

**FOUNDATION FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE
AMERICANS FOR PEACE NOW
ARAB-AMERICAN INSTITUTE
J STREET**

**CHURCHES FOR MIDDLE EAST PEACE
B'TSELEM
RABBIS FOR HUMAN RIGHTS – NORTH AMERICA**

February 4, 2010

President Barack Obama
The White House
Washington, DC

Dear Mr. President,

We are seven organizations that strongly support your commitment to a two-state peace between Israel and Palestine that will ensure Israel's security, win Palestinian self-determination, and protect U.S. national security. As your administration works to launch a political process to achieve this, we echo the recent call of the fifty-four Members of Congress who signed the McDermott-Ellison letter urging that the U.S. also address now, urgently, the grave humanitarian crisis affecting 1.4 million Gazans.

We recall your words in January 2009, after the devastating war in Gaza: "I was deeply concerned by...the substantial suffering and humanitarian needs in Gaza. Our hearts go out to Palestinian civilians who are in need of immediate food, clean water, and basic medical care, and who've faced suffocating poverty for far too long." Yet today, due to Israel's policy of severely limiting passage of essential goods and materiel through its crossings, the suffering in Gaza continues.

We believe this policy is strategically unsound, harms Israel's security, and exacts an unacceptable toll on innocent Palestinians. It offends American humanitarian values, and is collective punishment that violates international law.

Israel's closure policy is linked to the larger issue of a comprehensive peace that would require reconciliation between Palestinians and reuniting the West Bank and Gaza. But, given the disastrous situation in Gaza and the likelihood that peace will not come quickly, the humanitarian crisis there must be addressed on an urgent basis.

We are aware that the Israel links its closure to a cease-fire and release of Gilad Shalit, which Egypt has been pursuing with Hamas. Nevertheless, we urge that, while supporting these efforts, the U.S. should oppose holding Gazans' right to food, shelter, healthcare, education, and travel hostage to these issues. The crisis in Gaza will become even more dire if Egypt completes its plan to shut down the tunnels under its border with Gaza, which are now a life-line for Gazans.

Israel's closure policies, rather than weakening Hamas as Israel had hoped, have helped Hamas tighten its authoritarian grip over Gaza and its economy. While many Gazans are unhappy with Hamas, there is no evidence that Gazans will overthrow Hamas to end their suffering. Instead, their anger is directed at Israel, the U.S., and the international community. The following data illustrates the grim toll taken by Israel's closure policy.

- 70% of Gazans survive on \$1 a day. 40% of workers are unemployed.
- 850 trucks daily with food, goods and fuel entered from Israel, pre-closure; 128 today.
- The closure and the war have virtually halted manufacturing and most agricultural exports. Before 2007, 70 trucks a day carried Gazan exports for Israel, the West Bank and foreign markets valued at \$330 million, or 10.8% of Gaza's GDP.
- 11% of Gazan children are malnourished, to the point of stunting, due to poverty and inadequate food imports. Infant mortality is no longer declining.
- 281 of 641 schools were damaged and 18 destroyed in the war because of the closure. Few have been rebuilt, and thousands of students lack books or supplies. There are daily eight hour power shortages.
- The war and Israel's refusal to allow imports of cement and material to rebuild 20,000 destroyed or damaged homes have left many more thousands of Gazans in tents, temporary structures, or with other families.
- Many war-damaged or deteriorating water and sewage facilities are health and environmental hazards, for lack of rebuilding supplies and equipment.
- The war damaged 15 of 27 hospitals and 43 of 110 clinics. Imports of medicine and equipment are delayed. Doctors cannot leave for training, and patients face long delays to visit Israeli hospitals. 28 have reportedly died while waiting.
- Movement of people in and out of Gaza, including students, aid and medical workers, journalists, and family members, is severely limited.

As for the alleged benefits to security from Israel's closure policy, the opposite has proven true. As you said in your Cairo speech, "Just as it devastates Palestinian families, the humanitarian crisis in Gaza does not serve Israel's security." In recent months, sporadic rocket fire into southern Israel has resumed. A generation of jobless Gazan youths – 70% of Gazans are under 30 - lacking any hope for the future, are ripe for further radicalization and violence. Already, more-extreme Al Qaeda-type elements are challenging Hamas, and Al Qaeda is effectively exploiting the plight of Gazans throughout the Arab and Muslim world. The prospect for renewed major violence is real.

We believe the dismal humanitarian situation in Gaza caused by the closure is intolerable on a human level and a threat to American national security interests. The perception of U.S. support for or acquiescence in the closure challenges our reputation for upholding humanitarian values. It deprives 1.4 million Palestinians of a decent, minimum standard of welfare. It restricts the use of the \$300 million the U.S. has committed to rebuild Gaza, and is a serious obstacle to restoring hope and making peace. We urge, therefore, that your administration use America's unique relationship with Israel to persuade it to lift the closure of its border crossing with Gaza now.

Respectfully yours,

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