

23.86x27.86	1	13	עמוד	the jerusalem post - front	22/01/2018	61976914-3
80790 - בנימין זאב הרצל - בהקשר לצינון -						

Changing the UNRWA narrative

• By ALEX BENJAMIN

Everyone knows the question about the sound made by a tree falling in the forest if nobody is around to hear it – but how about this one: if a clown poses a serious question, do you take it seriously?

It's been a difficult week. The US decision to cut \$65 million in aid to UNRWA represents the latest slap to the UN from the American administration. First it was withdrawal from UNESCO, then snubbing UN policy by supporting the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem, and now cuts in aid to UNRWA.

Unlike the previous two mentioned, these cuts will have a direct effect on Palestinian lives. On TV screens last week we were bombarded by images of Palestinian children collecting water, and the elderly getting bread. And UNRWA heads using their formidable PR skills to pull on everyone's heart-strings. News segments resembled long adverts, with sad music from charities rather than factual reporting. In short, it looked bad. Really bad. And advocates for Israel, like me, tend to get it with both barrels from European audiences.

It may sound cynical to put things in such a context. And I for one am not about to start blaming "the fake news media." But it is a problem. How can the American president expect to hold a sensible, measured conversation while trashing everything and everyone around him? Where his abrasive and clumsy New York style of politics that links aid to "respect" and seemingly has little to do with good will but everything to do with "what return I get on my 'investment'" jars so badly with people who aren't alpha-male "Manhattan" types who get his kind of lingo?

Meanwhile on the other hand you have a wholly defensive, emotional "think of the children" response from a UN agency.

There will be no mea-culpas on the UNRWA side. No analysis of what prompted this cut. Just two seemingly black and white positions to choose from. Of course things are seldom so simple.

I know it's hard in such an atmosphere but let us try to be truly objective here. First some context. With the exception of UNRWA, refugees wherever they are in the world are assisted by UNHCR, the UN High Commissioner for Refugees. This organization works in 130 countries with a staff of about 11,000. In 2016 it resettled 190,000 people. One of its core missions is "ending statelessness."

On the other hand UNRWA alone



THE GATE of an UNRWA office in Gaza. (Reuters)

handles the Palestinians. Unlike the UNHCR its mission isn't resettlement. A phrase such as "ending statelessness," as many have noted, would be anathema to it and is found nowhere on its website. Since 1950, UNHCR has tried to place refugees in permanent new situations, while since 1950 UNRWA has with its staff of 30,000 "helped" over five million Palestinian "refugees" to remain "refugees."

UNRWA has three times as large a staff as UNHCR – but helps far fewer people than the 17 million refugees UNHCR tries to assist. Second, it is not an unreasonable question to ask why the US is giving UNRWA two or three times as much as all Arab donors combined. Just to take an example, the immensely rich Qatar gave a grand total of one million dollars to UNRWA in 2016.

And this is the question that must be posed to UNRWA: will it perpetuate the Palestinian "refugee" problem forever rather than helping to solve it?

This important question is now on the table, but most people think the president and his entire administration are a bunch of clowns and cannot possibly be taken seriously.

And this prevailing thought masks and muddies underlying logic of the move, making rational conversation on it nigh on impossible.

Meanwhile, while all eyes are on

what the clowns' next shenanigans may be, UNRWA will carry on doing what UNRWA does best: using images of children and the elderly as cover for abject failure and refusal to help the resettlement of millions of Palestinians who continue to believe that they will return to a Palestinian state when Israel is ultimately and finally "dealt" with.

When sensitive issues arise we often get caught up in a smog of emotionality. Couple it with Trump's clownish chauvinism and you have what Londoners used to call a "pea souper" – a smog so dense you can't even see your hand.

What a genuine pity, because the US move asks one of the most pertinent and pressing questions: does continuing to give more money and resources to UNRWA take us any further forward in our search for a peaceful outcome? Or does it simply reinforce the entrenchment of an intractable Palestinian position.

It may help here to look at what Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas said just last week.

"The Jews didn't want to come to Palestine even after what they went through in Europe, with pogroms and even after the Holocaust. They didn't want to come but [Theodor] Herzl said that antisemitism served the purposes of Zionism. That way Europe and the Zionist movement profited twice – the

Europeans got rid of the Jews and the Zionists got to bring Jews here – that's what happened."

"This is a colonial enterprise that has nothing to do with Jewishness," Abbas told the Palestine Liberation Organization's Central Council at the opening of its two-day gathering. "The Jews were used as a tool under the concept of the promised land – call it whatever you want. Everything has been made up."

The Abbas we heard on Sunday was reflecting a movement that equates Palestinian nationalism with the negation of the Jewish state. And UNRWA is undoubtedly helping to perpetuate and support that position by keeping a refugee population, that is repeatedly fed these untruths, in a permanent state of limbo, waiting for something that will never happen. It's nothing short of tragic.

Changing this dynamic and narrative are central to unlocking a meaningful peace process. So while we may argue over the methodology used on such an abrupt cut (as we certainly have this week), we shouldn't shy away from the issues that such a shake-up affords us to properly dissect the situation as it is, in spite of the smog and distractions.

The author is the director of EIPA: Europe Israel Public Affairs, a multi-disciplined pro-Israel advocacy group based in Brussels, with offices in Paris and Berlin.