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## THE CASE FOR REFORMING UNRWA

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### **CHANGING TACTICS**

UNRWA – the UN Relief and Works Agency – appears to be adopting a new face and new policies. These changes can be seen as part of a bold PR campaign to insure, first, that the UN will renew its mandate on June 30. Allusions to “administrative reform” promote an image of an agency that has its house in order.<sup>1</sup>

Additionally, UNRWA wants to secure maximum funds for its operation. Whereas the vast majority of operational funds in the past came from donations provided by individual nations, UNRWA now seeks financial resources from the United Nations regular budget.<sup>2</sup>

The changes, however, are tactical, and do not begin to represent the sort of reform that is urgently advocated by the Center. UNRWA operations, at their core, have not changed, and the problems they generate remain as critical as ever. In fact, not only do the tactical changes mask underlying problems, they also generate additional problems.

### **Washington Office**

UNRWA is in the process of setting up a Representative Office in Washington DC, the mandate of which will be “to represent the interests of UNRWA vis-à-vis Washington, DC-based US government and non-governmental entities, with particular reference to the US Congress and the US State Department [and the National Security Council].”<sup>3</sup>

Key staff members in this office will lobby “relevant members of Congress and their staffers to advance understanding of UNRWA’s role in the context of the regional issues of the Middle East [and] the Agency’s operations...”<sup>4</sup>

The Office additionally will “monitor on a daily basis relevant developments in the US Congressional agenda, with a view to formulating and leading the implementation of an outreach and advocacy strategy dedicated to optimizing UNRWA’s relations with Congress and other Washington, DC-based governmental and non-governmental agencies...”<sup>5</sup>

Lastly, it will formulate and institute “a media and communications strategy dedicated to addressing the US audience, including disseminating information to media as well as

civil society and non-governmental entities and timely responses to queries from media and other entities...”<sup>6</sup>

### **Talks by John Ging**

Since February 2011, John Ging has been going out to speak within American communities, primarily on US college campuses, often via Hillel chapters. His subject, broadly, has been Gaza.

What is notable about this is that Ging has been promoted directly by J Street and J Street U. <sup>7</sup> (J Street co-founder, Daniel Levy, serves on the Board of Directors of American Friends of UNRWA.)

When Ging began this speaking tour he was still serving as Director of UNRWA Operations in Gaza. The Center has documented numerous highly politicized, inciteful and tendentious statements he made over time in that capacity. <sup>8</sup>

In February he moved over to OCHA, the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, where he is Director of Operations. And yet, on April 27, 2011, John Ging will be speaking at the Hillel Chapter on the Brown University campus, having been promoted yet again by J Street. <sup>9</sup> He is now billed as the former Director of UNRWA’s Gaza operations.

## **THE UNRWA OPERATION**

In the course of years of investigating and documenting the work of UNRWA, the Center has consistently concluded that UNRWA operations and policy constitute a major precipitating factor with regard to unrest and radicalism in Palestinian Arab areas. In fact, a report on UNRWA produced by the Center in 2003 indicated that:

“...a continuation of the *status quo* of UNRWA operations is neither desirable nor acceptable. That *status quo* is detrimental both to the long term well being of the refugees and to the possibilities for peace in the Middle East.”<sup>10</sup>

In light of the increasing radicalism in Gaza, this conclusion is more relevant than ever.

### **Unique rules for Palestinian refugees<sup>11</sup>**

UNRWA is the *only* international organization dedicated exclusively to one group of refugees. This is in contradistinction to the UN High Commission on Refugees (UNHCR), which is charged with working on behalf of all the world’s refugees, other than those who fall under the UNRWA mandate.

Furthermore, the High Commission is mandated to promote solutions to refugee problems. But UNRWA provides only humanitarian aid (education, health care, welfare assistance, social services) and has by *policy* absented itself from involvement in any creative resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem.

This arrangement, which has been in place for over 60 years, has generated a highly problematic and inequitable situation:

- UNHCR policies call for permanent settlement of refugees as quickly as possible, so that they might get on with their lives.

When it is possible to repatriate refugees, this is done, but when it is not possible, refugees are provided with permanency either in the country to which they fled, or a third country. Once they achieve citizenship, they are no longer counted as refugees.

- UNRWA, on the other hand, says that Palestinian refugees and their descendents cease being refugees *only* if they “return” to Israel, from which they or their parents or grandparents great-grandparents fled in 1948.

No other settlement option is considered permanent – the status of refugee continues to pertain even if a Palestinian has full citizenship in another country. What is more, the children of refugees (patrilineal line), now to the fourth generation, continue to be conferred with the status of refugee.

### ***Problem generated by these unique rules***

- The Palestinian refugee population is the only refugee population that has grown by leaps and bounds over the years instead of diminishing. While some 500,000 to 800,000 refugees were estimated to have fled Israel in 1948, UNRWA now claims over four million refugees on its lists.

### **Promotion of the “Right of Return”<sup>12</sup>**

In point of fact, there is legally no “right of return.”

Resolution of the Palestinian refugee problem is defined within the UNRWA mandate as being based on UN General Assembly Resolution 194, paragraph 11, which states in its lead sentence that “the refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date.”

However, General Assembly resolutions are only recommendations and carry no weight in international law. What is more, the UNRWA mandate utilizes one phrase from a larger paragraph that in fact alludes to various solutions to the refugee problem including resettlement.

Lastly, there remains the question of whether refugees would truly live in peace with their Israeli neighbors. Evidence that this might be the case is close to non-existent.

Nonetheless, UNRWA for more than six decades has made the notion of “return” the focal point of its operation. Refugees are consistently taught about the villages in Israel they or their families had come from – this is reinforced in multiple ways, from the registration code on their ID cards to names on streets in the UNRWA camps to special programs.

The message delivered to refugees is that they have an inalienable right to return, and that Israel is blocking their exercise of that right.

The official UNRWA website currently runs a series of quotes from refugees. These quotes reflect precisely what has been communicated to them by UNRWA:

“We were born here, and live here, but we are strangers.” (a refugee in Jordan)

“All Palestinian children want to enjoy their rights. We want to live like everyone else.” (a refugee in Gaza)

### ***Problems generated by the policy on return***

- The refugees themselves pay a price for this policy, for they are maintained in a stateless limbo situation, unable to find permanency and get on with their lives. This constitutes a deprivation of their human rights – a fact that is largely ignored within the international community.
- The reality is that they are political pawns, forced to live with uncertainty when their problems might have been resolved, so that they might be used to pressure Israel. Consistently over the years attempts to ameliorate the difficult conditions of the refugees have been blocked because this would have the effect of reducing their desire to “return.”

As far back as June 1957, the Chairman of the Near Eastern Sub-Committee of the United States Senate Foreign Relations Committee reported at the end of a survey:

*“The fact is that the Arab States have for ten years used the Palestine refugees as political hostages in their struggle with Israel. While Arab delegates in the United Nations have condemned the plight of their brothers in the refugee camps nothing has been done to assist them in a practical way lest political leverage against Israel be lost.”*<sup>13</sup>

That situation has not only persisted, it has been exacerbated over the years.

In 1984, former Minister Mordecai Ben Porat wrote, “Preservation of the image of miserable, homeless, and penniless refugees has ruled out any possibility of dealing with the issues...*the funds initially intended to erase the refugee problem have become a powerful instrument intent on preserving this very problem.*”<sup>14</sup> (Emphasis added.)

In line with an Israeli government decision on the matter, Ben Porat had been asked by then Prime Minister Begin to address ways to ameliorate the situation of the refugees but found his efforts were consistently blocked.

Most notably, in 1985, when Israel attempted to move refugees into permanent housing that had been constructed with funding from the Catholic Relief Agency, the UN officially intervened. A General Assembly resolution<sup>15</sup> was passed that forbade Israel from moving refugees out of their temporary shelters, since this would violate their "inalienable right of return" to the homes that they left in 1948."

- *The result of this situation has been a radicalization of frustrated Palestinian refugees, who are imbued with rage. This rage is directed at Israel, which is perceived as the cause of their suffering.*

## **UNRWA CONNECTION TO HAMAS**

It has been irrevocably and inevitably the case that the situation of the refugees has rendered them receptive to membership in and support of the terrorist organization Hamas.

What has further been the case, however, is that UNRWA has, at best, turned a blind eye to refugee association with Hamas, and more frequently, has implicitly sanctioned refugee terrorist involvement and utilization of UNRWA facilities for terrorist activities.

### **UNRWA Employees Involved with Hamas**

The association of UNRWA employees with Hamas follows from the fact that some 99% of those employees (top managerial staff excluded) are themselves Palestinian refugees – subject to the same frustrations and angers as other refugees.

This connection had become apparent by 2002, in good part because the IDF moved into UNRWA camps in Judea and Samaria as part of Operation Defensive Shield.

In interview, IDF Colonel (ret.) Yoni Figchel, a former military governor in the territories, observed that, "As long as UNRWA employees are members of Fatah, Hamas, or PFLP, they are going to pursue the interests of their party within the framework of their job... Who's going to check up on them to see that they don't? UNRWA? They are UNRWA."<sup>16</sup>

The situation still pertains. (See following.)

## **Hamas Presence in the UNRWA Schools**

### ***Teachers Union***

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 select representatives to its executive council.

For over 15 years, Hamas (via its affiliate Islamic Bloc)<sup>17</sup> has dominated the UNRWA's teachers' union in the Gaza Strip. In 2006, the Hamas victory was decisive: for the first

time, its candidates won all 11 seats for the teachers' section, meaning that Hamas representatives would control the executive council of this union sector.

In the 2009 elections, once again, Hamas-affiliated candidates won all 11 seats in the teachers' section guaranteeing Hamas control of UNRWA schools in Gaza.<sup>18</sup>

### ***Islamic Bloc Operating 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 counsellor (*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.<sup>19</sup>

One example of many, regarding *Kutla* involvement in the schools: 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.<sup>20</sup>

### **Terrorist Activities in the UNRWA Camps and Facilities**

Operation Defensive Shield also shed a light on the use of UNRWA camps for terrorist activity.

Speaking of the UNRWA Jenin refugee camp, in 2002, then Deputy Prime Minister Natan Sharansky, said:

“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.”<sup>21</sup>

Over the course of the years since:

- Wanted terrorists have been found hiding inside schools run by UNRWA.
- A large number of youth clubs operated by UNRWA in the refugee camps have been discovered to be meeting places for terrorists.

- Sniper shooting has been done from UNRWA schools and bombs for terrorist attacks have been manufactured in such schools.
- UNRWA vehicles – including ambulances – have been utilized for transporting weapons and explosives, as well as terrorists on their way to attack.<sup>22</sup>

In recent years this situation has been most problematic in Gaza, where terrorism emanates from inside the UNRWA camps and camps are used as launching sites for rockets, as well as the storage of rockets. The UNRWA Jabalyia camp in northern Gaza is most notable in this connection.

During Operation Cast Lead, in Gaza, in December 2008/January 2009, tensions between the IDF and UNRWA were heightened when UNRWA leveled accusations that Israel had hit UNRWA facilities inappropriately. The IDF provided evidence for the presence of terrorists inside or on the grounds of those facilities.<sup>23</sup>

### **POLITICIZED AND INCITEFUL STATEMENTS BY UNRWA STAFF**

UNRWA is, according to its mandate, a purely humanitarian organization. Politicized statements made by its staff would be inappropriate in any event. However, what the Center has tracked over the years are politicized statements that are tendentious, inciteful, and overtly anti-Israel. A few examples will suffice here:

- During Operation Cast Lead, UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness, spoke on the radio.<sup>24</sup> After speaking about proportionality, without any sense of what the term means legally, he addressed the reason for the rockets that Hamas had been launching at Israeli civilians:

“But let me also say that the root of the rockets —and people in Gaza tell you this all the time— and, by the way, I also spend a lot of time in Gaza. They will tell you that the occupation is being resisted. That’s the reason for the rockets...

“And from the UN’s point of view, there is one occupied territory. So if there’s one Israeli soldier occupying the West Bank, then Gaza is also occupied. I’m afraid that is how international law works. Gaza has continued to be occupied. And until the underlying cause of this, the occupation, is addressed and the strangulation, which is part of that occupation, is addressed, I fear for the people of Sderot.”

Gunness, who sounds like spokesman for Hamas here, is also totally wrong in what he says about “one occupation.”

- Similarly, Karen Abu Zayd, who was then Commissioner-General of UNRWA, in a speech made after the war, fabricated accusations:

“The saddest thing, is that all of the private sector - every single factory and workshop - was destroyed. Anybody who was working has to start all over.”<sup>25</sup>

In point of fact, Israeli attacks were pinpoint — done to hit specific identified targets. One might also ask how AbuZayd *determined* such a thing: how could she *know* that there was not a single workshop left standing? This is not a case of empathy for the residents of Gaza that would lead to a tendency to exaggerate. In this instance, one is led to the possibility that AbuZayd willfully and maliciously misrepresented information for political purposes.

- On May 3, 2010, in an interview in his Gaza office with the Norwegian paper *Aftenposten*, John Ging, then Director of UNRWA Operations in Gaza, suggested that the international community had a responsibility to act with regard to the situation in Gaza. The situation now, he suggested, is that “Israel refuses to act reasonably.”

“Therefore we ask the international community: Bring us the supplies we need to rebuild schools and run them, bring us the equipment we need to hospitals and health centers. Everybody knows how desperate the situation is in the Gaza Strip after almost three years of blockade. We need action now...

“And who would stop the ship with such things as teaching materials and materials to building schools? In that case we would get a new reality for the international community. Then the purpose of the blockade would be to destroy Gaza, not to protect Israel.”<sup>26</sup>

There is considerable reason to believe that this inciteful statement served to promote the flotilla that sailed towards Gaza in May 2010 with such disastrous results.

## **TEXTBOOKS IN UNRWA SCHOOLS**

It is UNRWA policy to utilize the textbooks of the administrative region in which its various schools are located. Thus, for example, in Syria textbooks used in the Syrian schools are employed.

In Gaza and Judea and Samaria, UNRWA uses PA texts.

The academic organization known as IMPACT-SE ([www.impact.se.org](http://www.impact.se.org)) – formerly CMIP – has done a thorough analysis of these textbooks, utilizing UNESCO guidelines.

Some basic findings:

- Israel’s name, with a couple of very minor exceptions, does not appear on any of the maps.
- Several Israeli cities, as well as an archaeological site, a region and a mountain within Israel are defined as Palestinian.
- Jerusalem is presented as a Palestinian city.



- Peace is not mentioned at all, while war against Israel as a usurper, occupier and aggressor is implicitly encouraged.
- The refugee issue is mentioned within the context of the destined return of refugees to their 1948 homes.
- There is praise of and encouragement for the waging of Jihad, Holy War.
- Jews and Israelis are represented as being cunning and deceitful.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

The nations that are primary donors to UNRWA – in the interests of promoting a peaceful situation between Israel and the Palestinians and protecting the human rights of the Palestinian refugees – are called upon to facilitate the follow changes within UNRWA:

- UNRWA’s mandate is adjusted to conform with that of UNHCR.
- Genuine, sustained and concerted effort be made by UNRWA to ensure that terrorist activities do not occur within or on the grounds of its facilities and that its vehicles not be employed for terrorist purposes.
- Hamas, in the guise of the Islamic Bloc, be prevented from maintaining a presence in UNRWA schools or facilitating activities in those schools.
- Persons with terrorist organizational affiliations, which includes affiliation with Islamic Bloc, be prohibited from running in the elections for the teacher’s union.
- The current school books in use in UNRWA schools be replaced by textbooks – which are available – that promote peace and recognize the legitimate presence of Israel as a Jewish state.
- A monitoring mechanism that provides full transparency be set in place for tracking the ways in which UNRWA utilizes its funds.

## **ENDNOTES**

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.unrwa.org/etemplate.php?id=956>

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> <http://foreignaffairsjobs.com/?p=326>

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

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<sup>7</sup> See comments by J Street U director Daniel May, on “J Street U Brings John Ging to Campus: <http://jstreet.org/blog/j-street-u-brings-john-ging-to-campus/>

<sup>8</sup> See <http://frontpagemag.com/2011/01/28/a-un-appointment-exposed/>

<sup>9</sup> Marshall Einhorn, Director of Hillel at Brown, indicated in communication with David Bedein, Center Director, on April 21, that Hillel had been contacted by J Street, which offered Ging free of charge.

<sup>10</sup> <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/library/pdfs/UNWRARReport.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> All information provided here is from the UNRWA report op. cit.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.mfa.gov.il/MFA/Foreign+Relations/Israels+Foreign+Relations+since+1947/1947-1974/11+Statement+to+the+Special+Political+Committee+of.htm?WBCMODE=PresentationUnpCredits?DisplayMode=print>.

<sup>14</sup> Nadav Anner and Mordechai ben Porat, *Will There Always Be Refugees: A Survey and Proposals for a Solution of the Middle East Refugee Problem*, Merkaz Hahasbara, Jerusalem, 1984, p.36.

<sup>15</sup> The document can be retrieved at: [www.un.org/documents/ga/res/40/a40r165.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/ga/res/40/a40r165.htm).

<sup>16</sup> Allison Kaplan Sommer, “UNRWA on Trial,” *Reform Judaism Magazine*, Winter 2002, p. 42.

<sup>17</sup> Party affiliation is always unofficial, but everyone knows who various candidates represent.

<sup>18</sup> Khaled Abu Toameh, “ Hamas wins teachers union elections for UN schools in Gaza,” *The Jerusalem Post*, March 29, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> Lt. Col. (res.) Yoni Dahoah Halevy, in direct communication with the author. Arabic-speaking, he provided information based on his research, on request. <http://www.hudson-ny.org/733/unrwa-its-role-in-gaza>.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> From the Foreign Ministry website: [www.israel-mfa.gov.il](http://www.israel-mfa.gov.il).

<sup>22</sup> <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/library/pdfs/UNRWAOVeriewAndCritique.pdf>.

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.hudson-ny.org/733/unrwa-its-role-in-gaza>.

<sup>24</sup> A radio news show for Democracy Now! hosted by Ami Goodman, January 5, 2009.

<sup>25</sup> <http://www.depauw.edu/news/?id=23119>

<sup>26</sup> <http://www.israelbehindthenews.com/library/pdfs/UNRWA-2010.pdf>