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OPINION

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Abolish the U.N.'s Palestinian Refugee Agency

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Displaced Palestinians outside a school run by UNRWA in Gaza. Credit...Haitham Imad/EPA, via Shutterstock

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United Nations agencies and officials are no strangers to scandal and infamy.

U.N. peacekeepers [caused a cholera epidemic](#) in Haiti and committed horrific [sexual abuses in the Democratic Republic of the Congo](#). The U.N.'s [oil-for-food program](#) for Iraq became a multibillion-dollar kickback scheme through which Saddam Hussein all but bribed his way out of international sanctions. In the 1980s, Kurt Waldheim, a former U.N. secretary general, was [unmasked as a former Nazi](#). He was the same secretary general who denounced Israel's 1976 rescue of Jewish hostages in Entebbe as "[a serious violation](#)" of Uganda's national sovereignty.

Now comes the latest scandal of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees, better known as UNRWA.

Last Friday, Israeli officials presented the U.S. government with an intelligence dossier detailing the involvement of 12 UNRWA employees, seven of them schoolteachers, in the massacre of Oct. 7. As reported by [The Times's Ronen Bergman and Patrick Kingsley](#), the charges range from kidnapping an Israeli woman to storing rocket-propelled grenades to murdering civilians in a kibbutz.

Awful enough — and the U.N. rightly [moved swiftly](#) to terminate the employment of nine of those identified by the dossier. But that may be the least of it. "Intelligence estimates shared with the U.S. conclude that around 1,200 of UNRWA's roughly 12,000 employees in Gaza have links to Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and about half have close relatives who belong to the Islamist militant groups," [The Wall Street Journal reported on Monday](#).

The figures are worth bearing in mind the next time you weigh the credibility of information about Gaza sourced to the U.N. Also worth bearing in mind is that this has been going on for years. As Bassam Eid of the Palestinian Human Rights Monitoring Group [noted over a decade ago](#), "In order for UNRWA to survive, they accept [Hamas's] conditions because they want to continue their activities."

The new revelations were enough for the Biden administration to suspend its funding for the agency — worth [nearly \\$350 million](#) in 2022 — while it investigates the allegations. As of Tuesday, other major funders, including France, Germany and Japan, have followed suit.

That’s a start. But the fundamental problem with the agency isn’t that it appears to be infested with terrorists and their sympathizers, or that their salaries are paid by naïve foreign donors. It’s that UNRWA may be the only agency in the U.N. system whose central purpose is to perpetuate grievance and conflict. It should be abolished.

Think of it this way. The United Nations has two agencies dedicated to the plight of refugees. One, the [U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees](#), is responsible for the well-being of nearly all the world’s more than 30 million refugees, with a mandate to help them resettle in third countries if they can’t go home.

The other is UNRWA, which theoretically operates under the umbrella of the high commissioner but is really its own organization. No other group except for Palestinians gets its own permanent agency.

Why? In part, because neighboring Arab [countries like Lebanon](#) cruelly refused to fully absorb Palestinian refugees, refusing them not only citizenship but also, in many cases, the right to most forms of work. In 1991, Kuwait went further by expelling [hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in a matter of days](#), because the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat had supported Saddam Hussein during the Persian Gulf war. Think of that the next time Arab governments profess solidarity with the Palestinian people.

As bad as the cruelty is the cynicism. The changing borders and independence movements of the postwar era produced millions of refugees: Germans, Indians, Pakistanis, Palestinians and Jews, including [some 800,000](#) Jews who were kicked out of Arab countries that [had been their homes for centuries](#). Nearly all found new lives in new countries — except for Palestinians. They have been kept as perpetual refugees as a means of both delegitimizing Israel and preserving the irredentist fantasy that someday their descendants will exercise what they believe is their “right of return,” effectively through the elimination of the Jewish state.

It’s upon that alleged right that efforts at a comprehensive Israeli-Palestinian peace deal [have foundered](#). It’s also the right that UNRWA’s very existence keeps alive. Palestinians should be citizens of the countries in which they live — just as some two million Arabs are in Israel. They should not be cudgels in a never-ending struggle, subsidized from one aggrieved generation to the next by international largess.

Defenders of UNRWA insist that without it, Palestinian civilians will suffer even more. But there is no reason other international agencies can’t shoulder the burden of the immediate relief effort for Gazans. In the meantime, the Biden administration and other governments need to ask hard questions of UNRWA’s senior officials, starting with Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini.

To wit: If Lazzarini and his deputies didn’t know that UNRWA in Gaza was employing potentially hundreds of Hamas members or sympathizers, what sort of oversight were they exercising? And if they did know, are they not responsible? In either case — gross negligence or quiet complicity — they need to resign now.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not be insoluble. But it can’t be solved so long as millions of Palestinians have been turned into the world’s only permanent refugees. By doing that, UNRWA makes itself an obstacle to peace — reason enough for it to finally go away.

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