

How the UN turned Palestinians into permanent refugees

When successful, American-born supermodels can be classified as 'refugees', something has gone very wrong.

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Three weeks ago, US president Donald Trump set the cat among the pigeons when he announced his plan to turn Gaza into a 'Riviera in the Middle East'. At a joint press conference with Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, Trump said America would take over Gaza, re-develop it and, most shocking of all, relocate Gaza's 2.2million Palestinians elsewhere, perhaps to Jordan and Egypt. He followed all this up this week by sharing an AI-generated music video on his Truth Social page. It depicted a futuristic 'Trump Gaza', complete with golden Trump statues and bearded belly dancers.



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Palestinians have responded to the White House's plan for their future with

understandable outrage. Like most other people the world over, they are fundamentally attached to the land in which they live. As one inhabitant told the *Guardian*, 'We would rather die here than leave this land'.

But here's the curious thing. The vast majority of those living in Gaza, those professing strong feelings of attachment to their homeland, are actually classified as 'refugees'. For all the international outrage over Trump's threat to turn Gaza's Palestinians into a displaced people, the truth is that the vast majority are already viewed and treated as such by the UN. Indeed, the refugee status of Palestinians is one of the unique features of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In 1948, a combination of the foundation of Israel and the Arab-Israeli war displaced around 750,000 Palestinians, turning them into refugees. Incredibly, nearly 80 years on, the number of Palestinians classified as refugees has actually increased, to nearly six million.

Compare this situation to that of the 11.4million Europeans displaced and classified as refugees after the Second World War. The UN High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) was set up to deal with the crisis in 1950. By 1954, millions had been successfully resettled, and the number still classified as refugees had fallen to below 200,000.



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At about the same time, at the insistence of Arab states, a second UN refugee organisation was established to deal specifically with the 750,000 Palestinian Arab refugees. It was called the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine

Refugees in the Near East, otherwise known as UNRWA.

UNRWA was only meant to exist temporarily, while the post-1948 refugee crisis was sorted out. Yet it's still going strong nearly 80 years later. Not only has it failed to tackle the original refugee crisis. It has also actively overseen an *800 per cent* increase in the number of Palestinian refugees it is responsible for.

UNRWA has played a central role in fuelling the conflict with Israel. In 1967, it unilaterally extended the definition of refugee to include third-generation descendants. And then, in 1982, it decided to include the descendants of all male Palestinians. Under UNRWA's unique classification rules, refugee status had become hereditary. It had effectively

created a permanent and perpetually expanding population of Palestinian refugees.

This cuts against the grain of international law, which says that once a refugee acquires citizenship in a country, he or she loses his or her refugee status. But for UNRWA, citizens in other countries can still be Palestinian refugees. Indeed, according to a recent UNRWA document, most of the two million refugees in Jordan have full citizenship there.



VIDEO

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To illustrate the absurdity of what has been happening, take the case of Mohamed Anwar Hadid. His father fled Nazareth in 1948 because he 'did not want the family to live under the Israeli occupation'. He ended up in California where he became a property developer building luxury mansions and hotels in Beverly Hills.

You might not have heard of Hadid. But you are likely to have heard of his daughters, supermodels Gigi and Bella Hadid, both of whom are American-born citizens. Bella, who reputedly earns up to \$20million a year, regularly posts anti-Israel sentiments on social media, and has been attending pro-Palestine rallies, chanting 'From the river to the sea'. Amazingly, the two sisters, their father and other members of the Hadid family are all still registered as Palestinian refugees with UNRWA.

That's not all. Under the auspices of the UN, people of Palestinian heritage the world over don't just have a permanent refugee status, they also have a so-called right of return.

Over several decades, the 'right of return' has allowed successive Palestinian political

leaders to continue a war against Israel by other means – by insisting on their right to return to land ‘occupied’ by Israel. No other group of refugees has been granted a similarly inalienable right of return.

For the Palestine Liberation Organisation, this right was the ‘foremost of Palestinian rights’. Hamas is equally attached to it. In 2018, it organised a massive protest along the border fences with Israel. The objective of this ‘great march of return’ was, according to Hamas’s then leader, Ismail Haniyeh, to ‘break the walls of the blockade, remove the occupation entity and return to all of Palestine’. No wonder novelist Amos Oz, the founder of Israel’s Peace Now movement, has argued that ‘the right of return is a euphemism for the liquidation of Israel’.

The twin issues of refugee status and the right of return have taken on enormous symbolic significance for Palestinians. They have also made, and will continue to make, any peace negotiations between Palestinians and Israelis inordinately difficult.

Now would be a good time to start reassessing Palestinians' permanent refugee status and the right of return. That way we might finally start taking some of the heat out of this interminable conflict.

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