

The Palestinians' Spoiler

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Advocates for engaging Hamas often argue that if the group is given a stake in the creation of an independent Palestine by being included in peace negotiations, it will moderate its positions. This co-optation argument is based on the misguided assumption that Hamas is a pragmatic nationalistic movement, motivated primarily by calculations of how to gain power.

However, Hamas is ideologically motivated, and misunderstanding its worldview is damaging. The growing Islamification of Gaza is only one example of Hamas's persistent allegiance to its ideological underpinnings, which it has shown no signs of abandoning. Hamas's ideology is rooted in the philosophy of its parent movement, the Muslim Brotherhood.

Hamas's actions must be understood in the proper context. Its lauded cease-fires with Israel are not a sign of political moderation, but rather calculated moves of self-interest. It has been deterred since the Gaza conflict. As recently as April 2008, Hamas's top official, Khaled Meshal, articulated Hamas's approach when he expressed his opinion about a temporary truce, or tahadiyeh, saying, "Hamas and the other resistance factions will use the tahadiyeh to grow stronger both in terms of weapons and training, and so the people will recover and prepare for the next round of resistance."

Moreover, Hamas feigns compromise on peace while maintaining its ideological consistency. Hamas has been given a great deal of credit -- by former U.S. president Jimmy Carter, among others -- for its promises to accept a final-status decision as long as the Palestinian people express support in a referendum. After meeting with Hamas leaders, including Meshal, in Damascus last year, Carter returned to Jerusalem touting a breakthrough. Meshal, however, publicly contradicted Carter within a few hours -- making clear that a referendum on peace must include all Palestinians in the world, not just those living in the West Bank and Gaza. This unworkable proposition was coupled with his other condition that he knows Israel cannot accept -- all Palestinians worldwide will retain their "full right of return" to Israel. Palestinian Authority Foreign Minister Riad Malki summed up the situation saying, "Hamas offered nothing to President Carter."

Moreover, Hamas has persistently refused to accede to the consistent demand of Egyptian intelligence head Gen. Omar Suleiman that it adhere to past Israeli-Palestinian agreements.

Clearly, Hamas's ideological rigidity greatly outweighs its pragmatism and political flexibility. If Hamas is included without committing, however grudgingly, to the cause of coexistence, it is unlikely to make the subsequent hard choices required by negotiations. In short, Hamas is poised to play the role of spoiler from the inside and not just from the outside.

This is not just due to its positions on peace and institution-building, but also its contemptuous attitude toward unity with Fatah. Hamas views Fatah's progress with disdain and wants to undermine U.S.-led efforts to train and equip the Palestinian Security Services. The U.S. has aided the Palestinian Authority (PA) in professionalizing its security force. Along with Israel, the PA has brought calm to Palestinian cities marred by chaos and drastically reduced the number of Israelis killed in attacks originating in the West Bank, from 410 several years ago to one this year. Hamas has vowed to remove the current PA government, which international bodies estimate is achieving 7 percent economic growth. In short, the steep price of internal Palestinian political cohesion is likely to be the crippling of nascent Palestinian institutions, as well as those boldly proposed by PA Prime Minister Salam Fayyad.

Furthermore, unconditional engagement with Hamas bears a key risk. If Hamas is engaged without having modified its program, Palestinians who stuck out their necks for a two-state solution would be branded as quislings. Hamas would be rewarded, and Abbas would be crushed. Bringing in Hamas will not give peace a chance; it will likely undo and discredit peacemaking and set a dangerous precedent for the entire region.

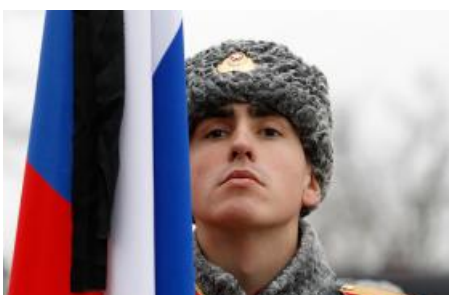
Yet keeping Hamas outside of negotiations requires a serious attempt to provide an alternative. This can be best accomplished by ensuring that its more moderate competitors actually do deliver. To build hope and a sense of possibility -- which is the antidote to the frustration and hopelessness that Hamas exploits -- there must be a peace process that has real promise. Moreover, there must be a day-to-day reality that reflects concrete positive changes. There is presently some evidence of this change, as Hamas is steadily losing public support. Even the slight spike in support for Hamas after the Gaza war has proved ephemeral. Rather, Hamas's decline has been unmistakable. Surveys conducted by the Palestinian Center for Policy and Survey Research, led by Khalil Shikaki, found that current Palestinian support for Hamas stands at 28 percent, compared to 44 percent for Fatah. In fact, Hamas has not polled better than Fatah since June 2006.

Ultimately, successful engagement must be predicated upon common interests and goals. Therefore, empowering the PA -- and not engaging Hamas -- should remain at the heart of a U.S.-led Israeli-Palestinian strategy.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65) (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65>). ♦

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