

UNRWA's Education System

Background: Over 55 percent of UNRWA's \$806 million program budget provides civilian, secular education to Palestine refugee children in grades 1 to 10. In 2021, UNRWA is educating 533,000 girls and boys at 709 schools and provides another 8,000-refugee youth with vocational and technical training. In terms of scale, the UNRWA school system would be the third largest in the US. UNRWA offers high quality programming at the lowest cost in the region. UNRWA students consistently out-perform their peers in public schools and attain above-average results on national assessments.

UNRWA's experience working in conflict zones allowed it to quickly undertake measures to contain the spread of the COVID 19 virus through remote education. In February, the Agency will unveil a centralized self-learning platform that will host student materials ranging from quizzes to educational games, including a parent's section to help them navigate their role in home learning.

MYTH: UNRWA schools promote anti- Semitism

FACT: Unique to the region, UNRWA utilizes a curriculum framework that emphasizes UN values including; neutrality, human rights, tolerance, equality and non-discrimination with regard to race, gender, language and religion. Independent scholarly research and reviews commissioned by UNRWA's donors focused on the West Bank and Gaza have found nothing to support allegations that UNRWA teaches hatred. A GAO report (GAO-19-448) stated State Department officials reviewed various NGO studies about potentially problematic Palestinian Authority textbook content and noted a general agreement in these studies on the absence of anti-Semitic content or explicit incitement to violence.

MYTH: UNRWA textbooks promote hatred of Israel

FACT: Consistent with UN practice in all refugee situations, UNRWA uses textbooks in its school provided by the "host country." For the UN this is a matter of national sovereignty, ensures students can integrate into host country educational systems at any level and more broadly participate in the social and economic life of the host country.

Importantly, UNRWA reviews all textbooks against the UN values of neutrality/bias, gender, and age-appropriateness. The UNRWA review of the 87 Palestinian Authority issued textbooks the Agency utilized in grades 1 to 10 during the first semester of the 2020/21 school year, over 9,000 pages, concluded approximately 3% of the total material did not comply with the above stated UN values. Almost 90% of the identified issues were broadly related to neutrality, two-thirds of neutrality issues focused on maps and the occupation.

Following this review, UNRWA provides teachers with enrichment materials to enable them to enter into critical thinking discussions with their students to address the issues identified in the textbooks that are outside of UN values.

MYTH: UNRWA's schools must teach hatred because it uses PA textbooks

FACT: Disinformation about UNRWA schools largely stems from the Israeli organization IMPACT-se, an organization that utilizes widely varying standards from report to report to support its claims of widespread incitement in Palestinian Authority textbooks. UNRWA's review of the IMPACT-se September 2020 report on PA textbooks is a case in point:

- IMPACT-se identified only 35 changes, positive and negative, to the Semester 1 2020/21 PA textbooks. By contrast, UNRWA experts identified 103 changes - over 75% positive.
- IMPACT-se deliberately downplayed or failed to note most positive changes, even going as far as ignoring changes the organization itself had called for in its previous reports.

MYTH: UNRWA allows its schools to be used by terrorists to store weapons

FACT: UNRWA inspects all its facilities several times a year to ensure that, among other things, there is no armed actor interfering in any way. On three occasions UNRWA discovered a tunnel near or under its schools and immediately condemned the interference and rendered the tunnels inaccessible. UNRWA publicly, strongly and unequivocally condemns the group or groups responsible for any violations. When weapons were once discovered, UNRWA staff were withdrawn from the premises. The agency immediately informed the relevant parties and pursued all possible measures for the removal of the objects in order to preserve the safety and security of the school.

MYTH: UNRWA's schools are run by Hamas

FACT: UNRWA's staff are not permitted to engage in any political activity or to belong to any political party. In 2017 UNRWA discovered that two of its staff in Gaza were members of Hamas. One was fired immediately, and the other resigned. Further, UNRWA staff are not permitted to engage in political activities on their personal social media accounts. UNRWA has a strict process for reviewing accusations that its staff engages in behavior that violates UN standards. If an investigation shows such claims to be true, appropriate disciplinary action is taken, up to separating the employee from the Agency.

MYTH: UNRWA's schools contribute to destabilization in the region

FACT: UNRWA runs centers of excellence. Its students consistently outperform their national counterparts in public schools by one year of learning (World Bank 2016). UNRWA invests heavily in teacher training and uses modern teaching pedagogies to facilitate student learning and outcomes. Each of UNRWA's schools has a democratically elected student parliament that is responsible for addressing student issues and liaising with teachers and administration. UNRWA students routinely travel to the UN General Assembly to address Member States and to Capitol Hill to discuss the value of UNRWA's education system in very personal terms.