

# Implications of the Gaza Conflict

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## Brief Analysis

The breakdown of the tenuous and ill-fated ceasefire between Israel and Hamas and Israel's subsequent incursion into the Gaza Strip not only pose a challenge to the outgoing and incoming U.S. administrations but also mark a portentous moment in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although the clash may end in a stalemate, it could also alter the political dynamics in the Levant, depending on developments on the ground and the terms of an eventual ceasefire. On one hand, a perceived victory for Hamas could strengthen its domestic position, ease its international isolation, and increase the regional influence of its backers in Damascus and Tehran. On the other hand, concerted action by regional states and the international community could yield a sustainable ceasefire that weakens Hamas, strengthens the Palestinian Authority (PA), and boosts prospects for eventual peace diplomacy while ameliorating the regional dynamics that contributed to the outbreak of violence.

### Achieving a Sustainable Ceasefire

Whatever tactical course it plots, Israel harbors no illusions about the trap Hamas is setting for the Israeli Defense Forces (IDF) in Gaza. Hamas will likely emulate Hizballah's 2006 tactics of withstanding the Israeli onslaught, inflicting as many casualties as possible on the IDF, all the while sheltering its forces in populated areas in a cynical effort to increase civilian casualties. With these actions, Hamas will likely seek to score a strategic victory -- even if it suffers a tactical loss -- by bringing international opprobrium on Israel, further undermining the PA, and forcing a ceasefire that will increase the group's legitimacy, break its isolation, and give it room to rebuild for the next round of fighting.

To forestall such an outcome, Israel must seek a ceasefire that corrects the shortcomings of the previous "calm": namely, the lack of consequences for Hamas's frequent ceasefire violations, inadequate provisions to prevent the smuggling of arms into Gaza, and the implicit reinforcement of Hamas's hold on the Strip through the absence of any PA role in the arrangement.

Three elements will be critical to achieving such a ceasefire. First, Arab states must press Hamas to stand down. This will require them to show fortitude in the face of domestic protests and verbal attacks by leaders such as Hizballah chief Hassan Nasrallah. Particularly important in this regard will be Egypt; as Israel's standing intermediary with Hamas, Egypt will play a key role in negotiating a ceasefire, and as the only country besides Israel that borders Gaza, it will also play a central role in an agreement's enforcement. Cairo will need to use its influence

with Hamas leaders and its leverage as the sole route in and out of the Strip to compel the group to accept and respect a more durable ceasefire. Egypt's incentives for doing so are strong: an escalation of the Hamas-Israel conflict may cause an influx of Gazan refugees across the border, a potential source of instability for Egypt.

Second, the international community will need to take a disciplined approach to the ceasefire negotiations and stand firmly behind the resulting agreement and assist in its enforcement. Active U.S. diplomacy will be needed to avoid a misguided wave of European and Arab outreach to Hamas, which would reward the group for its violence by easing its isolation. Washington will also need to press its allies to avoid equating the actions of Hamas, which rejected a renewed ceasefire and has targeted civilians indiscriminately, with those of Israel, which is responding to Hamas's attacks and has been taking care to minimize civilian casualties. Allowing Hamas's actions to go unpunished, or even worse, allowing the group to improve its position as a result of them, would give succor to terrorists worldwide.

Once a ceasefire is reached, international support will be required to ensure its enforcement. Although international monitoring of the ceasefire has been suggested, it is not evident that this step would be apt. Monitoring is useful in preventing misunderstanding or building confidence between two parties who are otherwise committed to a ceasefire, but it is unlikely that it would have a significant effect on the calculations of a terrorist group such as Hamas. Instead, the international community's role in enforcement should focus on assisting Egypt, the PA, and Israel in countering the smuggling of weapons into Gaza. An effective countersmuggling approach will need to encompass measures to both detect and prevent the movement of weapons as well as steps to punish states or entities involved in supplying or transporting them to Hamas.

Finally, a sustainable ceasefire must bolster the PA's role in Gaza. Even a tough ceasefire formally negotiated between Israel and Hamas could have the perverse effect of tightening the group's de facto control of the Strip. This can be avoided by involving the PA in both ceasefire negotiations and enforcement, for example by taking up Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak's proposal to hand control of the Rafah crossing to the PA. Military action alone cannot achieve peace in Gaza; steps to restore a government in Gaza dedicated to coexistence with Israel will be vital to long-term stability in the region.

### Looking Beyond a Ceasefire

Once the fighting has stopped and a ceasefire is in place, the broader challenges raised by Hamas's actions will need to be addressed by the United States, Israel, and responsible Arab states, whose interests in this regard largely coincide.

First, greater focus will need to be placed on elements of the peace process other than the political negotiations that command the lion's share of diplomatic attention. If the PA is to ward off Hamas in the West Bank and resume its rule in Gaza, the PA must have in place effective economic, political, and security institutions. Likewise, the Gaza experience will increase Israel's reluctance to make territorial or other concessions that could expose even larger numbers of its citizens to rocket attacks emanating from the West Bank. Israel and the PA will need to seek cooperative arrangements that ease this threat while avoiding any infringement on future Palestinian sovereignty.

Second, Arab states must reject efforts by groups such as Hamas and Hizballah to practice both politics and terrorism. These groups have exploited the state for their purposes -- participating in elections to gain influence and leverage -- while undermining the state by openly challenging its leaders and institutions. Arab leaders should cut off financial flows to such groups and deny terrorist leaders official audiences or visas. On the flip side, in the face of extremist challenges Arab states should step up efforts to support leaders such as PA president Mahmoud Abbas and Lebanese prime minister Fouad Siniora both diplomatically and financially.

Finally, the conflict in Gaza should give new impetus to international efforts to isolate Iran and Syria. Iran provides arms and funding to both Hizballah and Hamas, which in pursuing their own agendas also satisfy Tehran's to the

detriment of both Israel and its Arab neighbors. Arab states -- as well as the international community -- must hold the Iranian regime accountable for its efforts to destabilize the region by more vigorously participating in U.S.-led sanctions efforts. For its part, the Obama administration, if it goes ahead with plans to engage with Tehran, will need to avoid the diplomatic trap of negotiating with Tehran over security in the Levant, thereby ceding to the Iranian regime the hegemonic influence to which it aspires.

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