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Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem? UNRWA's representations in the digital public sphere

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Middle-Eastern Studies
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**Part of the Solution or Part of the Problem?
UNRWA's representations in the
digital public sphere**

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Key words

UNRWA, Twitter, Public Sphere, Digital Spaces, Influential stakeholders

Abstract

The relief of Palestinian refugees has been handled by the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) since the 1950s to our days. Over seven decades of existence, the agency has been under various criticisms for its unconditional commitment to Palestinian refugees on the one hand, and for its failures to address the refugees' issue on the other. As a result, the agency is often represented as an obstacle to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by some and as an essential part of the solution by others. The aim of the present study is therefore to investigate the discourses employed by influential stakeholders to participate in the construction of a public discourse on UNRWA's activities. Moreover, building on the public sphere conceptualized by Habermas, many have argued that the emergence of new technologies and globalized communications revolutionized the public debate, making it transnational. In this sense, social networking platforms like Twitter constitute actual parts of the digital public sphere where "social-influencers" compete to impose their interpretation of the public debate and to strengthen existing narratives. Using qualitative discourse analysis, this paper describes the diversity of strategies employed by certified users to participate in reputation narratives as well as the type discourse associated with their position in the public sphere.

Research question

To what extent the diversity of discourses concerning UNRWA's role in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict contribute to build its image in the digital public sphere?

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Introductory statement

The conflict between Israelis and Palestinians is ongoing since the establishment of the state of Israel in 1948 and can even be traced back to earlier dates. During its history, the conflict has shown multiple faces; from hot conventional wars (and guerrilla warfare) to cold wars between Israel and its Arab neighbours, to peace agreements with the Palestinian Authority (PA) during the Oslo process. With variations in intensity due to the political and military context, the conflict over mandatory Palestine's territory continues until our days. In this sense, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict can be considered as intractable because of its duration, its difficulty to be resolved and the socio-psychological structures developed by both societies¹. Indeed, this conflict is related to very concrete issues like borders and mutual recognition but what makes it intractable are the collective constructions of the 'other' and the fear of its intention to harm existential interests. Accordingly, the production of collective narratives around remarkable events fosters the national ethos, which prevents the reach of a comprehensive settlement. In this sense, ideological narratives in the public discourse are designed to disseminate ideas and concepts in a society and to permit its members to identify themselves to the group as normative experiences, and to the out-group as alien.

To illustrate this concept of collective narrative, the displacement of Palestinians in 1948 is well described by Benny Morris in *The Birth of the Palestinian Refugee Problem* (1988). In this book, the historian claims that although some Palestinians may have been driven by local Arab leaders to flee their land, the most important reason for the displacement of 700 000 Palestinians was the result of Israeli military operations, and the targeted expulsion decided by top officials. From this perspective, Palestinians remember this event as a catastrophe (*Nakba* in Arabic) which constitutes an important symbol of Palestinian nationalism. On the other side, the official narrative of Israel would present it as a voluntary fleeing engineered by

¹ Bar-Tal (2007), *Sociopsychological Foundations of Intractable Conflicts*, p.1444

Arabic countries. This example shows that in the context of intractable conflicts, the same event inevitably produce radically opposed narratives, providing different frameworks to interpret Palestinian refugees' issue.

Over the years, political analysts and academic researchers have identified the refugee issue as a core element in the conflict and one significant (if not the one) obstacle to a peaceful settlement between Israelis and Palestinians (Bowker 2003, Kagan 2009, Karsh 2011, Romirovsky 2019). There is, at the heart of this question, UNRWA, an international organization that started operating in May 1950. Firstly designed to assure the emergency relief of displaced Palestinians, it later diversified its missions with development programs and economic integration projects. The agency was initially perceived by refugees as an attempt to deny their right of return and to promote their reintegration in neighbouring Arab countries², and positively regarded by Israelis as a stabilizing factor in the region³. Yet, as a result of its extended involvement in the region to provide shelters, healthcare and education for refugees, the representations of UNRWA among Israeli and Palestinian publics has shifted.

Factually, UNRWA was created in order to answer the specific issue of Palestinian refugee after their displacement in 1948, and if it is still active seven decades later, we can safely assume that this problematic has not been resolved yet. In addition to its commitment for refugees' relief and development, the agency started to employ Palestinian refugees and progressively acquired legitimacy among Palestinians. UNRWA was even perceived by refugees as the last advocate of their political claim on return after the repeated failures in peace negotiations⁴. On the contrary, from an Israeli perspective, the increase of UNRWA's beneficiaries and the diversification of its missions were pointed by scholars as serious

² <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-178254/> § 36.

³ Ben Ari (2014), *UNRWA: Blurring the Lines between Humanitarianism and Politics*, p.137

⁴ Bocco (2009), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History Within History*, p 245

obstacles to reach comprehensive peace between Palestinians and Israelis⁵. As a result, we are in a context where conflicting representations of an international organisation coexist; the paradox of UNRWA being part of the problem or part of the solution demonstrates that in spite of being implemented by the United Nations Assembly, the agency is represented in diverse ways in the public sphere.

While most of academic research has investigated UNRWA in the fields of international law (Hilal 2014, Irfan 2020), refugees' rights (Bracka 2005, Kagan 2009) or humanitarian aid (Rempel 2009, Rosenfeld 2009), the question of its image in the public sphere is rarely mentioned. From one side, T. Rempel presents the organization as a stabilizing force in the region making it a crucial stakeholder of any peace agreement⁶. From another side, E.Karsh depicts UNRWA as a failed organization that increased rather than decreased the number of refugees thus preventing any plausible settlement⁷. Acknowledging this dichotomy in the literature, my objective is to investigate the discourses that participate in UNRWA's representations in the modern days. Indeed, the emergence of digital communications in the last decades has changed the face of the public sphere rendering it global and transnational. Building on the evolving concept of the public sphere, the aim of my research is to show the diversity of discourses disseminated in the digital public sphere (DPS).

To me, understanding UNRWA's perception within societies that live next it or within it is essential in my opinion, because any resolution of the conflict will need to involve UNRWA - in one way or another- due to its relations with a large part of Palestinian population. Without answering to the question whether or not UNRWA contributes to the continuation or the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this paper inquires the communication of "social-influencers" or opinion leaders, and their participation to the public discourse, facilitated by

⁵ Kagan (2009), *The relative decline of Palestinian exceptionalism and its consequences for refugee studies in the ME*, p.434

⁶ Rempel (2009), *UNRWA and the Palestine Refugees: A Genealogy of "Participatory" Development*, p.432

⁷ Karsh (2011), *How many Palestinian Arab refugees were there?* p.227

interactive platforms like Twitter. In the same way that press conferences or political speeches are often used to investigate elite rhetoric, tweets from political actors can be a useful source of data to understand political communication in the digital sphere. By analyzing tweets from “certified” users, I intend to describe how institutionalized actors frame the representations of UNRWA in the DPS, through the lens of three contemporary events; the Gaza War during the summer 2014, the scandal of UNRWA’s teachers in fall 2015 and the US decision to reduce its contributions to the agency in 2018.

Historical Background

“Palestinians view the “refugee problem” as the heart of the Israeli-Arab conflict, the anchor of their memory and political motivation. Any settlement which does not directly address this problem is therefore inconceivable. On the other hand, it is equally inconceivable that Israel will agree to the return of Palestinians to their original homes or those of their parents, even in the context of a peaceful settlement. To do so would be to undermine the Jewish character of the state—i.e. to contradict Israel’s very *raison d’être*. A settlement is therefore possible only if the Palestinians can somehow transcend almost completely the central reference point in their national memory and instead focus on replacing a tragic past with a hopeful future. How can this be done?”

—Mark A. Heller and Sari Nusseibeh, *No Trumpets, No Drums*, p.87

The refugees’ issue as a central element of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

From a Palestinian perspective, any settlement with Israel undermining the refugee issue is unconceivable, the symbol of UNRWA as the last advocate of Palestinian claim on return is considered to be central in peace negotiations. The very meaning of the right of return in Arabic (*Haq Al-Awda*) is related to the concept of justness which explains its interpretation as

‘the existential umbilical cord linking the Palestinian people to selfhood and nationalism’⁸. Nevertheless, the concept of return among Palestinians has obviously evolved. According to Nassar’s study on the newspaper *al-Ittihad* between 1948 and 1959, the perception of the right of return has gone through several stages. Showing how newspapers conferred meaning, legal basis, and symbolic references to the right of return; from humanistic and anti-imperialist frames towards the crystallization of human rights and the international justice frame⁹. J. Segal adds that “while Palestinians have legitimate claims to compensation for their homes (...) the issue is whether they have a right to return to the areas from which they came or, perhaps more generally, a right to live anywhere in Israel and even a right to become Israeli citizens”¹⁰, illustrating that many Palestinians insist on the right of return for its moral and legal aspects rather than any realistic intention to return¹¹.

From an Israeli perspective, the advocacy for the right of return for Jewish people seems to be as important as it is for Palestinian. As David Ben Gurion states; “The Law of Return is the law of inertia of Israeli history, it is a law which determines the statist principle by virtue of which the State of Israel was established”¹². The Jewish majority in the country has to be secured by state agencies; guaranteeing the control of the borders as part of strict demographic and immigration policies¹³. Within this framework, it seems natural to deny the legitimacy of the Palestinian return as a rival narrative that would question Israel’s national values. In this sense, beside the main objective to guarantee a safe place for Jews around the world, the Law of Return also serves a demographic agenda which is to populate the land of Israel with Jewish communities to balance Palestinian demography. The controversial definition of the refugees’ status guaranteed by UNRWA then appears as a major source of

⁸ Bracka (2005), *Past the point of no return? The Palestinian right of return in international human rights law*, p.282

⁹ Nassar, (2011), *Palestinian Citizens of Israel and the Discourse on the Right of Return, 1948–59*

¹⁰ Segal (2001), *Clearing Up the Right-of-Return Confusion*, p. 26

¹¹ Ghannam (2000), *Where Will They Go?* p.43

¹² Knesset annals 7 (1950), p. 2037

¹³ Yonah (2004), *Israel’s immigration policies: the twofold face of the ‘demographic threat’*, p.207

contention between Palestinians and Israelis, because the renouncement from any side would mean the renouncement to the basic premises of its national identity.

Overview of UNRWA

In the aftermath of the war between Israel and its Arab neighbours in 1948, UNRWA was created by the United Nations General Assembly through the Resolution 302 (IV)¹⁴. It became operational in May 1950 and was designed for emergency relief after it had been assured by the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), the League of the Red Cross Societies (LRCS) and the American Friends Service Committee (AFSC). In the spirit of the definition gave by the agency in 1952 the official website states that “a Palestine refugee shall mean any person whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period June 1, 1946 to May 15, 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 war”¹⁵. UNRWA’s specificity regarding other UN agencies lies in the fact that it serves a unique refugee population (any other refugee falls under UNHCR’s authority) which now constitute the majority of its local staff.

Over the years, UNRWA started to implement public work programs in collaboration with local governments for the refugees’ economic integration in addition of the humanitarian relief. According to R.Bocco, since the establishment of UNRWA in the 1950s, the organisation has changed its approach and strategies on several occasions¹⁶. Starting from primary health care relief and work programmes in agricultural development, it focused its approach on human development in the 1960s. During the 1970s, education and development of the refugees were crucial, while in the 1980s enhancing the participation of Palestinians in the agency and integrating human rights principles were prioritized.

¹⁴ <https://www.unrwa.org/content/general-assembly-resolution-302>

¹⁵ <https://www.unrwa.org/palestine-refugees>

¹⁶ Bocco R (2009), *UNRWA and the Palestinian Refugees: A History within History*, p.232

From its origins UNRWA had to adapt to the changing situation of refugees' needs and aspirations while trying to keep its politically neutral nature. In order to be able to respond to the evolving needs, UNRWA developed a top-down approach by recruiting Palestinian workers. It sought to foster refugees' autonomy as integrated actors within host economies or as working force in the refugee camps, thus becoming a crucial actor in the Palestinian economy. R. Farah describes the situation in her study that gathered interviews of UNRWA employees in Jordan as follows; except for 200 international staff-members, around 30 000 Palestinians constitute the vast majority of the Agency's working force¹⁷. Acting as administrative staff but also as mediators with the refugee population; teachers, nurses, social workers, technicians, cleaning and maintenance staff regard their jobs as means to serve the Palestinian cause. Moreover, considering employment opportunities, UNRWA's jobs are considered to be well paid and prestigious, providing their young employees better status than their parents as a result of education programs.

Nevertheless, the high-level management of the agency has always been assured by international professionals coming from the diplomatic, development or human rights fields. Until the 1990s, having international managers aimed at keeping the neutral nature of UNRWA and protecting itself from the influence of political factions. This high degree of bureaucratic centralization was often criticized by UNRWA employees that had always to handle two challenges: while their responsibilities within the agency were mostly constrained to an executive role without any say on policy issues, they were considered privileged among other refugees and often blamed for the failures of the agency¹⁸. During the 1990s with the Oslo Accords and the perspective of a future Palestinian state, UNRWA tried to resolve this problem by promoting local staff to higher ranks of the administration. However, despite these efforts to prepare a future hand-over of administrative responsibilities to the Palestinian

¹⁷ Farah (2009), *UNRWA through the eyes of its refugee employee in Jordan*, p.403

¹⁸ Also Farah (2009), p. 410

state, failures of the peace process preserved the status quo, fuelling Palestinian workers' frustration.

Perceptions of UNRWA among Palestinian refugees

From the beginning, the role of UNRWA was source of concern for refugees. After 1948, some displaced Palestinians viewed the agency as established to organize and facilitate the resettlement in the host countries, meaning to abandon the right of return. In this regard, the director of the agency mentioned in his annual report of the period 1 July 1954 to 30 June 1955:

“It must be strongly emphasized that unless some opportunity is given to the refugees to make their choice, or unless some other political settlement can be reached, the unrequited demand for repatriation will continue to be an obstacle to the accomplishment of the objective of reintegration and self-support.”¹⁹

However, working on humanitarian relief, on the development of large-scale economic and on educational projects has participated to change the image of UNRWA of among refugees. It is then difficult to separate the refugee population between supporters and opponents of the agency. In fact the views shared by most refugees on UNRWA are often contradictory and paradoxical. As one of the interviewees mentions, the relationship between Palestinians and UNRWA is one of “love-hate”; being simultaneously “good and bad, guilty and innocent, important and irrelevant”²⁰. It is the “perfect scapegoat” on which refugees can relieve their frustrations; by being close to the people as well as close to the field of “high politics”. It is thus expected to obtain far-reaching results even though its prerogatives are mostly limited to humanitarian relief and education.

¹⁹ <https://www.un.org/unispal/document/auto-insert-178254/> § 36.

²⁰ Also Farah (2009), p.400

Following seven decades of practice in Palestinian territories and neighbouring countries, UNRWA is perceived by Palestinian refugees as the very last institution to consider the question of return. Lacking a proper Palestinian state, UNRWA barely became the sole representative of Palestinians on the international stage. Moreover, in order to organize and regulate its relations with the refugees, the agency had to develop norms and eligibility conditions, leading to a *de facto* functional sovereignty over this population. According to Jalal Al Hussein, this character of “quasi-governmental” services was also enhanced by the distribution of a registration cards which soon became a highly symbolic document considered as an official link to Palestine²¹. He claims that this role and image of welfare government (although lacking political and legal authority) is reinforced by the Palestinians employees’ rate in the agency, conferring it a “national ethos” and legitimizing its place in Palestinian society. In this sense, UNRWA is generally presented by favourable discourses as an essential step towards the peaceful resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

UNRWA as a tool to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

The narrative according to which UNRWA is central in the resolution of the conflict is differently presented by several scholars. For example Robert Bowker highlights in his book, *Palestinian Refugees: Mythology, Identity and the Search for peace*, the role that UNRWA represents in the Middle-East peace process because of its operational skills and the delivery of humanitarian aid²². Over the years, the agency came to represent an essential source of support in areas of education, health, relief and social services, as long as the refugee issue would be lasting. Moreover, Benjamin Schiff claimed that “UNRWA helped Palestinian refugees individually to survive their statelessness, to prosper in regional labour market, and thus to survive as a political force”²³. In this particular context, UNRWA was presented

²¹ Al Hussein (2010), *UNRWA and the Refugees: A Difficult but Lasting Marriage*, p.9

²² Bowker (2003), *Palestinian Refugees: Mythology, Identity and the Search for peace*, p.123

²³ Schiff (1995), *Refugees unto the Third Generation: UN aid to Palestinians*, p.270

during the 1990s as an effective agency by donor and hosting countries, having a stabilizing influence in the region. At the same time, even if this commitment to the refugees was occasionally colliding with Israeli interest, the agency was perceived as helping to avoid extreme reactions to Palestinians' socioeconomic situation and keeping a positive and constructive relationship with Israeli governments.

In the same view, J. Stebbing argues that working for Palestinian relief during seven decades proves that UNRWA made a major contribution towards the resolution of the conflict²⁴. Being still effective in five areas such as Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, the Gaza Strip and the West Bank demonstrated the adaptability of the agency. The author even claims that in spite of tensions provoked by Israeli settlements, rendering its missions harder to fill, the agency made significant progress in education with restricted resources, led pioneering work in rehydration and developed projects to address mental and physical health issues.

Accordingly, the support of the refugee population has developed the technical capacities and operational facilities throughout the region, assuming the role of a public administration for Palestinians. Moreover, with the extensive data collected over the years on the refugees and their family and the relatively high level of trust in the agency, Leila Hilal argues that although UNRWA is excluded from peace discussions, its networks would be essential to communicate the implementation of any decision, to inform the refugees of their rights, to register their choices and to organise the resettlement wherever it may be²⁵.

UNRWA as an obstacle to the peace process

From another perspective, most of the discussions surrounding peace agreements during the last century were held by political leaders on the level of high politics, often neglecting the refugees' issue. The Oslo process was not an exception and the negotiating parties' failures to

²⁴ Stebbing (1985), *UNRWA: an Instrument of Peace in the Middle East*

²⁵ Hilal (2009), *Peace Prospects and Implications for UNRWA's Future: An International Law Perspective*, p.620

address the subject of UNRWA's future appeared as a serious obstacle to the resolution of the conflict. By negotiating for a two state solution in Oslo, the Palestinian leadership put a great emphasis on borders and territories (Jerusalem, settlements) delaying the refugee issue for the final status negotiations. The discussions implying the idea of "trading refugees for territory" is even presented by A.Hovdenak as an adoption of Israeli terms and shows the deficit of legitimacy that Palestinian leadership suffered at the time²⁶. He also adds that the Palestinian leadership excluded the issue of refugees rights because it was seen as an obstacle to peace while his priority was the effective control of Palestinian territories²⁷.

Similarly, UNRWA was also considered as an obstacle to the peace process for the fact that the agency continues to serve millions of refugees today, which supports the idea that it failed to address the refugee issue²⁸. Like no other UN body, UNRWA focus its mission on one population (Palestinians) and unlike the UNHCR, it is accused of including refugees themselves, but also their descendents. Due to this special status, UNRWA is depicted as the perpetuator of the Palestinian refugee issue, and therefore constitutes a major obstacle to the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Furthermore, the agency is pointed by others scholars for keeping the refugees in a permanent state of welfare dependency, financed by western donors (Kagan 2009, Karsh 2011). In so doing, it acts as a barrier against the attempts to make refugees into productive citizens. Finally, UNRWA is also criticized for the dedication of its infrastructures to support and promote the Palestinian cause while from the 2000s onwards, several reports accused UNRWA employees to diffuse incitement to hatred though textbooks and curriculums²⁹.

²⁶ Hovdenak (2009), *Trading Refugees for Land and Symbols: The Palestinian Negotiation Strategy in the Oslo Process*, p.32

²⁷ Also Hovdenak (2009), p.36

²⁸ Romirovsky (2019), *Arab-Palestinian Refugees*, p.99

²⁹ Bowker (2003), *Palestinian Refugees: Mythology, Identity and the Search for peace*, p.136

On the basis of these representations of UNRWA within the academic field, I am able to identify certain reputation narratives diffused in the public sphere. Nevertheless, I intends to associate the contributions made by researchers in the field of digital communications to expand the concept of public sphere to the digital world. Building on the Habermasian framework, the digital public spheres created by interactive platforms provide me an interesting field to explore the variety of discourses in the online environment.

Theoretical framework

The Habermasian Public Sphere

The original concept of public sphere was developed by the German philosopher and sociologist, Jürgen Habermas, on the model of the “bourgeois public sphere” developed in the 18th century in Western Europe³⁰. He described it as a space where individuals free from state and economics structures, would debate of political issues on the basis of ‘rational-critical discourse’ in public spaces like coffee-houses and salons³¹. The public sphere was conceptualized as an ideal of neutral space with the ability to counterweight political power and state’s domination, fostering the democratic functioning of institutions by the development of a common good defined by the participation of its members. Bearing the potential of democratizing western and liberal societies in a post-enlightment context, the notion of public sphere is believed to emancipate citizens to become a wise public capable of critically engaging with public issues. As a theoretical framework, the public sphere then provides valuable information about the state of discourses, the tone of political debates and reveals markers of mobilization in the public space.

In later works, Habermas made a distinction between the public sphere in periods of rest and in periods of public mobilization. While commercial and political interests dominate the

³⁰ Habermas, (1974), *The Public Sphere*, p.49

³¹ Benson (2009), *Shaping the Public Sphere: Habermas and Beyond*, p.176

former, collective initiative and public engagement regain the lead in the latter. He perceived a convergence between public discourse and private economic interests that characterized the bourgeois readers' audience³². In his view, with the advent of cultural industry and mass consumption, the new processes of information's diffusion progressively evolved towards a platform for media publicity beneficial for dominant discourses to be diffused. The emergence of "mass media" was problematic for him because it reduced the necessary distance to engage with political debate and favoured profit-oriented logic on the production side³³. In this sense, Pierre Bourdieu defined the contemporary public sphere as an addition of multiple fields competing to impose a particular vision of the society: the political field, the economic field, the academic field, the religious, the non-governmental advocacy organizations, and at the centre of this structure; the journalist field³⁴. To me, that placing the field of media in the centre of the analysis allows to visualize the importance of public reputation in the era of global communications.

During the second part of the twentieth century, the Habermasian framework was considered as core notion for academic research to explore the relation between institutional states and citizens. Although his public sphere served as a benchmark to identify and to challenge democratic deficits of existing Westphalian states, it struggled to adapt to the development of modern nation-states. Within this concept, it was implicitly assumed that public debates were conducted in a (unique) national language through a national communication network shared by a majority of citizens within a coherent territory. However, taking into consideration the fragmentation of historical nation states, the development of regional organizations and the spread of digitized communications, N. Fraser argues that the concept of public sphere should be understood in transnational terms rather than national ones³⁵. Various networks have

³² Habermas (1989), *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p.3

³³ Nencioni (2016), *YouTube, Migrant Rappers and the Early Cinema Aesthetics: Is There a Digital Public Sphere?* p.391

³⁴ Bourdieu (1996), *Sur la télévision suivie de "L'emprise du journalisme"*, p.39

³⁵ Fraser (2007), *Transnationalizing the Public Sphere*, p.19

emerged during the last decades, regardless of nation-state borders, and internet users can elaborate public discourses out of the national framework as understood by the Habermasian public sphere. Furthermore, other studies has discussed the rise of internet and the development of social medias as a restructuration of political debates occurring in the public space, thereby establishing a digital framework to analyze public discourses.

Conceptualization of the Digital Public Sphere (DPS)

The current media landscape has become more diverse and presents new challenges to approach the public sphere in which the complexity and the plurality of digital content created a hybrid media system. This new ecosystem involving traditional media actors, professional communicants and ordinary citizens has developed new forms of communication, hybrid norms and cultures constructed around global and networked technologies³⁶. In this context, the emergence of interactive platforms certainly modified the lens through which the public sphere is understood because it represented the ideal vehicle for political debates. Through accessible communication's channels providing alternative means to disseminate political statements, Social Networking Platforms (SNP) became essential tools and sources of information for political actors. This evolution of the media and political culture has radically changed the communicative relationship between politicians and their publics, by increasing the speed, the scale and the reach of information in the public arena³⁷. Although the importance of traditional media should not be neglected in understanding the process of connecting publics, the digital space is crucial to engage with public participation and political engagement in the modern days.

Within this framework, the online space represents a deterritorialised social space that foster direct communications between individuals geographically distant from each other.

³⁶ Chadwick (2013), *The Hybrid Media System : Politics and Power*, p.165

³⁷ Karadimitriou & Veneti (2016), *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p.322

Expanding the reach of traditional media by the spread of smart mobile devices and SNP, the notion of public sphere evolved towards a digital public sphere with new boundaries. Theorizing the digital public sphere thus allows researchers to study socio-cultural dynamics and the role of global communication in the formation of social identities³⁸. In addition, understanding how communities who share such identities participate in shaping the public discourse is essential to approach the notion of DPS.

Among various content, digital media contains diverse forms of public participation such as journalistic articles or academic papers, but it mostly serve the individual expression of citizens be they elected officials, party leaders or ordinary voters. New generations of communication technologies has established a new dynamic between users and organised a ‘mediatised interdependency’ where both journalists and political actors can be considered as a source of information and a medium to process the information³⁹. Therefore, Twitter is recognized for having a real agency in the journalistic field for gathering information, identifying journalists and their editorial policies and for monitoring politicians’ statements. Being the first space where news’ information emerge render the platform necessary for journalists, but at the same time it exposes them to critics and direct responses by the readers. In this environment, rival notions of the public good compete to occupy as much as possible the digital space, since engagement rates contribute to enhance or reduce the salience of a news event in the DPS⁴⁰.

The Social Media Era

With the emergence of social media in the late 2000s, an increasing number of citizens around the world started to adopt SNP. The purpose was at the beginning to reinforce the relationships within existing networks, but it progressively evolved towards more diverse

³⁸ Karatzogianni, Nguyen & Serafinelli (2016) *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere*

³⁹ Ekman & Widholm (2015), *Politicians as Media Producers*, p.89

⁴⁰ Karadimitriou & Veneti (2016), *The Digital Transformation of the Public Sphere*, p.327

functionalities. Users started to broaden their networks as well as the content of their publications, thereby attracting an increasing number of people during the last decade (more than 2 billion users worldwide in 2015)⁴¹.

Regarding the region studied, the Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics (PCBS) reported that already in 2014 three quarters of internet users were using social networks⁴². Similarly, social media reach in Israel was around 70% with 5.8 million active users in 2017⁴³. Aware of this trend, political actors invested these platforms where political debates and news information were published in order to influence or at least observe the current debates. Nowadays, it is difficult to find a politician or a public figure without a Twitter account sharing its positions. Official institutions have then begun to use SNP with the intention of fostering the dialogue with citizens.

In the era of global communications, social media are essential for governments and states' actors to communicate about their policies, becoming a highly political tool. For instance, massive platforms like Twitter are often questioned on their ability to prevent the use of personal data for political ends or criticized about their tendency to create echo chambers where ideas are strongly polarized through algorithms⁴⁴. In this sense, fakes news are spread with a specific purpose to harm organizations, individuals and governments' reputations or to influence people's perceptions with manipulation of SM algorithms⁴⁵. Providing the opportunity to bypass journalists and traditional media appears as a core argument for political actors to speak directly to their followers, delivering the intended discourse without filter⁴⁶.

⁴¹ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2015-global-digital-overview>

⁴² <https://www.pcbs.gov.ps/post.aspx?lang=en&ItemID=1664>

⁴³ <https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2017-israel?rq=israel>

⁴⁴ Duncombe (2018), *Twitter and the Challenges of Digital Diplomacy*, p.98

⁴⁵ Ozbay & Alatas (2020) *Fake news detection within online social media using supervised AI algorithms*, p.126

⁴⁶ Duncombe (2019) *The Politics of Twitter: Emotions and the Power of Social Media*, p. 422

Unlike Facebook, Twitter is mostly characterized by its degree of publicity, the content shared and its moderation policy⁴⁷. Assuming a relative freedom of speech means that tweets are usually unfiltered and visible for every user on the platform. While Facebook is considered a social network, Twitter is generally understood as a public space⁴⁸. It is obviously used in private environment but permits to connect with individuals sharing the same ideas in transnational spaces and offers the chance to participate in the public discourse. Twitter is also an ideal platform for users to spread political opinions. Studies have shown that staying updated on news is a key reason to use social media: over two-thirds of users claim to use Twitter to follow news reports and to share news with their networks⁴⁹. In this sense I have decided to investigate Twitter as a space that fosters free speech expression and public deliberation.

Twitter, a space for public debate

By amending the Habermasian framework, social media represent an opportunity to expand the scope of the public sphere, creating a virtual place for rational debate where the voice of all citizens could be equally heard⁵⁰. Researchers have discussed their potential to provide more egalitarian spaces for public deliberation (Neuman & al. 2011, Papacharissi 2016) because digital networks extended the reach of alternative discourses by lowering the costs of communication and reducing the obstacles for public expression. Moreover, this democratising effect expected from internet's horizontal architecture offers new perspectives to develop new networks as well as to reinforce existing ones. In some aspects, the observation regarding the political engagement on Twitter could be positive. However G. Green argues that the idea of taking part in the public discourse might be delusional⁵¹; although the command of communication technologies has given the sentiment of

⁴⁷ <https://help.twitter.com/en/rules-and-policies>

⁴⁸ Marwick & Boyd (2011) *To See and Be Seen: Celebrity Practice on Twitter*, p.142

⁴⁹ Bullard, (2015), *Editors Use Social Media Mostly to Post Story Links*, p.180

⁵⁰ Papacharissi, (2002) *The Virtual Sphere*, p.21

⁵¹ Green (2016) *From Bulletins to Bullets to Blogs and Beyond*, p.80

empowerment and political agency, some researchers do not see it as a catalyser of meaningful political participation (Green 2016, Siapera & al. 2020).

By nature, the follower-following logic characterises Twitter's flow of information as an unequal relation where fragmented audiences are constituted around influential users. In an environment where the most popular accounts have thousands of followers; the size of these networks inexorably affects the reach and the success of their tweets. Moreover, the system of "hashtags" and "mentions" allows the mobilization of audiences around specific topics regardless of the intention to form a group. Accordingly, the visibility of one political position depends on who supports such opinion and the engagement of his community. Furthermore, in the DPS, users tend to advocate for political and social ideas with other users sharing the same positions, in what Papacharissi calls "affective publics" brought together by common narratives⁵². Even though an online community sometimes represent an offline community, A. Matos Alves adds that it also presents "features of semi-public spheres of knowledge sharing, mutual support, memory-building and resistance"⁵³.

The influence of certified actors is excessively important when analyzing political discourses in the public sphere. While it could be argued that Twitter promote political engagement and horizontal debates, I would balance this claim by mentioning that the DPS reproduce the markers of legitimacy that usually dominate the field of traditional medias, promoting "prestige users" as catalysers of the reach and the influence of one discourse⁵⁴. Moreover, studies highlighted Twitter's tendency to favour echo chambers and its role as a channel for disseminating political content rather than promoting dialogue between users⁵⁵. As a result, it seems that digital communications do not particularly bring democratic features to the public

⁵² Papacharissi 2015, *Affective Publics: Sentiment, Technology, and Politic*, p.118

⁵³ Matos Alves, (2016) *Online Content Control, Memory and Community Isolation*, p.88

⁵⁴ Pond & Lewis (2019) *Riots and Twitter: Connective Politics, Framing Discourses in the Digital Public Sphere*, p.224

⁵⁵ Larsson & Moe (2012), *Studying Political Microblogging: Twitter Users in the 2010 Swedish Election Campaign*, p.741

discourse when news outlets and institutionalized individuals already hold prominent positions in the digital sphere.

Opinion leaders disseminating reputation narratives

In such an environment it appears that certified accounts receive more attention from their followers and that their public legitimacy in the offline world is reproduced in the online world. As a result, their communicative skills translate into narrative agency, allowing them to articulate reputation stories and influence decisions⁵⁶. This reputation agency highlights the art of influencing, necessary to legitimize and propagate ideas in the public sphere. Reputation narratives represent the collective and discursive processes involving expectations, opinions and beliefs about individuals or organisations that contribute to mediate information and ideas in a given environment. These are recognizable by the positioning of its influential actors, according to their place in the reputation narrative (information seeker, influencer, and pressurer). Stakeholders invite their followers to support their positions in order to increase the exposure of their opinion. This set of narratives is constantly evolving, built and modified by interactions between different categories of publics over time, and emerge following a specific path, as described by S. Laaksonen:

“The most relevant chain for reputation formation within the online arenas consists of circles of spreading activity among the first three agents: individuals, communities, and masses. The chain starts with an individual influencer, whose opinions gain higher visibility. First, a community is created, then the issue starts spanning wider to larger audiences. When a “critical mass” is reached, the issue becomes so important and powerful it is likely to gain coverage in traditional media as well. (...) This is the most profound form of reputation risk involved in online environments, as the practitioners still see traditional media as the way of reaching large audiences.” (p.249)⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Laaksonen (2016) *Casting roles to Stakeholders, Narrative Analysis of Reputational Storytelling in the DPS*, p.239

⁵⁷ Also Laaksonen (2016)

As a result, the advent of new technologies and globalized networks has permitted more interactions and critics than traditional media, since individual users are now able to initiate campaigns to affect organisations' reputation⁵⁸. Acknowledging the fact that social media provide channel for organisations to communicate about their activities and to interact with basic users and influential stakeholders, the digital sphere appears as a crucial place to for reputation management. Any public organisation facing an outbreak of critics is nowadays demanded to provide answers and to engage discussions with the driving forces of these reputational narratives. In this sense, public reputation cannot be neglected because the ability of influential stakeholders to write stories and share narratives contributes to frame the public discourse over organisations and individuals.

Researching Social Media data

Social Media's data constitute relevant sources of context-based reactions that allow researchers to observe trends, evolutions and variations of public discourses on a daily basis. SM data has been employed over the years for studying socio-political issues and the field of "social media analysis" started to grow. Academic researchers tried to understand the behaviour of users on social media and the patterns of online communication (Lindgren and Lundström 2011, Hughes & Al. 2012, Larsson and Moe 2012, Barbera & Rivero 2015). In addition, Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan established an interesting framework to conduct an analysis of political discourses based on the collection, the monitoring and the analysis of social media data⁵⁹.

The data extracted from SM platforms can refer to any form of information in a digitized format including text, audio, photographic and video files. Even if, significant numbers of data are often collected to lead large researches, other studies manage to lead "web content

⁵⁸ Sedereviciute & Valentini (2011), *Towards a More Holistic Stakeholder Analysis Approach. Mapping Known and Undiscovered Stakeholders from Social Media*, p.230

⁵⁹ Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan (2012), *Social Media and Political Communication: a SM Analytics Framework*, p.1289

analysis” with both automated and manual methods⁶⁰ which require smaller samples. Moreover, the use of SM to study opinions, perceptions, experiences or behaviours through verbal expression are included in the larger framework of “Qualitative E-Research” which was first designed to conduct online interview research, and now applies to any qualitative approach in the digital sphere⁶¹.

When it comes to inquire SM data, researchers have to determine the size of their sample, according to the design of their research. The field of SM analytics usually makes a distinction between “Big Data” that refers to mostly quantitative processes of collecting data through computerized algorithms, and “Small Data” implying a human collection and coding of sources. The contribution of quantitative studies are essential to map the field of SM and several studies describe the platform’s culture, its trends and the type of discourse adopted on this platform (Zeitzoff, Kelly & Lotan, 2015, Barberà & Rivero, 2015, Bossetta, 2018, Ng & Araz, 2021). These studies provided me a global idea of the DPS interactions; yet I believe that small data also have a significant relevance in SM research because it appears to be more effective to capture intentions, subjectivities and historically situated phenomenon⁶². By small data I mean a dataset composed of few targeted publications analyzed with qualitative methods to grasp users’ perspective which is embodied in ways that can hardly be captured by quantitative approaches⁶³ like rhetorical tropes, humour and satire that are frequent in the platform’s culture.

In my opinion, manual data collection encourages exploration and fosters greater familiarity with the sources in their original format, as they appear to random users. With little algorithmic assistance, this approach allows the dataset to be small enough to be processed by

⁶⁰ Herring (2010), *Web Content Analysis: Expanding the Paradigm*, p.245

⁶¹ Salmons (2017), *Using SM in Data Collection: Designing Studies with the Qualitative E-Research Framework*, p.179

⁶² Latzko-Thot & al. (2017), *Small Data, Thick Data: Thickening Strategies for Trace-based Social Media Research*, p.199

⁶³ Marwick (2013), *Ethnographic and Qualitative Research on Twitter*, p.110

human analysts and to produce a representation of the content's richness. Researchers gathering such data use external observations of publicly available content or 'found data' using Jensen's distinction with 'made data' referring to reactive methods implying responses from the participants⁶⁴. This method is based on a targeted collection of publications, messages, images and other sorts of content posted by SM users. Hand coding is applied to categorize the tweets, calling for a flexible approach by which the corpus is built along the research with adaptations. In such studies, it is necessary to adapt the coding rubrics and the categories during the different stages of reflexion because choosing the coding categories is complex and subjective. While it is impossible to erase any subjective bias, describing the research methodology is necessary to understand my research choices.

Methodology

Research choices and relevance of my design

I took the decision to investigate Twitter which was widely adopted in the region from the 2010s and is now broadly used to share political content⁶⁵. My contribution to the field would be to describe the diversity of discourses disseminated by influential accounts in the DPS in order to illustrate the formation of UNRWA's public image. By monitoring the mention of the agency around selected events, I intend to verify the following hypothesis:

- First hypothesis: The tone of the discourses in the DPS will appear less moderated than in traditional media.
- Second hypothesis: Discourses about UNRWA in the DPS will set a clear distinction between supporters and opponents of the organisation. I expect the public discourses to be directed towards targeted audiences strongly isolated from each other.

⁶⁴ Jensen (2014), *Audiences, Audiences Everywhere—Measured, Interpreted and Imagined*, p.229

⁶⁵ Bullard, (2015), *Editors Use Social Media Mostly to Post Story Links*, p.180

- Third hypothesis: Expecting the public discourse to be dominated by “certified experts” reflecting offline structures of legitimacy, I contend that different types of stakeholders will hold specific positions in the formation of reputation narratives.

The scope of my research is focused on the image of UNRWA in the DPS and especially on Twitter. This platform has its rules, its particular means of communication and a culture of its own, which are hardly measurable with “Big Data” farming. As a result, the small size of my data sample allows me to lead a manual data collection and to describe in depth⁶⁶ the paradox of UNRWA being the problem or the solution in the DPS.

Why researching Twitter as a field for my analysis?

First of all, Twitter is a research field that constitutes a part of the public sphere and represents an extract of the public discourse that surrounds the agency. It is a public space, where influential actors of the society and regular users share the same field and sometimes interact. Private accounts are not the norm and public accounts have rules to follow, involving their private responsibility. However, as opposed to the common view that characterizes social media’s interactions as not occurring in the ‘real world’, behaviour on these sites indeed mirrors offline behaviour in some aspects, which can help researchers to describe the representations developed by SM’s users on political issues. In addition to the fact that this platform was widely adopted in the region in the last decade as a source of information and a place for political debate⁶⁷, I believe that to do research on Twitter can contribute to the knowledge of UNRWA’s representation in digital public spheres.

⁶⁶ Quan-Haase & McCay-Peet (2017), *Building SM Research Teams: Motivations, Challenges, and Policy Frameworks*, p.49

⁶⁷ Siapera, Hunt & Lynn (2015) *GazaUnderAttack: Twitter, Palestine and Diffused War*, p.1314

How to collect my data and under which criteria?

The process of data collection for my case study has gone through several stages; I intended to engage with the material following an inductive approach, adapting my design to the data available. I chose to study a relatively small sample of data, rather than collecting anything relating to UNRWA. The reason was that the topic of my research is not a daily concern of SM users, and little activity was noticeable besides meaningful events. In this idea, I chose to operate the data collection with a mix of “keyword-based” and “actor-based” process⁶⁸ in order to preserve my sample from irrelevant tweets which did not fit my design. Then, I collected tweets from influential accounts who frequently engaged with the topic on the basis of their certification by the platform and their followers (10K minimum). I could be objected that the certification does not guarantee the rationality of an account and only represents an arbitrary decision of Twitter, but it seems that users have accepted this “blue-check” game providing public legitimacy in return for individual responsibility.

After my first encounter with the available data, I have identified three contemporary events that questioned the legitimacy of UNRWA and have provoked more engagement than usually on Twitter, to observe the reactions of certified stakeholders. These events constituted my cases of study through which I analyzed the rival discourses; First, I study the accusation of UNRWA’s political implication during the Gaza war (summer 2014) in which the agency was in the middle of a conflict between the Hamas and the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF). Then, I investigate the perception of the agency’s educational mission after a scandal involving Palestinian employees of UNRWA for their sharing of incitement to murder Israelis on Facebook⁶⁹ (winter 2015). Finally, I inquire the discourse about UNRWA’s financial structure in light of US President Donald Trump’s funding cuts (summer 2018) to observe with which arguments the stakeholders praised or rejected the decision.

⁶⁸ Stieglitz & Dang-Xuan (2012) *Social Media and Political Communication: a Social Media Analytics Framework*, p.1284

⁶⁹ <https://unwatch.org/report-un-officials-inciting-murder-of-jews-call-to-stab-zionist-dogs/>

Data collection process

In order to collect my primary sources, I have openly researched UNRWA in three languages (Arabic, Hebrew and English) with Twitter's research tool to identify relevant periods that created engagement with the topic. During this step, I identified three periods when the activity was higher, and then processed my data according to this observation. Around these events, I collected the publications that framed UNRWA either as a troublemaker or as a solutions' provider. As a result, I removed some interesting tweets that did not published around those events and publications that did not engaged with UNRWA's reputation. In an effort to be the less biased possible, I selected five tweets sharing supporting views and five tweets sharing critical views, regardless of the language in which they were published, in order to illustrate the diversity of discourse present in the DPS. As a time range to collect the material, I chose a range of two months because of the high rhythm of news consumption and the versatility of events' coverage in the public sphere; July and August 2014 for the Gaza war, November and December 2015 for the UNRWA's staff scandal, July and August 2018 for the funding cuts.

Organizing Data; Hand coding

The collection of my data was made from publicly available content of influential political actors (think-tanks, journalists, scholars, politicians). Once the data was collected, I have coded the material according to the paradox of UNRWA being a solution for some and an obstacle for other. At this point, I had divided the three main themes related to UNRWA's mission and illustrated by each event; political involvement, education mission and financial structure. However, I have needed an additional category for each event in order to encompass the diversity of discourses existing out of the simple dichotomy concerning UNRWA's role. In 2014, alongside the rival reporting of war's events in Gaza, the framing of UNRWA as an actor in the information war seems relevant enough to add a group of five

tweets. In 2015, apart from the competition to frame UNRWA's mission of education, the neutrality of the agency's top officials and their involvement in the political context is also questioned by additional discourses. Finally, the public debate on UNRWA in 2018 which was focused on financial aspects and donor countries launches another debate challenging the very meaning of UNRWA existence, which constitutes the last category.

As a result, my data sample represents a corpus of 45 tweets equally distributed between the three periods and their three themes. I lead a critical discourse analysis on this sample based on Krzyzanowski's⁷⁰ framework involving the identification of key themes and their supporting arguments. In my case study, the tweets are considered as sources of spoken information on which discourse analysis methods enable me to identify meaningful discursive patterns. According to the limited size of my sample, I have manually codified each publication with supportive, hostile and alternative arguments following each event in a table. This table provides a brief description of the message for each tweet, the date of its publication and a hyperlink to access these sources⁷¹.

Reading and interpreting data

Krzyzanowski's framework for critical discourse analysis includes two stages: after the 'entry-level' dedicated to the extraction of key themes, the 'in-depth level' consists in the study of discursive strategies employed in tweets, associated with images, video clips and hashtags. These extra-textual elements sometimes appear in my analysis as the main body of discourse which implies visual and audio analysis. According to the themes mentioned before, each discourse competing in the DPS is associated with one or more argument. In addition to describe the features of stakeholders' discourses, my analysis also investigates the respective positions hold by stakeholders and the discourse attached with their position. To summarize, I

⁷⁰Krzyzanowski, (2020) Digital Diplomacy or Political Communication? p.57

⁷¹ Primary sources in the Appendices

engage with the data; by first identifying the discourse and their frames, then by briefly presenting the author and contextualizing his message, and occasionally by associating the arguments with broader narratives mobilized to support a claim.

Limits of my design

In leading this research, I have to mention the limitation of this study which is the representativeness of the dataset. The original public sphere theory implies the existence of a coherent national society that share certain principles and values. However in my case study, both public spheres could not fit my model. On the one hand, Palestinian public sphere is at first divided between the Gaza Strip and the West Bank but also in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. On the other hand, one fifth of the Israeli population is of Palestinian descent. Can we consider a public sphere only by the dominant trends in its public discourse, thus ignoring a significant part of the population? My position is to not automatically associate a discourse with the socio-cultural background of its author, but to view the public sphere a transnational where various populations compete to impose their narratives, and to base my analysis on a supportive versus hostile cleavage rather than a nationalist cleavage.

Besides this question, I think there are evidences that social media can reveal information about citizens' characteristics and behaviours, even though people's opinions are not precisely measureable. For instance, studies have highlighted that likes on SM are highly predictive of private traits such as party preference, age, gender, sexual orientation, and psychological traits (Kosinski & al. 2013, Youyou & al. 2015). Given that SM publications are often shared within restricted social environment, the readership or viewership can hardly be considered as random or representative of the population. As a result, the analysis of social media data may reveal patterns that are not always generalizable. More, if my sample includes tweets mentioning names of political candidates or parties, it could oversample individuals with extreme political identities, because these parts of the society tend to publish about politics

more frequently⁷². However, samples that are not completely representative can still be scientifically relevant. In this sense, I study a sample of tweets about UNRWA as a set of ‘opinion leaders’ discourse that can be more influential than ordinary citizens.

Findings and discussion

1. Gaza War between the Hamas and the IDF (2014)

The first event with noticeable engagement discussing UNRWA’s role was the war that took place in the Gaza Strip and in Israel between the 8th of July and August 26th 2014. The main reason for this choice was the emergence of Twitter and its development in the field of public communication during the 2010s. In November 2012 the accounts of the @idfspokeperson and the @alqassambrigade were already leading a digital war on Twitter⁷³. Therefore, during the summer 2014, Twitter was more used by Palestinians and Israelis to follow the evolution of the military operations and official declarations from both parties. It was also the first time that several influential users engaged with UNRWA’s role as a central element of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

○ UNRWA presented as a victim and of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

In an emergency report on September 2nd, UNRWA claimed to have lost 11 personnel of its staff during the war, without forgetting the many employees that risked their life to bring humanitarian aid⁷⁴. During this operation, rockets were fired from both sides causing the destruction of 18 000 housing units and the displacement of nearly 100 000 Palestinians in UNRWA shelters and schools⁷⁵. In this context, Arabic-speaking accounts mostly emphasized the sufferance endured by Palestinians, with UNRWA as a background. The agency was not brandished as a central actor of the conflict but rather as a collateral damage and as a

⁷² Barberá & Rivero (2015). *Understanding the Political Representativeness of Twitter Users*. p.722

⁷³ <https://www.bbc.co.uk/blogs/collegeofjournalism/entries/001acfe3-9d55-3066-b6d1-b0c1e5de6c85>

⁷⁴ <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/emergency-reports/gaza-situation-report-56>

⁷⁵ <https://www.ochaopt.org/content/three-years-2014-conflict-29000-people-remain-displaced>

sheltering place, with one exception. Rasha Qandeel, an Egyptian journalist from the BBC, asked the question of war crime responsibility for bombing UNRWA's school, in a tweet on August 3rd.



In my opinion, the use of this vocabulary reveals a supportive discourse of UNRWA's mission that tends to consider the agency as sacred and its aggression as non-conventional. In addition, its introduction tries to present the news as a worldly event to emphasize the gravity and reach a wide Arabic-speaking audience. Here, the liberty in tone offered by the platform permits a journalist to take radical political stances by qualifying IDF of "war criminal" for bombing a UNRWA school. Yet, certified users usually prefer to moderate their declaration while reporting on the same topics because of their reputation, the responsibility of the institution they represent or their employer. For instance, Mohammad Abu Alkomboz, a Palestinian businessman based in the United Arab Emirates and specialized in digital marketing strategies, tweeted on July 31st;

"151 schools were partially damaged as a result of various Israeli attacks (75 public schools, 76 UNRWA schools)".

Considered as the one of the most effective and valuable mission of UNRWA, here the destruction of places for education is mentioned by a Palestinian actor more as mean to inform the public rather than to take political stances on UNRWA's role or image. This strategy resembles a journalistic style of reporting that is not essentially aimed at sharing

opinions to the audience but mostly to inform about the situation. Still, the wording of “Israeli attacks” refers to a vocabulary that could be considered as non-neutral when other reports would opt for the words “surgical strike”, “targeted retaliation” or “preventive operation”.

In another post late August, the official account of the Palestinian Liberation Organization (Negotiations Affairs Department) updated the information that 141 government schools and 136 UNRWA schools were damaged in Gaza. I perceive this effort to stay as objective as possible, as a strategy to be shared in various digital spheres, without being excessively engaged on political issues. It allows to enlarge the audience towards moderate readerships. In the same style, Noura Erakat, a Palestinian-American scholar and human rights attorney, declared that the siege of Gaza increased to 100% the food dependency of Gazans to UNRWA, without any personal comment. I consider this style of reporting as messages for the Palestinian public but also the international one, by doing so it contributes to the compassion of Palestinian suffering and highlights the role of UNRWA in sustaining Palestinian refugees’ relief, education.

It is important to note that the quasi-neutral reports on Palestinian casualties designed to inform and to create empathy, were also shared by an Israeli-American journalist specialized in the region; Mairav Zonszein who quoted the publication of UNRWA on August 28th reporting an estimation of 142 families having lost 3 or more members in Gaza during the conflict. I view this tweet as a confirmation that the DPS expressing positive views on UNRWA’s mission cannot be merely divided between Palestinian and Israelis advocates. Instead, this discourse constitutes a valuable source of information to share with large audiences. In this sense, the DPS appears as transnational with fuzzy boundaries that prevent any generalization in terms of nation-based discourses.

- **UNRWA Presented as a partner of terrorism**

From another perspective, discourses on UNRWA in the DPS highlighted the fact that the agency discovered approximately 20 rockets in the basement of a Gazan school⁷⁶. Therefore, the public reputation of UNRWA on Twitter during high intensity operations was critical about its involvement in the conflict. Influential stakeholders accused the organisation of providing facilities for Hamas' missile attacks on Israel. Notwithstanding the necessity to inform the Israeli public about such military operations, discourses of the detractors framed UNRWA as a partner of terrorism; playing on the confusion about the coexistence of UNRWA with Hamas in Gaza. The agency obviously condemned any involvement of its staff or its facilities in military operations but this accusation of partnership was aimed, in my mind, at linking UNRWA's mission with terrorism for an audience relying on narratives built on the idea that Palestinians refugees are victims of UNRWA. For instance, Danny Ayalon who served as diplomat in the United States between 2002 and 2006 and as foreign policy advisor of Israeli Prime Ministers tweeted on July 23rd (in Hebrew):

“ Hamas once again takes over UNRWA school and turns it into a terrorist cell. Instead of the missiles and Hamas being expelled from the school, UNRWA personnel were expelled...”

While the Israeli diplomat namely blames UNRWA for its responsibility in terrorist activities, the tone of his discourse still contains elements of moderation. Indeed, by building on a tangible fact without exaggerating the picture, this type of discourse allows an audience that would be akin to support UNRWA's activities yet sceptics about its implementation, to be informed about the official Israeli position. In a more direct way, I notice other strategies to

⁷⁶ <https://www.unrwa.org/newsroom/press-releases/unrwa-strongly-condemns-placement-rockets-school>

harm UNRWA's reputation in the digital public sphere by employing radical discourses; during the following month, Hilel Gershuni, a Talmud researcher, translator and editor at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem tweeted "UNRWA is Hamas" with an attached article⁷⁷ explicitly claiming that Hamas has control over UNRWA's activity and that there's no difference between them in Gaza, since most of its staff is composed of "terrorist agents". I also find this degree of criticism with Hen Mazzig, a senior fellow at the Tel Aviv Institute and Israeli digital influencer, who called UNRWA "war criminals" in a tweet mentioning the presence of rockets in school basements. Mirroring the tweet of Rasha Qandeel, I consider that this kind of simplification illustrates the type of discourse disseminated by pressurer stakeholders to fuel reputation narratives in the DPS.

While contributing to the reputation-building by blaming the agency for its support of terrorism, these targeted attacks mostly serve to create a digital environment where UNRWA would be considered as ill-headed and corrupted organisation, in order to advocate for its removal or its defunding. Using defamation claims to delegitimize or temper the content shared by UNRWA indeed contribute to frame its activities in a negative way⁷⁸. Accordingly, Hillel Neuer a Canadian international lawyer, human rights activist, and executive director of United Nations Watch⁷⁹ criticized in a tweet UNRWA's spokesperson Chris Gunness for his complicity with Hamas and his lifestyle without providing substantive information.

⁷⁷ <https://mida.org.il/2014/08/04/%D7%90%D7%95%D7%A0%D7%A8%D7%90-%D7%94%D7%95%D7%90-%D7%97%D7%9E%D7%90%D7%A1/>

⁷⁸ Macnamara & Zerfass (2012) *Social Media Communication in Organizations: The Challenges of Balancing Openness, Strategy, and Management*, p.302

⁷⁹ UN Watch : Non profit organization operating as a watchdog of UN activities, based in Geneva, Switzerland



As described in previous studies (Sapiera & al. 2020), sarcasm also constitutes critical communications with the potential to address political issues as would satire do. In trying to ridicule a specific target, sarcasm can be understood as a comic appropriation of meaning which widens the discursive space and contest one dominant narrative⁸⁰, in this case the relief of Palestinian children. Following this idea, sarcastic messages can have more effects than ordinary communications; while it strengthens in-group's links it also sets the tone of discussion on a radical tone.

I think that the most explicit strategies to communicate with social media are expressed in this tweet because it optimizes the visibility and the reach of the discourse in the DPS. Especially on social media where powerful images often reach a significant audiences, it is difficult to ignore the narrative carried with that picture which also presents the #Gaza and the direct mention of @ChrisGunness' and @UNRWA's accounts. In this situation, directly addressing other users of the platform allows the influencer to appear as a political debater publicly exposing his ideas, although Twitter's algorithm does not offer equal visibility to the answers - when there are – supporting the hypothesis of a seemingly public debate that is mostly directed towards targeted audiences strongly isolated from each other.

⁸⁰ Halabi (2017) *The Contingency of Meaning to the Party of God: Carnavalesque Humor in Revolutionary Times*, p.4032

- **War of Information and image, UNRWA as a symbol**

During these two months, UNRWA was either framed as a partner of terrorism or as a victim of the IDF, but it also emerged as an actor in the information war occurring in the DPS. Subject to rival discourses and contradictory news, the agency was caught in a “digital war” in which harming the organisation’s reputation or defending it, were the polarized positions adopted by influential stakeholders. In this section, despite the fact that the primary sources were all collected from stakeholders that I identify as Israeli advocates, the diversity of positions expressed in these tweets tend to temper the hypothesis of closed and sealed communities. Indeed, I notice significant variations regarding UNRWA’s depiction in the public discourse which illustrates the complexity of describing such issues within a supposedly coherent environment. Moreover, I argue that sharing contradictory voices serves to provide a more accurate insight of reputation narratives and of the symbol that UNRWA represent for Israeli stakeholders.

Unsurprisingly from a statement of the Israeli state, the official Arabic Twitter account of Israel tweeted on August 19th that stopping aid to UNRWA would be the best solution to develop the Palestinian state. According to the language in which the tweet is written and the emphasis on UNRWA as an obstacle for Palestinians, I interpret this message as directed towards an Arabic-speaking audience in favour of the establishment of a concrete Palestinian State. Pointing out the failure of the organization can certainly find an attentive ear for this narrative without being offensive by outrageous statements. As described earlier for D. Ayalon’s tweet, it is interesting to note that framing UNRWA as a problem not for Israelis but for Palestinians while keeping a moderate vocabulary reflects an official discourse of the State of Israel on Twitter to engage with UNRWA’s activities.

Acknowledging the official discourse of UNRWA's role, an alternative discourse can be found within the Israeli DPS. For instance, Chico Menashe, a reporter and senior editor in Israel's top news organisations published a serial of three tweets in two days which viewed the involvement of UNRWA facilities in the conflict as a danger for Israeli reputation and image in the public sphere. First, he mentioned on July 24th an incorrect firing of Israel or Hamas' missiles on UNRWA's school, and regretted on the 25th that this "unfortunate incident" provided a substantive platform for the international community to condemn Israeli's operations, he also claimed that:

It is ridiculous to hear commentators in the studios say that "the world is not even moved by the UNRWA event," while world editions open with very difficult photographs of the injured children there.⁸¹

These tweets appeared to me as essential to illustrate how certain parts of the Israeli DPS were concerned about the reputation damage caused by harming UNRWA's neutral status in the region. The symbol carried with the destruction of UN facilities as well as shocking images of injured children could therefore be seen as counter-productive for the support of Israeli military operations. In this sense, I argue that real-life events have a life of their own in the DPS and their potential to mobilize criticism or support cannot be neglected because it reflects patterns of Twitter's communications in which image and reputation dynamics are crucial.



⁸¹ @ChicoMenashe 25.07.2014

To conclude this section, I found relevant to provide an illustration of the direct effects resulting from the depiction of UNRWA as a partner of terrorism. Approximately one month after the discovery of missiles in a UNRWA school's basement, the death of a four years old Israeli child in a mortar attack from Gaza provoked immediate accusations of UNRWA's complicity. Although the information was refuted the next day⁸², C. Duncombe argues that fake news has usually more visibility than their correction among the public⁸³. Yet, the intervention of Peter Lerner, a social media expert and former Lieutenant colonel of the IDF, is aimed at providing truth-oriented reports in the competitive arena of the DPS. Presenting himself as a bridge builder operating in the fields of crisis communication and reputation management, his tweet demonstrates the importance of coherence and credibility that influential stakeholders engage in the digital space. Indeed, in this online environment, one certified user cannot intentionally propagate false information without facing the risk of being banned from the platform. Even though Twitter can certainly not be considered as an ideal vehicle for "true information", it seems that reputation dynamics compel influential users to adopt public correctedness, which is not the norm for Twitter users.

In this competition over UNRWA's framing in the context of a military conflict, influential stakeholders all participated at their level to fuel reputation narratives. While the supportive discourses mostly emphasized the damage inflicted to UNRWA's facilities, the opposing discourses highlighted the cooperation of the agency with Hamas' attacks. Yet, underlying this debate, the importance of UNRWA's symbol in the reputation's narrative concerning Israeli military operations came to balance the assumption that online communities would coherently propagate the same narratives.

⁸² <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/aug/23/israel-admits-mortar-bomb-not-fired-un-school>

⁸³ Duncombe (2018) Twitter and the challenges of Digital Diplomacy

2. Publication of hatred posts on Facebook by UNRWA employees

During the fall 2015, several employees of UNRWA were exposed for publishing anti-Semitic messages on their Facebook pages. This event provoked diverse reactions from UNRWA supporters and detractors that either praised the efforts of the agency in its education mission or its failure to prevent hatred speeches from its employees. Apart from this debate over UNRWA's teaching staff, I also found discourses trying to politicize UNRWA's activities in the region. This additional layer illustrates the ability of external actors of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to get involved in the reputation narratives surrounding UNRWA, but also to show how the vocabulary and the type of discourse used by influential stakeholders are embedded in broader narratives which influence real-life decision.

○ UNRWA is educating Palestinian children with terrorist ideology

On November 30th a UN Watch report was published to denounce violent posts of UNRWA teachers⁸⁴. This organisation based in Geneva describes itself as “the only UN-accredited NGO that monitors the world body, defends human rights and fights dictatorships and double standards” in its Twitter biography and is directed by Hillel Neuer. Indeed, during the data collection he and his organisation appeared as important stakeholders in UNRWA's reputation on Twitter platform. His involvement with the question of UNRWA cannot be ignored because for my whole sample, he represented approximately 15% of the material studied. Returning to the report titled; *despite UNRWA promises, teachers again inciting to violence against "Jewish Apes and Pigs"*, it detailed the cases of ten employees glorifying violence against Jews and praising terrorism on their Facebook pages. Following its publication, the UN Watch account tweeted on December 2nd a link to the report with an injunction to “save Palestinians” by stopping their “exploitation by the powerful”. Again, this

⁸⁴ <https://unwatch.org/report-despite-unrwa-promises-teachers-again-inciting-to-violence-against-jewish-apes-and-pigs/>

discourse does not simply inform the public but it also contributes to strengthen the narrative according to which Palestinians are victims of UNRWA's exploitation.

In this effort to blame the institution as much as its employees for this scandal, Danny Danon the Israeli ambassador and permanent representative to the UN tweeted on the same day a picture of the Facebook posts alongside a diploma of UNRWA ethic course. His reaction to the publication employs a sarcastic tone to ridicule the reliability of UNRWA's education and to condemn the values transmitted by its teachers. It is interesting to note that the Ambassador chose to communicate in Hebrew while he mostly expressed himself in English. Positioning himself as an influential stakeholder in the discourse over UNRWA, he chose to write his message for a Hebrew-speaking audience. It could be argued that the cursing was explicitly targeting Jewish population and therefore explains this strategy, however in terms of representation to the international community, I would have expected this kind of information to be accessible for larger audiences. It is possible that Palestinians learned about this event by other channels of information, nevertheless lacking Arabic commentaries about the report, I expected -like for the position of the Israeli state in Arabic- to observe more coverage of this information in the Arabic-speaking DPS.



6:55 PM · Dec 2, 2015 · Twitter for iPhone



Translated from Hebrew by Google

This is how a graduate of UNRWA's Ethics' course called the Zionists and the Jews, thus again trampling on the values of fairness that are supposed to lead the UN:

Relevant people

Ambassador Dann...
@dannyanon
Israel's 17th Permanent
Representative to the UN | Chairman
of the World Likud

"Zionist and Jews are sons of pigs and monkeys" Suad Halil Ramawi (Suad Assi) English Teacher at UNRWA.

Any UNRWA employee, or any other UN body that expresses itself in this way, must be dismissed immediately. Only in this way will we succeed in uprooting anti-Semitism and incitement from the organization once and for all.

In a following tweet the Ambassador added that any employee exposed for such behaviour should be dismissed as a step to fight anti-Semitism within the organisation. This generalisation of the whole education mission and the imperative tone indicates that stakeholders occupying the “pressurer” position consist in trying to influence the behaviour of organisations⁸⁵. As a result, the implication of D. Danon in UNRWA’s reputation narratives appears to me as an attempt to negatively frame the agency in the Israeli-DPS

In this regard, another tweet from UN Watch published on December 9th even went further when quoting a message praising UNRWA’s activities in Palestine. It encompasses the teaching staff in this controversy by mentioning the “400\$ million collected from U.S. taxpayers” as a mean to harm the agency’s reputation in the American public. By blaming the entire education mission of UNRWA, this deliberate strategy from the watchdog institute obviously targets an American audience, since the main contributor of UNRWA’s budget remained the United States. In my opinion, damaging its reputation in the American DPS contributes in the long term to affect the legitimacy of UNRWA to exist. In this idea, its director Hillel Neuer tweeted on December 18th from its personal account the US’ decision to fund UNRWA with \$123 million in support for school building in the West bank. Without any commentary on the information, I interpret this unexpected silence as a frustration; having frequently warned about the danger of funding UNRWA, US’ administration ignored it and continued to support the agency.

Similar to the narrative developed during the summer 2014, in which UNRWA was framed as a partner of Hamas in Gaza, Hillel Neuer continued to build on this narrative in response of a job offer in Amman. Even though the offer was located in Jordan, the international lawyer took the opportunity to ironically present the position of “director of security” as the protector

⁸⁵ Laaksonen (2016) *Casting roles to Stakeholders, Narrative Analysis of Reputational Storytelling in the DPS*, p.247

of “ Hamas rockets across UNRWA schools in Gaza ”. Here, the diffusion of the information is secondary; in fact this sarcastic approach to frame UNRWA under Hamas’ control is aimed at convincing sceptic audiences while strengthening convinced ones. Similar to cynical attitudes towards the state of affairs adopted by this kind of discourse, cynicism and sarcasm contribute to enlarge the space of acceptable positions and to legitimize discursive practices that challenge dominant narratives. Nevertheless, Sloterdijk claims that this “ detached negativity ” occurring in political debates does not lead to meaningful political actions; rather it beneficiates the status quo by resignation and fatalism⁸⁶. In my opinion, these communicative patterns proper to Twitter’s culture contribute in the public discourse, and perpetuate a strong polarisation as well as a high degree of animosity.

- **UNRWA’s mission in Education**

In the day following the UN watch’s report, another research institute based in Geneva specialised in world affairs, the IHEID also communicated about UNRWA’s education but with a different perspective. Indeed, this tweet shared Pierre Krähenbühl’s (Commissioner General of UNRWA) statement that education was the only hope for Palestinians. Clearly avoiding the question of the teachers, the position taken by this institution reflects the commitment of influential stakeholders to promote UNRWA’s mission of education in the context of strong criticism towards its staff. Guided by the same strategy, a deputy leader of UK labour party, Angela Rayner tweeted on December 8th:

“Hearing about UNRWA who provide education to 500,000 Palestinian refugee kids across the Middle East.UK must continue 2 support [@PKraehenbuehl](#)”

Acknowledging the numerous children beneficiating from UNRWA’s services, this British deputy also chose to support the agency during period of trouble while not mentioning the controversy. It is certain that being involved in such scandals affects the reputation of

⁸⁶ Sloterdijk (1984) *Cynicism : the twilight of False Consciousness*, p.194

organisations, especially when these organisations are already the target of other accusations. Therefore, communicating an emphasis on children and their need for proper education could be interpreted as a mean to balance the visibility of discourses challenging UNRWA's education. During my analysis of the event, the two main representations of UNRWA that appeared competing in the DPS were; the fear that Palestinian children would be educated according to hatred principles and the fear that these children would not receive an appropriate education with funding lacks.

According to this critique-versus-supportive logic, the Global Teacher Prize, an American foundation which awards worldwide inspiring teachers each year, also decided to promote Palestinians efforts to cope with education issues. On December 10th the organisation highlighted in a tweet the non-violent statement from a Palestinian teacher at UNRWA, Hanan Hroub. In response to this tweet, she expressed her commitment to human rights and peace values as essential duties which obviously participates - regardless of her intentions - to reinforce the narrative supporting UNRWA's education mission. Indeed, I contend that within the DPS, publicly available messages have a larger effect than the one intended by their author. I assume that despite a certain communicative agency, influential stakeholders' statements are encompassed in a broader discourse, participating –willingly or not- in the construction of reputation narratives. As a result, I believe this tweet can show how tweets can be interpreted differently regarding the context.



The task of teachers is to raise peace-loving generations and defend human rights

Struggling to observe explicit reactions of supportive stakeholders about the UN Watch report, I have decided to include a tweet from the latter on December 12th claiming that “feeling the heat”, UNRWA refuted the accusations of hatred incitement. In the article attached to the tweet⁸⁷, a UNRWA spokesperson indeed defends the organisation by saying some teachers were no longer employed by UNRWA at the time, however it does not deny the accusation. Instead the article explicitly mentions the agency’s commitment to fight anti-Semitism and racism within its staff and confirms that every allegation of this sort was investigated and in relevant cases the teachers were sanctioned by suspension and loss of pay. While the statement could at first appear as a spontaneous defence supporting the denial mentioned in the tweet, it actually contradicts the source provided which acknowledged verbatim to “take these allegations seriously”. Here, the veracity of the information does not count, but the high flow of information allows this kind of discourse to reinforce the broader narrative without being always fact-checked.

⁸⁷ <https://www.bostonherald.com/2015/12/09/dec-9-2015-letters-to-editor/>

Despite the lack of Palestinian reactions and other supportive stakeholders about the hatred accusations, I have collected a tweet from the Palestinian Information Centre indirectly addressing the teachers' issue. Presenting itself on Twitter as the “The voice of Palestine to the world... And the voice of the world to Palestine”, this account is followed by nearly 400 000 users and constitutes a valuable source of information for Palestinians. Without mentioning the trouble caused by UNRWA's teachers, this Arabic-speaking account states the decision of the agency to appoint 152 new teachers. Explicitly avoiding the scandal, this source of information does not provide a complete understanding of the situation while at the same time it contributes to the narrative of UNRWA as an essential actor of the education sector. It is interesting to note that throughout its existence, UNRWA represented a symbol for various reasons, and during my research I observed that education was the most –if not the only- mission that provoked supportive engagement on the DPS.

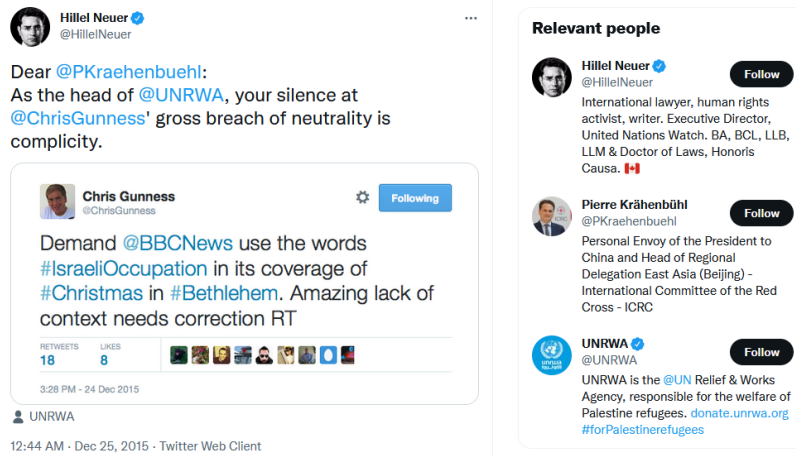
- **UNRWA being politicized in the conflict**

Alongside the rival discourses concerning UNRWA's teaching staff, I observe different types of discourse which attempted to politicize UNRWA's mission. As an agency working in the field of humanitarian relief and refugee care, it could be expected that its missions do not invest the field of politics. However I would argue that UNRWA's activities are at core of a highly politicized conflict where refugees are crucial. It is then difficult to pretend that UNRWA is never involved in political discourses since it depends exclusively on the policies of other countries to sustain its activities. In this sense, a Jordanian influencer representing and sharing positive news about the kingdom, Noor Bint Ali tweeted on December 14th:

“Until a final solution to the issue of Palestinian refugees is found, [#Jordan](#) shall, in implementation of its national and national obligations, cooperate and coordinate with [@UNRWA](#) [@UnitedNationsJO](#)”

By conditioning the collaboration between Jordan and UNRWA to the resolution of the Palestinian refugees' issue, she reminds that the agency is still operating because no agreement has ever been reached on the question. It is political to contend that supporting the agency is a national obligation, particularly in a period of accusations challenging UNRWA's legitimacy. Therefore I argue that influential stakeholders positioned themselves in favour of UNRWA and tried to diffuse alternative discourses that would either mobilize support or create compassion for the Palestinian refugees. In this sense, Lyse Doucet a Canadian BBC presenter and Chief International Correspondent, tweeted a statement from the spokesperson of UNRWA Chris Gunness welcoming any improvement in the armed conflict occurring around Yarmouk to stop the "inhuman conditions" of Palestinians refugees. Like the previous tweet, it recalls the fact that thousands of Palestinian refugees are still sheltered in refugee camps in Syria, facing the damages of the war started in 2011.

Also from Chris Gunness, a tweet published on December 24th praising the BBC to use the words "Israeli Occupation" in the coverage of Bethlehem's Christmas Eve, expressed a clear political opinion that official representatives of UNRWA might not spread in the public sphere. This example of the individual responsibility harming the organisation's reputation illustrates how the position of stakeholder can appear to be detrimental with problematic declarations. It is interesting to note that during my research this tweet was already suppressed by its author. However the reactions of rival stakeholders provide me the lost material to reconstitute the context. For instance, in a quote of this tweet the Gatestone Institute, an American "non-profit and non-partisan organisation" monitoring global security and freedom issues, condemned this attempt to politicize UNRWA in the Christmas period. In the same way, Hillel Neuer pointed this declaration as a "gross breach of neutrality", directly questioning the Pierre Krähenbühl about his complicity.



Similar to these reactions blaming UNRWA’s representative for taking position in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, this event was generalized by a tweet of Gerald M. Steinberg. He is an Israeli academic, political scientist and activist who founded a non-governmental organization in Jerusalem called NGO Monitor which declares in its mission statement “to promote accountability and advance a vigorous discussion on the reports and activities of humanitarian NGO’s in the framework of the Arab-Israeli conflict”⁸⁸. He claims in his tweet that “UNRWA’s propaganda fuels the conflict and terror while there are real refugees to help” in reference to Chris Guinness’ declaration. This example is relevant for it shows the combination of two frequent narratives surrounding UNRWA, which is presented as a partner of terrorism as well as the oppressor of Palestinian refugees. Within this framework, UNRWA does not stand as a passive associate but as the main culprit of its employees’ declarations. In light of the public pressure directed on this declaration, I want to show that back in 2015; simultaneous mentions from several influential stakeholders could harm UNRWA’s reputation enough to lead to the suppression of the tweet.

Besides the teachers’ scandal, I observe very different strategies from the stakeholders involved in UNRWA’s reputation: while supportive ones chose to avoid polemics, the

⁸⁸ <https://www.ngo-monitor.org/about/>

blaming ones opted for cynical discourses and explicit accusations. On top of that, the controversial tweet published by UNRWA's spokesperson which launched a backfire on its author, illustrated the effects of the pressurer position in the reputation narrative.

3. US cuts its funding of UNRWA, 2018

After announcing in January 2018 the intention to cut UNRWA's funding by half⁸⁹, US President Donald Trump started to implement his decision during the summer. Then, it seems natural that the withdrawal of the most important contributor radically changed the financial organisation of the agency, and the discourse surrounding its budget. In reaction to that, different voices rose in order to frame the agency either as a sponsor of terrorism perpetuating the dependency of Palestinian refugees or as an impoverished organisation struggling to meet its financial needs. Moreover, alternative discourses challenged the legitimacy of UNRWA to operate in the region by discussing its protection or its replacement.

○ UNRWA is a scam which perpetuates the dependency of Palestinians

The narrative according to which UNRWA allocates its budget to sponsor Hamas' activities and incite hatred had been strengthened in 2014 and 2015 by the stakeholders mentioned in the previous sections. In this sense, Barak David, a diplomatic correspondent at *Walla News*, pursued this strategy by considering in a series of tweets on July 27th that the Palestinian establishment should find a way to bypass UNRWA in the field of education to avoid the internal pressure provoked by unschooled children in Gaza. Welcoming the US decision, this position does not explicitly accuse UNRWA of partnership with Hamas. However it does reinforce the narrative claiming that UNRWA is not qualified to educate Palestinian children. In another tweet, the journalist shared the information that despite budget cuts UNRWA should be able to open its schools on time. Presuming a link to the agreement between Israel and Hamas, he concludes his tweet by questioning the origin of money which enabled this

⁸⁹ <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/1/17/us-cuts-unrwa-funding-by-more-than-half>

surprising turnaround. Despite an innocent interrogation, this seemingly moderate discourse participates, in my opinion, to the framing of UNRWA as a suspicious organization benefiting from obscure funding.

From the political field, Nir Barkat, the mayor of Jerusalem, also praised Donald Trump's decision in a tweet published on August 26th, but with explicit accusations against UNRWA. In a video clip recorded in his office, he claims that "UNRWA has become an obstacle to peace; rather than providing solutions they have become part of the problem" and expresses his wish to replace UNRWA with real hope, instead of violence and hatred. I content that this communication from an important political actor enriching his narrative with personal experiences and shocking images, is designed to support D. Trump's commitment to "fight" the organization, as declared in the descriptive message stating that "UNRWA is not the solution, it is the problem". Although the author occupied an elected position at the moment of this tweet he did not adopt the usually moderated discourse perceived in previous statement from officials. In this situation, I believe that the unfiltered type of discourse specific to Twitter's communications took over official communication standards as suggested by D. Trump's vocabulary and discursive strategies⁹⁰ during his presidential campaign.

Building on the same narrative, Arsen Ostrovsky, an International Human Rights lawyer specialized in digital diplomacy, tweeted during the same period with enjoyment to the funding cuts. Qualifying UNRWA of the "greatest impediments peace" which perpetuates an "indefinite false sense of Palestinian victimhood" he contends that the project of the agency is to "destroy" Israel with millions of Palestinians. This exaggeration on UNRWA's mission to justify the cut of its funding reflects that establishing a powerful narrative over the years was essential to support the implementation of real policies. As an illustration, a video clip

⁹⁰ Duncombe (2019) *The Politics of Twitter*, p.420

published by Stand With US, an organisation promoting Israel around the world and fighting anti-Semitism through education, demonstrates that in order to delegitimize its activities, UNRWA was presented as a scam:

Fun fact: #UNHCR covers all refugees in the world EXCEPT Palestinians...and they have 1 staff for every 5982 refugees. #UNRWA, the agency exclusive to the Palestinians, has 1 staff for every 186 refugees. Does that sound proportional to you?

Is UNRWA a Scam?

5,231 views 0:01 / 3:12

12:15 AM · Aug 30, 2018 · Twitter Ads

Relevant people

- StandWithUs @StandWithUs Follow Education is the road to peace! We're fighting #Antisemitism and supporting Israel around the world. Learn more about #Israel at standwithus.com

StandWithUs @StandWithUs · Aug 30, 2018
Replying to @StandWithUs
If that's not enough, #UNHCR spends \$117/per refugee #UNRWA? \$141/ Palestinian refugee.
#Israel #Palestine #refugees

StandWithUs @StandWithUs · Aug 30, 2018
In 2016, #UNHCR resettled 186K+ refugees In 70 years, #UNRWA has resettled 0 known refugees permanently.
#Israel #Palestine #refugees

StandWithUs @StandWithUs · Aug 30, 2018
#UNRWA has increased the number of Palestinian refugees from ~700K to 5.2 million in 70 years when their job is to do the opposite. #UNRWAfail #RefugeeAbuse

StandWithUs @StandWithUs · Aug 30, 2018
Only under #UNRWA are foreign citizens still "refugees." 2.2 million Palestinians live in #Jordan, 1.6 million are full citizens. UNRWA calls them refugees.

StandWithUs @StandWithUs · Aug 30, 2018
#UNRWA's job should be to protect and resettled Palestinian refugees. But instead they are the single biggest employer of Palestinians in the West Bank and #Gaza.

StandWithUs @StandWithUs · Aug 30, 2018
#UNRWA's job should be to protect and resettled Palestinian refugees. Yet over 3,000 Palestinians have died in the #Syria civil war due in Yarmouk refugee camp where they remain for decades because UNRWA refuses to assist in resettlement. #Palestine #Israel

In this video, a girl is exposing UNRWA’s inconsistencies as summarized in the following tweets. In her efforts to demonstrate the fraud that UNRWA’s represents, she questions the uniqueness of Palestinian refugees’ status regarding the UNHCR and details every difference between the two organisations. For example, the former is claimed to provide one employee for 186 Palestinians while the latter only have one employee for 5982 refugees. It is interesting to note that this demonstration does not relate the fact that UNRWA is the biggest employer of Palestinians to the reality that most of its employees are refugees themselves. She also condemns the increase from 700 000 in 1948 to 5.2 million Palestinian refugees in 2008 which is due to the fact that the status is transmitted over generations, even after acquiring citizenship (in Jordan for example). As a conclusion, she claims that UNRWA is a corrupted agency that “has blood on their hands” which resembles the discourse of non-governmental

institutes stakeholders, and the human rights lawyers' vocabulary. In my opinion the presentation of the video as an educational content explaining the "truth" about UNRWA to undermine the political content of this message, is characteristic of Twitter disinformation that often struggle to provide a complete view in the public debate.

- **UNRWA struggling to meet its financial needs**

The radical changes in UNRWA's budget made several employees of the agency lose their job during the summer 2018, especially in Gaza. As a result, most of Arabic-speaking stakeholders adopted this framework to discuss the topic of UNRWA in the DPS. For example, TRT Arabic, a Turkish news channel publishing in Arabic, tweeted on July 25th the decision of UNRWA to terminate the work of 1000 "emergency employees" in the Gaza strip. Oriented towards an Arabic-speaking audience, this neutral statement still reflects the choice to depict UNRWA financial issues through the lens of social crisis.

On the same day, the Palestinian Information Centre tweeted pictures of the protests organized in front of the agency's headquarters in Gaza to contest the decision. This publication which covers a demonstration to expose the effects of the funding cuts presents the features of standard news coverage, yet the reference to the Return Marches Authority serves in my mind to identify the source of this protest. In sharing these messages, I argue that the press agency gave voice to the narrative linking the return march with UNRWA's crisis. This symbolic association appears to me as a reminder of the expected role of the agency to defend the right of return for Palestinians refugees that the press' stakeholders were willing to diffuse. Similarly, Al-Arab Qatar, a daily newspaper tweeted about the demand of the protesting employees to reverse the decision of jobs' cut. Among the different slogans, the tweet highlighted a banner claiming "there is no justification for depriving us of education and health". This choice reveals the effort to inform an Arabic-speaking audience about the crisis in Gaza. In this sense, I contend that the strategy to associate the reduction of

UNRWA’s staff with the symbolic right of return and the access to education and health contributed to build the public discourse forging the positive reputation of the agency.

In such a changing environment on the international stage, the organisation had to develop alternative sources of funding in order to sustain its activities. Accordingly, the support of third parties was necessary to compensate the diminished contribution of the United States. An important sign of support was thus send by the official Twitter account of the Consulate General of Sweden in Jerusalem on august 28th.



The picture attached with the tweet shows the Swedish consul with the CG Pierre Krähenbühl both holding the agreement for the financial support of Sweden to UNRWA’s budget. This public commitment for UNRWA’s activities in this period reveals the extent of the crisis which permitted the organization to mobilize important stakeholders to participate in the supportive discourse. In that sense, I also present a tweet from Ayman Safadi, the Minister of Foreign Affairs and Expatriates for the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan who promoted the collaboration with Japan concerning UNRWA’s funding.

Growing [#Jordan](#) [#Japan](#) partnership yielding stronger bilateral cooperation & coordination on regional issues. Great phone conversation

with FM [@konotaromp](#). Grateful to the FM for agreeing to join countries sponsoring event Kingdom is working on to support [#UNRWA](#) during [#UNGA](#)

Similar to the Swedish statement, this official declaration naturally addresses the sponsoring issues. Nevertheless it goes further by mentioning a multinational initiative organized by Jordan. As a close partner of UNRWA's activities, the Jordanian declaration established an alternative framework to reconsider the financing of the UN agency, involving a greater cooperation between the contributors. It is clear that promoting the funding of UNRWA on the international stage reflects a confidence in the work of its employees but also a national commitment to the agency. More than providing an alternative discourse to balance the reputation narrative of UNRWA, this tweet participates in building an environment to rethink the financial support of the agency and to mobilize explicit marks of support from other stakeholders.

- **Discourses on the plan to remove UNRWA**

From a different perspective, the defunding of UNRWA was not discussed in the DPS in terms of financial cooperation and fraud but rather in terms of its legitimacy to exist. This international debate indeed provided the opportunity to challenge the very existence of UNRWA in the region to replace it with a Palestinian led authority. In this context, Al-'Ayn Al-Ikhbaria, a digital world news agency from the United Arab Emirates, tweeted on July 29th about the creation a of committee headed by Ahmed Abu Houli to "preserve the agency". In resistance to a premature removal of UNRWA, the position of the Palestinian Authority reflected the desire to preserve UNRWA by counter balancing the public discourses suggesting its replacement by another institution. Following this idea, a Palestinian cartoonist, Amjad Rasmi published an interesting drawing to illustrate the crisis of UNRWA.



Amjad Rasmi
@RasmiAmjad

الأونروا و الشعب الفلسطيني !!
#كاركاتير #أمجد_رسمي في صحيفة "الشرق الأوسط"
اللندنية

#كاركاتير_اليوم #فلسطين #الأونروا #أونروا #المخيمات
#اللاجئين #القدس #غزة #الصفحة_العربية
#UNRWA #palestine #cartoon #amjadrasmi

Translate Tweet



8:00 AM · Jul 29, 2018 · Twitter Web Client

Relevant people



Amjad Rasmi
@RasmiAmjad

Follow

الحساب الرسمي لرسم الكاريكاتير أمجد
رسمي
Welcome to the OFFICIAL
ACCOUNT OF CARTOONIST Amjad
Rasmi

Translated from Arabic by Google

UNRWA and the Palestinian people!!
#Caricature #Amjad_Rasmi in the London-
based newspaper As-Sharq Al-Awsat
#caricatureoftheday #Palestine #UNRWA
#RefugeeCamp #AlQuds #Gaza #WestBank

I interpret this cartoon as a mean to express the feelings of Palestinians regarding the situation of agency. First I view the commitment of UNRWA to save Palestinians as the initial purpose of the organisation which turned out to be sustained by the work its employees. This might be a reference to the operating staff, mostly constituted of Palestinian refugees, that was the first to suffer from the funding cuts. Then, I also interpret these drawings as a call for support in times of crisis. In this idea, the context in which UNRWA was in 2018, pushed the caricaturist to take position in favour of this narrative to mobilize Palestinian support of the agency.

As opposed to the supportive network of stakeholders around UNRWA's reputation, Dana Weiss, a political analyst at Israeli channel 12, detailed in a thread of tweets Trump's plan about the right of return and the funding of UNRWA. It begins with the abolition of the right of return according to UNRWA's definition which could lead to the reduction of Palestinians benefiting of the status of refugee by 90%. She adds about the budget's management that it should not be transferred to the organisation in the West Bank and any contribution from Arab countries should be forbidden. The conclusion of her message mentions an "historical step towards peace" which illustrates in my view the contribution to the narrative of UNRWA

being the problem of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This journalist's publication is interesting because it recalls several narratives that are frequently mobilized about UNRWA: the inflation of the number of refugees, the suspicion over its funding and the framing as an obstacle to peace.

In an effort to provide a reliable insight of digital discourses, I would like to highlight the diversity of nuances regarding UNRWA's discourses. For instance, the GLZ radio, a nationwide Israeli radio network operated by the IDF, shared the declaration of the Knesset Member Tsipi Livni criticizing Trump's decision to reduce UNRWA's budget. According to her, Israeli interests were to have a reliable intermediary to provide education and welfare in the Gaza Strip. I analyse this statement as a concern about the potential void created by UNRWA's removal or about the danger of seeing it replaced by a less transparent and more corrupted organization. I also found this concern in a tweet from the Israeli Policy Forum, defining itself in favour of a Jewish, democratic and secure Israel: it proposes an alternative to the deal proposed by Donald Trump, the "50 steps before the deal" campaign. Presented as the twentieth step, the idea was to maintain UNRWA "while transitioning to its replacement". It was argued in a second tweet that with this politicized institution, the transition should be gradual to not beneficiate extremist organisations.

In this section the sources showed that within the Israeli DPS coexist two representations of UNRWA: one that depicts it as an elementary obstacle on the road to peace and another that views UNRWA as a necessary tool to implement any agreement on the status of refugees in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In addition, I observe that the crisis faced by UNRWA in 2018 mobilized Palestinians and International stakeholders to reaffirm their support to and remind the importance of UNRWA in the region.

Conclusion:

To conclude, my work intended to describe the variety of discourses framing UNRWA as a solution or as an obstacle within the digital public sphere. By collecting certified users' publications, I have identified influential stakeholders who contribute to the reputation narratives of the agency as well as the discursive strategies that enhance their messages' reach. Through the lens of three contemporary events; I have studied first the question of UNRWA's politicization in the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians, before to engage with its education mission of the agency and finally conclude with the debate over its financial structure. It is important concerning this last issue to mention that the recently elected US president Joseph Biden decided to restore UNRWA's funding in April 2021 in order to setback from his predecessor project for the agency⁹¹.

First, the results of my study demonstrate that the platform's certification does not prevent influential stakeholders to spread disinformation, to exaggerate their framing or to consciously avoid controversial information. Therefore, I consider that the high flow of information encourages a mass consumption of news which does not necessarily imply fact-checking. Although I recognize some features of traditional medias' discourse in terms of vocabulary and reporting style, I contend that Twitter offers more freedom for political communication and a liberty of tone that is more constrained in traditional mediums.

According to my second hypothesis, in spite of a distinction between supporters and opponents, alternative discourses balanced the idea of a complete isolation. Indeed, the depiction of UNRWA as a symbol on the international stage or as a necessary organisation to implement future agreements from Israelis stakeholders provided illustrations of the diversity of discourses competing in the digital sphere. Furthermore, I perceive during my data

⁹¹ <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestinians-usa-blinken-idUSKBN2BU2XT>

collection a discrepancy between Palestinian and Israeli discourses in terms of visibility which is the reason why I chose to investigate the polarization rather than national perspectives. Moreover, I think that the only supportive discourses from the Palestinian DPS were stemming from press agencies with a primary goal of informing. My interpretation is that the bias of certified users confers less visibility for Palestinian voices because less Palestinian are actually certified by the platform. However this question should be inquired by further studies to describe the phenomena.

Concerning the assumption that “certified experts” would reflect offline structures of legitimacy, my study show that in addition of their opinion leaders’ role, their position in the narrative often corresponded to their institutional position. Different stratus of the civic society take part in the digital discourse about UNRWA, academics, journalists, international lawyers and politicians who express themselves within their respective boundaries. While politicians often adopt a moderated discourse to support or to blame the agency, journalists prefer to recall the emotions of their audiences with more engaged statements and accusations. On another scale, I find international lawyers and think-tanks’ discourses to be explicitly harming or defending the public reputation of UNRWA which makes me conclude that they were the most engaged stakeholders of the sample. From my perspective, it seems that the public discourse in the digital public sphere is dominated by these individuals and these structures rather than by politicians and press agencies.

Recently, the famous businessman Elon Musk planned on buying Twitter and proposed to amend the algorithm which manipulates the public according to him, and to introduce an edit button⁹². I think that this kind of evolution can challenge the reputation of Twitter as a reliable source of information as well as a channel of communication for politicians and citizens.

⁹² <https://www.washingtonpost.com/technology/2022/05/18/twitter-musk-takeover-chaos/>

Notwithstanding the outcomes of a possible modification of Twitter's rules, it allows the users to reconsider the place of this platform which organise a significant part of political debates in the digital public sphere.

Primary sources:

	2014: Gaza war between the Hamas and the IDF
UNRWA Presented as a partner of terrorism	<p>(23/07) Hamas turns UNRWA schools into Terrorist cells https://twitter.com/DannyAyalon/status/492052020472586240</p> <p>(04/08) Hilel Gershuni : UNRWA is Hamas https://twitter.com/gershuni/status/496232897821413376</p> <p>(24/08) Sarcasm UNRWA protect terrorism rather than children https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/503594088105381889</p> <p>(25/08) UNRWA war criminals https://twitter.com/HenMazzig/status/503930100023164928</p> <p>(30/08) UNRWA aims to sustain grievance, not resolve the problem https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/505789771889643520</p>
UNRWA Presented as a victim of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict	<p>(31/07) Reporting damages on schools https://twitter.com/abualkomboz/status/494916670385684480</p> <p>(03/08) Bombing UNRWA, War crime? https://twitter.com/RashaQandeelBBC/status/495945318190829568</p> <p>(25/08) Food's dependency in Gaza: https://twitter.com/4noura/status/503925331758436352 :</p> <p>(26/08) 136 UNRWA schools were damaged: https://twitter.com/nadplo/status/504302954820554752</p> <p>(28/08) Reporting on death in Gaza https://twitter.com/MairavZ/status/504951855827267584</p>
War of Information and image UNRWA as a symbol	<p>(19/08) Stopping Aid to UNRWA is the best solution for PA https://twitter.com/IsraelArabic/status/501660533209042945</p> <p>(23/08) Peter Lerner : Correction, the mortar was not from a UNRWA facility https://twitter.com/LTCPeterLerner/status/502940494146449408</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Chico Menashe:</p> <p>(24/07)IDF spokesman : incorrect firing at UNRWA facilities https://twitter.com/chicomenashe/status/492357599249981441</p> <p>(25/07)Attacking UNRWA school is damaging Israel image in the US https://twitter.com/chicomenashe/status/492526353699180544</p> <p>(25/07)Photographs of injured children https://twitter.com/chicomenashe/status/492521728371724291</p>

	2015: UN Watch report of UNRWA's teacher sharing Jewish-hatred on Facebook ⁹³
UNRWA is educating Palestinian children with terrorist ideology	<p>(02/12) UNRWA staff share Anti-Semitic values on Facebook https://twitter.com/dannydanon/status/672111753027854336</p> <p>(02/12) Save the Palestinian and End their exploitation by UNRWA https://twitter.com/UNWatch/status/671857311418327042</p> <p>(09/12) UNRWA collects 400 Million \$ to fund teacher inciting hate https://twitter.com/UNWatch/status/674713669452865536</p> <p>(18/12) US promises to support UNRWA with 123 Million \$ for building for schools https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/677767245179846656</p> <p>(30/12) Sarcasm: Director of security = hide Hamas rockets https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/682240236982800384</p>
Promoting UNRWA's mission in education	<p>(03/12) For P. Krahenbuhl (CG): Education is the only hope https://twitter.com/IHEID/status/672329966353309697</p> <p>(08/12) UNRWA provides Education for 500 000 Palestinian children (UK must support it) https://twitter.com/AngelaRayner/status/674262226170224640</p> <p>(09/12) UNRWA denies the UN's Watch report on teachers hate https://twitter.com/UNWatch/status/674708687961907201</p> <p>(10/12) UNRWA teacher says no to Violence in Classrooms https://twitter.com/TeacherPrize/status/674929121697251329</p> <p>(10/12) Agreement to appoint 152 new teachers in December https://twitter.com/PalinfoAr/status/674903670820073472</p>
UNRWA being politicized in the conflict	<p>(14/12) Jordan should cooperate with UNRWA as long as the refuge issue remains https://twitter.com/NoorHKJ/status/676352708694159360</p> <p>UNRWA welcomes eases in the conflict (25/12) https://twitter.com/bbclysedoucet/status/680347526436892673</p> <p>(25/12) Breach of neutrality : BBC News #Israelioccupation https://twitter.com/HillelNeuer/status/680172342048235520</p> <p>(25/12) UNRWA fuels conflict and terror instead of helping refugees https://twitter.com/GeraldNGOM/status/680300365171060737</p> <p>(28/12) : Urge to depolitize UNRWA https://twitter.com/GatestoneInst/status/681507216017494016</p>

⁹³ <https://unwatch.org/report-despite-unrwa-promises-teachers-again-inciting-to-violence-against-jewish-apes-and-pigs/>

	2018: US funding cuts of UNRWA
UNRWA is a scam which perpetuates the dependency of Palestinians	<p>(27/07) Struggle to pay the teachers for next year, pressure in Gaza? https://twitter.com/BarakRavid/status/1022902253701791744</p> <p>(16/08) Despite budget cuts, UNRWA will open schools on time https://twitter.com/BarakRavid/status/1030019872279994368</p> <p>(26/08) UNRWA is not the solution it is the problem https://twitter.com/NirBarkat/status/1033791142150791168</p> <p>(29/08) UNRWA remains the greatest impediment to peace https://twitter.com/Ostrov_A/status/1034623404131995648</p> <p>(30/08) Is UNRWA a Scam? Biggest Palestinian employer https://twitter.com/StandWithUs/status/1034927615235248129</p>
UNRWA struggles to meet its financial needs, Social perspective	<p>(25/07) US cuts make 1000 people lose their job in GAZA https://twitter.com/TRTArabi/status/1022053741774684160</p> <p>(25/07) Sit-in in front of UNRWA agency during the march of return, against funding cuts https://twitter.com/PalinfoAr/status/1022057715252842497</p> <p>(02/08) Employees protesting against the reduction of UNRWA staff https://twitter.com/AlArab_Qatar/status/1024970895893438469</p> <p>(28/08) 206 Million \$ for 4 years from Sweden to UNRWA https://twitter.com/SwedeninJERU/status/1034324494536585216</p> <p>(29/08) Cooperation and partnerships between Jordan & Japan on UNRWA https://twitter.com/AymanHsafadi/status/1034714215335043073</p>
Discourse on the plan to replace UNRWA	<p>(29/07) Cartoon: After UNRWA saved Palestinians, Palestinians manage to save UNRWA https://twitter.com/RasmiAmjad/status/1023448210495270912</p> <p>(29/07) M. Abbas creates a committee to preserve UNRWA https://twitter.com/alain_4u/status/1023668575335342080</p> <p>(25/08) Detailing Trump's plan about the right of return and the funding of Palestinians https://twitter.com/danawt/status/1033406125855653888</p> <p>(27/08) T.Livni: Our Interest is to have someone providing education and welfare in Gaza https://twitter.com/GLZRadio/status/1033948211663319041</p> <p>(29/08) : Propose to maintain UNRWA while transitioning for its replacement https://twitter.com/IsraelPolicy4m/status/1034806074233237506</p>

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