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Plans for Mideast Peace UN Reform Needed for Palestinian Refugees by Peter Berkowitz

Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice may still salvage a shelf agreement - the articulation of a framework to inform future negotiations - before the next president takes office. But the Bush administration's prospects of achieving the full and final peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, that was their original intention in convening the November 2007 Annapolis conference, look increasingly dim.

Many Democrats fault this administration for undertaking too little too late to bring Israelis and Palestinians together, and believe that a key to progress in resolving the conflict between them depends on finding a larger role for the United Nations. Certainly our next president should focus on reforming the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East.

According to its Web site, the UNRWA "is a relief and human development agency, providing education, healthcare, social services and emergency aid to over 4.5 million refugees living in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and the Syrian Arab Republic." But UNRWA, which since its inception in 1950 has delivered indispensable relief but very little in the way of productive work, has also for nearly 60 years perpetuated opinions among the Palestinians that could hardly be better calculated to impoverish and embitter them, and subvert the achievement of the two-state solution that Annapolis envisaged.

To be sure, Annapolis was doomed for many reasons. Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, both of whom were politically weak in November 2007, are weaker today - with Mr. Olmert last week, amid multiple corruption scandals, announcing his intention to resign in mid-September. Israel can't afford to withdraw its army and internal security services from the West Bank without exposing the greater Tel Aviv area to Hamas rockets. But Mr. Abbas can't sign a political agreement that diminishes Palestinian sovereignty by allowing Israeli defense forces to operate routinely beyond the Green Line. And, not least, too many Arab leaders, who could provide the legitimacy and financial support to create a viable state in the West Bank, are unprepared to explain to their own people why Israel must retain sovereignty over even an inch of Jerusalem.

UNRWA is a more fundamental obstacle to peace because its very existence promotes the belief among Palestinians across the Middle East that a two-state solution is essentially unjust. By encouraging Palestinians to believe that the international community owes them

repatriation to the land their parents and grandparents fled when five Arab armies invaded Israel in 1948, the UNRWA faithfully carries out a U.N.-authorized policy toward Palestinians that runs contrary to U.N. policy in regard to the vast majority of the world's refugees.

For nearly 60 years, the United Nations has maintained a successful and respected organization for refugees apart from Palestinians - the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees. The UNHCR responds to refugee crises by seeking a mixture of voluntary repatriation, local integration and third-country resettlement. While it values repatriation, the UNHCR's aim is to enable refugees to become citizens somewhere as quickly as possible, with all the protections and privileges that citizenship bestows. In contrast, the U.N. has effectively eliminated local integration and third country resettlement as desirable or even possible outcomes for the Palestinian refugees, and instead has enshrined in the UNRWA's mission the 1950s promise of repatriation that was implicit in the resolution that established the agency.

Moreover, contrary to the policy that it generally applies to refugees, the U.N. regards Palestinian refugee status as transferable from parents to children without limit. This enables UNRWA to fuel the conflict with Israel by cultivating a trans-generational belief among Palestinians that the one-and-only solution to their plight consists in returning to homes and lands vacated more than half a century ago.

Finally, by providing welfare instead of work, the UNRWA has created incentives for Palestinians to remain dependent on the very international organization that is premised on resisting compromise with Israel.

Accordingly, America should seek to bring to an end the U.N. General Assembly's annual resolutions that, year after year, renew the UNRWA's mandate to reinforce the Palestinians' false hopes for a homecoming in Jerusalem, Haifa and the Galilee.

The answer, however, is not to abolish UNRWA. That, given the composition of the U.N. General Assembly, would be impractical and counterproductive.

Instead, the United States must persuade the General Assembly to fold the UNRWA into the UNHCR, where it belongs. The UNHCR has the political legitimacy and moral authority to change the UNRWA mandate from one focused on repatriating Palestinians to one determined to help Palestinians create homes and build a prosperous economy and a decent political order in a Palestinian state alongside Israel.

It would have been far less glamorous had the Bush administration's Annapolis conference focused on UNRWA reform. It would have also provided a far greater contribution to the long-term achievement of peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

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