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Who—and How Many—Are the Palestinian Refugees?

How, under the auspices of the UN Relief and Works Agency, can their numbers have exploded from 650,000 in 1948 to more than five million today?

In 1948, some 650,000 Arabs fled from Israel during Israel's war of independence against six invading Arab armies. The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) was then formed to provide humanitarian aid to those Arab refugees. Sixty-five years later, UNRWA has grown into a huge, half-a-billion-dollar-a-year bureaucracy that claims a constituency of five million Palestinian-Arab refugees. How has the number of Palestinian refugees grown so dramatically? Is UNRWA helping resettle the refugees, or is it exacerbating the problem? Finally, why would the Palestinian Authority in negotiations for a Palestinian state insist that these refugees be moved to Israel?

What are the facts?

UNRWA's original definition of a refugee was someone "whose normal place of residence was Palestine between June 1946 and May 1948, who lost both their homes and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict." UNRWA began by providing emergency assistance, temporary shelters and basic relief. Soon after, UNRWA helped resettle the refugees in permanent housing and create educational and health institutions. But, unlike the treatment of refugees in all other wars, UNRWA dramatically and inexplicably expanded the definition of "refugee" to include *descendants* of Palestinian refugees.

Today, UNRWA claims more than five million Palestinian refugees, most of whom are in fact descendants and have never lived in Israel. UNRWA currently employs 30,000 people, mostly Arabs in Gaza and the West Bank. The organization receives more than \$600 million annually to serve these people, almost 40% of which comes from the U. S., and the Palestinian economy has become absolutely dependent on this aid.

By contrast, the UN's High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR)—formed in 1950—serves all the world's refugees *except* the Palestinians, and has successfully resettled 50 million refugees. Yet UNRWA, with its strange definition of refugee, has actually increased the number of Palestinian refugees by more than 700%—several million of whom are citizens of Jordan, and millions more of whom are living in Lebanon, Syria and Gaza. By 2030, the number of Palestinian "refugees" is expected to hit 8.5 million.

UNHCR, which currently serves about 34 million refugees, employs only 7,685 staff—about one for every 4,424 refugees. UNRWA, however, employs one worker for every 172 refugees, and their staff budget per head is *double* that at UNHCR.

After 1993, when an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians gave broad authority for self-governance to the Palestinian Authority (PA), many donor nations argued that UNRWA's purpose should be taken over by the PA and refugee

host governments, such as Jordan and Lebanon. UNRWA argued vehemently against this move, however, and won out.

How many true refugees from Israel are left? In May 2012, Senator Mark Kirk introduced and Congress passed a bill known as the Kirk Amendment, requiring the U.S. State Department to specify the real number of refugees who meet the original UNRWA definition. That number is estimated to be

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no more than 30,000 Palestinians—a far cry from the five million claimed by UNRWA. The actual number is critical because the U.S. is the single largest donor to UNRWA—contributing about \$240 million annually. Surely U.S. citizens have a right to know whether

they're supporting legitimate refugees from Israel's 1948 war of independence or whether they're paying to support millions of descendants of refugees and thus creating a new category of Arab welfare dependents.

Why does the Palestinian Authority want millions of "fake" refugees moved to Israel? One of the greatest obstacles to an Israeli-Palestinian peace has been the insistence by Palestinian leadership of the "right of return" of Arab refugees to Israel. Of course there is no inherent right of legitimate refugees, let alone their descendants, to move to Israel. But in every peace negotiation, the Palestinians have stubbornly insisted that millions of "fake" refugees—descendants—"return" to Israel, though 98% of them have never set foot in Israel. This poses an obvious question: Why would Palestinian leaders who are determined to create a Palestinian state want their people now living in the West Bank, Gaza, Lebanon, Syria, and Jordan to move to Israel instead of to their own new state?

There can be only one explanation: They want a Palestinian state *and* they want to conquer the Jewish state. For surely, if Israel, with a population of eight million—six million Jews and two million Arabs—were to agree to such peace terms, it would be tantamount to suicide. An influx of five million Arabs would swamp Israel demographically, and it would instantly cease to be a Jewish state.

It's clear that UNRWA is an organization that has outlived its usefulness. Rather than working to help stateless Palestinian-Arabs assimilate into other societies, it encourages refugee camps. Rather than promoting Palestinian self-determination and self-reliance, the agency is nurturing a new, rapidly growing welfare class. Rather than working to eliminate the problem of Palestinian refugees, UNRWA has become a bloated bureaucracy whose goal seems to be its own perpetuation and the demise of Israel—a mission that costs American taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars a year.

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