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COMMENTARY

Arab Leaders Need to Step Up to Avert War in Gaza

Hamas refuses to disarm, but pressure from outside could help strengthen the Palestinian Authority.



Palestinian protesters demand that Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas end financial sanctions on the Gaza Strip, in the West Bank town of Bethlehem, June 20 PHOTO: ABED AL HASHLAMOUN/EPA-EFE/REX/S/EPA/SHUTTERSTOCK

By *David Makovsky and Ghaith al-Omari*

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Diplomatic efforts continue to reach a cease-fire and end the current clashes between Israel and the Palestinians in Gaza. The hope is to avert what would be the fourth Israel-Hamas war in the past 10 years.

Even if a cease-fire is reached, the resumption of significant international aid to Gaza will probably require a return of the Palestinian Authority, which was violently expelled by Hamas in 2007. Yahya al-Sinwar, who has been the leader of Hamas in Gaza since 2017, has said he would like the PA to come back. The catch? He wants Hamas to keep its weapons.

The Palestinian Authority's President Mahmoud Abbas sees a trap. He fears the PA will be stuck with all of the responsibility in Gaza while Hamas retains all of the authority—as with Hezbollah in Lebanon. Thus, he has been willing to call publicly on Hamas to surrender its weapons. An official with the Israel Defense Forces tells us Mr. Abbas has slashed the monthly funds sent to Gaza from \$112 million to \$84 million. This has generated some backlash, including rare demonstrations in the West Bank city of Ramallah urging Mr. Abbas to transfer more money.

The situation in Gaza is bleak. The territory gets only about four hours of electricity a day, and its economy hardly functions. United Nations officials tell us Gazans earn less than \$3.50 a day on average, one-third of West Bank wages. Israel, which sees Hamas as sworn to its destruction and has had to defend against frequent rocket fire on its cities, maintains many restrictions on Gaza. Egypt does as well, given that Hamas is part of the banned Muslim Brotherhood network and has ties to jihadists operating in Sinai.

Egypt has been spearheading the effort to bring the Palestinian Authority back to Gaza. Having concluded that the immediate disarmament of Hamas is unrealistic, Cairo is focused on restoring the PA as the legitimate address for substantial aid, hoping that will alter the political dynamic. Mr. Abbas is abysmally unpopular in Gaza because residents believe he is indifferent to their suffering, but returning at the head of aid convoys could change that perception. Once sentiment turns in his favor, Egypt believes Mr. Abbas may have greater success in calling for disarmament.

Yet Mr. Abbas, 83, may not have time for such long-term political maneuvers. He also has every reason to be skeptical that Hamas will be more willing to disarm down the road. How to square the circle? The answer may be to apply pressure on both sides.

Egypt, with backing from the Arab League or countries such as Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Jordan, could make a clear statement declaring Hamas's weapons to be illegitimate, echoing publicly what Mr. Abbas has repeatedly urged for Gaza: "One authority, one gun, one law." This would make clear that Arab leaders will not legitimize a perpetually armed Hamas, in keeping with the sentiment that led the Arab League in 2016 to designate Hezbollah as a terrorist entity. Explicit Arab condemnation of Hamas would have far wider resonance than American and Israeli denunciations. It would also isolate countries that support Hamas, including Qatar.

Meanwhile, Arab states should remind Mr. Abbas that he does not have the luxury of staying out of Gaza, since Hamas cannot effectively be delegitimized unless the PA returns. Accordingly, they should signal their willingness to bypass him and Hamas altogether by helping international bodies provide direct aid to Gaza. This is not the ideal path, but the message needs to be clear: Arab leaders will keep pressuring Hamas indefinitely to disarm, but only if Mr. Abbas returns.

If the PA resumes control in Gaza, donor countries will need to make good on aid pledges they made years ago, and Egypt will have to be more open about the Rafah border crossing. Yet this effort cannot succeed unless Israel finds a way to loosen its restrictions significantly on the movement of goods and people without endangering its security. A more stable Gaza is certainly in Israel's interest, both to avert war and to halt a public-health crisis. At one point last year, Gaza was dumping an estimated 25 million gallons of raw sewage into the Mediterranean each day, forcing Israel to close beaches and desalination facilities in the adjacent city of Ashkelon temporarily.

Arabs and Israelis alike want to prevent another war in Gaza. But success will require many parties—Arab states, Mr. Abbas, international donors, Hamas and Israel—all to realize that they have a vital role to play in alleviating the territory's misery.

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