



Rethinking humanitarian aid

Efraim Inbar, THE JERUSALEM POST

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While most of the international community has suspended financial support to the aid-dependent Palestinian Authority, several states have sought ways to circumvent the Hamas-controlled bureaucracy in order to deliver humanitarian aid directly to the Palestinian people. Such attempts are functionally and morally misguided.

Humanitarian aid is almost always political. It's governments and organizations with clear political agendas who dispense most "humanitarian" funds. A close look at foreign aid indicates that the self-interest of the donor rather than altruism usually motivates such programs.

The French directed economic aid, primarily to former African colonies, for years in order to further a Francophone community. Meanwhile, European aid programs to the Palestinians are a way to exercise a diplomatic role in a conflict in which most of the shots are called by the Americans.

FOREIGN AID is seen as buying influence. While establishing a clear connection between economic dependence and political compliance is problematic, such a link is on the minds of decision makers.

Secondly, decisions on financial aid are hardly based on a meticulous comparative analysis of the respective needs of various hard-hit groups around the globe. Aid programs are only minimally related to an objective evaluation of the economic situation of potential recipients. Simply put, it is not the poorest that get the most money.

For example, Palestinians receive substantially larger amounts of money per capita than do far more destitute populations in Africa - the Sudan, for instance. There are many countries whose populations suffer far more than do the Palestinian Arabs on such key indices as life expectancy and average caloric intake.

Thirdly, rendering financial aid strengthens the donor political organizations and states dispensing it. This is precisely why several European states toy with the idea of sending money directly to Mahmoud Abbas, representing "the good guys," rather than to Hamas, perceived (for the time being) as "the bad guys." The fact that Abbas chaired a corrupt and inept government seems irrelevant.

FOURTHLY, there is the "CNN effect," which is responsible for eliciting a significant portion of the



humanitarian aid provided. Disasters that attract the attention of the media for extended periods are inevitably viewed as good tools for public diplomacy. Such disasters are capitalized upon to announce generous offers of foreign aid (not always fully delivered) in order to enhance national reputations.

The Palestinians, now partly under economic siege, have a clear interest in playing up the idea that they face a humanitarian disaster. It's a way to overcome political obstacles and speed up delayed financial contributions.

Of course, generous donations (usually from Western states) do not always reach the intended recipients. Some leaders in the less-developed world are ingenious at siphoning aid away from those who truly need it.

Many top-ranking Palestinians have enjoyed the fruits of the donors' gullibility. Moreover, in war-torn societies it is the guys with the guns who usually end up with the food supplies and other goodies provided by well-intentioned foreigners. Food and medicines sent to the Palestinians will invariably end up in the hands of the armed militias.

THE PAVLOVIAN response of sending money to societies unable to put their houses in order must therefore be questioned.

Maimonides, the great Jewish scholar of the 11th century, established a clear hierarchy of philanthropic acts. In his view, the most valuable philanthropic deed involves aid directed at enabling the recipient to become economically independent. His insight is validated by the history of humanitarian aid in the past century, which shows that outside economic aid is only as good as the ability of a recipient's economy and government to use it prudently and productively.

Thus it is not at all clear that sending more money to the dysfunctional Palestinian economy will do any good. After all, millions of euros transferred to the PA since the 1993 Oslo Accords have been squandered and misused.

Indeed, the Palestinian arena provides a telling example of an utterly dysfunctional welfare institution, UNRWA, whose stated goal is to set the Palestinian refugees "on the road to self-reliance and sustainable human development."

The expectation that UNRWA will help the refugees rebuild their lives and stop living on charity remains unfulfilled. Surprisingly, according to the organization's own figures, the number of refugees has *grown*, from hundreds of thousands in 1948 to over 4 million in 2004. These numbers indicate a colossal failure on part of UNRWA to turn the refugees into self-reliant individuals.

We know that welfare can be addictive. In the case of UNRWA, its activities have created a multi-generational dependence. UNRWA has, in fact, become the main tool for *not* solving the refugee issue.

UNRWA has subordinated the welfare of the people it is supposed to be helping to the political needs



of Israel's enemies by ensuring that the refugees stay addicted to foreign welfare.

In the final analysis, humanitarian aid should be dispensed judiciously, while making sure that it does not preserve poverty and dependence.

Addiction can be treated in several ways. "Cold turkey" is one approach, and the Palestinians should be induced to try it.

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