

Israel's Anti-UNRWA Campaign Falls Flat

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The Israeli authorities, in their campaign of remorseless killing, doctoring and adjusting the numbers of the Palestinian populace for whatever future awaits, have been found wanting on accusations that Hamas terrorists packed, stacked and filled UNRWA (the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East).

Not that this, in of itself, negates the need to feed, clothe and provide medical assistance to Palestinians being pummelled into oblivion. Or avoid committing war crimes against them. Or avoid starving, humiliating, and degrading them through administrative fiat and bureaucratic oppression. By any estimation, bad apples do not destroy the entire crop, and still need harvesting.

From the outset, Israel asserted that 12 such individuals in UNRWA had participated in the October 7 attacks by Hamas, [sharing the sparse details](#) on January 29 with media outlets. The grateful recipients of the alleged scandal proceeded to gorge on the thin morsel comprising a few pages. The *Financial Times*, for instance, [wrote](#) of Israel's ministry of foreign affairs having "something explosive on their agenda", even if 12 suspects from a Gaza complement of 13,000 would have barely caused a ripple in any other circumstance.

Fifteen donor governments, in a fit of stretched moral outrage, froze promised funding, insisting that investigations by the organisation be undertaken. The UN's Office of International Oversight Services immediately commenced an investigation while US\$444 million was withheld from an aid agency that has assisted dispossessed Palestinians for three-quarters of a century.

On February 5, the UN Secretary General António Guterres announced that an independent panel would assess "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, chaired by former French Foreign Minister Catherine Colonna, and also comprising

the work of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Sweden, the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Norway, and the Danish Institute for Human Rights, released its findings on April 22.

The [full report](#), titled “Independent review of mechanisms and procedures to ensure adherence by UNRWA to the humanitarian principle of neutrality”, was marked by a total absence of cooperation from Israeli authorities. Two requests from the Colonna-led inquiry in March and April requesting names and details to support Israel’s allegations died in silence.

In its findings, UNRWA was found to have, in place, “a significant number of mechanisms and procedures to ensure compliance with the humanitarian principles, with the emphasis on the principle of neutrality, and that it possesses a more developed approach to neutrality than other similar UN or NGO entities.”

It also noted that staff lists, comprising names and functions, are shared on an annual basis with Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, Israel and the US for East Jerusalem, Gaza and the West Bank. It falls on the states in question “to alert UNRWA of any information that may deem a staff member unworthy of diplomatic immunity.” The report further notes that “the Israeli Government has not informed UNRWA of any concerns relating to any UNRWA staff based on these staff lists since 2011.” Regarding the March 2024 list, Israel made public allegations “that a significant number of UNRWA employees are members of terrorist organizations. However, Israel has yet to provide supporting evidence of this.”

The report does not ignore the challenges facing the agency in the Gaza Strip, one made more complex since Hamas took over the reins of the territory in 2007. It found, generally, that the agency had been admirable in maintaining its neutrality in such trying circumstances, though identified eight “critical areas” for improvement, among them addressing the neutrality of education, the political position of staff unions, staff and behaviour, and management and internal oversight mechanisms. UNRWA schools, for instance, were not found to be breeding grounds of antisemitism, though some “host-country textbooks with problematic content” were being used in them. Other areas needing rectification are unlikely to be taken, given the need for Israeli cooperation.

As the report’s executive summary notes,

“In the absence of a political solution between Israel and the Palestinians, UNRWA remains pivotal in providing life-saving humanitarian aid and essential social services, particularly in health and education, to Palestinian refugees in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank.”

Despite refusing to furnish any solid evidence, Israel was already preparing the ground for refusal and refutation ahead of the release. Any findings would be ignored with a fanatic’s adamance. While the country jumps at every opportunity to conduct investigations into its own military misconduct at the drop of hat, with the inevitable exonerations, no external review would convince them. Nothing short of the destruction of the agency would satisfy the objectives of the Israeli state.

In March, *The Guardian* [quoted](#) one Israeli diplomatic source (nameless, naturally) as claiming that a “double game” was being played by Hamas and the agency, “so much so that UNRWA is a Hamas strategic asset.” Another nameless diplomatic source was of the view that the aid agency was “so penetrated in Gaza, it cannot be repaired. This is the

policy of the state of Israel. We want to see an end to UNRWA activity in Gaza. This is not a case of a few bad apples. It is systemic, consistent and cannot be ignored.” Out, it would seem, with the entire orchard.

Presumption can therefore take the position of hard fact, a point made crystal clear in another round of allegations (no evidence supplied about that either) that 2,135 UNRWA staff were supposedly members of Hamas, of whom 400 were alleged to be active fighters.

From the perspective of lusty warmongers, UNRWA remains an obstacle, a nuisance, a nightmare of reminder to those wishing to be done with the Palestinian issue once and for all. May it continue to thrive, and, more ever, may its funders finally wise up to the fact that in the viciousness of conflict, civilians should never have to pay the price for military actions undertaken by others. Unfortunately, three months after, and a human-confected famine ravaging Gaza even as the killings continue, various donor countries such as the United States, Germany and the UK are still minding their wallets.

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