

# Terror on the UN Payroll?

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Brief Analysis

On October 4, 2004, Commissioner-General of the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) Peter Hansen unapologetically admitted to the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) that the UN employs members of Hamas. "Oh, I am sure that there are Hamas members on the UNRWA payroll," Hansen stated, "and I don't see that as a crime." The fact that Palestinian terrorist groups have increasingly used civilian cover to facilitate their activities remains undisputed (notwithstanding the recent spat between Israel and the UN over drone reconnaissance pictures depicting what Israeli officials claimed were Hamas operatives transporting Qassam missiles in a UN ambulance, but which now appear to have been merely stretchers). In several documented cases, Palestinian terrorists have exploited employment with UN and other agencies to support their groups' activities.

## Between Politics and Terror

According to Hansen, "Hamas as a political organization does not mean that every member is a militant, and we do not do political vetting and exclude people from one persuasion as against another." Yet, several key nations that fund the UNRWA have legislation banning any association with Hamas and therefore regard employing members of the group as a problem. Both the United States and the European Union, the two single largest contributors to the UNRWA, have banned the military and civilian "wings" of Hamas. Canada, which provides the UNRWA with \$10 million per year, has already demanded a clarification from the UN.

Hamas leaders readily acknowledge the central role that the organization's political "wing" plays in operational decisionmaking. In July 2001, for example, Hamas leader Abdul Aziz Rantisi commented, "The [Hamas] political leadership has freed the hand of the brigades [i.e., the Qassam Brigades, the group's military "wing"] to do whatever they want against the brothers of monkey and pigs." Intelligence and law enforcement investigations in the United States confirm such statements. For example, an August 2003 U.S. Treasury report identified some of the strictly military functions served by several senior Hamas political leaders. The report noted that Khalid Mishal, head of the Hamas political bureau in Damascus, "has been responsible for supervising assassination operations, bombings and the killing of Israeli settlers. To execute Hamas military activities, [he] maintains a direct link to Gaza-based Hamas leader, Abdul Aziz Rantisi. He also provides instructions to other parts of the Hamas military wing." Similarly, recent indictments of Hamas activists in Dallas and Chicago highlight the operational role of U.S.-based members of the Hamas political bureau in recruiting and training new operatives, personally funding operational cells, and traveling

to the Middle East to oversee their progress (see [PeaceWatch no. 471 \(templateC05.php?CID=2162\)](#)).

### Exploiting the UN to Support Terror

In his comments to CBC, Hansen also insisted that UNWRA staff members, "whatever their political persuasion," are required to "behave in accordance with UN standards and norms for neutrality." In recent years, however, there have been numerous cases of Palestinian terrorists employed by the agency or using its facilities and vehicles to carry out terrorist attacks.

Over the past four years, thirteen Palestinians employed by the UNRWA have been arrested for alleged involvement in terrorist activities. In one particularly egregious example, Nahed Rashid Ahmed Attalah, the agency's director of food supplies for Gaza refugees, used his UN car and free travel permit to facilitate terrorist activities undertaken by members of the Popular Resistance Committee (PRC). Indicted in September 2002, Attalah admitted to using his UN vehicle on multiple occasions during summer 2002 to transport arms, explosives, and PRC activists to carry out terrorist attacks. Attalah also confessed to using his UN travel permit for trips to Egypt, Lebanon, and Syria, where he established contact with members of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine "in order to obtain money for transferring arms to the Gaza Strip as assistance for the PRC." Similarly, in August 2002, Israeli authorities arrested Nidal Abd al-Fatah Abdallah Nazal, a Hamas activist who worked as a UNRWA ambulance driver. During his interrogation, Nazal admitted to using his ambulance to transport "arms and messages to Hamas activists in various cities, exploiting the freedom of movement granted to him" as a UNRWA employee.

UNRWA is not the only relief organization exploited by Palestinian terrorists. In March 2002, a Palestinian Red Crescent ambulance was intercepted at a checkpoint south of Ramallah. The ambulance was transporting not only a sick Palestinian child and his relatives, but also an explosives belt hidden under the child's stretcher. During his interrogation, the ambulance driver—Islam Jibril, a wanted Fatah Tanzim terrorist—admitted that he had intended to transport the explosives to other Fatah Tanzim operatives in Ramallah. Similarly, Wafa Idris, the female responsible for the January 2002 suicide bombing in Jerusalem that killed one Israeli civilian and wounded more than 100, was a Palestinian Red Crescent paramedic who used her credentials to pass through checkpoints easily on her way to carry out the attack.

### Hamas Civilian Support Network

Hamas actively solicits the assistance of civilians to facilitate its propaganda efforts, radicalization and recruitment campaign, and terrorist attacks. In particular, it targets those who can make use of their place of employment to meet the needs of the Qassam Brigades. For example, the organization recruited Mustafa Amjad, a doctor at al-Razi Hospital in Jenin who used his job to help infiltrate suicide bombers into Israel. After his arrest in June 2002, Amjad confessed to helping Hamas terrorists enter Israel while delivering medicines in his professional capacity.

Many hospitals and similar facilities are available for use by Hamas operatives as meeting places, storage places, and more. For example, according to Israeli information cited by the FBI, the Dar al-Salam Hospital in Gaza "was founded in 1995 with Hamas funds and protection. The building is located on the land of a Hamas-associated family by the name of Al Bata from Khan Yunis." Hamas activists use such hospitals as recruitment grounds for terrorist activities. Hamas commanders Khaled Abu Hamed and Said Kutab recruited Rashed Tarek al-Nimr, a chemist employed at hospitals in Nablus and Bethlehem, to procure chemicals for Hamas bombmaking. Al-Nimr first met these and other Hamas figures when they hid inside hospitals where he worked to evade arrest. Over a period of months, he gave Hamed six containers of hydrogen peroxide, an ingredient used in the production of the TATP explosive favored by Hamas. He also attempted to obtain sulfuric and nitric acid, materials used to produce nitroglycerin explosives. In at least one instance, Hamed specifically informed al-Nimr upon receiving the chemicals that "there would be a large explosion in Israel in the near future." Al-Nimr agreed to help find a safe place to store the chemicals and offered to

covertly transfer them to Hamas in a Palestinian ambulance.

In an interview with Israeli police, Hamas military activist Mahmoud Rumahi listed Hamas activists employed by medical organizations that benefited from charitable donations. Included on the list were Ziyad al-Ghani, supervisor of the Tiba hospital in Jenin; Dr. Idris Abu Samaha, supervisor of the Tulkarem hospital; and Hafiz al-Sadr, supervisor of the Red Cross station in Nablus. Rumahi also conceded that he served as "medical director" at a "medical center in Ramallah" that was tied to Hamas.

## Conclusion

Building on Peter Hansen's statement that the behavior of all UNRWA employees must conform with "UN standards and norms for neutrality," the United States should work with the UN to develop, apply, and monitor a set of professional standards to ensure that UN offices, equipment, and personnel are not exploited for terrorist purposes. A logical starting point would be to ask employees to sign an antiterror pledge such as the "Certificate Regarding Terrorist Financing" already required by all recipients of U.S. Agency for International Development funding. As a member of the Quartet, the UN has a special obligation to uphold the commitment outlined in the Roadmap to dismantle terrorist capabilities and infrastructure. In an effort to insulate good works from terrorist infiltration and exploitation, Washington should stand ready to help the UN live up to this obligation by funding an "Office of Professional Standards" for the UNRWA and similar agencies.

Matthew Levitt is a senior fellow and director of terrorism studies at The Washington Institute. His publications include *Exposing Hamas: Funding Terror under the Cover of Charity* (Yale University Press, forthcoming in 2005). ❖

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