

Palestinian factions in Gaza call to end latest UNRWA-US deal

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Under the framework signed in July, the United States paid UNRWA \$135 million in additional funds [Reuters]

Gaza City, October 6 (RHC)-- Palestinians in the besieged Gaza Strip called for the scrapping of an agreement between the US and the United Nation's agency for Palestinian refugees, saying the deal violates many of their rights.

Dozens of people protested in front of the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees' (UNRWA) headquarters on Tuesday, calling for an end to The Framework for Cooperation — a two-year working plan signed between the US State Department and UNRWA.

Protesters also held banners reading: “We totally reject the agreement between the US and UNRWA,” and “The right of return is consistent; we won’t give up.” The Framework for Cooperation is an agreement signed between the U.S. and UNRWA for 2021-2022 that calls for the resumption of funds to the refugee agency, after it was halted by former US president Donald Trump’s administration.

Under the framework, which was signed in July, the United States paid UNRWA \$135m in additional funds. “No contributions by the US shall be made to UNRWA, except on the condition that UNRWA takes all possible measures to assure that no part of the US contribution shall be used to furnish assistance to any refugee who is receiving military training as a member of the so-called Palestinian Liberation Army or any other guerrilla-type organization or has engaged in act of terrorism,” it said.

The framework also includes “monitoring Palestinian [school] curriculum content.” The deal sparked a wave of anger and drew criticism from Palestinians who perceive it as a “threat” to Palestinian refugee rights and a “serious change” in UNRWA’s vision.

Senior Islamic Jihad member Ahmed al-Mudallal told Al Jazeera: “This agreement is totally rejected by all Palestinian bodies as it does not go in line with the UN agency common work towards Palestinian refugees. “By this agreement, UNRWA will act as a security agent for the US state through chasing employees and refugees who benefit from its services.”

Salah Abdulatti, a Gaza-based lawyer, said the agreement violated United Nations covenants, the Refugee Convention, as well as the agency’s authority. “The UN agency has no right to sign a contract at the expense of refugees’ interests and impose restrictions on their freedom of expression under the pretext of neutrality,” said Abdulatti.

The framework was signed without consulting the Palestinian Authority or any other Palestinian body, he added. Abdulatti referred to the funding to UNRWA as “conditional” and added the move was a form of “flagrant blackmailing.” “The agreement will transform the agency from a service agency to an intelligence agency whose goal is to provide security information,” Abdulatti said.

Baker Abu Safia, a member of the leftist Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP), said the United States used to donate one-third of the UNRWA budget, and then the amount was reduced to \$365 million annually, following Trump’s move to slash funding.

“Now, years later, the U.S. will donate \$135 million for an agreement that sets a dangerous precedent in exchange for UNRWA’s pressure on its staff,” he said. Abu Safia said U.S. interference in the Palestinian school curriculum under the pretext of “incitement to violence” is totally unacceptable. “The agency’s mission is to keep the refugees’ cause alive and uphold their rights, not to eliminate them,” he said.

Meanwhile, Mahmoud Khalaf, coordinator for the Joint Refugee Committee, said the framework stipulates “preventing freedom of expression for its employees on social media platforms, as well as interfering in the Palestinian curriculum.” “Unlike the agreement with the UN agency, the [school] curriculum should be according to the host country and this is applied over a period of 73 years,” he told Al Jazeera.

According to Khalaf, the agreement also requires UNRWA to provide the US State Department with periodic reports on its work, as well as to respond to all its inquiries. “Several terms included in the agreement were imposed upon the US vision, such as combating terrorism, anti-Semitism, and women’s rights et cetera,” he said.

Khalaf vowed demonstrations against the deal will continue until it is scrapped. “We call on the Palestinian Authority and the UNRWA host countries to move to cancel this agreement, and not to accept any conditional funding at the expense of Palestinian refugees’ rights,” said Khalaf. “Our protests will continue until this unjust agreement is revoked.”

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