

HOUSE COMMITTEE ON APPROPRIATIONS
SUBCOMMITTEE ON STATE, FOREIGN OPERATIONS, AND RELATED PROGRAMS
PUBLIC WITNESSES HEARING FOR FISCAL YEAR 2020

Testimony of J Street President Jeremy Ben-Ami

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Thank you Chairwoman Lowey, Ranking Member Rogers and the other Members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to offer the pro-Israel, pro-peace movement's views on US assistance for Fiscal Year 2020 to our ally Israel, the Palestinian people and to other partners around the world. We greatly appreciate how the leaders and Members of this committee have worked together for many years, on a bipartisan basis, to ensure robust appropriations in each of these areas.

Meeting Aid Commitments to Israel

Maintaining a strong, vibrant US-Israel relationship based on shared values and goals is a core American interest. US support for Israel as a democracy and a national home for the Jewish people is an historic and crucial commitment. An enduring relationship between the United States and Israel promotes common interests in the security, economic and strategic spheres.

American assistance to Israel, including maintaining Israel's qualitative military edge, is an important anchor for any viable peace process based on providing Israel with the confidence and assurance to move forward on a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict - a two-state solution - based on land for peace. J Street strongly urges the Subcommittee to appropriate \$3.8 billion in security assistance for Israel in Fiscal Year 2020 in accordance with the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding agreed to under President Barack Obama - the biggest pledge of US military assistance made to any country in our nation's history.

US Bilateral Assistance Benefitting the Palestinian People and UNRWA Funding

Just as ensuring the security of Israel is a vital American interest, so is restoring and maintaining robust US assistance benefiting the Palestinian people through both bilateral aid and funding of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, also known as UNRWA. J Street therefore urges you to include in Fiscal Year 2020 appropriations not less than \$360 million from the Migration and Refugee Account made available to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and not less than \$225 million in Economic Support Funds (ESF) be made available for assistance for to the West Bank and Gaza.

Subject to considerable statutory limitations and congressional and executive oversight, US assistance benefitting Palestinians has served as an essential component of efforts by previous administrations of both parties to enhance security and quality of life for both Palestinians and Israelis.

Washington Institute for Near East Policy Senior Fellow Dana Stroul and former US Ambassador to Israel Daniel B. Shapiro recently wrote that this consistent bipartisan backing of bilateral Palestinian aid mirrors Israeli authorities' long-standing support for such US assistance as insurance against "a breakdown in security, an economic collapse or a humanitarian crisis in the West Bank [that] would place an enormous burden on Israel."

US assistance benefitting the Palestinian people impacts the security not just of Israel, but of the entire immediate region. This is especially true when it comes to the region-wide operations of UNRWA, to which the United States has typically provided around a quarter of the agency's operating budget.

UNRWA provides vital humanitarian and development services to Palestinian refugees, including but not limited to primary and vocational education, health care and emergency relief. UNRWA operates not just within the West Bank and Gaza, but in neighboring countries which rely upon its efforts to assist millions of Palestinians whom they would otherwise be unable to adequately provide for. UNRWA's protectees include more than two million Palestinian refugees living in Israel's strategic ally Jordan, and nearly half a million Palestinian refugees impacted by the horrific conflict in Syria.

The direct relationship between US assistance to Palestinians and the security and stability of Israel and its neighbors is undeniable, but far from the only reason Congresses and administrations have consistently provided such aid. As the work of this Subcommittee has shown time and again, in addition to the strategic necessity for generous US assistance to vulnerable populations, there is a clear moral imperative to do what we prudently can as a great country to help others in need.

US assistance to Palestinians is, in addition to its purely practical benefits, a means of recognizing their dignity and standing as individuals and as a people. It is an acknowledgment that their suffering is real, and a reiteration of our commitment to help end the conflict at the root of it.

Ms. Stroul and Amb. Shapiro importantly noted that even when Congress decides to leverage US aid in order to challenge policies of the Palestinian leadership, as was the case in consideration and passage of the Taylor Force Act, lawmakers "also voted resoundingly to maintain key

elements of assistance, including humanitarian aid, people-to-people programs [and] medical services[.]”

We want to see this bipartisan commitment continue. Yet, despite this aid being vital to Palestinian well-being, Israeli security and prospects for peace, new statutory hurdles and decisions by the current US administration are now preventing this assistance from reaching the Palestinian people.

We greatly appreciate the efforts being undertaken right now by leadership of relevant committees to find a workable fix to the unintended consequences of the Anti-Terrorism Clarification Act, which has resulted in a complete shut-down not only of USAID-administered programs in the West Bank, but of US training and funding - which J Street strongly supports - of Palestinian security forces that cooperate with Israel’s own security forces to prevent terror attacks. For all the reasons I’ve set forth here, we feel it is essential that any such fix allow both security and non-security aid to resume.

Yet the most significant barrier to ensuring that crucial US assistance reaches the Palestinian people is the Trump Administration’s decision to indefinitely end US contributions to UNRWA and to cut off all aid benefitting the Palestinian people other than funds for the funding and training of Palestinian security forces.

Through their refusal to disburse funds specifically allocated by Congress to aid the Palestinian people, the president and his administration are undermining the will of Congress and charting a dangerous course for US foreign policy.

The administration’s cuts appear expressly intended to cruelly punish Palestinian civilians and to marginalize and undercut Palestinian leadership.

Within months of taking effect, the cuts had a devastating impact on innocent women, children and families. Some of the suspended or scaled-back programs include those providing food assistance services for tens of thousands of families; clinical breast cancer treatment for thousands of women; preventive and nutritional health services for thousands of children and their caregivers; and youth engagement for over 50,000 young people intended to stem radicalization.

Choking off this assistance is nothing less than a deliberate attempt to deny a civilian population access to humanitarian aid, in order to achieve a dubious political objective. Ironically and outrageously, it has also further imperilled the security and safety of Israelis.

Israel's own security establishment has repeatedly warned that these cuts will undermine Israeli security by exacerbating Gaza's humanitarian crisis and further destabilizing the difficult situation in the West Bank — increasing the prospects for violence and unrest. As former Israel Defense Forces spokesperson Lieutenant Colonel (retired) Peter Lerner wrote in response to these cuts, “[I]n our region, poverty has been a breeding ground for radical recruitment, violence, and terrorism... hardballing the Palestinian into submission is likely to blow up on Israel's doorstep.”

The administration's actions not only ignore the counsel of Israel's top security professionals, but disregard the authority of Congress and expertise of this Subcommittee, which appropriated these funds after careful and due deliberation.

I want to thank Subcommittee Member Congressman David E. Price for authoring a September 2018 letter along with Congressmen Peter Welch and Adam Smith - also signed by Subcommittee Member Congresswoman Barbara Lee - urging the administration to abide by Congress' instructions and restore this vital assistance. As they and more than one hundred of their colleagues wrote, “Unilaterally refusing to disburse this funding disregards Congress' constitutionally given power of the purse and the will of the American people, whom Congress was elected to represent.”

Your colleagues in the Senate, led by Senators Chris Van Hollen, Dianne Feinstein and Chris Coons sent a similar letter to the administration making clear that they “strongly believe it is in the national security interest of the United States, our ally Israel, the Palestinian people, and our other partners and allies in the region to expeditiously obligate the FY17 Economic Support Fund assistance originally planned for the West Bank and Gaza and to sustain U.S. contributions to UNRWA.”

However, in the months since receiving these clear directives from lawmakers in both chambers of Congress, the administration has only doubled-down on its cruel and dangerous gambit of denying any US assistance to the Palestinian people. Mired in an exchange of heated rhetoric with Palestinian leaders -- triggered in large part by its own reckless policy decisions -- the administration seems content to allow the situation on the ground to fester, to the detriment of Palestinian well-being, Israeli security and US interests.

That is why, in addition to including robust funding for UNRWA and Economic Support Funds for the West Bank and Gaza, J Street also urges the Subcommittee to request the inclusion of directive bill language requiring the administration to actually disburse these funds within 60 days of bill enactment.

In doing so, this Subcommittee can and should lay down a clear and unmistakable marker that it rejects the administration's callous and counterproductive cuts restricting Palestinians' access to hospitals, shuttering people-to-people programs and putting the hope for a just and lasting peace further out of reach.

Foreign Assistance & Diplomacy Worldwide

The same security, strategic and moral considerations informing our support for generous US assistance to Israel and the Palestinian people hold true when it comes to US aid and diplomacy around the world. J Street therefore urges the Subcommittee to ensure robust overall funding for global US assistance, State Department personnel and operations, financial commitments to multilateral organizations and related programs supporting peace and diplomacy.

US funding for a strong Foreign Service, the United Nations, humanitarian assistance and cultural exchange programs worldwide significantly impact the ability of the United States to work in concert with our allies and the international community on matters of immense strategic importance that affect every American and Israeli.

As we have seen in previous years, diplomacy has the ability to deliver significant national security payoffs to the United States at a fraction of the cost of military action and without any of the attendant human suffering. As Admiral Mike Mullen, former chairman of the Joint Chiefs, has stated: "It is my firm belief that diplomatic programs, as part of a coordinated strategy, will save money by reducing the likelihood of active military conflict involving U.S. forces. The more significant the cuts, the longer military operations will take and the more and more lives are at risk."

An overwhelming consensus of pro-Israel organizations – including J Street – have long argued for robust US assistance worldwide, and importantly urged that Israel not be treated as a special case, exempted from cuts to foreign aid while programs affecting the rest of the world are put under increasing strain. We urge the Subcommittee to continue expanding generous US assistance to other partners and peoples in need, just as it has continued to increase aid to Israel.

Thank you again for the opportunity to provide our views on Fiscal Year 2020 appropriations. I welcome and look forward to answering any questions or requests for information that you may have.