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“Can This War End? The Battle over Gaza”
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United States Secretary of State John Kerry and United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki-Moon are in the Middle East trying to bring about a cease-fire between Israel and the Gaza Strip. Perhaps by the time you read this, they will have succeeded. The real question is not whether they can end the present battle, but whether they can set up conditions for an end to the simmering war between the two. Otherwise, another conflict will occur in a year or two.

Since Israel withdrew from the Gaza Strip in 2005 and Hamas won governing power in democratic elections in 2006, there have been six battles between the two sides. The ongoing state of war between them has led to a constant land and sea border blockade by Israel.

President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi's government in Egypt has closed the Egypt-Gaza border as well. Gaza's Palestinians have found food, milk and basic supplies difficult to come by. The government cannot even pay its 40,000 employees.

The present conflict began in June, when Hamas militants in Gaza started firing long-range missiles into Israel. As the number of rockets increased in early July, nearly half of Israel's population found themselves running to bomb shelters at one time or another.

In response, Israel began bombing rocket launchers and other militant sites in Gaza July 8. Last week, Egypt proposed a cease-fire to which Israel's government agreed. Hamas did not, but kept up its shelling of Israel. This week, Israel's army invaded Gaza on the ground.

Casualties have mounted. Nearly 700 Palestinians have died; three-quarters were civilians. About 40 Israelis have been killed, mostly soldiers.

This lop-sided toll has inspired several nations to call for a cease-fire, blaming Israel for “disproportionate force.” Yet, the Hamas government refused to sign a cease-fire, and their militants continue to fire rockets into Israel each day. If the “losing” side will not stop fighting, how can the “winning” side?

This is the context in which Secretary of State Kerry and Secretary General Ban are trying to negotiate a cease-fire.

A successful cease-fire will require two agreements: an end to hostilities and a long-term arrangement.

The first will not be easy, since the achievements of each side will position them for negotiations over the long-term agreement. Gaza's Hamas government has accomplished what it considers some successes, including the effective closing of Israel's international airport to planes from the USA and Europe. If it can discomfit Israel further, then it is in a better bargaining position.

It needs a better bargaining position because Gaza's Palestinians have never been in a worse position. Not only has Israel imposed a strong blockade, but the Palestinians have lost supporters around the Muslim world. The Palestinian cause has been championed by Arab and Muslim governments since the 1950s, but few speak out now. The Arab Spring has effectively silenced them.

Egypt's government dislikes the Gazans, despite its strong support for many decades. Hamas aligned itself with Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood government under Mohammad Morsi and when General Sisi overthrew him, Sisi removed Egypt's support of Gaza's Palestinians. He closed Egypt's border with Gaza and destroyed the smuggling tunnels, which has effectively prevented food from reaching Gaza. The army has turned back convoys carrying relief aid.

Syria and Iraq, also longtime supporters of the Palestinians, are fighting civil wars and cannot intervene on Gaza's behalf. Hamas's relations with Iran have deteriorated, and now Iran's attentions are focused on protecting Shiites in Iraq. Mahmoud Abbas's Fatah-based Palestinian government in the West Bank is a rival of Hamas and does not wish to strengthen Hamas's hand instead of his own.

Despite this, a cease-fire will be negotiated. But will it lead to the end of a state of war between Gaza and Israel? Gaza needs an opening of borders, the restoration of trade and the return of normal daily life. It needs to reduce its 50 percent unemployment (mostly among young men) and bring in a stable supply of food and other essential goods.

In exchange, Israel needs the demilitarization of Gaza and the absolute assurance that open trade does not lead to an increase in the number of missiles and other military hardware. Hamas might agree to this but, given its present refusal to a cease-fire, that seems unlikely. So, the battle will ultimately stop, but the war will probably continue.