

Holding Hamas Accountable

Jan 2, 2009



Articles & Testimony

Operation Cast Lead, initiated in response to resumed Hamas rocket attacks on communities in southern Israel, represents Israel's most furious attack on Hamas since the terrorist group assumed control of Gaza. For the past six months, an Egyptian-brokered cease-fire maintained an uneasy status quo, during which time Hamas smuggled some 80 tons of explosives, roadside bombs and longer-range rockets into Gaza. While Israel's military operation may succeed in weakening the heavily armed Islamist group, the Gaza crisis also highlights a vexing challenge awaiting the new Obama administration: the question of how to deal with Hamas.

Some will recommend that Obama approve direct talks with Hamas. Since Hamas controls Gaza, the theory goes, it must be brought into the political process, engaged not isolated, or else there is no hope for peace. But Hamas is dead set against a two-state solution, whether it joins a unity government or remains in the opposition. Indeed, Hamas deploys suicide bombers specifically aimed at derailing progress toward peace. Engaging Hamas will not help the peace process, but it will legitimize the group most violently opposed to such progress.

Meanwhile, as renewed rocket attacks make clear, Hamas remains committed to the use of violence targeting civilians. Engaging in direct diplomacy with Hamas while it targets civilian population centers would empower a movement designated as a terrorist group by both the United States and the European Union. It would also pull the carpet out from under Palestinian moderates who are truly interested in pursuing peace and are vying with Hamas for popular support.

What, then, should Obama do?

The Obama administration should take the opportunity to lead an international coalition bent on empowering Palestinian moderates and weakening extremists. American and European officials alike have shunned Hamas over the group's continued use of terrorism and political violence -- means it has used despite its electoral victory in January 2006. America and Europe are united in their shared position that politics and terrorism cannot go hand in hand. The internationally recognized conditions for engaging Hamas are clear, and should be reaffirmed: renunciation of terrorism and political violence, respect for past agreements negotiated by the Palestinian Authority and recognition of Israel.

The current round of fighting is not likely to dislodge Hamas from Gaza, but there are a few concrete things that could help facilitate progress when that day comes. Chief among these is encouraging political reform within the moderate Palestinian camp that is still dominated by Fatah.

The United States should continue to work with Israel and the international community to improve conditions on the ground in the West Bank, where Hamas is under pressure from Israeli and P.A. forces alike. Israeli raids of Hamas safe houses and Palestinian closures of Hamas charities have put Hamas on the defensive in the West Bank. Meanwhile, the United States recently announced a \$14 million increase in development assistance to the Jenin Governorate. Combined with American-facilitated progress on the law-and-order and security fronts in Jenin, Nablus and Hebron, such development aid can tangibly improve the day-to-day lives of West Bank residents.

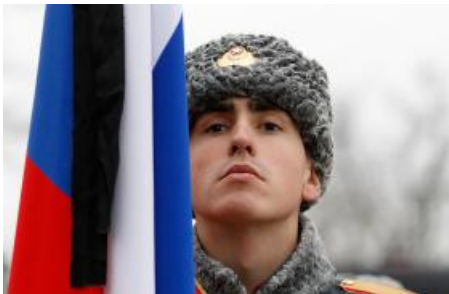
The United States should also press Egypt to effectively police its border with Gaza -- above and below ground. Cairo has sidelined Hamas diplomatically, announced its opposition to the emergence of "Islamic warlords" in Gaza and laid the blame for the failure of intra-Palestinian negotiations squarely at the feet of Hamas. It needs to follow up on this rhetoric with a serious border patrol initiative focused on the eight-mile-long border with Gaza. Even under siege, Hamas continues to have access to smuggled funds and supplies while Gaza's residents do not. Denying Hamas access to the resources it needs to threaten Israel and to radicalize Palestinian society -- and to rebuild the military infrastructure Israel has just destroyed -- is of paramount importance.

Radical Islamist groups from Lebanon to Iraq will be watching the international community's response to Hamas. So long as Hamas remains committed to violence, anything less than isolation will convince such groups that they need not moderate their tactics to gain international recognition. The message to violent Islamists throughout the region must be clear: Terrorism and politics cannot go hand in hand.

Matthew Levitt directs the Stein Program on Counterterrorism and Intelligence at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He is the author of [Hamas: Politics, Charity and Terrorism in the Service of Jihad](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=265>) (Yale University Press, 2006) and [Negotiating Under Fire: Preserving Peace Talks in the Face of Terror Attacks](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=294) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC04.php?CID=294>) (Rowman & Littlefield, 2008). ❖

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