

# World Vision, Friend of Terrorists

by Cliff Smith

Last year, a civilian court in Israel convicted and sentenced Muhammad Halabi, a former employee of the large evangelical aid organization World Vision, of diverting funds to the terrorist group Hamas.<sup>1</sup> But this barely made the news outside the region.

World Vision has stood by its man, and the scant Western and [Israeli](#) coverage<sup>2</sup> of the episode largely followed the organization's [talking points](#)<sup>3</sup>—[criticizing](#) the Israeli court system for excessive secrecy<sup>4</sup> and uncritically mentioning supposed outside audits exonerating World Vision.<sup>5</sup> Much of this reporting concerning Halabi is misleading or woefully incomplete while some is also false.

This is not the first time World Vision has landed in hot water over its involvement with terrorist organizations, and it has, successfully, gone to great lengths to obfuscate and downplay its actions and to continue business as usual. This is why the campaign to exonerate Halabi and its wider context need to be more fully understood if World Vision's systemic and cultural problems are to be truly fixed. But to understand this scandal fully as well as the public relations pushback against



*Photo: Herzel Yosef*

*An Israeli court convicted Muhammad Halabi (above), a former employee of World Vision International, of diverting funds to Hamas. This is not the first time the aid organization has been involved with terrorist groups.*

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<sup>1</sup> *Christianity Today* (Carol Stream, Ill.), [Aug. 30, 2022](#).

<sup>2</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, [Feb. 15, 2022](#).

<sup>3</sup> “[Mohammad El Halabi](#) Trial Overview,” World Vision International, Monrovia, Calif.

<sup>4</sup> *Christianity Today*, [Aug. 30, 2022](#)

<sup>5</sup> *The Washington Post*, [Aug. 20, 2022](#).

it, requires a look at the history of World Vision and its numerous dalliances with terrorist organizations.

**Most of World Vision's terror-finance scandals involve funding violent, anti-Israel groups.**

### Israel and the Palestinian Issue

Founded in 1950 as “a missionary aid organization to meet the needs during times of crisis [i.e. the Korean War] in the Orient,” World Vision has since become one of the [largest and most influential evangelical aid charities](#) in the world. And while its staff and private donors undoubtedly view its work as part of their Christian beliefs and identity, it is now best seen as a major cog in the wider international aid industry with branches in over one hundred countries and annual revenues in the billions—more than half of which come from governments (including the United States) and [international organizations](#).<sup>6</sup>

In the late 1980s, writes Luke Moon, deputy director of the Christian advocacy organization Philos Project, World Vision

began to drift away from its evangelical roots, even as it began accepting more and more money from the U.S. government and expanded into a global organization.<sup>7</sup>

In 1985, Tom Getman, formerly a staffer for Sen. Mark Hatfield (R-Ore.), became World Vision's director of government relations and had an instrumental role in moving the organization away from what he considered an excessively “[narrow focus on](#)

[evangelism](#).”<sup>8</sup> This facilitated World Vision's massive growth, in part, by giving it access to government funding, which is unavailable for

proselytizing.

By this time, World Vision had already shown its anti-Israel hostility. In summer 1982, its president Stanley Mooneyham traveled to Lebanon during that year's war with Israel, and in essence, blamed Israel for the conflict, ignoring altogether the role of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO). He went so far as to compare Israelis to Nazis. This caused problems with some of World Vision's major donors and lost Mooneyham his job.<sup>9</sup>

But Mooneyham had already spent years forging a culture within World Vision that attracted and recruited those who saw Israel, both politically and religiously, very differently from most Evangelicals.<sup>10</sup> The majority of Evangelicals view Israel as the ancestral homeland of the Jewish people, a democratic ally, and often, to varying degrees, a [fulfillment of biblical prophecy](#);<sup>11</sup> but a [growing minority](#) of evangelicals, of which Mooneyham was a prototypical example, fundamentally reject that view.<sup>12</sup>

Years later, Getman helped further steer World Vision in this direction. While it would be a serious mistake to ignore the

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<sup>8</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>9</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>10</sup> Adam Kredo, “[A Confederacy of Dusses](#),” *The Washington Free Beacon*, Aug. 15, 2013.

<sup>11</sup> *The Washington Post*, [May 14, 2018](#).

<sup>12</sup> Peter Wehner, “[Why It Matters](#) That Support for Israel Among Young Evangelicals Is Falling,” *The Bulwark* (Nashville), Jan. 25, 2022.

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<sup>6</sup> Gerald Steinberg, “The Palestinian Charity Trap,” *The Wall Street Journal*, Aug. 11, 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Luke Moon, “[World Vision's Decades-Long Hate Campaign against Israel](#),” *The Tower* (Washington, D.C.), Dec. 2016.

operational, political, and social factors that have led to World Vision's problems with terror finance, the fact that most of their terror-finance scandals involve funding violent, anti-Israel groups, suggests that, at least in part, this practice emanates from its negative perception of the Jewish state and the attendant blindness to violence from Palestinian and Islamist groups.

### Terror-related Scandals

While the Halabi scandal has caused World Vision the biggest headache, it is hardly the first or even the second time for the organization to be implicated with terrorist groups. The first instance occurred in 2012 when World Vision was caught using Australian government dollars to fund the Union of Agricultural Work Committees (UAWC), a front for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP),<sup>13</sup> designated as a terrorist group by the United States, the European Union, and Israel, among others. Feigning innocence, World Vision used the excuse, which it was to repeat on future occasions, that it was merely funding an innocuous Israeli non-governmental organization (NGO) with a similar name untethered to UAWC, but this proved to be false.<sup>14</sup> Despite the spirited denial by World Vision Australia's Tim Costello,<sup>15</sup> various counterterror NGOs such as Shurat Hadin and The International Legal Forum had repeatedly warned World Vision that

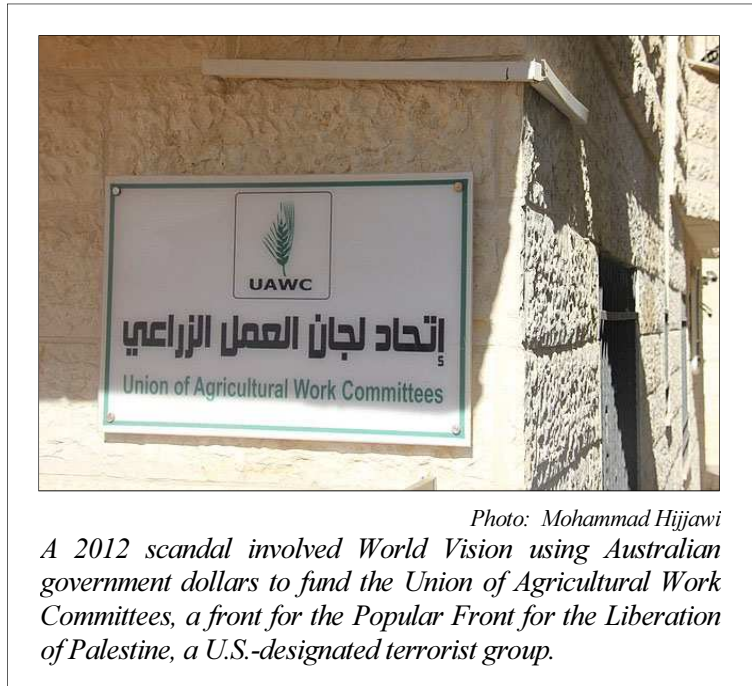


Photo: Mohammad Hijawi

*A 2012 scandal involved World Vision using Australian government dollars to fund the Union of Agricultural Work Committees, a front for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, a U.S.-designated terrorist group.*

they were working with a terrorist organization.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, one of World Vision's biggest funders, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), had noted the obvious truth about UAWC as early as 1993.<sup>17</sup>

It is true that Israel formally designated UAWC a terror organization after the fact. However, while the issue was never tested in court, this would have been only a formality since, as an arm of the PFLP, UAWC was already designated because it operated "on behalf of" the terror group. The evidence that UAWC was a PFLP arm was overwhelming and explained repeatedly, in private and in public, to World Vision officials, who not

<sup>13</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, [Feb. 17, 2012](#).

<sup>14</sup> J-Wire News Service (Sydney), [July 21, 2017](#).

<sup>15</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald*, [Oct. 19, 2012](#).

<sup>16</sup> J-Wire News Service, [July 21, 2017](#); *The Jerusalem Post*, [Aug. 5, 2016](#).

<sup>17</sup> "Palestinian Institutional Configurations in the West Bank and Gaza under Four Autonomy Scenarios," Democratic Institutions Support Project, USAID, Washington, D.C., [May 1993](#).

only ignored it, but actively attacked those who informed them.<sup>18</sup>

While the scandal caused World Vision some bad press in Australia and Israel, plus the loss of some donations from the Australian government, it did not sufficiently register in the United States, or with many of World Vision's funders in other countries.

The partnering (and possible funding) of World Vision's Lebanon branch with another PFLP affiliate, the Palestinian Children and Youth Institution,<sup>19</sup> headed by the openly declared PFLP operative Khaled Yamani,<sup>20</sup> received even scant attention. This incident has never been fully investigated though clear evidence of World Vision's work with the institution still exists online with pictures showing its work with the organization. Mentioned only in a few articles, mostly on think-tank websites, the incident has apparently gone unexamined by any government. This is particularly surprising as Yamani is alleged to have [recruited](#) for Iranian intelligence, a plausible accusation given that the PFLP [openly brags](#) about Iranian support.<sup>21</sup> World Vision has also signed joint memoranda with Interpal (Palestinian Relief and Development Fund), a British charity designated as a terror financier by the United States, Israel, Canada,

**The U.S. Senate Finance  
Committee produced a scathing  
report, which chastised World  
Vision's behavior.**

and Australia for supporting Hamas.<sup>22</sup> While it has not been so designated in Britain, British banks have increasingly put greater restrictions on how Interpal operates, and

British courts have required Interpal to break off relationships with the Union of Good, a massive, international fundraising network for Hamas that is also a U.S.-terror designated entity. Interpal supposedly did so.

Given the other NGOs that work with Interpal, and, at least on the surface, the relatively innocuous nature of World Vision's affiliation with the organization, this relationship has gotten little attention. But it deserves to be mentioned given the documented and repeated work by World Vision with terrorist organizations.

World Vision's only significant terror-related scandal that has not directly involved Israel is that of the Islamic Relief Agency (ISRA), an Islamist charity in Sudan designated as a terrorist entity for funding one of Osama bin Laden's organizations as well as Hamas. Caught red handed, World Vision lobbied Congress and the Obama administration to keep the relationship going for fear of getting kicked out of Sudan. This was done [with federal U.S. dollars](#).<sup>23</sup>

In late 2020, following a series of articles published by Sam Westrop, the

<sup>18</sup> J-Wire News Service, May 23, 2012.

<sup>19</sup> See Abed Khattar website, [Oct. 22, 2025](#).

<sup>20</sup> Jonathan Spyer, "Who is Lebanon's Khaled al-Yamani: An Israeli indictment, Iran, and the PFLP," Middle East Center for Reporting and Analysis, Oak Bluffs, Mass., [May 6, 2020](#).

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> SDGT Designations, U.S. Dept. of Treasury, Washington, D.C., Aug. 21, 2003; Joint memorandum submitted by the Palestine Platform, Select Committee on International Development Written Evidence, House of Commons, U.K. Parliament, London, [Oct. 2006](#).

<sup>23</sup> Sam Westrop, "[Obama Administration Knowingly Funded Designated Al-Qaeda Affiliate](#)," [National Review Online](#), July 25, 2018.

Middle East Forum’s Islamist Watch director, as well as this author, the U.S. Senate Finance Committee, chaired by Sen. Charles Grassley (R.-Iowa), produced a

**The organization has neither admitted fault nor shown contrition when implicated in dalliances with terror groups.**

[scathing report](#) chastising World Vision’s behavior as “borderline negligent” and “ignor[ing] elementary level investigative procedures” in vetting its partner.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, the Senate report makes it clear that World Vision saw ISRA on the designated list but claimed to have believed it to be another group with a similar name because USAID had not raised the issue. Stressing that World Vision ignored clear language in its contract obliging it—not USAID—to vet its sub-contractors, the report inserted a footnote that reads “[google.com](#)” as a tool that World Vision could have used to discover the truth about ISRA, indicating the level of ineptness involved. Furthermore, the committee voiced its “reservations concerning World Vision’s ability to avoid situations similar to the ISRA-Blue Nile Recovery Program incident in the future” because

World Vision’s posture during and after this episode gives the impression they have externalized the responsibility for vetting the groups and organizations with which they choose to affiliate.<sup>25</sup>

Indeed, a culture of incredulity is something that comes up time and again in these various World Vision terror finance scandals.

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<sup>24</sup> “[World Vision Financial Transactions](#),” Oversight and Investigations Unit, Finance Committee, U.S. Senate, Washington, D.C., Dec. 22, 2020.

<sup>25</sup> [Ibid.](#), p. 10

But the story does not end here. Nearly a year after disavowing ISRA, a World Vision job posting specified work with ISRA as part of the job description, which raises the

question of whether the organization continued to fund ISRA through non-U.S. sources.<sup>26</sup> It was also discovered, after the report was released, that the office of then-U.N. ambassador Samantha Power—now administrator of USAID—lobbied the Treasury Department to delist ISRA, seemingly as a result of World Vision’s push, outside the usual legal parameters for delisting a terror entity. Grassley asked tough questions concerning this unfortunate event, but Power’s reply dodged the questions.<sup>27</sup> As a result, Grassley sought to block her nomination as USAID administrator, to no avail.<sup>28</sup>

While World Vision officials have openly pondered whether its willingness to work with armed groups has crossed ethical lines,<sup>29</sup> the organization has neither admitted any fault nor shown any contrition when implicated in dalliances with terror groups. Responding to the Senate’s report on its ISRA funding, World Vision “[appreciate\[d\] the acknowledgement](#)” that it did not “knowingly” fund a terrorist entity,

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<sup>26</sup> Clifford Smith and Sam Westrop, “New Evidence: UN Connected to World Vision Terror Finance Scandal,” [The Daily Wire](#) (Cisco, Tex.), July 12, 2019.

<sup>27</sup> Samantha Power to Sen. Charles E. Grassley, [Mar. 23, 2021](#).

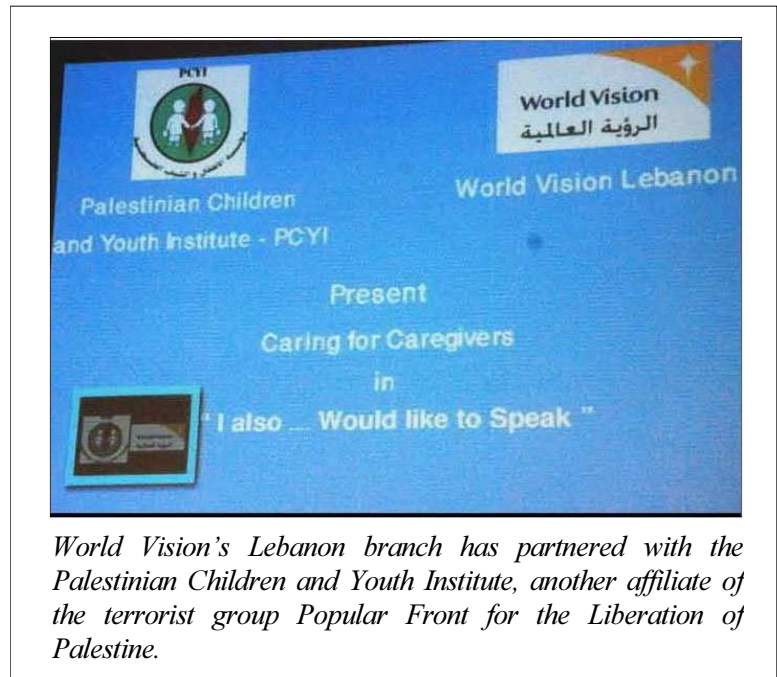
<sup>28</sup> Sen. Charles E. Grassley to The Honorable Mitch McConnell, [Apr. 20, 2021](#).

<sup>29</sup> Edwina Thompson, “[Principled Pragmatism](#): NGO engagement with armed actors,” World Vision International, [2008](#).

completely ignoring the report's chastising it as "borderline negligent" and the more damning indictments in the report. In the case of UAWC funding, World Vision is still [openly defiant](#).<sup>30</sup> Not only has it apparently never publicly acknowledged that [UAWC](#) was a PFLP arm, but the organization has spent years down-playing and dismissing clear evidence and demonizing those who [pointed out the connection](#).<sup>31</sup> World Vision's work with the PFLP-run Palestinian Children and Youth Institution remains almost totally ignored as does its relationship with Interpal.

### The Halabi Scandal

Israeli authorities arrested Muhammad Halabi in 2016 and charged him with funneling up to US\$50 million to Hamas. At the time, he was World Vision's manager of operations for Gaza having worked for the organization since 2005. The scope of his indictments was massive and varied, from using his position as a senior aid worker for "transferring monies and equipment that he knew would be used to fund terrorism and assisting terrorists," to providing information to Hamas, to engaging in military training and possessing weapons, to



*World Vision's Lebanon branch has partnered with the Palestinian Children and Youth Institute, another affiliate of the terrorist group Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine.*

creating fictitious aid projects to facilitate his alleged crimes.<sup>32</sup>

World Vision reacted to Halabi's arrest with a mixture of disbelief and deflection, professing ignorance of any fact that might have led to suspect Halabi of any wrongdoing. Losing no time in moving onto the offensive, it laid the groundwork for questioning Israel's court system by calling for "a fair and transparent legal process."<sup>33</sup> Though innocuous in-and-of-itself, the call set the stage for World Vision's claim of Halabi's innocence and of the Israeli courts' guilt, among other things, of failing to reveal the full version of the verdict and to accept as

<sup>30</sup> "Committee Staff Report Finds [No Evidence World Vision Knew ISRA Was Blocked Party](#)," World Vision International, Monrovia, Calif., Dec. 30, 2020; J-Wire News Service, [July 21, 2017](#).

<sup>31</sup> Ran Porat, "There is ample evidence [banned Palestinian NGOs are PFLP-affiliated](#)," Australia/Israel and Jewish Affairs Council (AIJAC), Sydney, Oct. 26, 2021.

<sup>32</sup> "[Verdict in case of Mohammad El-Halabi/World Vision Diversion of Funds to Hamas](#)," NGO Monitor, Jerusalem, June 16, 2022; Gerald M. Steinberg and Joshua Bacon, "[NGO Links to Middle East Terror](#)," *Middle East Quarterly*, Summer 2017.

<sup>33</sup> News release, World Vision International, [Aug. 8, 2016](#).

evidence an audit done for World Vision that would have (supposedly) exonerated Halabi. Overtly seeking to delegitimize the entire Israeli legal system well before the verdict was handed down, Halabi's lawyers mocked the Israeli prosecution, and its judicial system more broadly, claiming it was "stretched ... to the limits of credulity," in an [interview](#) with DAWN—a [Qatari-regime affiliated, Islamist think tank](#)—and expressed confidence of victory.<sup>34</sup> Given that Qatar is one of the most [overt funders of Hamas](#), and terrorism in general, it was an odd choice of venues.<sup>35</sup>

But even if one questions the integrity of the Israeli court system, the overwhelming body of publicly available evidence—barely discussed in most media reports—points convincingly to Halabi's guilt. To begin with, Halabi confessed to funneling large amounts of money and materials for use by Hamas—a designated terrorist organization in Israel, the United States, and dozens of Western and Muslim states. In fact, Halabi confessed to two separate parties nearly two weeks apart, and both times cited similar relevant details.<sup>36</sup> In the words of the Beersheba District Court, the confession

**Halabi confessed to funneling large amounts of money and materials for use by Hamas.**

presents a logical, coherent story, which is interwoven with many details, from different time points and involves many people, with different roles and has an affinity for security incidents that occurred in the past and unlikely that the defendant fabricated them while confessing to them, had they not actually occurred.<sup>37</sup>

It was only after both confessions that Halabi's lawyers sought to withdraw his testimony, claiming that his confessions were made "under duress" and that his interrogators "beat him a lot." If the lawyers offered any evidence to back their torture allegation, it has not been made public. Perhaps due to this fact, the Israeli court [rejected](#) the idea that Halabi's confession had been coerced.<sup>38</sup> Somewhat paradoxically, Halabi claimed that his confession was so wild he did not expect anyone to believe it.

In addition to Halabi's confession, there are other key sources of information that confirm his misdeeds. As reported not long after his arrest, a local World Vision accountant, Muhammad Mehdi, blew the whistle on Halabi leading to his arrest in the first place.<sup>39</sup> In a complaint before the court, Mehdi

described the operative mechanisms that the defendant used

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<sup>34</sup> Michael Omer-Man, "[The Truth Stands with Mohammad](#)": Israel's Outrageous Trial of Mohammad al-Halabi," Democracy for the Arab World Now (DAWN), Washington, D.C., Feb. 18, 2022; Martha Lee, "[The DAWN of an Islamist Think Tank in DC](#)," *The Investigative Journal*, Jan. 4, 2021; Susannah Johnston, "[Iran and Qatar's Unofficial Agents in D.C.](#)," *Focus on Western Islamism*, Nov. 17, 2022.

<sup>35</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, Feb. 17, 2022; Reuters, [Nov. 22, 2021](#).

<sup>36</sup> Reuters, [June 15, 2022](#).

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<sup>37</sup> Summary of the Verdict, State of Israel v. Halabi, Judge Shlomo Friedlander, Deputy Chief Judge Natan Zluchover, Deputy Chief Judge Yael Raz Levi, Beersheba District Court, Beersheva, Isr., June 15, 2022.

<sup>38</sup> *The Jerusalem Post*, [Feb. 15, 2022](#).

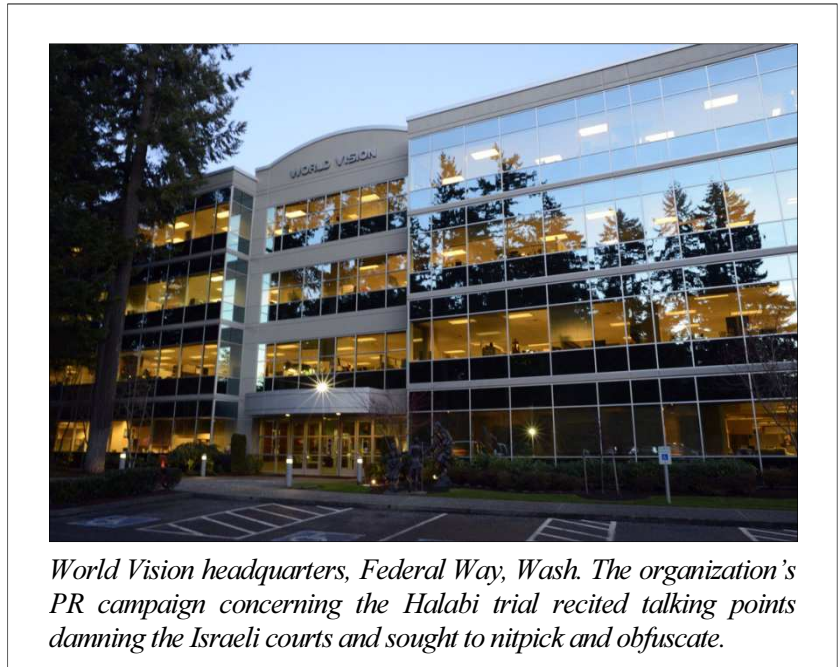
<sup>39</sup> Gregg Carlstrom, "[Israel Declares War on Gaza's NGOs](#)," *Foreign Policy*, Sept. 20, 2016.

which were consistent with the operative mechanism [described by Halabi].<sup>40</sup>

Moreover, Mehdi's experience raises questions about World Vision's methods. The Halabi verdict questions "the circumstances of the dismissal of Muhammad Mehdi," saying it lends credence to Halabi's confession.<sup>41</sup> Unsurprisingly, having blown the whistle on a Hamas operative, Mehdi was interrogated by Hamas. Luckily, he was not executed and now lives outside Gaza. Halabi's lawyers [sought to portray](#) Mehdi as a disgruntled former employee.<sup>42</sup>

Be that as it may, according to the conviction, a copy of Mehdi's interrogation by Hamas was [found](#) on Halabi's personal computer after his capture.<sup>43</sup> It is difficult to imagine an innocent explanation for this fact that would not strain credulity.

But Mehdi is not the only witness against Halabi. According to the prosecution, there were thirty-five individuals available to give testimony against Halabi. Some of them



*World Vision headquarters, Federal Way, Wash. The organization's PR campaign concerning the Halabi trial recited talking points damning the Israeli courts and sought to nitpick and obfuscate.*

were incarcerated, but most were not, according to news reports.<sup>44</sup>

The facts above contradict the impression left by World Vision's PR machine. The classified nature of the rest of the evidence may grate at those who live under a different system, but the fact that Israel lives next door to a territory run by a terrorist organization [explicitly](#) dedicated to its destruction cannot be ignored. This warlike situation means that it needs to protect agents, informants, and collaborators in ways that would not otherwise be desirable. This is [not unprecedented](#).

### **Disingenuous PR campaign**

Halabi's conviction barely changed World Vision's PR campaign both during and after the trial, which recited several talking points damning the Israeli courts and their alleged miscarriage of justice. But the

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<sup>40</sup> "[Verdict in case of Mohammad El-Halabi](#)," NGO Monitor, June 16, 2022.

<sup>41</sup> Summary of the Verdict, State of Israel v. Halabi, June 15, 2022.

<sup>42</sup> Joe Dyke, "[Has a lone Palestinian aid worker been falsely accused](#) of the biggest aid money heist in history?" *The Guardian* (London), [Aug. 19, 2021](#).

<sup>43</sup> "[Verdict in case of Mohammad El-Halabi](#)," NGO Monitor, June 16, 2022.

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<sup>44</sup> *ABC News*, [Jan. 11, 2017](#).



publicly-known facts tell a wholly different story.

Upholding Halabi's innocence would require proving several, highly unlikely facts:

**The organization claimed that its Gaza budget was significantly smaller than the sums Halabi was supposed to have stolen.**

- Halabi's multiple confessions were coerced.
- Mehdi, a Gazan Palestinian, was part of a multi-layered conspiracy to fabricate a story incriminating Halabi. So were the other thirty-five witnesses for the prosecution.
- Israeli law enforcement agencies, or some other unknown actor, planted evidence on Halabi's personal computer.
- Shabak operatives tortured Halabi in contravention of Israeli law to coerce his false confession, then lied about it.
- The Israeli court system on multiple levels, all the way up to the Supreme Court, which turned down several appeals by Halabi claiming unfair treatment, ignored all of this. This at a time when the Israeli Supreme Court is widely perceived by the Israeli public as having a left-wing, pro-Palestinian bias.

Searching through the reams of public statements, comments to journalists, and other documents provides endless ways in which World Vision sought to nitpick, obfuscate, or change the subject concerning Halabi. But there are essentially three major, substantive claims made by the organization to discredit the case against Halabi: a) its entire Gaza budget was significantly smaller

than the sums Halabi was supposed to have stolen; b) various audits of World Vision programs came back clean; and c) its controls are so tight that nobody could ever divert money to terrorism in the first place.

### **Adding up the Numbers**

According to World Vision, its entire Gaza budget in the decade preceding Halabi's arrest had been \$22.5 million, hence allegations that he stole \$50 million are "hard to reconcile." But this claim omits several key facts, not least that the \$50 million figure comes from Halabi's own confession. In the words of the court:

It should be remembered that the defendant told in his confession about the financial assistance he gave to Hamas retroactively and without having before him [relevant documentation] ... he did not remember the exact amounts. Nor do we rule out the possibility that the defendant "inflated" the sums to boast of his achievements and assistance to Hamas.

In addition, as the court explained, the amount is not relevant. It is legally sufficient to prove that Halabi provided funds to Hamas.

While courts are confined to the facts presented to them, there could be other reasons, not discussed in the Halabi verdict, why the confessed figure was so high. As one watchdog group pointed out, there are multiple chapters operating under World Vision's auspices in a parallel fashion, including "five offices operating under

the area it terms Jerusalem-West Bank-Gaza [JWG].”<sup>45</sup> JWG does not exist as a separate financial and legal entity. According to the Registrar of Non-Profits, Israel’s charities’ regulator, there is an Israeli World Vision entity with offices in Jerusalem whose relationship with the JWG office “is entirely unclear, they do apparently overlap to some degree.”<sup>46</sup> As such, it is entirely possible that multiple funds, not just one World Vision branch, fed Halabi’s thefts.

Years ago, Hanna Weiss, an enterprising local reporter for a small outlet in Israel, using World Vision public data posted online, explained that the real figure the organization spent in Israel and the JWG area was likely far higher. For example, Weiss points to a [2013 financial report](#) for “Jerusalem-West Bank-Gaza” that cites eleven separate funding streams with over \$18 million spent that year alone. She also cites a similar [2014 Financial report](#) that expended a total of \$16 million that year. A [2015 report](#) cited \$10.7 million being spent on “Jerusalem-West Bank-Gaza” endeavors.<sup>47</sup> That is \$45 million in just those three years, far more than the \$22.5 million World Vision claims to have spent over a decade. Weiss pointed out that extrapolating these figures would lead to spending roughly \$142 million, far above the \$50 million

**An audit by Israel’s Registrar of Non-Profits found problems amounting to millions for which the charity cannot properly account.**

Halabi confessed to stealing.<sup>48</sup> This dynamic was confirmed when the Israeli organization NGO Monitor obtained further financial documents from the years in question as well as previous years.<sup>49</sup>

World Vision has not even attempted to explain these seeming contradictions.

While the court was bound by the facts brought forward by this specific case, this does not mean the conflicting accounts of World Vision spending and opaque records will forever escape scrutiny in Israel’s judicial system. Indeed, as early as 2014, Israel’s Registrar of Non-Profits sent a warning that World Vision had failed to comply with transparency regulations. Seven years later, in November 2021, the registrar asked a Jerusalem district court to dissolve an Israeli nonprofit owned by World Vision following an audit that found rampant non-compliance with various laws ensuring financial transparency.

A copy of the registrar’s audit shows severe problems of transparency and accountability in World Vision’s finances: funds have been spent without clear recipients; officials have been unwilling to provide clarifying information to auditors, and financial statements for each project did not match accounting data, among many other problems amounting to millions for which the charity cannot properly account.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> “[World Vision Finances](#) in Jerusalem, the West Bank, and Gaza,” NGO Monitor, Jerusalem, Nov. 1, 2016.

<sup>46</sup> [Ibid.](#)

<sup>47</sup> [World Vision Annual Review 2013](#); [World Vision Annual Review 2014](#); [World Vision Jerusalem-West Bank-Gaza Annual Report FY 15](#), World Vision International, Monrovia, Calif.

<sup>48</sup> Hannah Weiss, “[With Love from Israel: An Open Letter to World Vision about the Gaza Aid Scandal](#),” *Kehila News* (Isr.), Aug. 11, 2016.

<sup>49</sup> “[World Vision Finances](#),” NGO Monitor, Nov. 1, 2016.

<sup>50</sup> Request for a Dissolution Order under the Nonprofit Law of 1980, The NGO Authority of Israel vs. World Vision, Atty. Tova Frish, NGO Authority, Jerusalem, filed Oct. 25, 2021.

Specifically, the audit says that World Vision's branches view themselves as

a rubber stamp intended to transfer [World Vision's] funds to activities unrelated to [World Vision Israel's] goals, and there is concern that funds [ended up funding] illegal terrorist activities.

A decision by the court concerning the fate of World Vision's entity in Israel is expected in early 2023.

### **Exonerating World Vision Audits?**

World Vision's other substantive claim is that multiple audits by various governments and its own auditors have vindicated its position in this episode. This is simply untrue, yet it has been relentlessly pushed by World Vision's PR team and uncritically repeated by the media.

The largest funder of World Vision's projects in Israel (as far as can be known given the organization's opaque accounting) is AusAid, the Australian government's aid arm. When the Halabi trial began, Australia's department of foreign affairs and trade conducted a review of the topic. According to many media reports, the review found no evidence that Halabi had diverted funds.

But this was a gross distortion that sparked an unusual denial by Australia's ambassador to Israel; he clarified that the review was not a finding that no funds had been diverted but only that the Australian government had no "awareness" of any wrongdoing by Halabi, while chastising media misreporting. In other words, the review vindicated AusAid, not Halabi, and left the final say on the matter to the Israeli courts. The ambassador stressed that Canberra was still withholding all funds to



*Australia's ambassador to Israel Ralph King clarified that a government review did not find that no funds had been diverted but that the Australian government had no "awareness" of wrongdoing by Halabi.*

World Vision "until we consider the outcomes of these processes."<sup>51</sup> Unfortunately, this clarification has not stopped endless "no diversion" claims by World Vision and unquestioning news outlets with only very few outlets reporting the ambassador's clarification that the review did not exonerate Halabi.<sup>52</sup>

World Vision frequently boasts annual audits by the internationally renowned firm PricewaterhouseCoopers, which it claims prevent the possibility of funds diversion. It also ordered its own, separate audit in response to Halabi's arrest, which it claimed, "found no evidence of diversion of funds and no material evidence that El Halabi was part

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<sup>51</sup> Amb. Ralph King, "[Statement from me regarding allegations against World Vision employee](#)," in response to recent media reporting," Twitter, Mar. 29, 2017.

<sup>52</sup> Hanna Weiss, "[World Vision Gaza](#): The questions continue," *Kehila News*, [Dec. 23, 2017](#).

of or working for Hamas.”<sup>53</sup> Interestingly, World Vision first refused to name the organizations that conducted the audit, pursuant to a non-disclosure agreement. And while, in his testimony, Halabi noted the World Vision audits clearing him, the organization refused to submit its own audits for evidence, citing Israel’s failure to sign the non-disclosure agreement.<sup>54</sup> The court found this pretext unconvincing. It was eventually revealed that the consulting firm Deloitte and law firm DLA Piper conducted the special Halabi audit and that some auditors spoke to the media.<sup>55</sup> But the audit itself was never released: not to the public, nor even to the court.

**Helping Gazans with aid means pouring funds to the bottomless pit of a rogue, terrorist organization.**

Apart from the problem of trusting an organization to conduct a fair investigation of itself, and the odd demand for a non-disclosure agreement to access a supposedly vindicating audit, World Vision’s Halabi audit faced the inherent difficulty of independently tracking funds in terrorist-ruled territories such as the Gaza Strip because, [among many other reasons](#), cash transactions would likely not have receipts, and even if receipts existed, there would be no way to ascertain their authenticity.<sup>56</sup> In short, there is no way to ensure that auditing a terrorist entity is anything but auditing a fiction.

Elliott Abrams, a former senior U.S. official, with decades of experience in the Middle East, also noted that there is an inherent problem

with willful blindness in such situations:

It’s likely that some percentage of local employees in Gaza are sympathetic to Hamas ... And it seems likely to me that administrators don’t want to know it. If they came face to face with it, what would they do? Fire them? Turn them in to the Israelis? Start difficult and likely very long back-and-forth communications with headquarters, which likely doesn’t want to know and won’t thank the employee who insists on revealing the truth? Simpler to be blind to what is happening.<sup>57</sup>

All indications are that World Vision has entirely failed to grapple with these problems.

### **No Diversion Possible?**

These difficulties notwithstanding, World Vision remained adamant there was no way its audit mechanisms would allow the organization’s money to flow to Hamas, repeatedly stressing that any such diversion was bound to antagonize Gazans who would have been deprived of sufficient aid.<sup>58</sup> Not unlike the Senate finance committee, the court found these claims hopelessly naïve, damning, and ignorant of the way totalitarian

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<sup>53</sup> “World Vision statement regarding the [trial of Mohammad El Halabi](#),” World Vision, International, Monrovia, Calif., [Dec. 18, 2020](#).

<sup>54</sup> *The New Arab* (London), [May 3, 2022](#).

<sup>55</sup> Dyke, “[Has a lone Palestinian aid worker been falsely accused?](#)” [Aug. 19, 2021](#).

<sup>56</sup> “[World Vision/Hamas Scandal](#) Shows Need for NGOs to Have Greater Transparency,” *The Tower*, Aug. 8, 2016.

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<sup>57</sup> Elliot Abrams, “[Foreign Aid for Hamas](#),” Council on Foreign Relations, New York, Aug. 10, 2016.

<sup>58</sup> Summary of the Verdict, *State of Israel v. Halabi*, June 15, 2022.

entities are run. Helping average Gazans is fundamentally different from providing aid to hurricane-hit U.S. states or even to a troubled-but-functioning state like Pakistan. It means pouring funds to the bottomless pit of a rogue, terrorist organization that runs a specific territory through absolute force with no accountability while hoping the money trickles down.

Given Hamas's repressive and secretive control, would ordinary Gazans even have the slightest inkling that their aid was being diverted? Hardly. If anything, the fact that Muhammad Mehdi, inside-whistleblower and chief-witness against Halabi, had to flee the strip demonstrates why even the few who might be privy to diversion of international aid funds to terrorist organizations would be loath to speak out. Besides, Halabi was accused of creating fictitious projects to facilitate the diversion of funds to Hamas. It is hard to imagine how beneficiaries of fictitious projects would be upset if a nonexistent program went unfunded.

Indeed, World Vision's transparency is lesser than that of the usual nonprofit since it registers as a church in the United States and does not have to file traditional 990 forms required of most charities.<sup>59</sup> But even by the standards granted to a religious organization, World Vision's accounting is opaque. A 56-page document filed by World Vision's Israeli operation with the Non-Profits Registrar included such items as \$145,905 for "transformed relationships," \$36,724 for "drawing a smile on children," \$173,387 for "special gifts reserve," and \$142,955 for "South Gaza empowered children."<sup>60</sup> One need not be a

forensic accountant to see such funds might actually be used to fund other purposes in a de-facto military dictatorship such as Gaza.

## A Significant Security Risk

Halabi's incarceration notwithstanding, this issue remains a security risk to Israel, the United States, and other allies as it goes beyond specific diversions of funds to terrorism.

Court documents state that Halabi attempted recruiting others to the Hamas cause, specifically because they had ties to American organizations.<sup>61</sup> The documents clearly indicate that Halabi tried to recruit Walid Musa of Save the Children USA, a branch of an international organization with thirty chapters, which receives considerable funds from the U.S. federal government as well as other U.S. sources.<sup>62</sup> Musa was named as the Gaza program manager for Save the Children.<sup>63</sup>

According to the court, Halabi's attempted recruitment sought to use Musa to discover "the identities of individuals appointed by the United States to sensitive positions in international organizations in the Gaza Strip," and "the identities of the participants in security courses of these international organizations."<sup>64</sup> While there is no way to know if Halabi succeeded in his efforts to recruit anyone, the fact that he was

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<sup>59</sup> Dexter Van Zile, "[Is World Vision International Really a 'Church'?](#)" *The Algemeiner* (New York), [Aug. 9, 2016](#).

<sup>60</sup> Anthony Klan, "World Vision hazy on how it spent Gaza cash," *The Australian* (Sydney), [Dec. 5, 2016](#).

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<sup>61</sup> Summary of the Verdict, *State of Israel v. Halabi*, June 15, 2022.

<sup>62</sup> "Save the Children – Profile," NGO Monitor, [Dec. 20, 2021](#).

<sup>63</sup> "Gender Mainstreaming Efforts in the Gaza Strip Non-Governmental Organizations," Heba Hasan Zayyan, *The Islamic University-Gaza*, [July, 2010](#).

<sup>64</sup> Summary of the Verdict, *State of Israel v. Halabi*, June 15, 2022.

trying illustrates a serious threat to U.S. interests.

This also impacts other countries. The court confirmed that funds from multiple states to Gaza, including Britain, Germany, and the United States, were also stolen. Public financial reports produced by World Vision indicate that U.S. funds were sent to Gaza as well as the West Bank during this time frame.<sup>65</sup>

### Conclusion

While Halabi is in prison and no World Vision funds currently go to Gaza, the scandal exposed the extent to which terrorist groups can exploit international good will to their murderous ends. As long as World Vision does not acknowledge this reality and continues to operate in conflict-heavy areas,

its aid programs are likely to fund terrorist activities on occasion. It is, therefore, incumbent on its donors—be they individuals, churches, or government agencies—to let the organization know they will not tolerate this behavior and to urge it to self-reform. If the organization does not regulate itself, others, starting with Congress, should do it for them.

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<sup>65</sup> [World Vision Annual Review 2013](#); [World Vision Annual Review 2014](#); World Vision International, Monrovia, Calif.