



April 24, 2017

## 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



The beginning of the announcement made by the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip about the termination of Suhail al-Hindi's employment. According to the announcement, al-Hindi "preferred to move to another role to serve his people..." (Facebook page of the UNRWA staff union, April 23, 2017)

### Suhail al-Hindi Resigns – What Next?

1. On April 22, 2017, Dr. Suhail al-Hindi, chairman of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip and principal of an UNRWA boys' elementary school, **announced he was taking early retirement**. UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness also announced that **Suhail al-Hindi was no longer employed by the agency**. Al-Hindi was forced to resign in the wake of the extensive media and political reactions to his election to Hamas' new political bureau in the Gaza Strip (**in violation of UNRWA's opposition** to its employees' affiliation with Hamas or other organizations). So far it is unclear whether al-Hindi resigned only from his union chairmanship or whether he resigned from his position as school principal as well.

2. In ITIC assessment, al-Hindi's resignation is **the result of a compromise** reached between **Hamas** (which strongly opposes the firing of UNRWA employees affiliated with the movement) and **UNRWA**. Thus his resignation was represented as his leaving UNRWA of his own accord, the term "fired" was not mentioned in the UNRWA

announcement, and the benefits he received as an UNRWA employee remained intact. The compromise brought to an end a dispute between Hamas and UNRWA that had been ongoing for two months. **However, it did not end the fundamental differences between the two, which arose again recently and have not yet been resolved.**

**a. UNRWA employment of Hamas activists:**

1) In addition to Suhail al-Hindi, **an engineer named Muhammad al-Jamassi**, who heads UNRWA's engineering department in the refugee camps of the central Gaza Strip, **was elected to Hamas new political bureau**. UNRWA was forced to deal with the problem of al-Hindi, which received much more media and political attention than al-Jamassi, but so far **it is not known if the agency tried to terminate his employment as well** (in principle, **there is no difference between the two**, both hold senior positions in Hamas and UNRWA).



**Another Hamas activist elected to the new political bureau in the Gaza Strip is Muhammad al-Jamassi, who heads UNRWA's engineering department in the refugee camps in the central Gaza Strip (website of the Hamas faction in the Palestinian Legislative Council, May 20, 2010; Haber Press, January 21, 2017).**

2) In addition to al-Hindi and al-Jamassi, members of Hamas' political bureau, **there are many Hamas activists and supporters working for UNRWA in the Gaza Strip, including teachers and school principals**, who belong to the Hamas-controlled UNRWA staff union. In April 2009 John Ging, head of UNRWA in the Gaza Strip, threatened to fire UNRWA

employees affiliated with Hamas after Hamas won the UNRWA staff union elections. However, Hamas opposed strongly the move and exerted pressure on UNRWA. **The end result was that Hamas members were not fired and the movement has retained control of the union to this day.**

**b. Difficulties experienced by UNRWA in its effort to make changes in the curriculum in its schools:**

1) **Hamas recently attacked UNRWA over its intention to make changes in the curriculum of its elementary schools in the Gaza Strip.**<sup>1</sup> Palestinian Authority (PA) textbooks are used in UNRWA elementary schools in Gaza. They inculcate school children with **Hamas' ideology of hatred for Israel, the struggle against it, refusal to accept Israel's existence and insistence on the so-called "right of return" of the Palestinian refugees.**

2) UNRWA recently tried, and not for the first time, to change the content of the textbooks but met with **strong opposition from Hamas**. Apparently UNRWA's ability to substantially change the anti-Israel hatred taught in its school is seriously limited. There are various reasons, including Hamas' sovereignty in the Gaza Strip and its control over the educational system; the PA's opposition to changing its textbooks; the informal educational system in the Gaza Strip's schools, including those run by UNRWA, which for the most part are in the hands of teachers and school principals who support Hamas.

3. For information about Suhail al-Hindi's resignation and the reasons behind it, see the following Appendix.

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<sup>1</sup> See the April 2, 2017 bulletin, "Hamas Strongly Attacks UNRWA for Its Intention to Introduce Changes in the Curriculum of Its Elementary Schools."

## Appendix

### Suhail al-Hindi's Resignation

1. **Suhail al-Hindi**, chairman of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip,<sup>2</sup> told the Dunia al-Watan website that **he was resigning from UNRWA** (Dunia al-Watan, April 22, 2017). Interviewed by the Samaa news agency, he said **he was taking early retirement** (Samaa News, April 22, 2017). A Hamas-affiliated website reported that **UNRWA had suggested two alternatives to al-Hindi: he could either quit, and thereby retain his benefits as an UNRWA employee, or he could be fired** (Palinfo, April 22, 2017). According to **Yusuf Hamduna**, secretary of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip, "al-Hindi preferred to move to another role [to serve] the interests of the refugees in the Gaza Strip, and **therefore decided quit his job to be able to serve [the Palestinian] people elsewhere**" (Dunia al-Watan, April 22, 2017).

2. On April 22, 2017, **UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness** said in an announcement that "**Suhail al-Hindi is no longer employed by UNRWA.**" He refused to say whether al-Hindi had resigned or been fired, noting that UNRWA did not discuss the terms of departure of individual staff members (AP, April 22, 2017).

3. On April 23, 2017, the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip issued an announcement headed "Announcement regarding commitment and loyalty. Dr. Suhail al-Hindi...27 years of giving and preserving his principles..." Its main points were the following:

a. **Criticism of UNRWA's Advisory Committee**, which, according to the announcement, hurt the representatives of UNRWA employees and denied them their rights. However, the UNRWA staff union remained strong and unbroken, and acted without fear, claimed the announcement.

b. **Praise for Suhail al-Hindi's achievements** and his sacrifices for the employees' struggle. His achievements of the past year included "reducing the number of students from 50 per class, as demanded by UNRWA, to 39; hiring 400 new teachers at the beginning of the school year; **opposition to including the Holocaust in textbooks;**<sup>3</sup> **opposition to removing "the map of Palestine"**

<sup>2</sup> The union's official Arabic name is "The union of Arab employees."

<sup>3</sup> On February 17, 2017, the committee for refugee affairs of the Hamas government in the Gaza Strip said in a statement that it would not permit UNRWA to teach about the Holocaust in its schools in the Gaza Strip. According to the statement, UNRWA's program for teaching the Holocaust was "disgraceful and unacceptable, and UNRWA planned to use it to poisoning the minds of our children" (Safa, date, 2017).

from textbooks;<sup>4</sup> his struggle against "erasing the national identity" from textbooks<sup>5</sup> and improving the employment conditions of the teachers.

c. **A possible hint at al-Hindi's future activity in the ranks of Hamas:** According to the announcement, al-Hindi "preferred to move to another role to serve his people. Thus he will be able to make the truth heard and **to stand on the stages of power** [i.e., in the corridors of power] to strengthen his people's position" (**perhaps a reference to his future activities in Hamas' political bureau**).

4. So far, it is not clear if al-Hindi resigned only from his position as chairman of the UNRWA staff union or if he also resigned from his position as principal of an UNRWA boys' elementary school. The announcement issued by the UNRWA spokesman stating that al-Hindi was no longer employed by UNRWA may mean he is no longer employed as a school principal, but that was not specifically stated. **Yusuf Hamduna**, secretary of the UNRWA staff union, said al-Hindi's replacement had been chosen (apparently his replacement as head of the UNRWA staff union). The post would be filled by **Amir al-Mes'hal**, who worked in UNRWA's service sector (Palinfo, April 22, 2017). However, so far, it is unknown whether anyone has been named to replace al-Hindi as principal of the UNRWA school.

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<sup>4</sup> The maps in question are maps of Palestine with no mention of Israel, and in many instances, of Israel cities and towns. Hamas uses maps of "greater Palestine" to inculcate school children and the public at large with negating the existence of Israel. It can be assumed that Hamas would strongly oppose any attempt to remove them from textbooks.

<sup>5</sup> The struggle in question was recently waged by Hamas because it objected to UNRWA's intention to change the curriculum in its elementary schools in the Gaza Strip. Hamas represented the changes as an attempt to erase the Palestinian national identity. Hamas then initiated anti-UNRWA protests, which were attended by Suhail al-Hindi.



**Suhail al-Hindi (second from right) replaced by Amir al-Mes'hal (center) as head of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip (Facebook page of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip, April 23, 2017).**

**5. Amir Ibrahim Abd al-Rahman al-Mes'hal** was born in Gaza in 1963 to a family of refugees from the village of al-Jura (near Ashqelon). He has two degrees in accounting from the Islamic University in Gaza. Joining UNRWA in 1994, he worked in the agency's accounting department in Gaza, and became a member of the UNRWA staff union in 2003. Between 2001 and 2011 he was **head of UNRWA's public service sector** (website of the UNRWA staff union). **Apparently, he is a professional bureaucrat with no particular political identity, unlike Suhail al-Hindi.** However, in all probability **Hamas will work behind the scenes to preserve its control of the union and use it when necessary to promote its interests.**



Amir al-Mes'hal, new chairman of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip (al-Aqsa TV, May 16, 2011).

## The Events Leading up to Suhail al-Hindi's Resignation

6. **Suhail al-Hindi was forced to resign after media exposure and political protests were held when it became known that he had been elected to Hamas' new political bureau.** The chain of events was the following:

- a. Suhail al-Hindi served as chairman of the UNRWA staff union in the Gaza Strip, **controlled by Hamas**, and was also principle of an UNRWA boys' elementary school. **In the middle of February 2017 the Palestinian media reported he was one of the new members elected to Hamas' political bureau.** Israeli publications pointed to the fact that he was also a senior UNRWA employee.
- b. The public exposure of al-Hindi's double role as both a senior Hamas figure and a senior UNRWA employee made difficulties for UNRWA. **In the past UNRWA had rejected its employees' affiliation with Hamas or other organizations, but did not enforce its position.** In an attempt to minimize the problem, **al-Hindi strongly denied he had been elected to Hamas' political bureau,** and even threatened to sue those who had reported his election.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See the February 23, 2017 bulletin, "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."

c. **UNRWA's initial reaction** to revelation of al-Hindi's election (February 23, 2017) was that an internal investigation had not proved the allegations against him. **However, later on UNRWA spokesman Chris Guinness announced al-Hindi had been suspended.** He said that following an independent internal investigation, during which "substantial information" had been presented from several sources, on February 26, 2017, UNRWA had decided to suspend al-Hindi until the investigation could be completed.

7. In the two months between UNRWA's announcement and his resignation, **al-Hindi participated in "popular" protests organized by Hamas against UNRWA** because of the agency's intention to make changes in the curriculum in the lower grades of its schools in the Gaza Strip. Calls to reinstate Suhail al-Hindi were also heard at the protests.

8. In ITIC assessment, during the two months of al-Hindi's suspension **Hamas and UNRWA held talks behind the scenes.** Hamas publicly rejected UNRWA's right to fire employees affiliated with the movement, claiming it was "the right of every Palestinian working for UNRWA to engage in political activity."<sup>7</sup> Apparently UNRWA, on the other hand, found it difficult to continue employing al-Hindi in view of the media coverage the affair had received, which apparently led to its being subjected to political pressure. In ITIC assessment, **the solution agreed upon by UNRWA and Hamas was to have al-Hindi resign "of his own accord," keeping the benefits to which UNRWA employees are entitled (allowing him to leave with respect and keeping him from being fired).**

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<sup>7</sup> See the April 2, 2017 bulletin, "Hamas Strongly Attacks UNRWA for Its Intention to Introduce Changes in the Curriculum of Its Elementary Schools."