US abstention on anti-Israel UNRWA vote marks ‘dangerous backslide’ in policy at UN

November 15, 2021

By Sean Savage

JNS.org

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The United States voted last week to [abstain](https://www.jns.org/1500-plus-rabbis-rebuke-us-for-abstention-vote-on-un-resolution-targeting-israel/) on a resolution concerning the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA), the U.N.’s agency that handles Palestinian refugees—part of several resolutions put forth in the U.N. General Assembly concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that largely targeted Israel for its treatment of Palestinians.

The text, called “Assistance to Palestinian Refugees,” demands “compensation” for descendants of Palestinian refugees who lost property when they fled their homes, as well as an unlimited “right of return” for Palestinian refugees to a sovereign Israel.

Israel was the sole country that opposed the text, which passed the General Assembly on Nov. 9 with a vote of 160-1, including nine abstentions from the United States, Canada, Cameroon, the Marshall Islands, Micronesia, Nauru, Palau, Papa New Guinea and Uruguay.

Nevertheless, the decision by the Biden administration to switch to abstention on the UNRWA vote marked a shift from the Trump administration, which had uniformly voted against such anti-Israel votes at the United Nations.

“This is basically a regression going back to the Obama administration’s policies,” Asaf Romirowsky, executive director for Scholars for Peace in the Middle East and UNRWA expert, told JNS. “UNRWA hasn’t changed any of their policies or behaviors; in fact, since the Gaza conflict in May, their terrorist activity and incitement to violence has increased.”

Romirowsky said he believes this is part of the Biden administration’s goal to undo many of the previous policies of the Trump administration without any thought to the ramifications of such moves.

“I believe this in tandem tied to push to reopen the consulate to the Palestinians in Jerusalem, appease the Palestinian Authority and reverse [former President Donald] Trump’s policies,” he said.

Former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley [slammed](https://twitter.com/NikkiHaley/status/1458462783171964932) the Biden administration’s decision to abstain.

“[U.S. President] Joe Biden has no opinion about the only Jewish state in the world ceasing to exist. This is not how you treat your friends,” she said.

“We are watching a dangerous backslide of American policy and principle at the United Nations,” Jonathan Schanzer, senior vice president of the Foundation for Defense of Democracies, told JNS. “From rejoining and legitimizing the U.N. Human Rights Council to this latest punt on UNRWA, it would appear that the Biden administration has chosen the path of least resistance at Turtle Bay. And that path is most easily described as appeasement.”

**‘Continuing to single out Israel’**

Political leaders and watchdog groups have long accused UNRWA of [promoting](https://www.jns.org/erdan-urges-world-leaders-to-take-action-on-unrwa-staff-inciting-anti-semitism-online/) educational material that contains anti-Semitism and incitement to violence. In July, Republican lawmakers [introduced](https://www.jns.org/republican-lawmakers-introduce-bill-to-block-us-foreign-aid-to-unrwa/) a bill to block taxpayer money from being sent to the agency unless certain requirements are met, such as verifying no employees are members of terror organizations or promoting anti-American or anti-Israel rhetoric.

The Trump administration had previously cut all aid to UNRWA over these concerns. The United Kingdom [recently](https://www.jns.org/report-uk-cuts-unrwa-funding-by-more-than-50-percent-due-to-incitement/) announced that it would cut funding to UNRWA by half as well. UNRWA chief Philippe Lazzarini warned last month that the group is facing a “severe funding crisis” as a result of these cuts.

Nevertheless, the Biden administration has pushed to restore funding and reform the organization.

Speaking before a congressional committee last June, U.S. Secretary of State Antony Blinken said the United States was “determined that UNRWA pursue very necessary reforms in terms of some of the abuses of the system that have taken place in the past, particularly the challenge that we’ve seen in disseminating in its educational products anti-Semitic or anti-Israel information.”

In his [address](https://usun.usmission.gov/explanation-of-vote-on-agenda-item-54-unrwa-in-the-near-east-and-agenda-item-55-israeli-practices-and-settlement-activities/) to the United Nations this week, Ambassador Richard Mills, U.S. Deputy Representatives to the United Nations, explained the decision but criticized the world body for “continuing to single out Israel” through a series of resolutions targeting the Jewish state.

“For this reason, the United States strongly opposes the annual submission of a package of resolutions biased against Israel. And while we do appreciate the modest efforts that have been taken to reduce the numbers of these resolutions, if the problematic and biased language remains, this effort is, well, moot,” he said.

However, regarding the resolution pertaining to UNRWA, Mills explained that America is returning to the position of abstention, which had previously been done during the Obama administration.

“As many members know, under President Biden, the United States announced it would restore its financial support to UNRWA, which we do believe is a vital lifeline to millions of Palestinians across the region,” he said, noting that the United States has provided $318 million to UNRWA since April.

“We were pleased to see language included in several of the resolutions that reflect our priorities in line with strengthening UNRWA,” he said. “The United States will continue to work with UNRWA; work to strengthen the agency’s accountability, its transparency and its consistency with U.N. principles.”

Romirowsky dismissed claims that the Biden administration can reform UNRWA.

He said agency officials “haven’t done anything on their end to prove trustworthiness or prove they are ready for the money. In fact, they have actually become worse, and the Gaza war in May only proves that.”