United States set to stop all funding to UNRWA — report

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<https://www.timesofisrael.com/united-states-set-to-stop-all-funding-to-unrwa-report/>

In a dramatic move vastly expanding previously announced foreign aid cuts, the Trump administration has reportedly decided to end all funding to UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for Palestinian humanitarian assistance.

The decision to cut all aid to the UN’s Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees 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, [Foreign Policy reported Tuesday night](https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/08/28/middle-east-palestinian-israel-pompeo-trump-kushner-u-s-to-end-all-funding-to-u-n-agency-that-aids-palestinian-refugees/).

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

A State Department spokesperson declined to comment on the apparent decision, according to Foreign Policy, but said that “US policy regarding UNRWA has been under frequent evaluation and internal discussion.”

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.

The US had been providing UNRWA with some $350 million a year — more than any other country — but as part of a slew of cuts in foreign aid given to Palestinians, the White House announced in January that it would withhold $65 million in assistance to the relief agency.

Earlier this month, [Foreign Policy reported](https://www.timesofisrael.com/kushner-said-pushing-to-end-refugee-status-for-millions-of-palestinians/) that Kushner 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.

Speaking on Tuesday at the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies, a DC-based think tank closely aligned with Israel, US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley said that funding for the body would only continue if major reforms were implemented.

“You’re looking at the fact that, yes, there’s an endless number of refugees that continue to get assistance,” Haley said, while insisting that the Trump White House would not restore its previous funding levels unless the body made dramatic changes.

“We will be a donor if [UNRWA] reforms what it does … if they actually change the number of refugees to an accurate account, we will look back at partnering them,” she said, adding that “the Palestinians continue to bash America” and yet “they have their hand out wanting UNRWA money.”

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.

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.

“That money at this time is not…[in] the US national interest and also at this time does not provide value to the US taxpayer,” Nauert told reporters during a press briefing.

“The United States government has provided far more money than many other countries in the region have,” she added.

The aid cut, announced 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 there.

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

They say 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.

Former US Agency for International Development official, Dave Harden, who was briefed on the meeting between Kushner and Pompeo, said the decision could benefit the Hamas at the expense of the PA.

“An immediate and capricious cut off of UNRWA funding … risks collapsing the Palestinian Authority, empowering Hamas, and shifting the responsibility of health, education, and ultimately security services to the Israelis,” Harden told Foreign Policy. “The decision is dangerous, with unpredictable consequences.”