

At UNRWA, An Open-and-Shut Case

by Hugh Fitzgerald



UNRWA

The head of UNRWA has [finally resigned](#). That is most welcome news for a variety of reasons.

Among the Trump Administration's most praiseworthy decisions was to end American funding for UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) that was established in 1949

by the U.N., in its Resolution 302 (IV), to “carry out in collaboration with local governments the direct relief and works programs” to help in the rehabilitation of Palestinian Arab refugees, and 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.” It was always intended to be a short-term measure, helping those refugees until they could be integrated into the Arab societies they now lived in.

But instead, those Arab countries did everything they could to keep those refugees from integrating. In every Arab state, with the exception of Jordan, those refugees were not allowed to become citizens. In many places they were, and many still remain, kept in refugee camps, prevented from living in regular housing among non-refugees. They were also prevented from practicing certain professions. In Lebanon, for example, Palestinian refugees suffer systematic disadvantages. Under Lebanese law, Palestinian refugees are banned from working in over 30 professions, including medicine and law. Palestinians are currently banned from owning property, attending public schools, utilizing public health services, and making an enforceable will. They pay taxes to the National Social Security Fund, yet do not receive any of the benefits. Not just Lebanon, but the Arab states, with UNRWA as their handmaiden, don't want to allow these “refugees” to be integrated; they want them to remain as geopolitical pawns, tugging at the heartstrings of the U.N. and the sentimental and gullible West, as they wait – how long, O Lord, how long? – to “return” to their “homeland” of “Palestine.”

In fact, the “Palestinian refugee” problem could long ago have been solved, had the Arabs wished to solve it. Ralph Galloway, former director of UN aid to the Palestinians in Jordan, summarized this situation succinctly. He wrote:

“The Arab states do not want to solve the refugee problem.

They want to keep it as an open sore, as an affront to the United Nations and as a weapon against Israel. Arab leaders don't give a damn whether the refugees live or die." (quoted in *The Palestinians: People, History, Politics* by Terence Prittie, p. 71).

And another forgotten voice, from a time when it was still possible for some to state home truths, is that of Elfan Rees, the World Council of Churches' Adviser on Refugees, who declared in 1957:

"I hold the view that, political issues aside, the Arab refugee problem is by far the easiest post-war refugee problem to solve by integration. By faith, language, race and by social organisation they are indistinguishable from their fellows of their host countries. There is room for them in Syria and Iraq [and even more room, and need, now, in Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf oil states]. There is a developing demand for the kind of manpower they represent. More unusually still, there is the money to make this integration possible. The United Nations General Assembly, five years ago, donated a sum of \$200,000,000 to provide, and here I quote the phrase "homes and jobs" for the Arab refugees. That money remains unspent, not because these tragic people are strangers in a strange land – because they are not, not because there is no room for them to be established – because there is, but simply for political reasons."

Of the tens of millions of refugees that have been created since World War II, there is only one group of refugees – the "Palestinians" – for whom that refugee status is inheritable. That is, the child or grandchild of a "refugee" is also declared to be a "refugee," and as the status is handed down, the number of "refugees" on UNRWA's rolls keeps increasing. There are now over five million such "refugees" in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza, the West Bank, and other Arab countries. How many are real refugees, that is, people who actually left Israel in 1948? They are all over 71 now. Perhaps 30,000.

UNRWA has always been essential to this scheme. It has been the chief vehicle for creating a parallel society for the refugees. They live in UNRWA-run camps, go to UNRWA schools, are treated in UNRWA health clinics and hospitals. Prohibited from practicing many of the professions, and not given citizenship, they remain outside the framework of the larger Arab societies in the countries they live in.

UNRWA is a collaborator with the Palestinian cause, and not only by treating the children and grandchildren of the real refugees from 1948 as refugees themselves. UNRWA has also been a jobs program for Palestinians, including many who are known members of Hamas. Indeed, Hamas membership helps one get a UN job on the West Bank. UNRWA now has a hugely bloated bureaucracy of 30,000; by comparison, the tens of millions of other refugees in the world are tended by a much smaller number of employees – 11,000 – belonging to the UNHCR (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees).

UNRWA lives on foreign donors, almost all of them Western countries. Of the 10 largest donors to UNRWA, only one – Saudi Arabia – is an Arab country. Saudi Arabia recently was contributing a paltry \$50 million a year, while the United States – before Trump ended all American support for UNRWA – had been giving, since 2014, an average of \$380 million a year, by far the largest amount given by any donor.

Members of Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the PFLP are members of UNRWA's staff; they have found comfortable sinecures, the not-too-taxing work allowing them to devote time to their real work – promoting terrorism against Israel.

According to Frank Musmar, whose article on UNRWA appears [here](#):

Peter Hansen, UNRWA's former Commissioner-General (1996–2005), admitted in an interview with CBS TV that there are Hamas members on the UNRWA payroll. For example, the

chairman of UNRWA's Palestinian workers' union, Suhail al-Hindi, is a member of Hamas's new political leadership.

Retired IDF Col. Yoni Figchel, a former military governor in the territories, notes that as long as UNRWA employees are members of Hamas, they are going to pursue the interests of that organization within the framework of their job.

And Hamas has – with the obvious cooperation of UNRWA employees – hidden its weapons in UNRWA schools, mosques, and other buildings.

This scandalous situation, which has been raised repeatedly by UN Watch, for a considerable period did not lead to any change in the running of UNRWA, and still largely has not done so. No Hamas members have been fired; the agency continues to be bloated, with many of its jobs practically sinecures, and it continues to feed a culture of permanent dependency among those it is supposedly helping to “get on their feet.”

But this summer, a scandal at UNRWA, involving not Palestinian “right-of-return” revanchism but those old standbys, money and sex, now threaten the organization. The tawdry details are in Musmar's article [here](#):

Not for the first time, the UN Office of Internal Oversight Services is currently investigating UNRWA's top management for abuses of power, including sexual misconduct, nepotism, bullying, and retaliation. The Swiss, Dutch, and Belgian governments have all suspended payments to UNRWA while the investigation is ongoing.

UNRWA's top official, Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl, was accused of appointing as an adviser a woman, Maria Muhammedi, with whom he was romantically involved. The pair traveled on business class flights across the globe. Deputy Commissioner-General Sandra Mitchell was accused of bullying and of manipulating the system to find a well-paid job for

her spouse, Robert Langridge, who was promoted. Chief of Staff Hakam Shahwan was accused of behaving like a thug, placing people loyal to him in positions of power, and lobbying to take over UNRWA operations in Jerusalem.

It is this scandal – not the scandals involving Hamas members as employees, or weapons hidden in UNRWA schools, or UNRWA's definition of who is a "refugee" – that has already had results. Deputy Commissioner Sandra Mitchell resigned in July, and so did the Chief of Staff Hakam Shahwan. Now Pierre Krähenbühl has also resigned, after trying to brazen it out. Already four countries have withheld their promised contributions to UNRWA – the Netherlands, Belgium., Switzerland, and New Zealand. They are waiting to see what action will be taken to clean up the mess at the top. Perhaps other countries will join them. UNRWA requires a thorough cleaning of its senior management.

The United States had already, for other reasons, having to do with UNRWA's ever-expanding rolls, which reflect its unique definition of who can be considered a refugee, and its harboring terrorists among its employees, chosen to permanently end its contributions to the organization, calling UNRWA "irredeemably flawed."

Now is the time for the United States to lobby its allies to end their own contributions to UNRWA, and simultaneously, to pressure the U.N. to shut the organization down. UNRWA has not been good for the Palestinians themselves. It has hindered, and not helped, them from integrating into the Arab countries they live in. It has been terrible for the cause of peace between Arabs and Israelis, keeping alive a spirit of revanchism among those "refugees." In its long history, UNRWA has done the very opposite of what it was originally supposed to do. Instead of helping those "Arab refugees"(as they were originally known, before the "Palestinian people" were invented) to become part of their host societies, and get off

the UNRWA rolls, UNRWA has always helped to keep those refugees apart from the larger society, living in their own UNRWA-supported camps, in a condition of dependency, pining only to "return to Palestine." UNRWA has done nothing to persuade Arab countries to offer the Palestinians citizenship, nor to allow them to practice the several dozen well-paid professions which, up to now, have been forbidden to them. UNRWA has knowingly employed members of the terrorist groups Hamas, Islamic Jihad, and the PFLP. It has also allowed its own buildings – schools and mosques – to be used to store weapons for use against Israel.

And the last straw is surely the scandalously corrupt behavior at the very top, by UNRWA's three most important officials, Pierre Krähenbühl, Sandra Mitchell, and Hakam Shahwan. The case against UNRWA, for a multitude of reasons, is now open and shut. Open an investigation of UNRWA, by the office of the Secretary-General himself, and when the full story of how it operates, what it discourages and what it fosters among its charges, whom – and how many – it employs, and when all this, including the latest sex-and-money scandal, has been laid out, then put UNRWA out of its misery, and shut it down.

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