

# How UNRWA Steals Money from Those Who Need It Most

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Commentary

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The UN High Commissioner for Refugees is [threatening](#) to end relief operations for Syrian refugees, who currently number 1.3 million and counting, if it doesn't receive the necessary funds soon. The agency says it has received only a third of the \$1 billion it needs through June, and only \$400 million of the \$1.5 billion donors pledged earlier this year. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has warned explicitly that absent more funds, UNHCR will have to [stop](#) distributing food to refugees in Lebanon next month. And Jordan, which has the [largest](#) population of Syrian refugees, is [threatening](#) to close its borders to new entrants unless more aid is forthcoming urgently.

Meanwhile, another UN agency enjoys comfortable funding of about \$1 billion a year to help a very different group of refugees—refugees who generally live in permanent homes rather than flimsy tents in makeshift camps; who have never faced the trauma of flight and dislocation, having lived all their lives in the place where they were born; who often have jobs that provide an income on top of their refugee benefits; and who enjoy regular access to schooling, healthcare and all the other benefits of non-refugee life. In short, these “refugees” are infinitely better off than their Syrian brethren—yet their generous funding continues undisturbed even as Syrian refugees are facing the imminent loss of such basics as food and [fresh water](#). I am talking, of course, about UNRWA.

It has long been clear that UNRWA—which deals solely with Palestinian refugees, while UNHCR bears responsibility for all other refugees on the planet—is a major obstacle to Israeli-Palestinian peace. Since, unlike UNHCR, it grants refugee status to the original refugees' descendants in perpetuity, the [number](#) of Palestinian refugees has ballooned from under

700,000 in 1949 to over five million today, even as the world's non-Palestinian refugee population has shrunk from over 100 million to under 30 million. Moreover, while UNHCR's primary goal is to resettle refugees, UNRWA hasn't resettled a single refugee in its history: By its definition, refugees remain refugees even after acquiring citizenship in another country. It has thereby [perpetuated](#) and exacerbated the Palestinian refugee problem to the point where it has become the single greatest obstacle to an Israeli-Palestinian agreement: Israel cannot absorb five million Palestinian refugees (though it could easily absorb the fewer than 50,000 original refugees who still remain alive), yet under UNRWA's rules, refugee status can't be ended except by resettlement in Israel.

But an even more basic reason for abolishing UNRWA is the harm it does to the world's most vulnerable people—real refugees like the Syrians. Were the Palestinians handled by UNHCR like all other refugees are, UNHCR would have the budgetary flexibility to temporarily divert aid from the Palestinians, who need it far less, to people who need it more, like the Syrians today. Instead, it is forced to watch helplessly as Syrian refugees go roofless and hungry while \$1 billion in aid is squandered on Palestinians with homes, jobs, and all the comforts of settled life.

Thus, anyone who claims to have a shred of genuine humanitarian concern ought to be agitating for UNRWA's abolition and the Palestinians' transfer to UNHCR's auspices. Unfortunately for the Syrians, it seems that many of the world's self-proclaimed humanitarians prefer harming Israel to helping those who need it most.