

After Gaza

What the United States and Europe must do in the Middle East



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Muriel Asseburg & Volker Perthes | **The war in Gaza seems to be over even if the cease-fire is shaky. A European-American initiative could now create the conditions for something more durable, which addresses the security needs of both Israelis and Palestinians. To do so, Syria and Hamas must be engaged in the peace process.**

Although the Israeli offensive in Gaza is over, conditions for a resolution have not improved. The Palestinians remain politically divided. The winter 2008/2009 conflict further weakened Fatah's Mahmoud Abbas, whom Hamas has not recognized as president since early January. Not only is Israel in the midst of an election campaign, but opinion polls predict gains for the Likud Party and the extreme right. Thus, President Obama has immediately turned his attention toward the Middle East.

However, faced with the economic crisis and other foreign policy challenges, Barack Obama is unlikely to focus all of his energy on a conflict that many American presidents before him tried—and failed—to resolve. Nevertheless Obama has promised swift engagement. Indeed, he has taken immediate action by sending his special envoy, George Mitchell, to the Middle East. Most probably, he will also emphasize policy options that differ from those of his predecessor, specifically concerning Syria, and more generally in his declared willingness to include formerly excluded parties like Syria and Hamas, at least in indirect diplomatic efforts.

Hope for an American initiative should not, however, lead the European Union to leave the political work to Washington while limiting its own contribution to reconstruction or aid to ease the humanitarian crisis in the Gaza Strip, as necessary as they both are. It would also be insufficient for the Europeans to provide primarily technical support for monitoring access points to what is known as the "Gaza prison." They should also go beyond sealing the



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tunnels that have served as conduits to both smuggle arms and—primarily—supply the population with food and everyday items.

Europe did not perform well during the Gaza war. Individual attempts to mediate yielded few results. The European Union as a whole proved incapable of acting swiftly, vigorously, and with a single voice. It failed to fill the vacuum so apparent during the American interregnum and to campaign convincingly for a peaceful resolution to the conflict and respect for international law.

European politicians should be aware that their commitment to Israel's security is regarded as lip service as long as they do not take on more responsibility for the conflict's political resolution and share in the costs. Europe and the new US administration must now work purposefully for durable and comprehensive conflict resolution. Brokers such as Egypt can mediate between Palestinian groups, and Hamas and Israel respectively, but they cannot replace a forceful and determined international commitment.

A European-American initiative would have to include three main elements:

- A renewed power-sharing arrangement between Hamas and Fatah;
 - Implementation of the 2005 Agreement on Movement and Access, meant to safeguard movement of people and goods to and from the Gaza Strip and maintain connections between Gaza and the West Bank after the Israeli withdrawal, complemented by measures to effectively prevent the smuggling of arms;
 - A political perspective, i.e. the implementation of a two-state solution and of a comprehensive peace accord for the region in the foreseeable future.
- Such an initiative can succeed only by including important parties to the conflict, particularly Hamas and Syria.

Even if Israel succeeded in dealing a “decisive blow” to Hamas by destroying part of the Islamic resistance movement's military infrastructure and killing important leaders; even if popular support in the Gaza Strip for Hamas rule falls significantly, the movement will remain politically relevant. Thanks to its religious and social activities, Hamas is deeply rooted in Palestinian society. In part because of the failure of the peace process begun in Oslo in 1993, Hamas won parliamentary elections in 2006 by a landslide, gaining an absolute majority in the Palestinian Legislative Council. It consolidated its rule in the Gaza Strip after a violent takeover in June 2007. It is illusory to think that Abbas and his Fatah bloc could simply retake power in Gaza after the war, let alone be installed there by Israel or the international community.

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By indirectly negotiating a cease-fire with the Islamists through Egyptian mediation, Israel's government demonstrated that it sought to weaken Hamas, not annihilate it. The Hamas leadership has repeatedly proven that—unlike Fatah—it can largely enforce a cease-fire both among its own ranks as well as among other groups. However, the destruction of Palestinian administrative and security installations, and civilian infrastructure has further complicated the exercise of any effective authority in the Gaza Strip. Also, the war has not strengthened those forces in the Palestinian political spectrum seeking a negoti-

ated end to the occupation. Anti-Israeli rage has grown among Fatah supporters and other opponents of Hamas as well. With that, the risk has also increased that jihadist groups, i.e. those that follow the example of Al Qaeda, could gain a stronger following and cause more trouble.

European and American policy aiming at lasting conflict resolution can no longer ignore Hamas. The first initiative toward that end would support, not block, fresh Egyptian- or Saudi-mediated talks to reconcile Fatah and Hamas and put a new power-sharing arrangement between them in place. For its part, Europe should signal its willingness to cooperate with a Palestinian provisional government supported by all relevant political groups. That includes financial support, even if one of the parties to the government remains on the European Union's list of terrorist organizations. The fact is: Fatah and Hamas will have to work together to pave the way for new presidential and parliamentary elections. Only a president legitimized in such a way will have the necessary popular backing to engage in negotiations with Israel. Power sharing is also the prerequisite for European measures to build a Palestinian state. It is impossible to build democratic, efficient, and legitimate government and security institutions as long as the political-territorial split continues.

And there will be no peace without the Gaza Strip. A cease-fire will be sustainable only if it takes into consideration the security concerns of both sides and permits economic development in the Gaza Strip. But the latter cannot take place under the nearly complete blockade of Gaza since the abduction of Israeli soldier Gilad Shalit in June 2006. This blockade was further tightened after the violent Hamas takeover in June 2007.

Gaza's Borders

A permanent opening of the border crossings into Gaza as envisioned by an agreement negotiated by then-US Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice in 2005 is elementary for reconstruction and economic development. This will also require an arrangement between all parties involved (Israel, the Palestinian Authority,

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Hamas, Egypt, the European Union) to enable the reopening of the Rafah border crossing between the Gaza Strip and Egypt and resume the work of the EU border assistance mission. It would be sensible to complement the mission with an additional group of observers monitoring the Egyptian side of the border so that existing tunnels are sealed and no new

smuggling routes are opened. To be sustainable, a cease-fire must ultimately also include the West Bank.

With the failure of the Annapolis process it has again become clear that the approach taken by the international community—insistence on bilateral talks between the warring factions without active international mediation or coercion—has so far not yielded success. Its chances in the future are slim as well because groups in both populations opposed to that process have proven too strong and elected leaders too weak. Efforts to achieve a peaceful settlement have not been forceful enough to nourish hopes that the necessary painful com-

promises can be made without international pressure. This is true although the outlines of a settlement have long been on hand: the Clinton parameters from December 2000, the results of the Taba negotiations in January 2001, and the informal Geneva Accord of December 2003. The transition to mediation that actively helps the warring factions to overcome their differences instead of merely facilitating dialogue is overdue. Part of such an approach is consequent monitoring of how both sides are meeting their commitments. Also, the quartet should present a blueprint for a final status agreement, along with specific offers of international troops to monitor such an agreement and safeguard the peace in the medium term.

Syria's Role

Moreover, the Obama administration should address another track in a new Middle East peace process. In fact, the prospect of continuing indirect talks between Israel and Syria—mediated in 2008 by Turkey—as direct negotiations under the aegis of the United States, and bringing them to a successful conclusion are currently better than the prospect of a peace accord between Israelis and Palestinians. Damascus is genuinely interested, not only in the process but also in peace: With it, the isolation of the country would end, its economic prospects would improve, and President Bashar Assad's domestic popularity would rise—that is, if he manages to regain the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights, which his father lost in 1967.

In this context, Israel, the United States, and Europe should avoid the mistake of making an Israeli-Syrian settlement conditional upon an end to the close Syrian-Iranian relationship. The logic of Middle East dynamics works the other way around: If Syria makes peace with Israel, it will contribute not only to an overall calming of the region but will also make a permanent pacification of the Israeli-Lebanese front possible. Furthermore, the interests of Syria and Iran in the Middle East would automatically converge less strongly than now.

For example, Syria would no longer need the Lebanese Hezbollah to conduct a proxy war against Israel and its interest in backing Hamas would wane. Instead, ideological differences between the secular regime in Damascus, on the one hand, and Islamist forces like Hamas, on the other, would come increasingly to the fore. Even today, in light of the relatively successful indirect Israeli-Syrian talks of the past year, Syria is more interested in calming the situation in Palestine and in the reestablishment of Palestinian unity than in expanding the conflict, in the shadow of which a continuation of negotiations with Israel is politically impossible. One can assume that Syria has also advised Hezbollah to that effect and refrained from efforts to open up a second front from Lebanon. In 2007 Syria contributed constructively ahead of the short-lived Saudi-mediated inter-Palestinian agreement of Mecca by exerting influence on the Damascus-based Hamas leadership in exile.

The Obama administration should promote the Israeli-Syrian talks.