



USIPeace Briefing

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A Hamas Government: Isolate or Engage?

The landslide victory of the Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas in the January 25 Palestinian legislative elections has been met with concern and alarm by Israel, the United States, and others in the international community. This concern is rooted in Hamas' history as an organization that sponsors terrorism and that is ideologically committed to the destruction of Israel. For many observers in Israel and throughout the international community, Hamas' victory signaled the end of Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking.

This paper reviews the position of the major stakeholders in the conflict and assesses the advantages and risks of the two strategies that have crystallized since the election: isolate and undermine a Hamas government, or engage with it in a cautious, selective, and conditional manner. This paper argues that a policy of engagement, if properly executed, could encourage fundamental changes in Hamas' policies and, eventually, its ideology. Moreover, this approach is preferable to the "isolate and undermine" option because it will be easier to move from a policy of engagement to one of confrontation if it becomes clear that engagement has failed to induce changes in Hamas' policies and actions. A movement in the opposite direction may not be possible.

Where the Parties Stand

- The "Quartet" (the United States, the EU, Russia, and the UN) has demanded that Hamas recognize Israel's right to exist, forswear violence, and accept previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements—or face isolation and sharp reductions in foreign aid. The United States has already stopped aid to the Palestinian Authority (P.A.) and has even suggested it will rescind some earlier assistance packages.
- Israel has put forward its own preconditions for any dialogue with Hamas, demands that go beyond the Quartet's. Israeli leaders have said that terrorist infrastructure must be dismantled, and Hamas must repudiate and revise those parts of its covenant that deny Israel's right to exist. Until these conditions are met, Israel is prepared to cut off relations with the Palestinian Authority by severing economic ties, suspending the transfer of taxes and customs collected on behalf of the P.A., barring the entry of Palestinian workers into Israel, and preventing construction of a seaport and airport in Gaza. Israel has already suspended revenue transfers and intends to implement additional steps following the formation of the Hamas government. These steps will undoubtedly lead to a major financial crisis for Palestinians, if not to a collapse, since Israel's leverage far exceeds that of Western donors.
- Recent public pronouncements from Hamas are mixed. So far, Hamas has refused to recognize Israel; suggested that they will selectively adhere to previous Israeli-Palestinian agreements ("to the extent that they serve Palestinian national interests"); and indicated that they are only willing to enter into a long-term ceasefire (hudna) if Israel withdraws to the 1967 borders. At the conclusion of a recent visit to Moscow, Hamas leaders publicly asserted that the party will remain inflexible and uncompromising, though statements by some Hamas officials in the territories suggest the possibility of pragmatism.

Policy Options

There are two basic policy options, with variations, for Israel, the United States, and other members of the international community. The first is based on the assumption that a radical Islamist organization such as Hamas, with its deep ideological roots, is incapable of changing. It therefore asserts that there is only one rational response: to isolate the Hamas government, undermine it, bring about its downfall, and then wait for a new reality to emerge that will be more amenable to peace and stability.

There are several problems with this strategy. First, if there is any potential for Hamas to change, implementation of this policy forecloses such a possibility. Second, it is more likely to result in anarchy and chaos and possibly a resumption of full-scale violent conflict with Israel. Engineering the collapse of a Hamas government is unlikely to result in greater stability. Furthermore, Hamas will have little interest in keeping even to the limited ceasefire (tahdi'a) it has committed itself to if outside actors are undermining their elected government.

Third, the failures of the Hamas government and the hardships suffered by the Palestinian population will, most probably, not be attributed to Hamas. Instead, Israel and the West will be blamed, and the rift with the Palestinians and the Islamic world will only widen. Fourth, it will be difficult to convince the international community and the major aid providers to maintain such an approach as conditions in the Palestinian territories deteriorate. In fact, such a policy will probably enhance attempts by Iran to expand its role.

That said, the main advantages of this policy option are its simplicity and its moral clarity. It expresses a clear, unequivocal stance against terrorism and against the objectionable positions in Hamas' covenant. Supporters of the "isolate and undermine" approach sometimes argue that it would deter others in the region from making similar policy choices, if given the opportunity at the ballot box. But this is a dubious proposition.

The second approach gives Hamas the opportunity to change without foreclosing on the option of isolating it if it refuses. There are a few reasons to hope that Hamas is capable of change. First, it is not al-Qaeda. Although it is a radical Islamist movement, it is rooted in a national program, not a pan-Islamic cause. Hamas was elected primarily on its promises to provide effective, honest governance. This program depends on wider public support than Hamas currently enjoys, given that only 45 percent of voters chose Hamas in the January election. Moreover, many Hamas voters cast a protest vote against Fatah and what the public perceived as a corrupt ruling elite. The vote was not an endorsement of Hamas' platform vis-à-vis Israel. Hamas knows the vast majority of the Palestinian public want quiet, law and order, security, good governance, and basic services. It will be up to Hamas to deliver on these expectations.¹

The organization that Hamas will lead, the Palestinian Authority, is a unique governing body. First, it is completely and utterly dependent on the good will of external actors. Its budget depends on taxes and customs collected by Israel and on foreign aid from the outside world. The P.A. is composed of two disconnected territorial units, the West Bank and Gaza, and passage between them is dependent on another state. Its imports and exports are almost completely dependent on Israel, its biggest market and its main outlet to the international market.

The behavior of Hamas leaders since the election indicates they are aware of their dependence and have a sober assessment of its implications. This may be why Hamas was initially interested in a coalition government with Fatah headed by a non-Hamas figure. Its own campaign promises,

¹ See Khalil Shikaki, "Willing to Compromise: Palestinian Public Opinion and the Peace Process," United States Institute of Peace, Special Report #158, January 2006.

combined with the public's expectations—not to mention the inherent constraints of the P.A.—may be leading Hamas to acquiesce to more moderate and pragmatic policies.

In order to succeed, this alternative approach will have to differentiate between what realistically can be expected from Hamas now and what can be expected at later stages. It should be made absolutely clear to Hamas that recognition of Israel is a necessary end following the process of engagement, but it should not be presented as an ultimatum that requires immediate acceptance. Hamas should be presented with a plan that delineates each stage of the process, describes milestones within each stage, and outlines sanctions and rewards if it stays the course with the Quartet's Road Map peace plan. In the first stage, what is important is:

- a) Action by a Hamas government to strengthen the ceasefire and prevent other armed groups (e.g. Islamic Jihad, al Aqsa Martyrs Brigade, Popular Resistance Committees) from acting violently against Israel;
- b) Maintaining existing agreements with Israel without exceptions and reservations; and
- c) Avoiding steps that would undermine Palestinian democracy and human rights.

These demands are within Hamas' capacity to fulfill. At later stages, other key steps would include dismantling militias, including their own, and making the necessary ideological changes, including the recognition of Israel.

It must be recognized that this approach carries significant risks. First, it demands a common, coordinated, and nuanced policy on the part of the external actors, which will be difficult to achieve. Second, if not properly executed, this policy could lead Hamas to believe it can play outsiders against each other, escape meaningful change, and eventually bypass the tougher policy goals such as dismantling the militias and making ideological concessions. Third, there is a concern that Hamas could play a double game and use any pause to re-arm and build up its terrorist infrastructure. Fourth, less committed members of the international community could waver on maintaining the system of milestones, sanctions, and rewards. Finally, there is a risk that such an approach might encourage other societies in the region to support similar radical movements.

Some of these risks should not be exaggerated; others are misplaced. To some extent, Israel's withdrawal from Gaza already enabled Hamas to re-organize and rebuild while they adhered to the tahdi'a. But any build-up by Hamas can be countered by the continued control of external boundaries by other parties, Israeli security control over the West Bank, and the continuation of Israel's separation barrier/fence.

The main advantage of the engagement approach is that it provides a framework to test the new Palestinian leadership, while at the same time denying it excuses for failure to change its ways. Should Hamas fail because of outside pressure, which remains a likely outcome, it will be more difficult to attribute its failure to its obduracy. They will shift blame to outside parties. Furthermore, this approach could widen the Palestinian consensus for a two-state solution without compromising support for Palestinian democracy. It could also create a relatively stable and secure situation on the ground. Past experience shows that cautious, selective, and conditional engagement, when combined with the right mix of pressure, can be productive, particularly in terms of alliance management. Should engagement fail, it will be easier to build a coalition that supports confrontation. The present case of Iran is instructive.

A period of conditional engagement not only deals with the risks presented by the new situation, but also exploits possible opportunities. Moreover, the engagement approach—if properly designed—is consistent with the Quartet statement of January 30 and the conditions placed on Hamas, thereby creating a pathway for the parties to return to the Road Map. Finally, should a Hamas government be destined to fail, as many believe it is, allowing it to collapse under its own weight is far preferable to being seen as responsible for its demise.

About the Author:

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