

U.S. official pressured to resign over Powerpoint on mothers starving in Gaza

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Palestinians evacuate following an Israeli airstrike on a mosque in the Gaza Strip on October 10,

2023. (Photo by AFP)

Washington, June 2 (RHC)-- A former contractor with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) said he was forced to resign after his presentation focused on declining maternal health in Gaza was canceled by leadership.

Alexander Smith worked as a senior adviser on gender, maternal health, child health and nutrition at USAID until last week, when he was set to deliver a presentation on maternal and child mortality among Palestinians.

One day before he was scheduled to present, the USAID leadership canceled his presentation. Smith says he got a call from the company that contracted his position with USAID and was then given a choice between resignation and dismissal. He was told he could either resign or be terminated over “personality differences.”

Smith, who is also a lawyer, had worked for USAID for four years. In February, he submitted an abstract for his presentation — titled “An Intersectional Gender Lens in Gaza: Ethnicity, Religion, Geography, Legal Status, and Maternal/Child Health Outcomes” — which was accepted for the small USAID conference.

He was scheduled to present on May 22 in Washington, DC.

At the conference, Smith wanted to touch on international humanitarian law. His slides on the topic did not mention Israel specifically, the presentation shows.

The rest of Smith’s presentation drew on data from the UN, WHO, and other sources about the decline of maternal health in Gaza, including reports about Israel’s devastating attacks on Gaza’s health infrastructure.

“I would like them to stop gas lighting and speak truthfully about what is happening,” Smith was quoted as saying by media. He added that USAID must do more than acknowledge famine is happening in Gaza.

“We need to take the next step of saying it is illegal and who is doing the starvation intentionally.”

Smith condemned U.S. President Joe Biden administration for silencing experts while supporting Israel, which claims there is no famine in Gaza. “It’s shameful that that misinformation can go around the world to millions, while we at USAID can’t even whisper about it in a conference on gender and human rights and health outcomes,” he added.

Smith joined the growing ranks of Biden administration officials who have resigned over Gaza.

“Actively silencing discussion of Palestinian lives and the ongoing global health disaster is dehumanizing,” Smith wrote in a resignation letter to USAID Administrator Samantha Power, “not only to the people of Gaza, but to the people of the United States who deserve to know the extent to which we are paying for and supporting crimes against Palestinians.”

“What happened to me sends a very clear signal to staff: We don’t talk about Gaza,” Smith told The Intercept.

Israel launched its onslaught against the Gaza Strip, targeting hospitals, residences, and houses of worship after Palestinian fighters launched a surprise foray, dubbed Operation al-Aqsa Storm, against the regime on October 7, 2023.

At least 36,379 Palestinians have been killed, most of them women and children, and 82,407 others injured.

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