



Kohelet Policy Forum (R.A.)
8 Am Ve'olamo Street
Jerusalem, Israel 9546306
office@kohelet.org.il
www.kohelet.org.il

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Is UNRWA's hereditary refugee status for Palestinians unique?

Summary: UNRWA's claim that their hereditary refugee status for Palestinians is not unique is simply untrue. There is no parallel and no precedent, even in protracted conflict situations, for the manner in which UNRWA transfers the "registered refugee" status, automatically, through the generations, while refusing to take any actions that would end this status. While UNHCR provides certain services on a case-by-case basis to the children of refugees, it does not make refugee status hereditary. This is one of many differences in UNRWA's treatment of its population from the general practices used by UNHCR. All these differences are designed by UNRWA to maximize the population counted as "Palestine Refugees" and perpetuate their status.

For almost 70 years, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) has created a unique category of "registered refugee" status - one that is automatically passed down to one's descendants. Under UNRWA's rules, the children and grandchildren of a Palestine refugee, and all their descendants thereof, are automatically considered 'refugees from Palestine'. Amid ongoing criticism of UNRWA's role in purposefully perpetuating the Palestinian "refugee" problem, the agency has attempted to obfuscate its policy. UNRWA has claimed that its hereditary refugee practice is not unique, and is also practiced by the main international refugee agency, UNHCR. This background paper aims to clarify this issue.

There are two separate UN agencies in charge of aiding refugees: the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (**UNHCR**) and the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (**UNRWA**). UNRWA was established in December 1949 and UNHCR in December 1950. UNHCR is responsible for all refugees except those from Mandatory Palestine, who fall with UNRWA's exclusive jurisdiction.

The UNHCR determines refugee status based on criteria from international law, in particular, **the Refugee Convention from 1951**, which defines a refugee as "A person who owing to a well-founded fear of being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion, is outside the country of his nationality and is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to avail himself of the protection of that country; or who, not having a nationality and being outside the country of his former habitual residence as a result of such events, is unable or, owing to such fear, is unwilling to return to it."

In certain cases, UNHCR gives refugee **services** - but not **status** - to the immediate family of a refugee but it does so in a manner that significantly differs from UNRWA's policy:

1. It is **not automatic** - it is based on a case-by-case review of whether the actual situation merits it. When it does, UNHCR gives certain services to the children of refugees. UNHCR does not automatically add the children and grandchildren of refugees to the **count of refugees** and does not automatically define them as refugees. Even if a child of refugees is given refugee services, the grandchild will not be eligible for status or services. UNRWA, on the other hand, automatically grants such children refugee status, resulting in **exponential growth** of refugee numbers.
2. UNHCR does not define as refugees people who acquired new citizenship. The Refugee Convention of 1951 has a cessation clause, which clearly says that a person ceases to be a refugee if he acquires a new citizenship. UNRWA acts differently: More than 2 million 'Palestine Refugees' hold **Jordanian citizenship**, most of whom have been born in Jordan and have lived there their entire lives and are still called 'refugees'. In addition, based on recent official census, probably 2/3 to ¾ of the 1 million refugees registered by UNRWA in **Lebanon and Syria** have left those countries over the decades, with many acquiring citizenships of western countries. Yet, UNRWA refuses to check their situation and take them off its registration rolls. UNHCR tracks individual refugees and takes them off its rolls as soon as they have acquired a status, such as third country citizenship, that ends their refugee status. This is another reason UNRWA's numbers never decline.
3. UNHCR does not define as 'refugees' people who are **internally displaced**, that is, who have moved within the same territory. "Palestine refugees" living in the West Bank or Gaza Strip were in fact internally displaced since they have **never crossed the internationally recognized border** of Mandatory Palestine. UNRWA considers these people as refugees, and their children and grandchildren, and all their descendants, as well.
4. UNHCR makes efforts to ensure refugees are **resettled or locally integrated** where they are staying, thereby ending their refugee status. UNHCR does not exclusively promote repatriation as sole solution, as UNRWA does, but also rehabilitation in country of refuge or in third countries. Repatriation, rehabilitation and resettlement are considered equally legitimate means of ending a refugee status. They are promoted based on expediency – that is which could achieve the goal of ending the refugee status most quickly. UNRWA refuses to promote local rehabilitation and resettlement, and actually makes no effort to end the individual refugee status of the Palestinians, arguing that "it's not in its mandate". It actually is. This is the main reason that UNRWA's numbers grow exponentially whereas the numbers of refugees in other, shorter duration, protracted refugee situations, decline over time.
5. UNHCR's longest significant number of recorded refugees is from Afghanistan - from the early 1980s. UNHCR does not have in its records refugees that have been **defined as such for 70 years**. UNRWA does. Such persistence of refugee status has no parallel.

UNRWA reports of 5.5 million refugees. These are the descendants of roughly 700,000 registered Palestine refugees from the war of 1948. These numbers include more than 2 million 'refugees' who hold Jordanian citizenship. They also include a larger number of 'refugees' who live in the West Bank and Gaza strip: They are citizens of the 'Palestinian Authority' or 'State of Palestine' and at the same time claim to be '**refugees from Palestine**'. According to the rules applied by UNHCR, **these people are not refugees**. UNRWA's claim that their policy is identical to UNHCR's is a lie and shows that they are not a neutral humanitarian organization but rather a political actor aimed at perpetuating the Palestinian refugee problem.