



April 2, 2017

Hamas Strongly Attacks UNRWA for Its Intention to Introduce Changes in the Curriculum of Its Elementary Schools



Hashtag protesting UNRWA's intention to change the curriculum of its schools in the Gaza Strip. The map shows the land of Israel covered with a Palestinian flag, indicating that it all belongs to the Palestinians, with no mention of Israel. The Arabic reads, "#our-identity-remains #no-to-erasing-our-national-identity- in-UNRWA-schools" (Facebook page of the refugees' popular committee in the al-Bureij refugee camp, March 27, 2017).

Overview

1. Hamas recently attacked UNRWA for its intention to introduce changes in the curriculum of the lower grades of elementary schools in the Gaza Strip operated by the agency. Hamas claimed the proposed changes served Israel and were intended to have a negative effect on the national identity of young Palestinians. In several refugee camps, "popular" protests were held against UNRWA. One was also held near UNRWA headquarters in the Gaza Strip during events marking Land Day (March 30, 2017).
2. During the protest near UNRWA headquarters calls were heard to reinstate Dr. Suhail al-Hindi, suspended by UNRWA after he was elected to Hamas' new political bureau in the Gaza Strip. Sabri Sidam, Palestinian minister of education, and the Palestinian ministry of education in Ramallah stated their objection to any change UNRWA might make in its curriculum. They said that in accordance with international law, UNRWA had to use the curriculum of the host country [in this case, of the Palestinian Authority (PA)].

3. In the past UNRWA tried several times to introduce changes in the curriculum of its schools, but found that **its ability to do so was extremely limited**. In ITIC assessment there were three reasons for the difficulties: one, **Hamas is sovereign in the Gaza Strip**, controls the entire educational system, **and its position vis-à-vis UNRWA is strong**; two, Hamas' rejection of changes in textbooks is **supported by the PA's ministry of education**; and three, informal education is in the hands of **teachers and school principals, most of whom support Hamas**, and they can be expected to undermine any change unacceptable to Hamas.¹

4. The PA textbooks used in the schools in the Gaza Strip indoctrinate the children with the fundamental Palestinian narrative of hatred for Israel, refusal to accept its existence, and adherence to the so-called "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees.² In addition, the **Gaza Strip's informal education, which is provided by teachers and school principals affiliated with Hamas, indoctrinates school children with Hamas' radical Islamist ideology and permits semi-military training within the schools.**

Hamas Attacks UNRWA Proposed Change to Curriculum

5. Hamas recently launched **a campaign against UNRWA in light of its intention to change the curriculum in its schools:**

A. **Kamal Abu Aoun, head of the education and culture department (of Hamas' ministry of education in the Gaza Strip), met in Gaza with Farid Abu 'Athra, UNRWA chief field education program in the Gaza Strip.** Abu Aoun expressed his ministry's **opposition to any change in UNRWA's curriculum**. A change, he said, would harm the Palestinians' "national principles" and "social values." He said that any change in the Palestinian curriculum **had to be carried out by authorized individuals in the [PA] ministry of education** (Facebook page of the ministry of education in the Gaza Strip, March 28, 2017)

B. **Yousif Hamduna, secretary of the UNRWA employees' union in the Gaza Strip** (which is under Hamas control), warned UNRWA not to change the curriculum in the schools run by the agency. He said [Palestinian] **teachers would not**

¹ **Dr. Suhail al-Hindi**, who heads the union, was suspended by UNRWA after he was elected to Hamas' new political bureau in the Gaza Strip. He was the principal of an UNRWA boys' elementary school and head of the UNRWA employees' union in the Gaza Strip, an organization under the control of Hamas.

² For example, see the April 20, 2016 bulletin, "About the Report of the Mideast Freedom Forum Study of Palestinian Authority Textbooks."

implement the changes. He said **UNRWA intended to make 52 changes** to its curriculum without first consulting any authorized official. He said UNRWA was thereby **exceeding its authority because the PA and its ministry of education were the only bodies qualified to make changes** (QudsN, March 25, 2017)

6. Hamas' organ al-Risalah recently published an article by **Wassam Afifa**³ **attacking the new curriculum formulated by UNRWA's educational department for the first four grades of its schools.** Although the curriculum had initially been approved in Gaza and the West Bank, **he accused UNRWA of making changes that "smelled of Israel" and were intended to "erase the national identity of young Palestinians."** **He accused UNRWA of being a pawn in the hands of the Israeli Coordinator of Government Activities in the Territories.** He ended by saying, "If UNRWA is determined to continue along that path, **it has to be treated as a biased political entity and not as an international aid organization**" (alresalah.net, March 16, 2017).

7. The following are some of UNRWA's alleged proposed curriculum changes which angered Wassam Afifa:

a. **Removal of maps of Palestine from textbooks** and no mention of Jerusalem as the capital of Palestine.

b. **No mention of cities in Israel which were "occupied" by Israel in 1948:** "...In describing the weather and climate in a city like Tiberias, Tiberias was replaced by Gaza, and Safed was replaced by Nablus. Thus we are prevented from even mentioning our cities occupied [by Israel] since 1948. [That is] an outrageous blow to our [Palestinian] principles" **[Note:** Hamas regards Tiberias and Safed as "occupied Palestinian cities" and for Hamas, Israel has no right to exist].

c. **Coeducational education:** showing boys and girls together dancing the *debka* [a Middle Eastern folk dance] in lessons about Palestinian traditions.

d. **No use of the word "Palestine" as a didactic measure to teach the letter "t."** To teach the letter in the first grade, the word *yaqtin* (pumpkin) is used instead of "Palestine" (leading Wassam Afifa to write, "UNRWA turns Palestine into a pumpkin").

³ **Wassam Afifa** is a Palestinian journalist and political commentator from the Gaza Strip who writes for Hamas' organ al-Risalah. He studied journalism at the Islamic University in Gaza City.

e. **No glorification of Palestinian prisoners:** a play about Palestinian townsmen welcoming released prisoners was replaced with "a fairy tale about people welcoming a prince."

f. **Improving the image of Israel:** UNRWA removed the topic of "rebuilding a home which the occupation [i.e., Israel] destroyed in the West Bank and Jerusalem."



Article by Wassam Afifa in a Hamas organ attacking the new UNRWA curriculum. It is entitled "UNRWA turns Palestine into a pumpkin" (alresalah.net, March 16, 2017).

Position of the Palestinian Authority

8. Hamas' strong opposition to changes in UNRWA's curriculum was **supported by Sabri Sidam, minister of education in the Palestinian national consensus government**. He said the **PA and his ministry would not allow UNRWA to introduce changes in the curriculum** (al-Araby al-Jadeed, March 29, 2017).

9. An Arabic news website posted statements from the Palestinian ministry of education and Sabri Sidam on UNRWA's intention to make changes (124news, March 25, 2017).

a. **The Palestinian ministry of education (in Ramallah) expressed objections to any change in the Palestinian curriculum**. According to the statement, in accordance with international law, **UNRWA was required to implement the curriculum of the host country**, and [the Palestinian ministry of education] intended to take steps to punish anyone who tried to change or "fool with" the curriculum. According to the statement, **"any attempt to change the**

curriculum would be considered aggression against Palestine and as obliterating the national identity."

b. **Sabri Sidam, the Palestinian minister of education**, said that **"the ministry [of education] will not accept change [or] distortion of the curriculum by an institution, whether it be UNRWA or any other."** He stressed his adherence to the Palestinian curriculum as received from the ministry of education, and said he would not allow UNRWA to make any changes (124news, March 25, 2017).



Sabri Sidam, Palestinian minister of education (Facebook page of Sabri Sidam, September 4, 2015)

10. Even the PA supported Hamas' strong objection to the changes UNRWA intended to make, apparently because it is trying to keep a low public profile in the argument between Hamas and UNRWA over the issue. The positions of the minister of education and the ministry did not appear on Sabri Sidam's Facebook page or the official website of the ministry of education, and there was no broad media coverage. There were also no "popular" protests against UNRWA in Judea and Samaria as there were in the Gaza Strip. On the other hand, Sabri Sidam, the Palestinian minister of education, is trying to draw attention to Israel ⁴.

⁴ On March 26, 2017, **Sabri Sidam** met with **Robert Piper**, deputy special coordinator for the Middle East peace process and humanitarian coordinator for the occupied Palestinian territories. He called on the UN to appoint an ad hoc committee to examine incitement in the Israeli curriculum. It was in response for Israel's claims that the Palestinian curricula contain anti-Israeli incitement (Dunia al-Watan, March 28, 2017).

Hamas-Inspired "Popular" Protests in the Gaza Strip

11. In the wake of the news of UNRWA's intention to introduce changes in the school curriculum, **"popular" protests have been held in the Gaza Strip, with no end in sight.** In ITIC assessment **they are not spontaneous but rather organized by Hamas, even though Hamas remains in the background.** The UNRWA employees' union, which is under Hamas control, held a protest demonstration in front of **UNRWA's main offices in Gaza City.** The demonstration, held on Land Day, was attended by Dr. Suhail al-Hindi, who was suspended by UNRWA. The demonstration was also exploited to demand that UNRWA reinstate Dr. Al-Hindi to his previous position.

12. Protest demonstrations were also held in front of the offices of UNRWA's education administration **in the western part of Gaza City, the western part of Khan Yunis and the Nuseirat refugee camp.** The demonstrations were held by "refugees' popular committees," in ITIC assessment **inspired by Hamas.** Demonstrators held signs criticizing UNRWA's intention to change the curriculum and accusing it of erasing Palestinian national identity.

Pictures from the Demonstrations



Protest demonstration held by the refugees' popular committee of the al-Shati refugee camp in front of the office of UNRWA's education administration in the western part of Gaza City. The signs read "The return is a sacred right that cannot be waived," "Jerusalem is in our hearts," "Education is a red line" (Facebook page of the refugees' popular committee in the al-Shati refugee camp, March 29, 2017).



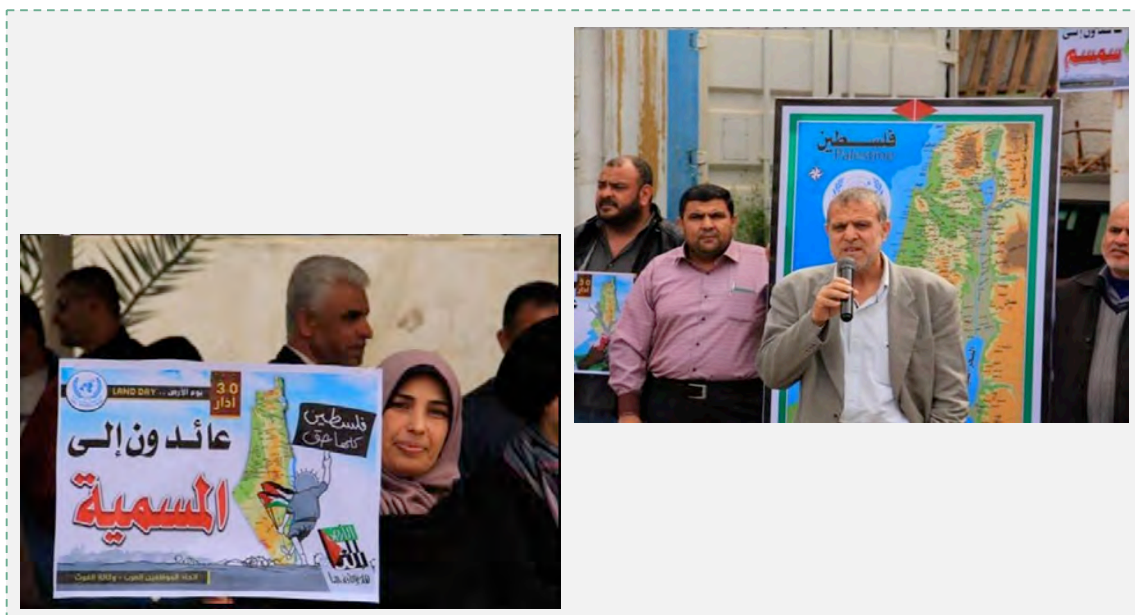
Protest demonstration in front of the offices of UNRWA's education administration in the Nuseirat refugee camp. Left: The signs read, "No to Judaizing our culture and legacy," "Our Palestinian identity is watered with the blood of shaheeds and prisoners." Right: The signs read, "Our national identity comes from our historical roots," "No and a thousand times no to changing one world of our Palestinian [teaching] methods," "It is our right to instill our national concepts in the next generations" (Facebook page of the refugees' popular committee in the al-Bureij refugee camp, March 29, 2017).



Protest demonstration in front of the offices of UNRWA's education administration in the western part of Khan Yunis. The signs read, "Jerusalem is in our hearts," "Education is a red line," "We have the right to instill national concepts in the younger generation," "Our Palestinian identity is watered with the blood of shaheeds and prisoners" (ahwal al-balad, March 21, 2017).

13. On March 30, 2017, the UNRWA employees' union held a protest demonstration in front of UNRWA's main offices in Gaza City to mark Land Day. They protested the measures taken by UNRWA against Dr. Suhail al-Hindi, the suspended head of the union, and called on UNRWA to reinstate him. In addition,

they demonstrated against the agency's intention to **"erase the national identity of the Palestinians and falsify historical Palestinian facts."** Dr. Suhail al-Hindi, head of the union and suspended UNRWA employee, **was present at the demonstration** (Facebook page of the union of Arab employees [or UNRWA], March 30, 2017).



UNRWA union members in the Gaza Strip hold protests in front of the agency's main office in Gaza City on Land Day. They hold signs and maps illustrating the concept that all the land of historical Palestine belongs to the Palestinians and demanding the so-called "right of return." Left: A demonstrator holds a map of greater "Palestine" which makes no mention of Israel. The Arabic to the left of the map reads, "[We] return to Masmiya" [a village near Gedera in the center of Israel]. The Arabic to the right reads, "[All] Palestine is the right [of the Palestinians]." Right: Dr. Suhail al-Hindi in front of a map of "greater Palestine," from which Israel is absent (Facebook page of the Arab employees' union, March 30, 2017)

Previous Hamas-UNRWA Conflicts

14. The current conflict between Hamas and UNRWA is another in a **series of arguments over the nature of the curriculum in UNRWA schools in the Gaza Strip**. The issue over principle surfaced in April 2009, when the Hamas organ Felesteen published an article by Mustafa Sawaf, the editor in chief, which severely criticized the director of UNRWA operations at the time, John Ging. He was accused of **"working to defile a conservative, clean society" through "hasty efforts to spread a culture of coeducation in UNRWA schools..."** Ging was accused of establishing "mixed" summer camps and holding "parties, music and entertainment" during what was referred to as "family day." Sawaf wrote that on family day agency employees were supposed to come with their families and organize "orgies," which were **inappropriate for a society that was Islamic, Middle Eastern, conservative and living in an atmosphere of war and destruction**" (Felesteen, April 16, 2009).



John Ging, at the time director of UNRWA operations in the Gaza Strip (UNRWA website, April 23, 2009). Hamas accused him of "trying to defile a conservative, clean society..."

15. The ideological conflict was illustrated in other ways in the past:

a. There has been a struggle over the nature of the summer camps organized by UNRWA in the Gaza Strip every year. They "compete" with the camps run by Hamas, which regards the camps as an important platform for indoctrinating children with its extremist Islamist ideology. The UNRWA camps provide sports activities and entertainment, without the paramilitary and Islamist activities that characterize the summer camps held by Hamas and other terrorist organizations. In the past Hamas activists and other Islamists accused UNRWA camps of coeducational activities and holding activities to promote Israeli-Palestinian reconciliation. Thus **in the past UNRWA camps were a target for attacks by Hamas and other extremist Islamist organizations, although in recent years the conflict seems to have died down somewhat.**



The ruins of an UNRWA summer camp burned by armed masked men. At the scene the police found a notice warning UNRWA not to continue activities that "damage children's morals" (alresalah.ps, May 24, 2010).



Bo Schack, director of UNRWA operations in the Gaza Strip, officially opens the agency's summer camps, 2016 (Felesteen, July 23, 2016). According to UNRWA, 165 thousand children attended its summer camps in 2016. The camps were another point of conflict between UNRWA on the one hand and Hamas and other extreme Islamic elements on the other, but in recent years the conflict seems to have died down somewhat.

b. **Holocaust studies in UNRWA schools:** On February 17, 2011, the committee for refugee affairs in the de facto Hamas administration said in a statement that **it would not permit UNRWA to teach about the Holocaust in the Palestinian schools in the Gaza Strip** (as enrichment material or as part of its human rights curriculum). According to the statement, UNRWA "surprised" the Palestinians with a curriculum which was "**shameful and unacceptable, by**

means of which it intended to poison the minds of our children, using methods that served no one except the occupation" (Safa, February 17, 2011). In addition, according to the statement, UNRWA's enrichment material discussed "the suffering, oppression, slaughter and ethnic cleansing of which the Jews were the victims, and represents the Jews as unfortunate, oppressed and enslaved." According to the statement, the committee for refugee affairs **had warned UNRWA in the past, saying that under no circumstances would UNRWA be allowed "to turn Palestinian schools in the Gaza Strip into a platform for the occupation...and to use UNRWA to beautify its ugly face"** (Safa, February 17, 2011).

In Conclusion

16. Hamas seeks to monopolize the education of the younger generation in the Gaza Strip. Despite the fact that UNRWA operates an educational infrastructure (donated by the West) in the refugee camps, **apparently its ability to significantly influence the curriculum, and to moderate even slightly the hatred for Israel, is extremely limited.** In ITIC assessment there are three reasons for that: **one**, Hamas is sovereign in the Gaza Strip and its position vis-à-vis UNRWA is strong; **two**, Hamas' opposition to changes in textbooks is supported by the PA and its ministry of education in Ramallah; and **three**, Hamas influences informal education because most of the teachers and school principals are Hamas supporters.