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Palestine Looms over Efforts To Bridge the U.S.-Islam Divide ^[1]

DOHA, QATAR --- When Hillary Clinton addressed the U.S.-Islamic World Forum here on Sunday night, she found the going smooth...until she hit the bump of Gaza. A group of religious leaders, whose spokesman was Cardinal Theodore McCarrick of Washington, D.C., asked why the Obama administration could not do more to help the beleaguered residents of Gaza, whose supplies of food, water, and medicine are barely at survival level. Secretary Clinton replied that the United States was doing all it could to get Israel to let “the trickle of supplies become a steady flow,” and then allow America and Arab states to rebuild Gaza’s schools and hospitals. Her message: U.S. influence has its limits.

Even at a conference featuring much constructive talk about improving the institutions of civil society and enhancing dialogue between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds, the gravitational pull of Palestine was always present. The rhetoric of reconciliation dominated, but there were also comments about “the foggy vision through which the United States looks at the Arab world,” and insistence that U.S.-Arab relations cannot substantively improve until Israeli-Palestinian disputes are resolved.

Pradeep Ramamurthy, Senior Director for Global Engagement at the White House, insisted that the administration is committed to a healthy Palestinian state, saying, “No day is soon enough.” But he admitted that the effort to get from here to there is constantly frustrating. Martin Indyk of the Brookings Institution added, “We have been let down by both sides.”

As they went about their business, the more than 300 attendees at this conference were mostly hopeful, but they could not shake off the specter of Palestine.

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