Freeze UNRWA funds to Gaza schools over Hamas attack tunnels, Erdan urges

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UN funding to United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) schools in Gaza must be frozen as long as Hamas refuses to allow international inspection of the attack tunnels found underneath those educational institutions, Israel’s Ambassador to the UN Gilad Erdan said on Wednesday.

The UN “cannot allow its own schools and buildings to be used as a sanctuary for terrorists and terror activity,” Erdan said in a letter to UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres.

At issue were two [Hamas tunnels](https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/unrwa-finds-attack-tunnel-under-one-of-its-gaza-schools-670262) found in proximity to two UNRWA schools this summer in the aftermath of the 11-Day Gaza war in May, one in Zeitoun and the other in Rafah.

The UN had sent a team from its Mine Action Service (UNMAS) to inspect the area of the tunnels by the schools, which are expected to service some 4,000 students when they open later this month.

Hamas, however, [prevented the UNMAS](https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/hamas-prevents-un-team-from-working-near-terror-tunnel-by-school-report-676400?_ga=2.198458095.1357033134.1627962999-449294072.1564573179) teams from inspecting the area by the Zeitoun school. As a result, the UN canceled the Rafah site visit.

Erdan called on Guterres and “all relevant UN bodies to condemn Hamas and to freeze all funding of UNRWA’s facilities in Gaza and bar the usage thereof until the completion of a thorough and independent investigation of Hamas’ use and abuse of these institutions to advance its reign of terror.”

When asked about the issue at a briefing in New York, Guterres’s spokesman Stephane Dujarric said only that UNRWA schools should be violence-free.

“It is critical for every UN premise anywhere in the world to be free of any weapons or anything that would put that premise at risk,” Dujarric said.

UNRWA itself condemns the construction of the tunnels at its schools and the control of its facilities by the “de facto” authorities in Gaza, but did not name Hamas as a culprit.

It asked that UNMAS be allowed to inspect its schools.

“Initial risk assessments have indicated the existence of underground structures that could have led to further damage,” UNRWA said.

It condemned the construction and use of the tunnels, and said that it had written letters of complaint to the de facto Gaza authorities.

“The Agency has also protested the takeover by the de facto authorities of one of these schools, which undermines the inviolability and neutrality of UNRWA premises,” UNRWA said. “These actions also stand to compromise the safe return of children to their schools and scuttles the Agency efforts to open the schools on time.”