

Abort Hamas

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Articles & Testimony

The new government to be formed in Israel has one urgent task: to abort the government of Hamas. Not to rout it or overthrow it, but to act with determination to cause its paralysis; to make it obvious to every Palestinian, within a few months' time, that Ismail Haniyah and his ministers are unable to function, that their administration is ineffectual and impotent.

Having a defined goal of crippling the Hamas government will help foil the inevitable attempts by self-appointed "facilitators" to try to drag Israel into an indirect dialogue with Hamas and to weaken the siege that is now taking shape.

True, this strategy comes with a price. Hamas is already gleefully signaling, principally through its Lebanon representative Osama Hamdan, that in the event of its government's demise it will again resort to the terror weapon. In fact, Hamas is already busying itself with preparations for such an eventuality, and would certainly prefer to go to war than to give up power without a fight.

Still, there is no better option for Israel. It is best to confront Hamas sooner rather than later, before it consolidates its rule, instead of allowing it a period of grace that it would use to mobilize additional sectors of Palestinian society and penetrate the security apparatuses of the Palestinian Authority.

It should be noted that there is already a Fatah-led Palestinian cordon drawn around the Hamas government. This has taken the form of Fatah's refusal to join a coalition under Hamas's leadership, and the sequestering of whole chunks of administrative authority (such as the intelligence and general security branches, the management of the crossing points with Israel and the authority to hold negotiations) from the purview of the government to that of the PA chairman's office. In addition, senior figures, most prominent among them PA chief negotiator Sa'eb Erekat, are waging a vocal campaign against the Hamas government, branding it as the only Arab government that rejects UN Security Council resolutions pertaining to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as well as the road map, and highlighting its stubborn refusal to recognize the PLO as the "sole legitimate representative" of the Palestinian people.

Even the miserable Arab summit that took place in the Sudanese capital of Khartoum on March 28, the day of the Israeli elections, made sure to prevent the Hamas representatives from participating, on the grounds that Hamas even rejects the decisions of the Arab League regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

That constitutes a significant, if far from perfect, Palestinian blockade and a partial Arab one that also includes Saudi Arabia, at least for now. In addition, the United States and the EU are sticking to a clear boycott policy, about which Russia has reservations, but which it is not actively opposing. Now, everyone is waiting for Ehud Olmert.

As prime minister-designate, Olmert must formulate an Israeli position, translate it into daily steps and firm up a plan to address issues such as transferring aid to the Palestinians while bypassing Hamas; dealing routinely with economic and humanitarian problems without Hamas being able to claim credit for their resolution; and of especial importance, continuing the aggressive defense against terror and expanding preventive operations not only against Islamic Jihad, but also against the infrastructure of Hamas's military wing, the Izz al-Din al-Qassam Brigades.

If Israel's new government begins to stutter, everyone will start stuttering abroad. If Israel allows cracks in its blockade, others will quickly pass through them. In other words, it is crucial not to leave the international community much room for maneuver between Olmert and Haniyah, but to force them to choose between the two.

Hamas is very aware of the abundance of problems it faces, and there is great anxiety in its ranks. Do not be taken in by the self-confidence its leaders are displaying now; that is just a predictable pretense. Within a very short time, they will start reaching initial conclusions about whether they have the ability to run their own government at all. Israel's contribution should be to persuade them that they have bitten off more than they can chew.

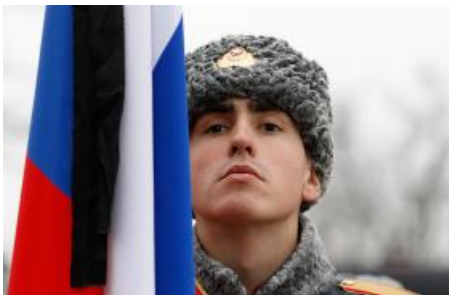
Of course, such a course of action requires Israel to nurture contacts with the parts of the Palestinian Authority that are still in Abu Mazen's hands. There is nothing wrong with that, so long as nobody harbors any naive belief that Fatah can rehabilitate itself rapidly from its crushing defeat and enter into a confrontation with the Hamas government. No such development is likely in the foreseeable future, but it is important for Israel that those who side, at least in words, with a peaceful two-state solution, do not get completely wiped off the map.

The new Hamas government won a vote of confidence in the Palestinian Legislative Council the same day Israelis went to the polls to elect their new government. That may be a symbolic expression of the collision course on which the two governments have embarked.

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