US said to mull shuttering PLO office in Washington

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The US is reportedly considering shutting down the offices of the Palestine Liberation Organization in Washington, the de facto embassy of the Palestinian Authority in the US, if Ramallah continues to refuse to take part in peace talks.

Israel’s Hadashot TV news reported Thursday that the step is being considered as part of the Trump administration’s steady ratcheting up of pressure on the Palestinian leadership amid growing tensions between the PA and Washington.

The report, by the network’s senior diplomatic correspondent Dana Weiss, did not cite a source and could not be immediately confirmed.

If the US is considering such a step, it wouldn’t be the first time.

In mid-November, the US State Department informed PA Foreign Minister Riyad al-Malki that the PLO office in DC would be closed because the Palestinians had violated a 2015 US Congressional mandate.

At the time, a US State Department official cited “certain statements made by Palestinian leaders” about the International Criminal Court as the violation.

In December 2015, Congress introduced a new provision into the annual State and Foreign Operations Bill mandating that the PLO mission in Washington be shut if the Palestinians initiate or support an International Criminal Court investigation against Israelis.

In a 2017 address to the United Nations General Assembly, PA President Mahmoud Abbas seemed to violate that clause, saying, “We have also called on the International Criminal Court, as is our right, to open an investigation and to prosecute Israeli officials” over Israeli settlement activity, he said.

In 1987, Congress outlawed any PLO presence on US soil due to the group’s terror activities at the time. In 1993, due to the Oslo peace process, Congress allowed for the PLO to open a mission in DC, as long as it stayed faithful to its commitments in the peace talks.

In 1997, Congress made it easier for the president to waive sanctions against the PLO: The president would only have to say the waiver was in the US’s national security interest without providing additional explanation. Still, a waiver would have to be signed every six months.

That was the case until 2011, when the Palestinians joined UNESCO and declared they wanted full membership status in the UN.

In response, Congress introduced a new provision into the annual State and Foreign Operations Bill, mandating that if the Palestinians obtained full membership status in the United Nations outside of an agreement with Israel, the president would be unable to waive sanctions against the PLO, unless “the Palestinians have entered into direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel.”

The “national security interest” excuse would no longer suffice.

After the Palestinians joined the ICC in 2015, Congress passed a similar provision into the December 2015 foreign operations bill.

The provision calls for the waiver to be revoked should the Palestinians “initiate an International Criminal Court (ICC) judicially authorized investigation, or actively support such an investigation” against Israel.