

Trump administration ends funding for Palestinian refugees

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After weeks of speculation and leaks, the Trump administration announced Friday that it is to end all its payments to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), including the \$290 million planned for this year.

The US State Department also attacked the agency's "endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries," rejecting UNRWA's definition of Palestinian refugees, which includes not only the 750,000 who became refugees in 1948-9, when they fled or were driven out by Israeli forces, but their descendants who together total some five million. In future, only those who became refugees in 1948-9 will be deemed refugees by the US administration.

The US has hitherto funded nearly 30 percent of UNRWA's total budget that provides health care, education and social services to Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. It was set to give around \$360 million this year, releasing \$60 million in January, but withheld a further \$65 million of the \$290 million it had been due to provide.

The loss of funding will be felt beyond the occupied Palestinian territories, in Jordan, Lebanon and Syria where UNRWA funding provides a vital safety net for regimes that have hovered on the brink of bankruptcy for years.

Although Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates and others have offered more than \$200 million in additional funding, and Germany said it too would boost its financial support for the agency, senior Israeli diplomatic officials said that Washington had indicated its intention was to "close down UNRWA altogether" and transfer its functions to other agencies.

UNRWA commissioner-general Pierre Krähenbühl in an interview with Associated Press contradicted Washington's assertion that the agency was inefficient. He said, "I can say with a great degree of confidence that the decision [to withhold funding] was not related to UNRWA's performance, because in November I had received very constructive and openly positive feedback on those issues."

Instead, it was meant to punish Palestinians for protesting Washington's recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

He warned that although its 711 schools that educate the 526,000 Palestinian refugee children in Gaza, the West Bank, East Jerusalem, Lebanon, Jordan and Syria would open on time, the agency only had enough money to keep them open until the end of September. It needed a further \$217 million to keep the schools running the rest of the year.

A few weeks ago, UNRWA announced cuts to its services that would mean laying off more than 100 of its 13,000 staff in Gaza, transferring some 580 to part-time contracts and cutting salaries of hundreds more, sparking angry protests and causing UNRWA to "lose control" of its compound in Gaza for more than two weeks.

The situation is particularly acute in Gaza where about half of its two million population are dependent upon food aid from UNRWA, which also runs more than 250 of Gaza's schools and 22 medical centres.

A spokesman for Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas called the US move a "flagrant assault" against all Palestinians and a breach of UN resolutions.

Saeb Erekat, the Palestinians' chief negotiator in the defunct Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, said, "The American administration's decisions on Jerusalem, refugees and settlements embody annihilation of international law and security and stability in the region." He added, "They are gifts for radical forces and terrorism in the region."

The US move has delighted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, who earlier this year declared that UNRWA "needs to pass from this world." He said, "The time has come to dismantle UNRWA and have its parts integrated into the UN High Commission for Refugees." He claimed that "UNRWA is one of the main problems perpetuating the conflict [between Israel and the Palestinians]."

Ron Prosor, a former Israeli ambassador to London and the UN, led the campaign against UNRWA on Israel's behalf. He said, "The time has come to state the truth. The refugees should be rehabilitated. There are no more than half a

million refugees from 1948. All the rest are hitchhikers getting a free ride; it is about time that they rehabilitate themselves in the places they live.”

According to Prosser, a review of the refugee issue, begun under the Obama administration, noted that the number of UNRWA-registered refugees was ten times the original number, with the result that “UNRWA has become a monster employing tens of thousands of people in order to perpetuate a whole industry. This makes any attempt to discuss a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict impossible.” He said that only the original refugees should be recognized as refugees.

Last month, *Foreign Policy* magazine revealed that Jared Kushner, Trump’s son-in-law and Middle East envoy, called for “an honest and sincere effort to disrupt UNRWA.” In January, Kushner sent an email to several senior officials stating that UNRWA “perpetuates a status quo, is corrupt, inefficient and doesn’t help peace.”

Dissolving UNRWA—and redefining the number of Palestinian refugees—is aimed at making their right of return to their former homes in Israel, a key issue in any “final status” deal aimed at settling the Israel-Palestine conflict, simply disappear. Israel has always refused to grant the Palestinians their internationally recognized legal right of return, despite granting that same “right of return” to Jews all over the world who have never lived in Israel/Palestine.

The shape of the “ultimate deal” that Trump promised on taking office, to be brokered by Kushner and US ambassador to Israel David Friedman, ardent supporters of an expansionist Israel, has long been 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 1948-9 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 a 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.

In another move clearly intended to force the PA to submit to its terms, the White House announced that it also intended to cut more than \$200 million in bilateral aid to the Palestinian Authority that was agreed following the implementation of the 1993 Oslo Accords. State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert said that aid to the PA “does not provide value to the US taxpayer.”

The Palestinian Authority already has a \$1.8 billion

financial deficit for 2018, thanks to Israel’s withholding of millions of dollars of the funds it collects on the PA’s behalf and the reduction in contributions from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, that will be further exacerbated by the US cuts.

The cuts, ostensibly the result of a review of aid to the PA, are widely seen as a punishment for the Palestinians anger over Washington’s decision to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, thereby recognizing Israel’s control over the entire city, including East Jerusalem that Israel illegally annexed after the 1967 war and the Palestinians claim as their capital. In the words of US President Donald Trump, it served to take the Jerusalem problem “off the table” in any “deal” between Israel and the Palestinians.

Now the Palestinians’ right of return is being taken “off the table.” US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley questioned Palestinian claims to a “right of return” to Israel, saying the issue should be taken “off the table” and suggesting the Trump administration would consider rejecting the demand that all the original refugees and their descendants be allowed to return to modern-day Israel in any final deal.

The US froze millions in aid to the PA earlier this year after the passage of the Taylor Force Act that made funding conditional on the PA ending financial support for Palestinians in Israeli jails convicted of terrorist offences. The freeze severely affected Palestinians’ access to medical services and food aid.

Nevertheless, US funds for 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—are to be continued.



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