

THE RISE OF ISLAMISTS IN THE NEAR EAST: THE EU, THE US, AND HAMAS

The resurgence of Islamists in the Levant is changing the regional balance of power and confronts the West with new challenges. The EU and the US will hardly be able to curtail the polarization and radicalization of the Palestinian population with their strategy of joining with Israel and moderate Arab regimes to isolate the democratically elected Hamas. Europe is faced with the difficulty of formulating a sustainable Middle East policy that will not cause new transatlantic frictions.



Supporters celebrate the 19th anniversary of the foundation of Hamas on 15 December 2006.
Mohammed Salem/Reuters

The current strategic picture in the Levant is characterized by four developments. First of all, a resurgence of various Islamist movements can be observed. Hizbollah and Hamas on the northern and southern borders of Israel are two groups that enjoy increasing support among broad circles of the Arab population. Israel's retreat from Southern Lebanon and the Gaza Strip is often attributed to their armed resistance. Furthermore, in areas such as education and healthcare, their social engagement is regarded by many Arabs as being more efficient than that of some regimes in the region. During the past months, Hizbollah has demonstrated

the efficiency of this two-tier political-military strategy—first, by not being forced into submission by Israeli forces in the latest round of fighting in Lebanon, and then through its ability to paralyze political life in Beirut by ending its participation in the Lebanese government. Hamas, in turn, took over the government from President Mahmoud Abbas' secular Fatah movement in spring of 2006 after its upset victory in the Palestinian parliamentary elections, to which it added a military defeat of Fatah in Gaza in June 2007.

Essentially, both Hizbollah and Hamas are pursuing local agendas. However,

in recent years, Muslim fundamentalist groups with ideological affinities to al-Qaida have gained a foothold in the region. One of these militias that are committed to global combat against the West and pro-Western Arab regimes is Fatah al-Islam (Conquest of Islam), which engaged in bloody fighting with the Lebanese Army in a Palestinian refugee camp in June 2007 and which has been blamed for a terrorist attack against UN forces in Southern Lebanon (UNIFIL). Another is the Jaish al-Islam (Army of Islam) group that kidnapped Western journalist Alan Johnson in Gaza in spring of 2007. While such jihadi units regard Shi'ite Hizbollah as their arch-enemy, they criticize the Sunni Hamas group for its willingness to participate in the political process.

Resurgent Islamists, weakened US

Secondly, the US and its regional allies are seen to be weakened. The Bush administration's Iraq policy and the lack of US engagement in the Arab-Israeli conflict have undermined Washington's influence and standing in the region. At the same time, pro-Western Sunni regimes, for example in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, are under pressure due to the regional ascent of the Shi'ites, and especially of Iran, after the overthrow of Saddam Hussein, and due to the growing power of religious extremist currents among their own people. The secular Arab nationalism for which they stand is largely discredited today, not least because it has failed to provide a solution to the Palestine question.

Israel, as the main US ally, is caught up in domestic crisis. The Lebanon War of summer 2006 exposed the limitations of Israel's one-sided reliance on high-tech weaponry against an opponent pursuing asymmetric strategies. It was also an illustration of the failure of unilateral conflict management as pursued since 2000. The unilateral demarcation of borders by way of constructing a barrier wall, and the withdrawal from parts of the occupied territories without consultation with the Palestinian side, have not brought the stability that the Israeli government had hoped for. Sustainable security will only come about through a negotiated peace settlement. The government of Ehud Olmert is weakened today not only because of the crisis of leadership in the Lebanese campaign, but also because it has been unable so far to present prospects for a solution to the conflict with the Palestinians.

Thirdly, we can register an increasing overlap of the various conflicts in the Levant with the crises in the Gulf region. In addition to the suspected ties between jihadis in Lebanon and the Gaza Strip and al-Qaida in Iraq, the focus here is on the ascent of Iran, which is pursuing an anti-American and anti-Zionist agenda. Together with its allies of Bashir al-Assad's secular regime in Syria, which – unlike Egypt and Jordan – has no peace treaty with Israel, the Shi'ite theocracy supports its co-religionists of Hizbollah and, increasingly, Hamas. Some analysts have interpreted the 2006 conflict in Lebanon as a proxy war within an emerging hegemonial conflict between the US and Iran, which is said to be striving to acquire nuclear arms. And indeed, neither the US nor Israel are likely to risk an air strike against Iran's nuclear installations before Hizbollah has been disarmed.

The fourth development is the emerging closing of ranks between Israel and "moderate" Arab states such as Egypt and Jordan as well as, though somewhat more reluctantly, Saudi Arabia. Today, these states feel more threatened by the rise of the Shi'ites and of the religious extremists than by the Jewish state. An alliance of convenience with Jerusalem first emerged in the coordinated strategy of isolation towards Hamas after the group's military takeover in the Gaza Strip in June 2007. It can be expected to intensify if the threat from Iran should increase.

Western reactions towards the power shifts

The responses of the US and Europe to the rise of the Islamists and towards the power shifts in the Levant differ in their degrees of convergence depending on the specific case. Hizbollah is listed by Washington as a terrorist group, while it is tolerated by the EU as part of the political process. Furthermore, a number of European countries are participating in the UNIFIL peacekeeping mission in Southern Lebanon, but the US is not. Further differences can be found in terms of policies towards Syria. Although both sides criticize the regional role of Syria, the US is pursuing a strategy of isolation, while the Europeans also set store by dialog and partnership. However, the EU has strongly reduced its contacts in response to the unexplained role of Syria in the murder of former Lebanese prime minister Rafik Hariri and has put the signing of an association agreement with Damascus on hold.

There is, however, a transatlantic consensus concerning the stance towards Hamas. Both the US and the EU emphasize isolation and have ostentatiously closed ranks with the regional anti-Hamas alliance. Since Hamas is an important actor in the Arab-Israeli conflict, this decision is of great significance for European policy towards the region. It may also signal the future strategy of the West towards political Islam in general. It is doubtful, however, whether the intended marginalization of such groups like Hamas will also result in their de-legitimization in the eyes of the Arab peoples and help stabilize the situation in the region. Instead, the West risks contributing to further polarization of the Palestinians and increasing radicalization of fundamentalist groups in the Levant and beyond.

Consequences of the isolation strategy

The EU included Hamas on its list of terrorist groups after a series of suicide attacks in 2002 and 2003. After the electoral victory of Hamas in January 2006, it moved away from its traditional policy of dialog and decided to embark on a more hard-line course. Together with the US and Israel, it rejected contacts with the new government and imposed a financial boycott. The Middle East Quartet, the framework in which the EU, the US, Russia, and the UN have been coordinating their

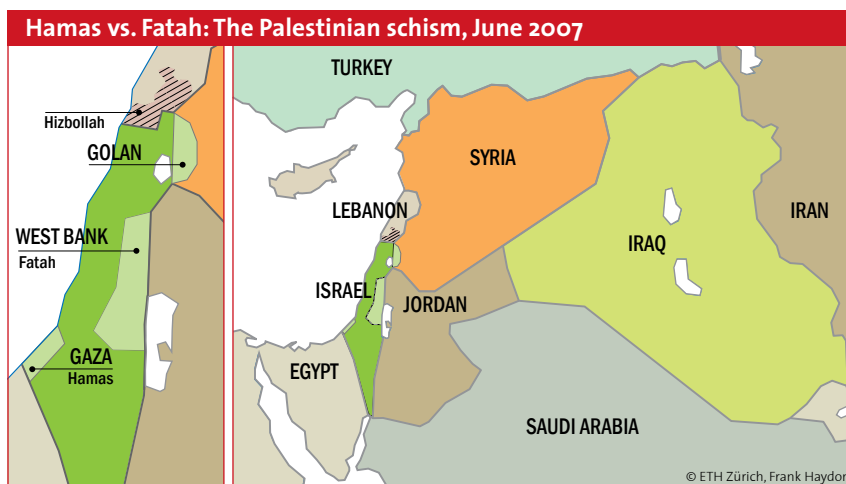
peace efforts since 2002, demanded that Hamas should acknowledge Israel's right to exist and recognize all treaties signed between the PLO and Israel, as well as that it should reject violence as a precondition for a resumption of financial aid and dialog.

The negative results of this strategy soon became apparent. First of all, the West continued to lose credibility among the Arab peoples. Despite years of fostering democracy, the EU and the US turned their backs on a Hamas that had won free and fair elections. Secondly, this isolation strategy gave Iran increasing leverage over Hamas. Third, it weakened the very institutions in Palestine that the EU in particular had been instrumental in building, and which are intended to provide the basis for a two-state solution in the future. Finally, the stance of the West also had a negative impact on the Palestinian society, where squalor and militancy continued to increase.

The EU in the corset of the Middle East Quartet

In order to end the escalation of inter-Palestinian tensions, Hamas and Fatah agreed in spring of 2007 to enter into a government of national unity. While the EU proceeded to consider a more pragmatic interpretation of the Quartet's conditions, the US remained skeptical and concentrated instead on strengthening Abbas' security forces. The fact that Fatah still refused to relinquish control over the security apparatus is seen to have contributed to the decision of the Hamas militias to make a grab for power in Gaza through a military coup in June 2007.

This move, in turn, prompted Abbas to dissolve the unity government and to institute an emergency cabinet without Islamists under the leadership of former finance minister Salam Fayyad. Since Hamas refused to acknowledge the new government, Palestine today is a non-state with two governments, with the influence of Fayyad and Fatah being limited to the West Bank. By breaking off the dialog with Hamas, Abbas has at least momentarily relinquished his role as a president of all Palestinians. The legitimacy of the new government is limited, however, as the president circumvented the constitution as well as the Hamas-controlled Legislative Council in order to



appoint it and keep it in power over an extended period of time.

In this situation, the EU again sided with the advocates of isolation. The latter hope to strengthen the moderate Palestinian forces through exclusive and comprehensive support for the emergency government in the West Bank. It remains questionable, however, whether this will serve to attain the goal of cornering Hamas. The party of Western-supported Fayyad won only 2.4 per cent of votes cast in the 2006 election. Abbas risks losing further support among the population unless his deal with Olmert and Bush leads to progress in bringing about an Israeli withdrawal from the occupied territories, in addition to economic aid. His Fatah party remains discredited on the domestic front and was exposed as an incompetent and corrupt government party ahead of Hamas' election victory. There is also a danger that Hamas may turn its back on the political process and set off a new wave of terrorism, which would make it impossible to implement any arrangements that Abbas and Israel could agree on, for example concerning greater freedom of movement.

Alvaro de Soto, the UN negotiator within the Quartet, resigned his post in reaction to the continuing ostracism of Hamas. He criticized the Quartet as having been reduced to a support group for the US that served primarily to manage transatlantic relations rather than the quest for peace in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Indeed, the EU, while it won some influence over US policies by initiating the Quartet in 2001, has lost some of its freedom of action in the region at the same time. Although there is discomfort in some European capitals regarding the isolation of Hamas, there is

even more fear of a new transatlantic rupture with the US in analogy to the crisis over Iraq.

A more flexible strategy

Since a schism in Western strategy towards the region would be counter-productive, the Europeans should try to convince the US that dialog should no longer be tied to preconditions that, in realistic terms, can only come about as the result of negotiations. A more flexible strategy of the West towards Islamists combining both isolation and dialog would be desirable. Financial aid to governments including Islamists should continue to be strictly conditional on factors such as acknowledgement of Israel's right to exist. However, "moderate" Islamists who participate in the political system should be accepted as actors qualifying for diplomacy and parties relevant to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Without involving Hamas in dialog, no sustainable conflict management or peace agreement will be possible in the Near East. Tony Blair's appointment as the new emissary of the whole Quartet could be an opportunity for the EU to communicate to the Bush administration the advantages of a more flexible position – although the way Blair is regarded by the Arab people will make his actual role in the region difficult.

Dialog with Syria would also be desirable. A new Syrian-Israeli peace process would weaken religious extremists in the region as well as Tehran. Progress appears possible in this area because Syria's disagreements with Israel, unlike those of the Palestinians, are not caused by a conflict over identity and territory that is difficult to arbitrate, but by security issues that can be resolved by rational means.

Furthermore, there are weighty voices in the US demanding a more constructive policy towards Syria. Finally, Ehud Barak – a representative of the "Syria first" school of thought – was appointed Israeli defense minister in June 2007.

Switzerland may point the way

Switzerland was the only Western country to have maintained relations with the Palestinian government after the election victory of Hamas (Norway only recognized the unity government). It pursues a remarkably active and independent diplomacy in the Levant. Berne has tried to build bridges between Hamas and Israel by assisting in the elaboration of a substantial Hamas draft for a five-year ceasefire with implicit recognition of Israel. As a facilitator, Switzerland has fostered the negotiation of groundbreaking model agreements for peace treaties between Israel and Palestine (Geneva Initiative) and between Israel and Syria by prominent representatives of civil society in those countries. In Lebanon, too, Swiss diplomats have been very active in recent months and have offered their good offices. Switzerland's favorable reputation in Lebanon goes back to the 1980s, when Berne invited the civil war adversaries to talks in Geneva and Lausanne.

On its own, Switzerland may not have enough standing to facilitate a peace deal between the conflicting parties in the Levant. Yet, it may point the way for other Western powers to acknowledge that dialog with groups like Hamas who are popular with large segments of the people is a prerequisite if sustainable peace is ever to occur in this conflict-ridden region.

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