Use UNRWA’s financial crisis to end its shameful apartheid system

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UNRWA, the United Nations agency tasked with caring for Palestinian refugees and their descendants in perpetuity, is facing what it terms its worst financial crisis ever. “Crisis” is an exaggeration, but the agency undoubtedly has less money than it wants. Given Gaza’s multiple woes (which UNRWA’s aid ostensibly alleviates) and Israeli fears that these woes could spark another Hamas-Israel war, this may sound like bad news. In fact, it’s good news for anyone who cares about either Palestinians or Israelis.

Obviously, no one wants a humanitarian crisis, but UNRWA’s budget shortfall won’t cause one. True, the agency is nearly $350 million short of its $1.2 billion budget, despite obtaining $100 million in new pledges at an emergency conference in mid-March, mainly because the Trump administration cut America’s contribution to just $60 million this year, down from $364 million last year.

Yet even if additional emergency appeals later this year fail to raise another dime (which is unlikely), UNRWA would still have some $850 million to help around 5 million Palestinians. By comparison, the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees has $7.7 billion to help around 60 million non-Palestinian refugees and displaced people worldwide. In other words, UNRWA can still spend a third more per capita than UNHCR spends—$170 versus $128. So if UNHCR’s budget can provide for its refugees’ basic needs, UNRWA’s far more generous one can surely do the same.

Nevertheless, it will face some financial constraints, and such constraints often spur reform. That’s good news because UNRWA’s current modus operandi harms both Israelis and Palestinians.

Two reforms are particularly essential. First, UNRWA should stop financing Jordan’s outrageous apartheid system, under which 2 million Palestinians registered with the agency receive no services from the Jordanian government, even though most (as UNRWA itself [admits](https://www.unrwa.org/where-we-work/jordan)) are Jordanian citizens. Instead of using Jordan’s health and education systems, they attend special UNRWA schools and health clinics; many even live in 10 designated refugee camps.

Clearly, people with citizenship in another country shouldn’t be considered refugees at all. Under UNHCR’s definition, which applies to everyone except Palestinians, anyone who obtains citizenship in another country automatically loses his or her refugee status.

But the situation is also unfair to the Palestinians themselves because they are denied the possibility of integrating into the country where they hold citizenship. Nobody can integrate if forced to live in special camps, and attend special schools and clinics, instead of being treated like all other Jordanians. Therefore, beginning a gradual handover of these services to Jordan would save UNRWA money while also helping 2 million people.

Second, UNRWA should stop financing the outrageous apartheid in the West Bank and Gaza—not the nonexistent “Israeli apartheid,” but the very real one imposed on Palestinian refugees by the Palestinian Authority.

After all, the P.A. styles itself the State of Palestine, and has been recognized as such by the U.N. General Assembly and 135 member states. That recognition has enabled it to join U.N. agencies like UNESCO and non-U.N. agencies like the International Criminal Court.

But if you thought a Palestinian state would alleviate the suffering of Palestinian refugees, think again. Like Jordan, the P.A. refuses to provide services to either the 800,000 registered refugees in the West Bank or the 1.3 million in Gaza. In other words, based on the P.A.’s [self-reported](https://www.timesofisrael.com/6-58-million-each-palestinians-claim-theyll-be-as-numerous-as-jews-in-historical-palestine-next-year/) population of 4.9 million, it’s refusing to provide services to a whopping 43 percent of the residents of its putative state.

These 2.1 million “refugees” live in 27 designated camps. They attend special UNRWA schools and health clinics, instead of the regular Palestinian ones. And senior P.A. officials have [said explicitly](http://evelyncgordon.com/palestine-to-deny-citizenship-to-45-percent-of-its-palestinian-residents/) that they are not and never will be entitled to citizenship in the Palestinian state.

Given that most of the world recognizes the existence of a State of Palestine, it’s ridiculous that 2.1 million Palestinians living in it should still be considered refugees. But it’s also unfair to the “refugees” themselves, who are denied the right to integrate into what’s ostensibly their own country.

And indeed, they abhor this situation. “The P.A. refuses to invest here because they claim it is the responsibility of UNRWA and the U.N.,” one refugee camp resident [told](https://www.timesofisrael.com/a-refugee-camp-seethes-with-anger-against-the-pa/) the Times of Israel in 2014. “So we get screwed. We have been abandoned. The P.A. supports the residents of the cities and villages. But it ignores us.”

Thus, by beginning a gradual handover of services to the P.A., UNRWA could save money while also helping 2.1 million Palestinians.

The status quo is also bad for Israel—and not just because of the [anti-Israel incitement](http://www.jpost.com/Arab-Israeli-Conflict/New-UNRWA-textbooks-display-extreme-anti-Jewish-and-anti-Israel-sentiments-study-shows-506174) taught in UNRWA schools and Palestinians’ [use of UNRWA facilities](https://www.timesofisrael.com/rockets-found-in-unrwa-school-for-third-time/) as weapons depots. By denying Palestinians the ability to assimilate into Jordan and the P.A., UNRWA effectively tells them that “returning” to Israel is their only hope of escaping refugee status. Nurturing such fantasies of mass relocation merely perpetuates the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; peace is obviously impossible if Palestinians condition it on turning Israel into a Palestinian-majority state.

Yet the status quo is even worse for millions of Palestinian “refugees,” who are forced into dead-end lives with no hope of ever integrating into the places they should be able to call home.

Admittedly, there’s no guarantee that UNRWA will implement constructive reforms; it might instead slash essential services to blackmail the world into coughing up more money. But even in this worst-case scenario, at least America will no longer be propping up UNRWA’s shameful apartheid system and its perpetuation of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. If European or Arab countries want this abomination to continue, let their taxpayers fund it.

There’s also a risk that even constructive reforms could produce enough short-term pain to provoke violence. But Israelis understand that sometimes, you have to do what’s right, even if it comes with a price. That’s why, in a poll [published](http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=330) just last week, 69 percent of Jewish Israelis said the U.S. Embassy should move to Jerusalem in May as planned, despite the fact that most believed the move would spark violence.

UNRWA reform is no less critical. And after 70 years of stasis, it’s clear nothing short of a financial crisis has any chance of bringing it about.