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End Hamas Hostage Strategy to Bring Peace to Gaza

James Phillips

After hijacking Gaza in a bloody 2007 coup, Hamas, as part of its long term strategy to destroy Israel, has now transformed Gaza into a hellish battlefield. Hamas has essentially taken Gaza's 1.5 million inhabitants hostage by putting a higher priority on killing Israelis than on protecting Palestinians. The organization is using Palestinian civilians as human shields while it exploits their deaths as grist for its propaganda mill. Meanwhile, Hamas militants continue to hide among Palestinian civilians while launching rockets to kill Israeli civilians.

The United States must work to secure a resolution of the crisis that protects civilians on both sides from Hamas war crimes. Such an outcome requires the United States to back Israel's right to defend itself, block any one-sided resolutions at the U.N. Security Council, and mobilize international pressure on Hamas to stop its illegal rocket attacks. The U.S. goal should be to put in place an enforceable and sustainable cease-fire that diminishes the Hamas threat to Israelis, Palestinians, and regional stability.

The Gaza Graveyard. Hamas, a revolutionary Islamist movement, is recognized as a terrorist organization by the United States, Israel, and the European Union because of its murder of more than 500 civilians in Israel, including more than 20 Americans. On December 19, 2008, Hamas unilaterally ended its Egyptian-brokered six month cease-fire with Israel—which it had frequently violated—and escalated its rocket attacks, indiscriminately targeting civilians in southern Israel. Despite persistent Israeli warnings that such aggression would not be tolerated, Hamas remained defiant. Israel responded with an air offensive against the Hamas

terrorist infrastructure on December 27 before launching a ground attack a week later.

Hamas has proclaimed that “Gaza will be a graveyard” for the Israeli army. The group seeks to duplicate Hezbollah's strategy from the 2006 war in southern Lebanon, building a network of underground bunkers and elaborate fortifications in Gaza. It hopes to lure the Israeli army into a protracted and bloody asymmetric war of attrition, fuel a media propaganda campaign, discredit the rival Palestinian Authority, undermine Arab governments that seek peace with Israel, and advance interests of its chief patron, Iran. Hamas is opposed not only to peace with Israel but to Israel's very existence. The revolutionary Islamist organization's long-term goal is to destroy Israel, along with moderate Arab governments, replacing them with extremist Islamist regimes.

Hamas therefore has rejected calls for a cease-fire with Israel, just as it rejected Egyptian appeals last month for extending the previous cease-fire. As long as Hamas continues to bombard Israeli civilians, no cease-fire is possible. Furthermore, outside powers should not pressure Israel to accept a cease-fire until Hamas, which provoked the crisis, finally signals its willingness to halt illegal attacks against civilians.

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Those who argue that the Israeli military response is disproportionate to Hamas rocket terrorism make several errors. This argument equates the intentional crimes of a terrorist group that purposely target civilians with the defensive actions of a democratic government that seeks to protect its own civilians while going to great lengths to avoid accidentally killing Palestinian civilians. The goal of Israel's war with Hamas is victory—not to match Hamas blow for blow or to employ the same tactics, such as indiscriminate bombardments or suicide bombings. It would be a gross strategic error to engage in a tit-for-tat conflict with a suicide cult that is only too willing to sacrifice the lives of its Palestinian hostages.

Criteria for Ending the Fighting. In order to stem the fighting, foreign leaders have flocked to the United Nations and to Israel. French President Nicolas Sarkozy, EU special envoy Tony Blair, and Karel Schwarzenberg, the Foreign Minister of the Czech Republic—which assumed the EU presidency last week—have met with Israeli leaders in efforts to defuse the crisis. Russia and Turkey have also mounted their own diplomatic efforts. U.S. Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice has reportedly spoken to 17 foreign leaders by phone but has wisely refrained from traveling to the region. No negotiated cease-fire is possible as long as both sides remain determined to fight: Israel to reduce the rocket threat and weaken Hamas and Hamas to transform a military disaster into a political victory. Hamas seeks to accomplish these goals through a propaganda campaign designed to fuel Arab anger, undermine moderate Arab governments, and strengthen like-minded Islamist extremist movements throughout the world.

The Bush Administration has blocked the passage of one-sided U.N. Security Council resolutions on the current Gaza crisis, such as a Libyan-sponsored resolution that puts the onus for stopping the fighting on Israel. Washington should continue to block such resolutions because they only encourage Hamas to prolong its hostage strategy.

Meanwhile, the United States should work behind the scenes with its Arab allies—particularly Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—to pressure Hamas to accept a halt of its rocket terrorism in exchange for an Israeli halt of military operations.

But any such agreement would be inherently unstable unless it includes the following conditions:

- *A verifiable end to rocket attacks.* A return to the *status quo ante*, in which Hamas and other extremist Palestinian groups were free to launch rockets at Israeli civilians with impunity, is unacceptable.
- *A halt to cross-border arms smuggling.* The previous cease-fire allowed Hamas to consolidate its control of Gaza and build up its rocket arsenal by using a network of more than 300 tunnels across the Gaza-Egypt border. Israel will undoubtedly seek to destroy these tunnels in the course of the fighting, but much stronger Egyptian cooperation is needed to prevent smuggling through new tunnels.
- *Deployment of international monitors.* To hold Hamas accountable for maintaining any cease-fire, a contingent of international monitors is necessary to verify that rockets are not being launched out of Gaza and that the tunnel network is not being rebuilt.
- *Monitoring of humanitarian aid.* Aid should be routed through border crossings controlled by the Palestinian Authority and distributed under the supervision of international monitors. This will ensure that Hamas does not divert humanitarian aid and other supplies to rebuild its war machine. Moreover, it will reassert the role of the more moderate Palestinian Authority and undermine Hamas's control over the welfare of Gazans.

Toward a Genuine Peace. International efforts to resolve the Gazan crisis should be aimed at shaping a postwar situation that restricts the ability of Hamas to threaten Israel or hold Palestinians hostage to its extremist Islamist goals. A cease-fire that allows Hamas to rebuild its military power and tighten its brutal grip on Gaza will lead to an unending series of crises that Hamas, its patron Iran, and other Islamist extremists will exploit. To restore stability to the region and rescue the dying hopes for a genuine peace, the United States and other powers must help defeat the Hamas strategy of hiding behind Gazans in its ruthless quest to kill Israelis.

—James Phillips is Senior Research Fellow for Middle Eastern Affairs in the Douglas and Sarah Allison Center for Foreign Policy Studies, a division of the Kathryn and Shelby Cullom Davis Institute for International Studies, at The Heritage Foundation.