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Racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and related forms of intolerance, follow-up and implementation of the Durban Declaration and Programme of Action

Written statement* submitted by United Nations Watch, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[1 February 2021]

* Issued as received, in the language(s) of submission only.



United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East Staff Incitement of Antisemitism and Terrorism Violates United Nations Principles

United Nations Watch is concerned by failure of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) to adequately address and remedy the problem of incitement to antisemitism and terrorism among its staff. Between September 2015 and September 2019, UN Watch published six separate reports, which were widely publicized in the media, exposing a total of 100 UNRWA staff and school Facebook pages containing antisemitism and terrorist incitement. UN Watch submitted its April 2017 report directly to UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl, but never received any response. Regrettably, although UNRWA received our reports and is well-aware of the issues, it has not addressed the problem.

Aside from grossly violating UN and UNRWA internal policies concerning staff neutrality and impartiality, UNRWA staff incitement to antisemitism also breaches several provisions of the International Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Racial Discrimination. UNRWA is technically not bound by that treaty as it is a UN entity and not a state, but it functions as a state when it provides educational services to Palestinian children in place of the Palestinian Authority or Hamas.

In August 2019, when the Committee on the Elimination of Racial Discrimination reviewed the State of Palestine, it criticized the existence of hate speech in “school curricula and textbooks” — which are those used by UNRWA — which it said “fuels hatred and may incite violence, particularly hate speech against Israelis, which at times also fuels antisemitism.”¹ UNRWA disavowed this criticism, claiming it was directed at the Palestinian government, not at UNRWA, because the agency’s textbooks come from the Palestinian Authority.

However, this assertion is belied by UNRWA’s new complementary materials distributed to students during the coronavirus pandemic. The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) recently exposed these materials as rife with problematic content, including incitement to violence and hatred and support for terrorism.² According to IMPACT-se director Marcus Sheff, the “UNRWA-created material is, in places, more extremist than PA material it complements.”³ UNRWA insisted the material was distributed by “mistake.”⁴ Significantly, these materials were prepared by UNRWA’s antisemitic and terror-supporting staff.

According to UN Watch’s research since 2015, UNRWA staff consistently profess antisemitism and support for terrorism on social media. This phenomenon is systemic and actually dates back to UNRWA’s early days. In their new authoritative book “The War of Return”, UNRWA experts Dr. Einat Wilf and Adi Schwartz describe the indoctrination in UNRWA schools in the 1960s, 70s and 80s:

¹ Concluding observations on the combined initial and second periodic reports of the State of Palestine, United Nations Document CERD/C/PSE/CO/1-2, at 19 (c) (August 29, 2019).

² Itam Shalev, Review of UNRWA-Produced Study Materials in the Palestinian Territories, IMPACT-SE (January 2021), <https://www.impact-se.org/wp-content/uploads/UNRWA-Produced-Study-Materials-in-the-Palestinian-Territories.pdf>; see also Monitoring group: UNRWA textbooks glorify terror, deny Israel’s existence, Times Of Israel (January 14, 2021), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/monitoring-group-unrwa-textbooks-glorify-terror-deny-israels-existence/>.

³ Id.

⁴ UNRWA Improves Safeguards on Ensuring Adherence of Educational Materials with UN principles, UNRWA (January 14, 2021), <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/unrwa-improves-safeguards-ensuring-adherence-educational-materials-un>.

The teachers were Palestinians — refugees and their offspring in the camps — who passed on their personal experiences. Pupils reported that their teachers were faithful to the national struggle...

UNRWA's schools repeatedly emphasized the idea of a violent return to the territory of the state of Israel...

All the maps of Palestine used in the schools showed the whole of Israel painted in black...

UNRWA's education system effectively became an instrument for the mobilization of the population of the camps for the Palestinian armed struggle...⁵

In contravention of international standards concerning racism in the classroom, where the norm is zero tolerance, UNRWA refuses to fire, and continues to employ schoolteachers, principals and other staffers who support terrorism and antisemitism. In other jurisdictions educators are routinely fired for incitement to antisemitism in cases comparable or even less severe to those published by UNRWA teachers.⁶ Therefore, contrary to UNRWA's claim, it does not seem to have been a mistake that materials put together by UNRWA staff contained antisemitism and support for terrorism. It seems to be a pattern.

In a new report, UN Watch reveals 22 recent examples of antisemitic and terrorist-inciting UNRWA staff Facebook pages in Gaza, the West Bank, Lebanon and Jordan. These new examples include:

- Awed Abedallah, UNRWA Syrian Arab Republic (Syria) principal and teacher, who posted a "Map of Arab Palestine" that completely erases the State of Israel with text taking pride in Palestinian violence — "if the gunpowder shrieks...do not say there is thunder in the sky – those are Palestinians."⁷
- Ersaa Abedalraheem, UNRWA Syria English teacher, who posted a Hamas propaganda video inciting children to deny Israel's right to exist.⁸ In the video, the Hamas journalist asks several Palestinian children what is the capital of Israel? The children repeatedly deny Israel's existence with responses such as "What Israel?" and "There is no Israel." The journalist even offers a prize to the children in exchange for saying that Jerusalem is Israel's capital, but they all refuse. The video is clearly directed at a child audience and aims to educate Palestinian children that Israel has no right to exist. The accompanying text — that there is "no such country as Israel" — reflects UNRWA teacher Abedalraheem's endorsement of this view.
- Ibrahim Sabbagh, UNRWA Syria English teacher who shared a propaganda video celebrating Palestinian violence with images of Hamas gunmen and children carrying weapons along with text that the Palestinian refugees will not remain

⁵ Adi Schwartz and Einat Wilf, *The War of Return*, All Points Books (2020), pp. 122-126.

⁶ See, e.g., Jordan Williams, Professor in Michigan placed on leave after discovery of 'racist, anti-Semitic and homophobic slurs,' *The Hill* (November 24, 2020), <https://thehill.com/homenews/state-watch/527321-professor-in-michigan-placed-on-leave-after-discovery-of-racist-anti>; New York private school fires teacher for anti-Israel posts, obscene gesture at rabbis, *JNS* (January 13, 2020), <https://www.jns.org/new-york-private-school-fires-teacher-for-anti-israel-posts-obscene-gesture-at-rabbis/>; Matt Drake, Teacher sacked 'after gas chamber joke to Jewish pupils,' *Independent* (October 16, 2019), <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/home-news/teacher-sacked-gas-chamber-newberries-primary-school-hertfordshire-a9157896.html>; UK lecturer accused of anti-Semitism and Holocaust denial is dismissed, *Times Of Israel* (May 29, 2019), <https://www.timesofisrael.com/uk-lecturer-accused-of-anti-semitism-holocaust-denial-is-dismissed/>; Aaron Bandler, Australian University Fires Lecturer for Adding Swastika to Israeli Flag on Lecture Slide, *Jewish Journal* (February 15, 2019), <https://jewishjournal.com/news/world/293990/australian-university-fires-lecturer-for-adding-swastika-to-israeli-flag-on-lecture-slide/>.

⁷ Awad Abedalla, Facebook (January 31, 2020, 12:47 pm), <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=2765247483563468&set=a.596295090458729&type=3&theater>.

⁸ Ersaa Abedalraheem, Facebook (January 2, 2020, 9:52 pm), <https://www.facebook.com/esraa.abedalraheem/posts/2549599028501039>.

“dispossessed” because they are “returning,” presumably to reclaim Israeli lands through armed resistance as depicted in the video.⁹

- Saeed Khalaf Abu Freh, UNRWA Jordan mathematics teacher who incited terrorism by glorifying the terrorist Omar Abu Laila who murdered an Israeli soldier, stole his weapon and then shot to death a 47-year-old Israeli father of 12. Freh lauds Abu Laila’s actions, which he considers even more impressive given Abu Laila’s young age — “Omar Abu Laila was greater than the Arab generals, and he was more powerful than armies and airborne missiles. He was a child, but he was bigger than a galaxy.” Freh then adds that “the only path for our bullets [is] Palestine.”¹⁰
- Husni Masri, UNRWA West Bank teacher who posted inflammatory antisemitic conspiracy theories that Jews control the world, created the coronavirus and seek to destroy Islam.¹¹ Among other things, his post claims that “Masonic Zionists” who control “all the great powers,” “possess 90% of the world’s gold” and “own the World Bank.”
- Abdul Salam Muhammad Alimat, UNRWA Jordan Arabic teacher who promoted violence by posting photos of armed Palestinians with text advocating for “weapons” instead of peace — “there is no solace for those sitting at filthy peace tables. There is one way, we know it, there is no choice between spirit and weapons.”¹² In another post, he shared classic antisemitism in the form of a quote from Allah Tulfah, the former governor of Baghdad — “I find it distressing to see 120 million Arabs subdued by a million Jewish vagabonds.”¹³
- Nahed Sharawi, UNRWA Gaza mathematics teacher, who posted classical antisemitism depicting Jews as scheming thieves. She posted a story about a Jew who tried to corrupt his Muslim neighbor into “mocking Muslims.” The Jew gave the “pious” Muslim a ring then stole it, threw it in the ocean, and demanded it back from the Muslim. Ultimately, the Muslim found the ring in the belly of a fish he caught and when he presented it to the Jew, the Jew was so stunned he converted to Islam.¹⁴ Sharawi also shared a video of Hitler with inspirational quotes to “enrich and enlighten your thoughts and minds.”¹⁵

United Nations Watch is alarmed that the teachers of a supposedly neutral UN agency systemically promote antisemitism and terrorist violence. We call on the Human Rights Council, as well all stakeholders, particularly UN human rights officials and donor States, to condemn this incitement and demand accountability from UNRWA.

⁹ Ibrahim Sabbagh, Facebook (June 24, 2019, 1:49 pm)
<https://www.facebook.com/ebraheem.sabbagh/posts/1314833582007588>.

¹⁰ Saeed Khalaf Abu Freh, Facebook (November 14, 2020, 12:26 pm),
<https://www.facebook.com/aaaabufraih/posts/1538871049656869>.

¹¹ Husni Masri, Facebook (October 30, 2020, 9:22 am),
<https://www.facebook.com/masricalling/posts/10158629663707068>

¹² Abdul Salam Muhammad Alimat, Facebook (May 15, 2020, 8:32 pm)
<https://www.facebook.com/abdalslam.mohammad/posts/10225004886374154>.

¹³ Abdul Salam Muhammad Alimat, Facebook, (November 21, 2019, 4:02 pm)
<https://www.facebook.com/abdalslam.mohammad/posts/10222819134491723>.

¹⁴ Nahel Sharawi, Facebook (September 3, 2017, 10:08 pm)
<https://www.facebook.com/nada.alsabah.503/posts/1351684991615754>.

¹⁵ Nahed Sharawi, Facebook (February 13, 2018)
<https://www.facebook.com/nada.alsabah.503/posts/1499392643511654>.