

The Palestinian Proletariat

The UN agency devoted to Palestinian refugees is the primary obstacle to peace

By Michael S. Bernstam

BRITISH PRIME MINISTER David Cameron recently called Gaza a “prison camp.” Former President Jimmy Carter has called it a “cage.” At first glance, these characterizations of the Hamas-ruled province seem like rhetorical excesses designed to cast Israel in the role of the unjust jailer blockading the strip. But Cameron and Carter have got it right, in a way. Gaza is a totalitarian paramilitary camp at war with its neighbors and other Palestinians. It is a paramilitary camp because it is a unique type of refugee camp. The narrow confines of the 139 square miles of the Gaza district—surrounded by Israel to the north and east, Egypt to the south, and the Mediterranean Sea to the west—feature eight separate Palestinian refugee camps, plus dozens of surrounding ghet-

tos. Altogether, they combine the features of a refugee camp and a military camp and, cut off from the world, look to some extent like the cages Carter mentioned.

These camps were established in 1949 and have been financed ever since by the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Yet far from seeking to help residents build a new and better life either in Gaza or elsewhere, UNRWA is paying millions of refugees to perpetuate their refugee status, generation after generation, as they await their forcible return to the land inside the State of Israel.

Though pundits and foreign-policy experts focus on the question of settlements or the current temperature of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians, UNRWA’s institutionalization of refugee-cum-military camps is, in my view, the principal obstacle to peace in the Middle East. The chances of achieving peace and security in the Middle East will continue to be remote as long as UNRWA is, in effect, underwriting

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a self-destructive Palestinian cycle of violence, internecine warfare, and a perpetual war against Israel.

The core issue is a phenomenon we can call “refugeeism.” For 60 years, UNRWA has been paying four generations of Palestinians to remain refugees, reproduce refugees, and live in refugee camps. It is UNRWA that put them in refugee cages and watched the number of inhabitants grow. The Palestinian refugee population in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza has exploded from 726,000 in 1950 to 4.8 million in 2010. About 95 percent live under UNRWA care. The unprecedented nature of this guardianship is rooted in the unusual nature of this institution. UNRWA is a supranational welfare state that pays its residents not to build their own nation-state, for, were they to do so, they would forfeit their refugee status and its entitlements of cash, housing, health care, education, credit, and other largesse.

It is these perverse incentives above all that have undermined efforts to improve the lot of the Palestinian people, such as those measures aimed at fostering economic development in the West Bank undertaken by Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad and the Israeli government. If the international community truly wishes to serve the needs of the Palestinians and improve their lot, its first task would be the abolition of UNRWA.

IN THEIR 1845 pamphlet *The German Ideology*, Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels coined the term *lumpenproletariat*. Marx later defined it as “neither wage-earning workers nor peasants,” “classless elements,” “beggars, alms-seekers, dole-seekers, paupers, and vagabonds.” In 1949, Josef Stalin, who knew his Marx, instructed his envoy to the United Nations to

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oppose a refugee agency devoted to Palestinian Arabs. He wrote: “We should not vote for UNRWA. The goal should be to return Palestinian refugees to normal productive labor so that they work for a living. We need the Palestinian conscientious working class, not the Palestinian parasitic lumpenproletariat.” Yet on December 8, 1949, the UN voted overwhelmingly to create the United Nations Relief and Work Agency for

Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The U.S., Western Europe, the Arab states, and even Israel voted for it. Acting on Stalin’s orders, the Soviet Union and all the other Communist-bloc countries abstained. Ever since, UNRWA has been among the most bizarre humanitarian organizations in human history. It is a refugee-relief effort whose definition of “refugees,” a term meant to describe those in emergency flight from imminent peril, includes the *descendants* of refugees.

UNRWA is unique by design. Whereas all other refugees and deportees fall under the jurisdiction and care of the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the Palestinians belong to UNRWA. Only actual refugees qualify for aid under the UNHCR, and that on a short-term basis. This draws a clear line between refugees as such and various ethnic diasporas. The UNHCR’s mandate is to resettle and integrate all refugees in their historical homelands or in new host countries—to un-refugee them, so to speak. Out of the millions of refugees and deportees who emerged after World War II and since—Germans, Poles, Czechs, Hungarians, Finns, Russians, Ukrainians, Japanese, Indians, Pakistanis, Jews, Turks, Chinese, Koreans, Algerians, Cubans, Vietnamese, Cambodians, and many others—the UN provided Palestinians a different sort of relief.

The UNRWA charter specified that the Palestinians who lived in British Mandate Palestine during the years 1946-48 and who subsequently fled in 1948-49 qualified for refugee status together with all their descendants. This open-ended definition of refugees applies for generations to come. It bestows housing, utilities, health care, education, cash allowances, emergency cash, credit, public works, and social services from cradle to grave, with many cradles and grand-cradles along the way, to its beneficiaries. In practice, this means multigenerational refugee camps and ghettos in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the West Bank, and Gaza. Close to one-third of today’s refugees, about 1.4 million, live in 59 refugee camps. There is no room in UNRWA’s mandate and agenda for resettlement and integration. In 1959, UNRWA discarded the last remnants of such programs.

UNRWA’s mandate created, in effect, a multi-generational dependency of an entire people—a permanent, supranational refugee welfare state in which simply placing most Palestinians on the international dole has extinguished incentives for work and investment. It has succeeded with a vengeance. It has thwart-

ed economic development, destroyed opportunities for peace in the Middle East, and created, along the way—both metaphorically and literally—a breeding ground for international terrorism. The great-grandchildren of East Prussian refugees do not blow up pizzerias in what used to be Königsberg and is now the Russian city Kaliningrad. But the great-grandchildren of the original UNRWA refugees do blow up pizzerias in Jerusalem.

It is this open-ended refugee status—which necessarily envisions a victorious return to the Israeli part of the former British Mandate Palestine—that puts bread on the table in the rent-free house, together with an array of social services. Only the triumphant return of the grandchildren and the great-grandchildren to the ancestral land will mark the final deliverance in this ideology. Until then, the permanent refugee welfare state means permanent war. It is no longer the epitome of former British prime minister Clement Attlee's dichotomy of warfare state and welfare state: it is both.

THE PERMANENT refugeeism of the UNRWA welfare state generates a particular “right of return” claim—the argument that Palestinians should be given title to the land they occupied before Israel's independence—that fuels perpetual warfare. To see its pernicious demographic and physical meaning, consider what this claim is not, and then what it is. First, it is not the right of return of *actual* refugees (as opposed to descendants) that was created by international conventions since 1948 to prevent deportations and to mitigate the conditions of concurrent refugees who fled the ravages of war. Nor is it the right of return of historical ethnic diasporas to *their own* nation-states that Germany extends to all Germans, Armenia to all Armenians, Greece to all Hellenes, and Israel to all Jews. Nor is it the establishment of new nation-states *where there were none*, such as the partition of British Mandate Palestine into the Jewish and Arab states or the partition of the British Raj into India and Pakistan. Rather, the claim of the Palestinian right of return is intended for one historical ethnic diaspora of the *descendants* of perennial refugees to repopulate another people's *existing* nation-state, Israel.

This is not the right of return *to* a country; this is the right of return *of* a country, a reconquest after a lost war. In Europe, a similar claim would apply to the right of the Germans to a return of the Sudetenland from the Czech Republic, Farther Pomerania and Silesia from

Poland, and East Prussia from Russia. In Asia, it would mean the right of the Pakistanis to parts of India.

This is not the right of return; this is a claim of the right of *retake*. In the world of historical ethnic diasporas, the right of return-cum-retake means a Hobbesian war of all against all. More than being detrimental to Israel, it is destructive for the Palestinians because it gives more belligerent groups, such as

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Hamas, an upper hand and prevents reunification of the two potential Palestinian nation-states. It converts what was meant to be a civil right into a civil war, on top of the war with Israel.

AFTER Israel's complete withdrawal from Gaza in August 2005, conditions were in place for building a Palestinian nation-state. The Palestinian Authority could have taken over the physical infrastructure of the aid pipeline as well as social services from UNRWA. Instead, there soon followed a violent takeover by Hamas, an internecine war with other Palestinian factions, and an escalation of the Palestinian war against Israel. This war became internationalized by flotillas sent by foreign organizations to break the Israeli and Egyptian blockade of the terrorist regime ensconced in Gaza. The Palestinian failure to take advantage of Israel's withdrawal to improve their lot is reminiscent of the old joke about the Soviet failure to manufacture personal computers. The punchline was that no matter which blueprint the Russians took from the West, they always ended up making a machine gun. Similarly, the perennial refugeeism of the UNRWA welfare-warfare state always results in paramilitary formations, perpetual warfare, and terrorism.

Indeed, UNRWA sponsors terrorism in two ways—one general and one specific. The general way is the incessant warfare that is a corollary of permanent refugee status and the concomitant claim of the right of retake. James G. Lindsay, UNRWA general counsel in 2002-07, summarized this experience: “UNRWA encouraged Palestinians who favor re-fighting long-lost wars, discouraged those who favor moving toward peace, and contributed to the scourge of conflicts that

have been visited upon Palestinian refugees for decades.”

The UN’s High Commissioner on Refugees disqualifies individuals who committed war crimes, crimes against humanity, and acts against peace from refugee status.

UNRWA does not exclude them.

JAMES Lindsay described it from the inside: “UNRWA has taken very few steps to detect and eliminate terrorists from the ranks of its staff or its beneficiaries, and no steps at all to prevent members of organizations such as Hamas from joining its staff.” And again: “The agency makes no effort to discourage supporters of members of Hamas or any other terrorist group from joining its staff.” Indeed, of some 30,000 UNRWA employees, fewer than 200 are “internationals” and the rest are Palestinian recruits, many of whom use UNRWA facilities and equipment to serve terrorist organizations. Since it is the claim of the right of retake that accompanies the eternal refugee welfare state, and warfare and terrorism enforce that claim, the staff of UNRWA must ultimately converge with the terrorist paramilitary organizations. Natural selection, if you will.

Lindsay cites numerous instances from his former agency’s history. From 1975-82, UNRWA’s Sibli Vocational Training Center in Lebanon was used for storing weapons, housing combatants, and retooling military equipment. At this facility, education converged with military indoctrination and recruitment. UNRWA textbooks represent what Lindsay calls a “war curriculum.” Since 1987, UNRWA schools have exhibited posters glorifying militants and suicide bombers and served, in effect, as recruitment centers. In

addition to Gaza and West Bank ambulances. They are the medical troops on one side in the war. And more: Hamas members have been employed as UNRWA ambulance drivers to transport combatants, weapons, and explosives in both the West Bank and, especially, Gaza.

The point is not that terrorists have infiltrated UNRWA. The point is that, by the logic of institutional evolution, even regardless of the policies of specific Western managers, UNRWA has become a terror-sponsoring organization.

THIS is not, of course, what the U.S., Western Europe, and Israel had in mind when they voted for UNRWA (or Stalin and his stooges when they abstained). But institutions tend to evolve according to their own intrinsic and devilish logic beyond the good intentions of their founders. Malthus pointed out in his classic treatise on population that the English Poor Laws, rather than alleviating poverty, actually reproduced, expanded, and perpetuated it. By subsidizing poverty, they created a demand for paupers, and demography duly provided the supply. This created the multigenerational underclass that Marx later dubbed the lumpenproletariat.

The same pattern of demand and demographic supply characterized the evolution of the U.S. welfare system’s Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC). AFDC was established during the Great Depression in 1935 as a complement to Social Security. As the name indicates, it was intended as relief support for preexisting families with underage children who lost their breadwinner—primarily the middle-aged widows of workers like the Appalachian coal miners. The program evolved into a multigenerational dependency

program for young, often teen-aged, unmarried mothers of the permanent underclass. Senator Edward M. Kennedy described the mechanism: “We go to a young girl—a child of 18, or 16, or even younger—and this is what we say: Abandon all your hopes. You will never have a decent job. You will live in neighborhoods of endless unemployment and vio-

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2000-01, Palestinian children received military training in militarized summer camps. UNRWA vehicles and drivers periodically transported armed fighters.

A most telling example of this institutional adaptation is the conversion of the most important humanitarian service, ambulances, into a lethal force. UNRWA ambulances routinely serve Palestinian combatants and wounded fighters during hostilities with Israel, in

ence. And then we say to this child: Wait, here is a way, one way. We will give you an apartment and furniture to fill it. We will give you a TV set and a telephone. We will give you clothing and cheap food and free medical care, and some spending money besides. And in return, you only have to do one thing: Just go out there and have a baby.” It was not until the Welfare Reform Act of 1996 that this trend was reversed.

Ancient Rome was the first to encounter the proletarian problem when it instituted a welfare state in 58 B.C. According to British historian Arnold Jones, it was intended initially just for the 220,000 plebeians who had lagged behind the general rise in living standards. The program began with grain allowances. But because the recipients did not want to bother baking bread, the grain allowance was converted into free bread. The right to welfare became hereditary, and by 284 A.D. there were millions of recipients. Bronze tablets, an equivalent of food stamps, were issued to recipients to control welfare rolls. N.S. Gill reminds us that “the first part of the word proletariat derives from the Latin word *proles*, which means offspring. The proletariat were ‘producers of offspring.’”

By the latest count, there are some 250 theories of the decline of the Roman Empire: moral decay, fiscal failure, inflation, unemployment, endless wars, barbarian onslaught, etc. This 251st is as good as any, and synthetically subsumes the others: Mighty Rome could not sustain, simultaneously, the welfare state and the warfare state.

However, the mighty UNRWA can. It can do so indefinitely because the United States and the European Union finance it.

UNRWA has been one of the most inhuman experiments in human history. Since UNRWA creates incentives for war and disincentives for peace, conditions for Palestinian misery and disincentives for economic development, it cannot be reformed and must be removed. The change in the Palestinian incentive structure is necessary for both peace and statehood. Palestinian sovereignty will only be achieved by liberation from UNRWA and, like peace, cannot be truly achieved without this liberation. The first order of business, then, is to dismantle the UNRWA welfare-warfare state. If this were to be done, the future Palestinian state, or at least the West Bank, would be able to join the family of prosperous nation-states. To juxtapose President Carter and the last canto of Dante’s *Inferno*, open the cage and enter the world.

But given the intractable nature of the problem and the strong support this destructive program retains in the international community, how can this end be achieved? One possible first step is to merge it with the United Nations High Commissioner on Refugees. Such a measure could allow UNRWA to be abol-

ished immediately. If the new, merged agency adopted UNHCR’s program of short-term emergency relief, it would signal the beginning of the end of the world body’s support for continuance of the Palestinians’ agony. Alternatively, UNRWA could be held in place and phased out gradually, say, over three years.

The process is not important. What is important is the change in mission. The new mandate should be

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resettlement, integration, and naturalization—or at least the former two or the latter two, with integration being a central and necessary component. The task is, in short, to transform 4.8 million people from dependent refugees into productive citizens.

Another option is for UNRWA funding to be converted into international subsidies earmarked exclusively for resettlement, integration, and naturalization. The funds could be applied in the countries of current residence (reimbursing, too, those countries’ expenses), in Palestinian jurisdictions, or in whatever country would admit refugees on an individual basis. Israel is obviously unsuitable as a country of resettlement because integration there is not feasible, and such a plan would defeat the whole purpose of the scheme.

Most important, the transfer of UNRWA funding to the Palestinian Authority and local authorities would dispose of the very institution of the refugee camps. They would become regular neighborhoods and dwellings once their refugee status is removed. Integration would also become easier once the refugee stigma is removed from these neighborhoods. UNRWA schools, medical facilities, financial institutions, and all social services could be given outright to the Palestinian Authority, which would enhance its status, scope, and power as a sovereign government of a new nation-state, and to local governments elsewhere.

In fact, the dismantling of UNRWA would, by itself, facilitate and accelerate the task of resettlement, integration, and naturalization. This process has been forestalled in many places by the very existence of UNRWA and its refugee designation of the Palestinians.

In Jordan, more than 1.8 million of the nearly

2 million registered refugees are already naturalized citizens of that country. Lindsay aptly calls them “oxymoronic citizen refugees.” Another 170,000 have permanent residency rights. Both citizens and permanent residents are integrated into the labor market and commerce and are isolated from other Jordanians primarily by the stigma of refugeeism—encaged, to rephrase President Carter. These Jordanian Palestinians

welfare. However, the transfer of the array of social and financial services and facilities from UNRWA to the Lebanese authorities would contribute to integration and help create jobs.

Those Jordanian, Syrian, and Lebanese Palestinians who cannot integrate into those countries could be resettled in the nascent Palestinian nation-state, which would master an expanded scope of sovereignty after the liberation from UNRWA.

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The end of UNRWA would automatically nullify the pernicious issue of the right of return-cum-retake. It is unsolvable in the presence of UNRWA, because it implies the repopulation of Israel with millions of perennial paramilitary refugees. But once UNRWA is discarded, the

or Palestinian Jordanians prefer to send their children to Jordanian schools that teach English and computer science rather than to UNRWA schools that teach historical mythology and use maps without Israel.

In Syria, since 1957, Palestinian residents have had the same rights as citizens in employment, commerce, and social services. They lack formal citizenship and full property rights because the Syrian government, in a concordat with UNRWA, committed itself to “preserve their original nationality,” that is, to keep them trapped in their permanent refugee status and the ensuing claim on retaking Israel. Without UNRWA, this obstacle to integration would weaken even if the Syrian hostility toward Israel remains intact.

Lebanon is the most difficult case. Of 414,000 registered refugees, only 70,000 are citizens. Others do not enjoy employment rights, cannot own land, and do not qualify for public education, health care, and

refugee status expires instantaneously or after a transition period, and the right of return becomes a non-issue due to immediate and actually pressing needs.

Though its defenders may claim that criticisms of this agency are ill-intentioned or biased against the Palestinians, the phasing out of UNRWA is not only the Palestinians’ sole hope of finding a viable future. It also fits well with Prime Minister Salam Fayyad’s hope of creating a viable independent state. Though supporters of the Palestinians and even some friends of Israel have come to believe that UNRWA is indispensable, nation-building from within is the only viable form of nation-building. Instead of perpetuating the dead end that the international welfare state for the Palestinians represents, ending UNRWA’s horrific six-decade reign would instantly create the conditions for an honest, meaningful, and viable peace process to begin in the Middle East. \$▶