



March 19, 2017

Head of Hamas' Department of Refugee Affairs Warns of Cuts in American and International Support for UNRWA and Opposes Firing UNRWA Employees Who Belong to Hamas



Dr. Issam Adwan, head of Hamas' department of refugee affairs (website of Hamas' department of refugee affairs, March 15, 2017).

Overview

1. In February 2017 elections were held for Hamas' new political bureau in the Gaza Strip, its highest leadership body in Gaza. Of the 15 members elected, **two were senior UNRWA employees: Dr. Suhail al-Hindi**, chairman of the UNRWA staff union in Gaza and principal of an UNRWA school; and an engineer named **Muhammad al-Jamassi**, head of UNRWA's engineering department for the refugee camps in the central Gaza Strip. A number of days after their election was exposed in the Palestinian and Israeli media, UNRWA announced Dr. Suhail al-Hindi's suspension.
2. The election of two senior UNRWA employees to the new Hamas leadership led Israel to engage in extensive political and media activity with the United States and other countries that fund the agency. The Israeli media reported that on March 8, while Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman visited the United States, he met with Rex Tillerson, the American secretary of state. Lieberman asked that the United States reevaluate its policies regarding the UN's Human Rights Council and UNRWA.

According to the Israeli media, Lieberman said in a statement that both agencies did not fulfill their assigned roles (Haaretz, March 9, 2017). According to a report in the American media, Lieberman asked Tillerson "to review the management and criteria of UNRWA" (JTA.org, Washington, March 6, 2017).



Israeli Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman meets with American Secretary of State Rex Tillerson in Washington (Twitter account of the American state department, March 8, 2017).

Hamas' Response

3. Hamas rushed to respond to reports of Defense Minister Lieberman's appeal to the American secretary of state. Its response was **voiced by Issam Adwan, chairman of Hamas' department of refugee affairs**, in an interview with the Hamas organ al-Risalah. The main points were (alresala.net, March 9, 2017):

a. **A warning of dire consequences resulting from negative actions against support for UNRWA. He said that Lieberman was working with Tillerson to stop America's funding for UNRWA.** He claimed any cut in support for UNRWA would have a negative influence on the services received by the Palestinian refugees. It would, he said, **"cause millions of refugees to demand their rights, creating new regional crises."**

b. **The United States did not have the authority to stop aid to UNRWA.** That was because **UNRWA operated under a mandate from the UN**, not the United States or Israel. Issam Adwan said the United States should instead increase its aid to UNRWA because of the current difficult circumstances [in the Gaza Strip], instead of stopping it as Israel wanted. He appealed to UNRWA not to surrender to pressure and to continue its humanitarian work.

c. It was the right of all the Palestinians who worked for UNRWA to engage in "political activity," that is, to belong to Hamas. He represented affiliation with Hamas [a terrorist organization] as "political activity." He said it was unthinkable that a Palestinian would give up his struggle for advancing the Palestinian cause because of his job at UNRWA. He denied Hamas had plans to infiltrate the international institutions operating in the Gaza Strip. However, he emphasized that UNRWA could not fire employees affiliated with Hamas unless it classified them [on the basis of discrimination], which could not be implemented.



Statements made by Issam Adwan reported in Hamas' al-Risalah (alresala.net, March 9, 2017).

4. It was not the first power struggle between UNRWA and Hamas over the issue of UNRWA employees' affiliation with Hamas. Hamas' claim that affiliation with it constitutes political activity is also not new. For example:

A. In **April 2009** John Ging, the director of UNRWA operations in Gaza, threatened to fire UNRWA employees who were Hamas members after Hamas' victory in the elections for the UNRWA staff union (held on March 25, 2009). In an article published in the Hamas organ Felesteen, Hamas called for Ging to be fired, claiming that firing UNRWA workers because of "political affiliation" meant firing all of them, because **"they are all men of the resistance, in all its forms."** The article said not only UNRWA staff belonged to "political organizations" and parties, but the overwhelming majority of the students. Therefore UNRWA

employees could not be fired on grounds of "political affiliation" (article by Mustafa al-Sawaf in Hamas' Felesteen, April 16, 2009).¹

B. In **September 2001** UNRWA suspended Suhail al-Hindi, a teacher in a UNRWA school, for three months because he met with Ismail Haniyeh as part of his Hamas activities. His suspension led Hamas to exert pressures on UNRWA to have him reinstated. Those pressures included protests held by the de facto Hamas administration, which closed down 243 UNRWA schools with 220,000 students. In the end Suhail al-Hindi was reinstated, and remained in his position (until the current suspension).²



September 2011: Suhail al-Hindi participates in a demonstration held by UNRWA staff in front of the agency's offices in Gaza City to protest the decision to suspend him because of his affiliation with Hamas (YouTube, September 11, 2017).

¹ For further information, see the April 28, 2009 bulletin, "Hamas lashes out against the UNRWA chief in the Gaza Strip."

² For further information, see the February 27, 2017 bulletin, " 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."

5. **In conclusion**, electing two senior UNRWA employees to Hamas' political bureau in the Gaza Strip again brought to light the issue of the affiliation of the agency's staff with Hamas. It was another stage in the power struggles between Hamas and UNRWA which have been ongoing for several years. **So far UNRWA has not been successful** in imposing its policy of forbidding employees to belong to Hamas and other terrorist organizations. The way the previous power struggles ended illustrated Hamas' power among UNRWA employees and the agency's difficulties in enforcing its policies on Hamas, which is the sovereign power in the Gaza Strip. **Hamas has shown itself to be determined to preserve its control over the UNRWA staff as an important tool for controlling the educational system in the Gaza Strip and for fostering the next generation of operatives, as well as gaining access to UNRWA resources.** In principle, Hamas represents the affiliation of UNRWA employees as legitimate "political activity" (despite the fact that the United States, which is the major donor of funds to UNRWA,³ regards Hamas as a terrorist organization in every respect).

³ The main contributors to UNRWA: the United States of America, \$380,593,116, European Commission, \$136,751,943, United Kingdom, \$99,602,875... (UNRWA website, December 31, 2015)