

Hobbling Hamas:

Moving beyond the U.S. Policy of Three No's

Apr 3, 2006



Articles & Testimony

Last week, one of the world's deadliest terrorist organizations--the Islamic Resistance Movement, aka Hamas--announced that it has formed a cabinet and is now poised to take effective control of the Palestinian Authority, which governs Gaza and the Palestinian population of the West Bank. This comes two months after the group, responsible for killing hundreds of civilians, including 27 Americans, won a sizable plurality in Palestinian legislative elections and, with it, a crushing parliamentary majority.

Since the triumph of Hamas, the Bush administration has taken what appears to be a hard line. Washington's mantra is "no recognition, no dialogue, and no financial aid" to a Hamas-led PA until Hamas recognizes Israel, renounces violence and terror, and accepts all previous Palestinian-Israeli agreements.

But is this really such a hard-line position? The Palestinian Authority was established solely as a vehicle for the purpose of resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict diplomatically, and the only claim it has on the U.S. Treasury is its contribution to that goal. Since Hamas leaders, without exception, confirm their objective of destroying the Jewish state, the administration would be hard-pressed to find a rationale for any policy more indulgent than the one it has adopted.

Indeed, on close inspection, the Three No's of U.S. policy actually mask a passive, often confused approach. This was most evident in the odd juxtaposition of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveling around the Middle East urging Arab governments to deny all funding to a Hamas-led PA--and James Wolfensohn, envoy of the Quartet (created in 2002 by the United States, Russia, the European Union, and the United Nations to spur Middle East peace), visiting those very same Arab capitals urging leaders to donate as much as they could to the PA. Washington may have terminated its own direct financial support of the PA, but it did little to stop America's European allies as well as the World Bank, in whose decisions the United States has a major say, from sending tens of millions of dollars to the same address.

At the core, the problem is that the Bush administration has a policy on Hamas but no real strategy. This reflects a deep ambivalence over whether the success of Hamas at the polls in the Palestinian election of January 25 poses a threat or offers an opportunity.

On the one hand, there is widespread sympathy for the view that the empowerment of Hamas is a grave danger to U.S. interests. It is transforming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict from a difficult, bloody, but theoretically resolvable nationalist conflict into an intractable, zero-sum religious war. Before our eyes, an Islamic Republic of Palestine is taking shape next door to Israel and on the borders of Israel's two treaty partners, Jordan and Egypt. Islamist radicals of all stripes--from the mullahs in Tehran to the Wahhabis in Saudi Arabia to the jihadists of al Qaeda--are cheering the triumph of Hamas as the greatest political achievement of the new century. Now that the radicals' caliphate has a foothold at the gates of Jerusalem, all these bad actors can be expected to invest in the success of the Hamas experiment, each in its own nefarious way.

On the other hand, others in the administration hold out elections as the way to coopt Islamist political parties via the democratic process. To win power, Hamas had to accentuate a civic agenda of good, clean, responsible government; to keep power, argue the advocates of this view, Hamas will have to deliver on those promises. Along the way, Hamas will learn the hard truths that all ideological parties eventually learn. In Hamas's case, that means the price of political power is to shelve the goal of destroying Israel. While it is true that Hamas--like the Lebanese terrorist group cum political party Hezbollah--was permitted to win electoral legitimacy without giving up its weaponry or renouncing terrorism, circumstances will eventually compel it to do so. Such moderation, say supporters of this approach, is inevitable--or at least likely.

For President Bush, this is no arcane policy dispute. Because Hamas's victory leaves the president vulnerable on two key foreign policy themes of his administration--the fight against terror and the promotion of freedom in the Middle East--the political risks are high. After all, the president delivered a landmark speech four years ago in which he committed the United States to building a Palestinian leadership "not compromised by terror." Today, it is an obvious embarrassment that the Palestinian leadership--indeed, the PA cabinet--is made up of terrorists.

At the same time, the White House has thrown the dice on promoting elections as the first step in advancing Middle East democracy. With Islamists reaping the gains in Iraq, Lebanon, and the Palestinian territories, the policy is looking like it might be a bad bet. Unless the "freedom agenda" produces a visible success soon--defined as an Islamist party that moderates in power--the president's legacy on his signature foreign policy theme will be in serious trouble.

So far, the administration has tried to reconcile these positions by condemning Hamas as a terrorist group but praising the democratic process by which Palestinian voters elevated it to power. It manages this balancing act by suggesting that Palestinian voters supported Hamas not because of its commitment to destroy Israel but only as a way to throw out the corrupt incumbents of Arafat's Fatah party and, as Bill Clinton recently said, to make the Palestinian buses run on time.

The problem with this view is that it has little basis in fact. Other parties on the ballot offered alternatives to Fatah, including the good-government Third Way, but Hamas won 74 seats and the squeaky-clean liberals just 2. Indeed, it is an uncomfortable truth that an absolute majority of Palestinians voted for parties publicly committed to the destruction of Israel--Hamas and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine. To suggest that Palestinians were oblivious to the political meaning of their votes is, as President Bush has argued in a different context, the soft bigotry of low expectations.

In practical terms, Washington's current policy--deny Hamas diplomatic recognition and U.S. financial aid but otherwise do little to arrest its growing hold on power--is an effort to have it both ways. In the end, it will achieve nothing. The policy does not pack enough wallop to undercut Hamas. Since Arab, Muslim, and even Western states are likely to fill in for lost U.S. aid, there is little chance that the policy will entice Hamas to come to terms with the legitimacy of Israel.

Already, the international consensus in support of the administration's three conditions has cracked. Russia was the first to break ranks, hosting a Hamas delegation in Moscow. Since then, such strategic partners as Turkey, a member of NATO, and Qatar, home to the largest U.S. air base in the Persian Gulf, have put out the welcome mat for Hamas, too.

When European powers begin to deal with Hamas, as they almost certainly will after Israel's election scheduled for March 28, the likely result of U.S. policy will be America's isolation, not the isolation of Hamas.

So Washington should get off the fence and decide what its strategic objective toward Hamas really is.

My own view is that Hamas's success poses such a threat to vital U.S. interests that we should do everything possible

to abort Hamas rule. We should do this as quickly and peacefully as circumstances allow. We should work both openly and clandestinely with allies and partners who share our concern. The U.S. interest is not that Hamas slowly wither on the vine. That would require many years of containment, during which Hamas could foil our efforts by tightening its grip on power as the ayatollahs have in Iran. To the contrary, the U.S. interest is that Hamas collapse speedily and spectacularly.

Israel's role is critical. Jerusalem controls virtually the entire Palestinian economy and provides access into the Palestinian territories for all goods. Israel has the right to sever all economic ties with Gaza so as not to be responsible for sustaining Hamas rule; a case can be made that Israel is even duty-bound to prevent the emergence of a terrorist regime on territory it controls. (Israel has no role inside Gaza; in the West Bank, its troops operate relatively unfettered.) If Israel chooses to choke off a Hamas government, Washington should stand with Jerusalem. But, critics will say, targeting the Hamas-led PA with punitive measures would punish the Palestinian people. That's right. If Hamas had come to power via a military coup, then it would be wrong to impose sanctions on the Palestinian people. But Hamas has come to power precisely because Palestinian voters chose it. If this isn't a moment when the populace itself should bear the repercussions of its actions, then what is? And isn't it more humane to level a swift blow than to inflict a thousand slow and painful cuts?

And what about democracy, the critics will say? Doesn't the Palestinian democratic process deserve our respect? The messy answer is that Washington made a mistake by acceding to an election in which Hamas could participate without first renouncing violence and recognizing Israel. Every democracy requires its participants to play by the rules, but we ignored the most basic rule of all: the choice of ballots over bullets. The Oslo Accords themselves had well-defined candidacy requirements for would-be legislative aspirants. But we foolishly acceded to PA president Mahmoud Abbas's decision to waive those requirements for Hamas. Admitting our mistake now is a bitter pill to swallow, but, in the long run, it will strengthen our ability to advance democracy among Palestinians and elsewhere in the Middle East.

At the moment, Palestinians pay little price for choosing a terrorist leadership. A new strategy based on vigorous efforts to stop international financial transactions and block all but narrowly defined humanitarian assistance would tell them that their actions have consequences. In the near term, this might conceivably propel into the streets the hundreds of thousands of Palestinians who did not vote for a radical Islamist government, perhaps even triggering the collapse of the Hamas regime.

Many of these voters, though, were themselves Yasser Arafat's fellow-travelers, companions in the two-faced game the chairman played as terrorist-peacemaker. In the longer run, therefore, the United States needs to revert to the principles enunciated in President Bush's farsighted but apparently forgotten June 2002 address: "A Palestinian state will never be created by terror--it will be built through reform." This will require a multiyear investment in building a truly liberal democracy in the West Bank and Gaza, one whose claim to sovereignty is worthy of our support.

Aborting Hamas rule will not be easy. With a war to fight in Iraq and no good answers on Iran, the administration may opt not to face up to its mistake and instead put the Palestinian issue in the "too hard to do" file. But whatever we decide, we should not delude ourselves that our current policy will solve the Hamas problem. On the contrary, it is likely to deepen our own.

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