

Washington, D.C. - *Rep. David Price (NC-04) delivered the following remarks today during debate of S. 2370, the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act:*

Mr. Speaker, I rise today to speak about S. 2370, the Senate-passed version of the Palestinian Anti-Terrorism Act before us today.

Earlier this year, the House considered a version of this legislation. I rose in strong opposition to that bill, because it would have unfairly punished the average Palestinian citizen for the crimes of extremist Hamas leaders. It would have shut off all aid but the most narrowly defined humanitarian assistance, ending U.S. support for successful non-governmental efforts to promote democracy, tolerance, and peace in the region. In short, though well-intentioned, it would have undermined our ability to stop attacks against Israel and to achieve our most important foreign policy goals in the region.

I was joined by several of my colleagues in opposing the bill. Though the House passed this flawed legislation, we were able to send a vital message: at this critical moment, we cannot afford to pull the rug out from those working for democracy and reconciliation in the region.

The Senate heeded our message, and passed a much improved bill. Specifically, the bill addresses two significant concerns we raised during the House Debate.

First, the Senate bill provides the Administration far more flexibility to deliver aid to the Palestinian people and to those working for a peaceful resolution to the conflict. In addition to broader humanitarian aid, it explicitly authorizes "assistance to promote democracy, human rights, freedom of the press, non-violence, reconciliation, and peaceful co-existence."

Second, the bill expands the Administration's options for engaging diplomatically with Palestinian leaders not associated with Hamas, including Palestinian Authority (PA) President Mahmoud Abbas, who will be a critical ally if we are to negotiate a peace agreement.

I am greatly pleased to see the improvements the Senate legislation has made, and for that reason I will support the bill's passage. However, because events have evolved since this legislation was first considered, I want to add a few words, lest our action today send the wrong message at the wrong time.

After a summer of crisis, during which the kidnapping of an Israeli soldier led Israel to send its military into Gaza, there have been several recent positive developments. First, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and PA President Abbas negotiated a ceasefire to end the violent confrontation in Gaza. Second, both Prime Minister Olmert and President Abbas have recently made clear their commitment to resuming peace talks. And third, Palestinian leaders are reportedly on the verge of forming a unity government that would end Hamas's sole control of the PA.

Passage of this legislation at this time should not be interpreted as unawareness of these positive developments or unwillingness to support them. Such progress should be rewarded with an increased U.S. commitment to work for peace in the region, not punished by the erection of new obstacles or the imposition of new sanctions.

With that said, however, I strongly support the goals of isolating Hamas and encouraging the Palestinian leadership to renounce violence and recognize Israel's right to exist, practical and principled steps toward the resumption of negotiations aimed at a two-state solution. This bill would accomplish those goals and I will support it. I hope it will serve not as an endpoint but as a launchpad for reinvigorated U.S. action to support a settlement that will bring a lasting peace to Israelis and Palestinians.

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