

UNRWA IN FOCUS

Briefing Papers

Briefing Paper No. 5

May 2021

Criticisms of UNRWA 1: *UNRWA Perpetuates the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*

This Briefing Paper will examine criticisms of UNRWA usually made from an Israeli perspective. Part two, Briefing Paper No. 6, will examine criticisms made usually from a Palestinian perspective. This Briefing Paper outlines the accusation that UNRWA perpetuates the Israel-Palestine conflict and assesses the veracity of this criticism. The UNRWA in Focus project does not endorse these criticisms, nor those in Briefing Paper 6.

UNRWA faces calls for its dismantlement from those on the political right in Israel and the US on the charge that it perpetuates the Israel-Palestine conflict. The calls have been bolstered by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who stated in June 2017 that UNRWA should be dismantled, and its duties transferred to the UN High Commissioner for Refugees.¹ It is accused of preventing refugees from integrating in their host nations, destabilising Israel, and encouraging Palestinian extremism.

UNRWA Prevents Resettlement

The number of Palestinian refugees eligible for UNRWA services has grown from 750,000 in 1950 to over 5 million today.² Even if they are citizens of a state, Palestinian refugees are able to maintain their refugee status, which is linked explicitly to the guarantee of the right of return to their former homeland.³ In this spirit, many camp refugees have opposed, for example, structural improvements to refugee camps which could be interpreted as a sign of acquiescence to their permanent resettlement and,



inevitably, environmental and socioeconomic conditions in these camps have deteriorated.⁴ Daniel Pipes, head of the Middle East Forum and one of UNRWA's most persistent critics, argues that, in maintaining the refugee status of Palestinians, UNRWA condemns them to "lives of exclusion, self-pity, and nihilism" while host countries such as Lebanon prevent them owning property or attending public school.⁵ Current Director of Policy Planning at the Israeli Foreign Ministry, Uri Resnick, argues that maintaining refugee status traps Palestinians in poverty and

UNRWA in Focus Project

The UNRWA in Focus project is an Exeter University student-centred activity, led by Professor Mick Dumper, designed to provide a platform for the publication of the students' research on one of the UN's largest institutions. UNRWA in Focus Briefing Papers are short and concise and aim to provide useful overviews on a range of issues relating to UNRWA, with the aim of exploring the notion of UNRWA as a significant political actor in the Middle East. Other Papers in the series can be found here:

<http://sites.exeter.ac.uk/unwrafocus/briefing-papers/>

¹ Hanin Abou Salem, "Why is Netanyahu trying to disband the UNRWA?" *Al Jazeera*, 22nd of June 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2017/6/22/why-is-netanyahu-trying-to-disband-the-unrwa>.

² UNRWA's definition of Palestinian refugees can be found here: <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees#:~:text=The%20descendants%20of%20Palestine%20refugee,are%20eligible%20for%20UNRWA%20service>.

³ Jalal al Hussein and Riccardo Bocco, "The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: The Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, No. 2&3 (2010): 262-263.

⁴ *Ibid*, 263.

⁵ Daniel Pipes, "UNRWA: The Refugee Curse." *New York Post*, 19th August 2003, <http://www.danielpipes.org/1206/unrwa-the-refugee-curse>.

pushes them towards criminality, denying their human rights and the chance to develop.⁶

UNRWA Destabilises Israel

Where critics like Pipes and Resnick foreground the welfare of refugees to make their argument, many critics highlight Israel's security and welfare, arguing that UNRWA provides a platform for incitement against Israel. Allowing the number of Palestinian refugees to grow exponentially is presented as an appeasement of the Arab world's "wish to destroy Israel," enabling international support for the right of return, which would subvert the country's Jewish nature.⁷ UNRWA is accused of having close relationships with Hamas, the radical Islamic group, and allowing its resources to fund Hamas' terrorism, while UNRWA's school curriculum is portrayed as teaching Jihad and the right of return by force of arms.⁸ The discovery of Hamas tunnels under some UNRWA schools has been used to support accusations of links to the group, alongside the suggestion that UNRWA Teachers' Unions are controlled by the Islamic Bloc, an affiliate of Hamas.⁹

Proposed Solution

The most commonly proposed solution in this criticism is to transfer UNRWA's duties to the UNHCR. This would entail a complete recategorization of who can be classed as a Palestinian refugee; it would exclude Palestinians who hold citizenship to another nation or who live in areas such as Gaza and the West Bank, which may form part of a future Palestinian State.¹⁰ Critics argue that the UNHCR offers three durable solutions for the cessation of refugee status - repatriation, local integration, and resettlement - whereas UNRWA only promotes repatriation to Israel. It is also accused of suspending the seeking of these solutions until a full-fledged Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is signed.¹¹ Closing down UNRWA and giving responsibility to the UNHCR is presented as the way to drastically reduce the number of refugees and bring an end to the conflict.

⁶ Al Hussein and Bocco, "UNRWA in Perspective", 48-51.

⁷ Adi Schwartz, "Dismantle UNRWA." *BESA Center Perspectives Paper* No.528, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (July 14th 2017).

⁸ David Bedien, "Don't Dismantle UNRWA; Reform its Policies." *BESA Center Perspectives Paper* No.556, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies (August 9th 2017).

⁹ Ibid. ; Arlene Kushner, "UNRWA's Anti-Israel Bias." *Middle East Quarterly* 18, No. 3 (Summer 2011): 86.

¹⁰ Michal Hatuel-Radoshitzky and Kobi Michael, "The End to US Funding to UNRWA: Opportunity or Threat?" *INSS Insight*, No. 1093 (September 6th 2018): 3.

Assessing the Criticism

Criticising UNRWA for perpetuating the conflict ignores the limits of UNRWA's capabilities and Israel's role in perpetuating the crisis. It seems ultimately to propose taking the safety net away from Palestinians so that they have no choice but to accept a peace deal on Israeli terms.

Michael Kagan points out that there is relatively little UNRWA can do to solve the crisis, as it is not part of the international political decision-making which seeks to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.¹² As a development actor, though, UNRWA has supported the developing of self-reliance of some refugees through job creation, employing over 30,000 Palestinians.¹³ Its education programme also compares favourably with others in the region and globally, achieving good literacy rates and gender equity in its schools.¹⁴ The Near East Project Survey indicates that the majority of Palestinians who register with UNRWA do so for proof of their refugee status, and consequently their right of return, rather than for access to services.¹⁵ The argument that UNRWA traps refugees in poverty is, therefore, unconvincing. Indeed, Kagan suggests that Pipes' argument, in

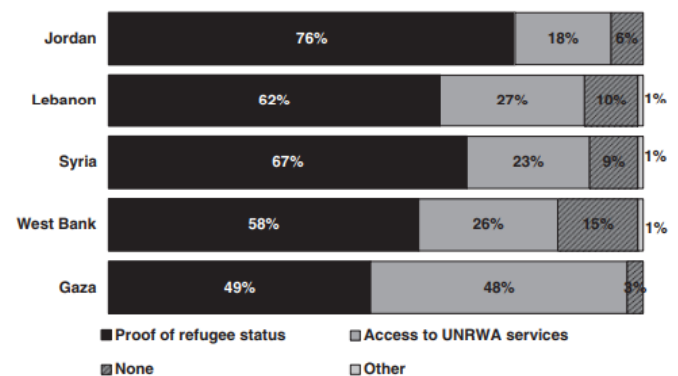


Figure 1: Data from the Near East Project Survey showing why Palestinian Refugees register with UNRWA across their different areas of operation.

¹¹ Uri Resnick, "UNRWA's Self-Serving Agenda." *Middle East Quarterly* 19, No. 4 (Autumn 2012): 45.

¹² Michael Kagan, "Is There Really A Protection Gap? UNRWA's Role Vis-à-vis Palestinian Refugees." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, No. 2&3 (2010): 520.

¹³ Elena Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, "The Changing Faces of UNRWA: From the Global to the Local." *Journal of Humanitarian Affairs* 1, No. 1 (2019): 30.

¹⁴ Lina Brooks-Rubin, "Whither UNRWA?", in Rex Brynen and Roula El-Rifai (eds.), *The Palestinian Refugee Problem: The Search for a Resolution*. London: Pluto Press, 2014: p. 62.

¹⁵ Al Hussein and Bocco, "UNRWA in Perspective", 276.

ignoring Israel's role in the refugee crisis, blames the bandage for the wound underneath.¹⁶

Israeli government officials, particularly intelligence officials, also recognise that UNRWA is a stabilising force in a volatile region and do not want to see a sudden wind down of services.¹⁷ Host nations such as Jordan are further anxious about being solely burdened with the costs and responsibilities of massive numbers of former refugees who would lose UNRWA's assistance if the agency were to disappear.¹⁸ Furthermore, Arab countries have previously flatly rejected suggestions of conferring citizenship onto Palestinian refugees pending achievement of a permanent status agreement.¹⁹ The dismantlement of UNRWA, therefore, would likely leave many more refugees than the critics suggest, in a more unstable region, with fewer prospects for the future and diminished access to education and humanitarian support.

By Jack Williams-Sharkey

Useful Links

The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies consistently criticises UNRWA:

<https://besacenter.org/?s=UNRWA#.YGITtehKjIV>.

Middle East Quarterly also regularly hosts criticisms of UNRWA: <https://www.meforum.org/middle-east-quarterly/>.

Bocco R., "UNRWA and the Palestinian refugees: A history within a history." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, No. 2 & 3 (2009): 229-252,

<https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdq001>.

Bartholomeusz L., "The Mandate of UNRWA at Sixty." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, No. 2 & 3 (2009): 452-474,

<https://www.unrwa.org/userfiles/201006109246.pdf>.

Further Reading

Kagan, M., "Is There Really A Protection Gap? UNRWA's Role Vis-à-vis Palestinian Refugees." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, No. 2&3 (2010): 512-530. <https://doi.org/10.1093/rsq/hdp037>.

Brooks-Rubin, L., 'Whither UNRWA?', in Rex Brynen and Roula El-Rifai (eds.), *The Palestinian Refugee Problem: The Search for a Resolution*. London: Pluto Press, 2014: pp. 54-75. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt183p3m8>.

al Husseini, J., and R. Bocco, "The Status of the Palestinian Refugees in the Near East: The Right of Return and UNRWA in Perspective." *Refugee Survey Quarterly* 28, No. 2&3 (2010): 260-285.

<https://academic.oup.com/rsq/article-abstract/28/2-3/260/1584601?redirectedFrom=PDF>.

Pipes, D., "UNRWA: The Refugee Curse." *New York Post*, 19th August 2003,

<http://www.danielpipes.org/1206/unrwa-the-refugee-curse>.

¹⁶ Kagan, "Protection Gap", 514.

¹⁷ Brooks-Rubin, 'Whither UNRWA?', p. 56.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 62.

¹⁹ Al Husseini and Bocco, "UNRWA in Perspective", 274.