

What Would Happen if Trump Were to Cut Funding to the U.N. Palestinian Refugee Programme?

A total US funding cut would mean a serious reduction in services and the complete halt of many of the education and health programmes for Palestinian refugees

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On Tuesday, Nikki Haley, the US ambassador to the UN, delivered a rather ambiguous threat in response to a question on the maintenance of the US level of funding to the UN Palestinian refugee programme.

She [replied](#): “The president has said that he doesn’t want to give any additional funding or stop funding until the Palestinians are agreeing (sic) to come back to the negotiating table.”

President Trump himself [tweeted](#) the following threat to UNRWA:

“But with the Palestinians no longer willing to talk peace, why should we make any of these massive future payments to them?”

Funding withdrawal

Ambiguous threats and foreign policy statements are not a new phenomenon for the Trump administration, and whilst UNRWA spokesman Chris Gunness [maintains](#) they have not been informed of any change in US policy, the consequences of potential funding withdrawal from the agency must also be considered in all seriousness.

UNRWA was established in 1950 in order to provide relief services for the 700,000 Palestinian refugees who had been expelled from Palestine following the establishment of Israel. It operates in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria and provides Palestinians with primary and secondary education, health services as well as various camp infrastructure projects.

Although millions of Palestinians rely on its services, UNRWA is also sometimes criticised for perpetuating the conflict and footing the bill that Israel should be paying.

The US is UNRWA’s biggest donor with last year’s donation totaling [\\$368m](#), nearly 30 percent of its total funding. In the past, when UNRWA has had a funding shortfall they have suspended programmes or certain aspects of them.

In 2015 it came close to delaying the start of the school year for nearly half a million

Palestinian children. Luckily, it managed to overcome the \$100m deficit after an [urgent appeal](#) by former UN secretary general Ban Ki Moon.

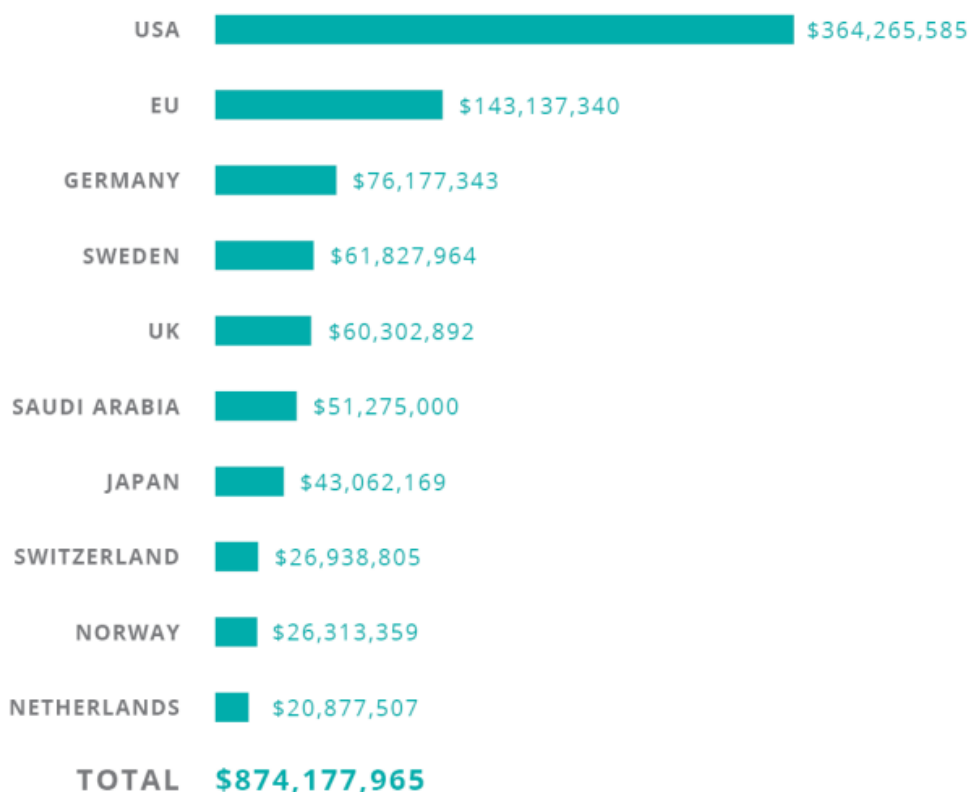
However, a total US funding cut would mean a serious reduction in services and the complete halt of many of the education and health programmes.

In other words, schools and health clinics would close leaving hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees across the region without schooling, health care, jobs, making their situation even more dire.

Indeed, if it is left to function at two thirds of its capacity, the viability of the agency as a whole would be called into question.

UNRWA funding in 2017

The top 10 donors contributed to over 80% of UNRWA's income in 2017



Source: UNRWA



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On the other hand, if the Palestinian Authority is forced to return to US mediated negotiations in exchange for the continuation of funding, UNRWA's basic services would be left tainted with the political demands of an administration that is determined to defy international consensus.

This is particularly problematic in light of Trump's recent recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, defying international law.

Aid and politics

This too, however, is not new, with aid and development in Palestine long being held captive

to politics. In a [recent piece](#) for MEE, Alaa Tartir explained:

“Aid flows over the decades resulted in entrenchment of aid dependency...which stripped the Palestinian people of power to resist colonialism, apartheid and oppression”.

The political strings attached to aid, and Palestinian dependency on it, are among the main reasons that have kept Palestinians from developing a sustainable resistance to the Israeli settler colonial regime. Indeed, UNRWA, and other international agencies, are paying the bill for Israel’s military occupation and thus are huge factors in maintaining the status quo.

Should UNRWA cease its operations, the gap will have to be filled by someone else. This is an important detail which seems to have escaped President Trump.

It’s not yet clear whether the Trump administration’s threats are directed towards UNRWA or the PA and it is very likely that the administration itself is also unsure of the recipient of these threats.

What is clear, however, is that if the threats were directed at the former, the Palestinian refugees will once again be the ones who suffer for the political decisions of a leadership that refuses to fight for their fundamental right to return home.

If it was directed at the latter, the PA is left with very few cards to play especially with its legitimacy among the Palestinian people dwindling.

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