

UN Chutzpah and the Refugee Racket

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Between the national security cuts in the sequester and the new scrutiny to which foreign aid is being subjected in a time of budget belt-tightening, those abroad looking for American taxpayer cash have something of a hill to climb. And just like with any foreign affairs issue, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict commands its fair share of attention. With regard to foreign aid to Middle East governments, it can be argued that while such aid should come with strings, those checks should still be signed lest rogue regimes fill the vacuum with their own cash and influence.

This is certainly the argument that usually prevails when it comes to the Palestinian Authority. Though some in Congress considered punishing the PA for its unilateral declaration of statehood at the UN, even Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has argued against cutting their funding, which could risk the collapse of Mahmoud Abbas's government and speed up the rise of Hamas in the West Bank. But there's another Palestinian interest group in Washington this week to lobby for taxpayer cash, and it will likely not find nearly so sympathetic an audience: the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), [which](#) has worked for decades to keep Palestinians in squalid refugee camps and radicalizing schools while helping to prop up Hamas, provide terrorists with jobs, and fleece American taxpayers—all while utilizing a definition of “refugee” at odds with American law and practice. Josh Rogin reports on his interview with UNRWA commissioner general Filippo Grandi:

Grandi said that U.S. contributions to UNRWA, which are voluntary, are needed more than ever due to the dire situation of Palestinian refugees caught up in the Syria crisis. Right now, the automatic budget cuts known as sequestration require that all accounts be cut evenly, but Congress is expected to provide the State Department flexibility in deciding what to cut. Grandi said he feels confident State won't choose to disproportionately cut money for UNRWA.

UNRWA and the refugee issue have been in the news over the past year, as Illinois Senator Mark Kirk has sought to clarify the actual number of refugees from the standpoint of American policy and how they are counted. It's controversial because UNRWA counts refugees differently than the U.S. does, and in fact differently than other UN agencies do for other refugee populations. Neither UNRWA nor its supporters at the State Department want to conduct such a count, because it would reveal that UNRWA is overcounting refugees by several hundred percent in order to gain funding for them. American taxpayers might wonder why UNRWA is allowed to make up its own rules in order to gain access to more of their money. They might also object to the fact that UNRWA has thrust itself into the conflict as a partisan actor and not as an "independent" or "nonpolitical" aid organization, and ask why they should have to fund its efforts to delegitimize Israel and prolong the conflict on which it depends for its money.

In May 2012, Rogin [reported](#) on the initial controversy. The State Department criticized Kirk's legislation, saying Foggy Bottom "cannot support legislation which would force the United States to make a public judgment on the number and status of Palestinian refugees." The State Department then expressly contradicted itself by telling Rogin that there were 5 million Palestinian refugees and that the State Department agrees with UNRWA in how to count them, despite being inconsistent with American law. In other words, the State Department absolutely believes the U.S. can and should "make a public judgment on the number and status of Palestinian refugees," as long as that judgment accords with what these individual officials believe, and that the outcome of certain final-status issues should be pre-judged, as long as those issues are pre-judged in the Palestinians' favor.

Of course, there's a reason those considered by UNRWA to be refugees need aid—and it's not the behavior of Israel or the U.S. Leila Hilal of the New America Foundation told Rogin that (emphasis mine) "to honestly determine which Palestinians remain refugees, one would have to wade into a long, complicated legal and factual analysis about which Palestinians in the region *have adequate national protection that would end their refugee status.*" And a State Department official told Rogin that Palestinian refugees remain under refugee status "until they return home or are resettled in a third country."

That is, as long as the Arab states in the region mistreat them, the Palestinians will remain eligible for American "refugee" cash, which will be distributed by agencies who work with the regimes responsible for this racket. As you can see, it isn't easy to justify making exceptions to American budget cuts to preserve cash that incentivizes and rewards Arab states' abuse of Palestinian migrants and is distributed [to and by](#) Hamas and its allies. But I suppose you can't blame UNRWA for trying.

