

American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research



Testimony of Danielle Pletka, Vice President, Foreign and Defense Policy Studies,
American Enterprise Institute

Before the

U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Foreign Affairs on “Israel’s Right to Defend Itself:
Implications on Regional Security and U.S. Interests”

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Madame Chairman, Members of the Committee, it is my pleasure to join you for this timely hearing on the regional and national security implications of the recent hostilities between Hamas and the State of Israel.

Over the last decade, the Middle East has undergone a transformation as dramatic as the one that shaped the post-war independence era in the Arab world. While those changes are all familiar to the members of this Committee, it is worth reviewing them quickly if only to underscore their breadth and depth. Consider that a dictator has been ousted in Iraq and a new and democratically elected government has come to power. That from Tunisia to Libya to Yemen to Egypt, Bahrain and Syria, the people of the region have turned on their tormentors and – where they are able -- voted in new leaders. That Iran has gone from nuclear ambitions to the threshold of a nuclear weapon. That Hezbollah now controls the government of Lebanon. That the Hashemite dynasty in Jordan is at risk. And that the Arab League has taken a position against not one but two of its own for the first time in history.

And where is the United States in today's Middle Eastern maelstrom? Unfortunately, largely on the sidelines, wringing its hands, hoping to restore, if not the status quo ante, then at least the pseudo stability of the age of Arab dictators.

What *should* we be doing?

Let's step back for a moment and consider the question before this hearing: Israel's Right to Defend Itself. Israel's right to self-defense is not in doubt here in Washington. Elsewhere, increasingly, not only is Israel's right to self-defense, but its actual right to exist is in question. Indeed, those who arrayed themselves on the side of Hamas in the recent fighting pose a long term challenge, certainly for Israel, but also for the United States.

To whom did Hamas look for moral, diplomatic, economic and military sustenance after it launched a barrage of attacks against Israel? To Egypt, Turkey, Qatar, Lebanon and Iran. Others may have mouthed support for Hamas, but it was this group of stalwarts that stood behind the terrorist group until the end.

What are the implications for the United States? In the case of Iran, none that were not obvious before Gaza. We know Iran is a state sponsor of terrorism. Yes we should have a more proactive policy that addresses Iran's dangerous proliferation of missiles throughout the Middle East and looks more clearly at the implications of a proliferator to terrorists on the verge of having a nuclear weapon. But this is not a hearing about Iran.

Similarly with respect to Qatar, we are well aware of that state's tendency to play all sides of the field, and find new sides that were never played before. But Qatar's lamentable lack of principle is not news.

What of Turkey, Lebanon and Egypt? Should the United States sit on the sidelines and watch passively as a NATO ally and two recipients of U.S. assistance arrange themselves on the side of terrorists?

Indeed, we might ask the same regarding the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah. While many suppose that Hamas' motivation in attacking Israel was to gain parity with its Palestinian political rival, Fatah, and harness the wind of Islamist extremism emanating from the post-Arab Spring Middle East, the Mahmoud Abbas government had an opportunity to look responsible in the eyes of its western donors by eschewing the violence. Instead, various PA figures have claimed that they too were a part of the great "victory" against Israel; and today, Abu Mazen will turn to the United Nations General Assembly to seek non-member state observer recognition, slapping all those who requested he not do so – President Barack Obama included – in the face.

What can the United States do? Many in Washington have suggested that our leverage is limited, that the ructions of the Arab Spring are an "internal affair" that we need to do more behind the scenes. Others, predictably, resurrect the peace process as a panacea. The administration's position seems to be to coast ahead as if little of great moment has occurred, while turning our foreign policy focus to Asia.

Indeed, there are plenty on both sides of the aisle, in the Executive Branch and in Congress, who suggest that the United States abdicate its traditional role in the Middle East and simply adapt to its drift into extremism.

There are two styles of abdication recommended: The first, favored in certain quarters of the Congress, is the exhortation to end aid to those who displease us in the Middle East. That's very satisfying, has certain clarity to it, and saves taxpayer money to boot. Aid to Egypt and the Palestinians alone was more than \$2 billion in FY 2012.

A second type of abdication appears to be favored by the White House and involves occasional crisis management (during the Gaza crisis, the President made three calls to Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi in one 24 hour period, and six calls over the course of a week), but otherwise a complacent passivity. In this vision, Morsi is treated as the new Mubarak. What was aid last year? \$1.55 billion. Let's keep it there and throw in some debt relief to boot. The attitude the administration conveys is that aid is an entitlement for the countries that receive it, a view shared in foreign capitals as well. It is not a source of leverage, and should not be considered one.

The right approach is to recognize that we have a stake in the future of the Middle East, not just in peace between Israel and its neighbors, but in the course of the political and economic lives of these countries. They can develop in ways that are positive to their own and our interests, or the reverse. And we can influence that course a great deal, if we choose.

How we choose to influence the region is a genuine challenge: We must walk a fine line. If we cut off all aid in anger, we lose some of our leverage. If we open the flood gates and allow aid to spill out willy nilly, we leave leverage on the table, unused.

Take Egypt for starters. The numbers in question are breath-taking. \$1.55 billion in U.S. aid (\$1.3 billion to the military and \$250 million in economic assistance), one billion more in debt relief, and \$4.8 billion in promised IMF support. This is not chump change to Morsi, for whom economic success will be the barometer by which he is judged by the Egyptian people. Right now that aid is on hold, as it should be. Why is the hold right? Because the Congress must demand answers from the administration about how our aid and debt forgiveness is going to further American values and American priorities in Egypt. The fact that there has been little substantial change to the composition of our assistance package since the overthrow of Hosni Mubarak is a case in point.

And here's another question: We are providing \$1.3 billion to the Egyptian military, presumably in part to bolster its ability to ensure security on the border with Israel, in part to ensure there is a balance of power within Egypt. But al Qaeda is now operating in the Sinai. And in Cairo, the military appears uninterested in playing any domestic role, consistent with Egyptian democracy, including that of guarantor of civil freedoms. So what is that aid for again? What is it buying?

More troubling still is that all of the conditionality that Congress has rightly put on economic assistance to Egypt – including certifications regarding rule of law, democratic transition, civil freedoms and treatment of Coptic Christians – have been ignored by the administration. Rather, the President and his delegates have chosen to exercise waiver authorities, a clear admission that Egypt is not on track to meet the conditions laid out in law. Those waivers must either be tightened or removed altogether.

Similarly, we might question the aid we provide to Lebanon. Since the 2007 Hezbollah war with Israel, the United States has provided more than \$1 billion in assistance to Lebanon, much of it security oriented assistance to theoretically support the authority of the Lebanese Armed Forces. Yes, the same LAF that has watched as Hezbollah has rearmed itself with tens of thousands of missiles from Iran. Is it not appropriate to ask at a certain moment whether that money is doing anything at all to moderate Hezbollah's behavior? Should American taxpayers truly be subsidizing the Hezbollah-dominated Lebanese government? What message is being sent by continuing to do so even as Hezbollah supports and fights alongside Bashar al-Assad in Syria?

We can run through a similar litany for the Palestinians. Aid is authorized and appropriated by the Congress, but the conditions placed upon assistance are more often waived or disregarded than not. If Egypt doesn't want democratization assistance, surely it should not receive investment seed money. If Lebanon doesn't wish to disarm Hezbollah, then what is the purpose of arming and training the LAF?

In short, aid provides us leverage if it is used wisely, monitored constantly, and adjusted regularly. Cutting off aid deals us, at least in part, out of the game of the Middle East. It may ultimately be the only course available, but it should not be the first choice.

Our challenge in facing Turkey's transition away from the Ataturk tradition of secularism and tolerance is much greater. Turkey is at once an ally, a serious economy, a democracy and a growing powerhouse in the broader Middle East. On the other hand, Turkey has paid little price for its support for terrorism in the region, its violation of Iran sanctions or its growing domestic abuses. Clearly we cannot thwart the will of the Turkish people; nor should we remain silent in the face of a government that has the dubious honor of the highest rate of imprisonment for journalists in the world. Should the U.S. continue to work with the Ankara government on issues of common concern like Syria? Yes. Should our relationship remain the same in light of other serious problems? No. And in that vein, constantly underscoring the close personal friendship between Barack Obama and Recep Tayyip Erdogan is highly inappropriate.

Think of it this way; we, the United States, have enormous political, economic and military power. Much of that power resides in the hands of the President, who has chosen not to use it to support U.S. ideals and principles. Rather, he is pouring both political and economic resources into governments that are working directly against U.S. interests. Congress has an opportunity to lead, but is being stymied. Results? Egypt supports Hamas, and only belatedly acts as a constructive force to end the violence begun by its friends in Gaza. Lebanon supports Assad. Qatar and Turkey pour oil on the flames.

Perhaps the ongoing human catastrophe in Syria is the clearest symbol of our uninterest. Before that conflict is done and Assad is dead or in exile, the civil war in Syria will spill over to Iraq, Turkey, Lebanon, Israel and Jordan. But the United States is hanging back, doing little where it must and nothing when it can.

It is possible that we will not be able to steer the Middle East down a more moderate path; indeed, it is possible that with the best of intentions and the cleverest use of America's power, we will fail. Right now, however, we are sitting on the sidelines and watching as the region transitions from secular autocracy to Islamist autocracy. That is a dangerous mistake.