

# Washington's Failure to Rein in UNRWA

by Asaf Romirowsky

General Assembly resolution 194 of December 11, 1948,<sup>1</sup> offers two options, repatriation and resettlement, to achieve the reintegration of the Palestinian Arab refugees “into the economic life of the Near East.”<sup>2</sup> Yet, U.S. Department of State documents from 1949 through the early 1950s reveal that despite the lip service paid to repatriation, Washington and its allies effectively equated reintegration with the resettlement of the refugees in the neighboring Arab states.

## HISTORICAL CONTEXT

Economic development has been viewed by successive U.S. administrations as the key to integrating regions and peoples, and since the 1930s, their vision of this endeavor was largely modeled on the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) project.

Created by an act of the U.S. Congress in 1933, the TVA was conceived as a regional economic development agency. It was tasked with responsibilities for flood control, electrification, reforestation, fertilizer production, agricultural education, and river navigation throughout the Tennessee Valley, an area that includes the state of Tennessee, parts of Kentucky, Mississippi, and Alabama, and smaller portions of Georgia, North Carolina, and Virginia.

The TVA was the first regional economic development project in American history and was by almost any measure a dramatic success. The region's endemic malaria was eliminated, and

health and life expectancy were improved through education about rural hygiene as well as through greater medical access. Educational efforts increased agricultural output. Rural electrification attracted a variety of industries to the region, increasing employment and raising standards of living. The TVA itself employed large numbers of local unskilled workers as well as skilled workers in various management roles. Hydroelectric projects on the region's rivers during World War II made it a vital center for aluminum production<sup>3</sup> and for the Manhattan Project when the world's first uranium enrichment plant was built in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.<sup>4</sup>

When the Palestine Arab refugee problem was approached by development-oriented planners, many of whom had been in government

1 U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) res. 194 (III), Dec. 11, 1948, para. 11, stipulated that “the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date,” but also that efforts should be made to facilitate the “resettlement and economic and social rehabilitation of the refugees.”

2 UNGA res. 393 (V), Dec. 2, 1950, para. 4.

3 “The Role of TVA during WWII,” Atomic Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., accessed July 6, 2012.

4 “Index: Oak Ridge, Tennessee,” Atomic Heritage Foundation, Washington, D.C., accessed July 6, 2012.

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service throughout the New Deal, the TVA was seen as a natural model to emulate. In the winter of 1949, an Economic Survey Mission (ESM) was proposed for the Middle East in order to assess what could be done. It was anticipated that this U.S.-led regional development program would help raise the overall economic level of the region and thereby facilitate resettlement of Palestine Arab refugees. The orientation of the commission, particularly under former TVA chairman Gordon Clapp, signaled to all parties that Washington would back a large-scale regional development orientation that could benefit both the major states and the refugees.<sup>5</sup>

U.S. assistant secretary of state for the Middle East George McGhee explained the selection of Clapp:

he symbolized dams and water which were the key to the Middle East development. I got Clapp to Washington. He spent the evening with me at my farm, and he went over to see the president [Truman]. The president urged him to take the job, which he did

without hesitation. We hoped that by pointing out the advantages of accepting capital to develop their countries (particularly the building of dams and the irrigating of land), the Arab states would see the advantages of using the refugees as resources and would welcome them.<sup>6</sup>

**It was anticipated that U.S.-led regional development would facilitate resettlement of Palestine Arab refugees.**

This strategy, with its implicit resettlement component, did not succeed. Despite initially positive responses from Arab states, the Clapp mission was quickly perceived as an official U.S. undertaking rather than an international effort.

5 Maya Rosenfeld, "From Emergency Relief Assistance to Human Development and Back: UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees, 1950-2009," *Refugee Survey Quarterly*, 28 (2009): 294, n. 24.

6 Richard D. McKinzie, "Oral History Interview with George C. McGhee," Washington, D.C., June 11, 1975, sec. 39.

Secretary of State Dean Acheson instructed U.S. representatives in Lebanon to stress to Arab authorities that "ESM was activated by PCC [Palestine Conciliation Commission] as [a] UN organ" and that they should make "special effort to dissipate FonMin [foreign minister] fears that establishment of ESM implies abandonment by UN or US of political or other functions of PCC."<sup>7</sup>

Even U.S. relations with Britain were affected by the launch of the ESM. On September 10, 1949, Acheson wrote the U.S. Embassy in London instructing representatives there to request more public British support.<sup>8</sup> The British responded that Arab states were complaining that "political objectives [were] being subordinated to economic objectives and that their case [was] consequently prejudiced."<sup>9</sup>

The Clapp mission's primary task—to investigate and make recommendations for regional economic development—had also raised the prospect of large-scale resettlement. Though the mission used the same "repatriation, resettlement, and economic and social rehabilitation" formula of resolution 194 (paragraph 11), the implicit resettlement implications of regional economic development were clear. This appeared to divide both the members of the Clapp mission and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC), who were engaged in refugee relief operations.

The mission's preliminary report on November 6, 1949, stated its goal as making recommendations for "the finding of temporary work for Palestinian Arab refugees . . . since the matter is extremely urgent and cannot await long-term decisions, attention has been concentrated on short-term projects."<sup>10</sup> It recommended a new—

7 "The Secretary of State to the Legation in Lebanon," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949, The Near East, South Asia, and Africa*, U.S. Department of State, Washington, D.C., Sept. 3, 1949, pp. 1359-60.

8 "The Secretary of State to the Embassy in the United Kingdom," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949*, Sept. 10, 1949, p. 1374.

9 "The Chargé in the United Kingdom (Holmes) to the Secretary of State," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949*, Sept. 12, 1949, p. 1375.

10 *Final Report of the United Nations Economic Survey Mission for the Middle East*, Part I, U.N. Conciliation Commission for Palestine, A/AC/25/6, Dec. 28, 1949, p. 25.

and temporary—relief scheme for the refugees to “direct the programmes of relief and public works on or after April 1, 1950.”<sup>11</sup> Direct relief would cease at the end of 1950, and thus the new program would “halt the demoralizing process of pauperization” that the refugees were undergoing. The report estimated a total of 627,000 refugees, and the inclusion of 25,000 additional destitute Arabs, for a total of 652,000. In contrast, in its draft final report, the U.N. Relief for Palestine Refugees agency (UNRPR)—precursor to the U.N. Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)—simply noted that it had provided 940,000 rations to “refugees.”<sup>12</sup> The response by the Department of State to the Clapp report was generally positive.

Despite earlier differences with Washington, London also agreed with the Clapp report recommendations: A mid-November meeting between U.S. and British representatives noted that “it is important that the Clapp report lay the basis for longer range development programs.”<sup>13</sup> The classified document also stated that “the Arabs must take the major responsibility for carrying out development work” but cautioned that “private capital was not attracted by the type of project envisaged for the Middle East countries.”<sup>14</sup> How all this was to be reconciled with efforts to involve relief organizations on the one hand and private groups (notably oil companies) on the other is not immediately



*The American Friends Service Committee was commissioned by the United Nations in 1948 to provide aid to Palestinian refugees in the Gaza strip. The AFSC had discussed reintegration for close to a year, but with the adoption of U.N. resolution 393 (V) on December 2, 1950, it also became an international goal.*

apparent. However, it was becoming quite clear that repatriation was considered a less likely option while resettlement was being viewed more favorably.

## REINTEGRATION AND ITS IMPLICATIONS

After much debate, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 393 (V) on December 2, 1950, stating that

without prejudice to the provisions of paragraph 11 of General Assembly resolution 194 (III) of 11 December 1948, the reintegration of the refugees into the economic life of the Near East, either by repatriation or resettlement, is essential in preparation for the time when international assistance is no longer available, and for the realization of conditions of peace and stability in the area.<sup>15</sup>

11 Ibid., p. 17.

12 Ibid.

13 “Statement by the United States and the United Kingdom Groups,” *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1949*, Nov. 14, 1949, p. 67.

14 Ibid.

15 UNGA res. 393 (V), para. 4.

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*As part of the reintegration model, UNRWA, alongside the United States, focused on developing regional water resources. For Israel, this became the basis for efforts that culminated in the construction of the National Water Carrier system, but Arab projects with one exception never got off the ground.*

The resolution went on to direct UNRWA “to establish a reintegration fund which shall be utilized for projects requested by any government in the Near East and approved by the Agency for the permanent reestablishment of refugees and their removal from relief.” The AFSC had discussed reintegration for close to a year, but with its adoption as a preferred option by the United Nations, it became an international goal. Defining reintegration, however, was to become subject to changing geopolitical contingencies.

Throughout 1949 and 1950, a series of developments fundamentally reshaped the global scene and changed the Western and especially U.S. perspectives on the Middle East generally, and the Palestine Arab refugee question specifically. Western defense interests had been given new shape and urgency in 1949 by the communist takeover of northern China in January, the creation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in April, and the detona-

tion of the Soviet Union’s first atomic weapon in August. Cold War issues began to dominate foreign policy planning as never before and reached new levels with the issuing in April 1950 of NSC-68, a classified national security report that situated the conflict with the Soviet Union as central and existential for the West and that moved Washington closer to a policy of containment.<sup>16</sup> The beginning of the Korean war in June 1950 shifted U.S. priorities still further, particularly in the areas of military alliances and the conduct of the war through the United Nations.

For Washington and London, Middle East affairs, including arms control efforts such as the Tripartite Declaration between the United States, Britain, and France guaranteeing the territorial arrangements reached by the Arab-Israeli armistice agreements and refugee policy, were increasingly viewed through the lens of superpower competition and anti-communism.<sup>17</sup> Foreign aid would be restructured in view of the larger Cold War situation, and regional defense

projects would be launched.<sup>18</sup> An October 1951 proposal for a Middle East Defense Command, relying heavily on Western basing rights in the Suez Canal zone was floated, only to be promptly rejected by Egypt, which had just repudiated the Anglo-Egyptian treaty of 1936 and the Anglo-Egyptian agreement of 1899.<sup>19</sup> After a brief period of official neutrality, Israel began to gravitate toward the West, but it was feared

16 Paul Nitze, “The Development of NSC-68,” *International Security*, Spring 1980, pp. 170-6; “President Truman Receives NSC-68,” History.com, accessed July 6, 2012.

17 George McGhee, *On the Frontline in the Cold War: An Ambassador Reports* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1997), pp. 48-50.

18 Michael Cohen, *Fighting World War Three from the Middle East: Allied Contingency Plans 1945-1954* (London: Frank Cass, 1997), pp. 239-70.

19 Majid Khadduri, “The Anglo-Egyptian Controversy,” *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science*, 24 (1952): 82-100; Peter L. Hahn, “Containment and Egyptian Nationalism: The Unsuccessful Effort to Establish the Middle East Command, 1950-53,” *Diplomatic History*, Jan. 1987, pp. 23-40.

that the Arab states might fall under communist sway. This became a central concern for both the U.S. State Department and the National Security Council.<sup>20</sup>

In November 1951, the State Department's chiefs of Middle East missions met in Istanbul but with a completely new strategic outlook. In a document generally concerned with power politics, the threat of communism, and the need to strengthen Greece, Turkey, Israel, and the Arab regimes, the Palestine Arab refugee issue found a central place. It was stated, with some apparent relief by the participants, that although during the course of 1950, "the Arabs have not abandoned the principle of repatriation, and may be expected to reaffirm it, they show signs of becoming more realistic as to the obstacles to any satisfactory implementation of this principle, and are giving serious thought to the alternative of compensation and to the concept of reintegration."<sup>21</sup>

The conference also expressed some satisfaction that Israel had voiced interest in resolving the issue of the refugees' blocked bank accounts, which was regarded as evidence of Israeli good will. But the official U.S. orientation toward the refugee issue was stated clearly: "The hard core of approximately 800,000 refugees, on relief and in temporary shelter, constitutes a serious threat to stability, and an important impediment to peace between the Arab states and Israel."<sup>22</sup> With stability in mind, the report endorsed the goal of reintegration, but it also made clear that the term was being used in a specific sense with respect to UNRWA's task of "direct reintegration," especially in rural areas, financed by international funds. The conferees recommended,

Reintegration should be approached as an

economic undertaking and service to the refugees, and political issues should be kept to a minimum. There is great need to prepare the minds of 600,000 refugees to move from present locations near Palestine to new countries, new climates, and new economies, and to encourage their acceptance by the publics of the countries to which they must move.<sup>23</sup>

The U.S. National Security Council concurred with the State Department. In a memorandum on U.S. policy toward Israel and the Arab states, Undersecretary of State James E. Webb reported to the executive secretary of the National Security Council, James S. Lay, that UNRWA had not received full funding

and was "perforce confined chiefly to relief measures and to very limited works projects." But he added with regard to the Arab states: "By their public acceptance of this resolution [creating UNRWA] and by private statements, Arab representatives have indicated that they regard resettlement of most of the refugees in Arab territory as inevitable."<sup>24</sup>

The same policies regarding resettlement were echoed a year later in a top secret memorandum sent to the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs bureau from the second secretary of the U.S. embassy in Beirut, Donald C. Bergus, who noted that the Arab and Israeli concepts of compensation differed vastly. Israel was willing to consider paying for real property that had been lost while the Arab states factored in damages. Bergus estimated that the Israeli concept would entail about \$500 million while the Arab version would cost many billions of dollars. Either way, he wrote, "Ultimate reintegration

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20 Peter L. Hahn, *Caught in the Middle East: U.S. Policy toward the Arab-Israeli Conflict, 1945-1961* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2006), pp. 137-42.

21 "A. Conclusions," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*, Feb. 14-21, 1951, p. 62.

22 "United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*, Feb. 14-21, 1951, p. 63.

23 Ibid.

24 "Memorandum by the Under Secretary of State (Webb) to the Executive Secretary, National Security Council (Lay)," *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1951*, Jan. 26, 1951, pp. 18-9.

tion of refugees now on relief will require an additional expenditure of at least half a billion dollars, and the U.S. will probably have to pay most of this bill as well” but that the

political barriers to the UNRWA program have almost been completely dissolved. The time has now come for us to press forward with positive action on the refugee program to a point where receiving states are fully convinced that refugee resettlement means a significant economic development.<sup>25</sup>

Reintegration, though perhaps initially vague, had become firmly understood as resettlement, at least in some official U.S. circles, just as it had earlier for most senior AFSC leaders. This also reflected the British understanding with Sir Henry Knight, a member of UNRWA’s Advisory Commission, commenting in July 1951, “Reintegration is interpreted as assistance to refugees in

finding homes and jobs.”<sup>26</sup> Throughout 1951 and 1952, similar tantalizing rumors regarding the Arab states’ willingness to accept refugees were reaching the UNRWA Advisory Committee just as they had at the U.N.-convened Lausanne conference some two years earlier (only to be dashed just days later).<sup>27</sup>

The appointment of John Blandford, Jr. as director of UNRWA to replace Howard Kennedy was telling of the mindset regarding reintegration

at the United Nations and among its patrons. Rather than a military quartermaster like Kennedy, Blandford was a TVA “veteran,” had been a consultant to President Truman on the Marshall Plan, and was, in short, a professional development administrator with experience in managing large-scale construction projects, budgets, and negotiating the surrounding politics. His efforts in building housing for defense workers during World War II had, among other things, entailed cutting through bureaucratic obstacles resulting in the construction of tens of thousands of residences in a matter of months.<sup>28</sup> If anyone could put UNRWA back on track and bring it into sync with regional development plans, it was Blandford.

Yet by mid-1951, the UNRWA Advisory Committee had become increasingly frustrated with the unfounded rumors regarding Arab willingness to accept refugee resettlement. Sir Henry Knight, for example, commented, “One of the Iraqi officials told Blandford that all the Arab states agree that the refugees must be resettled but not on who should ‘bell the cat’ by accepting refugees!”<sup>29</sup> Despite the frustrations, large-scale resettlement of Palestine Arab refugees remained the preferred U.S. policy through the 1950s.<sup>30</sup>

**A letter from the Arab League rejecting reintegration effectively ended the concept at the United Nations.**

## DISAPPOINTING DEVELOPMENTS

Reintegration would be the paradigm adopted by UNRWA and the international community for the next several years. On January 26, 1952, the U.N. General Assembly adopted resolution 513 (VI) “which envisages the expenditure of US\$ 50 million for relief and \$200 million for reintegration over and above such contributions as may be made by local government, to

25 Donald G. Bergus, “An American Policy for Arab-Israeli Peace,” Department of State, Bureau of Near Eastern, South Asian, and African Affairs, Office of the Country Director for Israel and Arab-Israel Affairs, Beirut, U.S. National Archives, Record Group 59, Container 72, Folder 2, ARC Identifier 2507045, Dec. 2, 1952.

26 Sir Henry Knight to Francis Evans, United Kingdom Foreign Office: Political Department, National Archives, FO 371/91417, EE 18211/19, July 17, 1951.

27 Compare Sir Henry Knight to Francis Evans, Apr. 19, 1951 with Knight’s follow up, Apr. 24, 1951, United Kingdom Foreign Office: Political Department, National Archives, FO 371/91417/345481.

28 *The Chicago Daily Tribune*, June 14, 1942; *Dubuque Telegraph Herald*, July 12, 1942.

29 Sir Henry Knight to Francis Evans, Aug. 16, 1951, United Kingdom Foreign Office: Political Department, National Archives, FO 371/91417/345481.

30 Salim Yaqub, *Containing Arab Nationalism: The Eisenhower Doctrine and the Middle East* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), p. 29.

be carried out over a period of approximately three years starting as of 1 July 1951.”<sup>31</sup>

As part of the reintegration paradigm, UNRWA in tandem with the U.S. administration explored a variety of regional development projects. A primary focus became comprehensive studies for developing regional water resources. While state development was the explicit goal of these studies, refugee resettlement was implicit in them as well. The inspiration for the scale and complexity of these efforts was again the American experience as seen by the title of a book on one of the plans, James B. Hays’s *T.V.A. on the Jordan, Proposals for Irrigation and Hydro-Electric Development in Palestine*.<sup>32</sup> For Israel, this became the basis for Israeli efforts that culminated in the construction of the National Water Carrier system.<sup>33</sup> In 1952 and 1953, UNRWA also undertook a project with Syria and Jordan to develop water resources on the Yarmuk River but disagreements with Washington regarding the specifications as well as conflicts with Israel regarding potential diversions from the Jordan River delayed implementation.

France also developed its own plans based on the concept of an international agency that would pay compensation to refugees for lost property. This, too, however, was never adopted because of fears by French officials that such an agency would be dominated by Washington and would reduce Paris’s influence in the region.<sup>34</sup>



*Port Said, Egypt, following the 1956 Suez war. The changing geostrategic situation in the Middle East, which included rising Egyptian nationalism and pan-Arabist fantasies, culminated in the 1956 Suez war; precipitated when Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser nationalized the international canal. The conflict, for the most part, ended sweeping regional development schemes by the West.*

In all these efforts, the concerns of the Palestine Arab refugees, as opposed to the interests of the West and Arab states, were pushed to the background. The envisioned \$200 million from U.N. resolution 513 (VI) did not materialize. Reintegration, whether construed as resettlement or public works, was effectively dead, and UNRWA would henceforth concentrate on relief and later, in the 1960s, on education. A changing geostrategic situation in the Middle East, which included rising Egyptian nationalism and pan-Arabist fantasies, culminated in the 1956 Suez war, a conflict that, for the most part, ended sweeping regional development schemes by the West.<sup>35</sup>

31 Reports of the director and the Advisory Commission, UNRWA, UNGA res. A/Res/513 (VI), Jan. 26, 1952, para. 2.

32 James B. Hayes, *T.V.A. on the Jordan, Proposals for Irrigation and Hydro-Electric Development in Palestine* (Washington, D.C.: Public Affairs Press, 1948).

33 See Rory Miller, “Bible and Soil: Walter Clay Lowdermilk, the Jordan Valley Plan, and the Battle over Palestine in the Final Mandatory Era,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, Apr. 2003, pp. 55-81; Nadav Morag, “Water, Geopolitics and State Building: The Case of Israel,” *Middle Eastern Studies*, July 2001, pp. 179-98.

34 Alberto Tonini, “International Donors, the Refugees and UNRWA: France, Britain, and Italy as Case Studies, 1950-1993,” International Symposium, The Palestinian Refugees and UNRWA in Jordan, the West Bank, and Gaza, 1949-1999, Mövenpick Hotel, Dead Sea, Jordan, Aug. 31-Sept. 1, 1999, pp. 8-9.

35 Jon B. Alterman, *Egypt and American Foreign Assistance, 1952-1956: Hopes Dashed* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), pp. 97-130.

## CONCLUSIONS

As late as 1959, the connection between reintegration, regional development, and the Palestine Arab refugee problem was still occasionally raised. U.N. secretary-general Dag Hammarskjöld suggested that the

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unemployed population represented by the Palestinian refugees should be regarded not as a liability but, more justly, as an asset for the future; it is a reservoir of manpower which in the desirable general economic development will assist in the creation of standards for the whole

population of the area.<sup>36</sup>

But even this mild and encouraging formula was rejected by the Arab states. Hammarskjöld was forced to insist publicly and privately that his proposal had been misunderstood and that he did not intend for resettlement to be the primary means of reintegration. He continued to defend the proposal throughout 1959, but a

letter from the Arab League rejecting reintegration effectively ended the concept at the United Nations.<sup>37</sup>

The refugees’ narrative, which would become an integral part of the Palestinian national story line as a whole, was completely crystallized less than a year and a half after their “exile”: They bore no responsibility whatsoever for their unfortunate fate; their own political processes and decisions, and those of their leaders, went unmentioned. In reality, the Arab states bore significant responsibility for the situation, having encouraged and facilitated the refugees’ flight. But the ultimate villain in this narrative was none other than the United Nations, which had passed the November 1947 partition resolution that set in motion the chain of events leading to the Palestinian Arab catastrophe, or the Nakba; as such, it had to maintain the refugees until the state of affairs was resolved in their favor by complete and total repatriation and compensation.

These demands are clear and absolute and, arguably, have not changed to this day. The U.S. policy of resettlement and reintegration, which once held such promise, is no longer seriously discussed while the intractable insistence on a “right of return” remains the ultimate obstacle to any durable solution.



36 “Proposals for the Continuation of the United Nations Assistance to the Palestine refugees,” UNGA A/4121, June 15, 1959, part II, para. 11.

37 Andrew W. Cordier and Wilder Foote, eds., *Public Papers of the Secretaries General of the United Nations* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), pp. 414-36, 492-3.

## Lebanese Tire of Protests

Beirut—If you can’t beat them, join them. Dozens of Lebanese, exasperated by rampant tire-burning protests across the country, rolled out tires and stopped traffic in the capital Beirut on Thursday. Police armed with automatic rifles quickly deployed down the street, looking baffled at the small crowd raising the banner, “We are tired,” and blocking traffic with colorfully decorated tires. Angry motorists honked their horns.

Lebanon has been plagued for weeks by almost daily demonstrations using burning tires to cut off main highways to protest everything from political disputes to electricity cuts. Laughing as the group quickly dispersed, the police officer in charge said: “I won’t give them a ticket. We’re all sick of this problem. And their tires are pretty.”

Reuters, June 29, 2012