

Three Reasons Why the United States Should Defund the U.N. Palestinian Refugee Program

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American taxpayer money spent on U.N. programs is often wasted, and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) is a prime example. The United States remains the largest contributor to the United Nations, funding 22 percent of the organization's 2015 budget.¹ The United States is also the single largest donor to UNRWA, paying approximately \$380 million toward a nearly \$1 billion budget in 2015 [see the figure].²



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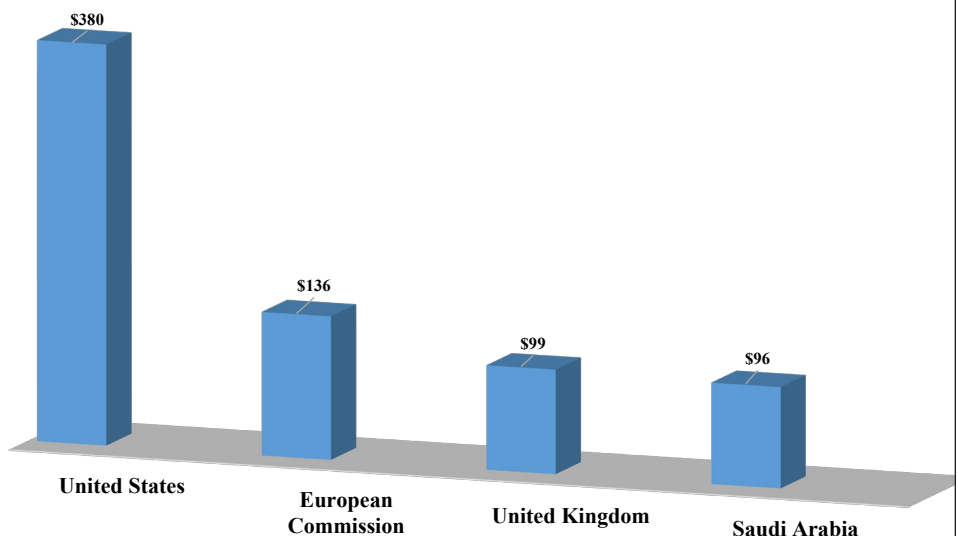


UNRWA Has Failed Its Mandate. Over the past 66 years, despite billions of dollars in aid, there has been little improvement in the lives of Palestinians under UNRWA's care.

The United Nations set up UNRWA in 1950 to provide relief services for Palestinian Arabs displaced after the 1948 war between the new state of Israel and its Arab neighbors. The organization was intended to provide temporary social services only to Palestinian Arab refugees and only until they could be integrated into the countries that sheltered them. UNRWA has instead grown into a near-permanent refugee industry. Its substandard education, health care and social services have left nearly 5 million Palestinian Arabs in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and the West Bank with little hope of improving their lives.³ Consider:

- Some 65 percent of Palestinian refugees live in poverty, which worsened for some in Gaza after Israel's withdraw in 2005.⁴
- The refugee infant mortality rate stands at nearly 22 percent.⁵
- Unemployment in Gaza reached nearly 30 percent in 2011.⁶

Top Four UNRWA Donors, 2015 (in millions of U.S. dollars)



Source: United Nations Relief and Works Agency, "Funding Trends," Accessed January 19, 2017.

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Problems with UNRWA's Mandate. There are many problems with UNRWA; three, in particular, undermine the rationale for its very existence.

1. Flawed Legal Mandate. A Palestinian-only refugee agency is legally unsound and morally unjust. Indeed, all other refugees around the world — 130 million since World War II — are cared for under the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR). UNHCR has a specific mandate to integrate refugees into the country where they reside to avoid creating generations of people dependent on foreign assistance.

UNRWA does just the opposite. Counter to international definitions of a refugee, UNRWA applies refugee status to third and fourth generation Palestinians who were never displaced. As a result, the number of “Palestine refugees” grew from 700,000 in 1950 to 5 million today. Many of them depend on direct aid with no plan to help them exit the system.

Whereas UNHCR avoids employing aid recipients to escape conflict of interests, UNRWA has no such stricture, and is staffed mainly by Palestinians and those with an interest in maintaining and growing the system.⁷ Furthermore, UNRWA is way overstaffed. Whereas UNHCR has one staff member for every 5,500 refugees, UNRWA employs one staff person for every 182 Palestine refugees registered by UNRWA.⁸

2. Faulty Logic of Refugee Status. Consensus at the United Nations today sets the state of Palestine west of the Jordan River, including the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. Approximately 2 million Arab Palestinians live in this area and are registered by UNRWA as refugees *from* Palestine.⁹ These refugees already live *in* Palestine; the vast majority were born in their current place of residence and were never displaced. Therefore, those who live in Palestine, most of whom were born there and have never been displaced from their homes, cannot be considered refugees *from* Palestine.

As a result of UNRWA's faulty mandate, tens of thousands of Syrians of Palestinian origin have been registered as refugees from Palestine, despite the fact that the majority of them were born in Syria and lived there as citizens until civil war displaced them. They have been resettled in refugee camps in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Gaza and the West Bank, and receive funding as “refugees from Palestine” under UNRWA's mandate, while thousands of other Syrian refugees not of Palestinian origin receive no such preferential treatment.¹⁰

3. UNRWA's “Human Shield” for Terrorism. UNRWA has been linked to terrorist organizations and

operations on multiple occasions throughout the years, including Hamas — the Palestinian paramilitary, fundamentalist political party and U.S.-designated terrorist organization in control of Gaza. The Hamas faction has won the last three elections for the employees' committee within UNRWA, meaning most employees are members or supporters of Hamas.¹¹ Additionally, UNRWA textbooks are based on Hamas ideology and systematically indoctrinate students in violent jihad. The schools also periodically hold ceremonies to honor “shahids,” those who have carried out terrorist attacks.¹²

In 2009, Hamas Political Bureau Chief Khaled Mash'al admitted that Hamas often reallocates to military use large amounts of donations intended to rebuild civilian infrastructure.¹³ In 2014, three Israeli soldiers were killed after discovering a bobby-trapped tunnel that led back to an UNRWA clinic. The tunnel was constructed by Hamas, which used its limited cement supply to construct tunnels into Israel rather than for its intended civilian use. On three different occasions that same year, inspectors found missiles stockpiled in UNRWA schools in Gaza — on one occasion UNRWA officials simply handed the confiscated missiles back to Hamas.¹⁴

Options for Policymakers. Among the options policymakers should consider to deal with UNRWA are to:

- Defund UNRWA, as Representative Ileana Ros-Lehtinen (R-Fla.) proposed in 2015, though the *UNRWA Anti-Incitements and Anti-Terrorism Act*.¹⁵
- Refuse to renew UNRWA's mandate when it expires in June 2017, and give UNHCR responsibility for Palestinian refugees.
- Transfer the operations and funding of UNRWA schools and hospitals west of the Jordan River to the Palestinian Authority.

Conclusion. The average Palestinian is living in abject poverty and U.N. money has served to strengthen fundamentalist Islamist elements. American taxpayers have virtually nothing to show for the millions they have provided to UNRWA. The U.S. government has a responsibility to reconsider how that money is spent.

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Notes

1. United Nations Secretariat, "Assessment of Member States' contributions to the United Nations regular budget for the year 2015," December 29, 2014.
 2. United Nations Relief and Works Agency, "Funding Trends." Accessed January 19, 2017.
 3. Ibid.
 4. Jim Zanotti, "U.S. Foreign Aid to the Palestinians," Congressional Research Service, December 16, 2016, page 10; UNRWA Emergency Reports, "Gaza Situation Report 92," May 14, 2015.
 5. UNRWA Emergency Reports, "Gaza Situation Report 92," May 14, 2015.
 6. United Nations Country Team, "Gaza in 2020: A livable place?" August 2012, page 4.
 7. UNRWA, "In Figures," Communications Division, Jerusalem, July 2013.
 8. Brett D. Schaefer and James Phillips, "Time to Reconsider Support for UNRWA," Heritage Foundation, March 5, 2015; Jennifer Rubin, "Is the U.N. making the Palestinian 'refugee' problem worse?" *Washington Post*, May 23, 2012.
 9. There are approximately another 2 million Arab Palestinians living in what the U.N. considers the state of Palestine, presumably not registered with UNRWA. For more information see Nir Hasson, "Demographic Debate Continues // How Many Palestinians Actually Live in the West Bank?" *Haaretz*, June 30, 2013.
 10. Alexander H. Joffe, "UNRWA Resists Resettlement," *Middle East Quarterly*, Vol. 19, No. 4, Fall 2012, pages 11–25; an UNRWA spokesman said in 2011 that descendants retain status until "achievement of a just and lasting solution." He fails to define how to achieve this unspecified solution. For more information see "Exploding the myths: UNRWA, UNHCR and Palestine refugees," *maannews.net*, June 27, 2011.
 11. Brett D. Schaefer and James Phillips, "Time to Reconsider Support for UNRWA."
 12. David Bedein, "The Time Has Come for UNRWA Reform: A Solution to the Palestinian Refugee Dilemma," *Israel Resource Review*, August 9, 2016.
 13. "Reliable intelligence indicates that Hamas use cement for military needs," Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center, June 14, 2010.
 14. Raphael Ahren, "20 Missiles Found in UN-Run School in Gaza," *Times of Israel*, July 17, 2014; UNRWA, "UNRWA Condemns Placement of Rockets, for a Second Time, in One of Its Schools," Press Release, July 22, 2014; Ilan Ben Zion, "Rockets found in UNRWA school, for third time," *Times of Israel*, July 30, 2014.
 15. Rep. Ileana Ros-Lehtinen, *UNRWA Anti-Incitement and Anti-Terrorism Act*, H.R. 3829, U.S. House of Representatives, October 26, 2015.
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