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U.S. to free up aid to Palestinians In balancing act, millions go to Abbas, needy in Gaza Strip

Media Mention of Ghaith al-Omari in The Chicago Tribune - June 20, 2007 - 11:00pm
http://archives.chicagotribune.com/2007/jun/19/news/chi-mideast_silvajun19 [1]

WASHINGTON - The Bush administration promised direct financial aid Monday to a new West Bank-based Palestinian government that is amenable to peace with Israel, while offering indirect humanitarian aid for Palestinians in Gaza following the territory's takeover by the militant Hamas organization.

By [Mark Silva](#) [2] and [Washington Bureau](#) [3]
[June 19, 2007](#) [4]

As the White House confronts a worsening schism among warring Palestinian factions, perhaps the most critical and elusive challenge lies in bringing about the reunification of a Palestinian Authority committed to President Bush's long-stated goal of two nations living side by side in peace, a task for which the administration acknowledged it has no "magic wand." Five years to the week after Bush articulated a goal of a "two-states solution" for Israelis and Palestinians, the hostile takeover of Gaza by Hamas, which the White House calls a terrorist organization and which rejects Israel's right to exist, poses the toughest obstacle yet. After a tumultuous weekend in which Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas moved to establish a new government in the West Bank, the White House acted to bolster Abbas, with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announcing the U.S. will release up to \$86 million in aid to the Palestinian Authority that had been frozen after Hamas gained control of the Palestinian parliament in elections last year.

Bush also telephoned Abbas to pledge U.S. support for his Fatah Party's new government. Aid to Gaza Strip

At the same time, Rice announced that the U.S. would steer \$40 million in humanitarian aid to Palestinians in Gaza through a United Nations relief agency, in a bid to prevent roughly 1.5 million Palestinians living there from becoming victims of the political turmoil and sinking even further into destitution.

"We are at a critical juncture for the Israeli and Palestinian peoples, one at which the choices are ever more clear," Rice said Monday. "We must take hold of this moment to make new progress toward the vision that President Bush laid out five years ago this week: Two states, Israel and Palestine, living side by side in peace and security."

The European Union, traditionally the largest donor to the Palestinian Authority, also announced Monday that the 27-nation bloc would resume direct financial aid to Abbas' government. The money, hundreds of millions of dollars, will be used to pay civil servants' salaries, and Abbas' new government also wants to pay civil servants in Gaza.

The maneuvering came on the eve of Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's visit to the White House on Tuesday. Olmert announced Monday that Israel would free more than \$500 million in tax collections for the government of Abbas that had been frozen after Hamas gained power last year.

"We will cooperate with this government," Olmert said in New York. "We didn't want these moneys to be taken by Hamas in order to be used as part of their terrorist actions."

Bush and Olmert believe the tenuous Abbas-led government in the West Bank holds the best prospect for a peaceful resolution of a deepening Israeli-Palestinian conflict. At the same time, experts said, the U.S. cannot simply abandon the Palestinians isolated within Hamas-run Gaza. The U.S. for now is trying to walk that delicate balance.

"Hamas sought to divide the Palestinian nation – we reject that," Rice said. "It is the position of the United States that there is one Palestinian people and there should be one Palestinian state."

Bush most forcefully articulated his ideas regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in a Rose Garden address on June 24, 2002, when he said, "My vision is two states, living side by side in peace and security." Those comments came after the Sept. 11 attacks but before the launch of the Iraq war, as Bush faced pressure from British Prime Minister Tony Blair and others to outline a vision for the Middle East beyond ousting Saddam Hussein.

Some critics fault the Bush administration's foreign policy – which has been occupied with wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and standoffs with Iran and North Korea – for investing relatively little energy in Middle East peace.

"The loss of Gaza caps what I can only call a five-year experience in virtual diplomacy," said Robert Satloff, executive director of The Washington Institute for Near East Policy. "Five years later, after doing precious little to implement that vision ... the administration has a government in Gaza that is in fact not [just] tainted by terror, it is filled only with terror."

No guarantees

Some analysts suggested that, while Hamas could be doomed to failure now that it must govern 1.5 million people without a means of paying for services, the success of Abbas' moderate government in the West Bank is in no way guaranteed.

"It's a lot easier to make sure that Hamas fails in Gaza than to make sure that Fatah succeeds in the West Bank," said Jon Alterman, director of the Middle East Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies.

"Right now, we're in the honeymoon – everyone wants to support Abbas," Alterman said. "It will require hard choices not in Week One, but in Week Five."

"This week, the West doesn't have a lot of hard choices to make in terms of supporting Mahmoud Abbas, but when Abbas starts asking for hard things and asking for Israeli concessions," he said, that will be the test.

Those requests will reach beyond financial support, Alterman said, and involve the movement of people between the West Bank and Israel, the release of prisoners and other contentious issues.

Ghaith al-Omari, a senior research fellow at the New America Foundation who was a political adviser to Abbas, predicted that Hamas, faced now with the responsibility of governing Gaza, "will fail." At the same time, he said, "No Palestinian leader can sit back and watch Gaza starve." And, he said, Bush and Olmert must reject any "assumption that we can separate the West Bank and Gaza."

Said Robert Malley, director of the International Crisis Group's Middle East program and a

former director of Arab-Israeli affairs in the Clinton administration: “You can’t have a genuine stable peace process if you don’t have a minimal Palestinian consensus. We have to relinquish these notions and myths that seem to be spreading ... of a separate West Bank and Gaza. ... You don’t cut off Gaza.”

White House officials say they already have started confronting the new reality of a friendly Palestinian government in the West Bank and a hostile one in Gaza.

“What the president’s doing right now is showing support for our friends,” said White House spokesman Tony Snow. “This is not simply the president waltzing – the president doesn’t have a magic wand.”

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