‘UNRWA, Hamas are Two Sides of the Same Coin’

July 3, 2015

By Nadav Shragai

Israel Behind the News

<http://israelbehindthenews.com/unrwa-hamas-are-two-sides-of-the-same-coin/13309/?utm_source=wysija&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=ibn-today>

Hamas maintains a tight grip on the U.N. Relief and Works Agency’s facilities in the Gaza Strip, and the two’s symbiosis is growing stronger, despite the U.N.’s denials • Israel is reluctant to have UNRWA removed over its strategic value in Jordan.

Little is known about the second U.N. report on Operation Protective Edge, waged in the Gaza Strip last summer. While the U.N. Human Rights Council’s fact-finding mission, headed by American jurist Mary McGowan Davis, looked into alleged war crimes committed during the fighting, the second, 207-page report, penned by retired Dutch Maj. Gen. Patrick Cammaert, focused solely on the damaged sustained by U.N. Relief and Works Agency facilities during the 50-day military campaign.

Cammaert’s report is classified, and only a fraction of it, some 27 pages, has been made public, garnering little attention. The findings concluded that 44 Palestinians were killed and 227 others were injured while taking shelter in U.N. facilities in Gaza. An addendum to the report said U.N. Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon was “shocked that militant groups had endangered U.N. schools by using them as weapons caches.”

One can understand why the Cammaert report was downplayed. Terrorist groups’ continuous use of UNRWA facilities across the coastal enclave is a source of much embarrassment to the U.N. The “shock,” however, should be taken with a grain of salt, as Israel has been warning for years about the interaction between Hamas and other terrorist groups and UNRWA. These ties have been recorded in dozens of files, and two new reports published in recent days, one by the Institute for Zionist Strategies and one by the Center for Near East Policy Research, indicate that the symbiosis between Hamas and UNRWA in Gaza is only growing stronger.

UNRWA itself recorded the terrorists’ use of its facilities in the Strip, and the findings were corroborated in the Cammaert report, detailing dozens of cases when weapons, munitions, and missiles were hidden in schools, and how school buildings were used as cover for rocket launching sites.

A report by Institute for Zionist Strategies fellow Lt. Col. (res.) Nir Amran, released earlier this week, called for Israel to pursue and end to UNRWA activities in Gaza. Amran’s research cited incidents dating back further: In 2001 one of the agency’s facilities hosted a mass gathering headed by late Hamas founder Ahmed Yassin; in 2002, during Operation Defensive Shield, wanted terrorists hid in UNRWA schools, and weapon mills were hidden in and around the agency’s office building; in 2004 several UNRWA employees were convicted of hurling Molotov cocktails at Israeli buses; and the military, according to Amran, has recorded numerous incidents when UNRWA ambulances were used to secretly transport terrorists and weapons across Gaza.

**The manipulation of good will**

The ease in which terrorist groups in Gaza have manipulated UNRWA over the years is linked to the interaction between Hamas and the U.N. agency. In their report, Center for Near East Policy Research Director David Bedein and research associate Lt. Col. (res.) Jonathan Dahuah-Halevy, argue that Hamas and the UNRWA are, in fact, two side of the same coin and that they are inextricably intertwined. Hamas, they cite an example, has been controlling the UNRWA’s workers union for years.

The relationship goes beyond mere control of a workers union. According to Bedein and Dahuah-Halevy, UNRWA employed senior Hamas and Islamic Jihad terrorists in its facilities in the past, and several of them were killed by Israel over the years over their terrorist activities.

UNRWA denies currently employing any would-be terrorists. Dahuah-Halevy, however, is skeptical, saying Hamas’ educational arm, al-Kotla al-Islamiyah (“Islamic Bloc”) still operates in the agency’s schools in Gaza and the West Bank on all levels, from elementary schools to universities, and therefore the real answer to this question will become evident only after the next military campaign in Gaza.

“The Islamic Bloc’s strategy in elementary and middle schools focuses on an attempt to engage students in a variety of activities the organization offers,” he explained. “These activities are designed to strengthen students’ Islamic faith and gradually introduce them to Hamas ideology, until they become Hamas operatives. There is a Hamas representative in every school, including those run by UNRWA.”

Islamic Bloc activities are an important indoctrination tool for Hamas, which eyes the younger generation attending both its state schools and UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip, seeing it as future of its military wing, the Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades.

According to Dahuah-Halevy, dozens of Izzedine al-Qassam Brigades operatives began their “careers” as Islamic Bloc members in UNRWA school, later joining the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas’ military wing, and carrying out terrorist attacks against Israel and the Israel Defense Forces.

The information he gathered also indicates that Islamic Bloc activities in UNRWA schools in Gaza have remained robust even after Operation Protective Edge. Given this close relationship there is no wonder that Hamas took the liberty of using UNRWA facilities for its terrorist activities.

**Perpetuating the refugee status**

UNRWA is very different from the U.N. High Commission for Refugees, which aids refugees everywhere in the world except the Gaza Strip. Pressured by the Arab states, the U.N. formed the Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East in 1949, as an independent agency operating under different criteria than the UNHCR.

Amran noted in his report that while the UNHCR has successfully helped tens of millions of refugees worldwide rehabilitate their lives, the majority of Palestinians under UNRWA’s care still reside in refugee camps, raising a fourth generation in poverty.

UNRWA’s mandate fails to clearly define who is a Palestinian refugee. Left to its own devices, the agency has determined that any individual who lived in Mandatory Palestine two years prior to the 1948 War of Independence, and who lost his home and livelihood because of the war, is a Palestinian refugee. The definition extends to the refugee’s immediate family through the generations, meaning his grandchildren can also claim refugee status. Absurdly, UNRWA has created a “genetic” refugee status, thus perpetuating the problem.

The agency’s original mandate was to aid 700,000 Palestinian refugees. Today, across Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Gaza Strip, and Judea and Samaria, UNRWA’s records list some 5.5 million refugees. UNRWA has an annual budget of $1.2 billion, while the UNHCR, which aids 40 million refugees worldwide, has a budget of $2 billion.

Amran noted that rather than help the Palestinians develop income sources, UNRWA has become the largest employer in the Strip, with over 13,000 workers. “While the UNHCR deliberately avoids employing refugees from among the population its aids, to avoid any conflict of interest, UNRWA employs [Palestinian] refugees, creating employer-employee dependency, which perpetuates the problem and prevents finding a solution that helps refugees find independent work,” he said.

The public criticism over UNRWA’s ties to Hamas may have prevented the latter from using agency facilities to hold its semi-military summer camps for Gaza’s children, but it has not kept Hamas indoctrination out of UNRWA’s schools, where the Palestinian refugees’ so-called “right of return” is preached alongside the need for a violent struggle against Israel.

Center for Near East Policy Research fellow Dr. Arnon Gross reviewed over 150 Palestinian textbooks used by UNRWA schools, from first to 10th grade. Some books, he said, link the term “jihad” with the right of return, effectively lauding martyrdom as a noble death.

The Palestinian Media Watch, a nongovernmental organization the documents cases of incitement by the Palestinian media, supports the argument that these textbooks are ridden with anti-Israel incitement, saying they are rife with false information describing Jewish and Israeli presence in the area as transient, and presenting places Judaism holds sacred as Muslim holy sites seized by the Jews.

Prominent Palestinian human rights and political activist Bassam Eid believes UNRWA is being used by Hamas, especially since the terrorist group violently took over the Gaza Strip in 2007. UNRWA, he said, is facing a $101 million deficit, which is poised to get worse, as many of the Arab nations that have pledged donations to the agency in 2015 have failed to deliver, leaving it to rely on donations from the U.S. and Canada.

Will the next round of hostilities between Israel and Hamas reveal the symbiosis between Hamas and UNRWA is as strong as ever? As a U.N. agency, UNRWA recognizes Israel’s right to exist and refrains from preaching jihad and opposes terrorism, but its loose oversight of its own employees and the fact that it employs refugees in Hamas territory, means it cannot truly sever ties with Gaza’s rulers.

In a 2007 report commissioned by the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, former UNRWA general counsel James G. Lindsay noted that the agency has “failed to take steps to detect and reject terrorists from the ranks of its staff or its service recipients, and has avoided measures that may deter members of organizations such as Hamas from joining its team.”

Has UNRWA changed following Operation Protective Edge? There is little to indicate as much at this time. Nevertheless, despite the criticism leveled at the agency by Israel, the latter has so far refrained from officially demanding it be disbanded, both over knowing UNRWA’s services do aid a large population in need, as well as over the fact that removing UNRWA would spell the collapse of the refugee camps in Jordan, whose regime Israel seeks to preserve for strategic reasons.