

Israel Can Ease Gaza Tensions, But So Must the U.N.

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COMMENTARY



AP Photo/Tsafrir Abayov

TEL AVIV – In mid-May, freelance journalist Ahmed Abu Artema, an organizer of “Gaza’s Great Return March,” emphasized in a New York Times op-ed the peaceful intentions of a movement that has sparked violence since late-March and led to dozens of Palestinians killed and thousands injured by Israel in defense of its border. In fact, the movement’s very name proclaims a warlike ambition. The “great return march,” a journey from Gaza to Palestinians’ supposedly true homes in the sovereign state of Israel, reflects the dream of abolishing the Jewish state.

This dream is the root cause of the humanitarian disaster that blights the lives of Gazans, and of Hamas’s new round of war—involving the use of flaming kites on a near daily basis to set Israeli fields ablaze and of terrorist infiltration to commit atrocities against Israel’s civilian population.

The seed that grew into “Gaza’s Great Return March,” according to Artema, was planted in December when President Trump announced—in accordance with a 1995 congressional resolution—that the United States would move its embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel’s capital city, Jerusalem. This, asserted Artema, deepened the wound he feels when he looks across the fence that separates Gaza from Israel and sees what he believes to be occupied Arab land.

The international community stokes Gazans’ ruinous belief that Israel belongs to them and fuels their delusive dream of return. On May 18, for example, the U.N. Human Rights Council again improperly intervened in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in favor of Hamas. By an overwhelming margin—29 countries in favor, two against (the United States and Australia), and 14 abstaining—the UNHRC authorized an investigation into the violence arising from the Gaza demonstrations while, in advance of the investigation, it “*Condemns* the disproportionate and indiscriminate use of force by the Israeli occupying forces against Palestinian civilians.”

Never mind that Israel, having withdrawn from the territory in 2005, does not occupy Gaza, and resorted to force in the recent confrontations only after issuing abundant warnings and in manifestly legitimate defense of its territorial integrity. The council’s gratuitous and entirely foreseeable action usurped Israel’s right and interfered with its responsibility under international law to investigate allegations of misconduct by its military. The one-sided resolution, moreover, airbrushed Hamas’s unlawful dispatch of combatants dressed as civilians into the frontlines of the border-fence demonstrations with the intent of breaching Israeli defenses.

Meanwhile, the United Nations Relief and Works Agency persists in encouraging Gazan and West Bank Palestinians—indeed Palestinians living in Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, and throughout the Middle East and around the world—to see themselves as refugees endowed with an eternal right of return to Israel. In December 1949, the United Nations established UNRWA to provide care for local Arabs displaced by the war five Arab armies launched against Israel following its declaration of independence in May 1948. UNRWA, however, has deviated greatly from its original mandate. With the international community’s blessing, it has turned itself into the only U.N. organization dedicated to restoring homes and lands not to the people who left them but to their descendants.

All refugees around the globe apart from Palestinians come under the jurisdiction of the UNHRC, which refers to itself as the U.N. Refugee Agency. The UNHCR’s overarching goal is to transform refugees into citizens. First it tries to repatriate them. If that fails, it promptly turns to resettling and integrating them elsewhere.

In stark contrast to the UNHCR, UNRWA is single-mindedly dedicated to repatriating Palestinians, most of whom by now were not born in Israel, while neglecting for several generations Palestinian resettlement and integration elsewhere. Unlike the UNHCR,

UNRWA treats refugee status as inheritable. That's why, despite there being no more than about 650,000 Arabs who left their homes in 1948 and 1949 during Israel's War of Independence, UNRWA today recognizes more than 5 million Palestinians as refugees.

By nurturing this dream of return, the international community perpetuates the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Repeatedly assured by diplomats and intellectuals that their people are blameless, Palestinian leaders refuse half measures. Systematically encouraged to believe that their grievances are all Israel's fault, Palestinians reject compromise. Relieved of accountability for violating the laws of war, they make human shields of their noncombatants and make military targets of Israeli noncombatants.

A solution to Gaza depends on a dramatic transformation of Palestinian political culture, and of the political culture of the international community that enables Palestinian belligerence and intransigence.

Israel, however, cannot pin its fate on such improbable developments. As a matter of self-interest, it must look for ways to reduce tensions with Hamas and ease Gaza suffering.

Gaza is a crisis waiting to explode. A narrow slice of land a little more than twice the size of Washington, D.C., it is bordered to the west by the Mediterranean, to the north and east by Israel, and to the south and west by Egypt's Sinai Peninsula. About 45 percent of the approximately 1.8 million Gazan Palestinians are under 15; about 66 percent are under 25. Since seizing control of Gaza in 2007, Hamas has established a theological despotism whose overriding purpose is Israel's destruction. Nevertheless, Gaza remains dependent on Israel for water, electricity, and other humanitarian necessities.

That's in part because Israel imposed a land, sea, and air blockade on Gaza to prevent Hamas from importing rockets, missiles and other weapons. It is also because of harsh controls instituted by the Egyptians at the Rafah border crossing.

Three times in the last 10 years—winter 2008-2009, autumn 2012, and summer 2014—Israel undertook military operations inside Gaza to counter Hamas mortar, rocket, and missile attacks on its civilian population. With the advent of the Iron Dome air defense system, Israel has gone a long way toward neutralizing the threat from Gazan projectiles. So Hamas has diverted a substantial portion of the building materials arriving in Gaza to constructing tunnels into Israel for terrorist attacks.

Israel has countered by installing an underground anti-tunnel wall. It is also building an underwater fence to prevent attacks from the sea. Hamas's response is the Great March of Return.

An understandable consensus has formed in Israel stretching from beyond the center right to beyond the center left that there is little to do in the short term to improve the situation. That's probably right.

But Israel should pursue the little it *can* do energetically. Even as it ensures that Hamas pays the price for acts of war, Israel must maintain a flow of basic goods to Gaza. And it must take advantage of opportunities—few and far between though they may be—to develop commerce and industry there.

Egypt can help. As Member of Knesset Anat Berko (Likud) told me, Cairo should allow a much freer flow of goods and individuals through the Rafah border crossing. Sinai's El Arish International Airport, less than 50 miles away, should become a Gaza hub.

The United States can help. It should bring diplomatic and financial pressure to bear on the Egyptians to ease restrictions on Gaza.

And the international community can help. By ceasing to encourage vain hopes and absurd expectations, it can help Gazans emancipate themselves from their self-destructive dream of return and replace it with the resolve to build prosperous lives in the present.

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