Israeli gov't lobby calls for reform of UN agency for Palestinian refugees

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Hamas’ increased exploitation of United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) facilities in the Gaza Strip has been a cause for growing concern among Israel’s upper political echelon, who worry that the UN organization is increasingly becoming a detriment to security for Israel than it is fulfilling its humanitarian mandate.

At a parliamentary session on the issue held Monday, Israeli lawmaker Sharren Haskel (Likud), Chairperson of the Knesset’s Lobby for Reform with UNRWA, expounded upon the need to address the potential for Hamas to use UNRWA in order to create a “strategic threat against Israel.”

“This phenomenon may very well create a strategic threat against Israel,” Haskel told i24NEWS at Monday’s Knesset session on the issue.

Several weeks ago, an underground tunnel was discovered beneath a school in the Gaza Strip run by the UNRWA. The revelation, approximately five months after a Hamas terror tunnel was found underneath two other UNRWA schools in the Palestinian enclave, was described by Israel’s UN Ambassador Danny Danon to be “more proof of the double war crime” in which Hamas’ underground tunnel network turned schoolchildren into human shields.

“We need to make sure that humanitarian aid is not being used and abused as a cover up for terror activities,” Haskel told i24NEWS. “If UNRWA is providing cover for ammunition warehouses in hospitals where they place rockets, it creates major difficulties for us because we obviously cannot target hospitals.”

Haskel also warned of financial aid allotted for UNRWA ending up in the hands of Hamas.

“UN organizations like UNRWA employ locals because such people are assumed to know what’s best for their communities,” she noted.

“But given the reality that the Hamas terror organization, which refuses to invest its own money for public infrastructure is in control of Gaza, employing locals who may very well be Hamas activists is a naive approach.”

Haskel recommended that UNRWA hire workers from overseas in lieu of local candidates.

“Instead of employing locally, they should actually bring people from the international community so that credible oversight inspections could take place to make sure that humanitarian aid is not used for terrorism,” she said.

UNRWA spokesman Christopher Gunness rejected the suggestion to exclude employment from potential candidates who live in the Hamas-controlled Gaza Strip.

“UNRWA employs about eleven thousand Palestinians in Gaza,” Gunness told i24NEWS. “The suggestion that they should be replaced by eleven thousand international staff is not something that has been under discussion in the donor community that would have to pay for this.”

“UNRWA takes the issue of the neutrality of staff extremely seriously,” he continued. “Where violations of staff rules and regulations are proven we always take action up to and including dismissal.”

According to Haskel, UNRWA also poses as an obstacle to conflict resolution between Israel and the Palestinians by offering refugee status to all descendants of male Palestinian refugees, including legally adopted children.

“As opposed to any other refugee agency that would absorb Palestinian refugees into their countries of location, UNRWA is actually maintaining their status as ‘refugees’ from generation to generation,” she said.

“They are educated about returning to their homes, but they themselves are not actually from there, so it makes it a lot more difficult to mend the hatred and violence between the Israelis and Palestinians.”

Former MK, Einat Wilf who spoke at Haskel’s session in the Knesset on Monday, went as far as to call UNRWA “a Palestinian organization.”

“Its entire structure is run by Palestinians,” Wilf said to i24NEWS. “All the workers except for a thin facade of international workers are devoted to the Palestinian cause.”

“In many ways, this is the organization that has kept the Palestinians together as a people and allow them to develop that victimized, angry ethos of violent ‘return,’” she added. “It’s not a side element, but the essence of the organization.”

Wilf said that UNRWA has helped inculcate Palestinians from their youth a perspective of “Palestinian maximalism” that completely rejects the right of the Jewish people to any part of the territory in the former British mandate of Palestine.

“Right now when a kid goes to a school, he sees the UN symbol, learns of ‘return’ and correctly understands that the international community is giving its support and sanctioning to the dream of ‘return,’” she said.

“The way to resolve the conflict is ultimately to make it clear to both sides that they are isolated with respect to their maximalist positions,” Wilf continued. “The international community has been very effective in sending that message to Israel but has yet to send that very same message to the Palestinians.”

UNRWA spokesman Gunness contended that it is actually the absence of any agreement between Israel and the Palestinians that enables the Palestinian refugee crisis to continue.

“As a humanitarian organization UNRWA has no direct role in a political resolution of the crisis confronting over five million Palestine refugees,” Gunness told i24NEWS. “What perpetuates the Palestine refugee crisis is the failure of the political actors to resolve their plight, which is why we call continually on them to assume their responsibilities.”

Haskel recommended that UNRWA, at the very least, meld into an international organization such as the United Nations Refugee Agency (UNHCR) to pave the path towards a better future for UNRWA Palestinian refugees.

“We need to decide whether UNRWA will become a branch of the Palestinian Authority (PA) or part of the UNHCR,” she suggested. “Palestinian refugees need to be treated like any other refugee and ultimately should be absorbed in the countries where they are located.”

Wilf asserted that UNRWA should cease to exist.

“There’s no reforming it because its very existence continues the ethos of ‘return,’” she reiterated. “The money that goes to UNRWA needs to go to other service providers, mostly the PA, the Jordanian, Syrian and Lebanese governments to provide the services but without the ethos of “‘return.’”

“The services should continue, but the politics should not.”