Statement on UNRWA's Response to IMPACT-se Report

July 21 2022

In respect to UNRWA's latest statement on our report reviewing UNRWA-branded school materials, labeled for use in 2022, below is an executive summary.

Given that UNRWA chose to reach out in its statement to IMPACT-se for guidance on the reviewed material, we felt compelled to provide additional information.

Although not within the scope of our research, a cursory inspection of UNRWA school social media accounts reveals that UNRWA-branded materials in our report, in violation of UN values, are, in fact, used in the UNRWA schools.

This is despite UNRWA's absolute denial that problematic UNRWA-produced teaching materials were "authorized for use in any UNRWA school," claiming that identified materials were from an unnamed, private commercial website, which illegally utilized the agency's logo and names of employees.

The UNRWA-branded material analyzed in the report includes 590 pages, in 30 documents, across at least four freely available open-source platforms, spanning six separate grades. They all bear the UNRWA logo or its name in Arabic. The materials list UNRWA staff, six of whom are supervisors and inspectors, as well as 49 teachers affiliated with over 30 UNRWA schools in three verified UNRWA school districts, who helped to write and supervise the documents in question.

The agency's assertion that hundreds of documented pages of material were illegally created and "not authorized" to be taught in schools is not credible and deflects responsibility.

See UNRWA materials recognition document here.

By not placing this material on its Digital Learning Portal (DLP), and then claiming that the DLP is the only source of self-produced content that the agency uses for teaching, UNRWA is attempting to disassociate itself from its own long-standing teaching practices in Gaza, where its education departments and employees have routinely produced a great deal of UNRWA-branded content not aligned with UN values, both before and after the April 2021 launch of the DLP. UNRWA owes an explanation as to how, despite extensive commitments to eradicating antisemitism and incitement, this material is disseminated with UNRWA's approval.

In May of this year, IMPACT-se was invited to participate in a roundtable with UNRWA's Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini, where specific concerns were raised over the agency's self-produced materials - those not on the DLP - as evidenced in IMPACT-se's previous UNRWA reports. We also pointed out serious deficiencies of the DLP, such as the deliberate omission of supplementary guidance materials in social studies and Islamic studies, both of which are taught in UNRWA schools, and are known to contain highly volatile content. Most of the examples cited in our latest report are from these subjects.

Unfortunately, this isn't the first occurrence of problematic institutional materials produced, and routinely used, by UNRWA. Last year, UNRWA promised that all hate material it had produced had been removed, was no longer in circulation, and reported that breaches of this policy had been dealt with firmly. This came in the wake of the agency's earlier admission that its teachers had "mistakenly" produced and distributed "inappropriate material," in response to IMPACT-se's reports on UNRWA-produced study material during the Pandemic.

It is clear that UNRWA's internal auditing mechanisms are not fit for purpose. The production and distribution of institutional material containing incitement to violence, a rejection of peace as the way to resolve conflict, antisemitism, hate, and intolerance, routinely continues.
This is not a new problem. In this article from 1957, UNRWA promised to remove incitement from Egyptian textbooks in Gaza.

Some facts

Facts relating to the main areas of concern encompass three distinct issues:
1) Problematic materials used today in UNRWA schools.
2) Alleged falsification of UNRWA's logo, and names of educators.
3) Use of UNRWA's Digital Learning Platform (DLP)

1. Problematic materials used today in UNRWA schools:

- As previously mentioned, while social media analysis does not fall within IMPACT-se's research, a cursory review of social media accounts shows that the materials in our report are used in UNRWA schools today. For example, on May 17, 2022, images of fifth-grade UNRWA social studies supplementary material, analyzed and cited by IMPACT-se in its report, were posted to a Facebook group of "Al-Zaytun middle school for boys B," a verified UNRWA school. The images of the material, which carry a timestamp, were posted by an UNRWA social studies teacher at the school who regularly posts pictures and videos from within this school on the same Facebook group, showing students and staff engaged in activities.

- Despite the UNRWA Commissioner-General's testimony before the European Parliament on September 1, 2021, claiming that his teachers use maps showcasing Israel, these exact examples appearing both in the UNRWA school on Facebook and in IMPACT-se's report erase the existence of Israel, a UN member state, labeling the entire territory as modern-day Palestine, with maps titled "map of Palestine." Other identical geography exercises task students with labeling cities in Israel proper as Palestinian cities. Unlike the materials in IMPACT-se's report, the examples appearing in the UNRWA school on Facebook also contain correct, handwritten answers, which further validate that UNRWA teachers teach their students that there is no Israel.

- A video by the same UNRWA teacher, posted on May 22, 2022 on a telegram group advertised on the school Facebook group and created for the sharing of UNRWA educational materials, shows the same UNRWA-branded supplementary material booklets labeled for use in 2022, and analyzed in IMPACT-se's report. The video is likely taken inside a classroom in the same Al-Zaytun middle school. In addition, a cover page of another fifth-grade Arabic Language booklet in the same packet appearing in the video shows a picture of Dalal al-Mughrabi, who killed thirty-eight Israelis, including thirteen children, in the 1978 Coastal Road Massacre. UNRWA claims her story is not taught in UNRWA schools, despite it appearing in a fifth-grade Palestinian textbook used in UNRWA schools, glorifying her as a national hero.

2. Alleged falsification of UNRWA's logo and names of educators.

- IMPACT-se's report on UNRWA-branded material includes 590 pages, in 30 documents, across at least six freely available open-source platforms, spanning six separate grades, that carry the UNRWA logo, and its name in Arabic.

- The materials list staff, which UNRWA confirmed were its employees in its statement. Six of them are supervisors and inspectors, as well as 49 teachers affiliated with over 30 UNRWA schools in three verified UNRWA school districts, all of which are listed in the UNRWA-branded material.

- The idea that this institutional material, all branded and created by UNRWA staff, is somehow appropriated by a rogue commercial website is astonishing and entirely lacking in credibility.

- Many official social media pages of UNRWA schools, teachers, and content supervisors listed in and outside of the analyzed IMPACT-se material, validate the routine use of institutional materials (not found on UNRWA's Digital Learning Platform) and school activities reaching thousands of children that violate UN values, and UNRWA's policy of neutrality and zero tolerance for hatred.

- If, as UNRWA claims, all of this material is indeed not authorized for use, an explanation is required as to how, despite extensive commitments to eradicate antisemitism and incitement, this material can nevertheless be disseminated with UNRWA approval.

3. Use of self-produced content and UNRWA's Digital Learning Platform (DLP)

- UNRWA claimed it conducts a thorough three-step vetting process to ensure full compliance with UN values for all teaching materials produced by its employees, before being posted on the DLP, launched in April 2021. UNRWA adds that the DLP is the only source of self-produced content the agency uses for teaching, and that any content not drawn from it is not authorized, nor is it used in any UNRWA school.

- IMPACT-se's report shows that, despite this claim, a great deal of UNRWA-produced material is not vetted, nor does it appear on the portal.

- The agency's assertion that hundreds of documented pages of material labeled for use in 2022 are "not authorized" to be taught in schools is clearly erroneous, given the extensive amount of teaching materials, all branded and prepared by UNRWA staff.

- For example, one of the UNRWA content supervisors listed in IMPACT-se's report, seen in UNRWA schools (see examples here, here, and here), posted images in December 2021 of problematic content he produced (see examples here and here), displaying his name and that of UNRWA's Al-Shati middle school for boys (B). It included a reading comprehension study drill, asking students to answer questions after referencing a ninth-grade Palestinian Arabic Language textbook of a Palestinian fisherman with "bloodshed bursting from his chest" who is, students are told, shot and killed in front of his son by Israelis, as a punishment for returning late to shore.

- This UNRWA material was created after the April 2021 launch of the DLP. This same UNRWA content supervisor was responsible for creating a poem glorifying martyrdom by teaching students that dying as martyrs by killing Israelis is a "hobby," itemized in IMPACT-se's report. UNRWA claims his name in the discovered material was forged.

- This also validates other findings in IMPACT-se's report, which show that UNRWA directs students to study hateful passages by referring to specific page numbers in Palestinian textbooks used in its schools, passages which UNRWA claims it instructs teachers to skip or teach differently.

- By not placing this material on the DLP, the agency disassociates itself from its own long-standing teaching practices in Gaza, where its employees produce UNRWA-branded content not aligned with UN values. This lack of responsibility, oversight, and control speaks to deeply flawed management practices.

- UNRWA explained that that lack of materials in its DLP are a "normal occurrence," as materials are only available during the lifecycle of their use by students, and that during summer no material is uploaded to the DLP, since schools are closed.

  - In May of this year, IMPACT-se met at a roundtable with UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini and raised concerns over his agency's self-produced branded materials, pointing out the deficiencies of its DLP, which did not address repeated transparency concerns.

  - In May, while UNRWA schools were still open, the platform contained very limited, out-of-date material, labeled for use in 2020. Most sections on the website had no content whatsoever. IMPACT-se brought this to UNRWA's attention.

  - Most importantly, since the DLP's launch and to this day, it does not include supplementary guidance material for social studies or Islamic studies - subjects known to contain highly volatile content taught in Palestinian textbooks in UNRWA schools and in UNRWA study cards, as previously reported by IMPACT-se.

  - Moreover, the DLP does not reflect what thousands of UNRWA students learn in class. It is used mostly for remote learning during times of crisis when schools are closed, such as during the Pandemic or a conflict, not in the classroom.

  - While in class or at home, students have and are instructed to use hard-copy Palestinian textbooks, which UNRWA states that it is obligated to use, and "has no mandate to alter any host government curriculum or textbooks which are a matter of national sovereignty."

  - Therefore, by UNRWA's own admission, its students are visually exposed to problematic content in hard-copy textbooks at school and at home, despite internal mechanisms UNRWA claims it uses - without evidence - for teachers to skip or teach differently.

- UNRWA also responded to IMPACT-se's report by stating that it incorporates tolerance and conflict resolution education via its teacher toolkit on human rights, conflict resolution, and tolerance (HRCRT).

  - However, the HRCRT teacher toolkit makes no reference to peace with Israel, or tolerance toward Jewish people—in fact, it does not mention Israel or Jewish people at all.

  - The HRCRT teacher toolkit states that it is provided solely to teachers to assist and guide them in integrating values into the classroom. Students are not presented with this toolkit, and there is no evidence that there is a separate class devoted to teaching this, as the toolkit itself confirms that it "is not a set curriculum for human rights education."

School education is the key to fostering peaceful, tolerant societies. IMPACT-se is committed to ensuring the next generation is educated according to values of peace, coexistence, religious tolerance, and a shared future.

IMPACT-se has reviewed dozens of school curricula, from Turkey to Iran and Syria, to Yemen, via the application of UNESCO standards and internationally-accepted procedures of good scientific practice. We work every day with governments and other partners across the Middle East and North Africa who share these aims. We have worked with those looking after refugee children, from Lesbos to Irbid - helping to drive hopeful, positive change toward peace and tolerance in school curricula across the region.

Exposing children to trauma, hatred, and intolerance in what should be a safe school environment is an abrogation of duty of care. Hence our surprise at the nonserious statement released by UNRWA. IMPACT-se might be a small research institute, but it will not be maneuvered into submission by one of the largest non-governmental organizations in the world, with a staff of 30,000 and a $1.5 billion budget.

The proliferation of inflammatory school materials is a serious issue, not a public relations problem. It needs to be addressed with transparency and respect for truth.