

Leaning on Hamas?

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In a recent radio debate on US public service radio in which I participated, one of the US speakers said that the United States respected the outcome of the Palestinian elections. He added, however, that Palestinians must understand that choices also imply consequences; and that one consequence of their decision must be the isolation of any incoming government and the ending of economic support.

Israeli commentators have put forward a more nuanced version of this formula: unless Hamas complies with Israeli demands on recognition of Israel, disavows violence, and accepts all earlier agreements they will impose sanctions that damage Palestinian economic prospects – short of causing starvation or cutting off their water. The object, Israeli security spokesmen suggest, is to induce Hamas constituents to put pressure on their leaders or, if that fails, to dump them in fresh elections in favor of a »chastened and reformed« Fateh which is perceived as »moderate.«

Collective punishment is not a new strategy. Following Israel's invasion of south Lebanon in 1982 the reaction of the Shia⁷, which had not been hostile at the outset, turned to passive opposition as the occupation began to interfere in their lives and to diminish their independence. On October 16, 1983, however, an Israeli commander insisted on driving a military convoy through the middle of an Ashoura celebration. This commemoration, which is the most sacred in the Shia⁷ calendar, turned into chaos as the convoy forced its way through the 50,000 Lebanese attending it. This incident sparked the beginning of armed Shia⁷ resistance in Lebanon.

During the following year Israeli forces tried to impose an economic cost on the local population in order to persuade them to turn away from

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active resistance. Israeli forces isolated south Lebanon from the rest of the country by limiting passage from Beirut to a single point of entry. This and other measures had a grave impact on the local economy. The resentment it caused swelled the ranks of the resistance and led to the establishment of Amal, the first broad Shia' resistance movement.

The pattern persisted: as Amal grew, Israeli forces tried to assassinate local tribal and religious leaders and to impose harsher collective punishments on the population in order to persuade them that the cost of supporting Amal was just too painful and that they should turn to other, more moderate leaders. It had an impact: Amal was displaced – but not by moderates. In fact, its successor was Hezbollah.

Again, Israeli forces tried to distance the public from the Islamist resistance and from Hezbollah: on February 16, 1992 helicopter gunships carried out an attack against Hezbollah's secretary general, Sayyed Abbas al-Mousawi, killing him, his wife, their one-year-old baby, and their escorts. This too had its impact: Hassan Nasrallah was elected Secretary General and Hezbollah subsequently became the effective resistance force that eventually drove Israel from Lebanon some twenty years later.

This familiar pattern has had little more success in the Palestinian arena: the Israeli forces have used both economic sanctions and practical impediments to life, such as the 430 checkpoints which exist in the West Bank as pressure points in the hope that popular distress would cause Palestinians to demand that their leaders cease the conflict with Israel and sue for peace. Israel had Fateh; but now it has Hamas.

This way of thinking may not be new to Israel; what is new and so striking is to find the European Union – and Germany in particular – perceived as being in the vanguard of supporting it. History suggests that such policies are counter-productive. However, what also seems to be missing is an understanding of the implications of this for the EU's wider engagement with the Muslim world. It reflects a disconnection with the public sentiment in the region and a misunderstanding of the currents that are presently shaping events there.

In Iraq, 78 percent of voters support Islamist parties of one type or another; in Egypt the Muslim Brotherhood has quadrupled its strength in Parliament despite official obstruction; and in Lebanon Hezbollah easily swept to power in the portion of seats, which the Taif Accord allowed it to contest. Is Europe to emulate that famous early king of England who was taken in his throne to sit at the sea's edge in order to command the tide to withdraw? Is Europe hoping to do the same with Islamism? To be

fair, King Canute only went through with this charade to impress on his fawning courtiers the limits of kingly power!

The reason Europeans, with our long history of understanding armed popular discontent, should now be drawn to ignore the lessons of history and to espouse these ideas may be our current flawed academic models of the transition of armed groups to political movements.

Most current models attribute a key role to civil society as the engine of transition. Also, most Western models see the transition from armed group to the political arena as a progressive movement along a single axis from armed group to political movement. I have spent most of the last 30 years involved in one way or another with conflicts around the world and believe that both assumptions are false.

In my experience it has been the armed groups at either end of their respective political spectrums which have initiated a de-escalation of violence. Civil society has had nothing to do with it; and nor have »moderate« politicians. It is not true, of course, that civil society has no role. Its impact, however, usually comes after the paramilitaries have for their own reasons concluded that a reduction of armed conflict is in their interest. This certainly has been evident in Northern Ireland where it was the paramilitaries who decided that they would de-escalate. The worthy politicians in the centre ground had little to do with it – and their huge investment in people-to-people work largely proved irrelevant.

Equally, the idea of a linear movement from armed group to political movement seems to have little connection to reality. I think that many understand this in practice, but these assumptions nonetheless linger. In all cases there has been a complex duality of processes with a shifting emphasis between the strands of political and armed action, depending on the current situation.

To assume, therefore – as European policy statements suggest – that pressures on Hamas will encourage them to move incrementally towards the European endorsement of the Israeli pre-requirements seems to assume that some sort of »civil society« – whatever that may mean now in the Palestinian context – will act to moderate Hamas's position. History suggests the reverse: if Hamas fails under the weight of external pressures, it will not be a »chastened« Fateh which will fill the gap, but rather al-Qaeda. The »nudging theory« of edging Hamas toward becoming a political movement also implies some linear progression, whereas most such groups see resistance as multi-faceted rather than a straight either/or choice.

Missing the Positive

More serious perhaps than misconstruing the mechanics of transition is the prospect of opportunities lost. The success of Hamas at the polls should not have surprised anyone, but apparently it did. It is a reflection of the West's self-imposed isolation from the principal currents of change in the region that it was surprised; and Europe – or at least the European press – assumes wrongly that Hamas was surprised too. Due to this misperception I believe that the West so far has failed to recognize the extent of the changes taking shape.

Here commentators tend to describe the Hamas win as no more than a protest vote against Fateh ineffectiveness and corruption, but if they succeed, Hamas are intent on much more: They intend to up-end the familiar underpinnings of the political process.

By demanding that Israel and the international community acknowledge the Palestinian narrative of 1948 and correspondingly affirm Palestinian national rights as the starting point of any process, Khaled Mishaal is doing no more than asking that the signposts pointing towards the destination of the political process must be clearly stated: that the Palestinian state take shape on the basis of withdrawal from lands occupied in 1967, with Jerusalem as its capital. President Clinton recognized clearly the perversity of beginning an open-ended incremental process, with parties of very different negotiating clout, which does not define where it is heading. Clinton's response was his 10-point plan outlining the shape of a possible agreement. It was a first, hesitant attempt to define Palestinian rights.

We should also try to understand the extent to which the vote, as one Hamas supporter in Lebanon suggested last week, reflects the profound disappointment of Palestinian hopes of a positive US or international role. Whereas Fateh had relied on Palestinian »good behavior« to persuade the US to balance the asymmetry of power in negotiations, Palestinians in voting for Hamas seem to have abandoned such aspirations and have opted for self-reliance. Europe's response – attempting to impose sanctions in order to force acceptance of Israeli conditions – will surely reinforce the sentiment that self-reliance is the right course. It will accelerate the trend toward Palestinian efforts to reduce the dependency on Europe in favor of other Muslim states.

The »revolutionary« element that risks being overlooked is Hamas's inversion of the old Arafat injunction that Palestinian institutions can

only be built after the state has been established. Hamas has been working on a comprehensive reform and institution-building plan. It envisages the establishment of a judicial system, the reform of the security services, and the placing of the Legislative Assembly at the heart of a system based on transparency and accountability.

This aspect – the keenness to give Palestinians effective and competent governance as the means to a Palestinian state rather than as its outcome, together with the emphasis on governing in the interests of all Palestinians – is at the heart of the Hamas revolution. I believe that a competent and effective Palestinian leadership speaking with a fresh mandate and broad support for a national policy will give the initiative back to Palestinians. It will be hard to ignore; and we may end up looking foolish in attempting to refuse to engage with it.

It remains to be seen whether Hamas can succeed with their planned reforms. They have earned an enviable reputation at local level, however. Their community support program in Syria, for example, is considered such a model of effectiveness by overseas experts and local officials that it has had an impact on Syrian political thinking and Hamas has seen its budget quadruple over the last two years.

Contrary to the press assumption that the Hamas victory took the movement by surprise, and that it was therefore unprepared, in fact Hamas had been preparing its plans for assuming office for more than a year. Hamas is quietly confident in its ability to provide effective and competent governance.

Impact of the Withdrawal of Financial Assistance

In hard practical terms, withdrawal of the salary component of EU funding for the Palestinian National Authority may in fact work to Hamas's benefit. Hamas have sufficient internal resources to pay their own salaries. They will pay from Hamas funds their own ministers, their members in the National Assembly, and their Assembly staffs. The shortfall, were the EU to cut the salary component of support to the Authority, will affect civil servants and the security forces who are Fateh members almost to a man.

Hamas knows that in any event it has to prune the bloated public sector. It intends to achieve substantial economies by cutting out waste and corruption. It seems clear from the Palestinian Attorney General's inves-

tigation of corruption that hundreds of millions of dollars have been misappropriated; but the incoming government knows that it will also need to shed many posts – this will happen irrespective of whether Europeans cut assistance.

Hamas, in the run up to the elections, was concerned that their plans to trim the public sector might have been perceived as an anti-Fateh program. This was not the intention, but inevitably as Fateh fill all the posts and have been its principal beneficiaries, it may have been perceived in this way. Now the public will see Hamas reforms as being an appropriate response to the EU sanctions. It should help it to avoid the odium of having to cut posts.

Any broad international action to cut financial aid together with any Israeli economic blockade is likely to reinforce public support for broadening the base of assistance for the Palestinian Authority. Hamas is likely to want to reduce dependency on Western assistance which may leave Palestinians hostage to the types of threat now being suggested. Sanctions will assist Hamas in achieving this objective.

Hamas remains very confident that it will be able to survive any Western pressures. It has been receiving offers of assistance thick and fast from Muslim sources. It is likely that whilst Arab states will be under US pressure to maintain a common front with the US-led policy of pressure on Hamas, they will not be averse to private or unofficial monies reaching the Palestinians. Most of these governments are too aware of Islamist sentiments in their own countries to allow Muslim hostility to Western attempts to de-stabilize Hamas to be re-directed toward the leaders of Muslim states.

More generally, any US and European led campaign designed to cause a Hamas government to fail will be counter-productive. External pressure of this type will unite Palestinians, paint Fateh as a Western stooge, and limit any internal criticism of Hamas. I well recall the inhibiting effect of the siege of President Yasser Arafat in his Muqata' headquarters on younger Tanzeem (Fateh cadre) members. This was a period in which there was anger at their own leaders' mismanagement and corruption, but so long as the Israeli tanks were surrounding the symbol of the Palestinian nation, Yasser Arafat, they would not criticize him. To do so was perceived as collaborating with the enemy.

Stepping Back: the Wider Issues for Europe

The stakes for Europe in formulating its response to the Hamas »revolution,« however, are higher than just the risk of stasis in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, as serious as that is.

By appearing to form the vanguard in the campaign of isolation for the movement that now enjoys greater legitimacy than probably any other government or ruling movement in the Muslim world, we risk broadcasting a message of hostility to Muslims everywhere. It may have been an accident of timing that both the German Chancellor and the foreign minister visited Israel after the election, rejected Hamas requests for a meeting, and used the occasion to underline German support for Israeli demands, but the perception has been implanted that Europe is in the vanguard of hostility towards a popularly elected Islamist government. We in the West may not be attuned to it, but for Muslims there is a faint aroma of Algeria in the air. »Algeria Two« is not to be a repeat of the military overthrow of a newly elected Islamist government, but an attempt, it seems to them, to undermine a repeated Islamist election victory through isolation and economic sanctions.

To do this at a time when Muslims see the European »Three« of Germany, Britain, and France in the forefront in referring Iran to the Security Council and with President Chirac of France taking the lead in exerting pressure on Syria has led many Muslims to conclude that Europe has abandoned its historic empathy with the Muslim world and is lurching in the direction of confrontation with Islam. The sense of grievance is the greater as the US has never been particularly associated by Muslims with empathy bridging the Western-Muslim divide – Europe was perceived to be different.

Of course that Muslim view is a misperception. Many in Europe simply want Hamas to give up their refusal to recognize Israel's right to exist and to commit to a two-state solution which they see as the only escape from further conflict. They do not want to undermine Hamas, but to move it toward European objectives.

Such a position may seem well-intentioned and sensible viewed from the comfort of our relatively stable societies, but from the perspective of a region caught in conflict and Muslim preoccupation with the humiliation of US occupations in Iraq and Afghanistan, and understood in the context of the resentment at Western demonization of Muslims as »terrorists,« we in Europe may in turn find ourselves misunderstood.

The Hamas discourse that demands that the West, besides acknowledging the Jewish narrative, also accept the Palestinian narrative of the injustice of 1948 by a clear affirmation of Palestinian rights is likely to have broad resonance amongst Muslims everywhere. Hamas insists that the route to mutual recognition of Palestinian and Israeli reality must start from this point. Hamas are on firm ground: their demand is based on our failure to give UN Resolutions 242 and 338 substance by stating clearly that a future Palestinian state must take its shape from the basis of withdrawal from Palestinian lands occupied in 1967 and should have Jerusalem as its capital.

It is unrealistic to insist that Palestinians should recommit to all past agreements. It was the loss of legitimacy and credibility of these earlier agreements that led to two Intifadas. To expect the Palestinians to recommit to precisely the terms that led to conflict, and to define this return to the status quo ante as the entry-point to all future talks, makes little sense.

Above all, we should free our eyes from this Israel-centred optic and consider European policy more generally. We are in the middle of crises in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as in Iran, Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine. Yet we choose to talk to fewer and fewer of those influential movements. The recent attacks on European missions in the Middle East is not unconnected with what I described as the widely held perception of the European lurch from its traditional empathy into the US administration camp. Our posture towards Hamas is reinforcing that image. If we continue in that line and adopt the rhetoric of the US towards Iran and Syria; if Muslims see no light between Europe and the US on Iraq, Afghanistan, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Muslim Brotherhood; then we may expect to see in coming years our diplomatic missions overseas emulating the American military fortresses that have become the norm for US diplomacy. The answer is to return to a practice known before its demise as »diplomacy.« This harks back to an era when governments *talked* with those who have legitimacy within their own communities – even when we did not share all their values. Diplomacy then was less about threats and »remotely guided Predators« – the modern gunboat – and more about managing areas of common cause, even in the context of differing values.