



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

UNRWA: Barrier to Peace

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Perspectives Papers No. 44, May 27, 2008

<http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/perspectives44.html>

Executive Summary: The United Nations Relief Works Agency (UNRWA) was created under the jurisdiction of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), with the unique responsibility of solely aiding the Palestinians. Due to this special status, the UNRWA perpetuates, rather than resolves, the Palestinian refugee issue, and therefore serves as a major obstacle toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Like no other UN body, UNRWA's definition of refugees includes not only the refugees themselves, but also their descendents. Moreover, refugees keep their status even if they have gained citizenship. UNRWA employs teachers affiliated with Hamas and allows the dissemination of Hamas messages in its schools. The Hamas coup in Gaza of July 2007 has resulted in a Hamas takeover of UNRWA facilities there. Therefore, UNRWA's activities require urgent action. The Agency should be dissolved and its services transferred to more appropriate administering organizations.

Background

Millions of refugees worldwide – over 130 million since the end of World War II – have come under the responsibility of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which aims to resettle and rehabilitate refugees. On December 8, 1949, the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 302, establishing an agency dedicated solely to "direct relief and works programs" for the Palestinian Arab refugees – UNRWA (United Nations Relief Works Agency) – making it a unique body.

UNRWA exists in order to perpetuate, rather than to resolve, the Palestinian refugee issue. No Palestinian has ever lost his or her refugee status. There are hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees and their descendants who are citizens of Jordan, for example – yet as far as UNRWA is concerned they are still refugees, eligible for aid. UNRWA, over the past 60 years, has transformed itself into a central vehicle for the perpetuation of the refugee problem, and into a major obstacle for the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The Problem of Definition

When UNRWA first began counting refugees in 1948, it did so in a way without precedent – seeking to maximize the number of those defined as refugees. UNRWA counts every descendant of the original refugees as a refugee themselves – leading to an increase of 400 percent in the number since 1948.

This was a politically motivated definition to imply that either Palestinians would remain refugees forever or until the day that they returned in a triumph to a Palestinian Arab state that included the territory where Israel existed. If they built lives elsewhere, even after many generations – decades or centuries – they still remained officially refugees. In contrast to other situations around the world, other refugees only retained that status until they found permanent homes elsewhere, presumably as citizens of other countries.

Moreover, refugee status was based solely on the applicant's word. Even UNRWA admitted its figures were inflated in a 1998 Report of the Commissioner General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (July 1997-30 June 1998): "UNRWA registration figures are based on information voluntarily supplied by refugees primarily for the purpose of obtaining access to Agency services and hence cannot be considered statistically valid demographic data."

Fostering Conflict

In October 2004, then UNRWA Commissioner General Peter Hansen publicly admitted for the first time that Hamas members were on the UNWRA payroll, adding, "I don't see that as a crime. Hamas as a political organization does not mean that every member is a militant and we do not do political vetting and exclude people from one persuasion as against another." Consequently, taxpayers' money in countries where Hamas was legally defined as a terrorist organization, like the United States and Canada, was being illegally used to fund Hamas-controlled activities.

Hanson's view that Hamas was a normal political organization whose doctrines did not interfere with the governance and education of Palestinians remains the position of UNRWA. This has been so even when Hamas has committed violence against other Palestinians. After the organization seized Gaza by force in July 2007, UNRWA immediately indicated to Hamas that it was eager to get back to providing its services. Nothing was changed in its procedure or performance after the takeover.

A graphic demonstration of this issue was the death of Awad al-Qiq in May 2008. Qiq had a long career as a science teacher in an UNRWA school and had been promoted to run its Rafah Prep Boys School. He was also the leading bombmaker for Islamic Jihad. He was killed while supervising a factory to make rockets and other weapons for use against Israel, located a short distance from the school. Qiq was thus simultaneously building weapons for attacking Israeli civilians while indoctrinating his students to do the

same. Islamic Jihad did not need to pay him a salary for his terrorist activities. The UN and the American taxpayer were already doing so.

The increasing numbers of UNRWA teachers who openly identify with radical groups have created a teachers' bloc that ensures the election of members of Hamas and individuals committed to Islamist ideologies. Using classrooms as a place to spread their radical messages, these teachers have also gravitated to local Palestinian elections. Thus, UNRWA's education system has become a springboard for the political activities of Hamas. For example, Minister of Interior and Civil Affairs Minister Saeed Siyam of Hamas, was a teacher in UNRWA schools in Gaza from 1980 to 2003. He then became a member of UNRWA's Arab Employees Union, and has headed the Teachers Sector Committee. Other notable Hamas graduates of the UNRWA education system include Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh and Abd al-Aziz Rantisi, the former Hamas chief.

Fostering Dependency

UNRWA's budget has been supported by many countries of which the United States and Western countries have been the largest contributors. In 1990, UNRWA's annual budget was over \$292 million, and by 2000 it had increased to \$365 million. Despite this seemingly significant rise, however, actual allocations among the various refugee camps has decreased – compounded by a very high birth rate and burgeoning camp populations. Refugees were discouraged from moving out and had the incentive of being on welfare if they remained.

Per capita spending among refugees in camps thus declined from \$200 in services per year per refugee in the 1970s to about \$70 currently. This situation has been most evident in Lebanon, where the government provides little if any additional assistance to the Palestinians.

UNRWA provides jobs to a large number of Palestinians (it has a full time staff of 23,000). While the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR) and the UN Children's Fund (UNICEF) avoid employing locals who are also recipients of agency services, UNRWA does not make this distinction. UNRWA thus keeps a large population of refugees and their descendants in a permanent state of welfare dependency, financed by the western taxpayer. In so doing, it acts as a barrier to attempts to make the refugees into productive citizens. Bureaucracies have a tendency to become self-perpetuating. In the case of UNRWA, this tendency is exacerbated by the fact that the organization's *raison d'etre* is the preserving of a refugee problem, rather than finding a solution for it.

Conclusion

The UN erred when it created a UN body devoted exclusively to one refugee population and with a *modus operandi* contradicting that of all other relief institutions. Four steps are required to bring the international approach to the Palestinian refugee issue in line with standard practice on similar situations.

First, UNRWA itself should be dissolved. Second, the services UNRWA currently provides should be transferred to other UN agencies, notably the UNHCR, which have a long experience with such programs. Third, responsibility for normal social services should be turned over to the Palestinian Authority. A large portion of the UNRWA staff should be transferred to that governmental authority. Fourth, donors should use the maximum amount of oversight to ensure transparency and accountability.

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**BESA Perspectives is published through the generosity
of the Littauer Foundation.**