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UNRWA: the lifeline for Palestinian refugees

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Behind an underused full title and an often lesser known relief and development -organisation, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East – lies a largely unknown, extraordinary story. It would not be an exaggeration to say that if it had not been for UNRWA's foundational work over the past 70 years, many thriving Middle East societies, especially in the Gulf, would today look very different.

UNRWA began life as a humanitarian agency, providing the essentials of life for some 700,000 refugees - Palestinian as well as other ethnicities – who had fled the 1947-8 violence and needed help. Those who could manage for themselves never registered with it. For those who did, the ID card handed out to recipients entitled them to the basics: food, water, shelter, health and education.

It was meant to be a temporary body until conditions would enable the refugees to return home. That is why UNRWA's mandate is renewed by the UN General Assembly every three years. But, despite endless negotiations, the refugee issue remains one of the most intractable. UNRWA has been literally left to through the decades to deal with the consequences in the absence of a political solution.

Its political masters in the UNGA and among the refugee host and donor countries, including the UK – a stout supporter from the start – agree its work is indispensable. However faced with an inexorable rise in the refugee population, they disagree over any fundamental changes to the mandate or the services UNRWA delivers. For the host countries to act otherwise would be to accept that the refugees were there to stay, an



unpalatable option for fragile states like Jordan and Lebanon. The bottom line remains: whose responsibility is it to pay for the refugees, with no political solution on the horizon?

As arguments continue over who should pick up the bills, several generations of UNRWA staff – the vast majority of whom are themselves refugees – have quietly got on with the job of educating and taking care of those who remain in need. While UNRWA frequently has to respond to emergencies, as in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and Syria today, in practice it has transformed itself into a development agency. In the jargon of modern

development work, it is building core human capacity.

What does this mean in practice? And why should the British taxpayer pick up some of the bill for what critics view – unfairly – as tantamount to pouring water into a bottomless well?

To answer those questions there is no better place to start than the inspiring story of Basma Doukhi. The 28-year-old grew up in the squalid Rashidieh camp in Lebanon, one of the most difficult countries to be a Palestinian refugee in. Her education was in UNRWA girls' schools and her health was looked after at an UNRWA health clinic. Thanks to UNRWA and of course her own talents, Basma has just completed an FCDO funded Chevening scholarship year at Oxford Brookes University before returning to Lebanon to resume her career as a social worker, helping others in need.

Basma's siblings studied at the excellent Siblin vocational training centre in Lebanon, also run by UNRWA. Siblin graduates can be found in skilled jobs throughout the Gulf, following in the footsteps of previous generations of Palestinian refugees. In the 1950s and 1960s, UNRWA refugees formed the backbone of the professional classes who laid the foundations for the spectacular boom in the Gulf economies.

One of UNRWA's proudest – and most justified – claims is that it was THE pioneer in promoting girls' education in the Arab world, long before this became fashionable. Its teacher training programmes produce highly motivated male and female teachers who meet the demanding expectations of Palestinian families, for whom education is the most precious asset. So, as girls' education has been identified by the Johnson government as a top priority for UK development aid, by this logic surely more, not fewer, funds should be allocated to UNRWA?

Helping vulnerable young people, prey to radical groups and ideologies all around them, to stand on their own feet and contribute positively to their societies and local economies is at the core of what UNRWA does day in and day out. With Al Qaeda and ISIS still very active in the Middle East region, that risk of radicalisation is real.

It is worth reflecting on what good value for money UNRWA represents. Keep in mind that today over 5.4 million people are registered on its rolls for basic services normally provided by states, and recall that absolute poverty has increased dramatically due to the regional turmoil. On top of everything else, COVID-19 has not spared the refugees, many of whom live in crowded shanty towns.

Traditionally the UK with its historic responsibility has been UNRWA's third or fourth largest donor. Its multi-year funding programme has provided stability and security for the agency's managers, enabling them to plan ahead. All this has been put at risk by a threatened draconian cut in the UK's funding this year and in future years.

In the aftermath of any cuts, the losers will be the Palestinian refugees themselves – the human faces of what is accurately called the longest and most intractable refugee crisis in the world. But as we have seen all too starkly in recent weeks, instability in one area can spill over with consequences for states and innocent civilians in the wider area and for the international community. Without continued support in line with need and Britain's responsibility, in future years we in Britain may come to regret our short-term thinking and mean spiritedness towards the Palestinian refugees who many in Britain feel it is in our national interest as well as our moral duty to support.

