

The False Hope of Embracing Hamas

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Articles & Testimony

Jimmy Carter's embrace of the radical Palestinian Islamist movement Hamas -- he actually hugged a senior Hamas official this week -- means that Ramsey Clark may finally get a run for his money as America's most embarrassing ex-somebody.

But no one should take the former president's freelance diplomacy lightly. Far more sober foreign policy experts than Carter have urged an end to Hamas' isolation. Carter's outreach to Hamas -- on Friday he also met Damascus-based leader Khaled Meshaal -- could represent just the first ripple of a tidal wave of dangerous and desperate initiatives designed to "save" the Middle East peace process.

Most advocates of engagement with Hamas fall into two camps. The first sees engagement as a way to strengthen Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas and thereby advance Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. A Palestinian "house divided" will never be strong enough to make peace with Israel, this argument goes, and diplomatic progress therefore requires reconciling Hamas and its bitter rival, Abbas' Fatah.

The second camp is more direct. Engaging Hamas reflects the reality of Hamas' power, popularity and ability to undermine any diplomacy in which it is not accorded its rightful role. Peacemakers should talk directly with Hamas, this argument goes, because the Islamist movement -- not Abbas -- is the most important player in Palestinian politics.

The first argument is illogical. No Hamas leader has ever endorsed a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so embracing Hamas can never advance the prospects of such a solution. At the same time, it is unfair and patronizing to suggest that Palestinians must be unified to achieve diplomatic progress. After all, the world routinely expects Israel to make national decisions by the narrowest of margins, such as the 61-59 Knesset vote on a key 1995 peace accord. For the Israelis, the key ingredient is not unity; it is leadership. Why are the Palestinians any different?

The second argument may be more candid about Hamas' power, but it's also sadly defeatist. Advocates of this school seem to forget that we have seen this movie before, with Yasser Arafat in the starring role.

In 1975, the Ford administration defined conditions that Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization would have to meet in order to merit dialogue with the U.S. government, including renouncing terrorism and recognizing Israel's right to exist. Despite pleas from around the world to soften these terms, successive presidents -- including Carter -- held fast. After 13 years, the strategy worked; Arafat uttered the magic formula and the Reagan administration, in its waning days, opened a dialogue with the PLO. Carter's trip strengthens those who are urging Washington to ease its conditions for dialogue after just two years of effort.

The difference between the internal PLO debate two decades ago and the debate inside Hamas today is critical. For the PLO, the historic divide was between advocates of a phased plan to destroy Israel and those willing to accept an independent Palestine next to Israel. The idea of talking peace only ever made sense with the latter.

Hamas, by contrast, has no advocates of peace with Israel. The divide is between those who call for a tahdiya (a brief lull in the fighting) and those who favor a hudna (a longer-term armistice). Neither approximates peace with Israel.

Against this backdrop, it would be folly for the U.S. government to demand less of Hamas today than it asked of the PLO 20 years ago. Engaging Hamas also would knock the wind out of Abbas' administration, essentially throwing the Palestinians to the wolves of Hamas. Those who advocate this approach must somehow believe that Hamas is willing to be complicit in its own demise.

Unsatisfying as it may be, the right course for U.S. policymakers is to persist in the strategy adopted after Hamas' Gaza putsch last summer: Invest in economic and political success in the West Bank and further isolate Hamas in Gaza. The goal is to give Palestinians a clear choice: a chance for peace and prosperity, or a certainty of penury and bloodshed. So far, the strategy has not borne results -- but it hasn't been given the time and attention it needs to work.

The Bush administration's last-ditch effort to promote an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement is, at best, a great gamble and, at worst, a costly distraction. Instead of fulfilling promises to build the Palestinian economy, civic institutions and a functional security structure, President Bush changed gears and is now pushing for a breakthrough by the end of his term. This dilution of U.S. effort will likely mean that nothing is achieved -- neither diplomatic success nor progress on the ground.

The irony is that Carter and Bush, who are different in so many ways, seem to have forgotten the most important lesson of 35 years of U.S.-led peacemaking in the Middle East: The road to a secure peace has no shortcuts.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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