UNRWA perpetuates the refugee problem

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A mid the tumult surrounding Donald Trump’s White House it is easy to overlook policy actions. Some people in the British Jewish community will regret the gesture politics which led Trump to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem, regarding it as a fresh impediment to peace. Why that should be is not immediately clear, since the embassy is in West Jerusalem, the home to the Knesset, the Israeli Supreme Court and other institutions of state.

 At this time of year, when Zion and Jerusalem are very much in our thoughts, there is another Trump step in the Middle East which makes practical sense. He is the first US president to question and cut funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) – the only UN agency with a specific mission to preserve the refugee status of one national aspirational group – the Palestinians.

One can be fully supportive of Palestinian rights to self-determination without believing in UNRWA. It may do brilliant work but its existence could be construed by some as an enterprise that places Palestinian refugees in a different category to all others. These would include deserving refugees such as those fleeing the still inflamed conflict in Syria, the Rohingya Muslims escaping oppression in Myanmar and African economic refugees moving north.

UNRWA was established in 1949, specifically to provide assistance to refugees fleeing or choosing to leave the newly-declared state of Israel. It was intended as an agency to deal with a short-term problem following conflict. But in the subsequent 70 years it grew into one the best-funded UN agencies employing tens of thousands of people supplying food, housing, social, medical and educational services to scattered Palestinian refugees.

No longer can it be considered purely a relief organisation. It has become highly politicised agency seeking to preserve the status of second and third-generation Palestinians as refugees. The original number of refugees supported by UNRWA is, according to its website, some 700,000.  As refugee status tumbled down the generations it now extends to five million people through the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria and other countries. These Palestinians do not live in the vast tent cities to be seen on Syria’s borders with Jordan and Turkey. They inhabit well-maintained apartment blocks and the children are educated in well-appointed schools.

The biggest funder of UNRWA has been the United States, with Britain not far behind. In a gesture designed to demonstrate the anachronistic nature of the organisation, the Trump White House as suspended some £232m of annual funds.

The administration is the first to recognise that an organisation with the main purpose of preserving refugee status is out of keeping with the rest of the world, where permanent settlement and integration is the goal. It makes peace in the region more difficult by encouraging the multiplication of numbers. That makes the promises of ‘return’ in any peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians infinitely more complicated.

Britain has dipped into its big overseas aid budget and increased its contribution to UNRWA by £90m to help make up the shortfall, along with the Germany. Palestinian peace envoy Saeb Erekat says the decision to reduce or even close down funding ‘aims at closing schools, clinics, hospitals and starving people.’ No one wants to see any of that happen and there is no reason why, if UNRWA was to uprooted, other UN and global agencies could not take up the baton.

That would end the current position where Palestinians are the only group in the region and across the world which has a specific agency which aims to preserve refugee status which is unnecessary and inequitable.

The real hope for the Palestinians are programmes such as those run by the World Bank which seek to unleash enterprise and economic development not to preserve a dependence culture. The US has struck a blow in this direction.

 That should be regarded as a positive approach for the New Year.