Ten myths about UNRWA

written by Dr. Adi Schwartz | 11.02.2024

This week's revelation about the complicity of personnel working for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) in the Hamas October 7 attack on Israel is not surprising. Not to anybody who has tracked the nefariousness of this organization over recent decades.

Nor is it a surprise that over the past three months IDF troops have found Hamas weaponry in, and terror attack tunnels beneath, nearly every UNRWA institution in Gaza – schools, clinics, hospitals, and more.

No, there is no surprise here. UNRWA is rotten to its core. It validates and perpetuates the Palestinian war against Israel instead of helping to solve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It is an obstacle to peace.

Despite this, Western leaders almost certainly will restore and even increase their funding of UNRWA soon enough – because they mistakenly view the organization as an irreplaceable, indispensable humanitarian tool.

Alas, nothing could be farther from the truth! Here are ten myths about UNRWA that must be busted.

Myth 1: UNRWA is a UN organization.

Well, technically it is, but in fact UNRWA is a Palestinian outfit with Palestinian employees and Palestinian objectives. Ninety-nine percent of its 13,000 employees in Gaza are Palestinian, alongside a tiny number of international employees who cover for Palestinian corruption and Islamic radicalism. It is a Palestinian boondoggle.

Since most Palestinians in Gaza support Hamas, it stands to reason that many if not the majority of UNRWA employees are Hamas supporters too. According to Israeli intelligence a full ten percent of UNRWA Gaza staff are identifiable Hamas or Islamic Jihad activists; hundreds of others openly celebrated the October 7 rapes and murders; and 190 UNRWA employees are "hardened militants" – fighters and killers with unmistakable terrorist records.

This is far more than “a few bad apples in the basket,” as some champions for UNRWA said this week.

Myth 2: UNRWA is a relief organization for Palestinians.

This has not been true for many years. UNRWA provides little food or humanitarian aid. The vast majority of its budget is devoted to Palestinian schools and hospitals, which is an anomaly without precedent anywhere else in the world.

There is no other UN organization that covers health and education costs for almost an entire population – in place of its local government. UNRWA runs the relevant institutions and pays the bills throughout Gaza, instead of Hamas having to provide health, education, and welfare for its own constituents. Hamas relies on UNRWA and its Western donors to operate core provinces of Gazan government, leaving Hamas scot-free to build terror attack tunnels and camp-out in underground military bunkers for war against Israel.

Myth 3: UNRWA is a neutral organization.

No, it is not. UNRWA is a political outfit that shapes the story of Palestinian victimhood, preserves and prolongs Palestinian refugeehood, and educates towards perpetual war with Israel including Palestinian dreams of destroying Israel through refugee “return.” UNRWA is the most deleterious driver of a narrative of Israeli criminality, for 75 years now and running.

In particular, UNRWA keeps conflict with Israel alive by granting fictitious refugee status to an ever-inflating number of Palestinians – 20 times beyond the scope of real refugeehood! – while refusing to permanently resettle even one single refugee.

Myth 4: UNRWA is a moderating and calming force.

Even though international wags (and even parts of the Israeli defense establishment) have made this claim for years, it simply holds no water. UNRWA is deeply impregnated and dominated by Hamas, and it certainly was of no taming or tempering effect before, after, or on October 7. Everybody can do without the make-believe soothing brainwaves of UNRWA.

Watchdog organizations tirelessly have documented the hate taught in UNRWA classrooms. Palestinian children learn that Jews are liars and fraudsters, and that

Jews spread corruption which will lead to their annihilation. Terrorists are glorified as a role models. Lessons which incite to violence are taught across all grades and subjects, including in math and science class. Inevitably, the systematic teaching of hatred and violence within the UNRWA school system is Palestinian terror against Israel.

Myth 5: Palestinians in Gaza truly need global funding for their most basic needs.

From what the IDF has discovered in Gaza over the past three months it does not seem that Gazans are exceptionally needy or helpless.

The Hamas government in Gaza appears to be perfectly capable of undertaking big, sophisticated, and expensive projects ranging from underground tunnel and bunker networks that rival London's underground subway system, to industrial weapons factories built to the best engineering standards, to well-organized commando units with top-notch intelligence capabilities and crafty attack planning skills.

Palestinians in Gaza do not suffer from underfunding, sub-par education, or a deprivation of skilled labor, but from self-inflicted wounds that stem from a distortion of priorities. For decades they have prioritized warfare against Israel over building their own society in a healthy way. They need Western guidance (pressure) in re-ordering their priorities, not necessarily more cash or other aid.

Myth 6: Palestinians in Gaza need UNRWA to keep them alive.

This is not true according to Palestinians themselves. Even as some Western funders of UNRWA have suspended donations to UNRWA in recent days, the main concern expressed by Palestinians relates to a possible denouement in global recognition of their cause. They are much more distressed about the political blow to their status as privileged victims than they are about the money.

There are hundreds of social media posts and other testimonies indicating this; that Gazans see UNRWA far less as a critical provider of social services and emergency aid and much more as the vital validator of Palestinian identity in their never-ending war with Israel.

Myth 7: Without an immediate restoration of full UNRWA funding,

Palestinians in Gaza will starve.

There is no "dire crisis" in access to food and water in Gaza. Nobody there is on the "verge of starvation." Hundreds of trucks with goods and fuels enter Gaza every day despite the war, based on donations from Arab and (still) Western countries. Hamas demonstrably confiscates millions of dollars' worth of such supplies for its army and favored elites, about which UNRWA has done nothing. But a steady flow of goods into Gaza continues, even if UNRWA's pockets are a bit less padded.

Myth 8: UNRWA is the most efficient way to deliver assistance to Palestinians.

No, it certainly is not, and not just because UNRWA lets Hamas run-off with lots of goods. There are far more efficient, less corrupt, and less grossly political aid agencies, some of which already are present in Gaza (and the West Bank), that can be mobilized to replace UNRWA. This includes USAID, UNICEF, and the World Food Programme. They could all do the work without succumbing to Palestinian legerdemain.

Myth 9: UNRWA can be fixed.

UNRWA needs more than an "urgent audit," as the EU reluctantly mumbled this week, and much more than "enhanced due diligence and other oversight mechanisms," as one unfriendly-to-Israel congressman grudgingly called-for.

UNRWA needs to be abolished so that Gaza's transition away from aid and toward economic development, and away from genocidal fantasies and toward peacebuilding, can begin quickly. It is certainly true that the current division of labor – UNRWA services above ground, Hamas terror operations below ground and from within UNRWA facilities – cannot continue.

This requires different international actors that can develop productive industry and jobs in Gaza, and that can lead the construction and operation of civilian services. International funding may still be necessary, but it should be administered by foreign governments directly and by different organizations that are subject to continuous oversight and rigorous accountability.

Myth 10: Wartime is not the right time to shutter UNRWA.

Now is the perfect time to do so. As Israel liberates Gaza from Hamas, the international community can unshackle Palestinians from UNRWA. And at the same time Israel can unchain itself from destructive dependency on UNRWA and its problematic Israeli counterpart, the Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories – COGAT.

Then the rebuilding of Gaza can advance, free from rank corruption, destructive indoctrination, the coddling of terrorism, and overall moral rot that for too long has contaminated international aid politics for Palestinians.

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