

NO MERCY

# The Long and Deadly War on Humanitarian Workers in Gaza

How the right's quarter-century campaign to demonize UNRWA led to the World Central Kitchen killings



YASSER QUDIH/XINHUA/GETTY IMAGES

Palestinians check a World Central Kitchen vehicle struck by Israeli drones in the central Gaza Strip city of Deir El Balah on April 2.

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On April 1, the Israeli military repeatedly struck a humanitarian relief convoy from World Central Kitchen, the beloved charity founded by celebrity chef José Andrés, killing seven foreign aid workers. The airstrike shocked the world, and accomplished what more than 30,000 Palestinian deaths apparently could not: President Joe Biden finally called up Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and told him to stop killing so many civilians.

But the fact that the Israel Defense Forces had targeted and killed humanitarian workers was not, in fact, unusual. By April 1, the conflict had already killed more than 200 aid workers—a staggering number compared to other conflicts, and one that continues to rise. The difference this time around was that the victims were mostly white Westerners—and that Netanyahu actually apologized for it, saying he “deeply regrets the tragic incident.”

Compare this to two weeks earlier, when the IDF announced that it had “eliminated” a high-value target and posted a 10-second video of the killing. Aerial footage shows a person walking alongside a building, just meters away from other people, all of whom seem to be going about their normal daily business. Then a blast consumes the frame.

For the IDF, this was a coup. “Muhammad Abu Hasna, a commander in Hamas’ Operations Unit, was precisely targeted and eliminated in the area of Rafah,” it said on X. “Among other terrorist activities, Hasna was involved in taking control of humanitarian aid and distributing it to Hamas operatives.”

The reality on the ground was messier. According to the government in Gaza—which has been run by Hamas since 2007—as well as his uncle, Abu Hasna was not a “Hamas commander,” but a policeman, whose job was to safeguard aid distribution in coordination with the United Nations.

What the IDF didn’t mention was where the airstrike happened: at a United Nations food warehouse in Rafah. The collateral damage, which the IDF also didn’t mention, was a humanitarian aid worker who was stacking boxes of infant care supplies when he died. Inside the warehouse, blood-soaked boxes of Baby Life diapers testified to the terrorist nature of his work.

The aid worker who was killed was a 42-year-old man named Husny, who had a wife and two children. We don't know his last name because he worked for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees, or UNRWA, which is tight-lipped about its employees—and for good reason, because they have been targets, both in a military and political sense, for decades now.

Husny was a casualty of the current war that began in October. But he was also the victim of a much longer conflict. For decades, the far right—both in Israel and the United States—has been waging a campaign of propaganda, disinformation, and outright lies against UNRWA, implying that it is indistinguishable from Hamas—in effect, that the U.N.'s oldest international refugee agency is a terrorist organization in its own right.

This antipathy toward UNRWA has long been common within the Republican Party. But now even many Democratic politicians—including President Biden—have taken a skeptical, if not downright antagonistic view of the relief agency, to the point that they recently agreed to ban U.S. funds to it for a full year. That has not only emboldened Netanyahu in his assault on UNRWA, thereby endangering other relief workers (including those from World Central Kitchen); it has also accelerated the already severe humanitarian crisis in Gaza, pushing it from widespread starvation to outright famine.



This latest hostility toward UNRWA began in late January, when the Israeli government claimed it had intelligence that 12 of UNRWA's 13,000 humanitarian aid workers in Gaza had participated in the war crimes committed by Hamas and other groups on October 7, 2023.

While the claims were shocking, Israel's evidence was paper-thin. Most of it was based on interrogations; Israel has a well-documented track record of torturing prisoners, and confessions extracted under torture are notoriously unreliable. And anyone familiar with Middle East foreign policy would have known that Israel's military and its supporters have a two-decade history of making dubious, exaggerated, or wholly false allegations against UNRWA.

Despite all this, the Biden administration immediately withdrew its funding from UNRWA, and 15 other world governments followed suit. The money they suspended represented 70 percent of UNRWA's budget. This action "is tantamount to increased participation in the on-going genocide of Palestinians in Gaza," warned the Lemkin Institute for Genocide Prevention, a nonprofit named after Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish lawyer who coined the term genocide and campaigned tirelessly to outlaw this crime.

Since then, as Israel failed to provide evidence for its allegations, many countries have reinstated or even increased their aid to UNRWA. But the U.S., UNRWA's biggest donor by far, went in the other direction. In March, Congress averted a government shutdown with a massive bipartisan funding bill. Largely lost in the news was a provision tucked inside the bill that extended the U.S. government's suspension of UNRWA funding for another year, until March 2025. Biden signed the bill on a Saturday morning.

When I asked the White House about Biden's position on defunding UNRWA, a National Security Council spokesperson responded: "UNRWA is indispensable to humanitarian operations in Gaza, and to the provision of assistance to Palestinian refugees in the region. That's why President Biden restored UNRWA funding, that the Trump Administration had cut, upon taking office. However, the serious allegations against UNRWA staff, that some of them participated in the horrific events of October 7th, must be addressed. We continue to support UNRWA's mandate while engaging with the UN on its investigation and independent review."

Meanwhile, we're witnessing the effects of this catastrophic decision. UNRWA is the lifeline for Palestinian refugees throughout the region, from Syria and Lebanon to Jordan and the West Bank. But it is especially indispensable for Palestinians in Gaza, who have already been under a land, sea, and air blockade by Israel—"a diet," as an adviser to previous Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert infamously put it—since June 2007.

More than two million people are already facing starvation in Gaza, and UNRWA is the only agency capable of delivering aid with the speed and efficiency necessary to stave off worse. Even before October 7, UNRWA was bringing in 60 percent of the basic food commodities that entered the strip; 1.2 million people, just over half the population, relied on its quarterly food baskets.

By cutting off money to UNRWA, the U.S. government has intensified the lethal engineered famine that is already inevitable in Gaza. No airdrops or hastily constructed pier—the U.S. government’s two strategies for circumventing Israel’s restrictions on humanitarian aid in Gaza—can come close to stopping the mass starvation unfolding right now: For that, you need UNRWA’s reach and nearly 75-year history of delivering aid on the ground.

The problem with UNRWA is a problem inherent to any humanitarian aid work, which is partly why the Israeli military doesn’t distinguish between foreign aid workers and Palestinian ones: In delivering humanitarian aid, any outside body, whether UNRWA or other charities on the ground like World Central Kitchen, has to coordinate with the local government. In Gaza, that’s Hamas.

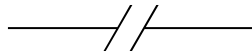
“Anyone who wants to operate in any country has to do some degree of logistical coordination with the authorities there,” said Anne Irfan, author of the book *Refuge and Resistance: Palestinians and the International Refugee System*. “So, the problem is that can then be framed as saying that they’re working with Hamas.”

In the eyes of Israel’s military—and of Lavender, the lethally indifferent A.I. system it uses to decide who lives and who dies—anyone who works “with” Hamas is a fair target. This could include police officers and other first responders, as well as whatever aid workers happen to be in proximity to them. And some right-wing Israeli figures make no apologies for that.

“UNRWA lets Hamas steal aid from civilians in need,” said Eylon Levy, a former Israeli government spokesman and media adviser to Netanyahu, after the March 13 killings. Abu Hasna was “a Hamas terrorist who stole aid and distributed it to terrorists,” he said, accusing UNRWA of being “a Hamas front that’s running interference for Hamas abusing its UN logo.”

This criminalization of humanitarian aid delivery means that delivering aid, in the eyes of Israel’s military, can be perceived as a terrorist act—or, at the very least, as enough of an accessory to make you fair game. The result is that since October 7, 2023, 178 of UNRWA’s 13,000 employees in Gaza have been killed—an astounding death rate, even for this conflict.

“World Central Kitchen is a tragedy,” said William Deere, UNRWA’s spokesperson in Washington, D.C. “We’ve had that tragedy 178 times.”



The United Nations established UNRWA in 1949 in order to serve all of the people displaced during the war that founded the state of Israel. Its mandate originally covered Jewish refugees as well as Muslim and Christian Palestinians (that’s why the name is “Palestine Refugees,” not “Palestinian”). But since 1952, its role has been to serve as a kind of quasi-state for the 750,000 Palestinians who were expelled or fled their homes during the war. Today, UNRWA registers them and their descendants, who now number almost six million; it provides emergency food assistance for about 1.7 million refugees, 70 percent of them in Gaza. It is the U.N.’s oldest continuously running refugee agency.

Politically, UNRWA has been a delicate subject in Washington and Tel Aviv since the second half of the twentieth century. “There’s a long history of Israel being suspicious and apprehensive about UNRWA, because UNRWA was seen as being embedded in the Palestinian refugee setting, and many Israelis felt, rightly or wrongly, that UNRWA was biased against Israel,” said Irfan, the historian. “But I think the point that gets lost in a lot of this, is that for a very long time, much of the Israeli state privately favored UNRWA, for the simple reason that it cheapened the cost of the occupation.”

The current far-right obsession with dismantling UNRWA—both in Israel and the U.S.—began as a fringe position in the early 2000s, when the far right launched a campaign against UNRWA’s schools, which for much of its long lifespan have been the agency’s main focus. In late 2000, a group called Jews for Truth Now took out full-page ads in Israel and America claiming that a textbook “introduced” into the curriculum of the Palestinian Authority—which UNRWA’s schools, which have to teach the curriculum of the host country, would be obligated to use—contained the phrase, “There is no alternative to destroying Israel.”

In fact, no such language existed anywhere in the textbook. Jews for Truth Now, founded by branding and advertising consultant David Suissa, had cribbed this from

the report of a group called the Center for Monitoring the Impact of Peace, or CMIP, whose research director, West Bank settler Itamar Marcus, had close ties to Netanyahu and Netanyahu's then communications chief, David Bar-Illan. When actual Arabic speakers examined the textbooks in question, they found that CMIP's report had either made up fake quotes from whole cloth or grossly mistranslated phrases that weren't even in the textbooks.

The group's accusations were so ludicrous, in fact, that people didn't take them seriously—at first. “My understanding is that UNRWA didn't give it the time of day, because [CMIP] is a really extremist organization,” said Jo Kelcey, a professor of education at the Lebanese American University who studies the history of UNRWA's education programs. “And their work was really bad. They would mistranslate, and decontextualize, and, quite frankly, also just make stuff up.”

But facts didn't matter. The U.S. Senate Appropriations Committee convened a hearing in which Marcus warned that the Palestinian Authority was grooming armies of child martyrs to attack Israel and “other Western democracies,” making it “among the greatest child abusers in history.” Hillary Clinton and Chuck Schumer, then both U.S. senators from New York, held a press conference denouncing the “incitement” in the textbooks and quoting the false translations from the ad campaign. The World Bank and the Italian government both pulled millions in funding for education for Palestinian children. (CMIP has since rebranded itself as IMPACT-SE, and still styles itself an authority on Palestinian education.)

These early attacks relied on a tactic that Americans might be a little savvier about today, but that was highly effective then (and arguably still is): first a wild, headline-grabbing allegation, one so shocking it provokes calls for harsh measures; then reluctant admissions that some of the accusations might need more investigation. By the time people figure out that the original claims were wildly exaggerated or wholly fabricated, public opinion has already been formed.

This tactic worked again in October 2004, when the Israeli military made a shocking allegation: UNRWA staff was letting Hamas militants use UNRWA ambulances to transport Qassam rockets in Gaza. The IDF released grainy drone footage of what it said was a Hamas member loading a rocket into an ambulance with the distinctive U.N. logo on its roof. Headlines around the world repeated the claim.

But Peter Hansen, the head of UNRWA at the time, examined the footage and concluded the “rocket” was actually a stretcher. In a furious letter to Israel’s foreign minister, he demanded an immediate public retraction and apology from Israel, calling it “appalling” that the government of Israel would put out “such deliberately inciteful, false and malicious propaganda.” False allegations against UNRWA staff during an active military campaign, when they were “operating in constant danger,” wrote Hansen, put their lives at risk.

After a week of insisting that the stretcher was a rocket, the Israeli army finally admitted, when Hansen refused to back down, that it was a stretcher. But Israel’s government and its U.S. allies had the last laugh: Less than six months later, in early 2005, the Bush administration strong-armed the U.N. into ousting Hansen.

The once-fringe position had reached the mainstream. And UNRWA, which had initially ignored the wild accusations against it, now had to reckon with them instead. “It just was like, ‘These people are nutters, and we’re not going to respond to anything that they say,’” said Kelcey. “But 20 years later, they’re a dominant strain of politics.”

The campaign continued throughout the 2000s. In 2012, the hard-right think tank Middle East Forum, founded by Daniel Pipes and known for its foreign policy hawkishness, Islamophobic disinformation campaigns, and sexual harassment scandals, devoted an entire special issue to UNRWA.\* But the Trump administration was the golden era for Israel’s UNRWA eliminationists (at least, until now). Netanyahu pushed repeatedly to abolish UNRWA during the Trump administration. The humanitarian aid agency “perpetuates the right of return narrative in order to eliminate the state of Israel,” Netanyahu claimed in 2018, adding that “UNRWA must become a thing of the past.”

Trump obliged Netanyahu by cutting off U.S. funding for UNRWA in 2018. The Biden administration quietly reinstated it in 2021. But the agency was still reeling from the loss of its largest donor by the time the October 7 attacks took place.

One of the oddest contradictions of the long campaign against UNRWA is how closely it tracks the evolution of far-right disinformation and propaganda campaigns—many of which explicitly target Democrats. And yet, when it comes to UNWRA, Biden and



many congressional Democrats have sided with Republicans to curtail the agency's work.

Privately, most of the people I spoke with in Washington think the Biden administration has decided not to spend any political capital on defending or preserving UNRWA: that sacrificing it, and by extension endangering all humanitarian aid workers, is an acceptable price to pay.

“They don't care about the human rights workers,” said one Defense Department insider, on background. “The plan is to act appalled while arming the IDF up to close the war. Encourage an indefinite occupation fortified by settlements to assure security. Start the Rafah campaign next week to close out this portion of the war.”

When that happens, Israel's military, and especially its Lavender A.I., isn't going to distinguish between deaths that the Biden administration seems to have largely accepted (local aid workers, not to mention around 30,000 other Palestinian civilians) and those that might cause global political outrage (aid workers from Western countries, like those from World Central Kitchen). Which is no doubt why several major aid organizations have already begun to pull out staff.

Netanyahu played Trump like a fiddle. Now the stakes are infinitely higher—but Biden and Schumer, despite all their bluster about standing up to Netanyahu, are still dancing to Bibi's tune when it comes to UNRWA. By siding with Netanyahu against UNRWA, Congress and the Biden administration have encouraged Netanyahu's sense of impunity, and sent a clear signal to Israel's military: Humanitarian aid workers are fair game. In addition to putting these workers at greater risk, this also contributes to the steady erosion in the norm—incribed in international law as the “principle of distinction”—that forbids attacks on civilians, and especially relief workers.

And yet, ironically, there is perhaps one thing that everyone involved in this long fight, from Netanyahu and his extremists to Gazans and even UNRWA itself, can agree on: the hope that the agency, one day, will cease to exist.

“The irony in all of this is that there is this inbuilt mechanism for UNRWA to go away,” said Kelcey, referring to the fact that the agency is mandated to continue providing services to Palestine refugees until the international community and Palestinians agree on a just and durable solution to their plight. “And that's what all

these”—she heaved a deep sigh—“funding questions, and constant crises that the agency has, I think they overlook that central point: No one wants this agency to last forever.”

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