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House Committee on Foreign Affairs

Subcommittee on Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations

United Nations' Bigotry Towards Israel;

UNRWA anti-Semitism Poisons Palestinian Youth

Testimony by:

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I worked for the UN for more than 15 years in support of conflict resolution. Most recently, from 2017-2021, I was based in Jerusalem, Ramallah and Gaza as a Senior Coordination Officer, supporting the provision of UN and international assistance for Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. I worked closely with Israeli and Palestinian officials to facilitate a variety of UN programs in Gaza ranging from construction of housing, installation of solar panels for hospitals, job creation, sewage treatment and the provision of fuel to generate electricity at Gaza's only power plant. This testimony is based on these experiences.

Background

The United Nations, its member state bodies, Secretariat and operational agencies have all been deeply intertwined with this conflict since 1947. There has hardly been a single war, violent episode or peace process between Israel and an adversary that has not in some way, shape or form, involved a United Nations response on the ground.

But the unimaginable brutality of the October 7th Hamas attack and mass kidnapping, and the severe trauma it has inflicted on the Israeli people, has ushered in a new and unprecedented period. The shockwaves will last for generations and the implications for Israel's future and its diplomatic relationships, including with the United Nations, will be profound.

Looking more closely at the role of the UN, and in the context of the current war, there are two issues that require our attention. First and foremost, there is an urgent need to ensure a sustained humanitarian response to the calamity unfolding for the civilian population in Gaza. From an operational perspective the UN is not just the best equipped to deliver assistance in a timely and effective manner, it is the only option.

Second, the UN and UNRWA in particular, have significant issues that need to be addressed over the medium to long-term. This is best placed in the context of post conflict planning and future support for Israelis and Palestinians. Together with international partners, the United States should embark on an in-depth review of the many structural, political and operational

shortcomings of the United Nations concerning this conflict, which includes an examination of antisemitism and bias against Israel.

Immediate Priorities

For now, however, as the war continues and Israel's operations against Hamas in Gaza enter a new phase, there are reportedly some 1.5 million internally displaced people out of a total population of 2.2 million. According to UNRWA, more than 700,000 of these internally displaced people are sheltering in 149 UN facilities. At least 79 UNRWA personnel have been killed and are among the more than 9,000 deaths reported by the Ministry of Health in Gaza. Medical supplies, fuel, food and water are running low and facilities for sewage treatment and water desalination have either shut down or are working at reduced capacity. In coordination with Israel, aid has started to flow across the border with Egypt but in insufficient quantities according to the UN's Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA). Secretary Blinken has been calling for humanitarian pauses, which are urgently required to allow for the major scaling up in the delivery of aid to respond to the humanitarian crisis. In light of the dire situation, there is a consensus among all actors on the need for increased aid to enter Gaza. There is no other way to do this other than with UN, and in particular UNRWA, support.

Among the 22 UN specialized agencies on the ground, UNRWA is the largest, and ordinarily works in support of some 1.5 million people in Gaza. There is no other UN agency anywhere in the world that operates like UNRWA in terms of its structure and direct provision of health, education and other services. Despite a small cadre of international civil servants at its helm, it employs more than 30,000 Palestinians in the West Bank, Gaza, Jordan, Lebanon and Syria. This includes teachers, doctors, engineers and others, 13,000 of them in Gaza alone. From a strictly operational perspective, UNRWA has traditionally been viewed by donors as a reliable partner and has maintained a close and relatively speaking, trusted, relationship with the Israeli military authorities.

In addition, UNRWA can play an important stabilizing role both when, and as the fighting de-escalates in different parts of Gaza. This is not just related to the distribution of aid, but with regard to medical and other services, schools and employment. For all intents and purposes UNRWA is the state, and in the immediate term the alternative is potential systems collapse.

As Secretary Blinken told the Senate last week, "Without swift and sustained humanitarian relief, the conflict is much more likely to spread, suffering will grow, and Hamas and its sponsors will benefit by fashioning themselves as the saviors of the very desperation that they created. Humanitarian assistance is also vital to Israel's security. Providing immediate aid and protection for Palestinian civilians in this conflict is a necessary foundation for finding partners in Gaza who have a different vision for the future than Hamas – and who are willing to help make it real."

Medium to Long-term Approach

Eventually the UN will need to address the broadly shared concerns from many donors about the sustainability of UNRWA, its financial model, its political advocacy role and how that reconciles with its largely humanitarian and development activities in its areas of operation.

Previous efforts to leverage change through defunding, have failed. UNRWA has always managed to make up the shortfall from European and other donors as it did during the previous administration's cutting of assistance between 2018-2021. Simply replacing UNRWA with other UN agencies or international entities is not a possibility, at least not in the short term. It would come with an enormous financial burden and likely fall well short in terms of capacity on the ground. But at the same time, efforts to improve the bilateral relationship, such as the current 2023-2024 Framework Agreement between the US and UNRWA, while a good start, could be expanded.

Eventually, UNRWA is more in need of an overhaul than reform. This is neither easy nor straightforward and it will take substantial political will from the United States as the largest single donor together with a broad coalition of support from other donors from the European Union, Japan and the Gulf States as well as the Palestinian Authority. The key issues range from management to the role of host countries in education and other service provision. There is also a need for clarification of UNRWA's accountability framework within the UN system. The aim should be to bring its political positioning and service delivery concept more in line with UN principles and resolutions. It would also potentially put the agency on a more stable financial footing. At the same time, it will be important to take into account the impact that any changes might have on regional stability, including on Jordan, Lebanon and Syria given the presence of UNRWA operations in those countries.

Of course, the easiest way to address UNRWA is by absorbing it into a future Palestinian state in the context of a negotiated two-state solution. This was certainly what the framers of the Oslo Accords wishfully assumed would happen some 30 years ago. But with that option seemingly more distant than ever, a concerted effort on the part of the State Department together with a broad coalition of international donors will be necessary.

If history offers any precedent, the opportunity to move ahead with a new approach to UNRWA, and international support for the Palestinians more generally, will certainly come about in the post-conflict period; planning for which is already being discussed in Washington and the region. But any post-conflict reconstruction effort and reimagining of international assistance to the Palestinians, can only succeed in transforming the reality on the ground if it is accompanied by a renewed political process aimed at resolving the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians.

The UN and Antisemitism

It should come as no surprise that antisemitism exists among some UN member state representatives and staff. Anti-Israel sentiment is also well documented among a number of the member state bodies and their subsidiary organs. But as a former UN staff member myself, I have always taken pride in the unwavering commitment of the late Kofi Annan, who courageously fought against antisemitism at the UN and across the globe throughout his terms as Secretary-General. He famously stated that, "A United Nations that fails to be at the forefront of the fight against anti-Semitism and other forms of racism denies its history and undermines its future. That obligation links us to the Jewish people, and to the State of Israel, which rose,

like the United Nations itself, from the ashes of the Holocaust.” Kofi Annan was also a passionate defender of Palestinian rights and noted that “When we seek justice for the Palestinians -- as we must -- let us firmly disavow anyone who tries to use that cause to incite hatred against Jews, in Israel or elsewhere.”

Kofi Annan was a giant of UN diplomacy and understood well his role as a voice for moral clarity, justice and peace. As is the case everywhere, leadership at the UN matters. Some of the careless language used by the current Secretary-General along with the silence of many parts of the system in the wake of the October 7th atrocities perpetrated by Hamas, suggests a betrayal of the principles outlined by Kofi Annan and his fight against antisemitism.

Despite these concerns, the UN is far too important and useful an organization for the US to disengage from. This is both for the sake of Palestinians, Israelis and the world, especially in light of the intensifying conflict in the Middle East. For now, the priority must be to support the UN and UNRWA, which is providing urgent relief and life-saving assistance to civilians in Gaza. With US support, the assistance must be significantly increased. The UN will also be critical for the post conflict period, although it is yet unclear what form that might take. And as we move closer to a day after scenario, there will also be an appropriate time to consider how to make the UN a better and more effective organization and one that can more consistently live up to the legacy and standards set by Kofi Annan.