House hears testimony on UNRWA ‘horror show,’ Hamas links

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<https://www.jns.org/house-hears-testimony-on-unrwa-horror-show-hamas-links/>

Members of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs heard expert testimony on Tuesday about the links between Hamas and the primary U.N. aid organization for the Palestinians in Gaza.

On Friday, it was [revealed](https://www.jns.org/extremely-troubled-by-allegations-12-unrwa-staff-took-part-in-oct-7-attack-us-suspends-funding/) that a dozen employees of the U.N. Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East may have participated directly in Hamas’s Oct. 7 terror attacks on Israel. The United States and 16 other countries and the European Union have cut off aid to the U.N. agency.

U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken called the allegations ‘highly, highly credible’ on Monday, but Richard Goldberg, a senior advisor at the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told members of Congress on Tuesday that the allegations are merely the tip of the iceberg.

‘UNRWA is a horror show that is decades in the making, co-produced by the U.S. taxpayer,’ Goldberg testified, during a hearing that ran about three hours and, initially, was disrupted frequently by protesters. ‘Terrorism support and subsidy, for UNRWA, is a feature not a bug.’

At the hearing, the Democratic witness, Mara Rudman, a University of Virginia professor and former official in the Obama and Clinton administrations, was asked about reports that as many as 15% of UNRWA employees in Gaza might be members of Hamas and other terror groups. Rudman testified that those figures likely reflect wider Gazan support for terrorism.

‘Press reports have indicated that the percentages of UNRWA staff that may be affiliated in some way with Hamas are roughly similar to the percentages in the general population that are thought to be affiliated, so between 10% and 15%,’ she said. ‘If they employ 13,000 people in the population, the single biggest employer, it would not be surprising if the percentages are roughly that of the general population.’

The other witnesses at Tuesday’s hearing, Marcus Sheff, CEO of IMPACT-se, and Hillel Neuer, executive director of U.N. Watch, testified about bias against Israel in UNRWA’s school curricula and in the wider U.N. system respectively.

**Congressional reaction**

Republicans on the committee generally signaled that they would support ending U.S. funding to UNRWA permanently. But many Democrats said they only support the Biden administration’s funding pause on a temporary basis and would like to see Palestinian aid restored as soon as possible.

‘I have very real concerns about the security impact and the moral implications if we do not find quickly a way to resume some funding and allow that aid to move forward expeditiously,’ said Rep. Jason Crow (D-Colo.). ‘The horrifying and inexcusable actions of roughly a dozen people should not speak for the over 13,000 UNRWA employees in Gaza.’

But some pro-Israel Democrats said on Tuesday that the U.N. agency had proven itself unfit to fulfill its mission, while noting that they would support aid to the Palestinians from other agencies.

‘We have to replace UNRWA with something else,’ said Rep. Brad Schneider (D-Ill.). ‘I support getting rid of UNRWA.’

‘UNRWA, long funded by your tax dollars, has been governing Gaza at the behest of Hamas so that Hamas, which sees governing as a distraction, could dedicate itself to murdering Jews in Israel,’ Rep. Ritchie Torres (D-N.Y.) [posted](https://twitter.com/RitchieTorres/status/1752331360830709972) on social media on Tuesday.

Torres also co-signed a bipartisan letter, led by Rep. Josh Gottheimer (D-N.J.), on Tuesday that calls on U.N. Secretary-General António Guterres and UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini to resign.

‘The U.N. and UNRWA can no longer be trusted to operate as the unbiased liaison to the Palestinian people,’ per the letter, addressed to the U.S. secretary of state. ‘It is unacceptable that U.S. tax dollars, allocated to assist innocent Palestinians, instead funded tunnels under UNRWA buildings and paid for terrorists to murder, rape, kidnap and hold innocent civilians hostage.’

The letter, which Rep. Claudia Tenney (R-N.Y.) co-signed, is circulating on the Hill for additional signatories.

Despite losing, at least temporarily, the support of 12 of UNRWA’s 15 largest donors, a senior U.N. official claimed on Tuesday that the United Nations had already taken ‘swift action’ to address the allegations against UNRWA and said they did not believe UNRWA could be replaced.

‘There is no substitution for the humanitarian role that is played in Gaza,’ said Sigrid Kaag, the UN’s senior humanitarian and reconstruction coordinator for Gaza, during a press stakeout at the U.N. Security Council.

‘Beyond political decisions, which are General Assembly bound, there is no way any organization can replace or substitute the tremendous capacity, the fabric of UNRWA,’ she said.