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How UNRWA prevents and prevented Reintegration

Executive Summary

The idea of resettlement of refugees in Arab counties was firmly understood to be the only viable approach from 1949 through the early 1950s. This is in spite of countless public pronouncements regarding a balanced approach that would include repatriation, resettlement, and ‘rehabilitation’ or ‘reintegration.’

This testimony reviews how the term “reintegration” had been used only once by the United Nations, in September 1948, in connection to the refugees.¹ In the coming years it would become one of the linchpins for the United Nations and other NGO’s who dealt with the Palestinian refugees.

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The Question of ‘Reintegration’ and its implications

1. United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 393 (V) on 2 December 1950. The Resolution stated:

   without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948, the reintegration of the refugees into the economic life of the Near East, either by repatriation or resettlement, is essential in preparation for the time when international assistance is no longer available, and for the realization of conditions of peace and stability in the area.²

2. The Resolution went on to direct UNRWA “to establish a reintegration fund which shall be utilized for projects requested by any government in the Near East and approved by the Agency for the permanent re-establishment of refugees and their removal from relief.” The AFSC had discussed reintegration for close to a year, but with its adoption by the United Nations

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² United Nations General Assembly. Resolution 393 (V), of 2 December 1950. For the political background to Resolution 393 (V) see Gabbay, ‘Arab-Jewish Conflict’, 386-393.
it became an international goal. Defining reintegration, however, was subject to changing geopolitical contingencies.

3. Throughout 1949 and 1950 a series of developments fundamentally reshaped the global scene and changed the Western, and especially American, perspectives on the Middle East generally, and the Palestine Arab refugee question specifically. Western defense interests had been given new shape and urgency by the Communist takeover of northern China in January 1949, the creation of NATO in April, and the detonation of the Soviet Union’s first atomic weapon in August. Cold War issues began to dominate foreign policy planning as never before, and reached new levels with the issuing in April 1950 of NSC-68, a classified national security report which situated the conflict with the Soviet Union as central and existential for the West, and which moved the United States closer towards a policy of containment.\(^3\) The beginning of the Korean War in June 1950 also shifted American priorities still further, particularly in the areas of military alliances and the conduct of the war through the United Nations.

4. For the United States and Great Britain, Middle East affairs, including arms control efforts such as the Tripartite Declaration and refugee policy, were

being viewed increasingly through the lenses of superpower competition and anti-communism.\textsuperscript{4} Foreign aid would also be restructured in view of the larger Cold War situation, such as through the U.S. Mutual Security Act of 1951, and regional defense projects such as ‘Middle East Command’ and the ‘Middle East Defense Organization’ would be launched.\textsuperscript{5} The October 1951 proposal for a ‘Middle East Defense Command’ relied heavily on Western basing rights in the Canal Zone but came a week after Egypt repudiated the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty of 1936, and the Anglo-Egyptian Agreement of 1899. Egypt quickly rejected the new proposal.\textsuperscript{6} Stable relations with both Israel, which was moving away from its brief early position of official neutrality towards the West, and with the Arab states, which were feared could fall under Communist sway, then became central concerns for both the State Department and the National Security Council.\textsuperscript{7}

5. In November 1951 the American Chiefs of Middle East Missions again met in Istanbul but with a completely different strategic outlook. In a document generally concerned with power politics, the threat of Communism, and the

\textsuperscript{4} For George McGhee’s comments on the perception of Communism in the Middle East during this period see his \textit{On the Frontline in the Cold War: An Ambassador Reports}. (Westport, CT, Greenwood, 1997), 48-50.


\textsuperscript{7} Hahn, ‘Caught in the Middle’, 137-142.
need to strengthen Greek, Turkey, Israel and the Arab regimes, the Palestine Arab refugee issue found a central place. It was stated, with some apparent relief, by the participants that while during the course of 1950 “the Arabs have not abandoned the principle of repatriation, and may be expected to reaffirm it, they show signs of becoming more realistic as to the obstacles to any satisfactory implementation of this principle, and are giving serious thought to the alternative of compensation and to the concept of reintegration.”

6. The conference also expressed some satisfaction that Israel had voiced interest in resolving the issue of the refugees’ blocked bank accounts, which was regarded as evidence of Israeli ‘good will.’ But the official American orientation towards the refugee issue was stated clearly, “The hard core of approximately 800,000 refugees, on relief and in temporary shelter, constitutes a serious threat to stability, and an important impediment to peace between the Arab states and Israel.” With stability in mind, the report endorsed the goal of ‘reintegration’ but it also made clear that the term was being used in a specific sense with respect to UNRWA’s task “direct reintegration, especially in rural areas, financed by international funds.”

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recommended that “Reintegration should be approached as an economic undertaking and service to the refugees, and political issues should be kept to a minimum. There is great need to prepare the minds of 600,000 refugees to move from present locations near Palestine to new countries, new climates and new economies, and to encourage their acceptance by the publics of the countries to which they must move.”

7. The U.S. National Security Council concurred with the State Department. In a memorandum updating NSC-47/2 on U.S. policy towards Israel and the Arab states, State’s James E. Webb report to the Executive Secretary of the National Security Council, James S. Lay that UNRWA had not received full funding and was “perforce confined chiefly to relief measures and to very limited works projects.” But he added with regard to the Arab states’ “By their public acceptance of this resolution [creating UNRWA] and by private statements, Arab representatives have indicated that they regard resettlement of most of the refugees in Arab territory as inevitable.”

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10 U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States*, 1951, Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Webb) to the Executive Secretary, National Security Council (Lay), Third Progress Report on NSC-47/2, January 29, 1951, 18-19. Webb would go on to greater acclaim as the second administrator of NASA, under whose leadership U.S. manned space flight was first accomplished.
8. The same policies regarding resettlement were echoed a year later in a Top
Secret memorandum to the State Department’s Near Eastern Affairs bureau
from Donald C. Bergus, second secretary at the American Embassy in Beirut
and political advisor to the American representative to UNRWA. The
primary issues addressed in Bergus’s memorandum were refugee
compensation, resettlement, and regional defense. After speculations
regarding the political connections of American Jews to Israel, more
revealing of his own attitudes and those of the State Department, Bergus
noted that the Arab and Israeli concepts of compensation differed vastly.
Israel was willing to consider paying for real property that had been lost,
while the Arab states factored in damages. Bergus estimated that the Israeli
concept would entail about $500,000,000, while the Arab version would cost
many billions of dollars. Either way, “Ultimate reintegration of refugees
now on relief will require an additional expenditure of at last half a billion
dollars and the U.S. will probably have to pay most of this bill as well.” But
he added that “The political barriers to the UNRWA program have almost
been completely dissolved. The time has now come for us to press forward
with positive action on the refugee program to a point where receiving states
are fully convinced that refugee resettlement means a significant economic
development” 11
9. Reintegration, though vague, had become firmly understood as resettlement, at least in some official U.S. circles. Reflected the British understanding, Sir Henry Knight commented in July 1951 that “Reintegration is interpreted as assistance to refugees in finding homes and jobs,” an analysis that was tantamount to resettlement.\(^{12}\) This understanding harmonized with clues emanating from elsewhere throughout 1951 and 1952. Specifically the same sorts of tantalizing rumors regarding Arab states suddenly becoming willing to accept refugees were reaching the Advisory Committee as had been floated at the Lausanne Conference some two years earlier, only to be dashed just days later. \(^{13}\)

10. The appointment of John Blandford, Jr. as Director of UNRWA to replace Howard Kennedy was telling of the mindset regarding reintegration at the United Nations and its patrons. Rather than a military quartermaster like Kennedy, who specialized in operational logistics, Blandford been a manager at the Tennessee Valley Authority, administrator of the wartime National Housing Authority, deputy chief the United States Bureau of the

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\(^{12}\) FO 371/91417, EE 18211/19, Sir Henry Knight to Francis Evans, letter of 17 July 1951.

\(^{13}\) Compare FO 371/91417/345481, Sir Henry Knight to Francis Evans, 19 April 1951 with Knight’s follow up on 24 April 1951. For the negative of publicizing U.S. negotiations and potential agreements with Arab governments on refugee and development issues see Oral History Interview with Harry N. Howard, Washington, D.C., 5 June 1975 by Richard D. McKinzie [Consulted Thursday September 8, 2011], 92-93.
Budget and then the U.S. Economic Cooperation Administration in Greece, and a consultant to President Truman on the Marshall Plan.

11. But by mid-1951 the Advisory Committee, which presumably directed UNRWA’s overall strategy, was also becoming frustrated with the unfounded rumors regarding Arab willingness to accept refugee resettlement. Commenting on UNRWA Director John Blandford’s conversations with Iraqi officials, Sir Henry Knight commented “One of the Iraqi officials told Blandford that all the Arab States agree that the refugees must be resettled but not on who should ‘bell the cat’ by accepting refugees!”

Despite the frustrations, large-scale resettlement of Palestine Arab refugees remained the preferred American policy through the Suez Crisis.

12. Reintegration would be the paradigm of UNRWA and the international community for the next several years. On 26 January 1952 the United Nations General Assembly adopted Resolution 513 (VI) “which envisages the expenditure of US$ 50 million for relief and $200 million for reintegration over and above such contributions as may be made by local government, to be carried out over a period of approximately three years starting as of 1 July 1951.”

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14 F0 371/91417/345481, Sir Henry Knight to Francis Evans, 16 August 1951.
13. As part of the reintegration paradigm UNRWA, in tandem with the U.S. government, explored a variety of regional development projects. A primary focus for UNRWA, the United States, Israel and Jordan were comprehensive studies for developing regional water resources. State development was the explicit goal of these studies while refugee resettlement was implicit.

14. In all these the interests of Palestine Arab refugees, as opposed to those of the West and Arab states, were pushed to the background. The ‘envisaged’ $200 million had also not materialized. Reintegration, whether construed as resettlement or public works, was effectively dead, and UNRWA would concentrate thereafter on relief and in the 1960s, education. The changing geostrategic situation in the Middle East, particularly rising Egyptian nationalism, also culminated in the 1956 Suez War that ended large-scale regional development schemes by the West.17

15. In 1959 the connection between reintegration, regional development and the Palestine Arab refugee problem was raised briefly by United Nations Secretary General Dag Hammarskjold. In a report he suggested “The unemployed population represented by the Palestinian refugees should be regarded not as a liability but, more justly, as an asset for the future; it is a

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reservoir of manpower which in the desirable general economic
development will assist in the creation of standards for the whole population
of the area.”\textsuperscript{18} Even this mild and encouraging formula, which viewed
reintegration as a “fairly long process,” was rejected by the Arab states.
Hammarskjold was forced to insist publicly and privately that his proposal
had been misunderstood and that it did not intend for resettlement to be the
primary means of reintegration. He defended the proposal throughout 1959
but a letter from the Arab League rejecting reintegration effectively ended
the concept at the United Nations.\textsuperscript{19}

16. The collapse of UNRWA reintegration plans, and the regional development
schemes in which they were situated, brought about a difficult period for the
organization during the latter part of the 1950s.

17. UNRWA’s reintegration and regional development plans finally faltered.
UNRWA’s strategic shift to an education orientation, described above, was
met by calls from Western governments, especially the United States, for
cuts in relief expenditures. The United States Congress has periodically
complained about UNRWA’s costs but the focus has changed over the
decades. During the 1950s and 1960s “rectification” of the refugee roles

\textsuperscript{18} United Nations General Assembly, A/4121, Proposals for the Continuation of United Nations Assistance to
Palestine Refugees, Submitted by the Secretary General, para. 11, 15 June 1959.
\textsuperscript{19} A.W. Cordier and W. Foote, (eds.), \textit{Public Papers of the Secretaries General of the United Nations}, (New York,
were the primary concern. In 1960 Public Law 86-472 stated “It is the sense of the Congress that the earliest possible rectification should be made of the Palestine refugee rolls in order to assure that only bona fide refugees whose need and eligibility for relief have been certified shall receive aid from the Agency and that the President in determining whether or not to make United States contributions to the Agency should take into consideration the extent and success of efforts by the Agency and the host governments to rectify such relief rolls.”

18. All and all, the refugees’ narrative, which would become an integral part of the Palestinian national narrative as a whole, was completely crystallized less than a year and a half after their “exile.” They bore no responsibility whatsoever for their unfortunate fate; their own political processes and decisions, and those of their leaders, go unmentioned. The Arab states bear some responsibility, but it is not made clear whether that means in their failure to defeat Israel in war or in encouraging or facilitating the refugees’ flight. The United Nations bears ultimate responsibility for the situation, presumably by considering partition in 1947, and thus must maintain the refugees until the situation is resolved in their favor, by complete and total

20 United States Statutes at Large, Containing the Laws and Concurrent Resolutions Enacted During the Second Session of the Eighty-Sixth Congress of the United States of America, 1960, Volume 74, 137.
repatriation and compensation. The solutions demanded are clear and absolute, and arguably have not changed until this day.