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The EU is an obstacle to peace in the Middle East

By EMMANUEL NAVON

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Transferring the fate of Palestinian refugees from UNWRA to UNHCR would remove a major obstacle to peace.

The claim that Israeli settlements constitute “an obstacle to peace” has become an accepted fact in European dogma. Of course, the truth is that from 1949 until 1967—that is, prior to the existence of settlements—there was never a period of peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Furthermore, that the Palestinian leadership rejected twice Israel’s offer to dismantle most of its settlements (by former prime ministers Ehud Barak in July 2000 and by Ehud Olmert in September 2008); and that when Israel unilaterally dismantled all its settlements in Gaza in 2005, the Jewish State was “rewarded” with thousands of rockets.

Rather than settlements, one of the major obstacles to peace between Israel and the Palestinians is the so-called “right of return.” Under the umbrella of this euphemism, the Palestinians want to flood Israel with about 7 million immigrants who are the descendants—or alleged descendants—of the 600,000 Arabs who left their homes during Israel’s War of Independence. This would turn Israel into a bi-national state with an Arab majority. Except for a minority of post and anti-Zionist Israelis, even the most dovish members of the Israeli Left consider the right of return a non-starter.

While the Zionist Left generally pooh-poohs the right of return as merely being a rhetorical device that even the Palestinians themselves don’t actually believe, the fact is that the refusal to give in on that issue remains the reason behind the Palestinian rejection of Barak and Olmert’s peace proposals. Moreover, neither late PLO leader Yasser Arafat nor Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas have ever attempted to educate their people into admitting that the right of return is unrealistic; on the contrary: both leaders have made it a central tenet of Palestinian nationalism and an issue whose abandonment is an act of high treason.

The fantasy of this “right” is also kept alive and indeed nurtured by UNWRA, the United Nations Agency created in 1949 to handle the issue of Palestinian refugees. There are two main reasons behind why the UNWRA perpetuates and even aggravates the “Palestinian refugee problem.” First, the mandate of UNWRA (as opposed to the mandate of the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, or UNHCR), is not to integrate refugees into their host countries but to support them and to subsidize their lives as second-class citizens in refugee camps.

Second, UNWRA applies the definition of “refugees” to the descendants of the refugees, while UNHCR limits this definition to the refugees themselves. Hence, the number of refugees in the world decreased from 60 million in 1947 to 17 million today, while the number of “Palestinian refugees” has increased from 600,000 in 1948 to a total of 7 million today.

UNWRA is thus a major obstacle to peace. Had UNHCR been in charge of Palestinian refugees (UNHCR handles all the world refugees except Palestinian refugees), the issue would have been solved a while ago. First, were Palestinian refugees defined as such according to UNHCR criteria, about 100,000 Palestinian refugees would still be around today, most of them elderly. Second, UNWRA collaborates with the discriminatory policies of countries such as Lebanon and Jordan by subsidizing the confinement of Palestinian refugees in camps instead of integrating them into countries with which they have no language, ethnic, and religious differences.

Dismantling UNWRA and transferring the fate of the remaining actual Palestinian refugees to UNHCR would thus remove a major obstacle to peace.

The EU has just decided to do the very opposite by granting UNWRA a €72 million donation. This decision is not only an affront to the Palestinian refugees themselves, since it contributes to the perpetuation of their status of segregated and pauperized minorities among their Arab brothers, it is also an affront to the cause of peace. The EU, in effect, has just signed a big check that will fund a major obstacle to peace.

While the EU did somewhat realize the Kantian vision of democratic peace within its borders (although with a little help from the United States, whose army protected Europe from the Soviet Union during the Cold War), Europe's contribution to peace outside of the Old Continent's borders has been dismal. From Rwanda to the former Yugoslavia, the EU has been powerless at best and part of the problem at worst.

The EU promoted the PLO in the 1970s (back when it was called the European Economic Community or EEC) and did not welcome the Camp David Agreements of 1979. Although the Oslo Agreements were not technically drawn up in the EU (Norway is not a EU member), it doesn't change the fact that Europe's recipe for peace in the Middle East is a miserable, tragic failure.

The EU's recent decision to fund UNWRA belongs to a long history of counterproductive efforts and confirms the fact that the EU is an obstacle to peace in the Middle-East.

The writer is an International Relations Lecturer at Tel Aviv University and the founding partner of the Navon-Levy Group Ltd., an international business consultancy. He is also the author of numerous books on Israel's foreign policy, including most recently, From Israel, With Hope: Why and How Israel will Continue to Thrive.



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