

As Islamists Grow Confident, It's Time for the West To Stand Firm

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Articles & Testimony

I recently returned from a trip to Europe, where I observed a troubling analytical failure: the widespread refusal to consider Hamas's January electoral victory beyond the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In reality, Hamas's rise to power has global ramifications. It opens a new front for radical Islamism in its confrontation with the West and provides encouragement to Islamists worldwide. But don't just take my word for it—ask Hamas's chief.

In a February 3 speech from a Damascus mosque—an address generally regarded as Hamas's victory pronouncement—Hamas leader Khaled Mashal declared: “We say to this West, which does not act reasonably, and does not learn its lessons: By Allah, you will be defeated. . . . The nation of Muhammad is gaining victory in Iraq, and it will be victorious in all Arab and Muslim lands. . . . These fools will be defeated, the wheel of time will turn, and times of victory and glory will be upon our nation, and the West will be full of remorse, when it is too late.”

Mashal's statement was significant for two reasons: First, with unnerving clarity, Mashal redefined Hamas's ambitions—from the goal of destroying Israel to the much broader goal of defeating the West. Second, in brazenly challenging the West, which previous Hamas leaders—for tactical reasons—avoided doing, Mashal revealed the growing confidence of Islamists in pursuing more ambitious and previously unmentionable goals.

Hamas's electoral victory is only the latest in a series of strategic successes that have given radical Islamists every reason to believe that God is on their side. This confidence was, for decades, established on the basis of Iranian achievements, including the founding of the revolutionary regime, the export of the Islamic revolution to Lebanon via Hezbollah, and the creation of a front against the West, in partnership with Syria and other radical elements. In the past decade, however, this confidence has grown exponentially on account of the successes of other Islamist actors, including international terrorist attacks carried out by al-Qaeda and its supporters in the United States, Spain and Britain; the insurgency's perceived victories against coalition forces in Iraq; Muslim Brotherhood electoral successes in Egypt, and Hezbollah's attainment of a Cabinet seat in Lebanon.

This increased confidence has inspired the Islamists' advance against Western interests throughout the Middle East. In the past half year alone, these maneuvers have been particularly bold. In January, Iran publicly cut the seals on its nuclear plants in outright violation of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. In April, Hizballah's Sheik Hassan Nasrallah admitted that his organization funds Palestinian terrorist organizations—in striking contrast to the group's previous denials. Last month, Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad sent a bizarrely combative letter to President Bush, effectively highlighting his belief that the Iranian regime is working from a unique position of power. In recent weeks, Hamas has increasingly confronted the Western-backed Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, working to replace his security forces with Hamas operatives. Moreover, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, the leading terrorist in Iraq, recently declared that America “is breathing its final breath,” while Palestinian Prime Minister Ismail Haniyeh of Hamas branded the United States an “enemy of Islam.”

For its part, the West has failed to act effectively to stem the Islamists' growing confidence and, at times, has actually reinforced it. Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 was perceived as a victory for Hizballah. Spain's

withdrawal from Iraq after the 2004 Madrid train bombings was a clear concession to Islamist terrorism. More recently, Israel's unilateral withdrawal from Gaza was viewed as a victory for Palestinian terrorism, fueling Hamas's political aspirations. The West's lack of determination in confronting Iran on its support for terror and pursuit of nuclear weapons has, to a large extent, convinced Tehran that it can continue using terror and nuclear development to its strategic advantage.

It is therefore imperative that the West swiftly change course and adopt a more tough-minded, united approach toward the global jihad movement. Conceptually, the West should be wary of any diplomatic, economic or military move that might serve to reinforce the Islamists' notion that they are winning. In terms of policy, this means taking direct action in those areas where the West retains the upper hand: The current Hamas-led government must be made to fail, Hizballah should be disarmed in accordance with U.N. Resolution 1559 and the Iranian regime must be stopped in its pursuit of nuclear weapons and support for terrorist groups throughout the region. A unilateral Israeli withdrawal from the West Bank would undermine any attempt to confront the advance of the global jihad movement; to the contrary, it would encourage and energize radical Islamists worldwide.

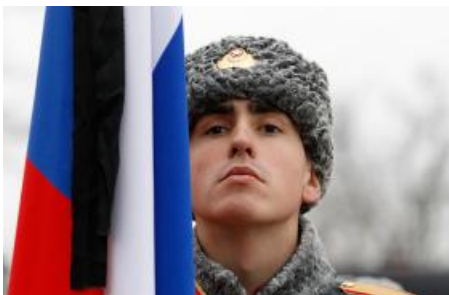
Strengthening Western resolve vis-à-vis radical Islamist actors, however, will only dampen their confidence in the short run. The long-term battle requires a sustained effort to win over the hearts and minds of the Islamists' constituents. For this reason, curricula throughout the Middle East—glorifying violence, denying the Holocaust, calling for the destruction of the State of Israel and vilifying the United States—must be carefully examined and revised. Furthermore, Western powers must work to promote moderate elements within Muslim society, including Iranian reformists, Palestinian liberals and Arab democrats. Lastly, there must be efforts to increase direct interactions between Westerners and Muslims; such opportunities would undermine Islamists' ability to portray the West as satanic.

Confronting the advance of radical Islamist elements requires, first and foremost, striking at the confidence that has motivated their progress. This requires uniting behind a policy that refuses further concessions to terrorism, acts aggressively against future transgressions and appropriately engages the next generation in the Muslim world.

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