

What UNRWA Tells Us about Refugees and the United Nations

Yasmeen Abu-Laban

Abstract

In September 2016, the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. This move made possible the affirmation in 2018 of two new global compacts: the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The Compacts, which are non-binding, have been variously analyzed and critiqued for the force of provisions aimed at enhancing protection of people on the move, and for what the embrace or rejection of the Compacts reflects about the state of multilateral cooperation in global migration and refugee governance. In marked contrast, far less attention has been paid to the implications of the uncertain fate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). Yet UNRWA was equally thrown into sharp relief in 2018 when the United States, the Agency's main donor, suddenly withdrew financial support, thereby jeopardizing the future of 5.5 million Palestine refugees registered with the organization.

The purpose of this chapter is to center UNRWA in relation to discussions of refugees and refugee governance. The chapter will trace how UNRWA's formation in 1949 – one year in advance of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) in 1950 – led to the world's refugees coming to fall under two different UN agencies and mandates, with the consequence that both UNRWA and Palestine refugees are comparatively vulnerable, and subject to ideological attacks.

Keywords

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) – United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) – migration, international refugee regime – United Nations Charter – international cooperation – Westphalian state system – statelessness

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Today, UNRWA is on the brink of collapse ... I remain determined to do everything possible to sustain critical services to Palestine refugees, protect UNRWA staff jobs, preserve the investment of the international community in the human development of Palestine refugees and avoid adding an additional source of instability in the Middle East. But today, I find myself questioning whether this is possible.

PHILIPPE LAZZARINI, Commissioner General UNRWA (quoted in UNRWA 2021)

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In September 2016, the International Organization for Migration (IOM) became a related organization of the United Nations, and the United Nations General Assembly unanimously adopted the New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants. This move made possible the affirmation in 2018 of two new global compacts: the Global Compact on Refugees and the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. The Compacts, which are non-binding, have been variously analyzed and critiqued for the force of provisions aimed at enhancing protection of people on the move, as well as for what the embrace or rejection of the Compacts reflects about the state of multilateral cooperation in global migration and refugee governance, particularly in relation to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) (Ferris and Donato 2020). We can expect in the years to come that such critiques and analyses will continue to be a matter of investigation within the UN system, as well as for stakeholders and academics, particularly in the field of migration studies (Guild and Grant 2017, 16). Standing in a stunning dramatic contrast, scholars and world leaders have paid far less attention to the implications of the uncertain fate of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). Yet, in the lead up to the United Nations' 75th anniversary and beyond, those overseeing the agency have rung the alarm bell, as noted in the 2021 dramatic statement of UNRWA's Commissioner General.

The purpose of this chapter is to center UNRWA in relation to scholarly discussions of refugees and refugee governance, as well as to the United Nations as the world's leading international organization. Article 1 of the 1945 United Nations Charter, the founding document of the UN, lists the following as the purposes of the organization: international peace and security; friendly relations based on respect for equal rights and self-determination of peoples;

international cooperation; and having the UN be a central point for harmonizing the actions of nations to achieve these goals (United Nations n.d.). In what follows, it will be argued that the protracted nature of the Palestinian refugee situation, coupled with the clear crisis and uncertain future of UNRWA, signals both a failure to respond to the humanitarian needs of refugees, and a looming failure to live up to the UN Charter itself.

In making this argument, this chapter takes a threefold approach. First, it situates the “Question of Palestine” within the UN system and traces how UNRWA’s formation in 1949 – one year before that of the UNHCR in 1950 – led to the world’s refugees falling under two different UN agencies and mandates. Second, consideration is given to how both UNRWA and Palestine refugees are comparatively vulnerable and subject to distinctive ideological attacks. Finally, the implications of the protracted nature and vulnerability of Palestinian refugees are addressed, a key one being that it speaks to a larger fault line around state power when it comes to the UN in its first 75 years of operation. This fault line, deriving from the Westphalian system, ought to compel greater attention from scholars and practitioners in the fields of migration and international relations alike in the years ahead.

UNRWA’s Formation, the Bifurcation of Refugees and the “Question of Palestine”

It is a striking feature of migration studies and the field of international relations in political science that when the term “international refugee regime” is used, it has largely come to stand for the UNHCR as an organization reflecting the rules, norms or laws that guide states in their responses to refugees (Abu-Laban 2021). In point of fact, both UNHCR and UNRWA have refracted norms and the responses of states to refugees for almost as long as the UN has been in existence, and UNRWA, being a year older than UNHCR, has actually done so for longer. UNRWA focuses on what the organization terms “Palestine refugees.” UNRWA was created in 1949 to provide services and relief to registered Palestine refugees and their descendants in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and Gaza. UNHCR, formed in 1950, has worked to support the protection of refugees as well as to find solutions to their plight, including through resettlement and return. While initially UNHCR was focused on European refugees displaced by the Second World War, over time it came to cover all parts of the world.

Most notably, when UNHCR was formed, it expressly excluded refugees covered by other UN agencies in its mandate (meaning UNRWA), setting up a bifurcation of refugees as a result of timing and organizational particularity

in the evolution of the UN system and, as will be discussed further, rendering Palestine refugees uniquely vulnerable (Irfan 2017, 18). In epistemic terms, this bifurcation has helped fortify the near invisibility of discussions of Palestinian refugees in the multidisciplinary field of migration studies, even as political scientists have come to do more work in this field over the course of the 21st century (Abu-Laban 2021).

The invisibility of Palestinian refugees is problematic from the standpoint of facts on the ground. Figures for the end of 2020 suggest that despite the COVID-19 pandemic (which resulted in border closures and travel restrictions across states) displacement actually grew to a new record level (UNHCR 2021, 6). In 2020, there were a total of 82.4 million people who were forcibly displaced worldwide, of which 26.4 million were refugees (UNHCR 2021, 2). Among the refugees, 20.7 million fell under the mandate of UNHCR and 5.7 million were Palestine refugees falling under the mandate of UNRWA (UNHCR 2021, 2). On numbers, it should be noted that the UN only counts as Palestine refugees those who are actually registered with UNRWA, and therefore in other counts the numbers of Palestinian refugees are higher (see, e.g., BADIL 2016–2018). Even so, based only on figures of the UN, well over one quarter of refugees in the world today are Palestinian. This fact alone should be indicative of the need to consider UNRWA and Palestinian refugees more systematically in migration studies.

Palestine refugees are also relevant to our understanding of the UN, a feature that can be overlooked in the overwhelmingly dominant framings that treat the issue in terms relating to the region of the Middle East, nationalism, or a conflict between “Jews” and “Arabs,” as opposed to the outcome of a tacit international agreement of the world’s powerful states that has been sustained through the United Nations in a paradoxical way, given the UN is also the site of the human rights revolution (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2020, 109–110). One way to begin to cut into this would be to recognize that the UN, and its predecessor the League of Nations, had an interest and played a direct role in the so-called Question of Palestine from the earliest moments of their organizational formations (UNISPAL 2021a).

Of course, neither the League members, nor the founding state members of the UN General Assembly, looked the same as the UN General Assembly looks now, given that large parts of the world were under colonial rule. In keeping with this colonial reality, between 1917 and 1947 Palestine, as a former territory under Ottoman rule, was entrusted by the League of Nations to British administration as part of its system of mandates. It has been observed that the mandate system worked less to dismantle colonialism than to reproduce it (Anghie 2006). In the case of Palestine, the British, with the support of the then self-governing powers that made up the world system, incorporated

the Balfour Declaration, calling for “the establishment in Palestine of a national home for the Jewish People” into the Mandate for Palestine. This allowed for Jewish immigration mostly from countries of Eastern Europe at the same time as the Palestinian Arab (Christian and Muslim) population in Palestine was demanding independence (UNISPAL 2021a). By 1947, amid growing tensions, the British turned the future of Palestine over to the newly formed UN, and the UN General Assembly in Resolution 181 (II) proposed partitioning Palestine into two independent states, Jewish and Arab, with Jerusalem as the capital (UNISPAL 2021a). Though this plan never came to be, it lingers on in relation to the idea of a “two-state solution” (Lustick 2019).

Summing up the decades preceding and following the partition plan, Columbia University-based historian Rashid Khalidi, a Palestinian-American, holds that

the modern history of Palestine can best be understood in these terms: as a colonial war waged against the indigenous population, by a variety of parties, to force them to relinquish their homeland to another people against their will.

2020, 9

Indeed, Palestinian Arabs, who remained a demographic majority in the area until the late 1940s, viewed the UN partition plan as unacceptable and unfair, for it threatened the geographical integrity of Palestine and they disagreed with the manner in which Palestine was to be divided (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2020, 66). Hostility between Arabs and Jews mounted in Palestine, and civil war broke out. On May 15, 1948, an independent state of Israel was declared and the British Mandate came to an end. As a result, open warfare between the surrounding Arab states and Israel erupted (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2020, 66). By the end of the war, more land had been taken by Israel than had been allotted under the partition plan (UNISPAL 2021a). Nonetheless, Israel rapidly gained the recognition of both of the world’s superpowers: the United States and the Soviet Union. Israeli leaders immediately indicated that the new state belonged to all the Jewish people around the world and invited immigration with the promise of citizenship. This is codified as the Israeli state’s “law of return” (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2020, 66).

The events of 1948 are subject to very different national narratives on the part of Palestinians and Israelis. For many Israelis, the years 1947 and 1948 are seen as a period in which the birth of a new state served as an implicit form of reparation for European Nazism and the genocidal horror of the Holocaust (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2020, 67). In contrast, for most Palestinians, the year

1948 represents a disaster (in Arabic the *Nakba*) characterized by well over half of the Arab population being violently uprooted, losing homes and property, and becoming stateless refugees within and outside of mandatory Palestine (Abu-Lughod and Sa'di 2007).

In coming to comprise now one of the world's largest and oldest refugee groups, Palestinian national identity has centered around the loss of homeland, the longing to return and the desire for self-determination. This is symbolized in the Palestinian quest for the "right of return" as recognized in UN General Assembly Resolution 194 (III) of 1949, which affirms the rights of Palestine refugees to return and to receive restitution (UNISPAL 2021b). In the same year, UNRWA, the Palestine refugee agency, came into being. UNRWA took as its focus Palestine refugees, "whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict" (UNRWA 2009).

As we know from the more than seven decades since, the situation of Palestine refugees became further entrenched through a series of wars in the region (in 1956, 1967, 1973 and 1982) that reconfigured greater control of the land in favor of the state of Israel. "Peace" has proven elusive, and notably, even high-profile efforts such as the 1993 Oslo Accords did not even deal with refugees. Successive Israeli leaders have portrayed Palestine refugees as the responsibility of the Arab states in which they reside, rather than of Israel (Masalha 2003, 1–2). Backed by powerful states including the USA, in the context of the UN Israel has faced no serious consequences for denying the right of return, making the UN a paradoxical space in which human rights are affirmed for some and denied for others (Abu-Laban and Bakan 2020, 109–128).

In such circumstances, the refugee situation became multigenerational. Hence, the descendants of 1948 refugees (notably along the male, not female line) came to be included as Palestine refugees by UNRWA, as did those forcibly displaced after 1967 (UNRWA 2009). This brings to the fore the need to consider the protracted nature of the situation of Palestine refugees, their comparative vulnerability and the increasingly evident weaknesses of UNRWA within the context of the UN.

The Comparative Vulnerability of Palestinian Refugees and UNRWA Limitations

The UNHCR defines a "protracted" refugee situation as "one in which 25,000 or more refugees from the same nationality have been in exile for five consecutive years or more in a given host country" (UNHCR 2019, 22). Key to a protracted

situation is that neither prospects for local integration (or resettlement) nor repatriation are likely (Costello 2017, 719). For Palestine refugees, access to citizenship and the rights associated with citizenship in other states has largely been denied, making it a protracted situation. However, even if such access were granted, it is not the easy fix that is sometimes portrayed.

For example, in the (now largely shelved) 2020 peace plan, dubbed by then US President Donald Trump as “the deal of the century,” the Palestinian right of return is presented as unrealistic (Trump White House 2020, 31). In keeping with Israel’s long-held position, the responsibility for refugee integration is portrayed as lying with the majority Arab states where Palestine refugees reside, and the only site of solution (Trump White House 2020, 31). However, the presumed dichotomy between citizenship and the right of return is overstated when considering the voices and long-held perspectives of Palestinian refugees themselves.

Qualitative research is instructive in this regard. Recent interviews conducted with Palestinians holding American citizenship, Jordanian citizenship as well as stateless Palestinians show across cases that they “do not see that the acquisition of formal citizenship elsewhere as meaning that they can no longer claim return or that they somehow lose it” (Bastaki 2020, 171). Moreover, as Bastaki more broadly argues, the understanding of Palestinians themselves

challenges state-centric discourses about what citizenship means in the Palestinian case, and possibly for other refugee situations where the refugees still desire to return home after being resettled.

2020, 171

In point of fact, the vast majority of Palestinians are *de jure* stateless or hold ambiguous nationality status (Institute on Statelessness and Inclusion 2014, 132), making this kind of qualitative work useful for showing the serious gap between the discourses of state actors (represented in the UN) and the stateless people they may speak about (who were never intended to have representation in this intergovernmental organization).

That the United Nations itself is an organization that has largely been about the representation of states, and the will of powerful states, is also confirmed by the dynamics surrounding the 2011 bid of Palestine for statehood in the General Assembly, and the continued dominance of the Security Council. Additionally, for Palestine refugees coming under UNRWA specifically, there are three main ways that they have been rendered comparatively vulnerable in addition to the state-centric representational mechanisms in the UN. These relate to institutions, resources and ideology. Each will be discussed in turn.

First, a key way in which Palestine refugees have been rendered comparatively vulnerable has to do with the *institutional bifurcation of UNRWA and UNHCR*. Since its founding, UNHCR was conceptualized as an organization aimed at providing protection to refugees and seeking solutions worldwide; UNRWA does not engage in advocacy and protection but was rather founded as a services provider organization specifically for Palestinian refugees (Hanafi 2014, 3). In particular, UNRWA was designed to assume the emergency relief that had initially been carried out by the International Committee of the Red Cross, the League of the Red Cross Societies and the American Friends Service Committee (Bocco 2009, 231). In keeping with this role, UNRWA has never been at the forefront of pushing for the Palestinian right of return as contained in UN General Assembly Resolution 194, and it has not been a player in discussions of peace or the advancement of a just and durable solution to the situation of refugees (Bocco 2009, 231–232).

With time it has also become apparent that while UNRWA has benefited Palestinians in certain ways (such as in having more regularized access to education), it has been detrimental in other ways. A prime example is that in practice, Palestine refugees have been excluded from UNHCR's 1951 convention definition of a refugee and attendant protections (Irfan 2017, 18). A major contemporary issue indicating the problematic division between UNRWA and UNHCR concerns the situation facing Palestinian refugees in Syria since the start of the civil war in 2011. Dire conditions in camps have forced many to flee to other countries and/or become internally displaced. Of an estimated 570,000 Palestinian refugees in Syria in 2019, only 320,400 were registered with UNRWA (Al Rimmawi and Kittaneh 2021, 3). Of those 570,000 refugees, 450,000 have been internally displaced and are in need of emergency assistance, and some 120,000 fled Syria, some perishing en route or facing uneven reception and even exclusion in neighboring states or European countries, because Palestinian refugees from Syria are stateless (Al Rimmawi and Kittaneh 2021, 3–5).

A second way in which Palestine refugees are vulnerable has to do with *support and resources*. UNRWA from the start existed only through the support of the General Assembly and depended on state contributions, just as UNHCR did. Both UNRWA and UNHCR required renewal of their mandate every three years, although this requirement for renewal was abolished for UNHCR in 2003 (Irfan 2017, 16). Having to renew its mandate so frequently makes it difficult for UNRWA to engage in longer-term planning, even though the Palestine refugee situation shows no signs of resolution after more than seven decades. Additionally, garnering state contributions has become an ever more competitive field in which UNRWA, UNHCR and IOM, which as noted has been affiliated with the UN since 2016, all make cases (Thorvaldsdottir and Patz 2021).

The number of forcibly displaced people globally has been growing over the 2010s as well, reaching a new record level in 2020. As numbers have grown, UNHCR has also faced financial challenges (Abu-Laban 2021).

Moreover, it has been decades since UNRWA has had sufficient funding; the last time UNRWA had full funding for its programs was in 1986 (Irfan 2017, 16). More graphically, UNRWA's vulnerable financial situation was thrown into sharp relief in 2018 when the USA, the agency's main donor since 1949, suddenly withdrew financial support to the organization's budget of about one billion US dollars under President Trump. Given that the USA gave 350 million US dollars in 2017, the 2018 decision clearly placed in jeopardy the education, healthcare and social services of millions of Palestine refugees registered with the organization (Hindy 2018).

The US re-engagement in multilateralism and the corresponding restoration of funding to UNRWA under President Joe Biden has not alleviated matters, as clearly attested to by UNRWA's Commissioner General in November 2021. This is because in 2021, the United Kingdom, also historically a major donor, cut its contribution by half. The dwindling contribution reflected a decision to reduce its overall aid budget but was also echoed and amplified by an even larger reduction from Gulf states since 2019 (Wintour 2021). Needless to say, in addition to creating an existential crisis for UNRWA, such yearly shortfalls have also meant that teachers and healthcare workers (in the COVID-19 pandemic no less) – among them many refugees – are not getting paid, and the decline in services has contributed to a sense of hopelessness among refugees (Wintour 2021).

The dynamics around resources cannot, however, be fully understood without also considering the third and final factor relating to the comparative vulnerability of Palestinian refugees and of UNRWA, which has to do with some deeply rooted *ideological factors and even mythmaking*. In justifying cuts, a key argument made by the Trump administration was that UNRWA's "way of doing business" was flawed because the only Palestine refugees that should be counted are those that were there when the agency was created in 1949. In other words, descendants should not count (DeYoung, Eglash and Balousha 2018). Instead, UNRWA was presented as bloated, and most Palestine refugees as some combination of "false" and, by extension, "undeserving." It can be noted that such charges have an eerie parallel in the dismissals of certain leaders and publics in Europe and North America leveled against refugees falling under the UN Convention definition for being "economic migrants," "bogus" or "asylum shoppers" (Smith 2019). Such discourses need to be continually debunked by refugee-serving organizations and scholars. However, the fact that in many countries both leaders and publics may have little knowledge of Palestinians or may hold negative and stereotyped views of this maligned group (Abu-Laban

and Bakan 2021b) makes it harder to foster a more clear-headed understanding of UNRWA and refugees.

In point of fact, the charges that were leveled against UNRWA by former President Trump fail to acknowledge that UNHCR also recognizes and counts refugees across generations in protracted situations. This is because in such conditions, a durable political solution is not found, thus making refugee-hood intergenerational. Moreover, in these situations, the impacted refugee group typically becomes largely dependent on international aid (Costello 2017, 719). This has also been stated by successive organizational heads of UNRWA, most recently in 2021 when UNRWA Commissioner General Philippe Lazzarini noted that:

it is not UNRWA that is perpetuating refugee statehood. Refugee statehood is perpetuated by the absence of a political solution, and there is no Palestinian, I promise you, that wants to remain a refugee after such a long time.

Quoted in WINTOUR 2021

In addition to the problematic assertion of perpetuating refugeehood, UNRWA has also been uniquely attacked with charges that it employs or benefits “terrorists” or promotes hatred (in particular of Israel or Jews) through school textbook choice (see Lindsay 2009). Such accusations were given credibility by the Trump administration and are echoed by right-wing politicians in Israel, Republican members of the US Congress and pro-Israel groups such as UN Watch. When combined, such a chorus effectively creates an ongoing atmosphere in which the work of the organization is constantly delegitimized (Berg and Jensehaugen 2021). Again in the words of UNRWA’s Lazzarini:

Every year we have tens of schools that are rewarded by the British Council for the quality of their education. By investing in the education of more than 500,000 boys and girls in the region, we are not only investing in the future but in the stability of the region.... We are subject sometimes to vicious political attacks normally through the lens of the school curriculum, but in reality it is because there is a naive view that if the agency is weakened or eliminated then an obstacle to lasting stability will have been addressed.

Quoted in WINTOUR, 2021

It can be observed that Palestine refugees continue to wait for a just response to their plight. But weakening, defunding or dismantling UNRWA will not make Palestinian refugees disappear, nor will their claim to the right of return, which

is grounded in international law, disappear (Berg and Jensehaugen 2021). However, the fact that this “naive view” carries weight at this moment raises profound questions about the UN as it moves beyond its 75th year.

UNRWA and the Implications and Lessons for the UN@75 and Beyond

There are practical, political and ethical implications and lessons that flow from a consideration of UNRWA and the United Nations since 1945 and from the lack of resolution to the so-called Question of Palestine and the Palestine refugee issue. When brought together, these considerations raise compelling questions for both researchers and practitioners of migration who are concerned about refugees, as well as those concerned about the future of the UN and international governance.

At a practical level, the case of UNRWA raises some profound questions concerning the gap between a UN agency that is repeatedly given a mandate by the UN General Assembly (because the UN has neither resolved the so-called Question of Palestine nor found a just and durable solution for Palestine refugees) and what individual member states do in relation to funding. The 2010s have proven to be inauspicious for the refugee agency concerned with Palestine refugees, and the responses from traditional donors have created a situation in which the long-standing problem of being unable to plan beyond a limited time horizon has combined with dramatic financial shortfalls for the agency. This is also in a very immediate sense a humanitarian issue, and the failure to sufficiently support UNRWA is in effect a decision of the international community not to provide for the humanitarian needs of refugees.

It is true there may possibly be reforms – for example to the funding model – that could improve the situation (UNRWA 2021). However, the last few years have shown us that funding to UNRWA, even among long-time large donors, is now making a “jack-in-the-box” appearance and disappearance. That this financial instability has put UNRWA, in the words of its Commissioner General, on the “brink of collapse” (UNRWA 2021) raises a serious question that needs to be asked: What would happen if there was no UNRWA? Here, it can be noted that refugees falling under UNRWA’s mandate are in five areas: Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, West Bank and Gaza. The combined impacts of Israeli occupation in the West Bank and Gaza, as well as growing numbers of displaced people and refugees in the region as a result of the Syrian civil war and growing numbers of refugees in Jordan and Lebanon, make it unlikely that the function UNRWA performs, however insufficient for existing needs, can be replaced.

When combined with the situation of Yemen, and the fallout from the US-led wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the humanitarian implications of letting UNRWA collapse would be staggering for the entire region. It is striking that in the litany of attacks on UNRWA we see today, there is no attention to this, nor to the historically unsupported understanding that somehow UNRWA has created the Palestine refugees.

There are also political implications in what is happening to UNRWA that pertain to the United Nations as a whole. In this sense, the case of UNRWA, which at first glance might seem trivial, should actually be treated as a “canary in the coal mine” for the UN at 75 and beyond. At one level, the traditional support given to UNRWA was reflective of a consensus among powerful actors to support multilateralism and the postwar international architecture including human rights and dignity. This is clear from what the 1945 UN Charter envisions as the purpose of the organization, which depends in turn on international cooperation and support for the UN and its various agencies and bodies to harmonize goals. Dramatic changes such as we are seeing with UNRWA coming to the point of collapse raise even larger questions about the viability of the refugee regime, the viability of being able to deal with international problems amicably and with success, and even about the viability of the UN itself.

The attack and withdrawal from UNRWA by former US President Trump signaled a larger retreat from multilateralism as well as US leadership in relation to the vision of the UN Charter, and it also clearly opened doors for other countries to do the same, even if under President Biden US support for UNRWA has shifted back to the *status quo ante*. It is true that in even reaching its 50th anniversary back in 1995, the United Nations accomplished something that was not achieved by its predecessor the League of Nations, but even then seasoned analysts highlighted that reforms were needed (Knight 1995). The case of UNRWA in many ways signals the uneasy place nonstate actors (Palestinians, Indigenous peoples, stateless people) face in an organization that was built on the supremacy of the Westphalian state. Does responding to this require reform or a more radical re-envisioning of international governance?

The answer to this may lie in how one responds to the profound ethical implications that the case of UNRWA carries as a window on some of the most disadvantaged groups in the world system, and how they can be left even further behind. The existence of the Question of Palestine, as well as of Palestine refugees, is intimately connected to powerful states and international institutions designed in their image. Critical scholars in the field of migration studies have made the important point that few analysts addressing refugees have connected the flows and massive displacement we are witnessing today with a wider temporal context that takes into account the institutions and power

dynamics of colonial legacies (Nyers 2019). This understanding is also relevant in addressing the unresolved Question of Palestine as well as the status of Palestinian refugees today. The UN (like the League of Nations before it) is an institution shaped by colonial realities and their legacies. Powerful states of the United Nations have played and continue to play a part in creating this world in which Palestinians are among the oldest and largest groups of refugees. There is then an ethical case for continuing to support their human needs, even if there has never been more than a modicum of support for the most desperate. There is also a case for not continuing to place discussions of just resolutions to their plight “on the back burner.”

We know that the member states of the UN have been unable or unwilling to actually resolve the plight of Palestine refugees, and increasingly they are leaving UNRWA to simply languish. Imagining a UN that could productively support and justly respond to Palestine refugees is an exercise worthy of collective consideration by scholars and practitioners alike. This could provide real clues about what would need to change to enable a form of international governance that might work better with civil society actors as well as those who have been denied a state, who flee states or who are stateless. Whether that envisioning takes the track of reform or radical change, the case of UNRWA carries much relevance for the UN and its future.

Conclusion

It is clear that in reaching and going beyond its 75th year, the United Nations has passed a milestone never accomplished by its predecessor. At a time when there are many other international organizations – from the European Union to the G20 – it remains the case that the United Nations is also seen by many in civil society as representative of the “international community” (see Shepherd 2015) and that it has garnered at least some degree of legitimacy (Dellmuth and Tallberg 2015). To put it differently, given its wide degree of representation from world states, and its longevity, the United Nations serves as a symbol of the promise and possibility of international cooperation.

As this chapter has shown, coterminous with the founding years of the UN has been the Question of Palestine, proposals for partition, Palestine refugees and the formation of UNRWA. By centering UNRWA in relation to discussions of refugees and refugee governance, this chapter has shown how UNRWA’s formation a year in advance of the UNHCR led to the world’s refugees falling under two different UN agencies and mandates. The consequence has been that both UNRWA and Palestine refugees are comparatively vulnerable and

subject to ideological attacks. The lessons learned from this discussion – in practical, political and ethical terms – are thus put to the international community, practitioners and scholars. So too are the imperatives of fairness, justice and multilateralism.

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