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U.S. must act now in Gaza

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For observers of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict committed to a peaceful and lasting two-state resolution, the conflict between Israel and Hamas in Gaza brings the temptation to throw one's hands in the air in despair. Mistaken assumptions and lessons left unlearned seem to guide each of the protagonists down a course antithetical to the long-term interests of both Israelis and Palestinians.

We can't help but lament another cycle of retributive violence – both for the terrible toll it takes on both sides and because we know it is not the way forward. Yet exasperation and passivity are indulgences that the United States and the world can ill afford.

Fighting vs. governing

For its part, Hamas has again proven that it would rather fight than govern or tend to the needs of Gazans, making it exceedingly difficult to envision it as a serious partner at the negotiating table. Israel, while unquestionably justified in its move to put an end to the daily barrage of rockets falling upon its citizens, seems to have forgotten the lessons of the 2006 Lebanon war, during which its use of massive force alienated the Arab world and turned Hezbollah into freedom fighters in the eyes of many Lebanese. And the Bush administration once again offers little – only an unconditional green light to follow the fight, now a full-scale ground war, wherever it leads.

It is difficult to imagine how the current conflict might ultimately lead to a just and lasting peace. Hamas, though militarily debilitated, is not likely to disappear as a political force or to suddenly prove more pliable in negotiations. It may become more rather than less difficult to bring Gaza under the authority of President Mahmoud Abbas and Fatah, lest they be seen as capitalizing on the misery wrought by the fighting.

And Israel, while addressing a key short-term security objective, risks far-reaching damage to the peace process that is essential to its most critical long-term security objective: a resolution to the conflict. Equally troubling, the overwhelming force of its bombardment has buttressed support for extremist elements, like Hezbollah and the Iranian government, that threaten Israeli and regional security.

As ominous as the picture may be, it is strongly in the interests of our own country to ensure that the architecture of the peace process is not irreparably damaged. To do so, the United States should take several immediate steps, even as the Bush administration draws anemically to a close.

Humanitarian crisis looms

First, the administration, working with the international community, must take swift action to avert a massive humanitarian crisis in Gaza. Gazans have been on the verge of a humanitarian meltdown for months; the bombing of border tunnels – which have been used to smuggle food and humanitarian supplies, in addition to weapons – pushes Gaza further toward collapse.

Secondly, the administration should urgently engage Israel, along with regional allies like Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, in putting together the framework for a sustainable long-term ceasefire, not simply a temporary halt to fighting. Such a framework must protect Israel from the persistent rocket fire on Sderot and from Hamas's stockpiling of deadly weapons. But it also must provide relief from the devastating embargo on Gaza. To be effective, it must involve Egypt and regional partners as mediators and monitors.

Collateral consequences

Coming on the heels of the 2006 Lebanon war, Israel's military actions in Gaza have had the unfortunate collateral consequence of generating substantial domestic political unrest for many of Israel's friendliest Arab neighbors, particularly Egypt. The United States will need to walk a fine diplomatic line, encouraging Arab nations to lead Hamas toward a sustainable ceasefire while empowering them to advocate for the just peace their citizens demand.

Finally, both President Bush and, as soon as he takes office, President-elect Obama should explicitly express the United States' unwavering commitment to a viable peace process and undertake diplomacy toward that end. How the present conflict is waged, and on what terms it is halted, will be especially consequential on the Palestinian side of the equation.

The U.S., Israel and moderate Sunni regimes have not done enough to help President Abbas and Fatah gain credibility, and that task is now even more urgent and challenging. As for Hamas, while its military capabilities may be downgraded by the conflict, its political stock may rise. The organization and its constituency must be taken into account, directly and indirectly, in any viable process. Regional mediations and renewed Israeli-Syrian talks should figure prominently in such efforts.

These steps will not resolve the conflict. But they will help preserve the possibility of a future peace, a possibility that is now teetering on the brink.

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