

Special Report 105, Israel Under Attack



UNRWA and its Role

UNRWA emerged from the turmoil after World War II, when borders were redrawn and tens of millions of refugees were displaced. Shortly after UNRWA was founded, the UN created its Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. It focused on long term resettlement and rehabilitation for refugees who could not return to their homes. Arab countries refused to allow UNRWA to be part of that refugee Office because they opposed permanent resettlement.

During the 1950s, neighboring Arab states declined to participate in a US sponsored proposal to settle, for example, in an agricultural development project in the Jordan Valley. American officials at the time warned of trouble: “The presence of three quarters of a million idle, destitute people whose discontent increases with the passage of time, is the greatest threat to the security of the area,” George McGhee, U.S. Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs, said in 1950.

UNRWA began its activity by providing tents, food and other emergency relief for refugees of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war. It has grown into an massive organization perpetuating the refugee status of displaced, Unlike the manner in which the international community has dealt with other refugees, no effort to settle the Palestinians has been made. Instead, Palestinians are accorded a right not accorded the tens of millions of refugees with which the international community has had to cope after the Second World War and following, to pass their refugee status on to following generations. UNRWA’s unique definition of a refugee extends even to Palestinians holding citizenship and fully resettled in other countries, including Jordan and the U.S. To this day, Lebanon and Syria, refuse to nationalize Palestinians. Other than Jordan, no Arab country has agreed to resettle Palestinians *en masse*. However, Jordan kept the majority of the Arab Palestinians in refugee camps built in the West Bank, and area meant by the UN to be part of the Arab Palestinians State, and subjected them to a military government.

Not only has UNRWA not aided the resettlement of the Palestinian refugees (whose number have grown since 1948 from 500,000 to 3.8 million, but UNRWA has cooperated with Arab nations and later with Palestinian terrorist organizations on the one hand to ensure the Palestinian refugee problem remain a thorn in the side of the international community and, on the other, in efforts to achieve the destruction of Israel.

UNRWA now employs some 30,000 people, nearly all Palestinians, operating in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Approximately 12,000 are employed in Gaza. It is

wholly funded by donations from various countries, with more of half of its budget supported by the US.

UNRWA reports (<https://www.unrwa.org/how-you-can-help/how-we-are-funded>): “UNRWA benefits from the generous support of UN Member States including regional governments and the European Union. Together, these sources represent close to 89.2 percent of financial contributions to the Agency. In 2022, UNRWA resource mobilization efforts yielded a total pledged amount of US\$ 1.17 billion. In 2022, funding received from the UN regular budget and contributions from other UN entities amounted to US\$ 44.6 million. Particularly during emergencies, individuals have an invaluable role in responding to the needs of Palestine refugees. Private partnerships added US\$ 15.4 million in 2022”. According to UNRWA (<https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/us-contributions-unrwa-2021-2022-are-key-agencys-ability-operate>) The US contributed \$618m since January 2021. UNRWA’s budget for 2021 and 2022 was US \$1.5 billion and US \$1.6 billion respectively.

Hamas forcibly wrested power in Gaza from the duly constituted Palestinian Authority (PA) In 2007, murdering representative of the PA. Instead calling upon Hamas to act responsibly on behalf of the people the organization governed, UNRWA undertook Hamas’ civil responsibilities by providing schooling, healthcare and other assistance to the civilian population in Gaza, overseeing the provision of clean water, electricity and the running of the sewage system, maintenance of the roads the provision of food, medication and fuel. This clearly enabled Hamas to focus it resources toward military operations against Israel and the creation of more than 300 miles of a sophisticated underground military system.

In 2009, UNRWA briefly suspended aid imports to Gaza because Hamas stole hundreds of tons of food and other humanitarian aid. Hamas returned the goods. A former top UNRWA official, who oversaw the firing of employees with suspected links to Hamas and the removal of weapons from schools, left Gaza in 2015 due to death threats because of his efforts. In 2017, the longtime head of UNRWA’s teachers union in Gaza, who also functioned as an elementary school principal, resigned when he was elected to Hamas’s political leadership.

Over the years, Israel complained about the antisemitic and anti-Israeli curriculum taught in UNRWA schools, also used by the PS. For example, The Wall Street Journal describes a fifth-grade reading comprehension textbook that “features Palestinian militant Dalal Mughrabi, who joined a 1978 terrorist attack that killed 38 Israelis, including 13 children. Middle-school science students learn physics in lessons accompanied by images of Palestinians using slingshots to hurl rocks at Israeli soldiers”.

UNRWA claims it “reviews problematic content and, while not removing it, offers teachers guidance for offering criticism, context or skipping the lesson and provides supplementary materials to teach tolerance. A US Government Accountability Office report in 2019 said teachers weren’t given such guidance”.

For years, foreign international relief workers and the Israeli military reported weapons caches found in UNRWA schools, underground tunnels being dug beneath UNRWA facilities

and theft by Hamas of agency-provided fuel and humanitarian aid. In 2014, a section of the UNRWA headquarters parking lot began sinking, due to a Hamas tunnel dug beneath. “No one talked about what was causing the collapse,” a former UNRWA official admitted, “but everyone knew.” There were complaints over school textbooks promoting the hatred of Jews and Israel.

While Hamas was engaged in the October 7 attack, one UNRWA staff member wrote, “Our boys are inside on jeeps,” and “God protect them and bring them back safe.” Another said that day she wanted to raise her children to emulate the October 7 attackers.

Israeli intelligence reported that a dozen employees of the U.N. agency allegedly participated in the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel. Twelve UNRWA employees are said to be among the thousands of Palestinians and Hamas militants who entered Israel on Oct. 7, in an assault that killed more Jewish people than any time since the Holocaust. Several of the assailants were employed in UNRWA schools, including an Arabic teacher and a math teacher. Six other agency workers coordinated logistics for the assault, helped provide weapons, or were told to report to staging grounds for the attack.

Israeli intelligence estimates that 10% of the agency’s 12,000 staff in Gaza are affiliated with or, worse are members of Hamas or of the Palestinian Islamic Jihad. Fifty percent of UNRWA’s employees have a close relative with an active membership in either of the two militant groups.

The information, prepared by UN Watch, a pro-Israel advocacy group, was presented Tuesday to a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing in Washington. Secretary of State Antony Blinken describes Israel’s findings as “highly, highly credible.”

Israel’s Military Investigates Soldiers for Misconduct

<https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-military-investigates-soldiers-for-criminal-offenses-in-gaza-war-8fe2d947>

Maj. Gen. Yifat Tomer Yerushalmi, the Israeli military’s chief advocate, said in a letter to commanders that investigations were under way into the incidents, some of which “cross over the criminal threshold,” and that a decision about how to discipline the soldiers involved would be made after the probes were complete. The announcement follows growing international criticism of civilian casualties and property destruction since Israel invaded Gaza in response to a bloody attack by Palestinian militants in October. Social-media posts have shown stripped and blindfolded Palestinian prisoners and troops inside homes in Gaza boasting about looting property.

Israel has called up hundreds of thousands of reservists for the war in Gaza and put many of them through hurried training exercises to prepare them for combat.

The chief advocate provided no details about the incidents, including how many cases are under investigation. She said the allegations included unjustified use of force against detainees, removal of private property for no operational purpose, and destruction of private property in violation of orders. She described the incidents as isolated and called on commanders to take steps to discipline soldiers found to have committed violations “in a serious way.”

“These actions and statements, on the part of individuals who do not represent the whole, are contrary to the IDF being a professional, moral and state-based army, and they will no longer be recognized in the IDF,” she said, referring to the Israel Defense Forces, the military’s formal name. “They also cause the state of Israel and the IDF strategic damage in the international arena, the seriousness of which is difficult to overstate.”

Barak Medina, a law professor at Hebrew University of Jerusalem, said the Israeli military had a good record at holding soldiers accountable for misconduct, though often through internal disciplinary proceedings and not in formal prosecutions. The letter came a day after Israeli military chief of staff Herzi Halevi issued a separate letter that also reminded commanders of the need to prevent misconduct and law of war violations. (Obviously, such a reminder was necessary due to known infractions, as Paul Edgar’s article stated. However, the Advocate General’s letter and that of the Chief of Staff’s are, again, indication of the Israel Defense Forces’ policies and its determination to ensure they are followed, *BM*).

In a January interim decision, the International Court of Justice in The Hague declined to order Israel to cease military operations in Gaza after South Africa initiated proceedings accusing Israel of violating the 1949 Genocide Convention. The court required Israel to punish incitement to genocide in Gaza, preserve evidence of potential violations of the international treaty and to report back on its compliance. Israeli government lawyers said the military complies with international legal obligations and that noncombatant casualties had been exacerbated by Hamas locating fighters and supplies in civilian areas.