

UNRWA: Hypocrisy is the Homage Paid to Virtue

by Michael Curtis



Experience has shown that power changes purpose, often using hypocrisy as a mask. Perhaps the most regaling if innocent demonstration is that of Prince Harry, the Duke of Sussex who most recently on July 31, 2019 has given a “barefoot” speech on climate change at a secretive Google camp from which the media were barred in Sicily, the Valley of the Temples rented for \$100,000. The meeting, “Davos by the Sea,” at one of the largest spa complexes in Europe, was attended by the wealthy and celebrities, who included well-known public-spirited individuals such as Leonardo DiCaprio, Naomi Campbell, Bono, Sacha Baron Cohen, and Orlando Bloom. The celebrities showed their concern for the planet by arriving in Palermo in 114 private jets, mega yachts such as David Geffen’s Rising Sun, and expensive cars leaving a considerable carbon footprint.

Prince Harry had already commented on the planet in an interview published in the September issue of British Vogue, guest edited by his wife Meghan Markle, Duchess of Sussex. Using mixed metaphors about climate change, the Prince explained, "we are the frogs in the water...We are the one species on this planet that seems to think that this place belongs to us, and only to us." Harry had already pronounced that as his contribution to environmentalism and to saving the planet he would have a maximum of two children.

"We should be able to leave something better behind for the next generation."

However, his concern did not prevent him from ending his globe-trotting lifestyle or travelling from London to Birmingham, normally 127 driving miles, by private helicopter, nor Meghan from travelling by private jet to a baby shower party in New York.

More serious than these royal lavish occasions is an initial report from the Ethics Office on a philandering hypocrite who is the head of UNRWA and on the behavior of some of its senior officials supposedly concerned with benevolent public activity. Sadly, they are accused of sexual misconduct, nepotism, discrimination. The head of the organization, Commissioner General Pierre Krahenbuhl, a Swiss diplomat, is accused of excessive travel and for being away from duty station in Jerusalem for considerable periods of time during which he got a daily allowance. He is said to be responsible for abuse of authority, for personal gain, suppression of legitimate dissent, and, with his "inner circle," consolidating power, and disregarding agency rules by bypassing normal decision-making procedures. He promoted his lady friend, his senior aide Maria Mohammedi and flew her, business class, around the world. The Deputy Commissioner Sandra Mitchell, among other peccadillos, promoted her husband to a lucrative job in the organization. As a result of criticism, she resigned in July 2019 as did the Chief of Staff

Hakam Shahwan.

UNRWA has always been an anomaly. There is an organization, the High Commissioner for Refugees, UNHCR, set up in 1950, a global body to deal with displaced communities and stateless people, to try to find safe haven for those seeking asylum, to assist them to return home, or to integrate and resettle them with repatriation. With a staff of 16,000 its personnel work in 138 countries. It has resettled about 200,000 people, ending their statelessness. It claims its problem is still to deal with the more than 50 million fleeing war and persecution. It is currently led by the Italian diplomat Filippo Grandi, who was appointed in 2016 for 5 years. Among its previous good will ambassadors are Richard Burton, James Mason, and Sophia Loren.

By a curious coincidence Filippo Grandi had been, 2010-2014, head of UNRWA, officially the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East, set up on December 8, 1949, almost 70 years ago, to deal only with Palestinian refugees. It was set up to provide relief, humanitarianism, human development, and protected services for Palestinian Refugees. Initially, these were calculated to be between 650,000 and 700,000, who because of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war fled or were expelled from areas that became part of Israel. UNRWA provided emergency relief, food and shelter.

Now it is the largest UN agency with a staff of more than 30,000, almost all Palestinians. Its activity increased to provide official services in a variety of areas, education, health, welfare, urban planning, and then to overt action for political and humanitarian rights for Palestinians. There was a shift from state-based aid to need-based aid.

The number of persons considered refugees also increased to a surprising degree. Palestinian refugees are officially defined as persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period, June 1, 1946 to May 15, 1948, and who lost

home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict. But its calculated numbers now include those who lost home as a result of the 1967 Six Day War and their descendants.

UNRWA has done some useful work in providing health care, clinics, social services, and education, providing facilities in its 59 refugee camps and other areas. It does not run the camps, and has no police powers, but provides services.

The essential factor is that UNRWA is not part of the solution of the Palestinian issue, but part of the problem. First, it now deals with 5 million so-called refugees whose number is increasing, not declining. In reality, the number of true Palestinian refugees, according to the definition, still alive, seventy years after the 1948 war, the "original sin" for Palestinians, is very small. It is bewildering that, in spite of the definition, descendants and legally adopted children are considered as refugees. U.S. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert commented on August 31, 2018 that UNRWA was endlessly and exponentially expanding the community of entitled beneficiaries and that it is simply unsustainable.

UNRWA has become a controversial agency because of its one-sided political statements, favoring Palestinians, and providing, either willingly or in ignorance, assistance to Hamas terrorists in the Gaza Strip and to criminals. In effect, there has existed an uneasy marriage of convenience between the State of Israel and UNRWA since the exchange on June 4, 1967, between the then head of UNRWA Dr. Lawrence Michelmore and the Israeli foreign office advisor Michael Comay after the June 1967 that UNRWA would continue its assistance to the Palestinian refugees with the full cooperation of the Israeli authorities in the West Bank and Gaza Strip areas.

But UNRWA has been rightly criticized for being involved with Palestinian militant groups especially Hamas, by employing

Hamas members and has helped it, at least indirectly, by not preventing Hamas military activity and its use of UNRWA facilities for war purposes. During the 2014 conflict in Gaza, Israel damaged or destroyed some UNRWA facilities used for military activities. Hamas and other groups had stored weapons in at least three UNRWA schools, and fires rockets from some of them. Seven Gaza shelters had been used as weapons depots. Tunnels built by Hamas to enter Israel ran underneath some of UNRWA schools.

The U.S. has been aware of the UNRWA problem for some time. In 2004 the U.S. Congress financed a program to make random inspections of UNRWA to see they were not being used for military operations, or to aid individuals involved in militant activities.

The Trump administration has responded to the UNRWA problem. President Donald Trump cut funding to UNRWA in 2018 from \$300 to 60 million a year, and in 2019 cut all funding. His argument was that because the Palestinians no longer are willing to talk peace why should the U.S. make any of these massive future payments to them?

The philandering hypocrite Krahenbull was critical on June 21, 2019 that the White House had sidelined the Palestinians, and had raised the levels of anxiety. But Palestinians refused to attend a meeting in Bahrain on June 25 to discuss the economic aspects of the Jared Kushner peace plan. Instead, the Palestinian leader President Mahmoud Abbas on July 25, 2019, announced he would stop implementing all agreements, water and security, with Israel concerning the West Bank. Noticeably, Abbas reiterated the slogan of Yasser Arafat, the "PLO is the sole legitimate representative of our people, and we have no partner."

The U.S. has recognized that UNRWA is part of the UN institutional bias against Israel. The Trump administration has closed the Palestinian office in Washington, D.C., and

decided to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem. It might go further and suggest other changes. The schools and clinics now run by UNRWA should be run by neighboring Arab states. Washington should also play a role in not allowing UNRWA to keep Palestinians as perpetual refugees. Rather, the care for Palestinians should be integrated into the appropriate global organization, the UNHCR, the Office of High Commissioner for Refugees. This would solve what has been a unique international problem.