

U.N. Agency in Gaza Fought Hamas Infiltration; Not Hard Enough, Israel Says

The main U.N. agency in Gaza said it has long investigated claims of links, firing several employees over the years. Israel says it is a compromised organization too weak to protect itself.



By Patrick Kingsley and Ronen Bergman

Patrick Kingsley and Ronen Bergman spoke to current and former UNRWA officials, interviewed the agency's head, and visited a tunnel underneath the agency's headquarters in Gaza.

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When the United Nations launched an investigation a decade ago into whether a handful of its employees in Gaza were members of Hamas, it was not long before a senior U.N. legal officer in the territory started receiving death threats.

First there were emails, sent from anonymous accounts, according to three senior U.N. officials based in Gaza at that time.

Then came a funeral bouquet, delivered to the main U.N. compound, labeled with the legal officer's name.

Finally there was a live grenade, sent to the compound with its pin still inside, according to two of the officials.

The U.N. evacuated the legal officer, a British lawyer and former military officer, hurrying him to Jerusalem, the three people said.

Previously unreported episodes like this one, from October 2014, form part of the back story to the current crisis embroiling UNRWA, the U.N. relief group in Gaza now sheltering more than half of the enclave's population.



A school affiliated with UNRWA in Khan Younis, southern Gaza, where Palestinians took refuge in October. Samar Abu Elouf for The New York Times

Current and former UNRWA officials say that the agency has long taken seriously and investigated accusations of infiltration by Hamas, which seized power in Gaza in 2007. The agency has variously responded to tips from Israel, the United States and its own networks. It was the kind of challenge, they said, that all aid groups operating in hostile environments faced, not unique to UNRWA, which has worked in the enclave for decades.

Rather than addressing such issues in a systematic process, they dealt with them in a piecemeal way mostly in private, working with officials at the United Nations in New York. Over the years, several people who had proven Hamas links were fired or left the agency, including after the 2014 investigation, current and former officials said.

Israel has long made a broader accusation: UNRWA didn't go far enough to root out Hamas and was unwilling to clean up systematically. It has said UNRWA is a completely compromised organization that is too weak to protect against infiltration and needs to be replaced by a more neutral aid group.

Last month, Israel accused 12 UNRWA staff members of participating in the Hamas-led raid on Israel at the start of the war on Oct. 7 or in the raid's aftermath. It has also said that one in 10 UNRWA employees in Gaza are Hamas members.

These two claims — for which Israel provided some evidence to the United States, albeit not publicly — have led at least 19 foreign funders to suspend donations for the agency. The loss of funding has endangered UNRWA's existence when the majority of Gazans depend on the group for food and shelter.

UNRWA's leaders say the agency strives to ensure its 13,000 employees in Gaza uphold standards of neutrality, regularly training its staff to stay above politics and investigating those who do not. But they add that it is impossible for UNRWA — like any large organization that draws its staff from a cross-section of society — to track the private political allegiances of all its employees.



Last month, Israel accused 12 UNRWA staffers of participating in the Hamas-led raid on Israel at the start of the war on Oct. 7. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

“What we want to make sure is that our staff does not have a public political function, because that would be completely incompatible with the function of a civil servant,” Philippe Lazzarini, UNRWA’s commissioner general, said in an interview with The New York Times on Friday.

But, Mr. Lazzarini added, “Our employees are part of the social fabric of Gaza and its ecosystem. And as part of the social fabric in Gaza, you have also Hamas.”

While Mr. Lazzarini fired most of the 12 employees accused of connections to Oct. 7, he said he had not been able to personally investigate the claims, in part because of the dire situation inside Gaza, and that they had been fired without due process. A separate U.N. investigative unit based in New York is now looking into the accusations.

In Israel’s view, UNRWA should have been far more proactive in protecting its neutrality. Israelis have often said the group has done too little to stop Hamas from building military infrastructure close to its facilities, or even from using those facilities to store munitions.

To bolster that argument, the Israeli military this week led a group of international journalists, including two for The Times, to one of the many tunnels dug by Hamas underneath Gaza to house its military infrastructure.

Roughly 20 yards beneath an upscale neighborhood of Gaza City, the tunnel ran in a southeasterly direction from under an UNRWA-run school. After passing under a major road, the tunnel eventually led to a subterranean communications hub, full of servers and computer hardware, that lay directly beneath UNRWA’s sprawling headquarters in the territory.



The tour this week took journalists through an access point made by the Israeli military into a tunnel said to have been built by Hamas that ran beneath an UNRWA school.
Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

The journalists entered the tunnel through openings that had been created by the Israeli military since its invasion began in late October; before Israel captured the territory, neither the school nor the headquarters contained shafts that provided access from UNRWA facilities to the tunnel.

The Israeli military said that the tunnel was close enough to the surface that UNRWA workers should have been able to hear its construction. They also pointed to wires that led into the ground from a room inside the UNRWA compound, which they said led directly to Hamas's subterranean communications hub.

“You have to be very naïve to think that the UNRWA personnel did not know what was happening under their feet,” not least because the construction and maintenance of the tunnel would have required aboveground assistance, said Maj. Nir Dinar, a spokesman for the Israeli military who accompanied the journalists.

“But whether they knew, or whether they didn't know, it is also important to say that UNRWA, like the population in Gaza, like all of us in fact, are victims of the terrorist organization Hamas,” said Major Dinar.

The Times could not verify whether the wires, which led into the ground from a room on the lowest level of the compound, reached the subterranean servers. The tour of the tunnel was led by the military and The Times was not allowed to move freely in Gaza during the embed.



The tunnel eventually led to a communication hub that the Israeli military said was used by Hamas, directly beneath UNRWA's sprawling Gaza headquarters. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Mr. Lazzarini said Israel had not brought the claims about the tunnels to UNRWA's attention. He questioned how the agency could have been expected to know what was happening so deep beneath the ground, and noted that the tunnel network — hundreds of miles long — extended far beyond just the area beneath the UNRWA compound.

“I don't have the capacity, military expertise or technology — or even the mandate — to monitor what is underneath the city,” Mr. Lazzarini said.

More generally, he said, UNRWA had little communication with Hamas leadership, adding that he had never met Yahya Sinwar, Hamas's leader in Gaza, or his deputy.

“In any humanitarian emergency, we will deal with any nonstate actor in control of a given population, otherwise you have no access to the population,” said Mr. Lazzarini, who has worked for the U.N. and the International Committee for the Red Cross in at least a dozen countries and territories.

Interaction with Hamas “has always been on a technical nature,” he said. Meetings with the group's political leadership happen “maybe once a year. Just when we feel that something needs really to be addressed,” he said.

Aid experts are skeptical that UNRWA could ever have completely shaken off Hamas's influence because of the nature of working in an authoritarian climate.

There is “always some form of infiltration,” said Kilian Kleinschmidt, a former senior U.N. official who helped lead aid operations in several countries.

“There has always been, in every U.N. office I know, somebody who's placed somehow by the government or by the guys who were in charge, to know what's going on inside of the organization,” said Mr. Kleinschmidt.



With Israeli forces at the UNRWA compound in Gaza City. In Israel's view, UNRWA should have been far more proactive in protecting its neutrality. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Matthias Schmale, who directed UNRWA's operations in Gaza from 2017 through 2021, described forming a "pragmatic working relationship" with Hamas that was nevertheless "overwhelmed with tensions and disagreements."

During Mr. Schmale's tenure, UNRWA fired an employee who was a member of the group's military wing. And Mr. Schmale said that, after a "shouting match" with a Hamas official, he successfully persuaded the group to let UNRWA block off a tunnel that U.N. officials had discovered near one of its schools. In addition to providing shelter during wartime, UNRWA operates hundreds of schools and health centers during calmer periods and provides food aid to more than a million residents.

"When I say 'pragmatic working relationship,' it doesn't mean agreeing ideologically or justifying what they do. It means creating the space for where you work," Mr. Schmale said. "You can't just walk in as UNRWA and build schools anywhere you like," he added.

Mr. Schmale was himself forced to leave Gaza early in 2021 after a backlash from both Hamas and UNRWA's own workers over comments to an Israeli channel in which he was perceived to praise the precision of Israel's strikes on Gaza.

Israeli leaders, including Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, now want to replace UNRWA with a different agency.

But officials from UNRWA and Israel alike warn that such a change would be impossible to enact without worsening the already dire humanitarian crisis in Gaza.



In the southern Gaza Strip during a temporary truce between Israel and Hamas in November. Samar Abu Elouf for The New York Times

UNRWA has by far and away the largest pool of aid workers on the ground in Gaza. If the agency shuts down, any successor organization would be likely to simply work with the same employees, making any change cosmetic, Mr. Lazzarini said. And absent UNRWA's school system, which educates around 300,000 Gazan children, there would be no immediate way to get many students back in class, he said.

At a recent interagency planning meeting, Ghassan Alian, an Israeli general who oversees the department within the defense ministry that liaises with Palestinian leaders and aid groups like UNRWA, told fellow Israeli officers that Israel should push to dismantle the agency in the long term, according to a senior military official present at the meeting.

General Alian also warned that any effort to close the agency before the end of the war would harm not only the civilian population but also Israel's war effort, the military official said. Israel's ability to extend its invasion is partly reliant on a functional and independent aid operation for Gazan civilians, according to four officials involved in Israeli military planning.



Israeli soldiers near Gaza's coastline during the escorted tour. Sergey Ponomarev for The New York Times

Patrick Kingsley is the Jerusalem bureau chief, covering Israel and the occupied territories. He has reported from more than 40 countries, written two books and previously covered migration and the Middle East for The Guardian. More about Patrick Kingsley

Ronen Bergman is a staff writer for The New York Times Magazine, based in Tel Aviv. His latest book is "Rise and Kill First: The Secret History of Israel's Targeted Assassinations," published by Random House. More about Ronen Bergman