

Speech on the Humanitarian Crisis in Gaza and the West Bank
Senator George Helmy (D-NJ)
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M. President, I come to the floor today as a New Jerseyan, as the only an Arab American serving in the Senate, and as a human being utterly devastated – broken, even – by the unfathomable scale of human suffering taking place right now in Gaza and the West Bank as a direct consequence of the Israel-Hamas conflict.

This war has already claimed an estimated 44,000 lives across Gaza and the West Bank. Almost half of those killed by the bombshells and bullets of this war have been women and children – teens, toddlers, infants. That’s not to mention the millions more who have been displaced from their homes by this conflict and threatened by famine and illness.

According to current estimates, every hour, this conflict claims the lives of fifteen innocent people. Every single hour. It is reported that fully rebuilding Gaza and the West Bank after this war could take at least 200 years or more, literal centuries from now. Well beyond our lifetimes.

It shouldn’t matter what one’s politics are, what one’s religion is, one’s nationality, or one’s ethnicity is. These facts should shock our conscience to its very core. On our watch, right before our very eyes, we are witnessing one of the most rapid decimations of human life in recent history.

Now let me be clear about a couple of things. I have always and continue to firmly, unquestionably support Israel’s right to exist and to defend itself against all forms of terrorism and those who sponsor terrorism. I vehemently condemn Hamas and its barbaric attack against Israel and its citizens on October 7th, 2023, on which it murdered over 1,200 innocent Israelis. A dark day in history during which it also took hundreds of innocent hostages, including U.S. citizens. One of those hostages is New Jersey resident Edan Alexander, a 20-year-old Tenafly High School graduate, who should immediately be returned home safely with all remaining hostages. Again, all human beings, regardless of political persuasion or ideology, should be devastated by the widespread loss of human life and human suffering on all sides of this conflict.

But I have some real, hard questions about what is causing the scale of suffering in Gaza and the West Bank, and why we seemingly aren’t able to alleviate it in any significant way. These are not questions in the abstract. They stem from what I

have seen and heard with my own eyes and ears during an official trip I recently took to Jordan to assess the state of humanitarian assistance efforts in Gaza, the West Bank, and Lebanon.

What I saw was this. There is a de facto blockade of even the most basic aid supplies getting through the Kerem Shalom crossing, the only viable point of entrance for aid to Gaza and the West Bank. This blockade has severely restricted the amounts of aid that make it to desperate Palestinians whose lives depend upon it. Just today, it was reported that nearly 100 trucks transporting lifesaving aid were violently looted at gun point, adding another unique challenge preventing aid from reaching civilians in Gaza and the West Bank.

The effects of this chokepoint have resulted in other absurd outcomes. I toured warehouses – including one that U.S. Secretary of State Blinken toured himself – stocked to the brim, practically overflowing, with life-saving aid supplies. The blockade has prevented the safe transport of them into Gaza and the West Bank, where just miles away, women, children, and families are literally starving. There are pallets upon pallets of food, medication, pillows, latrines, and winterized tents to keep families warm as winter sets in. All of it, just sitting there, because of a manmade blockade.

What I heard was this. I met with medical surgeons and doctors of the Jordanian Armed Forces serving in Gaza who recounted harrowing stories of amputations on children, futile attempts to keep the malnourished alive, and operations in makeshift tents under live fire and drone strikes. These frontline providers – these heroes – told me that a number of partially-operational hospitals are resorting to using everyday materials like sewing thread for clothes to stitch up patients after surgeries because they have run out of appropriate medical supplies. That should appall every one of us.

Israel's recent passage of two laws to totally ban UNRWA from operating anywhere in Palestine has, of course, threatened to make the problem even worse. It is irrefutable that UNRWA is the primary, on-the-ground provider of aid, food, and other essential services to the people of Gaza and the West Bank. Shutting down UNRWA at this time, is shutting down the very nerve center of humanitarian aid and assistance within Palestine.

These insights left me with many questions. Do these actions intent on limiting aid into Gaza and the West Bank – taken under the pretense of security operations – comply with international humanitarian laws and norms? Are these the actions we

should expect from one of our closest democratic allies in the world? Perhaps these are questions for people far more versed in the matters of war and legal compliance than me, but members of this body should at least be asking these same questions, many are, and I thank them for their bold leadership.

And what exactly are *we* doing to ensure that our closest ally in the Middle East is living up to the human rights and humanitarian principles we claim to embrace and enforce around the world? My conversations with Americans of all walks revealed a deep desire for the United States to take a more aggressive role in protecting innocent civilians suffering the brunt of this war. And, on occasion, we have done that. I thank the Biden Administration for their efforts thus far to alleviate the chokepoints and expand the flow of aid into the region. I also think it is important that the administration agreed with the UN Security Council's statement "that UNRWA remains the backbone of all humanitarian response in Gaza," and that "no organization can replace or substitute UNRWA's capacity and mandate to serve Palestinian refugees and civilians in urgent need of life-saving humanitarian assistance." However, so much more needs to be done.

As we enter a new Congress and a new administration takes office next year, the United States government will and should continue debating the enormously complex policy and geopolitical issues at stake in the Middle East. But I am not here to opine on the Gordian Knot of Middle East policy. Nor do I pretend to have cure-all solutions to the problems plaguing the region for many decades.

I traveled through several states over the last two months and spoke with students, Arab and Muslim Americans, and many others who are deeply concerned with the crisis. The conversations were thoughtful and reflected the complexity of the situation. One can call terrorism what it is, terrorism; one can stand up and support Israel and the Jewish people worldwide; *and* one can speak the truth that the humanitarian crisis in Gaza and the West Bank is unacceptable.

When I asked a young man what he hoped to see, he said simply, "I want to see the world say and show that the life of a Palestinian child is just as valuable as the life of a child anywhere else in the world."

I simply will conclude where I began. My fervent plea is for all of us in this body to see what is happening in the Middle East through the lens of our humanity, first and foremost. No human being should be worth less than another based on which side of a checkpoint or crossing they live on. Perhaps, just perhaps, if we keep that

principle at the center of our approach, we can do better by the innocent people of Gaza and the West Bank who so desperately need our humanity.

I yield the floor.

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