U.S. Government Hiding Report on Number of Palestinian Refugees

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The U.S. government continues to inappropriately keep classified a report on Palestinian refugees that congressional officials view as a potential game changer in how America approaches its regional policies and allocates billions in taxpayer funds, according to multiple sources with knowledge of the report.

Congressional officials familiar with the classified report, the existence of which was [first disclosed](http://freebeacon.com/national-security/state-department-hiding-game-changer-report-myth-palestinian-refugees/) by the Washington Free Beacon, say the State Department continues to keep it secret in order to not disrupt billions of dollars in allocations to United Nations Relief Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA), the organization responsible for providing aid to what they claim is some 5.2 million Palestinian refugees.

Those familiar with the report say the U.S. quietly determined under the Obama administration that the actual number of Palestinian refugees is far smaller, closer to around 30,000. This disclosure could fundamentally change the way billions of U.S. taxpayer dollars are allocated to UNRWA and the Palestinian government and impact America's longstanding policies regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Lawmakers are pressuring the Trump administration to finally release the report to the public. The Free Beacon first disclosed this effort earlier this month, [publishing a letter](http://freebeacon.com/national-security/congress-demands-state-department-release-game-changer-report-myth-palestinian-refugees/) signed by more than 50 members of Congress who are calling on President Donald Trump to finally release the report, as is mandated by current U.S. laws.

Those familiar with the classified report's contents told the Free Beacon the State Department is intentionally trying to keep the document secret, not for national security reasons, but because of the political implications of its release.

Rep. Chris Stewart (R., Utah) told the Free Beacon in a recent interview that the report's release could change how America provides aid dollars to the Palestinians and UNRWA.

"On its face, when you understand this issue, you think why in the world is this classified?" Steward said. "This isn't the codes to launch nuclear missiles."

The report's findings, which are believed to provide evidence that the number of actual Palestinian refugees is closer to around 30,000 individuals, could spur real progress in the peace process by redefining the parameters of the debate on Palestinian refugees' right of return to the Jewish state.

"If we can solve the right to return, if we can define refugees in such a way that it becomes possible, that's an enormous step forward in the peace process," Stewart said. "As long as you have a right to return for millions of people, there's no way in the world the Israeli government would agree to or could agree to, if you could redefine refugees as a number that is manageable and fair and represents the reality, that becomes, instead of a stumbling block, it becomes a building block on trying to reinvigorate the peace process."

Asked about the document's classified status, Stewart responded, "there's no reason in the world it's classified. The reason it's classified is because it's a political document that the administration just didn't" want to release publicly.

"Is it a meaningful document?" Stewart added "Absolutely. Is it information that should be shared in the world community? Absolutely. If this information was shared and we were to take a practical look at this, would it help in negotiating a peace proposal? I believe it absolutely would."

A State Department official declined to comment on the report's classification and whether it will comply with U.S. laws mandating its public release.

"As part of normal congressional interactions, we routinely respond to requests for information," an administration official told the Free Beacon. "We do not comment on any specific reports; however, the Department takes Congressional reporting requirements very seriously."

Other senior congressional sources familiar with the situation said UNRWA and its supporters are frightened to see the report released, as this could affirm longstanding arguments against the aid organization's existence.

UNRWA is a deeply problematic organization that, among other things, goes out of its way to screw with Israel," said one senior congressional official with knowledge of the situation. "If they needed to exist maybe there'd be an excuse. But Congress has very good reason to believe that the number of refugees is way overblown. The State Department wants to hide the real number from becoming public, despite the national interests and taxpayer money at stake."

E.J Kimball, director of the Israel Victory Project for the Middle East Forum, an organization that advises members of Congress on such matters, said Congress is taking important steps to compel the Trump administration to finally release the refugee report.

"It was great to see Congress speak loud and clear to the State Department to declassify this report," Kimball said. "Now, it's time for Congress to bring US policy toward UNRWA in alignment with the US definition of a refugee, consistent with the Immigration and Nationality Act. We look forward to working with our partners in the Administration and Congress to make this a reality."