

Food Fight Between Israel and the Palestinian Authority

by Hugh Fitzgerald



Last October, the Palestinian Authority banned imports of Israeli beef. It did so because, according to the PA, Palestinians found themselves forced to buy meat only from Israeli farmers, thereby limiting the import of meat from abroad.

For several months, the Israelis tried to convince the PA to lift the ban, without success. Israeli cattle farmers, hurting badly, asked the government to put more pressure on the Palestinians to reconsider.

At the beginning of February, in response to the rollout of Trump's peace initiative, a furious Mahmoud Abbas announced he was severing all relations with both Israel and the United States. In this fraught atmosphere, partly in answer to Abbas'

beef boycott and prompted, too, by his threat to sever "all relations" with Israel, including coordination on security matters, Israeli Defense Minister Naftali Bennett decided to halt all Israeli agricultural imports from the West Bank Palestinians, amounting to some 700 million shekels (\$204 million dollars) in annual sales.

This halt in agricultural imports from Palestinians in the West Bank may yet cause Abbas to end the ban on Israeli beef. But if it does not, some believe the next step taken by Israel to pressure Abbas economically would be to revoke entry permits for about 100,000 Palestinian workers in Israel, many of whom are employed in the construction industry. There are another 150,000 foreign workers, mostly illegals, in Israel today, from Romania, Ghana, Nigeria, Colombia, the Philippines, Turkey, Ukraine, Russia, and other former Soviet countries. The government could regularize their presence, making them legal, and also bring in another 100,000 workers from the same countries, to replace the Palestinians from the West Bank.

But such a move, to ban Palestinians from the West Bank working in Israel, would have undesirable economic consequences. To replace these workers takes time and money. Israel would have to find such workers abroad, vet them, arrange for their travel to Israel, have them matched up with employers, in construction, manufacturing, and farming who, even for some menial jobs, would have to train them. And the ban would also have undesirable security consequences. Such an enormous increase in Palestinian unemployment overnight would create anger at Israel for putting such a policy in place. It could trigger more violence among the Palestinians directed at Israelis.

Instead of answering Abbas tit-for-tat, by ending all agricultural imports from West Bank Palestinians, as has already been done, and then by halting Palestinian workers from the West Bank and Gaza, that does neither party any good,

the Israelis could take a different tack. Rather than cut off agricultural imports from Palestinians in the West Bank, if the PA will lift its ban on Israeli beef, Israel could offer to lower its prices to match what foreign cattle ranchers charge. It could also agree not to ban Palestinian workers, but instead undertake to do the very opposite, and hire more of them to replace some of the other foreign workers. The numbers of new Palestinian hires would depend on the security situation: the fewer attacks on Israelis, the more Palestinians will be hired. It gives the PA a renewed stake in the security collaboration that Abbas has just declared he was ending, but now might reconsider. More carrots, fewer sticks. It's worth a try.

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