

Exposed: UNRWA's Rigged "Independent" Review

A Report on the Colonna Investigation of UNRWA's Terror Ties

18 April 2024

A. Introduction

On February 5, 2024, UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres announced the appointment of an "Independent Review Group" with the stated purpose of assessing whether the UNRWA "is doing everything within its power to ensure neutrality and to respond to allegations of serious breaches when they are made."¹ The appointment was officially made only "in consultation with" UNRWA Commissioner-General Philippe Lazzarini, but in fact he had previously informed the media, as reported on January 17-19, that UNRWA was itself the one creating the inquiry.

UNRWA Chief Lazzarini Announced UNRWA Would Commission the Review

Lazzarini made the decision to create the review only one week after UN Watch sparked a [media firestorm](#) in [exposing](#) a 3,000-member Telegram chat group of UNRWA teachers in Gaza who cheered and celebrated Hamas's October 7th massacre, called for the execution of Israelis, shared instructions on how to aid Hamas' efforts, and proclaimed they would like to emulate, in their own classrooms, the education given to the October 7th terrorists.

So while the Review Group's creation came shortly after 18 donor states suspended funding to UNRWA,² due to revelations that at least 12 UNRWA staffers participated³ in the October 7th massacre, and that hundreds of the agency's employees are operatives of Hamas and Islamic Jihad,⁴ the origin and purpose of the review relate to [UN Watch's reports](#).

Initially, Lazzarini [told](#) reporters he would appoint a professional consulting group or some other "independent entity" to look into the claims. However, in the end, in a process that has not been revealed, UNRWA selected Catherine Colonna, the former French Minister of Foreign Affairs, to lead the Review Group, supported by three Scandinavian research institutions: The Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) in Norway; The Raoul Wallenberg Institute in Sweden, and The Danish Institute for Human Rights.

¹ *Statement by the Secretary-General – on UNRWA*, **UNRWA** (February 5, 2024), <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/official-statements/statement-secretary-general-%E2%80%93-unrwa>.

² *List of Countries Suspending UNRWA Funding*, **UN Watch** (January 29, 2024), <https://unwatch.org/updated-list-of-countries-suspending-unwra-funding/>.

³ *Details Emerge on U.N. Workers Accused of Aiding Hamas Raid*, **The New York Times** (January 28, 2024), <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/01/28/world/middleeast/gaza-unrwa-hamas-israel.html>.

⁴ *Intelligence Reveals Details of U.N. Agency Staff's Links to Oct. 7 Attack*, **The Wall Street Journal** (January 29, 2024), <https://www.wsj.com/world/middle-east/at-least-12-u-n-agency-employees-involved-in-oct-7-attacks-intelligence-reports-say-a7de8f36>.

The Review Group began its work on February 14th and submitted an interim report to the Secretary-General on March 20th. Though the interim report was not made public, the UN announced that the report “found that UNRWA has in place a significant number of mechanisms and procedures to ensure compliance with the Humanitarian Principle of neutrality.”⁵ The final report is scheduled to be released to the public on April 20th, and is likely to reach the same conclusions, in order, as the UN had announced in creating the inquiry, to “reassure those donors who may have doubts.”⁶

Countries To Decide Funding UNRWA Based on Colonna Report

In their statements, leading democracies have already lent credibility to the Colonna Review, with many countries declaring that Colonna’s report, as well as the separate UN investigation into the 12 UNRWA staff implicated in the October 7th massacre, would be critical in deciding whether or not to reinstate funding.

Britain is awaiting the outcome of the Colonna-led review, [said](#) a spokesperson for Prime Minister Rishi Sunak said, and then the government would decide what to do. “We want to hear from UNRWA detailed undertakings about the changes in personnel and policy,” [noted](#) Sunak.

Germany [made it clear](#) that a decision regarding its future support for UNRWA in Gaza Strip would be taken “based on the outcome of the current assessment and review process.”

On February 13th, the US [welcomed](#) “the Secretary-General’s and UNRWA’s commitment to investigate all claims and, once complete, act on the independent review of the organization’s neutrality policies and practices and hold anyone implicated to full account.” On March 4th, State Department spokesman Matthew Miller [said](#) the US decision on resuming aid to UNRWA would be made “at the conclusion of the two investigations the UN is conducting with respect to UNRWA.” On the same day, at a special UN General Assembly session about UNRWA, the US [said](#), “We appreciate the Secretary-General’s swift action,” including his “initiating an independent review of UNRWA’s procedures.”

Canada, which has already reinstated funding, [said](#) that it “commends the independent review of UNRWA currently underway, led by Catherine Colonna, and anticipates reviewing the report assessing UNRWA’s neutrality mechanisms.” Other who have attributed weight to Colonna’s review include [the Netherlands](#), [Australia](#), and [Switzerland](#).

⁵ *UNRWA review panel presents interim findings to Secretary-General*, UN, (March 20, 2024), <https://news.un.org/en/story/2024/03/1147796>.

⁶ *Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General*, UN (February 21, 2024), <https://press.un.org/en/2024/db240221.doc.htm>.

UNRWA Deliberately Selected Biased Members For Review Group

“I will commission a review by a third party,” Lazzarini [told AP](#) in a video interview. “It needs to be reputable and credible enough to basically look into the various claims we can see in the media coming from either individuals or organisations, attacking or blaming or accusing the agency of collusion with a de facto, with Hamas in the Gaza Strip.”

However, a brief examination of the parties involved in the Colonna Review confirms that they are not unbiased, objective and impartial observers, and therefore the review is not credible.

Rather, Ms. Colonna, the three organizations, and many of their staff have previously issued statements, published reports and articles, and publicly endorsed social media posts demonstrating their ardent support for UNRWA, and sharp condemnation of any criticism. In the case of Colonna, she herself was a public champion of UNRWA, and oversaw France’s participation as a financial donor and UNRWA board member.

B. UNRWA Chief Taints Inquiry By Dimissing Allegations as “Smear Campaign”

UNRWA itself was behind the creation of the review group. Weeks before it was formally created by Guterres, on January 17, 2024, Lazzarini had announced that he “requested an independent review of claims by pro-Israel groups of unchecked pro-Hamas activity in his organization.” On [repeated occasions](#), Lazzarini confirmed that he was the one commissioning the review.

Lazarinni’s announcement came only one week after UN Watch sparked a [media firestorm](#) in [exposing](#) a 3,000-member Telegram chat group of UNRWA teachers in Gaza who cheered and celebrated Hamas’s October 7th massacre, called for the execution of Israelis, shared instructions on how to aid Hamas’ efforts, and proclaimed they would like to emulate, in their own classrooms, the education given to the October 7th terrorists.

Notably, UNRWA’s January 17th announcement of the review also came two days after the U.S. Congress had sent Lazzarini [a letter](#) demanding that he appear before the House Foreign Affairs Committee and answer [questions](#) about UNRWA’s ties to Hamas terrorists. He refused.

Rather than submit to a congressional examination, it would appear that Lazzarini decided instead that UNRWA would orchestrate a review to create the appearance of undergoing scrutiny, yet in reality, by carefully controlling the process and appointees, it would effectively be investigating itself.

Right from the start, the head of UNRWA [determined](#) that at least part of the allegations of UNRWA's terror ties were "disingenuous," "politically motivated," and constituted a "smear campaign."

In publicly declaring this characterization with his creation of the mandate, Lazzarini irreparably tainted the credibility of the inquiry.

C. Top UNRWA Official: Colonna Report Is To "Provide Cover"

In a moment of candor, the actual purpose of the Colonna Report was stated by longtime UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness, who retired in 2019 after 12 years in the post, returning recently to act as a surrogate for UNRWA with frequent appearances on Al Jazeera and other media. "I hope that the external report by the former French foreign minister, soon to be available, will provide the donors with further cover if that's what they need within their own internal constituencies to resume funding for UNRWA," Gunness [told](#) Passblue, a website that advocates for the UN.

In other words, the review is not an impartial investigation into how UNRWA's mechanisms and procedures have completely failed to ensure compliance with the humanitarian principle of neutrality, turning a blind eye to hundreds of UNRWA staff, teachers, school principals and union leaders who serve as Hamas operatives and as members of the Hamas Politburo. Rather, the appointment of the review group was designed by the UN and UNRWA as a political maneuver to give "further cover" to donor states—"if that's what they need within their own internal constituencies to resume funding for UNRWA."

D. UN Says It Named Colonna "To Reassure Donors"

This is corroborated by statements made by the UN itself, acknowledging that the purpose of the Review Group is to ease the concerns of donors, rather than to objectively investigate UNRWA's ties to terror.

On February 21, UN Spokesman Stéphane Dujarric said that Secretary-General Guterres named Catherine Colonna to lead the Review Group in order to "reassure those donors who may have doubts."⁷

Likewise, on February 22, Ms. Colonna herself stated that that the entire purpose of her investigation is to ensure that donations to UNRWA continue—not that everything be done to objectively investigate and stop systematic UNRWA staff complicity with and promotion of terrorism. Speaking at a UN press conference on February, Colonna said:

⁷ *Daily Press Briefing by the Office of the Spokesperson for the Secretary-General, UN* (February 21, 2024), <https://press.un.org/en/2024/db240221.doc.htm>.

“The aim of this important and delicate mission, entrusted to us by the Secretary General, is to enable donors, the largest among them, but in fact everyone, to regain confidence, when they have lost it or when they have doubts, in the way UNRWA operates.”⁸

These statements confirm that a predetermined outcome to ensure the reinstatement of funding was in mind for both the UN and Ms. Colonna.

E. Colonna Biased For UNRWA, Against Israel

Less than two weeks before being appointed to head the review group, Ms. Colonna posted on X on January 13, 2024 to commend UNRWA for its work, which she wrote was “more useful than ever.” She expressed this praise for UNRWA just four days after UN Watch revealed to the world that 3,000 UNRWA teachers were members of an UNRWA Telegram chat group that celebrated the October 7th attack. Ms. Colonna was also a public supporter of UNRWA during her time as French foreign minister.

The feelings were mutual. UNRWA referred to its “strong support from France” while Colonna was foreign minister, and specifically praised Colonna:

“One week after the Humanitarian Conference at Elysee, thank you to [President] Emmanuel Macron and [Foreign Minister] Colonna for their continued political and financial commitment alongside UNRWA. The strong support of states like France for UNRWA is crucial for the humanitarian operation at Gaza.”

UNRWA praised France’s role at a pledging conference, for having “highlight[ed] unanimous and continuous support to UNRWA.”

Likewise, when Colonna was foreign minister, France repeatedly praised the agency. “UNRWA plays an important role in regional stability and remains essential,” said France on June 2, 2023. “France reiterates its full support for UNRWA.” A year prior, France tweeted that “UNRWA is a leading stabilization factor in a region affected by crises.” In 2021, France also praised UNRWA lawyer Johann Soufi, who openly lied on French television when he said that the non-governmental organization United Nations Watch is “a lobby that works primarily for the Israeli government.”⁹

⁸ @HillelNeuer, X (March 22, 2024), <https://x.com/HillelNeuer/status/1771139517170205067?s=20>

⁹ *FranceInfo*, March 5, 2024, “12/13 Info” program. In fact, United Nations Watch is a Swiss non-profit association governed by its members, recognized in 2002 by the United Nations as a non-governmental organization and granted special consultative status with the Economic and Social Council. It does not “work” for or receive funding from any government.

Colonna's Conflict of Interest As UNRWA Donor and Board Member

The independence of Catherine Colonna as the head of the Independent Review Group into UNRWA is further called into question by her recent role as French Foreign Minister. She served in this position from May 2022 to January 2024. Previously, she had served many years as a French diplomat and as spokeswoman for the Elysée, the French presidency.

France is the [fourth-largest donor](#) to UNRWA. In addition to financial support, France is also a major political backer of UNRWA, routinely [promoting and endorsing](#) its work. On March 4, 2024, in a statement before the UN General Assembly, the French ambassador declared complete support for UNRWA, describing its role as “crucial.” The agency, France insisted, is “an essential contributor to the stability of the region,” and for years to come, its mandate “will remain relevant until a political settlement is found to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”

All of this contributes to the complexity of Colonna's position in leading an impartial review. Her lifetime in French governmental roles and associated responsibilities towards the foreign policy of France, which is a donor and founding board member of UNRWA, presents a conflict of interest.

If the review were to find systemic failures within UNRWA concerning its ties to Hamas or other terrorist groups, or systemic failures to address UNRWA staff encouragement and promotion of terrorism, as well as incitement to violence and antisemitism, such adverse findings would retrospectively cast a shadow on Colonna's decisions and actions as Foreign Minister, where she might have overseen or endorsed French financial and political support for UNRWA. Such findings could also cast a shadow on any decisions and actions by her predecessors and colleagues in the French foreign ministry, and in other levels and departments of the French government, who were involved in overseeing the country's support for and oversight of UNRWA.

This situation places Ms. Colonna in a delicate position where her very recent affiliations with French governmental policies towards UNRWA could influence her current evaluative responsibilities and could lead to potential biases, consciously or subconsciously, in the review's findings.

Colonna's ability to lead an impartial investigation into UNRWA could therefore be compromised, as her professional integrity and historical decisions, as well as those of other diplomats and elected officials in France, could be at stake depending on the outcomes of the review.

Colonna's Conflict of Interest Violates UN Standards of Conduct

Catherine Colonna's participation in the Independent Review Group for UNRWA amounts to a gross violation of legal principles relating to conflict of interest and the requirement for impartiality in administrative and legal reviews.

1. **Conflict of Interest:** According to general principles of administrative law, any individual involved in a decision-making or review process should be free from any conflicts of interest that might influence their judgment. As a former French Foreign Minister, Colonna's prior involvement with policies or decisions relating to UNRWA funding could represent a conflict of interest, particularly if her actions during her tenure could be indirectly assessed as part of the review.
2. **Duty of Impartiality:** The duty of impartiality is fundamental in international law and administrative procedures, ensuring that decisions are made based on fairness and without bias. The UN itself emphasizes the importance of impartiality in its operations. Because Colonna's previous role aligned with French foreign policy that is supportive of UNRWA, her impartiality in evaluating the agency is compromised.
3. **United Nations Standards of Conduct:** The UN has its own standards concerning the conduct of individuals who undertake roles on its behalf, which stress independence, impartiality, and integrity. These standards are meant to ensure that reviews and assessments are conducted without any undue influence from previous affiliations or potential future incentives.

Colonna's participation in and leadership of the Review Group violates these principles. Her very recent role in a government that supported UNRWA financially and politically could be seen as a direct conflict with the need for an unbiased review of the agency's conduct, infringing on the legal and ethical standards expected in such reviews.

Secretary-General Guterres could have chosen from any number of prominent and credible figures who did not have these conflicts, or prior public pronouncements that take a position on the work of UNRWA. But the UN chose Colonna precisely because they were certain that her findings would "reassure the donors."

F. Review Members Have Record of Advocating For UNRWA, Against Israel

1. Chr. Michelsen Institute: Israel Guilty of 'Apartheid,' 'Genocide'

The impartiality of the Chr. Michelsen Institute (CMI) concerning UNRWA is undermined by the extreme bias of its publications on UNRWA, and by the litany of pronouncements by numerous of its staff and board members accusing Israel of "apartheid" and "genocide."

For example, in 2022, CMI published a report on UNRWA examining reasons for the agency's funding troubles and advising steps forward. In the report, CMI states that UNRWA's funding problems are caused by "unfounded claims" that the agency "instigates violence, for example, through school curricula with an anti-Israeli edge." In other words, CMI has already expressed the opinion that claims of UNRWA incitement—documented over 10 years in a series of reports by UN Watch that show screenshots of UNRWA teachers calling to slaughter Jews—are "unfounded."

CMI's report also celebrates UNRWA's political significance "as a symbol of the refugees' right of return and the international responsibility for their predicament."

The lead author of CMI's 2022 UNRWA report is CMI Post-doctoral research fellow [Kjersti G. Berg](#), who is involved in most if not all of CMI's [publications on UNRWA](#). Presumably she will be a focal point for CMI's work on the Colonna review group. In her CMI reports on UNRWA, and in her [other writings](#), such as this 2021 [CMI-sponsored article](#), Berg strictly adheres to UNRWA talking points, and turns a blind eye to UNRWA's complicity with and incitement to terrorism. Berg ardently defends funding UNRWA. In her 2023 book, "Palestine: Facts on the Ground," as in all her other writings on UNRWA, Berg [argues in favor of a Palestinian "right of return,"](#) which effectively means the [destruction of the State of Israel](#). In 2017, Berg hosted a lecture with [Raja Shehadeh](#), founder of the group Al-Haq, which was in 2021 was [designated by Israel](#) as a terrorist organization.

Notably, after an advance version of this report was published, Ms. Berg completely [deleted her Twitter account](#).

CMI should therefore be disqualified from partaking in the review, as its conclusions have already been set in advance.

2. CMI Senior Staff & Board Members Accuse Israel of "Genocide" & "Apartheid"

- In January 2024, in a post entitled "[Speaking out against genocide and repression](#)", the CMI's *Anthropologist* blog issued a call for papers that spoke of "Israel's ongoing destruction of Gaza and ethnic cleansing of Palestinians." CMI made no mention at all of Hamas, its atrocities, or the Israeli hostages in Gaza.
- The editor of this CMI blog, Antonio De Lauri, is a research professor at CMI. On March 7, 2024, he [tweeted](#): "President Biden, why do you support genocide in Gaza?" The CMI employees has also [endorsed](#) similar claims by condemned antisemite Francesca Albanese. A review of his Twitter feed shows that, by contrast, he has [never even mentioned Hamas](#).
- CMI Research Director [Torunn Wimpelmann](#), [posted](#) in [support](#) of South Africa's legal action in the International Court of Justice accusing Israel of "genocide."
- In October 2023, 17 CMI researchers and staff [signed a statement](#) accusing Israel of practicing "apartheid." The signatories alleged "historical inequalities, injustice and violence" brought about "by Israel's longstanding occupation" and its "maintenance of an apartheid state." Those accusing Israel of these crimes, as published on the CMI website, included the following employees, each of whom indicated "Chr. Michelsen Institute" after their names: Antonio De Lauri, Heidi Mogstad, Anwasha Dutta, Emily Hume Lovise Aalen, Salla Turunen, Jessica Schultz, Astri Suhrke, Carmeliza Rosario,

Iva Jelusic, Saul Mullard, Cathrine Talleraas, Liv Tønnessen, Mari Norbakk, Karine A. Jansen, Aslak Orre, Kari Telle and Elin Skaar.

- The recent chairman of CMI's board, Guri Rørtveit, [clicked like](#) to endorse a post by the anti-Israel group "Jewish Voice for Peace," in which members of the group celebrated an illegal sit-in at the US Congress.
- On October 10, 2023, just three days after the Hamas massacre, CMI Board Member Catharina Bu published a Facebook post about "Orthodox Jews demonstrating for Palestine against Israel," presumably the fringe Neturei Karta sect, and she [added a photo](#) of a sign reading "Israel is responsible for 75 years of tragic bloodshed." In the same post, she encouraged the Norwegian government to increase funding for UNRWA. Likewise, this CMI Board also posted on X that she was "very happy" that a Norwegian activist group and its leader, at a conference of the Norwegian agency for development cooperation, "express[ed] their concern about the economic cuts to UNRWA." Earlier, in 2013, Ms. Bu called on Norway's government pension fund to divest from Israeli government bonds. Notably, Ms. Bu is the Secretary General of the UN Association of Norway, which claims that "Israel is practicing apartheid against Palestinians."
- Another CMI Board Member, Andrew Norton, [posted](#) an article accusing Israel of "apartheid."
- CMI Research Director Sarah A. Tobin worked as an [instructor for UNRWA](#).

In conclusion, it is clear that there is a systemic bias within CMI against Israel and in support of UNRWA, and it lacks the impartiality necessary to objectively examine UNRWA support for and complicity with terrorism.

3. Raoul Wallenberg Institute Attacks "Abhorrent" Critics of UNRWA

The leading staff and board members of the Raoul Wallenberg Institute (RWI) routinely have been portraying Israel as uniquely evil.

In 2014, Lundberg [tweeted out](#) an Electronic Intifada post by Ali Abunimah, adding: "Must see debate about UNRWA Video: UNRWA's Chris Gunness demolishes anti-Palestinian activist on Fox."

Eight years ago, in 2016, RWI Executive Director Peter Lundberg [accused](#) Israel of "apartheid."

When he was a Swedish diplomat in Jordan, UNRWA's headquarters, Lundberg [said](#) Sweden was "a proud partner to UNRWA." He again [tweeted out](#) UNRWA talking points published in *The Guardian* by UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness.

- Mr. Lundberg also [clicked “Like”](#) on several pro-UNRWA posts since the Hamas-Israel War, including:
 - [Jan Egeland’s post](#) attacking critics of UNRWA as “abhorrent”: *A united humanity must stand with, fund and defend UNRWA. They do more for civilians in Gaza than the rest of us combined. The extremist political attacks on them are abhorrent. More than 100 of their aid workers have been killed.*
 - OCHA chief [Martin Griffith’s tweet](#) advocating support for UNRWA, endorsing criticism of Switzerland’s vote to defund UNRWA: *What @UNRWA needs right now is more support, not less.*
- RWI Board Member [Anne Ramberg](#) has [accused](#) Israel of committing “an ongoing genocide in Gaza.” She also liked several pro-UNRWA posts, including:
 - Isabella Lovin’s [post](#) defending UNRWA funding: *There will be catastrophic consequences for the 2,2 million people of Gaza if funds are stopped to @UNRWA. Everyone knows no other entity has the capacity to replace this support, the entire humanitarian system in Gaza will collapse. Please listen to @UNReliefChief!*
 - Malin Bjork’s [post](#) defending UNRWA funding: *“It’s devastating to stop the support for #UNRWA. Even members of the liberal group in the EU Parliament understand this. Why don’t the Swedish liberals understand it? Good initiative from @samiraraf.”*
- Ms. Ramberg likewise [has written](#) that Israel’s treatment of Palestinians “equates to apartheid” and [accused](#) Israel of ethnic cleansing.
- RWI [on its website](#) features a lengthy interview with Richard Falk, after he was famously [condemned for antisemitism](#) by the United Kingdom, championing his report for Arab states that accused Israel of “apartheid.”

In light of the above, it is clear that RWI is not impartial when it comes to UNRWA.

Danish Institute Backs UNRWA Funding

The Danish Institute for Human Rights has demonstrated a sharp anti-Israel and pro-UNRWA bias, as evident by its public statements, pronouncements of its board members and senior staff, and its sole Palestinian partner organization.

For example, DIHR applauded South Africa's ICJ case that accused Israel of "genocide." In a [statement](#) on behalf of DIHR, Senior Researcher [Peter Vedel Kessing](#) called the ruling a "breakthrough and an important progress for international humanitarian law."

In addition:

- DIHR Board Member [Jonas Vejsager Nøddekær](#) supported continued funding to UNRWA, [stating](#), "It will make the humanitarian disaster even worse to suspend support for the UN's humanitarian work in Gaza. The humanitarian aid that comes into Gaza is already extremely limited, so we support the Danish government's decision to continue the support, because the needs are so great."
- DIHR's Communications Director, Jakob Sheikh, has posted anti-Israel content. For example in 2021, he [publicly stated](#) that Israel has "illegally occupied" Palestinians for 70 years, effectively contesting Israel's recognition by the United Nations before and after its founding in 1948.
- Sheikh also [clicked like](#) on pro-UNRWA [posts](#) as recently as January 29th, 2024, just one week before his organization was selected for the Review Group, including Waleed Safi's [post](#) condemning Western countries' withholding of support to UNRWA.

Finally, the DIHR's [Palestine partner](#) is the Palestinian Independent Commission for Human Rights (ICHR), a group that [hosted](#) at its events members of the US-designated terror groups Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). Multiple staffers of this DIHR partner have voiced support for these terror groups, and its [founding members](#) include PFLP members Raja Shehadeh and Raji Sourani. The [Director](#) of ICHR's North Gaza office, Raafat Salha, [represented the PFLP](#) at a conference in 2012. In a January 28, 2024 statement, DIHR's partner [voiced support](#) for UNRWA and opposed its defunding. The notion that DIHR could be impartial on matters affecting UNRWA is not credible.

In light of the above, it is clear that the Danish Institute is not impartial when it comes to UNRWA.