

NGO Statement of Support for S. Res. 171, Sen. Merkley's Resolution on Bilateral Assistance to the West Bank and Gaza.



As organizations who implement and/or support programs that address the ongoing humanitarian crisis in the West Bank and Gaza, we are grateful to Senator Merkley and co-sponsors Senators Coons, Cortez Masto, Feinstein, Leahy, and Van Hollen for introducing Senate Resolution 171. This resolution calls on the Administration to expend money already appropriated to the Economic Support Fund and intended by Congress to be spent on programs that provide food, essential health services, and other humanitarian goods and services to vulnerable families living in the West Bank and Gaza.

The humanitarian situation facing Palestinians is dire, especially in Gaza. Gaza's poverty rate is over 50% and 1.24 million of Gaza's 2 million people receive food assistance. There are 140,000 children under five in Gaza who suffer from chronic malnutrition and stunting. About 97% of Gaza's aquifer is contaminated and is not suitable for drinking, and 12% of deaths of children under four were linked to gastrointestinal disorders caused by water pollution. The West Bank is experiencing similar challenges where about 22% of the population of 3 million people lack clean water and about 13.6% of the population is food insecure.

In January 2018, the Administration initiated a review of all aid going to the Palestinian people, and at the time halted funding for all existing programs. In late July 2018, the Administration communicated to Congress that as a result of its review, it would redirect all FY2017 funds to other countries. The Administration continues to hold all FY2018 funding pending the outcome of the continuing review.

The resolution notes that all programs and activities to be supported must be consistent with restrictions and exceptions provided in the Taylor Force Act. The resolution also calls on Congress to clarify that programs and activities consistent with the Taylor Force Act may not be used as a basis for jurisdiction pursuant to the recently passed Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act (ATCA). This latter point is especially important, since all USAID program activities, including those that still had residual funding from previous fiscal years, have been halted due to the potential liability stemming from differing legal interpretations of the ATCA.

It is the hope of our organizations that the message of this resolution will be well received by the Administration and lead, in the near future, to the expenditure of FY18 and FY19 humanitarian assistance for the West Bank and Gaza. The release of these funds will strengthen the humanitarian response in the region and at the same time promote security and stability for both Israelis and Palestinians and foster an atmosphere more conducive to a long-term resolution of the conflict.