

The Specter of 'Hamastan':

More Must Be Done to Counter Islamist Gains in Gaza

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Articles & Testimony

In several days of discussions in Jerusalem and Ramallah recently, I was struck by the nature of the debate I witnessed in both places. To my surprise, it wasn't about the stalemate in the peace process or the Arab peace initiative. It was about the conflict between Palestinian organizations in Gaza -- Hamas vs. Fatah -- and whether Gaza was in fact already lost to the Islamists. Both Israelis and Palestinians were wondering about the consequences of Gaza's becoming, in their word, "Hamastan."

Not all felt Gaza was lost. Some said Israel should let weapons and ammunition get to Fatah forces in Gaza to battle Hamas. I also heard from Palestinians and Israelis alike that Egypt could do much more to prevent Hamas from receiving smuggled arms and money through the Sinai tunnels running into Gaza.

But for every Palestinian and Israeli who argued for arming Fatah, I heard a contrary point of view that at this point it might not make any difference. The consensus was that Hamas had made a deliberate calculation to attack all key security positions held by Fatah in Gaza and that the Fatah forces now had few, if any, senior commanders still in that area.

All those I spoke with were worried about the consequences of Gaza's becoming an Islamist enclave. They saw it offering inspiration to other Islamists throughout the Middle East and providing a new haven for Islamists of all stripes. They feared it would spell the end of even the possibility of a two-state solution. Most were convinced Hamas would never accept peace with Israel.

Interestingly, there was consensus among Israelis and Palestinians on the dangers of Gaza's becoming a failed state. No one thought it would be easy to isolate and contain -- or had any clear ideas on how to respond to such a development. Israelis voiced no desire to go back into a densely populated place where nearly everyone has weapons and Israel would face, as one person told me, "our own Baghdad." But few Israelis felt they could tolerate continued rocket fire out of Gaza. Their conclusion: If Egypt does not act more decisively, Israel may have to occupy the area near the Egyptian border to stop the smuggling of larger and more effective weapons.

As for Palestinians, the most striking conclusion was that it was essential that Hamas not succeed in the West Bank

the way it is succeeding in Gaza. Fear is a great motivator, perhaps enough to overcome the personal rivalries that have hobbled Fatah in its competition with Hamas. I certainly found a new readiness among the young guard of Fatah (and the activists who represent Fatah's third and fourth generations) to organize themselves at the grass roots and rebrand Fatah. They know they lost the elections because of their divisions, the corruption of the old guard and their inability to respond to the needs of the Palestinian public. I saw a new awareness that Fatah must offer services and programs, not just words, if it is to preserve its hold on the West Bank.

Among some I heard an interesting proposal: Let's make the West Bank work -- socially, economically and institutionally -- then hold up our model of success in contrast to the failure of Gaza, where functional unemployment is close to 70 percent. Let Hamas preside over a dysfunctional, lawless state. We will build our own. Let's create understandings with Jordan and Israel for at least economic confederation and security. And if Hamas still hangs on in Gaza, perhaps there can be a "three-state solution."

Sounds good in theory, but I doubt it would work. No matter how sensible confederation between the Palestinian state and Jordan might be, at least economically, a failed state in Gaza would be a constant source of instability. Israel wouldn't find it easy to occupy just a narrow strip of territory to stop smuggling. The Israeli presence would invite an insurgency much like the one Israel faced in southern Lebanon. No alternative international force is likely to be vigilant or serious enough to do an effective job -- just look at Lebanon.

Moreover, while West Bank and Gaza Palestinians have much that divides them, they still have a common identity as Palestinians; the creation of a Palestinian state without Gaza would be an endless source of grievance and irredentism.

So what is to be done? If a failed state in Gaza is not acceptable, more has to be done now to prevent it. Egypt, while it has made commitments to stop the smuggling, does not see the situation as a national security threat. We will need to put a spotlight on this to change the Egyptian calculus and, at a minimum, to move Egypt to stop Hamas from accumulating more weaponry and money. If Fatah does have a plan for bolstering its forces in Gaza, it is worth supporting it by coordinating with the Israelis and Egyptians -- not to produce a bloodbath in Gaza but to deter Hamas from seeking to impose itself there.

The logic of having donors (public and private) working with Fatah where it seeks to rebrand itself makes sense for the West Bank and Gaza. What Hamas has done in Gaza has provided a wake-up call for Fatah and Palestinian independents. They now know they have to compete socially, economically and politically. They need help to do so. It is time we, the other donors and the Saudis and the Gulf states woke up to the reality that if we don't help remake Fatah, we may face a future in which Islamists control the Palestinian issue and neither a two-state nor a three-state solution will be in the cards.

The writer was director for policy planning in the State Department under President George H.W. Bush and special Middle East coordinator under President Bill Clinton. He is counselor of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. His new book is *Statecraft: And How to Restore America's Standing in the World*. ❖

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