

Supporting Israel by withholding support to International Organizations: UNRWA and UNESCO in Trump's foreign policy

La retirada de la asistencia a instituciones internacionales para respaldar a Israel: la UNRWA y la UNESCO en la política exterior de Trump

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Abstract

This paper analyses the steps undertaken by the Trump Administration against UNESCO and UNRWA, the former being a specialized organization, and the latter a specialized agency of the United Nations system, in order to pressure the Palestinian representatives to reach a final peace agreement with Israel that would go against the basic national aspirations of the Palestinian people and the international law. The article aims to highlight the consequences of this new political approach and how it directly affects the relationship between Palestinians and Israel.

Keywords: United States/UNESCO/UNRWA/Palestine/Israel

Resumen

El presente artículo analiza los pasos tomados por la Administración Trump en contra de la UNESCO y la UNRWA, la primera, organismo especializado y la segunda agencia especializada del sistema de Naciones Unidas, con el objetivo de presionar a los representantes palestinos para alcanzar un acuerdo de paz con Israel, aún en contra de las aspiraciones básicas del pueblo palestino y del derecho internacional. Asimismo, el artículo pretende mostrar las consecuencias de esta nueva estrategia política y cómo está afectando directamente la relación entre los palestinos e Israel.

Keywords: Estados Unidos/UNESCO/ UNRWA/Palestina/Israel

Introduction

In December 2017, Trump Administration launched the *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (2017). In this document, the U.S. government recognized that competition for influence exists in international organizations, but also that not all institutions are equal for U.S. interests. It stated that *"(t)he United States will prioritize its efforts in those organizations that serve American interests, to ensure that they are strengthened and supportive of the United States, our allies, and our partners"*. The document also emphasized that cooperation means sharing responsibilities and financial burdens among members of international society. Otherwise, if the United States had to provide a "disproportionate" level of support for a given international organization, Washington would expect a concordant degree of influence over the control and efforts of that institution.

The document may well be a statement of principles of the Trump Administration regarding international organizations and the role that the United States should play within them, but in no way does it depart from the strategies already implemented by this country in previous decades. Despite the apparent erratic foreign policy driven by President's twitter account, it is possible to trace out some paths between the present and the past of U.S. diplomacy.

In this sense, the main objective of the article is to understand why and how the U.S. has gone some way deeper into a neo-realist approach by withdrawing from UNESCO and reducing financial support to UNRWA in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Thus, this paper analyses how the United States has orchestrated the withdrawal of its support for UNRWA and UNESCO, as a way to urge Palestinians and Israelis to reach a peace agreement. In January 2020, Trump offered his so-called "deal of the century" to Israel and Palestine, an agreement that ignores the historical claims of the Palestinian people, including the right of return of refugees and their claims to Jerusalem.

Despite Trump's inconsistent Foreign Policy and the traditional American unique approach to Israel, there are some evidences that suggest the new U.S. strategy can be framed in neorealism theory; therefore, this article begins by explaining how it approaches relations between states and international institutions. This International Relations theoretical perspective explains that, in the first place, the great powers distrust international cooperation and international organizations; and secondly, how states use them to pursue their own national interests. Additionally, it compares the Obama and Trump Administrations' goals and strategies regarding the Middle East in general, and the Arab-Israeli conflict in particular, as an introduction to specific U.S. policies towards UNESCO and UNRWA.

The U.S. strategy of reducing financial contributions or withdrawing from an international organization like UNESCO is not new. During the Cold War, the United States used this ploy to maintain its role as a superpower against attempts by the so-called Third World - within the UN framework - to move away from its colonial past but also from a kind of economic, cultural and informational neo-colonialism. This neo-colonialism manifested itself just a few (Western) news

agencies with global reach. The U.S. interpreted some measures to counteract the overwhelming superiority of its - and Western- cultural and informational instruments as too aggressive for its own interests and, because of this, withdrew from UNESCO from 1985 to 2003.

The real novelty lies in another turn of the screw towards open U.S. support for the State of Israel. Trump attempts to use international organizations such as UNESCO and UNRWA as political arenas to force Palestinians to accept a peace agreement. Trump promised the U.S. people that he would achieve "the deal of the century" to forge peace between Israelis and Palestinians (Awad, 2018). Nevertheless, once he became the U.S. president, the deal was translated into a plan shaped by Israeli interests and imposed by Washington on the Palestinian authorities. This agreement includes waiving Palestinians' right to return to their homeland and annexing Jerusalem to Israeli territory. The changes in U.S. policy towards UNRWA and UNESCO aim to achieve that purpose.

On the one hand, since 1949, the UNRWA has been the main support for Palestinian refugees in the Middle East, who currently number more than five million¹ -1.34 million in Gaza, approximately 818,000 in West Bank, more than 560,000 in Syria, 475,075 in Lebanon, and 2.2 million in Jordan-(UNRWA 2018a), and, in a certain way, a defender of their right to return. The United States has been the major donor since then. However, the Trump Administration has decided to end that economic support, assuming the Israeli thesis that UNRWA's very existence has been an obstacle to the resolution of the conflict as it has prevented the assimilation of refugees in their host countries (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

On the other hand, UNESCO's refusal to accept Israeli premises about the Jews' connection with the holy places of Jerusalem to the exclusion of any Palestinian links, has been the excuse for the U.S. withdrawal from that institution. This move is consistent with the U.S. decision to recognize Jerusalem as the official capital of Israel. Previously, almost no country and no previous U.S. administration had declared in favour of Israel, because Jerusalem is, according to international law, a militarily occupied city, which should be under international control and whose future should be negotiated, in a peace agreement between Israelis and Palestinians (United Nations General Assembly, 2017).

The prospects for the future are not encouraging. The Palestinians have been disappointed with the first steps taken by Trump's Administration and have rejected the peace terms proposed by the U.S. This decision has frustrated Trump and now he is looking for ways to force Palestinians back into U.S.-controlled negotiations (Awad,2018), exploiting its position of strength through UNRWA and UNESCO. However, no matter how harsh the sanctions are, no Palestinian authority has enough popular support to give up the right of return of refugees or Jerusalem.

International relations research allows to achieve knowledge about the shifting approach from different states into a certain conflict of interest depending from multiple factors. The type of investigation selected is applied research. In this sense, the review of secondary sources has allowed to illustrate the current U.S. Administration changing position in reference to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

¹ In order to decide who was a candidate to UNRWA's protection and services, in 1952, the Agency defined Palestine refugees as "persons whose normal place of residence was Palestine during the period 1 June 1946 to 15 May 1948, and who lost both home and means of livelihood as a result of the 1948 conflict" (UNRWA, n.d.) This definition also included refugees descendants, but according to Mar GIJON, it is incomplete, therefore many refugees were left outside that definition and without protection from the Agency. See GIJÓN, Mar (2007): "¿Quiénes un refugiadopalestino?", *Revista de Estudios Internacionales Mediterráneos*, No. 3, pp. 45-54.

The neo-realist approach to International Organizations

The proliferation of International agencies has been studied by International Relations (IR) theorists since the emergence of IR itself. Traditional IR theories describe these organizations as tools or machineries developed by sovereign states to achieve a better world system. States enmesh International Organizations (IOs) in mutually beneficial transactions (Cho, 2013). However, realists and liberals offer a different explanation of the origins and ultimate goals of this kind of inter-governmental cooperation.

Even though all realists (realists, neo-realists, defensive realists, offensive realists) agree the state is the central role player in an anarchic international society, emphasizing central concepts like self-help (Waltz, 1979) and national interest, they also agree that states sometimes cooperate with one another as a means to survive, given the wide spectrum of cross-border issues that need to be coped with, from human rights to international air transport, from international trade to climate change. International regimes, that is, the international laws agreed by states and the international organizations that implement these laws, give states relatively clear expectations about another State's conduct.

Nevertheless, cooperation is not an easy task in an anarchic international environment, due to concerns over the possibility of cheating (according to liberal institutionalists) and relative gains. Realist focus on relative gains, as Mearsheimer (1995: 12) explains *"each side not only considers its individual gain, but also who well it does compared to the other side"*, as the anarchic environment dictates the maximization of relative power. Because of this, both realists and neo-realists view IOs with a certain scepticism, as they do not have confidence in concepts related to international organizations such as interdependence, multilateralism or legitimacy.

From the neo-realist perspective, states use balance of power, alliances and international organizations as tools to moderate conflicts (Vargas 2019), but also to consolidate their own power, as states depend on having more power than other states to survive. As a result, IOs are weak institutions controlled by states, and the great powers will fulfil their commitments only if they fit with their self-interest.

In other words, a state can exert its power through international institutions (institutional power), struggling to influence other states through them. According to neo-realists, these institutions are some kind of reflection of the distribution of power in the world (Mearsheimer, 1995: 7) and the relative allocation of its capacities (Vargas 2019). Because of this, they are hopelessly linked to the state's interests, representing mainly the interests of powerful states. Furthermore, neo-realists would not rely on collective action for the protection of their individual national interest (MingstandArreguin-Toft 2011) but would rather consider IOs as political arenas where powers can exert their influence to pursue their national interests. According to neo-realists, even in an increasingly interdependent world organized through IOs, their role in international cooperation will be effective *"if there is a hegemonic state that is willing to bear an over-proportionate percentage of the cooperation costs and that will bind other states into the organization through the judicious use of carrots and sticks"* (Rittberger and Zangl, 2006:16).

American Foreign Policy towards the Middle East

The next section will address how the Trump Administration has implemented policies regarding UNESCO and UNRWA that may fit into the neorealist scheme. In this context, it is important to note that there are other evidences in Trump and his Administration's political rhetoric that brings him closer to a neorealist conception of foreign policy:

- state-centred concerns,
- maximising state power to increase its security,

- achieving peace through strength,
- strengthening military power,
- understanding world politics as a struggle of national interests (against China or Russia, for example) (Trump, 2016).

In addition to the abovementioned, the current US president's policy is also moving away from typically neoconservative stances such as the commitment to implement liberal democracy abroad and the *nation-building* process. Neorealists have been present on Trump's closest staff, especially in his first year of tenure, such as Herbert McMaster, National Security Adviser, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, or former Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson (Tovar, 2018: 15).

Notwithstanding this, the Trump Administration's neo-realist view is not absolute, given that other ideological currents are present in it, such as neo-conservatism or Jacksonianism (Tovar, 2018). Indeed, with the departure of the above-mentioned advisers, Trump's policy towards Iran came closer to Jacksonian populist approaches. Foreign policy moved away from the traditional perspectives that ended up getting U.S. embroiled in Middle East conflicts. According to Jacksonians, national issues take precedent over foreign policy, but when an enemy attack, they spring to the country's defence (Mead, 2017: 4).

In this regard, Luis Da Vinha (2019) conducts an interesting analysis of the foreign policy decision-making process in the first year of the Trump Administration, where opposing positions are debated and compete with one another. Furthermore, the President himself promotes that competition and decants the final result, not based on a specific ideological approach, nor on advisor's rank, but in personal affinity to Trump's ideas.

American foreign policy towards the Middle East has been shaped by the changes introduced by the so-called Arab Spring in 2011, the current conflicts in Iraq and Syria, the rise and proliferation of terrorist groups. However, the most influential circumstance has been the rise of Iran as a regional leader. These changes have contributed to the loss of prominence in the Arab-Israeli conflict as the most important issue for U.S. foreign policy and national interest.

Thus, the Ayatollah regime has become the main concern for Americans due to its nuclear aspirations and growing influence in the region through the support of political and military groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas in the Gaza Strip, and other entities that increase political destabilization or openly engage in armed conflicts in Syria, Iraq or Yemen. This growing concern has been present in the Obama and Trump Administrations, and it is shared by America's leading allies in the region, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

During the two terms of the Obama Administration and continuing with the Trump Administration, leaders have been reluctant to be involved in open-ended wars, looking for reducing U.S. presence in the region (giving up the neoconservative commitment to spread liberal democracy in the Arab world). In spite of this similarity between Obama and Trump, the current president's strategy to stop Iran differs quite much from that of his predecessor. Obama's strategy involved reaching a nuclear deal with Iran, reintegrating it into regional politics to achieve a regional balance of power -a seminal realist concept- between Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Sunni countries. Contrary to this, Trump has committed to breaking the nuclear pact, restoring economic sanctions and strengthening ties with Saudi Arabia and Israel, Tehran's main rivals in the area (Rodriguez, 2018: 218).

This policy shift has been criticized by leading realist experts. Walt (2019) and Mearsheimer (2019) consider Trump's policy towards Iran is having the opposite effect, giving Tehran an incentive to go nuclear and thus eliminate any threat from the U.S. But neo-realist position on nuclear weapons as means of deterrence has not been unanimous. Waltz and Mearsheimer have historically recognized the role played by such armaments and both emphasized the stabilizing effects that nuclear weapons brought to the international system, but Mearsheimer stress the interest of states to expand and achieve regional hegemony (Krieger & Roth, 2007). Indeed, Waltz (2012) noted that allowing Iran to have nuclear weapons would restore stability in a fragmented Middle East. Finally, another realist, Robert Kaplan (2019) frames rising tensions between the U.S. and Iran into a broader context of American Chinese geostrategic struggle for controlling the Indian Ocean and the Road and Belt Initiative.

Taking into consideration this context, as it is disclosed in the National Security Strategy (2017: 49) described in the introduction, the US considers that it is not the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but Iran -described as the "world's leading state sponsor of terrorism"-, the main stumbling block to achieve peace and prosperity in the region. Thus, the main U.S. foreign policy goal would be regional containment of Iranian expansionism, and, in order to achieve this objective, the peace between Israelis and Palestinians would be the first step. This would result in an Arab-Israeli alliance against the common enemy.

Implementation of U.S. neo-realist strategy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict

Neo-realists' ideas regarding IOs, as described above, can be traced into the current Trump administration regarding its foreign policy towards the Israel-Palestinian conflict. On the one hand, Washington announced its withdrawal from the UNESCO at the end of 2018, and, on the other, has reduced its financial support for the UNRWA, the UN agency that supports Palestinian refugees throughout the Middle East. Some analysts claim that both decisions form part of Trump's "Withdrawal Doctrine", a new isolationist foreign policy based on "America First" economic policy, resulting in a loss of international power and credibility (Yamei, 2018). In fact, the current US administration arrived with a series of pull-outs by the Trump presidency, including withdrawal from the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP), the Paris climate accord, UN Human Rights Council², the UN Global Compact on Migration, as well as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on the Iran nuclear issue. Trump also inflicted substantial damage on the principles of multilateralism, when he reneged on the Group of Seven's long-standing solidarity over free trade, launched a complex renegotiation of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) (Yamei, 2018), started a Trade War with China, and labelled NATO as obsolete while calling members of the alliance "delinquent" in their defence spending. These measures fit with Jacksonian populism, that is only intermittently concerned with foreign policy, and focused on domestic issues (Mead, 2017: 4). Nevertheless, Trump's policies regarding UNRWA and UNESCO could also be described as a neo-realist step towards achieving American goals in the Middle East, primarily regarding Israel-Palestine conflict.

According to Joffe (2017), if there is a Trump Doctrine it is not "no-force" but rather the "economy of force", which includes balancing means and ends and sizing up present and future costs in order to protect U.S. allies and deter its enemies, moving away from open-ended wars (including those in the Middle East). Trump does believe in America's power, but not in its omnipotence. Washington is pressing for a more equal sharing of the burden of international organizations and, of course, of international security responsibilities and tasks. But at the same time, its changes in foreign policy regarding multilateralism and the UN system have affected selectively a few UN organs that deal with low-level political subjects such as education, science, culture and human rights (Yamei 2018). The political reasons for U.S. President Donald Trump's decision to withdraw

²US withdrew from UN Human Rights Council in June 2018, arguing against Council critics to Israel and critics against US migratory policies.

from UNESCO and cut funding for UNRWA seem to have stronger links to his own perspectives and goals regarding the Palestinian-Israeli conflict than to an isolationist foreign policy. Both strategies are consistent with the relative gains' neo-realist approach.

The U.S. has historically been an atypical mediator of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Since the first Arab-Israeli agreement between Egypt and Israel in 1978, where the "land for peace" formula was already used, the return of territories has been carried out with compensations by the U.S. government. Besides, all U.S. administrations have supported Israel within the UN system, blocking any sanctions against Israeli violations of International Law. The exceptional nature of the American-Israeli relation and the influence of the unmatched pro-Israel interest groups in shaping U.S. foreign policy to the Middle East has been explained by John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt in the controversial article *The Israeli Lobby* (2006). In the article, the authors explain how practically all U.S. administrations have adopted Israel's own goals and justifications of its position on its conflict with the Arab world and the Palestinians.

This is an anomaly of U.S. foreign policy, based more on the country's internal dynamics than on a strictly realistic or neo-realistic vision founded on the self-help, the national interest, or the imperatives of the international systems. However, as noted above, recent strategies to force an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement are embedded in a broader policy aimed at protecting U.S. interests in a changing Middle East, where Iran is seen as the main threat.

Further enlarging on this issue, turning to Obama and Trump Administrations, there are some differences in the type of relationship between the US and Israel yet there have been no substantial changes in the privileged role granted to Tel Aviv over the Palestinians. Overall, the Obama Administration had a more active role during its first four years, calling on Palestinians to take stronger actions to combat terrorism, and Israelis to freeze settlement construction in the occupied Palestinian territories (oPt) in order to move on peace negotiations.

Despite these positive approaches for negotiation, Palestinians insistence to include East Jerusalem in the peace talks and the resumption of Jewish settlements construction in that part of the Holy city prevented any progress in negotiations. Even though personal relation between Obama and Netanyahu was not of the highest regards, the American President did not take this fact into account and pursued a solid support of Israel. This is evidenced by the fact that Obama overlooked the continuation of the illegal expansion of Israeli settlements, he did not pressure Israel to alleviate the blockade against the Gaza Strip, continued to fully support to Israel in international forums, and even increased U.S. economic aid to the Israel military to record levels, from \$ 3 billion to 3.8 billion (Rodriguez, 2018).

In any case, nowadays the connivance between the two governments or, more precisely, between Trump's and Netanyahu's administrations, is closer and more complete than ever. In this regard, the current U.S. government has undertaken policies that no previous administration had dared to take, namely: the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, the reduction of its contributions to UNRWA, the proclamation recognizing the Golan Heights as part of the State of Israel (U.S. White House, 2019) and the recognition of Israeli colonies in the West Bank as legal.

It is possible to identify a few factors explaining the President Trump's assumption of his political position towards Israel. First, Israeli ties to the Trump Administration begin with the Trump family: Likud Party leader Benjamin Netanyahu has a longstanding friendship with Charles Kushner, the father-in-law of Ivanka Trump, the President's daughter. It has not been difficult for Israelis to

make Trump embrace Israeli principles and its agenda regarding the Palestinians and the Middle East, as evidenced by Trump having appointed pro-Israeli politicians in key posts, such as his son-in-law Jared Kushner, in charge of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, or David Friedman, a strong right-wing supporter of the settlement movement in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, as Ambassador to Israel. Second, while running for the presidency, Trump promised the Evangelical voting bloc that he would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the U.S. Embassy to this city (Awad, 2018). Third, the strong financial support given to Trump's campaign by Las Vegas-based casino mogul Sheldon Adelson, a Likud supporter and also strongly committed to moving the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Entous, 2018). Finally, as stated earlier, it seems there is a regional goal regarding this new agenda. According to Entous (2018), since Obama's administration the Israeli and Emirati -and then the Saudi- governments have joined forces to persuade the U.S. administration to take seriously the Iranian threat. That is, America's goal would be to bring Israel and Arab states closer together based on a common opposition to Iranian foreign policy (Rodriguez, 2018). A deeper cooperation between Americans, Israelis and Arabs against Iran and other enemies would brush aside the Palestinians, who would be the greatest losers in a reshaped Middle East, as they would lose the traditional Arab support for their claims. In any case, Israelis know that with President Trump and his chosen team of right-wing advisers in charge, this administration would be the greatest ally and would in turn provide more favourable terms leading to a better deal for the State of Israel (Awad, 2018).

Despite this clear political bias, President Trump presents himself as an honest and impartial broker. He has tried to cast himself as uniquely suited to brokering the "ultimate deal" between Israel and Palestinians (Entous, 2018). He stated in his book *"The Art of the Deal"*: *"My style of deal-making is quite simple and straightforward. I am very high, and then I just keep pushing and pushing and pushing to get what I'm after"* (Schwartz & Trump, 1987:45). Because of this, in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, Trump has aligned his position with Israeli objectives, trying to push Palestinians into accepting any deal with Israel makes sense with Trump's bargaining strategies. On the one hand, the U.S. has drastically reduced its funding for UNRWA, whose social, health and educational services are vitally important to millions of Palestinians in Gaza, East Jerusalem, the West Bank, Syria, Jordan and Lebanon; furthermore, it has also decided to withdraw from UNESCO because the latter does accept Israeli claims about the historical sites of occupied Jerusalem.

By sharpening its role as judge and interested party at the same time, the U.S. administration seeks to further weaken and isolate the Palestinian Authority, to make it accept a final peace agreement that involves the abandonment of its historic claims in relation to Jerusalem, the right of return of the refugees of 1948 and 1967, as well as the acceptance of the borders that Israel proposes. In other words, Trump's proposal is to sweep away the Oslo process (Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 1995), which left pending negotiation of the most sensitive issues of the conflict between Arabs and Israelis: the future of Palestinian refugees; Jerusalem; water resources; Israeli settlements in the oPt; the establishment of borders and the future of the Palestinian entity. In Trump's "bargaining" vision, the solution would be imposed on rather than negotiated with the Palestinians, who are the increasingly weakest actor in this conflict. Will this strategy, which includes collective punitive measures against the Palestinian people, especially in Gaza, force Palestinian political leaders to surrender to U.S. and Israeli demands?

The United States' withdrawal from UNESCO and the future of Jerusalem

UNESCO is the United Nations' Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization. It seeks to build peace through international cooperation in the fields of education, science and culture. UNESCO's programs contribute to the achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals defined in Agenda 2030, adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 (UNESCO, n.d.).

UNESCO have suffered several withdrawals from member states, the most notorious being:

- South Africa in 1957, alleging interferences with internal racial issues in protest of its anti-apartheid policies;
- United Kingdom in 1986, when Margaret Thatcher was displeased with uncontrolled budget increases, inefficient administration and a tendency by the organization attacking Western values;
- and Singapore in 1986, due to the method Singapore's contributions were calculated.

However, all of them re-joined the organization years later. The reasons for withdrawing support from UNESCO are mainly related to funding and political pressure rather than UNESCO scope. This is also the case for United States and Israel. The United States is a founder member and Israel joined the organization in 1949. However, their relationship has been rather controversial in the last 35 years. In 1984, Ronald Reagan's administration dropped out amid allegations of mismanagement at the organization and complaints about a perceived anti-democratic agenda (McNeil, 2011). UNESCO approved a report, led by Nobel Peace Prize winner Sean McBride, in which he advocated promoting cultural and communication policies throughout the world as a mechanism to promote plurality and reduce informational monophony, as brilliantly summarized in the report's title: "Many voices, one world" (International Commission for the Study of Communication Problems & MacBride, 1980).

A powerful intellectual debate worldwide was articulating, around UNESCO, the proposal of a New World Information and Communication Order (NWICO or NWIO) that would raise barriers against transnational news - for example, the big international agencies - and promote regulation of the media in developing countries (Badillo, 2017). The developed countries were offended by the proposal because it promulgated the right of everyone to access new technologies and the right of everyone to issue any type of information, a fact that diminished the economic interests of developed countries. The United States re-joined UNESCO in 2003 after a nearly 20-year absence. It returned only when UNESCO's New Communication Strategy (UNESCO, 1997), promoted by Federico Mayor Zaragoza, guaranteed a less belligerent approach towards its interests.

In announcing that the U.S. would re-join UNESCO, President George W. Bush stated, *"As a symbol of our commitment to human dignity, the United States will return to UNESCO. This organization has been reformed and America will participate fully in its mission to advance human rights and tolerance and learning."* (U.S. Department of State, 2011).

However, in 2011 the United States announced it would again withdraw its support over UNESCO's decision to admit Palestine as a member. Therefore, UNESCO had to face the loss of an estimated \$80 million in 2012. Obama's Administration had to enforce Public Law 101-246 related to this specific point *"No funds (...) shall be available for the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof which accords the Palestine Liberation Organization the same standing as member states"* (U.S. Congress, 1989).

In 2013, UNESCO responded to this decision by suspending U.S. voting rights. However, since then, the U.S. has maintained a presence at UNESCO and lobbied behind the scenes although it does not fund or vote at this UN organization.

The latest friction came after a UNESCO vote in June 2017 referring to Israel as an "occupying power" in Jerusalem. Israel immediately claimed that the organization has an evident anti-Israeli bias. During his speech at UNESCO's 39th General Conference in Paris, Carmel Shama-Hacohen, Israel's ambassador to the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization said:

“Sadly, UNESCO has been hijacked and abused as a tool for the persecution of Israel and the Jewish people, while concocting fake facts and fake history, meant to erase our history in Jerusalem and re-write global history.” (Shama-Hacohen, 2018). However, Israel reaction should be also understood as a support to the U.S. decision, trailing along the foreign policy set by the U.S. administration confirming their strategic relationship.

The Trump Administration’s support for Israeli interests was evident when officially recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. He announced his intention to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem in December 2017, and the new opening was effective in May 2018. Therefore, the U.S. supported Israel in its dispute with UNESCO and both countries began to withdraw from the organization in early 2019.

U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO adversely affects the principle of universal membership, which is of fundamental importance to the entire UN system. However, it is clear evidence of the Trump administration’s new neo-realist approached to the conflict.

The United States’ funding withdrawal from UNRWA and the future of Palestinian refugees

The UN Relief and Work Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA) began operations in 1950, funded by volunteer contributions from UN member states, to provide relief for Palestine refugees after the 1948 Arab-Israeli conflict. The Agency would keep supporting refugees until they exercise their right of return, recognized by UNGA Resolution 194.³ Without a solution to the conflict that would allow such a return, UNRWA has developed humanitarian aid and development programs aimed at Palestinian refugees for almost seventy uninterrupted years. Nowadays, the Agency provides education, medical care and emergency assistance to more than five million Palestinian refugees in the occupied Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria, and since the agency was set up, the United States has been the largest bilateral donor (UNRWA 2018b).

Palestinian refugees have suffered the consequences of the conflict from the outset. They have been deprived of their right to return and have constituted an important issue within the unrest. Dispossessed of their houses and their goods, persecuted and harassed, many continue to depend on the services of the Agency, on the host countries, and on international aid in general (Monterde, 2016). Equally important is the role played by UNRWA, in the construction of the Palestinian identity, which occurred without a specific intention by the agency to generate this new cultural entourage. In its camps, refugees were gathered according to the cities and villages of origin, which contributed to maintaining a sense of community and unity. In addition, the UNRWA files hold thousands of identity cards and property documents, films, photographs, statistics, reports, etc., that account for the process of dispossession of Palestinians and reflect their claims to return and recover lost property.

When Israel invaded the occupied Palestinian territories of Gaza, the West Bank and East Jerusalem in the 1967 Six-Day War, it signed an agreement with the United Nations allowing UNRWA to continue to administer schools, food assistance, and other social services in refugee districts. The subsequent relationship has been described as an *"uneasy marriage of convenience"* (Mitnick, 2018), because Israel has been able to control the oPt without having to provide health services or education to hundreds of thousands of refugees covered by UNRWA.

In fact, Israel had originally voted for UNRWA’s creation, and in 1967 officially invited it to continue its operations in the territories it occupied. The agency brought significant resources into

³On December 11, 1948, the United Nations General Assembly adopted resolution 194 (III), resolving that “refugees wishing to return to their homes and live at peace with their neighbors should be permitted to do so at the earliest practicable date, and that compensation should be paid for the property of those choosing not to return and for loss of or damage to property which, under principles of international law or equity, should be made good by the Governments or authorities responsible.”

the oPt, even if the Israelis sometimes argued that they could have used the same resources in better ways. Israel disparaged the idea that people could be refugees for generations but was unwilling to solve the refugee problem, either through repatriation or by annexing territories and granting citizenship to Palestinians, except in East Jerusalem. Israeli governments did not want to extend their social service responsibilities to the refugees. Perhaps improved economic conditions would reduce Palestinians' resentments of the occupation and lead political accommodation. UNRWA could help that process (Schiff, 1995: 11). According to Peter Lerner, a reserve Israeli military spokesman who also was the spokesman for the army agency that liaises with UNRWA, *"(e)very single Israeli government has permitted UNRWA to operate. When it is so enmeshed in Palestinian society, ordering an abrupt aid cut can lead to catastrophic consequences for Israelis and Palestinians alike."* (Mitnick, 2018).

The permanence of UNRWA has been politically exploited not only by Israel, but also by the Arab regimes and the Palestinian leadership itself. Its existence has been linked to reaching a just solution to the question of Palestinian refugees. According to the Arab side, such a solution would be to exercise the right of return to their homes of origin, while for the Israelis the solution lies in their definitive settlement in the places where they are located or their absorption in a third country.

In the early years of the conflict, the United States attempted to use UNRWA to definitively settle refugees in host countries, promoting developmental policies in cooperation with these states. Although this strategy failed, the United States was and continued to be a major donor, accounting for almost half of the organization's budget for decades. In 2017, it contributed around \$365 million, accounting for close to one-third of UNRWA's budget. By way of comparison, the second-largest contributor—the European Union (EU)—provided approximately \$143 million (Al-Omari, 2018).

However, the Trump Administration announced on 31st August 2018 that they will not make additional contributions to UNRWA, calling UNRWA "irredeemably flawed" and "unsustainable" (Nauert, 2018), due to support for the descendants of original refugees (Hiro, 2018).

Funding reduction for political reasons

In the statement of August 31st 2018, the U.S. Department of State indicated *"(t)he Administration has carefully reviewed the issue and determined that the United States will not make additional contributions to UNRWA (...). Beyond the budget gap itself and failure to mobilize adequate and appropriate burden sharing, the fundamental business model and fiscal practices that have marked UNRWA for years – tied to UNRWA's endlessly and exponentially expanding community of entitled beneficiaries – is simply unsustainable and has been in crisis mode for many years. The United States will no longer commit further funding to this irredeemably flawed operation"* (U.S. Department of State, 2018).

This statement claims that the U.S. bears a very disproportionate share of the burden of UNRWA's cost. However, the U.S. contribution to the UN Peacekeeping Force effective rates of assessment represented 27.89% of the total in 2019 (United Nations Peacekeeping, 2019), and it is still one of the biggest contributors to many organizations within the UN framework. Therefore, U.S. motivations for defunding UNRWA were based on political goals rather than economics.

According to the Muslim Public Affairs Council (2018), defunding UNRWA is part of a larger U.S. plan to reduce the number of Palestinians recognized as refugees. Leaked emails revealed that

Jared Kushner is trying "to disrupt UNRWA" and remove Palestinian refugee rights from the negotiating table. This organization claims that the plan is to reduce the number of Palestinians recognized as refugees from five million to less than a tenth of that number – effectively eliminating the "right of return" for most Palestinians. These actions also tie into the administration's recent moving of the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem as mentioned above. The recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the defunding of UNRWA form part of a broader policy shift by this administration to reshape Middle East policy. According to Abunimah (2018), *"Israel has also called for the dismantling of UNRWA, as part of its drive to eliminate support for the rights of Palestinian refugees who remain in exile due to Israel's refusal to allow them to return home solely because they are not Jews"*. Supporting the Trump Administration's anti-UNRWA policy sets a new attitude for Israel's government on the refugee issue (Mitnick, 2018).

In response to the funding reductions implemented by the U.S., in January 2018, UNRWA (2018c) launched the *"#Dignityispriceless"* a global fundraising campaign in Gaza which sought to raise US\$500 million. By September 2018, international donors had pledged an additional \$118 million; *"(w)e are sending a message that the world does still care about the plight of Palestinian refugees"*, proclaimed UNRWA chief Pierre Krähenbühl (United Nations News, 2018). Along with these fundraising campaigns and other efforts, such as reduced expenditure amounting to US\$92 million, in 2018 the agency overcame an unprecedented deficit of US\$446 million (UNRWA, 2019). Nevertheless, UNRWA challenges keep growing: In July 2019, Al-Jazeera (Williams 2019) leaked a confidential internal report from the UN's Palestinian refugee agency's ethics office that accuses top UNRWA officials of misconduct and mismanaged. As a result, the Netherlands, Switzerland and Belgium governments have suspended their funding to the Agency.

Towards the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict?

The Trump Administration's strategy towards UNESCO and UNRWA has had a negative impact on any possible peace process relaunching, in that it has affected two of the most sensitive issues for both Israelis and Palestinians: the right of return of Palestinian refugees and the future of Jerusalem.

The right of return is considered a fundamental issue in negotiations for a peace agreement. However, moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem as well as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel further de-legitimizes the U.S.'s credibility as an honest and fair broker of peace negotiations (Muslim Public Affairs Council, 2018). Authors like Awad (2018) go further and believe that such a move could herald the end of the role of the U.S. as a broker in Israel-Palestinian peace negotiation. However, this is an unlikely scenario, given that no U.S. administration would leave Israel alone regarding regional issues, and no other states are willing to challenge U.S. influence in the conflict.

The current U.S. administration's rush to reach a peace agreement is not only based on candidate Trump's promise in this regard. A final deal between Palestinians and Israelis would mean the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict, and that change in regional politics would be advantageous in geopolitical terms for the two main U.S. allies in the region, Israel and Saudi Arabia. The end of the Arab-Israeli conflict would allow these three countries to focus –even joint- efforts against the common regional enemy: Iran.

However, a peace agreement imposed on the Palestinians stands little chance of being accepted by them and of being successful in the long term. Prominent Palestinian figures have positioned themselves in different forums on the issue. Speaking to Ma'an News Agency, the historic leader and member of the Executive Committee of the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), Dr. Hanan Ashrawi, noted that, *"Palestinians will not surrender and no amount of coercion or unwarranted collective punitive measures will bring the Palestinian leadership or people to their knees"* (Awad, 2018). In the same vein, Adam Entous (2018) describes some contentious meetings between

Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner –in charge of the U.S. negotiations in this conflict- and Saeb Erekat, a Palestinian negotiator who had worked on the Oslo Accords. According to Entous, in these meetings Erekat complained about the role taken by the new US Administration in the negotiations, telling Kushner that the U.S. was not going to make peace for Palestinians and that Washington was destroying the two-state solution. Driving Palestinians into a corner may not be the best political strategy. It will bring more distress, but not surrender.

Conclusions

In recent years, social and political changes in the Middle East have brought a re-enactment of the balance of power in the area. The Arab Spring, the proliferation of terrorist groups, civil wars in Iraq and Syria, but above all, Iran's regional rise has forced the United States to rethink its foreign policy towards that MENA region. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict has ceased to be considered the main threat and source of regional instability. Especially when evaluating the Trump Administration's perspective on the matter, forcing a peace agreement between Palestinians and Israel would create a regional alliance that would include Israel and the rest of Saudi-led Sunni ally countries against Iran.

In this context, Trump addresses neo-realistic approaches by recognizing the struggle between national interests in the international system and distrusting International Organizations. This strategy is a step away from the moral footprint of neoconservatives, thus creating a strong change from other combinations of foreign policy strategies. Furthermore, the US novel positioning in this regional conflict has been seen as an effective tool to achieve some of the objectives that are considered American national interest, particularly those that are aligned with Israeli interests.

When the peace process between Palestinians and Israelis began in 1993, the conflict's most sensitive issues were postponed until the end of the negotiations, namely: the refugee question, Jerusalem, Jewish settlements, water, and borders. However, the stalemate in the negotiations has prevented an agreement from being reached on the "final status" of the Palestinians in the region.

Reaching a real and lasting peace in the Middle East means applying a fair solution to each of these questions. Yet perhaps the hardest ones are, first, the future of the more than five million Palestinian refugees currently living under military occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, in the midst of a civil war (Syria), or under governments who very often regard them with suspicion (Lebanon and Jordan); and second, the future of Jerusalem, a holy city for both Palestinian and Israeli people.

Unfortunately, the policy pursued by the Trump Administration seems to be aimed at the imposition of an agreement based on *faitsaccomplis* and inequality of power. On the one hand, it is worth mentioning U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and the recent support for Israel annexing the Syrian Golan Heights. Moreover, it is evident that power asymmetries among the contenders have been exacerbated by the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO and the UNRWA budget cut. The U.S. goal when using international organizations as a tool to support its foreign policy seems to be to force Palestinian representatives to accept any agreement in the face of the threat that their situation will worsen with the withdrawal of international aid to their cause.

Since 1980, the U.S. has used its participation within UNESCO to exert pressure on decisions conflicting with its own interests. Since UNESCO's recognition of Palestine in 2011, the United

States has aligned its interests with those of Israel to the extent that both are currently detached from the organization. The historical narrative created about heritage is a cornerstone element in the conflict seeking to justify certain historical rights over the territory. For this reason, UNESCO stands as a key institution in the justification of Israel's interests in Palestine.

The UNRWA's future is still uncertain. Almost since its creation, this organization has survived in a practically permanent budget crisis situation, but now it is facing the biggest economic challenge in its history because of the U.S. cuts. If the Agency introduces further substantial cuts to its services, Palestinian refugees could start exerting strong political opposition through public demonstrations and violent acts in all the areas where the agency operates. For Palestinians, the UNRWA is not only a service provider but also a strong symbol of the international commitment to protect Palestinian refugees' right of return.

The chances of success of the new U.S. strategy do not seem very high. The Palestinian leaders do not seem willing to accept an imposed peace agreement that fulminates their aspirations, which are supported by International Law and reinforced by innumerable resolutions of the United Nations General Assembly, Security Council,⁴ Human Rights Council⁵ or International Court of Justice⁶. Even in the hypothetical case that they would give in to U.S. pressure, the Palestinian population would reject this kind of agreement and would probably start an escalation of protests throughout the Middle East. Given this possible scenario, Palestinian leaders are more likely to reject any kind of imposition and wait for a better interlocutor to reach the White House.

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⁴ Among others, A/RES/194 (III) (1948) and A/RES/3236 (1974) regarding Palestinian refugees' right of return; A/RES/2253 (1967) Condemns Israel's measures to change the status of Jerusalem as invalid; A/RES/3236 (XXIX) (1974), states for economic sanctions and an arms embargo on Israel until it withdraws from all territories occupied in 1967. S/RES/237 (1967) urges Israel to allow return of 1967 Palestinian refugees; Res. S/RES/242 (1967) and S/RES/338 (1973), calls upon Israel to withdraw its forces from occupied territories; S/RES/478 (1980) considers Israel attempts to change the legal status of Jerusalem are invalid; S/RES/446 (1979) declares legally invalid the Israeli settlements in the oPt.

⁵ Several resolutions regarding Human Rights situation in oPt, including East Jerusalem, Israeli settlements, violation of International Law in oPt, etc.

⁶ For example, on July 2004, the ICJ handed down its advisory opinion against Israel's separation wall in the oPt.

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