

ISRAEL

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CHECK AGAINST DELIVERY

Statement by
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Ministry of Foreign Affairs

United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the
Near East

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Mr. Chair,

Since UNRWA was established 66 years ago, Israel has cooperated in advancing its humanitarian mission, and continues to do so to this day. During this time, UNRWA and Israel have jointly coordinated hundreds of projects that provide essential services to the Palestinian people. Israel recognizes UNRWA's contribution to the welfare of Palestinian refugees and their descendants and remains committed to the understandings expressed in the 1967 Comay-Michelmores Exchange of Letters.

However, Israel views with grave concern UNRWA's political agenda, which in many respects clouds its humanitarian efforts.

The purpose of UN member states in establishing UNRWA in 1949 was to ease the suffering of hundreds of thousands of refugees. In 1950, the UN established the High Commissioner for Refugees in order to assist men, women and children in dire situations around the world. This agency has helped tens of millions of refugees *restart* their lives while providing a brighter future to the next generation. UNRWA stands in dire contrast to this agency.

When UNRWA was established, its mandate covered hundreds of thousands of refugees. According to UNRWA's estimates, today over 5 million Palestinian "refugees" are eligible for UNRWA services. One must wonder how did the number of beneficiaries increase so dramatically and whether UNRWA's work improved their situation.

If we were to apply UNHCR's standards to count the number of Palestinian refugees worldwide, the figure would drop dramatically. According to UNHCR, a person who has taken residence in another country and obtained its citizenship loses their refugee status. But only in the Palestinian case, this restriction does not apply. UNRWA attends today to a fourth generation of Palestinians, keeping them in a perpetuated refugee status.

Mr. Chair,

Promotion of a one-sided narrative and fueling of false promises is unfortunately taking place within UNRWA's educational system.

New generations are raised on a notion that does not recognize the existence of the other. Children attend schools which exhibit maps showing "Palestine", while ignoring the existence of the State of Israel. It sends the wrong message. Clearly, not one of co-existence. One must wonder why such a map was covered up during the visit of the Secretary General in an UNRWA-run school at the Gaza strip last June. Why was there a need to hide the map which every child sees on a daily basis?

Palestinian children are encouraged to believe that the only solution is the so-called "right of return." Many UNRWA camps are decorated with keys, symbolizing this claim. Young children are taught that these keys will one day open doors for them – but in truth, these keys keep them locked in a distorted reality. Instead of giving new generations keys to the past, UNRWA should give them keys to the future - the benefit of education.

UNRWA's goal is to provide assistance and protection for Palestinian refugees in order to help them achieve their full potential in human development. Education plays a vital role in achieving such potential. UNRWA can, and should, play a role in creating a better future, in assisting

its beneficiaries, by educating generations on notions of tolerance and not of hatred, of inclusion and not of exclusion.

Education is the key to the future, not the past. It provides the promise of a better future for Palestinians and Israelis alike.

Mr. Chair,

In the reporting period, UNRWA has regrettably once again failed to uphold the standard of balanced reporting and neutrality expected from all UN bodies.

Israel is extremely concerned by UNRWA's illegitimate political advocacy, especially UNRWA's one-sided and provocative statements, issued by its spokesperson. In recent years UNRWA invested extensive resources in advocacy at the expense of the well-being of its beneficiaries, while seeking to serve the Palestinian narrative and political agenda.

Hamas plays a destructive role in Gaza. Yet, this internationally designated terror organization which controls the Gaza strip, is mentioned only once in UNRWA's report. Hamas is cynically abusing every humanitarian step and measure introduced by Israel. Hamas often obstructs the vigorous reconstruction efforts and the endeavors to boost the energy infrastructure and facilitate movement.

Hamas confiscates, diverts, and smuggles resources designated for the humanitarian needs of the residents of the Gaza Strip, and redirects these resources to its own priorities - rearmament and terror buildup - excavating tunnels, manufacturing rockets, and constructing training camps.

Even in the numerous cases when Hamas endangered the lives of Palestinian civilians, and committed war crimes by using civilian areas to target Israeli citizens, among them UNRWA schools, public reports and statements issued by UNRWA avoided mentioning Hamas by name. It seems that while they are quick to condemn Israel, when it comes to reporting about Hamas and other Palestinian terrorist groups, UNRWA's employees demonstrate significant reluctance.

Israel expects UNRWA, as an organization that has been continuously calling for accountability and transparency, to abide by the same standards and report accurately on the situation. Hamas, an extremist terror organization that viciously controls the Gaza Strip, bears responsibility to the situation on the ground, a fact which should be reflected in the report.

Mr. Chair,

While Hamas is doing everything to hinder reconstruction, Israel is working together with UNRWA to help meet the humanitarian challenges in the Gaza Strip.

Israel is doing its utmost to improve the humanitarian conditions and standard of living of the civilian population in the Gaza Strip, while safeguarding the basic security needs of Israeli citizens. Israel has been facilitating the reconstruction of Gaza through the Gaza Reconstruction Mechanism, enabling the shipment of over 6 million tons of building materials into the strip.

Every day, hundreds of trucks carrying goods enter Gaza from Israel through Kerem Shalom crossing. Israel is working to expand the capacity to over 1,000 trucks a day. In the first half of 2016

more than 80,000 truckloads of goods entered Gaza, an increase of about 25% compared to the same period in 2015. However, over 370 cases of smuggling attempts of illicit items were registered, an increase of over 200%. Despite these challenges, Israel continues to facilitate the provision of millions of tons of equipment, materials and supplies to assist with the reconstruction efforts.

The extensive cooperation between the Government of Israel and UNRWA is scarcely mentioned in this year's report. The attention and detail paid in the report to the desperate situation of the Palestinian refugees fleeing Syria pales in comparison to the attention paid to those in the West Bank and the Gaza Strip. It is difficult to believe that the hurdles faced by UNRWA beneficiaries as well as UNRWA workers in Syria receive so little attention in the report. The inherent imbalance reflected in the report attests to the lack of attention paid to 60% of UNRWA's beneficiaries.

I would like to emphasize that Israel shares the hope for a better life for the Palestinian people. It is therefore truly disheartening that while dedicating so much time and effort to criticizing Israel, this discussion avoids trying to find paths to improve the situation of so many people.

Israel aspires to peace. It is our sincere hope that creating a conducive environment for enhanced economic activity will encourage the resumption of direct and unconditional negotiations, leading to the realization of two states for two peoples, living side by side, in peace and security, as expressed by Prime Minister Netanyahu in September at the General Assembly.

Mr. Chair,

The Middle East today is in a state of turmoil. Regimes are unstable, larger segments of territory are ungoverned and seized by terrorist groups, while the civilian population suffers the dire consequences. Palestinian refugees in these countries are caught in the chaos.

In Syria, they face death and displacement due to a bloody civil war. Those who manage to flee, face yet more hurdles in Lebanon, where they seek shelter from the mayhem. For generations, the existing Palestinian populations in Lebanon have been segregated and isolated from the rest of the Lebanese society.

In light of the actual needs of the refugees, it is troubling that UNRWA continues to channel a significant portion of its budget to political campaigns at the expense of humanitarian assistance. Such campaigns only serve to inflame tensions, perpetuate Palestinian abstinence and distance us from achieving peace.

The ever shifting sands in the Middle East carry a tide of change. They encompass peril as well as prospect. The time has come to seize this opportunity and support the effort to create a better future, rather than have another round of biased resolutions which damage the prospects for peace in the Middle East. In order to contribute more effectively towards achieving the peaceful future we all hope for, we encourage UNRWA to embark upon a more constructive agenda. Let us use our keys to open a brighter future, rather than stay in the past.

Thank you.