**Trump Administration to Close Palestine Liberation Organization Office in Washington**

By: Michael R. Gordon

Wall Street Journal

September 10, 2018

<https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-administration-to-close-palestine-liberation-organization-office-in-washington-1536546125>

“The Trump administration is expected to announce Monday that it will close the Palestine Liberation Organization’s office in Washington, administration officials said Sunday night, widening a U.S. campaign of pressure amid stalled Middle East peace efforts.

‘The United States will always stand with our friend and ally, Israel,’ national security adviser John Bolton planned to say in a speech he is scheduled to deliver Monday, according a draft of his prepared remarks reviewed by The Wall Street Journal.

‘The Trump administration will not keep the office open when the Palestinians refuse to take steps to start direct and meaningful negotiations with Israel,’ he is planned to add.

Senior Palestinian officials strongly condemned the Trump administration decision and described it as a ‘reckless escalation.’

Husam Zomlot, the Palestinian representative to Washington, said in an interview that the State Department informed the Palestine Liberation Organization of the U.S. decision to shutter its Washington office in a move that he said is part of the Trump administration’s efforts to begin enacting its so-called ‘deal of the century.’

‘We don’t think this is just about bullying…we believe this is about the implementing of Israel’s grocery list, they are implementing it rather than pressuring us,’ Mr. Zomlot said in a interview on Monday, adding that relations between the Palestinians and Washington ‘are a historic low.’

He said the Trump administration’s move to cut hundreds of millions of dollars in bilateral assistance to the Palestinians and to the U.N. Palestinian refugee agency; its criticisms of the way Palestinian refugees are defined at the United Nations; the Jerusalem move and its policy on settlements are evidence that the Trump administration is pressing ahead with its yet-to-be-revealed peace plan.

‘All of this is making sure the U.S. will never ever play the role of the peacemaker,’ Mr. Zomlot said.

The PLO will speed up its efforts to challenge Israel in the ICC as a result of the U.S. decision, Mr. Zomlot said, as well as step up contacts to the American public, who he said don’t see the Palestinians the way the Trump administration does.

Mr. Bolton also plans to threaten to impose sanctions against the International Criminal Court if it moves ahead with investigations of the U.S. and Israel.

‘If the court comes after us, Israel or other allies, we will not sit quietly,’ Mr. Bolton is planned to say, according to his prepared remarks.

Among the responses, Mr. Bolton says, the U.S. would ban ICC judges and prosecutors from entering the country.

‘We will sanction their funds in the U.S. financial system, and we will prosecute them in the U.S. criminal system,’ Mr. Bolton adds. ‘We will do the same for any company or state that assists an ICC investigation of Americans.’

The PLO office in Washington has long been the focus of controversy. The Trump administration warned last year that it might close the office after Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas called for the investigation and prosecution of Israeli officials by the ICC and other bodies.

Saeb Erekat, a senior Palestinian Authority negotiator responded at the time that such a move would undermine prospects for peace. The PLO opened its mission in Washington in 1994 and joined the ICC after receiving observer state status at the U.N. in 2012.

Explaining the decision to close the PLO office, Mr. Bolton planned to say that it reflects longstanding congressional concerns with Palestinian efforts to prompt an ICC investigation of Israel, according to his prepared remarks.

The closure, which Mr. Bolton says would be formally announced by the State Department on Monday, follows other steps by the Trump administration that have angered Palestinians, including moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv and ending funding for the U.N. agency that helps Palestinian refugees.

Mr. Bolton planned to say, however, that the Trump administration is still committed to negotiating a peace accord between Israel and the Palestinians.

‘The United States supports a direct and robust peace process, and we will not allow the ICC, or any other organization, to constrain Israel’s right to self-defense,’ he planned to say, according to the prepared remarks.

The ICC recently said it has jurisdiction to investigate Myanmar officials for the violence against the Muslim Rohingya minority. It also has pursued charges of genocide against people in the former Yugoslavia, Rwanda and the Darfur region of Sudan.

The U.S. and Russia aren’t members of The Hague-based court, formed under an international treaty, and the Philippines has moved to quit it.

In the U.S., the ICC has long been the bane of conservatives, including Mr. Bolton, who consider it biased against the U.S. and a danger to U.S. sovereignty. Mr. Bolton is scheduled to deliver his speech, ‘Protecting American Constitutionalism and Sovereignty from International Threats,’ to the Federalist Society, a conservative group, on Monday.

A particular concern has been a request last year by the ICC prosecutor to investigate U.S. military and Central Intelligence Agency personnel who served in Afghanistan for alleged detainee abuse and possibly other war crimes.

In the prepared remarks planned for Monday, Mr. Bolton offers an extended critique of the court, which he asserts is rife with abuses, and vows that the U.S. will use ‘any means necessary’ to protect American citizens and those of friendly allies from prosecution by the court.

If the court moves against the U.S. or its allies, he planned to say, the administration will negotiate binding agreements to prohibit other nations from turning over U.S. citizens to the court.

Nations that cooperate with ICC investigations of the U.S. and its allies will also risk losing foreign aid and military assistance, he will state according to the prepared remarks.

Other responses, he warned, include economic sanctions against the court itself.

The U.S., he said, also will consider asking the U.N. Security Council to constrain the court’s authority. ICC officials didn’t immediately respond to a request for comment.