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I thank the House Foreign Affairs Subcommittees on Oversight & Accountability and Global Health, Global Human Rights, and International Organizations, for the opportunity to appear before you. I have warm memories of my service on the Committee staff, as legal counsel to Chair Lee Hamilton. So much of how I learned to approach U.S. foreign policy, and the important oversight responsibilities of this Committee, I attribute to the wise tutelage and counsel of Chairman Hamilton. His past guidance is foundational to the case I make to you today. Of course, I am solely responsible for my statement, and represent only myself.

Consistent with my Hamiltonian training, I will start with a focus on U.S. national security interests at stake, and how/why that should shape decision-making on how the US proceeds regarding UNRWA and UN operations more generally; I will then highlight historic Palestinian needs, particularly in Gaza, and will conclude with how I see the first two areas making the case for continued U.S. support for UNRWA and other UN entities, with appropriate oversight and related pauses where necessary, until and unless alternatives are created. Such support is critical for serving US national security interests, and sustainable security for the State of Israel.

I. U.S. national security interests at stake

United States security is best protected by a secure and stable Middle East. This is consistent with the national defense strategies of Presidents Trump and Biden. They describe China as a pacing competitor, and Russia as a constant and immediate threat. With a keen eye on how the U.S. outpaces and out-competes these Great Powers, we need to be cognizant that we (and they) are operating on a multi-dimensional world chessboard. In this context, the United States is best served by stability and strong relationships in the Middle East, throughout the African continent, and in Latin America, as well as in Europe and the Asia-Pacific. The time, attention, and resources focused on the Middle East now, as a virtual tinderbox of regional instability has developed, illustrates the point. Vigilance and resources are required to keep the tinder from igniting, or keep the fire maximally contained where it does ignite.

If security and stability in the Middle East is critical to protecting American interests, a safe, secure, sustainable State of Israel is arguably the most important part of the regional equation, from a U.S. perspective. Embedded within the U.S. Israel Strategic Partnership Joint Declaration of July 2022 is language that states that “[c]onsistent with the longstanding security relationship between the United States and Israel and the unshakeable U.S. commitment to Israel’s security these commitments are bipartisan and sacrosanct, and they are not only moral commitments, but also strategic commitments that are vitally important to the national security of the United States itself.” To review the basic demographic facts, Israel has a population of approximately 9 million people, which includes about 1.7 million Muslim citizens). Palestinians in Gaza number over two million, and Palestinians in the West Bank about 3.2 million. UNRWA has responsibility for administering to some 5.4 million registered Palestinian refugees, many of whom are resident in Gaza, or the West Bank.

II. Security, stability, and Palestinians in Gaza (and the West Bank)

I describe the situation for Palestinians in Gaza not only from research and policy study, but also from direct on the ground observation and experience. I first traveled to Gaza in 1987, when driving into the territory involved no real checkpoints; I subsequently returned on staff delegations during my service on this Committee post Oslo, and with President Clinton in 1999 when he speak to a convening of the Palestinian National Council on their rejection of the passages of the

Palestinian Charter calling for the destruction of Israel. I was there several times as a non-government official, including in support of President George W. Bush's push for Palestinian elections in 2006. My comments reflect this on the ground exposure, exposure to many Palestinians from Gaza over the years, and my work with Israeli military and security officials, and UN officials, related to the flow of goods and services to and from Gaza and the West Bank.

Gaza has long been a particularly challenging place to live. Palestinians living there, whether under Egypt's control from 1948 to 1956, and 1957 to 1967, or Israel's oversight essentially from 1967, are a relatively large (and ever growing) population packed in a relatively small space. The Gaza Strip is approximately twice the size of Washington, DC, with three times the population, with significant constraints on individuals' exit and entry, and on import and export of goods, extraordinarily limited economic opportunity, extraordinarily limited educational access, overtaxed water and electricity sources. Since the time that Hamas asserted de facto control in a violent overthrow of Palestinian Authority forces in June 2007, the vast bulk of that two million population have suffered even more, as Hamas did and does not prioritize taking care of the Palestinian population it rules, to understate significantly its reign of terror. This was the case prior to the ISIS-like and barbaric Hamas attack on Israelis on Oct 7 of last year, and Israel's subsequent military campaign to eliminate the real and present danger Hamas poses to the Israeli state. And now Palestinians in Gaza, already in a bad place, are in dire circumstances: a huge percentage are homeless, food shortages are intense, clean drinking water is a scarcity, and reestablishing even the non-fully viable economy in place previously will take considerable time.

Having two million famished, increasingly desperate people, long treated as expendable by de facto Hamas rulers, with no ability to move and limited ability to provide for themselves and their families, within walking distance of the portion of Israel's nine million who live in southern Israel, threatens Israeli security and stability. And West Bank Palestinians as well are further destabilized by what is happening in Gaza. Not only are there Hamas cells within/among certain West Bank refugee camps, but the challenges the Palestinian Authority has had in governing effectively since the departure of Salam Fayyad as prime minister in 2013 are well documented.

Providing for the most basic needs of Palestinians is part and parcel of providing security for the State of Israel. Palestinians that are food secure, and able to sustain themselves and their families, and have a political horizon that will one day realistically offer a better future for their children, are Palestinians less likely to be drawn to, or be forced to serve terrorist forces such as Hamas.

When I served in President Obama's administration, I spent a great deal of my time with Israeli military leaders committed to getting humanitarian assistance into Gaza and some goods exported. They prioritized doing so not for altruistic purposes, but because they saw it as directly serving Israeli security interests. They worked closely with UNSCO, UNDP, WFP, and UNRWA leaders to devise the most effective and secure means for executing these aims. They did so appreciating that there was risk involved, but they saw far greater risk to their country, and their security, if goods were not able to flow, and they knew these UN entities were vital actors to ensure provision of such services in Gaza in particular.

III. Role of UN entities, including UNRWA

The United Nations has been involved in the region since its establishment in 1945, and prior to the existence of the State of Israel. The offices of the United Nations Special Coordinator (UNSCO) coordinates the humanitarian and development work of UN agencies and programs in the West Bank and Gaza, in support of the Palestinian Authority and the Palestinian people. Set up in 1994, UNSCO is intended to strengthen UN inter-agency cooperation, mobilizing financial, technical, economic and other assistance. Multiple UN organizations are tasked with providing humanitarian and development assistance to Palestinians. Amid the arguably too many UN entities operating in this area, UNDP, WFP, and UNRWA stand out for the depth and breadth of their role. UNRWA, a United Nations agency established by the General Assembly in 1949, is unique in the UN system in that it is mandated to provide assistance and protection specifically to some 5.4 million registered refugees, in Gaza, the West Bank, Jordan, Lebanon, and Syria. UNRWA's mandate has broadened over years to include providing education, health care, and social services to its target population, as well as employment and direct relief.

Is UNRWA, or any of the UN entities perfect? Far from it. The recent termination of 12 UNRWA employees who allegedly participated in the horrific Hamas attacks of October 7, provides one of the more extreme examples. It also shows the need for the ongoing oversight the Biden administration displayed in communicating to the UN that action and thorough investigation was required. For the services UNRWA provides to a desperate population, however, there is no substitute at this time.

Before or alongside any case for phasing out UNRWA in its entirety, consideration must be given to how these 5.4 million Palestinians, including at this point nearly the entire two million in Gaza, will survive with sufficient food, water, electricity, education, and the economic means to support themselves, ultimately. Any other approach seriously endangers Israeli and Palestinians' security – which in turn impacts security for others in the region and beyond, including in the United States. Given the fundamental responsibility of every president of the United States to safeguard this country's security, it is not a risk I would advise any US administration to take.