

How to End the War in Gaza

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Reaching a viable Egyptian-brokered ceasefire will not be easy, but if the aim is anything more than a temporary break from fighting, it's a deal worth striving for.

Israel and Hamas are once again locked in a shooting war. Each day, hundreds of missiles fly toward Israeli cities and villages. Meanwhile, the Israeli Air Force has been systematically pounding the Gaza Strip, carrying out no less than 1000 strikes on Hamas military targets in the last several days. As indirect negotiations over a cease-fire progress at this moment, with active U.S. involvement, it is time to chart a course to end this round of hostilities.

Israel has set fairly modest goals for its campaign, dubbed Operation Pillar of Defense. It does not seek to topple the Hamas regime in Gaza, as it has sought in the past, nor does it want to bring about the total collapse of Hamas' military wing. As statements from senior Israeli officials indicate, the objective is a long-term cease-fire along the Israel-Gaza border. Hamas, for its part, has one objective: to stay on its feet. It is trying to inflict maximum damage and casualties in order to prove that Israel's military superiority alone will not force it to back down. With the right kind of a no-victors formula, sponsored by the United States and other international players, a deal can be reached to ensure a long-term calm.

Previous conflicts between Israel and Hamas, including the 2009 war, have been resolved, with Egyptian facilitation, through a simple formula: each side commits to refrain from opening fire as long as its adversary does the same. But these calm periods -- or tahdia, as they are called in Arabic -- have historically not lasted very long. Hamas has increasingly allowed other heavily armed terrorist groups in Gaza, such as the Palestinian Islamic Jihad, to launch attacks on Israel. And in the past few months, despite Egyptian warnings, Hamas has targeted Israeli soldiers and military outposts along the border, too.

This time, ending the conflict and restoring stability will require a different type of arrangement. The cease-fire agreement should involve other parties and contain additional checks on violence. It will have the best chance of lasting if it is primarily based on an Israeli-Egyptian agreement, supported by the United States and, possibly, by the

European Union. It will be up to Hamas to adhere to the terms.

Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood-led government has showered Hamas with statements of solidarity, and its prime minister made an unprecedented visit to Gaza on the second day of the Israeli operation. But what Cairo ultimately wants is a speedy cease-fire. Despite its support for Hamas, the new Egyptian regime is reluctant to grant the group a defense guarantee or to open the Rafah crossing between Gaza and Egypt. Egyptian President Mohamed Morsi underscored this on Friday, saying, "We don't want a war now."

Egypt knows well that ongoing support for Hamas' shelling of Israeli civilians would jeopardize the billions of dollars in international aid that its bankrupt treasury depends on -- \$450 million annually from the United States, \$4.3 billion annually from the IMF, and \$6.3 billion annually from the EU's development bank. This explains why, despite Cairo's venomous anti-Israeli rhetoric over the past several days, Egypt did not take any serious actions beyond recalling its newly accredited ambassador from Tel Aviv. Furthermore, the Egyptian military and intelligence services are hesitant to provoke a confrontation with Israel.

Given Egypt's adversity to conflict, Egypt and Israel should strive to reach an understanding about Gaza. In doing so, they would reaffirm the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty for the post-Arab Spring era. Such an Egyptian-Israeli understanding could include several components.

First, Egypt should broker the Israel-Hamas cease-fire at the highest political levels, rather than through behind-the-scenes talks organized by its General Intelligence Directorate. That in itself would constitute a departure from the Morsi administration's policy of putting a pause on normalization with Israel and preventing any contact with the country other than for military or intelligence cooperation. Egypt faces a choice: launching a high-level political dialogue with Israel to obtain the cease-fire that it desires, or seeing the continuation of violence in Gaza. An Egyptian refusal to lead the political process should raise red flags in Washington.

Second, since most of the weapons in Gaza were trafficked through Egyptian territory, Cairo should agree to help prevent the reconstruction of Hamas' arsenal. For years now, Egypt has been turning a blind eye to smuggling in the Sinai Peninsula and tolerating the operation of 1200 tunnels that run underneath the Egypt-Gaza frontier. Cairo could try to shut down the tunnels and intercept arms shipments that come through the Suez Canal. Egypt, which is already domestically unstable, has every reason to prevent renewed violence by counteracting the remilitarization of Hamas and its allies.

Any agreement should also address the growing lawlessness in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula, where attacks against Israel and even sometimes against Egyptian security personnel have become regular occurrences. Egypt's Operation Eagle, aimed at cracking down on insurgents there, has so far failed to dismantle the widespread terrorist infrastructure in the area. (Hamas even twice took the liberty of testing its long-range Fajr-5 missiles by firing them into the Sinai desert.) Since a number of Salafi jihadist organizations have branches in both Gaza and Sinai, for all practical purposes the peninsula is an extension of the Gaza front.

Egypt and Israel need to ensure that when the cease-fire takes hold in Gaza, terror operations do not simply pick up and move south to Sinai. Despite restrictions on Egyptian military deployments in the area, which stem from the 1979 Egyptian-Israeli peace treaty, Israel and Egypt can work through the decade-old Agreed Activities Mechanism to allow Egyptian units to take up positions in the eastern Sinai. Israel has already consented to let Egypt introduce a mechanized brigade and commando battalions in the area. Israel could also approve the deployment of whatever Egyptian troops are necessary -- save tanks and antitank weapons -- to uproot the terrorist safe havens. Egypt won't just be doing Israel's dirty work; Cairo knows that these organizations might eventually target the Suez Canal as well.

A cease-fire agreement could also address the sensitive and important issue of border crossings. Egypt might get Israeli consent to open the Rafah terminal on its border with Gaza, not only for passenger traffic but also for trade.

This could mean that Gaza would get its fuel and other commodities from Egypt, while Israel would continue to supply electricity. Egyptian ports could begin to handle the flow of goods in and out of Gaza, and Israel would gradually phase out the commercial activities that pass through the six terminals it now operates into Gaza. The move would signal the completion of Israel's 2005 disengagement from the Gaza Strip, slowly handing over responsibility for the area's economic needs to the Egyptian government. Egypt, which already perceives itself as a patron of Hamas, would see this situation favorably because it would grant Cairo more influence over the group. And Hamas is already pleading for this type of arrangement, seeking to end its economic dependence on Israeli goodwill.

Given its leverage over Egypt, Washington has a role to play in bringing about such a comprehensive cease-fire -- and in keeping it in place. The Obama administration should inform Morsi that, in return for the huge financial support Egypt gets from the United States, it must start ensuring stability in the region, create a dialogue with Israel that is not restricted to security personnel, prevent Egyptian territory from becoming a safe haven for weapons smugglers, and convince Hamas militants to stop lobbing missiles into Israeli towns and villages.

Reaching such a deal in the depths of a conflict will not be easy. But if the aim is anything more than a temporary break from fighting, it's a deal worth striving for.

Ehud Yaari is a Lafer international fellow with The Washington Institute.

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