

Can Hamas Be Tamed?

by [Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Mar 1, 2006

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Michael Herzog \(/experts/michael-herzog\)](/experts/michael-herzog)

Michael Herzog was appointed Israel's ambassador to the United States in 2021. Previously, he was an international fellow at The Washington Institute.



Articles & Testimony

Reprinted by permission of [Foreign Affairs \(http://www.foreignaffairs.org/\)](http://www.foreignaffairs.org/), 2006. Copyright 2006 by Council on Foreign Relations. For permission to republish, please contact lhammes@cfr.org

The Great Experiment

Much has happened in the decade between the first parliamentary elections for the Palestinian Authority (PA), in 1996, and the second, this year. The Oslo peace process staggered forward and then collapsed; a second Palestinian intifada raged and subsided; Israel erected a barrier fence along part of the West Bank and withdrew from Gaza; and Yasir Arafat, the founder and personification of Palestinian nationalism, passed from the scene. Meanwhile, Hamas -- the largest Islamist group in the Palestinian community -- continued its march into the political arena. Having boycotted the first elections, it campaigned vigorously in the second, and with its stunning victory in January, now stands poised to play a major role in Palestinian governance.

Hamas' involvement in the democratic process may strike many as a profound irony. After all, the group fields a private army, embraces violence as a political tool, regularly orchestrates terrorist attacks, and is dedicated to the destruction of Israel and the establishment of an Islamist state ruling the territory of Israel and the PA. Granting Hamas legitimate political status and access to the prerogatives of state power seems to be asking for trouble.

A number of optimistic observers argue, however, that this concern is overblown. It is precisely the burdens and responsibilities that come with democratic politics, they claim, that will tame Hamas. After all, as the Carnegie Endowment's Marina Ottaway wrote last summer, "There is ample evidence that participation in an electoral process forces any party, regardless of ideology, to moderate its position if it wants to attract voters in large numbers." Once trapped in a normal political mode, these observers argue, Hamas will have to answer to a more diverse array of constituencies and either deliver practical results or risk being marginalized for failing to do so.

Hamas will thus effectively be forced to sheathe its sword and behave. Instead of being concerned about Hamas' new role, the optimists contend, outsiders should actually welcome it as the most likely catalyst for moving the group's focus from radical rejectionism to mainstream politics.

The logic behind such a theoretical evolution is solid, and there are indeed examples of nondemocratic political actors making the journey to respectability through participation in routine democratic processes. The problem is that few of these examples have much in common with Hamas -- and those that do are much less encouraging. For all the confident assertions that everything will be fine, comparative analysis suggests skepticism is in order about whether the conditions are ripe for Hamas to be co-opted by its political participation or if instead Hamas will simply use political participation as another vehicle for pursuing its alarming core objectives. What the political inclusion of Hamas has really started, in other words, is a momentous experiment -- the results of which will have a major impact on the future of Palestine, Israel, and the Middle East at large.

From Pariah to Player

Hamas was founded in 1987 as an offshoot of the pan-Islamic Muslim Brotherhood movement. It sought to address Palestinian nationalist aspirations and grievances from an Islamic perspective; its name, which means "strength," "bravery," and "zeal" in Arabic, is also an acronym for Harakat al-Muqawama al-Islamiya, or the Islamic Resistance Movement.

The group's ideology was set forth in its 1988 covenant, which remains operative to this day. The covenant defines Palestinian nationalism and the conflict with Israel in religious terms: the land of Palestine "from the river to the sea" is considered an Islamic waqf, an "endowment," and so no Muslim has the right to cede any part of it. The covenant explicitly calls for the obliteration of the state of Israel through the power of the sword and portrays the Jews as the source of all evil in the world. Freemasons, Rotarians, and members of organizations similar to theirs are denounced as Zionist agents, and they too are threatened with obliteration. The covenant stipulates that peace between Muslims, Christians, and Jews should only be permitted "under the wing of Islam."

Soon after its founding, Hamas became a major player in both Palestinian-Israeli relations and domestic Palestinian politics, pursuing a dual agenda through the parallel development of an operational and a social wing. The former now oversees hundreds of militants devoted to armed struggle against Israel and is in the process of building a backup militia of several thousand. It has been responsible for countless acts of terror -- from abductions and murders to suicide bombings and rocket attacks -- which have killed hundreds of Israelis, most of them civilians. The group's social arm (DAWA), meanwhile, has developed a network of charities and religious, educational, and cultural institutions, positioning Hamas as an attractive provider of social services and an alternative to the hapless and corrupt PA.

Unlike, say, the Irish Republican Army (IRA), Hamas does not have an explicit separation between its military and its political wing. All its branches answer to the same organizational authority, which makes the principal decisions on terror operations as well as on political, social, and other policies. Hamas does, however, recognize both an "internal" leadership, living inside the Palestinian territories, and an "external" one, living outside, primarily in Damascus.

(The latter seems attuned less to the practical realities on the ground than to the radical environment in the region.)

Arafat believed that it was possible to pursue diplomacy with and violence against Israel simultaneously, and he wanted to avoid major conflict within the Palestinian community. As a result, he tolerated Hamas' opposition to the peace process in both word and deed as long as the group did not directly challenge Oslo's foundations or his own political authority. He tried to co-opt the movement while keeping it at arm's length.

When Arafat died in November 2004, Hamas calculated that the time had come to step forward as a political party and make a bid for legitimate political power. This decision was driven by a number of factors, including the pa's disarray following years of chaotic and corrupt leadership; the weak position of Arafat's successor as president, Mahmoud Abbas; the opportunity to claim credit for Israel's disengagement from Gaza and a share of that territory's subsequent management; and Hamas' own growing reputation as an effective social-service provider and militia.

Abbas made Hamas' decision easier, first by campaigning in the January 2005 presidential election on a platform that clearly differentiated the ruling Fatah Party's appeal from Hamas' (by emphasizing nonviolence and the pa's monopoly on arms) and then by failing to translate the broad mandate he received into serious reforms or effective governance. Sensing its moment, last March, Hamas accepted a temporary cease-fire with Israel in return for Abbas' agreement to incorporate the group into both the Palestine Liberation Organization and the pa's electoral system. Because the deal did not require Hamas to disarm or abandon violence permanently and promised the movement some formal input (through the PLO) in determining Palestinian negotiating positions on final-status issues such as the repatriation of refugees, it rewarded Hamas' violent course and eroded Abbas' own political standing. But the Palestinian leader apparently felt he had little choice, thanks to his own weakness.

It took U.S. and Israeli policymakers some time to focus their attention on this emerging challenge, and when they did, it was too late to do much about it. Although Washington has consistently denounced Hamas' ideology and militancy, it decided not to let these concerns stand in the way of the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. "This is going to be a Palestinian process, and I think we have to give the Palestinians some room for the evolution of their political process," noted Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice last September. Washington accepted Abbas' assertion that political participation will either transform Hamas or marginalize it.

Israeli officials also found themselves without many practical options. During a mid-September visit to Washington, Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon threatened not to facilitate elections in the West Bank if Hamas participated. Under U.S. pressure, he clarified his position two months later, saying, "While we will not interfere in the elections, we will not coordinate . . . and will not allow Hamas members to either work or move about other than they do today."

From the moment Hamas entered the field, polls consistently indicated that it would earn at least a third of the vote and possibly much more in the elections. Its popularity, according to the same polls, stems less from widespread support for its extremist ideology than from dissatisfaction with the pa's corruption and the stagnant Palestinian economy. Understanding this situation well, Hamas ran on a platform stressing reform and good governance rather than ideological struggle. With such a practical appeal and (following its sweeping victory in December's municipal elections) its day-to-day responsibility for the living conditions of almost a third of the population in the territories,

Hamas clearly positioned itself as a plausible, and formidable, alternative to the old PA leadership.

History Lessons

Some observers detect signs that Hamas is already evolving in a moderate direction. They point to its very willingness to engage in elections and enter the Palestinian Legislative Council, an institution born from the Oslo peace process, which the group has long rejected; its acceptance of a temporary truce (tahdiya) with Israel; its expressed willingness to consider a longer cease-fire (hudna) should Israel withdraw to its 1967 borders; and various statements by Hamas leaders that exhibit flexibility.

There is, however, overwhelming evidence pointing in the opposite direction. For example, Mahmoud al-Zahar, the group's leading figure, gave a series of interviews in the run-up to the parliamentary elections in which he explained that the group sees no connection between the elections and the Oslo process -- which is dead anyway -- and that any cease-fire along the 1967 borders would not come with a recognition of Israel or relations with it, but would be merely a step in the continued struggle. "Some Israelis think that when we talk of the West Bank and Gaza it means we have given up our historic war," Zahar told an Israeli newspaper in late October. "This is not the case." As for Hamas' stance on democracy, Zahar's words have been equally discouraging: he proclaimed, "We will join the Legislative Council with our weapons in our hands," later adding, "In the Islamist Palestinian state, every citizen will be required to act in accordance with the codes of Islamic religious law" -- not exactly a Western vision of how democracy should function.

The debate over what to expect from Hamas has often drawn on supposed lessons of history. Optimists point to several cases in which illiberal movements or groups conformed to liberal norms once ensconced in democratic political systems. Such was the case with many European socialist parties after World War I and with erstwhile communist parties in many eastern European and former Soviet countries more recently. In recent decades, several political groups in Latin America on both the right and the left have managed to move past their antidemocratic and even violent histories to become normal political actors. Rice herself has cited Ireland and Angola as examples of countries in which unsavory forces have opted for ballots over bullets. Pessimists, in contrast, note that the Nazis initially played by the rules of Weimar Germany's democratic system and rode electoral success to power, only to turn around and establish a tyranny. The Italian fascists did the same.

A more useful analogy can be found in the modern history of the Muslim Middle East, with its assortment of relatively young independent states -- nations where there is no democratic tradition or culture and where the governments have been challenged by Islamist movements advocating for the imposition of sharia while brandishing swords. In Turkey, the Islamists have been co-opted successfully, to the extent that the leader of the Islamist Justice and Development Party (AKP), Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has been serving as prime minister since 2002. But Turkey is unique in the region in having sustained a secular public culture for more than eight decades and democratic institutions for more than five. Moreover, contemporary Islamist moderation there may also stem from a tradition of state repression and intervention that has set clear limits on political behavior. Since Turkish Islamist parties began to participate in government in the 1970s, they have been banned and outlawed four times, and the Turkish military, the guardian of the secular republic, deposed an Islamic prime minister in 1997.

Among Arab countries, Jordan presents a model of successful Islamist co-optation (although less so of democracy). Islamists in Jordan were recognized publicly and given a stake in the political life there from the country's founding, in 1946, and as a result they have led the most establishment-oriented and least violent Islamist movement in the region. The Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has channeled its energies into nonviolent activism and anti-U.S. and anti-Israel rhetoric, generally invoking sharia in moral rather than political affairs. Jordan's Islamists have stood by the monarchy's Hashemite ruling family in moments of crisis, such as the showdown with Palestinian armed groups in 1970-71 and the al Qaeda bombings in Amman last November. And since entering the formal political system by running in the parliamentary elections of 1989, the Muslim Brotherhood in Jordan has occupied, through its political wing, the Islamic Action Front, an average of a third of the seats in parliament.

It has been more common for regimes in the region to deal with Islamists through repression and confrontation followed by partial and limited co-optation. The Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, for example (established in 1928), which favored violence to the point of assassinating a prime minister in 1948, was outlawed in 1954. Decades of repression and political exclusion eventually split the movement into two branches. The radicals found their way into Egyptian Islamic Jihad and ultimately al Qaeda. The moderates moved toward the mainstream, focused their message on education and the "indoctrination of the heart," and renounced the use of violence in 1971. They were then allowed to enter the political field, and they began participating in elections in 1984 (although they have had to run as independents, since Egyptian law bans parties based on religion). Relying on strong organizational skills and the good reputation of its social and religious arms, and taking advantage of the government's poor performance, the Muslim Brotherhood is now Egypt's leading opposition group.

Lebanon offers yet another model, with a strong Islamist movement (Hezbollah) operating with sponsorship from an external power (Iran) within a weak and fragmented political system. Hezbollah now maintains the most powerful militia in the country, with control of a virtually autonomous area in southern Lebanon and a global terrorist reach that has often served Iranian purposes. It has also become a central player in Lebanese politics, drawing on its base in the Shiite community, the largest community in the country. Syria's departure from Lebanon last April created a new freedom in Lebanese politics, and after enhancing its parliamentary representation in the May 2005 elections, Hezbollah joined the government for the first time. It has indeed found itself under pressure to disarm but, thanks to its newfound political power, has been able to fend off such pressure so far. Joining the government did not prevent Hezbollah from undertaking a serious cross-border attack on Israel in late November 2005, nor has its ideological platform or political demeanor shown signs of moderation. Whether, when, or under what conditions it will ultimately disarm remains to be seen.

Conditions and Context

The most important lesson to be drawn from these cases is that co-optation through political participation is not a given, but rather depends on the existence of certain conditions in the local political context. No Islamist movement has renounced violence or moderated its ideology of its own volition; when one has done so at all, it has been for lack of a better alternative. It appears that at least three factors need to be present for co-optation to occur: the existence of a strong, healthy, and relatively free political system into which the Islamists can be absorbed; a balance of power tilted against the Islamists that forces them to play by moderate rules; and sufficient time for co-optation to take

effect.

A strong and healthy political system is essential because only it will offer Islamists the incentives for proper socialization. Unless elections are free and fair enough for the results to accurately reflect the popular will, there is little reason for a party to compete for new constituencies or marginal voters rather than cater to its extremist base. And unless the political order is stable and the state enforces a monopoly on authority and violence, there is little reason for a party to disarm (and much reason for it not to).

An imbalance of power favoring the state and mainstream forces is vital, meanwhile, because without checks and balances, a party inclined toward radicalism will be able to capture the state apparatus and bend it to its will. The Turkish army and the Jordanian monarchy have thus contributed to the eventual moderation of their countries' Islamists by setting limits on the kind of behavior permitted.

Many established democracies have also set up legislative roadblocks to help contain the political havoc that radical parties can wreak. In the wake of World War II, for example, a number of European countries barred outright certain types of parties to prevent a resurgence of fascism. In 1948, the first Israeli prime minister, David Ben-Gurion, forcibly crushed partisan armed movements in order to prevent them from poisoning the new Israeli democracy, and the Israeli legislature later excluded violent extremists. And in 1984, then President Chaim Herzog (my late father), refused to meet with Meir Kahane, the leader of the ultranationalist Kach Party, even though Kahane had been elected to parliament -- a stance that helped expand the legislative requirements of acceptability in Israel to include the rejection of racism and the endorsement of democracy.

Time is critical, finally, because ingrained habits of political moderation tend to be learned not in a day, but only through sustained experience over several years and several electoral cycles. It took several decades, for example, for the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood to renounce violence. And in Ireland, it took a full seven years after the 1998 Good Friday agreement for the IRA to actually decommission its arms.

Unfortunately, if one looks closely at the case of Hamas, hardly any of these potentially moderating factors are present. Elections in the PA may be relatively free. But Palestinian political, security, and other institutions are a chaotic mess, and the pragmatic political center, represented by Fatah, is in complete disarray. Hamas is launching its political career in the legislative and executive branches without having disarmed and is quite possibly stronger than the rest of the state apparatus. Despite Abbas' occasional promises that he will force Hamas to disarm, no domestic player will be able to check the group's extremist tendencies, nor will any rules or safeguards be in place to proscribe unacceptable behavior.

In fact, all past Palestinian thresholds for political participation have been lifted. The 1995 Israeli-Palestinian Interim Agreement on the West Bank and the Gaza Strip introduced just such a threshold, with Hamas in mind. In Annex II, Article III(2), it disqualified from Palestinian elections "any candidates, parties or coalitions ... [that] commit or advocate racism or pursue the implementation of their aims by unlawful or nondemocratic means." Yet the Palestinian election law for the 2006 elections, enacted in June 2005, contains no substantive rules by which candidates or parties have to abide.

The ongoing Palestinian-Israeli conflict, meanwhile, adds fuel to the fire of domestic Palestinian turmoil and to extremism. It provides an excuse for tolerating private armies within the PA and enhances the legitimacy of Hamas' rejectionist stance. Opinion polls show that although most Palestinians disagree with Hamas' ideological extremism and support a two-state solution to the conflict, they also accept the notion of "armed struggle" as a legitimate route to get there, citing the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza as an example of what such pressure can achieve. This complicated preference structure gives Hamas a perverse incentive to disrupt progress in diplomatic negotiations, since the normalization of Palestinian-Israeli relations could well lessen Hamas' appeal. As long as its military and political power enhance each other, Hamas will be able to fend off pressures to disarm and will derail progress toward peace. Given the urgency of moving the conflict toward resolution, finally, there simply is no time to let Palestinian domestic politics play out long enough for Hamas' political socialization to occur.

Heir Conditioning

It is too late to prevent an unreconstructed Hamas from participating in Palestinian politics. It is not too late, however, to avoid compounding that mistake by giving the group a continued free ride and full legitimacy regardless of its behavior from now on. The Palestinians, with the help of Israel, the United States, and the rest of the international community, should now try hard to create the conditions under which Hamas may liberalize, in the hope that one day the optimists might be proved right. This, obviously, is a long-term project.

With Hamas controlling Palestinian politics and national institutions, the immediate onus has shifted to outside players to create real incentives for Hamas to abandon its militancy and real disincentives to preserve it. The international community was poised to invest a tremendous amount of political and financial capital in promoting domestic Palestinian reform. Those investments should now be provided only if they can be used to equip moderates to compete more effectively with Hamas in both the security and social spheres. Aid should also be designed to create a pragmatic Palestinian political center by revamping Fatah and encouraging reform-minded activists and parties.

Outside actors should also try to use their influence to create the proper incentives and disincentives for Hamas' future behavior. The fact that so many Palestinians regard the group as entirely legitimate does not mean that all other interested parties have to agree. The international community should therefore clearly assert that in its eyes, democratic participation will confer legitimacy on Hamas only so long as the group renounces violence, disarms, and recognizes Israel's right to exist. Political engagement with Hamas and the removal of it from international terrorist lists should be made contingent on real progress in these areas, not simply on the group's willingness to enter the political field.

Ideally, Israeli-Palestinian relations would need to improve in tandem with conditions in the pa, so as to create a virtuous cycle that can help drive both the peace process and the Palestinian reform process forward. Because of the nature of Hamas and the threat of terrorism, final-status negotiations now seem as remote as ever. The transition of political leadership in Israel together with Hamas' newfound prominence will make extensive bilateral talks of any kind unlikely in the near term. The specter of a weak, dysfunctional PA coupled with a strong, violent Hamas is likely

to deepen Israelis' inclination toward unilateralism in their relations with the Palestinians.

Ultimately, no outside party can substitute for the Palestinian leadership in creating what the New York Times columnist Thomas Friedman has called "the village": a domestic environment that can truly delegitimize extremism. The momentous experiment of allowing Hamas to enter democratic politics is only beginning, but even at this early point, the short-term dynamics seem bleak enough to undermine the project's long-term prospects. The time for taming Hamas may already have passed.

Michael Herzog is a brigadier general in the Israel Defense Forces and a visiting military fellow at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. He was formerly the senior military aide to Israel's minister of defense and the head of strategic planning for the IDF.



Foreign Affairs

RECOMMENDED



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Iran Takes Next Steps on Rocket Technology](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Farzin Nadimi

(/policy-analysis/iran-takes-next-steps-rocket-technology)



BRIEF ANALYSIS

[Saudi Arabia Adjusts Its History, Diminishing the Role of Wahhabism](#)

Feb 11, 2022



Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/saudi-arabia-adjusts-its-history-diminishing-role-wahhabism)



ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

[Podcast: Breaking Hezbollah's Golden Rule](#)

Feb 9, 2022



Matthew Levitt

[\(/policy-analysis/podcast-breaking-hezbollahs-golden-rule\)](#)

TOPICS

[Peace Process \(/policy-analysis/peace-process\)](#)

[Terrorism \(/policy-analysis/terrorism\)](#)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

[Israel \(/policy-analysis/israel\)](#)

[Palestinians \(/policy-analysis/palestinians\)](#)