

Proposed ban on U.S. funding for UNRWA raises alarm

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Washington, February 8 (RHC)-- A U.S. security bill that would curtail funding to the United Nations agency for Palestinian refugees is raising alarm, as rights advocates say a years-long effort to dismantle the agency is gaining steam amid Israel's war on Gaza.

The proposed \$118 billion legislation, a draft of which (PDF) was blocked in the U.S. Senate on Wednesday, includes a provision prohibiting Washington from allocating any funds to the United Nations

Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA).

Seth Binder, advocacy director at the Middle East Democracy Center, said this would apply to humanitarian assistance included in the bill as well as any previously approved funds for UNRWA that have not yet been allocated, a sum totalling about \$300,000. “It’s unclear ... where and how this specific provision may become law, if it ever is able to,” Binder told Al Jazeera. “But it is concerning nonetheless just given recent developments.”

UNRWA came under renewed scrutiny last month after the Israeli government accused around a dozen of the agency’s more than 13,000 Gaza employees of taking part in Hamas’s attack on southern Israel on October 7th.

UNRWA immediately sacked the employees in question and announced that it was opening a probe into the allegations, which it described as “shocking” and “serious.” UN Secretary-General Antonio Guterres also has appointed an independent panel to investigate.

Israel has yet to provide evidence to back up its allegations, but the US and several other countries quickly suspended funding to the agency as a result. UNRWA relies on government contributions to fund its operations in the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, Syria and Lebanon.

Against that backdrop, the Senate bill — which had the support of President Joe Biden — reflected growing bipartisan acceptance of what previously were Republican-driven attempts to curtail UNRWA, said Ethan Mayer-Rich at the Arab Center Washington, DC.

“We’re seeing a pretty quick departure from what used to be a split down party lines,” he told Al Jazeera. “It’s reckless, and ultimately I think history is going to see [the US] as being completely complicit in what is unquestionably an incredibly tragic and dire situation.”

Mayer-Rich, the centre’s liaison for U.S. government affairs, added that “the conversation in part is guided by the Biden administration”. “We’ve seen, at this point, an endorsement by the highest level of office that it’s OK for Democrats to call into question UNRWA’s mandate, to call into question the necessity of its mission, which has long been a Republican-guided effort,” he said.

“This is a message that will have a durable impact on the way that Democrats are talking about UNRWA and the necessary services it provides.”

Indeed, current attempts in Washington to defund UNRWA come at a critical time. The agency is leading humanitarian aid efforts in Gaza, where Israel’s military bombardment has killed more than 27,708 Palestinians and caused wide-scale destruction since October 7.

Palestinians in the besieged enclave also face dire food, water and medical shortages. The local healthcare system is near total collapse, and more than 1.7 million people have been internally displaced. Many families have sought shelter at UNRWA-run facilities.

Since the Biden administration announced its UNRWA funding freeze in late January, top UN officials — as well as human rights advocates and humanitarian aid groups — have issued multiple pleas asking Washington to reconsider. The U.S. previously provided \$422 million to the agency in 2023, making it UNRWA’s largest contributor. Those funds accounted for nearly 30 percent of UNRWA’s contributions last year, explained Bill Deere, director of the agency’s Washington representative office.

“If this proposal were to become law, that’s a huge hole that would have to be filled,” Deere told Al Jazeera in an email, referring to the Senate bill.

The legislation, which included more than \$14 billion in additional U.S. security assistance to Israel, had the backing of the White House, but it is unlikely to reach Biden’s desk to be signed into law, particularly

after Wednesday's setback in the Senate.

Top Republicans have also said it will be “dead on arrival” if it reaches the House of Representatives, amid calls for stricter immigration measures. Still, Deere — who described the atmosphere in Washington as a “challenging policy environment” — said the bill “demonstrates that we need to keep discussing with lawmakers the fact that UNRWA and the UN have acted swiftly and decisively in the wake of the recent news”.

He also warned that the agency “will have a very hard time operating beyond March 1st if donor states do not resume their support” and stressed that UNRWA operates beyond Gaza alone. “Hundreds of thousands of Palestine refugees in the West Bank, Lebanon, Syria and Jordan will lose access to primary healthcare, direct food support, rental assistance, and education,” Deere said. “Human decency aside, such an occurrence also poses a regional stability issue.”

But despite those warnings, Republicans have seized on the accusations against UNRWA to reinvigorate a years-long effort to close down the agency. “This is something that they’ve long been trying to do, and they’ve really seized the moment,” said Mayer-Rich.

At least seven pieces of legislation aimed at defunding or disbanding UNRWA have been introduced by the Republicans in Congress since Israel's allegations were made public, according to a tally by the Arab Center Washington DC.

Republican legislators held a subcommittee hearing last week titled, “UNRWA Exposed: Examining the Agency's Mission and Failures.” And a group of nearly two dozen Republican senators had called for legislation to include “an immediate and permanent prohibition” on US assistance to UNRWA. “The United States must permanently stop all contributions to UNRWA,” they said (PDF) on January 31.

The push comes less than six years after former Republican President Donald Trump ended US assistance to the agency in 2018, saying that Washington was shouldering a “very disproportionate share of the burden of UNRWA's costs”.

That move — widely seen as part of the Trump administration's hardline, pro-Israel stance — crippled UNRWA's operations. Biden restored funding in 2021.

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