

Gaza donor conference: conspiracy wrapped up as compassion

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The donor conference Monday at Sharm el-Sheikh in Egypt had nothing to do with alleviating the appalling humanitarian crisis in Gaza and rebuilding the homes, factories, infrastructure and schools destroyed by Israel—its ostensible purpose. This stated goal was a cover for furthering Washington’s geopolitical interests in the oil-rich Middle East, by overthrowing Hamas and restoring the discredited Palestinian Authority of President Mahmoud Abbas to power in Gaza so as to help police the region in American and Israel’s interests.

The meeting followed Israel’s US-backed 22-day war against Gaza at the end of last year, an assault that killed more than 1,300 Palestinians, wounded many thousands more and drove 400,000 people from their homes. Attended by US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, the donor conference is part of an attempt by the Obama administration to portray itself as more even-handed in its approach to the Middle East in general and the Israel-Palestine conflict in particular. This is vital in order to provide cover for the Arab regimes’ collusion with the US in the occupation of Iraq, the war in Afghanistan and any offensive against Iran.

The essential purpose of the gathering was to demand that the Palestinians “break the cycle of rejection and resistance” and submit to Israeli demands. This means accepting a bifurcated state made up of Gaza and several non-contiguous enclaves in the West Bank, ruled by the Fatah-dominated PA. This entity would be dominated by Israel with the help of Egypt and Jordan, while Israel continues to expand its settlements in the West Bank. Just last week, the Israeli PeaceNow movement announced that Israel had drawn up plans to build 70,000 new homes for Jewish settlers in the West Bank.

The conference was attended by diplomats from 45 countries, but not by Israel. Hamas, despite being the elected government, was not invited, as Israel, the US and European Union regard it as a terrorist organisation. Instead the Palestinians were represented by Washington’s puppet PA regime, headed by Abbas, even though his term of office expired last January.

Egypt’s Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit announced that international donors had pledged \$5.2 billion from 68 countries for rebuilding Gaza. He said that the total was “beyond our expectations.” The Palestinian Authority had requested only \$2.8 billion for reconstruction, to be channelled through its government in the West Bank. The Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, pledged \$1.65 billion, the US \$900 million, and the European powers \$554 million.

Clinton made clear that Washington’s \$900 million contribution is conditional on the

Palestinians accepting its dictates. She said, “[The aid package] will only be spent if we determine that our goals can be furthered rather than undermined or subverted. We want to show we care about their plight [the Palestinians] and that we obviously don’t want civilians to suffer any more than they have. But we want to make clear that any contributions we make will not go to Hamas.”

Clinton added, “Our response to today’s crisis in Gaza cannot be separated from our broader efforts to achieve a comprehensive peace.” The aim of the aid was to “foster conditions in which a Palestinian state can be fully realised.”

Her spokesman, Robert A. Wood, said that \$600 million was for the PA, based in the West Bank, with only \$300 million for humanitarian aid for Gaza. This is a drop in the ocean compared with both Gaza’s needs and the support Washington has lavished on Israel for more than 40 years. Clinton insisted that iron-clad safeguards would be put in place to ensure none of the \$300 million went to Hamas.

The European powers fully support this agenda, although they tried to appear more even handed. British Foreign Secretary David Miliband said that “visible signs of progress” in the West Bank and Gaza were vital. He added, however, that Palestinians needed “a single government across the occupied territories.”

French President Nicolas Sarkozy took a somewhat different approach, urging Hamas “to engage resolutely in searching for a political solution and engage in a dialogue with Israel.”

Little of the monies promised are new. Most was pledged at the Paris conference in December 2007 and never delivered due to Israel’s refusal to lift the then 500-plus roadblocks in the West Bank and allow Gaza to open its borders, making any investment impossible and pointless. There are now more than 600 roadblocks.

Fully \$1.5 billion was specifically earmarked for the Palestinian Authority’s budget deficit, economic “reforms” and private sector projects.

Only \$1.33 billion was budgeted for reconstruction in Gaza. This is far less than the \$2.4 billion the United Nations estimated is necessary to make good the destruction wrought by Israel. And even this pittance would not be disbursed until Hamas is no longer a force in Gaza.

The Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, Qatar and Kuwait, said that the \$1.6 billion they had pledged would bypass both Hamas and the PA. Not wanting to be seen to be favouring Abbas directly, they said they would set up an office in Gaza to carry out their own reconstruction. But since all reconstruction materials, such as cement, pumps and generators, must pass through Israel, and an Israeli Defence Ministry spokesman has stressed that Israel wanted “each and every pipe accounted for” by a project-by-project approvals process, it will be impossible to get even the most modest reconstruction programme off the ground.

The money for humanitarian purposes would bypass Hamas and be channelled through UN agencies and international aid groups. But since Israel controls Gaza’s borders, coastal waters and airspace, and allows only some food, medical supplies and fuel to enter Gaza, this has little substantive meaning. According to the UN, Gaza needs a minimum of 500 truckloads of humanitarian aid and commercial goods a day. While the Israeli authorities

have told humanitarian agencies that they will allow up to 200 truckloads a day, the actual number has never exceeded 120 since the blockade began in June 2007. The average in February was between 88 and 104, including the grain shipped by conveyor belt at the Karni crossing. New security procedures since the January war make it almost impossible for aid agencies to plan deliveries more than 24 hours in advance. Israel's latest condition for any easing of the restrictions is the release of Gilad Shalit, an Israeli soldier who has been held in Gaza since June 2006.

According to Human Rights Watch, the New York based group, aid workers said that on several occasions the Israeli authorities refused to allow the shipment of pre-scheduled aid just hours before they were supposed to arrive. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) said that Israel has arbitrarily refused entry of even basic items like chickpeas, macaroni, and wheat-flour, notebooks for students, freezer appliances, generators, water pumps and cooking gas.

Israel insists that all trucks enter Gaza via Kerem Shalom near the south of Gaza, where every item on the trucks must be unloaded, inspected, repackaged and reloaded with a "handling fee" of \$1,000, even though there are other crossings with more sophisticated security screening equipment. It is clear that Israel's actions are aimed less at preventing arms from getting through into Gaza than intimidating and punishing the Gazan population, destroying whatever remains of the Gazan economy and forcing Gazans into exile.

Egypt, which controls Gaza's southern border, says it can only fully open Rafah, its crossing with Gaza, under the previous arrangements requiring that the PA, not Hamas, controls the terminal. Egypt is continuing to broker talks between Hamas and Fatah, aimed at restoring Fatah to power.

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