

# The Israel Embassy Killings: Wrong in Every Way

written by Stephen R. Shalom | May 27, 2025



In the face of the ongoing genocide unfolding before our eyes in Gaza, with Human Rights Watch warning “Latest Israeli Plan Inches Closer to Extermination,” it is not surprising that people with decent instincts would feel desperate to do something to stop the carnage. But the path chosen by Elias Rodriguez, who shot and killed two staff members of the Israeli embassy in Washington DC, was not the solution. On the contrary, it was a tragedy and wrong on multiple levels.

Most people are not absolute pacifists, but believe that there are times where violence is morally justified. But the moral bar for using violence is a high one, and violence must be focused on those who bear particular responsibility for harm. That’s why international humanitarian law makes a crucial distinction between combatants and noncombatants—a distinction that has been violated by Israel on a vast scale. Low-level embassy employees are not combatants nor are they policymakers. Killing them was morally wrong. That they worked for the foreign ministry of a state engaged in mass crimes was condemnable, but not a capital offense.

Moreover, to be just, violence must offer the best chance of stopping the harm. Yet there is no chance at all that the deaths of the staffers will cause Israel or its American enablers to reverse course. On the contrary, the incident is already being used to justify further repression of the pro-Palestine movement.

From the reports of the shooting, one wonders whether Rodriguez even knew for certain that his victims worked for the embassy. The crowd leaving the event at the Capital Jewish Museum included diplomats, young Jewish professionals, and keynote speakers from two aid organizations, one of which suffered the loss of three volunteers in Gaza, killed, in the organization’s words, “when their residence was attacked by Israeli forces without any warning.”

Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu declared that the “terrorist who cruelly gunned [the pair] down did so for one reason and one reason alone—he wanted to kill Jews.” This is preposterous. Nothing in Rodriguez’s “Explication” or his social media history that has been extensively pored through shows that he held any animus toward Jews qua Jews rather than towards the Israeli state and its terrible crimes. It’s hard to imagine that he would have acted as he did in the absence of Israeli atrocities that have reached the level of genocide. He shouted his support of Palestinians, not antisemitic slogans. On his window in Chicago he had a sign reading “Tikkun Olam means FREE PALESTINE.”

But still, by targeting a mostly Jewish meeting organized by the American Jewish Committee held in a Jewish space without an explicitly pro-Israel agenda, Rodriguez has blurred what should be a

bright line between anti-Jewish and anti-Israel actions. Israel apologists have long been working to deny the distinction; unfortunately Rodriguez has muddied it further. Whatever his intentions, his victims will not just be the two staffers, but the people of Palestine. As a result of his actions, attention will be diverted from the ongoing mass slaughter in Gaza to the deaths of the young couple.

The pro-Palestinian movement had been making important strides in recent weeks. The latest Gallup poll showed that fewer than half of Americans support Israel, and that among those who identify as Democrats, Palestinians were supported over Israel by an incredible 59% to 21%. According to an Economist-YouGov poll, a plurality of voters want to decrease military aid to Israel, particularly among Democrats. And though Congress lags far behind the public, opposition has been slowly growing there to the U.S. blank check to Israel and to the enforced starvation.

Now, however, the killing of the staffers will be used to try to discredit the Palestinian cause. There will be all sorts of further clamping down against activists: more weaponized charges of antisemitism, more surveillance, more arrests, more deportations. This repression will not be new. But it will have more public support than before. Already the print *New York Times* has run a story on its front page:

“Attack Tangles Pro-Palestinian Movement’s Path”

“The slaying of two Israeli Embassy workers cast[s] a harsh spotlight on pro-Palestinian groups in the United States. Activists, who were already being scrutinized, could face further pushback.”

And on the op-ed page, they offered up a piece by the media director at the Consulate General of Israel in New York with the print title “This Is the Tragic Consequence of Conflating Jews and Israel”—ignoring the strong presence of Jews and Jewish organizations in the movement for Palestinian liberation.

To be sure, terrorism has sometimes “worked,” particularly when carried out by powerful states (think of Guernica or Hiroshima). But the historical record of terror by Palestinians has been to strengthen the Israeli right. Palestinian attacks on Israeli civilians in the mid-1990s or during the Second Intifada, or rockets fired at Sderot, led not to justice but to more repression, the disappearance of the Israeli left, and greater racist intolerance among the Israeli public. Likewise, October 7 did not advance the Palestinian cause, but set it back horribly. And the assassinations of low-level Israeli officials in the United States will certainly not help in furthering Palestinian interests.

The survival of the Palestinian people will alas depend on political change in the United States. That will require the growth of the U.S. pro-Palestine movement, building support as widely as possible. Such a movement needs to maintain its moral clarity—both for its own sake and to have any chance of success.