

# Here's Why U.S. Aid to Palestinians Needs to Continue

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Jan 31, 2019

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## A former ambassador to Israel and a veteran congressional staffer outline concrete steps for preserving the most crucial security and humanitarian programs.

Is U.S. assistance to the Palestinians an indulgence we can do without? Will its elimination leave Israelis, Palestinians and U.S. interests better off? Unless Congress and the Trump administration act quickly, we are about to find out.

Since 1993, the United States has provided more than \$5 billion (<https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS22967.pdf>) in assistance to the West Bank and Gaza. This generous program continued across Republican and Democratic administrations, with bipartisan Congressional support, despite ups and downs in the peace process, spikes and drops in violence and frustrations in Washington and Jerusalem with Palestinian leaders. But the whole enterprise is now in jeopardy.

First, the Trump Administration cut the entire fiscal year 2017 economic aid program (<https://www.cnn.com/2018/08/24/politics/trump-palestinian-authority-aid/index.html>) for the West Bank and Gaza and looks likely to do the same for fiscal 2018. Now the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) mission, with no money to spend, is on the verge of closing down, leaving ongoing projects uncompleted (<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/17/685932903/palestinian-school-and-sewage-projects-unfinished-as-u-s-cuts-final-bit-of-aid>).

Next, the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (

**clarification-act-2018**), which exposes the Palestinian Authority to legal action in U.S. courts if it accepts any U.S. assistance funds, comes into force on Feb. 1. The ATCA's passage last year prompted Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Rami Hamdallah (**who resigned Tuesday** (<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/01/29/world/middleeast/palestinian-government-resigns.html>)) to inform Secretary of State Mike Pompeo in a **late-December letter** (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/with-new-anti-terrorism-law-going-into-effect-pa-will-stop-accepting-us-aid/>) that the Palestinian Authority will no longer accept any U.S. assistance. If carried out, that will end U.S. assistance for the Palestinian Authority Security Forces, the deliberately under-the-radar and largely successful U.S. effort to develop these forces and facilitate effective security coordination with Israel in the West Bank. It will also eliminate the role of the U.S. security coordinator, a three-star general who oversees the training of the security forces and serves as a liaison between Israeli and Palestinian security officials.

Thus far, there has been minimal debate in Washington over the implications of these developments on stability in the West Bank and Gaza and the inextricable link to Israel's security. Nor has there been a sober reckoning of the very real implications for U.S. influence.

It's easy to be cavalier about these programs, considering the moribund peace process, Palestinian leaders who lack legitimacy with much of the U.S. public, and bouts of violence. But members of Congress, including many of Israel's strongest supporters on both sides of the aisle, have long understood their value. While oversight has been rigorous, funding for Palestinian assistance programs has always flowed with bipartisan support because it was determined to reinforce Israel's security and provide a measure of U.S. leverage and influence.

This logic was ratified by the support of the Israeli government for these programs. Israeli authorities understood that a breakdown in security, an economic collapse or a humanitarian crisis in the West Bank would place an enormous burden on Israel. A crisis in the West Bank could require the Israel Defense Forces to redeploy personnel from other high-risk areas like the Lebanon border or the Golan Heights.

Moreover, U.S. assistance has sustained lines of contact with Palestinian officials. During flare-ups and crises, this connective tissue has placed the U.S. in a position to defuse situations when direct Israeli-Palestinian engagement was too difficult. **U.S. Security Coordinator Lt. Gen. Eric Wendt** (<https://www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/biog/bureau/276283.htm>) and his predecessors have at times been the only American officials able to bridge both sides in moments of high tension.

The current funding crisis runs contrary to clearly expressed Congressional intent. Last year, large bipartisan majorities passed the **Taylor Force Act** (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1164>), which, by withholding some U.S. aid, aimed to compel the Palestinian Authority to end, among other things, its practice of providing payments to families of convicted Palestinian terrorists. But Congress also **voted resoundingly** (<https://www.sun-sentinel.com/florida-jewish-journal/fl-fpg-ijps-taylorforce2-0328-20180323-story.html>) to maintain key elements of assistance, including humanitarian aid, people-to-people programs, medical services and other programming with no direct connection to the Palestinian Authority.

The Israeli government, for its part, was clear in its support for the Taylor Force Act's intent of ending U.S. assistance that could even indirectly subsidize the Palestinian Authority's payments to terrorists' families. But there was never Israeli support for curtailing the accounts Congress protected—programs acknowledged to maintain a modicum of stability in the West Bank and prevent a full-scale humanitarian crisis in either the West Bank or Gaza.

In other words, the Taylor Force Act's passage underscored bipartisan Congressional support for *continuing* U.S. assistance to the Palestinians. Trump officials, who took an axe to the entire program, citing the Taylor Force Act, have misinterpreted the meaning of the law.

The Israeli national security establishment remains painfully aware that it will face the burden—financial, security, and otherwise—of addressing a full-scale collapse in the West Bank or Gaza if the U.S. steps away or loses all influence and credibility with the Palestinians. And if they lose cooperation with the Palestinian security forces, Israeli security forces will find themselves in the far worse position of needing to directly intervene to confront security threats in Palestinian-populated areas, rather than working through the U.S.-funded multilateral construct.

If all parties remain stuck on the current course, the biggest losers will be innocent Palestinian civilians and Israel. The winners are those benefiting from instability and the opportunity to point to the U.S. as unreliable and in retreat from the Middle East: Hamas, other assorted terrorists and Iran.

To reverse the current course, here are some steps that the administration and Congress should urgently undertake:

**Fix the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act.** A straightforward legislative fix is low-hanging fruit. **Congressional and administration staff (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-u-s-government-shutdown-could-endanger-aid-to-palestinian-security-forces-1.6809635>)** recognize that ending U.S. security assistance to the Palestinian security forces only helps adversaries and empowers enemies. In recent days, **Israel belatedly added its voice. (<https://www.axios.com/government-shutdown-threatens-derail-israeli-palestine-security-a4327e68-6e8b-46ef-ace8-aeb2d69ef7b2.html>)** making clear it wants U.S. aid to the PASF to continue. In fact, Congress and the administration should go further and seize the opportunity in this crisis to permanently protect U.S. security assistance to the Palestinian security forces.

**Mitigate damage.** Walking away from ongoing USAID projects in the West Bank and Gaza—unfinished roads, incomplete water projects, and piecemeal humanitarian and education programs—is a total waste of U.S. taxpayer dollars. Such visible reminders of U.S. abandonment will also inflame local sentiment against the United States. Congress should authorize and explicitly appropriate funds to complete these projects, following a thorough review of the status of U.S. programs in the West Bank and Gaza.

**Pass positive legislative alternatives.** Even if traditional assistance programs remain blocked, there are creative legislative proposals that preserve space for U.S. influence and enjoy bipartisan support. The **Palestinian Partnership Fund Act. (<https://www.coons.senate.gov/newsroom/press-releases/sens-coons-graham-kaine-gardner-introduce-legislation-to-foster-economic-development-and-community-ties-between-israelis-and-palestinians>)** introduced in the last Congress, promotes economic development by connecting Palestinian entrepreneurs and companies with counterparts in the U.S., Israel, and the Middle East. An **International Fund for Israeli-Palestinian Peace (<http://www.allmep.org/international-fund/>)**, long advocated by the nonpartisan **Alliance for Middle East Peace (<http://www.allmep.org/>)**, has enjoyed **bipartisan support in past Congresses (<https://www.congress.gov/bill/115th-congress/house-bill/1221?r=315>)** and would promote people-to-people peace-building activities by pooling funding from government and private sources. Now is the time for Congress to approve funding for it.

**Urge Israeli clarification on U.S. assistance.** Members of Congress naturally seek Israel's views on the security and economic consequences of completely shutting down U.S. assistance programs to the Palestinians. But during the Trump administration, the answers have been murky. After **Israel's election in April. (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-to-hold-elections-in-april-coalition-heads-announce-1.6775062>)** Congress should urgently seek a clear picture of the new government's views, as members continue to vote on this much-debated set of issues.

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*the NPR website (<https://www.npr.org/2019/01/31/689742245/opinion-heres-why-u-s-aid-to-palestinians-needs-to-continue>). ❖*

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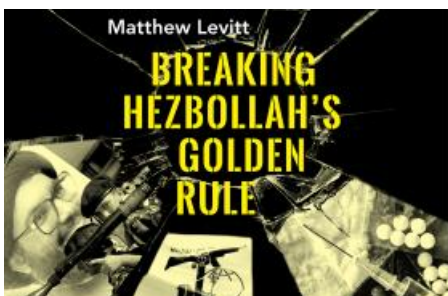
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