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Gaza Cease-Fire Must Halt Hamas Rockets

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The crisis in Gaza, provoked by the Palestinian extremist organization Hamas to advance its radical agenda, is likely to worsen in the coming days. After initially showing great restraint after Hamas ended the six-month cease-fire (which it never fully complied with anyway) on December 19 and escalated its rocket bombardment of Israeli civilians, Israel has sought to lance a festering boil. The situation had become intolerable, and Israel took justifiable action to protect its civilian population. The United States should stand by its beleaguered ally and seek to resolve the situation in a way that yields a stable and sustainable cease-fire, not a band-aid solution that allows Hamas to continue its inhuman strategy of hiding among Palestinian civilians to launch attacks on Israeli civilians.

The Growing Threat of Hamas Rockets. Hamas had used the cease-fire to build up its stocks of rockets and other arms, some of which were smuggled through a warren of tunnels beneath the Egypt–Gaza border. Hamas—deemed by the U.S., Israel, and the European Union to be a terrorist organization—seeks to duplicate Hezbollah’s strategy during the 2006 war in southern Lebanon. It has built a network of underground bunkers and elaborate fortifications in Gaza and hopes to lure the Israeli army into a protracted and bloody campaign of urban warfare. Hamas seeks to outlast, not to outfight, the Israeli army by drawing it into an asymmetric war of attrition.

Hamas remains confident that it can withstand Israel’s superior military capabilities because it is willing to accept the deaths of more Palestinians than it believes Israel is willing to accept. Intoxicated by a fanatic ideology of hatred, Hamas seeks

to exploit Palestinian deaths caused by its own ruthless policies through a media propaganda campaign that shamelessly puts all blame on Israel.

The Gaza Strip, from which Israel unilaterally withdrew in 2005, has posed a growing security threat to Israeli civilians. Over 10,000 rocket and mortar shells have been fired from Gaza since 2001, and the indiscriminate bombardment has escalated since Hamas seized power in a violent coup in 2007. The increasing range and capabilities of Hamas rockets have steadily escalated the threat. Crude homemade Qassam rockets with a 10-kilometer range have been supplemented by a growing number of *Grad* Katyusha-type rockets with a range of 40 kilometers (approximately 24 miles). These longer-range weapons—built with components supplied by Iran, Syria, and a network of black market smugglers who move contraband through cross-border tunnels into Gaza—have recently exploded in the Israeli cities of Ashdod and Beersheba. Israeli police authorities estimated on December 31 that these missiles now threaten about 860,000 civilians, more than 12 percent of Israel’s population.

The Israeli government has understandably taken action to remedy an intolerable situation. To stop the rocket terrorism and counter the Hamas military buildup, Israel launched a devastating air attack

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against the Hamas terrorist infrastructure. But rocket barrages are difficult to stop with air power alone, as Israel's 2006 war with Hezbollah in southern Lebanon demonstrated. Israel is therefore poised to follow up with a ground attack by massing armor along the border and mobilizing 6,500 army reservists.

The scale and operational objectives of Israel's imminent ground offensive remain unknown. But it is likely to put a high priority focus on northern Gaza to push back rocket launchers from vulnerable border areas, and southern Gaza to destroy tunnel networks that have facilitated the Hamas military buildup. Jerusalem also seeks to restore its deterrent capacity—which was undermined by the inconclusive nature of the 34-day war against Hezbollah in 2006—and to loosen Hamas's grip on power. Although the crisis will probably strengthen Palestinian political support for Hamas in the short run, over time it could fuel resentment over its harsh rule and its callous disregard for the interests of the long-suffering Palestinian people, which it put at risk by ending the cease-fire.

U.S. Policy and the Gaza Crisis. The Bush Administration (correctly) has strongly supported Israel's right to defend itself and has denounced Hamas for provoking the crisis. Hamas must be held accountable for its murderous policies. Washington has also pressed Jerusalem to minimize Palestinian civilian casualties, and Israel has taken care to warn civilians to move away from targeted Hamas facilities. President-elect Barack Obama has also remained silent, wisely, to avoid complicating the situation. If Obama or his advisers make statements that lead Hamas to conclude that his Administration will take a softer line on terrorism, then it will be encouraged to prolong the crisis to get a better deal from the incoming Administration.

The goal of both Administrations should be to end the fighting in a way that leads to a stable and sustainable cease-fire that strengthens the security of civilians on both sides and undermines the fanatical leadership of Hamas. As long as Hamas retains its stranglehold on Gaza, no stable peace is possible, because it remains committed to destroying Israel.

U.S. policy regarding the Gaza crisis should be guided by the following principles:

- *A cease-fire agreement must include an immediate and permanent end of rocket attacks by Hamas and other extremist Palestinian groups.* A return to the *status quo ante*, in which Hamas felt free to launch rockets at Israeli civilians while hiding among Palestinian civilians, is unacceptable.
- *Legitimizing the false moral equivalence between terrorist attacks aimed at murdering civilians and counter-terrorist actions taken by a democratic government to protect its citizens must be avoided.* Israel has taken precautions to minimize civilian casualties by employing precision-guided weapons and warning Palestinians to stay clear of targets. Talk about a “cycle of violence” that conflates the actions of both adversaries only clouds the situation and encourages Hamas and other terrorist groups to continue their illegal and immoral attacks.
- *The focus of international pressure should be put on Hamas, which instigated the crisis, not on Israel.* Hamas will seek to prolong the fighting as long as possible to mobilize popular support for its radical agenda in the Arab and Muslim worlds, transform itself into the “victim” of Israeli “aggression,” and politically undermine moderate Arab governments that have supported peace negotiations with Israel. Until Hamas has been defeated and its radical ideology discredited, there is no hope for a genuine peace in the Middle East.

Free Palestine—from Hamas. Hamas has tightened its barbaric grip on Gaza since its violent 2007 coup against the Palestinian Authority and now holds 1.5 million Palestinians hostage to its ruthless drive to destroy Israel. The long-term goal of American policy should be to free these hostages from the draconian rule and endless violence promoted by Hamas. Therefore it is important that the current crisis be resolved in a manner that undercuts the capacity of Hamas to continue its cynical and destructive policies.

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