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Quaker United Nations Office

## Threats to United States Support for the United Nations An Overview

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*Since 1947, the Quaker United Nations Office (QUNO) has worked with diplomats, UN officials, and civil society to support a United Nations that prioritizes peace and prevents war. For more information, contact: [guno@afsc.org](mailto:guno@afsc.org), sign up for our newsletter [here](#) and visit our [website](#).*

Despite the global impact of the United Nations (UN) in its three pillars of work - human rights, peace and security, and development - and the vital contributions made by the United States to the organization, there are growing concerns that the new US administration may seek to further alter its support for and funding of the UN. This concern comes after a range of proposals have emerged from the White House and from Congress, including the budget proposed by the White House in March, various draft Executive Orders that became public during the first weeks of the administration, and the introduction of legislation in the House and Senate. These measures focus in varying ways on issues related to US funding and involvement in the UN, and illustrate an approach that, if undertaken, would drastically change financing for the UN.

On 30 March, first steps were taken to reduce funding with the withdrawal by the US of financial [contributions](#) to the [UN Population Fund](#) (UNFPA), which works in more than 150 countries and territories carrying out lifesaving women's health programming. Furthermore, on 5 May the President [signed](#) the FY17 omnibus spending bill, which funds the government for the remainder of the fiscal year. While the bill maintained funding levels for the UN's regular budget and that of many of its agencies, the Administration halted funding for environmental work, such as that done by the [Green Climate Fund](#), and decreased peacekeeping financial support by 3%. Meanwhile, the spending bill increased military spending by \$15 billion, and border security by \$1.5 billion. Weeks later, the White House then released its full proposed budget, which financially illustrates the Administration's policy priorities. While the budget is just a proposal at this stage and requires action by Congress, it clearly shows an interest by the White House to cut funding to UN programs, decrease peacekeeping funding, and decrease the Contributions to International Organizations account, which includes the UN Regular Budget.

In addition to decreasing or ending such funding contributions, the US government [announced](#) its intention to withdraw from the Paris Climate Change Agreement on 1 June 2017, an agreement that was adopted by 196 Parties in December 2015. This ambitious agreement seeks to bring together all nations to respond to the ever-growing climate change threats impacting the world now and in the future. Per the Agreement's withdrawal terms, the US can officially withdraw in 2020 and will join Syria and Nicaragua as the only countries that are not parties, with Nicaragua not having joined because it considered that the agreement did not go far enough to address climate threats and needs. The withdrawal from the Paris Agreement was then followed by announcements to leave UNESCO, halt participation in the Global Compact on Migration, and to withhold more than half of the US funding commitment to the UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA). With regards to UNESCO, the US [declared](#) in October 2017 that, as of the end of 2018, it will serve as a

nonmember observer state to the educational, science and cultural body. On the issue of migration, the US government [stated](#) it will no longer engage in the Global Compact out of concerns that the process will infringe on the country's sovereign right to enforce immigration laws and policies. The Global Compact process followed the adoption, in 2016, of the [New York Declaration for Refugees and Migrants](#), a non-binding pledge by all 193 Member States that "expresses the political will of world leaders to save lives, protect rights and share responsibility on a global scale." It was announced in January 2018 that the US government will indefinitely [withhold](#) \$65 million of its \$125 million funding commitments to UNRWA, the UN agency responsible for providing relief and work programs for Palestinian refugees. In response, UNRWA [launched](#) a funding appeal on 22 January to raise the deficit and ensure that programming is not jeopardized.

The various draft legislative and budgetary measures, and the actions taken by the US government thus far, show the growing uncertain environment facing the UN and global efforts for peace more broadly. Below you will find further information on the impact of the UN; how the US has funded the United Nations; what the White House's proposed budget, US House and Senate bills, and draft Executive Orders call for; avenues for you to show your support for the United Nations; and materials for further reading.

## Impact of the work of the United Nations

The diverse [work](#) of the United Nations includes efforts to address the most critical and pressing issues facing the world, as well as to undertake initiatives to improve our daily lives. The past decade has witnessed a doubling in the number of people in need of humanitarian assistance, and the UN works globally to provide immediate support to victims of conflict and natural disasters. The United Nations seeks to support countries emerging from conflict so they can build long-term, sustainable peace. Such work is vitally important given the cyclical nature of war.

But the UN does far more than prevent conflict and provide humanitarian services. Its Members have taken unprecedented action to address the continued effects of climate change and to strive to protect the earth for generations to come through the adoption of the Paris climate agreement. Through its global health work, the United Nations has guided the eradication of diseases, supported maternal and child health, and combated the spread of health crises. Initiatives to support education and literacy have led to a rise in access to schooling and the increase in literate adults, while work in the area of telecommunications sets the norms to connect people throughout the world. Focus by the UN on combating hunger, and undertaking efforts to ensure food security, including through support to small-scale farmers who provide at least 70% of the world's food, contributes to a people-centered approach to development, and the protection of the environment. Recently, in adopting the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, all Member States committed to a "*plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity*" that, through achievement of its 17 Goals, will lead to the strengthening of more peaceful, just, and inclusive societies.

Through its various bodies, such as the [Security Council](#), [General Assembly](#), [Peacebuilding Commission](#) and [Human Rights Council](#), Member States lend their voices to call for upholding human rights, and to take measures to build and promote sustainable peace. Additionally, the United Nations provides the only forum for all Member States to participate as equals within the UN General Assembly, and to contribute towards fostering a peaceful world.

In sum, we are supported on a daily basis, either directly or indirectly, by the breadth of work conducted by the United Nations at its headquarters, and in countries across the world.

Despite its tremendous impact, financial support for the UN is just a fraction of annual military spending. Global military spending exceeds \$1.6 trillion USD, dwarfing the \$8 billion USD budget for UN peacekeeping and the total UN-related spending of \$48 billion USD. Furthermore, research has [shown](#) that taking steps to invest in prevention – rather than responding to crises – is “*on average, 60 times more cost effective*,” illustrating the urgent and economical needs for supporting the work of the UN and other actors working towards peace.

## Background on US funding to the UN

### What does the US contribute?

The United States, as a founding member of the UN, a permanent member on the Security Council, and a substantial [financial contributor](#) to the UN, plays a critical role in the work of the United Nations. The US provides 22% of the overall budget, and 28% of the budget for peacekeeping operations.

While the US provides the highest percentages allotted for a Member State, these financial contributions amount to a mere 0.1% of the overall US federal budget. The amount provided to the UN by the US is put into perspective when considering how much the country [spends](#) on its military budget – almost \$600 billion, or \$1 trillion including costs related to past wars - which is more than a third of global military spending.

### Has the US threatened or defunded UN agencies before?

The current risk to the UN may be the most extreme, but the US has previously reduced funding for agencies, most notably the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

In 1994, the US government put into law a [restriction](#) on funding “*to any affiliated organization of the United Nations which grants full membership as a state to any organization or group that does not have the internationally recognized attributes of statehood.*” This law was then put into action in 2011 when UNESCO [voted](#) to grant Palestine full membership into the body.

Prior to the 2011 vote, the US provided 22% - or \$80 million annually – to UNESCO. This funding was then cut from the UNESCO budget. As a result, UNESCO had to undergo a period in which it [suspended](#) new programs while it sought to identify a course forward for making up for the funding loss. Additionally, in 2013, the United States [lost](#) its voting rights at UNESCO after not having contributed to the budget as UNESCO rules require suspension if a Member has not paid dues in two years. The [withdrawal](#) of the US from UNESCO, announced in October 2017, will result in the country becoming a nonmember observer state, meaning that the US can continue to engage in discussions within the body but will not have any access to voting rights going forward.

## Current proposals before the US government – what risk to the UN?

There are multiple proposals before the US government, which are in various forms and have different potential implications. It remains to be seen if and how the below drafts or proposals will move forward.

## White House Budget Proposal

In March 2017, the White House released its proposed budget, [\*America First: A Budget Blueprint to Make America Great Again\*](#), which outlines the president's budgetary vision for the US government. The budget calls for a \$54 billion increase in defense spending, and identifies a range of drastic cuts to offset the rise in military costs. Key targets are those domestic departments and programs focusing on foreign aid and diplomacy, as well as contributions made to international organizations, including the United Nations and programs affiliated with it. The budget calls for an end to all US support of UN climate change programs, an unspecified reduction in contributions to the overall UN budget, and a decrease to UN peacekeeping so that the US does not provide more than 25% of the peacekeeping budget.

In May 2017, the White House released its full proposed budget, [\*A New Foundation for American Greatness\*](#). When it comes to the UN, this budget continues the track of cutting funding for the organization, including its environmental programs, a decrease in peacekeeping funding, and cuts to the Contributions to International Organizations account, which includes the UN Regular Budget.

The UN Secretary-General (UNSG) has warned about the potential effects of funding cuts, [\*stating\*](#) that they could lead to *"the adoption of ad hoc measures that will undermine the impact of longer-term reform efforts."* Furthermore, the UNSG's spokesman [\*stated\*](#) that the proposals in the May budget would *"simply make it impossible for the UN to continue all of its essential work advancing peace, development, human rights, and humanitarian assistance."*

The proposed White House budgets is one step in the overall US budgetary process. Congress is ultimately responsible for adopting the budget, and while it has been [\*said\*](#) that the President's proposal is *"dead on arrival,"* there is great concern that the proposal will lead to negotiation processes that will result in some agreed upon decreases to UN funding.

## Proposed House and Senate Legislation

A bill becomes a law after it passes the House of Representatives and the Senate, and then is signed by the President. On average, only about 5% of all bills become laws. That said, proposed legislation can influence discussions and messaging on the issues in focus.

Lawmakers in both the House and Senate have proposed various pieces of legislation relating to US funding of and engagement with the UN. Some bills, such as the [\*American Sovereignty Restoration Act of 2017\*](#) brought forward in the House, serve as a re-introduction of past legislation that has been repeatedly brought by a small minority of lawmakers. While this draft bill, and its predecessors, is alarming as it calls for drastic actions, including full withdrawal from the UN, it has historically only been supported by a small minority of lawmakers.

There are new bills before the House and Senate, however, which could potentially affect US financial support for the UN. These bills have been brought forward in response to the passage of UN Security Council (UNSC) [\*Resolution 2334\*](#) that reaffirms international law in respect of Israeli settlements and

calls for renewed diplomatic efforts. The [Countering Anti-Semitism and Anti-Israel Activities Act](#) introduced in the Senate calls for a halt to funding of the UN Human Rights Council and the [UN Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East](#) until certain actions are undertaken by the US Secretary of State. Bills entitled, *Safeguard Israel Act 2017*, have been brought forward in both the [House](#) and [Senate](#). These bills call for a halt to all UN funding until Resolution 2334 is repealed.

While it is unlikely that these bills will become law in their current form, their messaging has the potential to influence upcoming deliberations on and action by Congress on the federal budget. In April, Congress will be adopting legislation to set out the federal budget for Fiscal Year 2017. It is possible that, as a result of the momentum surrounding these bills, lawmakers could settle on a funding reduction that would prove detrimental to the United Nations. Such a reduction could move through Congress as lawmakers may view this as a compromise, given that the initial bills sought a complete halt to UN funding.

### Draft Executive Orders

Presidents have used Executive Orders to implement policies or action across a range of issue areas. This power, while not specifically outlined, is drawn from Article II of the Constitution, which focuses on the powers and duties of the Executive Branch.

The new US Administration has been active in signing Executive Orders on a range of matters. Draft Executive Orders have also been leaked publicly, with some causing great alarm as a result of their content and potential impact. Two such drafts relating to the United Nations and multilateral treaties have been particularly concerning and deserve attention.

As first reported in the [New York Times](#) in January 2017, the US government has produced a draft Executive Order entitled [Auditing and Reducing US funding of International Organizations](#) that, if signed, would create a committee to review US funding to international organizations, including the United Nations. Amongst the committee's charges is a call for it to recommend "at least a 40 percent overall decrease" in US funding for international organizations, including the United Nations. Such a cut would not only drastically limit the involvement of the US within the UN, but would threaten the lifesaving work carried out by the United Nations every day.

Additionally, the US government has produced a draft Executive Order entitled [Moratorium on New Multilateral Treaties](#) that, if signed, would create a committee to assess all multilateral treaties to determine if the US should remain a signatory, and halt all new treaties until the committee has conducted its review.

At the time of writing, some [reporting](#) has suggested that the draft Executive Orders are on hold, but it remains unclear if the drafts will be taken off the table completely. Even if taken off the table, the existence of such draft Executive Orders gives insight into the views of the US government on its approach to the United Nations, and should remain a concern for those who support the work of the UN.

## How to show your support for the United Nations

### For those in the US

- Friends Committee on National Legislation  
[Fully Fund the UN!](#)  
Access a customizable letter to directly contact your state Senators to urge them to show their support for the United Nations.
- Better World Campaign  
[Tell US Leaders: Defunding or withdrawing from the UN is not an option](#)  
Contact your elected official using a customizable template letter.
- United Nations Association of the United States  
[Advocacy - US UN Funding](#)  
Find a number of options for action ranging from contacting your members of Congress to ways to engage on social media.

### For those outside of the US

- Consider engaging with your government to voice support for the United Nations. Your local UN Association can also serve as a great start for learning more.

## Further reading

### Additional background information on UN funding

- Better World Campaign  
[The Devastating Impacts of Cuts to United Nations Funding](#): This document explores what the implementation of the White House's proposed budget would mean, and how such cuts would adversely affect US national security.  
[Importance of Funding the UN](#): Learn about the types of funding given to the UN - assessed and voluntary - and why US funding to the UN is important.  
[Why Congress Must Oppose Efforts to Withhold Funding to the UN](#): This document explores the contributions made by the UN, and how this work contributes to advancing US priorities.
- United Nations Association of the United States  
[UN Funding](#): This brief document explores the importance of US funding to the UN, and discusses how cutting funding the UN will undermine US security.
- Alliance for Peacebuilding  
[Talking Points for the Peacebuilding Community](#): While these points address funding cuts facing domestic agencies such as the State Department and USAID, they give a useful summary of the importance of investing in peace, diplomacy, and development.