

**U.S. Senate Foreign Relations Committee Briefing**  
**The Middle East: The Road to Peace**  
Dirksen Senate Office Building, Room 419  
Washington DC 20150, May 15<sup>th</sup>, 2009 2:00 PM

**Opening Statement: Senator John Kerry (Chairman, D-MA)**

The hearing will come to order.

It's a great pleasure for me today to be able to welcome a tremendous friend of the United States of America and, I'm pleased to say, someone who, in his (inaudible) and who I can happily call a good friend, and we're delighted to have Prime Minister Blair here with us.

Since ending his decade of service as Britain's prime minister, Tony Blair has continued to lead on global challenges, from development in Africa to interfaith tolerance to climate change.

And at a moment when many people might have been content simply to leave public office and rest on their laurels, Tony Blair left office and volunteered for another tough assignment.

He's here today as the Middle East quartet representative to discuss the prospects for peace.

As all the members of the committee know, this week and this month are critical for the administration's Mideast policy-making. Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas will all be here visiting Washington. They will also visit with the committee, as well as the administration.

And we expect that in the wake of those meetings, the administration and the quartet will be releasing more details about their plans for peacemaking.

And in early June, President Obama will travel to Egypt to deliver his much anticipated speech about America's relations with the region and the wider Muslim world.

We all understand that peace will not come easily to the Middle East or even quickly, but I share Mr. Blair's optimism that this moment presents an opportunity that we can't afford to miss.

If we are to avoid perpetual conflict and radicalization, more missed opportunities and countless lives lost, then we have to pursue peace now and with urgency.

One particularly promising diplomatic opening is Saudi King Abdullah's Arab peace initiative, which never received the focus that many think it deserved when it was proposed in 2002.

Every Arab country has now agreed to the basic formulation of land for peace, recognition of the state of Israel, and normalization of relations.

The Arab initiative must now grow into a dynamic, evolving Arab engagement with Israel and with the Palestinians.

The simple reality is the regional dynamics of the Middle East have shifted and today, most Arab governments are more concerned about Iran than they are about Israel.

Our challenge is to translate these changed dynamics into a regional road map that signs all of the key players to take a series of concrete interim series of steps on the road to peace.

We know that among the reasons Camp David failed was the lack of a buy-in from Arab state whose support would've given Israel the broader peace that it sought and, also, give Palestinians the necessary cover to make difficult decisions.

That's a shortfall that we now have an opportunity to address by developing a regional road map that fleshes out the promise of the Arab peace initiative.

A key aspect of this, and I emphasize this, I've had a number of conversations with Prime Minister Blair and with other leaders in the region, a key aspect of steps forward is the empowering of those Palestinians who are committed to peace.

It's not enough to talk about getting Israel a legitimate partner for peace. We have to work to support and empower that partner to be able to deliver for its people, to build capacity, and to gain legitimacy.

We've seen real progress in increasing Palestinian capacity and economic development, and this is progress we need to build on.

In Jenin, thanks, in part, to Prime Minister Blair's efforts, we've seen the site of some of the worst violence of the second intifada become a place where Palestinians police the streets and economic growth is a reality for many.

General Dayton's efforts to train Palestinian security forces have also been encouraging. During the invasion of Gaza, Palestinian security forces largely succeeded in maintaining calm in the West Bank, amidst widespread expectations of civil unrest.

Make no mistake, as I'm confident Prime Minister Blair will share with us today, much work remains to be done.

In Gaza, where Tony Blair visited in March, we need to ensure that we deliver desperately needed humanitarian aid and reconstruction assistance, without, obviously, empowering Hamas in the process.

Having courted destruction, Hamas and Iran cannot be allowed to take credit for the rebuilding, just as Hezbollah did in the wake of the Lebanon war in 2006.

As Prime Minister Blair has said, economic and humanitarian progress will not be enough. There is no substitute for political progress toward a two-state solution.

That is today, has been for these past years, and remains American policy, and I'm confident that the president will be firm on this point when the region's leaders meet later this month.

The president has picked an ideal envoy in Senator George Mitchell, who worked closely with then Prime Minister Blair to achieve the Good Friday agreement in Northern Ireland.

So this is a team with a proven track record.

We will also need help from Israel. Nothing will do more to make clear our seriousness about turning the page than demonstrating with actions, rather than words, that we are serious about Israel freezing settlement activity in the West Bank.

As recently as 2007, at the Annapolis conference, Israel recommitted to implementing its obligations under the road map, which include freezing all settlement activity.

We will defend Israel's security unflinchingly, but the fact is Israelis themselves decided that the settlements make it more difficult to protect the security of their citizens. They're not just fragmenting the Palestinian state. They fragment what the Israeli defense forces have to defend.

None of us can afford to continue in the present course and nothing drove home to me more the human toll of continued conflict, over 26 years of visits to the region, than a recent day I spent visiting the southern Israeli village of Sderot and the Gazan town of Izbet Abed Rabo.

In Sderot, which has been the target of thousands of rockets over the last eight years, security officials told me that from the moment they know a rocket has been fired from Gaza, people have just 15 seconds to find safety.

Children in the second grade have spent literally every day of their lives never more than 15 seconds from danger.

In Izbet Abed Rabo in Gaza, I saw little Palestinian girls playing in rubble, where just months ago buildings stood. I saw the ruins of the American school in Gaza, but I also saw a glimmer of hope in the faces of average Palestinians who manage and are determined to carry on with their daily lives.

As I said I Gaza and I said it in Sderot, also, if terrorists in Quincy, Massachusetts were launching rockets into Boston, we would've had to have put a stop to it long before the Israelis chose to put a stop to it in Gaza.

But on both sides, I was inspired by the determination of all who live with the daily reality of this conflict. And if kids on both sides can hope for themselves, if they can persevere for a better future, then we have an obligation to help them get there.

Senator Lugar?