A lesson in incitement

January 12, 2018

By Nadav Shragai

Israel Hayom

<http://www.israelhayom.com/2018/01/12/a-lesson-in-incitement/>

A potential hot potato known as the "UNRWA file" has been on a back burner in Washington for months, unreported. UNRWA – the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees – is being investigated by the U.S. government. The reasons for the investigation are suspicions backed by a wealth of documentation about the growing overlap between the organization and the existence and goals of the PLO, to the point of accepting content of violence, terrorism and incitement.

The U.S. government announcement that it intends to reduce funding to UNRWA in light of the "Palestinian Authority's retreat from the peace process" – which the Palestinians have called a line in the sand in terms of its relations with the U.S. administration – is linked to this investigation no less than to the "peace process."

Here are the full details: In January 2017, immediately after U.S. President Donald Trump entered the White House, a team from the U.S. Attorney General's office launched a probe, on behalf of Congress, into whether the textbooks used in UNRWA schools in Judea and Samaria and the Gaza Strip included anti-Semitic content and encouraged terrorism. The team is also investigating whether and to what extent UNRWA is linked to terrorist entities, particularly in Gaza.

The team's report is expected to come out in February or March. The investigation is being handled by professionals, not politicians. Head of the Government Accountability Office Eugene Louis Dodaro, an appointee of previous U.S. President Barack Obama, is the one who decided to launch the investigation in response to a request by Republican Sen. James Risch.

The investigation Risch set in motion is the result of significant information submitted to him by the Center for Near East Policy Research, which is chaired by David Bedein. Bedein and his staff supplied Rich with dozens of research papers, recordings, videos, photographs and in particular Palestinian textbooks, all of which he handed on to the government investigators. They amassed additional material and started to get the picture. UNRWA was asked to respond. As of now, nothing has been leaked. However, the material from the Center for Policy Study in the Middle East and Israel are available to everyone.

They were collected over many years by Badin and by former IDF Intelligence official, Lt. Col. (res.) Yoni Dahuh-Halevy; Middle East researcher Dr. Arnon Gross, who has spent years studying Arab and Palestinian textbooks and their content; and recently Dr. Ronni Shaked, coordinator of the Middle East Unit at the Harry S. Truman Research Institute for the Advancement of Peace, located next to the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. The results are not flattering to UNRWA, to put it mildly. Over the past few weeks, the organization has been trading accusations with the center's researchers.

**Martyr pop**

One of the subtitles in the latest report from the center, which is hard to argue with – if only because UNRWA doesn't make any attempt to hide anything – has to do with UNRWA's links to famous Palestinian singer Mohammad Assaf, who rose to fame in 2013 after he won first place in the "Arab Idol" competition, a sort of Palestinian "American Idol," thus becoming a Palestinian national symbol.

The story about Assaf and UNRWA is more than gossip because it is symptomatic of UNRWA's identification with the Palestinian narrative, as well as the fact that the organization has accepted many expressions of incitement to terrorism and violence, both in the forms of the textbooks used in its schools and in its ongoing ties to Hamas members in Gaza.

For years, the Israeli defense establishment has been warning about the dangerous give-and-take between Hamas and UNRWA, which for years has shaken off these accusations. But James G. Lindsay, a former legal advisor to UNRWA, confirmed in one of his reports that "UNRWA did not take steps to identify terrorists or push them out of its upper echelon or decision-making positions."

In the case of Assaf, whose songs glorify holy death and jihad, UNRWA not only is not distancing itself from him but has also made Assaf its official youth ambassador. Assaf was supposedly chosen to promote peace, but in his songs, he repeatedly praises sacrifice and violence and encourages a martyr's death and jihad.

He also sings about the vision of a Palestinian state that will stand on the entirety of the territory of Israel. His music videos are broadcast on PA and Hamas television, with background images of Palestinians fighting IDF soldiers and funerals of "martyrs," whose bodies are wrapped in Palestinian flags and carried on supporters' shoulders and passed from hand to hand by the throngs.

Assaf sings about his country, which stretches from the Jordan River to the Mediterranean Sea. "Take my blood, and bring freedom," he trills. "Victory or a martyrs' death, said its men."

In one song, "Oh, Flying Bird," many places in Israel – Safed, Tiberias, Acre, Haifa, Beit Shean and Nazareth – are presented as some of the locations to which Palestinians will return. Many Palestinians doubtlessly identify with what he is saying. What is unclear is why UNRWA opted to be identified with a singer who holds views like these?

**Tel Aviv – not what you thought**

For years, UNRWA has been stringently criticized for using Palestinian schoolbooks written in this spirit and even more for not doing anything to change. The latest report from Gross and Shaked, published a few months ago, focuses on the Palestinian books used in UNRWA schools.

The report is some 200 pages long. It has been presented in the Knesset and forwarded to monitors in Washington. Some of the books for early childhood education covered in the report ignore the existence of Israel. In one of them (a 2016 edition), Tel Aviv is renamed "Tel al-Rabia."

"Apparently, this is a new development in the Palestinian narrative in which Tel Aviv is presented as a modern Jewish city that was built on the ruins of an ancient Arab town," Gross explains.

In another book published in 2015, Hebrew writing is deleted from a picture of a stamp. A fourth-grade textbook from 2014 explains that "Acre is a Palestinian city founded by the Arabs and Canaanites in 1000 B.C.E.," and that it is destined to return to its rightful owners [the Palestinians]. Another Palestinian publication shows a girl floating above the security fence who aspires to reach "the lost parts of the country" of Palestine.

Elsewhere, the pupils are asked to repeat: "Let us sing and learn by heart: the ground of the noble – I have sworn. I will sacrifice my blood to saturate the ground and the noble will cast the thief out of my country and destroy what remains of the foreigners. O, the land of Al-Aqsa and the forbidden holy place; O, the cradle of pride and nobility. Patience. Patience, as our victory will be the sun rising out of the darkness."

The books used in UNRWA schools eradicate almost any mention of Israel, and when they do refer to it, it is in the context of "occupation" or the perpetrator of the "Nakba."

**'A very harsh picture'**

Gross and Shaked checked the books used up to ninth grade in UNRWA schools and discovered a "very harsh picture."

"The schoolbooks published by the Hamas government in Gaza, which include blatant anti-Semitic expressions and open incitement to an armed struggle to wipe out Israel, are taught as part of the UNRWA curriculum there, in which some quarter of a million students were enrolled in the 2015/16 school year," they said.

"UNRWA is an international organization that is not supposed to take a side in the … conflict, but rather adhere to the principles of the U.N. on a solution for peace. Therefore, it cannot be that this organization's schools are teaching material that calls for a violent struggle against Israel and for jihad, especially when the struggle is not limited to the areas that might be considered, by the world at large, occupied – but covers the entire area of the sovereign state of Israel as it is recognized in international circles," they add.

The two researchers also attempt to refresh what is obvious: "UNRWA, as a U.N. organization, is obligated to prevent any situation in which a U.N. member state – Israel – is portrayed as illegitimate to students at schools it operates, both in the texts [used] and on maps. A textbook in which Israel does not appear on the map should not be used at all in an UNRWA school.

"We must not forget UNRWA's historical responsibility for the future of the children and youths it educates. Allowing the Palestinian Authority to insert into UNRWA textbooks content that teaches them about a future war against Israel is a betrayal of UNRWA's obligation to protect Palestinian children from such a future," they say.

UNRWA spokesman Christopher Gunness calls the information from Gross and Shaked "inaccurate and misleading." Gunness claims that 178 of the 201 books checked by the duo are not in use in UNRWA schools and have gradually been phased out, while the other 23 were in use, but have been "thoroughly checked" by UNRWA and paired with complementary supplemental material. According to Gunness, the PA textbooks were found to be "free of incitement to terrorism." Gunness says that the UNRWA curriculum seeks to meet the values of the U.N.

Gross, who has been researching Palestinian textbooks since 2000, is doubtful about the UNRWA claim that 178 of the books he and Shaked reviewed have been phased out. He mentions that his latest report covers a three- to four-year period.

"The books used by UNRWA do not call for Jews to be killed. They 'only' say that Dalal Mughrabi, who led a terrorist attack on an Israeli bus in 1978 that killed 30 men, women, and children, was a hero and a martyr," Gross responds.

"They 'only' describe a Molotov cocktail attack on an Israeli bus in the West Bank as a 'barbecue.' These are two examples taken from books printed in 2017 for grades six to nine, which the UNRWA spokesman says in his statement are being taught in his organization's schools."

Gross explains that the textbooks in use in UNRWA schools "do not call for the destruction of Israel. They 'only' erase Israel from maps and replace it with 'Palestine.' The new books from 2017 even managed to erase the name Israel from their many demonizing sections and replace it with the expression 'the Zionist occupation.'"

The Center for Near East Policy Research continues to inspect Palestinian textbooks. Gross is now reviewing the books published in December 2017. He is getting the impression that the "demonization [of Israel] is on the rise. One ninth-grade book, for example, tells students that the Zionists built their entity on terrorism, destruction and colonialism."

Two other books published that same month portray the terrorist Mughrabi in an admiring manner. One book, intended for use by fifth-graders, writes: "Our Palestinian history is full of many names of martyrs who sacrificed their lives for the homeland. These include the martyr Dalal Mughrabi, who in her battle wrote one of the banner chapters of resistance, challenge, and heroism."

Gross is convinced that UNRWA "must re-examine the material is has been teaching to over 2 million Palestinian children and youth for over 70 years in the areas in which it is active. Their bending to ideas of jihad, martyrdom, victory, and return [of the Palestinians] are dangerous to both peoples, and certainly do not fall in line with the principles of the U.N. The future of the young generation of Palestinians, which is in its hands, must be a main consideration for UNRWA, otherwise it will betray its mission," he warns.