End the UNRWA Farce

March 1, 2017

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Frontpage Mag

<http://www.frontpagemag.com/fpm/265957/end-unrwa-farce-sol-stern>

After President Obama greased the wheels for the U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israel’s settlements policy, President-elect Trump tweeted that “things will be different after January 20th.” I didn’t vote for Trump, but for the sake of restoring some sanity to America’s Middle East policies, I fervently hope he fulfills that promise.

To make a real difference, our next president needs to understand how the United Nations’ hostility to the Jewish state is rooted in perverse institutions that have been abetted by previous U.S. administrations. The most glaring example of this is the inaptly named United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). With its $1.3 billion budget (30 percent of which comes from U.S. taxpayers), this agency actually perpetuates the refugee problem it was created to solve, while promoting Palestinian rejectionism and Jew hatred. Trump will soon have the means to drain the UNRWA swamp. If he does so, he would increase the chances of peace between Palestinians and Israelis.

The United Nations created UNRWA with the noblest of intentions. By the time an armistice agreement ended the first Arab-Israeli war in 1949, roughly 700, 000 Palestinians had fled (or were driven) from the territories governed by the new state of Israel. The prevailing view at the time was that refugee problems produced by war were best solved through resettlement in the countries to which the refugees had fled. In the aftermath of World War II, 7 million ethnic Germans in Central and Eastern Europe were the victims of brutal ethnic cleansing campaigns approved by the victorious allied powers. On the Indian subcontinent another 3 million people were uprooted in the violent creation of India and Pakistan. These destitute refugees had to make do in their new host countries with virtually no outside aid. Yet, within a decade, there was no longer a refugee problem in Europe or Asia to trouble the international community.

Unfortunately, the surrounding Arab countries that launched a war of conquest against the Jewish State—Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Egypt, and Iraq—refused to accept any responsibility for the welfare of their Palestinian brothers who were the big losers in the conflict. That’s when the U.N.—led by the United States—generously stepped in. The 1949 General Assembly resolution establishing UNRWA called for “the alleviation of the conditions of starvation and distress among the Palestine refugees.” Yet the resolution also stated that “constructive measures should be undertaken at an early date with a view to the termination of international assistance for relief.” In other words, the new refugee agency’s mission was to be temporary, pending a peaceful resolution of the Middle East conflict.

Flash forward 66 years. The original 700,000 Palestinians leaving Israel have now been magically transformed into a mini-state of 5.6 million “refugees” registered with UNRWA, about half of all the Palestinians living in the world today. The “temporary” U.N. agency has been transformed into a bloated international bureaucracy with a staff of 30,000, almost all of whom are Palestinian refugees themselves (many are activists of Hamas, the Islamist terrorist group).

Less than 5 percent of UNRWA’s clients ever lived in Israel, but the agency’s regulations state that all patrilineal descendants of the original displaced persons shall retain their refugee rights in perpetuity. Nor does UNRWA seem to be troubled by the fact that 40 percent of its camp residents are citizens of Jordan and Lebanon, and shouldn’t even be considered refugees under accepted international law and practice.

The unchecked growth of UNRWA is a classic case in international politics of the economic principle of “moral hazard.” By providing a social welfare safety net, the U.N. enables the Palestinian leadership to undermine efforts to solve the underlying conditions that created the refugee problem in the first place. Palestinian rejectionism is thus rendered risk-free. In turn, UNRWA nurtures Palestinian extremism, yet never is held accountable by the agency’s donor nations, including the United States.

The original sin was the world body’s unprecedented decision to create a single agency dedicated to dealing exclusively with one national group of refugees. Only the Palestinians who left Israel, a mere trickle of the post-World War II refugee flood, were designated as specially approved victims deserving of aid and support by the international community. To paraphrase Marx, this misguided policy created an historic tragedy, with elements of farce. It’s not only the billions of dollars and millions of lives that have been wasted over the past half century in the squalid refugee camps. It’s also that the easily solvable problem of the 1948 refugees was allowed to fester and then become the single greatest obstacle (no, President Obama, it’s not Jewish settlements on the West Bank) to a peaceful solution of the Israel-Palestine conflict.

In the 59 UNRWA refugee camps on the West Bank and the Gaza strip a daily drama of redemption and return is played out. The Palestinian Nakba narrative (i.e. the 1948 “catastrophe”) and the myth of eventual “return” are nourished under the approving eyes of UNRWA teachers and social workers. Generations of Palestinian children have learned in UNRWA schools that their totally innocent forbearers were driven out of their homes by the conquering Zionists. Yet they are also told never to lose hope, because the day is not far off when they will be returning in victory to their ancestral homes in Jaffa, Haifa, Acre, and all the other places throughout the Jewish state where their people lived in peace and harmony for hundreds of years.

An extraordinary [documentary](http://israelbehindthenews.com/two-states-not-at-camp-jihad/9990/) produced by Israeli journalist David Bedein graphically illustrates how this destructive culture of the Nakba is actively promoted in the UNRWA camps. It should be required viewing for all members of President Trump’s incoming foreign policy team. In the video, children at an UNRWA summer camp can be seen chanting that they will soon be returning to the villages from which their ancestors were driven by the Jews. They sing martyrdom songs and praise suicide bombers. An UNRWA teacher promises a classroom of children as young as ten: “We will return to our villages with power and honor. With God’s help and our own strength we will wage war. And with education and Jihad we will return.” Speaking to the camera, a teenage Palestinian girl announces: “I dream that we will return to our land and with God’s help Abu Mazen [Palestinain Authority president Mahmoud Abbas] will achieve that goal and we will not be disappointed.”

Unfortunately, mainstream media outlets have shown little interest in exploring UNRWA’s role in creating obstacles to Palestinian-Israeli peace, focusing instead on Israeli settlements on the West Bank. The conventional wisdom is that agitation for the right of return in the refugee camps is mostly harmless rhetoric that will recede after the “two-state solution” to the conflict is achieved. That has also been the official position of the State Department during succeeding U.S. administrations. It was reemphasized most recently in Secretary of State John Kerry’s speech doubling down on the U.N.’s condemnation of Israel over the settlements issue. Let’s end the settlement project, get to a two-state solution, and the refugee issue will then fall into place, Kerry promised.

Too bad that the recent history of failed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations demolishes Kerry’s illusions. In 2007 and 2008, Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert met with Abbas 35 times to try to achieve a peace agreement—precisely the two-state solution that Kerry called for in his last speech. During the secret negotiations, Olmert offered the Palestinian leader the same terms that Kerry now advocates: the 1967 borders with mutual swaps allowing Israel to keep the large settlement blocs; Jerusalem to be the capital for both states; and a five-nation consortium controlling the Old City and the Jewish and Muslim holy places.

On September 16, 2008, Olmert presented Abbas with a detailed map showing how Israel would retain 6 percent of Palestinian land on the West Bank and thus avoid evacuating most of the Jewish settlements. To compensate, Olmert proposed transferring an equivalent amount of Israeli land to the future Palestinian state. For their part, however, the Palestinians would have to drop their demand for the “right of return” to Israel of the 1948 refugees and their descendants—though Olmert offered to admit a few thousand on “humanitarian” grounds.

Abbas assured the Israeli prime minister that the map was worthy of study and he would come back the next day for further discussions. But Abbas never returned to the table. In an interview I conducted with Olmert in 2010, the then-former prime minister told me that there was only one plausible explanation for Abbas’s decision to end the talks: he couldn’t bring himself to announce to the Palestinians in the UNRWA camps that they wouldn’t be returning to their homes in Israel.

Nothing has changed in the past eight years. Abbas still can’t tell that Palestinian teenager in the David Bedein video that her “dream” of returning to her family’s ancestral lands will never happen. Contrary to Kerry’s apologia for the Palestinians, it isn’t Israel’s settlement policies that are preventing the two-state solution. Rather, it is the myth of a Palestinian return built up for generations in the UNRWA refugee camps.

As president, Trump can do a big favor for the Palestinians by disabusing them of their fantasy of return. He should begin by immediately cutting off all American funding of UNRWA. (This will be quite easy to do, because UNRWA isn’t financed out of the U.N. budget, but rather through voluntary contributions from many member states.) Instead, the president can announce that the $400 million that usually goes directly to UNRWA will be set aside for a fund available for permanent resettlement of the Palestinian residents of the refugee camps in the West Bank and Gaza. Trump should also lobby the other nations funding UNRWA (mostly our European allies) that it’s time to end this destructive 66-year venture that breeds hate and violence.

Finally, Trump should read the Palestinian president the riot act. He should tell Abbas that it’s time to end the 1948 war and let the 5.6 million alleged Palestinian refugees know that they are never going back to Israel. If Abbas is agreeable to this new path to peace, President Trump can assure the Palestinian leader that the U.S. will do everything it can to facilitate negotiations for a two-state solution. If Abbas refuses to renounce the right of return, Trump should warn him that the U.S. will end all aid programs to the Palestinians.

If President Trump is firm on this, Palestinian leaders may finally get the message and end the UNRWA farce.