that existed in the early and mid-20th century in Greece, India, Pakistan and many other situations. The difference, however, is that these population exchanges were ratified both during and after the fact by treaties. The Liaquat-Nehru Pact of 1950, for example, obliged India and Pakistan to accept the refugees received during the partition, and addressed both minority protection and property rights.⁸¹

While such general treaties are inherently unfair to individuals, they remain one of the few international legal mechanisms to codify political and demographic shifts. Any Israeli-Palestinian negotiations must incorporate recognition of population exchanges as a founding principle, as well as acknowledge that compensation must be made to parties deprived of property, and formalize the existing demographic arrangements as part of the final agreement. Elaborate analyses of competing property claims have been generated and should be addressed by a joint commission, following up on the Oslo era Refugee Working Groups.⁸²

The Israeli-Palestinian example has implications for other parts of the Middle East. For one thing, the demographic shifts attending the Syrian civil war make a strong case for Kurdish autonomy and sovereignty.

Any final agreement in Syria is also likely to include recognition of an Alawite enclave. Ultimately, the redrawn borders of the new Middle East must be recognized and validated, along with the demographic shifts.

Refugees cannot become political tools

Refugees have been used as tools to overwhelm the capabilities of neighboring countries and blocs. Early examples include the post-World War II Soviet release of refugees into Western Europe to destabilize Allied occupation forces and the newly reestablished state structures in Austria, Germany, and Italy. The use of Palestinians as long-term tools to exert financial and political influence over Western powers and the United Nations was pioneered by Arab states from 1948 onward. Turkey's control over refugee flows into continental Europe combines both aspects of deliberate destabilization (and long term plans for Islamization), along with financial blackmail.

Recognizing these manipulations of refugee crises requires overcoming innate Western sympathies, which have paralyzed deeper analytical perspectives. It also requires hitherto unknown political will to call out the abuse of refugees and to develop consensus about, first of all, national and regional self-protection, and second, policies that effectively address refugee crises locally. The Israeli experience of prioritizing national survival over solutions that demand national suicide – namely the so-called Palestinian “right of return” – should be examined by Europeans, who are experiencing similar instrumental threats and calls for their own societies to commit suicide in favor of refugees and migrants.

POLICY ISSUES

The collapse of Arab and Muslim states and the rise (and fall) of ISIS mean the problem is no longer a question of addressing local needs and local politics; the crisis encompasses the entire region. Given these needs, what is the role for UNHCR, NGOs, and UNRWA? Given the overwhelming needs elsewhere in the Middle East, should international aid continue to be channeled to UNRWA, and indeed, to Palestinians?

What should American, European, and Israeli policy be towards Palestinians and the refugees, given their different viewpoints and interests? Three essential facts are obvious; each set of stakeholders has different values and interest that must be harmonized for any solution to be possible.

The US values global stability and has global responsibilities

Washington has supported UNRWA for decades largely because it does not wish the Palestinian issue to threaten other policy imperatives. During the Cold War, these were defined as containing Communism through various security architectures and maintaining the flow of energy resources from Arab producing states.

Since the end of the Cold War, however, US policy has revolved around two different goals: containing the Arab-Israeli conflict in order to prevent regional conflagration and preventing regional hegemons, namely Iraq and Iran, from obtaining nuclear weapons. The 2003 invasion of Iraq succeeded in that limited goal but at an enormous cost, and resulted in the Obama administration's frantic pursuit of a chimerical diplomatic solution to Tehran's nuclear ambitions.

American diplomatic efforts toward establishing a Palestinian state began in the post-Cold War context of unchallenged American power and rising regional hegemons. But energies were directed through the Oslo process and the Palestine Liberation Organization, which led to the creation of the Palestinian Authority, an entity that has deliberately failed to create stable foundations for a functioning state. The new Trump administration's Middle East policy is not yet formally wedded to any existing diplomatic process, whether with Iran or in the Israeli-Palestinian arena. While the pursuit of stability is a long-term American political trait, shifting funds away from UNRWA and addressing other refugee crises is more likely to occur now than at any time in the past sixty years. In early 2018 the Trump Administration now seems to be moving in this direction – to the predictable outrage of Palestinian leaders.⁸³

These efforts should be intensified. The first step is a clear presidential policy statement on the question, made with the support of key congressional leaders: UNRWA has outlived its usefulness and the

Palestinian Authority must assume its responsibilities, with special provisions made for refugees in Syria and Lebanon. This must be followed by elaborate plans to shift funds and responsibilities from UNRWA to the PA, best developed by an independent study group.

Implementation of such plans, by a State Department that has long been supportive of UNRWA's agendas, will require political will. The positions of other internal stakeholders, such as the Department of Defense and the National Security Council, are difficult to predict. Congressional pressure has historically been unable to move any of bureaucratic parties from their long-held positions on the status quo of the Palestinian issue and UNRWA. A carefully developed political program simply to bring American bureaucratic stakeholders on board with changes to the long established status quo must be developed and then implemented. But for better and for worse, the old adage that failure to support UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees would undermine Arab allies and lead to radicalization cannot be taken seriously. Nor can the claim that the Palestinian issue is the single most important refugee problem in the world.

Europeans see the problem of UNRWA and Palestinians differently

Western European states are concerned about refugees and terrorism as well as maintaining their political influence in the Middle East and in international forums. As the regional refugee crisis has morphed into a massive migration crisis that has put an enormous economic and security burden on the European states, gaps have emerged between different states and between leaders and electorates.

At the same time, the *idée fixe* of the Palestinians remains strong. Left to their own devices, the European states, both individually and through international organizations, are unlikely to change their approach to UNRWA and the Palestinians. But American leadership on the issue by the Trump administration will also be rejected on principle, given the personal antipathy Europeans and their leaders have towards the president and his policies, such as they understand them.

At the same time, the growing migrant crisis may make European leaders more amenable to low-key changes to UNRWA such as increased oversight that would ground future changes, notably shifting more responsibilities to the Palestinian Authority. American and Israeli diplomatic efforts to convince European leaders should usefully highlight the contrast between the crisis at their doorstep with the comfortably static situation of the Palestinians and UNRWA. The gaps among internal European stakeholders, and between competing European needs, should be usefully heightened by a dedicated information campaign.

Israel's relationship with UNRWA and the Palestinian refugee question remains complex

On the one hand, Israel wants no responsibility for the health and education of Palestinians should UNRWA be dismantled, or if the Palestinian Authority flounders. This determination is particularly strong in the military and security services. On the other, Israel has steadfastly criticized UNRWA's tacit support for terrorism and endorsement of the Palestinian "right of return." Making Israel recognize that UNRWA is, on balance, more of a problem than a solution, has proven difficult, especially in the face of pressing security challenges on the borders.

Signs of a shift within Israel, however, have been seen recently, when for the first time Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called for UNRWA to be dismantled, and his subsequent endorsement of the Trump Administration's frustration with the organization. Whether this was an expression of frustration or the beginning of a real policy shift is unclear. Persuading Israel to agree to dismantling UNRWA requires demonstrating that the economic and security burdens will not be increased, and that calls for 'one state' from Palestinians, and to a lesser extent the Israeli far left, are ignored. Bringing Israel's internal stakeholders to an agreement should be studied carefully.

The UN and the Arab and Muslim states will not acquiesce to any changes to UNRWA

In private, Arab and Muslim leaders do often agree that the Palestinian problem is far from significant. But after a century of using this problem as the central organizing principle and a means to deflect attention from internal shortcomings and repression, it will be difficult to impossible to overcome. At the same time, the relevance of these arguments has declined in the face of the collapse of the Arab state system, widespread wars and rebellions, Islamic radicalism, and the rise of Iranian hegemony.

Public support for changes to UNRWA will be received with outrage both by the “Arab street” and by conservative and radical elements. ISIS, and Iran, may insist that the Palestinian question – defined by them as the annihilation of Israel – is the most important issue for the world, and certainly for all Muslims. Such arguments alone may be more than enough reason to dismiss them and to demand more sensible and more just solutions. But if the muted reactions to the American recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel are any indication, the “Arab street” has other concerns.

In practical terms, any American diplomatic position that links support for dismantling UNRWA to other regional concerns makes that proposal a hostage to Arab and Muslim demands. An approach that makes changes in UNRWA must be accompanied by an information campaign that highlights other more compelling needs as well as the relative stability of Palestinian society (though not political structures), and which argues that fetishizing the Palestinians is an impediment to them and to the Arab and Muslim worlds at large.

Finally, with regard to the United Nations, it must be recalled that much of the organization is invested in the Palestinian issue through countless committees and initiatives. Changes to UNRWA should be part of more pervasive changes to the UN, beginning with the US zeroing out its contributions to the elaborate Palestinian architecture within the organization.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Middle Eastern refugee crisis is a paramount international humanitarian and political concern, having become part of a global migration crisis that threatens the stability of Middle Eastern, North African, and European states. The Palestinian question does not pose nearly a similar threat, and attention and resources devoted to it are disproportional. They must be reduced and reallocated.
- Comprehensive approaches to contemporary Middle Eastern refugee problems will not be successful until the Palestinian issue is lower in priority. Realistic solutions must also be adopted, not unlike those offered during the massive refugee crises of the late 1940s: a choice between repatriation and resettlement. Since Israel cannot accept more than a symbolic number of returnees, resettlement with compensation is the only viable solution.
- Western and Israeli security require a Palestinian state and stable system of Middle Eastern states. The latter is a global geopolitical concern that will necessarily involve formalizing demographic movements and the redrawing of borders. Meanwhile, the Palestinian Authority should be strengthened and held accountable for its citizens – something that has never been done before – first by taking over UNRWA's responsibilities.
- Creating and strengthening a Palestinian state cannot be done with the refugee ideology and refugee structures such as UNRWA. The agency should therefore be dismantled if possible, and otherwise defunded by Western donors. Resources and responsibilities should be transferred to the Palestinian Authority, both within its own territories and in neighboring countries. Oversight mechanisms must be dramatically enhanced to prevent financial corruption and to ensure above all that UNRWA's (and the PA's) educational curriculum promotes peace and not hatred and the "right of return."
- Local resettlement of Palestinians must be encouraged. Pressure must be exerted, in particular on Lebanon, to permit Palestinians to own property and work in their professions. Similar measures must

be taken for Syrian Palestinians as an integral part of negotiations that end the civil war in that country. West Bank Palestinians whose health and welfare is provided for by UNRWA must become the full responsibility of the Palestinian Authority.

- A policy debate among stakeholders in the US, Israel, and Europe should be held on whether funds should be shifted from UNRWA to the Palestinian Authority or Palestinian civil society groups, knowing these are dominated by political factions and terror groups, all of which share a basic rejection of Israel and the idea of peaceful coexistence. Proposals to shift responsibility for Palestinians to UNHCR threaten to mire that organization in politics and corruption. The alternative of the West threatening to cut Palestinians off entirely should be debated as a means of pressuring the Palestinian Authority to take responsibility for its population in place of UNRWA.
- Palestinian refugee ideology needs to be changed. This is the hardest problem of all. At a minimum this entails addressing the well-documented incitement and anti-Semitism in UNRWA school materials, and ensuring that incitement and hatred from Palestinian officials are noticed and have well-understood and tangible costs in terms of foreign aid.
- Broader relief efforts in the Middle East and Africa must ensure that refugees are repatriated if possible and otherwise resettled quickly in surrounding countries with similar cultures, with their rights protected. Refugee crises that become mass migration crises that overwhelm the host nations and threaten their economies and social cohesion will likely produce dramatic social changes and impoverishment and contribute to the rise of both fascist backlashes and local militant Islamist movements.

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