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UNRWA Association with Hamas: An Overview

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Background: UNRWA set the stage

A strong case can be made for the fact that the UNRWA policy regarding “right of return” has fomented radicalism in the population it assists.

Additional material on the ways in which UNRWA promotes “right of return” will follow this introductory report.

Here the reader is referred to citations from one source: “UNRWA: The Unsung Hero,” by Dr. Salman Abu Sitta, the founder of the Palestine Land Society, London.

The perseverance of the Palestinians in their quest to return home is enhanced by the increasing world support and also by the work of UNRWA and its records. These records are the building block of the Return Plan... This simple card [illustrated in a slide] is the genome of the refugeehood (sic). It defines the refugee's name, his family, the new families of his off-spring, his home in his village of origin and his camp of exile. The whole home-exile odyssey is imprinted in history.

We, all of us, must work actively for the return of the refugees. Only when they return, when they are rehabilitated in their own homes... can we say the job of UNRWA is done...

UNRWA of course will be the main instrument for repatriation. It has a rich history and dedicated staff, ideal for the job.ⁱ (Emphasis added)

This was taken from a speech that was delivered by Abu Sitta for the Palestine Return Center in London on December 16, 2009, and then reprinted by the Palestinian Land Society. The Palestine Return Center has been identified by the Terrorism Information Center in Israel as having affiliation with Hamas and the Muslim Brotherhood.ⁱⁱ It has been outlawed in Israel.ⁱⁱⁱ

The progression from UNRWA's policy on “return” to radicalism is fairly straightforward: For four generations now, because there has been no “return” to Israel, UNRWA has maintained the status of “refugee” for all those it serves: Its mandate neither provides for nor recognizes permanent settlement of its clients outside of Israel. Disenfranchised “refugees” – indefinitely maintained in a temporary status – are embittered and angry. As they are given to understand that their situation is Israel's fault, their anger is vented against the Jewish state. In 2003, this author concluded in a report on UNRWA that:

Imbued with a promise that has not been realized, shunted aside, caught in the misery of squalid surroundings, the refugees in the camps are filled with frustration, with despair, and with rage... they are disenfranchised, set apart...

...The situation has fomented radicalism and terrorism.^{iv}

The Palestinian Arab population of Gaza is more heavily radicalized than that of Judea and Samaria.^v It is legitimate to consider whether UNRWA policies may have had a role in generating this situation: Is it merely coincidence that the more highly radicalized Gaza has a considerably higher percentage of refugees within its Palestinian Arab population than Judea and Samaria?^{vi}

UNRWA's highly unusual hiring practices may play a role in fomenting radicalism, as well: With the exception of some 100 "internationals" serving in high level administrative posts, the roughly 23,400 employees of UNRWA are all themselves registered as refugees and live in or near the camps in which they work.

This practice of hiring from within the client population – which is almost universally frowned upon by social service agencies – means that the persons charged with professionally serving the refugee population are not separate from their clients' problems. They are experiencing the same disenfranchisement and sense of limbo – and potentially the same embitterment and anger – as other refugees. In a significant percentage of cases, these professionals transmit their perspectives to their clients or empathize openly with their clients' radicalism. (Evidence of this follows below.)

Exposure of radicalism in the UNRWA camps

Hints of the radicalism that pertained in the camps were provided by 1997, if not sooner, with reports such as that of the *Washington Jewish Week*.^{vii} This included photographs of UNRWA schools decorated with Hamas and PFLP graffiti, and a map of "Palestine" that ran from the Jordan to the Mediterranean and was covered with pictures of machine guns. It is doubtful that anyone was paying attention back then.

Broad scale exposure came in the spring of 2002. In response to the terrorism emanating from UNRWA refugee camps in Judea and Samaria as part of the "Second Intifada," Israel launched "Operation Defensive Shield." At that time, the IDF went into the camps and laid bare the facts regarding the refugees' connection to terrorism.

Dore Gold, former Israeli Ambassador to the UN, was in Jenin in April 2002 as a consultant to the IDF and himself witnessed the presence of *shahid* (martyr) posters on the walls in the homes of UNRWA workers. "It was clear," he said, "that UNRWA workers were doubling as Hamas operatives."^{viii}

Perhaps most damning of all was the briefing provided by then-Deputy Prime Minister Natan Sharansky in Jerusalem on April 19, 2002, following a major IDF incursion into the UNRWA refugee camp in Jenin:

...Jenin and the refugee camp of Jenin were the heart of the terror activities. Dozens of suicide bombers were sent from that relatively small place. It had more explosive materials, this small area of the Jenin refugee camp, than most of the big cities of Judea and Samaria. Definitely, it had the highest

concentration of explosive materials in this area, if not in the world.^{ix}

Evidence of the involvement in terrorism of UNRWA-supported refugees – and of the UNRWA refugee camps as the source from which the terrorism emanates – has come to the fore repeatedly since that exposure in the spring of 2002.

In December 2002, a special intelligence report^x was released in Israel. See the Appendix for some examples of the facts it uncovered.

In recent years, it has been the Gaza camps in particular that have been strongly associated with the stockpiling and manufacture of rockets, as well as the launching into Israel of these weapons. A few examples:

In June 2006, Israel took out the Hamas headquarters located in the Jabaliya camp in northern Gaza,^{xi} and killed Jamal Abu Samhadana, a security chief for Hamas, who was a resident of the UNRWA Rafah refugee camp at the southern end of Gaza.^{xii}

In May 2007, the UNRWA Nuseirat refugee camp, in mid-Gaza, was identified as a site for launching Kassam rockets and a weapons storage facility was targeted there by the IDF.^{xiii}

In January 2008, the Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center released a report^{xiv} that documented that “many places in Jabaliya served as rocket launching sites both before and during [the Israeli] Operation Cast Lead, including places close to mosques and UNRWA schools,” and that “rockets were launched from the Sha’ati refugee camp into Israeli territory...”

Material provided by Middle East Strategic Information^{xv} in January 2009, documents the case of Al-Kik born in the Jebaliya refugee camp and a resident of the Rafah refugee camp. He studied at UNRWA schools and moved to a teaching career at UNRWA schools; he became principal of an UNRWA elementary school and then subsequently a principal of a junior high school. As a student, al-Kik was active in Islamic Jihad. He then joined the military wing of the organization, where he was one of the senior operatives in charge of manufacturing and developing rockets, preparing explosive charges and training others. He was ultimately killed by Israel.

A necessary clarification

In an effort to achieve deniability for what happens in the refugee camps, in recent years, UNRWA has taken the position that it does not run “camps” but only provides services. This however, does not wash.

There was a time when UNRWA acknowledged that it did more than simply provide services:

In an interview in 1991, Sandro Tucci, then head of UNRWA’s Public Information Office, was asked about who inherits a home in a refugee camp when the father of the family living there dies. Tucci answered, “This is not his property, **it’s our property.**”^{xvi} (emphasis added)

The camps themselves – on land put at the disposal of UNRWA by host authorities or governments – are carefully defined in UNRWA records according to exact location and number of dunam.^{xvii}

But even if UNRWA opts not to assume responsibility for administration of “camps,” there is still the question of facilities and equipment utilized directly in conjunction with the services—schools, clinics, ambulances, cars.

Beyond this, there is the very serious question of UNRWA responsibility for persons with which it is associated, most notably as employees, when such persons become involved with terrorist groups.

These issues lead directly to the final section of this report.

From fomenting radicalism to facilitating it

It is one thing to argue that UNRWA’s policies on “right of return” have generated a frustration and anger in its client population that has led to radicalism and an embrace of terrorism.

It is another to maintain that UNRWA educational staff – teachers and administrators – are actively involved in recruiting the next generation of Hamas from within the UNRWA student population in Gaza, and utilizing UNRWA school facilities in the process.

That second charge, however, holds, as it can be effectively documented.

What is more, it is a cyclical process at this point: “Right of return” moved the refugee population in the direction of radicalism. As Hamas-affiliated refugees have assumed positions of influence – formally and informally – within the schools in Gaza, the message delivered to the students has incorporated the theme of “right of return,” along with the need for jihad and martyrdom. And thus UNRWA’s policies reinforce the message delivered by the radicals.

UNRWA, then, has culpability for the current situation of extremism and violence in Gaza in several respects. Most importantly, there is no way for the agency’s administrative staff to be absolved of responsibility for the radical political orientation of those teaching and providing programming for the students studying within its schools.

On July 6, 2001, Hamas convened a conference in a school in the Jabaliya refugee camp, in which the school’s administration, teachers, and hundreds of students participated. Hamas leader Ahmed Yassin presented his ideological doctrine to the junior high school students and said, “This is the generation of liberation and victory. The Zionist enemy wants to overpower us and make us give up Palestine, Acre, Haifa, Jerusalem and the Al Aqsa mosque, but this will not happen.”

Suhail al-Hindi, *representing the teaching sector on behalf of UNRWA*, praised Hamas student activists who carried out suicide attacks against Israel in recent months, emphasizing that, “The road to Palestine passes through the blood of the fallen, and these fallen have written history with parts of their flesh and their bodies.”^{xviii}

The Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs registered a protest with UNRWA with regard to this, as UNRWA’s spokesperson acknowledged two years ago in a YNet op-ed. No

action was taken against al-Hindi, who is still in an influential position in UNRWA (more on this below) and at the same time represents Hamas in an official capacity at events.^{xix}

On December 30, 2005, a cultural event was held to honor a hundred teachers, male and female, who had been singled out for their excellence from an UNRWA school in Khan Yunis. Among those present was Dr. Yunes Al-Astal, one of the heads of Hamas who openly advocates terrorist attacks against Israel, and who has issued religious edicts (*fatwas*) to the effect that Jews will be burned in both this world and the next.^{xx}

Khaled Madi, an UNRWA teacher, told the audience at this event that “those worthy of being honored are the teachers who sacrificed their lives for the sake of Allah and the homeland, like the *shahids* [“martyrs” who gave their lives in terror attacks] Tareq Abu Al-Hussien, Subhi Abu Namous, Iyad Al-Sir, Muhammad Al-Awaj and Majid Al-Slibi, who were all teachers in Khan Yunis.”^{xxi}

Teachers’ union control

The UNRWA teachers’ union in the Gaza Strip – by far the largest union sector – has close to 7,000 members. Elections are held once every three years to choose representatives to executive councils.

For over 15 years, Hamas (via its affiliate Islamic Bloc) has dominated the UNRWA’s this union. In 2006, the Hamas victory was decisive: for the first time: its candidates won all 11 seats, meaning that Hamas representatives then controlled the executive council of this union sector.

In 2009, once again, Hamas-affiliated candidates won all 11 seats in the teachers’ union in Gaza, guaranteeing Hamas control of UNRWA schools in Gaza.^{xxii} In March 2011, Suhail al-Hindi was reelected as head of the teachers’ union of UNRWA in Gaza.

After the 2009 election, John Ging, then serving as UNRWA Director of Operations in Gaza – discomfited by leaks regarding the political affiliation of successful candidates – gave indications of intention to relieve certain persons of their positions, one of them reputed to be al-Hindi. However, the Palestinian news website Sama^{xxiii} reported, on May 31, 2009, that when Ging attended an event honoring retired UNRWA teachers, he was accompanied by al-Hindi. Clearly, al-Hindi was not out of favor with UNRWA in 2009, and is not now.

It is worthy of note that on April 16, 2009, Mustafa Sawaf, editor-in-chief of the Hamas daily *Felesteen*, wrote an editorial in his paper in the form of a letter to Ging, addressing his “threat of layoffs.” He wrote:

*...laying off the agency employees because of their political affiliation means laying off **all** the employees of the aid agency [UNRWA], because...**they are all members of the ‘resistance,’ in its various forms [i.e., terrorist groups].***^{xxiv}
(Emphasis added)

Al-Kutla in the schools

The Hamas-affiliated Islamic Bloc (known in Arabic as *Al-Kutla Al-Islamiah*) maintains broad programs in UNRWA schools; these begin as early as junior high school, and promote incitement for jihad and opposition to Israel.

Representatives of the *Kutla* operate in the schools, with each group of representatives supervised by a counselor (*amir*) assigned by Hamas. The goal is winning the hearts and minds of students so they can be recruited into the Hamas military wing during high school or after graduation.

This is done via supplemental programming, special events, and offers of assistance, including: clean-up projects; visitation of sick students; vacations; soccer tournaments; planting trees at the schools; assistance in preparing for exams; quiz contests with prizes; bringing and bands and singers associated with Hamas; and so on. Teachers are also given gifts by *Kutla* at holiday times.^{xxv}

A few examples of *Kutla* activities in the schools:

In May 2008, the *Kutla* ran a commemoration of the *Nakba* [“catastrophe,” by which is meant the founding of Israel] in an UNRWA junior high school, Izbet Beit Hanun. A video on the Hamas website documented the ceremony, in which an unnamed boy, accompanied by a *Kutla* representative, stated:

We are still holding the key for our return, we are holding weapons and we are defending our country until we return, with the help of Allah, our ownership right....we will free Al-Aqsa [mosque]...and our homeland...from the heretic pigs of the sons of Zion ...we shall return...we shall return...we will never recognize what is called Israel.^{xxvi}

In early 2009, the Hamas website reported on *Kutla* programming being done in an UNRWA junior high school in Rafah. The goal, according to the website, was “to draw in 155 new students to operate under the Islamic flag.” Methods included: distributing pamphlets and magazines containing religious indoctrination (*Daawa*); attending school programs; arranging competitions; meeting new students, and offering gifts to teachers and students.^{xxvii}

Iz-A-Din Adel Al-Farah, a 15 year old student in eighth grade in UNRWA’s Al-Qarara junior high, had joined the *Kutla* and was head of the *Daawa* committee. After he was killed in an IDF operation in January 2009, *Kutla* activists in the school hung up posters that included a picture of Al-Fara in uniform and carrying a gun.^{xxviii}



Projection for further information

Al-Kutla continues to operate freely in all of the UNRWA schools in Gaza.

Researcher Lt. Col. (res.) Jonathan Dahoah-Halevi, who confirms this fact, has obtained video clips documenting ceremonies held in UNRWA schools. In these, teachers and principals stress the Palestinian commitment to the right of return and students hold banners with names of Palestinian villages before the *Nakba* while chanting slogans in favor the liberation of Palestine.

These video clips and a significantly larger report will be available before the end of August.

APPENDIX

Facts exposed by a special 2002 intelligence report in Israel. ^{xxix}

- A number of wanted terrorists were found hiding inside schools run by UNRWA.
- Ala'a Muhammad Ali Hassan, a Tanzim "activist" from Nablus, when arrested, confessed that he had carried out a sniper shooting from the school run by UNRWA in the al-Ayn refugee camp near Nablus. He also told his interrogators that bombs intended for terrorist attacks were being manufactured inside that school's facilities.
- Nahd Rashid Ahmad Atallah, a senior official of UNRWA in the Gaza Strip who was in charge of distributing financial aid to the refugees, told his interrogators, when arrested, that during the years 1990 through 1993, in his capacity as an UNRWA official, he had granted support to families of wanted terrorists, on behalf of Fatah and the Popular Front. He also revealed that during the months June and July 2002, he had used his car, an UNRWA car, for the transportation of armed members of the Popular Resistance Committees who were on their way to carry out sniper attacks.
- Nidal Abd al-Fattah Abdallah Nazzal, a Hamas activist from Kalkilya, was arrested in August 2002. Nidal, an ambulance driver employed by UNRWA, confessed during his interrogation that he had transported weapons and explosives in an UNRWA ambulance to terrorists, and that he had taken advantage of the freedom of movement he enjoyed to transmit messages among Hamas activists in various Palestinian towns.

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- i <http://www.plands.org/speechs/i01.html>.
- ii http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/ipc_e171.htm.
- iii www.shabak.gov.il.
- iv <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/library/pdfs/UNWRARReport.pdf>. Page 18.
- v As evidenced by the fact that it was Gaza that was taken over by Hamas and serves as a center of its operations.
- vi According to the UNRWA website as of July 2011, there are 1.5 million Arabs in Gaza, and 1.1 million – or 73% -- are refugees. In Judea and Samaria, the Arab population is 2.4 million with 688,000 refugees, representing almost 29% of the population. Some demographers have calculated that there may be as many as 1million fewer Arabs in Judea and Samaria than PA figures indicate. If so, the refugees would constitute 49% of the population.
- vii Shawn Cohen, “The Refugee Dilemma: A Day in the UNRWA Arab Refugee Camps,” *Washington Jewish Week*, July 23, 1997.
- viii In interview, December 14, 2003.
- ix From the Israeli Foreign Ministry website: www.israel-mfa.gov.il in 2003.
- x Reuven Ehrlich, Ph.D, Editor, “Special Information Paper,” Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, December 2002.
- xi Patterns of Global Terrorism: Israel 2006 Overview.
- xii Fox News, 8 June 2006.
- xiii Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- xiv http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hamas_e049.pdf.
- xv <http://www.mesi.org.uk/ViewBlog.aspx?ArticleId=46>.
- xvi Interview conducted by Jeff Arner and Sylvia Martin, October 1991 in the UNRWA West Bank Field Office in East Jerusalem. Quote drawn from transcription.
- xvii <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/library/pdfs/UNWRARReport.pdf>. Page 10. In 2003, this information was available on the UNRWA website.
- xviii In 2001, this was made available on the website of the Israeli prime minister, with direct quotes drawn from the Hamas website.
- xix Source for this information is Arabic-speaking Lt. Col. (res.) Jonathan Dahoah-Halevi, formerly with IDF intelligence.
- xx Ibid.
- xxi Ibid.
- xxii Khaled Abu Toameh, “Hamas wins teachers union elections for UN schools in Gaza,” *The Jerusalem Post*, March 29, 2009.
- xxiii <http://www.samanews.com/index.php?act=Show&id=43829>.
- xxiv http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/html/hamas_e071.htm.
- xxv Ibid.

xxvi

Ibid.

xxvii

Ibid.

xxviii

Ibid.

xxix

Reuven Ehrlich, Ph.D, Editor, "Special Information Paper," Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center at the Center for Special Studies, December 2002.