



SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

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On 31 March 2003 the Centre Simon Wiesenthal (Europe) made a series of allegations about UNRWA to the annual meeting of the UN Human Rights Commission in Geneva. [Here is UNRWA's response, delivered to the Commission on 9 April 2003.](#)

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT

ALLEGATION: "UNRWA is complicit in terrorism because it turns a blind eye to militant activity in "its" camps."

FACT: UNRWA does not run refugee camps. It is a UN agency with a clearly defined mandate, in accordance with which, it provides health, education and other humanitarian services to refugees, only one third of whom live in refugee camps. The Agency has never been given any mandate to administer, supervise or police the refugee camps or to have any jurisdiction or legislative power over the refugees or the areas where they lived. The Agency has no police force, no intelligence service and no mandate to report on political and military activities. This responsibility has always remained with the host countries and Israel, who maintained law and order, including within refugee camps.

Between 1967 and 1994, the Israeli authorities were in charge of security and law and order in the West Bank and Gaza Strip, including the 19 refugee camps in the West Bank and the eight in Gaza Strip. Subsequently, and based on Israel's bilateral agreements with the Palestinian Authority and the terms of the Oslo Accords, responsibility for security and law and order in area "A" (including all eight camps in Gaza and 12 of those in the West Bank) was passed to the Palestinian Authority. Under the same accords, the remaining seven camps in the West Bank in areas "B" and "C", and in the Israel-defined Greater Jerusalem, remain to this day under Israel's security control.

ALLEGATION: "Many of UNRWA's installations have been turned into bomb making factories."

FACT: The Agency is scrupulous about protecting its installations against misuse by any person or group and conducts constant inspections to ensure that its rules are complied with. Only once in 52 years has there been credible evidence that UNRWA installations have been put to misuse and that was in 1982 in Lebanon in the midst of the civil war. The Agency immediately launched an internal inquiry and discovered that the training centre in Siblin had indeed been misused for a brief period prior to June 1982 during a time when governmental authority was absent in south Lebanon. The investigation was handled in an open and transparent fashion and prompt action was taken to remedy the situation. Both Israelis and Palestinians accepted the objectivity of the inquiry and the efficacy of the Agency's subsequent action.

From 1967 to-date, UNRWA has not received from the Government of Israel any complaint related to the misuse of any of its installations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip.

ALLEGATION: “UNRWA employs Hamas members on its payroll” and therefore “supports terror”

FACT: UNRWA is not in the business of hiring terrorists. It has in place very strict standards of conduct and it expects all of its area and international staff members to adhere to them. These are contained in the Agency’s extensive “Staff Rules and Regulations”. UNRWA enforces a zero-tolerance policy towards inappropriate activities of its staff members, which is applied irrespective of where or when those activities take place.

UNRWA applicants are vetted during the recruitment process by personnel departments. Moreover, the Agency adheres to strict standards of conduct concerning the impartiality of staff members in the discharge of their professional duties, which are well documented. Swift disciplinary action is taken whenever there is evidence of involvement of staff members in inappropriate political activities or in military activities. Such actions are well-known, predictable and consistent, and therefore deter others.

The Staff Rules and Regulations quoted above are consistent with the relevant norms for all international civil servants.

In short UNRWA cannot police the beliefs of its staff, but it does strictly police their behaviour.

ALLEGATION: “Hamas is in control” of UNRWA’s Area Staff Union.

FACT: UNRWA’s Area Staff do have a union, but it is not staffed by representatives of any militant or political group or party, nor are elections to the union conducted on party or factional lists. Needless to say, all members of UNRWA’s Area Staff Union are subject to the rules and regulations quoted above concerning impartiality in the discharge of their duties as UN staff.

ALLEGATION: UNRWA “does nothing” to ensure staff impartiality

FACT: To ensure that Area staff are made aware of the obligations imposed upon them by the Staff Regulations, all new staff have to sign that they have “been made acquainted with and accept the conditions laid down in the staff regulations and rules”. In addition, the Commissioner-General has on numerous occasions reminded UNRWA’s area and international staff of their obligations of impartiality as UN employees and officials. In numerous letters to all staff he has recalled that “staff of the Agency are required to conduct themselves in accordance with established principles and practices of the United Nations and must not engage in any activity which is incompatible with their status as independent and impartial civil servants”. He also stated that “whilst UNRWA staff members, like other United Nations officials, are entitled to their political views, such views must not be allowed to come into conflict with the duty of the individual staff member to give loyal service uninfluenced by external political pressures”.

In addition, since the start of the current strife the Agency has employed a group of International Staff as Operational Support Officers one of whom’s main tasks is to ensure the integrity of UNRWA property and installations in the OPT. The Agency enforces all the rules mentioned above in a stringent manner and has initiated disciplinary measures against its staff where necessary. For

example, the Agency once disciplined a staff member for attending a political rally in contravention of Staff Rules and Regulations. On another occasion, a staff member was disciplined for having circulated an email with inappropriate political connotations.

ALLEGATION: "UNRWA Spends American Tax Dollars Without Any kind of Oversight".

FACT: U.S. law (section 301 (c) of the Foreign Assistance Act) prohibits US contributions to UNRWA from assisting refugees who have engaged in any act of terrorism. A recent US Government Accounting Office (GAO) investigation conducted in 2003 found no instance of UNRWA failing to comply with that law.

ALLEGATION: "UNRWA schools and textbooks teach hatred of Israel."

FACT: The curriculum in the Agency's schools is determined by the education authorities in the locations where it operates. For historical reasons UNRWA schools followed the Jordanian curriculum in the West Bank and the Egyptian curriculum in the Gaza Strip and this practice continued under the Israeli control of those areas between 1967 and 1994. Since 1994 the Palestinian Authority has progressively been replacing the old Jordanian and Egyptian textbooks as new PA-produced textbooks become available.

The United States Congress requested the US Department of State to commission a reputable NGO to conduct a review of the Palestinian curriculum. The Israel/Palestine Center for Research and Information (IPCRI) was thereby commissioned by the US Embassy in Tel Aviv and the US Consul General in Jerusalem to review the PA's textbooks. Its report was completed in March 2003 and delivered to the State Department for submission to Congress. Its Executive Summary states: "The overall orientation of the curriculum is peaceful despite the harsh and violent realities on the ground. It does not openly incite against Israel and the Jews. It does not openly incite hatred and violence. Religious and political tolerance is emphasized in a good number of textbooks and in multiple contexts."

Nathan Brown, Professor of Political Science at George Washington University, has also published studies on this subject. Regarding the Palestinian authority's new textbooks, he states:

- "The new books have removed the anti-Semitism present in the older books
- while they tell history from a Palestinian point of view, they do not seek to erase Israel, delegitimize it or replace it with the "State of Palestine"
- each book contains a foreword describing the West Bank and Gaza as "the two parts of the homeland."
- the maps show some awkwardness but do sometimes indicate the 1967 line and take some other measures to avoid indicating borders; in this respect they are actually more forthcoming than Israeli maps
- the books avoid treating Israel at length but do indeed mention it by name
- the new books must be seen as a tremendous improvement from a Jewish, Israeli, and humanitarian view

- they do not compare unfavorably to the material my son was given as a fourth grade student in a school in Tel Aviv".

Ruth Firer of Hebrew University reached similar conclusions in her study of the new books.

Much of the criticism of Palestinian textbooks has been based on research published by an organisation entitled the "Centre for Monitoring the Impact of Peace" CMIP. The organisation's work has been criticised as "tendentious and highly misleading" by Professor Brown.

ALLEGATION: "UNRWA does nothing to teach tolerance and understanding in its schools."

FACT: The Agency has been creating curriculum enrichment materials for teachers and extra-curricular activities for students focusing on peace education, human rights, tolerance and conflict resolution since long before the issue of its textbooks became a subject for public debate. In 1999 it stepped up this effort when it undertook a comprehensive review of all the books used in its schools that led to a donor-funded special project to promote tolerance, human rights and conflict resolution. These systematic efforts, which have included translations into Arabic of relevant textbooks, the creation of special manuals and involvement in cross-community summer camps, have reached every one of the Agency's schools in the West Bank and Gaza. The Agency's work in this area has been praised by, among others, the Israeli delegation to the United Nations.

ALLEGATION: "The Government of Israel does not support UNRWA"

FACT: Israel has consistently supported the work of UNRWA over the decades and the Agency depends on close co-operation with the Israeli authorities to carry out its operations in the territory that came under Israel's control in 1967. At that time Israel specifically requested UNRWA continue its operations in the West Bank and Gaza Strip and entered into an agreement committing it to facilitate the work of the Agency. The Government of Israel has made many statements of support for UNRWA over the years, for example, Israel's Ambassador to the UN, Yosef Lamdan's statement to the UN Fourth Committee on 4 November 1999 affirmed: "We see in UNRWA a major force for stability among a significant segment of Palestinian society.' On 30 October 2000, Israel's representative to the UN, David Zohar, said: "UNRWA has continued to play an important role...in administering a variety of important services, especially in the fields of health care and education. At this time Israel would like to formally record its appreciation for this good work under the able leadership of Commissioner General P.Hansen."

ALLEGATION: "UNRWA perpetuates rather than solves the Palestine refugee problem."

FACT: It has long been recognised that a solution to the Palestine refugee problem requires a political settlement among the parties involved. UNRWA was established to cater to the humanitarian needs of the refugees pending such a political settlement. Removing UNRWA from the scene would not cause the refugee issue to disappear, but it would lead to untold suffering and hardship. The UN resolution that established the Agency clearly recognised the need for humanitarian relief to Palestine refugees both to prevent "conditions of starvation and distress" and to "further conditions of peace and stability". Removing that humanitarian relief could only do further damage to the stability of the region.

FACT: UNRWA has always looked forward to a time when the relevant political parties would bring about a situation where there would be no more need for the Agency. Following the signing of the Oslo Accords, and the emergence of hope that a solution was in sight, the Agency began preparing itself for the eventual hand-over of its services to the Palestinian Authority and the other host governments. The Agency wanted to be ready for the possibility that there would be a just and lasting settlement of the refugee problem. Unfortunately however, the peace process has faltered and all relevant parties to the conflict have stressed the need for UNRWA to continue its services.

ALLEGATION: "UNRWA could be replaced by the United Nations High Commission for Refugees."

FACT: UNRWA and the UNHCR are both UN agencies mandated by the international community to do specific jobs for refugee populations. UNRWA deals specifically with Palestine refugees and their unique political situation. One reason for the distinction is that in the main the UNHCR is mandated to offer refugees three options, namely local integration and resettlement in third countries or return to their home country – options which must be accepted voluntarily by refugees under UNHCR's care. These are not feasible for Palestine refugees as the first two options are unacceptable to the refugees and their host countries and the third is rejected by Israel. Given this context, the international community, through the General Assembly of the United Nations, requires UNRWA to continue to provide humanitarian assistance pending a political solution.

ALLEGATION: "UNRWA has fostered a culture of dependency among the Palestine refugees"

FACT: Normally only 5.7 per cent of the refugee population receive food or other direct assistance from UNRWA – special hardship cases who are those without a breadwinner, the elderly and the disabled. Rather than foster dependency, UNRWA's education and healthcare services have enabled the vast majority of the refugee population to become self-sufficient members of the local communities. Indeed UNRWA-educated Palestinian doctors, engineers and administrators have made a meaningful contribution to the development of the region as a whole.

The Agency's award-winning micro-credit programme, which provides commercial, self-sustaining loans to the refugee community, has also furthered the cause of self-reliance among the refugees and has placed a special emphasis on assisting female entrepreneurs. Since its inception the Micro-finance and Micro-enterprise Programme has awarded 49,000 loans worth a total of over \$69 million.

UNRWA's gender balanced schools and its support for women-run community organisations have encouraged the empowerment of Palestinian women through training, legal advice and other assistance.

