

Blaming Hamas Sidesteps Regional Realities

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Articles & Testimony

The eventual bankruptcy under international boycott of the Palestinian Authority led by Hamas appears imminent. Since Hamas's sweeping victory in January, the US and the European Union have sought to put pressure on the movement to moderate or face international isolation by blocking all financial aid to pay for the Palestinian government's outstanding debts. But is the problem just one of how to deal with Hamas or is it more complex?

Shocked and angered by the ascent of the militant Islamist group, many in the west have evoked an all-too rosy picture of the past. They overlook the fact that although there have been opportunities to further the peace process in recent years (such as the election of Mahmoud Abbas and the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza), there has been very little tangible progress.

Three years after the "road map" was agreed to, even the first phase, which calls for "an unconditional cessation of violence and (the dismantling of) terrorist capabilities and infrastructure", has not been achieved. President Abbas has proved unable to control the militant groups, including his own Fatah party's armed wing, which was responsible for one of the recent suicide bombings.

Why has there been so little progress? For the answer, look not just to the Israelis and Palestinians, but to other governments in the region which have been neither receptive nor helpful to reaching a lasting peace. While the roles of the Middle East's two most radical regimes, Syria and Iran (the latter recently pledged Dollars 50m in aid to prop up the bankrupt Palestinian government) are usually at the centre of the debate, very little attention has been given to the policies of the "moderate" regional governments.

In this context, the US has been unable to convince the two countries considered its closest regional allies -- Egypt and Saudi Arabia -- to follow through with their commitments to the road map, apart from occasional assurances and rhetoric.

Since Saudi Arabia is committed to the Islamic political agenda, it should not surprise anyone that its pledges to the US contradict its real position regarding support for the Palestinian resistance and Hamas in particular. It has agreed to a large assistance package to the Palestinian Authority, which comes after the Arab League spearheaded the effort to unite the Arab world to fund Hamas under the banner of "saving the Palestinians".

Similarly, although Egypt signed the first peace accord with Israel and has played the role of mediator, its policy remains complex. Since a large part of the regime's legitimacy is based on its support of the Palestinian cause, it is fully dedicated to the "legitimate" national armed resistance. So, while the Muslim Brotherhood is banned in Egypt, the regime gave full political recognition to Hamas -- which is part of the Brotherhood's transnational network -- even before the Palestinian legislative elections were held.

Accordingly, the "Egyptian-led mediation" has always revolved around reaching a truce between Israelis and Palestinians -- which remained fragile -- or, more recently, betting on giving Hamas time in order to preserve the regional status quo. This position is reflected continuously through the single voice of the state-controlled press and

media which exclude any divergent views or opinions on this issue. Hosni Mubarak, the Egyptian president, recently admitted in an Arabic-language interview: "Egypt has never pushed Hamas to recognise Israel." In light of this, it cannot be said that Hamas contradicts the mainstream policies of Arab governments, either radical or moderate.

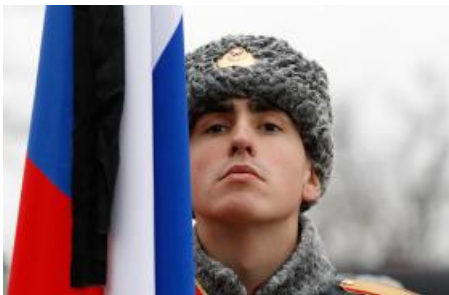
Ensuring peace requires more than tactical steps or occasional moderation by Arab governments that fail to bring freedom and peace to a region that is in dire need of both. The lack of reform in the Arab world has only fuelled the fire of the Islamists. At the present moment, even Hamas's defeat in government will not be the magic solution that brings peace.

Peace requires that a new culture of openness be nurtured and supported by moderate liberal orientations throughout the region. It requires moving further for constructive change and not settling for the false stability of the status quo. While it is easy to blame democracy for bringing Hamas to power and halting the so-called "road map to peace", it is hard to ignore the fact that the policy of "stability" over reform has failed to achieve any progress towards peace.

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