

UNRWA in the Gaza Strip is Counterproductive

It must have come as a great shock to the so-called international community that in June 2015 the so-called refugees, the Palestinians in the Gaza Strip protested that the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was giving resources they deserved to other Palestinians.

The Gaza Palestinians demanded of UNRWA that it not cut the funds allocated to them, nor transfer those resources to the Palestinians who remained in the Yarmouk refugee camp in south Damascus, despite the fact 150,000 had fled the camp because of the Syrian War. They also demanded that the international community, implicitly the U.S. and the EU, provide extra funding for their needs.

Perhaps because of this protest, Robert Turner, Director of UNRWA in Gaza, without reason or explanation, announced his intention to leave his position in mid July 2015. He has held that position since May 2012. His resignation might have been a cause of regret if he had not continued to refer, inaccurately, to the Gaza Strip as "Occupied Palestinian Territory." He seems unaware that since 2007 it has been ruled by the terrorist group Hamas. He has always been a true naïve believer in the self-serving fallacious Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood.

Sometimes people in power do speak truth, or part of it, to the rest of us. On June 2, 2015, commemorating more than 65 years since UNRWA was established, the United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon remarked that it was "never meant to exist for this long." Ban regards it as a political failure.

Yes, UNRWA has been in the Gaza Strip for longer than anticipated. It was created by the UN General Assembly Resolution 302 (IV) of December 8, 1949. It was given only two functions. One was to carry out, in collaboration with local governments, the direct relief and works programs as recommended by the Economic Survey Mission. The other was to consult, with governments in the area, measures to be taken when international assistance for relief and works projects was no longer available.

Neither of these functions corresponds to its real activity, nor has the explicit, if unduly optimistic, expectation come to fruition that constructive measures would be taken to end international assistance for relief. Overall, there are now 5.5 million registered Palestinian refugees, and 58 camps in various countries that house 1.5 million. Of these, in the Gaza Strip, there are 1.2 million registered refugees and 8 camps. The startling reality is that UNRWA is not a relief and works program providing jobs on public works projects as originally intended, but a social welfare agency for Palestinians.

The Palestinians are dependent on that agency even more as the population of the small Gaza Strip has increased and with a high fertility rate that is expected to increase another half a million by 2020. The unemployment rate is one of the highest in the world. Youth unemployment is more than 50%.

In the Gaza Strip UNRWA employs more than 13,000 people. It has been particularly active in health and education programs. With a health staff of 1,000, it now has 22 primary health centers and other facilities that record 2.1 million visits. It has 245 schools in 130 buildings, with a staff of 9,600 teachers, and 232,000 pupils. It provides regular food packages. In the year 2013 UNRWA received \$1.1 billion in donations: the U.S. gave \$294 million and the European Union \$216 million.

Turner continually demanded the lifting of the Israeli blockade that, he argued inexplicably, costs the international community millions of dollars. The partial Israeli and Egyptian blockade of the area undoubtedly has caused some problems and difficulties for the Gaza residents. But, continuation of the blockade results not from lack of humanitarian concerns, but from the crucial need to prevent Hamas rocket attacks and ensure the security of Israel.

Indeed, the UN Secretary-General's Panel of Inquiry on the May 31, 2010 flotilla incident concluded in September 2011 that Israel faced a real threat to its security, that the naval blockade was imposed as a legitimate security measure, and that its implementation complied with the requirements of international law.

The real, intellectually absurd, predicament is that more than 70% of the Gaza residents are considered refugees, and the number increases every day. The UNWRA definition of a Palestinian refugee is a person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period of June 1, 1946 to May 15, 1948 and who lost home and means of livelihood as result of the 1948 conflict.

Logically, the number of people alive today, 65 years later, who fall into the defined category is obviously very small. Yet, four generations later, UNWRA, in its bizarre formula, considers the descendants, children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren of Arab residents who left the area that is now Israel in the 1948 War of Independence as refugees. That implies more than eight times the original number who fled from the area of conflict in 1948-49. More than 80% of the so-called refugees were born in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

UNRWA deals with only one group of people, while the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) handles while all other refugees in the world. The continued existence of INRWA has worked against resettlement of

Palestinians in countries where they are located. In contrast, UNHCR has coordinated international action to resolve all other refugee problems in the rest of the world. With a staff less than a quarter of the number employed by UNRWA, this group has helped millions of refugees and returnees.

Truth emerged to some extent during the fighting in 2014 in Gaza. The terrorist ruling group Hamas used the facilities, schools, and hospitals of UNRWA. On three occasions, caches of dozens of rockets were found in UNRWA schools. The organization did not send any munitions expert to disarm and remove the weapons. Is it possible that none of the 12,000 employees were aware of these weapons? Were all of the 12,000 ignorant of the use of children by Hamas to build the 30 attack tunnels, one of which started in a UNRWA health clinic, to use against Israeli civilians?

The truth is that UNRWA has not been neutral in the conflict between Palestinians and Israel. It records that 99.3% of its staff are Muslims. UNRWA schools teach "the right of return," the ability of the 5 million Palestinians to move into Israel, implying the obvious destruction of the Jewish State of Israel. Hamas representatives in the elementary and junior high schools play a role in teaching. Textbooks are notoriously critical of Jews as well as of Israel. On the UNRWA staff union, 25 of the 27 representatives are members of Hamas. One of them, Suheil al-Hindi, once head of the union, is a senior Hamas activist. A long-time UNRWA teacher, Issa Abd al-Batran, was an important figure in the terrorist al-Qassam Brigades.

Indeed, it is bewildering that UNRWA has convinced the world to assign refugee status to people who live in the Gaza Strip when they are ruled not by Israel but by a governing Palestinian body, the group Hamas that improbably even has a Division of Refugee Affairs. Mr. Turner and others believers in the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood apparently have forgotten the decision by Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in

August 2005 to dismantle all Israeli settlements, remove all 8,000 Israelis living in the Gaza Strip, and withdraw all Israeli forces from the area.

Two years later, after the ruling Fatah group lost the parliamentary election, and the consequent civil war between Fatah and Hamas took place in Gaza, Hamas in June 2007 seized and retains complete control of the area. Hamas did not try to develop or modernize the area. Instead, it has been incompetent and corrupt. To achieve its seemingly single objective which is to eliminate the State of Israel, Hamas has never ceased firing rockets, missiles, and mortars into southern Israel.

The person appointed to succeed Mr. Turner in Gaza should have two overall objectives: to promote Palestinian self-help and responsibility while at the same time working to overcome their dependence on victimhood; and to help convince Palestinians to seek a peaceful accommodation with citizens of Israel.

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