

The Sham Accusations Against Mohammad El Halabi

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Who is Mohammad El Halabi and when was he arrested?

Mohammad El Halabi is the Gaza program director for World Vision. He has an MA in civil engineering and is the father of five children. In 2014, El Halabi was recognized by the UN as a “humanitarian hero.”

El Halabi was taken into custody by Israeli authorities on June 15, 2016 at a checkpoint while returning from a staff meeting in Jerusalem. He has spent almost five years in Israel’s Ramon Prison without a verdict and has been subjected to over 155 court appearances.

What were the reasons for El Halabi’s arrest?

Israeli officials claim that El Halabi had been recruited by Hamas’ military wing in 2004 and was subsequently asked to “infiltrate” World Vision. Israel claimed that El Halabi had used his position at World Vision since 2005 to divert the organization’s funds to assist Hamas for “terrorism” purposes, including for the digging of military tunnels and to pay Hamas salaries.¹ El Halabi was initially accused of diverting \$7 million a year (up to a total of \$50 million) from World Vision’s humanitarian work to Hamas.²

In 2016, Israeli authorities claimed that El Halabi confessed during interrogation about the methods he used for diverting money to Hamas,³ but El Halabi has denied all accusations against him (including the supposed “confession”), and has steadfastly maintained his innocence.⁴

Do Israel’s charges against El Halabi have any credibility?

No, as confirmed by multiple third-party investigations. Following El Halabi’s detention, World Vision immediately ordered an external forensic audit of the claims. Completed in 2017, the audit concluded that there was “no evidence of diversion of funds and no material evidence that El Halabi was part of or working for Hamas.”⁵ The Australian Government similarly ordered an internal review of World Vision funding in Gaza and “uncovered nothing to suggest any diversion of government funds.”⁶

In fact, World Vision noted early on that its entire operating budget for Gaza during the time in question was about \$22.5 million, less than half the amount that El Halabi was accused of stealing (\$50 million).⁷ Additionally, for five of the seven years in question, El Halabi was in a subordinate position and not authorized to make payments of more than \$15,000.⁸ In other words, El Halabi was accused of crimes which were literally impossible for him to commit.

As part of their external audit, investigators for World Vision found that El Halabi had actually gone to great effort “to ensure World Vision avoided improper interactions with Hamas.”⁹ Hamas, for its part, has denied having any relationship with El Halabi.

Finally, El Halabi’s “confession” cannot be taken as credible evidence, as it was produced under duress (see below) and later recanted. Israeli interrogators routinely rely on torture in order to produce confessions, often pushing people to confess to things they did not do.¹⁰ In a related manner, Palestinian detainees face extreme pressure to sign plea bargains – implying guilt – in order to avoid a lengthy trial and possibly get out of prison earlier.¹¹ This contributes to a situation in which Israeli military courts can boast of a 99.74% conviction rate.¹² Notably, El Halabi has rejected offers to sign a plea bargain, even as an Israeli judge warned him in 2017 that there was “little chance” he would not be convicted.¹³

How has El Halabi been treated by Israeli authorities?

Following his arrest, El Halabi was denied access to a lawyer for 25 days and denied the ability to meet with family members or World Vision staff for over 50 days. It took 55 days before any charges against him were made public.¹⁴

According to his father and his lawyers, El Halabi was beaten and severely tortured during his 52 days of interrogation, including being subjected to sleep deprivation and being hung from the ceiling. El Halabi told lawyers that he was afraid that interrogators would kill him.¹⁵

El Halabi has been subjected to over 155 court appearances in four years, most of them in sessions closed to the public and media. This makes his trial one of the longest in the history of Palestinians detained in Israeli prisons.¹⁶ Amnesty International has condemned the “secret” nature of his trial as a “flagrant violation of the right to a public hearing.”¹⁷

A variety of arbitrary restrictions placed upon El Halabi’s legal team have also deprived him of a fair trial. These include being denied complete information regarding the prosecutor’s key witness; denial of full access to transcripts of prior hearings; refusing to provide proper translation; preventing defense witnesses from entering Israel from Gaza in order to testify; and not allowing his lawyer to prepare notes on his own computer.¹⁸

In November 2020, United Nations experts said that “Mr el-Halabi’s arrest, interrogation and trial is not worthy of a democratic state,” and that “Israeli authorities must grant him the full rights of a fair trial, or else release him unconditionally.”¹⁹

What is the impact on the humanitarian sector in Palestine?

In the wake of El Halabi’s arrest, World Vision’s bank accounts were frozen by Israeli authorities, causing the organization to suspend its operations in Gaza and lay off 120 employees.²⁰ The governments of Australia and Germany also suspended their funding to World Vision projects in the occupied Palestinian territories.²¹

Immediately following El Halabi’s arrest, Israel’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs initiated a public relations campaign to share the allegations against El Halabi and World Vision far and wide, and Israeli diplomats were “instructed to spread the news of the El Halabi’s alleged actions among liberal and religious groups who support World Vision.”²²

Some observers believe that this was the point: that Israel is pushing false charges against El Halabi to undermine international support for the humanitarian sector in Gaza. A video, infographics and other media released by the Israeli government immediately after El Halabi’s arrest are clearly directed at international humanitarian donors.²³ According to El Halabi’s father, Khalil El Halabi, Israel is pressuring El Halabi to confess to mismanagement and embezzlement in order to undermine and deter international development aid in Gaza.²⁴

When will the trial reach a verdict?

Even after years since the indictment against El Halabi, it is unknown when the trial will reach a verdict. Pending the outcome, El Halabi is under order to remain in detention until at least May 19, 2021.²⁵

¹ Gili Cohen, “Top Official in Christian Aid Group Charged With Funneling Funds to Hamas,” *Haaretz*, August 4, 2016.

² Frank Walker, “Christian Charity Loses Two Top Donors After Israel Charges Director with Funding Hamas,” *Haaretz*, August 6, 2016.

³ Gili Cohen, “Top Official in Christian Aid Group Charged With Funneling Funds to Hamas,” *Haaretz*, August 4, 2016.

⁴ Ben White, “Christian charity ‘top of Israel’s target list,’” *Al Jazeera English*, August 9, 2016.

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- ⁵ World Vision International, "Mohammad El Halabi Trial Overview," accessed March 5, 2021.
- ⁶ Rod McGuirk, "Australia finds no proof its World Vision aid went to Hamas," *Associated Press*, March 31, 2017.
- ⁷ World Vision International, "Statement from Kevin Jenkins, president and Chief Executive Officer of World Vision International," August 2016.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Adam Rasgon, "Charged with helping Hamas, Gazan aid worker says he's being denied a fair trial," *Times of Israel*, September 22, 2019.
- ¹⁰ Ibid; Michael Schaeffer Omer-Man, "Report alleges abuse, torture at Shin Bet interrogation facility," *972+ Magazine*, February 24, 2016.
- ¹¹ B'Tselem, *Presumed Guilty: Remand in Custody by Military Courts in the West Bank*, June 2015, pp. 57-59; B'Tselem, "Confessed? There's no way out now," November 19, 2020.
- ¹² Chaim Levinson, "Nearly 100% of All Military Court Cases in West Bank End in Conviction, Haaretz Learns," *Haaretz*, November 29, 2011; B'Tselem, "New report: A Palestinian charged in a military court is as good as convicted," June 21, 2015.
- ¹³ As the Israeli judge directly warned El Halabi: "You've read the numbers and the statistics ... You know how these issues are handled." Sophie McNeill, "World Vision staffer told guilty verdict likely over alleged Hamas funding," *ABC News (Australia)*, March 29, 2017.
- ¹⁴ Sophie McNeill, "World Vision 'shocked' by Israel allegations Gaza manager diverted charity money to Hamas," *ABC News (Australia)*, August 4, 2016; Krishnadev Calamur, "The Allegations Against the Head of World Vision in Gaza," *The Atlantic*, August 5, 2016.
- ¹⁵ Ben White, "Christian charity 'top of Israel's target list,'" *Al Jazeera English*, August 9, 2016; Gideon Levy, "The UN Called Him a Humanitarian Hero. Israel is Accusing Him of Funneling Money to Hamas," *Haaretz*, October 21, 2019.
- ¹⁶ Maha Hussaini, "'Longest trial in history': Palestinian NGO worker's case resumes for 129th time," *Middle East Eye*, October 23, 2019.
- ¹⁷ Amnesty International, "Israel/OPT: 'Secret Trial' of Gaza aid worker will not deliver justice," August 29, 2016.
- ¹⁸ CJPME personal communication with El Halabi's lawyer, 2021.
- ¹⁹ Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, "Gaza Aid Worker Must Be Given Fair Trial or Released, Say UN Experts," November 12, 2020.
- ²⁰ Nidal al-Mughrabi, "Christian Charity Lays Off 120 in Gaza After Israel Alleges It Funds Hamas," September 9, 2016.
- ²¹ Frank Walker, "Christian Charity Loses Two Top Donors After Israel Charges Director with Funding Hamas," *Haaretz*, August 6, 2016.
- ²² Itamar Eichner, "Israel's diplomats to put a spotlight on redirecting aid to Hamas," *Ynetnews*, August 5, 2016.
- ²³ Thomas Woodley, "Shaky Allegations Shouldn't Derail World Vision Operations In Gaza," *Huffington Post Canada*, September 28, 2016.
- ²⁴ Amjad Ayman Yaghi, "The case of Mohammad El Halabi and the rabbit hole of Israeli 'justice,'" *Electronic Intifada*, September 3, 2019.
- ²⁵ Yonah Jeremy Bob, "Supreme Court orders El Halabi to remain in detention pending trial verdict," *Jerusalem Post*, February 18, 2021.