

From Washington to Hamas: Change or Fail

By Dennis Ross

HAMAS'S STUNNING SUCCESS in the Palestinian elections promises to redefine the Israeli-Palestinian relationship even as it confronts the United States with hard questions about its policy toward the broader Middle East.

On the most strategic level, the Hamas victory should compel Washington to reconsider its current approach to promoting democracy in the Middle East. At present, the administration clearly needs to take more account of the potential for antidemocratic groups to use democratic forms and mechanisms to seize power, especially in environments where existing regimes are corrupt and despised and where Islamists are the only organized alternative. Democracy promotion should remain a leading U.S. objective for the Middle East. But clearly much more emphasis needs to be placed on building the conditions for secular, liberal, or moderate alternatives to emerge—and trying to enhance their capabilities—than on continuing to focus such a heavy share of our effort on holding elections as a priority. Such an approach applies throughout the broader Middle East and goes well beyond what the administration must now consider as it deals with the Israelis and Palestinians.

On the Israeli-Palestinian front, the administration's policy has, since 2003, been defined by the "Roadmap to Middle East Peace." The Hamas victory makes this a problematic basis for shaping policy now. After all, the roadmap was designed to move from the existing reality to President Bush's vision of two states, Israel and Palestine, coexisting side by side in peace and security. Hamas not only rejects a two-state solution and Israel's right to exist, but it is also highly unlikely to dismantle its own infrastructure as mandated by the roadmap. Although value certainly exists in retaining the rhetorical guideposts embodied in the roadmap, it is probably time to admit what has long been the case: the roadmap is, at most, a declaratory posture offering general guidelines for behavior; it is not an operational plan.

Should the Bush administration develop an operational plan? Perhaps, but the starting point for such an action-oriented policy needs to be an understanding

of the realities we now face with both the Israelis and Palestinians.

Competing Political Earthquakes

Both Israelis and Palestinians are going through political transformations. In Israel, a new political center (the Kadima party) has emerged that threatens to displace the parties that have traditionally dominated Israel's politics. The Hamas electoral victory is creating a parallel reality for the Palestinians by sweeping aside Fatah, the predominantly secular national movement that defined politics. These twin political earthquakes, though equally momentous, appear to be leading the two sides in very different directions.

For probably the first time since David Ben-Gurion served as prime minister, Israel has a broad centrist consensus, particularly on how to deal with the Palestinians. The public appears ready to disengage from the Palestinians, withdraw extensively from the West Bank, and get out of Palestinian lives. Ariel Sharon both shaped and reflected this consensus and was determined to act on it. And, even though Sharon is now incapacitated, his political heirs—led by Ehud Olmert—appear determined to follow in his footsteps.

By contrast, the Palestinians have now voted to remake the Palestinian Authority (PA) by electing Hamas, a group that rejects the very concept of peace with Israel. Indeed, Hamas may even reject a "negotiated divorce" of Israel from the territories, which is how many Israelis view the essence of disengagement. Does the Hamas election mean a consensus exists among Palestinians on how to deal with Israel—or, more likely, not deal with Israel? No one can answer that question with certainty. Many observers will argue with some justification that the Palestinian elections were about corruption, lawlessness, chaos, joblessness, and the overall fecklessness of Fatah—a movement that was not responsive to the Palestinian public's needs and paid the price for its disdain of the electorate. But although Hamas campaigned under the banner of reform and change, it never hid its basic principle of resistance to and rejection of Israel.

In effect, we now face the paradox of having an Israeli consensus for taking far-reaching steps to remove themselves from controlling Palestinians, which is certainly what most Palestinians want, while at the same time, on the Palestinian side, a dominant political force is emerging that seeks not Israel's removal from Palestinian life, but Israel's eventual eradication.

Will the Hamas election alter the Israeli consensus? This outcome is unlikely; consider that just prior to the Palestinian election, 77 percent of Israelis told pollsters that there was no Palestinian partner for peace. Hamas's victory is likely to cement that belief and reinforce the Israeli impulse toward unilateral separation. The problem, of course, is that separation or disengagement is not a simple proposition, especially when it comes to the West Bank. Unlike the situation with Gaza, where the distances from major Israeli cities were significant, in the West Bank, proximity will breed Israeli security concerns. For example, can Israel count on short-range Qassam rockets not being fired from the West Bank at Israeli cities and communities after Israel disengages? Even if Israel takes the painful step of evacuating settlements from a significant part of the West Bank, will it feel the need to preserve a military presence to prevent the firing of rockets? Will it also feel compelled to control access into the West Bank to prevent smuggling of more dangerous weapons into the territory? If so, to what extent will these requirements limit the practical and political impact of disengagement?

Even though no simple answers exist to these questions, the Israelis are likely in time to proceed with separation as a strategic option, given their widespread popular desire to address the growing demographic challenge to Israel's character as a Jewish democratic state posed by continued control over the Palestinian population of the West Bank. A large majority of Israelis want to define their borders and the country's future without letting either be held hostage to Palestinian dysfunction or outright rejection.

Hamas's Dilemma

Although, given its rejection of Israel, Hamas's instinct may be to avoid any cooperation with it, Hamas will find that governing presents dilemmas. As much as

Hamas may not want to deal with Israel, the reality of the situation is that Israel supplies much of the Palestinian electricity and water and collects taxes and customs revenues that have provided much of the money for meeting the costs of the Palestinian administration. And outside of the Rafah passage to Egypt, Israel controls access into and out of Palestinian areas.

Hamas must face one other reality when in power: It ran on a platform of reform and change. To the extent that Palestinians voted for those twin concepts, their presumption is that their quality of life would improve under a Hamas government. But life is unlikely to improve unless Hamas has the quiet it needs to reconstruct society. From dealing with chronic corruption and lawlessness to providing social services, to developing an economy that offers jobs and promise for the future, Hamas needs calm, not confrontation with Israel. When Hamas leaders, including Mahmoud al-Zahar and Ismail Haniyeh declare that Hamas will create a new social policy, a new health policy, and a new economic and industrial policy, they raise expectations. Can they deliver on those expectations if they are at war with Israel?

The irony is that Hamas needs quiet for the near term in order to cement its political victory at the polls with popular success in government. On the one hand, Hamas's external leaders, like Khaled Mashal and Mousa Abu Marzouk in Damascus, will push for a return to violence soon, especially with their backers in Iran urging this action and perhaps tying increased funding to it. On the other hand, internal leaders like Zahar and Haniyeh, who live in Gaza and have to deal with the daily realities of life, may have different priorities. They will be no different than the external leaders in their rejection of Israel, but they may seek at least an indirect dialogue with the Israelis on preserving calm. As Zahar has already said, "If Israel has anything to bring the Palestinian people, we will consider this. But we are not going to give anything for free."

The Israeli position and that of the United States and the international community should be a mirror of that posture: Hamas gets nothing for free. Hamas should be forced to prove it has changed fundamental aspects of its policy at a time when its leaders will go

to great lengths to avoid any such change. Hamas may want quiet for its own needs, but it will try to trade calm for recognition from the outside and a de facto relationship with the Israelis.

Again, one other irony in the current situation is that both Hamas and Israel may see the utility of such a relationship. Israel gains calm and proceeds to complete the separation barrier. Hamas tolerates that situation so that it has the freedom to focus on internal reform and reconstruction. Although such a de facto arrangement sounds logical, it will only be sustainable if Hamas is, at the same time, actively preventing terror attacks by the Palestinian Islamic Jihad or the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades, stopping the smuggling of qualitatively new weapons into Gaza and the West Bank, and not building and amassing its own Qassam rockets and bombs.

Israel will not go along with a calm with Hamas that gives the latter all the benefits and yet requires nothing of it. Calm punctuated by acts of terror (or a buildup of capabilities for even greater acts of terror later on) will mean no calm to the Israelis, and they will act to preempt both the attacks and the buildup of the terror infrastructure. Whether one is talking about a de facto relationship that has functional value for both sides or broader policy changes that Hamas is asked to adopt, one can assume that Hamas will not only seek to do the minimum and gain the maximum, but also that it will offer clever formulations of moderation that suggest peaceful intent without actually committing the group to a change in its fundamental rejection of Israel's right to exist.

One of the greatest mistakes would be to set up a diplomacy that provides Hamas with a way to escape making choices. At some point, Israel may let some non-Hamas Palestinians act as a go-between to determine whether a de facto relationship is possible, but Israel's terms will be clear, particularly on security.

U.S. Responses and Options

Given Hamas's near-term priorities, the United States must be no less clear on what Hamas must do if a Hamas-run PA is to have a relationship with the international community. Hamas will seek to have it both

ways, wanting relations while avoiding any change in its fundamental strategy of rejection of Israel and support for violence. On this score, Washington needs to be vigilant: No half-measures or vague formulations should be acceptable. Hamas must unconditionally recognize Israel's right to exist as a Jewish state, reject violence, end all acts of terror, and agree to disarm and dismantle its military/terrorist infrastructure; if the international community permits Hamas to escape accountability, its political doctrine acquires legitimacy, and the building blocks for coexistence will disappear.

Already, the United States has worked with the other members of the Quartet (the European Union, Russia, and the UN) to insist that Hamas "be committed to nonviolence, recognize Israel, and accept the previous agreements and commitments" like the Oslo agreements and the roadmap. That is a good starting point, but the central issue of conditioning assistance to the PA has essentially been deferred pending the selection of a new prime minister, the formation of a new cabinet, and their approval by the new, Hamas-dominated Palestinian Legislative Council (PLC).

The easy choice is the one in which Hamas officials become prime minister and fill out the cabinet positions. This choice is "easy" because if they do not meet Quartet conditions for a relationship—at a minimum, recognition of Israel and rejection of violence—the United States should be able to lead an international consensus to break ties and cut off assistance to the Hamas-led PA.

But Hamas is unlikely to make the choice easy. Hamas leaders are more likely to support candidates for prime minister and other cabinet posts who are not formally affiliated with Hamas. In this way, non-Hamas officials who ostensibly agree to Quartet conditions would be the public face of the PA, while Hamas pulls the political strings and shapes policy from the PLC—and, of course, preserves its purity and its attachment to its principles of rejection and violence. In this circumstance, one option for the United States would be to mobilize the international community to insist that relations with, and continuing assistance to, the PA will depend on the prime minister and his cabinet committing themselves to a platform that embodies internationally recognized principles of a two-state solution

and rejection of violence—and the PLC must vote to confirm the government on that basis.

To make this decision appear more Palestinian and less as an imposition from the outside, President Mahmoud Abbas could say that he will only appoint a prime minister who accepts his platform of recognition of Israel, rejection of violence, and adherence to all previous agreements made with Israel and endorsed by the international community. (In fact, as of this writing, that is what Abbas has publicly announced—going so far as to say in Cairo that Hamas must accept these conditions or he will not ask them to form a government.) One way or the other, Hamas must be put in a position in which it must acknowledge these conditions, directly with Abbas and also in the PLC when the prime minister and his cabinet are explicitly confirmed on this basis.

To be sure, Hamas may seek to limit the scope of the platform and make it more ambiguous. Such an approach would permit Abbas to claim that Hamas accepted his conditions and Hamas leaders to claim they did not change their posture on Israel. (For example, what if the platform makes a vague reference to Oslo and simply refers to acceptance of the principle of negotiations with Israel? Hamas might claim it has never opposed negotiations with Israel, particularly if designed to meet only Hamas objectives.)

No doubt, many in the international community will look for a face-saving way to permit relations and assistance to continue to flow to the PA without Hamas being forced to openly embrace the principles of peace and coexistence that it rejects. Already, Russian president Vladimir Putin has declared that aid to the Palestinians should not be cut off regardless of the Hamas position, and notwithstanding the Quartet statement, Russia has announced it will invite Hamas leaders to Moscow. Regardless of what the Russians say in the meeting, the meeting itself sends a message that the Russians, at least, will deal with a Hamas-led government. The Japanese, too, have reportedly conveyed to the Palestinians that they will not stop assistance in any circumstances.

For its part, the Bush administration should make it as hard as possible for Hamas to avoid choices and

hide behind fictions. Hamas must be seen as adjusting to the world and not the other way around. For those who believe that Hamas can be transformed, the only possibility will be for pressures from within it and from Fatah and independents to grow to the point where Hamas changes, splits, or discredits itself before the Palestinian public. Only clear and consistent conditions imposed from the outside, specifying what Hamas must do, have any chance of building the necessary pressures from the inside.

Here again, much may depend on whether a Palestinian alternative to Hamas exists that preserves pressure on it. Today, such pressure exists, insofar as the president of the PA has considerable power both to initiate and to block actions. The administration has called on Abbas to stay on. So far, he has resisted any deal-making with Hamas leaders and has been clear on what Hamas must do to form the government. In the transitional period before Hamas forms a government, when Abbas remains the undisputed source of authority in the PA, the international community should work with him to find ways of providing financial assistance to him, with appropriate safeguards and auditing procedures to ensure transparency on how the money will be spent. One other condition for donors providing money directly to Abbas must be the creation of implementing structures within the office of the presidency to carry out his decisions.

To date, Abbas has not distinguished himself by making decisions. But now with his strategy of co-optation of Hamas having failed, perhaps he will be more demanding. He has already been more assertive with the security forces, emphasizing that he is commander in chief and that they will take orders from him and not Hamas. If the United States and others want him to play that role, they must be prepared to support him practically and not just rhetorically. They must find ways to meet his needs—where necessary, financially—and also enable him to show he is delivering for the Palestinian people in contrast with Hamas, which can only produce isolation of the Palestinians.

Such support for Abbas, however, must be tightly conditioned on his sticking to the demands he makes of Hamas, on his following through on the decisions

he makes, and on his not becoming a front for Hamas. The worst possible outcome now would be for Hamas to have a veneer of legitimacy that allows it to avoid choice and preserve its doctrine so that, as Mahmoud al-Zahar has said, Hamas precepts are taught in the schools, permeate every ministry, and shape the public Palestinian discourse.

So what must the Bush administration do now? First, its policy should be to work intensively to maintain a common front on the international and regional scene to require Hamas or a Hamas-led PA to meet clear conditions for any contact, relationship, or assistance. Given the Russian defection on meeting Hamas, the administration must redouble its efforts to hold the line internationally—and make clear to the Russians that if they want to remain a member of the Quartet, they will stick to the policy adopted by it. Second, Washington should make sure that the Saudis and other Gulf states maintain strict controls on charities and nongovernmental organizations to prevent so-called private monies and unofficial finan-

cial assistance from flowing to Hamas, and, thereby, enabling it to guide the PA and its functioning without transforming its posture. Third, the Bush administration should coordinate closely with the Egyptians and Jordanians to ensure that they reinforce Abbas's demands on Hamas and also reinforce our messages to the Gulf states on the consequences of providing even indirect financial assistance to Hamas. Fourth, the administration should assertively support liberal or moderate Palestinian groups as alternatives to Hamas to show a readiness exists to engage and help Palestinians who believe in coexistence and nonviolence. Finally, if Israel, in time, proceeds with separation, the United States needs to be clear that it will back Israel's needs if Hamas has made meaningful negotiations impossible.

Ultimately, if any hope is to exist for the Israelis and Palestinians in the future, U.S. policy must be guided by the principle that either Hamas must fundamentally transform itself and its program or we will do all we can to isolate it and ensure it fails.