

U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations
Chairman John F. Kerry
Opening Statement For Hearing On Middle East Peace
March 4, 2010

Chairman Kerry Opening Statement At Hearing On Middle East Peace

WASHINGTON, D.C.—Today, Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman John Kerry (D-MA) chaired a hearing focusing on the way forward in the effort to bring peace to the Middle East. The hearing follows the Chairman's recent travel to the region.

Full text of Chairman Kerry's opening statement as prepared is below:

Yesterday in Cairo, the Arab League endorsed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas' entry into US-mediated indirect talks with Israel. With negotiations likely to resume soon, we are reaching a critical juncture. And after meetings this weekend with Israeli and Palestinian leaders, I am confident that this is a real moment of opportunity.

Of course, we are all well aware of the obstacles: A profound trust deficit between Israelis and Palestinians. Deep divisions between Palestinian factions in Gaza and the West Bank. An Israeli coalition government that initially retreated from prior peace initiatives. And a profound frustration in the region with the lack of progress since the President's Cairo speech raised new hopes.

While some are deeply skeptical, I continue to believe that, to a greater extent than many realize, the conditions are in place for significant progress—but only if all sides can summon the leadership, commitment, and courage necessary to make lasting peace possible..

The fact is, most Israelis and Palestinians still recognize that a two-state solution remains the only workable solution, and the only just solution. The demographics in Israel simply demand a two-state solution if it is to remain a Jewish democracy. Israelis are troubled by what they see as growing efforts to delegitimize Israel around the world. And while many Israelis are understandably gravely concerned about the existential threat posed by Iran – and the danger of a re-armed Hezbollah and Hamas – nothing will do more to undermine extremists and rejectionists than real progress towards peace with the Palestinians.

In President Abbas and Prime Minister Fayyad, I believe we have genuine partners for peace and the Israelis seem to recognize this as well. They have made unprecedented strides in the West Bank toward building a future Palestinian state from the ground up by increasing security capacity, fighting corruption, and building institutions that can govern effectively. But they must now show progress in the peace process to capitalize on Hamas' weakness and build greater credibility with the Palestinian people.

Ultimately, it is the Israelis and the Palestinians who must reach an agreement. But America has a vital role to play as an energetic and effective broker, ensuring that both sides make good faith proposals that bring the parties closer to peace. And at the right moment, we will have a role to play in bridging any gaps between the respective positions.

Personally, I suspect that progress will likely come first on borders and security. Israelis cannot and will not accept a repeat of what happened when they withdrew from Lebanon and Gaza. Focusing on borders and security initially would help build confidence, resolve the issue of West Bank settlements and lay the groundwork for reaching agreement on other issues.

While a final agreement may seem far off, remember, it was not so long ago that Israelis and Palestinians came closer than ever to a comprehensive peace. The Clinton parameters included tough sacrifices on both sides as part of a compromise that was fair to all: A contiguous Palestinian state based on 1967 borders with land swaps; security guarantees for Israel; a capital for both states in Jerusalem; and significant compensation for refugees, with a right of return to Palestine and any resettlement in Israel subject to negotiation.

In 2002, the Arab Peace Initiative, endorsed by every Arab country, provided another key piece of the final puzzle: The promise for Israel that a comprehensive peace agreement would bring normalized relations with the

Arab world—a regional shift more plausible at a moment when Israelis and Arab governments share profound concerns about Iran.

I still believe the Clinton parameters and the Arab Peace Initiative provide the only realistic basis for lasting peace and security – and I'm confident that deep down, most of the Israeli and Palestinian people still understand this as well.

America's role is vital, but we must all be partners in this effort. Prime Minister Fayyad has laid out a detailed plan for strengthening Palestinian institutions. This effort needs greater support from the Arab world. And they all must encourage the Palestinians in the peace process – that's why the Arab League decision was so significant, and why I was particularly pleased to hear Syrian Foreign Minister Walid Moallem praise President Abbas' decision to enter proximity talks.

Finally, even as we move ahead with negotiations and building capacity in the West Bank, we must address the dire conditions in Gaza. One year ago, I saw firsthand the devastation there – and it's a great disappointment that so little has been rebuilt since then. In southern Israel, I also saw the toll that Hamas rockets had inflicted in a barrage that no country would endure interminably. And I recognize the importance of Gilad Shalit to the Israeli people. But our grievance and theirs is not with the people of Gaza. Based on my recent visit, I believe there is a way to work with international organizations to get more reconstruction material into Gaza in a way that empowers the Palestinian Authority and not Hamas.

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