**Barkat: I want to expel UNRWA from Jerusalem**

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Jerusalem Mayor Nir Barkat threatened to expel UNRWA from Jerusalem, in the first public statement by an Israeli official that called on the government to use its power to shut down the agency that services Palestinian refugees.

“UNRWA is a foreign and unnecessary organization that has failed miserably,” Barkat said in a speech he delivered Monday morning in Jerusalem at a conference sponsored by Channel 2. “I intend to expel it from Jerusalem.”

Barkat explained that he had already instructed his municipal staff to come up with a plan to replace the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which he plans to present to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

He spoke just three days after the US State Department announced that it intends to permanently halt its annual contributions to UNRWA, which last year amounted to $360 million out of the organization’s one billion dollar budget.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly stated his support for that decision.

The Trump Administration’s decision to defund UNRWA is seen as an initial step in a larger plan to destroy the organization which has serviced Palestinian refugees and their descendants, since the 1948 War of Independence caused 750,000 Palestinians to flee.

The organization now services more than five million Palestinian refugees, including 2.17 million in Jordan, 1.3 million in Gaza, 809,738 in the West Bank and east Jerusalem, 526,744 in Syria and 449,957 in Lebanon.

UNRWA operates under a UN mandate and only the UN General Assembly can abolish the organization or change its definition of who is a refugee.

“No matter how often attempts are made to minimize or delegitimize the individual and collective experiences of Palestine refugees, the undeniable fact remains that they have rights under international law and represent a community of 5.4 million men, women and children who cannot simply be wished away,” UNRWA Commissioner-General Pierre Krähenbühl said.

But according to media reports, the US plans to work behind the scenes to force its closure. Jordanian Foreign Minister Ayman Safadi told the BBC on Saturday that his government had already rejected a US push for Jordan to service its 2.1 million Palestinian refugees through other avenues than UNRWA.

An administration official said that Trump’s envoy to Israel, David Friedman, had not spoken with Barkat of his plans before the mayor delivered his remarks. But a spokesman for the State Department said that UNRWA’s model of operations were proving an obstruction to peace, suggesting the administration would not get in the way of his policy proposal.

“We have not made any request to Israel regarding UNRWA’s mandate or operations in the West Bank or the Gaza Strip, but we do not advance a comprehensive and enduring peace by ignoring the reality that UNRWA is unable to fulfill the mandate given to it by the General Assembly,” Edgar Vasquez, the State Department spokesman, told The Jerusalem Post.

“The number of UNRWA beneficiaries continues to increase exponentially,” he added, “and funding has failed to keep pace. That model is fatally and irredeemably flawed.”

UNRWA operates in east Jerusalem, the West Bank and Gaza under an agreement with Israel that according to the Foreign Ministry is still in force.

At issue for right-wing Israeli and US politicians who have long battled to eliminate UNRWA, is the concern that it creates an ever-growing Palestinian refugee population definition which provides a stumbling block for any attempts to reach a final status agreement with the Palestinians.

“During the eight years of the Obama Administration, no Israeli government official ever asked the US to cut off aid to UNRWA,” said former US Ambassador Dan Shapiro. “They expressed complaints about UNRWA and they demanded reforms of UNRWA. Parenthetically, we should have done more to support that agenda.”

He explained that Israeli officials were concerned that eliminating UNRWA “could likely cause a humanitarian crisis and that Israel would have to bear much of the burden of that crisis and the security crisis [that would follow.] That was true from Israeli political leaders, and especially from military and security professionals,” Shapiro said.

But Barkat on Sunday publicly told the Jerusalem conference that UNRWA, which has been responsible for Jerusalem’s Shuafat refugee camp since 1965, had been a harmful rather than helpful influence.

The mayor said the 30,000 Palestinians in Shuafat are dissatisfied with the organization’s services, including welfare, cleaning and education.

Only one percent of the pupils there go to UNRWA schools, where incitement is high, he said.

“We will close their schools and provide pupils with hope,” said Barkat, adding the pupils could study for and take the matriculation exams in existing schools throughout the city.

“Wherever the municipality operates, the Arab public is more satisfied and less violent. UNRWA’s treatment of residents as refugees is a barrier to their advancement and has no place,” Barkat said. “The time has come transform them from refugees to residents and to rehabilitate them. It is possible. The removal of UNRWA will reduce incitement and terrorism, improve service to the residents, increase Israelization in east Jerusalem and contribute to [Israeli] unity and sovereignty in Jerusalem.”

UNRWA said in response that it “has received no notification about this alleged plan and UNRWA’s schools and other core services in the city remain operational.”

Israeli NGO Ir Amim said the 30,000 Palestinians in the Shuafat refugee camp are among the 120,000 Palestinians residents of east Jerusalem who live beyond the barrier.

It charged that the Jerusalem Municipality has neglected to service those areas of the city, such as the Shuafat refugee camp and the other 90,000 Palestinians there who are not classified as refugees.

Barkat’s pledge to better incorporate that area into the city is a rare affirmation that it is part of Jerusalem. Right-wing politicians this year pushed to advance legislation that would have created a separate municipality for the 120,000 Palestinians.

“Barkat will no doubt win the primaries for the cynical politician of the year,” Ir Amim said in response to his speech. “Nir Barkat, as mayor, has completely abandoned these neighborhoods, so that even garbage removal takes place there only following court petitions.”

Barkat’s neglect of this area during his 10 years in office “has turned the neighborhoods on the other side of the fence into terrible slums that lack education, welfare and which have collapsing water infrastructure and roads,” Ir Amim said.

PLO Executive Committee member Hanan Ashrawi condemned Barkat’s statement: “Clearly, Barkat’s comments have been emboldened by the latest American decision to defund UNRWA and redefine the status of Palestinian refugees.”

“These moves are part of the US administration’s plan to dismantle all permanent status issues at the core of which are occupied Jerusalem, the Palestinian refugees and the right of return, the two-state solution, 1967 borders, and the legality of the settlements, thereby destroying the chances of peace,” Ashrawi said.

“Regardless of the American administration’s irresponsible and illegal latest moves, neither the United States nor Israel (let alone the so-called ‘Mayor’ of Jerusalem) can impose their will on the international community or target its institutions,” she said.

“It is up to governments worldwide and all members of the international community to rise to the challenge and intervene immediately to ensure that such threats are not carried out and to maintain the integrity of the global legal and political system,” Ashrawi said.