

[US Rejection of UN Membership for Palestine Betrays Claimed Two-State Position](#)

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Robert A. Wood, deputy permanent representative of the United States to the United Nations, vetoes Palestine's U.N. membership during the Security Council meeting on April 18, 2024. (Photo: Manuel Elias/United Nations)

Last week, the United States [cast](#) the lone dissenting vote in the UN Security Council, thereby vetoing Palestine's application to join [Israel](#) and the world's other 192 countries as a full members state of the United Nations. While Biden has praised the UN for admitting Israel in 1949 over the objections of the indigenous Palestinian population and its Arab neighbors, he insists that the UN must not recognize [Palestine](#) unless it is approved by Israel, which categorically rules out ever doing so.

According to Biden's [Deputy UN Ambassador Robert Wood](#) "The issue of full Palestinian membership is a decision that should be negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians," [insisting](#) "it will only come from direct negotiations between the parties."

[Israel's UN ambassador Gilad Erdan](#), not surprisingly, categorically rejects Palestinian membership, claiming that it would threaten Israel's survival. [The representative](#) of that far-right government thanked the United States and President Biden in particular "for standing up for truth and morality."

Biden's UN ambassador [Linda Thomas-Greenfield](#) also defended the decision on the grounds that the [Gaza Strip](#), part of what would become Palestinian, is "being controlled by a terrorist organization." When ISIS controlled a significantly larger portion of Iraqi and Syrian territory, however, there were no U.S. objections to those countries being members of the United Nations.

Currently, Palestine is recognized by the United Nations as non-member observer state, the same status as the Vatican. On April 8, the Security Council asked its membership committee to review the Palestinian Authority's application to become a full member state, which has been on hold since 2011 as a result of U.S. opposition. Full membership would not only give Palestine the right to vote on UN resolutions, but it would strengthen the legal case against the ongoing Israeli occupation of the West Bank and other Palestinian lands initially seized in the June 1967 war.

The United States was determined not to allow that to happen.

This is yet another indication of the insincerity of the Biden administration's claim that it supports a "two-state solution" — a Palestinian state on at least some portion of the West Bank and Gaza Strip alongside a secure Israel. Despite rhetoric to the contrary, the Biden administration and Congress have been working hard to ensure that that does not come about.

The [State of Palestine](#) was declared in 1988 and has since been recognized by 140 countries. France, Ireland, Spain, and Slovenia have recently announced their intention to recognize Palestine as well. The [U.S. State Department](#), however, insists that UN recognition would be "premature."

Why do Biden and Democratic congressional leaders still claim to support a two-state solution when they are going to such great lengths to prevent one?

The Palestinian Authority (PA), the recognized Palestinian government, controls most of the urban areas in the West Bank with some limited administrative control of larger areas, though Israel controls security for most of the territory it initially seized in 1967, and its armed forces routinely enter even the nominally PA-run urban areas with impunity. (Hamas, the rebel Islamist faction that forcibly seized the Gaza Strip in 2007, is not recognized as legitimate government by any country.)

Unlike most governments that support a two-state solution, the United States only recognizes Israel, not Palestine. Indeed, U.S. policy is to refuse to open any correspondence with Palestinian officials which includes their national emblem or anything else referencing the "State of Palestine."

And, while the Biden administration and the [Democratic Party](#) recognize Jerusalem as the undivided "capital of Israel," they deny such an acknowledgement for Palestine, despite Jerusalem for many centuries serving as the center of Palestinian cultural, academic, political and religious life. President Joe Biden has even refused to reopen the U.S. Consulate in occupied East Jerusalem, which had served Palestinian interests since the 1930s until Donald Trump ordered it closed in 2019.

The entire Palestinian government has recognized Israel for decades. To ensure that doesn't change, [U.S. law](#) says all assistance to the Palestinian Authority will be eliminated unless "all its ministers publicly accept Israel's right to exist and all prior agreements and understandings with the United States and Israel." However, despite the fact that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's entire cabinet refuses to accept Palestine's right to exist and does not accept many of the prior agreements and understandings with the United States and the PA, U.S. aid to Israel is at an all-time high.

All Arab states have [agreed to recognize Israel](#) in return for Israel recognizing Palestine. To remove that leverage, [bipartisan legislation](#) passed by Congress and signed by Biden in 2022 requires the State Department to develop "a strategy on expanding and strengthening" efforts to convince countries which have not done so already to unilaterally recognize Israel and to "leverage diplomatic lines of effort and resources to encourage normalization." By contrast, the United States has actively discouraged countries from recognizing Palestine, even using the [Foreign Assistance Act](#) and other measures to pressure them not to.

Unlike the Republican Party, which rejects any kind of Palestinian statehood, the 2020 [Democratic Party platform](#) claims to support “the right of Palestinians to live in freedom and security in a viable state of their own.” However, Biden’s representatives blocked inclusion of any language that would condemn or even mention the ongoing Israeli occupation and colonization of the West Bank. The platform does, however, reject calls for the United States to pressure Israel to allow Palestinian statehood through conditioning military aid, insisting such taxpayer-funded arms transfers remain unconditional. It also criticizes international civil society campaigns to boycott companies and other entities supporting Israeli occupation and settlements.

Though Biden, in his 2024 State of the Union address, reiterated that “the only real solution to the situation is a two-state solution over time,” he has given no indication that he is willing to take any steps to make that possible. As Matthew Duss of the Center for International Policy noted in a recent article in [The New Republic](#) on the Palestinian quest for statehood, the Democrats’ view is that, “Violent resistance is unacceptable. Nonviolent resistance is also unacceptable. The only acceptable path to liberation is to negotiate with an Israeli government that is fundamentally opposed to granting it and is continually protected by the U.S. Congress from any consequences for that opposition.”

Indeed, the Biden administration and Congress have long taken the position that Palestinian statehood is only acceptable on terms voluntarily agreed to by Israel in bilateral negotiations. This comes despite the fact that there have been no such negotiations since 2015 and the Israeli government categorically rules out allowing any kind of Palestinian state.

Contrast this position with the United States’ reaction to Iraq’s invasion and occupation of Kuwait in 1990. There was no insistence that it be left to bilateral negotiations between the occupier and the occupied nation. Indeed, the United States went to war to free Kuwait from Iraqi rule on the grounds that countries cannot expand their territory by force and that people have the right to self-determination. This principle does not apply to conquests by U.S. allies, however.

It was the United Nations that established the state of Israel through United Nations General Assembly [Resolution 181](#) in 1947, a decision which has long been celebrated by Biden and other Democratic leaders. However, these same leaders categorically reject any role for the United Nations in establishing a state of Palestine.

Earlier this month, the United States was one of only two countries in the 47-member UN Human Rights Council to vote against [a resolution](#) which “reaffirmed its support for the solution of two States, Palestine and Israel, living side by side in peace and security.”

Even prior to the recent veto, the United States has been quite vehement about making sure the United Nations does not support Palestinian self-determination; it has been U.S. policy since 1990 to withdraw funding from any United Nations agency which grants Palestine full member status. When Palestine was admitted to the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 2011, the Obama administration suspended funding. This 22 percent reduction greatly harmed UNESCO’s important work to improve literacy, protect women’s rights, provide technical training and education, preserve regional and cultural history, encourage scientific research, protect independent media and press freedom, promote cultural diversity, and set international standards for artificial intelligence and technology education. The U.S. position was that opposing Palestinian membership in that body was more important than supporting UNESCO’s work.

In 2018, President Trump withdrew from the organization altogether, making the United States the only UN member to not be part of UNESCO.

In 2023, Biden announced that the United States would be rejoining UNESCO and begin paying its dues, enacting a waiver to the congressional ban but including a proviso that the United States would cut all funding to the United Nations if Palestine was admitted as a full member state. [Robert Wood](#), deputy U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, said that if Palestine was recognized by the world body as a whole, it would mean “funding would be cut off to the UN system, so we’re bound by U.S. law.” Mae Elise Cannon, executive director of [Churches for Middle East Peace](#), told *Truthout* that when she and other representatives from church groups met earlier this month with a high-ranking U.S. official in Washington, they were told that the Biden administration would indeed withdraw all funding for all UN agencies if Palestine was admitted as a member state, as well as demanding their UNESCO dues be refunded.

The Biden administration and Congress are also determined to punish the Palestinians directly for pursuing recognition of statehood. The recently passed [2024 Appropriations bill](#) promises to cut all U.S. funding for the Palestinian Authority if “the Palestinians obtain the same standing as member states or full membership as a state in the United Nations or any specialized agency thereof outside an agreement negotiated between Israel and the Palestinians.”

As prominent journalist and commentator [Peter Beinart](#) said on social media: “Most Democratic leaders don’t actually support 2 states. In practice, they support 1 state that denies millions of Palestinians basic rights.”

What is particularly disheartening is that the Palestinian Authority, the Palestine Liberation Organization, and the ruling Fatah party are simply demanding control of 22 percent of historic Palestine, an area only slightly larger than the state of Delaware. This is less than half of what the United Nations initially called for in resolution 181. The longstanding U.S. position, however, is that while Israel must be able to hold on to the 78 percent of Palestine it has controlled since the 1948-49 war, Palestinians must be willing to compromise on how much of what remains they could govern.

Former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak’s supposed “generous offer” of a Palestinian state in the 2000 Camp David talks would have not only reduced Palestinian control to barely 18 percent and not included most of occupied Arab East Jerusalem and its environs, but the remainder would have been divided into four noncontiguous cantons with Israel controlling the air space, water resources, and the movement of people and goods between them.

While Republicans’ strident opposition to Palestinian statehood is clearly rooted in bigotry, the Democratic leadership’s role is more like that of the “white moderate” described in [Martin Luther King Jr.](#)

Even if Netanyahu and his far right government are replaced, there is no conceivable Israeli coalition government that could come to power in Israel that would be willing to offer anything close to what even Barak was willing to offer. Indeed, in February, 99 out of the 120 members of the Israeli Knesset went on record [in opposition](#) to international recognition of a Palestinian state.

As a result, many longtime supporters of a two-state solution in Palestine, Israel, and elsewhere now believe that Israeli colonization of the West Bank with Israeli settlements, made possible by the U.S. blocking the UN Security Council from enforcing resolutions citing their illegality, has changed the demographics to the extent that the establishment of even a Palestinian mini-state is now impossible. Many activists have moved from an anti-occupation focus to an anti-apartheid focus, calling for a single binational state between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea with guaranteed equal rights for both peoples, a position which a bipartisan majority of the U.S. House of Representatives recently [declared](#) is somehow “a genocidal call to violence to destroy the state of Israel and its people.”

Fear that time may be running out for a two-state solution has led moderate Zionist groups like [J Street](#) to call for the United States to recognize Palestine as part of a comprehensive peace initiative. Given such divisions within Zionist groups in Washington, it would be inaccurate to characterize Democratic rejection of such proposals simply as a result of pressure from “the Zionist lobby.”

In light of all this, why do Biden and Democratic congressional leaders still claim to support a two-state solution when they are going to such great lengths to prevent one? They recognize that the [vast majority of their constituents](#) believe that Palestinian Arabs, like Israeli Jews, have a right to statehood. Constituent pressure is likely the major reason that Biden, who strongly opposed Palestinian statehood for most of his long Senate career, at least claims to support it now.

While Republicans’ strident opposition to Palestinian statehood is clearly rooted in bigotry, the Democratic leadership’s role is more like that of the “white moderate” described in Martin Luther King Jr.’s [“Letter from a Birmingham Jail,”](#) who professes to support the goals but not the methods, who insists on endless negotiations with oppressors who refuse to compromise, and who “believes he can set the timetable for [someone else]’s freedom.”

Until more Democrats recognize the duplicity of their leadership, the Biden administration and congressional leaders will continue to give lip service to a two-state solution while blocking every avenue to actually make that possible.

An earlier version of this column [appeared](#) at Truthout.