

Chapter Four: Discussion and Conclusions

UNRWA was established according to UN General Assembly Resolution 302(IV) from December 1949, which ordered the creation of an aid agency for a two-to-three-year period until the emergency situation (following the war) would end and some 700,000 refugees would be resettled. At the time, the Palestinian refugees constituted only a small portion of the world's refugee population following World War II. However, unlike other refugee populations whose numbers were significantly reduced with important UN assistance, the population of Palestinian refugees grew to over 5.5 million registered as UNRWA beneficiaries, seven decades later. This influx is the product of an accumulation of circumstances outlined in this document, including (but not limited to) a number of adaptations to the definition of who is eligible for refugee status and the maintaining of refugee status despite citizenship in host states and regardless of socioeconomic indices or involvement in terror. This definition is opposed to the terms and conditions that define refugees from other conflicts in the world.

Despite significant financial support of the international community, whose aid to Palestinian refugees exceeds that of other refugee populations in terms of budget per person, UNRWA has failed to rehabilitate Palestinian refugees in its five operational zones due to the host states' refusal to permanently absorb them. Thus, sadly, the ever-growing Palestinian refugee population is cynically used as a political tool to leverage pressure against Israel in addressing grievances as part of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Moreover, the analysis conducted as part of this research found deficiencies not only in UNRWA's operational paradigm but also in its procedural functioning.

The decision of the United States in 2018 to cease funding UNRWA, along with the complexity of the humanitarian and military reality in UNRWA's operational zones; the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian political process; the Middle East's upheaval and its impact on the Palestinian refugee population

have all influenced UNRWA's actions. Within this context and as UNRWA enters its eighth decade of activity, this memorandum sought to propose alternatives to emerge from this dire situation. In doing so, this research avoids falling into the trap of “reinventing the wheel” and builds on previous initiatives (e.g., the Oslo process; the signing of the Interim Agreement; Camp David and Annapolis, in addition to informal initiatives such as the Geneva Accord) that have remained in writing due to staunch opposition of the relevant stakeholders—primarily the Palestinians and Arab states.

Thus, in full recognition of the obstacles to changing the status quo in relation to UNRWA while also squarely facing the problematic situation perpetuated by UNRWA's current operational paradigm and procedural functioning, this paper presented the following alternatives:

- A. Comprehensive reforms including reviewing UNRWA's mandate, organizational structure, and methods of operation, and redefining beneficiaries in a manner that will substantially reduce the number of those eligible for the agency's support
- B. Transferring UNRWA's responsibilities and budget to governments in the different operation zones, including the Palestinian Authority
- C. Merging UNRWA with UNHCR
- D. An integrated modular approach based on successful elements in the first three alternatives.

For analyzing and comparing the alternatives, we used a modular assessment model that enables assigning different weights to a set of chosen criteria to be determined by the assessing party; that is, in assessing each course of action, the criterion defined by the decision maker as most important can be assigned a higher value than other criteria. The numerical score of each criterion is determined by weighing the relevant metrics for the same criterion, such that here too, decision makers can set different values for each metric, according to the importance that they relate to each parameter. Clearly, the criteria for assessing the alternatives are determined by the interests of the stakeholders.

On the Israeli side—because of good working relations with UNRWA's local leadership and within the context of Hamas's rule in the Gaza Strip, Israel's defense establishment perceives the continued functioning of UNRWA in its current format as an acceptable default. In contrast, figures in Israel's political and academic realms consider UNRWA's operational paradigm

to be an obstacle that creates additional hardship in resolving the already complicated Israeli-Palestinian conflict. On the Palestinian side, UNRWA's current state of functioning serves as a bargaining chip in future negotiations with Israel. With respect to the international community—UNRWA's donor states (except for the United States) and the Arab world—the preferred alternative appears to be maintaining the status quo.

Within the limitations of the scope of research presented in this memorandum, we chose to present the model as a conceptual tool and thus refrained from delving into the possible metrics comprising each criterion. Our choice of the alternatives and criteria to assess them was based on the literature and personal experience with the issues at hand. Choosing other criteria for assessment or, alternatively, assigning different weight to the chosen criteria, could lead to different results. While this may be perceived as the model's weakness, we believe that it is a strength for four central reasons: First, it introduces transparency into an extremely delicate process, thereby enabling all parties to understand and be considerate of others' interests and needs. Second, it introduces a systematic, empiric method of evaluating alternatives to the status quo in a calculated manner that allows place for emotion and political dynamic but is not governed by them. Third, it enables stakeholders to work individually and separately in the initial stages of the process and then proceed to common talks and joint sessions on a shared common base. Fourth, it provides a pragmatic tool to begin to delve into what has become an almost “untouchable” symbolic and loaded issue that must be addressed if the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is ever to be resolved.

In selecting the criteria, we related to the feasibility of implementing the alternative, the rehabilitation of the Palestinian refugees, strengthening the Palestinian Authority's governability, the contribution to a political process toward resolving the conflict, and financial costs. We applied the model to the first three alternatives (major reforms, transferring UNRWA's responsibilities and resources to host governments, and merging UNRWA with UNHCR) and not to the fourth modular alternative, which combines the relative advantages of the first three alternatives because of the many possibilities that are encapsulated by this approach.

The analysis of the three central alternatives according to the five criteria (assessed on a scale of 1–3), shows that the alternative of reforms and the alternative of merging UNRWA with UNHCR have a slightly lower feasibility

than the second alternative of transferring UNRWA's responsibilities to host governments in at least some of UNRWA's operational zones—primarily the Palestinian Authority and Jordan. In relation to the criterion of rehabilitating the refugees, the alternative of transferring UNRWA's responsibilities to host governments (together with the third alternative of merging UNRWA with UNHCR) also provides a better response in comparison to the first alternative of reforms. Transferring UNRWA's responsibilities to host governments also best addresses the third criterion of strengthening the Palestinian Authority's governability and state rationale and—together with the alternative of merging UNRWA and UNHCR—has the highest potential to lead to a situation that is conducive to a future Israeli-Palestinian peace process. In considering the fifth criterion of financial costs, high expenditures associated with proceeding with any of the alternatives produce the most favorable cost-benefit analysis should UNRWA's responsibilities be transferred to host governments, or if UNRWA and UNHCR are merged. Thus, our comparative analysis clearly demonstrates that, despite any flaws, the alternative of transferring UNRWA's responsibilities to host governments is the most favorable course of action with which to proceed.

In concluding the analysis chapter, which employs the theoretical model to compare the proposed alternatives, we recommend an integrative approach based on transferring UNRWA's responsibilities and resources to host governments, but following six guiding principles, namely: **differential implementation** tailored to each operational zone; **gradual implementation** over a predetermined period of time while maintaining the ability to fully cater for the refugee population; **modifying the eligibility criteria for refugee status**; **introducing fundamental change to the mandate** of any organization that will oversee the issue of Palestinian refugees in the future, with a clear emphasis on defining a time limit for refugees' resettlement and rehabilitation; **establishing a supervision and monitoring mechanism**, all done with **significant international backing**.

In conclusion, in this memorandum we sought to demonstrate how the sad reality that has evolved over the years, in which Palestinian refugees and now primarily their descendants are unable to exit the circle of refugeehood, can be changed and repaired. Our hope is that the information on UNRWA's history, operational paradigm, and procedural functioning in the first and second chapters of this memorandum, together with the model assessing

alternatives to emerge from the current situation presented in the third chapter, will serve as a basis for in-depth discussion with all stakeholders regarding the best way to move forward for all parties. This is in addition to recognizing that the status quo regarding UNRWA does not serve anyone: not the international community that continues to fund it; not Israel, for whom the Palestinian refugee issue is a stumbling block to resolving the conflict with the Palestinians; not the Palestinian Authority, whose governance and state institutions are weakened by the external agency; and not the Palestinian refugees themselves, who have not been resettled and cannot become fully integrated into the societies where they live.