

Stopping the Cycle in the Mideast

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In addition to seeking Egypt’s help with mediation, the Biden administration needs to recognize that several motivations are driving Hamas in this round, so raising the cost to the group cannot just be measured in military terms.

The searing scenes from Gaza and Israel stem from one new reality: Hamas is trying to change the rules of the game, seeking to show it can hold Israeli behavior hostage through its threats. Hamas’s leaders are essentially saying, “take a step in Jerusalem or elsewhere that we don’t like, and we will indiscriminately fire rockets against Israeli cities.”

Israel won’t accept its new reality and will act to re-establish deterrence by imposing a very high price on Hamas. As is the norm with Hamas, Palestinians in Gaza will pay the price for Hamas’s political ambitions.

What is motivating Hamas? Put simply, its leaders see the possibility of seizing the mantle of Palestinian leadership, believing that three factors have created both an opportunity and need for doing so now.

First, the spiraling clashes in Jerusalem, including at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, have been focusing attention and mobilizing passions. The city and the compound are contested by Palestinians and Israelis alike: Muslims see it as where Muhammad ascended to Heaven, and Israeli Jews see it as the site of the two historic Jewish Temples of

history, the very sovereign Zion of Zionism. Both see it as central to their prayers.

Look at the reaction to the opening of the Jerusalem Tunnel near Al-Aqsa in 1996, Ariel Sharon's walk on the Temple Mount in 2000, the metal detector crisis of 2017 about access to the compound: It consistently proves to be the greatest flashpoint of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. While religion and nationalism are intertwined, Hamas's leaders realize that no other Palestinian nationalist symbol can evoke such rage.

Second, Mahmoud Abbas's cancellation of the planned elections, the first since 2006, triggered deep frustration among Palestinians. Abbas, the president of the Palestinian Authority, had been stung by criticism that Palestinians had not been able to vote since 2006, and he thought to appeal to the Biden administration and the Palestinian public by announcing elections. Palestinians reacted enthusiastically, with a **reported 93% of eligible Palestinians registering to vote (<https://www.timesofisrael.com/93-of-palestinians-register-to-vote-in-election-amid-claims-of-voter-tampering/>)**. But with a replay of the 2006 Hamas victory looking increasingly likely as Fatah once again fragmented into three lists and Hamas retained its discipline with only one list, Abbas looked for an excuse to cancel the election.

And he did so, claiming that Israel would not allow Palestinians to vote in East Jerusalem. But the public saw through the pretext, and Hamas saw the opening.

Third, Hamas understood it was losing its image as the leader of the resistance and instead becoming the keeper of the status quo. For the last two years, it worked out with Israel a de facto cease-fire in Gaza known as "the Arrangement." Israel would make some gradual economic concessions in areas ranging from construction of Gaza infrastructure projects to fishing zones in return for Hamas's non-involvement in attacks. While Hamas used the time to arm heavily, it was being increasingly challenged by the Iran-backed Islamic Jihad and others for not leading the charge against Israel.

All this is motivating Hamas. But Israel won't simply accept Hamas's new militancy. Instead, it will impose a price. Unfortunately, with Hamas leaders and fighters deliberately embedded in densely populated areas, often making their command posts in hospitals or mosques, there will be a terrible civilian toll. The basic asymmetry of this conflict will be evident with Israelis calling ahead to residents located on top of military targets to evacuate buildings, while Hamas fires indiscriminately against civilians. Hamas is trying to project the image as protector of the Palestinian people, but its tunnels are for protecting its weapons and its fighters, not its public.

Arab governments may criticize Israel for its actions in Jerusalem and the bombing, but they are very wary of Hamas's desire to destabilize Israel-Arab relations. With the exception of Iran, Turkey and Qatar, leaders see what Hamas means to the region—and some, like Egypt, have real leverage to chart a better course. Egypt has been instrumental in shaping the ceasefires between Israel and Hamas over the last several years.

The Biden administration would be wise to work with Egypt again to bring this round of hostilities to an end. But unless it wants a replay of what we are now witnessing, a larger strategy for Gaza and Hamas is needed. To start with, Hamas's rocket fire must be internationally delegitimized. Beyond this, the administration should mobilize an international effort to rebuild Gaza provided that Hamas is disarmed. The point would be to publicly and repeatedly make clear what is on offer for the people of Gaza in terms of massive reconstruction. But no such massive effort is possible so long as Hamas can instigate a conflict at a time of choosing and destroy the investment. In other words, raising the cost to Hamas cannot just be measured in military terms.

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