

# Fight Delay

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Articles & Testimony

**T**his is the concrete deal that Hamas is offering Israel: an open-ended armistice in exchange for a well-armed and independent Palestinian state; a prolonged cessation of hostilities, but no peace treaty and no resolution of the conflict's underlying issues. According to conversations with its leaders and its public statements, Hamas will recognize Israel as an "occupier state" while still rejecting its legitimacy. As a sign of their seriousness, the heads of Hamas have already quietly given assurances that they will unconditionally extend the tahdiah, the lull in attacks on Israel, that they painstakingly maintained in the year leading up to their stunning victory in the Palestinian Legislative Council elections on January 25. They will keep their terrorist weaponry on safety, without giving it up.

Unfortunately, it is likely that the Europeans will soon advise Israel to accept such a deal. The Egyptians are already arguing in private that an armistice without a peace treaty is preferable to another intifada. And, rest assured, down the road there will be Israelis who will urge taking the deal that is possible and giving up on the one that is necessary -- that is, a final-status agreement incorporating Palestinian recognition of Israel. This is how Hamas hopes to achieve legitimacy and to consolidate its gains.

Israel, therefore, has a tough decision to make within weeks, if not days: test an extended ceasefire and allow Hamas to slide into power or prevent its worst enemies from taking control of the Palestinian Authority (PA). In 1993, when the Oslo accords opened the doors to Yasir Arafat, Israel unwittingly imported a vicious civil war, waiting in vain for Arafat to transform himself into a peaceful neighbor. If Israel deludes itself into thinking that Hamas is about to undergo a purifying metamorphosis, it will wake up to discover that Islamic fundamentalists are running the PA -- without even pretending to accept Israel's right to exist.

As soon as they heard that their party had won 74 of the 132 seats in the Palestinian legislature, the heads of Hamas began to scatter vague formulae for a long-term hudna, or truce. The chairman of the Hamas political bureau, Damascus-based Khaled Mashal, and the movement's chief spokesmen in Gaza, Ismail Hanieh and Mahmoud Al Zahar, all quickly acknowledged their inability to enter into an all-out armed confrontation with Israel at the present time. The implication, of course, was that they wish they could confront Israel -- and that they will prepare and mobilize the Palestinian society for an eventual showdown.

For the time being, however, Hamas is offering an armistice that recognizes the June 1967 lines, including Palestinian sovereignty in East Jerusalem. There are Hamas leaders who indicate that it may be possible to integrate this proposal with the establishment of a Palestinian state within "provisional borders," as envisaged in the U.S.-backed road map. In fact, they argue that there is little difference between their armistice proposal and Ariel Sharon's vision of a long-term interim agreement with provisional borders and Palestinian sovereignty. (Of course, Sharon never envisaged retreating to the pre-Six Day War borders.)

Hamas is presenting this political vision in order to smooth its way to hegemony. It must ease Israeli fears -- and, indeed, Defense Minister Shaul Mofaz has stupidly announced that Hamas is behaving "responsibly" -- and reassure Fatah that partnership with Hamas will not necessarily lead to a dead end or to more bloodshed. And, not least importantly, Hamas wants to provide the Europeans and the United States with the illusion of progress toward peace

so that they will continue giving aid to the Palestinian Authority.

Hamas, in other words, understands that it must handle its victory with great care and that, if it wants to enjoy the fruits of the ballots, it must eschew the use of bullets. Its leaders are aware of the limitations of their achievement and of its potential pitfalls, so they are speaking far more softly than usual and keeping their sticks out of sight. The 6,000 members of their terrorist arm, the Izz a-Din al-Qassam Brigades, have been ordered not to carry arms in the streets, not to hold celebratory parades, and to keep away from the violent demonstrations that the defeated Fatah activists have been staging.

There is no reason, for now, to doubt Hamas's willingness to enter into a prolonged armistice. The volume of terrorism perpetrated by the movement has declined steadily since the summer of 2004. There was only one suicide bombing by Hamas during this period, in Beersheba, and that, according to reliable Israeli intelligence sources, was the result of a "misunderstanding" within its ranks. Since the withdrawal of Israeli settlements and troops from the Gaza Strip, Hamas has not fired a single rocket at Israel. (They have left that to the Islamic Jihad, the Popular Resistance Committees, and some factions of the al-Aqsa Martyrs Brigades.)

This conduct reflected Hamas's decision to take over the Palestinian Authority before again turning its sights on Israel. Indeed, the Cairo agreement -- an accord between Hamas and PA President Mahmoud Abbas in March 2005 -- comprised a simple tradeoff: a lull in terrorist operations in exchange for elections. In recent days, the Hamas leadership has been veritably gushing with praise for Abbas for keeping his side of the bargain. Now they want him to accept an armistice. The reason he might well accept that idea is plain: He is not capable of reaching a final-status agreement, both because it is now even harder to resolve the issues (such as Jerusalem and the right of return) that prevented an agreement at Camp David in 2000, and also because Fatah's power has shrunk. A hudna would therefore be better than nothing at all.

In the eyes of the Fatah leadership, too, a hudna is not out of the question, although Fatah still claims adherence to Oslo's principles of peace with and recognition of Israel. After all, even Arafat was working toward "runaway statehood," whereby Palestinians would gain independence but would not pay its price by making concessions leading to a formal "end of conflict, end of claims." The threat remains that, if a runaway statehood is not granted to them, the Palestinians will gradually run away from the concept of a small state alongside Israel. This danger -- that the Palestinians will choose to collapse into Israel's unwilling arms -- is the greatest challenge faced by Israel. Two states without peace, as opposed to two governments fighting within the same country -- this, ultimately, is the choice.

At this stage, there's no telling whether the Hamas victory will save the PA from implosion and disintegration, or whether it will hasten that collapse. Within Fatah, a mighty brawl is underway, and the organization's future is in doubt. The Palestinian security apparatus -- 60,000 men with guns -- is in disarray. The "armed tribes" that truly control the territories, be they political groups or local clans, are gaining strength. In the meantime, Hamas does not dare try to assert its authority.

On the Palestinian field, the only possible game is a local version of what is known in France as "co-habitation" -- a regime in which a president works alongside a prime minister from a rival party. But the Palestinian situation is far more complicated, because the president is also the head of the opposition, and the parliamentary majority is a party that also functions as an underground. This is a structure with two hostile armies: the security apparatus commanded by the president and the militias commanded by the majority party. (Incidentally, Hamas is already planning to elevate the Qassam Brigades to the status enjoyed by Iran's Revolutionary Guards.)

To achieve a co-habitation agreement, Hamas is willing to let the Cabinet be made up of technocrats rather than Hamas officials, showing that it prefers to rule rather than govern. Its leaders don't delude themselves that Fatah's

debacle at the polls meant the demise of that deep-rooted movement. Indeed, Fatah has several times more rifles than Hamas, and, by my calculations, it could have achieved near-parity in the elections if so many votes had not been wasted on the 76 Fatah leaders who ran as independents and lost. So, at least for the near future, Hamas will not confront Fatah, choosing instead to co-opt its rival and gradually erode its power. In the meantime, Fatah retains some power.

Hamas is forging a long-term strategy, building up its future capabilities instead of cashing in immediately on its election gains. Using Abbas rather than pushing him aside. Joining up with the security apparatuses rather than purging them. Living with the Oslo arrangements rather than burying them. It is careful not to trigger an Algeria-like counterreaction, in which the security organizations stage a coup to annul the election results. For Hamas, the PA should become the first country to be successfully taken over by the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood. Hamas needs time, a long time, to digest its prey. It needs co-habitation at home and an armistice on the borders. Like a tiger at rest, its claws are sheathed until the time comes to go hunting again.

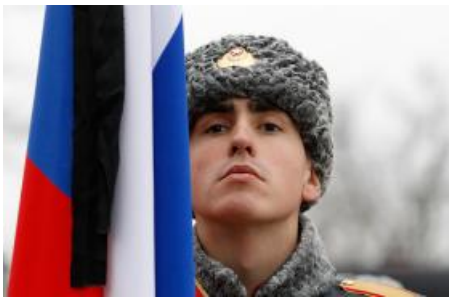
Israel and its friends must decide whether to let the tiger gain strength or to beard it in its den. Until Hamas accepts Israel's right to exist and renounces terrorism, Israel should freeze its economic agreements, border procedures, and all other dealings with the PA. A diplomatic siege and an active boycott should be developed, coupled with persistence in counterterrorism operations. Any attempt by Hamas to invite Iran to step in must be subverted in an effort to nip this hostile new regime in the bud.

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