

Israel-Hamas war

Israel has not provided evidence to support UNRWA claims, report says

Independent review commissioned by UN says relief agency needs to improve neutrality



Israeli soldiers prepare to enter the UNRWA headquarters in Gaza City © AP

Steff Chávez in Washington YESTERDAY

An independent review commissioned by the UN has said that Israel has not substantiated allegations it made that staffers working for the body's agency for Palestinian refugees were members of terror groups.

The Jewish state has claimed publicly that “a significant number of UNRWA employees are members of terrorist organisations”, the report said, but “Israel has yet to provide supporting evidence of this”.

[Israel](#)'s allegations prompted 16 donor countries to the UN Relief and Works Agency, including the US and several EU member states, to halt a combined \$450mn in funding. While some donors such as the EU, Sweden and Canada have resumed contributions to the aid group, many including the UK and US have not.

However, the report, published on Monday, said UNRWA needed to improve its neutrality, which is considered a fundamental humanitarian obligation by the UN. The report cited instances of staff expressing political views, textbooks in UNRWA schools with “problematic content”, and staff unions threatening agency management and disrupting operations.

The report characterised the aid organisation's “neutrality challenges” as different from those of other groups “due to the magnitude of its operations, with most

personnel being locally recruited and recipients of UNRWA services.”

The UN considers UNRWA a “humanitarian lifeline” that is “pivotal in providing life-saving humanitarian aid and essential social services”, particularly healthcare and education, to [Palestinian refugees](#) in Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria and the West Bank, the report said.

The UN agency, which employs 13,000 people in Gaza, was thrown into [crisis](#) in January after Israel said it had identified a dozen Palestinian staffers at the organisation who had taken part in the October 7 attacks on the Jewish state, which killed 1,200 people, according to Israeli officials.

UNRWA ultimately said it had [fired](#) “several” employees as a result, but its [leader](#) resisted Israeli calls for him to step down. The neutrality review, which was led by former French foreign minister Catherine Colonna, was commissioned by the UN in response to the January allegations. Its remit was not to assess Israeli allegations about UNRWA employees’ participation in October 7, which is the subject of a separate investigation.

Israel on Monday rejected the review’s finding, with a foreign ministry spokesperson telling reporters that the Colonna report “ignores the severity of the problem, and offers cosmetic solutions that do not deal with the enormous scope of Hamas’s infiltration of UNRWA”. He also said more than 2,100 UNRWA workers were members of Hamas or Palestinian Islamic Jihad.

Both UN secretary-general António Guterres and UNRWA head Philippe Lazzarini have accepted the report’s findings, a spokesperson for Guterres said in a statement.

