Republicans push back against Biden moves to fund controversial UN Palestinian refugee agency

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Republicans are pushing back against the Biden administration’s moves to fund a controversial [U.N. Palestinian refugee agency](https://www.foxnews.com/category/world/united-nations) which has been dogged with accusations of anti-Israel bias -- and one that the Trump administration stopped funding.

21 Republicans, led by Sen. Jim Risch, R-Idaho, wrote to Secretary of State Antony Blinken this week expressing concern about the Biden administration’s decision to resume funding to the [U.N. Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA)](https://www.foxnews.com/us/amid-claims-of-incitement-and-antisemitism-biden-administration-signals-it-will-refund-controversial-un-agency) that deals with Palestinian refugees -- and has faced accusations it teaches hate against Jews and Israelis in its schools.

"We are concerned that this administration’s decision to resume U.S. assistance to UNRWA was made in haste, without any actionable attempt to secure much-needed and meaningful reforms of the agency," the lawmakers wrote.

"Beyond its inflated and duplicative structure, there are serious concerns about the impartiality of UNRWA. Over the years the agency has employed individuals affiliated with Hamas, a U.S. designated terrorist organization. UNRWA schools have been used to store Hamas weapons," the senators continued. "Additionally, there have been numerous cases of UNRWA textbooks including material that is anti-Semitic, such as encouraging the destruction of the state of Israel and supporting martyrdom and/or violent jihad."

Earlier this month [Blinken](https://www.foxnews.com/category/politics/foreign-policy/secretary-of-state) announced the U.S. would restore aid to UNRWA, which was halted by the Trump administration, in the amount of $150 million as part of a broader effort to restore Palestinian aid.

"U.S. foreign assistance for the Palestinian people serves important U.S. interests and values," he said in a statement. "It provides critical relief to those in great need, fosters economic development, and supports Israeli-Palestinian understanding, security coordination and stability. It also aligns with the values and interests of our allies and partners."

UNRWA was set up in the wake of the 1948 Arab-Israeli war to deal with displaced Palestinians, but is a frequent target of [Israel](https://www.foxnews.com/category/world/world-regions/israel), which rejects a so-called "right of return" for the descendants of those who were displaced in the conflict. UNRWA, meanwhile, has said it does not promote a "right of return."

UNRWA is estimated to provide education, health care, financial assistance and food to 5 million people in the Middle East. According to UNRWA, its education system serves over a half a million students in some 711 elementary and preparatory schools.

Critics also acccuse UNRWA of using too broad of a definition for refugees, covering the descendants of Palestinian refugees, as well as people who have become residents in other countries and are no longer displaced. They also object that Palestinian refugees are the only refugees with their own refugee agency, with all other refugees coming under the remit of the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR).

Much of the controversy has focused on the textbooks that UNRWA uses in schools. The Bedein Center for Near East Policy Research, which reports on UNRWA’s curriculum, recently cited several examples showing what they claimed was anti-Semitic and religious incitement, such as a textbook given to fifth graders describing a terrorist as a martyr for killing 38 passengers, including 13 children, on an Israeli bus in 1978.

The Trump administration cut funding altogether, one of a number it moves it took to pull out of or defund agencies that it saw as anti-Israel or anti-American.

The letter to Blinken was praised by former U.N. Ambassador Nikki Haley, who was a key voice in halting funding during the Trump administration, and said this week the U.S. should not give UNRWA "a dime" until it "Stops employing terrorists -Stops promoting anti-Semitic textbooks -Releases the true number of "refugees."

The Biden administration drew further controversy this week when [Ambassador Linda Thomas-Greenfield met with the head of UNRWA Philippe Lazzarini](https://usun.usmission.gov/readout-of-a-meeting-between-ambassador-linda-thomas-greenfield-and-unrwa-commissioner-general-philippe-lazzarini/), but the readout only hinted at the long-standing concerns.

"The two discussed U.S. re-engagement with UNRWA, including the recent announcement of the resumption of U.S. assistance to the agency," the readout said. "Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield underscored the critical role that UNRWA plays in providing vital services to a vulnerable population and reiterated Secretary Blinken’s pledge of partnership with the agency."

The statement concluded, "Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield also committed to working together with UNRWA to achieve important reforms to strengthen​ the agency’s effectiveness and efficiencies, as well as to promote shared UN principles of equality, neutrality, tolerance, and anti-discrimination."

A source familiar with the conversation, who could not speak on the record about a private diplomatic meeting, later told Fox News that "Ambassador Thomas-Greenfield extensively discussed with Lazzarini the issue of inflammatory material in textbooks, a zero-tolerance policy, and the urgent need for reforms."

But the criticism of the Biden administration’s moves toward sending taxpayer money to UNRWA is likely to continue.

Rep. Lee Zeldin, R-NY, also hit out at the Biden administration, saying it is "is willing to look the other way while the U.N. actively perpetuates anti-Semitism."

"The Biden administration's eagerness to bury its head in the sand is a continued betrayal of America’s greatest ally Israel," he said.

The Biden administration’s intention to grow closer to the U.N. has also included an attempt to rejoin the U.N. Human Council, which the Trump administration left in 2018 due to its anti-Israel bias and ongoing concerns about its membership. The Human Rights Council [currently includes](https://www.foxnews.com/politics/cuba-china-russia-un-human-rights-council) members like China, Russia, Cuba and Venezuela.