Trump Challenges UN Over Anti-Israel Funding

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“We’re not paying until you make a deal.”

That’s how President Trump justified the administration’s controversial decision this summer to cut off all U.S. funding for UNWRA, the UN relief agency for Palestinians. Administration officials and the Israeli government blame UNWRA for perpetuating the never-ending impasse in the West Bank, and insist on breaking the deadlock.

In a January email published by Foreign Policy magazine, special U.S. envoy and senior Trump adviser Jared Kushner explained the administration’s goal “can’t be to keep things stable and as they are.” He added: “Sometimes you have to strategically risk breaking things in order to get there.”

Historically, UNWRA’s existence stems from the displacement of Palestinians that accompanied the creation of modern Israel in 1948. The United States has been the organization’s biggest funding source. But under Trump, the State Department described it as an “irredeemably flawed operation.”

Jeremy Ben-Ami, president of the liberal J Street organization, warned in a statement issued after Trump’s move that the defunding would “ratchet up the risk of greater destabilization and conflict across the Middle East, undermining the security of Israel and countries throughout the region.”

After all, UNWRA provides education programs, food assistance, health care, and other vital support to some 800,000 Palestinians in the West Bank, as well as 1.3 million in Gaza. Hundreds of thousands of Palestinians in Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan are eligible for assistance as well.

So far, the predictions that the funding withdrawal would set the Palestinian tinderbox alight have not been borne out.

UNWRA -- an acronym for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East -- has trimmed its expenses and tightened its belt. Bolstered by a $50 million contribution from the Saudis, it has been able to stave off fiscal insolvency -- at least so far. But whether the withdrawal of funds has moved the region any closer to peace is an open question.

Former Israeli Ambassador to the UN Ron Prosor tells Newsmax in an exclusive interview he has launched a new website, Unrwa-Dynasty.com, to document the fecklessness of the UN’s Palestinian aid policies:

* UNWRA’s 5.6 million claimed Palestinian refugees receive three times more funding than the world’s more than 60 million non-Palestinian refugees, who are represented by the UN High Commissioner on Refugees (UNHCR). “There is a clear discrimination against regular refugees -- from Sudan, from Eritrea, clearly,” Amb. Prosor says. “Those are the facts.”
* The UNHCR has a staff of about 10,000 people working to stem the massive, global refugee problem. UNWRA manages to sustain a staff of 30,000 -- just to attend to the needs of the Palestinians. Many of those workers are believed to be Hamas sympathizers, and some UN officials have openly stated they believe UNWRA probably employs some Hamas members.
* In 2017, according to Prosor’s data, UNHCR successfully resettled 160,000 refugees last year. The number resettled by UNWRA? “Absolutely zero,” he says.
* A census by the Lebanese government found some 275,000 refugees that UNWRA said lived there actually “do not exist,” Prosor says. He says UNWRA issues “inflated reports” to justify its budget.
* According to Prosor, UNWRA’s educational and placement programs are faltering badly. He says its number of graduates declined by 12 percent from 2009 to 2015.
* Educational programs UNWRA underwrites in Gaza teach “hate and incitement against Israel,” he says. “And most of the employees are often members of Hamas, publicly,” he tells Newsmax. “So of course, good cannot come out of this.”

One reason the annual U.S. contribution of over $350 million a year to UNWRA has become so controversial: Allegations of corruption. In March 2010, an internal UN audit found UNRWA was vulnerable to “misappropriation, graft, and corruption,” especially regarding its “procurement, partner selection, food and cash distribution, hiring and promotions, and other areas.”

Prosor comments: “The UN and efficiency are contradictory terms. I would say that if you want to really promote accountability and transparency, you would not start doing it with UNWRA as an organization: Fuzzy numbers, using money to incite rather than educate, perpetuating the refugee problem and not solving anything. Clearly, this is a very problematic institution.”

UNWRA’s critics in Israel and in the Trump administration say it should be absorbed into the UN body that looks after other refugees around the globe, UNHCR. Anything less, they say, will only serve to reinforce the quixotic notion that over 5 million Palestinians have a “right of return” to someday be allowed to reoccupy Israel and Palestine. “What they call ‘return’ is basically a euphemism for an end of the state of Israel,” Prosor says.

Prosor and at least some in the Trump administration see the so-called “right of return” as one of the biggest contributors to the longstanding futility in the troubled region. Trump has apparently decided he must “strategically break” the impasse, if peace is to ever break out in the Middle East.

Amb. Prosor remarks: “UNWRA is the problem, UNWRA is not the solution. People don’t understand that UNWRA is not just bad for Israel, but it’s bad for the peace process and bad for the Palestinians.

“It’s bad for the Palestinian people because it creates this endless cycle of refugees without a solution. It gives them this false hope, and the ‘right of return’ doesn’t really allow them to move forward to find a solution.”