



The Hamas Takeover Serves Israel's Interests

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Executive Summary: The decisive victory by Hamas in this week's Palestinian elections, paradoxically, serves Israel's interests. Hamas' win provides Israel and the international community with an opportunity to fashion a tough line against Palestinian Islamic terrorism, and to bring the aid-dependent PA into line. Moreover, Hamas is bound to fail in running the PA, leaving open the possibility in the long term for the emergence of a more mature Palestinian leadership.

A careful analysis of Hamas' recent victory in the Palestinian elections leads to a counter-intuitive conclusion: Hamas' win can work in Israel's favor if Israel and Western leaders intelligently calibrate their responses to the Hamas-led Palestinian Authority.

Over the past decade Israel has suffered enormous damage from the double-game played by the Fatah-led PA and gullibly accepted by the international community: that of 'negotiating' with Israel while simultaneously waging a war of terror against it. Whilst Mahmoud Abbas himself might have been opposed to this game, it nevertheless continued unabated.

Now, following the January 25 elections, the reigns of the PA are definitively in the hands of the triumphant, Islamic fundamentalist Hamas. This is a moment of truth in that Islamic radicalism threatens not only Israel, but clearly poses a threat to the US and Europe as well. All things considered, the international community ought to be as wary as Israel of Ramallah's new leaders. The US and the EU cannot possibly allow an Islamist government, which attained power by democratic means, to continue to wage wars of terrorism and simultaneously benefit from Western aid. Were such a precedent to be tolerated, it would subvert American efforts to promote democratization in the region. Instead of serving as a means to challenge Islamic extremism, 'democratization' would turn into a means of propagating Islamic extremism and terrorism.

As a result, Israel should be able to persuade the US and the EU to press for a strong linkage between the receipt of international aid – without which the PA will utterly collapse – and the dismantling of both Hamas and Fatah terrorist arms. In addition,

Hamas can and should be pressured to end its anti-Semitic, anti-Zionist and anti-Western incitement.

The Palestinians are the most subsidized and dependent people in the world. No matter how efficient and uncorrupt a new Hamas government may be (and it is unlikely that Hamas will prove to be less corrupt than Fatah in the long term), the 'savings' afforded by such efficiency could not possibly compensate for the serious cuts in international aid that will be implemented if Hamas fails to deliver on these issues.

Another key element to be considered is Israeli military power. Tough Israeli action against terrorism has been critical in the past in teaching Hamas the rules of the game: Hamas' decision last year to enter PA politics directly followed Israel's assassination of Hamas leaders Sheikh Yassin and Abdul Aziz Rantisi, and attempted assassination of Mahmoud Al-Zahhar. The targeting of these key figures caused Hamas to reconsider the continuation of its terrorist activities, and provided the organization with a push into the realm of politics. Similarly, if Israel remains on guard and acts swiftly and resolutely to end the activity of any and all Hamas leaders who return to terrorism, Hamas can be kept in line.

It is important to note that Hamas has proven itself capable of recognizing and respecting certain red lines. For instance, Hamas has refrained from engaging in terror abroad, has not attacked Americans in the Palestinian Authority, nor has it openly identify with al-Qaeda terrorism. Hamas knows the red lines that exist in the murky world of realpolitik.

However, given the problems facing the PA, the Hamas in its present form is destined to fail. If it does not transform itself, it will collapse under the weight of the PA's accumulated debts and inevitable, ensuing Palestinian public dissatisfaction with its inability to deliver a better living standard. Hamas did not want to win a majority government in this election since it did not want the responsibility of governing the PA. Overwhelming electoral success is a victory foisted upon the Hamas.

However, the fate of the new Palestinian government depends on the strategy adopted by Israel and West. All sides must have the patience to sit back and put pressure on Hamas, while it faces the newfound difficulties of governing the PA. Israel itself must refrain from spoiling the Hamas-led PA government with political eagerness to achieve quick-fix solutions. It would be extremely harmful for Israel to engage in unilateral withdrawals or premature negotiations with the Hamas-led Palestinian government at this time.

Now is the time to sit tight, walk softly, carry a very big stick, and work with the international community to force Hamas to dismantle its arms and cease its incitement. Perhaps over time, the Palestinian public will sober up from this experience, and elect a more mature leadership that will be ready for a real end-of-war deal with Israel.

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