

**The terror enablers: How UNRWA helps  
perpetuate Palestinian misery and sustain  
the Middle East conflict with Israel.**

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**February 2017**

## **Introduction:**

British governments have long said they wish to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict through just and peaceful means. Ministers have reaffirmed their belief in the two state solution and in the various incarnations of the peace process predicated on achieving this goal. But at the same time, the UK is undermining this position by providing financial support to UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) every year.

This organisation is actively hostile to resolving the conflict between Palestinians and Israelis. In the schools it administers, Palestinians are encouraged to hate Israelis and to commit acts of violence towards them. They are told that their 'right of return' is sacrosanct, even though it would be impossible to implement. It inflates the actual number of Palestinian refugees and encourages a sense of permanent victimhood.

The UK, specifically, the Department for International Development (DFID), is UNRWA's third largest donor, behind the United States and the European Union.<sup>i</sup> In terms of pledges made to UNRWA (cash and in kind) for 2015 (as of 31<sup>st</sup> December 2015), the USA was the major donor, contributing \$380,593,116 (30.5 %) out of a total \$1,246,802,615 budget. It was followed by the European Union with \$136,751,943 (10.9%), the UK with \$99,602,875 (8%), Saudi Arabia with \$96,000,000 (7.7%) and Germany with \$91,724,417 (7.4%). Other major donors include Sweden, Japan and Norway.<sup>ii</sup>

DFID's budget for 2015/6 was £11.1 billion, meaning that its UNRWA funding was 0.73% of this figure.<sup>iii</sup> At 2015 figures, \$99 million (or approximately £80,000,000) would buy 11,760 state pensions, or 24,000 job seekers' allowances or it could fund 184,000 people's disability living allowance per annum.<sup>iv</sup> British taxpayers are entitled to question whether this money is being put to good use or whether it is exacerbating the very problems the government is seeking to resolve.

Moreover, the UK's financial support for UNRWA is highly problematic in view of the government's commitment under the Terrorism Act 2000 to prescribe Hamas as a terrorist organisation.<sup>v</sup> Hamas representatives have long been employed by UNRWA and they play a key role in influencing the educational content and activities in its schools. The government is therefore funding an organisation with deeply entrenched links to a proscribed terrorist entity. UNRWA also has a welfare programme for Palestinians in Gaza, performing a role that should be undertaken by Gaza's Hamas government. By releasing Hamas from this obligation, the agency (and by extension the British government) allows the Islamist group to

transfer money designed for welfare and use it to build terrorist infrastructure in Gaza. This cuts against the government's aim to undermine Hamas in favour of the PA.

This paper identifies a number of specific problems with UNRWA and the critical (and negative) impact they have on ordinary Palestinians. They include the organisation's inflation of refugee numbers, its insistence on the right of return and most importantly, its incitement to violence and terror against Israelis. Some recommendations are made at the end.

### **Inflation of refugee numbers:**

To address the short-term needs of the refugees arising from the 1948 war in Palestine, the UN General Assembly established UNRWA with Resolution 302 (IV) in December 1949 to carry out humanitarian relief and work programmes for Palestinian refugees as well as to "consult with the interested Near Eastern Governments concerning measures to be taken by them preparatory to the time when international assistance for relief and works projects is no longer available." It began operations in May 1950 to provide services (at first mainly food) to Palestinian refugees. According to UN Secretary-General Trygve Lie, the refugees would 'lead an independent life in countries which have given them shelter' and they would be 'integrated in the economic system of the countries of asylum and will themselves provide for their own needs and those of their families'. Subsequent events were to frustrate his hopes.

UNRWA provided a definition of a refugee that would later be at odds with the definition of every other refugee in the world. Refugees for UNRWA were: 'Persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who both lost their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict and their descendants.' UNRWA's services today are available to all those who meet this definition, who are registered with the Agency, and who need assistance'. Today it operates five field offices, in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

By contrast, the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees offers the following definition of a refugee: "Any person who: (2) 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; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country.' Persecution is the key concept in defining a refugee as far as the UNHCR is concerned, but not for UNRWA.

UNRWA also counts descendants of refugees within the refugee population, something that has needlessly multiplied the number of people claiming relief. Whereas the number of actual

Palestinian Arab refugees was estimated at 600,000 to 700,000 after the 1947-9 war, the number was 5.09 million refugees (5.49 million registered persons) in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, and the West Bank and Gaza Strip as of 2014. As Asaf Romirowsky points out, 'In the UNHCR you can only be a refugee for one generation after which time you do not have the refugee status anymore.'<sup>vi</sup> James Lindsay, a former legal advisor to UNRWA, sums up the absurdity of this situation:

A man who fled in 1948 from what is now Israel and was registered as a refugee (first generation refugee) could have had a male child with a non-refugee; that child (a second generation refugee) could have himself grown up and had a male child with a non-refugee and then that male child (a third generation refugee) could have had a male child (a fourth generation refugee) with a non-refugee. Although such a fourth generation refugee would have only one-eighth "refugee blood" and even though he, his parents, and his grandparents may have never set foot in what is now Israel, for UNRWA they all remain refugees entitled to repatriation to their "homes" there.<sup>vii</sup>

The fact that the vast majority of these millions of Palestinians are not refugees gives the lie to the argument that they all have a right to return 'to their own country'. There was never a separate independent nation of Palestine that gave 'Palestinian citizenship' to all its inhabitants and between 1946 and 1948, Palestine was simply an area under British mandate control where all citizens (Jewish and Arab) were citizens. The vast majority of Palestinians have never set foot in Israel and have no cultural or linguistic affinity with it. It is not 'their country'. In addition, of the 5.49 million "registered persons" that UNRWA supports, less than one third (1.58 million or 28.7 percent) reside in UNRWA camps.

Moreover, the problem of 'refugee inflation' is exacerbated by the fact that many of the original people counted as refugees were in fact not so. According to the report of UNRWA's director from July 1951-June 1952, it was difficult to separate 'ordinarily nomadic Bedouins and...unemployed or indigent local residents' from those genuinely fleeing their homes and that 'in many cases individuals who could not qualify as being bona fide refugees are in fact on the relief roles'.<sup>viii</sup> Given that these original bogus refugees will have had a large number of descendants, it is clear that there are serious problems with UNRWA's figures. In addition, whereas UNHCR exempts from the status of refugee anyone who has a newly acquired nationality, this is not so with UNRWA. The latter still considers Palestinians living in Jordan with full Jordanian citizenship to be refugees, further evidence of how the organisation is inflating refugee figures gratuitously.

Worse, instead of trying to resettle the refugees, UNRWA now facilitates their 'primary and vocational education, primary health care, relief and social services, infrastructure and camp improvement, microfinance and emergency response'.<sup>ix</sup>

## **Inefficiency:**

UNRWA is a failure, not just because it has inflated the refugee numbers, but because it is a highly inefficient organisation. Despite the fact that the ‘refugee’ population that UNRWA serves is far smaller than the population served by UNHCR, it operates far more staff. On July 1 2014, UNRWA had 30,252 staff to support nearly 5.5 million people in 3 countries (and the territories) with an expenditure of \$1.1 billion.<sup>x</sup> By contrast, the UNHCR had a staff of 7,735 (2013) to serve nearly 43 million refugees and internally displaced persons in 100 countries.<sup>xi</sup> Whereas UNHCR has helped some 25,000,000 refugees to escape their adversity and start new and better lives, UNRWA has failed to find any lasting solution to the Palestinian refugee problem. Not only is the staff-refugee ratio less favourable to UNRWA, it has failed to deliver any constructive solution to those under its care.

In addition, many of the UNRWA employees come from the refugee population, something the organisation admits: ‘UNRWA has over 30,000 employees, most of them Palestine refugees and a small number of international staff.’<sup>xii</sup> By hiring from among its own clients, UNRWA’s employees have a vested interest in perpetuating the refugee problem for their economic self interest. Moreover, among these clients are recruits to many violent terrorist organisations, including the Islamist group Hamas. As one commentator has put it, the organisation ‘has become so enmeshed in the terrorist population as to be effectively held hostage by it’.<sup>xiii</sup>

## **Encouraging the Right of Return:**

UNRWA is the only refugee agency in the world that remains dedicated to the right of return for all Palestinian ‘refugees’, with no second option considered. James Lindsay, the organisation’s former general counsel argues that ‘UNRWA has gradually adopted a distinctive political viewpoint that favours Arab narrative, the strain of Palestinian political thought espoused by those who intent on a ‘return’ to the land that is now Israel’.<sup>xiv</sup> Certainly, a belief in the right of return is shared by all Palestinian leaders, including those who say they want peace with Israel, something that no doubt reflects a widespread belief in Palestinian society. The belief in the right of return is symbolised by the installation of a huge key, weighing nearly 1 ton and measuring 9 metres in length, which was installed by the entrance to the Aida refugee camp.<sup>xv</sup>

UNHCR by contrast is prepared to consider a number of options if return is not possible, including the right to asylum and resettlement in a third country. As we will see, the ‘right of

return' as understood today is an impossible sticking point in any negotiation between the two sides. To understand why this right is fictitious, a little history is required.

The basis of the claim of return is often taken to be resolution 194, passed in December 1948. It resolved the following: "That the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date" and that "compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return." Of course, the 1948 War created two refugee problems, one relating to Palestinian Arabs who were forced to flee or who fled because of the ongoing conflict, and the second relating to the tidal wave of Jewish refugees who were forced out of Arab countries under threat of persecution. These Jewish communities, in countries such as Syria, Iraq, Aden, Morocco, Egypt and Libya, had ancient ties to these countries.

However, resolution 194 gives no explicit reference to Arab refugees, so this can be taken to mean both Arab and Jewish refugees from the war of 1947–8. Second, this General Assembly resolution was a non-binding one, which could only suggest rather than require action by the parties involved. This is reflected in its language, where it is stated that refugees "should" be permitted to return home if they so wished. The word *should* has a hortatory or moralistic quality, exhorting rather than demanding action. The UN did not give some absolute, unconditional right of return simply because of subsequent (wholly biased) UN resolutions. The conditional language of the original resolution is unambiguous.

More fundamentally, the resolution stipulated that the refugees had to "live in peace with their neighbours." Yet there is evidence that this condition would not be met. Contemporary Arab spokesmen predicted that the returning refugees would be the vanguard of a renewed assault on the Jewish state. Typical was the view expressed by Salah al-Din in 1949: "In demanding the return of the Palestinian refugees the Arabs mean their return as masters, not slaves, or to put it more clearly—the intention is the extermination of Israel." According to *Al Siyyad* on 6 April 1950, the returning refugees would form "a powerful fifth column for the day of revenge and reckoning."

There is also no *right* of return because an equal emphasis is placed by international law on repatriation, resettlement and the payment of compensation on an equal footing. Thus Resolution 393 of 1950 stated, "The reintegration of the refugees into the economic life of the Near East, either by repatriation or resettlement is essential ... for the realization of conditions of peace and stability in the area."

Over time, instead of allowing for the resettlement of Palestinian refugees as recommended by UN resolutions, the Arab states kept them in squalid refugee camps, ensuring that a

permanent state of hostility with Israel would be maintained. It is little wonder that Ralph Galloway, a former director of UN Aid in Jordan, once said that the Arab states were refusing to “solve the refugee problem” in order to “keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel.” While later General Assembly resolutions (such as 3236) reaffirmed Resolution 194, imparting to it a new and binding quality, it is false to argue that this changes the original resolution. Subsequent highly politicized attempts to correct the meaning of a resolution cannot undo its original intent, which was in any case to merely recommend a course of action during the Arab- Israel war of 1948.

The right of return is unworkable for another reason: No Israeli government could countenance it. Quite simply, the return of 5–6 million Palestinians, even half that number, would spell the end of Israel as a Jewish state. The country would quickly have an Arab majority and its Jewish minority would be overrun by hostile forces. Any treaty providing for a right of return today would instantly void the Jewish right to self- determination and is therefore a non-starter. Yet UNRWA encourages this delusional dream on a daily basis, preventing a realistic appraisal of how this conflict might be solved in the long run. As political analyst Asaf Romirosky writes:

‘UNRWA's job is to keep Palestinian refugees in suspended animation--and at low living standards--until they achieve the goal set for them by the PLO and Hamas: Israel's extinction. In the meantime, their suffering and anger is maintained as a weapon to encourage them toward violence and intransigence.’<sup>xvi</sup>

### **Delegitimation of Jews and Israel:**

UNRWA schools have a mission to educate Palestinian children so they can:

- Improve their lives and their societies as citizens of Palestinian, Arab, and global communities;
- Become aware of the need for interdependence and tolerance toward differences among individuals and groups;
- Balance their rights and needs with those of family, community, and global society.<sup>xvii</sup>

Contrary to this mission, and the PA’s obligations under the Oslo accords, the schoolbooks used in UNRWA schools do not promote mutual recognition, co-existence and conflict resolution. Instead they remain dedicated to demonising and delegitimizing Jews, Zionism and Israel.<sup>xviii</sup> Among the central themes of these books are the following:

1. **Delegitimation:** All of Israel is considered to be under occupation and the country is therefore considered illegitimate. Zionism is depicted as a colonialist movement with

all evidence of the Jewish presence in the Holy Land erased. School textbooks do not mention the Jewish connection to holy places, such as the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem, the Cave of the Patriarchs in Hebron or Rachel's Tomb in Bethlehem. These are described as Muslim holy places usurped by Jews. Cities in pre 1967 Israel are absent from Palestinian maps and the word 'Israel' does not appear on a map either. During a visit by Ben Ki Moon, an UNRWA school covered up one of its maps of Palestine to avoid embarrassment.<sup>xix</sup> Nor is there any mention that the primary language of Israel is Hebrew. One textbook lists the countries of the Levant as 'Palestine, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon'<sup>xx</sup> The implication is that the entire country is Arab and Muslim.<sup>xxi</sup>

2. **Demonisation:** Jews and Israelis are presented in a uniformly negative light, not in a nuanced way. Zionists are presented as genocidal enemies of the Palestinians, and they are accused of massacres, ethnic cleansing, expulsion of the Palestinians, destruction and polluting of villages, murdering Palestinian children, demolishing houses and trees, erasing the Palestinian cultural heritage and desecrating Muslim holy places. Jews are also presented as opponents of the Muslim prophet. Such boundless enmity towards Jews and Israelis can only exacerbate the conflict, destroying any chance for reconciliation and mutual recognition and creating a festering pool of hate within the next generation.
3. **Encouraging murder:** Killing of Jews is presented as a precondition of the End of Days.<sup>xxii</sup> Violent jihad is lauded in school textbooks and children are taught to kill Israelis.<sup>xxiii</sup> Support for terror is expressed by having school walls adorned by pictures of suicide bombers while schools encourage celebrations when Israelis are killed.

In October 2015, UNRWA suspended some 22 employees for posting virulently anti-semitic material on the social networking site Facebook. They were 'subject to disciplinary action, including suspension and loss of pay, following an investigation that verified evidence published by UN Watch'.<sup>xxiv</sup> This came after UNRWA spokesman, Chris Guinness, dismissed 'baseless allegations about anti-Semitism.'<sup>xxv</sup> UN Watch had been working tirelessly to expose examples of hatred emanating from UNRWA employees.<sup>xxvi</sup>

**The terror connection:** The culture of hate and incitement is hardly surprising. Many of the teachers in UNRWA come from refugee camps and are almost entirely affiliated with Hamas and the Islamic Bloc. Hamas officials have the freedom and autonomy to develop the school curriculum, unhindered by the UN. The school textbooks read by Palestinians have been developed by the Hamas education ministry, led by Osama al Mizini, and the Minister of Religion, Ismail Radwan and not surprisingly, bear the imprint of the Hamas Charter. Their

charter calls for the destruction of Israel and reproduces the worst modern tropes of anti-Semitism.

An important organ within Hamas is Al-Kutla al-Islamiya, which operates educational institutions in Gaza. It encourages students to be active within the Islamic movement and also acts as a recruiting sergeant for the Hamas military wing, the al-Qassam Brigades. It does this through a special programme called War Games. This teaches students how to use lethal weapons, including hand grenades, and to climb through various spaces. In other words, schools have been turned into launching pads for terror. This is a clear violation of article 38 of the Declaration of the Rights of the Child which expressly states that governments should do all they can to ‘protect and care for children affected by war.’ It adds that ‘children under 15 should not be forced or recruited to take part in a war or join the armed forces.’ The Islamic Bloc, which monopolizes the UNRWA teachers’ union, also ensures that there is a festering climate of radicalism in all schools.<sup>xxvii</sup>

Proof of the links with Hamas comes from their minister of religion: ‘Hamas’ relationship with UNRWA is good, very good! We assist UNRWA and Hamas cooperates with UNRWA on many levels. Now a direct connection exists between UNRWA and Hamas.’<sup>xxviii</sup> It also came from Peter Hansen, UNRWA Commissioner General, who said: ‘I am sure that there are Hamas members on the UNRWA payroll, and I don’t see that as a crime...We do not do political vetting and exclude people from one persuasion as against another’.<sup>xxix</sup> In fact, the vetting carried out by UNRWA is designed to exclude those with connections to Al Qaeda and the Taleban alone.<sup>xxx</sup>

All of this makes it unsurprising that Kassam rockets were discovered in July 2014 at UNRWA Jabalia Elementary “C” and Ayyobiya Boys School. Compounding the fact that a school was used to store lethal weapons, a UN board of inquiry found that the school was active at the time, with schoolgates unlocked and children allowed inside. As Ban Ki-moon stated: “I am dismayed that Palestinian militant groups would put United Nations schools at risk by using them to hide their arms.”<sup>xxxi</sup>

## **Conclusion:**

UNRWA has inculcated a culture of hatred among Palestinians towards Israelis, encouraging them to commit acts of terror and violence by spreading jihadist, anti-Zionist and anti-Semitic ideas in line with the Hamas Charter. They continue to preach the importance of the right of return to Palestinians, rejecting other ways of resolving the refugee crisis, such as resettlement in other countries. This is part and parcel of a violent ideological rejection of any

Jewish sovereignty in the region, and now a core component of Palestinian identity. By recruiting staff from the refugee population, UNRWA provides them with a perverse vested interest in perpetuating the conflict. And by falsely inflating refugee numbers, they ensure that ever more people live in the misery of refugee camps without statehood.

Yet it is highly unrealistic to think that UNRWA will ever be shut down. One of the main reasons is that there is a lack of Congressional support for doing this, and the US government is the primary donor to the organisation. This is aided by the fact that AIPAC, the leading pro-Israel lobby in the country, rarely lobbies Congressional support for an anti-UNRWA resolution.<sup>xxxii</sup> And their failure to intervene reflects, at least in part, the most astonishing fact of all, namely that it has received a consistent level of support from the Israeli government. Israel believes that UNRWA plays an important role in providing stability in the West Bank and Gaza. In addition, there is a concern that care for the refugees might automatically devolve onto Israeli shoulders if UNRWA were to be shut down and that the alternative to UNRWA run schools would be Hamas.<sup>xxxiii</sup> Despite these constraints, there are things that western donor governments should make clear to UNRWA.

1. UNRWA should no longer provide services to, or count as refugees, any Palestinian who is a citizen in a sovereign state, such as Jordan. This will reduce the burden on the organisation and end the absurdity of classifying a sovereign country's citizens as refugees in need of external aid.
2. Donor countries should stipulate that future funding must depend on UNRWA ending the culture of incitement and demonization in its educational curriculum. Balanced books promoting co-existence should be encouraged, at the expense of the ones currently in use.
3. UNRWA should be told not to seek employees from within its own refugee population, especially if they are supporters of Hamas.
4. UNRWA must be told to stop supporting the right of return to Palestinians under its care and focus on a more forward looking vision of peace and progress. This can involve the adoption of other proposals, including the absorption of Palestinians living in other countries, such as Lebanon, the right of return to a future Palestinian state and adequate compensation for refugees that have legitimate property claims.

Ultimately, UNRWA would not exist without the extensive funding from the US, Canada, the UK and other nations. Such funding should be used as leverage to bring about fundamental and wide ranging changes to an organisation that is not currently fit for purpose.

## ENDNOTES

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- <sup>xx</sup> Islamic Education, Grade 2, Part 1 (2014) p. 72
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