Hamas endorsement of UNRWA elections underscores the agency’s inherent flaws

June 14, 2019

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JNS.org

<https://www.jns.org/hamas-endorsement-of-unrwa-education-elections-underscores-the-agencys-inherent-flaws/>

Following the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine (UNRWA) union elections in Gaza on April 24 and the publishing of the results mid-May, various terror groups, including the Islamic Jihad, Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine and Hamas, have endorsed the new leadership of UNRWA’s union of teachers and administrators.

According to David Bedein, director of the Israel Resource News Agency and Center for Near East Policy Research, while the endorsement is no surprise for an agency that was “effectively taken over” by Hamas 18 years ago, the news further underscores the problematic education that UNRWA provides—an indoctrination and brainwashing that is “beyond the imagination.”

UNRWA, like Hamas, Bedein told JNS, is “run on one principle”—namely, “the so-called ‘right of return’ of the Palestinian people to the land by force of arms.”

“Palestinian ideas about the *nakba* (“catastrophe” in Arabic, referring to the exodus of Palestinians upon the establishment of the State of Israel in 1948) and ‘right of return’ are not a nostalgic issue,” said Bedein. Rather, he said they are current subjects of the Palestinian curriculum in UNRWA schools, resulting in a population raised to yearn for a violent takeover of Israel.

School textbooks from the last two to three years, which Bedein received from the Palestinian Ministry of Education, “show pictures and portrayals of people who have murdered Jews.”

In school, he said, the children sit in groups according to where their families lived 70 years ago. “They’ll say, ‘I’m from Jaffa, Ashdod or Beersheva, and I’m going back,’ ” reported Bedein, “but they don’t realize that Jaffa, Ashdod and Beersheva are full of Israeli homes.”

‘Political cells for terror groups’

The overlap between faculty at UNRWA schools and members of terrorist organizations is also at issue. “Teachers and administrators at UNRWA schools use the educational platform as a springboard for terrorist ideologies and incitement,” said Asaf Romirowsky, executive director of Scholars for Peace in the Middle East, a senior non-resident fellow at the BESA Center and a Fellow at the Middle East Forum.

During the last operations into Gaza in 2008, 2012 and 2014, Romirowsky maintained that it was “set up by design” that UNRWA schools were used as launching pads to fire rockets with the clear intention that Israel would fire back and then say “Israel is clearly targeting schools.” The education a student receives at an UNRWA schools is “analogous to Hamas education,” he told JNS, adding that school unions that have become political cells for terror groups.

Their ultimate goal, said Romirowsky, is for millions of Palestinian refugees to flood the State of Israel, replacing it by a process of demographics that pushes the nation out of existence.

Clearly, UNRWA does not “set up individuals in a way that would serve statehood and recognition of Israel,” said Romirowsky.

For this reason, in 2018, the U.S. State Department withheld funding for UNRWA, citing that it was “irredeemably flawed” and has “perpetuated and exacerbated the refugee crisis.”

Indeed, the number of Palestinian refugees that the agency has served began with about 700,000 Palestinians after the 1948 establishment of the State of Israel. However, today, the agency claims there are about 5 million Palestinian refugees worldwide, which include the original refugees of 1948, in addition to all of their descendants.

According to Romirowsky, the lineage aspect within UNRWA’s definition of Palestinian refugees is unfounded. “In contrast other refugee organizations in the UNHCR, rather than decreasing the number of refugees, they are increasing the number of refugees.”

While UNRWA says it will end its mandate with the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Romirowsky posed that the agency itself is the “one thing preventing the resolution.”

Historically, the United States was the biggest single donor to UNRWA, representing more than a third of UNRWA’s annual budget, nearly $400 million. Without the U.S. funding, the Arab world has made up the deficit, doubling their donations to UNRWA.

Bedein called on other U.N. member states to follow American’s lead and pull their funding from UNRWA until six conditions are met: removing UNRWA curriculum that incorporates jihad, martyrdom and “right of return” by force of arms; cease paramilitary training in the schools; dismiss terror-affiliated employees; cancel their contract with their youth ambassador and singer Mohammad Assaf, who encourages violence in his performances; request an audit of donor funds that flow to UNRWA to prevent cash flow to terror groups; and introduce new UNHCR standards to UNRWA to advance the resettlement of Arab refugees.

In September, Bedein will present these conditions in the United Nations annual General Assembly meeting in New York.

“This is an issue that anyone left, right or center can jump onto if you truly care about the Palestinians, who are being kept hostage in refugee camps under false pretenses of a ‘right of return’ from 1948,” he said.

Romirowsky similarly said, “While UNRWA claims to take care of welfare-management issues related to Palestinian society and refugees at large, what they have actually done is exacerbated the refugee issue. The issues of terrorism and incitement are symptoms of larger problem we’ve created. Instead of resettlement and repatriation within refugee populations, the unique definitions and infrastructures put in place maintain the cycle.”

If the Palestinian Authority really wanted a state, Romirowsky said, they would have to uncouple Palestinian identity from ‘refugeehood.’ Additionally, as the largest employer of Palestinians, the 30,000 UNRWA employees could become civil servants of the future state rather than their current role, acting as a “shadow government” to the Palestinian Authority.