The UNRWA Charade

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The recent decision by the Trump administration to defund the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was nothing less than a long overdue moral imperative.

In many ways, it was also a master-stroke of international diplomacy that exposed one of the most-long standing and mendacious myths that has, for decades, plagued the discourse on the Arab-Israeli conflict in general, and the Israeli-Palestinian one in particular.

UNRWA is not really a humanitarian organization. Rather, it is a political organization that employs emotive humanitarian issues to further its underlying political goal — preserving, perpetuating, and promoting the so-called Palestinian “Right of Return.”

Implementation of this “Right of Return” would mean that around five million people, comprising mainly descendants of those who left Israel during its 1948 War of Independence, and who reside today in various countries around the globe — mainly in Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria — would have the right to return to Israel.

This would effectively eliminate Israel as the as the nation-state of the Jewish people. The mendacious intent was clearly reflected in a 1961 interview with Gamal-Abdul Nasser who proclaimed: “If the refugees return to Israel, Israel will cease to exist.”

The callous disregard for the Palestinians themselves, who have been sacrificed for cynical political goals, was tellingly conveyed in a 1952 [statement](http://www.romirowsky.com/7948/a-tale-of-two-galloways) by Lt. Gen. Alexander Galloway, then director of UNRWA in Jordan: “It is perfectly clear that Arab nations do not want to solve the Arab refugee problem. They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront against the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel. Arab leaders don’t give a damn whether the refugees live or die.”

The same enduring unfeeling indifference to the plight of their Palestinian “brethren” on the part of the wider Arab world was later reflected in a [2004 Los Angeles Times interview](http://articles.latimes.com/2004/jan/04/news/adfg-palestine4) with Hisham Youssef, then-spokesman for the 22-nation Arab League, who admitted that Palestinians live “in very bad conditions,” but maintained that the official policy on denying Palestinians citizenship in the counties of their decades-long residence is meant “to preserve their Palestinian identity”.

According to Youssef: “If every Palestinian who sought refuge in a certain country was integrated and accommodated into that country, there won’t be any reason for them to return to Palestine.”

The significance of this is clear.

The nations comprising the Arab League are prepared to subordinate the improvement of the dire humanitarian conditions of the Palestinians living throughout the Arab world to the political goal of using them as a pawn to effect the elimination of Israel as the nation-state of the Jews.

To begin to comprehend the egregious anomaly of UNRWA and its pernicious consequences, it is crucial to realize that all other refugees on the face of the globe fall under the auspices of the UN High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR).

These two organizations have different definitions of who is a refugee and a different mandate for dealing with them — differences that have far-reaching political ramifications. In very broad brush stokes, the differences and their significance can be summarizes as follows:

The UNRWA definition of a refugee includes any one “whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948 [i.e. even transient laborers resident there for less than two years! – MS] and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict” — even if they have acquired citizenship and/or resident’s rights in another country. Their “rights” also extend to all male descendants.

According to UNHCR, a refugee is a person who “owing to 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 his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country.”

However, unlike UNRWA, under the UNHCR refugee status does not extend to those who acquire citizenship/resident’s rights in other countries, or to migrants, and is not transmitted automatically to descendants — although in certain circumstances, it has been extended to later generations.

Moreover, according to UNHCR’s mandate, refugees under its auspices can be resettled permanently outside of their counties of origin — either in their country of refuge or in third party countries. According to the UNRWA mandate, it will only take care of the refugees’ humanitarian needs until they can return to their country of origin — i.e. present day Israel — but cannot resettle them permanently anywhere else. Indeed as a recent [Foreign Policy article](https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/17/unrwa-has-changed-the-definition-of-refugee/) underscores: “UNRWA … is the only refugee agency in the world whose purpose is not to resettle refugees and help them go on with their lives.” [Emphasis in the original]

It should be clear that by UNRWA’s very definition of “refugee,” the number of refugees under its auspices will increase over time, while its inability to resettle them permanently ensures that nothing can be done to reduce that number.

Clearly then, the combination of its definition specifying who is a refugee and its mandate specifying how to deal with them leads to the inescapable conclusion that UNRWA is in fact an organization that perpetuates — indeed, even magnifies — the very problem it was supposed to solve. As such, it creates an insurmountable obstacle to any peace plan intended to resolve the conflict over control of the Holy Land.

An influx of millions of Palestinians into the territory west of the Jordan River would either hopelessly overwhelm and destabilize any putative Palestinian state established in the West Bank; or eliminate the Jewish majority within Israel, whatever it borders, and its ability to retain itself as the nation-state of the Jewish people.

Therefore, however one might envisage the Israel-Palestinian conflict being resolved, UNRWA is currently blocking any such resolution.