

Bush's Dying Days in Gaza

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In the days before Barack Obama takes office, while a power vacuum persists in the US, the EU has a unique role to play in international initiatives to end the violence and the unfolding humanitarian crisis in Gaza. To succeed, it must pursue the policy launched by the French presidency, giving priority to a ceasefire and distancing itself from Israel's disproportionate use of force.

PARIS – During a visit to the Middle East, Secretary of Defense Robert Gates warned that enemies of the United States should not use the power vacuum there to try to alter the status quo or to undermine the new American president's objectives. But the major challenge in this respect is now coming, ironically enough, from America's main ally in the region, Israel.

Hardliners in Israel naturally regret the end of the Bush administration, for they know that, even if President Barack Obama does not dramatically change US policy toward Israel once he assumes power, he will not repeat Bush's unconditional support. Israeli hardliners saw the "war on terror" and the war in Iraq as their wars, supported Bush's war-like rhetoric and isolation of Iran, and considered the neo-conservatives their ideological kin. In particular, they shared the neo-cons' conviction that military intervention is a legitimate and effective way of achieving political change. This is what the Israeli government tried to achieve in Lebanon by "smashing Hezbollah" in 2006. Now it is trying to do the same in Gaza. In response to Hamas rockets, Israel is now using disproportionate force, just as it did in Lebanon. The result will probably be the same: at the end of the campaign, Hamas will have increased its popularity in Palestine and in the Arab world. Indeed, the current military operation follows Israel's two-year blockade of Gaza, which was supposed to have damaged Hamas, but failed to do so. It is likely that Obama will consider a Palestinian state to be in America's fundamental interest. He will see it as a precondition for altering perceptions of the US in the Arab and Muslim worlds, since restoring America's credibility will be a major objective of the incoming administration. Israeli hardliners cannot be sure that, at the end of the day, Obama will not find it necessary to change policies toward Israel in order to achieve this objective, for he considers it to be a strategic concern. They also know, of course, that any serious engagement with the Palestinian question must imply engaging Hamas in the search for a two-state solution.

The Israeli government is, in short, using the Bush administration's dying days to implement its military-first policy. At the same time, it is trying to create a situation that will, in effect, make it more difficult for the new president to achieve his policies in the region. News reports show that revulsion is spreading through the Arab world, where American and Israeli flags are burned side-by-side. This war, therefore, will simply make it more difficult to engage with those countries at the very moment such talks are absolutely necessary. One reason for international suspicion of Hamas has been the support that it receives from Iran. Obama has vowed to change American policy toward Iran, opening diplomatic channels rather than merely issuing military threats. Such a change would make it easier to end the isolation of Hamas as well. America's renewed engagement with Iran is clearly a policy that will have a far-reaching impact in the Middle East. Although that strategic change in US policy is also in Israel's best

interests, most Israelis will not see it that way. An American dialogue with Iran will be a serious blow to the interests of Israeli hardliners, and some of them dream of making it impossible. Constraining American policy may, therefore, be one of the motivations behind Israel's incursion into Gaza. Yet it is a grave challenge to international peace and could spread instability throughout the region. Were that to occur, Obama's planned rapprochement with Iran would be strangled in the cradle. In the days before Obama takes office, while a power vacuum persists in the US, the European Union has a unique role to play in international initiatives to end the violence and the unfolding humanitarian crisis. For the EU to succeed, it must pursue the policy launched by the French Presidency, giving priority to stopping the war and distancing itself from Israel's disproportionate use of force. Negotiating a ceasefire between Israel and Hamas could be the first step toward a permanent end to hostilities and to the blockade of Gaza. It could, in effect, pave the way for the new Obama administration to convene an international conference to implement the two-state solution for Palestine, which should follow the ceasefire. Such initiatives should not become bogged down in tortuous negotiations, but should focus on implementing the basic principles for a two-state solution, along the lines proposed by the Clinton administration before it left office eight years ago. Hamas has already engaged in ceasefire negotiations and should now be brought fully into the peace process, alongside Fatah, but it will, of course, have to abandon its own strategy of force, as expressed through the rockets it has rained down on Israel. It is a policy that has proved to be ineffective, and that is illegal under international law because it targets Israeli civilians. Israel, for its part, needs to recognize that, if it wants to act in ways that are consistent with its own democratic values, it must abandon its strategy of violence and disrespect for the basic human rights of the Palestinians, as well as the idea of "Great Israel." In short, it must accept a Palestinian state, through deeds as well as words. Until this happens, dangerous days lie ahead until Obama's inauguration, and the international community will need strong, level-headed politicians to see it through.