US withholds $65 million from UN agency for Palestinians

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-withholds-65-million-from-un-agency-for-palestinians/>

The United States sent $60 million to keep the UN relief agency for Palestinians (UNRWA) in operation but withheld a further $65 million while it urged others to pay more, a State Department official said Tuesday.

“There is a need to undertake a fundamental re-examination of UNRWA, both in the way it operates and the way it is funded,” the official said.

The official told AFP the decision to withhold some funds was meant to encourage more “burden-sharing” by other members.

“The United States has been UNRWA’s single largest donor for decades. In years past, we contributed some 30 percent of UNRWA’s total income,” he said.

“Without the funds we are providing today, UNRWA operations were at risk of running out of funds and closing down.

“The funds provided by the United States will prevent that from happening for the immediate future.”

US President Donald Trump earlier this month threatened to cut US aid to the Palestinians, saying on Twitter that Washington gets “no appreciation or respect” from the Palestinians.

“We pay the Palestinians HUNDRED OF MILLIONS OF DOLLARS a year and get no appreciation or respect,” Trump tweeted on January 3.

“With the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?”

Although Trump referred to all US assistance to the Palestinians, the contribution to the refugee agency would be the first to be affected.

Israel has often criticized UNRWA, accusing it of sheltering terrorists and allowing Palestinians to remain refugees even after settling in a new city or country for many generations, thus complicating a possible resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The State Department announcement was hailed by Israel’s Ambassador to the United Nations Danny Danon on Tuesday.

“UNRWA has proven time and again to be an agency that misuses the humanitarian aid of the international community and instead supports anti-Israel propaganda, perpetuates the plight of Palestinian refugees and encourages hate,” Danon said in a statement.

“Just over the last year alone, UNRWA officials were elected to the leadership of Hamas in the Gaza Strip, UNRWA schools denied the existence of Israel, and terror tunnels were dug under UNRWA facilities. It is time for this absurdity to end and for humanitarian funds to be directed towards their intended purpose – the welfare of refugees,” he added.

Public Security Minister Gilad Erdan also praised Washington’s “bold” new approach.

The agency focuses on providing health care, education and social services to Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza Strip, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

On Monday, the United Nations said the work of the [agency was “critical”](https://www.timesofisrael.com/un-defends-palestinian-refugee-agency-says-its-work-is-critical/) and if the United States or any other donor cuts its contributions “we will have to find other sources.”

Human Rights Watch director Kenneth Roth on Monday called the US move “vindictive” and a “bullying tactic,” as he urged other governments to step in and fill the gap if the United States decides to definitely cut funding.

“It is vindictive for the US government to deprive the UN of money to feed and educate Palestinian children in order to blackmail the Palestinian Authority into rejoining Trump administration-led peace negotiations,” Roth said in a statement.