



**The Colonna Review Ignored UNRWA's Systematic Refusal  
To Address Widespread Staff Promotion of Terrorism**

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*Submitted to the Hearing on:*  
**"Eliminating U.S. Aid to Terrorists – New Policies for the  
U.S. Government and Its Partners"**

**The House Committee on Foreign Affairs  
Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights,  
and International Organizations**

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Chairman Smith, Ranking Member Wild, and distinguished members of the subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify at this important hearing. I wish to share my thoughts on and experiences with the “independent review group” on UNRWA that was chaired by Catherine Colonna. I would like to ask that my full statement be ordered part of the record.

### **Colonna Review Was Not Independent, Verdict Determined in Advance**

UN Watch has demonstrated in detail why the Colonna Review was not truly independent, including because of the manifest bias and conflicts of interests of the examiners, and because both the UN and UNRWA declared the outcome in advance, in a mandate explicitly designed not to objectively examine potential wrongdoing, but rather to “reassure the donors.”<sup>1</sup>

### **What the Colonna Report Ignored: How UNRWA Systematically Refuses to Act Against Staff Support for Terrorism**

UN Watch sent a detailed submission to the Colonna Review Group showing how, since August 2015, UN Watch has been warning UNRWA about systematic and widespread promotion of terrorism and antisemitism among its staff on social media.<sup>2</sup> We documented over 180 cases of UNRWA staff incitement to terrorism and antisemitism on Facebook and Telegram in 11 separate reports, all based on public information.<sup>3</sup>

Astonishingly, the Colonna Report completely ignored all of this — as it did all of the submitted evidence below.

### **Terrorism Promotion Is Widespread, Not Just “A Few Bad Apples”**

If UN Watch had access to all UNRWA staff lists, social media profiles, and classroom activity, thousands of UNRWA employees would certainly be implicated in promotion of terrorism and antisemitism.

There is not a single known case of any of the UNRWA staff who on social media has responded to condemn their colleagues’ posts promoting the murder of Jews. On the contrary, the only known responses are of UNRWA staff endorsing the offending posts, as reflected in the examples below.

- [February 3, 2017](#), Mohammad Yaser Arab and Hamad Al-Shehabi liked a post endorsing Holocaust denial; Anas Al-Hamidi liked a post promoting terrorism and child soldier; Fadi Mousa and Ahmad Nasser liked a post celebrating Hitler
- [April 10, 2017](#), Samah Al Saleh liked a post celebrating kidnapping and murder of three Israeli teens; Wafaa Sharaf Adlouni, endorsed a post for Hamas terrorism
- [March 14, 2023](#), Jasmine Al-Shami and Muna Awad liked a post praising Hitler

Indeed, over the years, several UNRWA educators have been suspended over support for and/or direct involvement in terrorism. Instead of condemning them, their fellow

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<sup>1</sup> <https://unwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/UNRWAs-Rigged-Independent-Review.pdf>

<sup>2</sup> <https://unwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/United-Nations-Watch-Submission-to-UNRWA-Review-Group.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> Some of the most egregious examples are listed here: <https://unwatch.org/un-watch-warned-unrwa-about-staff-support-for-terror-since-2015/>

UNRWA employees rallied around these terror-supporters, organizing mass solidarity protests and rallies, shutting down UNRWA services, as they demanded their colleagues' reinstatement.

### **8,000 UNRWA Teachers Rallied for Suhail al-Hindi, School Principal, Head of UNRWA Gaza Union and Hamas Politburo Member**

In September 2011, UNRWA notified teacher and Gaza staff union head Suhail al-Hindi that he would be suspended for three months without pay due to his political (*i.e.*, Hamas) activities, specifically meeting with Hamas chief Ismail Haniyeh. Then-Hamas spokesman Taher al-Nunu condemned the decision and threatened that the UNRWA staff union, representing 8,000 teachers, would act to “embarrass the agency.”<sup>4</sup>

During al-Hindi's entire three-month suspension, from September to December 2011, the UNRWA Gaza staff union orchestrated a broad protest campaign, closing UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip several times. The campaign shut down 243 schools, with 8,000 teachers and school principals going on strike, affecting 220,000 school children.<sup>5</sup>

Given UNRWA's oft-touted “zero tolerance” policy for hatred, one would have expected UNRWA teachers to be shocked and outraged that a school principal—and the head of the entire UNRWA Gaza staff union—was an active member of a terrorist group. Instead, the opposite occurred. They rallied around al-Hindi and even rewarded him, re-electing him chairman of the UNRWA Gaza staff union in 2012.<sup>6</sup>

At the time, UNRWA should have investigated all staff who participated in the Suhail al-Hindi protests for neutrality violations for having supported a Hamas member. Yet, as far as we are aware, none were investigated or disciplined.

Notably, UNRWA's Legal Officer in Jerusalem at the time was none other than current UN Palestine Rapporteur Francesca Albanese,<sup>7</sup> who just published a report accusing

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<sup>4</sup> UNRWA announced the suspension of Dr. Suhail al-Hindi, chairman of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip, after his election to Hamas' political bureau. In 2011 he was also suspended by UNRWA for his affiliation with Hamas, but remained in his position, **Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center** (February 27, 2017), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21163/>.

<sup>5</sup> Strike closes all UNRWA schools in Gaza Strip, **The Palestinian Information Center** (September 29, 2011), [https://english.palinfo.com/o\\_post/Strike-closes-all-UNRWA-schools-in-Gaza-Strip/](https://english.palinfo.com/o_post/Strike-closes-all-UNRWA-schools-in-Gaza-Strip/); Teachers Protest at UNRWA's Gaza City Headquarters, **Palestine Chronicle** (October 5, 2011), <https://www.palestinechronicle.com/teachers-protest-at-unrwas-gaza-city-headquarters/>; AFP, UNRWA's Gaza schools stage mass walkout, **AhramOnline** (October 30, 2011), <https://english.ahram.org.eg/NewsContent/2/8/25543/World/Region/UNRWAs-Gaza-schools-stage-mass-walkout.aspx>; @HillelNeuer, **Twitter** (March 24, 2024, 11:36 AM), <https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/1771833500921987168>.

<sup>6</sup> Dr. Suhail al-Hindi, Chairman of the UNRWA Staff Union in the Gaza Strip and Boys' Elementary School Principal, Is Elected to Hamas' New Gaza Political Bureau, **Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center** (February 23, 2017), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21160/>.

<sup>7</sup> Francesca Albanese completed application form for position of Special Rapporteur on the situation of human rights in the Palestinian territories occupied since 1967, **OHCHR** (Last visited April 2, 2024), [https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/ALBANESE\\_Francesca\\_form.pdf](https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/2021-12/ALBANESE_Francesca_form.pdf).

Israel of genocide in Gaza and denies that the Hamas October 7<sup>th</sup> atrocities—the worst massacre of Jews in a single day since the Holocaust—was antisemitic.<sup>8</sup>

### **Strike by 2,000 UNRWA Teachers for Fathi al-Sharif, School Principal Tied to Hamas**

In a similar case this year, the entire UNRWA system in Lebanon rallied around two UNRWA teachers disciplined for neutrality violations—Fathi al-Sharif, head of the UNRWA Lebanon teachers' union and Raif al-Ahmad, deputy head of the union.<sup>9</sup> Al-Sharif was suspended for three months without pay due to his position as a senior Hamas leader. In response, the UNRWA Lebanon teachers' union, representing 2,000 teachers, organized mass strikes across all UNRWA camps in Lebanon, shutting schools and services, so that everyone, including teachers and students, could march on the UNRWA office in Beirut and shut it down. The strikes affected 64 schools with nearly 40,000 students.

At a March 27<sup>th</sup> protest in front of UNRWA's Beirut headquarters, al-Sharif rallied the crowd of hundreds by threatening “bad consequences” if UNRWA does not resolve the issue quickly. One of al-Sharif's students, Ilana Abdel-Ghani, decried the injustice against her Hamas-teacher and expressed her admiration for al-Sharif who had “raised the generations to love Palestine...to love the homeland and redemption.” She added that the students would “not return to school until [UNRWA Lebanon Director] Dorothy Klaus withdraws the punitive measures.”<sup>10</sup>

### **Strike by 2,000 UNRWA Lebanon Teachers Supporting Colleague Riad Nimr Who Was Suspended for Encouraging Terrorism**

The UNRWA Lebanon teachers' union had orchestrated similar protests one year ago, in March 2023, when UNRWA Lebanon elementary school teacher Riad Nimr was suspended after we exposed his hateful Facebook posts. Instead of condemning him, the UNRWA Lebanon teacher's union, representing 2,000 teachers, rallied behind Nimr, pulling students out of class for a three-day-strike, and effectively paralyzing UNRWA operations in UNRWA's Nahr el-Bared camp for three weeks until UNRWA reinstated Nimr under pressure. According to one source, UNRWA Lebanon Director Dorothy Klaus “was very cooperative” after learning that the situation in the camps had become “unbearable” and “may be a prelude to many things.” After this incident, we are not aware that UNRWA investigated any of the UNRWA staff who participated in the strikes for their neutrality violations.

### **UNRWA Students Endorse Teachers' Violent Messaging**

These examples show that UNRWA staff who condone murderous terrorism are role models for their impressionable students, as was demonstrated by al-Sharif's student,

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<sup>8</sup> *Why Germany & France Condemned UN's Francesca Albanese for 'Disgraceful' Antisemitism*, **UN Watch** (March 26, 2024), <https://unwatch.org/germany-france-condemn-uns-francesca-albanese-for-disgraceful-antisemitism/>.

<sup>9</sup> *UNRWA Teachers Union Rally for Accused Hamas Teachers*, **UN Watch** (March 26, 2024) (Article translated from the **Palestinian Refugees Portal**), <https://unwatch.org/unrwa-teachers-union-rally-for-accused-hamas-teachers/>.

<sup>10</sup> *Id.*

Ilana Abdel-Ghani, quoted above praising her Hamas teacher. Indeed, UNRWA students have endorsed the violent messaging of their teachers on Facebook. For example, our March 2023 report contained a violent post by an UNRWA student who tagged his UNRWA teacher Ayman Dlash, apparently knowing the teacher would endorse it.<sup>11</sup> Similarly, our February 2017 report showed how UNRWA students praised their teacher Ghanem Naim Ghoneim's post venerating Hitler.

### **UNRWA Fails To Investigate Encouragement of Terrorism**

As part of its public defense, UNRWA has repeatedly insisted, including in its latest *Claims vs. Facts* publication, that it always takes “very seriously any *allegation*” about staff misconduct and that “UNRWA reviews all *allegations* of misconduct” (emphasis added).<sup>12</sup> This means that UNRWA's approach is reactive rather than proactive. It investigates only when it receives an “allegation” from some third party like UN Watch. Therefore, if UN Watch did not research and inform UNRWA about staff neutrality violations, then UNRWA would take no action. Thus, UNRWA effectively admits that it has never undertaken, and does not see itself as obligated to undertake, a comprehensive review of its staff for neutrality violations.

Considering these facts—that UNRWA's investigations were only in response to “allegations” supplied by outsiders and that UNRWA itself has never conducted its own comprehensive investigation—it is highly misleading for UNRWA to claim that this is just about “a few bad apples” simply based on the small number of investigations UNRWA has opened.

Moreover, UNRWA's approach of minimizing the problem and focusing only on the issue of staff social media violations ignores the deeper, systemic problem, which is the fact that UNRWA is hiring these antisemitic and terror-supporting teachers in the first place and placing them in classrooms to serve as role models for impressionable Palestinian children. The UNRWA staff social media violations are merely a symptom of this serious systemic problem which has never been addressed.

### **SYSTEMIC FAILURE TO ADDRESS STAFF SUPPORT FOR TERRORISM**

On repeated occasions over the last nine years, UN Watch has reached out to UNRWA and other responsible UN officials to discuss our warning about their staff support for terrorism. On every occasion, our request to meet was ignored.<sup>13</sup>

UNRWA has persistently ignored our requests to engage on the issue, disparaged our research, and ignored our recommendations.

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<sup>11</sup> @HillelNeuer, **Twitter** (March 15, 2023, 7:55 AM), <https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/1635882496075223040>.

<sup>12</sup> UNRWA: *Claims Versus Facts*, **UNRWA** (February 2024), <https://www.unrwa.org/unrwa-claims-versus-facts-february-2024>.

<sup>13</sup> <https://unwatch.org/evidence-of-unrwas-2015-2024-refusal-to-engage-serious-allegations-of-terrorism-promotion/>

Over the years, UN Watch has sent our reports to both the UN Secretary-General and the UNRWA Commissioner-General and requested meetings to discuss our research. Our requests were met with silence virtually every time. Only one time did we ever receive a reply—not from UNRWA chief Lazzarini, but instead from UNRWA’s DC Representative William Deere, in May 2023—in which he persisted in defending UNRWA’s approach, refused to engage constructively, and did not respond to our request for a meeting. Moreover, UNRWA recently rejected the opportunity to directly engage with me by refusing to send a representative to a March 19, 2024 hearing in the European Parliament about UNRWA’s terror-ties.<sup>14</sup>

### **UNRWA Attacks UN Watch For Warning Of Terror Support**

Not only did UNRWA refuse to meet or engage with UN Watch. Worse, in reactions to our warnings and reports, the UN and UNRWA have repeatedly and disgracefully resorted to attacking and disparaging UN Watch, instead of tackling the issue of terror-support among staff head-on.<sup>15</sup> Sadly, we are not aware of any donor state that asked UNRWA to stop attacking the few groups that expose UNRWA staff support for terrorism.

### **UNRWA’s Gaza Workforce Has Been Infiltrated By Hamas Since At Least 2004**

It is widely known that Hamas has infiltrated UNRWA’s Gaza workforce. As far back as 2004, then-Commissioner-General Peter Hansen remarked “Oh I am sure that there are Hamas members on the UNRWA payroll and I don’t see that as a crime.”<sup>16</sup> Hamas has controlled the UNRWA Gaza staff union since at least 2009.<sup>17</sup> When, in February 2017, UNRWA suspended school principal and chairman of the UNRWA Gaza staff union Suhail al-Hindi, it was not because of his Hamas affiliation, but because he had been elected to the Hamas Politburo (along with Yahya Sinwar).<sup>18</sup> Al-Hindi ultimately resigned from UNRWA to avoid being fired and apparently continues to receive UNRWA benefits.<sup>19</sup> He went on to chair—on behalf of Hamas—the violent “Great March of Return” border riots that preceded the October 7<sup>th</sup> massacre.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> @HillelNeuer, **Twitter** (March 20, 2024),

<https://twitter.com/UNWatch/status/1770431558391918619>.

<sup>15</sup> <https://unwatch.org/unrwa-attacks-those-who-warn-of-staff-support-for-terrorism/>

<sup>16</sup> David Patrikarakos, *How can the war between Israel and Hamas ever end when so many schools in Gaza – run by a UN agency backed by our millions – teach children to hate Jews?* **Daily Mail** (January 22, 2024), <https://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-12993841/How-war-Israel-Hamas-end-schools-Gaza-run-agency-backed-millions-teach-children-hate-Jews.html>.

<sup>17</sup> *Resignation of Suhail al-Hindi, chairman of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza strip, after exposure of his election to Hamas’ new Gazan political bureau*, **Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center** (April 24, 2017), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21194/>.

<sup>18</sup> *UN suspends Gaza staffer amid allegations of Hamas ties*, **AP** (February 26, 2017), <https://apnews.com/general-news-a555d90827ee4282bb6384810acc516a>; @HillelNeuer, **Twitter** (March 22, 2024, 6:57 PM), <https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/1771219686287430099>;

<sup>19</sup> *Resignation of Suhail al-Hindi, chairman of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza strip, after exposure of his election to Hamas’ new Gazan political bureau*, **Meir Amit Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center** (April 24, 2017), <https://www.terrorism-info.org.il/en/21194/>.

<sup>20</sup> *Mapping Palestinian Politics: Suhail Al-Hindi*, **ECFR** (Last visited April 2, 2024), [https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping\\_palestinian\\_politics/suheil-al-hindi/](https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/suheil-al-hindi/).



More recently, UNRWA officials have confirmed the agency's position that employee affiliation with Hamas is not itself considered problematic. In a 2021 interview with *Foreign Policy*, UNRWA spokeswoman Tamara Alrifai explained that UNRWA acts only when its employees are found to hold a political position with Hamas, meaning that Hamas affiliation itself is not an issue for UNRWA.<sup>21</sup> In February 2024, UN Relief Chief Martin Griffiths told *Sky News* that "Hamas is not a terrorist group for us, of course, it's a political movement."<sup>22</sup>

Suhail al-Hindi is not the first UNRWA employee to move on to a senior position with a terrorist group. He joins a list of elite terrorists who started out as UNRWA teachers. On March 14, 2024, the former head of UNRWA's curriculum development, Ahmad Oueidat, boasted about how "UNRWA schools were giving rise to leaders" such as Hamas political leader Ismail Haniyeh and PFLP-GC Secretary-General Dr. Tal Naji.<sup>23</sup> The PFLP-GC, an offshoot of the PFLP terrorist organization, opposes peace with Israel, has close ties to Syria, is supported by Iran, and cooperates with Hezbollah. It was involved in several attacks against Israeli civilians and soldiers in the 1970s and 80s and took responsibility for a 2015 rocket attack on Israel from Lebanon.<sup>24</sup>

Other famous Palestinian terrorists that started out as UNRWA employees, and may still be receiving UNRWA benefits.<sup>25</sup>

## CONCLUSION

The Colonna Report failed to state the obvious: that UNRWA's decade of responses to UN Watch's reports leave no doubt that the agency is not serious about addressing the root problem of terrorism and antisemitism among its staff. The agency is far more concerned with placating donors and ensuring its continued existence than dealing with this serious problem. Thank you.

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<sup>21</sup> Yardena Schwartz, *Palestinian Schools Have a Problem – and Are Running Out of Time*, **Foreign Policy** (November 5, 2021), [https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/05/unrwa-palestine-israel-refugees-united-states-funding-corruption-education/#cookie\\_message\\_anchor](https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/11/05/unrwa-palestine-israel-refugees-united-states-funding-corruption-education/#cookie_message_anchor).

<sup>22</sup> @HillelNeuer, **Twitter** (February 15, 2024, 10:43 AM), <https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/1758049397965717709>.

<sup>23</sup> Former UNRWA Official Ahmad Oueidat: Hamas Leader Ismail Haniyeh Was A Teacher In One Of Our Schools, As Was PFLP-GC Leader Talal Naji; The West Tried To Corrupt Our Curricula, **MEMRI** (March 14, 2024), <https://www.memri.org/tv/fmr-unrwa-official-ahmad-oueidat-schools-rise-palestinian-leadership-hamas-ismail-haniyeh-pflp-talal-naji>; @HillelNeuer, **Twitter** (March 22, 2024, 6:34 PM), <https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/1771213795622375574>.

<sup>24</sup> *Mapping Palestinian Politics, Popular Front For The Liberation-General Command (PFLP-GC)*, **ECFR** (Last visited April 2, 2024), [https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping\\_palestinian\\_politics/popular\\_front\\_for\\_the\\_liberation\\_of\\_palestine\\_general\\_command/](https://ecfr.eu/special/mapping_palestinian_politics/popular_front_for_the_liberation_of_palestine_general_command/).

<sup>25</sup> See UN Watch Submission to UNRWA Colonna Review at pp. 16-18: <https://unwatch.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/04/United-Nations-Watch-Submission-to-UNRWA-Review-Group.pdf>