

Trump threatens Palestinian aid cut-off

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US President Donald Trump has repeated his threats to end Washington's financial support to the Palestinians. His actions undermine the Palestinian Authority (PA), undercutting the role it plays on behalf of the US, the European powers and Israel in policing the Palestinian people.

Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the United Nations (UN), amplified Trump's tweet, stating that Washington might halt its contribution to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian refugees (UNRWA) until the Palestinians agreed to engage in US-led peace talks with Israel again.

Trump tweeted that the US "gives them hundreds of millions of dollars," but gets "no respect. ... They don't even want to negotiate a long overdue peace treaty with Israel."

Trump presented his decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital as a positive gift to the Palestinians, denouncing them for opposing the move in the UN and making identical threats of financial sanctions to those he made to other countries protesting the action.

"We have taken Jerusalem, the toughest part of the negotiation, off the table, but Israel, for that, would have had to pay more," Trump claimed. "But with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?"

The shape of the "ultimate deal" that Trump promised on taking office, to be brokered by his son-in-law Jared Kushner and US ambassador to Israel David Friedman, ardent supporters of an expansionist Israel, is clear. The Palestinian Authority must accept its role as security guard for Israel and US imperialism in the region, and settle the long-running Israeli-Palestinian conflict on Israel's terms: the abandonment of Jerusalem as the capital of any Palestinian statelet made up of non-contiguous towns and villages, and no right of return for the Palestinians who became refugees in

1947-48 and 1967.

Trump's decision to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and move its embassy there from Tel Aviv marked the definitive end of the decades-long US policy, which formally upheld the position that the status of Jerusalem could only be determined through a negotiated settlement between Israel and the Palestinians.

Washington's European allies opposed Trump's decision, as it cut across their own geo-strategic interests in the region by exposing the fraud of a two-state solution. They supported the overwhelming vote in favour of a nonbinding resolution at the UN General Assembly last month affirming that the status of Jerusalem—claimed as a capital by both Israel and the Palestinians—can only be settled as an agreed final issue in a peace deal.

After the vote, Haley threatened that Washington would "remember it when so many countries come calling on us, as they so often do, to pay even more and to use our influence for their benefit." The US then announced that its contribution to the UN budget would be slashed by over \$285 million this year.

To make sure that the PA falls in line with Washington's demands, Trump has now threatened to cut off its very limited funds. US funding for the Palestinians is made up of two elements.

It gives UNRWA about \$368 million a year, about a quarter of the agency's \$1.25 billion budget. UNRWA supports 5.9 million Palestinian refugees and their descendants in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and provides essential health and educational services.

A cut to UNRWA's budget would have a devastating impact on the humanitarian crisis, particularly in Gaza where UNRWA funds are a major source of income for the besieged entity. With an unemployment rate of 40 percent, around 1 million of Gaza's 2 million

population depend on emergency food assistance from UNRWA. This number has risen sharply from 80,000 in 2000 as a result of Israel's 10-year-long blockade and repeated military attacks that have destroyed Gaza's economy.

Bereft of financial support from UNRWA, the host governments in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan and Lebanon would be unable to control their restive and destitute populations and would face collapse, further destabilising the region.

The second part of US aid includes direct funds to the Palestinians in the West Bank, following the implementation of the 1993 Oslo Accords. According to a Congressional report published in December 2016, Washington has provided about \$400 million a year for the last 10 years. US aid increased after the factional split between Mahmud Abbas' Fatah-led PA in the West Bank and the Hamas-led Gaza Strip in 2007.

The report makes clear that funding that goes to the PA in the West Bank, less than half the total, is channelled largely to the PA's security forces, the largest per capita in the world, which act as Israel's subcontractor to suppress the impoverished Palestinian working class—thereby protecting both Israel and the Palestinian bourgeoisie.

The funding was “primarily in direct support of the PA's security, governance, development and reform programs in the West Bank under Abbas” and intended “in part to counter Hamas.” The report adds that the US may also have provided “covert” funding—meaning the CIA.

Most aid is channelled via the US Agency for International Development (USAID), as “investments” in the West Bank and in Gaza, whose ultimate beneficiaries are again the Palestinian bourgeoisie.

Much of this was already under threat from the proposed Taylor Force Act, seeking to make funding conditional on the PA ending financial support for Palestinians in Israeli jails convicted of terrorist offences.

While the US is the largest single contributor to UNRWA, the European states provide far more, both via the European Union (\$160 million) and their own country budgets (\$330 million). The EU provides an additional \$218 million in aid to the Palestinians, about half of which defrays the costs of the PA's salaries, with the rest going towards social and economic

projects in the West Bank, East Jerusalem and Gaza. This is channelled via Palestinian businesses, with individual European states also granting aid from their own domestic budgets.

The European powers are concerned that any further cuts in funding, which has almost been halved since 2013, would threaten the collapse of the PA and the further destabilisation of the Middle East region. Moreover, Trump's aggressive measures against the Palestinians are bound up with Washington's efforts to assert its control and dominance against its imperialist competitors through an anti-Iranian alliance in which Israel and Saudi Arabia are to play a key role, with the aim of preparing for possible war with Tehran.

Trump's attack on UNRWA is also an attack on the EU. Last July, the EU issued a statement describing the organisation as “one of the pillars of its Middle East peace policy.”

Trump's threats highlight the growing dangers to the Palestinians and the working class and oppressed masses throughout a region who face being plunged into war. They also underscore the impossibility of opposing these dangers without breaking free of the strangulating grip of the PA and waging a political struggle independent of the venal Palestinian bourgeoisie. Its perspective of establishing another small state in the Middle East with the help of one or other imperialist and regional powers has proved to be a disaster.

The only way to resolve the economic, social and political problems of the region and end the drive to war is the development of a political movement to unite workers and peasants, of all ethnicities and religions, in a common struggle against imperialism and its local agents, Arab and Israeli, for the building of a United Socialist States of the Middle East.



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