

US Shuttters Palestine Liberation Organisation's Diplomatic Mission in Washington

Palestinian officials continue to deny any role for the US in peace talks with Israel after Trump unilaterally declared Jerusalem to be Israel's capital last year

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Featured image: Outside view of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's office in Washington, US on 10 September 2018 [Yasin Öztürk/Anadolu Agency]

The US on Monday announced the closure of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's (PLO) Washington diplomatic mission as the Donald Trump administration prepares to roll out its Middle East peace plan, Anadolu reports.

The State Department announced the decision, saying "the PLO office in Washington will close at this point." The office had served as Palestine's de facto embassy in Washington.

The department said "the PLO has not taken steps to advance the start of direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel," and pointed to Palestinian calls for the International Criminal Court (ICC) to investigate Israel as reasons for its decision.

"We have permitted the PLO office to conduct operations that support the objective of achieving a lasting, comprehensive peace between Israelis and the Palestinians since the expiration of a previous waiver in November 2017," State Department spokeswoman Heather Nauert said in a statement.

"However, the PLO has not taken steps to advance the start of direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel. To the contrary, PLO leadership has condemned a US peace plan they have not yet seen and refused to engage with the US government with respect to peace efforts and otherwise," she added.

Image on the right: Outside view of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's office in Washington, US on 10 September 2018 [Yasin Öztürk/Anadolu Agency]



Another State Department spokeswoman later said the mission was ordered to vacate its office no later than Oct. 10.

Mark Perry, a former unofficial advisor to late PLO Chairman Yasser Arafat, ripped Washington's announcement, saying

"the US has always been Israel's lawyer."

"Ironically, the announcement is actually good news — as it ends the pretence that the US actually cares about peace in the Middle East," Perry told Anadolu Agency.

"The US is now perfectly aligned with the Israeli national project. Israel does not now, and never has, believed in the peace process or sought reconciliation with the Palestinians," he said. "Rather, its goal is the destruction of the Palestinian national project. What changed today is that the US has now joined that effort."

National Security Advisor John Bolton later Monday said Washington would act if the ICC decides to prosecute Israel, the US or any of its other allies.

Those actions include potential sanctions of ICC funds residing in the US, as well as a ban on ICC prosecutors and judges from entering the US

"We will take note if any countries cooperate with ICC investigations of the United States and its allies, and we will remember that cooperation when setting US foreign assistance, military assistance, and intelligence sharing levels," Bolton said.

We will let the ICC die on its own, after all, for all intents and purposes the ICC is already dead to us he added.

The comments come as the Trump administration prepares to roll out its plan to achieve peace between Palestine and Israel, a deal that Trump has framed as the "deal of the century."

Palestinian officials continue to deny any role for the US in peace talks with Israel after Trump unilaterally declared Jerusalem to be Israel's capital last year, upending long-held

underpinnings of peace talks which had maintained the issue was to be determined as part of final status negotiations.

The decision provoked worldwide condemnation.

Husam Zomlot, the PLO's US ambassador, strongly condemned the decision to shutter the organisation's offices as a "reckless act" that ultimately confirms that the US "is blindly executing Israel's 'wish list,' which starts with shutting down Palestinian diplomatic representation in the US."

Image below: Outside view of the Palestine Liberation Organisation's office in Washington, US on 10 September 2018 [Yasin Öztürk/Anadolu Agency]



Zomlot insisted the US action would not deter Palestine in its mission "to hold Israel accountable by referring it to the International Criminal Court," or force Ramallah to return to US-brokered negotiations.

"We stand firm in our decision not to cooperate in this ongoing campaign to liquidate our rights and cause. Our rights are not for sale, and we will block any attempts at bullying and blackmailing us to forgo our legitimate and internationally endorsed rights," he said in a statement.

"While today is a dark day for peace in the Middle East, for multilateralism, and the integrity of the international political and legal system, we will continue our struggle to pursue all possible legal and political means to achieve peace, independence, and our internationally enshrined rights," he added.

Before the formal announcement of the mission's closure, Palestinian officials described the move as "an escalation that will have serious political consequences by sabotaging the entire international system to protect the Israeli occupation and its crimes."

"This is another blow by the Trump administration against peace and justice," said PLO Secretary-General Saeb Erekat.

The decision to close the Palestinian mission is the latest effort to ramp up pressure on Ramallah. The US has already halted all funding to the UN's Palestine refugee agency and cut more than \$200 million in aid to the Palestinians.

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