**Is the U.N. making the Palestinian ‘refugee’ problem worse?**

By [Jennifer Rubin](http://www.washingtonpost.com/jennifer-rubin/2011/02/24/ABbIUXN_page.html)

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[*http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/is-the-un-making-the-palestinian-refugee-problem-worse/2012/05/23/gJQAxW0BkU\_blog.html*](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/is-the-un-making-the-palestinian-refugee-problem-worse/2012/05/23/gJQAxW0BkU_blog.html)

Until recently, few Americans ever heard of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees ([UNRWA).](http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/right-turn/post/palestinian-refugees-and-the-un/2012/05/14/gIQAgFW0OU_blog.html) But then Sen. Mark Kirk (R-Ill.) got interested in what the agency, supposedly neutral in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, was up to. As [Jonathan Schanzer](http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2012/05/21/status_update)of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies reminds us:

Sen. Mark Kirk (R-IL) is trying to get a handle on the real number of Palestinian refugees in the Middle East -- a move that could result in a change of status for millions of Palestinians. . . .

The aim of this proposed legislation, Kirk’s office explains, is not to deprive Palestinians who live in poverty of essential services, but to tackle one of the thorniest issues of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict: the “right of return.” The dominant Palestinian narrative is that all of the refugees of the Israeli-Palestinian wars have a right to go back, and that this right is not negotiable. But here’s the rub: By UNRWA’s own count, the number of Palestinians who describe themselves as refugees has skyrocketed from 750,000 in 1950 to 5 million today. As a result, the refugee issue has been an immovable obstacle in round after round of negotiations between the Israelis and Palestinians.

How have these numbers swelled, particularly as the Palestinians who fled or were forced from their homes in 1948 and 1967 grew old and died? This question lies at the crux of the Kirk amendment. And the answer is UNRWA.

The knock on UNRWA is that it exists to perpetuate the refugee problem, not solve it. It was UNRWA that bestowed refugee status upon “descendants of refugees,” regardless of how much time had elapsed. As a result, the Palestinian refugee population has grown seven-fold since the start of the Arab-Israeli conflict.

As I discovered when I started figuring out how UNRWA pulled off this demographic stunt and what it is up to, I learned that there is plenty to keep Kirk busy.

Let’s start with UNRWA itself. Early last year it set up a D.C. “liaison” office. With whom is it liaisoning? Mostly Congress, it turns out. U.S. law forbids the United Nations from lobbying Congress, but as we learned with Newt Gingrich “lobbying” or a “lobbyist” is in the eye of the beholder. UNRWA employs two full-time staffers in D.C., both of whom have loads of experience on Capitol Hill. Chris McGrath is a former aide for Sen. Harry Reid (D-Nev.); his boss, Matthew Reynolds, worked in legislative affairs for the State Department. I was assured no “lobbying” goes on, but they do meet virtually nonstop with lawmakers — appropriators are key — to answer questions about how taxpayer dollars are spent, why UNRWA’s work is important and how it makes sure money isn’t going to terrorists.

It seems American tax dollars are going, in part, to fund this office that in effect makes sure Congress doesn’t get fed up and cut off the money flow. Kirk might want to find out just how much liasioning is going on and whether the letter and spirit of the ban on lobbying are being strictly adhered to.

Then there is the matter of UNRWA’s inventive definition of “refugees.” I was repeatedly told that definition comes from the U.N. itself and has been part of UNRWA’s charter from the beginning. When I asked for documentation, I was given a 1950 U.N. Resolution 302 (iv) and a recent extension of the mandate. *But neither mention anything about “descendants.”*

U.N. history experts tell me that the definition wasn’t changed until 1965, when over the objections of the United States, UNRWA extended “refugees” to include children and grandchildren of those displaced between 1946 and 1949. That was extended again by UNRWA in 1982 when the General Assembly, without much fanfare, instructed UNRWA to issue Palestinian identification cards to Palestinians *and their descendants*.

That’s how a “refugee” population grows to millions. Who are these people? How many are left from the actual displaced persons? Where can we find them to ask them whether they want to return to their homes or would rather take compensation? It’s not so easy to find out.

Does UNRWA oppose the Kirk legislation? UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness in the Jerusalem office e-mailed me: “‘Millions of Palestinian refugees receive UNRWA’s education, health and social services. The international community has committed to support them through UNRWA. Without UNRWA, or with a weaker UNRWA, this support will not exist, depriving the refugees of basic and essential services. Peace in the Middle East must be just if it is to be durable and for that, there must be a resolution of the refugee issue based on international law and UN resolutions.” No, he didn’t actually answer my question on UNRWA’s views on the Kirk legislation.

To make matters even more bizarre, *Palestinians living in the West Bank under the auspices of the Palestinian Authority are still counted as “refugees” and get UNRWA services*. When you ask why the PA isn’t taking care of them, you generally get guffaws. So much for the PA’s “institution” building. Whatever the legal status of these people, I have to agree with Schanzer’s colleague Cliff May, who dubbed it “profoundly dishonest” to classify such people as “refugees.”

When I tried to figure out how many of the “refugees” are actually living in PA areas, McGrath e-mailed me: “In terms of the number of refugees receiving our assistance within areas the PA has control, there’s unfortunately no way for us to track that down. We could probably calculate the number of students we have in those schools, but determining how many people receive our health assistance in these areas is much more difficult. We’ve tried to estimate this before and we have found troubles with this.” Now there is some information on UNRWA’s Web site that breaks out numbers of “refugees” by geographic region, but there isn’t information readily available to tell us how many Palestinians are in areas in which the PA has effective autonomy.

This isn’t the only fuzziness about UNRWA’s operations. I was told UNRWA employs about 31,000 Palestinians to provide services to “refugees.” Why not a mix of nationalities, like other refu­gee organizations? Well, it seems UNRWA considers part of its “works” to give the Palestinians jobs — with the relief agency itself. This, of course, is not making for independent, self-sufficient people but for permanent wards of UNRWA.

Okay, now UNRWA does offer vocational assistance. For how many? UNRWA’s spokesperson told me there are a total of about 3,000 graduates a year (out of millions?) and the majority get jobs afterward. Do these figures include those placed with UNRWA? The answer: “I am not sure.” It is impossible to determine if UNRWA is finding jobs for these people or merely building its own staff.

Finally, one of the biggest issues with UNRWA has been the [concern](http://palwatch.org/main.aspx?fi=122) (in the State Department and [Congress](http://townhall.com/columnists/joelmowbray/2009/06/05/how_us_taxpayers_are_funding_palestinian_terrorism/page/full/)) that [textbooks](http://thehill.com/opinion/columnists/lanny-davis/57983-time-for-transparency-and-accountability-for-unrwa) supplied by the PA include anti-Semitic and anti-Israel material. UNRWA insists there’s really no problem at all and that it hasn’t found such material. While UNRWA insists the textbooks are audited, it could not provide me with any data on the audits. Are UNRWA officials uninformed or dissembling on this point?

There is plenty here for Kirk and for the relevant House and Senate oversight committees to explore. Perhaps they can start by figuring out how many actual displaced refugees from 1946-49 are alive and residing outside the West Bank or Gaza. Once they figure that out, they can decide where U.S. dollars are going and why the PA isn’t accepting responsibility for people in its jurisdiction.

In doing so, the “right of return” might become a far more discrete problem, and UNRWA’s refugee-expanding operation (now humming along with a budget of about $600 million per year) might be cut down to proper size. Perhaps eliminating the “liaison” office in D.C. is a good place to start since lobbying isn’t allowed anyway.