

Accountability for Attacks on UNRWA Personnel, Premises and Property

Between 7 October 2023 and 12 May, Israel has killed at least 391 UNRWA staff and affiliated personnel as well as hundreds of their children; it also damaged or destroyed 312 UNRWA premises and other UN property in Gaza. In January 2026, Israel demolished the UNRWA headquarters in occupied East Jerusalem. The UN Security Council (UNSC) has noted that 1010 humanitarian personnel were killed globally in the last three years and demanded accountability. 560 of them were killed by Israel in the Occupied Palestinian Territory (OPT). Despite Israel's obligations to respect and protect UNRWA, its personnel, premises and property as confirmed by the International Court of Justice (ICJ) and by the UN General Assembly (UNGA), the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) has not taken any steps to hold Israel accountable for its attacks on UNRWA.

Israel's Binding Obligations

1. In its advisory opinion of 22 October 2025 on Israel's obligations in relation to the presence and activities of the UN including UNRWA in the OPT, the ICJ confirmed that Israel has binding obligations to respect the privileges and immunities of UNRWA and its personnel, premises and other property as well as to protect the safety and security of UNRWA and its personnel, premises and other property. Most importantly, it emphasized Israel's binding obligation to ensure that "they are not targeted."
2. In its Resolution 80/77 of 5 December 2025, the UNGA, among other things, deplored the legislation adopted by the Israeli Knesset against UNRWA; called upon the Israeli Government to respect UNRWA's privileges and immunities including the immunity and inviolability of the UN, including its premises, property and assets; deplored the failure to protect UN, including UNRWA, personnel, premises and property; condemned the killing and injury of UNRWA personnel as a result of Israeli attacks; and demanded that all parties respect international humanitarian law obligations, including the protection of UN, UNRWA, and other humanitarian facilities.

The 2009 Board of Inquiry

3. During what Israel called "Operation Cast Lead", a number of incidents occurred in the Gaza Strip and southern Israel between 27 December 2008 and 19 January 2009, in which UN personnel, premises and operations were affected. In his capacity as the Chief Administrative Officer, then UNSG, Ban Ki-moon, established the UNHQ Board of Inquiry (BOI) to review and investigate nine of these incidents, in which death or injuries occurred at, or damage was done, to UN premises or UN operations.
4. The BOI was chaired by Ian Martin (United Kingdom) and was mandated to develop a clear record of the facts -- not to make legal findings or consider questions of legal liability. The BOI was convened on 11 February 2009 and submitted its report on 21 April 2009. Both the Government of Israel and the Palestinian Authority cooperated with the BOI. Although the BOI's report remains confidential, a public summary of the report was prepared by the UN Secretariat and presented to the UN Security Council.
5. In six of the nine incidents, the BOI concluded that the IDF was responsible for death of and injuries to UNRWA and other UN personnel as well as Palestinian civilians including children; in these six incidents, the IDF was also responsible for damage to UNRWA and other UN premises. In one further incident, the BOI concluded that damage to an UNRWA vehicle was also caused by IDF. In one incident, the BOI concluded that a rocket fired by a Palestinian faction, most likely Hamas, missed its target and caused damage to WFP premises. In one incident involving the death of an UNRWA employee and damage to an UNRWA school, the BOI was unable to reach any conclusions as to the cause. The BOI estimated that IDF is responsible for total

repair and replacement cost for UNRWA at more than \$10.4 million and for UNSCO in excess of \$750,000. The damage to WFP was estimated at \$29,000 for which the Palestinian faction was responsible.

6. It is also important to note that the BOI concluded that Israeli allegations about Hamas' use of UN premises for military purposes were untrue. The BOI concluded its report with a number of observations regarding steps that might have been taken to minimize risks for civilians and civilian objects and put forth 11 recommendations concerning compensation and reparation; future coordination; commendations; and further investigation. In January 2010, Israel paid the United Nations \$10.5 million explicitly maintaining that the *ex gratia* payment implies no liability or admission of wrongdoing. The UN spokesperson issued a statement confirming that the UN and Israel "agreed to put the question of legal responsibility to one side for the purposes of settling the organization's claim".

The 2014 Board of Inquiry

7. During what Israel called "Operation Protective Edge", a number of incidents occurred in the Gaza Strip, between 8 July and 26 August 2014, in which UN personnel, premises and operations were affected. USG Ban again established a UNHQ BOI to review and investigate a number of specific incidents in which death or injuries occurred at, and/or damage done to UNRWA schools and other premises. The BOI was also tasked to review and investigate incidents in which weapons were found to be present on UN including UNRWA premises. The UNSG noted that this was the second time during that he was obliged to establish a BOI involving attacks on UN personnel and premises in Gaza.

8. The BOI was led by Patrick Cammaert (The Netherlands) and, similar to the first UNHQ BOI, was mandated to develop a clear record of the facts -- not to make legal findings or consider questions of legal liability. The BOI was convened on 10 November 2014 and submitted its report on 5 February 2015. Both the Government of Israel and the State of Palestine cooperated with the BOI. Although the BOI's report remains confidential, a public summary of the report was prepared by the UN Secretariat and presented to the UN Security Council.

9. The BOI found that, in seven incidents, Israeli military action had caused damage to UNRWA schools and death or injury to at least one UNRWA staff member and his two sons and at least 44 Palestinians killed and 227 injured at UNRWA schools, health centres and warehouses being used as emergency shelters. The BOI found that Palestinian militant groups had used three unused and empty UNRWA schools to hide their arms and may have also used them to launch attacks. The BOI report put forth eight recommendations to strengthen safety and security; nine recommendations to improve communication and coordination; as well as two general recommendations including the urgent need for counselling to address potential post-traumatic stress disorder among UN and UNRWA personnel.

Conclusion

10. At a meeting of the UNSC on 8 April 2026, member states noted that 1,010 humanitarian personnel were killed globally in the last three years and that more than half were killed by Israel in the OPT. Of the 560 killed by Israel, nearly 400 were UNRWA staff and affiliated personnel in Gaza. The majority of the UNSC members demanded accountability and adherence to international law. In light of the two prior BIs established by UNSG Ban, UNSG Antonio Guterres should at long last establish a third BI or, given the scale of the Israeli attacks, a broader UN Commission of Inquiry to confirm the facts relating to any and all incidents which occurred in Gaza, since 7 October 2023, in which UN personnel, premises and property were affected.

The Palestine Refugee Policy Forum is an ad hoc group of independent analysts who seek to generate informed discussion on the future of UNRWA. Participants include Kjersti Berg, Mick Dumper, Mona Ali Khalil, Mezna Qato, Lex Takkenberg and Andrew Whitley.