

Israel Tries to Lighten Burden of Palestinians In Gaza and the West Bank, Receives Only Contumely In Return

by Hugh Fitzgerald



At the end of August and beginning of September, Israel did what it could to ease the lives of Palestinians both in Gaza and in the PA-run territories in the West Bank. First, it expanded the Gaza Strip's fishing zone to 15 nautical miles – the most since 2007.

Then Israel announced that many more goods and construction materials would be allowed into Gaza from Israel at the Kerem Shalom Crossing. Especially notable was Israel's decision to allow in "dual-use" items such as cement, which can be used for civilian purposes, to help in the rebuilding of Gaza after the 11-day war, but can also be used to fortify rocket launching pads and artillery emplacements and, even more worrisome, can be used to rebuild the extensive network of underground tunnels – about 100 kilometers of which were destroyed by the IAF airstrikes in May – that enable Hamas to move fighters and weapons underground on "the Metro," undetected by Israel.

In addition, Israel has promised to supply Gaza with an extra five million cubic meters (1.3 billion gallons) of water.

Israel has also agreed to allow 5000 more workers from Gaza into the Jewish state, to help relieve unemployment in the

Strip.

Finally, Israel has been collaborating with Qatar in making it possible to distribute directly to the 100,000 poorest families in Gaza the \$10 million that Qatar, partly at Israel's urging, has committed to send every month.

One might have thought that all of those concessions would have led to Hamas quieting down. But one would be wrong. Instead, Hamas has responded to all of this by letting loose arson balloons into Israel where they have again been setting farmland and forests on fire. Hamas has also lobbed rockets into Israel. It has started up again the "great-march-of-return" marches – or rather, violent riots – that it conducted in 2018 and 2019. Now thousands of Palestinians again march every evening toward Israel's security fence, where they throw rocks and explosives, especially Molotov cocktails, at the Israeli soldiers, who are defending that fence from possible breaches by the Palestinians. The Israelis use non-lethal means to keep the rioters at bay – tear gas, rubber bullets, stun grenades – as best they can, using live fire only when the fence is threatened with an imminent breach, and the soldiers are deemed to be in serious danger. During one of these recent riots, an Israeli soldier was shot in the head, and subsequently died.

Having pocketed as its due the concessions Israel made unilaterally, Hamas responds with a threat of "more escalation" – more rockets fired at Israel, more arson balloons let loose to fly into Israel, more riots at the fence. Hamas might have taken a different tack, and responded to those concessions by announcing its continued willingness to observe the ceasefire. It interprets concessions as a sign of weakness to be exploited; the more Israel gives, the more Hamas demands. It is now calling for "more concessions" from Israel; presumably it has in mind a still-greater loosening of restrictions on imports into Gaza of "dual-use" items, more work permits for Palestinians in Gaza, and more formerly

prohibited goods allowed into the Strip.

But what about the “moderate” Palestinian Authority? Its behavior is akin to that of Hamas. Like Hamas, it pockets whatever concessions Israel offers, without any felt need to respond in kind. But it does not threaten violence like Hamas; rather, it has engaged in a diplomatic onslaught on the Jewish state. During the Gantz-Abbas meeting in Ramallah in late August, Defense Minister Benny Gantz pledged to provide a \$155 million loan to the P.A., money it desperately needs. He also agreed to allow 16,000 new workers from the West Bank into Israel.

The response from the PA was one of ingratitude. First, the PA’s Prime Minister, Mohammed Shtayyeh, at a meeting with a visiting delegation of American Congressmen in Ramallah, urged the Biden Administration to hurry up and reopen the “consulate to the Palestinians” in Jerusalem that the Trump Administration had closed. The Americans have said that they will wait until November, after the Israeli government has passed a budget, to reopen the consulate, because they don’t want to do anything that would “destabilize” the nascent coalition and cause the government to fall, with a possible return of Netanyahu to power. Shtayyeh worries that in coming months Israel will be able to rally its supporters in Washington to persuade the Biden Administration not to follow through on its promise to reopen the consulate. Shtayyeh wants it to be a done deal, and fast.

Second, Mahmoud Abbas, while pocketing the \$155 million loan from Israel, still insists on continuing the “Pay-For-Slay” policy that rewards past, and incentivizes future, acts of terrorism. And as a sign that he remains implacable in his enmity to the Jewish state, Abbas renewed his call on the International Criminal Court (ICC), to hasten its investigation of Israel for “crimes” it has supposedly committed against the Palestinians, including the crime of building settlements on the very lands that were assigned to

the future Jewish state by the Mandate for Palestine, which calls for “close settlement by Jews on the land” (Article 6). Abbas wants Israel put in the ICC dock forthwith, and convicted of those nonexistent “crimes” committed against the Palestinian Arabs. And once the ICC reaches a decision, Defense Secretary Benny Gantz could be among the Israeli leaders who would then be subject to possible sanctions – the same Benny Gantz who was so forthcoming with offers of assistance to the PA’s Mahmoud Abbas, with a large loan and 16,000 extra work permits, when they met recently in Ramallah.

Third, in a meeting in Cairo with General El-Sissi and Jordan’s King Abdullah, Abbas pushed for them to adopt a joint declaration. To wit: that any negotiations by the PA with Israel should take place under the aegis not of the United States, deemed too favorable to Israel, but of the Quartet – the United Nations, the European Union, Russia, and the United States. Of that Quartet, two of the members – the United Nations and Russia – are resolutely anti-Israel and pro-Palestinian, while a third member, the European Union, tilts against Israel, insisting that the Jewish settlements in the West Bank are “illegal” and berating Israel for its conduct in the four wars with Hamas where, despite Israel’s best efforts, some civilians were killed and wounded. In the Quartet, only the United States can be counted on to exhibit some modicum of fairness toward the Jewish state. Abbas’ insistence on replacing the U.S. with the Quartet is one more bit of evidence of his desire for a stacked deck in his favor, and his bad faith toward the Jewish state.

Both Hamas and PA have, in their different ways, answered Israeli concessions – that large loan, those work permits for Palestinians in both Gaza and the West Bank, the fishing grounds expanded, and a lengthened list of imports into Gaza – with ingratitude and contumely. The moral of this tale – often have you heard it told – is simply this: when it comes to Israel’s concessions to the Palestinians, no good deed goes

unpunished.

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