A U.N. Agency Is Accused of Links to Hamas. The Clues Were There All Along.

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[https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-israel-attack-united-nations-UNRWA-0ec8d325](https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/hamas-israel-attack-united-nations-unrwa-0ec8d325)

For years, international relief workers and the Israeli military have reported weapons caches occasionally found in schools operated by the [United Nations Relief and Works Agency](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/at-least-12-u-n-agency-employees-involved-in-oct-7-attacks-intelligence-reports-say-a7de8f36), the organization that for decades has provided schooling, healthcare and other [assistance to Palestinian refugees](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.wsj.com/world/europe/more-countries-halt-aid-to-u-n-agency-amid-claims-staff-involved-in-israel-attack-7dd9dff7) in Gaza.

They learned of underground tunnels beneath UNRWA facilities and the theft by Hamas of agency-provided fuel and aid. Some had run-ins with teachers over textbooks promoting the hatred of Jews and Israel.

In 2014, part of the parking lot at the UNRWA headquarters in Gaza began sinking, likely from a Hamas tunnel dug beneath. ‘No one talked about what was causing the collapse,’ a former UNRWA official said, ‘but everyone knew.’

Suspicions that Hamas and other militant groups wielded untoward influence over UNRWA spread worldwide this week after Israeli intelligence reported that a dozen employees of the U.N. agency allegedly participated in the Oct. 7 attacks on Israel.

What began as a small agency providing tents, food and other emergency relief for refugees of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war has grown into an organization with a staff of 30,000 people, nearly all Palestinians, operating in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. Western nations pay for most of its roughly $1.3 billion budget.

Its future is now in doubt. Western donors are questioning whether the agency has become irrevocably radicalized. The U.S. is among 18 countries that have suspended funding, including most of UNRWA’s largest givers.

Six UNRWA employees were allegedly among the thousands of Palestinians and Hamas militants who entered Israel on Oct. 7, in an assault that killed the most Jewish people since the Holocaust and sparked a war that threatens the region.

Several of the assailants were from UNRWA schools, including an Arabic teacher and a math teacher, according to Israeli intelligence reports viewed by The Wall Street Journal. Six other agency workers allegedly 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 or have membership in Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad and half the employees have a close relative with an active membership in the militant groups. Since Hamas has both a military and political wing, affiliation doesn’t mean membership in the armed group.

‘UNRWA is totally infiltrated with Hamas,’ Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu told a meeting Wednesday of U.N. ambassadors in Jerusalem, saying it was time for the agency to be scrapped and replaced by other U.N. or aid agencies that would operate in a neutral fashion. ‘We need such a body today in Gaza. But UNRWA is not that body.’

Secretary of State Antony Blinken said this week the U.S. hasn’t done its own investigation into Israel’s claims but called them ‘highly, highly credible.’ Even so, American officials have also said the actions of individuals shouldn’t taint the entire agency, a sentiment echoed in other donor countries.

UNRWA officials questioned the Israeli assessment. ‘What qualifies an alleged involvement?’ UNRWA spokesperson Tamara Alrifai said. ‘Since when is someone accountable for what their cousin does?’

Phillipe Lazzarini, UNRWA’s director general, said the agency took swift action to fire the employees alleged to have been involved while the U.N. continues its investigation. Two others died. He said the West’s funding freeze amounted to ‘collective punishment.’

Aid agencies say UNRWA holds the biggest role in providing shelter and lifesaving aid to the vast population displaced by Israel’s campaign to eradicate Hamas, which has killed more than 26,000 people, according to local authorities. The numbers don’t distinguish between combatants and civilians. U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres pleaded Tuesday with representatives of donor countries to resume aid, his spokesperson said.

Besides providing schooling and healthcare, UNRWA maintains streets, sewage and water systems in the sprawling neighborhoods of refugees that it oversees. Israeli officials say that by taking care of such municipal tasks, the U.N. agency freed up Hamas, Gaza’s de facto authority, to expand its terrorist capacities over the years, including construction of an estimated [300 miles](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/israel-struggles-to-destroy-hamass-gaza-tunnel-network-fb641122) of underground tunnels.

The tunnels are believed to be holding many of the more than 100 Israeli hostages who remain in Gaza. One tunnel found in 2020 had an entrance inside a food distribution warehouse operated by UNRWA, according to images viewed by the Journal.

Beyond the current humanitarian crisis, UNRWA is in some ways too big to fail, especially in Gaza, say some Israeli and former agency officials. U.S. officials said the funding freeze is temporary.

Whatever is learned about the U.N. agency’s role before, during and after the Oct. 7 attack will figure largely in its postwar future. U.S. officials expect to see fundamental changes at the agency before it resumes direct funding, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N. Linda Thomas-Greenfield said Tuesday.

‘I can’t from personal knowledge say how entwined Hamas is with UNRWA,’ said James Lindsay, the legal counsel for UNRWA from 2000 to 2007. ‘UNRWA minimizes the problem, and Israel tries to maximize it. The truth is probably somewhere in between.’

**By the book**

Some teachers on UNRWA’s payroll voiced support for the Oct. 7 attack, according to conversations in a Telegram group for contract workers for the agency’s Gaza school system. The information, prepared by UN Watch, a pro-Israel advocacy group, was presented Tuesday to a House Foreign Affairs subcommittee hearing in Washington. Transcripts of the alleged conversations were reviewed by the Journal.

As Hamas mounted its attack, one group member wrote, ‘Our boys are inside on jeeps,’ and ‘God protect them and bring them back safe.’ Another person said she wanted to raise her children to emulate the Oct. 7 attackers. Both people were said to be linked to UNRWA’s payroll by UN Watch.

UNRWA, which helped pioneer schooling for girls in Arab countries, has a record of helping refugee students outperform their peers at public schools in host countries. Among its graduates is a [NASA engineer](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-honours-nasa-engineer-and-former-school-student-loay-elbasyouni). Israel has long criticized classroom lessons at UNRWA schools for stoking grievances and inciting violence.

UNRWA’s Gaza and West Bank classrooms teach the Palestinian Authority curriculum and use the same textbooks taught by Hamas. Several of the books inject doses of antisemitism and martyrdom into class exercises, the Journal found.

One textbook to teach fifth-grade reading comprehension features Palestinian militant Dalal Mughrabi, who joined a 1978 terrorist attack that killed 38 Israelis, including 13 children. Middle-school science students learn physics accompanied by images of Palestinians using slingshots to hurl rocks at Israeli soldiers.

UNRWA said it uses the same national curriculum wherever it operates. The agency said 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 U.S. Government Accountability Office [report](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.gao.gov/products/gao-19-448) in 2019 said teachers weren’t given such guidance or the supplementary materials.

Militants began to make extensive use of UNRWA facilities to shield their activities during the 2014 conflict with Israel, according to Israeli military officials. UNRWA said it found weapons kept in three of its schools. Israel also identified at least 28 incidents of militants firing projectiles from close to a UNRWA school or facility.

UNRWA staff told Israeli officials at the time they had found rockets in an UNRWA elementary school in Gaza. When Israel asked what happened, the agency said it called local authorities, linked to Hamas, to collect them, according to two former Israeli military officials.

Then-U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon expressed outrage that rockets had not only been found in an UNRWA school but then went missing. Militants, he[said](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.un.org/sg/en/content/sg/statement/2014-07-23/statement-attributable-the-spokesman-for-the-secretary-general-weapons-unrwa-school-gaza), were responsible for ‘turning schools into potential military targets.’

UNRWA criticized Hamas in 2021 for[commandeering](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-reiterates-inviolability-its-installations-must-be-respected-all) one of its schools and for tunneling under UNRWA facilities. The agency said the following year that it had identified a ‘[man-made cavity](https://archive.vn/o/BZeF9/https%3A/www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-strongly-condemns-neutrality-breach-against-agency-gaza)‘ beneath the grounds of a school in Gaza.

Alrifai, the UNRWA spokeswoman, said in an interview that UNRWA checks schools for weapons and immediately reports any findings to donor countries. Any crimes by small numbers of teachers shouldn’t condemn an entire school system, she added. ‘I sometimes wonder if we can hold the entire U.S. education system accountable for one mass shooting from someone who went to a school,’ she said.

**Unruly**

UNRWA has had at least 152 of its Palestinian staff killed so far during the war in Gaza. Thousands continue to work handing out food and medicine, many of them displaced themselves.

The agency emerged from the turmoil after World War II, when borders were redrawn and millions of refugees displaced worldwide. Shortly after UNRWA was founded, the U.N. created its Office of the High Commissioner for Refugees. It focused on long-term resettlement and rehabilitation for refugees who couldn’t return to their homes.

Arab countries and Palestinian refugees didn’t want UNRWA to be part of that refugee office because they opposed permanent resettlement. The refugees wanted to return to their lives in Israel, a right blessed by the U.N.

During the 1950s, neighboring Arab states and many refugees refused to take part in U.S.-backed proposals for homes outside of Israel. One was an agricultural development project in the Jordan Valley that would have created a permanent home for 200,000 refugees.

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’s unique definition of a refugee extends even to Palestinians holding citizenship and fully resettled in other countries, including Jordan and the U.S. Two of UNRWA’s five areas of operations, Lebanon and Syria, refuse to nationalize Palestinians. Other than Jordan, no Arab country has agreed to resettle Palestinians en masse.

Neighborhoods of impoverished refugees overseen by UNRWA became fertile ground for Palestinian nationalism and militancy. The Trump administration cut off funding for the agency in 2018, saying ‘The fundamental business model and fiscal practices that have marked UNRWA for years—tied to UNRWA’s endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries—is simply unsustainable.’ The Biden administration restored funding in 2021.

Starting 2007, when Hamas took power in a coup, UNRWA leaders trying to enforce the agency’s neutrality in Gaza faced threats and attacks. That year, John Ging, the agency’s local head, was in an UNRWA convoy when armed militants blocked its path and tried to enter the vehicles. They fired shots, but Ging wasn’t harmed.

Two years later, Ging suspended aid imports to Gaza after Hamas stole hundreds of tons of food and other assistance as it arrived. Days later, 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 after death threats, including a box with a grenade, said people familiar with the incident.

Evidence mounted that Hamas was burrowing into the U.N. agency. In 2017, the longtime head of UNRWA’s union in Gaza, an elementary school principal, resigned after it was revealed that he was elected to Hamas’s political leadership.

In 2021, Israeli warplanes bombed roads near the UNRWA headquarters in Gaza during a brief conflict with Hamas. UNRWA’s Gaza chief at the time, Matthias Schmale, raised protests after he acknowledged the precision of Israeli strikes on Israeli TV. Hamas said it couldn’t guarantee his safety, and he left Gaza. He said later in a radio interview that it was a ‘safe assumption’ that Hamas tunnels ran near or under UNRWA schools.

Some in Israel’s government want the agency abolished. Others worry there is no better option, especially for delivering emergency aid. Ronny Leshno-Yaar, former head of the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s unit on U.N. agencies, said Israel’s diplomatic position has been ‘until there is an alternative, we need UNRWA.’