**US announces it’s cutting all funding to Palestinian refugee agency**

By: TOI Staff

Times of Israel

August 31, 2018

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-announces-its-cutting-all-funding-to-palestinian-refugee-agency/>

The Trump administration announced Friday it is cutting nearly $300 million in planned funding for the UN agency that aids Palestinian refugees, and that it would no longer fund the agency after decades of support. Instead, it said it would seek other channels by which to aid the Palestinians.

The administration castigated the UN’s Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) for failed practices, and indicated that it rejected the criteria by which UNRWA defines Palestinian refugees, whereby the UN agency confers refugee status not only on original refugees but on their millions of descendants.

The State Department said in a written statement that the United States “will no longer commit further funding to this irredeemably flawed operation.”

“The fundamental business model and fiscal practices that have marked UNRWA for years – tied to UNRWA’s endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries – is simply unsustainable and has been in crisis mode for many years,” the statement said, a reference to the fact that the agency grants refugee status to all the descendants of the original Palestinian refugees, something not granted by the UN to refugees from any other places.

However, the statement said the US would look for other ways to aid the Palestinians.

“We are very mindful of and deeply concerned regarding the impact upon innocent Palestinians, especially school children, of the failure of UNRWA and key members of the regional and international donor community to reform and reset the UNRWA way of doing business,” it said, adding that “Palestinians, wherever they live, deserve better than an endlessly crisis-driven service provision model. They deserve to be able to plan for the future.”

The US will now work together with other international groups to find a better model to assist the Palestinians, the statement said.

Reports had circulated throughout the week that the US was planning the move.

The US supplies nearly 30 percent of the total budget of the UN Relief and Works Agency, which provides health care, education, and social services to Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon.

The US donated $355 million to the agency in 2016 and was set to make a similar contribution this year. In January the Trump administration released $60 million in funds but withheld a further $65 million it had been due to provide.

Ahead of the announcement, Israel signaled its support for the move.

“Israel supports the move because UNWRA is one of the main problems perpetuating the conflict,” Hadashot news quoted Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office as saying on Friday evening.

A senior Israeli official told Channel 10 TV that Israel supports providing humanitarian aid to Palestinians, but not through UNWRA. The official said the funding would be better spent by other agencies.

The Washington Post reported Thursday that Washington had made a final decision to halt all funding for UNWRA and would soon announce the move.

The Trump administration is now set to reprogram the remaining funds — around $290 million.

The withdrawal of US funding will leave UNRWA facing a financial crisis, but officials noted that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and others have provided more than $200 million in new funding to help cover its budget this year.

Germany said Friday it would also boost funding to the beleaguered UN agency and called for an international effort to sustain the aid body.

“The loss of this organization could unleash an uncontrollable chain reaction,” German Foreign Minister Heiko Maas said, according to Reuters. “We are currently preparing to provide an additional amount of significant funds.”

The Washington Post added that the US would also move ahead with a previously reported plan to remove the refugee status from millions of Palestinians around the world — recognizing only several hundred thousand instead of the five million claimed by Palestinians.

There was no explicit call for this in the State Department statement, however, beyond the criticisms of “UNWRA’s endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries.”

The “right of return” is one of the key core issues of dispute in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Palestinians claim that five million people — tens of thousands of original refugees from what is today’s Israel, and their millions of descendants — have a “right of return.” Israel rejects the demand, saying that it represents a bid by the Palestinians to destroy Israel by weight of numbers.

It says there is no justification for UNRWA’s unique criteria, by which all subsequent generations of descendants of the original refugees are also designated as having refugee status, including those born elsewhere and/or holding citizenship elsewhere; such a designation does not apply to the world’s other refugee populations.

Israel’s population is almost nine million, some three-quarters of whom are Jewish. An influx of millions would mean Israel could no longer be a Jewish-majority state.

The Post’s report followed another by Foreign Policy Tuesday, according to which a decision to cut all aid to UNRWA was made at a meeting earlier this month between US President Donald Trump’s adviser and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, and Secretary of State Mike Pompeo.

Since then, the administration has informed “key regional governments” of its plan, the report said.

The Foreign Policy report came hours after State Department spokesperson Heather Nauert said that aid money to the Palestinian Authority “does not provide value to the US taxpayer,” following a White House announcement that it planned to slash more than $200 million in overall aid to Ramallah.

Also Tuesday, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley questioned Palestinian claims to a “right of return” to modern Israel, saying she believed that the hot button issue should be taken “off the table.”

Haley suggested the Trump administration would consider an official rejection of the Palestinian demand that all refugees who were displaced between 1947 and 1948 — as well as all of their descendants — be allowed to return to modern-day Israel following a final peace accord.

Last weekend, a Hadashot TV report said the US will announce a policy that, “from its point of view, essentially cancels the ‘right of return.’” It said the US in early September will produce a report that says there are actually only some half-a-million Palestinians who should be legitimately considered refugees, and makes plain that it rejects the UN designation under which the millions of descendants of those displaced between 1947 and 1948 are also considered Palestinian refugees.

Netanyahu has called in the past for UNRWA to be “dismantled.” Last July, for instance, he accused the organization of inciting against Israel while doing nothing to help the plight of Palestinian refugees. He asked why they needed a specific body, when the UN High Commission for Refugees has helped tens of millions of displaced persons since World War II. “The time has come to dismantle UNRWA and have its parts integrated into the UN High Commission for Refugees,” he said, accusing the body of “perpetuating” the plight of Palestinian refugees.

The $200 million aid cut announced last Friday is the ostensible result of a review of US assistance to the PA that Trump ordered in January, following Palestinian outrage over his decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and move the US embassy to the city.

Sources in the Israeli defense establishment are understood to fear that Washington’s apparent efforts to weaken UNRWA may strengthen the Hamas terror group in Gaza and endanger Israel’s security.

They have reportedly said that serious cuts to UNRWA’s budget would create a vacuum in the provision of basic services in the Strip, where the majority of residents are dependent on the organization. This would be particularly felt in food shortages and a breakdown of education, which Hamas could use to strengthen its grip on the coastal enclave.