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Israel-Gaza Violence Means Biden Must Avoid Emboldening Hamas in Any Cease-Fire Deal

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Boosting aid and addressing provocative policies will need to be discussed soon, but doing so prematurely would only further the terrorist group's power struggle against the nonviolent Palestinian Authority.

When President Joe Biden entered office in January, he parked the simmering Palestinian-Israeli conflict on the back burner, only to find it boiling over by May. His reasons for de-emphasizing the issue made sense, but as so often happens in the Middle East, events on the ground outpaced U.S. planning, and [the Biden administration](#) is now facing growing calls to forge a cease-fire as the [fighting in Gaza escalates](#).

A cease-fire, which [Biden said he supports](#) but has yet to call for outright, is urgent given the scale of the unfolding humanitarian disaster and the loss of lives on both sides. The U.S. is the only international actor capable of brokering one because of its close relationship with Israel and its unique ability to mobilize regional Arab allies to compel Hamas, the Islamist group that controls the Gaza Strip, to accept a cessation.

But it's not as simple as stopping the bloodshed triggered when Hamas started firing rockets at Jerusalem last week: Biden needs to ensure that the terms of the cease-fire don't allow Hamas to claim a victory. Such an outcome would embolden Hamas and significantly empower the terrorist organization in its intra-Palestinian contest with the secular Palestinian Authority, which is in charge in the West Bank.

In fact, this internal power struggle is one of the backdrops for this latest episode of hostilities. The Palestinian Authority's commitment to diplomacy and its security cooperation with Israel are unpopular because they have failed to produce tangible benefits for the Palestinians in recent years. The tensions only intensified after [the authority's president, Mahmoud Abbas](#), last month canceled the [first Palestinian elections since 2006](#).

In this context, Hamas sought to capitalize on the Palestinian public's discontent by presenting itself as the defender of Palestinian rights and interests. At the end of this round of fighting, Hamas will want to declare that its "resistance" was able to force Israel to change its policies. Its spokesmen are already claiming to have established [deterrence against Israel](#), and point to the [intercommunal Arab-Jewish violence](#) that has spread throughout Israel to claim that its foe is in retreat.

A cease-fire must therefore focus only on ending the hostilities and not on shaping post-conflict diplomacy. Issues such as providing international aid for Gaza reconstruction and addressing the policies that led to tensions preceding the Hamas rocket attacks and Israeli strikes will need to be discussed soon—but not in the context of a cease-fire.

Using Egypt as a mediator provides the best chance of success. Egypt borders Gaza, giving it tremendous leverage vis-a-vis Hamas, while also being committed to denying Hamas a political victory, since [Hamas is part of the Muslim Brotherhood](#) movement that Egypt sees as an existential threat to its own stability.

Just as crucial as Biden achieving a cease-fire, however, is that he not change his game plan once the fighting ends. There is bound to be an impulse to "go big" and try to relaunch negotiations, and there are already voices urging the president to take bolder action. This is understandable in that ultimately the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can only be resolved through a negotiated two-state solution, and until such a solution is reached, the situation will remain volatile with occasional, tragic flare-ups. But today such an outcome is not realistic, and trying to achieve it when the time isn't ripe wouldn't serve the Palestinians, Israelis or, indeed, the U.S.

Diving headfirst into high diplomacy almost certain to fail could make the situation on the ground—and of Biden's standing in the Middle East—considerably worse. Another fruitless round of negotiations would only add to the loss of faith in diplomacy as a way to end the conflict, increase the sense of despair among Palestinians and Israelis and add to the volatility. And the U.S. doesn't need another Middle East breakdown that makes it look incompetent and distracts from other foreign policy priorities.

Biden, perhaps having learned something from his decades on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee and eight years as vice president, wisely decided on a different course from every president who preceded him since George H.W. Bush. Instead of seeking a comprehensive Palestinian-Israeli peace, Biden would avoid grandiose, high-level initiatives in favor of smaller but realistic goals with [minimal engagement from top U.S. officials](#).

The Biden team correctly concluded that this conflict, while remaining important, was now less of a priority both for the region and for U.S. interests. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict was once seen by most Arab states as the central issue in the region; today, they see countering Iran's nuclear ambitions and malicious regional activities and dealing with the conflicts in Syria and Yemen (to mention but a few of the region's woes) as more pressing. Last year's [Abraham Accords normalizing relations](#) between Israel and four Arab nations stand as a testament to this receding importance.

The Biden administration also concluded, correctly again, that Israeli and Palestinian politics do not lend themselves to the kind of compromises needed to resolve deeply sensitive and foundational issues. Israel has just conducted its fourth round of inconclusive elections in two years, with a fifth one possibly on the horizon. Meanwhile, the cancellation of any elections at all on the Palestinian side attests to the depth of its political stalemate.

So Biden opted for a more modest but achievable approach: recovering from the disruptive years under Donald

Trump, in which he departed from longstanding U.S. and international diplomatic positions that led to [cutting off all relations with the Palestinian Authority](#). Biden has re-established those relations, restored aid and identified concrete areas that could improve Palestinian and Israeli lives, such as progress on the economy, infrastructure and security.

Once a cease-fire has been achieved, doubling down on the administration's initial impulse—working to better the lives of Palestinians on the ground—has acquired added urgency, as it's not only the right thing to do but can help shift the narrative. The U.S. also needs to engage Israel to change some of the practices that contributed to increasing tensions before the beginning of this month's hostilities, particularly in Jerusalem. Finding a way to stop the [eviction of Palestinian families](#) in the east Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah and strengthening the Jordanian role in the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif—the site of Al-Aqsa Mosque—will be crucial to prevent future escalation.

Resolving such issues through diplomatic means in conjunction with the Palestinian Authority, Jordan and Egypt can give credit to diplomacy and to constructive actors. Enlisting the support of the Abraham Accords countries can lend additional heft to these efforts, providing the authority with additional diplomatic cover and helping finance economic development for the Palestinians.

Even if a comprehensive peace remains out of reach for now, diplomacy must not be among the victims in this latest tragic conflagration. In the midst of the current despair, the world, under U.S. leadership, needs to demonstrate to the Palestinians that a cooperative, peaceful approach can be a viable alternative to Hamas' violent ways.

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