

Give Palestinians Hope and Peace May Follow

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Articles & Testimony

Considering the Trump administration's lack of credibility with the Palestinians, the crucial task of announcing projects for Gaza now falls to European and Arab leaders.

If ever there has been a conflict seen in zero-sum terms, it is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Passion, emotion and distrust have long characterised the two sides in their view of each other. Perhaps that should not be surprising. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is essentially one of two national movements competing for the same space. For far too long, both sides have seen the conflict in existential terms, with little ability to take account of the needs and grievances of the other side.

In the 1990s when I was America's lead negotiator on the Arab-Israeli conflict, we had serious negotiations and there seemed genuine recognition by each side of the other. Then, there was a sense of possibility between Israelis and Palestinians, and the Arabs more generally. Today, there is not—and that may seem surprising when Sunni Arab leaders in the Gulf, Egypt, and Jordan co-operate tacitly with Israel in the face of what they see as dangerous threats from Iran and radical Islamists.

But their co-operation, born of the old adage that the enemy of my enemy is my friend, has not translated to peacemaking between Israelis and Palestinians.

With the psychological gaps compounding real differences on issues, we should not expect peacemaking efforts to produce real progress any time soon between Israelis and Palestinians. Those psychological gaps and the basic disbelief between the two sides have reinforced each side's narrative—making them and their supporters even less willing to question their own narratives or even to accept that maybe there is something to the other side's claims.

I have long said that peace comes from seeing reality as it is and not letting mythologies deny reality. Unfortunately,

I feel the recent events in Gaza have fostered a distorted view of reality—and much of the reporting has not helped to provide insight into what is actually going on.

Before explaining the current reality, let me provide a few basic facts. Gaza has about two million people living in about 360 sq km. It is about the same size as the city of Detroit in the U.S., and about half of its population lives in refugee camps. Its inhabitants feel like they are living in a prison, as it is very difficult to move into or out of Gaza.

While most reporting focuses on the Israeli quarantine around Gaza, Israel allows movement of goods, humanitarian and economic assistance, and people with permits. Egypt, Gaza's other neighbour, keeps its border closed, denying the movement of people and goods—except on rare occasions.

Why does Israel maintain control over what moves into Gaza and how far out in the Mediterranean Sea Gazan fisherman can fish? Again, some background is required. After declaring in 2004 that he was going to disengage from the Palestinians, the Israeli prime minister at the time, Ariel Sharon, withdrew all Israel's settlers and soldiers from Gaza in August 2005. He also would raze all the settlement housing that was there, but decide to leave in place the productive greenhouses that could have benefited Gazan agriculture. Unfortunately, they were destroyed by looting soon after the Israeli withdrawal. At the time when Israel withdrew, it did not impose an embargo or quarantine on Gaza.

Hamas, which stands for Harakat al-Muqawamah al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Resistance Movement, wanted to be seen as having forced the Israelis to withdraw through its acts of violent "resistance." Regrettably, Hamas did not stop with acts of violence and terror after the Israelis withdrew. Within two weeks it carried out a bombing in the Israeli city of Beersheba. Across the next six months it was responsible for carrying out attacks against the crossing points that allowed commerce to pass -between Gaza and Israel as well as permit Gazan workers to go into Israel and find employment.

Because of the attacks, the Israelis, who had run six crossing points, reduced those to two and reduced the hours of operation while also beefing up security. Even then, it was not until Hamas effectively carried out a coup against the Palestinian Authority in 2007 and took over governance in Gaza that Israel imposed the embargo. The real reason: to stop the smuggling of arms and rockets and bomb-making materials into Gaza.

It is worth noting that in 2005, after the announcement of the Israeli intention to withdraw but before the actual withdrawal, I was invited to speak to a few hundred Palestinians in Gaza. In my talk, I said that Palestinians had never been able to control their own destiny—the Arabs determined what would be done in 1948. Yasser Arafat told me at the Camp David summit in the northern summer of 2000 that he had wanted to go to the original Camp David in 1978 but the Soviets and Syrians had prevented him. But now, I said, Israel was getting out and if the Palestinians turned Gaza into a going concern and developed it, the international community and the Israeli public would say, "Why not apply this to the West Bank as well?" However, if instead Palestinians turned Gaza into a platform for attacks against Israel, who would say, "Let's take that failed model and apply it elsewhere?"

Well, we know what Hamas decided. It preferred to build tunnels and rockets and carry on its war against Israel, and in turn Israel tightened the control over access to Gaza. And who has suffered? The Palestinians—in Gaza, through three devastating conflicts in 2008-09, 2012 and, worst of all, 2014. The ceasefire that ended the conflict in 2014 has largely held, but reconstruction needs remain profound, with the electrical power infrastructure far too limited and at least a third of the housing destroyed not yet rebuilt. And with all these needs, Hamas continued to divert construction materials to building tunnels for Hamas fighters hoping to penetrate Israel.

But as conditions deteriorated, Mahmoud Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, decided early this year first not to pay Israel for provision of electricity to Gaza and then, in March, to cut salaries to former Fatah employees there—two moves that dramatically worsened the conditions in Gaza. He wanted to squeeze Hamas into making

concessions, and it seemed to work when the Hamas leadership in Gaza agreed that the Palestinian Authority should resume responsibility for governance in Gaza. (The new Hamas leader in Gaza, Yahya Sinwar, would go so far as to say that Hamas had failed at governing.) Efforts at reconciliation, however, foundered on Abbas's demand that Hamas give up its militias and its weapons, saying he could not accept a Hezbollah model for Gaza where the PA had civil responsibility while Hamas retained ultimate leverage because of its arms. To make matters worse, when there was an assassination attempt in Gaza against Rami Hamdallah, the prime minister of the PA, Abbas threatened to cut off more money.

Gaza needs a serious influx of funds, not further cuts. The conditions there are truly awful. There are roughly four hours a day of electricity; 96 per cent of the water is undrinkable; there isn't power to run the sewage treatment plants; the overall unemployment rate is 44 per cent and, in the 15-29 age group, it is 60 per cent.

When people have little to lose, we should not be surprised that they can be mobilised for the demonstrations designed to breach the fence on the border with Israel. And it is this context that helps to explain what has been going on and why Hamas began roughly six weeks ago to organise mass marches designed to go to the fence and try to penetrate into Israel. Hamas said the protests would be peaceful even as it called them "Demonstrations for Return"—return to Palestinian homes in Israel. But, of course, those being mobilised don't have homes to go back to in Israel, and Israel is not the country it was in 1948.

So what is all this about? Hamas's leaders are seeking to achieve several objectives. First, within Gaza, to divert the public's attention away from Hamas's domestic failures. Second, to put countervailing pressure on Abbas, because he cannot be indifferent as Palestinians die at the hands of Israelis. Third, to make Hamas the centrepiece of the Palestinian movement. Fourth, to stigmatise Israel before the world as a way of also weakening Israel's ability to engage in self-defence and discredit it internationally. And, fifth, to put the Palestinian issue back in the region's and the world's consciousness.

From the Hamas standpoint, the more Palestinians who die, the better. On Monday, when 62 Palestinians died, Hamas leaders were falsely announcing that the fence had been penetrated and the Israelis were retreating, urging those mobilised to press through the smoke, the teargas and the shooting—something that surely added to the deaths. Hamas knew the Israelis would not allow their border to be penetrated by those whose purpose in going into Israel was not to have a picnic.

There is an important additional point that needs to be made. Recall that Hamas mobilised 40,000 people on Monday when the Trump administration opened the U.S. embassy in Jerusalem—an event Palestinians interpreted (wrongly) as denying their claims to the eastern part of the city.

But Monday was supposed to be a prelude to the biggest mobilisation on Tuesday, May 15, or Nakba day. Nakba, meaning catastrophe in Arabic, commemorates the founding of Israel and what Palestinians consider a catastrophe for them. This was to be the culmination of the past six weeks of demonstrations, with Hamas having announced it planned to have 100,000 turn out. And yet only 4,000 appeared on Tuesday, with two people killed.

What happened? There appears to have been a backlash against the number of people killed on Monday. The indication of that came on Wednesday when Hamas, after claiming the march was peaceful, publicly said that of the 62 killed, 50 were its operatives. It was as if Hamas leaders were saying: "We did not send the innocents to die; our fighters were the ones who mostly got killed." (If true, it also tends to validate the Israeli claims of violence and shooting against them.)

If Hamas felt the need to say this and, in effect, undercut its own story, it reminds us that there are limits as to what Hamas can do. But it also should remind us that it is well past time to deal with the economic conditions in Gaza. Sooner or later, they will lead to an explosion, and it is simply wrong from a humanitarian standpoint not to address

the dreadful conditions there. The Trump administration held a donors meeting on Gaza about six weeks ago, but nothing has happened. Given its lack of credibility with Palestinians now, it is probably best for the Europeans and the Arab leaders to issue a joint declaration that they will finance shovel-ready projects immediately to deal with electricity, water and sewage, but cannot do so unless there is calm.

Hamas leaders, especially now, cannot look like they are blocking the assistance that would alleviate the terrible economic realities in Gaza. This is not mythology. This is the reality that must be dealt with now—and, who knows, if the conditions in Gaza can be improved, it may even restore some hope that the larger political issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict may yet be tackled.

Dennis Ross, the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, is the author of [Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama](#)

<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/doomed-to-succeed>. ❖

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