

US Congress blocks Palestinian aid after UN statehood bid

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In a provocative move, the US Congress has blocked nearly \$200 million of humanitarian aid to the Palestinian people, intended for food, health care and development initiatives.

Palestinian Authority spokesman Ghassan Khatib condemned the decision, as “unjustified.” He told Britain’s *Independent* newspaper, which first broke the news on Saturday, “These are mainly humanitarian and development projects, it is another kind of collective punishment which is going to harm the needs of the public without making any positive contribution.”

The move is part of a broader campaign of bullying and intimidation by Washington aimed at forcing PA President Mahmoud Abbas to drop his bid for Palestinian statehood at the United Nations (UN).

Abbas presented the application to the UN September 23, in the face of opposition from Washington and Tel Aviv. The Obama administration threatened to veto the bid if it went before the UN Security Council, underscoring the reactionary and predatory character of US policy in the Middle East, and the hypocrisy of its claims to identify with the aspirations of the Arab masses and act as an “honest broker” in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

The three congressional committees with responsibility for overseas aid made their decision on the last day of the US fiscal year, blocking payment of \$192 million to be funneled through the US Agency for International Development (USAID) for programmes that assist the Palestinian people. None of the money passes through the hands of the Palestinian Authority, which has already received its full allotment \$600 million for the fiscal year that ended September 30.

Gary Ackerman, the ranking Democrat on the House Middle East Affairs subcommittee, also threatened to withhold all of next year’s \$600 million allocation if Abbas does not drop his bid for UN statehood recognition. According to the *Independent*, a draft American budget for 2012 would make next year’s aid dependent on Secretary of State Hillary Clinton certifying that the Palestinians were no longer seeking

“unilateral recognition” of a Palestinian state.

The move has bipartisan support in both the House and the Senate, underscoring the venal and right-wing character of both parties. Officially, the Obama administration has opposed the withholding of aid but only on the basis that it will harm the US’s ability to “advance its interests in the region at a critical period.” This is a reference to the fact that Washington’s standing in the Middle East has been gravely weakened by the mass uprisings that have seen the ouster of its long-term allies, Hosni Mubarak and Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali.

The block, which the *Independent* described as “unpublicised”, has been largely ignored in the US media, and the details are sketchy, as there was no official announcement.

On Monday, Bradley Goehner, the communications director of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, made the specious claim that the funding had been put on hold as a “tool of Congressional oversight” while Congress sought further details about the PA’s use of the money. He made it clear that Congress opposed the PA’s application to the UN for statehood, its pledge to form a national unity government with Hamas, and its failure to recognise Israel as a Jewish state.

He said, “Members [of the Committee] believe that the funding cannot be considered in a vacuum, and that the PA’s activities at the UN, its arrangement with Hamas, and its failure to recognise Israel’s right to exist as Jewish State must all be taken into consideration.”

The move follows a congressional resolution in July that called on the White House to suspend all financial assistance to the Palestinians unless the PA called off its bid for statehood recognition and resumed talks with Israel.

Abbas’s turn to the UN was an implicit admission that the peace talks are nothing but a charade behind which Israel has expanded its settlements in the occupied West Bank and East Jerusalem. Together with its control of Palestinian resources such as water, minerals and telecoms, its military checkpoints

and Jewish-only “security roads,” this has restricted the development of the Palestinian economy, and made daily life a nightmare for the vast majority of Palestinians.

But the PA is still animated by the same bankrupt perspective of pressuring Israel and the imperialist powers for support. Abbas had hoped that resorting to the UN would force Israel to return to the negotiating table with some meaningful concessions. He apparently agreed to a deal that would see his bid lapse pending the outcome of talks to be brokered by the Quartet, made up of the US, European Union, UN and Russia.

An incident reported in *Ha'aretz* makes clear both the desperation of Abbas and the perfidy of the major powers. On behalf of the Quartet and at the request of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, German Chancellor Angela Merkel telephoned Abbas to ask what it would take to get him to resume talks with the Israelis. In the conversation, Abbas renewed his plea for a three-month freeze on settlement construction to allow talks to be held. Abbas told her, “I don’t need him [Netanyahu] to say so publicly, I need him not to embarrass us.”

The Quartet duly came up with a proposal to resume talks within a month, with no demand for a settlement freeze, simply that both parties should refrain from “provocative actions,” present proposals on borders and security within three months, and reach a final agreement by the end of 2012.

While Netanyahu formally accepted the Quartet’s proposals, which commit him to nothing, his office immediately objected to the short timetable and the separate negotiations for borders and security arrangements. He also demanded that Abbas freeze his bid for UN recognition for the duration of the talks.

Israel’s real attitude was made clear by last week’s announcement that 1,100 new homes are to be constructed in Gilo, a settlement in East Jerusalem. The decision was intended to scupper talks, while casting the Palestinians as “peace spoilers.”

The Obama administration issued the mildest possible verbal protest over the Israeli provocation, then sent Defence Secretary Leon Panetta to Ramallah, Tel Aviv and Cairo to push Abbas back to the table on US terms.

While Saudi Arabia and the Arab League have announced that they will make good the \$200 million shortfall in funding, Abbas faces mounting political and social unrest within the West Bank. The bid for statehood was bound up with an attempt to bolster the credibility of himself and his Fatah party, both gravely undermined by decades-long subservience to Israel. This is one of the factors that led Abbas to agree to a

deal—yet to be implemented—with Hamas for a National Unity Government and elections.

While economic activity has picked up, it has not reached 1999 levels, the year before the Palestinian intifada. Furthermore, the growth has resulted in increasing poverty and social inequality as official unemployment has not changed—in 2010 it was 17 percent in the West Bank and 38 percent in Gaza. Some 26 percent of Palestinian large families in the West Bank and 38 percent of Gazans spend less than \$640 a month on basic needs.

Foreign aid, mainly from the EU, accounts for nearly half of the PA’s budget, and another 37 percent comes from taxes collected by Israel on the PA’s behalf, which Tel Aviv has threatened to withhold unless Abbas drops his bid for statehood. Both of these are now under threat.

According to a new report by the PA’s Economics Ministry, the Applied Research Institute in Jerusalem and consultants funded by the UN, Israel’s occupation is costing the Palestinian economy at least £4.35 billion through its control of natural resources, including water, Dead Sea minerals and farmland, resulting in higher prices for water and electricity. The report argues that Israel has gone out of its way to exploit Palestinian resources for its own benefit while imposing constraints designed “to prevent any Palestinian competition with Israeli economic interests.”

Hundreds of Palestinian detainees in Israeli jails have gone on hunger strike and are threatening to disobey all prison rules in pursuit of their demands for an end to solitary confinement, collective punishment, humiliating inspections and the practice of binding detainees’ hands and feet during visits, and the right to study. Twenty prisoners have been kept in solitary confinement for 10 years.

Within Israel itself, an arson attack on a mosque in the village of Tuba-Zanghariyya, a Bedouin town of 5,500 people in the north of the country on Monday, has led to angry demonstrations by Palestinian Israelis. The attack has been described as a “price tag” operation by extreme right-wing Israelis—a reference to acts of vandalism and brutality carried out by vigilante groups against Palestinians. While such arson attacks have been carried out on mosques in the West Bank, attacks on mosques in Israel have thus far been rare.



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