

Switzerland

Only UNRWA can aid the people of Gaza

Open letter to the Council of States

(CH-S) On 16 October 2024, the Swiss “Observatory for Ethics and Humanitarian Health” (OESH)* sent a letter to all members of the Council of States, calling on them to reverse the National Council’s decision to cut subsidies to UNRWA. The Monitoring Agency also endeavours to preserve Switzerland’s humanitarian tradition and its positive influence in the world.

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Dear Sir or Madam,

Dear Member of the Council of States

At its meeting on 9 September 2024, a majority of the National Council decided to suspend support for UNRWA, which had already been halved a few months earlier. This decision was based on political considerations, fuelled by unfounded rumours, rather than on reliable facts or the real plight of a suffering population. In particular, it is based on the misleading argument that UNRWA is an ally of Hamas, which is responsible for the atrocities of 7 October 2023 against Israeli civilians. From this it is concluded that this United Nations agency, headed by a Swiss citizen, is funding a terrorist organisation.

Following the Israeli government’s accusations that agency employees were involved in the deadly attacks of 7 October, the UN called for an investigation into the neutrality of the agency, which – under the chairmanship of *Catherine Colonna*, the former French foreign minister – was entrusted to an independent committee. The report, which was submitted to the Secretary-General in April 2024, concludes that there is

* The Swiss Observatory of Ethics and Humanitarian Health (OESH) is a Neuchâtel-based Swiss non-profit association working in international cooperation. The aim of its activities is to address the current challenges facing humanitarian work in the field of global health by providing a place for discussion and dialogue to stimulate public and scientific debate. The observatory was founded in 2020 in recognition of the fact that it is becoming increasingly difficult for humanitarian actors to fulfil their core mission: to provide care to victims. (Cf. <https://oesh.ch/qui-sommes-nous/#continue>)



no evidence of complicity with Hamas: “To date, Israel has not provided any evidence of the involvement of UN staff in these attacks.” It also states: “UNRWA has taken a more neutral approach than other similar United Nations agencies or NGOs.”

As a result of this report, Japan, Germany, Italy, Australia, Canada and the United Kingdom resumed their funding.

Our approach is not political in the partisan sense but is based solely on the defence of human rights. We also seek to preserve our country’s humanitarian tradition and its reach in the world.

The United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) was formally established on 27 December 1949 to assist refugees who had fled or been displaced at the time of the creation of the State of Israel and subsequent conflicts. The creation of this agency is the result of the adoption of Resolution 302 (IV) of the United Nations General Assembly, which was adopted on 8 December 1949. Thus, only the UN General Assembly has the power to modify or terminate its mandate.

UNRWA currently employs around 30,000 people, mostly Palestinians, and its mandate covers the areas of education, social services and health. It gives aid and protection for 5.9 million registered Palestinian refugees in Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, including East Jerusalem.

This information is important because if you decide to halt the Confederation’s financial support for UNRWA, you will be punishing not only the population of the Gaza Strip, but all Palestinian refugees in the Middle East.

To absolve themselves of the disastrous effects of this decision on the people of Gaza, the majority of the National Council members claim that the aid would be delivered by Swiss human-

itarian NGOs financed by the Swiss government. However, no Swiss NGO has the means, expertise or capacity to replace UNRWA. Even the *Red Crescent*, UNHCR and ICRC have stated that they cannot replace UNRWA. Even Federal Councillor *Ignazio Cassis* said that without UNRWA, aid cannot be distributed to the people of Gaza.

Currently, the catastrophic health and nutrition situation affecting 2.2 million people – who are in “survival mode” – urgently requires aid that only UNRWA is able to provide.

The Gaza Strip used to be almost food self-sufficient, producing vegetables, poultry, dairy products and fruit trees to feed its population. According to the FAO (*Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations*), 96 per cent of the population in the Gaza Strip faces significant food insecurity. It warns of a high risk of impending famine.

According to the *Palestinian Red Crescent*, at the time of writing this letter, the death toll was 40,972 dead, including 16,756 children, and 94,761 injured, including at least 6,168 children. In an article published in the renowned international medical journal *The Lancet* on 9 July 2024, the authors estimated the total number of deaths at around 186,000, due to the large number of people buried under the rubble, but also to a lack of medical care, access to medication, food or water contamination.

On the initiative of the Ethics and Humanitarian Health Observatory, the signatories from the fields of science, diplomacy and humanitarian aid therefore call on you to overturn the National Council’s decision and to reinstate Switzerland’s financial support for UNRWA.

With best regards

Nago Humbert, Director of the Observatory for Ethics and Humanitarian Health, former employee of the Red Crescent and the World Health Organisation (WHO) in Jerusalem and Gaza, founder of Médecins du Monde Switzerland.

Carla del Ponte, former Attorney General of Switzerland, former Chief Prosecutor of the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia.

Jean-Daniel Ruch, Former Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to Israel, Turkey and Serbia, former Swiss Special Envoy for the Middle East.

Yves Besson, Former Swiss diplomat, former director of UNRWA in the West Bank, 1993–1996 head of the UN delegation for the peace process following the Oslo Accords.

Jacques de Watteville, State Secretary at the Federal Department of Finance (2012–2016) and State Secretary at the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (2015–2017), former ambassador and former ICRC delegate in Lebanon.



Boy sitting in the rubble of a destroyed UNRWA school in Nuseirat, Middle Areas. (© 2024 UNRWA Photo)

Urs Ziswiler, Former Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to the United States, Canada and Spain. Former head of the FDFA’s Humanitarian Policy and International Refugee Issues Division and former ICRC delegate in Gaza and Tel Aviv.

Salome Zimmermann, Doctor of Law, Attorney-at-Law, former Judge at the Federal Administrative Court.

Charles Kleiber, former State Secretary for Education, Research and Innovation and former Director General of the CHUV in Lausanne.

Yves Daccord, Former Director General of the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC).

Didier Pfirter, former ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to the Middle East.

Lorenzo Amberg, former Ambassador of the Swiss Confederation to Georgia and Greece.

Franco Cavalli, Doctor, oncologist, professor, former president of the International Union Against Cancer, he heads humanitarian projects in Central America.

Thomas Bischoff, Doctor, former director of the University Institute of General Medicine (IUMG) in Lausanne, member of the MASM association (Médecins Action Santé Migrants).

Viviane Châtel, Sociologist, lecturer and researcher, Chair of Social Work and Social Policy, University of Fribourg, Director of the master’s programme in “Ethics, Responsibility and Development”.

Jean-Daniel Gerber, former director of the State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO) and former director of the Federal Office for Refugees (now BAMF).

Jochi Weil-Goldstein, Former secretary of Medico International Switzerland, responsible for several medical projects in Israel/Palestine.

Ruth Flint, Former Swiss ambassador to Lebanon (2010–2014)

Janvier de Riedmatten, Former representative of the UNHCR in Jordan, Greece, Angola, Congo, Iraq; former delegate of the ICRC in Gaza and Lebanon.

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