Congress Demands True Number of Palestinian Refugees From UNRWA

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Longstanding US support for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA) is facing new questions this week, as both houses of Congress work to modify critical funding bills to determine the legitimacy of the agency’s operations.

For the first time, drafts of both foreign operations bills include sections demanding the State Department publicly define the term “refugee” as it pertains to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and using that definition, identify how many Palestinians fit the criteria for receiving UNRWA aid.

Premising Congress’ question is the notion that many Palestinians – arguably a majority – are permanently settled in the Gaza Strip, the West Bank or east Jerusalem, and therefore not under the jurisdiction of a refugee agency. Such a finding would fundamentally change the narrative of the decades-old conflict.

In 2014, UNRWA declared that five million Palestinian refugees are registered in these territories, as well as in Jordan, Syria and Lebanon. The US provides hundreds of millions of dollars to UNRWA in support of its education, health and social services programs.

Four years ago, the Senate passed similar language in its own foreign operations bill, which requires the State Department to account for the number of Palestinians receiving aid who qualify as 1940s-era conflict refugees – as opposed to those who are descendants. In February of last year, the department completed its report, but had it classified.

Now the Senate is directing the secretary of state to produce either an unclassified version of the report or, alternatively, an explanation as to why the government cannot release these figures in an unclassified context.

“UNRWA is sort of becoming an entitlement program of the Middle East, and the desire is to increase transparency on who actually are refugees relevant to that conflict,” said one senior Senate aide familiar with the language. “The bill goes to the heart of the debate over UNRWA funding.”

Republicans have launched a parallel effort in the House to compel the State Department to define “refugee,” as the term pertains to the Palestinian question. Language sponsored by Congressman Chris Stewart (R-Utah) was added this week in mark-up to the House version of the bill.

The secretary of state would be directed by law to provide “a justification of why it is in the national interest of the United States to provide funds to UNRWA,” should the House language pass.

“Such justification shall include an analysis of the current definition of Palestinian refugees that is used by UNRWA, how that definition corresponds with, or differs from, that used by UNHCR, other UN agencies, and the United States Government, and whether such definition furthers the prospects for lasting peace in the region,” it continues, adding, “The committee directs that such report be posted on the publicly available website of the Department of State.”

Its push to have the State Department release a publicly available posting appears to be an attempt to preempt classification of the document.