

La Tampête de 'UNRWA 1/3

Pierre Krähenbühl, l'homme qui voulait sauver les Palestiniens

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Pierre Krähenbühl, the man who wanted to save the Palestinians

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The bombardments that hit the Gaza Strip these days once again highlight the crucial role played by UNRWA, the UN agency in charge of Palestinian refugees. Its health centres are overwhelmed, tens of thousands of people have found shelter in its schools. Of Gaza's 2 million inhabitants, almost 1.5 million depend on UNRWA's assistance, after they (or their ancestors) were expelled from their homes following the creation of the State of Israel in 1948.

This article was conceived before the conflict erupted. Pierre Krähenbühl of Switzerland took over as head of UNRWA in 2014, before resigning five years later, for reasons that are still not fully explained. It seemed all the more important for us to come back to it, as it is another Swiss, Philippe Lazzarini, who is today holding the reins of the organization and facing, with it, this new war.

The photo is one of those that make history. In a devastated Palestinian refugee camp, Yarmouk, in Syria, Pierre Krähenbühl walks alone among the ruins, his gaze focused. He is "the first senior official to have had access to the camp in years," notes, admiringly, the website of UNRWA, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East. The date is July 3, 2018. However, on this day, in Jerusalem or Gaza, the atmosphere is quite different. The UN agency is struggling with an unprecedented financial crisis. Hundreds of positions are under threat and letters of dismissal have been sent out. Sorrow and anger are rife among the agency's employees. Internal revolt is rumbling, but the Commissioner-General is busy elsewhere.

This way of showing off has contributed to the resentment against Pierre Krähenbühl among a considerable part of UNRWA's senior staff. It is emblematic: as soon as he arrived in 2014, the new Commissioner-General began crisscrossing the globe in search of funds, practically leaving his organization to its own devices. "He had become a rock star with messianic overtones," chuckles one person who knew him. "He quickly stopped listening to those around him and

started to preach to them. Not only did he know nothing about the workings of UNRWA, but he did nothing to familiarize himself with it," adds a director with more than 20 years of experience in the organization. In Switzerland, the former ambassador François Nordmann says: "At the UN, it is the Secretary-General who makes policy. It is not the role of his clerks, even when they seem to act with a mandate from above."

The "farm"

A Pierre Krähenbühl so carried away by his mission, as if intoxicated by the possibility of speaking publicly after having undergone the ICRC's law of silence, that he forgot to run the organization of which he was the head? At that point, UNRWA began to earn an unattractive nickname: "the farm". A farm in which, for lack of guards, the animals frolic happily, at the risk of letting the strongest win. Or the smartest.

The discomfort had become so great that some people admit to having uncorked a good bottle the day the Genevan decided to resign, on November 6, 2019, a few hours after he was informed of the results of the investigation commissioned about him by UN Secretary General Antonio Guterres. Pierre Krähenbühl, one of Switzerland's brightest and most respected "humanitarians", was dismissed as a foreign body, while disciplinary actions were taken against his main acolytes and the organization would be decapitated.

Since then, it has remained a mystery as to exactly what the former Commissioner-General was accused of. The final report on the allegations against him - of which at least the (Swiss) Federal Department of Foreign Affairs has received a copy, and which support groups for Pierre Krähenbühl in Switzerland are demanding be published - is supposed to remain secret, in accordance with UN procedures. Following an RTS documentary broadcast in December 2020, the assertion that this report does not contain any decisive elements against the former head of UNRWA has nevertheless gained ground. Krähenbühl himself asserts that the report cleared him of "98%" of the accusations that prompted the investigation.

"Thorough investigation"

In an interview with Le Temps, Pierre Krähenbühl insisted: "The investigation concerning me, in which I actively participated, was thorough and lasted eight months. Its conclusions cleared me of the serious charges brought against me (fraud, corruption, management of funds, etc.) and retained only a few management failures. I think it is time for everyone to take note and move on. To me, those are the results that are the real deal today."

In fact, beyond the secrecy of the document, this statement poses a problem: the resignation of the Commissioner-General interrupted the UN (disciplinary) process against him. Two sources confirm that, far from being trivial, these "management failures" would have led to inevitable disciplinary action against the former head of UNRWA if he had not left his post. Pierre Krähenbühl retorts that nothing of the sort was ever communicated to him. But upon receiving the report, Antonio Guterres placed the head of UNRWA on administrative leave. This is not a

decision to be taken lightly: within the UN, such a measure is required when the continued employment of a person "poses a danger to the organization".

In the course of its own investigation, Le Temps gathered some 15 interviews and testimonies from among the most senior UNRWA staff, as well as from diplomats and officials from donor countries. They describe the workings of a "farm" that Le Temps wanted to understand, where there is a concentration of power, favoritism, and irregular decision-making. Most of the people we spoke to asked that their names not be published.

The Takkenberg report

When he arrived in Jerusalem in 2014, Pierre Krähenbühl had an excellent reputation for probity and commitment within the ICRC, where he had worked for more than twenty years, twelve of them as director of operations. "His great knowledge of the field, his eloquence, his youthfulness, added to his way of explaining the rights of Palestinian refugees in a convincing and articulate way. We were all very impressed." Lex Takkenberg had already spent three decades with UNRWA. No one knows it yet, but this man would later become one of the protagonists of the affair, collecting, on behalf of the agency's Ethics Office which he heads, the complaints that land on his desk.

In his report, which will be leaked resoundingly in July 2019, 20 directors (of the agency's 25 or so), as well as other staff members, say they are willing to testify. "Put together, the pieces of the puzzle provided a very ugly picture of the situation," says the Dutch-born lawyer.

Before submitting his report to Antonio Guterres in December 2018, Lex Takkenberg took care to consult a committee of experts from outside UNRWA (the Advisory Committee on Internal Oversight) that oversees its good governance. Their cry of alarm was unanimous, so much so that they informed Secretary-General Guterres directly of the extent of the danger, even before the Takkenberg report reached him.

The testimonies gathered internally, as well as the resentment that still permeate the discussions, contradict the image that Pierre Krähenbühl has built up outside the organization. Particularly in the face of Donald Trump, who in 2018 froze U.S. contributions of \$365 million a year, the Swiss has earned a reputation as the "savior of UNRWA."

But some are not far from thinking he was threatening to become its gravedigger. Pierre Krähenbühl was the highest-ranking Swiss diplomat at the United Nations. Despite his departure from UNRWA, the continuing gap between these two perceptions and the questions posed by the "Krähenbühl affair" to the Federal Department of Foreign Affairs (FDFA) are of public interest. The aim here is to confront these perceptions with the facts.

"Hold your troops"

"In international organizations, and mainly in UNRWA, which is very fragmented and almost serves as a state structure for Palestine, internal management is essential. The Commissioner-General has to be present. He has to be able to hold his troops together and bang his fist on the

table. But Pierre Krähenbühl was not there. The atmosphere had become unbearable, like never before," notes the Swiss-Palestinian researcher Jalal Al Hussein, who has been studying the organization for a long time and is a consultant to the Swiss Confederation.

Several interlocutors maintain that these dysfunctions were known long before Donald Trump entered the White House. "The first serious doubts appeared as early as 2015," explains one of them. "Pierre Krähenbühl's absence and the problems it was causing had become public knowledge, but everyone was convinced that it could be much worse if UNRWA were to reveal its internal flaws. So we let it go."

Among the donor countries that have repeatedly expressed their concerns: Switzerland, but also the United States under Barack Obama. Very quickly, the UN headquarters in New York conducted its own discreet investigation. The result: "Antonio Guterres [who arrived at the head of the UN on January 1, 2017] knew about it from his first day," they say.

Feeling blindsided, UNRWA directors and deputies began to seethe. WhatsApp groups sprang up to share unpleasant experiences. "These people sometimes have thousands of employees under their responsibility. Each one of them has more experience with the UN than Pierre Krähenbühl had," notes an executive of the organization. But when they finally managed to get direct access to him, they were told platitudes that were often useless.

The same source railed against the idea that these criticisms could have been politically motivated, or that they were part of an Israeli-American plot to weaken the agency: "These people are very committed to the Palestinian issue. If they did not shout louder, it is precisely because they were afraid that their words would be used by those who advocate the dismantling of UNRWA. These are the people who kept the agency going before Krähenbühl arrived. And they are the ones who continue to do so after his departure."

Tomorrow: The emir, the deputy and her husband

[Note: the subsequent articles in the series were delayed and eventually published on 31 May 2021]