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Oral Testimony of Dr. Ziad J. Asali - February 12, 2009

Ziad Asali
House Committee on Foreign Affairs
Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia
February 12, 2009 - 12:00am

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ORAL TESTIMONY OF DR. ZIAD J. ASALI
President and Founder, American Task Force on Palestine
House Committee on Foreign Affairs, Subcommittee on Middle East and South Asia
Chairman Gary L. Ackerman (D-NY)
February 12, 2009

Mr. Chairman,

I wish to thank you and the Sub-Committee's esteemed members for the privilege to testify here, and summarize my written testimony.

Although Hamas launched reckless and provocative rocket attacks against Israel, Gazans are not Hamas, they are not combatants, and should not be punished. As a human being, and as a physician, I was horrified by the tragedy that has befallen the people of Gaza by Israel's disproportionate use of force. After an estimated 1,400 deaths and 5,400 injuries, 80% of surviving Gazans now depend on food aid and 51,000 need shelter. Their suffering must immediately stop.

Gaza lies in ruins, but Hamas still controls Gaza, and the responsible policies of the PA and other US Arab allies have been undermined.

Mr. Chairman,

The challenge now is providing essential aid and reconstruction to the people of Gaza without bolstering Hamas. Opening the crossings and implementing the Access and Movement Agreement of 2005 is essential.

Immediate humanitarian assistance should proceed unimpeded and without politicization, to deliver food, shelter, medical, fuel, and educational supplies, as well as power and sanitation. It should be provided and expanded through existing agencies, including UNRWA and international NGOs. If Hamas again attempts to interfere, it risks the suspension of aid.

Reconstruction however, takes time, and requires a new international mechanism that can ensure construction materials enter Gaza, secure from political interference. Any party blocking the reconstruction process must publically bear the blame.

This mechanism should be structured to quickly grant contracts, vet recipients, and have security and logistical components. This must be coordinated by the new US Special Envoy to the Middle East and composed of the Quartet, Egypt and the PA.

Private reconstruction should be managed through direct bank transfers from the PA to beneficiaries, as proposed by Prime Minister Fayyad, which will benefit 21,000 property owners at a cost of \$600-800 million.

The Palestinian partner for reconstruction can only be the PA under President Abbas. A non-partisan Palestinian “national accord” government could help. But it must meet the Quartet conditions, exert security control, and have the specific mandate of overseeing reconstruction, and preparing for elections.

Mr. Chairman,

There is no military solution to this conflict, and until it is resolved through two states – a secure Israel alongside a viable Palestine freed from occupation – further violence is inevitable.

Unless progress is made on advancing Palestinian statehood and quality of life through negotiations, and unless the PA and Fatah expand serious and genuine reform efforts, the PA will continue to weaken. Without progress, anything rebuilt will be destroyed. Our actions can either foster hope or feed hate.

Permanent status negotiations must continue, but cannot be sustained without expanding the space of freedom in Palestinian cities, and delivering tangible improvements in access, mobility and economic opportunities.

Settlements entrench the occupation and are the most pressing political and logistical impediment to peace. All hopes for progress depend on an immediate settlement freeze, and this is where US leadership must be asserted to preserve the credibility of the two-state solution.

US assistance must be intensified to help the PA further develop the new professional security system, which has proven its effectiveness under difficult circumstances; develop the fledgling economy unimpeded by unreasonable restrictions; and pursue good governance reform, transparency and the rule of law.

A devastated Gaza, a stagnant West Bank, and a moribund peace process would validate extremism. The losers will then be the Palestinians, Israel, the cause of peace, and, most importantly, our own national interest.

Thank you.

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