

# FOUNDATION FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE

## **Testimony of Matthew Duss President, Foundation for Middle East Peace**

June 9, 2016

Good afternoon ladies and gentlemen of the committee, I thank you for this opportunity to share these views on an issue of considerable importance for U.S. foreign policy.

Before I begin I would like to acknowledge the tragic and horrific terror attack that took place in Tel Aviv yesterday, which took the lives of four innocent civilians, and send my sympathies and solidarity to the victims and their families. As I know all of you do, I look forward to the day when this conflict is ended, and the people of Israel and Palestine live together in peace and security.

The U.S. and Israel have long been close partners in a relationship built upon both strategic interests and shared democratic ideals. It is a relationship that is enduring and unwavering.

And, for decades, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict has been one of the world's most intractable problems, one with serious implications for U.S. interests. Successive American administrations, Democratic and Republican, have seen resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a key U.S. national security goal in the Middle East.

There is no question that we should be, and will be Israel's friend in resolving this conflict. At the same time, we must recognize that Israel's continued occupation of Palestinian territories and its daily restrictions on the most basic political and civil liberties of the Palestinian people run contrary to fundamental American values. We must reject the idea that we have to sacrifice our values in order to stand with our allies.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict not just threatens Israel's security, but it is also a continuing source of regional resentment that hinders the U.S.'s relationships in the region, creating a deep well of resentment from which extremists draw freely and profitably. As General James Mattis, the former head of U.S. Central Command, put it in a 2013 interview, "I paid a military security price every day as a commander of CENTCOM because the Americans were seen as biased in support of Israel."<sup>1</sup>

The creation of a Palestinian state in the territories occupied in 1967 has long been seen as a way to diminish these tensions. It is the best way for Israelis and Palestinians to achieve peace and security, and to control their destinies in their own homelands.

Yet today, the two-state solution is in crisis. Many in the region and around the world no longer believe it possible, as indiscriminate attacks against Israel continue and Israel continues to expand illegal settlements and entrench its occupation in the West Bank. But, as U.S. officials have repeatedly warned, the status quo is not holding. It is deteriorating, with growing despair and violence leading to greater despair and violence. More than ever, strong American leadership is needed, leadership that considers equally the needs, aspirations and rights of both Israelis and Palestinians.

A final peace agreement must ultimately be negotiated and agreed to by Israelis and Palestinians themselves,

but the United States can and must do more to help create the conditions under which such negotiations can succeed. This must be done with a commitment to Israel's legitimate security concerns. But it must also focus on securing the Palestinians' inalienable rights through the creation of an economically viable and independent Palestinian state.

Democratic Party policy toward Israel and Palestine should reflect the values of inclusiveness, security, democracy, justice and freedom. A two-state solution is the best way to support all of those values, to ensure the continued existence of the State of Israel and secure the rights of the Palestinian people in a state of their own. In the absence of that solution, however, and in a continuing situation of occupation, Palestinians have rights under international humanitarian law that must be recognized and protected.

### **Shifting Public Opinion**

Polls have shown for some years that Democrats are becoming more supportive of an even-handed U.S. approach to the conflict,<sup>2</sup> and the party platform should reflect that reality.<sup>3</sup> For instance, polls conducted by the Chicago Council on Global Affairs since 2002 have consistently found that "solid majorities of Democrats and independents and about half or more of Republicans repeatedly endorsed keeping a nonaligned U.S. role" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.<sup>4</sup> This should not be interpreted in any sense as hostility toward Israel, but rather as a recognition that the common interests of Americans, Palestinians and Israelis are best served by the U.S. acting as an effective mediator.

### **The Israeli-Palestinian Impasse**

This will be no small task, given recent positioning by both the Israelis and the Palestinians.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his allies seem to be preparing for a de facto one-state future, in which Israel controls in perpetuity the entire territory between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River, and the Palestinians are at best provided limited "autonomy" within a disconnected series of cantons. It should be distressing to all of us that in the run-up to the March 2015 elections, Netanyahu made clear that a Palestinian state would not be born during his term as Prime Minister. Over the past year, U.S. officials have steadily escalated their warnings about Israeli policies in the West Bank.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, the two main Palestinian factions – Fatah and Hamas – have been unable to end their political divisions, raising serious questions about their ability to deliver on any final agreement. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is now in the eleventh year of a four-year term, and Palestinians increasingly see their own fledgling political institutions as illegitimate and ineffective.

And while President Mahmoud Abbas has met his commitment to coordinate with Israel on security issues in the West Bank (something which Israeli security officials repeatedly hail), his inflammatory rhetoric has been problematic, especially when he called for the abrogation of the Oslo Accords. For its part, Hamas's continued use of violence and terrorism against Israel is both morally abhorrent and politically counterproductive.

### **Regional and International Support for Peace**

While only the U.S. can provide Israel the security guarantees it will require to make the hard choices for peace, partners in the European Union as well as the United Nations have a role to play in creating an environment conducive to negotiations. As we saw in last year's P5+1-Iran nuclear deal, marshaling and mobilizing international consensus to address shared challenges must be a key part of the U.S.'s role as a global leader.

## Settlements

Israel's continued settlement of occupied territories – which has now reached some 600,000 Israeli citizens in communities in the West Bank and East Jerusalem – has long been recognized as a serious stumbling block to peace. These settlements not only threaten the viability and possibility of a two-state solution, they are an affront to the very idea of Palestinian self-determination.

The settlements also undermine the moderate Palestinian leadership, which is seen as ineffective in stopping their continued proliferation into Palestinian territory. As one U.S. official put it in the wake of the collapse of Secretary John Kerry's peace initiative in 2014, "There are a lot of reasons for the peace effort's failure, but people in Israel shouldn't ignore the bitter truth—the primary sabotage came from the settlements."<sup>6</sup>

Our support for a strong Israel should not blind us to the bitter truth, either. Settlements are illegal under international law. The overwhelming international consensus is that Article 49 of the Fourth Geneva Convention, which forbids the transfer of an occupying power's civilian population into occupied territory, applies to the West Bank.

The Democratic Party should recognize settlements as an impediment to peace, call for a freeze of settlement activity in East Jerusalem and the West Bank and make clear that any settlement blocs to be retained by Israel in an eventual peace agreement must be negotiated with and agreed upon by the Palestinians.

## Jerusalem

Jerusalem is a holy and historic city for Jews, Christians, and Muslims alike. It is also central to Israeli and Palestinian political, social, and economic life. The Democratic Party should make clear that it supports a final status arrangement for Jerusalem that is mutually agreed upon by the parties. Unilateral declarations regarding the exclusive status of Jerusalem are harmful to the peace process.

## Gaza

The Democratic Party should unequivocally condemn the use of rocket fire from Gaza by Hamas and other extremist groups, as well as the threatening use of tunnels to attack Israel.

The Democratic Party should also acknowledge that innocent civilians in Gaza suffer under a destroyed economy and almost complete physical blockade. The United Nations says Gaza will be completely unlivable by 2020. Gaza is already facing a severe water crisis, where 95% of the water is unfit for human consumption. The World Bank reports that Gaza's unemployment rate of 40% is the highest in the world, with youth unemployment exceeding 60%.<sup>7</sup> Israeli security analysts have repeatedly warned that these conditions feed extremism, and could lead to yet another escalation between Israel and extremist groups in Gaza.<sup>8</sup>

The Democratic Party should call for an end to the closure of Gaza, and for an arrangement that ensures security for Israel *and* the rebuilding of Gaza's economy and infrastructure.

## Reflecting American Values

The Israeli-Palestinian crisis is one of the most emotionally fraught issues in U.S. politics, involving as it does the legitimate historical claims, identities and security of two peoples in the same land. One of the most elegant reflections on this matter was offered by President Obama himself in his remarks to the Adas Israel congregation in May 2015<sup>9</sup>: "The rights I insist upon and now fight for, for all people here in the United States, compels me

then to stand up for Israel and look out for the rights of the Jewish people. And the rights of the Jewish people then compel me to think about a Palestinian child in Ramallah that feels trapped without opportunity.”

As President Obama noted, these ideas are based in the same shared values that impel us to condemn anti-Semitic bigotry, support Israel’s security, and seek justice for Palestinians. These are the ideas that should be reflected in the Democratic Party platform. The values of inclusiveness, security, democracy, justice and freedom should inform not only America’s engagement with Israel and Palestine, but with the region and the world.

Thank you.

---

<sup>1</sup> Duss, Matthew. “Former CENTCOM Head: U.S. Pays ‘Security Price’ For Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” Think Progress. Center for American Progress Action Fund, 22 July 2013. Web. 5 June 2016.

<sup>2</sup> Saad, Lydia. “Seven in 10 Americans Continue to View Israel Favorably.” Gallup, 23 Feb. 2015. Web. 6 June 2016.

<sup>3</sup> “Public Uncertain, Divided Over America’s Place in the World.” Pew Research Center, 5 May 2016. Web. 6 June 2016.

<sup>4</sup> Smeltz, Dina and Greg Kafura. “Americans Prefer Neutrality In Israeli-Palestinian Conflict.” The Chicago Council on Global Affairs, 7 Aug. 2014. Web. 6 June 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Duss, Matthew. “Shoot the Messenger.” Tablet. Nextbook, Inc., 29 Jan. 2016. Web. 6 June 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Barnea, Nahum. “Inside the Talks’ Failure: U.S. Officials Open Up.” YNet News.com, 2 May 2014. Web. 6 June 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Goldman, Paul and Wajjeh Abu Zarifa. “Gaza Has Highest Unemployment Rate: World Bank Report.” NBC News.com, 27 May 2015. Web. 6 June 2016.

<sup>8</sup> Harris, Shane. “Israel Warns Another Gaza War Is Coming.” The Daily Beast, 2 June 2016. Web. 6 June 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Obama, Barack H. “Remarks By The President On Jewish American Heritage Month.” Adas Israel Congregation, Washington, DC. 22 May 2015. Speech.