

Written evidence submitted by Dr. Einat Wilf

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The following expert opinion makes the case for reform of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) as means for clearing the path to peace based on the principle of two states for two peoples. This opinion argues that the handling of the Palestinian refugee problem – in particular, the inflation of its scale – by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is a rarely acknowledged obstacle to peace.

The ideas put forth here for reform of UNRWA are as follows:

- The welfare, education and health services provided by UNRWA could continue and even be expanded, but their provision should be based on need, not refugee status.
- In Gaza, where there is no Israeli presence and which is clearly part of a future state of Palestine, the continued registration of Palestinians living in Palestine as refugees from Palestine should be discontinued, while continuing the provision of services based on need.
- In the West Bank, in the areas under Palestinian Authority control, the funds currently going to UNRWA should go to the Palestinian Authority for the provision of services, thus strengthening it as the government of the Palestinians, while the designation of the citizens of the Palestinian Authority as refugees from Palestine should also be discontinued.
- Outside the West Bank and Gaza, UNRWA's work should be merged with that of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and operate on the same basis as all other refugees in the world, with efforts directed at securing the equal rights of the descendants in Lebanon and Syria where they were born and have lived their entire lives.

## Defining the Problem

(1) One of the greatest obstacles to peace, and certainly the least acknowledged, is the perpetuation of the Palestinian refugee problem and the inflation of its scale by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Whereas the actual number of Arabs who could still claim to be refugees as a result of the Arab-Israeli war of 1947-1949 is today no more than several tens of thousands, the number of those registered as refugees is reaching 5 million, with millions more claiming to have that status.

(2) Since the Second World War the UN High Commissioner for Refugees has been responsible for the welfare of all refugees in the world and has assisted in their resettlement and relocation – so that nearly all of them are no longer refugees – with one exception: the Arabs from Palestine. By contrast, UNRWA, the organisation created specifically to handle the Arab refugees from Palestine from the 1947-1949 Arab-Israel war, has collaborated with the Arab refusal to resettle the refugees in the areas where they reside, or to relocate them to third countries. Worse, UNRWA has ensured that the refugee issue only grows larger by automatically registering descendants of the original refugees from the war as refugees themselves in perpetuity. This practice is entirely not necessitated by UNRWA's original UN General Assembly mandate. The decision to automatically grant refugee status in perpetuity, while also avoiding any resettlement efforts – without parallel in any other conflict, is entirely UNRWA's own.

(3) For several decades UNRWA has been engaging in an act of bureaucratic self-aggrandisement, inflating the numbers of those in its care, ensuring the growth of its budget. If the descendants of the Arab refugees from the Arab-Israeli war were treated like all other refugees, including the Jewish ones, they would not qualify for refugee status because almost all of them (upward of 80 per cent) are either citizens of a third country, such as Jordan, or they live in the places where they were born and expect to have a future such as Gaza and the West Bank. The Palestinians born in the West Bank and Gaza are not fleeing war and are not seeking refuge. They are considered citizens of Palestine by the Palestinian Authority itself, just like all other Palestinians born in these territories. No other people in the world are registered as refugees while being citizens of another country or territory. Moreover, if the European Union has adopted the policy that Gaza and the West Bank are territories to be allocated to Palestine – and some EU countries already recognise Palestine as a state – then **it makes no sense for it to argue that people who were born and are living in Palestine are refugees from... Palestine.**

(4) The remaining 20 per cent of the descendants who are not Jordanian citizens or citizens of the Palestinian Authority in Gaza and the West Bank, are inhabitants of Syria and Lebanon who are by law denied the right to citizenship granted to all other Syrians and Lebanese. Yet, UNRWA does nothing to fight for the right of these Lebanese and Syrian-born Arabs to citizenship, collaborating in their discrimination and the perpetuation of their refugee status.

(5) Why does this matter for peace? Because if millions of Arabs who are citizens of

Jordan and the Palestinian Authority, or inhabitants of Syria and Lebanon, claim to be refugees from what is today Israel, even though they were never born there and never lived there, and demand that as a result of this refugee status they be given the right to relocate to Israel ('the right of return'), *then the whole basis for peace by means of two states for two people crumbles*. If Israel with its 6 million Jews and more than 1.5 million Arabs has to absorb between 5 and 8 million Arab Palestinians then the Jews will be relegated again to living as a minority among those who do not view them as equals; the only country in which the Jews can exercise their right to self-determination would be no more. This idea cannot be considered a serious basis for peace among equals.

## The Role of the UK as a Donor Country

(6) Even though some of UNRWA's practices obstruct the path to peace based on the principle of two states for two peoples, it is heavily funded by countries that support peace based on this principle. The United States, the EU, the UK, Canada, Japan and Australia fund 99 per cent of UNRWA's annual budget of approximately \$1 billion, whereas the 56 Islamic countries supply only a few million dollars. The donor countries are the ones who truly determine whether UNRWA's practices are supported or not. UNRWA's mandate by the UN General Assembly leaves substantial manoeuvring room for the organisation and it is entirely up to the donor countries to decide, for example, whether they condone UNRWA's refugee registration practices or not.

(7) Just to demonstrate the manner in which the UK support of some of UNRWA's practices is an obstacle to peace, it is useful to compare it to the policy of the UK towards the Jewish settlements in the West Bank, which it treats as a clear obstacle to peace. If Western countries policies towards the Jewish settlements in the West Bank were similar to their policy towards the Palestinian refugees as shaped by UNRWA, they would go as follows: 'Go ahead Israel, build as many settlements as you want and keep expanding them in perpetuity. We will accept the settlements as a natural expansion of Israel. We will even support the expansion effort financially. Don't tell the settlers that they will ever need to leave their homes, teach them that it is their legal right to be there. We trust that when the day comes to negotiate peace with the Arab world you will do so in good faith and in a way that guarantees the existence of a sovereign and contiguous Arab state in Gaza and the West Bank.'

(8) As it stands right now the policy of the UK towards UNRWA is precisely that – it is essentially telling the Arab world: 'Go ahead and keep inflating the numbers of refugees in perpetuity by registering descendants of refugees as refugees themselves. Register them as refugees from Palestine even though they were born and are living in the Palestinian Authority. Allow them to maintain both a refugee status and citizenship from a third country. Keep telling them that even though they were born in Gaza and Ramallah, they are actually from Ashdod and Ashkelon and can realistically expect to live there soon. Keep them in a discriminated-against state in Syria and Lebanon, where their basic human rights are denied, just so they can keep the conflict alive. We trust that when the day comes to negotiate a final settlement with Israel, you will do so in good

faith in a way that guarantees the coherence and existence of a homeland for the Jewish.’

(9) If the first policy appears preposterous to the UK government, which supports peace by means of a two-state solution, *then so should the second*. If the UK truly wants to remove obstacles on the road to peace it cannot condemn the growth of settlements on one hand and condone the manufactured growth of the number of refugees on the other. Either *both* the growth of settlements and the inflation in the number of refugees should be treated as obstacles to peace, or neither should be. Moreover, whereas Israel has demonstrated time and again that for peace with Egypt – and for much less than peace in Gaza and the northern West Bank – it will ruthlessly and effectively uproot settlements, the Palestinians have yet to demonstrate that they are willing to take even the smallest steps to give the refugee issue its true and proper proportions.

## The Path to Peace

(10) If the UK truly wants to promote a coherent policy that supports a two-state solution and does not favour one side over another, it should use its power as the financial supporter of UNRWA to steer its practices along a more constructive path in the following manner:

(I) The welfare, education and health services provided by UNRWA could continue and even be expanded, but their provision should be based on need, not refugee status.

(II) In Gaza, where there is no Israeli presence and which is clearly part of Palestine, the continued registration of Palestinians living in Palestine as refugees should be discontinued.

(III) In the West Bank, in the areas under Palestinian Authority control, the funds currently going to UNRWA should go to the Palestinian Authority for the provision of services, while the designation of the citizens of the Palestinian Authority as refugees should also be discontinued.

(IV) Finally, outside the West Bank and Gaza, UNRWA’s work should be merged with that of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees and operate on the same basis as all other refugees in the world, with efforts directed at securing the equal rights of the descendants in Lebanon and Syria where they were born and have lived their entire lives.

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