Gaza Aid Worker Accused of Funneling Millions to Hamas was UN ‘Humanitarian Hero’

August 5, 2016

The Times of Israel

<http://www.timesofisrael.com/gaza-aid-worker-accused-of-funneling-millions-to-hamas-was-un-humanitarian-hero/>

The Palestinian aid worker accused by Israel of [diverting tens of millions of dollars to fund the Hamas war machine](http://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-hamas-stole-tens-of-millions-from-world-vision-charity/) in the Gaza Strip was profiled by the United Nations in 2014 as a “humanitarian hero,” according to the charity that employs him and a [now-removed page](https://web.archive.org/web/20150223055611/http%3A/worldhumanitarianday.org/aidWorkers/get/258/english/) on the website worldhumanitarianday.org that is still archived online.

Muhammad Halabi, a Hamas member and manager of operations for World Vision in Gaza, was indicted in a Beersheba court on Thursday on a number of security-related charges for his alleged role in the scheme. He was arrested on June 15 in a joint operation between the Shin Bet, the Israel Defense Forces and the Israel Police at the Erez Crossing from Israel into Gaza as he tried to return to the Strip.

Halabi, a member of Hamas from a young age, was handpicked to infiltrate the international charity in 2005 in order to steal money for the terrorist organization, according to Israeli investigators. “This was a meaningful and important investigation that showed — above all — the cynical and crude way in which Hamas takes advantage of funds and resources from international humanitarian aid organizations,” the Shin Bet said.

In an August 2014 [interview on the World Vision website](http://www.wvi.org/world-humanitarian-day/article/why-i-am-humanitarian) to mark his nomination, Halabi says he became a humanitarian during the Second Intifada at the turn of the millennium, when he “saw the victims among civilians and saw how people were suffering.” This, he said, “motivated me to volunteer in one of the local NGOs.”

He added: “Having lived through consequent conflicts and wars, seeing injured and killed children, and knowing my own children have been traumatized by the violence, I decided to fully dedicate my life to helping people and children to restore their lives.”

Regarding his work for World Vision, Halabi said: “We are helping more than 1,500 children in 15 Child Friendly Spaces, 350 injured children in hospitals and 600 in neighborhoods. Furthermore, we have helped 8,000 parents in psychological first aid training which significantly reduces the stress on their children during the war.”

World Vision cast doubt Thursday on the accusations by Israel, insisting it conducts regular audits and evaluations to ensure financial aid in Gaza reaches those who need it most.

“Based on the information available to us at this time, we have no reason to believe that the allegations are true,” said World Vision International in a statement.

“Programs in Gaza have been subject to regular internal and independent audits, independent evaluations, and a broad range of internal controls aimed at ensuring that assets reach their intended beneficiaries and are used in compliance with applicable laws and donor requirements,” the charity said.

The money — allegedly some 60 percent of the charity’s total budget — was used to purchase weapons, dig tunnels and construct military installations for Hamas, according to investigators.

Hamas spokesman Sami Abu Zuhri denied the “false accusations,” telling AFP the movement had “no relationship” with Halabi.

World Vision works in conjunction with the United Nations, often implementing its projects.

The UN said it was “aware of the very serious allegations” and would be following the case.

Israel’s Ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon called on the UN to exercise greater control over its Gaza aid programs to ensure that they are not exploited by terror groups.

“An organization which received UN support was caught funding terrorism,” he said in a statement. “The UN must ensure that other organizations supported by the international community are not aiding terrorists.”

Halabi was handpicked to infiltrate the international charity in 2005 in order to steal money for the terrorist organization, according to the investigation.

Over a period of several years, approximately 40% of World Vision’s funds for civilian projects — $1.5 million a year — was also given to Hamas battalions in cash, according to the Shin Bet, along with approximately $4 million a year that was designated for helping the needy.

World Vision is an Evangelical Christian charity created in 1950 that operates in nearly 100 countries worldwide. It is today one of the largest relief organizations based in the United States, with a budget of approximately $2.6 billion and nearly 50,000 employees. It has operated in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza since the 1970s.

A 2015 statement on World Vision’s website said it provided support to roughly 90,000 people in Gaza.