



UNRWA Fact Sheet

Background

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees (UNRWA) was established by United Nations General Assembly [Resolution 302](#) in 1949. Its intended use was to facilitate a solution (resettlement and/or repatriation) for the 700,000 Arabs who fled their homes during the 1948 war. Resolution 302 made it clear that UNRWA was to be short-term. Direct relief was to be terminated in December of the following year. However, the General Assembly passed [Resolution 393](#), which asserted: “direct relief cannot be terminated” and recommended the continuation of UNRWA activities and the establishment of a reintegration fund that would “prepare for the termination of international assistance and for the permanent reestablishment of refugees and their removal from relief.” Seven decades later, UNRWA’s “short-term” assistance has not helped facilitate a solution for the refugees, nor has it lead to the economic development. Conversely, UNRWA evolved from a temporary organization that supplied only emergency relief into a [permanent](#) governmental and developmental services providing bureaucracy that affirms [dependency](#) over self-sufficiency.

Meanwhile, the office of the [United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees \(UNHCR\)](#) was created in 1950, during the aftermath of the Second World War, to help millions of Europeans who had fled or lost their homes. UNHCR now handles ALL other refugees. UNHCR has helped over 50 million refugees to restart their lives.

Shifting Mandates: Temporary to Permanent Dependency

Initially, UNRWA followed a policy of [reintegration](#). The underlying idea of the reintegration fund was to resettle the majority of refugees into their host countries. The [plan](#) was to offer the Arab governments, who were facing grave economic hardships, vast resources that would improve their economic situation while simultaneously absorbing the refugees with the end goal of eliminating this fund in exchange for a plan to create and enforce a permanent resolution to the refugee “crisis.”

But with the exception of Jordan, the Arab states adamantly rejected resettlement options, refused to grant the refugees citizenship, or to contribute to UNRWA’s budget. The [Arab States](#) came to perceive UNRWA not only as an important asset against Israel—the perpetuation of the refugee problem feeds into the narrative of “Palestinian injustice”— but also as a cash-cow to be milked by the Arab regimes at the expense of reintegrating the refugees into the societies where they have resided for decades, and many born into. As a result, they kept the refugees marginalized and discriminated against in refugee camps.

The nations which refused to grant the Palestinians a permanent status and residence are receiving massive amounts of money which is intended for the permanent resolution of the issue. Declining to integrate the refugees is in direct violation of the mission on which UNRWA was established. [Sir Alexander Galloway](#), a former UNRWA official, said: "Arab States do not want to solve the refugee problem. They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the UN and as a weapon against Israel."

With prospects for resettlement frozen, UNRWA abandoned those efforts to switch focus towards human development and humanitarian services. Today, [UNRWA](#) operations include: primary and vocational education, primary health, relief and social services, infrastructure and camp improvement, microfinance and emergency response. UNRWA’s social service programs fosters an attitude of [dependency](#), rather than preparing refugees to be self-supporting, as initially envisioned. Nearly all of UNRWA beneficiaries depend on direct aid with no plan or desire to exit the system.

The recipients of UNRWA benefits generally perceive the payments as “guilt payments” and thus, the payment help fosters a mentality of hostility and animosity towards Israel and the paying party as well as, a reassurance, that they have legal claims on Israel, i.e. ‘the right of return.’

Redefinition of a Refugee

Although many of the original 700,000 Palestinian refugees are deceased, UNRWA’s refugee population continues to grow exponentially. The current number of Palestinian refugees registered with UNRWA exceeds five million. This is due to UNRWA’s unique [definition](#) of a refugee, which extends refugee status to the descendants of refugees. This is in contradiction to UNRWA’s original definition of a refugee, defined by Resolution 302: “persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict.” Failure to enforce the “cessation” rule of the [1951 Convention](#) further contributes to UNRWA’s enlarged population. The rule stipulates that a person shall no longer be considered a refugee if “he has acquired a new nationality and enjoys the protection of the country of his new nationality.” Although a majority of UNRWA beneficiaries in Jordan have been given [citizenship](#), or live under the Palestinian Authority, UNRWA continues to define them as refugees. Of the original 700,000 refugees, only [30,000 to 50,000](#) are still alive. A majority of those who claim refugee status were born after 1946 and therefore did not live in Palestine between 1946-48. UNRWA’s refugee definition is problematic for a number of reasons:

- The definition is in contrast to international law, specifically the [1951 Convention relating to the Status of Refugees](#), which applies to all the world’s refugees, except Palestinian Arabs, and [U.S. law](#), both of which exclude the descendants of refugees.
- UNRWA’s definition [undermines](#) the possibility of future peace negotiations by constructing a fictional refugee population that vastly outnumbers the actual remaining refugees. UNRWA is forced to provide [unnecessary services](#) to individuals who are already integrated into the economy of their host states, and puts an unnecessary burden on the international community and the U.S. tax payer.
- A [projection](#) published by UNHCR paints a troubling picture of UNRWA’s future growth rates. By 2030, UNRWA’s refugee list will expand another 70% to 8.5 million, and by 2060, UNRWA will have twenty-five times more people registered than in 1950, despite the fact that not a single one of the original Palestinian refugees is likely to still be alive by then.
- Had refugee status been limited to those that fled from the land that became Israel and to their children, Israel would have been able to [accommodate](#) those refugees.

Funding/Staffing

Since its inception, UNRWA has required massive funding from the international community that only increases as UNRWA’s population and mandate increases. The United States is not only the largest [contributor](#) to the U.N., it is also the single largest donor to UNRWA. ***Cumulatively, the U.S. has contributed over \$5.8 billion to UNRWA since 1950, averaging over \$250 million annually since 2007.*** In 2015, the United States provided more than \$390 million of UNRWA’s \$1 billion budget. This is nearly double of what the European Commission, UNRWA’s 2nd largest donor, paid (\$136 million) that year, and nearly four times what the United Kingdom paid (\$99 million).

UNRWA can be compared unfavorably to UNHCR. While UNRWA’s focus is on Palestinian refugees in only five countries and territories, its budget and employee roster far exceeds UNHCR, which is responsible for the rest of the world’s refugees in more than 100 countries. While [UNHCR’s](#) total budget in 2017 was \$7.7 billion for nearly 93 million people, UNRWA’s total budget was roughly \$1 billion for only 5 million people. [UNRWA](#) reports a staff of over 30,000 employees to support some five million people (one staffer for every 182 UNRWA beneficiaries). UNHCR reports a staff of over 10,000 to support approximately 93 million people (one staffer for every 8,500 persons). Whereas UNHCR avoids employing aid recipients to avoid conflict of interests, UNRWA has no such restriction. A majority of [UNRWA](#) employees are Palestinian refugees, who share an interest in maintaining and growing the agency. UNRWA is the [single largest employer](#) in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and thus indispensable to the Palestinian economy. This conflict of interest explains why UNRWA has failed to resettle a single Palestinian refugee while [UNHCR](#) resettled 189,300 refugees of other backgrounds in 2016 alone.

Incitement

The UNRWA [curriculum](#) incites violence against Israel and encourages martyrdom. More than half a million Palestinian children are being educated by schools run by UNRWA. Disturbing themes found in UNRWA [textbooks](#) include the delegitimization of Israel, the demonization of Israel and Jews, the denial of Jewish holy sites

in the Holy Land, and indoctrination of students to take up arms for the “right of return” to the villages their ancestors left in 1948. UNRWA schools are led by un-vetted headmasters who give access to organizations they affiliate with, such as Hamas, to use school property and conduct seminars. A prime example comes from EMET’s senior fellow, John Calvin, who said, “ALL the summer camps I attended growing up have been Hamas’s and were held at the UNWRA schools.”

UNRWA [summer camps](#) promote jihad and teach that war is the answer to the conflict, according to primary research. Quotes from students’ songs and cheers include: “We are the swords and the joy;” “When we die as martyrs, we go up to heaven;” “I will defeat the Jews. They are a gang of infidels and Christians;” and “Palestine is an Arab land from the river to the sea.” [Maps](#) hung in UNRWA schools erase Israel completely by presenting all of Israel as ‘Palestine’ and renaming Israeli cities with Palestinian names.

UNRWA employees use [social media](#) to spread anti-Semitic graphics and promote acts of violence and hatred with impunity. Examples include:

- Endorsing various forms of [violence](#); one UNRWA teacher posted the infamous video of Sheikh Abu Rajab’s mosque sermon, where he pulled out a knife and with violent stabbing motions, called on Palestinians to murder Jews in the name of Islam.
- Celebrating acts of terrorism and [kidnapping](#); an UNRWA employee shared a picture of a Palestinian boy holding up three fingers towards Israeli soldiers, a symbol that is recognized as a celebration of the three Jewish boys that Hamas kidnapped and murdered in June 2014.
- Praising Adolf [Hitler](#); a biology teacher at an UNRWA school posted two photos of Hitler on his Facebook page with the accompanying captions, “our beloved,” and “Hitler the great.”
- Postings of overtly [anti-Semitic](#) videos, caricatures and statements; an UNRWA employee’s Facebook pictures featured him grasping a bloodied knife and calling to “stab Zionist dogs.”

Terrorism

UNRWA employees have been linked to terrorist entities and operations on countless occasions, especially Hamas, the U.S. designated terrorist organization in control of Gaza. UNRWA employees have [elected](#) the Hamas faction to win the last three elections. In 2012, UNRWA employees elected 25 Hamas members out of 27 overall seats on a union board that represents ten thousand UNRWA workers. UNRWA employees have been [arrested](#) and found guilty in Israeli courts for participating in organized and unorganized terrorism. In August 2002, an Israeli court convicted Nahed Rashid Ahmed [Attalah](#), director of food supplies in an UNRWA office in Gaza, on charges of using his official UN free travel document (*laissez-passer*) and UN vehicle to bypass Israeli checkpoints to aid Palestinian terrorist activities. Attalah admitted in September 2002 to using his UN vehicle on multiple occasions to transport arms, explosives, and armed activists to carry out terrorist attacks.

Additionally, UNRWA [schools](#), hospitals and [ambulances](#) have been utilized by Hamas to hide, transport and launch rockets into Israel. There are even cases when UNRWA discovered rockets and rather than turning them over to a third party or arranging for their disposal, UNRWA gave the [rockets](#) back to Hamas. The abuse of UNRWA facilities during Operation Protective Edge in 2014 was so disturbing it created a social media trend rebranding UNRWA’s acronym to: United Nations [Rocket Warehousing](#) Agency. In one instance, three Israeli soldiers were killed in July 2014 during an explosion at a [booby-trapped UNRWA health clinic](#) that housed the opening of a terrorist tunnel. In addition to the loss of life, the explosion destroyed the health clinic.

Possible UNRWA Reforms

Calls for UNRWA reform and/or to [merge](#) UNRWA with UNHCR have garnered recent attention among American and Israeli officials. Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu told U.S. Ambassador to the UN Nikki Haley during her June 2017 visit to Israel, that it’s time to dismantle UNRWA and merge its components with UNHCR. This came shortly after a terror tunnel was discovered under two UNRWA schools in Gaza.

Senators Marco Rubio (R-FL) and Tom Cotton (R-AR) introduced legislation (S.169) in January 2017, titled “[the Countering Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israel Activities at the United Nations Act of 2017](#),” which calls for the removal of citizens of recognized states from UNRWA’s jurisdiction, and the change of UNRWA’s definition of a “Palestinian refugee” to that used by the UNHCR. The Act states that the goal of the U.S. should be “to eliminate

UNRWA and give the Office of the UNHCR full responsibility for Palestine refugees (as defined by the Office of the UNHCR).”

Conclusion

Despite serious population displacements in both the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, including a [record high](#) of forced displaced persons in 2015, UNRWA remains unique only to the Palestinian people while UNHCR is responsible for the rest of the world’s refugees. After six decades, UNRWA has failed to achieve what should be the focus and priority of any refugee agency: the permanent resolution of the problem by either assisting refugees’ return to their own country or settling them permanently in another country as quickly as possible. UNRWA has helped perpetuate the refugee problem it was created to resolve. UNHCR, on the other hand, has successfully repatriated or resettled large numbers of displaced peoples into various countries. In fact, UNHCR helped facilitated over half a million Jewish refugees from Arab countries into Israel. Reforming UNRWA will help resolve the refugee problem rather than perpetuate it and will help foster an attitude of peace and coexistence rather than one of hatred and war.

The alternative is an indefinite continuation of UNRWA which will diminish hope of resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict for both economic and political reasons. Economically, UNRWA has failed to provide tools and incentives for the Palestinians to become self-sufficient. Instead, UNRWA’s expanded mandate created agency dependency. Politically, UNRWA’s expanded definition of a refugee keeps alive the impractical dream of the “right of return.”