

It's Up to Hamas Now

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Hamas will be more decisive than any other actor -- including the United States -- in determining whether it is isolated or not. The militant movement must now decide whether it will govern responsibly or remain mired in violence.

Some of those who criticized the United States and the European Union for imposing sanctions against the Palestinian Authority upon Hamas's ascent to power last year are now criticizing the lifting of those same sanctions in the West Bank, claiming that the international community is embarking on a "feed West Bank, starve Gaza" approach at the very time that it should be giving Hamas incentives.

The problem, however, is not the lack of incentives, but political resolve on the side of Hamas. To appease Hamas now would be wrong and counterproductive. First, it would be wrong given what Hamas has just done. It staged nothing less than a coup last week. Hamas gunmen ransacked many Palestinian institutions in Gaza, took over crossing points, seized Palestine television, fired into hospitals, summarily executed some of their rivals and even pushed some people out of windows.

Their actions led the Palestinian president, Mahmoud Abbas, to form a new government; Egypt, Jordan, the European Union and the United States have all thrown their backing behind him. It is Hamas that should be blamed for fracturing Palestinian nationalist aspirations.

Second, it would be counterproductive because it would undercut moderates. Why would Fatah support a two-state solution and incur domestic Palestinian wrath if a group that perpetrates terror attacks and received aid from Iran was being treated as a legitimate interlocutor?

Third, Hamas knows that the whole idea of "starving Gaza" is false. In a recent speech in Washington, the Palestinian

Authority Finance Minister (and now Prime Minister) Salaam Fayyad said more money from abroad in public and private donations arrived in 2006 than in any of the previous three years. A variety of actors, including Israel, have made clear that aid will continue to flow into Gaza.

Fourth, Hamas has been given no shortage of incentives up till now, all to no avail.

Hamas knows that if it enforced a cease-fire in Gaza, Israel would treat it differently. But the movement has shown no interest in making the transition from revolution to nation-building. In the whole time it has shared power with Fatah, Hamas has not lifted a finger to halt the more than 1,000 Qassam rockets fired from Gaza into Israel.

Now that Hamas controls Gaza without Abbas, it has to decide whether it continues the way of the past or not.

Hamas leaders are secure in the knowledge that no one is likely to wrest Gaza away from them. No international force would want to go into the Gaza Strip and face the 40 separate militias Hamas commands. And Israel, while it may continue retaliatory strikes against the rocket attacks, is not likely to re-enter Gaza indefinitely after pulling out only two years ago.

But there is also the fact that Hamas is dependent on Israel for export access, as well as electricity and water. Gaza's borders are controlled either by Israel and Egypt. As Hamas seeks to consolidate its authority in Gaza, the issue of access will remain paramount. How this control is used will depend on how Hamas now acts.

That choice is up to Hamas, not Washington.

David Makovsky is director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. ❖

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