

Jerusalem and Gaza

Events in Israel were prominent in the news in May. Chief among them were the official opening of the United States Embassy in Jerusalem (instead of Tel Aviv) and the climax of the Palestinian demonstrations at the Gaza border, with its resulting dozens of deaths and hundreds of injuries.

Jews of good will differ over whether the relocation of our embassy is a good idea. However, I was interested in the remarks of Dan Shapiro, our former ambassador to Israel, appointed by President Obama.

In an interview on PBS' News Hour on May 15, Shapiro agreed that the relocation is appropriate, but he said that our government made two mistakes. The first was the failure to place the relocation in the context of a future two-state solution, with the implication that, should East Jerusalem become Palestine's capital, our embassy will be there.

The second was to schedule the opening on the day before the anniversary, in the secular calendar, of Israel's independence. This is a day of protest for Palestinians, and Hamas moved its massive and threatening demonstration up a day in order to coincide with the embassy opening and share the news coverage. Our government could easily have scheduled the opening earlier or later.

With regard to Gaza, and as much as I abhor the violence and loss of life, I understand and support Israel's response to the attempts to breach the border fences. Many of the Gazans at the front line were, in fact, armed. Some nations and NGOs have argued that Israel's response was disproportionately violent, but without suggesting alternatives. Talmud famously teaches that if someone is coming to kill you, "rise up and kill him first."

From its side, Hamas—freely elected to govern Gaza—has admitted to deceiving its civilian population to join potentially lethal demonstrations. It regularly uses its people as human shields. It has goaded its people to sabotage infrastructure, most recently wrecking the fuel terminal at Kerem Shalom. It has refused shipments from Israel of life-sustaining food and medicine.

Israel is not blameless. It is random and inconsistent in deciding what supplies it will allow into Gaza, and also in allowing Gazans to cross into Israel, whether for medical emergency or employment.

Resolving this situation is only partially Israel's responsibility. It should be fair and compassionate in its treatment of Gaza. It wouldn't hurt to look to Jewish tradition for guidance in the practice of both justice and compassion. As for Hamas, it has to be up to Arab/Muslim countries to move Hamas toward humane and fair treatment of its own people.

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