

Dealing with Hamas: Future Pathways for Britain

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On March 3, 2009, Matthew Levitt addressed the Quilliam Foundation in London, England, regarding Hamas and other related topics. The following is an edited version of what was said

The new Obama administration has placed a renewed focus on trying to move forward the Israeli-Palestinian negotiation process. The biggest problem is the nature of Hamas and its control of Gaza. I believe Hamas is part of the problem, not part of the solution.

Should we engage with or recognize Hamas?

The three wings of Hamas are not disparate. Hence we don't just have the problem of having Hamas continuing to engage in violence, but also that they have not decided who they want to be: Do they want to be an Islamist political party that pursues its goals through legitimate political means or do they want to be a group engaged in terrorism and political violence while also pursuing their goals through political activity? Moreover, does it want to be a political party responsible for and to its constituency or a social movement responsible only to its members?

There is a huge cost in allowing parties that use violence to engage in the political process at the same time. We need to make demands of them if they are to be accepted by the international community. The US made a colossal error in encouraging political elections that involved Hamas before there was proper civil society set up in the territories. Civil society, not elections, is the bedrock of democracy.

The other issue, which is more fundamental, is that Hamas is expressly against a two-state solution. FBI material used in Holy Land Foundation trial in the U.S. demonstrated that Hamas was in fact very disturbed at the prospect of a two state solution.

Perhaps most disturbing is not Hamas' acts of violence targeting civilians, but their strategic and successful radicalization of Palestinian society. They are engaged in a broad-based radicalization campaign that seeks to shift the Israeli-Palestinian conflict away from an ethno-nationalist conflict over how to compromise over disputed land, to one based on demonization of the "other" and mutually exclusive religious principles. To the extent Hamas succeeds in this radicalization, peace-making becomes infinitely more difficult.

Hamas is part of the problem because of its commitment to violence and an extremist ideology that refuses to accept the "other" and rejects a two-state solution. That said, the problem is with Hamas, not with religiously observant or

even conservative Palestinians. Indeed, Hamas is not monolithic; there are splits and fissures within the movement which should be exploited. For example, in 2003 Hamas leaders in the Gaza Strip debated whether or not to 'go Muslim Brotherhood' -- that is, to cease engaging (overtly at least) in violence and to become more of an Islamist party. This debate was shouted down quite vociferously, but even the fact that they did have this debate is telling.

The difference between the moderates and extremists in Hamas is really one over tactical flexibility rather than strategic change. In the immediate we have a big problem not just because Hamas is in control of Gaza, but because it is the most extreme and militaristic part of Hamas that is in control of Gaza. In the wake of shura council elections in Gaza last summer, for example, the relative moderates within Hamas were pushed out by people affiliated with or members of the Qassam brigades in Gaza, reportedly including Brigades chief Ahmed Jabari.

The international community just held an aid conference in Sham al-Sheikh, but no one has any practical ideas about how to get this money effectively to those people in Gaza who desperately need it without empowering Hamas. Having taken over the Gaza Strip by force, turned its weapons against fellow Palestinians, and illicitly smuggled into Gaza not food and medical supplies but some 100 tons of weapons, Hamas has proved itself an unworthy and untrustworthy partner.

The answer is not to reward Hamas' shelling of Israeli civilian population centres with political dividends. Instead, choices have to be forced upon Hamas. It has to choose between being a movement or a political party, committed to the movement's best interests or bound to the interests of its purported constituency, respectively. It has to choose whether to insist on the trappings of legitimacy as a movement by refusing to agree to the 2005 international agreement by which border crossings could be opened immediately so long as Hamas does not control them. It must choose whether it will only allow international aid to enter Gaza if it controls such aid or if it will enable the international community to engage in independent reconstruction of Gaza. More generally, Hamas has to decide who is going to make the choices in Gaza: the duly elected members, or those harder-line members in Damascus who today are responsible for Egyptian-mediated negotiations.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict needs the full commitment and attention of the international community and needs to be solved for all the right reasons: Palestinians deserve a sovereign state and Israelis deserve security. But we cannot pretend that realities on the ground are not there. Where we have failed to achieve realistically achievable goals is in making the West Bank more of a success, even if this is just on the economic front for now. We need to demonstrate in the West Bank that peace can bring dividends and that prosperity and hope are immediate not long-term goals. Economic development in the West Bank might be the only area of convergence with Hamas in control in Gaza.

The Q&A Session

There are increasing calls to recognize Hamas. What implications do you think that this has for the legitimacy of the PLO?

It cuts them off at the knees -- and more than that. We are not legitimizing Iran by gracing them with our presence, but this is not the case with Hamas. We give Hamas tremendous legitimacy even when individual parliamentary members meet members of the group in their individual capacities. All relations provide Hamas with further legitimacy, which comes at the expense of Palestinian moderates.

There are a whole range of Muslim organizations -- including zakat committees -- who are being systematically closed down. These organizations were aimed at providing social welfare when the PA was totally corrupt. Instead, we now have a destroyed social welfare network.

For all of us who care about getting aid to the Palestinians, such aid needs to be provided through organizations that are completely disassociated from violence. Not all zakat (charity) committees in the West Bank and Gaza are tainted

by ties to militants and violence, but those that are should not be considered viable partners for the disbursement of aid and development funds. It is critical that aid be provided to needy Palestinians, and no less critical that it not be delivered through entities that not only provide aid (often earmarked to members of their own groups, like Hamas) but also engage in less charitable and more violent activities as well.

Any Israeli government must have a strong partner if they are to achieve a two-state solution. Fatah is a weak partner and Hamas, whether you like it or not, is a strong one. Rather than wish Hamas away, we should encourage unity talks again between Hamas and Fatah so that we have a broad-based Palestinian movement to deal with. You said Hamas is not the solution, it's the problem. But if that is the case, how do you intend on getting rid of them?

I think there is more convergence here than you assume. There are plenty of ways to engage parties without doing so directly. The Israelis have been communicating with Hamas through the Egyptians for some time now. But we don't need to legitimise them by making them fully acceptable partners in the international system without their having to live up to acceptable standards. This is a choice Hamas has to make.

Do they need to meet all three conditions -- the Quartet principles?

There are a lot of ways Hamas could fudge either recognizing Israel or past agreements. It says a lot about Hamas that they are not willing to do that. There are ways that they could easily save face and but Hamas' refusal to do so speaks volumes about its commitment to violence and its opposition to a two-state solution.

But they did fudge around them, that is the point.

What happened in Mecca was not negotiated with the Quartet, it was between Fatah and Hamas and so they did not even need to fudge around the Quarter principles.

They moved towards meeting all three conditions, even on violence. And we cannot just wish Hamas away.

I would question that, especially on the violence point -- note the events of June 2007 when Hamas turned its guns on fellow Palestinians and took over the Gaza Strip by force. Note also Hamas' continued weapons smuggling throughout this period. Hamas continuing to engage in acts of violence, no words can hide that. But you asked a second important question -- how to get rid of Hamas. You're right -- you can't wish them away. There are solutions, more so for Hamas than Hezbollah. You get rid of Hamas by out-doing them at their own game: competing with Hamas's social welfare infrastructure by empowering the moderates to do so. It's not so much that Hamas won the January 2006 elections but that Fatah lost them; they won by default because Fatah were busy tearing themselves apart internally and fielding multiple candidates who diluted the Fatah vote. Instead of embracing Hamas- even as it embraces violence- we should work to reform and promote democratic alternatives.

What would constitute an acceptable renunciation of the violence? Were Hamas to agree to a hudna, but the violence continued by an element that broke with Hamas, would that be sufficient?

This is an unanswered question because to date the myth that the political, charitable and military wings of Hamas are disparate is just that, a myth. What would happen if, theoretically, Hamas as an organization truly ceased engaging in violence? First, that would have to be verifiable and believable. Then, if Hamas remained in control of territory, consideration would have to be given to whether Hamas was supporting or allowing others to carry out attacks from territory under its control and responsibility. But again, this is all hypothetical given that Hamas clearly remains committed to violence targeting Israelis and even fellow Palestinians. Hamas continues to hold an Israeli hostage; continues to fire rockets at Israeli civilian population centres within Israel proper; and continues to smuggle weapons into Gaza.

Do you really believe that Palestinian unity is possible?

This is a very serious question, given Hamas attacks -- some particularly heinous -- against fellow Palestinians. The

West may desire a unity government as a means of moving forward, but there is a very deep fissure within Palestinian society now. It very much depends on who is in charge. A national unity is not necessarily going to be easily achievable, however logical it may seem to some- or even desirable -- if it empowers Hamas without Hamas having to renounce violence. In any event, it behoves reminding that it was Hamas that walked away from the Egyptian facilitated national reconciliation negotiations between Hamas and Fatah in December, and Hamas that refused to renew the ceasefire with Israel later that month.

There is much talk about the only solution for a national unity government being a technocratic government. What do you think the probability of this is, and how it would happen?

There have been, in the past, members of PA governments who were Hamas in all but name, mostly technocrats. That might be a way to bridge some of this divide, but even some of the technocrats are among those who are deeply scarred by recent violence.

You alluded to a change in leadership being central for the PA and Fatah in order to achieve some sort of unity with Hamas. Is this you subtly referring to Marwan Barguti's release?

I am not making allusions to any one leader or another. I imagine Marwan Barguti may well be released at some point. However, members of his inner circle often make it clear that he is a Palestinian leader and that just because he is not an Islamist and doesn't like Hamas does not mean he should be expected to take on Hamas. More generally, I do not know of any one individual who would be a panacea to the crisis of Palestinian leadership.

How do you get around the fact that you cannot deliver unless you have control on the ground and that Hamas controls Gaza today? You cannot do so without a lot of soldiers -- and we have seen that this doesn't work.

When I speak about beating Hamas at its own game and facilitating the provision of much-needed social-welfare and charity support by moderates, not Hamas, I am talking about doing so today in the West Bank. Unfortunately you are correct, Hamas controls the ground in Gaza. The newly trained Palestinian battalions now being deployed in the West Bank -- those already there and those soon to be deployed on completion of their training -- should suffice. Indeed, they have already instituted significant law and order on the streets of the West Bank.

You touch on the fact that Hamas is a religious as well as a political movement. Isn't that a huge source of strength for its support base in Western Europe? Won't this make it even more difficult to compete with it?

It certainly makes it more difficult to deal with Hamas, because it moves things beyond politics and gives Hamas additional legitimacy and the means to radicalize society. But I would hope that most of the money collected here in the West would not end up in Hamas' coffers because a lot of strictures have been put in place to prevent international aid -- which is inherently fungible -- from being diverted by groups like Hamas.

You seem confident that the Obama administration will hold a specific line of non-negotiation with Hamas, but there are important people within it who seem to take a very different view. Will there not be a shift?

I think that there is certainly going to be a greater push to meet with Hamas, if not to recognize them, by some academics and journalists in particular. I find it highly unlikely the Obama administration will go down that route and think it would be very unwise to do so. It is interesting, however, to see what fissures exist within Hamas that could be extrapolated. I do think that we are not going to see as hard-line rhetoric coming from the Obama administration, and this is not just a semantic difference. The US is going to demonstrate -- in deeds, not only in words -- that it absolutely cares about resolving this conflict. Moreover, it will articulate its desire to resolve this conflict for all the right reasons: not just out of its own self-interest, like removing a powerful propaganda tool from al Qaeda and other global jihadist groups, but because Israelis and Palestinians deserve to live in peace, side by side, in secure and sovereign states. Perhaps most important, I think this administration will continue to pursue Israeli-

Palestinian peace even if circumstances make that difficult. There is not going to be the type of overt outreach to Hamas that there will be with Syria and likely with Iran as well, but this does not mean there will not be the effort to reach out through third parties. We need to think creatively to resolve a very difficult problem. This administration is going to try and push things forward in ways that we have not seen over the past few years, but it will do so primarily by leveling the playing field by boosting and prioritizing support for an array of moderate groups. ❖

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