

U.S. lawmakers block assistance to Palestinians

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U.S. Republican Senator James Risch (right) of Idaho and GOP Representative Michael McCaul of Texas (left) are blocking President Joe Biden from delivering aid to Palestinians

Washington, April 10 (RHC)-- Senator James Risch of Idaho and Representative Michael McCaul of Texas, the ranking members of Senate and House Committees on Foreign Affairs, issued an "info hold" on \$75 million in economic and development assistance for the Palestinian people, a congressional

source told The Hill on Friday.

The administration of former Republican President Donald Trump cancelled all the U.S. funding for Palestinians in 2018 under its extremely pro-Israeli policies. Earlier this week, however, the Biden administration announced a total of \$235 million assistance to the Palestinians. The blocked funding is part of this package.

The move by Risch and McCaul was denounced by the left-leaning, progressive group J Street, which called it “punitive and performatively anti-Palestinian.”

“Congressional Republicans are doubling down on the cruel policies of the Trump administration by putting a hold on the resumption of critical aid to the Palestinian people. The Biden administration should disburse this aid as instructed by law — as past administrations have done after due consultation with lawmakers and when faced with similar bad-faith abuse of that process,” J Street’s President Jeremy Ben-Ami said in a statement.

Risch and McCaul issued on Wednesday slammed the Biden administration for restarting funds that were cut off under the Trump administration. “Resuming assistance to the West Bank and Gaza without concessions from the Palestinian Authority (PA) undermines US interests,” the hawkish lawmakers said in a statement.

The Taylor Force Act in 2018 ended U.S. assistance to the Palestinian Authority until it eliminates the Palestinian Martyrs Fund. The Taylor Force Act was signed into law in March 2018 by Trump, whose administration after that ended all assistance benefiting Palestinians and assistance to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), the primary organization for Palestinian refugees.

Trump’s 2020 Democratic rival Biden promised to restart assistance to the Palestinians, including to UNRWA.

On Wednesday, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken announced that Washington would provide \$150 million for UNRWA, \$75 million in economic assistance and \$10 million in people-to-people projects. State Department spokesperson Ned Price said: “All of this aid is absolutely consistent with relevant U.S. law.”

Several more Republicans, including Sen. Ted Cruz (R-Texas), also opposed the resumption of assistance, saying U.S. funds should not be used in the occupied West Bank and Gaza Strip, which are governed by the Palestinian Authority and Hamas.

UNRWA has welcomed the Biden administration's resumption of aid to Palestinian refugees, but said the contribution is too little to cover all their needs.

UNRWA currently supports an estimated 5.7 million Palestinians with refugee status across the Gaza Strip, the occupied West Bank, Jordan, Syria, and Lebanon, providing them with healthcare, education, and social services. Most are descendants of the roughly 700,000 Palestinians who were driven out of their homes or fled the 1948 war, which led to the creation of Israel.

Before Trump's cuts, the U.S. had been providing UNRWA \$365 million a year, roughly a third of its core annual budget.

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