

Absence of Evidence: Israel's Case Against UNRWA

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Statistics are often given lanky legs that take their user far. But how they are used, and how they are received, is striking. The current figure of 27,500 dead is a blighting, grotesque fact. But as they are Palestinians, the issue is less significant to certain parties than, say, 140 Israeli hostages being held in Gaza.

As with much in the noisy clatter of Middle Eastern violence, the value attributed to numbers alters in the shade of ideology and self-interest. Massacres become acts of self-defence; acts of self-defence become unconscionable inflictions of murder. It also follows that an organisation of 30,000 employees, working in the field of humanitarianism, aid and salvation, can be plastered as terrorist sponsors for having 12 individuals in their service allegedly involved in a murderous assault on Israel on October 7, 2023. Despite the relative smallness of this figure, the entire organisation itself becomes a target.

What, then, of the evidence? The state of Israel was initially adamant that 12 such individuals in UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East) had participated in the October 7 attacks by Hamas, [sharing the details](#) on January 29 with several media outlets. The accusations were made via a thin dossier amounting to no more than six pages. Little by way of evidence was supplied, though Israel was content to make further claims that almost 10% of the agency's staff had ties to Hamas. As UN Crisis Group expert Daniel Forti [writes](#), "Thus far, Israel has not provided evidence in writing to the UN to substantiate its allegations."

For a gaggle of Western states and donors, that hardly mattered. The mere mention of the Satanic Twelve had made their way into public and political consciousness, and something had to be done about it. Funding to the aid body was swiftly suspended by the United States, Germany, the European Union, Sweden, Canada, Australia and the United Kingdom. The organisation was smeared and threatened with functional incapacity and prospective

oblivion, an outcome that would also, inevitably, doom Palestinians. Unchallenged accusations that the agency had long been a Hamas front – an article of faith among Israeli nationalists – were bandied about with abandon.

The United Nations, for its part, was unusually fleet footed in responding to the dossier. Contracts were terminated. Inquiries were announced, along with promises of stern self-examination, purging and cleansing. On February 5, the UN Secretary General António Guterres announced that an independent panel had been created with the specific purpose of assessing “whether the agency is doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and to respond to allegations of serious breaches when they are made.” The panel will be chaired by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, who will work alongside a Scandinavian complement of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Sweden, the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Norway and the Danish Institute for Human Rights.

With the setting up of such heavy machinery, the picture started getting foggier. Then a smiting [report](#) from the British news outlet Channel 4 took issue with the scanty material supplied in the document. As the network’s Lindsey Hilsum [stated](#), “We got hold of Israel’s dossier against UNRWA – why did the donors including the UK withdraw funding on such flimsy unproven allegations before an investigation?”

Channel 4 goes on to reveal that the dossier “contains no evidence to support Israel’s explosive new claim other than stating, ‘From intelligence information, documents, and identity cards seized during the course of the fighting, it is now possible to flag around 190 Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihadi terrorist operatives who serve as UNRWA employees. More than 10 UNRWA staffers took part in the events of October 7.’”

Even the usually less than critical CNN network [reported](#) that it had “not seen the intelligence that underlies the summary of allegations”, going on to mention that the summary did “not provide evidence to support its claims.”

When Ophir Falk, an advisor to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, was asked by CNN anchor Anna Coren to provide evidence of the claims, he refused to do so. When asked why the alleged culprits had not been arrested, he [merely replied](#) that “the first step is for them to be fired”.

Outlets such as *The New York Times* and *Wall Street Journal* were less than concerned by the gaping lacunae and skimpiness of Israel’s case. Instead, the latter could even go so far [as to claim](#) that the dossier provided “the most detailed look yet at the widespread links between the UNRWA employees and militants.” The ABC World News Tonight was clumsy enough to [suggest](#) that the UN had “not denied the claims”, implying a veneer of veracity.

Now, other countries are finding absence of evidence from the Israeli side more than awkward. Australia’s Foreign Minister, Penny Wong, had to also admit that she had not been furnished with much in the way of evidence. “We have spoken to the Israelis and we have asked for further evidence,” [she told](#) the Australian Broadcasting Corporation’s 7.30. When asked why she did not ask UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini about the subject, she simply reiterated the point that she had asked the Israelis directly and was not aware if Lazzarini had evidence. “He may, I don’t know what he has.”

With trademark oiliness, Wong countered that the *allegations* were what mattered. “I think it is clear from UNRWA’s own actions that they regard these allegations as serious.” They

had done so by “terminating the employment of a number of employees and putting in place an inquiry – in fact, there are two inquiries.” Effectively, the agency was to be punished for its own enterprising efforts to investigate the claims, leaving the accusers free to level whatever charges they saw fit.

In the meantime, Lazzarini has been scrambling to fill the funding void, making visits to the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Kuwait. The dying and starvation in Gaza continue with the prospect of even more horror as Israel’s armed forces prepare their offensive on Rafah. A fine thing, then, to see donor countries for UNRWA, some of whom continue funding Israel’s military efforts, to moralise about terrorists and the agency.

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Featured image: Philippe Lazzarini, Commissioner-General of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) holds press conference in Jerusalem on October 27, 2023 [Mostafa Alkharouf/Anadolu Agency]

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