



Intelligence and Terrorism Information Center

September 6, 2009

The battle for hearts and minds in the Gaza Strip: Hamas attacks UNRWA for planning to teach the Holocaust in its schools. The attack reflects Hamas' ambition for absolute control over education in the Gaza Strip and to inculcate students with its radical Islamic ideology, including hatred and terrorism against Israel.

The battle for hearts and minds in the Gaza Strip...



The UNRWA school in the Jabaliya refugee camp (Electronicintifada.net, August 10, 2006).



Children in the yard of a Gaza Strip school (Imeu.net, February 4, 2009).

Overview

1. Hamas recently initiated a new campaign against the UNRWA educational system, this time for its alleged intention to include Holocaust studies in its schools. Behind the attack is the report current in the Gaza Strip – which UNRWA has not yet confirmed – that it is planning to include basic Holocaust studies in its 8th grade human rights curriculum. Hamas spokesmen, in response to what is considered a dangerous precedent (the Holocaust is not taught in Palestinian Authority schools), raised their voices in loud chorus to denounce UNRWA, calling the Holocaust “a Zionist lie,” and calling support for teaching Holocaust studies “a war crime” and “support and service for the Zionists.”

2. The current media campaign is part of an overall attack being waged by Hamas against UNRWA’s various curricula and other educational activities, which includes attempts to prevent students from attending UNRWA summer camps and schools. Hamas also tries to prevent UNRWA schools from teaching human rights as defined by a UN resolution, and to prevent UNRWA from sending student delegations to the United States and other Western countries in reward for excellence in human rights studies.

3. The outcome of the educational struggle between Hamas and UNRWA is particularly important because Hamas is using its political and security control of the Gaza Strip to impose its ideology on the younger generation and hamper the activities of any opponent, including UNRWA. Hamas’ objective is to ensure that the younger generation is raised according to a radical Islamic ideology in line with Hamas’ political interpretation, which includes hatred for Israel, hostility to the West and its values and the readiness to take part in an armed struggle against Israel as a preferred alternative to the peace process for “liberating Palestine.”

Reports which reached Hamas about the inclusion of Holocaust studies in the UNRWA curriculum

4. Senior Hamas figures recently received reports that UNRWA, which operates 221 schools in the Gaza Strip with more than 200,000 students, was planning to include the Holocaust in its curriculum this year. According to three UNRWA teachers who spoke on condition of anonymity, the **new curriculum for the 8th grade includes basic lessons about the Holocaust** within the framework of overall human rights studies. Two of them said they heard about the new curriculum from colleagues involved in formulating it. The third said he heard about it at a meeting of senior educators who were trying to find a way to teach the topic without offending the sensibilities of the parents. All three said they had not yet received lesson plans for human rights studies even though the school year began at the end of August (AP, August 31, 2009).

Reactions from Hamas and UNRWA

5. When the report surfaced about UNRWA's intention to include the Holocaust in its school curriculum, senior figures within Hamas were quick to denounce it. Some of them also denied the existence of the Holocaust, calling it "a lie invented by the Zionists."¹ A senior member of the Ministry of Education in the Hamas de-facto administration said that the ministry would consult with UNRWA and demand the subject be eliminated from the curriculum.

6. Some of the comments were the following:

i) **Yunes al-Astal**, member of the Hamas faction in the Palestinian Legislative Council and a well-known Holocaust denier,² said teaching the Holocaust in UNRWA schools would lead to "marketing and spreading a lie." He said that adding the subject to the curriculum was "**a war crime and an attempt to spread lies...**" and "**support and service of the Zionists**" (*Filastin al-Yawm*, August 30, 2009). Interviewed by Hamas' PalToday website he reiterated that by teaching the Holocaust in its schools UNRWA was committing "**a serious crime.**" The "crime," he said, was in line with the "Jewish plots to steal more Palestinian land" and might teach the youth to like the Jews and agree to the existence of their entity [i.e., the State of Israel] on Palestinian soil and to coexist with them.

ii) **Sami Abu Zuhri**, Hamas spokesman in the Gaza Strip, said that Hamas opposed adding the subject called Holocaust to the curriculum because its objective was to justify the "Israeli the occupation" of the land of the Palestinian territories (Reuters, August 30, 2009). Interviewed by AP, he said that it was more important to teach Palestinians about the so-called "crimes of the Israeli occupation" (AP, August 31, 2009).

iii) **Abd al-Rahman al-Jamal**, head of the Palestinian Legislative Council's education committee for Hamas, told a BBC correspondent that the Holocaust was "a big lie." He said that teaching it would serve Israel, which had been fighting Hamas for years. Instead, he said, the UN should teach the Nakba, the term used by the Palestinians to describe the establishment of the State of Israel and the expulsion of hundreds of thousands of refugees (BBC website, August 31, 2009). He said that Hamas would not allow UNRWA to include the Holocaust in the curriculum of its schools (Al-Bayan Center website, the Gulf States, August 31, 2009).

¹ Holocaust denial is an inseparable part of Hamas' charter (1988) and day-to-day anti-Semitic statements and publications. For example, see our April 21, 2009 bulletin "The hate industry: Hamas's Al-Aqsa TV continues its crude anti-Semitic incitement, using The Protocols of the Elders of Zion and calling for the genocide of the Jews" at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hamas_e070.pdf.

² In an article written for Hamas' *Al-Risala* (March 13, 2008), he used the term "Holocaust" (*mahraqa*, "burning" in Arabic) to justify terrorist attacks against the Jews and genocide. He said that "burning" would be the fate of the Jews, and that one of the signs was the suicide bombing attack in Mercaz HaRav Yeshiva in Jerusalem (March 6, 2008).

iv) **Mustafa Sawaf**, editor of Hamas' *Felvesteen*, wrote an editorial (September 1) entitled "Keep the agency from its evil path," slamming UNRWA's intention to teach the Holocaust. He claimed that UNRWA was attempting to brainwash the younger generation in the Gaza Strip and to "prettify the image of the murderous, criminal Jews." He claimed that the Jews exaggerated the dimensions of the Holocaust and the Israel's crimes against the Palestinians were worse than the Holocaust.

v) After a meeting of the Hamas representatives of the Palestinian Legislative Council and the Minister of the Education of the Hamas de-facto administration, **Jamila Al-Shanti** said that "Talk about the Holocaust and the execution of the Jews contradicts and is against our culture, our principles, our traditions, values, heritage and religion" (*Washington Post*, September 2, 2009).

vi) The Hamas-affiliated Popular Committees for Refugee Affairs denounced UNRWA and its head, John Ging, **claiming that the Holocaust had not yet been scientifically proven and that teaching it was liable to cause students to identify with the Jews**. Members of the committee absolute refused to have their children "**learn the lie invented by the Zionists**" (Filastin al-'An website, August 30, 2009). According to the Committees, "the Holocaust was not real and outstanding Western scholars have proved that" (PalToday website, August 30, 2009).

vii) Some of the children's parents also opposed teaching the Holocaust. For example, one parent whose child attends an UNRWA school, said "I don't want them teaching my children Jewish lies. It will just be Zionist propaganda," (AP, August 31, 2009).

7. In response, UNRWA sources said that no decision had yet been made. **Adnan Abu Hasneh**, UNRWA spokesman, said that **there was no mention of the Holocaust in the current curriculum**, but he refused to say whether that was about to change (Reuters, August 30, 2009).³ **Karen Abu Ziyad**, UNRWA's commissioner general, said that the study unit for human rights was currently being developed and so far it was only in draft form. She added that in any case before it was taught it would be examined by various groups for reactions. UNRWA spokesman **Chris Guinness** said that a final decision had not yet been made (AP, August 31, 2009).

Other disputed educational issues

8. An article in Hamas' daily *Felvesteen* recently by Muhammad al-Dalou dealt with other educational issued in dispute between Hamas and UNRWA (*Felvesteen*, August 31, 2009) :

³ In fact, the Palestinian Authority curriculum in Judea and Samaria does not include the Holocaust.

i) **Teaching human rights and ignoring the role of the “resistance” [i.e., terrorism]:** One of UNRWA’s school supervisors, who asked to remain anonymous, attacked UNRWA for integrating material about human rights into the curriculum on the basis of a UN General Assembly resolution passed last year. According to the supervisor, “the material is good but problematic,” because on the one hand it stressed the rights the Palestinians do not have, but on the other it stresses that every conflict “can be resolved by dialogue” and ignores the role of the “resistance” [i.e., terrorism] in the liberation [of Palestine].

ii) **Sending student delegations from the Gaza Strip to the United States and other Western countries:** The principal of one of the UNRWA schools, who also asked to remain anonymous, attacked UNRWA’s educational policy of the last few years for what he called “transmitting Zionist content to the [Palestinian] students.” He also attacked UNRWA for sending 46 students aged 14-16 to the United States and other Western countries including Holland, Germany and France as a reward for excelling in human rights studies. He claimed that the students were in the throes of adolescence and a trip abroad might, he said, negatively influence their behavior. *Felesteen* interviewed an UNRWA school teacher who expressed “deep worry” over sending 8th grade students abroad, and was particularly angry over the fact that the human rights studies emphasized the tolerance Palestinians had to show Israelis, “that is, the victim for the murderer, and we cannot allow that.”

9. **Yussef Ibrahim**, Under Secretary for Education in the Hamas de-facto administration, told a *Felesteen* correspondent that a number of weeks ago his ministry met with **Mahmoud al-Hamdiyyat**, director of UNRWA’s education department in the Gaza Strip. They agreed to present a number of disputed issues to educational methodology experts before Hamas’ Ministry of Education made its final decision. He said that al-Hamdiyyat had promised him that “no subject dealing with human rights would include expressions or contents which might adversely affect Palestinian identity, and [what the students studied] would not contradict the interests of the Palestinian people” [i.e., as determined by Hamas]. Yussef Ibrahim complained that there was no official supervision of UNRWA’s educational system, which **had to function on the basis of what was known legally as “the policy of the host nation [i.e., the Hamas de-facto administration].”** He said that his ministry “is striving to play an important part in this issue” (*Felesteen*, August 31, 2009).

Conclusions

10. The affair of Holocaust studies in UNRWA schools is another aspect of the campaign Hamas is waging in the Gaza Strip to control the nature of its educational system. Hamas seeks **complete and exclusive control** over education, which will enable it to inculcate students with radical Islamic ideology according to its political perception, into which are integrated hatred for Israel and the West and terrorism against Israel [“the resistance”] until the “liberation” of Palestine. Hamas regards UNRWA as its main competitor in the education and indoctrination of the younger generation. While Hamas controls the educational system in the Gaza Strip, UNRWA still has considerable advantages, relatively speaking, in its far greater financial and logistic resources and its broad network of teachers and schools.

11. The affair of Holocaust studies is but one link in the chain of formal and informal Gazan educational issues in dispute between Hamas and UNRWA. During the summer of 2009 Hamas waged an aggressive mudslinging campaign against UNRWA and its chief, John Ging, both represented as corrupting the morals of Palestinian youth.⁴ Hamas spokesmen, especially **Yunes al-Astal**, member of the Hamas faction in the Palestinian Legislative Council, claimed that the UNRWA summer camps were coeducational, that the campers used drugs, learned how to dance and even engaged in activities intended to foster reconciliation between the Palestinians and Israel. The Hamas-affiliated Filastin al-'An website even claimed that the UNRWA camps spread disease (Filastin al-'An website, July 16, 2009). Hamas itself operated a broad network of summer camps whose activities included radical Islamic indoctrination and semi-military training.⁵

12. Omitting Holocaust studies from the Palestinian curriculum is not only Hamas policy, but **also the policy of the Palestinian Authority**. Following the Hamas attack on UNRWA a senior member of the Palestinian Authority Ministry of Education noted that the Holocaust was not taught in PA schools. Teachers in the Palestinian school networks said they had no guidelines from the PA regarding teaching the Holocaust (AP, August 31, 2009). In PA textbooks, including those printed between 2005 and 2007, there is no mention of the Holocaust of the Jewish people in connection with the Second World War. In an exceptional case in one book there was a vague reference to “what the Nazis did to the Jews,” but it was part of an attempt to explain “why there are those in Europe who are sympathetic to Israel.”⁶

⁴ For further information see our August 16, 2009 bulletin “Hamas summer camps in the Gaza Strip integrate social activities with political and Islamic indoctrination and semi-military training” at http://www.terrorism-info.org.il/malam_multimedia/English/eng_n/pdf/hamas_e078.pdf.

⁵ Ibid., Footnote 4.

⁶ *Qadaya Mu'asara, Modern Issues*, 11th grade book, p. 41.