US set to announce it rejects Palestinian ‘right of return’ — TV report

August 25, 2018

By [TOI STAFF](https://www.timesofisrael.com/writers/times-of-israel-staff/) and [ERIC CORTELLESSA](https://www.timesofisrael.com/writers/eric-cortellessa/)

The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-set-to-announce-it-rejects-palestinian-right-of-return-tv-report/>

The Trump Administration will announce in the next few days that it rejects the long-standing Palestinian demand for a “right of return” for million of refugees and their descendants to Israel, an Israeli television report said Saturday night. The US will announce a policy that, “from its point of view, essentially cancels the ‘right of return,'” the report said.

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. 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.

According to the Hadashot TV report Saturday, the US in early September will set out its policy on the issue. It will produce a report that says there are actually only some half-a-million Palestinians who should be legitimately considered refugees, and make plain that it rejects the UN designation under which the millions of descendants of the original refugees are also considered refugees. The definition is the basis for the activities of UNRWA, the UN’s Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.

The US — which on Friday announced that it had decided to [cut more than $200 million in aid to the Palestinians](https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-cuts-aid-to-palestinians-by-more-than-200-million/) — and has also cut back its funding for UNRWA — will also ask Israel to “reconsider” the mandate that Israel gives to UNRWA to operate in the West Bank. The goal of such a change, the TV report said, would be to prevent Arab nations from legitimately channeling aid to UNRWA in the West Bank.

Created in 1949 in the wake of the 1948 War of Independence, UNRWA operates schools and provides health care and other social services to Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria.

Hadashot said the new US position represented a further endorsement of Israel’s positions, months after the administration recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and relocated the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.

The TV report said officials at the Trump Administration National Security Agency were refusing to comment on the story, but that the officials said that “the administration will announce its policy on UNRWA at the appropriate time.”

Earlier this month, [Foreign Policy reported](https://www.timesofisrael.com/kushner-said-pushing-to-end-refugee-status-for-millions-of-palestinians/) that Jared Kushner, US President Donald Trump’s senior adviser and son-in-law, has been pushing to remove the refugee status of millions of Palestinians as part of an apparent effort to shutter UNRWA.

Israel’s Prime Minister Benjamin 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 be integrated into the UN High Commission for Refugees,” he said, accusing the body of “perpetuating” the plight of Palestinian refugees.

On Friday, the head of UNRWA suggested that the United States had been slashing his budget to punish the Palestinians for their criticism of the American recognition of Jerusalem as Israel’s capital, and warned that the Palestinian refugee issue would not go away.

“One cannot simply wish 5 million people away,” [Pierre Kraehenbuehl, the UNRWA commissioner, said](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-official-says-palestinian-refugee-issue-cant-be-wished-away/).

On Friday, the State Department announced a cut of more than $200 million in aid to the Palestinians, indicating that those tax-payer funds no longer served American interests.

The Palestinian Authority [condemned the move](https://www.timesofisrael.com/palestinians-accuse-us-of-blackmail-over-aid-cut/) as an attempt to “blackmail” the Palestinians into abandoning their demand for East Jerusalem and the Old City to serve as the capital of their hoped-for independent Palestinian state.

Friday’s move was the declared result of a review of US assistance to the Palestinian Authority that Trump ordered in January, following Palestinian outrage over his decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and move the US embassy there.

“As a result of that review, at the direction of the president, we will direct more than $200 million … in Economic Support Funds originally planned for programs in the West Bank and Gaza,” a State Department official said. “Those funds will now address high-priority projects elsewhere.”

This is not the first time Trump has cut longstanding aid bound to the Palestinians. In January, the White House announced it also would withhold $65 million in assistance to UNRWA.

Earlier this month, the administration released millions of dollars in frozen aid to the PA, but only for Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation, an administration source said.

The funds withheld Friday are directed toward health and educational programs, as well as initiatives to make Palestinian governance more efficient. They are used both in the PA-administered West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip.

The Trump administration said the terror group’s control of Gaza was one of the main reasons it wanted to cease its aid to the coastal enclave.

“This decision takes into account the challenges the international community faces in providing assistance in Gaza, where Hamas control endangers the lives of Gaza’s citizens and degrades an already dire humanitarian and economic situation,” the State Department official said.

The official did not give an exact amount of the funds to be cut, but said it is more than $200 million that was approved in 2017. The US had planned to give the Palestinians $251 million for good governance, health, education, and funding for civil society in the current budget year that ends September 30. But with just over a month to go before that money must be used, reprogrammed to other areas, or returned to the Treasury, less than half has actually been spent.

Washington’s withdrawal of the aid comes as Trump’s team tasked with brokering an Israeli-Palestinian accord is expected to release its long-awaited peace plan.

Kushner and Trump’s special envoy for Middle East peace Jason Greenblatt are expected to roll out the proposal in the near future, though they have provided no timetable for when that might happen.

Friday’s move was immediately castigated by the Palestinians, who said the cuts were “cheap blackmail.”

PLO Executive Committee member Dr. Hanan Ashrawi said the Trump administration “has already demonstrated meanness of spirit in its collusion with the Israeli occupation and its theft of land and resources; now it is exercising economic meanness by punishing the Palestinian victims of this occupation.”

Liberal US Jewish groups also cast the cuts as detrimental to efforts, and said they would exacerbate Palestinian suffering.

The left-wing Middle East advocacy group J Street said Trump’s decision would “have a devastating impact on innocent women, children, and families,” arguing that they were intended to “cruelly punish Palestinian civilians and marginalize and undercut Palestinian leadership.”

On Tuesday, Trump told a campaign rally in Charleston, West Virginia, that Israel will “pay a higher price” and the Palestinians “will get something very good” in any future negotiations in return for the US having recognized Jerusalem as Israel’s capital.

“It was a good thing to have done,” Trump said of his recognition of Jerusalem and the relocation of the US embassy to the capital, “because we took it off the table. Because every time there were peace talks, they never got past Jerusalem becoming the capital. So I said, let’s take it off the table. And you know what? In the negotiation, Israel will have to pay a higher price, because they won a very big thing.”

Later, seeking to allay Israeli concerns, senior US officials told Israel’s Channel 10 that “the US will not impose unacceptable conditions on Israel in its peace plan.”

UNRWA grants refugee status to all descendants of Palestinians who left or fled Israel with the establishment of the state in 1948, swelling the number to an estimated five million at present, when the number of actual refugees from that conflict is estimated to be in the low tens of thousands. In peace talks, the Palestinian leadership has always demanded a “right of return” to Israel for these millions — an influx that, if accepted by Israel, would spell the end of the Israel as a majority Jewish state.

Israel argues that the Palestinian demand is an UNRWA-facilitated effort to destroy Israel by demographic means. The Palestinians also seek an independent state in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, and East Jerusalem. Months of ongoing violent protests fueled by Hamas at the Gaza border with Israel were initiated in March under the banner of a “March of the Return,” and encouraged by Hamas leaders with the declared ultimate goal of erasing the border and destroying Israel.

Israel often argues that an independent Palestinian state, if agreed upon in negotiations, would absorb Palestinian refugees and their descendants, just as Israel absorbed Jewish refugees from Middle Eastern and north African countries over the decades.