

REVIEWS OF BOOKS AND ARTICLES

Milton Viorst, *Reaching for the Olive Branch: UNRWA and Peace in the Middle East*, Washington, D.C., The Middle East Institute, 1989.

-by Howard Adelman

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) is an anomaly. The United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR) is responsible for all the refugees of the world *except Palestinians*. The primary responsibility of UNHCR is to provide protection for refugees, arrange temporary relief and seek a permanent solution for the refugees through resettlement abroad, settlement in first countries of asylum or through repatriation in their home country subject to the voluntary agreement of the state to which they are returning as well as the refugees themselves. UNRWA, by contrast, is schizophrenic in two respects. It was set up to resettle refugees but the UN guidelines stress repatriation. Secondly, the choice of repatriation, on the one hand is seen to be totally at the discretion of the refugee, so that no efforts can be made to solve their problem without their expressed consent. On the other hand, there is a second requirement, which Viorst omits, that is, the legitimate interests of states (including Israel) be safeguarded where the right of return is expressly conditioned upon a willingness to "live at peace with their neighbors". Thus, both the refugees and Israel have been given a veto on any solution.

UNRWA lacks a mandate to provide protection. Further, UNRWA plays no role in seeking a permanent solution for the refugees, and what is more, perceives itself and is perceived by others as necessarily avoiding such a role. The role that it was assigned was an impossible one to fulfil.

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While the UNHCR assumes responsibility for refugees who are *outside* their homeland, 37% of the registered refugees on UNRWA's rolls lived within the borders of what was Palestine in 1947. Another 38% live in Jordan where, with the few exceptions of those who moved to Jordan from Gaza, they are citizens who participate fully in the political and economic life of the state. They would be considered to have been permanently settled under the UNHCR definition of a refugee and no longer the responsibility of an international agency.

It is odd then to read in Viorst that, "Without UNRWA the refugees would have to integrate into Jordanian society, and Jordan would have no choice but to take them in," and that instability "is likely to follow if Jordan is forced to absorb the Palestinians juridically into the state." (p. 86) What could this mean when this paragraph is immediately followed by one which acknowledges that "Jordanian policy has been precisely to integrate Palestinians *unreservedly* (my italics) into the Jordanian political structure." (p. 86) Inconsistent and unresolved contradictory assertions set side by side plague a monograph which, with its errors, inconsistencies, and misconceptions about some key fundamentals, does however generally provide an accurate synopsis of the current operations of UNRWA.

If UNRWA were UNHCR, it's concern would be with those among the balance of the 25% of the UNRWA registered refugees.

Of the balance, 288,176 or 13% were registered in Lebanon in 1989 at the time of Viorst's study and 265,225 or 12% were registered in Syria. In Syria, though the refugees cannot own arable land or own more than one house, and although they have not been granted citizenship (a limited benefit under Asad's ruthless rule) they have been fully integrated into the Syrian economy, and "there is no unemployment among refugees." (p. 97) On the other hand, Syria is an oppressive

dictatorship and in the absence of any protection, most Palestinians stay "away from politics, even in casual talk." (p. 98)

In Lebanon, the refugees have been in even greater need of protection during the protracted civil war that plagued that country and as a result of the successive invasions and incursions by Israel. As Viorst notes, however, UNRWA played a crucial role in rebuilding the housing destroyed by the Israeli army when 40,000 of the refugees in the camps in Southern Lebanon were made homeless. However, although Palestinian refugees in Lebanon and Syria would fall within the UNHCR mandate, there are not 453,400 of them, although that is the number on the registry rolls. Syria will not permit a census or even allow UNRWA to make home visits to ascertain whether the 20,000 alleged hardship cases in Syria are eligible to receive welfare assistance. In Lebanon, a census would be difficult but not at all impossible and would reveal far fewer refugees remaining in that country than the numbers registered. (The Refugee Documentation Project of York University documented this in its 1983 study of the homeless in Southern Lebanon following the Israeli invasion.)

Why are so many registered? "Once registered with UNRWA, refugees stay registered, whatever their economic status." (p. 49) Or, I would add, their place of residence or citizenship. Why?

"The resistance of the refugees to any updating of the rolls has been a longstanding nightmare to UNRWA. Arab governments have supported the tactic and have further forbidden UNRWA to conduct any census to establish precisely how many refugees there are. This obstruction probably means that the administrative rolls bear only the slightest resemblance to the actual numbers of refugees that UNRWA serves." (p. 50)

This is not written by a critic of UNRWA, but by Viorst himself who is clearly a defendant of UNRWA's continued existence. There is another source for the discrepancy between the numbers registered by UNRWA who would not fall under UNHCR's mandate – the original definition of a refugee in UNRWA's

mandate. For UNHCR, a refugee must be both outside his/her homeland and have a well-founded fear of persecution for a set of specific reasons. Palestinians refugees need be in no fear of persecution at all or *outside their homeland*. In fact, a refugee did not even have to be outside Israel. Of the original number of refugees, 40,000 were Jewish – mainly refugees who were forced to flee the West Bank.

Further, "About 150,000 of the Arab population of Palestine remained behind in the new state of Israel, but those among them who had their homes destroyed or *lost their livelihood* found themselves quite as dependent on relief as those who had left the country. Initially, they were assisted by UNRWA, but in 1952 the Israeli Government accepted responsibility for them."¹ The Clapp Commission, in fact, recommended that the number of registered refugees be reduced from 940,000 to 652,000.

Though an estimated 640,000 to 720,000 Palestinian Arabs fled their homes in 1947-48, the number registered exceeded 900,000, both because of fraud (the listing of non-existent persons and widespread duplication of registration) and because the definition was both vague and broad.

Viorst, without explicitly referring to Annex VIII:I of the UNRWA mandate, quotes the definition of an UNRWA refugee as, "a person whose normal residence was Palestine for a minimum of two years proceeding the conflict in 1948 and who, as a result of this conflict, lost *both his home and means of livelihood* and took refuge in one of the countries where UNRWA provides relief." (p. 48) This is the definition utilized for relief. The definition for purposes of repatriation or compensation is "less restrictive." In fact, the Palestinians and Arab governments have argued that even for relief purposes the refugees not only need not have fled outside their homeland, but that a Palestinian refugee was anyone who lost *either* his home *or* his livelihood. He need not have fled. He need not even have lost his home. UNRWA is premised on a definition of a refugee which is on the one hand, economic and, on the other

hand, political. It is not based on the definition of someone whose rights have been abused or who has a well-founded fear of persecution.

Further, Viorst noted that the definition stipulated that, "the direct descendants of such refugees are eligible for agency assistance." The result was that refugeehood became a matter of inheritance rather than a product of one's condition and circumstance even merely economic ones.

UNRWA serves less than 400,000 refugees if the UNHCR definition of a refugee were utilized even in the broadest interpretation. Yet UNRWA is, as Viorst documents, the largest UN agency with 18,000 Palestinian employees and 130 internationals mostly Western, an employee complement almost as large as all other UN agencies combined and the largest single employer, with the exception of government, in most of the countries in which it operates. UNRWA received \$234 million in funds to service the refugees within its mandate, about one-half of UNHCR's budget, an organization which served 15 million refugees in the rest of the world. Yet Viorst states that UNRWA operates on a "shoe string budget" and admits that, "it would be more efficient for the UN to write a check to Jordan for the sum that UNRWA spends in the country and allow the Jordanian government to run the schools, clinics, and other services that UNRWA performs." (p. 86)

So why does UNRWA exist? It has no protective mandate, though in the West Bank and Gaza it has begun to perform a quasi-protective function through the use of 12 Refugee Affairs Offices (RAOS) in the West Bank and 8 in Gaza to observe the Israeli treatment of the Palestinians, and has extended its protective function to cover all Palestinians not just those registered as refugees. It intercedes with the Israeli army in efforts to defuse conflicts and has developed an Early Warning System for its own purposes to enable its officers to be present as witnesses rather than to prevent situations from arising altogether.

In 1982, the commissioner-general of UNRWA reported that, "today nearly all refugee families are self-

supporting." (p. 56) Yet, at the time, 823,000 refugees were still receiving rations on a sustained basis. And even though rations were eliminated in 1983 against the opposition of Arab states, large numbers of refugees (see the reference to Syria above) continue to receive relief support.

Over 10,000 of UNRWA's employees are teachers. The UNRWA educational program absorbs, during the recent period of the greatest demand on its welfare and health responsibilities, two-thirds of the UNRWA budget, so that "Palestinians have emerged as one of the world's most educated peoples." (p. 55)

UNRWA also runs an extensive network of medical clinics and hospitals, a function greatly expanded in the West Bank and Gaza as a result of the *intifada*. The fact is UNRWA is the Ministry of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) for, but not of, the Palestinian people, a far cry from its original mandate of providing relief and works for Palestinian refugees. The demand for relief is minimal. And, as Viorst states, UNRWA gave up, "in the early 1950s on its plans to create jobs in economic development projects." (p. 55) In fact, it never gave up on this goal until the end of the 1950s. In 1959, as Viorst notes, "Hammerskjold was still expressing his strong belief that prosperity, by permitting local integration of the refugees into existing Arab states, held out the prospect of ending the Middle East conflict." (p. 38) The plans were scuttled, not because the principle obstacle was "the resistance of the refugees themselves" to large scale development projects, (p. 37) but because the unstable politics of the region and the resistance of the Arab states to plans viewed as neo-colonialist – a fact which Viorst himself notes. (p. 39)

Why does UNRWA exist? It exists as an indirect route to economic integration. (p. 55) Education is substituted for works. Now that UNRWA has succeeded in making the vast majority of the refugees self-sustaining and capable of supporting their own schools, why does it continue to exist?

Viorst's explanation is that UNRWA plays a crucial political and economic role in the Middle East. In

various parts of the slim volume a plethora of factors are cited. UNRWA is an instrument in the politics of suffering where the "best weapon against a hostile world was their own suffering." (p. 72) In this context, refugees in the Gaza Strip and Jordan have vetoed providing amenities such as water or street lighting for camps in fear of "losing credibility if their living conditions became too comfortable." (p. 89)

Sometimes this charitable function is interpreted as part of the politics of humiliation. UNRWA was "an agent for humiliating them (the Palestinians) with charity." (p. 117) But when one woman was asked whether the women were "humiliated at having to struggle for this charity," the reply was that, "the food is a status symbol showing that the woman knows how to work the system." (p. 66)

If the politics of suffering and humiliation are suspect, the politics of the rectification of alleged injustice is not. "UNRWA was established by the United Nations", Abu Khalil said to me six years ago, "in recognition of the crime committed by the major Western powers against the entire Palestinian people. A whole people was thrown off their land and a new state set up within their country... UNRWA exists to ensure the rectification of this injustice." (p. 106)

This is not just Abu Khalil's view. It is Milton Viorst's. "The agency had been founded to help the Palestinians – losers in a contest that Israel had won. Although it was not expected to take sides, only in the most abstract way was it a disinterested party in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Its task was to redress, at least in some measure, the legacy of the Palestinian defeat." (p. 43)

That was not its task. As Viorst himself notes, UNRWA was set up, following the model of the Marshall Plan, or more accurately, the Tennessee Valley Authority, to use economic development to integrate the Palestinians into the countries where they found refuge. This was in direct contradiction to the UN General Assembly's commitment to paragraph II of Resolution 194 (III) "proclaiming for the dispossessed a right of repatriation or compensation." (pp. 33-34)

The politics of the rectification of an injustice not only assigns UNRWA a goal totally opposed to the purpose for which it was set up, but allows history to be rewritten as myth. The fact that the Eastern Bloc and the Latin American countries voted for partition is irrelevant. The fact that the *whole* people were not thrown off their land and that they retained part of the land under Arab control does not matter. The fact that the exodus of Palestinian Arabs would not have occurred on the level it did if the Arab countries had not attacked the nascent state of Israel does not count. It was the creation of Israel *within* Palestine that is the heart of the alleged crime, and the responsibility for that creation is laid at the doorsteps of the Western powers. UNRWA, in this perception, exists as an instrument to pay guilt money.

The politics of suffering, the politics of humiliation, the politics of guilt are all wound together in the role of UNRWA as the embodiment and icon of memory of the losses of the Palestinian people. "Only UNRWA... does not forget." (p. 73) UNRWA is a reminder of the promise of a state of Palestine for the Palestinian people. Although the UN partition resolution was a recommendation only and had no force in international law, even so experienced an individual as Per Olof Hallquist, UNRWA's director in Damascus in 1989, stated, "I can't take the Palestinians' history away from them. According to the UN partition resolution of 1947, the promise of Palestine still exists in international law (my italics)." (p. 90)

This is the explanation of UNRWA's continued existence for the refugees and the international civil servants. Is there anything beyond the perception which comprehends UNRWA's role in terms of more objective factors?

One explanation is that UNRWA contributes to political stability in the Middle East. Viorst quotes a Lebanese spokesman (p. 80) and the Jordanian government (p. 86) to this effect, and argues that, "It would never occur to the Syrian government that allowing refugees to organize to represent their own interest might promote stability. Such an idea would be foreign to the region.

Syria, however, is comfortable – and so are the Palestinians, having UNRWA, a disinterested party, represent those interests in the refugees' behalf." (p. 102). In other words, democratic government responsible to and elected by, and not simply responsive to and expressive of, the will of the Palestinian people, is an alien concept.

It is no surprise then that UNRWA failed, "to train the Palestinians in any significant way for the demands of self-government." Giacomelli, the current head of UNRWA, admits to UNRWA's 'paternalism', associating it with the fact that the Palestinians, "are not accustomed to community responsibility, and we don't know how to instill it in them." (p. 108) *Instilling* community responsibility is a contradiction. One gets accustomed to community responsibility by assuming responsibility. As long as UNRWA denies the Palestinians, individually and collectively, from assuming financial and political responsibility for that which is most immediate in their lives, the responsibility for them over physical and intellectual well-being, when, by international actions, (all well-intended, of course) Palestinians are deprived of ultimate authority for these responsibilities, how can the United Nations expect Palestinians to accept community responsibility?

Why then does UNRWA continue? Because it is in the economic interests of all states in the region. For example, Palestinians are "called upon to fulfil the same military and social duties as Syrians, are also assessed the same level of taxes – more, in fact, if one adds levies that once went to the PLO and now go the treasury. UNRWA, meanwhile, pays for schools for more than 53,000 refugee children as well as for other services that the government routinely furnishes. A strong argument can be made – applicable not just to Syria – that UNRWA, far from fleecing the 'host' countries, as GAPAR's (Syria's supervisory agency for UNRWA, the General Authority for Palestine Arab Refugees) complaints imply, actually provides them with substantial annual subsidies. Like Jordan and Israel, Syria has serious financial

problems. Some experts say it is nearly bankrupt. From that perspective, what UNRWA spends is important not only to the Palestinians but also to the Syrians. 'UNRWA is bringing in \$20 million in hard-currency expenditures this year... major infusion of capital'." (p. 104)

This is not only true for Jordan and Lebanon, but for Israel as well. "Israelis dismiss the nearly \$100 million in hard-currency that UNRWA spent in the occupied territories in 1988 to provide food, education and health care, responsibilities that otherwise would have fallen on Israel's shoulders." Though this is the official explanation, Israel, which would banish UNRWA at its choosing, "keeps UNRWA because in some ways its functions serve the nation's interests." (p. 44) The Israelis nevertheless valued UNRWA, acknowledging tacitly that it "performed important services which, in its absence, would fall upon the government." (p. 12) Israel, even less than Jordan, Syria and Lebanon, of course, is not interested in a self-governing Palestinian community. When UNRWA is said to provide a 'stabilizing influence', when UNRWA is called on to rebuild the camps, the preservation of political stability has a cost – the denial of responsibility to the Palestinians.

Thus, the politics of economics and political self-interest form a synergistic combination with the politics of illusory memory, the politics of suffering and the quest for rectification of a past injustice.

Why does the U.S., the major donor country, still provide support? Because it is unwilling to contemplate direct donations to the Palestinians themselves. And whenever it girds its loins to act to reduce its funding, as it did prior to the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, Israeli action sabotages the effort as Arab countries rally around UNRWA as the symbol of commitment to the Palestinian cause. The U.S. will not risk alienating the wealthy oil states of the Gulf. This is but an imitation of the roots of the unique anomaly of the UN commitment to Palestinian repatriation.

Viorst is correct in attributing to Count Folke Bernadotte, the UN appointed mediator in 1948, the conviction that Palestinians had a

'right to return' as 'innocent victims of the conflict' and because they have been 'rooted in the land for centuries.' However, he is wrong on two counts when he asserts, "Bernadotte's assassination by Jewish extremists in December 1948, far from weakening this position, served in international circles to give weight to Bernadotte's argument." (p. 83)

First, Jewish extremists assassinated Bernadotte on September 17th and not in December. Secondly, rather than this action giving weight to Bernadotte's argument, it meant the delegates were unable to delete Bernadotte's recommendation on this count lest it be seen as a deliberate impugning of a UN official who died in the line of duty. They were only able to add the clause about compensation, hoping thus to dilute the illusory visions of repatriation of all the refugees. The UN did not intentionally set out to provide a national homeland for the Palestinians as it had done for the Jews (p. 33), for partition already was intended to do that. Repatriation became Bernadotte's epitaph; for the next half century it served to haunt the Jewish terrorists who killed him.

Has the *intifada* and the Gulf War changed the perception and role of UNRWA? Lucius Battle, President of the Middle East Institute, in the Forward to Viorst's book argues that, "UNRWA, which for 40 years has sought to abate the suffering of the refugees, cannot be abolished until a solution to the problem is found." (p. v) Is the corollary also true, that as long as UNRWA exists, no solution to the problem will be found? Though Viorst is undoubtedly correct that, "The 'Palestine Problem' showed itself to be relentlessly political, unyielding to even the most artful economic strategy." (pp. 42-43), what connection is there between the hoped for political solution and UNRWA's perpetual existence?

Since the *intifada* was undoubtedly the impetus to the new study, the slim volume began with a seven page introduction to the causes of the *intifada* when morale in the West Bank and Gaza was higher than in many decades, "buoyed by the sense that sympathy world wide

had shifted to the Palestinian camp." (p. 6) This essay is being written three and one-half years after the *intifada* began, when the *intifada* has receded and is no longer even covered on the back pages, when the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and the defeat of Saddam Hussein by the American-led coalition emerged front and center, when the plight of one million Kurds in Northern Iraq protected in safe haven receives the media attention, but the suffering of the Kurds in Iran and of the Shi'ites in the South, once again understand Saddam Hussein's ruthless rule, are ignored, though not as nearly as much as the plight of the Palestinians. Not only do other much more serious crises of refugees in Ethiopia, Sudan and Malawi, Afghanistan and Iraq vie for more sympathy because of the inherent desperation of the conditions for those refugees, but the Palestinian support for Saddam Hussein and the alleged cheering of the SCUD missiles aimed at Israel lost much of the sympathy the Palestinians gained in the *intifada*.

The difference in timing perspective would require a great deal of rewriting even if Viorst interpreted most the factors about the *intifada* correctly, given such a capsule view. But he provides two interpretations which are not only suspect in themselves, but provide clues to the weakness of the whole study.

The first 'misinterpretation' is about tactics. Viorst alleges that the tactics of the *intifada* "fall loosely under the rubric of *nonviolent protest* (my italics)." Viorst's peculiar thesis resonates with another historical frontier harking back to 1970, Black September, and the uprising against King Hussein. "Only a handful joined the organized PLO contingents on the PLO's armed forces and drove them out of Jordan. Very few of the refugees decided to leave with them." (p. 87) Somehow, in Viorst's lexicon, the Palestinians who rose against Jordan were not refugees. Only those who did not participate were. It seems that Palestinian refugees, by definition, are non-violent for Viorst. Viorst argued that, "the doctrine of non-violence had recently been introduced to the occupied territories by Palestinians familiar with the civil

rights and anti-Vietnam War movements in the United States." (p. 5) But then Viorst notes that, "By the standards of Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, Jr., the *intifada* was never non-violent." And more accurately should be called "non-lethal" and was "based on a long Middle Eastern tradition of protest by stone-throwing." Viorst goes further. In a story which ends the chapter, he describes an incident of stone throwing "that was essentially innocuous," and concluded that this, "seemed to me like an allegory on the nature of the *intifada*." (p. 31)

I believe historians will verify that the non-violent tradition had no influence whatsoever on the *intifada*. Faisal Hussein, who, through a Ford Foundation grant, had assembled a significant body of literature on non-violent methods of protest, never had a chance to inculcate this new tactic for the Middle East to those who took to the streets in Gaza. If he had, the *intifada* might have taken a different course. The fact is that stone-throwing was represented as non-violent by some of the media, but it, in fact, was violent and unique only in the age of stone-throwers and the way it involved the masses of Palestinians in their determination to actively resist the Israeli occupation.

The second misinterpretation Viorst makes is one of omission rather than commission. In answer to the question, "Why then after 20 years of occupation did the *intifada* occur?" Viorst, correctly I believe, says "that if they were ever to attain their freedom, they would have to do it on their own." This assertion, however, requires an important addendum. Not only had no Arab state come to their aid in Lebanon, not only had the Palestinian issue been placed in the back burner of both superpowers and the Arab states preoccupied with the Iran-Iraq border, but the indigenous population, however much most of them supported the PLO as a symbol for their material aspirations, had lost their faith in even this *external* source of liberation when the Palestinian militia were expelled from Lebanon as a result of the Israeli invasion in 1982.

Not only must the PLO be added to the list of external libera-

tors who could not save them, but the decision to liberate themselves was not altogether a conscious one. Though some of the leaders have come to this conclusion, the actions of the protest in the Gaza Strip was itself therapeutic, given the long depression they had been in since the PLO left Beirut.

What does the error in identifying the non-violent civil rights movement with the *intifada*, or their omission of giving up on a reliance on the PLO militia, have to do with understanding UNRWA? It is crucial. For though the PLO remains in command of the foreign and defense ministries of the Palestinian peoples and UNRWA holds the head of command of most of the health, education and welfare ministries, to the extent there is a Ministry of Justice in Palestine for Palestinians it is held by the Israeli military authorities, with the result that 10,000 Palestinian protestors are still in prison. Into this vacuum an absence of a justice ministry responsible for and responsive to both the rule of law and the rights of the people, the tactics of the *intifada*, because they are *not* non-violent, soon deteriorated to outright violence so that now more Palestinians are 'executed' by their own vigilantes than are killed in protests against the Israelis. What Viorst notes is that these 'murders' "bear witness to the awesome power exercised by the new leadership structure in the occupied territories." (p. 25) For these victims, UNRWA does not intercede. For these victims, UNRWA provides no protection. For these victims, UNRWA provides no early warning.

The significance is that the Palestinians are not only living among a number of countries without a territory or government of their own, but to the extent they are governed, it is by a myriad of governments other than their own, including the UN. And in the one area — the rule of law — where they are not governed they are heading along the path of ungovernability. UNRWA shares in that responsibility for these developments.

NOTES

1. UNRWA: A Brief History, 1950-1982, Vienna, UNRWA, p.4.