

Political

update: – Egyptian efforts to reconstruct Gaza and create Palestinian unity between Fatah and Hamas – 5 March

Key points:

- Egyptian conference raises £3.2 billion for reconstruction of Gaza, exceeding Palestinian Authority request for £2 billion
- Europe, the US and the Arab states all make significant pledges to the Palestinian Authority
- UK and US call for international efforts to focus upon reconstruction as well as political progress towards a two state solution
- UK supports Egypt's efforts to create a Palestinian unity government; Egyptian mediated reconciliation talks between Fatah and Hamas underway
- US says it will not work with a Palestinian unity government, including Hamas, that does not recognise Israel

Latest developments – Gaza reconstruction conference

- At the Gaza reconstruction conference hosted by Egypt in Sharm el-Sheikh on Monday (2 March), the UK pledged £30 million for rebuilding homes, schools, hospitals and essential infrastructure, damaged during the recent conflict. The conference was attended by the UK Foreign Secretary, David Miliband and Secretary of State for International Development, Douglas Alexander.
- Hamas, which has controlled the Gaza Strip since its violent coup in June 2007 was not invited to the conference. The monies pledged will be spent through the Palestinian Authority, EU and World Bank mechanisms or directly through international NGOs, rather than by Hamas.
- The £30 million UK pledge includes £20 million of newly announced funds as well as an allocation of £10 million from the financial support for Gaza announced in January. This brings the total UK response to the humanitarian situation in Gaza to nearly £47 million since the conflict began.
- The European Commission has also pledged \$550 (£400 million) which will be spent on the reconstruction of Gaza and the Palestinian Authority (PA) budget.
- The Foreign Secretary said that the aim of the international community should not be to simply rebuild Gaza's infrastructure, but to make political progress towards a single Palestinian unity government and a two state solution:

“Our responsibility is not just to rebuild Gaza, but to work to prevent further conflict. So in 2009 we need to do things differently. There must be... physical reconstruction in the West Bank and Gaza... political reconstruction to give the Palestinian people a single government; ... international engagement of a wholly different order... and... a convincing peace plan... That is why we support the efforts of Egypt to help create a non factional interim government.” (02/03/09)

- The conference was attended by over 45 foreign ministers, French President Nicolas Sarkozy, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. Opening the conference, Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak called on Fatah and Hamas to form a unity government to oversee the reconstruction effort.
- The US pledged \$900 million (£640 million) to Gaza and the PA budget, subject to the approval of Congress. Like the UK Foreign Secretary, in her address to the conference, US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton also described Gazan reconstruction and political progress towards a two state solution as inseparable aims, saying:

“It is time to look ahead with an eye on the human aspects of what years of regional conflict have meant for the Palestinians and others... The United States is committed to a comprehensive peace between Israel and its Arab neighbours, and we will pursue it on many fronts... Our response to today’s crisis in Gaza cannot be separated from our broader efforts to achieve a comprehensive peace.” (02/03/09)

- Arab states pledged \$1.65 billion (£1.2 billion) for Gaza at the conference, the majority of this (\$1 billion) pledged by Saudi Arabia at an Arab League conference in Kuwait on 19 January.
- PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad had asked the donors for a total of \$2.7 billion (£2 billion): \$1.3 billion (£900 million) to reconstruct Gaza and \$1.4 billion (£1 billion) to support the PA’s annual budget. Fayyad said that he did not simply want to repair the damage of the recent conflict, but to re-launch Gaza’s economy:

“The goal is not to turn the clock back two months, or even to June 2007 [when Hamas conducted a violent coup in the Gaza Strip], but to make a qualitative change to the socio-economic situation.” (02/03/09)

Latest developments – Palestinian unity talks

- Egyptian mediated reconciliation talks between Hamas, Fatah and a number of smaller Palestinian militant groups began on 25 February in Cairo, with the aim of establishing a Palestinian unity government.
- Hillary Clinton said on Wednesday (4 March) that Washington would not work with such a government unless Hamas recognises Israel and renounces violence. Similarly, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas said on Saturday (28 February) that any new unity government would need to be based on support for a two state solution. However, Hamas’ spokesman in Gaza, Ayman Taha immediately rejected the offer, saying that “Hamas will never agree to sit in a government that recognises Israel.”
- The Palestinian factions have set up five committees to discuss the formation of a transitional unity government; gestures of reconciliation between the factions, including the release of each other’s detainees; control and manning of the Palestinian security services; and the merging of Hamas into the Palestinian Liberation Organisation (PLO), the diplomatic arm of the Palestinian institutions. The committees are scheduled to finish their work by the end of March.
- Each committee consists of members of Fatah, Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Democratic Front for the Liberation of Palestine, the Popular Front

for the Liberation of Palestine, the Palestine People's Party, the Popular Struggle Front, the Palestinian Arab Front and an independent.

- Pending a final agreement, both factions have agreed to a prisoner release, although the details are yet to be settled.

Background

- Israel's Operation Cast Lead in Gaza between 27 December 2008 and 17 January 2009, in response to eight years of Hamas' rocket and mortar attacks from the territory, resulted in massive destruction and a devastating loss of life. The Palestinian Central Bureau of Statistics has estimated that 4,100 homes, 1,500 factories and workshops, 20 mosques, 31 security compounds and 10 water and sewage lines were destroyed in the fighting. Palestinian medical officials in Gaza put the death toll at 1,455.
- Hamas conducted a violent coup in Gaza in June 2007, using its control of the territory to increase its attacks against Israel and persecute Fatah members, women, Christians, trade unionists and members of the LGBT community. During the coup Hamas killed approximately 100 Fatah members. In addition, Amnesty International reported on 12 February 2009 that Hamas had killed at least 24 more Fatah members during the recent conflict, injuring and detaining many more.
- By mediating Palestinian reconciliation talks, Egypt is attempting to create a new political settlement between Fatah and Hamas so that border crossings can be reopened and reconstruction efforts begun. Egypt also hopes that if the Palestinian territories are reunified under a single government, progress can be made on the Peace Process. Hamas refused to take part in reconciliation talks in November 2008, with Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit citing, on 4 December 2008, "Hamas' lack of enthusiasm."
- Hamas expelled PA operatives from Gaza's border crossings during their violent coup in June 2007. This resulted in the freezing of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access between Israel and the PA and consequently, the closure of Gaza's crossings to all but humanitarian aid.
- Israel continues to facilitate the transfer food, medical aid, fuel and electricity to the Gaza Strip.
 - Since the end of the conflict, on 17 January, aid transfers from Israel into the Gaza Strip have increased. Between 17 January and 3 March, 131,000 tons of aid and 13 million litres of fuel have been delivered to Gaza.
 - During the conflict Israel facilitated the entry of 37,000 tons of food and medical aid; 1.5 million litres of heavy duty diesel; 234 tons of gas; 188,000 litres of diesel for the UN; and 30 ambulances. In addition 68 people left Gaza for medical treatment in Israel, the West Bank and Jordan and on 19 January a medical clinic for Palestinian victims of the conflict was established on the Israeli side of the Erez border crossing.