American taxpayers should demand accountability from UNRWA

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By Eric Mandel

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In July of 2022, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) thanked President Joe Biden for his financial support of Palestinian refugees, helping them ‘to live dignified lives (with) basic health, education and social protection services.’ The funds, it said, ‘contribute to the human rights of Palestine refugees.’

To the average American who is not schooled in the Middle East or believes that media reporting is accurate, this sounds consistent with our values.

What was not stated was UNRWA’s educational programs, which incite violence and delegitimize and dehumanize Israelis. This is antithetical to creating an atmosphere of tolerance, respect and eventual peace between Israelis and Palestinians.

The Institute for Monitoring Peace and Cultural Tolerance in School Education (IMPACT-se) noted, ‘UNRWA is complicit in radicalizing schoolchildren through the glorification of terrorists, encouragement to violence and teaching of blood libels to Palestinian schoolchildren.’

‘UNRWA’s Facebook pages have glorified suicide bombers, including Wafa Idris, a Red Crescent volunteer who drove an ambulance with explosives into the heart of Jerusalem, killing an elderly man and injuring more than one hundred civilians,’ IMPACT-se pointed out. ‘Mathematical problems in UNRWA textbooks count terrorists, telling students to defend the motherland with blood. A spelling exercise condemns peace and normalization agreements between Israel and Arab states … while Israel is referred to as ‘the Enemy’ and is erased from maps of the region.’

Yet the Biden administration reinstated UNRWA funding to the tune of more than $600 million in American taxpayer dollars since 2021. A White House official said UNRWA is committed to ‘zero tolerance for racism, discrimination and antisemitism.’

But is it?

On Feb. 15, Sen. James Risch, the ranking member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and Rep. Chip Roy introduced ‘The United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Accountability and Transparency Act.’

Senator Risch said, ‘When UNRWA was created, its specific purpose was to provide relief for refugees of the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. More than 70 years later, the organization has employed individuals affiliated with Hamas, a U.S.-designated foreign terrorist organization, and its schools have been used to promote antisemitism and store Hamas weapons. It is unacceptable that U.S. taxpayer dollars are being used to fund this agency.’

The legislation would require the administration to certify to Congress that UNRWA employees are not part of American-designated terrorist organizations like Hamas and that terror groups do not use UNRWA facilities. In addition, the act would require UNRWA not to employ anti-American, antisemitic or anti-Zionist rhetoric in its schoolbooks. That should be a low bar for any organization that receives our funds.

The previous administration suspended funding to UNRWA because these problems were never resolved. Yet early in its term, the Biden administration resumed funding without first demanding UNRWA change its curriculum or associations. Without evidence, Biden State Department Spokesman Ned Price claimed safeguards were in place to ensure the monies would not fall into the hands of Hamas. In 2019, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that State Department documents on UNRWA funding ‘weren’t always accurate.’

Five months after the Biden administration restored funding, UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini, under questioning at the European Union Parliament, acknowledged the continued use of texts glorifying terrorism and filled with hate speech. E.U. Commissioner Oliver Varhelyi, whose department covers aid to UNRWA, issued a statement calling for consideration of conditioning aid to the Palestinian education sector on ‘full adherence to UNESCO standards of peace, tolerance, co-existence, non-violence’ and the ‘need for Palestinian education reform.’

David May of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies said, ‘UNRWA personnel are also part of the problem. In Aug. 2021, another watchdog group, UN Watch, issued a report detailing 113 UNRWA staffers who promoted terrorism, violence and antisemitism, mainly on social media. … Teachers praised Hitler, espoused conspiracy theories of global Jewish domination and shared Hamas propaganda videos. Following the report, UNRWA suspended at least six employees, and what happened to the other 107 remains unclear.’

Foreign aid is vital to American foreign policy and advances our national interests. When Americans hear that hundreds of millions of their hard-earned dollars support an organization that promotes hatred and terrorism while undermining our most important ally in the Middle East, they rightly question their government’s fiduciary responsibility to them and stop trusting their government to be a watchdog for American interests.

A fundamental change in the mission of UNRWA needs to be instituted before any additional American aid is given. The previous State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert criticized UNRWA over what she called an ‘endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries.’

The U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)’s definition of who is a refugee needs to be applied to Palestinians as it is applied to every other refugee in the world. Moreover, Palestinian refugees must be treated as the UNHCR treats all other refugees, seeking to resettle them rather than make their status permanent.

Today, there are less than 30,000 Palestinian refugees according to UNHCR standards, but over five million and growing by UNRWA standards. If you want any chance for peace through a ‘two states for two peoples’ solution, it must begin with reforming UNRWA.

Democrats should join with their Republican colleagues and demand proper accountability for UNRWA before any further funds are released.