Report: Israel to shut UNRWA schools in East Jerusalem

January 20, 2019

The Times of Israel

<https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-israel-to-shut-unrwa-schools-in-east-jerusalem/>

Israeli officials are reportedly set to revoke permits for schools in East Jerusalem run by the UN agency for Palestinian refugees.

The move would come as the latest strike against the UN Relief and Works Agency, which has seen its budget slashed by the US and its activities in East Jerusalem increasingly curtailed by Israel.

Israel’s National Security Council decided to revoke permits allowing UNRWA schools in the city’s Palestinian neighborhood to operate, starting next school year, Israel’s Hadashot TV news reported Saturday.

According to the report, the UNRWA schools will be replaced by schools run by the Jerusalem municipality and under the aegis of the Israeli Education Ministry.

The network said the decision was reached during a National Security Council meeting last month to discuss expelling UNRWA from East Jerusalem following US President Donald Trump’s decision to end American funding for the agency.

According to UNRWA, the group runs seven schools in two refugee camps that sit within Jerusalem’s municipal boundaries, serving over 3,000 students.

Israel claims East Jerusalem as part of its undivided capital, in a move largely unrecognized internationally, and has sought in recent months to push the UN Palestinian refugee agency out of the city.

Israel alleged the UN agency perpetuates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by making it harder for Palestinian refugees and their descendants to settle abroad. It also rejects UNRWA criteria, under which refugee status is extended not only to the tens of thousands of Palestinians still alive who used to live in today’s Israel but also to over five million of their generations of descendants. Officials have called for the body to be shuttered and the refugees absorbed into other existing UN programs.

Prior to the end of his tenure last month, Jerusalem mayor Nir Bakat detailed a proposal to expel UNRWA from the capital and have the municipality provide education, health, welfare, and sanitation services in its place.

Barkat accused UNRWA of failing those under its purview and instead inciting terror activity. He also gave details of a plan prepared by a team of city officials and experts to replace all of UNRWA’s functions with municipal services in the Shuafat refugee camp, founded in 1965 and home to some 20,000 residents.

The plan comes after the Trump administration announced it was cutting nearly $300 million in planned funding for UNRWA, and said that it would no longer back the agency after decades of support. Washington has also cut other aid to the Palestinians in a bid to pressure the Palestinian Authority into negotiations with Israel.

“The US decision to stop funding UNRWA creates a rare opportunity to deal immediately and decisively with the PA’s intention to perpetuate the ‘refugee problem’ and encourage incitement,” Barkat said in a statement in October.

“There are no refugees in Jerusalem, only residents. They will receive their services from the Jerusalem Municipality alone, like all other residents,” he added.

Barkat proposed to expropriate or lease the existing UNRWA schools to use as municipal buildings, and in addition will construct an educational and municipal services complex near the East Jerusalem neighborhood “whose services will be far superior to those that UNRWA has provided.”

At the time, UNRWA pushed back against Barkat’s statement, and said it was operating in East Jerusalem “with the cooperation and on the basis of a formal agreement with the State of Israel, which remains in force.”

There was no immediate comment from UNRWA on the report.

East Jerusalem Palestinians hold Israeli residency cards but are not Israeli citizens, and have complained for decades of discrimination by the city in providing municipal services. Israel recently put forward a NIS 5 billion plan to invest in Arab parts of East Jerusalem, though much of the education funding is conditioned on adopting the Education Ministry’s approved curriculum.

There was no immediate confirmation of the report from the Prime Minister’s Office.