

Activities

Activity 3

Comparing UNWRA with UNHCR

Preparation:

Estimated Time: 1-2 class periods • **Materials:** Internet connection for research. If computers aren't available, background materials on UNWRA and UNHCR should be provided.

Lesson Plan: This activity is based on the last several paragraphs on page 15. Students should be encouraged to research this issue using other sources as well, such as the UNWRA and UNHCR Web sites.

Background: The General Assembly of the UN (United Nations) set up UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency) in 1949 to provide humanitarian relief to the Arabs who fled from Israel during Israel's War of Independence. It was viewed by the UN as a temporary agency. In fact, the UNHCR (UN High Commission for Refugees) was founded a year later. At first, its mandate was to provide humanitarian relief to the millions of refugees from World War II. Later, this mandate was expanded to include all refugees in the world. However, this mandate did not apply to UNRWA. Thus, today there are two UN agencies that deal with refugees: UNHCR, which deals with all of the world's refugees, except for the Palestinian refugees, and UNRWA, which deals only with the Palestinian refugees.

Introduction: Provide the above background information to students.

Activity:

Ask the students to research the following question: "Does UNRWA have a unique and important role to play, or should it be absorbed by UNHCR?" Students can use the Internet sites listed below or materials that you print for them from these and other sites.

For example, here is information from one site (amizdatblogfree.blogspot.com/2005/11/report-to-unca-transform-operation-of.html):

"A document found on the UNHCR website, 'The State of the World's Refugees, Part 1, The Early Years' puts the matter baldly: '[Arab States...] feared that the non-political character of the work envisioned for the nascent UNHCR was not compatible with the highly politicized nature of the Palestinian question.' Over the years, UNRWA has developed into a massive bureaucratic agency that provides for Palestinian Arab refugees at a level that exceeds what is given to any other refugees in the world. The Palestinian Arab refugees are the only ones to have guaranteed health care, welfare assistance and primary education. In fact, 50% more per refugee is spent on the Palestinian Arabs than on any other refugees. One of the reasons this is so is because UNRWA has come to function in a quasi-governmental fashion for a growing population that has remained, according to UNRWA's rules and definitions, stateless now for 57 years. Whereas UNHCR seeks to help the refugees under their jurisdiction find solutions so that they might get on with their lives with permanency, UNWRA operates under the premise that the Palestinian Arab refugees are still refugees, even if they have acquired a new citizenship, as many have in Jordan while still anticipating a return to their homes and villages in Israel, from which they or their grandparents fled. The question remains: Why do western nations who finance UNRWA (including the 31% contribution from the US) not demand that UNRWA operate according to the principles of UNHCR – to resettle refugees instead of implementing a policy that perpetuates their suffering, while fostering their delusions about the 'right of return'?"

Presentation and Discussion: Students should present their findings and give their opinions regarding the guiding question.

Wrap-Up: The United Nations should play an important and constructive role in helping to solve the plight of refugees around the world. The above guiding question regarding the proper relationship between UNRWA and UNHCR needs to be highlighted when the topic of the Palestinian refugees is raised.