

Aid Wars Over Gaza: “An Abrupt Wave in Starving the Agency”. Resuming Funding to UNRWA

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The steady and ruthless campaign by Israel to internationally defund the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), is unravelling. The lynchpin in the effort was a thin, poison pen dossier making claims that 12 individuals were Hamas operatives who had been involved in the October 7 attacks. Within a matter of days, two internal investigations were commenced, various individuals sacked, and US\$450 million worth of funding from donor states suspended.

As the head of the agency, Philippe Lazzarini, [explained](#) at a press conference on March 4, he has “never been informed” or received evidence of Israel’s claims substantiating their assertions, though he did receive the prompt about the profane twelve directly from Israeli officials. Every year, both Israel and the Palestinian authorities were furnished with staff lists, “and I never received the slightest concern about the staff that we have been employing.”

Had Israeli authorities signed off on these alleged participants in bungling or conspiratorial understanding? Certainly, there was more than a pongy whiff of distraction about it all, given that Israel had come off poorly in The Hague proceedings launched by South Africa, during which the judges issued an interim order demanding an observance of the UN Genocide Convention, an increase of humanitarian aid, and the retention of evidence that might be used for future criminal prosecutions for genocide.

An abrupt wave of initial success in starving the agency followed, with a number of countries announcing plans to freeze funding. In the United States, irate members of Congress accused the agency of having “longstanding connections to terrorism and promotion of antisemitism”. A [hearing was duly held](#) titled “UNRWA Exposed: Examining the Agency’s Mission and Failures” with Richard Goldberg, a senior advisor of the Foundation for Defense

of Democracies [frothing at an agency](#) that supposedly incited “violence against Israel, subsidizes US-designated terrorist organizations, denies Palestinians their basic human rights, and blocks the pathways to a sustainable peace between Israel and the Palestinians.”

The attempt to cast UNRWA into gleefully welcomed oblivion has not worked. Questions were asked about the initial figure of twelve alleged militants. News outlets [began questioning](#) the numbers.

The funding channels are resuming. Canada, for instance, [approving](#) “the robust investigative process underway”, also acknowledged that “more can be done to respond to the urgent needs of Palestinian civilians”. The initial cancellation of funding to the agency, [charged](#) Thomas Woodley, president of Canadians for Justice and Peace in the Middle East, had been “a reckless political decision that never should have been made.”

The Swedish government [was also encouraged](#) by undertakings made by UNRWA “to allow independent auditing, strengthen internal supervision and enable additional staff controls”, promising an initial outlay of 200 million kroner (US\$19 million)

The Minister for International Development Cooperation and Foreign Trade, Johan Forssell, [promised](#) that it would “monitor closely to ensure UNRWA follows through on what it has promised.” Aid policy spokesperson for the Christian Democrats, Gudrun Brunegård, also conceded that, given the “huge” needs on the part of the civilian population, that UNRWA was “the organisation that is best positioned to help vulnerable Palestinians.”

Much the same sentiment was expressed by the European Union, with the Commission agreeing to pay 50 million euros to UNRWA from a promised total of 82 million euros on the proviso that EU-appointed experts audit the screening of staff. “This audit,” a European Commission [statement](#) explains, “will review the control systems to prevent the possible involvement of its staff and assets in terrorist activities.” Having been found wanting in her screeching about-turn, the European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen insisted that the EU stood “by the Palestinian people in Gaza and elsewhere in the region. Innocent Palestinians should not have to pay the price for the crimes of [the] terrorist group Hamas.”

Commissioner Olivér Várhelyi was stiffly bureaucratic in expressing satisfaction at “the commitment of UNRWA to introduce robust measures to prevent possible misconduct and minimise the risk of allegations”. At no point was Israel’s own contribution to the calamity, and its insatiable vendetta against the agency, mentioned.

The bombast and blunder of the whole effort by Israel was further discoloured by claims that UNRWA staff had been victims of torture at the hands of the IDF in drafting the dossier. In a statement released by the agency, a grave accusation was levelled: “These forced confessions as a result of torture are being used by the Israeli Authorities to further spread misinformation about the agency as part of attempts to dismantle UNRWA.” In doing so, Israel was “putting our staff at risk and has serious implications on our operations in Gaza and around the region.”

For its part, the IDF, through a statement, [claimed](#) that this was all exaggerated piffle:

“The mistreatment of detainees during their time in detention or whilst under interrogation violates IDF values and contravenes IDF [*sic*] and is therefore absolutely prohibited.”

Increasingly on the losing side of that battle, Israeli authorities decided to cook the figures further, declaring with crass confidence that 450 URWA employees in Gaza were members of militant groups including Hamas. Sticking to routine, those making that allegation decided that evidence of such claims was not needed. Those employees, [claimed](#) Rear Adm. Daniel Hagari, “are military operatives in terror groups in Gaza”. “This was no coincidence. This is systematic. There is no claiming, ‘we did not know’.”

In the fog of war, mendacity thrives with virile vigour; but the current suggestion on the part of various donor states is that the humanitarian incentive to ameliorate the suffering of the Gaza populace has taken precedence over Israel’s persistently lethal efforts. That, at least, is the case with certain countries, leaving the doubters starkly exposed.

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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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