Time for UNRWA to go

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Palestinian Arabs have occupied everyone’s attention in recent weeks as a result of the rioting and disturbances on the Israeli/Gaza border. Yet few wonder why the refugees, on whose explicit behalf these days of rage have been launched, are there at all. Most refugee problems are dealt with in a matter of months or at most years, yet few pause to consider why a Palestinian Arab refugee problem still exists after 70 years.

The reason is actually simple: from the outset, the Arab world has resisted their resettlement. As a result of this concerted opposition, the international community has fallen in line and long ago discarded the goal of their resettlement.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the relief agency charged with overseeing the Palestinian Arab refugees of the 1948-9 Arab/Israeli war, is a perfect reflection of this fact. While other refugee relief organizations seek to resettle the refugees in their charge quickly, UNRWA does not: it seeks to maintain and sustain them in their current predicament – in large, sprawling refugee camps, many of which have essentially become towns and cities, in the West Bank (Judea/Samaria), Gaza and neighboring Arab countries.

UNRWA exists in its current form only because it operates under a mandate that uniquely defines as “refugees” not only Palestinian Arabs who fled the fighting and chaos during the 1948-9 war – which would be in accord with the standard definition of “refugee” as applied in all other cases – but also successive generations of their descendants.

Thus, Palestinian Arab refugees and their millions of descendants under UNRWA care live in limbo, prohibited from living and working in the economy of the wider society in which they are located. UNRWA-run camps are thus entering their eighth decade of existence, housing sometimes the third- or even fourth-generation descendants of the refugees they were originally built to serve temporarily.

UNRWA also serves to perpetuate the conflict that created the refugees by permitting their radicalization and irredentism. To receive an education in UNRWA camp is to be raised to accept the fabricated Palestinian Arab narrative of original Israeli aggression and deliberate dispossession of Palestinian Arabs. A seething determination to return to and eliminate Israel has been the social consequence.

Indeed, the abortive 2000, 2000-1 and 2008 American-endorsed peace offers that encompassed the creation of a Palestinian state within almost the entirety of the West Bank and Gaza were most likely rejected by the Palestinian Authority (PA) for the simple reason that PA leadership could not sign off on any peace plan that encompassed Israel’s continued existence and survive.

All this stands in stark contrast to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the international body that deals with all refugee problems other than the Palestinian Arab one. UNHRC observes a universal definition of refugee status, one that applies solely to those who actually fled their country during hostilities, civil war, natural disaster or other disturbances. UNHCR works to resettle refugees quickly and to dismantle the temporary refugee camps housing them. Nor does it count as refugees subsequent generations of descendants of refugees.

This has immense practical ramifications: in literally all other cases other than the Palestinian Arab one, the number of refugees shrinks over time, chiefly through successful resettlement. In contrast, in the Palestinian Arab case, their numbers continue to expand ceaselessly.

Thus, instead of the Palestinian Arab refugees officially numbering 30,000 – the approximate number of original refugees still alive today – their number, according to UNRWA, is some 5.3 million.

Accordingly, if all major refugee problems of the past century have been solved through resettlement rather than repatriation, then it needs to be understood that UNRWA is a central component of the problem rather than of the solution regarding Palestinian Arab refugees.

It is past time for two things to happen: the disbanding of UNRWA and its mandate, and the assumption of its duties by the UNHCR.

Such a huge administrative adjustment can occur only if becomes the policy of the United States that it should occur. No other country has either the clout or will to propose this outcome and to persuade and, if necessary, pressure friends and foes into supporting it. No other country has the ability to firmly place this proposal on the international agenda. And no peace agreement worthy of the name can be achieved one day without the disbanding of the UNRWA system of maintaining and entrenching a hostile, unsettled and irredentist population as a permanent impediment to peace.

Short of this occurring, the current situation, with the “refugees” continually growing in number and determined on Israel’s elimination, no Israeli/Palestinian Arab peace can be expected at any time.