

## Questions About the Impartiality of RTS Journalist Anne-Frédérique Widmann on UNRWA, Israel & Antisemitism

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

#### ***Anne-Frédérique Widmann's UNRWA Documentary for RTS***

Anne-Frédérique Widmann is a Geneva-based investigative journalist with *Temps Présent*, the current affairs weekly magazine show of Radio Télévision Suisse (RTS). She has been working on a 52-minute [documentary](#) about UNRWA that will be aired on 17 December 2020, on *Temps Présent*, and in all French-speaking countries through the TV5Monde global television network. The show's stated purpose is to examine UNRWA's recent crisis, including the departure of commissioner-general Pierre Krähenbühl, and the future of the organization.

UN Watch learned of the above when Ms. Widmann earlier this year contacted our Executive Director, Mr. Hillel Neuer, to request an interview for the program, which was accepted and scheduled for 12 October 2020. Shortly thereafter, we discovered troubling information concerning Ms. Widmann that raised serious questions, as detailed below, about her capacity to impartially investigate and present the subject matter of her RTS report. UN Watch spoke with Ms. Widmann to request clarifications about the nature of her documentary, indicating that Mr. Neuer would speak about [UN Watch's reports](#) that revealed systematic incitement to antisemitism and terrorism by UNRWA teachers and other staff, and inquiring whether Ms. Widmann's documentary would ask UNRWA for a response, including as to whether the organization ever took disciplinary action against those employees identified in our reports as inciting to racism or terrorism. Shortly thereafter, in an abrupt email, Ms. Widmann summarily canceled the interview with Mr. Neuer. She provided no explanation, despite her having invested significant efforts—including through her numerous emails, phone calls and even a visit to UN Watch's office together with the director Xavier Nicol—in order to secure the interview.

UN Watch is a Geneva-based NGO that monitors the United Nations for its compliance with the UN Charter, including the principles of universality and non-discrimination. Since 2015, UN Watch has produced [six separate reports](#) detailing neutrality violations by UNRWA staff, specifically 100 UNRWA staff and school Facebook pages containing antisemitism and terrorist incitement. Following the publication of UN Watch's [February 2017 report](#), the culture of hate among UNRWA teachers was reported widely in Switzerland by the [Neue Zürcher Zeitung](#), [SonntagsZeitung](#) and [Basler Zeitung](#), as well as internationally by [The Times of London](#), [Bild](#) and the *Wall Street Journal*.

#### ***Switzerland Recognizes UNRWA's Problem With Incitement to Antisemitism***

Switzerland is one of several UNRWA donor states that has recognized the problem of antisemitism in UNRWA schools. In 2017, Foreign Minister Didier Burkhalter took the floor in the lower house of the Swiss legislature to acknowledge that "the Federal Council has become aware of the allegations

contained in the report from the NGO UN Watch, stating that UNRWA employees allegedly propagated racist and anti-Semitic messages over social networks.”<sup>1</sup>

“The Federal Council condemns this in the strongest terms,” added Foreign Minister Burkhalter. “We condemn these forms of racism and anti-Semitism.”<sup>2</sup>

The minister told the parliament that the Swiss government “has opened discussions with UNRWA also about the cases mentioned, and an examination of these allegations is underway. Therefore, we expect our partners, such as this organization, to carry out investigations and to take disciplinary action if these allegations are proven.”<sup>3</sup>

More recently, the Swiss Federal Council once again highlighted its ongoing concerns in a report about UNRWA released on October 14, 2020.<sup>4</sup> The Swiss government report acknowledged that notwithstanding various training sessions undertaken by UNRWA, the agency’s schools were still using “unbalanced textbooks from host countries.”<sup>5</sup>

The report also cited to the recent findings of the UN Committee on Elimination of Racial Discrimination expressing concern about statements by Palestinian public figures, politicians and media officials, as well as in school textbooks and curricula, pointing to “hate speech against Israelis” which the Committee found “fuels hatred” and “may incite violence” and “antisemitism.”<sup>6</sup>

The Swiss government report condemned UNRWA “school materials that run counter to the spirit of a two-state solution, glorify violence, racism and antisemitism,” saying these “are not in line with the Swiss Near East position.” The report emphasized that Switzerland does not finance the textbooks or curricula.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the Swiss government’s expression of concern, UNRWA employees continue to publish Facebook posts celebrating radical Islamic terrorism, and inciting antisemitism.

### ***Serious Concerns About Anne-Frédérique Widmann’s Impartiality on UNRWA, Israel & Antisemitism***

UN Watch is deeply concerned that RTS is producing a documentary that relates to UNRWA, Israel and antisemitism where the show’s lead journalist has a substantial and consistent record of making numerous public and prejudicial statements on each of these matters.

Ms. Widmann’s lack of objectivity in matters relating to UNRWA or the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is evident from her Twitter and Facebook accounts, both of which are her official and public accounts that

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<sup>1</sup> *Swiss FM condemns UNRWA teacher’s incitement in ‘strongest terms’*, UN WATCH (March 7, 2017), <https://unwatch.org/swiss-fm-condemns-unrwa-teachers-incitement-strongest-terms-defends-organization/>.

<sup>2</sup> *Id.*

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*

<sup>4</sup> *UNRWA: Review and Outlook after 70 years*, SWISS FEDERAL COUNCIL (Oct. 14, 2020), <https://www.news.admin.ch/news/message/attachments/63248.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*

<sup>6</sup> <https://unwatch.org/breaking-un-urges-palestinians-to-stop-hate-speech-against-israelis-that-fuels-antisemitism/>

<sup>7</sup> See Swiss Federal Council, *supra*, at note 4.

she advertises in the signatures of her RTS emails. On her social media, Ms. Widmann consistently downplays or dismisses concerns about antisemitism, manifests a sharp bias against Israel, and strong favor for UNRWA.

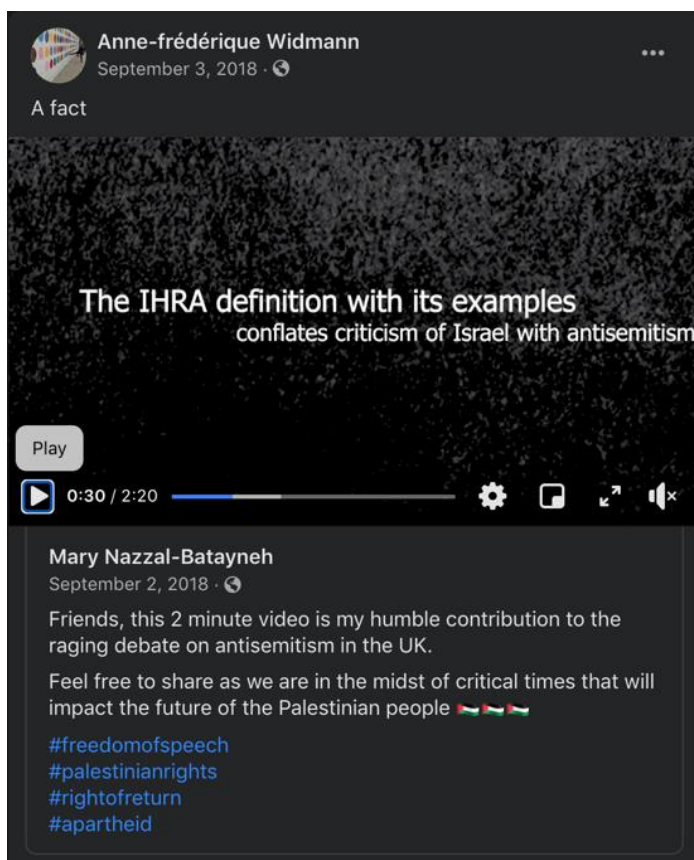
Despite the deep concerns expressed by the Swiss government and media, as well as by other international actors, concerning UNRWA schools and staff that promote antisemitism, Ms. Widmann on her social media has only supported and never criticized UNRWA. As reflected in the examples below, Ms. Widmann's social media posts reflect her personal partisan positions, indicating that she lacks objectivity when it comes to UNRWA and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

UN Watch is *not* calling for the program to be canceled, even if it is difficult to imagine how it could be objective and impartial in light of Ms. Widmann's personal views as reflected on her social media posts. However, at a minimum, Ms. Widmann and RTS should disclose to viewers the fact that she is investigating and reporting on issues upon which, as documented below, she has already taken adverse stands to relevant parties, and pronounced herself on the merits of the very questions purportedly being investigated, all of which give rise to actual bias or the appearance thereof. The integrity, independence and impartiality of Radio Télévision Suisse require no less.

## I. MS. WIDMANN'S PATTERN OF DISMISSING ANTISEMITISM

Ms. Widmann's social media posts routinely dismiss or downplay concerns over antisemitism.

1. **Endorses accusation of Israel as guilty of "apartheid" and "ethnic cleansing."** On September 3, 2018, Ms. Widmann shared and endorsed as "a fact" a video by pro-Palestinian activist Mary Nazzal-Batayneh which accused Israel of "apartheid," "ethnic cleansing" and "caging in" Palestinians.<sup>8</sup> In endorsing this post, Ms. Widmann was helping to lobby the British Labor Party not to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) definition of antisemitism, which it did ultimately adopt. The IHRA definition of antisemitism is also accepted by 35 countries including France, Germany, the UK, Denmark, Canada, the U.S. and Bahrain.



<sup>8</sup> Timeline of Anne-Frédérique Widmann, FACEBOOK (Sep. 3, 2018), <https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10216555895785678>.

2. **Dismisses antisemitism accusation that led to *Süddeutsche Zeitung* firing cartoonist.** In May and June of 2018, Ms. Widmann defended cartoonist Dieter Hanitzsch who was fired from the leading German daily *Süddeutsche Zeitung* for a cartoon widely condemned as antisemitic. The cartoon, published shortly after Israel's victory in the 2018 Eurovision song contest, replaces the "V" in Eurovision with a Jewish Star of David, and depicts the winner, popular Israeli singer Netta Barzilai, as Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in a blood-soaked performance outfit, holding up a missile adorned with a Star of David, with the caption "Next year in Jerusalem." The cartoon plays into classic antisemitic tropes and conspiracy theories about Jewish power, implying Jewish control over the Eurovision contest, and that Jewish people, represented by the Star of David, and Israeli citizens, represented by singer Netta Barzilai, are interchangeable with the Israeli government, represented by Prime Minister Netanyahu.



Ms. Widmann rushed to defend Mr. Hanitzsch on Facebook, sharing multiple posts protesting the dismissal, and denying that the cartoon was antisemitic.<sup>9</sup> In one of her shared posts, she wrote a caption describing the accusations of antisemitism as “nauseating” and asked, “Where is the world going?” Another post claimed that the antisemitism accusation was “as unfounded as it is infamous.”



Regardless of whether the cartoon was antisemitic or not, Mr. Hanitzsch was fired for it, and Ms. Widmann leapt to his defense. UN Watch has found no other example from Ms. Widmann's social media where she dismissed or downplayed an allegation of racism or discrimination

<sup>9</sup> See, e.g., Timeline of Anne- frédérique Widmann, FACEBOOK (June 5, 2018), [https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10215851605218854?\\_ft\\_n=&\\_ft\\_z=0&\\_ft\\_w=1000](https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10215851605218854?_ft_n=&_ft_z=0&_ft_w=1000); Timeline of Anne- frédérique Widmann, FACEBOOK (May 30, 2018), [https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10215803195408639?\\_ft\\_n=&\\_ft\\_z=0&\\_ft\\_w=1000](https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10215803195408639?_ft_n=&_ft_z=0&_ft_w=1000); Timeline of Anne- frédérique Widmann, FACEBOOK (June 1, 2018), [https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10215819175888141?\\_ft\\_n=&\\_ft\\_z=0&\\_ft\\_w=1000](https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10215819175888141?_ft_n=&_ft_z=0&_ft_w=1000).



against any other group, such as against blacks, women or gays. The only type of discrimination that Ms. Widmann has a pattern of dismissing is antisemitism.

### MS. WIDMANN'S SHARP ANTI-ISRAELI BIAS

Ms. Widmann's social media indicates a sharp anti-Israeli bias. She routinely shares content accusing Israel of colonization, apartheid and other violations, but ignores Palestinian terrorism and attacks against Israelis.

1. **Shares cartoon accusing Israel of "colonization."** Ms. Widmann frequently promotes the work of her husband, the cartoonist Patrick Chappatte. The fact that Ms. Widmann and Chappatte are married is not relevant. However, Chappatte's work is known as highly partisan if not outright hostile in its portrayal of Israelis. As a RTS journalist who is supposed to be objective, Ms. Widmann should not be sharing highly partisan material on subjects that she is meant to report on impartially. Posting on Facebook in November 2019, Ms. Widmann shared a Chappatte cartoon entitled "The USA legitimizes Israeli colonization." The two-state solution was depicted as faceless Israelis living in highly militarized and walled-off compounds waving both the Israeli and U.S. flags, while a hapless Palestinian man and his child on a donkey are left stranded in the desert.



2. **Endorses tweets accusing Israel of “apartheid” and “subjugation.”** Ms. Widmann also liked and shared tweets accusing Israel of “permanent subjugation of Palestinians,” “apartheid,” and of imposing a “siege” on Gaza.<sup>10</sup>



<sup>10</sup> Contrary to the images conjured up by the “siege” accusation, every day an average of 800 trucks leave Israel to enter the Gaza Strip carrying food, medical equipment, fuel, building materials, agricultural inputs, textile products and more, according to Israel’s Office of Coordination of Government Activities in the Territories (COGAT), which publishes weekly data about humanitarian traffic in and out of Gaza. In the first week of May 2020, 260 tons of medical supplies were transferred to Gaza through the Kerem Shalom crossing, in addition to 12,500 tons of food, 100 tanks of fuel and 355 tons of agricultural products. Also, on May 7, 2020, Israel facilitated the transfer to Gaza of a Watergen water machine that can create 600 liters of water per day from air. This movement of goods and services continues even during closures due to Hamas rocket attacks. For example, despite hundreds of rockets fired against Israel from Gaza in the summer of 2018, Israel continued to allow food and medical supplies into Gaza. On August 13, 2018, the day before Israel reopened the crossings, COGAT reported the transfer of 3,889 tons of goods in 156 trucks, which entered Gaza through Kerem Shalom Crossing.





3. **Responds negatively to Israel-UAE peace.** When Israel's peace deals with the UAE and Bahrain were announced, Ms. Widmann did not post anything in favor of the most significant Arab-Israeli rapprochement in decades. Instead, her reaction was immediately negative, as she shared an August 21st tweet by Kenneth Roth that criticized the agreement between the two countries to normalize relations.



## MS. WIDMANN'S PATTERN OF SYMPATHY AND SUPPORT FOR UNRWA

Ms. Widmann's social media demonstrates a pattern of consistent and uncritical support for UNRWA.

1. **Endorses cartoon dismissing concerns that UNRWA schools teach antisemitism.** In April 2020, Ms. Widmann posted an endorsement on Facebook for Patrick Chappatte's new book of cartoons which features a pro-UNRWA cartoon making fun of the U.S. President for cutting funding to UNRWA, and dismissing accusations that UNRWA schools propagate hate and antisemitism.<sup>11</sup> The cartoon depicts President Trump in the foreground saying "I'm not paying for Palestinian weapons" and an UNRWA classroom in the background with a teacher pointing to the blackboard with the words: "The most powerful weapon: Education." The cartoon thus ridicules documented concerns, acknowledged as legitimate by UNRWA donor governments including Switzerland, that UNRWA teachers incite antisemitism.<sup>12</sup>



<sup>11</sup> Timeline of Anne- frédérique Widmann, FACEBOOK (April 19, 2020), <https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10221446893657568>.

<sup>12</sup> See Swiss FM condemns UNRWA teachers' incitement in 'strongest terms', *supra* at note 1, and Swiss Federal Council, *supra* note 4.

## 2. Supports UNRWA even when mainstream media exposes major UNRWA corruption scandal.

Putting aside the issue of UNRWA staff antisemitism, Ms. Widmann posted support for UNRWA even when it was being widely criticized by donor governments and the press. It was *Al Jazeera*<sup>13</sup> that broke the story of the UNRWA corruption scandal in July 2019 in which a number of senior staff, including then-Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl, were accused of various abuses of authority and even sexual misconduct. Swissinfo and other major media published a number of stories about the scandal.<sup>14</sup> Despite critical coverage about UNRWA in mainstream media, Ms. Widmann's social media completely ignored the issue. She posted about it only three months later when Krähenbühl was replaced—to show her support for Krähenbühl.<sup>15</sup> On November 10, 2019, she shared on Facebook a media interview with Krähenbühl headlined: “There are no cases of corruption, fraud or mismanagement of funds” at UNRWA.

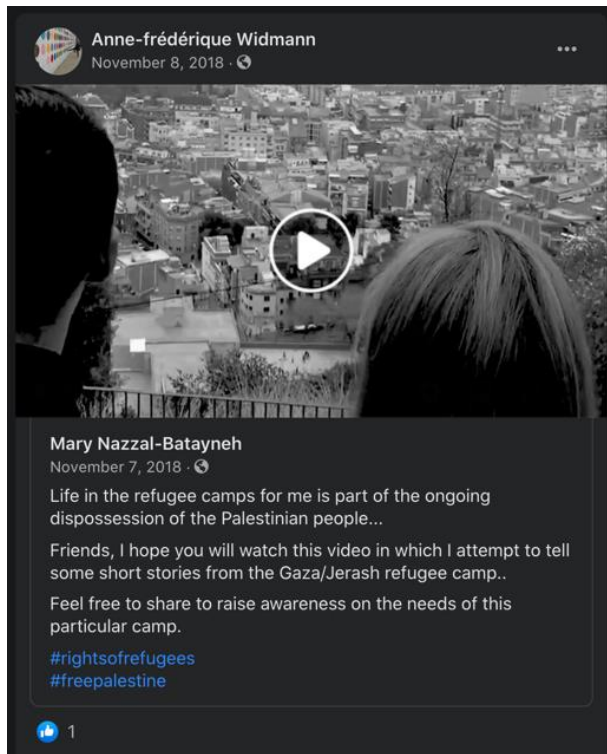


<sup>13</sup> Ian Williams, *Ethics report accuses UNRWA leadership of abuse of power*, AL JAZEERA (July 29, 2019), <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/07/29/ethics-report-accuses-unrwa-leadership-of-abuse-of-power/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Swiss suspend payments to Palestinian refugee agency*, SWISSINFO (July 30, 2019), [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/unrwa\\_swiss-suspend-payments-to-palestinian-refugee-agency/45129342](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/unrwa_swiss-suspend-payments-to-palestinian-refugee-agency/45129342); *Swiss UNRWA boss said to have created 'toxic work environment'*, SWISSINFO (Aug. 4, 2019), [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/mismanagement-allegations\\_swiss-unrwa-boss-said-to-have-created-toxic-work-environment-/45139970](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/mismanagement-allegations_swiss-unrwa-boss-said-to-have-created-toxic-work-environment-/45139970); *UNRWA replaces Swiss boss pending misconduct inquiry*, SWISSINFO (Nov. 6, 2019), [https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/palestinian-refugees\\_unrwa-replaces-swiss-boss-pending-misconduct-inquiry-/45350590](https://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/palestinian-refugees_unrwa-replaces-swiss-boss-pending-misconduct-inquiry-/45350590).

<sup>15</sup> *Timeline of Anne- frédérique Widmann*, FACEBOOK (Nov. 10, 2019), [https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10219897053432531?\\_cft\\_\\_\[0\]=AZV4Ouf6Ne8AAQ S5FVfY1rVM3P2Y2i4B9NdUWBPP3GuBck-gk1dhwuRzxN 5-ZRHK68HoXCTKEsTeZo10mCPgPxz-o3OYaX7uEVnvK7-DvejHQd ee1AsdB7Ef orkWb1w&\\_tn\\_=%2C0%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10219897053432531?_cft__[0]=AZV4Ouf6Ne8AAQ S5FVfY1rVM3P2Y2i4B9NdUWBPP3GuBck-gk1dhwuRzxN 5-ZRHK68HoXCTKEsTeZo10mCPgPxz-o3OYaX7uEVnvK7-DvejHQd ee1AsdB7Ef orkWb1w&_tn_=%2C0%2CP-R).

3. **Shares video critical of funding cuts to UNRWA.** In November 2018, Ms. Widmann shared a post and video with the hashtag “#freealestine”, published by Jordanian businesswoman and pro-Palestinian activist Mary Nazzal-Batayneh in support of Palestinian refugees in Gaza and critical of funding cuts to UNRWA. The post depicted Palestinian refugee camps as an example of Israeli “dispossession.”<sup>16</sup>



<sup>16</sup> Timeline of Anne- frédérique Widmann, FACEBOOK (Nov. 8, 2018), [https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10217034060299492?\\_cft\\_\\_\[0\]=AZUV9NvzCrnxOumUkP1MMYVpK10HEhSdB7t1alecZFtKHKf5TlaLGOymQp4CjLHZTyZSddjT-Sk2ZGjd-e7W3XKJ0fGJ-JD9t5rVWc\\_r9pQ5C\\_lqxMCn6f90-X-R0zr0eNI9Bx4FA-5lkjpHmFdyyc&\\_tn\\_=%2CO%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10217034060299492?_cft__[0]=AZUV9NvzCrnxOumUkP1MMYVpK10HEhSdB7t1alecZFtKHKf5TlaLGOymQp4CjLHZTyZSddjT-Sk2ZGjd-e7W3XKJ0fGJ-JD9t5rVWc_r9pQ5C_lqxMCn6f90-X-R0zr0eNI9Bx4FA-5lkjpHmFdyyc&_tn_=%2CO%2CP-R).

4. **Shares UNRWA PR material.** In November 2018, Ms. Widmann shared UNRWA's public relations material in the form of a Facebook post quoting Mary Nazzal-Batayneh on why she supports UNRWA.<sup>17</sup>



<sup>17</sup> Timeline of Anne- frédérique Widmann, FACEBOOK (Nov. 25, 2018), [https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10217151117385846?\\_cft\\_\\_\[0\]=AZUdDROMQOI7Ua1cd029rzEEBH-sslmIuA90U35QQFz1dogEwCo5IbApclVCPHj\\_TaHm-QmS39q2sPQBIdNS\\_j6nBdS6NDQ8XQ6\\_0-nM2DPK4uYaeKl\\_oJhQZ5cLWS1fMY\\_JDhLc8QO8qULDsdnPwVmD56zoB9xbmdNg35LP5mNAeOWGyAi9ot4dB3fYY04Ao66x2vGdODOxBIYqABgXSsJH&\\_tn\\_=%2C0%2CP-R](https://www.facebook.com/annefrederique.widmann/posts/10217151117385846?_cft__[0]=AZUdDROMQOI7Ua1cd029rzEEBH-sslmIuA90U35QQFz1dogEwCo5IbApclVCPHj_TaHm-QmS39q2sPQBIdNS_j6nBdS6NDQ8XQ6_0-nM2DPK4uYaeKl_oJhQZ5cLWS1fMY_JDhLc8QO8qULDsdnPwVmD56zoB9xbmdNg35LP5mNAeOWGyAi9ot4dB3fYY04Ao66x2vGdODOxBIYqABgXSsJH&_tn_=%2C0%2CP-R).



5. **Shares posts by UNRWA Gaza head Matthias Schmale promoting Palestinian narrative of only blaming Israel.** In August 2020, Ms. Widmann did not post anything about Palestinian jihadists who fired rockets into southern Israel. Instead, she shared partisan tweets by UNRWA's Gaza Director Matthias Schmale which promoted the UNRWA narrative of only blaming Israel. In one tweet liked by Widmann, Schmale lauded UNRWA for providing critical services in the midst of Israel's bombings. In another tweet shared by Widmann, Schmale posted a picture of an "explosion in the middle of Gaza a short while ago" and lamented the "rockets & missiles flying back and forth all night" as Gaza "struggles to cope with spreading local #COVID19."



Widmann Anne- F. Retweeted

**Matthias Schmale** @matzschmale

Sheer madness! As #Gaza struggles to cope with spreading local #COVID19 outbreak, military tensions continue. Rockets & missiles flying back and forth all night; this explosion in the middle of Gaza a short while ago. This must stop; we should all focus on fighting the virus!



6:16 AM · Aug 28, 2020 · Twitter for iPad



## CONCLUSION

Despite the deep concerns expressed by the Swiss government and media, as well as by other international actors, concerning UNRWA schools and staff that promote antisemitism, Ms. Widmann on her social media has only supported and never criticized UNRWA. As shown in the examples above, Ms. Widmann's social media posts reflect her personal partisan positions, indicating that she lacks objectivity when it comes to UNRWA and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

UN Watch is *not* calling for the RTS program to be canceled, even if it is difficult to imagine how it could be objective and impartial in light of Ms. Widmann's personal views as reflected on her social media posts. However, at a minimum, Ms. Widmann and RTS should disclose to viewers the fact that she is investigating and reporting on issues upon which, as documented above, she has already taken adverse stands to relevant parties, and pronounced herself on the merits of the very questions purportedly being investigated, all of which give rise to actual bias or the appearance thereof. The integrity, independence and impartiality of Radio Télévision Suisse require no less.