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“Gaza After the War: What Can Be Built on the Wreckage?”
Rep. Gary L. Ackerman, Chairman
House Subcommittee on the Middle East and South Asia

I'd like to start with a quote:

“Today, the subcommittee had hoped to examine those realistic and productive measures that the parties, directly and indirectly involved with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict might have taken to restore a sense of hope and maybe even make some material progress towards peace. But in light of [what's occurred]... I'm not sure what's left to discuss.

“Over the past six years there have been many plans and many envoys. And contrary to popular opinion, there hasn't been a deficit of attention, merely a deficit of performance. Commitments made to the United States, or between the parties, have often been honored only in the breach. The timing was never right. What was promised was not delivered. There was always a provocation, an incident, an upcoming election, a crisis, an attack. And so it is again today.”

Strike “what's occurred” and insert “Gaza conflict” and these sentences, which I read at this Subcommittee's first hearing in 2007, are, to my dismay, equally applicable today.

It only looks like we're going in circles. In fact, we're spiraling downward. I don't know where the bottom is, but I know it's there, and I know it's getting closer every day. It will hit with shattering force when, through malice and terror, through shallow calculation and venal self-interest, through short-sightedness and through political cowardice, the two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is finally rendered impossible.

The downward pressure comes from terrorism and the march of settlements and outposts; from the firing of rockets and the perpetration of settler pogroms. It comes in daily images of destruction and the constant reiteration that “they only understand the language of force.” It comes in the form of a political party that's always just a few months away from reform and in the form of governing coalitions whose chief purpose is avoiding new elections. It comes in the form of promises that bloodshed is what God desires and declarations that dirt and stones mean

more than human life. It comes from tunnels in Gaza and from digging in Jerusalem as well. There is no moral equivalence between these acts but they part of the same destructive dynamic.

Since the end of the Clinton Administration, the basic outlines of a peace agreement have been clear. And in fact, in its waning days, the government of Ehud Olmert—like other departing Israeli governments—further closed the gaps and added even more detail. Except now there are three sides. And one of these sides is looking for an outcome very different than the other two. Hamas is the odd-man out.

I don't know what to do about that. I don't know how you make peace with half of a want-to-be country. I don't know how you sign an agreement with an entity whose legal, political and administrative bona fides are all in question.

Which brings us to Gaza, where so many of the contradictions in this conflict come into focus. Start with Hamas, a terrorist organization, an entity beyond the pale. They are the enemy and no one can talk to them until they accept the Quartet's conditions of recognizing Israel, repudiating violence, and accepting the PLO's agreements with Israel.

Except that for years, Israel has been talking to Hamas through Egypt, and directly to the Hamas prisoners in Israeli jails. And when the IDF was in Gaza in force, with reserves building up outside, the Israelis announced that the destruction of Hamas was absolutely not their goal. Hamas is a deadly, vicious, implacable enemy, but somehow, one that had to be left in place.

For their part, the Fatah-led PA blasted Israel for the violence while quietly hoping that the IDF would cripple Hamas and pave the way for the PA's return to Gaza. Likewise, the PA has continuously denounced Hamas for the 2007 coup in Gaza and then intermittently engaged in direct talks to form a unity government with it. And even Hamas itself—the great paragon of ideological purity—insists in Arabic that its goal is the complete liberation of Palestine, which is to say, the elimination of the State of Israel, while in English it declares that Israeli withdrawal to the 1967 borders would be sufficient for a long-term, but not permanent, peace.

The one real bright spot in all the chaos is the work of the U.S. Security Coordinator, Lt. Gen. Keith Dayton, who without fanfare, and with very little money, has helped stand up a force of several hundred competent and disciplined Palestinian security forces. Trained in Jordan, and deployed successfully to major cities in the West Bank, these mostly young Palestinians have restored law and order in Jenin and Nablus, and are finally starting to put some authority back into the Palestinian Authority, which for years has been leaking the stuff like a bucket with no bottom.

I think we've learned from our own awful experience in Iraq that between politics and security, security has to come first. So what can be made of the new and growing security dynamic in the West Bank, remains to be seen. A lot will depend on whether Israel—in a break from years of habit—can recognize its own self-interest in the success of this Palestinian enterprise.

And even if that happens—and I think we really must try hard to help that process along—how developments in the West Bank can be used to reestablish a connection with Gaza is far from clear.

And it is in Gaza that the United States, Israel, the PA and the Arab states have to start coming up with answers. There are pressing humanitarian needs and a reconstruction vacuum that will surely be filled by someone, either for good or ill. Hamas is still in charge there, and, depending on what polls you read and which people you speak to, is either badly damaged or fully in command. The war either alienated them from the public or powerfully reinforced their leadership. Hamas has either suffered a severe blow or has benefitted immensely from merely surviving the Israeli onslaught. The fact that so basic a question can still be in doubt should make all of us a little more circumspect in our assertions and little less confident in our understanding of this conflict.

Fortunately, we have with us today a panel with real expertise in the politics of Israel, the Palestinian Authority and Egypt, to help us understand where the interests of these parties lie, and what equities they most need to protect in coming to grips with the future of Gaza.

It is our job to start answering these same questions for ourselves. What is it that we want? How can we achieve it? What has worked and what has to be done differently? What assumptions have we made that haven't been borne out in fact? We can start today by learning from our distinguished witnesses.

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