

Trump Creates, Then Exacerbates, Crisis for Palestinian Refugees

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Global Research, February 19, 2018

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Law and Justice](#), [Police State & Civil Rights](#)

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One of the most consequential actions Donald Trump took during the first year of his presidency was to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in December 2017. When the Palestinians predictably responded by pulling out of the US-led "[peace process](#)," Trump retaliated by cutting US financial support to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) by more than 50 percent.

"A Death Sentence" for Gazan Refugees

The US cutback in aid to UNRWA [critically threatens](#) the access of Palestinian refugees to food, health care and education.

In Gaza, 1.3 million Palestinian refugees, who comprise 70 percent of Gaza's population, depend on UNRWA for food assistance. The refugee crisis was [aggravated](#) by Israel's [2014 massacre](#) in Gaza.

Established by the UN General Assembly in 1949, UNRWA was mandated to provide assistance and protection to roughly 5 million registered Palestinian refugees forced off their land by the 1948 creation of Israel. Palestinians call this event the "Nakba," which is Arabic for catastrophe. This year marks its 70th anniversary.

The United States, UNRWA's largest donor, contributes \$125 million annually. But Trump is withholding \$65 million from the next scheduled US payment unless the Palestinians participate in peace talks with Israel. On January 2, Trump tweeted, "with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?"

But the consequences of withholding these payments are deadly.

"Any reduction of aid would be a death sentence for refugees in Gaza," Ahmed al-Assar, who lives in the Nuseirat refugee camp in Gaza, [told](#) The Washington Post.

Husam Zomlot, leader of the Palestinian delegation to the United States, [said](#) that

"taking away food and education from vulnerable refugees does not bring a lasting and comprehensive peace.... The access of Palestinian refugees and children to basic humanitarian services such as food, health care and

education should not be a bargaining chip, but a US and international obligation.”

Last week, the European Parliament responded to the impending humanitarian crisis occasioned by Trump’s cutback by urging the European Union and its member countries to increase their funding of UNRWA. In its February 8 resolution, the European Parliament warned of “damaging impacts on access to emergency food assistance for 1.7 million Palestine refugees and primary healthcare for 3 million, on access to education for more than 500,000 Palestinian children in 702 UNRWA schools, including almost 50,000 children in Syria, and on stability in the region.”

Trump’s “Blackmail” of Palestinians

Trump appears unfazed by the disaster his actions have created. At the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, in January, Trump said he would suspend aid to the Palestinians “unless they sit down and negotiate peace.” Hanan Ashrawi, a member of the Palestinian Liberation Organization’s executive committee, called Trump’s decision “blackmail.”

On February 4, “Western diplomatic sources” unveiled the leaked United States’ “peace plan” for Israel/Palestine, dubbed the “[deal of the century](#).” The moniker refers to Trump’s [promise](#) that his son-in-law Jared Kushner and Middle East envoy Jason Greenblatt would work out “the deal of the century” between Israel and the Palestinians.

The plan — which reflects the wishes of Israel, with no Palestinian approval or even input — would allow Israel to annex 10 percent of the West Bank area. It would also allocate portions of Ashdod and Haifa for Palestinian use, but Israel would continue to oversee security there. It would grant Palestinians safe passage between the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli sovereignty, and would give “Israel the upper hand in the demilitarized Palestinian state, which will have its own police force,” [according to Al-Monitor](#).

Mazen Abu Zeid, head of the Palestinian Liberation Organization Refugee Affairs Department, [told](#) Al-Monitor,

“The deal of the century is a liquidation of the Palestinian cause. Since he took office, Trump’s decisions on the Palestinian cause — recognizing Jerusalem to be the capital [of Israel] and cutting aid, which was the largest package to UNRWA ... are designed to liquidate the Palestinian cause.”

Hamas spokesperson Hazem Qassem [concurs](#).

“Refraining from recognizing the Palestinian people’s legitimate rights to their land and sacred sites, denying them the right to return and expropriating their sovereignty over the land in exchange for a regional peace and normalization with the Arab world is the right way to liquidate the Palestinian cause,” Qassem stated.

Trump Has No Legal Right to Change the Status of Jerusalem

Moreover, Trump's attempt to make Jerusalem the capital of Israel is not legally permissible.

Abu Zeid called the United States "a biased mediator in the peace process" that "has broken all international laws and UN General Assembly resolutions and taken unilateral decisions, such as the deal of the century, which it seeks to levy on us."

Zeid was likely referring to the December 23, 2016, UN Security Council Resolution 2334, which states

"that it will not recognize any changes to the 4 June 1967 lines, including with regard to Jerusalem, other than those agreed by the parties through negotiations."

What are the 4 June 1967 lines? From June 5-10, 1967, Israel (with US assistance) invaded Egypt, Jordan and Syria and seized the Palestinian territories in the West Bank, Jerusalem, the Golan Heights and the Sinai Peninsula.

Later in 1967, the Security Council passed Resolution 242, which enshrined "the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war" and called for "withdrawal of Israel armed forces from territories occupied in the recent conflict." Today, however, Israel continues to occupy the Palestinian territories it acquired in 1967.

The Obama administration abstained from Resolution 2334, allowing it to pass. Since the United States is one of the permanent members of the Security Council, it could have vetoed the resolution. Trump, who had not yet been inaugurated, tried unsuccessfully to stop it from passing.

After Trump declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel, the United States vetoed a Security Council resolution that would have condemned his decision. The General Assembly then overwhelmingly expressed "deep regret" over Trump's determination, and declared that the status of Jerusalem "is a final status issue to be resolved through negotiations in line with relevant UN resolutions." Nikki Haley, US ambassador to the UN, warned that the United States would be "taking names" of those countries that supported the General Assembly resolution, implying that the US would cut off their foreign aid. More blackmail.

The Right of Return for Palestinian Refugees

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu said in a January 7 cabinet meeting, "UNRWA is an organization that perpetuates the problem of the Palestinian refugees," declaring that it "must disappear" because the cause of the Palestinians' right to return to Israel is aimed at the elimination of the State of Israel.

Palestinian refugees have a legal right to return to their lands. In 1948, the General Assembly passed Resolution 194, which established the right of return for Palestinian refugees. It stated,

"refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbours should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or in equity, should be made good by the Governments or

authorities responsible.”

The right of refugees to return to their home country is also protected by the 1951 Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees, and the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights.

By removing the issue of Jerusalem’s status from the peace talks, then trying to remove the issue of Palestinian refugees as well,

“Trump was heeding Netanyahu,” Zomlot said.

Once again, [Trump is walking in lockstep with Netanyahu](#).

Trump’s “Glaring Bias” Toward Israel

Trump’s decision on Jerusalem is evidence of his administration’s “glaring bias” toward Israel, according to Riyad H. Mansour, the Palestinian ambassador to the United States. The US has “undermined its role in any future peace process,” Mansour told The New York Times.

On February 12, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas [met](#) with Russian President Vladimir Putin to secure Russia’s support in the peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians because, Abbas said, the United States “can no longer play a leading role.”

But, as Professor Richard Falk, former UN special rapporteur on human rights in the occupied Palestinian territories, [stated](#), until the United States lifts the unconditional mandate it gives Israel to repress the Palestinians,

“there will be no peace. It’s our struggle here to end this destructive policy.”

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